

Rich Man Road

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MCW

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1. Attestation of Authorship

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

Signed: *Ann Glamuzina*

Name: Ann Glamuzina

Date: 12/11/09

2. Acknowledgements

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3. Abstract

As the daughter of Dalmatian migrants and as a novice fiction writer, my creative work is in part my own journey to discover who I am: it is a search for a connection – not just to the past, but to the present and the future.

My writing has been influenced by where and how I was raised, and as such, it is an attempt to transform those shared memories and the stories of my forebears into my own unique written voice. My personal narrative has been informed by the legends and tales that have been passed down to me through oral storytelling, as well as my experiences as a young New Zealander living in a Dalmatian household.

In my exegesis *Finding My Voice – a Hybrid Writer in New Zealand*, I have taken an autobiographical approach. I look at how oral storytelling has been at the core of my development as a writer, and how the role of a writer differs from that of a storyteller. I also consider where my fiction writing belongs within the New Zealand Literary landscape.

To follow the exegesis is my fiction manuscript, *Rich Man Road*, a story about two female protagonists and their search for belonging. I have written within the historical fiction genre taking my cue from writers like Louis de Berniere, Monica Ali, Maurice Gee, Amy Tan and Amelia Batistich. It is a first draft work which post-submission I will continue

developing into a longer piece, concentrating on character development.

INTRODUCTION

WHO AM I? WHERE DO I COME FROM?

I grew up in the 1970's listening to stories and songs at my father's knee. Often the table around which we gathered would be encircled by Dalmatian immigrants who stayed with our family while they found their own feet in this place they called *Novi Zeland*. Often they found solace in my parents' home where my mother provided plates of meat and soups and fresh bread, while my father was generous with his wine.

At that time, Dalmatian households all over Auckland hosted similar gatherings of homesick men and women looking for others with whom to share their common feelings of loss and displacement. Sometimes they sang sad nostalgic songs like *na brigu kuca mala* ("Little house on the hill"), *ja sam Dalmatinac* ("I'm a Dalmatian"), and on other occasions they told stories of excitement and discovery. But they all had one thing in common – they were looking for a place to 'belong'.

All of these things happened before I had ever learnt to speak a word of English, let alone write one, and they may never been anything more than childhood memories had someone not shown me a book called *An Olive Tree in Dalmatia and Other Stories* (Batistich, 1963).

The book was written five years before I was born, but it had a profound impact on me. I suddenly understood that the stories and songs I was hearing around me were part of a wider written and oral

tradition that I was a part of - although at the age of ten I didn't see it quite in those terms. I had always sensed that I was not part of 'the dominant transposed Anglo-Celtic culture, in the New Zealand model' (Nola, 2000, p 204). And often, I felt painfully 'foreign' in the homes of friends whose heritage was Irish, English, Welsh or Scottish.

As a young reader, I never felt a deep connection to the stories of Enid Blyton, Margery Williams, Roald Dahl or C.S. Lewis in which my contemporaries took such delight. That is not to say that I did not enjoy them - I loved these authors immensely and I credit them with opening up a world of fantasy and possibility for me. Even today I read C.S.Lewis and Roald Dahl to my own children. And yet there, in the pages of *An Olive Tree in Dalmatia and Other Stories* (Batistich, 1963), were the characters of my family history, the protagonists of my father's stories, and the hero's of Dalmatian legend. Through Amelia Batistich's words, I had somehow been legitimised as a young reader and writer: it was possible for me to tell my own stories.

But I do not speak for all readers or writers and I do not represent all first generation New Zealanders, or even my own family. In Sollors introduction to Mary Antin's work he writes:

"She may be speaking for thousands in one sense, but in another sense, her story does not even resemble that of her own sister.(Sollors in Karakayali, 2005, p. 15).

Like Mary Antin, I knew that I had my own story to tell, but the stories that played at the edge of my subconscious, were now energised by Batistich's renderings of Dalmatian folk. I had found a place to 'belong'.

ORAL STORYTELLING TO WRITTEN WORK

Before finding the printed word, there were the legends and folktales told with such physicality that as I child, one could sometimes be transported into the far off forests inhabited by *Vilas* (Dalmatian fairies). It was these storytellers who ignited in me the desire to narrate my own stories.

As suggested by Lord (Lord, 1974), oral storytelling began with Ancient Greek scholarship and Homer. All that we know for certain about the legendary blind poet is that he composed two of the greatest epics in world literature: *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*. It was the scholarship of Milman Parry that established that *The Iliad* was the outcome of a folk-tradition of unwritten oral poetry. The content and style of his epics formed the basis of classical study that has influenced western literature for centuries with the beauty and strength of the imagery, for the character development and for the universality of the themes.

It is my reading of Homer's works that he portrayed a view of history from a subjective perspective, in a style unique in those times. Unlike today's writers, Homer had no authors to imitate, no

genres to follow and no literature to guide him. The reality was that at the time of composing his epics, literature, and indeed, civilization itself were still in their infancy. He was, in short, the world's first great writer and a model for others to emulate (Zott., 2003. eNotes.com 2006. 10 Feb, 2009).

Relating history orally has a strong tradition in the Southern Slavic region which includes Croatia and its Dalmatian coastline. Even with the advent of Croatian literature beginning as far back as the 15th Century, oral story telling has endured into the 21st Century. Croatian literature embraced a wide variety of biblical stories, legends, folklore, and popular tales. As the intelligentsia developed this sophisticated body of literature, the relatively uneducated peasant classes remained proponents of the epic poem and orally retold their history and legends down through generations.

But as Ong suggests, a writer is categorically different from that of a speaker. An oral storyteller can assess the audience and make changes to his or her delivery or even story content based on the reactions of the listeners, where a writer cannot. It is also true that oral storytelling is a method of transmitting heritage, and as such, some plots, actions and characters are stereotypical, and, as suggested by Lachman, it is by mnemonic construction that we attempt to recapture the past (Lachmann, 2004).

What Lachman refers to as the *diegetic paradigm*, encompasses divergent modes of recording the past. This recording, or recalling, is a complex and controversial process of reconstruction that takes place in literal and oral

genres, and, of course the historic novel. Oral and literary text incorporates other texts, thus mnemonic space unfolds between and within texts. In storing and accumulating cultural data, the literary text in its 'mnemonic space' functions as part of cultural memory.

A good example of mnemonic construction can be found in the works of Nobel Prize-winning author Ivo Andrić. In his wonderful novel, *The Bridge on the Drina* (Andric, 2002; Ashcroft, Griffiths, & Tiffin, 1995), he explores the stories that the Serbs, Croats and Montenegrins tell about each other. Andrić was himself a Bosnian-Croat and in the aforementioned novel he speaks about how enduring these *folktales* really are, and how they help inform the people who hear them and shape the way they view themselves and others.

It was Vladimir Propp, a Russian formalist (formalism itself relates to critical approaches that analyse, interpret or evaluate the inherent features of text) who analysed the basic plot components of Russian folk tales. In his work *Morphology of the Folktale* (Propp, 1968), translated in 1968, Propp presents an elaborate pattern-sequence of 31 "functions" that make up any hero story. He defined a "function" in a story as an event interpreted "according to its consequences".

Propp's approach has been criticised (most famously by Claude Lévi-Strauss (Lévi-Strauss, 1963)) for two main reasons. Firstly, for removing all verbal consideration from the analysis, even though

the folktale's form is almost always oral. And secondly, it has been suggested that it removes all consideration of tone, mood, character, and, anything that differentiates one fairy tale from another.

I tend to support the Propp and believe such criticisms are largely redundant, as Propp's approach was not intended to unearth meaning in the fairy tales he examined, nor to find the elements that make one tale different from another. His approach was intended to unearth the building blocks that formed the basis of their narrative structure.

But words and their narrative structure are never determined in their abstract, they acquire meaning through their interaction with their surroundings (Ong, 1975). I submit that the job of the writer can be more difficult than that of the storyteller who stands in front of a gathered crowd. When a written narrative has been completed and published, the writer and reader are divorced by time and distance. To quote directly from Ong,

"The writer's audience is always a fiction. The historian, the scholar or scientist, and the simple letter writer all fictionalize their audiences, casting them in a made-up role and calling on them to play the role assigned" (Ong, 1975, p.10)

As Ong implies, the writer who pens a story in the expectation that the prose will be read, naturally turns his attention to those phantoms who will read their work, although this is complicated in modern

times where the readership is often multicultural and / or global.

In *A Heuristic Model for Creating a Writer's Audience* (Pfister & Petrick, 1980) the authors advocate use of a procedural model in creating an audience. Their first assumption is that writing involves the writer, the reader, the subject and the style/format of the text. Secondly, the writer must understand each component and how it relates to the other components. They suggest it is important to 'identify' the reader.

Reader Response Criticism, depending on who is advancing the concept, generally suggests that a text gains meaning by the purposeful act of a reader reading and interpreting a text. Reader Response Criticism, just like New Criticism, can completely ignore authorial intent, but it will judge how well the author succeeds based on acceptance of the author's works by different interpretive communities (Tompkins, 1980). It is the reader's interpretation that is important and not the intent of the writer.

According to Gibson, the writer must pay careful attention to the 'mock' reader role.

"We [as mock readers] assume, for the sake of the experience, that set of attitudes and qualities which the language asks us to assume, and, if we cannot assume them, we throw the book away"(Gibson, 1980)

Gibson's view provides some useful lessons for the novice writer. The novice writer may believe

that in doing a detailed analysis as suggested by Pfister & Petrick that the writer has uncovered all the necessary information about the reader. However, in doing so, the writer has only acknowledged the ‘real’ reader, not the ‘mock’ reader. All that effort on collecting audience data is worthless if the novice writer creates a mock reader role that somehow "turns off" the audience. For instance, the novice writer may use language, tone and structure that cast the audience in the role of an unsophisticated reader to be told the story step by step, when in fact they may not want to adopt a more sophisticated and knowledgeable role.

It is useful to examine Ong further at this point. He suggests that there is seldom a clearly definable audience out there that the writer can keep in mind as they create their text. Instead, the writer must "fictionalise" his or her audience by imagining them in the role they must play as they read the text. But as Ong states,

“A reader has to play the role in which the author has cast him, which seldom coincides with this role in the rest of life.”(Ong, 1975)

Ong's premise that the writer must create a satisfactory role for the audience to play in the text is supported by Long (Long, 1980). Long has suggested that instead of the writer asking who the audience is, the writer should ask who the writer wants the audience to be. Create the audience first, and then write to that audience.

“What attitudes, ideas, actions are to be encouraged . . . what distance between reader and subject should be established. What of diction and the creation of tone? What pieces of information do I want the reader to take for granted? Which do I want to treat in detail and emphasis? Such questions shift the burden of responsibility upon the writer from that of amateur detective to that of creator, and the role of creator is the most important and most basic the writer must play.”(Long, 1980)0, p.225-226)

If Long is right, and the most important role of any writer is that of the creator, then analysis of rhetorical theory does not necessarily assist a writer in creating an engaging narrative. However, many of the ideas about audience analysis and motivation prevalent in rhetorical theory can promote better understanding of the audience through comprehension of audience function and motivation. Although, as a novice writer such scholarship can be of some assistance, I concur with the sentiment as expressed by Salman Rushdie when, in his essay *Imaginary Homelands*, he stated

“I have ideas, people, events, shapes and I write ‘for’ those things, and hope that the completed work will be of interest to others.”(Rushdie, 1991)

Some would suggest that writers construct an audience that is an ideal reader, that is, a reader who will read a given text and achieve the particular or expected interpretation of that text (Kay, 1983).

However, given Rushdie’s view above, I hope that in relation to my own manuscript a reader interprets the events and themes that I have put to paper and finds a connection with that text and the characters within it.

The modern novel uses a myriad of techniques to engage the reader. As writers, we may keep the hero of the story moving (to create an unsettled position for the reader): we may employ the diary or journal by inviting the reader to an inner circle or as a snoop; and sometimes, we use the unreliable narrator – but who does the reader trust if not the narrator?¹

All these techniques have been available to me as a start out writer. I have chosen from those who have gone before me the tone, viewpoint (employing first and third person views) and method of narration in my own unique style. And like Rushdie, I hope the completed work will be of interest to readers wherever they may be and whoever they are.

THE HYBRID WRITER

“Today a gap had closed. I felt two countries firmly under my feet. Both equal.”(du Fresne in Nola, 2000)

It is only now, as I search for my own identity as a writer, that I consider where I fit into the New Zealand post-modern literary landscape. Indeed, is there a place for me and if so, am I comfortable with the labels that others may attach to my identity?

¹ This is a question that has no easy answer and I do not propose to consider it here in this essay.

Both Nola (Nola, 2000) and Bozic-Vrbancic (Bozic-Vrbancic, 2008) agree that New Zealand is a bicultural society, constructed on the back of the historical interaction of two peoples, Maori and Pakeha. Pakeha refers to the mainly British settler population in colonial New Zealand and their descendents: I am not Pakeha. In terms of literature in New Zealand, this biculturalism exists uneasily with a growing wealth of ‘other’ writers (two examples of which are Bulgarian born, Kapka Kassabova, and Canadian born, Eleanor Catton). If I do not fall into the New Zealand mainstream, where is it that I do fit?

It seems prudent to start by looking at the area described as ‘migrant literature’. Migrant literature is the term generally used to denote work whose authors have undergone a major cultural and, in most cases, linguistic shift. Migrant or immigrant literature or ethnic minority writing today is often considered a category of literature in which authors write from an aspect of at least two cultures, national identities and/or languages (Sharma, 2006).

It is arguable my “immigrant background” categorises me as a migrant writer. I reject this label, even though I am trying to write a novel in a language different from the one I learned as I grew my first teeth, and the manuscript I have written is the story of two women migrants to New Zealand.

Migrant Literature has been debated by many critics, but I have chosen to focus briefly on just two of those: Homi Bhabha and Edward Said. Bhabha has

suggested that minority writing, can transcend time and space, while Said's view is that the migrant can apply a double perspective - things are seen both from the point of view of what has been left behind and of the here and now ((Bhabba, 1990) and (Said, 1994)). The new world is filtered through the one left behind, leading to a unique view of the present (Rando, 2006). If the world was linear in time and space, then we would always live in the present. But we don't – at any given point in time, we live in the past, present and the future. My writing is perhaps a case in point in terms of my representation of the new world and the old world, as well as the language used to articulate this vision. It is a reflection of my understanding of the complexities of life as portrayed through my fictional characters.

While the words I have chosen were determined by creative choice, the subject matter is explicitly linked to the migration experience (for example, feelings of displacement and loss, questioning of life and philosophy). Other elements of my writing clearly have links to the literature of migration. This is evidenced through the characters' reactions to and relationship with New Zealand and its people arising from the transition to a new world and a new life, the examination of the physical environment, and the comparison between the old land and the new. But the overarching theme of my manuscript can be summed up as 'search for 'belonging', and I submit that this is a universal theme, and not one that is specific to migration alone.

It is my view that all literature lives and dies on the quality of the prose, whether or not it is called migrant literature seems to have little to do with a writer's success or lack of success, but more to do with marketing and categorization as an attempt to define and pigeonhole writing by publishers, media, reviewers and sometimes by authors themselves.

If I am to be called anything, I would be most comfortable with the term 'hybrid writer', for there is little doubt that I am a blend of both Dalmatia and New Zealand.

But I did not choose to write because I am a 'hybrid'. I choose to write because I want to tell my story. When I first started to write seriously and consulted 'how to' books and other writers, I heard the advice to 'write what you know', closely followed by the advice, 'write what you don't know'! So, it is of little surprise that my stories are often about Dalmatia and her immigrants. When I branch out and write about others that are not from this background, they often have similar immigrant characteristics, and almost always are searching for where it is that they belong, often in a physical and meta-physical sense.

But the Dalmatia I write about isn't the encyclopedic version, or the Dalmatia of my father or mother: it is *my* Dalmatia. This Dalmatia is the one in my imagination: an invention of sorts based on fairy-tales and songs, anecdotes and real life and history retold many times before they reached my ears. I have not written 'memoir' - that implies '*re-living a past*' (Lim, 2003, p.442) What I have written is most

definitely fiction, but in some sense the stories I write about are a re-telling of places, people and ideas that I grew up with.

In this way, I have created my own world, my own Dalmatia in some middle-place that is not in conflict with the real Dalmatia, or with the place I live. As suggested by Rushdie, our physical alienation from our home country gives rise to deep uncertainties that inevitably mean we will not be able to reclaim precisely that which we have lost; we will create our own fictions, not actual replacements, but invisible ones ‘*imaginary homelands*’ (Rushdie, 1991)

Perhaps this new homeland, this ability to walk between multiple worlds gives creative artists from second and third generations a different perspective. It is a view that is not as perfectly formed as the original, but is one that creates a new outlook - a future (Amin, 2008). Ultimately, unless the story is about migration, these issues are never at the fore because the story, the one that’s been dancing at the edges of the writer’s mind, is always the most important thing. And like the men and women who sat around our family’s kitchen table in the 1970’s, my story has been a search for the place where I belong.

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Rich Man Road

Auckland, June, 2003

As the sun threatened to spill over the horizon, Sister Mary rose from her bed. She shivered as her feet touched the cool kauri floors, crossing the small room in a few steps to where her habit lay. The woven scapular slipped down over her head and she wiggled in a way not entirely appropriate, until her slight body was hidden from the approaching daylight. On her feet she placed house slippers and reached for her headdress, fastening it to her frizzy black hair. As she paused by the bed, it occurred to her that she had not heard Sister Teresa this morning.

Once in her friend's room, she looked at the sleeping woman, smiling at how peaceful she appeared lying there on her back in the growing light. Her wrinkles seemed to have disappeared, and her hands lay folded delicately across her

middle as if she had been praying in her dreams. Sister Mary was tempted to let the older nun sleep, but she knew how she hated to miss morning prayers. More than any other at the Priory, she seemed to relish the routine of the day. Sister Mary herself had begun to find the structure stifling, and although she loved God with all her heart, the young novitiate was still not entirely sure that life within the walls of the convent was for her. She certainly didn't want to face today without Sister Teresa, needing her friend's quiet presence until she found her own strength in the meditative power of prayer.

Placing her hand on her slumbering friend, Sister Mary whispered a morning greeting. Her palm cupped the older Nun's shoulder and she waited for the familiar warmth to filter through. But none came. Looking more closely at the still features, she noticed the blue-purple tinge of her lips. With a sharp intake of

breath her eyes darted around the room as if searching for the one who had stolen her friend's life from her. She blessed herself and hung her head for a moment, focussing on Sister Teresa's hands and the age spots that looked like tea stains on parchment.

Sister Mary almost didn't notice the piece of twine poking out from between the fingers. She pulled gently, but it was stuck firmly in the grasp of rigor mortis. With more force this time, she started to prise the fingers apart. There was a sharp 'crack' as the index finger snapped, and with one final tug and the string came free.

There it was. Not a piece of yarn or twine, but a soiled and crude kind of rope-doll. Its coarse threads had blackened over time as it swung like a crucifix over its owner. The novice nun murmured a prayer asking forgiveness as she pressed her friend's stiff fingers back into place. The doll she dropped into a pocket in her

voluminous dress as she turned and opened the drawer in the bureau that lay next to Sister Teresa's bed.

Lifting the ageing Bible, searching amongst the neatly folded undergarments, her fingers found a bulging paper packet. She withdrew it from its hiding place, careful to replace the clothing and the Bible so that they appeared undisturbed. Sister Mary opened the flap and pulled out the envelope she knew would be on top, placing it in her pocket with the doll. The bigger package she slid under the belt beneath her habit before breaking into a run, stumbling as her skirts wrapped around her legs like seaweed, as she went in search of the Prioress.

...

Dear Sister,

If you are reading this, it will be because I have gone to be with God and that you, as my

friend and Sister, will have done what I asked of you.

I trust that you found my things in order; that the undergarments were neatly folded and my habit and blouses were carefully darned and pressed and hanging where they should be. I also hope that it was not too late and you unearthed this letter and the other enclosed items and photos before the others did.

I have a confession to make to you Sister Mary: I am a fraud. I know that you looked up to me and see me as the embodiment of all that a nun should be, but I am not the person you thought I was. You asked me once about my motivation to become a nun, and this may come as a shock to you, but I never planned on becoming a Religious. Never. My conversion, from a compliant parishioner to one whose life's work has been to serve God, was one of self-interest. I chose a monastic life to escape the

world and the pronouncements of others, and becoming a Carmelite was a way of abandoning a life that I could no longer endure.

But a funny thing happened when I came here. I found I loved Him. It was through that love that I hoped to somehow atone for my sins. Every day I prayed for a deeper understanding of spiritual life, but my focus on deepening my union with God wavered. On occasion, it has been absent altogether. What will you be thinking of me as you read this? That I have somehow lost my senses in my old age? That I have been placed here on earth to test your resolve to love Him and your commitment to our Order as you think about making your final commitment to God? I hope to persuade you that it is none of these things.

I regret that I was never able to tell you any of this before my passing, but I hope that as you read through my journal, you will come to

*understand my reasons for joining this Order,
and why it is important to me that you are sure of
your own motivations for wanting to take your
final vows. You and I are more alike than you
could ever imagine. We both came to this land
to fulfil the aspirations of others, but we escaped
those expectations, replacing them with
acceptance and contrition.*

*For me, I have returned to where we must
all return. I wish you well in this life, Sister. And
please know that I am happy, for finally, I will be
with Him.*

May He keep you safe my dear friend.

Sister Teresa Olga Mastrović

...

Sister Mary Pualele Sina Avua'a

It seemed to Sister Mary that Siesta time
took forever to arrive on the day of her friend's
passing. After Lauds and Silent Communal

Prayer, there were work preparations followed by more Prayer and Holy Mass. Breakfast, then actual work time until Spiritual Reading and Examination of the Conscience and the Midday Hour followed by the Angelus, lunch, recreation, then finally, Siesta. Free time!

She prayed for patience.

The other nuns were not surprised when she retired to her room to be alone. It had been an upsetting day for everyone, and they were all mindful that the younger nun was soon to make her Profession of the vows, and such vows required careful contemplation.

She shut the door and sat on the bed, removing the packet from under her belt. She closed her eyes and turned it over, fanning her fingers out like a Kentia Palm leaf, wondering if Sister Teresa was watching, urging her on. As she closed her eyes, she recalled the first day they had met.

...

Auckland, 2000

The young postulant arrived at the convent by taxi. As she stepped out of the car, the sun flirted with her, peeping out from behind shale coloured clouds and touching her face before disappearing again. She picked up her leather bag with its marbled cracks and walked towards the gate. For a long time Pualele had imagined this moment, but suddenly, she was paralysed by thoughts that she didn't belong here. Her hand hovered motionless above the buzzer while the other remained in a fist around the handle of her bag.

Across the tree-lined road, a vintage Jaguar pulled out of another gated residence, the driver of the car barely registering Pualele's presence as he accelerated away. She turned to watch the vehicle, puffing exhaust fumes as it ascended the hill before disappearing over the

top. She couldn't understand why anyone would want a car that boasted of such affluence. *Pride is an ugly thing.* It was enough to remind her why she had come and she finally pressed the button.

There was a low buzz and Pualele leant on the gate until it swung open. Inside, the path was lined with standard roses that stand guard over cropped buxus. She stopped a moment, tipping back her head and inhaling the aroma of freshly mown grass. The liver-coloured paving ran directly up to the double storey convent where wide steps waited for her. She headed towards the building as the front door opened. A small figure stepped onto the verandah. She was engulfed in her habit, hands slipped inside the opposite sleeves, only her pale face visible amongst the brown fabric. She was too far away to see the detail of her features, but there was

something of Pualele's mother about her - and Pualele felt comforted by this.

“Welcome.”

The nun's voice was melodic and Pualele detected an accent - big fat vowels and a 'v' where the 'w' should have been. Here was someone that was different, just like her. She had been concerned with everyone gone, that she would be lonely. But now she felt some hope that she might find the companionship and love she had been missing.

Pualele walked up the stairs, stopping one step below the waiting nun. The older woman remained impassive and just when it seemed she was about to speak, she turned and walked inside the convent, leaving Pualele to scramble after her.

Baking bread mixed with the unmistakable odours of borax and wax were the first things that she noticed. They were familiar smells of

the life she had left behind. She swallowed carefully, feeling less nervous about this new place. Her hands remained coiled into fists, her fingers worrying the scars that sat in the middle of each palm, twin images of each other.

And overlaying all the familiar smells was the stillness. Sounds were soft and muted as the sisters went about their work in peace. The walls were white – not a bright diamond white, but the kind that has the shine taken off it. Subdued.

The nun stopped and was waiting for her again. This time, Pualele could see the crêpe-like skin that covered her face. Deep lines ran from her nose down to her mouth and spread outwards from the corners of dark brown eyes.

“Mother will be with you soon.” Her voice had a soothing quality to it and Pualele allowed her hands to relax. The nun motioned to a wooden chair leaning against the wall. To the left of it, there was a door that reached up

towards the vaulted wood ceiling that added to the piousness of the convent.

“I don’t mind waiting. Really I don’t. I’ve been waiting forever to come here.”

Pualele bit her bottom lip and dropped her gaze to the tongue and groove floor. She couldn’t believe her own boldness. She clenched her hands as she willed the words back, and then tentatively raised her eyes. The corners of the nun’s mouth started to twitch, and the lines around her eyes crinkled before she turned away from Pualele. It was those same undisciplined outbursts that had got her into trouble as a child, but she wasn’t going to let impetuosity ruin this. She didn’t know the older nun’s name, but she made a mental note to find her and thank her later.

It was hard to tell the age of the Prioress. The hair that escaped her headdress was still

dark blonde, and the skin that stretched over her cheekbones was pale and smooth. It was the eyes that suggested her age. They had started to yellow and a filmy white cataract was creeping its way across her left eye. Pualele knew better than to stare, but she could not stop checking to see if the milky eye was still able to see her.

“Welcome, Sister.”

The eye came to life as she spoke.

“Father Barry speaks highly of you,”

She nodded, not knowing what to say.

“He says you have a great love for our Lord. Are you determined to persevere?”

“Yes, Mother.”

“Good. I understand that you wish to take the name ‘Mary’?”

Pualele bobbed her head again, her mouth barely open trying to do the right thing.

“But what if I don’t love Him enough?”

“That is the lot of a Postulant - to learn to love with commitment and not be deterred.”

She wanted to be committed, to persevere until the end.

“I have asked Sister Teresa to guide you. She has been with us almost as long as I have, and she knows how hard it is for a young woman to make such a decision. Go now and Sister Teresa will show you to your cell before Free-Time.”

Outside the door, the older nun waited.

She held Pualele’s case in her hand and led her along the hallway and up a narrow staircase. At the end of a long corridor was a room with its door open. Sister Teresa went into the room and placed the small bag on the end of the bed. She whispered to Pualele.

“Come to the garden once you’ve unpacked.”

She crept down the stairs and along the hallway, mindful of sounds coming from behind closed doors. The back door was open and she could see a raised vegetable garden running along one side of the property, while on the other were trees – plum, apple, peach and several more she could not identify. There at the back of the garden, Sister Teresa was leaning over a low fence of chicken wire, scattering food scraps.

Pualele stood a few feet behind the older woman waiting to be noticed. Once the scraps were gone, Sister Teresa turned and walked up to Pualele, and without uttering a word, she handed her the empty bucket. Sister Teresa walked on towards the vegetable garden where she drew a short bladed knife from her belt, bent forward and started cutting silverbeet. Once she had a handful of the dark green leaves, she held her fist up and Pualele clambered over the raised edge of the bed, taking them from her.

Pualele was grateful for the quiet. Sister Teresa seemed neither happy nor displeased with the company. She merely continued with her jobs using Pualele to help when she thought of it, ignoring her when it seemed too difficult. For the new Carmelite, Sister Teresa was a reminder of her Mama and Mrs Davsion. These women were frugal with their speech too. Words were too important to fritter away with meaningless chatter.

A bell rang inside, and Pualele found herself following Sister Teresa back into the convent and the kitchen.

“Do you cook?”

Her throat was parched, unable to let the words out. Pualele nodded instead.

“Potatoes and onions are in the scullery.”

Sister Teresa jerked her head towards the far end of the kitchen.

Pualele walked across the floor that had been polished until the lime linoleum was almost fluorescent. Through the walls of the kitchen she started to hear the patter of feet and the creaking of doors. She felt herself torn between wanting to preserve the companionable silence she was enjoying and a desire to meet the other nuns. When it was clear no one else was going to join them, Pualele sighed and a ghost of a smile appeared, and then just as quickly, vanished. This was exactly where she needed to be.

...

Lunch was served in a narrow room off the kitchen. On one side were French doors facing the garden, and on the other was a wall of solid wood panelling with a sideboard leaning against it. At the west end of the room was a door connecting the dining area to the kitchen, and Pualele stood in the doorway staring at the longest table she had ever seen. Like the

kitchen floor, the table had been polished until it gleamed. Above it hung a chandelier, casting refracted light over the mahogany table top, so that the table appeared to be teeming with silver fish dancing across a flat sea.

Pualele tried to count the number of chairs tucked under the table, but she jumped as the door at the other end of the room opened and a stream of nuns entered. Two went to the sideboard in front of the panelled wall and picked up cutlery, while another two gathered white plates, glasses and napkins, before setting them on the table.

Pualele felt a hand at her elbow and let herself be shown to a seat. She stood behind the chair, hands clasping the back of it as she waited for a signal as to what she should do. She wanted to return to old ways and press her sharp filed nails into her hands. Instead, she

focussed her gaze on the gold line that encircled the white plate in front of her.

It wasn't until the prayer giving thanks was over, that she raised her eyes. There, staring back at her were the twelve residents of the convent. As her gaze skipped over the nuns, she noted another brown face amongst them. At the end of the table stood the Prioress, and next to her a pudding faced nun with wire framed spectacles. She found Sister Teresa across from her, and was surprised at herself when she smiled back at her.

“Sister Mary, we welcome you to our table. We hope you enjoy our simple fare and we look forward to getting to know you after dinner.” Mother Superior's words brought a rush of heat to her cheeks. She would rather they didn't *look* at her or try and speak to her. Pualele had spent many years perfecting the art of being invisible: in the classroom, at home, and at the

funeral parlour where she had worked. She wasn't sure 'Sister Mary' was going to like this attention, even if it meant getting closer to God. Sister Teresa's eyes were on her as she started to scratch at her palms. She had seen the expression before. It said *I know you*. Without thinking, her fingers stopped digging at her flesh. She found herself following the older woman's lead and pulled out her chair, suddenly ravenous for her first meal as a Carmelite.

...

After several months, Sister Mary was welcomed as a novitiate into the Order. She had chosen God over all others – He would never let her down, and even though it was an austere life, she received her habit with joy.

Pualele had taken on the new mantle of Sister Mary and she wore the white headdress and the cropped hair with a guilty pride. She had taken to the hermit life, feeling at peace in

prayer. The sharing of life under the guidance of the Prioress she found more difficult. Everyone she had ever loved had been taken away from her in one way or another. So, she protected herself like the octopus she remembered from her childhood in Samoa, and kept to the crevices and shadows of life.

In Sister Teresa she had found friendship. Her dealings with her remained perfunctory, but a closeness slowly developed that required few words. She observed Sister Teresa – watching her every movement, the way she held herself, her calmness, her only talking when it was necessary. God was showing her the way through the older nun, and there was never a more devout pupil than Sister Mary.

But there was one thing that Sister Mary found difficult to admit, even to herself. She felt envious when it came time for monthly visits,

especially when Sister Teresa received visitors.

There was no one to visit Sister Mary.

On one visiting day, Sister Mary continued working in the garden while her friend went inside to receive a visit from her brother.

Between her forefinger and thumb, Sister Mary picked up a stray runner bean tendril that was searching across the soil for something to cling on to. Carefully, she began to weave the green shoot in between the strings she had attached between stakes in the ground. The stem snapped. She left the rest of the beans untrained and wandered around the perimeter of the garden towards the front of the grounds, angry with herself for being so clumsy. An army of aphids caught her eye as they swarmed over a rose bush. She swooped on them and pinched the little black soldiers between her fingers, satisfied as her hands became slippery with their green juice.

The front door of the convent squealed, and Sister Mary looked up. An elderly man was stooped over, hugging her friend. She flushed as she watched them and hoped they would stop soon, wanting the man to go back to where he belonged. But who was she to say who belonged and who didn't? Maybe it was herself that didn't fit in, and that perhaps she should have returned to Samoa instead of coming to the convent.

After that day, Sister Mary often found herself dreaming of Samoa and her family, even though she knew she could never go home. She prayed for guidance and strength but, sometimes in those solitary moments, the uncertainty would sneak up and she would find herself questioning her commitment to the Order. She would seek out Sister Teresa and her mentorship.

“What if I made a mistake? Sometimes I think I don't belong here.”

“Don’t fret, Sister Mary. The answer is always there - in every soul. The very essence of where we belong.”

It was after these times of counsel from Sister Teresa that she no longer struggled. The older nun made Sister Mary feel she had made the right decision in joining the Carmelites. Her mentor’s words soothing her fears until they were once more pushed aside.

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It was advice that she sought one spring afternoon.

“Sister Karen! Have you seen Sister Teresa?”

“Slow down! Nothing is ever that important.” Her voice was calm and measured as she pushed her glasses back up onto the bridge of her nose. “She’ll be in the garden, I suspect.”

Sister Mary nodded, wishing she could be less impetuous. But she knew she had to speak

to her mentor before she would feel centred again and her doubts would evaporate.

In the garden a shower had passed over, and the grass and trees were slick and shining. She walked past a trowel lying on a partly weeded section of the vegetable patch. Further on, gardener's gloves had been stuck on top of tomato stakes where they hung suspended in the air. Sister Mary turned back towards the convent. On the steps were footprints leading back inside that she had missed before. She followed their trail and found herself outside Sister Teresa's room. Sister Mary tapped lightly and opened the door a crack. She peeked in and saw the older nun doubled over on the end of her bed.

“Sister! Are you alright?”

Sister Mary rushed forward, letting the door close behind her, and knelt down on the

floor in front of Sister Teresa. The older nun's face was tense, her eyes squeezed shut.

“Help me undress.”

She did as she was asked and lifted Sister Teresa's habit over her head and helped her into a dry dress. She picked up the nun's headdress and settled it onto her hair, clipping it into place. As she moved to the side, she saw sitting on the bed next to the old nun a crumpled photograph of a young man. Sister Teresa followed her gaze.

“I've known many Mother Superiors, but I could never confess it.”

She picked up the creased photo and handed it to Sister Mary. They stared at each other.

“I've always obeyed the rules, but it's hard at my age to stay quiet.”

A young man in an ill-fitting suit looked back at Sister Mary, his square face sombre with

dark eyes. She searched for any likeness between the still features in the picture and her friend. Sister Teresa reached up and plucked it out of her hand, slipping it into her pocket. She struggled to her feet and swayed, so that Sister Mary had to grab her around the waist to stop her from tumbling over.

“Perhaps you should lie down?”

Sister Teresa smiled at her, a determined set to her chin.

“I’ll be doing that soon enough. Come. Give me a kiss - the kind that warms you.”

Sister Mary leant forward and pressed soft-full lips to her forehead. The older nun closed her eyes, exhaling slowly just as the bell sounded calling the sisters to prayer.

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Auckland, 2003

Sister Mary opened her eyes again and wished that she could kiss her friend one more

time. The packet was still lying on her lap. It was time. She slid her index finger under the paper flap and eased the envelope open. The first thing her hands came into contact with was an amber lump of translucent rock. It was shiny and warm to the touch and trapped within it, an insect had been preserved, its wings mid-flight. She placed it on the bed next to her and let her fingers wander back inside the envelope.

A small cloth sampler was next. Its white background had discoloured over time; but the mauve, red and green of the embroidery was still as vibrant as the day the needle had carefully been pulled through the cotton swatch.

Sister Mary held the cloth up to her face and inhaled. There was a hint of an odour she couldn't quite identify: something woody, not unlike rosemary. Maybe it was thyme. Lavender! It was lavender. She was pleased with herself as she inspected the embroidery

more intently. It was a simple piece, something that a young girl might make on her first attempt at the craft. The embroiderer had made a series of M's, with lavender sprigs at each end; all straight lines for the stalks and letters, with feathery purple petals for the flowers. MMM - like a contented sigh.

Footsteps in the corridor approached her door and Sister Mary held her breath, her heart beating like a trapped sparrow flying against a closed window. The footsteps passed and she breathed in relief, her body relaxing as she lay back on her bed, closing her eyes. She would probably give everything to the Prioress. At least, that's what she should do.

...

Dalmatia, January, 1944

Olga

To understand me, you must first know something of where I came from. It wasn't just a

place, a point on a map, a village, a community, our home. It was much more than that. Our DNA had built the mountains where we came from, layer upon layer like silt that finally turns to stone. Our dead were interred in mountainside plots, our blood spilled on the rock through misadventure and war until ultimately, we became the place itself.

While our ancestors merged with the earth, our living selves inhabited the world above ground. All along the coast, the mountains crowded around the sea, almost tipping into it as they strove to see what was beyond the horizon. Over time, others came from beyond: the Ottomans, the Hun and the Venetians. Most often they came by sea, and although they raped the land and its people, they could no more remove us from our place in the world than they could destroy the mountains. Our family had

always stayed, and it was here in this place that I was created and here that I began to die.

I don't want you to think that I was an unhappy maudlin kind of child, who kept to the fringes and never learnt to smile. Until that last winter I was happier than I ever had the right to be. I was on the cusp of becoming a young woman – and I was excited. My happiness was the kind that came from ignorance of all the ways that things could go wrong.

If we had run from the War earlier, or had emigrated with my father and older brother, things would have been different – but who's to say? All I know is that happiness is a fickle thing that comes and goes at God's whim. It seems the more content with life you are, the more likely that it will be taken away and replaced with an excruciating sense of loss.

But I'm getting ahead of myself.

I want to you to know that there was a time when life was full of promise. Adventure and opportunity stretched out before me, and I remember my childhood as a time of running free across the rocky mountainside with my friends and the little brother I adored. Sometimes we played silly children's games like hide and go seek. Other times, while we were supposed to be watching the sheep and goats we would lie in the grass and talk. I loved that best of all.

And of all my friends, the one I loved most was Mila. I wish I'd a picture - a coloured photograph to show you how she looked. You would see how her almost-black hair fell down around her slim shoulders in waves of velvet. How if you got close enough, you would see that her eyes were flecked with gold and green. And you could imagine how she inhabited the world - like a magic fairy-woman, a *Vila* come to honour us by just *being*.

She was a few years older than me, but it wasn't her age, it was her beauty that made her stand out like a nugget of gold in a prospector's pan. Next to her I was plain. My hair was that shade of brown you see for only a few brief days when the corn stalks turn from green to golden yellow. No one can ever remember it until they see it again. And there was my oval face with sallow skin that I always thought made me look like an egg. To see us together you would wonder why Mila took an interest in a not-quite-thirteen year old tomboy. It is a question I have often asked myself and I am no closer to an answer now than I was then.

Back then, I thought that we would go on being happy, that the War would end, that my family would be reunited and things would only get better. When I write that now, I wish I could go back and find that young girl with the tawny hair and the dark brown eyes. I would take her

in my arms and tell her that she was good. I would let her know that there was nothing to be done but to follow the will of the Almighty. He determined what happened to us, and there was nothing any of us could have done to change that. But I knew nothing of God then. Mine was an unthinking faith based on guilt. And guilt is a funny thing; it lives on long after the love and the hate have gone.

I guess I should start with the day the Germans came, for that's when my life turned. They were tired and hungry men by the time they arrived in Dalmatia, with orders to quell any resistance. It wasn't the first time this had happened to us. We had been occupied by the Italians until they capitulated. Many of our people had chosen to evacuate and leave the Partisans to fight. But some, like my mother, weren't so easily moved.

That day, the *Jugo* was blowing from the south bringing with it an ill-temperedness that had everyone out of sorts. I was outside feeding Šuša some food scraps. I heard the sound of their boots first. Clump, clump. Clump, clump, as they headed towards us along the lane. I dropped the bowl and it bounced off Šuša's head and landed in the mud, sending the goat scurrying back into her stall. I ran too, inside to my mother. I heard my own heart thumping in time with the marching outside. Mama was sitting with my little brother, Pero, her eyes unblinking as she looked past me to the approaching soldiers. She got up and pushed Pero into my arms. "Sit in the corner," she said and walked to the doorway. She stood there, her arms by her side, back straight and perfectly still. Waiting.

One of the soldiers stepped forward. He was as fair skinned as we were olive and tanned,

a pale creature in grey uniform. He was like someone who had never been outdoors before with hair as white as my goat's coat, and translucent eyes like the scales of a fish. He cleared his throat and spoke in halting Dalmatian as he read from the papers clutched in his hand.

“You are Gospodje Mastrović?”

I saw Mama incline her head forward.

“I inform that we are requisitioning your house under the orders of Sturmbannführer Schüller.”

We all remained exactly where we were. I tried to make sense of what was happening, and I hid my fear just as Mama hid a piece of kauri gum in a small wooden box under her bed.

I thought I should move, stand with my mother and show the soldiers I was not afraid. But I was paralysed by the fear that trapped me there on the floor. So I did nothing at all.

Pero let out a cry. Mama turned her back on the soldiers and moved towards us. Her face was expressionless, but her eyes were blazing like a cat ready to pounce. She bent and picked Pero up, hugging him to her, talking quietly and running her hand over his silky hair. I sat, willing her to notice me. “Come. We must get our things.” I stood while she returned to the doorway. In the few moments that her back had been turned, the soldier had moved too, and was now standing in front of Mama at the door.

“You will wait.” She spat the words at him and tried to close the door in his face. His foot shot out and stopped the door before it could shut. The soldier stood there, his cheeks the colour of claret.

“YOU. WILL. WAIT.” My mother stared at the man. She barely came up to the soldier’s shoulder, but there was an authority in her voice that made the man stop.

“Fünf minuten” he said, holding up his open hand and keeping his foot in the doorway.

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Samoa, August, 1979

Pualele

For Pualele Sina Avua'a, life changed forever with the howls of her mother and aunties. Her father pulled her away before she drowned in all the tears and she rode the bus from her coastal village into Apia, sitting in the back seat squashed between her father and her brother, Kasi, her bag tucked under her legs. She remembered the sun rising, sending out lines of orange and lemon and pink across the island like unfurling crepe paper streamers.

The south eastern coast road turned inland and climbed the road to Le Mafa Pass, creaking from the weight of all the people. At the top, she could see the ocean miles away now, and for the very first time, the valley and the

surrounding hillsides. The area was overflowing with tree ferns that were as tall as the spire on the Lotofaga Catholic Church: coconut palms hid their bounty under green umbrellas while towering banyan trees sent roots to the ground like wax dripping from a candle. Sprinkled throughout were teak trees with leaves the size of doormats with a weave of vines and ferns hidden beneath. The island was a vibrant green with a sapphire sky and white cumulus that floated through the valley as if searching for a way out.

She remembered her father waking her.

“Come on. We’re here.”

Pualele had never been to Apia and she could not believe the scene in front of them; streets turned every which way and so many buildings and houses - who would ever have thought such a place existed. They stayed there for two whole days. She was nine years old and

had never left the south side of the Island, and now she was going all the way to New Zealand. Imagine! Her father told her that they would be taking a boat to the Fiji Islands, and then they would take a plane. A plane! She stopped listening because it just did not seem possible that someone as insignificant as Pualele Sina Avua'a should be going on boats and aeroplanes to New Zealand. Sister Juliana had given her some rosary beads that the Irish nun had told her came all the way from Rome. Pualele laced them in between her fingers as she walked mutely a few paces behind her father and brother through the streets of Apia.

They had put on their best clothes for the walk; they were city people now. Pualele fussed with her lava lava. She suspected that it had come from someone else, but it was so beautiful, with enormous crimson hibiscus flowers splashed across it, that she didn't care. She

wound it around her body, concealing her plain black skirt and white shirt that were leaving presents from the nuns. She imagined herself to be just like the Queen in her stylish touring outfit in the photo Sio had brought back to the village from Apia. It was taken by a photographer from the Samoan Times, and showed the *palagi* Queen waving from the gangway of the Royal Yacht Britannia. If only Pualele had a hat, her outfit would be complete!

Then she saw it: an enormous royal blue and white cruise liner lying harbour side. Just like the Queen's! There were people pouring out of it onto the street ahead of them, men and women talking loudly with big boxy cameras swinging around their necks. Pualele felt shy as they laughed and chattered. Her English wasn't good enough to catch everything, but she could hear them asking for directions to Aggie Greys and how could they get transport to the Robert

Louis Stevenson Museum outside the city. She avoided their eyes, keeping her head bowed and counting her rosary beads.

As the Avua'a family walked along in their finery, fat droplets of water started to fall from the sky. They fell slowly at first, and then picked up speed, hitting the ground and spitting up onto the hibiscus on Pualele's lava lava. She was alarmed as spots soaked into the fabric.

"Quickly." Father had started to pull his new fawn cotton shirt over his head; her brother was doing the same with his until they were both bare-chested. Kasi turned and grabbed at Pualele's lava lava. She gaped at the length of material with its water freckles as Kasi spun her around until she stood there in the street - plain, simple Pualele standing in the nuns' clothes, looking every bit a girl from the village.

The *palagi* laughed as they watched the crazy Samoans rip off their clothes and run for

cover. Some of them even lifted their cameras from under huge black umbrellas and snapped away as the Avua'as headed back to their modest accommodation, their best clothes saved from the offending rain.

...

Pualele's wide feet slapped on the wet road as they made their way past the Queen Elizabeth 2. Kasi grinned at his little sister's full bottom lip, pushed out and turning down at the edges. "We'll be getting on our boat soon."

"When?" She looked at the liner with its royal blue strip hugging the curve of the portside. She hoped that people on board wouldn't remember her as she plodded along in her missionary garb.

"Not that boat, silly. *That* boat."

She followed her brother's gaze and her eyes fell on another smaller vessel. Where the QE2 floated like a building, this one was like a

shed. Samoan Reefer was a refrigerated cargo ship. It transported bananas, but between the decks, there was room enough for passengers. This was their QE2.

Pualele waited for Kasi to laugh. Surely they wouldn't be loaded with the bananas? She watched the stevedores as they carried enormous green bunches of fruit into the holds. There was no gangplank decorated with bunting, simply an open side port, like a gash in the ship's belly. Its hull was painted white, the better to reflect the sun's heat, but it wasn't the bright shiny colour of the QE2's upper decks or Kasi's new shirt; it was an impure island cream. The colour of shells on a beach.

They boarded the Samoan Reefer in the early morning to the sound of the horn of the departing cruise liner. Pualele watched the liner pull out into the harbour, her eyes glassy and nose starting to run. She could see the

passengers waving goodbye to Apia, their thoughts had already turned to the next place on their itinerary, another South Pacific paradise full of its own Aggie Greys and Stevenson monuments.

The ship sailed from Upolu, island hopping all the way from Samoa to Tonga and Niue and then onto Nadi. The whole journey took two weeks and Pualele spent the entire time vomiting in the small four berth cabin. At Nuku'alofa, they were joined by an old Tongan man. Pualele had not noticed the new arrival until she heard him strike a match. She turned her head on the pillow of the lower bunk and saw him light his pipe. As the wisps of smoke floated through the air towards her, she felt nauseous once again and was soon bent in half over a waiting bucket. She thought she wouldn't survive the journey and wished she hadn't been chosen to go to Auckland.

Two days in Nadi, and she was feeling much better. Her father had arranged for her travelling skirt and blouse to be laundered and she was comforted by the smell of starch and soap. It was with some enthusiasm that she boarded the flight to New Zealand, noticing that palagi travelled on planes too. She might have been less eager if she had known that the journey would take just over four bumping hours. But it wasn't Pualele's way to complain about anything.

...

Olga

My mother had piled whatever food lay on our kitchen table into the middle of an old blanket. There was olive oil, goat's cheese wrapped in muslin, day old bread and the last of our *prsut*.

"Olga, get whatever clothes you can find."

I piled spare clothes into the middle of another blanket and we tied them in knots. Mother inserted an old switch broom handle under the knots and we each held an end as we walked back towards the door with the bundles swinging between us.

“Wait.” Mother put her end of the stick down. She walked back towards the deep window sill that opened out to the chicken coop behind our house. From the sill, she snatched up the only photograph we had of my father, slipping it inside her hip pocket. The picture was of him with my brother Ivan, both unsmiling and leaning on shovels. The image was grainy in muted sepia tones. There was a watermark stain across the top of their heads, and someone had written on the bottom of the photo – *Awanui, Northland, Novi Zeland, 1940.*

Outside, the three soldiers milled around the yard and laughed as they taunted the goat.

They tempted her with fresh leaves from an olive branch, and then they flicked her in the face as she came near. They turned when they heard us at the door. The soldier who had spoken to mother earlier stepped forward. His eyes were on the dried ham leg under my mother's arm.

“Nein! Nein! Sie müssen bleiben!”

My mother dropped her end of the stick again and walked forward until she was standing alone in front of the gathered men. She pushed through them and they watched her as she walked into the stable where Šuša and Darko, the donkey, were sheltering. She tethered the animals together and led them out into the yard. The young soldier was becoming apoplectic.

“Nein! We keep the food!”

As he continued to shout, another soldier walked into the yard flanked by two others.

“Entschuldigungen, Frau Mastrović.” The man who spoke seemed a little older than the

others and his uniform had different markings on it. He sported a moustache in the style of the time and below a greying widow's peak and moist forehead, were eyes the same colour as his uniform. He walked to the front of the group.

“Please,” he said in Croatian. “Food stays, bitte.”

I'd an uneasy feeling. He was smiling, this man, but the smile had not reached his voice and as his lips parted, I could see the glint of gold in his teeth. The other soldier had been demanding in his recited Dalmatian, but this man was like a hunter luring his prey. From the doorway, I watched my mother and the man facing off like roosters in a cock fight.

I didn't hear the sound, but I saw the lob of spittle land on the man's face. It slid down his cheek and for a moment I thought I might have been imagining things. No one moved. Pero started to giggle. The soldier turned his head

and focussed on my little brother. Pero turned and hid his face in the folds of my dress. The soldier reached into his pocket and pulled out a white handkerchief. Very slowly, he wiped the spittle off his face. He refolded the handkerchief carefully, and placed it back into his pocket.

His face was impassive and his eyes were steady on my mother. His hand slowly moved and rested on the Luger nestled in the holster hanging at his side. As he undid the clip, it sounded like the flick of a whip. I winced.

“What’s going on here?”

Uncle Jure stepped out of the trees that lined the lane. His eyes darted from my mother to the German. He walked towards slowly but without hesitation to Mama’s side, putting his arm around her. “*Meine...Schwester.*”

“*Sprechen Sie Deutsch?*”

“*Ein bisschen.* I was a sailor. Captain was German.”

“Then my Croatian is better than your German! Would you tell your sister that if she wants to continue living... perhaps she would be kind enough not to spit in my face?”

“*Entschuldigungen*. There must be a mistake. She is...alone, you can see...my brother...”

“A Partisan!”

“No!” Mama’s fight turned to panic.

“He’s in New Zealand. I...I have a letter.”

Mama retrieved a letter from the house, smoothing down the grey and red stamps that were peeling off. The soldier took the letter from her and examined the postmarks and stamps that had started to curl away from the paper. He opened the envelope and cast his eye over my father’s letter, raising an eyebrow as a smirk played at his lips. He held the envelope in his hands, and as his eyes found my mother’s, he

ripped it slowly in half. Jure's hand clamped onto Mama's shoulder at the tearing sound.

"I assure you, that even though my wife and children are very far away, I will not spit in your faces."

My mother was cursing under her breath as her body seemed to be about to launch itself forward at the soldier. Fear turned me into a cowering child and I squeezed my eyes shut.

"Please Ana," Uncle Jure spoke quickly to her.

"They're taking the house!"

"It's ok..."

"Enough! Your sister and the children will leave. Food will stay." He paused and I watched as his chest rose and fell as if in an effort to draw in as much air as possible.

There was a shuffling as someone else approached.

“Please, sir. Take my home. I am an old man. It is bigger and I have more supplies. Take it all.” Ivica’s words whistled out, singing from a mouth that had lost most of its teeth. His words sounded reverential, but as he lifted his head and uncurled his crumpled form, he was more like a benevolent King come to give alms to the poor. Ivica had no relatives left in the village - we were his adopted family. He helped my mother on our small holding whenever he could, and in exchange, she mended his clothes and provided him with her best bread.

“What is this man saying?” The German’s hand was caressing the gun at his hip. “You,” pointing at my Uncle, “What’s he saying!”

“He says take his house, please. He has...lots of food. Bigger house. More food. Please.” Jure was stumbling over the words, distracted by my mother who appeared to be on the verge of snapping. We all waited for the

German; Mama biting back words, Jure and Ivica trying to appear benign and me biting my lower lip as Pero embedded himself in my side.

“You people need to understand who is in charge. If your...sister... should forget who is in charge here, I will not be so lenient next time.”

He clicked his heels together and walked stiffly away. He spoke quickly to the other men waiting behind him, and then in a flurry of one-armed salutes, he stalked off back down the laneway. I watched him leave, while another unsmiling soldier came forward. He had a large khaki canvas bag in one hand and a knapsack on his back. He barely hesitated as he tore the ham away from my mother to the sound of his comrades' laughter. He turned to Ivica, and shouted in German, pushing Ivica in the small of his back so that he almost fell over.

“Go Ivica,” said Uncle Jure. “You must show them the way. Come to my house after...”

The other four soldiers followed, but not before pulling open our blanketed parcels and taking the cheese and bread with them and leaving the rest of our possessions scattered on the ground. They marched two abreast along the lane, back towards my uncle's house and the rest of our small village.

“Come, Ana.” Jure mussed up my hair as my mother stood there with her mouth pinched shut. “Take the children inside. I'll go and make sure Ivica is okay. I'll be back with food.”

We watched him leave too, our precious belongings lying at our feet. I noticed how the trees and shrubs were covered in a light film of dust from the German's boots with their rounded black leather toes and thick tread. I thought I heard their guttural voices on the breeze coming up from the houses further down the mountainside. And I remember wondering, how many of them would also be receiving an

unsolicited houseguest? As I walked over to soothe Šuša and put her and Darko back into their shelter, I saw the outlines of the standard issue soles in the dirt, trampling uninvited all over our village.

...

Pualele

Over the roar of the engine, there was a loud bang followed by a continual whirring sound coming from the underbelly of the plane. Pualele was frightened, her head feeling like it might explode as her ears blocked. She watched the Air Hostess on departure and expected the emergency oxygen masks to drop down at any second, but they didn't and there was no sign of the hostess. The passengers seemed unconcerned. They simply continued reading, or sat back with their eyes closed. Even her father was calm as he held the Bible in front of him and mouthed the words as he read. Kasi was

asleep, leaning into the side of the plane and dribbling slightly as a low rumble came from his throat.

Pualele sat between her father and brother, her panic growing. Meanwhile, the other passengers and air crew appeared relaxed, some were even excited. Perhaps this was what you did when you were about to die, you accepted His plan and grew excited at the prospect of entering eternal life. But such acceptance was not what Pualele felt at that moment; she wanted to see her mother one last time before she died. Terror rose up through the vibrating fuselage and Pualele grasped Afakasi Avua'a Snr's fleshy arm as the Air Hostess passed by. "Ten minutes until landing." Her father squeezed her hand and then returned to his Bible, this time speaking the words out loud.

“..and some fell among thorns; and the thorns sprung up, and choked them. But others fell onto good ground, and brought forth fruit...”

Pualele stopped hearing the words after a while. Instead, she concentrated on not crying as she tried in vain to stop the warmth that was leaking out between her legs onto the seat.

...

The plane taxied to the terminal and the Auva’as alighted in varying states of enthusiasm. Father was observant and slow moving, as if he wanted to savour everything: the cool breeze that came off the mangroves and mingled with the plane’s fumes; the ground staff shepherding the new arrivals towards the building; and the other passengers, chattering about their Pacific adventures. Kasi was sombre, scuffing his feet as he walked along the tarmac.

Pualele bent her head down and walked several paces behind her father and brother.

She was fearful that someone would notice the wet patch at the back of her lava lava. Her first steps in New Zealand were ones of shame and self-loathing. Would they let her into their country, these white men and women? And what if the people who owned the plane found her seat? But, most of all, what would Aunty Sefi think of her having peed her pants? Perhaps she would be sent back so that one of the other Auva'a children could take her place. It never occurred to her to question why it was that she was going to New Zealand instead of one of her other siblings. After all, she couldn't work and earn money. She wasn't pretty like Lani or clever like Sione. She was Pualele, and she was nine years old.

They found their luggage eventually, the biggest 'bag' having exploded. The twine used to tether it together had snapped and the clothes within the woven mat had spilled over the

concrete floor of the luggage claim area. Pualele was mortified to see her underwear lying on the ground in full view of the other passengers. Tears rolled down her face in fat drops. Father was distressed too. He struggled to place all the clothes back into the middle of the mat. He spoke urgently to Kasi, who sat on top of the pile while Father tied the twine. People walked around them, as if they were avoiding stepping in dog faeces. The *palagi* eyes skipped over the family as they scrambled to collect their possessions, not knowing the new immigrants would never dream of asking them for anything.

Finally, the bags and assorted luggage were loaded onto a trolley and trundled towards the Customs officials. The Auva'a's passports were stamped – *“Three months - visitors permit”*. Father led the way, head held high with pride, as he and his two children walked through the doors towards their new life.

“Welcome to Auckland!” Aunty Sefi was as large as two men put together and approached her brother-in-law and children with a smile that threatened to split her face in half. There were kisses and hugs all around. Aunty grabbed Pualele and hugged her so that her small self almost suffocated between Aunty’s enormous breasts. Pualele gasped for breath as Aunty clutched her upper arms and held her out for inspection.

“You’re too skinny,” she laughed. “I’ll feed you up!”

Aunty kept laughing as a horn hooted and made Pualele jump. The front of a long black Lincoln Continental hearse swung up to the sidewalk and Uncle Sam hopped out of the driver’s seat. He moved slowly, leaving the excitement to Sefi.

“It’s a work car!” Aunty grinned and nodded. “I’m very proud.”

Pualele wasn't sure whether Aunty was proud of the car or Uncle.

"Come! Now we go to our home. It's in the Richmond Road. Grey Lynn. Very good place to live." Pualele's jaw fell open. Rich Man Road! Pualele Sina Auva'a was going to live in *Rich Man Road!* The thrill she felt when she had first started the journey to New Zealand returned. It even helped her forget about the wet lava lava until Uncle spoke to her.

"You sit with us in the front!"

Pualele stared at the front bench seat with its fine leather upholstery and lingering smell of incense. She thought of running back towards the plane.

"Come Pualele. We're very happy you're here!"

Father gave Pualele a push in the small of her back. "Go!"

Reluctantly, she walked towards the car and stood by the passenger door, the drive to the house in Rich Man Road suddenly more terrifying than any of the boat or plane journeys in the world. Kasi was already in behind the driver's seat, his feet on the leather as he reached into the back where their bags were piled where a coffin should be.

"Feet off!" Aunty was screaming at him, her face crumpling into a frown.

She was at the door now and had grabbed Kasi by his waistband, pulling him out of the car, his backside leading the way. Aunty released him and Kasi struggled to stand as she then grabbed onto his arm, her head shaking as she made a clicking sound.

"You're not in Samoa now, Afakasi."

He squirmed as she pinched the back of his arm.

“What do you want with that?” She motioned with her head to the *laufala* he had tucked under his free arm.

“For Pualele.”

Aunty snatched it away. The Auva’a siblings remained motionless while Aunty drummed her fingers on the pandanus weave, considering her options.

“It will keep such a beautiful car clean from our travelling clothes. We will all sit on one.” Father’s voice was firm as he stepped forward.

Aunty’s frown deepened and her mouth opened, formed an ‘o’ as she turned towards Father, her shoulders pulling back so her chest reached forward to confront him. Pualele held her breath and inspected the white rims of the Lincoln’s wheels while Aunty and Father held their positions on the pavement. She prayed that Father would say something, and as she raised

her eyes she saw Kasi standing there calmly. He gave her a quick nod and Pualele started to breathe again.

Father waited patiently, his face soft and open. "Come now, Sefi. You don't want our village bums on these seats, do you?"

Aunty cleared her throat, wobbling where she stood just as Uncle arrived back from returning the airport trolley. "Sefi?"

Her scowl vanished and in its place her happy beaming face reappeared. She glanced at Uncle Sam before turning back to Father. "Yes. That's right, brother. You will *all* sit on one!" She turned back towards the car and thrust the mat towards Pualele as if the idea had been Aunty's very own. Pualele wanted to take the mat and jump in the back, snuggling in between her father and Kasi. Instead, she took the *laufala* from Aunty and slipped it under her, back against the creased tan leather, bum on the

criss-cross pandanus leaves. Uncle raised an eyebrow at Aunty. She shrugged and he started the car and headed for Rich Man Road.

...

Olga

I raced up the slopes of Biokovka; enormous slabs of ancient rock leading the way to the summit. I jumped from one giant stone to another, imagining that I was a mountain goat. I cast a look out over the Adriatic, dappled with islands. The sea stretched all the way across to Italy and past that to the rest of the world. I loved the sea. Our sea. It held opportunity. I wondered if I would ever be one of the people to sail off to America. Or Australia. Or maybe even New Zealand where my father was.

Mila and I'd decided if we were to go anywhere, America would be our choice. There we could have our own dresses, not hand-me-down ones. They would be made out of silk and

we would live in big houses, two storeys high.
And not a two storey house where we slept on a platform above the animals, like Baba Danica still lived in. No! We would live in a house only for human beings. We would have our own rooms to sleep in and we would become famous and be driven in our very own cars by a man that called us by our new English names, Milly and Olivia.

Mila had given me a postcard from her sister who lived in a place called St Louis. The card showed a city crammed with buildings that sprawled out by a wide river. The river had boats with huge wheels at the back of them that Mila said were called paddle steamers. St Louis was 'the Gateway to the West'. I didn't know where 'the West' was, but anywhere that had a gateway to it must be somewhere very special. And that's where we wanted to be.

I breathed in the smell of the hillside – a mix of lavender and sea air. My thoughts turned

back to the men who'd come to our village. Perhaps I'd imagined them. Mama was always complaining that I spent too much time dreaming about what I couldn't see and would never have. She said I would do better if I accepted what God had in store for me instead of dreaming about things that would never happen. For Mama, dreams only made you sad for what you can never have. They were an extravagance for those who could afford to squander time thinking. And thinking never fed a family.

The hillside was speckled with trees, gardens and clusters of buildings. From up here, I could see the stone walls that hugged the curvature of the hillside; they were like girdles around the mountain, stopping it from spilling into the sea. Further down, where the water lapped at the feet of the village, were the russet tiled roofs of our church and the houses in the village proper. The town square lay next to the church

and was like a sheet of discoloured paper by the side of the dirt road that connected us to the rest of the coast.

My eyes scanned the landscape for signs of the soldiers. In the distance I could see the villages further along the coast with their own white stone houses and church spires. But there was nothing to be seen of the Germans. I was not able to shake the image of the soldier with the spit rolling down his cheek. I'd never seen my mother behave like this before, and I shuddered as I continued on, hoping to find the twins, Mila and Oliver, tending their few sheep.

I was searching for wild dandelion and parsnip for Mama that I could easily have found closer to the village, but foraging higher up the slopes was a good excuse to get away. As I turned, my foot slipped off a stone step and I fell, peeling the skin back and making a small tear in my dress. A trickle of blood ran down my leg. I

brushed away the blood with an already muddied sleeve as a sweet smelling hand clamped itself over my mouth. There wasn't time to think before Mila had leant forward in front of me and put her free hand up to her lips. I nodded as she removed her hand from my mouth and pulled me behind some boulders.

We heard loose stones sliding and then bouncing off the bigger rocks from somewhere above us, then nothing. Mila pressed in closer to me so that I was sandwiched between the boulder and her body. I felt the length of her against me, her hip bone pressing into my back and one of her legs hooked around mine. Through the softness of her chest pressed to my arm, I could feel her heart beating fast. I dared not move in case she should get up and leave. Then something moved just out of my line of vision, and she leant forward towards me, her

face coming as close to my ear as she could without actually touching it.

“Don’t move.” She exhaled into my ear. I held my breath waiting for more. I could’ve stayed there forever just like that lying next to her on the mountain.

“Got you!” There was a thump as someone landed on the ground below us. Our screams echoed out across the hillside.

My breath burst from me as I turned and saw that it was Oliver grinning at us. Mila struggled to her feet, laughing too.

“Smile, Ola!” Oliver was standing next to his sister, both of them with wide grins on their faces. I didn’t feel like smiling. I wanted to be lying back where I was a minute before he had landed next to us. How could I explain to him that he shouldn’t be here, or tell Mila that I would rather just be next to her and have her whisper to me again?

Oliver's eyes were on me and I felt my skin growing hot. I'd caught him looking right at me like that before. His eyes had run over me in such a way that it felt indecent. I'd returned the stare, and it was only my nervousness that had me look away. I knew I should mention it in confession.

"Come, we have something to show you," said Mila taking my hand.

We crossed the pasture where the animals grazed, oblivious to our movements. Where the pasture disappeared, the hillside spewed up lumpy formations from the stony ground, and Mila let go of my hand and let her fingers trail over the taupe rock.

"In here."

I followed her and Oliver to the entrance of a cave we had found years before. I ducked my head as we entered, and waited a moment

while my eyes adjusted to the darkness. It smelt of damp earth and rodent droppings.

“Ola! Look at this!”

I followed Oliver to where the shape of Dragan hovered over a glowing candle. In front of the candle were long bundles wrapped in sheets of canvas. Out of the corner of one of them poked the butt of a rifle.

“And this.” Dragan nudged the canvas with his foot and we all heard the sound of glass bottles rolling against each other.

“Yeah. And we think there’s some other stuff under here too.” Mila, Oliver and Dragan were all peering under a ledge that was not more than two feet off the cave floor. I watched Oliver as he lay down, his arm and upper body disappearing as he searched under the ledge. Dragan was crouched down beside him, and I noticed his hand resting in the hollow of Mila’s

back, before she wriggled sideways away from him, making his hand fall away.

“Listen!” Oliver craned his head towards the entrance of the cave. “Someone’s coming.” He dashed behind an outcrop of rock, extinguishing the candle and fanning the air with his arms. Dragan followed him as fast as he could with his withered leg, pulling Mila with him.

I dropped to the floor, grimacing as I landed on my knee, and slid into a recess in the cave wall.

Slowly, men’s voices started to drift into the cave.

I could see nothing. The light that illuminated the first few feet inside the cave was blocked. There was a sound of heavy bags being dumped on the floor and the clatter of metal on metal. There was a grunt as someone hefted a bag further into the cave, his face in profile against the outside light.

The two men worked quickly.

My foot was becoming numb as I pressed it into the wall of the cave. I hoped that the men wouldn't stay long, but they were talking. It felt wrong to be sitting there listening as they discussed Germans and keeping the village safe. Who cared why the soldiers were here? They would go like the Italians; and Mila had said that the Germans in Ivica's house had given them a bar of chocolate.

From where we hid I heard the sound of bags being dragged further into the cave. My heart started pumping harder as the grunting and pulling came nearer to our hiding place. I tried to hold as still as the rock I was pushed against, but something was tickling my bare leg. I reached down with my free hand and felt the soft brush of fur on the back of my hand. I gasped and moved my legs to scare the rat away. The pulling

stopped, and for a moment, there was stillness in the cave.

“What was that?” There was a rattling of glass and the striking of a match as an oil lamp started into life. A man I didn’t recognise swung the lamp around, an arc of light grazing the top of Mila’s bowed head. The rat was sitting on the cave floor a few inches from where I was hiding. It froze momentarily in the lamplight, before it scurried off towards the far wall of the cave.

“A rat!”

He turned back to his companion who was bending over the bags. I watched their backs as they pushed them under a gap between the cave floor and the overhang, spending sometime ensuring that everything was hidden from sight before extinguishing the lamp.

“Let’s go.”

We heard them leave and when there were no more sounds from outside, I felt myself

relax, the pins and needles pricking my sleeping foot awake.

I saw Mila craning her neck to see over the rocks, while Oliver and Dragan were already moving from their hiding spots. Amongst the search and the discussions of what to do next, nobody heard the approaching footsteps until the light at the entrance of the cave was once again shuttered from the outside world.

“What the hell...”

“Run!” Dragan and Oliver were closest to the entrance. They had jumped up and Oliver had run at the figure silhouetted in the mouth of the cave before Mila and I'd a chance to react. I saw the bigger frame fall to the side as the two smaller figures ran out into the sunlight. I ducked down into my hiding place just as I saw Mila spring over the fallen man's legs. I heard the man groan, his feet scraping as he tried to stand. There was a pause before I heard him running

out of the cave. I knew that I didn't have long before he would be back; this time I was up and gone.

Daylight burned into my head and paralysed me for a just a few seconds while I adjusted to its brightness. Then a large hand grabbed my shoulder and spun me around. "What the hell do you think you're doing? Hhhmm?"

Father Bilić was angry and there was something about the way he was yelling at me that reminded me of the German soldier. He was a tall man who had the shape of a sack of grain hanging on a hook in the cellar, and he squeezed my shoulder until I winced with the pain.

"Please! You're hurting me!"

"That's nothing to what the German's or Ustashe would do to you! Who else was with you? Tell me!" He shook me and I shut my eyes

while tears leaked out. I tried to swallow but I was choking.

“Tell me, Olga.” His grip softened. But his voice stayed firm.

“Ol....Oliver...and Dragan.”

He released me, satisfied with the names I'd given, and tilted my head so I was forced to look at him again.

“I'll walk you back to your mother.”

...

Father Bilić followed me down the stone path leading to my house. We picked our way between giant boulders and homes that had been abandoned over time as our people had moved down the hillside towards the sea. The houses were like old men who had shrunk with age, their bones warping until there wasn't a straight line to be seen. The walls bore deep wrinkles, as vines strangled the last of the life out of the buildings. If we'd paused, we might have

heard a rustling of leaves and sticks as some animal scuttled further into the belly of the houses. But the priest showed no sign of stopping until we were in front of my mother.

By the time we reached the end of the track, I was feeling quite ill. Father Bilić hadn't said a word. I wondered what he would tell my mother. That we'd been in a cave far above the point on the hillside that we were forbidden to cross? Or, that I'd been in a cave alone with Dragan and Oliver? I couldn't decide which would make her angrier. Perhaps I should run to Uncle Jure and tell him my friends and I'd caught the priest hiding food away from everyone. That seemed my only hope of escaping my mother's anger and a beating with the switch. But a beating was nothing compared to her sharp tongue. One of the first things I learnt from Mama was that some women like men more than they do other women. Or at least that is how my

mother appeared to me. I sometimes wished that I'd been a boy, and then she would have loved me more; or maybe I mean, differently.

As Father Bilić and I got to the stands of pine and cypress trees, my feet dragged, knowing that I would no more run off to Uncle Jure at this point than my mother would stand by and let the Germans take our house from us. Instead, I hung my head and worried about what she would say. We'd been told it was dangerous to venture so far up the mountainside, that if the soldiers caught us alone they would slit our throats and leave our bodies for the birds and foxes.

As we neared our house I could see the door open. The chickens fossicked for scraps in the yard. My mother was in the vegetable patch, pulling the dark green leaves of *blitve* for our dinner. She stood up as we arrived, placing her hands behind her back and arching backwards.

“I’ve been bending down too long! What brings you to our humble home, Father?”

“You work too hard, Ana.”

I felt Mama’s gaze on me. I didn’t meet her eyes and hoped that she didn’t notice the blood on my leg or the rip in my dress.

“Could I have a word?”

“Of course. Come in.”

I followed Father Bilić and Mama to the door, following the worn shoe steps. Mama turned, blocking my way inside. “Go and find Ivica. He went fishing. He might have some *srdele* for us.”

...

I walked off towards my Uncle’s house. It occurred to me that I might very well be in just as much danger in the village. After all, this was where the soldiers were. They were in our homes where they slept in our beds and ate our food and drank our wine. On the other hand,

why would they give us chocolate if they meant to hurt us?

I wondered what Father Bilić was saying. My mother fawned over him. He was always right, no matter what. Everyone in the village accepted his advice as if he were an expert on everything from the cultivation of crops to the gender of unborn babies. Adults were a mystery to me. Except Uncle Jure. He never made me feel bad. He listened to my dreams of going with Mila to America. He nodded wisely when I talked about plans to live in the big foreign cities where everyone was rich. And he told me about my father and my brother. They had been gone so long that I could barely remember them. Apart from when Jure laughed. That's when he looked like the image of my father that I could see when I closed my eyes. I often pretended that Jure was my father, and that made everything seem right.

There was nobody at Uncle Jure's when I got there, so I headed to the small bay where the boats came in. I ran down the path, through copses and past gardens towards the sea. I saw Ivica standing on his own away from the boats that were anchored in the small port.

"Ivica!"

"Ola! Come. You can help me!" He was standing in the shallows and had a length of *bušinać* in one hand. In the other he was holding a crab between his middle finger and thumb. I took one end of the coiled twine while he tied the loose end around the crab, placing a flat stone on its underside. The crab waved its pincers in the air, trying desperately to snip Ivica's hand and escape. "There! I'll throw. You can pull it in." I nodded as he swung the crab above his head, releasing the twine so that it flew out into the water where it landed with a 'slap', slowly sinking beneath the surface. He handed me the

rope and I pulled it in slowly, hand over hand over hand.

The end of the rope was at my feet, the crab tied firmly and still trying to snip anything within its reach. Ivica picked it up and we repeated the throw and pull again. Hand over hand over...

“Got one!” I could feel the insistent pull of the octopus, as every tentacle sucked onto the crab - both of us intent on catching our quarry. A few more pulls and we could see the mottled orange and brown creature as it trailed through the water. Ivica stepped further into the sea and yanked the twine up in the air, grabbing the octopus at the base of its head above the tentacles. As he held it, the colours drained from the frightened octopus until its rubbery skin was white. He stabbed it between the eyes before flipping its head inside out, exposing the slimy yellow-white interior.

He held the octopus in the air and we laughed. "Your mama will be pleased with you!" My joy evaporated. "Wait here. I'll get the fish." As he walked back towards his boat, the fist was twisting again inside me. I was dreading going home, regardless of whether I'd *srdele* and octopus for Mama or not.

As I stood there, angry voices floated down to me from up on the hill. I couldn't hear what they were saying, but I could see Mila and Dragan arguing beneath an almond tree. He had her wrists in his grasp. They stood facing each other for a moment. Their voices dropped, and after a minute Mila rose up onto her toes and kissed Dragan on the cheek. She pulled away from him and disappeared into the trees. Dragan took a step forward before limping off in the opposite direction towards his own house. I hoped that Dragan wouldn't be angry with me when Father Bilić came looking for him.

...

When I returned home, Father Bilić had gone and my mother was peeling potatoes. She glanced my way when I came in, but didn't stop paring the potato in her hand. "You can clean the fish."

I knew what it meant when she stopped talking. I kept my head bent over the fish as I picked up a knife and twirled it in my fingers. I crouched down on the floor over a wooden board and laid out the fish and octopus. I started by scraping off the filmy covering on the octopus, cutting out its black beak and its innards full of tiny crabs from its last meal. I then chopped the tentacles into lengths, the suction caps staring up at me like a hundred little eyes. I quickly put them into a cast iron pot, lifting the board up on top where it balanced as I sliced the rest of the octopus into opaque white strips, flicking them into the pot to cover the 'eyes'. I turned to the

fish while Mama started chopping onion and garlic. The only other sounds were from the animals outside. As I gutted the fish, my face grew hot as I tried not to cry.

Pero wandered in dragging a blanket behind him, rubbing his knuckles into his eyes.

“Mama?”

She put the knife down.

“Come,” she said opening her arms to him. She picked him up, and balancing him on one hip, they left the house. I could see them walking towards my Uncle’s as I felt the tingle of tears behind my eyelids. I kept preparing dinner, wishing that I could follow them. By the time they arrived back with Uncle Jure, the octopus was stewing, the potatoes and *blitve were* boiling over the fire and the fish were cleaned and ready to be grilled.

“Mmmm. Smells good!” Jure winked at me. “Octopus! My favourite!” Pero ran up to me and held out his hand.

“Look what Barba Jure made me!” It was a whistle made from a hollowed stick. He put it to his lips and let out a shrill note that pierced the air.

“Enough! Outside with that, Pero!” My mother pointed at the door and my little brother ran out, still blowing the whistle as he went.

“Why do you make such awful things?”

“It’s fun for them, Ana. Relax!” Jure placed his hand on Mama’s back. She stepped away from the hand and twirled around to face him.

“Relax! I will never relax with those Germans here! And now Olga is running all over the countryside like a wild animal.” She turned on me, her hands waving in the air and spit flying from her mouth as she spoke. “Do you have any

idea what they'll do if they catch you on your own?"

"Ana!" It was Jure's turn to shout now.

"Stop it!" He paused trying to calm himself.

"She won't go up there again – will you *maška*?"

"Stop calling her that stupid name! She's not a cat! And how can you guarantee they won't hurt our children." She was pacing and gesticulating, becoming more agitated as she continued. "You saw them." Her face was red and blotchy. Pero stood in the doorway, his mouth gaping open. His lips started to quiver.

"Ana. They were just being children. Germans and *Ustashe* aren't interested in children." Jure held her hands and coaxed her across the room to a stool. "Sit down. I'll get you something to drink. Olga, you get the dinner." He motioned to my little brother to come to him, and then he carried Pero to the table. Mama reached out, touching my brother's

cheek. He clasped her hand and crawled across into her lap.

“Sorry Mama,”

“No. I’m sorry...” She trailed off and Jure squeezed her arm as he placed a glass in front of her. She cradled the wine in her trembling hands.

“Just don’t go up there again.”

...

The next day was Sunday, and I dutifully walked with my mother and Pero to Mass. I admit that I was a reluctant churchgoer. I hated the sermons preaching fear and guilt, especially when I had done something to be guilty about. But I was obedient, if nothing else, and recited the prayers by rote and ensured that no one ever knew I believed anything other than what was expected of me.

After Mass, I went in search of Oliver and Mila. We had sat across from each other at

Church where I spied Oliver glowering at me. I found the twins watching over some sheep grazing just above the village. In the trees surrounding them, there were hundreds of *lastavice*, small black birds with split tails, sitting on the branches. Their twittering was so loud in the trees that my friends didn't hear me enter the clearing. Mila jumped as she noticed me for the first time. "You gave me a fright!"

"Sorry." I sat down next to them.

Oliver looked my way. "Thanks for sending the priest!"

I felt the creep of pink rising up my neck and onto my face. No one spoke. We were all staring at the few sheep that were milling around a clump of grass. "He made me. Did he come to your house?"

"You bet he did. I got such a hiding. This is the first time I've been able to sit down since yesterday!"

“Shut up! You’re exaggerating.” Mila rolled her eyes.

“I promised Mama I wouldn’t go up there again.”

“But Ola, that’s just it.” Oliver jumped to his feet, frightening the *lastavice* from their perches and sending them skyward. “We’re scavenging for food and minding these bags of bones while there’s plenty hidden away – but Mama didn’t want to hear about that!”

Oliver picked up a stick off the grass and threw it at the sheep so they scattered.

“What happened to Dragan?”

Oliver stood still, watching his sister. “Ask her.”

Mila shook her head, glaring back at her brother as he walked away.

I waited for Mila to speak, but she just chewed on her bottom lip and stared off into the distance. I yearned to hold her hand and ask her

things. I wished we could talk in the easy way we always had, but I felt that easiness slipping away. I searched desperately for the words to bring her back to me. It seemed at that moment my friend was as separate from me as the swallows waiting in the trees to leave. I looked intently down at my bare feet, dread flooding my body as she turned away. She had gone only a few steps before she looked back.

“Thanks...for not telling about me.”

I thought she might say more and we both stayed where we were for a few moments, me willing her to come back.

“I’ll see you later, maybe.”

I stood there mutely, as I watched her moving away through the grass. The fading blue dress clung to her slim waist and pulled across the swell of her buttocks as she took long strides towards the trees and the path home. As she

disappeared from sight, it occurred to me that I didn't know her at all.

I headed towards home. I walked through a group of fig trees, catching a whiff of the humus rising up from the damp earth. Suddenly, I felt a sting on my neck and I raised my hand to brush an insect away. I felt a second sting on my arm and then another hit my dress with a thud. I twisted around and scanned the trees. "Where are you?" The tiny shots kept coming, but missing me now as I moved for shelter behind a tree. I saw a dried kernel of corn fall down at the foot of the tree. "Dragan. If that's you, stop it!" The corn kept coming and I sank down on my haunches and waited. "Please!"

He dropped down from one of the trees, landing with a squishing sound. I moved out from behind my hiding place. "That was for yesterday, cousin!" He grinned at me, a

slingshot in one hand and a bag of corn kernels in the other.

“How’d you know it was me?”

I shrugged. I knew everything about who he was. How his father, Tome, had felled a brown bear in the forests of Bosnia with a slingshot and an iron ball, and how Tome disappeared with the gypsies one summer, only to return with the travelling *Ciganin* caravan the following year with a wife, Bilja and their baby, Dragan.

When Bilja died giving birth to their second son, Tome took comfort in drink. Even when he almost lost Dragan to polio, he left his boy to raise himself as the next drink became the most important thing in his life. Tome’s greatest, and possibly the only gift to his son was to ensure that Dragan knew how to use a slingshot.

...

“Have you seen Mila?” Dragan moved too close to me and I stepped away from him. Something was tugging at me, pulling me away from the question. What did it matter if I told him where he could find her? But I chose to ignore him, suddenly protective of Mila.

“Did you get into trouble?”

“Papa was so drunk that by the time Bilić got to our front door, he was throwing things and cursing at him! He didn’t stay.” Dragan laughed.

“Lucky you!”

“I’m going back up there to get some wine and stuff...”

“What if you get caught?”

“If any German tries to touch me I’ll pop him!”

“A boy with a slingshot and a bad leg.”

Dragan huffed and turned away. “You don’t understand anything!” He stood up straight and I was suddenly aware of how much older he

appeared. His dark blond hair curled over his collar and I saw for the first time a shadow on his jaw line. Muscles flexed in his arm as he balled his hands into fists, a sneer pulling at his face. He stormed away with his distinctive lolloping walk through the figs and down the hillside. For reasons I didn't understand, everything I did or said just made people, even my family, angry with me.

As I stood there alone, the last few *lastavice* were dancing from tree to tree and I watched them as they flitted into the pines and vanished behind me. If something happened they didn't like, they just flew off into the sky. I wished I was a bird. I wanted to grow giant black wings and take to the air and not stop until I made it to America.

...

Outside, large anvil shaped cumulus tinged with pale lemon and mauve, hung over

the Adriatic like fading bruises on the delicate sky. I led Pero around to the chicken coop and we searched out several fresh eggs. We placed them carefully in a basket as the chickens gathered around us, hoping for scraps from the kitchen. Pero picked up a branch and he drew in the dirt while I sat on my heels and leant against the wall of the house and I wondered where we would go if we left here.

I'd never been more than ten miles away from the place I'd been born, but it hadn't stopped me dreaming. Mama had always said she would never leave our village, not even to go to New Zealand where Papa and Ivan were. She said they would come back, and then we'd be a family again. But they had been gone since before Pero was born and I felt I didn't know them anymore. Besides, we had Uncle Jure and he was better than anyone. I hoped that if we

ever went anywhere, that Mila would come too.

Maybe even Oliver.

“Come on, Pero. Let’s go.”

He hesitated. He looked up at the closed kitchen window and then back at me.

“Mama’s busy.” I reached out to him and he slipped his grubby hand into mine. We walked along the lane past Uncle Jure’s and then down the small track that led to Mila’s house. I hummed a tuneless song and as the winter sun hit the tops of the olive trees, turning the leaves from green to silver.

Mila was outside carrying an armful of dark green *blitve* back towards her house. She stopped when she saw us enter the yard.

“Hey, Mila!”

Her face was blank.

“What’s wrong?” She didn’t move at first, but her gaze drifted over my shoulder before she shook her head. I followed the direction of her

gaze. Close behind, the fish-eyed soldier was walking towards us.

“*Guten Morgen, Fraulein.*” He inched towards Mila, his lips parting as he ogled. I felt Pero’s grip on my hand tighten as Mila slipped in next to me.

“They’ve taken Father Bilić and some other men. They’re taking all our food too,” Mila whispered to me.

The soldier stepped closer and spoke to Mila. “*Kein Reden.*” His skin was almost transparent; it seemed the blood would burst through its filmy covering.

Pero whimpered at my side and edged behind me so that I was between him and the soldier.

“*Was geht hier weiter?*” Out of the front door of Mila’s house strode another soldier, his voice flooding the yard with his harsh tones. “*Sie sind nur Mädchen. Schnell! Starren Sie nicht,*

Wagner! Wir brauchen mehr Speise.” He turned and looked directly at me. *“Kommen Sie!”* He held out his long arm and snapped his fingers at me. I kept my eyes fixed on a small black pebble on the ground. I thought if I ignored him long enough that he would stop talking at us, and Pero and I could disappear.

I heard his footsteps grinding across the yard. The German stood directly in front of me. His open palm reached out towards my face and tilted my head upwards until I could not avoid his eyes any longer. Everything about him seemed oversized: his hands like opened cabbage leaves; his thick perfectly formed lips; and his body a giant from one of Uncle Jure’s stories. He wet his lips and then let his hand fall away from my chin to my forearm. He placed his other hand on Pero’s head, turning us both around until we were facing the direction from which we’d come. I glanced towards Mila, the fish-

eyed soldier standing close to her, his eyes wandering over her body. Oliver was on the other side of her, his face slack.

In the doorway of the house, I caught a glimpse of Roza, Mila and Oliver's mother. Her hands were trembling as her fingers tried to button up her blouse.

The soldier pushed me in the small of my back, and while still crushing Pero's hand in mine, I started the walk towards our house. As we moved away from Mila and her family, a dog whimpered in the almond trees at the head of the pathway. His whining was accompanied by the twitter of birds in the trees, and apart from our breathing and the stomp of the German's boots following us; these were the only sounds to be heard.

...

By the time we reached our house, Pero was having trouble breathing, wheezing and

stumbling as I pulled him along. I didn't want to stop. If we kept going, if we paid the soldier no attention, perhaps he would simply disappear.

Mama came to the door as we crossed the yard. She stiffened when she saw the soldier behind us and stepped out of the house. Her cheeks were flushed. She was in no mood for a German on her doorstep.

Cabbagehands herded Pero and me towards Mama and the front door. Pero was gasping and we stumbled forward until we were enveloped in Mama's arms. She pulled us in to her. But I felt little comfort in her embrace.

"Food and wine." His lips parted to let out the stilted request.

"Get whatever's inside." My mother spoke quietly, her head turned to me, but her eyes stayed on the soldier. "And the eggs. There's a skin of wine hanging on the hook too. Go!"

I got the food and wine together as quickly as possible. The eggs we had collected were in the basket on the table. I slipped three out and placed them under an over-turned copper, before piling leftover bread and some cheese and almonds into the basket. I plucked the wine skin off the hook with my free hand and went back to Mama's side. She nudged me towards the waiting man. I stopped in front of him and bent to place the basket and wine skin on the ground. As I let go of the handle and started to turn away, I felt his hand clamp around my wrist, pulling me towards him. I knocked the basket, scattering the food over the ground like chicken feed, my foot crushing an egg as I went. I fell against his body, struggling to escape as his grip tightened.

“Let her go!” My mother was screaming.

Laughing, Cabbagehands lifted my arm and tried to spin me around as if we were dancing. He spun me again and again until I

was dizzy, disorientated, tumbling into him once again. This time he stopped and leaned down until his hazel eyes were level with mine. I turned my face away as he exhaled his soured breath. My belly churned uncomfortably. He tried to twist my head back towards him, his hand on my cheek. I reacted without thinking of the consequences. I turned my face aside and bit the soldier's palm. He let out such a yell that I almost didn't hear over the gunshot.

He cursed loudly as he yanked his hand away from my mouth, and slapped me with an open palm across the cheek. My head snapped to the side so that I was facing Mama. More gunshots followed – back and forth, talking to each other on the hillside. The German released me and reached for the Luger at his side. His eyes surveyed the surrounding trees and then without another look, he ran off towards the guns, sending loose stones clattering off the

path. There were indistinct voices in the distance, but we didn't wait to hear what they were shouting. Mama ushered us inside and leant against the door's solidness as she closed her eyes and exhaled.

"Tell me what happened?" Mama was busy pouring *rakija* into a bowl of hot water before setting Pero in front of it with a blanket over his head to ease his breathing.

"They were at Mila's house. One of them was inside with Rosa... he marched us back here. I didn't know what to do!"

Mama moved from Pero to where I was standing by the closed door. She stroked my head, her face tight with concern. "You did the only thing you could, Ola. Don't worry – we'll be safe soon."

"Mama, what was that shooting?"

"I don't know."

"Are we going to leave like the others?"

“Probably. From now on you’re to stay inside. The Germans are nervous and are watching for partisans. We have to keep our heads down so they don’t turn on us.”

“But what if they come back, Mama?”

As my eyes rested on her, I thought that she appeared much older. Deep lines fanned out from the corners of her eyes and mouth and her skin had started to sag around her chin and neck. My mouth was dry and I couldn’t swallow even though I needed to. I thought she was going to say something, but she turned back to Pero who was still crouched over the steaming bowl of water, breathing in deeply the fumes of the *rakija*.

...

Uncle Jure arrived as the late afternoon light gave way to the creeping evening darkness. He was agitated and anxious to speak to Mama

on his own. Pero was in better spirits and sidled up to Jure, searching his face for an answer.

“I don’t have anything for you.” He gently ran his hand over Pero’s head, but instead of picking him up as he normally would, he moved over to Mama and motioned for her to follow him. They slipped out and stood talking outside the closed door. I tip-toed across the room, putting my finger to my lips. Pero copied me. I winked at him and he followed, sitting on the floor next to me as I knelt and tried to catch snippets of their conversation through the door. Cold air whistled in through the keyhole against my cheek and I shivered as it blew right through me.

“We can’t go without you. We need you too.” My mother’s voice pleading.

“It won’t be for long...you’ll be ok.” I thought I heard him sigh, and then nothing.

I tugged Pero across the room to the beds where we slept. He snuggled below the blankets

and soon fell into a deep sleep next to me. Much later, Mama came inside and went to her own bed. I could not stop thinking about having to leave our home again. There were times with the Italians when we hid in the caves, but now we would have to abandon our mountains. I was momentarily excited by the prospect – if I could speak to Mila maybe we could make a plan to get to her sister in St Louis. Then fear crept like night shadows across my mind. How would we get there? What about the animals – who would care for them if we weren't about? And what would we eat? Perhaps Mila and I could get some food from the cave. We could even get guns. We could do something if I could talk to her. I lay waiting on the bed hoping it wouldn't be too long before Mama fell asleep.

...

Pualele

Pualele lay in bed that first night staring at the room around her. There were thin curtains of white cotton over the windows that didn't stop the moon from sending a dappled pattern of shadows across the ceiling and walls. Outside, the jacaranda tree's arms tapped on the windowpane. Pualele pulled the blankets and candlewick bedspread up under her chin, wondering who would be looking after Leti the pig. She knew that her other brothers and sisters had no time for Leti. Sione only liked to chase the pig and give it a good kick if it was too slow, and Lani avoided going near it in case it should flick muck onto her. The other siblings were too old to be fussing with a mere pig, so it had been Pualele who had ensured that Leti was the best cared for swine in Samoa.

She put Leti out of her mind. Her eyes came to rest on the picture of a young girl hanging on the wall. It was surrounded by flowers made from silk and draped with a string of rosary beads. On the table a candle glowed weakly from behind a cylinder of glass. Next to it, propped up against a frame, was a prayer card, curling in at the corners and attached to the frame by yellowing sello-tape that was starting to crack and flake away.

Pualele Sina Auva'a

12th May 1962 - 07th June 1970

May the Lord grant unto her eternal rest

And may perpetual light shine upon her

May she rest in peace

Pualele knew all about the second Pualele. She had been named after her maternal grandmother and had died of pneumonia four weeks before her Samoan cousin had been born. And so, here she was,

Pualele Sina Auva'a from Samoa, lying in the bed of her dead cousin, and staring at the shrine that Aunt Sefi had kept for the last 9 years, the candle lit every night as the sun disappeared behind the multicoloured wooden houses of Grey Lynn.

Pualele worried about the candle. What if it fell and the table cloth on which it sat caught fire? And what happened when the perpetual light went out in the night? Could her cousin still see her way to God? She hoped that it wouldn't burn out before dawn came and she wished her mother was here to ease her fears – she would know exactly what to say.

Further around the room, Pualele could make out the pattern of the brown *fleur de lis* on the wall paper. There were rectangular patches where some old paintings or photographs had been taken down, mapped out by the harsh New Zealand sun that bleached any wall paper or

coverings left exposed for too long. *Fleur de lis*. She had learnt about it when the French nun, Sister Emmanuelle, had come to the village for a time to teach, and Pualele had been chosen to help her unpack. The inside of the nun's travel bag had been lined with a silk fabric that was a swirl of hundreds of tiny dagger blades with drooping leaves on either side. The nun had told Pualele it represented the Holy Trinity. She had liked that it represented something that important. The symmetry of the pattern pleased her as well. And now, she took some comfort in it appearing on the wallpaper in her new bedroom. Slowly, Pualele's eyes closed as the *fleur de lis* merged with images of Leti running around the village being chased by Sione...

...

Kasi was standing over her bed. "Wake up! You're going to school." Pualele squeezed her eyes shut and turned her face towards the

wall. Even though she had known that she'd be going to school in New Zealand, the reality of actually walking into a classroom full of unfamiliar children was terrifying. Any confidence she had in her modest English had disappeared after listening to the chatter of the *palagi* at the airport. She had been unable to make out a word they had said. They may as well have been speaking in Chinese like the Leilani Lam's grandfather. She could read and write in English, but speaking? She didn't want to speak to anyone, much less educated *palagi* who would surely laugh at her. They would know that she didn't belong here.

“Come on Pualele. Get dressed!” Kasi pointed to the uniform that someone had left on the end of her bed while she had slept. He pulled the blankets off her, tugging on her arm so that she half fell out of bed. She stumbled to her feet and Kasi vanished out into the hallway.

Tentatively, she ran the back of her hand over the heavy navy tunic, the wool fibres prickling her skin. The label was sticking out and someone had written her name in black pen on it. Warmth radiated from her chest as she picked up her very own uniform. Maybe she did belong after all. She lifted the dress to her cheek, the row of buttons at the back imprinting them onto her skin.

She held the tunic up against her and noted that the hem fell almost to her ankles. It was then that she noticed the small thatch of darning just below the knee. Her pride disintegrated as she pulled the dress to her nose and inhaled the musty smell that no amount of airing could remove. She understood now that the clothes were new only to her. On the bed, brown socks and a white shirt waited for her and she slowly began the process of dressing for her very first day at school.

...

St Mary's Primary School was on the curve of the road as it rose up towards Westmere. Aunty Sefi was on one side, father on the other, as they marched Pualele across the school playground towards the single level weatherboard buildings. Children raced around yelling at each other as a ball bounced in front of the Auva'a's and over their heads. A posse of boys and girls chased the rogue ball as it sped towards the gates. Aunty moved into the lead as Pualele and father followed through this foreign landscape, all of them aware that they stood out in this unfamiliar place.

A large dour-looking nun materialised in the doorway. Aunty Sefi lowered her head as she pulled Pualele in front of her.

"Good morning, Sister Carmel. This is Pualele Sina Auva'a."

Pualele was pushed forward, until she was suspended between her aunty and father, and the enormous nun. She stood motionless in front of the nun's round belly, focussing on the belt that rose up and down with every breath. Pualele considered what might happen if the belt came undone. Would Sister Carmel spill out onto the playground?

"Does the child speak English?" The voice flowed out in a soft Irish lilt, in complete contrast to the body it came from.

"Pualele!" Her father was whispering to her in Samoan. "You must talk. Say 'Hello'."

She swallowed and the word squeaked out of her, barely above a whisper. "Hello."

The nun's sausage fingers lifted Pualele's chin until she was staring directly into her face. "And you will call me Sister Carmel. 'Good morning Sister Carmel.'"

“Good morning Sister Carmel.” She thought she might be sick.

“Right then. In you go. Elizabeth Dillon will show you to your desk.” Pualele stepped forward towards the door of the classroom, away from her Aunty and father. She turned her head, seeking reassurance.

“We’re very proud, Pualele.” Aunty was smiling and growing taller again, while father looked on, hands behind his back, his face immobile.

Inside the classroom, Elizabeth Dillon came right up to Pualele and stood not more than an inch away from her. Pualele stepped backwards away from her.

“You’re the new girl. How come you’re wearing one of those old uniforms? Mine’s new! I’m Elizabeth, like Elizabeth Taylor. That’s my Mum’s favourite actress, ever since she saw her in National *Velvet*. I like Olivia Newton-John in

Grease. Have you seen it? I'm going to go when it comes to New Zealand. My Mum said I could."

Pualele wanted her to stop talking so she could ask her where she should sit, but the girl kept on and on. She couldn't follow it all because she was talking so fast. It sounded like one big stream of noise. Elizabeth twirled her ringlets around her fingers as she spoke and Pualele watched them bouncing into the air like orange springs when she let them go. She had never seen anyone with such hair before. Nor heard anyone talk so much and for so long without stopping to breathe.

"...and Sister Carmel said you're to sit by me so that you can learn faster. I'm top of the class you know. Just like my Daddy was. He owns the Four Square up the road *and* the stationery shop and one day, he said he's going to buy me my very own ice cream store! Do you

like ice cream? My favourite's jelly tip. Do you like them? Jelly tips?"

Elizabeth finally paused long enough to notice Pualele was staring down at the floor. Pualele felt the panic rising in her. What should she say? Should she admit that she had never had a jelly tip, didn't even know what one was? Elizabeth Dillon might laugh at her and leave her to fend for herself. Perhaps it was better to say nothing and let Elizabeth talk again. Pualele felt her face starting to glow red, heard her own heart pounding in her head.

She focussed on the freckles sprinkled across Elizabeth's nose and cheeks as she wondered what to say to her.

"Oh!" Elizabeth's eyebrows rose and her bottom jaw dropped open. "DO...YOU...UNDERSTAND?" She was shouting now with what seemed to Pualele to be excitement. "Oh my goodness! You can't

understand a word I'm saying. Fancy that! But your mother speaks such good English. For an Islander at least. Wait 'til I tell Sister, she'll probably want to put you in the slow class with Timothy Bates and the Mancini girl. She's got a funny name too, you know – Annunzia, or something like that anyway. You'd think her parents would have thought a little more before calling her that! And that's not even mentioning Mariana Sutich...she's not a dummy, but she came to school spelling her name M-a-r-i-j-a-n-a. Imagine it! With a 'J'. Couldn't even spell her own name properly..."

Pualele understood. She wondered when she would meet these other girls who were more like her. Perhaps they might talk less than Elizabeth Dillon and maybe they would understand that she was frightened. And she wanted to tell Elizabeth that her mama was very far away; Auntie Sefi wasn't her mother – couldn't

she see that? But the room that smelt of unfamiliar things like glue and blank paper and floor polish was already a swirl of children babbling and giggling and jostling about as they wove through the rows of desks. A bell had started ringing and Elizabeth was talking again, as she ushered Pualele into a wooden chair at a desk. Pualele sat down and placed her hands on the desk, letting her fingers run over the half-words and numbers like a blind girl reading Braille. As she read the snatches of poems and half completed arithmetic, Pualele remembered why she was sitting at this desk, in this schoolroom, in this city called Auckland.

The bell stopped ringing as a new nun entered the room. There was a scraping of chairs as the children scrambled to their feet behind their desks. Pualele stood up, pushing back her own chair with its wooden seat and metal legs. It crashed to the floor. There were

muffled giggles from some of the children while Pualele blushed and struggled to turn around without falling over the legs of the chair. As she reached down, a brown hand brushed against hers and grasped the wooden back lifting the seat up, returning it to an upright position behind her. Her eyes travelled up the arm of the helping hand, past the grey shirt sleeve and collar right up to a double chin and generous eyes that nestled in the boy's soft brown face. A flash of recognition went between the two. It acknowledged who they were and where they had come from. It was a look that said *I know you*. And Pualele forgot that she was frightened.

“Turn around, please.” The nun's voice was firm but kind.

Without pausing, the nun and the rest of the class launched into the Lord's prayer.

Pualele bowed her head and recited the words to herself, feeling a sense of calm starting to seep

through her body as the words fell into their comforting rhythm. Pualele looked furtively at the nun. Apart from her navy habit, everything about her was pale, almost ghostly: from the tendril of hair that poked out from under her headdress, to the skin of her face and her fine-boned hands. Unconsciously, Pualele stepped back, only stopping when she felt the edge of her chair pressing against her the back of her legs.

At the end of the prayer, everyone sat down and Pualele followed. Elizabeth Dillon was now completely still, her eyes firmly fixed on the nun at the front of the class.

“This morning we have a new student in class. *Pua-lee-lee Oow-var.*” The nun exhaled, glad to have got the name out. Her face became animated as she went on. “Before we begin, I welcome you to our class. I am Sister Margaret.” She spoke softly to Pualele and beamed at her – eyes crinkling around the corners. Pualele gave

a tentative smile in return before the nun went on. “Elizabeth! Sister Carmel has said you are to help Pua-lee-lee.”

Elizabeth nodded vigorously and looked possessively at her charge. Pualele felt panicked by Elizabeth’s enthusiasm for the job and started to breathe more quickly. The rest of the class had turned in their seats to take a good look at the new girl too. Twenty-five pairs of eyes examined her, categorised her and mostly, dismissed her. She was flushing again. If only they would stop staring!

“Eyes this way please children! I think we will start the day with English. You will all write down something about yourselves. Your name. Age. How many in your family. Pets. What you like to do after school. Use your imagination! Then we will read them out so that Pua-lee-lee will know something about us. Quiet now, Michael Davis!”

A boy at the back of the class was whispering and laughing behind his hand. The children were all staring at Pualele, a private joke tweaking their mouths into smirks.

“You too Pua-lee-lee! You will write something so that *we* can get to know *you*”.

Pualele gulped. She would prefer not to say anything about herself. She didn't want to be boastful. But she knew she should be obedient. And despite Pualele's first thoughts about her vapid appearance, Sister Margaret seemed to a kind sort of a nun and Pualele wanted to please.

“I have a pencil you can borrow.”

Elizabeth passed her a brand new 4b red pencil. “It's from my father's stationery shop.” Elizabeth then bent her head over the page in front of her and started to write carefully on the page. Each stroke a precise and measured movement.

Pualele opened her bag and withdrew an A4 lined workbook whose edges had discoloured

over time. The cover was stripped black and red and in the white window her name had been printed in a child's scrawl in blue biro. She opened it to the first page and tried to assemble her thoughts. Then slowly, she began to write *"My name is Pualele Sina Auva'a and I am nine years old..."*

...

Pualele was ready to run away long before the session was over. She could hear the murmurs and the muffled laughs that continued as they scribbled their stories. Occasionally, Sister Margaret would move down the rows of desks stalling the whispering, before returning to the front of the class and her marking. But Pualele couldn't concentrate on writing, knowing that the whispering would start again. Her focus wavered and she wished she was back in Samoa with her mother and the rest of her family. The open sided *fale* that was their school

house had no desks. The children sat on the floor while the nuns taught them about Jesus and the Apostles, and by extension how to read and write. Pualele and Sione were often asked to read in their New Zealand English with its swallowed vowels and indistinct consonants. The Irish nuns, and even the French Sister Emmanuelle, corrected their pronunciation that their mother, Olina, had given them.

In the late 50's a Monsignor O'Reilly from the Diocese of Auckland had wandered through their village. A round man perched on stick legs; he had been brought to a sudden halt. He had clutched his chest and gasped, and his companions had started towards him fearing the worst for the corpulent priest. But it wasn't some physical collapse that had almost stopped his heart, but an angel's voice coming from a small *fale*. He soon arranged for Olina to be sent to Auckland where she studied under Sister Mary

Leo. But the Auckland climate and her asthma made it impossible for her excel in the same way that the other more famous pupils did, so she had to return to her village: fluent in written and spoken English; and Italian and German Opera.

Pualele wished she could hear her mother now. She wanted to close her eyes and be transported by her mother's voice, a voice so enchanting that it could draw the whole village to her, even if they didn't understand the words she sang. And then Pualele remembered what her mother had said to her the night before she had taken the bus to Apia with Kasi and her father, the words resounding in time with the ringing lunch bell.

"Make me proud Pualele. Make me proud."

...

Olga

Pero was curled up like a small dog at my back, radiating a welcome warmth that would have sent me off to sleep if I hadn't been so sure about what I needed to do. I waited impatiently to hear the steady breathing of my mother and by the time I could be sure it was safe for me to move without waking either of them, the moon was already high in the night sky, giving the stone of Biokovka a luminous white sheen. It made me hesitate. I felt the unseen threat of the soldiers. Everywhere I imagined them watching me, waiting for me.

I decided to take a route through the trees to avoid the shimmering stone paths. I'd taken an oil lamp and some flints, along with a jute sack. If I could wake Mila up I'd tell her about our leaving. We could talk and make plans.

My nerve started to fail me as soon as I reached the olive grove with its gnarled and

twisted trees. Normally the sight of the ancient boughs gave me a sense of belonging. We had survived here on this mountainside for hundreds of years, the olives providing us with our precious oil year upon year. Thunderstorms pelted the mountainside and lightning set trees on fire. The trunks would blacken but green shoots would always sprout out from the deadened wood, and the trees would live on. Now, in the moonlight that bounced off their silvery foliage, the branches were leaning down, giant arms with leafy fingers, reaching for me.

The ground squelched underfoot as I hurried towards Mila's house, the only sound the odd stick that snapped underfoot and the rattle of the oil lamp in my hand. I paused at the head of the path that hugged the curve of the mountain. On the upper side of the path lay a scramble of bushes and creeping brambles. On the lower, pines mixed with cypress that stretched up

towards the night sky. I thought I could hear voices travelling along the path towards me. I listened, but only the trees whispered to each other on the wind.

Then I heard it again. The sound of voices.

I stepped off the track and crept amongst the trees, holding my breath as I peeped around each tree trunk. The voices growing louder. Dalmatian voices. Voices I knew.

The spot where they stood was a small space between an overhang and several giant cypresses. The round moon balanced on top of the trees, its light sending spiky shadows dancing across the luminescent rock. Dragan had his back to me, legs slightly apart, and hands at his side. As he moved, I caught sight of Mila in front of him, her back against the rock.

I felt like the cold night air was pushing me down into the ground, and I slid onto my haunches, listening.

“It doesn’t have to be like this. We could be happy.” Dragan’s voice was soft, but insistent.

“There’s a war on if you hadn’t noticed.”

“What better reason. We could join the Partisans even.”

“No. I can’t, Dragan. We should wait.”

There was a pause as he reconsidered. Then, very carefully, he went on.

“Why wait?”

She said nothing for a moment and I willed her to say ‘no’. I wished I could un-hear the words they had said, and tell Mila to walk away.

“I can’t just go. Anyway, where would we go? We’ve got no money and I can’t leave Mama.”

His body appeared to tense at her words and his voice was louder this time.

“It’s her isn’t it? Thinks I’m not good enough.”

“She never said that!”

“No – but she thinks it and she’ll say anything to keep us apart.”

“Stop it Dragan. I’m sick of arguing.” She sighed as if she was very tired, her body shrinking away from the argument while Dragan clenched and unclenched his hands hanging by his sides.

“It’s true Mila. You just don’t want to believe it. She hates me.”

“This isn’t about my mother. I just can’t.”

“Can’t what? Meet me in the daylight? So long as no one sees. That’s it, isn’t it Mila?”

“You’re being ridiculous!”

Dragan stepped in towards her, so all I could see was his back. He reached forward.

“Stop it! You’re hurting me!”

Dragan wobbled to the side as they grappled with each other, both of them grunting as Mila tried to twist away. I was up on my feet immediately, I don’t know what I thought I was going to do, but I couldn’t let him hurt her. I started to move forward then stopped as his head bent down towards hers. Muffled sounds reached me, as they stood locked together. And I stepped back behind the tree. Dragan’s head lifted, and there was a brief pause, before he cried out in pain.

“Ooowwww!” He bent down and clasped his shin.

“I said ‘no!’”

“Why not? Or would you rather have a German like your mother?”

There was a pause before she spoke, and her cold words reached my ears. “You’re nothing but a *Ciganin*.”

Dragan didn't move. She went on.

"You're the son of a gypsy whore. And your father no better." She spat the words at him.

"You're not a man. You're nothing! You're a crippled gypsy bastard."

They stood there facing each other, both of them breathing loudly waiting for the other to do something. I saw Dragan's body hunch forward, as if Mila had punched him in the stomach and all the air had gone out of him.

"I'm sorry." I heard her whisper the words like she meant them. But he was already gone.

The scene darkened as a cloud moved across the moon. My heart was thumping. I stayed where I was leaning with my head against the tree trunk, trying to make sense of what I'd just witnessed. I thought I knew everything about Mila – thought I could see right into her soul. But this girl-woman was no-one that I knew.

“Olga! How long have you been here?”

She was standing over me and I was frightened by her. I knew I could have said nothing and run away, but I was frozen against the tree.

“You and him – is it true?”

“Yes.”

If only I could take back my question, for if she didn't say it, then it wouldn't be true. I was crying and couldn't stop. “But...what about us...and...”

“For God's sake, Olga. You're a silly little girl and you don't understand anything – there is no 'us'.”

The words were like a thousand tiny daggers piercing my heart – ‘*there is no us*’. It was intolerable standing there hearing her say this to me. I was her best friend. We'd made plans – together. I didn't know what I should say so that she would realise she was making a

terrible mistake. I meant to say that I didn't believe her, that I knew she was just angry. But it came out all wrong.

“Is it true what he said about your mother...and the Germans?”

I don't know if it was my words, or a shadow cast by the moon, but the light left her so that her face became a grotesque half-face, sneering at me with an elongated nose and a single black eye. Her voice was very low and steady. “I never want to see you again. Just go Olga! GO!”

I backed away from her until I was sure I'd merged with the forest. And I ran, oblivious to the noise of my feet slamming through the bushes, snapping twigs and trampling pine cones into the pulpy earth. By the time I reached my house, my thoughts were a jumble. I wished I'd never left our house that night. My heart lay

abandoned and crushed underfoot. If only I'd left it there, but that was impossible.

I slipped the latch on our door and waited a moment, convinced my breathing would give me away and waken my mother. I carefully slid into bed next to Pero, and wrapped my arms around him. He tried to wriggle free as I clutched him to me, cold and shivering, desperate to go back to the world I knew before I'd left the bed.

But the image of Mila and Dragan was stamped on my eyelids, and Mila's words played on in my head: *there is no us, there is no us...*

...

Pero and I were running.

Flocks of tracker birds flapped overhead sending a downward draft that almost blew us over, stopping us in our tracks. We could hear grunting that seemed to be coming from all around.

*We dived under broom and laurel bushes
to avoid the birds' eyes that shone like
searchlights down upon the forest.*

*We made a run for it – scrambling through
the tearing brambles that clawed at our clothing
trying to pull us down.*

*When we tried to escape from the vines
and prickles, it was Mila who was standing there.*

*She was the thorns that tore at us, the
vines that looped around our arms and legs. It
was her unfathomable eyes that accused us and
her finger-like talons that clawed at my eyes and
grabbed at Pero as I tried to protect him.*

*Her gnarled hands had Pero in their grip,
her mouth gaping. Wave upon wave of birds,
their blue-black feathers shimmering in a
crescent of moonlight, flew out of her mouth at
me.*

*As I stood there paralysed, I heard Pero's
calls for help disappearing into a void.*

Then out of the vast blackness came words. I tried to move, but couldn't, as the words turned into the unmistakable rhythm of the Cigamin's music.

...

I woke up, gasping as if I was being crushed. I threw off Pero's arm that was lying across my chest, and tried to steady my breathing as he turned next to me, eyelids fluttering. I hoped that his dreams were less disturbed than mine. I couldn't go back to sleep. I felt as if someone had died.

I lay there next to my brother as the dawn bubbled up over the horizon and spread across the sea, inching its way up the mountainside. The honeyed light finally poured into our room, and I convinced myself that I would go straight to Uncle Jure and tell him what had happened. He would say the right thing and make everything better.

I was eager to see Mila, to say sorry. I wanted her to forgive me for the silly things I'd said and for her to realise that she had made a mistake. It was all a terrible misunderstanding and if I were to go and for Mila at her house, I would be sure to find her happily doing chores. She would take me aside and we'd look through the letters from her sister. We'd talk about what it would be like to live in a city where you didn't know everyone and in a house that might not even have a garden. But what I really wanted was for Mila to tell me that I was her best friend. That it was *me* she cared for and that *we* would one day run away together. But the more I tried to deny it, the more it became true. She wasn't that kind of friend after all.

...

Pualele

Pualele didn't know what to do. Elizabeth had temporarily abandoned her on the wooden

benches attached to the side of the school building, and was now running around with the other girls throwing a large ball up and down the playground. Every now and then, they would get to one end and some of them would throw the ball around until someone finally tried to get it through a hoop on top of a pole while the others tried to snatch the ball away. It didn't seem like a very clever game to Pualele. She couldn't understand why they didn't just kick it, at least that way it would get to the end faster.

Across the field the boys were playing soccer. Now that was a game she understood. She had been good at dribbling the ball past other children in the village, and she could run almost as fast as the boys of her age. She wandered over towards the grass and stood watching, waiting for someone to notice her. She saw them running, a swarm of bees around a honey pot. Michael Davis broke free, heading

towards the unguarded goal. He lost his balance and kicked the ball with his left foot skewing his shot across the field before the ball bounced several times on the soft turf, finally coming to a stop under Pualele's foot. Without thinking, she slid the toe of her shoe underneath the ball, flicking it up in the air before kicking it back onto the pitch. It arced beautifully through the air and seemed to hang there for a long time before dropping right back in front of the boy. He was close enough for Pualele to see him glaring back at her as another boy yelled out.

“Even a girl can do better than you,
Davis!”

She felt their eyes on her. Dropping her chin to her chest she turned away. She didn't know what had possessed her to kick the ball like that. But she had loved the feeling of kicking as hard as she could and was pleased that she had enough skill to return it to Michael Davis.

She didn't understand what he had against her.

She wondered if it was the uniform not being quite right, or maybe she had done or said something wrong and just didn't know it yet.

Whatever it was, it drove her back towards the girls and the hard grey tar sealed playground.

“There you are!” Elizabeth was in front of her, her face an unnatural red that made her freckles darken across her cheeks.

“Come and play – you can be Goal Keep. Betty Seumalu used to be Goal Keeper. But her and her family got sent back to Samoa. They were overstayers, my Dad said.”

Pualele nodded mutely and followed, happy to get as far away from Michael as she could. She meant to ask what an overstayer was, but Elizabeth had already barrelled onwards and pushed her towards the goalpost. Another smaller girl with a familiar appearance

came and stood next to Pualele, giving her a lopsided grin.

“You’re on the other team. You need to stop me shooting a goal.”

The girl had kind eyes that might be blue or grey and a nose that curled up at the end.

“My name’s Catherine. You can call me Cate.” Pualele summoned up her best smile. She wanted to thank her for talking to her like she was just another girl, but before she had a chance to speak, Cate jumped to the right, catching the ball in both hands. Pualele watched her as she concentrated. Cate put out her bottom lip as she blew a strand of light brown hair out of her eyes and shot the ball through the hoop.

“Pualele! You have to move!” She just nodded back at Elizabeth and went back to trying to make Cate her friend, and promising, at least

in her own head, that she would try and get the ball this time.

...

By the end of the day, Pualele was exhausted and wasn't looking forward to the walk back to her new home. She couldn't imagine coming back to school the next day, or the one after that. Apart from Cate and maybe Sister Margaret, she felt totally alone. Elizabeth didn't count, because she was being made to be her friend. Some of the children didn't seem to like Pualele at all. She felt bad thinking these thoughts especially as she was very aware that a great gift had been bestowed upon her. She didn't want to be ungrateful, but she longed for her mother and the village and the wonderful, welcoming sea.

Father had worked in the plantations that encircled the village. On one side, there were lines of coconut palms for copra. On the other

side were bananas. At the top flowed the stream and together they formed a trio of protectors – the banana plantation, the copra plantation and the stream that laughed at the children as they fell more often than not when trying to cross it. The stones in the stream were dark green with slime that made them more slippery than a banana peel. At one end, the boys had created a dam of sorts from pieces of forgotten wood and felled logs that caused the water to eddy into a muddy pool.

Sometimes they would swim there, and other times they would navigate a *paopao* along the stream and out over the multicoloured coral reefs. If you looked down through the clear water, you could see the fish swimming over the patchwork patterns of the reef below. The patterns were like the quilt sent to her grandmother by Aunty Sefi. It seemed Sefi had forgotten that there was little need of a woollen

crocheted blanket in Samoa, but her mother Olina had given it pride of place in their *fale* so that all visitors should know they had family in New Zealand.

But the village and the plantations of Pualele's memory had been replaced with the concrete that formed the paths to St Mary's from the house on Rich Man Road. Not that any of the Auva'as had to hunt or gather food any longer. In this new place, food was bought. The joy of exploring had been taken away from Pualele. Instead of the roads to freedom and adventure, the streets around her new home were ropes tying her to a quarter acre section.

...

She was almost home when she felt a sting on the exposed flesh between her socks and the hem of her uniform. As she turned around, a small piece of the scoria glanced off her cheek and made her cry out in pain. Pualele

put her hand to her cheek and scanned the street. A Morris Minor came around the corner, whipping up an empty chip packet and sending it cart-wheeling across the road like tumbleweed. As the car rounded the next bend, she spotted a dark-haired boy hiding behind a hedge. And there on the footpath, stood Michael Davis. His schoolbag sat at his feet and his arms hung loosely at his side as he eyeballed Pualele. She gulped, as his eyes narrowed at her.

“What’re you staring at?” His chin rose and he watched Pualele. There was something familiar about his blue eyes and the nose that flicked up at the end. But most of the children looked the same to Pualele. She heard him summoning up the saliva and saw the spit land on the ground between them.

“Cat got your tongue? Or you just stupid?”

There was laughing from behind the hedge. She was too frightened to move as Michael Davis picked up his bag and started to advance towards her. He was a few feet away when a car appeared around the same corner the Morris Minor had just taken. The driver gave a few short toots on the horn before she slowed and wound down the window.

“Michael!”

In the car was a woman with the same light-brown hair. She pulled the car over and it idled while she waited for the boy to cross over. Pualele gaped at the girl in the front passenger’s seat, not quite believing what she was seeing. But then the girl in the car called out to her and she knew she was not mistaken.

“Pualele!”

Cate was waving madly at her, and in contrast to her brother’s scowl, she was smiling.

...

Olga

Mama stirred and was soon out of the house to tend to the animals. I woke Pero and helped him to get dressed. I prepared bread and some hard cheese for breakfast just like any other day. Everything else seemed outside of my control, except for the daily routine.

Mama and I danced a strange ballet that day, both pirouetting around the other. I was never sure if it was because she knew I'd been out the night before, or if she too had her own problems, her own private thoughts and demons. I wished I could have confided in her like Mila did with her mother, but I didn't know how to. She wasn't a cruel person, not at all. But there was something about her manner that always kept me at a distance. Even when she bent down to

show me how to darn a stocking, or how to embroider some detail on a shirt, there was never that feeling of closeness that others must have felt with their own mothers. About that I can only speculate.

To her credit, I knew how to cook a soup with wild parsnip and a chicken. I could clean a house that had dirt floors and stone walls and watch our few sheep that were bait for the wild foxes that roamed the hillside. It is only now that I wonder if it would have been better for her to have taught me how to love her. I guess knowing how to grow cabbage and silverbeet in the rocky soil that clung to the side of the mountain was about as much as she could manage. I don't blame her for that.

I do believe that she wanted a better life for me than her own. I was sent to school to learn to read and write so that I wouldn't be like her, having to take her letters from my father to

Uncle Jure to read to her. I often wondered what my father thought about another man reading the thoughts and longings meant only for his wife, even if the person reading them was his own brother. But school had ended for me when Ivan had gone to New Zealand. Mama needed another pair of hands to help with the chore of survival, so I left the classroom behind. I'd loved everything about school, but the thing I loved the most was being able to read, and at least that was something I'd been able to take home with me. Before long, I was the one reading father's letters. At least that made me more than just another person to work our family holding.

But I still knew nothing of Mama's dreams or desires. She refused to be drawn into conversations about the future. I would ask her, "Mama, shall we go to America one day?"

"Only God will decide that, Olga!"

She had an unwavering acceptance of her place as a mother and as a wife to an absent husband. There was seemingly nothing else that was as important to her as raising her children and living life as if my father and brother would step off a boat some afternoon, and be home in time for dinner that same evening. I loved her for that. For always making me feel like I was part of a family - that I belonged. But I hated her refusal to consider a more exciting and richer life – why couldn't *we* decide what happened to *us*? Just for once, I wanted Mama to press me to her and have her stroke my head the way she did with Pero. I wanted her to tell me that everything was going to be alright. I didn't understand that the future is unknowable.

...

The morning slowly passed into afternoon. When the last of the inside jobs had been completed, I went outside to do the washing. I

became more anxious. I peered towards the path that led to Uncle Jure's house, and then, to Mila's. I wondered what had happened after I'd left her last night. I imagined her appearing on the dirt lane, Dragan by her side, and I felt sick at the thought. My heart was lurching as each new movement sent me into a fresh panic. I scrubbed the bed linen against a wooden washboard, and wrung it out until the last drop of water bled onto the ground.

I folded the sheets over the line suspended between the house and the trees. They smelt, not unpleasantly, of the soap my father had sent from New Zealand, and I fought to hold onto them against the growing wind. As I struggled to pin them to the line, I saw Jure approaching.

He hadn't seen me, and I stayed and watched him from behind the billowing sheets that licked around me. I moved backwards until I

was amongst the laurel bushes that surrounded the almond tree, watching as Jure stood at the front door and spoke to Mama.

“Olga!” Mama looked towards the laundry. “Olga!” His face was full of concern. I didn’t want to talk to anyone. My tummy tightened as I melted into the brambles, not flinching as the small thorns worked their way in through the thick weave of my dress. They spoke a little longer before they embraced and he headed off. She turned and went back inside. My body relaxed and I flipped over the wash bucket and sat on it as the sheets snapped in the breeze.

...

Later, I heard someone coming and peeked out to see Oliver peering back at me. “Who are you hiding from? I need to talk to you,” he said.

I felt like jumping up and running from him, but nothing would move.

He stepped towards me, behind the drying sheets. “Were you with Mila last night?” I shook my head, hoping the tears wouldn’t come.

“You need to tell me. She’s gone.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about. Why’re you asking me this?” I was aware of my voice, pitchy and rising as I popped up onto to my feet. “How should I know...?”

“Alright!” Oliver grasped my hand in his as I tried to control my voice and stop from crying. “. If something happened between the two of you, you need to tell me. Please Ola, if you know something..!”

I stared at the ground trying to breathe.

“I saw him.” My words catching in a sob.

“Who?”

“I saw him. With Mila.”

“Who? Who did you see?” His hands were now gripping my arms, rattling the words out of me. “Who was it Olga? What happened?”

“The other day when I came to find you... he was...I saw how he was looking at her...”

“What did he do?”

“They were fighting...he kissed her...”

“No!”

Oliver was breathing heavily, his eyes darting around. “Bastards!” He covered his face with his hands as he repeated the word over and over.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t know she hadn’t gone home. I should have said something before...”

“I’ll kill them!” He dropped his hands and growled at me.

“Who?” My voice trembling.

“I’ll get one of those guns from the cave and I’ll shoot the bastards. All of them.”

“Don’t Oliver. Please!”

“It’s what my father would’ve done.”

“Your father’s dead.”

“Not before he shot a few Italians.”

“Don’t. Please.” I heard my voice whining, but I didn’t want him to kill Dragan and Tome. “Maybe if you talk to Dragan...”

“Why would I want to talk to Dragan? Anyway, his father hasn’t seen him since yesterday. Says Dragan’s gone to join the Partisans.”

“Then who are you going to shoot?” My words spoke to his back. He was already running back towards his house. I said nothing more, my thoughts jumbled and pounding in my head. What did it matter? He had joined the Partisans and she had probably joined too. I was glad she was gone and I hoped she would never come back.

...

Pualele

Within two weeks of arriving, Kasi and Father had jobs with the Ministry of Works.

“We help fix the roads,” Kasi said.

To Pualele, it sounded a very important job, but she didn’t understand what a ‘Ministry’ had to do with it. Did they have to pray to repair the roads? She didn’t suppose it mattered, so long as they had a job to go to. Mama was very pleased that they had work so soon, and as a regular stream of money arrived in Samoa, her fortnightly letters glowed with pride.

For Pualele, the weeks fell into a predictable routine. Every day after school, she came home to an empty house. With the men all working and Aunty on permanent afternoon shifts at the hospital, Pualele ran all the way from St Mary’s without stopping and let herself into the rectangular box that was their home. There were two panes of coloured glass inset into the front door. When you looked through the glass

everything took on a distorted bluish hue. Pualele liked the way it made things appear squat and ghoulish. She was always very careful to close the door gently for fear of cracking the delicate panes that were thicker at the bottom than they were at the top.

Once inside, a long corridor dissected the house. Pualele went to the room that had the TV in it. This was where Kasi and Father slept. A mattress that left no space to walk in the room was littered with their clothes. She dropped her bag in the doorway and moved the clothes to one side, sinking into the hollow of the mattress. Pulling her knees up, she reached her arm over to turn on the TV that was wedged between the makeshift bed and the wall. She watched as the box hummed into life, a glow starting to radiate from it, and then slowly, black and white images danced across the screen.

Pualele was very pleased with herself. She wasn't supposed to be in the room, but she liked the children's programmes, and they helped her understand more of the conversations around her at school. '*Keep cool, 'til after school*' the man on the TV said every afternoon. She thought it very funny. Why would you want to be 'cool' when most everyone she saw on the streets wore thick jumpers and coats? New Zealand wasn't hot at all. It was a very odd country.

The programme ended and she struggled to her feet, kicking the pile of clothes back over the bed. She had better get her school work out and start before her Uncle, and then Kasi and Father appeared. Once they were home, they would be hungry and wanting the dinner that she was expected to prepare for them. She was amazed at all the food you could get in New Zealand. Tonight they would have pork chops

and chicken and beef sausages and steak and chop suey too. It was like every day was a special occasion here in Auckland, and she could imagine how jealous her brothers and sisters would be.

As she pulled her school bag towards her, there was a knock at the door. She turned off the TV and held her breath, listening to the sound of the wooden joinery creaking and the mynah birds squabbling in the backyard. There was a second knock, more insistent this time. She looked out down the hallway to where the afternoon sun was shining through the glass, sending streamers of coloured light along the wooden slats. On the other side of the glass Pualele could see the shape of a dwarf, and watched as it pulled a coil from its head and then let it go. She didn't move as the thing put its face up to the glass.

“Pua-lee-lee! Open up!”

Pualele slipped the latch and opened the door to find Elizabeth grinning at her as she swung a pink vinyl bag in front of her.

“Would you like to come to our shop and get something?”

Pualele wasn't sure what to say. She should probably say no and do her maths and spelling. It wouldn't be long before she would have to get the dinner on, but it was a tempting offer. The first of its kind – and she wouldn't be long.

“Yes.”

The door clicked behind her as she followed Elizabeth onto the footpath where Cate and Michael were waiting. Pualele stopped at the gate: she wasn't sure she wanted to go anywhere with Michael. He was kicking the wooden fence post, leaving black scuff marks on the white palings. She should tell him to stop;

Aunty Sefi wouldn't like it. But Cate was smiling at her expectantly.

Michael trailed behind as the three girls walked towards the blocks of shops on Ponsonby Road. Aunty had promised to bring Pualele up to the shops, but with school and Aunty's shift work, they had never quite made it. The four of them reached their destination and Pualele read the faded green sign that hung over the door - *Dillon's Convenience Store*. The door was wide enough to fit a car through it, and as she stepped onto the chequered linoleum floor, Pualele felt like she was entering a giant cave of treasures. She marvelled at the aisles of goods all neatly arranged like pews in a church. Tins and plastic packages and boxes, and even fruit and vegetables all lined up. She didn't know where to start first.

"What are you going to get?" Cate was talking to Pualele.

It would take her all day to choose, there were so many different things that she had never seen before. The four aisles stretched the length of the building; she couldn't possibly say what she wanted. And that wasn't even taking into account the lollies and other things below the tills under the counter, nor the jars and packets of brightly coloured stuff on the shelves behind the lady that Elizabeth was talking to. She watched Michael pick up a toffee apple, its red shell sticking to the skin of plastic wrapping.

Elizabeth was now picking up a small packet with a chicken on the front, while Cate was nearby fingering something unidentifiable in a slim blue package no longer than a pencil.

"You can get anything you like, you know."

Pualele nodded at Elizabeth and wandered down the first aisle past cereals and flour and tins of tomatoes and peaches, stopping in front of the biscuits where packets of every

conceivable variety confronted her. She didn't know what they were, but she let her eyes feast on the packets. A movement distracted her and she turned her head to see the girls were already waiting outside. Michael was talking to the lady behind the counter. She slipped out the door with a small packet no bigger than her hand – she didn't want to be greedy. On the outside of the box was a white spaceman on a pink planet. She'd liked the colour of the packet. Carefully, she opened it up and withdrew a white stick with a pink tip, and leaned against the window like her two friends.

“A packet of cigarettes! You're a funny girl, Pualele!” Elizabeth laughed as she plucked a crisp potato chip from the bag and popped it into her mouth.

Pualele popped the end of the cigarette into her mouth. It immediately crumbled into a sugary paste. She closed her eyes as she

savoured the tingling sensation on her taste buds. Her eyes opened when she heard banging on the window. The lady from behind the counter inside was yelling something at them.

Pualele followed Elizabeth and Cate who were already at the entrance to the shop. The lady was in front of them when Pualele stepped inside. The woman reached out and grabbed the Spaceman Cigarettes from her and started screeching.

“You’re not in the bloody Islands now you know. I’m calling the police!”

The other three were staring at her. Michael almost enjoying himself while the girls’ mouths were opening and shutting like gawping fish. Pualele pressed her fingernails into the palms of her hand, willing herself back in time to her village.

“You did pay, didn’t you?”

Elizabeth stood there, her voice almost pleading.

What are you talking about? Pualele wanted to scream. Nothing made sense, and somehow the happiness she had felt walking to the shops had been replaced by uneasiness. She had broken some unwritten rule. She wanted to ask what she had done wrong - how she could fix it - but she didn't want to make things worse. She needed Kasi or father or mother here. They would know what to do and say.

"Please Mrs Merrick. She's only new. Please don't call the police."

"Listen here. She needs to be taught a lesson. Probably a bloody overstayer, aren't you?" Mrs Merrick was red in the face.

"Can't just take what you like, girlie."
There was spittle on her lips and Pualele hung her head to avoid the woman's eyes.

“She’ll pay. She just forgot. Didn’t you?”

Pualele kept her head down. Money?

What money? She thought Elizabeth had said...

“I can get money at home.”

“What? What did she say? I’ll not be having the likes of her playing games with me!”

“Here.” Cate held out some silver coins.

“It’s already stealing you know. Once you’re outside the door and that.” Mrs Merrick took the money but didn’t move.

She wagged her finger in Pualele’s face.

“She knows what she’s done. Can’t even me in the eye – should send them all back to the Cook Islands or wherever it is they all come from.”

Michael was smirking in the background and followed Mrs Merrick to collect the change.

“And don’t you let me catch you in this shop again!”

Alone with the girls, Pualele wanted to explain how stupid she felt. She wanted to say

sorry and start the afternoon over again – without Michael, and shops, and Mrs Merrick. She didn't expect them to say anything, but she couldn't help hoping for words of solace and the solidarity of friendship.

“How could you, Pualele?” All of Elizabeth's bounce had disappeared, and for the first time since Pualele had known her, Elizabeth's face was still.

“It was just a mistake, Elizabeth. Leave her alone!”

Pualele wanted to thank Cate, but she was terrified of what Elizabeth might say to her next. She felt a shame so deep that she responded in the only way she knew how. In between the cars on Ponsonby Road, Pualele ran. The sounding of horns followed her as she sprinted between the vehicles, choking a little as she breathed in the exhaust fumes of the cars. She kept running down the orange chipped path

back towards her house along Rich Man Road, only stopping once she was inside and had slammed the blue-paned door shut behind her. She bent forward, hands on knees, panting, her heart beating so loudly in her ears that she was deaf to the approaching feet slapping on the kauri floors.

“Where’s my dinner?”

It could never be said that Uncle Sam ever *looked* hungry. But even perceived hunger can do funny things to a man, and his question required only one answer. Pualele straightened up. She needed some of those packets and tins from the shop. She could just open them up and there would be dinner, ready to eat. The thought of the shop made her feel sick and she gulped, trying to settle her queasiness.

“Well?”

She heard his stomach grumbling.

“Yes, Uncle.” She moved to squeeze by him, trying to go quickly. She was almost past him when the back of his hand hit the side of her head. The blow took her by surprise and knocked her down onto her knees. Uncle Sam hauled her up onto her feet by her arm, pulling her like a doll down the hallway towards the kitchen. Pualele stumbled along and recovered enough to run the last few steps into the kitchen.

She pulled out the tray of meat and the leftover chop suey that Aunty had left for their dinner. Uncle Sam stood in the doorway and watched her as she lit the gas and started to throw chops in the pan and the chicken in the oven. She kept her eyes on the pan as she picked up a plate with one hand, tipping it forward so that the sausages slipped off in a solid semi-defrosted mass onto the floor. *Splat.* She was trembling, trying to brace herself against the blow. She kept her chin tucked in

and feet wide apart so that she wouldn't fall over. But none came. She looked up – there was nobody there. She gathered up the sausages and put them into a second pan. The chops spat onto her skin as she turned them, and the kitchen filled with the smells of fried meat and reheated cabbage. She felt the pull of air as the front door opened and listened as it closed, followed by the sound of heavy boots being thrown on the floor.

“Pualele! Smells good!” Kasi stood in the doorway in his muddy blue overalls grinning.

“How was school?”

Pualele tried to smile back, but only succeeded in making a grimace. What did you say when you had ‘stolen’ for the first time and been caught? Or how did you explain that you’d managed to lose the only friends you had in this place where they wanted to ‘keep cool’ but wore more clothes than most Samoans owned? And

who would listen when you told them you'd been hit around the head so hard that your ears were still ringing? What did you say to a question like that? She swallowed to find her voice and answered.

“Good.”

Kasi beamed at her.

“What’s for dinner?” He leaned over the top of Pualele and with two fingers plucked a chop from the pan.

“Oww! Oww!” Kasi juggled the meat before finally grasping it and tearing off a chunk of the half cooked pork with his teeth. Pualele laughed at her brother and tried to push him out of the kitchen, but Kasi just braced himself against the door as a breeze blew down the hall.

“Afakasi!” Their father’s voice called from outside. Kasi immediately headed for the front door.

“Needs more cooking!” he whispered back to her, running as she threw a dishcloth at him. The cloth missed him and landed at the feet of Uncle Sam as he stepped out of his bedroom. Carefully, he bent and picked up the cloth without looking at Pualele who stood paralysed in the kitchen doorway. He walked towards her, only stopping when he was all that she could see. He folded the cloth carefully and held it out to her. With hands quaking, she took it from him and backed up into the kitchen where the chops were stuck and burning in the pan.

Father’s hand landed on his older brother’s shoulder, and Uncle Sam turned to face him.

“I told you Pualele was a good cook.” Father’s face was grimy with a black smudge across his cheek, but Pualele thought she had never before seen him so pleased.

“They’re all the same.” Uncle Sam turned away.

Cooking was not what she wanted to be doing. Nor did she want to live with Uncle Sam and Aunty Sefi or go to school in New Zealand. She wanted her Mama and to be with her own family. It made no sense to her why her Uncle and Aunty wanted her here when all she seemed to do was disappoint them and make them angry. She didn’t want to be *this* Pualele. She wanted to be Pualele in the village again.

...

From outside the classroom, the sound of children talking behind the closed door was like the electricity pylon on the street corner that buzzes and hisses with unseen power. Pualele walked in and the noise stopped, not instantaneously like turning off a switch, but more slowly, like the time it takes for a light bulb to finally fizzle out and die.

Aunty Sefi shuffled in behind Pualele and Sister Margaret immediately rose. The two women left the room while Aunty explained her lateness.

She walked between the desks towards the one seat that was still vacant next to Elizabeth, trying not to catch anyone's eye. There was a folded piece of paper on the chair and she picked it up and unfolded it as she sat down.

You better watch out for Pua-lee-lee

She thinks that every-thing is free

The smirking and whispering floated all around her as big fat drops fell onto the paper and the words began to swim in water before her eyes. She crumpled the note in her hand and pushed her nails into the paper so that they dug into her palms. The sharp points in her hands made her feel calmer, and by the time the door opened again and Sister Margaret came back

into the room, Pualele had entered her own world where she was walking next to Sione on the way to the swimming hole.

...

As the children filtered out into the playground for morning tea, Pualele sat at her desk.

“Pualele, Sister Carmel would like to see you.”

Pualele nodded at Sister Margaret and pushed herself up onto her feet. A hot pricking sensation started again behind her eyelids as she moved towards the door. The school was a blur as she rushed towards the Principal’s office. Snatches of conversations reached her ears along with the sound of laughter as she scuttled along, keeping close to the sides of the buildings. She couldn’t make out what they said, but she didn’t care anymore. After this she wouldn’t be coming back to school again. She opened the

door and stopped. There, seated on the bench outside Sister Carmel's office was the Italian girl Annunzia, and the Vietnamese boy Lok. *What had they done?* They were all still gazing at each other when Sister Carmel's door opened.

"Enter!"

The school secretary Mrs Jones stepped aside as the children filed into the office.

"Well. We seem to have a problem."

Pualele dared not catch the nun's eye, so stared at the floor. It was going to be worse than she had thought.

"Your names..."

Despite herself, Pualele scratched her nails across her palms.

"...they're simply not good Catholic names."

Pualele raised her eyes to get a glimpse of the nun.

“Things will be much easier for everyone if we use names that everyone can say. A Saints’ name, for instance.”

She wanted to tell her that she had three names already. That she was named after her grandmother and her cousin. She was already somebody – she was Pualele Sina Avua’a. There’d be another name when it came time for Confirmation, but no one had told her of having to have *another* name. She felt herself disappearing. She didn’t want to be anybody else – she just wanted to go home to Samoa where no one wanted to make her something she wasn’t.

Sister Carmel made eye contact with each child as she spoke.

“Luke... Anne... and... well, I guess Pauline will do.”

Pauline! This was surely worse than being expelled. What would she tell her parents

and Aunty Sefi? Pauline wasn't even a real Saints' name. And Paul was a boy not a girl. She wanted to cry all over again.

"You may all go now."

Pualele was last to leave and she reached for the handle to close the door behind her.

"And Pauline...?"

Pualele turned towards her voice.

"You must look people in the eye when they speak to you."

Slowly, Pualele raised her eyes until she was looking openly at the nun.

"You may go now."

Pualele slipped out the door and headed to the Church that dominated the school grounds. Outside there were questions and talking and people everywhere. In the Church, a solemn hush washed over her and Pualele melted into the pews without having to be a part

of anything else other than her own thoughts and dreaming.

She admired the Stations of the Cross and the statues that were positioned around the Church. They were far more spectacular than anything she had ever seen before. The statues looked so real: the serpent around the feet of the Blessed Virgin Mary and the bloody wounds on the crucified Christ. They made her shiver. It was the latter image that fascinated her the most. The gaping wound in Jesus' side, thorns piercing his temple, the nails in feet and hands.

Pualele was entranced by the dead Jesus on the cross. The wound in his side was like the inside of some over ripe fruit. The line separating what was real from the imaginary became blurred. Everything seemed jumbled up together with black doris plums taking the place of bleeding hearts. And pain had become something different too. Pualele pressed her

fingers into her palms, felt her sharp nail digging into her flesh. She winced as the pain started to spread across her hand and travelled up her arms, her neck and right into her head. Her eyes closed and she let the air hiss out between her teeth, as her nails pushed further in. Facing the crucifixion, she knelt down. For the first time in weeks, she felt at peace.

...

After school she ran home, only stopping at the letterbox to collect the mail before springing up the steps to open the stained glass front door. She leant against the door to catch her breath before going to her room and dropping the mail and her school bag on the floor. Pualele threw herself down on her bed, burying her face in the pillow while her mind raced over the events of the day. She thought that now she was home she might be able to pretend that she didn't have a new *palagi* name.

How would they know? She didn't have any friends who might call to the house anymore. It would be easy - she could be Pauline at school and Pualele at home, and with Aunty Sefi she could be whichever Pualele she wanted her to be. But what would her mother say?

She sorted through the mail on the floor and plucked out the light blue envelope from home. Her finger eased under the flap until it opened. She withdrew the paper and lay on her pillow to read.

My Dear Husband,

It has been many weeks now since you have gone, and we all miss you so. Especially the little ones! We pray every night that you are well and we look forward to your letters.

I thank you for the money that we received today – Banu says he has some pigs for sale and I think that I will buy one with some of the money. Leti will not like the competition, but

is getting old and I need to plan for a time when you return and we will have a feast in your honour! I think also I will use some of the money to take Mama to the palagi doctor when he comes again. Her eyes are not well and Mere says that he might be able to help. The money is very good!

How is my Afakasi? I am so proud of him working with you and earning New Zealand money. He is a good boy and I hope that maybe he will find a nice Samoan girl in New Zealand.

And Pualele? How is she settling with Sefi and your brother? I worry about her – she is not a strong one like the other children, but it is right that she is with Sefi and Sam. They will give her a good life.

I must go. There is much to do these days without you all. I can't wait for your letters to arrive and hope that it won't be long before we can all be together again.

Your loving wife

Olina

Pualele folded the letter up and placed it back in the envelope. *It is right she is with Sefi and Sam... They will give her a good life.* Why did her mother want to give her away? Pualele didn't want this life. She wanted to be with her mother and father and brothers and sisters in their village. Not here in Auckland where she couldn't even be herself, but always some other person that she didn't know. Her eyes found the prayer card propped up against the wall.

If it hadn't been for the second Pualele Sina Avua'a, she would never have been sent here. She reached down and picked up a book that had slipped out of her bag and threw it at the picture of the girl. The book missed and hit the corner of the drawers before crashing onto the ground. She rolled onto her belly and hit the bed with her fists and kicked with her feet until she

was panting. She rolled over and tried to calm herself, her fingers curling as if they knew what had to be done. She felt her heart slowing and her breathing returned to normal. She thought about the statues in the Church, calmly standing on their plinths, waiting for the people who would come and pray before them.

She would worry about who she was later, but right now, she would try and think of nothing as she recited the Hail Mary and dug her nails deeper into her flesh.

...

Olga

It's funny how I can forget what I ate for breakfast this morning, and yet I cannot erase from my mind what happened on one day more than fifty years ago.

Although, I would rather forget that too.

The night was abuzz with murmuring as I lay there sleepless next to Pero. I heard

snatches of whispered conversations. Father Bilić and Jure spoke with Mama.

“...we’ve got him but he’s not talking.”

“...when they realise he’s gone they’ll come looking for him and anyone left in the village will be in danger...”

“...partisans are planning an attack to defend the village...ready to move women and children...”

There was a growing dread in my belly that I was somehow responsible. Had they found Dragan? Why would we be in danger? Perhaps I should have spoken then - I suppose I could have. It would have been easy to betray my silly self as a jealous girl of no ill intentions. If I’d told Mama I could have stopped them. But then I thought – I didn’t tell a lie. In my own defence, I would have spoken if I’d known what was to happen that next day.

But I didn’t.

I kept silent because of Mila. She had hurt me and I didn't care what happened to her anymore. I hoped they would find her and Dragan and they would be shamed for running away together, maybe he would get a beating. At least that's what I thought would happen.

...

The morning was a sombre one. The mountain was enveloped in a thick mist. It was the kind of fog that drenches your clothes if you stay in it for long. So, I was motivated to be quick with feeding the animals. Once inside, I knelt down on the floor and started to play marbles with Pero.

"Ola. You can help."

Mama pointed with her nose at a pile of darning that she had placed on the table. Socks spilled out from underneath Ivica's trousers and Uncle Jure's shirt. I mouthed a 'sorry' to Pero and sat at the table where I started on the shirt.

The fog had eclipsed the sun so Mama lit an oil lamp. As I thatched the small hole in the elbow, I was startled by a knock at the window. My hand jerked, sending the needle tip into my finger. I sucked on it, tasting the warm blood as Mama opened the window. The air was thick and soupy as she passed out a covered basket to a pair of disembodied arms. She leaned out of the window and whispered into the mist, shutting the window again and immediately returning to her own stack of mending as if nothing had happened. I watched her and waited.

“Keep your eyes on your work, Olga. I don’t want to have to wash that shirt again because you’ve pricked yourself.”

I swallowed my curiosity and went back to pulling the thread through the thick cotton shirt, carefully extending the darning to cover the speck of blood.

Pero had grown bored and was now next to me, rolling his marbles along the grooves in the table. Mama reached out, covering the small balls with her hand, stopping them. Her face relaxed as she spoke to him.

“Go and see if we missed any eggs this morning.”

Pero slid off the seat and headed for the door. I remember him stretching up to pull the door open, his jersey and undershirt riding up to expose his lower back. I could see his slender waist and spine pressed hard against his skin. He looked so little, like a tadpole just starting to change. I wish that I could bring that image into my head every time I think of him. Instead, another picture always appears.

But first you must know what happened

A few minutes passed by as Pero searched the coop for eggs while Mama and I sewed without speaking. Eventually, she stood

up and opened the door, allowing some of the dampness to come inside. She stepped out into the yard, the air so thick that it wrapped around her until she was gone like a diver disappearing under the sea. I couldn't imagine the villagers finding Dragan or Mila out there. I wished that they would melt away in the mist so that I might never have to see either of them again.

The door was wrenched open and I jumped in my seat. Mama stood there, her fog-damped hair sticking to her face.

"Quickly. We need to go! Something's gone wrong."

"What's happening?"

"Move, Olga. We don't have time. The Germans are searching every house for Partisans."

I dropped the shirt and needle on the floor and ran towards the door before I heard what sounded like a pine cone cracking in a fire.

Mama pulled our coats off the hook behind the door and thrust mine at me. Before I'd buttoned the front, she was clutching my wrist and pulling me after her. We moved towards the chicken coop and I suddenly realised that Pero was not with her.

"Where's Pero?"

She pulled on my arm until we were in the coop. I followed her as we clambered over the wall at the back, and she grasped my hand again as she started up the mountain. I pulled my hand free and stopped. A cold sweat was spreading over me, my body tensing. I saw her hand moving and I thought she was going to strike me.

"Where's Pero?"

"He's with Father Bilić. Come on." She wiped her forearm across her face and turned back up the hill again, hauling me again by the arm as I stumbled to keep up with her. As we

rose above our house, I heard men shouting and the sound of someone kicking a door. I turned and tried to see through the grey blanket that covered our house, but I could only make out than a few steps behind me. Mama raced on. I was behind her now. We were both panting as we scrambled higher. Eventually, the fog started to thin, and we soon emerged above the shrouded village, under a pearly sky. I paused to catch my breath and immediately knew where we were. The mountainside up here was a tableau of rocky outcrops in between clumps of trees. To the right of us was the grazing meadow, and if we kept going higher we'd find ourselves at the cave entrance. Mama had already moved on and was motioning to me to follow. I forced myself to run to keep up with her as she picked her way across the mountain.

We were headed towards the old village with its overgrown houses when I saw Pero in

Father Bilić's arms. I cannot tell you how I felt seeing him being held by the priest, with not a hair out of place. They waited for us outside a crumbled building covered in vines and set into the hillside. Mama tore Pero from Father Bilić, locking him to her.

"In here."

We followed the priest as he lifted back some vines and a broken door. We found ourselves in a small space that had once been a room. It smelled earthy and felt cold, and as my eyes adjusted to the light inside, I could see weeds and plants encroaching from outside. Rosa and Oliver stepped from the shadows to embrace us. We clung to each other as if to shut out the world. As I disentangled myself from Rosa's arms I noticed tucked in the corner of the space was the basket my mother had passed out our window. Next to that were a few blankets - and a gun.

I gaped at the gun - black metal against the brown earth. I had no need to pick up the gun and fire it. The bullet had already been released from the barrel and was on its way to its target.

“You’ll be safe here until tonight. The Germans have the village, but our people are attacking from the West. We’ll move tonight.”

“Thank you, Father.” My mother kissed the priest on both cheeks. He turned his attention towards me, a sort of smile on his face. I avoided his eyes, focussing instead on his boots.

“Don’t worry Olga. You did the right thing. The soldier will talk and we’ll find Mila.”

“Soldier?” I said, but already realisation was spreading through me. I had to say something. I took a deep breath and opened my mouth; it felt like I had swallowed a rock.

“The other night...”

Mother and Father Bilić both stared at me.

“I... I think I there’s a mistake.”

Mama’s eyebrows drew together, while his rose up towards his receding hairline. I knew I had to go on and stop whatever I’d started. I had to stop the men and the guns.

“When I saw Mila the other night...”

My mother exhaled like a burst tire, slumping against the side of the warped walls of the house as she put her arm around Pero. Rosa pushed herself up onto her feet and stepped towards me, her face a tapestry of emotion. I tried again to say what I should have said a dozen times before now.

“Mila and... She walked off... alone.”

“What do you mean?” Father Bilić growled at me.

“She was with Dragan. But they left separately.”

“And the German?”

“What German?”

But I knew. I hung my head and listened to the sound of my heart in my ears. Oliver took his mother’s arm, pulling her away from me.

The priest grunted, lacing his fingers, bringing his hands behind his head.

“I never said there were Germans!”

I wanted Father Bilić to believe me and looked around for support. Oliver stood to the side and as I spoke, he let out a choking sound. He appeared to be about to say something, but as he leaned forward towards me, Rosa’s pulled on his shirt collar, preventing him from moving.

“Say something, Oliver!”

Oliver stood there like a wild hare in a trap. I could hear his breathing and see his shoulders heaving, but he said nothing as his mother’s hand remained at the nape of his neck.

I thought about telling Father Bilić that Mila had left on her own accord. She had

decided to run away. I turned wildly from Oliver to the priest. *Say something, Oliver.* He avoided my gaze and ignored my plea.

The priest released his hands and let them fall to his sides as he stepped away from me and reached for the door hanging off its hinges. He paused before leaving and turned his head to speak to Mama. She nodded her assent before he left us in the ruins. I watched the spot where the priest had been standing and felt relieved he had gone. At least, I thought, they knew there was no need for guns.

A growing fury replaced relief as I focussed on Oliver. I couldn't fathom why he had refused to speak up. I thought he was my friend. He could have told them what I had actually said. Then I recalled Mila's words – *there is no us.* It occurred to me that the twins were more alike than I had ever considered before. He was just like her, and I was as

desperate to be away from him as I had been to get away from Mila. It made me even angrier to see Oliver sheltering at his mother's side. I couldn't wait for the whole family to disappear.

"Can we go home now, Mama?"

She stepped forward and, involuntarily, I shrank back into the corner. I will never know what she thought of me. Her faced was closed and tight. In the end, her words were without emotion.

"We can never go home."

...

I was thankful that Pero was with us. Without him it would have been a painful silence punctuated with steely s from my mother. As the day wore on I watched the shadows change shape and darken on the ground. The winter sun had finally dispelled the fog and it sat teetering on the mountaintop, ready to fall off and plunge us into darkness. Mama entertained

Pero by telling him stories that I'd heard a thousand times, while I wondered how long we would have to wait here. I tried my best to fade into the brambles that had pushed their way in through the fractured walls and missing roof tiles. With nothing else to do, I went over and over everything in my mind. I wasn't a liar. I'd told the truth (except the parts that didn't matter to anyone but me) and there would be no more guns. I'd finally done the right thing.

Outside the sounds of the odd bird searching for food and the wind ruffling the trees travelled in through the cracks. They distracted me from my thoughts and I tried to guess what kind of bird I was hearing and in which tree it sat. As I listened, the sound of stones crunching became clear. A small gasp escaped from me before I could catch it. Mama held up her hand and manoeuvred herself so her small body filled the narrow entrance, blocking whatever was out

there from the rest of us. I stared as fingers wrapped around the edge of the door, hanging off its hinges. It creaked as the hand pulled it aside, revealing Uncle Jure with Father Bilić at his side.

Both their faces were sombre and for the first time ever, Uncle Jure avoided my eye and didn't smile.

"We need to move."

Mama and Rosa were now both standing in front of the two men.

"But it's not dark yet."

"Things have changed."

Mama opened her mouth to reply, but Jure went on, filling the space where her words should have been.

"Olga. Was there a German the night you saw Mila?"

I shook my head and he let out a hiss as his breath escaped through his teeth. He turned to Father Bilić.

“We keep this to ourselves.”

The priest moved his head in agreement as Rosa lurched forward.

“But Mila...?”

“Let’s go.” Uncle Jure cut her off.

“I won’t go without her!”

“Listen. We don’t have time for this,” Jure growled at her.

She pushed past Mama until she was inches from Jure. She ripped the front of her dress open, buttons popping off onto the ground like confetti. There was just enough light left for me to see what appeared to be deep sores on her chest. Mama cried out and she moved to Rosa’s side as Father Bilić crossed himself.

“I didn’t let them use me as an ashtray to leave her behind. They can do whatever they like to me, but they won’t have her.”

Jure dropped his eyes to the floor and took a deep breath.

“We’ll find her. But you can’t help her if you’re dead.”

Rosa hadn’t seemed to have heard him. She didn’t move and we all waited in confusion until Oliver placed a blanket around his mother’s shoulders, wrapping it across her chest.

Jure was the first to leave followed by Mama, Pero, Rosa and Oliver and then me and Father Bilić at the rear. I didn’t notice the gun slung over Mama’s shoulder until we had marched for several minutes up the mountainside. She handled it as if she had always carried one. The men had guns too and I was suddenly overcome with a deep, dark shame. Had I really started all this? I wished

that I'd never opened my mouth. What was it that I'd set in motion? The Germans had turned on us and we had abandoned our homes. Where would we go from here? I'd so many questions and a desperate need to understand what was going on around me, but I knew the best thing I could do right then was to not say a word.

...

We continued on up the mountain moving eastwards, leaving behind the clumps of trees and the old village. We were almost at the caves when a sound like one of Dragan's slingshots hitting a tree trunk made me stop. One missile was closely followed by another, and then an entire volley of shots pitted the ground around us. We took refuge wherever we could find it.

I immediately recognised the spot. It was where I'd once hidden with Mila, only this time I lay with my arms enfolded around Pero behind

the boulders. A few steps away to our right, Mama was sheltering behind a fallen log with Rosa and Oliver, and I watched in amazement as Mama cocked the gun, loaded it and fired over the top of the log at a protrusion of rock ahead of us. There was a scramble of feet behind me and I saw Jure running towards us. He slid to a halt and crouched next to me as shots hit the ground behind him, sending little puffs of earth and stones into the air. He brought his mouth close to my ear.

I'm not really sure how or exactly what happened next. Pero was next to me wide-eyed and unspeaking as I tried to stop myself from losing control of my bladder. We were pressed together and I could feel a tremor running through him. I found his balled fist and I closed my own hand around it.

I remember someone telling us to run. I squeezed Pero's hand and pulled him up. Then

we were running towards Mama and the others. Time seemed to slow down as we dashed the last few feet. It felt like we were running through water as I dragged Pero on with me. I never doubted that we would make it to Mama, so when the bullets hit and Pero and I both fell to the ground, I couldn't understand why we weren't standing next to her.

I was on my knees, Pero just behind me on his stomach. I clamped onto his wrist and dragged him with me, half-scrambling, half-crawling until we were behind a cairn marking the track. Mama was facing us now, thrusting the gun into Rosa's hands and shouting something at me, but I couldn't hear her. I tried to understand what she was saying as something trickled into my eyes blinding me momentarily.

In panic, I wiped them, and saw that my hand was red. I stared at the blood dripping off

my fingers and then down at my dress that was now speckled with bright red polka dots. Up on my sleeve there was the boot of Italy taking shape.

Mama sprang towards me and I anticipated her warm embrace. She was on her knees, a hand on each of us dragging us behind the logs. I leant back against the hard wood as she placed her hands under Pero and lifted him to her.

A primal sound came out of her, so full of pain that I clapped my hands over the sides of my head to block it out.

Mama shook him and as she pressed her head to his chest, I saw the blood leaking out of his side, turning their clothes black. I felt like someone had punched me in the throat and only a strangled cry came out. I grabbed at one of Pero's arms, but my hand slid off his blood-slicked skin.

My ears were ringing and the blood in my own head seemed to be pounding against my skull, trying to get out. At some point I remember Jure holding Pero. I wished I could have swapped places with my brother. In my mind, I touched my lips to his and he took the life from me and lived again. I would have given it gladly.

I don't remember how long it was before the gunfire eased, and then after some shouting and a few quick bursts of fire, it stopped completely. A call rang out from one of our own. Before daylight vanished completely, Father Bilić emerged from behind a tree, followed by several other men. They wore the red star on their hats and thick beards on their faces, and they didn't seem like anyone that would help me.

I stood back as Uncle Jure and the men spoke briefly. Then they started moving towards the caves, my Uncle still carrying my brother with my mother, the walking dead, at his side. I was

invisible to my family and Oliver and his mother.
I considered falling behind and losing myself,
until I heard a pine cone crack behind me.
Father Bilić was watching me, like a shepherd
herding a stray animal. When we reached the
cave, I paused. I could be near them in the open
air, but the cave, our cave, was a different story
altogether.

The priest nudged me gently onwards.

“Get inside, Olga.”

“Father...I’m sorry.”

“It’s not me who you need to ask
forgiveness from.”

I entered the cave, the air thick with sweat
and the smell of gunpowder. Pero lay in the
middle of a stretch of canvas on the unyielding
cave floor, my mother kissing his face and
smoothing his matted hair. I looked away when
Jure folded the sheet over his face and rolled his
body under the ledge where Oliver had once

found a gun. A sarcophagus of rocks and stones was made over the small bundle that was my brother while the priest spoke his words. I thought I heard a scratching from the recesses of the cave. But that could have been my imagination. The other men stood at the mouth of the cave, one them holding an oil lamp that he swung like an incense burner. And me? All I can tell you is that I was there too.

...

Mama came to me that night as I slept in the cave. She carried two rucksacks and I wondered why my brother wasn't holding onto her cotton skirt, until I remembered. In her hands she had a pair of boots. "Go quickly," she whispered in a voice that invited no comment. In the weak light from a candle, she motioned towards my clothes at my feet. "Put these on." She dropped the boots at my side and then busied herself stuffing one final blanket into one

of the rucksacks. I was clumsy in my half-sleep, struggling with arms going in through where my head should be, and my toenails catching on heavily darned socks. I picked up the left boot and weighed it in my hand. It had thick soles that were caked in mud and leather uppers that had been scuffed by an unnamed donor. I placed the boot on the ground by my foot. My toes ended a good two inches from the tip of the shoe. I looked up at my mother, the unasked question lying between us. She handed me two pairs of thick woollen socks. I stuffed one sock each into the toes of the boots and then pulled on the second pair. The boots were still too big.

I followed my mother to the cave entrance. It was as if we were going out for an evening stroll, except Oliver and Rosa were already moving off ahead of us. Outside the cave, and in the moonlight veiled by gossamer clouds, Uncle Jure waited for us.

“Will you not change your mind?” Mother asked.

I wasn't sure that he'd heard her. He dropped his head staring at the ground.

“Someone must stay.”

“Why *you*?” Her voice was wobbling and I examined her face. Her eyelids were swollen and I felt guilty that while I'd been able to sleep, she had not.

Uncle Jure was no better as he shook his head. His breathing became heavy and irregular. My mother grabbed his hand and pressed it to her lips. They stayed like that until I shifted and they remembered I was there.

“...after things and be safe. We *will* be back.”

Jure encircled Mama with his arms and let his lips run over her forehead, the bridge of her nose, her lips. He released her and turned to

me, slipping a small doll made out of a length of rope into my hand.

“To keep you safe.”

It had raggedy arms and buttons sewn on for eyes, and I knew it had been meant for someone else. I clutched the doll to my chest and fingered its plaited body. Jure’s eyes became glassy. He pulled me to him and I felt his stubble graze my skin as he kissed my cheeks. He squeezed me so hard it hurt, and when he released me, I became afraid. I wanted him to hold me again and not let go. But instead, we stayed where we were, staring at each other.

“Can’t you come too?”

He smiled for the first time and pulled me back to him. I buried my face into his warm chest. I could feel his heart beat and I did not want to leave this man who had been more of a father to me than my own.

Mama gently disengaged my knotted fingers from Uncle's jacket. Jure reached for her, but she swatted his hand away as a sob escaped her. She grabbed my hand firmly in hers and turned and walked away. We had gone only a few steps when I pulled free of her hand and ran back to where my Uncle stood.

"Don't forget to feed Šuša." He squeezed my arm and nodded. I wish I'd hugged him one last time before I ran back to my mother, but I never did.

We walked quickly, making our way down, skirting the village and the houses that dotted the hillside above the coastline. The buildings were made out of the same blocks of white stone carved from the mountainside. They had been built by hand and each block was cemented to the next by orange clay, giving the houses a mottled appearance. Even in the pale night light,

we could see the marbling of white stone and ochre cement.

I thought I saw curtains waving goodbye in the windows of the houses as we moved down. We kept the track to our left, using it as a guide, shadows flickering from behind every tree and rock. Mama took the lead down the steepest parts as we ran down the mountainside like a trickle of water running away from a block of melting ice. She never said a word to me, not even when I stumbled. She kept her eyes firmly on the path she was making to the sea.

We passed stands of olive trees and the neglected vegetable patches of those already gone. As we made it to the beach, I saw the skiff waiting in knee deep water. The night air was cool and fresh, and I was thankful, at least for that. There was a shimmer of light cast by the moon across the inky water, looking like a path

of liquid silver running to where the sky meets
the sea.

In the boat, there were already five others,
including Oliver and Rosa, waiting on a vessel
meant for two fishermen and their catch.

“You can’t bring all that.”

Mama hesitated, wobbling on the slimy
stones underfoot. She held both the bags in
front of her, and held her position in the water.
The sea was slowly numbing my legs. My teeth
chattered as we stood in the water. I could see
that Mama was also trying to keep from shivering
as she waited.

“Your choice. You or your bags.”

She looked at the others in the boat, but
no one would meet her eyes. My Mother turned
to me. “Come, Olga.”

“If you want both of you on - no bags!
We’re already overloaded.”

I shuffled on the stones making them crunch against each other, reminding me of marching soldiers. Mama stood firm.

“We’re coming like everyone else.” Her hand fixed on the edge of the boat, tipping it in our direction and making the other people on board shift uncomfortably. They sat on the boxes and bags they were taking with them.

“For God’s sake, Filip, let them on.” I recognised Ivica’s voice. He was sitting on what seemed to be a crate of chickens, but was just a down filled quilt that was losing its feathery stuffing.

“The sea’s flat. We’ll be fine.”

Filip pulled the back of his hand across his forehead wiping away sea spray. He turned and walked towards me muttering. Before I could react, he placed one arm across my back and the other under my legs and carried me to the boat. I let out a whimper as I landed in

the boat. I saw Oliver sitting next to Rosa, his arm protectively around her shoulders. He glanced over at me and then turned and spat into the water.

“Mama!”

“Shsshhh. It’s ok.” Ivica pulled me next to him, humming into my ear while Filip turned and went back to where mother was waiting with the rucksacks. They stood in the water, neither moving. It was my mother who shifted first. She held out the rucksacks and they swung like an incense burner. It was Filip who hesitated and the only sound was the tide as it slapped against the wooden boards of the boat. Filip grunted and reached out for the bags. He took them from my mother and nodded for her to get into the boat. Once she was settled, Filip let the bags trail in the water as he walked around to the starboard side of the boat. He lifted the

dripping bags onto Ivica's lap. "If the wind picks up, throw them over."

...

Pualele

As the weeks passed, St Mary's became Pualele's refuge. Whenever she entered the church she would immediately curl her fingers into her palms and start to feel a calmness flooding through her veins. She looked forward to Sundays and gladly helped Aunty Sefi arrange the altar flowers.

Twice a week, Sefi strode into the Church with armfuls of flowers. Pualele would stand by the altar and pass each stem and branch of foliage to her Aunt to place in the vases. Pualele watched in wonderment as the displays emerged from a ragtag of shoots and flowers. The giant hydrangea heads were Pualele's favourite - they were more like pink and purple pom-poms than flowers. With her face creased in concentration,

Sefi would place each stem carefully into position. She fussed and adjusted the flowers until they were 'just so', then she would turn with a beam that lit up her face, nodding with satisfaction at Pualele, who would grin back.

Although Aunty Sefi loved being in charge of the Church flowers, she loved playing Bingo more. The flowers were her duty, but it was Bingo at St Mary's Parish Hall every first Tuesday of the month that she lived for.

The first time Aunty won the bingo jackpot, she went straight out and bought herself a brand new pair of shoes. They were black patent leather with a rounded toe and a silver buckle that fastened to the outside. It was no matter that her feet were so big that they spilled over the top of the shiny leather; she wore them every day.

"Come. We' go see Mrs Magasiva."

Mrs Magasiva knew *everything*. She was the undisputed Samoan matriarch of Rich Man Road, and was known as 'the Queen' behind her back - although everyone knew that she knew they called her that. Pualele suspected that it was Mrs Magasiva who had somehow heard about her misdemeanour in the Four Square and had shared it with the world. She was also certain that the Queen had a direct line to Mama in Samoa so Pualele didn't think going to her house was a good idea. But, obediently, she followed Aunty. Instead of dashing across the road as Sefi normally did, Aunty walked an extra fifty yards along the road to the zebra crossing, her shoes crunching the loose red metal all the way.

At the Magasiva house, Aunty stopped on the steps leading to the front door and tapped her shoes on the railing as if she were a man removing mud from a pair of work boots. A

sprinkle of red gravel fell off the soft rubber soles, and while Pualele removed her roman sandals, Aunty left her new shoes on.

The banging had the Queen at the door immediately, almost ripping it off its hinges as she readied herself to launch into a tirade.

“Sefi!” Her forehead wrinkled as she looked Aunty over from head to toe. Her gaze sticking on the patent leather.

“Oh! Beautiful!” She motioned for us to come in, making a clicking sound that showed her delight.

“I had to come, Merita, to tell you that we won’t be about after Church this Sunday.”

The older woman’s mouth fell open.

“I will take Pualele to St Heliers.”

“You do this on Sunday?”

“With working it is the only day! We might go for a walk.” Aunty Sefi looked down at her

shoes, blushing at her own boldness before the Queen.

The Queen stared at the shiny black shoes.

“Pride, Sefi, is an ugly thing.”

“See you at Mass, Merita.”

Aunty ushered Pualele out of the house, taking tiny clacking steps across the wooden floor.

...

By Sunday, the heels on her shoes coupled with her boldness, seemed to have made Aunty grow taller. In contrast to Aunty Sefi’s brazen showing off, Pualele never wanted anyone to notice her in case they discovered she wasn’t the Pualele Sina Avua’a they thought she was. Amongst the swarm of parishioners at St Mary’s on a Sunday, she tried to appear as small as possible. She swivelled and slipped out of the way of families hurrying for the door of the

Church, women clutching babies and men
shepherding snot nosed children toward
salvation.

The flush of a winner's purse had Aunty
proudly surveying all before her - the Duchess of
Rich Man Road. After Mass she announced
loudly, "We take the bus to St Heliers."

Pualele had never been to the sea in the
several months she had been in Auckland.
There had never been any cause to go near it.
She had glimpsed it sparkling like Christmas
tinsel; and smelt it as gusts of wind rose up from
the harbour sweeping over Freemans Bay and
Ponsonby.

Pualele squeezed into a seat next to
Father and Kasi, Aunty Sefi and Uncle Sam
sitting in front of them. The bus took them along
the waterfront in and out of bays until Aunty
announced that they were there. There was a
flat park on the left by the sea, and a wooden

dinghy rose and fell with the tide in the bay as Pualele breathed in the air that made her nose tingle. The men were already on the slim strip of sand, and after removing their shoes, Pualele watched as they walked into the bluey-green water. Waves gently broke into a white foam around their legs, and she started towards them.

“Come. We cross the road.” Sefi’s hand encircled Pualele’s wrist, pulling her firmly away. She went without a word, but couldn’t help wishing she could stay with the men as they laughed at the water’s edge.

Aunty and Pualele crossed the road and stood outside a dairy. Standing in their Sunday best, they watched other people walk out of the store carrying ice cream towers of every colour. Pink and chocolate, white and green, some even with chocolate sticks poking out of them or concealed under a thick layer of candied sprinkles. As the sun bounced off the front

window of the shop, Pualele could see a small boy standing before a giant gumball machine in the shape of a rocket. He placed coin after coin into the slot and turned the handle, waiting for his fistful of multi-coloured sweets. The aging rocket seemed to stick and occasionally, refused to let go of its candied cargo. The boy would stamp his feet and shake the machine in an attempt to free the boiled lollies, and would then impatiently hold out his pudgy hand for still more coins. His father stood next to him, arms folded with just his left hand dutifully doling out more money at each unsuccessful drop into the machine; the man, somehow responsible for the child's misfortune.

The lady behind the counter looked like a giant pink marshmallow. Her white puffy skin squashed into a pink crimpolene smock that bulged across her, threatening to explode should she move too quickly. She had a kindly eye cast on the boy and his father at the gumball

machine, smiling just a little more as each coin dropped into the waiting rocket's fuel tanks.

When the Avua'as entered the shop, the bell above the door announced their arrival with a tinkle. The shop owner turned to greet them.

Her smile dropped momentarily as her gaze fell on the family of two, before she remembered her business and managed to return a less than kindly smile to her face.

Pualele stepped up to the display cabinet of ice creams. She placed her fingers on the clear glass and pushed herself up on tippy-toes. There before her was a rainbow of flavours in deep containers; chocolate with dark chocolate chips in it; strawberry, hokey pokey, vanilla, lime, and orange chocolate chip. In all her life she had never seen such a selection, or such huge containers of ice cream. Pualele licked her lips at the thought of them – and those were only the flavours she could see before the rocket machine

let out a whoop and she turned to watch the boy scooping up a bounty of hard boiled sweets from the metal tray at the base of the machine. His cheeks bulged as he stuffed several multicoloured lollies into his mouth as his father clamped a hand on his forearm and dragged him out of the store.

“You’ll have to get your hands off the glass. I can’t be spending all day cleaning after you...people.”

Aunty Sefi hit Pualele’s hands so she fell back onto her feet and couldn’t see the ice creams anymore. The promise of the sweet cold dessert lying only a few inches from her was too much after seeing the boy with his sticky loot.

“Can I have orange chocolate chip, Aunty? In a cone?” Sefi looked at Pualele with eyes that seemed as if they might pop right out of her head.

“That’s more expensive you know. In a cone.”

Now Aunty was looking straight at the marshmallow lady. She put her hand in her pocket and pulled out a \$5 note. She placed the money on the counter, not breaking her stare.

“Orange chocolate chip, is it?”

Aunty didn’t move, but Pualele nodded vigorously in case the lady didn’t understand.

“Single or double?”

The store owner had now broken out in a blotchy crimson colour that clashed with her dress. She picked up a cone and held it, poised to set a single scoop into the waiting cone.

Pualele wished that she had a camera to take a picture of her face. Not the marshmallow lady, but Aunty. She was so proud standing there in her finest churchgoing clothes with her legs 11 winnings.

Pualele waited for Aunty to say something. She was warming to the action now: pushing her lips forward and swaggering a little as she stood in front of the stainless steel and glass display cabinet; savouring the word she was about to say like it was the richest full-cream ice cream anyone had ever tasted.

She stepped back from the counter, her shoes squealing on the linoleum. Pualele held her breath, hoping that Aunty Sefi wasn't going to walk away and leave her with only the memory of the smells and colours of the parlour. They both stood there for a few seconds, not moving. Then, Aunty Sefi leant backwards, her chin rising as she wet her lips.

“Double.”

And at that moment, it was the most beautiful word in the English language.

The marshmallow lady gave a grunt and plunged her arm into the display cabinet,

emerging with one fat scoop of ice cream after another. She placed the orange tower into the holder before snatching the \$5 note off the counter. She slapped the change down and promptly turned her back on the Avua'as.

Pualele stepped out into the sunshine with Aunty, orange ice cream already running down the cone onto her fingers. She licked furiously at the creamy orange trail as it pooled in the 'v' between her thumb and finger.

"Pualele! How many times have I told you?"

Pualele stopped licking and thought hard, wrinkling her nose as she tried to remember what exactly she had been told.

"You must keep clean. Lick the ice cream *before* it melts."

Pualele nodded. She had never had an ice cream like this before, but somehow she understood. She smiled back and let Sefi take

her clean hand and lead her across the road to the park and breaking waves on the beach.

“Hey, sister!” Kasi was waving from the sand. Aunty’s grip tightened on her hand and she looked up at Sefi as the woman’s face clouded over.

Kasi was in front of them in a few bounds.

“Can I have a lick?”

“No, no.” Sefi’s voice was uncompromising.

Pualele and Kasi waited for an explanation.

“Germs.” Pualele looked from Aunty to her brother. Didn’t Aunty know that they always shared food? Hands in the same bowls scooping out rice, slurping sweet warm drink from the same coconut shell? The ice cream was melting down onto her hand again and was trickling onto her wrist. She watched the orange trail heading for the white cuff of her shirt.

“I won’t let it happen again.” Aunty was talking. Pualele heard the words but she was mesmerised by the stain spreading like ink on blotting paper. Let *what* happen again?

“Aaaaah! Your shirt!” Aunty grabbed her wrist and the ice cream tumbled out of the cone onto the ground at their feet. Pualele continued to hold the cone and looked back at the melting orange heap as Aunty dragged her towards the sea. Uncle and Father watched in astonishment as Aunty strode into the water and plunged Pualele’s arm, cone and all, into the salt water and started rubbing the fabric between her fingers.

They stood in the ankle deep water, the bottom of their lava lavas soaked as Sefi made a *tsk tsk* sound and shook her head at the rock melon coloured cuff. Pualele looked down at the silver buckles that sat like gilded shells on Aunty’s shoes. Pualele’s tongue was thick and

sticking in her mouth as the breaking waves momentarily obscured the shoes, before the water settled and they appeared again like shiny black *maisū*.

The scream, when it came, was one of utter despair. It was so loud and sharp that Pualele dropped the sodden cone and clapped her hands over her ears. She squeezed her eyes shut and waited for it to stop. Within seconds, Father and Uncle were in the water. They took Sefi under each arm and helped her to a bench on the grass, every step a squelch as seawater oozed out of the patent leather shoes. Aunty sat doubled over sobbing as she gaped at her entombed feet. Uncle whispered to her, his arm across her back patting her gently, as Father walked towards Pualele.

Pualele wiped the last of the ice cream off her face with a dripping hand. She could see her

own worn shoes in the ankle deep water, but couldn't make herself move.

“Look what you've done!” Father hissed, “Everything she does for you, and look what you've done.”

She could see Father's hands hanging in tight balls at his sides. She braced herself and waited. But Father turned and walked away from her, leaving her in the shallows as a seagull swooped down and snatched the cone out of the water. She wasn't sure how long she stood there, her own briny tears mingling with the sea, but it seemed like hours. She wanted Mama's arms around her and then, like she had willed them into being, she felt them wrap around her shoulders.

“Don't worry. They were too small for her anyway!” Kasi turned her around to face him, his mouth serious, but his eyes were full of glee as he winked at her.

“Come on.” He took her by the elbow and led her along the beach away from the others.

Under a pohutukawa tree he motioned for her to take off her shoes and plonked down next to her.

In his hand he held a pale green tennis ball. It was heavy from having been in the water and was balding from where some dog had gnawed it. Kasi threw it up in air, and Pualele instinctively lunged for it. She tossed it back and soon they were volleying the ball back and forth. Pualele giggled as Kasi dived to stop the ball from hitting the sand, until she noticed her sleeve with the stain on it flapping in the breeze, and her laughter would stop. But her brother wasn't one to let her slip into self pity, and he would flick sand at her so she would squeal and jump in the air.

“What did she mean, Kasi?”

Kasi looked at her, one eyebrow higher than the other.

“About the Germs?”

He sucked in his lower lip, chewing something over before he spoke.

“Pualele. She got some bug. That’s how she... y’know.”

Pualele tried to swallow, but a sour sticky coating glued her tongue to the roof of her mouth. There were so many conversations that she didn’t understand, but when she finally comprehended, she wished she could forget.

Kasi and Pualele saw the waving arms, and without discussing it, decided to ignore them. Soon, the voices reached their ears. Kasi raised his eyebrows and Pualele nodded in acknowledgement. He picked up the ball and gave Pualele one of his full smiles that showed his perfect white teeth and made his cheeks bunch up around his eyes. Kasi was her anchor and she didn’t know what she would ever do without him here. The voices were louder. Kasi

took the ball in his hand and flicked his wrist so that the green missile travelled out past the breaking waves before it hit the water. They turned towards the adults, and hand in hand walked back towards them.

That evening, it was Pualele who cooked and served dinner. Aunty refused to go to the Orange Dance Hall with Uncle Sam and instead, had taken to her bed. A sombre veil had fallen over the house. Even Kasi was morose, not even bothering to shoot Pualele a smile or give a quick wink. As soon as she had finished with the dishes, she went to her room and closed the door. A mauve tinged light seeped past the jacaranda and filtered into the room. She could see enough to light the candle as Aunty always did. The flame flickered wildly on the brand new candle that stuck up above the protective glass

surround. Pualele jumped back to avoid its yellow wobbling tongue.

She turned and sat on her bed wishing that she had never asked for the ice cream. Every time she went near a shop in this place, she seemed to make the wrong choice. Why was she so stupid? So greedy? Mama would be mortified to know how badly she had behaved since arriving in New Zealand. The flame caught her eye, and she watched it, mesmerised as it danced in front of her cousin's picture. She caught glimpses of Pualele smiling back at her. She wondered how she had caught a germ when she hadn't a brother or sister to share with. She tried to feel sympathy for the poor dead girl in the picture, but instead she felt an intense hatred for her.

She hadn't felt this kind of anger towards her dead cousin since the day she had thrown a book at her and had missed. Pualele was sick of

seeing her stupid smiling face. It was because of her that she was here at all and not home in the village with her mother and brothers and sisters. Without thinking she went to the dresser and the frame that displayed the card with the girl trapped in time staring out at her. Pualele's fingernails grazed her palms, and then she let the hatred take over and her nails moved away from the soft flesh of her hands.

She pulled off the sello-tape and disinterred the picture from its resting place. She reached for the candle and held it so the flame licked the back of the stiff card. Pualele watched in fascination as the card started to darken and warp from the heat, the girl's face puckering before finally bursting into a blue tinged flame. As the flame spread, Pualele searched for somewhere to drop the burning paper as she replaced the candle on the dresser. She rushed towards the window, trying to wrench the sash

upwards with one hand. The heat from the card in the other hand was intolerable. The curtain whipped up in the evening breeze, touching the flame in her hands.

She let out a squeal and jumped back into the room, the curtain now billowing out towards her trying to wrap itself around the flames. Her free hand shot out and grabbed the curtain, thrusting it aside long enough for her to get her other hand out the window and drop the paper. She leaned out the window and watched as the paper floated downwards, tiny pieces of blackened card falling away while other shreds of paper caught in an up draught, hung in the air, flaming red and lemon in the breeze before finally burning out to nothing.

Pualele rested her head on the windowsill, her relief coming in small tears that trickled onto the painted wood. She was glad the prayer card was gone. But what would she say to Aunty?

She lifted her head up as the last of the day seeped away, straining to see if she could catch a glimpse of the Church's steeple. Maybe she should jump out the window and go there, away from the house and the people in it. She could pray and do the thing with her hands that made her feel calm. Maybe use something sharper than her nails this time.

She sniffed the air; the burning smell wasn't going away. Spinning around, she saw the cotton curtain come to rest over the top of the candle holder just as it became a sheet of fire. The open window fanned the flames and they jumped onto a lava lava thrown on top of the dresser. Pualele grabbed a book lying on the ground and started to bat at the flames, but they seemed to run away from her, racing across the walls, gobbling up the *fleur de lis* as it went. Pualele threw her book on the ground and ran screaming for the door.

“Fire! Fire!”

Father and Kasi burst out of their room first, followed by Uncle and Aunty a few moments later. Father pushed Aunty and Pualele towards the front door while Uncle shouted at Kasi to get water from the kitchen.

Aunty and Pualele stood in the street, and Aunty’s wailing brought neighbours out of their homes to see what was happening. Mrs Magasiva was soon by their side. She ushered them across the road and onto her porch before either of them had a chance to say anything.

Someone called the fire brigade and an engine arrived with flashing lights and siren blaring as orange and red flames rose from the back corner of the house. Pualele watched as the men ran inside with fire hoses. The fire crackled and spat and a thick blanket of smoke rose into the air, blacking out the lights from the street behind. It ascended like some evil spirit

escaping into the night and Pualele shuddered. She worried about her Father and Uncle and Kasi and wondered where they were. A police car pulled up just as Uncle and Father and Kasi appeared at the front door of the house flanked by firemen.

“Quickly. Inside.” The Queen was insistent, and pushed Aunty and Pualele into her front room.

“You can stay here tonight. I’ll send Ben to let the others know.”

“The Police, Merita!”

“Don’t worry. They only come to see what’s happened.”

Aunty sat down, chin on her chest, dejected and out of fight.

“Do you know how it started, Pualele?”

Pualele sucked her lips and shook her head, squeezing her hands as hard as she could. Mrs Magasiva gathered Pualele in her

arms and helped her into a room where three other children were already in bed. Pualele lay down next to one of them. The Queen placed a cover over her, stroking head until she fell asleep.

...

When Pualele awoke, the room was already light and she was alone. She lay still as she tried to recall where she was. It was only when she took a deep breath through her nose and smelt the smoke in the air that she remembered the events of the night before.

Her head was pounding, and soon the thumping in her head was echoed by footsteps in the hallway. They paused outside the door to the room and Pualele closed her eyes again. The door opened and someone stepped in. She heard them move across to where she lay and felt a familiar hand rest on her body.

“Come. We can go home.”

Pualele swung her legs over the side of the bed and waited for her head to stop pounding. Her father's eyes drooped a little at the corners and he had dark smudges under them.

Pualele stood up and followed him. She didn't know what to expect. For all she knew the house could have burnt down in the night, but as they stepped onto the Magasiva's porch, there it was, the Avua's house. The front as perfect as it had been every other day; taro leaves peeking up over the fence and the blue paned front door exactly where it should be.

The smell became stronger out in the street, and Pualele's confidence disappeared. Up the steps and in through the front door, the smell was unbearable and Pualele choked a little as it caught in her throat.

Aunty and Uncle were there in the front room waiting. Kasi was nowhere to be seen. Father closed the door to the room behind them.

“Sit down, Pualele.” Uncle indicated a spot on the floor with his eyes.

She sank down onto her knees and placed her hands on her lap, the fingers on top curling under the hand below. Immediately, Aunty started crying, not the wailing of the day before, but a sad keening kind of cry.

“Have we not been good to you, Pualele?”

She nodded.

“And, have we not been generous, given you clothes and food?”

She nodded again.

“And we say nothing when people say you steal from the shop.”

She gulped and glanced at the three adults sitting in a line in front of her: judge, jury and executioner.

“Then, why is it you play with fire and try and burn our house down?”

“No!”

Uncle rose onto his feet.

“You dare say different.” He was now standing over her. “The Firemen. They see what you did. The Police. *They* come and *they* see what you did.”

His large paw shot out and grasped her collar, pulling her to her feet.

“The landlord says we pay for all damage. We lucky he doesn’t make us find a new house! You think it easy to find a new house when you try and burn one down?”

Pualele was squirming as she rose onto her toes to stop from choking. She shook her head ‘no’ and he released her so that she stumbled, almost falling over.

“And do you think we ever get back Pualele’s picture?” Uncle’s voice was very quiet and his words wobbled at the end.

Then it was Father grabbing her, stopping her from falling over. He stood in front of her and then slapped her twice with the back of his hand so that she was almost knocked off her feet again. The hot sting spread across her cheek and she felt the skin puffing up around her left eye.

“You very lucky, Pualele. I should beat you, but I’m not a violent man.” Father stood next to his brother. “Sefi and Sam say they give you one more chance. Any more problems, you go back to Samoa.”

The physical pain was nothing compared to the humiliation she felt at father’s words. She wanted to go home to Mama and the other children more than anything in the world, but not as a disappointment. She could cope with the

taunts of the children at St Mary's, the critical eye of the shopkeepers and the nuns who wanted to re-brand her, but she couldn't face returning to her own village a failure.

"You can sleep in the room with us and next pay day I buy you a new uniform." Pualele made fists with her hands and dug her nails hard where the burning picture had left a small blister on her left hand.

"You come to work with me until your father gets a new uniform. We don't want *palagi* thinking we can't afford to dress our children." Uncle Sam started to walk away before stopping and turning.

"And Pualele – last chance." She could feel Uncle's eyes on her and she wished she could just be what everyone wanted her to be. But that was the problem – she wasn't sure who she was anymore.

...

That day, everyone except Kasi stayed home to clean up and wait for the Fire Chief. Pualele's bedroom was a gaping blackened hole in the side of the house. She had lost everything – if it hadn't been burnt, it was drowning in pools left by the firemen. The rest of the house had escaped the flames, although there was the lingering smell of smoke throughout. They were lucky that the fire station on Ponsonby Road was only seconds away.

The Chief arrived later that morning, just as Pualele's left eye had finally swollen shut. He was a trim man whose skin stuck to his frame as if he had been vacuum packed. You could see his shoulder blades through his shirt and Pualele thought his jawbone might pierce his tawny skin.

“Just a few questions for our investigation.” He held a pad in one hand, and his pen hovered over the paper as he continued. “Whose room was it?”

“It was my daughter’s bedroom.”

“You’re very lucky no one was hurt.”

Pualele blushed violently.

“I need to confirm some details. Who was home at the time?”

Sefi stepped forward in front of everyone, her arms waving like a bird in distress. “My family. We’ve been here ten years. Never any trouble before.”

“Of course. It’s just routine.”

“Ah yes – routine.” Aunty Sefi’s head was bobbing up and down, her hands now clasped in front of her. “Well...my husband...brother...nephew...”

“And your daughter?”

“Yes, yes, of course.”

“I think my men got your names last night.” He flicked back through the pad and trailed the pen down the side of the page. “Yes, think we have everything for now.”

A sigh of relief escaped from Aunty's lips and she broke into a wide smile. "Thank you, sir. Thank you very much."

...

Uncle Sam worked for *Davison and Davison Funeral Directors of Grey Lynn*. He was a mechanic by trade, but had worked for the Davison's for ten years as general maintenance man. Uncle Sam could fix anything – including the Lincoln Continental. Occasionally he helped in the embalming room or the crematorium, but mostly he kept the fleet of four vehicles in top condition.

"Hello, Sammy! Sorry to hear about the fire – everything alright?"

"Hello, Mr Davison. Yes, we' ok."

"Terrible thing fires." Mr Davison gazed past Uncle to where Pualele stood. "And what have we here – you look familiar?"

Pualele stared at the man. His head was perfectly bald and the light reflected off it like a polished stone. And as if to make up for the lack of hair on his head, he had cultivated lamb chop side burns and had a pair of eyebrows that looked like two exotic fuzzy caterpillars. She couldn't help gaping at them.

"This is my niece – Pualele. She comes to help until she goes back to school."

"Oh! Pualele!" The caterpillars jumped skyward as the skin underneath paled. "Well...errrr...as long as she's no bother. We can always do with an extra pair of hands." He cleared his throat like a man does before saying something important.

"Well, then. Mrs Davison needs some help cleaning up the embalming room. Hope you're as good as the other little one."

Pualele felt a burning shame. Her cousin had been a good girl and everyone had loved

her, and she had tried to burn her memory away. She wished that both her eyes had swollen shut so that she didn't have to see their disappointed faces.

“Don't worry Mr Davison. She'll do as she's told.” Mr Davison smiled at the words – a girl who did as she was told was exactly what he had hoped for.

...

The embalming room was an assault on her nose – the chemicals burnt the inside of her nasal passageways that were already sensitive from the fire. She screwed up her face as if to shut out the smell.

“You'll get used to it, love.” Mrs Davison was as hirsute as her husband was bald. Her thick blond hair was pulled back into a chignon, the centre part showing her dark roots. And as the light from the window caught her side profile,

Pualele could see the light fuzz on her chin and upper lip.

“We’ve had a few through yesterday and Tom’s got another one to do this morning.”

Pualele chewed her lip and waited.

“Take a broom from the cupboard over there and sweep the floor. There’s a good girl.”

Mrs Davison had her head down over a bench top as her arms drew vigorous circles with a cloth. Pualele wandered towards the wall, searching for the cupboard. She found a series of silver handles and pulled on the middle one.

The door was heavy and she closed her good eye as she gave it an extra tug to get it to move. A cool rush of air washed over her as she opened her eye. Through the partly opened door she saw a pair of long thin feet with yellowing toenails pointing at her. On the big toe of one foot was a brown tag attached with string.

Pualele’s jaw dropped, and even her closed eye

opened a sliver in fright. She heard Mrs Davison behind her, clicking her tongue against her teeth.

“This is Mr James,” she said as she reached around Pualele and pushed the door closed. “Tom’s to do him later.”

She turned towards the other wall. “The door you want’s over here.”

She pulled out a red handled broom and thrust it in Pualele’s direction. “It’s alright, love.

Mr James won’t hurt you,” she said reaching over and giving her a squeeze on the arm.

“Dead men don’t hurt you the way the living ones do.”

She touched her finger to Pualele’s cheek, and before Pualele could stop herself, a tear had formed and was already travelling towards Mrs Davison’s hand.

“I tell you what. Why don’t we leave this ‘til later and we’ll go make a cuppa for the boys?”

Pualele gulped and nodded. She wasn't crying because of poor dead Mr James. In all the months she had been in Auckland, no one apart from Kasi had touched her in such a tender way as the undertaker's wife. She reminded her of her mother. It was Mrs Davison that had made the tears come. In a funny way that she couldn't understand, Pualele felt happy again.

...

That night there was a light tapping on the Avua's front door. Uncle Sam went to see who it was and returned a few minutes later leading a tall *palagi* woman dressed in a candy coloured house coat and teetering on three inch wedges with fuchsia patent leather.

"Hello. I'm Edith Davis. I've brought some things over for Pauline. I'm Catherine and Michael's mother." She held up a paper shopping bag stuffed with clothes.

“Please, please. Sit down.” Aunty Sefi was on her feet. “Pualele mentioned your girl. Very nice girl.”

“No, no. I can’t stop. And my Cate says Paulin... Pualeelee is a very good netballer!”

“Yes, and very bright girl!”

The two women smiled and moved their heads in agreement with each other as the men shifted uncomfortably in their seats. There was a pause in the conversation that stretched out a little too long before Mrs Davis rushed to fill the space.

“The children are home on their own so I must rush off – you never know what they might... oh, sorry I didn’t mean...the fire....ummmm...” Mrs Davis pinked up, before quickly clearing her throat and recovering.

“There are some school clothes for Pualeelee!”

“Oh! Thank you!” Aunty Sefi clapped her hands together. “You are very, very kind.”

Mrs Davis wobbled on her patent shoes and Sefi looked down at them, her smile fading.

“Well. I must go. Goodbye.”

Sefi showed her out and returned to the room just as Father swivelled around on his chair and spoke to the space left by the lady.

“We will give thanks for the good fortune we have been given.”

Uncle and Aunty knelt on the floor and nodded sagely as Kasi mutely followed their lead and slid to the floor next to them.

“Our Father, who art in Heaven...”

Pualele closed her eyes and swayed gently to the incantations as she curled her fingers. She couldn't help thinking that things were on the up. She had new clothes, would go back to school, and best of all, Cate Davis had said that she was a good netballer. And hadn't

she learnt that sometimes you have to suffer a little to make it to Heaven? And that's what this life was all about. Everyone said so. She hoped her suffering was over, for tomorrow was Saturday. Kasi would be home to play with her and he had promised to take her to the park. She couldn't wait to get to sleep so that she could wake up and start again in the morning.

...

The sound of smashing glass shattered her dream about butterflies. Men's voices were shouting. Father and Kasi struggled to their feet. Kasi almost fell on top of her as he balanced on one foot trying to put his other one into a trouser leg. The door to their room was kicked open. The men were inside the room and grabbing her father and brother by the arms. Kasi was yelling at the men in Samoan. Father grunted as he resisted the men who were dragging them out into the hall.

Pualele screamed as she pulled the covers around her. Another man entered the room and starting pulling Pualele out of the bed as she continued to scream. Aunty Sefi was behind him, hitting him with a broom.

“She’s mine! Leave her alone!”

The man turned towards Aunty to ward off the blows from the broom before another person arrived, putting Aunty in a bear hug so that her arms were pinioned to her sides. She grunted and fought as the first man pulled the blankets off Pualele, leaving her exposed in one of Father’s long tee-shirts, as she curled into a foetal position facing the wall.

“She’s mine! She’s mine!” Aunty Sefi was still screeching at the men as Pualele pulled the tee-shirt over her knees to cover her bare legs.

“You can prove that later!”

“No! The fire - everything in her room was burned!”

The first man looked from the girl curled up on the floor to the older woman.

“Please! I show you photos!”

“You go with her and I’ll stay with the girl.”

The second man took Sefi’s elbow and guided her out of the room.

Pualele lay still, willing herself to vanish.

“What’s your name?” The man nudged her with the toe of his shoe.

“Pualele.”

“Speak up!”

“Pualele Sina Avua’a.” The man sniffed and walked across the room to some of Father’s clothes. He started rifling through his things, throwing everything to the floor after a quick inspection. As he flung a pair of pants onto the floor, a letter fell from the pocket and skidded towards Pualele’s feet. She put her foot out and

dragged the envelope back until it contacted with the mattress. She kept her eyes on the man as she wedged it between the kapok bedding and the floor.

Aunty re-entered with the other man.

The man held up the photographs for the other man to take. There was one of a baby in white christening gown, the child's name clearly written on the back. The man grunted.

"There's a bunch of baby pictures and stuff. It's their kid alright."

"Birth certificate? Passport?"

"The fire!" Aunty was pleading.

The man searched her face, his jaw moving as he mulled over his options. Aunty looked away. He cleared his throat and turned to his colleague.

"This one, her kid and husband are legal. The other two are overstayers like the Fire Chief said."

“No!” Aunty Sefi was screeching as she clawed at the man’s arm. He shoved her hands away and held his head high as he went on.

“Your relatives are being deported under the Immigration Act 1975. When are you coconuts gonna learn you can’t come in here and take our jobs?” He sneered at them and Aunty seemed to give up, letting her shoulders droop forward as the man with the photos held them out for Aunty to take. She reached for them, but he let them go before she had grasped them properly and they fell to the floor. Aunty yelped like a kicked dog as the other man chortled.

Pualele didn’t comprehend what was happening. She was mortified that she was semi-naked as these men spoke to Aunty about things she couldn’t follow. And what about Father and Kasi – where were they? What was

he saying about taking jobs and what was an overstayer?

Uncle appeared at the door with yet another man. Sefi threw herself into his arms, sobbing as the man looked on impassively.

“You’re lucky we don’t prosecute you for hiding them, y’know.”

Uncle held the man’s stare, his breathing heavy, like he had been running a long way. He stood there like that as the men turned and walked over the photos and out of the house, leaving the front door wide open.

...

Olga

Oliver’s face was everywhere I turned. We numbered thirteen, six more people having joined us from another boat, but it was Oliver’s presence that never let me forget why we were on the island of Hvar. We set out from eastern side of the island towards a safe haven at the furthest point from the mainland. There were no

Germans on the island when we started our trek, but we couldn't help jumping at every sound. We travelled on with the resignation those who had exhausted all other options.

All I knew about the island was what others had told me. The islanders lived much as we did: tending plots of land, raising animals and fishing. But I'd also heard wonderful stories about their lives. In the summer, lavender blanketed the islands in a purple haze, and the harvest festivals adorned the towns and villages with flowers and the people sang and danced the *kolo* for days. I'd heard of freshwater bubbling up from the ground and forming streams that fell over cliffs in water veils. And then there were the stories brought back by their sailors. Tales of foreign lands where jungles hid people who wore nothing but coloured paint on their brown skins, and other places where people ate monkey's brains and smoked golden pipes. But as our

group of women, children and the aged walked on, all I could focus on was Oliver's down turned mouth.

Cold droplets fell onto my skin from a silver sky. My pace quickened. I needed to get out of the rain, but more than that, I was anxious to get as far away as possible from Oliver and his mother. I didn't care where we were going: for me, the forty miles to safety slipped by as I tried to empty my mind of the past few days. I placed one foot in front of the other and I fell into the silence of those who know the guilt of inaction.

Sometimes I felt gratitude towards the Germans for having forced us to leave. My steps would speed up before I remembered Pero, and I would catch sight of Oliver with a snarl on his lips and I'd fall back into a shameful shuffle, counting each step until I reached a thousand before starting all over again. I tried to focus on the

ground, surveying the pebbles and stones that had lodged themselves in the dirt roads and paths that we followed. Mama was in a trance marching beside me. She was like one of those shell-shocked men returned from fighting who are not really part of the world they walk in. And as I walked on next to her, I felt as alone as I'd ever been.

The group moved on with men taking turns to scout ahead. For two weeks we moved like that, crabbing our way slowly towards the port of Stari Grad, sometimes resting a day where locals could provide us with shelter from the winter. The town was nestled into the rock that surrounded the bay, and it was a slight reprieve to be amongst other people again. We were transported by boat to another Island one day before the Germans took Hvar. Our luck was holding. So they said.

...

“How long must we wait?” It was the first words I’d heard Mama speak to anyone since the night we’d left our village.

The young Partisan, nodded. “Soon. That’s all I can tell you.” He walked away, leaving the mass of mainland refugees staring out onto the bleak harbour of Komiža. There was talk of fishing boats taking us to safety. But all we could see in the harbour were a few aging skiffs sitting low in the grey water.

As dusk fell over the port, I sat on a low stone wall, knees tight together with hands in my lap. I’d taken to slipping away to escape Rosa’s detachment and Mama’s indifference. But mostly, I did it to avoid Oliver. A cold breeze blew in from the west and a mantle of purple light fell over the bay. On the horizon, I could just make out a flotilla of storm coloured vessels heading towards the island like an army of tiny seafaring beetles. At last, I thought, we’re

moving on. And I prayed that we would be separated from Oliver and Rosa and I could finally leave them behind.

In the late hours, we set out from Komiža on British military cargo steamers fitted with barrage balloons. Two patrol boats accompanied us and we were kept in total darkness in order to avoid detection by the Germans. I was crouched down next to Mama below deck, bent forward as my stomach heaved. I lost the contents of the day's rations into a waiting bucket, and forgot all about Oliver and Rosa.

The rolling of the vessel mixed with the diesel fumes and the continual shudder of the propellers meant that I was joined by many others in vomiting throughout the night. The positive mood of earlier turned to one of fear as we lurched through rough waters. Ivica went out

onto the deck to find out where we were, but clouds covered the stars from us and there were no coastal lights to offer any idea of where we were going.

...

I woke in a daze of exhaustion, my head on Mama's knees. I peeled the tongue off the roof of my mouth and gagged as a tang of acid saliva hit my taste buds. "Here." Mama passed me some warm water and I gulped down several large mouthfuls. I would have felt much better if the movement of passing the cup between us hadn't stirred up the air and sent a waft of stale vomit towards my nostrils. I belched up a watery stream all over myself and Mama. She said nothing, and I followed her lead.

"We're here!" Ivica was smiling and gesturing towards the stairs. It never occurred to me to ask where 'here' was, so long as it meant getting out of the stinking mess of the vessel. I

raised my head. The fog in my brain started to clear and I realised that I hadn't seen Oliver and Rosa since we had boarded the boat.

...

Oliver found me smelling of my own vomit, on the dockside at Bari.

Ivica had held out his hand to me as I stepped off the gangplank onto solid ground. Portside was abuzz with activity and as I set foot on firm ground, Ivica released my hand and I was swept along in a stream of people.

"Ivica!"

There seemed to be men everywhere in khaki and grey uniforms. They were all moving with purpose and I tried to twist around to see if I could spot Mama or Ivica, but the press of bodies made it impossible for me to move. My head was spinning again. The noise was too much and I was having trouble finding my land legs.

"Mama!"

At first, all I could see was the skyline of the port with its white spires and buildings nestled in the curve of the harbour. My breathing quickened and I tasted the briny air tinged with the stink of char. I caught sight of the scarred dockyards, and the carcass of a battleship still lay half submerged in the water, its nose pointing heavenwards out of the oily water of the harbour. Other navy vessels were jammed into the bay too, resting next to fishing boats and cargo ships.

I heard someone say my name and I craned my neck backwards as a hand closed around my forearm. Oliver's face was ruddy and the same dark hair that fell around Mila's shoulders stuck to his face. There was a wildness about him.

"Where do you think you're going?" Spittle flew from his pink lips as he tightened the grip on my arm. I was speechless and we stood there like that, buffeted by the on shore crowd.

“Let me go.”

“You didn’t answer my question.”

“Why’re you doing this, Oliver?”

“You have to ask!”

“Let go.” I was screeching as I tried to get away, but his hold tightened. “Help me someone!” People stepped around us, like water eddying around a rock in a river.

“Help, please!”

Two soldiers stopped. They said something to me but I couldn’t understand their babble. One of them grabbed Oliver by the hair and pulled him backwards so that he was forced to release his hold on me. The two of them struggled briefly, the soldier quickly overpowering Oliver and trapping him in a headlock. Oliver swore at him and continued to squirm until the man increased the pressure on Oliver’s windpipe and he ceased to fight. I wanted the soldier to let Oliver go but I felt

powerless, only able to dab my eyes started to fill with tears. Looking up again, the other soldier was in front of me. He pointed at his chest and shouted his words as if I was deaf.

“John.”

Shifting position, he held out his hand to me. I caught a whiff of diesel from the dockside and it made my stomach somersault. The soldier had a slightly dishevelled appearance and rings under his eyes. His mouth twisted into a leer and he touched my wrist. I jerked away. His eyebrows rose and he gestured towards me, his voice assaulting me again.

“You?”

He bent down until his face was inches from mine. His stale breath mingled with the strong fuel smell, making the vomit rise up again. I didn't think there was anything left inside me, but I began to choke, trying to hold it back. The soldier's smile vanished as his lips curled back in

disgust. He sprang back, but it was too late. I spewed over his boots.

He threw his hands up in the air and started yelling. I lurched backwards hitting into a passer-by. People were now stopping to see what was happening. Oliver jabbed his elbow into the gut of the soldier holding him, and broke free. He leapt the few paces to where I stood and snatched up my hand and started yanking me into the throng of people. I didn't have time to argue and let myself be pulled along.

The soldiers were roaring at the crowd, but no one was going to stop a girl reeking of vomit. A whistle was blowing somewhere in front of us and we kept going until Oliver pulled me into an alley. We collapsed in a disused shop doorway, its front boarded up and slivers of broken glass crunching under our feet. The sound of boots pounding in unison and coming closer made me hold my breath. Three

uniformed men ran past without a glance in our direction. I looked at Oliver questioningly.

“Army police, I think. Those soldiers back there are in trouble.”

“How do you know?”

He shrugged.

“Will they come after us?”

“I don’t know. If you hadn’t started screaming...”

“You were hurting my arm!”

He snorted air out of his nose and kicked the closed door of the shop. What seemed like several minutes passed before he spoke again.

“Do you ever think about that day after Mila went missing?” His voice weary.

“Every day.”

“Me too.”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean for any of this to happen.” My apology ended in a sob. Oliver

shook his head. We stared at each other for a moment, neither of us knowing how to fix things.

“What did we do, Ola?”

“I don’t know...”

“It was my fault. I was hot-headed...”

“No! It was me. I should have been clear about what I saw.”

“I’m older than you, Ola. I shouldn’t have jumped to conclusions.” I could see that he *was* older. He understood how the world worked more than I did. If I’d only stopped him that day he would’ve helped me do the right thing.

“It’s my fault Pero’s dead...and Mila’s gone...” My voice was barely above a whisper as I circled back in my mind.

“She’ll be ok. I know it.”

“How do you know, Oliver?”

“I just do.”

“Do you know where she is?”

“No. But Dragan won’t let anything bad happen to her.”

He held out his hand to me and I took it. I knew that it was God who I needed to seek forgiveness from, but this was a start.

...

We spent the night on stretchers in a disused warehouse. Mama had found somewhere to wash my outer garments, but they hadn’t dried completely in the winter air. The damp clothes chilled me, but I no longer wanted Oliver and Rosa to disappear.

“We’re moving out!” The call came in the early morning as we were stirring. We collected up our things and moved towards the doors. Outside, several army trucks waited for us and we piled into them obediently, squashing in with our bags against the thick canvas sides. As we rumbled off towards the south, the whispering started. *Where were they taking us? What were*

we doing in Italy? Six months before the Italians had been looting our homes and killing our people, and yet here we were, seeking shelter amongst those who had sought to crush us.

We passed by farmers working on small holdings, much like our own. An old farmer stopped his donkey as we trundled by and raised his arm in greeting. He had the same weather lined face and wiry body as a dozen older men in our convoy. His clothes hung off his thin frame, but his voice reached us in a crescendo. "*Vivo il Partigiano*"

The convoy erupted into a chorus. "*Partizani, Partizani!*" We passed other people working the land or walking the roads. They all waved and called to us. We had much in common with these people, and I wondered if it would be the same if we were travelling through America. Or Germany.

The trucks stopped and we were transferred onto a train. It was the first train that I'd ever been on. I could smell the oil and I started to feel queasy remembering the cargo steamer. I gaped at the hulking black engine while I felt ready to gag as fumes swirled in the air.

I rested my chin on the window ledge and welcomed the air that came rushing into my face as we hurtled through the Italian countryside. The towns were make-believe. All white and perfect with orange tiled roofs. The names flicked past me, Mola, Brindisi, Otranto. They may as well have been Berlin, St Louis or Auckland. The names meant nothing to me other than the knowledge that with every clickety-clack of the train, we were moving further away from Dalmatia.

After many hours the train stopped - we were all exhausted. It was Filip who came to our over crowded carriage with the news.

“We’re resting here for a while.”

The town was a paradise. While the winds sang of loneliness, we moved into a waiting villa. The entrance way was large enough to fit our entire house into it. Marbled floors led to a staircase that rose up to a second level and bedrooms that were adorned with polished tables and chairs and beds big enough for three people to sleep in! I walked into the room that was to be mine and Mama’s. A chair stood by the bed.

“It’s big enough for all of us...” I said the words without thinking. I hoped that Mama hadn’t heard them, but her eyes were already filling up as if she had been struck across the face.

The chair by the bed was covered in an ornate red brocade fabric. I ran my finger over

the material, felt its bumps and traced the flower pattern over the stuffed seat. The bedcovering was similarly ornate in heavy red and gold damask. It was what I imagined Mila's sister would live in. The little tight fist reappeared and gripped my gut once again. Then I remembered what Oliver had said. *Dragan will look after her. He won't let anything bad happen.*

...

A few days later we were marched south to the Italian harbour of Toronto. We were loaded onto boats and we headed due south. "Where are we going, Mama?"

She shrugged and reorganised herself, turning her head away from me, erecting an invisible shield. I watched her when I thought she couldn't see me, waiting in the hope that she might cry - then I would go to her. But her face seemed to have set into a hardened mask. I searched for a way to get her to get through to

her. I thought of hurting myself so that she could tend to me. Perhaps I could have fallen down the stairs that led to the bowels of the ship, or cut myself with a knife. But I couldn't bring myself to do it. Mama remained impregnable, and I supposed that this was how it would be. You might think that I deserved her indifference - but isn't it true that a mother forgives her child anything?

Standing up, I sighed and left her alone as I joined Oliver and Rosa leaning on the railings, watching the last views of Italy. I closed my eyes and let the winter sunshine kiss my face. My mind was perfectly blank, an empty vessel waiting for new memories to fill it up and wash the old ones away. When I opened my eyes, I caught sight of Mt Etna, its white peaks starkly outlined against a cerulean sky.

The converted cruise liner was like a floating city. There were hundreds of refugees

on board, but unlike our other boat journeys, I was not sea sick. I clung to the Oliver's friendship like a lifeline.

As the days sailed by, nobody seemed to know where it was that we were going.

"I heard from someone that we might be heading for Asia," Ivica said.

"Keep your eyes open, we should see Malta soon."

Then on another day, Oliver, "I heard we're going to Africa."

Someone even said, "No one will take us. We will live on the ship until the war is over!"

But every day I watched the horizon, hoping that this would be the day that we would find our new resting place. Then, one morning, as the air warmed itself before the growing sun, it appeared. Over the bow towards the south east I noticed a smudge where the sea met the sky. As I focussed, it blossomed into a lumpy mass,

and then into mountains. The ship sailed parallel to the coast as the ships decks were flooded with people, and Oliver, Rosa and I joined them.

“Alexandria, Alexandria!”

It sat on the edge of the sea, our very own Mecca. Its buff coloured minarets and buildings stood proudly erect under the North African sky. We reached Port Said at the head of the Suez Canal, not really sure what we were seeing. The port shimmered as heat rose off the desert sand, like a reflection in a pool of water rippled by a pebble.

We followed the calls to leave the ship, and as we alighted on to the dock, Arabs in long robes and wearing fezzes appeared carrying wares in giant wicker baskets or tied in flamboyant fabric knapsacks.

“It’s Jesus!” A child was pointing towards the dock to a man with camel coloured robes and a flowing black beard. His fez had been knocked

off in the commotion, but he stood there fanning himself with a palm leaf while all around him other traders swarmed, jostling and bumping in order to get at the newcomers.

“Come away.” Mama was pulling me away.

“But, Mama?” I waved my hands towards the baskets of fruit and food that a small group of women were bringing towards the ship. The baskets overflowed with dates and orange and red fruits that I had never seen before. I pleaded with her. But she was ignored me.

We lingered by the boat with our bags, penniless and without the exotic foods and trinkets that were available on the wharf. As the sun started to slip beneath the western horizon, a loud crackling and piercing squeal made me cover my ears. The loudspeakers kicked into action.

“What are they saying?” I covered my ears as a voice boomed out, a babble of words that would’ve made no sense if I’d listened anyway. The buzz of the afternoon dissipated as people looked at the loudspeakers spewing their message out, while others stared into some middle distance, lost in their own worlds far away from the boat as we waited for someone to translate the foreign words.

On the other side of the wharf sat several empty rail wagons that I hadn’t noticed up until that point. And without ever hearing anyone say it, I knew we were leaving the boat behind. Mama and I walked with Rosa, Oliver and Ivica towards the windowless wagons. The rectangular shape and wood gave them the appearance of cheap coffins. The inside of the rail cars was no better than the exterior. There were no seats, no toilets, no information. Ivica stood in front of us, his arms limp at his sides as

he gazed at our surroundings: the wooden slats, the sliding side doors, the disenchanted people. He squatted on the floor as a breeze slipped in and stirred up the faint odour of animals. Ivica cupped his face in his hands, and then crumpled into the side of the wagon. Mama reached over and squeezed his hand. I wondered why no one was asking where we were going.

Finally, someone spoke. People shuffled uncomfortably. A camp. In a desert. I could hear the low whispering between some of the adults. How were we going to survive in a desert? The train slowly moved off to the south, the doors half open to the Arabian night. Outside, palm trees flashed by along the Suez Canal. My eyelids were heavy and my chin kept falling to my chest before I jerked awake again. Each time I opened my eyes, Oliver was there.

Even now, I remember how the train
finally rocked me to asleep as its wheels sang
their African lullaby,

“A-fri-ka, A-fri-ka, A-fri-ka...”

...

I was woken the next morning by the
desert sun that sought out the insides of the
wagon through the gaps, teasing me awake. I
sat up, rubbing my eyes as I unwound my body
after sleeping the night partly curled onto my
rucksack and partly on the wooden floor. I
inhaled deeply and tried to stretch, but the air
was stale with the stench of too many bodies,
and my arms hit a shelf that ran along one side
of the wagon. I gave up and placed my feet flat
on the floor, pulled up my knees and wrapped
my arms around them.

The train seemed to be slowing as Oliver
and another man slid the door all the way open
until we were flooded with light. It took several

seconds for my eyes to adjust, and by that time the train had almost stopped. People started to tip out of the train onto the sand, and Mama pushed me forward. I tried to lean back against her hand, revelling in the contact, but she pulled her hand away so that I almost fell backwards. A second later the crush of people had moved me to the edge of the wagon. I focussed on the words on a sign poking out of the desert sand:

“El Shatt”

Here in this train station of sorts, I gazed out at the miles and miles of desert stretching in every direction. I felt like we had arrived in hell after the fires had gone out. It wasn't a place. It wasn't even a real town. It was nowhere. I was now afraid of how far we had come. It was true that I'd almost run from the village, but the reality of the Sinai desert with its washed out landscape and a sky so big that it almost swallowed up the earth beneath it was enough to make me regret

leaving. I yearned for the smell of the Adriatic – fresh and salty and alive. I longed to feel the mountains, the smooth rock beneath my feet, and the pale green shoots that sprung up from the awakening earth in spring. I would have loved to feel the ochre and yellow leaves of autumn cracking into a thousand pieces in my hands; I dreamed of plucking ripe figs with their ruby hearts from the trees and to feel their juices running down my chin.

Instead, I turned my head to the east, and let a dry wind lift the hair from my forehead. I could make out the canal a few miles away, and at the edge of my vision I could see something else. I put my hand over my eyes, shielding them from the sun, but I wasn't prepared for the row upon row of military issue tents that were lined up on the sands. British soldiers, clapboards in hands started organising us and

marshalling us into groups that set off towards the camp.

“Welcome to El-Shit!” I heard one of them say with a crooked smile. I didn’t know what it meant, but I do now.

From the ‘station’, we walked with our sacks and backpacks and battered suitcases, a collection of broken people and children come to live in an uninhabitable land. There was a sound of engines firing up to the west as we trudged along. We watched as a fighter plane climbed into the air over our heads. A few people dropped to the ground and some started to run.

“It’s ok! They’re British!”

The soldiers must have thought us a queer bunch diving down onto the sand like that. We were hardly worth bombing! To look at us, with our tattered clothes and rag tag collection of rucksacks and bags, anyone would think we were a band of aging gypsies with their children!

But the British soldiers were kind to us. The Croatian camps at El Shatt were well organised and our people were treated with respect.

The camp was dominated by a khaki neatness. There were hundreds of tents in rows, broken up here and there by more substantial 'buildings' that had real walls and corrugated iron roofs that housed the military storage depots, workshops and administration buildings. The thing I recall most about those buildings is that they didn't flap in the dry desert breeze like the tents we lived in did.

"Where are we going now?" As we waited in a queue I longed to wash myself. I had no idea what we were waiting in line for.

"I don't know, Olga." All the fight and strength seemed to have drained from Mama. She waited without speaking to any of the other refugees, and only shuffled forward when the

queue started to move and Rosa prompted her onwards.

Once at the front, we were confronted by a soldier sitting behind a fold-out table, screeds of papers and a stamp pad and cards lying in front of him.

“Name?”

When no response was forthcoming, the soldier looked up, a frown set on his face. He sighed loudly and tapped his pen distractedly against the ink pot. Just as I was about to reply, Mama stepped in.

“Ana Mastrović,” and pointing to me,” Olga Mastrović.”

He issued us with stamped identity discs, and assigned us to a tent before we set out with Oliver, Rosa and Ivica for our new home. Outside the administration block was a laundry building where we would later take our clothes to be disinfected. There was a sharp smell. It

tickled my nose, but it was a relief from the stench of human sweat and excrement.

We followed the instructions carefully. Row number 45, tent 0602. Oliver led the way, but I was soon disorientated. All the *housing units* were identical. And there were hundreds of them. They were made up of two tents placed end to end and joined together.

I stepped inside tent 0602 and gazed up at the ceiling. Several linings meant to keep out the cold night billowed down above us. It was like a folk tale Uncle Jure had told me of *Ciganin* and their travelling tents. The sides were held up by thin poles. I reached out and touched one, letting my hand slide down the bamboo reed. It was covered in a soft, sock like fabric that felt luxurious to the touch.

The others had already made their way to their camp beds at the back of the tent. The beds were low to the ground, sacking stretched

over wooden frames. Mine was directly across from Mama, and Ivica, Oliver and Rosa were just next to us. In all, there were fifteen people including our small group living there.

I couldn't imagine how we would survive. There were no sweet animal aromas or fresh sea breezes, and there was a complete lack of colour. The dryness was insufferable in the way it robbed you of every last bead of sweat from your face and arms until you felt your skin cracking. Even at night time, when the temperature dropped and we pulled our coats around us. And I never got used to the way the dry breezes of the Sinai sucked the moisture from your eyes, so that it hurt to blink, and tears never came.

...

We lived in El Shatt for three years. It was there that I came to understand that I would

never have my mother's love again, but that perhaps, someone else loved me.

I held to the hope that in her heart, Mama still cared for me in the way that all of us love our families. But it is hard to sustain a love when you do not *like* someone. And in that sense, my mother no longer loved me in the way she perhaps once had.

Living in those huge desert tents, you could never physically be alone. So I created my own world, a make believe America where our family was reunited on streets of gold, and where we carried no memories of the past. During the day I went to the camp school and I started to learn English, but I couldn't wait until classes were over and I could retreat into my own world again.

While others around me felt lost and abandoned, unable to go back, powerless to move forward, I'd found a way to feel content in

our displacement. Here I could pretend that no one knew what I'd done and I resolutely lived my new life, just like a man dying of thirst in the desert believes in the mirage on the horizon.

And all through this time, Mama kept me at a distance. She became thinner as time went on, the Sinai shrivelling her to permanent nut brown.

One night, I crept over to her bedside to watch her as she slept. She was motionless except for the rise and fall of her chest. As I wriggled on the ground by her, Mama rolled on to her side to face me, flinging one arm over the side of the bed, where it dangled like a vine. I was lonely and wanted to snuggle in beside her. I missed Pero, especially at night when I longed for his warm body. But Mama didn't want to touch anyone. She used to hug us – Pero, Jure and me too. As I remembered how she had been, I touched her. Her fingers were cold. I

held my breath as I took her hand in mine and felt the rough patches on her palms and tips of her fingers. I scanned her face and the pale spider marks at the corners of her eyes. Without thinking, I squeezed her hand. Her eyes remained closed, as she tugged her hand away and she rolled onto her other side. Her breathing continued in a perfect rhythm as I scuttled back to my bed.

...

When Mama wasn't about, I would go through the few things she had brought with her. I used the Kauri gum like a worry stone and would massage it in my hands until it became hot to the touch: I examined the photo of my brother and father in Awanui for clues as to who they were; and I smoothed out the few clothes she had packed, sniffing the fabric as if to capture the essence of her and make it a part of me.

One day, I lifted a silk slip to my cheeks, rubbing its smoothness against my skin, and saw a cotton handkerchief fall from its folds. I pocketed the square of cotton and repacked Mama's things. I'd seen the women in the camp embroidering and sewing clothes from the lining of the tents, and I thought I might do something with the handkerchief. One woman from our tent carefully peeled off the fabric from the bamboo poles. She unravelled the cloth until she had hundreds of fine threads. Out of her hip pocket, she produced a spindle and proceeded to turn the threads into a kind of yarn in front of my eyes. She was known as the best knitter in El Shatt, and she would happily knit jumpers with needles fashioned from the bamboo reeds for anyone who asked.

I watched other women making fine thread for embroidery, taking the lining from the tents to make dresses and shirts, or making

intricate collars to freshen an old coat. Very soon, I had almost everything I required. I'd bargained for a needle from a woman who wanted a letter written, and I had carefully pulled off some fabric from the poles when no one was watching.

"You'll need one of these." Oliver was grinning at me, a wooden spindle in his hand. "I made it."

"Where did you get the wood?"

"There were a few off cuts from repairing the Church."

"Thanks." I was touched by his gift. I hadn't realised that anyone had noticed me stripping cloth to make into thread.

"I better get going. Told the priest I'd help hang some stuff before Mass."

"I didn't realise you were so religious!" I teased.

“Church isn’t so bad, Ola. Maybe you should listen more when you come instead of day-dreaming!”

I glowed under his words. He was right. I went through the motions and recited prayers when I should, but I never really paid it more attention than that. Maybe there was something in what he said. I resolved to make something for Mama and for Oliver, and I quickly went about spinning just the right thickness of thread to embroider with.

For several evenings after that, I took out the cotton square from under my pillow and sat on the floor of our tent, staring at the cloth. I threaded the needle with my *El Shatt twine*, waiting to be inspired.

“What are you making, Olga?” A young girl from our tent enquired.

“I don’t know.”

“Perhaps, you could put your initials –
then you wouldn’t lose it.”

My fingers started to move as my mind wandered. I craved to be back in our village before the German soldiers had come, when Mila had sought me out and been my friend, before she had said the words that haunted me now - *there is no us*. In dreams she still came to me, promising me things that a waking Mila never could. She took my hand and we ran together, through a meadow towards a golden gateway. She was a beautiful ghost in those dreams. But at other times, it was Pero and me running away from her. I tried to conjure up her happy face with her full lips, framed by dark locks – but the image always clouded over just as I thought I could see her clearly.

I looked at the handkerchief and there was a perfect ‘M’.

The next night, I sat down and saw Mama watching me from her bed. Her features were partly shadowed but I could see that her lips were parted, as if she might say something. She sat with her hands loosely resting on her thighs and there right in front of me, I could see the proof of all that she had suffered. Her look stilled me for a minute, and I felt a twinge of embarrassment, my face growing hot. I pulled the needle through the cotton and turned myself away from her eyes.

It had been a long time since I'd seen her looking straight at me. Normally, her eyes passed over me like a torch beam searching the darkness. I looked back, but I'd already missed her: she was lying down on the cot, facing the wall. I kept working on the sampler until I'd finished two more 'MM's, knowing that Mama would never love me the way she loved my dead brother.

...

The first correspondence arrived a few months after we had settled in El Shatt. I marvelled at how father's letter had found us when we didn't even know where we really were. If I had known what was in the letters I never would have been so desperate to receive them. But I was excited when Mama asked me to read Papa's beautifully drawn script to her.

Dear Ana,

Our little boy gone! Tell me how did this happen?

You should've gone before the German's arrived – I'll never forgive myself for letting you stay when we all could've been safe in New Zealand.

I could barely get the words out, and I dared not look at her. I stumbled on...

*And I have other bad news – but maybe
you know it already? My brother has been killed
too.*

The words didn't seem real. They were
wrong! I read on like an automaton.

*Mate Jugić received news from his sister.
She said there was more fighting after you left
and Jure and your cousin's boy, Dragan were
killed.*

Jure couldn't be dead. Neither could
Dragan. I had never considered that things
could be any worse than they had been, for who
could imagine a world where people kept dying
all around you, even when you weren't there? I
peeked at Mama from under my eyebrows. Her
face was immobile.

“Did you hear Mama?”

She didn't move.

“Did you hear what I said? I screamed at
her. “They're dead!”

I was on my back on the ground before I knew what had hit me. I saw the flap of the tent fall back into place as Mama ran outside. It took me a moment until I got my breath back, and by that time, she was nowhere to be found. Outside the tent, I held the letter in my hand as I turned one way and then another, trying to decide which way to run, but not going anywhere.

“Olga! What’s happened?”

“Ivica!”

I crumpled at the knees and he rushed to me.

“What is it?”

I thrust the letter in his face and he read the words. He helped me to my bed and the tears came at last. Not even the desert breeze could stop them this time. I had thought nothing could be worse than what had happened to Pero, but one death doesn’t make the next loss hurt any less. I felt like a hot knife was twisting in my

belly. It hurt so bad that I thought I might die. I know that I wanted to.

I don't know how long it was, but I finally stopped weeping and realised that Ivica had gone. I picked up the letter again and re-read the words, just to see if I hadn't made a mistake. But there they were on the page in my father's tidy handwriting. I couldn't deny them. I read on ...

They tell me that you are safe with the British (and I hope that this is true) and that when the War is over, you'll return to Yugoslavia. But listen to me. I'll book a passage for you when the time comes and you and Olga will come to New Zealand. Ivan and I are in Auckland now and we've saved some money - not enough to buy land, but enough to buy a fishmonger's shop, so you'll never have to break your back toiling on the mountain again. We will be city people, and I will be a rich man!

*It will be our new home above the shop –
for all of us. Write me if you get this letter so I
know that you're safe.*

Your loving husband,

Ivan

As I finished the rest of the letter, the tent flap was pulled back and Ivica guided Mama to her bed. She lay down and curled up like a small dog. I got up to go to her, but Ivica stopped me.

“She needs to rest.”

I left the tent and went to find Oliver. He was now honing his carpentry skills as part of an organised group of builders, and I spotted him helping to erect another storehouse for the camp. His back was to me as he hoisted a beam above his head and passed it up to a man balancing on the upper wrung of a ladder. I moved closer and stood in the lee of a tent across from him, watching the muscles moving under his skin. He turned his head as he wiped

his face with the back of his arm, catching sight of me watching him.

“Ola!” He walked across to me, his forehead oily with sweat and his cheeks red from the effort of lifting wooden beams into place. His cheery greeting was replaced by concern as he fixed his eyes on me.

“What is it, Olga?”

I thrust the letter into his face and watched as his colour faded. He bunched his hand around the paper and shook his head.

“I thought they were together?”

He grunted back at me.

“Maybe she got out? Went somewhere else?”

“Shut up, Ola! Just shut your stupid mouth!” He threw the crumpled letter onto the ground and strode off along the tented rows, disappearing towards the east where the camp gave way to the Sinai.

...

Oliver came back to our tent after nightfall. He glared at me as he passed on the way to his cot. My lips quivered and I almost called out to him. I wanted nothing more than to soothe him and tell him not to worry. That Mila was alright. But I was learning to stay silent. I got up and went to Mama. She didn't move. I tried to speak to her, but there was no response. I stroked her hair, and she let me, but she kept her eyes shut and the only sound that came from her was the in-and-out of steady breathing.

...

The next day she stirred early. She rose and went to the hospital building. I followed her, a few paces behind, happy that she was going to get help. Once inside she found the matron and spoke to her. They led her to a pile of smocks and pulled one out. Mama slipped it over her head and followed the woman. She spent every

day from then on in the hospital helping feed the sick and dressing their wounds. I couldn't understand why they didn't see that she was sick too. But she was a competent nurse aide that was desperately needed, so they let her keep working, while each day she descended a little further into herself.

...

Whatever friendship I thought I had with Oliver was gone. I waited for an opportunity to get through, but he refused to let me in. Finally, I couldn't stand it any longer. I couldn't bear him not being my friend and I marched up to him as he worked on the storehouse.

He caught sight of me and stopped for a moment, then turned back to hammering nails into the frame of the building. I cleared my throat, planting my feet in the sand, preparing myself.

"You can't just ignore me."

He swung harder, lifting his arm back and smashing the nail head until there were large indentations in the wood. He took another nail from his mouth and placed it on the frame and swung again. This time the hammer glanced off the nail head, hitting Oliver's knuckles.

He swore loudly as he dropped the hammer onto his foot and let out another yowl. I couldn't help the giggle that bubbled up from inside me and escaped from my lips before I could catch it. Soon it was a full blown unstoppable belly laugh.

Oliver glared at me as I held my hand up to my face, trying to control my hysterics. Then a flicker of a smile crossed his face as he shook his injured hand, followed by a nervous laugh, and suddenly, he was laughing as hard as I was. We stepped towards each other and his arms went around me. I rested my head on his shoulder as the laughter turned to weeping.

I sniffed the last tears away as Oliver looked intently at me. I knew what was going to happen and I closed my eyes. The thrill of his lips on mine was more than physical. My whole body tingled with pleasure under his touch and I let him move his chafed lips over my face, my eyelids, let him kiss my chin. When he finally lifted his mouth away from me I felt cheated.

“Don’t stop.”

My words broke the spell we’d been under and he pushed me away.

“I’m sorry...”

“Stop apologising, Ola!”

“I just want...us to be friends again.”

“I shouldn’t have done that to you.”

I felt the sharp pain of rejection – he regretted kissing me. I felt like a dog tempted out with a treat and then kicked for accepting it. My bottom lip began to wobble and I sniffled involuntarily. I heard him curse himself and step

close to me again, placing a hand on my shoulder.

“I’d like to kiss you a thousand times over. Can’t you see that, Ola?” He sighed and let his hand fall away. “But you’re so young.”

“I’m not!”

His eyes locked on mine, searching inside of me. I wanted us to never argue and for him to kiss me again.

“Look, we’re friends and...”

“But that’s all...”

“All I’m saying is that you’re very young. I only want what’s best for you, Ola.”

“Then why did you yell at me if that’s how you feel?”

“You must’ve known how I’d react when I read that letter?” His voice was understanding and I suddenly felt very young next to him. He stepped forward and placed his hand on my shoulder.

“How ‘d you expect me to react?”

“I don’t know. I just don’t want any more secrets.”

He took my hand and gripped it in his, turning it over and tracing a figure eight my palm. Without taking his eyes off my hand, he went on.

“I hoped they were together too.” He let go of my hand and squeezed the bridge of his nose before raising his eyes to mine.

“Just you and me now.”

...

Pualele

It was unbearable for Aunty Sefi. She paced up and down sighing as she tried to tempt Pualele with hot food, and then with cold food. Sefi could not understand why Pualele had withdrawn so completely, remaining curled on her father’s mattress, facing the wall, eyes firmly shut to the world. She was at a loss at how to

break through to Pualele. But Pualele couldn't stand to talk or to even move. There seemed no point.

The officers hadn't just taken her brother and father away: they had removed the last hope she had of holding onto herself. Without Kasi and father, there was no one who knew who she really was. It would have been easier if they had died instead of being stolen away in the early morning. Instead, she would live the life that she had been cast into, and forget who it was that she had once been. All anyone said to her was how lucky she was that she was in Auckland and not back in Samoa. What an opportunity, they had said. But they were wrong.

"Pualele. You must eat." Aunty Sefi used the soft, low voice she reserved for priests and nuns and anyone of importance. It had a deferential tone.

Pualele sniffed and kept her eyes closed, willing Aunty to give up and go away.

“Pualele. Hot *Koko Samoa* .”

She could smell the sweet smell of the cocoa and sugar. Her mother made the best *Koko Samoa* in the world. On special occasions, she would roast the beans before making a thick chocolate paste. She poured hot water over the paste and sugar to make the drink, and then she added coconut cream – her own special touch. Just for a moment, Pualele turned her head and let her eyes follow her nose. She thought she could see her mother standing over her, a steaming cup in her hand. She was smiling at Pualele and motioning for her to take the cup and drink from it. Mama had come to take her home.

“Aaah! Koko always makes people feel better!”

As her mother spoke, she started to change; her features dissolving into those of her Aunty Sefi. Pualele couldn't hide her disappointment, but she sat up and took the cup from her aunty before taking a long drink of the hot chocolate, savouring the sweet sensation in her mouth and letting the drink burn its way into her. She wrapped her hands around the cup. She felt better. But she wasn't ready to move just yet. Finishing the cup, she placed it on the floor next to the mattress and slid back down onto the blankets, turning her back on Aunty Sefi and closing her eyelids, blacking out everything and everyone.

...

"Pualele."

She didn't move.

"Pualele!"

Go away, she thought.

“Pualele, you must get up. Sister Margaret is here to see you.”

She squeezed her eyes shut as the blanket was pulled off her.

“You must hurry. Can’t keep Sister waiting.”

The nun stood in the kitchen, her gaze running over the ordered open shelves and shining floor. She nodded, as if in appreciation of Aunty Sefi’s housekeeping. Pualele felt like a person walking through water, each step slow and deliberate until she came to a stop just inside the kitchen door.

“Well. Good to see you up, Pauline. No good in lying about.”

Pualele remained still as she waited for the nun to go on.

“I know the fire was an accident – you must put it behind you. And your father and brother have returned home, I understand? But

you have been given a great gift Pauline. You have been taken into this good home and you are being educated. You are a lucky girl.”

Lucky? LUCKY?

“Your Aunt and Uncle are very worried about you, Pauline. And I’m sure your family in Samoa would be very sad to think that you are not...well. Such an opportunity and here you are lying in bed. There’s to be no more of this! You must come back to school. Tomorrow.”

Pualele stared blankly at the floor, concentrating on pushing her fingernails into her hands. She knew that she had no say in what happened to her. She was Pauline now and she may as well forget about her home and who she was before – she was never going back to Samoa. The nun walked past her, turning sideways to fit her girth through the door. Aunty followed Sister Margaret down the hall, opening the door for her and thanking her for coming.

“You do what Sister says, but don’t say anything about what happened to your father and brother.” Aunty was by her side, holding her elbow. “And stay out of trouble,” she hissed.

Pualele stood there immobile, trying to think. She wanted her mother; wanted her to come and take her away from this place.

“Understand?”

Pualele nodded mutely. She understood perfectly.

Say nothing.

Do nothing.

Be nothing.

...

1947, El Shatt

Olga

When the time came to leave Egypt, I was sixteen. I survived the years in El Shatt, by escaping inside my head to my own imaginary future that had grown to include Oliver. But it

was the promise of a life together that made me believe that one day life would be good.

In all those years, Mama never came out of her locked-in self. She treated me politely but never spoke to me as a mother does with her daughter. I learned to live in my own self-contained world, attending the camp school and embroidering and making clothes, but apart from stolen time with Oliver, I stayed away from people. When I could, I climbed the sand hills that lurked on the edge of the camp. I would lie there and try and imagine I could see Oliver, but in reality I watched nameless people moving about like tiny insects on the desert floor. When it was time to return for dinner, I would slip quietly back into the camp and find myself once again at Oliver's side.

...

Almost everyone from our village returned to Dalmatia. But with my father's plan in place,

my mother found us passage on a boat that would take us to New Zealand. Oliver and Rosa came with us too – she had no desire to return to our village. The rumours about Rosa and the Germans had reached El Shatt. She had been shunned by many of the women in the camp, and she knew the kind of welcome she would receive if she returned home, even if what they said about her wasn't true. Rosa had tried to get to America where her daughter, Edita lived, but unable to get visas for her and Oliver, New Zealand had thankfully become their only option. I told myself that fate was keeping us together.

...

We left Port Said on a converted soldier transport ship called *Victory*. We travelled for five weeks. More seasickness. I have a vivid memory of retching over the railings on deck, thankful that I was alone, when a familiar voice intruded.

“I brought you a towel and some water.”

I lifted my head and Oliver gently wiped my mouth with the corner of a moist towel. I tried to smile, but stopped. I was afraid of being sick over him. He chuckled at me.

“You’re very beautiful. Even when you’re sick.”

I wanted to kiss him, but the pitching waves set me off again and I ran for the railings once more.

“Was it something I said?” He laughed.

I couldn’t speak. Oliver stopped talking too, but he stayed with me until I was exhausted. He then led me off the deck down into the open hold of the ship where the bunks were packed tightly, one next to the other like kernels on a cob of corn.

Whenever the seas picked up, he would come and find me. Sometimes when it wasn’t so bad, we would just sit and talk. Other times, he

would hold my hand or rub my back, and I knew that he would never leave me.

As we sailed into Auckland, I looked at the patchwork of houses on the hills that ringed the harbour. Behind some of the houses cows dotted the hillside like miniature black and white toys in a children's play farm. I surveyed the land for vines and olives and the stone walls that held the soil from falling into the ocean – but there were none. The city revealed itself in oyster colours, buildings jutting up into the sky, some more than five or six floors high – a modern city!

I was excited to be landing finally in place such as this, but I didn't show it. I'd grown into a blank faced girl who hid her emotions away from others. It was one thing I learned from my mother.

As we stood on the deck of the ship, I felt Oliver's eyes on me. Arriving in Auckland was

an unwritten beginning for both of us. But although we never spoke of Mila, she was always there, and I felt her standing next to us that day.

Gazing at Auckland, with its buildings and proper roads, I marvelled that we were as far away from our village as we could go without falling off the earth altogether. It was our South Pacific 'gateway to the West'. Mama was her new self - drawn and composed. I wanted to shake her until she smiled – but it didn't seem right when I couldn't manage one myself.

I hadn't seen my father or brother in years and only had the vaguest idea of who to keep an eye out for. Mama went first, as we carried our things down the gangway toward the waiting crowds on the dock. People pressed in close to me as they jostled to get past. Mama and I kept up our steadied unhurried pace. What were a

few minutes more when you'd been waiting
years?

“Ana!”

He was older. His hair was slicked back
black and shiny, but his face was weathered. He
picked up my mother and spun her around as
she clung onto him, a look of detachment on her
face. Someone touched my elbow.

“Olga! You’ve grown, sister!”

Ivan was different too – he was a younger
version of Papa.

“Hello, Ivan.”

“Not Ivan in New Zealand! Call me Joe!”

A lock of hair fell across Joe’s face and in
that instant he reminded me of Pero.

“Olga.”

My father’s voice chipped in. He placed
his hands on my waist and I turned to face him. I
felt his calloused palm through my thin dress,

and knew that the suits he and Joe wore weren't their normal outfits.

"You are beautiful, *moja mala*." His brown eyes warmed me as he left one hand on my hip, his other arm hooked around Mama's waist. He lifted his eyes and they landed on Rosa and Oliver who had followed us off the boat.

"Rosa!" She came up to us and father kissed her on both cheeks. "Who's this?" Father nodded towards the young man to her right.

"This is my Oliver."

"You've grown! You're exactly what this country needs!" He let me go and grabbed Oliver's hand, pumping his arm, grinning madly at him in excitement.

"You will come with us, Rosa. No need for the Boarding House – we have plenty of room in Richmond Road!"

"We don't want to be any trouble, Ivan."

“No trouble! We’re from the same village. That’s how it works here. We all stick together.”

“Just until we can get our visas for America. Oliver can work for you until then.”

“Perfect! Let’s go!”

A thought flashed through my mind. Would Oliver and me stay in New Zealand or go to America? But just as quickly as it had come, the thought was gone and I was back standing on the wharf in Auckland.

Papa had a Ford flatbed truck, and he loaded our meagre belongings onto the back. Mama and Rosa squeezed in beside him in the front. Joe, Oliver and I sat on the open back of the truck, leaning against the cab with the bags at our feet as we headed for our new home.

With every gear change, the truck slowed and lurched. I felt as flimsy as the rag doll in my bag as my body was whipped backwards and forwards. Everything was moving too fast for

me. I needed to lie down and close my eyes and open them when everything was still and quiet and made sense again.

But there was no time for self pity. I was too busy concentrating on not being flung from the truck. I barely noticed the streets and buildings we passed by, until we turned into a road lined with plane trees. Their spiky branches were nude, leaves swirling on the ground as they were chased around by a cheeky breeze.

The road started to descend and the jerky gear changes stopped for a moment as we glided down a hill.

“This is it, sister. Richmond Road.”

Through the trees, I spied house after wooden house. Their roofs were covered with corrugated iron and they were mostly painted a dirty-white that seemed responsible for holding the buildings together. Some houses had verandahs while others were fronted by modest

porches. There were walls that bulged out from the buildings, with different coloured glass patterned into the windows. I was horrified. Where were the solid stone houses? Everyone knew that wood rotted in the wet.

Father hit a pot-hole and I was catapulted into the air, landing hard on the truck. I could feel the bruises before they were ever there, and as we hiccupped along the road, I began to feel as if we would never make it to our destination alive. Oliver's hand landed on my thigh where it lingered for several seconds. I smiled at him and he gave me a nod before he looked away, letting his hand slip down between us so that his fingers touched mine on the wooden slats of the truck.

“Here we are!”

I had forgotten about Joe for a second, and was startled by his voice as the truck turned down a side street, and then quickly into an alleyway. The truck stopped in front of some

wooden steps leading up to a dark green door.

The building was grey, but it was solid. Concrete and plaster – only the windows were wooden.

A fresh easterly had come up off the harbour and whipped up the plate sized plane leaves in the alley. The sea-gust mingled with the smell of old fish, and I wrinkled my nose as I stepped off the truck onto the loose metal driveway. I scanned the alley lined with corrugated iron fencing and moved my feet. The metal crunched as I swivelled around. Where was the garden? How would we grow anything on the cracked concrete smelling of fish guts? Excitement had turned into despair and I thought that I would rather be in El Shatt.

“Welcome to Richmond Road Fisheries!”

Father swung his arm expansively.

I thought he was mad. The hair that had been so carefully moulded under the pomade

was now lifting up from his scalp in the breeze.

He beamed at Mama who remained blank faced.

“Rosa, there’s a room upstairs you can have. Oliver and Joe can share.” My eyes followed his up-stretched arm that pointed towards windows high up on the building. I didn’t think to ask where I would be sleeping.

“The outhouse is behind you.”

I turned to look at the iron shed that appeared to be held together with wire.

Rosa’s mouth fell open and she stood like that for several moments before Mama spoke.

“Who lives there?” She gestured towards the other windows above us.

“No one. They’re used for storage for the butcher and green grocer. They have their own houses.” He fixed us all with a look of excitement. “We work hard, we’ll be rich enough to buy a house too. Come. Let’s go in!”

I walked up the steps and followed father. As my eyes adjusted to the light inside, my spirits sank further. We stood in the sparsely furnished interior of the dining-come-kitchen. The bench space hadn't been cleaned in a while and I could see a frying pan wedged into the sink where a green ribbon had stained the vitreous china basin. On the kitchen table lay an empty plate, the fork and knife crossed in the middle marking where the food had once been.

“Come on, Olga!”

I started after Joe, but couldn't help glancing over my shoulder to where Oliver stood in the kitchen. He was openly staring at me, and I stumbled. Joe peered over his shoulder and caught the look that went between us. He smiled at us and I blushed under his gaze. Joe extended one hand towards me. I followed him to the staircase that marched upwards and let him lead me up to my new home. My heart was

thumping in my ears. I didn't want to share my feelings for Oliver with anyone. I somehow thought that I could protect what we had and preserve it forever.

...

1999, Auckland

Pualele

The alarm continued to whine somewhere near her ear as she reached out an arm and felt for the clock. She pushed herself up onto an elbow and focused on the time as she hit the pause button.

0615.

She had time enough to get to early Mass and still make it to Davison's in time for work if she hurried. The house in Richmond Rd was still the same, except for the repairs to her room after the fire. New gib on the walls had been stopped but never painted, and the wooden flooring had been covered in *laufala*. Even the jacaranda tree

had survived largely unscathed, apart from a dark scar on its lower trunk where the flames had curled, briefly holding the tree in a fiery grip, before the firemen slapped the flames away.

She pulled on her clothes and walked over to the tallboy that she'd bought with her own money from her very first pay cheque. On top of the dresser were several photos of her family. In the centre and blown up so that it was slightly grainy, was a picture of her mother and father, caught laughing as they watched her younger sister returning home from New Zealand. Lani had come to New Zealand along with Sione and Tao.

They'd all stayed in Richmond Road for a time, but only Sione had remained in New Zealand. He lived in Wellington now and worked as an accountant. They all said he was *fiapalagi*, with his Dutch wife and European ways. But he'd made up for any disappointment by being

father to four boys and for his generosity to his relatives in Samoa. It was Sione's success that glossed over the disappointment they felt over Pualele.

She hadn't married – she'd never even tried. Her life involved Church, home and work. There'd been no room for anything else. But she still sent money home too. The money was the one thing that allowed her to remain where she was, leaving her untroubled by her family's desire that she find a husband. Until now.

...

Pualele had been the one to find Auntie Sefi that morning. She remembered hearing a noise like the water gurgling down the sink. But she'd been almost asleep and hadn't wanted to get out of her warm bed. She'd clear the sink in the morning, she'd thought before sleep had overtaken her.

A chill in the room had woken her early. She jumped up, pulling on her robe as she went to the window. But it was already shut. Without thinking, she opened her door and walked down the hallway to the lounge where long ago, visitors had slept. Now it was Sefi's room. She could no longer sleep with Sam. The oxygen machine he had for when his emphysema was bad kept her awake, she said.

Pualele eased open door. The bed was empty, curtains already drawn. Aunty must have beaten her to the kitchen this morning.

Aunty Sefi sat with her back to the door, rounded shoulders humped over so that her forehead was on the table. Pualele put a hand to her own chest.

"Aunty?" She stood beside and knew without touching her that she was gone.

Heart attack was what they said. The Davison's took care of all the arrangements.

Sione and other family flew in. The funeral and afterwards were hazy recollections in Pualele's memory. Her own life had been so centred by Aunty, that her death had taken Pualele's New Zealand life with it. It had been easy to hide the truth that the three of them weren't a 'proper' family.

Aunty Sefi had believed that she could transform Pualele into her own child, never seeing the flaw in the plan. She trusted that she could be a mother again, and that in doing so, her life would be complete. But in her grief for her first child and obsession with her second, she'd only succeeded in alienating her family and community.

It was pride, Pualele thought. Pride alone made her think that she must have another child in order to be complete. But no one had warned Sefi that desire could lead down roads she didn't want to travel.

...

“Pualele!” The shuffle from the hallway and the sound of hands trailing along the walls made her jump. She pulled on her skirt just as the door was pulled opened.

“I was worried.” Uncle cast his eye towards the clock with its red LED display flashing continuously.

“Just coming.” She walked towards her Uncle, taking his arm and leading him towards the kitchen. She pulled out the chair and waited while he lowered himself into it, the seat creaking under his weight. Uncle placed his puffy hands on the table and waited patiently as Pualele made tea and brought some breakfast.

“Pah! What’s this?”

“It’s toast.”

“Can’t you get me some sausages, some eggs?”

“No Uncle. The Doctor said you have to eat this way.”

“He wants me to die!”

Pualele jammed some toast dripping with butter into her own mouth chewing determinedly as if to bite back the words. She loudly licked her fingers as she watched Sam. He sat like one of the stone lions outside of Davison’s. Head held high and still.

“Trying to starve me to death!”

Pualele went to the door and picked up her coat from the back of a chair.

“I’ll be home to make lunch.”

“Wash your hands before you go!”

Pualele sighed and walked over to the tap, turning it on briefly before snapping it off again and banging the side of the sink with her dry fingers.

“See you later.”

“But you didn’t...” She ran out before hearing the rest. There was something that she would never admit to anyone else, but sometimes she was glad of Sam’s blindness. He couldn’t always see the crumbs still on the bench, or if she’d washed her hands properly or the Magasiva’s cat walking across the table. And with Sefi gone, she could flout the rules without fear. It had been a long time since she’d worried about the consequences of disobedience. The time had come for her to act.

...

Mass was the same most week days. Father Barry, a handful of old men and women and Pualele sitting right at the back. Sometimes if Father Barry was in the mood and decided to linger on a sermon that half of the small congregation couldn’t hear anyway, she would slip out the door and head to work. On other days she would lose herself in the prayers and

gently squeeze her hands shut. On this day, she felt strangely elated knowing that she was finally going to ask the priest the question that had been burning in her head all these years.

She remained seated while the other parishioners filed out the door and then slowly walked towards the altar. She waited for the priest to emerge from the sacristy.

“Oh! Pualele! You gave me a fright – what can I do for you?”

“I wanted to ask you something Father.” She opened her mouth to speak just as a low rumble came from the priest’s belly.

“Well. What is it? Are you sick?”

“No. I’m well, Father.”

“Good. Uncle Sam?”

“He’s well.”

“Your parent’s, I hear, are looking forward to seeing you.”

“Yes.”

He nodded at her as if to encourage her to speak, but she could only suck on her upper lip. A loud grumbling sound started and Father Barry distractedly rubbed his midriff.

“For the love of Jesus, Pualele. What do you want?”

“I want to be a nun.”

“What? What are you talking about? You’re going back to Samoa with your Uncle.”

Pualele stared straight at him now, boring into his solid blue eyes.

“It’s what I’ve always wanted.”

He exhaled loudly and tucked his chin and examined her face.

“But what about your family? They want you to come home at last.”

“I can’t go home. I want to give my life to God.”

He shook his head from side to side, his eyes never leaving hers.

“Think of your mother, Pualele. She wants you back.”

“It’s too late. I’m not that person anymore. She’ll only be disappointed.”

The priest kept staring and Pualele wondered if there was something wrong with him.

“Have you considered an Order?”

She nodded and the priest narrowed his eyes. He seemed to waver on his feet. Pualele knew that Father Barry liked her. She was a regular at Church and when her Aunty had passed on, Pualele had taken over the flowering arranging. Father Barry knew all about her: the childhood misdemeanours; the self-harm; the unnatural job; and now, the refusal to return to Samoa, but she hoped that he would look kindly on her.

“You know something, Pualele? My father used to cry into his pint, not because he wanted

to go back to Ireland, but because he knew he never could.”

A look of understanding passed between them.

“You better come and see me after work this afternoon. I’ll see what I can do.”

...

Olga

And everything echoed in our new home. Every step and dropped enamel mug, every whisper and creak of my parents’ bed could be heard in the upstairs flat. Even the building itself seemed to speak to us. The wind sought out the cracks between the windows and the building, invading constantly so that I thought of our first home in New Zealand as the whistling house. My room was more of a large storage cupboard, with no windows. Papa removed the door and we hung a blanket across the front of it for privacy. I soon got used to my ‘cell’. After the

years of communal living, it was luxury to have a space that was all mine.

Life settled down quickly in Richmond Road. Papa rose early with the boys, and they headed for the fish markets on the wharves for the daily catch. Not long after they left in the mornings, the poultry man would be at the kitchen door with his delivery of fresh chickens. Sometimes there were even rabbits with their fur still on. Mama and Rosa would skin them and place them on hooks ready to display in the shop window. The shop opened at nine and I helped serve with my broken English.

Papa did all the shopping for us from the markets. He would stop at Turners & Growers and buy our fresh vegetables and fruit. I wished that we had a garden where we could grow our own things. Sometimes from the upstairs windows that looked out onto the alleyway, I could see into the yards of the houses at the

back. There were apple and plum trees, and I marvelled at the lawns that the people clipped on Saturdays. The neighbours' vegetable plots, brimming with winter harvest, made me envious. I felt trapped in our upstairs house and thought that this must be how Šuša felt when we locked her in her pen. Then I would feel sad wondering what had happened to my dear Šuša.

I even looked forward to Sundays. It was the only time I left the house except to go to the Yugoslav Club. The congregation was a mix of Dalmatians, Irish, Maori and a few Britishers. Church had become something to hold onto. It was a tangible thing that we all understood. Although I had once been a reluctant Catholic, I found comfort in its familiarity and its customs. Even more than that, it was in those early months at St Mary's in Richmond Road that I came to understand 'faith'. To me it meant hope.

And I conceded to myself that Oliver had been right - *Church isn't so bad.*

We knew nothing of what had happened to Mila, and her existence in the world was never mentioned. Just like Pero and Jure. If you didn't talk about them, then you weren't reminded of the pain. Words were for the living. But it was in Church on Sunday's that I thought of them all. I prayed for Pero and Jure in heaven, and asked forgiveness for myself. For Mila, I prayed that she had escaped and was living somewhere wonderful.

...

Oliver and I found it difficult to spend time alone. Sometimes after Mass we would walk home together, but I grew increasingly impatient with the limited time we shared. It was partly my own fault. Joe was the only one who really knew about us, and without having spoken of it, he

was complicit in my need to keep the relationship with Oliver private.

Spending time together was further complicated by Oliver's relationship with Rosa. He was a dutiful son with a doting mother, and he was a constant companion to her whenever she needed him.

"Why do you always have to go with her?"

I pleaded one day.

"She's had a hard life. And she's all alone."

"What about me?" I whined, feeling myself getting angry. "Us?"

Oliver stroked my hair and planted a firm kiss on my mouth.

"Don't worry. Soon we'll have all the time in the world." He smiled reassuringly and I forgot to be cross.

Apart from dances at the Yugoslav Club, there was never more than a stolen kiss and the

promise of a future. It seemed important to us at the time that we told no one of our love, but we often spoke about being together. I was sixteen and in such a rush!

“Why doesn’t your mother go to your sister? Then we can be together.”

“We will be together. I’ve told you many times. I just can’t disappoint her. There’s a good chance that she’ll get a visa. Maybe we could too? Go to St Louis.”

“Yes. You’re right. Maybe we should go too. But we’ll wait before we tell anyone.”

“Smart as well as beautiful! This is why I love you, Ola!”

I was happy and felt a rush of satisfaction. He loved me. I was beautiful. And smart.

It was one Sunday after Mass that first summer. I watched Oliver with my father, standing at the edges of the congregation. Oliver

had his hands behind his back as he spoke, my father nodding at him, saying nothing. I saw him rest a hand on Oliver's shoulder before Mama called me to follow her, and I walked away.

That evening, father sat in front of me at the table.

"Ola, you get on well with Oliver."

"Yes, Papa."

"I like the boy. He works hard." He cleared his throat and went on. "Oliver asked for your hand in marriage."

I felt the same physical sensation that I'd felt when he kissed me in the desert. A delicious tingling excitement coursed through me, a realisation of years of longing.

"But, there's a problem, Ola."

I jumped at his words and held my breath. Papa had a sober look on his face, his palms flat on the table.

"I'll miss you," he whispered.

I breathed again and let out a squeal.

Papa stood up, pulling me to him.

“Come, let’s call him and tell him the good news!”

We burst out the door and I ran down the steps.

“Oliver!”

He was standing with Joe, hands pushed deep into his pockets, feet shuffling nervously on the ground. I ran to him and he opened his arms to me. He lifted me off the ground and we spun around several times, laughing while Joe shouted his congratulations.

Oliver put me down, my head spinning.

“Steady!” Oliver put his arm around my waist stopping me from tumbling over.

“What’s going on?” Rosa had appeared on the steps behind us. She was unsmiling and her arms were folded across her chest. Papa turned and went towards her.

“Wonderful news, Rosa. You should be very proud of our children.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Oliver and Olga. Oliver told me he spoke with you. They’re getting married!”

“No. This ends here.”

Her voice was sharp and reached us across, piercing my joy as she shook her head violently. I felt Oliver’s arms tighten around me as I leant back into him.

“Rosa? Oliver spoke to me today – he told me you knew?”

“He said he wanted to marry – yes. Wanted it to be a surprise for me - but, Olga? No!”

My father bristled at her words as my mother appeared behind her and Rosa moved to make way for Mama on the steps.

“She’s a good girl! You should be happy they want to marry!”

Rosa glowered back at him.

“You weren’t there Ivan. It’s because of Olga that we’re here without Mila.”

“You can’t blame her for that! And we’ve helped you when no one else would.”

“And I appreciate your help. But I will never forgive her for what she did. Our visas are coming and Oliver and I will go to America.”

“I know what happened. She was young. We all make mistakes.”

“We all make mistakes, yes! Normally a mistake doesn’t kill someone!”

“For God’s sake Rosa, listen to yourself! There was a war. I lost my brother and son – you don’t think I feel...”

“At least you know where they lie...my Mila is gone and no one can tell me what’s happened to her.”

“Rosa, I’m sorry about Mila. But Oliver loves Ola and they want to be married – you want to punish your son too?”

“She will never marry my son.” She glared at me with open animosity. “We will move to the boarding house tomorrow.”

“Rosa!”

She spun round, pushing past my mother and went back inside the building.

“Ana, you talk to her!”

I saw a nerve twitch along Mama’s jaw line and stared at her as she tilted her head, looking Papa in the eye.

“No. I won’t.” My father stepped back as if he’d been hit.

“Olga will never marry Oliver.”

I felt Oliver release me.

“No!”

“It’s ok,” Oliver said taking me by the shoulders. “I’ll talk to her. She’ll get used to the idea.”

Oliver walked towards the building and I observed my mother turn her back and go inside. Papa was beside me, putting his arms around me.

“Don’t worry, Ola. I’ll make them see.”

I wanted to believe him, but I understood that he didn’t have the strength to fight Rosa and Mama. Their resolve was impenetrable, and neither father nor Oliver was ever going to change their minds.

They left the next day. I watched out the window as Oliver carried their bags and placed them on the back of the truck. Joe sat in the cab ready to drive them away. Oliver didn’t look over at our house, he knew it was worthless. It wasn’t

our way to disobey our parents. And, he had his own guilt to contend with.

Every Sunday after that, I prayed for Mila, Pero and Jure as always. I added Oliver too. Before he had left for America, Oliver got a message to me. He would get his mother settled with his sister and then he would be back. I just had to wait.

Mama had other ideas.

“Olga. We need to make some *crostoli*. We have an important visitor.”

The visitor was a middle aged man that my father had known on the gum fields. I heard the rap of knuckles on the door and kept tying the *crostoli* into perfect pastry bows ready for deep frying.

“Hurry, Olga. Go and wash your hands and change into the dress on your bed.”

I listened to Mama, even though I knew that I didn't have another dress. As I ascended the stairs, I heard the visitor speaking to my parents and hoped that he wouldn't be staying long.

I stood at the foot of my bed and gaped. Laid out in front of me was a cornflower print dress. I held it up to me and smoothed my hands over the cotton fabric. It had a full skirt that fell below the knee with a square neck and capped sleeves. Realisation dawned as I changed into the frock and went down to meet my suitor.

Mr Papić was a neatly dressed man of no great height. He was not unpleasant to look at, but I felt uncomfortable as he examined me over the top of his bifocals.

He took to calling every week, arriving on a new red bicycle. I would spy on him as he rested the bike gently against the back of the

building. He would spend sometime removing the trouser clips from around his ankles before smoothing his hair. I learned to dread his knock – rap-rap-rap. Mama made me dress carefully, and I'd serve tea and sit at the table while Mr Papić gnawed on his knuckles, glancing my way when he thought I wouldn't notice.

It was ironic that it was the Church that gave me a way out. One Sunday, my stomach turned in knots as I anticipated another visit. I absentmindedly scanned the notice board at the back of the Church. A pamphlet on St. Therese hung on board, fastened by a thumb tack. I took it off and read about the Carmelite nun and her mission. A line that I have never forgotten made me pause for thought:

"In Him we live and move and have our being."

It became stuck in my mind and a tug-o-war began in me – Did I have the courage to

choose such a life? Or would I stay where I was until others decided my future for me? I could not conceive that there were any other choices. Sundays suddenly couldn't come fast enough and prayer and God became very important to me. *Church isn't so bad.*

...

I may have stayed there in Richmond Road, but I knew that no matter what, I could not marry Mr Papić. And so my path seemed clear. Joe helped me – he understood. He still comes to see me and lets me know about Oliver and his family in St Louis. Oliver at least is happy. And although I had desperately wanted nothing more than to be Oliver's wife, I know that what we had was not lasting love. It is the kind borne out of mutual suffering.

So, neither Mila nor I made it to America, although I did travel further than I ever imagined I would. I wonder what she would make of me. A

dried up walnut of an old woman, deep lines on my face not nearly as deep as the crevices in my heart. There were rumours about her as the years passed. Some said she had been murdered by the Germans, her body thrown down a well. Others said that she had been shot by mistake by our own people and her death concealed. I don't know the truth, but I like to think she is now a *Vila* on our mountain guiding a new generation of young women through the treacherous waters of life into adulthood.

Now you know everything, all my sins – the lying and deception, the disobedience, the cowardice. But my greatest sin was the crime I committed against myself. I never stood up for what I wanted. I thought I wanted to leave my home and family behind me – but I was wrong.

Even after all I'd done, I would have been happiest living in our village with a few animals and some vines to tend: that is where I have

always belonged. Instead, I have hidden away from the World and have lived off the love and support of our sisters, these honest women who never knew my true feelings. I am sorry that I deceived them too, for they deserved much better than that. I guess you should add that to my list of crimes.

I'm tired now and don't see that I need to bother with the pretence any longer, but like all lies, at some point, it is too late to make amends. I will be gone soon, but you, Pualele, have a choice. Find where it is you belong and go there, for He will be with you always.

...

Sister Mary

Sister Mary put down the journal and looked around the simple room. Her head was spinning with Sister Teresa's life, and she felt a rush of love for her friend. She put everything inside the envelope, suddenly exhausted and

confused. She would talk to Mother Superior and seek her guidance. She would know what to do.

...

"She left me these things Mother."

The Prioress opened the envelope and pulled out the papers, doll and embroidered swatch.

"Yes, I know."

Sister Mary's eyes widened at the admission as the Prioress picked up the photograph of the young man.

"This was her lover. I let her keep it because I could never decide whether to take it from her."

Sister Mary leaned in towards her, peering at the man in the picture, comprehension dawning on her face.

"Why did you let her?"

“A broken heart makes a good Carmelite, Sister. And, I’m a practical woman - the man sent us money from America.”

“But the journal, you let her keep that too?”

“It’s better to write if you can’t talk.”

Mother scrutinised the photo, her middle finger sketching the outline of the man. “Let me ask you something Sister Mary – why did you come here to this convent?”

“I came to be Christ’s bride.”

Mother Superior harrumphed, her lips tightening across her face.

“Why did you really come here?”

Sister Mary stopped and thought a moment. The answer was on the tip of her tongue, but the wrong words came out in a rush.

“This is what I’ve always wanted. When Aunty died Mama wanted me to return to Samoa,

but I couldn't go back. It was too late. I belong here."

"The words aren't important, Sister, it is what you believe inside that counts."

Sister Mary wasn't sure what she believed as she rubbed her palms back and forth across her knees. Sister Teresa had been her last anchor in the world, and now she was gone.

"I came here because the world is so ugly."

"But it can be beautiful too, Sister - the beauty in prayer and silent contemplation with your sisters. And don't forget, we're all on this earth to suffer."

"Suffering is wrong!"

"God sent his son to suffer for all eternity to save our souls. I'm sure you don't mean that God is wrong."

The Prioress had never before been reproachful before and Sister Mary smarted at

the words. The older nun exhaled and bowed her head over the photo.

“You’ve much to learn before final vows, Sister.”

“I don’t know if I can stay, Mother.”

“You are my lamb, and I am the shepherd. It is human to doubt, but I will do everything in my power to guide you.”

...

The taxi pulled up, its front wheel rim gouging the curb. The driver stepped out wearing a white *kurta* over jeans. He flicked a cigarette butt out into the road as he walked around the vehicle to Pualele’s side.

“You Pualele?”

She nodded, avoiding his eyes as she bent down and wound her fingers under the worn handle of her leather carry bag. She lifted it by her fingertips and let it swing out towards the car. The driver reached to take the bag from her, his

hand grazing her forearm. Unconsciously, she moved away and the bag slipped from her grasp, her open hand exposing the raised purple scar on her palm. The driver sucked in his breath, but said nothing as he picked up the bag in one hand. With the other, he opened the passenger door for her, his eyes taking in the simple, but neat package of a woman standing by the car.

Pualele raised her eyes to the driver. She noted the frown on his face as she massaged the palms of her hands.

“You ok?” His voice nervous and thin.

Pualele swallowed and looked back at the walls surrounding the convent. She could get in the taxi and go. Or, she could go back in. All she had to do was press the intercom and walk through the gate, follow the buxus lined up beside the path and run up the steps to the front door that would open again without question. If she went back in she could leave the leather

carry-all behind on the grass verge for the rubbish men to collect, and then she would have nothing to remind her of her other life.

I will do everything in my power to guide you.

But there was something niggling at the edge of her mind...

“Miss, are you ok?”

Pualele wanted to tell this stranger, what had happened to her. Not just about Sister Teresa but about her own life. All of it. It was such a simple question he asked, but there was no easy answer. She let her hands hang free as she tried to settle her thoughts, the voice in her head growing stronger.

It is always there. In every soul. The very essence of where we belong.

“Miss! Are you ok? You’re not looking good?”

He had her by the arm and she let herself be led until she was sitting in the taxi, her feet still on the grass verge. It could take her anywhere she wanted to go. She just had to say. She took a deep breath and peered at the gabled roof of the convent over the wall. Her arm pressed against her thin coat and in her breast pocket she could feel the outline of the Kauri gum, the winged insect suspended within it.

“I’m fine,” she whispered as she examined the kikuyu creeping over the concrete at her feet. The driver bent his head towards her, not sure of what she had said. Then, in a much stronger and clearer voice, she lifted her chin until she was looking directly into his almond shaped eyes.

“I’m going to be just fine.”

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