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A Dead Ordinary Woman

A thesis
submitted in partial fulfilment
of the requirements for the degree
of
Master of Professional Writing,
Department of Writing Studies
at
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by
KIM PEARS



THE UNIVERSITY OF
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Abstract

Muriel Murdoch died in 1961 yet she asked – bullied me more like – into telling her story. ‘Write it all down – all of it,’ she insisted from her an unmarked Essex grave that Mum never let me visit. She was furious to be dead at thirty-five, and wanted me to be her voice. I was reluctant. And curious.

The veil between us lifts as Muriel shared her childhood losses, and her adult struggles with 1940s Essex as the backdrop. Muriel’s tales mirror, dovetail, and blend with mine. My doubts morph into enthusiasm; irritations settle and across time and space, a loving, playful connection forges between us.

The story needed to be told because Muriel said it did. She was a dead ordinary woman with a life cut short, yet she represented women labelled in 1940s Britain not just as difficult: but as ‘good-time girls’ and ‘home wreckers.’ She was hot-headed, loving, resilient, and principled: she thought that war was stupid; and was unafraid to call out the misogyny of some opinionated men in the chip shop queue: ‘Got herself pregnant? Never heard of that before. You’d better ring the papers.’

I was influenced by Kate Atkinson’s *Behind the Scenes at the Museum*, whose protagonist starts her narrative from inside her mother’s womb, providing a poignant, witty story of her unfolding life using the omnipresent point of view. Alice Sebold’s *Lovely Bones* helped me to think about writing about the impact of loss from beyond the grave, and Doireann Ni Ghroifa’s *A Ghost in the Throat* gave me a taste of a piece where the author included herself in her journey of researching and writing about a long-dead poet, doubting herself at times. This story was also about a woman who had been forgotten and overlooked.

The story needed to be told for the adventure of the telling. In its writing, I trusted myself, the process, and the connection with my ancestor. Each day I sat at my desk with the loosest of plans listening to Muriel and putting her words to the page. The more I committed the more the stories came. Why her? Why this? Why now? I agree with Gurprakash, the Dutch, guitar-strumming yogi when he says, ‘The meaning is the experience.’

Lastly, it needed to be told for my own growth. Writing as Muriel with her flaws and foibles has helped me to accept, love, and even revere, my ordinary self. To accept oneself fully, as Matt Haig writes in *The Midnight Library* ‘like the way you accept nature, a glacier or a puffin or the breach of a whale. And in so doing you find freedom.’

Above all, I wrote this because I wanted people to feel for Muriel, to feel for me, and for themselves. To feel with compassion. And, as Matt Haig says: ‘Just to say your own truth out loud, is enough to find others like you.’

*A Dead
Ordinary
Woman*

By Kim Pears

The deeper that sorrow carves into your being, the more joy you can contain.

Kahlil Gibran

The Prophet

My heart's grown with all that pain, I like to think. Always making room for what's to come.

Nathan Harris

The Sweetness of Water

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Preface and acknowledgements

Rotorua, 2021

A list of positive affirmations languishes on my bedside table. It's covered with dust and has a coffee ring between *I lovingly forgive myself* and *The past is over*. Still dark. Monday morning anxiety buzzes inside my ribcage. If it was a bluebottle, at least I could dance around the room and attempt to swat it with the laminated sheet. Instead, I sit up in bed listening to the dog snore and the rain lash against the window. *I am safe. It is safe to feel.*

I take a deep breath to settle my jitters; I exhale, relax my jaw, then my abdomen. The dog, heavy and solid next to me, shudders without waking. There's some pressure; the firm touch of an invisible hand rests between my shoulder blades. *My feelings are normal and acceptable.* I focus on the sensation and sigh open-mouthed. A grey banner of light projects above the curtains as my shaky old dog slumbers. The touch vanishes. *Each moment in life is perfect.*

Yeah, of course it is.

My counsellor is a dark-haired woman called Helen. She oozes competence as she sits holding a gold pen that's poised over her spiralbound notebook. I imagine her in an elegant house with tall, sparkling windows and marble kitchen benches that exude a zesty citrus tang. If she had a dog, it'd be a Golden Retriever.

She suggests the use of affirmations like *I am enough* to counter my low self-esteem. I think they're a load of old bollocks. Parroting something I don't believe is going to do sod all good. Still, I get Louise Hay out of the library and practise *I'm loved, I'm loving, I'm lovable* in front of the mirror and laugh, especially when I sing them or project them with Shakespearean gusto to the dog.

I'm not just learning from Helen though; I'm learning from Muriel – the nan I never knew. Not when she was alive anyway.

The first time Muriel *had words* with me was at 3am on a Wednesday. I was sat bolt upright in bed, fumbling for my glasses ready to write down everything she said. I had a buff-coloured spiral-bound notebook. And an ordinary pen.

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PART I

A bit of sex and a long-dead relative

Rotorua, 2021

The dog's snores next to me on the bed. I flick on the light and sit up. It's the middle of the night and my room has an autumnal chill to it.

'Write that I was none too chuffed about dying.'

A voice breaks the silence.

'That I went to bed on a cool April night, and I didn't wake up.'

The voice of a dead person.

'Write that your mum finds me. Dead. In the morning.'

The voice of a dead person called Muriel. My nan who died in 1961. I pick up my pad and pen and begin to write hoping that I'll be able to read my scribbles in the morning.

'Your mum was only fifteen. Wearing her uncomfortable school blazer. But not her hat because she bloody hated it.'

Mum had told me about that morning. Getting up early for school and finding Muriel dead after they'd had a blazing row the night before. Then rummaging for coins. Walking down the phone box. Holding her little sister Chris's hand.

'Are you getting all of this? And don't grip your pen so tightly.'

The plastic biro leaps from my fingers, rolls across my notepad and lands on the quilt.

I pick up the pen and tut at the dot of blue ink staining my quilt. My hand's throbbing and the light's starting to seep in through a gap in the curtains.

‘Write about the lousy choices I made,’ she says. ‘Especially with men. And write about the war. Maybe I shouldn’t say this, but its awfulness was exciting.’

War. Exciting?

‘Anything else?’ I ask, putting down my pen and folding my arms. My back’s aching and I want a cup of tea.

‘Look at you,’ she says, ‘Arms folded like that. You’ll be shaking your head next.’

I can’t believe her cheek. Open-mouthed I uncross my arms.

‘You’ll soften. You just need time.’

A smidgen of courtesy. At last.

‘Before long you’ll be sizing all this up. Such a great idea for your book. You’ll be turning it over and over in your mind – tipping it like water between two pans. You do love to play, don’t you?’

Book? I’m not writing a book. I slip out of bed and pull the curtains open. The sun flickers through the branches of the magnolia tree then washes across the dandelions that sprout from the lawn.

‘Oh yes you are,’ she says as I slip back into bed. ‘You’ll be cracking on with this in next to no time. I think you’re excited already.’

‘And write about the love,’ she continues. ‘The wildness of loving a man in wartime – I tingle when I think of it now. Shame he turned out to be a lying, cheating good-for-nothing.’

I turn the page. It’s warming up.

‘Oh, and put a bit of sex in it,’ she says, starting to laugh. ‘I don’t mind.’

Am I mad?

Aren't all writers mad? I park that question and smile, vowing to review my sanity some other time, and not tell Helen.

Muriel: fierce, passionate. And downright cheeky. I put my pad and pen down and look out across my scruffy garden. My mind has gone nice and quiet. And I haven't even had my tea yet.

The spiritual significance of fridges

Auckland 2014

A horse-shoe of white plastic chairs – an A5 retreat programme and a blue biro resting on each one. Lucky us. I choose a seat and gather up its contents. Taking off my green puffer jacket, I self-consciously drape it over the back of my chair. My face is ruddy. Outdoorsy and uncomfortably warm. The room is lit by fluorescent lights, and bare, swaying branches are visible through the high windows. Flimsy curtains, with straggly cords hanging down. Our broken circle is too large to speak to people on the other side – all women, all alcoholics. We're *on retreat* but there'll be no cocktails for us.

Our first exercise is to list, using the pen and paper provided, the contents of our fridges. I'm puzzled. A trick question to see who writes bottles of Sav. I left some milk in mine, a bit of cheese – can cut the edges off when I get home. A bag of salad – that won't last.

'What do you have in your fridge that is past its use-by date?' The facilitator, closely cropped short hair, looks around the group.

Someone offers tinned peaches to low-level murmurs and giggles.

'What are you holding onto that needs to go?'

Ah, I begin to realise what the exercise is really about.

She questions what we might need by way of nourishment that isn't there; or what's so untidy and muddled that we can't find it even if it is.

I consider my vegetable drawer in a whole new light.

As soon as I get home, I clean out my fridge.

Rotorua 2021

So, when my fridge begins to freeze-up, I make a phone call; I know that we both need some radical care.

Ken pulls up in his white van, dressed head-to-toe in black. He has a round face and is way too cheerful to be repairing fridges. I see him more as one of those entertainers on children's TV, who dresses in clownish primary colours, and whose stare can quickly become unsettling. As I slide the dog bowls out of the way, he pets my friendly hound Dusty, who succeeds in shedding her fur all over his black pants. He diagnoses a leak of refrigerant gas and oil – and says he'll need to take it away for repair. I watch from the window as Ken wheels my ruptured fridge out to his boxy van.

In its 24-hour absence, food in various states of decomposition litters my house. Plastic containers of meals I have made and frozen steadily became translucent; vegetables change from dimpled rocks to dripping, soggy pouches. I huddle the food together as much as I can muster, hoping that in some vain way each item will support its neighbour. They could witness each other's falling apart, and perhaps draw strength by re-assembling in a utilitarian vegetable stew somewhere down the track.

I use the time to clean the space where the fridge stood, the sort of activity only carried out on moving day, which in a sense, this is.

I reflect on the seven years since the AA retreat particularly a woman who was newly sober, newly separated and learning to make friends with herself. In that time, I've changed jobs, changed men, changed islands even, and now find myself back in the town that I left. That night without the fridge was a hiatus. A time to rest and reflect.

A slurping sound jolts me from my introspection: my dog has her head in the white plastic bin containing all the freezer stuff. She is contentedly lapping away at the thawing peas and a packet of blueberries. I grab them from her and tip the remains of the peas into her bowl. Such dreary vegetables. I give the blueberries a rinse under the tap and pop them into another bowl. I use up the yoghurt and curl up on the couch to think about the vacant clean space left by the fridge. Dusty, my only constant, hops up to join me.

Ken returns the next day, backing his pristine white van over the spot where I feed the birds half-moons of oranges and crescents of apples. I help him carry in my fridge and together we walk it into place. He's identified and repaired the leaks, re-filled it and tested it.

After he leaves it's just me – and Dusty, of course – and the quiet hum of the fridge. I inspect its chilled, illuminated interior. Time to clean. I wash and dry each glass shelf, wipe the inside, and take out each of the plastic shelves from the door and wipe them clean..

Next, I look at the array of food on my benches and in the white plastic bin. I biff some of it, cut up some for the birds and think about replacing what I need.

I look up my favourite recipes and make a shopping list – the only thing I write today. Still, I reckon Muriel's glad that I'm making a fresh start.

A dead ordinary woman

Rotorua, 2021

I wake up anxious as hell having spent the previous day writing about an AA retreat and my fridge. *Oh God*. My inner voice is having a field day. There are numerous thoughts of the *you're not good enough* and *who do you think you are* variety. What rose its ugly head the highest was worrying about what other people might think. Especially Helen the counsellor. I can see her now, hands on hips. Bet her fridge is always clean and never plays up.

I roll over in bed, click on my heater, and push the dog back so at least I have a tiny bit of space.

'Oh sod what other people think! An attitude like that didn't get me through the war.'

Muriel. This is all I need. I stuff my ear plugs back in, but I can still hear her. Dead relatives can be so bloody opinionated.

'Not listening to other people was one of my best decisions,' she continues.

The dog is squashing me to the edge of the bed, and I have Muriel at full blast.

'Would I have kept your mum if I'd listened to what other people thought? Trust yourself for God's sake.'

I really hope this tirade will soon be over.

'Stop comparing yourself – *you're* the only one who's doing it. Just write your soddin' book. So what if no-one reads it?'

This can't go on much longer.

'Are you finished yet?' I say out loud to no-one in particular. Not even the dog looks up.

‘Your mum will read it,’ she continues.

I put my feet to the floor. Yes, she will. Something we agree on.

‘Oh, and one more thing.’

No more! I put my hands over my ears, trying to block her out.

‘You make it so bloody complicated, you.’

My face is scrunched up. I can still hear her and she’s getting to me.

‘This ‘ere life business. It’s only about turning up. That’s all.’

Finally, her tone starts to soften. I feel fingers through my hair and they’re not mine. Mum used to do this to me when I was little. I’d lean on her lap, and she’d stroke my hair while she was reading the paper, or the latest *Poldark* novel.

‘Do your washing up, walk your dog and write your book. Oh, and don’t forget to enjoy yourself sometimes.’

I laugh despite myself. Dusty stirs and starts niggling with her teeth at the base of her tail. Then she licks her backside.

The room’s lovely and warm now and it’s time to start the day. I flick the heat pump on, run the tap for the kettle and gather my mat and blanket ready to do some yoga. The dog, of course, settles next to me.

I find the class on my phone and prop it up on a chair. Kundalini – it’s quite vigorous physically, with plenty of breath work and some chanting. There’s a simple warm up and then the teacher goes through the *kriya*, which is a series of movements designed for a specific purpose. Today’s is about shifting the stagnant energy of grief and fear from the

body. I get to the part which involves punching the air and breathing hard, in and out.

Working vigorously for a short period of time is what counts. I punch and punch and punch.

The teacher has moved onto something else. I am still punching. The tears are streaming down my face. It's shifting, it's shifting.

I stop. I don't analyse. I let whatever it is go.

To finish, I close my eyes, sit on my heels, and repeat the mantra *sat nam*. Over and over *sat nam, sat nam, sat nam*. Truth is my name, truth is my name, truth is my name.

Baby Patricia

Elm Tree Road, Teddington 1929

Me baby sister keeps me up cough, cough, coughing half the night for weeks. This morning she doesn't make a sound. Mum's face is all red and puffy, and she makes these choking sniffing sounds. I sit with me legs sticking out on the green sofa. I'm nearly five and Trixie, our scruffy dog with the one sticky-up ear, stretches up and sniffs at me feet. I lean on Mum's arm as she rocks backwards and forwards. She holds Patricia who's wrapped in her pink knitted blanket that smells of milk and talcum powder. I want a cuddle too. Every time Mum rocks forward, I slip behind her, and she squashes me right arm as she rocks back. I can hear Doreen in the kitchen playing. She's banging on something and doing her pretend reading.

There's no fire on and I'm cold. Dad stands in the doorway with his hair all greased back. He hasn't gone to work.

'Pass her to me, love,' he says.

Mum ignores him. It's like she's frozen – same as Patricia.

Then Dad starts one of his coughing fits and the doorbell goes at the same time. When Dad opens the door, he's still coughing.

'Morning Ted. Still here mate? Usually, it's your good lady I see. Now you had two extra this week so that makes one and nine.'

I hear the milkman pick up the empties – a cold draught seeps into our front room. I try to pull a bit of Patricia's blanket onto me, but her little legs are bare now instead. She's wearing her knitted booties with white ribbons threaded through. Mum doesn't even look at me. She's just rocking and now she starts this moaning sound. Like Trixie when she has a bone, and Doreen crawls towards her.

‘Muriel, there’s some change on my table upstairs. Be a love and go and get me a shilling, would you?’ says Dad.

I almost roll off the couch and run upstairs for him. Trixie thinks we’re playing, and she runs after me.

‘Trixie!’ Dad sounds cross. She stops in her tracks halfway up the stairs, then runs back down.

Dad takes the money I fetch, gives it to the milkman and closes the door. I want to go back and sit with Mum. My stomach feels weird. I’m cold. Something’s going on and not in a nice way.

Dad blocks my way back into our front room and says, ‘Muriel, go and play in the kitchen with Doreen, there’s a good girl.’

Me tummy’s feeling really funny now and I’m shaky.

In the kitchen I close the door and lean against the back of it. I slide down and sit on the floor. I don’t care if me drawers show. Doreen waddles over in her big nappy, leaving her pan which she’s been banging with a wooden spoon. She holds her book upside down and leans next to me, cuddling up to my right arm. She points at one of the pictures and makes baby noises that I can’t make out. My face is hot. There are tears on it. Doreen looks at me and leans closer. She yawns, puts her book down, leans against my right arm and sucks her thumb.

Bourbons and bats

Brentwood Station, 4 March 1943

I'm happy as Larry working at Brentwood Station, even though this bloody war that was supposed to be over yonks ago is still going on. I get to do the announcements and broadcast to the whole station. I feel like the Queen on Christmas Day! I check the tickets too, and I work in the booth.

When the trains pull in, I watch the soldiers jump onto the platforms that you can't see 'cause of all the steam. Those blokes carry so much clobber, and they have to walk up that hill to Warley Barracks – rifles and bags looped over their shoulders like they're wearing two pairs of Dad's braces. Sometimes I'm jealous – they're passing through, off having adventures and I'm always here. I like me job, but I want to get out of here too. I fancy myself as a nurse sometimes, and not just a volunteer neither.

Don't get me wrong, I'm happy being a FANY – a volunteer nurse with a proper uniform and everything. FANY stands for First Aid Nursing Yeomanry, which makes me think of the Beefeaters, not that I get anywhere near the Tower of soddin' London. I think I look a bit daft in me FANY's uniform that's way too long. (I have to roll the waistband up so I don't trip over it). Len says if Florence Nightingale had a little sister who was pretty and smart, it would be me.

Len says he'll help me. He's got a good job in the army, and he knows people. That's how it starts with me and him – his lost rations tin, autumn leaves on platform seven, larking under the clock that's been broke for years, its hands stuck at ten past three. I get near enough to his closely shaved face to smell his Lifebuoy soap. He disappears and I end up pregnant. Still, it starts well enough.

Not every day, but sometimes, I help with loading and unloading the mail. It isn't me job, but David, the boy who does the sorting is friendly and he smiles at me. If it's quiet, I wander up to meet his train.

His eyes are blue and quite small really. The little creases round them get deeper when he smiles – I feel warm when he does. And I blush. Then I look down at me feet in me sensible lace-ups and me bare legs that I smear with gravy browning and feel like a right ninny. I hope that 'cause he's tall, his nose is too far away to smell me skinny Bovril legs. They're like giant-sized Twiglets.

Nothing happens between David and me; I daydream about him though. We chat about what we'll do after the war as we haul a sack onto a trolley and start to wheel it along the platform. I get a glimpse of his mates inside starting to sort all the mail that's just been loaded on. They stand next to each other, stretching out their arms towards each little cubby hole like they're feeding baby birds.

'It's just on morning teatime, David,' I say. 'Come and join us – Vera's on and I'm pretty sure there's a packet of Bourbons.'

David steadies the cart as we walk; it bumps over cracks in the platform, and I watch the light from the stained-glass windows above wash over his face. 'How could I resist an offer like that, Muriel?'

I smile so wide I bob down to hide my blushing face behind the bag of mail. We park the trolley outside the tearoom, making sure we can see it from the window.

Inside, the urn's bubbling away and Janice is doing the honours, spooning tea into the massive tea pot.

‘Apologies in advance love,’ say Janice, looking over at me, ‘tea’s like gnat’s piss as per usual, and I know you like a nice strong one.’

She pauses, glances at David, and says, ‘You’ll just have to make do with your young man there instead.’ She gives the pot a good old stir, followed by a regal tap on its rim. ‘Bloody rations.’

Janice is so bloody embarrassing! I blush for the second time in as many minutes. A few dark curls spiral out from beneath her felt hat and her ample bosom strains at the shiny buttons of her uniform.

‘Janice!’ is all I can muster, even though I’m steaming inside.

I do love her though. She’s like a mum to me at this place – always looks out for me – she means the world. I pull up one of the old wooden chairs to make a raggedy circle. Charlie sits, holding his paper folded into quarters in one hand and his roll-up in the other. He tilts back, legs akimbo with the paper perched on his belly, reading through his wired specs. The room’s too large for our small, motley group and bloody cold in the early Spring. A two-bar electric fire has its own space in our tiny circle. Milky sunlight filters in through the windows, which are bloody filthy and never get cleaned.

‘Bloody shocking about Bethnal Green,’ says Charlie, putting his paper down as Janice passes him a mug of tea. His gnarly old hands shake, and the tea sloshes over the rim like rowing boats at Dunkirk.

The double doors to the room swing open and there’s Vera. Holding a hanky to her eyes, she leans on the door with her backside and blows her nose.

‘Door, Vera!’ bellows Charlie, his usual loudmouth self. Splashes of tea are on his fingers now; he wipes them on his dark pants. And he coughs. Just like Dad.

Vera glares at him, pulls up a chair and sits down. Janice passes her some tea and David looks at me and raises his shoulders.

‘I was there last night, Charlie,’ says Vera. She puts her tea down, leans forward and stares.

‘It’s where I catch my bus from.’ She looks up to the windows with the sun streaming through, then back to Charlie. ‘They were piling up bodies like sandbags. I can’t get it out of my head.’

Janice walks over and crouches down in front of her.

‘Must’ve been such a shock for you, Vera love,’ says Janice.

Vera flicks her the faintest of smiles and nods as she dabs her eyes.

‘Women, kids – so many kids. This bloody, filthy war. I hate it!’ says Vera, who breaks down and cries her eyes out. Poor thing, she can be a bit of a drama queen at times, but it must’ve been bloody horrible – all those people rushing down the tube station steps and a bloody pile up at the bottom. Another reason I hate soddin’ air raid shelters. I’m one for just taking my chances.

‘Sorry Vera love,’ says Charlie, picking up her tea. ‘I’ll put some more sugar in for you. Shock ‘n’ all that.’

Bless him. Vera doesn’t speak; just nods and waves her hanky. Charlie puts her tea back down beside her and goes back out to the platform.

‘I’d best be going too,’ says David standing up. ‘Vera,’ he nods. ‘Janice – thanks for the tea.’

I follow him out. Blimey, what a morning. Poor Vera.

David lets out a sigh and opens his arms out towards me. I hug him back. I do think he looks like a bat though, all tall and lanky in his dark uniform.

‘So much for Bourbons,’ he says.

We grin at each other, and David heaves the mail trolley out towards the road.

wasps and windfalls

Brentwood, November 1943

I dreamed about him last night. Tiny, like a baby he was. Laying in an oversized cradle. It rocked from side to side, hovering mid-air. His big army coat was laid over him and leaves floated down and settled. Then it snowed. Mum was there wearing her thin white nightie. She stroked him, so gently. When she looked at me, she had this peace about her – proper calm. I reckon dead people – or mums, come to think of it – don't get all ruffled like I do. Len was a different story; he was curled up and crying his little baby eyes out. Can't wait to see him today – the grown-up version.

I turn over, still under the covers and look at Mum's picture. We were sat in the garden of our old house, leaning up against the apple tree. The bark was digging into me back, and I had half an eye out for the wasps creeping on the windfalls, but I didn't care. Mum was leaning over, the side of her face resting against the top of me head. She was wearing her soft white pullover that smelled of Lux. And our old dog Trixie – her with the wonky ear – was sniffing about behind us.

I'm busting as usual, so I head downstairs and out the back to the lav. Bloody freezing as per. When I sit down, I check – like I've done every day for the last fortnight – knickers still spotless. Oh no. Please no. Splash me face quick, then back inside. In me room I sit down on the unmade bed, blankets flung back. Oh God. Surely not. Millie and Dad will have my guts for garters.

Anyway, I'm off to meet Len again. It's November but I still want to wear a summer frock, even though it's not nearly warm enough. I pick out my blue gingham one anyway, wear my white bolero cardy over and top it off with a big coat. Give me hair a quick brush and that's me done. When I put the hairbrush down next to Mum's photo, I'm ashamed of the

state of the place. Mess and dust. I pick up the picture and give it a quick rub on the skirt of me dress. Oh Mum, I could do with you right now – the whole house could.

I close the front gate and look back at the place. It looks tired. Workaday. The mortar between the bricks is crumbling, paint's peeling on the sills. If it was human, it'd be an exhausted mother of too many children. At least it's still standing though.

Plenty of people out as I walk to the station. Babies in big prams, toddlers running. People getting on with it; walking past piles of rubble that weren't there the day before. I dodge round a big pile of bricks on the pavement that used to be someone's house. The street looks like a mouth that's been savaged by a dodgy dentist – broken teeth pulled and left shattered. The wind whips and I'm glad I put that big coat on. Even though it's ugly. As I hop between the bricks, making a game of it like I'm at the beach, a woman wearing a maroon coat pushing a huge navy-blue pram bends over a sobbing toddler. He's leaning against her in his bright red jumper and short shorts, showing his dusty grazed knee to the world.

'It's all right love,' coos the dark-haired woman as she bends down and squeezes him close, one hand still on the pram. 'Excuse me.' She looks up and catches my eye. 'Would you mind watching the baby for a moment? This brake's such a struggle and I need to see to his nibs here.' She nods towards the pram. It's enormous, with a big hood and a frame under shaped all fancy like a treble clef. The whole thing's tarnished – rusted to buggery in places.

I take the handle from her and watch the boy wipe his eyes on his red sleeve, gulping in mouthfuls of air between sobs. The woman rummages in her bag and finds a hanky, spits on it and dabs the boy's knee.

The baby inside moves his head from side-to-side. Its mouth starts opening and closing like a guppy. Fine blond hair pokes out from edge of his bonnet and miniature fingers spring from under the covers, clenching and unclenching.

‘Just give him a little rock if he starts,’ the hanky woman says.

I jiggle the handle up and down and watch the baby’s eyes. They blink a few times and slowly close – starfish fingers still spread. I get a waft of his smell. Milk and just-cooked bread. It hits me eyes, and my gut clenches. I look back at me house, forward to the tumbled down street and then to the baby in between.

‘You all right?’ she says. ‘You look white as a sheet.’

I nod unconvincingly as some leaves blow along the pavement, swirl up and settle on the cover of the pram.

‘I’ll be right,’ I say. I let me shoulders relax and keep on walking.

Where the bloody hell is he? I’m stood here under the broken clock looking up and down the platform, wind whipping round me legs. I shift from one foot to the other, arms wrapped round myself in this big old coat. Next to the waiting train, gaggles of young soldiers chat, laugh and puff away at their ciggies. Not sure where there’re going, but there’s bloody loads of ‘em. Their bags – full of army clobber – make tangled mounds along the platform for the likes of me to trip over. I watch a mum with a green coat fuss over a skinny young lad; his loose pants held up by a belt with a silver buckle. She brushes fluff – that only she can see – off his epaulettes then down his sleeves; her gloved hands working nineteen to the dozen. She stops and holds his hands instead. That’s when her face puckers and she looks away to cry. Poor woman. The boy, that’s all he is really, looks down at his feet – boots all shiny – then over to the waiting train.

Janice walks the length of it, unlocking each door with her big bunch of keys. The skinny boy turns round and wrestles with his stuff. The platform's a sea of waves and embraces. Smokes snuffed out under heavy boots.

Lads clamber aboard as the platform empties to the sounds of doors slamming and tears. No sign of Len or me bloody train. Just steam from the engine, smoke from all the ciggies and lads jostling past me like I'm not even there.

'Muriel,' Janice calls out and gives me a wave. She walks hurriedly towards me like a scurrying mum, feet hidden by steam and her damp curls slipping out from her hat. 'Sorry about all this, love.' She turns to look at the soldiers packing into the train. 'I hoped we'd get you out for the day, but not much chance of that now.'

I know that anything to do with shifting the lads, supplies and all that comes first, but I'd had me heart set on going out with Len. Not that he bloody turned up. I look down and shrug. She's holding a whistle in one hand, but with the other she touches my arm – not for long though.

'Oh bugger,' she says as she spots a stray satchel on the ground with its long, spiralled strap. 'Must get on.' She scoops it up and walks towards the train. 'See you tomorrow – bright and early.'

Work tomorrow. Don't want to think about that today.

I cross the road and by the side of the dug-up cricket ground there's the duck pond. It's warming up and I find a sheltered spot to sit down. Nice and peaceful. A girl with a kite runs past me so fast trying to get it off the ground that her white ribbon falls loose from her hair and lands at the edge of one of the cricket grounds trenches. A few ducks waddle over to

investigate. These were going to be air-raid shelters till someone realised they'd be neither use nor ornament. Ducks like them though – and kids who fancy sliding in the mud.

The hanky lady with over-sized rusty pram is there, her boy chucks crusts to the ducks. Sparrows fly down and pick up a few crumbs too, and there's the odd starling. Whoever's in charge of all this mess could learn a thing or two from these 'ere birds. They might have tiny brains, but they all get on – you wouldn't catch them leaving home to go and fight the Germans.

I get up, bum a bit damp, and begin to wander home. I walk past the bombed-out house. A couple of old men are stacking the bricks, two at a time, out on the pavement. They've made a brick table already and there are two mugs of tea on it. Their faces are red and they're laughing. One of them straightens himself up, hand on his lower back and groans. He takes his cap off as I pass.

'Don't mind me, miss,' he wipes his forehead with the back of his hand. 'Got a bit of cleaning up to do here – King's due round for a cuppa at four.'

I smile and keep walking. Straight home, as Mum would always say. I go round the back this time, down the passage and open the gate into the yard. A few birds startle as I do. Wonder if Hitler goes out the back of a morning and sets his crumbs out for the birds? Not ruddy likely.

Back in the house, I grab the Johnson's polish from under the sink plus an old duster and head back upstairs to me room. I start with Mum's picture and clean it up nicely. I give the side tables a wipe. Next, I move all me bits and pieces off the dressing table and dust that. I make the bed. Wipe the windowsill. The place looks better already.

When I'm done, I sit down at the end of the bed and look out the window at the birds.

Where are you, Mum? I bloody miss you today.

Birthdays and deathdays

Elmtree Road, Teddington July 1932

There's presents under the bed. Mum's bed. I stand in her doorway with a towel wrapped round me looking at them. 'Bout four things piled up. Corners sticking out – pointy, like how Doreen draws stars. Not neat and tidy edges like you get at the library. Mum's covers flop down so I can't see the presents properly.

At night in me room I'm scared to stick me feet out from under the covers – I keep them tucked in even though it's hot. I'm not scared of presents though. They wouldn't touch your feet in the night because they're not alive. I'm glad Mum's alive – and Doreen and Dad. Baby Patricia isn't anymore. I wonder where she is.

Me cossie makes a few drips on the floor and so does me hair. Dad put the old tin bath outside for us to play in today. Doreen sits in it, holding pans, and playing tipping and pouring. I practise putting my face under. I want to tell Mum, so I run upstairs to find her. She doesn't come down much anymore.

I hope Mum gets up when I'm seven. And that she'll make me a jelly with the rabbit mould. We could go on a picnic with sandwiches in a basket. All four of us. Go and feed the ducks. Bring Trixie.

'Muriel, is that you?'

I hear rustling from Mum's room – no crying – and I take a few steps in. 'Mum, you're awake!' I climb onto her bed. It's bit tricky as I'm holding the towel round me cossie, which is brown and baggy and only a little bit wet.

'Look at you, all in a tangle,' she says.

I love it when Mum smiles. I go from being ordinary and flat like a photo to being bright and alive like playing outside in summer. She pats Dad's side of the bed and I wiggle in next to her. Cuddle right up to her face and play with her hair. She has lots of dark curls – I get one and twiddle it round and round. Mum smells soft, like powder, and what cherries would smell like if you put them in a pan on the gas. She smells like she's been playing outside with me and Doreen, but she hasn't.

‘Mum, when will you be better? I want you to play with me.’

She turns over – my finger comes loose from her curl. I hear her sniff and watch her hand come out from under the covers. She pats around on her little table knocking over her Palma Violets. She sits up properly, stands the bottle back up, takes her lacy hanky and dabs her eyes. I climb in beside her and she snuggles me close. I lean under her arm, and I think it's like a branch. If Mum was a tree, she'd be a graceful, bendy one with leaves that go red-brown in autumn. I look up at her hair and see red glints. Magic is happening – the sun is making her better.

She leans over and kisses the top of my head. Squeezes me in nice and tight. ‘I want to play with you again, Muriel.’ She strokes my hair this time, from the top of my head right down to my shoulders, and to my hand, coughing a few times as she does. ‘Let's play now!’ she says, holding open my palm. Drawing circles with her finger, she sings, ‘Round and round the garden, like a teddy bear, one step, two step, tickle under there!’

I laugh and laugh. ‘Again, again!’ I feel her shudder next to me.

‘That was fun,’ she says as she coughs into her hanky. It's pretty, but now it's all scrunched up in her hand with just the lacy bit sticking out.

‘But you still haven't told me. When will you be better?’

Mum goes quiet for a minute. ‘My heart’s not working properly, and it might not get better.’

‘What’s wrong with it? Did Patricia break it?’ I ask.

She doesn’t answer me, just keeps stroking me, but my body tenses up. That can’t be right – she must get better.

‘Oh, Muriel, my darling.’ She holds my face in her hands and really looks at me – her eyes are smiling but there are tears falling out of them. Her hanky’s damp; squashed against my chin.

I want her to always cuddle me. I pull her arm round me and we link hands – my left one into her right one. Her fingers are long and slim next to mine. I take her hanky and spread it out flat.

Some of the lace has torn away. As I hold it up to the light it flops down, thin, and creamy. A saggy old rabbit’s tail. I wave it about a few times in front of my face to help the sun make it better.

Mum isn’t crying anymore but Dad is. He kneels at the side of their too-big bed and holds her hand. The tiny hairs on the backs of his dark fingers curl over. He rocks, forwards and back – the sleeve of Mum’s washed-out nightie moves up and down her skinny arm. Her body’s limp – skin like pastry that’s not cooked yet.

The light’s on even though it’s morning. It’s a yucky beige and it hangs from the ceiling like a dusty old onion, but it does make a circle of light that warms the bed. I’m so cold stood here in me nightie. I cross me arms over and start to rub them. Doesn’t make much difference. Dad doesn’t notice me watching him from the doorway. His greasy black hair

flops forward and he smells of tar. I can't see his eyes, but his face looks slimy, covered with tears and snot. He wipes the whole lot with the back of his sleeve, and stares at Mum's still face. She looks like a statue.

Pans clatter – Dad doesn't notice that either. With Mum upstairs so much, Doreen plays at being helpful in the kitchen. Dad stood her on a stool yesterday, the Bisto tea towel tied round her podgy little middle whilst she peeled taters for tea. She ended up soaked from splashing in the sink and she left the eyes in the potatoes. When she'd had enough, I helped her get down and swung her round to dry her out about a bit and she giggled.

Dad leans right over Mum now. He's running his fingers through her hair like he's trying to straighten her curls out on the pillow. They spring back, but it doesn't stop him.

'Trixie – stay!' Doreen races up the stairs and it sounds like Trixie is too. My little sister sees me, rushes up and loops her arms round my waist.

'Sock's wet,' she says, 'Look!'

I turn 'round as she holds up her left foot. Wet footprints too.

'Wet, wet, wet!' she says giggling, 'From the doggy bowl!'

Dad stands right by us now. He wipes his face with his hanky this time and combs his own hair a bit and takes Doreen's hand. 'Come on Doreen, you show me.'

He looks back, tousles my hair and smiles – for about one second. Scruffy Trixie, with her wiry brown fur and the ear that's always folded over, trots away following Dad and Doreen.

It's proper quiet now. In Mum's room, I watch the bits that float in the air underneath the onion lampshade. There's plenty of dust on Mum's bedside table too. There's her bottle

of Palma Violets, her torn lacy hanky, and a drawing of her by Doreen. Her hair, all splayed out on the pillow, looks just like the picture. I push her stuff to one side and write her a message in the dust. I'm guessing that she can't hear me now that she's dead, not that I really know. I want to write my name, but there's only a small space so I write M LOVES MUM. I look at my mum with her eyes closed and her stretched-out hair.

The quiet gets broken. There's a thud at the window – I jump out of me skin. There's fluttering, then nothing 'cept little brown feathers. That's when I cry. I flop on the bed next to Mum, squeeze my knees up to my chin so I'm nearly a curled-up ball in the light, with the floaty bits all around. Mum smells of Palma Violets.

My tears wet the bedspread. I wriggle up to her face, crying and shaking, and stretch my arm out to take a strand of her hair. Twiddle it round and round my finger. The pillow is wet now too. She doesn't turn over to grab her hanky, so I do. I hold it up under the onion light. The torn tail still hangs down. The sun didn't make it better.

A hand strokes me and my soggy mussed-up hair. Tar smell now. Dad scoops me up and holds me to him, my face squashed on his scratchy jumper. I keep hold of the hanky. He gives me a cuddle and rocks me backwards and forwards in his big arms.

He says, 'Shush, shush, shush baby girl,' just like he used to with Patricia. He keeps on stroking me and puts a little kiss on my forehead.

But I'm not a baby girl, I'm nearly seven. And there's presents under the bed.

I wake up on the green sofa; it takes about three seconds till I remember. There's a scratchy blanket with pink and blue squares on it laying over me legs. I'm holding Mum's hanky with its tail scrunched up. The sun streams in through the net curtains and I watch the bits that

float round the room. The light in here has a shade made of strips of glass that hang down. It's square like a box, not round like an onion. I don't like it. Each piece of glass is the size of Dad's comb and I'm scared that a piece of the glass will fall and slice me.

There are deep voices talking upstairs and only one of them is Dad's. The light moves and some of the glass pieces sway. I'm scared to stay in here – I'm going outside to look for the bird.

The voices are louder in the hall. I stretch up to open the front door: a black car that looks like a small bus is parked at the front of our house.

Outside, the bird is on the ground underneath the window. It's brown and dead. I'm glad its eyes are closed. Its thin legs are all curled up; they stick out of its plump body. Lots of fluffy feathers blow up and down in the wind. It has big feathers too – long ones to make wings and a tail. They don't move. I crouch, then I sit down next to it, leaning against the wall of the house.

There is a lady walking on the other side of the road. She has a basket with shopping in it. She puts it down on the wall, takes her hat off and fans herself for a moment. She sees the funny car; puts her fingers to her lips, kisses them then points her fingers towards me and blows. She looks like a teacher because she is tidy with shiny shoes.

The front door bangs open and a man I don't know steps outside too and says, 'I'll hold it.'

After him comes another man, walking backwards out of the house holding the end of a long wooden box with handles on it. He is short and the shape of a sack of potatoes. He takes small steps, shuffling backwards like he's trying to keep his feet warm. It's summer

though so that can't be right. His face is red and there are drips of sweat on his forehead. His face is stiff. He doesn't smile.

Then I see the man holding the other end of the wooden box. He is tall and has blond hair.

Dad follows them and says, 'I'll get the gate.'

The two men stop whilst he squeezes past them on the path. He doesn't quite manage it and he trips. Dad says, 'Ouch,' as he stumbles and falls into the mud

I put both hands over my mouth. My face screws up like Mum's hanky and I laugh. Dad stands up again. The men with the box let him come past. His trousers look funny – one side is all muddy and the other isn't. When he tries to brush it off, he says, 'Ouch,' again and starts to pick bits out of his hands.

I'm still sitting with the dead bird when Dad opens the front gate. The men slide the box into the van, nice and easy like my shoes when the path is icy. The men get in, close the doors and the funny black bus drives away.

Dad sees me and the dead bird. He bends down and picks it up by the legs, its head dangles downwards.

I grab his sleeve. 'Leave it, Dad. Leave it.' I keep pulling but he starts to walk away. 'No! Leave it alone!' I bury my face in my hands and tears wet my face. My shoulders slump up and down and I cry and cry. The world is all blurry and the sun has gone down.

In the dimness, Dad crouches down with his back towards me. His white shirt puffs out of his braces and his dark hair ruffles in the wind. He's holding a trowel and digging the dirt next to the path, near the rose bush where he tripped over. When he stands up, the bird is gone.

Doreen and I aren't allowed to go to the funeral. We stand on the settee and look out of the front window at the black car with Mum in it. Dad's wearing a dark suit and he's hurrying around. He can't find his comb. He walks backwards and forwards past the door of the lounge and he smells mainly of soap and worry.

'Be good for your Aunty Rose.' Dad puts his head round the door. He doesn't wave.

We watch his back as he strides up the path. There are quite a few men stood on the path out the front, including the men who carried Mum out of the house in the box. They all lean across each other and shake hands and Dad gets into a car parked behind. Doreen slides down the sofa, sucks her thumb and leans on me. I let her hold the rabbit hanky with her other hand. When she falls asleep, I peel open her fingers so I can have it back.

Popcorn at Lizzy's

Brentwood, December 1943

Made it – the sneaky torch that I pinched from Dad's shed wedged back in me pocket. Pitch-black and five minutes till curfew. I'm stood on Lizzy's step, breath making puffs. Only three streets away but me hand's aching from the holding this tatty suitcase. I'm stuffed inside a thick, scratchy coat, sweat dripping. Her front door's brown and shiny; like me old scuffed shoes used to be. She opens it – warmth and light flood out.

'Quick – in you come!' Photos stand to attention on the hall table. Not a spot of dust.

Her face beams – bottle green eyes and a matching too-loose jumper. The freckles on her face move as she smiles. She stands back and looks me up and down. My coat's tight, but I can still do it up. Just. I take the torch out, which helps.

'Muriel, what are you doing with that?' She puts her hands on her hips and looks at the torch. 'The wardens would have your guts for garters if you'd got caught.'

'Well, I didn't, Lizzy.' The torch is still a bit dusty. I wipe it with my hand before I put it down next to the photos. Two shiny young men, both in uniform. 'Didn't want to break me soddin' ankle walking round here now did I?'

She puts her head to one side and shrugs as I start to undo my coat.

'Bit warmer in here than the station, eh?' Lizzy's just started working there too – in the café. Sneaks me a fruit scone when I'm starving. 'Leave your coat,' she says taking my hand and pulling me down the hall to the kitchen. 'Mum got some butter today!'

There's a small table in the middle with four wooden chairs round it. Lizzy's mum is in the far corner by the stove – there's a big pan on the gas rattling away. She's tall and wears a half apron with a pleated frill and there's cherries on the pocket. She lifts the lid, looks over her specs and peers inside. Her hair is straight, and tucked behind her ears

'I'd thought I'd make you girls some popcorn as a treat.' Her faced is flushed and her forehead's damp from the steam. She puts the lid back down with a smile, but not before a couple of stray bits of noisy corn jump out and land on the lino. Just like doodlebugs; landing wherever they bloody like.

It's even hotter in here. The whole room feels like an oven, specially me still in this bleedin' coat. And the smell! I don't feel well. I have to get out.

'Muriel, what's the matter?' Lizzy's mum replaces the lid.

I lurch for the back door – it's locked. I turn the key that's poking out but can't shift it. I hold my belly, hunch over and I'm sick all down the door frame – and on me hand, the one that was fumbling with the stupid key. My disgusting, smelly sick has gone on the floor as well. Oh God.

'Let me help you, dear.' Lizzy's mum squeezes round the table, unlocks the door and opens it; touching the sicky handle, she lets me outside. She asks Lizzy to bring a flannel.

'Just take your time.' She stands next to me, close, just breath and darkness and a few old plant pots with weeds sticking out. She takes my hands one at a time and wipes them. Really slowly, so gently. I feel my shoulders slump down. My face has tears leaking out. I can feel them right down to my chin.

'And glass of water, Lizzy please,' she calls over her shoulder. 'Take as long as you need.' Her brown eyes lock onto mine. The flannel's gone cold now but she keeps wiping for

a little bit longer. She just stands with me. Doesn't give me any grief. There's not much to see – just breath and stars, and a bit of next door's light peeking through a dodgy blackout curtain. Lizzy joins us with the glass of water. I take a mouthful, sloosh it round and spit it onto a weedy pot plant. She strokes my hair away from my face. Her apron with the cherries waves forwards as she leans.

‘Stay as long as you like, Muriel.’

Butchered

Brentwood, April 1944

I'm starting to show; not a big bump, but a bump all the same. And I've started to feel him move. I say him because I really want a girl; if I convince myself it'll be a boy, I won't be disappointed. I love to feel the fluttering: I wasn't sure if it was the baby at first, but now I am. It's like there's a butterfly in my belly – a nice colourful one at that.

As Lizzy and I approach the butcher's, I see the line: six people – all women; all queuing – outside the shop, with people inside too. There's a navy-blue pram parked outside too with a chubby-looking baby inside who's sitting up, gnawing on a rattle.

We stand in the sunshine, against Mark Gott's shop window, with all four ration books at the ready. I smile at the baby who's shaking its rattle that's shaped like a Belisha beacon. No carcasses hanging outside today thank goodness. I hate seeing those – thinking about the poor creatures getting butchered. Still, they probably don't do it to spare me. More likely in case some bugger sneaks up and runs away with a pig.

'Look at you now, with your extra rations,' says Lizzy, eyeing my ration book with its extra stamps for milk and orange juice.

'Yeah, and me cod liver oil,' I reply. 'Yuck! You're welcome to that!' We start to laugh.

'Orange juice, though.'

'I'd rather have a couple of real oranges,' I say. 'That citrusy smell! What I wouldn't give...'

‘Vera said someone had an orange at the cinema last week,’ says Lizzy. ‘Said the smell went through the whole place. People stopped watching the screen, and everyone was looking around trying to work out who had the orange!’

‘Some people have their sources,’ I say, my mind wandering.

The door to the butcher’s shop opens; the bell tinkles as a couple walk out. She’s a dark-haired slender woman wearing a maroon coat, and she’s holding the hands of two little boys. Then comes the man who’s clasping two parcels of meat to his chest. Some sawdust from the floor blows out, landing on the polished red step. My heart ricochets around inside my chest, bouncing off each rib in turn. I think it bruises itself.

‘Muriel, what’s the matter?’ says Lizzy.

Len takes one look at me and walks double quick in the opposite direction.

‘Len, Len!’ The woman calls, ‘Come back, will you?’ One of the boys breaks away from her and runs towards his dad.

She says, ‘Bugger,’ as she struggles with the brake of the pram that’s parked outside the shop. ‘Oh, don’t bother – I’m coming now,’ she mutters and starts pushing it along the rough pavement towards him; the other boy stretches up his hand looking for his mum’s. ‘Hold there, will you?’ she says pointing to the pram’s tarnished silver-coloured frame that looks like a treble clef. She jiggles the handle as she walks, leans towards the baby and says, ‘Mummy’s back now my darling boy.’

Gurprakash and Simon

Rotorua 2021

My yoga mat is laid out on the floor. Next to it is a bolster with pink mandalas on it, an assortment of blankets laced with dog hair, and two eye pillows stained with years' worth of face powder, mascara and sweat.

On a live yoga app, Gurparakash is playing his guitar at the start of the Kundalini yoga class. He has unkempt wispy hair and in another time zone, sits on his cushion strumming and chanting *Wahe Guru, Wahe Guru, Wahe Jio*.

His first class fell on the first day of lockdown so I've passed the four-week habit-forming milestone. Every Wednesday morning at 6am I go from darkness to light. The chant is about becoming amazed – realising what is really important.

I settle on my meditation cushion. It's a squashed felted disc, resembling a giant-sized red blood cell. Or a lentil. Gurprakash is explaining the kriya – or yoga set – he has prepared. My mind is on my inbox.

'Our kriya today is not particularly strenuous, but it is difficult.' He stops strumming.

Has Simon the Librarian replied?

'When you start to feel the pain, stay with it,' he adds.

This sounds serious.

The dog settles herself and lies next to the pink bolster.

'Let the pain grow. Let it fill your body – let it expand. Let it fill the room.'

Gurprakash puts down his guitar: it's clear he means business.

It's still dark outside, the heat pump whirrs and my elderly dog snores lightly.

‘Keep your mind on it, don’t try to avoid it.’

I crack – snatch my phone. Click on Gmail.

He has! I scroll through Simon’s long message. There is a picture of the factory where Muriel used to work. Slender people – some walking, some on bicycles – cheerfully leave through its gates on a sunny day. There is the diary of a school child recalling the bombing of the factory, which also damaged a school and flattened some surrounding houses.

Gurprakash gives instructions for the first exercise; pain it seems, is imminent.

At the same time, I’m excited: Muriel’s story is coming to life with the help of the History Librarian from Havering, who until yesterday, I didn’t know existed.

I wonder about Simon the Librarian. Is he an older man, coming close to retirement, who likes to snooze on a Sunday afternoon and listen to Radio 4? I decide instead he is a young man – still in his 30s – who looks older than he is. Unsettlingly tall and has difficulty finding trousers long enough to fit. He wears a waistcoat to work in an unironic way, and he shows something of himself by his socks; his favourite pair are green and have fish on them that swim around his ankles above his dark brown brogues.

I can wait. I can settle back to my class.

Gurprakash has me raising my arms 60 degrees, elbows bent, palms to the ceiling like I am holding up two trays of drinks and poised to saunter through a crowded bar. I don’t saunter though, I sit. He goes back to his guitar playing and chanting whilst I watch what happens. There’s tingling in my hands first. Then it moves down to my upper arms. Hot. Achy. I stay with it. Shoulders next. It’s hard. The dog starts shaking and whimpering in her sleep. Daylight is beginning to pierce through the curtains. I can do this. I’m not going anywhere. It’s like I can chase the pain away with my mind.

‘And release.’ Gurprakash stops playing and I relax. My upper body’s tingling intensely; I’m relieved to have my arms back by my sides.

As soon as my mind is set free to wander, it goes back to the email from Simon. There’s an old film clip he sent. It shows the inside of the factory. What if Muriel has been incidentally caught on film? What if I catch a glimpse of her, as I’m sat in my untidy living room trying to make friends with pain with my shuddering dog at my side?

Gurprakash is upping the ante now. I am to put my arms out to the sides now, 90 degrees. Crucifix style. This is the pinnacle of the class. Hands face down this time. He suggests visualising being a hawk, perhaps. I like the flying idea. It works for a while till the pain grows in my arms, hands, and shoulders. I try to stare it down. My stomach does a few somersaults and tears prickle behind my eyes. I stay with the pain till it burns, then I drop my arms, wipe my eyes on my sleeve and start again.

‘*Wahe Guru, Wahe Guru,*’ he strums and chants. I try being a chanting hawk. The sound reverberates deep within my chest. ‘*Wahe Jio.*’

I stop again. More tears. A sip of water.

When Gurprakash finally gives the instruction to release the relaxation is sweet, the tingling sense of aliveness exquisite. He talks of keeping on going – not giving up, not doubting yourself. Staying with it and coming out the other side.

We have passed the peak. The next exercise has us with elbows bent, hands and forearms out in front, shoulders circling forwards. He says he feels like Bryan Ferry when does this – I think of Tommy Cooper. Then I visualise myself as a big cat, racing across the savannah in Africa. Cheetah? Jaguar? Cougar? Never could tell the difference.

For the relaxation, I pile both my grubby eye pillows over my eyes and settle, as sensations like sparks of electricity pulse through my body.

Then I'm ready. Refreshed – ready to walk the dog, have breakfast and write myself into Muriel.

Kim's baby

Preston Tandoori, 11 February 1993

Something's up: I'm letting my husband eat my curry. The Indian restaurant's grime is shrouded by the glow of 40-watt lightbulbs set behind tasselled wall lights. I want to tell you that the wallpaper isn't burgundy in colour and flocked, but I'm afraid it is. We sit facing each other across a table at the rear of the vast space, which stretches deep into the bowels of the old building. We're as far away from the noisy front street, and the wintery draught, as possible; northern towns have a bleak chill all their own.

Nauseous, I sip from my water glass, opaque from too many cycles through the dishwasher, as the heavy pain in my lower back radiates outwards. Paul tears off a piece of naan bread, leans over and dips it into my curry.

'We can go whenever you like,' he offers. His mouth is full, and the navy sleeve of his fleece jacket hovers perilously close to the rims of our steaming miniature woks. Do other women wonder whether they are out of Vanish when they're in the early stages of labour? The joys of conditioning: I'm not talking about hair or laundry.

I manage a nod. I don't smile. We leave shortly afterwards with a pile of plastic containers in a brown carrier, white paper napkins and coin-sized mints shrink-wrapped in cellophane. I love the Preston Tandoori. A gutsy little place situated all on its own in a street where empty shops and a deserted cotton mill are the order of the day.

I slam the door of our old gray Mazda and pull my coat up to my chin. Paul puts the heater on full blast.

‘I don’t know if this is it or not.’ My baby is one day late. ‘It just feels like a period pain that someone’s turned the dial up on.’ We’re sat at the lights at the top of New Hall Lane, fan whirring as the car warms up.

He looks across at me and smiles. I touch his arm; his left hand is poised on the gearstick.

At home, he wedges the containers into the fridge and potters around in our tiny kitchen, ignoring the dirty cat bowls on the blue lino. My back hurts again. I lean across our pine table; my forearms slide into the unsorted junk mail like the penny cascades at Blackpool Pleasure Beach. It’s warm though. The central heating has an easy job making our two-up-two-down mid-terrace cosy, with its cat door and a boiler that drips, staining the wallpaper.

Upstairs, I can’t sleep. The back pain keeps me awake and I writhe around, clutching my rotund belly, trying to settle in our king-sized bed. Paul sleeps soundly next to me.

Pain has its uses. I am in it. In my body. My pain womb. It ebbs and flows. Expands inwards and outwards. A tide of pain which comes so close till all I am is pain. It rolls over me – from my back to my torso to my arms and my legs. It is behind my eyes. A pain that’s dull then squeezes. An intensity that sharpens and grows and just when I am at the limit of what I can stand, it pauses, then rolls away. I can see again. I can feel my arms and legs. It returns to my back and then it’s gone. I am once again in bed, beside my sleeping husband, with light from the street sidling in through unlined flesh-toned curtains.

It’s still dark. I touch his arm and put my face close to his, ‘I want to go now,’ I whisper.

He turns over, puts his feet to the floor and layers on clothes that he finds draped over the chair. By day, he dresses immaculately for the office. Sharp suits, crisps shirts and stylish ties. At home, he layers up like a toddler learning to dress himself, putting on whatever comes to hand, yet always finishing with his maroon Burnley F.C. hat and scarf.

Driving the short distance to the hospital, we splash through pools of orange streetlights. They are steppingstones. I imagine that I am the size of a giant, stepping from one orange glowing puddle to the next, our plucky car negotiating my enormous legs.

A receptionist ushers us to the lift. Inside, I lean against the metal rail inside and hunch as another contraction seizes me. I feel nauseous with the movement and remember advice that I read somewhere about never getting into a lift when you are in labour. I wonder if hospital lifts are exempt.

We are greeted by a midwife who shows us to a room on the third floor. It has a high bed and windows on two sides, but she says to walk about for as long as possible. I leave my bag and shuffle along the hospital corridor, pausing to lean against the wall, or whatever else comes to hand. Paul follows me, walking slowly like he's overseeing a child learning to ride a bike. He's there. Just in case. I don't want to be petted or offered banal words of cliched encouragement. By osmosis, he knows this. I sit down and watch as he wanders to the payphone to ring his work. I can't hear him, but his face is animated as he speaks. It's layered with joy and excitement. I am happy to have this image to focus on and I let it soak in.

The low sun of the morning splashes through the glass which lines the corridor. In one part, there is a bridge-like section, which joins one area to the next. There are full glass panels either side with handrails and views of houses, and hills in the distance. North towards Longridge and the Bowland Fells beyond. I am on a gantry. An in-between place. I am crossing over. Part of me is spooked by the height; I grip the handrail more tightly than is

necessary. But I breathe in the expanse. I love the aliveness of this undulating, rolling County of Lancashire we adopted five years before.

Paul finds me. This time, he holds out his arm. I curl mine through and we walk together gently, looping 'round the ward, passing small rooms with open doors. In one, a woman in sheepskin slippers sits and watches TV. In another, a woman leans against a man, arms around each other, heads connected like they are on opposing rugby teams. Doors are closed to other rooms. In front of me, a midwife opens a door and walks in, pushing a trolley stacked with medical supplies – a box of blue latex gloves, a packet of sanitary pads and some glass and metal items that rattle as she wheels it along.

Apart from the sound of TVs spouting breakfast news, the corridor is quiet, with a sense of subdued industry taking place just beyond.

The click of the closing door marks the start of another contraction. My noticing zooms back to the space behind my closed eyes. I watch red and blue swirls fold over and over into the black as I squeeze Paul's arm. The pain grips all the way around now, spanning out from my back to my belly. My muscles cinch me like a ferocious corset. As the hold ebbs, I loosen my grip and resurface, and notice another door open and a tinkling trolley trundling out into the corridor. Without looking at Paul, I tell him I want to go back.

We re-trace our steps, return over the glass bridge to my room with the windows on two sides. I climb into bed as Paul puts my tape into the cassette player. Along with the view, the music forms a backdrop to my labour. Rachmaninoff's Piano Concerto number 2 – the music from *Brief Encounter* – brings me ease.

Sometimes at home we'd put on our best pre-war English accents and quote lines to each other from the film, delighting in the romance, and the antiquated dignity of Celia Johnson and Trevor Howard choosing to part forever at the film's climax. I know Paul was

born in the wrong time. The night I met him, he was wearing fifties-style trousers – loose-fitting with turn-ups, and braces over a white shirt. An introvert who enjoys music from a bygone era and the company of his newspaper’s crossword and thinks that speaking is for the most part unnecessary. It’s remarkable we got together at all.

As the intensity ratchets up, I retreat inside my own head. I witness the momentum of my body, the seamless support from midwives who flit in and out and the connection with Paul. The man who’s always there for me and who I only sometimes find annoying.

Then they gift me the gas – it is nectar. When I close my eyes, the colours and the shapes somersault behind my eyes and I begin to giggle. I look at Paul’s serious face. He intermittently tries to pet my free hand and smile even though he is plainly terrified. I laugh some more. It doesn’t do much for the pain, but it does take the edge off – much like a second glass of wine.

I reach the gap; the jumping off point where my body takes charge. The biggest wave of my life is rolling in and it’s my job to plunge in and trust. I am alert. So fully alive and at the same time, plausibly close to death. I push my child’s head from my body. I shriek from the searing. Then I stop; to laugh, to cry, to look around – wanting to connect to faces.

Another gap. I wait in the nothingness. The lull. I can hear *Brief Encounter* playing from the hospital’s cassette player.

The next wave builds, and my child’s body is smoothly born. She is in the world – a hospital room in Lancashire with windows on both sides. With views of the hills. She is born hundreds of miles from my own place of birth, and that of my mother.

Mum. Born in 1944 to an eighteen-year-old. An eighteen-year-old with a dead mother and a dead sister. An eighteen-year-old called Muriel.

Muriel's baby

Oldchurch Hospital, Romford 3 July 1944

I did it. I bloody did it. The nurses are wearing masks, but I can see one of 'em's smiling. Her eyes go all crinkly at the edges and some of her curly hair pokes out from beneath her white hat. She wraps my baby in a shawl and passes her to me.

'Congratulations Muriel.' She's older than me and when she leans over, she smells of face powder and sweat. The other nurse is pottering about behind her, stuffing dirty sheets into a laundry basket like she's pounding them to a pulp.

I say thanks, but I'm fixed on my new baby.

Blimey, I'm a mum.

I hold her to me. Really hold her. Breathe her in. She smells so new and fresh, like clean sheets on the line and bread and butter pudding. I could sit cuddling her, just like this, all day. She still has some of that white stuff on her, and I think she's a bit pale; but her little eyes are gently closed, and her left fist is up to her mouth, thumb in. I lean over to listen, make sure she's breathing, and my long hair flops over her face. I sit up again, smiling, and some tears spill down and drip on her. I'm shaking, but I'm not cold.

The laundry basket nurse stares at me as she walks to the door. Gives me the shivers.

'Yes, it's a lot to take in.' The nurse with the curly hair sits by me as the other nurse leaves, slamming the door behind her. 'Take no notice of her,' she says, looking from the door back to me.

She tells me her name is Grace as she takes a warm flannel and cleans my face. Slowly and gently: first one eye, then the other. She wipes my forehead and my cheeks. It's

the kind things that make me cry. I remember Lizzy's mum the night I was sick, then I really start crying.

'Take your time.' She carries on sitting. I gaze at my baby who's all calm and notice some glints of red in her fair hair; my shoulders begin to relax. It's peaceful here. Even though the windows are a bit steamed up, I can see trees waving outside. It's supposed to be summer but it's one of those drizzly days.

Grace stands up and holds out her hands. 'Muriel, your baby needs to go to the nursery, and it's time for you to get some rest.'

I squeeze her to me. 'I'm keeping her – no-one's taking her away from me.' My head's hot, and I'm jittery. I've come this far. They won't trick me now.

Grace doesn't say anything. She just sits back down. Looks at me. It takes me a moment to tell her the truth.

'I'm scared, Grace.' I keep holding my baby to me. 'I've heard people. Heard 'em myself.' I look at the door in case the grumpy one's coming back. 'People talking about adopting babies on the sly. I once heard two women making a deal in the queue at the bloody chip shop.'

She doesn't say anything straight away. 'I can't pretend it'll be easy for you Muriel.' I'm all ears, 'But I can promise you one thing. No-one's going to take her away from you whilst you're in here.' She looks me straight in the eye. 'All the babies go to the nursery, not just yours.'

It takes me a moment. I sit there and we look at each other. The door clicks and the other nurse comes back in and holds out her arms for my baby. I keep holding her tight.

‘Muriel will be taking her baby to the nursery herself,’ she says, staring at the nurse who puts her hands on her hips, then crosses her arms and stares at me again. ‘Oh, and Mary,’ Grace says to her, ‘Close the door gently this time.’

I smile, ‘Thanks Grace. Am I really allowed to do that?’ I ask as she helps me get down from the bed. I’m still holding my baby and it’s a bit tricky. My bare feet touch the tiles. It’s cold, and my legs are wobbly. Grace holds my free arm.

‘That’s it.’ She guides me towards a wheelchair. As I lower myself down, my long white nightie balloons up in front of me. I say nightie but it’s a hospital gown. Cotton, but the fabric’s stiff and scratchy, and more grey than white. I feel like I’ve landed in a parachute. The blokes in the army aren’t the only ones battling.

The nursery is close by. We stop outside and I look in the window. Lines and lines of babies in cribs like they’re all in fishbowls. I give her a kiss on the nose before passing her to Grace. I’m still not happy; it doesn’t seem right. Still, I know she’ll look out for my baby, and for me.

I’m glad Grace hands me a blanket ‘cause it’s chilly being pushed along the corridor in a wheelchair. It’s fast too and I feel a bit queasy. When we reach a set of doors, she turns me round, goes through backwards and so do I. The doors swing shut behind us, then she turns me forwards again.

‘Grace, it’s like being on the Waltzer.’ I hold on to the sides of the wheelchair and giggle. My stomach doesn’t like it as much as I do.

The ward has two long lines of beds – like the keys of two pianos that face each other. Grace wheels me between them. I don’t like the feeling of people looking at me being pushed along

like a bloody invalid. There's a fresh bed on the right-hand side right near the end, close to a window. She clicks on the brake, and just as I stand, I hear 'good time girl, that one.'

I feel myself go hot as I clench my fists. Red-faced, I hiss 'bitch' under my breath. I scour the long ward to try and spot the culprit. No-one looks. I just hear low murmurs of women talking; some sitting, some standing in their stupid long nighties. I lower myself back into the wheelchair. Tears prickle, but I'm not going to bloody cry in front of this lot. Grace shushes me, but in a tender way, then leans in closer.

'Save your strength for your baby, Muriel,' she whispers.

Next thing I feel her stroking my hair. Really gently, away from my face a bit. I'm staring at my bed as the tears brim up and a few spill over. Only Grace can see.

'There's no hurry, Muriel.' She touches my shoulder. Just rests her hand. This woman's a soddin' angel. I'm not used to this. I don't get out the chair till I'm good and ready. She pulls back the sheets for me and I slide in – heaven.

I'm so tired. I turn onto my side and close my eyes. I feel her tuck the covers in behind me. I think of Mum holding her lacy hanky. Of the time we sat together in her bed. The time she stroked my hair.

I have no idea what the time is, but it's still light. Women are getting out of bed. Nattering. Putting on slippers and cardigans. I feel weak when I do, and a bit shivery. The woman in the bed next to mine gives me a smile, so I follow her back down the ward with the long lines of piano-key beds.

We have to walk through a courtyard outside, along a crisscross gravel path with tidy, clipped roses before we get to the dining room. Beyond the heavy glass door, the place is full

of long tables, the smell of roasting meat and vegetables and windows that have steamed up from all the heat and chatter. It's echoey inside. Like being back at the station, but warmer.

I sit down with my tray of food and the woman from the next bed joins me. We're on a long wooden bench at one of the tables.

'You must be starving,' she says, looking at my plate, but I already have my mouth full of meat, slathered in loads of gravy. I'm trying not to spill anything on the white tablecloth.

I don't reply; just nod and tuck in. I'm so bloody hungry. Can't remember when I last ate. She tells me her name's Joyce and that she's just had her third baby. Her hair's lank and mousey and she doesn't look that well – her arms are skinny, and her face is lined. I'm guessing she's quite old. 'Bout twenty-seven I reckon. When I finish, I tell her my name.

She says she heard the 'good time girl' comment as I came in.

'There not all bitches but a lot of 'em are,' says Joyce, piercing her last spud and wiping it round her plate, soaking up the last of the gravy. 'You're best just keeping your head down.' She's still chewing when she speaks. 'Young women,' she doesn't say 'like you,' but I hear it all the same, 'can have a bit of a tough time in here.' She glances at my ring finger as she swallows.

I think of the door-slamming nurse, and I've heard that some of 'em even play God by not giving pain relief to women who they think need teaching a lesson. But I didn't think about the other mums in here.

'Married women aren't saints either, Muriel.' She pushes her plate away. 'We miss our men when there're away fighting.' As she puts her hands on her belly, fingers interlaced,

her wedding ring glints as the setting sun catches it through the glass. ‘And sometimes, we get caught out.’ She turns to me, without smiling, and gives me a little shrug.

The clouds are turning pink in the blue sky. I look around at all the tables; the women talking and laughing, their piles of empty plates stacked high. There’s just two plates on ours – mine and Joyce’s.

Back on the ward, they wheel in the babies and start handing them out. It’s not easy watching everyone else being handed theirs; little parcels being unloaded from trolleys like warm loaves of bread straight out the oven. And there’s me, waiting and waiting. In fact, I’m last. Well, me and Joyce are equal last.

I’m feeling settled after eating me big dinner, so I don’t mouth off about it. My baby’s crying when the nurse passes her to me; legs and arms waving, having a right ol’ paddy. I don’t know what to do, so I watch Joyce unlace the top part of her nightie. I do the same and my baby finds my boob, has a little root around and then gets stuck in. She must’ve been starving too.

They’ve put a white bonnet on her, and I can see a bit of her fair hair poking out. It’s just fuzz really. Then I look at her feet. Tiny white booties with ribbons laced through. Cradling her body I’m a kid again, back on the couch with Mum who’s rocking Patricia backwards and forwards. I kiss my fingers, then touch her forehead. She has that lovely milk and yeast smell and I watch her feet wriggle. I rest the palm of my hand under them and feel the pressure as she stretches, pushes them against me, then relaxes.

I still can’t believe it. That I’ve made a brand-new human. Len had something to do with it too of course, but I haven’t seen him for dust. And you should’ve seen Dad when I

told him. He stood up out of his bloody old chair in the kitchen, all his roll-ups fell on the floor and then he shouted at me. Called me a 'silly cow,' and stormed off down the garden. Millie – that's his new wife – and I have had our moments, but she could see how upset I was. She stayed in the kitchen with me, her big pots of veggies bubbling away, and said 'Leave him to his vegetables; he'll come 'round.' I watched him out the back window, tying up the tendrils of his runner beans, all growing up a tee pee.

Wonder if he'll visit me. Wonder if he knows yet. Or am I just going to sit here in this big old bed. An island that no-one wants to swim to.

There are some visitors wandering in. They bring new smells of the outdoors with them. Shoe polish, soap, and chrysanthemums. I look back at me baby. She's almost fallen asleep by the looks, but when I try to change positions, her mouth goes back into action. Sucks like a little fish.

There's the clop of heeled shoes coming up the ward – it's Lizzy! And she's holding flowers. My friend's in the chair by the side of my bed that I thought no bugger would sit in.

'Oh Muriel, look at you.' She leans in and puts her hands on my shoulders. 'And, oh! Who's this?'

I try to sit up a bit more and feel shy with my friend seeing me with me nightie half undone and a baby drowsing on me boob.

'Well, she's not going to be Mary, Margaret or one of those common old royal names.' We laugh together. 'I'm going to call her Beryl.' I look down at my baby. 'My little Bee.'

'What about a middle name?' she asks.

'She only arrived today! One name will do her for today.'

Lizzy finds a vase, arranges the flowers and we have a natter. She wants to know all about the birth. I feel heroic now. At the time all I knew was that I was in bloody agony, and I wanted it to be over. No pain relief 'cause the gas trolley was on the other floor. Apparently.

I ask her about how everyone is at the station, but I only really want to hear about Len. If anyone knows anything. She's wittering on about Janice and Vera and I come straight out and ask her. Someone down the ward laughs loudly as Lizzy avoids my gaze. Looks all uncomfortable in her chair.

'Oh, spit it out Lizzy.' Beryl stirs as I feel myself getting agitated. Her little legs have a stretch, then go limp again as she goes back to snoozing.

'He's gone, Muriel.'

That shuts me up. I just sit there. Let it sink in. The hum of voices echoing along the ward. And that loud laugh again.

'Gone. Gone where?' I know I sound sharp.

'I don't know, Muriel.'

'You must bloody know something.'

'Only that he's gone. He's certainly not around anymore.'

'Is he still in the army? Or has he gone and left that too?' I know I'm grasping at straws and I'm starting to get upset.

'I don't know. If it helps, I did overhear someone say he'd deserted. Taken off to France. But I don't know if that's true – it might not be.'

France. All that sea between us.

'If it is true, he'll be in trouble,' she adds.

Nothing but trouble – that’s what Charlie said.

‘Oh Muriel, I’m sorry,’ she says, touching my arm.

I know she means well, but I flinch. Everyone I love leaves me or bloody well dies.

What I say is, ‘I’m tired Lizzy. I don’t want to talk about it anymore.’

She stands up to go, hovers for a minute then sits down again. ‘I know this is terrible timing Muriel.’

Oh, what now for God’s sake? I glare at Lizzy. Beryl is sound asleep. Heavy. Her presence is a comfort.

‘My dad’s had an accident.’ She looks down at her hands. ‘He fell off a ladder at work. Was trying to help get someone’s power going – the neighbour’s house had been hit...’

Why is she telling me this? I’ve had enough.

‘I’m sorry about your Dad Lizzy.’ My arms are aching, and I just want to get some rest. ‘I really am. But I’m so tired and...’

‘You can’t stay with us anymore.’ She pulls a hanky out of her pocket. Then she looks away, looks at her feet. Looks everywhere but doesn’t bloody look at me.

No more, please no more. I’m numb. My face is blank, my shoulders sink down. What the hell am I going to do? There are voices and the scraping of chairs. Kisses, waves. A nurse comes over and stands and looks at us.

‘I’ll come back tomorrow, Muriel. I’ll help you sort something out.’ As she stands, her chair scrapes on the floor and she stuffs her hanky back into her pocket. She knows what I’m thinking. ‘It’s not you, Muriel. It’s not you – or the baby.’ She’s the last one here and the

nurse is walking over. 'It's the money.' She turns to walk away just before the nurse goes to tap her on the shoulder.

In my island bed I scan the ward, empty of visitors. Stale smells of bodies and breath hang in the air. The nurse opens the window and the chill of night-time loneliness ripples in through the heavy, sea-green curtains. Joyce is sat up in bed; skinny arms poking out her nightie. Her hair's so limp it clings to her shoulders like damp seaweed.

That night I dream of Mum. And the sea. Wearing my favourite blue dress with the yellow birds on it, I wade out, holding Beryl till the water is over our heads. We can breathe; the current gently sways us back and forth. I turn around and Mum is there. She doesn't like the water, but she still comes in. Taking Beryl in her arms, she walks back towards the shore, leaving me free to go deeper.

Disco yoga

Rotorua, 2021

My yoga teacher says he has the same birthday as John Travolta as he instructs his 6am cyber students to rotate our hands, thumbs tucked in, *Night Fever* style. We must imagine we are travelling through space. Is this yoga or is he just making it up? He asks us to use the exercise to contemplate the unending space inside us too.

I like Gurprakash. Sitting on his cushion with his candy floss hair, he plays his guitar, chants *ware guru*, and gives deadpan instructions in his Dutch accent. Today's class is about renewal, with a focus on the pituitary. He has become part of my Wednesday mornings.

As has Simon the Library Historian and his messages. He has sent me information about the hospital where Muriel, in another dimension, lies dreaming about the sea.

'Now we are going to roll up into shoulder stand.' My heart sinks but I do what I'm told. I swing my legs up and my bulging abdomen – the doughy offspring of my ongoing relationship with Peanut Slabs – is now inches from my face.

'The blood rushes to the head. We need to do that sometimes,' he says.

Couldn't agree more, Gurprakash. I, and generations of women before me, haven't done that often enough. Kept it in, stuffed it down, not made a fuss. Time for renewal indeed. For liberation.

Whilst Muriel was dreaming about swimming, I was dreaming about writing.

'Liberate your characters,' says my sub-conscious mind. 'You've got to set them free.'

I'm on my shoulders with my legs in the air when Gurprakash says to kick my feet towards my bottom and make a humming sound at the back of my throat. The dog snores on her bed, next to my mat. I manage the hum, laughing at myself at regular intervals, but the bum kicking? No. I do it a couple of times then put my legs back up. Besides, I don't want to kick the flowers over. I visualise all that blood rushing to my head.

The class is winding down. Next, I am to sit on my heels, lean forward onto my hands, then dip my face down on the outbreath and up on the in. Devotional style. Gurprakash says it's really a meditation practice and not yoga. Has any of this been yoga?

'Maybe you will start feeling sacred,' he says. 'Because you are.'

I start to cry. I carry on with the bowing thing, crying into my sheepskin rug. When we're done, I sit on my heels and let the tears come. I get a whiff of my pink lilies, elegant in a vase behind me. Sacred: highly valued and important. Entitled to reverence and respect. It's the kind things that make me cry. I close my eyes for our final meditation – the dark space spins like a red whirlpool. Seizing her chance, the dog relocates to the rug, sits right in front of me and places her head on my knees. I caress her as my tears dry.

Another rush of blood

Oldchurch Hospital, Romford 4 July 1944

Next morning when they bring the babies in, and I'm sat waiting like a lemon again, I do pipe up.

'How come I'm last again?' I ask the nurse who's doling out the bundles. Joyce looks over at me. 'And me and Joyce had to wait the longest yesterday.'

'You're at the end of the ward.' She hands my Beryl to me. 'Nothing personal.'

She must think I'm bloody well stupid. She starts walking away, then comes back, leans over just as I'm undoing my nightie and says, 'Where'd you leave your wedding ring Muriel? By the soap?'

I could feel the blood rushing to my head.

'Leave the girl alone.' It's Joyce, standing right by me. I didn't see her get out of bed. 'You should respect my friend Muriel – she deserves it.' The way she said it. She didn't have to utter another word. The nurse, dark hair, and greasy skin, who probably wasn't much older than me, scuttles off back to her trolley.

'Thanks Joyce.' Beryl's rooting around hungry for her feed.

The woman in the bed opposite snorts with laughter, gestures to her neighbour then points at us with her red puffy hand; a gold band squeezing her ring finger like the skin of a sausage.

Joyce glares at her and says, 'Told you there were a lot of bitches in here, Muriel.'

The woman puts her hand back in her lap.

'Nosey, interfering bitches,' says Joyce.

It goes quiet after that.

Beryl and me

Rotorua 2021

Mum doesn't like her name, so much so that she often uses her middle name instead. She says Beryl is a common name. Vulgar even. I like it because it's her name. When people refer to her as Alex – short for Alexandria – I don't know who the hell they're talking about.

At 8pm my time and 8am hers, we get together for a video chat. We laugh as I teach her how to reverse her phone's camera so she can show me Teddy, her niece's sound-asleep scruffy dog that she's minding. I do the same and show her my dog Dusty, stretched out and snoring on the couch next to me.

Mum has a twinkle in her eye; she's lively, funny, and fiercely determined. When a developer wanted to turn a small grassy area outside her house into flats, she rounded up the neighbours, appealed to the council and got it stopped. It was the animals that mattered; she couldn't bear to think of hedgehogs and birds being ousted from their homes.

I get comfortable and tell her about Simon the History Librarian, the pictures of Oldchurch Hospital, Romford's Mother and Baby Home and the evidence for Len being her father. This is the clincher – the mystery that's tormented Mum her whole life. Driving home from summer outings, my younger self would snooze on the backseat of her old, untidy car whilst she'd tell me romantic stories of her made-up father – a soldier who went off to war, died a hero's death and never came back. This tale was a comfort to her and neatly explained my lack of grandparents. If Simon is right, we now know the truth.

She tells me about her childhood scrapes – the time Muriel had called her, and she was hit by a car crossing the road. She recalls the vehicle's headlight rolling down her street after the impact, her five-year-old self thinking it was her head tumbling down the hill. It was her foot that was injured. Although both Mum's feet arch at the instep, one of them never

straightened again. She's one of the few women who, because of this, looks more comfortable in stilettos.

My favourite story is about her regular 60s haunt – Cassattari's Café, close to West Ham's football ground and across the road from the Electricity Board where she used to work. She'd make a beeline for the place in the hopes of getting a glimpse of one of the up-and-coming footballers who used to frequent it for tea and tactics. Allegedly, pre-match planning involved the salt and pepper pots as well as the tomato ketchup being moved around the tables in different formations. Her claim to fame that she once went to a party with Bobby Moore, which resulted in playful speculation about the left-footed winger being my real dad. The truth was that she once went to a party and Bobby Moore happened to be there. Still, the fanciful tale doesn't stop me from enjoying a wry smile whenever I kick a ball with my left foot.

We talk for so long that we both need a toilet break. When she's back, she tells me things about Muriel I never knew; that she was good at smocking (a kind of embroidery that was common before elastic) and that she still has a sampler she made at school.

'Do you still have any of her things, Mum?' I ask, 'things you kept from the house after she died?'

She tells me she has a brown, wavy glass ornament in the shape of a basket, wrapped in tissue paper under the stairs. 'And a cigarette case with a map of Ireland embedded in it,' she says. 'I don't think it's silver.'

They went to Ireland for a holiday once. Mum was so sick on the ferry on the way out that Muriel tried to scrape together enough money for her to fly home instead.

'She didn't manage it, but I love that she tried,' says Mum.

I love it too.

I feel the miles then. I stroke the ceramic handle of my mug of hot chocolate and ache to touch the glass ornament shaped like a basket and the cigarette case that isn't silver.

I smile at the scratched screen of my phone. At Mum: seventy-seven, with Muriel's brown, wavy glass basket wrapped up carefully in the cupboard under her stairs. Of how she caught COVID from her friend Eileen; they hatched a secret plan and met during lockdown to colour Mum's hair for Christmas. Of Teddy the loaned dog, and of her tortoise, Mr Naughty – who she successfully resuscitated after finding him at the bottom of her garden pond. The whole family, as well as Mrs Naughty of course, were mightily relieved that he was revived from the depths.

It's nearly 10pm and I'm yawning. I say, 'One more question – tell me about Muriel and Millie. Did they get on better when you were growing up?'

'They did,' she says. 'They were close. Mum – Muriel – would take me and Chris 'round every Sunday. She'd chat to Millie in the kitchen whilst the dinner was cooking.'
Chris is Mum's younger sister.

I want to hear her tell me the elephant story again, but I'm struggling to keep my eyes open.

'Goodnight, Mum. I love you.'

'I love you too.'

I miss her when the phone's screen goes blank. Leaving the empty mug of hot chocolate on my table that's shaped like a flamingo, I call the dog from the couch and together we go to bed.

Three more days

Oldchurch Hospital, Romford 4 July 1944

What Lizzy said last night hasn't sunk in yet. At least I've got three more days here, getting fed, and having a lovely warm bed to sleep in. I'll work something out. I'm safe. For now.

Being in here, I do think about all the mums and babies who died at Mill Road Hospital up north. Those babies would've turned three by now if they'd have lived. Took a direct hit. Used to be a workhouse too, like this place. Sometimes I forget that other cities are copping it as well. But London's like that. Likes to think it's the centre of everything. Right now, though, it mostly is.

Lizzy does come back, like she said. We chat, but it doesn't feel the same. I know none of this is her doing, but I have this queasy, uneasy feeling in my stomach. She brings me my embroidery stuff from home to work on. From home. Won't be able to say that for much longer.

'It's not your fault,' I say. Here's me still in this hospital that feels like prison trying to reassure her. Lizzy looks even more uncomfortable than she did yesterday. 'Is there anything else you want to tell me?' All credit to her, she does manage half a smile. 'It's just that I'm the one who's getting booted out and you're the one who looks so soddin' miserable.' I was trying to make a joke. Maybe I should've kept me trap shut.

'Actually, there is something.'

Here we go again. She holds her little cream clutch bag on her lap and her gloves that match.

'You know I said I'd help you sort something out.'

I'm all ears.

'Mum called into the place on Junction Road today, you know the girls' hostel?'

I don't know, but I keep listening.

'Anyway, they've agreed to have you, and Beryl of course. Me and Mum can take you there when you leave hospital.'

I feel myself go hot and my heart's pounding in my chest. 'What? I can't go back home – to yours – first to pack up my things?' I'm shaking. 'And what is this place, anyway? Not like some bloody workhouse where I'll be cleaning floors and getting lectured to about the errors of my ways.'

Lizzy touches my hand, still with her gloves on.

'Get off!' I snatch my hand away. 'Just answer my questions!' Some friend she's turned out to be.

The night I moved in I thought I'd struck gold – found a down-to-earth friend I could rely on. Now she clip-clops in here in her heels, bossing me around. Who does she think she is? I miss the old Lizzy – the one with the wild curly hair and her green jumper that was so baggy she could almost live in it.

We both just sit. I'm tingling with rage. The blood's not just rushing to my head it's raging through my whole body.

'If you hate it Muriel, I'll help you find somewhere else, and so will Mum,' she says.

I don't want to cry in front of her. How did I end up like this? Nowhere to go, no-one to stay with. I'm not even nineteen yet. And where the hell's my dad?

It takes a few moments before I start to cool down.

‘It’s a hostel for single women – those with babies due and for new mums.’

I’m calmer now. A bit, anyway. I start to listen.

‘It’s just a house – they only take eight women. So no, I don’t think it will be like a bloody workhouse.’ She smiles as she does her best impression of me. ‘Or maybe it’s a bloody small one.’

Very good, Lizzy. I don’t say it, but I think it.

That night, when I’m getting settled, I imagine looking back at my life when I’m old, like 40 or 50 even. Beryl will be all grown up. I’ll have my own little house, and a dog of course. There’ll be no more war or rationing. And I’ll have hot chocolate with as much milk as I bloody well like.

I turn over and there are the sea-green curtains and Joyce’s bed in front. It’s smooth. Freshly made up. She’s gone and I never saw her leave. Too busy bloody moaning and worrying to notice. I screw up my pillow. Make fists. At least it’s proper dark so I can cry, and no-one will see.

The day I’m allowed to leave hospital is the day my milk comes in. My boobs are like rocks – so heavy and uncomfortable.

I’m stood by the huge glass doors at the entrance to the hospital with my baby in my arms. ‘It’s you and me now,’ I whisper to her as we wait.

‘Muriel!’ Someone calls my name from along the corridor. As she comes closer, I recognise dear Grace. ‘I’m so glad I caught you. I heard you were leaving today,’ she says.

She puts her arms around me and Beryl. The smell of her face powder. I relax, my eyes sting with tears.

Whilst we're talking, I see Lizzy. She pulls up right outside in a shiny black work truck with GEC on the side and her mum is driving!

Grace looks surprised too. 'Wouldn't get me doing that,' she says, pointing at the vehicle. 'Anyway, no need if you've got a husband.' She doesn't realise what she's said. Lizzy comes through the doors all excited, her curly hair squashed under a green beret.

Grace holds my shoulders and kisses me on the forehead. I don't want to move. So, I don't. Keep looking into her eyes, breathing in her smell as Beryl wriggles in my arms.

'Time to go.' Grace smiles at me.

I'll miss you. I'll never forget you. I couldn't say it out loud 'cause I knew I'd cry if I did.

I sit in the back holding Beryl. Lizzy's in front of me in the passenger seat, pointing out left and right turns to her mum. I look at my friend; her glossy hair, and the staunch beads of rain that perch on her hat.

Eight more days

Ashram Yoga, Opoutere 2012

I climb into our grey Hyundai Tuscon and I know straight away. He asks me how the training was and what the food was like as our boxy Tuscon negotiates the potholes of the unmade track. My husband of twenty-two years is driving me back towards civilization after my month-long yoga teacher training. I respond with polite, hollow answers.

My body is a mass of sensations. Crawling with ants. I'm hot. Panic rises.

I ask how he is and what's new.

I can't do this anymore.

'Everything's pretty much the same. I'm still going to football.' I look at his hands on the steering wheel. 'We have an away match tomorrow. I won't be back till late.'

Moving to New Zealand for the adventure of it was my idea: Paul wasn't so sure.

'What about my pension?' he'd said when I came home from work on a drizzly Wednesday and raised the idea, sorting through the mail and wondering what to make for tea. He did come around, but I thought things would be different now.

So much for a fresh start.

Numb, I nod silently.

We stop for a coffee on the way back. At the training, we sat on the floor for all our meals, around a huge circular table low to the ground. This is my first time sitting on chairs in a month. I choose a bench seat and cross my legs under the table, my knees just about fitting.

There are lots of people. Everything's loud: talking, laughing, wiping of tables. I'm not comfortable in any sense of the word. We sit facing each other, holding our cups of tea with both hands like hot brewed shields.

It's not his fault. It's not anyone's fault.

Back in the car, I ask if he remembers the dream he shared. That he wanted to take off, ride across America on a motorbike. I say, 'We could do that. Let's do that!' I'm animated. Touch his hand as he changes gear. 'The girls are almost grown-up.' I pause to watch the windscreen wipers swish back and forth. 'It's not my dream, but I'd love to do it with you. Let's have an adventure together.' I'm on the tiniest ledge of my marriage and its crumbling; my fingertips losing their grip.

'It was just an idea,' he says. 'Something I once imagined.' I take my hand away. Swish swash left right. 'It's not something I want to do in real life.' He chuckles, embarrassed maybe that I took him seriously.

I plummet.

I watch my husband as he drives. His closely cropped salt and pepper hair, his prominent cheekbones, and his left ear; its earlobe attached, sticking closely to the side of his head. Small and pulled in tight.

I watch the windscreen wipers for the rest of the journey and leave eight days later.

I take only my toothbrush.

Pea and ham soup

Girls' Hostel, 51 Junction Road, Romford July 1944

As we pull up outside, steam rises from the pavement – the rain's stopped and the sun's out.

Lizzy pulls off her beret, drops it on the front seat then opens the door for me.

I breathe in the fresh air, invigorating after the stuffy hospital. Beryl's nodded off for now, but I know she'll be starving as soon as she wakes up. Can't wait. Me boobs are so bloody painful.

I don't have much stuff. Lizzy and her mum have packed up me things from home. Still wonder why I couldn't go back, even for a few days. Maybe Lizzy's dad was embarrassed. Didn't want to see me. Anyway, I'm here now. Fresh start.

Standing on the pavement, Lizzy's mum gives me a bag with a few things it.

'Just some basics,' she says. 'A few bits for Beryl, some soap, a facecloth and a new toothbrush.' We laugh, because we both know that my old one was only fit to clean the grate with. She loops the handle over my hand, and I carry Beryl. Lizzy and her mum bring in my stuff from home. From their place.

The door of the house goes straight into the kitchen. There's a woman stood at the stove stirring something. She's big; her fleshy arms wobble.

'You must be Muriel. I'll be with you in a minute, dear.' There are beads of sweat on her forehead dripping from a curly fringe. 'Go through, go through.'

She waves us in the direction of the living room with a wooden spoon. We duck down below an airing rack that hangs above the fireplace, nappies drying like white, triangular bunting. On the other side sits a girl on a faded, burgundy couch.

The fleshy-armed woman appears from the kitchen, wiping her hands on a tea towel.

‘Lunch won’t be long, Muriel,’ she says.

I think Beryl can smell it. She starts wriggling and kicking; her mouth opens and closes like a guppy.

‘I hope you like pea and ham soup,’ she gives Lizzy’s mum a nudge with her elbow, ‘without the ham!’ She laughs at her own joke and Beryl starts crying.

‘You can stay for lunch. No need to hurry away.’ She looks at Lizzy’s mum holding me stuff and at Lizzy. Neither of them replies; they just fuss with the bags.

‘We’ll come and see you in a few days, Muriel,’ says Lizzy. ‘Oh, and I almost forgot. Janice asked me to give you this,’ she says, sliding a card into one of the bags that form a mound in the centre of the floor.

‘Thanks, Lizzy,’ I say. Beryl’s crying her eyes out now.

‘Soup? Sounds great that, thank you. With or without ham,’ I say, sitting down next to the girl.

‘Sort your baby out before lunch, dear,’ says the woman, still holding the wooden spoon that’s dripping onto the floor.

It’s a bit of a chaotic goodbye; Beryl crying, the-pea-no-ham-soup-woman laughing and sweating and the girl on the couch looking like she’d vanish if she could. It’s fiddly getting half undressed to feed my baby, but I’m happy to be sat down. I kick off me shoes and tuck me feet up onto the couch as Beryl feeds.

The girl looks younger than me; about fifteen or sixteen, and wears dungarees that show off her rounded belly. Her fingers interlink underneath her bump, and she looks straight ahead, glancing at me every now and again. Her skin is ruddy – or perhaps she’s blushing.

‘Does it...’ the girl looks up – it’s just her and me in the room now, ‘hurt?’

‘It does a bit. My milk’s just come in and my boobs are bloody solid. This one can feed for as long as she likes,’ I reply.

The girl goes even redder and puts both hands up to her face, stifling a giggle. She’s got fair hair cut quite short. Choppy.

‘Oh, you mean the birth!’ I laugh too. My wobbling doesn’t disturb Beryl. ‘I’d be a liar if I said it didn’t.’

The girl’s expression sets hard on her face.

‘But us women are made of strong stuff.’ I don’t tell her about me crying, and the nasty comments. She manages half a smile.

There’s some swearing and some banging and crashing coming from the kitchen. We look at each other and grin.

‘You’ll get used to Mavis,’ she offers. ‘She’s always like this.’

And with that, Mavis appears from behind the nappy flags. A bulk of a woman, wiping her hands on the same blue checked tea towel she had before and sweating like a good ‘un.

‘That there soup’s got a mind of its own, bubbling and plopping. You should see the state of the cooker.’ She puts the tea towel on the arm of a chair. ‘Some of it’s splashed up the walls too.’

She's cheery though; doesn't seem to mind a bit of mayhem, like it's all part of the fun. I can't place her accent. Somewhere up north. Not London, anyway.

'I see you've met our Patricia here.'

Hearing her name sends a shiver. I flash to the day my sister died. Mum rocking. The white booties.

'Was it something I said?' Mavis peers at me, hand on her hips. 'Maybe you just need feeding.' She walks back into the kitchen. 'It's ready, girls!' she calls.

Beryl's sound asleep now. I'm hungry but I want to be close to her for a bit longer. I touch her tiny little feet, kiss her button nose and then I slide her gently as I can onto the sofa. She startles for a moment, then settles again.

Patricia has trouble getting up. She rocks backwards and forwards a couple of times, then she manages it. That was me not very long ago. Like a bloody bowling ball.

The round wooden table is slightly too high for me and the old straight-backed chair creaks as I sit down. It's by the window. I can see Beryl from here and I can look outside. A breezy day and brightening up; the grass out the front is bright and some spindly trees in the front garden bend in the wind.

Mavis walks in, still sweating, holding two bowls of soup.

'There you go, girls.' Some soup slops out of Patricia's bowl as she sets them both down. She says 'bugger' and 'shit' as she waddles back to the kitchen, giving us the chance to giggle.

'Just getting the bread, girls.' Mavis brings herself a bowl of soup too and plonks herself down. Her chair creaks so much I think she's going to bust it. 'Ah, that's better.'

There was me worrying about this place being like a workhouse and I like it here already with jolly old Mavis and shy Patricia.

There are rules though.

‘No boyfriends sneaking in here, Muriel my girl,’ Mavis says reaching for a piece of bread, her apricot sleeve hanging perilously close to her steaming soup. ‘Friends can call ‘round.’ She’s speaking with her mouth full as crumbs drop onto the tablecloth. It’s cream-coloured with flowers spiralling over it. ‘But no ruddy boys.’

Patricia’s face is bent down towards her soup. Her cheeks are red and she’s stifling another laugh.

‘Gentleman callers,’ she looks up at us both, conspiratorially, ‘can be lovely company.’ I raise my eyebrows and nod. Patricia glances up. ‘But when it starts getting dark, you’ve got to put them out on the back step.’ She picks up her spoon, ‘like you would a cat.’

In that moment, I forget everything. I’m simply here with Patricia and Mavis, laughing over pea and ham soup – with no ham.

Stevie wonder and a Pharmacy Direct delivery

Rotorua 2021

The dog trails after me as I wander from room to room looking for various bits of my swimming gear. Blue goggles. Pink swimming hat. Kiwiana mask with retro caravans on it.

I check my emails before I leave; Larry, the former nurse who trained at Oldchurch Hospital, Romford, where Mum and I were born, has replied saying that he's writing down some of his memories for me. I'm delighted. I love the idea of sprinkling these – letting them land on Muriel's story. I don't think she'd mind.

I say goodbye to the dog, bundle my stuff into the car and head off to the pool. It's falling down with rain. I'm thinking about Larry working where Muriel had her baby and I drive straight past my turning. I turn left to go through Kuirau Park instead; it's where they hold the Saturday market and the book fayre, and it's full of geysers all bubbling away that tourists can wander 'round for free.

The road however is blocked off by council vehicles and a huge black crane. Steam pours out of the ground, just beyond. I reverse out and find another way. Last Friday, this road joined other parts of the park. Since then, the earth decided to open and shoot steam from its depths.

Once in the outdoor pool, its own steam rising and billowing in the wind, I work on my breathing, trying to get as many strokes as I can from one breath. I have a lesson tomorrow and want to practice.

I notice one of the lifeguards pointing towards the new Kuirau Park eruption that blocked my route to get here.

‘They poured a whole load of concrete in it yesterday,’ he calls, shivering in his long, black coat, ‘and that didn’t work.’ I raise my goggles and rub my eyes as he pulls his hood up to protect himself from the rain. ‘And today they’ve got a crane and they’re going to try to pour more concrete in it.’ He points towards it. ‘Look at it now!’

I climb out of the pool to get a better view. I shiver, watching mud and steam spurt out of the ground. It bubbles away as men in orange high vis look on with folded arms.

‘They might as well put a fence ‘round it and move the road instead!’ he says.

I laugh in agreement. Indeed, right now it’s the best display in the park.

My swim relaxes me and I’m hungry for my breakfast when I get in. Porridge bubbles away on the stove. I love to cook it for a long time, nice and slowly till it’s smooth – the texture of wallpaper paste.

When the evening draws ‘round and I disconnect from my writing, my body is churning. I’m restless. Something’s going on – I’m not quite right. My younger self would’ve numbed sensations like these with chilled wine from the fridge and found fault with someone else – probably her husband.

I practice sitting with my discontent. Being with my unease for as long as it takes. To let it pass through me. Which I know it will in its own good time. So, I spend the evening not very comfortably. Sat on the couch. Watching the sky darken till it’s time to draw the curtains. I go to bed fidgety and uneasy.

In today's yoga class we are focusing on the glands that are 'the guardians of the body', according to Gurprakash.

'They determine everything,' he says, setting down his guitar. 'All secreting.' I assume that is Dutch for secretions.

He says that this will be a very special class. 'You'll feel relaxed in a way that you haven't known before. An unknown state.'

He also informs us that we will be chanting *ware guru* for the whole class. It is an expression of bliss, but we are not to worry about the meaning.

'The meaning is the experience.'

I can't wait and nor can the dog, who settles next to me in her usual spot.

For the first pose, we squat down, knees pointing slightly out like a frog, and then we put our arms down between our legs, grabbing the backs of our feet. This is a bit of a mission, but I manage it.

Next, we are to turn our heads from side to side, looking alternately towards each shoulder whilst chanting *ware guru*. The dog gets up to see what all the fuss is about and sits down right in front of me. I can smell her dog breath: vague odours of old, warm fish. I start to laugh. This encourages the dog even more, so now when my head passes the centre point, she gives me an enthusiastic lick, no doubt urging me on as only a canine could. I laugh some more, my body shaking in its frog position.

I remember that I am waiting for a delivery from Pharmacy Direct and listen out for a van.

Gurprakesh sets me free after a few minutes and I get to stand up. This time, I am to stand with my hands on my lower back and lean back slightly, looking towards the ceiling. The *ware guru* chanting continues as does the head shaking. The dog doesn't move though. She sits looking up at the spectacle.

'You feel like Stevie Wonder,' he says. 'Ray Charles used to do this as well.'

I laugh, keeping half an eye out for the delivery driver.

After this, it's another standing pose without the head shaking. I'm almost disappointed.

'You're still standing. Like Elton John.'

I do wonder if Gurprakash makes all of this up for his own amusement – his yoga income just a side hustle. Perhaps he's a Chartered Accountant in another life?

At the end of the class, I sit in meditation, thumbs to index *Jupiter* fingers whispering *sat ta na ma*.

I open my eyes. A delivery driver wearing an orange high vis jacket puts my parcel down outside the French doors and scuttles off. At least he didn't knock for a signature.

First offender

51 Junction Road, Romford, July 1944

After lunch, Mavis gives me a tour. It is just a house as opposed to a workhouse and I follow her swaying behind out of the living room, leaving Patricia to watch Beryl on the sofa. We walk up the stairs, wooden and steep with a narrow strip of worn carpet down the centre. There are still patches of a blue and green pattern, but mainly it's shreds of sand-coloured hessian. She leads me along the landing.

'This is you, Muriel,' she says pushing open a door to the front bedroom. 'Largest room in the house.'

There are two single beds, two side tables with a lamp on each, and two little cribs at the end of each bed. There's a big rug covering the centre of the floor, again badly worn, and the ceiling lampshade is dusty with tassels that hang down.

'You'll meet your roommate later,' she says.

One of the beds has some folded clothes piled at the end, and a book sitting on the bedside table.

'She's not a first offender like you,' Mavis muses, smoothing out my new bed. 'Well, in a way she is.' She ambles towards the door. 'I'll leave you to it then,' she says and wanders off. I hear her muffled footsteps going down the stairs.

A first offender? No bars on the windows at least, and none on Mavis's ruddy tongue, more's the pity.

I go back down too, pick up Beryl and the bag with the card in it, and head back to my new room. Time for a bit of peace and quiet. I pull the curtains and put the card on the

bedside table. Climbing into the little bed I snuggle up to Beryl and feed her; smoothing her downy hair with my hand I watch her eyes close.

I grab the card and tear open the envelope. It has a picture of a pink cherub on it, being delivered by a stork. If only it was that easy! When I open it, a folded letter slips out. The card's signed by Charlie, Vera and Janice, of course. Not David. Maybe he's slung his hook too.

Dear Muriel,

Congratulations! Lizzy told us your news! We are all happy for you and hope that you and your new baby girl are doing well. We all miss you at the station of course. You're a breath of fresh air, especially in times like these.

I know it's not my business, but Charlie says he's heard from Len. He's been posted to Alexandria in Egypt, where the army has a big base, as you probably know. Helps with getting supplies in from Cairo, along the Desert Road. I don't know much more, but thought you'd want to know. So much gossip goes around these days.

I hope you're doing all right, considering. Must've been such a shock finding out about Len the way you did. Know we love you and that you're made of strong stuff.

With so much love from your friend,

Janice Xx

The new roommate

51 Junction Road, Romford July 1944

When I wake, I glance at the pink cherub card. Janice's note. Hot, dusty Egypt. Alexandria.

Beryl's still asleep and my pillow's damp, the drool from my mouth making a chilly wet patch. It feels cold in the bed too. And wet. I put my hand further down. Oh bugger.

Beryl's nappy is absolutely soaking. I'm for it now.

I climb out, leaving Beryl for a minute. I 'spose I'll have to go and tell Mavis about my first offence. Just as I'm opening the curtains someone taps at the door. I slide the note into my top drawer.

'Muriel, can I come in?' A woman's voice. It doesn't sound like Mavis. I say yes, but I'm feeling flustered, trying to straighten my hair and smooth out me skirt that's covered in piss.

The door opens slowly, and a woman pokes her head 'round.

'Thought it was time for you to meet your new roommate.' She steps in, big grin on her face.

Bloody hell, it's Joyce! 'Oh, thank God!' I go to hug her and stop 'cause of me wet skirt. 'I'm so happy – I didn't think I'd see you again.' She looks a bit better than I remember her from hospital. Bit more colour to her. Still skinny though.

'Well, I'm happy to see you too.' She looks over at the bed, 'and it looks like I came in the nick of time. Want some help?'

'Yes, please Joyce.' I'm so relieved, I feel calmer straight away. 'I forgot about changing her nappy and now the bed's bloody soaking.'

She helps me change Beryl first, gets one of the nappies that was drying above the fire and puts the wet one in the bucket outside the back door. And actually, shows me. No bugger in the hospital did. Babies don't come with a soddin' manual. I put Beryl down in the crib whilst we strip the bed, and she takes the sheets to the outhouse.

'We can do that tomorrow – they'll never dry if we wash them now.' Joyce brings me clean sheets; we make up the bed then sit on it together, Beryl at the end.

'I feel so much better. Thank you, Joyce.' I lean against her; she puts her arm around me and gives me a squeeze.

'Time for a cuppa. What do you reckon?' she says.

I look at Beryl in her crib and say, 'We'll leave the door open. We'll be able to hear her when she wakes up.'

Downstairs, there's no sign of Patricia or Mavis. Joyce puts the kettle on. It's great to watch her in the kitchen, opening cupboards knowing where everything is. When it's made, she puts the pot on the table and fetches milk, cups and saucers. She pulls out a chair for herself.

'So, what happened to you, Muriel?' She shoots me a quick glance as she picks up the huge deep brown tea pot and begins to pour. 'Who got you preggers, and more importantly, is he paying up?' The chair creaks as she sits down. She shuffles it in and picks up the milk bottle.

I feel myself flush. Heat shoots up my body and my face is roasting. I look outside at the waving trees urging me on. I don't come clean straight away. 'He's gone anyway, Joyce. There's no point.'

She looks up at me, stirring her tea. ‘Gone?’

‘He’s in the army, gone miles away now, and I can’t see him coming back to me.’ It’s worse saying it out loud. ‘And he’s married.’ I wait for the flack. She won’t be the first one who’s called me a homewrecker.

‘Oh, that’s bloody tough, Muriel,’ she says, putting down her spoon. No judgement, no bitchy comments.

‘Blokes get stationed in different places – they’re always coming and going. Not surprising he’s keeping a low profile though, wherever he is. Besides, would you want him anyway? Even if he left his wife and came on bended knee?’

I look away. Tears well up. It was so bloody good.

‘Well, he should pay up, that’s for sure,’ she says, leaning on the table, looking me straight in the eye. ‘His baby too.’

She makes me smile. I wipe my eyes with the back of my hand. She’s right: I’ve avoided thinking about money. How I’m going to live.

‘I’ll help you, Muriel. You’ve got to take him to court – get some maintenance out of the bugger.’

Beryl starts to cry so I stand up, scraping my chair back. The trees wave outside, and the nappy flags hang limp inside. ‘Joyce,’ I look around the room one more time. ‘Where’s your baby?’

Guinness

Hennessy's, Rotorua 2012

When I tell my husband that I'm leaving, his face crumples like a discarded workaday shirt. He doesn't fight for me though. He doesn't say 'I love you' he doesn't say 'let's talk', he doesn't say 'we can work this out'. He is resigned. He nods and may or may not have said 'ok'.

I stuff my toothbrush into my bag and drive away. Down the hill and into town. I text Neil, my yoga teacher, and he meets me at the pub. We sit across from each other drinking Guinness; our large glasses drip with chilled tears of their own.

I'm grateful to be in the company of someone else who's found yoga. Someone who knows what a *netti pot* is and that *kumbhaka* isn't a fermented drink. He's a fine-featured man; slim, strong, and also originally from England. We have a lot in common and I enjoy being in his presence. I also fancy him like hell.

'Of course, you can stay with me,' he says smiling, a stripe of Guinness froth foaming on his top lip.

I have all weekend to let the feelings effervesce inside me. I switch off my phone because I can't face anyone. I miss a call from my daughter who can't get to work because I've taken the car. I feel wretched.

I think that walking away will bring me immediate ease. I haven't learned yet that walking away from one man straight into the arms of another won't make me happy. I spend the time navigating between immediate practical concerns (I need to get some clothes to wear for work on Monday) and emotional ones (I need to be able to function without crying).

Mainly, I spend the weekend with my phone switched off, trying to avoid feeling my feelings. I still have a long way to go.

Joyce

51 Junction Road, Romford July 1944

I don't wait for Joyce to answer my question. I go upstairs and my little darling is wriggling in her cot, covers all crumpled like her teary little face. I pick her up and coo; cuddle her and soothe her by stroking my hand over her face and head.

'Hello, my little sweet pea, let's get you fed' I squeeze her to me, 'and I won't forget your nappy this time.' I hold her up to my face. 'Mummy's still learning.'

When I get back downstairs, Joyce is sat on the sofa. Still no sign of anyone else. The room is hotter now that the sun's coming through the windows. The wind's dropped and the trees I was watching before are still. I sit down at the other end from Joyce and start to undo my buttons ready to feed Beryl. Joyce sits with her feet up, knees pointing away from me. She's looking away too. In her left hand is a hanky held tightly in her fist.

'I gave him away,' she replies.

She rocks gently. You wouldn't notice unless you really studied her; now Beryl's settled feeding, I do. There's just the smell of my baby, the sounds of sucking and her lovely baby coos every now and then.

'We'd talked about it before – me and Sandra,' she turns to me now and I can see how red her face is, 'she's my sister.' She dabs her eyes, one then the other. 'But I hoped Billy would come round to the idea. Once he'd seen him in hospital.'

'Billy's your husband?' I stroke Beryl's head lightly as she feeds.

She nods. 'That's why I'm here. He said he wouldn't let me back in the house if I brought my *little bastard* with me.'

She starts proper crying now. ‘And Mum’s not well again. Dad’s got his hands full looking after her so I can’t go there either.’

I shuffle along the sofa, still holding Beryl, and reach to touch whichever bit of her I can. I find her arm first, slide my hand down to her hand. She grasps it tight; wipes her face with her sodden hanky then takes a deep breath.

‘Thanks Muriel.’

‘So, your sister has your baby?’

She nods.

‘And you have a place here, for a few weeks anyway.’

She seems calmer now.

‘And you’ve got me for a roommate.’ I scrunch my face up all silly and give her a thumbs up.

She starts laughing and wipes her face some more.

A door slams. Mavis is back. ‘So, you’ve met your roommate Muriel?’ she says, putting a couple of bags down, and some soil-covered potatoes spill out of one of them. They roll across the floor. She bends down, picks up one of the rogue potatoes and addresses it: ‘There’s no escape for you!’

The tide of the war would turn with Mavis in the ranks, I reckon. She groans as she stands up again.

I turn to Joyce and raise my eyebrows. I don’t feel so bad talking to my baby now. Makes me miss Dad though and his bloody runner beans.

Tomatoes

Rotorua, 2012

‘You’ve ruined the dream! Don’t you see?’

Dad’s reaction to me leaving my marriage is hardly supportive. He lives by himself 11,000 miles away in his house which is peppered with dog hair and strewn with *Gardeners’ World* magazines and packets of tomato seeds captured in used envelopes.

I’ve been putting off telling him. He wasn’t the first family member to say that I was making a big mistake.

I’m just as flinty in my response and the call finishes with me slamming the phone down. I numb my feelings with a chilled glass of Sauvignon Blanc. Not one glass. It’s never just one glass.

Five years from now I’m with my sisters, clearing out Dad’s place after his death. The magazines form dusty mounds on his dining room table. We keep all his seeds in envelopes; the names of various holiday destinations from where they were smuggled are scribbled on each one.

Eight years from now, my sister sends me a photo of tomato plants growing on her balcony in Essex and an envelope with *Santorini* written on it, in Dad’s familiar hand.

Cucumbers

51 Junction Road, Romford, July 1944

‘You don’t have to help, Muriel – just sit with your baby.’

Joyce is stood at the sink, digging eyes out of potatoes, peeling them, and putting them in a pan filled with cold water. A cauldron-sized pot heats on the gas and Mavis hums and fluffs around the kitchen.

I sit at the table, Beryl dozing in my lap so I can watch the kitchen goings-on and talk to Joyce. I don’t know where Patricia’s got to, and I wonder when I’ll see Lizzy and her mum again. When the door goes, I lie Beryl down gently on the couch and answer it. It’s probably Patricia.

Dad is standing on the step. His hair’s all combed flat and he’s wearing a suit – maybe even the same one he wore to Mum’s funeral – and he’s holding a big bag. Looks like some cucumbers are sticking out the top.

‘Hello Muriel.’

He looks, I don’t know – uncomfortable, embarrassed.

‘I went to the station. They said you were here.’ He smiles at me. ‘I brought you these. From the garden.’ He holds out the bag in front of him. A peace offering.

‘Come in Dad, come in!’ He walks up the steps and into the hall with the bag held in front of him like a big, pregnant belly.

‘Where can I put this? Where shall I?’ He turns back and forth a couple of times, then just puts leans it against the coat rack, with a green umbrella sticking up in the corner.

I’m aching for a hug. To be close.

When we do embrace, the green umbrella slides down the wall and slaps the floor behind Dad, a barrier to keep him in. I breathe in a whiff of tar and the musty smell of his suit and remember the day of Mum's funeral.

I take his hand and walk him into the front room. There are kitchen sounds and the smell of mint coming from the boiling potatoes. Patricia is sat on the sofa with Beryl. He turns back and picks up the bag of vegetables and stands with it in the living room this time.

'This is Patricia,' I say to Dad. He holds the bag tighter and looks at me. Features frozen.

'And this,' I pick up my baby, 'is Beryl.' I beam at him. He puts the bag down against the sofa, looks at his hands and wipes them on his suit pants.

'Hello.' He gets very close to her. Touches her arm, very gently strokes her hair then lets her grasp his finger. 'Hello little one.'

I'm watching his face. Defrosting. Softening. I watch his eyes go dewy.

Where have you been Dad? It's been tough and I've needed you.

I reach out and touch his arm. He turns to me, almost surprised that I'm there and he puts his arm around me, ruffles my hair. Beryl is sandwiched between us.

'I know it's been a while.' He takes his arm away. We're still close though. 'But I'm back now.'

'Back?'

'I've been in Holland. They were needing some help with the roads over there, so I decided to go.' I knew what Dad did, but this was news to me.

He looks uncomfortable as he scans the room Patricia gets up off the couch, in her unique rolling-up way, and wanders into the kitchen. His eyes watch her go.

‘There were things I said.’

I look down at my feet, then back up at him.

‘I shouldn’t have.’

Nothing but breath. His dark, slicked-back hair and Beryl wriggling her little feet.

‘I’m sorry Muriel.’

He’s brave not to move. To let me see him. Tears come. Soundless ones. I touch his arm. Meet his gaze. I think that by holding his arm I can make him stay. Our silence smelling like his old suit and the minty potatoes.

‘I need to go now.’ He breaks the stillness and I drop my one-armed barricade.

There are tears in his dark eyelashes. ‘I will be back.’ He leans in and kisses me in the space between my eyebrows. He kisses Beryl on the head. Then turns to leave. I hear the front door close. Gone. Again.

I sit down on the sofa. My whole body is tingling. I can’t think straight. I don’t know what to think so I don’t even try.

Joyce comes back in.

‘We’re just serving up.’

I amble to the table, still holding Beryl, and Joyce puts a steaming plate in front of me. She holds her arms out and I pass her my baby.

‘Now, tuck in.’

I inhale what's been lovingly placed in front of me: shepherd's pie, peas, and gravy. Minty, meaty smells. I look up at Joyce holding Beryl and then back to my dinner. Maybe I have everything I need.

Neil

Rotorua, 2012

I move in with Neil, the dishy yoga teacher. Of course, it doesn't work out.

One week later, when I arrive home after spending time with a friend and doing the shopping, he tells me that he'd needed my help, and that I wasn't there. That I could've gone some other time. That my actions showed that I didn't love him.

Oh. I'd never heard things like this from my husband. But I had heard things like this coming from my own scrambled brain.

It's two years before I leave.

Stepping-stone

Rotorua, 2013

Neil and I have a blazing row. I don't get my own way and I'm furious. When crying and shouting don't work, I decide to add wine. In my fury, I start drinking. One glass, then another, then another. I finish the bottle and I shift to the self-pity stage. Crying and feeling desperately sorry for myself until I'm hollow.

Before I fall asleep, I have one glimmer. The tiniest spark of knowing that the drinking has to go.

I am teaching yoga now. I stand in front of my class: a picture of serenity, but it's cool, crisp Sauvignon Blanc that's on my mind. Every Thursday night after I leave the hall, my car packed with mats and blankets, I speed to New World before it closes.

Seventy-two hours later, I find the venue park up outside and follow the others towards the entrance. Inside a scruffy hessian mat is a stepping-stone into an expanse of worn red carpet. Straight ahead behind some glass panelling, is the church. I look at the rows of empty cinema-style seats. Also devilishly red. I hear talking and laughter coming from a room off to the right and watch others head that way. This must be it. There's a set of large double doors which are thankfully secured open. I walk inside to see rows of people, talking and laughing, sat on red plastic seats. A woman is making herself a coffee; she turns around and welcomes me.

'First time?'

I nod.

'By yourself?'

I nod again.

I find a space in the second row and look around. Everyone looks ordinary. Some people are dressed formally, some casually; there are young people, older people. Most seem to know each other, but I'm guessing that there are other newbies like me.

There are two big flags on the wall: one with the serenity prayer and one listing the twelve steps.

We admitted that we were powerless over alcohol and that our lives had become unmanageable is the first one.

I stare at it. Look around. Listen.

I have shown up: I'm in this space with others like me.

After the meeting, I go to New World. I don't buy wine; I buy chocolate instead.

The moth

Rotorua, 2021

Whilst writing about Muriel's shepherd's pie my dog is sick on the carpet. Dusty possets a slimy parcel of grass just behind my desk and then retches some more. I follow her outside and we sit on the grass together. My dog is eleven years old. She has seen one husband and two boyfriends come and go.

She is listless and hasn't been eating. I worry that my giving her one of the first strawberries of the season has upset her, or else that she is dying of something incurable and that I am not aware of this.

That night, I keep reaching out to check that she is still alive. I'm not entirely sure. I am woken at 4 am by the sound of my door banging open and my old alarm clock tinkling. My door is firmly closed, and the alarm on the clock is defunct – it's been broken for years. I switch on the light and a large moth is on the wall immediately above my head, Silence of the Lambs style. You're not more than one generation from poor white trash, are you, Agent Starling?

Four years ago, precisely in a hospital bed on the other side of the world, my Dad died. He'd collapsed in his garden, tending his beloved tomato plants fracturing his leg in two places. Fourteen weeks later he choked on a glass of water. That night too, I sat bolt upright in bed, feeling a charge like electricity surge through my body. I knew he was dying. I wrote it down, and what time it was. In the morning, there were 'call me as soon as you wake up' messages from both my sisters.

Grateful that my dog is not dead, I leave the moth alone, write down some dreams, and then go back to sleep.

When my phone's alarm goes off the house is stuffy. I open all the doors and windows, mostly to freshen the place up and to encourage the moth to depart. Dusty runs outside out onto the grass, then enthusiastically runs back in again. My dog is on the mend.

Today's online yoga class is all about immunity.

'It's a bit of a weird set but you're used to this with me,' says Gurprakash.

Our mantra today is *har* which we will repeat throughout the class. I lean my phone against my speaker and turn the volume up.

'*Har* is an aspect of God or totality. It is the creative force,' says Gurprakash. Good. I could do with some creative force. What will come after shepherd's pie?

'It's also about liberating us from whatever is blocking us or holding us back.' Poor white trash. I could do with this too.

After the warm-up, we start in bow pose, which is laying on the floor on your belly, arms stretched back to grab your ankles. As Gurprakash plays, I make the *har* sound along with him, doing my best to rock forwards and back. What happens is that I manage to pull my knees away from the floor and then they come back down. The swinging movement doesn't really get going. Still, the *haring* makes me laugh. The dog comes over to see what all the fuss is about and settles next to me on some cushions. She faces the door, her rear end towards me. When I get tired, I lean my head on her, happy that she is feeling better. As Gurprakash continues to play, I notice a smell. A strong, rancid stench. It is my dog. Farting along for all she's worth.

I try again – in need of some momentum to get away from it.

'Har, har, haaar,' I laugh and wince at the same time, moving my head from sidetoside. This was last week's class though, not today's.

When we're done, I turn my face to one side. Not the dog's side.

The next pose, again with the haring, is bridge pose, or *kandharasana*. For this one, I lay on my back, feet close to my bottom and raise my hips up and down in time with the mantra.

'You are making love with the angels.' Gurprakash must love his job as a guitar-strumming yogic comedian.

No doggy farting this time. Instead, she takes the opportunity to lick my face, seeing as I can't get away. I laugh, wipe away her slobber and wonder about the angels that might be checking out me right now. Hunky ones, for sure.

Happy to stand up again, mainly to get away from the dog, Gurprakash says, 'Dance however, you want,' as his John Travolta side re-emerges. He plays a longer mantra. I don't catch it all, but *edamame* is definitely part of it. I've always loved those Japanese soybeans and now I'm worshipping them. Literally. In one part, we have to bow down to a forward bend and then carry-on dancing.

To finish Gurprakash says to 'run in place' for two minutes and 'make boxing movements.' The dog hops onto the couch and lies down with her head resting on her front paws. My plaintive canine spectator.

Dancing with porridge

51 Junction Road, Romford, July 1944

Mavis stands at the stove, her fleshy arm wobbling as she stirs the porridge.

‘Pardon me boy,’ Mavis serenades us, ‘is that the Chattanooga choo choo,’ she taps her wooden spoon on the side of the pot, and does a twirl still holding it tight, ‘track twenty-nine, boy you can gimme a shine.’

Sat at the table Joyce elbows me and points at the spattered porridge that has plopped as far as the clock on the windowsill.

‘Looks like she’s made enough for an army,’ I say, stifling a giggle.

‘She’s wasted on us,’ Joyce replies, ‘let’s go into town and sign her up.’

I’m smiling as Mavis puts our breakfast on the table. The room is lovely and warm, with the heat coming from the stove and the sun streaming in through the window. There’s already milk and sugar on the table. She comes back holding a jar.

‘There you go, girls,’ she places it down. ‘Made it last year. Blackberry.’ She’s still puffing a bit from her kitchen exertion.

‘Thanks, Mavis. And great dancing.’ I smile at her, take the little cloth cover from the jar and breathe in the smell of late summer sweetness. I think of picking blackberries with Mum, walking home with a bowlful and me with stained fingers and scratched arms from reaching into the prickles for the best ones.

‘Let’s go into town today, after breakfast,’ says Joyce as I pass her the jar. She spoons some out and puts it on top of her porridge.

We'd talked last night about it, going to the court to find out about getting some maintenance from Len.

'But what if he's overseas, fighting? What if he doesn't come back?' I reply, tipping milk into my bowl. It makes a moat around the pale, oaty island. Mavis is still shuffling away behind us.

'It's the court's job to worry about that.' She holds her steaming spoon up to her mouth. 'You won't be the first one who some soldiers got pregnant. Typical bloke,' she says blowing on the porridge. 'Gets a good woman up the duff then buggers off.'

She's right, of course. Doesn't mean I'm not scared to go to court. Face something like this. Everyone will know my personal business and will bloody judge me for sure. Still, I can't live on thin air.

Joyce does the washing up and I get Beryl ready. There's a pram parked up in the hall that I can use. It's a bit scratched up and there are some cracks in the hood, but it feels good to be going out, even though I'm so tired from being up however many times in the night. Then I remember the sheets.

'It's not washing day today,' says Joyce. 'I don't think Mavis will even notice – she's too busy choo-chooing around the kitchen.' She gives me a nudge; we get our things together and I get Beryl settled in the pram.

It's good to be outside taking a walk and to have Joyce with me, of course. She's just what I need. I would never say this to her, or anyone – people would think I was daft – but she's like an angel to me. An angel that someone sent. Grace is another one.

Back outside, I remember the war. There are piles of bricks from someone's bombed-out house that've spilled out onto the pavement; I have to wheel the pram into the road to get past. I stop to watch a milkman who's picking up empties from outside it. He's holding his white wire basket in one hand, and his other hand is held out to one side to balance. Both arms outstretched like a crucifix. Reminds me of the dusty picture of Jesus on the cross in the front room of the hostel. Right by the faded burgundy sofa. Someone probably put it there for us sinners.

I follow Joyce. It gets busier the closer we get to town. She parts the seas of people for me and Beryl. Some people smile at me as they go by, some turn away and some don't notice me at all. My first time out with the pram. I'm happy I don't run into anyone. With the hood up, I can't see a bloody thing.

I see the court coming up on the left and it's massive. There are loads of steps up and a bloody great crest at the top. The front of the building looms in its own vast shadow. Even looking at it makes me feel cold.

When we stop the pram's brake is stiff, but I manage it. Joyce touches the handle and starts to bounce it gently, looking at Beryl, then turning away. I ask if she's all right. She nods, but she's not smiling, and her face looks red and puffy.

'Are you all right?' Joyce sniffs, wiping her eyes with the back of her hand.

My face gives me away. I'm shaky as hell.

'No turning back now,' she says managing a smile. She rubs my arm. 'I'll wait here with Beryl. Besides, you won't get the pram up all those bloody steps.'

I take a breath, clench both my fists like I'm going to punch someone, then breathe out and start walking up. At the top, I turn 'round to see Joyce waving up at me.

There are two massive glass doors with vertical metal handles. I go through into a spacious foyer. There's a hessian mat just inside the door, then a sea of red carpet. I'm not sure where to go – I look around at the different doors leading off. Every other bugger looks like they know where they're going.

'Can I help you, miss?' a man asks. He's smartly dressed in a black suit with a cape over it. It has sleeves that make big loops where his arms poke through. Reminds me of a bat. Or a vampire. He doesn't smell musty like Dad though. I just get a whiff of the woody smell of his hair cream.

'Yes, I need to know where to go.' I look at all the rooms. 'I've just had a baby you see.' I feel my cheeks go red, but the man just nods and listens. 'I need to find out...how to...' He nods again. I whisper, feeling so embarrassed. 'I need to find out how I get some money from him – from the father.'

'Oh, I see,' he says softly. 'Courts can be intimidating places. Wait here a moment.'

'Ronnie! Ronnie,' he calls out, his black cape swishing as he turns around.

A woman bustles over. Her clothes are quite tight. She's wearing a checked woollen skirt in beige, a neat cream-coloured blouse and a light green cardy over.

'Ronnie, I'd like you to help this young lady here,' he says smiling at me. 'Please take her through to the Family Court and help her with the paperwork.'

'Certainly Sir,' says Ronnie.

'Child maintenance,' he says in a low voice, leaning towards her.

'Come with me, miss,' she says as the man walks away.

I follow her 'round to the right and we go through more heavy doors and along a corridor, and past a picture of the King holding a sceptre and looking all serious. I walk behind Ronnie; her low-heeled shoes clip-clopping and her ample bottom – squashed tight into her wool skirt – wobbling left-right-left-right.

She leads me into a poky bare-walled room furnished only with a table with two chairs. From the window, I can see into other offices and there's a rickety fire escape that zigzags down – the last letter of the alphabet rusty and crumbling.

'I won't be a jiffy, dear,' says Ronnie leaving me alone in the room. I think of Joyce waiting with Beryl outside. All those steps.

Ronnie returns with a wad of papers.

'There are a few steps to go through.' Her glasses on a chain sit on her bosom; she puts them on as she leafs through the forms.

'So, let's make a start here with the basics.' She slides a piece of paper towards me, along with a pen.

I start writing but begin to worry about how long this will take.

'We've had a lot of girls like you coming in,' says Ronnie.

I glance up, then carry on writing.

'I blame the Americans,' she takes her glasses off, folds her arms and nods in agreement with herself, 'coming over here and our women throwing themselves at them.' She shakes her head and tuts.

I'm writing Len's details now and point to a part I don't understand.

‘Date of offence?’ Ronnie slips her glasses back on and peers at the form. ‘You put the date that the bastard child was born.’

I stop writing and glare at her.

‘Right here, dearie.’ She points, ‘have you lost your place?’

First offender. Bastard child. I feel my rage bubbling up; my face is hot, and my hand is starting to sweat as I write. I decide she’s not worth my energy. (I haven’t forgotten you, Grace).

When I finish, I slide everything back to Ronnie.

‘That was quick! Some of the girls here take ages, some of them can hardly write. Can’t say I’m surprised...’

‘Thanks for your help with all this,’ I interrupt her, ‘and I’ll hear from you? With the date this comes to court?’

‘Oh, yes you will, dear.’

My name is Muriel.

‘My name is Muriel.’

‘Yes, of course – Muriel,’ she does a genteel little cough into her hand. ‘You’ll get a letter from us with a date for the court hearing.’

I stand up to go.

‘I hope he turns up when he’s summonsed! Lots of them, well they...’

‘Thank you again.’ I give her a half smile as I walk out of the room before I say something I shouldn’t. I just hope I can bloody well find my way out of this maze and back to Joyce and Beryl.

Outside, I run down the steps to find Joyce has scooped Beryl out of the pram and is giving her a cuddle.

‘You did it!’ Joyce smiles, passes Beryl to me, ‘I’m so proud of you, Muriel.’

‘Thanks Joyce.’ I’m proud of myself come to think of it.

Joyce pushes the pram, and we wander to find somewhere for me to feed Beryl where there’ll be no bugger gawping at me.

The barber's chair

Methodist Church Hall, Old Taupo Road, Rotorua, 2014

Every Monday night, I go to AA. The huge doors and the red carpet that daunted me so much at the beginning now feel like home. I learn the names and the stories. There's Hone, who breaks down sharing that he'd spend all his money on alcohol, leaving his children to go hungry; Jen, whose husband threatened to leave her if she didn't stop drinking. She did stop. She's been sober for twenty years. They're still together. And Jennifer, from generations of alcoholics, whose husband did leave, but who has found a new family here.

The first time I am invited to speak, I sit in the chair at the front like I have no skin. I share I have been drinking every day for as long I remember. That I'm scared to feel my pain, now I'm not numbing it with alcohol. And glad to be surrounded by others who have been there.

When I walk back to my chair, I hear words of encouragement. 'Glad you're here Kim. You're in the right place. Keep coming back.' The words are a balm. There's no judgement here. Just empathy, support, and fellowship.

The wise words and phrases I pick up week after week begin to soak in and work their magic. I love 'acceptance is the answer to all our problems'; its wisdom floats across my mind when traffic lights turn red, in a long queue at the supermarket, and at the petrol station when the price goes up just as I pick up the oily handle of the pump. I go to meetings at various locations and make more connections. The steadiness of people who've been in recovery for a long time is magnetic. I want what they have.

And practically, I learn some hacks. Do something else at the time you used to start drinking – now 5:30 pm is dog walking time; don't get too hungry, too thirsty, or too tired –

I make sure I have food ready when I get in from work. My favourite is the tip to eat sweet things because you don't fancy drinking after you've been eating cake. And of course, don't go to places where others are drinking: if you sit in the barber's chair, you're going to get a haircut.

Home isn't a safe place because it's not free of alcohol. Neil is an alcoholic too and I find him drinking when I get home from my AA meetings. I keep going to meetings and I stay sober, one day at a time. But when I get home, I'm sitting in the barber's chair.

More red carpet

Romford Magistrates Court, 24 August 1944

Even though I've been here before, I'm nervous as hell. Joyce comes in with me this time and Mavis is looking after Beryl. We go up the court steps together, through the massive doors, over the hessian rug and into the foyer with the red carpet. The court's letter came with a little map and the number of the courtroom; we stand in the foyer looking at it. I feel me heart pounding away in me chest.

'Cop hold.' I push the letter and the map onto Joyce. 'I need the ladies.'

I find the door with a beautiful stained-glass 'Ladies' panel above it and walk through. I dash into a cubicle and sit down on the cool seat. Hardly anything. Just me bloody nerves. When I come out, I splash my face with some cold water, wash and dry my hands and look at myself in the mirror. You've done so many bloody hard things already. You can do one more I tell myself. I take a few breaths and look at my just-turned-nineteen-year-old self in the mirror. I reckon I'm made of strong stuff.

Joyce has worked out where we need to go and we take a seat in the public gallery.

Walking into that room is like walking into another world. Quiet as the soddin' grave. No windows. People standing around all wearing those funny gowns. Gives me the creeps.

There's a bit of mumbling, some leafing through lists and then they call out his name. People look 'round. Someone goes to the door of the court and calls again into the foyer. My hands are cold, and I notice I'm clenching my fists. Of course, there's no sign of him.

'Adjourned until 12 September.' There's more paper rustling and they start talking about something else.

‘So that’s it?’ I turn to Joyce. ‘Putting it all off again? Took six bloody weeks to get this far.’ I’m hot and my fists are clenched again.

As we get up, the backs of our red chairs flip up like they do at the pictures. Mine catches me skirt and I have to push it back down to get free again. Bloody thing. I can see Joyce smirking. Cheeky cow.

Yoga and phad thai

The Arts Village, Rotorua, 2014

Initially, it's great to have Neil's support, especially when I first start to teach yoga. My first class is less than a month after I've finished my training and three weeks after leaving my marriage. I'm as nervous as hell.

I'm back in the small, upstairs rooms of The Arts Village, where I spent time as a student in someone else's class. Now I'm the teacher. Scribbled notes – a sequence of poses to follow. I'm shaking and I go to the loo I don't know how many times before the start.

A small group of women traipse in, holding their rolled-up yoga mats, and chatting with each other. One woman I know from a meditation class I went to a few years ago; a class for people with a cancer diagnosis. Kathy lives with lung cancer and is committed to caring for herself and living her best life. That's not to say that she doesn't have a good old moan about her chemo sessions and how skinny she's getting. As the weeks go by, she keeps on turning up. One woman, Lou, is a real estate agent and has trouble switching off her mind, and her phone as it turns out. There are a couple of friends of mine there to support me and some other women who saw my poster and have always wanted to try yoga.

I start with some simple breath work to help my students, and me, calm down and get comfortable. I feel the pressure to offer lots of poses and make the class more like a workout than a yoga class. I hang on in there and trust the yoga. I know what this simple practice can do, and I want my students to feel it.

I watch people settle and sense that they are becoming grounded in the room. I look at Kathy's body lying on her mat. I can see her prominent ribs and her bony legs through her Lycra yoga tights. Her breath is slowing down nicely.

Lou keeps opening her eyes. She lifts her head up and looks around, then lays down again. One of the new women is not breathing into her belly. It's just her shoulders that are moving, so I go over, kneel and coach her as the others practice.

We move on to the *asanas* or postures. I know where I'd planned to start and I watch people follow me, now nicely calmed by the breathwork. The space has a different feel; it's tranquil, with just the odd noise from outside the room, or from people talking as they walk past outside. I learn that if I get my class to do something laying down, I can check my notes without them seeing me. I learn that sun salutations can take up quite a bit of time in a class and tire people out, and that balances lift the mood and make people giggle as they wobble and try to hold a pose.

Winding down, I cue more breathwork and opt for *nadi shodan*, alternate nostril breathing. It takes all my courage to lead in a practice that I'm afraid that some people, especially the new ones, might find weird. It involves closing one nostril as you breathe in through the other, pinching both nostrils at the peak of the inhale, and then closing the opposite one and breathing out. I'm still learning how to cue, and I check my notes. Lou has her eyes open. She leans forward and looks around the group. Her gold stud earrings catch the light as she moves, as does her blond highlighted hair.

We reach relaxation, everyone's favourite part, and the women begin to chat as they prepare. One of the new women takes a sip of water, then as she puts her bottle back down it tips over, wetting the carpet. Giggles and apologies.

I don't say anything. I just wait and sure enough, everyone does settle.

I love relaxation. It's what comes to me with the most ease and I love to offer it to others. The magic of *pratyahara*, sense withdrawal, comes first. It's like treating the mind like an energetic child. I ask people to go as far away from their bodies as they wish. Tell

them to listen to sounds as far into the distance as they can. Sounds of cars, birds, whatever they can hear. Then slightly closer – outside of the room. Next, come sounds inside the room, and I sense my class listening to the sounds of each other breathing, some rustling of clothes, and the odd cough.

Then I say, ‘Now listen to the sound of the ebb and flow of your own breath.’

Silence. Absolute stillness. They are fully relaxed and ready to go deeper. I cue a full body rotation, always starting with toes, and lastly a short retreat into the *chidakash* or the mindspace, that dark space behind the closed eyes. When I do this, I get a glimpse of the infinite – the vastness of the space that’s inside your own head. A bit like entering the Tardis. My experience is a big black silence that’s permeated with colours that mix and merge – a subconscious marbling of oil on water.

I love guiding people to a place where they sense they are more than a physical body. When we get a glimpse like this we slow down: take stock. Change our whole lives, even.

It’s also my job to bring people safely back but Lou’s phone does it for me. She leaps up as it warbles away, then grabs it and leaves the room. I hear her talking loudly outside as I bring people ‘round. The women sit up rub their eyes and stay quiet. One of the new women is asleep. I leave her there for a bit longer as I finish the class; she rouses as the other women are rolling up their mats and the volume of chatter increases again.

As she comes to there are tears in her eyes. She whispers, ‘thank you’ and tells me about her anxiety; her fear of letting go.

I touch her arm and smile. I already love this new choice that I’ve made. I’ve cried so many times in yoga classes, and now I’m helping someone else with their journey of healing.

The empty room smells of sweat, make-up and incense. Someone's left a sock in the corner and there's the wet patch by the door.

I gather my notes, a pile of cash totalling \$60 and go downstairs to pay the \$20 fee for the room. I'm starving so I go out for lunch. \$15 for a Phad Thai. I come home with \$25 dollars in my pocket.

Robin Hood and the peace lily

Rotorua, 2021

Another Wednesday morning and I'm poised for Gurprakash and his made-up yoga. I prop my phone on my flamingo table, unroll my mat, and gather my dog-hair laced blankets and make-up-stained eye pillow ready for his comedy offerings. My daughter Eve is staying with me. I have primed her to expect early morning chanting.

When I log into the yoga app, he isn't there. No listing for this week. Knowing that I can choose how to respond, I scan the possibilities; I can be grumpy, I can go and do something else like drink tea and tuck into the packet of chocolate digestives that Eve bought from Countdown. Or I can look to see who else is on and still practise some yoga. I choose the latter, find Mark from Oxford offering Zen Yoga and decide to give it a go.

He's all set up in his lounge with a shelf of books and a peace lily behind him, curtains drawn as it is an autumn evening in England. His hair is shortly cropped and russet red – the colour of the season. On the other side of the world, I enjoy hearing an English accent again.

His yoga focuses on the Chinese meridian system. Today is the turn of the lung and the large intestine, which are linked to the season of autumn. There is no chanting and no mention of John Travolta, but there are plenty of those nervy stretches of toes and fingers that I trust must be doing their magic. I picture my *chi* or energy lying sluggishly in my veins as I think about how many biscuits are left in the packet and then whoosh, it's being super-charged through my body like Augustus Gloop through a chocolatey pipe.

My favourite pose is pretending to be Robin Hood. We are to stand facing our tiny phone screens, making an 'L' for loser shape with our thumb and first finger of one hand: this is where the imaginary frame of the bow is. With the other, we pull back the pretend string

with curled fingers then kapow, we let the invisible miscreant have it. Nerve pulses shoot along both arms. Is this doing me any good? Do I have RSI? I worry that I'm going to need carpal tunnel surgery after this.

As we change sides, there is a tapping sound. There's no-one at my door but there is someone at Mark's. There's some shuffling behind his ranch slider, or more correctly his patio door curtains, and his wife comes in wearing a beige raincoat. Her blond hair is damp and tousled and she's carrying two carrier bags. They have Sainsbury's in orange letters written on them. There are muffled whispers as he hurriedly closes the curtains and once again, I return to the yoga equivalent of Sherwood Forest.

Mark recovers his composure, telling his cyber audience watching from countries scattered all over the world that he's sorry for the interruption, but he'd locked his wife out of the house.

To loosen all those tingling meridians, we are allowed to dangle forwards with bent knees, arms falling between our legs, and shake around a bit. He says that the practice is about letting go like the leaves falling from the trees in autumn. I try to shake mine from my personal branches, but he says that leaves need no encouragement. They simply drop when they are ready.

Six shillings a week

51 Junction Road, 12 September 1944

I'm still at the hostel for first offenders. Patricia's had her baby, a little girl, same as me. I help her with the nappies, and I get stuck in with the washing too. I'm a dab hand now at hanging them over the drying rack and hoicking the whole thing up high of an evening. It's September, but the weather's still mainly fair, so all the laundry goes out on the line most days.

Haven't seen Dad, but Patricia's dad came round, and he brought her a loaf of crusty bread. Mavis made some of her pea-not-ham soup and we all tucked in. He wanted the baby to be called Martha after his mum; Patricia said that she'd already named her Dorothy. I could see that he was a bit miffed, dipping his bread into his soup like he was trying to unblock a drain. I took no notice.

Joyce is still here as well, and her husband Billy comes over quite often. They talk a lot. They argue a lot too. And Sandra visits with baby Thomas. He's a chubby wee thing already and Joyce cries her eyes out every time he goes.

Today, we're going back to court. Mavis is minding Beryl and me and Joyce are heading off again after breakfast. I've got all those nervy feelings in my stomach, and I feel hot and thirsty. I'll be more relaxed once we're on our way.

'This time, he'll have to come.' Joyce is stood in front of the mirror in our room, combing her hair. 'He'll be in trouble if he doesn't.'

'He might be overseas, Joyce.'

She nods in agreement, putting a comb into her bag, coins into her purse.

‘I’m not sure I want to see him,’ I say, ‘how I’ll feel.’ Janice’s card is on my bedside table, faded from the sun. I’m sat at the end of me bed watching Joyce. ‘Don’t know if I’ll want hug him, or punch his ruddy face in.’

Joyce starts laughing. ‘Mine was the opposite – couldn’t get rid of him.’ She’s still smiling, but her eyes aren’t. ‘He had blue eyes to die for, soft hair and a Californian accent to match. Just a young G.I.’ She puts down her bag and sits on her bed, facing me. ‘Bloody hell, he asked me to marry him, Muriel.’ The wind inflates the net curtains, and they flounce up. The white lampshade on the ceiling begins to sway. ‘I said no, I still love my husband.’ The curtains float back down as the wind drops. Joyce isn’t looking at me, she’s just staring straight ahead. ‘Now Billy doesn’t want me back after what I did.’

I let the silence billow around us for a moment or two. ‘You did it because you missed your husband,’ I say.

She looks up at me. Her face is blotchy. ‘I tell Billy that, but it don’t seem to register.’ She sniffs and wipes her nose on her sleeve. ‘Should’ve just buggered off with the American.’

And leave your kids?

I’m itching to reassure her. Tell her everything will work out, but what the hell do I know. Things don’t always come right instantly. Sometimes they don’t come right at all, and you just have to carry on anyway.

I hear Mavis talking downstairs. She calls Joyce. Turns out Sandra’s here to visit, with baby Thomas. I get my handbag too, tidy my hair and I’m ready to go.

‘I’ll be all right by myself today, Joyce.’ She’s cuddling her baby and embracing her sister with her free hand. ‘You stay here.’

Joyce says she can still go with me – that we can all go together.

‘I’ll be all right, thanks.’ I smile and touch her arm.

The leaves are starting to turn, and some have fallen off the trees already. Russet red. I love autumn – still warm days, cooler nights and all those beautiful rich colours. I walk past the duckpond on my way into town and watch the wind skim across its surface, making ripples. It’s nearly a year since that day. Walking to the station and him not showing up. Sitting there. Watching the world go by.

Now I’ve got my own baby and I’ve got business to do. It’s only right that Len pays something towards Beryl. I can’t stay at the hostel and live on charity forever. I want to get back to work. Back to the station.

I’m at the bottom of the steps. Again. I climb to the top, step over the same old rug and onto the red carpet. I check the court lists on the wall, so I know where I’m going. Of course, I nip to the loo first before I find the courtroom.

‘I trust the summons was served this time.’ The Magistrate, well that’s who I think he is, looks over his half-rimmed glasses at a young man wearing a suit that’s too small for him. The young man mumbles something back; his hair’s dishevelled and he’s leafing through papers.

‘I know there’s a war on, but it’s vital we follow due process. This is an important matter.’ He scans the courtroom. I’m the only one in the public gallery. The young man in the tight suit goes out into the foyer and comes back in shaking his head.

‘In that case,’ continues the judge, ‘I shall enter a plea of absent and make an award.’ He looks down at his papers and begins to write.

‘I grant six shillings a week to the informant, Muriel Murdoch, to be paid by Mr Leonard Osborne, aged thirty-two in respect of her bastard child, whom she alleges is the father.’ He pauses, looking around the courtroom. ‘This will be paid until the child reaches the age of sixteen years. Date of offence is recorded as 3 July 1944.’ He clears his throat. ‘In addition, I approve the conduct costs of two pounds, two shillings and sevenpence and other costs of eight shillings and sixpence.’ He looks around again. ‘Court adjourned.’ He bangs a little hammer, and everyone stands up. My skirt doesn’t get caught this time. I get up, pick up my bag and go back to the toilets.

Standing in front of the mirror, I splash my face with cold water a few times and dry myself with the towel. There are drips, but I don’t care. My heart is pounding. Hearing my name read out loud. Bastard child. My baby’s birthday as the date of offence. There’s some rage. There’s also some relief. And I’m bloody glad! It’s official. They believed me and they’ve order him to pay up! Bloody good job.

I go out in the foyer, disorientated for a moment, looking for the doors.

‘Ah, there you are.’ It’s Ronnie. Same skirt. Same waddle. ‘When the maintenance gets paid, you’ll need to come back here to collect it.’ She’s holding a piece of paper in front of her. ‘Then we’ll pass it on to you by cheque.’

More delays. More red tape. ‘Can’t I just have the cash? I really need the money.’

She looks a bit flustered. ‘Erm, I think we can do that. I’ll need to find out first for you, though.’

I feel myself getting agitated. I’m hot, I’ve had enough. I just want some money and to get back to my baby.

‘Let’s sit down for a minute, shall we dear? Er, Muriel.’ Ronnie corrects herself. Should bloody well think so. ‘And I can explain what happens next.’

We sit in the foyer. It’s a huge place with plenty of seats. Not strictly private, but there’s no-one else around.

‘As Mr Osborne wasn’t here today, we have to let him know about the decision and what he is required to pay.’ We sit next to each other, her knees pointing towards mine. I know I look surly, but I don’t care. ‘He needs time to make the payment to us, and then you can come in and we can pay you.’

I sigh. ‘So how long’s all this going to take?’

‘Ideally, a week should be enough time. Otherwise, we can write to you to let you know. Save you a wasted trip.’

I’m tired. Dejected. I just sit there with me shoulders slumped wishing I didn’t have to walk home.

‘You’ve done the hard part. I bet many women don’t even try. Can’t face doing this at all.’

Bloody hell, I’m surprised to hear this from Ronnie. She had it in for me last time. I tell her I’ll be back next week. I say thanks. And mean it.

It’s a breezy, cool afternoon as I walk back to the hostel; curled, crispy leaves blow to-and-fro on the uneven path. I think about Len. We were so close. For a while. A young couple walks past me holding hands. He’s in uniform and she puts her hand on the top of her head to stop her brown hat from blowing away. Len. Married. And with kids. Hell, I’ll never forget the day I found out, lined up outside the bloody butchers with Lizzy. He’s slippery as a bloody eel. But I miss him.

Tea and tulips

Rotorua Aquatic Centre, 2021

They concreted over the geysers. Swimming laps at the Aquatic Centre without views of bubbling mud spurting from the nearby road isn't the same. The Council's orange tape is still there, as is some rogue steam that brazenly seeps out from the edges.

Mother Nature won't be quelled. Across town at the Government Gardens, the ground has ruptured near the beds of well-behaved tulips, and mud is spurting from the depths, flagrantly spattering their crimson orderliness. I like to think that Mavis is behind this, dancing in the mud and mayhem to the 'Chattanooga Choo Choo' waving her spoon yet being careful not to tiptoe on them.

Across continents and space, Larry the nurse writes again and tells me of his night shifts at Oldchurch Hospital, and the smell of the hops that would waft from the brewery. I wonder if they gusted through Muriel's window as she hungrily ate her roast dinner with Joyce. He writes of Romford market and watching West Ham play. Did he go to Cassattari's Café, watching the West Ham players prepare for a home game over tea and tactics? Perhaps he even to a party with Bobby Moore.

He tells me that he met his wife, also a nurse, at the hospital. Whilst struggling to insert a catheter she offered to assist him, and the rest is history. A similar vintage to Beryl, they celebrate their 44th wedding anniversary this year.

Going home

Girls' Hostel, 12 September 1944

All that for six shillings a week. I bloody did it though. Kept at it like a terrier clamped to an old bloke's trouser leg. Homes in sight as crunchy leaves twist into a spiral, picking up road dust and bits of old rubbish too. The same wind lifts my hair then runs out of puff, so I shuffle through the crispiness instead. Trixie used to chase the leaves. I remember her running up the stairs. Dad telling her off.

I walk back past the pond. A child in a red jumper chases some ducks. Not the same boy as a year ago – could be the same jumper though. Things disappear during wartime. Then crop up again when you least expect.

I'm warm and ruddy when the house comes into view. The gate squeaks, and I walk up the path. There are three milk bottles and glass skittles glinting on the bottom step. The suds of washing-up liquid bubble at the bottom. Soapy, latticed shells which morph and shrink as I watch.

Joyce opens the door with Thomas balanced on her hip. 'I've been waiting for you, Muriel,' she says, pulling me inside.

There are some vegetables wrapped in newspaper, propped against the wall. 'Has my dad...'

She doesn't let me finish. 'It's all settled. I'm going home, Muriel!' I can hear the delight in her voice. She hugs me still holding Thomas. I notice his milky smell somewhere near my right ear. Over her shoulder is Mavis in the kitchen, Beryl on her hip. It's steamy inside. A waft of mint from the bubbling potatoes.

‘That’s great.’ I should feel happy for her, but I don’t. My stomach churns and my hands are hot.

‘I’d best be getting back,’ says Sandra. I hadn’t noticed her standing in the hall. She takes Thomas from Joyce and squeezes past us towards the door. ‘Don’t forget to tell Muriel.’

I feel jittery. The minty steam. The milky smells of babies. And there’s the six shillings that she hasn’t even asked me about.

I cross my arms. ‘Tell Muriel what?’

Rain dancing, and a sofa in a field

Rotorua, 2022

I open the door and look to either side. 'Come on, dog!'

Dusty hesitates. It's early; gloomy and overcast. The first snap of autumn and the rain's falling heavily.

I lift a shiny pot of geraniums from the shelter of the top step down to the bottom; the rain begins to puddle on each furry leaf. In the tub a pink plant is nestled in close to an orange one. I trust neither one minds. 'Come on!' I walk away from the door, urging the dog to follow, and open the gate that leads to the garden. She pads behind, holding her head low as the icy rain pelts her back.

The birds on the grass scatter when they hear me coming. I'm surrounded by trees and there's only a wet dog to witness me get pelted by the chilly rain. I dance around, stretch my arms out wide, put my face to the sky, then squelch in the soaked grass. Dusty fossicks through the leaves under the canopy of a flowering cherry.

I remember Mum doing this. With the rain pelting down so hard that you could see each drop bounce up again in the yard, she'd take off her apron and walk out into the darkness and get herself soaked. The evening meal would be left to its own devices whilst she laughed and frolicked. Back inside and sopping wet, she was more alive. I'd get her a towel from the upstairs airing cupboard, and she'd wipe her face and beam at me.

Eating dinner together, all five of us sat round the table, no-one would mention Mum's wet hair dripping steadily onto her work blouse. Dad didn't always see, but when he did, he'd mutter 'silly daft cow' under his breath; I live by myself, so no-one says silly daft cow to me.

Later that day, and when it's stopped raining, I take Dusty for a walk. We hike up a hill, and push through an overgrown hedge into a field where no-one cuts the grass. There's something about the effort of wading through waist-high grass. A bit like walking through water. Despite her advancing years, Dusty takes to leaping through it, lamb like.

We haven't walked for long when I spot a burgundy sofa. And a coffee table. They are both in mint condition, clearly not tatty old things that have been dumped. They rest on a clean tarpaulin, laid out like a carpet. I picture people coming up here of an evening. Sitting and looking at the stars, glass of wine in hand. Perhaps a couple who hold hands and have reached that stage of comfort when they can sit in silence with each other, not feeling the need to speak. Not wanting to break the spell.

At home, there are wet towels on the floor, piles of washing-up and flies settling on the plates. The courgettes! My friend brought me some yesterday as a gift, but I'm not a fan, so I take them to the neighbour's house. Leave them on the step. I wonder if they will make up a story about how they got there.

Going home, continued

Girls' Hostel 12 September 1944

Joyce closes the door and flits back into the lounge. Mavis is twirling Beryl around to the rhythm of the rattling lid on the pan of spuds. Minty air and steamed-up windows.

‘The vegetables. Has Dad been ‘round? What did he say?’ I speak to Joyce’s back. She ducks under the net curtain, its grey crispy edge round her shoulders like a pauper’s shawl as she waves to Sandra and Thomas.

‘What?’ she turns around and straightens her hair after its playful brush with Mavis’s nets. ‘Oh, I don’t know, Muriel.’

She almost skips into the kitchen, and I see her ask Mavis something. They laugh together as she takes Beryl into her arms. Well, sod her. So much for being a friend. I plonk myself down on the burgundy couch in front of the window with the grubby net curtains. Even Beryl’s chuckling now. No bugger cares about me. I get up to go to me room where I can have a proper sulk and snivel in private.

‘Muriel! Don’t go!’ Joyce comes up behind me. ‘Come and sit down. Please.’

I don’t move. She takes my hand and pulls me back towards the sofa. I feel a smile coming on, but I don’t want her to see.

‘Everything’s sorted, Muriel. And not just for me.’ Beryl’s between us on the couch. She smiles and waves her soft, pink arms. At least someone’s bothered about me.

‘Look, it’s great that you’re going home, Joyce.’ I’m really trying not to cry. I want to say I’ll miss you so bloody much, but I keep schtum. ‘That Billy’s seen sense at last.’

‘No, he bloody hasn’t!’ she replies.

Well, that shuts me up.

‘I’m going home to Mum and Dad’s. In Factory Road. I can’t wait around for Billy, and the longer it goes on...’ She doesn’t finish her sentence, just looks towards the window with the net curtain. ‘Mum’s getting better, she’s going to help me with Thomas. And she’s lined me up a job!’

She’s so happy. I turn away clenching my gut. Then cry me eyes out.

‘And not just for me, Muriel.’ She ignores the gulpy sobs. ‘For you too if you want it.’ I look up at her. ‘And Beryl here.’

‘Isn’t Beryl a bit young for a job?’ I say wiping my snotty face.

Mavis is pounding away in the kitchen, giving the spuds what for. We both start laughing then.

Turns out Joyce’s mum works in a factory that makes buttons for soldiers’ uniforms. She can get us both jobs there, and we can all live with her and Joyce’s dad. I don’t have my mum, but I’m bloody glad that someone else’s is looking out for me.

‘What about the station? Don’t you want to go back there?’ says Joyce.

‘The station’s miles from Factory Road. And it’d be fun going to work with you,’ I say. ‘Besides, I haven’t a peep out of Lizzy or Janice for ages.’

Mavis puts our plates on the dinner table, and the three of us play pass the parcel with Beryl, all taking turns to eat.

‘I put his note over there.’ Mavis nods towards the kitchen, mouth full of mash.

This is news to me.

‘From your dad.’ Mavis puts down her fork as Joyce passes Beryl to her. ‘It was tucked into the vegetables.’

I go to get up.

‘Leave it till after Muriel love,’ says Mavis, who still has hold of Beryl. ‘And I know Lacrinoids, the factory that makes all those buttons. Important job that, girls. We’re hardly going to win a war without buttons.’ I flick my eyes to Joyce and she’s trying not to laugh. ‘Imagine our lads going over the top with their trousers round their ankles.’

‘Perish the thought!’ says Joyce, as she kicks me under the table.

Take five

Rotorua, 2014

I'm sober. I'm teaching. I leave Neil.

It takes a few attempts.

'We could be just friends – we could meet for coffee?' I offer.

My counsellor doesn't nod; she asks me how I feel in Neil's presence. My gut clenches and I don't reply.

'From my experience, it takes five.' She leans back in her compact armchair with its grey, linen upholstery. Her eyes make the briefest of flickers towards the clock on the wall before they return to me.

Five? Five minutes? For what?

'Once you leave him for the fifth time, you won't go back.' She puts her hands together in a steeple the way confident people do.

I'm aware that I'm blushing.

'It's already been three,' I say, relaxing and allowing myself to smile.

Three, it turns out, is enough.

The moth and the scar

Rotorua, 2022

The moth is tiny. The type that's not easy to fathom without your glasses. Before I reflexively swat it away, I slow down and watch its flimsy wings flap up and down at the speed of an early flying machine. It walks at a dodderly pace too. Fairground ladybird speed.

It lands on my left forearm and has chosen to totter along parallel to one of my scars which sweeps crossways, close to my elbow crease. I once worried people would think it was a badly misplaced suicide attempt. I don't think that anymore.

cold feet

The Skin Centre, Tauranga, 2008

Flat on the operating table I try not to look. Yet for forty-two years I've been socialised to nod, smile and generally be pleasant.

Examining my left arm, the surgeon pulls down a huge light, shaped liked an oversized red blood cell. It's silver, retro and shiny. Alison Steadman flitting around her lounge in her 70s orange maxi dress comes to mind. She'd have one of these.

I'm numbed out. I watch him pick up his scalpel, ready to take a slice. My look-don't-look dilemma is exacerbated because I can see my extended arm reflected in the big silver shade of the lamp.

He leans in and mumbles 'Tell me if you feel anything,' from under his mask. He's all gowned-up and wears Hannibal Lecter spectacles. The nurse, a slight woman with brown eyes, hovers at his left shoulder.

'Ow!' I holler.

He sits up, looks at the nurse then back at me.

'Sorry. Just joking. I can't feel anything.' Not in my arm, anyway.

He's smiling behind his mask. I can see it in his eyes.

'My feet are cold though.' The words that come out of me are streams of nonsense.

I do my best to focus on my breath so as not to lose my shit. Really slow it down. In through the nose. Out through the mouth. I then suggest to the surgeon that he should gift 'Skin Centre' embossed socks to all patients that come through here. It's freezing – like I'm being sliced up in a massive fridge. A very clean, spacious, and modern one though. Shame

there aren't any melanomas on my feet; he could do anything he liked to them and save on the anaesthetic.

When he's sewed up my left arm, it's time to turn onto my front. We both adjust my gown and I try to get comfortable. Do I rest on my chin? Turn my face to one side? The operating table adjusts in a way that I didn't think was possible. My legs are raised and so are my shoulders and upper body, leaving my lower back in a dip. I am the shape of a banana.

'It's a good thing you're flexible or else we'd be doing a skin graft,' he chortles behind me. 'You going to be alright like that for a while?'

I say yes. Will I? And how long is 'a while?'

I have the floor and the lower part of the wall to study. All white. Still cold. Immobilised. Sensations of pulling along my knicker line that are far from sexy.

The surgeon calls on our drive back from Womad. Paul stops the car, pulling over on a country road, miles from anywhere. Yes, both biopsies are melanoma. One in situ, one showing signs of spread to other tissues.

Oh.

I think of the cancer swimming through my body and rubbing its hands with glee whilst I'd been dancing around and feeding it alcohol and other goodies.

The eloquent surgeon talks to the back of my head as he waits for the local anaesthetic to take effect. Tomato plants that line his sunny windowsills, his children's damp swimming things; their warm stench as pungent as cat urine, left to mature in his brand-new car. I tell him about yoga and breath. And the relationship between cancer and stress. I'm genuinely surprised that he doesn't know this.

I start to feel woozy. Achy. Fatigued.

He says, 'Not long now' more than once.

When he's finished, he says I can get up, but I wonder how to move. Using my tummy as a place to swivel, I look for the floor with my dangling legs. My flexibility is gone. I am sewed, ramrod straight.

He takes off his mask and his glasses and puts them on the operating table. The nurse stands the other side of me, and I am between them as they help me to stand up. I take a deep breath and some tears spill over. My cold feet touch the tiled floor. The three of us huddle for a moment. Warmth. Medical smells. The fragrance of supermarket shampoo.

I nod, feign a smile release my arms.

I say thank you politely. The feelings of humbling, convulsive gratitude will hit me in three days' time.

I get dressed, slowly, gingerly, then shuffle to the waiting room. Paul puts down what he's reading, his face grey and pasty. There's no-one else there. It's an office after hours. Just fluorescent lights and untidy stacks of magazines.

'I was worried,' he says, looking at me and the clock. It's ten past six. The streetlights aren't on yet, but the sky is turning pink.

The letter in the cucumbers

Girls' Hostel, September 1944

Joyce and Mavis are washing up. There's noisy chatter, loud laughs, and the clanking of pans. I grab Dad's letter wedged between a couple of cucumbers and sit down with Beryl on the old green sofa. My baby has a bit of dried potato on her face – Mavis let her have some. Sucked it off her like a little piglet. She's got it all over her chops and looks like a right urchin. Beryl puts her fingers in my hair now. I let her so I can read in peace.

Dear Muriel,

Here are some bits from my garden for you. I hope you can use all the tomatoes, which I'm glad I picked before we were bombed out. The side of the house is gone, and the garden's wrecked. Tangles of beans and tomatoes plants strewn and covered in debris.

Lucky we were all in the shelter. The bomb shook the earth – it was so loud. Millie covered her head and started crying and so did the kids.

In the morning, we all climbed out and were covered in dust – eyes, hair clothes. Fagin's boys I said to Millie.

Anyway, Mum and Dad in Factory Road have taken us all in. It's going to be a squeeze, but at least we have a roof over our heads. I hope little Beryl is doing well. I'll come and see you again.

Love, Dad.

Beryl's pulling and sucking my hair as I put the letter to one side.

Mavis wanders over, tea towel in hand drying up a pan. 'Found your letter then,' she says. Beside me on the couch, it's only a little bit crumpled.

Mavis hums as she stirs the porridge and bustles around the kitchen but we all know that this is the last time. Joyce and I sit at the table, bags packed. My stomach is churning over and over and I don't feel hungry. I can feel Joyce looking at me as I think about the first day. The nappy flags, Mavis, and her pep-talks about gentleman callers.

Mavis rustles over and puts steaming bowls of porridge in front of us. 'There's plenty more if you want it,' she says, not looking up. She goes back to the kitchen; I hear the back door close behind her.

'It's freezing out, what's she thinking?' says Joyce, picking up her spoon.

I leave me breakfast and go to the window, pulling the kitchen nets to one side. Mavis is on the back step, face in her hands. Her skirt is hitched up to her knees showing her dark-stockinged legs and worn black shoes. My stomach turns some more, and I wonder if Mavis still has a mum.

Back at the table, the surface of the porridge has started to seal over like skin.

Joyce pushes a jar towards me. 'Jam will make all the difference,' she says.

I smile, open the lid and dig a trench in my bowl and spoon some in – a strawberry scar.

When Mavis comes back in, she's singing again, and bustling about with what sounds like greaseproof paper. She comes back to the table and plonks down a heavy disc of a thing, wrapped in muslin with a big knot at the top.

'Can't have you both going hungry,' she says, arranging the knot on the top of the thing like she's tidying its hair. 'Made you a cake, girls. Fruit cake,' and with a laugh adds, 'hope you can carry it!'

Her laugh turns to huge, convulsive sobs. She cries, gulps and sniffs. Then Beryl starts. It was chaos the day I arrived and its chaos now.

Joyce stands up and gives her a hug. I watch Mavis; her body shakes as she sniffs and dribbles into Joyce's hair.

Someone knocks at the front door – Sandra, I'm guessing, come to take us to Factory Road. I look round at the burgundy sofa, the net curtains, Jesus hanging on the wall and back to my plate of porridge, a smear of jam running though it like a gash. A moth totters along my spoon, eyeing it up as its next meal, I reckon. I usually rescue any creature going, but today I leave it alone.

'Muriel, get the door, would you?' Joyce mouths and points, patting the wide swath of Mavis's back.

The moth flies away; it doesn't need rescuing.

Cake at Factory Road

Factory Road, Hornchurch September 1944

The houses in Factory Road are two lines that face each other. All squashed in nice and tight. The road runs down the middle like that hospital ward they wheeled me down. I hope there'll be no name calling here. Joyce's mum, tall and wearing an apron, is at the door when we arrive, and I sense the street is watching us too. There are three children by the gate, two of them on trikes and one leaning against the low wall. The step is painted an orangey-red and it's gleaming.

'In you come, in you come.' Joyce's mum bundles us through like she's saving a couple of orphans from the storm.

'Albert. Albert!'

No hall – the door opens straight into the living room where a man in an armchair holds a newspaper. I can't see his face, just his thinning grey hair neatly combed.

'Help the girls with their things, Albert.' Joyce's mum looks over at him, shakes her head. 'We had it all planned. Sorry about this Muriel.'

I can't see anything to be sorry about.

Albert does no such thing. Instead, he places his paper on the floor and walks over to greet us. 'Hello Joyce, dear.' The lines around his pale blue eyes crinkle as he smiles. They're so light, like a husky dog. 'And you must be Muriel. And little Beryl?' He takes her hand in his and shakes it up and down a couple of times.

We wave Sandra off and I close the front door; our bags make an island in the middle of the room, and we sit down on the chunky two-seater. It matches Albert's armchair – toffee

brown, like the front step. The fire, with a mantel over, is opposite us and the radio is beside Albert's chair, perched on a cluttered shelf in an alcove.

Joyce's mum has gone. To the kitchen, I suppose.

Albert's poised to sit down again. He leans forward, pulls at the fabric of his trousers, revealing white skin above his navy socks, and lowers himself with a sigh.

'Your mother's a lot better, but she still gets tired,' Albert offers, picking up his paper again as the sound of water running flows from the kitchen.

The cake's knotted muslin ears poke out from our mountain of bags. With Beryl on my hip, I kneel down, excavate it and take it through to the kitchen; she's doing her best to grab hold.

At the back of the house the kitchen is dark after the sunny front room. The kettle's on the stove and Joyce's mum is arranging tea things on a tray. Her dark hair is short, cut around her ears, and the strings of her apron form a perfect bow from behind.

'I thought you might like this.' I put the cake down on the counter.

When she turns to me her face is flushed and she drops a teaspoon which falls to the floor.

'Go and sit down dear,' she says bending down picking up the spoon and dropping it in the sink. 'I can manage.' She wipes her eyes with the back of one hand, her gaze fixed on the slippery spoon; the second person to cry in the presence of this ruddy cake today.

'What's the matter? Can I help you with anything?' I take step towards her, and Beryl grabs hold of her sleeve. She's wearing a handknitted cardy the colour of mustard.

‘I try so hard. I want everything to be nice,’ she says, unpicking Beryl’s fingers from her sleeve. ‘I’m exhausted.’

I don’t say anything. She looks tired. Her skin’s pale and she’s very slim. Not that it’s easy to grow fat on these rations.

‘I’m sorry Muriel. Here’s me prattling on about my worries and here’s you with a baby and all—’

‘Oh, I cry too.’ I don’t know what to call her. I don’t even know her name. ‘Over lots of things.’ Beryl reaches out again. Joyce’s mum faces her this time then wipes her hands on her apron, even though they’re not wet.

‘Everything will be all right again when the war’s over.’ She smiles. ‘Oh, what’s this?’ She points at the cake.

I begin to unwrap the muslin and the smell of moist fruit unfolds with it.

Will everything be all right when the war’s over? Maybe the future is just a place lined up with more problems for us to face. But one thing I do know is that I’m going to have a slice of cake, and no bugger’s going to stop me.

The house is small compared with where we’ve come from. Two up two down with Maggie and Albert having the front bedroom that looks over the street. The bedroom for me and Joyce is at the top of the stairs and gets less sun. It’s narrow with a small square window at the far end which has a pretty net curtain that billows up in the breeze. It gets smothered every night by an ugly old black one though.

I pull the nets to one side to get a better look at the back yard, which is joined to all the others in the street like sand-coloured puzzle pieces. Beyond the yard there's a grassy patch of land with rubbish left lying about. I spot an old bathtub, a pair of Wellington boots and a child's rusty trike. There are large trees beyond, losing their leaves but still noble. Past them are some buildings and a scruffy patch in the distance. The smell of polish collides with the waft of breakfast toast as Beryl wriggles on my hip.

'Ready for your tour?' Joyce is at the bedroom door.

'Aren't you going to lecture me about gentleman callers first?' I ask.

She elbows me in the ribs, laughing.

I follow her down the stairs. As we pass the front room, Albert's in his chair with the paper. The breakfast dishes are neatly stacked on the drying rack and the surfaces are clear. The room pausing between meals.

Joyce leads me out the backdoor into the yard, then through a gate. The path beyond snakes towards the grass and is longer the further we get. We reach a line of trees, then the path gets steeper.

'This is what you couldn't see from the window.' Joyce takes off her shoes and begins to walk down the bank towards the stream at the bottom.

I listen to the sound of the water and watch the light glint off it. Joyce is already paddling. The moving stream laps round her ankles as she wades to the other side and sits on the opposite bank facing me.

I take my shoes off too. There's something about the coolness that calms me. I stand for a moment, then sit and face her. Beryl squirms on my lap. I take off her socks and dip her feet in. She lifts them up and I cuddle her to me.

‘Doesn’t this feel good?’ I say to Beryl, touching cool, damp feet. I let them rest against my hand, then I splash some water onto my face. Leaves and a few twigs float past and there’s the sound of children’s laughter from somewhere further down. ‘I could stay here all day.’

‘I used to when I was little,’ says Joyce leaning back she brings her feet to the surface as the water gushes ‘round them. ‘Mum would come down here looking for me, but she didn’t stop and play.’

‘Is your mum alright?’ I ask. ‘She seems pretty tense.’ I say remembering her tears earlier.

‘She’s like a coiled spring. Can’t seem to relax. And this bloody war can’t help.’ Joyce looks up, back toward the house.

I don’t tell Joyce about her mum crying in the kitchen but sounds like she knows what her Mum’s like better than I do. We watch the stream; the flotsam and jetsam that float by. A beetle goes past on a leaf. It walks about from one end to the other, and back again. Surveying its whole world.

Maggie's wicker basket

Factory Road, December 1944

When Joyce's aunty knocks at the door there are prickles of sweat on my neck. Ivy trudges up the front steps, and once Joyce closes the door behind her the stale smell of old lady cardy wafts along the hall. Her sandy hair – short and thinning – was likely redder in her youth, and the downy hairs on her face are smothered in face powder. We had talked about her minding the babies, but now she's here I'm thinking better of it.

Maggie's made lunch; sandwiches double wrapped – first in greaseproof, then with a red checked tea towel for good measure. A flask keeps them company in her square wicker basket.

'Aren't we just working for half a day?' I ask.

'I like to be prepared,' Maggie says, checking her appearance in the hall mirror. She wears face powder too and I catch a whiff of her minty breath as she wipes a smudge of lipstick from her tooth.

There's sweat on my palms as I pass Beryl to Ivy. My baby's face is blank, but she doesn't cry.

Out in the street, she holds Beryl up to the window and I shiver in the winter chill. The last of the leaves tumble along in the gutter, chaperoning the sounds of our clip-clopping shoes and the prim creak of Maggie's wicker basket.

As we approach, the factory's metal gates are wide open and fixed to a brick wall on either side. Chatty groups of people walk in together and bicycles scoot past. A young man hops flamboyantly off his black-framed bicycle, then wheels it towards the racks by factory's

entrance. When he sees us, he jams its front wheel into the rack and takes off the flat cap he's wearing.

'Muriel is that you?' he says, squinting into the low sunlight. 'It's me, David. From the station.'

'David, hello! Yes, it is me. Oh, I'm so happy to see you! What are you doing here?' People are milling past me like I'm not even there. I don't wait for him to reply. 'Look, I'd better go – it's my first day.'

Maggie walks right past him, chin in the air; her only response is the squeak of her basket.

'Good luck!' he says, 'I'm happy to see you too.'

I catch up with Maggie and Joyce, then look back over my shoulder at him. He bows, brown cap in his right hand. I giggle, noticing that he's still wearing his bicycle clips.

We don't get issued overalls like the men. We get aprons and not new ones neither. Mine could stand up by itself it's so old and stiff. And it's too long. It rustles against me old lace-up shoes as I walk into the factory proper.

The noise! I cover my ears, but it makes no difference. Joyce and I shuffle along behind a stout woman called Mrs Shepherd who keeps up a fair old pace. The factory's ceiling is high and there are grubby little windows right at the top. Shafts of light stream down from each one, making squares on the floor. We pass rows of what look like cement mixers, with all sorts of buttons of rolling around inside. Despite the din, I want to slow down and have a good look at all this, but I keep Mrs Shepherd in sight.

I don't like the smell of the place neither. Exhaust fumes and a hot plastic. We dodge men wheeling rattling trolleys stacked with boxes, and I narrowly miss colliding with an old man wheeling a wheelbarrow that's full of dark brown buttons. There'll be no bloody use on his garden.

Mrs Shepherd leads us to a couple of empty stools beside a moving conveyor that's chock full of buttons – big dark brown ones – and gestures to us to sit down. We have a bucket between us, and it's our job to pick out the duds. She picks out a few to show us – ones that are broken or have chips or rough edges – then leaves us to it.

The belt moves slowly, but it's overflowing with the buttons. Some spill over onto the floor, but we're told to leave those alone. A few months ago, a young woman crouched down underneath to have a clean-up. Her hair got caught between the conveyor and the roller and the bloody thing scalped her. Bashed the side of her face too. She works in the canteen now and her hands shake when she pours the tea.

It's hard to see – there's only the light from those dirty high windows – and the buttons are dark. Easier to knit socks for the troops during an air raid, but doing my bit for our lads keeps me going.

Maggie comes and finds us. She points at her watch and waves us to her. I wriggle off my wooden stool that's cracked on the surface. My arms ache, I'm thirsty and I'm so happy to be following Joyce to the canteen. The three of us sit down at a square table with a window that we can see out of. There are the metal gates we came in by, the bicycle rack and people walking past. My ears are ringing from the noise.

Joyce unwraps the sandwiches and sets them in the middle of the table. The other workers chat to each other, wandering around with trays of food from the counter and tea the colour of the Thames in plain cups and saucers. Outside, the bicycle clips guy is having a smoke, and talking and laughing with a soldier. Joyce reaches for the flask then she sees them too and freezes. Just stares. The canteen seems even noisier with Joyce not speaking.

‘Look at the state of my hands,’ says Maggie turning her palms to one side then the other. ‘Excuse me girls.’

She pulls back her chair, which scrapes across the floor, and wanders off.

‘It’s him, Muriel,’ she says, pointing outside.

I get a whiff of the pale fishpaste sandwiches exposed in front of us. Joyce stands to untie her apron and dumps it on the table like an old rag.

Her empty chair is skew whiff framed by a line of workers queuing up with trays at the counter. The young woman with the bruised face looks at the line, and tucks imaginary hair behind her left ear as steam floats from the spout of the weighty tea pot.

An easy first pinch

Preston, July 1992

On the factory floor, the three of us stand 'round scrutinising a pillar drill; a grease-covered industrial specimen. I'm happy that someone's cleaned away the blood and hair from the spindle. I'm nauseous because I'm pregnant; I don't know this yet. The air is an oily haze that tastes of metal. As I breathe, I will my tiny nostril hairs to filter out every grimy particle.

'How's Sally?' I ask the supervisor, glancing at Tom. It's his first accident; his hands shake as he makes a sketch of the drill in his notebook. It might be July, but he's wearing an anorak and his face is flushed.

Solo for my first investigation, I remember fumbling with my tape measure and studiously taking photos as the factory manager looked on. I saw him glance at the wall clock more than once. A sewing machinist pricked her finger on a sewing needle whilst making curtains. Would a male inspector have been sent to this one? I consider writing 'the machinist's injury resulted in a hundred years' slumber' in my report to see if my boss even reads it.

'She's back at work,' the supervisor replies. It's noisy but I can hear him if I really concentrate.

'Such pretty long hair she had too,' he adds, hands slotted neatly into his pockets of his work-issue coat the colour of hessian. His face is blank, and acne scarred.

'We'd like to see her,' I say.

He nods in response. 'Shall I go and get her now? Or wait till your boss is finished?'

The Page 3 wall calendar flaps in the draft of a passing forklift truck. The month of July shows the profile of a blond topless woman wearing magenta lipstick and holding a yellow beach ball. Her rose-pink bikini bottoms are skimpy and high cut.

‘Now, please. And we’ll need a quiet office.’ Before he turns to go, I say, ‘He’s not my boss.’

Tom is a trainee inspector, but I don’t share this. He’s not landing a 747 or conducting emergency surgery, but no-one likes to think they are being practiced on.

‘An easy first pinch for Tom’, my actual boss had said to me in the office, handing over the accident report. The underarms of his white shirt were pooled with sweat. Pinch? I hated the term. Dated, blokey slang.

Of the six pillar drills standing to attention on individual bases, four are unfenced. The remaining two have guards that hang open like the doors of budgie cages, their spindles glinting beneath. I spot some broken bits of Perspex on the floor and gesture to Tom. He wrestles his camera from his pocket to capture the evidence as the supervisor returns with Sally.

She’s nineteen and wears a close-fitting brown beanie. Short, scanty strands of sulphur-yellow hair poke out from beneath it, feathering her forehead. I think of acorns and newly hatched chicks.

We borrow a sparse room containing the minimum of furniture. Two chairs with metal legs. One table. No windows. Designed for interviews and intimidation. Abandoned, a peace lily sits in the corner; it’s one white flower brown and shrivelled. As I close the door to the din of the factory there’s a hush, which magnifies the sound of rustling papers. Tom is

ferreting through his case hunting for his statement pad. We'd talked it through, he'd watched me. Now it's his turn.

'Am I in trouble?' The young woman sits on her hands. 'It was an accident. I didn't know what I was doing. Not working on one of those things again. They've got me on a glue gun now and that stinks to high heaven—'

'You're not in trouble,' I interrupt her as Tom finds a pen and takes his jacket off at last. 'Tom here's going to take a statement from you,' I tell her. Her eyes widen. 'It's not like the police. It's different, it's called a witness statement.'

She finds one of her remaining pieces of hair from the back of her beanie and begins to twiddle it, round and round her index finger.

'Tom, are you ok to take it from here?' I ask.

He nods, at little too enthusiastically. His face is still red and haloed with his soft gingery hair.

'I'll be back in about twenty minutes,' I say leaving him to it.

I wander off to find the canteen. It's empty apart from a couple of the kitchen staff chatting at one of the tables before the lunchtime influx. They both stub out their cigarettes as I arrive and blow smoke as they go back to the counter. They wear aprons over white coats and their hair is folded in hairnets, which rest against their necks like sleeping hamsters.

Outside a rusted bicycle stand leans against a skip and a couple walk past the window. Another whiff of cigarette smoke.

I unpack my white bread sandwiches from their tinfoil jacket and take a bite. My unwashed hands are grimy.

When I return to the windowless room, Sally has gone and Tom is packing up, putting the signed statement into his case.

‘There’s a canteen here,’ I suggest.

‘No, let’s go to the Acapulco,’ he replies.

Our favourite haunt; a cheap everything-and-chips type of café on Eldon Street. Posters of the ‘real’ Acapulco – high-rise hotels, sun-drenched beaches, women in bikinis holding drinks adorned with mini umbrellas – line the walls. The decaying remains of one of Preston’s cotton old mills are right opposite. Who doesn’t love chips and incongruity? Plus, our four pounds fifteen pence lunch allowance goes a long way here.

Fishpaste and fury

Lacrinoids, Ardley Green, Hornchurch, December 1944

When Maggie comes back, she sees the empty chair then looks out of the window. Joyce holds hands with the man in uniform; they look happy.

‘Will she never learn.’ Maggie’s question, huffed from her fixed mouth, isn’t designed to be answered. ‘And slide those sandwiches away from me Muriel, would you? I don’t want to be breathing in the smell of fishpaste at a time like this.’

I do as she says, pulling the checkered tea towel towards me and wondering how much difference it will make. Outside, it’s sunny. Joyce and the man who I assume is ‘the American’ laugh and talk. He puts his arm around her and kisses the top of her head.

‘Tea is what I need,’ says Maggie, unscrewing the lid of the Thermos. ‘A cup dear, a proper cup,’ she interrupts my gazing, ‘Would you mind?’

I saunter to the counter, take a cup and saucer and a teaspoon for good measure. My apron, which grazes the tops of my lace-up shoes, rustles as I walk.

When I put them down on the table Maggie thanks me, then begins to curse the lack of sugar.

As they stand talking on the pavement, the American takes Joyce’s hand, lifts it and spins her ‘round like a top. Her hair spills out behind her and a blush of joy flushes through her face.

Maggie stirs her tea with the vigour only sugarless fury could induce, taps the spoon on the side of her cup and drops it onto her saucer. I pick up a fishpaste sandwich. The girl with the torn-out hair catches my eye as she pours tea into plain white cups, her hands shaking.

American Spin

Netherlands Society Hall Rotorua, 2015

I speed across town with my large dog riding shotgun, her jowly face squashed against the passenger side window. When her hind legs slip off the seat and wedge against the gear stick, I give her a shove and say, ‘move it, dog.’ She turns to face me as I change gear, doggy slobber dribbling from her chops slides down my arm. Yuck! I wipe it best I can, but there’s still some left in the furrow of my scar.

Parking up late, I scour the back seat for my dancing shoes. No sign. I hurry into the hall without them, my drooling chaperone’s doleful eyes watch me go. I’m wearing my new fifties-style op shop dress. It’s white, overgrown with blue and green flowers and it’s too big; floral straps take it in turns to slip gracelessly from each shoulder.

There are a set of heavy red curtains at the back of the room with a polished wooden dancefloor in front. Scurrying children race between chairs, and two lines of dancers – a gaggle of women facing an assortment of men – are in full swing. Face flushed, I kick off my shoes and sidle into line barefoot, hoicking up the left strap of my dress.

The teacher, Justin — a young Brian Adams type, slender with fair hair and a bit of rock n roll about him — stands with the men teaching the ‘basic’ step. This consists of stepping from side to side, followed by a step to the rear. Dad dancing. Basically. If you really get into it, dad dancing plus a curtsy at the end.

The women mirror him: right-tap-left-tap-back-step. We’re shoulder to shoulder, pretty much in sync. The men, of varying heights, knock against each other’s shoulders, beads of concentration shining on their foreheads. I picture the jostling playing cards in *Alice in Wonderland*.

‘Keep it going!’ says Justin the upbeat teacher, as the men mouth the left-tap-right-tap chant and stare at their feet. He dashes to the back of the hall, narrowly missing a child who ricochets across his path. Finding a remote control on the stage just under the hem of the red curtains, he points it and says, ‘This’ll make it easier,’ as music floods the hall. ‘In time!’ he adds, walking back.

It doesn’t make it easier for the men. Their shoulder bumping continues as a boy wearing a Spiderman tee-shirt scoots through the no man’s land of our two lines, then turns and stares back at us. He leans against a poster of a woman in Dutch national costume, its corners curling away from the wall.

Neil Sedaka sings, ‘Tra, la, la, la, la, la, la, la, la, Happy Birthday sweet sixteen.’

The Dutch poster woman wears a Volendam hat, pink lipstick, and holds a yellow wheel of Gouda cheese, big as a beach ball. Justin ratchets up the volume on trilling Neil Sedaka. Like somehow, it’s going to help.

‘Partner up, partner up!’ Justin stands between our two lines and gestures enthusiastically. A rock n roll flight attendant. The men on the frontline are tentative; ready to cross. Superman boy is picking at the poster of the woman holding the cheese. It is next to the emergency exit.

Meandering – Dad’s Army-style – a man weaves his way across and dances in front of me. He has light curly hair and teeth so white that I wonder if they’re his own. He holds out his hands. I take them and continue to step from side to side as Neil Sedaka rhymes teenage dream with the sweet sixteen.

The man says, ‘Hi, I’m John.’

‘Hello John, I’m Kim,’ I say, ‘And I like your shirt.’ Which I do. It is white, short-sleeved and has purple animals running across it that I think are giraffes.

As John speaks, he’s out of step with the music. I mirror him so we are both are and pull up the right strap of my dress.

‘I’m from California,’ he tells me, ‘Been here since 2005.’

‘Me too! Been here since 2005, that is. I’m from England; not California.’ Oh no. I’m stating the bleeding obvious.

John smiles back at me. We are holding hands. Out of time. Together. Didn’t the Yanks invent rock n roll?

Frosty

Factory Road, December 1944

The walk home is frosty and I'm not talking about the weather. Maggie walks as fast as Mrs Shepherd, her basket squeaking huffily.

Maggie warns Joyce about the 'terrible things' that are likely to happen if she keeps on seeing 'that American'. Joyce doesn't say much and nor do I. I'm thinking about my baby, Auntie Ivy and her smelly old cardy. The wind is against us walking home and I walk with my head down against the chill, only looking up when I hear a man's voice call out my name.

'Muriel! It's so good to see you!' he says. Someone comes running from the other side of the road.

I forget about the wind as Dad holds his arms out to me. How long has it been since I've been held? My shoulders relax, tears gather at the rims of my eyes. His hair is greasy, and with my face pressed against his dark jacket I breathe in his tar smell.

'Come on Joyce,' says Maggie in a shrill tone.

Feasting on the touch of Dad's toasty arms, I'm happy to hear footsteps as Maggie and Joyce pitter-patter home without me. I keep my face squashed close. Eyes closed, I'm back in the kitchen sat with Doreen, then I'm sat out the front with the dead bird that he picks up by the legs and takes away from me.

He holds me and strokes my hair. Don't run away from me again, Dad. I need you. My tears are on his jacket.

He looks at my face he says, 'I thought you'd be pleased to see me.'

'It's not enough, Dad,' I cry.

I'm the one who runs away. Along the street, down the side alley and into the yard. Out through the back gate, past the old bath and the rusty trike. Sobbing and choking, I pull off my socks and shoes and stand in the stream. The water flows around each foot. I take a few steps. When I block its path, it goes around me. Without any fuss.

I watch and listen. Bend down, scoop up handfuls and splash my face. Some trickles down my front; some down my back. I stop crying and rinse my face again for good measure. I look at my socks and shoes on the bank and realise that my feet are cold.

I grieve for Mum. I grieve for Patricia. And I grieve for me.

I dry my face, dry my feet the best I can and go back into the house.

Beryl will be waiting.

The dog – the stream

Rotorua 2022

I wake early. Like my mum.

Every morning there's anxiety. Ripples of dread that lap over me, washing up unhelpful thoughts. Things I haven't done, that I should've done by now; commentary about my general inadequacy as a human. A woman in her fifties who sleeps with her dog. Doesn't work and doesn't particularly want to; the thought of it even brings unpleasant chills.

I am reading a biology book called *Why Zebras Don't Get Ulcers*. So now I know the name of the hormones that spurt from my pancreas every morning triggering my anxiety. I know too how these wreak havoc with my health. I'm not designed for chronic stress. I don't run it off across the savanna. I sit up in bed and worry.

So, extended breathing is my first tactic. In for four, out for eight. The bad hormones retreat, the thoughts quieten. I think of still water. My book confirms the ancient wisdom of yogic breathing – something about toning the vagus nerve. Sounds like the city in Nevada that's far from calming. The city I went to with the American.

My next mind hack involves me gathering the dog, a bag containing an old towel and my diving gloves and jumping into the car. Dusty heads to the backseat on her old towel and we drive to the Utuhina Stream. It meanders with the golf course on one side and the International Stadium on the other. I still wear sandals even though the morning grass is cold and wet on my feet. Dusty wanders and sniffs all manner of doggy smells as I walk behind her, listening to the stream, watching the birds, hearing the odd hail of 'four' from nearby golfers.

Dusty lumbers down the slope, plonks herself into the water and wades against the current, lapping away at the flow of water that swirls around her face. On the bank I take off my dress and add a pink swimming hat and my black diving gloves. My bikini is blue to match the temperature of the water.

My turn. The dog continues to wade and snuffle in the shallows, close to the edge. I tiptoe to find just the right spot then plunge in. Cold shock. Sharp breaths. The chill covers my whole body, but I stay submerged and breathe, knowing I'll come out the other side. I pinch my nose. Dunk my head in. The thrill. The dog's still padding around, ducking underneath twigs from a fallen branch. A fantail lands on an overhanging branch, just above us, chirping and wagging its tail.

Now, I feel amazing. I laugh soaking up the sensations of aliveness. My chattering mind is clear; I'm restored to factory settings.

When the dog starts to dig into the wet muddy riverbank I call her. We wade back and climb out. On the bank, I grab my towel, luxuriating in the early morning sunshine.

Last night I read about FOADs – fetal origins of adult disease which can be transmitted across generations. It's not shared genes, but shared environment, especially a baby's shared blood supply during gestation. I think of Mum – a swimming fetus growing inside Muriel. War. Loss. Flowing through Mum's veins too.

As my skin warms, I revel in the calmness. There's just me. Dog. And breath.

Last night talking to Mum, she said 'I used to hold down a job and now I sleep with the curtains open because I'm scared. Silly old biddy.' Hues of shame colour her words.

It's not your fault, Mum; it's not anyone's fault.

I want to hold all of it: all the pain and the hurt and the mess. Hold it all close. Accept it. Could I love it all, even? Like an old jumper that's worn and full of holes.

I get dressed. Slide my muddy wet feet back into my sandals and wander back to the car. Dusty clammers onto the backseat, old body soldiering on, and I make the most of my chilled, clear mind and get writing before the gremlins creep back in.

while you were out

Factory Road, December 1944

Ready to explain and apologise, I wander back inside. Maggie's in the kitchen, opening and closing cupboard doors. There's a pan on the stove, a chopping board on the worktop and a knife on top. No sign of Ivy or her woolly cardy.

'I've just made some tea, Muriel.' She nods towards the large brown tea pot. 'Help yourself.'

I thank her and take my cup into the front room. Albert sits playing with Beryl. His paper's spread out on the floor and he's holding her up, feet touching his knees, then flexing up. They both laugh when she does this.

'Here's your mummy,' he says, passing her to me.

It feels so good to be holding my baby again; I cuddle her close. She smells different and I don't like it. My stomach turns over and I feel stirred up. Tears aren't far away. I stand up to go as Maggie pokes her head round the door, holding a letter.

'This came for you, Muriel. Mavis dropped it round.' She passes it to me. 'Shame you missed her.'

Yes, it is. I thank her. I take Beryl and the letter upstairs; it's from the court.

In the back bedroom I share with Joyce, I can see the copse that hides the stream. At this time of day our room gets the sun. It shows up the dirty window – which the clean nets do a good job of hiding. I kick off my ugly black shoes and flop down on the single bed with Beryl. I'm still wearing socks – bet I got them muddy. A shaft of light strikes my baby's head. I stroke her fair hair, pull her in close and let her feed, the letter by my head on the pillow. Everything's warm as I smell Beryl's baby smell: milk, and yeast on baking day.

Then I'm churning inside again – it's the part of me that misses Patricia. The net curtain drifts up and down. I kiss Beryl's head and let my eyes close. Just for a minute.

Keen sandals

Netherlands Society Hall, Rotorua 2015

John notices I'm barefoot so he sits down and takes off his shoes. He is wearing Keen sandals. The type that has faux elasticised laces that runs up the middle. They are functional and ugly. Underneath he wears hiking socks – over-engineered for a dance class – that are the colour of uncooked biscuit dough.

We carry on dancing, him sliding around in his socks that are probably leaving an alpaca particularly cold, and me needing to slide more. When he tells me he's a scientist I'm not surprised. I decide to focus on the giraffe shirt and that he's made the effort to front up to a dance class. And that whatever he says sounds delectable in that Californian accent. Warm and buttery.

If I don't look at his feet, he's passably tasty.

Lashes and warm dough

Factory Road, September 1944

When I wake up Beryl is sleeping by my side. Her lips form a perfect cherub's bow and dainty lashes sweep upwards from her closed eyes. I touch her face. Like dough that's warm, anticipating the oven.

I kiss her on the forehead, then sit up and open the letter. As I pull it from the envelope something slips to the floor. Another piece of paper. A cheque. It's a bloody cheque. He's paid up.

I look at Beryl sleeping and whisper, 'Things are looking up for us.' I don't think she hears me, but I think she knows. Just shows what happens when you don't give up.

Part II

The pigeons and the carthorse

Brentwood Station, September 1943

It seems ages ago now when I first met Len, but it wasn't long at all really. I look back at my naïve younger self and wonder now if I'd have done things differently. Probably not. Besides, if it wasn't for Len, I wouldn't have Beryl. And I wouldn't trade her. Not for all the tea in China.

When a train pulls in at work, the lads have the doors open when it's still pulling in, and some of 'em start bloody jumping out. You think they'd want to look after themselves, but it don't look like it to me. Then there're all pushing and shoving each other, lighting up ciggies and bloody larking about.

When I was new, I tried to go along the platform and close the doors – that of course they left open – as soon as they got off. Nearly got knocked flying. Don't do that now, I just leave 'em to it.

I remember it was a Friday. They'd all gone and were walking up the hill to the barracks. I was about halfway along the train, slamming doors and checking each carriage as I went, when I heard footsteps from someone running up behind me. I turn 'round and it's one of the blokes running back. He's out of breath, puffing away, can hardly speak.

'Miss, miss!' he says, leaning over, hands on his knees puffing like a carthorse. 'Can you help me miss?'

He looks very smart in his uniform even though his hat's all skew whiff. He has dark hair, all slicked back and neat under his hat. A dark, orderly moustache too. A sheer film of perspiration covers his face. Nor sure how old he is. Older than me, that's for sure.

'I've lost my rations tin. Think I left it on the train,' he says.

I say he can walk along with me, and I get him to check inside, then close each door afterwards. It's saving me a job.

'Bet you find all sorts that gets left behind,' he says as he slams another door.

'Yes, mainly bags, sometimes letters and other bit of paper. Wallets,' I say. Some pigeons scatter from the platform in front of us as we walk down the train. 'I found a pair of boots once, army issue by the looks.'

'Oh, how queer,' he says, looking over his shoulders, to one side then the other. He checks his watch. 'I really must go.'

As I close the door and see the pigeons again. They've settled further up the platform getting closer to the bridge. 'I'll keep an eye out. I'm sure your rations tin will be here somewhere.' He grins at me, and says, 'I can't be getting into any more trouble,' and I'm sure his eyes flick me up and down.

Then, he goes running back along the platform towards the road and he's gone.

I keep going down the train, checking and slamming. The birds flutter up again with each slam. Jumpy things. Can't say I blame them; I'm a nervous wreck myself most of the time. I know I shouldn't, but I've started on the ciggies. Calms me down like nothing else.

Inside each door, I expect to find a rations tin, but I don't. I check the last carriage, the one right at the front closest to the engine. No sign. I do find a book though. Laying on the floor. Dusty and tatty. I pick it up and wander back down the platform.

Janice gives me a wave from outside our tearoom. Bet Charlie's already there with his feet up. I hope someone's put the heater on, even though it's next to useless in that big room, at least there's the hope of warming up.

Inside there's steam from the urn and the rustle of Charlie's paper. I rub me hands together, grateful that it's warmer here than on the platform. Janice passes me some tea and I put down the that book I found in the front carriage. Holding the cup with both hands I start to warm up.

'More lost property?' she asks. 'We could have a jumble sale with all the clobber those lads leave behind. Watches and wallets I can understand, but one boot, a grubby grey vest, and a pair of Y-fronts left in a train carriage all on the same day? I don't know.'

'No wonder the country's going broke,' Charlie pipes up as he shakes his paper straight in from of his face. Smoke from his ciggie swirls up from the headlines. What an old misery.

Janice is always nice. Never moans. Holding her cuppa, she tells me about her neighbour Sylvia whose daughter has taken to sitting under the staircase at home.

'She'd sit under there for hours and knit for the soldiers. Socks I think it was,' she says. 'Safe there at times like these. You would think.'

Janice puts cup her back into its saucer.

Charlie's hand reaches out from behind his paper in search of tea. Is that a rations tin next to his cup?

'Two nights ago, there was an air raid,' she tucks a stray curl behind her ear, 'Her house was hit.'

My stomach flips over. ‘Are they safe, Janice?’ I ask.

‘Poor Sylvia. I went out in my dressing gown and slippers. Found her standing there on the pavement, covered in dust — hair almost white with the stuff. It wasn’t easy to see the firemen’s hoses that were littered across the road, but I managed it, made my way through and brought her back to mine.’ Janice says as she collects the cups and takes them to the sink.

Charlie looks over his paper but doesn’t say anything.

‘What about her daughter?’ I say, following her. I pick up the tea towel with the Blackpool Tower on – pretty ribby, but it does the job.

Janice whispers, ‘She was under the staircase. Must’ve been knitting ‘cause when they found her—’ Janice stops washing the cups. Just stares into the sink. ‘It was the knitting needles that killed her.’

‘Now, what am I supposed to do with this ‘ere rations tin?’ Charlie’s put his paper down and is dangling the tin by its strap. ‘Don’t just leave stuff laying around for me to deal with, Janice, I’ve got work to do.’

Janice is stock still.

‘Give it me to me, Charlie,’ I walk towards him holding out my hand.

Janice is sobbing, with Fairy suds up to her elbows.

Bloody hell, Charlie – when he’s not grumbling, he’s upsetting people. I wish he’d just sod off.

When he closes the door behind him, Janice dries her hands and we both sit down.

‘At least she was helping,’ Janice says wiping tears with the back of her hand, ‘doing something useful.’

Helping? It was the helping that got her killed. I keep schtum as Janice goes back to the sink and pulls the plug out. The water makes that lewd sucking sound as the last swirl of dirty water drains away.

I pick up the tea towel and finish drying the cups. So bloody helpful.

I take the rations tin along with the book to the office and write it in today's lost property entries. Date. Quantity. Location. I don't know where Janice found the rations tin, and I'm not of a mind to ask her right now. But I do know about the book I found – *Goodbye to all that* by Robert Graves. Must be a rebel, I reckon.

Bring a sweater

Leonardo's Italian Restaurant, Rotorua March 2015

For our first date, John books us two tables at the restaurant: one inside and one outside, after telling me in Californian to 'bring a sweater.' It's my first time at Leonardo's. A meal for two here costs a day's wages. I rarely eat out, let alone here.

The evening is warm, so we settle on the outside option where the smell of garlic and red wine pungency wafts from open windows. He pulls back my stool for me like you see men do in old movies. I climb up and am too far from the table. Which happens to be an actual barrel. When he walks back round to his side I climb off, pull the stool in closer and climb up again, trying to be subtle as I don't want to hurt his feelings. Inside, there are small round tables with red checkered tablecloths and the obligatory peeling poster of the Colosseum. (There's one of the Leaning Tower of Pisa in the toilets, next to the mirror).

I notice that John has exchanged his Keens for a pair of R M Williams. He wears dark jeans and his familiar giraffe shirt. I get to study the purple galloping creatures as John tells me about the process of making the Indonesian batik fabric, which I instantly forget.

Mostly, I feel wary. Like I am being interviewed by an authoritative man who is older than me, wealthier than me and is used to getting what he wants. I do enjoy the meal though; bruschetta, which he chooses for us both, pasta slathered in a tomato sauce and infused with the salty tang of generous amounts of garlic. I have chocolate gelato for dessert.

Feeling more relaxed by the soporific effects of the meal, I am enjoying being out with an attentive suitor on a Friday evening. Empty dishes cleared from the barrel top; John asks what I look for in a man. I have glimpses of myself perusing shelves of men, all pre-packaged for me like playthings, with different qualities listed. If John was a toy waiting to be chosen,

he'd be a Buzz Lightyear. But he'd be aching to be Woody. Relaxed. Easy going. Indeed, he's already wearing the boots.

I snap back. Onto my stool, which is by now starting to dig into the back of my legs. All I can come up with is kindness, which, pre-pandemic, isn't half as dull and over-used as it is now.

In response he says, 'I can do kindness.'

When he finds out I'm in my forties, he says it's a 'stretch goal' of his to date a woman so much younger than him. I'm not sure what a stretch goal is, a yoga term maybe? He pays the bill, and as the sky fades from red to darkness, we go for a walk across the village green towards the lake. Dignified black swans glide, necks erect and red beaks occasionally dipping into the water. On our way back to the John's car he takes my hand, which I neither like nor dislike. When Neil and I had gone for walks he'd stride off ahead, scolding me for walking too slowly and saying that I did it just to annoy him.

John drives me home in his grey Subaru Forester, which has light velour seats, clean mats, and a pile of CDs – none of which are familiar – stacked neatly under the radio. At home, he gets out quickly to walk 'round and open the passenger door for me.

He says, 'I've been well-trained.'

I let him kiss my cheek and thank him for a great evening. Back inside, I kick off my shoes, flop onto my comfy couch and google Indonesian batik and stretch goals.

The next day, John invites me to a salsa dancing festival, where he asks me about things that I'd still like to do in my life.

‘I’ve never been sailing,’ I say, ‘And I’d love to give it a try.’

‘That’s easy,’ he replies, ‘Let me take you out on my boat.’

We go sailing on Lake Rotoiti on a hot Saturday. There is no wind. I bring sandwiches that are soggy by midday, and we eat them in the middle of the calm lake. I wear a lifejacket. And sunscreen, where I can reach. When I get home, I notice a patch of sunburn in the centre of my back. John says he can see angel’s wings. Bless him. A moth’s more like.

On Sunday, John invites me round to his place for a meal with some American friends. His house is large and nestles at the edge of Lake Okareka. It doesn’t get much sun and there are cobwebs in the corners of the high, wooden ceilings. He cooks Mexican food, and there is apple pie for dessert, made by Sarah, a pre-school teacher from Santa Rosa. (Her husband Max works with John). She explains to the group that she mistook the sugar for salt and hopes that the pie will taste ok. We all eat it, and we all lie. We say, ‘This tastes fine,’ when it tastes like salty apple pie.

When his guests go home, John and I have sex on the floor of his lounge; he says it is the best sex he’s ever had. I’m left with carpet burns on both knees, but my sunburn’s unscathed.

I enjoy his infatuation. Vicariously. This is what ‘the real thing’ must be like.

Another soggy sarnie

Brentwood Station, September 1943

After Janice told me about Sylvia and her daughter; the day feels heavy. I didn't ask the girl's name. I imagine her as a fairy-tale character, with long hair like Rapunzel locked away in her cramped cupboard. A cupboard under the stairs is not a ruddy tower I know, but it's a prison of sorts. Maybe she'd hoped one of the soldiers would marry her? Receive the socks, then embark upon a knit-one-purl-one quest. He'd wrench open the awkward triangular door to her understairs dungeon and find her, waiting in a nest of army green 4 ply. She'd toss her number 9s aside, step past the ironing board and the piles of laundry and he'd take her away from all this.

Romance doesn't happen 'round here. I 'spose there must be nice men out there somewhere, but I'm wary. Don't trust the buggers. Even me own Dad gives me the slip now that wife number two's come along.

I certainly don't want to be acquired by no bloke. If there's any rescuing on the cards, I'll be bloody well saving myself.

The ration's tin soldier comes back at the end of the day when I'm getting ready to go home. He follows me into the office where I get his tin for him, from the lost property cupboard. Whistling, hands in his pockets, he has a good old poke round the room.

'You'll need to sign for it,' I tell him. I can be all proper at work – make sure things done right.

He comes up to the other side of the counter. I turn the book around to face him and pass him the pen. I hold it for a second longer than I really need to. He looks at me as I get a

waft of his moist, musky odour, layered over Lifebuoy soap. I let go of the pen and watch him sign. Fast. Flamboyant. Yet steady in his skin somehow, mid-to-late twenties, I guess. He loops a line under his name with a flourish. I notice little scribbles of dark hairs on the backs of his fingers – he catches me staring.

‘Don’t worry, I’ll give you back your pen,’ he says. This time, he keeps hold of it as I try to take it. I feel myself blushing and I let go.

A whistle sounds from out on the platform and a train begins to move, the force of the pistons slow at first, then steadily faster. Then there’s the huffing of the steam from the chimney. In here, there’s only the ticking of the mantel clock and the sound of my breath. My heart’s pounding in my ears. I hope he can’t bloody hear it.

‘Well, well, well,’ he says as he puts the pen on the counter and slides it towards me. ‘Looks like I might be coming here again.’

I’m burning up now. Hot and uncomfortable. There might be a counter between us but he’s too close for me.

‘I can be such a forgetful fellow,’ he says, and bold as brass gives me a wink as he swings the rations tin by the strap and walks away. He puts his hand on the door, then stops in his tracks and turns around.

‘Have you forgotten something?’ I ask. My mouth’s dry; I’m gasping for some water.

‘As a matter of fact, I have,’ he says as he turns around, strides towards the fireplace and sits himself down in a chair. It’s one of those square ones – a director’s chair with wooden armrests and a tan leather base and matching back. The leather’s sewn up with black thread. ‘I’ve forgotten my manners completely,’ he continues as he opens his rations tin which is perched on his lap.

Something smells fishy to me.

‘It’d be rude of me not to share my sandwiches with you. You’ve been so helpful,’ he says, picking up one and starting to eat.

Must be fishpaste. When I breathe it in, it gets into my veins; fury, with a hint of the sea, pumps ‘round my body. Who does he think he is? He holds out the open tin and offers me one. There’ll be all bloody soggy by now anyway. ‘You can’t eat in here. You have to go now,’ I say, he looks away as the door swings open.

‘Charlie!’ the man says as he closes up his tin and stands up, ‘I was wondering if I’d see you!’

‘What the hell are doing here, Len? Not keeping young Muriel here from her work, I hope?’ Charlie replies.

‘Muriel, eh?’ says Len, staring at me. He turns to Charlie. ‘Not at all,’ he says, ‘you know me, Charlie boy!’

There’re laughing now like I’m not even there, so I walk to the door; leave them to it.

‘Maybe I could buy you a sandwich one day? From the café here?’ It’s the man who I now knows called Len. ‘Don’t blame you for not wanting one of these soggy old sarnies.’ He’s being all nice now in front of Charlie.

I’m stood holding the door, feeling awkward and letting a draught in. I shrug. Then smile. Even though I don’t want to.

‘That’s right Muriel. Don’t have anything to do with him, love,’ says Charlie. ‘He’s too old for you and he’s nothing but trouble.’

Out on the platform, I can hear them both laughing inside the office. I wonder how they know each other. I'm glad to be outside again. In the fresh air. Away from the pair of 'em.

But walking home past the duck pond, Len's on my mind. I like that he seemed to like me – can't remember the last time anyone took an interest. Mum used to of course but our cuddles feel like a lifetime ago.

Len though, he's in the here and now. All playful and confident. And that glorious smell he has – warm earth in summer with a zing of lemon sherbets. Charlie said he's too old for me and nothing but trouble; but if he was on the shelf in a sweet shop, I'd gorge myself on the whole bloody jar.

More sandwiches, and Joyce and the American

Lacrinoid's, Ardley Green, December 1944

His six shillings a week starts to come regular. As it bloody well should. I still feel proud of myself when I think of it. What it took. Of waddling Ronnie. Getting me skirt stuck in the chair. Those steps and the red carpet. Chuffed it all paid off.

Nice having a bit of money coming in from the factory, even though I come out every day feeling like my head – my whole body, actually – is buzzing from the bloody noise. Things are going well with Ivy. Beryl smiles and reaches out her little arms when she arrives. I should feel glad. But I don't. Something turns over inside my stomach when I see them together cuddling and playing.

Last Friday when I came home there was Ivy, her knitting in a basket at the end of the sofa, with Beryl curled up asleep in her lap. She was rocking backwards and forwards and gently stroking her hair. My baby's booties weren't white like Patricia's, but I couldn't stop looking at those little feet, waiting for them to move to make sure she was still alive. How silly is that? My minds got this habit of thinking about bad things. It does it a lot, which is not bloody surprising.

David and I chat pretty much every day now. He's taken to sitting with the three of us all at lunchtime. If Joyce's American is there, we sit on a table by ourselves and wave out the canteen window at the pair of them. I don't know what the hell Joyce is up to, but Maggie doesn't like it. Tuts and gets all huffy. Besides, it's bloody cold now. Christmas will be here before we know it and still, she stands out there with him, giggling and larking about – and shivering 'cause she's not wearing enough clothes.

Joyce doesn't tell me much, but when she talks about him – Mitch, his name is – her face lights up like a candle on a Christmas tree. Says he's teaching her rock n roll steps. And

I say, what? On the pavement outside the soddin' factory. And she laughs as her face grows red as a beetroot.

'So, what you doing here?' I ask, 'Had enough of all that mail?'

'I wanted to learn a trade. I'm getting trained up as a mechanic, in the workshop here,' he replies.

I look at his hands, which I'm sure are clean, but are stained by oil and grease.

'That's Plan B, at any rate,' he says, taking another bite of his sandwich. 'Dad says getting a trade under my belt is never a waste. Something I can always fall back on.'

'Sounds like he's got his head screwed on, your dad.'

'Yeah, but is he happy? Spends all day changing taps and unblocking people's toilets. What kind of life is that?'

'What your Plan A then?' I ask, trying not to think about blocked toilets with a Marmite sandwich in my hands.

'Well, I'm not sticking around here after the war,' he says. 'I want to do something with my life. Get into films maybe.'

I think about his flamboyant bow. Yes, I could imagine him doing that. When all this is over.

'I'll come and see you at the Odeon when you're on the big screen,' I say.

He's still chewing away and looks up from his lunch. 'You serious? You really think I could?' I have one of those time-freeze moments. He looks so young. Excited. Full of life. Wish I could capture it. Put it in a bottle that they do with those model ships.

‘Course you could. And when I come and see you, I won’t be sitting in the cheap seats neither,’ I say.

‘No grease under my fingernails either,’ he says. ‘On the big screen I’ll be wearing my finest threads.’ He stands up, brushes imaginary dust from each of his shoulders in turn, then does one of his bows.

I feel tender. Here’s David working in the factory workshop, wanting to be the best that he can be. My heart feels like it’s getting bigger and bigger. I like being around him.

I look down at the table, then out the window at Joyce and her American. ‘I wonder if she’ll be hanging around here after the war,’ I muse, ‘Or if she’ll move to America with him?’

Outside the window, Joyce leans in close to Mitch. He wraps his big coat around them both and she kisses him. In broad daylight. In the middle of the pavement. I glance up and David’s eyes are on mine. We both look away and I feel myself going scarlet.

when I'm cleaning windows

Brentwood Station, October 1943

Isn't long before Len comes back. Just before lunch on a Wednesday. I'm in the ticket booth, standing on a stool, cleaning the glass with a bit of vinegar, and scrunched-up newspaper. I'm hungry and thinking about fish and chips rather than the boring lunch I've got. I don't notice him straight away.

'Hello again,' he says. Must've been standing there looking at me. How embarrassing. I climb down from the stool, hot from cleaning the glass and I chuck the piece of newspaper in the bin. My hands are covered in print. Filthy.

Len shakes his head from side to side and tuts. 'Now, I can't take you out to lunch with hands like that.' He takes both my hands in his and turns them over, inspecting them.

I snatch them away.

'Sorry, just having a bit of fun. You do like to have fun, don't you Muriel?'

There's something about the way he says it. I feel tingles — scaredness and excitement. There's something about Len that's like watching a bloody air raid.

'Course I like to have fun!' I say, 'but you're being cheeky touching my hands like that. I hardly know you.'

He smirks, then asks me if I'm hungry.

'Yes, I'm starving,' I say.

'Then wash those filthy hands and let's get out of here,' he replies, looking at his watch.

'Where are we going?'

‘To the chippy, that’s where,’ he says.

I forget his cheekiness. This is a fun idea and I really want to go. I can’t help smiling. I dash off to wash my hands and tell Janice that I’m going out to lunch.

I feel special queuing up in the chip shop with him. When it’s our turn he’s confident as he points, orders, and pays. There’s a bit of banter with the bloke serving; they agree that the country would give up the fight tomorrow if they rationed fish and chips. You men might: us women would be just fine if we had to go without.

The woman standing behind us wears an orange headscarf and a brown and white checked coat that looks too warm for her. She fans herself with her fingers, raw and chapped from too much washing up. There’s face powder on her cheeks, and her nose – which is probably pointier than she’d like – is red and shiny. I reckon she’d trudge on just the same without her fry-up.

The counter comes up to my chin. I curl the ends of my fingers over the edge and lean, thinking of big jars of pickled eggs that are long gone. The bloke cooking plunges a whole load of chips into the oil. I love the hisses, splutters, and crackles, then the steady bubbling as the oil rages away. Reminds me of a storm; when the rain’s so fierce that drops rebound as soon as they hit the dirt.

When he scoops out the chips and lays the fish on top I breathe in the warm, oily smell and my stomach gurgles. Then he shakes salt and vinegar over the top with such gusto it’s like I’m watching a magic show.

Len takes the hot parcel and gives it to me.

‘Come on you,’ he says.

Come on 'you'. I'm steaming – with hunger and irritation. I open the shop's door, and fresh air whirls in. The bell tinkles, its brass mouth woven thick with spider's webs, cushioning its wobbly yellow tooth.

'Don't call me you. My name's Muriel.' I'm all jittery inside, but I say it anyway.

He says, 'Sorry Muriel,' and that's the end of it.

We cross the road and head for the wooden bench close to the duck pond. A flock of ducks with amber eyes shuffle towards us, their skinny carrot legs waddling nineteen to the dozen. Len unwraps the hot parcel in the space between us, and I breathe in its salt and vinegar fumes.

'Dig in,' he says, and we both eat straight from the paper. The chips are so hot that I puff on them like a train.

'Right little urchin,' he says smiling.

'And so, what if I am?' I'm more confident now, being away from work with no-one else around. Apart from the ducks, that is. They're really close to our feet, but neither of us shoo them. There are sparrows too, and a few pigeons pecking and scratching on the grass.

'I like that about you, Muriel,' he says, 'That you speak your mind – don't mince your words.'

Well, I'm proper blushing now 'cause most of the time, I don't think I do speak my mind. I'm chuffed he's taking some notice of me – often, I feel invisible. I pick up a piece of fish, its white flesh slippery in my fingers and give it a good blow.

'Well, I've been left to me own devices a lot.' I say, 'Had a lot of practice of just having to get on with it, if you get my drift.'

‘That sounds familiar,’ he says, looking towards the pond.

Some of the ducks wander off, but there are still three or four milling around, hoping for a bite. Neither of us speaks. I look at the water, the different birds and then back to us.

‘Thanks Muriel, this feels special.’ He takes my hand, even though it’s all greasy, and gives it a squeeze.

I try to let the tender feelings soak in, but I feel shy and take my hand away. Then I grab a couple more chips and chuck them to the ducks.

He walks with me back to work, and I ask him how he knows Charlie.

‘From football. Saturday afternoons,’ he says.

‘But there’s no football.’ I’m confused.

‘No club football. That’s why our afternoon run-arounds matter more than ever. It’s all low-key, but good for the blokes. Helps let off a bit of steam, I reckon.’

We’re nearly back at the station.

‘You should come one day,’ he suggests. ‘We have tea and a bit of something after.’

‘Thanks, I’ll think about it.’

‘It might be fun, Muriel,’ he says.

‘I said I’ll think about it,’ I say. But I’m smiling as I say it. Think about it? I not going to think about it. I’m bloody going.

I feel light all afternoon, even though it’s clouded up and looks like it’s going to bucket down, just when I’m walking home. Bet those ducks won’t mind.

Noisy, boring and normal

Lacrinoid's, Ardley Green, December 1944

Life's starting to feel a bit boring and normal. And I like it. The six shillings from Len comes in regular as clockwork; and of course, I have money from me job at the factory. Handy, as it's only a few weeks till Christmas. Joyce is still gadding about with her American outside the factory, both wrapped up in coats and hats now. Maggie still gets all snippy when she sees them, so no change there, neither.

And there's Ivy with her face powder and cardies, who comes 'round of a morning to mind the babies when me Joyce and Maggie head off to work. Sometimes a bombed-out house makes a right old mess and there are people's personal things littered on the street. One day, I walk past a calendar with birthdays circled in red ink, flapping about on the pavement. There's a smashed jug too, with it's pretty beaded cover next to it getting all dirty. I pick it up and stuff it in me pocket. Maggie tuts at me, but I don't care. It's too nice to just step over.

Work might be noisy and boring, but I look forward to going, mainly because of David. We sit together in the canteen and laugh and chat – sometimes before work as well as at lunchtime. I tell him things I don't tell anyone else – what I want to do after the war, how me and Beryl will get our own little house, how I'll get a better job, something I really like, not just sorting bloody buttons all day. My ideas change like the weather, but he doesn't mind. He smiles and tells me that I can do whatever I want.

It's early, and still cool in the canteen.

'It'll be Beryl's first Christmas,' says David, 'What you gonna get for her?'

The women behind the counter are talking, tying up their aprons. The young woman who had the accident tucks her fair hair into hairnet, switches on the oven and starts opening drawers in front of her.

‘I know she won’t know, but I’m doing some embroidery for her.’ I rub my hands together, trying to keep warm. ‘It’ll have her name, when she was born,’ I feel a bit silly telling him, but I think I can trust David not to bloody tease and make fun of me, the way bloody Len used to. ‘I might make it into a sign for the wall, or a cushion even.’ I look at the clock on the wall. Joyce and Maggie will have started by now.

I leave him sitting there, finishing his tea – not that you’d know it was tea as it’s so bloody weak – and head for the cloakroom to get changed.

I walk past the mixers towards the conveyor and there’s Joyce, already working away. Sun comes through the north-light roof but there’s no heat in it. I think of David still in the canteen. The warm oven and the smells of baking.

No warning. No bloody warning. The blast splits my ears, then a wave – a big whoosh – and breaking glass rains down. Flat on the floor. Ow! The shards stab me in the back like daggers. Bloody north-light windows. Glass in me hair too. Face pressing in the grime and a load of broken buttons. I’m cold and I’m shaking like a leaf.

Footsteps – people running. Shouting. Crying. The smells of oil and grease.

Bitterly cold. The outside’s come in now with no bloody windows. And the water. Gushing down the wall nearest to me and along the floor. I manage to stand up. Glass everywhere and water pouring in.

Someone calls my name; it's Joyce. From under the conveyor, she crawls on her hands and knees towards me. Her hair flops forward and her face is cut.

'The glass. The glass!' I shout at her as she scrambles along the floor. She'll get cut to blazes.

Two men stagger past us. One has a big gash down his cheek. His dark hair is bloodied; one jacket sleeve is ripped open and a blackened arm pokes through beneath, hanging down like it doesn't belong to him. The other man has his arm 'round his waist and half drags him. That's when I get scared.

He shouts, 'Get out girls, don't hang 'round in here.'

Behind them, at the far end of the factory, I spot the smoke. Welling up. Billowing towards us like a massive thunder cloud.

Joyce is crying and my heart's pounding so strong I can hear it throbbing in me ears.

'Where's your mum?' I ask her.

'I don't bloody know!' She screams back at me, crying hard. When she wipes her eyes with the back of her hand, I see shards of glass poking out of a whole load of cuts on her palm. Blood starts to run across her wrist and up her sleeve. Scarlet on her grubby white cuff.

The smoke. The bloody smoke's getting nearer. I can taste it in the back of my throat.

A gaggle of men try to open the doors at the side of the factory – the big ones that the forklifts use. They're shouting and shoving. Don't know why it won't open. The smoke's nearly here and it's not shifting. The whole floor's wet too, like an icy pond sloshing round me ankles. Bloody pipes. I'm all at sea – and I can't tell what's ice and what's sodding glass.

'This way Joyce,' I say. We can't wait for them.

I touch her elbow and feel a sharp jab. When I look, there's glass in my fingers and I hadn't even noticed. I know there'll be a crush of people, but we head back towards the cloakroom and the canteen. The canteen! David – where the bloody hell is he?

It's really squashed with so many of us filing down the narrow corridor trying to get out. We come to a stop at one point right by the portrait of the King. The glass is cracked right across and he's hanging all wonky. Some people are unhurt, lots have cuts and bloody hands and faces.

'I'm checking the canteen,' I tell Joyce. Of course, she tells me to get out, but I ignore her. I know he could be anywhere. But I'm here now and I'm looking.

I swing the door open. Silence. The tables aren't in their usual straight lines but it's like the bomb never dropped in here. It's flooded. No glass though just lots of cold water. I wade through towards the counter. Feet numb. Just the sound of me sloshing.

I call his name. More than once. Into the watery silence. Someone's crying but I can't see who.

At the counter, I look over without touching it as my hands hurt too bloody much. A woman is crouched down, crying. She stocky, older than me and I can see the top of her white hat; the hairnet poking out at the back.

'All the others are gone,' she's gulping back sobs.

I can hardly make it out what she's saying. 'Come with me, I'll give you a hand,' I say starting to wade 'round to the back of the counter.

The she turns to me like something wild and screams, 'I'm not leaving her!'

Shit. She's not alone. The girl. The girl who got hurt under the conveyor is laying –

floating – more like. Her head wedged under the counter and her body sticking out. There's water all around. The girl's brown skirt washes back and forth against her legs like bladderwrack. I can see her knees. There's a plaster on her left one; the sock on that leg has slid down; bunched around her ankle. Her boring old black lace-ups, just like mine, are still firmly in place.

Oh God. Oh my God. I have no skin. I feel everything – cold, sick, panicky, angry. At the same time, I'm numb. Hollow. There's nothing left of me.

'We had an orange. To celebrate.' The woman's talking bloody gibberish now. An orange? What a load of rubbish. 'It's her birthday—'

'Are you coming with me?' I ask. If she's not, I've got to get out of here anyway.

'Yes,' she says.

At last. When she stands up, the water moves. Slops against the walls and back, like the tide. I try not to look, but the girl's legs move like she's trying to swim. I close my eyes, but the sight of her is still there. There's pink. Pink water coming out from underneath the counter. Where her head is. And bobbing along on the rose-pink swirls are three pieces of orange peel, strands of white pith attached.

What on earth?

My heart's going to tear open it's pounding so much.

'Anyone in here?' There's a man's voice. He's standing at the door.

'Yes, we're coming,' I say, like I'm back in school and I'm late. The woman, who tells me her name is Betty, follows behind me. I don't think she's hurt. But she's white as a sheet.

The fireman holds the door and directs us. I try to tell him about the girl, but I just manage to point and say, 'There's someone,' and I start crying. Gulping tears. 'A girl—' that's all I manage.

The fireman is wearing gloves. Makes me think how cold I am.

'This way, miss. This way,' he says. 'I'll go and take a look.'

Outside, there are ambulances, blankets, people milling around.

Joyce sits on the wall. She calls my name and stands up when she sees me.

'Thank God,' she says. I sit down next to her, and a woman in uniform puts a blanket round me too and starts looking at my hands. It's freezing out here. My whole body is shaking hard.

'You'll have a bit of a wait, but we'll be back for you,' she says. 'You're not as bad as some.' I laugh when she says this. Must be my shot nerves.

I watch her close the rear doors of the ambulance, climb into the cab, and drive slowly away.

'They've taken Mum already. She got hit on the head in the blast.' Joyce says. I notice Maggie's basket at her feet.

There's groups of people talking. I hear snatches. Bloody V2s. Bloody Germans. Turns out the school's damaged too. Windows blown out and water pipes hit, same as us. Poor little mites. I think of the kids wandering home on this perishing day. Some of them to houses with their windows blown out.

Beryl! Ivy! I feel so guilty. I'd forgotten about them in this bloody mayhem. All I could think of was David. And there's still no sign of him.

Romance at the Storage King

Rotorua, April 2015

John's giving up his rental house and putting everything he owns into storage. First there's a conference in Australia, some consulting work in the Philippines then California. We drive to the industrial fringes of town in his Forester to the characterless edifice that is Storage King. As we pull up in car that's loaded with boxes, John announces that he's going to marry me. It isn't a question.

The height of romance. The charge of these words shoots through my veins. I smile back at him and decide I have met my dream man. Wealthy, charming, assertive. I sit tight and enjoy the ride.

Don't stop believin'

Rotorua to Picton, April 2015

I have plans of my own. The week after I drive John to Auckland airport, where we take selfies and kiss at the departure gates like much younger lovers, I'm packing up to drive south. I have accepted a new job and I'm leaving for cute little Picton. I load up my car with boxes of books and saucepans. My Dyson is wedged inside, its hose snaking around my shiny red suitcase. It has a Telluride Bluegrass Festival stubby holder looped around the handle to distinguish it from the rest in airport arrivals halls. Dusty hops into the passenger seat, all ready to ride shotgun – food bowls and a sack of IAMs dog food wedged in the footwell – ready for our drive to Wellington.

I'm so excited! I sing ACDC's It's a Long Way to the Top (If You Wanna Rock N Roll) and watch my dog as I drive – her eyes are fixed on the road ahead. We stop in Hunterville where I buy an egg mayonnaise sandwich and a packet of salt 'n' vinegar crisps. A perfect picnic. We sit on a patch of grass outside the public toilets where I pour water for Dusty. She hardly touches it, but watches me eat my sandwich with the crisps inside. Of course, I feed her some.

Then Journey's Don't Stop Believin'. Dusty is asleep now. Her large paws slip off the seat every so often, taking it in turns to knock the gearstick and then the handbrake.

After a night spent in Wellington with my daughter, I drive to the Interislander ferry terminal and join the queue. An old couple share a flask of something steaming, sat in a campervan with a peeling sticker on the back windscreen that says, 'adventure before dementia'. Fellow dog owners walk their hounds along the roadway, searching for patches of green.

Beckoned by a man in hi-vis, I enter the innards of the cavernous vessel with its smells of diesel and the loud rattling of chains. Leaving windows open for Dusty, I climb claustrophobic stairwells until a brightly lit deck with a low ceiling opens out in front of me with signs for a café, lounge, and a cinema even.

Outdoors, I walk around the ship, delighting in the way the wind pounds my whole body each time I turn a corner. At the rear, I gaze at a truck load of cattle on the deck below. Huge doe eyes catch mine as tails flick.

A man with unkempt hair approaches and says, 'They're not mine.' He points down at them. 'My animals don't travel like this.' I study his ruddy face and curly hair that's tousled by the wind. 'I need to make a living,' he pauses as smoke bellows from the ship's funnel. 'It's hard. But not like this.' He looks at me. Face set, just the movement of his brown curls. Then walks away.

I watch for longer. Wafts of cow dung. Some shuffling. Stamping of feet. Then I walk away and try not to think about the cruel, undignified fate that awaits them: one they never signed up for.

On arrival in Picton, the vessel turns on a sixpence, pirouetting in the charming harbour, then reverses into the dock. It is early evening in late April, and the Cook Strait's now a memory. Returning to the bowels of the ship, its interior dingy in the low light, I'm happy to be re-united with my dog. Back inside the car, Dusty's wagging tail pounds against the seat and she shows her enthusiasm by licking my face. Her breath smells of fish and the car reeks of leftover egg mayonnaise sandwich.

As I wait in line, the cattle truck bumps noisily from the vessel and down the ramp. Strands of straw fall out and blow back towards me.

The house that I'm renting is close to town, just a few minutes' drive away. I find it nestled into the hillside at the end of a cul-de-sac with views of the marina. I took it sight unseen and of course, it is perfect. The only door to the small, tumbledown cottage opens straight into the kitchen, where I am greeted by a mass of green tiles of Ganesh, the Hindu elephant deity, which surround a range. It has patches of rust and is set into the chimney breast, I love it.

Dusty walks inside, wagging her tail and sniffing the new space.

My new landlady is called Jane. She wears a thick jumper and coat, greets me in the kitchen. There's a small log burner in the living room; kindling and a pile of logs are stacked beside it. I'm tired and hungry, and it's growing dark; the house is cold, and the fire isn't lit.

From the back window, a row of large poplars forms a border between the long, overgrown garden and the reserve below. Just in front, a small grey pony with a cream-coloured mane grazes nonchalantly. His name is Dingle.

I can do what I like

Brentwood Station, October 1943

End of the day and it does start raining. Standing in our tearoom, I get me coat down from the cupboard. We use an old wooden wardrobe with a mirror on the front. The door doesn't close properly, but it does the job. I'm putting it on, fastening my belt when Charlie comes over, taking care to close the door behind him.

'I saw you with Len,' he says. Then nothing.

I don't really know what to make of this. He sounds serious rather than moany.

'Yes, we had a lovely time, thanks.' Blimey, I'm feeling cheeky. I do suddenly feel hot under me coat though. It's autumn. Rainy and mild.

'It's just. He's—' he looks over his shoulders again, one then the other. 'He's a lot older than you, Muriel.'

'Well, I'm eighteen now,' I say, 'I can do what I like.'

'I know you can love,' he says.

Love? Cheeky sod. Who does he think he is!

'At least ten years. That's a lot. You're still so young and—'

I've had enough of this. 'Well, we had a lovely time. And I like him.' I'm not sure if I mean it; I hardly even know Len – but if anyone tries to tell me what to do, they've got another think coming. I pick up me things and head out into the rain. I haven't got an umbrella and I don't care less about getting wet.

Crystals and 'American Tan' tights

Picton, April 2015

I wake up surrounded by boxes stacked up in the small lounge. I pull back the curtains and shards of sunlight pierce jostling grey clouds, and shoot in through the large, east-facing window that looks out along the valley in the direction of Waikawa. A patchwork of trees sewn up with gravel paths lays beyond the grubby window, and in the distance there's a children's playground.

There's a pine coffee table on wheels. I push it to the side to make some space to unroll my yoga mat and stretch into the day. It feels good to get some life back into my body after so many hours in the car. I roll my shoulders and hear little clicks in my back and rotate my neck. Dusty finds a place next to me. She is on the rug but as she relaxes, she spills onto my mat. I push her back once or twice, then decide to move around her.

As I open the two stays on the large window, light shifts and catches something at the top of one of the boxes. My crystals. Mum gave some to each of us after Doreen died. I remember them catching the light in her little Council house, strung up against her window where she'd stand to do the washing up. Her view was a pot from Holland: for her washing-up brush, and a Brillo pad, and the neighbour's fence.

Mum found her dead in that very spot. Laying on her faux fur rug, wearing 'American Tan' tights and a pair of sheepskin slippers. The yellow washing-up bowl in her sink was half-full of luke-warm water. There were no suds left to speak of.

I take the crystals to the kitchen sink. The windowsill is dusty, and my view is an herb garden going to seed with a hedge behind; the road, at eye level, is beyond that. I stand on a colourful rag rug; woven strands blend and insulate my feet from the floor with its chilly jade-coloured tiles – the same shade as the Ganesh tiles around the range.

Once dry, I take the crystals back to the lounge and hang them on the curtain rail above the window. Light flickers, making rainbows around the room. Dusty is still asleep as I return to my practice, her jowly face with its grey whiskers rests on the long side of my mat.

A few days into my new job, I take Dusty to a nearby kennels, en route to the airport. I'm flying to Christchurch for a few days for an induction at the head office. As a Vocational Consultant, I support and encourage people back into work who need extra help. People who've suffered loss, health struggles, run of the mill poverty or, for various reasons, don't fit in.

I spend the afternoon at the new, modern office and meet fellow consultants, and the managers and physiotherapists I'll be working with. I enjoy the energetic feel, a sense of busyness, care, and professionalism.

In the evening, I walk to a scruffy Indian café and soak up the homely atmosphere and fragrances that remind me of my student days in Birmingham. Balti curries with friends and yellow naan breads as big as a washing-up bowls.

I walk back to my motel. A bland scattering of units, where everything's magnolia, including the kettle. I think of my dog in the kennels, my friends in Rotorua and hope that my night isn't punctuated by an earthquake.

When morning comes, I check my phone. John is finished in Sydney and texts me about the annoyances of air travel. He travels business class. Which doesn't sound too bad to me.

Then a message from my sister. Dads had a stroke. He's in hospital. Ring me when you get this.

It's good to talk. Her 9pm, my 8am. A voice of home – someone who's known me my whole life. He was at a hospital appointment when it happened. They were onto it straight away. I'm hollow, churning, yet connected. From my motel, I walk along a busy unfamiliar Christchurch street to the office. It's a new building in the suburbs; the original one was in the city and damaged beyond repair in the earthquake.

I tell my new boss the news and that I'm feeling stunned. Numb yet functional. I'm sixteen months sober, which I don't share. I watch a thought waft across my consciousness about a glass or two of chilled Sauvignon Blanc to take the edge off. Then I remember — I'm a different person now.

Playing aeroplanes

Brentwood station October 1943

The day's mostly still, but with the odd gust. I'm sweeping leaves along the platform, watching their curled, crispy little edges bunch together. Some get stuck into the bristles of the broom. I hear someone running up behind me then slide along the platform, like a kid. It's Len.

'It's tomorrow!'

I guess he's talking about the football game, but I don't let on.

'You coming?' he says, taking off his hat and wiping perspiration from his forehead.

I lean against the broom handle, look him up and down and shake my head. I can't hide my grinning face though.

'Muriel. Please!' He takes hold of it; turns it vertical like it's a bar between us.

'Oh no you don't!' I keep hold. 'You'll get me the sack, you!'

'You? You? My name's Len. And don't you forget it!'

I am laughing though.

Four hands on the handle; he starts to spin me 'round, laughing too.

'I won't stop until you say yes,' he says, eyes bright and full of mischief.

I'm back. On our back lawn. Me and Dad are playing aeroplanes. He's swinging me round, his hands holding on tightly to my forearms as my legs fly up into the air. I'm laughing so much that tears spill down my face. Mum was watching us.

I let go. Len puts his hands on his hips, catching his breath. I look up and down the platform: Janice or Charlie won't be far away.

There's something about Len. He's playful, childlike. But not just that. I bet there's lots of things he hasn't told me. Maybe he has people that he loves; people that he misses.

'Penny for your thoughts, Muriel.'

'Oh, just thinking about people I miss,' I reply. 'Mum, mainly.'

No-one's on the prowl, so we sit down on a bench together, broom propped at the end. I tell him about Mum and Patricia. And Dad and new wife, Millie. I tell him that she ain't too keen on me and the feeling's mutual. I don't say that she had Trixie put down. Came home from school one day and she was gone. I don't tell him that because I still can't speak it without crying.

He doesn't say much. We both sit still. I look at the pile of leaves in front of us. A light gust nudges some from the edges of the pile; the ones in the centre stand firm.

Mental health swimming

Rotorua, Autumn 2022

I need to swim most days to stay sane. Today is stunning. Almost hot, even though it's only a few days till the clocks go back. I swim up and down the 50m outdoor pool and notice my breath. How I can breathe out slowly, taking more strokes each time. When I resurface into the sun, I am lighter. I take some time to float. Inhaling fully. I visualise my belly as a rotund island sticking out of the water as I lay on my back. An island for penguins, perhaps. I have my eyes closed so no-one can see me.

My mind has this habit of flicking back into the past, flashing images that I am not proud of. Tearfully throwing my husband's clothes out of the bedroom window in a rage triggered by something that now, I can't remember. At the time it made sense. Now I know that sometimes my mind talks shit.

I've cut the grass, but there's more energy rising. I pick up the broom and sweep out all the little bits of mud from between the tiles in my back yard. Brush them into a pile. And then what?

I sit on my back step and let the tears come. Tears of frustration. With my scratchy, sensitive self and my mind that chatters nonstop.

My heart feels so heavy sometimes I wish I could swap it. I'd exchange it for one from a Patagonian alpaca farmer that's airy; infused with dewy mountain flowers that wave in the breeze, and the swish of a condor's wing. I could bury mine – that's marinated in generations of war, loss, and common-or-garden hard knocks – at the side of the road somewhere, miles from civilisation. In a hole too deep for the foxes excavate.

I'm hot from the sweeping. I put the broom back in the garage next to a rusty hoe and the stacked tire-sized slices of an old Cypress. Ring after ring extends from the centre of each one – ripples on a pond. The tree had outgrown its place; my view is much better without it.

Maybe I'm outgrowing the well-worn and familiar grooves of my own miserable victimhood. What might my view be without it?

The Nelson lot

Picton, May 2015

Back in my cute Picton house with the Ganesh tiles, John and I talk on Skype, with regular calculations to work out the time difference. Sometimes he calls me in Blenheim's New World, where after work I wander around as the sky grows dark looking for something quick and easy for tea. I love hearing his delectable Californian accent and how much he misses me.

The job isn't what I hoped. Interviewed on Skype, I didn't realise that I'd be working in a narrow, windowless room. It's upstairs in the local sports centre; a place often filled with the laughter of boisterous children and women, blissed from their modest exercise, talking over coffee. The woman I share the workspace with is my boss. She is called Lee, is about thirty, and is highly committed to the company. There is a team of fellow Vocational Consultants based in Nelson. Lee is their boss too. She thinks they are wayward and doesn't like them. She calls them 'the Nelson lot'. After the long drive in the car over to meet them, I wish I was working with them instead of Lee. They're an interesting and diverse bunch who work in a spacious building with windows that overlook the main street. Lee tries to tell the Nelson lot what to do, which they don't like. On the drive back, she tells me about her stutter and how she changed schools because she was bullied. I hold the aliveness of her pain like a sack of unruly puppies.

When I get home from work it's dark. I light the fire and then take Dusty out for a walk in the cool night. Smoke coiling from chimneys of houses with sheep in the garden. Once we are back, I cook some tea. A message from my sister says that Dad is doing ok – starting speech therapy because it is difficult to make out what he is saying.

When I speak with John on Skype, I'm happy to see his smiling face, and the way he leans in close to the screen takes off his glasses, and squints to find the right keys.

Back in California, he tells me he wants to visit his first wife. Wants to ask her why their marriage, which ended over thirty years ago, failed. Why his love for her wasn't enough and other things that have nothing to do with me. I'm angry and disappointed. His absence is making my heart grow fonder; I break down and let him see my tears.

He responds with a dispassionate 'sorry.' And 'my son said that no good would come of this.' His mothballed pain still wants to be heard.

I work with Lee Mondays through to Thursdays; Fridays are my own. I find a morning yoga class at a local venue and head on over with my mat under my arm. A modern complex called The Pavilion with stunning views of the surrounding hills. I walk through the double doors, finding someone else waiting for the class. Her name is Kaitlyn, a softly spoken woman with dark hair and brown eyes. We greet each other in the cool, spacious room that has floor- to- ceiling windows. Just a pane away, the outdoors beckons to us – welcomes us home.

When the teacher arrives, she is heavily pregnant and out of a breath.

She opens with, 'I can't stay. I'm on my way to the hospital. Just wanted to let you know.'

I am privileged to be part of her story. The excitement of her new beginning. Then I ask if I can help, explaining that I've just moved here and I'm a yoga teacher.

'It's yours!' she says, holding one hand on her abdomen and placing the other on my arm. 'Take the class!'

I'm surprised and delighted.

'I don't plan on coming back,' she says. 'Think I'm going to be pretty busy for a while.'

It takes us a few moments to settle – the room spinning from the joy of unforeseen commotion.

I offer to stay and teach Kaitlyn, just the two of us in a room comfortable for twenty. We occupy our mats, move, and quieten. Sounds of trucks rumbling along Waikawa Road and the hum of children playing from the neighbouring school. On the other side of the glass, two blackbirds peck amongst brittle leaves that billow across the grass in the fitful morning breeze.

Another thundercloud

Brentwood, October 1943

Saturday morning lie in. No work! No picking up stupid lost property and no listening to Charlie and his gripes. Wish I could say no weak tea but that'd be a lie.

Can't believe how excited I am to be going to some silly old football match. I can picture him now, shouting at the lads from the sidelines. His lads. Imagine shouting at soldiers for a living. Knocking them into shape, then sending them off. I thought that it was only sergeants who got paid for shouting – and who even knew that they had PT instructors at the barracks, working in the 'Physical Training and Hardening School.' Hardening them up to kill other young men, just like 'em, I 'spose. Bloody hell; doesn't bear thinking about.

At school, they made me do cross country. I hated it. And it was always freezing. Mrs Wallis was grumpy and shouty—she loved telling me off. She'd yell 'you're not trying' when I was running through the mud like I was at the bloody Somme. What a cow.

I pull the covers up higher, shiver, and try not to think about her.

'Muriel. Muriel!' Millie's bellowing from downstairs.

I'm trying to have a lie-in, and she knows it. Then there's stomp, stomp, stomp up the stairs. Across the landing. She doesn't even knock. Just barges straight in.

Light floods in around her sullen silhouette.

'Come and give me a hand, Muriel. With the boys.' She's a hulk of a woman; rumbles right in like a bloody great thundercloud.

Leave me alone. You had all those bloody kids – you look after them.

'Muriel.' There's a rolling edge to her voice and I don't like it.

She's in my room. I feel like screaming at her, but I don't. I sit up and say, 'I don't want to.' Low. Firm. Under my breath. 'It's my day off. I'm going out soon.'

She stands there. Hands-on hips. The silence smells like charged air before a storm.

'Get. Up—' she mouths the words like I'm an idiot, 'Now!'

I hate her for killing Trixie. I hate her! The atmosphere's explosive – you could start a fire with it.

I pull back the sheets, and jump out of bed – my long, white nightie billows like a soddin' parachute, and my dark hair's messy — wild. But I don't care one jot.

'I don't want you; do you hear?' I yell, getting a whiff of her Palma Violets. You're not my mother even though you bloody smell like her.

She steps backwards, mouth hanging open. Back just far enough so that I can slam the door in her stupid face.

'I want my mum!' I cry, nose pressing into the door's peeling white paint.

Tears burst from my eyes. I buckle. Legs fold under me like our dodgy clothes horse till I'm crumpled. A rag on the bedroom floor. My insides are a pit of scary blackness. I haven't had a mum for so bloody long I've forgotten what it's like to be treasured.

When the crying stops, I open my top drawer and hunt around its musty, damp innards to find Patricia's white bootie. I put a few drops of Mum's old Palma Violets on it, then I climb back into bed and lay it beside me on my pillow. My feet are cold, but I can't be bothered to look for socks in this messy pit of a bedroom, so I curl up and tuck them under me nightie instead. Although my mind flickers to Millie, when I take an extra deep breath I can still remember Mum.

I wake up with no idea of the time — it's black as a cave in here. When I heave myself out of bed, Patricia's bootie falls to the floor. I pick up the grubby little thing, its ribbon all frayed, and put it back in my drawer.

I'm still tired. Putting one foot in front of the other to open the curtains is a struggle. When did I last eat? I worry that when I get upset, my strength goes. And I get upset and angry a lot. It's drizzly outside but I'm guessing that the match will still be going ahead.

I look at the drab street, a woman hurrying along with a black umbrella pulling along a reluctant child who's crying. She turns around and swipes his bare legs with the palm of her hand. I wince at the sting of it. The volume of the crying goes up a notch. She carries on dragging him along the wet pavement.

Shouting at Millie. Slamming the door in her face. My shoulders slump with the shame of it. I can't face her now. I need to get out of here. Walk in the rain to meet Len. My stomach gurgles, trying to get my attention.

I get dressed, stuff a few things into a bag, and creep down the stairs. Of course, they creek. I don't want her to hear me.

She's in the front room. I can hear the boys whining and her moaning to Dad. I don't catch her every word, but I do hear 'ungrateful,' 'minx' and 'not under my roof.' I don't hear a peep out of Dad, but then again, who does?

I close the front door as quietly as I can. I'm out. Don't care if it's raining. It cools me down and I love it. Everyone loves the sun, but too much light makes me nervous, and heat gets me all ratty.

The pavilion isn't far from the duck pond, but I'm early and mainly I'm hungry. I think there's a bit of food after, but I can't wait that long, so I take a detour to the chippy. As

I open the door and the bell tinkles, there's a woman on the other side coming out with her parcel wrapped in newspaper. She's wearing a headscarf that's a boring tan colour and flat black shoes that look tatty. She's managed to do up her navy raincoat, but only just. She looks older than me, but not by much. And she's pregnant. She gives me a flicker of a smile as we change places.

The bell goes again as two men walk in behind me and start having a moan. If I didn't know better, I'd say they were Charlie and his doppelganger.

One says 'disgraceful' and the other says 'women of today, have they no shame?' Then I hear tutting as one of them shakes his umbrella. Right in the middle of the shop.

I turn around. The man with the umbrella is tall and wears a black raincoat that's neatly belted. His hair is dark too. Slicked back.

'Oh, sorry miss,' he says, as he rolls up his umbrella and goes to prop it by the door. Then he addresses me and his stout companion. Grey hair. Balding.

'We noticed that young woman – no wedding ring in sight – who's gone and gotten herself pregnant. And at times like these!' He shakes his head and looks at me and his short friend, whose coat is so tight around his middle that the buttons might fly off at any moment. He's got another thing coming if he's trying to make an ally out of me.

My tuppence worth of chips wrapped nimbly in the *Daily Express*, sits on the counter. I pick it up and peer at the propped-up umbrella. Of its own accord, it slides to the floor with a slap.

'Gotten herself pregnant?' I say, 'Never heard of that before.'

The tall mall man says, 'What I mean is –' He looks at his prone umbrella as another woman opens the door.

The headline on my wrapped chips says *ONE MILE TO GO NOW—RUSSIANS AT KIEV*. Keep going, Muriel. One more mile.

‘That is quite a story,’ I say to him, clasping my warm newspaper-chips close. ‘You should ring the papers.’

A woman opens the door and stifles a grin. She’s holding the hand of a wriggling toddler who says she’s hungry now.

‘Oh, and don’t forget your umbrella,’ I call, looking back at the pair of them from the doorway.

Outside, it’s more mist now than rain. The chips are hot. They smell divine and my stomach reminds me of how hungry I am with the racket it’s making. I don’t want to get there early, so I shelter at a bus stop, unwrap my chips and dig in. I get my fingers all greasy but use the *Daily Express* like I would a tea towel. And now I’m covered in newsprint. Oh well.

The pavilion is just across the road, and I can see someone unlocking the doors. Others are standing around outside, talking and laughing by a pile of sports bags.

I’m scrunching up my rubbish ready to put in the bin and cross over as a bus pulls up blocking my path. The engine hums, there’s a waft of warmth and cigarette smoke from the rear deck and a man holding onto the pole jumps off flamboyantly, carrying a big satchel over his shoulder. He’s freshly shaven, moustache neatly trimmed, and he smells gorgeous. Len looks so handsome in his long, brown raincoat.

The bus pulls away, all noise and fumes. Doesn’t stop me from soaking up the warm presence of him, standing there on the damp pavement.

‘Didn’t save me any I see,’ says Len, hoicking his bag up onto his shoulder.

‘Didn’t think you’d want the scraps,’ I say nonchalantly, wiping my hands on the empty chip paper and then stuffing it into the bin.

‘Urchin!’ he says, tickling me in the ribs from behind.

‘Oi! Get off!’ I wriggle, laugh, and spin round to face him.

‘Come on you,’ he takes my hand and checks the traffic before we step out.

I glare at him.

‘Oh. Sorry! Muriel,’ he says mockingly.

I don’t say anything. I feel my hand in his and together, we step out into the road. On the other side, the sun comes out and he lifts my hand in his, turns it over, and kisses my knuckle. I feel so grown up and imagine I’m a young Celia Johnson.

Home with Lizzy

Brentwood, October 1946

My toddler, usually such a wriggler, just wants to cuddle up to me. As she lays across my lap, I stroke her hair and worry she's getting ill. It's autumn and the dappled light from the tree in the front garden splashes through the clean room. Me and Lizzy get all the cleaning done on a Saturday, so on Sundays we can relax and take it easy. Well, as much as anyone can relax with a two-year-old.

I love being back in this house. And back at the station. When Lizzy's nan died, her parents moved into her old place in Clacton. They always wanted to be by the sea and now they are. And great that we can go and visit too.

The house is pretty much the same. We've done a lovely job tidying up the plants out the back. We've got pots of red geraniums — so easy to take cuttings from — on the front steps now as well as out the back. That ruddy door handle's still the same. The one I was sick down. Sometimes I want to swap it for a new one. Other times, I touch it and think of myself, only three years ago, and feel proud. It's been hard at times.

I'm glad Lizzy's mum's popcorn didn't put me off for life. I love the pictures, even though I don't go that often.

'Fresh air might do her good,' Lizzy offers, getting ready for our walk. She puts on a pair of white gloves and wears a white bolero cardi over a pale blue dress.

Beryl's nearly asleep on my lap.

'Maybe I'll take her outside. We can sit under the tree,' I reply.

Lizzy gives us both a kiss and goes off by herself. A chill in the air but such a stunning day. I watch her walk down the garden path. She waves back at us, closes the gate, and heads out.

I find a blanket. Carry her outside and lean against the old apple tree. The bark is bumpy against my back.

‘What’s up with you, my little sweet pea?’

She’s usually so full of energy and loves going out on a Sunday. Ordinary things. Feeding the ducks is still our favourite thing to do.

I love getting letters from Joyce, who tells me about the beaches in California and the huge redwoods. She must miss everyone – especially her two ‘big’ kids. Couldn’t see me ever leaving Beryl, no matter how big she gets. When I’m ninety-five she’ll be seventy-seven and I’ll still be petting her and loving her. I’ll tell her she can never leave home! Can’t think of anything worse than your mum dying when you’re still a child. Except of course, your child dying.

She coughs in my lap and carries on sleeping. I keep stroking her hair away. It has those red bits like mine, but her hair’s finer more of a strawberry blond. Covered in freckles too. I couldn’t love her more. As I stroke, I worry she’s getting a fever. Her face is flushed and I’m she’s hotter than usual. I look at her little feet. White socks pulled up to the knee like a big girl.

Last Sunday we saw Billy at the park with the two children who are both bigger than Beryl. She followed them around. Picked up bread that they’d thrown to the ducks, then threw it again. It landed at her feet. The boys laughed and she laughed too. His new wife,

Madelaine I think she's called, looked happy. I thought that she might have been pregnant, but I decided not to ask.

Two blackbirds settle close by and scratch away under our tree. I watch their tiny eyes, looking up at me and then back to the earth. The dark feathers are so shiny. They look almost navy in the sun; shiny, polished like school shoes on a Sunday night.

Beryl coughs and they scatter. I touch one hand and inspect her fingers. Is it me or do her nails look pale blue? I look more closely and kiss her hand. Yes, they do.

'Let's get you in,' I say, getting to my feet. I lean down and scoop her into my arms. She coughs, loops her arms around my neck, and squeezes me tightly.

I carry her past the pots of red geraniums, which are scraggy now, in through the backdoor, along the hall, and up the stairs. I lay her in my bed and cover her with a sheet and one blanket.

'You have a good sleep, sweetheart. I'll be back to check on you.' I blow her a kiss and go downstairs. It's clouded over and feels colder. It might only be October but it's cool enough to light the fire.

Once it's going, I sit with my feet tucked under me watching the flames lick around the kindling. The smoke seeps from the coal till slowly each jagged piece starts to glow redder and redder.

A game of two halves

The Pavilion, Brentwood, October 1943

Len lets go of my hand when we reach the group. They are all men, tipping bags full of bits and pieces out onto the ground. Someone starts dragging a net towards the goalposts and there's a man pumping up footballs – three of them, I think he has.

I feel a bit of a spare part standing around with all this industry and besides, Len says 'I've got to crack on now. Lots to do before the game starts,' and winks at me.

I don't mind being left to my own devices. I did think it was odd though, him not introducing me to the others.

I wander inside the pavilion. It's a large, open room with a wooden floor. Good for dancing, I think. I can hear women talking in the kitchen which is at the back of the room. It's small but has a large window that looks out over the pitch. Two women are doing the real work of getting the food ready. The ovens on. The oldest of the women stands by its door and keeps peeking inside. I ask her if I can help.

'Yes please,' she says. 'We haven't got Linda today.' Then she asks me my name. 'Would you make up the eggs for the sandwiches, Muriel?' she says.

I must look confused because the younger woman says, 'I'll show her, Mum.'

She places a crusty-looking packet in front of me, next to a brown bowl on the worktop. 'Spoons are in the drawer,' she says.

I find a spoon, add some powder then dribble in some water. Mix, mix, mix. Eggy wallpaper paste. Yuck. Luckily, the aroma of the baking is all I can smell. The young woman standing next to me, who tells me her name is Mary, slices some bread.

‘Our Linda’s proper poorly,’ says Mary as she slices through the loaf, ‘We left her at home in bed. ‘Flu of some sort. Hope she comes right.’

‘Linda?’ I ask.

‘Linda’s my sister – my twin, actually. And that’s Gregory,’ she points with her knife towards the window.

There’s a big group of young men milling about outside now; I don’t know who she means. Mary passes me a slice and I load up some of the gloopy egg.

‘He’s just signed up. Turned eighteen a couple of weeks ago,’ she says.

Mary’s mum gets a tray of something out of the oven and says, ‘I’ll save you one, love,’ as she put the tray down on the side.

I didn’t see Len come in.

‘Mmm, something smells delicious,’ he says as he puts both his hands on my shoulders and surveys the scene.

Mary’s mum lifts the lines of gingerbread men from the baking sheet and places them on a cooling rack. As she turns her back to put the tray in the sink, Len leans over, snaps a limb from one of them, and puts it straight into his mouth. Then he starts puffing and waving his hand in front of his mouth.

I reprimand him and so does Mary’s mum.

‘Get out of my kitchen!’ she says to him, ‘You cheeky bugger.’

He takes my hand saying, ‘I’ve been called worse,’ and he leads me back outside.

Pink clouds

Brentwood, October 1946

The room is toasty warm; the red coals dim to grey, then flare back to red again with a soothing regularity. Anthracite glow-worms. When Lizzy gets back, she folds her coat in half and lays it gently over the armchair. The sun's low in the sky; it'll be dark soon.

'Maybe she's got the 'flu?' she offers. 'Whatever it is, you'll need to keep her fluids up.' Lizzy's changed a lot since she started nursing. She's still a student, but she left the café with its fug of cigarette smoke, scone crumbs, and tea-stained cups and signed up. She said it was the nurse who was nasty to me who inspired her. Wanted to even up the playing field, as she put it.

'I can come with you in the morning, tomorrow, if you like,' she says, 'To see the doctor.'

Tears prickle behind my eyes and my heart grows a tiny bit bigger; kind things do that.

'I would love that,' I reply.

When Lizzy heads out to the kitchen, I get up to draw the curtains; the dusky night sky is striped with candy-floss pink clouds. As I watch, they grow ashen and I shiver, despite the heat of the fire. Lizzy returns with a sandwich for each of us and tea of course. We sit together in the front room and eat, watching the flames lick the flinty coals.

The slop of the dried egg coats the inside of my mouth, and I wish I had a gingerbread man to take the taste away.

The rook

The Pavilion, Brentwood, October 1943

Outside the game is poised to start. Both teams are neatly spaced across the pitch. All wear dark shorts, but only half wear dark shirts – the rest wear white. I think of a game of human chess; only pawns are on the pitch. They all look very young to me, and I wonder which colour shirt Gregory is wearing.

I watch Len, animated on the sideline. He runs up and down, keeping pace with the linesman. There are cross words, which seem to be triggered by the flag-waving linesman. Besides, I thought all these lads were from the same barracks. And it is only a game. Of course, I don't say these things to Len.

At half-time, the teams stand around Len, who's worked up quite a sweat by now. His hairline is damp, and his cheeks are ruddy. I can see the slightest bit of stubble growth on his cheeks as he gesticulates to the men, standing in a semi-circle around him. I watch them breathing hard, their misty puffs visible in the low afternoon light.

He claps his hands three times and the black and white pawns retreat, taking up their chessboard places again. I don't see Len as their king; he's more of a rook to my mind. Once they're back on the pitch, I approach him and link my arm through his. He looks at me, pats my hand then slides it away without saying anything. As the ref starts the second half he's glued to the action: I might as well be invisible.

When the final whistle goes, he turns around with his arms wide, says 'yes, and gives me such a big hug I'm winded. He applauds the lads as they leave the pitch. Some of them run, but mainly they walk, hands on hips towards the changing sheds. He says, 'well played' and

‘good lad’ to the steady stream of players. He tousles the hair of the shorter ones, his face beaming.

We head back inside the pavilion where the food’s laid on some trestle tables covered in a white tablecloth. It looks quite fancy. I’m happy to be warm again and to eat something. Ages since I had those chips at the bus stop.

The lads wander in dribs and drabs, unrecognizable now that they’re clean and in uniform. One young man walks in and greets Mary and her mum. Gregory, I’m guessing. He’s not very tall, has fair hair and his uniform looks baggy on him. They stand in a huddle, and I see his mum smuggle him something, which he stuffs straight into his mouth.

Mary stands at the end of the table with a big teapot. I walk up to her with my plate, and she pours me a cup of tea.

‘Who’s that you’re with?’ she asks, handing me a plain white cup of wishy-washy tea, balanced on a matching saucer.

As I look down at the table, I see the gingerbread man with the missing leg.

‘He looks a lot older than you,’ she says, looking from side to side, ‘And Mum says he’s—’ I see her face change and she stops talking.

I feel a hand on my shoulder. Len’s hand.

‘Tea?’ Mary says to him.

‘Thank you. Yes.’ Len leans over me and she passes him a cup. ‘And I’ll take another one of these.’ He picks up a gingerbread man and bites into it straight away.

‘Muriel,’ he says, looking towards a table in the corner. We wander over and put our plates down. ‘How long have you got? I mean, I’d love to get out of here. Take you out tonight.’

I think about Dad, Millie. Those bloody little kids of hers.

‘I don’t have to be back yet. What are you thinking?’ I ask as I sit down.

He stands, leaning over me. ‘How about I take you to the Essex Arms? I could buy you some tea. Besides, I’m gasping for a pint.’

I smile and say yes without thinking. I’m bored and I want to get out of here too.

‘Come on then,’ he takes my hand. We leave the plates and the weak, lukewarm cups of tea.

I can see Mary looking at us. She starts walking our way, weaving between the groups of lads who are talking and laughing. She gives me a wave and calls out to me. Len’s already at the door, holding it open. Part of me wonders what Len interrupted just now. But I want to go; have Len to myself.

I wave farewell and head for the door.

I follow Len over to his car, it’s a green Ford Prefect, but I keep looking back. Mary’s standing at the door now.

‘Muriel. Muriel!’ She calls. ‘It’s Mum. She—’

Len’s sat inside. He leans over to unlock the passenger’s door for me, then starts the engine. She does look agitated.

‘Can you come back inside for a moment?’ says Mary from the door.

Len beckons me from inside the car and revs the engine.

Queen of Hearts

Brentwood, October 1946

Beryl's in my bed and I climb in next to her. Soundo she is, laying on her back, mouth gaping open and her breath rattly. I put my hand on her forehead and she's burning up. I go back downstairs to fill a bowl with some tepid water and find a flannel in the airing cupboard. Back upstairs, I lay the folded, damp flannel on her forehead. She doesn't flinch. Doesn't move a muscle. I pull the blankets back, so there's just a sheet on her, and I blow on her face, trying to cool her down.

'It'll be all right, sweetheart,' I say, trying to convince myself that it will.

I find her hands, and one after the other I wipe them. Her fingers straighten as I wipe, then curl back over.

How long till morning?

I'm scared. Laying here in the dark. Nothing to do but wait and listen to Beryl's raspy breathing and have my own thoughts flash through my mind – they're like a deck of cards and my mind is dovetail shuffling them. Nonstop. Of course, there's Mum. Queen of Hearts. Still with me even though she isn't. And baby Patricia. Patricia. And Mum.

Mum. She was never the same again.

I lay in the dark and try not to think about it. I don't like the noises in the dark. There are footsteps. Millie. Millie?

Tap, tap, tap. 'Muriel. Muriel.'

I flick the lamp on, and it makes the thoughts go away.

Lizzy opens the door slowly, her hair tumbling forward in spirals.

‘Come in, come in,’ I whisper. ‘Lizzy, I’m worried. Look at her for me. Please.’

Lizzy crouches down at Beryl’s side as I lift the flannel that’s like a hot rag now.

‘She’s really ill, isn’t she Lizzy?’ I study her expression as she looks at Beryl, places her hand on her forehead, then places her ear to her chest.

‘We don’t have to wait till morning Muriel if you’re worried. We could wake up George next door. He’d drive us.’

What if I’m making a fuss over nothing? What if she wakes up right as rain? I’m worried about how I’ll afford it too. Besides, my decisions are always lousy ones. ‘I don’t know what to do, Lizzy!’ I’m a mum now, I should know what to do. And thinking this makes me feel even worse.

Lizzy says she’ll be back in a moment. She comes back with a glass of water and an idea. ‘Let her sleep,’ she says. ‘You need some sleep too.’

I drink the whole glass and put it down on the bedside table.

‘How about you go and sleep in my room?’ she says. ‘I’ll stay with Beryl.’

I feel anxious. At the same time, I’m so tired.

‘I’ll wake you if anything changes.’ She stands up and holds the door open for me.

‘Thanks, Lizzy,’ I say. I wander down the hall and climb into her bed.

In my dream, I’m swimming. Under the sea. Mum’s holding my hand, pulling me, away from my baby. I want to go back but Mum’s grip is strong.

‘Muriel. Muriel!’ It’s Lizzy tapping loudly and calling me from the door.

I'm disorientated. Not sure where I am.

'Muriel, come quick.' Her face is blank. 'It's Beryl.'

Players, and an ordinary woman

The Essex Arms, Brentwood, October 1943

I open the car door, lean in, and say, 'I wonder what she wants?'

He looks at his watch, 'Look if you're not coming, Muriel—'

'I am, I am!' I reply, jumping in.

He drives away quickly, turns out of the entrance, up towards the High Street, and accelerates through the gears like he's being chased.

'I just wondered what she wanted. That's all,' I say.

He looks at me; glares more.

When we arrive, he remembers his manners. Jumps out, dashes round to my door opens it for me and holds out his hand. I hesitate to take it.

'Look, I'm sorry Muriel,' he says, 'I was snappy with you before. It's just. Well. Got a few things on my mind, that's all.'

He manages a smile, but he still looks uneasy.

'Best behaviour from now on,' he says. 'I promise!'

I take his hand and get out of the car.

The pub's right in front of us, up a few steps. He runs up them, pulls open the door, and holds it for me.

Someone playing the piano towards the back and people are singing. A group of men lean against the bar, some in uniform, their hats forming a stack at one end.

The place smells of stale beer, cigarette smoke, and merriment. Makes me fancy a smoke myself.

Len holds my hand and walks me to the snug – a cosy little room off to one side – then wanders back to the bar to get us some drinks. There’s a fire on the far side of the room opposite the door. The two bench seats, perpendicular to each other, are covered with red velvet that’s secured with bronze studs to a wooden backrest. It’s hard as nails. Choosing to sit close to the corner, I look at the bevelled mirror that hangs above the fireplace. It’s oval. Translucent. A bloodless eye.

Len opens the door with his body and the sounds of the piano and a waft of cigarette smoke drift in too. He’s holding drinks in either hand – a pint and my gin and orange – and a packet of Smith’s crisps in his mouth. I laugh as he sits opposite me on a low stool, his back to the fire, takes the crisps out of his mouth, and puts them on the table in front of me.

He rubs his hands together, takes a swig of his beer, gets out a packet of Players and offers one to me.

‘Thanks Len!’ I say, taking one. Half decent cigarettes are about as rare as hen’s teeth.

He strikes a match and I lean over and let him light it, just like in the movies. He tosses the match into the fire.

Everything feels better already. Just me and him. By the fire with a drink and a smoke.

We both take a drag on our ciggies, breathe out together with a big sigh and laugh at the same time. Then a sip of my drink and I nearly hit the roof it’s so strong.

‘Is this a double?’ I ask. ‘I didn’t ask for a double.’

‘Saves my poor tired legs going back up to the bar, Muriel. Besides, you’re not driving,’ he replies.

An alarm bell sounds in my mind, but after a few more sips I forget about it. I finish my cigarette, open the crisps, find the little blue salt bag, and shake it in. When he puts his hand in to take one, I pull the bag away, laughing, and spill a few on the floor. The room feels warmer, heating up nicely from the fire.

He downs his pint sharpish, and when he comes back from the bar with more drinks and slides in beside me on the bench seat. He smells of Players, beer, and masculinity.

‘You trying to get me drunk?’ I say, leaning my head onto his shoulder and breathing him in a little closer.

‘As if,’ he says, lighting another cigarette, then passing it to me to take a drag.

A young man in uniform opens the door to join us, and there’s a blast of intoxicated laughter from the piano singers. He thinks better of it and closes it again.

I pass the cigarette back. He leans down and takes it from my hand with his mouth and takes a long, slow drag.

‘Hopes and dreams, Muriel,’ he says, ‘Hopes and dreams.’

I’m feeling the effects of the gin now, but I don’t want to tell him too much. I take off my coat and let it drape over the red bench seat. He’s dishy as hell. Confident and charming. Maybe a bit too confident and charming.

So instead I say, ‘Oh, the usual things. I want the war to be over, I want a family of my own. To be an ordinary woman.’ I feel myself blush as I take the last sip from my first glass.

I look towards the fire, and I feel his fingers glance my cheek. Then he lightly touches my chin and turns my face towards his and looks into my eyes. I'm so alive and so terrified at the same moment.

Slowly he says, 'You're anything but ordinary, Muriel.'

Like a kaleidoscope, he's in sharp focus and nothing else exists. I can hear my heart beating throughout my body, in my throat. It's loudest in my ears.

He lets my chin go. I look towards the fire as I feel his hand brush the side of my face again, across my shoulder, and down my arm. When he reaches my hand, he squeezes it in his; one finger brushes the skin of my inner thigh.

I gasp. I don't think my body could be any hotter.

The tongues of flames lap against the coals. Delicate. Persistent.

He stands. Faces me.

'It's time,' he says holding out a hand towards me. 'Time to go.'

It's time to go

Oldchurch Hospital, Romford, October 1946

We stand at Beryl's side, her slight form covered with a white sheet.

I kneel and place my hand on her chest. Her breath is fast and shallow. She's still so hot. Her lips are blue; I don't even bother to look at her nails.

'Oh God! Look at her – I should've taken her last night,' I can feel that wild, heat rising in my head. Thoughts getting out of control.

'Get dressed,' says Lizzy, 'I'll give George a knock.'

My eyes are glued to Beryl as I layer on any clothes I can find. I don't care what I look like, and I don't care about work.

I hear Lizzy; she's at the front door and there's a car engine running. I gather her up, wrap the sheet around her, then another blanket. She's floppy. I'm terrified. I breathe as slowly as I can, holding her to me, imagining that somehow, she'll follow suit.

It's one of those grey, drizzly mornings. Lizzy sits in the front talking to George. Says he's happy the football's back on. How much he loves being on the terraces. The feel of Upton Park on a Saturday afternoon.

Lizzy thanks him over and over as we drive and directs him to the entrance of Oldchurch Hospital.

I'm so happy that Lizzy's here. And not just because she knows where she's going. Inside the hospital, I sit down with Beryl on my lap. The chair is metal and cube-like and rocks as I sit down. It's all joined together – doesn't have proper, separate legs. A number five without its top.

Lizzy comes over with a nurse, who escorts us all to a room where we're to wait for the doctor. It has a bed in it, a sink, and a framed print of a woodland scene with a rainbow. I stand by the window, holding Beryl. Her eyes are closed as she's limp. Her hairs splayed out over my left forearm and her mouth hangs open showing her tiny teeth. I rock her in my arms, looking out of the window and watch a huddle of sparrows that flap their wings and screech tunelessly on the grass outside. A few curled leaves fall, and the birds fly up in unison to and settle on the branch of a tree.

Come on, come on.

When the doctor arrives, there are no pleasantries. He puts his face close to Beryl's and tells me to lay her on the bed, which I do, and Beryl starts coughing, curls onto her side, and brings her knees up towards her face.

There's a nurse with him. He gives her instructions. I hear him say 'fluids' and 'fever' and start to leave the room.

'Hang on,' I say to him. He turns around with his hand on the door. It's like he's annoyed.

'My nurse will deal with your questions,' he says. He's got a sallow face and dark hair, all slicked back. He isn't that old.

'What's the matter with her? And what happens now?'

He sighs back at me.

'Your daughter has pneumonia. She's very ill. We'll do everything we can.' He looks at the floor and then walks off, leaving the swing door flapping backwards and forwards behind him like it can't make its mind up.

The nurse, who's even shorter than me, comes over and touches my arm and I flinch.

'You must be upset. And worried,' she says.

'Too right I bloody am!' I know I'm starting to lose my temper. It's just what happens.

'You need to leave her with me now. You can come back at visiting time,' she says,
all chirpy.

'What time is that? And what are you going to do now?' I don't know what's
happening, but I do know that they're not kicking me out of here.

'I'm not moving,' I say, and sit down on the floor and cross my legs and my arms like
I'm back in soddin' school. I don't care if anyone sees my drawers.

'It's time,' Lizzy says. 'Time to go.'

I take no bloody notice.

The green jumper

Essex Arms, Brentwood, October 1943

I stand up, feeling red and flushed, and let him take my hand. I'm hot and not just from the fire.

Outside, at the bottom of the steps, someone opens the door and calls out, 'Excuse me.' I turn around to see a young woman with curly hair. She's wearing a green jumper and she has my coat over her arm.

'I think this is your coat,' she says, 'You left it inside – on the bench,'

She's right. And I've just realised how cold I am.

'Muriel?' she says. 'It's me – Lizzy,' she smiles at me. It takes me a moment to remember.

'From school?'

She nods, and I do – I remember her freckles, her beautiful long, curly hair.

'Lizzy! Hello!' I run back up the stairs towards her, hug her and then take the coat.

'Come and find me! I work at the station. One day next week?'

'I would love that,' she says, and gives me a wave adding, 'Yes, I will,' as I head back down the steps towards Len and his car. He's holding the passenger door open for me.

It's just starting to get dark with smatterings of pink slicing through the grey clouds.

'I was going to buy you tea.' Len says, pulling away, 'You must be hungry by now.'

I hadn't thought about food, and I must admit that I giggle when he says that.

'I have a surprise for you,' he says. 'I hope you like surprises.'

Maybe it's the fresh air. Maybe it's the gin – I giggle some more.

'Whatever gives you that idea?' I say, putting my hand on his as he changes gear.

It's not far – we'll get there before it's dark.

'And then you'll take me home?' I ask.

'And then I'll take you home.'

We drive for a couple of miles. Len takes a left turn, just past the barracks, then he turns left again, parking outside the perimeter wall.

'What are we doing here?' I say, 'I can't go in there!'

'Relax! Relax,' he says, 'It's fine Muriel.'

I get out of the car and there's a gate, and a two-story building just inside and to the right.

'That's where we're going,' he says pointing to it.

He gets some keys out of his pocket and dangles them from his index finger.

'No-one else is here. And the fridge is full,' he says. 'Do you like roast beef? Fresh eggs? Oranges?'

My stomach's growling. 'You have all that food?' I'm not sure I can believe him, but we're here now, no-one is around and I'm starving.

'I'll explain inside,' he says. 'Come on.'

He holds open the gate for me and we walk inside. Through the gap in the buildings. It's still light enough to can make out the parade ground in front; a blanket of grass looking neatly mown. I follow him up a set of steps on the outside of the brick building, leading up to

a landing. We turn right to a door, painted red, with a shiny brass number two on it. He puts the key in the lock, looking over his shoulder at me.

‘This is us,’ he says, and I follow him inside.

The door goes straight into the lounge room, where there are two green sofas – at right angles to each other – with a lamp on a low table where they intersect. The fire’s already lit. The carpet is brown; a coffee table nestles in front of the sofas. There’s a standard lamp in the corner. It has a cream shade and tassels that hang down.

‘Gorgeous!’ I say.

He wanders through a door to the right, where there’s a kitchen, and starts opening and closing doors, getting things out of the fridge, and finding plates.

I talk to him as he’s slicing a loaf of bread and there’s a piece of roast beef that he’s just got out of the fridge. I can’t believe all this!

‘You have so much food!’ I say, ‘Where’d you get it?’

He carries on cutting.

‘And who lit the fire? I love your place. It is your place, isn’t it?’ I talk a lot when I’m tipsy, but I do want to know.

He replies by asking me if I’d like some mustard on my beef and finishes making the sandwiches. Great doorstoppers of things, they are. He sails past me holding two plates and puts them down on the coffee table.

I flop onto the couch, grab my plate, put my knees up and tuck my feet under.

He does the same. We face each other. Our knees touching. Our plates touch too. We both lean on the back of the sofa.

No sound, just the fire. Until I say, ‘Where did you – tell me about –’

He replies by putting one finger on my lips and holding it there for what feels like an age. At the same time, his eyes lock on mine. Then his finger traces down from my lips to my chin and around the line of my jaw. He looks at my neck; leans in and kisses my ear. Nothing else exists. I’ve forgotten the plate that’s propped in front of me. His eyes flick back up for one moment, then his finger traces along my shoulder to the top of my arm, till he reaches my hand. He strokes the back of my hand and each finger in turn. With my eyes closed, I turn my palm over, and he caresses it. Draws circles. Slowly. Gently.

Tears line up at each eyelid. They overflow. Spill down my face. Profusely. No sound. Tears stream. Some hit the sides of my nose and head for the curve of my mouth. Others go down the side of my face till they reach my jawline, sliding towards my chin.

He takes both plates and puts them on the coffee table, looks at me, pats both hands on his knees, and nods slowly. I launch myself onto his lap, throw both arms around his neck and the whole of me cries vigorously, my face pressed into his chest until I am exhausted.

I feel him stroking my hair. He holds me for a long time. Rocks me saying sh sh sh like you would a baby. I think I fall asleep.

When I wake up, he is still sitting there. There’s a wet patch on his shirt; I lift my face and smile. He beams at me and strokes my hair away from my face. Kisses me on the forehead.

‘Time for you to sleep,’ he says, smiling. ‘I think we both need some sleep.’

I notice that the fire’s gone out, but the room’s still warm.

‘I don’t want to – I’m not ready –’ I want to be clear, but I’m not. This is embarrassing as hell.

'I know,' he says. 'I have no intention of sleeping with you, Muriel.'

Why can't I be more like that? I like him even more now.

I climb off his lap, straighten myself and wipe my face with my hands. I dread to think about what on earth I look like. Bit late to worry now. He's seen me. What happens to me. When I feel stuff.

We walk through a door to the back of the flat where the heat hasn't reached. Brrr. I reach around and grab both my arms, then through another doorway to the right. There's a double bed. Neatly made. All quite plain. No tassels on lampshades in here.

'This is you, Muriel,' he says, 'Bathroom's across the way.'

I must've raised my eyebrows.

'Indoor privy, and a bath,' he adds.

'Thank you. Thanks so much!' I wrap my arms around his middle. Squash my face into him again and he lets me.

Another kiss on my forehead.

He says, 'You're welcome, Muriel,' and closes the door behind him.

My mind has a little race on a treadmill for a moment. Where will he sleep? What about Dad and Millie? They'll be furious. And worried. And oh God, I've just cried my eyes out like a baby in front of someone I'm really starting to like. I bet he just sees me as a snivelling little kid. The gin and the tiredness and the beef sandwich have their way and before you know it, I'm spark out.

sh sh sh

Oldchurch Hospital, Romford October 1946

I don't care if they think I'm behaving like a little kid. They can't ignore me if I'm sat right in their bloody way.

Lizzy leans over me.

'I thought you were on my side,' I say to her.

'It's not about sides, Muriel,' she says, and then she's got the cheek to say, 'Save your energy for Beryl.'

'That's what I'm doing! Can't you bloody see that?'

I'm nearly crying but not quite. My blood's pulsing. I can't believe they're all just going about their business ignoring me.

Another nurse wheels in a tall, spindly contraption with a bag hanging on it and nearly runs me over, but this one at least talks to me.

'Would you like to sit here instead?' she says, nodding towards a chair that's all on its own by the window.

'What's that?' I say in response.

I start to rub the dust off the hospital floor off my hands.

'We need to get some fluids into her. She's dehydrated,' she says.

I nod and begin to pick myself up off the floor.

'Will she be all right?'

She doesn't answer me straight away.

‘We’ll start on antibiotics too,’ she replies, ‘But if we’re dealing with a virus—’

I watch her fiddling with the tubes then and take Beryl’s hand. Her fingers are curled up. The nurse turns one hand over and strokes it. So gently. Straightens out her fingers and wipes the back of her hand with something.

‘Would you like to hold her other hand?’ she asks me as the first nurse walks in and glares at us both.

I hold Beryl’s other hand. I stroke her, and say ‘sh, sh sh’ as the nurse puts the needle in.

Beryl flinches: yelps like a puppy then goes silent again. Lizzy’s stood right by me now; she places her hand right in the centre of my back. Just holds it there.

‘Thanks,’ the nurse says. Then she looks at me, doesn’t try to shush me out of the room, and says, ‘You did the right thing. Well done for getting her here.’

My shoulders relax when she says this, and Lizzy starts stroking my back.

‘And if it’s a virus?’ I ask.

‘If it’s a virus, then antibiotics won’t help. They won’t do any harm though,’ she offers.

‘That wasn’t what I was worried about,’ I say.

I realise how serious this is, but I’m calmer now. I look around the room, at Beryl with her little drip in looking so tiny in that big bed, at the shards of sun beaming into the room. I’m tired to the bone. If I don’t get home soon, I’ll curl up and sleep right where I am.

‘Visiting time starts at seven o’clock,’ says the kind nurse. ‘Go home and get some rest.’

Tired. But that doesn't mean that my stomach doesn't lurch when she says this.

'I'll take good care of her,' she says, reading my expression.

I smooth Beryl's hair away from her face and kiss her on the forehead. The sun lights up her soft pale skin. My little peach.

As I turn to go, I let Lizzy put her arm across my shoulder. She leads me from the room, gives me a squeeze then takes my hand.

Home again

Brentwood, October 1943

It's early when Len drops me home. He pulls up outside and turns the engine off. The sun's streaming through the windscreen; my face is hot but it's not just that. I look at the house. Curtains are still drawn. My fluttering heart lands hard on my cement-mixer stomach: I'll have to face them. Face the music. I think about last night. About this morning. Our sensuous joy. Our playfulness. The real eggs we had for breakfast. We smile at each other like little kids.

I put my hand on the door handle.

Len says, 'Before you go—' and pulls a hanky from his pocket, folds it several times, then takes hold of my chin.

I let him. Laughing.

'Urchin,' he says, showing me the smudge of yellow.

'You'll make them envious, Muriel,' he says, looking towards my blacked-out house, 'Of what you had for breakfast.'

More sniggering. We lean towards each other, bump noses, and enjoy one last, long kiss.

I go down the path, through the side gate to the back door which I know is always open. Inside, the kitchen is cool with a lingering smell of last night's tea. Nondescript green vegetables. Overcooked.

In the hall, I hear footsteps coming from upstairs. Millie; she's coming down. Towards me. Oh God.

When she gets to the third stair she stops. Sits down. Wraps her dressing gown tight. Face blank. She just sits there. Doesn't say a word. I wish she'd just have a go at me. Get it over with. I hear voices from upstairs. The kids. Her kids.

'Sorry.' I blurt it out. Not thinking. 'I didn't think about you. Or Dad.'

Not a flicker. She looks drawn. Pale. And her hair's a mess.

'It's not easy for me, either Muriel,' she says, and I'm chilled to the bone. Not completely understanding. I was expecting a tirade from her. 'You miss your mum – of course you do,' she whispers.

My hands are hot. My face is hot. I don't know where to look.

'And it's clear as day that you can't stand me,' she says, looking me straight in the eye. There are noises again coming from the kids upstairs. She looks over her shoulder.

'But I'm here for you anyway,' she says, 'and so's your dad.'

Dad? He keeps such a low profile I wonder if he's real sometimes. My eyes roll to the ceiling.

'Yes, slippery as an eel — but your dad's your dad,' she says. Something we agree on. She stands up, walks down the last few stairs, and turns to go to the kitchen.

'Oh, and Muriel,' she looks over her shoulder at me, still holding on tightly to her dressing gown, 'Don't do that again.'

I feel the colour flush to my cheeks.

'We were worried sick.'

More birds and the doorstopper sandwiches

Rotorua, 2022

I'm in 1943. Penning the flat – Len, Muriel, and the doorstopper sandwiches when bang, a sparrow strikes the window and I'm shocked back into 2022.

My heart pounds high in my throat. My skin flushes with goosebumps. I take some slow, deep breaths. Stare at the grubby windows. The plants in their weedy pots. The damp pallet leaning against the garage wall. All waiting for me.

The dog rouses from her sunny spot under the window and trails after me to the kitchen, where I put the kettle on. My skin's still tingling from the shock of the bird. I wonder if it flew away, or if it's lying dead amongst the succulents.

'It flew away.'

A voice. From inside my head or the house? A woman's voice.

The dog wags her tail and trots into the lounge, and I stand amongst the piles of washing up, gripping the handle of the brown teapot. Frozen to the spot. Knuckles white.

I call, 'Who is this?' Then, without conviction, 'Get out of my house!'

I hear whoever it is pat my dog, giggle and say, 'No sugar for me love.'

I let go of the teapot, take some more deep breaths and peek into the next room.

Sitting on a chair is a young dark-haired woman, wearing a dressing gown and a pair of slippers. She has fair skin, blue eyes and she's leaning over, petting my dog. The three wooden elephants that I keep on top of the log burner are on the glass-topped table in front of her.

She arranges them, nose to tail, into a line.

Muriel?

Dusty pushes her head under her hand.

‘So how are you going to finish your book?’ she asks, running her finger along the backs of the elephants. ‘With death, I suppose – considering the title.’

She starts to laugh. Pulling back the chair from the glass table, she bends over and howls from her belly. The dog wags her tail and pants; her eyes bright and only one clouded with cataracts.

‘Don’t forget the elephants!’ she says. ‘And the songs. Put at least one in.’ She stops laughing and looks at me. A couple of tears roll down my cheeks.

‘Not long to go now,’ she says. ‘You’ll be glad to see the back of me.’

The bright song of two fantails dancing on the deck. The smell of hours-old breakfast toast. My old dog scratching, making specks of dust spiral in the sunlight.

‘Will I be seeing the back of you?’ I say, smirking. ‘And if I remember rightly, there was only one elephant.’

She starts laughing again.

With a smile, I wander back to the kitchen to pour us some tea.

I won’t be glad to see the back of you, Muriel. I’ve missed you my whole life.

Sheep at Spring Creek

Marlborough Airport September 2015

I make friends with Kaitlyn and some other women who steadily start to join my Friday morning yoga class. At work, Lee and I have a ritual of making a huge plunger of coffee first thing, to get us through the day in the room with no windows. The mellow high doesn't last all day. Sometimes I get a boost from a sneaky chat with John over Skype when she's out of the office.

When he tells me he's booked his flights back to New Zealand, I'm excited.

He says he plans to relocate to Picton too. 'Oh,' I say.

And 'I wondered if I might move in with you?' he asks.

'Of course,' I say. As high as a kite at the idea. The fact that we only met a few weeks before he left the country doesn't trouble me in the slightest. I am in love and I'm plunging in.

I collect him from the airport on a cool, crispy Marlborough morning. Early for the flight, I turn right at Spring Creek. Rapaura Road unfolds for miles in a straight line, making a sleek parting through the land. Budding vines – perfect strands of vintage hair – splay neatly to either side.

I slow down as the road changes texture to something resembling porridge: a herd of sheep, clumped together and wedged between two boundary hedges, mingle in the road around my car. They stare with blue, slitted eyes. Baaing. Oily wool and dags. I gaze into the distance. Towards the airport. Check my phone as a sheep sniffs my wing mirror. Twitches a tail like it has a charge all its own, then totters along with the rest. A wave from a farmer on a quad bike, two barking huntaways, and I'm moving again.

At the airport, I hurry past pictures showing tourists who smile in the sun as they hold their glasses of Sauvignon Blanc. Amongst bountiful vines, of course.

John's plane has landed. A trail of passengers wander across the tarmac towards glass doors. He's one of the last. My face presses against his jacket. His brown leather briefcase dropped at his feet. We block the way. Just stand and hold each other. People walk around. I have no idea if they stare or not.

Tears on Old Taupo Road

Rotorua, 2022

After my swim I head home, pulling away from the traffic lights to turn right into Old Taupo Road. I'm tired; Muriel's on my mind. A song starts playing through my car speakers.

'Did somebody hurt you many years ago?'

Enough Muriel. Please.

'Did someone desert you when you needed them the most?'

I crunch a gear as I turn the corner.

'Maybe it's time?'

It's a Wednesday morning; I'm on SH5 and need a break from my dead grandmother.

'Maybe it's time to leave the pain behind?'³

At home, I cry. My old dog with grey whiskers wags her tail and licks my salty face. I put the kettle on, but not my music, then take my cup of tea to my writing desk and stare at the weedy pots outside my window.

³ Pattengale K and Ryan J *Maybe It's Time* (Spotify: 2011)

Our sweet reconciliation

Picton, December 2017

Back home after our adventures, John opts to stay at home, but I still take a few days away on the Sounds. I need some nourishment and some care. I'm doing ok, but it's only been a few weeks since Dad died: he collapsed outside his tunnel greenhouse, caring for his tomatoes. He fractured his femur and never recovered.

Today is my birthday; I decide that things will turn a corner.

John! My Motorola pings on Queen Charlotte Drive. I'm playing slalom in his Subaru on my way home; the dog – face out the window, ears flailing – is riding shotgun. I call into the bakery first for a Cherry Danish and a slice of carrot cake. Our sweet reconciliation.

I'm fiddling with the lock of the ranch slider and clinging to the paper bags of cakes; the dog's pushing at my knees to get in first. The house – a huge, modern space with lots of glass framing views of the bay – has an air of grubbiness about it. The dark lounge carpet is vast and unhoovered; there are lilies, brown and withered in a glass vase, and a few unopened birthday cards with familiar handwriting piled on the glass coffee table. I hate the table – its solid, dusty intransigence. And as for the red faux leather suite – veritably Middle America. The only sparks of joy are my disco ball which hangs from the ceiling with fishing twine, and a spindly wooden giraffe that falls over if you so much as look at it wrong.

'John?' It's cool inside. I flick on the heat pump and put the cakes down. The benchtop could do with a wipe. I fill the dog's water bowl; she drinks messily, showering droplets of water and saliva onto the lino.

'John.' I already know. The place has a different feel to it, like when an animal has recently died. Or a guest has left. The Baining people of Papua New Guinea call this

profound loneliness *awumbuk*; the heaviness that infects the air when someone leaves. They leave a bowl of water out overnight to absorb this and throw it away in the morning. I wonder if chucking the dog water out the back tomorrow morning will count.

I walk into his room – the one he’d migrated to since the row. The made bed with its ugly wooden headboard that scuffs the paintwork. His smell – old green sweatshirt, and unwashed hair. I slide open the mirrored cupboard where empty metal hangers tinkle – a windchime wardrobe. The floor inside is carpeted. Not hoovered either. I shut the door and listen to the muffled chimes. A closed – and very empty – musical box.

I fill the kettle and sit in the corner of the giant intersecting red couches. Cold and slidey. The heat pump’s breath has knocked the dead petals from one of the lilies; they’ve landed on Mum’s unopened card; she never forgets my birthday. The bubbling kettle clicks and then quietens. The English and their tea. A ritual. A distraction. From the shock. Of him leaving me, today of all days, without a word.

John asks me to meet him at Le Café, to talk. It may or may not be Christmas Eve. Tourists amble past as the Picton ferry turns in the harbour, ugly smoke billowing from its lofty funnel. Wearing his Keens – without socks – he says he had to leave me for ‘his own safety.’ And besides, I ‘couldn’t be relied upon to support him during the tough times.’

I stir my coffee, and think of Dad. And tomatoes. That I burst into tears on my Air New Zealand flight after take-off at Heathrow, when a flight attendant called Jade served me a salad with three tomatoes, rolling around inside a plastic container like bashful marbles. *Tom Thumb’s* or *Tiny Tim’s* – I never could tell the difference.

John continues, saying that although he's never studied Psychology I am, in his opinion, 'suffering from a serious personality disorder.'

I smirk; a mature American couple from the cruise ship, wearing matching beige shorts and 'I-Heart-Picton' baseball caps study one crumpled map. They thrust it backwards and forwards between them as their volume increases. Linda from the jeweller's next door walks past; her perfectly manicured nails are coated with silver frosted nail polish. She waves to us clutching Pippin, her Bichon Frise, who has festive doodle boppers that wobble on its fluffy white head.

Tea and Nurofen

Rotorua, 2022

I look up from my keyboard; a semi-circle of used tissues litters my desk. Time for tea and more Nurofen. I'm still in my dressing gown, my nose is running and my head throbs like one of my long-ago hangovers. Flicking on some music to compete with the sound of the boiling kettle comes

‘Wasn’t much of a warning

Disappeared one morning

Put his mattress up on the back of a pick-up truck’⁵

I smile and look up at my disco ball, which survived the break-up too and is secured firmly to the ceiling. The dog lies on the floor as fragments of its \$12 light shimmer across her dark body. My disco lamp is another story. As the tea brews, it topples to the floor, bringing an empty box of Paracetamol with it.

Before Muriel, these little jolts and surprises would unsettle me. Not now. Besides, we’re family.

⁵ Margo Cilker *Tehachapi*. (Played on the Mark Rogers Show, Radio NZ, Saturday 31 July 2021).

The size of a bar of soap

Factory Road, December 1944

At home, Albert hears the blast. Windows rattle but don't break. Except the one in the kitchen – there's a diagonal slash right across it – half a sheer, glassy mountain. One that peaks just behind the curtains.

Maggie's still not right. She stays upstairs – head bandaged – and Albert brings her soup in an earth-brown pot with a white cupid's bow of a chip missing. Sometimes she doesn't bother with a spoon; drinks straight from the bowl, holding the pale sliver to her wrinkled lips. Stares out the window like she's somewhere else. Don't talk much neither.

When they found her that day, she was spark out – locked in the loo with red lacy knickers 'round her ankles. Pinned 'round the toilet bowl like gaudy Christmas decorations they were, with a streamer of crumpled loo roll for good measure. Had to take the door off to get her out. When she came to, she was crying and saying, 'I haven't flushed the chain.' Poor Maggie. Hates it when things aren't ship-shape, and Bristol-fashioned.

Terrible what happened, but I see a different side to her now, wearing fancy knickers like that. I took her as the high-waisted type, but blimey, she must've still been having fun in the bedroom department even at her age. I mean, she must be fifty if she's a day.

And then there's Joyce, announcing that she's taking off with the American and baby Thomas. She's going through her things, giving bits and pieces away. Fresh start and all that. I don't know if her husband knows. But he's not given her the time of day, so I can't say as I blame her. The kids though. Those two little kids. Bloody hell. I don't know how she can. No wonder Maggie spends so much time staring into space. Joyce doesn't sail 'til the 6th of January, but I can't see it being much of a Christmas.

The kitchen. The only normal place in amongst all of this. The cracked window steams up, drips running down in weary rivulets. The smell of boiled cabbage and damp tea towels. Alberts sat at the table holding Maggie's empty soup bowl. He puts it down and brings his hands to his face. The cuffs of his Aran cardigan are folded over, showing his bony wrists. Skin all crepey with brown spots.

I sit next to him while he sobs. The wireless in the background forecasts the weather for Christmas. Then I take his hand. Dry and papery. Little hairs sticking up. 'A chilly 30 degrees on Christmas Eve.' He squeezes my hand back, without looking. 'Rising to 50 degrees on Christmas morning.' He turns it over, and with his index finger, slowly traces circles on my palm, as tears roll down his cheeks. Round. 'And 58 degrees around lunchtime.' And round. I'm frozen, and hot at the same time. I feel him grip my hand more tightly as he puts his finger into his mouth.

I snatch my hand away.

'Get off me!'

The chair scrapes the floor as I stand up and look at him. Balding. Face blotched with tears. The soup bowl going crusty.

He says sorry. Starts crying again. 'I didn't mean anything,' he says. Then he lurches to take my hand back.

I run out of the kitchen, up the stairs, and catch sight of Joyce in our bedroom, packing.

'Muriel?' She looks up, as she delicately folds a liberty bodice into a neat pouch, the size of a bar of soap.

'I'm going to the stream. Won't be long,' I say.

‘It’s freezing, Muriel,’ she says.

I reply with a shrug.

I glance at Beryl, sound asleep in her crib. Joyce looks too.

‘I’ll keep an eye.’

Out the front door, round the back, and down the path to the stream. I take off my socks and shoes to paddle and douse my hands in till they’re numb. Then I sit on the bank, scrunch my knees up to my chest and listen to the water lapping over the smooth, round stones, my breath making misty puffs.

David's House

February 1945

'Come in, love. Come in. Out the cold.' Ray, David's dad opens the door with his left hand. His right arm's missing. The sleeve of the grey woolly jumper he's wearing is chopped off at the elbow and some wiry threads of wool spiral down.

As I step into the hall the dog rushes up to me, a white fluffy thing that wags her tail so hard that it knocks against the wall. I lean down, rub her soft ears and think of Trixie.

'He's in his usual spot,' Ray says loudly. His hearing isn't what it used to be. Big guns. At Ypres. 'I'll take Stella here. Come on Stella!' he says as the dog trots after him into the kitchen.

I peek into the lounge and David's sat in his armchair with a red tartan blanket tucked 'round his body and over his legs.

'Muriel.'

He doesn't say anything else. His grey slippers poke out from underneath the blanket. His face is sallow. Flat. Someone's who had the stuffing knocked out of him. I sit down on the couch, and we exchange a few pleasantries. Talk about how cold it is. How Beryl's doing. Joyce and Mitch.

Then he says, 'Muriel, I love it that you come and visit me. I really do. I just—' he hesitates as he fiddles with one of the red tassels on the blanket. 'Things are different now. I'm not. The same.'

The clock ticks on the mantelpiece and I hear Ray say something. Talking to the radio perhaps. Or the dog.

I don't know what to say. I look out of the window. There are no leaves on the trees.

'Your body's not the same—' I go over what happened that day, over and over in my mind. 'But *you* are.' I smile and the image of David, leaning over the fork-lift truck trying to fix its squeaky brakes, appears. 'I still like you. I still want to see you.' When the bomb dropped, the fork-lift bounced against the factory wall. Crushed him. Shattered his pelvis. I blink. Try not to see it. But I do. Over and over.

'I'm a bloody *invalid* Muriel.' He doesn't shout, but his voice is fierce. Stares right at me. 'I could never. We could never.' He looks around the room. Out the window. At the clock.

The lounge door opens and Stella rushes in, tail wagging.

'There you go, Muriel love.' Ray wanders into the room holding a mug of tea for me. 'I'll be back with yours son.'

Ray shuffles out again. The dog stays. Sits on my feet.

'We could never have children, Muriel. We could never even have *that* kind of life.'

I'm numb. Of course, I know this. I stay silent as Ray comes in with David's tea.

Stella's excited. She jumps up onto the couch next to me. Down. Then up again. She has a collar with a metal name disc on it that tinkles when she moves.

'Come on Stella.' The strand from Ray's jumper is even longer now. Only a few inches from the floor. When he leaves the room, it's the last thing I see.

'Does your dad ever talk about what happened to him?' I ask, changing the subject.

'No,' David says, picking up his tea. 'But sometimes I catch him staring out of the kitchen window. Miles away, he is.'

I take a sip of my tea.

‘Does say he’s lucky though.’ David glances out of the window. ‘Says he’s glad he got to come home. Even with buggered hearing and no right arm.’

In the street outside, a young man rides past the bare tree on a black bicycle.

Rag doll

Oldchurch Hospital, October 1946

It's been two days now. She's still laying there like a rag doll. Bloody tubes and background hospital smells. Disinfectant and cabbage. What about the antibiotics? Shouldn't they be working by now? I'm sat by her bedside feeling weak. It's dark outside, me hair's a mess. Can't think about anything except my baby laying here in this too big bed all by herself. Lizzy's right by my side and George is sat in the waiting room, glasses perched, doing the crossword in the *Express*.

'Isn't there someone?' I ask Lizzy, weepy. I'm glad she knows what I mean. I hear her talking to a nurse in the corridor.

Beryl's little features. Tiny snub nose. Dusting of freckles. Soft hair. Her skin is the colour of old washing-up water.

Lizzy found a 'someone'. She beckons and he wanders into the room after her. The doctor – a different one from last time – stands next to me, hands in the pockets of his white coat. This one has fair hair, scuffed shoes, and circles under his eyes.

I sit up and there's this awkward silence. He looks at me, then Beryl, then 'round at Lizzy like he's a cornered animal wanting to leave.

'Well?' I ask. I don't want to risk saying more in case I cry.

He takes his hands out of his pockets and wrings his hands. There's some laughter in the room next door and somewhere a door slams.

'She's not responding. To the antibiotics,' he says. The sound of a trolley tinkling along the corridor.

‘She looks worse,’ I manage. ‘Look at the colour of her.’

The doctor’s uncomfortable. Like he’d rather be anywhere else but here.

‘So, it’s viral,’ asks Lizzy.

The doctor nods, his face blank.

‘Probably best –’ he censors himself. I’m guessing he’s new to this. ‘Don’t get your hopes up,’ he says instead. ‘We’ll do our very best for her.’ He seems like a good man. But sounds like there’s bugger all left for anyone to do.

My whole body’s charged – like someone’s given me an electric shock.

‘I’m sorry the news isn’t better,’ he says. His head hangs heavy as he looks towards the floor.

Then nothing. I’m numb. Zoom out like a stunned animal before it gets its throat cut. I’m floating on the ceiling looking down at Lizzy, myself, the doctor walking out and of course at Beryl. I watch it all from up here because I’m not there anymore.

Real eggs

Warley Barracks, October 1943

'Well good morning young lady,' is how Len greets me.

I wander into the kitchen rubbing my eyes. God knows what I must look like. Nothing to brush my hair with. No toothbrush. And I've got a headache after that gin.

'Tea's in the pot.' He gestures with his face as he's holding a spatula.

I look over his shoulder. Eggs!

'Can you be in charge of the toast?' he asks.

I put the teapot down and take some bread that he's already sliced and place it under the grill. Then I pour myself some tea.

Still holding the spatula, he kisses me on the forehead.

'Thanks. Take a seat,' he beams at me. 'I'll bring it through.'

What happened to the tetchy, impatient guy from last night? Maybe he's looking forward to seeing the back of me.

He brings us two plates of eggs on toast; one egg has broken. He keeps that one for himself and give me the perfect one. I jab into it straight away and watch the custardy yolk puddle out, making a golden moat 'round the toast.

He's opened the curtains and the sun shines onto the floor, landing in elegant, diagonal shards.

We talk about food. How it was before the war. Oranges, bananas, and real eggs of course. He doesn't give away his source but says there's plenty more where they came from.

He stands up to pile the plates; hands clamped round their egg rims. I stand up too. Put my hands over his. Stretch up. Kiss him. On the lips. I've had enough of him kissing me on the forehead like I'm a bloody kid. His hair smells oily: melted lard and crispy, buttered toast.

He puts the plates down. I watch him flush – his neck, then his face.

'I'm older than you, Muriel,' he says. 'Eleven years. Twelve years.'

Oh, I wish he'd stop going on about age. It's not like polio – I won't catch it. I take his hands and squeeze them. Then kiss him again. Longer this time. Till he kisses me back.

'I'm an adult too, Len,' I say.

I put my arms around his waist and pull his shirt out, on either side. Rest my hands. He's toasty.

'My turn,' he says pulling my shirt out too, tracing his fingers across my back. Up to my shoulders then all the way down. I love it. Gives me the shivers. And makes me itchy.

'Scratch my back,' I say, as he starts laughing.

I undo the buttons of my shirt, take it off and plonk myself face down on the sofa. My bra's a scrappy old blue thing with ribby elastic. 'Please! You've got to.' I say, twisting my arm behind my back and pointing, 'There. And there.'

I hear his knees crack as he bends down.

Alright,' he says. 'Don't keep on.'

He starts to scratch me, with plenty of pressure. I direct him – left a bit, no right – and when he hits the spot, I make sounds like when I ease myself into the bath. I don't ask him to

kiss my back too, but I'm glad he does. He grazes along my spine, from its bony base slowly upwards. Moves my hair to one side.

'Not my neck, not my neck!' I say, giggling and squirming. I turn over to face him.

'How about here?' he says.

He kisses me around my navel. His touch is faint. Breathly. Exquisite. Then playful. Plants kisses on my ribs, the side of my waist, and the crease of one elbow. Grabs my left hand, studies each finger, then pushes my thumb into his mouth. I laugh – my stomach contracts, eyes crinkle.

His pulse throbbing in a neck peppered with whiskers. The autumn sunshine drenches us — magnificent bodies steeped in ordinary aliveness.

I take his hand. Walk him to the bedroom. Close the door, unzip my skirt, and, pulling back the sheet that's the colour of butter, I climb into bed first. I watch him undress. Remove his shirt. Unbutton heavy wool trousers that slip to the floor. He steps out of the olive-coloured pile and into bed. With me.

My glow, the damp fuzz of my hair. He strokes my fringe. Then gentle, deliberate kisses. Forehead. Eyelids. Nose. Caresses my arms. Explores my body – my whole body. With fingertips. And tongue.

He tastes me and it's delicious. Juicy unhurriedness. Wiry hair. Soft hair. Straight, baby tufts of hair that sprout from his armpits. Tickles. Wiggles. Waxen limbs and lithe laughter.

Agile manoeuvres. Striding over. Knees clutch. Slippery flesh.

Clench, clench, clench. Our mixed-up bodies.

Implode.

We crash-land on pillows

In luminous columns of dust.

Rose-coloured glasses

Oldchurch Hospital, October 1946

I watch her dozing from the bedside chair. The sun slices through the partly opened curtains behind me and warms the length of my back. I don't speak of the blush that spatters her cheeks in case it's not real and just my rose-coloured glasses. I stroke her fine hair away from her forehead. Watch the mound of her belly rise and fall like yeasty dough. Her fingers curl 'round the edge of a cream blanket.

Lizzy stands behind me. She doesn't speak either. Returns my gaze with the slowest of nods, her hand on my shoulder.

I flop down onto the bed, my hair splayed out. Lizzy's hand doesn't move. My tears are the gulping, noisy type. Tears that need to break out. That I've been holding back for too long.

A young nurse walks in and pulls back the grey, unremarkable curtains and sunlight drenches the whole bed. She bustles around, removes water glasses and a jug, then leaves the room. The door swings shut behind her. I lay still. Face on the blanket, the colour of vanilla ice-cream in the sunshine.

I feel pulls on my hair. Twists and twiddles. And a rustle of sheets.

Turning my head to one side, I watch my baby girl through the strands of my long, dark hair. She's twisting it between her fingers, tongue out in pensive concentration. Lizzy's hand is still there. Beryl grabs two pieces now, one in either hand and shakes them up and down, giggling and making a clicking sound with her tongue.

Lizzy says, 'Giddy up.'

I keep watching my baby girl through my hair as tears hit the curl of my upturned lips.

‘Don’t encourage her,’ I say.

The Elephant Story

London Zoo, August 1952

Life's good in the decade before I die. Sod's bleedin' law. I take Beryl, your mum, and her little sister Chris up to London Zoo one day in the school holidays. It's a bit of a trek from Brentwood, catching the train and then it's a bloody long walk to Regent's Park. I take a picnic with us – a flask of hot coffee – and chicken sandwiches with tomatoes and plenty of salt. I love going out with the kids and having adventures, even if it is only the odd day here and there.

Your mum stands and watches the animals like she's in a trance. She gazes up at the giraffes; their long necks as they swoop down and then stretch back up again. Chris runs around a lot rushing from one thing to the next like our bloody terrier. Not everything's caged up all the time. The elephants are out, and you can have a ride. There's a queue, and you have to pay extra, but worth it, I think. Don't get a chance like that every day and bugger all chance of us lot ever going to Africa.

So, we join the line and when we get to the front, your mum's too bloody scared! Chris does it, of course. I sit her in this little seat when the elephant kneels, and when it stands up – blimey – Chris wobbles so much I think she's going to fall out. Well, it can't be easy being a bloody great elephant and getting up and down all day with kids on your soddin' back. Still, I'm glad she gets to have a go. She comes off laughing her little head off.

But your mum. Blimey, she's all mopey, head down. She walks so slowly back to the railway station. Like a soddin' wet weekend she is.

I've got a good idea what it's about, so before we get on the train I ask, 'Are you still thinking about that bloody elephant?' She looks up at me. 'You've changed your mind, haven't you?' That's when she starts to smile. 'Come on then!' I say.

The three of us start back towards the zoo – we couldn't be walking any faster. I still have me tickets, so they let us back in; and there's the zookeeper, walking the bloody thing back towards us.

'Excuse me,' I run up to him and I start waving. I've never had a conversation with a man walking an elephant before.

'My Beryl here's changed her mind and she wants to have a ride.'

'Sorry ma'am, rides are all finished for today. Come back tomorrow though.' He gives me a wave all friendly like and goes on walking.

I don't give up. Carry on walking beside him. I'm being like our bloody terrier now.

'We live in Brentwood, took us hours to get here. We can't just come back tomorrow. My Beryl here was scared before, but she really wants a go now.'

He looks at your mum, standing between me and Chris. The elephant makes a bit of a snorting sound like Dad blowing that bloody nose of his.

'Come on then – only five minutes mind.'

I'm jumping up and down now too, I'm so happy. I can hear the last bit of scalding coffee shaking about in me flask and rattling against me house keys.

Well, your mum's face looks different after that, and it's a bloody dash to catch the train. Even Chris is tired. We pile into the train and me two girls sit either side of me in the last carriage. Rumbling out of Liverpool Street, the buildings outside the window turn into fields; I put me arms around them and snuggle them in close. By the time we reach Stratford they're both soundo.

unruly handles and decomposing lentils

Rotorua, Autumn 2022

It is 4 am. The moon is full. I have a book to finish. My elderly dog, who now sleeps in the cosy nook outside my bedroom, continues to snore on her bed. I make some tea and clean out my fridge.

Plastic pots of leftover meals that are past their best are scattered on the bench. Dried-up humous, guacamole gone from green to brown, and kumara-topped shepherd's pie, made with brown lentils. Yuck. Disgusting! I look at one singular lentil, gone from brown to green. It has strands of mould that shoot out from its surface; it looks like a festering, home-made pompom; a virus under a microscope, or something vast floating out in space. It's alive! Growing. Flourishing. I can choose to see its beauty and be amazed – or I can choose to see it as abhorrent.

It's a mild night; I take my tea, sit outside, and look at the moon. Dusty follows; her stiff old limbs move awkwardly, and her paws tap, tap, tap across the deck where she flops down beside me.

Gurprakash didn't come back. He told the class one day that he loved yoga but wasn't making enough money with his less-than-standard approach. That he was going back to his old job as a copywriter. Has yoga comedian been invented yet? I miss him and haven't found anyone to replace him.

I'm teaching yoga again. A handful of students once a week – I love it. Makes me spend some time in my body. Reminds me to feel. And I feel a lot.

Back at my second-hand rimu desk bought from a man at the hospital who took its legs off to transport it into my small office, I put down my tea on my fabric coaster with

seven bees on it. In front is a picture of Alice in Wonderland that says, 'I can't go back to yesterday because I was a different person then.' Under my desk, my feet perch on my felted meditation cushion that doubles as a footrest: the colour of weak tea and shaped like a red blood cell. Or a lentil. I've had it since 2012. When its fluffy surface started to wear away and crack open, I had it repaired. A woman embroidered it with coloured threads, making vibrant patches over the holes. Vibrant blobs resembling indiscernible organic matter: it's more alive now with its multi-coloured scars.

Tapping away at my keyboard, I cry ordinary tears. Dog outside the door.

I sign up to study trauma. What writers do with their experiences of war. Of loss. And shame. Their choice to transfer their pain from their minds to the page.

'The Literature of Trauma?' says the young woman in the student advice centre as she taps away at her keyboard. 'Your request will go to the department. They'll be in touch.'

I thank her, stand up and gather the unruly handles of my two bags full of library books. I push the chair back ready to leave and notice a single white feather resting on the seat.

Beryl and the elephant

Rotorua 2022

My Wednesday evening. Mum's Wednesday morning. I answer my phone and see her smiling face on the screen; she's enjoying her first coffee of the day.

'I'm sorry – you wanted to talk on Wednesday, and I've got the wrong day,' she says.

'It is Wednesday, Mum,' I reply.

She starts to laugh; I laugh too – it sets the tone nicely.

She asks me how I'm doing, and I tell her I'm feeling excited. Read my whole draft through yesterday and I can't believe I've done it. Of course, she says that she's proud.

'I want to write the elephant story, Mum,' I say. 'Will you tell it to me again?' Even though I know this story well, I want to hear her memories of it one more time. I want to finish my book with it; I love this story so much.

I love it because Muriel took Mum back. Eight-year-old Beryl, who was too scared to ride the elephant, then changed her mind. Muriel walked her back, all the way from the train station, with their cheap train tickets that Muriel always got. Back to the zoo as it was closing. Just so that Beryl could ride on the elephant.

And she did.

'I don't remember it anymore,' she says. 'I know it because you've told me. But I don't remember it now.'

I glance at my three wooden elephants standing in a line on my glass table, my dog curled up beside me on the couch, then back to Mum's face.

I smile back at her. She takes a sip of coffee and asks me how I got on with today's Wordle.

A piece of my jumbled heart snaps off. For good.

Epilogue

Although not diagnosed at the time, Muriel was suffering from Hypertrophic Cardiomyopathy, which caused her sudden death on 27 April 1961. It is also probable that this was why Muriel's mum died on 29 July 1932, just a few weeks before Muriel's 7th birthday. (May Murdoch nee Ellison was 27 years old).

Hypertrophic Cardiomyopathy is an inherited condition that causes abnormal thickening of the heart muscle wall. Or, put another way: people with Hypertrophic Cardiomyopathy have hearts that grow bigger than the rest of us.

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