Things Inside Things

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Abstract

Things Inside Things is a collection of autofiction that revolves around a single mother and her two young daughters. It is at once an intimate account of single motherhood and an ode to, a call to arms for, the maternal bond as irreducible, sacred–the thing at the centre of all things.

Made up of fragmentary scenes, poetic prose, and short stories, the narrative moves back and forth in time, across hemispheres, through shifting points of view and recurrent characters painting readers into the living and breathing layers of one single mother's experience and world.

Taking inspiration from writers Katherine Mansfield and Lucia Berlin, Things Inside Things bucks linear plot convention for a form that is voiced, sensory and shaped by the physicality of emotion.

If this is a collection that advocates for the joy, reward and importance of the mother-child bond it is also one in which that bond does not come easy. Inside the walls and skin of these stories a mother seeks help for chronic maternal anxiety, navigates the loss of relationship break down with her children's father, holds space for paternal and cultural ties that must span distance, be sustained over Zoom calls, and navigates the emotional and material weight of mothering alone.

Above all this is body of work that seeks to hold ordinary, domestic days to the light. That pays homage to the everyday maternal and relational moments of connection, rupture and repair that shape who we are and can–if we let them–transform us. These are not stories of martyrdom. Rather, they give us motherhood as a creative, radical and transcendent force. Where a daughter's 'sturdy seven-year-old legs with downy hairs intact and lit up are holier than all the Gods of all religions', where female friendship is a haven of 'light, smile lines, vast and loyal as the seasons' and within which we witness a mother, a woman, a writer finding herself on the page.

Things Inside Things

By

Jessica Thornley

'Things come suitable to the time, Velvet. Enjoy each thing, then forget it and go on to the next. There's a time for everything. There's a time for having a horse in the Grand National, being in love, having children; yes, even for dying. All in proper order at the proper time.'

Mrs Brown, National Velvet, 1945

What cannot be communicated to the mother cannot be communicated to the self.

John Bowlby

For Billie and Juno, Love Mum.

Appointment

The baby was three weeks old my eldest not yet two I'd left them with my mother
to go to the appointment and the world hurt my eyes powerlines taut or did they sag
against white sheet suburban sky milk-blood nipples floating deadweight
outside real life daytime TV stretching the mother baby Bluetooth
as far as it would go to get help for the hole I was in apparently
very normal.

I sat down on a chair in a hallway to wait and there were closed doors
an accountant behind one the psychologist behind another business cards a clock
a transistor radio letting slip
the midday news.

I remember I was leaking everywhere and outside cars whooshed by

soft stabbing breast pump whooshes

I remember I went to tap the baby capsule with my foot a phantom limb
no baby thin air
and the whole shape of me convulsed and the chair leg made a rude scraping noise on the
polished wooden floor.

I remember at three minutes past the hour I started to feel anxious well more anxious
what was I supposed to do? Had I got the time wrong? Was I that useless? Should I go in?
Should I just leave? I was alone and there was no one to ask and I kept thinking
about the baby in her room crying hungry weight percentiles broken breasts
fatherless or worse not even aware I was gone her hopeless mother
cracked to blue.

I remember the thoughts collapsing in on each other disgraced cheerleaders
and how somehow despite its frightened brain my body stood up

leaky and brave like maybe it knew what to do after all lightly rapped its knuckles on the psychologist's door. I heard a voice on the other side so I entered.

Then it happens very fast.
I'm in the wrong scene. The psychologist and her client look at me in unison turn their heads to take in my wrongness. *Sorry* I offer reverse back into the hall at eight minutes past the client leaves and I am called into the room the blue-black pressure in my chest a whip a flood now and the psychologist this professional this woman the one to help me with the blue-black water the one who knows how to keep us both alive she holds me then with mother eyes

You can't do that, you know, just walk in. Please, don't do that again.

Zoom Chess

The Father teaches his daughter to play chess over Zoom.

The girl is scrubbed and ready for bed. Smells of soap. A winding baby hairline slick against skin, the drip, drip, beads of water from a posy of curls.

First, he teaches her how to castle. Says, 'you want to make this move at the start of the game, it's a one-off move, gets your king to safety early on.'

And his words are mellow, deep, a man's. They boom and melt and rumble around the room.

The girl cocoons her knees up into her sweatshirt, bounces her chin on bony, fleece peaks then tilts forward onto elbows. Her hand hovers and a white horse head is levered by a tiny wrist crane. The Two-Dollar Shop chess board chafes against carpet. A strip of Sellotape holds the board together down the middle.

'Would I be in danger…' she starts to ask but trails off. She makes her move anyway and then claps her hands quickly in succession, a scattergun gesture that says, *well, it's done now.*

And you know the feeling. It's a *fly by the seat of your pants, don't look back, what's done is done* kind of feeling.

The Father's face looks down out of the laptop which is tilted forward to meet the chequered slice of floor and the girl's hands.

'Can you move my knight from D6 to BF please?'

She obliges and clicks her tongue, 'Dad, what's more important–a bishop or a knight?'

'They're different but equal. It depends on your situation.'

And the girl cocks her head to consider her situation.

'I would recommend you move your pawn,' he advises. 'See how they're all still in a straight line?'

The girl seems unsure but moves the pawn forward. Its faux velvet foot makes a sweet and muffled thud.

The Father leans in and his face takes up the whole screen. He's so close you can see up his nose and his moustache bristles and pixilates. It's unflattering and intimate. And you watch him watching your daughter's nearly ten-year-old-hands as they move around the board and she yelps 'yes, no, yes, no' and there are words like 'threat' and 'it's ok'… 'what

are we trying to do?' and he lets her retract her moves and try again and then he narrates her forward three or four moves at a time.

'Check,' says the daughter and then a breath later, 'oh no. I think Dad has trapped me. Mum. I think Dad has got me in a trap!'

'You're ok. You can move,' he says to unbend her worry.

'Daddy, you know how queens can move in any direction–does that mean they can move like a knight, too?–Dad? Dad? Are you frozen?'

She loses him. The screen glitches and un-glitches.

'I'm here. I'm still here. So, your queen can only go in straight lines. Any direction in straight lines.'

'Uh, ok. Well, that's not really any direction, is it.'

'I suppose not,' he laughs. 'But that's a good move you made there. A really good move.'

'Mum, Mum–I made a good move!'

The Daughter grins with closed stretched lips, tries to hold the light in.

The Father leans back and smiles.

You tell her, gently, it will be time soon to wrap up the game, just loud enough for the Father to overhear.

But he needs more time because he doesn't want to beat her. She moves his pieces. Then hers. The slender, nearly ten-year-old hands, playing both sides, playing the game for herself and the man that's her father inside the screen.

She stops.

Rocks back and forth inside her sweatshirt inside a long, triangular silence.

After a while she says, 'actually. I really need to go to the toilet. Can we press pause on the game Daddy? You wait there.' And she pops her knees out of her sweatshirt and disappears leaving you alone with the Father.

The quiet in the room turns fluorescent and flickers. The only sound is the tiny tinkling of the girl peeing somewhere off-screen. The noise trickles down the hallway and into both your ears.

The Father waits. You wait. The cat ambles over and paws its way towards the game that is also waiting. Tries to brush itself up against the kings and queens and pawns.

Affectionate turns territorial turns destructive.

'Ahh, no Visitor,' the Father says to the cat from inside the laptop, from a hot place with red roads and a mango tree.

For a split second you think about how the cat is the colour of the chess game but all mixed up, brown and white chequers, black and white splotches. Chess is a tabby cat that has had its fur separated out into two teams.

Then as you rush in to scoop up the cat and save the game the Father sees you, so you say with your face hanging upside down, 'hello! Sorry about the cat!' and that's all. But you notice how the words fall out warm.

The girl returns and the game continues but it's getting late so you tell her again. 'Nearly bedtime, love.'

Then it comes.

'Check.'

'Check mate.'

You're still not sure if he will let her win. It's nice to have him making decisions for a change.

Outside the sky has grown dark. The sun has departed here for there.

'My tip for today,' says the Father, 'move your pawns out across the board. They're important. They protect your king and queen.'

The girl thinks.

'…but they're so little.'

'It's ok. You're learning. We'll keep practicing.'

And you can tell he enjoys how ordinary this sounds. A thing Dads who play with their kids in backyards after dinner might say.

'Yeah, and then we can play in real life when I come to your house.'

The Father looks at the girl with his computer eyes.

'This is real life,' he says.

'Yeah, but you know what I mean. Real life, when you can play with your real hands and we can sit on Grandma's sparkly Dubai couch.'

You kneel down, mostly off screen, but close enough to gently collect up the little plastic chess pieces and fold away the board along its Sellotaped seam.

The girl picks up the computer and pulls it into her lap. She wraps her arms around the Father's face, kisses the hard silver surfaces goodnight as his voice makes 'see you soons' and 'I love yous' from a smothered speaker.

And when she stands up the Father has gone and the screen says *You have left the meeting.*

Calling the softness

It's one of those mornings. I wake up and there's something under my skin, the house feels dirty on me. My mum would have said to me, back in the day, with an expression on her face like her insides are forcing her mouth into a tight line–*who got out the wrong side of the bed, then*?

My therapist might say there's something I'm minimising. The mouth like a line maybe. As I think about it now I urge my face to relax, to surrender its skeletal edges and bobby pin lips. The look, the feeling is the worst. A kind of gnawing. I think it comes from being frightened and angry at the same time.

Here's the thing. We're supposed to be going to church this morning. It's *food bank Sunday* and my girls have been given readings to do. I don't usually attend church. The girls go with my parents, to give me a break, and I'll do a yoga class or submerge myself in salty water or call an old friend in London for a nice, long chat.

They seem to like church, my girls. Even though there are no other kids, just a lot of old people who are happy to see them. They get to be in charge of the candle snuffer at the end of the service and watch as threads of smoke go berserk towards the heavens. Then there's morning tea laid out on a collapsible table in the vestry. Scones, slices, chocolate fingers and the girls dart fast as flies, run loops around the old people who talk to each other over trembling cups of tea.

Only, lately some other kids have started showing up at church. The girls tell me Tilly and Roland, my old yoga instructors' kids are there. And Georgie and Isla. 'You know, Isla, who always wins the cross country at school?'

Soon enough the girls enjoy having the other kids around. They learn to squirm and wriggle in the pews and ask questions about eating the body of Christ. And of course, they know the ropes, so they have important God jobs the other kids don't. Like candle snuffing and Bible readings. I don't tell them the new kids won't be there for long. That they're just stopping in for God's watery seal of approval on their promising foreheads and then they'll be off. Back to active relaxing on Sunday mornings. That their parents are all in a Facebook messenger group called *the Diocesan dip*.

God. Why am I so brittle this morning?

I'd been looking forward to this all week. A morning in God's house, one of his houses anyway, cheering on my girls with their readings, cheering on my dad who plays the church keyboard in organ mode and even then, manages to give the hymns a Bob Dylan lilt. All for a good cause. *Food bank Sunday*. Yes. I'd been looking forward to it. The sitting with other people, people you don't really know and didn't choose but who live in the same town as you, being a bit bored together, singing badly together, following along from the same photocopied page.

I'd even bought the girls' church shoes so they could stop wearing gumboots.

Rush. Rush. Rush. Snap. Snap. Snap. That's how it goes. It's normal, okay even, to get a bit cross with your kids when you're trying to get out the door. Most days the girls brush it off. They can sense when it's skin deep. That you'll all be laughing soon about how the cat left the bottom half of a rat on the welcome mat again. Just its haunches, the soles of two pink, rubbery feet and its pink, rubbery tail. *It's a rat bum purse, Mum*. And you look again, see the purse, spilling over with intestinal rat-lady essentials. At least you know its dead, and you have to laugh.

Other times, like today, the irritation has fangs. Comes from a place bone-deep, narrow, bobby-pin black. When I start to go there the girls sense it. My little girl fights back, she'll whine and shout, intentionally spit toothpaste on the bathroom floor.

And my big girl, my big girl, she goes quiet. Makes herself into a corner and watches me sideways.

'Shit,' I say. 'Shit. Shit. Shit.' The word shoots out incisor shaped. The *shhh* sound is the antithesis of the one you make to soothe a baby. Like its slicing off fingers.

The girls look at each other. They know this isn't the funny kind of swearing.

With no minutes left, the breakfast dishes in a dirty pile on the sink, and a promise to listen to a run through of the girls' Bible readings destined for breakage–I've remembered the rabbit.

'We've forgotten Precious,' I say and roll my eyes in the girls' direction. And they know from the mean horse-white-eyes and my tone, sharp as the end of that sawn-off bobby pin, that *we've forgotten* is really *you've forgotten*.

Precious is the neighbours' rabbit. We look after him when they go away.

Doting owner, fourteen-year-old Debbie writes out step by step instructions with cutesy bunny diagrams on a sheet of paper that she pops into a plastic sleeve. Feeding, brushing, poop-scraping, the kinds of cuddles and songs he likes–a list of things that might kill him. Over time it's become clear that Ruth, not Gracie, is the more committed bunny sitter. So, these days Debbie addresses the instructions directly to her like a birthday party invitation–waves her over the fence for a practical demonstration of the tasks, sweetens the deal with an ice block and bounce on the tramp.

'Ok you two. We *really* have to hurry now,' I plead and bark. 'I need you to be helpful, girls. I need some damn help!'

And there's some truth in this. I do need help, but not so much with the jobs, the dishes, the rabbit. And not from the girls. The help I need in this moment my girls can't give me. They can't get to the bone deep bit where the black is festering. They can't travel back in time to stand up for the little girl scared of a mother whose rage about a 'filthy house' has swallowed the girl up whole.

And the tragedy of it all–is that I know this.

I know what's going on. That the rage I feel has nothing to do with the here and now. That it's disproportionate as all fuck. Oozing out of cracks in a vessel too small, too little, too young to hold it.

I think it might be the second most pitiful place a mother can be. Where she wants so desperately to speak and behave differently with her children, to locate the foreign object inside her body and draw it out. And yet, even with everything she knows and all the ways she wants to do better, be different, in this moment...she can't.

Instead, she says, through gritted teeth–'Can one of you please head over and feed the rabbit, can't you see I'm trying to finish these bloody dishes!'

But Ruth has already gone, wants out of this house. Gracie just ignores me. Knifes Lego around the carpet like she's opening up the floor.

'Fine!' I yell at the small girl. 'If there's pocket money for looking after the rabbit *you* won't get any. I'll give it all to your sister. You never help!' And I yank off the silly tongue-coloured dishwashing gloves and throw them at the sink where they dangle around, useless hands.

I march the shape of myself that feels and looks like a mouth in a tight line, up our driveway and down the neighbour's driveway. I scramble along the fence line with its Bird-of-paradise gawking and pretty and become aware of the sound of someone breathing. The breaths are

shallow and tattered as if the person is very cold or trying not to cry. I stop and look around. Up ahead I see my daughter...I realise the person I hear breathing is me.

With her spindly arms Ruth has managed to pull away the large sheet of plywood that sits on top of the rabbit hutch pinned down by bricks and two black rubber tyres. She's wedged the heavy hutch door up with a stick, slid open the smaller inner door to the rabbit's daytime run and she's fiddling with a blanket on the ground, her small body bent over and inside the hutch like she might just fall in.

'What are you doing?' I say coming up behind her like a tree that's grown a menacing face. It's less a question than an accusation. What *she's* doing is obvious; what *I* am doing is less so. 'We were meant to be at church five minutes ago, Ruth. We don't have time for cuddles or faffing around today. Just feed him so we can get going, please.'

Ruth turns around, her face going grey inside my shadow.

'I'm not faffing around,' she says. 'I'm following Debbie's instructions. She told me I have to fold this blanket in half and lay it between the hutch and the run so that he doesn't cut himself open on the door. On the wire.' She looks at me. 'So *that* is what I'm doing.'

She turns back to the hutch and her eyes well up as she lays the blanket down. Lays it down as she's been asked to, lays it down just right, lays it down so the creature entrusted to her care will be safe.

Something rips in me then. Something about the scene, the rabbit, my daughter's defiance and care, the wet sheen over her eyeballs, a brimming that can't bring itself to brim over or admit to being tears.

My chest cracks and I stop.

I stop.

On the bank by the Bird-of-paradise, beside my daughter who is laying down a blanket for the neighbour's bunny, I stop myself.

And in the stopping I see her.

And I tell the little girl stuck in my gut who is scared of the bobby pin lips that I see her too.

Little by little the shape of me softens, expands, and I become a forty-three-year old mother again.

'Ok, Ruth,' I say. 'You're right.'

I reach over to steady the hutch door that is propped above her body.

'I'm sorry, love.' I say. I whisper it to her back.

We sit in the car outside St Peters Anglican Church. I apologise again to the rear vision mirror where Ruth and Gracie are contained. Quiet with bruised expressions on their faces. ‘I’m sorry about the shitty morning. For being scary. Shall we go in now girls, you ready?’

Just then the church bell tolls from a cream stucco tower because God is waiting.

‘I’ve still got the bad feeling,’ says Gracie and she pushes her foot into the back of my seat to show me.

‘Yeah. I know,’ I say leaning into her prodding toes, letting her feel me feel it.

A can of tomatoes and bag of couscous, our food bank donations, eye me up from the passenger seat. I wonder for a moment whether couscous is appropriate, practical, too posh to donate. I consider hanging on to the tomatoes, could really use those myself and feel instantly cheap. And then it hits me. I turn around and hand the girls an item each. ‘Put the bad feelings here,’ I say. ‘Let’s go give them to God.’

It's fucking random, but it’s genuine. Gracie cracks a reluctant smile and digs her fingers into the soft plastic sides of the couscous packet.

We open the car doors all the air rushes out and rejoins the world.

Inside the church Ruth’s eyes start to teem, chafe on air made dusty by Bibles fingered as dollar bills.

The minister, the pastor, the priest–whatever she is, her name is Kristine, rushes over when she sees us, robed and breezy and leans down as if to tell the girls a secret.

‘Ready for your readings girls?’ she smiles. A wide and reassuring rabbit of a smile. ‘Just remember to go slow. When I finish my lines–these ones,’ she points to the lines not in bold on the pieces of paper the girls are clutching, ‘take a breath, allow for a pause, count to three before you read your lines,’ and she points to the lines in bold that belong to the girls. The girls nod, they seem unphased, bored even, but I can tell they’re counting to three in their heads.

Ruth’s eyes thick with water now hose down her cheeks and she pushes small brutal fists into the spongy orbs till they go red and she blinks.

‘Are you ok?’ I ask, ‘are your eyes bothering you?’

‘They’re itchy,’ she replies, ‘but I’m ok. I can still read.’

I’ll admit. I feel bad. I wonder whether the water coming out of Ruth’s eyes is my fault, has been waiting all morning for a safe way to escape and, now in God’s house, is finding its release.

Right on time, as though tuned in to my guilt, Mum, who is sitting on the other side of Ruth leans across her and loud-whispers down the pew, 'Don't worry, this always happens to Ruth at church. I think it's the flowers. Or the dust. Some kind of allergy, it'll pass.'

I look around and sure enough myriad floral offerings, glorious and ordinary, splay out of vases and vessels on all sides. Except for two arrangements that perch on the back wall either side of a gold crucifix so glossy it seems liquified. They are fake. Look the same every Sunday. Plastic and conforming and immortal and dead.

A hunch-backed woman named Bess, from whose garden all the living (on account of their dying) flowers come, is threading the last few stems into a vase at the base of the pulpit, expertly arranging stalks, heads, petals, and leaves.

Bess has silver cropped hair that on a younger woman you'd call cool and androgynous but on Bess is just plain. She has thick glasses, a moustached upper lip, stockinged legs, and a good soapy heart. She also has a garden by the sea. Sometimes she invites the parishioners over for afternoon tea in the garden. Bess bakes in a kitchen that has resisted renovation or open living– reserving the right to remain its own room. A sacred space with four walls and cupboards and shelves enough to keep jars of pickles, jams, preserves to last through a winter.

You suppose this is how she earned her hunched back. A life bent over growing flowers. It fills you with an acute tenderness. And while it's plausible that it's simply the flowers or the Bibles making Ruth's eyes red and watery you can't help but wonder whether there's more to it–the flowers, Ruth's tears, Bess, her hunched back, the tender feeling–like it's all connected, like you're all implicated.

And then just as quickly you think 'for Christ's sake, Lucia, why must you make meaning out of everything, why must you always make meaning till you bleed?'

The internal reprimand brings me back to myself with a thud. To unease and worry and Ruth's teeming eyes.

'You know, you could always just get up there and tell everyone you have a touch of hay fever before you start your reading. People will understand.'

Ruth turns her clogged eyes on me, horrified.

'No,' she says. And that is that.

But the air between us has the stench of something said that can't be taken back. Because before now it hadn't occurred to Ruth that she should preface herself with a disclaimer or pre-empt the congregation's judgement or concern. And that her *own* mother would prescribe it?

The interaction catches like a fairy knot–microscopic, pesky and hard to un-do.

'I'm going to get some toilet paper,' Ruth says and shuffles away from me along the pew.

'Yes,' I think to myself like a corrected child. 'Something to dab the water from your eyes. That's a much better idea.'

All along the pews we wait for the service to begin.

I can't believe I spent so much of the morning in a panic, rushing to–not be late. I mean, it's not surprising really. It's a feature that runs in our family. Hypervigilant early-ness. What also runs in the family but hasn't seemed to catch up with my girls as of yet is what I call sideways crying–an excellent ability to cry openly at all manner of things. For a long time, I saw it as being very emotionally in touch. Crying at movies and TV shows, over episodes of Britain's Got Talent, commercials, the news–weeping for it all, weeping for the world. And yet, curiously, this wearing of hearts on sleeves comes with an equally exceptional inability to cry for our actual and own tragedies and hurts. Relationship breakdowns and triangles, betrayals, absent fathers, abandoned mothers. I am at my most rational and intellectual in therapy–it really is one of the more enlightening, stimulating hours in my week. But I can't bloody cry. For the life of me, I can't cry then. I have to wait for an episode of Britain's Got Talent so that the tears can come out sideways.

Ruth returns from the bathroom and sits down, a wad of toilet paper in one hand, her readings in the other. She is all set. I rest a hand on her knee, she gives me a smile and then in unison we raise our eyes to the heavens.

A large TV hangs in the upper right corner of the room. The screen will soon display the order of the service, gospel, prayers, hymns–all the words we will mouth along to but for now it has us beamed into a service elsewhere, one of those contemporary services where fathers and sons belt out evangelical songs of praise on electric guitars and the worshippers let loose. And well, shit. It's not what I signed up for today. I wanted dusty, kitsch, my dad on the organ, drab chords, dry communion crackers; proper church, not this 'God is cool' shit.

I do my best to ignore the TV and focus on Jesus instead. A stained-glass Jesus cradling a lamb while its mother looks up in reverence. The blues and reds of the glass where colour colludes with light produce a swallowing effect, as though I've been imbibed into a body and I'm taking a look around, the internal glow of organs, valves, and veins. I start to count black and white swirls, hundreds of glassy swirls, intricately etched to make the mother sheep's fleece. I am mid count when quite abruptly the TV in the corner cuts not to the order of service for the day, but to an advertisement for the management of erectile disfunction.

Shoulder to shoulder with Jesus, a bare buttocked man is trying to pee. I look around. No one seems to have noticed that there's an angel relieving himself in the rafters. But I am delighted. The word penis in God's house delights me. That no one is bothered delights me. In my mind I paint wings, large albatross wings, onto the man's shoulder blades. I switch off my phone. The service begins.

And the whole thing is a splendid anticlimax. The girls deliver their readings, nailing pace, delivery, enunciation. No one bats an eyelid at Ruth's red rims and snotty nose and pretty soon, as mum said it would, the water in her eyes resolves. The girls wedge their readings, folded, fingered, and inky, into the cracks of the pew and forget all about them. We watch our tomatoes and couscous paraded in a box with all the other donations to the front of the church and Gracie grabs my hand and grins because there they go; all our bad feelings stashed inside small acts of charity, to be metabolised by God into something good.

The sermon today is a Q+A with a woman who runs the food bank. I recognise her. A sort of aloof and ageless woman with buck teeth. I try to place her, and then it comes to me. Her daughter was on Gracie's soccer team for a few short weeks. The woman had come up to me at the first practice of the season, as I was settling Gracie in, pushing a stroller with a brood of kids trailing her and asked me to keep an eye on her girl, because she had other kids playing and she needed to spread herself around. I remember being struck by how easily she took up space, delegated the duty to me, a total stranger–and how easily I accepted even though I also had two kids playing on different pitches, even though I also needed to spread myself around. I remember feeling resentful. Like somehow, I had made myself small. A single mother with never enough of herself to go around so why bother. Put in her place by this woman with stacks of kids–and I presumed a husband somewhere sharing the load. And the woman's daughter kept racing off in all directions, demanding attention from me like I was her mother who never had enough eyes to watch.

When the food bank woman is asked *why* people use the food bank, she says it's usually because they're in urgent need or crisis and can't get through to welfare services. They need food now. They've been on hold listening to Lorde on repeat for eighty minutes and have chewed through all their phone credit. Their hunger or desperation or loneliness can't traverse the four or five weeks of paperwork, call backs or the gauntlet of accessing Ministry of Social Development services online. When the woman is asked *who* uses the food bank, she doesn't skip a beat, is blunt and emphatic: 'Mostly single mothers. And lonely old men.'

The air in the chapel hangs static then. The congregation wait politely for her to go on. For a longer list. But there isn't one. The bucktoothed woman is deadpan with the facts. She looks around the room, comfortable inside the silence. Her eyes settle on me, land with what I imagine is a resounding 'Amen.'

In the flicker of holy validation my resentment for the woman deflates and I let myself feel, just for a moment, the hardness of the here and now. Let myself believe that sometimes a day is hard just because it is. And sometimes tongue-coloured dishwashing gloves dangle like useless hands because that's what they are.

When the service finishes the parishioners gather outside the vestry on a drizzly lawn for morning tea. Mum makes her way over to me, suggests I leave the girls with her for a few hours, go for a walk, read a book.

I kneel down and empty my mug of milky tea into the grass.

Then I hug the girls and tell them what a great job they did, that I will see them later.

There, but for the grace of God, go I.

Back at home the house is noisy with the girls' absence. Grey noon light shows up nests of human hair in the carpet, fingerprints swarm like greasy bees over the fridge, cupboards, walls, a fine bolognaise mist coats the stove top. There are cat biscuits sprung like beads across a grubby kitchen floor, a mustard ring has set in around the base of the toilet. Whichever way I turn, I feel shabbier than before. But it's disorder and gloominess I know how to treat. It's almost pleasant in that respect.

I vacuum and scrub and vacuum and scrub until my knees and wrists ache and I'm able to curl up on the couch and love being inside our little house again.

With the distant sounds of other people's weekends drifting into now tidy, clean rooms I switch on my phone to message mum and check what the girls are up to. Immediately the phone pings three or four times. Messages from Debbie.

Hi Ruth, I just wanted to see how Precious is doing...

If it's not too much trouble, could you send me some pics?...

I miss him so much!...

The messages have come in, one by one, over the course of the morning while we've been at Church. It feels like an age ago that I was next door at the rabbit hutch scolding Ruth for holding us up. I picture Ruth's face. Debbie's neat list of instructions with diagrams. The blanket being laid down. With phone in hand and full of tenderness I head next door to get Debbie some photos.

But redemption is short lived, the tenderness with which I approach the rabbit hutch is quickly displaced. Something isn't right.

I hope he's being good for you?!...

Rubber tyres are flung hap hazard in the grass, the large sheet of ply that we'd so carefully put back hours earlier is half off and hanging at an angle, as though slid in haste, the top hutch door bent back on itself and open. My stomach drops, and panic thumps me from inside my ribs. I bend over the hutch, move straw and bedding, wipe my hands through wet pellets of rabbit poo, looking for Precious, for his velveteen ears, his anxious nose and small softness. I scramble around the sides of the hutch on my knees, calling the softness, over and over, searching for movement, sick with guilt.

How has this happened. What has happened? It must be my fault.

Please give him a cuddle from me, xoxo Debbie...

I call again and my voices wobbles. How am I going to tell her? She's going to blame Ruth. Something the size of murder bears down. And I sit there in the grass, by the orange-eyed Bird-of-paradise, the violated hutch and try to breathe. Those cold tattered breaths again. Those bobby pin breaths.

That's when I feel eyes on me.

I look up at the neighbours' house and see a figure in the window. It's hard to make out who through the grey glass full of reflected treetops. My thoughts clatter into a heap. I squint, lift a hand to my forehead to keep back the harsh and overbearing sky.

It's Debbie. Debbie is at the window holding the rabbit to her chest. And in the moment before relief washes through me I wonder how long she's been there. Watching me. Looking down on me. Judging me. A perfect mother with a baby in her arms.

Whiteware

Joseph

I give the letter to Mama Ruth in the morning. She's going and I'm going. It's hot with rain on the day we're thinking about going. And all the doing is about going. The rain is hiding, pressed into the hot, but it will come soon. I wrote the letter with a blue pen, our Betty she writes lists with the prices of the fruit, she let me use the pen. I give the letter to Mama Ruth in the morning. She paid me three months' worth of wages to leave with. I wrote the letter before I knew about the money. She gave me the money and a photo of us under the avocado tree. The photo makes us shiny. Me, Betty, the girls, Mama Ruth, all smiling for the photo. The photo turns us into something like a family. I'm the only man. Though we never chose each other as family, we do our jobs and smile. The photo cannot show that we don't share words.

I'm the only man here.

Tomorrow I'll be going back to my children, my wife, I'll have a new job, God willing.

Tomorrow Mama Ruth is going, too.

I've been the only man here since Papa Ruth left. The wet hot steams the clothes on the line. Mama Ruth, she gave me sheets and clothes to take with me when I go. I showed her a picture of my wife and sons on my phone. It seemed to make her happy. Tomorrow we will all be gone from here. But today I'm still the only man, and I'm working. I have the keys.

I give the letter to Mama Ruth in the morning. When she reads it her eyes narrow like sleep and she holds it her. She says *murakoze, murakoze, murakoze*. Her face creases, makes big shapes and lines and then she goes inside with the letter. Holds it to her chest.

I give the letter to Mama Ruth in the morning. In the afternoon I hear a horn outside the gate. I don't know this horn, its black diesel snort. Asking to be let in, one, two, three times now. I take the keys from the hiding place and go to the gate and the gate is heavy and red with the hot pressed in.

Mama Ruth, she's hurting. She's got different voices, one of them is too soft. Luckily the money keeps her strong and we do our jobs. I'm at the gate. I'm the only man around here since Papa Ruth left. I'm the gate.

Ruth

Betty is doing my hair. I sit on the ground between her thighs, and the tiles are cool, nice, and cool. I can feel Betty pause and she's listening. Outside the gate groans and soon the smell of the airport road with all its smog-breathing trucks fills up my nose. An engine wheezes and tyres crunch with the turn and turn and turn, back and forth on the spot, of a truck trying to press itself into our skinny driveway. Vehicles always get stuck in our driveway with no room to move or turn around. Mama knows the trick and the trick is not to come all the way down. You have to turn up towards the big red Rapunzel wall and then reverse in. The driver of this vehicle, whoever they are, doesn't know my mama's trick. Most of the time Mama will park our car out of the way, right up beside the Rapunzel wall, beneath the shade of black and purple bougainvillea. Leaves the thin and cobbled driveway clear so that us girls can play musical statues on it at night.

I hear Joseph now, talking with some men. His keys jingle-jangle the men's voices.

Betty gets up and goes to the door but the braids in my hair are so tight it feels like she left her fingers in my scalp.

Tomorrow we are going. Betty has bathed us and pressed lotion all into our bodies. Bathed us in the plastic tub that will always remind me of being small, while she sings Baby Beluga and pours water over our heads. Lately, I think she cries as she sings, and the tears magic our skin.

She goes outside now to see about the men's voices.

Tomorrow we will go on an aeroplane. We are leaving our house and most of everything in it. Mum's friend Deborah is going to live here when we go. The land lady agreed to it, and Mum is pleased because she doesn't have to sell all our furniture on Expats in Kigali. The strangers won't come and pick all over our things like birds. I'm happy that one day we might be able to come back here, to visit Deborah, our house with the flamingo-pink walls. And guess, what? I have my very own ladybug suitcase with wheels.

Betty comes inside, sways herself down the hall to go find Mum. The baby in her belly makes her go to side to side when she walks. Her hand pressed into the low of her back stops her from toppling over.

My head is throbbing in a pleasant way from all the little rubber brands holding my hair in place. Soon I'll be ready for going. And Nanny Betty she'll have her fingers on my scalp all the way to New Zealand. I squish Doggy-do into my cheek, and he smells like me, like Vaseline. I say 'it's ok Doggy Do, I'm taking Nanny Betty with us in my hair. I can feel

her pressed into the neat rows and squares my braids make. She's there. Even though we left her and went on a plane.'

Doggy-Do

Dear Ruth,

The dribble, dirt, tears made me real. Pressed the magic, the warm into me. Made me perpetually soft and smell like home wherever we went. Some say I'm a transitional object– that I help you make the emotional transition from dependence to independence. But we know better. Your mama she understands even if she can't hear my voice the way you do. That's ok. Grown-ups forget, forget how to hear.

I've slept with you every night since you were 9 months old. Known you close-up in the dim hour before sleep when you talked to me about the noise coming from the walls. The scrape of pincers. Or how you wished that Daddy didn't have to go, even though he seems better now, in the new house with your new Aunty, and he plays with you more, so you wonder why at night, under the covers, you're all mixed up with sad.

I knew just what to say to soothe the worry. Kept you safe when the Tail crept out of the wall, into the skirts of the mosquito net that fell around your bed. Said, 'let's wait Ruth, for sleep to come, for sleep to come or the Tail to leave.' And if you still couldn't sleep I helped you to be brave, told you how to make slow careful steps across the cool-tile floor, towards the door, across the hall and into the warm of your mama's bed.

The day the men come to take the fridge away, the day the rain comes, will be our last together.

Tomorrow, you will leave me on a plastic seat in the departure lounge of Kigali airport.

I want you to know it's ok. It wasn't your fault. You didn't lose me. You didn't lose Daddy either. It's just that sometimes a transition changes everything.

Betty

‘Mama Ruth. These men, they say Papa Ruth he wants the cooker, the washer. They’ve come to get it with this truck outside, they’re gonna take them away.’

Mama Ruth looks up at me with fire eyes.

‘No, Betty. No, they’re not.’

Mama Ruth

The letter is on my lap, hot from my hand.

I’m on the floor, sitting cross legged. In this room. In this house. I breathe in and the yolky curtains breathe too. We breathe shallow, there’s no breeze to speak of, just that static humidity before the rain comes. Still. We’re breathing. Me and the house.

You see. Even before he moved out. Before he confessed to there being someone else. Before I’d learned second hand that the wedding date had been set and the invitations were in circulation. Before he let me know in a WhatsApp message that she was expecting. That she was five months along and I did the maths so that my mind would know what my quagmire body had known all along. Before I pieced together the rest that around town was old news. Before all that, I’d known this house would need to hold us.

Perhaps that’s why I’d loved it from the beginning, obsessively, urgently, its red brick skin and concrete cool. Painted the inner walls flamingo pink, had the Ameki Paint Shop owner cut up the pink just right. With Betty’s help we filled rooms with clay pots, monstera, fiddle-stick and cacti sculptures, papyrus tables and chairs, kaleidoscope baskets– all the things we found or brought on the sides of roads, until we felt warm. Until we felt wanted.

Outside I hear men’s voices. Kinyarwanda spoken fast with pin prick holes and then fast again. Or perhaps it’s not fast at all. Perhaps fast is just how language spoken between native speakers sounds to foreign ears. Pressed together with no gaps, no doors, like music that’s not yours. Still, I can tell the words carry the rhythm of inquiry, some negotiation or commotion that will find me soon.

I take another shallow breath. Even now, the room smells like fresh paint.

Betty comes in, a hand on her belly, looks at me with the letter in my lap.

Then she looks at the near empty shelves, the receipts I found in his things.

I know she knows and her knowing is a terrible comfort.

The receipts are for a hotel I'd never heard of. Handwritten details, barely legible, from one of those generic receipt books where you fill in the blanks and rip the docket out along perforated lines. A tiny, paper pile of proof.

Betty tells me the men are here for the cooker, the fridge, the washer. That Papa Ruth has sent them.

I picture the men, these strangers with the voices coming inside our house and removing the whiteware while we watch. Unplugging it all. Fridge lights turning black, dead with no hum. The barrel of the washing machine hollow and slack. The cooker gasping for gas. Click–Click–Click. I see the men, their hot wet bodies, heaving it all away. I see the outlines the appliances leave on the floor. Homicidal shapes.

Besides. Betty and me, we promised to make Ruth and Grace pizza for their last meal.

I put my hand on Joseph's letter then, as if to draw strength from the gentle, cursive lines, the grace of his hand, the acknowledgment that for a time, he was our watchman, our employed protector, our only protector, and that there is much to be grateful to God for, even as the terms of his protection come to an end.

No. These men must go.

I phone their father for the first time in weeks and my rage comes out in neat steel lines. I say, 'you need to let us leave. Let us leave with some dignity for Christ's sake. After everything. Let us leave before you take the house apart.'

Ruth

Joseph, Betty, the men with the dirty truck. They stop talking real fast when mama goes to the door. I can see them through the doorway, they are playing musical statues and this is the bit where my mum turns around and they all freeze.

They hang there in the hot air, twist their necks to stare.

The voice comes from the place in Mama's belly where she grew me. I haven't heard Mama's voice speak this way before but I know that's where it comes from. From a place so deep and old it speaks with every voice and bone that ever was.

The men don't want to go away, because if they go without the fridge, they might not get their money.

But when they hear my Mama's voice, they grow unsure.

She's there with her arm lifted, pointing at the gate, and her voice is loud and round as a drum. She stays like that. Pointing. The arm is the stillest, toughest thing I've ever seen.

Me, I'm not scared. I'm not even surprised. These men don't know my mama. How last week when we were at Daddy's and she was here alone she met a scorpion in the hallway. Nearly stood on it, too. Its tail curled up, a deadly bracelet–the sting aimed right at her. She told us how she had to chase it out with a broom, away from our bedroom and out of the house so there was no chance it could get us while we were sleeping.

I think about the scorpion as I watch Mama in the doorway. Her arm pointing towards the gate tough as stone, sting raised, the voice pouring out of her belly, filling up the sky with rain and the scorpion scuttling away, away from our house.

Joseph

The men with the truck they won't leave. Our Betty, she tells them they have to go and so they phone Papa Ruth. They think he's the boss and will tell the women what to do.

The gate's still open. And all the words with the hot pressed in escape out onto the road. But I can't shut the gate, even though the words are not for passers-by to hear.

The men, they're mixed up and frustrated. Worried their money won't come if they don't put the heavy white things in their truck and take them to the boss's new house. And they have all day. Patient at being impatient as men can be. They don't want to listen to our Betty. Or any woman. But when they phone Papa Ruth there's nothing he can do, he's just a small voice inside a plastic phone and this isn't his house anymore.

I know the confusion; this isn't how it's meant to be. I'm the only man here since Papa Ruth left. Betty holds the men at the door and they pace in the wet hot and I keep my eyes on the men, the men, and the gate. But still, they won't leave.

Now Mama Ruth is here, standing in the doorway of the house. Between the men on the outside and her girls on the inside. In one hand she's got the letter I gave her. She lifts the other hand up, points at the gate. And then she speaks. I've never heard this voice before. It sounds like its coming from the ground. She's talking Muzungu but we all know what the word *leave* means because of how it rolls out a heavy snake, how it brings the rain.

The men get in the truck. They tell me they will come back tomorrow when the crazy lady has gone.

I swing the gate closed behind them, poke iron spokes into holes in red dirt, teeth rooted in gums. When I look back Mama Ruth has gone inside, the doorway is black and empty and open.

Betty

'Ruthie, come here. Let me finish your hair,' I say. The girl and her little sister have gone out onto the porch to watch the rain. The rain turns them into playful baby goats, they climb up onto the windows, climb the iron grilles that hold us in, hanging off them, shouting out to the rain. They tell me how they're going to miss not having a house with monkey bars on the windows when they leave this place. I didn't know what monkey bars were till I knew my Ruth and Grace. They told me in New Zealand there are monkey bars at school just for the children to play on, not on the windows to keep people out.

The rain slithers everywhere, the ground is so hard it can't get in. Ruthie comes back inside, sits between my knees. Her hair is almost done. I'm pleased with the neat lines, like the whole back of her head is smiling, smiling as she leaves.

My belly with the baby in it pushes gently into Ruth's small back. Holds the sadness firm between us, so that it won't fall and break.

Ruth and Grace are going away. I must not worry them with my tears. I know they have to go.

It's what I told Mama Ruth the day she got her hand caught in the car door. Slammed it real hard. And she cried. Cried for the first time since Papa Ruth left and made a baby with another woman. I let her rest on me for a moment, put my arms around her real thick, a house for the tears, told her not to let the girls see her cry.

She's small and she's Muzungu but her bones are strong as monkey bars.

Now I can feel this girl between my legs is getting restless.

Mama Ruth comes over and sits on the floor. She takes Ruth's hand, says, 'you Ok, love? I didn't mean to scare you.'

But there's no fear in Ruth. She's got that Doggy-do in one hand, her mama's hand in the other and from the place where she sits pressed in between my belly and thighs, as I'm

braiding in the last sun licked ends of her hair, she asks ‘why did Daddy send those men here, mum?’

Mama Ruth thinks for a moment.

‘They came to get a few things that Daddy wants for his new house. But they came on the wrong day. Today we’re still here. We’re having Pizza tonight, one last game of musical statues. Then tomorrow we leave. That’s the plan, right Ruth?’

I pat Ruth’s head then, to soothe the tight and let her know I’m done.

The Tail

I know the rain is coming. I’ve known for days, been watching the house for days from a gap between the clay pots at the end of the porch, waiting for a chance to get back to the cool, dry, dark inside. Back to the wall between the room where Papa Ruth used to sleep and the room where the children sleep. The one girl Ruth, she’s got a Dog with a human voice. And the voice would say, ‘I hear you Tail. I know you’re there. Your black claws, your mean tail, I hear you in the wall.’

The day’s been sizzling with the hot for long enough. Days pressed hot with the rain that’s coming, coming, and no one can stop it from coming. I’ve got to get back to my nest in the wall. My sweet spot till Mama Ruth chased me out. Or the rain is going to take me with it. Wash me away, with my young in my gut, down, down, down the red river where the moto taxi’s go, the rain won’t stop till I’m nothing but little black stones.

All the coming and going.
I watch and wait.

Papa Ruth was the first to leave.
Soon Mama Ruth and the girls will go.
Then the Gate he will leave, too.
All the doing is about going.

On the inside I saw how Mama Ruth lies on the floor in the room where he used to sleep. Lies like she's been stung. Like she has the venom in her. Breathing smoke, the place in her neck, where her heart is, jumps out too fast.

On the inside I heard the girl Ruth talk to the Dog, cry with the Dog. And the Dog with the voice talks back. The Dog looks after the girl and the girl looks after the Dog.

And today outside, the strangers come. The rain comes.
The rain is here, I haven't got long. The ground fills up with water.

Watch. Wait. Watch. Wait.
Some slit-eyed gecko inside the house, vibrates through the walls, stirs my hunger.

And before the night is over and I am almost washed away, a small glass sun in the house bulbs up. Mama Ruth comes outside. Opens up the car creature's doors. The Gate he helps her lift black boxes, heavy as rocks, into the car. Then the children appear, dragging their own black boxes, they get in too. The Dog hangs on to Ruth by its ear. Nanny Betty she's there with the egg in her belly, and rain falls out of her eyes as she kisses the girls goodbye. The weight of the rain so loud now there's nothing else to hear. Not the engine of the car as it pulls away, or the clang of the gate as it closes.

I take my chance; make a run for the inside where it is dry and dark and empty.
Where everything is still.

Weet-Bix

On the evening the Mother serves Weet-Bix for dinner the March sun lays pale and anaemic in the sky. It strains to make proper shadows with edges, dissolves carpet and walls in hues of sallow, departs like a person trying to slip away from a meeting unnoticed.

The Mother with caffeine-creased skin, still hopeful, even at this later-than-usual hour of the day leans into the pending night-shift darkness. Flicks light switches with painted fingernails. Magics a kitchen into bright existence.

Tip number 9 for a cost-of-living crisis, or so says drive-time radio, is to shop what you already have in the pantry so she surveys the empty cupboard that is not a pantry and waits to see what will happen next.

Canned chickpeas and tomatoes wink 5-star health ratings and a bag of bored potatoes mug her with a recollection of a before-children London flat where Kerry, the then more practical and stable housemate, is whipping up post-hangover redemptive spud curry with yogurt and mango chutney.

The mother takes this as a sign from the Potato Gods. She lays out the means for her experiment in reverse psychology on a cold Formica bench top. She googles *Chickpea Curry*, adds *easy* to the search bar, and from the maze of recipes selects one, not based on looks, but because it speaks simply, in the language of spoons and cups.

Outside the world has gone black. The children are thrilled with the extra screen time.

The mother turns on the radio for adult company, builds a pyramid out of spices in every shade of red and gold, sets a timer for the simmering rice and estimates dinner will be–better late than never. Moths, willing to beat at the kitchen window for eternity watch her trip back and forth to the stove in fizzing whiteness. Watch her probe chunks of potato for signs of softness, gentleness, only to come up against marble hearts that won't be boiled away. All while the chickpeas turn to mush, disintegrating beige eyes that stare, don't see. The digital oven clock glows loudly. Like achy bones. She goes to meet the lip of a wooden spoon for a kiss, to sample a taste, and hostile cayenne fire bites back.

She pauses then. Let's out an existential-looking sigh. The shirt she wears–the green one with the small white daisies on it that she loves because it makes her feel 'writerly' in a Sally Rooney kind of way even though it is so synthetic it clings to her bra strap like a skink to a wall–balloons outwards with the force of the sigh.

The light bulb screams, and she turns off the hob. Hunger has morphed into something else. She phones her own mother to ask where she's gone wrong, but her voice comes out in that constricted way like it's her mother's fault. She texts through photos of the potatoes, their moles and warts, the wrong variety maybe? the rust-coloured stew, and her mother texts back *potatoes look fine, curry looks yummy. What a shame*.

Then the hollow, intestinal weight she's been holding in, bubbles out of her eyes, the tears swell her body like warped MDF. She double bags the still steaming curry into neon food waste while her daughters eat white rice with grated cheese and have Weet-Bix for dessert.

When she apologises the youngest one gets up from the table, walks over to where she stands in the lonely spotlight of a kitchen scene and wraps her arms around the Mother's real and hungry legs.

Later, after dishes are done and the kitchen has been put into dark, the Mother will make a cup of tea, gather up her girls in her arms and say, 'wanna play a game of truth and dare before bed?' And they will go to bed full and delighted.

How did I get here?

The first time I asked myself the question, properly, was soon after we returned to Rwanda to a house with their father in it and where my big girl, only three, wet the bed and I yanked the sweet, wet knickers from her bottom and the sheets from the mattress, and my girl, she cowered, and her father came in from another room where he slept without me but not always alone, took her away, cast gentle disgusted eyes around the walls so he wouldn't have to see me, a mess of child bones, left me again, curtains diluting morning sun, far from home, and the tiled floor was cold and I asked myself the question in that way you ask when you truly, desperately want to know the answer, because for the first time you truly, desperately realise you might just have no idea, and you arrive at the question, prodigal daughter, like it's been waiting for you, or following you, for a lifetime, which it has been, only you can't unsee it anymore because it's in your skin, and you lie awake at night with your face on fire, go to the bathroom, splash crawling cheeks, look for yourself in the mirror and it's just your normal face, no flames, no rash, no redness even, and you realise that to go on living you have to answer the question, or you'll burn forever and no one will know, because they can't see you, that you are burning, not ok, not thriving, *oh so progressive with an important career, making a difference, girl boss*, and when they get close, they'll scorch themselves on you, especially the kids, only they'll think it's them, and then they'll start burning too, picking at skin, making new wounds of old scabs, so you have to ask, have to want to know, before the rupture spreads and you break, blacken and disappear. A pile of dust crying to be held from behind a closed door.

Since then, after that first time, whenever the question comes up it's an echo, a ripple, a twinge but then I remember that I know how I got here, and my skin and hair are not on fire anymore.

Holy Grail

A lot can happen when you rest. On Saturday afternoon I was reading on my bed. I'd got my period that morning and there was a small ocean pressed up into my lower back and even though it was small, it was deep–the weight of tentacled water reaching through my tail bone for the moon.

Now, I know I'm lucky because my periods have never been particularly painful. I have one day at the start, like today, where sea monsters swim in me and then I bleed the inky thickness out and if anything, it's a release. My breasts soften again, the bloat of my belly turns elastic and the blue-black recedes from my bones and other cavernous spaces. I'm like a happy storm water drain.

The worst bit for me is always just before my period arrives. My bra cuts in. My edges go brittle. I'm on a plane that's going down, bracing for impact. I feel hard done by, ugly, irrationally alone. Sometimes I weep–which always helps–but can be unsettling for others.

So here I am in a slow crush throb on my bed with the winter sun streaming in, lemony clean. It's quiet as anything, just the sounds of the neighbours active relaxing. Hosing down the boat. Mowing the lawns. My little girl comes into the room still wearing her soccer uniform, stands by the bed in the honest lemony light with a book in her hand. She climbs in beside me and everything hums. There we are. Two bodies resting. Resting and reading, ocean containers.

After a while she looks over, asks me what page I'm up to.

'Page fifty,' I say, 'I've just started really.'

'I'm up to page two hundred and eight,' she says and then to reassure me, 'but I started mine ages ago.'

I don't know about you, but I don't think there's anything quite as lovely, as restful, as having someone lying next to you reading. Especially when that someone is a person you grew inside you. But you can't know how lovely that is until you stop labelling yourself untalented at lying down or calling yourself an active relaxer.

I watch her small hands holding the book open to the heavens, to the warm lemony light like a shameless prayer. Her body goes into surrender. Slumps and ticks as it wants to. After a while she senses me watching her and says, 'what sound is *Phh*? because *thh* is *thh*' and she demonstrates with the shape of her tongue between her teeth and it reminds me of an

orca whale that gently holds a man's head in its jaws to entertain crowds, 'and *fff* is *fff* which is the same as *Phhh*.'

We both try it then. My wonky, tainted teeth and hers all bright white with gaps, lightly pressed against lower lips just enough to shunt the wind through.

'Yeah,' I say, 'they both sound like an F.'

Then we do it again, and the tiny gusts we make with our mouths sound like we're resuscitating fairies.

When soon our lips go numb, she goes back to her book. I stop watching her read and read her body instead. I take in the sturdy brown seven-year-old legs. They stick out from her soccer shorts thrown down but neatly crossed at the ankles. The skin is terracotta clay; ashy at the knees from being covered up through winter without the African heat to cajole the daily pressing in of Vaseline. There are bruises and pock marks from old scrapes and bites. The sun has caught on a film of fine hairs–static, proud, and shot through with light.

Now. I don't mean to get sappy, but these legs, in this moment, these legs are everything that is good. Everything worth anything. My girl's sturdy seven-year-old legs with downy hairs intact and lit up are holier than all the Gods of all religions.

I reach over and run my hand down the shin. Stroke the fuzzy halo soft as grass. I wonder how long till she wants to get rid of those hairs. The thought and the feel of the leg flood my guts. Honey veins. Drink it in. An ode to iridescent soccer balls and doing cartwheels in bike shorts. These legs. This girl. Over and over, my hand down the leg. Rub it in. Urge and urging her with my hands to keep loving this real, beating, sturdy body.

Ask my own for forgiveness.

She looks over at me and her forehead furrows like puckered water. Frowning. Thinking. All those feminist face shapes women fought to wear then botoxed away.

I hold her with my eyes. Soothe her concern with the concern in my own face, say *It's ok. We're listening to our bodies. I think they're talking.*

Ten

Outside the rain sets in. Drains gush, awnings drip and I commit to one raindrop, trail it with my eyes till it meets the ground. We fly to Rwanda on Friday to see your dad.

It's been an uncomfortable week. I've been making myself sick about all the wrong things. Thirty-two hours by aeroplane, not our first rodeo. Four weeks where you will be with him, not me. How many plummeting raindrops is that?

And you turn ten on Monday. Double digits. We did an advance celebration with your family last week–Nana, Poppa, aunties, and uncles, your cousins, gathered around a long timber table in the garden of a café with your face beaming sunshine into our eyes. Woohoo, went your aunties and me, laughed about what you'll be doing ten years from now, a glass of wine maybe, and I laughed but this foreboding in my bones has been dogging me for days. Joints can't hold the weight. The pinprick skies they must come down.

It's easy to get confused about what you feel. It's real easy to think you're feeling when you're just thinking about feeling. That's not feeling at all. The body will always fight back. And so, I get pretty anxious about the packing, the logistics, buying gifts for everyone, your stepmother–is that what she is?–my brain is wet sand and my ribs are a clothes-line. There's this one peg stuck, right where my sternum is. That's the worry, that's the fear holding on –rusty and worn out these days from tears and rain and being felt and maybe soon it will rust away for good but for now it holds on, has work to do.

Funny, how, if you watch a raindrop for long enough it looks like it's falling upwards.

I've been telling myself all week how wonderful, how special it is you're turning ten. I've tried to dwell on it real hard like I'm revising for an exam. *You are amazing.* Which you are. *I'm a good mum.* Which I am.

This morning, after you left for school I went and stood in the bedroom you share with your sister and stared out the window at the cutty-grass, my limbs sodden with the weight of this love.

It's not wonderful at all, sometimes.

Ten years of carrying you on my own. Not only your body to grow and care for but the weight of learning you, knowing you. It was there the moment you were born and in my arms. In the downy birthmark on the back of your knee. Changed the way the air worked when I breathed. Everything smaller, everything bigger. Without your dad around, was the

love heavier? Your dad he has his own weight to bear. His is the colour of absence. Mine, what colour is mine?

At the hour you left my body, my body knew. Knew that we would always be joined. Knew the weight of what was to come. That I would change in ways my mind could never have known before you were there. That I would discard skins and pluck out rusty pegs learning how to hold you, so that you might unfold gently, an inevitable wave, an elastic petal.

This morning, I climbed into the top bunk, your bed, to try and figure out the colour of raindrops, of a person unfolding.

There's a sign you made blue-tacked to the top rail that states in your best drippy house of horrors handwriting:

Knock before Talking!! *Do not enter top bunk. This is Ruth's private space!*

See, there you go. Unfolding.

Please knock on the wood before you speak.

I knock on wood; don't want to trespass.

If no answer, I am not here or I do not want to talk to you, in that case, please leave! No one may enter the top bunk without permission. If your name is Grace you are banned for life!

And soon I hear the sound of your voice etched into my ribs, a heartbeat in my armpit. I hear it smoky and sweet as it was when you were two years old and talked to me through a bar of soap, held it to your ear like it was a phone.

There's this trace of you inside my brain, cells curdled with memories and what this means of course is we all die a little when our mothers go.

The sheets on your bed smell fresh as white paper. We washed them before the rain came. Let them flap all day in a mild breeze so they'd be lovely to come home to.

My own mother's love, her mother's love, and now your mother's love, knotted together in sundrenched sheets.

Remember how you told me once that you wished you could walk on the ceiling? I was always banging on about how great our high ceilings were, a redeeming feature of our otherwise cramped and cosy rental home so you imagined your way up there. What use were they otherwise?

Soon you told stories about an upside-down world with pet tigers and monkeys, indoor swimming pools and slides instead of furniture, watched over by a chimera mother who roamed the rooftop plains.

Up in the ceiling you even had your own room–not just your own drawer.

Sometimes, when I put my head in at night to check on you and your sister, as often I do, I find you up there. Two little spirits with a toy tea set playing at a dream between the white wooden beams.

Most people look forward to going overseas, to travel and adventure. I used to be like that. All week I tried to get excited about the trip, chastised myself for coming up short, just couldn't stop thinking about being outnumbered by suitcases and the bit before we land in Kigali where I take my earring out and use it to switch over sim cards, trying not to lose any of the small parts between airport seats, so that when we land, I'm reachable.

But this is the thing about pretending you're excited when your gut is a riptide pulling you the other way. The exhaustion sets in and all you can do is drift, swim sideways, look for something to hold onto.

Something or someone like Jean. A friend who knows you the way a sandy bay knows the sea's watery hem and you ebb and flow, but you always fit. Last night when my quicksand bones were getting unbearable I heard from Jean. She sent me a text message*, fancy a call?*

I told her about the rusty peg in my chest. About how a first-born daughter turning ten was supposed to feel wonderful. How I took you and your sister to buy gifts for your father, half-sisters, grandparents–how you insisted on buying your father and stepmother–is that what she is?– a print from a woman who was selling her art from a hole in wall. The woman had painted our mountain, *Karioi by the sea*–a scene pieced together out of bright abstract shapes inside black outlines. The broken shapes added up to make the place you recognised as home. You thought it would be nice for your landlocked Rwandan family to have a painting of the sea on the wall in their house. The place where you live most of the time. I admitted to Jean that I was relieved you hadn't chosen his wife her own gift, it was somehow easier that you chose a general one. But it was also not lost on me the ease with which you have turned them into one.

Then I told Jean about how I was secretly pleased when I saw that the painted mountain's silhouette had been accurately captured; a sleeping maiden, the profile of her face, nose, lips–her hair streaming back, tendrils of black bush. I imagined you telling your father the story of the maiden Karioi, this mighty woman, this jilted lover, who hurled her philandering man out to sea. How you can still see him now, if you look out from the gorge. A lonely speck of rock, drowning over and over and over again, inside a rising tide.

And then the childishness turned to hurt. Hurt and the rub of the rusty peg at the prospect of our upcoming trip. I confessed to Jean that with every fibre of me I just wanted to stay home. At the foot of this mountain. That I didn't want to go, didn't want to relive the long-haul journeys with toddlers and suitcases containing our lives, back and forth and in between.

You were ten months old when I took you back. I have a picture of you in a cream stretch and grow with fluoro stripes, sitting up in the bassinet that they clip onto the aeroplane wall. We were on our way to be with your dad, to return to a life that was full of cracks. Even then, you were–hard to describe. All knowing. So full of trust. Calm and bright eyed like a lake. You made me your chimera mother; designed by God to have faith I could do the job.

The first leg of the journey you slept, but I did not. We had to spend a night in a transit hotel in Seoul. At the airport the porter would only take us so far. We came to a painted line on the shiny laminate floor and he refused to take us any further. Kept pointing at the line painted on the floor. I had to leave you there, alone in your pram, as I pushed, with all my chimera strength, our bags on a trolley across the arrivals hall to a storage locker. I parked the trolley and ran back for you, the fifty feet, with tears in my eyes.

Jean listened. She reassured me it wasn't all wonderful. That the rusty peg was no figment of my imagination. That when her own son, first born, turned ten all she could do was take herself to St Pauls for Evensong to be alone with angels and the sacredness of it all.

Sacred is different to wonderful. Sometimes it's wonderful. Sometimes it's hard.

And sometimes raindrops will pour the colour of everything. The colour of you meeting your Dad for the first time in Auckland airport when you were three months old. I sat with you on the plastic seat waiting for him to appear through those doors, for the doors to deliver you a father and they did but it was only when we got to the carpark that I handed you over. That he held you for the first time.

I turn my head sideways into your pillow. Breathe in the cotton sun, your skin, your hair. The achy delight, the endless wonder. I feel the damp from the tears I've made recounting you, telling you stories of you, of us. Stories inside stories, that's what we are.

And outside the rain comes down. Falling and falling, falling upwards.

Today

I wake up at half past five in the morning from a sad dream. Luckily the dream is sad for someone else, not me. In the dream my friend walks through a room that is both a church and a café and she's in tears which is something she would never do in real life–cry in a church or a café. In the dream she has cut her hair short. I tell myself I don't know why she's crying, but I secretly wonder whether the tears are to do with the haircut. Then I wonder in my dream if am projecting onto my friend. The thing about the hair. And can you even project in a dream–or do you need a therapist for that? Anyway. I'm fairly sure my friend's tears can't really be about her hair. My friend is very pretty in real life and surely that's what matters. In real life, maybe she's a little sad. Who isn't?

The dream wakes me up fifteen minutes before my alarm goes off. I notice my left eye won't open, is gluey around the rims. And then I remember the dream and worry I've been mean to my friend. The feeling makes a dirty mauve mess of my belly. Not so lucky after all.

Lately I've been trying to start my days with a walk. Before my daughters wake up. Before the sun rises. Set the tone for the day. I read about it somewhere. Begin your day with an achievement. I wasn't sure what sort of achievement to choose. Of all the things to use that first precious hour for. In the end putting one foot in front of the other seemed the least controversial. The closest thing to sleep.

I started walking a month ago as a Matariki resolution. It is so dark when I leave the house all I see are layers of black and bits of streetlight snagged in bodies of water–in puddles, the sea, in the watery birthmarks of a rugby field, on the many wet tongues of Agapanthus bushes. I've grown to quite like the way my eyes have to adjust to darkness as a way into the day. Other walkers will be out with their tiny, powerful headtorches, in goose down jackets that swish like sleeping bags, more serious and prepared than me. Or just more thoughtful perhaps. Because it can give you quite a fright when a body looms out of black layers from nowhere. Especially when it it's a big man jogging.

But today I wake up and after I notice the dirty mauve feeling and peel open my left gluey eye, I remember it's Tuesday. I can't walk on Tuesdays because on Tuesdays I have a work call at six AM. I get up and make coffee instead.

The house is freezing. I open my laptop and it glows like a baby UFO. I try to get a fire going but I've run out of newspaper. All those hand-me-down newspapers with the crosswords done, donated by a woman from my mother's church who has been living alone

since her husband passed away, gone already? I start to scrounge around for something else to burn. And maybe it's the dream, or the cold, or the running late before the sun has even cracked navy blue sky but as I'm rifling through the recycling to find a way to keep us warm resentment sets in like a hangnail. I collect the cardboard cylinders from toilet rolls, junk mail, four square receipts. Then I come across a stack of paper that my youngest daughter has biffed. The discarded pages of a comic she's made about a teacher called Frick n Fro who overdoses on cabbage–cause of death, too many vegetables is what the doctor says. I read the entire thing even while I'm running late, then try not to feel guilty when I have to scrunch Frick n Fro into little pulpy fists and set her alight in the wood burner.

The meeting doesn't go great. Doesn't go badly exactly but I've mucked up some calendar invites, disappeared them somehow from everyone's diaries. Fortunately, the error has been caught by a scrupulous colleague in another time zone where she's warm and awake and it's still yesterday so can be fixed before nobody shows up. All's well that ends well. But it still feels too early to be getting things wrong.

Of course, I know it's not their fault yet there's nothing much I can do about it when the purple hangnail makes me cross with my girls at breakfast. Makes me snap and bark orders as I rush to pack lunches. Brush your teeth. Make your beds. Pineapple your hair. I remind Gracie it's her turn to sort the rubbish and recycling and when she asks for help to bring the bins up from under the house because she's scared of cockroaches I huff in a dramatic way and tell her, 'No. There's nothing to be scared of. Get over it. You can do it on your own.'

And the crazy thing is, here I am, mean and pesky as hell and my girls still manage to laugh their way through it, play as they go, resist my edges. It's as if they know how badly I want to be reasonable, to take a breath and begin again, tell them 'it's not you it's me, it's this raggedy hangnail, so pervasively catchy and sore' but –I just can't.

With my next work call in thirty minutes all I can do is keep rushing.

I'm in my bedroom now drawing on the ends of my eyebrows, trying to pick out a shirt. I think about whether to apply that blue eyeliner again today. A friend of mine wears electric blue eye liner to match her electric blue nails, and I read somewhere that blue eyeliner brings out dark, brown, and hazel eyes. At any rate, the blue eyeliner looks amazing on my colleague who is Nigerian with dark eyes and wrinkle-free skin and I'm not sure I can achieve anywhere near the effect. I am now both rushing *and* wasting time. The girls have started to kick a football around in the lounge. I can tell they're trying to kick it gently, but still. The ball thuds into furniture and every now and then meets the iron grill of the fireplace

and the clanging is such an affront to my bones that I explode at the bedroom wall like I hate its guts, 'Take that bloody ball outside!'

'Ok, mum,' come their sweet, muffled voices back to me through wall and the house outside my skin goes quiet.

Eyeliner in hand, I look for myself in the mirror but all I can see is a blob, a blur. Going nowhere fast, like a squashed mosquito. It's so silly, I think, but it's like my eyes are trying to cry.

Now, this isn't really where this little story was supposed to end. When I set out to write this story I wanted to tell the story of a whole day. A day that was strange and hard in small and big ways. A day that started with a dirty mauve kind of feeling and ended with a surprising and simple revelation. But it was such a slog just to get to breakfast, just to get to the bit where the girls take the soccer ball outside and I try to put my eyebrows on straight that I wondered whether it might be best to end it there. With my eyes wanting to cry and me trying not to. I doubted the story was turning out how I imagined it would. I started to feel that continuing was silly and pointless. I have to warn you, it's not like anything much happens in the story because the truth is often, not much happens in a day. We all like to pretend that we're living each day as though it's our last but often our days have other ideas. What's more is I thought this was going to be a very short story. A series of 'vivid fragments' is what I envisaged. And well, that's not how it's turning out. Which in a funny way is very in keeping with the moral of the story. I mean, what do I know? The story tells me, not the other way round.

It always amuses me, well, sometimes it amuses me and other days it makes me mad as hell, when the supposed and self-proclaimed common-sense types like to suggest that if the rest of us just pulled our socks up, took responsibility, abandoned our petty feelings and toxic relationships, if we would just quit the magical thinking and stop expecting the universe to solve our problems or the world to apologise for our hurt then we'd be ok. Now don't get me wrong, as I've grown older, I really have much more time for a lick of social conservatism. I've learned the hard way how little the brand of feminism I grew up with– the have sex, make money, and work like a man kind–cares about me now that I'm a mother. I've also learned (too late?) that perhaps the most radical of feminist acts might be to get yourself a supportive spouse. BUT–what these types get wrong, and I mean this in a science-y sort of way, is this idea that any of us have the luck of free will, that we at any moment can choose something new or do something different than that which is laid down in our bones. They will stick to their guns on this. All in the face of that time you auditioned as an eight year old for

Les Misérables and your voice wobbled through the entire audition and you just carried on, even as you sputtered the tune of a broken sparrow, held in tears and humiliation, sucked it up and, along with everyone else, your mother and father pretended it never happened so that from then on you could never sing or speak in public again without your voice disowning you– cracking and popping like a tiny animal blackened by spitfire.

The world won't let you have that tragedy.

Not the tragedy of the failed audition. The failed audition is neither here nor there. The failed audition will be the thing to make one person and break the next. The tragedy for a child is never simply what happened, but usually what didn't. Who wasn't there, who didn't intervene, of going unseen, of so very much going unrepaired. The types who believe life comes down to bad and good decisions, that you always had different choices or easier still, can just do as they do, are truly in their own realm of magical thinking.

No. They won't give you your tragedy. Instead, they'll call you thin skinned.

Today I rush for an eight o'clock meeting that doesn't happen. All that rushing amounting to nothing.

I sit at my computer, in front of an idle Zoom link and let out a long sigh.

Quite suddenly the house reeks of isolation, of longing. The same house that on another day, on a different morning is so warm and alive I find myself in conversation with the freckled sunlight on kitchen cupboards.

In the wake of cancelled meetings, I stand up from the kitchen table. I look down and notice two things: One. I am still in pyjama bottoms, my shirt reluctantly tucked in, like it's embarrassed to be seen together, rolling its eyes. And two, there is mud traipsed across the living room floor. I mean, I did tell them to take the ball outside. Into the wet, muddy garden. I did insist that she bring the recycling bins up from under the house despite her genuine fear of cockroaches–was needlessly rude and mean about it. A part of me wanted her to think that her fear was silly. Part of me won't admit that the tiny torn flesh from a cuticle, the size of a flea, can make you want to cry.

Pangs of crossness meet little pangs of something else. Oh, there it is, a little puddle of dirty mauve regret that I didn't tell them I loved them before I rushed them out the door. I remind myself I *did* tell them to be careful crossing roads–which surely counts as an indirect I love you–as I try to keep at bay the thought that they might die crossing a road and I haven't told them I loved them.

And to compound matters I then catch a glimpse of the recycling and rubbish–sorted, binned, bagged neat as a pin on the front porch. She pulled it off. But at what cost? To please me. Or...? I'm overthinking it. I swear. It's exhausting. To care this much with no one watching. Try to imagine the scale and colour of all the world's invisible and unwitnessed mothering and you end up with a thing as beautiful and unthinkable as dying stars in space.

I mean, am I even allowed to write this stuff? Am I allowed to write about recycling bins and maternal angst and joy and reward yet? And call it a story? Is it enough?

Speaking of death. Today I will make my way, half dressed, a person of two halves, towards the porch and open the ranch slider doors to get a better look at what a great job my kid has done with the rubbish and recycling and, just as I'm flooded with gratitude for my girl that is umbilically and biblically acute, the cat will deliver a single and intact bird wing onto the doormat.

This is nothing new. Our days often begin with dead animals the cat brings us. Afterall, she loves us. But there's something about the detached birdwing that unsettles me.

A single feather or two on the mat indicates a bird still alive, no love lost.

And a dead bird on the doormat is a dead bird on the doormat. We can all move on.

But one perfect wing? The feathers stitched together in a line where the wing is supposed to join to a body, one perfect wing so lovely I want to pick it up, stroke it, frame it, keep it. One severed, perfect wing can only mean one thing... Irreversible loss of the part of you that makes you, you.

Through the iris of my groggy left eye the wing ripples satin as though it is still attached and in flight. But of course, the wing feels nothing. And somewhere out there a bird is suffering.

Today I will do what I do most days and leave the house. Not because I have somewhere to be but because if I don't then I might never take my pyjama bottoms off.

I leave the house every day to prove to myself I can.

I step over the birdwing, still warm, a dismembered black hand and head out into the world.

Usually just down the road for a coffee but I can't stress enough how much that flat white means to me. A small daily ritual that transitions me from mum mode to another mode, brings me into contact with human adults, something most human adults do well with during the course of a day. Though not everyone agrees. I'm sure a flat white is just the kind of expense that the Ministry of Social Development refer to when they question what costs I have cut to better budget for those unexpected car repairs. Or maybe not. Maybe beneficiaries

consuming flat whites does not even enter the realm of possibility, even part-time beneficiaries who are also working part-time are probably frowned upon for that kind of fiscal indulgence, all out frowned upon. Inconceivable. Taxpayer money and flat whites. Probably illegal even. Bloody beneficiaries.

Today l get coffee from a spot I don't usually go to with a pretend friend because when I run into her, I can't say no.

We sit together on those flimsy school chairs that these days are considered cool and retro and drink coffee while she tells me about her misadventures searching for a 'soulmate' on the dating apps. Only, it's not just me she's telling. There's a quite lovely-looking man, a real-life man, that has ended up wedged between us with his morning coffee and he half-smiles politely as she, oblivious and unhinged, lofts way too much information over him to me like he's a human badminton net.

I want to tell this man I'm not on The Apps. That I don't really know this woman. She's not a close friend. That I no longer condone or partake in first date sleepovers with guys I've never actually met who show up at your house at midnight, pass out in your bed and keep you awake with their sleep apnoea so that then when you have sex in the morning you look terrible–like you've been up all night–because you have. I want to tell him my eye doesn't usually look like this, that it's not infectious. I feel like I want to tell this man so much. But I can't get a word in edgeways and well, over coffee and in person–it's just not how you meet a man these days.

The man finishes his coffee and looks relieved. Off he goes into a whole other day.

The coffee shop encounter with my pretend friend and the real-life man has the effect of stirring in me some deep rush of purpose towards my daughters and I'm reminded that I need to make photocopies of Gracie's birthday invitation. Friday will come around quickly. I head to the library. I'll work from there this morning.

'Party time,' I say hopefully to the librarian who looks at me cooly from below a blunt fringe dyed the colour of gorse flowers. 'Could I get eight colour copies, please?'

I slide the invitation my daughter has made across the counter towards the woman, allowing time for her to comment on how great it is. Which it is. My daughter spent ages on it. There's a tree and in its branches she's drawn all her friends as animals with speech bubbles coming out of their mouths. The tree is held in place by a bright blue sky, incessant strokes of inky felt-tip pill the page. Well actually it's not blue it's teal. We're in that phase you see, where we don't refer to colours by their pedestrian names. We deal in teals, magentas, and lilacs. But the librarian won't be lulled into small talk about any of it–the

nuance of colour, my child's artistic promise, the birthday party plans or and what it's like to watch your kids grow up. She's not there to witness or approve of my mothering. She doesn't even look up when she says, 'the photocopier's broken, you'll have to go to the bike shop.'

My eyeball throbs as though wrapped around a speck of hot gravel. I check work emails and follow up with the travel agent about the flights she's holding for us. So that I can take my girls to see their father. In an instant a reply lands in my inbox, reads cheerfully: S*o sorry Lucia, missed your last email. The flights have gone up overnight. Want me to put to hold them. I don't want you to miss out : -)*

'No. No. This is not acceptable,' I think, my brain melting out through my eye socket. The only reason I'm using a travel agent, paying the extra is to have someone, a professional help me carry the load, not drop balls, miss emails, or make mistakes. So that I don't end up stranded in Addis airport again with botched flights and connections, luggage-less, a kid with diarrhoea and no one to call and help me fix it. I can do that all on my own. Does she not know how leftfield it is (how frowned upon it would be if word got out) for a beneficiary to even use a travel agent anyway? Travel (along with flat whites) is NOT something beneficiaries are generally permitted to partake in. Even when the reason for travel is taking two little girls to see their father for the first time in three years. No, you must have economic reasons for leaving the country. A job interview or a conference. If you have a job interview or a work opportunity, you might get one or two weeks before Work & Income cut you off and you can't pay rent. As it happens, I am travelling for work AND taking my girls to see their father so we have been granted approval to travel. My partial but precious benefit will be covered for fourteen days once I've provided proof of work obligations and travel dates. Two weeks with their dad after three years apart has got to be better than nothing. But an airfare increase of a thousand dollars overnight because Trisha Marsden of *We Fly You Better* travel agents missed my email? Talk about straws that break camel's backs. Does she not realise that she needs to make good on the faith I've put in her? Or rather the faith I've gingerly put in myself for making what I believed was the grown up, sensible decision to use her in the first place? To pay extra for a little peace of mind? For a little less aloneness? Is this the universe reminding me that peace of mind and being a single mother on a benefit just don't mix? Systemic oil and water. I can already see the comments section in the Herald, hear the call-ins to national radio, the pile on of taxpayers, of which I am one 'if she can afford to travel, why in the heck is she getting a benefit!' And of course we can't afford to travel, not really.

It would in many ways be easier, not to go.

Because if there's one thing that makes people madder than a beneficiary who hasn't got their shit together it's a beneficiary who has.

Gosh, I bet by now you're wishing I'd written those succinct fragments. Something shorter, more minimal–more Carveresque, more the way of Hemmingway, pithier, to the point, deceptively simple, left more unsaid, showed more restraint, more genius, thumbed all this raw, lowly emotion and ordinary life into a single scene, a devastating, wry line. Something altogether a bit more masculine, please. More, more, more, don't you get it lady? Less is bloody more.

And well, wouldn't that be nice. But I don't have long before the kids get home from school. We're here now. In the thick of it. I've dragged you down too, and we can't go over it, can't go under it, the only way is through.

By late morning in the library my thoughts are a mushy muddle of travel insurance quotes, medical evacuation options, overdue work tasks, messages to the girls' father, emails to my boss, birthday party planning–everything seemingly harder and more entangled than it should be. Or perhaps it's just me, because I keep seeing teeth, wonky faceless teeth in metal braces. The little enamel flags flash into consciousness, subliminal, uninvited, animal intruders, and all I can make of it is some anxious relation between the cost of the airfares and my kids' future orthodontic needs.

As is so often the way when I feel a bit wobbly I decide to drop into my parents' place for a cup of tea and a vent, a regressive and die-hard sort of habit, a risky move. I take a seat at the kitchen table. Mum offers me lunch but all I can manage is the cup of tea and three pieces of cake. My eye is a weepy mess. I can hear the grind of whatever is living in my lid line ring out through my inner ear–coarse and noisy as a pebbled beach. I excuse myself to go take a look in my mother's bathroom mirror. Futile. Through groggy vision I'm still just a blur. I try to close the bad eye and use my good eye but it hurts. The blur in my mother's bathroom mirror looks back. And though I can't see my facial features I'm weirdly aware of the grey in my hair and the hair in my mole. That's how I feel. Gross, wiry, gone rogue in a mole.

Eventually, seeing me fuss, my mother takes me outside onto the patio, asks me to look up. She peers then into the sore eye. 'Oh,' she says, 'you have a stye! It's just a little stye,' and she scurries off returning moments later with something in her hand. She points the object at my head like a gun, so that I brace, pull back and before I can wriggle away she sprays decisively into my retina.

‘Here you, go, love.’ She pats the bottle into my hand. ‘Use it every few hours. It’ll clear up in a few days.’

‘Thanks, mum.’ I blink. Tears mixed with window cleaner make a trail down my cheek.

Somehow, it’s already early afternoon. I head for home and think about the bird’s wing on the doormat, about how, now that I can see again, I will bury it. Bury the beautiful wing and get on with some work.

But as I approach the house something is off. Is it my broken eye or is the place strewn in trash? The remains of a blue council rubbish bag that only a few hours ago had neatly contained our household waste glint out from the domestic, ravaged, and useless insides of my life. Here it is, loose, scattered, laughing, running off in spiteful gusts of wind. I wade through chip packets, swollen tampons, the shredded soft plastic they won’t recycle anymore. We’d been so proud, you see, that we’d made one of those five-dollar bags last for weeks. We’d really packed it all in and drawn it out. Not just to be frugal either. We were good citizens, weren’t we? Limiting our landfill to one blue bag a month. And yet here it all was, thrown back at us, an intestinal domestic slurry over the porch, sour and steaming, not even of interest to whatever animal has ripped into it.

For a few long seconds I stand there and curse at the universe, curse at some imaginary audience, witness, some hateful other. And then as is sometimes the way when you remember no one is watching, I decide, abruptly, just to give up.

I no longer care about burying the bird’s wing, its beauty a symbol of severed promise. Instead, I haul up a black garden bin from under the house, stick my hands into pink rubber gloves and turn my arm into an oar. With manic, sweeping strokes I heave everything– bird wing, toilet rolls, bloodied tampons, all of it, into the bin. Daring the stink to infect me, match me, to fight back.

Then, with my hands still in pink rubber gloves I go and lie down on the living room floor.

The afternoon sun, the carpet, are with me. Warm and benign, in no rush to be or do anything. We just lie there, gluey eyed, doing and being nothing. Let fingers grow sweaty in their pink latex rooms.

Of course, I could turn to one of the gurus I have loaded and ready to go on apps on my phone, but I already know what they will say. One guru will tell me to begin again. Remind me, that in any moment I can decide to begin again. Be present. Let thoughts and emotion pass on through. And when I resist this guru will advise a shift in perspective,

suggesting I consider that somewhere out there, some poor soul would kill for my life, for this day, to be lying here in the sun on the living room floor with a simmering eye. The other guru will tell me to take more seriously my woe, old stories, terrors that show up as flashing teeth, prescribe I be more, not less, curious, attentive, imaginative with my melancholy.

Well, all I know is this:

two things can be true.

And this makes life hard. And this makes life wonderful.

And much can be learned from the ways we don't sleep.

I have a pet theory you see. There are two kinds of people, two types of insomniac. For the first, sleep never comes, they lay their body down at night rigid with fear. 'There it is again,' they think, 'the ominous hum of God knows what.' For the second insomniac, they are fast to fall asleep, adept at sleeping on trains, planes or sofas, experts at lying in. Falling asleep is not the issue. For them the wakefulness comes in the middle of the night. Wakes them right up. Crawls out from depths. And even then, this ever stoic type will stuff the visitor right back down. Put headphones on or go watch TV, try to drown the thing out. And so, all this to say, the ways we can't sleep are a clue to the truth we might seek, the gurus we need.

Today is still Tuesday.

Tuesday evenings–after the PowerPoint, the emails, the prep for evening Zooms, the random afternoon shower to wash away litter-pink-latex skin, the removal of a dead cockroach from the plug hole, that rests with all six arms and legs crossed over its pale-belly corpse, the laundry, the folding, the firewood, the doses of eye spray and the too-late defrosting of spaghetti bolognaise, the conveyor belt of marmite toast served up for afternoon tea, the sweaty lunch boxes left to soak, the hoovering up of human hair and cat hair and the de-worming of cats and children with itchy bums, an appointment finally made to get that wart burnt off, and time to watch a dance routine your eldest has made up with the next-door neighbour and wrap kisses and ice around fingers bent back by a netball– I try to get to a community dance class.

Usually, by five in the afternoon I don't feel like going at all. Wrestle in my head about how I will feel better for going, even though I don't want to go, and then I go and always feel better for going.

The thing about this class is I can take my girls along. They're allowed to sit quietly and watch while I dance. It's both an informal and serious affair. Run at the old town hall, you show up with a gold coin donation, whatever you can manage. The dance teacher is an

older woman called Molly I've come to admire, maybe love. She has silky, thick hair and skin and when she dances you can see all the parts of her–baby through to wise old crone in synch and moving as one, like she's connected to everything. When I first met her she showed me the exact spot in her shoulder blade where her dead mother's prodding finger lives. She leads us through routines, she calls them 'phrases' to very loud music and when we stretch she will come around and put her hands on our bodies, adjust us, move us into a deeper place. I dance while my girls sit up on the stage, while they draw or read inside slippers and dressing gowns, wrapped into a blood brown velvet curtain that gushes the floor. And sometimes as I move across the room, and the bass rolls through me like a noble mauve wave, I have to fight the most beautiful urge to cry.

Today, as always, we form a circle to warm up. I say hello to the woman next to me. She asks how I am. I point to the stye in my eye, shiny and swollen as an inflatable ring. She sympathises. Says styes are usually a stress response, asks, do I have quite a bit going on right now? I know what she means. We all know these days. How our bodies keep the score, speak physical truth to the things that keep us up at night, to the dirty mauve feeling lodged in our bellies. But this. This isn't that.

And as the music starts to shake the walls and my daughters beam at me from their nest on the stage I confess to the woman that I should never have used that blue eyeliner. It must have been ten years old. It was a stupid thing to do, a poor decision, a silly mistake.

I'd wanted to bring out the black in my eyes.

Bric-a-brac Tales

Holiday Shopping

It's quite hard not to get a park in Rotorua. We get one right outside.

Since I can remember, Hospice has always been the market leader in charity shops. Hospice Rotorua is no exception. We walk in and even though it smells of moth balls and old people everything has room to breathe. The mannequins in the window display are living actual lives, the racks are orderly and uncluttered, merchandised in clearly marked sections alongside jars of home-made jam and hand knitted baby booties and there's a sort of fuck-you-dignity in the way the best bits of furniture–a kauri cabinet, a cane chair, a 70's lamp–are *not for sale.*

Resurrection a state of mind and Hospice won't be selling out anytime soon. Hospice gets that the devil is in the detail. That us op-shoppers, the serious ones, we're never just buying things, we're buying the feeling the thing gives us. We're buying the love, the care, the old ladies; the deathy-dignity, the karma, the pre-laundering.

But we're also buying the things.

I make a beeline for the jumper section. I have a weakness for other peoples' old hand knitted jumpers. Perhaps it's something to do with all of those ghost hands against my touch-starved skin or how they make me feel indoorsy and outdoorsy at the same time.

Whatever the reason, the habit is becoming unviable. Jumpers require a lot of drawer space. Lately, I've taken to storing them under my bed, a bed that will soon float away on a cable knit sea.

Op-shopping is a bit like writing. You don't find the clothes; the clothes find you. Words and clothes have the stories sewn in–they're just looking to be worn, expressed, a way out into the world. And this gives you an ancient, urgent, slow but fast focus so that you levitate around rooms even as you're standing quite still.

Just then I bump into the girls. They want gold coins to spend and I smile and wink at them as I dig around in my wallet because I can see that they're levitating too. I put a dollar into each outstretched hand and we go our separate ways. Get back to being found.

Red Cardigan Girl

The first story to find me is Red Cardigan. I know it sounds crazy but when I pull her off the rack it's like remembering a version of myself that's been waiting around the bend. A kind of prophetic remembering. Like adult me passing child me in the street.

The first thing to know about Red Cardigan is the redness. Bright red. Fire-engine red. Red that comes in a lipstick shade called *Lady Danger*. Yet here it is screaming from yarny sleeves. Screaming neon. A hue so at odds with its scratchy, serious, V-neck existence it's a scandal. And that's why I love her. Instantly. I put her on and I'm like Janet Frame. Iconic, bookish, a sane kind of mad. I imagine playing this version of myself in an indie film where my character wears the Red Cardigan in every scene except that one scene where she tries to be someone else, to impress the guy–which is of course a disaster. Because she's Red Cardigan Girl. That's why they put the Red Cardigan in all the promotional posters.

I check the little yellow tag that hangs by a plastic thread from Red Cardigan's neck. It tells me she's eight dollars and I think that's a small price to pay for staying warm.

Mumsy Woodstock

A rotating rack like a mini washing line advertises 'staff picks'. I look closer and there's a hanger amongst its mates that's clutching something rigid, denim and impossibly blue.

I float over and pull it out, am struck by the weight. No wonder the hanger is holding on for dear life. Gripped in its tiny metal hands, a panelled, full length denim skirt. Tailored to fit snug at the waist and through the hip it kicks out into what my big girl would call 'princess twirl'.

The skirt is made in that unapologetic heavy denim with no give–and there's so much of it–like a wash of alpine sky. True blue. American blue. Can I pull it off? I love how it's mumsy, wholesome but a little bit Woodstock. The label tells me it's a couple of sizes too big for me, but I suspect it's been made to 1970's measurements. You know, when all the housewives had tiny pinched in waists, were twiggy thin. I will need to try it on. And so, I do. Turns out it fits pretty good confirming my hunch re dieting 1970's mums.

I look at myself in the mirror, in the skirt. It's certainly a vintage gem but I'm thinking can I handle the weight? It's not like wearing a pair of jeans where your legs live in separate rooms held up by the support beam of a crotch. No, in this skirt, it's like you're wearing the

room, you are the beam, and your legs hang out in there, together in the open-air, being crossed and uncrossed, skin touching skin, gossipy thighs. The room hangs heavy and I can already feel where the waistband will cut into the bloat after fish ‘n’ chips on Fridays. I teeter. Is the skirt me, am I this mum? They definitely don’t make them like this anymore.

The Black Racks

I feel myself starting to come back down to earth. One more sweep, I think as I head for the racks of black. It’s always important to trawl the black.

And I don’t have to trawl for long. Almost at once my chest drops through the floor. Because sometimes just the skin of something is enough. I pluck the black thing out from the other black things. Turns out she’s a crushed velvet jacket, somewhere between a blazer and a shirt. Light as nothing, light as a cigarette, even though she’s fully lined, complete with pockets and shoulder pads. And I’m trying to place her, because I know this story, she’s a new, old friend.

I hold the jacket up to the Hospice shop window and she winces, a nocturnal animal. She’s the deepest, inkiest, blackest, black cherry. The colour of blood on walls caked and cracking. So deep and dark it’s almost painful to admit she’s not the sea. The crushed velvet performs a kind of optical illusion on my eyes. Reflects the light in a way that doesn’t feel natural. Like she’s making rays with her own black sun or subverting moonbeams. Like she’s messing with me. Pissed at being up before noon. Vampiric. Sleek as panthers. She belongs underground. Where lost boys and girls drip from the walls and mascara runs from their eyes. She belongs in a Tracey Slaughter story–little black cherry bomb with her *bigger, badder, bitches than me* shoulder pads, pedalling in stolen moonlight.

You don’t try her on, you accept she’s second skin. Just like black magic will always go best with red hair.

Treasure

A red cardigan. A long, blue denim skirt. A crushed velvet dinner jacket.

Of all the versions of myself, of all the stories that could have found me today in a Hospice store in Rotorua, this motley crew, this scratchy, twinkly, serious gang of unlikely friends is tucked tight under my arm as my feet hit the floor.

The hunt is over.

I've calculated what it will cost to take each item of treasure home and made peace with where that will leave me for petrol, groceries, rent, and the other activities the girls have on their holiday wish lists for the week. And perhaps I can request a discount at the counter, request a little rounding down to the nearest zero.

And then on cue, as though we are three buttons in a row on a shirt that will always be done up or undone together and can sense the tug and pull of each other's existence, my girls emerge–surface from their own trawl for treasure with wide, hopeful faces.

And truly, I am as curious as I could be to learn what they have set their sights on. What part of themselves they have sought out in objects discarded and donated by other people with other lives. What they have discovered for a dollar that speaks to their choosing.

My big girl rushes up first.

'Mum, look what I found! Only fifty cents. Just like yours, but lilac.'

She holds up a pair of corduroy trousers. Thick ribbed, loose legged and sort of hemmed too soon. They are indeed dark lilac, a shade usually perfected in wildflowers or pebbles at twilight.

'They're not too short?' I ask her.

'No! They're supposed to be like that. They're like yours, mum. I even tried them on. They're like your green ones.' She nods at the trousers I'm in. My old Topshop favourites. The ones I wear with all those second-hand jumpers I can't help but buy. Olive cord, fitted at the waist with sturdy belt-loops, a relaxed leg that ends a good inch above the ankles. Cropped, so there's always a slice of skin showing, and the top of a black cotton sock. That soft, girlish bit.

My daughter holds the item up to herself and looks down the length of her nine-year-old body. The trousers don't reach much below her knees. But I can tell that her mind is made up. The part of herself she's seeking out, the story, the hero in her world–is still, for now, me. Even with the unrealised, dark, fantasy versions of myself tucked under my arm, my daughter sees me in clear definition. I am her, mum.

‘Also...’ she goes on, ‘If I get these, can I keep the change?’

I smile at her then, from beneath the singular weight of her adoration, light and heavy on my heart as nautical twilight. ‘Yep,’ I say, ‘fine by me.’

With my big girl sorted, one last transaction remains.

‘What about you, darling, what have you found?’

My youngest girl is still empty handed. She doesn’t say anything, gently grabs me by the elbow and guides me towards a cabinet full of miscellaneous jewellery. Cheap, imitation silver and gold, sure to irritate the skin. Dangly clip-on earrings, bangles and beads painted to look like zebra skin. The kind of thing my Aunty Lois always used to wear. Aunty Lois–naïve, unlucky in love, music teacher and pianist had always bought us kids charity shop loot as gifts. A pack of oil pastels partially used. A printed scarf. Books with strange illustrations. She also took us, supposedly by accident, to nudist beaches and when we went to stay with her we discovered art posters taped up inside wardrobe doors, usually of naked lovers, or surreal scenes–a grand piano in a house where the ocean swept in blue over the floorboards. We knew Aunty Lois was bonkers, but we loved being around her, the way she teemed with life was just so reassuring.

My daughter points to the thing she wants through the glass and says, ‘that one there, the butterfly.’

Conspicuous amongst the lesser objects d’art is a necklace. A butterfly pendant. Gunmetal, dark green wings attached to a dull, chunky chain. The wings give off an artificial, impenetrable sheen, like baked bubble gum. The caterpillar body is made up of three diamante stones and tiny platinum antennae spiral out of its head and join up with the wings.

‘But mum. It’s three dollars and I only have one.’

Just then a put-together older woman with put-together silver hair approaches and smiles at my girl. She has the look of a woman who doesn’t need to work and therefore enjoys volunteering immensely.

‘Have you seen something you like, dear?’ she inquires.

My daughter nods, taps on the glass with her finger. ‘The butterfly necklace. But I only have a dollar and I think it’s three.’

The woman reaches into the back of the cabinet and retrieves the lifeless insect. She inspects a white sticker and says, ‘so it is.’ Then she looks around the store as if to check no one is watching her. She leans towards my girl and whispers. ‘But I will sell it to you for one. I think this butterfly has been waiting for you.’

My little girl looks at the woman and then back at me, reigned in delight, surprise, she wants to be sure she has my approval.

'Lucky girl,' I say and with that she opens her small fist and places a single gold coin on the countertop.

'Would you like to wear it now?' asks the woman with the smooth-as-clouds hair.

'Yes, please,' my daughter responds.

Around the counter the woman comes. She takes the necklace that clatters its heavy junk body loudly on the glass countertop and releases the clasp.' Ok, sweetheart, here we go.' And the posh old woman circles the chain around my daughter's neck, carefully lifting the girl's dreadlocks as she goes.

For the next few days my girl will not take the necklace off. Fortunately, the gunmetal doesn't seem much affected by the sulphur of Rotorua's thermal pools. Doesn't tarnish or go black. It's not expensive enough for that.

And when the holiday ends and we're driving home into the darkest and longest night of the year I ask my youngest daughter what wish she will make to the Matariki stars.

'My wish to the Matariki star...' she begins to say and she puts her hand on the pendant she got for a dollar from the Hospice store on the main street in Rotorua, and you swear you can see it glow.

A gate in Kigali

We're here, outside.

I send the WhatsApp message to their father when we pull up to the gate. He knows I'm coming so it should be enough. We agreed a time. He's expecting me. Hot air streams through the car windows. The air out here is cooking. But the gate is made to withstand the heat.

Sky and sun impaled on gate.

It should be enough.

I watch my phone. Notice he's changed his profile picture. In the picture Ruth holds a baby in her arms. Her newest little sister, who she's only just met–in real life, not counting Zoom. Her newest little sister who shares none of my blood, is nothing to do with me. Ruth hoists the baby up on her small hip, a mash of sibling bodies. She looks so grown up my girl. Beams at whoever is taking the picture.

Probably him.

And isn't it amazing and devastating how they look like sisters, already? Something in the way the way they fit together, where the shape of their bodies meet.

Feathers that dovetail.

Cancel out the bad blood.

Still no reply to my message.

I look harder into the phone till my eyes pop stars all over the screen. Ruth must have tied her own hair on the day this photo was taken. A day that could have been yesterday. Or maybe the day before. But no other day because on all the other days she was with me. Over an ocean full of blue-tooth tears. She's wearing her hair in a low bun. It's not a style I knew she liked.

So, I switch my attention to the stone wall and trees in the background of the photo. Searching there for clues or reprieve.

A few minutes pass. Nothing happens. The gate groans in the heat.

Do I send another message?

'Maybe beep the horn,' I say to Sylvie who is at the wheel of the car. So, she does, beeps the horn. Elongated. As is the way here to announce an arrival. The horn says

Let me in.

When no one comes I get out of the car and go sit on a stone ledge to the side of the driveway with my phone in my hand. Concrete bakes the back of my thighs. The crotch of my jeans cuts in. My feet sweat in their loafers. And I watch the brassy door handle and the seams of the door sewn into the gate, and I'm holding the gate's gaze. Waiting. Staring. Who will blink first.

The only thing I can see beyond the top of the gate is a steeply pitched A-frame roof of orange tile and the whisp-stick tops of a bamboo hedge that can't quite mask the distant hill with its patchwork slum.

His roof over their heads for a change.

Then, finally.

Footsteps and the sound of bodies.

'Coming mum,' calls the unmistakable voice of my youngest daughter. Her kiwi accent, thick as the gate, slices through the quiet swelter. The gate starts to mumble. The brassy door handle moves, turned from the inside by a lucky-dip hand, and then the door in the gate pops itself open.

My girls spill out like happy tears.

Gracie runs at me–jumps into my arms like a footballer celebrating a goal and Ruth lanks out behind her.

How has it only been a week and they look different?

Gracie smirks in this great way, beams me a code that says, *look Mum. I'm whole*.

And she's at ease. Wearing her favourite pink flares. I notice they've got food stains down the front and she picks at the stain with a witchy nail.

Ruth seems older, angular, serene. Maybe it's just the earrings. The dangly gold costume ones with purple gems that her best friend got her for her tenth birthday. My eyes fix on her swan neck then and I can't help it, I well up, I say, 'Woah Ruth, did you grow up in a week?'

Their father follows behind. Dips his head an inch to get his tall frame through the door in the gate. He's in his brown leather house sandals that tell me he's not planning to leave the compound or get too close.

I fix my eyes on the thread of braided leather between his long, ebony toes.

Nina, the third of his now four daughters clings to his leg, curious and sweet, taking in the scene.

When no one says anything Ruth lays her head on my shoulder and Nina, the half-sister (who is not related to me and has nothing to do with me) bounds over and wraps her arms around my waist.

'Hi' I say to their father, entwined in sisterly body parts.

'Hi, Luce.'

There's a laughing melody to his voice that might be to do with the girls wrapped around me or might be an attempt to take the edge off the five feet of planet between us.

Sylvie gets out of the car. Stands beside me a bit like a pillar. My very own gate. She braces one shoulder against my ex, the gate, slopes the other towards me gently like a hill. And she taps a foot with papaya red toenails on the steep driveway where we loiter.

The toes cheer. The toes tut-tut.

'Hi, how are you?' she says to the girls' father over the tapping and her voice is warm and bouncy on the outside, steely, and protective on the inside. 'Wow girls, look how big you are!? Hello, Nina.'

Nina runs over and cuddles her legs.

This, you see, is how Rwandan kids learn to greet adults who come into the orbit of their parents. They haven't learned to be fearful of adults or that adults are fearful of them or detest them in public spaces. And body autonomy isn't a thing. Here, children know their bodies are

bound up with the adults around them, for better or worse, that this is the truth. And the default seems to be that they want to press themselves in and make the adults they love smile. That they want to be close. That an autonomous body for a child, is actually the more frightening thing.

'Are you ready to go see Betty and baby Janine?' I say to the girls. 'I've got our gifts in the car.'

'Are we going to her house?' Grace asks.

'Yeah. Remember, we're going for Janine's Guhemba.'

'What's a Guhemba?'

'It's where we take Betty gifts, things she needs, like bananas, or nappies or washing powder. It's like a baby shower but the baby has arrived. So, it's more fun. We get to hold the baby.'

'Why does she need bananas?' Gracie asks deadpan and cheeky.

'I was wondering about that, too,' Sylvie says and gives Grace a wink.

'I don't really know about the bananas. I guess it's just what you do. Tradition. And a stalk of bananas probably lasts for ages, right?'

'Ok,' Grace shrugs. And then as if she's bored of snipping at the five feet of air between us all, 'can we go, now?'

I look over at their father, settle my gaze on his nose not his eyes. 'We'll drop them back in a couple of hours, ok?'

'No problem, Luce. Have fun girls.'

My name is a ghost in his mouth.

Nina smiles and presses herself into the gateway her father's legs make. I can't tell if the looks like she wants to come with us or is happy she isn't, happy to be claiming back her dad.

The back seat of the car is hot and sticky with the three of us in a row. I pat Gracie's thigh, those pink flares she loves, and it's like I'm recharging the battery that's gone low on our bond. Both girls are wearing socks with rubber Croc sandals. I want to ask why the socks when it's so hot but I decide not to. Like I decide to say nothing about the girls' fingernails which have grown lady-like-long since they've been with their dad. It's not that I mind. Not even close. It's just that he's usually so fastidious about things like that. Washing, nail clipping, oiling away the girl's ashy skin.

That’s a thing I thought I knew about him.

So, I don’t say anything.

We wave as we pull away, we wave at the gate.

Work and Income

'They looked at me the way they often did in the dreamtime: as though I was the most wonderful, and important, and kind person in the whole world. In the corporation of their love, I was at the top of the power structure. There is no greater joy in this life than having a baby. Here is a person who has been uniquely designed to love you.'– Caitlin Flanagan.

Your children are three and five, yes? Can you tell me what steps you're taking to find work?

Yes, three and five. This is my little girl, Grace. Say hi Grace. Her big sister Ruth just started school. You know, she's at the school my mum went to? Who would have thought. And you know what else, her teacher is my mother's childhood best friend. They're still best mates now. Raylene. She's one of those veteran teachers. Has taught at that little country school for over twenty years. Tries to retire and keeps coming back. Got a Cup in her name and everything. The local kids, even the ones that act tough say 'Hi, Whaea Ray!' when they see her at the bakery or swimming down Papahua. On Ruth's first day in that little school, after everything, seeing Raylene with that thick glossy braid of hers, slung down her back to her bum, hearing the warm boom of her teacher's voice, having her shepherd my Ruth into her first classroom, well, it made me cry. That everything can be so not how you thought it would be and still so beautiful, isn't that crazy? So weird. It really felt like I was where I needed to be that day. Like I'd been planning it all along. Only I hadn't. We ended up there because we had nowhere else to go. We'd come home. Maybe that's what felt so lovely and sad. It felt so safe that day. Just to be home. The shabby school prefab my girl walked into, with the ocean looking in the windows and art on the walls. We had nowhere else to go but home. And I guess that's lucky aye? I tell you; I'll never forget Ruth's first day at school. Do you have kids?

You know you can get the childcare subsidy for your youngest now that she's three. You want to be a good girl for mummy and go to kindy don't you darling? So, Lucia, what plans do you have to find work? To get the sole parent benefit you'll need to keep us updated on what you're doing to find work.

Oh ok. Well. I'm sort of rethinking my options, right now. My kids need me. They've lost their father. So, I'm taking some time, you know, to just be a mum for a while. To just do that.

What skills do you have, what line of work were you in?

He's not dead by the way, their father. I should have been clear. He started a family with someone else. So yeah, for now, I just want to focus on my girls. Be around for them, resettle us. Try and get our new rental place feeling like home. Cosy. You know I went to this women's leadership retreat in the UK about a year ago, before everything imploded–or while it was imploding. Was run in this fancy estate, country house, on the Dorset coast in England. My old boss was running it with a mate. She's great, my old boss. Always believed in me. Offered me a spot on the retreat at a discount because she knew I was in town, she'd always gone out of her way to help me, you know, be more of a tiger in the boardroom. There were all these exercises designed to help us unlock our 'Bigger Game.' Play your Bigger Game was the mantra of the weekend. I was told I needed to channel a bit more Michelle Obama. Spent an entire evening with a post it note stuck to my forehead that said Michelle, and everyone called me Michelle and I had to try and be a bit more Michelle. Meanwhile I had a disintegrating relationship with the father of my tiny kids, who were half-way around the world with my folks for two weeks. I was trying to sort my job out after extended maternity leave. It all felt so phony and wrong. You know? So absolutely surreal and crazy. To be away from my kids–even though I knew they were with my folks and technically everything was fine. I worried that my little one, this one here, would think I'd died. Died while I was off self-actualising. I thought about it the whole time. That she must be wondering where the hell I'd gone. None of the women there seemed to think it was strange I'd left my just one year old on the other side of the world. We had to do this exercise where we listed out our fears, so they'd stop getting in the way of our Bigger Game, we had to take each fear and think about the worst that could happen. The idea being that when we applied logic, we'd realise our worst fears weren't going to eventuate. Well, I don't know about you, if you've ever played the fear ladder game? But I was like, yeah, no I think my fears might be very real and legitimate thank you very much! Why is the world trying to convince me otherwise? I mean at the time I could hardly articulate what I was scared of. It was a foreboding, an instinct, a thin hum that had been brewing for months and was trying to make itself heard. To do with my kids, their father. We were broken, falling apart, sleepwalking into some predetermined

accident. This fucking tragedy unfolding in plain sight while I noodled away with a gang of C suite execs thinking about my Bigger Game. There was no place for that kind of fear at this Women's leadership retreat. A mother's fear. A baby's sadness. There was all this talk of 'bringing your whole self to work'. About how a women-centred workplace needed to recognise all the hats women wore if we were ever going to truly smash glass ceilings. And besides how much more profitable companies were when they invested in female leadership, had greater quotas of female CEO's. Not just the right thing to do, it was the economics of it, good for GDP. I don't know, it was hard for me to think. I had two missing limbs after all, limbs I'd only recently grown in my womb. And well, I was seriously starting to doubt that work was the thing that deserved my whole self anymore. *Yes, be a mother*, they said. *Mothers are amazing* they preached. *Mothers can do anything*. *Such great multi taskers. If you want something done, hire a mother. Mothers possess superpowers*. *But whatever you do, don't just be a mother*. And I mean, honestly, at one point over dinner one of the facilitators told us her Bigger Game story, talked about the judgement she'd felt being that working mum who had her nanny collect the kids from school most days. She raised a glass of vino, courtesy of one of the other participants whose Bigger Game was to go from wine critic to wine maker, and said, whatever you do ladies, please, please, don't be the mum waiting at the school gate. I'd bristled then. But no one said anything. Just raised their glasses toasted, and there was the sound of bells tinkling as if mischievous fairies were about to wreak havoc. Again, what got me, wasn't how radical, right, or wrong it was. But how normal.

The next day in the drawing room of the estate we were tasked with collaging our bigger future selves. Middle aged women, we tore, ripped, cut out our dream lives from magazines and pasted them onto fancy recycled card. My old boss, who I do really love, who thought she was wanting the best for me and most of Womenkind, and who had always had a positive-mindset-sunny-sadness to her, looked at my collage. She pointed to a magazine clipping of a 1920's flapper with a great bob, I'd cut carefully around the triangular hair, and she said to me, don't lose the rebel in you, Lucia. You've always fought for the underdog. Don't stop trying to change the world.

She was right about that. About there being a rebellious streak in me. Only now the rebel in me was looking for something I couldn't put my finger on, something very out of fashion, something much more boring and profound. There was no quick fix, no vision-boarding my way to it. Do you understand? I had to change my life!

So, what kind of work were you in, then? We might have something on our database to match. You will need to update us every six months with the actions you're undertaking to find work. Do you understand? The action could be applying for actual jobs but preparing for a return to work also counts, upskilling. You could take one of our Work Ready workshops. We do CV and interview skills sessions. These all count towards meeting your obligation to find work.

Communications, advertising, international development. That sort of thing.

Ok. So, you can get a job then. Great. What do you call yourself, a marketing professional?

I could get a job I guess; I mean my professional networks are all overseas so it's not totally straight forward. And besides, these days if I look at LinkedIn I kind of feel a little bit sick. Like literally I get a little bit of sick in my mouth. That's not a great sign, is it? Of being ready to go back to work? That it's the right thing to do. No, I don't think a job is the best idea right now. Like I said. My kids need me. They're small. It's just me now. I want to be with them. Ha! Trust me that still sounds as weird to me as it probably does to you! That I'd choose being a mum over money, career, being relevant–me, of all people. Who would have thought. But I want to stay home with my girls. Blow love into the gap, you know?

I see you live near the beach. Maybe you could get something part time in a shop or café or something, do something a bit different. Why not, now that you're eligible for childcare subsidy. Maybe you could find work in one of the surf shops?

I'm not sure they'd want me in the surf shop. Besides, it's not worth it, really, is it? Days away from my little kids to earn minimum wage? Not sure any mother should have to do that. Especially if she's on her own. We only moved to the beach to be close to my folks. So, I'd have a bit more support. The girls adore their grandparents, and again, another one of those blessings in disguise, silver linings in this whole mess I could never have predicted. After all those years girl-bossing my way around the world, I've ended up three doors down from my folks in a dead-end town by the sea. There are no traffic lights, where we live, you know? Not one! And it turns out they're great grandparents. It's quite a thing to see your mum, who you had all this mixed up enmeshed emotional baggage with, just being an absolutely

beautiful grandmother. The way she holds space for them. Just potters with them. Everything slow. In the garden, looking at caterpillars and snails. She has this way of seeing my girls. Beholds them. That's what it is. That's what she does. Beholds them. And it's like its fixing some old rift in her, me, in us, reaching all the way back down through ancestral lines and mending something. I know that sounds a bit woo-woo and cheesy. But it's true.

Ok, that's great. Sound like your parents could watch the kids if you needed to work. And then there's the subsidy...

I'm not sure, I think it's another reason *not* to race back to work if I'm honest. More of a reason to be around my kids, my parents for now. You know–while I figure things out now that I'm on my own. While I find my feet. We've been through a lot, you know. The girl's father... but not just that, I mean, it could have been so different. There's a version of the story, where there's no grenade, no lights going on, I just do what I thought I'd always do. Have kids. Go back to work. Keep on making something of myself. Outsource the care. Or do it all. Stay busy and stressed and juggle and miss out on little moments and churn through on cortisol. Not that it's easy this way. The days are often long, repetitive, and boring. But it's so strange, that's also where the magic is, and that's what I mean. I might never have known... If I hadn't broken first. I've got to this place where I enjoy my kids. Not all the time, but deeply and gently most of the time. I know them now. After everything, the baby blues, betrayal, feeling like a terrible mother–I enjoy my kids. They delight me. Hard bloody won, I tell you. But there's still work to do. Their father isn't around and I'm their mum.

Ok, Lucia. Well perhaps you should just sign up for one of the training sessions, for now. Should I put you down for the CV writing workshop in a couple of weeks?

Ok, sure. I mean there's not much to add to my CV. Just a gap, really. A gap with a mother in it, who's waiting at the school gate.

This is Renting

This is the family that moves into the house still holding hands. This is them as they roll up their sleeves, discard the board and batten wrapper, make skin with the walls, arrange their belongings into bright laughing bones. This is the blanket with satin trim laid out warm as a lick of marmalade in winter. This is the room where the mother will sleep, dream, dress, cry, worry and count to ten. Rooms within a room, not a room of one's own, more like a corner or a pipe dream. This is the bed that folds away limbs and disappears monsters in a soft cotton forest. Here come the nymphs who slip into bed on Saturday mornings searching for puddles of grownup heat. This is a small hand under the covers playing a game of Snap that catches a boob and everyone laughs. This is the window they open to let in the cat and then they lie back down and listen to the lawns. This is the hair that falls out of their heads, stitches up drains, plugholes, and plastic teeth. This is the house that acts like it has never met afro queen coils, pineapple kinks or silver dipped curls before. This is the stainless-steel kitchen sink trying to be an altar or a mindfulness retreat. *Not today* says the mother and dances instead. This is the kid from next door with a dirty glass in his hand who asks *where's the dishwasher? Good question* laughs the mother *we'd best ask the landlord. What's a landlord?* says the kid still holding the glass. This is the email from a woman in accounts. *We have been instructed by the landlord of the above property to increase your rent to the above amount and hereby provide you with the required minimum sixty (60) days' notice of the increase*. This is half of an L shaped couch, one velvet arm kissed to fade by afternoons in other people's lounges. This is the sun visiting at noon, a little white diamond on the faux marble floor and the mother makes a cup with her hands and holds it until it overflows. This is the spot on a dresser where they keep a casket, palm sized, made of shell and full of baby teeth. These are the shelves that hug the books that talk to each other and in the thread of paper chatter the mother locates herself and finds her way home. This is the ghost that stands at the window, leaves fingerprints in lotion all over the glass. These are the eyes that use ranchslider doors to frame a picture of towels hung out to dry, salt, summer flags, and sunbathing daughters evaporate wood. This is the moment when the heart is full and happy to die. *I don't mean to be blunt, but who are you anyway?* This is what the property manager says to the mother at the inspection when she asks if she can choose the colour of the new curtains. These are the kebab-brown drapes that the tenants don't want. This is the placenta growing itself Monstera in a concrete pot and the family take their whenua with them when they leave.

Logo Blue

A little girl needs to believe her father is indestructible. She observes his world from inside a tee shirt that says *Grandma Loves You*. It's all soft cotton, tight sleeves, and pretty pastels. It's her favourite. It's pretty enough, she thinks, to offset her missing front teeth and short curly hair butchered to match. She lost the teeth in a game of rough and tumble. That's what they called it after it happened. Though she's not sure about that. It makes it seem like she knew what was coming.

He held her hands as she skipped on top of the newspaper he was reading. It was spread out, she remembers, like her very own puddle-sized ice skating rink. The newsprint was just slippery enough under her small, socked feet to let them glide. She leaned into his hands. Faster, faster, as he looked down through the loop their arms made and caught up with the sports news. And she skipped and skidded and skated to nowhere as though he was watching. As though his half smile was for her.

When her face hit the ground the two baby teeth met the floor first and popped straight out.

After that there was blood and ice.

And after the blood and ice it would take three years for the big teeth to grow in.

The teeth that finally sprouted out of her gums had spidery white lines etched into the enamel. So bright and white they made the rest of her teeth look dull. Other kids would point to the stains on her teeth. Troubled rivers that forked and split over and over until they split themselves into nothing.

In all the photos the girl with no front teeth wears the little blue tee shirt with the words *Grandma loves you* in bubble gum letters and the o in 'loves' is a pink heart, pink as baby gums. She thinks perhaps they got her the tee shirt when the accident happened. They tell the story about how the Mother tried to put her into anything else, slacks or a dress and the girl would go stiff as a board and refuse. That's how much she loved that tee shirt. And it will turn into a story about how the girl knew her own mind since way back when. No need to dwell on the part where a grown woman uses adult strength to bend a child's limbs to her will. Or how the thing that poured back and forth between their bodies left a thumb shaped bruise where baby blue sleeves met the girl's arm no bigger than a milk-green leek.

They tell the story about how the girl learned to whistle through the tunnel where her teeth should have been. A three-year-old whistling genius, she would whistle the tune to *How*

much is that doggie in the window while her father sung along, never skipping the verse about *robbers with flashlights that shine in the dark.*

When the teeth finally grew in the girl couldn't whistle anymore. And when she couldn't whistle, they say, she developed some bad habits. She would wear the *Grandma Loves You* tee shirt with corduroy dungarees on repeat like a uniform. Walk around with her hands in her pockets all day long, never taking them out. Not even for lollies. She liked the way the corduroy talked when she moved. Sometimes she kept her hands in fists. Hidden. Other times she liked to press her open palms hard against her thighs, soothed by the feel of the legs walking, the sense that she could hold herself together as she moved around.

Then, when they took the pockets away the girl slipped her thumb into the gummy gap in her mouth where her teeth should have been and left it there for four years.

The scarred adult teeth grew around her fleshy young knuckle like tree roots around earth, bucked and crossed at the tip to keep the soft parts of her quiet.

The Mother wears a dressing gown the colour of heart valves all day long. She is angry and blames the Father for going to work and leaving her with the girl. The girl feels sorry for the Father which sometimes interferes with her belief that he is indestructible or that she is special. When she starts to have waking nightmares about her teeth falling out the Mother takes her to a play therapist.

She remembers a house. A large cream villa brushed around by oak trees in summer. The sweet wooden cool of the floorboards, the strangeness of a place, not a hospital, not a home, a thing in between. She sits in the waiting room and looks out the window into rustle-green treetops. Leaves lit up like piano keys. The large, dark insides of the villa with scores of light and sound neatly framed on the walls.

While the Mother speaks to the receptionist the girl realises something: the Mother isn't wearing the dressing gown the colour of baby gums today.

The girl goes into a room with a lady in a skirt that swishes as she walks. The Mother doesn't go with her. There is a rug on the floor. Sunlight, cicada song, high ceilings. The lady has a plastic dolly and asks the girl if she wants to wash its hair. She lets the girl bathe the doll in a plastic tub on the carpet where the sun has landed. The girl remembers the doll's chestnut hair, the way it shines and goes silky in the tepid water and she feels at ease with her hands submerged.

Later as an adult woman she will say to the Mother, ‘remember when you took me to see that lady for the nightmares about my teeth falling out? Do you know, she had me bathe a doll? I don’t think we even spoke.’

The Mother will look confused for a moment before saying, ‘Oh. Oh, no. That’s not why we were there. It was *me* seeing a therapist. I was depressed after your grandfather died. They let you play with that doll while I was in my appointment.’

The girl as a young adult will consider this. It won’t be the first time a piece of information, a casual remark will unmake a story that she has carried with her since before she can remember. The river forks and splits again. Or perhaps, the river rejoins itself. Sometimes it’s hard to know what moves you closer to the source or further away. She will pick over what her mother has said. Facts lie about–logical, random, and battered as debris on a beach after a storm. ‘I was depressed after your grandfather died. It was me seeing a therapist.’

The girl was six months old when the Grandfather died. Long before her baby teeth turned the weekend news red. Every day at the start of her life and at the end of his she was placed in the old man’s bed. Into his lovely dying arms. New and soft and helpless. A squish of life capable of eliciting that singular and acute joy, more powerful than forty suns, where two souls–one on its way up, one on its way down–meet for a fleeting moment as they pass through the world’s skin.

And then he was gone. Left the girl and the Mother alone. And the end of summer brought with it a strange fog that arrived in the mornings and didn’t lift till noon.

So why had the Mother waited until the girl couldn’t sleep for the sound of disintegrating teeth to get help? How had the Father let it happen? What happens to a little girl when her mother is unreachable–wrapped up and bound tight inside dressing gown grief, thick and ribbed and red as torn muscle.

One day they start to tell a new story about the white marks on her teeth. And it becomes *the* story. They say the little girl, along with thumb sucking and pockets, had a thing for apple juice. ‘Bodda-da-duice’ she would bleat, some of her first words, her own catchy slogan. So cute. So sweet. But eventually acid got in through the sallow rubber teat and bleached her bones. None of this adds up of course. The timeline is all wrong. But the story sticks and now she has a cute reason for why her teeth look weird. It wasn’t the Father’s fault. It wasn’t even an accident. It’s all on her.

The Father works for a company that makes and sells paper. Every few weeks he travels for business. Goes to a place they call the ‘Pulp Mill’ and leaves the girl with the

Mother and the girl's now three siblings. He wears a suit and tie; has a company car and a secretary called Sasha. Sasha is young, olive skinned, an expert at taking phone messages. When the company throws a Christmas party Sasha comes over to the house in a strapless black dress. Someone takes a photo of the three of them–Sasha, the Father, the Mother. The girl only has eyes for the Mother. She wears an electric blue dress that dazzles with sequins and fish tails at the ankles. The girl thinks she looks like an elegant blue throat drinking up the floor.

Later the girl will study the photo. She will notice that Sasha has straight white teeth that make for a plain and pleasant smile. But the Mother has a gap between her front teeth and the gap makes it seem like the Mother's smile is something special, stretched out, mysterious, like she's a movie star, like she has a sexy secret. The girl will wonder why she's never noticed the gap in the Mother's teeth before. As though she's never seen her smile.

One of the perks of the Father's job is that he brings home computer paper. The continuous kind with perforated edges made for machines. Reams and reams of the stuff. The girl has never encountered so much space and soon she has an urge to leak words all over the white. Stories. She writes mostly versions of the books her father has read her: *Bed Knobs and Broomsticks, Black Beauty, Anne of Green Gables*–and finds a way to put herself in them. She imitates and copies without shame, concerns herself largely with sadness, bravery, and magic, likes to write the 'blurb' that will go on the back cover–at the start. She doesn't show the stories she writes on computer paper to her friends. She worries about the trees, the hole in the ozone layer, how her taking up space on paper is probably making the hole worse.

When the Father travels to Indonesia to meet with the Company's Partners he brings back gifts. Perfume for The Mother. For the girl, a cotton nightie with a beaded butterfly sewn across the front. Pretty as anything and the beads cut into her belly skin at night when she tries to sleep. He brings back cartons of cigarettes, to have on hand for the Company Partners when they come to town. Stores them high up in kitchen cupboards where the kids can't get to them. Every now and then the Mother likes to smoke a cigarette. Usually with a drink in the garden when there are other adults around. It fills the girl with an irrepressible righteous anger to see the Mother smoke. She is so overcome that she will snatch the still burning stick out from the Mother's fingers and run with it, across the lawn, into the house, open the fridge and bury the smouldering butt in a jar of jam. The hiss and glug of that strawberry salve around her tiny, smoking rage.

Sometimes when her father is at the Pulp Mill, the girl goes to stay with the Grandmother. It is quiet at The Grandmother's house and the wallpaper smells of lavender.

The girl sleeps with an electric blanket and in the morning all the breakfast condiments are laid out and they eat off fine China plates and the toast is propped upright in a silver stand, like bicycles parked in a row. The Grandmother reminds the girl of a wise sparrow. A bird-boned woman with an immaculate home and immaculate thoughts. Together the old woman and her granddaughter take walks around the neighbourhood down to the sea. They pick out and rank their favourite houses and gardens explaining the rationale for their choices. In the bird-boned woman's company the girl learns to whistle again. And when one morning she discovers the old woman's false teeth in a glass of water, faceless and magnified, she stares them down with brave, narrowed eyes.

'Did you lose your real teeth because you are old?' The girl asks the Grandmother over breakfast as they watch sparrows in a stone bird bath out the window, the flutter and sparkle of sunlight and wet wings. The old woman laughs. The laugh is like one of those sparrows taking flight. It can't help itself.

'Oh no, Lucia. They removed my real teeth a long time ago. When I was just a young lady. To save us money down the line. The teeth you saw in the glass. These ones,' she strokes her puckered lips, 'they were a wedding present from my parents.'

Funny the stories that scare a child and the ones that don't. Sometimes the plain old truth of a thing can put a person at ease. After staring down her Grandmother's dentures in their glass, the most terrifying of matrimonial gifts, the nightmares she has suffered with for so long about her own teeth dropping out, just up and fly away.

When she is seven the girl gets the mumps. On the fourth day the Father takes her with him to the office. He works in a high rise building where all the windows are stacked on top of each other. The kind of office building that is very boring to draw. The Father gives the girl pens, business cards and a paper pad that has columns and numbers printed on it. She pretends to write cheques. Twinks out the Father's first name on the business cards and writes in her own. Experiments with all the other names she wishes she'd been called. Marion. Estralita. Filly–(Filly as in female baby horse.)

Sasha is on the phone in a room with glass walls but no windows. Partitioned. Everyone can see her from all sides. Sasha spots the girl and waves. When she gets off the phone, she brings her biscuits and a can of Sprite.

The girl lays right up against the window in the Father's office. The Father has a real window, one with a view, one that runs from floor to ceiling and she scares herself imagining the glass giving way and her body rolling out into the air. She puts her small forehead onto

the cool pane and watches the traffic below. Watches it ‘merge like a zip’ onto the motorway, picks a car and tracks it with her eyes, watches it go from being beetle-sized, to a speck, to nothing. Before long she falls asleep to the hum of fax machines and photocopiers and the taste of corporate carpet in her mouth.

The lumps in her throat go warm and idle in the sun.

At lunch time the Father says he has a surprise. He takes the girl through a heavy door that wants to swing back and eat her. They travel up concrete stairs that echo because even the elevator doesn’t go up this far. The stairs end. One last door. The Father leans in and duels with the door until it gives way.

Light and sound rush in.

The Father holds the girls’ hand. The rooftop is an infinite grey slab beneath a bully wind. The Father’s tie flies out sideways from his neck and snaps like cross fingers. The only thing up here besides them is a logo. Eight huge letters that spell out the Company’s name. The letters are like statues, like Gods, each one twice the size of the Father.

He tells the girl how you can see the logo for miles. From almost anywhere in the city. And everyone who sees it knows it stands for the company where the Father works.

The girl looks at the great big word. The letters like teeth in a wide smile. Painted a particular shade of baby blue. It is, the girl decides, the blue of all the blues. Perfect. That blue. That exact blue. She squints, commits it to memory and makes a solemn vow that it will be her favourite colour forever. Logo blue, the size of the sky.

As a middle-aged woman, the girl will decide it might be an idea to get herself the braces she never got as a child. An act of agency she reassures herself, not of vanity. Who says you cannot force confidence with metal, with a new smile? Besides, these days you can get those invisible braces. Hardly a bother. No, it isn’t vanity. It’s more embarrassing than that. The thing is, she needs a bigger mouth.

You see, when she is deep in thought she has the habit of pinching her front teeth. Between her thumb and index finger. She suspects that as she’s grown older her mouth has grown smaller. Sometimes it’s as if her mouth is still the size of her three-year-old thumb. No wonder it struggles to hold her adult voice. The two front teeth overlap more and more. And she pinches them, hard, at the point where they give way to one another. Holds herself together by the bones, inside her mouth, a dark corduroy pocket. Pinches the teeth towards some kind of impossible seamlessness. Runs a finger over the ridge, over the hard edge of her cross-eyed big girl teeth.

The night before her consultation with the dentist she dreams she is a baby again. In a bassinet on the floor next to her Grandfather who is dying in his bed. The Mother, gone for a walk on the beach, has left her, the sleeping baby, with the sick old man. The girl wakes and starts to cry for the Mother. And the old man, who cannot bear the baby's desperate call, wills his cancerous frame from the sheets and scoops the girl up in his arms even as he sees the glint of his own piss in a bedpan beneath the bed. Together as one, the old man and the crying baby girl inch their way out of the house, across the lawn, towards the beach. On the sand they wait. Inside a thick, noiseless fog they wait and look for the Mother to return.

At the appointment the woman lies back in the dentist's chair, opens her mouth as wide as she can while little mirrors on sticks probe places inside her that she has never seen.

'Did you have an accident when you were young? An injury to the baby teeth?' the dentist asks as he withdraws the sticks from her mouth and her lips pucker. The woman hesitates as she tries to recall her baby teeth. Sensing her confusion the dentist clarifies, 'the white marks on your teeth, indicate some kind of trauma to the baby teeth.'

'Oh,' she says and then quite plainly, 'yes, there was an accident–my front teeth got knocked out when I was two, but the marks are from too much apple juice I think.'

The dentist laughs. 'No, no. The marks are from the accident. The permanent teeth discolour like this when the primary tooth has been injured. Your discoloration is nice and white though, you could always just get the rest of the teeth whitened to match.'

The dentist goes on to tell her the teeth are reasonably healthy. But she is not a suitable candidate for adult braces. Apparently she's had too many teeth removed (the cheaper alternative to braces back in the day) and there's no longer enough to work with to force her mouth bigger or her smile straighter. He tells her in a consolatory tone that he thinks it might look weird anyway. Rabbit teeth on such a delicate face.

The woman is not so disappointed. After so long, at least it makes sense.

And she won't be whitening her teeth. That, she thinks, would just be vanity.

The Dentist turns away from her to make notes and next to him a screen shows an X-ray of the inside of her mouth, the valleys and ridges of her teeth blown up large as icebergs. She stares at the image, grey and white and undulating. And as she looks, what she sees is thick, noiseless fog, and out of the fog, a mother is coming.

The Centre

I arrive at the Centre like the startled white of a horse's eye. Rolled back, full of fear, ready to bolt. The baby screams all the way there. Her screams, also the whites of animal eyes, are intolerable. You see, since I had the baby, there's been a rot in me. As if my recently vacated womb is going bad and taking me with it. And the tiny living girl, helpless in her car seat screams and screams and screams. As if she knows. Screams with such intensity so that my vision smears with a thousand eye whites. Can't see straight, can't think straight. The rot down my cheeks, the rot milking me from the eyes. At roundabouts. Red lights. As I drive, I cry. Drive and cry and drive and cry without consciously doing either. Can't help it. Can't hold it in. And yet, to catch sight of myself in the rear vision mirror, my leaky face next to the baby's contorted by screams, I mostly worry about what the people in other cars will think. That I can't make it stop! And everywhere those tangled eye whites. The commuters frighten me, the baby frightens me. The baby's mother frightens me most of all.

The Centre operates from a house on a steep and narrow residential street. A nurse on the phone had told me I should park in the driveway, save me having to parallel park. The relief of that now, that little salvation. I pull in at five to nine and the rot and screams fall out with me when I open the car door. I go to fetch the baby and my hands shake. I knock and bump the plastic capsule as I drag it from the car.

At the front door I wait, unsure of what to do. It's an ordinary house and I am early. There's a sign with logos, the Centre's sponsors. I stare at the logos as they swim and try again to think.

The door opens.

'Lucia?' says a woman in navy blue scrubs. She has a brown ponytail and tanned forearms, tattooed and strong.

'Yes, hi,' I try to smile, sound bright, but my voice won't hold. And a strange whimper flies out of me. Shoots out like trapped apple core. More of a choke. Snot flies, nipples dilate, two dark swampy patches appear through my shirt.

The woman steps towards me. She releases the capsule with the baby in it, heavy as a church bell, from my lopsided grip and brings us inside.

Ding dong goes an electric buzzer. One of those sensor doorbells that dairies have to announce the arrival and departure of customers or thieves. And something about the tone of the bell, mechanical, rude–the way it marks me confirms what I already know.

Ding dong. Down, down, down.

Ding dong. This is descent.

'Sorry about the bell,' the nurse says seeing me flinch. 'We have quite a few mums with toddlers. Little escape artists so we need to know who's coming and going.'

'It's ok,' I reply, a stupid thing to say.

'You've got a lot to talk about this morning, sweetheart,' coos the nurse as we make our way down a hallway. She speaks to the baby with a sing-song indifference that is at once reassuring but also makes clear, we're not hearing the same thing. I'm tuned in from a different planet. A murderous planet. And we can't both be right. One of us is mistaken, one of us is crazy.

'I'm Kelly,' the woman says, glancing back, as if to check I haven't run away or been swallowed up by the floor. 'It's ok Lucia. It's going to be ok.'

We enter a living room.

She nods at a brown corduroy sofa that is low and buckled in the middle. 'Take a seat,' she says.

I sink into the forlorn upholstery, grateful to be told what to do.

'Right. Why don't we see if your little lady,–what's her name?'

'Grace.'

'Why don't we see if Grace wants a feed, are you breastfeeding?'

'Yes. Well. Trying to.'

Kelly shoots me a crooked smile. Kind but not ready to indulge my bad attitude just yet.

'Ok, how about some boob, some snuggle time aye, Grace? I'm going to get mummy a nice of cup of tea.'

Kelly lifts the baby with its blotched, desperate face out of the car seat and puts her in my arms. With the practicality of a plumber, she takes two cushions from another couch, props one on my lap beneath the baby and wedges one behind my back. Positions the baby towards my breast. 'Comfortable?' she asks.

I nod and fumble with the buttons on my shirt. 'Thank you.'

The baby shakes her head and arches her back. Gusts of tiny fierce breath pitter-patter my chest. Another shriek and she chomps down on my nipple, the too-small mouth, a hot gummy claw. All at once fire shreds flesh meets a milky let down.

The room fills with quiet.

'That's the way Grace. That's what you wanted aye,' Kelly chimes. 'I'll be back in a minute, Lucia. Try to relax.'

Though sceptical, I take a breath. An ashy, gravel breath, but a breath none the less. Perhaps the first I've taken in weeks. I take another.

From a sunken couch at the bottom of the world, I breathe.

So let me describe how things work at the Centre.

There is a large whiteboard above an old, unused fireplace.

As each mother and baby descends into the Centre by way of the ding-dong bell their vitals are recorded on the board:

Lucia and Grace, in at 8.55 am, full day stay, 8 weeks, BF.

9:15 BF right side 5 minutes, mls unknown

9.20 sleep on mum...

The living room is snagged in a 1950's time warp. Floral wallpaper. Houndstooth carpet that looks a bit like placenta sieved into an army of tiny squares. Mustard drapes the hue of newborn shit. There are more couches, armchairs, and cushions crammed into the space than is usual in a home. They all carry the body bruises of past lives, indented, faded, choked full of goodwill.

The couches, I learn, are important. Each mother-baby duo is assigned their own soft patch. We feed our babies there. When they refuse to sleep in the cots we are instructed to hold them on us. The nurses show us how to settle our overtired and upset babies in our arms, to pat their swaddled bottoms rhythmically, to mimic our own heartbeats. And sometimes they laugh and say, 'slow down. Nobody's heart beats that fast.'

While we sit for hours on couches the staff get to know the difficulties we are having with our babies. We are prescribed strategies and routines for feeding and sleeping. We learn, again, about tired signs; that our young babies cannot cope being awake for more than twenty minutes at a time–and we wonder fretfully how it is then, that *our baby* is able to stay up all night.

And so, you see the couches are important. Because more than anything, we're able to watch each other. Mothers watching mothers on couches. And in our numbers, able to see,

admit, surrender to the sitting. Just sitting. Sitting and holding and feeding. That this really is the job.

The kitchen area is a lactating hive of scales, sterilisers, bottles, motorised breast pumps. Babies weighed before and after each feed. Everything observed and recorded. Millilitres of breastmilk drunk, time on each breast, signs of fast or slow let down, how well baby is latching, could there be tongue tie, allergies, reflux the nurses ask as the babies throw out balled fists on the end of angry stick arms. Those of us whose babies are deemed by the scales not to be drinking enough are tethered to pumps to 'up our supply' and often at first, we cry or shut down with shame, failure, the rot in us, while pastel yellow machines suck the dregs from our breasts. Because even when they tell us it will all be fine, we now know for sure, the scales don't lie.

Of course, the bottle feeding is a whole other thing. The babies aren't having it! Those sallow rubber teats. The nurses have all sorts of tricks up their sleeves, but the babies have theirs. Every now and then applause breaks out. Another twenty millilitres in a pea sized stomach! One more baby weaned, a mother can return to work!

The babies come out looking drunk and confused.

And for every mother unsettled by the protocol there are those who relish it–the control and certainty–who break down not in shame, but in relief.

Whatever we make of the tactics, when it comes down to it, we're all here for the same damn thing.

We need help.
We need sleep.
Mostly, we need to not be alone.

There's Lucy. A doctor. She's been coming to The Centre since her baby Anne was four weeks old. She has an air of confidence about her, air being the operative word. It's fragile. She speaks in certain terms about Anne. Has applied the Centres' routines with military precision. And most of the time it works. But of course, Anne is a baby so sometimes it doesn't.

On those days, like today, she comes back to the Centre.

Lucy is slim and athletic with a plump top lip. I imagine the lip quivering when she cries. But I can't imagine Lucy crying. Just the lip. Not as part of Lucy's face. She has the

demeanour of a machine in trouble shoot mode. Moves and talks fast. The fast talking is more coachy then conversational. We are introduced and she fixes me with a look like a firm handshake. Tells me loudly how wonderful the Centre is. How she'd be lost without it. How truly incredible the staff are. And though it's genuine, it's also a sales pitch, a performance appraisal. Five stars for the baby plumbers! Today she is back at the Centre for supervised feeding. At three months Anne is still refusing to bottle feed and Lucy is going back to her practice in a week. She needs Anne to 'smash this one out the park'. The daycare Lucy has chosen is high quality she tells me; offers flexible options for early drop offs or late pick-ups, boasts smaller than standard teacher child ratios. She's been lucky to get Anne in with its long wait list. But of course, fancy as it is, they won't take Anne if they can't feed her.

Anne is a beautiful baby with puffed up cheeks and rollie-pollie arms. All the staff at the Centre know her, she seems not to mind being passed around. And as I watch sweet Anne plump and unbothered in other people's arms, I can't help thinking how very clever, her refusal to let go of her mother's breast.

As for Helen, I recognise in her that white rim of fear that is mine, too. Crowded out by a sunny disposition, all the fear trapped in something as small as a nail clipping, something as shallow as that. The perpetual thin hum of not being enough. Only now our lack has been made flesh in bonnie daughters who are small and alert and moving in the wrong direction on the Plunket growth chart. Heaved from our wombs average and chunky they've been gently dipping in weight percentiles since. From fiftieth to twenty-fifth. And the failure we feel for not fattening them up makes true what we've suspected all along–our wrongness writ large in mammalian milk.

And yet, here's the thing about meeting a mother who mirrors you–you get to see yourself with a degree of separation, and that ten inches of mushy brown sofa, it's the most distance you've had from your broken brain since the baby was born.

Helen is the blonde, dolly-eyed version of me. Descended into the Centre as our babies turned eight weeks old. A good four weeks after the rot had already set in. Because we kept telling ourselves that we weren't that bad. Surely, we weren't that bad. How could we be? What about the women sheltering with babies in domestic violence shelters, the mothers and babies who really need help? We had no excuse for our defective nipples, our ache and desperation as mothers. Of all the things wrong with us, this undeserving need was the worst!

Like me, Helen is anxious in that way that puts others at ease. This has always been the goal of our anxiousness. For everyone to be comfortable and okay. Our mothers. Our

babies. We're experts in chatty small talk, open, bubbly, disarming. So much so, it seems innate. We beam on the outside as we simmer and burn below.

Within thirty minutes I know everything and nothing about Helen.

She has haemorrhoids from childbirth that won't go away.

She used to be a teacher but since having kids has gone into pyramid scheme organic skin care, she can do it from home and makes twice the money in half the time.

She lives with her husband and daughters in a neighbour-less brick house on a long rural road known for its high crash rate.

I watch as Helens chats away with bright-eyed Eve in her arms. They have identical eyes, mother, and daughter. The brightest blue. As though all the blueness of the sky and sea has been pressed into four buttons. Helen worries Eve doesn't sleep, drink, nurse enough, about how small she is compared to the other babies who are cherubic and rubbery. And I know what she means because I have those same concerns, as I stroke Grace's small thigh, soft and sweet as buds in Spring.

And yet, it's obvious to me that Eve is fine.

Yes, she is small, but so is Helen.

'She's just so alert and awake,' Helen says as if this is a problem, that Eve isn't drowsier, floppier.

Yes, Eve is small and wiry and prefers to snack at the breast. But she is strong.

Just look at the way she holds her beautiful, bulbous baby head with those button eyes full of sea on her barely born neck with such fierceness and strength and joy.

And soon when I look at my own baby, I see she is the same. Alive, and strong, and her ferocious cries, though they tear at me like internal teeth, are not the cries of a baby failing to thrive.

Gwyn is different. She sits with her son Rory on a faded pink armchair that curves outwards like a throne made of cheeks. Still, very still but for the slight rock of the armchair. Not soothing rocking, not heartbeat rocking, lifeless rocking. The drip-drip of something damp, alone, in darkness. Rory feeds and sleeps beautifully. He doesn't cry. Gwyn only needs to tilt him towards her breast, and he will find his own way, latch, her fleshy chest shuddering as he draws long, loud, efficient gulps. The whiteboard tells us Rory is getting everything he needs. Gwyn makes it look easy. But Gwyn is dead in the eyes. And though she doesn't want to talk, her stillness in the chair, the way she slouches into its linen roses tells us she isn't ready to leave.

Who comes, goes, how long they stay at the Centre starts and ends with a woman called Bev. Bev has run the place for fifteen years. You don't see much of her over the course of a day, dotted around in purposeful bursts. Bev spends most of her time in an office at the end of the hall where she meets and assesses mothers as they come in. On your first day, as soon as your baby is fed and settled the nurses usher you towards Bev's office, 'your angel is fine, we'll be right there, no need to worry.'

Bev insists on seeing you alone. Wants you for all of twenty galactic minutes not to worry that something you say, do, let slip in front of your baby is going to harm them.

You start to think Bev might be some maternal Wizard of Oz. Fixing mothers from behind that closed door with a matriarchal pull of strings, some secret knowledge; the courage, heart, smarts with which to plug your maternal lack.

Her office is small and cluttered and orderly. A desk with a plastic phone on it–an old-school landline with a curly cord. A framed family photo–Bev in a cream tank top with two large, bread loaf arms wrapped around a team of well slept and average looking grandchildren. One window with a half-drawn blind–slatted slits for seeing out, not in. A paper filing system. No parenting or academic books on the shelves. And as I take a seat in the chair opposite Bev, I see it: an entire wall plastered in photos of babies. Thousands of bug eyes and gummy smiles. The thing is alive. Growing out and across like a birth mark, a mash of faces, suns, moons, and eggs.

'Some of those kids are teenagers now,' says Bev when she sees me looking at it. 'All babies we're had through the Centre. It's become a bit of a tradition. Mums, once they've been through, bring in a photo of their bub and we add it to the wall. The fruitcakes, the dreamers, the firecrackers. I never forget them, you know. Not a single one.'

Success stories. I'd read the testimonials on the Centre's website. And here was the proof. The blinding beam of happy babies. Oh God. I want so badly to make the wall.

'Ok Lucia,' says Bev. She has small intense eyes that look out from lashes clumped with mascara into little black swords. 'Grace will be fine with the nurses. Let's talk about you. Things are tough, are they?'

I blink. The rot, the apple core pressed up in my throat.

'Um, yes,' I stutter. 'I've been finding things tough.'

Bev nods. Slow, approving, right answer.

'I heard you come in this morning,' she says still nodding. 'Sounded pretty tough to me.'

I force a dismissive giggle. ‘Other babies seem to love going in the car, they go to sleep. But not Grace. Soon as I strap her in, she starts to scream.’

Bev doesn’t laugh. Her face remains stern and warm.

‘Tell me about you, Lucia...Bit of a high achiever, are you?’

‘Excuse me?’

‘High achiever,’ Bev repeats. ‘Lots of the women who end up here are. A Types. Really smart. Run companies, perform surgery then baby comes along and throws them through a loop.’

Of course I hadn’t thought of myself as a high achiever. More ‘imposter syndrome Type’ than ‘A Type’. And yet, there’s something so unexpected, almost taboo, in Bev’s casual assertion that this kind of woman might struggle as a mother, it catches me off guard. Cracks me open with some surprising truth.

‘Really? But don’t you mostly see mums who need proper help? Teen mums. Mums who have no one around?’

‘Sometimes. We run a special program for young parents. But in general, the teen mums we see don’t have such a hard time in the early days. Bonding. Breastfeeding, sleeping when their babies sleep, doing a whole lot of nothing with their babies. It’s the mothers used to running things, performing, managing. They can really struggle. I’ve been doing this for fifteen years. It’s what I’ve seen.

Bev gestures at the wall of happy babies. ‘Don’t get me wrong. Most make excellent mothers in the end, but the journey there, well...’

And so, in a small room eclipsed by baby photos I open up to Bev. To this doughy grandmother with arms like loaves. Tell her I’m a second time mum and still can’t figure it out. That Grace’s daddy is overseas and wasn’t there for the birth. This birth or the one before that. So, for now I’m back home with my parents. Resentful, angry. So angry as if something–I don’t know what–is all their fault. A bratty mother. And I will have to head back to my important job pretty soon or lose it, and well, I’m confused. Because maybe I don’t want it anymore. Confess I’m not a natural mother. Wonder in slight, ghost tones if my baby is angry at me for the nearly-abortion. Damaged already. And when the baby cries, I cry too. And sometimes I swear beneath my breath. Swear at the baby. Losing my mind on three hours sleep each night, my sore defective breasts. Tell her I want to love the baby properly. Like a proper mother. Tell her how frightened I am of the baby’s mother. That there must be something very wrong with the baby’s mother, for her to be growing teeth in her womb.

Bev isn’t fazed.

‘Lots of mums need a bit of extra help in the early days to feel better, Lucia.’

Then she puts in a call to a doctor on speed dial.

‘How soon can you go if I can get you in?’ she loud-whispers at me with the receiver squished between her thick neck and gold studded ear. The dial tone reaches out like a small, depressed pulse. And while I’m relieved to have Bev act on behalf of my parched brain, I’m also unsure. That my mothering needs medicating. I mean. Maybe it does. And yet something in that bleating dial tone etches a sadness, a warning in me.

Because maybe it’s okay, for a little while longer, for it to be this hard?

And when Bev reminds me that sleep deprivation is a form of torture, that a dangerously tired mother is doing no one any favours, least of all her baby, and that for some women the best they can do is put their baby in the laundry for a night and close the door, and the baby will learn to sleep, and the baby’s mother, without the claw of screams learns to sleep again too, I know that something is indeed very wrong and broken, but that perhaps this time, it isn’t me.

‘But won’t the baby be terrified on her own?’ I ask, imagining the black of that room, its icebergs and eels.

‘It’s just a night or two, Lucia. The baby will be fine. She won’t remember. She needs her mum to be ok. She needs a mother who is well.’

It’s not that I don’t believe Bev. And oh, how a part of me wants to. But the thing that my withered brain cannot think its way through, is how anyone can ever know what a baby is trying to tell them if they are not around to hear.

And in my gut, in my belly, I can’t ignore what feels like a dangerous and unremembered thing...

‘She’s sleeping like an angel,’ says Kelly. ‘Come take a look.’

We tip-toe into a bedroom. Dim, curtains drawn, a small transistor radio cloaks the room in makeshift voices.

There she is. My baby.

The perfect curve of her caramel cheek, the rise and fall, thank God, of breath in her sweet acorn body. The flutter of an eyelash. A tiny earth-shattering twitch.

‘You should try and get some rest,’ Kelly nods at a single bed in the corner of the room.

And so, I lay my body on the bed's cool laundered quilt, and I wait. For whatever comes first, for sleep, for the swaddled child to break free of her wrapper, fling arms out into the womb-less world, as if she knows she's falling.

But sleep is impossible. I lie there, eyes glued to the cot's silhouette. Wait for sleep the way you might wait for a pin to meet a bouncing balloon.

I turn my ears towards the sounds in the room, to that little transistor radio, two men talking, an interview with an old man called Lazarus Lake. He has an eccentric lilt to his voice, perpetually amused, a voice that falls out through the scrawl of his beard. Lazarus is the architect of the toughest running race in the world. Sixty miles of brutal terrain with climbs equivalent to the ascent and descent of Everest twice. Most years no one finishes. Contestants don't sleep for days. Come back with limbs lacerated by brambles and thorns, jogging crucifixions, or resurrections, they don't know which. For exactly one dollar sixty anyone can enter but not everyone is chosen to run. Lazarus selects his motley crew via an essay each contestant is required to submit. He's all about the story. The fuel, the demon, the odds. The thing to be conquered. Once chosen they show up to the race with a number plate, and a plaid shirt. Gifts for Lazarus, a sort of tradition. Then, in the middle of the night, after the sounding of a horn, the runners line up at a yellow gate in the woods. Lazarus lights a cigarette, takes a drag and the race begins.

When the radio presenter asks what one thing the runners find most challenging, Lazarus chuckles. Says it's not the physical stuff. Not even mental. These people are tough and well prepared. The thing, he says, that catches the runners out most is navigation. Losing their way.

The wayfinding part of our brains, he warns, has atrophied.

I think about the babies in the laundry then. Crying in the dark for mothers that don't come. Sleep trained to save mothers who were sleep trained to save mothers who had to hurry back to work, to being thin and independent, to who they were before, or should be now, or couldn't be ever. The anguish we feel when our babies cry–protective and old as deep time–can't place it, told to ignore it, try to fix it, want it gone, cos you know, Happy Mum, Happy baby. So, we buy all the stuff, the slings, prams, jolly jumpers, white noise machines, artificial nipples, and arms. Left alone in rooms in village-less buildings feeling unlike ourselves for too long, for generations, and we need holding.

We've always needed holding.

And yet the holding is a frightening thing. We become mothers and the first baby we hold is our own. Whenever our mother's friend passed the new baby around, we squirmed.

Just knew in our arms the infant would shriek, break, dislike us. For some of us it is still a shock we've made it here at all, when through our youth the billboards yelled 'freeze your eggs, live now!' as we sat on buses and trains or drove to work. Were we not wise to put it off, this thing that wasn't living?

Is this the atrophy of maternal instinct, of mother baby bonds passed down and alive inside rituals and acts of care, inside skin, touch, voice, inside days and days of holding? We cannot know because we don't have words for the thing we are mourning, for the startle reflex we can't outgrow, the unremembered thing, so we reach again for phantom limbs to catch and guide and soothe us.

Tougher and softer than we've ever been.

Still sleepless I try to imagine I'm one of Lazarus Lake's runners, that my achy legs and swollen feet are masterful and enduring, have covered ground the height of Everest and earned their right to rest, to sleep. Somehow it feels like the easier thing. Easier than the thing happening right here, at the Centre, Gwyn, Lucy and Helen, invisible and brave, bodies and minds torn inside out around a sacred bond, this thing so much harder than being free...surrender to and for a child.

And as I drift off the old man Lazarus Lake chuckles and chuckles.

Before my body has even warmed the bed, I wake from a dreamless place. Wake knowing that baby Grace is about to stir. And sure enough, there she is, the spasm of her small body in the cot causes a mobile of fuzzy felt zoo animals strung up above her to jiggle with life.

She calls for me.

I rise up, a mountain.

The rest of the afternoon at the Centre passes in cycles of feeding, sleeping, milky tea and biscuits. The white board is awash with blue marker pen, a record of all the mothering we've been doing and even it looks tired.

At four I go into the kitchen for a final feed.

Weigh, nurse, weigh, pump–offer Grace the bottle, liquid gold, while she purses her defiant mouth.

'Bless her, she's so alert,' says Kelly when Grace catches her eye. 'You could try feed her in the bedroom, without the noise and distraction.'

It is different in the bedroom now, curtains thrown open, no longer a dark nest for sleeping babies. I settle into a chair and look out the window to where a vast and melancholy sky signals the turn of the day. It's been raining. Everything wet and shiny. The peel of car tyres turning on slick roads like Sellotape coming off the roll. And something about the sky, the hour, that final pale thrust of light before the dark stirs a quiet valour in my bones.

I try again to nudge the teat between Grace's lips, watch the milk stall, going nowhere. Quite suddenly, the bottle slips. Bumps her on the forehead with a thud. 'Oh,' I gasp and pull her in close. Wrap all of her into me with instinctive firmness so that the pressure might relieve the hurt. But she doesn't cry out as I think she will. And when I lower her into my lap to inspect that spot of skull where the bone has not yet grown over and she is gloriously soft and new, when I look at her then, she looks right back, and with the dying light of the day in the nets of her eyes, she laughs.

Underarms

Something big happened this week. I got my first deodorant. Apparently, I've started to smell like a woman.

A woman has two kinds of smells.

The first smell of a woman comes at the end of a day, after work, after she's chopped onions or shopped for groceries, when the sun has swung right round the Rimu tree and looks in through the living room window like a lemonade eye and we lay out the nearly-dry laundry all over the Moroccan rug so that our clothes soak up the rays of the sun, the smell of the sun, the bright of the sun.

Come to think of it, the sun is a bit like deodorant. The way it gets into musty cracks, damp folds, swampy bits and, how can I describe it– uncrinkles things, coats things in a white shadowless crisp.

The hour of smelling like a woman has always been one of my favourite times of the day. It falls somewhere between afternoon tea and dinner time. We're home from school, bellies full of marmite toast, lunch boxes emptied of orange peels and washed in the sudsy sink. It's like a new day inside an old day. A baby day inside a mama day. But inside this new day we're not rushing to get out the door. We flop around and even mum flops around, lies on her back in the middle of the laundry with her eyes closed and the sun on her face.

Usually, we like to go lie beside her. Watch her eyeballs twitch under thin skin lids like cabbage butterflies. She keeps her eyes closed, curtained against the too bright sun, but she knows we're there. She smiles. And then she opens her arms in this slow, dramatic way, slaps them out wide where they land in the laundry and we know what's coming next, she says 'Cuddle, girls?'

We pile in. Wrap as much of ourselves into the hills of her as we can, and when we can't get any closer or make any more of our surfaces meet her arms snap shut around us, a precious bracelet clasp.

Sometimes we just lie there like that, listening to the sounds that bob about in our ears. Birdsong, a breeze moving through green, the muffled shriek of some happy, faraway kid. Other times she'll ask about our days and we take turns filling her in. Tell her about the prickles we got in our feet playing games of Manhunt at the peninsula and laugh because she keeps calling it Manhole. Tell her about any noteworthy achievements. Gracie won a

bookmark for the best sentence starting with an *ing* word. I got to take Owen to the sick bay when he mistook citric acid for sherbet and threw up all over his desk.

Lately I've been telling her other things too. How Sophie cried again today, three different times. I ask if it's a bad thing to cry too much. I try not to make it sound mean but since I turned ten there's been way more drama with the girls in my class and Sophie is always in the middle of it. I heard two girls whispering about how Sophie's tears aren't real, that she cries for no reason, just to get attention. And I've been wondering how 'attention' tears are different to 'real' tears or what Sophie's tears are made of if they aren't real.

Mum thinks for a while and then answers the question without answering the question, says 'poor old Sophie. Maybe she saves up her tears for school.'

It's on afternoons like this, inside bracelet arms and piles of clean washing, that I get to know the smells of my mother. Smells that bubble up from her hidden places. Never unpleasant but sometimes strong so that I have to breathe a bit shallow or find a new crook for my face. Whatever way the day has shaped the smells that come from my mother, I learn these are the smells of a woman.

The first smell.

The smell a woman's body makes all on its own.

Like soil, like jasmine at dusk. Like magic.

The second smell of a woman comes from the outside. Smells that live in potions, creams, shampoos, and lipsticks. These smells are called scents and fragrances. Women keep them in bottles so they can't run away.

Mum has always displayed her perfumes in the same spot on her dresser. Gorgeous glass ladies with flower sap wombs. She tells us how she would always buy perfume whenever she travelled to a new place, so she could remember what it was like to be there, who she was then. She'll swipe an oily lick on our wrists and say, 'this was me in New York,' or 'this is wine and rocks and a sunset in the Cinque Terre.' And I get this feeling that the world is a wonderful, beautiful, irresistible place and my mother has seen it all.

The second smell of a woman masks the first. It's not who she is in real life but it's who she chooses to be at a particular moment in time. It's the one she wears on her skin for you to remember her by.

Now that you know about the two smells of a woman let me get back to the story about my first deodorant.

It’s a Thursday I remember because we had dance class after school and after dance we went to the library to play on the computers until the library closed. Then we sat outside, by the water fountain, waiting for mum to pick us up eavesdropping on the teenagers who swarm about for the free library WIFI like scruffy bees clacking their skateboards and eating bakery food. Thursdays are one of Mum’s long workdays and sometimes we’re all a bit tired and over it by the time we get home. When this happens one of us might say, ‘Should we have some *You’re the Boss time* after tea?’

You’re the Boss time is a thing Mum invented. It’s where she plays with us one on one in this close-up kind of way. It’s pretty simple. She sets a timer on her phone, looks us in the eye and says, ‘Ok for the next ten minutes you are the boss–you have my full and undivided attention, what do you want to do?’ And then she does whatever we want to do. That’s it! That’s how it works. Oh, and there are four rules. No money, no cars, no screens, and most important–when the timer goes off, You’re The Boss Time is done. Mum says that’s what makes it special. That it ends.

Sometimes I just want to do her hair. Sometimes we play Lego or The Floor is Lava. Sometimes we’re so tired we can’t think of what to do and we cry until the timer goes off. When this happens, Mum sits with us and makes her eyes into soft brown acorns as though our tears are just as important as a game of Floor is Lava.

But my all-time favourite thing to do with Mum when I’m the boss is jump on the trampoline. I kind of know when I say ‘trampoline!’ she doesn’t really want to do it, not at first. She’d probably rather I play with her hair. But she’s good at sticking to the rules so she says *okaaay* in this long way, like she needs a moment to remember she’s not the boss anymore and then she goes to the toilet to ‘empty her bladder’ and follows me into the backyard.

Seeing Mum climb through the zippy slit in the netting and onto the trampoline makes my teeth beam like headlights that I can’t turn off. When she starts the timer on her phone and says, ‘your ten minutes start now!' my stomach explodes into milkweed and butterflies. And even though she holds her boobs and yelps about her ‘bloody pelvic floor’ I’m always impressed with how great her tramp skills are. It makes me think there are some things adults don’t forget. That their bodies remember. Like how to control a double bounce or point their toes during a cartwheel or dance to an olden-days singer called Tiffany.

It's an epic double bounce that gives me the smell. The bounce takes the smell from Mum and puts it into me.

This is how it happens.

We're holding hands. We start to jump. Our knees bend in time, our feet sink into the trampoline's stretchy mesh palm. Mum sinks deeper. I can feel the double bounce brewing. An elastic jolt. Then up, up, up I go into an endless loop of blue.

I scream and soar and make wind with my armpits while mum guides the arc of my rise and fall with her outstretched arms. We land in a heap. My stomach lands too. My hands, still inside Mum's, our hands like clams.

'Oh love!' Mum says and pinches my sleeve to her face. 'You smell like a little woman.' Her eyes glow soft like flat Coca-Cola. I swan my head towards my neck and take a whiff. And just like magic, there it is.

The next day after school we get ice creams in town and Mum slips me a brown paper pharmacy bag. 'Look what I got you,' she whispers over the boysenberry swirl I've licked into a neat mound. She opens the bag just enough for me to glimpse a cosmetic blur that looks a lot like my ice-cream. 'Your own deodorant,' she beams and presses the bag into my lap.

'Thanks, Mum,' I say, and bite into my cone.

At home I take the deodorant out of the bag and put it on the breakfast bar. A cylinder of smooth opaque plastic in a rose and copper label. The brand name *Essano* is embossed across the top of the lid, white on white like cloud on clouds and I run my thumb over the delicate word the way you stroke a kitten's nose. My fingers curl around the thing's cool, creamy skin. *Essano* appears again down the side of the bottle in gold leaf lettering just above the swirly bit that reads *Mandarin & Aloe vera Deodorant*. 'Essano,' I mouth the word making a mental note to add it on my list of names for future children. I study the information on the bottle as though I'm decoding a note from a secret admirer. *Aluminium free, 8 hours protection, our promise to you.* There are instructions–*apply to clean, dry underarms throughout the day for best results* and cryptic explanations–*our natural deodorant is made with powerful actives that eliminate body odour caused by bacteria* and an ingredients list that reads like a science experiment crossed with a Witch's cauldron. After I've inhaled all the words on the label I spiral open the lid and it makes a seamless whooshing sound, like a door pretending to be a bookshelf that has rotated around in a wall to reveal some secret room.

And the secret is out.

The lidless deodorant is a glistening, rolling eye, a crystal ball, a lemonade planet. And all around the mysterious orb a force field of magical mandarin scent.

‘What’s that?’ Grace asks when she finds me in the kitchen the kitchen with the deodorant.

'It's my deodorant’ I say and emphasise the 'my'.

‘Smells good, what does it do?’

‘Eliminates odour.’

‘What’s odour?’

‘A kind of smell.’

‘What does 'eliminate' mean?’

‘It’s when you make something disappear.’

‘Cool. Can I have a go?’

I look at my sister and consider the request.

‘Put out your wrist,’ I say.

And I roll the wet mandarin eye onto her skin and wait to see if she will disappear.

For the rest of the afternoon, I carry the deodorant around with me looking at it in different locations around the house. On my dresser. On the windowsill. Tucked into my undies drawer. I turn it on its side and roll it down the hall. The thing glides fast over the carpet and goes an impressive distance before it veers left and hits Mum’s feet. She bends down to pick it up.

‘Have you tried it yet?’ she asks.

I shake my head. ‘I was wondering where to keep it.’

‘Come. Let me show you,’ she says and beckons me into the bathroom.

‘You can keep it in here with my things.’

My mother slides open the top bathroom drawer.

Her drawer. The forbidden drawer. The drawer that contains all her cosmetic treasure.

‘Really?’ I say gaping at the curves and lines of all her little pots, tubes, and wands.

‘Yup.’ And she stands my deodorant in the drawer, taps it shut. ‘Look, it fits perfectly.’

Then, like she hasn’t just given me the world, she takes the deodorant out again. ‘Come on love, I’ll show you how it works.’

She puts her hands on my shoulders and with the boysenberry vessel pressed between us steers me towards the mirror at the end of the hall.

'Ok so you won't need to use much. But sometimes if we have a really active day, or a school speech we're a bit nervous about, our body will talk to us with smells.'

As Mum speaks to my reflection in the mirror I notice that my eyes have tiny people dancing in them, wisps like capping waves, that it's us, me, and her, reflected over and over, making my dark eyes bright with life.

Mum goes on to talk about odours, bacteria, how it's all natural, how there are very few truly bad smells, maybe neglect, fear, unattended death… but I'm not listening so much to the lesson as surrendering to the trance she has me in, the spell I'm under. Mum's voice, the two of us infinite as capping seas, the mandarin scent of my first deodorant laced with goodness, care, forbidden drawers, ice cream, sundrenched laundry, a place to land. I'm so light with fumes I might just float away.

'Right, love. Arm up,' says Mum and guides my hand skyward.

With our arms raised we are like ballerinas, two crescent moons. My eyes flit back and forth between my own underarm and my mother's, the petal flesh of our soft parts.

'When did you get your own deodorant, Mum? Did Grandma get it for you?'

'I don't remember. She must have, I guess. I just don't remember.'

'You can't remember when you got the smell of a woman?' I ask, surprised. And when she doesn't reply I am gentle, 'maybe it was from a double bounce?'

'Maybe,' she smiles. 'Maybe.'

'I reckon I'll remember, Mum. I reckon I'll remember this.'

I meet my mother's eyes in the mirror then, meet the milky moonscape of our related underarms and something passes between us. The way you know something not as thought but as body. The way a child knows a thing it cannot yet say. And it dawns on me that there will be other smells, hidden places, velvet bits, and openings still to come. That this is a prelude and who knows how far my mother can travel before the depths of me are too deep. That she can take me so far, equipping me with magic, kairos time and mandarin muscle memory.

'Ready...?'

Mum takes the deodorant and stripes my small pit.

It's wet and cool and hot. I feel everything. I laugh because it tickles.

In the morning, I decide to put the deodorant in my school bag.

There's something thrilling about taking the deodorant to school. I sit in class and think about it zipped into the front pocket of my bag, emitting its womanly scent, the magic escaping. I wonder if the others can tell there's something different about me today.

At recess we sit on the school veranda, me, Sophie, and a few other girls from our class. As usual Sophie eyes up what we're eating, flaunts a strap of strawberry fruit leather while she makes statements disguised as questions about the items in our lunchboxes. 'Is that left over rice? Doesn't it taste weird cold?' or 'Your mum always gives you nuts aye, Keira, that must get a bit boring, does it?'

We tend to ignore her, so she switches tactics, rips the last strip of fruit leather into parts and bestows it on her chosen few.

Just then Mahlie, who is on my netball team comes over and sits with us.

'Hi Ruth,' she says, 'you want to walk to the game tomorrow?'

Before I can answer Sophie has narrowed her eyes.

'You're not in our class,' she says to Mahlie. 'I don't know, girls what do you think, I don't know if I really want kids from other classes eating with us. I like it better when it's just us.'

Mahlie raises an eyebrow. 'Well, that's dumb,' she says.

And we all take a unified breath inwards.

Now here's the thing. We've been here before. Where we explain to Sophie that in fact we don't feel that way, that we're happy to eat with others who aren't in our class etc, etc and it's a play right into her hands, just the drama she's craving. Mahlie is right. It's dumb.

I sit there for a moment. Look again at Sophie's face, knowing the haughtiness will soon morph into tears. I think about what Mum said. About how Sophie saves her tears up for school. I think about my mum.

'Hey guys, wanna see something?' I say.

I leap up and go to my bag, zip open the front pocket, pull out the deodorant. My heart thumps, what am I doing?–this could go badly.

The gold leaf lettering on the label dazzles in the sun.

'My mum got me this,' I say rejoining the group, 'It's just deodorant. But it smells so good!'

The girls gather around. Sophie with her narrowed eyes.

I swivel the lid off, exposing the deodorant's liquid eye and then I roll the cool wetness around and around the skin on my wrist. The girls lean in, sniff at the air.

'Yeah that's so good,' says Mahlie. 'Smells fruity.'

'How about we all put it on?' I suggest tentatively. 'Let's stink the place out with mandarin!'

The girls contract around me in a ring, line up the undersides of their forearms making a kind of fleshy star. I do Mahlie first. Then I do Sophie. Roll the scent on slowly, all along her arm where there are little freckles. When I look up her face is soft, with glazed over eyes, like she's under my spell. I hold the deodorant out to her.

'You can do the others,' I say, and the girls hold out their arms.

Hanging around

You hung around that night. At first I thought the hanging around was a promising sign. That the arrangement was working.

You'd moved out two weeks earlier. Into your own place. Framed it as a way to work on our relationship. At least that's how I heard it. When you told me. Only after the rental agreement was signed, deposit paid, keys in hand. But I wasn't against it. A way to create space. To work on things. I wanted that too. Because even though we'd been sleeping in separate beds in different rooms for months we were still under the same roof. Breathing the same air. Not enough space. Or a stifling gulf. Which was it? Either way it wasn't working. Every time we inhaled, the air we breathed back out was reptilian. Breath by breath. We turned the place cold.

Over a few short months I'd made that house into my sanctuary. Like some deranged nester. Like I knew what was coming. Turned a gecko into a pet with a name. Flamingo pink walls. There were those three lightbulbs. The ones that give off warm light. Say *warm* on the box. I'd brought them back with me after our last trip home. Inside my suitcase inside a one-way flight back to you. LED bulbs, still energy efficient, but just so much more cozy than the bulbs you got there; bulbs the shape of a menacing coil, albino snakes, zapping rooms white as fridge light. Say *cool* on the box.

I put one of the warm bulbs in my room, one in the girl's room. And I was saving one. I can't remember why. I think maybe I'd decided you didn't care about warm light the way I did. The cool light was what you were used to. Perfectly efficient for seeing with. How silly of me. To think about lightbulbs in measures of seeing and feeling. That light should be forgiving. Maybe I just needed to know I had warmth in reserve.

You messaged around dinnertime to see if you could stop in. On your way home from work. Say goodnight to the girls. Do the bedtime routine. That was part of the arrangement. That you could do that. That we could still do that together.

And you showed up just as the girls and I were playing our version of musical statues. On the long skinny driveway beneath the Rapunzel wall. The version where the one who turns around and shouts freeze must also make the music. Hum a tune, wiggle their bum. All

pretend and lovely-like until the tune gets axed, the crooner whips around and turns the creeper into stone. No one wants to get got.

I remember how that night, inside the equatorial dark, bougainvillea sprawled around the house, dense and light as an afro.

You came in gentle, as you always do. Sat with me on the little papyrus seat on the porch and we watched the girls finish their game.

Back inside the house, in the cold blooded light I asked if you wanted to put the girls to bed and read them a story.

You were in your work clothes. Trousers. Creaseless and smooth bar the pleats. Shirt. Tucked in yet lenient over the slight bulge of your belly. And I thought how you would be hungry at this hour. Hollow. That you would want to get home to that new place of yours with all its space and eat something. Your own place, a place I couldn't get to, a place I hadn't turned warm and pink to save myself.

I remember, for a moment I thought about offering you dinner. We had leftovers in the kitchen. But I caught myself. That wasn't part of the arrangment. Besides, I didn't want to jinx what seemed to be a nice enough vibe.

You disappeared with the girls to the end of the house.
I listened to your voice through the walls.
Its boom and melt and rumble.

Now I have to confess. I might be remembering things all wrong. It's hard to know what I actually knew before you told me. And what I knew only once you told me. Because when you told me it was like I already knew. Only I didn't.

What I *do* know, I think, is that on that day, as I listened through walls to you reading Giraffes Can't Dance with your sweet, low East African lilt I was still invested.

Just that week my therapist had asked me what *I* wanted. *Really* wanted. Asked me to think about whether you and I had ever had a genuine emotional bond. He assured me if the bond was there, asphyxiated as it may be, that there was hope, that if we both wanted it, we could fix things.

He suggested I write you a letter.
On the evening you hung around I hadn't written the letter.
But I'd decided I was going to.

Who knows if we had an emotional bond. I wasn't such a great judge of that sort of thing back then. But I was invested. You can't deny that. I'd sold up. Paid off my student loan and the ridiculous interest I'd incurred living overseas for fifteen years. So that I could put down roots. With you. We would drive around Kigali on weekends to look at plots of land. Patches of red earth on sweeping slopes with half built homes inside matchstick scaffolding. How quickly I got attached to a view, blue hills, twinkling lights, to a particular banana grove, passion fruit vine or mango tree. As though these held the key, the cure, the fix. Imagined the garden I would grow, the home I craved.

Never quite able to picture us in it.

And here's the thing. I still feel the burn of that investment. In moments, pockets and flashes when least expecting it, I'm mugged by breathtaking anger minced with grief that you let me do it. Put all my eggs in that basket. Let me get back on that plane. Let me sell the only home I would ever own. Our girls' home. When you'd already put your eggs in someone else's.

And then I loiter. Go back and forth. Weigh up what was mine, what was yours in the whole mess.

Because you let me do it. But you didn't make me.

Sometimes, when I think about the letter I never wrote I take comfort in the knowledge it would have made no difference. But then I wane with a lick of embarrassment that on that night of all nights I was still deluded enough to want to write it.

You were long gone by then.

Or were you?

Perhaps we can agree: we were both half in and half out, each in our own ways, for our own reasons, most of the time. Precariousness had kept us together for so long, we clung to it.

That's not a bond. That's something else.

‘They want you to say prayers,’ you said to me when you reappeared in the living room after storybooks and goodnights. I remember this because I got a small fright. I was lost in thought, transfixed with our pet Gecko on the wall.

‘Ok, night then,’ I said thinking you would leave.

But when I returned to the living room thirty minutes later you were still there. Sitting in one of my eucalyptus chairs with the electric blue upholstery and the cushions printed with abstract hands.

Waiting.

Your shirt sleeves rolled up to the elbow. Smooth black forearms, lovely and unblemished in the surgical white light.

That’s when I thought maybe I wasn’t imagining it. The arrangement *was* working. You were hanging around because you wanted to. Stay a little longer. With your own air to breathe, your own space to retreat to, we would start to find a way back. To us. For the sake of our girls. Talk again maybe, maybe get some help.

I offered you a cup of tea.
You said no.
Then you told me.

Years later your friends will say, ‘but you knew right? Surely you knew. He told us you knew.’

No. No. I didn’t know.

Remember that work party your boss threw? I was six months along. You hadn’t told anyone at the company I was pregnant. That *we* were pregnant. Said you needed more time. So I went along with it, wore loose clothes. No one noticed. I had a small bump I guess. You laughed a lot and introduced me to some of your colleagues the way you would a cute new girlfriend. And then I sat alone, with our small, precious, humiliated bump, listening to a covers band, some old guys, the same guys who owned that place we used to love in Kigali, Mr Chips. Remember?

Remember when you left us waiting at the airport? One flight, eighteen hours we'd been in the air. Both girls are under the age of three. You'd promised me you'd be there. Meet us halfway for once. The girls were so excited to have a night in Dubai, to stay in the hotel, you'd sent them photos of a pristine turquoise pool that glittered the shape of a lotus flower. And then you weren't there. Showed up two hours late. I can't remember why, there was some excuse, but I do remember the waiting, unable to reach you, dangerously tired, minutes ticking on not knowing when or if you'd show up. Rage and exhaustion marked my skin, and below skin there was despair, and below bone and deeper still, wisdom.

I'd made a huge mistake.

When we got to the hotel I locked myself in the bathroom and wept, ceaselessly, from a hole in my sternum, while you took the girls to play in the pool.

I'm not sure why I'm telling you this. Perhaps because for me that day will always feel like the last thing that happened before the beginning of the end.

After you told me, everything I thought I knew was reordered, reshuffled, turned inside out, or right way in, in the space of a breath. I was shot through with truth. There were words. You were saying things like 'she was a friend...someone to talk to...fond of...it just grew.' There was already, at the eye of the confusion, a surprising sense of something like relief. And once you'd told me what you'd come to tell me, there was really nothing left to say. No reason to hang around anymore.

You wanted to leave. I wanted you gone.

Alone in the living room I made a phone call to a friend in another country. Talked and paced in rectangles like a wound up toy. Let my legs believe they were running away. I remember feeling numb and floodlit, sparse as smithereens. And at the same time wired and clear, charged large with adrenalin.

Then. For a long time I sat very still. Watched Liz the pet gecko on the wall. With her plasticine body and lime-slit eyes, quiet and motionless as a small root. Together we kept watch. In the cool, white and unforgiving light. While down the hall, tucked up and wrapped in prayers, our two little girls slept. Yours and mine. Fast asleep and in the dark.

Dead Parts that grow

When you're twenty minutes early for your hair appointment go browse in a second-hand bookshop called Browsers. Notice, as you walk in, a man on a sofa outside the bookstore. The bookshop, the salon and a café meet in an atrium like three snobby friends hanging out. They say–this sofa belongs to everyone, to no one, to us. The man on the sofa looks into an open laptop, head bent forward. You notice his hair. It's all you can see. Brown and lollipop shaped. But it's a quick kind of noticing. Subliminal. You think, is his hair curly or is it just big? Too late, you can't look back. That would be obvious. Settle on big. Intellectual hair. Strong hair. Grows-like-weeds-hair. Unkempt hair. Not balding hair. Doesn't-think-about-his-hair-much-hair. What else can you remember of the man from two seconds ago? The man on the sofa. The man who, with one self-conscious foot shuffle, you could return to your peripheral vision. No. Keep him where he is. Minds' eye. The man wears tones of blue. Blue shirt. Blue pants. A medley of blues. Hydrangea blues. Waldorf blues. Maybe he has blue eyes? No. Brown eyes. To go with his brown round academic hair. Blue goes well with brown. The brown has a warming effect. Or is that the blue? The blue makes the brown feel even warmer. A feeling becomes a thing and a thing becomes a feeling. Collect eyes you admire from the books you love. Blood shot and baby blue. The whites cracked and chipped scarlet. Eyes gone wooden. Imagine the man is a character from one of the Lorrie Moore stories you're reading. Lost, bright, mediocre. Middle / upper end of Maslow's hierarchy of needs, searching for meaning, self-transcendence, a normal kind of miserable, hopefully warm-hearted. Bookish. Bookish? As in–lives in a book. In a story. Inside your head. In a blue woollen jumper. Has an 80's American cult TV show quality to him. 'You, handsome, goofy Teddy Bear, you!' Tussle his hair. Or smooth it. Either way, makes you want to.

Inside the bookstore called Browsers a wall of books goes up fifty feet high. You have to crane your neck to see where it ends. Extreme browsing. You wonder what would happen if you were to ask the shop manager to get you the book at the very top, three books from the right. Your whole life you've been too shy to ask. If you squint you could be in The Strand bookstore New York. Squint, sway, and picture snow. Hissing pavements, puffy donuts, an old, brownstone-goofball-city swarming with perfect strangers. In your minds' eye you stumble through a memory where you're sitting up top, up front of a Newark airport bus as the sun's coming up on the day, and there it is before you, the whole of Manhattan, grand and

dirty and dripping in gold. Cry. Remember. That *really* happened to you. You have the tote bag to prove it.

Right now, though, it's just you in Browsers. Kirikiriroa. One lone, extreme browser. In denim shorts and a vintage blouse because it's trying to be summer here. Inside this slice of real life. Happening right now. Life that's trying to be cake, going by a slice at a time. Singe serve and single file. Time to spare before an appointment with a man whose job it is to see about your hair. The dead stuff that grows out of your head. Let him take to your ends. Deal to the ends of you. Pay him to. He's qualified.

The man in blues walks into Browsers. You don't want to think it, but you think it anyway–wonder if maybe he's following you, and cheeks bloom pohutukawa. He asks the girl on the counter about an author. You don't catch who. It's an unlucky sign, a love story lost. You weren't listening properly. Again. Caught up in thoughts, your thoughts chide. The man in blues says, 'Ok, thank you,' and leaves. He strides. Pants rustle, a symphony of legs, air, cotton drill, hues of waves. Browsers does not have what he's looking for today. You imagine him half naked. An inoffensive hairy chest. Safe. Like a teddy bear. The kind that cannot repulse you. Imagine the two of you making coffee together in the morning. Where are you? The décor in your head is familiar and unfamiliar. It's lovely. Warm and woody, smells of books. Your place or his? And where are your girls? Oh Christ. Put a top on! you tell him, the kids could be anywhere. Now that you have conjured them, they will be wherever you look next. Say sorry. It's too soon. You can't picture the round-haired man or any man in your life, in more than a public spaces sort of way. When you try to, you know what happens. You disappear. Abandon the room in your head. Run away. Leave him there. With your girls. Their faces look up, halo-haired angels, the smell of coffee, a watercolour room of browns and blues, they're looking for you, asking:

How did we get here?

Where did she go?

Who is this man?

Whose children are these?

Whose head are we in?

But you're nowhere to be found. You've floated away like somebody without a body, not a soul or a ghost, like somebody who evaporates with heat, on contact.

Leave Browsers and go to the coffee shop. Order a coffee and a thing that calls itself a Rhubarb Breakfast Bar to get you through the hair appointment without a rumbly tummy. The man at the cafe counter makes a joke. You don't catch it. He has a silver beard and twinkly

eyes that on another day could signal irritation. Says he will bring the coffee to you at the salon. Laugh and say thank you like a mad lady.

Walk back past the sofa where the man in tones of blue isn't sitting anymore. Push open the big glass door to the salon, it swings like water off an oar. A bigger than usual door inside bigger than usual walls. The salon is see-through and bodyless and minimal. The man who is your hairdresser, let's call him J, gives you a nod. You beam back. A wide as collarbones grin. Disproportionate cheerfulness. And your eyes crinkle into crow's feet as he sweeps up some other lady's hair. Sweeps her ends off the concrete floor that mirrors the ceiling and there are exposed pipes like space veins and a few indoor plants try to reach them with leafy greenness, with leaves like twenty-dollar bills, the thin alien stems grow out of pots in neutral shades, vine around like tiny capillaries, life reaching for sunlight that isn't there.

Sit down in the salon chair. It gives a soft sigh, or does it wheeze, as you thumb your denim-clad bottom into position. Cross your ankles. Feet in loafers like impotent pencils. Place your book on your lap. The book has an orange cover, fat as a brick. All those stories, all that music. Heavy. Soul shaped brick holding down a lid, or a tarp or another brick. Holding you down. A young woman called Eliza puts a cape on you like you're a child. You consider the book that is still on your lap, and now trapped inside the cape. Pat it a few times, plot its escape. Make a commotion fishing it out and set it on your lap again, brick on a tarp. You get your colour done first. What are we doing? The girl asks the salon mirror, fingering your curls and one hair snags, stretches, and snaps and it hurts in a way that feels nice because someone else who isn't your daughter is touching you for a change. Just the usual, you say. Mostly the roots, the grey. Maybe a bit of colour through the ends. What do you think? Eliza inspects your hair. Sure. This is pretty. She holds out hair ends that have gone topaz with salt, sun, insomnia and being dead too long. Maybe we'll just put some gloss in the ends. Ok. Sure, thing Eliza. Gloss away the dead ends. But don't forget to drench the living grey, drench it at the root, every wiry old strand, drench it just the right shade of teenage brunette till it drowns.

Eliza goes into the back room to mix up the dye.

The man from the café delivers your coffee and the rhubarb breakfast bar on a plate which comes with a smear of yogurt or cream like sun lotion but more artistic. Nudge yourself closer to the coffee, expect the chair to glide, and when it doesn't, feel stupid, the chair's metal legs scrape rude and loud, a posh gash, a woman-shaped stubbed toe, and the

orange book sleds down the slippery surface of the cape and lands in a papery splat on the polished concrete floor, pages splayed like drunk, slutty limbs.

No one notices. So, you scoop up the book and reach again for the coffee. Drink fast. Before Eliza gets back with the dye. Use the little silver fork to feed yourself a morsel of rhubarb breakfast bar, manoeuvre a piece through the arty yogurt smear towards your mouth and as you do a crumb breaks away, a big crumb, a muesli noodle, bounces and streaks across the salon floor, comes to rest beneath another client's chair. J, your hairdresser is talking to his client in the mirror. Small talk. The crumb is a spy, a bug, a wire. Listening. We wait and listen. J says something about the kids he has with his first wife. The bad wife. How he worries about them. In a way that he doesn't have to worry about the kids he has with his second wife. The good wife. You will the fat crumb on the floor to rise up and give him hell. Even more pissed that the woman in the chair isn't standing up for you.

Eliza comes back with the dye and you open your book. You feel a bit rude reading but reassure yourself Eliza prefers it this way. The dye goes on to your dry hair with a paint brush, rough, expert strokes to your spiderweb bits. Just then, as Eliza plies tar onto your temples, painting beyond the hairline onto your face where the grey hair grows wispy but persistent, you look out the window and see the man in blues walk by.

Blush when you imagine he's looking for you.

Flinch when you remember how vulnerable you are.

Not in a damsel in distress kind of way. Not in a helpless but beautiful way. In a slimy helmet slurped onto your scalp kind of way. Ugly. The dry ends of your hair poke out– parched, humiliated, desperate for gloss. Don't want him to see you this way. But want him to see you. What a bind. And then just like that he's gone. The dye stings, a fake orgasm in your follicles. Notice a wiry black hair has snagged in the yogurt smear around your rhubarb snack. As tiny and startling as a crack in porcelain. Now you wait, for the dye to take. Lucky you have your book. Face first and open in your lap. Wonder if the book is consolation in more ways than might be good for you. Let the fat bulge of the pages you've consumed slump to the side like belly overhang. How literary and mysterious you imagine the round-haired man thinking. Jeez you're embarrassing. And then you grasp the bulk of the book's pages in your hand, confident, the way a lover grabs a chunk of thigh. Read. Wait. Read some more. Forty-five minutes later and your scalp tingles, shouts at the dead parts to look alive!

Finally, it's time. Eliza takes you to the wash basin. Lays your neck and head into the cool crook of the sink. Comfortable? She asks. Yes, you lie. Water from a hose hits your brain like a poultice. Tepid at first then way too hot. That temperature, ok? Eliza asks through

rubber gloves. Yes, you lie. None of it matters once she's got her fingers in your scalp. Up above you a tinfoil pipe snakes across the ceiling. Let your eyes close. Grateful for the boundary you set with Eliza earlier on, grateful no one's talking.

The actual haircut only takes ten minutes. J bounds over swinging scissors, trigger happy. Pulls up and parks his crotch by your temple, right at your eye line. You like J. Not as a person. As a hairdresser. J says casual, mildly offensive things. Tells you your hair grows an unusually long way down the back of your neck, that you have a small head. You've learned to sit through it, take it. You almost always end up with a great haircut, a haircut that suits you, flatters your small head, your hairy neck, and you look at yourself in the mirror and say– this is just **so** me. Besides, you've learned the hard way. Other hairdressers will give you the cut you want for the face and hair you don't have. A disaster every time. So, you come crawling back to J, the mean, useful prick, and he fixes you. Confess you cheated on him and he doesn't get mad. Just chops you that short little bob again, the one you return to again and again. The cut that makes your curls sing and your shoulders feel sexy. Hacks it all off like he's wielding a sword, pulls down hard on the wet hair, with both hands, to check the length, the symmetry either side of your chin. You let him teach you a lesson. Look at your eyes in the mirror then close all four, to the blast and euphoria of machine dried hair. And when you open your eyes again you wear a new crown. So fresh, and clean and shiny–your skin and nails look extra old. Oh well.

Once he's had his way with you, go to the counter and pay for the privilege, book in to do it all again in six months' time. Where will you be then, you wonder, as the salon's big glass door whooshes shut behind you. Where will you be then? You toss your new hair, look hopefully at the sofa for the man in blues. That he might see you now, if only he could see you.

My friend Janice

I meet my friend Janice at Manu Bay. I like writing that sentence. I like writing the bit *my friend Janice.*

I meet Janice at Manu Bay, just as soon as I can once the kids are at school. We tether surfboards to our ankles and hobble down the boat ramp, leashes dangling like umbilical cords. The concrete is warty and sharp and mean under our feet.

Surfing is how I met Janice. Mums who'd ended up in a surf town and decided to give it whirl because, well, why not when the ocean is right there? Why not, if like me, you're building a new life with the broken bits of your old one, the bits you salvaged and stashed in your hand luggage. Why not, when your only plan after he left you to start a family with someone else was to get on a plane, head for home shores and make a plan. Why not learn to surf when you find it harder and harder to answer the question 'so, what do you do?' without confounding people with what a bad feminist you've become. Single, stay at home mother, social welfare beneficiary, recovering girl boss with a growing sinkhole in your resume labelled *Family Management.* Why not make your way towards the water in this small town where your resume is mostly useless anyway but at least you have your retired parents down the road to help with the kids and for now that trumps everything else. Why not learn to surf in this place where your mother grew up, where your grandparents are buried up on the hill in the urupā and you can see the white headstone like a giant pipi, a ghost on the headland, from wherever you are around town and for some reason it makes you want to cry. Why not do a thing that doesn't come naturally, where mid-life has fused bones and ideas in rigid, maladaptive arrangements. Now is not the time to let nature take its course or to pursue what feels familiar. Now is the time to break it all open and start again. Why not, when the ocean is right there.

You see, Janice and I had lived entirely separate lives that in the end led us to the same dead-end town, the same spot of sea.

We'd see each other at the beach, knots inside the tangle of whatever friends we'd come with that day, me with my huge foam board more like a raft, a lifeboat, a coffin sized chunk of pumice. Janice with that old board she bought off a backpacker. Out in the water we'd make lilting small talk, gush about how beautiful it was, how lucky we were to be out in

the jade or clear or glassy sea, whoop for each other when we got a wave, and there was this sort of unspoken sense from the beginning that together, we had permission to be there.

After a while our other mum friends dropped off. But Janice and I, we were hooked. We were terrible but secretly hoped we could get better. Janice was always a step ahead of me. Still is. But hey, we had our own demons to beat out there in the waves. Not that we talked about it. There wasn't much point oversharing at sea. The roar of the real world drowned us out. Backstories sunk like the shipwrecks they were.

Besides, you could tell enough about what we were holding by the stance of our bodies on our boards. Janice was knock-kneed and punishingly strong. She'd clincher a wave, get low and hang on, her back hand trailing the air like an elegant wing or a horse's mane. I'd been told by the guy that rents surfboards from a truck in the carpark that the most counterproductive, indeed dangerous, thing you can do as a surfer is hesitate. But my body teemed with the stuff. Joints and lungs clogged with sandy indecision. Up on my board I had the look of a crab scuttling on the spot, scuttling to nowhere. I had to accept I was scared as hell, that no matter how coordinated I believed myself to be on land, out here my dancers' limbs were brittle claws and I clung, crouched, forgot to breathe. Sometimes, embarrassed by the thick fear my body held I would make sudden and erratic attempts to override it. I would throw myself into large, steep waves, a second too late, at bad angles and then, dwarfed by a pitched, leering face fear stripped me of my skin and bone. The only thing left - a surfboard, and a hyperbolic, throbbing heart.

Janice took a more incremental approach to her progression. One of the things she mastered early on was how to fall off well, safely, with soft bones. In such a way that her body was not caught between the crush of the wave and the hard edges of her surfboard. Something I learned only after a fin clip to the corner of my eye that in an instant popped my face blue, yellow and shiny as a jellyfish.

I am still possibly the most unlikely surfer you'll ever meet. Dark haired, small, a bit vampiric–wearer of shiny patent Mary-Janes. But this was the thing about my life when I met Janice. There were no labels that fit anymore. I was done with them all. With the cloaky weight of myself. My identity a mosaic of stones and jewels, immutable in nature perhaps, but always, as it turns out, able to be moved around, woven into new shapes and patterns. Or thrown away entirely. A weight to the sea. It was a dazzling and confronting thing, to have an ocean to play with.

Strange to think now how watery the beginning of our friendship was. How it settled into the gaps and spaces of rock-pool days. I mean this in a lovely way, looking back, it was lovely. Slow with boundaries–full of light, smile lines and the vastness of seasons.

For an entire summer I only knew what Janice looked like in a wetsuit with salt-slicked hair. I can't remember how or when exactly we became friends that talked and surfed most days. After school drop off, before school pick up, between night shifts and day shifts, around kids, husbands or in my case the absence of one. It just sort of happened. No mutual friends, political view, lifestyle, or vocational choice to bind or divide us, we weren't even mums who'd met at the school gate.

It was the sea. It was the sea, the sea introduced us.

A year later, when we finally ended up at a mutual friend's party in dresses with blow waved ponytails on solid ground we sat together like two nerdy schoolgirls–awkwardly at ease–confessed to each other how much our watery encounters meant and laughed in relief that we seemed to get on just as well on land as sea.

It wasn't just that I liked Janice. I was drawn to her. To something in her that was embryonic, late blooming in me. Strong bodied Janice. Her beautiful, open face smattered in Māori freckles and gentle, clear eyes inspired a kind of restraint and warmth. I wanted to learn her like she was a poem. The particular ways she loved being a mum, enjoyed her kids, looked at her man. But she was no fucking martyr. She was funny. Whip sharp. Countless the times I snorted into my phone at one of her deadpan lines. Never at anyone's expense. Usually to do with the kids, or some domestic matter which in my mind only proved her genius. The woman was able to make snorty joy out of school runs and mealtimes.

When Janice spoke to you, or sent you a text message, she used your name.

I still haven't deciphered what it is about how Janice deploys my name in sentences but when she does, I've never felt more seen.

Janice is a very reliable and surprising person.

Now it might sound like I'm putting Janice on a pedestal, but I don't think that's it. You have to understand that I met Janice at a time when the scales were falling away from my eyes. I'd just become the solo mother of two beautiful plasticine-brained daughters and, weary of

thumbing that putty with my own betrayals, desires, and un-held babies, was learning to still my hands. To gently grapple with the question 'how did I get here?' in ways that might preserve our severed family's dignity, dignity that like a mollusc was hard and soft bodied at the same time.

Before I met Janice, before I became a mother and then a mother alone, I'd moved between one romantic relationship and the next, often in triangular, overlapping, whirlpooling motions. Grabbing each time for something new, something or someone better, but more often than not sleepwalking into the same relationship, albeit one that wore different clothes, liked different music, was cool or appealing in a different way on the outside but wired up the same old way on the inside.

When the sea introduced me to Janice things were different. I was on my own. I had regret, I had wreckage. But most of all, with everything washed up and out in the open, I had light with which to see, with which to hold it all and say, 'this is mine–I want to mend it, who can help me mend it?' And for the first I heard the answer in my brittle, crab bones that wanted to grow strong. They said, '*No. Not him. Not like before. You. You. Your daughters'* and when I met Janice, they said '*Janice.'*

More often than you might think, people will ask me about my love life. They'll inquire with some variation of 'so what's going on, anything happening with the love life?' as if my love life is a dormant volcano to be monitored, that will blow eventually, just no one is quite sure when or which way it's going to go. And all we have to go on really, are past eruptions, patterns, as a way to predict what might come next. There seems to be a general consensus that periods of inactivity are not useful in and of themselves. That these are simply the lull, the lack before the next eruption or realignment of the earth. And so, for now, my love life is a crater. To the naked eye it probably looks the same today as it did yesterday, or a year ago, or five. Rock. Tussock. A hole.

Except that it's not. Everything about the way I love has changed with stillness. With ceasefire. The stakes of a love life become all the more complex when you're a single mum. You don't want to mess your kids up more than you already have. You want to do things differently. Perhaps this is why I've got so attached to not having one, a love life. Because the more time I spend in the hole, as the crater, the more it teaches me, the fuller I become. It's surprising what grows in there.

And so, in the gaps and spaces of rock pool days I surfed with Janice.
Our kids became friends. We got new surfboards. We helped each other out.
On land, on sea.

Some Friday nights we'd do pizza at her place and my bones would memorise the way it felt to be in her home. The way she'd lean back at one end of the sofa, her partner Ray at the other end, stretch her legs out and rest her feet on his knees. The framed baby photos by the front door. I studied them. The infant faces with the same loved and secure expressions her kids wore now. They were like totems as you entered the house, that whispered, reminded you that in every child is the adult they will become and in every adult the child they once were.

Janice is a midwife, Ray lays floors. There are day shifts and night shifts, but the shifts, the work, the money wrap around their family the way a ring wraps around a precious stone. Family at the centre. Not the other way round.

I remember when Janice told me her youngest daughter had brought home a children's book about anxiety from the school library, one where the sweet fluffy monsters listen to what their sweet fluffy monster bodies are telling them. A few days later her daughter announced she couldn't go to school because she had a tummy ache. 'Oh no, what did you do, what was she anxious about?' I asked, immediately concerned.

Janice smiled. 'I told her, you know what will help your tummy darling. You need to go to school and stop reading that book.'

Revelations like these, so surprising, so small, so huge. That maybe the world, the books, the gurus don't always know a child better than a mother who is paying attention.

One summer evening after dinner Janice messaged me about a surf. Said she'd just come off a shift, needed to wash away the day, said I should drop the kids around, that Ray would watch them for an hour. My girls couldn't believe their luck. I dropped them off in their pyjamas smelling of soap.

The water that night was big and tepid and gentle. Wave after wave, just Janice and me. To one side of us the sun was going down in a Fanta rush and to the other side a full moon had come up large like a fizzing disc of aspirin.

Janice and I looked at each other as we bobbed about between the sun and the moon.

'I think this might never happen again,' I said.

Janice had nodded. And I watched the beautiful silhouette of her rocking on water. Violet, violet and shining.

In the gaps and spaces of rock-pool days with Janice I learned how to be alone and how not to be. Learned our friendship like a poem, memorised in my marrow what a love life could be–light, smile lines, vast and loyal as the seasons.

I meet my friend Janice at Manu Bay.

We stand together on the boat ramp and the sea rolls and rushes up around our thighs like a burly dog. The sky is mostly grey except for a spill of cream sun.

We walk ourselves deeper until the water is around our waists and we can let our surfboards rest, weightless, beneath our palms. Our bodies adjust to the chill pushing up against neoprene skin.

The bay reaches around us with rocky arms. Sturdy and strong. One bay between sister bays all spun out from the harbour mouth, big blue notes and curling coastline.

I look over at Janice who squints out to sea. Strands of hair lick at her bare and exposed face. I think how today even her freckles look cold.

'How's things?' I ask.

'Things are ok,' she says and touches her neck. 'Last night was pretty tough at work. We had a stillborn baby. A baby that couldn't have been any more wanted.'

A tiny sad smile dapples my friend's face, slips off into the sea.

'Janice, I'm so sorry. Did you know something was wrong?'

'Nah. Not really. There was a chance of Down Syndrome but the parents knew that. They came to hospital expecting to take their baby home. But when mum went into labour there was no heartbeat.'

Janice takes a long drag on the sharp salt air.

‘And you know, the same night,’ she goes on, ‘I had another mama on the ward, on drugs who kept yelling at us all to fuck off. She didn’t tell me she was pushing. She was just standing there; I didn’t know she was pushing. But she was and the baby fell out onto the floor...you know what she said when I picked the baby up, Luce?’

I shake my head.

‘Get that cunt away from me. That’s what she said, get that cunt away.’

I put a hand on Janice’s rubbery wetsuit arm as though to steady her, or steady myself. Every vein and pore in me pricked with salt and ice.

‘Shit,’ I say and the word comes out faint and weak like a puddle of water shirred by the wind.

‘Just so unfair...’ Janice says and shakes her head while the sea carries on around us. Then she pats the top of her surfboard. ‘That’s the job though, right? Can you imagine what must have happened in that woman’s life for it to come to that?’

I try, but all I get is darkness, darkness and a thick throbby love for my friend.

‘I’m glad you were there,’ I say. ‘I’m glad it was you.’

Janice looks at me and smiles, puts her hand on top of my hand that is still on her arm. ‘You know, Luce, even with the hardest of people, the most broken, torn up, traumatised families, in that moment you usually get a minute of hope. You get something.’

Janice dips herself down, dips her head, her whole body down into the sea. When she comes up her hair is slick as sleeping petals. She slides onto her surfboard, presses her hips in close and starts to paddle out towards the distant breaking waves.

I watch her for a while, watch my friend move away.

And the sea it bustles like the world, all the blues, all the greens.

At 2.26 AM on a Monday night a mother writes to the thing keeping her awake

Dear thing whatever you are fear, anxiety, the rusty peg in my chest again, the unresolved cud from the day. What am I missing? What the hell is going on? Okay one minute, desperate the next. Beside myself now. Desperate. Desperate. The shame of my lying here, lying here, lying here. Waiting for sleep to come. The terror starts in at the hair follicles, miniscule but cumulative. Crazy making. What's most confusing is how, these days you show up out of the blue when everything is okay. More than okay. I read a book until my eyes smudge the words or the words smudge my eyes. Dog ear paper corners and switch off the light. Curl up, dead bug, more like dying than sleeping and try to ignore the unease. Then try to unignore it, to notice it–isn't that what I'm supposed to do? Feel feelings. Notice thoughts. No judgement. Let them float on by. But my muscles are tight ropes that slice through anything soft, cotton, that resembles clouds and I fizz and crack below sheets like an electric storm. Breathe. Just breathe. Breathe through electrocution in chest, breathe into red wire eyelids, breathe in through nose out through mouth, five in, six out, longer on the exhale, breathe around the lightening rod zipped into guts but don't make a sound, or move or let an ankle twitch. Don't kick off the covers. Don't admit to anything. That no one has ever breathed through an electrocution before. Don't look at the clock on the bedside table. Or any clocks for that matter. Try not to want to know the time. Don't admit you care about the hour or her glow in the dark bones. Watch some more thoughts float by. *There's no rhyme nor reason is* the literal thought going through my head right now. Those exact words. Rhyme nor reason. *What a fucking dumb thought* is the next thought. Keyed up like a spiralizer trying to think thoughts with this soft tissue brain. I turned forty-four on Saturday, a perfect day. Perfect as in didn't plan or expect anything, just woke up and let the world surprise me. It gave me blue skies and I videoed the sun when it showed up on the kitchen cupboards, dappled and wriggling, an affectionate pet. Stroked my daughter's eyebrow and found everything that matters looking back at me from her big black eye. Think happy thoughts. Blow them up like balloons. My girls made me birthday cards, those ones I'll keep forever with thoughtful, sweet messages bearing their distinct little souls and I only know this because lately I've been paying attention to their handwriting and all the other places their souls show up and I thought this could only be a

good thing. We ate birthday pancakes, let our bellies swell up with fried batter and content. Yeah, well. That was Saturday, this is Monday. All that pancake delight and here I am in bed with you again. Ruminating thoughts like fucking mirrors. My skull a dingy room where rhyme and reason try to fix each other with violent make up sex. Never helps. Just prolongs. But I know this, of course. The way dysfunctional lovers always do. I know so much; I try all the things. Sleepy tea, warm milk with nutmeg and honey, magnesium pills, melatonin pills, fuck it–Panadol. I mediate like David Lynch, replay the day's events backwards, avoid blue light, set a sunrise alarm clock. But it's like you saw me coming. I get up. Sit down. Walk around. Go lie in a strip of moonlight in the living room because the bedroom isn't working anymore. And around the house the power sockets are all ears. Notice how the kitchen window is a rectangle of black and etched into the glass–a reflection, a single carnation in a vase. Magenta petals, still beyond still. The night has painted me a still life and I try really hard to marvel at it, to be moved by it, to be still like the carnation in its vase. Is there anything more comforting than to be seen, rendered in the world exactly as you are? But you! You make this kind of thing impossible. And so, I rub magnesium cream through the soft, thin walls of my wrists. Turn my bloodstream into a battleground, a hot mess, of rhyme nor reason, of ebb eating flow. Try to tell myself it doesn't matter if I sleep. Not sleeping won't kill me. Tell myself this too shall pass. That it's probably just my subconscious trying to work something out, pass something unresolved from the day like it's a kidney stone. Or better yet! That I'm on the brink of a creative break through. Tell myself to quit with all the telling already. Cos here's the thing, all the telling and the knowing and the trying and my body is still scared as fuck. It doesn't believe me. Extremities tingle, go numb with the exhaustion of not believing. The only way to make a rhyme, really, is with blood and flesh and bone. Without a body, reason is just vapour. And You! So shifty, so tricky, you lie around like tripwire, laughing. I haven't been able to write in weeks. I'd even put together a plan that was supposed to tell my brain how important writing was to me, how loved it was. The plan involved waking up at five in the morning just like Toni Morrison to write for a couple of hours before my daughters woke. The plan involved purchasing a sunrise alarm clock, exiling my phone to the kitchen at night, sleeping with a notebook under my pillow. The plan even involved coming up with a ritual, a commitment ceremony in which I would make a vow to my writing, to my creative self, with my daughters there as witnesses. Kind of like a marriage but homemade and fun. I'd stolen the idea from another writer, a big prolific writer who'd been married to her writing self since she was ten years old. And because I didn't want to scare the kids, for it

to feel too weird or culty I put them in charge of the music. At first, they chose a tween pop song called 'Scars My Beautiful' and we listened to it loud on repeat in the car for a few days, singing as we drove, and even though it was cheesy it was also kind of perfect and definitely not too culty. But then they changed their minds. Opted instead for Leonard Cohen's 'You Want It Darker' because they said the music should be serious, would go better with candles and we could sanctify the union by chanting 'Hineni, Hineni, I'm ready my Lord!' at the end. We were all excited. But you, you derailed the plan before I could get my vows onto paper or set a date. You saw me coming and you laughed, said it was stupid idea, sewed me up in all the places the words needed to come out. 'What a joke,' you said. 'You want to write but you can't even write about wanting to write.' And I don't know how exactly or where you got in, but suddenly I couldn't organise my days or my fingers anymore, couldn't access my flesh, blood, and bone, and had this crazy thought that this was it. I'd never be able to write again. Reason hauled up in my knuckles. And because I'd thought the thought– the one about never being able to write again–I was wretched and worried I'd made you real. And so, I lie here now, wrapped around a heart that wallops me from the inside out, unable to sleep or write for fear of not being able to sleep or write. For fear. For Fear. For the love of God. Second night insomnia is always a trip. To never, never land, never write, never sleep again. Squeeze a sob from my body like I'm getting the last of the tooth paste out of the tube. Desperate and rough. And the sobbing ensues with lyrics to go with it, like little questions, they start small at first but they keep coming the lyrics plead, they say, don't take this from me, don't take this one thing that I do because I want to, that feels weightless, like swimming for the light through quiet diamond water, like coming up for air. And I push a few more toothpaste sobs out from my valves and start to fucking hate the sound of my own pleading refrain. Cos it's not working. I've tried all the things. Tried to be curious. Tried to be brave. Booked an appointment with a therapist for a week's time, the soonest I could get. Sought reassurance from flesh and blood angels who write back with the most magical words, with rhymes, with fire and heart, and I print their emails out, keep them close like charms. So yeah, I've tried it all and yet you remain. None of it is enough.

So, thing. Let's try something new. If you're going to hold me ransom in this lucid state then at least let me look at you. Cos I'm pissed off. I'm frazzled. I've got no more toothpaste sobs or fucks left to give. I'm a let rip my electric brain. Here's the deal. You want my writing? Come fucking take it. You think waking up at five to write is a joke? I'll give it up, see if I care. You've already tainted the sunrise by association, you've tainted Lorrie Moore, you've latched onto it all and now its soaked in fear too. So, fuck it. Have it. If

you don't want me to write, get on with it, take my hands, take my eyes. Stop fucking around. Don't keep me awake for this shit. Don't put the fear into me if you haven't got the balls to strike off my fingers. The way after a while a sunrise clock can send a girl crazy with its soft amber glow, all that artificial sun, incremental and easy on the eyes, no screens, no blue light, fucking me off no end. Is that what you want? That I give up, throw it in, to end me? Is that you whispering in my ear? So then, how come my fingers are still attached? Look, look, look at me pick up a pen. Can't write, can't sleep, can't write can't sleep. Can't breathe through an electrocution, can't rhyme with a body made of tendon blades or reason with vapour, so what's a mother to do, when she's become the smoke that hugs the ceiling, toxic and black hovering over herself with disdain, gathering nebulous and pathetic, and the smoke with nowhere to go will do what smoke does, swallow rooms, infiltrate throats, choke her while she gets low to the ground, searches for a pocket of air. And it's here. Inside this thin line, carpet burned cheeks pressed to the ground with nothing left to lose and fingers splayed at your feet that I look up at you and say see what you've turned me into, this slither inside your smog? You see it? Look, look, look what I can make with it! Imagine a piece of paper that has been torn from a notebook, an average piece of paper, marked from top to bottom in lines as thin and faint and blue as fairy veins. See the line, that place where you have me pinned by my throat at the bottom the page? I have one line. One line between me and oblivion. Hey thing, watch me use it. Watch me put words on the line, write my way back to the surface.

Watch me write you arsehole.

Watch me write moonlight that fizzes the edges of blinds like lemonade, sugary and hyper, eyelids match-sticked awake by the beams. Watch me write my escape from this room with its diseased houseplants, an escape from myself, especially my teeth, from the clench of you. Watch me write my way into the night with a pen in my hand and wings drawn on. Watch me levitate above the house, above the whole fucking neighbourhood, write myself into some demented wakeful star. Watch me write all the ways you deserve my sleep-deprived, worry addled brain, my bad writing. The inky whiplash my amygdala leaves behind. Watch me scribble nonsense till my knuckles break or bleed or explode. I don't care. Watch me write fast, write slow, watch me write left-handed. Watch me write with my toes, my tongue, my hair. Let's see what slips out. Who cares. Watch me. Watch me write sideways, watch me write backwards. Like I'm coming down the stairs with my wrists snapped back, headfirst,

belly to the sky, upside down on the earth, demonic and jittery, an exorcism by alphabet. Watch me write the word scream. Over and over. Cursive release. See? See, how I'm writing you? Writing you into oblivion. Watch me show up on the page even when I want to puke. You want to stop me but you can't. Because the thing I'm writing is you. And its bottomless. Let's play a game. How many ways can I write you black. Black like abyss. Black like rot. Black like a star. Black as khaki veins. In a nappy. Clots of despair. Shit slid down white porcelain walls. An abortion. A pipe. A hole. Now. Watch me write sound, watch me write noise. The roar of waves from beyond the bar, they roar all night through the windowpanes. Me and the waves, we've got all night. So, watch me write you into the sea, watch me put you in the blue-black water. Hold you under. Then watch as I march you backwards. Shove, punch, shunt you there. Off a ledge with a nib in your heart. Watch me whip you with your own darkness. To cud. To froth. Alone. But hey, I'm not done. There's still time, insomnia to go around, time enough to gaffer tape with words a scary thing, a scary feeling to the clothesline in our quagmire yard, a thousand lashings of the black sticky stuff mummified inside plastic slats, this metal post your cross to bear while I creak and whirl and turn in the wind, round, and round, running circles with my ballpoint pen. Watch me write you deep, deep below ground, sieved into segments through a hungry plughole. Amputated. Disowned. Me or you. Watch me write my legs back on and run like hell for the next blank page. Watch me write the sentence *read my lips* while I spit and snarl and smile. Watch me write a list of everything I **want** and write the word **want** all over the walls until the walls go black with my **want** and disappear. Till my hand aches. The scrawl of you laid out in letters, blood off a rusty nail. And when I have no words left, none of my own, watch me read, trace, copy, draw, watch me move through the night inside every story that has ever come before.

Then watch me write myself into stillness.
Black glass, no wind, a specular carnation.

Thoughts are more like feathers now– weightless and precise even as I'm bruise-tired and leeched of sleep. I think about how much space I give you all the time. In the ways I talk about myself, in all the disclaimers, pre-emptive apologies, qualifiers, how I offer you around like biscuits at morning tea and everyone feels compelled to take one and make polite conversation for fear of upsetting us. *How ridiculous* says one particularly refined, silver feather as it lilts down towards the ground. *I am not scared, not really*. I pluck the feather

from the air and show it to a little girl no longer cowering in my chest. See, I say. You're safe. I'm not scared. Truly. I could go down into the garden right now and sit in the black wet grass by the shredded leaves of the banana tree, the sashes of dead beauty queens and the night wrapped all around me and I wouldn't be scared. The real world does not scare me. Only figments do. This time, my body believes me.

I get out of bed then and feel the form of my adult shape against surfaces, feet on the carpet, moving through doorways. I'm a large, loving mother. I go into the room where my daughters sleep. Tucked into bunk bed cocoons. I watch them dream for a while. The most real thing I can do. I think about a conversation I had recently with a friend where I'd told her about how I'd started writing. How the girls were at the age where they needed me a little less, needed me differently. How I wanted to write them, us, our bond–hold our days to the light. This friend, who I like very much, who has a big corporate job and gets paid bucket loads, money she uses for overnight nannies and to take her daughter on holidays to all kinds of places said to me like it was the most obvious thing, 'well yes you need your own life. They're just going to leave you one day.' And I remember thinking kindly but clearly: exactly. They will leave one day. They will leave. This is why I'm here now. It's funny because it felt like my friend and I were coming at a similar thing but from opposite sides of the same cloud.

With my bones gone quiet, I get up. Go to the toilet. Climb back into bed and the sheets are soft as cake batter. Maybe I can sleep now. I close my eyes and wait the for gradual glow of my sunrise alarm.

Customs

The dread kicks in when she weighs your suitcases. Red digital numbers toggle back and forth. Undecided or taunting. You and your girls have made bets on how much they will weigh. The longhaul fun and games starts now. You'd rather not be an expert at knowing exactly what 23 kgs worth of running away or starting again or betrayal feels like on the end of your arm. But you are. Remind yourself this time it's different. Your girls are older. You're taking them home. Their other home. On your terms. To visit their father. While you will work, write, go to bed late or early, bamboozled with time. Everyone is excited. And whatever happens, however it goes, you get to come home again. Your home.

The suitcases are mostly full of gifts. There never used to be room for gifts. Gifts, a weight that can be dispersed in joy at the other end. Leaving suitcases empty and airy as happy ghosts. With an appetite for swallowing gifts in return. See how their little swivvly wheels turn in all directions like they're giggling. See? Things are different now. You already know in your bones you won't be over the limit despite what your bones remember. Ditching that book you knew was indulgent. Or pay the exccess. The scales can't hurt you now. The numbers flicker, flash red, trying to decide. The way they do with newborn babies.

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An older Indian man at the check in counter says to the airline staff, 'my humble request is that this bag travels safely.'

He leaves a soft palm on the bag even as it trundles along the conveyer belt away from him. 'My parents' wedding photos are in there.'

The bag gives a rubbery squeal as it goes.

Because much can be lost in the sky between airports.

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A woman with her elderly mother sees you queued up with your daughters. Makes a beeline over and says, 'hello.' She smiles. 'Are you travelling to Doha?'

‘Yes,’ you say and smile back. You’ve always been one of those people whom concerned or lost strangers feel they can approach. Even more so now than before. Which is strange because, come to think of it, you’ve never been the kind of person who is comfortable asking anything much of strangers.

‘This is my mother,’ says the woman.

The old woman next to her is small, shawled and hunched. Her silver hair, tied in a bun, looks like a glassy doorknob. She smiles hopefully at you, in the way of a child.

‘Are they Ethopian?’ The old woman’s daughter asks about your daughters.

‘No. Rwandan,’ you say, still smiling. ‘We’re going back to Rwanda.’

The woman smiles again. There is still much in common. There is between you already an understanding. ‘My mother is going home to Ethiopia, via Doha. Can you please keep an eye on her?’

The old woman, the old mother who has no English pats your arm.

‘Of course,’ you say. ‘Of course.’

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Kids love travelators. The thing with a travelator is it’s a moving walkway. The walkway walks you so you don’t have to. But with kids the travelator just makes them want to move more. Run, leap, walk backwards. Faster, faster. Kids want it all. To be moved and to move. Kids have no trouble behaving like stars in space. Living and dying at the same time. The sign says. *Look forwards. Don’t run. Adults must keep hold of children at all times*. Well, for what parent has that ever been possible? Especially when you’re one adult with one pair of hands. But you tell them anyway:

‘Don’t run. Just walk. You can’t go backwards. Like, literally. You *can’t*.’

And when their feet can’t help but run anyway, because they can’t let the travelator win, you can only laugh. Little Supernovas in space. Exploding and outshining galaxies, not taking no for an answer, one answer, one travelator at a time.

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Lines through security before an eighteen hour flight look like midriffs, blue sports bra, floral chiffon dress–roses to be exact–skinny jeans, bare legs, a crisp ironed shirt, fake lips, snood, scarf, more than one snood, flame-red turban, matchy-matchy aqua tracksuits, spagetti straps,

muscle tee sprouting armpit hair, an ombre bomber jacket, sandals, Ugg boots, Crocs, Crocs and socks, sandals, slides, slides and socks, just socks, kitten heels, denim dungarees or an adult sized baby grow, caps, caps, caps, cowboy hat, cheesecutter, beanie, hats in airports?, spiritual stretchy mesh tunic over tie-dye leggings, wet-look turquoise shirt that's never breathed and so many, so many sleeves clinging to waists like children, lovers, mothers, soft and pleading, don't go, don't leave.

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You clear security. No scissors this time.

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After MacDonalds you sit with your daughters on those beige plastic airport seats. The ones joined up in row like a centipide. Soon enough, as you know she will, Ruth says, 'mum, remember when I lost Doggy-do? I left him behind on one of these seats.' And you will say, as you always do. 'I know, Ruthie. I know.' And you reach your arm around until she's right inside. Airport seats will always be beige and indifferent to loss.

And that's ok.

///

Grace's dreadlocks glow slightly lime under the fluorescent airport lights. Synthetic ends battered and tatty with sea salt and chlorine. Her hair has grown since the baby locs were put in a year ago. Since you first went back. With all those little bullets still twisted in your gut. You've done your best to maintain the locs, divide the hair at the root, palm roll the coils with gel and oil just like they do on YouTube. But it will be good to get it done in Rwanda again. By gentle brown hands who know your girl's hair. It's ancestral twist. Who understand the softness of her child's scalp.

Her stepmother will arrange it. Like she did last time.

You are going back. Leaving home to take them home. Not for the first time. Which makes all the difference. You picture their stepmother's face because this time you can.

Anger and sadness growing out at the roots.

///

As you wait for take off the air conditioning kicks in full blast. Cool and dry. Plastic air. At altitude it will dry out your eyeballs and prefrontal cortex. You will get used to the vice-like pressure.

The girls pull headphones and plane socks out of wrappers and organise their travel loot into the pouches in front of them. Book. Pens. Stickers. They go straight for the neck pillows you splurged on last minute at the airport shop. Baby blue with flying koru. Fleecy neck braces up to their ears so they can't hear too well. But they're expert travellers. Gracie is well past blue-faced toddler tantrums on the floor at the back of the plane while that one kind air hostess offers you a warm wet towelette for moral support.

As for Ruth. Ruth has been travelling like a diplomat since she was ten months old.

These days you have time to look out the aeroplane window while the other passengers file in.

Planes parked up and bug-eyed on the tarmac, swirly hypnotic engines tucked under their wings, tails adorned with patriotic airline logos, dorsal fins to cut open clouds. All these galactic planes grounded and balancing on two wheels, small and absurd as a critter's front teeth. Tubes, pipes, high viz workers in golf carts, yellow lines that cannot be crossed and signs that say *emergency fuel shut off button*.

Just then the sun breaks through. Sun's out on the runway like a premonition.

'Where are we going first again, Mum?' Gracie asks loudly over whatever she's listening to in her headphones. 'Doha? Then Rwanda?'

You give her a thumbs up. She beams you back one of her constipated-with-excitement smiles.

As always, when the safety briefing starts you try hard to concentrate. Fifteen years of circling the earth and it never sticks. Even now the only bit you seem to retain is the part about removing high heels before using the slide.

It's not long then before the rumble of rubber on runway rattles through you like a possessed supermarket trolly. The hydrolic moan of wheels being folded up. Houses and roads drop away and as you angle left a plasticine wing moves through blue. Your belly wants to stay down there so you focus on the wings' seams, nuts and bolts to coax it up. Higher, higher, higher still. The girls lean across you, strain against seatbelts to get a glimpse of the big, big sky.

Through the porthole window you see a single white cloud, an inflatable ring, as though God has left his lilo bobbing about in the pool and the cloud lets you know, you have now left Earth.

'Look at that!' Gracie points to the cloud as though it's hers. She turns to Ruth. 'Last time we were on a plane me and mummy saw a sunrise while you were sleeping. It was so beautiful,' and then she says kindly, 'you're the best sleeper.'

You order a G&T from the cart.

You take a sip and Ruth asks if it's yummy, is thrilled when you say yes. She wants you to have fun. She's all brown skin, white teeth, framed by those three messy braids you put in her hair and in that moment they become her, so pretty, so shiny, like they know she's going home.

///

Coming into Doha Ruth starts to choke. Says she can't breathe. Then she's sick all over her sister's shoes.

You wait for the other passengers to file off the plane. It's just you, your girls and Gracie's crocs in a rubbish bag the air hostess gives you.

The colour has already come back to Ruth's face. You start to make your way up the aisle of the aircraft like you're the last bit of crud. The seats in business class reek of sleep. As you near the exit you catch up with the old woman with the bun like a glassy doorknob. She's pleased to see you. She's halfway home. She takes your arm.

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Things start to change the closer you get to Africa.

First of all the planes change. They get older, more retro. There are still ash trays in the toilets. Buttons and surfaces worn through with skin.

Then there is more open air, more heat. You don't board or disembark through air conditioned tinfoil tubes. You take stairs that they roll up to the side of the plane. You disembark like presidents. Get on buses. Walk across tarmac while a fierce and joyful sun licks sweat into your pits, folds and creases. Transit buses steam up with humanity. You watch your girls calibrate. Strip down to singlets. See their skin come alive. Shiny eyelids damp with heat. Roses out of brown red soil, pink rimmed ears and Akabanga cheeks. Soon

strangers start to smile and talk to your children. A spectacled elderly man in a tracksuit jacket and dress shoes. His wife slick-wigged with friendly raised moles that dance near her eyes. You are squeezed in next to each other on a bus that will connect you through to your flight to Kigali. After some moments admiring the children the man asks a series of questions: 'Are you sisters? Who is the oldest? Are you going to Rwanda? Do you speak Kinyrwanda? What are your names? Is this your Mama?'

The wife nods along. The couple are delighted with the girls' shy and tentative answers, delighted by their presence, delighted you are bringing them home, as if they are theirs, too, as if your children are their children, as if you are welcome, and your children are welcome and precious and adored. You can tell the couple hold the expecation that children can be polite and engaging. The girls blush and twinkle inside their attention.

Anyway. That's what you notice. The closer you get. The heat. The light. The large sepia sky. And the way your girls begin to transform. Still themselves, but different. Colour called to the surface by a great and ancient sun. Glow, bloom, tended to. Like petals. It shows up first in their skin.

///

You slide your New Zealand passports through the gap in the perspex screen to the customs officer. He is young and serious and in uniform. He looks at the two girls next to you and you wonder what he sees. He says nothing and so you say, 'they have Rwandan passports, but they've expired.'

He doesn't look at you. His elegant fingers, the smooth, manicured nails flick expertly through passport pages like he's shuffling a deck of cards. Then he says still without looking at you, 'what visa do you need? Why are you here?'

'We're visting friends and family. Tourist visas. We're here for a month.'

Then still not looking at you he says, 'They're Rwandan.'

'Yes,' you say of your girls, 'they are.'

Then he says something else but you don't catch it. 'Excuse me?' you ask.

'Contact,' he repeats the word, 'who is your contact in Rwanda while you're here.'

After forty hours of travel your mind is slow and thick. In that moment you are so close and so far from arriving. And you find yourself giving him the name and contact number of the girls' father.

He looks at their passports again. Studying something. Then he looks at the girls. Gracie is pulling on your sleeve, she needs the toilet.

'Your husband is Rwandan,' he says and it's not a question.

The moment stalls and your brain gives up. Everything goes spongy as you try to think. You've been here before. Only before you could go along with it because their father didn't have a wife then. It was easy enough to pretend back then, when you were defacto partners that you were his wife and he was your husband because, who knew, maybe one day you would be. But that's off the table now. No longer a half truth, or wishful thinking. Now it's an all out lie. But you and the customs office both know its the only answer you can give. He would rather you tell him what he wants to hear. And well, God Dammit, you need to clear customs.

'Yes,' you say.

Because how do you explain what you are? With a dehydrated brain and a child whose about to wet her pants. You are a single mother. And he is their father. But you are not a wife. Their daddy has a wife, and two other daughters, and he is a husband, but not yours.

And here you are anyway, on the other side of the planet, bringing his daughters home.

The customs officer looks at you then, properly for the first time, tilts his head sideways, boyish and soft, 'you're here to see the boss, then,' he smiles.

'Yes,' you say and you laugh. Because it's funny. All you can do is let it be funny.

'One month. You have one month,' the officer says stamping the passports forcefully, before passing them back through the gap in the screen. 'Then when you stay past one month you get an extension' he goes on, instructs you. (Because why would you only come for a month?)

'–and you will get your daughter's passports renewed, and you will get your Rwandan passport, too!' And now he is positively beaming. Happy to be the one sharing the good news; you will soon be legitimate. Legitimately home.

And maybe it's the relief of being waved through, the gladness you feel after passing a test, but for a moment you let yourself go along with how happy it makes him and you feel happy, too.

'Murakoze,' you say, as you bend down to pick up your hand bag, stowing away the passports with care.

'You don't have a husband, mum,' Ruth whispers into your ear so only you can hear.

‘I know,’ you whisper back. Then you sigh and you laugh again. ‘Just a husband for customs, Ruth. I get a husband then.’

And you gather up your bags and your childrens’ hands inside your tired ones and you make your way to arrivals.

Mollusc

No Papa Bear

A fifteen-hundred-dollar WINZ loan got us the warrant in the nick of time. I'd spoken with a case manager on the phone. Her voice had been young and kind, like a milk moustache. She'd asked me to run through our family costs. Really? All of them? Embarrassed for us both I began my recital. About a third of the way through she stopped me. I was poor enough. I thanked her. A pinkie promise goes unbroken.

The girls load up the car, dented and growing moss from its seams.

'We're going on a Bear's holiday,' says Ruth as she climbs into the car.

'Yeah,' says Gracie, then adds, 'but with no Papa Bear to swim us into a whale's mouth because he thinks it's a cave.'

I throw my bags in the boot, on top of a ladybug suitcase and a pile of pastel Crocs. Head back inside for one last sweep of the house. A bedroom window left ajar for the cat. Rooms tidy and clean if you squint. There's a gang of rice bubbles mashed into the carpet under the dining room table in the spot where Grace sits. Weet-Bix cement in kauri grooves. Yeah. Been meaning to get to that. A quick hoover and chisel, but now's not the time. I can't keep these girls waiting any longer. They've been packed and ready for days, for weeks. Literally. *Literally, mum.* What is it with kids and the word *literally*?

Swish goes the ranchslider door, jiggle goes the key inside the lock, our rickety rented world, warm as skin.

I look over at the car and see the shape of the girls propped up on their booster seats. Meercat sisters. Even though tinted windows, the beam of white teeth.

Ruth wrote a list of everything she'd need for the holiday. Gracie copied her. I could write a book about those lists if I had the time. Items numbered with squiggly black boxes for putting ticks into. When I checked their lists, Ruth had each box neatly ticked and there was nothing on her list surplus to requirement. It was a perfect list. A list that pinched at me, snug and thorny, the colour of first-born daughters.

Gracie on the other hand, put X's into quite a few of her boxes, and notes in sideways smiling brackets.

My List of stuff for the Mount and Rotorua. By Grace

1. Duvet **X** (don't need)
2. Duvet cover **X** (don't need)
3. Pillow **X** (don't need)
4. All the other bed things **X** (DON'T NEED!)
5. Hot water bottle √
6. Clothes √ (do not forget new pink ~~flairs~~ flares!)
7. Head torch **X** (if I can find it)
8. Scooter or bike**?** (wait until I'm actually going)
9. Sleeping toy √
10. Book–Squirrel-Flights' Promise √
11. Towel √
12. Toiletry √
13. Quiet activit~~y~~ies √ (smelly felts and notebook)
14. Good walking shoes √
15. Easy shoes (my peach crocs, don't forget gibbet's) √
16. Jumpers and jackets √
17. PJ's √
18. cosy gumboot socks (can also be worn with crocs) √
19. Shampoo and conditioner (use mums) √
20. Sports activit~~ys~~ies √ (just see what they have there)

And in a far-flung corner of the page an unnumbered swampy smudge fenced in with blue biro:

Paw print from my cat. √

See? My A4 heart bursts into confetti again. I pocket the pieces. Even I'm excited now.

A not so nuclear family of three Bears wing their way west coast to east. Halfway over the Kaimanawa ranges the sky descends like a spaceship. Fog so thick we strain to see even ten feet of road. The girls think this is terrifying fun.

'Wow mum,' says Ruth, impressed. 'How are you even driving right now?'

‘Slowly,’ I say.

And I think about the delicate, important work of making terrifying fun in my girls’ lives when there’s no Papa Bear around.

And then I think about how I’ll pay back that WINZ loan three bucks a week, as I inch us forward into alien mist.

Good Enough Men

We pull into New World, Mount Maunganui to buy breakfast supplies. I always do breakfast when we come to the Mount. The idea of preparing and cooking dinner for more than three terrifies me, the domestic pressure, and so it’s become a thing that I take care of breakfast and bake a batch of the Alison Holst cookies I did one year that were a total fluke, and a total hit, and so now they indulge me and say, ‘that would be great if you can do breakfast and ooh, can you bring some of those healthy chocolate chip cookies you always make?’ And we all do our bit, a strengths-based approach to holiday planning. The couples do dinner, I do breakfast and the cookies, they just disappear from the biscuit tin ‘like bad magic’ according to the kids. Us grown-ups swiping them to dip in our teas and coffees while we talk.

Bread, butter, milk, jam, cereal, the girls request crumpets, I select a nicer than usual bottle of wine. And then we glide up and down every one of the supermarket aisles, window shop the shelves of cosmetics, take note of new shampoo brands, which ones might work for curly hair, trolley our way around deli displays squeezing soft cheeses and making elegant turns, because we’re on holiday and this is New World after all and we want to get our money’s worth.

The house looks like a giant white Lego brick that has yellowed in the sun. An eyesore. Paul’s father built it himself in the late 80’s as their family holiday home and was probably going for something a bit ahead of its time, modern, with brown aluminium window frames and unconventional window shapes. One window meets in a glass seam at the corner of the house and one in the kitchen comes up and then bends over you, so you find yourself looking up, star gazing, while you do the dishes. This was back when Mount Maunganui had a holiday park on the little island off the main beach, that they called Leisure Island, with dolphins, kangaroos, monkeys in waistcoats and waterslides.

The curious thing is that the house is so ugly it’s sort of timeless–hard to pin down.

Paul and his siblings have developed a booking system that enables them to, mostly amicably, take turns using the house over various holidays. Except for one brother who won't participate in the system–or any system. Keeps threatening to check their mother out of her nursing home, put her on homeopathic meds and take her to India for a holiday.

Over the course of our visits, I get the gist of how the system works, how Paul's family works. Some of it from Paul himself. Some of it the house tells you.

I suspect our upbringings may be why my sister and I get on so well with Paul. There's commonality in the way our middle-of-the-road families parted ways with the middle-of-the road for more alternative lifestyles. In our case the departure was mild. More of an artistic, or spiritual foray. Our parents sent us to Steiner schools and joined the Auckland Anthroposophical Society. Paul's parents didn't just join a spiritual community; they started one. One in which they picked and chose the bits they liked from different traditions. Meditation and mindfulness were mandated daily practice for the whole family, even the toddlers–resilience building apparently, along with all the other stuff meditation is good for; emotional regulation, clear thinking, wise decision making. All stuff children have no business dabbling in.

There was no TV in the house Paul grew up in. The family got their first set when they built the house at the Mount. The set that's still there.

We had a TV in our house but with inconsistent rules around when and what we could watch. We were allowed to watch MacGyver on Friday nights with Dad. When MacGyver finished and Baywatch took its slot Dad didn't say anything so we just carried on and watched that, too. Dad said both shows had great theme tunes.

At some point as a kid, probably at school, I learned that when you watched TV stupefying radiation flowed out of the set and into your brain. I think this is what Paul's parents believed, too. I remember my sisters and I staring intensely at the air in the living room to try and see the evil particles. And when we couldn't, decided it was probably ok to put the TV on while Mum went to the shops. Until she cottoned on. She'd put her hand on the back of the TV to check if it was warm and if it was, she'd say, 'That's it. No MacGyver on Friday kids.' But by Friday she'd be worn out and we'd plead, and Dad would say to appease her, and us and himself, 'Just this once kids, just this once.'

Because Paul's parents founded their own spiritual community their home became the group's headquarters. Paul said he grew up with members coming and going. In and out of philosophical discussion groups and meditation circles. Food in the house was simple, clean, and joyless. Paul told us how he and his siblings were not allowed to talk at the dinner table,

so they invented a kind of miming language to trade and barter bananas for whatever they didn't want on their plates.

Unlike our father, Paul's father's spiritual choices did not see him opting out of making a stash of Boomer money. On the contrary. He bought multiple properties and built a once successful high-end menswear company–specialising in Italian belts, socks and ties. I'm not sure how Paul of all his siblings ended up taking on the family business (I get an inkling its prickly) but he did. So now he runs the company mostly as it has always been run, in no rush to move with the times, holding the fort while the buildings the business owns, prime real estate, go up in value. During the covid pandemic he sent us all posh silk face masks made from the offcuts of Italian Ties. Paul's father, who built the holiday house, has passed on–and really Paul doesn't speak in any detail about him as a person but I get the impression the best bits of his Dad are tied up in this house. Paul's now elderly mother has dementia and recently, after she broke her hip, the siblings made the decision to move her into a nursing home. This suited all of them except for the one brother who doesn't do systems, especially the Capitalist one, and had lived on and off with their mother under the guise of caring for her most of his adult life, even as he failed miserably to care for himself.

Paul and Margot invited the girls and I to the house for the first time about three years ago along with my sister Esme, her partner Phillipe and their kids and we all had such a good time we've been coming back since. We bring hot water bottles in winter and togs in summer and tradition grows like barnacles on a rock.

And let me tell you right now, I'm grateful for the tradition. I don't take it for granted. I wonder if other single mothers feel like this…a sense of relief, fortune at being included in holidays with other 'nuclear' families, my kids etched in memories of sliding down stairwells in a mosh pit of limbs, pillows, and cushions, being read bedtime stories from a strong shoulder-top perch and swung around from the armpit sockets by other kids' dads, in a house built by a man who put secret child sized doors between bedrooms and filled those bedrooms with bunk beds enough to host a small school. I don't take for granted the good men here, borrowing the arms and shoulders of these other fathers.

When we arrive in the afternoon the others are already there. I pull up under the pohutukawa tree that's been planted too close to the house so that it grows into the gutters and Paul has to hire an arborist every year to prune it back to the shape of a lollypop.

The kids rush out in a babble and swallow up my girls. Likely I won't see them till teatime now. I grab bags from the boot, come through the open front door and kick my shoes

off into all the other shoes piled up in a cardboard fruit box. I poke my head in the first bedroom and find Paul making up a bed.

'Hi!' I say putting my bags down.

'Hello, hello–you're here!' he says and scoops me into his tall man's embrace. 'Just in time for an afternoon aperitif. Margot and Esme are upstairs.'

'Perfect timing then,' I smile, 'which room are we in this time? I'll just bring in our bags.'

'We'll put you in here. Let me finish up and give you a hand.'

I look at the bunk beds made up in matching blue ombre duvet sets mimicking seas receding from shore.

'New bedding?' I nod at the pillow slip in his hand.

'Yip, Kmart's finest,' he says. 'Should be good for hiding the stains.'

And he's right. Like everything in this house, the things that find their way in seem to stay–to be used and preserved and become memory. The Kmart sheets will find their place among varnished beach shells and decorative Christmas pinecones, the extendable rimu table permanently covered with a wipe-down plastic tablecloth, cream leather la-Z-boys that lurch and crack, the bookshelves with three decades worth of board games, and several volumes of one brother's self-published poetry.

I can already feel grains of sand between the soles of my feet and the corkboard floor. It's good to be here, to become, for a few days, fixtures in this house.

Margot's big, black curls are cut in a bob. They lap at her neck like kittens. And her skin is a marvel, the texture and colour of cream cut with just the slightest tinge of something leafy and deep. Olive. She's braless in a long brake-light red halter dress that exposes her back, an opal set in a ring, and she's leaning over the sink rinsing lettuce.

This is the image I have in my head as I take the stairs up to the second floor. But as I round the corner and come into the kitchen, I'm reminded that we are here in July. It's winter. And so, I find Margot, just as unwittingly beautiful as she is in my mind and was in summer - sitting at the dining room table in black jeans and a lavender sweater.

The low afternoon sun cuts in through the blinds and stripes the room. A game of Bananagrams is ready to go, alongside an embossed glass bowl full of nuts, a plate of cheese and sausage chunks, and a jar of pate.

'Hi, you want to play, want a drink?' my sister Esme calls from the kitchen when she sees me.

Esme and Philippe ran and owned restaurants for a while. Cool ones where you ordered cocktails from a menu inside 80's Viewfinders. 'Ruby-cheeked and handsome like she's out of a Thomas Hardy novel' was how one food journalist had described my sister. I remember the description surprised me at first but I had to admit she was right. My warm, ruddy, thick featured and effortlessly cool little sister. She's funny, too. The magazine article really stuck with me.

I plop the nicer than usual bottle of red I've brought down on the breakfast bar and reach over for a one-armed hug.

'No to the game, yes to the drink.'

'Pals, beer–wine?'

'Red wine please. Let's open this one. It's a nice one I think.'

My ribs cringe a bit at the way I can't help impressing, casually, how decent the wine I've bought is. Later Paul will produce a bottle 'a pretty decent drop' that he's ordered by the case from one of those catalogues where buying bulk gets you a discount. Put some aside for Christmas, you know. And I will think about how I could never afford to buy or make things in bulk to save money or time. Such economising and budgeting just doesn't work if you're a low income single mum. It's not just a money or cashflow thing, it's as much a storage thing. Where in my tiny home would I put a 5kg bag of flour? Where in the gym bag sized freezer at the bottom of my fridge would I put pre-made meals? And while we're at it, what's it like to fill up the tank of your car in one go? Genuinely, how do you do it? –when you press 'fill' at the pump what happens, how does it work, how does the pump know the tank is full, does it ever get it wrong and overflow? Who pays for the petrol then?

Esme slides not one but three wine glasses over the counter towards me. I braid their stems between my fingers and whip them headfirst onto the dining room table. Then I sidle in next to Margot, open the wine and settle in.

We talk about all the usual things. We start with hair. What products we're using to tame or enhance our curls, regaling recent tales of good and bad haircuts. Margot tells us she's been told to stop referring to her hair as curly because her white woman curls are in fact wavy not curly–that she's distorting the marketplace for those with ethnically curly hair by claiming to have curls. She's interested in what I think as someone with curls (I do have curls, white ones I guess but pretty curly ones) and African daughters with kinky, 'real' curls. I sigh. In New Zealand almost no one, ethnic or otherwise, has curly hair compared to my girls if what you're going by is the number of directions one strand of hair can dance. In Rwanda, almost everyone has curls, curls the size of forget-me-knots and the girls and

women wear their hair cropped-to-svelte like Grace Jonesy panthers or they have it twisted, braided, locked, short, long, straight, or wavy–however they want. Like everything else curls are relative. Relative to the sea or the hills, humidity and heat, a mother and father, to drums, jazz, and violin strings, to magazines and Instagram and how many mirrors you have in your house or how well loved you feel without having to think about it. I've learned to care for my daughters' hair well enough. Their hair is clean. We go through tubs of conditioner like it's cereal. Mostly skip shampoo. My girls swim in the sea and their hair repels water. Their curls come out crispy, defined and licked to salted caramel by the sun. For now, they don't care. They love to swim. There are fairy knots and matted bits and grass and black sand and joy and tears. It is what it is. Hair is just hair and hair is everything. I'm not sure Margot calling her hair wavy changes that. I'm not sure it's going to revolutionise the way my girls feel about themselves or their hair. I'm not sure white women with wavy hair have that much sway, anymore? Unless perhaps she's your mother. And even then, it all comes down to fingertips, the way a mother talks with her fingertips.

But I like talking hair with Margot. Talking hairdryers, and air drying and configurations and balms. Just like I've grown to love, in a eudaimonic kind of way, every month or so (and it has nothing to do with the marketplace) detangling my daughters' curly coils, gently, curl by tiny curl, for as many episodes of 'I Can't Believe It's Cake' as it takes.

'You know,' I say, 'Their father is learning to swim. When we were in Rwanda last year he took the girls to the tennis club every day to swim in the pool. At the start of their trip both girls got their hair done. Gracie got locs and Ruth chose braids with these blue synthetic extensions. And then they went swimming every day, just trashing their new hair. And you know, he'd never even seen the ocean before we met. We went to Zanzibar once, before the kids were born and that's where he saw the sea for the first time. But he wouldn't get in, he was scared of the water.' I pause. A flashback with heat, to that time, that place, there was something about the aqua marine of that place, pale turquoise see-through-ness and the ignorance of the white sand–kryptonite for fat tourists–that was eerie and unsettling and all I'd wanted was for him to see how beautiful the ocean could be. I think I'd sulked. It was only when he'd come to New Zealand to meet Ruth for the first time that he was able to enjoy the shallows against the black of his ankles and each day he'd take baby Ruth for a walk in her pram and come back exclaiming how good the salt water was for rubbing away the tiny, raised moles and freckles from his cheeks. Like it was this surprising gift, a lovely ritual he'd chanced upon, as unlikely, as accidental, as impossible to maintain as our union itself.

‘So yeah. Now he’s learning to swim and when the girls visit, they go to the pool every day, with their brand new braids and their locs. He puts their hair in swimming caps but it doesn’t stop the water from getting in. It took me hours to take Ruth’s braids out when we came back home, they were all fused together at the roots, leeched dry as bones by the chlorine. I teased free as many of the knots as I could with my fingers, cut out the really matted bits and then for a few weeks when I washed her hair, I’d douse it in conditioner and wrap it in a warm wet towel, and eventually her curls found their way back. It’s just funny, isn’t it? He’s learning to swim; I’ve learned to care for our daughter’s hair. It’s not what either of us knew. But here we are. Here we are. Doing it–separately together across hemispheres. Parenting.’

‘It’s cool he’s learning to swim,’ Margot says and tops up my wine. ‘But you’re the one parenting, Lucia. You’re the one doing everything for your girls. Literally everything.’ I take a sip. The wine is nice. I’m pleased. And just like that we’ve hopped topics like kids on rocks from hair to men.

‘It doesn’t feel like everything. It feels like everything with a hole in it.’

‘Yeah, well. That sounds harder than everything. How do you feel about him now? Do you ever wish things were different?’

‘I don’t wish things were different. They never could have been. Not then. I have regret for what we didn’t know and couldn’t do for ourselves or each other and for our kids. For the guidance we never got and probably would never have listened to anyway before it was too late. I mean he got someone else pregnant while he was still living with us. She’s now his wife and Ruth and Gracie have two half-sisters they love, but you don’t stand a chance wishing things were different with that kind of plot twist. You know what though, and I don’t mean this in a romantic way, like I’m not harbouring romantic feelings at all, kind of the opposite, but I sometimes think if we’d met as the people we are now–the people we’ve become, the parents we’ve become at the hand of how badly we fucked up with each other–that maybe it would have worked.’

Esme narrows her eyes at me, a gentle warning, that what I’m saying might not be true, but I continue because there’s something I’m trying to say that is.

‘I think on some level we were probably a good match. When we weren’t consumed with how to be or not be intimate, we were able to talk. Really talk, argue, disagree, laugh. Our senses of humours were like little happy magnets. Kind of amazing when you consider how far flung our homelands, our beginnings were, that the things we found funny liked to hang out. And I only say this because our girls make this all so obvious now. I can’t not see

the parts of him unfolding in them. Even without him physically around. It's crazy. They are him. Ruth has his care and patience. She eats slow, chews her food. She's engineered that way–it's how her jaw operates. She definitely doesn't get that from me. Gracie walks around with her hands clasped behind her back or in her lap like a monk. And then the ways we laugh, what we laugh about, the comedic timing, it's deeply fucking biological somehow. All these beautiful parts and I can't love them without loving him.' I take a breath. 'Even if we were clueless, turns out our bodies were not. My bones chose an excellent human to make babies with, even if we were perfectly wired to make each other miserable.'

Esme, my little sister who is of my bones smiles. 'Not everyone would talk about their ex like that Luce. Margot is right, though. What's been salvaged is on you. At great cost to you, amidst great fuckery and tragedy. You know that, right? Lucky fucker.'

'Maybe,' I laugh as a warmth that might be the wine or might be the melt of being advocated for glows my belly. A warmth that comes with a pinch of something else, that small knowing that all of it, the good, the bad, is always a dynamic into which two people play. 'That's the thing though, right, Tragedy. I think that's the one thing their father and I got right inside of everything we couldn't help but get wrong. Owned the fucking tragedy. I did it first and he was able to follow suit. So that Ruth and Gracie don't have to.'

I finger the last piece of fancy french sausage alone in the glass bowl. Put the meat in my mouth, chew the little oily pearls of fat and make a wish for some of what I've just preached to be true. Then I wash it down, wash it down with wine.

Conversation meanders towards dinnertime. Politics, family, school yard antics. Some of our kids have started learning about puberty at school. One of our kids has a pubic hair, the others do not. We lol over some Thomas Sainsbury videos. Margot sings the praises of a colour consultant who expertly got her and Paul to agree after ten years what shade of not-quite-white more like bone-marrow-cream to paint the interior of their house. Suggested a navy wall where the smart TV hangs to mute the swirly, black quicksand presence and pull of the large screen. We talk movies and TV shows. White Lotus. Succession. The Metal detectors. We talk about our dads. Because they've always seemed like the same person. Lovely and aloof. The kind of men who will talk to anyone they meet, strike up conversation with strangers on the street and yet all at once are never fully here, on earth, with you. One an accountant the other a dentist, both exuding relaxed bohemian vibes married to successful, anxious women. Men who adapted or evolved to express emotion at the hand of Bob Dylan songs so that they could roll and roll like rolling stones.

After a while Paul wanders in with a builder. Stands in the kitchen and points out the swollen sills where the avantgarde windows have let the rain pool artfully over the years. They look up at the ceiling, darkness the shape of a silver bellied fish marks the spot where the bath above may soon fall through.

Outside the street with leaky homes like mistresses in latex waiting for lovers puts on its lights. The children are back on the stairwell again. We can hear them hurtling themselves and marbles into the walls. Two of the little ones come to us and tell on the big ones for hoarding the marbles. We make sympathetic noises. Philippe appears and takes a seat at one end of the extended extendable table. We're arranged like un-serious too-familiar directors in a board meeting. The builder leaves. Paul sits down, too. More wine is poured. With the men there we venture into lively disagreement. About everything. Paul wants to know how my love life is going. Have I looked into taking a tango class, or a cooking class as he suggested. That's how he and Margot met. At tango classes. I love hearing the story. I love to imagine how intimidatingly beautiful Margot would have looked to Paul and what 'secure, sensible with taste in quality things' kind of handsome Paul would have looked to Margot. I like to imagine how a couple goes from what they see on the surface to seeing each other as they are–many-sided as a tree, the spindly, knobbly, twisted bits, grown from the inside out, the rings and rings of a person - and sticking around. What must that be like? Though I've not had success myself I'm getting good at collecting couples who have. I think about the French films I've watched where the woman, thin with great skin and a subtle hook nose, interesting yet beautiful, falls for the less physically attractive but intellectually, or artistically or professionally accomplished, clueless and usually older man. They might fight like cats and dogs. Their intimacy is scathing and loud or cold shouldered and gagged. There may be thoughts of affairs. There may even be affairs. But they pull through. They were always, in the end, in it together. Cut from the same wound. Mal-adaptive in ways that fit, ways that can hold them, sustain a family, a person's spirit. Oh, to be with someone the right amount of broken. Brokenness that knows itself. Brokenness that wants repair.

I tell Paul 'no news' on the love life front. That actually, I'm back to being content on my own–back from where exactly I'm not sure. I go on. Does he know about the Cinderella effect? That a child living with a non-genetic parent, especially girls, are forty times more likely to be abused? That teenage girls living with non-related men get their periods earlier? Paul considers me, the bloody and murderous potential of my non-existent love life. I add 'pinch of salt of course. No one says you have to live together.' Paul leans back on his chair

and puts his lovely large man hands on the rimu table. ‘It’s tango, Luce. If nothing else, you get to dance.’

Dinnertime. A tinfoil dish of lasagne bubbles and steams, bonfire-sized in the centre of the table. Large tarps of iceberg lettuce doused in just the right pitch of honey mustard dressing in salad bowls either side. The children pull up on whatever stool or plastic chair they can find and Phillipe makes a loop like a track and field runner, ladling up plates. We sit back and let our little people hold court. Their eyes shine, silly and delighted with all this syrupy adult attention on them. Laughter, smiles, the curl of lip corners. Mary–Margot and Paul’s eldest holds court, recounts the day’s marble antics through a wide-as-ribs grin.

Quite suddenly, Margot fixes Mary with a bespoke and disapproving look. Something about the way her daughter is drawing attention has flustered her.

‘Yes,’ she interjects, ‘but you bully the little ones, Mary. They told us you took all the marbles.’

The reprimand sucks the joy right off the girl’s face, her milky nine-year-old features distort and crack inwards. Humiliation lands like a hook in. Up in the ceiling the silver bellied fish is a thrashing dark stain. The rest of us avert out eyes, gaze at the lasagne on our plates.

‘I am *not* a bully,’ Mary gasps with a wobbly, wet voice. And then she fixes her mother with her own custom-made glare before she cries, ‘I was trying to stop the kids from throwing the marbles at each other. I was trying to be good!’

The silver bellied fish lurches wide in the gills, wide in the eyes. Mary bursts into tears and runs from the room.

Margot forces out an awful giggle. ‘Go after her,’ she instructs Paul and her tone is casual-swag but she looks pale.

‘No,’ Paul says, sticks a fork in his dinner. ‘You did it. You go fix it.’

Mother and daughter are not gone long. Margot escorts Mary back to the dinner table, the child’s face flushed clean, eyes red-rimmed but clear, gently sits her daughter down and nestles a kiss into the place where her hair meets her ear.

And just like that the silver bellied fish is given back to the sea, stunned, blinks, swims itself free.

This is what I mean about everything with a hole in it. The thing that’s missing. The thing that makes it hard. No one to tell you straight when you can’t see straight. No one to tell you–*go fix it.*

After dinner Paul reads the children stories. He does all the voices. All the accents. My daughter Gracie likes to perch on his shoulders, her pyjama arms and soft palms a wreath around his balding head. He lets her, and the other kids tired and sprawled on either side of him don't seem to notice or mind. She sits up there and peers over the ledge of him, peers to see if the pictures in the book match his funny voices.

We put the kids in their bunk beds and decide to watch a movie. Phillipe jacks his laptop up to the old TV set with a cable like it's a tugboat back to the future.

Usually, we don't make it all the way through the movies we put on. Esme and Phillipe slip off to bed first. Margot and I go next. Paul tries to stay up. Falls asleep in his dad's old Lazyboy armchair and when he wakes up in the night to the blue glow of screens he goes back to where he left off and watches the end of the movie so that he can tell us everything that was silly or wrong with it over breakfast in the morning.

Tonight, we watch Anthony Hopkins in *The Father*. We watch the whole thing. We're still there as the credits roll and agree it's the best movie we've watched in ages. I can tell we all feel a bit altered by how little we say. We don't rush to get to bed. We sit together for a while, nibble on chocolate, talk about the film.

And even once I go to bed and lie on the foam mattress with its sunken middle like failed cake I can't stop thinking about the film's last scene. The camera pans the room– daughter to father and then out the window into the high up branches of an Oak tree. Rustle of wind through green, leaves lit up like piano keys. The light playing with the dark and on it goes.

Back to front loops

We don't really fit in here. We're not locals or tourists. We're not in active wear. We're a gaggle of trench coats, berets, trainers, work boots, op shop jumpers. Paul wears his signature woollen vest. Though it's July, Phillipe is, as usual, in shorts. I read his tattooed knees left to right. They say *Summer's Here* all year round.

We do daily, or twice daily walks around The Mount and compared to other walkers, runners, and leisure seekers we always seem to be doing the loop back to front, the wrong way round.

In the mornings we start harbourside, the port side, in the shadow of container ships and make our way to the open sea, coastal stripes of white and blue that dazzle like toothpaste. In the afternoons we do it the other way around. Chasing the sun with the whites of our eyes.

The children prefer not to walk the path at all. They clamber up onto dirt ribbon tracks and scramble along like lambs. Every now and then one of our lambs gets stuck too high up and Phillipe or Paul will circle back grab them by the underarms and fly them down.

Perhaps it's because the runners and walkers want the sun on their heels and not in their eyes. They come towards us in a lululemon sweat. We nod, say hello, step aside. Then we carry on with whatever it was we were talking about. Let me think. We get into a conversation about 'work styles.' I propose that we're all creative, but in different ways. Margot is the producer, the curator–she has excellent aesthetic taste, attention to detail, she can lead and follow a process, teach herself how to design a logo from scratch on YouTube. Esme is offbeat, cool, has a sort of haphazard, effortless way of putting things together that leaves you both envious and proud to be her sister. She has weathered hands from those pots she sculpts out of cement that we all tell her she should sell but she just puts them in the garden like beautiful, battered eyeballs. Whenever I have a decision to make, an idea to bat around she's my go to. She will see the thing I'm blindly circling straight away. I tell her this and for a moment she agrees with me then just as quickly laughs it off. Me? Maybe I'm words and a deep well. I don't craft or follow process too well. I don't make much art with my hands. I can however make hands with my words. I'm not precise. I'm something else. For example, when I tidy a room I'll leave a particular pile of books out on the bed, messy and intentional like friends. Because it feels better that way. With some curated randomness. What kind of creative is that?

Anyway. What's clear is that none of us are currently living up to our commercial creative potential. But we also can't bring ourselves to care that much right now. Each of us a mother out of or juggling or in between work. To be honest it feels good just to have admitted out loud what we might be capable of. All in a forty-five minute back to front power walk as we chase the tails of our lambs into oncoming joggers, into the sun.

The beach when we see it, when we round that last bend, is as long and white as a wedding. So different to the beaches back home. On the west coast our beaches are as many shades of black as a funeral and the pipis glint like tears.

We take our shoes off and walk. Sink toes into sand. A warm crust on the surface, cool and damp beneath where the winter sun can't go.

Up ahead, Margot stops on the shoreline. She is looking at something on the ground, the children frenzy her ankles like sprats.

It turns out they have come upon a sand bank, a patch of beach dense with shells. So dense as to be intentional. I draw nearer and something about the scene strikes me. A kind of feeling into me. A kaleidoscopic twist that in an instant gives me a child's eyes. And with it a sense that we have found ourselves in a new country, an untouched place. That we might be the first and last people on earth to visit this spot before the sea takes it back with the next tide. Entrusted with a secret that the high-rise apartments across the main street are too big, too detached, too generic to know. For us alone the sea has parted.

The children hunt for the prettiest shells, the ones that have been waiting especially for them. Ivory elephant trunks the size of earlobes, shells with faces etched in, corkscrews, spirals, horns, and rings. They bend, and choose, and scramble as if the world has always been a graveyard that crunches and sings with the presence of children.

Ruth and Gracie show me their shells. Each calcified line, vein, ripple is gifted a new story in their looking. I promise to keep their treasure safe. Sink the sea's broken bones deep into the pockets of my trench coat.

'Anyone want these?' Margot asks.

Cupped in her palm are a family of scallop shells. Mermaid bikini tops. Rocks embossed with sunbeams. She has stacked them, one inside the other, biggest to smallest, like Russian dolls. When I look at them, I think of Margot. A warm rush of Margot. Of Margot making things beautiful with her hands. 'I'll take them,' I say. I can't bear to think of them being left behind. Can't bear to think of them coming apart.

Quite suddenly, the children realise they are hungry. Then that they are starving.

It's time to bring our back-to-front-loop-of-a-walk to an end.

As a grand finale before we head home Phillipe gives out aeroplane rides, his specialty. Flings the children out from their arm sockets till they scream.

'Can we go to the blow hole?' They cry and stumble around in dizzy, drunk circles on the sand. 'After lunch,' we tell them. 'We'll go the blow hole after lunch.'

We make our way from the beach to the road, a zebra crossing, shake out the grit from our socks and shoes. The children put their hands in ours. Go dreamy and quiet. Behind us the old Leisure Island drops away. But you can feel the imaginary eyes of dolphins,

kangaroos, and monkeys in waistcoats watching us as we leave. Watching and waiting. Always waiting on the island for the children to return.

Mollusc

It's our last morning at The Mount. Esme, Phillipe, and their boys packed up and left after breakfast. Paul was gone before any of us woke up. Off on a sales circuit of the region with belts, socks, and ties. A thing he says he tries to do when he's 'in this neck of the woods', meet with customers, his father's customers, face to face. I imagine he'll be wearing that woollen vest, a shirt–socks and tie. He'll brush it off when the store managers, who do most of their business online these days, see him coming and blurt 'we don't need anything!' before he's even put a posh-socked foot in the door.

How I love Paul.

Margot is curled up on one Lazyboy scrolling on her phone. I am curled up on the other, reading. Two women making themselves small so that the armchairs can't pop open as designed. No heavy man-legs splayed downwards to coax the chairs prone. We fold all our warmth inwards, hot dents in the 80's cream leather.

'I'm being accosted by this man,' Margot says all of a sudden. 'He keeps screaming *did you know you have curly hair?* It's creepy.'

I look up from my book.

'I'm getting ads,' she continues. 'Ads for that hair dryer you recommended. And ads where this guy chases down women on the street with a camera crew yelling *did you know you have curly hair?!* Then they do a demo on the spot. Right there in the street. Wash the women's hair, apply the product and when her hair dries she's amazed that she has this curly hair that she never knew she had. I mean it's definitely not curly–it's wavy.'

Margot turns her phone over in her hands. 'It's been listening to us. Creepy.'

'Yep,' I agree. 'Ads, algorithms these days trying to work the way dreams do. Taking snippets of our days, conversations, memories. My therapist says what happens in dreams is less important than the way the dream feels. The atmosphere, the feeling tone of your dreams is what you should pay attention to. That's where the useful information is.' I nod at her phone. 'Imitation dreams distracting us from our real dreams, especially our nightmares. From feeling things properly.'

Margot blinks.

The sound of the girls playing handball downstairs, the thud, thud of a rubber heart being served back and forth travels up through the carpet.

'I've got my hairdryer with me,' I say to Margot who is still blinking, 'you can try it if you want?'

'Oh yes please,' she says and furls herself inwards again, goes back to her phone.

I'm still thinking about imitation dreams when Ruth shrieks up the stairwell.

'Mum! There's a weird creature under my bed, it's having a baby! You won't believe it! come and see!'

Her voice contains the high, urgent tones of freakish discovery.

I struggle out of Paul's dead dad's armchair to go and investigate.

All four girls when I find them are crowded around a bunk bed in the corner of the bedroom, their heads bowed, looking at the ground. Whatever it is, they are thrilled and disgusted and take turns speaking in hushed tones, 'is it dead?' and, 'it's some weirdo crab that's crawled up from the beach' and, 'ewww, look at what's coming out of its bum, gross!'

'Mum!' Ruth turns around, her eyes giddy. 'Look at this!' And she steps aside to let me see.

I'm not sure what I'm expecting. A squished moth, a legless weta, a deformed cockroach perhaps. But as I lay eyes on the thing, I draw breath.

A scorpion!

How could it be?

Has it followed me here?

But my eyes have played a trick on me.

Of course it's not a scorpion; it is too wet, too shiny of a thing to be a scorpion. There are no scorpions here.

The thing, the creature, is some kind of thumb-sized mollusc. Curled up because it is dead; that much I can tell. It has a fog-coloured body, soft and translucent as a bloated vein and tiny bulbous eyes protrude from sticks on its head. Coming out of its rear end is what looks like a mucus marble. Half in, half out. I can see where the wretched animal has dragged itself across the corkboard floor, a thick line of gel, like a streak of misfired dishwashing liquid, marks its passage.

'So, what is it, mum?' Ruth asks.

'I don't know,' I admit, 'maybe it's a baby lobster or a baby crayfish, but how the hell did it end up in our room. How did it get here?'

And perhaps it's the lingering shock of believing I've been followed halfway round the world by a scorpion, or the strangeness of seeing a thing so out of habitat, too dreamlike, too uncanny to be real, but it's some time before the obvious occurs to me, the shells we brought home from the beach.

There they are on the dresser where we left them, still dribbling beads of sand.

I stare at them. Like someone seeing seashells for the first time. Truly seeing them. Not as kitsch ornaments but as the rings and rings of a life. And there's humanness. Me-ness. How have I never noticed before? It's as if a sculptor has taken my blood, bone, brains, my khaki organs, and grass green eyeballs and stroked them into trinkets, stroked them into the world.

I go over to the dresser. Very carefully, I pick up and check each shell for other stowaways. But there aren't any. Just the dead mollusc on the floor. And of all the shells I inspect only one is intact–a conch shell the shape of an ornate nipple or a perfectly spun meringue. No broken parts, no drill holes where the living bit, the soft bit has been slurped out by a predator.

'This must be its shell,' I say to the girls and hold it to the window, imagining for a moment that I am the creature inside its shell inside a trench coat pocket being carried away from the beach to be put on a dresser in a holiday home to die. And how, while we slept, the little mollusc forsook its bones, forsook fear and tried with all its might to slope its way back to the sea.

The usual thing to do with a seashell is hold it to your ear and listen for the roar of waves. A better thing to do is hold it to the light, look inwards, till it turns into a tunnel of such soft and luminous peach you can see what it will be like when you die.

The children gather around ceremoniously as I scoop the creature out from under the bed onto one of Margot's scallop shells. The Daddy shell. A tiny purple curl of a fish inside a halo. Ruth finds a shady spot in the crook of pohutukawa tree roots to lay it down, and the girls say some words; the instinct children have to lay a thing that has lived to rest before God.

I leave them to it and head back indoors, into the bedroom where I put the conch shell along with all the other seashells inside an empty biscuit tin.

We clean, pack, load up the car. We say our goodbyes and I hug Margot for a long time. Then we leave. Things inside of things inside of things inside of things.

Gravity

Sunday evening and two little girls line up at a kitchen table hustling for prime position in front of an open laptop. It's that time of the week again, that hour. An audience with their father.

You're in the kitchen wiping down surfaces with a Wonder cloth now so overused its labrador yellowness has turned pale and blemished, balding in patches, a sickly mangy scrap of dog.

Dinner dishes drip dry on the rack. You wait for the girls to settle in, assume their default positions, you know they will.

Gracie, the little sister, likes to take over the controls, to manage filters, effects, the chat function. She commands the father into a cowboy hat and neck bandanna. From your off-screen vantage point in the kitchen, you think he looks quite good. Quite handsome as a cowboy. Surprisingly, so. The hat works with his moustache. The midnight blue of the bandanna against his deepest brown, volcanic skin.

For a while there you had tried to get your youngest daughter to talk to her father more on these calls. She was always on the chat, two-finger typing in little stories, riddles, conducting conversation via a Q+A or sometimes typing total nonsense, then asking her father to read it back to her. Gobble-de-gook. Hilarious.

You worried she wasn't getting her fair share of real 'father daughter' time. While her big sister, Ruth, chatted away about school, netball, her ten-year-old life. And then you worried that Ruth was having to carry the load, the load of maintaining the 'real father daughter' conversation while her little sister basically got away with bonus screen time. Then you worried that their father might feel annoyed, or let down, with his youngest daughter's insistence on typing not talking. Because if you only got an hour a week with your kids, well, wouldn't you?

In the end though, you learned to surrender this hour. It was not your hour to fix or manage or make right. This one hour in one hundred and sixty-eight was his. Was theirs.

And over time you grew to admire and feel an unexpected warmth in the way their father navigated his sixty minutes, let himself be led, entirely, by the whims and moods of the girls. Your girls. His girls.

He never came to the calls with much of an agenda. And again, sometimes this bothered you. His nonchalance, that he couldn't and didn't need to be across every detail of his daughter's lives. He just showed up. And left again.

But he never pushed the girls to make good on his absence. Let the hour flow whatever way they chose.

Sometimes he played chess with Ruth, she'd set up the board and he'd coach her hands through a game.

Sometimes the girls read him stories.

And sometimes he simply sat there. In silence, watching the girls draw, read or play a game of cards.

In those moments it was almost as if he was with them in the room and they'd forgotten he was there.

The intimacy, the achievement in that–from where you stood, offscreen, it took your breath away. And you wondered if he felt it, too.

The only thing he actively pushed was the relationship between half-sisters. Your daughters and his daughters. The daughters he now had with someone else. The family he'd made with someone new. And, you had to admit, this was harder to watch. Of course, it was important they got time with their sisters, too. But an hour doesn't leave a lot to go around, and though you suspected it was petty, you didn't want your girls short-changed.

Through a screen you watch the father give the other girls, the half-sisters, a puppy for Christmas. Through a screen you watch the littlest one learn to crawl, walk, and say her first words, all while bounced on her daddy's knee. And the pang you feel watching your daughters watch their sisters with a daddy they never got.

But if you feel that pang, your girls don't seem to. In fact, it's as if they now got to live those moments in some small way through their half-sisters.

The puppy is theirs too.

The first words are their first words.

And soon you cannot deny the sibling bond, that there is some voodoo healing grace, some God, some magic at play, that perhaps only children have hearts big and open enough to know.

'So, Dad,' says your big girl, 'I had this question at dinner tonight and Mum told me I should ask you.'

It's true. Over dinner, after a long week, the sink stacked high with dirty pots and pans, and a mind stacked higher with little worries, niggles, and 'to do's' your daughter had asked you a beautiful question; something to do with 'gravity' and 'Rwanda' and 'falling upwards' and when you realised you were not listening, you'd said: 'Gosh, I don't know, love. Why don't you ask your dad?'

Because that's the other thing about Sunday evenings. You can lob a few things their father's way. Sometimes, once the dishes are done, you can even take some time for yourself.

And so now, from the bedroom where you settle on your bed with a book in your hand Ruth goes in with her question. You pause, listen, the book hangs open like a mouth about to speak.

'Yes, Ruth,' says the father, 'what do you want to know?'

'I was wondering,' says the girl over the tap-tap of the keyboard which you assume is Gracie typing gobble-de-gook in the chat, 'If we made a hole in the earth between New Zealand and Rwanda, one that went all the way through, and I dropped a letter in it, a letter from me to you–what would happen? Would it fall up to you?'

'That's a great question, Ruth,' her father replies, and you realise you are nodding along.

It *is* a great question.

Her father continues, 'No Ruth. It wouldn't fall up. It would get stuck in the middle. Do you know why?'

'Is it something to do with gravity?'

'Yep. That's right, gravity keeps us all pulled in towards the earth. Otherwise, we might float away, or fall off. So, the letters they would fall down and then get stuck in the middle.'

You're riveted now. The unfolding of this question. Your heart feels sore imagining your daughter's letters stuck, piling up in the middle of the earth. Unable to fall upwards. Feels sore imagining your daughter imagining a tunnel to her father, the length of the world, so unimaginably far.

'Oh, ok. Do all planets have gravity then?'

'Yes, they do. The ones in our solar system. And we all gravitate around the sun, the sun's gravity pulls us.'

'Can birds escape gravity?' the daughter asks then.

‘No, not even birds can escape gravity, but I guess they can push themselves upwards within an atmosphere. But the sun is big you know, Ruth. It has a lot of pull. That’s why all the planets in our solar system orbit the sun.’

‘Could we give the letters wings? Like birds, but robot wings, and then they could fly their way down and then fly their way out?’

You imagine envelopes with robotic wings, a paper flock, yes, yes. The letters fluttering downwards, falling, upwards.

‘Maybe we could give the letters wings, Ruth. That’s an idea.’

‘Daddy, do you think there are stars far away bigger than the sun?’

‘Probably, Ruth. Possibly.’

‘And do all stars have solar systems?’

‘Well, no–I don’t know, there are too many stars to know.’

‘The Sun is our star, and we’re a planet and so is Jupiter and Mars...’

‘That’s right and gravity is why we don’t bump into each other. Do you know what else is fascinating?’

‘What?’

‘All the planets in our solar system follow the same path around the sun.’

There’s a pause as Ruth takes this in. The tap-tap of the keyboard stops. You listen with every muscle through the wall, a planet drawn in.

‘Ok. So, like a never-ending roundabout,’ you hear your girl say and then, ‘No hang on, I guess all roundabouts are never ending.’

‘You can get off a roundabout though,’ the voice of your youngest chips in. ‘So, it’s not the same. You can drive on and off. The planets just keep going round and around. They’re stuck on the roundabout. Grandma’s been on the roundabout around the sun for seventy years. And even when she dies, she’ll still be going around. Going around in the ground.’

You can tell from her tone Grace has had enough serious talk for one day. She announces:

‘Ok Dad, now you have to sing the song I typed into the chat. You have to guess what the tune is, the rhythm is, what the language is–it could be real, or it could be a fake language. Put your cowboy hat back on first.’

This ought to be good. You put your book down.

The father's voice starts into its stilted recital. The girls wail with laughter, the unbottled kind, the shooting star kind, they cheer and urge him on, 'Great, Dad. Cool beat Dad. Do a little dance Dad.' And then they explode again.

Without realising it, you have stood up and moved down the hall towards the laughter. The thing happening in the lounge draws you in.

The girls look over when you walk into the room, faces on full beam and you put your finger to your lips and wave a hand letting them know to carry on, not to let their father know you're there. And with your showing up it's as if you've poured kerosene on the flame of their delight, a special kind of witness, the joy in the room inflates ten-fold. And so now they really put on a show.

Gracie gets back to work, types more words into the chat and when she's satisfied says, 'Ok Dad. Now do this one. I'll give you a clue. It's a real language.'

You reach for your phone. Big sister sees you and gives you a thumbs up, hangs and bounces on the back of little sister's chair, she's all catapults of excitement.

Seated on a bar stool, off screen you aim the phone at the scene and press record.

'Ok, here we go,' says the father.

He starts to bop from side-to-side, hands raised, the cowboy hat and bandanna struggle to keep up as he sing-raps the lyrics set out for him inside his screen. And he runs the Māori words together in a way that turns them into something else, threading them way too fast, with an African lilt and the girls can't believe it, they hold their breath, they look back at you, to check that you're getting this, that you're finding this funny too, and their delight grows again, all the more intense for being suspended between you, between their mother in the room and their father on the screen.

The father finishes with a weird flourish of his voice and hand.

The girls roar and clap.

'Ok, Ok,' Gracie gushes and leans forward towards the laptop, flutters her hands at the screen in a gesture that seems to say *don't you dare move, stay there, don't let it be over*, 'that was really good Dad, you made up a good beat, but this is how it actually goes...' and she launches into a rendition of Toiā Mai Te Waka Nei while her sister leaps, dances, pretends to throw the long poi behind her.

You video the whole thing and only when you stop recording do you realise your cheeks hurt, the corners of your eyes are sore from smiling.

Soon you let the girls know it's time to wrap up the call. They swarm the laptop on the table, pull their father's face on the screen into an embrace of jittery limbs. And the father

is saying, ‘I’m the sun, I’m the sun, I’m pulling you in girls, pulling you in with my gravitational pull.’

You let this play out for a minute or two. But neither party is willing to end the call, so you have to say, ‘come on girls, time for bed.’

There’s another flurry of *I love you’s* and then it’s Ruth who bravely says, ‘Ok Dad, I’m ending the call now. I’m pressing end. Bye!’

And everything goes quiet. Both girls back away from the laptop, now nothing more than a machine. They look to you, the delight, the frenzy, the goodbye hangs off them like static.

You hold out your arms.

‘Wanna see the video?’

‘Yes!’ they cry and rush in, one either side, a mash up of bodies and sofa, and together you watch the video back.

Their father bopping. Goofy. Uninhibited.

The girls in hysterics.

And all strung together with spilt second glances, smiles back to camera, back to you.

You watch it again. And watch it again.

‘What do you reckon, should we send it to Dad?’

‘Yes, yes. Let’s send it to Dad,’ sing their unanimous and tired voices.

Heya, what a great call. Girls had so much fun. Here’s a pretty classic video.

You press send.

One tick, the message has flown.

Two ticks, message received.

And all around, the whirr of wings.

The Smiling Braid

Do you worry that your daughter smiles while she talks? Smiles and talks at the same time. Smiles too much. That the smiling is for putting people at ease, which is not your daughter's job.

Should you worry about such a thing? Or should you worry more that you've noticed this thing about her smiling while she talks and, without meaning to have fashioned it into a problem. You never noticed it before–the smiling while talking, but come to think about it, the worry is nothing new.

Do you worry that you've made it all about you again? Do you feel your bones like ornate chains threaded together in your mother's womb?

Or do your bones feel nothing. Did your mother turn them into a pile that for a time sat lifeless on the front lawn.

When you look harder, do you see clearer? Or is there a speck of marrow in your eye. The creamy shrapnel our mothers leave behind.

Look again. See the way your daughter smiles as she talks? It's not so much forced–as stuck. Do you hope quietly without meaning to that she isn't stuck because of you? And then feel ashamed for the wish you made.

Do you notice that she's speaking through the sticky smile and her words are outstretched–strung together, beads on a chain, lilting, pretty but hard to hear. Do you worry that your daughter does not want to be heard? That she's performing the words, wearing the smile, a toothy white heirloom.

Do you then consider that perhaps she smiles for all the reasons she may truly have to be happy?

For example, she got her hair braided this week. Her father sent you a photo of her on the porch at his house with her head tipped down and her gorse curls being twisted into sleek speckled snakes. You saw how gentle, brown hands made pathways through her scalp weaving in synthetic strands of electric blue that at the root glinted but by the end of the braid gushed a neon river mouth.

The braids have given her longer hair than she's ever had before. She shows you with pride how she likes to twist the glossy ropes around like a crown. She tells you she's a mermaid. She can't stop smiling. Even her father tells you how excited she was to add in the fake blue hair. How she knew what she wanted from the moment she saw the extensions, a

rainbow, in the woman's hand. And now she asks you if you can take a photo of her with her Disney-blue tips and she sends a message from your phone to her friends back home that says, 'do you like my hair?' and the friends tell her she looks so beautiful, like a Queen.

Did you know blue was the last of all the colours to be named, given its own word? Before blue the sea was wine-dark. We couldn't hold it in our hands. Couldn't see it for the longest time–in the trees, in our food or in the earth where our bones go.

Do you believe in the story told by the old woman Nagatuu about the little girl Wanjíru whose mother beat her so severely that she broke and died and the birds they came and gathered up her bones amongst the grass and joined them together by means of little chains women like to wear and one bird, who was very clever, joined her back together and she became alive again and went to live in a cave by the riverside far away from her mother's house?

Can you locate the indigo ache you have for your daughter in all the ways Wanjiru's bones were undone and threaded back together, dead, and alive, over, and over, the girl with no say in the matter, whose only way to exist was to leave so that her bones could become her own?

Can you feel your own spine being unstrung like a necklace; the pieces sprayed onto the floor?

Do you think perhaps the truth lies somewhere between the grass and the sky?

Your daughter, she smiles because she wants to. Today she feels good in her skin, you catch her eye, smile, and the smile sticks to both your faces like gleaming pendants.

So, Mama, sweet Mama, take your synthetic concern and braid it into something real. Hold it in your hand–the soft, shiny vertebrae are strong and we are each remade, bright, and rare as blue.

END.