Ghost Town

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David Wrigley

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Abstract

A hometown is a thing full of horrors.

Ghosts line the footpaths like spectators at an ANZAC Day parade. They leap from thickets and pounce from suburban ranch sliders like tom cats.

These ghosts have been waiting for you. There are things they need you to remember.

When David Wrigley returns to Cambridge, a town he thought he'd left behind him forever, he finds the ghosts are out in force. He stumbles on a note in his mother's garage, tightly folded and hot to the touch, that sets him off in pursuit of the memory of Jacob Avonlea, a friend from the past who he has never been able to leave behind.

But the currents of memory are unpredictable, and the waters and riverbanks are crowded with the dead. David and Jacob's friendship, which crackled with a boyish intensity and a surfeit of secrets, was just the first of many stories tussling for attention.

There is a family history – a fifty year old cataclysm that destroyed his brother.

The grotesque origins of the school that nurtured David and murdered Jacob. The eccentric founder who brought with him from the mill towns of Manchester a fear of women and a predilection for young boys.

And then there is the land – the meanders of the Waikato and the eruptions that diverted it from one coast to another, leaving forgotten oxbows in its wake. The roaming forests of kahikateas that followed the river and the wetlands, and once dominated these landscapes but have now all but disappeared. The rich farmland that has usurped the forests and slowly leaks poison into the soil and the waterways.

Ghost Town is a psychogeographer's novel. A novel in which the landscape and the people that live and act upon it are inseparable, the ghosts of one haunting the present of the other. It is a story of colonial men, locked into cycles of violence and destruction. The story of the silence they have inflicted upon themselves and on their children, and ultimately on the landscape itself, as the forests retreat, the birdsong hushed.

As we drift downstream, at every bend of the river we can see through the ever-widening gaps in the trees, glimpses of lost futures– that different species of ghost.

A free and autonomous Māori Waikato.

A spring-fed lake full of eels and koura.

Five hundred year old kahikateas growing arrow-straight into the distant blueness.

An egalitarian, socialist Aotearoa.

A family man gathering his sons into his arms.

A man of forty six raising his eyes towards the swaying tree-tops and starting to sing.

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“This music crept by me upon the waters”
And along the Strand, up Queen Victoria Street.
O City, City, I can sometimes hear
Beside a public bar in Lower Thames Street,
The pleasant whining of a mandoline
And a clatter and a chatter from within
Where fishmen lounge at noon: where the walls
Of Magnus Martyr hold
Inexplicable splendor of Ionian white and gold.

The Waste Land, T.S. Eliot

The Day Before

A rock in a stream.

I am standing on the pavement in Shoreditch on a Friday afternoon in June 2018.

I am still. I am holding my mobile phone against my ear. People swarm past me. Groups of friends and colleagues part ways just in time to avoid knocking me down, then merge together once more as if I was never there.

A pair of shirtless men holding tall cans of English lager tell me to get out of the fucking footpath. I can smell the sweat and the beer as one of them shoulders me out of his way. "Move, you wanker."

They check back over their shoulders to see if I'm going to do anything about it. I just stand there with my phone.

Over the noise of Hackney Road in the summertime, my mother, from the depths of winter, is telling me that the funeral will be held at the end of next week. That my sister Lucy is booking flights for us both. That we'll leave in two days' time. That my father is dead.

"Are you okay, Ma?" It's 3am in New Zealand.

"I'm fine. Relieved more than anything."

"Are you on your own?"

"For now. But Ruth will be here in the morning. I'm just going to go to sleep. It's been a long day."

"Okay. Well, I love you."

"I love you, too."

I walk back into the restaurant and sit down next to my friend, Mark.

"My Dad is dead."

"Fuck. I'm sorry."

"It's okay. He's been gone a long time. Dementia."

"I guess so. But still. It's your dad."

"Yeah. My Dad."

The last time I saw my father it was in a secure residential home in the suburbs of Hamilton. There were bars on all the windows and keypad entry locks on all the doors. The lounge room smelt of ammonia and cheap laundry detergent.

He had been moved there after the care home in Cambridge told my mother they couldn't offer him the support he needed. He had punched a nurse. He had thrown a chair through a plate-glass window. He was a big man, like The Chief in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest.* Unlike The Chief, however, he did not follow the chair through the broken window and into the wide world beyond. He just stood there and listened to the glass chirp and tinkle as it hit the concrete path outside. He didn't even smile at the havoc he had caused. My Dad, until quite recently, had enjoyed a bit of havoc.

When I walked into the facility in Hamilton it took me a while to find him. There were twenty or so patients in the lounge room and six nurses. One woman, whose age I found impossible to guess, shambled between windows, her eyes wide with anxiety, her hands worrying each other like she was moulding clay. Upon reaching one window she stood still for a minute, straining to remember why she had started walking in the first place, before turning around and setting off, full of certainty, in the opposite direction. An old man, almost hunched double, was settled in front of the barred French doors that led out into the garden. He stared out from between the bars, towards the camellia bushes shielding the high fence line and the suburban streets beyond. His mouth hung open like a cave in a cliff face.

I recognised my father at last. He was sitting at a table, staring down at a sheet of paper, his lips moving, a pencil in his hand.

A nurse approached me, an exhausted-looking Indian woman. She mustered a smile. "Are you here to see Mr Wrigley?"

"Yes. I'm his son. I'm David."

"Hi David. He's having a pretty good day today. We printed out a few columns of numbers and asked him if he'd mind adding them up for us. He seems to like it."

"Once an accountant, eh?"

"Yes. I suppose. On really good days we let him go through our old accounts. He gets a kick out of that."

"That's nice. Thank you for looking after him."

She gave me a sad little smile and touched my arm.

I walked over to my father. I stood beside him, but he didn't look up at me.

His skin hung loose on his bones. His hands were not his hands. They were delicate and weak looking, covered in liver spots. The veins were shrunken and dark, like rivers in a drought. His hair was almost gone. Just a few unhappy strands clinging on above his ears.

“Hi Dad.”

He looked up slowly. He stared at me for a minute, his lips moving, still adding things up.

A little flash of something behind his eyes. He stopped adding for a second.

“Dave.”

He reached out and took my hand and squeezed. My breath caught in my throat and the hairs on my arms stood up. The dead are stirring. Then he let me drop and turned his attention back to the sheet of paper and the long string of numbers snaking down the margin.

A sob escaped from my chest. I screwed my eyes shut to wring out the tears and wiped them away with my sleeve.

That lightening glimpse of my father undid me. I struggled to breathe in enough air. The room shrunk and I could taste the smell of piss on the tip of my tongue.

I crouched down so our heads were level.

“I love you, Dad. I’m sorry I haven’t been around.”

“One four nine and sixty one is two ten. Two ten and two fifty three is four sixty three add sixty seven is five thirty…” and down the page he goes.

I had been forgotten or put aside. For him the numbers were quite enough to be getting on with. Numbers are definite. They are solid. The ghosts that come and go, back and forth, within this room cannot compete. We are treacherous. Our faces slip like clay hillsides into the ocean, revealing mothers and sisters long dead, children long since grown.

Mark insists on paying for lunch and I let him.

We stand outside the restaurant. Mark is ordering an Uber.

“Shall we go to The George? Have a couple of beers? Maybe toast your old man?”

I thank him but no. I should get in touch with my sister and find out when we’re flying. I need to call work, tell them what’s happened. Tell them I’ll be gone for a week or two.

“Okay. But if you want to hang out later then give me a call. I’m around.”

He puts his arm around my shoulders and grapples me into a hug. We’ve never hugged before. We are both awkward men. He is not tall, about my height, so our chests and bellies brush against the other’s. He slaps my back with both hands and pulls away.

“You okay?” he asks.

“Fine. All good.”

I watch Mark get into an Uber and drive away into the Friday traffic, an ocean of Priuses, black cabs, red London buses.

I don’t want to go back to my flat just yet. I don’t want to call my sister or my work. I don’t want to be around my friends, but I want to see people. It’s important to me that I’m surrounded by the living.

I begin walking west.

The eastern fringes of Shoreditch are the extreme limit of what I consider to be my London. This nebulous zone lies mostly within the Borough of Hackney, but also crosses into Islington to the west and Tower Hamlets to the south. It runs from Hackney Marshes in the northeast, and west from there into Stoke Newington, then southwards into Highbury, before turning left along Regents Canal as far as Victoria Park. Along the canal, between Islington Tunnel and Victoria Park is Broadway Market, where I lived and worked for many years and where I can be sure to meet many friends and more than a few enemies. My London stretches from there down Goldsmith’s Row and past Hackney City Farm (where I sometimes stand and contemplate the donkeys), and onto Hackney Road and the nearby flower market.

It is within these self-constructed borders that I now live the majority of my life. Bartenders, publicans, waiters, and chefs know me here. We nod at each other in the street. We buy each other drinks.

I work in Islington, for a restaurant twenty minutes’ walk from my central Hackney flat. My local pub is almost on my doorstep, on the wide, often chaotic thoroughfare of Mare Street. Mare street, which seems immune to the forces of gentrification that are closing in around it. Mare Street, where lives are lived right there in the open for everyone to see. Mare Street with its bickering families, three generations walking beside and perched upon a mobility scooter. The Jehovah’s Witnesses under the railway bridge giving away doomsday magazines. The clusters of street drinkers: some Polish, some Romanian, some London Carribean, some Scottish, some Cockney. Occasionally a crackhead passes through like a comet, straight across the wide diagonal of the intersection with Graham Road, oblivious to traffic, raging at something that has been lost or taken away. Mare Street turns its head as one, trying to avoid eye contact, hoping the furious star will pass by without collision.

Mare Street, which turns into Cambridge Heath, which turns left into Hackney Road, and shimmies towards Shoreditch and the City. Where Hackney Road meets Shoreditch High Street, all is chaos, and my London comes to an end.

Two Roman roads cross one another here, east to west, north to south.

On one corner of the crossroads sits Shoreditch Church, hemmed by a wrought iron fence and some exhausted-looking plane trees. On another corner there is a strip club, open 24/7. Over there is a cocktail bar. A backpacker's. A five-a-side football park. As always, two dozen London buses stretch in every direction, waiting their turn to cross the intersection. I know all the bus routes that pass through here: the 242, 149, 55, 243, 36, 25, 47. I know whether they'll take me back into the safety of my London or ferry me deeper into the foreignness of the rest of the city.

It occurs to me that, allowing for the time difference, my father actually died tomorrow. He will die in the winter. He will die tomorrow and he is already dead.

Today, on the 13th of June, the day before my father died, I decide to venture out of the zone and travel southwards, down Shoreditch High Street, towards the Thames.

The city is intensifying as Friday afternoon ripens. More young people are out in the street. Concertina windows are drawn open to allow bar patrons to feel the breeze on their bare shoulders, and chat with their friends as they smoke cigarettes and puff on vapes in the little roped-off cordons on the street now reserved for such things.

I want to smoke. I gave up ten years ago, but my father is dead.

When I was seven, my father gave up smoking with the help of hypnotherapy. I assume only as a result of intense pressure from my mother. When I visited my parents from university, he would sit outside with me and roll my cigarettes. It relaxed him, he said.

I duck into a newsagent and buy twenty Marlboro Red and a lighter.

Once outside I rip the plastic off the pack, no longer the iconic red and white branding but instead, a queasy green background and a picture of a cancer-eaten human tongue.

My fingers are clumsy with anticipation. There is something pleasing about the tension holding each cigarette in its place. I prise one loose and light it. Disappointing. It doesn't taste as good as I had hoped. But the nicotine hits my system. A jolt. I set off walking again.

This is an unlovely part of town, an architectural hodge podge on the northern fringe of the City. Three and four storey buildings rise from the undulating

tarmac. Teetering Victorian brick, brutalist concrete, late twentieth century steel and glass butt up against one another. Time is disjointed here, scattered, no longer pretending at straight lines.

Shoreditch became a theatre district after the Puritans, who controlled the City to the south, banned playhouses in 1575. Shakespeare was born here. Hamlet was first performed just around the corner on Curtain Road. Another dead father.

In the eighteenth century the Huguenot weavers arrived, escaping Catholic persecution in France, and Shoreditch became the centre of the textiles industry. Jewish immigrants followed, also seeking safe haven from a hostile Europe.

The Second World War and the blitz turned most of Shoreditch to rubble. After the bombs and rockets came post-war neglect. For the latter half of the twentieth century, Shoreditch was synonymous with urban decline. Industry never returned. Poor Bangladeshi immigrants moved in. The National Front flourished among the white working class of the district.

The 90s brought regeneration and gentrification. Artists occupied the vacant warehouse spaces and derelict Victorian houses. Alexander McQueen set up his fashion studio in Hoxton Square in 1993. Nightclubs filled up with happy people. Everyone joined a band. The ‘creative’ industries moved in: graphic designers, advertising agencies, video game studios, tv production companies.

Now, as I walk southwards on the day my father died (or the day before), every third shop front is an outpost of one coffee chain or sandwich shop or another. The ‘edge’ that I felt when I arrived here in the late 90s is gone (people were already saying that then). The centripetal force of the City and the real estate agents were always going to suck the life out of Shoreditch.

I cross Great Eastern Street. Shoreditch High Street is now Bishopsgate. I am not quite sure where Shoreditch ends and The City of London officially begins but for me, the Rubicon has been crossed.

On a whim I step into a pub. It’s an old-fashioned place with hanging baskets of pink flowers outside. A mix of rank and file bankers and financiers from the City, their ties loose and their top buttons undone, and big men in hi-viz vests and work boots stand around high tables drinking pints of lager or Guinness. An old man in a flat cap is drinking London Pride and staring down at the bar top.

I order a half pint of strong beer and a shot of bourbon.

“Alright, my son?” asks the old man. His voice is rough and hard, the word endings sticking to the back of his throat. An accent left over from another time. A ghost.

He has noticed that I also don't quite belong here. Perhaps the angle of my boot angled towards the door.

"You in a hurry or something?"

"Yeah. My dad is going to die tomorrow. I have to go to New Zealand. Salute."

I drink the shot, take a breath, neck the beer, and I'm gone.

"Fair enough. Don't do anything I wouldn't do," the old man says to my back.

"Righto."

Out in the warm air of the afternoon, I notice the shadows cast by the narrow terraced houses on the other side of the road are inching closer. The evening is almost upon me.

I light another cigarette and set off again towards Liverpool Street Station, the beer and the whiskey lighting up my veins, making my chest and shoulders blush with warmth, causing my blood to reach out to the ancient stone, allowing me to forget my grief for a minute, to spend a moment merged with the infinite.

The working day is all but over. Bishopsgate is crowded with commuters, hustling to catch their trains eastwards towards the outer suburbs and satellite towns.

I fold myself into the stream, allow myself to be carried along by the urgency of strangers desperate to be somewhere else. I can smell their aftershave and their tired sweat through their cotton-blend work shirts, the fumes from their hastily finished pints of lager or glasses of pinot grigio, their eagerness to be seen to be a part of the work-place culture, the after-hours bonhomie, and their even stronger desire to be away from one another, to be home with their televisions, their wives, boyfriends, children, and cats.

The City looms around me now. Gone are the modest Victorian terraces, gone are the fashionable boutiques, gone are the hipsters and the loose-limbed youths in search of a good time. The City is steel and glass. It is not interested in fashion. It has no time for children unless they can somehow be put to work.

The fires of the modern world were sparked here. The invention of credit, of finance, of global trade, the freeing of commerce from the shackles of gold. This was the engine room of the Empire. It was here that Capital became ink on paper and then, in time, pure data. It became wisps of electricity moving at impossible speeds, in patterns of unfathomable complexity, expanding out into the world and into space, filling every vacuum, electrifying the deepest trenches of the oceans, penetrating the darkest forests, illuminating whole continents, and bringing with it the voracious Puritan virtues of light and labour and logic.

As I pass Liverpool Street Station, the commuters melt down escalators and disappear underground.

The street narrows and the City closes over my head. I am walking along the bottom of a deep canyon. Threadneedle Street slices away to the west. The sun can't reach down here. As I move towards its heart, the City lets it be known that it can defend itself. My bare head is vulnerable to attack from above: from bullets, crossbow bolts, boiling oil, credit checks.

Bishopsgate becomes Gracechurch Street.

Across the road, below the claret and gold cathedral ceilings of Leadenhall Market, the City's officers and generals gather around tall black tables. Dark suits and white shirts for the older men, salmon or baby blue shirtsleeves for the young turks. Their laughter echoes like gun shots from beneath the arches and sprays out into the street. The women in trouser suits or knee-length skirts smile gamely but seldom speak. One hand holding a wine glass, the other tucking a stray ringlet of hair behind a flushed ear. Pints of lager and Guinness, tawny brown ale, burnished silver ice buckets, forest green glass necks emerging from beneath white cotton cloth.

There it is. The City's robotic heart.

The arteries begin to broaden once more. A faint note of rotting fish reaches my nostrils, and on cue, a gull screeches in the distance. The Thames is near, and its lungs are full of the ocean's breath.

I duck into a pub, heaving with bankers. I push my way to the bar. Order a pint of ale and a double scotch, no ice. Another one, please. Pay cash. Drink fast and silent. Push my way out again.

The street is a torrent of people now, raging towards London Bridge. I am pushed and harried and bustled southwards. I begin to chuckle to myself, wondering if anyone can see that I'm drunk and that my father will die tomorrow.

Ahead of me, Gracechurch, Cannon Street, King William Street and East Cheap collide. Double-decker buses fume and grumble their impatience to reach the Thames. I make it across the intersection, narrowly avoiding being mown down by a cyclist, his wheel a hairsbreadth from my boot. His eyes hide behind reflective glasses, his sharp nose presses into the nape of my neck.

"Watch where you're walking, ya fucking prick."

"A crowd flowed over London Bridge," I explain. "I had not thought death had undone so many."

He thrusts his head towards mine. I feel the point of his racing helmet, sleek and tapering like the tail of a teardrop, push up and under my jaw and into the soft flesh of my throat.

"Cunt," he snarls, and disappears into the stream of traffic.

"Farewell friend. I'll let you know what time the funeral starts as soon as the arrangements have been made."

As the river draws nearer, I decide I am not ready to face it just yet. I veer off to the left towards the pillar of Wren's Monument, a stone and gold torch on the site of the bakery where The Great Fire began. I stand at the base and stare up. The clouds drift above my head and my eyes follow them. I lose my bearings, over-balance, and stumble backwards into the path of a City-boy hurrying towards the bridge. "Watch it," he says and shoves me away so that I find myself pressed against the inscriptions in stone at the base of the Monument.

I think of Pope:

Where London's column, pointing at the skies,
Like a tall bully, lifts the head, and lies.

Down Fish Street I can see the ornate spire of a church. I stride down the hill towards it.

I reach Lower Thames Street. It runs alongside the river and its two lanes hurry beneath London Bridge. There are only a few pedestrians down here, so I take the opportunity to cross the road, slip into the church yard, and relieve myself behind a tree. The tree smells strongly of camphor like eucalyptus. But not. A few drops of piss darken my boot leather.

The black timber doors of the church are open, so I step inside. An organ is being played and a shiver slinks down my spine.

A little man with a dense, ginger moustache and flowing robes approaches me from behind a little nook to my left.

"Good afternoon, sir. I'm afraid the church is just closing to the public for the day. We'll be holding mass on Sunday if you'd like to come back then."

"Oh. I'm sorry. It's just… my father just died. In New Zealand. Lucy has booked the tickets. So I won't make it back here on Sunday."

The man's moustache twitches, and he stares at me strangely. He glances over at the door from which I entered and then at the altar and the crucified, gilded figure of Jesus looking down on us both. The man smiles gently and opens his arms towards the dark wooden pews.

“Sit, please. Stay as long as you like. The organist is practicing with one of our choristers. I hope they won’t disturb you. God bless you. And may He have mercy on your father.”

“Thank you.”

I sit down on a pew at the back of the church. The sun is pouring in through the stained-glass windows. White and gold pillars rise up to support the canal of pure light that is the arched ceiling.

The organist stops playing and I can hear but not see him conversing with someone. A boy, I think. The organist, I decide by his tone – I cannot make out what he is saying – is explaining something to the chorister. His voice is gentle and kind but full of conviction.

He starts to play once more. I recognise the piece as Handel’s “Lascia ch'io pianga”.

The boy begins to sing. His voice is a ribbon of cool white light. It curls like smoke into the ceiling’s arch, it mingles with the particles of sunlight, and expands to fill the corners of the church.

I have a vague memory of Mr Glick, my old choir master, explaining to us young sopranos that this aria was about weeping. I don’t really remember. But I remember Jacob Avonlea singing it solo in the school chapel while I stood beside him, staring at his rose cheeks, and his dark eyes lifted towards heaven, my vision blurred through tears. Jacob’s voice froze the spine. It made you want to wrap your arms around yourself and weep for all the beauty that was leeching out of the world.

The boy’s voice and the organ swell as the aria reaches its crescendo. I am sobbing loudly now. I wonder if the boy can hear me and what he must think. The reservoir of grief is almost empty, and the boy’s voice begins to fill the vacuum in my chest that my tears have left. I feel my stomach swelling. And twitching. Lurching.

“Oh no.”

I get to my feet and stumble towards the aisle. My knee crunches into the hard wood of the pew end.

“Fuck.”

The boy stops singing suddenly and leaves the organ to drift on alone towards the end of the aria.

I clamp my hand over my mouth and rush for the exit.

I burst out into the grey-stone sunshine of Lower Thames Street and empty the contents of my stomach into the gutter.

As quickly as I can, desperate to avoid the kindness of the small man with the thick moustache, I wipe the vomit from my chin with my hand, and my hand on the rough bark of the strange-smelling tree. I scurry back up Fish Street and towards London Bridge.

The Thames is rushing westwards, its tidal business done for the day, returning to the vast emptiness of home. The water is smooth and brown and purposeful. To the east the ornate bascules of Tower Bridge are dwarfed by the steel and glass of The Shard and the 'Walkie-Talkie', the City's latest monuments to its own limitless energy. To the west, the dome of St Paul's, and all of London stretches out like a body beneath the afternoon's gathering clouds.

I lean over the railings and spit. My mouth tastes like whisky and battery acid. My father is gone. I wonder to myself; have I been hiding from him all this time? The sheer size of the man. The smallness of my town. There was no room for me there. He used up all the oxygen, blocked out all the sunlight. And now he is gone.

London provided a certain type of freedom. It's true that I didn't always feel that I belonged here, but I also never felt that my presence was harming anyone. I was just one more foreign stranger in a city full of and built by foreign strangers. In Aotearoa the ghosts eyed me warily and recognised me as a trespasser. In London the ghosts just didn't care. There were too many of them and too many of us: they lined the bottom of the river, clung to the underside of bridges, crammed themselves into the vast network of tunnels beneath the city and the Thames; preferring the pressure and gravity of their own chronology, their own particular stratum within the city's archaeology.

For the first time in twenty years I felt gravity shifting. He is gone. The moon that held me in place from the opposite side of the earth has waned and loosened its grip. My mother is eighty and has no family with her besides the hollowed-out shell of my brother, James.

It's time.

Spaceship

At first glance Cambridge Primary is the platonic ideal of a small-town, colonial school. The buildings are pale yellow weatherboard, arranged into tall, elegant schoolhouses. The roofs culminate in neat bowed arches, painted a modest shade of white that speaks to the purity of all who work and learn beneath them. The central schoolhouse has a turret to house a fine brass bell.

There is a small concrete swimming pool, complete with outdoor showers and a trough-like, chemically treated footbath. There is a wooden changing shed, a wall of cheap pine dividing it into two, the gaps between the slats just wide enough to allow light to pass between. We boys would press our eyeballs up to the wood and learn something of the terrors that await us.

A toilet block runs along the Western border of the school grounds and there is a tight gap between it and the high hedge that separates the school from the property next door. The ground is bare earth, with only ragwort and dandelion managing to establish themselves in the shadow.

It was here that I first discovered cruelty. At lunchtime, a gang of us five-year-olds cajoled Brendan Banner, a sweet, trusting boy with severe learning difficulties, to take his penis from his pants for us to cackle at. He was laughing along, his eyes squeezed shut with the joy of being included in a game. As the realisation of our betrayal dawned on him, his green eyes opened, and he stared at each of us. His forehead creased; his lower lip began to quiver. He sat down on the hard earth, his pants still around his knees, and a terrible keening like the sound of an old-fashioned kettle, rose up from his belly and would not stop until a teacher found us and led him away.

After lunch, our teacher Mrs Hotere, an imposing Māori matriarch with a penchant for crossing young knuckles with a metal ruler, had us all stand up in front of the class. She calmly lay before us the crime that had been committed: the humiliation of a vulnerable classmate. She said she'd prefer if we'd admit to what we had done. She asked us, "Did you do it?" Nobody spoke.

"David Wrigley! You won't lie to me. Did you do it?"

I knew that name. That was my name. It was attached to me and there was no way to be free of it. How did she know I wouldn't lie? Was there something in my face that gave me away? As a cruel boy, but an honest one?

I took a moment to look at the faces of my fellow criminals. Their eyes pleaded with me to be silent. I looked at the grey linoleum floor. The blood rushed to my face and all the world was sorrow and shame.

'Yes. I did it. I'm sorry'.

And with that the tears escaped me in great floods. Perhaps for the first time, but certainly not for the last, I wept for the bad things I'd done.

And, of course, I wept with tenderness and pity for all the trouble I'd got myself in.

It was here, at this fine, well-maintained organ of the State, that I learnt to divide one thing from another.

There were two Māori brothers, the Te Kahus. Tane in my class and Israel in the year below. Their skin was darker than mine. Darker than Mrs Hotere's. But it was not their skin that taught me to set them apart.

It was the clothes that did not fit and the holes in the knees of faded pairs of pants. It was the scabs on those knees that went untended from one day to the next. The noses that were never quite wiped clean.

I remember their faces, their noses, the abrasions on their skin, their clothes. But I can't remember a single word they spoke. I can't remember their voices or the words they used. In my memory they are that particular kind of spirit that stands and stares at the end of a luckless bed for dreary nights on end, their mouths wide open, always about to utter a curse or an accusation which never comes.

I used to watch Mrs Hotere with Tane in the classroom. Her voice would soften when she spoke to him. She would stand close to him and bow her head to listen.

One afternoon, when they had been whispering together for longer than usual, I edged myself a little closer to try to catch what they were saying. But Tane, his eyes always wide and always darting, saw me coming and folded into his silence.

"Could you help me with my handwriting, please Mrs Hotere?"

Mrs Hotere stared at me like she would stare down a thief.

"Not now, David."

I stood there, waiting for something more.

Tane looked at me then up at Mrs Hotere. He was waiting for something too.

"You've been helping Tane for ages. It's not fair. Why does he get all the help?"

I wasn't sure why I was saying these things, why I was standing there.

"Mr Wrigley. I will help you when I've finished helping this young man here. Until then you can go back to your desk and get on with your work. Don't interrupt us again."

She turned away and once again I felt a surge of pity for myself, mingled with frustration at the knowledge that there was something between two people to which I was not welcome to share.

"Mrs Hotere, I feel sick."

She turned back to me, her eyes wide in disbelief at my persistence. "Nonsense. You don't feel sick. You were fine a second ago."

"I've got an upset tummy. It's just started."

Mrs Hotere and Tane both stared at me for a long moment. She patted Tane on the back of his hand which lay limp on the desk between them. "I'm sorry boy," she whispered. "We'll talk later, eh? Eh?"

Tane nodded slowly.

As he looked at me a tiny spark of something sharp and hot flickered across his face.

I had taken something from him.

The thinness of my army-green cotton t-shirt and my bare feet mean it must be summertime. Perhaps near the end of that first term in Mrs Hotere's class.

Some friends and I decide to build a spaceship. Spaceships occupy a great deal of my thinking. I am already keen to leave the Earth behind me.

We assemble in the courtyard where we eat our lunch, and gather as many of the heavy, wood-slat and iron-bound benches as we can muster. We push them together and stack them into the shape of a spaceship. There are six of us and we allocate rank and occupation based roughly on who is the oldest and who can convince the others that they know something of the rigours of space travel. For the remaining twenty minutes of morning playtime, we sail through the hostile void, battling alien warships, and identifying habitable planets which we can explore and earmark for future colonisation.

The brass bell rings, and we disembark. As we file into the classroom we exchange salutes and loudly ten-four one another's fearlessness.

When the bell rings for lunch we race outside and clamber aboard. The lunch hour stretches into an endless future. We wolf down jam sandwiches on the bridge, and from the engine room jettison careless apple cores and mandarin peels into the void. They float undegrading in airless space forever.

It doesn't take long for us to realise that we are not alone amongst the stars. Our classmates, who we thought we had left behind on Earth, are in fact drawing dangerously close to the exterior of our ship. Lunch boxes in hand.

"Hey! Where are we supposed to sit?" asks one girl, looking at us hungrily, her body somehow untouched by the freezing wastes of outer space.

A boy perches on our rear thruster and begins to unwrap a couple of pink Hundreds and Thousands biscuits. He balls up the Gladwrap and throws it at our first mate, Nathan. Nathan takes umbrage and shoves him with his foot back onto the asphalt. Into the Void.

Breached by hostile forces, our ship is beginning to lose its integrity. It is flickering ominously between realities.

The boy gets to his feet and stares at the six of us. He takes a bite of biscuit and chews it slowly, weighing up his options, weighing up Nathan and the rest of the crew. He retreats a little way towards the gathering crowd of hungry children. He turns and says something we can't quite hear. A huddle forms around him.

We are a nervous crew now. Having played at war so happily this morning, the afternoon is ushering us towards a very different kind of conflict. Our Captain, Robbie, rallies the men. We try to ignore the mob conspiring off to starboard. We half-heartedly shift to warp drive, hurtle off into uncharted regions of space, hoping to leave this bad business behind us.

For a while it seems to be working. The ship feels solid beneath our feet once more. We set off in pursuit of an alien vessel we suspect is transporting valuable minerals across the galaxy. We are pirates now and pirates fear nothing. We arm ourselves with lightsabres we gathered this morning from the bamboo forest that divides the school from the river. We prepare to board. Our teeth are filed to points. Our blood is slow and viscous like rivers of black ice.

Shane stands at the nose of our ship. He raises his bamboo sabre above his blonde bowl cut and cries out:

"Victory or death!"

His head jerks off to port and, for a long moment he is still. A drop of blood forms at his temple and begins to trickle down his cheek like a teardrop. He crumples and falls, his left shoulder hitting the asphalt with a sickening thud.

A rumbling off to our right swells and builds to a high-pitched, hungry roar. The alien ship is gone. Our ship is gone. We are standing on a dozen wooden benches holding bamboo sticks.

The hoard pelt us with rocks, empty Coke cans, half-eaten apples. A stone catches Nathan in the face and he goes down clutching his jaw. A cricket ball fizzes past my nose.

And now the infantry. I never imagined that there were so many children in our school. A howling mass of bodies is bearing down on us and our doomed ship. My shipmates, those who have survived the volley of stones and garbage, turn and flee towards the toilet block, perhaps hoping to barricade themselves in a cubicle until the mob's fury subsides.

I stand as still as I can, hoping that somehow if I don't move, I can avoid the worst of the onslaught.

My plan almost works.

Children stream past me towards the toilets, confusion momentarily softening rage-twisted faces. My shoulders hunched, my arms ramrod straight by my sides, fists clenched, head bowed, eyes scrunched closed against the threat of violence: the pathetic sight of me doesn't quite meet the ambitions of their fury.

I feel a wave of bodies pass by me on either side. I hear their shouts and the screams and the pleas for mercy of my friends disappearing into the distance behind me. I dare to open my eyes. An almost empty playground opens up in front of me. My shoulders drop and I think perhaps I can slink away unnoticed to the classroom and escape retribution.

But one boy is coming towards me. He isn't running but he is moving fast. Tane Te Kahu. His eyes are locked on mine. He's not interested in my friends. He's not going to pour past me in search of more interesting sport. The look on his face isn't like the other kids. There's something older in his anger. This isn't about spaceships or benches or lunch. He throws himself at me, his knee sinking into my chest, knocking the air from my lungs. I'm down on my back and I can't breathe. I close my eyes, settle into the pain, and wait for the beating to stop. My world shrinks into darkness, except the fists and bare feet pounding my face, my thighs, my ribs. The long fingernails tearing the skin on the nape of my neck. The open palm slaps against my ear.

When it's all over, the six of us are lined up in the principal's office. Mrs Hotere is there too.

"Who did this?"

My friends name some names, faces they manged to pick out of the mob, a few old scores that needed settling.

I’m the worst off. There’s blood on my face, on my army-green t-shirt. My ears are ringing and one of my eyes is closing over itself.

“David, who did this?”

“I’m not sure.”

Mrs Hotere looks at me, as softly as she’s ever looked at me.

“David, I know you’re an honest boy. You can tell us. Who did this?”

“I don’t know.”

The Letter: I

I returned to Cambridge for good in January of 2020. The summer was hot and dry, and I was happy enough to spend most afternoons sitting by the pool in my mother's small back garden, watching the birds coming and going and savouring the feeling of not having to go to work.

This house is the house my mother and father had hoped to grow old in. My mother was adamant that the house we I grew up in was too big for an old couple with kids scattered around the globe, but she didn't want to give up living on Princes Street, on the correct side of the road to catch the light. So they subdivided and the new house sits on the spot where a willow tree once stood, protecting what was once our front garden from the eyes of passers-by. I can just see the roof of the old house from the garden. I can hear the front door slam every now and then, and I sit up straight and think to myself: "someone's home."

It took me 18 months to extricate myself from my London life, to give fair warning to friends and colleagues, to make sure my cat had a good home to go to, to live a while in the knowledge that things were coming to a close, adding the piquancy of imminent loss to the pleasures and chores of the every day.

I spent six of these months learning how to drive and received my first driving licence in the post a week before my flight. I was 42 years old.

I ate in all my favourite restaurants and drank in all my favourite bars. I found time for each of my friends and did the things that we most enjoyed doing together – football matches, the Tate Modern, the Natural History Museum, punk rock shows, autumnal walks through Epping Forest.

My boss took me to Otto's on Euston Road where we ordered the pressed duck and a magnum of venerable Burgundy. Otto himself turned the screw of the silver press, squeezing the blood, marrow, and juices from the carcass of the bird, ready to be flambéed with Normandy butter and Cognac and served as a sauce, while regaling us with the story of the time he spent the night with Marilyn Monroe, whose portrait hung on the wall behind him. He wore a Viking's helmet though he didn't explain why, and we didn't ask.

I spent a day alone at the National Gallery with the Van Eycks, the Rembrandts, and the Carravagios. It had been my habit to stop in here when I was in central London to look at a painting or two. There was no entrance fee so I could easily slip through the crowds of tourists and school children bustling at the

entrance on Trafalgar Square, climb the cool marble staircases, perhaps just to look at a single painting that had been on my mind. Such were the simple joys of living in a city of such historic and immense wealth.

I always returned to the Caravaggios. I could spend a half hour staring at The Supper at Emmaus: the small miracle of the jug of water and the shimmer of its reflection, the over-ripe apples and quince about to tumble out of the basket, through the frame, and onto the gallery floor.

Or wonder at the expression on the face of Salome, as she turns away from the sight of John the Baptist's weary-eyed severed head. Her face a study in… what? Disappointment, perhaps? Distaste? The little girl on Christmas morning who finds the doll for which she has spent weeks pestering her mother and father, is in fact a little too life-like for comfort. The very thing she thought would bring her such pleasure causing her spine to tingle with a cold dread. What is this thing she has invited into her home, and how can she ever convince it to leave?

I said my goodbyes to the paintings as if they were old friends, tried to trap their likeness in my mind's eye, to hold it there in the amber light of aspic, knowing I may never see them again.

My mother leaves me alone for a weekend in early February. I'm relieved to have a little time to myself. I have no friends in Cambridge, they long ago left, or died, or simply ceased being my friends. I stretch out by the pool. I go for a run around lake Te Koo Utu. I drink European beer from the bottle and watch the light soften on the lime tree by the pool in the late afternoon.

My banjo arrived a few days earlier, my leaving present to myself, a beautiful thing in black walnut and goat skin, over-sized for richness of tone, the head inlaid with a mother-of-pearl likeness of my cat about to dispatch a rat. The luthier was an old friend with whom I stayed a few boozy nights in the Shropshire hills, picking out the wood, the tailpiece, the tuning pegs, the frets. I pluck a few notes, hum a melody I've been working on, sing a couple of old songs to see how they sound in the sluggish Waikato atmosphere.

I slip it back into its velvet-lined case and go inside the house to get another beer. The beer fridge is in the garage. It is cool and silent in there. I help myself to a Peroni and knock the cap off using the edge of the deep-freeze and the heel of my hand.

On the far wall there are racks of shelving with old pots and pans, kitchen gadgets from the 80s, baking trays, board games, a mah-jong set, a box of gardening trowels and rusted secateurs, a stack of CDs, a row of empty glass

bottles. On one shelf is a collection of my things, dutifully rescued by my mother from the upstairs storage room in our old house and deposited here for lack of anywhere better for them to go. I cross the garage and sit down on the concrete floor.

There is a plastic rack of cassette tapes: the Violent Femmes, The Pixies first album, a cassingle of "Smells Like Teen Spirit", a dubbed collection of 2 Live Crew singles, *Venus Trail* by The 3Ds. Some copies of the school newspaper which I had edited in the sixth form. Some mounted photos of form classes and sports teams (St. Michael's 2nd XI Cricket. 1992, Top left: D. Wrigley, M Madson, D Butler…). A book of Irish Verse. A cheap paperback edition of *Under the Mountain*, the cover a still from the 80s television adaption. A copy of *The Owl and the Pussycat* with the inscription inside the front cover: "To Davey. Love Mummy. Tetbury. 1980".

A wooden box that I had produced in Third Form woodwork. Or rather my friend Reece had produced on my behalf in exchange for help with his English homework. It was made of unvarnished pine and had a hinged lid and a cheap aluminum latch. Reece had written on it sarcastically: "David's Special Box."

Inside are sheets of loose paper. Letters from girlfriends mostly, Sandra Winter and Laura Lejeune, as well as letters I had written to them which had, for whatever reason, been returned to me.

There are fragments of my adolescent poetry and a few early attempts at song writing which make me blush as soon as I see them. I can't bring myself to read past the first couple of lines.

At the bottom of the box, tucked into one of the not-quite-flush corners, is a small pebble of lined paper. It has been folded in half and folded again, six times, and pressed and kneaded by a sweaty palm so that it has wadded together like papier-mâché. I reach in and pick it up between my thumb and forefinger. It is warm to the touch. Hot even. In the cool air of the garage I can feel it tingle and prick as I press it into the tender skin of my palm.

I don't immediately recognise it for what it is but as soon as I see it, I can feel the beer start to churn and curdle in my stomach. This is a thing I had been hoping to forget for the last thirty years but couldn't bring myself to throw away. Perhaps I had hoped my mother would unwittingly do it for me.

I turn the thing over to look at it from every angle, to see if I can find an outer edge so that I can begin prying it apart. But there is no way in.

Time and sweat and humidity have sealed it shut.

I put it in my pocket, stuff the rest of the poems, songs, and letters back in the box and put the box back on the shelf. I consider taking the whole thing and throwing it in the rubbish. Why would I want to hold on to this box full of embarrassments? But I can't do it.

I take my beer and walk out into the garden. The evening has brought a cool breeze with it. I sit down and take a swig from the bottle.

I can feel the wad of paper pressing against my thigh. It stings and prickles. I don't take it out of my pocket. I don't bother to shift my weight to make myself more comfortable.

Oxbow

I was raised less than a hundred metres from the steep slopes that form a natural amphitheatre around lake Te Koo Utu. In the summertime, raupo chokes its western shore. There are frequent algae blooms that drench the warm air with the smell of vegetal death. Pukeko flourish here. Their graceless legs never break the surface. They pick their way across the black water, heavy with silt. Act out their slapstick squabbles. Grotesques doing a Christ bit in the swamp.

Te Koo Utu was formed 1800 years ago when Taupō erupted, sending a mountain's worth of pumice alluvium boiling down the Waikato River, cauterising one of its tributaries, and leaving the lake to its lonely destiny. A cast-off limb, an estranged brother.

Taupō has erupted many times over the millennia. The one that sealed the fate of Te Koo Utu was the most powerful volcanic eruption recorded on planet Earth for the past 5000 years.

Taupō controls the Waikato like a puppeteer: changing its course, flooding landscapes, leaving boulders the size of houses lying supine on the floodplains.

Once the river ran from Karapiro, just south of Cambridge, through the Hinuera Gap, and into the Hauraki Gulf on the east coast. After Taupō erupted some 26,000 years ago it diverted to the west.

When Tainui made their way westwards from Kawhia a few hundred years ago, they settled in great numbers around the lake, a valuable source of eels and freshwater crayfish, as well as flax for weaving and raupo for thatching. A pā sat on the northern shore. The surrounding area was probably podocarp forest, rimu, totara, and kahikatea. The water would have been still but clear, refreshed by a spring and feeding into the nearby Karapiro stream. A quiet kind of paradise.

There is a sign offering information of this sort next to a platform jutting out over the slopes. It does not tell me where all those people went, nor why they are not here now, standing next to me, reading over my shoulder. Nor does it explain the lack of eels, crayfish, or flax. There is just blankness where the tangata whenua and their taonga ought to be.

Europeans, nostalgic for the silhouettes far-off homelands, transplanted oak, elm, London plane, and Spanish chestnut trees onto the high collar of the lake. In autumn, the leaves begin their slow dance of death. From green, to yellow, to orange, to a final dazzling crimson. As they fall, they collect at the bottom of the lake, which lacks the necessary movement to cleanse itself of these foreign

materials. The leaves decompose in the stillness and turn the water toxic, killing their fellow sentimental transplants: goldfish, perch, ducks, and family dogs.

Other futures for Te Koo Utu were once possible.

Governor Grey, along with a number of Auckland-based land speculators (who happened to moonlight as official organs of a fledgling state), had cast jealous eyes on the fertile Waikato. In 1863 the British Army marched south from Auckland, ostensibly to quell the threat of insurrection from the Kīngitanga movement. A redoubt was built above the banks of the river, near the spot where local Māori would launch their waka, and what is now known as Cambridge was established as a military town. Māori were forced off their land, many driven into exile in the King Country.

Soldiers were paid in parcels of land. These parcels were often too small and too difficult to defend from vengeful Māori raiding parties to be viable. The soldiers were forced to sell up and move into the relative safety of the town or out of the Waikato altogether. The speculators who fomented the war in the first place were on hand to buy up the land on the cheap. They waited patiently until the government tightened its grip on the region and prices began to rise.

The Māori King, Taawhiao bathed in the waters of Te Koo Utu to cleanse himself after attending 'the court that steals land' in the building that houses the Cambridge Museum today. 'Ko Kemureti tōku oko horoi,' he famously lamented: Cambridge, my wash bowl of sorrows.

The Land Court was biased against those Māori who had taken up arms to defend their home against the invasion. The Court also refused to recognise the ownership of land by groups of more than ten people, meaning that the Court would not accept traditional tribal models of ownership. The process begun by the invasion was continued by the Court: land was taken from Māori hands and delivered into those of the settlers and soldiers.

The oak and the chestnut trees were planted. The carp were released. The town sewers were built, and the colonists' waste was allowed to flow into the little lake, once described as "a beautiful sheet of pure spring water."

There was once a Māori Parliament with its own newspaper at Maungakawa. A Māori owned and operated bank at Maungatautari. Gardens stretched from Cambridge along the river terraces as far as Hamilton. Māori owned and operated mills turned wheat into flour. The produce was shipped down river to Auckland and across the oceans, aboard Māori owned ships, to New South Wales and California.

These tools and signifiers of Māori wealth and power, just like the eels and crayfish that once thrived in Te Koo Utu, have long since disappeared beneath the murky waters of the town's history.

A child of my time, I hold fond memories of the vacuum-tube television that dominated our living toom. I can feel the warmth and the crackle of static that clung to the convex surface of the screen like an atmosphere to a planet. When my mother or father turned the television off, ghostly figures would continue to move through the grey darkness.

One evening when I was eight, I remember something remarkable happening on that television.

I knew our Prime Minister was David Lange and that he was a big man who some children at school called 'Fatty'.

He was indeed a man who seemed to carry an excess of flesh around with him. Even when he smiled and laughed, which was often, there remained a residue of annoyance left on his face, like the ghostly images on our dormant television screen. He looked like a man whose body was weighing him down. He seemed grateful for his voice, which was strong and rich and moved through the air without constraints, an emissary of an unhappy body tethered to the earth.

I had seen him on television before, on the news, speaking in a strange room with adults seated behind and in front of him in rows like school children. I didn't always understand what he was saying but I liked that his speeches always made the adults in both that room and our living room, roar with laughter or howl with rage.

His words changed things.

On this particular night he was not in that particular strange room but another strange room altogether. He was dressed, along with everyone else there, in black and white, a funny little bow tied around his neck. His clothes didn't seem to fit, and he fidgeted and fussed while the other men stood at their lecterns and took their turns to speak.

These other men did not speak like me or my sisters or my dad or like our Prime Minister. They pronounced their words differently though I still understood them. They seemed so sure of themselves, as if the way they spoke was the only correct way of speaking. They jabbed their fingers into the air like they were playing with pistols. The audience cheered like a crowd at a rugby match. I could tell these speeches were part of a game, and that the speakers were confident they would win.

My dad explained that the men David Lange was arguing with were Americans and that the men and women in the audience were mostly British. They were in a place called Oxford University, and this argument they were having was called a debate.

One of the Americans was speaking, and I was worried for the Prime Minister. The American was so sure of his cleverness, so sure that the words he spoke were the right words and unquestionably true. It seemed impossible to me that he could be wrong, that there were any other words that could be more right, or more true.

"Whether you are snuggling up to the bomb, or living in the peaceful shadow of the bomb, New Zealand benefits, sir, and that's the question with which we charge you, and that's the question to which we would like an answer."

My mother had already explained that David Lange had told the American government he didn't want nuclear ships to sail to New Zealand and the Americans were very angry with him. America was very powerful and New Zealand was not. David Lange was either brave or stupid and Mum wasn't sure which.

The American steps back from the lectern, a sharp little smile on his face.

I feel bad for David Lange. He must surely surrender, slink away, and admit defeat.

He rocks back on his heels for a moment, like he's taking a punch. He steps away from the lectern, opens his arms as if gathering strength from the audience. Then he pounces onto the front foot, his fingers striking the air like cobras.

"I'm going to give it to you if you hold your breath just for a moment ... I can smell the uranium on it as you lean towards me!"

The room on the television explodes with laughter. My dad shouts "Hah!' and punches the air in front of him. My dad doesn't like David Lange because he's "Bloody Labour", but he seems to like him now.

It was like watching the All Blacks beat England. But it was better. We were used to the All Blacks winning at rugby, used to the idea that New Zealanders could be big and fast and strong, that we could take an elbow to the face without wincing, break an arm and keep playing.

This was something else. This was a victory in words, delivered in an accent just like ours, from the mouth of a man who grew up just north of here, in the suburbs of South Auckland.

How we as a nation love this moment. Our boy, over there, sticking it to the yanks, holding his own in the very breeding ground of the British establishment,

the nursery of Imperial power. How clever we could be. This was a moment we could see ourselves as something other than a Man Alone, a raggedly dressed hero estranged from the complexities of language, a stranger peering into the drawing rooms of intellectual subtlety, before slinking away to the bush-covered hills of the interior.

Never mind the fact that this was nothing more than a knock-about exercise in rhetoric and showmanship, theatre for expensively educated, clever boys to flex their wits in front of an audience of their peers. Never mind that this was an arena that actively penalized moral substance, dismissing it as unnecessary ballast that could only hinder the cut and thrust of sophistry, the real business of point scoring and playing to the gallery.

While we were watching the left hand of government establish New Zealand's reputation as a peace loving, environmentally pure outpost of sanity in a dangerous world, the right hand was doing the real work. Lange's Labour government embarked on a slash and burn orgy of deregulation, privatisation, and devaluation that left the country's egalitarian myths in tatters. The country's markets were suddenly subject to the wild squalls of international capital, industries collapsed, thousands of jobs were lost, and of course a handful of well-positioned citizens got very rich indeed.

The fact that it was a Labour Government that did this to the country meant that the neo-liberal juggernaut was unstoppable, irreversible. As the Soviet Union collapsed on the other side of the world, it was clear that capitalism's victory was final and near total. The futures containing a socialist New Zealand, an egalitarian New Zealand, a classless New Zealand, crumbled and dissolved like silt.

Out the window

By the end of 1986 my parents' patience with state education had reached its limits. The walls that separated the standard two, three and four classrooms were removed to form an enormous open-plan space, overseen by three teachers stationed at strategically placed desks, one at each end and one positioned against the window near the middle of the room's length.

There were ninety of us children aged between seven and ten years old, scattered around the room: at round eight-seater tables; at conventional rows of individual desks; at various 'activity stations', complete with craft supplies and old issues of *Woman's Weekly* magazines; and small glades of open space, free from desks and chairs, artfully dotted with beanbags and small piles of story books and *School Journals*.

This combined age-group structure had become fashionable in primary schools throughout the country. There was a nebulous, progressive ideology at work which my mother, a former teacher, could not fathom and had little interest in grasping. It had something to do with the dismantling of artificial hierarchies, adjusting the optics of a single teacher standing all-powerful and infallible at the head of regimented rows of silent children, the rejection of the idea that all children of the same age would all develop at the same pace and respond predictably to the same stimuli. Which, as I write these words today in 2022, in theory, seem to me to be laudable and desirable outcomes.

The reality, as it manifested at Cambridge Primary School in 1986, was chaos.

Robbie Yates, Nathan Mosley, and I quickly identified the flaws in the new system. The freedom gifted to us by this arrangement, designed to allow us to follow our intellectual and creative interests, opened up wide vistas of possibility for mischief, idleness, and truancy. One weekend, early in the first term, we transported a few homemade spears, fishing lines and hooks, plastic buckets, and tin billies from Robbie's father's shed across Victoria bridge, to the school playground. We abandoned our bikes and continued on foot, through the forest of bamboo and down the steep bank to the river. Once we were satisfied that our gear was hidden from plain sight, down rabbit holes and under the root systems of willow trees, we climbed back to the playground, recovered our bikes, and continued on with the business of free-range, late-summer mucking about.

Come Monday morning the three of us made a point of being seen: we asked the teachers questions, made contributions to group activity books, positioned ourselves at tables and stations in the direct eyeline of teachers at their desks.

Upon returning from the morning interval, we each approached a different teacher and asked a different question. Then, one by one, we made our way over to the windows, wide open to let in the warm summer air, and after checking no one was watching, climbed over the ledge, and dropped silently down to the hot asphalt below.

We pressed our backs against the weatherboard classroom and looked around and straight up to see if we'd been noticed. No one came to the window, and we couldn't see another soul in the schoolyard. We made a dash for the cover of the incinerator that sat in between the classrooms and the playing field. We lay faces down on the concrete ramp the caretaker used to move wheelbarrows of refuse to the corrugated metal hatch of the furnace. We took a moment to catch our breath and to allow a fit of giggling to pass through us. We could smell woodsmoke emerging from the incinerator chimney. We could taste the ashes of discarded artwork, the char of unsuccessful stories, uneventful beach holidays and trips to Auckland Zoo. We surveyed the empty playground that separated us from the absolute freedom of the river.

"Ready boys… one, two, go."

From oak tree to chestnut tree to the worn, wooden planks of the adventure playground. We had planned to stop there to find cover once more, but there was no one in sight. We pushed onwards.

"Keep going. Keep going." we whispered to each other between exhilarated gasps.

The wall of bamboo that marked the edge of the school grounds rose up in front of us. We slipped sideways between the hollow trunks, into the darkness and out of sight of the authorities. We turned around and peered back at the playground and the classrooms beyond. We listened to the roaring whisper of the wind weaving through the tips of the bamboo forest. A wild sound. A lonely sound. We pushed on down the steep bank towards the river.

The rest of the afternoon was spent languidly fishing for eels, telling dirty jokes we didn't totally understand, and making fun of the stupidity of the school, our teachers, and most of all, our classmates, for submitting to such arbitrary and, as we had proven, entirely optional constraints on their freedoms.

Fifteen minutes before the bell rang for the end of the school day, we climbed back up the bank and, one at a time, ran the gauntlet of open fields back to the

classroom. We sauntered in through the side door, picked up a book, and sat down on a bean bag and enjoyed ten minute's silent reading before it was time to go home.

We repeated our escape routine throughout first term, making sure we didn't disappear too often– twice a week, three times at the very most when the weather was too good to stay inside. We gradually became less careful and more brazen, not bothering to check in with teachers before we made the leap through the window, strolling through the playground instead of dashing between hiding places. No matter how lax we became, no one ever noticed our absence or caught us in the act.

Occasionally, Robbie would bring a single cigarette he had slipped from his mother's packet while she was busy changing his little sister's nappy. We'd pass it between the three of us, coughing and spluttering, even retching but pretending we were enjoying every puff.

As the term wore on, the three of us started to bicker. Once or twice these arguments turned violent, the three of us rolling round in the dirt, our heads knocking against tree roots, dried fern fronds and twigs snaring themselves in the tangle of our hair. We'd end up sitting in the dirt panting, looking at the river flow past us so we didn't have to look at each other, at least one of us surreptitiously wiping away tears and dribbles of dusty snot with the hem of his t-shirt. Our little idyll was beginning to bore us.

As the days grew shorter and colder, we leapt from that classroom window less and less often until, by the time winter proper arrived and our parents began crowbarring us into long pants and canvas sneakers, we had given up escaping altogether. That isn't to say that we became model students, but our distractions became less ambitious.

In the middle of the final term of that year, I arrived home one day to find my mother sitting alone at the dining room table. She was smoking a cigarette and thumbing through one of my exercise books that I had mistakenly left in the kitchen that morning. My older brother and sister had by this time both moved out, my sister Ruth to live and work in Germany, my brother James to a grimy student flat in Hamilton. My other sister Lucy, two years my senior, was out at a friend's house. My father was, of course, at work. We were alone in the house.

"David," she didn't look up at me as she spoke. "What's 27 divided by 3?"

I immediately felt sick to my stomach.

“Do you know? 27 by 3. What’s 27 divided by 3?”

My mother had been a high school maths teacher before I was born and, at moments like this, she slipped easily into a persona of her profession, all feigned patience barely masking a seething disappointment.

I opened my mouth but didn’t speak. My brain was trying to recall my three times tables and to somehow work backwards from there to the answer. The gears shuddered and wheezed but wouldn’t engage. Mental images of twos and sevens and threes drifted in front of my mind’s eye, but no solution presented itself.

“I… umm… I don’t…”

“What’s the capital of Australia?”

“Sydney!” I burst out, relieved.

My mother took a long pull on her cigarette and stubbed it out in the ashtray, a delicate ceramic oval with Constable’s The Hay Wain reproduced on the bottom.

“What’s an adjective?”

I had a vague idea about this one. It was one of three possible answers.

“A doing word?”

My mother looked up from my exercise book and stared at me like I had just caused her serious physical harm.

“What did you learn at school today?”

“We did baking today. So, I learnt how to make fudge. I brought some home. Do you want a piece?” I started to unzip my backpack and rummage around for the slab of Russian fudge wrapped in baking paper.

“No, thank you. I don’t want any fudge. I want to know what you learnt at school today.”

I couldn’t think of a single thing.

“What books are you reading? Do the teachers read to you?”

“Well… I’m reading a *School Journal* thing at the moment. It’s about making bread.”

“It sounds like they are training you to work in a bakery. Which would be fine if you had ever expressed the slightest interest in working in a bakery, but I don’t believe you have. Is that what you want? To be a baker’s apprentice when you turn sixteen?”

“I…uh… not really, no.”

“Well, that’s the direction you’re heading in. I don’t think you’ve learnt a single thing all year. Look at this book.”

She held my exercise open to the front page. It was covered in an elaborate but artless doodle. She turned the page. More doodling. Another page. The words ‘FUCK OFF ROBBIE’ emblazoned across both leaves.

“I phoned Mr Taylor at lunch time. I asked him how you were doing in class. He told me you weren’t academic. Not academic. He means thick, David. I should know. ‘Not academic’ is teacher code for thick.” She took a deep breath and leaned in toward me.

“I don’t think you’re thick. No, I think your teacher’s a fucking idiot and that you are a lazy, spoilt little brat. But you. Are. Not. Thick.”

With that she threw my exercise book on the floor, took another cigarette from the packet on the table and lit it. She looked up at the ceiling.

“When your father gets home tonight, whenever that may be, he and I are going to have a little chat. I won’t let you waste your time at that school for another year. Your father won’t be happy but one way or another we are going to find the extra money and we are going to send you to St. Michael’s. We were always planning to send you there once you reached the third form, but based on this evidence,” she waved her cigarette in the direction of my exercise book, which had fallen open to a page containing half a dozen poorly drafted designs for eeling spears, “that might just be too late.”

She fixed me with a hard stare.

“This could not have come at a worse time. Your father… well your father has just lost a lot of money. Not his fault.” (It was his fault.) “But he has. I don’t know where he’s going to find it, but he will, I’ll make sure of that.”

I had been in bed for over an hour by the time my father came home from his ‘club’. I was never sure what united the members of this club besides white skin, a white-collar profession, and a fondness for alcohol (in my father’s case, white spirits). I suppose that’s plenty.

I was then and am still a night owl. I would stay awake long after my bedtime, reading books, playing with Lego, listening to the local country music station on my clock radio while buried under the duvet to avoid detection. (I liked the story-songs: ‘A Boy Named Sue’, ‘The Devil Went Down to Georgia’, and ‘Ode to Billie Joe’. The line ‘Billie Joe MacAllister jumped off the Tallahatchie Bridge’ taking up residence in my imagination for years afterwards).

That night, when I heard Dad’s car pull into the driveway, I quickly switched off the light, put aside my book, and hunkered down under the covers. I heard his car door open and shut, and his footstep as he walked up the cloistered walkway,

past my bedroom window, past my sister's, to the front door. He took a long time fumbling for his keys. He dropped them twice. He'd had a few. A bad sign.

He finally managed to let himself in and, once he'd closed the door behind him, I could hear nothing for a few minutes. I almost drifted off to sleep until I heard his peevish rumble gradually rising, in both volume and pitch. The words were hard to make out, but I caught the odd "fuck" and "little shit", and every now and then "bankrupt".

His voice quickly hit that familiar pitch that meant his temper was out of control, that he was no longer listening to what my mother or anyone else was saying to him, that he only heard his own rage, which came looping back into the closed circuit of his fury.

These bouts of rage were familiar to all of us children, but that wasn't to say we ever got used to them. At least, I didn't. There was no need for an external catalyst like the one I had provided on this occasion.

On Sunday evenings in particular, he would come home from golf boiling drunk. He hardly spoke. He would sit brooding in front of the television, watching horse racing, ignoring us. Or, he would be exuberantly good humoured, laughing and joking, wrestling with my sister and me, teasing my mother in the kitchen.

"If your mother could make a roast potato as good as my mother could, then she'd be the perfect woman."

Whichever mood prevailed, once we sat down to dinner, the result was the same. We would say something, anything, or he would speak, until eventually someone would trip over an unseeable snare. A word, a name, a story on the News that night. And he'd be off, talking normally at first, about Māoris, or Catholics, or Wellington civil servants, or homosexuals (these last two being somehow interchangeable), but building with dizzying speed, until within seconds, the furious feedback loop was in motion.

"These fucking Bastion Point horis. They think we owe them a fucking living. They want us to feed their kids, build their fucking maraes, they want the crayfish all to themselves. Who gave them the fucking right? If it wasn't for us, they'd still be cracking each other's skulls open with clubs and eating their bros for breakfast. And those fucking poofs down in Wellington just hand it over to them."

My mother, siblings, and I were little more than helpless spectators to a Catherine wheel of seething hatreds, festering jealousies, and petty but deeply held resentments.

I spoke to my aunt Marjorie about my father a few years before he died. She was driving my cousin Kate, my sister Lucy and me along the Hawke's Bay coast, taking in the sharp, parched peaks, the miles of white sand, and cruel-mouthed surf. We were there for a family wedding. A cousin from the Auckland branch of the family. We were taking a break from the painful small talk of the rehearsal: who's having a wine cellar installed; where to stay in Fiji; North Shore property prices; at which marina to keep the boat.

I had flown back from London so the family could be "all together for once". I was a little resentful. My band was doing well, gigging frequently, recording, getting ready to head out on tour. I wasn't a great singer or a great musician, but I could hold people's attention on stage. Nail them down with a look. My lyrics were good. People called me a poet which I secretly enjoyed but pretended to bristle at. Bristling was a big part our schtick.

I didn't want to be in New Zealand. I didn't like having to explain my idea of success to my family. I was in my mid-thirties and didn't make any money. I worked in a bar. But, as far as I was concerned, I was making music and therefore succeeding. Being home and having to justify my life choices to an uncle with a multi-million dollar paper and cardboard company made me feel like a child who didn't know the capital city of Australia.

We stopped the car high on a coastal road and got out to look down at the beach below, the wind spitting sand and salt into our faces, knocking our hats from our heads. We giggled and cheered as we chased them to the brink of the cliff, retrieving them just in time.

"Your father looks well, David. All things considered." My aunt had a Melbourne accent, having lived there for over fifty years and producing seven children, all blonde, tanned, and as Australian as crocodiles.

Lucy and Kate had wandered off down the road a little way, talking about their young kids, swapping war stories.

"Oh yeah, he's ok I suppose. Starting to forget things a bit. He never could get our names right on the first go, but now it's other stuff as well, stuff that he'd never get wrong. Street names, kitchen utensils…"

"Not so bad..."

"Racehorses…"

"Crikey."

“I know.”

“How’s that temper of his?” Marjorie sucked in breath through her teeth as she asked the question.

“Better, much better these days. He doesn’t drink as much as when we were kids, you know? He’s softer, sweet even.”

“Used to be pretty bad, eh? I hope you don’t mind me asking… did he ever… did he used to hit you kids?”

“Not really. Hardly ever. I think James and Ruth got it worse. But with Lucy and me… nah. It was pretty much just words.”

“Bad enough, though eh?”

“Yeah.”

“Did he ever talk about his dad. Our dad?”

“Never to me.”

My grandfather Harry had died a few years before I was born. I had been nicknamed for him, due to an apparent resemblance between him as an old man dying of lung cancer, and me as a rather sickly newborn baby. Marjorie shifted a little bit. We had sat down beside each other on the bonnet of the rental car, looking out to sea.

“He was a bastard, your grandfather. I hated my dad. We all did. He was always putting us down, telling us we weren’t worth a thing. I wanted to go to university, I was clever, top of my class. But no daughter of Harry’s was going to get above herself like that. Made me leave school at sixteen and get a job.”

She shook her head.

“He was cruel to us girls, but he was a monster to your dad. Used to beat him. With things, you know? Broomsticks, belts, chair legs. Whatever came to hand. He’d hit him hard, and he’d keep hitting him, even when he was down on the floor. I’ll never forget the sound of those beatings. Your dad screaming, the sound of the belts cracking against his legs, the handle of a spade thudding into his ribcage, the moans and groans that escaped his little body. He was just a kid. Just a baby.”

Marjorie’s voice caught in her throat as she spoke these last words. She wiped her eyes with the heel of her hand. She let go of a little rock of sound that had been building in her chest. Part sob, part laugh, part strangled shout.

“It stopped though. Too late I reckon, but it did stop. Dot, your grandmother, put an end to it one day. I would have been ten so your dad must have been twelve or so.”

I pulled a pouch of tobacco out of my jeans pocket. I offered it to Marjorie who shook her head. She was still staring out towards the horizon.

"Harry had got your dad down on the ground in front of the forge. Our house backed right on to the foundry in those days. That was Harry's business, forging window fittings and things like that. We girls were hiding in the house. The connecting door was open, and we could hear your dad screaming and screaming. Harry was hitting him with a kettle cord. Really going at it. And yelling at him as he did it. Calling him a poof and a fairy and a little girl. Saying he'd rather commit murder than have a son embarrass him the way he did."

A gust of wind blew the paper and tobacco out of my hand. I said nothing and started again.

"After a bit, your dad went quiet. But Harry kept going. Kept hitting him with the kettle cord and screaming at him. That's when Dot appeared.

"She'd never got involved before. Always said it was men's business what happened between fathers and sons. But something must have snapped. She went in there and closed the door, and we could just hear her saying something to Harry, not shouting, just saying something in her normal voice, but harder and colder.

"And Harry stopped. And we could make out him saying something, something like 'stay out of it, woman', but he didn't sound sure. And Dot kept talking, cool as you like, and eventually, Harry marches out the foundry door into the house. He shouts back at Dot that she'd be the ruin of the boy, that he was soft, and would never amount to a thing without his hand to guide him. All the while collecting his coat and hat. And he walked out the front door and didn't come home for a week."

I finally managed to patch a cigarette together in the face of the wind. I tried to light it but couldn't. Marjorie got up and cupped her hands around the lighter and the tip of my cigarette. Smoke rose from her between her palms and was hurried away by the wind.

"Dot told me later that he kept a mistress in Parnell. Probably went to stay there. But he came back eventually. Worse luck. But he never laid another hand on your father. Tough old bird, my mother."

Marjorie took the cigarette from between my fingers and took a long draw. She glanced furtively down the road to check Kate couldn't see her.

"Better be getting back soon, eh? Your mum will think I've driven us all off a cliff to escape all the yacht chat."

Years later, after my father had died from alcohol induced dementia, I told my mother the story that Marjorie had told me, fully expecting her to already have heard it from dad. But no. She hadn't heard the story.

"I never knew. He never said a word about Harry hitting him. We were together sixty years. He never said a thing."

Wings

The stuffing loss made me hit a timelock.
I ended up in the eighteen sixties.
I've been there for one hundred and twenty-five years.
A small alteration of the past can turn time into space.
'Wings' The Fall

The Gemäldegalerie in Berlin. We walk up the length of one wall and down another in the manner of all tourists everywhere. We are hungover. We came here by happy accident, on the way to a Holocaust Museum I suspect we did not want to find.

We linger for a moment when a painting catches our eye: a face, a torso, some terrible crowd scene rich with violence. Self-conscious, we move on. We are carrying our instruments, a banjo, a guitar, an accordion. We have not washed. We are unable or unwilling to hold our ground against dogged waves of humanity. We are no match for the middleclass European families absorbing culture for their children's betterment, the German pensioners, the earnest art students, determined to see the Vermeers, the van Eycks, the Bruegels.

We drift away from each other without speaking. We suspect our instrument cases draw too much attention when clustered together, intensifying our post-alcoholic anxiety. We are tired of one another. Tired of planes and trains, of half empty bars, of sofas and airbeds in poorly heated squats, here, in Dresden, and in Hamburg. We are exhausted by the extraordinary German habit of paying close attention to our words and music. We miss London and being ignored. We are tired of museums, tired of art, and tired of ourselves.

I stop in front of a Rembrandt the crowds have momentarily forsaken. I am looking at the painting, but my eyes are only resting on its surface, amongst the dust and yellowing pigments. There is a bearded man in a red tunic, he looks sleepy, on the verge of admitting defeat. An Angel holds him. One arm around his shoulders, one resting tenderly on his hip.

The Angel looks like a parent who has been awake half the night with a troublesome child. They are exhausted but have given up the idea of sleep. They look past the shallow breath of the child, to the fold of the robe covering their shin, to the downy hair that is beginning to sprout on the knuckle of their toe, to

the fraying fringe of a rug they cherished when they were a student, living alone in an attic room in Finsbury Park, which they now find gauche and have hidden away in the nursery where visitors are unlikely to see it.

A straight, wide nose dominates the Angel's face. It lends them the air of a clever sheep, poised to do something remarkable, like a feat of simple addition, the sum stamped out in the dust by an unsteady hoof.

They shoulder a pair of wings that have known better days. They have seen a lot of miles those wings. They have hovered over Canaan, Judea, Palestine, Israel. Grains of time and desert dust have buried themselves between the veins and barbs of countless, interlocking feathers. If they ever get a new pair, they will miss them.

The painting is called 'Jacob Wrestling with the Angel' which surprises me. I get no sense of violence or struggle. Rembrandt portrays the denouement of a long contest, the moment when a fight becomes more rest than wrestle, a grapple loosens into an exhausted embrace. In Genesis, this is the moment when the Angel, or perhaps God, touches Jacob's hip and dislocates the socket. Jacob is blessed by the Angel and given the name Israel. Jacob asks the name of the Angel. The Angel demurs.

An Italian couple, young and beautiful, stand beside me and pretend to look at the Rembrandt while they continue their conversation. I can't understand Italian, but it is obvious they are flirting.

I'm suddenly appalled by my dirty coat and the smell of stale sweat whenever I move my arms. I am ambushed by a furtive tendril of sexual longing. It wraps itself around my sinking stomach.

I walk away, in search of a painting that no one else wants to look at.

I am thinking about human wings and the enormous shoulders we would need in order to hold them open, to bring them together at our feeble chests, to spread them again. The wingspan necessary to support the weight of our marrow-packed skeletons above the earth for even a moment. It is impossible. This fact, inexplicably, brings me to the edge of tears.

Another set of wings. These attached loosely to the lithe body of a boy. The boy is naked, and he thrusts his genitals into the centre of the frame. Beneath his bare feet a laurel wreath, a draughtsman's compass, various pieces from a suit of armour, a crown, a handwritten book with attendant ink-stained quill, a violin, a lute, a book of sheet music. In his hands a pair of arrows. Cupid, or rather a boy posed to suggest Cupid. The wings are an eagle's wings, a stage prop, and like

Rembrandt's Angel, they have known better days. The boy is bathed in unwholesome yellow light and grubby shadow.

I know this boy. Caravaggio's boy. We were friends once.

Vile creatures

A light-drenched, late summer classroom. My first day at St. Michael's. I'm nine years old, though I'll be ten in three months. The other children are already at their desks, crisp grey shirts and shorts, knee socks, and Nomads with thick, glue-like soles. Some boys read or pretend to read, some fill fountain pens from little bottles, some stare dumbly towards the front of the classroom, waiting.

I slide into the only desk remaining in the back two rows. As far from the teacher's desk as possible. I turn around. Four boys looking pleased with themselves stare back at me. One of them is enormous. His head reminds me of pictures I'd seen of Easter Island in a *National Geographic*. He has velvety blonde hair combed flat like a mouse's pelt. He must surely weigh twice as much as I do. His cheeks, where they meet his jaw, have started sinking into jowls. He notices me staring but seems not to mind.

We exchange nods.

At the other end of the back row, nearest the door, I notice a boy noticing me.

A strange little quiver passes through me as our eyes meet. Beneath tight dark curls shines a face of such fresh-cream whiteness it seems impossible it has made even the most fleeting contact with sunlight, like one of those calves they keep in a box. A rose-burst of pink touches each cheek. He would almost be moon-faced were it not for a strong jaw and chin jutting precociously forwards, lending a handsomeness to an otherwise angelic aspect.

He is like another species, composed from lighter, airier elements, a little less bound to the earth by the rigours of gravity. I, by contrast, feel all of a sudden bovine and coarse, a golem made carelessly from clay and animated with a dull spark from two grey stones.

The blood begins to rush to my cheeks, in mutiny. I tell myself to look away, to open my desk and fill it with empty exercise books and pencils, with my fresh-from-the-box fountain pen, my plastic ruler, my burning sense of inadequacy and embarrassment.

But then he smiles at me.

His smile is like watching something impossibly graceful fall down a flight of stairs. The slightest twitch at the corner of his mouth sets off a complete collapse, his every atom falling into a state of joy, that drags you down with them, whispering little secrets in your ears you fall.

I smile back and I am suddenly convinced that everything will be okay for now, and that the future, rising up on the horizon like landfall, holds unknown wonders.

At that moment the door swings open and Frances Sweers enters the room. A handful of boys leap to their feet, probably those returning for their second year. The rest of us hurriedly follow suit.

In an instant I am cured of my belief that everything is going to be okay. The future stretches out before me and although the path is still lined with wonders, they are covered in prickles and barbs.

Frances Sweers is in her sixties, her posture still unyieldingly upright. The kind of posture that negates the possibility of rest. Her hair is short and swept back from her high forehead in one perfect wave of silver. Her enormous bust, which to my horror immediately seizes my attention, is rigid and unmoving, held in place by some manner of machinery I have no intention of imagining.

She stands at the door and stares at us with what appears to be surprise mingled with horror, as if she's discovered 13 boy-sized cockroaches standing behind their desks staring at her.

Making a show of collecting herself, Miss Sweers turns her eyes towards the heavens as if asking for strength, gathers herself up to her full height, mutters something under her breath.

She moves slowly between the rows of old-fashioned wooden desks, peering at the boys standing in various approximations of attention.

After what seems like an hour of silent scrutiny she reaches the front of the classroom, pulls a white screen down over the blackboard and switches on an overhead projector. The words to all four verses of God Save the Queen appear.

'This country in which we find ourselves,' her voice filling the room like shrapnel, 'has two national anthems. Did you know that? Boy?'

Miss Sweers points a long, accusing finger at a terrified wretch of a child in thick, black-rimmed glasses. He looks back at her, stunned, moving his mouth like a captured trout.

'Are you deaf? Did you know that? Answer me, boy.'

The child gapes dumbly a few more times before slowly lowering his head, dropping his face into cupped hands, and letting out a short, desperate sob.

'Feeble.' She turns on another child.

'Braithwaite. Did you know that this country has two national anthems?'

A small, delicate-boned boy at the front of the class with thick eyelashes and a slender, aquiline nose, looks up from his hands which he has been diligently studying.

‘Yes, Miss Sweers.’ A reedy whisper of a voice.

‘Good, Braithwaite. And so you should. The other anthem is God Defend New Zealand. What do these two anthems have in common? You, boy?’ She points at the huge stone-headed boy.

‘God?’ he replies hopefully.

‘God what?

‘What?’

‘God, Miss Sweers. Vile creature. And don’t what me.’

‘Yes, Miss Sweers.’

‘God is correct. We shall sing one of the two anthems every morning. Some days we shall sing both. This will help remind us of where we are and to whom we owe that privilege. The singing also serves to wake young boys from their slumbers which would otherwise extend until afternoon tea. Now. Boys. With gusto if you please. One, two, three…’

A knock at the door.

Miss Sweers’ face darkens at the interruption.

‘Enter!’

A long narrow head crowned by a slick of grey hair and brylcreem appears from behind the door.

‘Stand for the Headmaster!’

‘I’m terribly sorry for the interruption Miss Sweers, please forgive me.’ The headmaster slithers into the room. “Through no fault of her own I have caused this pupil to be late and I wanted to deliver her to you myself so there would be no question of her innocence. Miss Sweers, boys, you may have heard that this year, for the first time, girls will be attending our wonderful school. There are a total of nine girls attending the prep school this term. Only one of whom will be starting her St. Michael’s journey in Standard Four. Boys, a warm welcome please for Miss Veronica Bainbridge.’

The headmaster, a tall, thin man, holds his own hands and sways and rocks and looks delighted with himself. A moment passes before he realises that no female student has been forthcoming, at which point he unfurls a long, reed-like arm through the open door and draws a figure into the room.

‘Miss Bainbridge. Well, I shall leave you to it. Good morning, Miss Sweers. Good morning boys… ah… students…ah ha.’ And he is gone.

A deep, ringing silence follows. Veronica stands rooted to the spot by the door. She looks at the door, then at Miss Sweers, then out the window to the wide, bright world she has left behind. It's obvious to all of us boys that she is considering making a run for it.

Miss Sweers just stares at her, open mouthed. A prickle of electricity starts to circulate the room, that transmission children receive when something has gone awry with the adult who is supposed to be in control. It is like the aftermath of a jolt from an electric fence: muscle and bone hum and vibrate, the heat of panic passing through, looking for the relief of earth, for the status quo to reassert itself.

It does not. Miss Sweers continues to stare dumbly at the blameless child standing by the door, who begins to shake a little at her skinny knees.

Finally, the silence is broken by the sound of a chair being pushed back as someone gets to his feet. It is the pale boy. He goes over to Veronica. He is smiling his falling-down-the-stairs smile. He takes her bag. He says something to her the rest of us do not quite catch. She wrenches her gaze away from Miss Sweers. She looks at him and the colour slowly begins to return to her cheeks. He says something else, and she coughs up a little laugh, stands a little straighter, looks around the room.

The pale boy takes her over to where he was sitting, collects his things and carries them to a desk in the front row. He has gotten Veronica settled as far from Miss Sweers as the layout of the classroom allows. He takes his place behind his new desk. Miss Sweers watches all this happen as if it were the wanderings of sheep on a distant hillside.

There are sounds so strange and beautiful that, once we hear them, they are with us forever. They are the last, lingering sediment from dreams that dissolve in the sunlight. They emerge like a search party from the cacophonous drone of a factory floor. They announce themselves from the rafters of lonely churches at midnight in unfamiliar cities. We will hear them as we leave this world, I am certain.

The pale boy begins to sing. His voice is a cold, blue ribbon of light. It shimmers a little at the edges. It is the brother of every atom in the classroom, and each takes its turn to vibrate in harmony. To this day it is, to me, the voice with which the dead speak.

God save our gracious Queen,
Long live our noble Queen,
God save the Queen!

The words could just as well be Russian for all it matters. The hairs rise up on my forearms, on the back of my neck. There are sudden tears in my eyes. I begin to shiver a little though I'm not cold.

O Lord our God arise,
Scatter our enemies,
And make them fall!
Confound their politics,
Frustrate their knavish tricks,

Braithwaite joins the song. His voice is also beautiful, although gentler and warmer, less full of emptiness. One by one boys begin to sing. I try to approximate the sopranos of my classmates and am horrified by the resulting slippery squeaks. I resort to a low, inconspicuous mumble.

From every latent foe,
From the assassin's blow,
God save the Queen!
O'er her thine arm extend,
For Britain's sake defend.

At last, Frances Sweers begins to sing. Her voice is tidal in scope; it could drown us all if she let it. For the last verse the pale boy drops his voice a register and lets it dance around the rest in clever, fleeting harmonies. Miss Sweers looks at him and smiles. She is grateful, she approves, and it is clear she loves him.

The song ends. We look around the room at one another, trying to make sense out of what has just happened. Braithwaite and one or two others are smiling beatifically. The pale boy is looking at Miss Sweers and grinning.

Miss Sweers turns off the overhead projector. She wheels it into the corner. As she walks back to her desk she pauses for a moment in front of the pale boy. She doesn't look at him, but with the tips of her fingers she touches the edge of his desk. She says softly:

"Avonlea."

Then gathering herself up, she sweeps the classroom with an imperious gaze. "Sit!"

And so begins my year in Miss Sweers' classroom. To my relief, and after repeated interventions by my mother, I am absolved from having to learn to write with a fountain pen. My left-handedness, and my by-now-unbreakable habit of curling my wrist around a pen like a question mark, make artless abstractions of the simplest of sentences. Miss Sweers tosses a biro at me, along with a blast of contempt that borders on hatred.

"You are my first failure, Wrigley. I shall not forget you."

I manage to slip back into the tempestuous harbours of her good favour by way of an appreciation and affinity for the novels of Jack London, and a talent for dramatic readings of her favourite poems by Wordsworth, Longfellow, and Alfred Noyes. The only other child in the class with any interest in literature is Veronica Bainbridge who, although bright and quick-witted, spends the year in a cold, unearned purgatory.

By the end of the first term, I can sing hymns in a serviceable soprano. I can recite a number of long, narrative poems on demand. I know the names of the Canadian provinces and can locate them on a map. I can confidently perform long division and have started reading Dickens' shorter novels in my spare time. I am receiving an excellent, if old-fashioned and eccentric, colonial education.

Montgomery

In the summer of 1933 Montgomery Birtwistle, accompanied by his valet, arrived in New Zealand. He was in the twenty-first month of a two-year world tour that had taken him to South Africa, India, Thailand, Japan, China, Canada, Australia, and the United States. The tour was ostensibly a fact-finding and scouting mission in service to Montgomery's ambition to set up an English-style private boys' school in a corner of the globe he believed to be suitable and which he hoped would benefit from such an institution.

Montgomery was born in Manchester, a scion of the Tuttle and Williams cotton empire. His childhood was, according to his own testimony, a happy one. At the age of eight he was sent away to boarding school where he flourished. He was popular with his peers, he performed moderately well academically, and what he lacked in athletic ability he made up for in enthusiasm and perseverance. The masters quickly identified and encouraged Montgomery's musical gifts. He sung in the choir, played the piano to a high standard, was proficient at the flute and the oboe, excelled at the cello.

Upon leaving school he was admitted to Oxford University where he read music. It was there that he developed his enduring taste for fine wine – he was a member of at least two wine clubs and three different drinking societies.

After graduating with a second class degree, he joined the family firm for which he worked listlessly until the outbreak of the Great War. He served in Basra, in what was then Mesopotamia, and in Egypt for the branch of the British Navy that would later become the RAF. He learnt to fly aeroplanes and eventually trained young men of his own class to do the same.

After the war, Montgomery returned to Manchester and continued working for the family firm for another decade. During this time he became a regular fixture of Manchester high society, a member of a number of private clubs, a frequenter of the best restaurants and the most exclusive nightclubs. Due to his wealth, he was considered an eligible bachelor, though there was never any suggestion of him marrying, or even courting, any of the young women who vied for his attention.

He had a wine cellar installed in his father's townhouse and filled it with the best vintages from Bordeaux, Burgundy, the Rhone, Porto, and the Rhine. He was particularly passionate about sherry and made regular trips to Andalusia to visit his favourite soleras.

Over dinner at a private club in 1927, Montgomery announced to his uncle and his father his intention to establish a boys' prep school somewhere in the former colonies. Montgomery would dedicate a proportion of his share in the family fortune to this end. He had already arranged to undertake an apprenticeship of sorts at Throckmorton Prep School in Worcester, where he would work as a music tutor and a House Master.

His father and uncle's reaction to this eccentric scheme is not recorded. What we do know, is that Montgomery presented his resignation the following morning, and left Manchester by train a month later.

Montgomery spent five happy years at Throckmorton. He was a popular figure with the staff and the students. His musical abilities led to him taking over the role of choir master. Under his guidance the choir became something of a local sensation, much in demand at the parish churches in the surrounding countryside. They were even invited to sing at Westminster Abbey.

The Headmaster, John Peacocke, served as Montgomery's mentor during this period. Montgomery wrote letters to his mother and sisters extolling Peacocke's virtues: his insistence on treating each boy as an individual, his warmth and familiarity with the students, his kindness, and his belief that a complete education must focus as energetically on the spiritual as the intellectual and the physical.

After five years of this apprenticeship Montgomery resigned and returned to Manchester. He enlisted the services of the Thomas Cook and Sons travel agency and set about planning his world tour.

For someone who intended to dedicate his life to the education of young boys, Montgomery displayed a surprising lack of curiosity in the world around him. His diaries show that wherever he was offered excellent hospitality (by hospitality I mean plenty of European food, sherry, claret, and convivial conversation) his comments were highly favourable. Those institutions that treated him with only mild interest or indifference would be labelled 'uncivilised' and 'unfit to carry the mantle of educators.'

During his time in the United States there is not a single mention of the Great Depression which then was at its height, uprooting great swathes of desperate men, women, and children and sending them drifting across the country in search of work and a crust of bread. This either escaped Montgomery's attention or he didn't deem it worthy of note.

He found Japan to be pleasingly orderly and full of national pride. The children were ‘polite and deferential but also possessed of a great spark of physical courage’ that boded well for the country’s future success.

He loathed China and declared the inhabitants ‘deceitful, ungentlemanly and, worst of all, completely lacking in any appreciation of spiritual beauty’.

He found India ‘colourful but dirty and greatly afflicted by the Oriental malaise of fatalism’.

Thailand was ‘by far the happiest place I have ever visited’. The people however, though ‘comely and surprisingly fragrant’, he found to be ‘stupid and incorrigibly lazy’.

Early in his African adventure he succumbed to malaria. He wrote little of his experiences there and left as soon as he was well enough to board a ship.

His accounts of his time on the first class decks of ocean liners occupy the most space in his diaries, or his ‘logbooks’ as he calls them, and also find him in the best spirits. The formula of long, mostly idle days punctuated by nights filled with music and socializing seemed to suit him very well.

He meticulously recorded his cabin number at the beginning of each journey. He provided detailed descriptions of the passengers (first class) and crew aboard each ship. The professorial air he assumed in his diary when recording his visits to one prep school or another was put aside, and a giddy school boy emerged: thrilled to be taught ‘the jitterbug’ by an American condiment heiress; beside himself with appreciation for the ‘Negro’ bartender aboard the crossing from Johannesburg to New York, who introduced him to such delights as ‘A Brown Derby Cocktail’ and ‘something called, rather aptly I think, a Corpse Reviver #2’. He was an enthusiastic participant in onboard games and competitions. He often played the piano and led his fellow passengers in singalongs. On one voyage he won a costume competition by dressing up as an enormous baby, complete with an oversized pram assembled at his request by the onboard carpenter.

It is during his adventures at sea that we start to get a sense of Montgomery as a man and not just as an aspiring school master. Although he was happy enough playing the role of dance partner or ‘dinner date’ he displayed something approaching horror at being left alone with a woman. He described one young French woman as ‘a predator. And the prey, I fear, is yours truly.’ His delight at being taught the latest American dance craze was tarnished when the heiress in question “gripped my knee like a terrier beneath the dining table. It took some

doing to explain to the captain why I had decorated his dress uniform with a mouthful of asparagus soup."

In photos from the time we know that by his early 40s, Montgomery was almost bald. He wore small wire-frame spectacles. His figure was that of a man who loved rich food and fine wine, and who had abandoned most forms of physical exercise as soon as he left school. He wore his pants high, the waist band dividing the hemispheres of his belly in half. His shirts and jackets were seldom tucked in and would flow from his shoulders and over his belly, the front allowed to hang down in front of his crotch like a veil. Although by no means handsome, he was a long way from grotesque and, considering his vast wealth it was no surprise that women saw in Montgomery something of an opportunity.

The day Montgomery disembarked from the ship that had carried him from Sydney to Auckland the weather was humid and wet. The sky hung low and draped itself languidly around the volcanic cones and peaks that surrounded the city. Montgomery writes in his journal of the relief he felt to escape the oppressive summer heat of New South Wales. He seemed little taken with Australia. His diaries complained with a bemused annoyance that everyone in Australia seemed to have a job, and because of this, cocktail parties tended to occur solely in the evenings.

Montgomery and his valet were collected from the docks by a man known only as Mitchell who had been enlisted to act as their driver during their time in New Zealand. Mitchell was the proud owner of a Graham-Paige Four-Door Sedan which drew small crowds of admirers wherever they went.

They spent two months touring New Zealand, during which time Montgomery grew increasingly sure that this was the place he would like to establish his school. In his diaries he described New Zealand as "a sunnier Albion. Not too hot. The land fertile and green. The people solid and trustworthy – Englishmen in all but geography."

He attended a rugby match and was impressed with the physical vigour of all involved.

In Rotorua, his entourage was expanded to include a local Māori woman named Rangi. Rangi acted as their guide for a few days. She showed Montgomery the geothermal wonders of the area ("smelly. Lots of hot mud. Not quite sure of the attraction") and introduced him to various elders and luminaries among the local Māori. Montgomery was impressed by Rangi and the Māori

people in general. He described them as “fine, handsome, upright people, clever yet admirably forthright and honest.”

Montgomery spent time at all the top schools up and down the county. He described King’s College in Auckland as “first rate” and possessing one of the finest chapels and organs he had ever encountered. Huntley School near Marton impressed him with the beauty of its setting and the “generous hospitality” of the headmaster. He thought Wanganui Collegiate would have no trouble holding its own alongside the best schools in England. In the South Island he visited Christ College and Waihi School Winchester where he spent two weeks teaching geography and music, dining with the staff and students, and singing with the school choir.

Back in the North Island and towards the end of his time in New Zealand, he arrived in the Waikato. He was immediately impressed with the quality of the farmland, the rolling hills, and the moderate climate which reminded him powerfully of England.

Montgomery had made an appointment to visit Southall School in Hamilton. Southall had an excellent reputation as one of the country’s finest prep schools. His visit was scheduled for 1pm, a time which led Montgomery to assume he would be having lunch with the headmaster. Upon arriving however, lunch was long gone. Montgomery was furious. He noted in his diary that the headmaster was “ignorant of the manner in which civilised peoples conducted themselves.” He went on to say that the school was “a poor facsimile of an English public school, lacking in modern facilities and bereft of strong moral leadership.”

It may be unfair to attribute St. Michael’s establishment in the Waikato to Montgomery’s wish to avenge this perceived sleight from Southall’s headmaster, but nonetheless, the following day he engaged the services of a solicitor and a local land agent and instructed them to find a site in the Waikato countryside within easy reach of Hamilton.

Montgomery took up residence at the Masonic Hotel in Cambridge, a town he found to be “charming and very English in character”. He extended his stay in New Zealand by two months to be sure that a suitable site could be secured in time.

It was an excellent time to buy land. The Depression had a firm grip on New Zealand by 1933 and farmers were being forced to sell their properties at ruinously low prices. The land agent quickly found a property in nearby Tamahere, over two hundred acres of rolling pasture, with an existing villa that Montgomery thought would make an excellent headmaster’s residence. Just

before the sale could go through however, anthrax was detected, and the sale was abandoned. The search went on.

Eventually a property of one hundred acres was found just two miles north of Cambridge, a dairy farm on the banks of the Waikato River. Montgomery quickly made the purchase for £3000. A farm manager was brought in to continue running the farm while the school was being built. An architect was commissioned to draw up the plans for the classrooms, boarding facilities, dining hall, and chapel.

Montgomery left his solicitor to oversee construction and returned to England to make the necessary arrangements for a permanent move to New Zealand.

St. Michael's was opened in 1936 by Peter Fraser, the Minister of Education. Hundreds of guests from Cambridge and beyond attended the ceremony. There was an initial intake of 37 boys. Montgomery had personally interviewed and vetted the staff. He convinced several masters to defect from Southall with offers of a better salary and more control over the syllabus. A bursar was engaged to manage the school's finances (the farm was already bringing in a significant income) and a matron to look after the physical and emotional well-being of the boys. A chaplain was brought in to tend to the boys' spiritual needs. Montgomery hired Charles Coen, a greatly respected teacher and administrator from Wanganui Collegiate to act as deputy headmaster, his idea being that Coen would handle the disciplinary side of things while Montgomery would manage the curriculum.

St. Michael's flourished and expanded over the next decade. More farmland was purchased, and the farm became the financial engine that ensured that the school needed no further investment from Montgomery and his family.

Coen left the school under a cloud after only three years. In private letters to his father in Scotland he made clear that differences with Montgomery Birtwistle were the cause of his departure. He claimed that he had been promised a more central role within the school and that Montgomery had assured him that Coen would act as the de facto headmaster due to Montgomery's regular absences. In reality, he claimed, Montgomery was ever-present and had a hand in every aspect of the school's management. He also wrote of his concerns regarding Montgomery's temperament, alleging that he had a "sadistic streak" and that he had witnessed him "beat a boy black and blue with his fists" when he caught the student fiddling with the keys of the beautiful pipe organ that Montgomery had commissioned for the chapel. He found it odd that Montgomery had banned all

staff besides the matron and himself from entering the boys' dormitories. He wrote that he had heard rumours of an after-lights-out wine club in which select boys were permitted small glasses of wine while Montgomery lectured them on the finer points of terroir and vintage.

"There is something not quite right with the man. He is obviously fond of the boys, to the point where he often behaves like their chum rather than their headmaster. He plays favourites relentlessly and keeps the boys in a constant state of high excitement as they compete to impress him. I do not believe this is a healthy environment for young boys. I have no concrete allegations to make but I will not be a party to such goings-on. I think it best that I seek employment elsewhere."

Kiss

Jacob Avonlea and I lie together, our temples almost touching, the carpet of lily leaves and wild garlic damp but not unpleasant against bare limbs in the dull heat of mid-March. His skin is so pale it takes on the deep green hue of the undergrowth.

It is a Saturday afternoon and we have sneaked into the copse of kahikatea that the school proudly maintains as the largest surviving remnant of its kind in the Waikato region. Although not strictly out of bounds, it is not in bounds either.

We watch the languid tops of the kahikatea swaying high above us and discuss the attributes of the few girls we know in common. We touch on the subject of eyes and lips and hair. We speak of legs and breasts and giggle and squirm at our mutual realization that another person shares our ludicrous, terrible dreams.

"Do you know what sex is?" he asks me.

"Of course I do." This is both true and untrue.

"Go on, then. Tell me all about it." Jacob rolls onto his side to face me, his head propped up on his elbow. He is mocking me, which I rather like.

"Well, Jacob, let me explain: the man takes his penis…"

Jacob squeals in delight. "Yes, yes, takes his penis out to dinner…"

"No, Jacob, don't be such a child. The man takes his penis, and when it is very hard, hard like the handle on a hammer, he inserts it inside a willing woman…"

More squealing. "Oh God. Oh Jesus. Inside a willing woman. Wonderful. Where is the entrance, David? Should he shout, 'Open Sesame'?"

"He isn't a thief, Jacob. He's an honourable man. Probably a husband I reckon."

"I see. So, this honourable husband. After dinner. His penis hard as the handle of a hammer. Where does he stick it?"

"He doesn't 'stick it' anywhere." I am floundering.

"If you don't know then say you don't know."

I study an aphid that has landed on the back of my hand. I look at Jacob and blow it away into the undergrowth like I'm making a wish.

"I don't know."

He smiles but he doesn't laugh.

“I thought not,” he said. “Well maybe I’ll tell you all about it sometime. Or maybe you’ll find out on your own before I get the chance. I saw Sandra staring at you in chapel this morning.”

Sandra is in the year above us, one of only three girls in her class. She always makes a point of talking to me. She often materialises behind me in the lunch line, finds a seat next to me in chapel or assembly, happens to be passing as I keep a lonely goal for the under 11s soccer team. She isn’t beautiful or even particularly pretty, but she has a way of looking at me as she speaks that somehow means something more than what she was saying.

“She likes you. I think she wants you,” Jacob

“I think you might be right.”

Jacob opens his eyes wide and makes his red mouth into a little O of mock disbelief. “David Wrigley! You are getting up yourself. ‘I think you might be right’? You probably think every girl in this school loves you. All nine of them. Eight if you don’t count your sister. You probably think I love you.”

“You do love me, I think, in a way.”

The playful mockery drains away in an instant.

“You think I love you, do you?” He pulls himself to his feet and looks down at me. The warmth and softness gone from his face. A flicker of cruelty emerges from the corners of his mouth.

“Y… yeah… I… like a friend. A brother.”

“A brother? I don’t have a brother. You do don’t you, Wrigley? I see his name up on the Colours Board in the dining hall. Head Boy, right? What’s his name again?”

He has bent over me, his face hovering just above mine. He stares into my eyes, and I can smell butter and bread crusts on his breath.

“James. He lives in Auckland now.”

“Do you think he fucks girls up there in Auckland? Or maybe he fucks boys? Did you know that boys could fuck each other?”

I don’t know what to say or do. I want to cry. I want to punch him in the face. I want to run as far and fast away from him as I can go. But I can’t move.

“Jacob… I’m… please…”

He stares at me for a second longer. Then, lunging, he grabs my face with both hands and kisses me roughly on the lips. His teeth grind painfully against mine. His mouth tastes bitter. Like blood.

He straightens up and takes a step back, his eyes locked on mine.

“I think you’re right, Wrigley. I think I do love you.”

As he turns to walk away, he spits into the undergrowth.

I lie still and watch him walking towards the bright sunlight of the playing fields beyond the trees. Just as the last of the colour is about to be stripped from him, he turns back to me. He stands there for a long time, shuffling his feet and looking from his shoes to me, and back to his shoes.

"Are you coming or not, Wrigley? It's nearly dinner time and I'm hungry and I don't want to sit on my own at a table of idiots."

I get to my feet and dust the leaves and dirt from my shorts. Jacob is grinning at me now, looking sheepish.

"Wouldn't want to leave you on your own with idiots, I suppose."

"This place is full of them. Never leave me."

As I catch up to him, he throws an arm around my shoulder, and we walk just like that, out of the trees and back into the light.

Choir

When I first arrived at St. Michael's in 1987, the headmaster was Paul Parker. He happened to be the father of a famous Saturday morning kids tv presenter, so he brought with him the glow of second-hand glamour.

I don't remember much else about him. I do remember sitting in his office with my mother the year before I started. He seemed a kindly enough old man. He asked me questions like 'what's your favourite subject at school?', 'do you enjoy reading?', 'do you play any sports?'. When he asked a question, he would tilt his head to one side while he waited for an answer. This had the effect of making me feel like the room itself was askew. As I answered his questions he smiled encouragingly. Every now and then a little triangle of tongue would emerge from between his straight white teeth to moisten first the top lip and then the bottom.

When I look back to the events of thirty years ago, I find myself struggling to think clearly about Parker. Yes, it was a long time ago and yes, I was very young, but there is something else, some kind of a static hiss interfering with the signal when I try to bring him to mind.

When the memory fails, I turn to the internet.

I have learnt that before he came to St. Michael's, Parker was the headmaster of Develin School in Auckland. Develin had an excellent reputation as a school that provided a quality private education to vulnerable boys from broken homes. He was there from 1967-1979, but the articles I find are from 30 years after that when some things have come to light. While Parker was in charge, a kid confided in him that he had been groped in the chorister's room by Nicholas Cowan, a boarding house tutor. Cowan quietly resigned; neither the police nor the teaching regulators were made aware of the accusation. He relocated to London where he was hired at the Royal School of Music, and worked there for four years until Paul Parker hired him again at Develin, this time as choirmaster and head of music.

In this position, Cowan went on to abuse numerous other boys over the next decade. The newspaper reports and court records from the time of the trial make for a harrowing read. It's hard not to see Paul Parker as partially to blame, if not actively complicit in what happened to those boys at Develin after Cowan came back. And it seems beyond the scope of coincidence that when he was

headmaster at St. Michael's, Parker hired another choirmaster who has since been convicted of abusing boys.

A few years before I arrived at St. Michael's, in 1984, Trevor Glick was hired as director of music and choirmaster by Paul Parker. Glick was convicted in 2006 and 2016 and is currently serving a sentence in Tongariro Prison for sexual crimes against boys. But these are truths I know from this point in time.

In his time at St. Michael's, Glick oversaw choir trips to Norfolk Island and to the United Kingdom. The Norfolk Island trip was the year before Paul Parker tilted his kindly old head at me in his office. As a choir member, I could have gone on the long trip to the UK in 1988, but my mother forbade it. It is the only time I remember her passing up a socially acceptable chance to send me away for a few weeks, and the only time she has ever claimed we could not afford to do something.

Abuse at St. Michael's neither started nor ended with Paul Parker or Trevor Glick. During an internal investigation into historic sexual abuse, launched in 2016 in conjunction with the New Zealand police, dozens of former pupils came forward. Complaints dated back as far as 1936, the year Montgomery Birtwistle welcomed the first intake of boy to St. Michael's.

I was not a particularly talented chorister, but I nevertheless joined the chapel choir soon after starting at St. Michael's. Jacob was the star, a brilliant soloist, and the lead treble. I am sure I was only drafted in to keep him company. I'm equally sure I wouldn't have bothered to join at all had he not insisted.

The choir master was Trevor Glick. He was the director of music at the school, the housemaster of one of the boy's boarding houses, and was also expected to give general music education lessons to form classes. The latter was a task he clearly detested and made no attempt to hide the fact. He would have us sit with our heads lowered, faces down on our desks. He would put a record on, usually Mozart or Bach, and tell us to listen carefully, to try and appreciate the sublimity of the music. He gave us no clues as to how we should find our way into these densely structured artifacts. He simply told us to be still and quiet. He would continue with whatever work he felt to be more important than educating children. If we disobeyed and had the temerity to raise our heads and look around the room, he would fly into a spittle-spraying rage and have us stand outside in freezing rain, or carcinogenic sunshine.

Mr Glick was in his early forties and possessed an moulded thatch of thick, strawberry blonde hair. His nose was long and straight and gave his face the

suggestion of a blunt hatchet. His cheekbones were high and jutting, his eyes small and greedy, a fact of which he was perhaps aware, as he often wore prescription sunglasses.

He had a look of perpetual annoyance, and his default demeanour was a cruel, sneering sarcasm. He fell into anger quickly and had seemingly little time or affection for children outside a small coterie of favourites, most of whom were either members of the choir or talented instrumentalists.

Even more so than the alien culture of Miss Sweers' classroom, the choir made me aware of the distance I had travelled from Cambridge Primary. Choristers dressed like an angelic sub-species, too far removed from the earth's heavy clay to entertain the possibility of wearing pants. We wore heavy nylon surplices of deep blue, with white cotton cassocks draped over top.

We dressed differently, we spoke differently, we operated at different times of the day and night.

The choir practiced in the evenings, after dark, and Jacob and I became familiar with the hidden nooks and crannies of the music block, the auditorium, and the chapel. Once practice was over, Mr Glick was not overly concerned with where we went and what we did. There was ample time and space to disappear into the cracks between authorities.

Choir practice would sometimes run deep into the evening, past what would normally be lights out for the boarders and bedtime for me. At such times I would often stay over in the prep school dormitories. Jacob and I would return late to an unlit and unsupervised world, the atmosphere silent and thick with the sleep of other children. We would sneak between dormitories and terrorise our friends and enemies as they slept: steal odd shoes and hide them in the footlockers of unwilling accomplices; relieve better-provisioned boys of their excess biscuits; plant the crumbs in the beds of their neighbours for sport.

Eventually we would crawl into Jacob's bed and whisper and giggle until sleep nearly overwhelmed us, but Jacob would always have the presence of mind to send me to an empty bed and keep us safe from the censure of the tutors, the Housemaster, or the potentially violent disapproval of our peers.

In bed we would talk mostly of girls, occasionally of the ever-shifting internal politics of the choir, occasionally of our classmates under the tutelage of Miss Sweers. Once or twice, I voiced my dislike of Mr Glick, pointed out the litany of cruelties and tantrums that we were forced to endure on an almost daily basis, wondered aloud how he managed to get away with such breath-taking rudeness and lack of interest in the actual work of teaching he was hired to carry out.

To these questioning accusations Jacob was unusually diffident. He would downplay the worst of Glick's behaviour, point out how frustrating teaching untalented musicians could be for someone possessing his gifts, assure me that once I got to know the man better, I would come to forgive his foibles. While he spoke, I would furrow my brow and roll my eyes in the darkness. My incredulity hidden from sight.

On one such occasion, Jacob interrupted me mid-sentence.

"Do you believe in God?" he asked.

I winced in the darkness. Jacob had tried to introduce the topic of religion before, and I had managed to dance away from the subject. There was no room in this little bed for dancing. I lay silent for a long time, wondering what to say. I listened to the gentle snores and mumbled nonsenses of a dozen or so sleeping boys, invisible and unplaceable in the darkness.

"No. I don't think so. It's not something we really talk about in my family."

"You must, Wrigley. You must believe. It's important."

"Why?"

"Cause if you die, and we can die anytime, no warning, if you die and you don't believe you'll end up in hell." He said this with such certainty that for a moment I felt afraid.

"I don't think I've done anything to end up in hell," I protested.

"It doesn't matter what you've done, it's about what you believe. It's about repenting your sins every night and every morning so that you're clean before God. It's about accepting Jesus Christ as your Lord and Saviour and making that commitment again and again and again."

"Um… ok. So, what's hell supposed to be like?" I asked, hoping he wouldn't know and perhaps we could change the subject.

"Darkness. Cold and dark. People say it's like the inside of a volcano, hot and burning and full of devils poking you with pitchforks. But it's not like that. It's cold and dark cause you're far away from Jesus. You're far away from his light and his love. Are you afraid of being alone?"

"Not really. I like it. I like when Mum and Dad go out and my sisters and brothers go out and I'm left on my own to watch television or read a book."

Jacob turned onto his side to face me. I could feel his breath on my ear. I turned to look at him. In the gloom I could see him staring at me, pleading.

"It's one thing being alone for a morning, or even for a whole day, a whole night. That's one thing. I don't even like that. But... imagine being alone for ever… always in the dark, always alone." His voice trembled as he spoke.

“I can’t imagine that. Isn’t it easier to believe we just die? We just stop being alive, close our eyes, and that’s it?”

“It sounds the same to me,” he replied.

“I suppose. Maybe.”

Jacob shuffled closer to me and slipped an arm across my chest. His hand gripped my shoulder.

“Pray with me. Please.”

“Ok.”

“Our Father who art in Heaven, hallowed be thy name.” He whispered directly into my ear as I lay staring up into the dark. “Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in Heaven. Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive them that trespass against us.” Here, as always when I heard this part of the prayer recited in chapel, I thought of stealing oranges from a neighbour’s garden in the Cambridge suburbs. “Lead us not into temptation but deliver from us evil. For thine is the kingdom, the power, and the glory, for ever and ever, Amen.”

I whispered “Amen” in turn and hoped that was the end of it.

We lay there in silence listening to the breathing of our sleeping classmates, to our own and each other’s. Jacob nuzzled his face into the nape of my neck. His wiry curls tickled and scratched my cheeks.

‘Tell God you’re sorry. Tell him every night. Promise.”

“I promise.”

“Good. You’d better go. I’m sleepy now.”

A few months after I start singing in the choir, Sandra Winter’s face appears in the alto section. The altos are mainly older girls whose range is slightly lower than a soprano but higher than a tenor. They stand across the aisle from us in the chapel stalls.

The other registers don’t usually mix with sopranos. We are a choir within a choir. We are the youngest, the smallest, but undoubtedly the most important cog in the machine. We are cheeky and often rude to the older children who are too scared of Trevor Glick to punish us. We are all distantly aware of the fleeting nature of our voices. Any day those soaring instruments could crash to earth, with a thud and a billow of feathers.

Sandra’s voice is lower than ours and surprisingly rich. It has the same dustiness as her speaking voice which I begin to find enthralling. After many hours spent staring at each other across the aisle of the chapel, her face begins to

seem beautiful. She has high, jutting cheeks bones and her hair reflects a dark red from the candlelight of evensong.

One night, perhaps through some mutual engineering, perhaps through chance, we find ourselves alone in the music storage room. The lights are off, and the room is windowless. Our hands reach out to each other in the darkness. My first real kiss unfolds amongst the violins and timpani, the oboes, cellos, and flutes, the ghostly hum of instruments at rest in the darkness. The never to be repeated thrill of her hand moving down my back as our lips part. The flicker of her tongue against my teeth.

Sandra, Jacob, and I quickly become a trio. We slip easily into dark corners of the chapel, the music department, and the adjoining auditorium. After some close scrapes with tutors and boys from the senior school, we decide the safest place to hide out is on the catwalk, high above the stage of the auditorium.

Jacob has a leading role in the school's production of *Joseph and his Technicolour Dreamcoat*, Sandra and I are in the chorus. As the narrator Jacob takes his place halfway up one of the enclosed metal ladders that leads up to the catwalk. Sandra and I, along with the rest of the chorus, sing from the platform itself. We become familiar with these high places. Jacob convinces one of the seniors to show him how to operate the house lights.

On listless summer afternoons, when the rest of the school is out on the playing fields or ensconced in their studies, Jacob, Sandra, and I turn the spotlights which hang below the catwalk to full beam. We climb the ladder one by one. Sandra would be first, "Don't you dare look up you two. It's not my fault I have to wear a skirt. Be nice young gentlemen please."

The bright tunnels of light blind anyone looking up from below, rendering us invisible from our captors and contemporaries alike.

Sandra lies as close to the lights as she can, basking in the heat like a cat in winter sunshine. Jacob climbs the wires and ropes that support the catwalk and serve as rigging for school productions. He is old-movie fearless. Graceful. Swashbuckling.

I oscillate between my friend and my girlfriend, these two extremes of energy. Sometimes I crouch beside Sandra, whispering in her ear, holding her hand, daring to stroke her hair. Sometimes I edge out over the abyss towards Jacob, sick and giddy with exhilaration and fear, my hands stinging with the heat of friction, my breath escaping into the thin atmosphere and refusing to return. After a minute of this torture, I clamber back to the solid ground of the catwalk,

clinging to the rails and drawing frantic fistfuls of air back into my lungs, hoping Sandra can't see my fear in the dimness of the auditorium, behind the lights.

It is here, high above the stage, that Sandra tells Jacob and me that her grandfather, more than once, had slipped into her bed while she was sleeping, while her parents were sleeping in the next room, and touched her body in a way that made her feel sick and scared.

We are playing truth or dare, and she tells us this while staring down at her hands as they rest in the lap of her crossed legs.

The three of us sit in silence for a long time. Sandra continues to stare, while Jacob and I alternate between shooting each other worried looks and gazing hopelessly at the back of Sandra's hands.

Just as I am about to say something, for the sake of saying anything, Sandra lets out a scream. A scream that bounces around the great empty spaces of the auditorium, reverberating and returning to us from every angle, drilling into us, imprinting upon us.

She leaps to her feet. In a blur of white limbs and blue tartan, she rushes towards the rails of the catwalk. Before I can raise my voice or drag myself to my feet, Jacob springs past me, reaching Sandra just as one leg goes up and over the rails. He grabs her by the shoulders and pulls her down, covering her body with his, pinning her to the hard, blonde wood of the platform.

They struggle for a moment before Sandra goes limp. He whispers "It's okay. It's okay," into the nape of her neck, and I, at last, get to my feet and stand over them both, trying not to cry.

That night Jacob and I hunch together in the dining hall, not touching our food.

We decide that we are too young to deal with this situation on our own. A grown-up must be brought into fold. Someone who would know what to do.

Jacob is adamant that Mr Dolion is the right man, the house master of the prep school. He is a gentle-eyed Englishman with long wisps of black hair swept across his smooth, otherwise bare pate. He speaks softly, even when reprimanding a boy, and has a reputation for being both kind and fair, not traits universally shared among members of the school faculty.

The fact that Jacob is deeply in love with Mr Dolion's daughter Victoria, perhaps has a bearing on his affection and trust in her father.

The next day is a Saturday, a fine blue morning. We set out across the glistening playing fields towards Mr Dolion's brown, weatherboard cottage. We

had sat together over breakfast, weighing up what we were going to say, what we would leave out, and what action we thought Mr Dolion might decide to take in light of this terrible account of incest, abuse, and attempted suicide. We both felt horribly conflicted, that we were betraying Sandra's confidence, but neither of us could think of a better course of action.

We climb two concrete steps onto a small porch and Jacob, stepping forward decisively, all doubt put behind him, knocks on the door.

Victoria answers wearing flannel pyjamas. She is thirteen and indescribably beautiful to both of us. Her hair, cut short like a boy's, is still messy from the pillow. Her dark eyes are heavy-lidded, and her long eyelashes rise and fall as she takes in the early morning manifestation of two serious, young boys on her doorstep.

Jacob blushes deeply, momentarily losing the run of himself. He looks down at his shoes and then remembers why we are here. He rallies.

"Good morning, Victoria. We're so sorry to disturb you on a Saturday morning, but I was wondering if David and I" he gestures behind him in my direction, without taking his eyes off hers. Victoria glances at me and gives me a baffled little smile, "might possibly have a quick word with your father? It is quite important, otherwise…" He trails off.

"Of course, Jacob. And David, was it? Come in, please."

We shuffle into the hallway and busy ourselves with removing our shoes which are wet with dew and covered in fresh grass clippings. There is a closed door to our right. The hallway splits in two in front of us, with a steep staircase leading up to the second storey, and a narrow corridor leading through into the kitchen.

Victoria climbs halfway up the stairs while we are busy with our shoes. She turns back and points at the closed door.

"When you're ready make yourself at home through there. Dad won't be long."

She disappears up the stairs and out of sight.

I follow Jacob through the door.

"The sitting room." Jacob says.

I'd never been in a sitting room. It looks little used. The floral print embroidered on the three-piece lounge suite is slightly faded but appears otherwise untouched by anything more substantial than sunlight.

Formal portraits and group photographs line the walls. Sports teams, military battalions, men in peculiar hats, their breasts galvanised with medals, bars,

insignia. The air itself has a yellow tinge. Motes of dust hang motionless in the stasis of sunbeams. The room smells of furniture polish and trapped air, like the inside of a confessional.

Mr Dolion steps through the door. He looks around the room as if seeing it for the first time. He frowns and wrinkles his nose before fixing his eyes on the two of us standing in the middle of the room.

"Good morning, gentlemen. Vicki said you wanted to see me, and it simply couldn't wait till Monday. Sit down, please."

He is wearing the native attire of prep school teachers in the late 1980s: knee length formal shorts, a plain short-sleeved collared shirt, neatly tucked, argyle knee-socks and, in concession to the weekend I suppose, roman sandals.

We take a seat next to each other on the sofa and Mr Dolion sits in an armchair opposite us. He crosses one leg over the other and leans towards us.

"So, what couldn't wait till Monday?"

Jacob begins recounting the events of the previous day. As we had discussed at breakfast, he makes out that this was the first time the three of us had climbed to the catwalk and leaves out any mention of Sandra and me being boyfriend and girlfriend. Otherwise, he tells the story just as it happened, in a quiet but steady voice, without exaggeration or comment.

Mr Dolion listens carefully. He nods and frowns and opens his eyes in dismay. When Jacob gets to the part when Sandra tried to throw herself off the catwalk he stands and walks over to the window. He pulls back the thin, orange curtain and hoists the sash window open. Fresh, cool air rushes into the room. He stares out into the courtyard beyond, his hands behind his back, mulling over what he has just heard.

He asks for clarification on a couple of small points. Did she give any details about the alleged rapes? Did she say which grandfather committed these crimes? Had she ever seemed unhappy before these events? Had we told anyone else?

We answer as well as we can. Mr Dolion remains at the window for a minute or two, thinking. Finally, he turns to face us.

"Gentlemen. It is my sincere belief that the two of you have been taken in by a very fine young actress."

He holds us both with his gaze for a moment, ready to silence any objection we might make. The two of us sink back into the angle of the couch, not quite able to grasp what he is saying.

"The story of the abuse seems to me very unlikely. I happen to know Sandra's mother and father quite well, and I can assure you there is nothing untoward

about either of them. The idea that these fine, upstanding people could somehow harbour a pervert in the family seems doubtful. That's the first objection I would raise."

We are both too stunned to move. I notice that Jacob has stopped breathing. I turn to look at him and see his face has turned crimson. His eyes are widening, and his jaw is beginning to quiver.

"The second relates to the manner of this, so-called suicide attempt. Suicide, I'm sorry to say, is in my experience a solitary business. The suicide slinks away from his community out of shame and self-disgust. He does not wish his crime to be witnessed by anyone other than his god, a god who, I may add, will not judge him kindly for his cowardice. The fact that Miss Winter decided to act out this charade in front of you both, suggests to me she was not seriously making an attempt on her own life. Attention, not annihilation, is what that young lady is after."

I find myself nodding my head, not from agreement, but rather out of habit. Mr Dolion has the virtue native to many unimaginative men: that of speaking with complete confidence, untroubled by any suggestion of doubt.

I realise we have made a terrible mistake.

I stop listening and begin to consider our next move. Should we approach the police? The school chaplain? Should I talk to my own parents, or Jacob's?

My train of thought is broken by the awful realisation that Jacob is getting to his feet, even as Mr Dolion continues to lecture us on the mercurial nature of young girls.

"You're wrong." Jacob is trembling from his lower lip down to his knees, but his voice is steady and fortified with contempt.

"Mr Avonlea, sit down. You have had your opportunity to speak and now it is my turn. You will pay me the courtesy of hearing me out."

"No. I won't. You're wrong. She's telling the truth; I know she is. Someone has hurt her, and she's in pain, and you won't do anything to help."

"Mr Avonlea you are on very thin ice. Mr Wrigley, you are excused. Mr Avonlea you and I will continue this conversation in private."

I look at Jacob, hoping to convince him with a look to climb down, to apologize and escape with me into the bright morning that is filtering through the curtains, into this close little room.

He doesn't look at me. He has turned bright red, and his eyes are fixed on Mr Dolion's. A blue vein has emerged from the whiteness of his neck. He is not going to back down. There is nothing I can do.

"Mr Wrigley. Thank you. You may leave."

I hesitate a moment, consider standing in solidarity with my friend.

"Wrigley. Out." Mr Dolion's voice is raised very slightly, but there is a cold fury behind it, one I recognise.

I stand, turn my back on my friend, and walk out the door.

I take up a position on the raised walkway leading around the dining hall and overlooking the playing fields. From there I can see the gate and the front door to Mr Dolion's cottage.

I feel like a traitor. I tell myself it was futile to stay. It would have done nobody any good. Not Sandra, not Jacob, and certainly not me. I tell myself Jacob is a fool to stay and fight with Mr Dolion. It won't change anything. Minds like his are concrete canals: they run between their narrow banks just as they are designed to run, and nothing in nature will cause them to change course.

I wait and watch for movement. Victoria emerges from the house in her netball kit and walks away from me in the direction of the gym. I feel something stirring in my belly beneath the queasy sensations of guilt and shame and worry. As Victoria disappears, I forget the whiteness of her legs beneath her skirt, and I'm left alone with my sickness.

Eventually Jacob appears at the front door, and I move to run to him, to comfort him if I can, to show him I didn't abandon him completely. I stop dead as I see the figure of Mr Dolion following him out the door. Jacob is being frog-marched across the fields towards the prep school. I know what this means.

There is a cane in Mr Dolion's office. Every boy who has gone in there for any reason has noticed it and told his friends about it. It is white and thin and imbued with an intangible malice. Some have claimed it is made from rattan, procured by Mr Dolion during his time in the jungles of Southeast Asia as a young British Army officer. Mr Dolion, for all his failures, is not renowned as an enthusiastic beater of children. But exceptions have been made.

Mr Dolion, in the face of great provocation (it is widely held), and as an alternative to suspension or expulsion (hugely inconvenient for the parents and Mr Dolion is known to be a considerate man), would call a boy to his office. There, in the dim, book-lined brownness, the boy would be calmly, almost solemnly, instructed to drop his trousers and underwear and to lean over the back of Mr Dolion's office chair. There would then follow a period of near silence, while the cane is retrieved from its corner, while Mr Dolion takes up his position, sets himself for the deed at hand. This moment is, by all accounts, the worst.

The sense of dread builds gradually, each sound absorbed and frantically interpreted for clues as to when the inevitable assault will occur. The stories of the excruciating pain experienced by other boys, who would gleefully recount each brutal stroke for the benefit of the next soon-to-be victim, run through the boy's mind on a loop, all the while the sense of humiliation, at being bent, buttocks exposed, over the back of this chair, grow by the second, while waiting for this kindly man to draw back his stick and reluctantly mete out the welts and blood-weeping lacerations.

Indeed, everyone agreed, a boy is lucky to receive this short, sharp shock instead of the longer term, more consequential punishments that might have been his fate.

Word spreads quickly. A caning is big news. Jacob is not universally liked by his peers. He is handsome, popular with the girls, talented academically and musically; a combination that is a little too rich for some of the more modestly-abled children.

Small pockets of whispering boys gather around the closed door of Mr Dolion's office. There is the crackle of gossip, of speculation, of bloodlust in the air. This must be what it was like to attend a cockfight, or a hanging.

I sit halfway up the stairs leading to the dormitories. I still feel sick with guilt, and the gleeful smirks of these boys, overjoyed at finding some kind of diversion on this unpromising Saturday morning, is filling me with rage and disgust. I don't admit to myself the relief I feel at having some external reservoirs for my loathing.

Dougal McKay climbs a couple of steps until his eyes are level with mine. Dougal is a giant of a boy, twelve years old but could easily pass for sixteen. His head is a mallet, his eyes set wide apart, his jaw jutting out in a huge underbite, as if he is trying to bite his own nose out of spite. He is wearing his Waikato representative under-13s rugby jersey, as he does at any opportunity.

"Your mate's in there, eh?"

I nod my head.

"That curly haired poof?"

I don't answer. I look past him down the stairs.

"He's gunna get beats. I heard he's gunna get six of the best."

"Where'd you hear that, Dougal?"

"Don't you worry where I heard it. You'll hear him squealing like a little girl in a minute. You can't tell by looking at him, but Dolion fucking hates poofs."

He gives me his biggest, ugliest grin and walks off laughing to himself.

Cutting through the muted hubbub of the expectant crowd, rises a short, staccato burst of sh-sh-sh. The show is about to begin. The boys fall silent.

I walk down to the bottom step so I can hear whatever sounds emerge from behind Mr Dolion's closed door.

For a long moment there is nothing. Even the birds outside the windows have fallen silent. There is a brass bust of Montgomery Birtwistle in an alcove of lead-paned glass opposite Mr Dolion's study. The top of its bald, brass head catches the sun and twinkles a little in anticipation.

A swoop and a sharp crack. Surprisingly loud and audible to every one of the boys listening so intently outside the door. There is a collective gasp at the sheer volume of the blow. A few giggles. One boy mutters, "Go on, Sir".

A second swoop and crack. Followed by silence.

"Come on Dolion, give him a good one. Let's hear him squeak." This is Dougal. His cronies all chuckle along with him. Most of the boys are silent though. They don't look at Dougal.

Thwack. Silence

Thwack. Silence.

"Jesus". One of our fellow sopranos, Darren. "That's got to be enough. What did he do?"

Eyes turn to look at me. I shrug. Look down at my shoes.

Thwack. Silence.

That must be it. Six strokes of the cane are reserved for the very worst offenders. Six strokes are an alternative to expulsion. Six strokes are for a brutal assault, for serious theft, for smuggling hard liquor into the dormitories. Jacob has done nothing wrong except speak his mind. Five would be too many. Six is savage beyond measure.

Thwack. Silence.

"Six. He got six."

The silence continues. Some boys slink away, ashamed of themselves for listening so long, not wishing to come face to face with Jacob. Most of the crowd hang around, curiosity getting the better of them, wanting to get a glimpse of Jacob's face in the wake of his ordeal.

The door opens and he slips out into the hallway. He looks around at the crowd of boys. He catches my eye, briefly, then looks away. He appears flustered. There is a puffiness around his eyes. He takes the measure of his audience then breaks out his biggest, showbusiness smile. His gaze settles on Dougal.

“McKay. I’ll tell you what. You would have fucking loved that.”

The hallway erupts in laughter. There is whooping and applause. Even Dougal laughs uneasily and gives Jacob a half-friendly punch in the arm with a huge, ham fist.

Jacob clasps his hands together above his head in victory, gives a low bow, and disappears into the shower block.

I find him a little later, after the crowd has melted away into the morning. He is lying naked, face down in the communal shower room. Cold water from two of the shower heads is falling onto his buttocks and thighs. The water flowing down the drain in the middle of the floor is strawberry pink. Jacob is sobbing, his head buried in his arms. Six angry stripes crisscross the middle of his body, from his tail bone to the top of his thighs.

Without looking up he says, “Leave me alone.”

“Are you… are you going to be okay?”

“I’ll be fine. What about you? Will you be okay? Do you remember what happened to Judas?”

I don’t. But I say I do.

He looks up at me. His curls are soaking and hang in spirals and loops over his eyes.

“I forgive you. I’m angry but I forgive you. But go away now. Call your mum. Get her to come and get you. Leave me alone.”

I know I am being dismissed. I wonder for a moment whether or not Jacob has the right to send me away. I know he does. The school, especially at the weekend, is a world I am only half in. I am a guest and if not a guest, then an interloper. Unlike these boys, I have the option to go home.

“Okay. I’ll see you Monday.”

“Yeah. Monday.”

The time is out of joint

After my second son was born I learn the meaning of sleeplessness. The first month is a blur of snatched naps and shared watches, nights and days fusing into one another. While Joanna recovers from the caesarean, it is mostly me who lifts him from his crib, carries him from bed to breast and back, takes the weight of his tiny body on my shoulder, a collapsed star's worth of anxiety, terror, and love.

As time goes on, we expect the situation to improve, but it doesn't, or if it does, progress is so slow as to be imperceptible and therefore meaningless. He is mulishly reluctant to loosen his hold on consciousness, unwilling to turn his eyes away from widening web of connections that form his expanding universe.

Once he is asleep, it takes only one intrusive splinter of light or sound to skewer the membrane of his unconsciousness (a dropped teaspoon two rooms away, a whispered joke, a muzzled gasp from the depths of a dream), and he is quick to shrug off the caul of sleep, to rejoin and swell the ranks of the unsleeping with his howls and clamour and gurgles.

I rise at 3am some mornings to sit at the kitchen table, too wired to follow the baby into sleep, the baby monitor beside me, the second-hand white noise of the dehumidifier in his room my constant soundtrack, writing poems, short stories, diary entries, poetry reviews.

I spent decades putting off the moment when I would start writing seriously, start living my life as I had always intended to live it. And now, at the worst possible moment, when time and energy have never been in such short supply, I finally make the leap, eyes closed, too dazed to think through the consequences of my decision.

I believe it is no coincidence that this emergence of artistic fruitfulness occurs at a time when I am walking, without any particular attention paid to direction, for hours every day.

Soon after Eliot is born, New Zealand is placed into a second, strict lockdown to minimise the spread of Covid-19. Schools are closed, and our six-year-old is suddenly at home all day, every day. There are few things as detrimental to a baby's sleep as the constant presence of a six-year-old brother.

And so, every morning I load the baby into his bassinet, tightly swaddled against the winter wind. I attach the bassinet to the pram and take to the streets. I walk for 15, 20, sometimes 25 kilometres every day.

Sometimes I walk out to the greenbelt that encircles Cambridge. It was meant to serve as a barrier against urban expansion, an objective it has failed to fulfil, as the houses huddle ever closer together within its boundaries, and new suburbs spring up like mushrooms on the cashed-in dairy farms at its outer edge.

We are walking north along Bowen Street, past the new primary school, past the driveway that leads down to my brother's house. I linger for a moment or two, hoping to catch a glimpse of him, hoping not to be caught, pushing the pram away so that only my fingertips grip the handrail, then pulling it back towards me, returning it to the basket of my belly. Back and forth. I stare down the empty driveway. Waiting for something to happen. Relieved that it doesn't.

Perhaps the rocking has sent the boy to sleep? No. He looks up at me as I peek under the bassinet's hood. Awake but calm, the skin of his cheeks a little pink in the cold air. His brown eyes seem to take up most of his being, they swallow the rest of him, and then start on me.

My late father haunts his face: the fold of skin beneath each eye, the Puckish smile.

How are we not paralysed by the weight of this responsibility? How do parents manage to do anything at all? Go for a walk, get in a car, step outside the house? Every action is unfathomable, reckless, insane. And yet here I am, here we all are, the world spins, still.

We are coming to the crossroads with Taylor Street. To the north the new suburbs: closely built, tidy cul de sacs, which could be the outskirts of Dallas, Spokane, Geelong. To the west: the high school, Hautapu rugby club, the trotting track with its solitary stand running parallel with the home stretch, and the floodlights peering down. We head east into the oak arboretum.

There are two dozen species of oak tree here, scattered across a dozen or so acres. A gravel path winding between them. Knee-high plaques stand at the base of the trunks with the species name (common and botanical), the countries and regions to which the trees are native, and the date of planting. The grass surrounding the trees is allowed to grow long and, twice a year, the council harvests a crop of hay.

The trees do not huddle together in the manner of their native cousins. As we meander through the open spaces between the oaks, I stop to read the plaques and speculate on the health or otherwise of each tree. How does this specimen from the Iberian Peninsula feel growing at its precise antipodes, as far as it is possible to get from home? And this one from the Southwestern United States? How cold it must seem here, even in the summertime. How damp its roots must feel. I think

of walking in wet socks and shiver a little. Some trees have lost their leaves and others hold to theirs. I think this tree from central Asia looks unhappy, dusty, exhausted.

Having grown up with the dense, tight, native bush of New Zealand, and having become accustomed to the high garden walls and sheer, concrete cliffs of London, this arboretum seems more like an exhibition of open space than of trees. The oaks have the demeanour of frames, of markers and velvet ropes. It is the wind moving between them that has the quality of an attraction, that invites us to wonder at its presence, to peer at it, walk in a circle around it, hands behind our backs.

The way the light suffuses the dome of the sky and everything beneath it, from horizon to horizon, gives me the creeping sensation of being surveilled. I feel the way I felt in the Gemäldegalerie, attempting to see the tiny square of darkness that was, probably, a minor Rembrandt or a portrait of a merchant by Van Eyck. The sensation of seeing is disrupted by the sensation of being seen: by my fellow gallery goers standing behind me; by the security guards in front of me, at once drowsy and vigilant; by the CCTV cameras collecting their whirring galleries full of their own impenetrable smiles, their own time-worn wings, their own country roads winding off into the horizon, disappearing into dust. The cameras I could see and the ones I could not, whose presence was always assumed.

There is one tree at the southern edge of the arboretum whose plaque carries more weight than the others. It has a history. It is only about six feet tall, little more than a sapling. If you were to rip it from the ground, letting its ragged roots scatter handfuls of soil into the long grass, it would probably weigh less than its plaque. I have retained the grammatical and punctuation peculiarities of the original:

"Lovelock Oak"

Grown from an acorn of the oak at Timaru Boys High School, which was given to Jack Lovelock after winning 1500m at 1936 Munich Olympics.

The plaque is missing the common and botanical names of the species. It is missing a description of the species' natural geographic range. We are not told when the oak was planted.

It is also wrong. The 1936 games were held in Berlin, not Munich.

The plaque is coy about the giver of the gift. A tree was handed to Jack Lovelock after winning a race in Munich (actually Berlin) in 1936. That is all the author of the plaque would have us know. It doesn't mention that Lovelock shook hands with Hitler, who presented him with his medal and the sapling that is now a tree in Timaru. In photographs of Lovelock on the podium, Luigi Beccali of Italy, who came third, is giving a Roman salute.

There is also no indication as to why this acorn, which is now a sapling, has found its way here to Cambridge. Perhaps the town boasts a connection to Jack Lovelock about which it has been uncharacteristically quiet.

Who retrieved, I wonder, this acorn from the Canterbury plains, nurtured it until it was strong enough to stand on its own, and planted it here, opposite the corner of Taylor and Stafford Streets?

Perhaps a former student of Timaru Boys High School who moved north to make his fortune. Who made the journey back to his hometown to collect an acorn from the tree that so inspired him as a boy and decided to plant it in the warmer soil that brought him success as a man.

Did he harbour a deep admiration for Lovelock? For his athletic achievements, his celebrated military service during WWII, his medical career? Did he hope this memorial (if that is what it is) would inspire the students at the nearby high school, just as the parent tree had inspired him?

Did this hypothetical Cantabrian mourn Lovelock's early death, his fall from a railway platform in Brooklyn, New York in 1949? Did he nurture a strong opinion as to whether that death by oncoming train was really an accident?

Moving back to my hometown in my early forties, a hometown I had left when I was seventeen, adamant I would never return, has stirred in me a new feeling for the passing of time. I have lost faith in time's materiality. I no longer believe that its movements resemble that of a wide, docile river, hemmed in by muscular banks, subject only to the meek pull of gravity.

There are seasons when time is in flood. Long summers when it bursts its banks, deposits its detritus carelessly on the slick skin of the Earth. A cow standing despondent on the roof of a house. A car nestled in the branches of a tree. Corpses like milestones on the green hillsides. The bruises and bloodless lacerations measuring the highwater mark, reminding us how close we too have come to going under.

On these long walks, stripped of the mooring weights of duration and destination, the pram out in front of me like a divining rod, my mind raises ghosts

from the gutters. They spring like feral cats from roadside copses, they hover in mid-summer humidity above street signs, stand in the doorways of weatherboard houses, or press up against the glass panes of ranch sliders, open-mouthed, about to ask a question, request a favour.

Some of these ghosts wear the faces of friends and family I thought I had left behind on long abandoned banks. There is Jacob, of course, his pale skin is paler still; his tight curls, dressed always in a yellow rugby jersey, always grinning at some secret he is holding to his chest, deciding whether or not I am worthy of his confidence. He is there as I walk along the high river path towards St. Michael's, he is down by the banks, amongst the gum trees, his lips moving, his voice lost in the dry roar of the wind passing through the brittle skin of eucalyptus leaves.

Fourteen-year-old Jacob troubles me too. This Jacob sits outside St. Michael's chapel when I bring my boys to swimming lessons. His curls are looser now, patches of acne on his cheeks and his chin. He doesn't smile. He is impatient. He is no longer deciding whether or not he can trust me. He knows he can't.

The baby and I continue our tramp along the country roads, eastwards, towards the gentle slope of Maungakawa. In the distance, I see the blond head of Billy Smithson striding away from me towards the hills. A champion runner and swimmer, a fine musician, handsome to the point of blandness. We were friends on and off from kindergarten. When I was 12 or 13 I would go out to his house in the countryside for weekend sleepovers. We would go eeling in the creeks around his property, play tennis on his parents' immaculate grass court, kick a rugby ball back and forth as the sun dipped below the hills.

One Saturday morning we were lying in front of the television, watching cartoons when his father, lean and powerful, his shorts and shirtsleeves unable to contain the guitar-string energy of his veins, emerged from the kitchen and slammed a brick into the television screen.

I can taste the battery-acid bitterness of sudden fear in my mouth, hear the sharp pop of the tube exploding, the fizz of electricity, suddenly without a path to follow, dissipating into the atmosphere. The chirruping of glass collapsing into itself. He picks Billy up by the throat with one hand and opens a ranch slider with the other.

"Go," says Billy's dad, and tosses Billy onto the neat lawn. He doesn't look at me as he walks back towards the kitchen. I stare in wonder at the ruin of the television then go outside to sit beside Billy.

“What the fuck…?” I manage. Billy shrugs and gets to his feet. He sets off running. I follow him. Treeless hills, sharp and corrugated by erosion, loom like waves in a frozen ocean. We climb the nearest one and careen, collapse and tumble down the other side. And then the next hill and the next. We are young and strong and can easily outrun the ozone smell of violence, the crackle of adult despair.

Billy disappeared a few years ago, while I was still living overseas. After unsuccessful stints as a professional surfer, a carpenter, and a pop singer, he had moved back in with his parents, into their new place by the sea at Mount Maunganui. He taught capoeira part time and haunted the surf clubs and cafés. Billy was popular, especially with the young women from Europe and South America who would summer in town, picking up part time work and fleeting romances. He was softly spoken and kind. He made endearingly poor attempts to learn Spanish, French, or German. His relationships were short-lived, but the endings were always amicable. There was just not enough gravity to bind them together. The women could feel the pull of places more permanent – Paris, Madrid, or Sao Paolo – and Billy lacked the solidity to keep them in his orbit; some reservoir of marrow had been siphoned out of him, a hillside of rootless soil washed away by the bludgeoning Waikato rain.

A few days after he disappeared a dog walker found him, in light scraggly bush facing the ocean, under the shadow of a lonely mountain. His body swayed in the gentle southerly, amongst the branches of a Pohutukawa tree, his feet a metre or two above the ground, as if the earth had finally relinquished its pull and set him loose.

Not all ghosts drift towards us from upstream. There are the spectres of lost futures, too. Futures that might have been if the alluvial deposits of catastrophe not been sent stampeding downstream, cutting off time’s tributaries and oxbows.

The baby and I are looping around to the west as the sun descends on the horizon, dazzling me, causing little black fish to swim in my peripheral vision. Sleeplessness is gathering as a dull ache at the centre of my forehead. I close my eyes to shield them from the sun but struggle to force the lids open again. I am, for a moment, sleeping on my feet A dream world, frantic and complex, unfurls, blooms, and then implodes with a snap as a car backfires in the distance.

I drink tepid water from a plastic bottle. I look under the hood of the bassinet to check the boy is alright. He is sleeping, though he smacks his lips lazily, dreaming of milk. He won't sleep much longer.

I am pressing on towards home. The blank fields of the greenbelt are on my right, on my left the road out to Maungakawa and the old sanatorium. On the far side of that road is the Scout Hall, the judo club, and the badminton stadium. Stadium is a grand word for it but that is what the sign says. All three buildings are boxes of wood and corrugated iron. White sheep with black faces blink at me incuriously through a wire fence. It is here, approaching the house in which I grew up, that my brother's many ghosts would sometimes appear.

The most straightforward of those ghosts is the one I sometimes glimpse as he walks his dogs in the evening. He moves slowly, deliberately, as if he is using a set of memorised instructions to put one foot in front of another. If I could get close enough, I would notice his skin, the colour of congealed mustard, except for the ovals of bright red on each cheek, twin patchworks of burst blood vessels, like maps of North Sea shipping lanes. His eyes are almost closed from swelling. He wears my late father's shirts and jerseys, which don't quite fit. James is lost in there. In the clothes of a bigger, stronger man. The handsome face of his youth flickers around the corners of his eyes.

We do not speak. We've said nothing to one another since I called the police about him.

One evening, months ago, he called to tell me he was coming round to punch my fucking head in. He was furious about a letter I sent to his wife, threatening legal consequences should she set foot on our property again. She had come to the house one evening while I was at work, screamed at my pregnant wife and tried to force her way through the front door. She was drunk and angry that my mother was planning to have Christmas lunch at our house.

I am not afraid of my brother. He is frail now, unsteady on his feet. There is something seriously wrong with his shoulder. He needs surgery. But he can't stop drinking for long enough to safely receive a general anaesthetic. By way of contrast, I am as strong and fit as I have been in my adult life. He poses no physical threat, but I have no wish for my sons to witness their father wrestling with an invalid in the driveway, or to hear the threats and insults lobbed backwards and forwards, grenades of failure and trauma exchanged in the kind of total warfare reserved for brothers who have no more relationship left to lose.

My brother, like Billy, was once a champion swimmer and runner. He was a brilliant rugby player, and a first-class golfer. My mother's best friend Janet

Lapfinch coached him at the latter. He had a career as a professional golfer within his grasp if he wanted it, she used to tell us. He was head boy at St. Michael's in his final year. He was charming, quick witted, and handsome. Soon after he finished school, he broke up with one winner of the Miss New Zealand beauty pageant and took up with her successor a few weeks later. Which was either a stunning coincidence or an act of remarkable single mindedness.

His name was on the honour board in the dining hall at St. Michael's. Once for being head boy, and once for his sporting prowess. On sports days his name would be in the programme as the holder of the records for the 100m sprint, the 1500m, and the 3000m. If you have even a passing familiarity with athletics, you will know how unusual it is to be an excellent short, medium, and long-distance runner.

My brother is twelve years my senior, which meant there was always a distance between us. He was, through most of my childhood, an unknowable figure. His interests, his friends, the beer he drank, the cigarettes he smoked, were all beyond my understanding. In my earliest memories he is mostly a conglomeration of unusual and troubling smells, of raised male voices muffled by closed doors, and whispers like broadcast static leaching through my bedroom window at night. All of these signals came attached to the faint but insistent pulse that meant danger, but I wasn't afraid so much as uneasy. His presence in the house was like a raucous party that threatened to intrude on an otherwise peaceful solitude. There was a different timbre to the silence of the house when he was simply asleep and when he was absent altogether.

As I am leaving the fields of the greenbelt behind me, James' apparitions come thicker and faster. On the corner of Princes and Stafford streets, I see my brother as a young boy. I see his blonde hair and his pink cheeks as they were in the faded, matt-finish photographs taken when he was seven, on just this corner, before I was born. Sitting on his Chopper bike, a proud smile on his face. A boy in the best possible place at the best possible time, poised to do something magnificent.

An old friend of James's who knew him fifty or so years ago, when they were kids, catches my eye and stops me. He is on his road-bike. He is lean and fit. He is a member of the Cambridge Tennis Club and a lecturer at the University. He tells me about my brother. Once he starts, he does not want to stop.

"What a talented kid he was. What a wonderful friend. I was a shy kid," he tells me. "I didn't have many friends my own age let alone older than me. One day your brother sees me kicking a soccer ball against the oak trees in McKinnon Park. He's riding his Chopper, and he stops and asks me if I want to kick the ball around with him. We kick it back and forth for a bit. Then he asks me if I play at the soccer club on Saturdays. I say I don't. He asks if I'd like to. I say I would. Fine, he says. I'll come and get you. Where do you live? I tell him. And he jumps back on his bike and rides away. That's the last I'll hear about that, I thought. On Saturday morning he knocks on the door. Got your boots? he asks. I don't have any boots. He holds up a plastic shopping bag. I brought my old ones. They should fit you. And we ride over to the soccer club. He introduces me to all the kids and the coach as his friend. And from that day forward I was in. I was part of the neighbourhood. I was James Wrigley's mate and that was good enough for everyone else. Where is he these days?"

I tell him he lives over on Bowen Street near the Primary School. He looks surprised. I tell him he's not doing very well. He's got some problems. I don't tell him that we don't speak. I tell him I better be getting home. Before the baby wakes up.

I am sixteen. On a hot day during the school holidays, out of boredom I rummage through the boxes of my brother's belongings, stored in the storage room of the family home. I am shirtless in the heat and the dust clings to the sweat on my arms and shoulders. Among the vinyl records (Meatloaf, Deep Purple, Neil Young), the collection of pulp paperbacks, the golf magazines, I find an unbound folder of Gary McCormack poems. It is called *Poems by Request*. The cover, a burnt-orange envelope, has a photograph of the poet and his dog looking out to sea, the sharp hills of Kaiaua beach in the background. Written in a looping, exuberant hand, the words: "To James all the best Gary M". Inside, there are half a dozen folding sheets of paper. Illustrating the poems, printed photographs of women and empty beaches. Line drawings of trees. It is a young man's poetry, romantic, lofty, occasionally didactic. They are not good poems, but there is a joyous sense of wonder within them, a wide-eyed amazement at the fact of their own creation.

It was a death of sorts–
The school prefect, sodomite
Burned out on the cliffs that night,

Every failure of the heart,
Every debt was paid for.
When next morning
I caught the bus to Castlecliff,
Standing naked among the dunes,

Nothing of the boy remained.
That is how we die–
Let no-one tell you
Death comes once
It comes a thousand times.

I come across this pamphlet once more, amongst my own things, just after Eliot is born. I must have decided, as a teenager and a young poet, that this object belonged to me, despite James's name written in the poet's own hand on the cover. What use could he possibly have for poetry?

I wonder about the boy who approached the poet for this inscription. His gentle shyness. The bravery it takes a young man in 1970s New Zealand to approach a poet like Gary M: longhaired, bearded, often shirtless, his hand clasped in yearning to his lean, bare chest. This was a tentative step towards a different world, a world on which, either out of fear or contempt, he would later turn his back. Perhaps that ghost is out there, too. The boy who followed the poet and would not be turned around.

The last of these ghosts is the strangest and I seldom see him. He comes from a place that I suspect is difficult to travel back and forth between. I see him only from a distance. He stands at the gates of the primary school at five minutes to three. His back is straight, and his shoulders are broad and square. He has the slightest hint of a paunch which, you can tell from his posture, he is conscious of and a little embarrassed by. His hair is starting to thin but the streaks of grey that pepper the sides and the back suit him rather well. His shirt sleeves are rolled up to his elbows. He is talking to the school principal. He holds his hands out in front of him to indicate the size of something, perhaps a fish. The principal laughs and he laughs. The other parents smile as they pass by and he acknowledges one or two of them with a smile, or a nod, or a little wave.

From out of the school gates two boys emerge. They are close together in age and they are both as blonde and as beautiful as that boy on his Chopper in the old

photographs. His never-to-be sons. They run towards him, gleeful and surprised because he should be at work, and one after the other he hoists them up in his arms and swings them around. He is strong and healthy, and full of love.

Perhaps if I had never caught a glimpse of that last ghost standing at the school gates, I would believe that the blonde boy on the Chopper flowed naturally and inevitably into the shambling figure walking his dogs in the twilight. And perhaps that would be a comforting thing to believe. That there was never an alternative, that the river never deviated, that time flowed in one cardinal direction, as unchanging as the sun rising at one end of Princes Street and setting at the other.

To know that other futures were once possible compels me to trace the river upstream, to search for the cataclysm that changed its course, to wonder if there was anything that could have been done.

I am nearly home. The baby is beginning to stir, to abandon whatever strange creatures inhabit his dreams. All that is left of the sun that tormented me a few minutes ago are extravagant streaks of pink and violet illuminating the bellies of rain clouds approaching, as always, from the west. I leave the ghosts on the road as I steer the pram into my driveway.

Caldera

Every summer, before I was born, my mother, my father, my sister, and my brother, would stay with the Lapfinches at their beach house at Mount Maunganui. These holidays are still part of the family folklore. The house was down at the Omanu end of the beach, a couple of kilometres from the main township. In those days there were very few houses, and these were mostly modest, weatherboard baches dating back to the 1950s. The Lapfinch house was comparatively extravagant: three bedrooms, one and a half bathrooms, a large lounge and dining area. There was a state-of-the-art record player and sound system with a stack of records, forever out of their sleeves: a selection of John Rowles, Prince Tui Teka, Howard Morrison, John Denver, and Tom Jones. A ranch slider opened from the living area onto a small lawn of tough coastal grass and, beyond that, a plummeting bank down to the wild, lizard-crawling dunes. At night, each bedroom window welcomed in the sound of the surf booming onto the beach below and then the fizzing whisper of rolling shells and stone.

Whisky sours were the thing. Bill Lapfinch mixed them by the pitcher and would dance from guest to wife to guest, never letting a glass drain as far as halfway before topping it up to the brim and dancing away again. Other Cambridge couples holidaying at the Mount would drop by in the early evening and stay for the parties that rumbled on through the night.

Bill was a pilot for Air New Zealand. He was tall and broad with a thin waist which he would accentuate by wearing his trousers high and his belt pulled tight so that the excess leather would dangle and swing halfway down his thigh. Janet was almost as tall and even broader than her husband. When he danced over to top up her drink or to repeat a joke someone had just told, she would draw herself up to her full height and lean in towards him, her eyes, which even in her early thirties were enmeshed in a net of laughter lines, locked to his, challenging him to try to love a smaller, lesser woman. Her shoulders were square and powerful; she insisted on always playing off the men's tee at the Cambridge golf club. She had made Bill teach her to fly and she would take her friends on hair-raising outings in her ancient, single engine aircraft. Her victims said they could hear her booming laughter over the drone of the engine and the sound of their own terrified squeals.

Gregory, the younger of their two boys, was a clever, gentle child who led my brother and sister, three and five years his junior, on lizard hunting expeditions through the dunes, and for long, battering swims in the surf. My parents could watch them from the patch of grass outside the house, as they weaved their way along the sandy paths that cut through the low scrub of the dunes, down to the beach and up again to the house for lunch and glasses of warm Coke from two litre bottles. Gergory leading the way, my brother behind him, and my sister bringing up the rear. The shouts of delight and the whine of petty squabbles would drift upwards from the dunes to reassure the adults, as they nursed their cups of instant coffee and their hangovers.

Bill Lapfinch Junior was two years older than his brother. By his fourteenth birthday he was already six feet tall and used his height to dominate and terrorize his younger brother. My mother claimed to have never seen him smile. He remained aloof from the other children and spoke voluntarily only to his mother and even to her he was domineering and petulant. Every morning he would disappear on his own into the dunes, only returning to the house to demand feeding, or to slink off into the cool darkness of the back bedroom for a nap or to read comics or war stories from dog-eared paperbacks. He ignored my brother and sister and was openly rude to my parents. Despite all this Janet doted on him. She made excuses for his behaviour and took his side in the arguments and fistfights that were the only meaningful communication he ever seemed to have with his brother.

“He’s highly strung, you see, Judith” she would tell my mother. “He’s very bright and he struggles a bit when other kids can’t keep up with him. He’s going to do very well in life. You’ll see.”

Bill Senior only saw what happiness the boy brought to his wife and would throw his hands up in the face of his namesake’s bad manners, slipping my father a sheepish grin and raising his eyebrows as if to say, ‘what can you do?’.

At night, while the adults drank whisky sours and sang and danced into the early hours of the morning, the children would huddle together in the boys’ bedrooms. There were rickety, bare-wood bunk beds that Bill Senior had built himself, and mattresses on the floor for my brother and sister. Most nights, Bill Junior would sequester himself in his parent’s room, watching the black and white television with its rabbit ear antennae until both channels ended their broadcast around midnight. He would sleep there until his parents were finally ready for bed, and then Janet would fireman lift him effortlessly, if a little unsteadily, and pick her way through the piles of discarded towels and clothes

and the bodies of sleeping children, to deposit him as tenderly as she could manage into his own bed.

One morning, it must have been in 1975, Gregory offered to teach my brother to surf. There were two surfboards at the house, one belonging to Bill Junior and one belonging to Gergory. Bill Junior had slipped away straight after breakfast, and no one had any idea when he would return. Gregory asked his mother if James could borrow Bill's board. Janet smiled, a little nervously, and said no, perhaps it would be better to wait until Bill came home, then they could ask him themselves. Bill Senior, who must have seen my brother's crestfallen face, broke with a habit of a lifetime and intervened:

"Let the boy take the board. Who knows when Bill will drag himself home. He'll probably be none the wiser. What he doesn't know won't hurt him."

Janet relented and the boys scooped up the boards and disappeared down into the dunes before anyone could change their minds.

An hour after they left, Bill Junior's sullen head passed by the living room window facing out onto the grass path that led down to the road. Janet let out a little groan of trepidation. He walked through the open ranch slider, saw the adults sitting round the table playing cards, and my sister reading on the sofa. His mother greeted him cheerfully and asked him how he was enjoying the fine morning.

Bill ignored her and wordlessly went into the kitchen and made himself a bowl of cornflakes. He ate standing up, staring out the kitchen window towards the sea. He hadn't seemed to notice the missing boards. The adults kept on with their game, although the calling of trumps was a little more muted than before.

Bill finished his cornflakes and dropped the bowl and spoon into the sink.

"I'm going to lie down." And he disappeared into the back bedroom.

Everyone relaxed, except Janet who stared accusingly at her husband.

"They'll be back soon. It'll be fine." He reached a bare arm across the table and squeezed his wife's shoulder. "It'll be fine".

Another half hour passed before Gregory appeared over the crest of the bank, his board tucked under his arm, pressing against his bare body.

Janet let out a sigh, "Thank Christ".

My brother followed. Instead of a board tucked under one arm, both his arms were full. Bill's board was in two pieces.

My brother was sobbing. A watery trickle of blood ran from under his right eye down to his neck and collected as a stain on the collar of his sodden, white t-shirt. The adults abandoned their cards and rushed out to meet them.

“He got a dumper.” explained Gregory. “Picked him up and smashed him into the sand. I thought he was a dead man. But you’re alright. Aren’t ya, mate?”.

My brother shuddered as he dropped the pieces of Gregory’s board onto the grass and fell into my mother’s arms.

“I’m sorry. I’m sorry Janet. I’m sorry mum.”

“It’s alright, darling boy. It’s alright. We’ll get Bill another board. I’m sure he won’t be too upset.”

The look on Janet’s face suggested otherwise. She walked over to my brother as he cried on his mother’s shoulder. She stroked the wet strands of hair out of his eyes.

“I’m sure it will all work out, sweetheart. I’m sure Bill will be fine. Let’s get that cut cleaned up and get some food into you, eh?”

“What will I be fine about?”

Bill was leaning against the frame of the ranch slider, tapping a rolled-up comic against his thigh. His eyes moved between the remnants of his broken board and my brother’s bloody, tear-stained face.

Everyone fell silent and turned to look at Bill. Janet stiffened.

My brother was shivering with the cold and the shock. “I’m sorry, Bill. I’m so sorry. The wave was so big, and I couldn’t ride it. I’ll get you a new board. I’ve got pocket money saved. I promise.”

Bill continued to stare at my brother.

“I don’t remember saying you could borrow my surfboard,” he said flatly.

“I said it would be alright, darling,” Janet stepped between James and Bill. “I really didn’t think you’d mind. You hardly ever use it these days. And we’ll get you a new one in town tomorrow. A better one.”

“But I do mind and I don’t want a new one. I liked that one.”

“Well,” said Bill Senior, “no use crying over spilled milk, eh? What’s done is done. It was an honest accident, and you can see how sorry the boy is, can’t you? Let’s all have some lunch, shall we? Who likes tuna sandwiches?”

He went to put an arm around his son. The boy shrugged him off.

“There wouldn’t have been an accident if he had never borrowed my fucking board, would there?”

“Bill!” exclaimed mother and father as one.

“Apologise to our guests please, Bill.”

Bill stepped onto the grass and walked towards where James was still huddled in his mother’s arms. She pulled him closer to her body and turned him away, so

her back was facing Bill. He leaned over her shoulder and spoke into my brother's face: "Crying won't help, you know."

With that he picked up one half of the broken board with two hands and flung it over the bank. He did the same with second piece. A terrible, rage-filled scream followed them out into the empty space.

Without turning or saying another word, Bill set off down the track towards the beach, his head down, his shoulders hunched, his steps long and savage.

He was gone for the rest of the day. In his absence, things returned to normal. My brother had his wounds tended to and was assured by everyone that Bill hadn't meant to scare him, that everything would be alright once he'd had a long walk on the beach and got it all out of his system. The cut under his eye was little more than a scratch. After lunch, my mother tucked him into the big double bed in their bedroom and he fell into a sound sleep.

When he awoke after a couple of hours, he was back to his usual, happy self. He went down to the beach with my sister and Gregory and went swimming in the ocean until a squall came rolling in from the south. Bill Senior and my father stood on the edge of the bank and shouted encouragement to the three of them as they came running over the dunes, screaming and laughing and falling over one another into the course, springy scrub on either side of the path.

Janet and my father challenged the children to a game of Monopoly which dragged on for hours and filled up the remainder of the now grey afternoon. Both my father and Janet were hopelessly competitive, so there was much good-natured bickering and the occasional tantrum from the children as they realised the adults had no intention of letting them win. Bill Senior dozed in an armchair and my mother stretched out on the sofa to read a novel.

When Bill Junior returned home, just before dinner time, the worst of his mood seemed to have passed. He went back to simply ignoring my brother, and he even showed a flicker of enthusiasm when Bill suggested the two of them go out to get fish and chips for their tea.

"Can I have twenty cents for the pinball while we wait?"

"You sure can, my boy. For you, anything."

In the middle of the round dining table Bill placed two rugby ball-sized bundles of newspaper, the grease already beginning to seep through to the outer layer. These Janet and my mother unwrapped and left open so everyone could help themselves to soft, thick chips and golden, battered fillets of john dory. Bill Senior handed out paper bags, stained red from the juices of pickled beetroot, to

my brother and the two Lapfinch boys. Inside were huge, sloppy beef burgers, lurid pink coleslaw spilling out from the edges, tomato sauce and pink grease oozing onto hands and arms and faces. Janet and Bill Senior shared a pungent, pitch-black pauā fritter, the look and smell of which caused the children to screw up their faces and howl in disgust.

The men drank beer straight from the bottle. The women, gin and tonics from cheap tumblers. Janet went round the table pouring cold lemonade into glasses for the children. When she by-passed Bill Junior, he was about to complain when Bill Senior, with a smile and a clap on the back, placed an open bottle of beer in front of him. This an unspoken reward for letting bygones be bygones with my brother.

They all ate in silence for five minutes, the receding heat of the day awoke dormant appetites, and every man, woman and child could think of nothing else but the filling of their empty bellies with hot chips and white fish, slices of buttered bread, and the slippery, savoury chaos of beef burgers.

Bill Senior broke the silence with a tremendous belch.

"Well, friends and family" he said over the laughter of the children and censorious howls from his wife and my mother, "It looks like it's going to be quite the gathering this evening. The Cruickshanks will be here any minute. The Baileys will be along at some point in proceedings, and old Jim Noyce will be coming on his own as, I fear, he doesn't know where his wife is. The Saunders are coming over from Papamoa, and rumour has it, they may be bringing the Haywoods with them, although I can't recall inviting them and I'm not sure why I would…"

"Bill…"

"I'm sorry dear but he is as dull as a grey pebble and she is what we used to call at school a harridan… no, you're quite right dear, not in front of the children, or Judith, of course."

My mother leaned over and pinched him on the arm.

"Horrible man."

"The horriblest" agreed Janet.

"You all had better get things cleaned up and I'll start on the whisky sours."

Guests began to arrive. Gregory, my brother, and my sister made themselves useful, helping Bill Senior serve the drinks, making conversation with the guests, fetching the outdoor furniture inside so the adults all had somewhere to sit.

Bill Junior watched television in his parent's room, emerging every so often to cast dark eyes over the gathering, and to top up his glass with Coke. As the adults relaxed and the party hit its stride, my sister saw him sneak a glug of scotch into his glass. He caught her eye and stared at her coldly until she looked away. She thought about telling Bill Senior but thought better of it. Let him drink till he's sick, she thought, it'll serve him right.

As the light began to drain away from the sky outside, leaving only whisps of pink cloud on the line of the horizon, the chatter of adults swelled, the music was turned up, and the children slipped away from their parent's attention. They played outside in the twilight, at 'go home stay home' and 'blind man's bluff', their eyes adjusting to the thickening gloom. They found their way across the lawn and between the cars parked in the driveway only by the light of a pale quarter moon, which had risen above the mountain to the north when no one was looking.

"Gregory!" Janet called from the open ranch slider, drink in hand, her eyes scanning the darkness of the lawn for the bare, white limbs of the children, her vision not yet accustomed to the moonlight.

Gregory appeared from one side of the house, my brother from the other, and my sister emerged the from the scrub at the crest of the bank.

"Who's hiding and who's seeking?"

"Gregory's seeking," my brother replied.

"No, you're seeking, silly."

"Oh. I wondered what was taking so long."

"Well, it's time you kids got ready for bed. It's nearly eleven o'clock."

My brother looked shocked.

"Eleven o'clock? Holy!"

"Exactly. Put on your pjs, brush teeth, then bed."

They followed Janet inside and weaved between the groups and pairs of adults gathered between the dining table and the kitchen. It had long since reached the point of the evening when the adults seemed to the children even stranger than usual. They swayed from side to side in time with the music, they broke out into song to accompany whatever was on the record player, they shouted across the room to one another, and barked strange questions at the kids as they passed by on their way to bed.

"How's the swing, Jack?", (this to my brother whose name was not Jack), "How's your father, Greggy?", and "Who's your father, Greggy?", (much

laughter from around the room, and some good-natured menacing from Janet), “Why’s Jack’s hair so white when Geoff’s is black as pitch, eh Judith?”.

My brother and sister kept their heads down and made a beeline for the door to the hallway that led through to the rest of the house. They were briefly detained by my mother, seizing them both by the shoulders and kissing them, wishing them a goodnight, and promising to check in on them once they were asleep. Gregory stopped and chatted and laughed with the guests, shaking hands, and shaking his head when sips of drinks were offered. (“Got a plane to fly, have ya?”, “Never stopped his old man!”)

Janet helped James and my sister get cleaned up and into their pyjamas. As they walked down the hall towards the kid’s bedroom, she scooped my brother up into her arms. She pushed open the door to her and Bill Senior’s bedroom and peeked inside.

“Let’s see if Bill Junior’s awake,” she whispered in my brother’s ear.

The black and white television was still casting flickering shadows across the bare, white walls. On the screen, gentle electric organ music accompanied a cartoon kiwi putting himself and his cat to bed in a television studio. Bill Junior snored quietly. Janet flicked off the television.

“He gets angry sometimes when things don’t go as he thinks they should”, she whispered to my brother. “But he means well. I think you two will be the best of friends in the morning. Don’t you think?”

“I hope so, Janet. I think Bill’s great.”

“I reckon he thinks you’re pretty special as well, darling.”

She carried my brother into the kids’ room, where my sister was already asleep on her mattress on the floor, and Gregory was reading a comic by torchlight on the bottom bunk. She lay my brother’s slight body down on the mattress, pulled the thin blankets up to his shoulders, and kissed him on forehead.

She reached over and stroked my sister’s hair, before rising and going over to Gregory.

“Goodnight darling. You’ve done a wonderful job looking after these kids. I’m proud of you. Don’t be too angry with your brother, will you?”

“No mum. Goodnight.”

“Don’t read too late, will you?”

“No, mum.”

Janet slipped out of the room and back to her guests.

It is turning into the biggest party of the summer. Carload after carload of unexpected guests arrive, as the pubs in town close their doors. Revellers spill out onto the lawn and down the side of the house and into the driveway. Janet and Bill are unfazed and welcome friend and stranger alike with a hug or a handshake and a drink.

Jim Noyce, in a snatched moment of introspection, takes one step too far when staring out to sea and tumbles, head over heels, down the bank. There are cries and gasps of horror from the men and women who witness the disappearance, and Janet and my father rush to the edge, only to see Jim standing at the bottom of the steep incline, with one shoe missing, his glass held high above his head.

"Didn't spill a fucking drop, Wriggles!".

Not one to be upstaged, my father takes a few steps backwards, runs towards the edge, and leaps out into the void, his arm outstretched like an Olympic diver, before falling to earth and rolling, somersaulting, and cartwheeling all the way to the bottom to join his friend.

The wind picks up from the south, shepherding guests inside. The sofa apart, on which Jim Noyce and both Haywoods have fallen asleep, it's standing room only. The music gets louder still, and couples begin to dance. The men croon along to Frank Sinatra, the women bawl Abba's Waterloo into one another's flushed faces.

Janet is called into the kitchen to help Bill with the whisky sours before convincing him to give up playing barman and join in with the dancing. Almost everyone has a cigarette in one hand and a drink in the other. A scuffle breaks out in the kitchen but is quickly broken up by Janet and Bill. A few of the younger guests slip out into the driveway to share a joint. Half a dozen hardy souls decide to brave the wind and disappear down to the beach for a skinny dip in the waves.

Around three AM, things begin to quieten down. One by one, couples drift away, either on foot along the beach or in one of the cars that fill the driveway and the road outside. Bill and Janet, their arms draped around each other, partly out of love, partly out of exhaustion, bid each guest a safe trip home and a long and happy life.

The music has been turned down to allow people to say their goodbyes. Prince Tui Teka's *Let's Stay Together* plays as people seek out their coats in piles on the backs of chairs, ask each other which way they're going home, clap Bill on the back and say, "Top man." My mother and father are collecting glasses and piling

them up in the kitchen. Everyone is wobbling. Everyone is thinking about their beds.

As the record comes to an end, and the music gives way to by the looping, train track rhythm of the final groove, a sound intrudes into this atmosphere of weary contentment. A high-pitched wail that everyone who hears it: Janet, Bill, my mother and father, the last few guests on their way out the door, dismiss at first as coming from somewhere along the beach, or from a neighbouring bach, or from a car passing by on the road outside. But the sound does not stop or disappear into the distance. It grows, and it changes, from a wail to a series of short barks, like a bad cough. Everyone stops what they are doing and listens. From somewhere at the back of the house a door is opened and pushed with some violence into the wall behind it. The sound is clear now. It is the sobbing, breathless cries of a child. And yelling. And something else.

A split second after that the door to the kitchen flies open and my sister is there in her pyjamas. Her face white as cotton wool. “Mum, Dad, help. Please….”.

My father and Bill Senior rush through the door, Janet just behind them. My mother puts her arms round my sister. “What is it? Oh god. What is it?”

My sister says nothing. My mother picks her up and carries her back into the hallway. The adults are crowded into the doorway of the kids’ room.

On the floor between the mattresses, Bill Junior is on his back. His brother is straddling him. He is raining open hand punches onto his brother’s head and face. He is saying, “you bastard, you leave him, you leave him, you sick bastard.” Bill’s nose is bleeding. He is looking up at the ceiling. And he is laughing. There is blood on Gregory’s hands, but he keeps punching until his father grabs his wrists and pulls him away. Bill is still laughing.

On the mattress beside them lies my brother. Curled into a ball on his side. His pyjama pants and underwear pulled down around his knees. He hugs those bare knees to his chest. His eyes are closed tight and from somewhere deep within him comes that noise. With every gasp he pulls something of this room, of this moment, into his bones, to the very marrow, and with every howling sob something leaves him, something light, like gossamer, leaves him, dissolves into the atmosphere, like electricity, and is gone.

Billiard Room

Every blade of grass is encased in a cocoon of frost. There is resistance underfoot and a satisfying crunch as we make our way across the playing fields. We bend to examine the individual strands in their skeletal casings, drops of meltwater forming at their tips, causing the grass to bow and bend groundwards. In these spheres of melting frost we can see the entire expanse of blue sky, the shimmering liquid sun, and our two faces blurring and bulging, rippling and magnifying the ripe berries of our cheeks. We are ten years old, and we are between worlds, perhaps one of us further through the veil than the other one can guess.

At home, tucked under the baby-blue duvet, are three soft toys: two dogs and a bear, Jimmy, Hawaii, and Fozzie. Here at school I speak confidently of sex and invent encounters with older girls from Auckland on holiday by the beach, informed as I am by the movie *Grease* which my sister and I have watched perhaps 50 times on the Betamax video player in the billiard room.

The house has a billiard room because in 1977, the year of my birth, my father won the trifecta at the Melbourne Cup and immediately purchased a full-sized billiard table from a friend who had not won the trifecta. Upon returning home a few days later, he broke the news to my mother.

“Where the hell are we going to put it?” she asked. “It’ll look lovely out there by the plum trees. And unless you’ve got a better idea then that’s where it’s going to go.”

After an evening of arguing back and forth the truth was gradually extracted from my father. He was always vague when it came to how much money he actually had. The win wasn’t just big enough to pay for the table. It was big enough to pay for an extension onto the house. It was, he admitted, enough to pay for a billiard room plus a second storey with two large bedrooms and a bathroom. Ruth and James would have brand new bedrooms and there would be plenty of room for baby Lucy and the new arrival.

The billiard room had thick, dark brown carpet which you could run your fingers through like a pet. There was a dartboard, an ornate scrolling scoreboard with black walnut trim, a heavy ranch-slider that led out to the tangelo trees in the garden, and a corner set aside for technological entertainments, which featured at various times: a vacuum tube television; a Betamax video player and later, as we realised we’d gambled on the wrong format, a VHS; a Commodore 64; an Atari

games console; a record player; a double tape player; and ultimately, a CD player. Under the stairs that led to the bedrooms, there was a cupboard dedicated to the storage of wine. Most impressively, and the thing that drew gasps of disbelief from visiting friends over the years, a bar complete with bar stools, an undercounter beer fridge, a wine fridge, a Soda Stream, matching flannel beer mats and sturdy glass ashtrays, and a fully stocked backbar that featured every spirit and liqueur required to throw an excellent party.

On the top shelf there were a dozen stone bourbon bottles painted with scenes from a duck hunt. I never saw anyone pour a drink from these bottles. They were more for decoration than drinking. I now keep them on a high shelf in my own modest kitchen just a few doors down the street. They were been locked away for years as part of the battle to keep James sober. I can't bring myself to throw them away.

The walls of the billiard room were lined with finishing-post photographs of racehorses that my father had been connected with in one way or another. The horses had names like Bellerophon and Bramble Rose. There was a bronze etching of a sunset over a river valley and a risqué painting of a woman lying on her side with her bare buttocks exposed to the viewer, which my mother hated but sold for a sizable amount of money after my father's death.

The billiard table itself was immense. Its six legs were turned mahogany, only slightly diminished versions of the trunks from which they had emerged. The felt of the playing surface was lush and pristine in a way that nothing in nature could be. To us children, the table was a universe in itself, complete with separate planes and dimensions which we could explore and even pass between. The luxuriant carpet and the fat hardwood trunks of the legs made a forest floor which lay in near darkness beneath the dense canopy of the table. Even on the hottest days it was cool under there and my sister and I along with our playmates would play games of the dark earth, of rabbit burrows, and secret tunnels, of buried treasure, and exhumations the dead.

We were too small and careless to touch the felt of the tabletop. It was a forbidden kingdom; a verdant Tibet. We would sit on the stairs, draping ourselves between the bannisters to watch my father and my brother and their assorted friends weave their magic with the slender wands they would pluck from a rack along the wall. The cues were inseparable from the sorcery of their cigarettes, which they held between elegant fingers, their wrists cocked as they leant against the brass plated, dark-grained edges of the table, or dangled from their lips as

they leant over the green expanse, deep in concentration, the smoke somehow curling upwards to disappear into the darkness, and never drifting into their eyes.

Of course, a forbidden country is a temptation for anyone with blood in their veins. When we knew my father and my brother weren't home and Mum was busy in another room, we would crawl up from the darkness of the forest to explore the higher kingdoms, daggers between our teeth, sniffing the air for danger.

When the men weren't using the table, it was covered by a heavy linen cloth the colour of snow that had lain undisturbed on rocky ground for a day or two. So games on the tabletop were games of a Northern winter we only knew through fairy stories, of blizzards, and wolves, kindly woodsmen, and pale witches. We would dig under the edges of the cloth and send snooker balls ploughing ominous furrows towards each other. They were boulders falling from a mountainside, avalanches, bullets from a hunter's gun.

Jacob and I had been sent out into the frosty morning by Miss Sweers to collect a box of Bunsen burners from the science department. She had found us sitting talking to one another when she entered the classroom. She was perhaps looking for an opportunity to spend a minute or two alone before the teaching day began and so immediately dismissed us back into the cold air. We were happy enough to oblige.

We crunched across the fields and enjoyed the different texture of silence produced by the frost-covered grass. The morning sun was just strong enough to brush our faces with warmth.

"Where will we sleep when I come to your house?" Jacob asked.

I hadn't thought about it. "I don't know. Maybe we'll set up a fold-out bed in my room? Or maybe we could camp under the billiard table. In sleeping bags."

Jacob seemed to like that idea.

"I think my mum and dad want to meet your mum and dad." He didn't look at me when he said this. "I think they want to come in for a cup of tea when they pick me up on Sunday". He started humming to himself and swinging his arms to keep warm.

"Ok. That sounds fine."

"Will we go to church on Sunday?".

"Umm. Probably not." I had never been to church with my parents. As far as I was aware, neither of them had ever stepped foot in a church.

My father's worldview was openly hostile to, but also partially formed by, religion. He saw religion as the primary source of evil on the face of the planet. He blamed it for war, for poverty, for child abuse, and all expressions of stupidity. He could become furious at the merest mention of Anglicanism, Methodism, Presbyterianism, or evangelicalism (at that time, in the cloistered world we all inhabited, there was no awareness of Islam, Judaism, or Hinduism – but he surely would have had some strong feelings had they been brought to his attention). The sectarianism of his childhood in the inner suburbs of Auckland meant he reserved a particular vitriol for all things Catholic. ("Fucking Catholics and their fucking pope. How could anyone be so fucking stupid? How could anyone believe all that bullshit a unless they were stupid? The blood of Christ every Sunday. The flesh of Christ on Christmas eve. Bloody ridiculous. How could any intelligent person believe that shit? Tell me. Tell me how?). He'd tell stories about pitched battles he and his schoolmates would fight with children from the local Catholic high school in Point Chevalier. When his sister Elizabeth had announced she was marrying a Catholic, he informed her that from that moment on he would never speak to her again.

And he didn't.

They exchanged not one word right up until his death fifty years later. He was proud of this excommunication. But that was only half the story. The truth was he always hated Elizabeth for reasons none of us could ever quite unpick. His sister Marjorie had also married a Catholic and not only had he stayed on good terms with her, but he also counted her husband as one of his closest friends. In fact, a sizable minority of Dad's close friends were devout Catholics.

Jacob and I traipsed up the hundred or so shallow concrete steps that led from the playing fields to the prep school and Miss Sweers' classroom. We hadn't said anything since he'd asked about church. "Do you think we could go to church on Sunday? Would your mum take us?"

"I don't think so Jacob. It's not really something we do. Can't you miss a week? Does it matter that much?"

"Not to me, no. It doesn't matter to me".

He looked down at his shoes, wet with melted frost. He turned back as we got to the top of the steps and looked back at our footstep in the frost. I turned and looked too. We stood in silence a while. Jacob took the box of science equipment from my hands and placed it on the ground beside us. Then slowly, deliberately, he put his arms around my shoulders and pulled me towards him in an embrace. He held me like that for a minute or more. I was too confused to hug him back or to pull away. He whispered in my ear: "I love you, David". He let me go and took a step back, picked up the box and turned towards the classroom. "Come on. She'll boil her brains if we're too much longer."

When Jacob was eight, in the year before I started at St. Michael's, Mr Glick had taken the choir on a trip to Norfolk Island. Jacob had already established himself as the lead soprano and was strongly encouraged by Mr Glick and the school chaplain to make the trip.

Norfolk Island lies in the Pacific Ocean between New Zealand and New Caledonia. It was first settled around the 13th or 14th century by Polynesians arriving from the south, possibly from New Zealand, and Melanesians from the north. It had long been abandoned by the time Captain James Cook sighted and landed on the island in 1774. Its terrible isolation and poor horticultural prospects had proved too much for those early settlers, causing them to climb back into their canoes and brave the great emptiness of Pacific once more.

It had twice been used by the British as a penal colony and was also seen as a valuable source of flax when the Royal Navy's supply of hemp was cut off by Catherine II of Russia.

The British eventually abandoned the island and it remained uninhabited until 1856 when the descendants of Tahitians and the *Bounty* mutineers were resettled there, forced to leave their homes on the Pitcairn Islands once the population had swollen beyond the limits of their resources.

One hundred and ninety three people left the Pitcairns and 194 arrived on Norfolk Island, a baby having been born in transit.

Over the years many of the settlers returned to the Pitcairn Islands but many remained, and their numbers were bolstered by new settlers arriving on whaling ships. The island has its own creole called Norfuk, a mixture of 18th century English and Tahitian which they brought with them from the Pitcairns, and which has undergone its own gradual evolution on these new shores.

The island has only a handful of last names, so nicknames are common and are even listed in the phonebook. A selection of these from 2021 edition: Carrots, Dar Bizziebee, Diddles, Geek, Lettuce Leaf, Possum, Pumpkin, Smudgie, Truck and Wiggy. The 1986 census, the year of the choir trip, showed a population 2386 people.

When I first heard about this trip from my fellow choristers, I was intrigued. "Where is Norfolk Island?" was my first question. My next question was "Why?". Why would you take a group of thirty or so boys thousands of kilometres across the south Pacific to visit an isolated rock with a population that was a fifth of the size of Cambridge? As a child it made very little sense to me. Now, as an adult and a parent looking back, it makes even less.

When I questioned Jacob about the trip, a year or more later, he answered robotically, as if by rote. They'd gone to sing in the local churches. They'd performed at government house for the President of the Legislative Assembly and other dignitaries. They were treated very well, and Norfolk Island was very beautiful. They'd gone swimming in the sea and Jacob had seen a pod of southern right whales from the shore. Mr Glick was much more relaxed than he is at school and was actually really fun. The chaplain came too. Jacob's mother was on the trip as well.

Miss Sweers would sometimes ask Jacob about the trip during class when we were discussing the geography of the south Pacific (which was often, as Miss Sweers, in one of the many surprising twists and turns that made up her personality, was a vociferous critic of French nuclear testing in the region), or the choir, or the voyages of James Cook. He replied to the class in the same way he replied to me, automatically and with little of his usual enthusiasm and animation.

There were two or three other children in the class who had been on the trip. They too seemed unwilling to discuss any details beyond the generalities of geography and what was published in the official itinerary. It seemed to me as if all the boys were trying to avoid being caught out in a lie, as if they were worried that if they disclosed a detail that deviated from the official version of events as published in the end-of-year school chronicle, they would be caught in an inconsistency. They seemed terrified of incriminating themselves.

Soon, we all stopped asking.

That weekend Jacob came to stay at my house. After our soccer game on Saturday, my mother collected us and brought us home. Jacob ate lunch with my

mother and sister and me. I could tell how charmed my mother was. Jacob was not only unceasingly polite but also spoke with a confidence that was beyond his years without being obnoxious. When he addressed my mother, he always called her Mrs Wrigley but the way he said it, it was if the name was a private joke between them, as if had my sister and I not been there the conversation would be all first names and gossip about the local bridge club. I could tell my mother was comparing this specimen with my shy and silent (read: completely normal) classmates from Cambridge Primary and quietly congratulating herself on her decision to send me to St. Michael's. Jacob's charm worked in our favour. My mother often confused polished social skills with upstanding morality, so Jacob and I were given the run of the house and the surrounding districts. I told Mum that we were heading out to show Jacob the neighbourhood and she waved her cigarette at us magnanimously and sent us into the world.

We celebrated this freedom by making our way down through the tight bamboo forest at the top of Te Koo Utu, eschewing the many cut tracks, down the steep banks, scrambling over the roots of enormous fir trees, colliding with the soft black trunks of ponga, our shoes vanishing into the humus of golden plane leaves, spiked chestnut shells, mushrooms and rich, fragrant earth.

We made it to the bottom of the bank and sat down on the picnic benches at the north end of the lake. I produced a crumpled packet of Benson and Hedges cigarettes that I'd stolen from my brother when he passed out on the floor of the billiard room two weekends ago. There were nine cigarettes left. They had been squashed enough so that the spongey tips of the filters were no longer round but not enough so the paper split and made them unsmokable. Jacob produced a Bic lighter, and we smoked a cigarette each.

"You're not inhaling. Did you know that?" Jacob asked.

"I am inhaling," I replied. "I just inhale a little bit at a time. It's cooler that way."

"Oh. Ok then. If you say so." Jacob smirked and watched me closely as I took the next puff. I did my best to take the sharp smoke into my lungs. I tried to hold back a cough but couldn't and smoke and spittle exploded from my mouth, and I collapsed into a choking fit on the ground beside the bench.

Jacob looked amused but managed to ask me if I was alright instead of laughing at me. "Come on, let's walk." We wandered around the lake, Jacob smoking his cigarette. I left three quarters of mine in the mud behind us.

Jacob asked me if I knew any girls we could visit. I told him I didn't. He looked disappointed and told me that I should come and stay with him in Tokoroa

some time. “I know girls all over town there. And I’ve kissed most of them. You should get to know some girls. Then we could really have some fun.” I nodded vaguely and wondered to myself how I could go about meeting girls. How does someone do such a thing? Just walk up to them on the street? It seemed impossible.

Later that night, Jacob and I lay awake beneath the billiard table. We could feel its weight in the air above us, compressing the atmosphere so it lay heavy on our chests. The room was quite dark. I could hear Jacob shuffling around in his sleeping bag. Suddenly, his mouth was beside my ear. I could feel the heat of his breath.

“What do you think? When I talk like this? How does it sound?”

His voice was deeper, richer, like the voice of a twelve- or thirteen-year-old. It even quivered and shook momentarily just as older boys’ voices did when they were beginning to change.

“Holy shit! Your voice is breaking.” I was amazed and instantly felt a plummeting sensation in my stomach brought on by anxiety and the fear of being left behind.

“No. It’s not.” His voice returned to its normal register. “I’m trying it out. I think I want to quit the choir, but I don’t want to have to explain why. I thought if I just started to sound like my voice was breaking then they’d let me go without fuss.”

“Why don’t you just quit? If you don’t want to do it, don’t do it.”

“Glick would go mental if I quit. Seriously, I don’t know what he’d do, he wouldn’t let me. And mum, mum would be furious. The chaplain would have something to say. Miss Sweers as well. Everyone would be on my back. This is the only way out.”

We lay in silence for a while, and I thought about what he’d said. It rang true. Jacob was an asset, a resource. Glick’s whole life was tied up in the success of the choir and Jacob was irreplacable. There’s no way he’d just let Jacob walk away.

“You’re right.” I said at last. “Keep practicing. Talk to me like that whenever there’s no one else around. We’ll get you out of that choir, no problem.”

Jacob reached out in the darkness and found my shoulders. He slipped his arm around my neck. “Thanks, David. You’re a real friend.”

I felt good about that. I believed it.

The next morning was Sunday and Jacob seemed subdued. He ate breakfast sullenly, replying to my mother's questions and prompts but without the grace and humour he had brought to their conversation yesterday. Afterwards, when we were alone in my room, I asked if he was ok. "Is it the church thing? Are you feeling bad about missing church?" He looked blankly at me for a minute before he registered what I was talking about.

"No. Church? No. I suppose I'm just nervous about mum and dad coming here. I hope it goes ok."

"It'll be fine. Don't worry. I'm sure our parents will hit it off."

That morning it rained. The kind of purgative downpour that descended on the Waikato every few weeks. The air would go still and the birds would stop singing. Our dog growled lazily from somewhere underneath the dining room table. My mother would get a headache and have to go and lie down. My father stalked through the house, peering outside from behind the yellow curtains, muttering to himself. Then one or two heavy raindrops would land on the tile roof, like a clearing of the throat, the tap of a conductor's baton. Then the rain began in earnest. An ocean's worth of water would hit the roof and the noise was a great beast roaring, silencing any conversation, catching hold of your attention and refusing to release it.

Jacob and I lay under the billiard table and listened. We were silent and still. We peered out from between the table legs and through the ranch slider door, watched the rain drops explode against the concrete, watched the surface of the swimming pool become opaque with colliding ripples. We listened as the downpour, impossibly, intensified. The pink noise of a billion rain drops hitting a thousand surfaces seemed to rise a tone or two, and the stillness inside the billiard room solidified, and Jacob and I were frozen like beetles in aspic.

Perhaps we fell asleep.

The rain began to slow. The great roaring tailed off into a low mutter, as if embarrassed that it had failed to drown us all. Jacob and I stirred and stretched beneath the billiard table.

The doorbell rang. The sound of adults greeting each other drifted in through the window above the stairs that looked out on the front garden, the driveway, and the front door. There was laughter and shouts of pleasure and a stream of half-heard jokes and teasing insults. The front door closed and the voices were muted for a moment before they reasserted themselves, booming through the door that led from the billiard room to the living room. We heard the sound of glasses clinking.

“Sounds like your parents have got friends over,” Jacob mumbled as he stretched his arms and chest and writhed around on the thick carpet.

“The Lapfinches. I think they’re here for lunch.”

“Shall we go and say hello?”

“I suppose we should.”

We crawled out from under the table and got to our feet. We were still drowsy from the rain. We both yawned.

“David Wrigley, sir, how the devil are you.” Bill Lapfinch reached me in two great strides, his hand out in front of him.

“I’m fine thanks Mr Lapfinch.”

“Call me Bill for god’s sake. And who’s this fine looking fellow?”

“This is my friend Jacob from school.”

“Hello to you Jacob, a pleasure to meet you. Any friend of David here is a friend of ours.”

“Thank you, Bill. A pleasure to meet you, too.”

“If you like me, you should meet my wife. Janet! Come here at once and say hello to these boys.”

Janet walked towards us slowly, a gin and tonic already in her hand. Her eyes flitted between Jacob and me.

“Well boys. What a sight for sore eyes you both are. It gets so exhausting looking at these old, withered faces all afternoon. David, you really are the spitting image of your brother at this age. What are you? 11? I think James was 12 when you were born.”

“I’m still ten, Mrs Lapfinch.”

“And goodness me! Who’s this? What beautiful curls. An angel stands before me,” she extended a hand with a great show of formality. “Janet Lapfinch, my angelic friend. And who might you be?”

“Jacob Avonlea, madam. Pleased to meet you.”

“Jacob Avonlea. Well, I shall remember that name. St. Michael’s boy, are you?”

“Yes, Mrs Lapfinch.”

“A boarder, I suppose. And where are you from?”

“Tokoroa, Mrs Lapfinch.”

“Oh. Well, never mind, you’re here now, eh? Do you golf? David, are you golfing yet? Don’t waste those good genes my boy.”

My mother interrupted the interrogation, which I found terrifying but Jacob seemed to enjoy.

“Boys, go and clear things up in the billiard room. Put away your sleeping bags and whatnot, and open a window. Get rid of that stale air. We might want to play some snooker later.”

We were invited to sit down to lunch with the adults. Mum had made an enormous beef pie which she placed in the middle of the table and accepted the gasps and applause of my father and the Lapfinches. The pastry was golden and lustrous and promised warmth and comfort.

My father opened a bottle of claret. There was already a bottle of champagne on the table. A confusion of glasses had to be navigated while Mum sliced and dispensed pieces of pie to the adults and children. My parents and the Lapfinches spent a great deal of time toasting one another, and the pie, and the rain which the farmers will no doubt be pleased about, and Jacob, and me, and friendships that endure through the decades.

Midway through the meal my brother came home to collect my father’s old golf clubs that he had arranged to borrow for a trip to Taupō with a group of friends. Everyone seemed pleased to see him. Janet immediately rose from the table and crossed the room to embrace him, saying how he was even more handsome than ever, that she was thrilled he was still golfing, that Michael would love to catch up with him soon.

Bill came over and shook his hand while the other hand rested on my brother’s shoulder.

“A glass of red, James?”

“Sure. Quick one.” My brother pulled a spare chair from the kitchen. He declined repeated offers of a piece of pie. “Not hungry, thanks. Although it looks great. Mum, you didn’t make that did you?” My mother feigned outrage. Everyone laughed.

Then, for a moment everyone was silent. I watched Jacob watching the collection of adults around the table. He looked like a kid at the zoo, mesmerised and quite enchanted by this happy scene. He didn’t notice the silence. How everyone stared down at their glasses. How everyone was remembering something, pushing the memory aside as quickly as they could. They all started to speak at once and the party continued through the afternoon.

The rain continued to fall. The ferocity of the morning had been replaced by sheets of misty drizzle. Jacob and I spent the afternoon playing computer games and watching videos in the billiard room. My brother left after a couple of hours.

We heard him pull away in his Datsun, the wheels spinning on the wet tarmac of the driveway. What little light there was in the day began to seep away.

"Do your parents remember that my mum and dad are coming to visit?" asked Jacob as we sit staring at the TV screen.

"I reminded mum this morning."

"Are their friends going to leave?"

"Dunno. Once they get started it can go on all evening. It'll be fine though."

Even as I tried to reassure my friend, I could feel his anxiety creep into my mood.

I got up and went into the living room, telling Jacob that I needed to pee.

The adults had retired from the dining table to the lounge suite in front of the TV. They were watching horse racing and Janet was on her feet and yelling encouragement through the television. Everyone had a cigarette in their hand. Ashtrays, wine glasses, and tumblers full of brown liquid were perched on the arms of every chair and sofa.

I crept over to mum and leaned over so my chest was resting on her lap and my feet were dangling above the carpet. I looked up sideways, watching her watch the television.

"Everything alright darling?" she asked without looking at me.

"You remember Jacob's parents are coming, don't you?"

The race ended and Janet launched a volley of highly original profanity towards the television.

Mum looked down at me. "I haven't forgotten, David. They're coming for a cup of tea, probably between five and six. They won't stop for dinner. Is that right? Have I got the gist?"

"Yes Mum. Are the Lapfinches staying long do you think?". Mum looked around at Janet arguing heatedly with my father about the performance of the horse on which she had apparently just lost a great deal of money.

"I shouldn't think so, darling. Now off you go."

I shuffled back into the billiard room and crawled under the table. Jacob was lying on his back staring at the underside of the tabletop.

"Everything's going to be fine. They seem to be winding down. I'm sure they'll be going home soon. It's a Sunday after all."

But they did not go home. As darkness fell, the party seemed to find another gear and the voices got louder and the laughter more raucous, and soon I heard the distinct tinkle and rattle of whiskey sours being served.

Jacob's anxiety gradually seemed to dissolve into apathy as he lay there under the table as still as a cat, and the darkness collected and filled every nook and crevasse of the billiard room like flood water.

Jacob and I had drifted off into our own private reveries when the door crashed open, and lights were switched on one by one. We crawled out from under the table, blinking and squinting.

"Well, hello there, little grubs." Janet boomed. "I'd quite forgotten about you both. Do us a little favour and get this cover off the table, would you?"

The adults drifted in, drinks and cigarettes in their hands.

"Now, Mr Wrigley. We'll start with twenty each on the table and we'll see how we go shall we?" Janet was collecting red balls from the string bags of the pockets and rolling them towards one end of the table where my father was waiting with a wooden triangle. She placed different coloured balls on black felt dots at different points around the table.

Smoke filled the room. The adults were paying us no attention, so we climbed the stairs to watch proceedings from a distance. Janet set the twin scrolls and the brass sliders of the scoreboard to zero. My father and Janet both produced crumpled green bank notes and placed them on the edge of the table, weighted down by a cube of blue snooker chalk.

"It's beautiful." Jacob whispered as my father bent over the table, his brow creased in concentration, his left hand cocked on the green felt of the surface, the cue between his fore finger and thumb. He broke with a great crack, and we watched order become chaos and listened to the clink and the click of the balls kissing one another, the thump of them rebounding off the cushions, the quiet rumble of their passage across the felt.

"Decent break Wriggles, thank you very much. I'll take it from here." Janet circled the table applying chalk to the tip of her cue, her eyes fixed on the possible permutations the break offered her.

Just as she bent to take her shot there was a knock the front door.

"That will be your mum and dad, eh Jacob?" my mother said as she stubbed out her cigarette in an ashtray on the bar. "I'll let them in, shall I? Geoff, Janet: best behaviour please. Bill I won't bother asking you, no point."

Jacob had lost the colour from his cheeks, but he looked relaxed enough. He patted me gently on the shoulder. "I've had a lovely time thank you David."

Mum reappeared in the doorway, turning her body to make sure the new visitors were still behind her. "Alright everyone: this is Vanessa and Jim Avonlea, Jacob's mum and dad. All the way from Tokoroa." Mum gestured like a

game show host at the empty doorway. Jacob got to his feet and began to make his way down the stairs. A moment or two passed and no one materialised in the doorway.

"I say," said Janet in a stage whisper "are they terribly small?"

My father and Bill collapsed in giggles at the very moment Jacob's parents entered the room, shoulder to shoulder through the narrow doorway. They looked around them, at the men struggling to control their laughter on the other side of the huge table, at the banknotes resting on its edge, at the many glasses and ashtrays dotted around the room, and inevitably, at the splendour of the bar.

My father collected himself and moved to shake Jacob's father by the hand. "Geoff Wrigley. Good to meet you both. Your son is a fine young gentleman. You should be proud."

Jacob appeared at his mother's side and put his arm around her waist.

"Thank you, Geoff." Jim replied. His voice was soft and distant as if it were arriving from a far-off country.

"You've met Judith of course. And these are friends of ours, Janet and Bill Lapfinch. And there's David" I climbed down the stairs to shake hands with them both. Their hands were cold and dry. They didn't look me in the eye.

"Can I get you a drink? Beer, wine, whiskey?" My father turned his body towards the bar, opened his arms in generosity.

"Or a cup of tea, perhaps?" added my mother.

"No. No thank you. We must be getting Jacob back to school."

"Of course" said mum. "Jacob is welcome here any time. He's a wonderful boy and such a pleasure to have around the place."

The Avonleas nodded and smiled weakly.

"Thank you, Judith. Jacob has told us so much about David. It's been a pleasure to meet you all." Jacob's father said this with finality. It was time to leave.

I looked at Mrs Avonlea for a moment. She looked like Jacob, the same moon face, the same high cheek bones and strong jaw. Her lips were drawn back against her teeth in a tight smile. Her eyes were a dull grey with only the slightest hint of blue. They reminded me of the strips of lead Miss Sweers had allowed us to handle in science class. But lead was soft.

"Say goodbye to everyone, Jacob". She squeezed Jacob's shoulders and gently pushed him back into the room. The Avonleas were still standing in the doorway, unwilling to venture any further into the billiard room, as if the roof might collapse at any moment,.

Jacob commenced shaking hands and saying his thank yous and goodbyes. When he got to Janet, she bent down and whispered something in his ear. The silence in the room was broken when Jacob let out a splutter and then a hoot of laughter at whatever Janet had said to him.

"Jacob." his mother said quietly. Jacob's smile disappeared in an instant and he scurried round the table and back to his mother and father. He locked eyes with me, gave me a quick nod and was gone, following his parents through to the living room, out the front door, and into the night, my mother trailing dutifully in their wake, closing doors and offering to welcome them all back any time.

"By their fruits ye shall know them," said Bill once their footsteps had receded down the driveway.

"Or not, as the case may be," replied Janet. "Puritans give me the heebie jeebies. A drink please, darling."

Kahikatea

A cold Monday morning. Miss Sweer's classroom always takes an hour or two of morning sun to warm up during the winter months. Pale sunlight pours in through the windows and we all stare out towards the playing fields glinting with frost and dew, the skeletal tips of the oak trees clawing at one another in the confidence course, and the distant slash of deep green that marks the river valley from the greedy creep of pasture.

When Miss Sweers enters the classroom, we rise to our feet as one being. We have been trained. The once-alien rhythms of this school and this classroom are our rhythms now and we move to them without question or complaint.

"Good morning, boys. And you too, Bainbridge." Veronica had been reluctantly accepted as a human being and a member of the class. Although Miss Sweers was still not happy about it.

"Good morning, Miss Sweers" we half recite half sing with one voice.

"'God Defend New Zealand'. With gusto, if you please. Warm your bones."

We start to sing. We do not require the words to be thrown on to the wall by the overhead projector. We know all five verses by heart and they trip from us as effortlessly as water tumbles downstream.

Jacob is not looking at me.

When we sing the first song of the morning it is our habit to make eye contact. To raise our eyebrows questioningly in a 'how was your weekend?' gesture, or to roll our eyes to say, "not this terrible dirge again", or to simply grin at one another without saying anything much except that it is a joy to be in the same room together once more.

Jacob does not turn his head in my direction. He is staring straight ahead at the clean empty blackboard. It looks like he is trying to see through the walls, to chisel through to the other side, his will tunnelling through one atom at a time.

Guide her in the nations' van,
Preaching love and truth to man,
Working out Thy glorious plan,

Even during this last verse, when we will usually crumple our brows quizzically at the mention of a 'nations' van', he does not look, and I know something is wrong.

The song ends and Miss Sweers says, “Sit”, and we sit, and everyone takes their fountain pens and ink bottles from their desks, except me who has a Bic biro instead, and Miss Sweers says, “On your feet.”

There is a slight, confused hesitation before we all stand up again.

“It’s cold in here and you can’t write beautifully with cold hands. Wrigley, you can’t write beautifully at the best of times, but for the rest of you it would be a waste of ink to proceed with our usual handwriting lesson. Follow me. Single file. No talking.”

With that she walks between the rows of desks and out the door at the back of the class. We peel off one by one and fall in line behind her like ducklings.

There are two boys in the line between Jacob and me. Jacob does not look back as he usually would. He does not step out of line to let the others go past so that we can walk in lockstep and crack jokes and make plans for the lunch break. He marches on ahead, seemingly oblivious.

We file down the steps of the prep school classrooms and pass through the cloisters that lead to the dining hall. We veer off to the right and into the main administrative block. We pass the stairs that lead up to the prep school dormitories, then Mr Dolion’s office door, then the bronze bust of Monty Birtwistle, then out the large timber and glass front door and back into the sunshine.

The line of boys and one girl begins to stretch as we walk down the path leading towards the chapel.

“Jacob,” I hiss. He does not turn around. Richard King is walking directly behind Jacob. He turns to look at me, then gives a little nod to say, ‘Let me help,’ and he taps Jacob on the shoulder. Jacob still doesn’t turn around and King looks at me and shrugs.

The rose gardens that border the chapel have long since lost their blooms but have been carefully pruned and tended to through the winter months. The huge wooden doors are open, and the spectral sound of fugues being played on the pipe organ drifts into the open air and away into the morning.

We leave the path and begin to traipse through long grass. Our socks and shoes are soon wet with dew. Miss Sweers, far up ahead by now, does not turn around to check that we are following her. Her confidence in her control over us is total by this point of the year. It is not misplaced. The sunlight illuminates her white hair and each of us feels we could follow her to the ends of earth.

She is swallowed by the shadow of the kahikateas and one by one we march behind her into the darkness.

As we enter this copse of trees, the wet grass beneath our feet gives way to the packed earth and thin humus of the forest floor. A pair of pīwakawaka follow us, dancing round our heads, hunting the tiny insects our footsteps stir up. I choose one and watch its skipping, tumbling, joyous flight. It disappears behind a tree trunk, and I look around for its mate. I see Jacob watching its frenzied acrobatics, his eyes darting this way and that to track its course, a smile on his lips. Nobody else seems to be paying any attention to the little birds.

We follow Miss Sweers into the centre of the forest where she stops and we wordlessly fan out around her, facing her, and waiting.

From the outside it looks like the kahikateas are covered in thick foliage, but once we are beneath the branches, we notice that only the ends of the trees' limbs are dressed in this cloak of small, interlocking leaves. The trunks are tall and slender and the far-off tips sway gently in imperceptible breezes. I have sensed it before, the feeling of transgression standing in the darkness of this forest, like I have slipped under the skirts of a shy and unsuspecting giant.

The pīwakawaka chatter to each other in their chaotic singsongs, swapping secrets and gossip.

Miss Sweers gives a little gesture with her right hand that means 'come closer'. We tighten the half circle around her. The pīwakawaka alight on nearby supplejack vines and even they shrink into stillness, awaiting our next move.

"These magnificent trees are kahikateas, or white pines," Miss Sweers begins, her voice low to make us listen more carefully.

"They are New Zealand's tallest native tree. These two acres are a remnant forest; the trees are around 120 years old. So relatively young. Like your teacher. What's funny, Wrigley? Nothing? I thought as much.

"Before we Europeans arrived, even before Māori came to these islands, forests like these would have covered the Waikato lowlands. They like fertile flood plains, lake margins, and riverbanks. They like to have wet feet. Forests like this one, but much larger, would rise up and eventually give way according to the changing meanders of a river– who knows what a meander is?"

The pīwakawaka chase each other through the lower branches of a kahikatea, their fanned tails serving as fulcrums around which their plump little bodies can somersault and spin.

"Nobody? It is the curve and spread of a river's course, the word coming of course… Avonlea are you listening? Coming of course from the Meander River in Turkey. This process would take centuries. As the Waikato changed its course," she pointed over to the south where the river ran out of sight, "kahikatea

forest would begin to colonise the new riverbanks, in soil too damp for other species. As the river moved away from an area, trees such as rimu, matai, and tawa that prefer drier soils would move in and gradually replace the kahikatea."

Every member of the class has tipped his head back like a hungry bird to stare at the swaying tips of the trees. Every mouth is open in silent wonder as the spell of Miss Sweers' voice and the silent enchantment of the trees themselves works upon each of us.

She tells how many of these forests, forever on the move in the wake of cyclones and floods and the caprices of the Waikato and Waipa Rivers, began to disappear from the landscape once the Māori arrived from the west, lost to cultivation and fire. But there were still thousands of hectares of pure kahikatea forest in the Waikato district by the time Europeans arrived here in the 1860s. The forests thrived on flat damp land, as did the settlers' cattle and sheep. And so the forests were cleared, and kahikatea disappeared from the landscape, taking with them habitats for many smaller native trees, shrubs and orchids, as well as pīwakawaka, grey warblers, shining cuckoo, tūī, and kererū.

"Remnants such as this are all that survive of the great forests that once dominated this region. Stands like this one grew from one or two seed trees: specimens that were spared destruction for one reason or another. Follow me now. We'll find a seed tree."

She turned on her heel and we fall into line behind her. I take the opportunity to skip ahead and slip in behind Jacob.

"Hey!" I whisper, a little desperate now. "Hey! Jacob. What's up?" He turns his head and fixes me with a look of pure anguish. The blush has disappeared from his cheeks and his eyes crowd with tears which he wipes away with the back of his hand. He turns back to face the front of the line and says over his shoulder, "Later. We'll talk later. Leave me alone now."

My stomach drops and the skin on my arms and legs tingles where it is exposed to the cold still air of the forest. I feel a crushing sense of dread which I can't separate from the vertigo induced by the tree tops swaying giddily above my head.

Long before Miss Sweers can point it out, we see the seed tree. The trunk is almost two metres thick and has wide, steadying buttresses at its base. It tapers away into the blue, towering over its descendants. It is a mighty thing, and it hushes us all. Even my mind's anxious jabbering is silenced in the shadow of this immense life.

“This tree is eighty metres tall. It is perhaps the tallest tree in the Waipa District. It is, at best estimate, between four and five hundred years old. Think on that, children. When this tree was a sapling, pushing through this dense soil, the ink was still wet on Shakespeare’s First Folio. Elizabeth I was on the English throne. The Mayflower had not yet set off for America.”

We could not conceive of something so old. We each stepped forward, unbidden, and lay our hands on the trunk. We looked at the backs of our hands, smooth and pink against the gnarly bark. We felt the coolness against our warm skin and tried to feel the slow pulse of life and time that we thought must be present if we only we had the sensitivity to find it. I could not. But I felt something else, something colder and darker emanating up from the soil. A ripple of something I had never felt before, a nod towards the brevity of things, the vast chasms of space between our atoms, through which time slips inexorably, like the current of a river passing through thin fingers.

The pīwakawaka catch up to us and they flit and dive and twirl frantically, taking advantage of a glut of insect life that we much have kicked up with the soles of our Nomads but cannot see.

There will be no new stands of kahikatea unless someone decides to plant them. Hydroelectric dams now regulate the flow of the river and even if they were to flood, we would simply drain the fields and resow the pasture and resume our control once more.

The remnant forests exist only at our mercy. Were we to leave them to themselves they would be swallowed up by weeds and possums and roaming cattle. The forests are no longer the companion of the rivers and the marshes. They are interlopers on our dominions which we have decided to tolerate. They are museum pieces, dramatic reconstructions of a nearly forgotten past.

We are an oddly subdued group as we retrace our steps back to the classroom. As we take our seats behind our desks, the classroom having warmed up with the gathering strength of the morning sun, we feel the residue heat on our cheeks and the napes of our necks from the brisk walk, but the chill of the forest lingers in our bones and refuses to leave.

The rest of the morning is spent in handwriting practice and learning Longfellow’s ‘Paul Revere’s Ride’ by rote.

At break time I follow Jacob out of the classroom. There is a nagging churn in the pit of my stomach. He walks ahead of me and doesn’t turn to look although I

know he knows I am there. At the top of the hill that leads down to the confidence course there is a miniature monorail track. It runs diagonally down the slope before disappearing into a thicket of trees and re-emerging at the bottom of the hill where it comes to a stop. The flat deck of the carriage we use to ride the rail sits at the end of the track, waiting for someone to push it back to the top.

Jacob vaults onto the rail and walks down towards the confidence course tightrope style. His balance is perfect. I do not try to copy him because I am not in the mood and because I know I could never stay upright on the thin track of metal still slick in places from the morning dew. He follows the curve of the track into the trees. He dismounts and walks away from me into the confidence course. I follow.

Eventually he comes to an oak tree that came down during cyclone Bola earlier tht year. He sits and pulls his feet up under him, so he is sitting cross-legged on the trunk. He waits for me to sit down next to him.

"My mum says I can't be friends with you anymore."

"What?" I don't fully understand what he is saying to me. "What do you mean?".

"She says your parents aren't Christians. That they drink and smoke and that they're not the sort of people I should be associating with. She's talking to Mr Dolion to limit my contact with you here at school. She won't let me go to your place again."

I sit in stunned silence. I had been forbidden from playing with kids when I was at Cambridge Primary. Kids that were 'too rough' by my mother's reckoning, which usually meant too poor. But I had never been on this side of the equation.

"I'm sorry, David. I tried to argue with her, tried to get her to change her mind but she wouldn't listen. She's done this before. Whenever I get a close friend that she hasn't introduced me to she does this. Finds something wrong. With them or their parents, or the church they go to. There's nothing I can do. I'm sorry."

I stare straight ahead, through the trees and back out towards the playing fields.

"But can't we still be friends like this? Can't we hang out down here? Or in the kahikateas? On the catwalk?"

"She'll find out. Mr Dolion will be watching us now. And the chaplain. And Glick. I'm sure she'll talk to Glick if she hasn't already. They became great

friends when we went to Norfolk Island. They've got plans for me. They'll be watching from now on. And Glick has his spies."

"But what can they do about it? There aren't any school rules saying who you can be friends with and who you can't."

"If I don't do what she says she'll take me out of school altogether. Home-school me in Tokoroa and make sure I only go to singing and violin lessons and nothing else. I won't be able to have any friends. Let alone girlfriends."

I'm not sure I believe this. Surely, she wouldn't take him out of school just to stop him playing with me. Jacob reads my thoughts as he so often does.

"It wouldn't be just you. If I don't do what she says she'll think I've fallen under some evil influence. She'll think something is controlling me and trying to corrupt me. It wouldn't be you. It would be… something else."

I turn my head to look at him. His elbows are on his knees and his face is buried in his hands. I think he might be crying.

"So, if your mum finds out we've been spending time together she'll take that as a sign that you're possessed by the devil?"

"I don't know if she believes it. But it's what she'll say. And I'll be gone for good."

He starts to sob, the sound escaping in muffled gasps.

I sit beside him not knowing what to do or what to think. Should I put my arm around his shoulders to comfort him? Should I walk away through the trees and follow the grey and ochre thread of the monorail track back towards the classroom? Should I attempt to stir up some defiance? Or should I just let him go, allow him to slip through my fingers and into the wide world alone?

We sit on this log, allowing our time, our time to play, seep away into the late morning. We stare straight ahead and do not look at each other. We are already alone. We are already on the way to being nothing to one another, to becoming one more memory, destined to detach itself from the continent of our attention and drift away into the open ocean, to lose solidity drip by drip, to be assimilated and absorbed into the vastness of the other's self, and become nothing more than a crystal of salt.

We hardly speak for the remainder of the term. When I return to school after the summer holidays, Jacob is not on the form class lists posted on the auditorium noticeboard. There are rumours he was asked to leave the school. Something to do with prescription pills stolen from the dispensary. I put it out of my mind. He is gone. That's all I need to know.

ANZAC Day 2022

The Maoris who came before us moved among the dark heavy tree like ghosts and could have sailed away at any time and never left a mark. We could leave it ourselves now: in a few years the red-roofed wooden bungalows would rot with borer and crumble into the earth. Fern would cover the grassland and, after fern, small trees would come and in time the dark, rich matted bush again.

Report on Experience, John Mulgan.

I wake up before dawn, alone. The house is silent and still. I lie in the darkness for a few minutes and tune into the low hum of the highway away in the distance, the far-off vibration of human activity. All of a sudden, I become aware of a polyphony of birdsong outside the bedroom window; the near melody of blackbirds, the nagging chatter of sparrows, then the strange loping symphonics of a lone tūī. I can't be sure if they just began to sing, as if by some signal, or if I just began to notice them.

4.30am. This is the time the baby usually begins to stir.

I would often wake a minute or two before him, before he begins to cry. Lie awake and listen. At first a short gasp of surprise, of confusion. I would hear him shuffling to his feet in his crib. Then a long, drawn out "Daaadaaa" or "Maaamaa". These first words of the day sound as if they are the last before a final collapse into despair. But despair to him is as transient as a sneeze. Then I swing out of bed and pad to the door that connects our room to his. I push it open and see him slumped over the rails of his cribs, his head resting on his arm. He always stands up straight when he sees me, his face brightening, his black eyes widening in joy.

"Hello," he says, his voice gruff with sleep.

As I reach down to lift him up, he reaches up to me and we hold each other for a moment before he pulls away and turns towards the door, points and says "Mama."

This morning, on April 25th, 2022, for the first time in many months, his room is empty and there is no one to call for me. Jo and the boys have gone to stay with friends, leaving me with time alone over the long weekend. There is a sharp chill in the air.

I rise and wrap myself in a robe. I shuffle to the bathroom and piss into the darkness, trusting memory and sound. I wash my hands and face in the sink, splashing my ears and neck with cold water to drive off the cotton-wool vagueness of a morning that hasn't yet seen the sun.

I make coffee and drink it slowly, sitting at the kitchen table and staring at my reflection in the French doors that lead out into the garden. I try to see beyond the glass and the gloom to the mimosa tree that is beginning to lose its feathery leaves. But I can only see myself, my unruly beard, the purplish circles around my eyes, my long hair beginning to thin, succumbing to its own personal autumn.

I let out a long sigh that seems to converge in my chest, tumbling from the top of my spine and rising from the pit of my gut. I'm surprised to miss Jo and the boys so acutely, so soon after they left me. I've been yearning for a moment of solitude for months and now, here in the kitchen, I feel hollowed out and untethered, unsure how to direct myself without the imperatives of parenthood and the organising force of a helpless creature's needs.

I finish my coffee and return to the bedroom to dress. I put on blue jeans, a check shirt, and my baker's jacket, into whose many pockets I slip a notebook and pen, earbuds, my wallet and phone, and a small green apple that will do for breakfast.

I step into the morning, locking the front door behind me. It could just as well be midnight although the stars are a little sparse in the cloudless sky. The moon hangs low and heavy on the western horizon.

In my previous life in London, it was not unheard of for me to be out on the streets just before dawn, whether returning late from a party or a pub lock-in or venturing out early to catch a flight or a train. Here in Cambridge, it's unusual.

A light mist drapes the trees and makes hazy yellow suns of the streetlights. The silence, the stillness of the air, and the softness of the moon's light lend the dark houses and the waxy-green of the lemon trees lining my street the textures of a dream. The birds have lapsed into silence. The motorway's hum rises to a growl.

I begin to walk towards the town. I realise I haven't dressed appropriately for the weather. The chill mist seeps through to my skin and I hunch and rub my arms for warmth. I consider turning back but decide against it: the sun will be up soon.

Other figures move with me through the morning. Within a few minutes of leaving my house I catch sight of six or seven others, ahead of me or crossing my

path a block or two further on. There is something spectral about them, the silver moonlight seeming to creep beyond their surfaces, to penetrate and pass through.

As I turn onto Thornton Road, I see that the trickle of walkers has become a stream. Couples with their young children, all dressed in sensible synthetic jackets. A handful of elderly men in military uniforms. Utes line the side of the road that borders the crest of the lake and from these step farming families in their gumboots and Swanndris. A man in his mid-twenties overtakes me. He has put on a collared shirt and a tie underneath his North Face windcheater. He does not turn his head to look at me as he goes by. His face is creased and folded into a semblance of studied earnestness, like he is trying to remember something desperately important.

Which, in a sense, he is.

ANZAC Day is celebrated every year on the anniversary of the first landing of Australian and New Zealand troops on the shores of Gallipoli in 1915. The disastrous Gallipoli campaign claimed over 130,000 lives. Of these, 2779 were New Zealanders, one sixth of New Zealand's total force involved in the campaign.

In the two decades I was living overseas, ANZAC Day had grown in significance and scope as a New Zealand holiday. In April 2020, during the first Covid 19 lockdown, in lieu of gathering at war memorials and town centres, people stood in silence at the end of their driveways to mark the occasion. This was much reported on by the local press, keen to find an uplifting lead story, one to complement and magnify the themes that Covid had brought to the surface, of New Zealanders working together selflessly for a higher purpose. It was a good time to remember the fallen soldiers. A good time to stand to attention in the dark.

I found these public and ritualistic acts of remembrance bizarre and somewhat out of keeping with my image of my countrymen. In my mind New Zealanders were allergic to displays of public emotion of any kind, whether that be grief or national pride. It also went against my conception of my compatriots as people with an innate horror of appearing foolish. This, or so I believed, often resulted in a tendency towards drab conformity, a determination never to stand out from the crowd. And yet here were these New Zealanders proudly *standing out* in the most literal and, in my mind, ridiculous sense.

When I was growing up, ANZAC Day for most people was little more than an extra day off from work or school. On the evening news there would be some coverage from the Dawn Service at the Cenotaph in Wellington, footage of the

Prime Minister and the Governor General laying wreaths, closeups of liver-spotted old men shrunken and lost in their uniforms, and a lingering closing shot of the sombre scene, soundtracked by the mournful bugling of the Last Post. The cameras would cut back to the newsreader in the studio, who would sit in respectful silence for a moment before taking a breath, looking straight into the camera, and moving on with the news of the day. And that was all. ANZAC Day was something that occurred but not something that was participated in.

Dawn services are now attended by ordinary people across the country. Crowds gather at war memorials in cities and small towns alike to remember those New Zealanders who were killed in the First and Second World Wars, as well as the Vietnam War, and other subsequent conflicts.

The service itself amounts to an annual military funeral. Heads are bowed, prayers are spoken, hymns are sung. The lost young men are nudged awake and dragged to attention so that we may look at them once more and say the words we say, 'Lest we forget' and 'we shall remember them'. The bugler bugles and then we pop them back into the ground for another year. We do not say to those who died in the First World War or the Vietnam War, 'We are sorry. We sent you there to die for nothing.' We do not acknowledge the futility of their sacrifice and our complicity in it. We tell them and ourselves that they died so we could be free.

The story that we recite for one other about these conflicts, particularly the First World War and the Gallipoli campaign, is one of national birth. We say that on the beaches of Turkey we became a nation, as we fought beneath our own flag for the first time. That the blood of these young men is the stuff that first bound us together and made a nation of a colony.

We tell ourselves that it is war that shapes us and continues to define us.

This last sentence is true. But we have cast our eyes too far across the sea.

The war that defined Cambridge, the war for which this town was founded, happened fifty years before Gallipoli and it happened on and for the very soil on which we now stand to commemorate the honourable dead from a far-flung campaign. When I was a boy, when these wars were talked about at all (which was almost never), they were called the Land Wars. They are now more commonly and accurately called the New Zealand Wars, and more specifically, the Waikato Wars.

The Waikato Wars are wars that the Pākehā of Cambridge would like to forget. Of those battles we do not say 'Lest we forget'. Of the dead we do not say

‘We shall remember them’. The dead of those wars are left untroubled by sombre bugling, by stern faced young men in sensible jackets, by farmers fresh from the milking shed, made awkward by the crowds but quietly sure of their own position in the town: as landowners, job creators, mainstays of the economy.

We do not call on those dead and we do not honour them. It would be better if we could forget them and leave them in the ground where our grandfathers and great grandfathers put them. But as one great poet of the memory said, ‘The past is never dead. It’s not even past.’[4]

Stubbornly, the dead rise and walk among us. They do not speak to us and even if they did, we would not understand them. They exist for us in the periphery of our vision, on the outskirts of our world views. For them it is still 1840, 1863, 1864. They are unbowed and undefeated. They walk with their shoulders back and their chests puffed out. They watch us curiously, not fearfully, but with trepidation, as bearers of evil tidings. For them, it is we who are the ghosts.

Our forgetful lives make insubstantial imprints on the land. Smears on a pane of glass.

> You didn’t buy a farm and build on it and grow pine-trees round it to stay there, but to sell it to somebody else and live on the profit.
>
> *Man Alone*, John Mulgan.

When my partner and I decided to go all in on our short love affair and attempt to buy a house together, we were amazed at the state of the housing stock– and this in prosperous Cambridge. I had recently moved back to my hometown after decades in the UK and Joanna is a native New Yorker by way of Austin, Texas. We were both, in our different ways, foreigners.

The houses we looked at were between 50 and 100 years old but in most cases, no one in that time had bothered to insulate the floors or the ceilings, let alone the walls. Single-paned windows wept for themselves on cold mornings and brought the misty, river damp into the bedrooms and kitchen to sit and linger until the afternoon sun drove it back once more.

The floors were more often than not built with excellent matai or rimu hardwood which, in the mid-twentieth century, due to the ongoing clearence of native bush for farmland, would have been plentiful and cheap. These beautiful

[4] *Requiem for a Nun*, William Faulkner

timber bones were often hidden beneath a skin of vinyl or linoleum– all the better for an easy clean, a quick getaway.

Problems both cosmetic and structural were hastily patched in the hope that they would last one more winter, one last season before… what? A return to the Old Country? The gentle, green hills of Surrey? The Scottish Highlands? Or to live once more beside the dykes and groynes, beneath the suffocating Dutch skies?

But the interlopers did not leave.

They moved their cold, draughty houses on to the next pale ghosts to settle here. $600,000; $800,000; $1,000,000 for three-bedroom weatherboard bungalows, red-roofed with a single toilet so families could stand in line and wait on those cold, damp Waikato mornings.

From Mulgan's suicide note in 1945 up until the present day, we Pākehā gravitate towards impermanence. We are confounded by the chasm that lies between the deep timeliness of the land and the brevity of humanity's time upon it. The rolling hills – not just the still semblance of movement, but the actual undulation of the land beneath our feet – suggest the movement of a raft adrift on an open ocean rather than a jetty anchored to the bedrock. This land is no more than a step on a journey, something hastily bound together in the hope it will keep us dry for a winter, our head above the waves.

There was no Manifest Destiny describing the Pākehā's arrival on these shores. They came for seal fur, whale oil, kauri gum, and gold. They stuck around and were given plots of land (stolen on their behalf) they could never dream of owning in the Old World. But these material opportunities were never underwritten by any spiritual imperatives like those that once drove the 'pilgrims' to the Eastern Seaboard of the United States. The Pākehā never felt they were brought here by Christ (missionaries aside) but rather by the hope of bettering their lot in the short, precarious time given to them.

Our cousins in Australia had their own reasons to establish themselves permanently on their sunny uplands. The convict narrative that so defined the white man's experience in Australia insisted that they were never going back to the country that had so brutally uprooted them from their families and cast them adrift on the high seas. What better revenge than to make a permanent paradise of their prison cell where 'everyone walks around with a perpetual smile upon their face'?[5]

[5] 'Australia' by the Kinks

We Pākehā are unquiet spirits, between times, between places, unable or unwilling to settle.

When we catch a glimpse of the dead out of the corner of our eye, when we can make out the brittle skeletons of human history resting on the skin of the land, when we are confronted by the truth of our history and all the memories we would rather forget, we point our fingers at the spectres just as they point their fingers at us, and together, in a rare of act of harmony, we say as one, “Look. There. A ghost.”

1991

It is 1991 and today is the first day of the school year, my fifth at St. Michael's. I am thirteen and over the holidays I have grown a little taller. When I stand before the mirror in the morning, I can see ripples under the skin of my torso where once was a featureless softness. At my throat is a knot of hard tissue that rises and falls with the rhythm of my speech. The childish roundness of my face has melted with the summer sun and the skin now clings to my jawline and cheekbones. An uneven growth of coarse hair is slowly replacing the peach fuzz on my upper lip, cheeks, and throat. Islands of angry redness, topped by peaks of yellow pus emerge on my face and temper the overarching pride I feel as my body and voice harden and shed the protective layers of childhood.

I am excited to get back to school. The holidays were spent running around Cambridge with kids from the local high school. I had got together with local girls at parties, ridden in cars borrowed from absent parents through the streets of the town at midnight, got drunk on a rocket fuel made of little dashes from every bottle of spirits in my Parents' house. I had vomited into lake Te Koo Utu and found my hand beneath Sally Cartwright's skirt in the back seat of Glynn Stoppard's father's Camaro. I felt grownup and sophisticated, and I was ready to share this new me with my school friends on this first day of the autumn term.

The morning is tinder-dry. There have been no clouds in the sky for the past week, just a clear, relentless blue. The blue suffuses everything, washes the trees and the concrete, the weatherboard of the classrooms, and the parched straw of the cricket pitch. There is no wind, just the dry crackling stillness of late summer.

The morning has been spent in assemblies, a chapel service, and attending to the various small, administrative tasks that have to be seen to at the start of a new school year.

At morning break, I sit with Laura Lejeune at the top of the concrete steps that run down towards the cricket pitch, the tennis court, and the confidence course.

Laura had been my on-and-off-again girlfriend through last year, and this morning she looks even more beautiful than I had remembered over the summer months.

Her dark hair has recently been cut in a short bob that frames her heart-shaped face. Her wide, flat nose wrinkles as she laughs at my jokes. I was tell her carefully edited stories of my summertime adventures, making sure I leaveout any reference to other girls I had taken up with. I am, to my own ears, being

terribly witty. Her dark eyes hold mine as I speak, occasionally disappearing into creases as she giggles at some anecdote about drinking stolen beer on the beach at Whangamata or driving a friend's parent's borrowed Mercedes on the predawn Cambridge back roads and coming headlight to headlight with a monstrous truck carrying an entire house.

The way we are getting along I think, perhaps we'll get back together, perhaps we'll be boyfriend and girlfriend again.

"It sounds like you had some fun, David."

"I did. But I missed you."

Laura smiles shyly and looks away over the playing fields towards the farmland beyond.

"I missed you, too. You didn't write to me."

"I did though. I just didn't send the letters. I thought you'd be too busy with all those good-looking Auckland boys to bother with me."

"I wish there had been some handsome boys around. I was so bored all summer. Just me and my little sister. A letter from you would have been lovely."

"Maybe I'll write you one at lunch. You can read it in bed tonight."

"Ok. I'd like that," she said this slowly, maintaining eye contact, her long lashes fluttering playfully.

Yes. She is definitely into me again. I start to make plans to get her alone. Perhaps down in the far corner of the confidence course, or down by the river, or in the basement of the art department with its huge disused printing press and the blocks of lead type that we used to spell out obscenities and insults. I begin to imagine how the curve of her breast would feel under the palm of my hand. I pull my legs up to my chest and shuffle uncomfortably.

"There's a new boy in my form class."

I am bustled out of my reverie. "Oh really. What's he like?"

"He seems really nice. Really friendly. Quite grown up I thought."

"Really." I'm suddenly cold with jealousy and I remember this feeling from last year. Of believing Laura liked me, perhaps was even in love with me, and then a moment later having that confidence washed away like a sandcastle. I'd become convinced that she did it on purpose, that she was playing with me. But the summer had made me forget.

"He used to go here. But he left. You might know him actually. Jacob something."

My stomach lurched.

"Jacob Avonlea?"

“Yes! That’s it. You know him?”

“Yeah. We were friends.”

“Oh that’s great. We can all hang out together.”

“Hmm. Yeah. Maybe.”

I hadn’t thought about Jacob for a long time. I’d shifted him into the attic of the disappeared, a room I didn’t visit often. A room filled with former friends from Cambridge Primary, children of couples my parents no longer liked, the dead pets of aunties and uncles. No one had ever emerged from that room, until now.

Laura is still talking about Jacob and about her form class, but I am no longer listening. I am thinking about Jacob and his disappearance from my life. About his parents and Mr Glick. I’m remembering the sound of his ten-year-old voice, rising through the rafters of the chapel, lingering a while, and disappearing out into the evening.

The bell sounds for the end of the morning break. Laura and I get to our feet and brush the grass from our uniforms.

“Where are you going now?

“English with Mrs Allen.” I gesture across the playing fields at the low, breeze-block classrooms that make up the senior block.

“I’ve got art” She gestures in the other direction.

“See you at lunch?”

“Sure. See you then.”

Laura puts her arms around my neck and pulls me to her.

“I missed you,” she whispers.

I pull away and look down at her smiling face. She is beautiful. My whole body groans with lust. She loves me. I’m sure.

“See you at lunch.”

And she’s gone.

I make my way down the hill towards class. The air is rich with the smell of freshly mown grass. I take a deep breath and try to work out whether or not I’m happy.

The sky without clouds, the fields without trees. The naked weight of the atmosphere above me, with nothing to cushion me from its crush.

Death must be blue like this. It must feel dry like tracing paper. If we shift in our graves we must crackle and crease.

I am catching up with a figure in front of me. It’s Veronica Bainbridge. I overtake her and walk in step with her without speaking.

"Oh. Hi," she turns to look at me, startled but polite.

"Hey. Good summer?"

"Alright. We've got a beach house. Spent the whole of the holidays over there."

"Nice."

We walk on in silence.

"English?"

She nods.

"Did you hear?"

"Hear what? Oh. You mean Jacob?"

"Yeah. He's back."

"I know. My dad told me a couple of weeks ago. Apparently, he got in some kind of trouble in Tokoroa, and his parents begged Morris to let him come back. They're churchy so Morris said yes."

"They're very churchy. Morris must have loved it."

"He loves a bit of god, and he loves a bit of grovelling."

"Who doesn't, eh?"

As we get close to the classrooms, we see that there is a crowd of students waiting out the back of Mrs Allen's room.

I strain to see whether Jacob is among them.

Will I even recognise him? Two years is a long time. Especially at this age. People get tall overnight. Their voices change. They lose interest in hobbies they've had their whole lives. Good kids start doing bad things. I know all this. But I'm also sure I'll know Jacob when I see him. I'll still recognise him in 30 years. I'm sure.

He's not there among the knot of students outside the classroom. Mrs Allen pulls up in her white sedan, looking a little flustered. Her thick black hair is brushed to one side and back into a neat wave rolling down her shoulders. It looks solid like moulded plastic.

Jacob isn't here.

Mrs Allen gives us a flustered but cheerful hello, unlocks the classroom door with one hand whilst pressing a stack of books and manilla folders against her breast with the other.

We file in after her and take our seats in the cold classroom.

The year begins with a reading from *Hamlet*:

Let us go in together,
And still your fingers on your lips, I pray.
The time is out of joint—O cursèd spite,
That ever I was born to set it right!
Nay, come, let's go together.

After English, maths. After maths, lunch. I do not see Jacob although I'm sure I catch a glimpse of him in my peripheral vision as I walk past the prep school on the way to the dining hall. A ghostly figure in the window of Miss Sweers' old classroom (she has retired; or been forced to retire if you believe the rumours). But no. That is not what he'll look like. He won't be the smiling, pink-cheeked angel he was four years ago. There will be hairs on his face instead of fuzz. His shoulders will be wider. His chest broader. Will he still smile like he used to? Will he smile when he sees me?

At lunch I sit with a group of boarders from Birtwistle House. I play rugby with a couple of them. Reece is the best player in our year. There is talk of him training with the first XV this year – some achievement for a fourteen-year-old. Greg Montgomery is the funniest kid in fourth form and is friends with a lot of cool older boys. Jay Wallis can play Metallica guitar solos at astonishing speeds. Matt Chandler is from Te Puke and comes from a working-class family. His uncle, a successful builder in the Bay of Plenty, pays his school fees.

We talk about girls we met on our holidays. I tell them about my rocket-fuelled exploits at Lake Te Koo Utu and they all seem impressed.

Laura walks past our table.

"Hello boys."

"Hi Laura," Chandler drawls, "you wanna sit with us? We'll make room, won't we Wrigley? David was just telling us about his holidays…"

"No thank you, Matt. I'll sit somewhere with a little bit less testosterone thanks."

She walks up the steps to the high tables to join her friends from the girl's boarding house. She is sitting under the honours board where my brother's name appears three separate times.

"Cunt" says Chandler, drawing sniggers from the rest of them.

Chandler looks me in the eye, smiling. It's a challenge. He wants to see if I'm going to do something about it.

I say nothing.

Reece breaks the tension: “Come back to the dorm with us later. Greg’s got some durries.”

“Oh you’re giving away my cigs are ya?” Greg reaches across the table to cuff Reece around the ear. Reece catches him by the wrist and twists it in one quick motion. Greg yelps in pain.

“Don’t worry about your cigs, mate. I’ve got stuff to do anyway,” I say as Greg sits down rubbing his wrist.

“Dirty fucking Māori.”

Reece stands up and pulls back his fist.

“Jokes. Jokes. Jokes. Jesus, Reece. You’re only a quarter Māori anyway. What’s your problem?”

“I just like punching fat Pākehā, eh?”

“Well, you’re in the right place.”

I get up to go, thinking I might get in a half an hour at the cricket nets before classes start again.

As I turn to leave, Chandler looks up at me.

“I hear you know the new kid. What’s his name? Avonlea?”

“Yeah. Jacob Avonlea. He used to go here but he left. He got asked to leave I think but they let him come back.”

“What’s he like?”

“He’s ok.”

“Seems like a bit of fag to me.”

Chandler stares at me, a little curl of a smirk playing across his lips.

“Mm. Yeah. I suppose he is a bit of fag. You looking for a boyfriend, Matty?”

“Fuck you, Wrigley.”

“See yous later.” I pick up my tray and head for the scraps bin and the exit.

As I leave the dining hall, I look across to the prep school Housemaster’s cottage where Mr Dolion and Victoria used to live. I remember standing just here four years before, waiting for Jacob to emerge. I remember the feeling of having abandoned him, betrayed him to the authorities. I feel small thinking about it. The heat of shame returns to my cheeks, and I start walking towards the playing fields on the other side of the prep school.

I feel even smaller now than I did a minute ago, as if my body had been shrunk back to the size it was when I was nine and Jacob and I had decided we had to do something for Sandra Winter. As if I hadn’t just spent a summer riding in cars and slipping my hands beneath skirts and over bras.

The sky above me is still cloudless and immense. I walk down the bank towards the cricket nets. I can see a kid gracefully picking the ball off his pads and sending it hurtling into the blue. A split second later I hear the distinct crack of ball connecting with bat.

I suddenly don't feel much like joining in.

I walk past the nets and find myself wandering aimlessly across the playing fields. An oily white paint marks out the eight lanes of the running track and also the boundary of the cricket field. I kick at the lines with my Doc Martens to see if the paint is still wet. It isn't. But still, a sharp chemical smell rises to meet me and blends with the perfume of the cut lawn.

I find myself walking into the confidence course, onion weed making a green meadow of the coppice floor, usually dense with dead leaves and mud. I feel better with the canopy of the oak trees above my head, sheltering me from the monstrous blue.

I take a seat on an old tractor tire in a sunken corner of the copse. I have a good view of anyone approaching from the light-drenched playing fields beyond the tree line. I think back to four years ago, to fencing with Jacob with lichen-padded sticks, to the jarring sensation in the hand and wrist when our make-believe swords clashed, the buzzing and tingling I carried around with me for the remainder of those long, late summer afternoons. I remember Jacob's face lit up with laughter and flushed with exertion and behind that a suggestion of wildness, of a lust that could have been for physical connection, some melding of the fervour of friendship and violence, or simply for blood. He was always a fraction stronger, a beat faster, more fearless, and aggressive. More often than not I would throw down my stick and turn away, hiding the tears in my eyes, embarrassed of my own timidity in the face of violence. When I turned back to face him once I'd regained control of myself, he was transformed: his cheeks returning to their pale splendour, his dark eyes gentle and filled with the light of concern, perhaps even love.

Since that first year at St. Michael's I've made many friends but very few that could be called close. I have no set social group. I fritter between cliques of day boys and boarders, an equal mix of girls and boys, of children my own age and kids from the years above and below my own.

It's a mode of living that has stayed with me into middle-age. A habit of solitude I learned from those night spent under a duvet reading books and listening to country songs. In London my days off work were spent alone in quiet pubs reading the *London Review of Books* or chatting to strangers who would,

over the course of weeks and months, become friends in a particular kind of way. I favoured places with plenty of dark wood panelling and furniture; with centuries worth of spilled beer absorbed into the floorboards and the bar tops, leaving a sour warmth that enveloped me further and further as the first pint became the second and the afternoon slipped into the evening.

The ochre slash of the monorail track still winds its way down the bank to curve briefly under the trees of the confidence course and out into the light again. The platform that we used to push to the top and ride down again, our knuckles white against the dull metal handles on either side, has long since been removed, after Nathan Kensington was thrown off as he rounded a sharp bend, and the back of his head connected with the edge of the rail, exposing the ghostly whiteness of his skull.

A large goat is now tethered to the rail by a chain, giving it some freedom to move along the length of the rail and graze the long grass that grows on either side. This is the same goat that Jacob released one afternoon with a mixture of misplaced kindness and mischief. We watched it become incensed by its new-found freedom, or perhaps the memory of its long captivity, and run amok through the grounds of the prep school, heaving one child after another squealing into the heavens with the elegant, twisted truncheons of its horns.

I remember finding the scene simultaneously terrifying and hilarious: watching my schoolmates run screaming from this newly wild beast, the quotidian and domestic suddenly transformed into the textures of fairy tale and nightmare, watching the goat's body bend and snap and children ascend like unwilling angels, their limbs still comically going through the motions of running away, or their bodies going limp with terror and somersaulting end over end like tomahawks, before disappearing out of sight over the edge of the bank or into the embrace of the long grass.

Jacob pleaded ignorance and I confirmed his alibi which I am sure no one believed but which the authorities on this occasion lacked the energy to refute. I was relieved when the goat was allowed to return to his life on the end of its tether, the consensus being that a dumb beast could bear no responsibility for its actions and that the fault lay with an inadequately secure chain and a boy who would, at least for now, evade punishment.

Someone is coming. A boy is walking down the bank, following the curve of the monorail. I cannot see his face from this distance, but I know who it is. He stops to look at the goat. He bends down and pulls a handful of grass and clover

from the ground and offers it, flat-palmed. The goat sniffs warily, takes a desultory nibble then turns away and walks up the hill, its chain rasping against the rail. The figure continues its descent.

As he passes from the light into the darkness of the trees, he sheds a dimension for a moment and is as flat and black as a shadow. As he moves closer, I begin to pick out details. The boy is perhaps three inches taller than me and walks with loose limbs, arms swaying with his momentum. He bends down to pick up a stick and hurls it at a nearby oak tree. He lets out a deep grunt as he does so. It's him alright. It's Jacob.

His curls are looser than they once were. A couple of ringlets hang down over his brow and he occasionally blows them out of his eyes with a sharp little puff of breath. His face has lost its childish smoothness and the contours of his jawline and cheekbones jut out beneath his skin. Fierce patches of acne mark his cheeks and chin. His shoulders are broad like a swimmer's. He looks older than thirteen or fourteen. He almost looks like a man. A little pocket in the depths of my guts fills with bilious envy.

He has not noticed me yet though he is only a few metres away, still as I am in the darkest corner of the confidence course. He picks up another stick and swings it at the onion weed around his ankles. He looks back towards the playing field and pulls a packet of cigarettes from his pocket. He tosses the stick away and produces a lighter. Just as he is about to put the flame to the tip of the cigarette I stand up.

"Jacob!"

He yelps, startled, and throws the cigarette and lighter into the weeds.

It takes him a second or two to pick me out of the darkness, then another second before he recognises me. His face collapses into the same graceful, guileless smile he gave me when our eyes first met in Miss Sweers' classroom four years ago.

"Fucking hell, Wrigley. You scared the shit out of me. Help me look for my durrie."

We start scanning the weeds and dead leaves. We are both giggling a little as we search, stealing glances at one another, noting the changes and the things that have stayed the same.

At the same moment as I reach down to pick up the yellow lighter, Jacob shouts triumphantly and holds the cigarette between his finger and thumb.

"Twosies?"

"Why not."

We sit down on the tractor tire, and I wait while Jacob lights the cigarette and takes a couple of puffs.

"What are you doing down here anyway?" he asks.

"Just thinking I suppose."

"Thinking about Laura?"

I stiffen at the mention of her name in his mouth.

"What? I've heard all the gossip already. I know she's your one true love or whatever. I don't blame you. She's cute."

I'm annoyed to notice a swelling of pride in my chest when my old, world-wise friend offers his approval.

We sit and smoke side by side. Our younger selves appear and disappear in the smoky corners of our vision. Bare chests. Cloven-hooved. No longer possible.

"So, you're back, eh? What happened in Tokoroa? I thought your parents wanted you close by."

Jacob takes his time before answering. Shifting his weight, crossing his legs, taking in a lungful of smoke.

His relationship with his parents had shifted almost immediately after returning home. The school had asked him not to return after the summer break. There were rumours about pills disappearing from the dispensary, of activities of a sexual nature taking place on school grounds, of boys being in the wrong bed after lights out. Jacob, the Headmaster pointed out, was at the centre of all these rumours. Rather than open a formal investigation, which would surely lead to expulsion, perhaps it would be better if Jacob found another school in 1988.

Once back in Tokoroa, Jacob refused to go to violin lessons. He didn't want to retrain his voice to sing as a tenor. He became increasingly interested in rock and pop music. He wouldn't go to church.

He noticed his mother withdraw from him inch by inch. She reached out less and less to touch his shoulder or to brush an errant curl away from his eyes. Her voice hardened when she talked to him, like he was a hostile stranger, a threat, an uninvited guest.

His father was suspicious, even fearful of this fast-growing beast that had returned to live amongst them. He would lecture Jacob's sisters at the dining table, warning them about local boys who didn't go to church, the threat that they posed to the godliness of young girls. He would deliver sermons with his chair angled away from Jacob, determined not to meet his eye or acknowledge his presence.

Once, Jacob heard his father chastising his mother in a low voice when he thought Jacob was outside in the garden. He told her she had brought a devil into their home, that they must either rid the boy of his demons or rid the house of the boy. He quoted to her:

"My name is Legion: for we are many."

Jacob knew the story well and he saw the scene once more, just as he had when his mother had read from the gospels in a Sunday school lesson in the basement of the local church.

He saw the man driven mad by a thousand wasps beneath his skin. That skin was a sickly yellow and hanging from him in places like a bloody, tattered robe. He saw his wild eyes with tiny black devils swimming in the whites like little fish. He saw his black teeth as he pulled his lips back to bare them like a dog.

He saw the herd of pigs grazing nearby. Happily chewing snout-fulls of green olives and acorns from Palestinian oaks, snuffling into the sun-glazed soil. He could smell their mushroomy stink.

And another man enters the scene, dressed all in white, improbably clean against the parched, tawny dust of Galilee. And this man, whose face Jacob could not see, speaks some words to the madman and listens to the reply with slow nods. Then the man in white raises his arms towards the sky, turns towards the pigs on the hillside, and brings his hands down with a flourish like a dancer or a gymnast. And the pigs lift their snouts from the soil and look towards the man in white, their eyes wide and questioning. Then one by one they let out a terrible squeal of pain as if an imprisoned rodent had begun tunnelling its way out of their bellies towards the murmuring blue sea. And the pigs rise up on their hind legs, gasping for the sweet air of a moment ago, and start to run, clambering over each other in their haste to find an ending. They skid and slip and tumble on the loose schist of the hillside and one poor beast appears to twist awkwardly as it falls and its leg crumples beneath it, crushed under its own weight. It pulls itself upright and drags the useless limb towards the cliffs. And over the edge they tumble into the sea, just as the fishing boats in the distance unfurl their sails, and the wind comes up like a conjurer's trick. Galilee's gentle corrugation arches its back and rises in great swells above the surface. And in a moment the pigs slip beneath the waves and are gone.

The silence after the squealing is like a hammer blow.

The mad man sits in the dirt, his body loose with the sudden absence of pain. He looks at the place where the pigs had been grazing, and he looks at the man dressed in white, and he speaks one short word. Then he gets to his feet, turns his back on his deliverer, and walks down the hillside towards the sea.

Jacob's mother started to cry. But she did not contradict her husband. Shortly afterwards, his mother gave up on the idea of home-schooling Jacob and enrolled him in the local high school.

"They wanted me out of the house. They kept me away from my sisters. I was like a boarder in my own home. They'd feed me, make sure I was dressed in nice clothes. But that was it. They stopped being interested in me."

We passed the cigarette back and forth without looking at each other. I could feel the heat of Jacob's anger without having to see it in his face. It was like sitting next to an open fire. I shuffled in my seat.

"At the end of last year I got caught smoking at school. It wasn't a big deal for the school, everyone did it. But they told my parents, and they took their chance. Called up Morris. 'He needs structure and discipline, a guiding hand to rediscover the path to Jesus', or whatever. And here I am. Back again. Happy to see me?"

I took a long drag of the cigarette and let the smoke sit in my lungs for a long moment. I exhaled and turned to look at Jacob. He had brought his knees up to his chest. Hugging them and rocking back and forth. He was looking straight ahead towards the green gold light of the playing fields.

"Yeah. Of course. It's good to have you back."

"Really? Friends?"

"Yeah. Friends."

With that the bell went for the end of lunch. We walked back through the trees, towards the monorail and the goat.

"Remember when you let that goat loose?

"Me? That was you."

"No way." I had a clear picture of Jacob tracing the chain back to the point where it connected to a steel peg hammered deep into the soil. Of him fiddling with a clip, of a triumphant cry when he managed to untether the goat, holding up one end of the chain to show the beast that it was free.

"You let that goat go. Then you told everyone it was me."

I stared at him. Could it be true? Surely not. I remembered him doing it. I could play it back in my mind's eye like a film.

“I gotta go. See you after school?” he started walking off towards the senior classrooms.

I stared at him for a moment still trying to take in what he had just told me. I shouted after him: “Ok. Sure.”

After class that day I didn’t look for Jacob, but I found him all the same. The afternoon air was hot and still, cicada song pulsed from every tree trunk, from the earth. At the top of the bank, overlooking the playing fields, where Laura and I had sat that morning, I came across Jacob and Laura, Kylie O’Brian, Julia Kent, Amanda Cargill, and Thurston Tally. Jacob and Thurston were play fighting, rolling over one another, laughing and yelping, kicking up clouds of dust.

Jacob was in his PE uniform, ready to go for a run perhaps. He wore running shorts and a yellow singlet. I was shocked to see the musculature in his arms and chest. I had never seen anything like it in a boy our age. Blue veins ran just under the surface of his pale skin. Muscle rippled with every twitch of his limbs.

The girls all watched and laughed along, shouting encouragement. I watched as Jacob pinned Thurston to the grass, his knees covering Thurston’s arms. Thurston cried out in mock-agony and Laura came to his rescue, pushing Jacob off then falling, perhaps accidentally, perhaps intentionally, her knees landing on Thurston’s stomach, her torso landing on Jacob’s chest. I could clearly see her white underwear as she flailed over the two boys.

Her hair fell into her eyes, and she was flushed with exertion, and I felt a pang of hopeless lust stirring in my belly.

Jacob whispered something in her ear that I couldn’t hear. Laura slapped him playfully on the arm and got back to her feet. She turned around and saw me. She didn’t look particularly pleased, nor did she look guilty or caught out.

“Hi, David.”

“Wrigley, you sexy, sexy man,” said Thurston, who was big enough and good enough at sport in general and rugby in particular to get away with being as camp as he wanted to be.

“Hey Thurston. Laura. Jacob.” I nodded at the others, but I kept looking at Laura and Jacob.

Jacob rolled over to lie on his back beside Thurston. He snaked an arm around the boy’s strong freckled neck. They both closed their eyes and let the sun fall on their faces. It was an extraordinary thing to see. Physical contact between boys, without the cover of violence or games, out here in the open.

“You going to sit with us?” asked Laura.

"Nah. I've got to go… the gym. I'm meeting Reece."

"Alright. See you tomorrow I guess."

"Yeah. Tomorrow. Bye"

"Byyyeeee…" everyone chorused together, giggling at themselves.

I trudged away towards the gym.

For the rest of the term I avoided Jacob as much as I could. He started going out with Kylie O'Brian so my paranoia around him and Laura subsided. I was still friendly towards him when we were in a group, but we rarely spent any time alone.

The school was awash with rumours about Jacob and Kylie, about how they had sex on the altar of the chapel, in the kahikateas, and underneath the gym, an event which Damon Rindle claimed he had witnessed. If these rumours reached the wrong ears, then it could spell the end of Jacob's second stint at St. Michael's.

In the day boy's common room I listened to Damon give a blow by blow account of events under the gym and the contours of Kylie's body. There were perhaps ten boys gathered around listening, their mouths hanging open.

I was sitting at the back of the room, not part of the group, listening to every word, but pretending I was reading my copy of *Catcher in the Rye*.

Just as Damon was reaching a key moment in his illicit story involving Kylie's bra strap, Thurston Tally walked into the room.

"Hello boys. Whatcha talking about?"

The room went silent. No one looked at Thurston. A couple of kids got up to leave.

"Where'ya going. Sit down. I just got here. Damon, you were telling a story. Carry on. I want to hear too." Thurston's tone was as light and as bouncy ever. But the way he stood in the doorway, blocking the light, making escape impossible, conveyed an altogether different impression.

Damon's eyes were wide with panic. He was a small boy, clever, a coward. Thurston had been known to protect him from bullies on occasion. Damon knew the position he had got himself into.

"I was all done telling the story, Thurston. I've got to get to the library I'm afraid. I've got some prep to catch up on."

"Of course Damon. I know you like to keep up to date with your work. So just tell me what the story was about. You can tell it to me later but give me the gist, so I've got something to look forward to."

“Haha… um… no it was nothing. Not the kind of thing you’d be interested in I don’t think.”

“You think you know what I’m interested in?” Thurston’s voice was all of a sudden hard and cold.

“No. No Thurston. Sorry.”

“So, what was the story about then?” His voice was back to its usual jovial singsong.

Silence. For perhaps thirty seconds no one spoke, which in the context of a boy’s common room is a very long time.

“Damon was telling us all about how he watched Jacob and Kylie fucking under the gym last Friday”. I said this quietly without looking up from my book.

“Was he, David?”

“Yep.”

Thurston walked over to where Damon was cowering into the corner of a couch. He took the lapel of Damon’s shirt with one hand and pulled him close. Their faces were almost touching. Damon’s knees were brushing the couch cushions. Thurston could easily throw him across the room.

“Listen, you little cunt. I like you. I’ve always liked you. And for three years I’ve been making sure McKay and his mates don’t kill you. But that stops here. I’m going to go see Dougal and tell him to do his worst. I won’t be getting involved.”

A couple of the kids that tried to leave before got to their feet and started making their way towards the door.

“Sit down.” Thurston’s voice rattled the windowpanes and the boys sat down again. Everyone in the room was still.

“Any one of your mates here going to help you out when Dougal comes for you? Well? Anyone? Who’s going to fight Dougal for Damon here?”

No one spoke.

“Nobody. Not one of your little friends is going to lift a finger to help you. How does that feel?”

“Not good.”

“Yeah, I bet. Listen. You stop telling that story. You don’t talk about Jacob. You don’t talk about Kylie. You keep your little mouth shut. And that goes for all of you. Understand?”

“Yes Thurston. Got it. I’m sorry.”

“Good. Now fuck off.”

Damon got up, collected his backpack, and scurried out the door. The other kids took great pains to show they weren't being scared off, that the warning didn't apply to them. But they too eventually melted away into the afternoon. Only Thurston and I were left in the common room.

He walked over to me and flopped down next to me on the couch.

"Boys will be horrible little rats, won't they?" he sighed.

"Yes, they will. That Damon's got something of the rodent about him. Don't know why you ever looked out for him."

"Even rats don't deserve to be tortured by dogs."

"You love animals."

"You love animals more."

We sat there for a minute.

Without looking at me, Thurston said, "Jacob's coming out to stay with us this weekend. Why don't you come? He was saying he's barely seen you all term."

"Yeah. We've both been busy with our own things I guess."

"Yeah. Well, come on Saturday. You can stay the night, or not, up to you. He'd love to see you. I would too."

I liked Thurston. Everyone liked Thurston. I didn't want to say no to him.

"Ok. I'll get Mum to drop me off on Saturday."

"Great. I'll tell Jacob. He'll be excited."

"Cool. Me too."

Thurston got up and high fived me with mock-clumsiness. He started humming to himself, looked at his watch and walked out the door.

I sat alone for a couple of minutes, trying to read.

I didn't want to spend a weekend with Jacob. I didn't want to stare at the muscles stretching the sleeves of his t-shirt. I didn't want to look at his rugged jawline and cheekbones. I didn't want to think about Laura thinking about him. About all the girls thinking about him. I wanted him to go back to where he belonged. Back to that dismal logging town. Away from this school which in his absence, I'd come to think of as something belonging to me. I wanted him far away. G

Redoubt Rd

Redoubt Road ran long and straight from the outskirts of Cambridge West towards the jutting hilltop of Pukerimu. The land here was poor compared to the lush pastures to the north and east of Cambridge. There were a few fir trees growing in ragged huddles by the side of the road. The occasional gumtree swayed in the corner of a paddock, its trunk the colour of a pākehā's lazy belly or a late afternoon moon. Little else grew to any size out here. The grass was thin and patchy at this time of year. Rabbits haunted the fence lines, lean and fearful little beasts, seemingly aware of the precarious nature of their time on earth, ears and noses twitching in the cold breeze, tasting the air for a hint of coming calamity.

Thurston's father was a horse trainer. He was six feet four, upright and powerful. He spoke very little but when he did his baritone rumbled deep into the guts of the listener. You listened to John Tally speak with your whole body. He was kind. I heard him tell Thurston he loved him many times, unprompted, for no other reason than he seemed to want to say it and wanted Thurston to hear it. John Tally made a room feel calm and safe.

Where John was quiet and somewhat shy, his wife Marie was a constant blur of activity, of dirty jokes, flirtatious asides. Every second sentence that passed from her lips was an invitation: 'come for lunch', 'stay for dinner', 'there's a spare bed for the night if you want it', 'why don't you take a swim… don't worry about your undies, I've seen it all before'. Her laugh was a deep, guttural rasp that you could hear from wherever you happened to be in the house or its immediate vicinity.

I had once seen Marie naked as I walked past her bedroom window on the way to the pool. She had screamed and laughed and had quickly, but not too quickly, covered herself with a towel. Later, noticing I couldn't bring myself to look her in the eye, she had taken me aside, put her arms around me and told me not to worry. That there was nothing to be embarrassed about and that one day I'd think no more about seeing a woman without clothes than I would about seeing a sheep after shearing. I thought about that moment, those three seconds of heart-stopping magic outside the bedroom window, for years afterwards.

As if Marie wasn't enough of an attraction for a teenage boy, there was also Thurston's sister Sienna. Sienna was friends with my sister Lucy, a couple of years older than Thurston and me. Whereas my sister and I were in a state of

constant low-key warfare, Thurston and Sienna were friends as well as siblings and would actively seek out one another's company. They laughed at each other's jokes, hugged often, rolled their eyes in unison at their mother's outrageous jokes.

Sienna had olive skin and a smattering of freckles across her nose and cheeks. Her hair and eyes were dark like Marie's. She was without doubt the most beautiful girl at our school if not in the entire Cambridge district. Not only was she beautiful, she was funny and friendly and kind. I did not know of a single boy who had been out to the farm at Redoubt Road who wasn't desperately in love with both mother and daughter.

My mother dropped me at the gate that Saturday morning. A cold, dry breeze came from the west and the shrubs that lined the driveway rustled and shuffled in its wake. The sky above me was flat and grey but off to the west an expanse of blue was stretching eastwards. The sun would already be shining on Te Awamutu and Kihikihi, just a few kilometres away.

It was just to the west of where I stood that the pivotal battles of the Waikato Wars were fought. To the west, the massacre at Rangiaowhia, where men were shot as they attempted to surrender, where women were raped and murdered in front of their children. To the west, the battle of Orakau, where the Kingitanga movement and their allies made their final stand against the invading colonial forces, where Rewi Maniapoto uttered the famous words: "Ka whawhai tonu mātou. Āke! Āke! Āke!" We will fight on forever, forever and forever. Before that, fields of golden wheat swayed in that same breeze. Māori farmers milled the wheat for flour. Two sacks of Rangiaowhia flour had been sent to Queen Victoria as a gift.

I did not know that then. This was just a road, and this was land like any other land. Once you know the history of a place, it is impossible to look at it with the same eyes, to not dress the present in the threadbare garments of the past.

I drive out here occasionally as an adult, sometimes with my baby asleep in his car seat behind me. The Tally family having long since sold up and moved on, and where I once saw only grass and soil, and a slender straight road, now I see not just my own past, but the past of the land, colonial, pre-colonial, and beyond. The road stretches back into the darkness of an ancient forest, into the ash clouds of prehistoric eruptions, into the silence of bare rock.

I paused to watch my mother turn the car around and drive off. There were no other cars in sight. Horses grazed idly in the fields, picking at patches of grass and little thickets of fat hen. The land was silent as if a blanket had been thrown

across it to muffle the sound. I walked up the driveway towards the Tally's modest brick bungalow.

There on the front veranda, their bare knees touching, sat Thurston and Jacob. Thurston was cleaning a rifle. He was explaining to Jacob what he was doing, methodically checking and double checking that everything was in good working order. Jacob looked on, absorbed.

I said hi and they looked up at me.

"John said he wants us to shoot some rabbits," said Jacob by way of a greeting.

"They're getting out of control. Dad reckons they'll start eating the horses if we don't do something about them." Thurston grins at me. "Good to see you, Mr Wrigley. Ever seen a rabbit eat a horse? It's not pretty. Go say hello to mum and Sienna. You can leave your bag here."

I follow the veranda past Thurston's room, the floor cluttered with sheets of paper and felt tips; past the window of the little office from which Thurston and I used to make prank phone calls; past John and Marie's bedroom, the site of my encounter with a naked Mrs Tally. The ranch slider leading to the lounge was open.

"Knock, knock," I called.

"Is that David Wrigley? Come in here and let us look at you."

Sienna and Marie were stretched across the huge sofa watching television. They both beckoned me over and looked me up and down.

"You're as handsome as ever, David. It's so good to see you. I've been hassling Thurston to invite you over for weeks. But if I tell him anything he'll do the bloody opposite. I should have learnt, shouldn't I?"

"You probably should have, yeah."

"Cheeky little shit," laughed Sienna without looking away from the TV. "You watch how you talk to my mum or Thurston will throw you in the pool."

Marie waved her hand in there dismissively. "Don't be silly, Sienna. We're all friends." You hungry, David?"

"Nah. I mean, no thanks."

"I'm hungry, Marie," Jacob walked through the ranch slider to stand beside me. Both women laughed. Sienna sat up.

"Jacob Avonlea. When are you not hungry?"

"I'm wasting away, Sienna. Look," he lifted his arm and curled his bicep into a body builder's pose.

“What a man you’re going to be, Jacob.” Marie stood up and walked towards the kitchen, stopping to squeeze Jacob’s arm and pat him on the cheek. “Peanut butter sandwich? Cheese and crackers? There’s left over spaghetti from last night?”

“Yes please,” Jacob shouted after her.

“You’re insatiable,” drawled Sienna.

“I am.” Jacob said with a little wink.

Thurston came in and we sat down at the big table to eat. Marie and Sienna fussed over Jacob, flirting with him, feeding him, laughing at all his jokes. The envy was swelling up in my stomach and making me feel sick. Why did I come? Why did Jacob have to come back?

“John says you’re going out on the farm to shoot rabbits. You’ll be careful, won’t you? Thurston, you make sure these pretty townies don’t do anything stupid, won’t you?”

“My life is dedicated to protecting pretty townies, Mum.”

“I know, darling. You’re so good at it.”

Jacob gets up and kisses Marie on the check by way of a thank you and the three of us carry dishes into the kitchen and say our goodbyes to Sienna and Marie.

“Don’t stay out too long, will you? Call me from the stables if you need anything.”

We went into Thurston’s bedroom so Jacob could collect a warm jersey. The paper on the floor I could see from the veranda appears to be a number of letters in Jacob’s handwriting, with little sidebars in different colours in Thurston’s beautiful, sloping hand. I saw one with ‘Dear Kylie’, one ‘Dear Dara’, and one ‘Dear Laura’. I try to read Laura’s letter without Thurston or Jacob seeing me but Thurston ushers us through the room and out onto the veranda.

We followed the dusty, unsealed driveway away from the house towards the stables and the farm. Thurston carried the rifle under his arm, carefully pointed at the ground. Jacob pulled a packet of cigarettes from his pocket and offers us both one. I accept and Thurston declines and we walk on in silence, Jacob and I smoking, Thurston scanning the fence line and hedges for rabbits.

A kahu flew above us, perhaps recognising the rifle for what it was, anticipating a meal, its wings almost still as it held the headwind in its wide embrace. It was close enough so that we could make out the individual feathers on its mottled belly, its black eyes watching us. Thurston spoke to it: “Off you go, now. Don’t follow us. We’re not all good shots. Some of us are very bad.”

For a moment it seemed as if the harrier had listened as it drifted away to the south. But it merely described a wide circle and ended up above us once more.

We reached the stables. John Tally came out, his hands on his hips, and watched us as we trudged past him. He wasn't quite smiling, but he wasn't quite not smiling. He nodded at us each in turn. As we climbed over a stile to enter one of the paddocks he called after us: "Careful." Thurston turned back to look at his father and gave him a little nod of acknowledgement: of course.

The Tallys' paddocks were pocked with deep craters, perhaps two metres deep and five metres across. They were, according to John, quarries from which the Māori has excavated sand and gravel. They would mix the gravel with richer alluvium soil to create a compound that would retain enough heat to grow kumara in the cold Waikato climate. These quarries were part of the sophisticated agricultural economy local Māori had built before troops marched down the Great South Road, and sailed up the Waikato, to wash it all away.

We walked down the steep sides of one of the ditches and stood on the bottom. Jacob sat down and lit a cigarette. I did the same. We watched Thurston pick bullets from a small cardboard box and drop them into the magazine of the rifle. He crawled with the loaded rifle up to the rim of the crater, tucked it under his arm and put his eye to the telescopic site. We heard him click off the safety. We waited in silence. Minutes passed and there was no sound other than the wind rustling through the grass and the puff-puff of Jacob and I gently inhaling and exhaling smoke. Then, in a moment of stillness, when both our breath and the breath off the earth had paused for a moment, a sharp crack exploded in our ears, followed by a distant, rumbling echo.

Thurston got to his feet and reset the safety. He disappeared over the edge of the crater. Jacob and I stood up and walked to the rim where we could watch him. About twenty metres from where we stood, he bent over and picked something up. He turned around carrying a rabbit by the ears, its body limp and still, drops of blood falling to the grass like the first beats of a rainstorm.

He walked past us without looking either of us in the eye. He tossed the carcass to the bottom of the crater.

"That's it. That's how you kill a rabbit. It feels like shit, actually. Wanna go?"

"I do," said Jacob.

We took turns shooting at rabbits all afternoon. We moved from trench to trench, paddock to paddock, Thurston very much in charge, taking the gun from our hands when he thought we weren't being sufficiently careful. Jacob was a good shot. I was not.

By 3 o'clock we had killed eight rabbits, Jacob had shot three, Thurston five, I had missed every time. We returned to the first trench and dropped the dead creatures beside the carcass of Thurston's first kill.

"You two had enough murdering for today?" asked Thurston.

"Can I have one more go?" asked Jacob.

"Sure." Thurston handed him the rifle. "Safety's on."

Jacob took the gun and climbed the crater's slope. He shuffled into place, his legs stretched out behind him, his eye pressed to the site, perfectly still and quiet.

Thurston and I settled in at the bottom of the trench, sitting as far as we could manage from the pile of dead rabbits. Flies buzzed around the carcasses. The kahu from this morning had returned and was circling lazily above our heads.

Thurston and I watched it watching us. Slowly spiralling, its wings set in a shallow V, a couple of beats every few seconds to correct its course.

Suddenly, it plummeted feet first towards the ground. We lost sight of it over the edge of the crater. We both stood up without speaking, curious to see what the harrier had seen.

We saw it beating its wings and rising a metre or two in the air, then letting itself drop again, its talons extended from long spindly legs. When it rose up again it was holding something small and grey in its talons. Its wings beat faster as it attempted to make off with its prey.

Then a shot. A deafening crack and a distant rumble.

The kahu went limp, mid wing beat, and fell like a sack of beans to the earth.

Thurston cried out, a sharp involuntary yelp of protest.

He ran over to where Jacob lay and pulled the rifle from his hands. Jacob had gone pale, his mouth hung open in disbelief.

"No." Thurston shouted at his friend.

Thurston ran towards the spot where the bird had fallen. I followed. Jacob got to his feet, absently brushing dirt from his knees, he walked a few steps towards Thurston then stopped.

Thurston nudged the harrier with his boot. It didn't move. But something else did.

"Oh no." Thurston groaned.

As I got closer, I could see seven little bodies huddled together. They were each no bigger than my fist. Some of their eyes were open, some were still tightly closed. We were near the spot where Thurston had shot the first rabbit of the morning. A female as he reminded us.

One of the kits lay on its side, a little apart from its siblings, near the body of the kahu. It was breathing rapidly, its ribcage rising and falling. Two small dark stains were spreading out across its grey fur.

"Jesus Christ," muttered Thurston. "we're going to have to do something with them."

His words hung in the air for a few moments, Jacob and I sucking air into our lungs and letting the meaning sink into our bones.

"We could take them back to the house. We can all take care of them till they're big enough to look after themselves." Jacob walked past Thurston towards the rabbits, his hands reaching out for their little bodies. Thurston put out an arm to stop him.

"There is no 'we' Jacob. You're going back to school tomorrow. David's going home."

"You and Marie and Sienna then. It won't be long."

"No. We don't have time to look after orphaned rabbits. They're wild. They're pests. They might have diseases. We can't do it. And anyway, if we were to look after them till they're big enough to fend for themselves, then what? We let them go and then try to shoot them the next day? There's a horse trough in the next paddock. We'll take them there."

"No. No. Please, Thurston." Jacob started to cry. He looked like the boy I'd met four years ago. A child.

Thurston put down the gun, took off his jumper and his belt. He tied a knot in both the sleeves and twisted the neck tightly before making a noose of his belt and tying it off. He knelt down and scooped the kits, scrabbling and whimpering in confusion and hunger, into the waist of the jersey. He clumped the waist together and held the makeshift sack in one hand. Jacob and I stared at it in horror as it bulged and squirmed, the whimpering rising to a high-pitched, hopeless shriek. Thurston picked up the rifle with his spare hand and walked off without waiting for us to follow.

"Thurston. Please. No."

He didn't turn around but walked a little faster.

I took off after him and Jacob followed. I was desperately trying to think of a solution: perhaps I could take care of them? No. No way I'd be allowed and there's no way I'd succeed at keeping them alive anyway. Find another female rabbit? A pet shop? No. It was hopeless. Thurston was right.

Thurston stepped over the stile into the next paddock holding the gun and the sack above his head without breaking stride. There were three of the trenches in

the field and a concrete trough at the far end. Thurston marched towards it. He was far ahead of me now.

Jacob ran past me. He caught up with Thurston. I could hear him pleading, remonstrating, threatening. Thurston didn't even turn his head to look at him.

They reached the trough and Jacob grabbed Thurston by the arm that held the sack. Thurston turned towards him. As I caught up with them, I could hear Thurston say in a low voice:

"Let go of me Jacob." The two boys, both big for their age, both of whom could pass for grown men from a short distance, stared at each other. The only thing that moved was the wind in the hedgerow and the fidgeting sack of rabbits in Thurston's hand.

Jacob let his arms drop to his sides. He took a step back.

Thurston lay the gun down by his feet. He turned towards the trough and took a deep breath. He closed his eyes and turned his head away before plunging the sack and his entire arm into the trough. There was no sound or sign of struggle from beneath the filthy brown water. Thurston began to weep. Jacob sat down and put his head in his hands. I did the same. The tears came suddenly and didn't stop for a long time.

At last Thurston pulled the makeshift sack from the water and laid it carefully at his feet. He sat down with his back to the trough.

No one moved and no one spoke.

That evening we carried tree branches and broken pallets and fence posts from all over the farm and stacked them carefully over the bodies of the rabbits lying at the bottom of that first trench.

As the sun went down, Thurston took a match to the newspaper and kindling we'd stuffed beneath the pile. We watched the fire catch and spread, sparks winnowing away into the cool evening air. The sky turned from blue, to lilac, to lavender. Venus appeared away to the north.

Once the fire had taken hold of the bigger pieces of wood and was growling and crackling with a steady intensity, Thurston got up and collected the sack of dead kits and the carcass of the kahu from where we had left them, on the grass a few metres behind us. He walked past us and down into the fire pit.

He threw the body of the harrier into the flames first.

"What about your jersey?" I asked.

"I don't want it."

He thought for a moment then unwrapped the belt that was holding closed the collar of the make-shift sack. With two hands he gently lobbed the rabbits and the

jersey onto the fire. He quickly turned around and walked back to where Jacob and I were sitting. He sat down next to Jacob and put his arm around his shoulder. Jacob let his head rest on Thurston's arm.

We stared at the fire, and I had never felt so alone.

We sat there for a long time, not speaking, as the stars appeared like talon scars on the belly of the sky.

Once the day was completely absorbed by darkness, Thurston got up and walked over towards the stables. He retuned five minutes later holding a six pack of Rheineck, lifted from John Tally's fridge.

We mumbled toasts to the dead and we drank.

Later, we laid out blankets under a wych elm next to the house and climbed into sleeping bags. We spoke a little about school, about music, about girls of course. Thurston had run an extension cord from his bedroom window so we could listen to music on his ghetto blaster. We listened to The Beastie Boys, Transvison Vamp, The Violent Femmes, The Dead Kennedys. Jacob told us he was going to be a rock star one day. Thurston and I believed him. I said I was going to be a writer, maybe I'd write some lyrics for his band. Thurston was going to be a pilot and would fly Jacob around the world on tour.

As the talk grew thinner and the darkness closed in around our heads, I heard Jacob whisper to Thurston:

"I'm sorry about the bird Thurston. I just wanted to scare it. I never meant to kill it."

"I know," Thurston replied. "I know you didn't mean to."

They were silent for a minute or two and I thought they had fallen asleep.

Then Jacob said, drowsily, as if from under water:

"Those poor rabbits. Those poor little things."

The Letter: II

Dearest Jacob, Jackie Boy, Jazz,

How ya doing my old phony friend.

I see you with Thurston, your special boy of the moment. You've always got one on the go, haven't you? I was one of your special boys for a while. I remember how you liked to snuggle up to me in the dorms after choir practice. Remember, Jacob?

And what about you and Glick, eh? You were always defending him. 'Oh Trevor, he's just misunderstood. It's not easy being so wonderful and talented.' That was pretty much your line, wasn't it?

There were always rumours, you know? But I didn't believe them. Not then. If Glick was a wrong 'un then you would have told me. You were my best mate. We told each other everything back then. Remember? Well, I thought we told each other everything. Now I'm not so sure, Jacob.

It was funny how you two disappeared at the same time. You went to the UK on that big trip. Two months away. It was winter over there in London, wasn't it? Snow on the ground. Must have been romantic. I wasn't allowed to go. Not that you cared. And then I get back to school after the summer holidays and Glick is gone. New music teacher. New choir master. New housemaster. And you. You were gone as well. No letter. You could have called. But you didn't. Fucking. Bother.

And now you're back. Well I'm finished with waiting for you.

Leave me alone. Leave Laura alone. Just leave, Jacob. This school belongs to me now. I belong here. Freaks like you and Glick don't. Have a nice life.

Your old mate,

David

I folded this note once, twice, three times, four. And once more so that it fit snugly into the palm of my hand. I caught the bus to school, went to chapel, to English class, the note nestled into my palm, my hand in my pocket. The note became hotter as the day went on. It made my skin tingle and sweat. The corners cut into my skin and left angry red craters in the flesh. I thought of the hot stones in *Under the Mountain*. How the children had to hold them in their hands and

bear the terrible pain. The pain that accompanies power. It shouldn't be easy to destroy your enemies. It should hurt.

I stood alone in the lunch line. Older kids shouldered past me, cutting in front. I said nothing. "Where're ya mates, Wrigley? Oi. Nigel No-mates!"

I didn't reply. I was thinking about what I was about to do. I was trying to consider the consequences. But I couldn't see past the screen of rage that was smouldering just in front of my eyes. The future didn't exist. Causing pain was the only thing that mattered.

Jacob and Kylie had broken up over the weekend. It was the talk of the school. No one had seen it coming. The golden couple of our year. So clearly in love.

But Jacob had called it off and no one was quite sure why. Rumours leapt from ear to ear like fleas.

I had heard the news Monday morning as soon as I climbed off the bus. Damon Rindle ran up to me and gleefully told me that Jacob and Kylie weren't going out anymore. "Probably finally realised it's a dick he's after, eh?"

I didn't reply. I shouldered my bag and pushed past Damon. I walked towards the day boys' common room where I could leave my things before the morning assembly.

The news, if true, was surprising but not shocking to me. I half-expected this sort of thing from Jacob. The dramatic break up. The sort of move that took everyone by surprise. Got everyone talking. About Jacob.

I snorted out a bitter little laugh. They'd be back together by Friday. Which would ensure everyone was talking about it over the weekend as well. An entire week of publicity. Jacob would love it.

As I walked along the path that ran past the chapel, I noticed two kids sitting side by side on the steps. It was Jacob and Laura. Their knees were touching. Jacob's head was resting on his forearms which were crossed over his knees. I couldn't see his face, but I was sure he was crying. Laura had one hand resting on his bicep and one arm was draped around his shoulder. She had tears in her eyes. She didn't notice me walk past. Her forehead was creased in concern, and her lips moved slowly, tenderly. She was whispering some comfort. Some promise.

I stood at the door of the day boys' common room and looked back at the two of them. They did not notice me. Jacob finally lifted his head, and I could see his eyes were red from crying. He looked at Laura. He said something and they both

laughed. He reached out and wrapped his arms around her. He held her to his chest.

I turned around quickly and walked through the door.

I made it to the front of the lunch line and could see through the glass doors into the dining hall. The cathedral ceiling with its rimu beams and rafters recalled the rigging of an old-fashioned sailing ship. I thought about a painting I'd seen in a book of a ship set alight on the ocean, the fire reflected in the water, creating an orange and peach haze that melted the sky and the sea together into one brilliant mass.

I scanned the communal tables one by one until I recognised Jacob. He was sitting with Thurston and four girls from the year below. All eyes were on Jacob. Judging by their faces he was telling a funny story.

I pulled the door open and walked towards him. The note was a ball of molten rock in my hand. I had to fight back tears which flooded my eyes unexpectedly and made the room a watery blur. I blinked furiously.

"Hi Wriggles," drawled Thurston when he caught sight of me standing behind Jacob.

Jacob spun around, startled but smiling. "Hey David," he said before turning back to his audience.

I drew my hand out of my pocket and stood there for a moment staring at the back of Jacob's head. The girls were all staring at me now, shuffling uncomfortably in their seats.

"What up, guy?" said Thurston.

Jacob turned around to look at me again. He raised his eyebrows in a question.

I held out my hand. He looked at it, then hesitantly reached out his own hand to shake mine.

I pressed the note into his palm. I wondered if he could feel the heat coming from it.

"What's this?"

I didn't reply. I turned round and walked back the way I had come. I didn't look back.

I didn't see Jacob again that day until the last period. Religious Education with Reverend Anderson. I arrived with Damon. We had walked from the

English classroom together, talking about our plans for the weekend, about the New Zealand versus Australia test match that was due to start on Saturday.

Jacob was sitting by himself at the front of the class. His shoulders were hunched over a book he had open on the desk in front of him. He turned around as I walked in. His eyes looked red. His face was blank. He turned back to his book.

Reverend Anderson breezed into the classroom, cracking jokes as always, gently teasing his favourites for their hairstyles or their performance at a recent rugby game.

"Avonlea. You look like your cat just died. Everything alright?"

Jacob didn't look up. "I'm fine, sir. Thank you."

The Reverend looked at Jacob staring down at his desk. The Reverend seemed like he was about to say something before thinking better of it.

He took a step forward so that he was standing beside Jacob. He put his huge hand on Jacob's shoulder and said to the class, "Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen. Don't worry, you're almost through the week. Just one hour of me and your time will be your own. Bear with me, it'll be over before you know it."

He gave Jacob's shoulder a little squeeze, turned and walked towards the whiteboard on the back wall. With a blue marker he wrote the word "Sex" in letters big enough to fill the entire white space.

The classroom briefly slipped into a stunned silence.

"Go on," said the Reverend, "off you go. Let it all out."

"Don't mind if I do," someone said, and the floodgates of teenage embarrassment and obsession opened, and the room filled with the sound of a hundred weak jokes and feverish cackling from the depths of a dozen churning bellies.

"Finished? No? That's okay. I'll wait." The chatter died to a simmer then stopped.

"Right. So. Sex. What does Christ have to say about sex?"

Anderson launched into his sermon on the dangers and pitfalls of sexual desire. He spoke of the body as a conduit between a fallen Earth and a predatory Satan. How if we weren't alert and walking the path beside Jesus, then we opened ourselves up to sin and the very real possibility of eternal damnation.

There once was a time when this sermon would have scared me. But I was beyond that point now. I liked the Reverend, but I saw his religiosity as an eccentricity to be humoured or, ideally, politely ignored. He was a good guy once you got past the Jesus stuff.

"So, sex before marriage is always a sin in the eyes of God. What else? What other aspects of sex might anger God?"

"Gay sex, Reverend", I called out. Half the classroom, the boys, tittered. Jacob turned to look at me and I grinned at him. "Hi Jakey Boy." He turned back around.

The Reverend raised his eyebrows and looked at Jacob and back at me.

"That's right. Thank you, David. Homosexuality is, as it says in the Bible, an abomination before God." Anderson walked to his desk and picks up a small Bible. He found his page almost immediately although it did't appear to be marked.

"In Paul's letter to the Romans, he says:

'For this reason God gave them up to dishonourable passions. For their women exchanged natural relations for those that are contrary to nature; and the men likewise gave up natural relations with women and were consumed with passion for one another, men committing shameless acts with men and receiving in themselves the due penalty for their error. And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a debased mind to do what ought not to be done.'"

No one said a word after Anderson finished reading.

Into this silence I whispered: "Shameless, Jacob. Shameless"

The class giggled nervously. There was suddenly a strange electricity in the air. It made the hairs on the back of our necks stand on end.

The Reverend took a step towards me, "That's enough, Wrigley." He looked at Jacob and then back to me. He was confused. He couldn't quite trace the meaning of what was happening.

"Sorry, sir. I'm just trying to help Jacob here. It seems he's a bit of a faggot and…."

Jacob's chair went flying backwards into the desk behind him.

Before I knew what was happening, he was bounding over the rows of desks separating us. He flung himself at me. I could see the rage twisting his face like a fractured smile as he flew towards me. He made a sound like an animal being tortured.

He knocked me back in my chair so that my head collided with dust-rough lino of the classroom floor. Even before the blows started landing, I could feel the skin of my cheeks and neck set alight with shame at what I had provoked. The blows were almost welcome. He wrapped his fingers around my throat and squeezed. I could feel the warmth of his hands crushing the air from my

windpipe. It took just a second before the world began to flicker and darkness started to come down from the ceiling, leak in through the open windows of the classroom.

When the Reverend finally managed to pull Jacob off me, once his hands had been prised from around my neck, his body no longer touching mine, I saw him go limp. He collapsed into the Reverend's arms, and he let out a wounded keening howl that seemed to go on and on for a long time.

There was blood on his hands and his chest where his shirt had somehow been ripped open. When I reached up to touch my face, I realised there was blood on me too. I didn't know if it was his or mine.

I lay on the floor and took in great armfuls of air. I stared up at the ceiling and let the light fill the room once more.

Death in June

My sister and I catch the bus to school every morning. It picks us up from the neat grass berm in front of the grey bungalow opposite our driveway. If we are late, the driver will stop and sound her horn a few times to see if we emerge, stuffing books into backpacks as we run down the driveway, a piece of white toast or a green apple in a clench between our teeth.

We are right at the beginning of the route and when we get on, there are only two other passengers: Jonathon and David Cashman. David is in my year, but we are rarely in the same class and we have little in common. He is a keen surfer, an excellent cricketer, and is always top of his class in subjects like woodwork and technical drawing, classes which I do not take. He is indifferent to the subjects at which I excel like English and History and doesn't seem to care if he fails. We greet each other with a lazy nod each morning but don't speak. He sits at the back staring out the window on the lefthand side. I sit in the middle and to the right. I like to watch the front door of our house as the bus pulls away, try to catch a glimpse of my mother or father as they leave for work.

Jonathon is in the same year as my sister, but they do not even acknowledge each other when Lucy gets on the bus. They have loathed each other since they first met when Lucy started at St. Michael's. Until recently, in the evenings, on the way home, when the bus was packed full of kids still full of energy and chatter, the two would occasionally bicker at each other from opposite sides of the aisle. A little insult here, a jibe there.

About a year before this particular day in June, the exchange was getting particularly pointed and Jonathon called my sister "an ugly pig". He pointed out that she had a big nose like an old man's. I could see that this rattled my sister as I knew she was sensitive about the family nose which all of us children, boys and girls alike, inherited from my father.

Uncharacteristically I leapt to my sister's defence.

"Shut up, Cashman. You faggot."

The bus went quiet. Jonathon, who had got to his feet to lean towards my sister all the better to land his jabs, sat down, looked at me for a few seconds, then turned to look out the window without saying a word. I turned to my sister who, like almost every other kid on the bus, was staring back at me in horror.

I knew what I had said but I also didn't know what I had said.

There was a story that went round the school, was always going round the school. A story we passed to one another on the back seat of the bus. That we shared in little huddled groups at the end of communal tables in the dining hall. In the library when no adults were paying us any attention. In gym changing rooms when everyone else had showered, dressed, and gone off to class.

The story went that in 1986, when Jonathon was in the first form, he'd been invited by one of the boarders upstairs to have a look at the dormitories. This boarder's name was Donnie. They had gone right up to the third floor into the little dormitory that was for the youngest children, which everyone referred to as The Crow's Nest. Once Donnie and Jonathon had got to the The Crow's Nest and Donnie was sure that no one was around, Donnie tried to kiss Jonathon. When Jonathon pulled away and yelped in shock, Donnie punched him, pushed him down on one of the beds, forced down Jonathon's pants, and raped him.

That was how the story went.

No one knows what happened to Donnie, but everyone knows that he was asked to leave rather than get expelled. Everyone knows that you are not allowed to talk about the incident. Everyone knows that Andre Clemence, a friend of my sisters, had asked Jonathon about it last year on the bus in front of everyone. Everyone knows that Andre was caned by the headmaster himself and that he left the school shortly after to attend St Paul's in Hamilton.

When I used the word faggot, I knew what it meant. I knew it meant gay and I knew to be gay was a terrible thing. Maybe the worst thing. I knew this from fellow students, from teachers and the school chaplain, and from my father. I had heard the word used about Jonathon, quietly, behind his back, when it was only trusted companions within earshot.

But did I connect the word with what I knew had happened to Jonathon? Perhaps in some foggy way, the way a child might associate the moon with the tide but not understand the precise connection.

I didn't get in trouble for what I said. I suspect there was a tacit agreement between everyone on the bus that day, including Jonathon, that Jonathon had overstepped a mark when he insulted my sister, and that although everyone knew what I had said was terrible, the circumstances dictated that the matter did not slip into the hands of authorities either at school or at home.

More than a year had passed since that afternoon in 1990 and since then a quiet truce had been in place between the first four kids to climb on that bus every morning. Nobody spoke or sat next to each other. We sat at the four

corners of the bus and listened to our Walkmans and stared out the window and waited for the ride to be over or for someone we liked better to climb on board.

Φ

A cold Monday morning in June. A gun-grey mist lingers in the depressions of our backyard; under the tatty skirts of the loquat tree; at the base of the wooden fence that divides us from our neighbours; on the surface of the swimming pool, beginning to show the first sick tint of green in the wake of autumnal neglect.

I sit at the dining room table and eat cornflakes while staring out the window at this unpromising scene. The sky is featureless as fresh concrete. An easterly wind arrives in gusts and coughs; I can hear it keening through the gum trees at the top of the lake a hundred metres to the south.

My sister is in her room getting dressed for the school day. My father has already left for work and my mother is in the shower.

I slip into a reverie in which I live in this big house on my own, a house that creaks at night, a house that, according to my father, was built without nails, fitted together by precise, interlocking joints. My family are gone for good, dead perhaps, or abducted by a shadowy government agency.

In this scenario I have spared the dog.

Just as I bestow this act of mercy, the dog appears in the doorway from the kitchen. He shuffles into the room and sniffs. He looks at me looking at him, sneezes, and with his usual flair for ingratitude, turns around and waddles back into the kitchen.

I decide the dog is dead after all.

How does it feel to be all alone in the world? I am fourteen. I am old enough to fend for myself. I could conceivably get a job. But perhaps there are no jobs in the world anymore. Perhaps I must hunt, or steal, or turn this quarter acre section into a working farm somehow. I decide that of those three options, stealing is my best bet.

I picture myself slipping out into the night. The stars are machine-cut punctures in the blackness, more numerous and more defined since the streetlights stopped working, since all the lights stopped working. The Milky Way barrel-rolls across the sky, a congealing slick of stars and solar systems and planets. I cannot fathom how I am observing this galaxy from the overgrown lawn of my front garden and yet, somehow, I am also a part of it.

How far away we are. How unlikely even the faintest, flickering pulse of connection.

I picture myself slipping quietly through the deserted streets. Purslane has pushed its way through the cracks in the footpath and is knitting a soft blanket of tendrils to smother the concrete. Dandelion, Onehunga weed, hawkes beard and dock have wrestled control of the once-manicured berms and front lawns of the neighbourhood from the coddled, domesticated grasses of the suburbs.

I stay close to the hedges that people once planted to separate themselves from one another, to keep out prying eyes, to give the illusion of isolation. I stay away from the wide road. I am slender and stealthy and move with the slow-limbed anxiety of an antelope across an open plain.

I slip through the kitchen doors of my once-neighbours. I carry a little hammer which I use to make openings in the frosted glass panels, big enough for me to reach my hand through and unlock latches and bolts.

There is always a terrible smell coming from the fridges and the freezers. The chest freezers in garages are the worst and I have learned to stay away from them if I want to hold on to whatever might already be in my stomach. Some houses have the stink of rotting coriander, some of mushrooms left too long and allowed to dissolve into gas and slime, and some have the unmistakable reek of rotting flesh. It is impossible to tells what manner of flesh it might be. Sometimes it comes from behind closed doors, rooms off hallways that were probably bedrooms. I do not open these doors.

I rummage through pantries and cabinets to find tinned food. I am not fussy. Tomatoes, oxtail soup, pasta in sauce, black beans, sardines, pickled peppers. I take whatever I think will keep me alive and then I get out of there, return to the smell of weeds, the smell of lemons ripening on roadside trees, the impossible but perceptible ozone of starlight.

I imagine one particular night, when I venture beyond my neighbourhood and towards the town. I stick to the collar of the lake for as long as I can, trusting to the darkness of the oak and chestnut trees to keep the secret of my presence.

I cut through what was once the railway yard, decommissioned long before the first link in the chain of events leading to this version of the world had even begun. Segments of track run from long abandoned warehouses and end abruptly in fallow earth. Piles of railway sleepers are stacked neatly next to mountains of gravel. I see half a dozen rats perched in an empty window frame. They watch me as I pass but do not seem troubled by my presence.

I scuttle across the state highway and into the grounds of the Catholic school. Rugby posts are beginning to lean towards each other as if preparing to kneel. Across the eastern boundary and over a fence and down onto Anzac Street. The church on the other side of the road has long been reduced to blackened rubble, as has the New World supermarket diagonally opposite. One checkout counter is miraculously untouched by the fire and looting. It looks as if the conveyor belt might start up at any moment, that some sullen teenager might appear and start ringing through a glorious parade of red apples and florets of broccoli, of deli meats, still-warm loaves of bread, frozen pizzas, and whole chickens wrapped in plastic and polystyrene.

I make my way down Anzac, keeping to the shadows of what used to be shops: the Blockbuster, the Mobil station, Liquorland. I turn onto Duke Street and walk towards the hill that runs down towards the river. Fort Street veers off in a hairpin back towards Victoria Street, the town's main artery. This triangle of streets once held the redoubt thrown up by the invading colonial forces, the first European foothold from which Cambridge could spread across the landscape like purslane. This was also the site of the land court, of the police station, and the jail.

I walk a few metres down Duke Street hill. I am deep under the shadow of the slope and the fir and poplar trees that guard the town's eastern border. I look down and see the bend in the river, where the water snarls and eddies and sucks the weak and the unsuspecting towards its depths. I see the bridge that joins Cambridge to Leamington and the broad sweep of Shakespeare Street that runs up and away from the river again, and from which shoot Wordsworth Street and Browning, Addison and Lamb, Byron, Burns, and Milton.

The darkness deepens and all at once I am standing on packed soil instead of tarmac. The bridge is gone and so is Shakespeare Street. Along the riverbank I see movement and hear the groaning and creaking of wood, like an old house freed from the tyranny of nails. Kahikatea, tall and straight and metres-thick, climb from the banks, drizzling soil and sand onto the ground at their broad, steadying buttresses. A forest springs up in every direction, on every side of me. The stars disappear and the swaying canopy is above my head. Ruru recite their two-tone poems from one bank of the river to the other.

The forest is as old as this bend of the Waikato, and it stretches for as far as my eyes can see. There never was anything before and there never will be anything after. There is only the forest and the birds, and the smell of the river

soil, and in the distance, against the brightening eastern horizon, the outline of sharp hills covered in dark, rich matted bush.

"Move it, Dave. We'll miss the bus." My sister comes up behind holding a piece of toast. With her free hand she messes up my hair which I spent ten minutes arranging into a breaking wave of hair gel.

"Eeeww. Jesus Harry that's disgusting." She wipes her hand performatively on her blue tartan school skirt.

"No one asked you to touch it, did they?"

"What about your little girlfriends? Don't you want them to run their fingers through your hair? Without vomiting?"

"Ideally, yes. Anyway it will dry by the time we get to school".

This is true. The front of my hair will stiffen into stalagmites by the time I get off the bus. The brittle strands will give me something to do with my hands as I sit through the chapel service that starts the school week. I am always aware of my hands. I don't trust them. I like to know what they are doing at any given time.

I rinse out my cereal bowl and place it in the dishwasher. My backpack is lying by the front door, ready with books and stationery, and rugby gear for practice after school.

Mum emerges dressed for work, her hair perfect, neatly pressed trousers and shirt, or slacks and a blouse as she would put it.

"All ready to go, my love?"

"Yep. Think I've got everything."

"I took chicken breasts out of the freezer last night. You'll get them in the oven when you get home? And peel some potatoes."

"What about Lucy?"

"Don't worry about Lucy. I'm asking you."

My sister appears from the kitchen.

"Ha. Nice try, mate."

I grunt my annoyance.

"Bye Mum."

"See you tonight, darling. Love you."

The morning is as cold and grey as it looked through the dining room window. Birds don't bother to sing. The dark greens of the jasmine and the camellia bushes look lustreless and exhausted. Patches of mist linger above the thick

carpet of dead leaves beneath the willow tree that stands as the first line of defence between the family home and the world.

The air is heavy with moisture that gets in under our jerseys and duffel coats, under our skin and flesh, right to the bone. The nearby river is reminding us of itself, gently tugging at our marrow.

Lucy and I stand apart from each other as we wait. The bus is late. I take out my Walkman. There is a tape already loaded. It's been in there for weeks. It's a twice dubbed copy of Violent Femmes' first album. I managed to convince Lucy to tape it for me, I don't know who taped it for her, and the more I listen to it the more exciting it becomes. It's partly to do with sex. The album is throbbing with sex, but not the sex of pop music. It has nothing to do with the smooth sex of vocal harmonies, of slick production, and clear skin. This is sex as confusion. Sex as pain. Sex as longing. Basement sex. Garage sex. Hips grinding against the gear stick. Knees jammed against the glove compartment.

It's not just the recognisable thrill of awkward teenage longing though. There is something more important. This record feels, rightly or wrongly, achievable. Like I could have made it. A couple of weeks earlier, four of us gathered in my bedroom on a Sunday afternoon. We had two tape decks. We pressed record on the one with the built-in microphone. We muttered to each other, cleared our throats. Then Billy Smithson said "Ready. One, two, three, four" and I pressed play on the other tape deck. 'Blister in the Sun' started right on cue.

We passed the tape around people we didn't think would have heard the Violent Femmes. We told them we were called the Sexual Dilemmas. Shane Berryman's mum asked us if we wanted to play at her church one Sunday. Which made us wonder if she was really listening.

We hadn't quite made the leap from "this sounds like something we could have done" to "we can do this" but this small act of fraud was the beginning of something that would stay with me all my life. It wasn't long before I was writing songs and recording them for real on that same tape deck. This was the year punk broke for me, although I didn't know that was what it was called.

The bus pulls itself in fitful arcs around the tight corner from Thornton Rd onto our street. Lucy and I both shuffle forward a little, keen to get out of the damp morning air and onto the bus, though we know it will only be marginally warmer at this early stage of its route.

The bus creaks to a stop in front of us and the door swings open. The driver, Mrs Cresswell, looks straight ahead and waits for us to board. Lucy and I both mutter our good mornings though, as always, she does not acknowledge us. She

is wearing too-small grey trousers and a short-sleeved white shirt that she wears in all weather. Her upper arms are huge and her flesh ripples with the shuddering of the engine. Her hair is a thin wool of tight copper curls.

The Cashman brothers are in their usual seats. We take ours. The slow amble of 'Please Don't Go' starts playing just as we pull away from the curb. There is a lethargy to the first verse, a too-tired-to-care energy, which bends into the elasticated snap of the sing-song chorus.

I lean my head against the vibrating window and watch the Cambridge East suburbs slip past. The houses are brick or weatherboard bungalows, modest but well maintained, exuding a quiet, comfortable affluence. Soft yellow light emanates from busy kitchens. Men and children sit at tables. Women ferry toast and hot drinks, push strands of hair away from their eyes, knit their brows at mercurial offspring and ungrateful spouses.

The bus chugs round a tight corner onto Taylor Street. On our left the houses continue. On our right is the high school, yet to open its gates, the playing fields flat and empty bar a couple of early morning dog walkers. The high school grounds blend seamlessly into the fields of Hautapu Rugby Club. We take a right onto Hautapu Straight and we are out amongst the dairy farms. Riding quad bikes, farmers, for whom the morning is already old, worry cows from one pasture to another or towards corrugated iron milking sheds. The sky is low and its breath, cold and damp, collects on every surface.

The bus is beginning to fill with kids. The boys in their grey shorts, the girls in their blue tartan skirts. The noise level rises slowly. The warmth of bodies and the bus's engine begins to seep into my bones. The desperate scuffle of 'Add it up' starts up in my headphones.

The energy of the music starts to lift the morning's gloom. I shiver in delight at the lyrics– every 'fuck', every 'screw', a little pearl of illicit pleasure.

The bus passes the great chrome tanks and pipes of the dairy factory, steam rising in puffs and curls, a sharp sour smell layered upon the customary stink of fresh deodorant and lingering adolescent sleep.

The sound of shouting intrudes on the music, and I turn around to see what is going on. The older kids are jeering at one of their own on the back seat. The boy has said or done something disgusting or embarrassing, the rest of them are pointing and laughing and acting out an exaggerated show of repulsion. I don't bother trying to work out exactly what crime has taken place and return to staring out the window, turning the serrated plastic dial of my Walkman to make the music a little louder and drown out the horseplay behind me.

The shimmering lurch and swing of ‘Confessions’ starts up as the bus makes a left turn towards the south, and a beeline towards the school. To our left and our right is Cambridge Stud, the source of much of the town’s wealth and all of its fame, with its immaculate black wooden fences, the pastures slick and vibrant, the thoroughbreds in green jackets against the cold.

We stop at the junction between Peake Road and State Highway One. Four-door sedans flash past us, obedient little comets, on their way to Hamilton or Auckland. We wait our chance to cross the road, the bus shuddering, the children quietening a little, readying themselves for the school day, unconsciously preparing for the crystalline solemnity of the chapel or the grinding gear change of the week’s first class.

I flip the cassette over.

‘Prove my love’, a joyous stomper, all teenage optimism and raging hormones, is the last track I’ll have time to listen to this morning, and I’m grateful that I’ll get off the bus with its chorus ringing in my ears.

Anything can happen, everything is possible, maybe music, maybe this music, can save us.

We swing out into the commuter traffic, the bus’s engine straining to get up to speed. A few seconds later we turn again, into the school’s driveway. There is a brown wooden cottage at the entrance of the school, and I see my friend Matt emerge from the front door with his bag slung over his shoulder. Matt is the stepson of Mr Ellery, the music teacher who replaced Mr Glick after he went on sabbatical three years ago and never returned.

We roll down the driveway towards the school, fir trees and maples on either side of us. Beyond the trees on our right, the farm, sloping almost imperceptibly towards the river, out of sight to the west.

Straight ahead of us, the textured, pale yellow of the prep school. A head is poking out from a window on the top floor, from the Crow’s Nest. As I watch, another head pops out from the neighbouring window, and then another. They are looking down on the courtyard and the little path that runs between the prep school and the chapel and beyond to the kahikateas. Pockets of girls and boys are clustered on the path. The chaplain, Reverend Anderson, decked out in full vestments ready for the morning service, is moving between the groups. I see him reach out and put his hand on a boy’s shoulder. Then he pulls him to his chest, and the boy is lost in the folds of white cotton surplice.

Odd. But as we veer left towards the area of loose gravel set aside for buses, I give it no more thought.

‘Prove my love’ comes to its wild singalong ending and I press stop as the music fades to leave the atmosphere of tape hiss. The next song is all cued up, ready for the journey home.

The bus circles around to face the way it came. There is a sigh of compressed air and the door swings open. Kids start to clamber off the bus, climbing over each other to get outside. I’m in no hurry and wait, staring out the window and wondering where Laura Lejeune might be at this moment.

Lucy knocks my headphones off my head as she shuffles past.

“Come on, dickhead. It won’t take you home again ya know?”

I aim a lazy slap in her direction which misses, and she is gone.

I pack my Walkman into my bag and stand up. David Cashman is the only other person left on the bus, and he raises his eyebrows in a tiny gesture of acknowledgment as he walks past. We’re here. We may as well get on with it.

I step off the bus and smell the familiar smell of this parcel of land: dust and pine sap with the waft of enthusiastically applied cologne coming from the lapels of some passing boy.

Something is not quite right. I have stepped off this bus hundreds of times. But there is something in the air today that was not here last week or last year. A silence where there should be… what? Laughter, or conversation, or some combination of the two? The buzzing nervous systems of the young perhaps. Whatever it may be, it is gone, and the absence causes a chill to surge from my shoulders down to my shoes.

Something is wrong.

I remember the scene outside the chapel. The heads popping out of Crow’s Nest windows. The Reverend Anderson enfolding a boy in his vestments.

I start to walk in that direction. I walk slowly, reluctantly. I find myself meandering, following branches in the path that lead me in arching tangents. Past the huge palm tree that I always picture on Palm Sunday, remembering the day of cyclone Bola when its enormous fronds were brought down and covered the prep school courtyard like a carpet. Past the clearing that they set up for school prizegiving one intolerably hot end of term, when teachers, students, and parents were dropping like sacks of flour one by one in the heat.

There is some small part of me urging me not to go on, to turn around, to walk down the steep hill towards the playing fields, towards the confidence court, the tennis courts. Find somewhere to hide, wait until the danger passes.

The chapel, with the little clusters of students orbiting its periphery, draws me closer. There is nowhere else I can go.

Coming towards me is Billy Smithson. He is walking with his hands behind his head, looking up at the sky, at the tops of the trees. He looks dazed. He is walking in little circles then coming to a stop, turning around to look back at the chapel, then walking on, his handsome face turned towards the blank, grey sky. I walk up to him and say his name. He looks at me but doesn't seem to register. He smiles absently and sucks in breath through his teeth, nods in the direction of the chapel– *go that way. I can't help you*– then he wanders off again.

There is Jimmy Butcher, the little class clown from the year above ours, squatting on his haunches, his head in his hands, beneath the tall fir tree that guards the path towards the chapel grounds.

There is Laura Lejeune in the arms of Amanda Cargill, both quite still and silent on the grass next to the rose gardens.

There is Brian Self, the virtuoso heavy metal guitarist and leather-tough blind side flanker wondering off towards the kahikateas, his friend Sam Eckford running after him, shouting his name.

There is Aroha Anderson, ushering children through the doors of the chapel. Handing them off to a teacher, or a matron who places an arm around their shoulders and guides them into the soft darkness of the interior.

Suddenly, Matt Chandler is at my shoulder. Matt is an acquaintance, part of a group of boarders I hung out with for a term the previous year but got bored of and unceremoniously abandoned. He is small and wiry. At fourteen his face has the constantly doubtful look of a middle-aged man. He is unsentimental and tough talking. He calls almost everyone that isn't his friend a phoney.

"Did you hear?"

"No. What's happened?"

"Avonlea's dead. Killed himself."

I rock forwards on the balls of my feet. I rock back again. My head fills with a swarm of bees. My mouth drops open to let them out.

"Good riddance I reckon. He was a fake. And a ponce. You hated him, eh?"

I look at Matt and try to decode what he is telling me. Avonlea. Jacob Avonlea? My friend. My enemy, too. I loved him once. I love him. I loved him. What has happened? Ask Matt to tell you again.

But I don't ask Matt anything. I walk off. Towards the chapel. Towards the other kids who, like me, are too stunned to speak, who are walking around in little circles in search of someone who can explain to them what it means, what these words mean, the words that people keep saying, that we find ourselves saying.

About our friend.

Jacob with the tight curls and the smile like somebody gracefully falling down the stairs.

Jacob whose soprano still lingers in the rafters of the chapel.

Jacob who charmed my mother and who instructed me on how to correctly smoke a cigarette.

Jacob who would put his arms around me and tell me that he loved me when no one besides my mother had ever done such a peculiar thing.

Jacob amongst the oak and onion weed of the confidence course.

Jacob amongst the kahikateas.

Jacob beneath the billiard table listening a billion raindrops explode at once.

Jacob with his arms around my shoulders.

Jacob with his hands around my neck.

The huge wooden doors of the chapel gape. An electric chandelier in the vestibule strains against the gloom. Stunned children disappear into the darkness of the chapel's throat, teachers emerge into the light, looking for something they can do, someone they might be able to help for a moment.

Aroha Anderson is at my shoulder.

"David, you've heard?"

"Yes. Yes. Chandler told me. Jacob's dead."

"I'm sorry. I remember you were very close."

"We were. Yes."

His huge hand is on my shoulder. He draws me to him, and I let out a sob as my cheek meets the warmth of his vestments. I close my eyes and the chapel, and the school, and my peers fade into darkness. My world collapses into the space between Aroha Anderson's arms. There is nothing left but the cotton of his surplice, the great gasping sobs leaving my chest, and the knot of grief that is unclenching and expanding behind my eyes.

I don't know how long I stay like that but at some point, the cool morning air is on my face once more and I am led gently up the steps of the chapel and through those open doors. Mr Anderson passes me off to Mrs Holborn, one of the house matrons with whom I had never exchanged a word, and she leads me, an arm around my shoulders, another cradling my head and pressing it into the warmth of her breast, down the aisle towards the altar, the chapel stalls, the great pipes of the organ. She guides me into a pew and sits me down next to Melissa Lyle. It's been at least a year since we spoke more than a sentence to each other,

but now we bury our faces in the nape of one another's neck and allow ourselves to disappear into our grief.

Over the course of the morning, details begin to emerge. The school is quick to provide as much information as they can to fill the vacuum where rumour and supposition might otherwise rush in.

Jacob died the previous afternoon, Sunday. Thurston found him on the veranda of their house out on Redoubt Road, a 22-gauge shotgun at his feet. Thurston is not at school today and neither is his sister Sienna. Jacob was on leave there for the weekend, he was due to return to school in an hour's time when Thurston, chopping firewood on the other side of the house, heard the sound of the shotgun going off. He thought Jacob was shooting rabbits and went to find him to tell him to be careful.

There is a note, but no one has seen it yet. Kylie, Jacob's girlfriend, left the school with her parents late last night. We are asked if we would like to go home. Our parents have been contacted and are standing by should we wish to be collected. I choose to stay. Almost everyone chooses to stay.

We mostly keep to the chapel and the chapel grounds. We walk up and down the aisle and find friends, put our arms around each other, say whatever we can to try to make sense of the morning. We try to grasp the idea of forever. The idea of gone.

I see Veronica Bainbridge walking up the steps of the chapel. I am sitting in one of the back pews, looking at the choir stalls, trying to remember the hymns we used to sing in our pure sopranos, as Mr Glick paced and prowled the aisle between us.

"Veronica," I call out.

She comes over and sits next to me. She stares towards the altar, the stained-glass windows dull with the grey light of the morning, like limp sails.

"Do you remember our first day?" she asks.

I think back to that bright day in 1987. Jacob, before I knew his name, taking Veronica's things from her and leading her to her desk, while Miss Sweers looked on, appalled.

"Of course. He saved you, didn't he? She was going to eat you I think."

Veronica smiles. "Yeah. I think she might have. Or thrown me out the window at least."

A pause. I say: "We weren't friends. We haven't been for ages."

"I know. It was sad. Watching you two fighting. You guys were so close."

"I know. Now he's gone."

"I know."

"What do you think?" She turns to look straight at me. "All this," a gesture towards the Christ in the stained glass, "is there anything after?"

"Maybe. But probably. No. Nothing. This is all there is."

"I think that too. He's gone."

"I know."

I walk outside. The sky remains dull and close as the day slinks towards the afternoon, its complexion a little lighter but still a flat sheet of old lead.

Classes have been cancelled for the day and the prep school kids, mostly unaffected by the tragedy from the upper years, are charging around the grounds, shouting and laughing.

I look over towards the kahikatea, their distant tips swaying in a breeze that doesn't touch us down here next to the earth. Jacob and I would hide in there sometimes. I can hear the slender white trunks groaning, the antics of the tui high above our heads. Feel the blanket of damp stillness that surrounded us in that remnant forest. Protected us and drew us closer together. Close enough to hear each other's breath.

James Baker walks towards me. His freckled face is red and puffy from crying. Jimmy and Jacob were close friends in School House. They had a comedy double act they would spend whole weekends working on. Jacob the goofy straight man to Jimmy's frenetic, wisecracking clown.

Jimmy reaches out his hand and I instinctively go to shake it. He presses a piece of paper into my palm.

"I found this in Jacob's cube. It's from you, isn't it?"

I unfold the ripped-out leaf of an exercise book. There is my writing, unmistakable. There is the word *faggot* and the word *fake* and the word *traitor*. I look up at Jimmy looking straight into my eyes. I can see rage driving the sadness from his face.

"I thought you'd better hold onto it. Wouldn't want everyone to see. Would you?"

"No. I'm… I'm sorry… Jimmy. This is from ages ago. I was angry."

"You look like you've been crying. Why were you crying?"

"He was my friend."

"Doesn't look like a letter you'd write to a friend."

"No. I know."

"Just stay away from us. We know who you are, Wrigley."

He walks away toward the boarding house, a couple of his friends standing in the entrance, glaring back at me. I am left alone.

I walk towards the kahikateas. The grass is still wet with dew. I can feel the cold seeping into the leather of my shoes. Into my socks.

I have been found out. I have killed him. I have torn the life from him with words on a page. The guilt sits like a cricket ball in my stomach. My guts clutch at it, clenching and squeezing.

I walk towards the kahikateas. I take one last look at the sky before I disappear beneath the tight weave of their skirts. I smell the damp earth and slow rivers of pine sap. I wander until I find the thick trunk of the seed tree, the last breath of an ancient forest. I touch it with my palm and sit down with my back against the wood.

There are memories perched in the high branches of the trees. I sit and watch them and hope that no one will find me.

Whale

On a winter evening round behind the gashouse
Musing upon the king my brother's wreck
And on the king my father's death before him.
The Waste Land, T.S. Eliot

My life, I suppose, is a story of two rivers.

The meanderings of one you have followed behind me. It is jade green in the noon's sunshine, or it is black, a devourer of light. You have seen it flex its graceful muscles as it bends this way and that, you have watched it grasp and pull at the flailing feet of boys adrift in its currents, you have watched them disappear into its darkness. You have witnessed some of them re-emerge into summer sunlight, bedraggled and gasping for breath, alive to the density of the atoms that contain them, but unsure where their bodies end and the river begins, or to whom their bodies belong.

You have waited and hoped, I think, for the others to break the surface. My eyes return to the spot I last saw them, even though I know that the current will have taken them, alive or dead, around a bend and away to the north and the west, into the silt of its thin delta before it merges and marries with the restless currents of the Tasman Sea. I am, despite myself, still waiting.

My other river is almost as far from the Waikato as it is possible to get. It is a different beast entirely. This river does not remember volcanic cataclysms and can only just recall the ancient forests that once bounded it. It has forgotten the lions and even the wolves. The broad, borderless swamp into which it once eased itself before meeting the cold dark sea has long since been tidied away. The river has been harried and hemmed between walls of concrete and stone. It is an orderly thing. A canal. It bears people and their attendant objects and potions on its surface, an organ of commerce rather than chaos. Its names recall an older truth: Tamesa, Tamesis, Tamis, Temes, Tamise, Tham, Tafwys. Thames, meaning darkness.

Northwest of London it is sometimes called Isis. A healer and magician. A protector and resurrector of the dead. Goddess of magic and wisdom, of kings and kingship, of the sky and the universe itself.

Where the Waikato's relationship with the ocean is a relatively simple one– it flows downwards from the volcanic plateau and empties into the Tasman Sea– the Thames' dealing with the North Sea is messier, more complex, muddier in every way. The Thames wanders down from the Cotswolds without drama. The further south and east it goes, the flatter the land and the slower its progress. Eventually, this long, controlled exhalation comes to an end where it meets the river Medway in the sprawling estuary shared between the counties of Kent and Essex.

But the Thames is not done breathing yet. The tide gathers itself in the estuary. The ocean puffs out its chest, pushing back against the tired river's course. And backwards into England goes the Thames. The water of the estuary, heavy with silt and soil and shit, is joined by the North Sea's brine. They blend together and with the insistent hand of the moon behind them, they journey back towards the bridges and locks of West London.

Where does the river end and the ocean begin?

In January 2006, a whale made its way up the Thames.

I, along with thousands of other Londoners, travelled west to Battersea to try to catch a glimpse and to offer silent support to this strange beast that had wandered so far from the deep waters of the North Atlantic into the murky, reeking shallows of this strange-tasting river.

For a day or two London spoke of little else. London almost never speaks of one thing. Only terrorism, snow, or disease can unite a city of this size. But this lost whale seized the imagination in a way that I had not seen before, and I would not see again. On the first day it was spoken of with wonder, even joy. Nature, in all her strangeness, had breached the high wall of the city's defences and allowed this leviathan to wander into our midst. It was a spell, a conjuror's trick, a bible story.

School children were allowed out early to stand on the riverbank or on the walkways of bridges to try to catch sight of the whale. Adults took off from work. An actual whale. For many of us, this would be the only whale we would ever see. Surely this is a gift or a portent. It must mean something.

The next day the city's mood darkened. News spread. The whale was lost and confused, clearly in distress. The reality of the situation began to seep into the collective London unconscious. This was not a place for fairy tales. No good could come to such a creature in such a place. The whale was deliberately

beached near Albert Bridge. Rescuers blindfolded the beast to stop it from panicking. A crane lifted the whale onto a barge which carried it down the river, against the rising tide, and back towards the sea.

The Thames of London is a different river depending on the tide. Some days when the tide is low, it is an unhappy slick, oozing through a stinking expanse of sand, silt, and mud. On these days I would stop and lean against a rail on its northern bank, and watch metal detectorists and mudlarks pick their way through the sludge of the foreshore. Godwits watched them too, from a cautious distance.

The detectorists hunch over their machines, determined to dredge forth the hurled rings, the wished-upon coins, the broken necklaces of the long dead. The Celts, and the Druids, the Romans, and the Angles, the Saxons, the Normans, the Vikings, the French, the Jews, the Irish, the Jamaicans, Pakistanis, Indians, Somalis, Afghanis, Italians, the Portuguese, and the Spanish. What wealth they possessed slipped into torn pockets, the sludge now thick with the remnants of their sorrows. This was the landscape of Eliot's *Waste Land*. An expanse of mud for us to slip beneath like a dream.

On other days the tide was high, and the river drew itself up to its full height. Now it was nearly level with the London streets. Boats rose and fell on a wind-chopped river and the Thames reminded me, in its width, in its motion, and its smell, of the sea.

But no. It was not suggesting the ocean. It was the ocean.

To look across the river, to its southern bank, was to remember that Shakespeare walked beside these banks, considering plot-points, perhaps muttering into a rain-thick breeze lines from Lear's madness. Swift swam in these waters. Dickens crossed at this bridge to dine in the evenings. Marx and Engels hatched their spectres here and set them loose into the world.

The Thames is not London's only river. Through the borderlands between Hackney (where I lived for more than a decade), Tower Hamlets, and Newham ran the River Lea. It wound through a landscape of crumbling furniture factories and warehouses which patiently waited to be demolished or gutted and used as shells for luxury apartments with names like "The Bagel Factory" or "Fish Island Apartments".

It meets and merges into the Grand Union Canal.

Houseboats line its banks. In winter, woodsmoke pours from chimneys and fills the evening air with muted longing. The boats' occupants are often barefoot,

dreadlocked, hardy, unkempt. They repair engine parts on the towpath. They greet passers-by with barely perceptible nods. These boat-dwellers are Londoners but they are not. They smell of patchouli oil and restlessness. They are doubtful of the great steel and concrete beast to the west, in whose slow-moving arteries they have made their homes but are ready, at a moment's notice, to escape.

Nature has clawed back the riverbanks while the developers weren't looking. Elderflower and ash sneak up along the towpath. Woodpeckers and peregrine falcons perch amongst thickets and on top of electricity pylons in the surrounding marshland.

The silence of the marshes and the creep of nature from between the cracks of industry bring to the surface of the imagination a memory of the inevitable end. The final sinking into silt will be terminal. There will be no metal detectorist or mudlarks to dig us out.

Then there are the lost rivers that have been swallowed, built over, or stolen and incorporated into the metropolis' sewer systems. The Walbrook on whose banks a temple to Mithras once stood. Mithras, the Persian god of light, adopted by the Romans and a rival to Christ and the early church. Bull slayer. Two-faced. Born from a rock, already a youth, a torch in one hand, a dagger in the other. At his feet swarms a menagerie of dogs, serpents, dolphins, eagles, lions, crocodiles, lobsters, and snails.

The Black Ditch, Hackney Brook, the Moselle, the Fleet, the Tyburn, the Effra, the Rom, the Peck, Counter's Creek.

These rivers run beneath our feet (or above us in the case of the Westbourne, carried by a black iron pipe over the heads of unwitting commuters at Sloane Square tube station) in no-one-knows what states of degradation and decline, their memories preserved in the names of suburbs and streets.

Occasionally they escape the sewers and the darkness. They bubble up to the surface for ten or twenty or thirty metre stretches, calling out to goldfinches and robins at dawn, bringing reports from the underworld, warnings and prophecies, babbling *hale hale hale* to the spring sunshine, which teases them with glimpses of warmth, before they bury themselves once more beneath the ruins and the rubble.

Londoners over the years have built parks around them, planted trees to keep them company, tried to make their brief passage into the world of the living a pleasant one. There is a quiet sense that London regrets what it has done, but that given the opportunity, would do it all over again.

The whale died. Its body was covered in lacerations where it had collided with boats and the Thames' rocky bottom. A post-mortem confirmed that it had died from a combination of dehydration, muscle damage, and kidney failure. It had not eaten in at least three days.

The city went back about its business but some of us, with the city-dweller's sentimentality for the natural world, avoided the Thames for a while where we could.

The river had brought a miracle to our doorsteps then slit its throat while we watched.

From then on, when I looked at the Thames, I saw the whale. Its death married it to the river's dark water; another strange ghost to haunt the bone-lined bottom of the Thames.

Those of us who stood on the banks and bridges on those summer afternoons breathed in the horror of the creature's suffering. Its disorientation, its lostness filled our lungs and clung to our insides for weeks and months afterwards.

And we in turn filled the whale with all our human longing, and let it sink below the surface and out of sight.