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# SILL ROAD

A creative writing thesis  
submitted in partial fulfilment  
of the requirements for the degree

of

**Master of Arts**

in

**Professional Writing**

at

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by

**ABIGAIL NAOMI MARSHALL**



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# Abstract

Nola Clark stays Inside, always. She loves a few things about living on the Road: her big sister Lauren, her cat Milton and her friend Seb. She worries about a few things: the winnowing wind of the desert beyond her window, the gnarled hands of the travelling Mapper, and her sister's inability to keep out of trouble. Set in an alternative reality to the Cold War, the world of Sill Road is one where people fear the Outside air will kill them. To protect themselves, houses are linked by covered-in Roads. These structures are advanced in large cities. In New Zealand's Central Plateau, however, things are much more rickety.

Growing up, Nola's neighbourhood is content to broil in the heat of their enclosed world. But the thing with Roads is that something's always coming along them. In the unexplained absence of her sister, Nola and the whole community are forced to choose whose story to believe.

Sill Road is a novel about family, a closed door and relationships held together by firm beliefs. Toying with themes of faith, survival and love gone wrong, the story bores into the heart of group survival. It examines how we use narratives to build a world we can survive. It looks at what happens to the people who don't fit inside those stories.

It is about the things we'll do to save each other. It is about how there is nothing harder than changing our minds.

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# Sill Road

by

Abigail Marshall

*Once the owner of the house gets up and closes the door, you will stand outside  
knocking and pleading, "Sir, open the door for us."  
But he will answer, "I don't know you or where you come from."*

—Luke 13: 25

*To make her happy, I would invent God if I had to.*

—Unknown

*For Justin and for Helen*



Her stomach is a Wall. A spit of wind hits the window by her bed. Solid and unmoving, she stops a breath trickling to her lungs.

She remembers what Lauren always says: don't go coward, Nola. Storms are just air that's on the run.

And anyway, Nola reminds herself. Nothing can get inside the Walls of the Road.

There's a crack in the window's curtain. Sun begins to pinch the sky. Indigo blanches above distant hills like blood, pressed back.

Nola burrows down in the woollen folds of her blankets.

The way the wind gets you, she remembers, is when it slithers between the layers of your skin.

In the opposite bed, Lauren lies flung across her scrappy mattress. She's all bone angles and thick, unhurried sleep. Milton the Cat creaks as he leaps up and rests against her. He squints. Reclines his ribbony spine against her stomach.

Nola can't promise herself that the desert wind howling beyond the window isn't already in their bedroom. That it isn't already in her lungs, rotting down her body cell by cell.

Lauren splutters in her sleep, then sighs—long, heavy.

A rancid feeling sticks on a high shelf in Nola's gut. "Stop it, Lauren," she whispers. The words clog around her tongue.

What was it that Mapper said when he passed through those months before? It was January. Paint left on the windowsills had melted tacky to the touch. Ants boiled in grit syrup on the asphalt. She remembers. It was the start of the new year, after old Mr Manual from No. 7 reclined in the Road on a yellow-striped beach chair, placed his hat over his face and died.

That day, when Mapper walked through the dust to the doors of Sill Road, Nola took stock of how he stood. How he watched her sister run. Watched her ricochet from Wall to Wall.

"Young thing," he'd tutted. Bent his tongue between his teeth—a dry grass whistle. "That girl sure makes the wind."

I

## *One*

The day he arrives, Ma nails the front door open on their house at No. 5. She drives four roofing shanks through rimu slab into the peeling patchwork of the west-facing Wall. Each knock cracks the hinges from the frame.

Nola Clark sits on a wide windowsill opposite her mother. All she can see is Ma's back. The cotton of her mother's shirt is ragged with sweat. Her hair knots with each swing of the hammer. With every slam and shudder, Nola grips the wooden sill. Her nail beds redden, like lips.

"This devil weather will let up," Ma grunts when she steps back from her work. "It has to go in time. I'm going to help Mrs Manual nail her door open next—don't let Lauren close any of the bedroom ones. We need the air we've got to mingle, swear to Churchill."

Ma trudges down to the next front door set into the Walls.

Nola stays on her perch. Her thighs threaten to slip, but she holds herself still. Her short legs dangle from the ground.

The Road is like this: the air Inside moves only through displacement. It pools in the seventy-seven houses—each one a little appendage off the Road's tunnelled corridor. Their front doors open to metalled bitumen and dust. Even when they're open, no wind gets in the houses. Air drawls. The neighbours slur between dwellings. They drag their feet along the remnants of the old highway, now encased—a closed box.

From her spot on the sill, Nola can see straight down the Road, north and south. It's a dull trail pockmarked with sun squares cast through windows. The windows are in the Walls. The Walls line the Road all the way along.

She does not look up at the Roof, though she can hear its tin iron bending in the heat. It makes her hold her breath, although the Roof, like each Wall, is layers thick. She shuts her eyes. Behind the heat, the Road, the Walls, the Roof and the little houses pecked with the movements of waking neighbours, she can hear the wind. It hits the Roof in sudden gusts. Nola draws her feet up on the sill. She looks out the window at the Outside. There are low grasses, lashed flat under the wind. They

stretch out, a desiccated expanse, to distant ranges.

She jumps when Seb slaps his hands down on the ledge beside her.

The boy clambers up onto the sill. He's nine, a whole year older than her, but with thin stick-insect arms. His shoulders bulge like frozen water bottles under a blanket.

"Your Ma doin' doors?" he asks. His voice is a room-temperature melt.

Nola nods.

"Can ya lift yourself up?" Seb stretches out his legs. Pushes his body up from their perch so that he's balancing on his palms. His fingers slip. He thumps down onto the seat of his trousers.

"Careful," says Nola, her chin tipping towards Mrs Manual's doorway, where Ma now readies her hammer.

"Don't fuss." Seb grins. He kicks her with his grimy foot. "Our Walls is strong as guts. Want some ice?" He takes a slick chunk from his pocket. Drops it in her hand. "Nicked it from Fetu's fridge."

In her peripheral vision, the Outside exists only as a blurred sun-haze on the window glass. Seb is a maroon splotch, backlit. The edges of his silhouette fur into the light like lemon mould.

It's Seb who spots him—a fuzzy lesion on the neck of the horizon.

By then, Nola has returned to the hollow of her door at No. 5. She scrapes animal figures in the dust with a stick: a skittish possum, a one-legged cat. Seb runs up. His steps shake tiny pebbles back into the divot lines. Nola stands on the front step and dips her toe to the Road. It's nice to feel the scrape of loose rubble. The tooth-like gravel grouted with dust. The windows never open, so there's nowhere for it to go. It piles up in drifts against the walls. The dark heat in the house swarms along Nola's back as she stands there. It pastes her singlet to her skin. The house is too dark now. Ma has drawn the curtains. It's too bright on the Road. Nola feels fuzz rummaging through her head. A faintness swells as she squints at Seb's heaving figure. Her toe cuts against a tarmac chip. Pulls her back into her body.

Seb catches his breath, leaning his hands against his knees, and looks up. "Oi. Where's your

Ma?”

Nola points into the house.

“I just seen Mapper! For real, I was just up by the generator, and I saw him coming. Had all his tools and everything.”

Mrs Manual, their neighbour, comes to the doorway of No. 7. She clutches the handle of a plastic broom. Pink, the sun-sucked shade. The handle, like her skin, is boned with white. “Our Mapper? Here? No one told us souls he was coming.”

Nola hears Ma rise from the kitchen table in the house and step up behind her daughter. She’s got a wet cloth over her neck. It drips onto the ground and makes a tiny dot of mud.

Nola ducks around her legs and retreats into the kitchen of No. 5. The main room is small and opens to bedrooms on either side. Pots and pans hang dormant from the ceiling. Everything looks dark purple with the curtains drawn. She bends around the big wood table. Drags a chair to the Wall bedside the pot-belly stove and lifts a pair of binoculars off a hook.

“Ma, is it really Mapper?” she says, returning to the door and pushing the binoculars into her mother’s hands. Seb and Mrs Manual step closer, their breathing shaggy.

Ma curls the binoculars to her face. One lens is a little cracked, but she sees what she needs. “Kids,” she says. “Go tell Fetu to ring the bells.”

“Told you I saw him!” Seb fists the air as he runs south along the passageway to the pub.

Ma’s face looks like it did when Nola broke her arm the year before. She spins out her words like they’re thread on a bobbin. She rests a hand on Nola’s back. Tells her to go, to walk at a steady pace, not to look like they are rushing.

Fetu’s pub is right in the middle of the houses, a hundred paces down the Road from No. 5. The concertina doors between the large room and the Road have been pressed back. As usual, the entrance is like a funnel. Before Nola even reaches the doorframe, a crowd pours in. There’s Charlie from No. 18 with his stout face and frazzled ginger hair. Mrs Manual limps in and settles at one of the mismatched tables. Behind the scuffed sheen of the kauri bar, Fetu reaches for a switch box. He presses down on a lime-green lever.

The bells begin.

Nola covers her ears, but the sound knifes through. It rattles the ridge of her ears, of the wooden walls, of the loose stones that rest against the doorsteps of all the houses.

“I can hear them all,” Nola yells to Ma. She runs to the pub’s wide doorway and watches the metal bells shuddering on the Wall outside the pub and at regular intervals down the Road. They ring far north in the Crop Rooms and by the generator. She can hear all of them—slushed and out of tune.

Then feet. Fast feet. The neighbours run.

Fetu lets himself out from behind the bar and waits, arms folded. They come stuttering, their hands raised.

“You tryin’ to scare the living hell out of us?” grunts Clive, the gardener. There are limbs of weeds still tucked into his apron pocket. He brushes past Nola at the door. “Watch out, little one!”

Ma ushers her to a table. “Wait here. Don’t get underfoot.”

“Do I need my mask on?” Tobias from No. 32 yells as he careens up to the bar, his hair muscled out of shape by sleep. A large green gas mask dangles from his hand.

Fetu yells for everyone to be quiet. “No need to go off your rockers just yet! Keep your grubby nosebag out of my face, Tobias. We’ve got Mapper walking into town, is all.”

“Is all!” mutters Tobias. He buttons up his shirt. “What’s Mapper doing here? And with no warning?”

In the gaps between the chatter, Nola makes out a ticking sound. It coaxes her to her feet. She slips out from the table. Bends through the crowd of soft bodies—the cotton pant legs, the bare feet, the shifting ankles. She huddles at the edge of the concertina doors. Looks out down the Road.

Mapper’s figure is a wavy dot at the far end of the passage. He halts at regular intervals, holding a box-like machine in the air. She can see him point it at the Walls, and up towards the Roof. It clicks. There’s a rolling grate as a tape winds back and air ripples into the box. The box clicks again. Mapper walks on.

He’s got a full mask over his face. Nola can picture her one curled, like a sleeping possum, in the cupboard over the bathroom sink. She wonders if she should have brought it with her, like Tobias

did—a fat thought that slides to her belly. But the neighbours are gathering beside her. They press her into the folds of the opened concertina door. Hold her still.

“Put your damn shirts on,” Mrs Manual calls out to the men, muscling to the front of the crowd.

Ma parts the masses. She ropes a hand around Nola’s shoulders. Pulls her close against her legs.

“What’s he doing here?” Nola whispers, her hand reaching up to the thin threads of Ma’s straw hair.

“He’s here to see the Road. To mark it down for everyone so that we know where we can go.”

“Now?”

They can see Mapper clearly by then. The crowd relays soft reassurances. Those at the door wipe sweat from their faces. Roll down their sleeves. Dig grey grit from their fingernails.

Ma pulls a hand through Nola’s hair, raking it away from her ears.

Nola squirms. “Why’s he come now?”

Ma rakes her daughter’s mousy strands into three ribbons. “He’s come to see if the Road has changed.”

“If the Roof is strong?”

“It’s built strong.”

“And it hasn’t changed?”

Ma’s hands craft the braid. They stretch the skin by Nola’s lash line. “The Road hasn’t changed.”

“And we didn’t write him?”

“We didn’t write him.”

“Ma.” Nola looks up. “Is something broken?”

From her angle, Nola can see the bottom of Ma’s freckled chin. A scar, from years back, when she stumbled carrying a pot of potato-peel soup. She leans out to see the figure as he approaches fifty paces away. “That’s Mapper’s job to know.”

“But what about us?” Nola whispers. The air starts to move—she’s sure of it. Perhaps it’s been

moving all day. A ripple on the Road. Perhaps a brick loosened under the bash of Ma's hammer. Goosebumps rise on Nola's arm like puckered glue.

She's sure now that she can feel the Outside air getting in. It's cleaving through her muscles. Rushing around her knobby bones. A numb hum grows around the seams of her head. She squeezes her eyes tight. Retreats against Ma's knees.

*Our Walls are strong.* That's what Seb said that morning. She holds onto Ma's hand, which is in her hair.

Someone pulls a chair across the floor. The judder reverberates in her teeth. Flat-footed voices roam through her lungs. She feels it: that the dirt on the Outside of the Roof and Walls is in her throat.

She looks up at Ma. "Will he know quick?"

Ma scans the crowd. "Where's Lauren?" she asks. Her lips fall open, two pink dry stones.

## *Two*

Nola's seen Mapper once before. She was three. It's a memory that slinks around, like bleach on fingers, at the edge of her eyes. If she focuses, she can play it back. The perspective of the scene wanders between her own and shimmery reconstructions from other people's retellings.

She recalls his leather boots. She'd been crouched under Ma's yellow tassel skirt. One arm around her ankle, one clutching the hem. In the gap between the skirt's edge and the ground, she saw them—possum skin fur tufted above the laces. Around the man in the boots hung a weighty stench of lanolin on legs. He bent his knees. Peered down at her. She recalls that he said something—his mouth barely moving but fixed in a smile. The mothers on the Road tell her she giggled so much that she tipped backwards on her haunches to the ground.

When he steps into the lineup of neighbours, she thinks that he looks smaller than in the memory.

No one speaks. Even the wind quiets its pelting. Milton the Cat slinks along the eastern Wall of the passageway. As silence falls, he picks up the pace—his tufted tummy swinging—and darts into the pub as if he's struck with a sudden urge to be unseen.

Mapper bends his shoulders back. He's not exactly tall but stands broad and straight. He switches off his air-testing instrument. He does it with slow care—twisting a knob, retracting an antenna into the box, strapping it all in place within a case. It's like he fits the Road. It is as if he's got the metal of the bitumen around his bones.

Nola wonders if he somehow hasn't seen them. If the years of walking on the Road have made him blind. There is a paleness in his blue irises as if they are covered by vellum sheets. While they stand watching, he unwinds a green scarf from his head. Nola can see it bead at the hem and drip. Mapper takes a moment to tuck his air machine into a canvas backpack. Then he lifts his face and smiles at the crowd in the pub door. Across his heart, he lays a hand.

The skin is scar-white, riveted—the fingers bent.

“Well, I'll be damned. You're a handsome crew, alright. You can wipe that tragic look off your

faces—I'm just here to say: the weather's fine!"

His words drop like water. They ripple through the gathering. Everyone laughs.

"The weather's fine!" Mrs Manual hollers, clapping her spindle hands together.

"Nothing's wrong, see? Of course not. Go play." Ma pushes Nola back into the pub.

Mapper parts the neighbours and drops his wet scarf on the polished bar. He stinks of acid grime. Nola can taste it, even from the far end of the pub. It's the smell of sour sweat, dried and remoistened in clothing over days. Mrs Manual turns her face away as she peels his pack from his shoulders and puts it gently on the bench behind the bar. Milton jumps up and sniffs the arm straps, one paw raised.

"You look like a tattered lettuce!" Charlie laughs, clapping Mapper on the back.

"It's not an envied state of dress, is it? But that's an affliction of the job. And in every way more favourable than a life without the Road, eh?"

The crowd from the pub muddle in, surrounding him.

"What did you come for this time, Mapper? Did you miss us much?"

Fetu lines up a round of drinks at the bar. "Alright, alright. Just give the man some room. Have yourselves a round of drinks. Don't you ratbags want to celebrate?"

Nola wants to go back and hang on Ma's leg, but Ma is already busy pouring puddles of liquor into shallow glasses. Nola sidesteps through the neighbours instead. Her hair catches on a silver pocket button. She bends around the moving foot of Sylvie from No. 18. Twists through a gaggle of old women. Then, she sees Seb wobbling on a table on the far side of the room. He rises on his tiptoes to catch sight of Mapper.

"Hi," she says once she's shouldered over to him. She leans her arms on the tabletop.

"He's stinking like a ruddy shoe!" Seb flops down and swings his legs off the ledge.

The line at the bar turns into a jovial swarm as Fetu pulls an extra crate of cups and glasses from under the bench. The odd, mismatched ones, some of which aren't even pub ware at all but small jam jars and teacups, like the ones Ma keeps under her bed for special birthdays. Mapper grabs the first cup poured. He sniffs at the clear liquid and raises a toast.

“To Sill Road.” His voice has liquid gravity, a smooth nightie nylon quality. “May its Walls be as strong as this shit. Did you make this Fetu? Did you?”

“There’s gotta be a law against Fetu’s alcohol in the Road Guide. It’s an unstable substance!” yells Charlie from No. 18, who gets a dirty look from his wife, Sylvie.

Fetu runs a hand over his hair. He flips a glass. “Try brewing with Clive’s piddly green potatoes. See if you can make one better.”

The smell of the alcohol sharpens the air. Nola pulls herself up to sit beside Seb. He holds himself with his thin arms off the surface, balancing his legs out in front of him. Then he bumps against her, knocking her to the edge of the table. He grins—lips half closed; one side pulled up into his cheeks.

“Nearly gotcha. Anyone who falls off the table is a dead guy.”

“I wasn’t playing.”

“Dead fellas can’t talk.”

“You seen Lauren?” Nola cuts in. She wobbles to her feet on the tabletop but can’t spot her in the crowd. Can only see the sea of grown-ups—the maze of their tufted heads.

“Water this time, or so help me,” Mapper yells, holding out his cup. He lifts it for a second toast. The pub falls into a humming silence.

Nola stands still and sucks her breath into her cheeks.

“Right. This one’s serious,” Mapper says. He waves a fly from his face. “I have in my pack the new Road Guide, Expansion Five, straight from HSSS Institute. Read it careful. Now more than ever—” he pauses then, surveying them down the slope of his nose. “—we must remember the importance of our life principles. So, let’s raise one up to HSSS, of which I am so privileged to be a cog in the humble wheel. Come on, raise ‘em up! To the Road—”

Everyone repeats it after him in a midline drone. “—to the Road!”

Mapper’s face glows bruised by sun spraying through the pub’s skylight “—and those who remain on it!”

The repetition drums from the crowd. It bends through Nola’s skull. Wires down the coils of

her ears, burrowing in.

For a moment, the room is a gush of tinkling glasses. Then, silence as the liquor mulls in hot mouths. Milton freezes his passage along the bar, ears twitching. Beside him, Mrs Manual keeps her glass lifted over the crowd.

She looks towards the Roof of the pub. There is a single skylight window there. Small, rectangular. Light bends around her—sheds through the pale paper of her skin—to the pink capillaries below. Her silver wedding ring catches the light. It casts a moonly reflection on the ceiling.

Nola shakes Seb's arm. "Look!"

They watch the reflection waver on the plaster ceiling of the Roof.

Then Mrs Manual drops the glass. It fractals across the floor. She folds over at the waist into a face-contorting sob.

Ma and Sylvie weave through the crowd. They prop up Mrs Manual, gripping her by her elbows.

"Come now, Manual," smiles Fetu, passing her a fresh drink. "Nothing's wrong. Didn't you hear the Mapper?"

The pub lapses into a hushed rearrangement of people, glassware and chairs.

Just as Mapper takes the initiative to shoot back his water and stamp up on his leather boots in a show of saying something, Nola feels it: a sound down the passage.

But more than that—a displacement of air. A tensing of the pub's carefully grouted floorboards.

An air flood at high speed.

## *Three*

Lauren skids by in a muddy streak of hair and a blur of her ochre dress.

Those at the bar turn their heads just in time to see her figure rumble into view of the pub doorway. There's the noise first, the peevd air. Then, the gangly figure of the oldest Clark girl on wheels.

The insides of Nola's skin clench as she realises what Lauren's found. It's the skateboard. Nola thought she'd hidden it pretty well after last time—after Lauren dented No. 50's doorframe with the impact of her legs. Ma carried Lauren home from the crash, holding the knee blood in with her hand. Nola took the beat-up skateboard and stashed it inside No. 7, in Dead Mr Manual's wardrobe. She'd even tucked it behind his shirts, in the dark cave made behind their hanging.

The skateboard has always juddered to one side. The wheels look like where they came from—scrounged off the bottom of a broken rubbish trolley. Lauren screwed them onto the bedhead from the unused cot that Marama Walterbridge left when she was reassigned to Wellington. Lauren knocked about with Ma's hammer for a week before she got them on. Nola watched as she split rusty iron into the wood.

The Clark sisters had only seen a skateboard once before in an old-timey poster ad painted onto the panelling of the Wall by the Crop Rooms. They'd hardly seen anything on wheels. Only the Crop Room barrows and an old Cushman 53 rusting along the Road. Nola knows Lauren still isn't sure how you are supposed to make the thing turn.

The pubgoers can only watch as Lauren skids past. They wince at the shudder as she slams into the Wall opposite the pub. There is a distinct crack. Wood splinters. Lauren judders off the board, tumbling to a gravel-slowed stop.

For a moment, they only see her hair. The lavish nest of it, dark and static in the air. Then dust settles on the thin strands. She sits up, wiping gravel from her palms.

Nola sinks into her spot on the table. She watches as Mapper folds up from his stool. He takes a moment to wipe a speck of dust from his shirt. Then he strides through the neighbours to the front

of the pub—glass still gripped in his palm. Nola can just see him as he steps into the Road. Looks down at Lauren’s figure on the ground, sitting up and shaking grit from the back of her dress. He reaches out a scarred hand. Pulls her to her feet.

She stumbles and limps in a circle on one leg.

Nola can only watch their mouths contorting, silent, as they speak. But then Lauren swings her hair out of her face. She gestures at the skateboard and flips it up against the Wall with a slap of her foot. Mapper turns and calls out to the people all watching in the pub.

“Friends. I don’t want to raise alarm, but I’ve found—a little gust.”

Charlie snorts out a laugh. A chuckle ripples through the crowd. In one fell swoop Mapper leans forward and hooks Lauren up by her waist. She shrieks, but he slings her under his arm and walks her to the pub door. Her bare feet kick violently. The neighbours go wild. Lauren dissolves into livid wails.

He places her down in the middle of the pub. Her feet scatter on the smooth floor as she flees to Ma, flinging herself over her knee and toeing the floor, saying that it isn’t fair, it isn’t fair, and he hasn’t any right.

“That’s enough now, Lauren,” Ma hushes, which only makes Lauren’s wail increase in pitch.

Seb leaps down from the table. Nola follows, scraping her legs. They squeeze through the crowd till they’re by her sister’s side.

“Lauren. Let’s take this into perspective, shall we,” Fetu’s saying.

Seb dances around on one foot. “Everyone’s looking at you, Lauren!”

Ma sighs. “Not helpful, Seb.”

He goes on about how it isn’t his fault what’s true. Nola watches Mapper settle back onto his stool, already rolled up in a tight swirl of conversation. Milton creeps out from behind the drinks, squinting against the noise, and cleans his paws.

While Lauren scrapes the tears from her face, Nola sneaks out to the Road. She grabs the slick wood of the skateboard. She tucks it under her arm.

Lauren broke some of the Wall in the crash. Splinters of scavenged planks now jut out into the

air. The interlocking chips where the planks joined have torn right off. Underneath, Nola can see the inner layer of the Wall—patches of scrap metal, firm concrete, and mud-earth blocks.

This is the strongest section of Sill Road.

Nola knows it, has been told it, understands. But seeing it like this—she shudders. Grips the board under her arm. She looks back at her neighbours. For once, no one is watching. She runs away from the din, north up the covered Road. She patters past hollow doorways as the house numbers ascend. Past the door that isn't for houses—the Reuse Room, piled high with trash—the dark passage of the Road to the lemony Crop Rooms. She gets to the end of Sill Road. The windows stop there, and the Walls continue in a dark tunnel. On the right, there is an open arch. A huge generator hums inside. Nola tucks the broken board behind it. Upside-down, the metal wheels spin. Stop. The generator shucks warm dust from its fan on Nola's feet. She sprints from the room. Back to the Road. Pauses in front of the door on the opposite Wall—a metal door. It has one small window. It is framed with yellow stripes.

*Warning* reads the sign over the tiny pane of glass. *Outside Exposure Risk Beyond This Point.*

Nola squeezes her eyes shut and covers her ears. Like that, everything is quiet—the generator, the hidden skateboard and her skin.

## *Four*

“So, what’s the story with that Manual woman?” Mapper asks that evening, pulling up a chair to the Clarks’ kitchen fire. He’s got his boots unlaced and drying under the stove. Ma is stitching up his grey socks at the table. Lauren and Nola stir Spam into a big pot of vegetable soup. “She seemed to be in a state. Purely institutional curiosity, of course. Her late husband considered himself an intellectual, right?”

Mapper’s boots, under the stove, look kind of like a turnip that’s gone bad. Nola can’t look away. The shrivelled layers of their heels stare back. The mould-like possum fur is matted around the tongues.

“Does Mapper ever get new shoes?” she whispers to Lauren, scooping up a handful of carrot slices.

Lauren just takes the pile from her hands, dumps it in the soup, and glares back at Mapper. “Mr Manual woulda known,” she says loudly.

“What was that, kid?”

Lauren sighs heavily, the wooden spoon catching on the sediment of the pot. “I was talking to my sister. I was saying that Mr Manual knew lots of stuff about people. He knew lots of stuff about everything. Good egg,” she says.

‘Good egg,’ Mapper laughs. The laugh stretches his upper lip into his mouth. “That’s a funny kid you got there, Mrs Clark.”

Over dinner, Ma answers questions about the other neighbours on the Road: what Sylvie has been saying and how much Tobias sleeps these days. Lauren scowls at her spoon and rolls her eyes when Mapper makes loud jokes. It doesn’t take long for Seb to slink in and join them. He eats at a different house each night, but he eats at Ma’s table more than he’s supposed to.

“Swapped with Clive’s lot for tonight,” he says at the door, then sinks into a seat at the table, looking Mapper up and down, his mouth open, his new loose tooth clicking in against his tongue.

Once the soup is gone, Mapper tells stories. There’s one about a leak he’d found further up the

Road last year. A triple-insulated Wall that was caved in by a satellite dish during a cyclone.

“I got an alert that a house had been damaged. It was at a small settlement, not much smaller than Sill Road.”

Mapper mimes to them how he donned his protective Outdoor suit, how he fitted the mask over his face, and how he covered the gaps around his boots in wax tape. He tells them how he opened the front door to see an emergency door slammed shut—how he wrenched it open only to find silence, the satellite dish sticking through the Roof, the window broken open, and a single slipper in the middle of the living room floor.

While Ma pours him more water, he tells them about a goose he’d seen in the old Rotorua Dome. Five years ago, but he remembered it like yesterday. The goose was heavy, grey. Wired off in a pond. Its feet made fluid circles. Water droplets beaded on its back, glinting like sap under the dome-filtered daylight. Its neck bent flat to the surface of the water. It fixed its eye on him as it floated.

“Last of its kind as far as we know,” he tells them. “Shook me to my core. Like seeing a hanged man’s boots just waiting to be nicked.”

Ma shakes her head. Places her drink down on the table and folds her hands. “It’s a calling, being here. To preserve the Road when the Outside takes so much.”

Mapper nods. “We save nature from Nature. But you can’t save ‘em all.”

Seb fidgets with his empty bowl. “What happened to the people in that house?”

“The ones whose Roof caved in?” Mapper sighs. “Don’t fully know. Can’t imagine we’d care to either. Their Walls were weak. They lived on thermal land, only a couple of hours from the Rotorua ruins—it was difficult to keep Walls sealed when there were mud pools popping up all over the place. Guess they’d been focusing on foundations more than roofing. When the storm came, they didn’t have a chance. Air got in all at once. Those poor souls got a raw deal, no doubt about it. It’s a terrible thing, but that’s Mother Nature. They pulled the airlock doors to shut their house off from the rest of the Road.”

“But why did they go and only leave their slippers?” says Lauren, stirring at the end of the table.

Mapper leans forward. “I suppose those people wandered off somewhere. Into the Outside. Wandered as far as they could, at least. Wouldn’t be nothing left to look for by the time I got to them. That’s radiation for you. I don’t for one second believe they died without the comfort of knowing they were faithful to our nation till the end.”

A shudder crawls up Nola’s neck into her ears and hides there.

She feels Mapper watching her from the corner of his eye.

“You got a thought?” he asks.

Nola shakes her head. Whispers, quiet. “Couldn’t they have been all right? Maybe they had their thick clothes on.”

“You see this?” He pulls up his cotton sleeve. Holds out his arm.

The skin is stretched, glossy and mottled. The surface is brown. Crumbling. Large sections slump with pale craters and flaking growths. “You don’t want to go out there. One wrong move, and that air can strip your skin clean off before you feel it. That’s why you got the likes of me to mark out the covered Road.”

He reaches into his bag and pulls out a leather-wrapped map. Mapper lays it out. Unfolds it across the table.

“Here,” he says, pointing to a small section. Nola looks at the lines of their tunnel town. The uneven spread of houses branching off it, like rooms along a hallway. The pub in the middle stands out as much larger than the rest. It even shows the crop room, a huge rectangular box at the north end. Mapper keeps unfolding the map, larger and larger. Domes and highways sprawl like a mass of spider webs. “This here’s our world, Nola.”

“So, we’re in the lines?” she asks, her shoulders sunk to table level.

“The lines are all of it. All the world we’ve got. And those big domes, those are the cities. The folk there don’t feel the threat of the Outside the same, but they live by the same principles as you on Sill Road. Any place there’s people breathing, there’s a Roof, a Wall—and if you’re lucky—a couple of windows.”

“And what’s that?” Nola points to the blank space beyond the markings of a city, lined with

darker green.

“That’s nothing to you. It’s like this dead crust rotting off my arm. It’s desert or hills or sea. Don’t matter what it is. It’s all ruined by the people who lived and warred before us. It’s all poisoned by their machines. Their ruddy smoke and waste.”

He folds his hands on the table. Nola stares at the dying skin around his wrists. He rolls his sleeve down, but Nola can still see it there, cracking under the cloth.

Mapper sighs. “The world is the Roads, Nola. Anyone who tells you different is trying to get you dead.” He glances over at Lauren, who’s picking at her stew. “You know, we complain a lot about the state of things, but life’s real simple these days. It’s where you don’t feel any of that goddamned wind.”

## *Five*

When Nola wakes up the next day, Lauren's bed is abandoned. The sheets knot in a pile at the end of the mattress.

Nola wanders aimlessly through the morning. She finds Lauren in the Manuals' house, lounging in the living room, browsing Dead Mr Manual's collection of old books.

"Whatcha doing?" asks Nola.

"Not going on my skateboard," says Lauren, turning a page.

"Oh," Nola bruises red. She blinks away an image of it, skulking beneath the generator.

"Watcha reading?"

"Read something for yourself." Lauren flicks a magazine at her sister. "Tryin' to find some interesting stories."

"Like Mapper's stories?" asks Nola, opening the frayed copy of *The School Journal of New Zealand, 1948*. It has black and white etchings on the front. The picture shows a girl looking through a window at a tree. Nola flips to the words, but they're long and fuzzy edged. "What's your one about?" she asks.

Lauren heaves a page over with the full strength of her arm. "Sheep farming."

"Oh," says Nola. "Like the Herd Rooms up Taupo way?"

"Nah," says Lauren. "Sheep farming in olden times. Outside farming."

"That's mad," says Nola.

Lauren slys her attention off the page and fixes on Nola's furrowed brows. "Madder even than Mapper's arms?"

Nola grins. She stomps the grin down from her cheeks. "Crazy," she says, savage.

It doesn't take long for Mrs Manual to wander in to boil her morning water. She kicks the Clark girls out. "Only three little buggers on Sill Road, but you make the mess of a full regiment," she mumbles, scooping books up off the floor.

Lauren slips out with a stack under her arm to return later. They head for the pub, only to be

stopped by an “Oi” from Seb, perched on his usual windowsill across from No. 13.

“Thought you was still in a bad mood.” He tips his head at Lauren.

Lauren sighs. “Not anymore. I’ve just been reading.”

“‘Bout sheep,” says Nola.

“Bloody sheep!”

“And horses. And goats,” Lauren clarifies, jumping up on the windowsill.

Nola leans her back between them on the wooden ledge. A flake of paint cuts into her arm.

The blood rises like sweat. She can feel the heat from Seb and Lauren’s legs washing out towards her.

“I saw an Outside goat once,” says Seb.

Lauren scowls. “Right.”

“Well, actually, Fetu saw it out a window and told us about it. I mean, me and the men, ya know? It was the Goatman, probably. It was crazy tall, and hairy, and had horns like a goat but walked like a man.”

“I thought the Goatman was meant to have a man’s face but walk on all fours,” said Lauren.

“That’s a foul-assed legend.”

“Yeah, foul-assed.” Nola wriggles, her back cooking in the sun. “There is nothing living in the desert.”

They all turn, pulled by some invisible force, to the heat of the window. Outside, the earth sparks with the occasional sun glint on sharp dirt. Strange grasses lie folded towards the ground like open pages.

“I’ve got a game idea,” Lauren interrupts the buzz of their pause. “If someone says Outside, you gotta make up a funny story about what you’d do if you were Outside right away or eat dust.”

“That’s not a game,” sighs Nola, plucking bitumen up with the pinks of her toes.

“Course it is. It’s like Truth or Dare. It’s just Outside or Eat Dust.”

Seb cackles, rolling from side to side. “Eat dust. Gross.”

“Whatever, let’s just play.”

“Outside!” Seb yells and points at Lauren.

She turns towards them, wriggling in her spot. “Okay. If I were Outside, I’d knock on Mrs Manual’s window and go ARHG.” She makes a face, peeling her lips back from her mouth. Nola can see through her teeth, with their hairline grey streaks.

Seb’s bare stomach undulates with laughter. It caves in below his ribs.

“Outside!” Lauren yells, finger-gunning Seb.

“If I were Outside—I’d—”

“Hurry up or eat dust!” Lauren jumps to her feet. “Eat dust, eat dust, eat dust —”

“—I’d chase down the Goatman, and—dress him in your Ma’s clothes.”

Lauren collapses onto the ground. Nola snorts despite herself. Seb whirs towards her, poking her cheek.

“Outside!” he says.

Nola shakes him off. “Nah, this is ridiculous.”

“OUTSIDE,” Lauren bellows.

Nola bites down a smile. “If I was Outside, I’d—make pies out of the mud and—serve them for dinner.”

They stare at her.

“Either way, you eat dust, ratbag,” roars Seb, slipping off the windowsill with a thud.

Nola looks up, blushing, to see Mapper standing in the Clarks’ front doorway, his arms crossed across his shirt. He watches them. “What are you lot playing at?”

Nola straightens up. Lauren sighs.

Mapper watches them with a raised eyebrow. His voice is rumbly gravel. “Alright then. Come on in if you’re a Clark girl. Your mother’s got your breakfast on the table.”

“We don’t eat breakfast on weekdays,” Lauren stares him down.

“Must be your special day then,” Mapper grins. “Come on in.”

## *Six*

They lurk at the kitchen table under the hanging pots. Scoop porridge into their bowls. Mapper talks to Ma about calling a meeting.

“Come on,” Lauren groans. “We’ve already had one boring one this month.”

Lauren gets a tight slap across the back of the head, and Nola takes a bite of her food. At the last meeting, she fell asleep against the pub Wall, sitting on a box of magazines. It was all “Can Fetu please keep the noise level from his radio down in the mornings,” and “Whoever isn’t putting the caps back on the fertiliser bottles can go get goddamn packing.” The room smelt like one big summer underarm.

But Mapper ignores Lauren’s pleas. Nola can see him bending and unbending his bare feet against the concrete floor. After they eat, he saunters out to let everyone know to assemble in the pub after lunch.

This kind of meeting always sends a swarm of chatter around the Road. By nine o’clock, Nola and Lauren are on washing-up duty. Mrs Manual walks into the room as Nola wipes a swollen oat off a bowl with a wet rag. She pauses to make Ma and Mrs Manual a cup of lemon tea from the old metal pot.

“Of course, Mapper’s staying with us,” Ma says, as if she wouldn’t have glued him to the fold-out couch to keep him there. “But I haven’t seen the meeting’s agenda. I really haven’t got a clue what it’s about. Officially, at least.”

Lauren scowls over her shoulder at the pair. She pulls the last of the dishes from Nola’s hands and slams them down, heavy, into the sagging kitchen cupboard.

Seb skips into No. 5 after lunch. His hair’s slicked back in a side part (a move enforced by Clive). He’s got a striped shirt on, buttoned all the way to his neck. He greets Ma and Mrs Manual on his way to the girls’ room.

“Yous comin’?” he asks cordially, leaning his head in.

“Just so long as you’re not,” Lauren mutters, stomping her feet down into her shoes. “Get out of our room. Your shirt’s too big.”

“It was my old fella’s,” he says and tucks the ends into his pants.

But by the time they’ve followed him out of the house and down to the pub, people are already seated—forming ranks. They face the right Wall, where Mapper sits. He’s looking down at the ground, deep in thought. There is a tense zippering sound to the conversations.

Fetu’s closed off the bar and put a cloth along the bench to make it look like a formal area instead of one Tobias threw up all over the night before. The chairs fill quickly. They’re set a hand width apart. Mrs Manual glares at Sylvie from No. 18 when she laughs at Milton chewing on a cicada. There’s a general air of someone about to attack—of everyone curling their fists inside their pockets.

“Right, perfect day for a quick, friendly catch-up,” Mapper says, rising off his stool.

Nola’s feet cramp in the shoes she hardly ever wears. She presses her blisters against their leather cage, one by one. Seb and Lauren climb up on the bar. She pulls herself up after them. Swings her legs. Feels blood sparks back into her toes.

“What’s happened this time? Not some Able-Archer nonsense again?” Charlie yells, to a round of pocketed laughter.

Mapper smiles down at the ground. A hush grows into silence. Even Milton hesitates in his wandering. He saunters up behind Lauren’s back, lies down and watches.

“For many years, you’ve waited here, looking out at the dead remains of this desert-stretched Road, for a time when we can go Outside again. The days of reckless running in the wild are gone—we’re not a young species anymore. We know the failings of our fathers. Aren’t we all descendants of their choices to be part of societal desolation?”

“Still, we got the Road up better than the fools over the ditch. Half our country was Walled in three years,” Charlie whispers to Fetu, who grins.

Mapper ignores them graciously. “They chose to harm us and our families with their extraneous machinery and villainous devices. Their nuclear schemes. Their toxic smoke. They don’t

understand the value of simple, family living. They've taken the air from our lungs. And so, we wait."

Nola hangs her head. Her lids grow thick at the lash line, so heavy they pull her gaze to the stitches in her shoes. Her legs feel like flummery. All strange and foamed. Mapper looks around the gathering.

"It's been hard. No one can deny it. You here, on Sill Road, know it more than most in our nation. More than those in the cities, with their high Walls and their Roofs so distant that they can't see the toxic raindrops being held away from them. You hear the danger. You hear the arrows of dirt cast upon this Roof. You rally against the summer heat and the bitter snow. You know more than any what it takes to stay alive. How close we are to destruction all the time. How we need to keep our Walls tight. Our diligence to the HSSS Institute's guidelines even tighter. I know it, too."

Mapper rolls up the sleeve of his arm. He holds it out.

"It's been fifteen years since my brush with the Outside. One moment of negligence with a Noddy suit led to this. There was one rip in my sleeve. Seven minutes of exposure to the Outside air. If the fellow with me hadn't pulled me back inside and patched me up—I'd have been as dead as the man we went out there to bury. As the Road Guide states: *the Road is narrow and those who take it are few*. How lucky to be the Few."

Mapper holds up a bent finger to his mouth. Wind skates the Roof in branching gusts. The sound is deep and heady. Like when a movie reel runs white and spotty at the end.

"We don't doubt it, do we?" whispers Mapper. "No. We remember the fates of the Many." Sweat curdles in the dip of Nola's back.

Charlie is fidgeting, wiping his brows with thumbby fingers. "It's just life, Mapper. Ain't no other way to live."

"And what a joy," Mapper beams.

Mrs Manual starts to clap, and it's picked up around the room.

"So, I hear we've lost good men these last few years," he continues conversationally. "Fine men. But we are not the kind of folk to lose faith because of it."

Sylvie from No. 18 raises her hand, but Mapper hushes her. "I recall young Seb's father, for

instance. It would be seven years since we last met. But I remember—he was sharp. Had a moral handshake. He showed me the very panels that light the ceiling over the Road and how he repaired them. Such care, you wouldn't believe it. Such precision. Like a surgeon—his hands were that steady! His gifts were certainly life-preserving. His work has kept those lights on down the Road long after his death. And those lights brought me back to all of you.” As he speaks, he lays a hand on Seb's shoulder.

Seb hangs his head. His ears redden. Nola can smell the rabbit-fat grease rubbed through his hair, melting.

“Your old man, Seb, he's providing for you even now. Letting you live in light within our kind Walls.”

Seb nods. Twists his hands till white bends through, and sniffs. When Mapper lifts his grip, Nola can see Seb hold his shoulder still, like if he doesn't move, the presence of Mapper's hand will stay.

“And then there's old Manual.” Mapper turns to the dead man's wife, captivated in her seat. “He was a troubled man, wasn't he?”

Mrs Manual nods, her face rumbling with caught tears.

“A gentleman in the end, I hear, despite his youthful doubt. I remember the day he told me that he'd hated his childhood in the cities. All the big space got him down. Made him feel lost. And it would, wouldn't it? And, of course, he had his doctoring, his literature, his looks, even, eh? Then he moved here. Met his wife. And then he understood, didn't he? Realised the purpose of our way of life.” He leans in close to the old woman's shaggy ear. “Listen to the wind. Hear its hate. Think of his love in the Walls, keeping you safe.”

Mrs Manual grasps Mapper's hand. Her fingers shake. She tips forward, her mouth parted to cry. There's a piece of loose skin, like a thin peeling of parsnip, bitten from the corner of her lip. It lingers stiffly as she gapes. Her chest starts to gasp. She doesn't make a sound. He lifts her chin.

Then, to Nola's surprise, he starts to copy her sharp breathing.

She looks at him like he's the last drop of water from a tap. Nola can see his neck bulging. Mrs Manual grasps at her collar. Then he sighs, once—long and heavy. Mrs Manual shudders. Collapses in

on herself. He puts his hand behind her head. Pulls her to his chest. Pressed against him, she slumps like a ragdoll.

After a moment, he leans her up against Sylvie in the next seat.

Nola closes her mouth.

“I’m here to double down on the regulations,” Mapper says. “But I need you to know that I do that with love. Love for all of you and for the men who’ve sacrificed their lives so we can sit here, drinking, on this Road. Because that’s what the Road does—it keeps the ones we care for safe. Any questions?”

Tobias, at the back, lifts up his hand. “Any new storm predictions from the Institute?”

Mapper scratches the back of his head. “Possibility of high winds at the end of next week,” he says. “It’s likely there’ll be a noxious cloud heading across the Pacific in a few days. And record levels of hot. That’s why old Manual didn’t sunbathe on the other side of the Wall, fellas. He’d have been eggy toast before he even carked it.”

## *Seven*

Each morning when Nola wakes up, she can hear Mapper in the kitchen. His knife taps on a plate. Ma brews him dandelion tea. Cooks him vegetables and little quail boil-ups.

The Clarks lounge around the house trying not to get in his way. Lauren bellies on her bed, reading the sheep farming book, although occasionally she flips and lies it across her stomach, tapping the cover with her eyes closed. She ignores Mapper's pacing in the kitchen. His opening and closing of maps. The neck-itching crumple of the papers. The scratch of pens on his endless regulatory forms. Nola sits beside her, chewing the ridges off her fingernails. By the second afternoon, she is begging Ma to let her watch a movie. She draws the curtains in the living room and shuts the door. She puts on the 1954 film *White Christmas*. She decides that if she can't move just like Vera-Ellen, she'll die.

Lauren sneaks in after the first few minutes. She leaves the door ajar so that a beam of light cuts across the film screen. She leans over the back of the couch.

"This is a dumb film," she says as a dance number starts. The sisters of the film swirl around each other while fluttering large blue feathers.

Nola squirms. "Isn't it a bit dreamy though? We can put on something else if you want."

Outside the door they can hear Mapper dumping his things down on the table. He tuts to himself as he shakes papers flat across the surface.

Lauren sighs. "Nah. Mapper tried to make me be a paperweight for his map. I'm just biding time here. Watch whatever you want." She looks back at the door. They can both see Mapper, the end of a pencil gripped between his teeth as he leans over the maps. "I gotta get out of here."

Nola wriggles down further in her seat.

The films arrived a few days after Mr Manual's funeral. Mrs Manual found them under his bed. They were relics from his childhood, preserved in tissue paper and dusty boxes. She left them in the Clark's doorway, along with the film equipment. An hour went by as Ma struggled to set up the machine, an image finally shuddering onto the screen as the first reel clicked into place. They watched their way through *Singing in the Rain*, *Meet Me in St. Louis*, and *Some Like It Hot*. Nola was sent to

bed halfway through that one. Lauren leaned back on the armchair and said it was so nice that Mr Manual had liked musicals. Ma said that what Mr Manual liked was none of their business.

Nola's not sure what a White Christmas is. She's never had one. She's never spent an evening in a club car on a train ride to Vermont with perfectly height-matched strangers. As the credits roll, she leans back on the sofa, the slick of her eyes flooded with the film's flickering colours.

She puts the film on again while they eat kumara mash with nubs of Spam from Mapper's pack at breakfast the next morning. The meat falls from the tin in a slow, gelatinous glub.

"Not all at once," whispers Ma, dicing off tiny cubes onto Lauren's plate. "And don't put your bowl down there. That's Mapper's map. We mustn't get it dirty."

They all perch their bowls between piles of Mapper's papers, sprawled across the table.

"It's not fair," says Lauren. "Nola gets to watch her favourite film, and Mapper gets the table, but I don't even get a decent fill of the good meat? What's in it for me?"

"What's in it for you?" chuckles Mapper in mock shock. "Blimey. You slave to keep a girl alive, but you can't keep her grateful."

Lauren chews down her mash and dumps the bowl into the sink. She darts out the front door.

"Where do you think you're going?" Ma calls after her.

Nola listens but hears no reply.

She leaves the door between the dining table and the film room open. She can hear Mapper get up to the front door to catch Fetu as he passes. He starts on about something to do with the pub's skylight regulations. But Nola focuses on the screen as Danny Kaye lifts Vera-Ellen off the ground—watches the tips of her tiny feet fold in a perfect weightless touchdown. When their dance ends, Nola resets the film and plays it again.

The next watch around, the scene feels warm, slipping over her eyes. So familiar and right. The soundstage encloses the dancers. Backdrop boards, painted to look like a hushed blue skyline with quiet trees, presses in around them. A bridge swings over a hushed chipboard river. When Vera-Ellen casts her pink skirts out over it, the stage lights melt the satin into silver dew. The air is clear, and still, and Vera-Ellen's smiling.

## *Eight*

It's Lauren who finds Place.

Every day Mapper has new job for the neighbours. He needs their hands to unroll papers and file-through type-written records, or re-glue sections of Wall with sickly glue. It leaves Ma home alone with more children to entertain than, as she confides in Nola, she strictly speaking enjoys.

On that morning, they lurk around the kitchen letting Ma sleep off the heat. Seb skulks in to read a dog-eared comic strip on asteroids for the hundredth time. Lauren slurps porridge. Runs her spoon through the slop. She holds it up and waits for the grains to drip back into the bowl.

"Why are you staring at the spoon?" Nola asks.

Lauren shrugs. "Watchin' the oats. They move so slow. That's what glass is like. It's liquid, just moving so lazily we'd never know it."

Nola glances at Seb, who's raised the book over his head, feet curled on the edge of the table. She's not sure if Lauren says things like this on purpose to be odd. If she is bored or feeling what Ma calls *fractious*, she does it a lot. Seb never quite manages to avoid her bait.

"Nah though, glass is solid. Everyone knows that." He places his book down against his raised legs, like they're a pulpit.

Lauren chuckles— she carves sections into the porridge with the spade of the spoon, watching the slop part and inchmeal back into place.

They don't see her again until after lunch. She runs into Ma's room, where Seb and Nola are spun out on the rug playing *Cluedo*.

"Do you believe in the Central Plateau Goatman?"

They lift their heads. Seb holds the plastic remains of a Mrs Peacock counter—her figure smelted down into a slumped cone. He'd left her stashed on his bedroom window last summer. She'd lain out on the sill. Nola has her feet in the air. She contorts them into stabbing movements, which she aims in Seb's direction. He picks at the game board.

“It’s not a Goatman, it is a goat mutant,” says Nola. “Gone all weird in the bad air. I asked Mrs Manual. She says she saw it as a kid. It’s dead now, for sure, though.”

“She’s being looney,” Seb says, peeling off a strip of sticky tape from the 2D dining room.

Lauren idles at the door, pulling her blouse up at the sides and knotting it under her arms. She leans to one side with her hands on her hips. “Right. But Fetu said he saw it once, too. You said that, Seb. Maybe the Goatman has his own shelter somewhere. Like a Road of his own, somehow, and that’s how he survives.

“Yeah, right,” Seb laughs.

“I’m not kidding.” Lauren picks a hangnail. “I know something you don’t.”

Seb and Nola give each other a long look over the *Cluedo* board. It’s Seb who finally caves.

“You gonna tell us?”

“Maybe.”

“What do ya want?”

“Nothin’,” Lauren sighs. “Might have found his house, is all. You could come with me to see it if you wanted. Okay, so maybe it’s not his house, but it’s—a Thing.”

“A Thing?” says Seb. He rolls onto his back and throws Mrs. Peacock (impaled in the library) at Nola. Hits her on the cheek.

“It’s a place.” Lauren turns back to the door. “You guys never listen to me. Swear on my life.”

“You sure it’s not somethin’ you been reading in one of old Manual’s books?” asks Seb.

“Ow,” says Nola, slightly delayed.

They follow Lauren down the northbound Road. The heat is foul. Sweat and dust curl up their noses. Nola starts to panic that they are getting a little far away from home without water, but Lauren tells her to grow up—they are only going as far as the Crop Rooms.

Nola wraps her arms across her chest. From the Crop Rooms, it’s only a short walk to the generator, Sill Road’s end and the Outside door. She likes the Crop Rooms, though—the open sprawl of them. Likes to walk through the tubs of potatoes and pick roots from the Walls where Clive grows arugula. She jogs to keep up with Lauren. They stomp to a stop at a fork in the Road.

They take the right-hand fork. Here, there are no windows. It's the passage to the Crop Rooms. Shadowed, windowless, crumbed with potting mix and dust. Boxy, mismatched Potting Sheds line the left-hand side. Nola hurries past them, trying to catch sight of a glow in the approaching door to the Crop Rooms. The door is wide. Covered with thick, transparent plastic.

Lauren saunters forward. "Hurry up," she calls back over her shoulder.

It's not that they're not allowed to be here. But Nola's feet go frigid. Seb takes her arm. Skips forward.

The Potting Sheds tower over the children like rickety old people—their weatherboard fronts bent and sagging—their beat-up doors like hollow mouths. Lauren pulls up at the end of the fork. From here, Nola can see through the dirt-splattered surface of the Crop Room's plastic sheets to the rows of slumbering greens beyond. Everything is quiet. Then Lauren turns to her left and pushes open the door to Potting Shed Twelve. Her steps crackle on loose stones as she disappears into the dark.

For a moment, Nola and Seb wait in the passageway.

"Yous coming?" Lauren calls from the shed.

"This stinks," says Seb, poking his head in the door. Nola tiptoes after him. Dust clings to the ridges of her toes.

Inside, Nola can already see signs of Lauren's presence. The shed is dingy and cluttered. Still, she can tell that things have been moved out of line on the shelves. Buckets linger, piled up as if climbed on. A jar of fertiliser drips to the floor in one corner in a viscous black pool, like wicked molasses.

But Lauren's already busy, shoving a wooden crate out from the Wall. It shudders across the ground. She's moved a pile of planter boxes already, leaving a track of wormwood sawdust along the floor.

"There are stairs," she says simply. "I've been down."

## *Nine*

Seb and Nola creep up to the spot Lauren has uncovered. With the room's contents moved, they can see the shed's cheap tin floor exposed. A terracotta scar of rust runs down the Wall, where a pipe must be dripping. A thin line of water trickles there, still. The edge of the Wall is green-crackled orange and puckered. The water has nibbled a section of the floor away. There's a hole, jagged-edged and nicely Lauren-sized, booted open.

"That happen naturally?" Seb asks.

"Pretty much."

Nola can see pale lines of concrete stairs and a coolness rising out from underneath them. It catches in her throat.

It just sits there: a place that no one on Sill Road has ever talked about.

Even Lauren stays silent for a moment as she stands over the opening.

"I think there might be an Outside leak," Nola stammers. "We should cover it up."

Lauren holds her at arm's length. "You're not listening. I went down. Am I dead?" she turns her head to one side and crosses her eyes. They roll back into her skull.

"Not dead." Nola says.

"Alright then. Come on in."

Nola shivers as she rests her bare foot on the first step. She sinks down into the hole, and with the next step down her knees reach the level of the gritted floor. It makes her feel closed in. Held tight in all the wrong ways. Closed. Slick and solid. Mr Manualled, all bunched up in a box, stuffed in. The day he was buried, the town lined up by the big east windows at the end of Sill Road. The men dressed up in their Noddy Exposure Suits in the contamination room, stepping over the creaky coffin. They opened the emergency hatch. Carried him out. Nola remembers. Tobias and Charlie did it. They dug him a grave. Walked back in and decontaminated. Stood in the little room between the Outside Door and the yellow-bordered door to Sill Road, Nola saw it all, even though her eyes only just reached the window where everyone else stood, watching quietly. Ma was at her shoulder. Lauren sucked tears

from her cheeks into her mouth, digging a sharp fingernail into her thigh until it frayed white. Nola didn't know why Lauren couldn't just be sad. People die. They just lie down with their hats over their faces.

Right now, Nola isn't sad; she's fizzing. She prickles with each step lower into the space beneath the shed. A dark haze swills around her ankles as she feels her way down the steps. Lauren's already in, two steps ahead—lost beneath the flooring. Nola stretches out a toe, looking for the next step. A dank, mossy smell rises. Lingers in the air.

“Don't take all day.”

Nothing else could make her this cold in January. Not even a chunk of Fetu's ice, slinking down her spine. She tries to step back up but knocks her head. There's a sharp pain. Warmth smatters under her head. Then Seb is behind her, on the stairs, stepping down.

“C'mon, Nola.” He takes hold of her shoulder to steady himself. Fingers warm. They trip down. Then they land onto a hard, cold floor.

“You think there's a light?” Nola squeaks. A pause. Then, from the purple haze, a laugh rolls out. Their vision adjusts to the faint outline of Lauren. Nola feels a hot smile rising through her cheeks. “Was just asking.”

Seb squints. “Could use some light, though, seriously. This place still kinda sucks.”

The room flickers into a yellow glow. “You silly buggers of little faith,” Lauren says, now illuminated by Ma's emergency oil lamp. “I've already been down here, remember. I've thought of things.”

Nola's relieved to see that Lauren's hair doesn't move at all while she speaks. It statics, like the spider webs strung across the dark ceiling. Things hang about in the space: a rusty ladder, a big skip of wood and nails. A rag blackened and frozen into a false drape. An empty crate marked *AMO*. From the cast of the oil lamp, Nola can see that the Walls are concrete brick. Sandbags line the back. There's a puncture wound in one of the sacks. A dormant, perfect spill piled below.

Lauren poses by an upturned bucket. She's already collected a pile of old blankets and lifts them off the floor to show Nola. She has an old tea chest filled with pegs. Her bed pillow rests,

crumbled, on the floor.

“So,” says Lauren. “Either of you wanna play with me now?”

Seb steps out in front of Nola. He goes up to the sandbags. Brushes his hand along them.

“What’s on the other side of this?”

Nola wonders if the air is moving towards her. A tight, hot spark flushes through her. She turns towards the stairs. The brittle circle of light draws her towards it, but Lauren sighs and skips in front of her.

“Ordinary sandbags, Seb. Look. I’m telling you, if there was a leak or no Wall behind the sandbags, we’d know. You saw Mapper’s arm, right? He said to me that it took seven minutes to rip off his skin. My skin—” she pauses and turns her arm in the lamp-glow “—is bloody glorious.”

Nola relents and creeps towards the sand-spill on the floor. There’s so much dust on the Road. So many kinds of dirt. But sand is mostly Outside. Mini rocks, Ma calls it. Dust of bones, plants, and pumice from volcanoes—from Lake Taupo an age ago and some from Tongariro blowouts. Up close, it looks tan, like the tender fur on Milton’s stomach where his brown fades to cream.

“You can touch it,” Lauren says. “It isn’t gonna bite you.” And then she presses her index finger against the surface, breaking down the perfect cone. Lifts it away, crumbed with sticky grains that dangle from her skin. She lifts a handful. Let it drop in a soft line of mist.

An ache blunders in Nola’s chest. She reaches out a finger as if someone else is inside her. Moving her arm with strings. Quiet. Her nail hits the sand. It falls around her skin in a wishbone wake.

Seb crouches beside her with his knees up by his cheeks. He runs his finger through the pile.

“Hey,” he whispers. “We could play hangman.”

They blow the sand out flat, their breath rippling the grains in a feathered spray. Nola guesses letter after letter until there is a stand, a head, a body and one wobbly leg. Then Lauren guesses ‘p’, and the word spells ‘place’, and from then on, when they plan to gather at Potting Shed Twelve, they tell each other to meet at Place.

## *Ten*

After a week of Mapper getting Sill Road up to Road Guide standard the town gathers in Fetu's pub, quietly nursing their drinks in swollen hands.

"I ain't patched so many bits of Wall in all my life," says Charlie as he picks plaster from under his nails.

"Amazing you're alive still, really," chuckles Mapper, slapping him on the back. He flops down beside him.

Nola is sitting at a table beside Ma and Mrs Manual. She's glancing at Seb. Watching him tap his knuckles on the bar. Lauren slumps under the window.

"You must come along. No more only playing with your friends. We're one big family on Sill Road," Ma had said that afternoon when Lauren kicked up a stink about having to go to the pub.

"But it's not even a proper meeting!" she moaned. "Mapper just wants to spend time with the adults. We're not adults. We don't need to spend time with anyone."

But sure enough, at 6:30pm sharp, they found themselves dragged along to the pub to ache on the wooden chairs.

Nola can't help thinking about Place. Even as the neighbours begin to laugh and peck their cups against the tables, she thinks about the earthy smell of Potting Shed Twelve—cool and scattered with metal tools. She thinks about the steps: the way the floor retreats again and again. Her legs thundering against them with each hesitant plunge into the dark. She imagines the oil lamp on the floor. Seb, Lauren and Milton the Cat crowded around it.

At least Milton can slip out of the pub uninhibited.

"We need a permanent Road Repair Agent, like what the big cities have, if we're going to have to do all this maintenance regularly," Charlie starts up again. "You could get us one of those, couldn't ya Mapper? Someone young 'n strong to keep our Walls in good shape."

"Hey, train up your own chumps to do the hard yards," laughs Mapper. "I don't just have Road Agents on tap for all the piddly northern settlements."

Charlie casts his eyes around the room. “Oi. Sylvie. Want to be Sill Road’s Road Agent?”

Sylvie guffaws, tipping back the last of her drink. “Drop on your head, Charlie.”

“Nah, I reckon we need one of the young ones. They’ve still got energy stashed up in their muscles.”

“Seb’ll do it!” Fetu says, clapping Seb’s shoulder across the bar.

“Sure. But I don’t know nothin’.” Seb stops tapping his knuckles. He grins, like the grown-ups.

Mapper has his shoes off like everyone else. He stretches out the nodules of his feet. Their calluses are thick, black and solid where they’ve cut against his walking shoes and the long days on the Road. “Young Seb will do something good with himself, just like we all have done for him, won’t you, Seb?”

Seb nods at Mapper over his shoulder.

“See, the young ones get it. The young ones love the Road. And we always choose to protect the things we love.” Mapper says.

A silence brews in the dips of the neighbour’s cheekbones. They turn their glasses in their fingers, nursing their snubbed devotion.

“Come now,” Mapper mumbles. “Don’t ruin my night of rest here. There’s plenty of drink. Enough bread that you’ll not need to scrape the crumbs into your bowls. And I’m here. Isn’t that cause enough for a little celebration?”

He plants his feet on the ground and stalks up to Fetu to be poured another drink.

Nola keeps imagining Place over breakfast with Mapper each morning. They make the most of his presence. He gifts them a shiny tin of golden syrup, and Nola watches Ma dribble it carefully across the mash in enamoured silence. She understands, without Lauren or Seb having to say it, that Ma can never know that Place exists.

Each day, she has a new plan. They could paint the Walls with whitewash left over from Tobias’ front door. If she takes them gradually, she could sneak her spare bedsheets down there.

She sees Seb walking with his half-crushed Uckers gameboard under his arm. Sees him tuck a yo-yo in his pocket one day when she's playing at his house. Sees them later, wedged between the sandbags on the Wall. Bit by bit, they move their earthly treasures down the stairs.

Once she has gotten over the initial terror, the stairs themselves prove intoxicating. They remind her of the ones in *White Christmas*, the ones that Vera-Ellen dances up on her way to the bridge. There are no other proper steps on the Road, only the ladders stashed in Potting Shed Five and in various kitchens and cupboards. Each day when the three children gather at the entrance, Nola floats down, hangs on to the pole at the bottom and swings around it before landing on the floor in her quietest thump.

"What do you reckon this room was?" Seb asks one afternoon.

"Maybe it's always been Place," says Nola, the hope of it wriggling around inside her guts.

"It's from ages ago," Lauren sighs. "Outside times, probably. Maybe it really was for some kinda Goatman to live in before he went completely radiation-crazy."

"Then it wouldn't be safe," says Nola, her throat constricting at the thought of it.

"Not dead, remember?" Lauren mutters. She leans against the Wall. "What would you do, if you were from Outside?"

"I'd be mush," Nola says.

"If you weren't dead, though. Just pretending you weren't."

Seb lowers his head and scratches a shape into the dirty floor. Nola glances back up to the steps.

"Come on. If it was safe Outside. What would you do?"

"I'd go Goat." Seb grins despite himself.

"Fuckin' Goat. Love it. I'd live in the big mountain over that way." Lauren points in one direction, pauses, then in another.

"You can't live in the mountains," Nola corrects, her gaze swinging back to the room.

"Can so. You ever tried?"

"Nah, but they got the noxious clouds in them. I've seen it on cold mornings."

“What would you do, Nola?”

Nola thinks. Seb watches her from his spot on the ground, a little shy.

“Prob’ly just live here,” she says.

They stare at her for a moment. Then Lauren bursts out laughing, her hands clasped over her mouth. “Yeah, you would, Nola, you would.”

“Crackup,” Seb shivers, jumping to his feet.

“Hey, where are you going?” Lauren says.

He stuffs his hands in his pockets. “I’ve gotta go train with Mapper. He said I’ve got Road Jobs to do.”

“You’re like, three, right? Isn’t that a bit early?” asks Lauren.

“Nah, I’m ten in June. I know lots of stuff.”

“Do you know his name’s not Mapper?” Lauren leans on her leg, one hand on her jutted hip. “I heard him talking to his Dictaphone when I got up for water the other night. He signed off as Mapper Paul. Crazy, right?”

“So, he’s Paul Mapper?”

“Oh my god. You’re such a joker. He *\*is\** a Mapper. Like, he maps stuff. The Roads and all that. You heard him the other night. But he’s just one of a team. A HSSS Institute Mapper, or HSSS-IM. They only call him Mapper because the letter thing sucks serious balls.”

Seb shrugs his shoulders. “Freaky.”

“So, his mum calls him Paul?” Nola asks.

“If he even has a mum,” says Lauren, and backs up the stairs, scowling wisely.

## *Eleven*

The window across from No. 5 is moving. She can see the glass of it, like melting sugar, in the sun. Nola knows it the moment she sees it as she leans up in the doorway of the house. She can hear Ma in the bedroom, beating clouds of plaster grain out of the sheets. Mapper is already out on house calls. Fetu trudges past, a sack of shrivelled potatoes over his shoulder. No one pauses to notice. Nola can feel sweat simpering from the inlets of her armpits. The smell ripens as she presses her arms to her sides.

The glass is melting. The Outside is doing it.

In the rectangular frames of the window, the ground is a deserted slab of brown sticks. The sky peppers with sun sparks. She can see them bouncing off the glass. A single, smooth cloud seeps across the blue.

When she sees the short sticks cracked off at their middles, the lone cloud, the thoughtless dirt, it's like someone has opened her at the ribs, pulled her in two like a Russian doll. Dropped out all the insides.

At least today, the heat has eased slightly—the smallest shift, but enough that when Nola swings her arms, they feel moveable instead of sodden. She skids off the front doorstep and down into the Road. She goes north, towards the fork. Takes the passageway past the Potting Sheds. The door to Potting Shed Twelve has been left open. She goes in for a bit. Stands in the cool box of Place.

A chill slips in. She is a little too alone, down there in the dark with the old ladder and skip and the sandbags. She runs back up the stairs and follows the passage down to the Crop Rooms.

The thick plastic of the Crop Rooms is speckled with dirt. No one ever seems to see those little dirt smudges. She doesn't know why she always does. She pushes through the plastic drapes. They slide over her shoulders, falling away heavy and stiff.

She only goes to the Crop Rooms with Ma. It's not that she's not allowed; it's just that you have to be careful of the plants. Careful not to crush them or tip them over in their pots, or bring in anything that might make them soften or mould or decay. The Rooms are broad, with low ceilings but

many skylights draped with muslin to soften the sun. Nola blinks against the glare when she first steps through. Small copper pipes and rubber hoses snake across the floor up to the raised garden beds.

She stands by the first row. The beds smell different from anywhere else on Sill Road. The dirt is thick, damp, heady. It makes her want to stretch her neck. Her face plumps in the warm buzz of the room. There's a watering can beside the planter box. She skims the tip of her finger in it. The water silks around her skin.

"Hey, careful," a voice barks behind her.

It's the old gardener, Clive. He's bent over at the shoulders. He holds a strip of old stocking between his teeth. Ties another around a beanstalk and a trellis.

"I'm here for Seb," she offers. "Is Mapper really making him do the gardening with you?"

"Down the far way," Clive grunts, adjusting the beanstalk. "Why'd you think the poor bugger got landed living next door to me when his Pa died? Was only a matter of time before he'd learn to earn his keep."

She finds Seb pulling pale sprouts from the soil at a planter box of seedlings. He waves a gangly arm before she walks up and leans against the box with her hands. It's awkward—him doing something she doesn't understand.

"Want help?" asks Nola.

"Nah, you're all right. Mapper said I got the rare gift for this. I'm not so good at buildin' stuff, though."

Nola notices the slide of his words as he says this. The way he rolled them deep in his throat, just like Mapper does.

Seb grabs the end of a long, feathered root and tugs it from the ground. "I get to help Clive every Thursday and Friday now."

"You always pulling stuff up?"

"Weeding," Seb corrects, slicking over his words. "You gotta shake the dirt off them and leave them for the other plants. This one here is a weed. That one there's a baby beetroot. Clive's gonna show me all the plants so I can help him keep us fed."

Nola crouches down to see the pale legs of the roots sway in the air. “You just chuck these out?”

“Some things ain’t worth growing. They’re chokers,” he replies and flicks the plant into a tin bucket on the floor.

## *Twelve*

In the moments when she wakes up, Nola's sure the Outside is watching her. Lauren's left the curtain open again. The Wind slaps against the glass, then lingers. She can almost see the face of it there, peering in. Feeling around the frame for a loose chink of armour. Slithering by.

All day, she tries to forget it. At lunch, she pockets a slice of dried-up jerky from the kitchen table and shares it with Seb down in the Crop Rooms. They sit on the edge of a garden bed. They watch Clive muttering at the compost bins, his neck curved down in a kumara-pile hump. Seb elbows Nola's ribs as Clive's shirt comes loose from his pants, and he giggles until Clive tells them he doesn't run a nursery and sends them off for the day. Seb takes Nola's hand and pulls her through the planter boxes. They race off to Potting Shed Twelve.

Lauren's already there when they arrive. She's got the ladder opened and leaning against the sandbags.

"Careful!" Nola says.

"I ain't gonna fall," Lauren yells down at her.

"I mean, careful—what if there's no Wall on the other side and the sandbags fall through?"

"Oh hush," Lauren says. She stands up on her tiptoes and reaches between the sandbags. She tugs a piece of paper loose. A trail of sand scatters on the floor.

"Careful—"

"—Careful. I know," Lauren snaps, jumping down. She holds the paper over Nola's head. "Wanna see what I found? It was Seb who gave me the idea to look when he left his toy car wedged in the sandbags. I've searched the whole Wall. Found those, too." She points to a pile of shrivelled cigarette butts on the ground.

"What's the paper?" asks Seb. He snatches it out of her hand and lays it on the ground.

"Oh shit," says Lauren. "This better not be Mapper's."

The paper has lines like Mapper's maps, though not in green. They're scratched in thin graphite pencil. They can tell pretty quickly that the map is of the Outside hills. There's the tightening,

ragged rings of the ranges. Then the desert, a flat stretch of straight lines. There's the dotted lines of a Road, but without any houses on it. Then a few strange rectangles to the east. *Base Camp* is pencilled in italics beneath them. There are also five little boxes on the map, scattered across the desert. One of the five boxes has an *X* in it.

"That means that's Us," says Lauren.

"That's not us," says Nola. "It can't be. It wouldn't make any sense."

"Yeah, it would," says Lauren.

"But we're on the Road. That box is away from the Road.

They look at the map. The boxes. The clear stretch between them.

"Maybe it's from before our Road. I mean, before it got covered in."

Nola shivers suddenly. She wraps her arms around her chest. "I wanna go home for a bit."

"Don't be a scaredy-cat," yells Lauren.

But Nola is already skipping up the stairs to the Road.

She spends the day skulking at the door of No. 5. She waits for Seb and Lauren, but only Seb returns. He waves at her from the Road. Runs on towards the pub to nick Fetu's ice. Ma calls Nola in. She makes her peel some leggy kumara. The growths flick off, tuberous. They dice the peeled roots on a chopping board and stir them into the soup. It gets close to dinner time. Lauren does not return.

"I'll go find her," says Nola. She heads back for the Potting Sheds. It's growing dusky violet between the Walls. She kicks her feet out as she runs. Points her toes in the way Vera-Ellen did and makes a line along the sand in a semi-circle. She does this all the way up to Potting Shed Twelve. The door is still ajar. She is about to push it open and creep down to Place when he speaks.

"Making croc tracks?"

"What's a croc?" she asks.

Mapper has got a stack of clipboards under his arm and an array of homemade pencil stubs poking from his plaid shirt pocket. He smiles down at her.

"Crocs were reptiles. They have a stuffed one in the Wellington Dome, at the museum. They had no hair, just skin and teeth. They walked low to the ground, and when they moved, their legs

swept through the earth and made semi-circles like you've done. They killed that last one from the zoo there for the museum to preserve it for us to see. If you ask me, though, I don't mind it being extinct."

"What's a museum?" Nola asks, wriggling her shoulders up to her neck.

He's about to answer when the door to Potting Shed Twelve creaks open. Lauren takes two steps out, her hair mussed and her skirt tucked up between her legs into her hemline to make pants. She pauses. The door whines as she pushes it shut.

"Hi," she says, nonchalant, and swings around Nola to the passage.

Mapper stands wide across the passageway, so that she has to step over his leg to keep going.

"What'd you need in there?"

Lauren smiles. "Oh. Shoot. Forgot it." She gives a high sigh and spins back around into the shed. They hear her moving things on the shelves.

Mapper looks down at Nola. "She with you then?"

Nola gulps. "We went to see Seb. He wanted to show us how he weeds."

Lauren appears again, dusting off her hands. "Been looking through these sheds for hours. Ma wanted a screwdriver. Phillips's head. Don't have one."

She stretches out a hand to Mapper, who lays his own, motley-skinned one against her palm.

"Top of the day to ya," she shakes. Then she jumps over his leg. Calls after her for Nola as she turns onto the Road.

They feel Mapper's presence as they walk home, a good distance behind.

"Hurry up," Lauren hisses. "Don't say nothin'."

## *Thirteen*

Ma doesn't seem to notice that all throughout dinner Nola and Lauren sit in silence. Nola pulls her spoon through the stew, crushing potato chunks along the way. Occasionally, she catches sight of Lauren, who can't get the tie at the back of her head to hold her hair properly. She pulls it off, and then tightens it back around, glowering. They don't look at each other, and they don't look at Mapper.

He was late. The stew and bread were already on the table, covered over to stay warm. He walked in slow. Peeled off his jacket. Straightened the sleeves and hung it on the coat hooks. Then he pulled out a chair from the table and sat back, observing the girls.

Nola watches him eat. He holds the broken flakes of bread in one hand.

"We'll have no crumb dinners this year, will we, Seb," he laughs. "You're a natural gardener!"

Mapper dips the bread flakes in the stew and lets the drips run towards his wrist while he talks. He keeps his other hand free for sudden gesticulations. But he talks a little less tonight, too. When Ma begins one of her winding, perilous thoughts, Mapper holds his gaze over Lauren's twisting hands. Nola curls down in her seat and shoves the bread into the stew, watching it plump into soft clumps. Lauren rips a knot from her hair and leans her arms up on the table.

They fall out from the table one at a time. Ma calls them back to wash the dishes while the adults talk.

"There's no dissension on our Road. Not since McWhinnie left," Ma's saying in her softest, deboned voice.

"There isn't now. But trouble likes to sneak in at times of peace," Mapper concludes.

Ma nods her head, sweeping breadcrumbs into a pile. "Like desert dust. Just cause it's not on the Road, doesn't mean it isn't happy to roll on in."

Mapper slaps his palm on the table and leans back in his seat. "True and poetical, as always. You gotta watch out for the little troubles that like hiding. Did you know I came from Rotorua this trip?"

“What were you doing up there? Nothing left to check, I wouldn’t have thought,” sighs Ma.

“We’ve been having some trouble with the rehoming of old survivors. They haven’t been staying put. The Institute got a tip-off that some of them were trying to resettle—unsanctioned, you see.”

“Gracious,” Ma shakes her head.

“It’s never the ones you’d expect, is it? Heard that some even left the Road in their hazmat Noddy suits. Thought they’d be able to salvage parts of the breached city—tragic, really. I think of the Guide verse: *In the days of the Road, no one ever leaves who lives.*” We just can’t have those kinds of ideas poisoning our towns. Everywhere must be properly mapped. HSSS Institute’s regulations really are there for a reason.”

“There’s a Road Guide for protection.”

Mapper taps his spoon against the bowl. A chunk of string-meat splats into broth. “Exactly.”

Nola squeezes out the fatty suds from the cleaning flannel. They cling and curl around her fingers. Lauren dries the last pot lid and tucks it in the cupboard. There’s no way to get out of the room without passing the table. She glides behind him. Sucks her stomach in to fit behind his pushed-back chair.

Lauren makes them meet in Seb’s room after dinner.

“It’s our Place,” she spits, herding Nola and Seb into the space under his bunk. “Mapper’s not gonna mess with it.”

Seb’s room is small—a cupboard of a house, a stone’s throw from the fork to the Potting Sheds and the Crop Rooms. Clive lives with him. Technically, their rooms are connected, but Clive keeps to himself most days—up at sunrise for the gardens and back when Fetu gets tired of his musings at the pub.

Seb’s bed is a top bunk. The bottom bunk is filled up with an overflow of seedlings and bulbs. Clive removed the bottom mattress long ago to insulate the Walls. Instead, it’s covered with old cardboard, like a makeshift table. Nola takes her time clearing a space to sit. She moves an egg tray of translucent green sprouts and wipes fine dirt onto the floor. Lauren paces around the room, kicking

the baseboards. Seb ignores her. He swings up the ladder to the top bunk. Leans his head over the edge of the mattress.

“Okay,” he says. “Shoot.”

“It’s just that Mapper can’t know,” Lauren mutters.

Nola edges back on the bottom bunk until her feet don’t touch the ground. She feels flushed in the back of her throat. Like she’s chewing a secret she can’t swallow down.

“It’s not like we’re doing anything wrong,” Lauren continues. “You two get that, right? We’re kids. We’re allowed to play. Mapper’s just a stick in the mud.”

“Yeah,” says Seb. He lets his hands hang down from the top bunk. Nola watches them cats-cradling the air.

“We gotta be more careful from now on. We only go in early or late at night or if everyone around us is busy.”

“Yeah,” whispers Seb.

“I’ll go in the morning before everyone’s awake, and I’ll cover the hole better so no one else can find it but us. And we’ll all have a story about why we’re there, in case someone sees us going into the shed. It will be easy for you, Seb. You can just say you’re getting stuff for Clive.”

“What about us?” says Nola. “What will we say?”

Lauren picks up a newspaper-wrapped cylinder of dirt from the bottom bunk.

“That’s a garlic seedling,” says Seb.

“Does Mapper really trust you with this stuff?”

“Course. It’s my job.”

“It looks too dry. And it’s wrapped weird.” Lauren slaps it down on the wood. “Us kids got nothing. We’re allowed Place. There’s nothing about it in the Road Guide.” She crouches down on the ground and looks at Nola without blinking. “We’ll think of something to say when we need to say it. But it’s fine, okay?”

“Okay,” says Nola.

“But snitches get stitches, okay?”

“Yeah.”

Seb pulls a wad of fluff from his mattress. It floats, slow, to the floor. Nola waits for it to settle. It lingers, blown nowhere.

“Mapper might worry, is all,” Lauren says. “But we ain’t doing anything wrong.”

Seb nods.

“Place is just between us, eh Nola,” whispers Lauren. She sits down on her haunches, watching.

Nola nods.

That evening, Nola hears a fluttering at her bedroom window. She crawls from the bed and pulls back the curtain. A lone twig batters against the window—the bud of a leaf knocking on the surface. She can see the end of the stick caught in a wooden ridge where the muntin is peeling away from the glass. She crawls back down into the bed. Covers her ears to stop the sound of it, hammering to come in.

Nola’s shoulder shakes under the grip of a hand before the sun is out.

“Get up,” Lauren whispers.

Nola forces her lids apart. Her view is stuffed with Lauren’s face, a dark, frizzy figure against the window haze.

“It’s Milton.”

In the moment between sleep and waking, with her mind a quiet fog, Nola makes out the blue tinge to Lauren’s skin. Red rashes around her lips and eyes and the dripping of her nose.

## *Fourteen*

They run the Road barefoot. Dust sticks to sweat—it clays between Nola’s toes. She can hear Lauren’s sharp limbs cutting through the air up ahead. Her breath shudders in and catches on the way out. Hair clings to her face. They don’t look back as they veer off the main Road to the Potting Sheds.

In the misty haze, part of Nola feels like it’s lifting out of her, waiting behind her to see what will happen. Lauren races ahead. Dodges rocks in the pathway. She melts from a full figure to a faint ghost of an outline. Nola can’t get her feet to move right. She stumbles forward. For once, she’s cold.

When they get to the door of Potting Shed Twelve, it’s wide open.

“We gotta keep it shut,” Nola whispers. Lauren looks at her over her shoulder with a loose-mouthed glare.

“He’s there,” Lauren whispers. “On the floor.”

Nola creeps inside. Thick fertiliser. Cold metal nails. Dried up, powdered rust. The jagged gap that leads down to Place glows. Ma’s oil lamp sits on the third step. It casts a half-moon up the Wall. At the top of the steps lies one of the sandbag sacks. It’s lumpy on the floor. It’s no longer filled with sand, though there’s a trail of the stuff on the ground. It’s been cut open, lain flat, and wrapped about Milton.

Milton, with his big green eyes.

Milton, in the cloth, his legs stretched out straight and stiff.

The fur on his right cheek is flat on the floor. Pink blooms around his ear.

“Something’s happened to him,” Nola hears herself say.

Lauren’s face is full of red slit veins. “No kidding.”

Nola’s never seen a dead thing so close before. Not even Mr Manual from the window looked like this. He was all covered over in coffin Walls. But the whiskers of Milton’s face poke out from the end of the sandbag. He seems somehow more solid than he ever was before. For a moment, she’s not sure that he’s real. Then heat burrows up her throat. Tears cauliflower, hot and salty, down her cheeks.

“I don’t understand,” she stammers.

Lauren's standing very still, hugging her arms across her chest. "I found him down in Place. He was just on the floor. A bit of concrete—"

The breath in Nola's lungs scurries out and hides along the shelves. "What bit of concrete?"

"I don't know. A bit from the ceiling. It was beside him. So, I guess it fell."

"From the Roof?"

"I guess."

"Like a crack?"

"No. I don't know. A chunk."

"And it hit Milton?"

"He was lying there hit. The chunk was beside him."

"A chunk out of the ceiling?"

Lauren looks up from the cat. She keeps her arms crossed around her waist. "Is that what you're worried about?"

But Nola barely hears her. It might just be the blood in her ears, but she can already feel it—a creep, a line of footless, soundless wind. Against the Walls, maybe. Hissing around the room from up the stairs. She can almost hear the crack in the Roof of Place splitting wider. A slow, dense ache spreads across the floor. The wind's in the room. It curdles in her ears, flowing in. *In the days of the Road, no one ever leaves who lives.* She stumbles out, numb-footed, from the shed.

"Nola!" Lauren yells, reaching for her. "I don't know what happened, but I swear I checked the Roof when I first discovered Place, and it was fine. It was fine."

Nola looks her sister in the face. She can see Lauren's pulse writhing in her neck. Her hand is very light and very small against Nola's arm. Nola rips away and runs.

In her first memory, Ma's skirt has long-stitched flowers on it in threads of dark mustard. Two leaves sprout from either side of the buds. She remembers the skirt lifting from the ground. A blush of sunlight shone through. The flowers cast shadow smears along her skin.

Ma still has a shirt like that, but there are no flowers on it. In the next bit of the memory, Nola

sees Mapper's shoes and the break in their seam along the toe.

There's a lemon streak in the room when she gets home. She can smell Ma's pot of dandelion tea muddling on the stove. There's the sound of warped singing from Mrs Manual's house. It's her phonograph, droning Vera Lynn. Trapped sound fuzzes at the edges of the record. The machine catches and whirrs.

She's suddenly aware of the Walls. She senses the three-paned window across from No. 5 with its porridge glass, slipping. She knocks against the doorframe as she walks into the house. A bruise riles into life.

Ma looks up from the kitchen table as Nola catches her step. "What's wrong, little one?"

Nola creeps forward. Lays her head down under Ma's bony shoulder. She smells of blankets, dried out in the sun.

"I know something wicked," she whispers.

Ma turns. Wraps an arm around her waist.

"Something about a place," breathes Nola. She sees Milton's face in the cloth: his whiskers splayed where he'd grown cold on the floor, soaking up the blood, now dried and stiff. She sees the crosshatch of the bag that Lauren had pulled from the Wall, split open and strung around his chest.

## *Fifteen*

The Air Hazard Alarm has never gone off for real in her lifetime, only in drills. Ma does it, punching in the code with shaking hands. It's shrill. It winds up and down in a piercing, nasal pitch. Nola stands back. Ma pulls the gas masks from the bathroom cupboard. She fits one mask to her own face and pulls another down over Nola's. The fabric makes a dark cave around her face. When she breathes, the air claws through filters.

The mask scrapes on Nola's nose. She can feel the faint pink lines forming. Ma pulls the straps too tight.

Nola hears herself call out, blurry and boxed-in, when Ma shuts them in the bedroom.

She drops to her knees. Pulls pillows from the bed and tucks them along the bottom of the wooden door. A piece of white paint flakes off it onto her fingers. Nola sees it on the skin as Ma pulls her onto the bed. They crawl under Ma's cream wool blanket, Nola caged in by Ma's arms. The smell of sweat fills the gaps in the covering. Nola curls her sticky palm around the brown-speckled dots on Ma's arm. There's cat hair pressing through the blanket.

"Lauren's not back yet," she whispers.

Ma squeezes the blankets around them tighter. The weave of it scratches the slope of Nola's neck. "She knows what to do. She knows. She'll go to the nearest house. They'll let her in."

The siren wails, pauses, wails again.

When the sound stops, they stay still. Nola presses her masked face into Ma's neck. Absorbs the rhythm of her breathing—Ma's heartbeat pulses above her collarbone—blankets rise and fall—the mattress frame pings—wind bends at the Outside Walls. It whistles over the Roof. They hear footsteps out on the Road. Voices, blurring.

When they pull open the front door, it groans on its hinges. The old nails that Ma had used to hammer it to the Wall hang out like teeth. Nola's hand is tucked in Ma's, and the grip squashes her thumb and fingers together, but she doesn't pull away; she just jogs to keep up with her mother's long

strides.

They're joined by others: Fetu catches up with them from his house by the pub.

"What happened?"

Ma says nothing.

"Not a planned thing? Not a test from Mapper?"

"He's got it under control," Ma says. Nola can hear the strings of her voice tangling together.

Fetu lays a hand on her shoulder. "A test, surely," he says, and then he hurries up ahead to a house and knocks on the door, checking that everyone's alright.

Ma picks up speed. Nola's feet barely graze the ground as she runs. There's a popping pressure in her shoulder from Ma's pull. They pass the opening doors. Sylvie calls after them, but they don't stop till they reach the Potting Sheds.

"Down here?" Ma asks.

Nola stands very still, staring down the path.

"Nola," Ma repeats, bending down to her level. "Show me."

"No need," says Mapper. He's standing at the door of Potting Shed Twelve. He pulls his mask down from his face. "You better see this."

They follow him to the shed. The smell of the space seems thicker than before. Nola tells herself that the alarm is off, so everything is fine. But she catches movement on the hairs of her arms. Around her ankles. Curling down her throat with each breath. She can hear Ma relaying her story over to Mapper. Snippets of it leak through. *Nola said, says Ma. That there are steps.*

The doors open. Mapper stands at the entrance. He's already put tape over the door—bright yellow. It reads HSSS-IM INSPECTED and TOXIC HAZARD in bold letters.

"Oh god," Ma covers her mouth. Nola can see the indents of her fingers in her narrow cheeks.

"There's been a breach. You can see room space covered in plastic—it's not mapped. Newly uncovered, like your daughter said. Cat's there too."

"The air killed him?" asks Ma. "Does everyone know?"

"I sent Clive to get me some repair tools. He'll be back. And no, looks like surface debris did

the fella in. But the Roof's highly unstable. Who knows who built the thing. I've sealed it off, but we'll need to fill it in securely."

Nola stands, one side of her face pressed into Ma's brown trousered leg, and her hand still gripped in her finger lock. Ma steps forward to look in the dim doorway, blocking her view. Nola doesn't want to move. Doesn't want to know. But then Ma moves back, and she sees.

The stairs are covered in plastic sheets. There's a dark tape and brick weights holding them to the ground. She can just see the pattern of the steps beneath the layer, each one darker than the next. No longer illuminated by the lamp. At the top, the plastic stretches over the floor and Milton's body. Presses his fur flat—like a bug blown up against some glass.

"Well, what's down there? You're a Mapper, right? What is this place?" Ma says, her voice sharp, unsteady. A cold sweat builds between their palms.

Mapper looks down at Nola. She looks at the handle on the open door. "How did you find this bunker, girl?"

Nola shakes her head. "I don't know who made it."

"Come on now. You did good to raise the alarm. Who knows what could have happened if the Roof came down. But we need to know how it came to be that there's an unmapped space on the Road, and a hazardous hole in the floor leading to it. It's not safe, you see."

"I just saw Milton there on the steps."

Mapper nods. "And yesterday, when I saw you here with Lauren, what did you see then?"

Nola gulps. "I didn't know it was dangerous in there."

"Didn't know that what, exactly, was dangerous? Did you know about the stairs? About the floor being broken? Clive says there are normally crates over that side of the Wall. They're those ones I see have been moved."

"I didn't move them."

"No. Someone else did," Mapper says slowly. He gets down close to the ground. She can see a small grey line in the yellow veneer of his front tooth. "You've been a very good girl, Nola. I think you see a lot. That's so helpful to us. Now, could you remember what you might have seen around here

recently? We wouldn't blame you if you didn't realise anything was wrong."

"She said it was safe," Nola says into the collar of her sodden t-shirt.

"Now, Nola, who said that? You need to give us the details. You don't want anyone to get hurt. If that Roof came down, we'd all be lying there, like your cat. So, tell us. To protect us."

She can feel the beat of Ma's veins stamping into her own. Everything looks shimmery, She's not sure she's even in the room. "Lauren only said it was a place to play".

"Lauren," Ma sucks the name in through her teeth.

"What about me?"

They turn around at once. She's walking from the Crop Rooms. Her hair limps in an uneven ponytail. Cobwebs and dust cling to the loose stands. Her cheeks are tracked with dry tear streaks like snail trails. She's still in her sleep shirt. The ends fray around her knees. She holds a bunch of spinach leaves, sweet peas and a zucchini flower upright in one hand.

She blinks at them. Looks past the door at Nola. "I only went to get him flowers."

## *Sixteen*

Nola sits at the kitchen table with her hands on her lap. Mapper and Lauren are closed in the film room. His voice is a dog at the door. He paces. His phrasing grunts, cuts and pauses. Somewhere in there, Lauren is curled up, scowling. Nola holds her breath and tries to hear her speak. But the pauses are mostly short, and then Mapper starts up again.

Ma loiters by the kitchen window. She moves the curtains to cover the sun as it sways across the ground.

When the door finally opens, Mapper comes straight to the table and leans on it, taking a long drink of water from the mug Ma passes him.

“We’ll call a town meeting in twenty minutes. Shouldn’t be hard, seeing as everyone’s waiting outside your door anyway.”

Now that he’s said it, Nola’s sure it’s true. “What about Lauren?”

Ma pours another glass of water. “It’s a town meeting. She’ll be there.”

But Lauren doesn’t exit the film room for the next half hour. It takes Ma, lifting her at the waist like a doll to get her out. Nola tiptoes behind them. Ma doesn’t need to say anything to her. She just looks down at them and presses her lips together. Lauren trudges along a half step behind them as they cross to the pub, where the town has already pulled their seats into formation.

No one says Lauren’s name. Mapper talks at length about the speed of their emergency response, the diligence needed to continue their work, and the importance of his role in mapping out safe places. Lauren and Nola sit beside Ma at the end of the first row, their wrists glued to their laps.

“We had a warning today. It wouldn’t be right to continue without calling out the behaviour of those involved,” says Mapper, looking around the room. Beside Nola, Lauren scowls in a silent rage. She pinches at her skirt. “In particular, we should mention a member of our community who acted to protect our lives.”

He kneels beside Nola. His scarred hand comes to rest on her knee. “This young lady told a

difficult truth. This young lady,” and he stands, raising his voice. “Was not distracted by youths’ temptation to stray from the Guide. She stood by principles. It saved her from a perilous situation. It may have saved all of us.”

Nola’s head swims. She feels everyone watching her. As Mapper stands, she looks over to Lauren—her expression is smooth, like the sheen of a fresh cut turnip.

After the meeting, Nola pulls at Mapper’s leg and asks him for a favour.

“Anything, Nola,” he says.

“It’s just about our cat. When will be bury him?”

“Oh, kid. We already did, down in the shelter. Just on the off chance any contamination had leaked in. We didn’t want to risk it on the Road.”

She finds a whisker on the green couch cushions that afternoon. Wraps it in a patch of cloth torn off the inseam of her winter pants. Seb’s in the fields for another training session, and so at lunchtime she takes it down to him in her pocket.

“You got a shovel?” she asks him as they sit on a shelf, picking their nails.

He slips down to his feet. The floors beside the garden beds are scattered with buckets of different tools. He pulls a small trowel from a flowerpot and holds it up for inspection.

“Good.” She takes the whisker from her pocket. Looks around the room.

They bury the whisker under an old dead tree in the middle of the back Wall. The branches are thin and hung with little trinkets Clive has found about the place: bits of broken mirror, tin scraps and fabric strips. There are also veggies hanging: garlic and onions in bunches and cut flowers hanging to drop their seeds.

Seb digs the hole three inches deep. The dirt crumbles up, dry.

“You in trouble with your Ma?”

Nola shrugs.

“Didn’t give me up,” he says, dropping his head between his knees.

“We didn’t know it was so perilous.”

“Yeah,” he says, but he drives his finger into the ground and flicks up a raw chunk. “Mighta

felt a bit like something we shouldn't do."

"Lauren convinced us," Nola grunts. A hot tear slides around her cheek. "We just gotta do right, from now on, that's all."

"She mad at you?"

Nola drops her head.

"You should tell her that she can still play with us."

Nola flushes. She's part of a two-person *us*. She looks around the room. Feels like she fits in it. "Yeah," she says.

They hear Mapper calling out to Clive. He winds his way through the plants. His footsteps fall heavy on the breathy ground.

Seb sits back on the earth. He stares at the flaking roots of the dead tree. "I think we did it right, though. Feels like it, anyway. I liked to play down there with you."

That afternoon, Nola sits in her room. She carves leather off Mr Manual's old satchel with a kitchen knife. Cuts her palm on the way.

She has a lot of trouble getting the needle to punch through all the layers of hide and fur. She has to hold the big mending needle, point end pressed to the floor, and push down on the tip with the shoes themselves. When she's done, the leather is strangely wrinkled at the toe, but there are no more flapping gaps along the edges.

Mapper's filling in a form on a bench in the pub when she finds him. She puts the offering at his feet.

"And what's this?" he asks, looking down at her.

"Shoes for the walking. So you can keep mapping," says Nola. "I fixed 'em."

Mapper turns the curious creatures over in his hands. He grins at her wonky stitching. With one finger, he lifts her chin. She can see, from the corner of her eye, a place where his skin is growing like beige and bleeding lichen around his wrist. "What do you want, kid? Why'd you do this?"

Nola presses her chin back down to the ground. The scarred skin of his fingerprints slides smoothly against her skin.

“It’s okay. You can tell me.”

“I just fixed ‘em,” she says. “So that we’d all be all right again.”

Mapper leans forward in his seat. “Not everyone understands the Road. Especially little girls. But I’ve been watching, and I’ve been seeing that you do understand. You know the Road gives us all we need. That’s why we protect it. A little girl like yourself must want some things. Road’s full of things. I could pick something up for you on my travels.”

Pink hums in Nola’s cheeks.

“You like them movies, don’t you? Want me to bring you a new film reel?”

Nola shakes her head. “I do like the films. I like the dancing. I’d like some shoes for it.”

“Dance, eh? And who’d Nola Clark dance like in her new shoes?”

“Vera-Ellen. She’s my favourite,” Nola feels a little dirty for the confession.

Mapper grates a callous from his thumb with his jagged nails. “Pity, I always liked that Rosemary woman better.”

“They would be hard to get, wouldn’t they?” says Nola.

“You know something I like about you, kid? You know the cost of things. You’d be careful with those shoes because of it.”

Nola feels his hand come to rest heavy on her shoulder.

“We need careful people. On Sill Road more than ever. I’ll bring you those shoes the next time I come through. The next expansion of the Road Guide is already in the Wellington printing rooms, so I’ll be coming back down the Road with it in a few months.”

“Thanks,” says Nola, very quiet.

“You know what? One day, you can come with me down to Wellington with me. There are dancers there, real live ones. When people study at the HSSS Institute to be Mappers and Road Guide Scribes and Wall Agents, they go and see them on their days off. Do you know what HSSS Institute teaches people to do, Nola?”

“*To keep the Road safe, and its people fulfilled,*” Nola quotes.

“Kid already knows the Guide,” grins Mapper. He tilts his head. “So, dancing shoes would

make you happy, eh?”

Mapper crosses his arms.

Nola thinks of the scene in *White Christmas* on the bridge. How Vera-Ellen’s feet swoop and lift over the ground, landing down paper-light on the wooden bridge over the chipboard sea.

“I’m already happy,” she says, careful.

“Good kid.” Mapper smiles and slaps her on the thigh as he stands.

## *Seventeen*

He leaves the next morning with his pack strapped to his back. The townsfolk linger at their doorways after his figure turns to fuzzy lines in the distance. For the rest of the day, everyone moves like cold syrup. The Road lists, hollow and pointless, without his figure marching between houses.

At the Clarks', Lauren gets cornered at the kitchen table and confined to the house for an unspecified period of time. She retreats to her room immediately and declines to eat. No one says she has to be there. It's self-inflicted. A personal protest. Nola watches from the doorway as she shimmy under her sagging bed, lies still and begins to mutter.

"Want anything?" Nola asks, kneeling down to look.

"Drop dead."

Ma walks past the bedroom door and sighs. "You've got us close enough recently, don't you think?"

For the next few days, Nola watches from the corner as Lauren decorates the diamonds of mattress fabric that bulge through the bottom of her wire frame. She makes up most of her creation with configurations of vile words etched with charcoal. She flicks the black stubs out at Nola's ankles when she ventures close.

"Is she still being diabolical?" Seb whispers as he wanders in for porridge. They can hear her through the Wall, kicking at the bedframe.

It doesn't take long for Ma to get tired of having Nola under her legs.

"Find something to do," she says, rubbing the skin around her temples and leaning back in her chair for a nap.

Nola falls back out onto the Road.

The mornings are too quiet. Mrs Manual begins to put out her late husband's folding chair by the front door, in the spot he liked for sunbathing in the light of the window. It adds a bright burst of yellow to the dull Road. No one sits on it. Then Mrs Manual puts on the phonograph and plays Mozart songs that rattle out warm and muted in the heat. Nola sways up and down the Road, unable

to find a place to sit by herself where she can't hear the phonograph's violinic shudder. She follows the sound back to her part of the Road in the evenings. Sits on the windowsill and stares at her front door.

Everyone is more careful than before. Clive takes a day off teaching Seb about the gardens and instead sets him to work resealing the Crop Room windows, even though that job's not due for another six months. The first day it heavily rains, Nola sees Fetu in the pub early in the morning, his hands on his hips, squinting at the skylight, checking for leaks.

The town decides unanimously to remodel the Potting Sheds at the next town meeting.

"It's a strange disgrace," says Sylvie. "To have buildings with unmapped cavities underneath them. Who knows what else is hiding there! Lingerin'. We ought to rebuild them to make sure they're up to code."

The day after the meeting, Charlie knocks on everybody's doors and rounds the neighbours up. They troop down to the Reuse Room and pick through the stack of waste for bits of spare wood and tin metal. Charlie instructs Sylvie to mix up her famous whitewash. She makes it in a barrel. Stirs it up with a picket-fence post. The post leaks worm-wood dust into the wash.

Together, the neighbours dismantle the fronts of the Sheds. Then they build a front along all of them in tidy lines. Sylvie thrusts a paintbrush at Nola and Seb. Tells them to dip their tools into the whitewash. It ribbons from their brushes. As Nola wipes it up and down along the Shed fronts, the mixture dries thick and chalky around her nails. Fetu and Charlie fit each Shed with a new door.

"That's the last of the looking around," chuckles Charlie, as he screws lock fittings in by the handles. He hangs the keys for each door on one large, jangly ring. "Only gardeners and grown-ups will be in these from now on, eh little rascals?"

Seb and Nola clean up the brushes in shallow pans of water in the Crop Rooms. The water leaves lepale streaks along the dirt when drained. When they walk back to Sill Road along the passageway, the Potting Sheds glisten. Clean, smooth-faced and tight. There are no gaps in the wood. No open entries. The air is tinged with the faint smell of drying egg whites and mixed lime. There are footprints on the passage. Ghosts of the neighbours who have walked back down Sill Road to Fetu's pub to drink up till the evening lulls them off to sleep.

After a week of sulking, Nola sees Lauren wake in the early hours and slink, without saying a word, out from under the bed. She wanders up to the open door of No. 5 and sits on the front step, curled over her knees. The sun from the window on the opposite Wall throws her shadow back into the house.

She heaves herself up. Wanders down to Mrs Manual's house. Asks to pick through Mr Manual's leftover things. She scours his shelf of worn-out novels, medical textbooks and books on pottery. She takes a few out into the Road. Sits up on a sill and reads them, ignoring the passing traffic of the yawning neighbours.

It takes another week for her to start following Nola around the Road. When she does, they pretend not to notice each other. Lauren is always a few paces behind, picking her nose. They twist against the Walls. Brush their toes through the dust on the metalled ground. Make bridges along the tarmac puddles for the ants. Seb catches up to them in the afternoons, leaden-legged, brown-nailed and quiet. They sit together outside the pub and watch the neighbours fall in.

Nola apologises to Sylvie as she passes.

"What'd you do that for?" Lauren hisses.

"I don't know, in case we look 'spicious."

Lauren scrapes a large, ominous 'L' into the wood plank by her arm.

They play Outsiders again—quietly—and pause in the presence of other people.

"If I were Outside," says Seb, "I'd catch a crazy nuked owl and call it Pigeon."

Lauren leans back against the Wall. "If I were Outside, I'd catch that owl and eat it for dinner."

"No problem," Seb says. "If I were Outside, the owl I'd catch would be a two-headed owl, so you could eat half for dinner, and I'd still have some left for a pet."

"If I were Outside," says Nola. "I'd—"

Seb mimes falling asleep. "She's too slow," he laughs, a hollow, chiming sound in the silence.

"Yeah, Nola, eat dirt or say what you'd do Outside."

"I don't want to go Outside," she says. Tears make milk with the dust of her lashes.

That night in bed, Nola flips onto her side.

“We left Ma’s oil lamp down in Place.”

Lauren rolls to face her. “So?”

“Do you think she’ll notice?”

In the dim haze, Lauren shrugs.

“Do you think having only one lamp is safe?”

“I bet Mapper got it out before he covered it in. I overheard Charlie and Fetu talking about the whole thing. They just chucked a lot of rubbish in there, old rubble and stuff, and sealed over with wood and concrete. Had to go down in the Outside suits to do it.”

“Ma said Clive said that Mapper tested the Roof strength, and it was pure luck that air didn’t leak through. Part of the Roof was just a few inches under the dirt. The Outside dirt. We’d have been toast if there’d been a big storm.”

Lauren throws her arms behind her head. Shrugs. “You know, I reckon we could look for one of the other ones.”

“I don’t get it,” Nola whispers, her cheeks tingling in the night air.

“One of the other Places. On the map. There were lots of them. Five, I think. Maybe some of the others are close by Outside or under the Road too.”

“The Places were from Outside times. We can’t go Outside.”

“I just mean, there has to be other places we could play.”

“You can’t go Outside.” Nola reaches out her hand under the blankets, trying to bridge the gap between their beds. “Swear on Mapper’s skin.”

There are hills in Lauren’s hands. Places where the tendons hold up her flesh. Nola watches them quake in the half-light.

“That’s cancer,” she says. “It happens over time. Read about it in Mr Manual’s book—*Diseases of the Working Man*. It’s from lots of sun. Not from one day in the wind.”

“That’s not what Mapper said.”

Lauren turns away.

Outside, there is nothing. Moonlight beams through the girls' bedroom window, still and blank as glass.

## *Eighteen*

For the years that follow, when the people on Sill Road talk about the Clark girls, they begin with Lauren and end with the other one.

Nola knows it. Her shoulders stretch with wiry muscle, and her stomach shrinks thin and cavernous, like when plaster dries over a punched-through wall. She doesn't mind it. She likes to be invisible.

The dancing, however, comes as rather a shock to everyone. Small, firm-bottomed tap shoes arrive in Mapper's satchel, tucked between copies of Road Guide and a *Dance Essentials* book. Nola breaks them in with fastidious passion. Ma circles around her morning stretches and exercises with increasing blindness. She hacks off slices of stale toast while Nola bends down to her toes. Looks up only when the metal plates of the shoes begin to stutter in the middle of the kitchen. The kettle spits, settles, and re-boils for several rounds of dandelion tea, drowning out the sound of Nola's step-counting.

Nola can't help the growing. She asks for a new pair of leather-laced shoes for her twelfth birthday that won't pinch her aching toes. Ma thinks long and hard about a useful gift and makes her a patchwork apron out of clothes rags. Nola puts it on and twirls around, and then closes herself into the living room to watch Vera-Ellen and cry.

The shoes arrive three months later with the last postal run of the year—before it gets too cold for the Posties to scooter on the Road for any length of time. Nola holds them under her bedcovers and slips them on her feet as soon as she wakes each morning.

As time goes by she knows, deep within herself, that it is strange to want to move like she does. But the more she reads the growing stack of books on dance form and theory and the more she watches old Russian ballet masters spin soundlessly across screens, the more she feels the desperate itch to remove herself from the weight of her steps. Each pose and stretch releases her a little more. By sixteen, she can jump and reach the doorframe of her room, landing without making more than a tight click on the floor. She's still a tiny person, but she can reach anything with a single leap.

“Now, what’s all this about,” asks Fetu one afternoon as she sits in the pub and shows Seb how she can bend her leg behind her shoulders.

“Takes up less Road room,” she grins. “It’s space-economical in our housing situation.”

She doesn’t try to explain it—how good tendons feel, stretched out long, wide and yet contained. She likes the knowledge that she can contort herself into any pose. A leg high and tight against the press of her ribs. The muscles of her core contracted until they burn. A perfect hold.

There are times when she dances that the Walls of the Road become a blur of blueish grey. All the imperfections smudge out in the spin of her body. When she leans into her final pose, she closes her eyes and sees the windows blinking chalk-white inside her lids.

She makes Seb take up dancing with her. In doorways. Down passages. In the Road. He’s clunky with his feet, but she likes the feel of his hand on her back.

She takes up bending into Seb. She fits her arms to his arms, the crooks of them knocking as they walk. Seb tells her how his Pa walked off into the Road every morning of Seb’s childhood. How Seb never looked where his father was headed, and then how, one day, he didn’t come back. They sit on the doorstep to his house. She tells him that she’s not the kind of person to go walking.

Now that she’s old enough, she has to work too. She tries hard to get into the Crop Rooms, but Clive sends her packing the first day of training. It’s deep in winter that day. The earth is splitting, frozen in the pots. Plants fling themselves up for the last spits of warmth falling through the skylights. Clive tells her to try something else, and leans on his hoe, watching till she’s past the plastic door sheets.

Nola slumps straight to the pub. A small crowd of post-work men are gathered at the tables. Lauren’s at the back, reading alone on a low pink couch. Nola passes the tables of men. A few sit up and nod. Others pat her on the back and wave her through. She takes up a stool at the bar. Fetu pours her a drink—lemon and water and insipid ginger beer.

“Clive said I don’t have a heart for it. What does that even mean? I’m stronger than half the people who help out,” she says, watching the door as Seb walks up. He stands there, wiping the day from his hands. He’s not a kid anymore, though he’s kept his thin muscles and stubby curls.

“Clive’s too old to see what’s in front of him. Don’t take it personally,” Seb says, pulling up a stool.

Fetu’s laugh rings out across the room. Those at the table turn their heads. “Clivey has enough brain cells to know why you applied. He just doesn’t want any complications.”

“I’ve got to work somewhere,” Nola grunts. “Do you need help, Fetu?”

“I need you to stop distracting Seb from helping me brew my gin. Part-time gardener and part-time Sill Road Distiller Assistant was sounding pretty good, until he became full-time Nola Mooner.”

Seb grins but shakes his head. “We don’t have a problem, do we Fetu? I think the next batch is looking pretty close to alcohol.”

“The only thing Seb’s gin will do is disinfect the wounds I give you both to get me out of having to watch whatever this is,” Lauren mutters, pulling herself up from her seat.

The room falls silent when she moves.

Lauren is a force. Her dark hair falls down the back of her neck as she leans against the bar. The last of the daylight bends around her skin. She’s a rock in a hard place—and she leans on the bar like she can take its strength with a touch. Under the pub skylight, her face is half in the beam and half in shadow. Lauren turns to watch Nola like she’s the page of a simple book.

But it’s Seb’s arms that rest at Nola’s side. The scuffed grooves of his knuckles brush against her own.

She thinks that maybe she isn’t good for many jobs. But she knows it’s Seb and her. Everyone on the Road knows it. Some things are just meant to be a certain way. Some things just go together, like lemon in ginger beer. She swivels on the stool so that she can lean on Seb’s shoulder with her legs knocking against his. “I’m running out of job options. Got any other ideas for me?”

“Got some,” he grins, despite himself, down at the ground.

Nola swings around into Seb’s chest so that she can’t see anything but the bleach marks on his blue flannel shirt. Her heart chips against the bones of her chest. She knows if she looks up, Lauren will still be watching her. But she keeps her face against this boy.

“Pour me something,” Lauren sighs at Fetu.

He pulls down a glass. “Me and yous are all just jealous of Seb and Nola. Seb’s an irreplaceable worker and Nola’s his muse.

“There’s hope for you still, Lauren!” one of the men calls out. “Didn’t you hear about the latest troubles by the old Rotorua Dome? Word is that they’ll send a team of Mapper-types from all over to monitor the area. Mapper might bring some young apprentice through Sill Road for you to nab on the way.”

“Can’t wait,” she says, cool. “Wouldn’t want to miss being as happy as Nola.”

Nola’s cheeks swarm with static. The pub warbles, a careless fuzz of conversation.

“The truth is,” Lauren continues, speaking low, not seeming to care if anyone’s listening, “Nola’s job’s already here, isn’t it? She’s just in reserves now. At least temporarily.” She laughs to herself, as if she’s come across the thought in the Road, and is picking up for the first time. “What I mean is that there’s only one job we’re missing on Sill Road, and that’s a people-maker. Seb’s the only young guy around here, so we can hazard a guess that he’s been lined up for the job since his arrival. The girl being into him is just so deeply convenient. That’s why they won’t give you any jobs, Nola kid. They want you perfect and bored.”

Charlie, at the far end of the bar, lifts his head and chuckles. Seb hooks his nubbed fingers around Nola’s sleeve.

He scrapes his chair back. On his feet. He leans over the bar. Brushes loose grains of salt into a pile. Wipes them from the bar with Fetu’s cloth. “You’re being mean now, Lauren,” he laughs, but the laugh sits on his lips.

Nola looks between the two of them.

Lauren only drinks. “I’m being truthful. Didn’t know you were afraid of it.”

“I’m not afraid of anything.”

Now it’s Lauren’s turn to chuckle.

“What?” sighs Seb.

Lauren glares down at the bench. “Sure. You’re a brave, brave man. So long as no one goes Goat.”

There's a sharp twist in Nola's gut. Lauren can't go there, she thinks. No one does.

"What does that mean?" Fetu pipes up.

Seb's a solid rock. "Yeah. Lauren?"

"It means you only play at making your own destiny."

"Destiny. Bloody hell, Lauren. If I'm so predetermined and important, why'd they give me all those tiresome jobs then?" Seb kicks the last word out.

Nola glances at his face. He's open, head dropped, a languid smile on his lips, but the rest of his face glows grey.

"You mean the grower jobs? Get you in the habit of sowing, I suppose. And the gin?" she smirks, vicious. "Don't make me say it."

Fetu slaps his hand on the bench. "Okay, no fistfights in my pub, okay? Okay? Drink more or get out."

"You know Nola only stays here because of you," says Lauren.

"And that's a bad thing?"

"I'm very happy here," says Nola.

"Box of birds, sure you are," snorts Lauren.

"I'm really not sure what you mean—"

"Hold up," Seb and Lauren both snap at the same time.

Seb spins gin around his glass. He grates the bottom down on the bar.

"And why do you think you're even here?" Lauren continues, her arms flailing loose, emboldened, swinging her drink in her hand. Beads of water quiver down the surface of her glass. Slick along her palm. "A lonely, orphaned kid on a Road? Why didn't they send you down to Wellington or off to live in some settlement with relatives? Put you in some boarding school or with some foster family? Why'd they keep you in a little cupboard of a house? No Ma. No Pa. This place is sick, honestly. It eats us all alive. I just can't stand watching you both get chewed up into it." She lets one hand drop onto Seb's shoulder. "Don't you see that we're only here because they need us? Because Sill Road is headed to be as dead as Seb's parents."

On the back of the bench, a fly lies on its back. Its wings on wood—a scissored hum.

“That’s a vile thing to say,” Nola breathes.

“Just because it’s ugly doesn’t mean it isn’t true,” Lauren leans across the bench. Her breath stinks of white mouth grease. She blows the fly off the bench. “Truth is one tough biscuit. You two just don’t want to believe anything that means you’re not promised to be together.”

“But we are together, Lauren.” Seb quietly wipes the hair from his eyes. He fixes his gaze straight ahead. “I’m here because I love someone. I don’t know why you can’t believe that that’s a good thing. And I stayed because Sill Road is my family. My home. It’s not about my dead parents. I’m not like them. It’s not my fault that maybe our neighbours let me stay because I’m the kind of kid some Mas and Pas actually want to have between their Walls.”

## *Nineteen*

Lauren waits for Nola outside the pub. In the dusk, Lauren and the Wall are reduced to opaque mauve.

“He didn’t mean anything by it,” says Nola.

Lauren shrugs and doesn’t move, so Nola has to take the first step.

“Alright.” Nola twists on her heel. Walks home.

She can hear Lauren, a half step behind her. Their feet shuck dry mist from the ground. It blooms up from their steps.

It is quiet everywhere else, like it hardly ever is. Like the wind’s wound down into the Outside ground. There are only their breaths and steps and Lauren’s hands buttering against her dress.

Mould is in the doorway when they get home. It wakes in the cool of the evening. The smell runs through Nola as she swings in the front door, brushes her hand along the frame, takes a drink from the cup. Swallows the water tinged with tin, feels it slick down her throat. She looks into the film room. Says goodnight to her Ma from the door.

Ma is tucked in the crook of the sofa. She’s watching *I Love Lucy*. She shells peas into a bowl without looking at their pods.

In the bedroom, Lauren lingers at the bevelled mirror on the Wall. She picks the grooves of her teeth with a strip of sardine tin metal, rolled and flattened to a point. She pulls the bedroom curtains. Then she braids her hair into a long French plait and lies on her patchwork quilt.

“He didn’t mean anything by it,” says Nola, in bed.

Lauren shimmies under the covers. Her voice floats. “Get over yourself, okay?”

Nola wakes before light. She’s alone in the room, with the curtains open.

For a while she just sits on the edge of the mattress, listening to a tree branch knock against the Wall. She gets up.

She takes the Road to Seb’s first. His snores halt as she tiptoes into his room.

He’s in the bunk, over the desk and piles of plant cuttings. She mounts a foot on the bunk

ladder and curls an arm through the rails. Runs a hand through his hair, her shoulder aching at the stretch.

“Hm,” says Seb into the pillow.

“Something’s strange,” Nola whispers. “Is it strange, do you think?”

But Seb just pats her on the arm and falters back to sleep. She dips her nose into his bunk blankets. She can still smell the mould—the stench of old water fouling in tiny leather-black bodies.

It feels to Nola like the room has never been so aware of her presence. There is a crawler plant, Lauren’s favourite, potted in an old cinder block. A hand-written label tucked between the leaves. There’s Seb’s flannel shirt on a hook, the threadbare towel lounging over the door, paper bags of dried seed pods and scribbles on cardboard scraps—they all watch her with an empty, thoughtless gaze.

Whatever propels her to the Crop Rooms feels infectious. Feverish. Her feet slip from Seb’s bunk ladder to his bedroom floor and carry her to the centre of the Road.

A possum darts past her on the ceiling pipes as she reaches the narrow walkway to the Potting Sheds. She looks at each door, although these days, they are all locked up. She pauses when she gets the plastic sheets across the Crop Room entrance. Then she slips her shoulders between them. There is no movement as she creeps between the lines of garden beds to the back Wall. Sits on Seb’s seedling workbench. Pulls her legs up to her chin.

For a while, nothing happens. The plants are membranous, still. Everything looks milky and shadowed in phosphorus green.

The gardeners won’t be in for hours. Seb must still be wrung out in his bunk. Nola rakes a chill from her arm hairs with her nails.

First, she sees Lauren as a shape—a grey mark moving down the left-hand row of planter boxes. Her sister turns suddenly, heading for the old tree by the left-hand Wall, and reaches into a basket hanging on a branch. From the bottom of the basket, she fishes out a thin calico bag. Shakes it out. She roves back into the garden beds.

Nola can hear netting as it lifts under Lauren’s fingers. Broad bean pods, dainty as foam, plop into the calico bag. As Lauren works her way around the garden, vegetables knock against one another

in dull thuds. There's the sound of the ceramic potato barrel lid lifting. It clinks back into place. Nola watches as Lauren turns her head and pulls the bag up over her shoulders—one strap on each. She starts to walk down the rows again, then stops.

Nola pulls her legs up tighter.

Lauren swings around.

They're looking at each other, although in the dark it's hard to see Lauren's face. Because everything is calm and green here, the shape of her is calm and green. She adjusts the bag on her shoulders. She watches Nola watch her. She lifts her chin. Nola can't tell if she is motioning to the door or not.

Then she walks.

Sometimes, Nola thinks of the Road as a body of tendons, strung tight. Everything before has been Lauren twisting them, indulging in sprains. Sitting on the bench, Nola is a frozen thing. She feels nothing at all.

The last sound is of Lauren's shoulders flicking through the plastic doors to the passageway. Once she's gone, the air holds a pulseless, hollow green—a plant without roots. Nola's watched her leave a room before. But this is not like that. It's the difference between cutting a finger and cutting it off.

## II

## *Twenty*

Years walk through Nola like sheep.

She's standing in a back room of the pub. In her hands rests a cool metal bowl of juniper berries. Yesterday, the berries were dry and puckered, but now they swill, plump, in bruised water. The smell of them pricks through the room.

She holds the bowl on the edge of a bench in the backroom of the pub. Beside her, Seb pours a jug of alcohol into a still. It's an old copper teapot, built up at the lid opening with tin cans. The spout's hammered off. The last of the liquid drips down with a hollow tink. Nola lifts her bowl. She and Seb plunge their hands into the berries. The juice stings. She can see Seb's wrists stained red—a bright, raw colour like when skin gets very cold.

Seb connects the lyne arm from the still to the condenser recipient with care. The thermostat wobbles as he turns a cracking, plastic dial. He leans back, arms crossed, and waits for the steam to fill the tubing. Nola picks up the bowl. Pushes it under the water of the nearby sink. Watches the suds flood in.

Fetu cleared this back room of the pub for them a year ago. He carried in the barrels of vodka and set the jars on the shelves which were still sticky with fly dander and oil rings. He'd helped Seb fit the still together. Then he'd walked back to the bar and left them to the gin-making. Even now, he only pokes his head in the room to watch.

“Can't mess this up,” he tells them. “Lotta people looking forward to the next brew.”

Now, while the steam builds and condenses in the plastic lyne arm, Seb and Nola lean on either side of the open doorframe to the main room of the pub.

Nola and Seb don't talk. But they tilt their heads. She can sense him, glancing over to check the seams of her skin for splits. Like her thoughts might ooze out as some organic matter.

She peels the rind from a lemon. He shakes the seeds from a bunch of desiccated coriander.

From their place in the doorway, they can hear the talk in the pub. It's already filling with neighbours. Fetu's voice booms as more people crowd in.

Nola puts the rinds in a bowl. She goes back to the sink to wash the lemon rinder. Seb steps up behind her. She can feel the lax arch of his neck down by her ear. It cracks warm through the navy dread pooling in her throat. He rests his chin on her shoulder. Reaches his arms around her arms, pressing her in against his chest. Washes his hands in the sink.

“We should head out there soon,” he says.

She’s too hot. The room stinks. The fibres of the stink root into her clavicle, her armpits, the curves of her nose. She’s infested with the shattered, boiled berries. She wipes her face with the back of her hand. Fatty soap bubbles smear on her forehead.

Seb tilts his head to the door. She knows he’s sorry for it—his feet a little shifty.

“C’mon. Buy you a drink?”

Nola shakes her head. She doesn’t want to go out there. She’d rather be slowly cooking, here, alone, with him.

When Seb finally takes Nola’s hand and pulls her into the crowd, half the town is already gathered with their glasses full. The pub’s tables are wiped clear of dust and crumbs. Mrs Manual carries in piles of popcorn strings and drapes them as festoons around the roof beams. Everyone talks in loud, loose sentences. There are piles of vegetables and fruit on the bar. Fetu knocks a dried gourd to the floor by accident. Internally, seeds sway and ring.

As Nola walks through the crowd, people turn. A few say hello. Some only glance her way. Sweat builds between her hand and Seb’s. He angles them between tables.

She’s always loved the easy way he moves. He stands like a part of the room. His pale skin sports freckle dust. The rough Walls echo his solid movement. Every few steps, he spots someone in the crowd.

“Charlie,” he says, clapping their old neighbour on the back. “Made some gin just for you! Charlie’s Ginger Gin, that’s the name. No kidding! Added a few of ya hairs for a sleazy flavour.” His laugh rocks out, easy.

He keeps one hand behind him, curled around Nola’s. He blocks her little figure from their eyes.

They wade through the people and sit up by the bar. Nola sees Ma skulk in with a basket under her arm.

“What did you make?” Mrs Manual asks her, turning around in her seat. She stares Ma down. Doesn’t stand.

Ma stiffens. “Jams. Plum jams.”

“I’m sure someone will have something to spread it on,” Mrs Manual sniffs.

“There’s bread coming.”

Mrs Manual has already turned back to the other women at her table.

“She’s bringing the bread,” Ma says, too loud.

Nola notices the shift in the room. It’s not the big air moving on the Road. It’s the way the air is in people’s mouths. They take it in with shallow-chested hunger.

Nola hunches down on her stool.

“And you?” Ma says to Mrs Manual. The words fumble on her lips. “What did you bring?”

Mrs Manual lifts the cloth on an earthenware bowl of rock cakes. Brown, and wormed with raisins.

“I haven’t had rock cakes for an age,” says Sylvie from the other end of the table. She takes a long drink.

There’s movement at the door. Nola sees it like she sees a leaf blowing across a window. A dull presence grows into a figure, and then the whole pub turns. There’s a stranger in the doorway. A little man in a blue cap, and behind him—quiet as stone—stands Mapper.

## *Twenty-One*

Nola can spend hours in the back room of the pub, preparing the gin. She sews small muslin bags and stuffs them with fruit, seeds, and leaves. She cuts nubblly citrus—frost-fresh. She can twist the peelings, bruise the acid out, beads of moisture—a sour palm on winter glass. She can crack the layers of dried bay leaves—their smell a wool jacket worn on pruning day in the Crop Rooms—wood and sap and must in sawdust chips. She can split a dandelion stem down the middle—lay it flat under a book. Can wait. She can watch it dry to green threads and thin, rust-yellow petals. She can lift it to her nose—and it smells like the Road, like dust and creeping mould. She can close her eyes. Can still imagine the stem milk in the scent—powdery and fresh—like the back of a baby’s neck.

She thinks of this when she sees Mapper there. She thinks of standing from her chair and retreating for the back room to check the current brew.

Seb takes her glass out of her hand before it slips. He places it on the kauri wood of the bar.

“Celebrating without me?” says Mapper. Then he saunters into the room.

Perhaps they are all watching the space behind him, just in case the other Clark appears. Not that it would be anything they’d be blamed for. She’s not their daughter. Not their sister. Not really.

“Forgive us.” Fetu strides out from the bar to find two chairs for the new guests. “We thought you were coming tomorrow.”

“Well, I happened upon one of HSSS’s fine Posties on the walk up from Wellington. I was happy to catch a ride on his scooter.”

All eyes rove to the small man in the doorway. He gazes past them to the food scattered on the tables. Nola notes the embroidery of the postal service insignia on his hat.

“Looks like Sill Road’s doing alright for itself,” he notes, and swinging a satchel of letters to his back, he walks in.

Nola is reminded, as she watches Mapper standing at the bar, of a plaster scratch on the wall of Seb’s room. Mapper’s hands are caved in even more than the last time she saw him. The skin is ripped on the side and weeping through a thin gauze bandage.

Fetu bangs his fist on the bar, and the crowd falls silent.

“Geez,” he laughs. “Okay. Let’s get this harvest celebration going. We’ve got vegetables. We’ve got fruit. We’ve got Mrs Manual’s toothbreaker cookies. We’ve got Seb’s updated and improved orange gin. But before we dive in, Clive is gonna say a word for us.”

Clive rises, knees halting for a moment, at the back of the room. He opens the Road Guide and flips through the pages. “At harvest, we recognise the gifts of our Road. As it says in the Road Guide, Expansion Five: ‘The Road gives, and the Road takes away. We are thankful for the Road.’ This is our safety. Our children’s safety and that of our children’s children. Let us eat so that they too may be fed.”

“Our safety,” the crowd murmurs. Fetu raises a glass.

The gin cuts down the grease of Nola’s throat. She leans back in her chair. There is still an urge to disappear slipping around her gut. She takes another sip and lets her vision blur.

“Should we let Lauren know?” whispers Seb. “Give her a heads-up, I mean?”

Nola nods. She begins to clamber from her stool, but then the Postie makes his way over to her. He parts the crowd. Settles down noisily at the bar, glancing between Seb and Nola with a kind of fascination.

“I came on the right day,” he says, nudging at Seb’s arm.

Seb heaves a shallow laugh from his chest. Nola swallows. The Postie looks alright, she thinks. A little chubby for someone travelling so much, but nothing suspicious. She sips her gin. She glazes her eyes past him. Strangers are strangers. They pass on.

The Postie takes a drink from Fetu. “Pretty good crowd here for the little wops,” he says in Seb’s direction.

Seb nods. “Yep, about 51 of us last we counted. Keeps things running.”

“Damnation! 51? Any kids?”

Seb takes a drink. “Well, there’s me and Nola here.”

The Postie laughs. “Well yeah, but you’re what—teens? Twenties?”

“Yep.”

“And you’re staying here?”

“Looks it,” says Seb.

“Good on ya. So, no other kids?”

“Sometimes.”

“Now?”

“There’s a new little one.”

“Right. Oh good. Boy?”

“Heketoro.”

“Interesting name. What’s it mean?”

Charlie leans over the back of his chair, chuckling. “That’s what we’ve all been asking. That and a few other things.”

“Other things?” the Postie turns for a better view. He cranes around and stops at the sight in the pub doorway.

Nola looks too. The girl in the doorway seems like a foreign creature in a book sketch.

It’s Lauren, with a child poised on her hip.

She has her hair let out in a wirey tuft. Her face has filled and thinned out again, somehow longer and more aware of its framing than it ever was when she and Nola were children. She holds a wrapped loaf of bread in her free arm. The toddler curves its small legs around her waist.

When Nola first puts the gin on to cook, the muslin is dry. Then the steam rises. It takes so long to swell through the cloth and the knot of botanicals. It’s not always clear what the flavour will be in the end.

“So, you’re a Postman?” Lauren says—her voice like string-pulled silk. She says it to the Postie, but Nola notices Mapper’s drink, the one he’s holding very still while he watches the things she has not yet surrendered to the room.

Everyone else pretends not to particularly notice her. They move the items near them, their plates and cups; they re-arrange their clothing. For a moment, Nola thinks she sees Lauren hesitate. But then she bends into the room and puts the loaf on a table.

“And you’ve got the youngest one in town,” the Postie says. He stands up from his stool, his small eyes glinting, and walks over to tickle Heketoro under the chin. “Where did you come from then, little bugger?”

Charlie holds his drink in his mouth. Beneath chairs, legs stop tapping. For a moment Nola can hear the wind on the Roof. The tink of icy rain. She sees it condensing on the insides of the windows. The room will smell of all of them, in a moment. Like their skin flakes gathered in the corners of the sills. The dust of them, moistening.

Heketoro’s face is a smooth, blank slate of pale brown. He gazes at the Postie and then twists, once and deliberate, into the nest of Lauren’s hair.

Lauren’s mouth crooks up into a smile. “All good things come from the Road,” she says, and clicks her fingers for a drink.

## *Twenty-Two*

When Heketoro touches down on the ground of the pub, everyone holds their breaths. He pretends not to notice, although a sly chirrup swims in the crook of his lips. Everyone is eating finally, churning the vegetables and the rock cakes between teeth. Lauren's bread stays on the table, uncut. Heketoro takes a wobbling step forward, letting go of her finger. He tips onto his fat-ringed wrists. They gasp. He looks around and crawls.

The neighbours start chewing again. Cut apple turns dark, untouched on Nola's plate.

She's watching Heketoro perambulate. He winds around the pub chairs like he's done it a thousand times, his breath pressing the cloth away from his body. His skin stays exactly where it should be. Flushed. Loose. Moving. When someone pushes back their chair to stand, he freezes. Nola doesn't miss Lauren's lurch forward. But he's fine. He speeds out of their way. His cheeks only pinken.

Nola's can't help but stare at him and Lauren. Her sister had just walked onto Sill Road five weeks ago. It had been four whole years. There was no one on the lookout to spot her. Everyone had stopped looking. She sauntered past the slow-registering gazes of the neighbours. Stepping into No. 5. Ma and Nola almost hadn't recognised her behind the dry chalk of her face—this strange woman in an unfamiliar pair of overalls with a baby tied to her back. She didn't pause, didn't speak. Just slipped the baby from its binds, walked into her bedroom and lay down with it on her old linenless bed.

A week of silent presence followed before the first time Nola saw it happen. It had been a week of asking—of Ma asking, of Mrs Manual knocking on the open door of No. 5, of Sylvie yelling in the pub that a deserter like that Lauren girl couldn't just walk back in, with no explanation, with no assurance of where she had or hadn't been. Where had she wandered to after Sill Road? Up to one of the small settlements, by the old Taupo exit? Down south to the Wellington Dome? What had she eaten, and who had she met? Why hadn't anyone sent word of her? They always paused, before they asked about the boy—the youngest person they'd seen for years. The whole town demanded a story. But wherever Lauren had walked her with her voice, it didn't seem like she'd brought it back. She glided out of town meetings. She pulled the old bread bowls from No. 5's cupboard. She mixed flour

and water and salt. Baked loaves. It had been a week, and Nola and Ma were watching her do this, completely silent, at the kitchen table. Heketoro was crawling around the room at high speed with a wooden spoon before he stopped short and reached one hand to pinch the skin of his neck. He opened his mouth. Raised his chin. The colour around his lips drained blue. His chest fluttered, shallow. They all stopped at the sound—the wheezing grate of his throat, closing.

They'd gone to him—this child they hardly knew, but Lauren ripped him from their hands, rubbed his back, hushed him down into a chesty panic, the nose flared and dripping, her own heartbeat bleating in her neck.

“He’s not right,” Ma gasped. “What have you done to him?”

That broke the voice out of Lauren’s veins. She stood in the kitchen screaming that they had to help. That he was everything. That of course she wouldn’t have come back. But she knew that even old soldiers on Sill Road would see the value in curing him. She sunk to the floor. Curved her fingers around Ma’s waist. The neighbours all heard it when she begged.

Nola shakes the thought of those moments from her head. She moves her attention back to the pub. To the Postie, picking through the spoils of produce and knotty rock cakes on his plate. She can see the tops of his letters, peeking from his satchel bag. Grey flecks of inky letters are visible. She looks for her name.

“What bring you this far up the Road?” she asks him, quietly, but his mouth is full of casserole and bread. He holds up a hand, telling her to wait. She slumps back in her chair.

Nola and Ma had spent the last three weeks scouring the medical advice in Section II of Road Guide, Expansion Five.

*Section II: 41 Every breath that is obstructed is obstructed by the body of the breath and is caused by the residue of the Outside destroying the body, as it does in many ways in many lingering particles. 42 The Road will provide. To restore a laboured breath, steam the lungs with ginger, garlic, turmeric, curcumin, black seed and other herbs, or even eucalyptus. Be aware of the cross-continental origins of the eucalyptus plant. Make sure it has been grown in good Road-*

*worthy soil and has not been found dried from an unknown origin. While, in past days, there have been medicinal interventions for breathlessness, these interventions cannot be remanufactured without countries unreachable by the Road and Outside materials, which are clearly unattainable in the necessary days of the Road.*

“That’s that,” said Ma. “I’ll go and see what Clive has growing in the Crop Rooms.”

“What does it mean, *medicinal interventions*?” Lauren said, her voice croaking out husky. Nola followed her out of No. 5 to Mrs Manual’s house. She watched as Lauren scooped Mr Manual’s textbooks from the living room bookshelf. Back in Ma’s kitchen, they flipped through the pages—the book was ragged at the seams, with pages ripped out and yellowing.

*Asthmatics may benefit from the use of various inhalers and intramuscular shots.*

Lauren ripped a scrap of wallpaper from the kitchen Wall and scrawled down the drug names: *epinephrine, isoproterenol, theophylline.*

Nola copied them down again on a thick recycled sheet of paper from the Sill Road storeroom. The ink caught on small hills in the paper. Bits where the previous sheets had not properly broken down before being reformed into a clean sheet of dull grey.

*To: To Mapper Paul*

*Private Bag 18 888*

*HSSS Institute Buildings*

*Wellington Dome 6160*

*Dear Mapper,*

*I am asking for assistance with a member of our community suffering from breathing difficulties assumed to be related to the condition known as asthma. I am seeking any supplies included in the attached list of medical interventions to aid their recovery. I am willing to travel. I trust the Road that provides.*

*Yours sincerely,*

*Nola Clark*

*(No. 5, Sill Road)*

In the pub, Nola itches to reach for The Postie's bag. She squirms in her seat.

"Don't worry," Seb whispers, squeezing her hand. "See, help came sooner than we thought it would."

But it doesn't feel right. Nola sucks in her foamy cheeks. Tries to flatten out the wrinkles on her forehead. The pub is a chime of glasses and bodies knocking against each other. Mapper watches her watch him, watch the Postie, watch Heketoro crawl under the tables, watch Lauren lift a tray of crockery from the bar bench. Watches as Lauren drops a pint-glass on the floor.

Heketoro jumps. Starts to cry. His face squirms into a mush of mauve dimples. Ma runs over and scoops him up.

Lauren pauses, then dashes to the back room. "I'll get a brush and pan."

Sylvie and Mrs Manual rise and swarm around the wailing child. They abandon their chairs, their bowls of cooling stew and crumbling cakes.

"There, there," they coo. "Little one!"

Nola strains to hear his breathing. To hear a wail instead of suffocated silence.

She tries to squeeze down to the backroom to help Lauren. But people block the way. Cream shirts. Dusky smears of people's skin. They bundle against her. Heke squirms to be let down. He toddles forward. His legs jelly at the knees. Then Nola sees her, Lauren, at the doorway of the gin

room. She's got something in her hand. Ma's voice is a dozen bells. Nola blinks. Peeks over the neighbours' heads. Heketoro stumbles. Lauren is stuffing something in her top. Herbs. Nola loses sight of her as the other neighbours gather around. They cheer around Heke, who stands in the middle of them, waddling forward. His eyes brim with tears again at the sudden claps. He tries to squirm between their legs. But he's the youngest on the Road, and they love him. Their legs become fences. Then Lauren is there, beside him, scooping him up and away. As she brushes past Nola, she looks back. Mapper is whispering to the Postie. Has his hand on the Postie's letter bag.

## *Twenty-Three*

When Mapper's letter of reply is delivered the next morning, it is crisply enveloped and sitting on the Clark's front doorstep. Nola slips it in her pocket, out of sight.

It isn't entirely clear to her why she takes it to the Potting Sheds to read. They seem so unfamiliar now. The whitewash paint has begun to flake under years of heating and cooling in the seasons. They're not the Potting Sheds Nola knew as a child, except in name. But they are somewhere to go where she's alone. Nola tries the doors.

She finds the fourth shed unlocked. The scent of ripe bark and wet silt settles around her. The floor is stacked with barrels of hand-labelled *Potting Mix*. Containers with *Fertilizer*, *Caution*, written in flaking paint on the sides line the far Wall. She weaves between the containers and sits out of sight, hidden by the barrels.

She takes the letter out. The paper has a little fleck of blue in it—a little bit of some previous document that hadn't been properly mixed in.

Her fingers hum when they touch the paper. The surface seems to move like there is electricity wired through them.

It doesn't matter what the letter says, she tells herself, because whatever it says will help them. It might not be easy news. But it will help. Mapper knows her heart, will help her. Already, she is finding shelves between her ribs. Hidden places in the recesses of her ears, neck and knees. It relaxes her to think of herself this way: that she is someone who can so totally absorb news in her body in a way that can make it disappear. She can dance herself into any configuration of movements to contain necessary thing. She imagines herself hung in the world as a vault, a haven, a burial ground. There are disappointments and notions trenched so deeply into her cavernous muscles that even she has forgotten them and remembers only in an ache as she stretches or bends against them. It is all just foreign matter that's become shrapnel, covered in.

Still, her finger hesitates on the blue fleck in the paper. It's raised from the smooth surface of the rest of the envelope. It trips her hand in passing.

Nola rips open the envelope. Unfolds the paper inside. The first sentence sinks in. She swallows, lodging the words away.

She decides she won't go back to No. 5, not right away. She drawls down the Road, dodging the sun-bleached window squares, to Seb's house. She crawls up into his bunk. Her feet are pitted with loose gravel from the Road. She gets under his threadbare blanket and pulls it over her head.

She hates how close she is to the ceiling when she's lying here. As he's grown up, Seb's pasted the walls with old posters and pages from magazines that feather at the edges. It makes the space feel dim. Nola makes a point not to look at the ceiling. There's a black line at the top of the Wall where the plaster ceiling joins, and although the room's been approved in the last inspection, she sometimes thinks it grows a little each time she sees it. She stays for the smell of him. Waits an hour to hear him shuffle in from work. Seb climbs the ladder in two steps and thumps down beside her. She falls into the dip made by his weight and pulls out the letter. She hides her face in the crook of his arms while he reads it out, slow and deliberate. He lies back. Stares at the ceiling.

"I just think," Seb's saying, "that we should wait a while. You know, think on this whole idea. There are tonnes of people who can fix Walls. It's not like there's any hurry to find someone."

"Lauren will be ropeable because they asked me, not her."

"Sure," says Seb, and brushes out her hair with his fingers. "Maybe. I don't know, Nola. Maybe we don't really know her anymore."

Seb's bed is so close to the ceiling that she can't sit up on it. She leans over him to press her fingers over the crack. The wood doesn't budge.

He'd asked her to move in. Not in a big way, just sort of in passing, when she was leaving in the morning a few weeks back. He'd said it with his hands in his pockets. She noticed that his face was all slack, and she'd felt the old familiar split happen in her—as if one part of her was outside of her body, taking notes on the event, and the other part of her, the one he could see standing in an old skirt with fraying seams, just stood in the door and felt nothing at all.

"Anyway, just a thought. There's no one else, is the thing, when it comes to me."

It was the way he said it that made her so uneasy. As a kid, she never doubted his presence.

Never looked at him skipping on the Road or appearing at her door to play as a loss of something else. Of course, they would always be together. When she's with him, all her bones settle down in the right places. Hours pass in his room. It doesn't matter what they do. When she's with him a kind of confidence exudes from her. She has strong notions. She tells him how she sees the world—her ideas about running Sill Road. “We don't even need half our town meetings,” she says, or “Someone should give Sylvie a bit more work to keep her from pickling so much stuff that doesn't pickle very well.” Seb doesn't say a lot, but he always understands. She has the feeling that they think in the same language. What happens in his room is her real life, and everything else, at home, or out in the passage of the Road or in the pub, feels like a holding place until she's back inside the poster-covered Walls.

Seb reads the letter again:

*You have been selected as a highly preferred candidate for training in the role of Wall Agent. As a trainee of the Institute of Habitation Solutions for Safe Societies (HSSS) as outlined in the Road Guide, (Expansion Five), you will serve as a preserving and practical influence on the Road and its Domes. Our Wall Agents carry out vital repairs and hazard-prevention procedures. These actions keep our beloved families of the Road safe. You have been especially scouted due to the following gifts:*

- a) Stature (< 5.3 foot; < 51 kgs = natural climbing advantage)*
- b) Location necessity (Lives on Sill Road = upcoming requirements for freshly trained Wall Agent due to:
  - a) Aging population*
  - b) Aging Wall materials**
- c) A remarkable sense of personal Institute pride, as referenced by:*

*Referee: Mapper Paul*

On the other side of the page, there's a handwritten scrawl. It is from Mapper himself. The letters curve in dirty blue ink.

*Saving paper. In reply to last letter, must inform you: no asthma medications left in circulation. Do not be distressed. See attached herbal remedies. The Road provides.*

She slips the letter from Seb's hand. She reads it again.

"I suppose we have to think long-term," she says, leaning into Seb's shirt so that he can't see her face. "Mapper says it's a necessary job. Those down in Wellington might forget to send us help if we were to rely only on them for our repairs."

"Maybe it's okay to be forgotten," whispers Seb. He pulls her close.

"The training only takes two years," Nola whispers.

"You'd miss me."

"Do you think they're really out of all the medication?" The question flurries from her throat. She gulps.

Seb's arm is very still. She can feel his heartbeat. A caged moth in his chest.

"Why'd you say that?"

"Just wondering. I'm not doubting anyone, I just wondered if there would be. Like, if there might be some that Mapper has missed. Not in any of the Institute's stores, obviously. But maybe someone has some in a drawer. People keep things for years. Lifetimes, even. I mean, just look at the Manuals' house."

"You want to search all the drawers in the Wellington Dome? You've never even been. You don't even know what it's like."

"No, I know." says Nola. "I am just thinking."

Seb keeps his arms around her. She's staring at the Wall. The crack does nothing. Just exists as a graphite-coloured line.

## *Twenty-Four*

Nola goes home to No. 5 before it's dark. She sets the table and puts veggies on to steam—carrots and turnips and lima beans. Seb comes by after seven with his hair wet and spouting from its slicked position on the sides. Ma is at the table, mending her socks. She always keeps a plate out for Seb on Fridays. Nola jumps to catch him before Ma emerges from the kitchen and steps between them.

“You brought me gin. Again!” Ma laughs, taking a corked bottle from his hand.

“It's a bit of an odd colour. Not sure why.” He presses the hair down flat with his palms.

It's something they have in common. Cleaning themselves up in a hurry. Nola has felt it since they were children. She likes the way he always moves a little faster in her presence—is a little more eager to pick up a dish for Ma or say something interesting but unthreatening to the visiting neighbours. She takes his hand. Pea straw and grime still cling under his nails from the Crop Rooms. It's the damp, hayish smell that she likes most. The way it enfolds her. It's a moment from before that he has brought with him and shared without having to say anything.

They sit together at the kitchen table while Ma grills tinned meat and Lauren bends a knife against a brick-skinned loaf of bread. She circles the sides with the serrated blade, breaking through to the holey interior.

“You want a hand?” Seb asks, but she shakes her head, pauses to wipe hair from her face, and leans back in.

Lauren does not actively snap at Seb, which is another thing Nola likes. She tries to hold this fact in her head while she watches him peel an ink stain off the table with his nail. A splash of dirty water has dried against the hairs on his arm. It binds them together in a nest.

The sharp point of the envelope presses into her thigh. She's tucked it in the pocket of her skirt. She keeps it there in case. It blanches her skin. Tonight doesn't feel like the right time to mention it. Just the weight of the letter makes her stomach lurch.

Heketoro toddles out of the bedroom.

“Where have you been?” Nola asks him. He smiles, lifting his shirt into his mouth. She pulls

him onto her knee. She moves the letter up in her pocket so that it doesn't cut in so much.

It's Lauren who notices. She leans across the table, slaps a piece of bread down on her sister's plate and says, "I think the more interesting question is, what have you got in your pocket that you're too chicken to show us?"

Seb glances at her. Nola feels suddenly like she's about to shoot a dog. "It's nothing," she says. "I got a reply from Mapper."

Ma shrieks, grabbing it from her. She reads it up by the window. Lauren tries to catch Seb's eye, but he keeps scraping an ink spill from the table. His face is a bruised citrus skin.

Ma reads the letter, hunched over the table. She says nothing. It's Lauren who stands, hoisting Heke on her knee, to read the letter aloud. Her face drops.

"Is that it?" she says.

Ma reads out Mapper's message about the medication. Slips it back in the envelope.

There's a moment where the only sound is the air Outside, spinning off the Roof.

"You've been blessed with an opportunity here, Nola—"

Lauren interrupts Ma's words. "There's no point leaving to just be an Institute tool. For god's sake. He's doing this just to spite me."

Nola smooths Heketoro's hair.

"Why do they mention your height and weight? How do they even know those things?" asks Ma.

"They want skinny people," Lauren spits. "To shimmy up the Dome Walls."

"I don't even know what Wall Agents do," Nola says. "Not really."

"They bloody mess things up—" Lauren flicks a wheat husk from her mouth onto the table, then wipes it away from Heke's curious hands.

"Right, I think we've gathered your opinion, Lauren," Ma hushes. She takes Nola's free hand, pulling it across the table. "I know this isn't what you expected. But it's an honour. A deep honour. Wall Agents maintain and improve the safety of the Road. To be involved with that? You've been called. This is a calling."

At the kitchen table, Seb studies her. He puts his arm on the back of her chair, and with his arm the time-stretching smell of the room, which boxes her in—she is calm and contained in its promise that in the next room there is something alive and growing. She isn't wrong to want that, she tells herself. That's why the Road exists—so people can be alive on it.

It doesn't matter what the letter says, because she won't go. She remembers a day last week when she met Seb on the edge of the Crop Rooms. He was covered in a thin film of silver dew.

He had called her over, in his open, gormless way. Put his arm around her shoulder and took her to see the gin he was brewing in glass jars. Little bits of lemon peel floated, foamy, to the top of the liquid, and when he unscrewed the lid, the smell coated the back of her throat.

Heketoro stirs on her lap. He sighs heavily, leaning back against her chest. She can see the quiver of his breath through the bulge of his little stomach. She tries not to think about his breathing. To imagine only her and Seb standing in the Crop Rooms for another year. How his shoulders will sag, little by little, and her stomach will fill out as they drink and eat. If they stay very still, they will fit into each other so that no gaps remain for the frigid air. She will absorb the thought of what is elsewhere, and when she doesn't move, she won't feel where it is buried around her bones.

## *Twenty-Five*

Mapper calls a meeting. It's raining. Outside the Road's dirty windows, the ground is slick with mud. The rain channels through it in veiny lines. Nola doesn't like to look at growing pools. She falls into the pub with relief and keeps her thoughts away from the filling skylight.

"I have one more trip after this. One more stop, further up the Road," Mapper begins, clapping his hands to draw the neighbours' chatter to a close.

"At one of the Road settlements?"

"Not that far up. I have a trip to the entrance of the old Rotorua Dome."

"But the Rotorua Dome is cut off now," says Charlie, crossing his arms across his belly.

"Shut off, Charlie. Walled over after the thermal damage to the Dome. But there have been reports from our passing Posties that there are people there. Trying to find a way to live in the old areas."

"But the Dome is as good as Outside now, with all the damage. It's a death trap!"

"Absolutely. The area was evacuated for a reason, all those years go. We don't build a Wall for nothing now, do we? But the remains of the Dome still linger. Some misguided, sick souls have fooled themselves into thinking it could once more be a home."

"Utter madness!"

"And evil danger. Who knows what they might let in while trying get to the Outside."

"How do they get into the Dome?" asks Lauren.

Mapper turns to her. "We're not sure yet."

"You just said that you Walled it off," says Lauren. "So, I'm wondering why you know there are people trying to live there. Surely, you'd only know that if you went Outside as well."

Mapper stands back. The neighbours on Sill Road are seated as always. They keep their faces to the ground, like nighttime flowers.

"I don't say this to upset you," Mapper whispers slowly. "Only to let you know the dangers we are still battling in our survival. Now, let's move on to the meeting minutes."

“I have questions first. The most urgent one is about food,” says Sylvie. “It’s been getting a bit tight the last few months. It’s spring now, so we’re not too worried. But we’ll have to get far more crops if we’re going to feed all the mouths next year.”

Mapper nods his head. Smooths out the blond stubble on his upper lip.

“Crumb nights,” he says, not looking at her. “They come easy in these parts.” He walks around the room. “I’ve just come from the Wellington Dome. I talked to a young man there who said he thought it was high time we took out the steel boats and tried to catch some fish. Says he’s seen them in the water from a window. Says he thinks they look edible. And oh boy—is he hungry.”

Those in the pub say nothing. Ma shakes her head.

“It’s tiring, those people in the cities. They forget to think. They forget that one fish could kill the lot of them. It’s a joy to be back, I must say, in this part of the Road. Where you have a simple respect of the Outside. I love to see the windows shut and the alarm systems running. So yes, there may be nights of hunger. But you will live to see those nights.”

Nola jumps as Seb speaks up beside her. “Just need some out-of-the-box thinking, is all,” he says. “There’s no one we can’t feed with the Crop Rooms and some trading with other settlements if we plan ahead well.”

Sylvie turns in her seat. “Easy for you to say. But you’ve not lived as long as I have. Next year will be harder.”

Seb thinks. “I don’t see why. We can squeeze in a few more rows of garden beds if Clive lets us. If we hadn’t lost the pumpkins to blight, we’d have had more than enough this year.”

Sylvie scoffs. “But there’s always blight somewhere. And more mouths to feed.”

Mapper pulls out a notebook and rifles through the pages. “Don’t remember a record of any relocations.”

“Well, no,” says Sylvie briskly. “But who knows who else Lauren will bring home if she wanders off again.”

His face doesn’t change, but Nola senses a shift throughout the room. “Been finding other strays, has she?”

Lauren stays in her seat by the pub door. She has Heketoro asleep over her shoulder—her scarf wrapped around both of their bodies. She doesn't answer.

“Aw, Heke's a kid with good taste, Sylvie,” says Seb, breaking the silence. “We tried him on your pickles and from his reaction, your supplies will stay reserved just for you.”

Fetu chuckles up beside the bar but cuts it short in the muted room. He flicks a dead bee husk from the bench.

“Strange name,” says Mapper suddenly. “Heketoro.”

Lauren doesn't respond.

“Forest folk, am I right? They're in some old myth; can't quite place it. Oh well. We always welcome children on the Road. They are our future generations. The lucky ones, who may one day walk Outside in clean air again.”

Lauren chews her cheek, gripping Heketoro with both arms. “I have a question, too,” she says. “It's about my son's health.”

“Pickles or no pickles, the Road will provide. We can feed two extra mouths on Sill Road, I'm sure,” Mapper says.

“I'm talking about his breathing. Nola sent you a letter, but you said you couldn't help. We've tried giving him herbs, but he's still having attacks. I hoped you might be able to source us some medicine from somewhere else. The doctors say that he needs medicine.”

“I don't remember there being a doctor here since old Mr Manuel. Don't tell me—” he spreads his arms out to the room and laughs. “That you've created one of those for your population too.”

“It's asthma. The medical textbook said so.”

“A story told you?”

“A book. He needs medication. It's asthma, brought on by the cold weather and the dust. The book says asthmatics need fresh air, too.”

“There is no fresh air,” says Mapper, very slow.

Nola feels the neighbours shifting in their seats. Someone coughs and presses the sound down in their chest.

“Medications are from the old world. We’ve been out of all that for years now in the Domes. I consulted with an Institute doctor, and sent you the recommended herbal remedies,” Mapper smiles. “I think you should get along with them just fine.”

Lauren grips Heketoro to her chest. “We’ve tried them. I don’t think it’s enough.”

Mapper is sighing. He has already turned back to the front of the room. “There’s been a lot of young people thinking recently.”

They get home from the meeting raw and weighed down. Ma lifts Heketoro over her head, tickling his back with her fingers.

There’s a moment, while she’s holding him, where he’s got his face all glowing, and a cackle starts to bustle from his chest. Then, his little face drains pale. The veins up by his temples begin to show through the skin. He falls silent. Purses his purple lips and coughs a slow, wheezing breath.

“Lauren,” Ma calls, loud.

She’s been in Ma’s room, mending the curtains with scavenged thread. She runs to the kitchen, a needle still in her mouth.

“Give him,” she says, and then she lies him over her knee with his face towards the ground. This is a routine she knows by heart. She massages his back in slow circles and lifts him to her mouth, blowing in a breath. His arms wobble, and he stares straight ahead, preoccupied with some internal clockwork.

Lauren lies him back over her knee again. Looks up at Nola.

Nola springs into action. She grabs an iron pot. Slams it down on the stove. She splashes in water from the simmering kettle and a bundle of herbs from a jar on the bench. The thick smog of oregano cuts into the air. When the mixture starts to steam, Ma carries it over and holds it under Heketoro’s face, wafting the mist around his sallow cheeks. It curls across his face. He shakes his head. After a minute, his chest’s quick, high flutter calms, and he looks at Lauren, reaching his arms up for her neck.

“See, little joker. You’re alright,” she says. Her hands shake as she enfolds him.

Nola grips her knee.

It's not that Mapper lies. He's famous for being clear—for drawing certainty out of confusion. But for the rest of the day there is a deep knot in the curve of her spine. She tries to bend it out with a high kick stretch, and half twist, and by cracking it over the back of the chair. It doesn't waver—a pain she cannot seem to absorb.

The next morning, Nola watches Lauren mix bread again with Heketoro. They pour sourdough starter—a bubbly grey slug—from a jar into a cast-iron tray. Heketoro pulls the jar from the bench, walks it to the opposite counter, and tips the scraps into the bin.

“Stop,” Lauren sighs, scooping up the jar. She pulls the strings of stretchy mixture from his fingers. Scraps them back into the jar. “We can't get rid of this, kid. It's the good stuff.”

There is a tug in Nola's stomach. It's not that Mapper lies. It's that he might not know. There might be no more medication. *Delivery comes in the form of injection or inhalation via inhalers*, Mr Manual's book had said. There might be no more help anywhere. But maybe someone's saved an inhaler by accident. She shifts on her chair. Lauren covers the jar with a square of cloth and twine and shuts it high up in the cupboard over the sink.

The Road is one big room. Nothing ever leaves. If there were ever medications or inhalers on the Road or in the Domes, they'd still be around, lingering.

Nola pulls her hair up and away from her face. She goes to the bathroom. She pats water into her skin and tries to slide the sleepless hollows around her eyes away with a slide of her knuckle. She puts on her good skirt and one of Ma's knitted cardigans. If she stops and looks at herself in the mirror without thinking, she can almost see her face as it didn't belong to her. She looks like a grown-up. So thin, she could be on screen.

She walks to the pub. The way is as familiar as her own skin. In the pub, she sits at a table with her hands crossed. When Mapper arrives, she gets him a neat gin from the bar.

“Do you like lemon?” she asks. “Or we've got feijoa wine. It's not real strong, but it's refreshing.”

Mapper listens with his shoe up on his knee while she talks, angled away slightly from the table.

“About what you said to me in your letter,” she says, letting only her hand move for emphasis. “If I go this year, I have a place guaranteed at the Institute’s Training Academy. It makes sense. We don’t have a Wall Agent here.”

Mapper taps his hip. “So, you’ll do it?”

She nods.

“It’s good to learn the skills,” he shrugs. He leans back in his seat. He’s sizing her up. Figuring out what shape he’ll form from her chaos. “No other reasons then. For leaving?”

Nola is a Wall. She feels herself forming for him. Building. Taking pose in the right form. She means it when she says it. “I only want to go deeper into what it is we are. Our lives on the Road are so important.”

“You know, we try with all our young things. Try to raise them to understand the Road. There’s the truth to all reason, all art, all life here. But the trick is that you have to believe it first. You have to let it sink in and change your youthful wildness. Not all the young ones can hear. Not all. You gotta hold on, you see.”

“I believe,” says Nola. She leans forward. A pale glare sinks into her face from the skylight. She thinks of nothing. She sips her drink, swallows a leaden calm.

## *Twenty-Six*

Things have been this way all week. Hot and syrupish. Nola lies with her stomach on her bed. Her face presses down into the blanket. One arm drops off the side. The air gulps itself and for once the wind Outside is busy somewhere else. The tin Roof pops under the licking sun.

Lauren slumps into the room and folds down on the floor between their beds. “Guess what.” She closes her eyes.

Nola unlocks her jaw and yawns. Lauren looks flushed today. Tight and flushed. Nola thinks Lauren should drink more. Move more. Sleep more. But Lauren just deflates on the ground or curls up on the sofa, waiting for the worst of the heat to come, fall over her, and pass away. From here, they can hear Heketoro knocking over blocks in the kitchen. Nola jumps as they clatter on the floor. Lauren glances over at her. Squints.

“What?” Nola snaps.

Lauren puts her hands over her stomach and stays very still. “Not much. I’ve just seen Seb.”

It’s so warm that she could be sick with it. She thinks about Seb and the lovely skin by the side of his ears. She thinks about him at the dinner table with his bad gin and about him now on the Road with a shovel over his shoulder. She thinks about his face in the dark when she told him that she’d leave in a month. Thinks of his face at the front door, and how she hasn’t seen him there, scuffing his gumboots along the shoe brush, all week. It makes her want to cry, and then it makes her want to sink deeper into the lumpy mattress and become unconscious.

“What about him?” she says.

Lauren doesn’t even answer the question, just starts on a new topic. “I saw Mapper too. And Clive. So anyway, I happened to be walking the same way as them. They were doing something, but it was all very hush-hush. But then Sylvie was standing at her doorway on the way home and pulled me—honestly, she used my arm like a cheap door handle—into her house to find out what they were doing. She left marks on my arm. I didn’t know, obviously, but I gave her some ideas.”

“Something’s happened.”

“Nothing’s happened for months. I’d like something to bloody well happen.”

Nola feels the same. But the way that Lauren says it makes her nervous. Things have been better recently. Not quite the same as before when they were children—looking back for each other when they walked around, always coming to each other with things they’d scavenged from the Road. That’s a strange, mist-edged memory of a time. She swallows the thought of it down in a lump. But Lauren is close again. She’s talking. She’s slowed and settled into a routine that fits with life on the Road. She gets up early, before dawn. Makes bread with Heketoro, guiding his puffy hands to draw flour into the dough. She’s started walking down the Road with him, veering across the passage so he can try to pick up little stones and fit them in his pockets. “Say, hello Charlie! Hello Sylvie!” she tells Heketoro as he toddles past No. 18. Charlie bends down and ruffles his curly hair.

She’s stopped snapping at people. The insults leak in the corner of her mouth, but she’s gulping them down. She touches people on the shoulders as she leaves rooms. When Ma twists a conversation towards an issue on contention, everyone turns their attention to Heke instead. He becomes a peace agreement. Why doesn’t Lauren pick up a few less books late at night? Heke takes his first step. Why doesn’t she start coming back to pub meetings? Lauren presses his chubby fingers into dust on the windowsill, and they form perfect heart marks. It is an arrangement everyone seems able to live with.

“Anyway,” Lauren says, with a full stop at the end, and raises her brows in Nola’s direction.

“You were saying about Seb,” she groans.

Lauren chuckles.

“I only ask because there is nothing else going on. You said it yourself,” says Nola.

“OK. Whatever you like. Anyway, I just thought you should know that he asked after you. He said something about a mouse. I don’t know what all that is about. I hope it isn’t sexual.”

“Shut up,” says Nola. But she pushes herself up on her elbows. Her head rushes in the heat, a weighty slush off whiteness, spinning. Her neck is bent off-kilter. She’s already planning how she’ll see Seb. Will have to shake herself together for it. He won’t understand her so undone like this. Heat seems to bounce off him. Doesn’t soak in the way that it does for her—makes her skull heavy and soft.

Makes the energy fall out through her bones, as if they are Roads themselves to somewhere vital her mind can't go.

“Does he need help?”

Lauren looks over.

“Mapper, I mean.”

Lauren shrugs, hands folded over her stomach. “I don't know, but whatever they're up to, I want first dibs on the information. Tell Sylvie to mind her own business.”

“Okay,” Nola twists her hair up into a bun. She walks out barefoot, the ground simmering under her toes.

She finds them in the corner of the Crop Rooms. They have a trolley of planks and scrap metal. Mapper has got his arm up on a support post, tapping it as if he can feel weakness just by touch. His other hand rests loosely on a ladder where Clive stands, glueing a panel back in place to the ceiling.

“Nollie,” says Mapper, letting go of the ladder and calling out to her. “Look who the cat dragged in!”

Nola makes a conscious effort to smile while leaning her foot against the ladder's base to support it. Clive glances down, his old knees wobbling badly.

“Is Seb here? I just heard he might be,” she says.

Mapper grins. “Came through, that's right. Got him on a job and a half today. He's down at his workbench. We had a mouse sighting this morning. Checked all the Crop Room Walls this for chew damage, good guy. But I've done a technically proficient look over it all this afternoon, too. Don't you worry about any chewed Walls.”

There's a mess of loose wood and sawdust through all through the lines of vegetation. Mapper and Clive have left tape and tools in piles around the place. She finds Seb at the seedling bench down the far end. He's tucked between the sink and stack of boxes covered in condensed plastic. He's stooped over the bench. With the crush of a hammer, he nails two pieces of wood into place. There's a pile of rodent traps beside him, all ready to be reset.

It's strange to smell the fresh sawdust on him. It's a raw gash in this silent, earthy place. He

stops working when she slips up beside him.

“Got a mouse,” he says. It’s in a jam jar at the back of the table, making the smallest splotch of fog.

“So not a euphemism then,” Nola says and instantly regrets it.

While Seb saws a piece of wood off a plank, she lifts the jar. The mouse is a lung. All movement, all air in and out. She notices its pale, spider whiskers bent against the glass.

The war on mice is eternal. They burrow through the Walls. Their small teeth river out trails of sawdust as they try to burrow from the Road. Clive gets complaints at least twice a week about sightings of them on crawling on pipes or along floorboards or chewing on loose Wallpaper. But somehow, she’s managed to hardly ever see one up so close.

“Likely, it’s got friends,” Seb says, resting his hammer on the bench. He’s pale around his waterlines. Nola wonders if he’s been sleeping.

“Got the lid on a little tight,” she says, unscrewing it slightly.

Seb lifts the new trap off the bench and places it beside one of the planter boxes. “At least if we catch all of them, it’ll have some company.”

“Can’t you just put it out quickly?”

“And do you want to do it yourself?”

Nola puts the jar back down on the bench. “Mapper says it’s best if I leave with him next week.”

Seb leans on the bench for a moment. Then he lines up another length of wood to cut.

“You always used to say our Walls are ‘strong as guts’, right? That will be my doing soon.”

Seb lowers his head. It hangs from his shoulder blades like a bead on a string. “Spoken to Lauren?”

Nola nods.

“Told her why you’re really going?”

“I’m going for the Road,” she shifts, her skin all crackling surface friction.

They are interrupted by the sound of a snapping branch and the rip of torn tape. It is Mapper,

with his ladder, CAUTION tape and tools. He's moved over to the far Wall, across from them, and, Nola realises, within earshot.

"Sebastian! You got the safety records for this area?"

Seb nods and turns back to the worktable. Nola can't help a grin swirling down her cheeks at the formality of his name.

"Sorry," she says as it breaks.

Seb glances over. Shakes his head, grinning.

Mapper calls again. "What's the story with this tree? Sebastian! This tree?"

It's the old one with Milton's whisker under it, buried deep down in the ground. Mapper wobbles one of the branches. He scrapes a pile of lichen loose onto the ground.

"That's always been there," Nola calls back to him.

Seb puts his hammer down and takes the nails from his mouth. "What about it, Mapper?"

But Mapper has already whipped out his notebook and pen, surveying the branches and brushing his hands along the surface. Seb watches him over his shoulder. When he steps forward, Nola follows. As they pass the cabbage beds, his hand brushes back along her fingers. He holds on. Lets go. Her insides wrap around themselves.

"See this rot?" Mapper asks as they reach his side. "This lichen, and these mushrooms?"

"Dead tree is all," says Seb. "We were gonna cut it down, but it's good for hangin' things on." He points at the garlic plaits on one branch. The tin hooks. The trowels and rags.

"Dead alright. A relic from Outside. Dead before this Road got built, even."

"Right."

"Good for hanging, you say?" He scratches the sweat from his scalp with one hand. "Now see, I see why you might think it was all right to leave it here. Not troubling a soul, you might think."

Seb and Nola say nothing.

"Thing is, this tree's not all dead. Look here," Mapper beckons them closer. With one yellowed fingernail, he scrapes off a path of pale lichen and a small, white mushroom. They rest like translucent moth eggs on his finger.

“They’re tiny,” Nola reaches forward.

“Wouldn’t touch.” Mapper slides his hand back. “You see, the thing about fungi is they aren’t just alive on the surface. They hide. Burrow. You think this is the mushroom—” he presses down on the tiny caps. “— and it’s a thing you can brush off at the surface. But the mushroom’s also here—” he knocks on the branch of the tree. “—you just can’t see it. But all through this tree it’s hidden its spores and tendrils. You gotta watch out for those. They reach down into the ground. Through the soil. Maybe that’s as far as they go. But maybe not.”

“You mean, they might go Outside?” Seb says, without any inflexion at all.

Mapper flicks the lichen and the mess of mushrooms from his finger. He lays his hands on Nola and Seb’s shoulders, gripping hard.

“The gaps to Outside are there. Nature’s always finding a way to break through. So, you have to cut them off at the source. Before they get through to the next section and get everywhere.” He looks down at his hand on Nola’s shoulder. “Huh. Watch out.”

She turns her head. A smear of mushroom sludge has smeared onto her sleeve. He wipes it off. Drops it on the ground.

For the next half hour, Seb stands at the workbench, splitting rusty nails into the wooden traps. Mapper wraps a roll of yellow tape around the branches of the tree. He tells Clive how to get it out from the roots and cuts one branch off with a handsaw. Nola watches the chips of dust scatter the floor. On his boots and Clive’s old waxy galoshes. Mapper counts the dry inner rings. Chucks the limb on the ground. She goes back to Seb and sits on the bench. Leans back and knocks the mouse jar over. The body is all bones and stretched skin. Its palm-pink feet lie stiff and raised to the skylights.

## *Twenty-Seven*

On the morning Mapper leaves, Nola heaves out of her bed—shaking. She can just see the outline of Lauren’s face on the pillow. Her skin glows pale. These days, Nola thinks that’s the only way she can ever see her sister fully: when she’s asleep. Only then does her face settle into its true form, unguarded. In the crook of her neck, Heketoro tucks his little fist. He’s leaned back into the pillow, cheeks exposed. His tight, birdish bones stand out. A single vein pulses green along his jawline. Taupe lips part between his cheeks, a dark cabbage butterfly. They are full and smoothed with light like he’s stuffed his mouth with the moon.

Ma is still asleep in the bedroom when Nola creeps into the kitchen. From the open door, she can see the edge of her blanket, and one foot slipped over the edge of the mattress. Mapper knocks at the front door. Nods to her. His hand rocks gently as he pulls on his boots. He ties the laces in two neat double knots. Picks up his pack.

They stand for a moment at the door, watching Ma’s blankets rise and fall in the dark.

“Let her sleep,” he says.

“We should get going,” says Mapper, stuffing some water into his pack. “You’ve said your goodbyes. Let her sleep.”

She follows him out to the Road with her bag. It’s heavy on her shoulder—stuffed with tight-rolled shirts and pants, pressed against each other. Ma has knitted her a whole new set of socks. In the toe, she’s stuffed money notes and an address for the bank once she’s in the city. There’s a rough toothbrush. A pack of hard, flat bread and jerky. A metal tin of biscuits that Ma packed, especially for Mapper.

They walk past Mrs Manual’s place, with the door open to the clear kitchen table, set up for breakfast for two. They reach the pub. All its chairs lie upside down on the counter. The cups stand in their places. Nola watches dust hang in the beam from the skylight.

Mapper tutts around with the Cushman scooter, unlocking the motor scooter from the Wall and pressing down on the wheels with his shoe.

“I’ll have to pump these up, dammit.” He casts his arms lank at his sides. Sets to work strapping on the bag with the trampoline rope. He puts a large container of water behind it, keeping it from slipping with some difficulty.

“Give me a minute,” he says. He glances up at her from his work. “Maybe you should go for a walk. Check you haven’t forgotten anything.”

Nola glances down the Road, where the light is just beginning to go pale, paving the path in blocks of blue. She starts walking.

Seb’s been busy when she gets to the Crop Room doors. Got his hands in water, washing the dirt from an early harvest of peaky radishes.

She’s not sure if he sees her. He moves his hands methodically through the bucket. But when she approaches, he turns. Sits on the step, one radish in his hand. He brushes flaked skin from its cap.

“The yield looks good.”

He lays the root down on the ground. “You got a choice day for a Cushman ride, that’s for sure.”

Nola sits. Looks out at the quiet garden beds. Leeks peep from the soil. Their shoots are lolly-sucked green. They pause in the silent morning, unsure where to reach without the sun to grasp at.

There’s a mouse trap under the bench again. Propped open with the stick but hidden out of sight. Seb’s nails sink in deep through the wood, so you can hardly see them, only the little holes they’ve left behind.

“You’re good at that,” says Nola, motioning to it. “The building stuff thing, I mean. You never wanted to do something else on the Road?”

“What, repair Walls?”

“You could travel. See stuff. Other people. Joinery designs. Garden architecture. Woodwork. Other magazine wall paperers.”

Seb laughs, sucking the sound in between his teeth and tongue. “I’ll leave that travelling up to you. You’re the one with all the silver-screen dreams. I’ve thought about doing more building or something. But I reckon I’m better at growing things than cutting them down.” He smiles at the tree

in the corner, wrapped in yellow tape.

“Would you keep an eye on Lauren?” Nola whispers in the silence.

“Course,” says Seb.

“And Heketoro.”

“Yep,” says Seb.

There’s nothing else to say. This fact sits as a curling ache in her chest. It’s a pressure that rocks on the balls of its feet. Without looking over, Seb places a hand on her knee. The air prickles her eyes—sour sting.

“Don’t you do that now,” he says. He hands her a rag from his back pocket. “Nothing to it. Nothing. Just a trip to the far end of the Road. I’ll see you back here. Always known that.”

“I don’t want to go.”

“That’s something I like about you. You never want to go anywhere.”

He stands then. Walks the length of the garden beds. At the end of the line, he pauses to press a stone on the ground into place beneath his foot. Then he folds his shoulders through the plastic curtains of the door and is gone.

## *Twenty-Eight*

She has never travelled further than the green window ten minutes' walk past No. 1, where Sill Road stops and the dimly lit Southern Road continues. Beyond that point the windows are occasional. Mapper will need to follow the Road by the trail of stuttering ceiling bulbs.

She has to squeeze on the back of the Cushman as it judders past the familiar houses, Mapper revving around potholes along the way. He accelerates as they pass the last houses. The scooter is a piecemeal collection of welded metal, and a hot rush of air floods out a gap on one side of the wheel cover. Nola holds her leg away from the fumes until her calf catches in a tight, wringing cramp.

Mapper's leather coat is cracked in places where the wax and fat he rubs on it in cold months has not been enough. The flesh splits in cream hunks. The sharp leather rips press against the front of Nola's coat jacket. The Road grows dark. Then Light flashes past them. Grey. Yellow. Tussock floods. Brown streaks. Red gushes of deserted ground.

Flash. The Outside, blue. Flash. Sky. Desert grass. Wall. Rushed flat and seamless. Ripping past her. Window. Dust in sheets, particles flood together. Glass glint. Slurry of grains on Roof. Acid hit on concrete. On tin.

The Cushman picks up speed, calling out loudly. The Road flies behind her; against the still air, they crush.

She feels the Road for hours—each dip through tar to pitted dirt under the tyres—the slide at infrequent corners to follow the centreline, long ago sanded away by winds and later feet. She's caged in by the air's resistance to their speed. Mapper looks straight ahead, and Nola feels frozen in place, gripping the sides of the scooter with her knees.

Then they pass a blue window. The lights fade. They are in black, the fingertips of the lightbulbs peeping out from the ceiling.

Flash. Ground. Flash. The Cushman's motor pops. She feels as if a mountain has shuddered.

And then it's dark. The last window falls away completely out of sight.

"We'll be in this for a few hours now," Mapper calls over his shoulder in the dark.

All she can feel is the numb space where her fingers should be, brushing up against their own wind as they burn along the Road.

For a moment, her mind fades to a vague smear of thought. Her eyes grow heavy. As she jerks awake, Lauren's voice is in her ears, untucking itself from a warm place in her head.

"Heketoro—it means a forest spirit," she's saying. What kind of a name is that? A name that no one else on the Road knows. Nola shakes her head. The darkness is grey, flickered with faint globules of bulb light.

When Nola was three, she got a fever. The way Ma tells it, she held both chubby hands over her face. In a small voice, she asked to please be hidden under a blanket until the fire went down. When Ma tells it, she smiles with the corner of her brown-flecked lavender lips.

It's too much. Too acidly lucent. At the end of the tunnelled Road the entrance to the Wellington Dome shines. It's a pure, blistering white. Mapper slows as they reach a small box on the side of the tunnel. It's a black booth. There is a large metal door beside it, to close off the Dome if need be. An old woman's sleeping behind scratched glass. Her mouth's open. A fly lingers on her hair. Her hands cross over her stomach. Mapper bangs on the side of the booth. She startles. Peers down at them, and then waves them through.

They pass through the wide gate. Nola can see the teeth of it poking from the Walls. Looking back as they speed past, she can even see the tracks where it would close in an emergency—if the Dome were ever breached. The woman is no longer watching them. She lies back in her chair and closes her eyes.

The way curves, dimmer for a moment. Then they burst out from the tunnel into the Dome.

She squints, but Mapper keeps driving, and as the light grows too bright, she has to press her helmet into the back of his jacket. It grows unbearable. Even with her eyes closed, her lids scream red, swarming with lit-up, blood-pink veins.

"Mapper," she calls. But he doesn't hear, and a stream of heat pummels the back of her neck. She jerks up.

The ceiling is glass. She crushes under sun.

She doesn't know how long she's been in it. Even with her face pressed against Mapper, she is aware of the bright Road beneath her blurring past. Between blinks, she sees it is smooth and grey. Parts are stained with white. They pause at a streetlight. A pushbike rolls up beside them.

She sees a man's shoes. Leather and rubber. Old soles sewn onto the new leather in bright red thread. He taps his foot on the ground. Peddles off.

The streets twist all the time. She has to hold onto Mapper's waist as he leans around the corners. When she looks back, they fall away to steep hills. Doors and Walls pile on top of each other, with ladders and steps down to the Road. She forces herself to peer up. The Walls stop short, finished with flat Roofs. Some cascade with greenery. Vegetables, and ferns that Nola doesn't recognise. Over the Roofs, there is blank space. Then, hexagons of steel, and between them, only glass.

They wind through a series of passages where the Walls on either side press in. They rise up sharply. She can see doors open to houses, shops and a place where there is a crowd of people eating from red clay bowls. There's a woman in a long dress leaning out a house window. Mapper pulls the scooter over on the side of the Road, against a Wall on Hill Street.

"You're here, kid," he says.

They've reached a flat piece of Roadway. The sun only hints down between the chasm made by the buildings on either side. As she wobbles from the Cushman, Nola sees that there are mostly shops around them—a sewing store with wet felted sweaters hanging like rabbit pelts in the window to dry—a vegetable shop with large signs out the front. A hot brackish scent pools in the gutters. The street is dominated by large steps, and a door so wide Nola could lean against it with her arms outstretched and not touch the frames. There are stained glass windows on either side of the door. The Walls of this building are the same earthy pink all the way up. They finish in a tower. She can see where the top touches against the glass Dome.

Mapper pulls the bags from the scooter and lugs them up the bottom of the stairs.

"The Institute building is a weight-bearing point," he says, following her gaze up to the towering peak. "You'll see a few around the city."

Nola picks up a bag and climbs the chipped steps. Mapper heaves the rest to the top, then pauses to tuck in his shirt. She notices how his light hair seems to melt under the sun into a burnt sugar slew. He seems smaller than usual. The edges of him hazy. Above her, the Wellington sun turns to geometric shapes along the steps. Everything too bright. Too caught in a glare.

She hesitates. A man swings open the door and passes her. He raises a hand at Mapper in greeting. Moves on.

“Can we just go in?” she asks.

Mapper pushes the door open to a cool lobby.

*HSSS Institute*, reads the huge carved stone at the far end of the room. Underneath, the words: *Habitation Solutions for Safe Societies*.

## *Twenty-Nine*

Cool tiles press flush against Nola's shoes as she tiptoes to the middle of the lobby. She's never been in a room this big before. Not even the Crop Rooms have such a high ceiling. This one rises to a peak in the middle, like a house in a picture book.

The sudden space jolts her, as if she's walked into a Wall.

As soon as the door shuts, the sound of the street is gone. No more chatter or creaking tyres or slow, weighty wheels. The lobby is full of curling quiet. There is no boundary between the lack of sound and the coolness. It's as if they are the same sense, smothering her body. Without windows, she can't remember the feel of the street. Can't even imagine the sting of the sun.

At the far end of the room, a group of young people linger. A woman speaks to them with large hand gestures. When she catches sight of Mapper, she pauses, her palm raised.

"We've started the tour already," she says. Nola isn't sure if it's to her or to Mapper.

"This is Leah," whispers Mapper, guiding her forward. "Got a few funny ideas, this one." He waves at Leah and raises his voice. "Corrupted any young minds yet?"

"We've been looking forward to your reports from the Road settlements. Any reason for the delays?"

"Several," says Mapper. "But we wouldn't want to rush things, would we?"

"Fastidious as always."

"Unique, as always," smiles Mapper and claps her on the back. His jacket gives up a little puff of dust on impact. "Stay focused, kids. It's good to know the theory of the Road Guide and the luxury of the Dome before you join the likes of me in the real world." He turns on his heels and walks off to a door on the left-hand side of the building.

"You're new?" the woman asks, noticing Nola at the fringe of the group. "Where are you coming from?"

"Sill Road."

"No Dome there. Must be a big adjustment."

“It’s all the Road, right?”

Leah holds her face in a smile. “Right. You’ll find there are lots of people from up north here. They all follow the Road Guide, but it’s helpful for us to know where you come from so, we can match you up in cohesive teams.”

“I get along with everyone,” says Nola, trying to smooth the edge in the woman’s voice.

She keeps smiling. “Of course you do. That’s in the Guide.”

Nola smiles, folding her hands together in a knot.

“You can catch up on what you have missed from your fellow trainees later. Now follow along. We’re about to go out to see the Walls.”

Leah marches ahead of them on the street. They have left behind the cool lobby, and once again, Nola feels sick in the bright expanse of the Dome. She stumbles in line behind the last two members of the group, their bored demeanours nothing like her own.

“Follow along,” Leah calls out as they cross a small street and head down a passage between buildings. “Wellington is a lot bigger than most of the places many of you’ve come from. You will get lost. I do not want to have to find you.”

The walk is fast and dazing. Nola covers her face as they pass between mountain-perched buildings. Flashes of white light slice down between them. And the sounds seemed to bludgeon her away from her senses—the bikes whizzing, the tick of their chains clocking over, the people talking thunder as they pass. She can see into the open windows of the houses, like her own, and also shops selling food and brown bags of segregated vegetables.

“What are those?” she asks, tapping the boy in front of her on the shoulder.

He swings back his head, glancing from her to the shop wares. “Vegetables.”

“I mean the ones in the middle bin, there.”

“Oh. Vegetables you’ve never seen before. You’re from Sill Road, eh?”

Nola nods.

“Rough. I’m Wiremu. This is Violet. She’s not as bad as she seems.”

The girl in front of him walks backwards and waves.

“Hi, Sill Road.”

“You can call me Nola.”

“Okay.” Violet turns back around.

Nola tries to remember the names on the metal street signs: Molesworth, Hill Street, and Old Waterloo Quay. The whole way along, there are no gardens, only buildings stretching up to the hexagonal glass ceiling. When they trip downhill to the cul-de-sac, she sees a single fern growing from between the planks of a house.

They stumble to a stop. Wiremu stands in front of Nola. She cranes up on her toes to see Leah gathering her hair into a knot. She beckons the group forward so that they’re in the middle of the houses. Behind her, they all gawk at an Outside exit door.

The door is part of a chamber, built out so that it’s not quite flush with the houses. It looks clunky compared to the simple wood and old chipped brick. The metal door sports a border of yellow warning stripes and toxic signs. A light glows green over the entrance. Leah lifts the cover on a keypad and enters a combination.

“This door leads to a passage,” she says. “At the far end, there is another door. If you open it and step through, you will be standing in the Walls of the Wellington Dome. They are double-layered and effective. Today, you’ll all take turns going in and looking at the second door. It is the door that leads you between those double layers. I will not make you go inside that second door. That is for another day. But you will have to face the anxiety of going in the Wall soon enough. That is how we do repairs and maintenance. That is what you’re training to do: to repair, either here or back in your Road settlements. The gap between the double Walls will fit one person at a time. When you are in, you’ll keep moving. You will not want to wait.”

“How safe is this, Leah?” Violet now asks, leaning uneasily to one side.

“Safe,” says Leah. “What’s not safe is what’s on the Outside.”

“The Walls aren’t built like this in most places,” says Wiremu.

“Right. And not all places survive the elements. There is nothing new here, just HSSS principles developed to their full potential. We followed the Road Guide exactly when we re-Walled

Wellington. We just did it better than before.”

“So, it’s safer now,” says Violet.

Leah looks bored. “It has always been safe. Just do not forget what’s on the other side. Why do you think we check for repairs? Why are you all here? These Walls keep us together. We will not take that for granted.”

Nola feels a wash of glandy nausea folding around her skin. She can’t hear the wind at all in this place, only the slow shuffle of her group members in their thick protective suits. Wiremu and Violet fidget. Violet is chewing a hangnail off her thumb. Everyone shuffles around in their places. When Leah opens the door, no one steps up to be the first one in.

The tunnel is dark. Nola follows the line as they start and stop, each person stepping over the threshold with a leg wobble. It takes a moment to adjust. The dark bends away from the figures ahead of her. Their steps echo. At the end, she can see huge bricks of the Wall, grouted together. They don’t look strong enough, not when she can now just make out the sound of some kind of wind behind them. It buffets the surface. Retreats. Then falls again, like a charging animal.

“What is that?” she backs up in the passage, barely glancing at the door into the double-layered Walls and the dark passage behind it. Violet shoulders past her, her arms crossed.

“This Wall borders the sea,” a voice says. It’s Wiremu. He holds her steady for a moment, keeping her in line. “It’s just the waves.”

Nola stares. “Ocean waves?”

“Yep, those waves.”

“I thought it was the wind,” she says.

“Well, some of it is the wind’s fault—battering the water and all that.”

Nola swallows the thump of blood behind her ears.

“Hey, it’s okay,” Violet tells her. “Didn’t you hear Leah? The Walls are completely reliable.”

But Nola can’t think clearly. She slumps out into the sunshine and leans against a house. The bricks are chipped fire against her back. Leah appears beside her and sighs.

“Sorry,” says Nola. She stands up.

“Are the Walls not good?” asks Leah.

“They’re good.”

Leah rubs her temples. She waits for the others to retreat from the tunnel. Then she speaks again. “Nothing is entirely good. Not any of the Walls. Not yet—that is our job. As Wall Agents, we must forget our bodies and their fearful reactions to continue their improvement.”

Nola nods.

“Wall agents are essential because of the work they do and the hope that they are. You become beautiful when those observing you, in this case the citizens of the Road, forget your fears. We don’t want to see you go in there with trepidation. We do not want to watch you worry you’ll succumb to the Outside. It is important that the people of the Road and Domes see your dedication. The thing about the Walls is that they keep us safe. If you are safe, and if you really believe it, your legs will not wobble. By following the Road Guide, we have created a world without a need for fear. That is the beauty. So don’t fear.”

## *Thirty*

Later, in her new bedroom, she sits against the door. Ma had said the city hummed with cantankerous slackards, but she can't hear any voices. There are sounds: the rip of tape from a box through her left-hand Wall. Water moving in a pipe. The rhythm of shoes for a moment, rubbering on the stairs. The room is like a small box. There is tiny sink in the corner. A cot bed.

Dinner isn't much. Nola follows the other trainees up a staircase and through the passageways of the Institute building to the cafeteria. Slim figures knot in tight groups. Nola lines up quietly at the counters where vats of food steam. Brown syrupy soup slops in their tin bowls. She fishes out a chunk of potato. A small piece of meat.

"This is hardly glamorous," says Wiremu, slumping down on the seat beside her. He has a thin, angular face. He picks at the food.

Nola hesitates. "Right."

"Why aren't you eating? It's not too crude for you, surely. Don't you eat rats down on Sill Road?"

"Rats?" The girl, Violet, slides up the table to them. "Is that true?"

"I've never eaten a rat," says Nola.

"Now, people say you can tell who's grown up on the Road from their bent posture. Is that true?" asks Violet, scanning Nola up and down.

Nola straightens. "I was referred to be an agent. My posture must not have been seen as an impediment."

"Here's what you don't get, Violet," says Wiremu. "It's not that they hunch in the Road towns. It's that they just don't grow tall enough to hit their heads on the ceiling. It's one of the perks."

"Wiremu's on sarcastic man pills. Takes one each morning with a glass of suicidality," says Violet. She wriggles closer so that Nola can smell the stiff cotton of her dress. "No offence, but do you have the skills for this?"

"I was referred."

“Are there Walls like this where you come from?”

“Not this—sophisticated. Walls are Walls, though, right?”

“Have you ever been to the Wellington Dome before?” Wiremu looks up from his food.

She wiggles out a sudden chunk twisting in her chest. “Well, no.”

Violet turns back to her soup, snickering at Wiremu across the table. He avoids her gaze.

“You can’t see the city from here. Not really. Let’s skip this muck of a dinner. We’ve got to show you around before it gets too dark.”

Wiremu eats his soup at high speed and hops up from the table. Nola and Violet have to hurry after him down the stairs. He’s knocks through the lobby doors and lets them swing shut behind him.

On the walk, he tells Nola that they’re headed to the botanic gardens. *Second best view in the whole Dome*, Wiremu say as they trudge up a hill. Violet skips ahead. She waves at someone in a window.

“You looked like a bit of Roadkill after you went in that passage,” says Wiremu. “Don’t blame you of course. The whole thing gave me a good case of the shivers too.”

The sun is low, but still peeks from channels between the towered houses. Nola stops to look up at them as they pass. She counts four floors over each other. The top floor is open, the Walls nonexistent. She can see a bed by the edge of the Wall. A curtain strings between the scaffolding beams.

“Do people live there?”

Wiremu nods. “The Dome Walls keep being moved inland whenever they get damaged. So, people keep building up.”

She’s getting used to the heat and the way it sinks behind her eyes, dampening them down. But the air in Wellington still feels too open. As they round a new street into the city, her feet become un-nimble, her head detached. The air swirls with greens and whites. She steadies herself against a jagged stone doorway.

The buildings part at the end of the street. The ceiling’s glass casts geometric streaks down the left-hand houses.

She can see something in the open space ahead. A large carpet, perhaps a rug. So bright it

glows. There is a man sitting on it. She finds herself pausing. A lump in her throat.

Grass. She knows the name. Knows it from books. Knows it from Outside, from windows. The houses break into an expanse of hills. Not even the Crop Rooms, not even the new plants under Seb's bunk, are so green. Her feet reach the edge of it—a spread of fawn grasses—pockets of Queen Anne's Lace as fresh as the full belly of a summer praying mantis—trees that curve around themselves, reaching for the ceiling and the sun.

Her feet crunch into the blades. The grass is a mass that, up close, bends without breaking. Each leaf is a structured line. There are thousands of them, clean and glossy to touch. She stands still. Blue honey light falls through her. It's all just helium in her chest and she breathes in and in and thinks of Vera-Ellen.

She can't shake the feeling that there's air around her, rippling past her shoulders, tightening on her neck. She struggles to keep up with Wiremu. He walks fast, passing Violet as she trudges up the hill to a curved, open garden. A huge dead tree stretches over a lookout space. There are seats, fenced in with white. Violet drapes herself over one, puffing from the climb.

"I hate hills," she sighs.

"I've never been on a real hill before," says Nola.

She can see the top floors of the houses. They're at eye level now, circling the garden. Dull boxes with vacant windows. Up at the fence line of the lookout, she holds onto the rail with numb fingers.

"What is this place?" asks Nola.

Wiremu shrugs and joins her, his hands in his pockets. "Don't have any gardens on Sill Road?"

"Only Crop Rooms. I was going to work there, maybe, before I came to Wellington to train."

"Grubby job," Violet says. "You dodged a bullet there."

"My friend does it. So, it didn't feel like that."

"Boy or girl?" asks Violet, perking up.

Nola keeps her explanation to Violet vague: Seb is a boy from home. A nice boy. Not a wanker, no. Makes alcohol as a second job but not in a worrying way.

“So, you think he’s perfect and you’re going to avoid your years of freedom in the big city until you go home and realise why you hate him,” Violet concludes. “Look, trust me. You need to see your options before you start hoarding your heart for child grooms.”

“It’s not like that,” laughs Nola.

“Whatever you say,” Violet says. She joins Wiremu at the rail. “The Crop Rooms don’t include gardens?”

Nola thinks of the bottom of Seb’s bunk. Of the seedlings in papers bags, the damp earth, the crisp stems. “Not like this—this would be a waste of resources.”

Wiremu huffs. “Yeah. Sounds right. I’ll be straight with you Nola—”

“Oh, this will be fun,” Violet yawns.

“As I was saying, the only reason this hill is still here is for show. HSSS only lets us have the garden space because of this thing here.” He slaps his hand down on the bench. There’s a small gold plaque on the wood.

“*They marched into history.*” Wiremu reads the etched letters with a spit in his voice. “They only keep the garden to justify that statement. To make us believe the soldiers and civilians—those noble believers—who fought and died and Walled us in after it all went nuclear and pear-shaped were doing it for a worthy cause. We get this garden. Not much comfort to the suckers who died for it.”

## *Thirty-One*

Nola follows the others back to the Institute in silence. When they get into the lobby, there is a single oil lamp on the front desk to guide their way. Wiremu peels off towards the stairway to the men's quarters, and Violet runs for the cafeteria.

"The food might be terrible, but some of us still need to eat," she calls. "Don't get lost, Sill Roder."

Nola stands alone in the high-ceilinged lobby.

There's no way she can sleep. Everything is silent—she can't even hear other people breathing through the Walls. Wiremu's harsh words roll uncomfortably through her mind instead.

She picks her way up the stairs. They all look the same: plain, white-washed Walls and hollow hallways. She follows signs to the Institute Records Room.

She's been thinking about going there all the way home from the gardens. Not for any good reason. Just to take a look, really. She wants to learn more, although she's not quite sure what yet. That's what she tells herself, and she tries to ignore the feverish skitter in her stomach as she tiptoes through the halls.

She finds the Records Room on the fifth floor. It's open. There are glass-paned doors, but they're not locked. Nola slips inside without making a sound. A large ceiling bulb glows over a round reading table. The Walls are lined with bookcases. *The Maps are Light*, reads a sign over the main shelves. Nola reaches for the soft rectangles of the folded papers.

They're in order by year. Each section is alphabetised with small, neat signs. *1961, Wellington Dome*. Nola pulls the record from the bookshelf and opens it on the table in the centre of the room. She scans the map for familiar landmarks: the Institute buildings, the botanic gardens, the Dome Entrance. She looks for medical symbols and notes the small red crosses on the streets. Leah had mentioned they had some days off training over the weekends, so she might as well make the most of her time here. Then, she folds up the map. She is about to put it back on the shelf, but she tucks it under her arm instead. Skims back down the rows, her finger halting on *1942, Sill Road (previously*

*Desert Road*). Nola pulls it from the shelf. Looking around the room once, she flips it open.

The pages ripple out, and she can see that it is an old map, made pre-Walling, with the Institute's insignia added later to the top-left corner.

There are some familiar scenes: the mountain ranges, and the long, straight Road. But there are none of the houses Nola knows. There's a large army barracks from those days. A huge firing range. The old military buildings. There is no sign of Place. If it was built then, it must not have been included on the map. There is one large building with a red cross on it. *Medical Surgery*, it says in the notes.

A voice starts her from the page.

"Don't tell me you've got your sights set on a Mapper job, Nola." It's Wiremu, leaning in the doorway.

"No," says Nola. "No, of course not. Sorry."

"For what?"

"I don't know."

Wiremu waits for her to elaborate.

"Being suspicious?" Nola ventures.

They look at each other in silence. To her horror, Nola starts to cry.

She's not sure why she lets the words out then. Maybe it's the need to defend herself or to calm any anxiety she may have caused him, or maybe it's just because he's standing there and waiting for more. She explains to Wiremu about Heketoro. How the breath slinks from his body in an asthma attack and then wheezes to get back in. She tells him about her sister, about what she does and doesn't know about Lauren's life, about the letter to Mapper, and about the medicine.

"I just want to look around. Nothing ever leaves the Road, so there must be medicine still hidden in the city. If I can help Heketoro, I have to."

Wiremu nods, his hands in his pockets. He flips the maps over in his hands. "Right," he says, and pivots for the door. Nola watches him pause before he leaves. "Meet me tomorrow after training. If it's old medicine you need, your best bet is hunting estate sales. That's where you find good stuff.

Bring a bag.”

“You’re going to help me?” Nola asks.

Wiremu shrugs. “I’ve got good reasons, don’t worry.”

Nola takes the maps with her when she leaves the room. She peels off from Wiremu at the next set of stairs. She trudges up another flight. She isn’t sure if she’s on the right floor for her bedroom. They all seem to look the same—like borer worm warrens. She’s very sleepy, all of a sudden. She takes the hallway slow, stopping to check the numbers by the rooms. The numbers are calming. In some ways, this place is like a mini-Road within the Dome, she thinks. The thought makes her feel almost all right.

A light on. A doorway floods with it—the quick flickers of an oil lamp. Nola tiptoes past. Inside sits a desk dressed high with piles of paper maps and notebooks. The papers are thumbed. She doesn’t see him for a moment, but she hears a strange grating sound.

Mapper sits behind the desk. He holds his left boot in his hand. He is shaving down the stitching with a sandpaper block.

Nola steps back from the doorway. She sees the sole of the shoe flop loose, as if broken by much walking, and Mapper leaning over his table to take a biscuit from the tin box Ma packed for him back home in No. 5.

## *Thirty-Two*

She doesn't know why he did it. She tells that to Leah the next day, standing in her office, explaining.

"Do you have a complaint?" Leah asks. She leans back in her chair.

"Not exactly," says Nola. "It's just that shoes are very valuable. My Ma fixed those ones for him. We do it every time he comes through Sill Road, ever since I was little. I just don't understand why he would destroy them again."

"Mapper Paul is a strange man," Leah sighs. She wipes dust from her table. "But all our Mapping Agents are trained meticulously and have the highest reputations. I do not know what you think you saw on a late-night stroll, but no doubt Mapper Paul was just adjusting shoes that didn't fit him right."

"Yeah," says Nola. She hesitates at the door. Leah looks up from her papers.

"We are all working for the same Road, Nola. You can get caught up in trying to understand everything when the whole work of the Road is to keep it built. If we're keeping it built, everything's fine."

Later that day, Nola follows Leah to the Wall. Leah lines her up with the other trainees at the entrance in the cul-de-sac.

"Keep your suits adjusted tight to your body. Follow my instructions while we're walking through the inner passage of the Walls. If you hear the alarm, fit your mask immediately and follow me to the nearest air-lock exit."

"Way to calm us down," Wiremu whispers to Nola.

Leah pauses in front of him. Tightens the straps around his rubber Noddy suit. It's bulky. He's tucked it badly into his boots.

Nola spent an hour in front of the mirror in the shared bathroom that morning, fitting hers right. She pulled the straps until they grazed a woven pattern into the skin of her wrists. She lifted her

hands over her head. Adjusted until she couldn't feel any gaps, any rifts, any air. She's boiling. They haven't even moved yet and sweat is wrinkling down her back.

Leah passes her without looking. Opens the air-lock door.

"Single file now," she calls. "And when we get to steps, take care. No tumbles on my watch."

They go in. For a moment, Nola can only see the dark of the approaching doorway and the back of Wiremu's suit. His breath is uneven. She watches him step over the threshold into the passage. Then, it is her turn.

"This is simple," he whispers back to her. His words blend together behind his mask. "It's just two doors. One to the Dome, one to the inside of the Wall. Simple."

This time, when they're all inside, Leah closes the passage door. She switches on a torch lamp.

Inky grey light splays around them. Then Leah is squeezing past their packaged bodies, cranking open the latch to the interior Wall door.

"All right. Follow me."

Nola has nowhere to go but forward. She slips into the passage between Walls.

It's like walking into a pencil case.

Her shoulders bump the bricks on either side.

"The materials for the Dome Walls are of the highest available quality," Leah says. "When you come through in your groups of three to do repairs, you will need to bring the repair materials with you. That is why being a smaller person is so useful in this line of work. You will fit with the materials more easily. Now, tell me—what is the next advantage?"

The troop pauses. Nola looks up at the Walls—so tall she can't see the end of them. She passes a set of bars jutting out.

Lauren's words ring in her ears. *They want you small so you can shimmy up.*

"It makes it easier for us to climb," she says.

Leah nods. "That's right. Now, then, let's get going. There is no time like the present to live out our principles. Why do we keep the Walls strong, in the Domes and in the Road?"

"To keep our loved ones alive," says Violet. "As it says in the Road Guide."

Leah nods. She beckons them to the first rungs of a ladder. “Now then. Let’s see you climb.”

## *Thirty-Three*

Wiremu shakes his arms and legs out as they walk. “That was horrible. That was absolutely horrible. I’m changing careers, effective immediately.”

Nola’s arms ache from the climbing practice, too. She’d been behind him, attached by ropes. Repair tools jingled into her thighs with each pull up the ladder rungs. They’d climbed up to the top of the Wall and hung there until Leah called them down. They’d spilt out from the Walls into the Dome’s sunlight, their arms and legs wobbling like jelly.

“I’m discovering I don’t really like heights,” she tells him. “On Sill Road, everything is single-story.”

“Lucky buggers,” says Wiremu. “Let’s hurry up and get you this medicine you’re after so you can get back to your cushy life.”

“That’s not why I’m here,” says Nola. “Heketoro has the herbal remedies. I’m just looking on the off chance. Believe me, I’m only here to fix Walls.”

He leads her up a hilly street to a wooden-fronted house. There are already people in the doorway, picking through boxes by the hall.

“The rules of estate sales,” says Wiremu, “boil down to ‘move fast and be assertive’. You have to make the other vultures fear you. That’s how you get your hands on the best deals.”

Nola squeezes past a woman at the front door and slips into the hallway. Mounds of clothes and books pile high on the floor. In the kitchen, the cupboards sit with their doors flung open, and the contents spill out onto the benches. She looks into a drawer and picks through the piles of old mail.

By the time they’ve hunted the whole house, the best thing Nola has found is an empty aspirin bottle. She also finds a Cluedo game board like the one she and Seb used to play with as kids. She carries it to the front porch, where people are lining up to buy their spoils, but then she puts it down again and tells Wiremu that she is ready to leave.

“Buck up. Better luck next time,” he whispers.

But the next day is the same. In the morning, Nola lines up at the Wall with the trainees in

their Noddy suits. Then they file into the dark Wall and climb as high as they can go. Leah stands at the bottom of their ladders, calling out repair instructions, telling them how to pass each other tools and strength test sections of the Wall and note down damage. Nola scrapes the knuckles of her gloves against the bricks as she climbs. Her feet bludgeon numb on the soles.

In the afternoon, she makes Wiremu take her to two more estate sales. They pick through the bathroom cabinets, the kitchen cupboards and the bedroom drawers. Then she follows her map to the Institute Hospital on Riddiford Street. At the front desk door, she tells a nurse the list of the asthma medications Lauren found in Mr Manual's book. Wiremu lurks behind her, his arms crossed uncomfortably.

"Oh darling," says the nurse. "We wouldn't have anything like that. All our supplies ran out years ago. Didn't they tell you that when you wrote your letter?"

## *Thirty-Four*

“Everyone’s buying Nola a drink tonight,” yells Wiremu as the troop settles into a little pub down the Road from the Institute. Nola’s hand is wrapped in gauze. She sinks behind one of the booth tables and lets Wiremu slide her a shot of vodka.

“I’m fine,” she says.

The other trainees who have been coaxed along to the pub don’t argue. They’re all too bone-weary. They sink into their drinks with quiet unenthusiasm. Violet folds onto the seat beside Nola.

“Fine, sure,” scoffs Wiremu. He slaps the table. “You could have been seriously hurt today. I can’t believe Leah made you do that move. It was totally irresponsible. That ladder looked way too rickety to be climbing.

“For the last time big-mouth, the Walls are safe,” Violet laughs, although Nola catches a small exhale as she says it—a hint of real exasperation. “They’re built, and we just maintain them, to the Road Guide exactly.”

“Which version of the Guide are they built to?” says Wiremu.

Violet stares at him, now clearly annoyed. “Well, the Walls were updated thirty years ago. There’s been, what, two expansions to the Road Guide in my lifetime? Another in my parent’s. So, I suppose it was three expansions ago.”

Wiremu smirks. Nola feels instantly pricked under his smugness.

“You’re saying that the Walls are not as safe as they would have been if they had been built on our Version Five.”

“You know,” says one of the other trainees, leaning in from his spot in the corner of the booth. “It’s standard to call the versions *expansions* because there’s no change; there’s just additions for relevancy.”

“Sure, and that’s why they remove the older *expansions* from circulation.”

“It would be confusing,” says Violet. “People need to know the up-to-date advice.”

Nola throws back the last of her drink. “I thought it was for recycling.”

“Sure,” says Violet and the other trainee in unison.

Nola’s hand is pulsing under the bandage.

She’d been at the top of a ladder, re-grouting the ceiling seals.

“Just lean across,” called Leah. “Grout the other side of the Wall before you get down.”

She’d been rope-tied to Wiremu, but when she stretched out, she’d made the mistake of looking down. Sweat rose in her gloves. Leah was a tiny spot on the floor, looking up. Nola felt herself lose balance and felt the glove slipping from her hand. She caught the next rung with a loud bang. Violet, further down the ladder, had screamed. The metal of the ladder rung was rusty and broken. It cut right into her palm.

“Anyway, that’s why our role is so important,” Violet continues. “The Walls work. People just need to fall in love with the concept of them more.”

“It works to a degree, sure,” Wiremu says. “I mean, we’re all alive, right? But there’s whole departments in the Institute for problem-solving. Did you know they’ve moved the Wall in by ten inches each year up by Whale Bay because the water keeps causing too much damage? Or that there’s a street cordoned off by the lagoon Wall because the new glass there channelled the sun wrong and burned down a pair of curtains?”

“Oh my god, you’re such a doom monger,” Violet stretches in her seat and, finding her own glass empty, takes a swig from Nola’s.

“What do you think?” Wiremu asks Nola.

She shrugs. “It’s like you said: we’re alive. It’s what the Guide says: *In the days of the Road, no one ever leaves who lives.*”

Wiremu shakes his head. “It’s a feeling of invincibility Violet here wants us to love, not a reality. The repair projects aren’t brave; they’re required only by bad design. Leah just happens to have survived this far. It’s making her believe that bones don’t break.”

The mood is sour for the rest of the evening. They troop walk back to the Institute with a strange static pinging between the group.

“Bye,” says Nola when they arrive at the lobby.

Violet waves. Wiremu just walks in.

She spends the rest of the evening soaking her feet in a tub of shallow water from her bedroom sink. Red stripes on her arches sting. Perched on the end of the bed, she pores over the Wellington map. With small pins, she sticks little cuttings of housing sales ads to the corresponding streets.

*Thorndon area. Family deceased. All items for sale, says one.*

Even after the water has wrinkled her feet, Nola lingers in it, hoping it will soothe the ladder burns.

## *Thirty-Five*

The next day, she waits for Wiremu in the front lobby. She presses the cloth in over her hand, jumping when Wiremu appears beside her.

“You’re bleeding,” he says simply.

The blood seems too thin. She wraps her hand around the thin bandage, trying to press the evidence away. Cherry red seeps between her fingers.

Wiremu reaches into his pocket and pulls out a pill bottle. Inside, he has stashed a collection of safety pins and loose pills. He pulls out a fresh bandage and a rectangle of scavenged plastic.

She rips the bandage on the raw edge. *Can’t take too much*, she tells herself. Just a little square. She holds it in place over the cut. Wipes the blood off the pill bottle, leaving a mottled pink smear.

He watches blood persist through the cloth.

“Here, wrap it up in the plastic.” He says, tying a strip of packaging around it. He folds the loose end over and tucks it in. “Good. That will keep it from bleeding through.”

Nola reads the plastic strip. It says: *Derivatives of meat from animals farmed in toxin-free countryside. Ingredients: wheat flour, salt—*

“What was this?” she asks.

He looks down at the little black letters on yellow. “Shelf-safe goat stew, I think. It’s packaging from old army rations. Found it in the bush.”

“You ever had this kind of food?”

He scoffs without the full movement of his face. Kicks open the door.

He stays in a quiet mood as they walk down the hill to the estate sale in Thorndon. The house is old and built up over the top of the original structure with rickety apartments. Outside, there’s nothing much to look at, but the wooden floors and wide staircase in the entrance are grand, like the skin of an old woman. A maze of irregular dips and bends.

They follow their usual routine. Wiremu settles in the living room, going over the shelves and cabinets. Nola heads straight for the bathroom, which is just a little closet on the downstairs floor. The

drawers below the sink are full. There's a tin of metal bobby pins seemingly fashioned out of a baked bean can. A tub of some kind of cream with the label rubbed off. A few white hairs stick to the sink. She picks through the mirror cupboard on the wall but finds only a litter of fly wings and a single, withered leaf of aloe vera. Even if she finds an inhaler, there'll never be enough. A few puffs here, a little relief there. She needs a huge supply.

"You want a pharmacy to appear with open doors. Good luck," Wiremu said once, and when she went silent, he tried to take it back. "We'll go to the next one. Something's better than nothing, right?"

She abandons the bathroom and joins Wiremu in the living room, pulling books from the shelves.

"You want this?" he asks, holding up a copy of *Air Travel, Remembered*. "It's about air. Breath. Inhalers. That's basically the same thing, right?"

Nola looks through a stack of movie posters on the floor. "I know this one."

The poster of *White Christmas* shows Vera-Ellen in red and white, wrapped up in Danny Kaye's arms. The paper is a little feathered at the edges, but not in bad condition.

"You seen this movie? It made me want to dance."

Wiremu sighs. "This? This made you want to dance? Wait, you dance?" he snorts, but then he checks himself.

"You don't like it," she whispers.

"It's not my thing. They played it at the Embassy Cinema a few months back, but I didn't make it past the first ten minutes."

Nola tells him about the bridge dance. "It's the perfect scene. They're perfect people."

Wiremu smirks.

"What?" says Nola.

"Nothing. It's just that Vera-Ellen wasn't very happy. She's got cancer. Her kid died. That sort of thing."

"Why do you have to know so much about things?" she says.

Wiremu shrugs. "I like to know the stories behind the stories."

Nola puts the poster back in the pile. She presses in on the cut along her finger. It seeps and starts to throb again. "Why do you always have to tell me ones I don't want to be true?"

Wiremu closes his eyes. When he looks up, he speaks softly, with an edge of hunger in his voice. "You should see something." Then he saunters out of the room.

Nola follows him into the front garden as he turns down a path between the houses and disappears.

The house isn't far from the botanic gardens and the war memorial plaque. Nola follows Wiremu in that direction, but then he takes a sudden right up St. Mary's Street. Ahead, a hill rises sudden and steep. The houses crowd in along the pathway.

She feels the pulse in her palm build as he moves out of sight. Deep in the muscle, the slice opens and shuts with the smallest movement. She should go home. Cool down and gather her thoughts. She should. But she follows him up the shadowed path.

## *Thirty-Six*

He stands at the head of a brushy walkway. Narrow, it slides between the tall wooden houses. The path is dirt. Nola looks up as she steps into the darkness. The Walls look as if they are moving, each floor topped with newer planks and mismatched windows, like precarious block towers. This patchwork city is too much up close. She longs for the simple Walls of home. The low ceilings. The single Road. But Wiremu is picking up his pace.

It's cooler, damper, as they channel into the passage. They reach some steps. Her thighs burn. Acidic fire.

He doesn't slow, and he doesn't turn around as they walk. Just keeps one hand in his pocket. She takes bigger strides to keep up. Follows the sway of Wiremu's brown coat. It has patches stitched on to cover rips.

They reach a point where the houses stop abruptly against a sheer rise.

The last house on her left leans against it, its Walls shaped to the muscle of the hill, which is exposed and dusty brown. A few loose plants clamber to the surface. They droop and shrivel. Nola wonders why they've sprouted here. If they know that just a few metres along, there is a panel of sunlight where the weeds are lush and green.

The path grows narrower again, and Wiremu leads her up a rise in the hill. There's thick brush and warped trees. Water sprinklers spit into life. Small streams trickle out onto the dirt as they walk. Wiremu angles his shoes out in a V shape when they cross the muddy tracks.

It's then, as the earth moistens, that it starts to smell like the Crop Rooms. Nola senses home over her shoulder. She could turn a corner and stumble into the dense heat of the Road. But then Wiremu stops, and she looks up from the ground into a fence. It's lined with trash.

"This used to be electric." Wiremu reaches out and lays a finger on the wire. "Hasn't been for ages. Not a priority. Classic. I've found some great rubbish here though. It's where I got your plastic bandage."

Wiremu pulls himself up, swings himself over the fence and waits with the wire bent down.

There's no signage saying they can't be here. That's what Nola tells herself to stall the blunt screw beginning to gouge inside her gut. It's beginning to feel all a little Laurenish though. She clambers forward. Lays her hand in the dirt—hooks a foot over the wire and lands on scraps of trash. He pulls her through, squeezing down around her hand. The palm cut bends open. She can feel her heartbeat pooling at the split.

The path levels out a little, then. The sounds of the street grow faint. Nola's breath curls around her face, back into her ears. Is the air hotter here? It's like she's resting under an oil lamp. Wiremu jogs ahead. He calls out, and she turns to see what he has found.

It's a wooden bench shrouded by a tumour of wandering dew. He sits looking up at something above him. Nola follows his gaze.

“Oh,” she breathes.

Above him, the Roof rests along a pillar. Twigs and branches press against it. He reaches up. Bends his fingers on the skin of the sky.

There's never been so much blue wrapped around Nola at once. She thinks of Ma's blanket, of the mornings when she was young and very cold. Ma's tawny arms holding it above her until she slipped into the bed. Now, branches cut the blue into sections, while metal hexagon framing makes a sea of windows.

“How long has this been here?” she asks, sinking to the bench beside him.

“Found it last year,” he grunts. “I hadn't found a proper isolated place like this since I'd been here. The Wellington Dome's problem is it somehow feels too big for me.”

“You're not from Wellington?”

He puts his hands in his pockets. “No.”

“Not even from the suburbs?”

“Not even the damn suburbs, Sill Road Girl.”

The heat bakes into the layers of her neck. “So, you come from up north?”

They sit in silence.

Wiremu cracks it with a low tone. “What Leah made you do on that climb was so messed up.”

“I came to apologise.”

Wiremu looks down at her, his hands crossed now under his arms. “For what?”

It’s a test. Nola’s known enough to know that. “For causing—I don’t know. Trouble, yesterday. I think I made you argue with Violet. I don’t think she’s forgiven you.”

“Aw, shut it,” he cuts her off—but his voice is tired, heavy. “You want to cover cracks before things break. Sometimes, they have to break. I’ve been on the Road, too. I do know what I’m talking about.”

“You came from Taupo?” she guesses.

“Rotorua.”

The heat drains out of her all at once. “Oh my god. When—”

“When they ‘closed the Dome?’. Yes.” He stretches back in the seat. Tilts his face towards the sky. “I was five. I don’t claim to know what it’s like to live how you do. You think you’re all so much tougher than the rest of us. But I know what it was like to leave a place.” He rolls towards her, his face stretching in a grin. “Well, I didn’t leave so much as get evicted, but same difference. That’s what they told us, anyway.”

Nola only just remembers that autumn. Huddling in the pub at Sill Road, listening to people pass. A mask over her face, cutting in along her cheekbones. The pub doors sealed shut, just in case.

“When they told us there were too many environmental breaches in the city, we packed up in a day. My mum left everything behind, even my dad. He worked out on a farm. We didn’t find him till we were here in Wellington. Things weren’t ever quite so good in the marriage after that.”

“I didn’t know—” Nola begins, but Wiremu holds his hands to his lips. He points to the Roof.

There is a sparrow. Plump feathers sprout from a thin chest. Around its leg a small strip of plastic hangs in a clumsy knot. The bird hops along a branch. Across to a new tree. Pauses up along the Roof.

Wiremu leans close. Breath clots along her ear as he whispers. “I call her Goat Curry.”

Then Nola smiles, the screw unwinding from her gut. And as she does, the feathers on the sparrow’s chest move out of place. The soft, beige skin swells over tight bones.

The bird jumps to attention, front on. The feathers lift again. As if of their own accord. Like brush rolling on the desert plains. The idea appears inside her skull—that the sparrow’s feathers move like something in the wind.

Her hands fly to her mouth just as Wiremu grasps her arms, pressing her down. Body on bench. Splinters biting. Her palm flushed again with a gush of blood.

“Wait,” he seethes. “Just keep bloody watching.”

But sand is falling through her larynx. As she dams her breath against her teeth, her palm opens through its wound mouth wide. The sparrow looks up towards a bit of Dome framing. It lands upside down, gripping the metal with its claws. Curls its body around. Eases its head through the place where the glass has lifted. Its feathers rush flat in the open air.

And then it slinks through—the underside of its feet visible on the glass—and takes flight.

## *Thirty-Seven*

She skids down the last half of the path—feet on slick.

She can hear Wiremu behind her. Can hear the shuffle of his coat against his legs, and once, his voice calling her name.

At the end of St Mary's Street, Nola turns out onto the Roadway.

In the obscure backrooms of her mind, she is already putting away the image of the bird. It's curving back into the Dome. Its blending into the trees.

Wild-eyed, Wiremu stumbles beside her. He coughs—his own personal storm.

“Stay away from me,” she calls out to him, and the sound falls flat into the street, where nothing moves. Around them, the piles of houses watch on.

He stumbles after her. “What are you going to do about it?”

Thoughts clamber into her mind. *Tell someone. Anyone. Run. Get underground.* What can she do about it, now? She finds, to her horror, that something buckled tight in her chest has come undone. She can feel tears verging up her throat. *Don't you understand,* she wants to scream, but it sticks. *You've let the Outside in.*

“I can explain,” Wiremu begins, taking one step closer. “Just listen, and you'll see you have nothing to worry about —”

Nola turns and starts to move away. There's a lake in her chest. It rises with each step.

“Nola!” he yells.

She doesn't even pause.

“I've been watching that bird for months.”

*Months.* The lake slips over into all the wrong cavities.

“It's exactly the same as it was the first day I saw it. If all the nonsense the Institute tells us about the Outside is true, why isn't it a puddle of flesh or dried-up scabs or plain old dead? The Outside isn't killing it.”

Her vision spots with white, like water raining into her skull. Her feet keep moving.

“Nola,” Wiremu calls out. “If it was really like they say, why haven’t you asked me if I’ll go back? Why haven’t you asked me to stay safe?”

She doesn’t have an answer, so she just stops.

“Go then.” He stares her down. “Tell them all. See how they explain it.”

“I hate this stupid place,” she manages to call out, raw and sticky-chested. “I’m only here to help my family. To keep them safe. You can kill yourself in the Outside if you like, but I won’t be part of doing it to anyone else.”

Wiremu hits his head, angry. “You still don’t get it, do you? If the Outside doesn’t hurt living things like the Institute says it does, then there’s hope. There are other things for us, beyond the Walls. Maybe there’s a cure for your nephew. Maybe there are other good things. Lands we could go back to. Other places.”

Nola looks ahead at her path. One turn at the end of the street and she’ll be out of Wiremu’s line of sight. From there, she can take a hard left down an alley. She can’t remember where it leads. But it will be down. Away from him, and from the wind.

Back at the Institute, she fills her bedroom sink. Plunges her face into the water.

For a moment, she waits for the heat to slink out of her. Droplets recoil along her skin. They crawl up the fuzz of her cheeks as she holds her face into the tepid pool. She imagines his thumbs over her arms. Press dents in muscle. Heat in the bruise blooms. The scrape of the wooden bench along her thighs. The possibility of wind flowing by along her ankles. She remembers her hands. Pulls her face from the water and presses them down under the surface instead. Watches little air bubbles escape across her skin along with a blush of red blood. Apart from the cut, her skin is smooth. Intact. She thinks of Mapper’s fingers. Bends her own just to make sure they aren’t withering.

She leaves the sink only to check the seal of the bed blanket she’s pressed under the gap of the Institute’s bedroom door. Blue flowers spray across the flannel. Despite the press along the bottom ridge, sounds still leak in.

Someone’s walking up the stairs. A feeling of caustic air flowing against her throat rises again, just as it had on the whole run home.

When she was little, if she woke too early in the mornings, she would sit and watch the window between her and Lauren's beds. She would watch leaves and sticks gathering there until the glass was almost full of them. Then the wind would change, and they would fall away. The grasses would rush around, desperate, in the open. They would stretch out in a violent carpet of browns and greens.

"Look out," Lauren would say, waking up and crawling into Nola's bed. Always just those two words.

That night, Nola sleeps on the floor beside her Institute bed. A towel over her bony outcrops. Outside, there are feet on the carpet, like the scrape of wild seedpods spitting against the sills.

The next morning, she wakes with her bones stiff and her head full of smog. She pulls on fresh clothes and stumbles out of the door, down the hallway and the stairs. Violet greets her as she steps into the lobby.

"Damn, you look like shit," she says.

"Is Wiremu around?" Nola asks.

"Haven't seen him since last night. He looked wiggled out, honestly. Heard someone say he's called into training sick. You seen your visitor yet?"

Nola pauses. The word 'visitor' clicks down into place inside her gut. She looks around the lobby. The stained-glass windows by the doors leak colour across the floor in watery streaks. People pass in huddles, occasionally glancing at the entrance. Nola follows their gaze. Sees the dusty figure standing on the steps. Beside her, the little face of Heketoro grinning with his nose pressed against the glass.

## *Thirty-Eight*

Nola doesn't say much as Lauren washes up in her dorm sink. Her sister lifts Heketoro into the basin and rubs him down with a towel, fuzzing up his hair. Although he's small, he's so much more of a child than a baby compared to when Nola last saw him. The pudge of his cheeks has flattened out. He has a copy of Lauren's stern upper face, with thin, swooping brows in a warm light brown. He rubs water from his eyes. Helps Lauren pull his sleeves down his little arms. The dust from his skin makes a tan-pink stain around the plug. He stares at Nola with his thumb in his mouth.

"What are these?" Lauren asks, picking up the maps on Nola's dresser. Nola feels sick just looking at them. She's hot. Seeing them here feels like a scratch in a record—an out of place whir.

"What are you doing here?" Nola says.

Lauren opens the maps. She pours over them, jiggling Heke on her hip. "Holiday," she says. "Are these legitimate records of the old Roads, before they were Walled?"

"They're nothing," she sighs. "I don't want them anymore."

Nola has a sudden urge to get Lauren away from her room. She opens the bedroom door and waits for Lauren to follow her. Lauren doesn't do anything for a moment.

"You must be hungry," says Nola.

Heketoro grins.

She leads her sister upstairs to the Institute's seventh-floor tea lounge, reserved in part for visiting parents and Institute tours. She takes the stairs slowly, hoping to think of something to say before they reach the top. Lauren can be heard below, breathing heavily up the stairs. Nola glances back. Her sister looks pale. A little shaky. Heketoro clings like a quiet possum on her hip.

"Come on," Nola says, more softly. "You won't believe the food here."

Nola orders two teas from the waitress and plate of sweet breads. The tea lounge has a balcony that looks out over the city. They can see the green stretch of botanic gardens from their seats. Can just spot the ocean clipping the horizon from the Dome windows to the south. The tearoom is too fancy for itself. The tables are old cheap metal from before, worn down over the years but spread with white cloths and cups. When drinks arrive, Nola presses the cup into Lauren's hands, noticing without trying that they are calloused and tinged with blood under the nails. "What 'bout me?" Heketoro asks.

Nola gasps. "So, you speak now, hey?"

He shrugs. She orders for him, and they watch him drink through pursed lips, his gaze darting around the balcony over his glass.

"Can I go?" he asks Lauren, pointing to the railing. She nods.

As he wanders forward, Nola turns back to her sister. "What are you doing here, Lauren?"

Lauren doesn't say anything for a while. She taps her foot on the ground in a sporadic rhythm.

"Sort of went for a walk, I guess," she says. "Well, a ride this time. I may have taken the Cushman without authorisation. It's not looking too great for my reputation, I'll be honest."

"Are you okay?"

Lauren's watching Heketoro peer over the railing. She shrugs. "Guess I needed to know for myself that you hadn't found anything to help him. When you didn't send anything back after a few months, I figured. But you didn't write. So, I didn't know for sure."

Nola feels all the strings in her body stretching to the highest tension. She takes a long sip of tea. "I have been looking."

"Anyway. I got this idea in my head that maybe you had found something, but someone wasn't letting it through. The Posties, or Mapper, or anyone really. I just thought if I came here myself —"

"Is he still having attacks?" Nola interrupts.

Lauren turns her head towards the park. The lines of her throat bulge out from her skin as she twists. "So, you didn't? Find any medicines, I mean."

"No," says Nola. "Not yet."

Lauren picks up her cup and holds it against her lips. With age her lips have dipped in the centre, like Ma's. Their freckled skin is dry and peeling. She seems to be observing something just beyond the edge of the balcony.

"I think I might have messed him up," she says suddenly. "Like, I think I made the wrong choice some time long ago. That's why he's sick."

Nola swallows hard. She wants to reach across the white beach of tablecloth and take her hand. "There really isn't any medicine."

"You know, Mapper came back through town the other day. He says that asthma is an illness of the Outside."

"You didn't make the Outside like it is. You've always been on the Road. You just went wandering, that's all. It's like you said. You just went for a walk."

Lauren lets her gaze flop onto her sister's. "We don't need to talk about all that."

They sip the buttery water of the milky tea in silence.

"The funny thing is, I thought I did feel it sometimes. Just walking. The smallest breeze. Even—even in the Domes. Even when I was wearing the Outside suits."

Nola feels nothing. She feels herself feel nothing.

"Anyway," says Lauren. "You don't need to worry about all that. I did come back, didn't I? And my skin is fucking glorious. I'm not Mapper, I'll have you know."

Nola leans forward. Takes Lauren's hand. A cold, limp thing until her sister stiffens and sits up. She pulls a piece of dry skin from her lip. It beads with fine blood pricks.

"There are still good things here," Nola whispers. "Maybe we'll still find something to help."

"You know, it's crazy that there's so much stuff in the Road and all the cities, but not enough for one little boy."

Nola tightens. "There's as much as there is."

“You’re very accepting, Nola. It’s probably why you’re so happy. Like, imagine the old times before the Walls,” Lauren swallows, suddenly animated, her nails bending into the thin flesh of Nola’s hand. “I imagine people would have sat here once without a Roof! There used to be green everywhere, all the time, did you know? Just fields of greenery and parks. Used to be boats and buildings. We went to the museum here and saw pictures. There were even buildings on our Road. We saw pictures of the old military base from during the War. There were whole structures that don’t exist anymore.”

“The past’s not very helpful,” says Nola. “You’re hurting me.”

Lauren turns suddenly in her seat. “Do you think they’re still out there? Like, other buildings?”

The bird’s legs grip on metal in Nola’s mind. “Not any worth knowing about.”

“Maybe,” Lauren lets her go. “You know, I never thought that Wellington would smell, but it does. It smells like the inside of Ma’s hatbox. The one she keeps under her bed. It makes you think, doesn’t it? Things are so often different when you’re in them.”

“Wait, when did you go to the museum?” Nola asks.

“This morning. Before we came here. I thought if I went somewhere old, I might find a good thing left. Some vial of medicine in a glass case. Can you believe that? Going to a museum for a cure?”

“Why didn’t you come here first?” Nola says.

Lauren shrugs. “Why didn’t you write?”

There is a pause.

“Did you see the crocodile?” Nola asks.

“Hm?”

“A stuffed crocodile. Mapper told me about it as a child.”

“When did he tell you that?” asks Lauren.

Nola says nothing.

Lauren leans forward in her chair. “I never wanted to do anything like what you’re doing here. All my life, I’ve been playing some game against the system instead. Never wanted to be a part of the town’s stories. You were smart to go along with it all. It’s what got you out of Sill Road, in the end.”

Nola gets up. “We should take Heketoro inside. You’ll be wanting to rest before you ride back.”

But Lauren only looks out over the balcony. Her eyes on the trees, and on the green.

# III

## *Thirty-Nine*

They pass the first window of the Road. Nola knows each one. Never memorised them this fast before though, barrelling past in smooth streaks. She wonders if you can really condense a thing back down into its parts like that: make all the familiar suddenly indistinguishable from everything foreign.

She holds on gingerly to Seb on the front of Cushman scooter. Soon, this moment will be over. She doesn't want the scooter to stop. For Seb to step off and for this moment to become a little darkness in the corner of her mind. An impression of him seeps into her bones. A year—no words between them. How could there be nothing to say when his smell is still a map she knows every part of, even after all this time?

But he does stop. He pulls the breaks outside Fetu's pub, and then they're moving away from each other, twisting off the scooter. Nola's stomach muscles cave as if they have never been used. As if his spine is her sternum. As if there's no other way for her to stand if not behind him. Her legs wobble. She slides onto the Road. She notices how dark it is between the Walls for the first time, even though they are in front of the window to the Outside, to the flattened grass, to the barren plains.

Nola steps up close to the glass.

She rests her hands on the old sill, its paint peeled and lifted in sharp husks. Airborne earth hits the glass in fine speck bullets. The side of the frame is host to the grey-tinged amber of late afternoon.

"Lauren," a voice says behind her. It's frail. "Is it you, come home?"

Mrs Manual stands at the door to her house. Her skin has wilted down along her cheeks. It folds under her eyes like a blind that's been pulled up with strings. She seems smaller than before. Her arms are closer to her body. Her legs bend towards the floor. Nola sees a fresh cut on her forehead and bruises wandering out from it in a directionless spread. She's compressed into an old woman.

"It's Nola, Mrs Manual. Lauren's sister."

For a moment, Mrs Manuel sways in the doorway, torn off course by the revelation. She rubs her head. "Come inside. Quickly now." She beckons with a hand. Then she turns and creeps to the far

Wall.

Seb lays a hand on Nola's shoulder. "She's not well."

"What does that mean?"

He thinks for a minute, then shakes his head. Unties her luggage from the back of the scooter.

Nola goes to No. 7's door and peers inside. The blinds are drawn. Mrs Manual stands at the table, swaying slightly on her feet.

"Oh, girl," she says, rushing forward when she sees her. "Come. You're safe." And she pins Nola's arms to her sides in a thin hug.

Mrs Manual's coarse hair brushes against her cheek. "I knew you would come back. I knew it. We all knew it." She leans back, moving the hair out of Nola's eyes. "He told me, you know. I heard him say it." And she smiles, her eyes suddenly filled with water. Her lips wobble, and she pushes Nola away. "Go on then. Where's that boy of yours? Go help him. Go and see your family!"

Nola backs towards the door. She watches Mrs Manual turn back to the kitchen Wall and rub the surface with her palm. Seb steps beside her, his hands in his pockets.

"What's up with her?" Nola asks. She steps out into the stillness of the Road.

Seb pauses. "It's kind of complicated."

"Tell me."

"I guess she's not thinking right. She's real emotional, all that. Anyway, she thinks she can hear him. Mr Manual, I mean. Thinks he speaks to her, like, in the Walls. Like what Mapper said once, but this time for real."

Nola remembers it. Right after Mr Manual died. *Think of him whenever you see the Walls. That's how he keeps you safe now that he's gone. His love, it's in the Walls.*"

"I don't think that's what Mapper meant. I think he was being metaphorical."

Seb keeps his eye on her even as wipes dust from the scooter with a brush. "Yeah. Maybe."

Nola rubs the back of her neck. There's a tight knot forming. It floods heat through her skin. Down her muscles. To her feet. The floor, she sees, is the same old dust. She can taste it, blown to the back of her throat from the ride.

Then she hears someone behind her. Footsteps, that stop short.

Ma is at the door of No. 5. She's holding a pile of bowls. Her eyes are fixed on the scene of Nola and Seb and the stopped scooter.

"Look who's back," Ma says. "Come in for dinner. Better late than never."

## *Forty*

Nola hadn't been ready for him when Seb arrived. She was busy, always busy—her and Violet and the new guy in their troop since Wiremu got sick and disappeared. The three of them had been set up on repair missions five days a week. She worked until her fingers bled from climbing and grouting and hammering. She grew strong, and at night she came home and fell straight to sleep.

And then one day Seb had been there, standing in the lobby. She was already in her suit, only the mask and gloves off, and she was about to head out the door to meet the others, and he was standing by the stained glass. He looked so out of place. A small, dirty man against the clean tiles. He said "Sorry." Then he said nothing.

That day that Lauren visited the Wellington Dome and talked on the tea lounge balcony, Nola walked her down to the bedrooms. Nola packed a bag of food and gave it to her sister. Wrapped Heketoro in a tight hug. Walked them both out to the scooter. Watched them ride away around the corner. Stood on the step for a long while, to make sure they had gone. It was only when she returned to her room that she realised Lauren had taken the maps.

It's Seb who leads her into the Clark's house. Ma has already retreated into the dark hollow of the door. There's a haze in the kitchen. Nola blinks and can't tell if it's the steam of the pot on the stove—the heavy salted meat of it—or the light filtered through the curtains, their fabric slightly moth-eaten. The kitchen table sleeps, crumbed with bread.

She's not sure why she can't just ask about Lauren. The way Ma moves makes her pause.

"I came back as soon as I could," she says. "Where's Mapper?"

Ma sighs. "He's busy. It's been busy, Nola. I'm going to need your help this week."

"Whatever you need. Just let me know what I can do."

"Be around," says Ma. It isn't short, the way Ma says it, but it cuts like a pin stepped deep into a foot.

Seb helps Ma move the dinner pot to the table. He slops stringy soup into quiet bowls. Nola

grabs a cloth, crocheted from unravelled wool. She wipes the spillage from the cracks in the wood. Sinks into her old chair at the table. It feels, sitting there, like her legs are fusing with the chair. They lock into the grooves, snapping back into place. The room grows hot, although it's not hot tonight. Her chest takes on weight with each breath.

“Is anyone out looking?” Nola crushes the silence.

Ma sips a spoonful of soup into her mouth. “Fetu and a few others have already sorted all that. Everyone knows the Road Guide. Everyone knows what to do. Whether they do it or not is nothing – nothing we can do anything about.” Ma looks for a moment like she's going to wobble out a tear. Then she takes another gulp of soup.

Nola wants to sleep. The few bites of dinner that she's had are rising in the back of her throat. She almost asks another question. Doesn't. She silks down under the familiarity of it all. She takes an internal inventory of the space: Lauren's empty chair, her still-floury bread bowl, a tumbled pile of wooden blocks—once Ma's, once the Clark girls', now Heketoro's. It's like Lauren's still here. Like she's just about to walk around the corner.

When she saw Seb in the lobby of the Institute, her first thought was that Mapper was dead. She'd heard Leah grumbling about him forgetting to check in about his assignments, and then the letter came from Sill Road: Mapper was sick and staying at No. 5 until he felt better. They'd heard nothing from him for six months. “The man is a liability,” Leah had said when Nola asked after him.

She'd followed Seb out onto the lobby steps. He sat squinting at the sky, like he was seeing the sun for the first time.

“I think you should come home,” he'd said. “Lauren's gone again. She's taken Heke with her, and those maps she got from you.”

## *Forty-One*

Halfway through dinner, Nola tells Seb that she needs to clear her head. Ma doesn't even look up when she walks out of the house—just piles up the dishes.

The Road feels as though it's shrunk. The doors are all off-centre from where she remembers them. She's never really looked at the Walls the way she does now, walking south towards the pub, back the way she came. They're so brash compared to the Dome. The Walls are just stuff on Sill Road, stuck together, grouted messily. Like it's the wind itself that's built them. Dirt scruff caught in a fence line.

She looks in each doorway as she passes. Mrs Manuel is sleeping in No. 7, curled up on her sofa in the front lounge. Her legs are uncovered. The blanket on the arm of the chair is still a folded map of warmth. No. 9 is empty—Fetu, off somewhere. The chairs are all pushed in. There isn't much noise, although Outside it's like the sky is falling. The neighbours sit in a mill of condensation and lifted dust. It buzzes in her head. She wants more space.

*I call him Goat Stew.*

Nola blinks the memory away.

*C'mon Nola. Too slow. Say Outside or Eat Dirt.*

She's almost dozing in the back of the pub. Leaning against the Wall. The empty room begins to itch with people. Tiredness begins to rush over her, like the rain that's started meddling with the Roof.

"You're back!" says someone. Nola doesn't even know who. The room blurs.

She feels Fetu's hand on her shoulder. "We've been up as far as a day's walk either way of the Road." His voice is a flashing hum. "We'll tell you as soon as we know anything."

"Gotta be glad to be back out of the city though, eh Nola?"

*Road protect you. Road keep you. Road give you peace until Peace is given.*

The skylight blisters, a hazy stream onto the bar and the floor—a bare footprint smeared in the

dust.

She wakes up like she's missed something, like she's lost, like time's gone walking. She feels the recent absence of arms as if they're new burns on her back. She looks up at her ceiling. This is her bedroom at No. 5. She rolls. Sweat cold. The window's the same. Her bed smells mouldy, like old paper in boxes. The other one lies empty. Has been many times. But it's still Lauren's bed. She wonders now, for the first time, if she remembers the last words they've said to each other.

Ma leans up in the doorway. "Seb just brought you home. You were tired."

*Why'd he bring me here?* she thinks. She looks at the window, the curtains drawn but still leak the Outside light in. She wants to be in Seb's room, without the window, pressed up against the warm ceiling, the Wall, under his blankets. She feels sick.

"You're not well," says Ma. She sits down on the side of the bed. Quotes from the Road Guide, one hand on Nola's arm. "Remember the words? *The time for travel is a time for sickness. But coming home is a coming to rest.*"

Ma does not look at the empty bed. She adjusts the curtains over the small window before she leaves.

The next time Nola wakes, she's on Lauren's cold mattress. She doesn't remember moving there. The directions of the room are all wrong. Fear ricochets through her throat. She almost calls out. The wind is angling against the Walls. Roaring now, no rain—an empty wind. The kitchen is dim lit by the window.

Ma is in bed.

She pulls a porridge pot from the cupboard. The corn grit jar and the oat jar are empty, too. She opens the cupboards, and there is a single crust of bread with Lauren's knife-cutting pattern on the grainy surface. Green fuzz feathers the raw edge. She picks it up. Her finger press against a pale mealworm. She drops the loaf on the bench. Watches the worm curl on impact.

"Nola," Ma says, wrapped in a blanket in the kitchen doorway. "You need more sleep."

There's a sound. Someone passing in the passage. She can hear the agitated stumble of their feet.

“Nola, wait,” says Ma, but Nola has already pulled away.

## *Forty-Two*

She sees them, like a swarm of ants, on the Road in front of the pub.

There's a gangrenous heat in her throat.

It's a crowd, at the pub door. They are a hum. An ancient drone. She can see them, gathering.

"Nola, wait," Ma calls out again. Nola leaves her in the doorway.

They know something. She knows they know. It's the energy of their movement. They're talking over themselves. Piling against each other. Pulling each other in. Some knowledge engorges them. Only terrible things do this. Only terrible things keep them churning, limb over limb, together.

They clot in the pub door. They open their wound mouths. She approaches, and they move away from her. She stumbles through the door. Fetu slides a glass into her hands. He lingers there as if to say something. Light burrows through the thick edges of the glass. It's full of amber liquid, like thin resin. He takes his hand away.

If a suspicion of Lauren's fate is a thing she has kept stashed in her bones, she now stands away from herself. Realises that all her skin has rolled inside out.

"Maybe we need to take some time," Mrs Manuel is saying. "We should go through the Guide before we make a move."

"Well, we know what's happened. Could have seen it coming from a mile away."

Nola watches them as she stands slightly apart.

"What did Charlie even say he saw?"

"Yeah," says Nola. "What has Charlie seen?"

The neighbours look down at their feet.

"We mustn't jump to conclusions," says Fetu. He rests a hand on her shoulder, a thick weight. But Charlie is there, in the middle of their neighbours. He doesn't meet her eye.

She makes him show her. He starts off down the Road, past the houses and Seb's flat and the forked track to the Crop Rooms. She follows him past the cooling machine, the churning water vats

and the Reuse Room. Then Charlie stops beside the emergency exit on the right-hand Wall. There is the safety door, with its rectangular window. The bright yellow warning signs. Charlie stops beside it. Nola looks in.

She can see into the small room that holds the Outside Noddy suits. There's a temperature gauge on the Wall, a control panel and the de-contamination vents.

There's the final dead-lock door.

"You gotta go in to see it," says Charlie. "I was just doing a maintenance check. Wouldn't have seen anything otherwise."

"Open it up."

Charlie hesitates. "Nola, kid. You can look if you want, but it won't change anything. Only one version of this story, and I've already told you what I've seen."

But he opens the first door for her, and she steps over a small ledge into the room.

It's very cold, in there. Just a holding pen, really, for the suits. Charlie waits on the Road, looking. Nothing's out of place. The helmets hang quiet on their hooks. The monitor on the control panel is lit up, glowing.

The door hums faintly with its perpetual compression. Nola edges towards it. She knows there is no wind in this room. But her skin prickles as she gets closer. The door's closed, as always. She looks out the window at the dry earth. In the distance, trees ripple on the hills.

Up close to the glass, she sees something blue in the corner of her eye. Sees it like a hair on her cheek. She remembers Lauren reading from one of Mr Manuel's books: how we always see our nose we just don't know it. The window lets in a cool ray of light. She watches the dust paused still within it.

The thing in the corner of her eye is fabric. It's a child's blue cardigan, Outside of the Wall.

First, her body washes with pale sick. Nothing's wrong because it's just a cardigan, she tells herself, swallowing the feeling down. It might not even be Heketoro's, she thinks, although as she thinks it, she remembers him wearing it, much too large for his little body then, on the balcony in Wellington. Nola looks mostly at the dust. She stands at the door. The double-layered metal. The latch

pressed down in place across the door. The scratched plastic window. The suction-shut mechanism whirrs.

Everything's in order. Almost everything. She scrapes her feet back on the ground. They grit on dirt and sand.

But there's no sand in the room. There's not. That's what she tells herself, looking at the sand. She tells the churn of nausea that it is just dust collected there from inside the Road. Just skin and flakes of Wall and animal dander. The Outside sand has never got in, and it never will. She puts other thoughts away, behind her shoulder blade. There, under her right rib, third one down. It isn't sand under her feet. Nothing is open. Nothing has been closed. She looks down at the grit below her leather shoes and puts the image in her liver. Pulls her muscles in. She tries to sink the facts into her body, like fingers in cold clay. No one has been here by this door recently, no one, not even herself.

When she was young, she ate porridge with brown sugar. She sat on Ma's lap. Ma spilt the grains on her knees, on Nola's shorts, onto her toes.

Sugar sand melts to nothing in the heat.

She remembers Lauren in Place with her hands in the sand wishbone. Lauren telling her stories. The one about the Goatman, living on the desert. A Real-Life, Make-Pretend, Outside Thing.

Nola's always been intrigued by how things look in glass. She thinks of Lauren sitting on the sills beside their house. Her clothes cast in the reflection. An identical ghost.

The Road is safe. *In the days of the Road, no one ever leaves who lives.* She turns her head a little to look again at Heketoro's cardigan on the brown sugar in the window. She can hear Charlie, behind her somewhere, saying something stupid. *I'll go get Fetu and the crew.* He leaves her in the little room between the doors. His words are not yet born. She tucks them in her closed womb, her red-full stomach sack. Everything is as it should be. This door is as good as an unopenable Wall, and thank goodness itself, because then no one ever dies.

## *Forty-Three*

There's a moment when she's out on the Road but she doesn't know where she is. Sand and stone and wood. Tin, concrete. She knows nothing, nothing at all.

She walks on autopilot to the Crop Room intersection. Passes the sills where she, Lauren and Seb used to sit. Her arms would stretch on the pull sideways as she leaned out from them. She wonders if all muscles work like that—something she's never stopped to ask. Not then, or at climbing lessons with Leah. Not any time at all.

When she reaches the soft smell of the Crop Rooms, she becomes aware of the place before it: the small, dark entrance where the Potting Sheds end. She sees the old plastic sheets and dark Walls. Moss spews from the doorframe. The growths raise spindle hands to the filtered sun coming through the skylights.

She sees him before he sees her. At the far end of the Rooms, he is setting up the greens for planting. Greens, which are the most fragile of all the plants. They are the plants most prone to fall under an overheated bulb or uncovered skylight. Too much heat and they desiccate down into a stain on the edge of a planter, their stems heat-bludgeoned into slime.

Seb's bent over them. Carving them from their tin cans and clay pots. There's nothing much to it—just time and gentle manoeuvring. She passes through the rows of cabbages gone to seed with little bags around their heads to catch the fall.

When she touches his shoulder, he stops. She can see it in his face. In the way he breathes because he knows that she is watching him. She thinks he might be about to say something, so she presses her head into the crook of his armpit. Rolls her hands around his chest until he lifts his arm and collects her there, like those seeds inside their bags. He shakes the last of the knotty dirt from a lettuce's root system and lays the seedling down on the bench. Its white legs lie lank. Nola presses her cheek against Seb's back so that she can't tell what's her blushing and what's his sweat.

She holds the thought of Lauren like a warm stone in the caverns of her throat. There's a space for it to sit there, though it can't be swallowed. If she keeps herself still, pressed along Seb's body, she

wonders if perhaps the cardigan on the Outside of the Wall won't have happened. If she closes her eyes, she can believe it's a summer, years ago. She's thinking about how her story is meant to go like this: her arms are in Seb's. They are tinged with window tan. Lauren has baked hot bread with her clay-grouted hands. She has some, still warm, in her pocket, and she will give it to them any moment. When Seb moves, the stone moves, and unbidden, the tears.

Seb's fingers pause around her shoulders. He jerks back against the bench.

"It's Lauren," she begins, diverting the salty leakage with her wrists. "I think you know."

He's very quiet. His eyes rim red.

Blood leaves her legs. Seb hooks his arms under her own. Heat against stick tendons. They hold each other up.

"What are you growing?" she asks to break the silence.

Seb breaks. Something halfway between a laugh and a yell leaves his mouth. A sob runs from it. "Do you think we knew?" His voice is a bristle brush. "When we were little, I mean."

Nola doesn't know what he's about to say. Only that he shouldn't.

"I mean, do you think we made up all those stories about what was good? We really thought we were doing the right things, didn't we?"

The stone in her throat drops. "Life just happens one way."

"I sometimes hate this place." The skin around Seb's eyes sinks in. "I'm not so smart like you or Mapper. Can't reason my way around why some fellas can't survive it."

Nola looks out at the shade cloths, forever still. "If she couldn't keep him alive here, then why wouldn't she leave?"

"She could have stayed," says Seb, sniffing. "She was stubborn enough for it. She could have at least tried to think up some other options."

"I guess life just doesn't turn out the way we dream it will when we are kids."

"You dance, don't you?" says Seb.

"I'm no Vera-Ellen," Nola replies. Although perhaps, she thinks, she is. Perhaps she is exactly the kind of person to live without the child that she wants. "It feels like there's nothing good left to

believe in here.”

“Just you,” says Seb.

“You’re here too.”

She comes to feel she’s close to him the way you feel you’ve already been bruised. It’s like he’s the sun. She’s a single thread of moss. She grows up to meet his golden shoulder. The brindles of his hair catch on her skin.

Her breath, made of roots. “We’re a good thing, aren’t we Seb?”

He leans down into her. The stem of his spine is a warm trellis. The dust, dormant on his hands.

They make it as far as a Potting Shed. It’s just what happens. She keeps her palms in his hair as he fumbles in his pocket for the key. He wrangles it out of the fabric—a bent old thing, the one Charlie handed to Clive all those years ago—*that’s the last of the looking around*. Doesn’t matter. Seb clicks the key into the lock—tink like ice in a glass—shoves the weight with his shoulder. There’s a strong strange smell Nola can’t place. Old, chipped, still raw. But then the moment is grey grain light—a single white bulb in a cage—warm plant spray condensed in plastic bottles and oil and piles of sacks, metal shovels and pots of canned whitewash for the Walls and Seb nests his hands around her face—his own forgotten, loose and doughed—then they’re back against the shelves. His boot crushes a piece of chalk down to the concrete bones. And she wants this. It’s his brown leather boot, the cracks in the heels, it’s all the places she’s seen them—in his room—under the high bed—treading the passages—carving trail lines through the grime of the pub floor. It’s the aching years of liminal distance and warm lips—the sink made by his shoulder blade—wired muscle of his upper arm—the familiar twist at the base of her spine that aches. But she presses it down, presses it down, because she’s here with her beloved, and he is a summer where nothing’s happened. She rises on her toes—she is a faultless dance, holding herself against him so no space remains on the boundaries of their skin. She is almost close enough. She is absorbing the freckle pattern on his chest that she forgot—how could she have forgotten? This is the story she wants: the silver scar along his hairline. The tuft of bronze wire fuzz frosting up towards his breastbone. She’s a window. She’s letting him in. He’s making her

beautiful. There is only this—so she’s raising her arms, ankling the dress off her feet, and there is chalk on the bottom of them, the white pieces slice in, they cut in and they crush. This is the truth: eyes shut. She rests her head against the shelf behind her. Stretches out her arms. She clasps around the poles of the metal shelves. Her palms scrape on loosening hammered nails. He lifts her from the ground. She bends back. Looks up.

There’s a rust hole in the iron shelf.

A water drip falls from above, straight through and down the Wall in an ochre smear. The iron shimmers from the clinging water at the edges, greenish-yellow, pink, tin rust, like mushroom mould. Like a lung wound with the blood drained out.

There’s something about the light—the way it moves through the cross-like, rusted out space—curls down from the ceiling bulb to bleach along the exposed Wall and peck into her skin.

She feels bird wings in her eyelids.

Seb’s breath footfalls against her neck.

She doesn’t know how a simple re-arrangement of the room could have fooled her. As if Lauren’s boot print through the ground below them could ever have been hidden by a renovation, a whitewashed floor.

And now the water is there, eating through tin again, just as it always did.

Seb’s body leans in, a moving Wall. She can’t breathe. Her footing slips from the lower shelf. It’s summer in the year that Mapper arrived the second time.

It’s summer in the year that she first knew.

“Wait,” she gasps, and Seb scrapes her against the shelf as he catches his balance.

“Oh god,” he says.

There’s blood on the inside of her palms from where the nails have scraped in. A numb disengagement. He’s pressing his shirt against the skin rip. There’s the sting of cotton shards. Phosphorus air.

It’s hundreds of tiny eggs—that smell. Their shells. Crushed in all the sacks around the room. Waiting to be scattered for the plants.

For a moment, she's back to being eighteen. Lauren is about to shoulder through the plastic of the garden, out to the Road with her bag of stolen vegetables. Nola is on the bench. She's holding in her legs. She isn't getting up; she isn't saying anything. Seb is home in bed.

Her lungs are plastic bags. She can't unstick them. They are Heke's lungs. Lauren is walking out the door. Seb's mouth is a hot coffin on her forehead. Lauren is leaving. There is sand on Heke's lips. Lauren leaves. A static lung. There is a closed plastic door. They are together.

Heat blurs her vision. She retches.

"Sorry," Seb says, frozen for a moment, and reaches to the ground to get her shirt, his body knocking against hers at the hips.

Tears tuck into the folds of her nose. Her breath is calcified. She grabs her boots from under the shelving, tips dirt from them, stuffs them over her toes. Seb pulls up his pants. Rubs the skin around his temples.

He says something as she swings the door along its hinges, but she doesn't hear it, doesn't stop moving till he's shut inside. She's in the passage, passing whitewashed sheds; she's in the Road. She's twelve and eight and two under Ma's skirt with Mapper's boots halting in view.

Out on the Road the air is wicked balmed, and she knows why.

## *Forty-Four*

HEKETORO

*Mum says I'll see it with my eyes wide open. Some bits of the world will look like window stuff. But it won't be like window stuff, 'cause it will be all real and all for us.*

*Mum puts a top that Nola made in the backpack bag and also the pants 'cause we always need pants now that I'm big. She puts on my cardigan. Then she says I gotta stay, gotta sit tight, gotta play and I can play with Ma and maybe Mapper. But don't bother him too much, he's tired see. Maybe play but don't tell Ma about the backpack. It's a special pack just for us and a secret, which is okay though we mustn't keep secrets other people tell us, just this one is okay 'cause it's only me and Mum's.*

*She puts the Breathe Leaves in the backpack too, but we won't need them too much longer, 'cause we're going on an Adventure Mission to find a big old box of medicines.*

*Mum goes out to get the last stuff and I do want to play with Ma, but she's in a nap so I just go and sit in her room. Ma's room is like Mum's but there's no pictures under the bed. There is a little picture on the window sill from Mum when she was my age though. It's a cat she scratched out with a pin and she showed it to me 'cause I'm more special to her than Ma or Nola or Seb or Mrs Manual or Sneaky Sylvie or anyone else on the whole big Road 'n it's big ol' Walls.*

*And then she's back and she says What you seeing? and I say The Window and she says What do you see out the window? and I say The stuff in the glass and she says Wanna have a closer look? She gets our backpack. She walks from Mum's room and she sits on Nola's bed and puts the bag on her shoulders.*

*Hold on to me tight, you know what time it is, she says.*

*But I don't know really so I lie back on Mum's bed and say No idea, No idea and she says It's time for our Adventure Mission and an honourable mission it is too!*

*Mum says bye to Ma on the way out but not loud enough to wake her. She says Say See Ya Soon to Ma, Heke. So I say See Ya See Ya to Ma and we go for a walk down Sill Road past all the ol' windows and I say We're going on our Mission now, 'cause the words is like a little teeny tiny niggles in my middle button, like scaredbutyeahyeahgottagottago. We never been on a Mission before, but Ma's been on*

heaps of them. She's been down the Road, way way way down to the place with the Red Woods in the Broken Dome, and on one of the Missions she found me in her insides like an Inside wart but a good kind of one.

For our Mission we go to the yellow-stripe door at the end of the windows, and it's the door we must keep secret that we go look at it the last few weeks—special because it's Mum's and me's. Everyone else likes to forget about it, cause they're scaredy cats. We're going on a mission, and our treasure chest's got big lung drugs.

Mum says sometimes you're not sure which stories are real life or just pretend so you have to act like they're true and then the proof is in the puddin'. We gotta go on this Mission, gotta get the good stuff from the Outside. The Road ain't got anything for us to find anymore. Never did, maybe never did, that's what Mum's been sayin'.

I say, Mum, does my face look blue? and she says No Heke, you look like someone who's fit for an Adventure.

I'm not scared.

Mum gives me a little bit of sleepy tea from the sippy cup, 'cause she doesn't want me to be scared. It's only an Adventure Mission after all. Take a little bit, says Mum. Tastes like tins a' beans and bitter leaves.

Now remember, says Mum. This is how you breathe—you think of what's coming next. Big tummy breaths. Big. 'Laxed shoulders. Wriggle them.

We have to go on this Mission, don't we? I say.

Mum says Yeah. She's got this hunch, see, that there's some place with the Lung Drugs and it's Outside. She's seen it on Nola's map. Our Mission, she says, is to find the Army Place—big one with the Lung Drugs, with all the medicines, with all the things we need to make me never stop breathin'.

Lotsa stories about us at home, Mum's been sayin'. But we ain't part of them. If we're part of them, then we're the bit that proves the point. But we ain't gotta prove nothin'. Nothin'.

She strokes my hair. Makes whirlpools in it like in water. Go to sleep, says Mum, but I say I won't, I think I won't.

*Do get squint-eye sleepy though.*

*Wake up in blue. Blue cardie. Blue weave around my face, not 'round my arms like normal. Got strings in the weave. They make tickles on my cheeks.*

*I can see outside the blue. Little stringy squares in it. Can see some ground. The stringy squares are windows. Stringy windows without glass. I throw the blue off, and me and Mum, we watch it run away through the air, 'cause I threwed it bloody good.*

*Can feel the ground breathing at me. The whole mountains breathing. Big breaths, big ones.*

*I go back to sleep, 'cause then I wake up, 'cause we slip onto the ground. It's brown on the ground, green bits on it like Seb's spinaches. The breathing blows them in my face.*

*I don't believe it, no. I don't believe it. That's what Mum's saying. We're in the wind. I just know it. On our Adventure.*

*We're not scared, are we Mum? I say.*

*Mum's walking fast.*

*Mum, we're not scared. We're gonna do our Mission!*

*I lean my head over her shoulder. She reaches into her pack and takes out Nola's map. Let's just have another look, says Ma. She has to yell over the wild breaths that's comin' from the mountains.*

*We can't see nothing for a while. Just Outside forever. Just the hills and the grass.*

*Ma's not breathing properly. I wriggle my shoulders. Wriggle Ma, remember? Then she laughs, laughs scared.*

*Look Heketoro, this is our windowsills from the Outside, she yells to me, and we turn around again. This is a sill on the other side of the Road, says Ma. And then I feel scared because she said my full name, with all the treeish letters in it.*

*It's out here, that's where you saw the place with the good drugs, eh Mum, I say.*

*Mum's hands are wiggling. I only saw the place on the map. I don't see it now, she says.*

*But there's nothing for us Inside anymore, Mum, 'member? We're on a Mission out here.*

*That's just stories, Mum says. It was just another story we had to try out to see if it was real.*

*Mum's face is mushy blue on the lips. Maybe we just gotta think about it differently, she's saying.*

*Maybe. We just gotta think for a minute.*

*That's what she says.*

*I look around, and the sand's all there. But Ma's walking us back to the Road. Funny to be out of it. We start running, Ma holding me up from the ground in her arms. Jolts me up 'n down. I got shivers. When we get there— Door's all closed. Closed, like, locked. Not part of the Adventure Plan. Musta closed when we came out. Ma just looks at it. Then Ma beats against that door.*

*I gotta remember how to breathe. Feels tricky in the cold. The wind goes peskin' me. Gets cold, gets cold, gets cold.*

*It's a beautiful day, Mum says. She stops beating. And we're not scared, remember? she says. Look, see? The sun's hiding behind a cloud. But it will be out so soon.*

*Mum holds me on the sill and I'm a little Window Pin Scratch Cat. And the door's gonna open any minute, says Mum, we just waiting for Ma to come by on her way to see her friends, and let us in or else we're gonna go walkin' again, just to walk and find out what we're walking for.*

## *Forty-Five*

The Clarks' front door is closed. Nola notes the way the edges look, pressed up against the Walls. It's never closed unless there is a siren. Maybe it has been on some winter night when it was especially cold. But nothing springs to mind.

She's never knocked before. No brightness slips from the gap beneath the door. The handle still turns, so she strains it open, bends herself around the wood, and goes inside.

The sound of pumice raining on the Outside of the Road rolls through the empty room. It slows her until she feels like film grain. She jumps through images without remembering how she got from one to another. There's the familiar chair by the window. The patchwork Walls—greyer, dingier, smaller than before. It's all fresh for the first time: the dining table, with crumbs of bread between the floorboards. Half a kumara rests on the corner of the kitchen bench, its pale flesh exposed. Purple peels scatter on the floor. Newly cut. Only beginning to shrivel up in curls.

It's like in old-style posters. Paint-like light poses on all the high points of the room. A slack afternoon sun drains from the window above the plate shelves. It picks its way down the stacks of jars and dishes, the pottery mugs from Ma, and an old biscuit tin from Dead Mr Manual. The only other glow in the room pools under the living room door. It's ajar. Nola walks in.

At first, she can't see him at all. The old blanket from Ma's bed hangs on a string across the door. It creates a small partition. Between this extra barrier and the slack, drawn curtains of the room, it's difficult to see. She can pick out the sofa as her eyes adjust. Its gold-green arms, grazed by the perching of herself and the others, sink lower than ever. There's a large lamp beside it, without a bulb.

On the floor she notices small offerings: a pink china saucer with toast cut into squares, a cup of something brown and boiled at scummy half-tide. On the table lies a copy of the Road Guide. The spine is crisp, unbent. Nola creeps forward. A cold stench rises. Mapper's head, she sees now, has shrunk. Did he always have that little hair—so blonde it looks translucent, strung up in web-ish mounds?

He's watching a film. It's not one she knows, and she wonders where he got it. Onscreen, a

man climbs a hill. Thunder rings around him. A crowd gathers below. The sound is off. As Nola sits, Mapper moves his head towards her. Then he tilts back. His face goes lax, his mouth sags a little open.

“Mapper?” she says, unsure. He shuffles back in his seat, as if she has made this request of him. Continues to watch the screen.

He keeps his large hands folded in his lap. One finger taps against the others in irregular beats.

Nola reaches out and presses him forward in the seat. “Let’s get you up. How long have you been sitting?” As she takes away her hand, she feels it brush over lumps in his skin. Large lumps, all over his body, and the skin so strange and flaked. There is a moist spot on his hand where the skin is turning liquid. Another, she sees, behind his ear. He stares at her blankly.

She moves towards him. He shuffles around in the chair, pressed up with his hands, as if he has forgotten how to place himself.

“She’s gone.” Nola says it for the first time. “I think Lauren did it. I think she went Outside.”

Mapper watches the film image shred into coloured lines and then flutter back to a clear scene.

“She went out of the Road. Do you know that? She took Heketoro with her. You know that, right?”

He takes her hand. His fingers feel like cold leather around her palm. The pits of his skin are scabbing, lifting off. He presses his lower lips together in case any words slip without thought. Half his face smiles slack. “This film,” he says slow. “It’s very good. It’s very—yes, it’s quite a good one. They’re up now, you see. So, it’s—though there are clouds.”

The man on the film moves out of sight between hillocks towards a painted sky. Mapper wipes his eyes, leans back in his chair, at ease again. Then the door creaks behind them.

Ma stops in her tracks. Lifts her hands into the air.

“What are you doing in this room? Mapper’s resting!” Ma glides the words around the room. She says it in a way that rolls Nola up like a rug.

Ma scuffs her feet on the floor as she rounds the sofa. She heaves Mapper’s body back in the seat by pushing on his legs. Stuffs two pillows behind his back. They stick out from his sides, like beige bobbed wings. “He can’t talk right now. There’s been a lot going on. Lots of decisions to make.”

For a moment, Nola believes her. The static feeling fills her up. She feels far too sleepy to know why she is standing from the chair, helping to adjust the pillows further down Mapper's back. She's told to get a rug. She lifts the heavy wool. Then Ma is walking to the kitchen, and Nola's left standing behind the cloth screen, on the other side, watching her through the woven haze. Ma walks to the table—pauses—goes back the other way.

“How long has he been like this?”

“Like what?”

“Sick, Ma. Dying.”

Ma pulls the table straight on the floor. “Everything will be fine, Nola. You mustn't talk to him without me. He's had a bit of health trouble over the last few months. He's tired, he's obviously tired and who wouldn't be? Gracious.”

Nola is surprised to see Ma shake her head and scowl. The tin rings in her earlobes start to quake. Then she pulls a pot from the shelf and places it on the stove. She pours a little water in from the kettle.

“For tonight,” she says. “Soup or mash?”

Nola's voice phlegms in the halls of her throat. “What can Mapper eat?”

Ma ignores her. “Soup goes further.”

She holds the kumara in her hand, turning it around. Carves an eye from the flesh.

Nola's first memory in this room is of Seb. They were three, or maybe four. She remembers the countertops came to their foreheads so that they only saw the middle of things: the sides of the stove glistening with oily soot layers, the pale undersides of the chairs. They crawled below the table and played knucklebone. The pieces bounced off their skin. Three on her palm became one on the cool flip side. The table was a second ceiling. Ma's knees tinkered past, and they went silent—both not sure why—her and this boy, who was the only person at the right height to look her in the eyes. The boy she has currently left in a shed.

“Why was the door closed?” The question slurries in her belly even after she's spat it out.

Ma turns the kumara around. Purple strips remain at either end. “You're in tonight, aren't

you?”

They're reverse cuts, those purple bits. Their coloured dye leaks into the peeled spaces as proof of a previous exterior. Nola waits for Ma to pick up the knife and take them off. It's like she doesn't see them.

Of course, now that she's thinking of the past, the first thing Nola remembers at all is Ma's knees. Back then, Nola was so small she could crawl under her skirt and hide. The skirt was thin and long. She remembers, even then, a chunk of worry in her chest, and how she was learning she could tuck it deep inside herself so she wouldn't feel it anymore. The skirt lifted slightly against the point-end of a stick, and there was Mapper, peering down at her crouched form. She held onto Ma's shin. Ma said to say hello. She doesn't remember if she did.

“The door was shut here, at No. 5, and the Outside door was shut on the Road too,” she says.

“The new Road Guidelines arrived last month with the Postie. *Expansion Six*. We've been quite lax with our safety.” Ma puts the kumara in her cardigan pocket and sees the slivered peelings, dropped from the bench onto the floor. She sighs. Picks them up one by one.

Nola feels like there's sand in her brain. She stops and grabs Ma's arm. A speck of dust swims in her eye. “The door that Lauren left from. The door was sealed shut from the Inside. The latch was down. That's the only way to seal it. They do it after every funeral when they've put someone Outside. When Mr Manual died, that's how they did it, don't you remember? Lauren left by that door, and someone closed it up again.”

Ma's hands form a nest around the peels. They lie, bellies up, in her palm. “It's at times like these that we remember how important it is to be safe. If it was shut, that's just because it has to be.”

“Is that what Mapper's told you?”

Ma shuts her hand. “Now, don't be like that. Mapper and I understand each other. Things are very complex here. I don't know if you realise how difficult it is to maintain. But it's essential. If Mapper needs me to do some things now and again, that's just what I do. It's not the same for you. You don't have the years of experience we have.”

“Mapper can't sit on a chair right anymore. I don't think he's making any decisions.”

“You don’t know anything,” Ma’s voice starts to rise. It’s a whine, a wind whistle. She turns the heat up on the boiling pot. “I only need to look at him to understand him perfectly. He always knows what to do.”

Something in Nola’s chest rips. It’s as if someone has placed a magnet outside her body. She feels shrapnel, long tucked away, begin to move. “So did he tell you to shut it?”

Ma shakes her head. “I can’t talk to you like this. You’re not listening right.” She tries to walk out of the room, but Nola steps into her path.

“Did you shut it?”

“The doors stay shut,” she says. “There’s no reason to go out. You know what happens if you do. *In the days of the Road, no one ever leaves who lives.*” The peels are still in her hand, peeking from her closed fist. “This is the safe place. There are only good things here.”

“There’s no Lauren. No Heketoro.”

Ma lifts her free hand against Nola’s cheek. She holds it there, still. Nola has never noticed her eyes this close before. The grey pools of them, the black holes. The window shines a perfect miniature reflection in their glassy surface, so she can’t see them fully. Can’t understand them at all.

## *Forty-Six*

There are only bad suits left, old ones that have yellow tape over the stitching. The boots are too big, but she puts them on anyway. She tucks in the pant legs. Tightens the bands at her wrists. Her arms scratch against the canvas lining rubbed dark at the wrists from the oils of other peoples' skin. Over her neck, she hangs the large fabric face helmet with its breathing filter.

She can't figure out what to do with herself then. She wonders if she should go and find Seb. Say goodbye. In the end, she lifts the latch up from the door.

There's a control panel set into the Wall and covered with a metal door. To open the Outside door, the yellow button must be pressed.

The thing about the buttons is that anyone could press them. They're not those ones you can have to force. It's not like a fire alarm, where you use a hammer, crack the glass lengthwise, hear it shatter. There's something too easy about it. Like a child could touch them, anyone.

She's going to faint. She knows it all at once. The suit's too hot. She feels spongy. Her arms—limp. Tongue swells sweet and heavy. Even as she pulls the suit away from her neck, it warps back onto her skin in other places.

She wakes up on the floor. A sharp pain rings on her temple where she'd fallen on the ground. She can't tell how long she's been lying there. She thinks she can see Ma's legs in the doorway.

"What are you doing Nola?" Ma asks.

Nola feels nothing. She's lined with lead. The tin of Ma's soup pot. The compost from the cabbage beds. Sedimented.

"When you come home, we'll have stew." Ma's feet shuffle. She steps back into the passage of the Road.

Nola folds herself up at the waist. It's the yellow button, the one she presses. Her fingers sink it down against springs and metal. There's a click as it flicks some switch deep inside.

Ma calls out behind her. "Where are you going, Nola?"

The door hums. Decompresses.

“For a walk,” says Nola. Behind her, she hears the interior door snap shut and the door to the Outside clicks open.

## *Forty-Seven*

In the beginning, the Outside is something she can see with her eyes closed. She didn't know it would be like milk—the light, without the windows. It pours onto her slick lids, sliding through the lash line, prying them apart. She stands on the metal step of the doorway.

In the beginning, she cannot open her eyes.

It's red—the milk. It twists in the inside of her sockets. It's too much—sun glare without enough shade. The red milk curdles into roots and wings. Folding—unfolding—dark patterns in the red. Her face gets very cold, even in the suit.

She notices that. It's how she knows this is not the beginning.

The light has been freshly sharded from the sun. Like a hard salt meat into a bowl. It's all raw and there is no darkness in it, not even in the dark framing of a window.

She's still in the threshold of the doorway. She reminds herself that if she's dead, she's already done it. The boots skate on the metal threshold. She startles, and her eyes start open. Brown fizzles at the edges of her vision. Below her, she sees the Outside ground, a step away.

Dust over her feet.

She is going to fall. Doesn't. Then she slides. Her arms worry up. She buckles onto the earth, which gives way only a little. Catches her balance. Can see the boot, her big green boot, there on the ground.

A crack runs under the toe of it.

The crack is dark brown, a gin-run spill on dust the moment after a bar-brawl, or a scab lifted from mottled pinky flesh. Beneath the crack, the dirt is damp and cold. She can feel that too, through the boot, as if there was no sole at all.

She waits for whatever is next.

The wind comes. Over the mountains. A ragged breath. Running. A finger. An ice arm, whipping down. The sun is too bright, and she can still see Ma's legs moving away in the sparks deep in the backs of her eyes before it hits her.

She remembers the sun is a spitting fire.

She remembers it—that burning star, her old friend. A feverish hand, on the back of Seb's childhood neck. A blister-former on stove-hot glass. A spotlight, cinematic, between Domed buildings. After all, that's what the Road does—it keeps the windows. It says—this is all we'll keep: we'll box the heat, keep only the sun.

For a moment, things are still. She closes her eyes. She could be standing inside Sill Road. It could be some early morning. Bright, the heat falling like salt through the window. She could be anywhere—just stepped out from No. 5 or pausing in the golden glow of Seb's door.

Then the wind falls around her. Wave without water. It floods. She ribbons in the wind's wake. Leaps and lands hard on one leg before it sucks back up into nothingness. The creature of the wind lurks like it always did, somewhere at the Walls of her body.

She almost turns to look back at the Road. Door like an eye's iris. Instead, she clammers to her feet. She walks. She hears the wind walk with her.

*In the days of the Road, no one ever leaves who lives.* She feels the wind flood up to her ears. Press the mask of the Noddy suit against her face. She says it towards the broad plain, the hills, the distant, white-smearred mountains. She looks for it. Her voice comes out high and uncertain, and the wind spins her words like it spins her on her ankles.

“You know what I've done,” she cries. “Now tell me, what is it that I deserve?”

Then the wind leans around the suit, dragging it this way and that, pushing right up against her body—her ribs, her stomach, her thighs, her neck. It picks her up with its formless hands. Batters her in one direction. Another. Presses her forward along the ground. She runs, like a dancer being played across a screen. The wind is there, at the suit's neck fastening. Nola feels it cut against the straps. Hears a rip.

There is a gap. The wind. Already in.

It's on her skin. A dead hand, boneless.

She reminds herself to begin the end.

She pulls back the mask. It happens like death.

She is not in it, then she is. The wind in her lungs, in her skin, in her body.

Blooming around her fingers and against her cheeks. It's unspooling through the air, twisting on the surface of the earth. It lifts the dirt and drops it. It hurries behind her ears. At the back of her throat is a nugget of fear—that it's all through her. That the tingle of her skin might be melting, that she's been infested. All around her now. Fresh and thick with a cool and unfamiliar scent. The wind hushes itself. Ceases to be. The wind is a face, but there's nothing that it's asking her to do. It sways against her. A face with no will.

Then it hits her again and whistles in her ears.

It occurs to her, for the first time, that the noise she always knew as the wind was perhaps more the sound of the tin Roof against it, rather than the thing itself. Like her body in a fast turn. The air might have no sound at all, until she's in it.

It balloons through the suit. She is full of it.

She hears a human yell. Stutters around, squinting against the weight of the acid sun.

The Road is still and dried and dark. The ground hushes her feet, but she's running, and when she gets up to a small rise in the ground, she sees yellow tape across the shoulder of a green Noddy suit. The suit jerks, helmet down in a tuft of grasses. Then it lies still.

For a moment, she stands alone on the plain. Her and the body. Then she runs.

## *Forty-Eight*

Nola knows it's him before she even gets there. Sick blunders up her throat.

"Seb?"

He's quiet for a moment. Through his suit, she can see his shoulders heaving.

"Are you alright?"

"Why'd you go without me?" Seb creaks.

She bends the legs of her thick suit so that she is crouched beside him. He presses himself up on his knees, shaking. She's not sure why, but before he turns around, she straps the mask back in place. Feels it lock around her.

"Nola?" calls Seb, panicked.

"I didn't think you'd come."

He struggles to his feet. Something winnows from him as he stands—a gruff cry, something shocked out of him with force. His leg folds like those on Mr Manual's beach chair. He judders back down onto his knees and cries out again. Nola's moving before she even knows she's moved. She crawls up beside him.

"You're hurt," she hears herself calling through the wind.

"Nah," yells Seb. He tries to move his leg. "Just a bit."

Nola watches him turn over, wince, and swing into a sitting position. He puts his head between his knees.

Nola reaches for the leg of his suit. Its thick rubber fabric is cool through her gloves. She presses her hands down around his leg. She can feel his tight skin, his driftwood bones. The rubber hides it, but she can feel the break, the tight protrusion of bone or maybe blood, bruised up in a hard bend. Seb jerks. He pulls her hands away.

"I saw you. At the window," he says, wincing. "I got stuck in the shed. The door locked behind you. Clive—he had to let me out. You were gone."

Wind falls against Nola's suit. Against her ears. The sound is like a hum, but low—a hum from

a stomach.

“You shouldn’t have followed me,” she says, loud but muffled by the mask. It makes Seb stop. Then he reaches around back to his bag. Thumbs the flap open and holds it out.

There’s a little roll of jerky in there. A bag of apple slices, dried down into rings.

“Might get hungry,” he says. The bag flutters against his grasp. “There’s blood in my shoe, I think.”

Nola turns around to get her bearings. The Road, like a worm, lies dried out on the desert. It stretches as far as she can see in a weathered bump across the plain. The windows of the Walls on the Road are darkened. The house drapes pulled shut.

By her feet, an old tree root bends up out of the ground. A chalky shoot with thin leaves grows off it.

“I think you tripped,” she says. She slings the bag over her arm and pulls Seb up.

They hook their hands around each other’s waists to stay upright. Seb’s weight is uneven, leaden on her waist. The wind chips grass along their legs. Stumbles them. They stagger in a circle.

“Well, we’re not crisped up yet.” Seb laughs.

Nola feels the pull of her eyes as she faces the long rise of the Road again. The door is shut. She knew it would be. “Not crisped.”

They start to walk forward towards the hills. The day is getting colder. Prickles of the icy air pierce through Nola’s suit. Over the desert plains, dust blows like a Jacob’s Ladder. Rolls over itself, but never leaves. The wind hums. Pauses for breath. Hums again. It trips them forward, towards the open land.

For a long time, they keep going like that. Hours, Nola guesses, as the sky mauves into late afternoon. Nola lurches forward. Seb follows, with a half hop, his hand pressing a bruise down into her hip. The shock of the ground burrows to Nola’s knees with each step. She can see Seb’s pant legs, collecting sandy dirt as they walk. He starts to look like something being built of concrete from the feet up.

Seb stops to look at the sky.

They go for another hour like this. The Road grows smaller, into a thin black line. Nola's throat is dry already. She can feel that her lips are fringed with white mould.

"Seb," she calls through the hum.

He doesn't look at her. Puts his hands on his hips and then sinks onto the ground.

"It ain't hurt me yet," he says. "It hurt you?"

"No," she says, swallowing her throat.

"Maybe we just rest a while. Just a while."

It only takes a few minutes for Seb to close his eyes. His breath fogs the inside of the gas mask. Nola sits and hugs her arms, shivering in the cold. At this level, the plain is like an endless blanket. There is nothing in sight except the Road, the land and the quiet things growing on it.

It begins to fade dark.

"Seb," Nola says, shaking his shoulder. "Come on Seb. We have to keep moving. This is how cold gets you. When you're still."

Seb pushes himself up on his elbows. He coughs in his mask and lets out a groan. Nola stands up and bends his legs for him so that his feet are flat on the ground.

"Lean forward," she says. "Come on now Seb. Just a little further."

She pulls him to his boots. He walks much slower now, dragging his leg and chattering his teeth.

"A little further," Seb laughs, sucking in air. "To where?"

They stop. The plain looks the same—dry earth—a large barren tree—a tussock sprawl.

Suddenly, Seb turns in a circle.

"What are you doing?" creaks Nola, her throat so dry the words come out as a husk.

"I think I know this spot," he says.

"Sure."

"I know, I know. But really. I think I know it from the map. The one in, I mean, when we were kids. I think I know where we are, because I think that big dead tree was on the map in Place."

She tries to catch his face, to see if he is telling the truth, but she can't see anything except the

sucking in and out of his mask as he staggers forward.

When he starts to hop over the sloppy rises and divots of the ground, she follows him.

Seb stops at the side of the tree. He starts to wipe the grasses away with his hand, peering at the ground below. “Do you remember, on the map, how there were other little boxes, Outside on the desert, which looked like Place? Other shelters, or whatever.”

“Place doesn’t exist anymore,” Nola calls out to him. For the first time in years, she thinks about Milton. His form stretched out stiff on the floor. His face picked red, white and raw at the ear by the falling concrete chips. She thinks of Mapper on his chair in Ma’s house. His mouth gaping open. His hands melting away.

“I can’t believe you remember that,” Nola says.

“I memorised it,” Seb says, grimacing as he limps across the grass. “I remember everything from that time. One of those places was by a tree. I don’t see any other trees near here, do you?”

“No,” says Nola. She’s stopped moving because she’s seen it already—the dull, dusted handle of a hatch door in the ground. Seb keeps kicking at the earth.

“Another Place,” laughs Seb. A rocky laugh. His breath already half-frozen to stone.

Nola keeps looking at the hatch. Solid metal, rising from the ground. Dirt over it. *It’s our Place, no one else’s.* The wind hums without words.

“Place was a dead end,” she says. “Remember?”

Seb pauses. He’s still not looking at her. He’s pulling the straps of his mask tighter. She tries to imagine what the blood must feel like, filling his boot. She wonders if it has stopped.

He hops and drags across the ground, stumbling forward onto his good knee, crying out, scouring for any signs of an entrance.

“I do remember the map,” she says. “They showed other shelters. But they didn’t lead anywhere. Place was just a room. So, there’s no point looking out for them. It would just be a hole in the ground.”

“We don’t know what the other places might be like!” Seb calls out, one arm on his leg to strengthen it. “Maybe there were tunnels, even in Place, blocked over. We never moved those

sandbags.”

The sick feeling in Nola’s chest has drifted. It hangs now in her throat.

*That’s the last of the looking around.* The matted hair around Milton’s ears, around Mapper’s mouth. Her hands are cold in their gloves, floury on the palms like the skins of the kumaras drying in Ma’s hands. She’s stuck behind a window, looking out. Nola shakes her head. Rubs her temples. Looks up at the sky.

It’s only just hanging onto blue.

Seb has wandered up to the next rise. He is a furred spot against the reddening horizon.

For one more moment, she lets the wind have all the noise. She calls him back. Her voice cracks on the way out.

She’s making up a story for him as he turns. In the story, already, she has always kept her mask on. She didn’t see the hatch right away. She almost missed it. She will feel him, in a moment, warm against her ribs. The familiar hush of his presence. There could be years. They can do this for generations.

Behind him, there’s a light. The sky, like from her window when she was young, is losing colour. There is a hint of autumn pre-rot to the edges of the hills. She’s looking at the hills, but she can see no figures in them. Only hazy clouds. Wiremu’s voice in the rushing of air: *just bloody look*. There is no one else on the land. Seb is already stumbling again. She knows in that moment that there can be no one else. Only him, only her.

She calls out to him.

“What?” he says, turning back towards her. She hardly hears him with the sickness pounding in her ears.

She makes the skin of her fists a taut Wall. Grips the handle of the hatch.

It takes all her strength to pull back the lid. Grassroots rip along the entryway. A patter of dry dirt falls into the ground. There’s a ladder. A deep hole. There’s dark rust and the echoing rumble of the Outside, flowing in.

The sky is already half-inked. The hills stand quiet. She does not look for what is in them.

“Careful,” she’s saying to Seb, although now her teeth are chattering so much that the words barely come out. She pushes him forward. Plants a boot on the hatch door to keep it open. The ladder rings with each of his groaning steps. The wind shimmies on the metal. She can hear Seb’s tight gloved hands hitting the rungs.

When she slings her leg in, she brings the hatch door over with her. The lid sticks. Rusted on its hinges. The Inside smells like apple cores, dry and mottle-edged. The last thing she sees, her eyes at ground level, is lashing grass. Blades waver. Back and forth. Like arms. Wind up by ears. Rushing faster—faster—the more she lowers the hatch.

It might not be true, what she sees before it shuts—a goat, on the closest rise. She thinks it’s tall, white and shaggy. When it turns its head, there are two of them. The body split at the neck into identical faces. Its faces face her. Their eyes are bright and gentle. Breathless eyes, like a child’s in a room of strangers. She’s not sure what it sees. But she’s almost certain it steps forward—perhaps, or it might be a strange sunspot cast off a distant window or a piece of wind-swept, sky-lit blue cloth. It moves, facing her as if it has two legs. It’s a figure—or a small mirage. Something in the wind. It starts to bleat, or maybe call. Her arm shakes under the weight of the hatch door. She takes another step down the ladder. She can hear Seb’s feet padding on the floor.

*The End*