

Buddha and a Boat

Stepping out of the matrix

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Abstract

Buddha and a Boat is the second of a trilogy I have been working on. In the first book Alice sails over to Fiji with her father and meets Cornelius, with whom she falls in love. In the first book I explore the way Alice mixes up the mystical and sexual. She is very narcissistic and creates fantasy in order to maintain a sense of adventure, romance and self-worth. Fantasy and reality are all mixed up. In the second book, *Buddha and a Boat*, Alice continues her journeying. In this book there is a sharper focus on the Buddhist teachings she is trying to understand. It is a semi-autobiographical novel. The story begins with her son Oliver returning home from Canada because his father is dying. Oliver has fifteen years in IT behind him and is in the throes of a mid-life crisis. He wants to know who his mother was when he was a child and why she was so drawn to spirituality. He is reluctantly but persistently curious about her spiritual adventures. Mainly around the fireside, Alice describes her teachers and the irresistible pull of spiritual experience. 'Reality' was knocking at her door. Oliver is sceptical, as is his sister, Emilee. Alice, the main antagonist, is in her late sixties at the beginning of the novel. The writer is currently 56, hence the semi-autobiographical description.

The novel is also about a sailing adventure set in Fiji, Vanuatu and New Caledonia. This was a real adventure and the story remains reasonably true to the facts. Alice and her father Jack set out from New Zealand for a six-month holiday sailing the Pacific. They are both looking forward to adventure and possible romance. Alice is also after the mystical. She needs to fill herself up with love, both human and divine. She meets and falls in love with Cornelius. The relationship is passionate and doomed because she confuses Cornelius with her mystical beloved, and because she has difficulty in relationships with men. Alice realises she needs to bring her two worlds together – the mystical and the ordinary. This challenge is the central theme of the trilogy.

A third level of the story explores Alice's meditation experiences when, as a young mother, she went on frequent meditation retreats. These early retreats captivated her, offering mystical experiences and insights into the nature of perception and self. This part of the story is autobiographical.

Many Buddhist themes are explored in this novel. The confusion between the Vipassana and Samatha – bliss and insight – is highlighted, because I see this confusion as a

serious handicap to spiritual progress. The book explores in depth the Buddhist understanding of self and emptiness, the significance of re-experiencing and understanding the stages of the womb, the importance of finding 'good' mother and the nature of 'free' child.

Exegesis

In this exegesis I explore my reasons for writing *Buddha and a Boat* and show why my research is relevant, important, unique and timely. I look at how this novel fits into current spiritual literature. I discuss why I chose the genre of the spiritual/autobiographical novel to tell my story, and explore the difficulties I faced turning autobiographical material into a novel. Finally, I touch on the influences on my writing and how they helped me solve the many problems with which I was confronted.

This creative work is the first draft of a novel, *Buddha and a Boat*.

My reasons for writing this novel.

Over the years I have read many books on Buddhism, both fiction and non-fiction. I have been inspired, helped and left strangely unsatisfied. The writings lifted me into a special ‘spiritual’ world and then returned me to the ordinary – the two worlds didn’t fit together and I didn’t understand why. Few books I have read explore in depth the confused relationship between the ordinary and the spiritual. By ordinary, I mean a world that primarily describes things – people, ideas, objects – and our reactions to them. This is a world in which other people and things are separate from me: the subject, the ‘experiencer’. By spiritual, I mean the world where life is experienced as a whole, a unity, where self is seen merely as a useful tool or orientation, constructed out of phenomena, but not a real entity. New age writing focuses on this distinction.

‘The New Age movement opposes ... the general tendency to fragmentation in modern western society where parts – be it individuals, religious traditions or countries – become alienated from the whole.’ (Askehave, 2004, p. 9).

In my novel, the focus is on the Buddhist rather than the more general New Age perspective. The western world is having a love affair with Buddhism (Abeysekera, 2003). However, I feel that the core teachings are still not well understood. I have talked with and shared a spiritual practice with many beings, and I see in them the same confusion I have experienced trying to understand the teachings. In this novel I want to

clear up this confusion and elucidate some of the reasons for flight into the mystical. What is potentially unique in my research is that I am not only exploring in depth the muddle and confusion of Buddhist teaching, but also using the genre of the novel to do this. The Buddhist Path of Liberation is not as ‘plain sailing’ as many self-help books describe. The experience of blissful unity in the mystical may exaggerate a sense of isolation in ordinary life. The sense of freedom experienced in the mystical may exaggerate a sense of feeling trapped in ordinary life. This flip-flop may destabilize rather than strengthen. My book is an attempt to redress the lack of clarity around the spiritual journey.

In writing this book I want to share my personal spiritual journey: the struggle and confusions that helped me to a realistic understanding of the nature and value of spiritual experience. I want to share my insights with others, to help them. I want to foster a curiosity in those who have avoided spirituality, using a compelling story, full of characters to whom they can relate.

Lastly, I have read many sailing books and none of them has focused on the physical details of sailing: *Seamanship* (Nicolson, 2004), *The Totorore Voyage* (Clarkson, 1988), *Passage to Juneau* (Raban, 2000) and *The Taming of the Crew* (Brown & Neale-Brown, 1994). The detail is important, whether it be the detail of spiritual experience or the detail of sailing. The detail is absorbing, and I want the reader to enter the world of sailing, to learn something of the craft, to understand how to set a sail, steer a course. I want them to go sailing. Sailing is exotic and a great metaphor for the spiritual journey. Sailing alone in the vast ocean is a great way to invite mystical experience. Time alone in nature awakens the mystical in many people. It is a common human experience, but it is not well understood. Sailing and spirituality go well together.

How my work relates to other spiritual writing.

Popular spiritual literature comes in all shapes and sizes – from spiritual memoir and spiritual autobiography to non-fiction, self-help books and the novel.

Traditional spiritual memoirs focus on the writers’ commitment to a spiritual teacher and the steady development of their spiritual life under that care. The writing tends to be dry, journalistic and lacking in critical investigation. It is written by the converted

for the converted, and tends to glamorize the teacher and the spiritual life (Osbourne, 2001; Alexander, 2000).

Many books describe spiritual experience and the lives of spiritual practitioners, or they trace a spiritual journey. Few look critically into the nature of such spiritual experience or into the lacks within the psyche of the spiritual practitioner, which may have created a need for this 'special' spiritual experience in the first place. They don't unravel the glamour of spirituality and place it back in ordinary life. My novel aims to do this.

Popular spiritual memoir is written for a wider appeal. *Eat, Pray, Love* (Gilbert, 2007) is the recent best seller that portrays spirituality as an adventure, something to experience, like eating or climbing a mountain. In this story, a western, recently-divorced middle-class woman is looking for adventure and romance. By the middle part of the book, she ends up on an ashram, practicing Vipassana meditation. In the book, Gilbert expounds the theory of Vipassana in a rather frivolous, pedagogic way, and she relates her antics and experiences at the ashram as pure story. She doesn't investigate the relationship between the two.

Soul Survivor (Hawkins, 1998) is another spiritual memoir. In this book Hawkins describes his spiritual/mystical experiences and philosophical reflections while tramping alone in the Tararuas. Spiritual reflection is primary and the story is secondary. He has left the ordinary world for some time with God. After 40 days, he comes down from the mountain refreshed and ready to return to ordinary life. The story itself is simple and genuine. He keeps the two realms separate while he puzzles philosophically about his dilemmas. 'My malaise came out of restlessness and discontent ...' (p.28).

Buddha and a Boat shares many features in common with these two memoirs. It resembles *Eat, Pray Love* in that it is a travelogue which highlights spiritual and romantic adventure. It resembles *Soul Survivor* in recounting time spent alone in nature and the kinds of mystical experiences that arise. Reflecting on the strengths and weaknesses of these two memoirs has been useful. I wanted a balance between frivolous and serious, introspective and dramatic. Neither book analyses the meaning of 'spiritual' or investigates the real relationship between the ordinary and the mystical.

Many popular novels have also been written with a spiritual theme. In *Surfing the Himalayas* (Lenz, 1995), a young American snowboarder heads for the Himalayas and meets a Tantric Buddhist Monk named Master Fwak. In this new age adventure novel, vast quantities of undigested, even indigestible Tibetan Buddhist teachings are dumped on the reader. Master Fwak spouts pages of philosophy at a time, with only brief interludes for responding to a question or comment from our snowboarder. The philosophy appears unrelated to the story line and, from my understanding of Tibetan Buddhist philosophy, is a mixed soup of ideas from all over the place. The plot remains undeveloped, with little conflict, dramatic tension or development, and the characters remain two-dimensional and unchallenged. Even so, it became a national best seller and was published in ten countries.

Casteneda, in *The Teachings of Don Juan* (1970) and *A Separate Reality* (1971), uses the same question and answer format as Lenz to deliver his Yaqui teaching. However, his writing is more sophisticated. I have followed a similar format for delivering Buddhist teaching in *Buddha and a Boat*, taking care not to overburden the story with philosophy and to use the conversations to develop character as well as story, in the way Casteneda does.

I was also inspired by Hawkins (1998) to quote actual material from my teachers, to give my story some weight. In *Soul Survivor* he fills the margins with quotations from famous philosophers and spiritual teachers.

What spiritual novels have in common is a desire to present a spiritual message in order to expand the view of the reader. In *Buddha and a Boat* I am doing the same. However, I am placing the spiritual struggle in as real a context as possible, and investigating it critically from the viewpoints of several different characters. I am attempting to get right inside the person drawn to the spiritual path, to tease out why they have become so entranced. Flying away into the spiritual is portrayed as a way of not facing up to ordinary life. Maybe it was the fantastical delusion of the spiritual embedded in popular spiritual novels that inspired me to take up my pen to try to right the wrong, or rather to continue the discussion started in these novels.

Journey to Ithaca (Desai, 1995) is a literary, spiritual novel that does some of this unmasking. A young man, Matteo, is drawn helplessly to the ashram of a woman guru. We follow the journeying of him and his girlfriend Sophie, through their druggy hippy

background; Matteo's encounter and growing obsession with his spiritual teacher; the birth of their children, whom they then abandon; and Sophie's search for clues about who this teacher is. She needs to find out why Matteo is so obsessed with her. The story is intriguing and beautifully written. However, the real nature and value of spiritual experience are never explored. The devotional element is highlighted and only one mystical experience is described, right at the end. This is a novel about a westerner's search for truth from an Indian perspective, in which the characters are well developed and their personal journeying through conflict and discovery is primary. I wanted my story to have this level of literary craft and, at the same time, I needed to honour my purpose, my reason for writing this novel: to seriously investigate the value of Buddhist teaching.

My choice of genre

When I first drafted this story it was based entirely on journals I kept at the time of a sailing trip through the Pacific. I recounted my mystical experiences, my reflections on them, my developing romance, my reflections on this romance and the physical adventure of sailing. The writing was very personal, didactic and in the style of a travelogue or journal. It was an as-true-as-possible account of events.

These journals could have been developed in several different ways: into a more sophisticated travelogue, into a spiritual memoir with a journalistic/travelogue style, into a non-fiction self-help book, into a spiritual autobiography, or into a spiritual autobiographical novel. Each genre had its advantages and disadvantages. I will explore why I chose the spiritual autobiographical novel as the most suitable genre for my story.

Travel literature typically records the experiences of an author touring a place for the pleasure of travel. An individual work is sometimes called a travelogue. Literary travelogues generally exhibit a coherent narrative or aesthetic beyond the logging of dates and events as found in travel journals (*Travel Literature*, 2011).

As a literary travelogue, my journal chronicled my experiences, adventures and personal impressions as I sailed the Pacific with my father and Cornelius. *Eat, Love, Pray* (Gilbert, 2007) is similarly a travelogue. Both travelogues are written in the first person, which is common for this genre.

This travelogue style can tend to develop an ‘and then and then’ rhythm, which can become tedious and lacking in dramatic tension, leaving the reader bored. This was a continual problem in my writing. I had to find a way out of simply recounting the daily events of sailing. Furthermore, I had big ‘issues’ I wanted to explore. The depth I was looking for seemed beyond the scope of a travelogue. I wanted the challenge of creating a literary work with a definite structure and strong characters. A more complex style of writing was required.

In its first stage of development, *Buddha and a Boat* transitioned from travelogue into memoir: a recollection. A memoir is less obsessed with factual events than a travelogue and centres more around the mood or attitude imbuing a particular section of one's life. Because I started out only dealing with one particular section of my life, the sailing adventure, the story was closer to a memoir than an autobiography. Autobiography details the chronology, the events and places of a whole life, while memoir is more closely related to the writer's own memories, feelings and emotions.

Gore Vidal (1995) gave his own definitions of the two genres, stating, "a memoir is how one remembers one's own life, while an autobiography is history, requiring research, dates, facts double-checked." (p.5).

Throughout this memoir phase my greatest challenge was to create a melody of the contradictions between the antagonist and her world.

“The lure in the memoir isn't: open your life to me, but something more difficult: create a melody of your contradictions. Contradiction is at the heart of confession.” (Foster, 2005, p. 172).

To create this melody, I felt I needed to go beyond a simple sailing romance. Also, I needed to extract myself from the subject matter – I needed a broader viewpoint, I needed to step away from my dogged respect for the truth, to see my story as a story, not ‘me’.

At this early stage, my story fitted neatly into the subgenre of spiritual memoir. Spiritual memoir deals squarely with the bedrock of human existence: why we are here, where we are going, what is life (Andrew, 2011).

In my writing, I was focusing on the mystery of human existence and I was working hard to understand what it was that I was writing about. What is spirituality? What do those experiences mean to me now? This introspective spiritual analysis meandered through the early stages of rewriting.

Andrew (2011) describes three qualities of spiritual memoirs. She states that the writer of spiritual memoir persistently attempts to describe the indescribable, “to uncover, probe, and honor what is sacred within his or her own life story” (para.3). Every spiritual memoir attempts to place a human life in a “broader, sacred context” (para.4). The writing itself becomes a means for spiritual growth.

Certainly this was true for me. I was gaining a deeper understanding of my personal story as I wrote and rewrote. However, I was also becoming increasingly entranced by these understandings, my new insights, the rush of ‘ahha’ moments. I was digging deeper and wider, with no end in sight. It was only after much prodding from my tutor that I finally extracted myself. Writing is about defining boundaries and working within them. Every idea will unravel back into the whole if allowed to do so. I had to contain my thinking.

Spiritual memoir was a dangerous genre for me. I wanted to create a well-crafted work, something that would be interesting for other people to read. I wanted to place my personal story in a broader context. I wanted to discuss some important Buddhist issues. The personal, rather introspective focus of memoir seemed not only limiting, it also allowed me too much scope for personal introspective reflection. I could have written a non-fiction self-help book on Buddhist psychology, lifted out all the argument and discussion, used some personal anecdotes, and stayed away from the problematic craft of story-telling. There is a huge market in non-fiction self-help books.

“ ... one of the consequences of the popularity of New Age is the veritable boom in self-help books which provide guidance and tools for the individual who wants to develop his/her human potential”

(Askehave, 2004, p.172).

Non-fiction self-help books are usually written by people who claim some authority. Like fictional self-help books they aim to sell their message, uplift the reader, inspire. I have read hundreds of them in my lifetime. However, *After the Ecstasy, the Laundry* (Kornfield, 2000) is the only one I have read that seriously looks at what happens ‘off

the mat'. What happens when ordinary life intervenes? It was this book more than any other that seeded my main theme – the problem of swinging between the spiritual and ordinary.

I chose not to write a non-fiction book for several reasons. I didn't think non-fiction would do justice to the richness and subtlety of what I was trying to say. It wouldn't be any fun to write. I'd spent many years at university wrapped in the dogged, dry rigour of analytical writing. I wanted to learn a new craft. Also, I wasn't an authority on Buddhism. Although I have been a practising student for almost thirty years, I don't have a scholarly Buddhist foundation. However, I had a serious problem in using another genre. How could I get the kind of critical analysis I wanted across without alienating or boring the reader? Story is primarily about character, not philosophy; it is about personal conflict, not didactic discussion.

As I kept writing, broadening the scope of the story back into the past and then into a possibly true future, my story slipped from spiritual memoir into spiritual autobiography.

Staude (2001) defines a spiritual autobiography as "a history and interpretation of a person's life written by the person who experienced it, considered in relation to its spiritual foundations" (p. 250).

It soon became clear I could not fulfil my 'story telling' objectives by keeping strictly as close to the truth as possible. I couldn't create a story that was compelling to read by sticking to the facts. My mentor finally persuaded me to push through the 'truth' boundary and leap into fiction. My writing morphed into the next genre: the spiritual autobiographical novel.

"One might say that the autobiographical novelist aims at telling us the whole truth, and not the truth. Whether he is successful depends on his capacity for discerning the whole truth." (Pascal, 1956, p. 137).

Whilst an autobiography is concerned to tell the actual truth, an autobiographical novel uses a certain amount of fiction to get at the essential truth of the character of the author. Sticking solely to the truth could not deliver the kind the tension, complexity and dramatic structure I needed.

“Edwin Muir felt this when he wrote, in his *An Autobiography* (1954, p. 48-9), that if he had adopted the form of the autobiographical novel he would have got nearer to the basic truth of his existence, of life altogether, and it is only a feeling of rectitude that makes him reluctantly 'stick to the facts and try to fit them in where they fit in'.” (Pascal, 1956).

It was only when I made this transition that I began to develop a feel for the structure of a story as something beyond a sensitive recounting of facts. I began to work on elements of suspense, conflict, arcs, climax and turning point. I realised I could manipulate my characters to tell their story rather than feel bound by what actually happened or might have happened.

I started to enjoy writing in this freshly creative way. I could now step back from all the drama, from all the themes, develop the characters and follow their lead. I was no longer in sole charge. My characters were building lives of their own. Up until this point all my writing had been an as-true-as-possible recounting of events. The freedom I now felt was extraordinary, as was my sense of being supported by the tighter structure of the novel. I was in love with the possibilities of the novel.

How I used different points of view and different layers to tell my story.

My journals were originally written in the first person present tense. I kept this point of view for the sailing story. It gives a sense of freshness, intimacy and immediacy to the narrative. Alice has a rather childlike even childish attitude to life, even at forty eight. Like a child, she is caught in her own stories and experiences, she is caught up in the physical pleasure of sailing, romance, cycling. First person present tense is perfect for her. However, always being inside Alice's head makes the story self-conscious, self-interested and introspective. Alice isn't that interesting and she isn't that reliable as a narrator. If we don't trust or like her set of eyes, what then? To get around these problems I introduced the device of discovered journals. Oliver stumbles upon journals written by Jack and Cornelius on the sailing trip. These entries add colour and depth to those characters and give the reader a different view of Alice. These journal excerpts are written in the first person in a mixture of present and past tenses.

The other problem I now faced was how to get across my philosophy, reflections and insights without overburdening the story. It was this problem that led me to develop an entirely new layer, with Alice as an older woman. I stretched the story forward in time, giving it the autobiographical flavour. As a mature woman, Alice discusses spiritual ideas and spiritual experience with her grown-up children, mainly around the fire. Oliver, her son, and Emilee, her daughter, become strong characters in this layer, and we follow their conflicts and their resolutions, to give us a break from Alice. Oliver and Emilee are written as characters with whom the reader will readily. They are level-headed and skeptical of the value of spirituality. Their questions are the questions I am expecting the reader to ask.

The characters of Oliver and Emilee are based loosely on my real children and projected ten years into the future. This part of the story is true-to-life. I chose the third-person past tense to give the reader a break from the first person POV of Alice in the sailing story and so that I could use multiple points of view.

The story opens in a current time frame when Oliver returns home because his father is dying. It is written in the past tense. The story progresses with flash backs to the sailing journey which, as pointed out, is written in the present tense. This is a little clumsy and it tends to make the sailing adventure read more like a journal.

The third layer, written in the third person past tense, develops into a fuller retrospective view of Alice's early life and meditation experiences. In short vignettes, Alice recounts her early Vipassana and mystical experiences, so the reader can understand the journey she is on, possibly be intrigued by it, and perhaps be prompted to make their own investigations. I included some flashbacks to her childhood to show why she created a special mystical world into which to escape. There is a continual unspoken tension between the value of this experience and its potential to confuse.

How I transitioned into the genre of the novel

Because the story started out as a true account of a sailing adventure, it lacked the dramatic structure of a novel. As I have already said, in the early stages of development I was concerned to remain as true to the facts as possible. Even when I added the layer of Alice with her children, I was still overly concerned to remain true to the actual

characters of my children. It took me a long time to accept that I was writing a novel, and that story and drama must triumph over truth. Very slowly, I learned to see the novel in terms of a drama built out of the characters, their conflicts and the way they resolved them.

I began the work of reducing the number of characters, introducing all the important characters early, developing themes and conflicts that continued through to resolution and creating dramatic incidents. Oliver's father dies at the beginning of the story, Oliver's childhood friend dies in a sailing misadventure, and Alice's father dies on the way back to New Zealand. All these deaths provoke a reaction in the other characters. I had fun fictionalising the characters Alice met on her hitch-hiking adventure around New Caledonia. Brainstorming with friends and family unearthed all kinds of scenarios. I initially portrayed Alice as a reluctant adventurer, both bold and uncertain. I decided to remove some of her vacillations to make her stronger and so more likeable. I needed her to be more of a heroine than she really was.

The lack of dramatic tension remained my biggest problem. I need to create drama without becoming melodramatic or sentimental. Every thread of the story needed to evolve, build to a climax and then be resolved. I realised that even Alice's early meditation experiences needed to be framed according to this shape, with a climax and denouement. I was beginning to see how to use the structure of the novel to tell a story.

How I increased the literary quality of my writing

Here my general reading was of immense value. Throughout the process of writing this novel I have been reading widely, both within the field of spiritual creative non-fiction and more general novels. I am very aware that everything I read has been influencing my writing and that I am reading in a critical way, to see how the writers do what they do and how my writing could benefit.

I turned to Casteneda (1971) to find an effective way to describe certain spiritual experiences.

“All I was aware of then was a green, amorphous, fog-like glow.”
(Casteneda, p.178).

“The ripples were immobile. Then the water began to fizzle; it was as if it had carbonated particles that exploded at once” (Casteneda, p.178).

In several places I have mimicked this descriptive style of writing and his frequent use of the phrase ‘it occurred to me ...’.

“The air is shimmering with this flowing from all the leaves and it occurs to me that this is life - the air is oozing with life ... “ (Wells, p.83).

I will mention a few of the books which had a significant influence in the early stages of writing.

Randall (2009) spends a lot of time describing the physical environment through which the characters are walking. There is no dramatic tension and almost no story development. The reader enjoys the meandering and the snippets of homespun wisdom. For this to work the writing needs to be of a high calibre. There are many rambling passages in my story. Where the writing is good, they work. Following her example, I have added pieces of homespun wisdom to add zest to gentle passages.

“A better New Zealand icon than the kiwi she thought. They were just hidey-hole brown birds she’d only ever seen behind glass.” (Wells, p.3)

Dowrick (1997), in *Tasting Salt*, describes in great detail the intimacy of food, homes, cuddles and delicate friendships. We get to know Cordelia through the detail of her surroundings and how she relates to them. I developed this intimate, descriptive style in Alice’s visits to her daughter, focusing on the food and family ambiance. This intimacy contrasts well with the more rugged sailing story.

“Large bunches of glossy silverbeet and the more rugged grey kale lay in heaps on the wooden bench. “Your job is to find the snails and slugs. The girls don’t like that job.” “ (Wells, p.126).

Another writer I found useful was Janet Frame. Frame (1998) is at her most vulnerable and personal in *Towards Another Summer*. Grace’s personal inner voice is at odds with

the outer world. She has trouble projecting a personality that is coherent, that she can rely on.

“ “Help yourself, smoke mine for a change” had been futile, she had been too shy to speak.” (Frame, 1998, p. 136).

“ ... Oh, Grace said, suddenly terrified that perhaps she had sounded too bold and proud, almost boastful.” (Frame 1998, p. 58).

I was encouraged by the effectiveness of this style to express Alice’s uncertainty and ambivalence in a similar way.

“I would – of course I would. ‘No, I won’t, thank you so much, I don’t have long to see the country.” (Wells, p. 165).

I was also encouraged by Frame’s example to be more extravagant in my descriptions.

“Grace looked about her at a landscape from which all life had been wrung; sodden grass, small heaps of black snow; slush; the trees standing stripped and grey ...” (Frame, 1998, p. 108).

“Oh, no, I must not remember, Grace thought. I’m a migratory bird.” (Frame 1998, p. 10).

“My ears start buzzing, scrambling my head, like mice gnawing holes in wall board, baby-pink mice crying out, ... “ (Wells, p. 192).

The idea of using a frailer, older woman, with flashbacks to her earlier life, came from the *Blind Assassin* (Attwood, 2000).

The idea of putting three deaths into the story to increase the drama came from *Crimes of Neglect* and *Music from a Distant Room* (Johnson 1992; 2004). Johnson has three characters die in both stories.

Conclusion

I had a major challenge in writing this project. I wanted to write about Buddhism and mystical experience, and I wanted to write a sailing romance. I didn’t know if it was

possible to do both successfully in one book. The breakthrough came when I finally managed to extract myself from the detail of my story, and from my personal insights, and see the story on the page as something that was separate from me. Although it had been suggested that I would be better off writing a memoir or a non-fiction self-help book, I was determined to write a novel, even though at the time I didn't understand what this meant. I thought a novel had the potential to reach the widest audience and to attract the ordinary reader, and I somehow suspected that only a novel would protect me from my tendency to over philosophize and introspect. As my writing transitioned through the various genres, I began to understand the structural and developmental requirements of the novel and to see the ways in which it was different from memoir and other non-fiction. Eventually I learned to use character to develop my themes and tell the story I wanted to tell. This story resolves the question Alice set out with – how to integrate the mystical and the ordinary.

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Buddha and a boat

Stepping out of the matrix

PART ONE

Chapter one

Alice picked Oliver up from Auckland airport. The traffic was furiously slow: five o'clock peak hour. She hugged her son, unwilling to let go, chest heaving as she settled a panic. He was a stranger. Oliver offered to drive.

'Other side of the road in this traffic? Too much of a risk.' She helped with the luggage.

'Traffic's much worse than in Vancouver.' Oliver kept the conversation light, for her sake and his. It had been at least ten years. Alice didn't want to think about that.

'Place hasn't changed that much,' he commented, looking around.

She crawled along the left lane of the motorway, liver-spotted hands gripping the wheel. New Zealand sun. Her hair was short and grey now. He remembered the long thick curls, ginger flecks catching the light.

'How is he?'

'You're just in time.'

They turned into Tamaki Drive, the sparkling sea of the Hauraki Gulf, and drove through Mission Bay, Kohimarama, St Heliers. The sun threw long low shadows over the sand, joggers pumped loose fists back and forth, racing boats keeled over in the chop. He turned away from the boats to the apartments and cafes on his side of the road. Starbucks was still there.

‘He’ll be so pleased to see you. Why didn’t you come earlier?’

‘I was busy. Almost didn’t come at all.’ The words came out too hard. ‘I’ve missed you and the girls, though.’

She turned in through trees hiding the house. He’d helped plant some of them.

‘Go in. I’ll bring the luggage.’

The family swarmed out to meet the prodigal son returned. He didn’t like the feeling.

‘He’s still alive, just,’ Emilee said, hugging and giving a reproachful stare. ‘Follow me.’

The thin, diseased body, stretched out in the double bed, seemed to be drifting in and out of consciousness. Oliver stopped at the door and clung a moment to the frame. A tiny conscious light twitched through morphine-glazed eyes and sticky tears oozed down the sunken cheeks. Oliver shivered, shrank, pulling his jacket close and walked in, until he was bent over his father’s face. Damian’s eyes reached out for him. Love swam in the oily, yellow slits, twisting up into grief and a plea for forgiveness, too late. Oliver took the tissues near the glass with a hanging straw. He wiped his father’s eyes while his own stayed dry.

Charlotte, Oliver’s younger sister, held her father’s empty hand, stroking it as one might stroke a small animal. Oliver looked into her serene sadness and was surprised at how peaceful the bedroom felt. He roamed over faces staring out of family photos, landscape paintings, the American pine chest of drawers and blue brocade chair. Some of it had emigrated with his father’s family. What would become of it all? He was surprised how smooth he felt. Not tormented and distressed like on the plane, bouncing around in the turbulence of ‘father.’ The room floated outside of time, surreal.

Emilee came in with soup. She was bossy in her role of chief nurse and needed help lifting their father to sitting. Oliver took one side and they pulled together, lifting a frame that was now as light as a bird skeleton. Charlotte propped the pillows all around and Emilee touched the straw to the dry lips, as one might encourage a child to feed. The mouth opened, but Oliver could tell his father was only pleasing Emilee, whose face was intent and strained with this responsibility of keeping him alive.

His children took turns through the night by the bed, in case he needed morphine, or to be rolled to use the urine bottle. They would settle a flurry of agitation with lullaby voices, stroking his hand, his face, his bony body, sending threads of love. Oliver took his turn on a thin mattress, staring up through the window into the night, and he felt as if he was floating and that this death was more real than his own life.

Alice came over during the day. She would choose from the extensive music collection – today a Mozart oboe concerto, yesterday Leonard Cohen. She took charge of the grandchildren. Connor was racing cars around the living room, and the girls flounced on a large sofa under the open window, reading, whispering jokes. A fantail, zig-zagging after gnats floating through falling liquidambar leaves, fluttered inside. Damian had planted the section out in North American deciduous trees, to remind him of Boston. Oliver knew that Alice and Damian had grown closer over the last few years. Neither of them had remarried and, what with sharing grandchildren as well as children, and life being so short and maybe a disappointment now it was almost over, it made sense for them to hang together. Getting old didn't make any sense at all.

Oliver and his Mum sat on the porch watching the pukekos creep through the boundary fence from a wild reserve sloping down to the Tamaki estuary. The birds made straight for the overgrown vegetable garden.

'Do you think Dad was happy before he got sick?' Oliver asked. It was a long shot. Suicidal mother, abusive, overbearing step-father. Told the same story over and over all his life.

'He got worse,' Alice said. 'Lost himself in the memories, the details. Gave them too much power. I'd lose the will to pull him out.'

Her eyes lifted up to the birds, long red legs folding up, claws spreading, stretching back down into the soil, brilliant purple-blue coats. A better New Zealand icon than the kiwi, she thought – they were just hidey-hole brown birds she'd only ever seen behind glass. What about the kea? She loved keas: wise, fun-loving, gregarious tricksters of the mountains.

Oliver remembered his Dad shooting pukekos with his slug gun. Cooked one up in a tough stew and made him eat it.

‘Sometimes’, she said, ‘he’d relax and enjoy me. He could be funny and warm, but it seemed to scare him, like he couldn’t leave himself for too long, he might get lost, he might never get back. Freedom scared him.’

Oliver squirmed. She hadn’t given up nailing Damian, a bit like his wife. Yes, Marie was a bit like that. Women made everything so complicated, so intense. Why did they do that? He shuffled. Maybe he’d go play with Connor.

‘Grandma’s very old, gets around on her walker. You must see her before you go.’

‘Bang, bang,’ came a jubilant cry from the living room. ‘I killed a bird.’

‘She’s full of sighs and gasps and she broke her hip last year, but she’s doing well,’ Alice kept going. ‘She feels the cold in summer and she remembers enough to know she’s forgotten and that scares her.’

The lawn was overgrown, kikuyu thrusting up through the wire fence, infiltrating the shrubs – a haphazard onslaught. He’d lived here with his Dad as a teenager. Now the weatherboards were peeling, and the pagoda they’d built was rotting. He remembered the music filling his head till he couldn’t think. His mother was different, not so frantic. She talked more than he remembered.

‘What’s happening in Canada?’

‘Hardly know. I’m too busy. Not sure I’ll stay in IT. Good money, though. I’m restless. How’s Orere?’

‘I only go out when a respite nurse looks after Mum. I can book some time. Come and stay. It hasn’t changed.’

Oliver drifted into memories of the rambling garden at Orere, reaching up for tamarillos just out of reach, feeding honey to the bees in winter. Emilee and Charlotte were in the kitchen, sharing recipes and their children, chopping vegetables, making spaghetti bolognese – Oliver’s favourite dinner.

In the afternoon Oliver sat with his father's purple claw in his palm. His father seemed dead, but for a trickle of breath in and out, and a long pause, and then a longer pause, before a stumbling breath in, a gasp, and an almost imperceptible breathing out, and then another gasp, a rattling wheeze – fluid, not air – as his father's chest lifted up, and it fell back down and a wailing burbling started out of the open mouth. Oliver called out, 'Come quickly.'

Damian opened his glassy eyes one last time. The family watched his mouth twitching and then he swam away and no one in the room would say for sure where he had gone.

Now that autumn had replaced summer, swimming in the sea was finished for the year, and the day would soon turn dark before dinner. Oliver went to the wood pile and swung the axe on the great log, abandoned by Alice on account of two gnarly knots. Alice gathered what she could from her overgrown garden, whilst pulling the odd weed. It was a self-seeding garden: tumbling clouds of lettuce, rocket, mizuna and silver beet, all dark green, maybe a bitter green. The brassicas (broccoli and cauliflower) hadn't self-seeded, but surprisingly some feathered leaves of carrots and purple-veined beetroot leaves ended up in her basket.

Oliver chopped vegetables for the soup. He looked through the wide ranch-sliders, over the sea to the Coromandel Peninsula. She hadn't done anything to upgrade this doll's house bach. The concrete laundry tub they'd bathed in as children, rough because detergents had eaten out the lime, was still there. And the outside toilet and shower, full of spiders and knot holes in the toilet walls for peeking through. Alice poured split peas and barley into the blue enamel pot and set it to cook above the wood fire, the way he remembered. The green leather chairs were the same. The leather had dried into flat folds with grey skeleton veins and, as she pulled them up by the fire, they seemed like her skin. From a wooden shelf in the laundry she produced a dusty jar of plums steeped in vodka and poured a clear, claret-coloured drop.

He flopped down in the leather chair. An old woman was sitting next to him. He didn't know her anymore. What had she done with her life?

'Mum,' he blurted out. 'I'm bored. I've been doing IT forever. I don't like it anymore. Now I'm old. *Old!*'

He stopped for another mouthful of vodka. Alice didn't say anything, just looked at him, so he had to go on. He started talking without thinking, almost tumbling over his words.

'It's nuts. Most days, I'm just wanting it to end so I can go to bed and do nothing. I haven't even lived. I'm a fucking old man already.'

He was embarrassed, saying what he dared not even think. Must be the vodka. Must be his mother casting a spell over him.

‘How’s Marie?’ Alice asked.

‘She’s okay.’ He swallowed hard. ‘The children keep her pretty busy: after school stuff, music lessons, soccer, art classes.’ He turned away. ‘I’m always working. We hardly see each other.’

She kept looking as he stared at the pot of soup – a dry stare. He was thin, a kind of slumped thin, something inside pulling him tight.

‘I’ve been worried about you, but you keep pulling away. What about your writing, your music?’

Oliver didn’t know what to do, maybe go for a walk. What had she ever done? He didn’t understand in that moment why he was so upset with her.

‘I don’t want to talk about me. What about you? I hardly know you. You won’t be around forever. I was always curious about ...’ he paused and swallowed, ‘about your spirituality.’

He almost couldn’t say it. The way she’d wrap herself up around that word. Just a word. What did it matter? How ridiculous.

‘Dad, he hated the way you lived, your freedom, lovers, adventures, so I never asked. You seem content. I don’t know if you are.’

He hated this morose side of himself, so did Marie. How could she stand him?

She poured more vodka as he stoked up the fire. Tibetan flags marched across the wall: blue, red, green, white. Faded, with old spider webs and ant carcasses caught in the loose weave. She should have taken them down years ago. Pictures he painted as a child were still pinned next to mediocre portraits: the best of a painting phase she went through. The house was frozen in time like a fairy tale.

‘Where do you want me to start?’ she asked, standing up with a flourish and a brittle waving of her arms, almost a quivering, and her hair, which was cut neatly above her

shoulders, a straight grey, tossed about like waves. The grey took a bit of getting used to.

‘Your teachers were Canadian weren’t they? Tell me about them. What did they teach? How did you meet them?’

Ronald Tinsdale was Canadian.

She took on a grand pose, chest lifted, stern expansive look sweeping across her face, a proud, majestic look. ‘This was Wongchuk.’

Oliver was surprised. He’d never seen that kind of confidence in a person for real.

‘Everything that is happening to the mother is happening to the foetus. Get this straight: you are your mother.’

Oliver couldn’t hold back a smirk. Her lively eyes travelled across the living room, the dining table where Charlotte’s nail polish remover had eaten out animal shapes, the bookcase with its dusty ornaments. She was transmuting the clutter of the ordinary into the mystical, the ‘whare’ at his retreat centre in New Zealand.

Oliver imagined the students, the charismatic Wongchuk.

Her voice deepened. *‘The dialogue between the father and mother is very important because it affects the chemistry of the mother and this chemistry reaches the foetus. The foetus will experience the pain of the father and others in the familial line because of a sympathy with the genetic coding.’*

She paused, while he smiled. It didn’t make sense. He almost wished he hadn’t asked. She was being too dramatic.

‘I’ve often wondered about Damian,’ she said.

‘About what?’

‘His father was shot down in the war – spitfire – when his mother was pregnant. Remember? It might have affected his chemistry. Pretty basic stuff.’

She sat down. ‘Wongchuk was Tenzin’s teacher. Tenzin was my first teacher.’

‘Have you heard of Robert Tinsdale?’ he asked.

‘No. But I’ll tell you about Tenzin. Do you remember Angela?’

Oliver nodded, ‘Oh course. You hung out together like love-struck puppies. Was it sexual?’

Alice often came home late, just in time to cook their dinner, and his father would scream at her for not caring. Oliver sometimes wondered if his wife Marie cared. His father made unkind jokes about Angela.

‘Sexual? We kissed once, nothing more. I certainly loved her.’

‘Go on – about Tenzin.’

‘I remember his house like it was yesterday. Angela discovered a book he wrote and contacted him.’

She paused, to follow a different train of thought. ‘We don’t remember things as whole images, we reconstruct them from the pieces, stored in different parts of the brain. Memory isn’t reliable, remember that. Anyway, it was a weatherboard and tile house with a concrete porch and roses and dahlias. I notice these things. There were about a dozen students inside. They seemed stupidly intense, precious, too self-conscious. When Tenzin came in they went totally quiet and stared adoringly. A kind of blind devotion. Not my style.’

She looked at Oliver until their eyes met. ‘Maybe we all need to meet a Tenzin, or a Ronald Tinsdale, to break us open again when life becomes more of a prison than an adventure.’

Oliver stood up to draw the curtains, to shut out the dark closing in. What did she know?

Alice waited, sipping her vodka. She put on her reading glasses, went over to the bookcase and pulled out the book.

‘Listen to this: “*A living, pulsing, multi-dimensional, ever-transforming universe is squished into a single ego mould, which then has to make enormous efforts to keep it from popping back out.*” Isn’t that grand?’

Oliver went to the sofa, away from the fire, away from Alice, to lie down.

She quietly continued. 'We spend so much of our lives pushing the world away, making our lives smaller and smaller. One day we find ourselves all alone, locked inside a prison and we've thrown away the key.'

Oliver closed his eyes. That's how he felt, but he didn't want her telling him. He wouldn't tell her, not yet.

'Who is Ronald Tinsdale?'

'Some kind of guru in Canada. Marie goes to his classes.' He stopped there.

'Go on.'

'Nup.'

Alice looked straight at him, waited a minute and then went on.

'Tenzin told lots of jokes and laughed uproariously at them, more than we did. He had his faults, but I respected him. I wanted to know what he knew. I was living a mediocre life. He wasn't mediocre.'

Oliver was starting to realize how little he knew his mother.

'Tibetan teaching is an orderly progression of explorations to help you re-discover what is fundamental to your being,' she read.

'Fundamental to my being?' he shouted, almost apoplectically. 'What does that mean?'

She flicked through the book. Her voice became slow and full of passion.

'The flimsy high-rise ego is not a secure home and the higher the structure, the more shaky it becomes. Some have built so high the ground is completely out of sight. They have forgotten the ground even exists.'

She dropped the book into her lap with her glasses and sighed. 'That's what I was like, living in a flimsy, high-rise ego. Maybe it's the same for you now. We did a Creative Visualisation exercise. It was a new thing then.'

'Marie has a tape she listens to, not sure what's on it – a meditation tape.'

Oliver wanted to pick up his guitar, play quietly while his mother talked, to soften her intensity, to settle the disquiet rumbling away.

‘I’ll give you some idea if you like.’

‘Sure.’

‘Let your mind reach out, visualise what I’m saying. Just for a minute. See what you think.’

‘You want me to do that now?’ Oliver reached for his guitar.

‘Yes, to get the idea, so you know what Marie’s doing.’

She propped herself up like she was meditating, legs crossed on the wide leather chair, cushion in her back.

‘Imagine you’re in a space ship, looking down on our blue planet.’ She paused for him to get comfortable. ‘You’re in space watching babies being born, people dying, the sun rising, people waking up, the sun setting, people going to sleep, people going to work.’ Her voice became dreamy and slow.

‘You see floods and droughts, abundance and poverty, country by country. Imagine the lives in Russia, in Greece, in the Arctic, farmers, goat herders, a civil war, Buddhist monks on alms rounds, Islamic chanting, a mother taking her children to school, factory workers, shoppers – so many people, so many religions, political systems, beliefs, so much joy and suffering, fear, grief, exaltation.’

She paused again, and Oliver reluctantly kept building the images, and found himself drawn into a strange feeling, images and sensations washing through him. ‘Hold this grand vision of the whole of life, feel it, become it, dance with it, feel the aspiration of a planet waking up in you.’

‘A planet waking up in me?’ he laughed, clapping his hands, when she stopped.

‘Evolution, of course, the evolution of consciousness,’ she replied.

‘The aspiration of a planet? That’s way too weird for me.’

The soup burbled and spat against the pot lid, a thick lumpy popping, and the sea ground against the stones on the beach below, and the sounds suddenly became magnified and stretched in a way that seemed unusual to him. He noticed the space behind the sounds opening into quietude, like the smoothness he'd felt in the room where his father lay dying. He took the wooden spoon from the bench, to stir the soup and check the split peas. He seemed to be moving differently. The peas were almost soft so he pushed in the chopped greens until there was no more room and he had to wait until they wilted for the lid to go back on. He remembered how Alice took Marion, her twin sister, to Tenzin's classes. In the school holidays they'd talk endlessly about meditation and Buddhism while he and his sisters and cousins played 'Murder in the Dark' and threw feijoas at each other, and did battle with toi-toi swords. That spiritual stuff took over her life.

Alice wasn't ready to stop. 'Angela and I returned the following evening, for a class of Kum Nye relaxation exercises.'

She lifted a couple of cushions from the sofa and sat down on the floor near the fire.

'We had to breathe gently through our mouth and nose, keeping our bellies relaxed, to balance the body and mind. I haven't done these exercises in twenty-five years. They were wonderful.'

'That's enough for now. Let's eat first, before the soup gets overcooked.'

He laid the soup bowls and spoons out on the coffee table.

Alice grated some cheese and splashed chilli sauce and tamari for flavour. They both said how tasty it was, how nutritious and warming, how like old times.

'Did you go to any of Robert Tinsdale's classes?'

'He has land on an island near Vancouver Island. I went there with Marie, to see. He gave a talk. Don't remember. Wasn't interested.'

After dinner he sat back to watch, smiling because he liked her enthusiasm, her crisp, flowery mannerisms. She was definitely O.T.T.

‘We slowly raised our shoulders, hands pressing into our thighs, arms straight, breathing slowly, awareness in the neck, noting the sensations all through the body.’

She lifted her shoulders slowly and Oliver’s mind went quiet and soft.

‘I’d never focused on sensation like this. Then we slowly relaxed our shoulders, noticing everything.’

She stayed sitting on the cushions and talked towards the fireplace, her eyes deep with the memory.

‘The second time I raised my shoulders, the sensations magnified and opened out into more and more detail. My mind entered a kind of deep space. When I came back to my body, my shoulders seemed way up in the sky, my ribs had stretched around huge expanses of space, and my abdomen had sunk way down into the earth.’

She got up. ‘What I loved was the scientific attitude. We were investigating, looking through the microscope of the mind, gathering objective data.’

‘You can’t use the word objective! Objective means verifiable by others. This stuff is the complete opposite: *private* experiences, right?’

It was an old argument, one they’d dragged out many times over the years.

He sat up. ‘Why not take drugs? Drugs change experience, make you feel good. What’s the big deal?’

Her face became mysterious. ‘It seemed a big deal. I was swimming into a profound mystery, beginning my journey of self discovery. It’s hard to explain. Can drugs take you on this journey? Maybe they can. I’ve never been impressed by the mind of anyone on drugs.’

She laughed as if to apologize.

‘You discovered who you were?’

‘I did.’

‘Who are you, then?’

She ignored him.

‘Angela and I went on a “Cleansing the Senses” weekend. We clay-packed our faces and bathed our eyes in lemon water and fizzed hydrogen peroxide into our ears. Gobs of wax, like dead bees, came out mine. We meditated and held yoga poses until our legs shivered and screamed. We tended each other like loving mothers. Then the first downpour arrived, the first breaking up. I fell into a pool of tears. No one had ever been kind to me. I was unloved. I cried and howled and sobbed like an angry river. I became the veil of tears, the daughter of sorrow. I’d never cried before then. I couldn’t stop.’

She paused, as if she should be embarrassed talking like this to her son. ‘That was the beginning.’

Oliver softened. ‘I remember when you stood on a rusty nail. You cried. It was shocking. You were so free in your crying. Dad smiled. You could cry. You had one little emotion.’

He dished them out another bowl of overcooked soup.

‘Tenzin. What was he like? Dad didn’t think much of him. I met him once, but I was too young to know.’

He strummed quietly in the background, now the soup pot was empty. He liked hanging out with his Mum. Missed her more than he realized. Tenzin was probably like Ronald Tinsdale.

‘We fought all the time. Maybe we were too similar: intellectual and not good with relationships. He was arrogant and brittle ... like salty toffee.’ she laughed. ‘I thought he was some kind of God, different from you and me.’

‘Why would you fight with someone you thought was a God?’

‘I couldn’t help it. Press a button and off I went, particularly with men. I was scared of them.’

‘So Dad was right,’ Oliver muttered under his breath.

She got up with a frown. ‘Some toasted home-made bread with guava jelly and tea?’

‘Yes.’

Alice curled up on the sofa with a book and Oliver picked up a *Listener*, months old now. He turned to the cryptic crossword. She wasn't reading. She was listening to the gentle breathing of the fire, the opossum on the roof, clattering and thumping over the iron like the ogre Jack met when he climbed the beanstalk. Fairy tales were more real than life.

‘Mum, what’s the word made up of the letters for sausage that means to calm down?’

The past was stirring up in her, the conversation re-igniting old memories that had burned down. She’d let them burn down, memories of the year she went sailing with her father, twenty years ago now she calculated.

‘Assuage.’

Chapter three

The night before Alice and her father set sail for Tonga, twenty years ago, Marion, Alice's twin sister, put on a farewell party in her Ponsonby villa: high ceilings, varnished floors, new kitchen. The family tussled and teased spiritual differences, over nibbles, triangles of pizza and glasses of wine.

Alice became over-dramatic. 'I'm going to find some answers. Eight years of work and I'm a wreck. I attack my job like I'm at an emergency, then I flee to where my heart lies waiting, looking for resurrection in the transcendental. I need to make peace with ordinary living. I don't know how.'

Marion spun round on high heels, tossing up her thick auburn hair, picking up the conversation. 'You're right. Spirituality should be transforming your ordinary life, not escaping it.' She spoke with the confidence of ignorance. 'You're tortured inside, that's why your ordinary life doesn't work. That's what you need to look at.' She was also a psychiatrist. 'Spirituality is interesting to me, too, as a natural extension of my life.'

They were identical twins – the same and opposites, both together.

Valerie, their mother, came over. She lived on her own in a neat townhouse with a small garden and a small view of a lagoon with many water birds. At home that evening she'd plucked her eyebrows to a gracious curve and filed her nails to a neat team of waning moons. She smiled at them and didn't say a word. She spent years reading New Age books and her fridge was covered in affirmations to remind her how wonderful life is. She could have anything she wanted as long as she believed she was worth it.

Marion passed around the cashews. 'Congratulations, anyway. I'm surprised you made it this far. I thought Dad was done for, holed up in Spam Farm with his old cronies, boat on the hard, channel silting up and mangroves creeping up the slipway. I'd

say you dragged him away just in time. You'll have trouble getting him away from Fiji once you arrive, though. He doesn't like taking risks.'

Valerie smiled at her ex-husband's expense. Her hands came together, as if to speak, but they pulled at her top and smoothed it down instead.

'When I sailed with him fifteen years ago, he definitely wanted to stay put,' Marion went on boldly.

Alice ignored the suggestion of 'staying put' on a sailing adventure. 'You never really went for spirituality?'

Marion's face hardened up. 'I'm more interested in social issues, you know – real issues.' Her hair flowed over her cheeks, creating shadows, accentuating the mascara and eye liner.

Alice didn't feel slighted, even though her belly tightened up.

'I'm the same as you, though. I work far too hard.' She looked at the floor, at her feet, her extravagant shoes. 'I don't know how not to. When I stop working, I feel so empty I can't stand it. I'm not going back there.'

That was a conversation stopper. Alice knew what she meant, rushing away from the hollow dread of annihilation, keeping one step ahead of the black hole.

'When I was young I got very depressed, maybe that's why I went into psychiatry.' Marion looked up slowly into space. 'I keep away from anything that might trigger it. It was horrible. I work hard doing something worthwhile.'

Valerie held her smile while she did another disappearing act inside.

Marion started moving away with the bowl of nuts, over to the rest of the family relaxing on the lounge suite by the French doors.

Jack came over, polo-shirt tucked into loosely-belted jeans, canvas boat shoes padding over the carpet, glowing with pride.

'I'm doing pretty well, sailing at my age.' His eyes swept over them both. 'Life is a wonderful adventure. I'm bringing some tapes of Ramtha.' His eyes stopped on Alice. 'You can listen to them on the way over.' He turned to Marion, calling her back. 'You can listen to them when you come over. Ramtha is a channelled entity. Noumea would be the best place for you to fly to.'

'Dad,' Alice asked, still chewing her theme, 'You don't have a dilemma fitting ordinary life and spirituality together?'

‘Not at all.’ His voice grew expansive. ‘Spiritual teachings opened out my life in a way I could never have imagined. The spiritual and the ordinary aren’t separate.’ He slowed down to emphasize the words, in a slurred way. ‘Spiritual laws are natural laws. When you understand them they give you control over your life, they give you choices, that’s all.’

Emilee, Alice’s elder daughter, wandered over and wrapped her arm around Alice’s waist, and Alice could feel the hesitancy in Emilee’s body, the question: ‘Do I still have time to back out?’ She was sailing across with them. Marion would possibly fly to Noumea for a two-week holiday in about four months time, with Zoe, Marion’s youngest daughter, and Charlotte, Alice’s younger one.

Alice stirred from her memories – children, families, jumbling up into the warm past. Oliver was still stretched out on the sofa, filling in the crosswords. The years of her family growing up had been the richest and the most difficult. Broken families are difficult. Charlotte was only four when she and Damian split up.



They never made it to Tonga, because of the winds – ended up in Fiji. Emilee was seasick all the way over and grumpy, wanting to be looked after like a child even though she was twenty. This was out of character. They did have some good times in Fiji though, before Emilee flew back. It was a long time ago now, but some memories stood out – the ones she wanted to keep forever, the good times.

Jack had taken them up the coast of Fiji, to a safe harbour with a long lazy lagoon running out onto the beach, scrubby island in the middle. One sun-blached afternoon, she and Emilee went rowing in search of a private sunbathing spot. Because every clearing, patch of sand and rocky outcrop was sprouting a lad or two with a fishing rod, they headed out into the harbour for the island. All around the sea was sparkling in the sun and the wind was freshening up the waves. The beach started moving as they landed the dinghy and they stared at the moving beach, not comprehending, until they saw it was thousands of hermit crabs, cramped up inside shells, scuttling off. They laughed out loud and lingered over broken coral at the water’s edge, collecting pretty shapes for necklaces. On the way home, after a short sunbathing session, Alice suggested sailing, using the sarong, because they weren’t making much headway against the wind. Emilee

often put a stop to her silliness, but not that day. Maybe she was tired. Alice held one oar vertical for a mast and the other horizontal for a boom, while Emilee tied on the sarong. The wind blew a belly into the cloth.

‘It’s working,’ Alice exclaimed. They were sailing, but even she could see that it was away from their destination.

‘We’re not moving properly. We don’t have a rudder,’ Emilee said evenly, like a mother to a child.

‘Oops.’

Alice dismantled the boom and replaced the oar with her arm and Emilee put the oar into the water, to use as a rudder.

‘We’re sailing well now, sort of.’ Alice said happily, bobbling in the waves, smiling at Emilee who spoke back quite sternly.

‘We’re sailing in the wrong direction. We can’t sail into the wind, which is the direction we want to go.’

The lads on shore laughed. Alice took back the oars, and pulled ever so fiercely against the wind, spraying them both, wanting the afternoon to last forever, wanting to stay alive in the sea with Emilee, wanting to keep hold of this perfection. *Dream-maker* was empty when they clambered onboard, so Emilee took off all her clothes, and cruised into the galley to fix a cracker and cheese.

‘I could be naked too, like you,’ Alice laughed awkwardly. She wasn’t awkward about being naked when she was younger.

‘Course you can, Mum.’



Alice opened her eyes with a start. She and Emilee had been very close. They’d looked after the younger children together, made plans together, sorted their problems together, until the tide turned and Emilee swept off to find who she was on her own. The sailing

trip was a tentative reunion. For Alice it had been a fresh start. Eight years of working in the city, building a new home for her family, financing a mortgage, had almost killed her. A sailing adventure meant she could slow down, investigate, contemplate, rebuild, swim with the mysterious and dive deep. It didn't happen quite the way she expected, because she fell in love. Cornelius – what a lover he turned out to be!

Alice stood up to put some wood on the fire and draw the curtains.

'Cup of tea?'

Oliver looked up. 'Sure.'

The memories were leaping up around her. He was a big man. He'd sailed around the world. Career in Hollywood as a movie producer. Been sailing the world for fifteen years. Sixty years old.

Alice slowly poured the milk into the cup, stirring her memory. Why now? She hadn't wanted to remember. Why not? She'd been so in love. Oliver's questions – that's what it was – pulling at the threads of her life, exposing her search for love, her desire for freedom, her burning need to understand life.

She fell in love with Cornelius straight away. When people fall in love so badly, they still have a lot to learn about themselves. She knew that now. His arms, wrapped around her, stroking her hair: his child come home. She'd been so hungry and so filled up by him. She remembered stumbling up the companionway to escape, breathing him in, lost in dream, while women passed with bundles of washing, seabirds squawked and a yacht motored onto its mooring.

One early memory stood out, from just before they all set sail for Vanuatu. Emilee had flown home a week before.

She and Cornelius visited a Hindu temple in Sigatoka. She had gone ahead and was perched on a wall, in the shade out of the heat. A dove with half its brain eaten out was standing on the path, in a pool of congealing red blood, looking at her – the dove, white, innocent and still alive. Why wasn't it trying to escape the hawk, which had fluttered to the nearest rooftop to keep watch? The power of the hawk had mesmerized the dove.

They had a pact, a common destiny unfolding, like a key in a lock. That's how it seemed at the time. Cornelius came down the path, big loping frame, chest over-inflated from years of winching and pulling up sails, black cap over his bald head, black Ray Bans, long grey shorts. The hawk's sharp eye turned to him as he almost stepped on the dove, which then fluttered behind a small bush. Cornelius spotted the dove, looked up at the hawk and then he saw her, through his Ray Bans. His face hung like damp, limp pastry, but he was attractive, in the way he walked, a hidden power, a tempest waiting to be furious or passionate, either or both. They looked at the hawk and the dove, and they looked at each other and they didn't say anything.

That evening they went out to dinner for her forty-eighth birthday. Twinkling coloured lights strung along open thatched roofs created an atmosphere of romance, fantasy, confusion. Shadows loomed behind bare bulbs. Palms, white stone paths, intimate alcoves mixed up with too much wine. She was far too open, naively garrulous. Cornelius brushed past, shouting in a hoarse whisper, 'You're too much of a risk to be trusted. You're just like my mother,' and slipped out the back with the maid. She turned to stone – clammy, wet stone. The candles flickered above the cake. 'Happy birthday to you ...' Cornelius loved dramatic entries and exits. He was from Hollywood, full of high drama. This was his style: intense, dangerous. She didn't get it. How quickly they fell from grace.



I stare into the broken sea, wind lifting waves against the outgoing tide. White froth spits from the peaks and dribbles down the faces. The day is overcast, lemon-grey smudge of sun peering through the cloud. Our boat swings back and forth in a jagged, disorientating movement. I can't unmix the happy and bad memories. We're still in Fiji: Musket Cove, a tourist island off Lautoka. Dad calls me down to look at the chart, stretching his arm across the navigation table – leathery brown skin, curly white fuzz. He points to the problem, the reef surrounding Fiji. His fingers have grown thick from a lifetime fixing things, electrical, mechanical and metaphysical, from tending sails and anchor chains. He used to train primary school teachers in the natural sciences, but

retired in his fifties to go sailing. I can't help noticing his thin stubborn legs, peeking below shorts pulled up too high. I don't like that he is shrinking inside his clothes. As he turns to make sure I understand, the sea-sprayed contours of his face roll into mountain ranges and his gentle eyes disappear under bushy-white eyebrows.

'We'll leave for Vanuatu today, as soon as you're ready. If we get good winds, we could arrive at Port Vila in four or five days.'

I follow his finger. 'There are several narrow passages through Malolo reef. Vanuatu is five hundred kilometres due west.'

I pull up the anchor and unshackle it from the chain, lug it down to the stern of the boat, then dump it in the lazaret. We motor out through a small reef circling Musket Cove into a choppy sea and set a course for the passage through the outer reef. I mark an 'x' on the chart, our position from the GPS, and run the ruler to the gap. I transcribe the angle of the ruler to the compass rose on the chart, make an adjustment for the magnetic deviation, and call up the compass heading to Dad. We soon come close, but we can't tell whether the passage through is directly in front of us, or slightly to starboard or port. A great hedge of billowing white foam spreads out in both directions.

Dad keeps staring up and down the wall of breakers, looking for a clue. The depth sounder is blinking towards single digits. I recalculate our approximate position and mark the chart again. We're getting very close. I feel the power of the waves leaping up and breaking into foam over the coral. The shallow water shows up as turquoise, streaked with white foam. We motor slowly along the outer edge, looking for a change in colour. The deep water of the gap will be dark blue.

'There it is,' Dad shouts.

Sea piles up around the edges and crashes down into the boiling centre. Surely Dad doesn't think we can get through that. He sends me up the mast to see if the dark colour goes cleanly all the way through. It does. We turn and head straight in. The boat rolls and pitches and I scream down to Dad where the dark water is. He noses *Dream-maker* in further, until she's bucking like a wild horse. I hold tight. The mast swings in wild loops. I cling with my whole body. It looks okay from up here. The sea is still dark under the churning water, dark blue all the way through.

Dad calls up, 'I don't think we can do it. I want to turn back.'

I yell back, 'It's okay, keep going, a little to the starboard.'

I scramble down the mast to reassure him, and tell him how dark the water is, all the way through, then rush back up to yell our course. We keep heading straight into the thrashing sea. On deck you can't see anything but mountains of water. Surely it would be too dangerous to turn around now.

Dad panics. 'I want to go back, I don't like this.'

We've ended up at the wrong exit, and he doesn't know if it's safe. We only have to scrape a bommie and that's it – matchsticks and shark food. Bommies, flat heads of coral, lie under the water. You can't see them, but the water on top is lighter and if the sun is directly overhead you can tell.

'No, no,' I yell down bravely, 'we're fine. I can see the way is clear from up here, you can't tell down there. Keep going, a little more to the port.'

My boldness comes from adrenaline. I haven't done this before.

He turns the boat, following my directions, through the churning foam.

'Stay at that angle, we're almost through,' I shout down.

The reef is very close both sides and we don't know the tide or current. We see-saw up and down, inch by inch, waiting for the coral, waiting for that terrible noise to take us by surprise.

'We've made it,' I finally get to call.

I slip down the mast and stumble over the dropped sail. The reef falls behind. Dad shivers into his feet, and leaves me at the wheel so he can check the GPS and the chart. I don't notice the strong current sweeping us back towards the reef, a strong subterranean current, a hidden threat.

'Keep away from the reef,' Dad shouts up. 'Head straight out to sea.'

I think we can keep to our course and head due west, but we can't, not with the current against us. Again, he calls up to head straight out and I turn to see the reef looming up

behind, the detail of the foam coming back into view. I finally do what he says, until we really are clear.

‘You can pull up the main now.’

He takes over the wheel, brushing a leathery brown hand through his white shock of hair. We’re safe.

‘Take it up to the second reef.’

Squinting into the sun he turns the boat up into the wind so the sail will stay loose while I raise it.

‘Now you can pull out the headsail.’

I find wind vectors challenging. The wind is coming from the port side, so I need to pull out the headsail on the starboard side. Dad waits patiently, possibly puzzled by my ineptitude. I slot the handle into the winch, make sure the sheet goes in the right way around and then pull. I heave the handle around and around, back and forth, until my muscles are jumping, and I’m breathing full in and out, and my stomach is like a knotted plank of wood. I love this part of sailing best: the workout. Dad tails the end of the sheet and steers.

‘Well done,’ he congratulates me when I finish.

I take the wheel while he sets the wind vane so the boat will sail without us and we can relax.

The sea is rising and falling three metres, taking us with it, rolling up and down, an old swell heaving around the earth. The horizon is the only steady perspective. The wind, exhilarating, rushes across the port side, one breath ending up on our sail. Dad says we’re on a broad reach, the best sailing angle of all, stable and fast. We stretch out in the cockpit. Dad pulls the tab off a warm beer, and I bring up crackers and cheese. I pick up my sailing book to study, but end up leaving it closed. The wind becomes unsteady, fickle, and by late afternoon it’s turned against us, arriving now from a westerly quarter, rushing straight from where we’re going, as if to stop us, send us back. Dad says we have to tack, which is depressing because we have to turn away from where we want to go. I remember something one of my teachers once said:

‘Consciousness which has no legs, rides winds which have no eyes. Your emotions are the winds.’

I wonder about the consciousness riding the winds of the planet.

I pull in the mainsheet to bring the boom to the centre of the boat and then let it out the other side. The sail collapses in a fluttery way, then fills with wind. I loosen the headsail and let the wind blow it across to the other side, then winch it in. We keep going on this new course for an hour, heading back to Fiji, still being knocking over in the wind and the pounding waves, endlessly battling. Dad looks gloomy, he wants a tack in the other direction, so I go through the whole procedure again, and I enjoy the physicality of the work and learning the sequence of operations. I play with the traveller, which adjusts the angle of the mainsheet, to see how to make a different curl in the belly of the main.

Of course I can’t get Cornelius out of my mind. Part of me wishes he wasn’t following, so I could start out again, free of our burden, free of our sticky cobweb, flies and spiders, the distortion, free to walk lightly over the beaches of Vanuatu on my own. The other part can’t wait to see him. I write love letters, curled up all alone on my bunk. Mostly I want to be in love, I want the delicious feelings.

Alice shook herself free of the memories. She'd been so lost in herself. The fire was burning low and the living room was becoming cold. When she opened the firebox, a bluish-orange flickering flame, lifted by the rush of fresh air, rose from the dying fire. It spread out in a thin ribbon before sinking back into the glowing embers. She pushed in a thin log, propped a thicker one on top and closed the door. Oliver was stretched out along the sofa, knotted up in his cryptic crosswords, three open *Listeners* dropped on the floor.

He looked up. 'They're much easier now.'

The cane basket lived under a tall cupboard on the other side of the dining table. Her journals would be embarrassing, but she was curious. Man versus the Mystical. God versus Demon. A lifetime of confusion. On that sailing trip she began to understand the separation. She never saw Cornelius clearly, didn't want to, couldn't afford to, she was too distressed inside. She read from a poem she'd written on the trip over to Vanuatu:

Your eyes are deep tunnels of inscrutability

Your cultivated smile is affable.

Your honesty hones a dark rock

Rising up from the sea of mediocrity.

She remembered how she kept changing the words to improve him, to maintain the fantasy, to transform the glowering hawk into a golden eagle. Then she remembered how in love she had been with life. Crossing the vast ocean to Fiji she'd come face to face with a glorious living creature, life as a breathing living entity, beautiful and loving beyond compare, beyond words and concepts. How she struggled to describe this most wondrous of all experiences, this fullness of love, this radiance of heaven. She stopped for a minute to let the feelings well up and subside. Such a glorious encounter.

Her thin hands, slightly unsteady now on account of her emotion, turned the pages.

One day you asked me what my values were. I only have one: my love of life, my need to make known whatever calls my soul; my need to slip through the surface tension and plunge naked into the belly of the sea.

How caught up she had been in her own precious experience of this mystery. With her pen she brought herself and Cornelius together in the mystical embrace.

Like you, I have no wish to die a suburban dream. Will we, won't we, can we, can't we, surrender to the dance? Total surrender is the way back into life. Can we walk hand in hand into this possibility?

She put the journal away and walked slowly around the room, memories tugging at her for resolution.

'I'm going out for a walk.'

Oliver looked up and nodded. 'You okay?'

'Yes, fine. It's a lovely clear night. I'll just go down to the river.'

A warm jacket and hat protected her from the cold as she stepped out onto the damp grass. The sky was swarming with stars, the sky between Fiji and Vanuatu.

I make instant coffee and check our position on the chart. We're averaging six knots; pencil crosses back on the rhumb line between Musket Cove and Port Vila. We should still arrive in five days. When I relay this information to Dad, he smiles from his prone position along the lazaret, resting in the slopping sea washing past, the sky blending with sea through his soft eyes. My eyes travel over the boat, the shambles of discarded clothes, bedding mixed up with coffee cups, dishes cluttering the sink. We share messy genes. When night falls, I rescue my jacket from the floor and take over from Dad, under stars still flooding the dark, silver in the dark ocean, and my eyes sink down into a silvery dark inside, the same as the darkness outside of me.

Dad appears in the small rectangle of light in the companionway.

'It's nine o'clock, time to call Cornelius.'

I fly down the steps and take the handset.

'*Fantasie, Fantasie*, this is *Dream-maker*. Do you copy?'

I flick the switch and listen to the hissing, as it shapes itself into a voice, deep and steady, with an American accent.

'Hello *Dream-maker*, this is *Fantasie*. Do you copy?'

I suddenly tingle all over as his voice reverberates in my body, a thumping in my chest, a sense of transportation, across space and time, into his arms.

'Yes, I can hear you, loud and clear. How are you? Over.'

'We're leaving in the morning, straight for Port Vila through the Navula Passage. Over.'

'You're leaving that early? That's wonderful news. Over.'

'Yes, I'm missing you and we're ready to go. Over.'

'I'm missing you, too. We're sailing well. If you want to check our position it's 17 52 South and 175 13 East. Over.'

‘Okay, I’ve got that. If you don’t get me in the morning it’s because we are busy getting away. Bye for now. I love you. Over.’

‘I love you, too. Over and out.’

‘Over and out.’

I switch off the radio and, with a little laugh, swing around in the thin light between the navigation table and the galley. We’re careful with lights to save the batteries.

‘I can’t believe it; he’s leaving in the morning.’

Dad smiles. ‘That’s great news for you.’

‘We might arrive together,’ I burst out. ‘I’ll make us some hot soup before you go to bed?’

On watch, in the light of my headlamp, I start another love letter. My pen starts hesitantly as I keep relocating his image, then it races along.

I love the way you discriminate, you listen and evaluate carefully what I say, and you know your own response as separate. You consider every issue and never discount a conversation as trivial.

I pour over my words. This man is my dream come true.

You hold me steady in your love and where the courage for this comes from I can’t imagine. Your refinement, style, sense of adventure, confidence, kindness, humour – I could write forever about all the qualities I love in you, the sailor on the boat next door.

That’s how I met him. When we arrived at Vudu Point and tied up to the concrete rim, he was on the boat next door.



Alice pulled her jacket tight around her birdlike frame. She could just make out the river tumbling over rocks, sounding like wooden play blocks knocking about in a bag, white-

flecked in the moonlight. Such grandiosity and self deception. She'd tossed him back and forth, breathing him to life then stabbing him with pins. Quick little steps took her down to where the river fanned out to the sea, full with the incoming tide, rolling like loosely-folded silk. She sometimes wondered what became of him. He didn't stay in touch. She sometimes wondered if they might have had a future together. She kept walking over the sand, careful on the stones, using her night eyes to pick the big ones or the patches of very small ones. The in-between sizes weren't stable, they caused the most trouble. She became disorientated by the shadows, the stirring sea.



I stir tuna and tomato sauce into sticky pasta for our lunch. I would make another cup of tea, but I won't go back to the galley. Bile is sloshing from my stomach into my throat and legs, and filling channels in my head, poisoning my brain. Down there in the galley I have to wedge myself in with my elbows and knees, and deal with the stove swinging on gimbals. The swinging makes me nauseous, and the cups and milk container sliding up and down the bench and banging in the sink start the runny mush inside me leaping up, until I retch. Something usually ends up on the floor. We've tried to stop the constant noise of shifting jars and bottles by packing tea towels and socks around everything until there are no more tea towels and socks. Something out of sight is still moving. The noise is driving us crazy. The wind is now coming up from behind the beam so the boat is rolling side to side, and it's this rolling that sets off the back and forth movement inside.

We take four-hour shifts day and night, following the clock, napping in between, sometimes plunging straight down through dream and beyond into the darkness of nothing, the ocean floor, sometimes marooned on the surface, bobbing restlessly until it's time to sleepwalk into the cockpit, into a sense of constantly flowing like the sea, attending to the barest essentials, sliding through the salty air, trapped on a tiny boat in the vast ocean.

I start drifting around in dreams of Cornelius, weaving him in and out of me until we're mixed up together and I'm feeling him as me and me as him. I try to pull free and focus

on something stable, solid – the boat as it rolls over a wave and starts heading up. The wind has turned around again. *Dream-maker* is always trying to head up into the wind, into the quiet lull. The sails flap as the wind disappears and the wind vane falls over, jerking the servo-rudder into action to turn the boat back on course, so the sails puff out again and *Dream-maker* leaps off through the sea, the way we want. A new moon rises late in the western sky and the horizon turns pink as the dawn washes across the dark and covers up the stars. I check the compass to make sure we're still heading due west and tighten the headsail, to make sure it's catching as much wind as possible. The wind vane keeps the boat sailing at the same angle to the wind, so if the wind changes the boat will change direction. That's why I have to keep an eye on the compass.

'Consciousness which has no legs, rides winds which have no eyes.' Our compass is the eye of consciousness, the course we set. The wind is the energy that will take us there, from whatever direction it's blowing. I think that's what my teacher meant. We can use any wind at all, if we learn how, to take us where we want to go.

I sleep until the sun is pouring pools of light through the hatch, embers of heat on my blanket, but I want to stay asleep and my feet kick at the blanket to get some of the breeze. Blind with sleep, my mouth and tongue thick with fuzz, I stagger into the galley and bang into the edge of the drawers. I put on the kettle, pouring water all over it, and make some toast, burning it in the gas flame. I pop my head out into the cockpit.

'Dad, do you want me to take over now?'

As usual he's stretched out along the lazaret, close to the sea, blue canvas hat shading his face, white beard and hair poking out like the frothing sea rising up behind us. When he looks up his eyes are glassy, almost translucent, like the cut faces of the waves under the froth.

'I'm fine up here, you rest some more.'

I come out anyway to stand up on deck, face into the wind which is rushing us headlong towards our future. Waves, stirred by the wind, are leaping up and falling down, tumbling over each other, reforming from the one just gone, over and over, all around. They sweep past and push down under us. This is where the secret is, in this

endlessly toiling ocean. Here, death is all around and it doesn't mean anything. It's not a real death – the ocean remains. Wisps of high cloud appear and dissolve in the baby-blue sky, like my thoughts: not real. How can something that keeps disappearing be real? A train of low cloud forms along the horizon, water rising up and condensing in the heat of day. Occasionally a winged seafarer stops on the mast. We're mostly alone in a vast circular emptiness. Dad and I sit together without talking much – nothing to say, we're lost in the wind and waves. Our bodies roll along with the boat, easily now, and the rolling binds us to the sea, taking us into her moods as if they were ours, without any words to tell them, without any need. Dad gets up slowly, drawing himself out of the silence, and nods when his mouth finally opens.

'You should be fine. The wind's settling down and it seems stable. We're doing about six knots.'

He takes the plates and goes down to rest. I squint into the sun to see the arrow pointing at the top of the mast. It points directly into the wind and makes a 90 degree angle to the waves. It isn't always so easy to tell the direction of the waves. Ocean currents and old swells from winds long gone can mess things up a bit. The ocean takes a while to settle after a wind has passed through. Just like me I realize. Watery stuff. I find the direction of the arrow at the top of the mast very useful to work out the angle the wind is hitting the sails. A sea bird landed on the arrow a while ago, so it's a bit wonky, not so accurate in light winds. I work everything out slowly in my head. One day it will be obvious, but it isn't yet. I need to know how the wind is coming into the sail so I can work out in my head whether I should be pulling the sail in or letting it out. It's so complicated. Dad knows instinctively of course – he's a master sailor.

On top of this we have our compass course. I still get confused, usually at night when I've come up from a half sleep. Then Dad has to go over it all several times to make sure I understand. Now the wind is coming from behind us again; it's pushing us along. You'd think this would be a fast way to sail, but actually it isn't. The truth is counter-intuitive. Logic helps in this situation. When we're sailing downwind, we're sailing away from the wind, which means the apparent wind speed – the wind that gets to blow into the sail – is quite a bit less than the actual wind speed. Apparent wind speed equals true wind speed minus sailing speed. I love simple equations. In the olden days the

square riggers sailed downwind around the world. It was all their sails would let them do. The winds pushed them to their destination.

The earth spins from west to east creating trade winds that blow from east to west. Ocean currents, created by the spinning earth – on account of the fact that water lags behind the earth when it spins – sweep from east to west as well, except where they're diverted by the land. The temperature differential between the poles and the equator mucks things up a bit too. The old ships followed the winds and currents all the way around the world in one direction; they were limited. Dad and I seem to spend most of our time sailing into the wind because we can – it's a modern trend.

I check the compass again to make sure we're still on course. The flickering needle on a wobbly liquid-filled ball points west – that's good. The wind has steadied, like Dad said. The headsail flaps now and again because the main is taking most of the wind. All around, the sea and sky stretch to a thin line on the circular horizon. It's not a real line of course.

I call Cornelius in the evening and plot both our co-ordinates on the chart. He's only one day behind because he stayed on the rhumb line all the way. Last night we wandered south. The wind turned and we hadn't realized how far. Maybe I didn't read the compass carefully enough. As I said before, the wind vane keeps the boat at the same angle to the wind. The wind changed but the wind vane didn't, so it kept us at the same angle to the new wind, on a different course. I should have called Dad up to reset it. A few degrees can make a big difference after a whole night of sailing.

Alice was sitting on a white log left by a storm. She didn't remember sitting down and she didn't know how late it was. The sea was rolling over the stones, sucking out sand, dropping shredded seaweed and sticks.

The sand below the log was glistening and her shoes sunk down as she traipsed back to the road, looking through black for the white of the concrete path. Most of the houses at Orere Point were holiday homes – black shadows behind trees. The long driveway through her orchard was unlit and straggly branches brushed her cheek. A warm yellow glow, like a lighthouse beacon, shone from the kitchen window as she came upon Oliver lacing his shoes outside the door.

'Thought you might have fallen or something.' He gave her a hug. 'I'll make some hot chocolate.'

The house was warm and she was pleased to have him here. They moved to the fire and listened to the rats scraping the ceiling, making winter nests.

'They come in at this time of the year,' she explained.

Skittering feet scraped along the ceiling, rolling a macadamia nut, at least that's what it sounded like.

'How can you live like this?' Oliver burst out. 'I didn't mind as a child, but *now*.'

'Do you have animals at home?'

'We've got a cat, Smoochy. She's pretty fat, Persian, fur gets everywhere.'

He passed Alice a cookie.

'I want to sort some stuff out. You went away on retreats when we were young. Why did we think it was so bad? I go away all the time for work. Marie doesn't mind. Don't think the children do either.'

'Your father told you it was bad.' Alice started getting angry, but she let it go. 'He came to some of the classes, you know, a weekend retreat out here.'

‘I didn’t know Dad was interested.’

‘He wasn’t. He came to check up on me – scared of losing control, losing his power. I do remember a funny story.’

Oliver leaned back in the leather chair. He understood how his father felt, Alice didn’t. That stuff was scary.

‘We were in this room. Tenzin said something in class about life showing us miracles all the time, but we’d lost the eyes to see. Damian asked him to show him one.’

‘Tenzin said, “Sure, now watch carefully.” Damian had a tight smile, a cat waiting to pounce. Tenzin raised a cup of tea to his mouth. “That’s a miracle.” A broad grin spread across his face.’

‘Damian turned to me with his “you’ve got to be kidding” look.’

Alice looked at Oliver, who stared blankly.

‘We have no idea how the mind gets the hand to lift a cup of tea.’

‘I don’t understand?’ It was getting late.

‘We don’t know how the mind manipulates matter, the mechanism, what mind is. Science has the problem of only allowing the objective, the physical, so once you bring in a mind you’re in trouble.’

‘So what? That doesn’t make it a miracle.’

‘Well, it depends on your definition of miracle.’

‘Absolutely. A miracle is the breaking of an established law of nature. It’s not just “something we don’t understand yet”.’

‘But our natural laws get broken all the time, that’s why science keeps moving forward. That’s not a miracle either.’

Oliver looked at the carpet for a moment. ‘Actually I’ve been reading up on that stuff. It’s fascinating, the mind, what it might be in terms of an emergent property of a network. But it’s not a miracle, is it? We don’t understand all sorts of shit – doesn’t make them miracles.’

‘No, that’s right.’

‘Tenzing, or whatever his name is, sounds like a bit of a dick.’

He stood up, bent over and kissed her gently on the forehead.

‘I’m going to bed. See you in the morning.’

Next day they went walking to the far end of the beach. The tide was low and stone-clay islands, fringed in small mussels, rose from the syrupy water. The rocks at the far end were stiff with oysters. Alice and Oliver tapped the hinges with sharp pointed stones, slurped the thin runny flesh and spat out the flakes of shell.

The concrete boat ramp, bordered with white-painted tyres, marked the end of the main beach. A little further on, before the next headland, she looked for the track. It had been at least ten years. A strip of mud under the bush seemed to head upwards. Alice pulled on the spindly trunks to keep her balance, to spare her legs the steep climb. Oliver strode on ahead, remembering the picnics, how far it had once seemed to White’s Beach. The track followed the perimeter of a sheep farm, long feathery grass outside the fence, good for rushing through and feeling free and happy. Out here he felt lighter than he had for a long while. Actually he was almost buoyant; his moroseness had vanished.

‘White’s Beach – we used to swim to here from the main beach,’ Oliver smiled, as he helped Alice down the final slippery bank. A fall at her age could have serious consequences.

The beach was a brilliant white, stretched wide between dark rocky headlands and broad between green pasture and the blue sea. Crabby pohutukawas hung out over the sand, roots deep in the small creeks trickling down from the hills.

Alice spread a rug over the thick cover of leaves.

Before she’d even had time to get settled, he started with his questions, like a detective following a strong lead.

‘So what *was* so special about this Tenzin guy? I still don’t get why you were so intrigued. Why *did* you keep going away?’

Alice stood up abruptly, she couldn't help it, and scraped her head on the thick knuckle of a branch.

'I went away because I had to.'

'You'd go for ages. You abandoned the family.'

'I never abandoned the family! That's your father talking. He'd always abuse me for it. He'd tell you kids what a ... '

Her anger suddenly arrived, uninvited. ' ... what a crappy mother I was? Is that the care of a parent? When you go away are you abandoning your children? Of course not. How dare he do that.'

Oliver stood and walked off down the beach, breaking into a slow jog.

Alice rubbed at the sore lump on her head.

She looked out to sea as if she might fly away as a sea bird and then she broke off a small twig and crushed and rubbed the chunky leaves into crumbs, forcing her sense of powerlessness – her inability to protect her children from these malicious words with their seed of truth – into her hands, into the twig, breaking it up into tiny pieces. She hated Damian in that moment and she'd worked hard not to hate anyone. She wouldn't hate him tomorrow.

She still looked distraught when Oliver came back.

'You were eight when I first went away on a long retreat – ten days.'

She sat back down looking slightly away. Oliver stretched out horizontal resting on his folded arm, facing her, calmer now. He hadn't meant to upset her, or himself.

They didn't say anything for a while.

'Tell me about your first long retreat, then.'

'Yeah? You want to know?'

'Yes.'

‘When you were eight, I flew to the Buddhist Retreat Centre in the South Island. I was given a long, narrow room, with a small window looking over a thin lawn, which had been regurgitated into millions of aniseed rabbit poos. There were rabbits everywhere. The bush was full of pigs and litters of piglets. Shallow-rooted pine trees came down regularly, undermined by the rooting pigs. The caretakers gave the pigs and rabbits priority over the trees and grass.

‘Anyway, we met for classes every day in the whare up on the hill. Every day Tenzin spoke, and every day he reached further and further down inside me, unearthing feelings I’d never known.’

Her voice changed, it became deep and proud. *‘All human beings need aspiration, and they need to feel and know their aspiration. Growing, breathing, living is the aspiring, the inspiration.’*

Her voice returned to normal. ‘He said stuff like that; it was pure poetry.’

Oliver was suddenly silent, not his normal dull silent, but an alert listening, more like an animal. What she said didn’t make sense, but something was glimmering, stirring. He remembered something from when he was very young. She’d said that everyone has a little flame inside them, their life. He’d wondered how that could be possible. A candle flame inside him?

‘It was early winter, full of camellia and rhododendron blossom. The whare was a mass of flowers, like a funeral, vases bursting with glossy leaves, brilliant reds and mauves soaring up. The stained glass window behind the shrine filtered clear blue, gold, red light into the room.’

Her voice changed again. *‘The process of knowing more, the freedom to continually grow and enter new dimensions, the unhindered process of living, is enlightenment in action. Bodhi means awakening. Budh means budding and ha is the sound of laughter, so Buddha is the joy of budding, of flowering growth.’*

Alice was sitting straight up under the pohutakawa, letting something grand climb out from the words. ‘*“I want to know more” is the silent cry running throughout nature. It is the central truth of your life.*’

She paused and returned to normal. ‘That was certainly true for me. I was crying out to know more. What was life? Who was I? What was I meant to be doing with my life? I was an endlessly rumbling questioning. The experiences I had on that retreat gave me a direction. I was never the same again.’

Oliver threw a stone. She sounded like Marie. They were both crazy. Either they were crazy or he was. He knew he wasn’t.

‘What experiences?’ he asked.

‘I needed to know what was real. I discovered love.’

‘What happened?’

‘One morning I was walking towards the main building, through the autumn leaves – burnt oranges and red – blown onto the gravel, The tuis and bellbirds were trilling their crystal flutes. Rabbits were on the grass. Occasionally a hawk swooped and the rabbits flicked their white tails down their holes, except for the one gone skyward. I was focusing on walking, the slow steady swing of my hips, my whole body twisting as it lifted each foot, feeling the simple pleasure of being present in my body, focused and quietly expansive at the same time. I shifted my attention to the soles of my feet, to the sensations of touching the ground, the detail of placing each foot, over and over, soft and steady.

‘Then, suddenly, something in my brain changed and I was seeing quite differently. It only lasted a few seconds but it was enough. The path suddenly lost its solidity, it turned into light and that light was conscious. I was directly perceiving everything I looked at as conscious light, as love. I knew for sure it was love. Don’t know how because I’d never felt this kind of love before. Then it passed. What I felt was more real to me than anything else I had ever experienced. I had to go after it. I still remember how excited I was. This was real.’

‘Well, you glimpsed something.’

Oliver had had glimpses of matter turning into light, but he’d been tripping on LSD at the time. It was a beautiful world, to be sure. To call it reality was another thing altogether. ‘Go on.’

‘A few days later, I was sitting on a broken-down armchair – inorganic rubbish collection furniture I thought at the time – balancing a big dinner plate full of gourmet food: salad, new potatoes, lasagne, butter-coated carrots, grated beetroot and carrot salad, quiche. Tenzin told us to eat very slowly and focus on the sensations of eating. I raised my fork slowly to my mouth, gathering my mind in from its wanderings, its dallying with the birds at the feeder and the grey mountains rising up into the clouds across the valley. I placed it directly into the eating – teeth grinding against themselves, pieces of food mixing with saliva, the sensations. Staying in the process of eating – raising the lettuce to my mouth, lips tasting for texture, looking over the plate for what to have next, the colours, mouthful after mouthful, until my mind was totally absorbed in the process of eating, until I was just eating.

‘A most peculiar thing happened. I found myself inside a mouthful of butter-coated carrots. I was looking out from inside the carrots in the same way I look out through my human body. I didn’t leave my body, I just spread into the carrot. This gave rise to the peculiar experience of me eating myself. The food and I were one, under the different shapes. I was eating and I was being eaten. I clearly saw the illusion of death. There is no death, there is only transmutation, form changing shape, same identity underneath. We are all one. This wasn’t a flight of imagination: it was a clear, direct experience. I didn’t know how to understand the experiences in an ordinary context. How could you understand, they were so personal? For me, they were everything.’

She would have kept going, to try and make him see, but he interrupted.

‘I don’t really know what this has to do with anything. If I had a lucid dream that I was a ladybird, I wouldn’t wake up thinking I’d discovered something new and important. You say things like “it wasn’t a flight of the imagination”. What exactly is it that makes it “not a flight of the imagination”?’

‘Haven’t you ever witnessed something incredibly beautiful?’

‘Well, yeah, of course. I’ll get blown away by a sunset.’

She sat up straight. ‘And in the wonder, wasn’t there a sense of something more, something ineffable, calling you to a deeper truth, to a bigger understanding?’

‘Nope.’

A seagull arrived, dragging a fish skeleton, pecking at the dead eye, shrieking at other gulls landing near. The tide was on its way in and it had washed the sand free of their footprints. The sun began casting long afternoon shadows.

‘We should be getting back.’

He leaped up, shook out the rug and passed the bottle of water, then dashed on ahead while she followed more slowly, feet paddling in the tide, cold around her ankles, washing in and out, breathing over sand soft and full of air bubbling out through small craters.

We're halfway: two hundred and fifty miles to go. The wind has turned around to the south west, coming over the side of the boat, so we're on a broad reach. I'm starting to understand why this angle is so advantageous. The wind is moving us forward in two ways. Some of the wind is rushing past the sail from the front to the back. It moves more quickly on the inside than the outside because of the belly in the sail; the shape of the belly is very important. This creates a vacuum on the outside of the sail and the boat is lifted forward into this vacuum, because the rudder stops the boat from slipping sideways into it. At the same time a lot of the wind is blowing directly at the sail and pushing us forward, like on a square rigger. The upshot is we can sail faster than the wind, something that should be impossible. Who ever invented this sail was a genius.

I keep remembering, because it is so mysterious and poetic: *'Consciousness, which has no legs, rides winds which have no eyes. Your emotions are the winds. How you use them is up to you,'* my teacher had said.

Dad pokes his nose up the companionway, he's always listening to the wind, even with his headphones on.

'The sails are flapping, you'll need to winch in the headsail and tighten the mainsheet.'

This is because the wind is moving forward of the beam, I think. I'm not sure about tackling the job on my own, so I keep looking at him.

'Okay. I'll tail the sheet while you winch.'

When the jib is tight, I sheet in the main until he says to stop. So we're on a tight reach now, wind forward of the beam, depending more on the vacuum theory rather than the push theory to keep us moving forwards.

'Now can you hold the course while I reset the wind vane?'

His voice is a bit gruff – I think he'd rather be resting. He clambers over the lazaret, right at the back of the boat where the wind vane hangs out over the water. This archaic piece of extraordinary ingenuity tends to fall apart all by itself, so I'm not allowed to adjust it or even to study it.

‘Are we on course?’ he calls around his body, as he loosens various bit of rope and holds the vane steady.

‘Wait a minute,’ I shout. ‘A wave has thrown us off.’

I swing the wheel around too far and the sails start flapping. Fortunately the boom preventer will stop the boom swinging over. The jib is just about to fill with wind on the other side. That would stop the boat pretty quickly. Dad turns around to protest at my incompetence.

I stop him. ‘It’s okay, I’ll get there.’

I swing the wheel the other way, overcompensating, then back and forth, making smaller and smaller adjustments, until I can keep the compass pointing due west.

‘Okay, we’re back on course.’ I’m fluttering inside, not sure if I can hold the boat against the waves tossing it about.

I don’t see what he does, but the wheel starts turning itself again, a little bit this way, a little bit that way, tight and precise. Dad doesn’t say anything and neither do I. We relax.

Then his voice becomes ragged and strained again. ‘Something is still rattling. I’m going back down to see if I can find it.’

He sets off back down into the galley, bent over. He’s seasick now I’m better.

I call after him. ‘I had a look a while ago but I couldn’t find it. It was driving me crazy.’ My voice has a thin edge, I can tell, because I feel guilty and I follow him down. ‘I’ll make us some lunch.’

I call Cornelius again in the evening.

‘*Fantasie*, this is *Dream-maker*. Do you copy?’

‘Hello *Dream-maker*, this is *Fantasie*. Do you copy?’

‘How are you? Over,’ I ask.

‘Fine, but my leg’s hurting badly. I hope it’s nothing serious.’

I remember when the pain started in Lautoka – to do with his back we thought, a pinched nerve. It comes and goes.

‘Are you getting plenty of rest? Over.’

‘Yes. Lying down is the only thing that helps. Over.’

‘How are your sails set? Over.’

‘Third reef in the main and a full headsail. Over.’

‘We’re the same. I’ve calculated our speed to be the same, just over six knots. Over.’

‘Okay. I’m going now. Over.’

Four hours of sleep seems like two minutes. Dad is calling in a loud whisper, through my dreaming, ‘Alice, it’s time for your watch.’

He seems to be standing right over me, poking at me through the shadows, large hands crushing me, but he’s not, he’s still up in the cockpit shining his torch down through the dark. Groggy and disorientated, I grab my torch and jersey and pull myself up into a night bright with stars. I fill with a sense of us rushing along through the warm wind to an unknown destination. Our torch light bobs around the cockpit, fading before it gets to the sea or the sky, and Dad explains the wind direction and our course and I accustom myself to the dark which is hovering in thick, voluptuous folds.

‘I’m taking a sleeping pill,’ he says. ‘You’ll be fine.’

I decide to sing to keep awake. I face into the wind so the words will blow away and I can sing as loudly as I please without disturbing Dad.

‘Have you seen the old man in the closed down market, kicking up the papers with his worn out shoes? ... So how can you tell me you’re lonely and say for you that the sun don’t shine?’

I flick through the music for another song to tell me more about how I feel inside.

'I am sailing, I am sailing, stormy waters, stormy seas. I am sailing, stormy waters, to be near you, to be free.'

Chapter eight

When Oliver rose the next morning it was already ten o'clock and Alice was out on the porch finishing her coffee, legs stretched out in the low sun shining off the sea onto wooden floors inside. He suddenly remembered the winter sun pouring in when he was young, playing with his train set, Mum in the kitchen making muffins or preserves.

'Plum jam! I'd love some,' he greeted her, wondering if he'd get away with it.

She licked her fingers, gave him a hug, holding her hands out so he wouldn't get sticky.

'Coffee, too?'

'Of course, Mum.'

He went over to the bookcase and scanned the spines. They hadn't changed over the years. He'd burn the biology and chemistry books in tonight's fire. Way out of date. He went over to the coffee table, a large wooden vault where his toys had lived: the old wooden train set his father had as a child and his father before him, so he was told. He opened the top lid to see if it was still there. He yanked the plastic bag free and carried it over to the sun by the open ranch sliders and tipped the pieces out on the floor. The sun warmed the yellowing wooden carriages and the chunky wooden people and animals. He became the child he had been, pushing the tracks together, placing the people and animals upright in clusters. He let himself slip back to when his train set had been real, into the child mind that can make anything real. As a child he had been full of wonder, he had lived in games as vast as his imagination. Those worlds had seemed real, more real than his mother now laughing and calling him to breakfast. He remembered how much he'd wanted to stay in the land of cowboys and Indians and trains chugging through the prairies and Rockies of the country in which his father had grown up. He could discuss this all with his mother, but she'd end up asking questions on imagination versus reality and what the difference was and if there was a difference. He knew the brain didn't distinguish: it made the same hormones for both.

'Who was Tenzin's teacher, again?'

'Wongchuk. On the bottom shelf.'

They sat out under the clear blue sky, with tuis in the olive tree pecking at the black fruit. Must be desperate, Oliver thought.

‘Tenzin called himself a mystical scientist. I thought of myself as a mystical scientist as well, exploring the mystical with the objective, enquiring mind of a scientist.’

‘Mum, that’s a contradiction in terms. Right?’

‘Only the most superficial part of the brain is logical. Most of it isn’t. Tenzin warned us endlessly about becoming trapped in the labyrinth of mystical experience, about becoming entranced by the inner displays, the mind-blowing fireworks, of getting caught in our personal stories of distress and not ever getting out. I didn’t understand what he meant for many years.’

She paused for her eyes to return from a misting over.

‘The mystical is a direct communion with life. Maybe you’re right – mystical scientist is an oxymoron.’

Oliver wanted more data, not a philosophical discussion. He wanted to see if she had something worth pursuing. Marie had gone to meditation classes, but it hadn’t affected her the way it did Alice. Maybe it had. Maybe he hadn’t ever listened to her. Maybe he hadn’t wanted to know. He suddenly felt foolish.

‘Mum, tell me more stories, then I might understand what happened to you. At the moment it doesn’t make sense – why you were so consumed and why it took you so long to sort yourself out. I like who you are now, but back then ...’

Alice sat in a chair a little bit away from Oliver now, who didn’t understand the pain he was causing, and then her face contorted as she tried to be as honest and vulnerable as she could, so he would know his mother if he dared. Her voice became quiet.

‘I spent most of my life running away, leaping into everything and anything, with a furious passion, to get away from myself. Whenever I paused, I’d feel like I was being crushed, strangled, snuffed out. I didn’t know what it was and I didn’t know how to stop it. I only knew how to run. Spirituality was the best place to run to. After that sailing trip with Cornelius, things started to change. Now I know that spirituality isn’t about

disappearing into the mystical, it's about making peace with ordinary living, about being happy whatever the circumstance.'

She shook herself free of the memories. The memories would always be there even though she was no longer the person in the memories.

When she looked up at him, his face was intent, waiting for her to go on.

'More data. What happened?'

'Okay. The evening of the star-group meditation, candle light flickered around our small circle. There were five of us, I think. As I remember, the moon was full, a pale orb shining into the room – eye of the universe. On the other side of the room firelight flickered through the glass door of the wood stove. The evening was very still, full of shadows and a flowery perfume. We held hands around the circle, and then someone squeezed and I squeezed back, and we all closed our eyes and started to meditate. My breath was jerky to start with because the situation was unusual for me, this meditating with others, but it soon quietened and became very deep and slow. I relaxed more deeply than I might have done if I'd been meditating alone. After only about five minutes, the room, my thoughts, my body had vanished and I was being hurtled through a vast rushing space, like a spaceship. The wind in this moving space started slowing down and like the clawing breath of a great beast it ripped me open.

'The pain was excruciating, like in childbirth, but it was tremendously exciting as well. Agony and ecstasy together. Every cell in my body was waking up in a different way and I started sensing directly an intelligence way beyond my normal capacity. I became certain that I was experiencing the boundless intelligence of life itself, as a symphony – the music of mountains and forests, joy and heartache, pouring forth. A magnificent awesome symphony was playing through every fibre of my being, so huge, so fine, so complex I couldn't bear it. But I did – I didn't resist, I let the agony be. Ever since then I can experience life in this way, as a magnificent creature, alive, sentient, excruciatingly beautiful. Then I knew for sure that human beings were deluded in thinking they were so intelligent. The universe gave birth to us, it isn't an insentient backdrop. How absurd to think so.'

She stopped there, into a gap of the sea breaking on shore below the cliff.

Oliver looked out into the blue sky and wondered if there really was a means for the universe to be intelligent or sentient. Possibly. Feasibly. Constant streams of information passed between the furthest stars. He opened the sun umbrella against the rising sun. The wind tossed the olives down and everywhere trees and leaves were dancing together. She seemed powerless now. Reliving her story had drained her. They sat quietly, watching the birds on the lawn after worms and fallen olives, and she gathered her energy back and tugged at her memories again to bring them forth for him. 'After that retreat, my life changed,' she started more quietly. 'When I got home I couldn't stop dancing. I'd whirl you children around, swinging into the Moody Blues, singing along – Mozart, Pink Floyd – before Damian came home from work. I started drawing and painting. I couldn't stop the colours swirling over the paper, running into volcanoes and waterfalls and flowers. I laughed and cried and jumped over fences and leaped into the sea. I don't like to admit this, but around this time I started to realize that I hated your father. I didn't know why I hated him, not really. I loved him as well, couldn't keep away from him. He treated me very badly, but that didn't explain it. I had married him maybe because he was abusive. I couldn't make any sense of our relationship and I couldn't fix us. I wanted to but I didn't know how, so I gave up and flew off into my miraculous world.'

Oliver had to speak. 'He said you were emotionally distant, you weren't there for him, that's why he got so angry.'

She stopped for a moment and felt his need to know and her defensiveness faded.

'Nothing justifies abuse, and emotional withdrawal I guess is a kind of abuse too, and we only abuse others because we don't know how not to. Neither of us knew how to deal with the situation.' She paused again. 'Let's not get caught up in all that again. I'm glad we finally became friends. There was one last experience around this time I could tell you about. Then we'll go down to the beach and get some seaweed. The northerly should have brought quite a bit in. What do you think? For the vegetable garden.'

'Seaweed? Really? I want to read, but the beach would be good, too.'

He didn't have to keep waving this banner for his Dad, he just wanted the truth. He kept swaying – he still didn't get what she was saying, why it was such a big deal. He'd become cold under his curiosity and he didn't like that. Separate from her, from life in

general, the colour washed out of everything, back in the same old place, morose. Maybe he was grieving, but what for?

Her voice was quiet and soothing now. ‘The morning mist was still hanging heavy in the trees. In the centre of the glade was a stupa. Above the white square base and the curved white midriff capped in gold flames, a crystal eye caught the early sun. As I moved, blood red turned to yellow then emerald green and sapphire blue. Walking across the damp grass onto the base of the stupa, dark green footprints behind me, I began my clockwise step, over coloured river stones set into spiral patterns inside shiny pava. The morning was very still, in mist so I couldn’t see beyond the trees.

‘As I was walking my ordinary mind suddenly vanished. I knew I was still walking around the stupa but my mind was gone to some place quite different, a long way behind everything that was on the surface. It became a completely different mind. What seemed extraordinary about this shift was the quality of peace, the radiant certainty, the deep confidence that everything was as it should be. In this mind, in that deep place, I knew for sure that there was nothing at all to worry about – nothing was the way it seemed on the surface. This was a perfect universe. The quality of peace I was experiencing was complete. It was perfect, whole, holy. The experience was so profound it has never left me.’

‘Mum, you go down to the beach, I’ll come soon. There are some things I want to do first.’

‘Sure.’ She gathered up their breakfast dishes and stacked them for washing in the kitchen. Maybe Oliver would do them? The two white buckets were nested under the laundry tubs. Swinging one in each hand she set out down the driveway.

Oliver flopped down in the green leather chair, hot now because of the sun. He pulled out his computer and turned to a new game he’d downloaded. Orere disappeared and he was thrown up into near-earth orbit, his forces drifting in great clusters through space, heavy with weapons and waiting for a commanding order. He selected the target on America’s eastern seaboard and then watched the ships peel away, glowing orange as they entered the atmosphere.

The sun slips down below the horizon around 6pm, when I begin my evening watch. Because we're on the equator it always sets at six. The wind arriving from the south, maybe from Antarctica, is cool and I pull Dad's old duvet in around my shoulders. It's damp with salt, a heavy damp that never dries, and my stomach tunes to the stink of old diesel and sweat. The feeling of Cornelius has faded from my body. I'm on my own. Snuggled up under the dodger, I hug my legs close up against my chest and my hands pull the duvet tighter till I am like a tiny ball floating in the vast ocean. Orange blood from the dying sun spills through the sky into the sea. *Life* is calling, like a siren, calling me to let go of everything and join with *her*. *She* is the sweetest love, tracing gold through the sea and sky. *She* is pulling me apart into *her*, as eternity, as *her* bliss, extinguished. I stay separated out, quiet like a child holding onto myself, uncertain now what I want. The clouds turn indigo, as *she* pulls at me to let go, to surrender. I shuffle back into my body, so I know I exist, stretching out to make sure, then curling up again.

The roar of waves rushing past becomes a soft lullaby, wind battering the sails, boat rolling and heaving, discordant music in the rigging. What have I done with my life that is worth anything? I empty out into nothing worth anything at all – I empty into *Life's* fullness calling me. I am done with my vanity and pretence. Nothing is worth anything without this love. It is all I ever wanted. Mystical love is intoxicatingly sweet, eternal, perfect. It is all I ever wanted. It is irresistible. This is not human love. It is not what I want – it doesn't solve anything. I get up and stalk the sea from the cockpit. I stare, defeated, into the slippery faces of the moving ocean. I pull away again. This isn't an answer. This love is not human love. I don't know how to find human love. My love for Cornelius is a fantasy.

The wind is unsteady, it's swung behind us and it's fading, so we're slowing down because of the apparent wind speed problem.

Dad and I aren't good at talking, actually we're rather formal, brief, maybe unsure of each other. Nevertheless I suggest it. 'Why don't we pole the headsail out? Good wind for it.'

His face withdraws, not much, like slinking shadows under bushy eyebrows pulling his words away. 'I'm not sure the spinnaker pole still works; it may have corroded up.'

'I can help. Let's have a look?'

I get up in a way that means he has to follow.

We unfasten a long aluminium pole tied along the handrail on deck – anodized gold with a few thin trails of green corrosion. The end slips into a clip on the mast, at about waist height.

'I'm not sure the clip still works.' Dad says hopefully, but can't help an exclamation of delight when it does. *Dream-maker* is his pride and joy. He begins moving with zest. The pole now sticks way out past the lifelines, over the sea, opposite side to the main.

'Bring it inside the lifelines, we need to attach the jib.'

'It's going to work!' I shout. The wind carries my voice away.

Dad moves slowly, on account of his ancient age, careful with his balance and his back, which is a bent plank. A few years ago, he fell from a roof onto his head and broke his neck. His back never quite straightened out. So with this and his one blind eye and his poor hearing he's at quite a disadvantage.

'Loosen off the jib sheet and I'll attach the loose corner of the jib to the end of the spinnaker pole.'

He explains: 'We can't use the sheet as it is because the end of the spinnaker pole is outside the shrouds and the sheet is running down inside them.'

I unclip the loose sheet from the fairlead which leads it down the deck, then drag the sheet over to the spinnaker pole, attach it to the end and then feed it around the outside of the shrouds and back into the cockpit. We've done it. The jib fills with wind, straight out the starboard side, ninety degrees to the boat. We let out the mainsheet – the main goes right out the port side of the boat. I tie the rope boom preventer to hold it there. It would make a pretty big whallop and mess of our heads should it fly across the cockpit because I'd steered the backside of the sail into the wind. Not likely, but with me anything is possible. *Dream-maker* is a white swan opening its wings, ready to fly, to

rise up from the azure sea into a sapphire sky – sapphire, the colour of destiny, heaven and joyful devotion to God.

Dad is beaming.

‘Let’s get the mizzen up as well,’ he suggests.

The third small sail in the cockpit is full of cobwebs and an old bird’s nest that must have travelled with us from New Zealand. I tug on the thin salt-crusted halyard. Dad pushes up the boom so I can pull it tight and stretch out the sail. He lets out the little mainsheet until the small crinkled sail catches a puff of wind.

‘*Dream-maker* has never looked so fine,’ I exclaim. ‘Three wings.’

I jump up on deck and study the way the sunlight pours through the white arcs, bellies full of wind, and *Dream-maker* slipping through the sea like a dolphin.

The beer is warm because the fridge doesn’t go. We sit in the cockpit full of a spacious exuberance.

‘I miss Cornelius. Maybe we’ll get married.’

What a great way to start. Dad doesn’t even like Cornelius.

‘Well you’ll know him pretty well by the time we get back to New Zealand.’

I hesitate, then start again. ‘Why didn’t you ever remarry?’

Dad looks away out to sea, an uncomfortable stain crossing his face.

‘I have known so many wonderful women,’ he replies. ‘I’ve been so fortunate.’

A “third reef in the main” kind of answer. This is harder than I expected.

‘*Dream-maker* is running well with all her sails out,’ he remarks, then glances back and then away again.

‘You say you’ve been fortunate, but look at you now. You’re on your own.’

In the pause that follows I wonder if I should have been so unkind.

‘I do like being alone, some of the time,’ he finally replies. ‘It gives me a chance to follow my own interests, to explore metaphysics. When I’m living with a woman, there doesn’t seem to be any time.’

I make us lunch, like always, to say it’s okay. Dad goes down to rest and I stay in the cockpit and watch the waves as they rush up from behind, pretending to be scary.

The outgoing tide was dropping bunches of fresh kelp – Neptune’s hair ripped off by a furious, northerly swell. Alice gathered the bunches by the stalks, fronds hanging down, a strap or two tracing the sand, like licorice stretched brown in a tug of war. The curled roots were stiff above her hands as she swung the bunches into the tide to remove the sand. She laid them high up on the rocks to dry so they would be light for carrying home, then set off paddling down the beach.

Her mind was like the water, reflecting broken faces, breaking into bubbles of empty foam, taking form like the sand under her feet as she plodded back to the cliff, over the so many stones now the northerly had taken the sand. It was such a long time ago, and the memories were twisting up like the roots of the great pohutukawa. So many roots climbing over each other into a cave-like web under the trunk, where her children used to play and hide and the branches flung out over the sand in all directions, grasping for life as the trunk fell. Still now falling down towards the sand and the sea still washing away at the earth until the roots are all bare. Her mind was hovering and slipping into another mind: Cornelius. A wind flying up under the pohutukawa branches, whipping around her face, teased her awake from her dreaming. What was that? She felt disorientated, not herself, caught in his heavy body, his collapsed, rigid frame, filled with his dark passion. Her eyes went slowly blank again.

Oliver put down his game and started nosing around the house for a detective novel, or even a thriller. Unlikely – most of the books had spiritual names: ‘*Loving Kindness*’, ‘*Unconditional Forgiveness*’. He couldn’t read that stuff. Trouble was he needed help. He couldn’t go back to Canada, didn’t have the courage for it. He felt like his Mum, strangled. Needed some time to find himself. Maybe it was in the genes, a sympathetic coding – that’s what Wongchuk said. But spirituality wasn’t the answer; it was an escape, a fantasy. His Mum had agreed, hadn’t she? He pulled out a book and flicked through: ‘*The Web of Life*.’ Possibly interesting? Two rather thin and tatty journals came out as well and fell onto the sofa. Fire starters? He brushed off the dust and ant carcasses, then went out to the macrocarpa to chop wood. “Chop wood, carry water.”

That was him: a Zen cliché. Good logs hiding under the leaf 'snow'. Came from a neighbour. Cut down the tree when he got tired of raking up the leaves, his mother said.

Where was his mother? He missed his kids, not that he saw much of them. Worked too hard. Funny thing was he couldn't see Marie. He could smell her and feel her in bed next to him, but he couldn't see her. His arms swung up behind his head, above the chopping block, and down came the axe. Maybe he'd call her tonight. The split logs piled into his bare arms, until he came alive in the pain. *I hurt myself today, to see if I still feel.* Nine Inch Nails. He stripped down for a shower with the door open into the garden: camellia, carpet of red and gold underneath, and the garden foaming blood green like a bursting artery. Who has an outside shower now? The rainwater was soft on his face, pattering over his shoulders and back, scorching hot, and he stayed until the hot turned cold. The small hot water cylinder only took thirty minutes to reheat so he knew Alice wouldn't mind. He picked up one of the journals and sat down. The writing was dark, full of capitals. It wasn't his mother's writing, he was sure of that.

Following Alice and Jack to Vanuatu tomorrow. Why not?

A fantasy of love. I don't have any other plan!

Who could that be, he wondered, and he read on:

Alice is great on the boat. Not a princess - not a drudge. Then she disappears inside herself. Fuck me. Fancy Jack telling me how smart and competent she is. Something's wrong and it will be to do with her mother. It always is. And that spiritual stuff.

Oliver felt embarrassed, as if he was poking around in Alice's underwear drawer. Who could it be? One of her old boyfriends. Don't want to know. Thought a bit. Of course, it was Cornelius, that American dude. Lived at Orere with her for a bit. Cool guy. Great boat. Pretty hard on Mum though, bossed her around. He turned the page.

Must change the music. You can have too much even of Paco de Lucia.

Spain – long time ago. I believed in myself then. Fancy having your picture on the cover of 'Time'. On my surfboard. Alice didn't seem to be impressed.

Spain. Especially the girls and the food. Juanita would have married me, poor as I was. She'd be sixty. Alice doesn't really love me.

My foot's been numb for too long. Something's wrong.

I gave in to my mother. I hate her even more because I gave in to her. Left Spain, gave up the guitar dream.

My leg is burning, streaks of pain running up and down.

Juanita would have gone back to Hollywood with me. THAT'S a vile nest of vipers. I had some guts to leave in the first place. Front-line warfare. And my mother, such a bitch. But I went back. Never should have opened her poison-pen letters.

My back is blasting me. Another pill. Body's falling apart just like the boat. Poor boat. I hate that fucking dent in the mahogany. Fuck Dierdre. Alice is different, but too gentle.

I remember Vuda Point, lying with her on this bunk. Doesn't every sailor dream of this, after all the sailing, all the loneliness, all the stormy weather? Isn't it what we all dream of - sinking into a woman and drowning in the pleasure of her loving? Maybe it won't last but the loving is extraordinary – thighs – front – small breasts, like breasts of a girl – tender. I'd give anything to have that again, to keep that.

Then she becomes aloof, patronising. I hate that. Like my mother.

My leg is giving me hell.

Oliver put the journal down, to wash his hands, to get rid of the disgust. What was she on about? Totally self-indulgent. Call that spirituality? When was it? Hardly remember.

I must have been at University. Maybe that's what I should be doing? Getting a life. He stomped around the house, looking for food and banging open the cupboard doors. Tim Tams.

Alice stirred, shaking the strange memories away. Not memories, what then? She felt sick. A dream, that's all it was. The seaweed should be dry. Maybe Oliver would come down tomorrow. She crept back along the beach, her hair grey as the rocks, face and hands yellowy-brown like the clay from the cliff crushed by the sea into soft sand. The seaweed, now black and crinkly, scratched against the white plastic as she pushed it in. Alice stopped at the river and put down her buckets. The water was full of ducks resting on the silky surface, floating downstream in the gentle ebb and upstream in the flow: micro movements, caused by the moon and the rotation of the planet, the breath of the planet.

The grass was dry so she stayed a while, arms around her folded knees, to watch a fishing boat, a small tinny pushing up the river, the mate backing the trailer down right into the water. The ducks flew away. She realized how much she missed her Dad, now he wasn't here. The man in the dinghy looked like her Dad: years bathed in salt air and sun, eyes keen about the ways of the water, ears on the knotty thread of the throaty engine, fish in a chilly bin – a practical man. He'd stood by her always, through all her troubles, and there'd been a few. She saw him bent over, climbing down into *Dream-maker* to rest, and she lay down on the grass and sank down into her memories.

Oliver came back to the journals – he didn't want to be mean about his mother. He was just curious about her life. In the other journal the writing was smaller, harder to read, stained – maybe coffee stains.

No longer want to sail to Vanuatu. Since Alice fell in love with that guy, a bloody American Hollywood film producer complete with slick yacht, what chance did I have? Guess it was inevitable. Now they've taken off in his yacht hunting manta rays. Nothing for it but to stay in Fiji and find a female companion. Then she can follow him. She

deserves some happiness. Not like the past now for me. Then I could always attract a young female backpacker. Too old and the local women wouldn't know arse from elbow about sailing a yacht. They'd want to marry me. All I want is romance. Hell, what a mess.

Must be his grandfather. He admired his grandfather. Family summers on *Dream-maker*, snorkelling and swimming, sailing around the Barrier and Kawau Island. His grandfather was always happy, gave them treats, made a fuss of them. Used to argue with Mum though, about spiritual stuff. Got quite heated. He could be more like his grandfather, more adventurous. He read on.

Now I'm bloody bored and lonely and hate being holed up in this hell-hole of Vuda Point. So bloody hot. Will have to do something. I'll have a little whisky for starters and think about it. Some of the family are coming to join us in two months. Should be a lot better then. But we were supposed to be in New Caledonia. How am I going to sail there if Alice abandons ship? Not that she would.

She's certainly been fantastic. Extraordinary crew person. Couldn't have possibly coped without her. She had it pretty tough back home. That's why she came sailing. Thought that battling the elements, the struggle for survival, fatigue and profound sleep deprivation would push past her worries into some perspective or, better still, out of her mind altogether. Seemed to work. She's loving every minute of it.

No accounting for love or is it infatuation? Really don't know what she sees in Cornelius. He's friendly enough but not the young tough, tanned, sexy, virile American. He doesn't appear to be blessed with an over-abundance of testosterone either. Guess it's simple American charm. Alice is so naïve in foreign hands. Certainly wouldn't possibly approve of her sailing anywhere with that big blob of fat. His yacht's rundown and he's past it. Sex, that's what it is, blinded by sex. That's all he wants. Maybe that's all she wants. Anyway, she can't go anywhere until I sign her off my crew list. That thought is worth another tot of whisky.

Carol and I last sailed out here three years ago. She was great company. Loved socialising – the bar, beach barbecues, dinner parties on other boats. Bit of a liability in the dingy though, almost capsized several times. Not much use on deck either and not strong enough to winch in the sails. But she loved me and was fantastic in the galley. Too good, I put on weight. Maybe I should have invited her on this trip. She wasn't well enough. Alice and Cornelius sure don't socialise much. They're too much in love, I expect. Never seem to come out of the cabin much except for air.

Oliver closed the journal and looked around. Those Tibetan flags – time for them to come down. He stretched up and yanked. Dust and ant carcasses showered down, catching in the wispy strands of hair on his head. Small nails pulled out, leaving craters behind. What happened to my hair? Don't know where those stink genes came from – not from my grandfather obviously. Time to get away from here. I'll go to Emilee's for a couple of days. Take Mum's car. He stomped the Tibetan flags into a heap and stuffed them into the firebox – good fire starters. Should burn the journals as well.

Alice sat up with a start. The grass was stuck to her sweaty legs and arms, leaving indentations as she stood up, and her skirt was creased. The white buckets of seaweed stood like sentries, reminding her where she was. Mallards looked her way, wriggled their tails to standing and started waddling over. The river was sloshing against the bank, the tinny and fish gone up the road behind the ute. She remembered – spirituality, romance and adventure. She had it all on that trip with her father. Her cup overflowed. She drowned in the bliss, melted away in the fine bubbling and fizzing of her body, abandoned the vessel of her body to the whole of life – in the arms of Cornelius, the arms of her beloved, the arms of life, mixing them up, lost in ecstasy. How ragged she became chasing it all.

Oliver was waiting. It was well past lunch time and he wondered what she had planned. He had done the dishes and had been around the orchard, browsing on guava fruit and mandarins. The possums were clever – they peeled the fruit on the tree, before it was sweet enough for Alice to pick. The last two bird-pecked persimmons were soft and drippingly sweet. This was the best part of Orere – fruit all year round: plums at Christmas, apples and pears through January and February, grapes until Easter, feijoas starting at Easter, buckets full, and now guavas, nashis, persimmons, mandarins. The bananas were still thin and green. Alice arrived with her seaweed and tipped it directly around the silverbeet and spicy greens. They went inside together.

‘I’ve been looking through your books. You were away quite a while. This guy Wongchuk – he was the one, wasn’t he, the chief? You said he was a Tibetan Rinpoche, but he’s Canadian, right?’

Alice washed her hands, wiped them on her clothes, tucked her hair behind her ears and came over to where Oliver was standing at the table with his books.

‘What’s that?’

‘Thought it was time the flags came down. We’ll burn them tonight.’

‘Good idea. He was recognized by the sixteenth Karmapa.’ She sat down and glanced over the pale shadows high on the walls. ‘Fell out with his lineage – too unconventional. Changed his name to Wongchuk.’

‘Seems pretty unconventional. I went to a couple of talks by some Rinpoche. Hell fire and brimstone stuff, straight out of the Old Testament. Didn’t realize Buddhism was on about hell realms. Scare us into being good, eh?’ He jumped up and pranced around the room like a witch. ‘Wongchuk was obviously different.’

‘Yes. He gave the realms a psychological flavour. We investigated the heaven and hell of our minds, right here, right now, the way the Buddha taught.’

Oliver went into the kitchen and opened the fridge, to let his mother know he *was* hungry.

‘We end up in hell states every day if we’re not careful. Your father was caught in a few.’

She stood up. ‘Toasted sandwiches?’

‘Sure.’ They swapped places. ‘I found these as I was searching through the bookcase. They seem to be old journals.’

Alice looked up. ‘Old journals?’

She wiped her hands and went over to where Oliver was holding them out, like a piece of mystery, quizzical smile on his face – two tatty water-stained, soft-covered exercise books. The words were faded, she needed her reading glasses. Her face became intense as she poured over the words.

‘They’re from that sailing trip around the Pacific. How strange, it’s been going over and over in my mind. I’d planned to write a story. I gave Dad and Cornelius journals while we were sailing, to jot down their thoughts and feelings. Think they had some fun. Had to prod them a bit though, to keep them at it. Thought I’d lost them. Had a look?’

‘Yep. Hard to read, but some interesting stuff about you and Grandad.’

‘I must have been about ten years older than you are now. Should I be embarrassed?’

‘Yes.’

The afternoon turned into evening. Oliver made a fire of the prayer flags and old text books. Alice could see the flames from the kitchen, flickering in the ranchsliders. She poured another drop of plum vodka. A fresh bundle of split logs hugged the firebox. Oliver had been busy.

‘So, this Wongchuk guy. I never met him, did I?’

‘No. He died when I was sailing, twenty years ago. I used to dream about him often. Not anymore.’

She disappeared for a minute to grab some greens from the garden, then continued where she'd left off. 'He was into psychotherapy, art therapy, body therapies and the western mystery traditions. He was into anything that might wake us up. He taught traditional Buddhism as well.'

She paused and then decided to throw it in anyway. 'The Tibetan Vajrayana teachings arguably never came from the Buddha. Don't worry, I can explain that later if you're interested.'

Oliver was intrigued. Underneath the surface was always interesting, at least it used to be, until he forgot. He had his own question. What's the difference between a real person and a not real person? He didn't ask Alice because she'd have a ready answer. The question gave him a focus.

Alice waited. He didn't speak. 'Wongchuk was remarkable. He taught the stages of the womb, from Grof. It was all the rage.'

Oliver opened the firebox and shoved in the last Tibetan flags, followed by wood.

'I don't get Buddhism. Is it a religion or therapy? Dad did lots of therapy. He said Buddhism never dealt with the emotions.'

'The Buddha taught how to become free of the emotions, to be happy. In conventional therapy you own your feelings. In Buddhism you don't. You discover there is no 'you' to own them. Detachment is liberation, freedom.'

'Ha, ha. You don't make sense. There is no real person?'

'Absolutely, no. Relatively, yes.'

'Hmmm. Anyway, about Wongchuk and his womb stuff?'

'Okay. I'll just get the potatoes in.'

Oliver found her tizziness challenging – the brittle way she said things, did things, like banging the oven door. Must be the neurons dying off. She wiped her hands on the tea towel again and flung it on the bench so it fell to the floor, then came to sit with him by the fire, scraping the chair along the floor.

‘Wongchuk was fatherly and a trickster. He liked good food, and travelling first class. His belly bounced when he chortled. Sometimes he’d roar – crazy wisdom to wake us up. On this womb workshop, he drove right up to the whare in a SUV. I wondered about his weight, the nicotine stain on his fingers, his heart condition and I wondered whether my wondering was compassionate. I’ve still got my notes from that class.’

She bustled over to a cane basket under the sideboard.

‘The first step to becoming free is to become aware of what is going on. In Mahamudra you deliberately dig things up but you don’t act on them. Cultivate choiceless, non-clinging awareness. What you must do is give up ego clinging for the observation of pure clinging.’

She read over a few lines then spoke again: *‘Be aware of the breathing. This will bring you in touch with energy which will bring you in touch with memory.’* She looked up from the notes. ‘We did special breathing exercises to get to the womb memories.’

Oliver’s face suddenly clouded over. He didn’t want his memories. He focused hard on what Alice was saying to keep them away.

She kept reading: *‘You were thrown out of the garden. The neurotic wants to crawl back into the womb, the magical garden. It’s possible to get rid of the neurotic you who wants to crawl back.’*

She put the notebook down. ‘I’d forgotten he said this: the magical garden.’

‘Go on.’ Oliver didn’t get it. He was getting bored, but he liked the distraction.

‘Everything is rosy in the garden, but you have a kind of inner certainty that it won’t last. This is the programme from the cutting of the cord at birth, the origin of anxiety attacks.’

She read on: *‘It’s only because you have a deep, organic contact with the ground, because the womb is a vehicle of immense, intelligent programming, that enlightenment is possible. Develop humility. Listen to the shaping.’*

She looked directly at Oliver. ‘That is so profound.’

‘Is it?’

‘Yes. Develop humility. Listen to the shapings in your being.’

‘That means absolutely nothing to me.’

‘All your frustrations, your dissatisfaction, anger are just shapings, blind winds. Listen to them - don’t get lost in them.’

‘I’m not angry.’

‘You’re always angry.’

Oliver looked around the room, stood up and walked a few steps.

‘Only when I’m with you, Mum.’

‘This is your shaping. Just listen to it.’

Oliver’s hands fell from his head. ‘Fuck.’

‘Wongchuk said to develop humility, listen to the shapings, don’t identify with them, they aren’t you.’

‘I know it’s not fucking me, it’s you.’

He slumped back into the chair. Dad was right about this. Buddhism is useless at dealing with the emotions.

The wind is fading and our ETA (estimated time of arrival) is slipping away. Now five days at sea, Dad and I are sailing like a single organism. Maybe our double helixes have recognized the same sequences and are resonating in harmony.

The sun grows large as it falls towards the sea. The three white sails wing us onwards. I continue to probe.

‘Dad, tell me about Vivian. Why didn’t you stay with her?’

He crosses and re-crosses his legs, and his arms, and looks out to sea.

‘Our suburban life was too claustrophobic. I wanted to go sailing. I dreamed of freedom night and day.’

‘She wanted to go sailing, too.’

He replies with disarming friendliness. ‘Well, maybe there were other problems. She wasn’t independent enough.’

This feels awkward, but I persist. I want to know him.

‘I left her to go back to Valerie, because I couldn’t see a future together. I broke her heart. I didn’t understand those things then. Maybe I was a bit cavalier in the past.’

‘You and Mum, together? You didn’t even love each other.’

‘I do love her.’ His voice becomes hard. ‘Maybe I didn’t behave well. She was my wife, the mother of my children. You don’t understand yet. We aren’t separate.’

‘I’m going to have a gin and tonic. Do you want one?’

Of course he does. I fill his glass and we struggle on.

He looks up and asks a very odd question.

‘I hope you don’t mind me asking, but I’ve always wondered. Do women like giving blow jobs?’

We've never talked about sex, except for a lesson from a biology book when I was twelve. I smile inside at all the memories. The taste, the hair in my mouth.

'I think they like it okay, but not hugely. Some might.'

'Thanks. I've always wondered.'

'I'm going down to rest, wake me in a couple of hours for my watch. Thanks for talking – it's important to me.'

What a strange question. How would I know? I lie down, stretching out my arms and legs in a big smile. Whew. I can finally relax around him, without weighing his life against mine. I roll over luxuriously. I'm so scared of men. Don't know why. I drift into a warm cosy sleep.

'Alice, Alice,' Dad calls softly, 'I need your help.'

I don't want to wake up.

'What's wrong?'

'Sorry to wake you, but the sails need changing. We need to take off the pole and pull down the mizzen.'

I turn off my grizzles, get up like clockwork, swallow a mouthful of water and within a minute I'm in the cockpit, ready to go.

'We should take down all the sails. We'll need to motor to Port Vila before dark.'

I'm confused.

'Motoring will take the wind out of the sails, with the wind behind us, and it's only a breeze. We'll use the autopilot.'

I still look confused.

'The wind vane doesn't work in light wind.'

'Sure.' I help as I can. Shadows of land grow close and take on a definite shape. I am too tired to get excited. I miss Cornelius, now we're close. I call him on the radio but

can't hear through the noisy rumbling of the engine. Just make out he's half a day behind.

Along the coast it's mostly rocky headlands, rocky shore and vegetation. There are a few buildings and a few people on a beach paddling in the tide, looking for shellfish. We arrive on dusk into a harbour full of boats. I hook a large yellow buoy in the quarantine zone, push a mooring line through, then cleat both ends on deck. Dad brings out a bottle of wine. I don't feel like celebrating, I'm too tired.

Alice entered the house first, not sure what to expect, even though the respite care nurse said her Mum was fine and active most days. Post-it stickers on the doors: ‘books, shoes, clothes, shopping bag’, in neat red ink. Valerie was in the study leaning over a grey filing cabinet, piles of papers, mostly advertisements from local rags, in heaps on the floor.

‘Hi, Mum,’ Alice called.

Valerie climbed up slowly, using her hands on the metal edge to straighten the crooks. Thin white hair fell softly around her transparent face. She was very frail.

“Hi, dear. Sorry about the mess. Just sorting – so much to do.”

They were still hugging when Oliver came in.

‘Why, what a surprise.’ Valerie looked startled and then flustered as she pulled away from Alice.

‘My dear – how lovely to see you.’ She gave Oliver a birdlike hug. ‘Come in and have a cup of tea.’

‘Mum, Charlotte is coming over as well.’

‘Charlotte?’

“Yes, and she’s bringing Connor, your great-grandson.”

‘Oh dear. Do we have enough room, enough tea, enough chairs?’

Alice started preparing cakes and pastries.

‘Alice, don’t put your bag there.’ Valerie’s sharp voice sliced through the air.

She turned towards her mother, who was scowling disapproval, looking straight at her, grey pinching the hollow face muscles and pulling them taut. The pastry slid off the bench and broke up on the floor. Valerie’s arms flung up, as she shuffled over to rescue the food, her floor, her equilibrium.

Alice felt ten years old and ready to burst into tears and run.

Charlotte waltzed in with Connor, eight years old, in an ever-so-white and blue sailor's suit, pressed front creases in the trousers, small hat to match, blond hair cut in a neat bob. Charlotte had become a doctor like her auntie Marion – top of the heap, dressed to kill. Grey satin tunic, pulled in loosely at the waist with a gold belt, flowing over her too thin body, high heels, pearl necklace, hair straightened with a slight flair at the edges and sliding over her shoulders. Connor grasped a toy truck in one hand – birthday party treasure – Nintendo in the other. After another round of hugs, Connor perched neatly on a chair, swinging his legs. Charlotte told him to sit still. He did and she came over to straighten his hair and cap. Connor looked around. The white of his shirt was still white, even after the party. He started kicking off his boat shoes but caught his mother looking and stopped.

‘Connor’s doing so well at school, Mum. He’s in an accelerate class. Those preschool reading classes did give him a head start. He’s reading young adult fiction. We’re thinking he’ll go into law with his father.’

Alice grimaced. Another lost boy for Peter Pan. She asked Connor about the party and whether he’d read the story of Peter Pan.

Connor turned on the Nintendo and his thumbs started doing gibberish talk to each other.

‘Special educational game,’ Charlotte reassured Alice.

Valerie joined in the conversation. ‘Yesterday when I was taking the rubbish out, I found it so hard to pack it all down, to get the lid on firmly.’ Her voice was steady, like a bulldozer. ‘And then for some reason it was hard to turn the bin around, but I dragged it behind me, all the way down the drive and then I had to turn the whole thing around again to park it on the lawn for the big truck. Didn’t have automated trucks in my day. There were young lads hanging on the back of trucks. They’d pick up the bags and swing them over with the truck still moving. Monday, my washing day, I’d hang out the washing ...’

Alice got up, to break her off and put on the kettle and hand around the cake. Connor looked at his mother. Yes, he could have a piece of cake.

Connor's mouth only just fitted around the oversize block of Madeira and wet crumbs sprayed out all over his sailor's suit and the floor. Charlotte looked upset and brushed the pieces on his clothes off onto the floor. Valerie's eyes turned sharp, as she saw all the crumbs being trampled through her house. Alice scrunched the bag into the bin and wiped the crumbs from the floor and bench. Oliver cruised out into the garden, away from the nonsense. He returned with a big fat orange.

'Hey, Connor, want to climb a tree, get the oranges too high up for Nana to reach.'

Connor looked up from his Nintendo. 'Yeh.' He started to get out of his chair.

'No, you can't, you'll mess up your suit,' Charlotte interjected.

'The party's over, doesn't matter now, does it?'

'Yes, it does.' Charlotte stared straight at Oliver, her older brother. She remembered the endless teasing. Well, he wouldn't get away with it now.

Oliver threw the orange at Connor.

Valerie got up nervously, holding onto the back of the chair. She pulled open a cutlery drawer and started taking out the knives and forks. Then she walked slowly into the bathroom for her old tooth brush to brush out the corners of the drawer, to get at the dust and bits of food that might be trapped.

'I'm so busy, don't have time, too much work to be done.' She put the forks neatly back, one on top of the other. 'I've put away the silver, because it takes so long to polish. You children can polish it when I'm gone. Connor, would you like a knife for your orange?' 'Thanks.'

Valerie crept over to the bench and slid the bowl along for the peel. She wiped again after Alice and rinsed the cloth under the tap – only a little water as she was the one who paid for it.

'Put the orange peel in here, please.'

The sun was streaking into the room.

'No good for the chairs, fades the fabric,' she uttered and moved over to the curtains.

‘She’s right,’ Charlotte said. ‘Sun fades fabric and ruins wood. Not good for your skin either. The UV comes right through the glass.’

Alice got up and put her arm around her mother’s shoulders.

‘Quite a crowd, must feel a bit like a home invasion. They’ll be gone soon.’

Charlotte gathered up her child.

‘We must be off. I’ve an appointment in half an hour. I’ll call in again soon. ’Bye, Mum. ’Bye, Grandma.’

Alice turned back to her mother. ‘How have you been?’

Valerie looked into Alice’s eyes, like a child, for approval. ‘I’ve been fine, thank you. Do you still love me?’

‘Of course.’ Alice stroked her mother’s wispy hair, as the old bones relaxed.

Dad's voice wakes me. 'They're here.'

I fumble for my watch, eyes reluctant to open. It's eight o'clock. I grab my clothes, claw my fingers through my hair and climb up into the cockpit. *Fantasie*, that sleek red racing sloop with a sexy tumble hull, is anchoring next to us. Cornelius is standing proudly at the wheel, like a rock come through a storm. The sails are neatly tucked inside their blue jackets and Kareen, his crew, is tying on the fenders. The sky is a baby blue, white clouds soft and low. We pull the boats together. I'm wobbly and shivering all through as I step across the gap, steadying myself on Dad's arm. The boats shift up and down against each other. I hang onto the lifelines, eyes pointing where my feet are going, so I don't trip over my excitement. The beneficent ocean has brought us back together, after six testing days. Blue cap, curved Ray Bans, white sailing shirt hanging loose over baggy grey shorts, he looks great. I beam our triumph, our success – returned to each other. A moment's pause, almost disbelief, then I fall into his arms against his solid chest and wrap my arms around his bear-like torso. I nuzzle under his chin and wriggle my lips to his face for a kiss. I guess that Dad and Kareen have turned politely away to inspect the harbour full of boats straining at their chains.

We pull apart to gaze at each other and talk. I remember the open sandals, large knobbly-toed feet, large long-fingered hands, goatee neatly trimmed goatee, soft lips. He stands confidently while he drinks me up. I can see by the stillness of his eyes this is what he's doing – eyes moving around my body, but still at the same time. I feel him latching onto my every word, my lips, my gestures, drinking it all in, like it may be taken away from him, like this moment will be gone. I become self-conscious and move further apart.

'I want us to tie the boats together while we're here, so Dad isn't on his own, like he was at Vuda Point.' I still feel guilty about jumping ship in Fiji.

'Kareen, why don't you go across and have some coffee with Jack? I'd like some time with Alice.'

We slip down inside our love nest: dark mahogany lining, floor and table; finely-striped green upholstery; photos of fish and coral immobilised behind heavy frames on the walls; galley sprouting plastic containers. We don't waste time talking, we're too desiring. We head directly for the front bunk, leaving a trail of clothes.

By the time the quarantine boat motors out, we're back to normal on Dad's boat, sharing sailing stories and growing concern about Cornelius's leg. I sit a little way apart to include Dad and I'm rather formal, to match Cornelius – not awkward, but our bodies were more comfortable half an hour ago than they are now. Cornelius fixes his attention on Dad, so I chat with Kareen. I find half a cucumber and some bread and drop it in the black quarantine bag so we can take down our yellow flags. The harbour looks huge and meandering, sweeping past the town into the industrial area. We'll stay near the entrance on the shallow shelf of coral, tight with boats. It falls off into a channel that's a hundred feet down, too deep to anchor.

'As long as the boats all swing together, we should be fine,' Dad reassures us.

He drops a large heavy anchor and Cornelius ties up abreast, with two breast ropes, bow to bow and stern to stern, two spring ropes, bow to stern and stern to bow, and the hulls staggered so the masts and shrouds don't get tangled.

'Your anchor's pretty lightweight at 35 pounds,' Dad seriously jokes, when we finally sit down.

'Don't laugh, it's never dragged,' Cornelius boasts and puffs up. 'Weight in the bow slows a boat down. Most of my anchor line is rope for the same reason. You must be carrying quite a weight up for'ard.'

I remember my early tramping days. Cut off the end of a toothbrush to keep the weight down.

Port Vila, where we are anchored, is the capital of Vanuatu on the island of Efate.

Vanuatu is a toss of eighty-three knuckle bones, most of them mountainous volcanoes.

Some are still active. Efate isn't. Vanuatu has the reputation of being one of the happiest

places to live. We clamber into Cornelius's dinghy. Dad and I sit near the bow, to catch the spray, and Cornelius sits near the stern by the motor. Kareen went ashore earlier.

Dad jokes with Cornelius. 'Napoleon used to send a message to Josephine by horse courier when he was about to visit. Don't bathe. I'll be there in a few days.'

'I'll see you two later, in town.' Cornelius walks off in a casual, almost offhand way. Maybe it's my imagination. I let it go. Dad and I have a busy morning clearing customs and immigration.

Alice looked up from the grey washing basket and grey wooden pegs. Oliver's clothes, mixed up with hers, flapped along a saggy line. Oliver must have been about twelve when they concreted the posts in. Spaded cement in a rusty wheelbarrow, through beach stones and sand. A medlar, russet fruit ripening in the autumn sun, was leaning into one post.

Cornelius stayed at Orere the year the persimmons turned a fiery orange and the tree was so heavily laden it broke. Never fruited like that again. When they arrived in Vila he was unusually circumspect.

The journals were on the table. Vila underlined three times.

They tied up next to me at Vuda Point. Must be two months ago now. Alice, Emilee and Jack – three generations. Envy got me. My family was all trouble - most families are, under the surface.

The journal was Alice's idea.

They giggled like sisters on the way to the shower. Left next morning with huge packs. Alice almost fell when a strap caught in the lifeline. The weight unbalanced her. She is unbalanced. Ten days backpacking around Fiji. Jack seemed relieved. He was good company. Shared a taxi into Lautoka when he needed a part for his generator. He said Alice was single and she loved sailing.

They're turning into the immigration building way down the street. I can tell it's her by the hair, the way she swings around to Jack. She's not thinking about me. I remember the year when I became invisible to women.

Getting old is terrible. Maybe I'll follow her to New Zealand.

I played it cool.

I need to go and get my own papers stamped and signed.

She is too much like my mother, smart and self-centred. Alice said she'd never been in a good relationship – she said she didn't know what kind of man she was looking for.

What kind of person is that? Do I love her? Of course not.

I can't stop seeing her, tied up in her sarong, singlet pulling against her breasts, intense eyes, hair a mess, irresistibly sexy. That's all I want, sex.

Alice hoped Oliver hadn't read this part. She pushed away threads of hair, put her feet up and closed her eyes into sunlight dancing across her face.

The market is open – corrugated roof, concrete floor, long wooden tables piled with beans and tomatoes, clumps of lettuce, paw paw, long purple-striped egg plants, bottles of oil, nuts, linseed necklaces and woven mats. I walk each aisle soaking up the earthy atmosphere, the sun woven into straggly bundles of tied leaves, yellow tomatoes, stubby bananas, knuckle bone kumera gathered from the earth, grown in dark soil by dark hands. The eating stalls are on the far side: kerosene burners and large pots of stew. Women tending the stalls move slowly, in little pieces, in thick air. Night-time, they lie down on thin grass mats to sleep on the cold concrete. Steps lead down to the harbour where a long boat is pulling in with locals and baskets of food. I like it here, much more than the town which is touristy.

I sit Dad down on a wooden stool.

‘Two coffees, please.’ A lad drops a box of fatty chewy bread on the counter. ‘And two pieces of bread.’ I’m as happy as can be, as an urchin. Dad isn’t.

‘Yes, this is nice, but somehow Port Vila has never appealed to me. I’d be happy to miss it altogether.’

‘You don’t like the native women?’ I joke seriously.

A slim neatly-dressed French woman comes in for her salad items and then a smartly-dressed maid and a chef from a restaurant with his list, so I imagine. The boaties are easy to spot: crumpled clothes, rough hair, usually shorts and canvas shoes, not in a hurry. The women behind the stalls don’t smile much. Their cotton print elasticised Mother Hubbard dresses are frumpy and sexless, the way the missionaries intended, their flat Melanesian faces a sullen dark. They must be pleased for our custom, surely.

I see Cornelius slipping past the tables like a dark cloud.

‘Dad, there’s Cornelius, I’ll be back.’

I rush over in a kind of panic. ‘Cornelius, come over, we’re having coffee.’ I pull up another stool. He sits down because I ask him to.

‘Some more coffee please, and another piece of bread.’

‘Hi Cornelius.’ Dad greets him warmly and gets the picture immediately. ‘I’ll leave you two. We’ll catch up in a couple of hours by the dinghy dock.’

He shuffles off, belt gathering his shorts in at the waist, tucking in his polo shirt. His large knobbly knees thin into shapely legs which then fan out into large canvas boat shoes. He walks with his characteristic stiff-backed stoop and stops to buy some bananas, fingering the change in his hand.

Cornelius immediately throws his voice against me. ‘Why are you so distant? Ever since we arrived you’ve been different.’ He stops for his coffee.

I reel at the dramatic re-entry. Is that all it is? His voice thumps against my chest.

‘Am I?’ I squeak back. Such a contrast between him and Dad. My gentle father – hard to get anything out of him. I decide to agree.

‘I know,’ I start out, trying to get to that place behind his words so I can understand what he wants. ‘I’m a bit unsettled, I’m not sure why.’

Why would he think that? I shift close against his arm.

‘We’re in a new country, everything’s different; maybe that’s all it is.’

‘I don’t think so,’ he retorts rather nastily. Doesn’t say any more. Holds onto his threat. Can he really see a change? We’ve hardly seen each other. So what? I don’t want an argument. Does he?

‘I know what it is. When we were sailing over, I got close to Dad. We became mates. I have to let him go to make room for you again.’

We’re quiet for a bit.

‘I missed you terribly.’ I kiss his cheek. He still doesn’t say anything. ‘I don’t want to be so wrapped up in each other. We have a new country to explore.’

‘I don’t understand. Either we’re together or we’re not.’ His eyes are intense, calculating, dark.

I weigh my options. ‘We’re together.’

We leave, hand in hand, roped close, to window shop and walk the hilly streets behind.

‘I don’t like Vila much, neither does your Dad. We only came because of you.’

In his shadow, I’m both protected and threatened.

A luxury liner arrives. Asian girls pour down the gangplank onto the main street for food, souvenirs and happy snaps. They look at their watches, pile back on the boat and leave the same day. They’ve done Port Vila. We’re not much better. Days pass bouncing around the closed container of our shrinking conversation and little excursions into town.

Kareen has wasted no time leaping into the bed of a hot-blooded young local and she’s already approached the local newspaper office about writing articles. She hangs out in town, cappuccino-ing with her new friends. We did join her for one ‘Alliance Francais’ movie evening and watched a highly-forgettable American movie dubbed in French. Now she’s leaving for Tanna Island. The locals pile onboard the ferry until the decks are overflowing. If they all climbed upstairs, my guess is the boat would capsize in a medium swell, a changing centre of gravity disaster. I linger, in the hope of miraculously finding myself beside her, with my bundle of clothes and a sleeping mat. We wave a last goodbye and turn back to the boats and shops, fresh salad greens from the market and baguettes and cheese from the store. We still have a half bottle of wine on board.

Back on board *Fantasie*, Cornelius and I turn to each other, almost desperately. I’d rather be on that boat to Tanna. The burning inside me is unbearable, overtaking every other feeling, all I have left. I would leap free if I could. We tear at each other and kiss ever so delicately, nibbling, licking the salt, drinking in the softness. We climb downstairs and sink into a delicious sweetness. The bliss takes over; waves and waves of delight roll through to capsize me and I sink further and further away from any other possibility. We hurry and we linger as if the moment is stolen and we have forever. Three hours are gone and we still haven’t eaten. The boat starts rolling, a steep swell is building. A sharp knock at the companionway alerts us.

‘Cornelius, Alice, we’re going to have to separate the boats. The masts are about to get caught up together.’

The afternoon light is harsh and jarring on deck. I unclasp Dad’s lines from Cornelius’s boat and Dad pulls them back across. He unclasp Cornelius’s ropes and I pull them into our boat. Dad stays anchored where he is. This narrow shelf of coral is the only suitable place. We motor around, dropping the anchor to see how we swing. After three or four times we find somewhere suitable. If the boats all swing together we’ll be okay. I’m tired of us all swinging together.

The days slip past, the world is drifting away, glassy, wobbly and indistinct. In this ocean of love everything is beautiful and pure. I’m trapped in a warm rippling love, soft, filled with light. I didn’t want this to happen. I can hardly remember anything, I hardly exist.

Cornelius and I walk the streets behind the town in the cool afternoons, arm in arm – white picket fences and wire ones woven into graceful curves, flowering vines creeping through, weatherboard, porches and paths, gardens and, everywhere, bougainvillea. Locals turn to us with wide smiles, ‘Gudaftanun, olsemwanem?’ I smile and reply ‘Gudaftanun.’ Away from the centre of town everyone is very friendly. Bislama, the official language, is a mix of English, French and Melanesian. The name comes from ‘beche-de-mer’, which is an ugly sea cucumber with supposedly aphrodisiac properties. When we were in the Yasawas, I came across racks of these dark rubbery penises, drying in the sun.

‘We can make good money, selling them to the Asians,’ a dark Fijian youth informed me, ‘if we can be bothered diving for them.’

Well, Cornelius and I certainly don’t need them. We scarcely make time to talk any more. My body starts burning whenever I think of him or look at him; the heat never gets to the thinking part of my brain. I always just can’t wait to be alone with him.

Alice fetched the straw broom from behind the laundry door. The thick spider webs wound up like candy floss, long-legged spiders leaping and swinging into the shiplap wall panels. She swept the nurseries, spraying the dead babies onto the floor. Didn't like killing them, but what else? Hadn't had a man in years – lost the courage for it. Her father said that women in their sixties were very sexy. Maybe she'd overdone it, like food – didn't like the taste anymore. Good thing, too. The afternoon was turning cold with a southerly rushing up the driveway. Oliver had gone away to Emilee's. She had wanted so much from life. Now it was almost over, she could see that such grasping was foolish. It hadn't made her happy. She poked the broom under the sideboard and behind the shelves. The sea was filling with cloud shadows, creating the appearance of shallow rocks under the surface. Now the Buddhist teachings made sense. There is clinging but there is no one clinging. She knew that meaning was a human need, not a reality.

Her father's journal lay on the table. His writing was very light. She missed the person inside the messy words, the sprawling script.

Wish Alice would show more interest in the teachings of Ramtha. Such a wonderful positive philosophy. Sure she could benefit from it. The teachings have really changed my life in so many ways. Love his view of the free, lawless, creative, evolving universe. We are masters of our own destiny and the world we experience is of our own creation. But really there is so much more to it. I've highlighted the important passages in case one day Alice might show more interest.

Tears welled up. She could hear her father, slow and precise, willing her to listen, to see. He really believed this stuff. He was a spiritual dilettante. Maybe she was wrong. Why had she been so cruel? She sniffed and kept reading.

I'm bored and restless. Should have stayed in Fiji. Now only time to think and worry. Tired of sitting anchored out in the bay in an exposed, dodgy situation or tied to a concrete sea wall. I'm getting too old for it and the yacht is becoming a constant problem. The generator has packed up and the radio flickers in and out of band width requiring constant tuning. God knows what will go wrong next. The bloody new outboard has become temperamental in starting and I don't know why. It's packing up altogether. Doesn't bear thinking about. Must be a little more positive about things. Perhaps a glass of Scotch and the Seekers instead of Mozart will cheer me up. Mary loved the Seekers.

She could see him lying back on his bunk, hand folded under his head, book on the table, the ashtray tipping, spilling the stubby maggots.



The sea washes around the boats, swinging us all together, licking the curvaceous hulls, watering the green ribbons of water-line algae. Wavelets, like broken rock, shimmer in the fading light – grey-green, a shade of teal breaking up into brown, ochre threaded with silver. They slip into folds and wrinkles and bubbles of pearly froth when a boat passes and sends a smooth train of wake, like the train of a bride, spreading out wide, ruffled at the edges. We motor ashore.

Dad is waiting for us at the market, shuffling back and forth, eyes lifting up, then down again to the tables. I suggested that we eat our evening meals here and the men reluctantly agreed because I'm the one who'd be cooking. We go to the same place – a wooden bench above three wooden stools. Mary lifts the pots onto the bench to spoon out chicken bone in broth, stewed veggies and lots of rice. The men don't appreciate the atmosphere, the life of these women working in poverty. Mary spoons neat piles of food around the plates. We've become a steady income for a week or two. I don't want to pry, but she seems happy to talk.

‘Yes, I have four children. I leave them in my village and come here to work.’ Her face is always sad and stubborn, the smallest light in her black eyes. ‘I have to pay someone there to look after them.’

‘Where is your husband?’ I ask.

‘I left him. He used to beat me. I am better off without him.’ She looks down, face turning sour and dark. ‘He’s gone with another woman.’ She holds her spoon over the rice to offer more. ‘My life is hard. I’m here all week cooking.’ She dishes some more for Dad. Her voice stays flat.

We assume she is grateful for our custom.

‘I sleep here at the market and go home in the weekends.’

We linger in the growing dark as the women pull out their sleeping mats – soldiers falling in battle, one by one. Time to go. Cornelius leaves a small tip.

The wind does change and the boats start swinging in a haphazard way. Soon we’re staring straight into the cockpit of a French couple, gone most days. I think they work in town. She waves a little wave, accompanied by a tiny smile, when she zooms past in her dinghy. Today she’s sunbathing in her minute bikini.

Cornelius has started stomping, a haphazard part of him poking through and leaping free.

‘Look at her,’ he points as he pokes at the salad I’ve made. ‘She’s hard and spiteful – I don’t like her at all.’

It comes out of the blue, but not out of character. His mother is everywhere he looks.

‘What is it about you and these women?’ I reply with a forced light-heartedness. I understand the clock is ticking. A piece of lettuce sticks in my throat so I reach for the water, then load a bit more salad onto my plate.

‘So, what if she was a bit abrupt, she might be lovely if you got to know her?’

‘I don’t think so,’ he immediately replies, then pauses, using his intelligence to reconsider. ‘Maybe you’re right. They seem pretty hard to me. They don’t like me.’

Cornelius and Dad go into town every day, climbing down into their dinghies, puttering away, busy doing nothing much. I stay behind to let the hours swim slowly around me; can’t seem to get enough of this slow swimming in nothing, life happening all around me – a boat slipping through the water, chugging, a gentle hum, someone appearing on deck, eyeing a suitable anchorage, water slip-slopping against the hull, a flag fluttering. I become the fluttering, colours wobbling in the heat, sun warm on my legs, cosy, soft inner currents slip-slopping like the water, radiance in the air, boats, bursting into life, full, where to do anything would be to break the fullness, so I don’t.

Cornelius checks his emails on shore, most days. I’m reluctant. I don’t want my past, any of it. I don’t want a future. I can’t imagine one. My past is a minefield. I want to stay here where no one can find me, not even me. I do have to check my emails.

‘Cornelius, I’m coming with you after dinner. Dad, are you coming too? We must check our emails.’

‘You make it sound like a visit to the dentist. Don’t you want to hear from your children?’ He doesn’t understand.

We walk in through the glass door. I’m between Dad and Cornelius, for courage. This is much worse than the dentist. The attendant logs me on. Time is ticking. Virtual reality, here we go. I start sweating. My heart pounds – to get me away quickly should I need to run. I imagine the worst. That was my life, the worst, with a whole universe of worst possibilities waiting for me now. What shall I open? I go for the letter from Charlotte. She writes sweetly and affectionately, telling me about her friends and school and a visit with Grandma. I am her mother. She’s coming over to visit in a month. A flood of motherly warmth and affection flows into the dancing keys as I tell her all my news and that I love her and miss her. I open a letter from Emilee. She and Bob have gone south. She’ll finish her degree at Dunedin in the second semester. I write back how pleased I am and send lots of hugs and kisses.

‘Cornelius, come and read this, it’s so funny.’

Oliver has written a very funny reply to a letter from Cornelius.

A wave of misery suddenly swamps my pleasure. What good are letters? I sailed away from my children. They write to keep me alive, to bring me back. I don’t want to go back.

‘There, Alice, that wasn’t so bad, was it? Isn’t it nice to know your children love you?’

Dad doesn’t understand. ‘Marion has sent the flight details. Not long now,’ he adds.

I smile at my children, a warm fuzzy smile. ‘I do love hearing from them and knowing they’re fine. I miss Charlotte.’

He doesn’t understand the torn cloth of our family, torn and mended, over and over, into a patchwork of heavy warmth. We held on, and as the years went by the lonely cramp of ‘missing someone most of the time,’ abated.

Cornelius wants to move. ‘We’re swinging too close to that French couple.’ He swallows down his toast, licks the jam off his fingers and starts the engine. We motor slowly around the gaps, water sloshing and sliding past in a dreamy way. ‘Drop the anchor,’ he calls. The boat swings around, on a short chain. I pick the anchor up again.

Some good memories. Riding horses into the hills with Emilee, collecting honey from our bees with Oliver, baby geese hatching under the toi-toi. One day the mother flew way down on the beach. We found her on the sand and brought her home.

‘Drop the anchor,’ Cornelius calls again. ‘It’s no good, pull it up again.’ He motors around some more.

This is a perfect world, shimmering and alive. Outside this perfect world, though, pushed away for now, is my past, my broken heart, my struggle to survive in a world I didn’t understand.

‘Okay, drop the anchor.’ We swing for a bit. ‘You can put the snub on now.’

I hang over the bow to hook the snub into the chain. Then, as I return to the windlass to let out more chain, I faint and slip to the deck, into a blank nothing, no world at all. When I revive, I'm staring blankly into wobbly, glassy water, light seeping through and then gone.

Cornelius drops me ashore to recover, set my feet on solid ground – over stony steps onto a concrete path that leads to a resort: spacious foyer and luxurious dining room overlooking the sea. Photos of happily-married couples and certificates and awards for excellence in hospitality line the walls. White table cloths, wine glasses, sofas, carpet present me the life I didn't choose, would never choose. The path winds around to a pagoda, above a stony beach. I pick up a fresh hibiscus flower from the ground and twirl it in my fingers, gold dust on my fingers. My toes burrow into the soil and I soften into a warm light seeping up, taking me out of myself, taking me back into the magical garden of love. The path leads around to the back of the island, to where workers dump the rubbish – an old fridge, rusting plastic furniture, compost scraps, a tractor, tree prunings. I continue right around and finish back at the jetty. As my toes curl tight around the worn planks, I let the pink wedding flower fall. Cornelius is bouncing over the waves in his dinghy.

That night we snuggle close and I pull Cornelius onto me and wrap myself tightly in his body, as his lips travel over my flesh, until I'm quivering all over, an angel afloat in space. We sleep deeply, but not for long. A solid thud, jarring through the mattress, wakes us.

'What was that?'

I didn't know Cornelius could move so quickly. I follow sleepily behind.

'Where are we?' I ask, at the unfamiliar shadows climbing out of the dark.

'It's okay. We've floated up the harbour. A westerly came up. I was worried about it.'

He seems pretty relaxed.

'How come?'

‘The anchor dragged, probably only a few metres, into the deep channel. We came in with the tide.’

I can just make out an open boat with a roof, a ferry. We seem to be knocking gently against its wooden hull.

Cornelius inspects for damage.

‘We’re fine. Let’s get some clothes on. We’ll tie up here until morning.’

When the owners arrive at dawn, they only laugh. ‘You’re not the first boat to float down onto us.’

Grey clouds were rumbling across from the south. The cold wind rushed at the open back door, shaking the glass back and forth, and when she closed the door it kept rattling inside the loose frame. She could pick the macadamia nuts before the rain arrived, if she hurried.

Hard green nuts hung in bunches – sometimes eight to a bunch, sometimes only one or two. In thick gloves she pulled the nuts free, as high up as she could reach, letting them fall on prickly brown leaves underneath. The next stage involved climbing. The hard leaves scratched at her arms and legs as she stepped into a low crook and clambered further up out along a branch, stretching far with her arms. This was the best part, climbing inside the tree. She kicked some dead twigs off, to make it easier. She stayed for a while resting and then tempted a shaky branch for a few nuts still out of reach. Clambering down was awkward and her foot twisted in a tight groove – not badly, but she landed heavily on the carpet of green nuts. She used to gather them up every year with her children, when they were young.

Folding out and locking the ladder was difficult, because of the corrosion. She pushed the unwieldy contraption into the tree. As she climbed, it wobbled on its bent leg, so she held tight to the branches in case. She wished Oliver was around to hold the legs firm. It took some time to get around the whole tree with the ladder and, when she'd finished, a few bunches still remained. The rats could have them. The rain arrived just as she finished filling the buckets. It came in a rush, sliding down the wind, a pelting grey onslaught, and she rushed to the house for shelter.

Alice put on the kettle and looked out through the ranchsliders at a lonely boat out in the gulf. It was crossing over to the Coromandel, still with some sail up, leaning way over as it rushed through the sea.



The dawn empties into daylight. Our new anchorage is a secluded bay on the island I walked over. It's inside the harbour, with the gentle lapping on shore and occasional birdsong, for company. The days pass easily: Cornelius continues to motor into town each day, I cook and clean, Dad comes over for coffee and we dine at the market. I'm becoming dissatisfied with such a superficial taste. I want to go over the hill and see what lies beyond, see where the people live, how they live. I want to cover myself in the land. The men don't. In the afternoon I present my plan.

'I'm going cycling around the island.'

I pass his special cup, with plenty of sugar, for what's coming.

His eyes sharpen and darken. 'You can't do that. You can't leave me alone.'

'I'll only be gone three days. I've worked it out. You'll be fine.'

'That's such a selfish thing to do. I don't want you to go.' He impales me with psychology. 'I was abandoned by my mother. I react very badly to being left.'

I pause for him to settle down, drink his tea. 'I need some time alone, to meditate, explore, be on the land. You aren't interested. I'm happy to go on my own.'

'I've seen the Pacific islands. They're all the same. I don't understand how you can be so selfish.'

He stops to reflect, not be so reactive. 'I see how the people live every day. You should come ashore more often. I don't understand why you would do this to us.'

He storms off into the dinghy and buzzes into town. It is hard to be serious when we're bobbing around in blow-up dinghies, bouncing through the water, climbing up and down little ladders and clambering over flimsy lifelines. I sit in the cockpit. Small boats carry passengers ashore with a plan of what they want life to look like. I see the eyes glancing around to make sure it is that way. They join dots with pencils, into the picture of who they are and what they want. I don't think they care where the book of dots came from – they just keep connecting the dots. If someone tried to tug the book away, they'd throw a tantrum. I have the image of an adventurer in *my* picture book. When I pick up my book and turn the pages, the dots are there, ready for me to join them up. That's who I am.

Alice picked up Cornelius's journal. She understood how selfish she had been. Joseph Campbell said, 'Follow your bliss.' She trusted him on that. She flicked to where the ink was very thick and dark.

She knows I can't cope with rejection. She knows my Dad left and that Mum always worked, latch-key kid, fridge for a Mum. Where does that leave me? I've told her all this. Went to a shrink for seven years. Can't cope with rejection. She could do with a good psychiatrist.

I know what it is. I can't fuck her properly. She says she doesn't mind, but she does. When a hard cock on a big boat arrives, she'll be gone. It's not going to work. I have my pension. The years in Hollywood gave me that. But I can still get mad as hell.

She did say she needs some time on her own. Yes, I remember that. I'm like that too. Time to cool down.

Alice put the journal down. She remembered her last conversation with Oliver. He'd said, 'If the suffocation and anger aren't me, then what is?'

She thought it strange that people should hold on so tightly to just those feelings that cause the most pain.



Cornelius returns and clambers back on board, while I cleat the painter. We circle around each other politely. When it comes up, I suggest that he is being selfish wanting me to stay. He doesn't follow the logic.

I dish out dinner hurriedly, clumsily, and we sit across from each other, forking in fried chicken, rice and salad, talking. We hadn't realised until now that we want different things from life.

Cornelius goes to bed. I motor over to *Dream-maker*, to collect my camping equipment: bike, Therm-a-Rest, tent, candle-lantern, cooker. I become light and high-spirited, flying free, soaring into the unknown. I'll be meeting with *her*. *Fantasie* is dark and quiet. In torchlight, I wash some undies to dry by morning, then fill plastic containers and bags with salt, sugar, butter and find Snap-lock bags for the rice and crackers. I pack clothes and Wongchuk's notes. Midnight, I'm finished. Cornelius turns away, so I lie alone in the saloon. Thoughts rush out in a furious tumble now I'm still, telling me to stay, look after him, be content with what I have. Why isn't he more adventurous? I need him to hold me, but I'm too proud to ask – too proud because I need him too much. I can't afford to need him so much. I need to be free of him. I don't understand why I'm caught the way I am.

In the morning we brush past each other. He makes the coffee, silent.

I'm ashamed – I can't do it. 'Come here.' I wrap him in my arms. 'I'll stay another day. I can't leave now.'

He looks up. 'I can't stand not being able to fuck you properly.'

I look straight into his eyes. 'It doesn't matter, you're a wonderful lover.' He can tell I mean it and I do.

'It matters to me, because it makes me insecure. We've talked about it before. This is not going to work.'

'Don't be silly. Don't talk like this.'

I cover his mouth with my lips to take him away from his words, to banish his thoughts. We are too much in love and it feels like the first time ever I have felt the way I do. We shed our clothes, our hesitation, our worldly stances, and fall into the rhythm of life as one becoming two merging as one again.

Next morning I ask him to help me load everything into the dinghy: my bike, bulging panniers, tent.

On shore I ask again, tugging his arm: 'I've forgotten how to put my bike together.'

'I'm still unhappy about you going. You're being stupid and putting yourself in danger.'

He clicks the back wheel into place and lifts the chain onto the derailleur. 'You're being very selfish.' He oils the chain while I murmur appreciatively.

'I need to go. You have Dad for company. I'll be back in three days.'

I stretch my leg over the bar, wobbling a bit, lifting higher than I need, then push down on the pedal and watch the wheels turn as they should. I brought my bicycle all the way from New Zealand to do this. I sewed it up in a heavy plastic case to protect it from the salt spray and tied it on deck.

Cornelius waves me off. 'I bet you seduce one of the natives. I know what you're after.'

'I'm not interested in meeting anyone. Don't be stupid, I want to be on my own,' I retaliate and poke out my tongue.

PART TWO

Chapter one

I cruise smoothly out of town towards the coast. Shiny tar seal turns to lumpy, rutted clay, now the houses are gone. Unconstrained, free to roam the landscape of my mind and the long grass and earthy scrub, I experience a bursting, leaping delight. I push the pedals down, over and over, and my chest breaks into a big sigh. The main road out of Vila heads towards the coast, according to the map poking from my shorts' pocket. This road seems to be turning inland so I turn right at the crossroads. As I cycle, I tune my mind to the teachings of Wongchuk, to keep Cornelius out. I remember the retreat as if it were yesterday:

Light was shining through the stained glass – blood red, sapphire blue – and I was staring at Wongchuk, trying to understand.

'The four stages of the womb carry on and on throughout life, in a blindly repetitive way: life's waltz.'

Wongchuk raised his arm, the conductor, first finger sweeping down "one," sweeping up "two", dancing his hand until we laughed.

'Today we are looking at the first stage: the boundless womb, the experience of no boundaries, of cosmic unity or boundless wellbeing. The light is soft – a glowing light, maybe a peachy-rose glow. But this feeling has not yet become insight, it's jhana – bliss, without prajna – wisdom. In this experience the being is sure that all things are one, it experiences the bliss of total union, oceanic. Throughout life, after birth, a being keeps searching, looking for a way to return to the womb, to recover this at-one-ness. Paradise has been lost. The entire motivation for enlightenment is to regain paradise. From the womb you can step forth into the universe, into the transcendental, you can begin the explorations you were born for; you can grow beyond the need to return to the womb.'

Wongchuk made it seem so very exciting.

'You need to see deep into the womb and see the pattern structure and disassemble it. You need to contact the good womb and you need good mothering. If you don't have good mothering you are gravitating towards doom. Again, I want to emphasize that the embryo has a great strength that is not from the mother, it is directly from life. Life is wondrous.'

Cornelius is certainly gravitating towards doom. He hates his mother. I arrive at the coast and look at my map for a possible camping site. It says, 'Please ask permission from the locals if camping.' There aren't any locals. I push and drag my bike down a narrow sandy track through the scrubby bush, down to the beach. Then I set out on foot. I need shelter from the sun and enough flat ground to pitch a tent, above the sand. His mother is the enemy. Life is the enemy.

All night the menacing sea crashes into my dreams. I'm lost and don't know how to proceed. Morning arrives as a harsh, blinding heat. I stagger up for my water bottle, totally disorientated. Nothing is moving but the sea. I recognise the sea-blasted rocks, the clinging seaweed and scrappy bush, but the shape is unfamiliar and the coral beach is a strange golden white and the grasses living on the edge of the sand curl in a way I have never seen. The lemon-grey light bouncing off the vegetation unnerves me. I don't have permission to be here.

I keep steady with the familiar routine – fold up the tent, break down the cooker, roll up the bedding and pack it all away onto my bike. I snuffle like a small animal, poking and tidying, then creep into the bush out of the sun, to curl up on my sarong and contemplate. The air is cool and sweet, from flowers I expect, not that I can see any. Leafy sand slips away underneath for my bottom and legs. Flies settle around my nose. I wriggle to get more comfortable, then peer out through the scrub to the misty sea horizon. My mind becomes very quiet, my breathing slowing as I sink down into the land under me.

I suddenly notice that the space I am looking through is starting to liquefy, it is becoming translucent. This surprises me, but I stay very still. It seems almost normal. The air around me is starting to move, to pulsate. Close by are plants with spoon-shaped

leaves. Their surfaces become luminous, glowing, until light is radiating out in an undulating, rhythmical flow. I am mesmerized by it. The air is shimmering with this flowing from all the leaves and it occurs to me that this is *Life* – the air is oozing with *life* which I experience as a very fine tingling on my skin, all over my body as if I don't have any clothes on, and then my skin disappears and the inside of my body is full of a pulsating sweetness.

I experience myself as part of the shimmering, breathing undergrowth and the light everywhere I look is growing as if from a million pin pricks merging into a sea of light. The softness, the fine sweetness in the flowing air, is blissful, like melted chocolate, and loving beyond all measure.

After a few minutes absorbed in this fineness, I notice that I am thinking about ordinary things and as I do so the space starts to lose its glow, the rhythmical flow in the air is dissolving and the space is becoming vacant again. I separate back out into something solid, moving arms and legs getting up off the sarong. The ground now feels solid, substantial, even though when I look closely it is still luminous – it is solid and light-filled, both, depending on how I look. I creep out from the bushes, unwrapped from the fineness, the shining, and I know that this is why I have come cycling, to meet *Life* again. I take out my toothbrush and pour a little precious water into a cup.

The road is packed clay, bruising my head as I bump over ruts and holes. The transition is too jarring and I'm not good at integrating stillness and moving, particularly under a hot sun. I push the pedals up and down, turning the wheels, stirring up dust, soothing myself in the rhythm, looking into jungle climbing up both sides of the road. Large vines, planted by American troops to hide their tanks in the war, have taken over the jungle. I'm cycling through a suffocating blanket of death. Small patches have been cleared to make gardens, but the soil is dry. The few locals I pass are clutching baskets and tools and further on a group of young men wielding machetes and coconuts smile and wave. I stop for their company and to rest. A strong young man, oily with sweat, waves his machete, holds out a coconut and whips the blade through the air. The sound startles me. The silver blade catches the sun and knocks off the top of the coconut. It tumbles to the ground. With a great grin he passes the dripping nut. The liquid is sweet,

trickling down my chin and rushing into my mouth. I guzzle, almost choking as it keeps pouring out.

‘Are you alone?’ ‘Why are you alone?’ ‘Where is your husband?’ They still look puzzled and stare after me when I cycle on, taking the empty flesh to chew on later.

My water bottles are empty. A boy on a bicycle just outside his village watches my approach.

‘Can I get some water?’ I ask.

He leads me to the village tap and cycles on with me for a while. ‘Are you alone?’ ‘How many children do you have?’

I pass a couple of utes full of young men and their tools and a few villages with mothers and children and old people sitting in the shade. Mostly I’m alone. I thought I’d be cycling a pretty coastal road with sandy beaches and turquoise breakers one side, pristine jungle the other. Instead I’m cycling through a wasteland. My head is throbbing, even after several Panadol. What am I doing? I stop at a small clearing, to sit in the shade and cool down. Slowly my headache eases and I relax. I pull out my notes from the retreat, to keep me focused, to inspire me, to give shape to my adventure.

Wongchuk was always chuckling, particularly when we were in the most miserable states.

‘This afternoon we will begin with unmitigated grey, the second stage of the womb. The quality of light is beginning to be ominous. There is no happiness to be found at this stage. It’s an existential truth that all beings must go through. The stage is sombre, dull, but it only last a few hours. It’s the hell of the inconsequential, the artificial. You are trapped, caged, imprisoned by events. There is no God, no Buddha, no purpose, no hope. This pattern takes over in life: on, then off, then on, then off. First there is purpose, then it’s ridiculous’

I look up. I’ve been falling into this stage all my life, sunk by a sense of meaninglessness.

‘There is no option here, only non-clinging awareness will see you through.’

I look into the dusty clay road, the tall jungle. I get so uncomfortable, I can't sit through the meaninglessness. The pressure builds up until it's about to crush me. I need to get out, get away, like a baby about to be born. Maybe this sense of claustrophobia, second stage of the womb stuff, pushed me to go cycling. Wongchuk says we need to sit through the feelings and do nothing, dis-identify with them – is that it? This is the only way to freedom. I can't.

I keep cycling because now I have no choice. One pedal, then the other, over and over, pedals in my throbbing head. I'm looking for a campsite. I need to stop and rest but where and how? I don't want to camp in a village and sit awkwardly around a cooking fire with the women. I'm too tired. The road meanders along the water's edge around some rocky coves. I could camp here, and slow down to see. A young man in a dusty red shirt and cargo pants immediately steps out in front of me.

'Hello, where are you from?'

'New Zealand,' I smile, as well as I can. 'Your country is very beautiful.' We both smile. 'Is there somewhere I could camp for the night?'

He looks across the road to his village. 'You could stay with us.'

'I would like to be alone. Can I camp on the beach? Is there anywhere above the sand under the shelter of a tree with enough flat land for my tent?'

'I will help you find somewhere. You can camp anywhere you like. Is there anything else you need?' he politely enquires.

'I might come over later for some water if you have enough.'

'Yes, we have plenty. You are welcome.'

'Thank you so much.'

He leaves.

I lean my bike against a tree. I have permission to be here and that changes everything. I can relax. Didn't he say: '*She* is ours, *she* is yours, enjoy *her*, sleep on *her*, make love to *her*. *Life* is beautiful beyond compare.'

I unroll my tent, poke the unfolded aluminium pole through the centre seam, peg out the four corners and unpack the panniers. Squatting down in the long grass, I fire up the gas stove and put water on for coffee. A few curious locals pass and say hullo, but they leave me alone.

Water laps at my feet, the sun slips into the sea and I let go all my thoughts until my mind is empty. This is what I came here to do: to breathe life in and hold her close. I relax into a soft awareness of my breath, the way I was taught, riding on the breathing in, breathing out, until it is as if everything is breathing with me, breathing together. My mind becomes very soft and spread out, and the air all around is glowing and shimmering with the colours of dusk – silvery charcoal, golden threads. My mind softens even further and soon the air is wobbling with tiny bubbles. The bubbles rush at me, a fine bubbling, and I dissolve into the sweetness of tiny effervescent spheres while I am listening to the noises all around, filling the space – a rooster crowing, an old man whistling on the road behind the tent, children kicking a soccer ball in the long grass near the beach.

I go very quiet, into the quietness in the air around me: a hush that is tunnelling through space. From the space behind the sea and sky, a clear light grows, making the edges of the sea and the trees sharp and inside the sharpness the colours glow and shimmer again. I think I am seeing life in everything around me. The world is alive. It is pulsating and I shiver inside with excitement at what I am seeing, because the glowing, pulsating radiance is so beautiful and everything is pure and precious. In everything I am hearing music, not really hearing, a kind of feeling-hearing, as if the shapes and colours are notes dancing together and the dancing is life. And then it fades as the pinks and purples go grey and the shadows are soft and dark as I fall back out into the darkness and the aloneness of the flickering flame of a small candle lantern. I sit and think about how beautiful *she* is, and that *she* is real.

And then I imagine the people in the village sitting around a fire cooking yams and potato and Cornelius listening to music and Dad tossing back a whiskey, and I feel that these two worlds are very separate and I don't know how to bring them together. I stretch out in my fine cotton sheet, soft on my Therm-a-Rest, warm under my orange blanket. I am in the bosom of the sweetest mother. Blades of grass throw shadows on the tent walls in the candle light, a small dog snuffles and shuffles outside, ants and

crabs crawl in and out the open door and the continual sounds of wind in the trees and water licking the water's edge remind me of the world I will wake up into tomorrow.

Morning comes pushing a rosy-orange glow through my eye lids. I blink awake into a baby-blue sky, which is the same colour as the sea. An old man clothed in a dark fluorescent pink tee shirt and light fluorescent-pink shorts is crossing the bay with a fine grass net, golden in the morning light. He treads, knee deep through the still liquid, small dog paddling behind him, and fine ripples spread and break over each other. A child picks a way through the mangroves, sloshing mud, to a rusting WW Two artillery vehicle, fishing spear carelessly hanging in one hand.

There is movement at the edges of the tent and some chattering noises. I see thin legs and arms, dusty ragged clothes, faces bright-eyed, shy and curious, egging each other on, until there are at least a dozen pairs of eyes, some sticky and half open, peer inquisitively from dark scabby frames, standing, crouching, sitting in front of me. I talk to a bold young boy of ten, the leader.

‘Are you all from this village?’

‘Yes,’ he answers, hand on his elbow behind his back, one leg bending back and forth, the children hushed around him.

‘How many people in the village?’

He counts up in his mind. ‘About twenty.’

‘How many families?’

‘One family – all brothers with their wives and children.’

The grandparents are dead. A new girl of about twelve in a pink polka-dot dress appears, clutching a small packet of crisps. She is bashful, almost ashamed. Of what, I wonder.

I tell them a little bit about myself.

‘I have three children at home in New Zealand. I sailed here on a boat. My husband is on the boat at Port Vila waiting for me.’

Their frowns mean they don't understand.

‘Will some of you go to high school and get a job away from here?’

‘No, maybe we will finish primary school. It costs too much to go to high school. We will help in the gardens and grow food for the market. We will never leave.’

‘Your English is very, very good.’

He smiles broadly.

‘Can you take me to get some water now?’

We traipse over to the village tap. Small groups of women stand together outside their houses. No one says hello. Maybe I insulted them by not staying with them. They seem unusually reserved and unconfident.

I remember reading something written by Grace Mera Molissa, a Vanuatu political activist and poet: ‘Vanuatu loves self-effacing, acquiescing, submissive, slavish women.’

I have also found out the Vanuatu girls are still sold as property by the father. Violence against women and children is very common. The constitution protects women, but the men insist on customary practice, even though it’s against the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, to which Vanuatu is a signatory.

Eager eyes follow every move and little hands barely restrain themselves from snatching and grabbing as I pass around biscuits and crackers while I pack. I ask about a shop, before I distribute all the food I have. Then I cycle away, even though it seems unfair to exercise this freedom, and take a side road through some jungle to where the trees are stretching up from sturdy trunks, disappearing into high canopies, and clumps of giant bamboo fan out in a huge welcome. A couple of tethered cows chew their cud near some wooden tables, maybe where the ferry comes in. Down by the water under the shade of a tree I sit down to read my notes, so I might use my precious opportunity well.

I remember how bright and cheery Wongchuk was for the next class, even though a thunderous rain was smashing in against the windows.

‘The third stage – three out of four. Then you’ll be ready for the transcendental,’ he commanded, bright eyes piercing the class, snippet of moustache bobbing up and down, knees moving apart and together.

‘In the third stage, death is real, it’s a release. At that moment the threshold of pain-pleasure is crossed over into a swooning ecstasy. Increasing pressure leads to death and then a bursting through into light. The baby goes through an existential crisis. There is a moment when you die. You have to let go into the light, no matter how much you struggle against it. In life, the third stage takes you from crisis to crisis, forcing you to be aware. You can feel like you are losing your mind or losing control. Everything is working to a crescendo and then there’s an explosion, both feared and sought. There’s a crisis orientation, a total engulfment, right in your face. These cycles are the law of life. You cycle through them every day. The only escape is to be aware and unmoved.’

I think back. I learned to identify the stages of the womb manifesting in my life, the pattern repeating itself over and over, but I couldn’t stay unmoved, that was the problem. How was that possible? And why would I want to stay unmoved? Life was for living, it was for being passionate, being involved, being moved, surely? The teachings were a puzzle.

I pack away my notebook, nibble on some fresh biscuits and cycle back up to a main road, hard with crushed coral. In the afternoon the women are returning home with full baskets – taro, kumera, potatoes and leafy greens. Young children scamper behind, doing stuff with their fingers, some kind of game. I see these women at the market and these vegetables bunched up on the tables for sale. I have found the source. I have found the land that grows the vegetables and the people living on the land growing the vegetables. This discovery is very satisfying, like a completed circle.

I keep going, past a shop full of old coke bottles left by the Americans after the war and a run-down operation advertising fishing and diving charters for tourists.

I stop by an old man – white stubble beard, shirt buttoned awry, stooped - shuffling down the lane.

‘Is it okay to camp down by the beach?’ I call. ‘I need to stop somewhere for the night.’

‘Sure, you’ll be fine there.’ He seems to be wondering why I’m asking him.

I turn into the scrub and follow a track that turns into looping sand trails, opening onto a white beach. A few boats are wobbling at anchor.

A father follows his young daughter heading my way.

‘Hi, I’m Chris, from that Cat over there. This is Jade.’

She smiles. Australian accent. I climb off my bike before it stalls. The wheels have sunk deep in the sand.

‘Hi, I’m Alice. A Cat, eh.’ I put out my hand for a firm shake. ‘What’s it like?’

He seems normal, well-adjusted, good looking, wealthy and very friendly. I’m not attracted to this kind of man.

Oozing charm, he candidly explains the catamaran benefits of shallow draft, high speed down-wind planing (most sailing is into the wind, so I’m not that impressed) and roominess.

‘Cats are very stable – you don’t get so seasick – like sailing in a big open-plan house with a huge front veranda.’

Jade swings around his legs through the centre and out again, a kind of peek-a-boo, and I play the surprise part of the game with her and listen to Chris at the same time.

‘The downside is that they’re expensive. They take a double-berth marina. Two hulls to paint, two engines to maintain.’

‘What about sailing into the wind?’

‘Better than you might think.’

I’m getting dizzy following Jade.

‘I’m a family man now. Driven by testosterone until well into my forties. I’ve finally settled down.’

‘That’s nice, families are wonderful.’

Jade hugs his leg, spins around a few more times, then runs off to find a shell. She rushes back with a sand-blasted cowrie and grizzles to be held. Up on his shoulders, legs kicking out behind, she covers his eyes and ears so he can’t see or hear. Chris is running out of baby-sitting patience.

‘Does Jade want to help me set up my tent?’

‘Sure, off you go,’ he coaxes.

Hand-in-hand we trot down the beach and up a rough track, to investigate further what I thought looked promising earlier. A freshly dug-over young banana plantation, pale curled leaves unrolling from transplanted shoots. Heart-shaped leaves wind out from small mounds of soil and run along the ground – either kumera or yams. To the side is a flat patch of land, a campsite.

We return for my bike and unpack it.

‘You can help. Fit these poles together, like this.’

She takes over, delighted by the smart way the pieces click into place. I unfold the tent and we slide the pole through.

A woman comes rushing up the track, in a flurry.

‘Hi,’ I greet her. ‘I need Jade’s help to put up the tent. She’ll only be a minute. I’ll send her back to the beach.’

Jade presses the pegs in at an angle and pulls the elastic over. We unzip the fly and I lay out my Therm-a-Rest and blanket. She leaves and I’m alone.

The sun, still on the beach, stays away; the tangled branches are too thick. The ground around my tent is dead sticks and leaves – brown earth, rotting leaves and black sticks. This is not a good campsite. The water I collected from the last village comes to the boil as two young men in dirty trousers and messy tee shirts walk up. They don't look happy.

'Hello.' I say in a clear, direct way.

'We own this land. What are you doing here?'

I stay confident and open. Not sure what I actually feel.

'I'm sorry. An old fellow on the road said I could camp here. I'm only here one night. Would it be okay to stay?' They crouch down. 'Would you like a cup of coffee?'

They nod. A white woman asking to camp on their land? We chat. I ask about marriage.

'Yes,' one of them replies, 'men own the women they marry.'

'Do you think that is a good thing?'

Their faces go hard. They don't know how to answer me and stand back up.

'We must go. We have to catch the ferry back home to an island where we live.'

I exhale into a long sigh.

'Goodbye and thank you again for letting me stay. I've enjoyed meeting you.'

We shake hands again. I do hope they're leaving on the ferry and that they don't boast to anyone about me.

Fallen leaves decomposing into humus, a shapeless tangle of sticks; I can't tell whether they're living or dead. I go back down to the beach. Life won't find me in the scrub. The smell of sizzling steaks arrives from a barbecue bolted onto the back of the Cat. I want some. I pull out my notebook for distraction.

‘In the fourth stage of the womb, there is the delivery, deliverance – a rush through the tunnel and out into the light, a hurling of consciousness to the heights, a sudden grand opening and expansion of space. Wow! You have release. Victory. The heavens are opened and there is intense light. There is no physical pressure and no mental containment. Then comes the cutting of the umbilical cord – back to reality. When you get into the fourth stage, you may jump into the first stage because of the positive association, the oceanic experience. You are all trying to crawl back into the first stage of the womb, by the way. Anyone who has sexual relationships is trying to do this.’

The steak has gone inside, to be eaten. The beginning of this cycling trip did feel like a deliverance. Didn't last, though – someone cut the cord – back to reality: hard work cycling in the heat. And sex. He's right. I become a baby in Cornelius's arms, bathed in the pearly-pink light of the womb, washed in tenderness and love.

‘For liberation it is necessary to clear yourself emotionally of all the shapings of the womb. I tell you that the womb builds your attitudes, your politics, your religion, your philosophy. As the Buddha said, “I have found you, oh builder; you shall build no more!” The shaper, you'd better go find the shaper.’

I put the notebook away and start wondering about this shaper of my life, the shapings from the womb. Doesn't the shaper have to be the whole of life? Aren't all the patternings of life from the very beginning of time shaping my being? And, even if this is true, it isn't the answer. Wongchuk was very clear on this. The only way to freedom is through non-clinging awareness. That's the rub. Can I stay present and not be moved by these patternings, not moved by the claustrophobia, the bliss. What would move me, then? Maybe I wouldn't ever move? Is that what I want?

My campsite is positively gloomy. Before I turned to spirituality I was a philosopher. Suited my melancholic, second stage of the womb, temperament. Didn't get me anywhere, though. I'd reflect on life. Force her shadow through the prism of my mind and tie her up in knots. Then I'd spend hours undoing the knots. I could forget the sizzling steak on the boat in the bay. Distracting thought is much easier than non-clinging awareness. When my fingers curl around a hot drink, thoughts start to flow like a rippling stream, bubbling up from a subterranean spring. They turn into a rushing

torrent if I don't slow them down. I grab hold of thoughts the way those yachties grab their steak and children grab at biscuits. I never quite know what I'll get when I bite deep.

I get up for a bit and stomp around outside in the flickering shadows, then traipse back down to the beach onto the cool sand. Light floods out the portholes, happy conversation and laughter bouncing over the waves. A tree which is draped in cobwebs, dead leaves like a spent patter of rain on the sand underneath, gives me shelter. I had rice and tinned tuna for dinner with some slices of cucumber.

I creep back to my hole to think some more. I'm lonely. A hollow thud hits my chest and travels down, making me swallow and cramp up in my neck. I clench my guts and all I see is darkness, spreading back behind me. Where does my feeling of loneliness come from? I don't like the feeling. I settle on the word, the idea, and follow it down inside myself, until it settles on an amorphous feeling that slowly coagulates into another idea.

Ahaa! I've got something. It's to do with how I build a sense of who I am in the world. I go slowly, unwrapping the thought, as if it held a treasure inside. I turn it around to see what's sticking, where it leads. I feel lonely when I am separated from those things that tell me who I am, that reflect me to myself. I hold the feeling and the abstraction; the abstraction keeps me safe from the dark cavern of my loneliness. These things may be people I love, like Cornelius, or things I do, like cycling, or own, like my house, or feel, like the land, or think, like about God. When the images fade, I start to fade as well, I shrink. Yes, I'm good at thinking and this is interesting and my gut is clamping up to squash the pain and it's painful, because a part of me is dying and I want to stay alive.

A noise from outside startles me and I jump like I've been electrocuted. I'm suddenly terrified for my life, shivering, trembling, listening for the slightest movement. I calm down and breathe a little. Then I reassure myself and slowly I start thinking all over again. What would Wongchuk say? He'd say not to cling to any of these things, they are all impermanent, they aren't you. Clinging is the root cause of suffering. Uproot it. But how can I be in the world without an anchor, a root?

Young children live as the stars above their head and daisies below their feet. You, with your pocketbook of memories – life is living you, every moment loving you, consuming you, making offerings to you, but you can no longer see. The music has moved on. How can I find my way back into the music?

The candle lantern flickering through a faintly sooty glass, smudged with unburned wax, finally goes silent. I snuggle down under my blanket and hope the young men don't return.

I'm still alive in the morning. I sit in the sun with the sea all around and chew a lump of fatty bread. The families are still sleeping on the rocking boats and all the footprints and scuffles have gone with the tide, so the beach is a virgin again. I'm on a rock with sharp angles so I let my feet take most of the weight and use my bum more for balance. I become as gentle as the morning, mind washing clean, like the sand, into a pristine clarity that is spreading into everything around me, like a pregnancy.

My perception starts changing as I focus in on this clarity and it seems that the sea and boats and the tide lapping at the shore are a very thin skin, the skin of a balloon, and my mind is the space inside everything I am seeing. And then I see, or is it that I imagine, the bodies of my children, Cornelius, Dad, woven into this skin, into a clear, unbroken weave over the space underneath, which is pulsating and glowing. I realize that the skin they are is dead. I see clearly that we are all confused, but I am not confused now because I can see that the skin is dead, because it is a concept, a memory, a fabrication of mind, and the space is living. It is the living space that brings the appearance of life to the skin. The space is radiant, fine and clear; it is intelligent.

This is life, beyond the forms it embodies, and it is ungraspable. There is nothing to let go of and nothing to cling to. I don't understand why we should grieve such a glorious passage into life at death, because what is dying was already dead? Why do I struggle against life rushing through me even now? Because it takes more courage than I can find to surrender. My heart suddenly leaps, making my chest shudder, squeezing my eyes. I hold on because I am too scared to let go. But life is magnificent. It doesn't make sense. I get up slowly like waking up from a dream I want to keep. A handful of sand slips through my fingers as my feet crunch on the broken coral and I float down the beach. I don't know what to do with any of this. I don't know how to fit this hugeness

into my ordinary life. Life is too grand for me. I walk slowly back to camp to pack up. I have had my three nights sleeping on her soft belly. Today I go home.

I push my bike up the backbone of the island. When the bicycle gears are beyond helping me, when every time I push the pedal down it's a major effort and I am still creeping along more slowly than a snail, well, then I walk. Getting up this hill in the heat is a struggle. I stay inside the sensations of my body, the heat, the breathlessness, the wanting to panic. I allow the pain, I defy gravity, I stay hopelessly in love. Golden pampas grass, dead on the inside, dances gloriously in the wind – life's mischief. And then, proud to have claimed the summit, I remount and with some small abandon career down to this other side, the Port Vila side, which looks like a scatter of children's blocks spreading out in the distance. I'm free-wheeling, excited about returning and nervous. I like being here. When I'm back I will long to be here again. I become terrified of my downhill speed. I try to take control by braking, but the pedals stay spinning like a Ferris wheel and I flood with exuberance, soaring to the heavens on the wings of a great bird. Wherever I look, love is offering her hand. Yes, I would like to stay and leave myself behind for a little longer. I only ever get a taste, never an endlessly full plate. Maybe all I want is a taste.

It's still early at the crossroads at the bottom of the hill. I head towards the coast, away from town, cycling past elegant holiday villas, the estates of the French elite, set in landscaped gardens, adorned with pagodas and waterfalls, bordered with box hedges. The grey sea rolls in behind. A black maid in a white apron pulls up in a tiny Renault. She smiles warmly, basket of sugared muffins under her arm. I'd like to ask for one.

I cycle on to where the road turns into a dirt rut meandering through scrubby coastline on and on until it reaches the sea. Dust is flying up into my eyes and hair, streaking down my wet cheeks and filling my throat. I drop the bike and shake the worst of it off. My legs are too wobbly to keep standing and my arms are jittery. My swollen, numb fingers work well enough to unpack the pannier and throw out the sarong, and I watch it fluttering over the sandy grass. I sink into a heavy heap, shaded by tree-like grass with long serrated crocodile-jaw leaves. Snaking plants emerge from leggy roots with bent knees. I look into the breaking sea and then at my unsorted food, drained water bottle, brightly-coloured sarong, iridescent purple-blue bike, and in that moment of letting go

into my tiredness, of relaxing thoroughly, in that moment it feels like my whole body is seeing: my feet, my chest, my arms are covered in thousands of little bright eyes. This sense keeps expanding until even the water bottle is seeing and the bike is seeing and the crashing sea is seeing and the seeing is a brilliant light oozing out of everything, making everything crisp and sharp and bright, and it seems to me that this light is my mind, and I am the seeing of all things. Everything is perfect, complete, whole.

Maybe the hours of cycling, the rolling wheels, the pedals going up and down, the wind in my hair, maybe all of this silenced me, emptied me out completely into this bare experience of life. In the warm sun, a cool breeze climbs over my naked limbs and the crocodile-jaw leaves throw their zigzag shade. I start chuckling, because I can tell life isn't my concept of it. When I move, this painfully exquisite moment will disappear. I chuckle with a kind of misery because it is clear to me that what is so precious has no meaning, it is nothing until I tie it up with my mind and give it a name. There is no way to hold onto any of it. What I hold onto is dead, a concept, a memory. The living moment, the beauty, the truth, tumbles like breaking waves and disappears as it is still forming. To grasp at it, to try and freeze it would be like pinning an albatross to the ground and then saying, 'this is an albatross'. I realize that the act of grasping makes the sacred profane. This is what the Buddha said, 'Give up all clinging and the truth shall appear.' I turn my back on the moment. I pick up my bike and cycle back along the same dusty road, away from my freedom – I can't do anything with this freedom.

Clay turns back into the tar seal laid by the Japanese after the war. My tyres now whirr and purr. I become the proud hero returned from the wild outback weaving confidently past the cars, making a beeline for town and then the harbour. In the distance, a ferry is pulling in. What luck! I can make it if I hurry. I bump down over the grassy bank at high speed to the wharf. I lift the whole bike up, arms like steel girders, and carry it onboard. The crew casts off and we chug out into the harbour, pushing noisily through the waves to our island. From the island I roll the bike along a gravel path, drag it down through scrubby grass and dump it on the beach. I undress to my knickers, plunge into the sea and dive down beneath the surface, staying down a long time, swimming along the sand until I need to surface for a breath. I become a frolicking sea animal, rolling and splashing, diving and swimming, washing free of all the sweat and dust from my journeying back into life.

Alice pulled up from the green leather chair. She was miles away. Without Oliver or her mother to attend to, the hours floated by with memories for examination. Thirty years ago she didn't get what Wongchuk was saying. How could she? It was the work of her lifetime to understand. Behind the patternings of the womb was freedom. Alice looked around her little house. She picked up Cornelius's journal and turned the pages. The writing had become light and round, with pictures grown from doodles in the margins.

I fired up the outboard and fucked round back to the boat. I got into recording some skits I had started. It would fill the time. I snored into the microphone, sloshed water into a bucket, crashed pots and jangled the rigging.

She became my muse, with her kiwi accent. I started dropping all my vowels as I recorded it. I made stories about what they do on her small island with its four million sheep. I was surprised at the fun, and then it slipped away and I started to worry. But I wasn't sure whether to be worried or angry, so I went ashore to pass the time.

Alice remembered how much she laughed. She'd played the CD many times over the years, until it didn't seem funny anymore.



'What a wonderful birthday present. You are so creative. Please make me some more.' I hug him, but he isn't solid. I can't feel him. I can't feel myself either. 'The trip was like a pilgrimage.'

He smiles like my mother, a grimace.

I look straight into his eyes. 'Don't worry, I'll always come back.'

At dinner it comes out.

‘I still don’t understand why you had to go. I was worried, anything could have happened.’

He stands his fork up on the table, a weapon to pierce me and hold me down.

‘I need to go. I’m not being frivolous. What can I possibly say to make you understand?’

He turns away with that look: “She’s totally off this planet. What’s she doing on my boat?”

‘You can choose not to worry about me,’ I continue.

‘No, I can’t.’

I know what he’s thinking. Why else would I go?

We climb into bed. My skin doesn’t recognize him. My mind is still spread out as a soft luminous awareness and the aliveness in my body is just under the surface of everything. With my eyes closed I can see fine golden threads, a mesh of silvery gold spreading through the boat, a very fine bliss. *She* has me in her arms. I don’t want to leave, and I do – I know I must, I must let ordinary dreams and desires shape an ordinary, solid body. I must allow myself to contract into a discrete note and forget the grand symphony. I must make distinctions to name a world that is separate from me. This is what life has me do – it has me imagine a solid world to live in, outside of me.

All the next day we stroke and cuddle and talk, until my ordinary sensing wakes up and my body takes him as my lover. It was just the way my journeying brought me home. Late afternoon we go ashore. Under a waterfall of crystal rain, I wash away the last golden threads. I scrape my nails through streaks of grease on my calves and then massage my soapy hair to clean the grease from my nails.

Cornelius takes my hand and I become gay and childlike, setting out for town. The market has pretty seed and shell necklaces – single strand, plaited from several strings, mixtures of shells and seeds – red, brown and yellow seeds, slippery brown linseed,

threaded into flowers, secured by a tight loop over a coconut or shell button. They are all pretty. I pick out at least one of each kind for my children. Sarongs hang in the shop doorways flowing with colour and they float away from my hand as I touch and then float back to stroke my cheek.

I buy carrots, radishes, lettuce, beans, pawpaw, bananas, pink grapefruit and then, from the supermarket, bread and pastries. I'm making a special dinner tonight, but when I return to the dinghy dock, our dinghy is gone, on account of the time I've taken to shop. That wasn't very nice of him and I wait for a lift with someone going my way. I don't mention my disappointment, instead I focus on cutting radish and tomato into pretty shapes for the table. I break the lettuce roughly for tossing in. Cornelius spreads out in the salon, head propped up with cushions, browsing an old magazine. We sit across from each other, forks raised again and politely discuss the BBC politics of the day.

I'm trying not to long for *her*. I want to run and leap back into *her* arms. I want to dive back through this great ocean of becoming and wake up inside *her* golden heart. How can I be expected to walk away? I catch glimpses – a breeze blows me apart and *her* fragrance wafts through. I'm powerless to change the way it is. Cornelius craves my body the way I crave *her*. We're deranged, trying to fill ourselves up again and again with that elusive, intoxicating feeling. Non-clinging awareness? I've totally forgotten.

I go up into the dark cockpit. Small lights wobble above a twitchy ocean and I think about how it is in the physical world – atoms, small particles rushing about in vast oceans of space, making up tables and chairs and people. I learned about this solid atomic bedrock at school. Now atoms are no longer such a bedrock, they've been disembodied into probability fields of energy, patterns of vibration, arising spontaneously, twisting up into the law of experience. They arise from a void, like waves from the sea, rolling, building up and breaking down, knocking into each other, travelling through space. What a fantastic illusion permanence and solidity are. I knock against the hull with my ankles – force fields of energy, resisting each other. Yes, life is as empty and as ungraspable as can be. I wonder if the scientist ever ventures into this vast emptiness he describes so well, ever falls in love with empty space, ever feels it to be himself, as fine waves of golden energy building up into ropes that snare his mind.

Cornelius and I are now reduced to talking about it all – love, sex, God, life, creation, energy. Language keeps us from falling through the night into *her* arms. For then all we are would be lost, but here all we are is lost as well. I can't leave again to fall at *her* feet and gaze into *her* face and entwine my fingers in *hers* until they grow together to keep me with *her*. *She* wouldn't stay alive, crossing back through the oceans of becoming into the ordinary world of this little boat anchored in Port Vila where Cornelius and I make love. *Life* would slip away and I would forget. I forget that I am lost until something starts stirring, telling me I need to go and find *her*. I won't remember why it is that I have to go, but I will have to go.

Cornelius and I climb down from our love nest – a scrambled egg of salty, crusty bedding, months away from a washing machine.

He starts, 'I'm worried about New Zealand.'

We're sitting out in the glorious morning sun. I drip sweet slices of fresh paw paw and mango into his mouth.

'What will happen to us there?' he moans.

'The first test isn't New Zealand. My family's visiting in Noumea.'

'What if they don't like me?'

I'm feeling mischievous and scared as well.

'It doesn't matter if they don't like you. What matters is if they show you to me in a different light,' I pause theatrically, 'so that I don't like you.'

Now, how mean is that? But I said it, I couldn't help myself, I was scared they would.

Dad's been up to the meteorological office again. As soon as the wind changes we're leaving for Noumea. The trade winds are south-westerly. So is Noumea, so we need something different.

Cornelius unfolds a bold yellow sarong, covered in fluttering tropical fish.

‘Painted by a local artist. I couldn’t resist. Good colours for you.’

Then he moans, ‘Most women would die to be with the guy who likes eating pussy as much as I do. Why did I end up with a woman who wants sex in an ordinary way?’

I try not to be angry and run my fingers through my hair.

‘I wish we could sail together, I wish we could do something together, anything,’ I say.

I tie the yellow sarong around my waist and spin around for him to see. I sit on top of him for fun. I don’t want him to take me too seriously, but I am serious. I want more than this.

‘This is fine by me, I could do it forever,’ he relies.

‘Do you think we’ll make Italy for the next Americas Cup?’ I fold the washing and tuck it away tidily.

‘I hope so. I want to take you to America, show you where Bob Dylan lives.’

I pour us each a glass of wine. My eyes turn down to my food. ‘Maybe we do have a future. I hope so.’

‘There is so much I would love to do with you.’ He says this intensely and I look up shyly to meet his eyes. ‘We have the world to explore.’

We keep watching the clouds, for a change in the weather.

Andrew, the freckled, thirty-two-year-old surfer we met in Fiji, arrives with his girlfriend, to rest up from a couple of weeks surfing at Tanna. He leaps aboard *Fantasie* and spears me with his questions.

‘I’ve started wondering about the American way of life, about what is really important.’

We had a relationship at Vuda Point. He fell into the marina sewage pond and I gave him tea tree oil for the festering wounds.

He bursts out with a new initiative next day. ‘I’ve just finished reading *‘The Last Testament of Christ.’* Remember the movie? I don’t know what to make of his choice – worldly happiness versus the everlasting happiness of heaven.’ He waits for my reply.

‘Do you think God is male?’ I ask when the discussion starts tying into meaningless knots. ‘Where is heaven?’

Most days we see him and most days he and I tangle and untangle some new philosophical idea and continue a different conversation in the spaces between the words, although we’d never admit it, even to ourselves.

An older English yachtie, Chris, also starts coming over regularly, initially to talk computers with Cornelius. These visitors know something’s up. Chris batters me in the saloon, a clumsy would-be seduction.

‘Yes, I came from the Isle of Wight, grew up on boats. So, your father had boats, trimarans? The history of English sailing is very interesting.’

I don’t think so, but I don’t mind the attention. He goes on to describe the great sailing ships of England.

‘What’s your email? I’d like to stay in touch.’

Cornelius, who’s listening in the background at the navigation table, explodes. ‘What’s going on?’

I start stomping around the boat, knocking things over. The boat has become the room of funny mirrors. Cornelius doesn’t get involved. I look out into the sky, streaked cloud up high, bringing change.

We walk the back streets of Vila, for imported carvings.

Cornelius lopes along at quite a speed and I grab his arm to slow him down a bit.

‘What kind of life would you choose if you were given another one?’ I ask, because I still don’t understand him. He says he’s bohemian, lives outside the city walls. I wonder if it’s a choice.

He slows down. 'Now that's an interesting question. I would be reborn a man, because in my view it's still a man's world.'

'Really? Do you mean that?'

Most of the shops here are for women: clothes, ornaments, furnishings.

'Yes.' He clears his throat. 'I would like to be very, very wealthy and famous for a great creative achievement, possibly in music.'

'You still believe in the American dream and yet you turned your back on it twice?'

We are finally walking slowly.

'I didn't know how to succeed, that's why I left. The great thing about America is that anything is possible. The ordinary man can become famous and wealthy. It's only people who don't have money that rubbish the wealthy. Really, they're envious. I've lived among rich people – they lead interesting, intelligent lives. I went to lectures given by world-famous people on fascinating topics. I went to concerts, the opera. I travelled everywhere.'

We buy a crazily-painted wooden gecko, to climb the saloon wall, and a panel of carved dolphins jumping out of carved waves, for behind the navigation chair.

Dad calls in. 'I've been back up to the meteorological service. They're predicting a two to three-day window of easterlies, from a high pressure system moving up. When the system moves away, the south-westerly will return.'

Cornelius and I look at each other. He doesn't have crew.

'We'll leave the day after tomorrow. Otherwise we'll be stuck here for who knows how long.'

He'll have to sail on his own.

'I'll pick you up early tomorrow morning to get ready.'

'Sure.'

The car, turning into the driveway, was slowing down on the wet grass. Alice's old top slipped easily from her wrinkled, lean body. She turned away from the mirror until the new one covered her up – disgust smoothed into a gentle acceptance. Oliver walked straight in, without knocking. Why should he?

They hugged and he pulled away, twisting up inside. He took his bags straight to his room, while she put on the kettle and buttered the warm pear and cinnamon muffins. His eyes were glowering.

‘How's Emilee?’

‘She's great. Pretty pissed off at Dad, though. I know why I left, why I didn't come back. Bit much having to remember, having to listen to her. She doesn't stop talking, you know. Great to walk over the farm. Went out most days with Bob, to help with the sheep and fences. Loved the physical stuff.’

He stalked the living room.

‘The two of you, so different – both crazy and self-obsessed. It's a wonder we turned out as well as we did.’

He started ripping the paper, screwing it tight, till his hands were black with the ink and shaking as he stuffed the firebox. His lips were quivering, mouth tight.

‘Don't you see how impossible it was? I had to choose between you and him. I chose him, because the girls chose you. Someone had to live with him. He was my father.’

Tears were close. There was a long pause. She waited.

‘I shut you out of my life. Didn't have a choice. Dad hated you and he loved you, he was always going on about you. I couldn't stand it. I was just a kid. I gave up. I can't love anyone.’ His arms spread out as he stood up, face softening, shining through the tears. ‘That's why I didn't come back. I didn't want to face our family.’

Sticks broke over his knee, a sharp cracking and splitting.

‘It wasn’t the same for Emilee and Charlotte. They had you. I missed you so much and then I didn’t. I missed Orere. It’s good to be back.’

Alice pulled up the chairs. ‘We did lots together when you were young.’

‘I know. The mountains and caving with Auntie Marion and sailing with Grandad. I still remember.’

‘What do you remember?’

Oliver shoved some more sticks in the fire.

‘The time we were together in the storm. I didn’t think we were going to make it, but we did. I learned something good then.’

‘Tell me. I don’t remember.’

She poured them each a drop of the plum vodka. The fire started cracking and flaring up around the twisted paper.

‘I remember being up on the mountain with you. I wasn’t that old. We spotted the tiny orange hut way down in the trees. Our map said it was Ballard Hut. Snow was piled up on the roof and the window ledges. It was very exposed, wind rushing and whipping around, but I was warm inside my coat and jacket. We’d been walking all day. I couldn’t hear what you were saying because of the wind.’

He opened the fire box to check the flames and put in some bigger pieces.

‘When we dropped off the ridge it was quiet, but the snow was unpredictable. We kept falling over, sinking into the snow, packs on top, buried alive. It was fun, kind of. You pushed open the door and almost fell over again.’

He stopped with a kind of laugh, as the images came back to life.

‘We were out of the storm and still alive. Seemed a miracle. The inside stunk of wood smoke and hunters and old cigarettes and dogs. The bunk mattress covers were ripped and stained. One of the mattresses had been chopped in half. The windows were too grimy to see out of. Part of me wanted to go back outside. The other part of me wanted to die. Candle-wax volcanoes covered all the ledges. A rough wooden table and bench seat, pocked with knife cuts, was pushed against the wall.’

‘Sounds awful.’

‘It was.’

“‘We need to make a fire or we’ll freeze,” you said. That seemed obvious. I found damp logs, damp twigs and an axe in the overhang outside. It was meant to be a fun holiday. I didn’t speak – I just lifted the heavy axe and split off some white shavings.

“‘This white wood never burns well, even when it’s dry,” I grumped. Our situation was pretty desperate. I gathered up the shavings. You broke the twigs up into tiny pieces.

“‘I’ll use a candle to dry them.” You spoke in a matter-of-fact way like we were at home, making pancakes for breakfast.

‘Snow kept falling. We’d set out early from ... I don’t remember.’

‘Te Puia Lodge.’

‘Thanks. We didn’t know a storm was coming. It was sunny when we set out and when snowflakes started falling we thought they were magical. You lit a candle in the fireplace and shaped a small stack of twigs over it. I passed some shavings to make a wall further out, for drying, and then axed some larger chunks for even further out. You fed tiny twigs, followed by dead beech leaves, into the flame.

‘I set up the stove to make you some tea. I didn’t believe you would get a fire going. I wanted to believe you could, but I’d been disappointed in you too many times. You turned to me with a red and purple smile, eyes pink and puffy with smoke. Your head had been in the belly of the stove, gently blowing, ever so gently, persistently.

“‘Thanks, dear. I’d love a hot drink,” you said.

‘In that moment something changed. I swallowed a lump in my throat. You were completely happy.

‘I pressurized the bottle and dribbled white spirits into the bowl, the way you taught me. Then I lit the spirits, to heat the element so it would vaporize the gas when I let it through. I loved that Whisperlite.

‘I crossed to the fire and squatted behind you, arm on your shoulder, and peered into the little flame, slowing growing, then collapsing, billowing smoke, catching again, held, it seemed, by your will.

‘I asked if you wanted honey in your tea. You stopped blowing, looked up and smiled. “Thanks. Now that’s a treat, tea with honey.” I thought that was funny. That’s the end of the story.’

Oliver stayed quiet, listening to the fire, then he looked up at Alice. ‘That story stayed with me, maybe I’ve changed it in my memory, maybe you weren’t that happy.’

Alice smiled. ‘I loved hanging out with you.’

‘I’m so confused about you.’ Oliver said quietly. ‘Maybe it doesn’t matter now.’

She paused to sort her thoughts. ‘We all need a good mother, so build on the good memories, make them strong. Wongchuk was very clear. Without good mothering you’re doomed. Nature is your mother.’

Oliver looked up at her. ‘I want to know the truth.’

Alice became frustrated.

‘What is truth? Particular memories, what you were told, years of mixing them up. Memories constantly change.’

‘Perhaps not.’

‘Focus on the good, keep the wonder and mystery alive, otherwise life is too hard, barren.’

Oliver got up. ‘How do you let something go when it’s who you are?’

He paced the room. ‘I’m going for a walk. Some things are facts, they just are true.’

The night air was swimming around him, slowing him down. He remembered Alice and Marion in the holidays, going on about their horrible childhoods. Their introspection had made him sick. They thought those memories and feelings were real, no doubt about it. His memories were real. He kept walking. He couldn’t stand it much longer.

The rusting anchor chain lifts out of the water, wraps around the windlass and rattles down into the anchor locker. I undo the stiff shackle, pliers turning round and round, until the anchor drops free, lug it down to the lazaret and push it in against the buckets and mooring lines. Standing at the bow, I face into a strong wind coming straight at us.

‘The land may have shifted the wind around.’ Dad calls.

Dream-maker strains up through a rising wall of water, careers over the crest, slip-slops down, then lifts up to meet the next wave sweeping upon it.

I stay at the bow, enjoying the spray of the troubled sea.

Dad shouts through the crashing and bashing: ‘We’re not making any headway, the waves are piling up against us.’

I move back down the deck, holding onto the shrouds and the handrails.

‘If we tack, we’ll be too far off course altogether,’ he yells. ‘We’ll keep going a while to see if the wind changes.’

The sea is grey-green like the sky. White caps smash against the hull. The fizz flies over, drenching me, blasting my face, rivers down my legs. I can tell it is impossible, just like Cornelius and me. The inside of Cornelius is ugly and twisted. He’s honest though, in a way I’m not. Says what he thinks. Knows what he wants.

Dad’s voice roars through the wind. ‘You’re not going to like this. We have to turn around. We’ll set out again tomorrow. Wait for the easterly.’

Turn around and go back. I collapse inside, stuffing knocked out of me. I don’t do this. We failed to get away. Anything could happen now. Nothing could happen – that would be worse. I want to insist, but I know we can’t. The sea and sky are grey, except for a sickly lemon glow along the horizon. Going back is quiet. The wind is behind us.

Through the grey, a red hull is pushing towards us.

‘Dad, look, it’s Cornelius.’

We slow down and shout across the space, ‘The weather’s terrible. We had to turn back.’

He yells back, ‘I understand.’

‘We’ll follow you.’

Cornelius and Dad make polite conversation over dinner, about boats and sailing and the warring in the world. Cornelius tells a story. I look out at him, from a distance, making him two-dimensional, until the way I’m seeing him scares me. I’ve made the living person disappear. There’s nobody there. Have I disappeared as well? Does Dad know that he’s not talking to anybody. I shrink into my corner, arms wrapping around my knees, churning up, hot and cold. A robot – conditioned responses, nobody home. His eyes are blank, empty, closed. I saw too much of this growing up. Scared the shit out of me. I ran to get away, to stay alive. The living dead. He’s laughing, but it’s not a laugh, it’s not anything. I want to scream, expose the lie. Too many people like this when I was young. I was meant to become one of them, to fit in and die, but I couldn’t.

I don’t have any answers and by morning, defeated, I let him back into my heart. When Dad and I sail away, I slip back into the hungry toiling of our embrace, thrilling in the memories of his touch, the bliss; standing up on deck, he’s alive in my body. My body is stretching away to hear another voice, *her* voice in the wind. *Life* is hunting me down, pursuing me across the wild seas. The wind howling and tearing at the sails is *her* determination to find me and hold my face to *hers*. ‘Come away from him, see ME!’ *she* is screaming. *She* is all I see, the wind is alive, the sea is alive, *her* wild, soft presence radiates in everything. Water streams down my cheeks, as I grab at *her* to keep myself alive in *her*. I fly with my hair tossing in the wind. I grab the lifeline to get back into the cockpit. I shouldn’t end up lost inside all this intensity. I sit out on watch and gaze into the mystery of living, the wonder of existence. I confuse my love for Cornelius with mystical love. This confusion gives us a mysterious glow.

We have been two days at sea. The fair easterly we started out with fades. The south-westerly trade winds are back. Nausea churns my stomach, shooting pain to my head, a diesel throbbing inside me, limbs hanging heavy, poisoned by the fumes, swaying with the boat, against the boat, and I stumble and drag myself to bed for most of the day to sleep. I toss in the discomfort, with nothing to do but reflect rather moodily on my life, mind churning through the nausea, as I roll with the waves, kicking out against the cupboards and the lee cloth. It's worse now because *she* was so close, but *she's* gone and I don't want *her*, *she's* no help in this world.

I know my problem. I'm a neurotic child who wants to stay in the womb. I need to understand why I'm so scared to leave, why I didn't grow up, why I hide away in dark corners inside myself. The blanket is all twisted. I boot it back out straight. Isn't the spiritual path about collecting up the bits and bringing them back together, to create a whole person? But I'm not all together – I'm like a fire cracker going off in all directions. Something's in the way, something I don't understand in the middle, human part of me.

Cornelius is grumpy when I call in the morning, his voice clipped. He hates single-handing. I take over from Dad outside. My seasickness has gone and I swing with the boat, as she leaps and falls and rolls through the waves. Dad's a different story. His face is patchy white and green, dark sacks under his eyes.

'A touch of seasickness,' he smiles as if embarrassed and creeps very slowly, like a china doll – any jarring would break him – onto his bunk, face down. I make him a cup of hot tomato soup and he drags himself up to sip a little, as if it is his duty. I return to the cockpit, zippered up in my fleecy windproof jacket, warm socks and a scarf. The sun slips away and the wind turns around to the south. A new moon sets – sprinkle of golden light across the water. Sparkles of phosphorescence flutter in the foam, racing down the hull.

I sing through the night, throwing my voice into the wind, until the notes are echoing down corridors of sound, reverberating in my body, until the music is all there is. The notes are alive, singing themselves into existence, and I am behind the sound at the bottom of the deep ocean. The music travels up and down from the ocean floor to the

surface, travelling since time began, tones coming together and breaking apart into the story of everything that ever happened on this planet.

The next day was cold, threatening rain. Oliver had become quiet and restless, picking up *Listeners* for the crosswords, reading, chopping firewood, helping in the kitchen. Their conversation had been left unfinished. He needed to think about things first. He was brooding. He needed a distraction. Alice was cleaning out her cupboards – a job she always left until it couldn't be left any longer.

‘Mum, the hot pools at Miranda, remember? We'd catch up with the cousins and Auntie Marion, fish'n'chips at Kaiaua. On days like this, when we were driving you nuts, you'd pack us into the car, throw the wheel around all the bends like a rally car driver and Charlotte would be sick.’

‘Of course I remember. Why don't we go?’

Her car had 250,000 kms on the clock. It lurched around the hills, not because Alice was driving quickly, but because the shocks were worn and they bounced the chassis into the bank and back again, swinging in a diminishing trajectory, magnifying a couple of squeals on the dashboard, Oliver's side. He thumped the plastic until it started up near the door. Road noise, a constant whine, a bumping hiss, made talking difficult. Oliver grimaced at the way she drove, braking on every corner, wavy along the straight as she talked. The view was stunning. They were driving along the coast, swampy farmland full of flax and toe-toes and brackish water running, not actually running, in trenches, where soil had been taken out for banks to keep out the sea. The flat land spread a long way inland, up into the Hunua's olive-green bush. They'd investigated that bush a few times – day trips with a packed lunch, trudging through mud. Pretty tame. Other side, the sea was rolling in against the stones, large round stones. They'd brought trailer loads back to Orere, for paths and garden edging – homes for slugs and snails. He'd roll their hidey holes away and feed them to the hens, who didn't like them much.

‘Mum, why *was* Dad so tormented? He'd ring me in Canada and tell me how bad his life was. I couldn't get far enough away. I hope I'm not like that with my children.’

‘Really?’ The violence in his voice startled her. ‘He made the mistake of believing he was his thoughts and emotions. He thought his feelings were real, they were who he was, like permanent stones in shoes he couldn’t take off.’

‘What do you mean? Of course feelings are real.’

She looked directly at him and the car swerved, just a little, her hands following her eyes. ‘Who are you?’

Her eyes rested on the beauty of the long grasses rising up out of the swamp, yellows and greens, spreading along the coast, then over the sea to the seabirds soaring on the wind currents.

He remembered the conversations from childhood. She’d be reading her Buddhist books and discussing the ideas with the kids.

‘Well,’ he answered. ‘I’m my body, my thoughts and feelings, my memories, altogether like a car, sum of the parts.’

‘Where did you get that from?’ She poked him. ‘Are some of them you and others not? Do any of them stay the same, or are they always changing?’

What did it have to do with his father? It was better than the “nothing interesting” of his own mind he supposed.

‘Some of them seem more me than others.’

‘Tenzin said we have thousands of selves – we create a new self every moment. Every self is different. Some of them are overused bad habits.’

Oliver thought about it. One moment he could be happy, the next sad, so was he really happy or sad? Both and neither. He almost got what she was saying. So, his question, about being a real person? Maybe his question didn’t make sense. His shoulders slumped.

‘Once you see clearly how your selves are constructed, the whole edifice collapses. You don’t have to be sucked in, you don’t have to suffer. You have a choice – you can unidentify, stay free. You don’t have to be swamped.’

Oliver leaped at her. 'I can't stop being angry or sad just because I want to. I don't want to be morose when I am.' All sorts of feelings were rushing up to take him over. 'It's not like I can change the weather just by noticing it.'

'You're not trying to change anything. Just see the patterns, the shapings and don't be so shaken up by them – non-clinging awareness. The whole universe is clinging, moving, shaping and being shaped, but there is no one behind the shapings. Understanding that is freedom. The ocean turns into waves, but it's not the waves.'

They were quiet. Oliver saw two large trees in a paddock, one broken off halfway up the trunk, maybe from a storm, lots of small limbs climbing chaotically from the jagged stump. Maybe it was a poplar. It was still alive, not good for anything except firewood, angry flames. The other tree had grown straight up into a good shape, leaves floating freely in the breeze. Oliver shivered, but it wasn't cold – the heater was on and the sky was a soft grey pillow. A storm was on its way, pressure building up, weather systems about to collide, hot and cold, rain.

Alice slowed down for some ducks crossing. They stopped at Miranda to see the birds, although with winter approaching they were mainly oystercatchers and wrybills. Apparently a few godwits were overwintering. Most left in February for their breeding grounds in the Alaskan tundra – 12,000kms and two months flying away. They would return in September. She remembered the excitement when a godwit with a radio transmitter was tracked taking only eight days of non-stop flying to get back to Miranda from Alaska.

Oliver persisted. He turned down the music and stared out the windscreen, following the wipers until the screeching of the wiper motor made him turn them off.

'What has the ocean turning into waves got to do with Damian? Isn't that what we're talking about?'

'Your father believed he *was* his childhood difficulties, that they had some kind of stubborn real existence, that he was doomed because of them. Maybe he was. He never forgave his mother. The Buddha said what the mind puts together the mind can take apart. Damian didn't understand that. Humans have a tendency to be masochistic, to do themselves in.'

Oliver clenched and unclenched his fists, staring out.

‘Dad went to therapy for twenty years? He should have sorted it out.’

‘Damian was a great client for his therapists – intelligent, insightful, dramatic, full of tears and rage and shame, full of rebuilding, reliving, embellishing, recreating his past over and over. His memories became a fortress. His therapists helped him lay the bricks. No freedom in that. They helped him identify the colours, see how they fitted together, what they looked like, what they were made of. But for freedom he needed to stand outside the fortress.’

The Miranda Hot Springs sign came into view – a simple sign, starting to peel back to the bare wood, grey-green mould softening the outlines. They turned down the long gravel driveway, old caravans and trailers one side, sheep grazing farmland the other. The land was rough, fence posts at angles, hillocks and dips, rushes growing up through the grass, birds resting on the rumps of sheep, rusting tractor parts. Fortunately, it was a weekday so the pool wouldn’t be full of fathers and their weekend children. They rolled to a slow stop in the almost empty car park.

Oliver wasn’t quite ready to stop. ‘Isn’t it important to remember your childhood, to know how you were made up? That’s what you used to say. You used to be all on about the inner child, the free child. You used to say the authentic adult has to grow from the free child.’

‘Exactly,’ Alice responded. ‘You can’t grow a healthy adult from a traumatized child, so why spend years and years in therapy exploring the trauma. Find memories of the happy child, bring them back to life, keep those qualities alive in the adult. Takes a lot of courage. Happiness scares people – too much freedom in it.’

Her voice started to soar, like a gull carried in updrafts from the sea, wings a brilliant white in the sun.

‘The free child goes exploring and adventuring, like the fool in the tarot, not looking back.’ She paused. ‘Freedom lies beyond all memories, good and bad – took me a long time to understand that.’

Oliver sat like a rock. She turned to face him directly. 'Memories aren't set in concrete. You can change them.'

'It's not that simple. Some memories won't let go.' He almost spat the words out.

'If they won't let go, you have to find out why you're holding on. They aren't more real than anything else.'

'They made me up.'

He got out stiffly, opened the back door and handed Alice her towel, wrapped with her togs and soap, then slammed the door hard so it bounced shut. They walked either side of the pool to the concrete-block changing sheds, through cold puddles on the concrete, wafting steam, past grass and the barbecue tables beyond.

Three days out of Vanuatu, the wind turns back to the south-east, a broad reach, and *Dream-maker* is surfing. The pencil crosses on the chart leap-frog the distance to New Caledonia. Dad recovers from being sea sick. Cornelius tells us through the VHF that his leg is getting worse. He can't sit for any length of time and wants to stop at the Loyalties before the long sail up the coast of New Caledonia. I ask Dad.

'It's illegal to stop before checking in at Noumea, but as long as we don't go ashore we should be fine.'

I relay this to Cornelius.

'Great. Over and out.'

We estimate it will take us about fourteen hours to get from Ile de Mare to Havana Pass, the narrow entrance to the west coast of New Caledonia. We could stop at Ile de Mare overnight. If we leave the following afternoon and sail through the next night we'll arrive at Havana Pass with the dawn. I relay this information to Cornelius.

'Great. I'll stand off Tiga Island until morning so we can sail to Ile de Mare together.'

The night sky is huge, complex constellations of stars without meaning until we make one up. Some of the stars no longer exist, even though I can still see them. The moon runs silver in the sea. It clings to the sea for a while, then lets it go, clings to me and then lets me go. I stare into the sea, endlessly breaking and reforming, silenced just beneath the surface. Sometimes the movement seems like a mirage, that we aren't moving at all, there's only form and colour playing on the screen of mind.

By morning, the wind is swinging backwards and forwards, a reckless jaunt. We stay attentive and tune the sails to suit. Cornelius is already at Tiga Island. He arrived in the night and has been motoring back and forth, waiting. We're two hours away. We call again.

‘This is *Fantasie*. Yes, I copy. Over.’

‘We’ll sail directly to Ile de Mare and meet you there. It’ll take us about four hours.’

‘Sure.’ His voice is heavy. He’s overtired.

Every day we trawl for fish – in vain, until now. A loud whirring starts up. I wonder at the sound.

‘We have a fish!’ Dad exclaims. He climbs over to the rod. ‘Roll up the headsail, quickly.’

‘Why?’

‘To slow the boat down, so I can wind it in without breaking the line.’

Handle in the winch, I turn it fiercely against the wind in the sail (mechanical advantage) to roll the headsail up, sheet between my knees. The flapping stops.

‘Stand by with the gaff,’ he shouts.

I grab the three-pronged wooden stick to shove it into the gills and help the fish out of the water, spinning and thrashing, heavy enough to break a line. I hadn’t imagined I could help. The fish lands in the cockpit.

‘It’s a small skipjack tuna. See the bright purple stripes.’ Dad looks delighted.

I stare down from on high at it thrashing and skidding over the washboards. He pours vodka into its gills and it stops moving straight away. Dead. I jump down for a close look. Dead fish are a sad sight.

Without her glasses, everyone was fuzzy and wobbly in the warm, wet air. Alice rolled her clothes neatly into an outside cubby hole, tripped back across the cold concrete and slipped down into the warmth sliding up. It washed over her, letting her arms float out, legs float, as she bounced into the middle, feet kicking up, head under, a few breaststrokes back to the side to wait for Oliver. Something had upset him. His face went grey in the car. She hardly recognized the body coming out of the men's changing shed – thin, shoulders sunk over – too many years at a computer, not enough sun. She'd let go of him when he wouldn't stay in touch. Visited a few times. He was usually working, wouldn't take time off.

He smiled, dived in and swam underwater to her side.

'I can still do it,' he spluttered, brushing the water off his face.

Alice swam a few lengths for the exercise, slowly in the heat, hands sweeping wide like angel wings – amongst drifting steam, romancing couples, an older gentleman with his Asian wife, a pregnant woman, mates play-fighting, faces glowing in wet steam.

Oliver reappeared from his subterranean explorations.

'The really hot one,' he pointed. 'Children weren't allowed. You and Marion would hang out there.'

They clambered over the cold concrete again. This one was far too hot for swimming, for even soaking. They hung their bodies over the concrete wall. Oliver started going grey again. He started moving, jiggling, kicking his legs.

'Do you remember when I was thirteen, that time I went sailing with Dad and David?'

'You mean the time David drowned? Of course I remember.'

She was very fond of David. He was a family friend. Never married.

'I've never told anyone what happened.'

Heat rushed to his face. Alice looked straight at him.

Did he dare? He had to find some way to let it go. Was he going to faint? The water was too hot. He lifted out further.

‘What do you mean? It was an accident.’ Alice said.

He kicked his feet, breathed a bit.

‘I want to tell you what happened. Dad’s gone. Then maybe I can let it go.’

Alice looked at him. His skin looked sickly green in the light, yellow in the water. She had wondered.

‘I’m listening.’

‘We’d sailed across the harbour to Waiheke for the day and were on our way home. Dad was steering and looking after the sails. The wind was gusting up, I think. Maybe David and I should have been helping.’ His voice stuttered. ‘I’ll be back.’

He climbed out and headed into the changing rooms. David was soft, earnest, considerate – probably gay. She’d wondered about him and Damian, even him and Oliver. He was so demonstrably affectionate to them all. They all loved him.

Oliver returned and climbed back in.

‘David and I were in the cockpit. David was helping me tie bowlines and other knots, and we were play fighting, having fun. I couldn’t get the rabbit down the hole. Then I got it and started tying bowlines all around the cockpit, around the stays and shackles and things. David was telling a story and we were laughing. He and Dad were drinking, they were both a bit drunk. Dad wasn’t happy – his face was all screwed up, particularly when David had his arm around me to help with the knot. David made some joke to him and went up to be friendly. I didn’t hear what he said. Something in Dad’s eyes scared me, a kind of animal terror. He had another whiskey and another beer. I didn’t like it.’

Oliver stopped. His eyes were losing focus, the pool lights were too yellow, turning into rainbows leaping in the grey sky. He waited, till he could breathe again.

‘Dad asked David to go up on deck with him, to help him reef the main. I took the tiller. I wanted to go down into the cabin, to get away from them both.’

He took off into the middle of the pool, arms sweeping, fighting the heat swirling up, the threatening tears, holding onto himself, moving his legs, noticing the movement so he could be distracted, to get a grip on his emotions.

Damian didn't even like sailing. Even though it was his, David let him skipper the boat, a small twenty-five foot centre-board.

An Asian couple stepped down into the sauna pool. The woman took one look at Oliver pacing through the heat, arms flapping, wild-eyed, then shifted her gaze across to Alice, who nodded that she was okay, and then led her partner away, back to the main pool. Oliver didn't seem to notice. He returned to the concrete wall, some distance from Alice.

'Dad told me to keep heading for the tip of Brown's Island.' Alice moved a little closer so she could hear. 'So I did. Took a lot of concentration. The boat kept swinging. I was scared of it swinging right around on a wave, of the boom coming across and knocking them both into the water. I didn't know how to steer. They were up on deck. There was an argument and Dad punched him.'

Oliver stopped again. 'Dad's very strong, much stronger than David. It wasn't fair. David wobbled and Dad punched him again and David grabbed at the lifelines, to pull himself back. The boat swung around and rolled over a wave and the boom lifted up and crashed down. He wobbled as the boat lifted up and rolled over on its side and then his knees gave way.'

Oliver swallowed and became rigid, to stop from falling after him, to stop from crumbling. He started crying. He sobbed and sobbed. Alice stayed near, her hand on his back. She didn't say anything. Finally, Oliver looked up and kept going through the jerking sobs.

'He fell overboard, head first. I'll never forget the splash, the sound of his body hitting the water. I dropped the tiller. Dad yelled at me and then at David. He leaped back into the cockpit to stop the boom swinging right across and yelled at me to get down. David's head came out of the water. He looked scared, but he was okay.'

Oliver's voice started racing, like he was telling a story he'd told himself over and over, a story that never let him go.

'He looked so scared. The boat was racing forward in the wind and he started to slip behind us, until I could hardly see him, for the waves lifting up in front. Dad yelled at me to throw the life buoy over. I couldn't undo it. I tried and tried. My fingers wouldn't work. Dad pulled the boat up into the wind to come about and then he got the motor going so we could turn around more quickly. I finally got the life belt off and threw it into the water, but David was nowhere to be seen. David was gone, taken by sharks. I started crying and crying. Dad was shaking, more than me. He started roaring, screaming. He was about to leap in after David, but he didn't – he had to look after me. He hadn't meant this to happen. It was an accident.'

Oliver screamed out: 'It wasn't an accident!' He stopped talking, to let himself calm down. 'It wasn't an accident.'

'We kept sailing around in a circle looking for David. Dad went crazy, screaming at David to come back. We caught a glimpse, I think I caught a glimpse a long way off, but when we finally got the boat over there, there was no one. The waves were too high, we couldn't see anything. We didn't know where he was. Dad finally said we'd have to go home. It was getting dark and we wouldn't be able to find our mooring in the dark. There was nothing more we could do. He sat me down. He told me that he would go to prison for the rest of his life if anyone knew what had happened. I thought it was all my fault. They were fighting over me. Dad said we had to say it was an accident – that David had slipped while he was on deck, drunk; that he'd fallen overboard by accident. I never told anyone. I've never told anybody until now.'

'Not even your wife?'

'Not even Marie. I tried to forget.'

There was a long pause and finally Oliver, his face quivering – wanting to cry again, but determined not to – turned towards Alice and leaned into her. Her arms folded around him while he sobbed and sobbed.

‘I loved David. I loved David.’ He said it over and over. He slipped back down into the water. ‘I don’t think a day goes past without remembering. I went to Canada to get away, so I didn’t have to see Dad any more. I still have nightmares.’

His voice was shaking but he kept going. He had to get it all out. ‘I hear David calling. Dad is yelling at me, yelling at us both. I’m David, we’re both drowning. Dad is on deck stretching out his arms as the sea takes us both away. There is nothing he can do. We sink under the waves and everything goes very still and quiet and I am drowning and then I wake up and sometimes I’m screaming and calling for David.’

Oliver’s body started shuddering again, gasping at the truth of what was still unacceptable. Fortunately they were alone in the overbearing heat.

Alice held onto her tears, she held onto the concrete wall to stay steady. A terrible trembling surge belted through Oliver’s body.

His voice became hard. ‘I know it wasn’t my fault. Dad let me think it was, so I wouldn’t say anything, so I’d keep quiet. I gave up. I didn’t believe life was good anymore.’

Alice broke into the pause.

‘You wouldn’t go to counselling?’

‘I couldn’t. I’d have told the truth. That’s why Dad said I didn’t have to go. I hope he’s rotting in hell somewhere. I died so he could live. It’s meant to be the other way around.’

‘It is,’ she replied quietly. ‘Maybe you can have your life back now. It wasn’t your fault.’

‘I keep having nightmares that I *am* Dad, it *is* my fault. I couldn’t concentrate at school.’ He laughed a ghastly crackle. ‘If I didn’t exist I wouldn’t feel anything, I’d be safe.’ His head started shaking. ‘I can’t afford to want anything for myself.’

He smiled a small grimace, swung his legs over the side and pulled up to standing. Then he stepped across the concrete, dived back into the first pool and torpedoed under the surface, the full length of the pool. Her hand went to her heart as it lurched and her breath stopped. She hadn’t understood at all. He’d been all alone in his grief, betrayed,

trapped by unspoken rage, locked away in hell. Then she breathed again. The worst was over. He would be okay now. She plucked herself from the heat, crossed back over to the main pool and slipped in after him.

On the way home they stopped at Kaiaua for fish'n'chips. Best fish ever, sweet and juicy and thick, just as they remembered. Car facing the sea, radio on softly, they unfolded the fat-saturated newspaper, squeezed out the tomato sauce and stubbed in the fatty chips.

‘Do you think I have a chance?’ he blurted out. ‘Can I ever forgive Dad?’

‘Of course you can. You must. To be free of Damian you must let him go. He’s responsible for what happened, not you.’

Oliver thought for a bit as spatters of rain danced over the windscreen and gulls came close, to fight over fish batter he’d dropped. Another car pulled up and raucous music blared into their conversation.

Alice went on. ‘The memories, the pain and confusion belong to you, though, not Damian. They are your responsibility.’

He closed the window and slowly took another chip. This was a difficult conversation. He stared into a sea which was totally oblivious to his pain, one moment prancing in the sun, the next dark and withholding. He saw the wind sweeping through the long grass, creating waves as it passed.

‘What’s inside you isn’t permanent. Memories aren’t forever. You can let them go. You don’t have to keep looking back. Find a way to let go and move on.’

The windows started fogging up. She peeled the thick batter from a piece of juicy fish and Oliver squeezed another sachet of tomato sauce and stuffed a few more chips in.

‘Mum, what happened to you? You and Marion used to moan about your mother all the time, go on about how sad you were as children, how abandoned you felt.’

Alice felt embarrassed. ‘I thought the memories were so real. I was wrong – took ages to let them go. They’d frozen in me, as icy rage. The last time I went sailing with

Cornelius, through Papua New Guinea, something changed. When I came home I saw her differently. I'd let her into my heart. I had a mother.'

Oliver scrunched up the fatty paper and left to deposit it in the rubbish bin. He stood staring out to sea then came back to the car.

'I want my life back. Anything else is too painful to imagine.'

Alice turned directly to him.

'Find what gives you joy and follow it. You need courage for that. Don't look back. The past isn't alive.'

They drove through the dark, lemon-yellow pools of light shining ahead of them – bright eyes of an opossum. Oliver scrolled the radio stations for the best tunes.

'Mum, why don't you go and see Emilee. She's so moody. Happy one day, down in the dumps the next. Don't know what's wrong with her. I could do with a couple of days on my own, to think things over.'

'Do you think so?'

'Yes, I think you should.'

The headlights shone on the house, lighting up the overhang, the porch and front door and Alice left them on so they could find their way inside easily.

She hung out their towels and togs and they both went to bed early.

Our rendezvous is the main harbour of Ile de Mare, in front of the small village. We scan the bay, motoring back and forth. I tidy the boat and re-tidy. I refold the blankets and wipe out the sink, again.

‘Maybe he’s decided to carry on to the pass.’ Dad suggests.

‘No, that’s not possible.’

‘I don’t know what to do now,’ he frets.

We keep motoring back and forth, losing patience. I scan every part of the sea and coast through the binoculars, almost giving up, when far off, around the corner of a headland, a faint patch of red bobs up above the waves. It disappears, then bobs back up.

‘Dad, have a look.’

I take the wheel so he can. The flash of red slips below the waves. A thin white mast marks the spot. I turn the boat. It must be him. I rush up on deck to wait. We motor in. *Fantasie* is almost on top of the coral.

‘*Fantasie*,’ I call, in a steady voice. Cornelius pokes his head out, then climbs up into the fresh air.

‘What are you doing here?’ My heart leaps at the sight of him, while I keep my voice steady to hide my delight, because I’m cross at him.

‘These are the coordinates you gave me,’ he replies.

‘Wait a minute.’ I disappear down to check the chart, legs wobbly, swinging the dividers in from the margins, counting and measuring with absolute precision.

‘The chart’s wrong. Our coordinates put you in front of the village over there. Guess you were using your GPS. We’ve been ages looking for you.’

Dad looks at the coral. ‘We can’t stay here – too exposed. We’ll go over to the village and check it out.’

He turns to Cornelius. 'We'll call on the VHF.'

'Sure, I'll follow as soon as I hear from you.'

Dream-maker quietly motors through the sea back towards the village.

My heart leaps free as I march over the deck – a sudden awakening, an exuberance. I'm in love again – with Cornelius, with life, with everywhere boasting the glorious, triumphant miracle of anything at all. I become swept into the oozing, flowing, bursting radiance around me. I slip through the boundaries, into the qualities – the silky flowing of the water, the oozing porosity, the stubbornness of volcanic clumps of rock, slippery bubbling green algae - all of it overflowing with brilliant presence, alive in the happening. The whole world is spinning in the darting, winging, soaring, shaping, flooding forth from the light.

We anchor at a distance from shore, far enough away for it to look like there are toy Renaults and Peugeots rolling back and forth along the waterfront, and plasticine pedestrians, with moving legs and arms, walking down the street past green Lego trees and smooth white buildings. Near to us, a rusting barge rubs its bottom against the shore, dispensing gravel to the busy bulldozer, which dumps it onto a nearby truck. Men toil and machines grumble.

Cornelius arrives and anchors nearby. Only much later does he come over. I hover, waiting for some attention, while I make cups of tea and sit down next to him and pass a tin of peanuts. He talks to Dad about Andrew and his girlfriend, and how they need to find more money to keep sailing. I serve a simple dinner of rice and stir-fry veggies.

'Thank you,' he says politely. 'Jack, wouldn't you rather Alice marry a Kiwi?'

My heart sinks. I wait the evening out, confused and impatient.

'See you tomorrow, Jack.'

'Bye, Dad, see you for coffee in the morning.'

He climbs down into his dinghy and I follow.

I bide my time, until we are on his boat. I need to know what has become of us. I take him and hold him close, my arms tight around him until I can feel it growing in him, pouring into me. I smile – a laughing inside me. It is still there. He does still love me. And then I realize that what I call forth I am responsible for. We snuggle and kiss and talk. My spider front legs keep spinning this love that I am responsible for. And in the moment when I pause from my spinning, I wonder how I can swing so much in my affection for him, why I keep rearranging him in my mind, why I am pushing him away and then pulling him towards me. And in that moment I realize that he is the shape of my mind, he is everything in me that stands in the way of choosing a good destination and sailing a true course. He is from a dark hole inside me where love and fear keep twisting up.

On her way to Emilee's, Alice drove down the coast into the Coromandel township and stopped for coffee. She'd been surprised none of her children had followed her into a scrutiny of the endless labyrinth of the mind. A few sparrows hopped in the sun waiting for crumbs. For a time she'd leapfrog from retreat to retreat, across the watery swamp of her life, just staying afloat. She remembered settling in her cabin, turning to look directly at her mind, to get some clues. 'Know thyself.' This is what all the teachers, in all the different traditions, had said. She *would* know herself. She would look into the nature of her thoughts – those persistent, troublesome occupants – look at them directly, not just think them, but see what they were.

Alice put the empty cup down and stretched her legs into the sun. She had wanted to know what kind of place her thoughts inhabited. When she looked closely, she noticed that they lived in a different space from physical objects: a space inside ordinary space, a different dimension. She looked more closely. Some of the images rose up behind her, some in front of her, and when she really concentrated the space got tight around her head. She noticed a connection between the images and sensations in her body. Every memory or thought was accompanied by a feeling or a sensation. It seemed at first that her feelings were in ordinary space, the space of her body, and her thoughts were in mental space.

She was very curious about the relationship. It occurred to her that the image and the feelings were different parts of the same event. Then it occurred to her that all her experience was mental; experience was a mental phenomenon. Now she was in trouble. What she had always thought to be physical was mental as well. She couldn't find a clear distinction between physical and mental, her body and mind. How could her body exist in a physical space, when all her experience of it existed in a mental space? What was physical space then? If all experience is mental, then what did the word physical mean? She had so many questions that didn't have answers. She loved it. Her questions were like wings lifting her beyond the mundane.

Alice smiled at her remembered excitement, the pride she had felt in her investigations. She'd come to the conclusion that because all experience was mental, the physical world wasn't real.

Emilee was carrying a large bundle of wind-dried washing. She dashed inside, then came back out to give Alice a big hug and take her bag. A flurry of conversation followed, about the children, Oliver, Valerie, Charlotte. They talked like they hadn't seen each other for ages, when it had only been a couple of weeks. Alice hadn't visited the farm in a long while. They settled in the living room – wall-to-wall creamy-brown flecked carpet, standard lamps, large matching armchairs and sofas, a bookcase full of books and magazines and a large TV on a kauri cabinet stuffed with electronics. Large windows and ranch sliders overlooked land rolling up into the hills on the east and down to the sea on the west.

Emilee brought in tea for them both. Alice admired her long loose hair, streaked with some grey now, and her strong features: wide mouth, Roman nose, high forehead. She was still beautiful. The tight-fitting jeans and loose merino pullover looked almost glamorous on her long body. Bob, Emilee's husband and the farm manager, was steady as a rock. He was still out on the farm. Alice was grateful for this quality in him and his open, reliable affection for Emilee and the children. The children were at hockey practice. Roast lamb, poked with rosemary and garlic, cooked slowly in the oven, bubbling in juices, filling the house with good smells. The old tabby cat sauntered over, looked up to consider and then leaped into Alice's lap. It pawed at her corduroy trousers and turned around and around, tail high, bum in her face, and started purring as Alice scratched the roots of its ears. Alice put down her red bush tea, to give Willowby the full treatment. Fur came out on her green jersey and dribbles of pleasure oozed over her trousers.

'Mum, I've been learning to meditate.' Emilee turned her almond eyes up, squinting a little, slight furrow in her lined brow. 'Seem to have spent most of my life not wanting to, but some friends are into it. It seems to help them.' She jumped up. 'Have to turn the lamb. Hold on.'

Alice settled back in her chair. Was it a surprise? She looked around the room, at the tasteful paintings and the ornaments. Oliver's story could have unsettled her, but she was relieved to know the truth. She accepted life now, whatever came her way, without feeling so responsible, without having to take control. She'd come a long way. She was glad her oldest daughter was getting into meditation and she was surprised how much she remembered of her early retreats. Emilee seemed to be taking a while. Maybe she'd been distracted by another chore. She could hear a car, maybe the children being dropped off. The back door opened.

'Mum, can you help me in the kitchen? Large bunches of glossy silver beet and the more rugged grey kale lay in heaps on the wooden bench.

'Your job is to find the snails and slugs. The girls don't like that job.'

Ruth and Amelia were browsing the kitchen for food. They hugged their Nana and asked how long she was staying. Amelia's hair had been cut into a cute bob and Ruth was stretching out long, like Emilee, and a bit serious maybe. The girls chomped on fruit and cheese and sat down at the table to listen in to the conversation.

'Tell me about your meditation. What are you doing?' Alice asked.

'Maggie, an older woman, runs classes at her home once a week – creative visualisation classes, I guess. She was a feminist I think, back in the seventies, never married, has a pretty face and she's a darling. I certainly feel calm and happy at the end of her classes. Ruth is thinking of coming with me, aren't you Ruth?'

Ruth nodded weakly.

'She has trouble sleeping. Thought it might help her relax.'

'What a good idea.' Alice replied.

'What kind of meditation did *you* do? Seemed to be all you ever did for a while. Pissed us kids off, you know. I understand now, but then I didn't. We had to stay with Dad. He got pretty grumpy. He didn't like you going off at all.'

She wiped her hand briskly on her apron, pulled out an oven rack and turned the pumpkin and potatoes.

‘Smells great.’ Alice replied. ‘You’re a better cook than me, darling. I’ll go check the fire.’

Alice walked into the other room. Did she feel ganged up on? She wasn’t sure.

She pushed in a couple more logs – plenty of firewood on a farm. Amelia was setting the table. Willowby was slurping up cat biscuits she’d regurgitated. Alice started on the roux sauce for the greens, melting butter over a low flame.

Ruth started talking, head over the chopping board. ‘I’ve been doing some meditation at school. Our geography teacher goes to Vipassana in the school holidays. We meditate for ten minutes at the start of his class. We have to watch our breath and count down from ten. If we get distracted, we have to start again.’

‘Well, well,’ Alice replied. ‘How do you find it?’

‘I’m surprised how often I lose count.’

Ruth looked up from the silver beet and relaxed her grip on the knife. Green curls slipped off the board.

‘Seemed such an easy thing to do. I’m starting to notice how busy my mind is, it never stops. Didn’t realize that before. Mr John said one of the most important discoveries is to realize just how busy and out of control our minds are.’

Alice lifted up her wooden spoon and shifted the pan off the flame. She looked directly at Ruth.

‘The interesting question is: “Are you your mind and, if you are, then who’s in control?”’

Amelia and Ruth suddenly froze and stared back at her, like she’d said something outrageous and totally ridiculous.

‘What do you mean, “Who’s in control”? I’m in control, of course.’ Ruth almost shouted.

‘Really?’

Emilee turned around from the kitchen bench.

‘That approach to meditation is scary. I’ve seen a lot of messed-up people coming out of vipassana retreats. My teacher is different. We don’t analyze ourselves into non-existence – that’s dangerous. We create positive images, good feelings, so we can feel good about ourselves.’

There was a moment of silence. The girls looked at Alice, waiting.

‘That’s fine.’ Alice replied. ‘But where’s the freedom in that. Feeling good doesn’t have anything to do with freedom.’

‘What do you mean, Mum?’ Emilee put down the measuring cup and flour. ‘I feel free of my negative states for ages after her class.’

‘Great. But what when you can’t go to her class? Positive affirmations are like taking a drug to feel good. One day the drug doesn’t work. What then?’

The three of them looked at Alice uncomprehendingly.

‘Freedom means not needing to be in a good state to be happy.’

‘Dinner’s almost ready. Mum, here’s the salted flour to stir in. Amelia, call your Dad.’

Alice let it go. Maybe it didn’t matter anymore. She remembered the Zen saying: *First there is a mountain, then there isn’t, then there is.* The path to freedom. The path the Buddha taught.

‘I’d like to pick a few flowers for the table, Emilee. Your camellias are so stunning. Do I have a couple of minutes?’

‘Sure. I’m just making the gravy. Bob can slice the meat.’

Alice picked secateurs off the table in the hall and walked outside. It was almost dark. She sat down on the steps. Meditation wasn’t a Band-Aid, the mind wasn’t a curiosity, the spiritual path wasn’t a jaunt. She’d given her life to this path. She remembered how like a detective, a scientist, she’d been on her grand adventure of hunting down the self, determined to put on trial this voracious beast that wreaked such havoc in the world.

She remembered how on a retreat, she'd be walking through the pine forest, ferreting around for its possible hiding hole. A warm day, dusty pine pollen flying past, rotting vegetation underfoot. Not to understand the nature of self was to be subject to blind becoming, a victim of the body, happy when the sun came out, sad when it rained. That's what Tenzin had said. The work she was doing was important. Thoughts, feelings, sensations were too ephemeral for consideration. Even Oliver understood that, in theory. So what was the self? Then she'd had an intuitive sense it existed. What was this sense? A moment of inspiration, like a light, had burst her open as she walked on under the trees. It was the part that made the choices, set things in motion. She was the doer. Of course, that was it.

She'd tested her hypothesis. She'd rushed back to her cabin, over-excited, no time to waste. She chose the action of walking, noting each part of the step, looking for the doer, the actor that set it all in motion, as her foot lifted and moved forward. Her foot moved all on its own! She could make it move only when she told it to, but that seemed awkward, unnatural. It wasn't the way she usually walked. As she slowed down and investigated even further, she started to see into the orderly, complex way her mind monitored the sensations – interpreting, overseeing, orientating, choosing, making the decision to lift. She watched it all and it dawned on her that this complicated activity was the elusive 'I' or the ego. It wasn't the answer she was expecting. 'I' wasn't an entity. There was no entity, there was nothing more than mental processing behind the activity of walking. There was no actor. An actor is a made-up concept with no reality. She started to shake and tingle with this astounding discovery. She walked out and spread out on the grass. She didn't know what she was meant to do with this understanding. She didn't know how shaky her sense of self was. She had thought she was done with it. She had thought she was liberated.

Alice returned with long stems of early pink sasanqua and golden-throated red blooms. She found an old glass milk bottle under the sink and arranged them nicely for the table. Bob was very friendly over dinner and asked after her mother and what she thought about the election coming up. Alice did like Bob – his clean features, soft brown hair, face ruddy and tanned from the wind and weather. A lot like her own father, she realized. He held his knife and fork like work implements and helped himself to seconds

and thirds. They talked about the funeral, how well it had gone, the music, how Damian didn't have to suffer any more. Ruth and Amelia gobbled their food. Alice, mostly a vegetarian, relished the juicy slabs of lamb, smothered in rich gravy.

'Mum, I didn't quite get what you meant.' Emilee persisted when there was a sufficient pause. 'I thought you believed in focusing on the good, on our strengths, and leaving the difficulties alone, letting them pass naturally. That's what you used to say to me. Don't cling, don't hold on. That's what I try to do when I get depressed, which isn't often.'

Alice swallowed a thick piece of gristle, almost choking, and reached for a glass of water. It didn't seem quite the place for this conversation.

'You're right, darling, partly. Of course we're meant to cultivate the positive. However, freedom lies in knowing who we are. Like Ruth was saying about her class. All the thoughts, feelings and memories that fill the day – are we our good thoughts and not our bad thoughts? It's easy to set up a conflict, a seesaw, so we only accept ourselves when we're happy and hate ourselves when we're not. We swing through all the emotions, like the wind; it's natural.'

She paused to look around the table. 'The point is not to cling to any state, to see it all as a passing show. Behind the show, behind the clinging, is freedom, a spacious happiness, independent of the activity of the mind. Seeing clearly into the empty nature of everything is vipassana. We all want to be happy. Samatha is cultivating the virtues, bliss, tranquility and clarity to find this happiness. You're doing this in your classes. It is important to cultivate the mind, but it can be a trap. We want to cling to the good states. That's where I got caught, for years, clinging to the bliss states. I'm just warning you.'

'Then how do you get out of depressed states. That's more my problem. Going to these classes really helps.' Emilee argued.

She passed the salt to Bob and the plate of roast vegetables to the girls.

Alice put down her fork, careful not to lay it in the gravy swimming around her plate and she concentrated on what she wanted to say.

'You're not bound to any state. The emotions are energies moving through the body. A depressed state is a pattern of energy. You can use it constructively, rather than being

swamped by it. This is tantra, but impossible while you're clinging to or pushing away. I'm talking from years of experience, of being caught up in all my states. I was a slow learner. That's all.'

She reached for the butter, to smother the kale.

'My teacher used to say: *Consciousness which has no legs rides winds which have no eyes.*'

Tiga and Ile de Mare are part of the Loyalty Islands, still owned by France, I read up. “A popular tourist destination.” We can’t land. In the 1800s, Europeans traders came for the sandalwood and whales, and missionaries came for the souls. The local people are Melanesian.

Cornelius may have slipped a disc, whatever that means, or have cancer, eating him out from the inside. His voice rises to a high pitch, almost terror. ‘What does cancer feel like?’ He swallows more painkillers to reduce the sharp pain shooting down his leg.

We’re protected from the easterly inside a rocky buttress of volcanic rock and decide to stay a second night. At nightfall the wind turns to a westerly, blowing straight in. Dad gets worried and wants to tie up to the breakwater, with its concrete road and huge hardwood rails and giant bronze bollards for the inter-island ferry that comes in twice a week. The night hangs heavy over the sea as I bob on the dark water between the boats, to help him, energizer headlamp pouring a pale circle of light bouncing off the waves, settling on the hull of *Dream-maker*, on the sea, on the splashing oars.

Cornelius calls after me, now he’s woken up to the wind moaning and straining the anchor and swinging the boat around. ‘I’ll move as well, so come back and help when you can.’

I row backwards and forwards through the night, clambering on board to lift one anchor and then the other, men at the helm, driving their boats onto the anchor chains to help, a low warbling rumble, propellers driving the boats over to the breakwater. I row the lines ashore, secure the dinghy on the ladder, then climb up the rusting, encrusted rungs to cleat the thick curled ropes around the great bollards. I’m happy in my work, bouncing over the sea, flicking the water with my oars, stars breaking through light cloud, the taste of salt and the smell of sea on the wind and the stain and smell of diesel on the breakwater, the shining puddles, the spacious, protective dark inside me – I’m quiet inside the howling wind - and the lines woven around the great bollards.

The wind is rising and *Fantasie* bangs against the hard rubber stoppers meant for ships not small boats – an uncomfortable thumping – and it feels like we could break. We sit through the thuds, the boat jerking and bending, slapping and twisting.

Cornelius snaps. 'We'd be safer in the harbour, maybe a little further out for safety.'

This time I leap the gap between boat and breakwater, bare-footed, down onto sharp gravel. A stony slop sprays up around my ankles, squeezing up inside my toes.

Cornelius pulls the rope back into the cockpit, and I reach across to the lifelines and swing neatly back on board. He steps up onto the squab in the cockpit to check our new anchorage, but in the dark his foot goes down on a wet leather cushion which slides with his foot away from him, wrenching muscles in his groin, as his other leg crumbles, and he collapses half way between the seat and the cockpit floor and then lands with a loud thump. A great roar rises from our cockpit, trembling out into the unforgiving night.

'My leg, my good leg! What am I going to do now?'

I stare down as he hauls himself up. 'I can't put any weight on it. I'm a total cripple. What am I going to do?'

He staggers inside, holding to the sides of the companionway. 'What if I can't walk at all in the morning?'

I offer tea and a soothing voice. He's not interested. He drags himself into the for'ard bunk and collapses. I curl up in the saloon. It'll be the first good night's sleep for either of us in four days, what's left of it.

Cornelius is prodding and calling. The surface breaks through, shadows of daylight and wood. I swim away. His image appears and is gone as I tumble back through floods of fine shivering bliss, a shimmering, gleaming light, sinking, forever sinking, into fine threads weaving through space, a dark warm space. There he is again, sitting close, calling. My eyes flicker, too far away, sinking, floating in silk, in union with *her*. *She* has me in *her* arms, holding me, *her* breath, a whisper that is almost too fine and I follow the whisper until I am almost too fine to feel anything at all, but I can and it is so exquisite. I must leave. *She* sends me away. I drag myself to sitting, for my cold tea and plate of gluggy porridge. Cornelius slept well, is well again. I am clear and light-hearted. Cornelius would chatter the whole day away – meaningless, distracted chatter. I don't want it. I want to stay inside myself where I can be close to *her*.

I lay mats down on the saloon floor for some yoga. *She* lives inside the poses. He hovers, bemused, then unfolds his charts to check the next passage and remixes his trays of CDs.

As if for the first time, I move into simple postures and become the shape of the cobra, the plough, bow and shoulder stand. My mind follows my body into the shapes, letting my breath shape me from the inside, twisting and untwisting my mind through corridors of bone, muscle and flesh, upside down and inside out, breathing – long deep breathing. I finally sink into the corpse pose, staying in my breath, in the sensations of the body. Mind soft, body relaxed, all given up, trusting, certain that life is good underneath all the breaking and tearing and mixing that goes on at the surface. Everything is beautiful, relaxing into the boat swinging silently, rolling and swaying, in the broken ocean swell. Cornelius makes a fresh pot of coffee, on his two legs, as our special song soars into the saloon:

I'll remember you, when the north wind blows, among the fields of barley. I'll remember you ...among the fields of gold.'

I return to Dad's boat for the passage across to Havana Pass. With the wind just forward of the beam, we're soon rushing along, six to eight knots. Cornelius doesn't pick up the receiver when I call. I mark our progress on the chart. We're going to arrive early. No response when I call in the evening, so I burst into tears. He may have slipped again, or something worse. Dad wakes me at eleven. I'm not asleep though, I'm too worried. I have to reef the main, to slow us down – we don't want to arrive in the dark. On my way down below, his voice crackles through the VHF.

'I'm sorry – I slept through our scheduled call time. I'm fine.'

Because we're so close to our destination now, I stay up with Dad. Cornelius's yellow mast-head light – must be him – bobs up and down in the waves, over the horizon, then back into view. Fishing boats appear through the mist. I watch the port and starboard lights closely. If they don't change their relative positions, we're on a collision course and will have to turn away. The three lead lights of the pass come into view, black all around. We adjust our course until we have them in a straight, vertical line. If we keep them in a straight line, we'll be safe all the way in. I note the compass angle as we start

heading in, pitch black, nothing but lights ahead of us. Dad reduces speed, so we might see any trouble before it smashes into us. He loses his nerve, even though we have to be okay.

‘I’m going to turn around and head back into open sea until we can see what we’re doing.’

I give him the course, 180 degrees in reverse. I can hardly stand it, this retreating. It doesn’t make sense.

‘We have to be fine. Let’s head back in,’ I say.

He looks anxiously into the dark and doesn’t reply.

‘It’s almost dawn. We still have the lights in a line.’

We turn around again. The sky turns grey, shadows of land forming in the grey, at a safe distance. *Fantasie* reconstructs nearby, emerging from the morning mist. The easterly fades and the westerly returns. Impossible to sail, so we’ll have to motor the forty miles up to Port Moselle. Winds are always a problem. I’m overtired and collapse for a couple of hours, no more, so Dad can then sleep. I’m to follow Cornelius up the coast. At the wheel, a swamp of hopelessness sinks me. I’ve lost the thread of myself. I’ve become too responsible for these men, too mixed up in them. I don’t know who I am anymore. I hang onto the wheel, as if it will hold me up. I want to cry. Maybe I’m just tired. *Fantasie* is in very shallow water, so are we. My heart is racing as the water turns turquoise all around the boat, coral just under the surface. The depth sounder flickers: ten feet, eleven feet, nine feet. We draw six feet.

Hasn’t he noticed the danger? Maybe he’s asleep? What can I do? I look for bommies in front, but I can’t see well from the wheel. Dreadfully slowly, the water gets deep enough to relax. What was he thinking? Dad stirs when the VHF hisses. I am upset by the disturbance and his intrusion into the cockpit, into a space I need, time alone to rethread myself. Not enough time to do it now, so I stay miserably dispersed. We turn into Port Moselle and drop anchor in the outer harbour. Dad hands me a cool beer from the intermittently-working fridge. He crosses his legs and sets off into a metaphysical conversation, one that can never lead anywhere.

The evening with Emilee and the grandchildren continued in front of the fire. They were all curious about Alice's life. Oliver must have started it when he was here. Ruth tossed her long hair back over her shoulders.

'Nana, tell us about your retreats. Mum said you glowed when you came home, that you'd bring them presents. You were so happy. She said that, when she was older, she wondered if you had a lover.'

Emilee stared at Ruth and Alice stared at Emilee.

'Of course she would have. I was certainly in love, maybe with Tenzin, my teacher, but I was more in love with my adventuring.'

Amelia climbed up onto Alice's lap, which surprised Alice because Amelia was ten, not a "climbing into Nana's lap" kind of age.

'Tell us what happened?' she asked. 'A bedtime story.'

Alice looked at them all.

'Okay. I'd been hunting for myself.'

The girls laughed and pointed at her. 'There you are!'

'I had the whole day. Emilee and Charlotte were at school and I wasn't expecting visitors. I took the phone off the hook and stacked a couple of pillows on my bed.

'I quietened down on the breath, breathing in, breathing out, maybe counting down like you, Ruth, until my mind became a still pond, ruffled only by playful, tiny thoughts.

'When it was very quiet I let some memories float up, so I could investigate them, to see what they were telling me about myself. This was difficult, because either the memory disappeared as soon as I looked directly at it, or else I got caught up in it and forgot what I was doing.

'I started out with the naïve idea that I was the thinker of my thoughts, the great philosopher. But I was seeing thoughts arise and turn into more thoughts without me,

the supposed thinker, doing anything. The thinking was happening all by itself, a stream of thought images rushing past. That was very disconcerting, but not enough to put me off. I decided to shift my investigation, to look into the way my sense of “self” was constructed from thought images. I became like a very young child, not yet condensed into an entity – an object, something separate from my experiencing.’

Alice looked at Ruth. ‘It’s hard to imagine not being a thing with a name, but you weren’t always.’

‘I was curious. I saw myself picking up ideas from other people about this child, who was me. I was a girl, sometimes a pretty girl or a naughty child. I was called Alice, whoever this “I” was. It was unsettling and fun, sort of. It didn’t make sense at first. “That’s a good girl.” Who was the “that”? Something was separating out from my experience – an idea, an entity, a concept made up by other people. I used the words “me” and “I” by copying, not because I understood. Doing this made me angry sometimes, because something was being stolen away by the grownups, taken over. I was forgetting.

‘I slowed my mind down on the breath again, quiet and slow. I began to notice that all my experience was now being referred to this concept of self, which had its own view of everything. This self was shaping my experience.’

Alice paused again. ‘I was so excited in my exploring, like in a dark unfamiliar forest with a small flashlight.’

‘I saw my mind darting backwards and forwards, between the object and me, orientating me to it, explaining it. I became nauseous again, when I realized how out of my control this backwards and forwards separating activity was. I began to see that my mind was interpreting everything before I could be aware of what might really be here. It was imprisoning me inside previous views, interpreting everything against the template of the past. I was dead.

‘I wouldn’t accept it. I wanted some way out. Then I let it go and returned to just watching, quietening my mind on the breath. At some point in my investigation, and I didn’t see it happen, this backwards and forwards activity disappeared and I was just seeing. My mind was staying steady on what it was looking at. I’d broken through to a

different kind of seeing. It was extraordinary. I was directly in the experience, directly in the door, the window. I caught a glimmer of something else, a very exciting glimmer.

‘The door and the duvet were seeing themselves. Or rather there was no longer an observer, no longer an object observed – there was only seeing. Everything I had read that had sounded so confusing and illogical and contradictory was true. This was fantastic. My mind was very clear, without the distortion of self view.

‘When I looked out my bedroom window, the camellias and ponga logs glowed with an inner light. I got up and walked into the living room and looked at the table. I felt that I was the table, although I wouldn’t have expressed it quite like that. I kept walking around, stunned at the clarity of everything. The living room was full of winter sun, low enough now to come inside, but the room glowed with a different light, a crystal-clear light that was very sharp and precise, and that light seemed to go straight through me and everything in the room. We were all made of this light. It occurred to me that this light was conscious and behind this light there was nothing.’

Alice stopped; she was exhilarated and tired, both. The children were almost asleep. Only Emilee seemed to be still listening.

‘That almost made sense. What an adventure. I’ve had an experience, or something like it, a glimpse of that wonderful light. So that’s reality?’

‘That’s who you were before you were born, before you separated out. That the mind can separate out into a self and a world, that it can be born and become conscious of itself, maybe that’s the best miracle of all.’

She paused. ‘Both are aspects of reality, different perspectives of the unending play of light and mind.’

Alice stopped to stroke Amelia’s hair and feel the warm weight not wanting to move, snuggled against her chest.

‘For a long time I thought I was meant to stay unborn, just seeing. I thought that was the spiritual goal. No one told me otherwise. Actually we live in both worlds – a relative

world of concept and self and an unbounded world beyond the self. The wonder is in the dance between them, light and mind coiling up into worlds of experience.’

Alice lifted her bundle up, but Amelia wriggled to the ground, too old to be carried, and set off with eyes half closed. Emilee gave her Mum a big hug.

‘Sleep well.’

Alice brushed her teeth in front of the large shiny mirror, three bright bulbs along the top and the face of a wrinkled, chinless old woman she didn’t recognize. She tip-toed along the hallway to her room. In her bag was a nightie, not much else – one change of clothes, extra undies, some toiletries, a warm fleece, a raincoat and some walking shoes. At the bottom, Jack and Cornelius’s journals. She climbed into bed and wondered if she’d said too much, too little. She pulled out her father’s journal and flicked through to when they arrived in New Caledonia. She snuggled down under the covers and twisted the moving neck of the bedside lamp until the light was directly on the page.

I handed Alice a cold beer. She's been sullen and unhappy since we stopped at Isle de Mare. One can hardly blame her. Cornelius sailed on his own from Port Villa. Then he anchored in a very vulnerable place behind some reefs, incapacitated with sciatica. Going to his aid and helping out on both yachts in very difficult circumstances stretched Alice's seaman skills, not to mention emotions, to the limit. I'm intensely proud of her. We had stale crackers and cheese with the beer, as there's not much left. The crackers fell to pieces. Alice kept looking away. Couldn't tell what she was thinking. Never could with women.

I had plenty of time sailing up the coast of New Caledonia to indulge my hobby of thinking about metaphysics. I wrote some of my ideas down to share with Alice. 'The world out there is such an incredible place – the fantastic ocean with its changing forms and colours, the cloud formations, glorious sunrises and sunsets and the magic. The world itself just is. Not happy, sad, beautiful or ugly.' Alice sipped her beer and stayed quiet. Tired from the long passage, I expect. 'What is perceived is a creative act of the individual. It can't work any other way.'

If Alice understood this she wouldn't be so moody. Buddhism has a lot to answer for, with its unhealthy emphasis on suffering.

Eventually she nodded and left to get some olives and tomato. Good idea. I continued when she came back. I liked the logic of my ideas. Alice likes logic, she has a post graduate in philosophy.

'Behind every emotion and every action lies an underlying belief, or system of beliefs, not necessarily recognized by the individual but something that gives the emotion form.'

I'd taken a while to get the words just right.

'Yes, Dad. Buddhists say that as well.' That's what she said. Her tone was cutting. Anyway, I went on.

'Every individual has the total freedom, capacity and responsibility to create or change their belief systems according to their personal choice.'

That's when she got excited. She started shouting. I like it when she does. She said I was contradicting myself – that I didn't understand what I was saying. She said. "Where does your personal desire come from? If you don't know who you are how can you be free?" Then she stormed down to the galley to tidy up.

I guess she thought I was spouting a lot of simplistic New Age trivia. Obviously it was getting on her nerves and I'd better learn to keep my mouth shut in future.

I called down for her help with the sails. We tied on the covers, inflated the dinghy with a bicycle pump and threw it into the tide. We lowered the outboard, with a line tied to the rail just in case, then motored over to Fantasie for some company.

Alice put down the journal. She had hated those discussions. Neither of them understood what they were saying. She turned out the light and curled around her hot water bottle.



Cornelius takes a sleeping pill and spreads out all over our bed, so I wrap up alone in the saloon. A thirty-five knot westerly blowing right into the harbour starts tossing us around. Too deranged to sleep, I climb up into the cockpit and check our position against the other boats, to make sure we aren't dragging. Because of this, I sleep late into the morning and, when I finally surface under my orangey eyelids, I dive straight back down into dreaming. I stay dreaming to not wake up, but I have to. I climb up into a heavy mood set to break out into tears at the slightest poke. I creep around the boat, trying to be invisible. I'm full of horrible stories, of being a failure, of not being real, of just pretending. I don't know who I am anymore. I never did – I was just pretending.

I help with *Fantasie* and then *Dream-maker*, raising the anchors, bringing them in from the outer harbour. I seem to be stuck with this job. When the boats arrive at the marina, I tie them up with bowlines to buoys at the arrivals pontoon – free for a day, close to the action. Central city is only a couple of minutes walk away. I trouble over the operation of tying the first bowline. It all falls apart. Cornelius helps. I get the second one by myself. No time to get sucked into the dark nothing backside of the universe. Customs and immigration arrive and interrogate us about our illegal stopover. We arrived with the tell-tale red mud on our anchor chains.

After our clearance and welcome, Cornelius comes over to relax.

Dad is happy again, after a good sleep.

‘Well, Cornelius, I do like it here. What a relief to be back in civilisation.’

Cornelius stretches out his bad leg. ‘I like it too, Jack. The women are beautiful.’ His eyes wander over to shore – the café, passers-by strolling on the footpath and heading in for morning coffee and breakfast. ‘I could sit and look at the women all day.’

Dad would agree if he dared, but I’m here so he doesn’t.

Emilee and Alice sat out in the morning sun on the verandah, legs in the sun, sharing a pot of fresh lemon-verbena tea. Alice passed the plate of cookies she'd just made: oatmeal with chocolate chips. Hens scratched and cackled behind the wire-netted paddock close to the house. Alice used to keep hens at Orere. They fended for themselves free range in her garden when she was away and sometimes made trouble digging up the neighbours' gardens and nesting in the wood shed next door.

Large elms and liquidambars now shaded the driveway, bikes resting against the trunks and red and golden leaves fluttering to the ground. Underneath, jonquils splayed out in big bunches like the froth of a billowing green sea.

Emilee wanted to know more. 'I'd like to find a way into what you were doing. Oliver remarked on how different you are. He hasn't seen you for years. He's right.'

Alice finished her oatmeal cookie and poured some more tea.

'You're making me embarrassed. Life would be pretty difficult at my age, if I took anything too seriously.'

She filled Emilee's cup.

'I do feel different, though – more spacious. I get over upsets easily, let them go. Poof, they're gone. I care, do my best, but I'm not responsible. So I'm happy.'

Emilee lay on her stomach, pulling up her shirt for some sun, face in the shade.

'Tell me more of what you did.'

'Really?'

'Yes.'

'Most days, when you were at school, I'd sit for hours, boring into a word until it revealed itself. One day I picked "boundaries". I knew that a lack of good boundaries leads to personality problems. I didn't have any sense of the word. I usually felt amorphous, floating in and out of everything in a drifty way – either that or totally

disconnected, a hard shell, in a dark room with tiny peep holes. Never had boundaries with you kids. We shared towels, toothbrushes and beds. I was sitting on the pink sofa that day. Remember, the puppies had ripped all the scrim underneath and Blossom had clawed chicken pox into the arms.

Emilee sat up. ‘We were like a Noah’s Ark. Hens roaming around inside for the food the puppies didn’t want; pet rats crawling on Blossom’s back, living in our drawers; puppies demolishing our shoes and furniture. How could you stand the chaos?’

Alice laughed. ‘I loved it, I think. Anyway, I’d sit on the sofa and gaze out over the lawn, over the grape vine – our boundary – across the public reserve, mown by the council so it was tidy, over the pohutakawas hanging precariously from the cliff – another boundary – into the sea and the wide blue sky. I never got tired of stretching out into that view.’

Emilee nodded and stretched out further, like a cat.

‘I wanted to experience boundaries directly. I turned to the breath again and focused on the detail, the jumps and bounces of the in breath, the holding and pause and then the rushing tumble of the out breath. I turned to my body, to investigate boundaries through direct experience. The first thing I noticed was the aliveness of sensation.’

Emilee was listening intently, staying in the words, like in her creative visualization classes. She stretched into the warmth on her legs.

‘I travelled from sensation to sensation until I no longer remembered my body – the mental image had vanished. I didn’t want concepts, I wanted direct experience. I felt extraordinary, moving through a vast realm of fine sensation. I touched the sofa, as something outside of me, to experience the boundary. When I pressed down on the fabric, what I experienced was no different from what I was already experiencing – a blunt, smooth sensation, which I interpreted as pressure, resistance, that’s all – no boundary at all, just sensation. Direct experience is sensation. In that moment I realized that boundaries and objects are mental concepts, they don’t actually exist.’

She paused. ‘That’s the kind of thing I used to explore. Like you said at dinner, you’ve seen people messed up from vipassana. In vipassana you see directly how the mind makes everything up. I ended up very confused, because I thought that what the mind

makes up isn't real, isn't outside of me, doesn't have any independent existence. Even sensation is a mental experience, in my mind. I was left with nothing to hold onto. I was trapped inside the universe of my mind. Nothing else existed but my mind.'

Emilee was clear. 'I'm not going to study vipassana.'

They started down to the beach, traipsing through a couple of paddocks, skirting lumps of cow manure and liquid green ooze.

'Let's climb over.' Alice put her hand on Emilee's arm at the next fence. 'For old times' sake.'

She gripped the top of the gate and lifted her feet to the bottom rung. The gate lurched away, pulling against the chain as she turned side-on and lifted her leg up and over, twisting her hands, careful on the rough wood. She hoisted her other leg up as the gate swung back the other way. Emilee followed.

'I was determined to fly off into the miraculous. I didn't want to be here. I didn't see that ordinary living is the miracle. I didn't ask for help and when I did I still didn't understand.' She paused until Emilee was close by. 'I don't see any alternative to vipassana. There's no freedom without insight that goes deep enough to change everything. After years and years of glimpses, something in the depth changes, something breaks properly. I didn't understand about *rupa*, matter, the stuff of the universe outside of me. You need a good teacher. Not for everyone. If your life's working, why do anything different?'

They arrived at a cockle and gravel beach, cluttered with driftwood and ocean debris dropped by the tide. Pohutukawas lined the foreshore.

Emilee faced Alice. 'Sometimes I'm fine, other times I'm not. What you said last night seemed important. I'm too caught up in myself. I used to get cross with Dad – so happy, so sad, so something special, so totally self obsessed. I want life to be straightforward, like it is for Bob. Don't know what I'd do without him.'

She rushed along the beach, hair blowing out in the wind, and then turned back to talk. Alice noticed the lines this time, the way the sun wrinkled the skin into deep grooves around her eyes. She was always surprised when her children looked old.

They stopped to sunbathe in the winter sun, out of the wind. Alice looked up through the leaves, red on the eaten parts, soft white underbellies, twigs thickening at the corners like elbows and knees. Sand crept over the edge of the old tartan blanket, further every time they moved, carrying old cockles and pipi shells. Emilee rolled over.

‘I’m still confused by the distinction between vipassana and – what was that other word?’

A large seabird stopped at the water’s edge.

Alice pointed. ‘See the bird. It has two wings – samatha and vipassana, jhana and prajna, bliss and wisdom, compassion and skilful means. It needs both wings to fly.’

The seagull, a brilliant white in the sunlight, raised its wings and soared back into the wind currents lifting off the ocean.

‘The liberated mind lies beyond both. Nirvana or liberation is the sky the bird flies through.’

We fix ourselves up behind sunglasses, sunhats and suncream. The fish and vegetable market is clean with fish behind glass in great tubs of ice, individual specimens laid out on display – all expensive, because the currency is set to the Euro. On the four-lane highway, traffic rushes at us the wrong way, confusing, possibly dangerous should I slip into old patterns. First stop is a boat shop because Dad needs a part for the alternator. He scans the shelves layered up to the ceiling, as we make our way to the small glass office at the back. I help with the French but I don't understand what it is Dad wants, so they don't either. He pokes around the shelves and flicks through some glossy brochures.

‘Why haven't they made the effort to learn English?’ he explodes. ‘They're all arrogant, that's why.’

While Cornelius floats away from us into the perfumes and glitter, looking for his email umbilical cord, Dad and I pass by the shopping malls and come across a Chinatown on the outskirts, where the native people, Kanaks, mill about in front of buildings promoting their culture. Altogether, Noumea is a modern city, with a single central park of large sheltering trees, modern sculpture and a fountain.

The country is full of nickel. I talk with the people down at the tourist bureau. That's why the Kanak's struggle for independence failed. France wouldn't let go of the money. The French have been moving here in increasing numbers, creating an apartment boom and a change in population statistics. The Kanaks are now less than fifty per cent of the population. We saw the scars as we motored up the coast – abandoned nickel mines, left to fall into the sea. The wine and cheese and baguettes are affordable. That's what we'll live on. Not a hardship.

Cornelius goes to bed, tucked around his French fantasies and I stay up, to be alone and to walk. Crisp midnight air hangs lightly over the pontoons and washes around me, emptying and filling, stripping me of my gloom and my sinking confidence as I walk through the night. Hundreds of boats are tied up in rows, like streets, stretching back into the harbour where even more hang at anchor. The half moon follows me, lighting up a group of teenagers bundled up together smoking, a fellow strumming a guitar to

himself. It shines into the bright lights and noises of parties and my breathing ebbs and flows into the night, settling my heart into the steady rhythm of my steps, and I walk for as long as it takes to smooth the disturbed winds inside me and only then do I go home to sleep.

Cornelius is shaky on both of his legs, ebbing and flowing with pain. The pulled muscle will heal, if that's all that it is – not cancer eating out his spine and creeping down his leg. He wants me near, but at a distance, not too far away. The vegetable market is far enough and he comes looking if I take too long, and he wants to know what I'm doing and how long I will be, and we often sleep in separate beds because of the pain. Our twenty-four hour free berth is over. Dad returns to an anchorage outside the marina. Cornelius and I move onto the front wall, directly in front of the café and the main route from the marina into town. I force myself to stay focused on the boat work. I wash down the deck, scrub out the cockpit, make sure all the lines are neatly folded, cover the mainsail and winch the dinghy back up on deck. I help Cornelius replace the filter in his water purifier, which takes the salt out of sea water. We pull up the floor boards and there it is, a small cylinder, strapped into the bilge. The filter replacement has been backwashed many times.

'Should work fine,' Cornelius says, and stows the used one away to clean out later.

I re-melt the ends of lines that are starting to unravel and bring out our salty bedding to air, then stop to make lunch. The stove dies, no propane, and it's Saturday. From somewhere deep in the lazaret Cornelius drags out a rusty trundler. We trek miles of concrete and tar seal through the hot sun, pushing the empty gas bottle, our baby in a pushchair, following every lead, but the same response everywhere we stop: 'Non, no gaz. Sorry. Peut-etre lundi.' 'Peut-etre a la supemarche.' 'Non, rein.'

And every time Cornelius explodes, like clockwork, until I've had enough.

I shout at him, 'Life is much more fun if you can enjoy your difficulties.'

That shuts him up. I'm tired of it – his pain, his grumping, his obsession with me. It's oppressive.



Alice opened her eyes into the branches, flickering shadows on her body. Emilee seemed to be asleep. The tide was lapping closer, frilled arches sweeping forward then rolling back. Trickle of foam, shells turning, making music when she became very quiet, like water falling onto glass. Alice looked for Cornelius's journal in the bag and pulled it out from under the water bottle and mandarins. She propped herself up on an elbow and flicked through. Could have written a book with all this. She kept flicking through.

Noumea is clean and modern. Surprised to see Robert and Jodie across the road. When I call out, a strange look comes over his face. Oh yeah - we fell out back then - don't know why. Jodie, wrinkled but still pretty. Sailing ruins a woman's face.

Eight years. I've been to Alaska since then. They've been hanging out in Mauritius, diving.

We had coffee and they remembered the CD I'd sent of underwater pictures.

Told them I was following Alice and her Dad back to New Zealand. They've only been back to the States once in two years. Don't like leaving the boat. Jodie wants to go home to her grandchildren. They're on their way to Thailand, last trip. They said Jack and Eve were up in the Mediterranean sailing the canals.

Alice and I are thinking of sailing around Cape Horn. She's on for anything.

Jodie asked about Julie. They'd been good friends - looked after each other in the Bahamas. Women get so lonely on boats. Julie's back in L.A. She wanted a baby but not on a boat.

They've invited us over to their boat.



A fish curry bubbles stupidly on a camping primus, steaming up my face, as I stare across the marina to the city. Red flashes and a green twirl, bars of white – a nonsensical flickering. A tedious roar leaps across the park, scrambling my mind, so I can't hear the wind. I miss the marketplace at Vila, the women with their slow, raw, lives. The French women are so thin and they smoke. On the outside they sometimes seem gay and happy. The separated-out lives of city people scare me. I can push it away, this sense of meaninglessness, but it keeps coming back.

Most days I make lunch for Dad, rowing all the way out into the harbour to keep an eye on him, because I like rowing and splashing in the wake of other dinghies zooming past, taking my time with the oars to look around at the sea and the boats. Sometimes he has dinner with us against the wall, on his days in town, which are most days. Every afternoon Cornelius and I walk, sometimes hand in hand, sometimes around to another marina for cheap email. How could anyone be content with so little? Buying fish from huge ice-filled buckets, with names I don't recognize, tasting real French cheese: Roquefort, Emmental, Camembert, sitting in the park and watching the children splashing in the fountain. I don't want any of it.

Oliver rang to let Alice know he was getting pretty bored. He'd booked his ticket. She would go home tomorrow. Alice and Emilee spread ingredients and utensils all over the bench and table. Alice measured sugar for a spicy-apple sponge cake. Emilee diced root vegetables for a roast salad and boiled up chick peas for an Indian stew. They brushed close with bodies and conversation, rummaging through drawers, cupboards and family memories.

'Those tramping trips – I always wanted to take my kids, but never got organized. Don't know how you did it. The girls keep asking, when they see the photos.'

Alice cracked a couple of eggs into the bowl and whisked the thick yellow yolks. She measured the butter and flour, organic flour she was pleased to notice. It made quite a difference to the flavour.

'I've still got the camping gear: tents, cookers. You can use it, even have it. The Kaimais are close. I'd come with you. A three-hour walk is long enough for me, though.'

The smells from the stove were heavenly. Emilee turned around.

'Maybe in the holidays.'

She sat down and twisted up her long hair around inside itself to hold it off her shoulders and face.

'I'm too much like you. I want to do everything you did, but I can't. I can't keep copying you.'

Chickpea froth burst from the under the pot lid and sizzled into the flame.

'Remember when I started knitting for Amelia? We joked about it. Then you showed me how to knit cable and fancy patterns. You had no idea.' Emilee's voice changed.

'I'm forty and I don't know who I am. I was looking after you most of my life, following you around, doing what you wanted, helping you. Don't you see?'

She stormed around the kitchen and slammed the door in case Bob was around.

‘I can come and stay if you want some time out. You could go on a retreat,..’ Alice volunteered.

‘Can’t you see? Go away on a retreat? Copy you again.’

‘Well, what do you want? We aren’t that separate, no one is, we’re always making ourselves up. Maybe there’s no “you” to find.’

‘I know. It’s easy to blame someone else. The children are growing up, they won’t need me soon. What then?’

Alice put her arms around Emilee’s waist and leaned in against her back. ‘I love you so much.’

That moment, Ruth and Amelia burst in, school bags on their backs.

‘One more story, please Nana. You’re going tomorrow aren’t you?’

Dinner was full of happy conversation, with plenty of compliments for the meal. Bob had just sold his wool for a record price and the children were looking forward to the school play. They’d been practising their parts all afternoon. Ruth loaded the dishwasher, Alice wiped the bench and they retired to the fire. Amelia climbed into Alice’s lap, Ruth sat on a cushion leaning against the chair and Emilee stretched out on the sofa.

‘A story about the mountains. We’ve got photos,’ Amelia started.

Emilee turned to Alice. ‘Remember our adventure in the Kaimanawas. I can’t believe we did it – carrying two weeks of food and Rosie’s dog biscuits, walking almost every day, over all those ranges. No one does that.’

The room was quiet, only the hush of the fire – air being sucked in, swirling around in the heat, rushing up the flue.

‘I was a kid. It was too hard. I’m glad now, though.’

Alice’s voice took on an impatient tone. ‘Getting born is hard, and dangerous. Not everyone makes it. Kaimanawa means “heart eater”. Named after a Maori chief who stopped for the night. He roasted up the hearts of the men who killed his daughter, for a hearty dinner. So are the Kaimanawas heartless or full of heart?’

‘Ha, ha.’

Amelia lifted up off Nana’s knee, with a sleepy smile. ‘Can’t imagine you being young, Mum, and Nana ...’

‘The year I climbed Makorako, I wasn’t much older than Ruth,’ Emilee said.

Amelia snuggled back down in Alice’s lap, stretching her legs out towards the fire then folding them up, feet pushing against the arm of the sofa. Alice stroked her fingers through Amelia’s hair, then stroked her forehead, the way she had soothed her children when they were young. She started the story:

‘Emilee and I were camped below the Umakarikari Ridge, above the Waipakahi River, inside the forest. Unfortunately a cyclone was moving down the country. Two years earlier a man had died from hypothermia on the ridge, so we had to be careful. I asked Emilee what she wanted to do. She rolled over in her sleeping bag, drizzly as the weather. She didn’t know, didn’t care, she wanted to go home.’

Amelia looked up. Nana in the mountains? Ruth was also re-evaluating.

‘Lowland podocarp forest thinned out to beech as we tramped up through the slushy leaf litter. I loved the bush, the silence of trees stretching way above me, rooted down in the earth. I sank into the quietude, child of the forest, leaves soaking up light, rain filtering and splashing down, ancient power houses transforming the sun, living wisdom, knowing something I didn’t, even though, when I’d stop puffing in the small breaks I took every few minutes, I tried to find out.

‘Two young women rushed down into us, stumbling and trembling. They’d been blown over on the tops, had to hold hands against the wind, to stop falling. The words came out in a scrambled rush as they burst into tears. They wouldn’t ever go tramping again. The men arrived, weighed down by huge packs. The most exposed part would take four hours to cross. The hut was seven hours away. We could do it, they said.

‘So we kept on. Maybe we should have turned back, to be safe, but we didn’t. I’d spent years roaming the mountains, head above the clouds, body wrapped in the forest, away from the civilized haunts of men. I belonged in the mountains. The trees became dripping grey, ghost-like shadows. Outside the shelter of the forest, a grey sleet was belting down. We needed food in our bellies before stepping out into it. Emilee didn’t

want to, but she did follow, almost on her knees, to under the dead root of an overturned beech tree, thick with cobwebs. Animal-like we crouched over our food, stuffing cheese and onion in pita bread, stuffing it into our mouths, shedding rain with our coats. I loved becoming an animal, slipping into a vast instinctive wildness, on the inside of mystery. The animal understands nature, it stays close.

‘Outside, the wind was shrieking, rain spraying in all directions. I could only see one waratah in front. That was enough. We faced into a terrifying, savage power, a wild lack of restraint, a carelessness. Rosie rushed off, zigzagging over the stones, tail steering, out of sight. The vegetation soon vanished. We were on rock and gravel, water sluicing into eroding channels, braided watercourses breaking open, water creeping into our clothes, the roaring wind sweeping our words away. Nothing but the storm in my head, like a faucet on full.

‘Rosie lost her nerve and came close to Emilee. A sudden gust whipped up and slammed me into the ground. I staggered back up as it blew me sideways, pushing me off the ridge. Water streaming down my face, I shrieked across to Emilee to stop to check the map. We could see a couple of shadowy landmarks. I took her hand, to stay steady and walk behind in the slip stream.

‘We kept on like this for hours, dashed with water, violent wind, watery whirlwinds, pummelling torrents – quiet inside, like the trees. That’s what was good, the quiet inside, the part untouched by the storm, seeing that it was untouched. We finally descended to where the shelter of rocks produced a few leafy plants with their summer flowers and more grasses and shrubs and then a single windswept tree. The river was swollen. Holding hands, we waded through, packs unstrapped to let them go should we fall. The water tugged at our legs, to sweep us away over the slippery rocks, but our thighs stayed solid, like tree trunks, as we inched across. Emilee clambered up the bank first.

“‘I can see it, the hut,” she called back.

‘Rosie’s whole body wagged as she barked and flew off into the golden tussock after a hare.

‘Everything in my worn-out pack, not in a plastic bag, was soaked. Emilee’s new pack was still dry inside. We began the familiar routine of lighting a fire, hanging out clothes, sorting food, cooking a meal. Emilee dragged in a couple of mattresses from the bunk rooms. Rosie curled up in the corner and didn’t move.’

‘Is that the end?’ Amelia raised her head.

‘That was the beginning, the baptism. Shall I go on or are you ready for bed?’

‘Can we have a hot drink, Mum, and a bit more?’

‘Sure. Hot chocolate for everyone, then?’

They all nodded.

‘Ruth, another log for the fire?’ Alice asked. The room was warm and cosy. The lamp threw a soft light over the sleepy child in her lap. She’d loved the mountains, more than anything else in the world, apart from her children.

Emilee came in with four mugs of steaming, creamy-chocolate milk and cookies. The room was quiet except for the crunching and slurping.

Alice continued:

‘Next morning, the cyclone had passed, the sky was blue and we spread tent, packs and sleeping rolls out in the sun. We washed over basins of hot water, giggling after the slithering soap that disappeared under the stove. Picked clean of twigs and sooty dust, it re-lathered into bursting rainbow bubbles. We stayed a second night perched above the Waipakahi, where the golden-brown tussock spread for miles, grass hair twirling and catching the sun. Behind the hut – the mountain sentries. We poured over entries in the hut logbook, pages thick with smoke and grime. Most trampers took the gentle path over Ignimbrite Saddle to Ngapuketuru. We would take the wilderness route over Makorako, the road less travelled, the hard one.

‘The first stage, the track leading up to Junction Tops, started directly behind the hut. We came back to the map. From Junction Tops the track dropped down to the Rangitaiki River, then crawled up along the spine of Te More, Te Wetenga and up Makorako, 1727 metres above sea level. The Rangimaire River, our destination, lay in the shadow of Makorako on the other side, 600 metres back down. My finger travelled further than it seemed possible to walk in a day.

‘Emilee’s voice went quiet. I reassured her. There would be stone cairns marking some of the route. This was a wilderness route, no man-made signs. We had a compass. I fretted through the night, tossing and turning about everything that could go wrong. In the morning we set out early, straight up. My chest immediately locked tight, so I couldn’t breathe properly and my legs ached, but I kept walking until it all let go, releasing into the rhythm, a rhythm easing me over the rock, pounding down, lifting up into the wind that smelled of wildflowers and freedom. I followed Emilee’s bouncing blue pack, long legs poked [or poking] underneath. What a delight to see her walking over my heart, hidden in these mountains, over a track cut through chunky rock gardens

with starry flowers, purple lanterns and tiny dwarf dracophyllum with reddish grass leaves spun around tough stems. We stopped frequently for water and to pant away the lactic acid. The sun floated in and out of cloud. Rosie kept rushing off and Emilee stayed in front, picking out a track from the maze of deer trails.

‘From Junction Tops, a vast skyscape rested on ridges and valleys rippling out in all directions. Our thighs were burning red, feet planted in the ground, hair wild in the wind, dust and sweat streaking down. We gazed over our land, our conquest. We identified Makorako, a purple, misty shadow on the horizon. A maze of trails scrambled away from us. I turned the map around to orientate. Ignimbrite Saddle was to our left, we thought, so we turned right, a 500 metre tumble down to the Rangitaiki River. That’s what it was like in the mountains. If you didn’t get lost, or give up, you arrived, usually not so far from where you started. A two-week walk would take maybe an hour to drive around by road.’

No one said anything and the fire continued to hiss and flare.

‘We headed towards the silvery thread below us – not such a big river, but mighty enough to have cut out a steep valley, over eons of change, a different time scale. Like trees but even grander, more primitive, raw power. I love stretching out of the human perspective. We scrambled down clay and scree into a wall of forest. In forest you can’t see where you’re going. If you don’t have a track, progress is difficult because of the undergrowth. We found animal tracks, but they could lead anywhere. Only one kept going. Emilee ended up under a huge, slippery log, pack suctioned to the mud, arms and legs kicking out like an overturned beetle. We burst out laughing into the ridiculousness of what we were doing. The country was rough and reckless, and we kept sloshing on through the mud, clambering over fallen branches, stumbling into small clearings of sunlight, sharing snacks and water. I loved it all fiercely, and best of all I loved sharing it with Emilee.’

Alice stopped for another cookie and to drain her cup. The room stayed quiet.

‘The river was cool to step in and drink and splash over our faces and arms. It was golden over the brown rock, sweeping by. We didn’t stay long – we had to be in another watershed by night fall. I was pretty tired by the time we climbed the three hundred metres back up through bush, on the other side of the river. Te More rose bare under the hot sun, lifting above the treeline. My legs were shaking as we stopped and I wobbled to the ground. We’d set out over seven hours ago. The sun was too hot, the shade was too cold.

‘When Emilee dragged the food bag out, I pulled myself to sitting, to set up the Whisperlite and fry the pita bread she’d stuffed with food and boil water for coffee. The jelly in me turned to lead, a grey weight dragging me down and I slept, not for too long. I had to make a huge effort to get up. We didn’t have enough water to stay the night, so I told myself. Maybe *I* was the greatest challenge, driving us on when it wasn’t necessary. I was reducing myself to the raw elements – the rock, the sun, the water and my heaving breath. I wanted a place behind the noise of being human. I didn’t want to talk with Emilee, I didn’t want to reassure her, I wanted to meet her there. If we stopped for too long, we’d trickle out in our ordinary conversation.

‘Cairns marked the route up Te More. We added stones, to reassure those who would come after, sharing with those who came before, confronting the barren womb. No shelter, rocks sliding away underfoot, no water, useless sun beating down. The rock would be cold by nightfall. Heads bowed, we kept trudging in the rhythm of our steps, the steady sound on rock, holding fast to a soft sensibility inside, steady on the barren rock, the cold grey, becoming hard except for a trembling flickering inside, beyond the reach of words.

‘We stopped to drain our water bottles and look out. A vast bowl of silent water, Lake Taupo, golden tussock spreading wild, the Waiouru Military Reserve and the untamed range of the Kaimanawa ponies. The human realm was far below us now and we were beyond its help.

‘We passed Te More and started up Te Wetenga, over more grey stone. A wild, woollen-capped man in gumboots and ragged rugby jersey stepped onto our path.

‘“Flown in for the week with mates. Down in Ecology Stream to do some hunting and rafting. Just checking out the environs.”

‘We chatted, an excuse to stop. “Mountains give you a perspective, eh,” he said.

‘We had to keep going. “Okay, mate,” and he was gone.

‘Te Wetenga was still 200 metres up, Makorako even further and the Mangamaire, the gentle river wending through the heart of the forest park, 600 metres down, I calculated from the map. We still had a long way up and a long way down to go.

‘Emilee got blisters so I gave her my old Nike running shoes, peeling and broken soles, with a hole in one upper for my big toe. Best shoes I ever had in the mountains. The track was gone, so we guessed cairns from natural clumps of rock, piled up over each other, a rock scramble and, every time we reached the top, it wasn’t the top at all, it

was an illusion. Blue sky and rock continued to rise up in front of us. We passed Te Wetenga. Again, the summit kept leaping ahead, just when we thought we'd arrived, until we didn't think we could stand it anymore, this illusion of the finish line. We'd never make it, our struggle was never-ending – lost in barren rock forever. We had to keep going. I would make Rosie a harness to carry her own food.

'Grey was creeping into the sky and the wind was turning cold. Emilee was slowing down, giving up, but she didn't have that choice. She retreated into a faint flickering inside herself. I became a steady machine, stepping out – more than a robot, more than a human – an animal, right inside my walking. We were on the saddle of Makorako, the watershed of the Rangitaiki behind us and a whole new watershed, a new vista, stretching out before us.

'It's easy to get lost on a saddle, slip down the wrong side. I've done it. We started down straight away, in the shadow of Makorako looming up – no track, just spurs and valleys and more rock. This shadow side of Makorako was different, quieter, like the inner chamber of a mountain lord, where he brooded, where he could see us, away from the dazzling radiance of the sun. We were slipping down the scree, clambering over rock, swinging past the few spindly trees. The twilight was upon us, cool and silky, hours slipping downward, no thinking at all. It wasn't relevant, it would use energy.

'Makorako had retreated, and the tussock and river were close. Water, a trickle in the reeds, the other side of a thick, matted jungle. Our last insult was this "bushman's nightmare". I went straight through the middle: Emilee followed. Thorns tore at our clothes, flesh, hair. We had no choice and it didn't matter. Nothing mattered but arriving, we were so close. On the other side was a grassy bank, a quiet river floating under grass, curling like a snake, and golden tussock rolling as far as the hills. We sank down on the bank – water to drink, water to wash in and water to sleep by. We survived the barren, grey rock.'

Alice stopped. Emilee was glowing. She hadn't remembered. Twelve hours of walking. Ruth looked up at her mother. 'Can we do that?'

'Maybe. Off to bed now,' she said.

'Nana, can you carry me?' Amelia whined. When Alice tried to lift her, she scrambled out, remembering she was almost a teenager.

Alice went to her room and slowly undressed. She was surprised when her excursions into the mountains came to an end, when she didn't need to go back. In the mountains she burst out from inside herself, a song wildly in tune with the forest, rivers, tussock, alpine flowers, snow – flung wide and wild into the arms of life, rushing through the wind as herself, with *her*, all mixed up together. The lover and her beloved together, extinguished. Maybe that was it – she was finally extinguished in her love.

Andre, the captain, shows us around his 45-foot centre-cockpit sloop. We're having dinner on his boat, which is tied up next to *Fantasie*. The rear is a totally separate double berth, used for storage, and a little workshop. I ask how he likes it, when we sit at the table to sip French wine. His wife is cooking. She only smiles because she doesn't understand any English.

'Love it.' His English is very good. 'It's steady, rocks instead of swings, less exposed to the weather. I give the rear berth to visitors, for privacy.'

I look around the comfortable saloon: real cupboards and a gorgeous curving main settee. Cherie serves a simple mushroom dish. She smiles and pulls her draped cardigan tight over her shoulders.

'Does Cherie always sail with you?' I ask.

Andre looks up at his wife. 'No, she flew in yesterday. Here for a month, then she'll fly home and I'll sail on to Australia. She'll probably fly over again.'

'How long have you been sailing?'

Dad and Cornelius let me monopolize the conversation.

'About ten years, on and off. Not sure how long I'll be able to keep going. The money's running out.' He lifts the bottle to refill our glasses. 'Did you hear about the shipwreck on Minerva Reef last week?'

We all turn to him with astonishment.

'Boat was sailing to Tonga, set the course on sea maps and left it to the autopilot. Boat sailed right onto South Minerva Reef – hard to see in broad daylight, barely ruffles the surface. I use sea maps, but always check the paper charts, to make sure.'

Cornelius interrupts. 'I did the same thing, sailing from Fiji to Vanuatu.' He sits up straight. 'We were almost there. I went outside to have a look around. *Fantasie* was heading straight for shore. Ten minutes later we'd have beached. I hadn't realized the

most direct route from Lautoka to Port Vila goes through the headland. I set the course on the coordinates.'

I cringe.

Dad interjects. 'It's been a bad year for wrecks. *Odyssey* shared a pontoon with me in Auckland. On its maiden voyage, the crew was asleep when the wind turned. Boat on a lee shore, anchor dragged, ended up on the rocks. The crew abandoned ship safely. In the morning the captain returned to retrieve what he could. Locals had taken the motor and everything else worth taking. He was left with nothing.'

We are quiet for a bit. Dad told us the story a while ago now. 'These boats aren't insured,' he adds.

We share a couple more disasters and drink up. Andre pours a tot of Cointreau to go with the sweet tart Cherie places in front of us. She passes the whipped cream around.

Next morning I sit out in the cockpit to write my journal. A mirage of freedom floats through the marina, not me. I'm trapped. My heart, which held such a wondrous world, has fluttered further away than my outstretched fingers can reach, beyond the dinghies ferrying passengers in through hundreds of boats, with flags aflutter from all over the world, and hulls awobble in shimmering, silvery, bewitchingly chaotic light. A sixty-foot sloop slips from its berth, crew moving like the sea, as if they incubated and hatched in rolling water, tossing mooring lines from shore, gathering them back on deck. We've been seduced by the sea. Our old mooring line is dirty and ragged. In the milky-green soup it's a graceful, writhing sea serpent, pulsing the breath of the sea up into the boat, into my body, tuning me to the sea until I almost can't pull away.

I need to pull away from a disturbance churning me up inside. I have to get away.

I go down to where Cornelius is resting. 'My family's arriving in another week.'

He looks up from his dozing. 'Yes, so they are. Are you getting excited yet?'

'Now is my only chance to see the island before they come. I want to go backpacking for a week.'

‘What?’ He sits up. ‘We’ve only just arrived.’ He considers what I’ve said. ‘You can’t leave me here. What will I do?’

‘You can come with me for some of the time. I’d need a few days on my own though, to be alone.’

I know it’s the same old pattern, this leaping away to escape the walls closing in, but nothing else does it. I need time with my feet in the soil, alone, to turn back into something worth anything at all. I’ve lost my connection, become meaningless static in a useless relationship.

He winds up to a roar. ‘This is ridiculous. What kind of a girl friend are you going off like this? It’s far too dangerous to hitch-hike here.’ His hands rise up as if to grab at me, pin me down, shake some sense into me. They fall.

‘I’ve checked at the tourist bureau. They say it’s safe.’

‘How could it be safe?’ His eyes go red and bloated. ‘You’d be playing Russian roulette with the local men.’

‘When did your life stop being an adventure?’ I’m shouting now. He won’t dare touch me. ‘Why are you so scared?’

His voice becomes soft and steady, not pleading, but demanding and reasonable. ‘I told you I hate being left alone. My mother worked. I was always left alone. I want you here all the time.’

He’s done this before. It makes me furious.

I do the same as him – lower my voice, slow down, act reasonable. ‘We both have to be prisoners of your mother? How ridiculous.’

He pauses to consider what I’ve said.

‘It’s not unreasonable. Couples on boats – they are there for each other, all the time.’

My voice rises again. ‘That’s not true.’

It doesn’t matter if it is true. I get like this, barren inside, lost in space, disorientated. I don’t know who I am anymore.

When Dad comes over for his daily coffee, he pats Cornelius on the shoulder. ‘When we arrived in Fiji, she took off for ten days with Emilee – nothing to do with you.’

Cornelius visibly sighs.

Thank you, Dad, I silently whisper.

He then turns to me. ‘I don’t approve, but I accept your decision.’

Alice packed her car before school. Big hugs all around, soft bodies pressed tight, arms tugging around her neck as she kissed through the hair. Emilee thanked her for coming and apologized.

Alice laughed. 'Don't be silly. It's good we can say how we feel. Then we can let it go.'

She steered carefully back along the gravel road, over two fords running a little water and back up to the main highway. She drove slowly through the morning, like in a meditation, eyes steady on the road. She'd been saying it for years in her yoga classes, to the yoginis wobbling on their one leg, stretching the other out behind, folding it up, holding the toe, soaring the arm in front, lifting off, in a row on their coloured mats. Keep the eyes steady – this will steady the mind, which will keep the body steady. Stay focused on a point on the wall or floor. It seemed strange to Alice that she could remember this detail. Her past was a deep pool of treasure. She never knew what would swim to the surface. Mist was lifting off the lush, green farmland. A hawk hovered above a squashed opossum. She swerved to miss it as it careered in front of her.

Alice remembered a later retreat. She'd been in her fifties. The pursuit of liberation had been a lifetime's work. A luxury retreat by her standards, in Canada, birthplace of Wongchuk and Tenzin – central conditioning and organic food, wild animals roaming the forest around the house, four long months through winter studying the Abhidhamma. Near the end, snows brought down the power lines and they had to make do with open fires and camping stoves.

Strict vipassana – watching the breath, watching every movement, watching the mind pick up and let go, over and over; seeing how the sensations, the images only lasted a moment, nothing lasted more than a moment; staying in the body, staying present, until the mind wouldn't, until it couldn't stand it, until it was so bored, so restless it wouldn't hold the focus. When it flitted away to something more interesting, she dragged it back to her heavy body, which was now smouldering. Just breathing in, breathing out, left foot lifting, left foot moving, left foot lowering, left foot placing.

She couldn't stand another second, an oppressive weight was crushing her, it wouldn't let go. Creatures were eating into her flesh, logs ramming into her chest until she couldn't breathe. The air was on fire, she was inside a plastic bag, full of an itchy dust, wringing her like a towel. She couldn't get away from the feelings. She wanted to scream, rip her body off in big chunks and fling them far out to sea, for the otters and whales to eat. She made some fresh coffee and bit into a muffin, threw the rest outside for the raccoons and birds. She could scarcely taste it. She would go for a walk, grab her jacket and run down to the iced-up beaver dam. She knew she had to stay and sit it out.

She paced up the hill for her interview, eyes leaping out to the snow and ice, dragging back to her unacceptable distress, her defeat, her struggle. The teacher smiled as she fidgeted into her seat. She said she was fine except for the oppression. It wouldn't go away and she couldn't stand it anymore.

'Is it there now?' he asked.

'Yes', she replied, although the distraction of his company was helping.

'Describe it.'

She did. He smiled. She waited for his verdict. A long pause ...

'It's just sensation,' he said. 'Why are you identifying with it? Suffering is caused by identifying with sensation, building it into stories.'

She started at his simple reply. How obvious – of course. She wasn't the feelings. They had nothing to do with her. In that instant the discomfort was gone, irrelevant. It was all sensation, nothing more. Her mind had done all the rest. No identification, no clinging, no suffering. She walked down the hill thinking about it all. Her mind created the suffering, built it up out of sensation, and what the mind creates it can discard. It picks up, puts together, puts down and takes apart. If she was aware, if she could stay aware, she could be free of her mind.

The oppression never returned.

PART THREE

Chapter one

The bus to Poumbout, a town up the west coast one hundred and fifty miles north of Noumea, leaves at eleven. I leap into the last seat, a small 'fold down' right at the front, with a panoramic view of the country. I turn into a wave of excitement rolling out the window, a spinifex rolling over the land. This is freedom. Wongchuk wouldn't agree. It feels like freedom. I'm free of Cornelius at least. The bus is packed with the local Kanaks. The one other white person, middle-aged with silvery grey hair cut short, is sitting next to me. I find an apple to munch on. She takes out a book to read. The bus chortles to a start, and soon we are rushing through flat countryside, sea to the left, knobbly spine of hills to the right, a few bony cattle eating dry yellow grass in the middle.

'Hi, I'm Louise. Where're you heading?'

Her deep eyes tunnel down inside me, until I shiver.

'I'm Alice. Backpacking around New Caledonia.' I sound stupid.

'You're brave.' She turns her body towards me. 'If you'd like to stay with me, I'm getting out at Poumbout. I have a place there.'

A strong desire or maybe just fantasy leaps out from the shiver. Would I dare? I like her straightforward confidence.

'What are you reading?' I ask to diffuse the situation.

'Hermann Hesse: *The Glass Bead Game*.'

'Why,' I declare. 'I loved that book. Read it in my twenties. I've never forgotten it.'

'I did, too. A reread, now I have the time.'

We continue talking, pulling too close for comfort, because we daren't touch. I turn to the view.

The land is barren, scrubby trees overtaking the grass. I smile at how quickly I've changed, sloughed off my old skin – a shape-changer, a fresh disguise, like a child on a new movie set.

'Niaouli trees,' she tells me. '*Melaleuca quinquenervia*. I always carry a small bottle of the oil – for colds, flus, cuts, everything. Here, have a sniff.'

Trees come close to the bus – grey-green, anvil-shaped leaves and grey paper bark. Grey, swimming with shadows of Dad, Cornelius, their boats; floating in a dreamy sea, mist and bubbles of spray.

The bus drops us at Poumbout. I have to get out first, to fold up my aisle seat. I swing my heavy pack over one shoulder and clamber down. She follows.

'Well? What do you think? Would you like to come over?'

I would – of course I would. 'No, I won't, but thank you so much. I don't have long to see the country.'

I throw my arms around her, all churned up inside.

'Sure, I understand. Here's my phone number if you change your mind.'

She walks away and I stuff the number in the front pocket of the pack and squat in the shade of a shop awning to study the map. I've already passed the turnoff to Plage Amenagee de Frenka. That was dumb. Well, beaches are much the same; another one will do. I haven't hitch-hiked in twenty years and hesitate to stick out my thumb, and I'm not sure which direction to go. I'm allowed to be confused and muddled – it doesn't matter to anyone now but me. I walk down a side road, through farmland and a few houses, very few cars. No one stops. The sun is slipping down. I return to the main road, stretch out my arm, my thumb, stand it up like a soldier, alert, sensitive to the vibration of all cars. I'll be okay, because I have my tent and sleeping bag. I can sleep in a paddock. I could call Louise. A car slows down, promising. It stops. I open the door.

'Bonjour, merci.'

‘Hello,’ the driver replies. His accent is delicious. A soft golden Labrador uncurls from the floor, wagging and nosing my groin. The driver climbs out to help with my pack.

‘I am going to Plage Aménagee Ferme de Foue.’

I point to a mark on my map in case he doesn’t understand.

‘Why do you want to go there?’

‘I’m camping.’

He drives ten kilometres along a dirt road to take me there. When I see the beach, I understand why he asked. Gravel parking area, a few trees on the stony grass embankment and a stony sand beach, cut out by the tide. How was I to know? I thank him profusely. It might be a long walk back to the main road tomorrow. My whole body breathes. I’ve arrived at my first destination. I re-orientate to a sense of vast possibility. The unknown is calling me the way a new lover might. I gravitate to some kind of establishment, a camp I think. Cornelius has become too predictable, too utterly boring. Men always become boring.

A couple of dark men come over. Their smiles burst wide and arms fling apart to embrace the fortuitous circumstance of a foreign visitor. The light is casting long shadows from the trees. They speak slowly and clearly, eyes rolling and sparkling, bodies gyrating, swinging free in the simple pleasure of our conversation. I beam my pleasure back. This is what I have come away to be a part of. I wish Cornelius could see how simple and happy life can be away from the unsteady sea. A moment of pure, expansive wellbeing surges through my body.

‘De l’eau la bas, le camping bien sur.’

They understand and point to the end of the beach. ‘Toute seul.’

I wish he wasn’t such a trouble for me. I wish I could somehow stop thinking about him.

No sooner have I pitched my tent and put some water on the stove to boil than a young woman rushes up.

‘Pour vous, des peches, pour votre repas.’

She drops two slippery fish to the ground, almost still alive.

‘Tous les peches, tous les deux?’ I ask, struggling for the words, ‘Merci, merci, beaucoup. C’est trop.’

She leaps back over the grass, down the bank and over the sand, out of sight, the same way she arrived. I stare into the emptiness she leaves behind, then pull out my Swiss army knife – never been sharpened in ten years, but sharp enough to scrape off the scales and peel fillets from the bone. The sun sets over at my stove, frying up the fish, sea tones of grey and blue-green washing the sky. I’m alone but not alone at all. From the stillness inside me, a cloud rises up and takes on his shape. I can’t separate us out. He sweeps around in a fury, exploding out of his pain, funnels of passion, sensitivity, cold steel reflecting my face. I’m surrounded by beauty. If I can keep him away, if I can stay on the surface, I can stay in this beauty.

The beach comes alive in the night. Cars arrive in my dreaming, pulling me back to the surface, people, singing, exploding champagne, French music, a lullaby soothing me back to sleep, the ground holding me close, voices peeping through the mist, foggy head, sunlight warming the tent, until I sit up and unzip into a full blue tide, a great blanket of sapphire blue unrolling to the horizon under early morning mist. Children are already spading moats and castles, poking in stick steeples and parading shell people. Outrigger canoes line the beach. Saggy old cars keep rolling up to the grass bank, unload beach umbrellas, rugs, chilly bins and more children. Screaming children rush into the tide: mothers keep watch from their umbrellas.

I imagine Cornelius as a child, facing up to his mother, sharpening his words, throwing tantrums, getting his way, storming down to the beach, in a world he couldn’t make friends with. Did she sit on the beach and watch him play, dump sand into huge mountains, carve out deep troughs of messy water? A wilful child, trapped in the steel girders of her definite plans, growing his power to outmatch hers. He fought. I flew. We both hid away deep down inside ourselves. Is that what is gluing us together?



The back of our section bordered empty land. Sometimes Marion and I would venture into the long grass, but we didn't go far because a dangerous lion lived there. We heard it roar, stalking its territory, proclaiming its right to hunt us down and eat us. One day I was alone near the long grass. I caught a glimpse and I knew it had seen me. I didn't stay to defend myself, I didn't yell for help, I ran as fast as I could over grass and concrete to the shed and slammed the door behind me. I was safe until I saw the dark opening into the carport. With my little heart thumping out of my chest, I scrambled over boxes and tables up into the rafters. Lions don't climb trees, only tigers do. My breathing settled and my heart slowed and I found a way to get reasonably comfortable perched up there with the dust and spiders. I was safe in the gloom, out of danger. Maybe the whole day passed, maybe only a few hours, maybe not even that long. It felt like forever and I was hungry, curled up in my frightened aloneness. I couldn't climb down. Marion came looking for me. She reassured me that the lion had gone. Mummy didn't know about the lion, that's why she moved our sandpit to the back of the house by the long grass. I gave up on her after that.



I walk down the main street of Kone, lugging my simple lifestyle right through to the other side, across a bridge and back into countryside, where trees, gardens and paddocks spread out in the sun. I want the sun to keep shining, without the shadows, for life to always be this welcoming and full. A stocky young man waits for me to catch him up. He's hitching, vinyl bag slung across his shoulder.

'Part-time preacher,' he smiles through broad white teeth, yellowy eyes crinkling up at the corners. 'On the road since yesterday. I was preaching in Noumea.'

He points to a church across the road with a scowl. 'See that. Jesus lives in people's hearts not in buildings.'

'Je suis d'accord.' I nod vigorously.

'L'amour de Jesus est dans mon coeur.' He places his hand reverently on his heart.

'Moi, aussi.' I nod and smile.

We walk and talk, mixing French and English up together, and we keep looking at each other to decipher the meaning inside the accent. He grew up in a tribu (village) near here. He helps out in the garden sometimes. Gets money from the government to live on. Nobody stops to pick us up. There are plenty of cars. The day is warm and breezy. He waves to uncles and cousins not going far.

'Vous, restez ici. Ne personne arretez pour nous, while we are together,' I finally decide.

He understands, stops walking and waves me on.

Cornelius sneaks up on me, leaps back in, with a lurching thud, a pang of guilt. I'm responsible for him and I've left him behind. I don't care. To care would destroy me. I shake him off, discard him, and walk on, focus on my thumb.



One day I came home with a little bird, hands cupping a trembling heartbeat, a weightless clump of down. I held it out to my parents. I didn't know what I was doing at the time, holding out this tiny creature, barely alive, without a mother. My father said I shouldn't have taken a baby bird from its nest. I said it had fallen from the tree and I couldn't leave it to die. I wished I could have taken it back. I had climbed the sturdy trunk, into a bowl of branches reaching out to me in my aloneness. I scraped along the lichen, drawing blood on the gnarly bumps. I reached into the nest and closed my fingers around a tiny softness, a cheeping, plaintive, trusting cry. I clambered down the tree, shorts pulling up above my panties and no free hand to pull them down. The

fledgling had short feathers growing from stiff white sockets, and red inside its mouth. It looked at me as stroked its silken head.

My mother looked at me with hard eyes while she wiped her hands on an apron. My father's eyes softened from blame into understanding. I would be its mother, and when it was bigger I would let it go. I woke very early to check the shoebox nest under my bed. It was still alive. I tapped its beak with a glass dropper and dropped in some warm milk. I cut up worms from the garden and poked the mush over its stiff tongue. Yuck. Early next morning it was still alive. I rushed home after school. It was still alive. It stayed alive for two days and two nights. The third day I took it to school in a small glass aquarium so my friends could feed and hold it. That night it died. I was so ashamed. The middle inside part of me that was all mixed up with other people was bad. Mummy and Daddy knew I was bad. I decided not to care. Way down inside the tiny cheeping bird stayed alive, hidden from the people world, pure and golden. I was this chick.

Within minutes, a white ute slows down like a good wave.

‘I grew up in Nouvelle Caledonia, that’s why my English is good,’ the driver explains. Dark hair, strong wiry body.

I tell him a little bit about myself.

‘Are you married?’ I ask.

‘Yes.’ He stares hard through the windscreen, hands tightening on the wheel.

I’m relieved, with a pinch of disappointment.

‘I was a sailor for many years, always meeting new people and visiting foreign lands. I married a few years ago. Didn’t expect to feel trapped, but I do. I want to go back to sea.’

He turns to look at me, as if I might have the answer, as if there might be a good answer hiding somewhere. I don’t see one. He turns back to the road, staring blankly into his future – a lot more of the same.

‘I don’t know what to do and I’m not sure what my wife wants.’

I suddenly laugh at the absurdity of our situations.

‘Don’t you see, there’s no freedom in running away.’

He slows down the car and turns to me again.

‘If I can’t stand the feeling, then I can’t stand it.’

I rush in to rescue the situation. ‘I know. I’m the same.’

I nod inside myself, like a ball on a wobbly stick. I’m still running – up and down mountains, in and out of relationships, jumping in where angels fear to tread – anything to get rid of the feeling, to shake free of it, outrun it. I stare out the window. Cornelius has stopped running, he’s given up. I despise him for that – given up to mediocrity, accepting an ordinary deal.

The main highway ends near the top of the island. We brake and turn right over the hills, covered in scrubby Niaouli trees.

‘All this land here belongs to my family. My parents, cousins and uncles bought it from the French government. They were virtually giving it away after the war.’

He points down a long gravel driveway. ‘This is where my mother lived. The house is still there. No one lives there now. The land isn’t good for anything but hunting. Still, it’s the most beautiful place in the world to me, it’s my home.’

I see through his eyes – a young boy growing up under a canopy of half shade, walking the dry river beds in summer, running down a hind with a dog. I climb out of my skin, into the body of a virile young man.

I remember Cornelius saying to me: ‘Who we are is how we remember ourselves when we were young.’ He had a lot of one-liners. I wonder if he learned them from Hollywood. Made him seem wise at the time.

‘I have to turn off here,’ my driver speaks again, a little way past his mother’s home. ‘Family birthday party. I’ll drop you at a main crossroad.’

Brown hills roll out in every direction. Midday sun beats down on the empty road. My water bottle is empty. I lift my pack up and walk through the silence. I could never walk down to the sea, it’s too far. There’s a car in the distance, coming closer. No one would drive past a traveller on such a lonely road. The wave of sound slows down to pick me up and carry me on, down to the sea the other side. I wasn’t expecting toilets and I wasn’t expecting filthy bowls pulled from the ground and smashed. Cisterns, a rusty dirt brown, lie in a heap, handles gone. I don’t want to know who did it. I don’t want it at all. I fill my bottle from a tap that still works and disregard it all. Further along the beach, the long grass with seed heads wobbling in the breeze and good shade trees will make a fine campsite. I pitch my tent, put water on to boil and lie down. She arrives through the grass, in a worn tee shirt and skirt, barefoot and intense. She crouches down to study me and my campsite and we talk a little in French. Her name is Christienne.

‘Mes enfants et ma famille sont sur la plage, venez.’ I follow her down the track to the beach. ‘Mes enfants.’

Then she is gone. Sometimes I see her in the distance, behind the trees, or further down the beach with other women. The children take my hands and pull me into their games, drawing big circles and spinning inside them. I try to say their names, perfectly, but my mouth won't do it. They laugh and say the names again, and I try, but I can't curl my tongue halfway back in my throat and lower my epiglottis at the same time as my fingers stretch out to catch the tips of the sound to twist them up. The children bunch up around me and then wander off to kick in the water or dig a hole until the water seeps in. We do cartwheels down the beach and spin around and fall down dizzy and watch the world turn around us. I challenge them to walk on their hands and I show them how, the way I always could from when I first went to school. We make more games and hunt for shells, and count them up and sort them into different piles. Sometimes I pause just to watch until they pull me in again.

'Les jardins. Vous avez les jardins?' I ask.

We go touring down narrow roads wending past rough fibrolite and timber houses, into small weeded plots and a wasteland of grass and rocks and trees climbing up into the hills behind. The dry, yellow soil has been tended into crumbly lumps. Tattered leaves of tomatoes creep along the ground, hiding a few small orange fruit. Leafy greens compete with weeds, wild yellow marrows hang down from their vines. The houses are in clusters, interlaced with paths and many lanes end in churches of different denominations. The tribu (village) divides up, usually by families, into the different denominations, so the children tell me.

My mother was like Christienne, trailing the same kind of aloneness, wrapped in a shell casing, indistinct. No, they're not the same at all. There's a natural pride in Christienne. My mother had no pride. She was a housewife, nothing at all. Something about them is the same – their faces, tight around the eyes and mouth, a pinched heart, worn out. My mother was intelligent, musical and mathematical. I once saw a photo of her when she was young, pretty, with thick hair and a sensitive face – too sensitive. I never knew her. I didn't like her.

It lay against the wall in the corner of the music room, zippered up in a corpse-sized canvas bag. I stared from the living room, through closed sliding glass doors, arms hugged around my knees, thumbs locked inside quiet fists, silently breathing in my pool of cool sunlight. Mummy carried in a dining-room chair and set it down near the slumbering shadow. A cello lived in this bag. I would never dare approach to finger the polished body or ping the sonorous strings.

She pulled the sleeping beast from its cover and laid the curved belly on the plain carpet. It was the mixed yellows and browns of Grandma's Christmas puddings. Grandma filled the puddings with silver coins that turned green and sticky. I traced the intricate curls of the cello's shape with my tongue and fingered into the carpet the pattern above the dark hole in the centre. The two curling cracks above the hole looked like the music she made. Flat wire, turning round and round into taut strings, climbed the animal's neck to its head. I kept wondering into the dark hole in the middle. I wondered what might live inside. Mummy's new baby came from a dark hole in Mummy.

She pulled a rusty metal spike from the cello's bottom and screwed it tightly in place, to make a leg. She pulled a long bow from the front pouch of the cover and screwed it up tight, then rubbed it up and down on something like hard hokey pokey till the blond hair filled with dust. She unfolded a metal stand, three legs wobbling until all the knobs were tightened, and selected the music, a page covered in dots and lines and wriggling tails. The pages kept falling until she fixed them under wire fingers.

Then she sat upright on the chair, spread her legs wide open and drew the cello in against her wiry woollen skirt. She pulled the long neck to her bosom and rested its many ears against her shoulder, in the way one might draw in a child to reassure it, or embrace a lover, not that I knew about either of those things back then.

I waited impatiently now, spread out on my tummy. My pool of light had grown bigger as the winter's sun slipped under the eaves. She drew the bow across the strings, over that dark hole, and twisted the ears of her animal until the sound was just the way she wanted it. My heart stopped at the sound. I couldn't have known it then. That sound was everything I didn't know about myself.

I looked at Mummy and wondered at her face. I didn't recognize it. A softness flushed her cheeks and her eyes gleamed from another world, maybe the world of the dark hole in the centre of the cello. Her fingers curled over the strings and started to shake, like my socks hung up in a good breeze. I started to shake inside as well. These fingers were different from the ones that locked around the kitchen knife chopping carrots into tiny pieces that I wasn't allowed to eat until they were cooked, even though I liked them better raw. They weren't the fingers that gripped the broom to sweep me out of the kitchen and never come back. These were her musical fingers and I followed as they yawned and stretched their way up and down the silver strings. Her baby finger worked extra hard to be as strong as the others. Her other hand spread out along the bow in an awkward grip. I tried it with my mouth in my pool of cool sunlight until my ears twitched from the effort.

A doleful melody flowed through the glass wall from her to me. Tremulous notes emerged from the heavy creature. They wavered to the ceiling then fell, gasping, sighing, back down into the dark hole in the middle of the cello. The crying sound re-emerged, wrapped in an infinite sadness, bursting with desire, like someone wandering homeless, searching. Her arm moved the bow tenderly, firmly, back and forth across the strings and I wondered at the music and my mother and her cello.

And when she was finished, I looked around at the pale green walls and grey-green carpet and grey heater and wondered some more. Life made very little sense way back then. And then she put her cello away, sighed a trembling shudder and strode into the kitchen to start our dinner. Every night she inspected the silver beet for snails. She never rescued them all from the boiling pot and I sometimes found half a body on my plate.

The afternoon draws to a close and Christienne calls me over to the small cooking fire under a roof without walls. I walk bare footed across the grass, away from the children in their tree. I'm lurching into that hollow place inside me, that waiting room of nothing, swinging between Christienne and oblivion, meaningless shapes, sick to my stomach. I threw Cornelius away. Now I have nothing.

The children let me go. Other women from the village arrive with their babies and food – a calm flutter of friendliness. I offer to help, but 'Non, non!' so I am left alone. I miss my own children and my own language and then it is as if a wind blows away even these feelings and I am just looking out at a world that is strange and unreal and I'm not holding onto any of it. And I don't like not being able to grab hold of anything to make myself up in. Adrift in nowhere space, eyes empty of the flickering fire, busy faces, resting faces, hands preparing food, laying down mats and feeding babies. I'm not in any of it, I've blown away. And behind the empty I am crying to be saved, but no one is there.

The women and their babies stay the night and we all sleep on mats in front of the warm fire, open to the night. Through the night my mind hovers in and out of the dancing flames, and the sleeping bodies all around me, until it has always been this way. Finally, the sun is brighter than the fire and we wake up into a day of worship and song, a celebration of family. Cousins and aunties arrive with boxes and bundles of food and bouncy children. They keep strolling in along the garden path, appearing from the shrubs and from across the road on the other side of the house.

The children gather me up with them on the floor near the Pasteur. His face is kindly and down to earth. The conscience and spiritual guide of this large family, he shares the teachings of Jesus and tells the story of the prodigal son. He welcomes me into the tribu and encourages his family in their generosity and care of me.

He beams across the room. 'You have done well bringing Alice into this tribu and looking after her. This is the true spirit of Jesus, this love and care of our fellow man.'

I understand enough French to follow. He uses English sometimes for me. Christienne glows. Everyone settles in the care and words of the Pasteur. He keeps reminding us that God loves us and they believe what he says, their faces are bright and clear. The children find the page for me in a hymn book and trace their fingers along the words, as we sing. I leap inside the swelling voices, praising God for his creation and become one of His children. There is no doubt in the voices – Jesus loves us, blesses us, has blessed us, will always bless us. We will never be alone.

After the service we bustle out for lunch: well-stewed vegetables, a small piece of stewed chicken, flat bread and milky tea from a large aluminium pot. The women don't know what to do with me and tend their babies and gossip amongst themselves, so I follow the children back to the beach. We build an even bigger sandcastle, patting the walls smooth, straight walls sloping to a stick spire at the top, and scrape moats down to the sea, for the tide to rush up and eat out the walls of the castle, and collect seaweed and twigs from the grass for forests. Then we dig down into the sand for edible shellfish and pile them up on the grass for Christienne to take home and steam. We skip again, leaping along the beach, hand in hand, shouting out French words and I try all over again to get the pronunciation right and I can't, so we laugh and they don't understand why I find it so hard.

I leave to walk alone around the village and panic at the sudden pain of nothing, infinite aloneness. I need to bring Cornelius back into my heart. But who is he? All the unacceptable stuff, the unsorted mess of the middle part, all the stuff I don't understand but can't seem to do without and wish I could. I stomp over the land, macerating twigs and leaves in my sweaty hands. How is it possible to live a human life? I need human love but, under the surface, human love is full of pain.



Mummy had a tiger's chair, black-flecked skin, wooden arms rolling into claws hidden inside the ends, and a new baby. She was untouchable. I was a fly. Shoo fly, shoo fly,

shoo. Like the cows in the paddock by my tree, she'd whisk me away with her tail, if I came too close. Daddy said I would set off a nervous breakdown. He stayed away as well. No one ever explained just what that was, but it sounded very bad, like too much electricity, arms and legs falling off, endless screaming and no sense in the words. I didn't want her to go mad and have to tell my friends she was in the looney bin. How would Daddy cope? We'd become orphans. She screamed that she was always climbing up the wall but I never saw it happen, and if she did climb up, like the flies do, maybe then she would be free, maybe it wouldn't be such a bad thing to be a fly. She and Cornelius weren't all that different, now I come to think of it – too much electricity, arms and legs coming off, prone to screaming, musical.

I kept my distance, while she mended and knitted in front of TV, watching *Lost in Space*, our favourite programme. She never stopped working – she couldn't stop, because housework was never-ending. Sometimes Ginger got into her wool bag. She'd scream for us to unravel the wool quickly, or she'd wring its neck. She hated our cat. I watched Daddy's old sock grow a new layer over where his toe had poked through. Mummy stretched it over a darning mushroom for its operation. The shining needle poked back and forth carrying a grey thread. Stitches, like I had in my thumb once when Daddy's fishing hook got stuck there. Mummy's fingers were always moving, chasing wool around a needle, one little stitch at a time. I always wondered how one little stitch at a time could grow a whole new jersey for Daddy. She looked pleased when she'd finished and said a few words, and he smiled at her. She didn't know how to have a conversation, to enjoy talking, to enjoy anything. Maybe she'd never known how.

Sometimes she seemed like a hedgehog - shiny nail heads poking out and Daddy bashing them back with his hammer. She seemed to be in pain, shrinking inside herself, poisoning her blood. Their eyes looked the other way when they poured over the bills, thick pile under the big clip, sharp words bouncing off the cork tiles.

My mother slipped into the grey carpet. She lost her footing and disappeared. She couldn't tell us where she'd gone; didn't have the words. She moved around like a drowned cat, dripping salty water, trailing her nightie, moving just enough to stay alive, until help arrived.



The Pasteur sits down beside me on the prickly grass, the dappled shade of a huge banyan tree wandering across our bodies.

‘Here, some freshly-squeezed lemon juice.’

He pours two cups from a screw-top jar that wobbles precariously on the grass.

‘Delicious. Did you make it yourself?’

He nods. ‘For you.’

I take another sip. ‘Sweet and bitter, just like life.’

He chuckles as if we have colluded in this profound understanding. ‘It is.’

He lies down on one elbow, facing me directly.

‘I worked in Noumea most of my life, hard work bringing up seven children. Played rugby. All Blacks don’t win as much as they should. The children don’t know how to work hard any more. They’re lazy – too easy to live off the government.’

I pour some more juice. ‘The same in New Zealand. Welfare is a way of life there.’

The lemon juice warms up in the sun. The children scramble all over the banyan, sliding along its broad trunks, pulling themselves up high into the leaves, peeking through like monkeys, then swinging down full of smiles and delight that we are still watching. Up they go again, chasing each other, and the Pasteur is like the tree and I feel like I have always been here beside him, with the children playing.

He keeps talking, about his family, his life, wanting the best for them all, grateful for what he has.

‘Come, Alice. It’s dinner time.’ He sits up.

We collect the children from the beach, in the light slipping away, washing cool around my body, like the sea. Christienne is heating the rice and meat left over from lunch. The children slurp the runny gruel from their bowls and rush off into the night, for chasing

and hiding games. The kettle murmurs, steam drifting, water pouring over curled leaves swelling and floating into amber-rose. I sit in the corner by the garden, fingers around my cup, dark closing in. My heart gathers up the memories, lets them be as they are; no need to change any of them. I can accept my human life, everyone who makes me up – Cornelius, my mother, good and bad – there is no other way. I get up to help with the dishes but Christienne shoos me away.

Tonight I am allowed to sleep alone in my tent, re-pitched near the kitchen, in the heart of the tribu.

The Pasteur is calling through my dreams.

‘Alice, are you awake?’

It’s 3:30 am. My bus doesn’t leave until 5:30am. Why so early? I pack my gear, take out the food for Christienne, fold up my damp tent and strap it onto the pack. The sky is busy with stars. Torchlight flickers over the coins and paper as Christienne counts the exact amount for the bus. I give her the rest. I can get more at the next place. The Pasteur calls me over for breakfast: sweet, milky coffee and warm, buttered bread. We sit together in the love swimming through his kitchen – a long time, so I am full up with his care of me, so I can hold onto it, so I never forget.

The bus slows down at the main road. A blast of diesel fumes sweeps me back into the great ocean of possibility. I wave to the small group left behind. A red orb flares up over the sea, re-igniting the trees and houses. Full up to overflowing with gratitude, I become a tide, flowing into the grass and sand and sea outside the bus window, serene, flowing everywhere, and the whole world becomes utterly precious, a miraculous world, afloat in a peaceful light stirring up into a new day.

The narrow coast is tropical, lush and wet, and the sea sweeps into wide river valleys, great pools of silvery blue, upside-down rainforest shaking along the edges. One valley sweeps too wide for a bridge to span. A motorised chain claws the ferry, bus perched on top, across to the other side. I chuckle at the clever mechanics, water all around the bus, wobbling on the flat tray, like the queen’s mail that has to get through. On the inland side, grey stone pillars and cathedral cliffs reach for the sky. Grand trees shelter

homesteads and everywhere gardens of ruby-red tomatoes and leafy green spinach feed the small settlements where we stop for travellers to alight and board. The mountainous backbone of the island stops the prevailing easterly, making it precipitate and rush down, full of mountain nutrients, into the gardens below. The mountains watch over this side of the island and starve the other.

At Plage de Tiehe, near Poindimie, shiny cars line the car park. Sunday strollers, mothers pushing toddlers and babies, and romantic couples enjoy the weekend, on the lawn, with clean, tiled ablutions nearby. Below, a golden-white beach slips under the tumbling sea and silhouetted bodies paddle furiously to catch a last wave. The golden sand is thick and soft as I plod through in search of a campsite. Small tracks in the scrub lead back to the road. I guess road workers, digging up tar seal and putting in drains, will be back tomorrow. Further along the beach a headland of black rock drags out into the sea. The curling waves are catching gold now. Up on the bank under a couple of straggly trees, I set up camp and fall asleep early.

In the morning, dewdrops on the tent fly shake in the rising sun, in the cool breeze rushing out to sea. My skin flutters like a drum, vibrating with bird song – hollow body, opening out into spider's webs snaring space, dragging pieces of it up into the branches. Wind teases hair across my cheeks, my lover, and sun warms my skin as my finger tips and toes stretch, and I slip through my skin into the pearly skin of the sea, that stretches over the sky and curls into pieces of sand and raises up into the trees.

I am like an open smile that goes on forever, and inside the smile my body is tuning, nerve-strings tightening, until a finer melody is playing upon the nodes, beyond my normal range, into the fraying dendrites. I am music in the waves and the leaves, celestial, excruciatingly sweet, turning the long grass and the trees into a melody too sweet and fine for a human ear. I would stay, but I can't keep the strings tight enough for the bow that would play them. I am not refined, not resilient enough. In no time at all, I begin to unravel, to splinter, while straining to catch a delicate modulation still streaming off the edge of the wind. I don't belong here; I am human. The strings go slack and resonate a deeper tone and the world turns into a solid lump of watery clay outside me. The music has gone, but I remember the sweetness pulling at me, then letting me go, sending me back.

A solid body now – bereft, out-of-sorts – I clunk down to the beach. A moment of beauty flew through and reconfigured the nursery rhyme. Humpty Dumpty didn't fall off the wall and Jack didn't break his crown and Gill come tumbling after. In this world,

actions have consequences. Not where I've just come from. Why does language divide the world into you and me? We were always one. Why, why, why?

I need some food. I chomp on a couple of crackers and a piece of cheese and sing into space: *'Somewhere over the rainbow, skies are blue, and the dreams that you dare to dream really do come true.'*

A noise in the bush behind me – maybe a dog – twigs snapping, branches pushed aside, heavy footsteps coming my way. It's not a dog. Camping alone as a woman is dangerous. My ears become great megaphones leaping after every sound. Breathing ... my breathing ... my breathing stops. I've been here before. A shadow looming, sauntering around the side of my tent, dark body filling the view from the feet up, heavy brown boots, stocky legs, tight dirty shorts, dirty tee shirt, loose navy jacket. His face, his eyes. What about his eyes? Are they kind eyes? I can't tell.

'Hi, there.' My heart pounds against my chest. Stay calm, steady.

He doesn't speak, just looks at me, at the tent, the food, the cooker, and squats down, 'You here on your own?'

'No,' I stutter. 'I'm with my husband. He's out walking.' I look away in the direction my husband went, down the beach.

'Oh.' The man looks at me, my tent – only big enough for one. 'I'm with the gang up on the road.'

'It's a lovely beach.'

'Would you like one?' He takes a grubby joint from his jacket pocket.

'No, thanks. I don't smoke.'

'Okay, then. Enjoy your stay.'

So magnanimous. He goes and I'm left shivering in the heat.

I set out to buy a few supplies. Dark men outside the supermarket load crates of beer into a ute. I can do what I want, it's a free world. I slip through the door – food neatly on the shelves, cans and glass, sterilized, no germs inside. The checkout operator on her stool smiles primly as she slides my food through.

The afternoon spreads out over the empty beach with its empty waves. It's Monday. I walk along the beach to the rocks at the end. What do I want? I keep leaping into the mystical and falling back to earth, over and over. I'm getting bruised. What am I doing? Long shadows follow me over the sand back to camp. I tip in the pieces of potato, then the carrot and courgette. The carrot rings twirl and float on bubbles frantically breaking through to the surface, courgette bounces over potato pieces near the bottom. I settle on my sarong and gaze into the last shades of dusk washing the soft sky and reflect on my beautiful experience. Why do I keep on needing to do this?

I see Wongchuk shaking his finger and chuckling. All clinging and craving are suffering. How foolish to cling to any experience. Experiences are put together by the mind and taken apart by mind. They are not real. Kissing the hem of the intoxicating Dakini is not liberation. That's what he would say.

I rise before the sun. Today I'm going home. After munching on dry bread for the necessary energy, I plod into town, uphill all the way. I tramp past the supermarket, municipal buildings, a few shops, and out the other side, onto the main road, through farmland with homesteads on one side, shallow creeks eating out stony beds running through sand to the sea, on the other. I keep walking. Finally a car stops. The local baker introduces himself through the car window, white flour blending into his dark skin, a fine dusting through his hair. He keeps smiling at me, a large broad smile, as I climb in.

'Please come home with me pour du cafe et du pain.'

I can smell the coffee, and I can taste a thick chunk of fresh home-made bread and wonder if he means real espresso coffee?

'Merci beaucoup, mais non, j'ai loin aller.'

He turns down a side road.

'Arret!' I shout. 'I want to get out.'

The car slows down. 'Vein avec moi. Surely you want to come home with me.'

‘Non, no. Stop the car.’ I want to shriek at him. I stop myself.

My hand is on the door handle.

He slows down. ‘Okay. A kiss, just a kiss, then you can go.’

‘Non, non.’

He lets me out and drives off without saying anything.

I’m shaking. What now? What about a bus? I need to get home. Around me the land is peaceful. On the surface it is always so beautiful, oozing perfection. I sit on my pack and focus on a bird, fluttering over the grass, purple wildflowers close to the fence, petals stretched wide to the sun, and a stand of trees, dazzling green, cow chewing its cud underneath. I have to keep walking, one day I’ll arrive. I return to the main road and poke out my thumb. It’s trembling like a butterfly.

A smooth shiny sedan, almost a limousine, slows to a stop. I take a good look before climbing in. The driver is well dressed – smart jeans, neatly pressed jacket, open shirt. He greets me in perfect English.

‘How did you know I was English?’ I do up the seat belt.

‘French women don’t hitch-hike. It’s too dangerous,’ he replies, applauding my temerity and naivety.

Cool leather seat, music, air conditioning, purring engine.

‘Why are you hitching all on your own?’

My heart is muddled. ‘To make peace with life.’ I don’t make sense. ‘To understand myself.’ That’s even worse. ‘To meet people and see the country.’

He nods. ‘I’m off a super yacht in Port Moselle, Troubadour. I’ve been in Burma until last week, on business.’

I mention my interest in Buddhism.

‘Why,’ he says, ‘I’ve been reading the Dalai Lama. Kindness is my religion. I get that.’

We cross back over to the east coast, sharing adventures, discussing the politics of New Caledonia, laughing easily, and I now think that I've come away on this adventure simply to enjoy the company of other human beings, even though I didn't know it at the time. At Bourail, where he's staying, we go to a small café.

He asks across a small table. 'When's your birthday?'

'August.'

'What's your birthstone?'

'Ruby.'

He takes out a small packet from his jacket. A little stone rolls onto the table, shining in the light above us.

'It's a ruby!' I exclaim.

'Ratnaraj, king of gemstones, for the traveller in search of love. May you find what you're looking for.'

I enjoy the way the light shines through and pass it back.

'No, it's for you to keep. If you change your mind and want to come sailing with me, anywhere in the world, here's my card. I'll fly you over.'

I look up into his eyes. He too is searching, but his eyes are clouding over.

He kisses me gently on the forehead when we leave the café. 'Till we meet again.'

As he drives away, I clutch the card and his gem – shining in the sun, vital, warm, passionate, alive, like a human heart – and tie it into the corner of a scarf for safe keeping, then pack it into the front pocket with my other survival essentials: torch, map and Swiss army knife.

Within minutes, a parcel delivery van pulls up. The wiry driver seems agitated but friendly. He wants to talk, but he doesn't speak any English. He's divorced. I get that. He loves jogging. His voice is high-pitched, a squeaky wheel, bent spokes, not rolling straight or true, leaping ahead of himself as I try to catch up. We humans have so many

different ways of staying disconnected from ourselves. He keeps looking my way to engage me, dancing his hands above the wheel, then gripping tight around every corner, afraid to let go, letting go by mistake so the van lurches across the middle line and he swings it back.

I try to think in French; I can't. I have to keep translating, back and forth, English to French, French to English until the words are battering my brain – broken thoughts, broken sentences, trying to decipher the meaning, nodding, 'oui, oui', 'bien sur', words rattling around inside the van. Finally, we're on the motorway coming into Noumea.

I walk across the busy streets, careful with the lanes, weaving through cars, across the park to the market, the waterfront. Walking quickly, slowing down, sweaty hands. A red hull, *Fantasie*, is still tied up against the wall. I've been away for seven days that feel like forever.

Alice woke up with a start, into the low winter sun flooding over her. She stumbled to the kitchen for a glass of water to freshen up. Oliver was there, through the kitchen window, a load of split wood in his arms.

‘How was your visit?’ he asked.

‘I didn’t hear you come home.’

‘You were asleep. I need the car for a day to visit friends.’ He opened the fridge door. ‘I’ve marinated some mussels. Heaps of them down at the beach’

She remembered the black crescent moons poking above gritty sand, glued to broken rock. When he was young, she’d help him twist the shells around their anchors until they came free.

‘Emilee gave me some lamb. Good season for lamb, and wool. We’ll have chops tonight, after the mussels,’ she answered.

‘I found spuds in the garden. The bag’s on the bench.’ Oliver’s eyes rolled with exaggerated pleasure.

‘Might be some mint under the apple tree,’ she laughed.

Oliver seemed different, a weight lifted. His arms swung as he talked and his step was loose and long. She didn’t like to ask why. Around the fire, plates of food on their laps, they fell back into an easy bantering. He’d been reading a *New Scientist* and filled her in, once he’d picked his chops clean, nipping the last strip of fat from the bone.

‘Self-consciousness might have evolved through natural selection, to give organisms an advantage.’ To make sure she understood: ‘The physical world is the foundation of consciousness.’

Alice didn’t like it. ‘Mind came first, everything arises in mind.’

The words came out quietly – she’d said them too many times over the years.

‘Everything is created by mind. Matter is an invention of mind.’ Then she got confused. Nama – rupa: naming - forming. Does the name create the form or does the form create the name? Form is surely separate from mind, my mind, but not the universal mind? She and Oliver were a bit like her and her Dad. They couldn’t help it.

He sat up with his idea, ignoring her useless philosophy, much as he liked quantum physics.

‘The brain is a great computer. The therapist is the IT guru. Fixes all the glitches, so it runs smoothly, integrates everything. I get it now.’

Alice looked up. ‘Maybe.’

‘So therapy is good.’ Oliver stared at his mother. ‘It fixes us up.’

‘Yes, therapy is good.’ She stared back at him. Would she keep going? ‘It isn’t freedom. It keeps you inside the software, the matrix. Remember the movie. The Buddha taught a path to freedom – a way out of the software. There *is* no one inside, no genie in the bottle.’

Oliver stood up. The same old conversation. Something didn’t make sense. Analogies could only be stretched so far. He walked over to draw the curtains. It was black outside, stars and moonshine. A cat stalked over the lawn, possibly after the rats living in the ceiling, come out to feed. He didn’t want her confusing ideas, not now. He picked up his book. Alice took the plates and the vase of dead flowers. She wiped the kitchen bench and window sill, which was growing a pile of ant dust from ant colonies living inside the walls. She made tea for them both, unpacked the journals and flicked through.

Oliver looked up. ‘I don’t remember Granddad much. I always wanted to be more like him, more adventurous. I guess it’s not too late. He was pretty radical wasn’t he?’

‘He was.’

She flicked through the journal. ‘He wrote some interesting stuff down. Must have been bored hanging around the marinas. She kept flicking through. ‘This might interest you. Shall I read it out loud?’

‘Sure.’

It’s what I would now call a bad case of ‘midlife crisis’. I felt repressed, over-burdened, and restless. I was bordering on a breakdown. Fantasies of a life free of constant burden dominated my thinking. I needed to do something. Didn’t know what. I loved my family dearly. Students signed a petition against me; Valerie was depressed, didn’t have that word at that time, but that is what it was; children were out of control with boyfriends, drinking, coming home late, maybe smoking dope. I didn’t know. I worried myself sick over them.

I’d lived a very ordinary life. A teacher in natural science. Always loved nature. Keen gardener, large vegetable garden with fruit trees. Piled the grass clippings

around the citrus, fermented wine in the ceiling. Spent the weekends digging out dry rot in a plywood yacht. Only way I could afford a boat of my own.

I loved the sea, like my father. I gave up on the church. My parents were very religious. Science was my religion. I believed in the rational mind. My father was a small town electrician, fisherman in the weekend. My mother was a primary school teacher, Sunday school teacher, kept a large garden and over-kneaded the bread dough. A big, religious woman, diabetic. I was her favourite son. Valerie was a Sunday School teacher as well, at the local Presbyterian church. She went every Sunday. The minister disappeared one day, left his wife and four children, ran off with a neighbour.

I met John when I was forty-seven. That was in 1971. Fresh from Esalen, California, he began holding encounter groups. Sadly, years later, after attaining guru status, he ended up in prison as a paedophile. A work colleague told me about John and his encounter groups. With some trepidation, I drove up to Auckland for his ten-day workshop, in his delightful Torbay beach home. After preliminary introductions, we seated ourselves on large cushions, in a semicircle facing John. I was surprised to find we were mostly professional people. Felt like the beginning of a meditation session. Alice would have loved it as she is a keen navel gazer.

Oliver stopped and smiled at Alice.

Previously Valerie and I didn't have many close friends. Suddenly our life was all friends, hugs, conversation, laughter and tears. A wall had gone down. We shared stories about our lives, what we wanted. Perhaps Valerie wasn't so keen about the big changes taking place, but she went along with it. We invited friends to our bach and bought lots of foam mattresses. I learned to cook gourmet meals, bought a good stereo for rock and roll and romance. Redecorated with shaggy rugs and paisley wallpaper. Valerie dyed her hair and shortened her skirts. She looked good. We moved into the world of therapy, inviting facilitators out, exploring Gestalt, Psychodrama, Transactional Analysis. We discussed the writings of Maslow, Fritz Perls, R.D. Laing. We were at the forefront of voyaging into the human psyche. We dared to live. Valerie described a mystical experience with cobwebs in a cave. She climbed to the highest point of a tree, further than anyone else in the group. Such fun. Full body massage, eastern meditation and yoga, were suspect and weird to a lot of conservative New Zealanders, not to us.

Oliver put the journal down. ‘How come I ended up so trapped? The sixties were meant to have changed all that. I *am* free to do what I want, I know that.’ He went over to his guitar. ‘What do I want? I certainly don’t want that touchy feely all-in-together stuff. It’s outdated.’

Alice stayed quiet.

‘I guess we all have to keep changing.’ He strummed Pink Floyd, Dark Side of the Moon. Alice had played the album over and over on their long car trips.

Alice curled up on the sofa. How adolescent her father became, bursting into sailing adventures, women and new age ideas. She was disapproving and intrigued when he introduced his young girlfriend. He was 50, she 20. Fortunately she’d left home by then. She picked up Cornelius’s journal.

Her voice jerked me awake. The sound got me in the chest where I’d been hearing her all week. She clambered over the lifelines with her pack – dirty, clothes crumpled and dusty, hair a mess. What a tramp. I was upset to see her. How dare she upset me like this!

She looked tired, and happy. I was so angry and I still loved her. Such a terrible week. Every time I heard a motorbike, it was her, coming back with somebody new, to collect her things. My imagination works overtime.

She looked shocked when I told her how scared I’d been of losing her. Something was different. I think she cared. I liked that. She was calmer than I expected her to be. We talked about our relationship. I really like her when she’s open like this, when she talks about how she feels, which isn’t often. Jack isn’t any better. They’re New Zealanders. Don’t know where I stand half the time.

I know I shouldn’t shout – it’s the only way I can get people to listen, do what I want. At least I’m straight about what I want. I used to think it worked in Hollywood – but not really; they ended up crapping on me anyway. I thought I was well liked – not sure what

went wrong. I probably lost my temper too many times, and they deserved it. They're a pack of liars at the best of times.

Hollywood – good memories, some of them, in the beginning. I miss all that. Feel displaced sometimes hanging about on my old boat.

Dad and I bring *Dream-maker* in from the outer harbour and tie up next to *Fantasie*. I take the bus, rumbling through the dark hills of the outer suburbs, through the still evening, to the airport, where a couple of young boys are swinging on the rope cordon, throwing their bodies against the wall, arms and legs flung wide, whooping their delight. The adults are hushed. Sister Marion, Zoe, her youngest daughter – only six, and Charlotte, my sixteen-year-old finally emerge like pale ghosts from the underworld. Their bodies move stiffly and the words that tumble into the dark night don't make sense. Charlotte and I hug and kiss through our tears. Marion is just a little cool. I want to know how she is and our other children. They talk about school and work, an imposed structure to which they must conform. None of it makes sense. Why would they live so far from the sea, the sky and land, doing what other people want? Charlotte clutches my waist, pulling my arm around her shoulders. She's thin. I want to keep her talking, so I can hear her. Marion's face is grey, haggard, and she explains as a kind of apology.

'I only got back last week from flying around the world – conferences and meetings. I've become involved in environmental activism. It wasn't much fun.'

Next day by late morning, she's perked up and looks great. Thick red hair, dark lipstick, sleek, tightly fitting dress, boat prints on the straps, flesh tugging at the seams just a little. I want her and Cornelius to enjoy each other. She's a professional woman, a psychiatrist, exuding charm, confidence, and he's ready to be charmed. She admires his boat, his photos and his intelligence. After two glasses of wine, strong coffee, warm croissant and cheese, she's ready to start planning our sailing holiday. She and Zoe didn't come over to sit on a boat in a marina. Cornelius goes quiet. Dad looks away. They don't understand the rush. They'd rather take it easy, do nothing much for a few days, watch the weather, wait for a wind change. I get tired of the conversation, the lack of action. Marion needs to rest. Cornelius reminds me to put the dishes away, not leave them in the sink. He's brusque. I spring up. Not sure why he does it.

I set out with Zoe and Charlotte for the park in town, one hand for each, and a bag of pens and paper over my shoulder. We swing through the streets, careful on the roads, light-hearted chatter, together in this new country, seeing how we will always be together, wherever we are, as one big family. I don't generally use the word 'family,' because my tongue gets stuck on it. I spread my golden-brown blanket in the shade of a huge palm and watch their game. Charlotte draws the plan, Zoe adds red, and they pile the sticks and scrape a circle on the ground, and Zoe jumps for no reason and climbs on top of Charlotte who shrieks with laughter and hugs her, and then they separate out to add more detail to the page. I retreat to my rug, filling with a maternal contentment, alive in their bubbling curiosity, their bursting creativity, reconnecting to the joy that living is.

The park is full with mothers like me. I remember the song: *Through the eyes of a child* ... Moody Blues. Best song ever. Over by the fountain, three small children skip across the concrete, leap onto a broad step, swing around the concrete rim, and focus on the water cascading over concrete nymphs in the middle. That's where they'd like to be, climbing over the nymphs under the sparkling fountain. They throw their bodies up against the curved side, again and again to get over, but they can't.

I lie against the solid trunk of the palm and turn back to Charlotte and Zoe growing their make-believe story of stick children and wicked teachers and a talking dog.

Over dinner Marion isn't so relaxed, maybe strained, like this mightn't be such a good holiday idea for her. Cornelius stays quiet in the corner, until I spill his beer – not much, but enough for him to shout, 'Look what you've done.'

She looks rather plump in her clinging shoestring dress – a comfortable plump I admit. Her face is rounder than mine and she has pretty eyes and a soft mouth. She's talking about her older children, their art work and music. Zoe snuggles against her shoulder.

I always wanted to be more like her. I suddenly remember a scene from primary school. The boys were lining up outside the classroom to kiss her cheek. I was in charge of the turns. She was my twin and every kiss they gave was a kiss from me, and I was jealous of the kisses. I never admitted the jealousy, even to myself, not until I was much older and even then I made excuses.

She turns to me. ‘Alice, you know Charlotte was missing you. It’s very hard on the children when you go away like this. I couldn’t do it. You need to think of them more.’

Her voice is soft and crisp, a condemning and compassionate mix.

Cornelius looks up, surprised at her attack. I’m stunned at her nerve, but I don’t want to start defending myself.

‘I needed this holiday. Charlotte’s sixteen.’

We go to bed. Cornelius stretches out on his back, staring up at the ceiling, without a word.

Suddenly I’m frying, buzzing blow flies against closed windows inside me. The flies die, legs stuck in the air, the buzzing stops. I’m nothing. He rolls over to give me a cold peck, turns away and flops his arm across my body. I lie still looking up into space, flies in a box to put out with the rubbish, lid on tight. Something’s wrong.

My beautiful sister. I was born to be with her. I followed her into the womb. We stayed together, sharing beds and toys, playing together with our robots. Batteries made the arms move and the lights on their heads blink red and green. We murmured indecipherable sounds of total understanding, bodies intertwined in our special, exclusive world. Daddy came into the room and smiled at Marion who looked up, and when he sat down she rushed over and climbed on his knee and there was only room for one child on his knee.

Something’s going on. I don’t know what it is, doesn’t seem to be sexual, and he’s definitely distancing himself from me, a kind of calculated disregard. We’re finally alone. He walks over to the navigation table as if I’m not there.

‘What is going on?’ I ask from across the room. ‘You’re so distant.’

I brace myself for the worst. Don’t think my trembling is visible from the outside. He turns around, not angry or hostile (that’s a relief), friendly, and comes to sit right next to me, like he’s been wanting to for a long time. I need to know what I don’t want to

know. My ears start buzzing, scrambling my head, like mice gnawing holes in wall board, baby-pink mice crying out, blue veins glowing, wriggling like yellow maggots in rotten meat left out for the cat. He becomes quite intimate.

‘Marion and I had a long discussion.’

He pauses and I go red – my face is on fire. Too hot, stay away, fire burns. I’m burning up, I need some water, I want to plunge into the sea, to cool down.

‘What did she say?’

‘She told me that you have a problem with sexual addiction, that I can forget about you once we return to New Zealand. She said that your behaviour was driven by emptiness, not love.’

He pauses, to give me some time.

‘How dare she say that! What kind of words are they?’

Marion isn’t malicious. She is my hope. She is what is still beautiful in the world.

‘She also reminded me that lust is a fire that destroys everything. She’s seen you high on sex. She’s seen it destroy your relationships, if that’s what you can call them.’

He pauses again, before continuing. I wonder if he’s making this up. Seems to be enjoying himself.

‘You always move on.’

I spit back. ‘What a strange thing to say. That’s psychiatry for you – a label for everything.’

‘She doesn’t want my heart broken when we go back to New Zealand. I am preparing for the inevitable.’

I stay quiet, now it’s all out. I wonder if she did say all this. Probably. Not out of spite, just to look after Cornelius. But she doesn’t know how much I love him.

‘Cornelius, I love you. She’s not being fair. I’ve never loved anyone the way I love you. I never think of anyone else.’

But I'm not in the mood for this kind of conversation, I hate justifying myself. He can think what he likes.

Marion arrives back from shopping with the children and we make dinner together. I don't say anything, I need her. I can deal with this later. She brings out holey cheese and quality wine. Dad arrives. Her confidence radiates through the saloon and I let go in the outpouring of food and conversation. She's been reading an article on how the highly-strung nature is a genetic trait, determined by fragile nerve endings. Cornelius is intrigued and asks about her work.

'Cognitive Behavioural Therapy is my specialty. Mind you, I think drugs work better than anything else. I've brought sleeping pills if anyone wants them.'

'CBT is the only therapy to have done consistently well in all the trials,' she says intimately. 'Freudian therapy is passé, not client-centred, and it's not effective – takes years for any results. The new therapies focus on the client as the source of the cure, the therapist is merely the facilitator.'

I'm impressed and dish out our meal while she continues. Everyone shuffles to get in front of a plate. I spoon out rice with curried fish on top, a creamy spicy smell wafting around the table. Courgettes fried in butter and garlic and a fresh salad go in the middle of the table. I love the way her mind works and challenge her preference for drugs.

'It's the quickest way to get people functioning normally. Like a miracle. Particularly for psychotic cases, which don't generally respond well to psychological therapies.'

'Borderline personality disorder is an interesting syndrome.' She's warming up. 'It responds well to CBT. Can be caused by neglect in early childhood. Borderline between neurotic and psychotic.'

'What is it?' Cornelius asks, while I top up the wine glasses and spoon out the courgettes.

'Well, that's complicated,' Marion starts. 'Symptoms are mood instability, black and white thinking. Big problems with self-identity, which can change rapidly from being extremely positive to extremely negative and can lead to dissociation. Let's see: it's

characterized by a pattern of unstable and intense interpersonal relationships alternating between the extremes of idealizing and demonizing the other. Ring any bells?’

She looks around the table without stopping at me.

‘The sense of self or self-image is persistently unstable. Individuals tend to experience frequent, strong and long-lasting states of aversive tension, often triggered by perceived rejection. They tend to see the world as dangerous and malevolent, and themselves as powerless, vulnerable, unacceptable and unsure – in a nutshell. I have a few cases.’

‘Wow. Sounds pretty desperate.’ I add. ‘What causes it, again?’

‘A history of childhood trauma, abuse or neglect, maybe a genetic predisposition or a vulnerable temperament – that kind of thing.’

We change the subject. Cornelius talks about his years of therapy in Hollywood. Marion listens carefully and responds, like she knows just what he means, and they laugh together about the plight of the therapist on the pedestal. She draws him out. He doesn’t need to be drawn out, he’s quite capable socially, but he plays her charming game and the rest of us settle back and enjoy the salsa swinging between them.

It happens every time I slow down enough to see. The way she speaks, the way she thinks, the way she moves, her mannerisms – identical to mine in glaring respects. Differences, of course, but the sameness throw me off, because I don’t know who I am anymore, because those mannerisms can’t be me if they are her as well, can they? I feel like a fraud, a copycat, watching a replica, the real thing as me. I become the shadow of her, without a face, and break my disturbing disorientation by offering everyone tea or coffee, so I can get up and stop seeing her as me.

Charlotte is learning French. She unpacks her French grammar books and tapes, when the table is cleared of dinner and the dishes done. I'm keen for some lessons. The tape has spaces for us to put in the phrases. We use the pause button to get help from the book and then laugh at our frightful accents. We rewind to try again and the speed slurps the sound. We go over and over, reaching for perfection.

A sharp retort bursts from the for'ard bunk. 'You're ignoring me. When are you coming to bed?'

I freeze. I used to study t'ai chi: flow with the object, use the energy of the object; stay in your centre; never resist, resistance is a sign of defeat; move with the enemy, in the same direction as the enemy, until you're leading the enemy. We've done enough and get ready for bed.

In the morning he gets up before me and leaves the boat. I'm dreaming of Charlotte. I put him away in a separate room in my mind and close the door. There are quite a few men in that room. It always works as long as I have a good distraction. I creep past Charlotte into the galley to make tea, eyes sliding over her flushed face, hint of a smile, ginger hair patterning the pillow. She stretches an arm and rolls back into the pillow. I wait and pass some tea and toast.

'We could pick up Dad's gas bottle and see more of Noumea at the same time,' I suggest.

'That would be fun.' Her face brightens, eyes leaping, almost laughing as I sit near, spraying toast crumbs and slurping tea.

'Then we could go inland to stay in a native tribu, if we have time. You'd really get to use your French.'

'I'd love, love, love to do that.' she exclaims.

I ask Dad to tell Cornelius we've gone on an errand. At the office the assistant draws a map and marks 'x' for the gas bottle and number 520 for the bus. Looks simple. I know it won't be. It will be an adventure. We get off the bus and unfold the map. Streets march off in all directions, branching and turning out of sight. The articulations and the

number of streets don't match the lines on the map. None of the streets on the map is named, only the destination. We ask for help and listen carefully to the instructions, or merely suggestions, and point to our map. Our French isn't good enough and each person points in a different direction. We walk a circle, like in the mountains after a wrong turn, a one hundred and eighty degree confusion, and end up on a grassy verge in the middle of a motorway flyover, unsure which way to go, trying to remember the streets we've already been down. The wind rushes up, like the cars, to carry off our sunhats and thin sarongs and leave us naked, but we hold on, hair flying, map fluttering, and look for any clue we might have missed. Cars toot appreciatively. Charlotte trusts me. We always came down from the mountains safely. She waits for my next idea.

Another concrete path leads into an industrial part of the city. We weave through cars rushing back and forth, across broken tar seal roads, on and on under the hot sky, until I see the name of the street. We turn in. I ask about the gas bottle and hand over the receipt. They come back after many minutes and say it was too old and rusty to be refilled and has gone to the dump. We turn to each other, shocked, and then decide that's good news because now we don't have to carry a heavy bottle all the way home. We are tired but don't say so. We stay together, like in the mountains, because this is an adventure and an adventure is not about the destination, it is about distraction. We walk the long way to the supermarket for supplies so we have something to bring home.

Cornelius is resting. He's polite and comes up to help with the groceries. Dad and Marion come over from next door.

'We bought the groceries so we can leave early.'

I dump them down the stairwell. Dad and Cornelius go quiet, like thieves.

'That's still the plan isn't it?'

I try to decipher the mood. 'What's happened?'

Marion speaks: 'The men have changed their minds.'

'What?'

'I thought it was too good to be true,' she blurts out.

‘What’s the problem?’

I glare after Cornelius as he goes downstairs. Traitor! I’m not in charge. Marion and I aren’t in charge. I’d like to scream.

‘Shall we eat here?’ I suggest. ‘I’ll make a big salad, with potatoes.’

‘I’ll make a pasta dish.’ Marion replies, in chorus.

‘The gypsies keep moving because of the women. The men would stay put,’ I say.

I let it go, leave it to simmer and stew in that middle part of me, thickening up.

The family swarm onto *Fantasie* for dinner. I didn’t ask. Cornelius is grumpy. Maybe I should have asked. The children clamber around behind us, while we drink and talk. Marion shifts the conversation back to our plans.

‘Zoe and I came over to go sailing.’

‘I want to go somewhere as well,’ Charlotte pipes up.

My voice goes hard – not my usual voice, the voice from the middle, unsorted part of me.

‘Dad, you invited them over. Where can we go?’

He can’t back down.

‘We can go to the lighthouse. I’ve been there before. It’s not too far.’

‘We’ll leave tomorrow,’ I say. ‘Is everyone agreed?’

Everyone nods. Now we can relax and the thumping in my heart can settle. I don’t understand the part of me that goes so hard, fighting the enemy. Dad isn’t the enemy. I make myself convivial, handing around cups of tea and telling stories about backpacking around New Caledonia.

Cornelius goes to bed early without a word, and I wonder if I should go after him, but I don’t. Cornelius isn’t the enemy. Charlotte makes up her bed in the saloon. We hug goodnight and I close the door between us. I must do something. I mustn’t turn Cornelius into the enemy.

‘Are you all right?’ I say to the lumpy shadow on the bed.

Alice was pruning the plum tree, when the car drove up. She dropped the secateurs and pulled a twig from her hair.

‘What a surprise. Oliver won’t be back until tomorrow.’

‘Oh!’ Emilee looked flustered. ‘Great to see Orere again. Hasn’t changed much.’

She leaned against her mother for a big hug. She faced the primitive sleep outs, which Alice had moved on and fixed up for large family holidays, hidden behind vegetation growing all over them now – ivy, Virginia creeper, wisteria and roses.

‘Needed some time out. I rang. You must have been at the beach. The girls are with Bob’s family.’

Alice led the way, under the pear and apple trees, leafless lanky wands stretching up from a prune several years ago. The citrus, arthritic with borer, offered globes of gold through the dark green, and near the fence sat the prickly macadamia nut tree and two hazel nut corpses, bearing empty shells. They dodged clumps of dark clivia and their orange blooms, bunches of daffodils with watery flowers and spent jonquils – over patches of grass, sun filtering through, winged insects like angels fluttering across their faces when they sat down on the wobbly garden bench. Shadows were in constant movement, like the sea, leaves and branches imprinting on each other, patterning their skin and clothes. They were quiet for a bit.

Emilee started. ‘I’ve become a born-again Christian.’

She trailed off into the silence. Alice reached for the branch, to feel how close it was.

‘That’s a surprise.’ An interesting surprise: turning to a Christian heaven for salvation.

‘Bob and the girls, as well?’

‘No. The girls come to church sometimes. They’ll decide for themselves. Bob’s not interested.’

‘We have plenty to talk about.’

‘Thought I’d stay a couple of days.’

‘Of course.’

Alice picked lemon verbena on the way in and rinsed out willow-pattern English bone china tea cups – heirlooms, on her father’s side.

‘That’s quite a decision.’ She sliced into a moist sultana and walnut loaf, freshly baked for Oliver.

Emilee was looking around the living room, until her eyes stopped on a brass figure, seated in a lotus position with a sword in one hand, flower and book the other: a Tibetan deity.

Alice set the tea and plates down. ‘You didn’t say anything when I visited?’

‘I was thinking about it. Hadn’t decided. I wanted to know what you’d done.’

‘I never guessed.’

‘You’re not upset?’

‘Of course not. I’m curious.’

‘Meditation helped me, but not much. I’d been getting quite low, didn’t see the point. Nothing wrong – just me. Maybe I was bored. Everything went grey, meaningless, mundane. Sometimes I wouldn’t get up, even just to do the housework, hang out the washing, cook meals, help on the land. I couldn’t stand it, and it went on and on. Bob was beside himself. He couldn’t help.’

She looked up, twisting her fingers into her skirt, eyes teary.

‘Being at home with children is hard: a housewife, a farm-wife, a nothing. I have everything. That made it worse. No one to blame. No reason.’

Emilee went on blaming herself, becoming even more miserable, until Alice interrupted.

‘I had no idea. I’m sorry. Why didn’t you tell me?’

‘When you came to stay I felt better, much better. You rubbed off on me. And you had Oliver to look after. Your children haven’t done so well, have they? When you left I fell down again.’

‘What did you do?’

‘A friend from the meditation group suggested I go back.’

Emilee slurped down the dregs and clattered her cup onto the saucer.

‘Can we go for a walk?’

‘Sure.’

They followed the concrete path down to the river, across parking gravel to the beach. It was almost low tide and Alice couldn’t help twisting off a few more mussels – upside-down sunhat for a container. The eroding cliff had collapsed a large pine onto the sand, bare roots without any foothold now, shrivelling in the sun. Only stumps of the larger branches left, the rest gone as firewood. Emilee broke a couple of smaller branches, thick with pine cones, to take back for the night’s fire. They sat on the stones right down the far end, sheltered by bush tumbling down and the cliff curling around protectively.

‘I went back to the church. When I went in, I felt like I’d come home. I knew that Jesus loved me. He’s in my heart, never leaves. My depression has gone. The emptiness I couldn’t stand has gone.’

Alice’s voice rang out: *‘I am the way the truth and the light. No one comes to the father but by me.* I love the teachings of Jesus.’

Emilee stared at her, almost dismayed. ‘How can you? Buddhists don’t believe in a God, they don’t believe Jesus was the son of God.’

‘We are all sons and daughters of God. What did Jesus mean by “the father”? A man with a long white beard sitting in heaven?’

Emilee was very quick. ‘I’m not going to have this discussion. You don’t understand about faith. You don’t know everything.’

She turned around to look up into the scrub, mostly coprosma and tea tree, some wattle, foreign weed taking over. She loved this beach.

‘What’s important is love,’ she declared. ‘That’s what this church is, coming together in the name of Jesus, his love. “Love thy neighbour as thyself.” ’

They were quiet for a bit. Alice suddenly remembered a time at Orere Point, in the early days when she was always meditating. The neighbours had come over. She suddenly saw that they were her. She *was* her experience. It's all there is. There is no subject talking to an object. They were one. The words had come to her then: "Love thy neighbour as thyself." Of course. Not something she could explain to Emilee.

'Tell me more?' she asked.

'To be saved by Jesus you have to be born again, into his love.'

'Well, I certainly understand that.' Alice's voice became like a bell. 'Experiencing divine love is a precious gift, it is a rebirth, it was for me.'

'Mum, you aren't listening, you don't understand. You can't be reborn in Buddhism. Jesus said that he is the only way.'

'Why didn't you stay with the Buddhist teachings, with meditation?'

Emilee stood up to shake the sand off her skirt and to move away from her mother.

'I didn't find love. Love is a personal connection. What's missing in Buddhism is the personal relationship.'

She sat down again on a flat grey rock, a bit away.

'I need a relationship with Jesus, a divine person, to make sense of my life. Becoming detached from life is anti-life, anti-Christ. I know he cares for me, he's looking after me, watching over me every moment. I'm never alone.'

'Where is he?'

'In my heart. Everywhere.'

'Is he a person?'

'Stop that. Let's walk back, it's getting cold.'

The wind was whipping around the protective headland now, sweeping up cloud, banishing the sun, muting the sand and water.

Alice followed suit, spreading her voice low, stirring with urgency, 'I'm pleased for you. I grew up on the stories of Jesus. Went to Sunday school, read the Bible – beautiful stories.'

'They aren't stories, they're real.'

Alice picked up a couple of tiny pink and purple fan shells, because she couldn't help collecting treasures, even now.

'Don't get hung up on the dogma or the literal interpretations. Use your mind. All the stuff about sinners burning in hell. Buddhism's the same, though, full of hell realms.'

'If you aren't reborn in God's love, you will burn in hell.'

'Wongchuk said the same thing. Without the good mother you're doomed.'

'They aren't the same. God is a divine and a man, so is Jesus.'

'What about the holy spirit? Male or female?'

'You won't give me an inch. Let me think for myself. I don't want to talk about it anymore.'

They walked home in silence, wind behind them now, sun casting dull shadows in front, long, long legs over the sand. Emilee was relaxed. Christianity is the best anti-depressant ever, Alice thought. Not the Presbyterian strain, though. In her family, joy was a cardinal sin. Jesus hung from the cross, despairing, betrayed, dripping sorrow. Or was that just her mother's interpretation? What about the churches where people sang and prayed until their hearts were bursting with joy running down their cheeks?

Emilee was preparing a special dinner and Alice wasn't to come into the kitchen. She fetched the ingredients from the car. Alice sat down to rest with a glass of home-made elderberry wine, feet up on the table. The flavour was a bit dry. Cornelius's journal was on the floor. She flicked through to another entry. Actually she was pretty sick of him. This would be his last chance. And it embarrassed her how gasping, grasping after love, sex, pleasure, whatever it was, they'd both been. The ink was pressed hard into the page.

She asked me if I was all right! I wanted to throttle her. At least she asked.

That hard side of her, bullying her Dad – unattractive in a woman. My mother was the same, talking over everyone, never listening. Alice's face, that's what got me, a kind of shameful gloating.

I couldn't see her in the dark when she came to bed. Just as well.

She's seen 'The Titanic'. Great flipping iceberg. Most of them died floating about in the water. They hung on for a while, but it got too cold.

Something's messed up inside her. Can't relax, totally obsessed with Charlotte.

Charlotte's a kid. What about me? She doesn't know how to look after a man. I wonder about her mother. She never mentions her.

She became quiet when she climbed down into bed and snuggled against me. I had to kiss her because she was so soft and trembling and I do love her, so I put away my anger and kissed her all over and we slept together peacefully, wrapped up together. But it won't last.

Cornelius comes over to where I'm sorting the food in the galley.

'I'm staying behind.'

'What?'

I swing around to his large frame, blocking the companionway, our light source.

'I'll be fine.'

'Are you sure?' I squeak. 'I want you to come.'

I can't tell what he's thinking, in his eyes, which are steady.

'Yes. I'm staying.'

That means I have to take all the food across to Dad's boat. Marion and Zoe come back from the market with lettuce and bananas. I'm shaky, but keep busy to stay away from the feelings, to keep from knowing what they are. Cornelius unties the lines, throws them across and waves us away. We motor out of the harbour away from him, and set a course into the north-easterly, Dad at the wheel, steady and good humoured. I leap on deck to haul up the main, sending all my frustrations into the winch, flying the plastic runners up the mast, cleating the sheet off tight. Dad turns the boat and lets out the mainsheet. I jump back down into the cockpit to unfurl the jib, a furious flapping into the breeze, without a pause. The danger is in the pauses.

Marion stands by to help. She's not much of a sailor. We fine tune the sails until they're set well and *Dream-maker* is leaping through a turmoil bursting around the hull, dashing us forward to our goal. Zoe turns green from the motion and Charlotte smiles into the wake, two chains of sea horses flaring wide. I'd forgotten how alive the sea is, how alive the sky and the wind, sunlight darting through shadow, full-on glare bouncing off the sea, sail thrashing at the worn edges, the cockpit plunging and leaping, the sea rolling and stirring like a great beast.

Marion clutches a stay to survey the scene from the deck, a wash of pleasure over her face, swinging with the sea through her wide-planted feet. I'd forgotten life outside the

knot of human problems. Zoe rushes to the side and ejects a stream of mush, then huddles under the dodger. Charlotte clambers over with a book. The sea lifts up into tumbling, foaming crests under the glowing, shivering sky. Dad stays steady at the wheel, keeping us all heading in the same direction.

Marion and I sit down under the dodger for some catching-up time. I'm curious about her new direction, environmentalism.

Her voice becomes hard. 'I've decided social pressure is the only way. Governments are sluggish. Business is self-interested. A lot of people are doing very good work. We don't have much time.' She looks directly at me. 'I'm speaking to a group at Melbourne next month. Don't have much time to prepare.'

I look away. Never enough time. Valerie, our Mum, escaped the hugeness of life that way. I could feel guilty and I do. She is the person I could have been, should have been. She continues: 'Councils need to take responsibility. The coastline is being over-developed, privatized, ruined. There's still no legislation.' Her face becomes tight with the struggle ahead. 'I want my grandchildren to roam free over the sand and hills, the way we did growing up.'

I stare out to sea, twisting and stirring under blind winds. I understand her passion, a raging wind, channelled into good projects. Anger sharpens the intellect, but when it takes over, it's a blind, ruthless, destructive fury. I've seen it happen. *Winds without eyes.*

My voice is quiet. 'Change can come about in two ways – by social regulation or by changing the mind of the individual.'

She barely pauses. 'Individuals are shaped by society. Change social rules and values and individuals will change.'

She seems impatient with me.

My voice rises up into a plea – to be understood. 'Don't you see? Social rules can't heal the heart. We've forgotten our relationship to the land, our natural environment. We evolved from the land, we're made up by it, one with it, dependent on it. No amount of social reconditioning or political pressure can fix our escalating distance, our

misunderstanding about who we are, our forgetting. No amount of legislation can heal the rift. It's a spiritual problem.'

Marion looks over me to Dad, steady at the wheel, the boat bouncing in the waves, a scene outside of herself, stirring with life, but not inherently alive. She doesn't see that it is alive. She can't afford to fray the ends of her rope. Spiritual philosophers aren't social activators. I haven't done anything to bring about change.

'Tell me more?' she says, words rolling into the smooth warp of the therapist, slicing apart our twin-ness.

I pick up the sun cream, to read the label, uneasy about showing my naked, vulnerable self, but I do, because I don't know what else to do. Maybe it's her professional manner.

'Nature is our mother. The energy of creation flows through her, as love. We're built from love. We are her children. Through her, by her, life is. We abuse her because we've forgotten this relationship. We can't feel love. That's why we do what we do. We are doomed because of this forgetting. Nature isn't threatened by our greed and abuse. Her time scale is different. To talk about saving the planet is patriarchal pomposity.'

Marion stays quiet. I know I sound stupid. These things are hard to say. I gaze into the distance and keep trying.

'I remember when I saw directly the trees and me, arising together, a co-evolutionary journey, making each other up. We aren't separate.'

Marion turns to Dad. 'Let's have a glass of wine. What do you say? Baguette and havarti?'

She slips down into the galley.

Alone at the bow, I face into the wind. The tears are from the wind. I grew up to be like her, a logical, rational, smart kid – nine years at university, graduated in science and philosophy. No career in philosophy. I can argue for anything. I can construct great, logically-coherent points of views and crucify any opponent with logic. Most arguments take for granted just what I need to question. This is the crux of it. I need to question the most entrenched myths of society, the very shape of our language that separates us out.

Marion's work would take me to an arid place of talking *about*, where I would quickly forget what it was I was talking about and why. I'd be caught in the glamour and self-righteous anger of my argument – big ego trip. I remember when I realized the words I was arguing for were hollow, they didn't mean anything: they were concepts without anchors in the world, without roots in me. That was a very empty day. I had no choice. The wind pulls more water from my eyes. I had no choice.

I look back at everyone in the cockpit. We're living a dream we don't understand. I *will* understand. What do I really want? I wait for an answer, there must be one. The waves keep racing past the hull. *Dream-maker* keeps rushing forwards, into the answer. It isn't what I'm expecting.

I want to be a person of such courage in ordinary life, that I can stand present, unshakeably present, in the awesome encounter living is – at all times, not just occasionally. I want to be able to live my life, just as it is, without hiding or wanting it to be different. I want to be able to stop wanting it to be different. I want to stop running away. I want to stop having to change the world into what *I* want. I want to stop wanting so badly. This is enough for me; it is enough to bring peace to the world; it is enough to transform the whole world. I have a long way to go. I start down the deck slowly, holding onto the rail. I don't want to be pushed around by the middle part of me anymore.

Dad circles *Dream-maker* into the shallow water of Lighthouse Island. We tie up to one of the several buoys placed there for visitors, to protect the coral from anchors and swinging chain. Before us is our tropical dream – ivory sand, coral, pretty fish, clear water. The sea is a flat swell, under a flat sky. The children climb downstairs for togs, chattering about a flying dolphin and that they are mermaids. Marion plasters herself with sun cream. We bundle into the dinghy and buzz ashore. I'm becoming scattered, bereft, falling out, breaking up into faces of the sea. Zoe and Charlotte help lift the dinghy high, careful not to scrape the bottom.

I look around. The sand is covered in seal-like animals. The amount of flesh falling out of stretchy speedos and string bikinis takes my breath away. Couples wrap around each other – hand in hand along the beach, guts hanging out, thighs wobbling; plopped on recliners; flopping in the water, soaking. I'd forgotten we were animals. Has my age made me not want to see the body, to pretend I am the mind, the conversation, the preciousness of something more spiritual? The women waddle through the sand like geese. In no time at all it all seems perfectly normal. I undress and expose my fleshy thighs and crinkled stomach, as a piece of the view, for others now to see where it hangs and how it quivers when I stand. Marion peels down to her bikini – white skin, brown arms. She's carrying slightly more weight than me, but then she's heavier boned. I start to shrink, implode. A beach overrun with humans is dangerous, it verges on mundane – I become a body, an object, and subject trapped inside my thoughts, fallen from grace. Help!

We take turns to swim and watch over Zoe. She and Charlotte splash at the water's edge, in a copycat game, creeping along the bottom as sea serpents, leaping out as dolphins. Marion strides down the sand and plunges in, powerful arms pulling her back out to sea. Not my style. When it's my turn, I wade in slowly so the water can creep up the inside of my legs, licking at my stomach until I have to plop down to put an end to the torture. I swim in large circles, searching for fish. Lying down on the sand

afterwards, face upwards under a woven hat with small holes that bend the light into sparkly geometric shapes, I remember as a child smelling the dried grass of a hat and disappearing into its keyholes of light. Marion and I grew up together in a keyhole of light.

The island takes less than an hour to walk around twice – three times would be boring. Charlotte and I come across snakes slithering up the beach and the curvaceous lighthouse, closed to tourists. The resort is sandy and dark, catering for day visitors from cruise ships. That's about it. The ocean side of the island is scrubby, windswept, rocky. I need more of a distraction to stop the panic, the dread of nothing worth anything at all again. Never know when it's about to leap up and swallow me and show me how empty of anything special my life is. Second-stage womb stuff, of course – contraction, shrinking universe, trapped inside a 'me' – not that the theory helps. I've turned into an ordinary tourist, a holidaymaker walking over the view out there. Where is the mystery, why isn't my thumping heart, coursing with blood from the whole universe, moving me to the beat of its numinous drum?

We sit on white plastic chairs gathered from the sand, under a fake grass umbrella, looking out at a cruise ship that's just unloaded its hold – two classrooms full of young teenage girls from New Zealand. The girls stomp clumsily up and down the golden beach in baggy shorts hung low. Charlotte's hair is tied the same, a bobbing ponytail. Boredom is dangerous. We're all drowning in the copycat game. Marooned in middle-class mediocrity and out of ideas is the worst possible predicament.

Marion strikes out in a pragmatic way. 'I'm going back out to *Dream-maker* to get some wine.'

I know we are meant to be having fun. Cornelius said it all: "A holiday in the Pacific is fun, end of story."

She returns with her hands around the solid base of a large casserole, last night's macaroni. She plonks it down, with a bag with wine and plastic glasses.

I dip a spoon into the cold gluggy mess and hand a plateful to Dad.

A sea snake, black with white rings, slides out of the water and slithers up the sand. Black and white – one or the other, mundane or divine, inside or out, door open door closed, samsara or nirvana. Where's the blender?

'Sea snakes are deadly poisonous,' Dad warns. 'One sting and you're dead. You have to watch out when you're swimming.'

Zoe shivers and moves close to her mother.

'They always come ashore to sleep,' he continues.

This one wriggles close. It lifts its head at Marion's sarong, a heap on the ground, then slithers underneath. After a few minutes I lift the fabric to see. A tight bundle, twisted around on itself, fast asleep. I'm the only one to think anything of it, but I've never had a visitor like this.

Zoe goes snorkelling for the first time. She learns to row, two hands together, keeping the oars steady so they slip into the water without jumping across the surface, soft on one, hard on the other when she wants to turn. She helps with the dinghy, carrying one side all by herself, an inch off the ground. She hasn't seen how it all fits together, a whole world known, a light bulb that never turns off, a living nightmare.

Dad has to say it again. I knew it. He's been watching Zoe as well.

He murmurs. 'Look at her, six years old. I wish I were six again. The world is still her oyster.'

Dad means that she can still shape the world to her dream. She can grow any dream she wants. I could throttle him. Zoe's face wrinkles into a kind of quizzical regard. The grown-ups will take her over if they can, to grow their dream, make her forget.

'Dad, what do you mean, "The world is your oyster"?'

He starts at the strange question.

'I mean she can do anything she wants; her life is full of limitless possibility; she can create any reality she wants. You still can too, you know. Now me – I'm getting old. My life is almost over.'

Just the answer I expected. Marion doesn't speak. I think she finds the conversation tedious, irrelevant, even ridiculous. She's heard it too many times before. We pack up our things. I lift Marion's sarong from the snake, black and white rings, and Zoe helps me with the dinghy.

All the other boats return to the mainland. We're here for the night tied up to the buoy. The tide turns and brings in the ocean swell, rolling and twisting us chaotically. Marion's face turns into patches of green, grey and white. Zoe throws up at regular intervals. Charlotte is prone, stretched out face down, while I stroke her back. Dad sits at the navigation table, worried the mooring line may break or that we're dragging the concrete block back to New Zealand. Too tired, too sick, too late to sail back to the mainland now, we curl up in our corners under a single light swinging and rolling in the jingling, jangling rigging, and water sloshing against the hull – united in our misery, our common danger, as a family.

While we're having breakfast next morning, an official boat packed with scuba divers arrives to check the moorings. They're all fine, except for ours. They'll replace the rusted chain on their next trip. Dad ponders this strange trick of fate, while Marion brings up a fresh Bodum of coffee. Charlotte and I go snorkelling. We take off together, leaping way out, flippered feet kicking air, hands gripping our masks as we fall under the waves into the cool awakening we were expecting. A half light tunnels down, gentle currents wafting this way and that. I dive away, rolling carelessly, arms sweeping wide, pushing fluid past my skin bursting open, buoyant, taking me back into my body, into the sensations – watery bliss, whole body caressed by the breathing sea. We return to the surface to make water spouts and fill up with the poison that keeps us alive.

Oxygen is a dangerous poison. It creates toxic free radicals in the body. Given half a chance it would oxidize everything, ruin us completely. Bad news. I re-experience weightlessness, faded light, reverberating sounds, restrained movement, from before I was born into full-on air and the dangerous rift began. A swarm of flickering blue fish comes into focus. We swim straight for the middle. It breaks up and reforms into a swirling globe of glittering light around us. We surface together.

‘We’ll go deep this time. Don’t be scared of the sharks – only reef sharks. They won’t hurt you.’

Charlotte nods, freckles leaping from her pale skin, and follows me down, flippers working overtime, to where the large fish roam. She swims behind when a couple of reef sharks come into view. We finally surface together and pull off our masks.

‘I’m cold.’

‘Me, too.’

Marion is waiting with towels. Purple with white goose-bumps all over, Charlotte’s shivering body is laid out in the sun to warm up.

The wind is blowing a light northerly when we set out for home. Dad decides to motor. Not enough wind to sail. Marion and I grew up on launches, before the trimaran – family holidays up and down the coast of New Zealand, diesel engine throbbing, heart beat of the sea. She wraps her teddy-bear child with a story, to soothe the churning in teddy’s tummy. Charlotte is reading against me.

Zoe settled, Marion comes over to sit with me and share the vibration.

‘I’ve been thinking about what you said on the way over,’ she starts, ‘about understanding life. I’ve read the same books as you, so I understand what you’re getting at. I don’t agree. The human psyche with all its unsorted emotions is the problem. Look at you.’

Now I’m on the back foot; she races on.

‘We *are* separate from the land. The miracle of life was that something separated out of nothing, and that it keeps separating, making divisions, into more complexity, more life, separate from the mother, born. Sensing implies something sensed, something else. This is the way we create the worlds we live in – we differentiate them out.’

I look away to Charlotte’s back, my hand folding the skin, more urgently now. I’m done. She’s right. That’s the problem with philosophy. You can argue convincingly for anything. She waits for me to nod, to admit defeat. I do, like gasping for air after a bulldozer has rolled over me. She goes on building her argument.

‘Each cell has a membrane, separating it from its environment, maintaining its integrity. Even an atom has a boundary. Every form of matter distinguishes what it is, from what it isn’t, what it wants from what it doesn’t, with life and death consequences. Separation, discrimination, and action based on choices, constitute life.’

She pauses to expand her voice, to fill it with wonder.

‘We are co-creators. Everything acts on everything else, is separate from everything else so it can, but also connected, so it can. This multi-faceted world is the result.’

I can see her on a podium speaking to a large audience. She’s good.

‘Humans are extraordinarily powerful. Self-consciousness, imagination, a rational intelligence, plus emotional stupidity, make us terribly dangerous. We need to be controlled through laws and education. The discrete note of the individual must be played in tune with the whole symphony, the whole planet. There isn’t an easy answer.’

I’m surprised at this change of tone: the voice of a dictator. I’m unsure now. I remember cycling around Vanuatu. I was surprised that I didn’t want to stay unborn, floating in unconditional love. I wanted to go adventuring. I remember Wongchuk saying it is possible to leave behind the neurotic who keeps wanting to return to the womb. I also remember how distressed I was yesterday, how trapped and desperate I felt without any sense of connection to the mystery of the whole.

‘We need both,’ I reply. ‘Neither on its own is any good at all. The mundane without the divine is hell on earth. It makes people do desperate things.’

‘Why are you separating mundane from divine?’ she asks, but we are interrupted by Dad calling. Just as well. His voice is urgent.

‘Alice, come quickly. There’s someone in the water.’

I leap up into the cockpit, just in time to prevent being massacred, and breath in deeply – fresh air.

‘It looks like a windsurfer,’ Dad points.

Beneath the low sun is a silhouette – arm waving, waves rolling over the shape, on a board I think, something dragging behind, water leaping up taking it out of sight, the sun blinking over the waves, shadowy glare, wind splashing the water. It's hard to see.

‘Yes, he's waving.’

Dad slows the boat down and we come close. I stand over the back to haul the figure up while Dad ties on the board. Charlotte and Zoe freeze in the background, eyes wide and watery.

‘I've been in the water for five hours,’ the windsurfer chokes. ‘I couldn't do anything and the night was almost upon me.’ He sips the coffee and swallows the reflex to cry. We cover him with towels and then a blanket.

‘Might've been eaten by sharks, run over by a ship, fallen off, drowned. I've never been so scared. I wanted to stay alive, but the sea was too cold and the wind too strong. I couldn't do anything. Thank heavens you saw me.’

Zoe shivers. Charlotte goes pale and her face collapses and she tightens up to stop the tears.

‘What would my wife have done, when I didn't come home? What could she do?’

Charlotte brings up more biscuits and I want to cry as well, for us all, that we are all safe from the cruel sea. In no time we arrive in the shelter of a harbour, multi-storied apartment blocks built down to the water. I row Pascal ashore so he can call his wife. I am happy rowing him in like this, happier than I have been this whole outing.

Cornelius is standing at the concrete wall, ready to take our lines when we motor in.

‘I've missed you.’

He excites me with kisses, as soon as we're alone. ‘I've made you another tape.’

I leap back into the furious distraction of us, my distress vanished, spinning in his adoration, soothed by his presence, lost in sensuality, in the moment. ‘Can I listen to it now?’

‘No, later. I broke up with you and made up at least fifteen times while you were away.’

He kisses me again, an exquisitely gentle stroking of our lips.

‘Now you are here, I couldn’t possibly want to be without you.’

I smile. ‘I was the same when I went around the island. The moment I saw you on the boat, I realized how much I loved you.’

We stare hesitantly into each other’s eyes as if we are about to leap together into a fire of eternity.

I panic. ‘We don’t have much time. We have a big family to feed. Pascal, the drowning windsurfer, and his family are coming for dinner with rum and a tuna loaf. Take your hands off me and I’ll tell you all about it.’

Oliver turned up the next day. He'd been shopping for clothes and looked smart in new black trousers, grey V-necked jersey, threaded with yellow and blue, over a yellow shirt.

'When are you going to tell her?' Emilee urged.

'Tell me what?' Alice heard them from the kitchen.

'Come and sit down.'

'I'll just get the muffins out. Is it about Marie?'

Oliver jumped up and hung over the servery facing her.

'It's about Marie. She's leaving, going to live in a community with the children. I can go too.'

'You haven't told me?'

'She wasn't sure. Rang a couple of days ago. I needed time to think it over.'

Alice lurched inside. He hadn't told her. Why not? He'd been here for weeks. Was she that overbearing, that unsympathetic? Emilee as well. She felt sick. Maybe he was embarrassed. Her children were full of surprises. She paused, until her legs stopped shaking. She shouldn't take it personally, blame herself. It wasn't to do with her; it wasn't about her.

The muffins came out easily. She buttered them and came into the living room with her offering.

Oliver poured the tea into the dainty willow-pattern cups.

Emilee curled up in her corner of the sofa.

'Tell me.' Alice started.

'Where do I begin?' He bit into a muffin. 'Rhubarb and banana. From the garden? Out of this world. Thanks, Mum.'

He licked his fingers. 'She went away on some weekend retreats with a girlfriend. I'm sure there's a guy involved, has to be, but Marie says no. This guru, doesn't belong to any group, seems to be doing his own thing – the new Messiah. He's very charismatic. The group is on about living in harmony with the land, with nature, with the divine. He talks about the world being out of kilter, too materialistic. We've lost our connection to the heart. Well, we all know that, of course. His followers started up a community on Cortes Island, in the warm Gulf Stream flowing past Vancouver Island. Two hundred acres – good farming land, forest, swamp and bluffs. They're almost self-sufficient. Some of them have jobs in Victoria, but mostly they work in the gardens and sell in Victoria. All organic – good money in it. He's written a couple of books. Come to save the world, show the new way. I've been there. Quite simple: one big kitchen, small cabins, large gardens. No drugs or alcohol. I certainly understand why she's keen. City living is hard. I don't like him, though. I don't like the guru up on a pedestal kind of thing. After the women I reckon.'

He took another muffin and demolished it in two bites. Alice waited politely.

'Anyway, she's going. She'll teach in the primary school. Don't think I could stand it. I'm not a gardener. Could be the IT man. I'm not into community living – like my own space.'

Oliver paused. Alice was still processing; it took longer at her age.

'It'll be good for Mollie and Brad. A natural life. The city hasn't done them any good. It's a good idea, except for him, Ronald Tinsdale. I mentioned him before.'

'I remember.'

She passed the muffins around again.

'What do you think?'

'I certainly understand her choice.'

Alice refilled the cups with tea; they were very small cups.

'Marie wouldn't make the decision lightly. She's a thoughtful woman.'

'I know. I'm the problem. Maybe that's why she's going, to get away from me.'

‘But you can go, too.’

‘I don’t want to. I don’t think I want to. I have to sort things out in my own way. I’m not spiritual. I’ve enjoyed our chats, to get clear, but it’s not for me.’

Both Oliver and Emilee seemed confused. Alice stood up. She needed to walk, to think. A human life? She stared out the glass to the sea. Such a struggle, the birth of awareness. Cities seem like the enemy, a spreading cancer of materialism, isolation and conformity, a barren womb, unplugged from the mother. Most of the world will soon be living in cities.

Oliver called her back with his conversation.

‘She talks like it’s the answer, like it will solve all our problems.’

Alice sat back down.

‘There will always be problems, humans always create problems, we like problems. Manageable problems are interesting. Living in a city with young children is hard. I’m surprised you’ve lasted this long.’

Emilee piped up. ‘I think it’s a good idea. Not sure about this Ronald guy. So what *will* you do, Oliver?’

Oliver stared at her, to shut her up. ‘I want to go down to the Orere School to check it out. Haven’t been back since I was a kid.’

They left in a hurry, to peer through the windows at their desks, remember animal days, the playground, the river, the pool where they learned to swim.

Alice picked up her father’s journal. Cornelius’s journal went on last night’s fire. She didn’t want anyone reading it. Her father was still on about encounter groups. John, the encounter group guy, set up a community. It lasted twenty years – a law unto itself, until the police raids. He’d been baptizing the children with his semen.

Then the serious work of the encounter group began. Volunteers approached John with their reason for attending the session. They were encouraged to live out and express long-repressed emotions of many kinds, some surprisingly violent and noisy, others heart-wrenchingly sad, usually ending in floods of tears. The person would be supported and reassured by the rest of us, by us putting our hands on them, wrapping them in our arms. My turn for the hot seat came. Everyone was watching.

After some gentle encouragement from John, an amazing thing happened. I found myself imprisoned in a large circular fortress of stone. John asked if I could see over the top. I said that I couldn't. Was there any way out? No.

It all seemed so real. John said that I had to find a way out. What was I going to do? Suddenly I was a foetus in the womb. My mother was breathing the walls of the womb, caressing me, massaging me. It was beautiful. I worked out that I would have to be born. Strangely I worried about the umbilical cord. Next I felt myself being ejected, kicking and wriggling, uttering a baby cry on my back on the floor. When I opened my eyes I was encircled by people looking down in wonder and amazement. I felt so stupid and embarrassed. I would never have believed such things were possible. The amazing thing was that I had escaped. At forty-seven I was reborn into a new world, a new opportunity. The effect on my life was dramatic. I discovered the real, authentic, genuine, expressive me. I'd become totally lost in my roles – parent, husband, teacher, all under a restrictive cultural conditioning. Now the world was a wonderful, friendly, supportive place. Working with students became a delight.

Marion is heating up a pile of fresh croissants from the market by the time we get up. She isn't normally an early bird. Loose pale-green silk top and three-quarter length tan cotton trousers, a pendant necklace with a greenstone heart hanging from her throat, hair rolled loosely in a big clip – she looks gorgeous. We're having a day together, just her and me, in town. I throw jeans on under a crumpled tee shirt and run my fingers through my hair.

'Ready to go.'

We step lightly across the park.

'Town or beach? You choose.'

'Show me the town,' she answers straight away.

Her manner is slightly resisting, but I keep chatting, showing her new places, getting excited, until she warms up and we become as we always were, are: bosom buddies. We sit on the rim of the fountain in the central park, splashing our feet in the cool water.

She starts our normal conversation: 'You put God first, I put family first. What do you think about our choices now?'

I decide to take the upper hand. I don't want another rout by her.

'Why *did* you stay in your marriage? Bad relationship model for your children. Dishonest and loveless. A repeat of Jack and Valerie. We know how bad that was.'

She becomes cool. 'Maybe marriage is about giving children security and stability, more than parents loving each other. Our marriage works. We never talk about our liaisons. If we did it would be over, so we don't. I've met this charming man, a retired neurosurgeon, so romantic. We write poems to each other every day and he sends me presents, china and clothes. An alcoholic, that's the only problem – teacup of wine by the bed for when he wakes up. When the children leave home, well, then we'll see.'

I'm glad she has a lover – she won't be after Cornelius. I splash my feet into paddle wheels, spurting up wings of water.

'Hmm, my spiritual path. How much choice did I have? I married an angry man. Cornelius is the same. My meditation practice helped me see what was going on – the self hatred, the self abuse. I gave him a chance to stop, but he couldn't. What else could I have done?'

'I agree. You shouldn't have married him in the first place. And now you've chosen Cornelius?'

'So, my choice of God first. I couldn't not put God first. Tenzin gave me my life back. That's huge. Wasn't the same for you. You were satisfied with just a taste. Maybe you were scared to let go the family and leap. Was it fear or responsibility that stopped you?'

I lean back on the concrete rim, so I can see her face. Even Stevens.

'I wasn't as messed up as you, not as desperate for love. You were always running from people who cared about you.'

She does it again – changes into her psychiatry voice, a smooth intimacy that isn't and it is. She keeps going.

'You were tormented. I fitted into a conventional life more easily. Having a career helped. You never did. Doesn't make sense to blame or say something should be different. Your children missed out on a stable family and a mother who put them first.'

The dagger. It's okay. I have an answer.

'Maybe it depends on what I have to give them now. Remember: "The fat lady hasn't sung yet." They seem fine so far.'

We keep talking down the street to the beach, without a break, entranced by the other, the shade we never became. We're turning over the same stones, propelled by the same investigations, no matter how long ago we last met. Best of all, whatever we talk about, she seems to be affirming me, telling me I exist, that I'm okay, that I make sense. We think the same under the surface. We can ramble on for miles, following a thread, holding together, creating a world that is strong and true. I need her to hold onto me, not

to let me go, to keep believing in me, because sometimes I don't and, when I don't, I don't know what to do when she's not there.

We gather back on *Fantasie* to finalize plans for our next sailing adventure. We were originally going to sail down to the Isle de Pins, a number one tourist attraction on account of its magnificent white beaches, offshore islands, snorkelling and walking trails through an indigenous reserve. After taking into account the possible weather difficulties and the limited time, we have decided to reduce our scope to Baie de Prony, a large inland harbour south of here. We two sisters sit on one side of the broad mahogany table, Dad and Cornelius on the other, like at a boardroom meeting, back in the same place.

'I'd like to wait a couple more days for the wind to change,' Dad starts. Cornelius nods and the air above the table suddenly freezes, like a storm arriving.

'Dad, we only have a week left,' I plead.

We all tense up, delaying the inevitable cat and dog fight. We wait to see Marion's reaction. She doesn't say anything.

Dad throws out a diversion. 'Why can't you relax? Marion hasn't seen anything of Noumea. We have plenty of time.'

'We don't have plenty of time,' I shout. Why am I shouting? I try to calm down. 'That's why we can't go to Isle de Pins. You don't want to go anywhere.'

'That's not fair. You keep pushing me to sail when I don't want to go, when the wind is all wrong. I wanted to stay in Fiji.'

'What do you mean? Before we left New Zealand you said we were going to sail to Vanuatu and Noumea. You have to follow through with what you say.'

Dad's eyes turn down. He's doing his best. He's angry, but he never gets angry – he bottles it all up till it disappears. He's been bottling this up for two months.

Marion stays quiet. The restless sea has unsettled us. We don't do this in our family. She didn't come over for this kind of a holiday.

Dad replies quietly, 'I wanted to stay in Fiji so I could meet someone. I was lonely. You met Cornelius.' He won't look at me. 'We should have stayed.'

I crumble inside. The words play like a mantra, over and over: "It's all your fault. It's all my fault."

I've been condemned, shut out from humanity, my cold heart exposed. I want to run away to where life is waiting with outstretched arms. *She* won't turn away from me. I can't find *Life* in my human clothes. I'll cycle away forever. Take me away. Take me back.

The meeting is over. Dad and I walk off in different directions and we don't talk. I'm determined not to talk to him at all. Marion can look after him.

I leave for the park, to be alone, and lean against a tree and draw sustenance from the cool earth. The sky is grey. It'll rain soon. I know there's something wrong with me: a grain missing from the human fabric so I don't stretch the right way, and the weave has holes that are too big. I don't really care. I'm like a block of wood, all splintered and cracked on the outside, a hard knot inside. Take more than a sharp axe to break me open. I look to my spiritual teaching for guidance and my rational mind. I keep trying to be what I am not, so I always risk being found out. This is exhausting.

Accept life (myself) as it is and you will find it a blessing. A wise person said this. It's true. I need to remember. Even my life is a blessing, if I can accept it, just as it is, if I can find the courage for this. Why is it so hard? I look around. Happy couples conversing, children playing, in a world I don't belong to. I keep trying, but trying is pretending, it's a pretence. I do my best to look after Dad and Cornelius and then I get found out, because I don't really care; it isn't really me. Who am I really? What a relief to be on my own again, so I can think about these things with no one to judge me. Let it rain – the rain is a blessing, swelling the wood, softening the dark knot. Clouds are darkening above me. Everyone's going home. I could go back to the mountains – streaming rain dripping down my neck and steaming off my beating chest; the sodden earth splattering over my trousers as I stomp across raging rivers and up craggy mountain tops to where alpine grasses struggle in the shelter of rock. Nature doesn't care whether I live or die. We're the same. I watch the first raindrops.

We come back together around the table, children clambering out into the night with their torches – squeals of terror and laughter as they hit a rock in a storm. The mahogany is the colour of burned caramel, no longer sweet; fish on the walls, imprisoned behind glass, but they don't know. Dad and Cornelius return to the charts and peruse weather printouts from the marina. Cornelius prints out the latest weather fax. They shake their heads. We're counting down the days Marion and the children have left. Dad glares at me like I'm putting him under too much pressure. Cornelius turns away. I stomp off saying I don't care what we do, but I do. I sneak back – I can't leave Marion and the girls stranded in Port Moselle, they need me to fight for them.

'That's not true. You know that's not true,' I shout when he accuses me again of ruining his holiday, of forcing him to sail to Vanuatu. He's seventy-nine. This is ridiculous. He's too old to be sailing. It scares him. Why doesn't Marion say something? She's confused. What is she thinking? What is Cornelius thinking? I can't tell. Dad goes back to his own boat, more stooped than usual, bunkered down inside himself. Marion follows.

I march outside again, second night in a row – a familiar pattern. I've done it my whole life, down dark footpaths, sometimes with a sleeping bag, headed for the bush. I haven't had enough time on my own, that's half the problem. I don't know who I am, no perspective, lost in the bits and pieces flying overhead. Hissing lullabies into the wind, I sit on a bus seat under a palm, long needles pointing down. Got one in my foot once – sharp poisonous tip, needed antibiotics. I need to find out why I'm so upset with Dad? I'm always so angry with him. Why does everyone distort the truth? I can't tell what's going on. Never could when I was growing up. Nothing made sense. And he keeps telling me my life is a wonderland of unlimited possibility – that I'm free to create whatever I want. What a load of crap.

An old man huddled inside his overcoat smiles as he walks past. He goes into the café.

What did happen in Fiji? How would I know? Fuck, I don't know. It's all distorted. Maybe I'm distorting everything. I'm shivering, and the grass is shivering in the cold wind. I kick the stones under the bus seat, kick them out onto the grass for the lawnmower. What about me? He's ruining my holiday now. The dark inside me is

growing, not dissolving. Why not? I can usually think my way out of my dark states.
Not this time. Something in me wants to get him, beat him to death.

Dream-maker and *Fantasie* sail in convoy down the coast, past the weeping sores of abandoned nickel mines. We saw them on the way from Vanuatu; we'll see them again on our way back to Port Moselle. New vegetation is covering some wounds, good land keeps slipping away in others. Baie de Prony is a long silent waterway, like a watery reptile – small inlets for legs, dragging its heavy belly up into the scrub out of sight. Isle de Casey is a small island hump on its back. There's a hotel for fresh bread, so we read (we'll have to find out) and moorings for a secure anchorage. Scrubby bush falls down into crystal-blue water, blue like the sky, reflecting the sky and bush. I'm on my own, shivering in the cold bowels of the boat, dark side of the sun.

We go through the motions of being a family. I remember the motions well, the constipated motions of our family. Marion passes the bread, she butters a slice and we break up the lettuce and slice the tomatoes and say, 'Isn't the weather great,' as a bolus of starch sticks in my gullet, like the gullet of the fish Dad stabbed with his saw-toothed knife. No one says anything real, because we might explode if we did.

I don't want it to be like this. The island is covered in cycads, my favourite plant on account of its heroic evolutionary leap into the gymnosperm family. I had an heirloom cycad once, from my grandmother, sharp quills growing from a furry heart, slow-growing in a fibrolite pot. In the end the ants got it, ate out the heart.

Cornelius stomps around, lashing out sporadically.

'Come over here; look what you've done. Your hair is everywhere.'

I jump to attention, pretending it's not what I'm thinking. It's not abuse, he's not putting me down – he's just wanting his boat to be clean.

Marion stays quiet, distracting us all with conversation, cleaning *Fantasie* to keep the peace, going back to *Dream-maker* with Dad in the evenings.

I need some exercise. Cornelius and I need to do something together. All we do is make love and that's not enough to build a relationship. We go for a walk. The track leads

through native bush – mainly cycads and giant ferns – over the top of the island, which isn't so high, and around the edge down by the water.

‘Why didn't you want to leave Port Moselle?’ I ask.

‘I like the city,’ he replies.

He keeps walking in front, so I have to dash to keep up. I ask him about Marion. Wouldn't he prefer her to me? Couldn't he fall for her?

He replies rather formally: ‘No, but she is a good listener and this gives her a quiet, seductive power.’

We meet her on the track coming the other way. Cornelius slips down a sidetrack, back to *Fantasie* and we walk on together.

‘Some holiday. Can of worms. Should have gone to Cairns.’ She bends down to inspect a fly trap plant. ‘I remember now why we never took men into the mountains. It was a good rule.’

I bend near to inspect the saw-toothed ridges on the leaves. She goes on. ‘That one time we went into the Kawekas with Damian and Terry. Overbearing and always grumbling about how far they had to walk. It was easy with us and the children, just got on with it. Boot camp, though. The men would never have followed you.’

She starts walking again.

‘I know.’ I catch up. ‘I don't understand men. Cornelius *is* a bully.’

‘Then why are you with him?’

‘I love him, I want to love him, be with him. He's intelligent, sensitive and interesting.’

‘And he's a bully.’

We find a clearing, a glade of sorts and sit on a fallen log.

‘Why are you so angry with Dad? He doesn't deserve it.’

I look around helplessly. ‘I have no idea.’

We both stare into the soothing, impersonal, silent greenery.

I start reminiscing. ‘For a time, on every retreat I was swallowed up in so much anger, I couldn’t get out of it. I’m a gentle person – it didn’t make sense. I was furiously angry with Dad. I didn’t understand why. He’s a gentle person. One retreat I went way down inside the anger. I relived memories of him sexually abusing me. I think I told you at the time. The detail was so clear, real – him coming into the room, climbing on top of me, kissing me. The experience was so intimate, confusing and close. I was sure this was it, the only explanation.’

Marion keeps looking off into the trees.

‘Later on I knew it wasn’t. My mind can make anything seem real. I don’t know where the memories come from, or the anger. Maybe I was born with them.’

Marion doesn’t have an answer. She doesn’t really get it. She’s not the same as me in this way.

The girls go swimming. The men rest on their boats. I swim away on my own, down deep so the water can push through my skin and clean me out. A turtle swims up from behind and hovers nearby, scaly paws scraping the water, ancient discus levitating, drawing me close, away from myself. I follow it through the milky water, down deep, until it’s no more than a murky stain in the silence, murky stain vanishing.

I wait, holding my breath, paddling hard to stay down, peering into the dark, hovering. It reforms and grows bigger and leads me back to the surface for a breath. Full lungs, then down again, out into the harbour and down, as far as I can, kicking full speed as it disappears, black space, going down forever, too fast, too far. It comes spinning back up, up to the surface, with me in tow, then further out into the harbour, paddling fast, pulling away, then turning, hovering until I catch up. The game continues – diving down, swimming away, sweeping way out into the harbour and back. I finally break the surface near *Dream-maker* and call to Marion. ‘Put Zoe in the water, there’s a turtle here, she’d love it.’

Zoe swims over and we follow the turtle together, but the game is over and the turtle paddles its ancient healing orb out of sight.

We set out for the upper harbour, the “reptile’s head”, boats in convoy, a gently throbbing in the crumpled water which is now reflecting the brown and green of land close by, maybe even the brown of mud stirring up from the shallow bottom. A light rain sprinkles our faces and patters on the dodger. The wind rises, sighing in the trees, even moaning, as branches move against each other, together in the wind, and we let go as well because there is no reason to hold on. Charlotte and I go over to Dad’s boat for some wine. He is cheerful, no explanation. We fill our glasses and pass around the cheese and crackers.

Marion comes over. She cleans and polishes the mahogany while I sit with my journal. She squeezes more ointment onto the cloth and her bum, tight in her tan three-quarter length pants, circles in rhythm with her arm, in the opposite direction, like internal cogs balancing each other – t’ai chi. Hair shaking free, she catches the bit that falls and pokes it back inside the clip. She’s doing more housekeeping than I’ve ever done on this boat, to show Cornelius how much she appreciates this holiday, to keep the peace. He does appreciate her – I can tell by the way he’s watching over his reading glasses. She’s usually very messy and untidy, much worse than me. I’m usually the one tidying and cleaning up at her place.

The boat wobbles in the shallow water and we can almost see the muddy bottom as we sit together in the cockpit. The hills are dull in the afternoon haze. Creeks cut down through clay banks, unearthing rough stones, tumbling them down to the rocky beach to be washed clean in the tide. We cradle cups of tea, intensely focused on each other. She’s been talking to Cornelius.

‘When you were backpacking around Noumea, Cornelius did feel abandoned and he did worry. You need to take some responsibility. He does love you. He does care about you. You need to be there for him as well as yourself.’

Back in her therapist role and I’m the problem. She’s not my therapist. Her voice is convoluted, snaking agendas, a whole symphony of modulated noises – a cacophony of barnyard animals shrieking their own points of view – and I can’t pick the individual sounds, to tell me her reasons for saying what she does. Never can tell with grown-ups, what they mean behind the words. Should I believe her?

The narrow finger of the harbour where we are anchored becomes a sanctuary when she takes her confusing voice ashore. Cornelius and I hover in a kind of weightlessness, gently rocking in the soft light, boat swinging wide with the turning tide. We wrap around each other in the saloon and I float off into the fine sensations – exquisite and boundless – then open my eyes to allow the reassuring comfort of his body next to mine. Dad and Marion have set off up the river and onto the land without me. I'd rather be with them all the same, on an adventure, in *her* body. Charlotte and Zoe are drawing sea monsters and turtles in the cockpit of Grandad's boat.

The tide turns. We didn't know it was almost full when we anchored. At the turn the water pauses, no movement at all, and then flows back to the sea, draining our bathtub, like water down a plughole, water slipping past the boat now turned the other way, bottom facing the sea, water moving slowly to start with, gurgling through the cervix, the tide pulling the anchor through the soft mud. Cornelius goes outside every so often to check. We have no idea how far this tide will fall, or whether the anchor will hold. This time he doesn't return, but shrieks, or rather screams. Brown murky puddles, growing wider as we watch, are appearing all around the boat. Cornelius pushes the depth sounder – we're almost aground. I rush to the anchor, Cornelius starts the motor, running the boat forwards as soon as the anchor lifts, to swing us around, nose towards the cervix, pushing through the mud further out to where it's safe.

Dad's not on his boat – he's still way up river with Marion, traipsing through bush. Charlotte couldn't possibly do anything on her own. Dad must return. We can't leave our boat which may still be dragging, the current's so strong, and it's clear his boat has started moving through the shallow mud towards a small headland curving into the water. The seconds are interminable – every second counts and I'm counting. Finally, he and Marion reappear on the sandy clay at the mouth of the creek. Can he see the danger? We wave. His dinghy is now metres above the falling tide. He sees us re-anchoring and how his boat is heading for rocks. They lift the dinghy down, half-dragging half-lifting through the soft mud. Charlotte and Zoe stare at the dinghy, willing it to arrive in time, game over, hugging the side of the boat. What can Charlotte do? They climb aboard. Dad turns *Dream-maker* away from the rocky headland, stirring mud with his propeller, carving a way through in the nick of time.

I suggest to Cornelius that life is like sailing. It's hard to obtain a secure anchorage, because we are never sure what lies under the water – the seabed, currents, tides – and I could go on and on.

He replies rather abruptly. 'The only thing we can be certain of is change.'

I remember the Buddha's teaching. He called it "the middle way" – lifting out of hedonism or materialism, anchoring idealism and the mystical in ordinary reality.

Change is on the way. Saturn hands over to Jupiter. Persephone ripens into Hestia. Bread dough rises under a damp tea towel, mung-bean sprouts drain into the sink, fresh yoghurt thickens in front of plastic food boxes. The galley is alive. I'm good in this role. At Christmas when everyone comes to my place, I roast turkey dinners and bake sweet mince pies in muffin tins. I take charge of the games and competitions and organize presentations of holiday pictures and run yoga classes and generally make each Christmas better than the last.

I don't polish the mahogany, but now I sweep the floor on my hands and knees with flair and flourish. Marion becomes an outpouring of new philosophical twists, spiritual connections and relationship advice, swinging around the saloon, glass of beer or wine close by. Charlotte folds up in her corner, reading the philosophy book Marion brought over, her face animated with questions, quotes to read out loud and start off new discussions. We argue over the development of ideas through Plato to Wittgenstein and what Heidegger meant when he said: "Man acts as though he were the shaper and master of language, while in fact language remains the master of man."

I leap in. 'See, we aren't the creators of our reality, like Dad keeps saying. Our world is determined by the language we use.'

Marion adds her contribution, 'Yes, and maybe the structure of language is set by the genes.'

Charlotte pipes up. 'Yes, listen to this – Wittgenstein: "A picture held us captive, and we could not get outside it, for it lay in our language and language seemed to repeat it to us inexorably."' '

Marion informs us, in an authoritative tone, that the philosophical nature is genetic. Cornelius relaxes into the buzzing ideas, the attention of two women, the good food, the

respect we are giving him, and he talks now and then but mostly rests. Dad hovers in the background. Our voices are too fast and too high to follow.

In the morning we set out for home, Port Moselle. The harbour is like a glove, fingers in all directions. Green hills sweep down everywhere we look. The charts don't help, because we don't know exactly how we're pointing. We end up in a blind alley. I remember the jungles of Thailand, following a river downstream, stumbling over rocks and looking into water holes, mesmerized by the flow, turning back in the late afternoon, arriving at two side rivers sweeping down into each other and not having a clue which one to take. I tried to place detail I hadn't noticed on the way down, but I just couldn't tell. I'd walk on, looking for something familiar, only to find two more rivers sweeping into each other around the next bend. I was as lost as Hansel and Gretel when the bread crumbs had gone.

We finally motor out into a fresh ocean breeze blowing right across the beam. The boats race each other up the coast, full sail. *Fantasie* is fast, a racing boat, tiny anchor up for'ard to reduce the weight, tumble hull to increase the waterline when she falls over. Maximum speed depends on the waterline length. Eight knots and, when we look behind, *Dream-maker* is right on her tail. It's a beautiful day and we're making excellent time and we're all bursting for more, not ready for the dull finish line of the marina just yet. What could go wrong?

Cornelius calls Dad on the VHF about stopping at the island up ahead for a last swim.

Dad consults his girls. 'Yes, that's fine by us. Over.'

We motor in close to shore, out of the wind, because the depth sounder says we can. I roll up the headsail and haul down the main. Dad comes over to pick up Charlotte. I want to go with them but Cornelius wants to stay, so I stay with him because I should. We get naked and lie down together, stretching out in the cool breeze fluttering through the hatch. We slip back behind the wreckage of the last few weeks, and swim through mist into the moonlight, pearly gold light, for loving and losing our minds. Cornelius' hand slides over my skin, drawing me into him, rolling on top of me, kissing me with pinches of moon dust, sweet nectar flowing between our bodies, bathing naked. The wind in the rigging rises, a lullaby of love, and the boat starts swinging because the

wind is turning, as we twist and turn, and the wind is leaping into the bay and catches the hull like a ball it's ready to throw and Cornelius is no longer a man, he's my beloved.

Cornelius rolls back a little and happens to glance up through the open hatch.

'What's that?' he blasts out, aghast. 'It's Jack's mast. This isn't possible.'

I open my eyes too, and there it is – long metal pole shaking with halyards, weather cock at the top, looking down through the hatch. Our anchor must have slipped over the hard limestone, across to *Dream-maker*.

'Let's get out of here,' he screams.

Emilee went home, uncertain whether Bob would be there. She knew he was seeing someone. A friend told her that triangles are more stable than straight lines and to let it be. Alice had a call from Marion. Would she come down to windy Wellington for a couple of days? They'd grown apart and only brushed at Damian's funeral. The family had become so huge. Alice liked flying – the packaged meal and a cup of luke-warm tea, soaring above the clouds, old-fashioned heaven, toy houses and sheep below, an Olympian goddess looking down, untroubled by earthlings.

Marion was in her office, south side of the house, cold but for the heat coming out of the computer. The room was full of books, stacks of paper and framed photographs of seascapes – a new hobby.

'I can't believe it!' she exploded, even though Alice had just walked in, following her call. 'Come in.' She looked drained.

'Deep sea drilling. It's going ahead, even after the oil spill. The government won't back down. Sneaked in new legislation.'

'How are you?' Alice asked, cheerily.

'The oceans are dying and we're still not doing anything. I'm giving up.' She swung around on her chair, mouth tight, eyes hard and immobile. She'd given up jogging because of shin splints and it showed.

'What's going on?' Alice asked more gently.

Marion paused, her face screwing up. 'Zoe's gone.'

'She's gone flatting? You must have been expecting it.'

'No, not flatting. She left university. Gone to India.'

Marion flung her hands in the air, let out a wail and rushed over, falling into Alice's arms, clinging on until she calmed down.

‘She didn’t tell me until she went – didn’t want an argument, didn’t want me to change her mind. Just like that – her life, her career, her future, gone.’

Alice smiled at the extravagance. Marion wasn’t *that* extravagant by nature. Her clothes were subdued – mushroom possum-wool jersey, tan trousers and an attractive string of pearls.

‘Maybe this is good rather than bad news,’ Alice suggested as they went down the hall to the kitchen.

‘What do you mean?’

Marion started work on the coffee machine. Alice stayed breezy and relaxed. Marion sighed in spite of herself, a tiny bit of letting go, then fired off again with added zest.

‘You gave up all that spiritual stuff. At least you never talk about it now – self-obsessed distraction from issues that really matter, like saving the world. The world is in a crisis. There’s no time left.’

‘Marion, stop it. Zoe needs to go. She’ll come back. Have you managed to save the world? And what are you saving it for?’

‘I’ve done my best.’

‘I’m pleased she’s gone.’

‘What?’

‘She knows that it’s not enough to fight. A blind fight is not a good fight.’

‘You’re not making sense.’

‘Spirituality wasn’t a waste of time for me.’

Marion poured the coffee and led the way into the living room and the comfortable cream chairs, chunky arms with white shag-pile draped across. Outside the lead glass window, above the window seat, a few barrel shrubs dropped leaves onto a handkerchief orange-concrete patio.

‘It took the best years of your life. So much focus on yourself. All that work just to discover that you don’t exist. That’s what you used to say. Western thinking has buried

you as well – the man in the machine. The man has gone – blended into the machine. Descartes is well and truly dead.’

Marion ran on, clever and quick. A hundred per cent for mental agility. Alice scanned the bookcase, a whole wall, floor to ceiling, thousands of books. When the room finally quietened down, she spoke.

‘I don’t talk about spirituality now, because there is nothing to talk about. The spiritual and the ordinary aren’t different – the waves and the ocean – two sides of a coin. It doesn’t mean the path isn’t important.’

‘So spirituality is a phantom, a doppelganger. Oh, Zoe, why did you do this to me?’

‘Marion, settle down. You don’t understand. I came to see that ordinary life is spiritual. The ocean is always a part of the waves. Waves are made from the ocean. They aren’t separate. How could they be?’

Marion bit into a biscuit with a sharp crunch and looked obliquely at Alice, who kept talking.

‘You’ve got one of his books.’ She stood up, pulled it out of the bookcase and passed it to Marion.

‘The Dalai Lama. Lost his country. The Tibetans were tortured and killed, their monasteries destroyed, and yet he remained cheerful. How was that possible? The ocean is more powerful than the waves.’ She paused. ‘Zoe needs to understand more about life to have any chance of happiness. Don’t you want her to be happy?’

Marion turned away and didn’t answer. She stared out the window, at the shrubs in their barrels, at nothing. ‘She’s rejecting the world, escaping her responsibility to it.’

‘No, she’s trying to find a way to accept the world as it is. Maybe you’re the one rejecting the world. She may make a real contribution.’

Marion stormed the room, trampling the carpet, not seeing the intricate patterns woven through, trapped inside. ‘You don’t make sense. I’m ready to give up fighting. The human race is a disaster. But what, then? What will I do?’

The sun peeked through a cloud into the room, splashing Marion's face into an anaemic yellow shade.

'You could go back to your photography, let go into beauty for a while, let it support you. Focus on what you love, not what you hate.'

'I love Zoe. She is my joy, she is my hope.'

Alice's voice became soft. 'The world is still beautiful. Greed, wanting more, is a difficult emotion. We have to understand ourselves to overcome greed. That's why Zoe's gone to India.'

The day was faded into dusk, cloud merging into a grey blanket covering the house. Streets light blinked on.

'I don't like eating on my own, can hardly be bothered cooking. We could go out. We'll walk. There's an Indian restaurant on the main road.'

Marion grabbed her coat roughly and poked her arms through. Grey was leaking into her red hair. It was downhill all the way to the restaurant, past terrace houses, picket fences – steep in all directions.

Marion and the children want the last day in town. I stay in the park while they go shopping and nuzzle against the bark of a tree – spreading branches, leaves shivering, shadows – and light cool earth, eyes drifting shut, then, footsteps in my direction.

‘Look what we bought.’ Charlotte unpacks sarongs and shoes for me to see. I’m overtired – too much night romancing, too much over-functioning, too much trying – and pull hard on shredded energy to sound enthusiastic. We missed Cornelius at the market where we arranged to meet, and I push down a niggle of a possible consequence as we board a bus to the cultural centre, packing the last day full.

It’s an extraordinary place, full of the voice of the Kanak people, their struggle for independence, their history, their way of life. A hallway of photographs portrays the wretched subjugation of the women under the civilizing influence of the English and French men. I enter rooms, bold with the Kanaks’ struggle for independence – newspaper articles, negotiations, agreements signed, broken, politicians, war, death, defeat. Too much nickel for the French to give this colony her freedom. They let Vanuatu go. In another large room, modern paintings and sculpture rise up like a phoenix from the ashes. I hold back tears, so I can feel their courage deep inside me. Hard stories.

Outside, the path leads through a garden of natives, with placards describing how the plants are used for medicines and food, and small plots show the different gardening techniques for a variety of plants and soils. City nomads will be able to come back to the land, when they want. I creep into dark grass houses with wooden shutters and mats on the floor. This centre is a peace offering, sharing what is closest to the heart, with people like me – white people, the persecutors, dominators – and I wonder where the desire to share like this came from. Again I want to cry to stop feeling so raw.

The night is black when we return to the marina and the dimly-lit waterfront, and I don’t know how to get out to our boats which are anchored in the harbour. We’ll either bump into some one going out or I’ll swim. Maybe Dad left a dinghy somewhere. It always

works out. Before I have a chance to think, he leaps out from the shadows. How strange. Marion and the children stand back. I start to say hi, but a fury leaps from him, impaling me, punching me.

‘Where have you been? Why didn’t you tell us you’d be away all day?’

‘What?’ I thought we’d made up. Why is he blaming me? What about Marion? I can’t stand any more.

‘Cornelius wasn’t at the market so we went shopping. We didn’t know it would be an issue.’

‘I’ve been waiting for hours.’ His voice moderates. ‘I didn’t know when you’d be back.’

He paces up and down, churning around inside. What have we really done? ‘*Fantasie* dragged again this morning. The wind came up. Anchor caught in some old chain. I had to go down several times to untangle it. Terrible job getting it free.’

Dad is stretched too far. I’m not steady enough to sympathize.

‘I helped him re-anchor further out. How were you going to get out to his boat?’

‘Swim and bring the dinghy back,’ I say sharply, not giving in, because I would cry.

‘It’s too far out to swim now. You’d be eaten by sharks.’ We stand about in the dark. He says quietly, ‘You’d never have found his boat in the dark.’

‘How did I know this would happen?’ The words come out like gunshot, not the way I want.

‘The dinghy’s down the end. Follow me.’

We creep along the gloomy concrete. I worry about the reception I’ll get from Cornelius.

‘We never thought you’d be waiting,’ I say.

I sit at the back of the dinghy as we pass the floating boats, puttering further and further from shore, and I’m getting ready for another scene, but I’m too tired. I sink down inside myself, pushing back cold, grey tears.

Cornelius rises up to take the painter – huge overbearing monster in the dark.

‘Where were you?’ he asks, welcoming us back on board. ‘Your father and I have been worried.’

I spit before he can get the better of me. ‘Worry? There were four of us.’

Once I’m captive in the saloon he gets stuck in. ‘Where were you this morning? We arranged to meet.’

‘I’m not responsible for an innocent breakdown in communication. I’m doing my best. Leave me alone.’

I go straight to the galley, to cook and intensify my feeling of being unjustly accused. The noise of crashing pans and hissing steam and sharp-pointed knife bashing at the vegetables keeps him away. The others return for a last family dinner, with a few punctuated comments about the holiday. No one replies. After a couple of nasty remarks from Cornelius directed at me, we lock up inside ourselves. The ring of Charlotte’s fork hitting her plate is as lively as it gets.

I take the empty dishes to the sink, wash them thoroughly and lay the plates out to dry. I can’t do it anymore. I tried too hard. I wipe the table with a damp cloth, wiping everyone away. Dad leaves. Marion and Zoe stay the last night with us. We all get ready for bed. I’m always to blame. I turn on Cornelius when we’re alone, keeping my voice quiet so they won’t hear, but they probably do. The lights are out so he can’t see my face, which is good.

‘Why are you such a monster?’ I spit. ‘Stalking me, out to get me, rubbishing me in front of everyone? I’m tired of it.’ My clenched hands push down on the mattress. He moves away, dragging the duvet and doesn’t speak. ‘I can’t take it anymore, I’ve had enough.’ I pause for the finale. ‘I’ll go on without you.’

My mind starts distorting with pain, technicolour memories of all the times he’s trashed me.

He doesn’t say anything. We lie away from each other. I don’t know if he’s asleep. I can’t go to sleep. I’m fighting a relentless battle with him now, polarized, separated out,

black and white, the woman subjugated, abused, hunted down, as I shrink, tiny, into shadows where I won't be seen. The alarm goes off at 3:30am.

What a relief to find out I'm alive in a body that works perfectly well and, by turning a light on, the dark is banished. Marion and I lug the travelling bags into the dinghy. Charlotte and Zoe get dressed. A full moon is travelling through billions of stars. What a wondrous perspective. Other galaxies, millions of light years away, explode with life.

The bus doesn't arrive, even after half an hour. I look at Marion's watch and the calculations don't look good. The children stand with half-closed eyes. Marion doesn't have money for a taxi, but there might be time to get some. I rush back through the empty city streets, leap into the dinghy, throttle on full, planing high speed over the water, leaping through the air, and everything is suddenly the exhilaration of life and always wanting it to be like this. I grab my purse and return to the dinghy, heart leaping forward into this flash of freedom, and then I rush back through the empty streets, now pink with morning light. When I get to the bus stop they are gone. Maybe the taxi took her credit card after all.

Cornelius is waiting. He stares until I lift my eyes. His voice is steady.

‘I want you off the boat now. I’ll take you back to your Dad’s boat. I’ve had quite enough of you, too.’

I freeze in disbelief – hadn’t thought of this possibility. I’ve nowhere to go. Should have thought before I blasted him.

We go down into the saloon. I’m trapped. He inflates, arms rising aloft, his voice thunderous, cymbals crashing, reverberating through the boat, eyes sharp as lightning. He’s enjoying himself, showing me how miserable my anger was, a mere overture to the full symphony.

‘You’re a selfish bitch, totally untrustworthy. I can’t depend on you for anything.’

He rages on, firing daggers, cudgels, iron picks from the fiery hearth of his wounded soul. I can’t do anything about what he’s saying. Some of it might be true. I can only disappear.

‘I need to sleep.’ I push past him. ‘I need to sleep.’ He lets me go.

I climb into bed and drop dead, under his voice playing over and over, telling me who I am. I become submerged in nightmares. I don’t ever want to wake up; I don’t ever want to ever return to this world. Forty hours – two nights and two days – I stay in bed, faded out in my bleak underworld. When I finally open my eyes, the grey fog of endless winter swirls around. This is who I am.

I peel back the sticky sheet, the lumpy duvet – white-painted fibreglass hull close to my head, fishing rods hang with the hooks still attached. My hands go to my head, to block the voices. The thick mahogany door is shut. The small stainless sink and mirror are splattered in toothpaste. I’m calm enough, steady in my body, so I climb down, inch the door open and creep out. Cornelius looks up, to see I’m okay I guess, then leaves without a word. I slip over to the navigation table to put on some music: Das Heldenleben. I lie down to remember myself in the music, to let my heart release and be

tutored again in the story of life, so I can accept it and be redeemed. I begin to climb inside, but someone's boarding.

'Hello, Alice. Are you there?'

It's Dad. I turn the music off. He comes aboard and I make coffee, willing my limbs to work, so he doesn't see how collapsed I am.

'What's wrong? Are you sick?'

I'm on the verge of tears. I won't cry.

'I'll be okay.' I couldn't possibly cry in front of him. 'I'm tired, that's all.'

He studies me. I become busy, even enthusiastic, so he won't see.

'How's the weather?' I ask.

'It doesn't look good. We'll leave as soon as the wind turns east.'

'You want to go home? I thought you would.'

'I'm bored sitting on my boat and I've seen Noumea.'

'That's fine by me. I'm ready to go.'

Cornelius returns and I make a salad for lunch. We are all polite and discuss the weather and talk about going home and we say that it was a good family holiday and thank Cornelius for his boat – we couldn't have done it without him. Dad leaves. I clear the table, shaking inside, and sit down next to Cornelius.

'We need to talk,' I blurt out. 'We can't go on as if nothing's happened.'

'I agree,' he replies. 'I'm feeling very angry and hurt about what's happened.'

He's steady now. He's never turned away from discussing our problems – maybe because *I'm* always the problem. We don't ever look at his crappy behaviour. I listen to him. He listens to me. We create the space we both need to be heard.

'I want to stay together. I do love you,' I say, because I couldn't survive any alternative.

He puts his hand on my knee. 'We must look after each other. We need to do better than this. I love you. I don't want to be fighting like this.'

It's over, we've made up. I think it is this easy.

The fabric of our relationship now has a big hole for the wind of Cornelius's rage to blow through. I often sleep in the saloon, ears ringing from his blow-ups. I creep around like the grey ghost of an endless winter. We return to the front wall, go for long walks, talk about practical things, check our emails, catch buses, sit on beaches, clutch at the veneer of normal – our lifeline.

'Cornelius, what is the foundation of our relationship? I've forgotten,' I ask, as we slow down on the grey sand of a popular beach, a bus trip away.

'It's quite clear to me,' he replies. 'Sex is the foundation and we have a common goal of sailing around the world together.'

I slow us down, exasperated by his reply. 'What about all the stuff in the middle, the stuff that keeps tripping us up?'

'Sit down.'

We sit under a tree, away from everyone else. He turns to me.

'That's the problem. You're one person in the bedroom and a different person out of it.' He takes my hands to keep me calm. 'In bed you're a loving, beautiful goddess. Out of bed you're a cool, distant bitch. I hate it. This is what you need to look at.'

He gets up. 'I'm going for a walk.' And he sets off down the beach, through brown bodies dripped over colourful sarongs, meringue breasts bared to the sun, naked children splashing in the tide. The sun is smiling down.

Dad calls in again, a hollow cheer in his greeting. He's unsteady and keeps looking around – at the dark wood, the prisms of light, the dull stainless cups. I make the morning coffee, spooning dark grounds into the stainless Bodum. The brooding kettle takes ages to boil.

‘I know the forecast doesn’t look good with a south-westerly blowing. I want to leave on Monday, anyway.’

‘That’s only four days away.’

‘I never used to look at weather forecasts. Didn’t seem to matter.’

I pass his cup. ‘We’ll be sailing straight into a headwind.’ I pass the packet of biscuits.

‘I understand.’ I laugh inside. ‘Life doesn’t always give us a good choice.’

‘I want to go home,’ he replies. He drains the cup and stands again, a little wobbly.

‘It’s okay,’ I reply softly. ‘I’m ready to go.’

I wring my washing out into bundles, then toss the soapy water overboard. On deck, a small washing line is stretched between two stays. I pin the undies and tee shirt so they can fly safely into the wind. ‘*Somewhere over the rainbow, skies are blue,*’ I sing, ‘*and the dreams that you dare to dream really do come true.*’ I don’t believe it any more. I turn to Queen: ‘*Is this the real life, is this just fantasy? Easy come, easy go, anyway the wind blows, doesn’t really matter to me.*’

I tell Cornelius when he comes back from town.

He rips open a paper bag. ‘Here, some food.’

A piece of chocolate cake and a tart slice. I cut them in half so we can taste each.

‘Your father’s crazy to go now, no one would leave in a south-westerly. I’m not leaving until I have crew and good weather.’

He chooses a piece of tart. ‘Last week I put a notice up at the marina for crew.’ He licks his fingers.

‘Antoine, a young pharmacist, replied. Sounds keen – no experience though. Doesn’t finish work for another three weeks. I’ll probably wait for him.’

‘Three weeks, that’s a long time.’ Too long I’m thinking, long enough to change his mind. I choke on the cake and need water and knock against the table getting up and drop the cake on the floor.

Dad arrives back.

‘I want to clear customs and immigration today, before the weekend.’

When I look at him, my vision distorts from something inside me, grubby pressure building up, bursting out. The debilitating grey gloom erupts into a volcano of overwhelming rage. I want to throttle this stooped old man, my father, who is as steadily good-natured as the wobbly sea will allow. It appears reasonable, this rage, appropriate. He deserves it. I don’t speak – I can’t trust myself to speak. My eyes feel like the flat tops of hard nails about to pop.

‘We need to go soon. We have a lot to do,’ he continues.

My voice comes out sharp. ‘Sure.’ I don’t recognize the sound and I can’t soften it. ‘I’ll get my things.’

Cornelius stares after me, stunned at my rudeness. So am I. I don’t say goodbye or how long I’ll be. Can’t risk it. We motor over to *Dream-maker* for our passports and boat papers. I sit as far away as I can, clamped up, pushing down on the tsunami rising up inside me, in that middle part of me.

‘We’ll do our shopping tomorrow and Sunday, so we can leave early Monday.’

‘Sure.’

The motor splutters and coughs across the harbour; the sides of the dinghy sag under our weight. Dad should blow it up before it completely deflates. It’ll be safe above the high-tide mark, above the barnacles and limpets, in the shade of a super yacht, *Troubadour*. My heart jolts. Through the glass – Persian carpet, plush sofas, low coffee tables, spaciousness, a person. It can’t be him. He can’t see me like this. Thumping in my chest. She turns to the window. Whew. I’m back with cold and hot weather systems turning into a tropical thunderstorm about to wreak havoc. The pressure bars are narrowing.

I charge ahead to the immigration building in the industrial area. Dad, puffing a bit, slows down, stops for a breather. The part of me not deranged hopes he’s okay. He can’t see how mad I am. I’m stuck with the fury until it burns itself out. I rush up the stairs, not waiting, copying everything in triplicate, forcing the pen into the paper, zipping

everything back up again in the folder, turning away when he arrives, striding back down the stairs. He follows me out.

‘Why don’t we get the fuel now?’ he suggests in a quiet voice, as we lift the dinghy back into the tide. ‘There’s still time.’

‘Sure, why not?’

We putter back to *Dream-maker* for empty containers, then over to the fuel dock. Fred and Jean, our American friends, are shopping. They chat while Dad gets the jerry cans filled.

‘What an amazing man Jack is, still sailing at his age, and such a gentleman. You’re very lucky to have a father like him.’

The full fuel containers fly over the lifelines into *Dream-maker*. Rage is strong. I throw six empty ones into the dinghy. Back to the fuel dock. Cornelius is planing after us, over the leaping spray.

‘Where have you been?’ he shouts. ‘Thought you’d sailed away without saying goodbye.’

I’m suddenly ashamed.

‘I knew you were angry.’ He pulls the boats together. ‘But I had no idea why.’ He greets Dad. ‘I bought some fresh fish. Come over for lunch. I’ll make sushi.’

‘Sure,’ I answer. ‘We’ll just fill the containers.’

Cornelius is wearing a white apron and white cap for the rare occasion of him cooking. After rolling the rice, raw fish and thinly sliced vegetables into sheets of seaweed with his bamboo device, he slices the rolls and lays them out on the table next to small bowls of sharp wasabi, black tamari and thinly-sliced French bread. We eat mostly in silence. Cornelius invites Jack for lunch on Sunday. He has more fish. As Dad leaves I want to go after him, to apologize, but I don’t. Electrical winds are still short-circuiting my brain. I’m still in danger. I call after Cornelius, as he lets Dad’s painter go.

He comes down and sits next to me, hand on my shoulder. ‘Okay. What’s the problem? What’s going on?’

I shake my head furiously, to get clear enough to talk. 'I'm ridiculously angry. I want to kill Dad. I don't know why.' I start wailing: 'I hate men. I can't stand it. I want to be normal. I want a good relationship.'

Cornelius is calm, interested, hand on my knee now, to earth me.

'What do you think it is?'

'Nothing makes sense.' I keep shaking my head. 'I don't know. Why would I hate Dad?'

'It's to do with your mother. You don't talk about her, like she doesn't exist. Why's that?'

'My mother? I'm mad at Dad.'

I stop to think. 'My mother. You're right. I don't talk about her. I don't even think about her.'

'Tell me about her.'

'I hated her.'

'How did Jack treat your mother?'

I can't think. I get up and walk around and look outside before I can go on.

'There's something there,' I whisper hoarsely and sit down to consider the question. Cornelius doesn't move. His eyes stay soft.

'Dad didn't seem to like women when we were young. Different now. We were second-class citizens. He brought us up to be like men. He ridiculed Mum, blamed her for being miserable, attacked her miserliness, her pettiness. She drove him crazy.' I pause. 'She was a huge disappointment – miserable and worried all the time, when she wasn't snapping at him or screaming at us. It was a horrible marriage. Probably quite normal.'

'Go on.' He stays totally focused.

‘She didn’t love us, but we were all she had. She couldn’t love anybody, because she didn’t love herself. She didn’t have friends. She didn’t know how. She was totally alone.’

‘Your father destroyed your mother. Go back to their relationship.’

I’m shocked. ‘Of course Dad didn’t destroy Mum. Mum never took responsibility. She was a miserable child her whole life.’

‘Stop rationalizing. What are you feeling, as a child, through the eyes of the child?’

I go into the memories, wait for the images, until I know, until the floor of my stomach drops out. I’m about to faint.

I become still, a terrifying stillness. ‘*I was my mother.*’

I take a couple of deep breaths, until I understand. I stay still for the moments of truth dawning. I look up slowly, into the confusion of the child I was.

‘We sided with Dad against Mum. We learned to despise her. I hated my mother. But she is me, she is alive in me – as my cold rage, my watery misery, always under pressure, self-igniting. I hated her, my mother, so I hated myself. She hates all men. She is the hell inside me.’

I look up. ‘I am my mother. I never saw it.’

It is as if the scales have fallen from my eyes. ‘Dad loved me, so why would I be angry with him? It has nothing to do with me and everything to do with her and him – their relationship.’

I keep pondering, searching my feelings.

‘I’m trying to get revenge for my mother, so she can survive in me, so she can survive.’

I take several long breaths. I’ve done enough.

‘Thank you so much. I would never have guessed.’

He hugs me, like a counsellor might. He’s good at this – must be his years in therapy.

I finish up, ‘I remember now the times you said, “You need to know your mother is okay now, you need to spend time with her.” I didn’t understand. Now I do. What an afternoon.’

‘Maybe now we have a future.’ He kisses me sweetly on the forehead. ‘I’ve invested a lot in you.’

Alice stayed overnight in Zoe's room. In the bookcase, a few titles she recognized: *Autobiography of a Yogi*, *A Theory of Everything*, *Secrets of India*, *Daughter of the Forest*, *Song of Fire and Ice*, *Game of Thrones*. Art posters, Ramana Maharshi and Sai Baba on a chest, some Indian clothes, shawls, ornaments – pretty typical girl's room. She'd be twenty-two now – last child, the accident. The others were all married and doing well. Marion moved to Wellington when her marriage broke up – didn't want to keep bumping into Terry in the same hospital. She was on her own now, like Alice. Alice preferred it that way. She wasn't sure Marion did. Snuggled up in the single bed, she could smell cloves and vanilla, Zoe.

Marion was laying out warm croissants and coffee, when she finally emerged into the crisp new morning.

'Thought you might like these. A reminder of Noumea.'

She was more relaxed as they sat in a patch of sun floating across the table, accentuating her glossy lipstick. 'I'm glad you're here. I'm lonely. I'll get used to it.'

Alice slurped coffee through the milky fluff. Marion was a pro when it came to the small pleasures.

'I know the feeling. It took me a long time to adjust.'

'Thought you might help me with something,' Marion put down her cup. 'I'm presenting a paper at a psychiatry conference on Buddhism and Mental Health. My topic is: "The effect of mystical experience on mental health". There's a bit of literature about, no good studies though. Now you're here I can pick your brains.'

'I'm hardly an expert,' Alice laughed. 'The mystical – that was a long time ago. As I've said, it's all blended now, integrated.'

The kitchen was brown and cream tones, a couple of photos on the fridge, spice rack, a few stainless appliances. Alice walked over to the window.

‘Oliver’s been staying since the funeral. Marie, his wife, is joining a community with a self-proclaimed guru, Ronald Tinsdale – a kind of eco-spiritual community. Not sure what Oliver will do.’

Marion fingered her necklace. ‘Our children have so much freedom.’ She sipped her coffee. ‘Is it really freedom? Remember when we were young, fighting for the freedom to do what we wanted, fighting with ourselves to decide for ourselves, declaring our right to exist, to be here. Where did it get us? We ended up confused, tossing about in endless waves of desire and choice. Better to focus on something outside, leave the self behind. That’s what I think now – do something worthwhile for society, for the planet. Distraction is the cure. My patients always do better when they get a job.’

She picked at a croissant, pulling off small pieces, poking them into her mouth.

Alice spun around. ‘And you call yourself a psychiatrist? That’s your job, to fix people up, reconstruct the self, unscramble and reconnect the neurons, change the routes, fix the memories so they work, so they can relax enough to be happy.’

‘Yes, drugs are great for that. Anyway – about the mystical and mental health?’

‘The mystical. Where shall I start?’

‘Did it change your life?’

‘Radically.’

‘All those years, you were so other-worldly, so driven by your need to escape.’

‘I was.’

‘So?’

Alice came back to the table and sat down.

‘I was driven by anger, in my search for love. You’d understand that. I didn’t know what was going on. Before I met Tenzin, I remember wanting so badly to be an ordinary mother. I wanted to enjoy cooking and baking for my children, symbolizing my love for them through my food, but in the kitchen I’d be swamped with emotional sickness. I’d fight to see a batch of cookies out of the oven before rushing outside and walking up the driveway to get free of some churning in my gut I didn’t understand, a kind of

poisonous clamping up. The most ordinary things would trigger this distress. I didn't want to be like this, I couldn't stand it. When I found the mystical – the direct experience of love, peace, beauty, stillness – I couldn't walk away. It was the only place I could stop running.'

'Doesn't sound healthy.'

'Of course it wasn't. How could it have been? It came from my pain – a distortion, a polarization.'

'So what changed?'

Marion had her recorder on – this would be useful.

'The time I went sailing with Dad and Cornelius, I started to get some perspective. I realized the mystical wasn't a solution. I'd polarized life into perfect and imperfect, where perfect was good and imperfect was bad. I was getting bored with flying off into a wondrous everlasting heaven, basking in radiance and love, completely fulfilled. I got tired of flip-flopping, I got tired of having no body, of not existing. It was disorientating and I'd feel empty, often very empty, when I fell out. And nothing was any different when I did – same old problems – although that's not entirely true. I was different, but not different enough. I knew love, so why wasn't it part of my ordinary life? It dawned on me on that *she*, my glorious, mystical goddess, and *he*, my mystical beloved, would have to bunker down in my ordinary life, where I spent most of my time, where I was meant to live, otherwise my life would never work.'

Alice stood up again, to warm up another croissant.

'I thought about my situation, about why I was doing this. It was because my mind and emotions were so tangled and thorny, love couldn't shine through. I was clamped shut. The only way I could reach love was to leap beyond. I needed to clear the rage, heal myself, fix the software. I had to sort my shit out and let it go.'

'I started to realize that clinging to the mystical is the same as all clinging – it creates suffering, because it polarizes, it excludes. All clinging is blind.'

She sat down and pulled the fatty croissant apart.

‘Years later I started to understand the “three in one” truth, common to many religions. Buddhists understand the three as body, speech and mind. You and I are the body, the form, the shape of life. Speech is its energy, love the purest form of this energy, but all the winds blowing through are speech. And mind is the ocean, the container – pure unclinging awareness. The mystical emphasizes love, union with the divine. Being love is incredible. It is the foundation of faith. Slowly, slowly, after many experiences, I started to understand I was all three. The three aspects started to pull together: pure, unadulterated consciousness; radiant love; and its manifestation, my individual, separate existence. I needed all my mystical encounters, all my vipassana experiences to know who I was as the blend of all three. Then I stopped being crazy. I became whole.’

‘So – the mystical and mental health?’ Marion asked.

‘A good dose of the mystical has to be good for mental health. It is a taste of our fundamental goodness, the foundation of faith. The memory never goes. It’s a reminder of the work that needs to be done, of who we are, where we have come from, that life is mystery.’

Marion’s voice became a little thin and then flippant.

‘So now, at the end of it all, how would you describe yourself? How might you be different from me?’

Alice laughed. ‘How can I possibly know how you feel? Are we different? You tell me. Just under the surface of me I am washing in a great steady ocean, stirring with life, rich and deep, and I am the unfolding manifestation of this stirring. I don’t feel isolated – every step, every action is a part of this ocean washing up into waves. The question of meaning no longer arises. Life is just what it is. It doesn’t feel so personal.’

She looked out through the window, almost into the house next door. They were close-packed on the hill.

‘If I get caught up in a wave, it settles quickly and I am at ease again in the flood of the ocean. I play my part, flowing with my desires, lifted by my inspiration, but not caught, picking up easily and putting down, breathing in and breathing out, full of faith in the goodness, faith in the love that is creating us. I don’t cling to myself. I have found life to be good when I don’t cling, when I don’t fixate on an outcome, a desire, when I don’t

take myself too seriously. Life doesn't belong to me. I tell you it is a fine way to live - as the ocean turning into waves.'

Alice turned directly to Marion.

'We chose different paths. Remember our conversation in Noumea. What do you make of our choices now?'

Marion stood up and turned off the tape recorder.

'Maybe you are happier, more at peace than me. I like to think that my effort has helped and supported others, that the world is a better place for the part I have played.'

Alice stood up and went over to the window. 'We are different. Being a twin has had its problems. I was always comparing myself to you, wondering if I made sense against your life, if I'd done enough. That's gone now. I can just appreciate the contribution you have made, your good heart, your sense of fairness and responsibility. We had different paths, different mountains to climb in this life.'

Marion came over and put her arms around Alice. They hung together, remembering the years, the closeness, the distance, that they were twins, the deep bond. They would share more of their lives, come back together now the children had gone and they were alone.

Antoine the pharmacist, Cornelius's new crew, and his girlfriend Rose arrive on Saturday morning to take us over the island – a break from the restless sea and all the muck it's been throwing up. We cross the park, placid morning light in the puddles, dewy grass. Cornelius and I sit close in the back seat. I'm all new, fresh and soft.

Antoine – lean body, olive skin and dark, curly hair – starts the car. Rose swings around – she's gorgeous, Vietnamese, long straight hair sliding over her bare shoulders – to talk about her work as a cabaret dancer.

At the edge of town we stop at a café: movie posters over the walls, brown washed two-tone over the concrete floor, circular tables.

Antoine stretches out his legs. 'My mother sailed to New Zealand. On a boat from Australia looking for crew. She loved it. I'm staying at her apartment while she's in France.'

He smiles across to Rose.

'She might sail with us?' Cornelius asks.

'She'll be back next week. You can meet her. What about a hot pool next?'

'I don't have togs.' I say.

'Doesn't matter.'

We pile back into the car and then stop outside a makeshift concrete erection a little further out. We're the only visitors. Rose and I slip down to our undies and patter across the concrete into the wet steam. The men follow. Cornelius and I should have done some more luxuriating. He'd go to the market for coffee most days, to watch the women and have a conversation. I resisted. I'd be okay with it now. I wriggle my toes up inside his thighs. Antoine looks at my tits. Spots of rain land on all our faces, glowing in the steam.

Next stop is the river – large boulders, water tumbling into deep pools. It's cold when I poke my feet in. Antoine strips down to naked, so I do too, the two of us, leaping over

the rocks. I dive in after him, because it seems safe to follow. We swim vigorously to keep warm, then haul ourselves out and dive in again. I start running over the boulders, leaping from one to the next, so fast I don't trip, because I'm in my animal body. I jump into other pools for swimming and then spread out in the sun to warm up, full of glee.

Antoine has a last treat. We drive on across the island to Kone – where I met the man from Burma with his ruby – and head south. 'The fair was in a local paper.' Antoine says.

The car park is full of beat-up old cars: eight people easily, with luggage. We head towards the voices and shrieks of fun. Cornelius stops at a CD stall, so I go on to stalls selling home-made jams, hats and baby dresses. I buy food and then take his arm to watch the competitions. Shouts and whoops erupt from the crowd. The axes swing up in the air and make powerful trajectories down onto the wooden stumps, bursting them open into firewood. I remember at a mountain hut when all the kindling had gone. Emilee showed me how. I was scared of the power in the swing.

The men attack husks of coconuts with knives, the noise of the crowd rises and children leap in and out between solid legs. The women contestants arrive. They sit cross-legged on the ground, turning leaf strips into baskets, fingers moving faster than I can follow.

When it is over, I take him to where it is quiet, overlooking a beach, into families and children throwing themselves into the tide already full of laughter and noise. Antoine and Rose join us on the grass. I pass around sliced pawpaw and a baked fish on the foil wrapping. The warm flesh is slippery and sweet. My two grass baskets, woven into zigzags with strong handles all the way round, are for New Zealand.

We head south in the falling light. The bush is tropical and shadowy forms of palms and large leaves leap into the headlights. A narrow road winds through to a large sign, where the road turns inland across the island. With the headlights, we can just read. It's a one-way road and cars may only cross at certain times, to prevent head-on collisions. We're out of luck. We can't go now.

Antoine tosses his head back. 'We'll go anyway. People do it all the time.'

He should know. I'm anxious, all the way down the winding, narrow road, watching for headlights coming our way, until we exit back onto a main road. We arrive home just in

time to buy dinner from the food trailers outside the marina. Antoine and Rosie head back to town for an evening of jazz.

‘I’ll email you about my Mum,’ he calls.

Next morning, Sunday, Dad, Cornelius and I make a final pilgrimage up to the marina office to view the weather fax. Then we march in convoy along the pontoon, turning left then right, to Fred’s boat for his internet weather. Jean, his double-sized wife, is in their bedroom attempting to ease her chronic back pain with some yoga poses. We huddle around the computer, waiting for the weather page to download, to scrutinize for any possible reinterpretation of the arrows pointing to the wind direction over the sea, looking for some change in the numbers indicating wind strength. We study the forecasts for the next two days. They all say the same thing.

‘You’ve got to be joking, Jack. No one would leave now.’ Cornelius says.

Dad plants his feet down firmly.

‘We’re going, anyway. The south-westerlies should be light for a day or two. We’re sailing south-south-west. Might be enough of an angle.’

Cornelius and I have one last afternoon together. He is stretched out on our bed, waiting.

‘Finish your lunch, I want you up here.’

The rest of the day floats around our naked bodies, wrapped together, dosing, kissing, stroking each other, making love.

‘I wish you knew how amazing this is for me.’ I whisper.

We don’t talk any more. There’s nothing to say. We don’t know the future. Monday morning arrives, an ordinary day like any other. It doesn’t seem real. I was expecting trumpets and violins, a cello solo. Everything is the same. It’s all about to disappear. My holiday is over. I leave Cornelius sleeping and go to the market, like on any other day. It isn’t possible that I’m about to leave. We don’t talk about New Zealand, not really. Dad

arrives. I simply say goodbye, in a daze. We hug and kiss and Dad and I putter back out to *Dream-maker* in his saggy grey dinghy.

PART FOUR

Chapter one

In the fresh south-westerly breeze, we set a reasonable enough course for New Zealand. Dad bends over the radio, twiddling knobs, listening in for a weather report. The course we're on won't exactly take us to New Zealand, it will take us to the Antarctic, but we can't do anything about that for now, because we're pointing up as high into the wind as we can go. The ocean swell – rolling around the planet, dragging its heels over the ocean floor, romancing with the moon, thrashing about with the continents, sweeping on and on without beginning or end – will soon start my stomach sloshing and churning until I wish I were dead.

I call down the companionway, 'Dad, do you want something more to eat?'

I certainly don't, but he may.

When he looks up, his face is grey. 'Some crackers and cheese would be nice.'

I slice gherkins and olives to decorate the cheese, while I still have the energy. He has no idea what I've been through. I reach out for his empty plate and cold cup of tea.

'It's okay, I'll finish it.' Dad takes the cup and swallows the milky dregs.

I tidy the galley and return to watching *Dream-maker* pushing relentlessly through the waves bearing down on us. She doesn't have a choice. We don't either. She turns up into the wind on the back of a wave, to ease the bashing, and the close-hauled sails flap a little, but then the wind vane activates and sets her back on her difficult course.

I stand up, baring my face into the wind, remembering the way I grew up – the rage of my mother frozen into an iceberg. No shelter.

'Dad, I'll try and call Cornelius again.'

'*Fantasie, Fantasie*, this is *Dream-maker*. Do you copy?'

Dad reminds me how to switch to the receive mode. All I get is an unsympathetic hissing.

‘I’m sorry,’ Dad apologizes. ‘It’s almost impossible to get through the static of masts in a marina. They confuse the signals.’

‘I won’t bother again.’

It takes days to acclimatize to an ocean swell, to register the drunken movement of the sea as normal, the way children do, and forget what is healthy and nurturing. I’d like to throw it all up back into the sea, start fresh, but I can’t. I’m trapped on this bucking boat, too uncomfortable for words. I lurch for support, head pulled down inside my churning stomach and I bump the walls up into the cockpit. Dad moves very slowly. There was no real choice – he needs to go home. When he looks up, his brows are weighted, his eyes sunk.

‘It looks like the trip home will be as bad as it was coming over. Why are we always beating into the wind?’

I don’t say anything. I don’t care. I’ve been uncomfortable my whole life. Everything is a struggle. This is normal.

‘You go down and rest. I’m happy up here.’

We sort out the times for the watches. He hobbles off to bed and pulls the blanket up over his head.

I check the sails, the compass, pick up abandoned cups and biscuit packets, then sit down to pull back together, to investigate the bruising of the last few days.

Consciousness which has no legs rides winds that have no eyes.

I have given the wind some eyes, I know where my rage came from and I know who it is directed at and why. My teacher said that, when working with difficult emotions, the key was to change the object. The winds will always blow, we need them to blow. All energy is valuable, precious. It is life stirring, looking for a direction. All kinds of winds blow around the earth, blow around inside us. Whether they are constructive or destructive depends on the use we put them to, the object. On a modern boat we can use any wind to take us where we want to go, even a headwind. *Be aware, use the energy of your emotions*, I can hear him say. *Use consciousness to choose the object, channel the*

winds, give them direction. This slender challenge gives me confidence. *Give the winds some eyes.* Don't be driven blindly by your emotions. I am trying to steer my own course.

When Dad wakes I make instant soup, pouring spitting water into dry pumpkin powder.

'Dad, you know how we use our feelings and reactions as a guide, because they're more honest than our thoughts?'

'Yes?' Dad looks up, wondering what I am getting at.

'I do wonder if negative feelings tell us more about unresolved conflicts within us. They don't necessarily mean we should avoid a relationship.'

He sits up to think and sees how miserable I look. 'Well, it seems to me you are still caught in the notion of suffering. You believe in suffering, so that's what you will get. You are free, don't you understand that? You can have anything you want. You create your own reality.'

That was a mistake. I plop the cup of soup down on the table next to him and stomp outside to sit in the wind. I don't want to be locked up in a small boat ploughing through a horrible, choppy sea with my father.

'Change the object, change the object. It's not your father, it's your mother.' My head starts breaking into sheets of pain, geological fault lines, laid down in the Mesozoic. I stagger down from the cockpit for something stronger than a Panadol.

'Are you all right?' His voice trembles with concern. I should be concerned about him, he looks terrible.

'No, I'm not. I want to die,' I shout back and collapse onto my bunk. 'You'll have to take over.'

I whimper after him: 'I can't move. If I do, I'll throw up.'

That should keep him away. I lift my head one last time. 'I can't do my night watch, the boat will have to look after itself.'

I collapse into the pillow, a dead weight, into a dark sleep – twenty-four hours non-stop sleeping and unravelling. ‘*Change the object.*’ It’s not my father, it’s my mother, it’s not my mother ... ‘*Change the subject – when working with difficult emotions, change the subject.*’ He said that as well. It’s not my mother, it’s empty winds, blowing around the planet, looking for a sail to fill. Re-adjust the wind vane, steer your own course. *Consciousness which has no legs rides winds that have no eyes.* Be conscious, use your eyes.

We both sleep through the night, leaving *Dream-maker* to the perils of the sea. In the afternoon, when I finally wake up, Dad is pacing the saloon.

‘We should turn around. I want you to go to a doctor. What if there’s something seriously wrong with you? I don’t like this at all.’

I can’t believe he’s serious.

‘Go back to Noumea? I’m seasick and tired, that’s all. I’ll come right.’

‘I don’t know about that.’ His voice is gruff and perplexed. ‘I don’t like this at all. We’ll go a little further and then see.’

He paces a few more steps, brooding. ‘No, I think we should turn around now and see a doctor.’

‘Don’t be stupid. I’m fine, I just need to rest.’ I drag myself up. ‘Look. I’m okay, I’m just seasick. Don’t worry.’

I can hardly get my body to work because inside I’m collapsed – like an amoeba, no definite shape – and I do the bare minimum, slowly and deliberately, forcing myself. *Dream-maker* seems to be struggling too, worn out from beating her way through the difficult seas for too long, always pounding against endless waves thrown against her hull. She has to keep going, she has no choice. Getting old must be like that.

At the navigation table I mark our position, another small cross in the large ocean, a tiny trail waving vaguely towards New Zealand. At our current speed, we’ll be lost forever in this churning ocean. The radio antenna comes loose and starts bouncing against a back stay. Most things in our boat are like this – broken or coming loose.

‘The radio might not work if we need it for an emergency,’ Dad frets.

What emergency? He stands in the cockpit scraping his teeth backwards and forwards, looking up at the problem. I can’t actually see the wire he means, but then I don’t look closely.

‘Norfolk Island is close by. We can fix it there.’

I determine our new course. Dad disconnects the wind vane and turns the wheel, eye on the compass. A shadow turns into a large rock which grows into an island. Two rocky headlands, so we motor back and forth to see and finally tuck inside just far enough for the air to go quiet. The boat eases into a gentle slopping. Norfolk Island pushed up out of the sea in a volcanic explosion. Now it’s sleeping, trees and pasture digging roots into its skin, breaking up and returning to the sea.

I pass Dad holey French cheese spread on thinly-sliced baguette, brittle after four days of drying at sea. He uncorks a bottle of cheap French wine. The deep watery caves running into the belly of the island remind me of childhood adventures, pirates’ treasure at the end. Then, when I wasn’t any bigger than anything at all, all caves were mysteries waiting to be explored, because you never could tell from the outside just how far they would go and what might be hidden right at the end.

‘Dad, I’ve been thinking some more about this ‘creating your own reality.’ I look up at him.

‘Yes?’ He sounds interested.

‘Well, we both agree that we start creating a reality by thinking it, or dreaming what we want.’

‘Yes, I agree with that. Thought is very powerful.’

‘My question is ... there are so many thoughts already dreaming us. You didn’t think yourself into existence, life did. You were trained to think as society dictated, you were shaped by everyone around you. You think you are creating your thoughts but you have no idea where they come from. You grabbed hold of ideas of freedom and personal power from the gurus of the sixties. What makes you think you have any say in the

process? I may think I'm a self-determining organism, but when I look closely it seems the entire universe has dreamed me up.'

'Well,' Dad replies, 'that's a pretty deterministic point of view. I believe we choose the life we want. The first rule is to take personal responsibility for what happens in your life.'

'Dad, you're not listening to me. When I meditate, I can see that thoughts come into my mind. I don't invent them, they just arrive. Where did they come from? I think we are part of a common mind, shared with everyone and everything that ever existed. Thoughts come from everywhere. Some stick, others don't. We make each other up.'

I pause to reflect on what I've said. 'It has to be like this. Don't you see?' I continue, because he doesn't reply and I'm a rush, almost tumbling over myself. 'I finally see how wrong I've been, how narcissistic. That's the problem with your model. It's narcissistic. The world is not a projection of your mind alone; we are not the centre of this wondrous universe. Don't you see?'

'I have those tapes of Ramtha somewhere. He's not as deterministic as you are. I'll find them for you. I'm going down to sleep. Thanks for the bread and cheese.'

I look up. 'Sure, have a good rest.'

The boat starts rolling through the night as the ocean swell sweeps in around the headland and slurps up into the caves. I fall into the stillness of the deep ocean, winds of fortune left to battle it out above me.

When I sit out in the cockpit in the morning, I'm finally relaxed. My empty muesli bowl crusts up in the sun next to my cup, cold dregs staining another ring. We're sheltered from the wind in the lee of the island. A lee shore means the wind is blowing onshore. In the lee of an island means the wind is blowing the other side. I have more serious dilemmas to wrestle with than this one.

Dad wakes from his sleeping pill. My morning reflections are interrupted. He wants me to fix the antenna. I look up the mast, a long way up. Physics turns a small rolling movement down here into a big swaying up there. I climb into the bosun's chair, big

plastic nappy. It hangs loosely around my legs while I clamber over the sail and start up the mast, kicking down the steps. Dad keeps the halyard, which is shackled onto the chair, tight so that if I slip I'll hang safely in midair, so long as he doesn't let go. Step by step, arms around the mast, I climb all the way to the top. I shackle the bosun's chair to the mast so I can't possibly fall and Dad can have a smoke. I only dare look down once, because when I see how far down it is, I start shaking.

I have no idea how to fix the antenna. If I tie a rope around a shackle on the head stay and then put it around the rope holding the antenna, I can pull the antenna tight to raise it above the back stay. I keep one arm around the mast to hold me firm, fingers free. I tie a knot around the shackle, mainly with the other hand, and then I pause, to let my breath settle down, because it's scary being so high up. I loop my rope around the antenna rope and pull. The antenna lifts above the backstay. My plan should work. I have to tie it again tightly with one hand and a bit, to hold the antenna up, clinging to the mast which is swaying and I'm shaking inside, but I won't let myself shake and I make the knot tight.

'I'm ready to come down.'

He loosens the halyard. I unshackle myself from the mast and step down slowly, folding the steps back up, willing my legs to stay strong and not turn to jelly. I clamber back over the folded sail, down onto the deck, and then I can hardly walk into the cockpit because my legs are shaking so much. My clothes smell terrible – fear hormones – so I change. My meditation experiences used to be like that, full of fear. I made myself go to lots of scary inside places. After I calm down, we work together on small jobs, putting together chain and rope and shackles for reasons I don't understand.

'We need to be prepared for anything,' Dad says as we tie up some old tyres. 'This is a drogue.'

Auckland Cruising is predicting an easterly, so we set out early afternoon, full of hope. Land falls behind and the wind is from the south-west.

'What should we do?' he asks, beside himself. He can hardly stand it. What can we do?

'The wind must change when the large high pressure zone passes.'

‘Then we’ll keep going,’ I say.

The cockpit is an untidy tangle of lines and sheets. The small headsail won’t set properly, it flutters and flaps. Forget the fine-tuning – the boat is heading into the wind from whatever direction it comes, however it turns.

Dad worries, about me, about the weather, about himself. He might have a heart attack. I’d be on my own. There were four of us onboard when we sailed out from New Zealand, full of vigour and zest. Now there’s only him and me, with the stuffing knocked out of us.

‘There are still things you need to know about the boat.’

I’d been thinking the same thing.

‘If you need to use the outboard, remember the petrol and oil should be mixed carefully in the ratio of three to one. Use the choke, and if you flood the carburettor, you may need to wait half an hour for it to dry out.’

‘I’m worried about the radio. What should I do in an emergency?’

‘Forget it. You’d never match the bands. It’s too old. The mayday signals are up on the wall.’

What else. ‘The autopilot?’

We take out a small device and Dad fits it against the wheel.

‘It follows a compass setting and turns the wheel like an automatic helmsman.’

‘That’s pretty straightforward.’

‘It uses the batteries and doesn’t adjust to a change in wind direction. It keeps the course you set. The wind vane is more complicated – too old for you to use. Parts would fall in the water. Check the batteries are charging. The solar panel and motor will do that. Forget the wind generator – vane keeps breaking off. If the batteries are charging you can use the autopilot all you need. And if you have to start the engine, remember to pause for thirty seconds at the first turn and remember it turns off in the lazaret.’

We both realize I’d be pretty stuck if something should happen to him.

He goes downstairs in the dark which has suddenly swept over us, torch-light bouncing over the GPS. It roams over the shelves as he goes into the galley and then it shines on his bed and goes out and I am alone in the great sea.

We've been almost week at sea and we aren't even halfway home. I don't want to think too much about that. The whole crossing is only 1000 nautical miles, usually a seven-day passage. Dad takes over at nine o'clock and I take over at midnight. His speech is slow and ponderous as he re-orientates me to the night and the sails.

I call down to his bent figure, hovering in the saloon, straightening his bed for the night. 'Dad, have a long sleep. I'm happy to stay up all night.'

When dawn arrives, he wakes slowly and clammers up the companionway to take over. I slink down to bed. Several hours later, sweating in the hot sunlight flickering across my face, my arm stretches out for solid wood to drag myself to sitting.

Dad is stretched out along the lazaret, pillow under his head, hat over his face, fast asleep. Behind him the sea rushes past, white capped, like his hair. His body seems a mere tracing over the sea, cool and glassy. I put on the kettle for tea and plot our position on the chart.

When I take the tea up, Dad hasn't stirred. I'm unwilling to disturb his tranquil repose. We never get enough sleep. I check the compass and the direction of the wind from the arrow at the top of the mast. Nothing has changed. In the shade under the dodger I return to my musings.

I have a new idea, new for me at least, and that's always exciting. It's about how we come to know other people. When I meet someone, maybe I'm tuning into the sympathetic resonances they set up in me. Only some of their patterns will resonate in me, like a radio picking up particular frequencies, and I will know the person as the patterns that do. People may amplify or nullify particular patterns in each other. It's the combination that's important. This is why we should choose our friends carefully. And so, I wonder, who do my feelings belong to?

I look out over the sea, into a shadow in front of the sun. The sun is still burning bright, but I feel a shadow, something leaving me, but everything is the same, but different – a

dark glowing, I can't see anything, my skin is creeping, bristling, sweating. I feel very strange. What is it? The quiet is too quiet. Dad! He hasn't moved, not at all. He's not a deep sleeper. I don't want to think what I am thinking. I don't want to go over. I call quietly at first, and then much louder. Nothing moves. I'm shaking when I stand, hands sticking on the fibreglass walls. I'm going to faint. I clutch the compass box, the wheel, lurching, quaking inside. My hand goes out to shake him, in a silent moment spreading out vast and incomprehensible. *Dream-maker* is racing along under the sun glowering down. Everything has changed. Under the bold sun my heart thumps wildly. It's not true. He wanted to go back for a doctor.

When I lift up his hat, his eyes stare straight up: blue, empty, cold. His hand is cold and he's stiff as a plank of wood. How long has he been dead? I lower his hat so he looks asleep. He is asleep, he'll wake up soon. We'll wake up from this dream.

It isn't a dream, this is for real. I look to the sea, terror and excitement all mixed up. I have to sail alone. I can't do it. Of course I can. The sea keeps rushing past *Dream-maker* leaping through the waves. Dad is the only one who knows this boat. I need him. I can't sail home by myself. A wash, like a heavy downpour, swamps me. My father is dead. My father is dead. I can't make it sink in.

It's my fault. I was unkind to him, pushed him too hard, didn't look after him, left him alone.

I take off his hat, close his eyes and stroke his cold face and hair, fingers tracing through my memories. He loved me. I finger his face with my tears and sit close, pressing my body against his arm, to warm him, comfort him. I stay a long time, without thinking, and become quiet. He is in the total care of the elements, the vast intelligence that grew him, being reshaped, transformed, journeying on.

He was a man of the land and sea. Steady, practical, enquiring. His mother, a big woman, brushed my hair thirty times every night we stayed. She fussed over what I ate and how I dressed for the wind and rain. From her medicinal chest she found potions to settle any upset. He didn't know what it meant to be cut adrift on the heartless sea.

I have to think about my situation. I'm at least five days, possibly more, from home. Sailing down the coast into Opuia might be challenging. I can use the VHS. No reason to panic.

I sit by his cold body. We'd grown close, clambering around each other on the boat, as finely tuned as the sails, steering the same course on the crest of the same dreams. He only supported me. So many early memories burst up: printing black and white photographs in his dark room; traipsing after him in the bush – he loved the bush; helping him sand and paint the trimaran; sorting tools in his garage.

A helpless gratitude stumbles out. He's still alive in me. That's why I can sail home on my own. The navigation will be easy – the charts for New Zealand are under the navigation table. A straight line from our current position, on our present course, barely touches the tip of New Zealand. Dad said, with the engine going, we could head further up into the wind. I'll use the engine if I have to.

I sleep like a baby, washed in his presence, memories of our life together rising up and passing through. The boat is full of light. I float into the cockpit in the tenderness of his arms stretching around me. *Dream-maker* is still crashing through the waves, without faltering. I check the GPS, mark our position on the chart, measure the angles, adjust for the magnetic deviation. I check the compass and the sails. As long as the wind doesn't change too much, we'll be okay.

His new age ideas – were we so different? I want to scream yes. He didn't understand what the Buddha meant by liberation. It doesn't mean being able to sail away on adventures looking for romance. It means the freedom to be present, without having to have an agenda, because life is huge and we are flowing, shaping and being shaped every moment by this huge pulsating web of life. I stare into Dad's image floating around me – a mere tracing over the sea, that's all the ego is. Presence is standing beyond the boundaries of self.

I need to put our battle to rest and say my final piece. As a woman I need to have the last word. The universe is not a personal new-age playground of unlimited possibility. Every action has a consequence, that's why. He's smiling back. He knows this. Every action reshapes the entire universe and bounces back onto us. We are all strung together,

wobbling in harmony and disharmony, making music together. He knew this by the way he lived. I begin to see what it means to be responsible. This is one of those words I almost can't say. One has to be *present* to be able to respond responsibly, appropriately, to what is actually going on, without running or twisting the facts to suit oneself. This is the spiritual challenge of the human life. This is freedom.

I sit near his body, his cold hard body, and think about all the things that could go wrong now. I don't know how to reset the wind vane. When I have to change course I'll need to use the autopilot, so I plan to stay on this course for as long as possible.

The days are carelessly long and rush past, like the sea. I sleep when I want, sitting late under the stars, taking the time to say what I never could, asking his advice. I can smell him. It's growing stronger, hanging about inside the boat, even with the hatches open. I gag on my food. Under the sheet, his stomach is bloating and the skin is breaking open, with black stuff frothing out. Disgusting bubbles ooze from his mouth and nose. What should I do? I don't want to touch him. He's a rotting carcass now and I can't get away from the smell. I'll have to roll him into the sea. I climb over his body to see. I could never get him over the wind vane without breaking it. I'll drag him across the cockpit and then up on deck and under the lifelines. I should have done it days ago, when he wasn't smelling and falling apart. I walk up to the bow, away from the smell.

Can I do this? I can if I hide inside his oversize wet-weather gear and pull on rubber kitchen gloves. It's almost funny, the struggle I now have with the body, half lifting, half dragging it across the cockpit. I stumble on the cushions and fall on top of him. He doesn't mind. When the corpse is stretched out on deck, bed sheet smoothed, I push the button for a Mozart piano concerto, drop a couple of plastic flowers on the sheet, two books of poetry, photos of the women he left behind, a bottle of rum and his smokes. I take off my gloves to light one, with a tot of rum, to celebrate. He was romantic to the end.

I'm not good at ceremony and turn into a blubbering idiot reading a poem. I must do it, for the family, his children, Mum, brothers, grandchildren. I say goodbye from each one, from my heart, which is leaping and thumping. A hymn ... *The Lord's my*

shepherd I'll not want, He maketh me down to lie, in pastures green He feedeth me, the quiet waters by. Not sure I got the words right. I sob, 'May the words be true for him, for us all, may we all have a good shepherd.'

Now I have to get him into the water. I drag his legs under the lifelines and lurch between intense sadness and comedy as the sheet drags free and the stench ploughs into me. I let it be. This is our common fate. I hold him in my arms one last time and then push his body under, holding onto the lifelines for balance. His head lolls forwards, as his bottom slips over the toe rail, and then the weight changes and he pulls out of my arms into the sea, floating over the waves, sheets trailing behind, gassy and buoyant. *Dream-maker* pulls away and he disappears. I'm all alone.

His wet-weather suit and the clothes I was wearing follow him overboard. I get clever with the bucket on a rope, flooding the lazaret, the cockpit, the deck, scrubbing and washing.

The wind is strengthening to the south taking me further off course. Next day it turns again, this time to the north-east, so if I keep heading directly into it I should make the very tip of New Zealand and I won't need to adjust the wind vane at all. The sea is grey, under a light grey cloud. I look through the book shelf for something to distract me, to keep my mind reigned in.

I start reading about the role of bacteria in the evolution of life on earth, how my cells contain ancient bacterial factories, the mitochondria, reproducing themselves in harmony with my energy needs. My whole body is a vast breeding planet for colonies of bacteria and other microbes. So was Dad's. I am only human from one point of view. I weave myself back into a grand perspective. Species are like stars, an infinite number of different views on life, and all one.

My mind stutters backwards and falls into longing for my children, Cornelius, my father, until I'm alone and sad in the great ocean with cold creeping through threadbare blankets and my thermal underwear. Outside the stars are taking up positions and the moon resumes its lonely trek across the sky. I talk to Dad about what to do next, how angry I am that he deserted me, and go down thumping and stomping about the boat. I become methodical, focus on the detail, absorbed in my activities – cooking, eating, tending the sails, navigation – an easy rhythm through the day and night. Dad is with me, inside and out, in everything he ever touched, still present. How else could it possibly be? I become positively happy, stretching out in the cockpit – the wind, sea, sky, sun warm on my face, returned to the elements, *Dream-maker* racing through the waves, content.

One morning, the shadow rising up on the horizon is not a cloud, it's land. My contentment flees. I burst into tears for all sorts of reasons. Dad is not here. I found my own way home. He'd be proud of me. I want to keep on sailing. Land is dangerous, full of hidden rocks and headlands that twist the winds around. The shapes grow sharp

edges. I pour over a new chart, translating numbers into a tidal range and the strength of the current, not sure what to do with the information. I trace every wobble of contour looking for submerged rocks. I'll keep way out. Three Kings Islands – guardians of the mainland. A few wind-deformed trees hold to the ridge.

I start the engine in case something should go wrong. Turn the key half way. That's what Dad said. Hold it for twelve seconds to heat the plates and warm up the pistons, then turn it right on. I do, and the engine starts fine. Whew! I make sure the dial doesn't go over 18,000 revs. Handle forward increases the speed, back decreases it. I practice nervously, to be ready for an emergency. Third reef in the main. I disengage the wind vane so I can steer, now I'm close. Dark walls of volcanic rock rise up, goading the raging sea, which bursts up into great eruptions of foam, neither letting go, neither backing down. New Zealand creeps out of the mist behind. I'm still a safe distance from land. Through the binoculars I see a fishing boat, turning, heading towards me, rolling through the steep sea. Pirates?

I turn on the VHF, 'Hello, this is *Dream-maker*. Do you copy?'

'Hello,' a voice crackles back. 'We want to come along side. We have some crayfish for you.'

I'm suddenly scared – a boat coming close in these waves? I see shipwreck.

'No, no, that would be too dangerous.' Then I remember my manners. 'But thank you for the offer.'

They take no notice and continue their frightening approach, until I can see them clearly. The crew is waving and smiling, stuffing crayfish into a black Kleensak. The bag rises up into the air, swings aloft, soars the gap between the boats and drops at my feet. I wave vigorously and the fishing boat turns around and heads back to land. A moving black bag at my feet. Inside, two sets of wobbling feelers and two sets of eyes on stalks turn to the light. I do burst into tears this time. My country folk. Dad loves crayfish.

The autopilot – which way round does it go? How do I set it? I go slowly, one step at a time, and think clearly, in a logical way. I set a new course from the chart, log it in and keep the engine running slowly so I can keep the course easily. The fatherly rumble of

the diesel settles my shaking inside. I roll up the headsail a bit more and stay in the cockpit on lookout. I can't sleep because I'm in a shipping lane now, heading down the coast: highway for container ships, fishing trawlers, other yachts. The two crayfish, boiled bright orange, begin their most significant change, into me. I break open the tubular spiky orange stick legs and coax out the stringy flesh. Then I gorge myself on the thick, sweet, soft flesh of the body. Night is in full flood. One eye closes, the other follows and I'm asleep, and jerk awake, to sing, eat, walk – anything to stay awake. The end is close. I must be vigilant. Tea, hot instant soup, I drink without wanting it. When morning comes I nap on the lazaret – ten minutes, twenty minutes. I shouldn't sleep at all.

With the chart in the cockpit, I mark off the bays and headlands. At the long, wandering entrance of the Bay of Islands, I drop the main completely and roll up the jib, so I don't have to worry, then turn in, winding through islands, eye on the depth sounder, looking for Opuia, the marina. There it is. I slow down, engine in neutral, and rush up on deck to let the anchor go, plenty of chain. Engine in reverse to dig it in, the way Dad does. I turn off the engine, my legs turn to jelly and I clamber over to the lazaret to sit down until the shaking stops.

I can't believe I made it, all by myself. The harbour is too quiet, the wind has vanished, water like glass under a soft rain making pimples. Twelve days of crashing and bashing through a wild sea – typical New Zealand weather. It's over. I need to sleep. Smiling inside, bursting with pride, but too tired to feel it. Rain all night, curtain of grey, rocking gently, sound beating down, taking me home, drifting into sleep, out of sleep. I can't believe I made it all on my own.

All sorts of officials arrive next day. When I tell them about Dad, they come swarming over the boat, taking his belongings, his empty pill containers, our charts. We don't have a ship's log. Doesn't feel real, but it is. They are kind and finally say I can sail down to Auckland, but must check in with Auckland maritime police as soon as I arrive. The boat may be quarantined for a time. I ring home to let everyone know. I'll bring the boat back down on my own, I say. I want to do it on my own. Yes, I'm fine now. I'll only be a couple of days. I email Cornelius, who's still in Noumea crumpling weather faxes into the bin. He's waiting for good weather or to change his mind.

I walk around Opua in the afternoon. Somewhere on the sturdy wharf a regular Kiwi bloke swaggers along. I haven't seen this walk in six months. His jeans slip down low on his buttocks making any movement difficult from the outset. His torso, the bulky unwieldy centre of him, is impassively uncooperative, so his arms and legs have to bully it into moving by throwing it from side to side – a bit the way I move a heavy piece of furniture on my own, by twisting while I pull. He seems all punched up on the inside. I walk around the bay where bush falls to the sea, a palette of olive-greens stretching back into layers of rolling hills fading into purple. Along a stony foreshore pohutukawas hang low, buds plumping up, ready to burst into crimson for Christmas.

After two days of rest, I head into the southerly I knew it was going to be. With the motor on and the autopilot, I pull up the main to the third reef then pull out the headsail, winching it in tight against the stay. I keep the chart in the cockpit and stay well clear of land all day, riding up over waves, pushing through. At the entrance to Tutakaka harbour, an outgoing tide is piling waves up against an entrance strewn with black rock. I can do it. A couple of aluminium fishing boats risk the swell for some fish. I turn in, motoring slowly, fast enough to stay steady in the current, my heart a racket, the headsail out a little more for the wind, my legs shaky, eyes keen and steady. The crashing waves push the boat around, so I shove the throttle forward for more speed. Out of the chop, sheltered by headlands, the sea becomes quiet.

I drop the main and roll up the headsail, heart still knocking against my ribs, remembering the steps, staying steady. Why did I say I wanted to sail home alone? I motor over to the other boats, scrutinize the chart, inch close to shore to where it seems safe and drop the anchor. Is *Dream-maker* swinging okay against the other boats? Is the anchor dragging? A row of baches line the beach, most of them renovated in breathless, suffocating plastic. A cluster of caravans parade striped awnings and wooden barbecue tables and taunt the few remaining pohutukawas at the other end of the beach. A four-wheel drive races over the sand.

The wind changes in the night to a south-easterly, so I get up several times to check my position. Next day I motor-sail down the coast in the warm sun, sitting out in the cockpit, gazing along the coastline. The land passes through my heart – rolling bush, hills pimpled with sheep, sharp rocky promontories, seabirds surfing wind currents close to the water, shadowy reptilian islands wading out to sea, ochre clay rock

crumbling from the cliff faces, sandy, stony, shelly beaches. This is my home at the bottom of the world. It is beautiful and it is ordinary. It is both together, a blend. In some places the water, cloudy with mud, flows out from a river, settling over the sea bed, which will one day rise up as a new land, neither different from nor the same as what went before. The winds will always blow around the earth, creating storms and currents and challenging situations. What I do with the winds is up to me.

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Oliver was packing when Alice brought in his clothes and folded them neatly on his bed. She didn't like to ask about the phone calls, his excitement, his happiness, the way he threw his limbs around in the thin sun. He clumped sweet-smelling jonquils in a bottle and prepared a special dinner.

She gulped her wine. He cut into the filo pastry – spinach and feta cheese flew out. He lifted a large oily slab onto her plate.

'I'm not going back to Canada. I need some time out. Marie's fine with it.'

'You're not?'

'No. I'm flying to San Francisco. Remember Arron. He has a boat.'

'What sort of boat?'

'Dunno. A forty-five foot sloop. Wants to sail to the Caribbean. Friends of his have a hotel. He has his charter ticket, so we'd have work.' He paused, but Alice didn't say anything. 'I need an adventure, I'm going sailing.'

His voice grew bold with the power of his choice, maybe the first choice he'd ever made for himself.

'Congratulations.' She raised her glass. 'Sometimes we just have to do what we have to do and pick up the pieces later.'

Oliver cringed. He didn't want to live that way, but he forgave her. He and his sisters had been the pieces to be picked up later.

'What about Mollie and Brad?'

'They can fly over in the holidays. I can get to know them properly.'

They ate in silence. The fire roared and a gust of wind swept down the flue. Outside, the sea rushed in against the stones, stirring and fermenting, sucking out sand, rolling the stones over and over, no time to waste.

‘I can’t believe I’m doing this, I’m actually going through with it. I’ve thought about it for years. Thanks, Mum.’

They set out early. Young lambs, maybe only a day or two old were boinging up and down, a skittery triumph, butting up under their mothers for milk. The oyster farm on the coast was stacked with the workers’ cars. A white weatherboard church up on a hill shone in the sun.

‘I have a last question.’ He turned down the radio. ‘What is the natural mind?’

Alice was surprised by his persistence.

‘You’re more interested than you let on.’

‘Maybe.’

‘The natural mind? Why, it’s like the bare sky, bursting with light. This mind is the possibility of all existence.’

‘That doesn’t make sense.’

She stopped for a moment to think about how to express it.

‘This natural mind is the matrix of all our experience, it is love, bliss, intelligence, awareness, presence. Children are its direct embodiment as an irrepressible curiosity, an open happiness. “Except ye become as a little child ... ” These qualities aren’t constructed, we are born with them. They are never lost, only obscured.’

A couple of horses were racing around their paddock. Alice slowed down. Their heads lifted up, nostrils flared like trumpets, white eyes wild with the morning, long tails – freedom brushes painting the sky. Under the bare yellow wands of a willow, a few dry leaves caught the wind, swaying like gondoliers then dropping to the mud underneath.

Oliver interrupted. ‘That’s the thing. It all sounds so simple. Be natural. Lao Tze Tung said something like “Let everything flow according to its nature.” That’s Taoism isn’t it? I like the poetry. I like that you don’t have to understand poetry to enjoy it.’

They passed the muddy Clevedon River, hiding a couple of boats.

‘It isn’t simple. It’s hard work uncluttering the mind, finding the way back, then living in accord with what you find.’

They were quiet for a bit, until Oliver spoke again.

‘I was reading another book: *The Eternal Self* by Ramana Maharshi. He was talking about finding your real self beyond the mind – who we really are.’

They drove onto the motorway, into ribbons of cars sweeping them along, under an aeroplane wheeling overhead.

Alice smiled. ‘The eternal self is your natural mind.’

She parked the car outside the terminal.

They hung together in the departure lounge until the final boarding call.

‘Thanks Mum.’ They hugged, kissed and he was gone.

She stayed a moment, blinking her eyes clear with a prayer to follow him. ‘May he find a good anchor in the restless sea.’

She thought about her father and Cornelius – tossing in the ocean swell, floating through the vast sea and sky, tuning their sails to the winds of the planet, staying close to the mystery. Then she turned away towards the carpark. She would never understand the mystery.

