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# **Passing Lane & Other Stories**

A thesis  
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by  
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THE UNIVERSITY OF  
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*Te Whare Wānanga o Waikato*

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# *Passing Lane* *& Other Stories*



*Mary Raleigh*

## Abstract

The process of growing into ourselves is one that we navigate through interactions with other people and, in turn, through interactions with the self. We learn from how the world refracts back to us and lodges deep within. This can be a bewildering experience as we attempt to discover who we are, trying to filter the continuous feedback thrown our way without losing ourselves. We build an absolute sense of self from the inside out. Despite the damage inflicted along the way, we seek to share and be understood.

This collection of stories intersplices experiences of what it is to be female - curious, observant, open, angry, lover of life, artist, idealist. It takes us on a journey forward and back through time, in the way our flickering minds and memories work to seek sense-making of the past from an ever-changing position in the now. As our lived experiences accumulate, time's gift is that we can see with clarity what was hidden from view at the time.

Inspired by the idea of the arc from innocence to enlightenment we all traverse, I sought to allow fragments of female experience to explore themselves on the page. What happens when the unexpected happens? How do we reconcile fantasy with reality? How do we cope when expected to contort ourselves for others? Can we know ourselves entirely?

Womens' lives are frequently fragmented and interrupted. We are always seeking to juggle the necessities of ordinary life, accept compromises, suppress or follow desires. I wanted to explore the lived reality of this fragmentation in the approach I took to these pieces of writing and how despite this, somehow, we still manage to hold on and savour life. Some of the stories are of traditional length, whereas others are shorter and more splintered. My goal was to capture the sense of how moments flicker by in our lives yet so many of them are poignant and extraordinary, gone in a flash and not always held on to.

The voices in these pieces are a female chorus, one woman on many different days, having many different epiphanies, or many women on a single day all experiencing life simultaneously. They are female harmonics seeking to make sense of the world.

The stories are narrated by unnamed female narrators, ranging in age from four to 49. They are in first person 'I' or third person 'she' with two narratives in second person 'you' to express a different energy. I sought to draw the collection together using this approach with the hope that it allows the reader intimately inside the world of the narrator.

From vulnerable and tender to sardonic and impatient, these female personae are honest and raw, funny and insightful. The plural *She* who speaks here seeks to understand how life shapes a person.

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To my family  
in love and gratitude  
and  
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for helping me find the path.

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## **Radiant**

I am scared of going dodderly and never having good sex again. Of never feeling fabulous and people looking at me weirdly and other judgementy stuff. I am scared of grey hair being a death sentence for the above and I'm scared of diseases ad finitum and of bad teeth. Poverty-stricken old age and never feeling fit and strong and great again are little fissures. They stop a return to sleep when a hedgehog scruffles under my window, or a late-home neighbour wakes me. I am scared of crying when I don't want emotional eyes and always being grumpy or sad and misplacing my phone or my radiance.

The weight of all the world's incompetencies hovers two inches above my deltoids. I feel it all bleakly like it's my fault that countries are badly run and decent people are disadvantaged. Ukraine is my fault. Solomon Island infrastructure is my fault. Covid pandemic burnout in nurses is all my fault.

Holding everything together is hurting my arms.

I want to be large-flat-white-after-a-long-walk satisfied. I want wall-to-wall Benee and Andreas Scholl and Alanis Morissette, my usual wonky playlist. I want little sunflowers nodding at me on my walk to work. Soft light dawn, veridical ideas and hope narratives spilling from all the mouths of all the people I share a day with. The mountain needs a climb, the muscles need pummelling. The book needs picking up and let those pages fly open to the bit where it tells about reconnection and seeing impossible things.

Answers are sought in the usual places. A small pile of non-spiritually spiritual prayer books, photographs of my loved ones, my commonplace books, stored around the house in furtive locations. The pinboard above my desk. On this I have Alice Walker 'Expect nothing. Live frugally on surprise.' And Anatole France 'If we do not change, we do not grow.'

I collect the necessities of hope on my desk. A pine cone and a smooth stone. Sparkling water. Highlighter pens. The Concise Oxford. Scribbly brown paper. This is one of the altars at which I think, then try very hard to not think. Look out window, west towards a city nestled in gold and red. Autumn is my season of transformation. It is when I make decisions. The mind cools to optimal temperature for clarity. Summer cataracts gone.

My night time read-in-bed is padded with six pillows and a cushion, start to sink into some great book written by a wise, calm, clever, witty person and then my damn bedroom door slides open. One at a time each child arrives for the observance of their second good night. The one where they come to say good night to me which is apparently different from the one where I go say good night to them. One by one the household is soothed.

First child has pent up study confusion and friendship dramas, the next a sense of guilt that he should have a part-time job, the youngest that everything she follows online has gone cray cray today. We work through the therapy together. They do all the talking, I do the a-haing and humming and none of them seem to notice I am a reflective surface off which they bounce.

Good night times three.

One last fear-flicker as I turn out the light and burrow. What about the loose ends that might be misinterpreted by future living persons when I am gone. The mis-reading, the re-narrating, telling the story again, wrong. Or perhaps with more accuracy than the person living it? Objectivity was always the impossible aspect. I am not scared of being gone. Totally not scared of that. Major pointlessness to that.

All is in flux.

## Hands

The kitchen is full of Ella Fitzgerald singing *Undecided* on the radio, up loud. Nana doesn't have an interest in getting hearing aids. Too much fuss. She stands, one bow leg, making her list a little to the left. The pale yellowy-green formica table is full of cast iron weights and measures, Sure to Rise baking powder in a worn old tin, eggs, a packet of currants. I'm not sure where to be until mum hoists me up on the bench beside the sink to watch. I can see the house next door over the top of the net curtains stretched on wire halfway up the windows.

'What are you making Nana?' I crane my neck to see in the deep mixing bowl.

'Tilly's buns.' These sound to me like a thing Mrs Tiggy Winkle would have in her basket. I am full of hope for a tasting.

'Here.' Mum gives me a warm bowl with softened butter in it. I hold my arm around the top, balancing it on my legs. 'Stir this in.' She adds sugar and passes me a wooden stirring thing. 'That's a spurtle.'

'A what?'

'A spurrrtle.' Nana rolls the rs across her tongue like lollies.

'The Scots use them for making porridge,' Mum explains.

My tongue sticks out the side of my mouth in concentration. Hard work this.

'Lovely. Thankyou.' Mum takes the bowl off me to add more ingredients and I watch Nana instead. She is mixing the dough with her hands.

Her hands!

'Don't you want a spoon?' my mum asks her mum.

'Arrch. Hands were invented before spoons.'

I am four and this is marvellous. Will Mum tell Nana off?

I look at Mum. She doesn't look up. Carries on her own mixing. She smiles and maybe she likes this too. This rule-breaking baking. Nana finishes mixing and turns the dough out onto the table, turning and kneading, pushing down into it with the pads of her hands, rolling it flat with an old milk bottle. Humming along to the music, she uses an upside-down glass to cut out little round shapes, placing each on the baking tray. I watch in a trance until the last ball of dough fills the tray.

Into the oven.

Mum has filled another tray with balls of biscuit dough. Nana picks up a fork and squishes a ball flat. She motions for mum to help me down and there is my hand and Nana's hand on top of mine and we are squashing the balls together.

I put my other hand on top of Nana's to feel her skin. I run a little finger up and down and the skin moves with me willingly. She chuckles and makes a comment about how old her hands are and what beautiful smooth hands I have. She has knobby joints, wrinkles, veins, coloured splotches. But that's not what I notice.

They're *so* soft.

I tell her so and she laughs her eyes crinkled shut and I think how beautiful her face is like that.

## They must Leave I don't want them to Leave

Motherhood is a bum deal.

They spend 18 years driving you mad and then...what? The house will be so quiet. How can this be? How soon until a return? And even then what kind of a return? An adult now, making adult decisions on living and loving. I never spent time analysing this with my parents.

It seemed taboo.

Now I face the quiet myself. It'll happen one day soon. I keep telling myself how essential it is. How there is nothing worse than a bonsai tree child. Their roots must feel their way into soil of their own choosing. All that invisible growth.

But oh the bleakness of it.

Is everything completely bleak right now? I sit very still and listen to the night. My books say, *come here you*. The clock ticks, jaunty. The back aches much less. I have choices. Stay up. Go to bed. Have a bath. Sing, paint, tidy a mess. Massage the temples, write a letter to my old friend in London. Pretend I'm travelling shortly and research the itinerary.

Make a mood board of so much hope and joy. Sellotape moodboard to the back of the toilet door for private meditationals. Position little buddhas of calm on the car dashboard, spiritual nobby dogs without the nod. Have a playlist on loop of Bach lute music interspersed with the Dunedin sound and Fatboy Slim.

There should be a rite of passage for the mothers. Other than Ezibuy purchases. All those deconsecrated churches and empty banks in tiny towns. They're just the kind of therapy space I'm talking 'bout. Deck them out in fairy lights and set them up like a playcentre for the mums. You'd be greeted at the door with a cup of tea in a comfy seat with a footrest. Optional VR goggles available for scenic views of the Aegean. Or the Kawekas.

Once your tea is drunk and you're sick of the Aegean, time to play. You may choose from traditional playcentre therapy (gloop, finger painting) or ramp it up to basket weaving or choral singing. There'd be breakout rooms for naps or feisty conversations. Always on tap - tea and biscuits.

What if the kids call? Your phone will be on silent. This will not be a problem.

## At the Top

I want to see.

Other kids had been doing it all term and I want to do it too. Big branches first. Thick like sideways trees. Once you're up the first four of them, the boys say it gets easier 'cos there's heaps of branches. There's always kids going up and giving the weather report to whoever wants to know as they whoompf their bare feet back on the pine-needled dusty earth below.

'Aw, it's pretty windy up top today. Better hang on.'

I want to see.

I want to see the view they keep talking about. Right out the school gate and along to the shops. Today I'm gonna do it. I just feel right about it today. I decide on lunchtime instead of morning playtime. I want to make the most of it. Don't want to rush.

The hardest branch is the first. It's high off the ground. As tall as the top of Dad's head. I stand, wondering at it for a bit. Anthony tells me how he does it.

'Ya just put ya foot there (points to a jagged branch for a foothold) then grab onto that (loops his arms over a bigger low branch that bends under his weight) and then swwwiiinnng up here!' He loops and sits up on the first big branch, a cowboy on his trusty mount. I must look not so sure.

'Umm.'

'Givus ya hand,' he reaches down to pull me up. Two blurred seconds later and I am sitting behind him doubling on the farm hack, like that photo of mum and all her brothers and sisters off to school.

'Woah.'

'Come on, race ya.' Anthony stands up on the horse branch. He puts his arms above his head and the leaves seem to reach down and suck him up.

'Where'd'ya go?' I look up.

No answer.

I stand slowly and start looking for my next move. It's cooler up here than down on the ground. The southerly has found its way off Cook Straight and into town and all the way to the back of our suburb, tucked tight at the end of the valley.

'Anthony?' Nothing. Wind in branches. Magpie call. A kid from the class next to mine shimmies past me.

'Oi. Ya goin' up or wot?'

I don't answer him. I never liked that boy. He always has snot crust that makes me feel sick. I haven't looked at his face since last year when the teacher told him to go blow his nose during maths. He muscles on up and again it's just me.

Me and a great big tree.

I sit back down hugging one arm around the trunk and swinging my legs back and forward. Other kids come up and down. They give me a nod. A smile. They don't care whether I go up or not. It's all the same to them.

Not to me.

I stand up again. Deep breath. I look for a branch above to grab and choose one. Yup. Good. Feet there. And there. Good. And again. Look, hold, foot up, and on like that with one kid above me and now some below. A nomad trail of kids going up one side of the ancient macrocarpa and down the other. The ones going down shimmy and skitter their way, buzzing. They grin at us on the other side. I smile back. Just a little. I need to concentrate.

And then there is no more.

A carpet of green greets me, nodding its branches in time with my breath. Ooohh. I steady myself and let the fact sink in. This is really the top and I am really here and I have really just climbed to the very top and there is the bottom field way way down there below me. Look. There's Nicholas from my class in his matching blue tracksuit top and bottoms playing soccer and he always scowls and says it's called football even though we all try to explain to him that football is rugby not soccer. He is a weedy blue stick insect from up here. A stick insect with a pudding bowl haircut.

And beyond the school fence. There is the road. Men doing roadworks with orange cones and white trucks. A concrete mixer. A roller thingee.

The green canopy carpet looks solid. Looks like you could stand on it but I *know* you can't. My foot would feel for a floor and it wouldn't be there and it would drop through into the air and my leg would follow and then the rest of my small self and it would be bad and scary and I might die if I fell but the leaves look so solid but they are not but I want to reach out and dance in the wind, my arms waving wild. But I can't.

The sea in Wellington harbour is the same colour as the leaves at the very top. Deep green. Seaweed green.

'Good view eh?' It's Anthony. Only his head is here, surrounded by a ruff of leaves. I can't talk right now. I just nod with my eyes wide and my hands gripping the branches below me, tight. He understands. 'See ya at the bottom.' And with that, he sinks from sight and I am solo again.

The wind is picking up a bit and the branch I am crouching on sways a little. Woah. I'm always first to get carsick in the family and the last time we crossed on the ferry, well...I don't want to think about that just now.

Then a warm hand on my ankle.

'Come on. Bell's gonna go.'

I crouch lower and see where Anthony goes. Ok ya just gotta do it, I tell myself. Down, bit by bit and gradually the earth gets closer.

Then whoompf. It's us dusting up our feet in the pine needles.

'Cool eh.' I nod and wipe some sticky sap off my hands and onto my legs.

Yeah. Cool.

## Date

I knew it was gonna be a terrible date when he explained how the menu worked. I'd only been to that particular fine-dining restaurant about half a dozen times prior but he hadn't thought to ask me that. The problem when men operate like this is that out of politeness I start to watch them with the detached maternal eye on the toddler.

It's a discreet place which I realised later, encouraged discreet behaviour. Mellow lighting, muted tones and muted sounds. Soft clatter of kitchen industry. Well brought up wait staff who keep a hand behind the back and serious elegance to their facials. Minimal flirty eye contact. The plate was the art. Food that makes love to your nostrils. Tender. Moist. Succulent.

Even if it's the first date, an investment's been made. A dress bought, the hairdresser bill. You want to give the guy a chance to relax, he'll be nervous. Give him a fair go.

So turned out that he sat on one wine all evening. Well that was fun. I had three-quarters downed mine before I noticed his tincy sips. Bugger. I had to order mineral water. I could tell I was getting a backlist of stories. His childhood, his children's childhoods. The old family funny story, ha ha ha. I wasn't even asking prompters - he'd got on an unsolicited roll and didn't want to get off. The last date I'd been on had also brought me here. At least that one drank more wine.

While he was banging on about one of his kids I began to have one of those out of body experiences the terminally bored suffer from. It allowed me to have a conversation with myself about what it might be like in a relationship with a man such as this. It was all *quelle horreur*. Me turned into an apron-wearing preserver of peaches, watching blockbuster movies, him turning off the news when the international items started because they were all *so boring*.

I shuddered at the thought and out-of-body me and body-me were pulled back into sharp alignment and I was eating at an expensive restaurant and the man across from me still had no idea that I had a Masters degree, an interest in etymology, or more awareness of his psyche than he did.

That's what lack of a sex life will make you do. But the future problem wouldn't be the sex. Great, fab, a sex life again. Whoopie. It was the aftermatch function that loomed large in my thoughts. If you can't have a post-coital convo about global politics, fundamentalism or the housing crisis then God help me. With sex taking up less than an hour a day (ok, a week) that leaves hundreds of hours of companionship to have to fill knitting and sitting by the fire or whatever-the-fuck else.

I had to bail but by now was so depressed by having just lost two hours of my life that I sat inert and looked the part more than ever.

‘Gosh I’ve talked a lot haven’t I?’

Yes you have, I thought, but my mute button had been pressed and I was starting to dream of my cool cotton sheets at home. So I just finished my wine. He went to the loo. Here was my chance. I wouldn’t, would I? Why not. I got up, paywaved half the bill and gapped it in a taxi before he was back from the bog. He even had his *Oh, you didn’t do a runner* joke ready.

Only I did.

No. You know I didn’t. I let the evening have its unsurprising flaccid denouement but at least I got a free ride home and saved the taxi fare to buy another book. On l’histoire de l’ironie dramatique.

## Goldie

‘Shall we get a photo?’

Uncle Angus limped off toward the farmhouse. I stood in front of Goldie, putting my hand out to stroke her long grey nose. Her left ear flicked back. Then both ears twitched forward together, her liquid brown eyes looking over my head toward the back door. Mum and Aunty Edie, were coming down the concrete steps, talking to Angus.

‘Sure you don’t mind?’

‘Course not. It’s good for a wee townie.’ Gus read Mum’s mind. ‘She’s a very calm horse.’ Goldie turned her head to look at the grown ups. Angus stood, wonky ‘cos of his bung hip, nodding at me, that grin I couldn’t read. My dad was the more serious flavour of father. I never knew what to make of Uncle Angus. His tickled-pink laugh, never in a rush, always happy to talk to boring old kids.

‘Go-orn. Up you get.’ He laced his knotty hands together to form a mid-air step. ‘Gimme ya foot.’ I turned to mum who nodded. She was doing that smile mothers do when they’re 85% sure this is a good idea. I put my blue gumbooted left foot into Gus’s hands and whoompf. I shot up and into the vast saddle. Miles from the ground.

‘That’s it!’ Aunty Edie beamed.

‘Take the reins.’ Uncle Angus slapped one leather strap over Goldie’s neck, then the other, making them cross at the pommel. He handed them to me and I held them up in the air like a rodeo cowboy. ‘Hold them down low, by the saddle. Firm but not too tight.’

I frowned, confused. ‘The reins aren’t joined.’ I’d only ever seen pictures of bridles attached in a loop. Angus looked up at me.

‘On hill country it’s safer if reins aren’t joined. If they get loose, the horse won’t get their leg caught.’

That made sense.

Photo. Me a gawky sight. Red sweatshirt and faded green pants. Gold metal framed glasses. Pigtails sticking out either side of my head, one always in the wrong place, too far back, too far up.

‘Come on then.’ Uncle Angus made a clicking noise with his tongue on the back of his teeth, and took the reins near Goldie’s bridle to guide her head around. He started up the stoney driveway. A little rise then a tight corner where the first car shed was. Turning hard left the driveway rose steeply past the second car shed, full of old khaki Land Rovers. The drive rose steadily toward the road. Past the pear tree and the cherry plum. Up Goldie clopped, shoulders working under my weight. Goldie was about 18 hands high, I reckoned.

‘Why did you call Goldie, Goldie?’ I asked my uncle. The mare flickered her ears back and forth at mention of her name. ‘She’s grey.’ It seemed an all right question to me but it made my uncle do his little chuckle.

‘Gold sounds flasher than grey. More special.’ I couldn’t argue with that. She was the only horse in the world right now and I could pretend she was mine for the next five minutes.

‘No,’ he corrected himself. ‘She was called that when we got her.’ I patted the side of Goldie’s neck. She reacted by shivering and I worried I had done something wrong. ‘Now, you go for a walk up the road. I’ve got to work on this letterbox.’ Uncle Angus suddenly became interested in the giant farm letterbox, the size of a small henhouse, big enough for two small kids to shelter in, knees up around eyeballs, as they waited for the country school bus.

*Eh? He’s letting me loose?*

‘Where shall I go?’ I couldn’t believe he would let me go solo on my first attempt.

‘Just follow the road a wee way up.’ It was basically follow the one lane road, or nothing. On the left was steep papa cliffs, rising up vertically from the road which had been carved into the hillside winding up the narrow valley. The right was fenced paddocks steeply dropping away, the grass hiccuping in rippled formations to the creek below.

‘Maaaaaa-aaaaaaa.’ A lone ewe reminded me of where I was. Not in Wellington.

*Walk off on Uncle Angus’s horse? Just like that?* I couldn’t believe it. No-one had ever placed trust this big in me, in my entire life. Except maybe that time I had to hold the cat on the backseat while mum drove to the vet. Mittens had had a scrap with the neighbour’s stuck up Siamese, Katie.

Goldie seemed quite happy to take me up the road. Her haunches pushed against the back of the saddle, a saddle far too big for an eight year old. I felt like I was doing the splits but I ignored all discomfort. This was too wonderful. I was living my fantasy life and I wanted to sing a ditty of joy. I loved the rhythmic ca-clop of her hooves on the gravel road, the push-me-pull-you feel of my torso being tugged forward in time with Goldie’s beat. And best of all, that horse smell. How to describe it? Horse hair, horse sweat, caked-on dirt. It smelt like the opposite of the inside of a church.

We came to the first curve in the road. I expected Goldie would need guidance like a bike so I tugged a little on the left rein. She spun on a fifty cent coin and we were facing home. *Huh?* I pulled the right hand rein to correct her direction and she turned 180 to face back up the road. Puzzled, I made that click click sound like I’d heard Uncle Angus do and obligingly Goldie began to move forward.

Second curve in the road, this time a right hand bend. Same deal. I gently pulled on the right rein, Goldie spun and faced home. We did this at four more curves in the road until I thought we'd probably pirouetted up far enough for one day. I pulled deliberately one more time and she shot around, ears pointing homeward. There was Uncle Gus, walking up the road not far off.

'How'd'ya get on?'

'She kept turning around at the bends.'

'Turning around?'

'Yeah, I pulled the reins to tell her to go around the bend and she turned right around.'

Gus's eyes disappeared as his cheeks came up to meet his bushy eyebrows.

\*\*\*

Next school holidays, I begged for another visit to ride Goldie. This time my older cousin was home and so it was arranged that he would take me for a real ride. All the way up the road to the top. Kev was on his chestnut gelding, Tommie.

'Yeah so they removed his nuts.'

'Why?' I knew what nuts were but what the heck.

'If you leave their nuts on, they're harder to control as stallions. If you make them into geldings, it calms them down.' *What the heck.*

'Time for a trot.' Kev and Tommie took off. Goldie followed without waiting for me to ask.

Bang bang bang.

I felt like my teeth were going to fall out. Kev laughed and swung Tommie around to explain how to stand in the saddle and get into the rhythm with the clopping hooves.

'Try again.' He took off at a trot once more and Goldie followed, again without any orders from me.

Up down, up down.

I did it. I felt elated.

'Well done!' Kev nodded his helmet at me. We walked on, chatting, then came to a long straight bit of the road.

'Let's speed up,' Kev dug his boots into Tommie's side and was off. Goldie kept walking.

'Come on Goldie.' I copied my cousin and dug my heels in and *Ohhhhhh...* Goldie did four steps of trotting and broke into a canter. The world wooshed by in a blur of wind and tears. I'm flying, I'm going to die and this is amaaazing and how do I stop and....' Goldie

came to a halt beside Kev who was sitting twisted around in his saddle, mouth open staring at me. I flopped forward up Goldie's neck, grabbing at her mane.

'Ya all right?!'

'Yip.' I sat back in the saddle. I was thrilled and all my words were gone. Best day ever.

\*\*\*

One school term later it was the long summer holidays. I went with Mum to stay with Grannie and Poppa for the holidays. The phone rang. Would I like to come out and go for a ride again? Next morning Mum drove me out to Angus and Edie's farm.

'I need to muster one of the hill paddocks, like to help me?' Angus was pulling on his work socks at the back door. I looked out across the fence, past the chook house. They all looked like hill paddocks to me.

'Yip.' As if I would say no.

Mum was at the kitchen table with her sister, drinking tea and discussing a recipe for something called tan square.

We ca-clopped past the woolshed, Uncle Angus answering my random questions as if I was the bank manager doing an inspection of his farming operation.

'How big's the farm?'

'Bout 500 acres.'

'Aw yip.' Sounded big. 'How many horses have you got?'

'Ahh, well, there's about seven, four that we ride.'

'What about the other three,' I was thinking of the gorse-covered slope below our hillside house in Wellington.

'One's gone lame, one is too old now and hasn't been ridden in years and the other isn't really broken in yet.' No spare pony then. And yet.

'Can the lame one be fixed?'

'Not really.'

'Who'll break the other one in?'

'Kev wants to try but it's pretty tricky, so I'll have to help him.'

'Then he'll ride it? Who will ride his horse?' This could work.

'Ya know, you can come and ride with us whenever you and your mother are here.' I reddened.

We paused at a gate while Uncle Angus leaned down to unlatch it. The dogs with us vaulted over and shimmied under, ignoring our towering mounts with their giraffe legs shadowing overhead. The horses ignored the dogs right back.

The sheep were on the other side of the creek and we had to zig zag down the south side of the paddock to reach them.

‘‘S’pose you’d liked t’have grown up on a farm.’

‘Yeah.’ I tried to imagine it.

‘I don’ think I could ever live in a city. Too many people. What’s it like?’

‘Umm. It’s loud.’ I tried to think of how to describe it.

‘I like the peace and quiet. City life would be too fast for me.’ I imagined Uncle Angus driving his Landrover down the Ngauranga gorge. Putt-putting round the sweep of motorway, getting passed by the commuter train rattling in from the Hutt. Coming into Wellington, taking the wrong exit, circling the Beehive. Getting out and asking the nearest MP for directions to our house. He was still smiling in my imaginary story, but only just. He looked a bit stressed out. I’d never seen him look stressed out in real life.

We crossed the almost dry creek, Goldie stepped between stones and began the climb up the other side of the paddock. I leaned forward in the saddle as I’d seen Angus do. Your head so close to the horse’s mane that you feel like you’re all horse. This side was steeper and the sheep were all over the slope, scattered specks of fluff.

Angus set the dogs to work, whistling instructions. How do the dogs know what that means? His mouth was a straight line, eyes narrowed under the fraying brim of his canvas hat, taking in all of the paddock ahead. I’d never seen that before. His man-has-job-to-do face. Man knows what he is doing, what has to be done, and is doing it face. Man doesn’t have time just at the minute to pay attention to niece face.

Goldie followed Angus who rode Kev’s Tommie, who also had his working face on today. I tried imagining I’d grown up here, that this was home and even that Angus was my dad. But that was past the reach of my imagination. A queasy guilt rolled in my stomach that my own dad might ever find out I’d considered alternatives. Was one of the ten commandments about that? Thou shalt not spurn thy mother and thy father? Dad was my dad and that was that.

The sheep seemed nervy creatures. They’d bleat at you then run the totally wrong way. The horses regarded them like kids in the primers. They seemed to be relieved that the dogs had to sort them out. I watched as the dogs slunk down and around the edge of a mob, manipulating their direction. Over and across, over and across. Gradually they merged into a

sea of daggy white. All heading for the one open gate in the far corner of the paddock out onto the road where we'd take them a few paddocks down, closer to the farmhouse. We were at the top of the other side now.

'Time to head back down. Lean well back in the saddle.'

I was feeling pretty dizzy looking at the steepness below but Goldie was the boss. She zigged one way then zagged another, correcting small stumbles, delivering me safely back up to the road. She was sweating.

'Good girl, good Goldie.' I patted her sweaty neck. I wanted to wrap my arms around her, bury my face in her mane. She snorted in response and shook her ears. I was feeling ready for a bit of that tan square.

'Wouldn't do this in town, any day of the year, would ya?'

'No.'

We herded the sheep down the country road. I felt a bit worried but there was only one car for the sheep to divide themselves around. A neighbour, who was crawling up the road in an old grey Morris Minor. She stopped to talk to Angus.

'Who's ya helper today?' A grey haired lady with a watermelon smile put her arm on the window and leaned out to see me properly, up higher than her car.

'This is Edie's niece, Nina. Nina, this is Mrs Peacocke.'

'Everyone calls me Mrs Morepork, cos I don't look like a Peacock,' she threw her head back chortling.

'I went to school with your mother! Fancy that. She's lovely your mum, I remember her. I was horrible homesick away at boarding school and your mum was so kind.' I tried to imagine this woman and mum as teenagers, this lady crying and mum patting her shoulder, handing her a hanky and saying *there, there*.

'I can see you look just like her, doesn't she look just like her?' Angus nodded in agreement. I always got confused when adults told you you looked like your mum or your dad. Your mum's side always said you looked like your mum and your dad's side, like him. What was really weird was when other people said they could see you were like your cousins and the whole family lookalike thing was a cobweb of relations and ancestors. 'D'ya like riding horses?'

'Yes!'

'Nothing like it. I was more homesick for my pony Billie when I went away to college than my parents. True! Billie understood me. I used to tell him all my troubles and woes and

he'd snort and I'd laugh and all my problems would go away. I wanted to be a vet but you need more brains for that than I ever had.'

I felt embarrassed that this lady had just told me she hadn't been much good at school. I also liked her a lot for saying that.

'Well I mustn't hold you up or those sheep will be out on the main highway if I keep talking. Pass my regards to your mother.' We said our goodbyes and Angus pushed on ahead to check Kev had met the flock with the motorbike as planned. Mrs Morepork's car swam through the stragglers. I didn't know what *pass my regards* meant. I decided I'd leave that bit to Uncle Gus.

'Maa-aaaaa. Maaaa-aaaaa.' Sheep bleats echoed around the valley as they followed each other down the road.

Like sheep.

## Tidy Up

When you are eight months and twenty-nine days pregnant the urge to get things in order is instinctual. Last errands run, nappies in a neat pile, baby garments in clean drawers, a baby quilt made(!), pantry stocked.

When you are nine months into menopause, the nest starts to feel discordant. A rebirth is occurring. I am now giving birth to my new self. I must clear away foolish beliefs. Yes I can change, yes I have changed. Yes change is good and yes it will be fine.

But how did this place get so choked up?

Items must earn their place. What first? Shoes. Those ones make my feet stink. No good despite their edgy hipster yummy mummy look (yeah, right). They're utter crap if they don't deliver on all fronts. Gotta go. And that feeble pile of clothes. Come on. The too tight tops, greenblue crunched up cotton shirt with buttons like slithers of pearl. The purple and black patterned crossover top I know I bought in San Francisco which carbon dates it appropriate for the op shop. I haven't travelled in a million years.

Downstairs there are kilometres of DVDs. I can't even.

Safe to just tackle the bedroom. Three bookshelves and two sets of drawers. How is this even possible that I have so much furniture? Spiritual cleanse-cleaning like this is exhausting, so I take months off in between. I would like to say weeks or days but why lie.

Is this the deal? Spend the first half of your life accumulating and the second half dispersing? The universe expanding and then the rush back to a tiny of dot of start.

This is the physical clutterage. What about the psychic clutter? Is wanting to learn the piano present or past tense now? What about being really really fit? What about those other wishes and dreams and longings? One thing at a time. I put on my overwhelm blinkers and tell myself five minutes, just five.

What is in that pile? An article about rereading Jane Austen. This makes me urgently need to find all my Jane Austens. What? I don't have Mansfield Park? Surely it's somewhere? And I'm on my knees scouring the bookshelves everywhere through the house. It'll be very small. Old. Navy leather? Faded brown? I can't remember. Inexcusable. It would've been my Grandmother's. I have never read it. Confession. I have only read P&P. I am a literary fraud.

The bookshelves groan with unrequited, unread books. Some people apparently think that it is sacrilegious to have books on your bookshelves that you haven't read. What a stupid notion. Bookshelves are in houses to create doorways. Opportunities to enlightenment. Plus if I ever get incapacitated and can't leave the house for lengthy periods of time, no problemo.

Yes I know there were all those lockdowns and stuff but that hardly counts because everyone else was locked down with me and we really needed to bake bread every day. And watch the 1pm update every day. And still work online, every damn day. In fact the week days and week ends and weeks just blurred into a jampot of survival tactics. So yes, sod all books got read.

The garage clutter? The garden shed?

Be realistic.

I need to get out of this with my sanity intact.

## Palmy Parties

It's a military operation.

Dad's relations are staying from Scotland and all the extended family is coming tonight to meet them. They've never been to New Zealand so Mum and Dad are putting on a big hoolie. Housework (Mum) lawns (Dad) trip to the bottle store (Dad) trip to the supermarket (Mum). Now they're talking about how many glasses of what shape we have (not enough, gotta go to Briscoes). As they drive off into town, I wander out of my bedroom into vast open spaces in the lounge. Whoa, it looks massive.

Will there be dancing?

Mum and Dad have pushed all the furniture back against the walls. Dad has set up the old fold-down table by the sideboard, put a white tablecloth on it and started to arrange some glasses in soldierly rows. I take a peek in the drinks cupboard. It's chocka. I crouch down to touch the bottles. They clink low notes as I lean them one against the other to look right to the back. More of a clunk than a clink. Bleuch. Their smells merge heavy and woozy. How do they drink that stuff? My science teacher says alcohol is a poison to the body so that's why when people drink too much, they throw up. Just breathing in their fumes makes my stomach pull away.

Mum is going full floral art today. She's already got the biggest crystal vase full of her lilies by the front door. They reach out from the hall table, offering their pollen and filling the entrance with headyness. I poke my head around the corner into the laundry. It looks like a florist's. Flowers picked in the cool of evening huddle together in buckets with bought ones, sharing the space with greenery. The air in here is a fantasy forest clearing. Anything could happen. The flowers speak in hushed tones. Long legged roses, buds exploding open into rich wine goblets, sprays of pink chrizzies. Cream and mauve lisianthus that look made of silk. And snapdragons. Their little petals glow velvet red, hot pink, orange. Who thought to name them that? Snap dragon. Snapdragon. S-napdrrrragon.

Soon it'll be a tornado in here, mum filling vases with the focus of a surgeon. Each vase will be arranged. Floral arranging. When I'm bored and flick through her flower books the photos have captions with words like balance, proportion, harmony, rhythm. Sounds like the music teacher at school talking about Bach. Mum looks more like Beethoven when she's in the laundry.

She made me make a sign to hang over the doorway between the lounge and dining room. Cardboard cut out letters with Women's Weekly scenic views of Wanaka and Ruapehu collaged onto the shapes. It says *Welcome to New Zealand* but the c and Z are wonky which

makes the words look not so sure of themselves. As if they are saying *Welsom to New Seeland* in some fake French accent. I got really into making the sign but then suddenly Mum was pinning it up and I didn't want her to. It felt so public. Like wandering out to the kitchen in your undies and turning around to see your neighbour at the dining table. I wish she didn't have to put it up in the middle of everything.

My growly stomach leads me into the kitchen where there's tonnes to pick at in the fridge but I'm careful not to leave any obvious gaps. There are cooling savouries on top of the oven. I love these little mini bacon and egg things.

'Hoy, hoy, those are for the party.' Mum appears out of nowhere. Fast trip to Briscoes.

'Sorry.'

'You can have one of the ones over there.' She points to a plate with a teatowel over it. Underneath are the rejects. Burntish. Brokenish. They still taste alright, just stuck to the tray a bit. I have a scratch around for the tasty bits.

'Mmmmm!' Older brother arrives back from his run. He greases mum up with a sweaty arm around her shoulder. 'Smells delish. What can I eat?' She points to the reject section I've just picked over. 'What about these ones?' He grins pointing to the perfect specimens on top of the oven.

'Don't touch. They're for later.' He grabs one and stuffs it in his mouth. Mum whacks his butt with the flick of teatowel as he darts out.

'Ow!'

'Serves you right. Go have a shower, you smell terrible.'

'Love you too, Mum.'

I go help Dad unpack the new glasses. He wants them washed and dried to a sparkle to join the ranks on the little table. He grins, an undercurrent buzz energising his movements.

'How many people are coming tonight?'

He doesn't seem to hear me. His mind is on party calculations.

'Hmmm?'

'How many coming?'

He tots up in his head.

'Bout 30-40?'

'And they're all related to you?'

He nods and gets this curious look on his face as his mind flickers off. I can't read it.

The Scottish cousins have gone off sightseeing which Mum and Dad seem relieved about. No time for tea and chats today. I'm not sure what to make of these strangers. I don't feel related to them. She is Dad's distant cousin. Like their grandparents were siblings or something. It's freaky to think about that. Her grandmother stayed put in Scotland. Dad's grandfather came here. One day I want to go there to see how it feels standing in that place. Will it feel amazing? I need to read more books set in Scotland. So far I've only read Greyfriar's Bobby.

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Time to get ready and I have to be creative as my wardrobe isn't full of party clothes. I settle on an old sleeveless black dress of mum's that I've never seen her wear. But I put it on and the straps keep falling off my shoulders. More back of the wardrobe rummaging and I find I have an old white cotton dress shirt of Dad's from maybe when he first met mum, judging by the size. I put this on and the dress on top. Pretty good. The old shirt has a bow tie hanging around the neck of the coathanger so I put that on as well. Yeah. That looks smart. Won't worry about shoes, it's my house. It's not till the guests are here that my brother tells me I look like a waiter.

They start to arrive. The visitors were late back so they're in the spare bedroom getting changed. Quiet cousins arrive first. The shy. Uncertain. They want to stay in the kitchen, and find themselves tasks to do to camouflage into the corners. Mum finds them jobs and they start to smile and tuck their hair back behind their ears.

Next are the ones who ask annoying questions. They ask you something random and then turn and start talking to someone else while you're still answering. Then they turn back surprised to see that you're actually still standing there and raise their eyebrows and smile their confused smiles. They flit about messing the place up with their platters of food, boxes of beer, their million handbags and jackets.

Then come the farmer cousins. You hear them before you see them. They're already having long distance conversations up the driveway with other cousins from Whanganui. Telling them what they think of their new ute. Interrogating their contributions as they unload food and drink.

'Got enough there? What's that? Rabbit food? Ya've not turned into a vegetarian, have ya?' They start to get slaps from their missus.

'Enough from you or you can sit in the truck all night.' They grin like naughty schoolboys.

High foreheads and voices like Huntaways. They bowl in the door and exchange niceties with the tourists who are smoothing hair, throwing on jackets.

‘Gudday.’

‘Howareya?’

‘So ya neva bin to Neuw Zeelind before?’

One heads straight for the grog cupboard.

‘How much we got in here Robbie?’ He bends and opens the cupboard door and does an inventory. Dad watches him from the other side of the room, his eyebrow flickers.

‘Three bottles of Johnny Walker. Not bad. Should be enough. Just.’ He hobbles over to Dad and slaps a hand on his arm. That’s the closest thing to a hug they do. Dad laughs and their shoulders both drop. His wife is busy rolling her eyes and apologising to mum who’s standing in the kitchen doorway. Mum’s holding a platter with an open mouth smile, the type you have on your face when you don’t know what is going to happen next. My parents are dealing with these firecracker cousins like they do it everyday. How do they just switch track like that? One minute talk soft and low and then all posh and then all strainer post.

The overseas cousins are laughing louder. But not as loud as the farmers. The clamour of voices and booze breath and exaggerated how-are-yous, I weave my way through.

‘Would you like something?’ I am learning that having a tray in your hand is such a good way to get around a room. I go up to two women. I don’t really know who they are. Wives of cousins?

‘Oooo, lovely, and this is Gina? How old are you now?’ One seems to know who I am and introduces me to the other older, tiny lady with wrists like twigs.

‘Fourteen.’

‘Fourteen! I think I last saw you when you were two years old!’ My face must look blank. ‘You won’t remember.’ I shrug politely. It’s too embarrassing asking them their names. Asking how they fit into this bunch of relatives. If they tell me their names, I will probably forget anyway or muck them up.

You can feel the point at which the party has taken off. The noise of them all talking at once gets louder and louder until it’s one big roar. They laugh and throw their heads back. Shift their lean from one hip needing a replacement to the leg with the bugged knee. Their shoulders seem to curl around the whiskey in their hand and they’re away, threading one old story with the next. The versions shift in the retelling and their faces expand and contract around sundrenched crows’ feet as they feign shock at the reinterpretation of the story when

told by a different cousin. They loosen into tipsyness and it's now safe to tell how great it is to see each other.

I wonder what the Scottish relatives think of this? Is it like their parties at home? Do they have parties at home? They seem to be enjoying themselves. He is now talking as loud as the farmers, only he sounds more Basset Hound than Huntaway.

She is holding one arm across her waist, hand propping up other elbow, propping up drinks arm. She's a small wee lady. No nonsense tweed skirt and cardy and pearls. She doesn't sound Scottish, I am confused by this. No ochs and wee bairns from her. She sounds posh.

'Gina. Do you know the origin of the word Posh?' It's like he's read my mind and I go pink. Scottish cousin's husband has come up beside me and is looking ready to tell me the answer to his question.

'No?' It's ringing a vague bell in my mind from school.

'Any guesses?'

I shake my head even though a memory thought is coagulating slowly. I know he wants to tell me the answer.

'Well, when the British were going out to India, the richer people would pay more to get a cooler Portside cabin so they took *Port Out*. And then on the way back to England the opposite, so *Starboard Home*. P.O.S.H. Posh.'

'Apparently, the word was around well before that. It dates back to the eighteenth century.' Cuz's hubby does a double take at this new voice who has joined us. It's my older sister who has arrived late. She's driven up from Uni in Wellington to the party.

They introduce themselves to each other and start a posh debate about the word posh. I get bored and wander off.

On my way to the kitchen I catch a glance at the photo of my great-grandfather on the wall. His face looks a little less serious than usual.

## Keep Time

Women call menopause the gift that keeps on giving. But you know, as I walk its long corridor, I see out the dusty windows. One shows a perfect autumn back at me. Five degrees dawn, stillness of turning leaves, blackbird quiet cluck. You have time, you may now gather your thoughts, the day says.

Some days feel a lottery win. The jug has boiled and there'll be perfect hot tea shortly. My lower back aches but come on, it's hardly surprising. Going to three pilates classes a year ago doesn't really count. Things do intermittently ache, intimate memento mori.

- Can I bake? sixteen-year-old son asks.
- Of course!
- What?
- Whatever you like!
- But what?
- Go take a look at what ingredients we have...anything!
- I'll go ask the others (goes to siblings, older, younger, *how sweet*, I think to value their opinions)
- I'm happy with anything... (literally anything, son. The joy of you wanting to bake is a hug.)

On a good day, the sandbags of control are released. Lift-off. I raise my eyebrows at my younger self who thought control was a pass or fail at life. I dunno what she thought. I am now so unworried by how things will work out tomorrow. I am here, now, today and that is all.

When the menopausal horrors hit, it is in a curiously disassociative way. I am anxious, but the anxiety is outside of me, half a metre in front. I watch it like an overnight freight train loading up my ears. It is to be ridden out, anxiety passing its rumble through town. When the mind gets forgetful or sludgy, I just muddle through the day, looking after myself like a patient needing kind words to help the broken bone heal. Not all has to be top performance. The computer is rebooting for Phase Three. There will be technical issues.

I love how it feels like a return to original self. Phase One self. Before the big bit in the middle where uterine usefulness decided all. I have big plans now and I am excited by them because they are mine. Some will happen, others not. Doesn't matter. I have heard what others have to say.

On TV, I watch a dozen retired folk stand in a circle at a community museum unveiling. They clap spontaneously. How cave-person-like this is. A strange thing to stand in

a circle. To clap. Early music, early phatic communion. Maybe it scared away wild animals and made our ancestors feel they'd cope.

I clap my way through menopause.

## The Startle of Daphne

Daphne smells of my first Waikato winter. Longing for the Manawatu plains and their constant westerlies but finding myself instead in fog that the river pulled tight to itself, close to our new house. The daphne bush grew enthusiastically under the dry, south-facing eaves, beside the front door. Right under my bedroom window. The smell would wait for me to arrive home from my new school.

Dragging my shell-shocked self onto the merciless school bus where nerds in glasses were not nurtured. Picking my way through hostile legs in my form class as girls sat, unsmiling, backs against the walls, unused desks and chairs clogging up the centre of the room. Words hissed as I passed. 'What a geek.' Try to keep my composure and not cry and find a place to crumple down onto the floor to listen to the daily notices. The only welcome spot hard up against the teacher's paper-scruffed desk, rubbish bin nosing out from underneath. Her open satchel dumped on the floor was afforded more space than I was. She never smiled at me.

The bell heralded time to join the burgundy surge fighting its way up the stairwell between classes, a swell of equal size barrelling down the stairs, yelling.

'Ree-ject!'

That fatal word. Once shouted, everyone looked behind them, searching for the scapegoat. To look around behind you was to state *it isn't me*, a ripple effect of insecurity. Any of us could have taken the title. Hair of nondescript length, wanting to be glamorous but epically failing. Bad posture hiding bras filled with breasts that we never asked for and heavy bags making us look like pack animals crossing the tundra. Some with terrible acne, others scrawny with sandpaper voices, splayed feet, clomping sturdy lace ups over the scratched lino.

The daphne never rejected. It was all joy-explosion at the bookends of the day. Tiny waxy clusters of flowers, tight buds pink-tinged outers, white inside. Stiff leaves like dancer's fingers. The smell tried to say *haveaniceday* as I turtled my way out the door in the morning and *welcomehome* upon arrival back from the trenches. I mostly missed its messages over the roar of my pulse.

I wanted to like the smell, so lemony and clean. It smelt brave and confident, everything I wasn't. But every day it shot my thoughts to the reminder room of my shortcomings. You are miserable, how can you be so? You have loving parents and a roof over your head. What could be the problem? Why aren't you sylph-like? Other girls are. Do you even know where you are? You should have your bearings by now.

But one mental map of a city overlapped another. I started giving the girl next to me in History directions to the department store in town she wanted to visit, only I was in the wrong city. She looked at me weird and it wasn't till I was trying to sleep that night that I realised I was talking of the Palmerston North branch, not Hamilton's.

*You can be at home here, too*, said the daphne, *you'll get used to it*. I didn't find I could agree, even though I knew I had to. Dad's job transfer demanded that we move. But I had loved Palmy. It was the centre of the universe, a whirling Para pool of extended family. Everything needing doing was doable. Drive five minutes and you were there. Drive an hour and you were everywhere.

*But you were born here*. Yes, that's right, I nodded to the daphne as I got the junk mail in for mum. This is the place I was born, even though we lived in Te Awamutu. I remember that sleepy town. I barely remember this city. A sprawling suburbia, too much to take in with the eye. The river an incision through its belly just like the one Mum had to suffer for me to be born. They cut vertically in those days.

Hamilton is a trip to Pollock & Milne as a four year old. Mum and her friend left me in the babysitting room on the top floor. Available so mothers could browse dress patterns in peace and toddlers were denied the chance to run their fingers over satin. I hated the wire-lace toughened glass on the double door of the top floor. Too heavy for me to push and run to find Mum. I didn't want to go near the limp toys and creased little golden books rammed in a woven basket in the corner, despite a faceless woman trying to entice me. I stood at the prison window waiting and did not speak in the car all the way home.

*Give it time*. Time was what I had plenty of. Too much of it. No friends yet to call on the phone or go see, everyone was still only acquaintances. I used to fill the after school hours when I got home with long exploratory bike rides of a there and back formation so that I didn't get lost in the muddled grid of streets. Best part was always the downhill wizz back to our road near the river. The joy of freewheeling banished melancholy for a few moments. I would amble the river path edging the golf course, under willow and poplar trees. The peace would be disrupted by a coach on megaphone barking instructions to a rowing eight sweeping the water rhythmically as they fought the current upstream. The ducks laughed at their efforts. Dogs snuffled the grassy banks and would skitter across my path sideways. Golfers marched up the closest fairway in conversation with each other. Pot-bellied men solving the world's problems. Slim-limbed women with efficient haircuts speaking in conditional sentences.

Mum picked some of the daphne blooms and put them in a little white jug on my desk. The daphne seemed pleased to sit with me as I did homework, burying myself in my studies. The scent helped sharpen my clouded thoughts but I felt guilty that the blooms had been cut and now their life would be even more of a flash. I silently apologised.

*It's ok*, the daphne said. *We come and we go*. I paused to lift the jug close to my nose, burying myself in the foliage. The sharp perfume had softened, a little flatter and sweeter with its edge of decay. I put my head down and finished my algebra sums. I'm doing algebra? I can do algebra? I'd never even understood it before. I understand the maths teacher at this school.

*See?* The daphne winked its mathematical sepals at me. Next was the Great Depression for History. There was a thing actually called that? I read of the Dustbowl Migration, looked at photos of starving kids dragging themselves along the road behind their cataract-eyed parents. Leaving your home to walk and walk, hunger driving you forward. What must it be to have nowhere exact to go.

*You have somewhere to go*, the daphne interrupted. *Into tomorrow, to see what's there*. But I'm scared. Every day is big. It's overwhelming and I am a robot, functioning. Can the world not see my stiffened neck, my startled eyes? I am an ornamental dog on the bookshelf. I am a beehive. I don't know what I am.

*You are cycles and phases, peaks and troughs. You are tightness and looseness. You are all the little births and the little deaths*, said the daphne.

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At my years-later house, I plant a daphne. It takes root slowly, sits tight for a few years not doing much. This winter it is ready to bloom. I pick some and find a little cream jug. I place it on my desk where I work and smell its fragrance as I stare out the window at the grey-streaked sky. A storm has recently passed leaving cloud traces, underlit with a tinge of pink.

## Arrrgggghhh

I am struggling to remember minor things, I remember later by pure chance (menopause). I am HOT (menopause) I am anxious, then sad, then enraged (men-o-paws). I am itchy all over (meno) I am tired (pause). I am falling apathy at the knees (me-) then my calf muscles seize like they're breezeblocks (o) then I wrench my lower back pruning the stupid camellias (pour) and then I wake up and get out of bed and my shoulder blade is in pain for two days (-sssse).

My skin is dry and so are my thoughts (meeee-). My ability to suffer fools is at Queen Elizabeth the First not Second levels (noooo) and it so happens that everyone is a fool (pauusse).

I am a gainer of weight (meennn) and a loser of pride (nooooo) I grow hair on my jawline (double nooooo) and I either completely forget how to cry (ppppaaaau) or flood my face (ussse).

I wake up at three or twelve, or one or five with my head a clenched fist (meeaan) or of complete bleakness (no) or anxiety over a detail of detritus from yesterday (pause).

Nothing is funny (mea) everything is stupid (nn) I am stupid (ooo) I am scared (ppp) I am clear sighted insightful (awe) I am quietly philosophical (ssse).

I love routine (men) I hate routine (o) I don't want alcohol (pour) I can't eat spicy (ssse). My breasts are tender (mea) my confidence is too (nnn). I need povernaps (oo) I'm awake crazy early (p) I can't get to sleep till I have a midnight snack (aww) I can't wake up with ease (ssse).

I feel dizzy (meno) I feel fraudulent (pause). I me am not (menopause) I me must find (men of the o of the pause) I, me, meh.

## Into the Wilderness of Not Thinking

‘Ya know, thinking’s bad for you,’ Mac says.

‘Yeeeeeasss,’ I agree vaguely then stop to look at him and *OhmyGod*. My mind snaps to attention and tries to wheel time back about six seconds, playing catch up with what’s going on.

Both hung over from his little-sister-my-friend’s 21st, we are jumbled-up awkward thinkers trying to not-think. He has dark overgrown curls, large capable hands, a wonky check shirt that longs to be unbuttoned, half tucked into trackies, which are fully tucked into tramping socks and his father’s slippers, the backs flattened. I’m in a green hoodie and jeans, my hair scooped in a messy bun. Totes glam.

I’m about to leave and somehow Mac and I start a random conversation as I pack my car. About studying at uni and stuff, about using your brain a lot and thinking and being all intellectual. He’s doing something Sciencey and I’m all Arts, the kind of degree people mock and say ‘Ah! Ya gunna work at McDonalds hahahahaha...’.

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We barely talked last night. His back leaning against the woolshed wall, right hand grasping the neck of a Waikato, left hand in pocket. He never looked my way once, not that I saw. He was in constant convo with the local fellas, former schoolmates before they all took off, farm labouring, working at the dairy factory in town, into the Tron for a bit of hospo work, off to uni down south. Suppose he hadn’t seen them for ages.

And my mind was on other things. So good to get away from Auckland and the pressures of study. Liberating to drive cross country from my folk’s place to this party. Down narrow roads flanked by bumblebee coloured letterboxes, dairy numbers, long grass nodding its welcome. I was busy trying to keep up with my friend Becs drinks-wise. Bloody shots. I had to slow down but she kept on trucking. God, I would have spewed everywhere if I had drunk as much as her. Anyway there was dancing to be done, speeches to be endured, her mum to help sort the food with. Plenty to do. Plus getting hit on by a random guy who seemed to be getting his learners licence in girls.

‘So you’re Sam?’

‘Yeah,’ I answered.

‘Nice to meet you, I’m Rhys.’

‘Hi Rhys.’ We shook hands.

‘So you’re a uni friend of Becs?’

‘Yep.’

‘Wotcha studying?’

‘History, English, bit of Psychology.’

‘Aw yeah, can ya read my mind?’

*Yes* I thought.

‘No.’

‘Oh. Are you a vegan?’

‘Nooo? Are you?’ I knew he wasn’t but oh well. Stupid. I’d gone and asked him a question. He’d caught me out asking that one out of left field. Rule number one. Don’t ask questions. He’ll think you’re keen.

He rambled on about all the food he loved and how he went hunting and how he could never live without meat. I had to exit even though I like a good steak too.

‘Hey ah, I’m just gonna go help Bec’s mum in the kitchen. I promised her I’d give her a hand.’ I took a step backwards for the door before Rhys could react. He stared after me then dropped his head and started to walk off to his mates. I felt a bit stink but what can ya do?

Bec’s mum was glad of the help and didn’t ask any questions about why I wasn’t desperate to get back to the party. It was a relief to stop having to be polite and chat about stuff that I didn’t really give a rats about. Parties are so weird when you stop and think about them. Everyone arrives all tight shouldered, glancing sideways for some invisible danger, as if their old PE teacher is suddenly going to appear and put them on detention, for breathing. Everyone will talk about anything to get things cranking. Even their mothers. The boys always love a good recent balls-up in the sporting world to bond over. Talking a load of bullshit but no-one cares cos everyone is toey. The girls usually have a long winded technical-hitch malfunction story from some part of their day.

First job is always to find a place to prop yourself while you start up a proper yarn with someone. Anyone will do for starters, even a Rhys. But as the booze hits your bloodstream, anyone becomes approachable, everyone’s your potential friend. So I chatted with Bec’s cousins, her school mates from TA. One of them knew one of my friends so we had heaps to chat about for ages. Bec’s summer job buddies from the dairy factory were hard case. One of them had a ukulele which he’d strum like punctuation in the banter.

Somehow though, I didn’t talk to Mac. It wasn’t that I didn’t want to, I just didn’t really get near him.

But now it’s tomorrow and Mac is looking and me and I am looking at him and we are sparking off each other in the morning sun. A couple of right scruffs we must look but neither of us is thinking about posing. We’re too distracted by this last minute discovery of

each other. I'm standing by Mum's borrowed Ford Laser about to leave their farm on the outskirts of Te Awamutu and damn. I want to stay now. Shit and damn. I am going back up to uni and he is going back down to uni and Auckland and Otago are not conducive to...well...

Mac looks at me for a long time, hands on provincial hips, ever the farmer's son. He drags a slow hand through those wildboy curls which makes me learn that being weak at the knees is actually a thing.

I never knew.

'So yeah, you're off.' He isn't smiling now but he hasn't stopped looking at me either.

'I guess.' Bugger and damn and bugger. WhatdoIsay? I kind of give him a wince-smile. If I was drunk, shit, I'd go straight over and rip his shirt off. Yeah right, *sure* I would. No. I'd go straight over and rest my hands on those dents where his shoulder joints are. I think I'd like to do that. I think he'd like me to do that. Then he'd get to put his hands around my waist and pull me in.

But no, fuck it. I'm not that sassy. Not that quick across the ground even to improvise a departure that will leave more trace of me than the whisper of my smile.

If I could go back in time to that moment, I would say 'I like that we agree on that - thinking is *definitely* bad for you,' or some other vague suggestive statement. It would indicate to him that I know this moment is one to be preserved, an archaeological earthquake and here are our hearts in our hands.

'Good luck with your studies,' I offer.

'Yeah, you too,' he shifts from one foot to the next, looks at the ground.

'Don't think too hard, eh.'

## **Educated**

In a free western democratic society, you'd think. You'd think that we knew more about the precious insides of our bodies.

'God, I'm so hot,' I say peeling off my denim jacket and dumping it on the communal ladies loo table at work. 'I could either blame Menopause or the fact I have been rushing around.'

'Mmmm,' Jacqs smiles. 'I've got that to look forward to shortly.'

We take our places in adjoining cubicles.

'It's a bumpy ride.'

'Mmmmm. Hope it's not worse than my current gyne horrors.' She goes on to explain the agony she's been enduring and the limited options for treatment of which she is scared.

'Sounds like Adenomyeosis.'

'Yes! That's it. Oh my gosh. I've just been diagnosed after years and years of not knowing what the hell was going on with my insides.'

'I have that. Get an IUD. Best decision ever. Changed my life. I was so scared of getting one but it changed my life immediately. I wish I'd done it earlier.'

'Oh my gosh...' she repeats and our conversation dissolves into a slapbang epiphany moment over the cubicle wall.

She leaves, sounding relieved and I stay on marvelling that this is how we learn things.

It's 2022 for god's sake.

Yet secret wimmins' business is still just that. It's either wobbly internet information, boring academic texts, weeks and months of fighting to get an in-person GP appointment.

Or the loo cubicle as modern-day confessional.

## Brown Kiwi

‘Baraaownn Kee-waaee.’

The broad provincial accent coming through my headphones introduces the call of our national bird on my *New Zealand Songbirds* tape. It pushes me back in my seat. I’m staring out the window of a bus on the Côte d’Azur, where France smashes up against Italy. I don’t register it as anything more than wallpaper to a mental image. Of my uncle. The man’s voice on the tape sounds just like my uncle nineteen thousand kilometres away, mustering in the Rangitikei. It’s not him but it is him.

The tape was a last minute purchase, slipped in to my carry-on luggage. An item marketed at Japanese tourists who might, for some reason, fancy listening to a man’s voice announcing names of birds, then a recording of their chirping and trilling for a few minutes. Like a director’s cut of the RNZ birdcall.

I’ve always loved birdsong, ever since I was a kid and religiously watched Wildtrack on TV. The presenters, Margaret and Peter, drew my attention to the fauna in our wilding garden in Dunedin. I spent hours after school on a 90 year old horse-curved Rhododendron branch, waiting for Tauhou to fill the canopy and eat from my homemade bird feeder. The flicker of their nearby presence was a gift.

Now I’m an adult (*I am?*) in the middle of nowhere. My body wants to fling itself out into the updraft which buffets the gulls off the cliffs below, expectant of safe passage on the trade winds back to the place my spirit kens. Triceps and quads twitch, holding themselves down. I don’t think the nocturnal scream of the Kiwi’s call in my ear helps either. Colonialists panicked at the sound. Thought children were being murdered near their pit-sawn huts. Started to pack their trunk for a return passage home to the Motherland more than once.

I try to make eye contact with my travelling companion, a man I just married a few weeks ago. I squeeze his hand and he frowns, his concentration broken on the CD he’s listening to on his Discman, bought dutyfree on our way to Europe. He looks at me to see what I want but all I can give him is a broken smile. Of not wanting to be where I am. For the family I can’t visit. He doesn’t inquire further and turns away to look out the window at the land dropping down sharply below the road that slithers around the side of the hills.

‘Karrkaapou.’

The booming nocturnal call sounds like the bird has turned itself into an incendiary device. Exploding the bush into flames in the night. I didn’t know till now that I might miss my uncle with such intensity. I’d never really spent that much time with him and his family.

Their farm was deep in one of so many lost valleys, tucked under the Ruahines. What always made me happy to see him was that my mum was so happy to see him. To watch your mother become a sibling again is like slipping into a room from the past. The chirpy banter. The understanding. Sit and look out over the farm where they grew up, her always baggs-ing him first to push around in the trolley, playing mother. An ease settles.

‘Wouldyalike a Gin?’

‘Of course!’

‘Good!’

He hobbles off to get her one, rummaging around in the garage fridge for tonic. I long to see his face again, so like their mother. He looks the most like her.

‘What’s wrong?’ my new husband sees I’m silently crying.

‘I’m homesick,’ I realise.

‘But you’re *here*. Most beautiful part of the world. Look at that view. Why would you be wasting your time being sad?’ He looks at me like I’m a child.

I feel like a child.

Thick in the sludge of a missing that grips and pulls. I didn’t know having oceans between me and home would do this. Never gave it any thought. When you’re all clever and 24 and outward bound on an exciting OE what do you know? My brain is flooded with memory. Pressing autumn leaves between pages of a leatherbound novel no-one read anymore, getting bucked off the old farm hack, setting the fire in the grate at my grandparent’s. Anticipation of woodsmoke.

I try to see past and look out to the butterfly sea, the cliffs crumbling history a handful at a time into the Mediterranean. We pass interlocked cliff top buildings. Homes of, I dunno, Swiss bank account owners, celebrities, ancient families. Not my whānau. Their cream plastered walls look permanently temporary, grasping at hillsides. The road pivots itself on tight horseshoe bends I’m not sure the bus will navigate. The french road signs look so sure of themselves. Nice. Menton. Beausoleil.

‘Rruuu-rruuu.’

Dad’s voice on the phone two weeks ago, when we first landed in London. The obligatory call home to confirm safe arrival in the land of my ancestors, where I expect to find deep spiritual connection to the whenua. England calling across the Pacific phone cable to Aotearoa. After being surrounded by foreign voices for weeks, to hear Dad, so original, I am six again and Dad is telling my brother to be quiet as we drive onto the Interisland ferry, Wellington to Picton. He needs to concentrate and follow the surly pointing of the boiler-

suiting ferry worker who wants Dad to park the Valiant so close to the next car we all enter a silent claustrophobic panic about ever getting up on deck to watch Port Nicholson slip away.

‘How are ya? How’s the trip?’ Dad sounds so happy to hear me. I want to auē so bad but all my Victorian colonialist parentage forbids it, invisible hands around my neck. I can’t get a word out. Dad thinks the line has broken. ‘Hello? Hello? Ya there?’

‘Yeeeeass.’

‘Y’alright?’

‘Yi...I...I miss you,’ I sob.

‘Yullbealright!’ he barks. ‘Here’s ya mother.’

‘Ga-ray War-blaa.’

Uncle voice butchers the English names as much as he does the Māori ones. Little Riroriro, my favourite. Sound of the bush. Day tramps, pack digging into shoulders, laden with water bottles and dagwoods and leftover Christmas cake. The cool of the filtered canopy, peace held still by trunks lucky enough to dodge the axe. A forgiveness. A recalibration of all the other scurrying around of the week, polluting the world with our self-importances.

The air in the tour bus feels close. I want a window that opens to let out the sour tinges of body odour massing from the males wedged in their seats. I want damp leaf humus smell. Sheep poo smell. The smell of standing inside mum and dad’s wardrobe when they left me home alone for the first time. What made them think that just because I’d left school and was almost 19 that I’d not mind them going to Canada? What made them think I would be fine in the house on my own for two weeks? I walked room to room, to stir the stillness. I forgot to speak for days. Stepping into their wardrobe - Mum’s cobalt blue polyester dressing gown, Dad’s steel grey suit and coat hanger of rugby ties. Smelling their smell was like an embrace. I never told them I did that.

‘Korreemarko.’

Little green bellbird. I never get why their call is considered bell-like. It transcends any sonorous Sunday morning clang I’d ever heard. Sitting on cold stones by Lake Rotoiti, Korimako fill the bushline behind me with song. Limbs aching from three days tramping the Abel Tasman. Final spot to take in before holiday’s end. Will *this* holiday ever end? Will this six week bus tour of Europe just leave me at the nearest airport? I’ll sort my own way from there. God how nice it would be to wave farewell to them all. My travelling companion might be a bit shocked. I don’t even really know him and I am supposed to spend the rest of this bus ride with him? And my life.

He doesn't feel how I feel right now. I seem to be the one with the problem. An acute reaction to surroundings, over-sensitive sensibility. I've had the get-over-yourself look more than once, become conditioned already to accepting that I will need to try harder. I push the homesickness inward but it only seems to leach straight out and circulate back for me to re-inhale. Like invisibly drowning. My heart is trying to tell me things my brain can't decipher. I grip the walkman and turn the birds up a little louder.

'Tūī.'

That backyard sass. A flamboyance that won't deny itself. Cleverness to transform on a whim but never forgetting its uniqueness. Imitating other birds. Humans. To sound like other but still be self? This idea itches at my tissue paper plans. The future glory I have signed up for seems now a fake advertisement of someone else's tourist brochure life.

## Slap up Job

It looks like crap.

It'll have to do, she tells herself. If they don't like it, well, too bad. I'm not paying for takeaways. They can all eat cereal.

It's Friday. The week has been vet bills and car repairs. She crouches down to see what is hiding on the bottom shelf of the pantry. Beans, tinned tomatoes. Ok good. Rummages in fridge vege drawer. Old courgette. Good. Grates that in. Couple of carrots. Good, getting bulked. Nother tin of beans. Old cooked spuds. Sliced up and in you go.

A pot of moosh. Smells bearable. Kids'll moan. Husband will widen his eyes and say nothing. But beggars and all that. Cooks some rice, finds some corn chips. Where's the grated cheese?

God that life has come to this. Shoving whatever's together to make a meal. She wonders at what other families will be eating right now. A million slices of pizza with festering pizza boxes piling up in carports across the country.

Such a joyless chore, decade upon decade of meals for the tribe.

When did she last sit down with a recipe book and decide to cook a new dish?

Ahhh...When did she last sit down?

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'Mum. What is this recipe?'

Everyone is around the table, the eating is in spontaneous silence.

'Mmm?' She looks at her daughter and realises she is serious. She was expecting sardonic.

'Yeah.' Younger brother chimes in dishing himself another spoonful. 'It's really good.'

'Recipe?'

'Yeah, where is the recipe from. It's good.' Daughter is expectantly waiting.

'No recipe. I made it up.' It's like a shock confession. *Yes, miss, it was me. I was the one who graffitied the toilets with those punk lyrics.*

They all look up. Stilled. Forks halfway to mouths.

There is a quiet drawn-in breath moment. Then a cascade of well it's really goods and the resumed clatter of eating. She looks at them all. They're not talking because they're so busy hoeing in. This is not what was expected.

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Daughter looks at mother.

Really, how does she do it, she wonders. I looked long and hard in the fridge and pantry when I got home from school and there was *nothing* there. Literally nothing. How did mum whip this up? I even checked the freezer.

## Excited

‘I walked past the ruin of a Roman temple just beside a tube station today!’

‘Oh yeah,’ London workmate smiles, puzzled. ‘And?’

‘A Roman temple!’

‘Yeah. Not sure why that’s so exciting.’ She’s squinting to see it through my eyes.

‘Thing is, where I come from, we don’t have Roman temples,’ I try to explain.

‘Yeah, but you have mountains.’

‘Yeah, but no Roman ruins. They’re so *old!*’

She chuckles at me like I’m a kid.

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‘What are you two culture vultures off to tonight?’ London workmate overhears me and the girl from Sydney planning our early escape from the office.

‘To hear The Messiah. In St Pauls!’

‘I don’t know how you can be bothered.’

‘It’s in St Pauls!’

‘Oh yeah.’

‘*The* St Pauls!’

‘Oh yeah.’

‘St Pauls survived the Blitz!’

‘Yeah.’

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‘I can’t wait! So excited.’

‘What’s it this time?’ London workmate eyerolls but still wants to know.

‘John Williams at the Barbican!’

‘Who?’

‘John Williams! Star Wars, ET, Jaws...’

‘The Barbican is so ugly. Wretched Brutalist architecture.’

‘I’m not going to stand and look at the outside. It’s JOHN WILLIAMS!’

‘But isn’t he American?’

‘Yes.’

‘Hmm.’

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‘Where’s ya off to tonight?’

‘The Globe.’

‘What’s on?’

‘The Merchant of Venice.’

‘Hate that one. Had to study it for A Levels.’

‘But it’s The Globe! You know, thatched roof, oak beams...’

‘No roof.’

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‘So what did you do at the weekend?’

‘Went to the National portrait gallery. And Liberty’s. You?’

‘Cleaned out my wardrobe. Got groceries. Visited my mother.’

‘I miss my mum. I miss my dad.’

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‘I’d like to visit New Zealand one day.’

‘You would?’

‘I’ve always wanted to go there.’

‘You have?’

‘Yeah, it’s beautiful, right?’

‘Yeah. It’s ok. I guess.’

## Photos

Time to catch up with printing. Oh so easy with a photo app. Click my brains out and then am shocked I have racked up \$180 worth of ticks and that's only the start of the stockpile. Seven years of unprinted memories. Five fat boxes wait on the counter for me to collect. Hundreds and hundreds of photos from years ago.

Remember when we had 24 clicks and you'd get your little wallet of six by fours. It would cover weeks or maybe months and you sat and looked and looked through the paltry collection over and over. Is that what we look like, you'd wonder and check in the mirror and check the rest of the family. Are those frozen images really us? Now it's abstract images floating unprinted in cyberland, stored by who-the-hell?

I get them home and start to look through. The smallness of the kids.

I can't do this.

Their tender little selves against backdrops from the past. The old backyard, a green curve of should bes. The front door that never could shut out or keep in. Voices travel, we forget.

I can't look at \$180 worth of photos without a backdrag of emotion. The kids so little they fit in and on small things like washing baskets, plastic toy boxes with wheels.

Kids in the courtyard, three on the trike. One pedalling, another wedged on the back, the third bundled into extra add-on trailer. How did the thing not break? How did its steering not give out on the corner?

I push on flicking faster and faster through the images. My breathing shallows. I am acting as if out on a marathon training run. Push it, come on, push through.

Then one of the three of them. All lined up on the playrug. Lying on tummies. Heads held up by little hands on little elbows. Three dear faces. Their innocence is a triad major chord but I feel the minor notes.

Can't do this today. I shuffle the photos back tight together. Back in the box they go. Shove in top cupboard. Yay for top cupboards.

Maybe another day, huh.

I wander out to the racket in the kitchen. The three of them are teenagers now, having one of their spontaneous combustion conversations. Today's topic is the rise of the right wing in France. How are they so aware? I was barely cognisant of the politics of my own family growing up, much less the planet. This would have been like me talking turkey about Regan. All I knew about him at the time was that he had been an actor.

They share their latest gleanings of the current global situation as one toasts a bagel. His sister is concocting some noodle horror by the kettle, the third one is sitting on the pantry footstool stocktaking the empty biscuit tins.

‘Mum. There’s nothing to eat.’ An entire wall of pantry food is backdrop behind him.

‘Make something.’

‘What?’

‘Remember when you were small. You loved to make pikelets.’ Minor chords tug again. Damn.

‘Did I?’ He frowns. ‘Pikelets?’

‘Yeah. I’ve got a photo of you standing up at the old kitchen bench somewhere.’

‘How old?’

‘I dunno...two maybe?’

You were two and you were so damn cute and you called them pie-keys and we made them together and ate them straight away and now that’s fourteen years ago what the hell.

‘Two? Huh. Can I see the photo?’

‘Yeah, I’ll find it later.’

Later, when I can face it.

## The Play

It was a humble abode, but felt like a palace. Functional and old but not dilapidated. A prefabricated standard rectangle that ticked all the necessary boxes. The ugliness could be camouflaged. Books on makeshift shelves. Posters on the walls and a few pot plants. Some secondhand furniture offcasts from family gathered into a cluster of sittable comfort. Good enough, you could say a bit ugly if you cared. But I didn't care.

The garden needed work. Had definitely been ignored. The kiwi obsession with having a house and garden was a classic example of what I say I want, isn't what I will actually keep on top of. Like gym memberships and eating cardboard-flavoured low-everything breakfast cereal.

I was determined to wrestle the garden back into something beautiful and cottagey.

Mum and Dad came over for morning tea on Saturday. Catching up with their professional working daughter. I was grubby with dirt and sweat when their voices carried up the path from the road.

'Helloooo.'

'Oh! Hi! What time is it?'

'10.30.'

'Already? Ah! I was going to get cleaned up before you got here. Sorry.'

'I'll put the jug on.' Mum brushed past me and up the back steps. 'Mark inside, is he.' I stood up from my crouch position, wiping my hands on my thighs.

Dad stood very still, eyeing me with a hard stare. It was a funny look for Dad. Not his usual jovial. An awkward second or two of silence. I could hear the kids next door talking about who had put the bike pump where, their yapster dog turning little tornadoes at their feet. Cicadas grated the air. Mynah birds yelped on the powerline.

'*Enjoy life.*'

I looked at him.

Embarrassment slowly flushed out over my chest and down my dirty arms.

Dad didn't usually make motivational speeches. Wasn't his style. He was a straight talker. Couldn't stand it when people spoke with bloated egos or made exaggerated remarks. You'd see his brow furrow behind his glasses. He'd press his lips together as if by doing that he could cease the flow of foolish words from their mouths. My own included. He brought me into line as a teen by challenging me to back up my statements with facts.

Fair enough.

My mind raced to see what he was seeing. My life written on my face.

Who wants to know that they're displaying grim determination at 28? Wasn't that for paramedics in helicopters, farmers helping a ewe give birth in a spring storm, orderlies at the hospital pushing slovenly drunk complainers from ED to X-Rays?

I scanned over my progress to date: New career establishing, involving evening and weekend work. Training for a 10K run. Tackling an overgrown garden at our first house.

Enjoy life?

I felt like I had failed at something. Missed a memo somehow. Hadn't I ticked the correct boxes? Married? Tick. Home Owner? Tick. OE done? Tick. Career? Tick. I turned all of these over in my mind. But the mind I was turning them over in was narrative-soaked like prunes in brandy.

I didn't even like brandy.

'*I am,*' I responded.

He pursed his lips. Breathed deeply in and held it. Forced a smile. Raised a quizzical eyebrow.

'Come-on then, bub, time for a cuppa.'

*Bub.*

He hadn't called me that for years.

'Show me what you've done inside.'

We did the tour, mugs of tea in our hands. Dad paused in the doorway to the office, where I kept up with my day job in evenings and weekends.

'Whaddya doing in here?' He nodded at the vast desk, papers and books already piled on either side of the laptop.

My marking and planning and...

'...and...'

I was going red again. Jeez.

'...and I hope you're getting that play finished...'

'I, ah...'

'Love to see it performed one day.' He put an arm around me, the tea in his other hand sloshed in the mug. 'I'll keep reminding you...' I bent my head into his shoulder.

'Thanks Dad.'

## Make it Better

The neglect hits her today.

A lone tramping sock at the bottom of the underpass steps. She can't imagine how it got there. A single Uno playing card scrunched up with the fallen lemonwood leaves, then another card, ten paces on, and another and, I never played that game, she thinks. She imagines the primary school kid flitting them out of his fat little hand as he ambles home from another hot Wednesday at school. Pocketed the cards when the teacher's back was turned, helping others with maths problems he just stares at. So many hieroglyphs in his book. Numbers joining forces then being split apart into other numbers. He hates them only a bit less than words forced down onto a page and squashed into a book when he much prefers their free cousins, the ones that tumble out his mouth, get sucked in his ear.

She turns the corner on her Saturday morning walk and her mind dispatches imaginary Uno boy and starts up its usual dirge of wishing her body into a more refined form.

*Weekend warrior*, chides inner bitch.

That unkind coinage slapped on unfit people, out trying to exercise in between the busyness of stretch-marked lives. She enters the noxious daydream. The one about having time for pilates classes, forming a devout addiction to crossfit, yoga, spending dollars she doesn't have spare on lycra and bike. All she has time for is one walk a week around the suburb. A counter-clockwise vortex of failure.

She tells inner bitch to shut the hell up.

God it's a scruffy place these days, she distracts, taking in the street about her. A community newspaper yellows and blisters its way to compost under a rusty dented letterbox with no numbers on it. A plastic chocolate milk bottle dead in the gutter, unfinished curb repairs, a badly parked conga line of cars.

She wishes the street into better condition. This is more uplifting. Doing stuff to the other, ignore the self. It must have its roots in her pious colonial ancestors and their making-it-better mentality. Here. Accept our religion and infrastructures. No, we don't have anything to learn from you. Yes, you are the one needing the help. No, we don't really need your help. Yes, us emigrating here is doing you a favour. Imagine if we hadn't enlightened you with our ways? Of course you're interested in our ways.

She stares at her ancestors like aliens across the centuries. What the hell were they thinking.

No wonder the TV is full of reno programmes.

Her sister looks shocked when she calls these shows middle-class voyeuristic houseporn. She quite likes that phrase, MCVHP. Sit, get fat, watch the tanned guns on the arms of a retired rugby playing builder/minor TV star. He'll *make it better*. He'll help that lovely volunteer driver from Ashburton get the kitchen she really deserves. And that couple who need a ramp to access their backyard with their bung hips and foster rabbits. Let's make their day. They do good, so let's do good to them.

Those programmes give her the irrits. Many's the evening that she has watched half the programme then taken on a hallway cupboard in the ad break and sort-of won.

But not really.

Never really.

There's always more to squeeze back in than she dragged out. Like trying to still fit last year's pants.

First up on her road-reno walk is a mental remake of house on left. A housewash to dispatch cobwebs and dirt and a thorough weed is all it needs. Uncut grass splats through the metal railings onto the footpath. Withered jasmine snakes up an old feijoa tree. There's more bark on the driveway than in the thin strip under the eaves, punctuated by groundcover Gardenia gasping in splotches. It needs a weed and a water. Oh and put that wheelie bin away round the back, will you.

Next house needs the fence repainted as the brown stain has long ago faded. The front is all asphalt for the renter's parked cars, wedged tight off the road. No-one empties the letterbox as none of them expect any mail that's not couriered right to the doorstep.

The one after that needs the fence totally removed. It is lying, deceased, on the front lawn. Fallen soldiers of rotting fence palings.

I'm no better than my judgey ancestors, tells herself.

Traffic roars past as she makes her way up the rise. Such a rush of places needing going to by a rush of people needing getting there. Why all the noise and aggro? A V8 with illegal things strapped to its roof (bed, bookcase) overtakes a ute pulling an empty flat-top trailer from which an unstowed strop trails along behind like a rat's tail. V8 toots at ute. Trying to get him to notice the strop. Ute thinks V8 is in some way criticising it and accelerates and it's testosterone all the way to the roundabout.

She's relieved when her path becomes cycleway, deviating from the road, leaving its roar behind. The path weaves close to the river, undulating its form to match the riverbank. This path is a mixture of beauty and eerie seclusion. The backyards of houses roll down the

slope towards the path. A little slither of each household life. A perfect design with outdoor entertaining area sits next to a neglected good life paradise. Bet they get on.

The hip flexors give a little twinge, glutes do their work and she takes an exit back up to the main street. Time to head home.

She thinks of yesterday's online staff meeting and what staring at herself on a screen is doing to her psyche. It was the kind of meeting where you had to keep your camera on, dammit. That serious face staring back. Everyone's eyes trying to watch everyone else's while still monitoring self-look for professional disdain, neutrality.

Everything feels like a front.

## Potential

She was scared of Death being in the room. She hadn't known it would even be allowed these days. Thought Death would never be given such a high level security pass anymore. But she had little time to worry. There was an urgent job to do along unmarked territory. The job had chosen the day and once started, could not be stopped.

Her body was teaching itself what was right, from moment to moment through the long night and long day of labour. Things seemed to be progressing but the midwife was an irritant, busy with her machinery of heartbeats and pressures. She wanted her mother to be there. A hand on the shoulder, lightly. A word or two, solutions practical like ice cooling water. Go. Phone her now. Ask her to come.

...I am scared of Death in the room but I can't tell her that. But she will know without me telling her because she knows more than me. I realise that now I am in this situation. How did it come to this for me to realise my mother knows more than I do? How can she not? She is my mother and I am her child. I hope she can forgive me my ignorances, my arrogances. I am sorry Mum for being such an adult-adolescent, I am sorry, I...

Her mother arrived as she was transitioning and being told to prepare to push. Exhausted, hair sticking to her forehead. Arms slick with sweat. Chest rising hard against the tide. Legs splayed and strengthless. Earthy inside-of-teapot armpit smell. Not called labour for nothing. Not a walk in the park. Later, her brother would ask her if it was hard. The question males always secretly wonder. Yes, bro. Harder than running a marathon? She laughs. Yes, bro. How? Bro, you can stop to walk during a marathon. Oh, yeah. Yeah, I hadn't thought of that.

There's a lot we haven't thought of.

When her mother walked in the room, Death sat down. Hard wooden seat, aluminium legs, straight backed and in the corner. *You sit there, Death. Be quiet.*

She saw her mother and with her, in the late afternoon air, was her mother's mother and her grandmother's mother too. Five and six and five children born apiece. They all knew what to do. The Grand and Great-Grand deployed straight to the corner and kept Death distracted with a barrage of *why* questions, determined to not let it stand. A tactic of reverse CPR. As soon as one tired, the other took over.

*Why did you take my brother when you did? Why didn't you let him stay and keep fighting? They'd nearly won!*

What about Albert? He called to you for so long. *Why such cruelty? Why do you ignore people when they need you?*

*Why Cassie so young? Why?*

Death couldn't get a word in edgeways, kept opening and closing its mouth. A fish on the deck of a ship. Late autumn sun caught Death's face sideways through the narrow blinds of the birthing room window. Rush hour traffic hum butting the outside of the building. Death raised its chin. The midwife couldn't understand nor deny the disbursement of her power to these women now in the room. The older, the wiser, more birthed. She faded back to hold her machines, check her clipboards. She couldn't see Death and stood on its toes as she bustled past. Death winced. Frowned a little. The Grands kept up their attack.

As she looked at her mother between pains, she caught the view past her mother's left arm. Death sat, impassive, refusing to make eye contact with anyone. Trying to blockout the Grands' barrage. All the fear-tension she'd been holding high in her ribs started to breathe itself out. Perhaps she was not going to die today. Perhaps she could get through this. Her mother knew she had to get her to focus on the now.

Hold my hands.

Breathe.

Look at me.

She could let herself be led by her mother through the door of knowing. To understand, at last that your mother suffered this agony for you. Almost sacrificing her breath, so you could taste air. Her mother did it for her, and her mother before that and on backwards through all the mothers. All here in the breath she now panted on command as the midwife prepared her to push at the right time while her mother steadied her hands to catch her grandchild.

Death went to stand, to try once more. Each of the Grands put a hand on its shoulders and pushed it back down into its seat. They linked arms and stood, backs to Death, fronts to Life.

She pushed and groaned, cheered on by the crowd, the whites of their eyes showing, their breathing labouring with hers. Death made a noise, a hiss of threat. The Grands urged her on, louder. *Not this time, Death.*

Final push, final scream of limits reached where Death and Life meet for a moment. Death stood, this time in solidarity. The Grands parted to make room for it, link their arms through its and through those of her mother, the midwife, and her.

And then, now.

Another.

## Piano

She watches her hands. They buzz just above the piano keyboard. About to start. About to slide into Marianelli. She adores this music, from the soundtrack of a movie watched long ago. She'd bought the sheet music as soon as her feet forgot to move forward that day in the kitchen as she passed her radio. *What is that? I know that.* The lingering notes ran a slow middle finger down her memory. They meandered down the keyboard, unhurried, yet urgent. Autumn light, sex, woodsmoke. She longed to play it. Waited until the end in the hope of a composer's name.

She watches her hands. They don't like her watching them and she knows it. She looks up at the sheet music, then blurs beyond, out the windows, out over the city's forest scape. The sun is going down filling the sky with a flood of apricot and pink. It turns to purple, yellow, green even, as the light meets the dark above. The view from the piano is one of the best in the house and it is the reason she placed it there. The trees submerge the ageing suburb below and sharpen their silhouettes against the dusk glow behind them. She is grateful for the low sway of her piano's shape, allowing a view beyond. It is an oddity, this spinet piano. She likes its tone even if the piano tuner who moved it for her turned up his nose and pointed out that she hadn't asked his advice first and that he had a nice baby grand freshly reconditioned if she was interested. When I win lotto, sure, she smiled.

Her fingers drop.

E...E...E...

She plays the first three solo notes letting the air in between each one catch the overtones. How audacious and coy it is of the composer to call the song to attention with three single repeats. It's an orchestra tuning itself to an A, the key note blown on the chorus pitch pipe. A call to focus. A promise.

She wishes she could do this with her body.

The Es repeat in the next bar of music and then the melody walks her fingers down the keyboard...damn. She stumbles a note and stops. Reads the music over to remind herself the path ahead. It has been a while. Muscle memory is a bit shabby today. It's a bit shabby more these days, since the diagnosis.

No, she tells herself, don't dwell.

Stay in the now.

The now is Friday, work over, all tasks for the week ahead prepared and ready on her desk back at work. She likes to stay until the chaos is wrestled into clearfile folders, the emails are single digits. She likes being the last to leave so she can farewell the communal

office by pushing in the meeting table chairs, picking up abandoned slithers of paper off the guillotine to drop into the recycling, a little paper waterfall. Blinds down, aircon off.

Now she sits and wants to play music and slip into a space of forgetting what lies ahead. While she can, she must try. Surely that makes sense. When your body won't cooperate any more, well then...well, then, she'll have to cope as best she can.

The terror of reliance on others, the awful disintegration, the degenerative closing off of options. Over these past months, she has formed a close relationship with terror. Has tamed it to a sleeping wolf at her side. It responds well to music.

Especially this music.

I'll still have it, she reminds herself. It'll be the radio, the stereo, other people making the music come to life. It won't be gone. It gets to stay with me.

She breathes deep, stretches her arms slow above her head then arcing down by her sides. Shoulder joint click there, muscle pull here.

Start again.

E...E...E...and on into the song, this time further to the next stumble. She pauses and regains momentum from the start of the line, doing repeats over a tricky bit. There is a soothe to the little parts worked over, kneaded into memory. Today's memory.

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She couldn't believe it when the specialist said the words.

'You are certain.' She wanted to say something more like, how dare he be so certain. But she looked around at his consulting office and everything emanated certainty. The qualifications in matching black frames, the neat line of medical textbooks with words like Pharmacotherapeutics running the length of their heavy spines. The expected family photo, he and his wife and two adult daughters. Everyone open-mouthed. Laugh-smiling in beanies and puffer jackets. Spontaneous selfie. There was a view beyond of a sprawling city, maybe Vancouver. It reminded her of a lookout she had been taken to by her Aunt and Uncle there.

'Is that in Vancouver?'

He was busy nodding at her previous question and looked up, eyebrows taken by surprise.

'Yes. My youngest is studying there.' His shoulders softened with her segue. He had braced for the usual response. Tears. Anxiety. Rage.

'It's a lookout in North Vancouver? I've been there. Great view. Such a beautiful city.'

'It is. My daughter took us for a drive that day to see the sights.'

She didn't say any more and he could see she was readying herself to know what he must tell her.

'So. How long have I got before I am...before I...' And he was off with the honest expert summary of her impending physical fate.

'...but medication is our first port of call and it is highly effective in the early years of diagnosis...' she listened a little. Taking this all in today didn't seem to matter.

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'Drink?' Dave is waving a bottle of pinot from the doorway. 'It *is* Friday night. We've been good all week.'

She tries to smile at him. Hopes he can see her attempt. She has taken to raising her hands in enthusiasm when in the past she would have just grinned. A conductor's gesture. Her new form of sign language.

He does not seem fazed by her impending reliance on him. At times she resents his calmness and wishes he would howl to the moon about it so she could too.

'Of course. A big glass please.'

'Have I ever given you a small one?'

'Never!'

'Well I'm not about to start,' he calls over his shoulder from the drinks cabinet.

'Unless...'

She waits until he joins her, glass in each hand. 'Unless what?'

'Mmmm...medication?' He respects her autonomy. Her body, her right to choose.

'Maybe. Probably. One day. But not today.' She stands up from the piano and takes her drink from him.

'Till then. Good health!' they clink glasses.

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Whereto from here, she wakes, asking herself the next morning. I don't want my life to be Medical Installment Art for others to walk past, commenting on. Rowing coaches with megaphones on the river.

How *are* you? How are *you*? How *are* you?

I'm not a fucking leper. You can't catch it off me, it's not contagious, just the body malfunctioning. That is what she wished she'd said to that woman at the golf club. That acquaintance of her golfing buddy, Hilary, the one with sleek bobbed hair and perfect peach-coloured nails. What was her name? Kelly? Karen? Krista. That was it. Ka-rista the barista she named her under her breath. She could tell Hils must have told her about the diagnosis. It

was clear from the way Krista had her head turned away. In fact her whole body swayed on a ridiculous lean as if about to get up and leave.

She wished Krista would piss off. Now.

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‘What are you doing?’

‘Making a list.’

‘Of?’ Dave peers down at her paper.

‘Important things. Things I want to do while I...’ a sob bursts upwards and Dave hugs her tight. She is sitting at the table and he is standing and she can hide in his possum fur jersey and never come out. He says nothing. He is brilliant at holding that nothing just long enough until she is ready to hear something. She can never figure out how he does this.

‘We’re all on an egg timer, hun.’

She stands and allows his full embrace to swallow her till she feels lightheaded and needs to sit. She pulls away and goes to the piano.

E...E...E...

The notes hold space in the air.

## Ancient Self

I'm at a dinner, some big organisation hosting. A first post-partum evening out so I am feeling newly minted, circulating in the world again. A long table of people. All polite, well mannered, well behaved grown ups at a nice, polite, well mannered, well behaved evening event.

Dinner out.

No cooking, except a simple dinner left for the children that my mother will feed them so I can be here. Thanks be to grandmums.

I had a busy mother haircut earlier in the day. Risked one of those whip-in whip-out hairdressers in a large shopping mall where an appointment is unnecessary and the price is reflected in the awful end result.

I look like Helen Clark.

But I still feel new. Post-natal wardrobe accessible again, garments from the past, bit of rushed makeup, heels even. He's driving, so I get to enjoy a wine.

Fate sits me next to a grey-haired woman. Thank the Gods for grey-haired women who can see things.

This one sees me and my life.

I'm surprised by her attention and realise slowly, as my mind swims to the surface, that I haven't had anyone look at the *me* of me, for a very long time. Babies come along and your role becomes squashy stage prop. So busy surviving the day you don't notice the months pass.

'So what do *you* do?' she asks. I tell her my job to which I will shortly return, how nursing is great for flexibility, I can work two shifts a week, or three.

'You enjoy it?' She smiles her question, already knowing the answer but still seeming to want my words. My mind is startled: *I am actually being listened to by another adult human being. She wants me to speak. She wants to hear my thoughts.*

'I feel like what I do is...you know...has...meaning. It's meaningful work. It also works in well with family life.'

We chat some more. Those polite things women say to each other as we both circle the carcass like wolves. *I won't attack it until you attack it.* A respect for the everything is all right and we are all right and our lives are all right.

Then she leans towards me, wine glass propped in one hand, half-full of Sav. Her other hand is on my wrist, intent.

'ALWAYS keep your career. You will never be sorry.'

My face is a block of marble. I want her to chisel on me.

Come find me.

I am here. I am stuck. Self-imposed locked-in syndrome. I hear you calling to me, call me home. I won't tell anyone. From the silent past, the hazed future, guide me. I'm lost. Call across the sacred time barrier, my ancient self has heard you. The one who has carried this DNA around since there was any. She is the one who makes me pay attention to these echoes from the future. Tendrils reach silently into the room, to the moment where I need to know something. Knowledge in the forest.

'Yyyeesss.' I'm uncertain what else to say.

She searches my face, a scan of cheekbone, temple, set jaw. A scan of... we will never meet again. Of... I hope you remember this.

Oh I have.

## Garden Party

At the weekend I circle the house, trying its vistas from this way and that. I love this place. On the north side, the old camellia tree with blood-red double-bloom flowers is perilously close to the guttering again. Must prune back. Remember the flood in the garage because of the blocked downpipe?

The old feijoa tree beside the camellia quietly camouflages the incoming autumn crop. The tree doesn't like you to look at her work until full green cricket balls start to drop with a thud you can hear inside the house.

I can relate. We all deserve our privacy.

The lemon tree is at last established and calls to the little orange and lime to play catch up and make this the most productive flank of the garden.

In the north-east corner you can see chooks over the fence. They are dark, glossy Rhode Island Reds who strut, unhurried, under the Copper Beech. The day we buried our adopted Red Shaver, Stacey, the girls quietly gathered on their side of the fence. I looked up from toiling over the grave, sweat making my hair stick across my eyes for a moment. I brushed it away with a forearm to see the three girls staring at me, head cocked one side to take me in with the left eye, and then a swivel to the right eye.

They knew.

Stacey loved Mum. She would follow her around the garden like a puppy. I never knew chooks did that. Mum would do some gardening and Stacey would scritch around, helping. She'd make a little satisfied *maaaaawww* sound as she fossicked.

She adopted us during the first Covid lockdown. One day she was just there, on the deck, capering into the kitchen.

Oi!

She was very tame and let me gently pick her up and take her back outside. Foolishly, we gave her some compost scraps and water. She was all over it, little scrounger. She was in our hearts straight away.

Next day she was eyeing up the piano when I came across her in the lounge and the day after that she'd made it through the garage and was heading down the hallway to go find the kids. I had to go to the hardware store to sort something.

'Can I help you with anything?' The hardware store assistant was one of those Northern England efficient types. No muckin' 'bout.

'Well. I need a kiddie-gate.'

'Yes?'

‘For a chicken.’

He raised an eyebrow.

‘A chicken has adopted us and keeps trying to get in the ranch slider.’

‘Riiight.’

‘But I need the gate easy to open for my mother to use.’

‘A-ha.’

‘So I need something to keep...’

‘...the chicken out, and your mother in?’

I burst out laughing.

‘This is the most fun I’ve had all day,’ Northern England efficient man’s lips held his smile professionally tight. ‘Come with me.’

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Turning from here you get the backyard view of deck and eastern back wall herbaceous border. Calling it this makes it sound way better than it actually looks. If only it looked that good. Great Dixter attempts are at least vaguely evident: Rose, rose, clematis, spindly delphinium. The biggest tree is a star magnolia that hides the covert bird feeding operation. Our neighbour on the south side requested we use our compost lid because she didn’t like how the birds ate things then flew over the fence and pooped on her deck. Given her house is the highest vantage point in the street, me not feeding them won’t stop them perching and pooping. We duly put the lid on the compost, then set up a bird feeder in the magnolia.

Feeding the birds gives my mother joy and when you’re heading for 89 you are entitled to a monopoly on all the joy going. She loves to sit on the deck and see who is partaking of the lamb roast fat, rolled oats and peanut butter. I get updates when I get home from work.

‘Waxeyes.’

‘Lots of sparrows. They waited out the rain in the gaps in the concrete block fence.

Starlings today. They have a nest over there (points to neighbour’s corner guttering).’

‘There was a mummy and daddy blackbird today. I am sure they have built a nest above the bird feeder. Been busy all day.’

The deck off the house is fringed with a place for herbs and tomatoes. A red cup and saucer with white polka dots is screwed to a totara post for the birds to drink from. The sparrows love it. Mum’s crabapple tree flickers at the corner of the deck. The blossoms are a

good show but mum threatens the tree with the chop if it doesn't give her an apple crop soon. My sister placates her with a bucket of crab apples from our cousin's farm.

Under the eaves of the bathroom, a tamarillo. Mum wills it to crop. I will it to not. While the colour is spectacular the inside of a tamarillo is not my favourite place. As a kid I must have had a reflux moment with one because my mind can't separate out tamarillo flavour and bile.

The vegetable garden is in the southeast corner. Carrots. Spinach. A pumpkin no-one invited to grow. I'm useless at looking after this patch. Only mum remembers to pay it any attention.

The south side is retaining wall and a thin ignored boundary strip. Only the hardy makes it here - Japanese anemones, irises, hydrangea. I am grateful they cope with benign neglect. Earn your place through the weather. Will you withstand the wind and the dry? Can you tough it out?

And the western frontage. There was a goldfish pond in the middle of the front lawn once. Very 1970s. A previous owner left the concrete infrastructure and planted a weeping cherry tree in the former pond.

I suppose if I left this house, a property developer would smash down everything and squash three or four townhouses on the site.

There'd be no garden, just a resentful strip for rubbish bins.

## Movie

Watching movies you don't want to watch. You don't want to because a) You're not interested in the storyline/topic/theme/genre/length or b) you would rather be:

a) at your sewing machine, piecing that quilt together whose fabric is exciting you with its rainbow saturation hues or b) having an actual conversation with the people that you're in the room with to watch the movie. In the dark. With no talking. Not looking at each other. All staring at the bland screen with bland faces like some bland religious cult at a bland Sunday service. Or c) rather be learning how to rock climb in the house with the kids, scaling the bookshelf, the top of the pantry, foot on kitchen counter, leap to table (the floor is lava!) or d) lying smelling the dusty dog-haired carpet while building an epic railway track along the hallway while the dog clumps over the railway station and wrecks the railyard's aligned perfection with her nose, because one of the kids left crumbs of the muesli bar they were distractedly eating in between Thomas and Percy.

You'd rather be e) swaying to Norah, paintbrush in hand, glug of gold paint on ice cream container lid in other hand and canvas tilted on kitchen bench, propped up on baked bean tins positioned for stability, reliability, convenience.

Rather like you as a wife.

Or you'd prefer f) a night out. To the theatre to hear the voices of the silenced speak. You'll cheer them on and hope the point might be taken but it won't because you're there without him and he would never take the hint secondhand, through your retelling. You'd enjoy g) a dinner party, raucous, curry and wine and exaggerated harmless statements of liberal world views that he'd frown at. Or h) time travel back to a corset and your ancestors and their decision to leave and the life you'd lived if they hadn't (would you have had a life?).

There's i) total fantasy but parenting together, equally, both merging the roles of the childrearing, the house taming and ending the day joyful or j) time travel into the future to see it all explode. Or there is k) the bit where you both read books. To the kids, to each other, to selves who can sit and be and don't have to watch a fucking movie. Or l) what about a weekend off? *Go away with the girls, relax, I'll take the kids camping in the backyard. It'll be great, they can toast marshmallows on the BBQ and we'll have waffles for brekky before you get back.* Script never spoken.

Or you'd rather m) be late summer gardening together, filling up the trailer we'll never own because that would involve him doing things with it that would be deemed useful for others and that might bite into online gaming time. Also, he hates gardening as much as

you hate watching shit movies. Or n) seeing family, inviting them for dinner and him having to make actual conversation because their blood is his blood not yours but who cooks the meal and fills the glasses or o) A night class, dancing. Why not? They say it's good for couples. Good how, it's unclear when he turns out to be one of four males in the ballroom with 25 females and the other three are gay. The gay ones are so lovely and so good at dancing and he can't keep time which you never knew was a thing, naive as you are or p) art gallery visit, craft fair visit, Otara market visit, elderly relative visit, visit to winery, visit to west coast beach, visit to the library, the war memorial to remind ourselves it could be worse or q) a family holiday (families do that, they go camping they go tramping).

Or r) God forbid cleaning out the garage together and getting rid of that crap he never uses or s) a romantic mystery weekend which costs actual money and culminates in actual champagne and conversazione or t) the bit where he fixes stuff around the house that hasn't been fixed in forever and he doesn't get his father to do it because he wants you to know that he really is a real man in the accepted Western narrative or u) he insists on doing all the housework that day to give you time to think your thoughts or v) he and you cook together, something exotic and complex. Spag bol. Or w) what about helping the neighbours or x) we're nearly losing our way here so begin a mood board of our future travel dreams or there's y) we could just talk; or

z) we could watch the goddam stupid movie.

## Make Sense of it All

Simplify your life down. Live out of one bag of groceries and don't open the curtains until you're ready. In the 1960s Mary Quant said 'women want to feel sexy' and you imagine your mother hearing that said out loud.

Must ask her about that.

Where did your sexy go? She put on shoes that don't aggravate the arthritis. Booked a flight to see a friend. Walked the shoe shops of Wellington with friend. Browsed unaffordable clothing, gave up and went to buy a book.

Do you feel sexy?

Look at the clutter around you. Do you need it, if you cast it off will you be annoyed with yourself in twenty years? Will you? Will it matter very much if you are annoyed with yourself in twenty years? Does the clutter make you feel sexy? Do you care about feeling sexy? (Yes. No. Yes.)

It's all boring if it's not you and then it is you and it is not boring. Then you see that to others it's boring because it's not them but it is you and you can't see how it's not boring to them even though you know if it wasn't you, you'd be bored too. So you encourage them to have visions of what's not boring only they're too bored to be bored by this and give you the look. The bored look.

Try sexy again.

Oh come on, who cares. Go back to the place where it meant nothing and we were all just getting through the day and that girl shouted the playground proclamation that you never forgot in her unvarnished voice:

'Life sucks and then you die!'

Or did she say life's tough and then you die or was it life's rough and then you cry or maybe life's enuf if you'd only try. You wonder what became of that squat little harpie. She was a classless nuggety wonder. You were a wide-eyed presbyterian. Neither had any hope of being sexy.

Sexy is the forest, indifferent. The worn steps to the summit, dirt spilling over eroded wooden edges. The coolness of elevation, lone sanctuary. What a view! You can see everything, we little gods think. You are sweating and heaving your pack-animal body. Too red-faced, hands on hips, legs a triangle of fatigue (knees, give you love later, we know you ache). Turn to see other equally unsexy humans make it to the top and we all feel happy just to look.

Back down in town, you traverse the supermarket (no eye contact, might contract an unsexually-transmitted disease) the petrol station. Such places we get to be ourselves but if they are close to places where we know people (the suburb in which we live) we have to put our face on.

Our sexy face?

Subversion. Can grey hair be sexy? Can old people be sexy? Can we define attractiveness in terms of broad visions of want? You want to be kind at all times (unless you have a thorn in your foot in which case you can be crabby, but only till it's fixed). You want yourself to smile. Smile even when and if you don't want to but please don't grit your hyena teeth. Genuine vulnerable only please.

Thoughtful gesture. Now *that's* sexy. A chair made free to sit in, a fridge door held open, an update on changes of plans that affect us all. A weather report to keep us all feeling like we know what's going on.

Sexy is not just sex. Sexy is not just beauty. Beauty is not just smooth skin and fast walking.

Check in again. What has altered? Eyesight, the blurs of age which give a Monet feel to your face. Are there more paths now to enlightenment? Shit yes. Go looking. Go offline and touch things unaugmented. A table that needs sanding (love sanding, the drone, the smooth result, the necessary trip to buy IMPORTANT STUFF at Mitre 10 Mega) or a weedy garden. One that you can make sexy again. A new idea from the mind of a person in Capetown or Canterbury that can reach you in clean edits. Pick-up-sticks of thoughts, past the pat buzz phrases and get to the real.

Are you feeling sexy now?

What happened to asking your mother about all this? You look at yourself in the mirror of a shop window and drop self-absorption in horror. It clatters with an embarrassing, out of control metallic ting and rolls into the gutter. You don't look up at the passersby who stare.

The world is full of sentences never spoken.

## Weeds

If I was honest I would say that I weed the garden to push away painful thoughts. I can control this, this I can control.

But I wish he would help.

I have asked. This became so demoralising I now forget when I last asked. One time I insisted. He came outside, scowling, resentful. Sat and half-heartedly plucked at a few weeds like a toddler. That turned out to be worse. Fine. You stay inside and I'll go out and tend the plants. They respond.

Maybe I am ADHD and that's why sitting on the couch is so loathsome. I trawl over my behaviour as I sweep the courtyard. Impatient? Demanding? Unrealistic? Forgiving enough? Tolerant? I have a shelf full of self-improvement books. I have been working on myself since he told me to shut the fuck up on our honeymoon.

I never told anyone that he did that.

I wanted it to work, of course I did. So I tried and kept trying. Here I am still trying, by weeding our garden. There are some treasures out here, roses, alstromeria, my little feijoa tree trying to make a go of it. Rhubarb thrives in the vege garden. Their long red stalks wave out, cheerful. They distract me.

I need distracting.

This year the hydrangeas make such a show they cluster over the path and I avoid pruning them, more so when he mutters *those hydrangeas need cutting back*.

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I have a strange dream.

In it, I have locked him outside in the garden. He is stuck. He can't scale the fences or the gates either side. He roams, a zoo tiger, pacing back from one gate to the next. Poking his face through gaps and yelling in a voice no one hears. I check on him daily in the dream and leave food on the porch when he's not looking. He starts to whine and mewl.

Then one day I notice he is standing still in a corner of the garden. There are ivy tendrils coiled around his limbs and new shoots of leaves appearing through the gap between his arms and his torso. The garden appears to be absorbing him.

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There are times now that I wish it would absorb me. Would reveal a secret door through which is a path to a new life.

I have run out of weeds.

I have run out of self-help books too. They are all starting to say the same thing and so it seems I have covered that terrain as much as the terrain inside the fence.

I am not sure what to do next.

I go outside and watch the wind talk with the trees. Summer's flush is fading. The leaves hang, an almost intolerant green.

## Singing

On the Greek island of Mykonos half my lifetime ago. I wandered the narrow streets, whitewashing picking out the shape of each stone in the path. It created a grey and white giraffe pattern between the houses. The paving went straight up to the white walled buildings so every inch seemed formed and sculpted by millennia of human habitation. The place was picture postcard pretty. Stone streets, whitewashed buildings with azure doors and railings, red froths of bougainvillea. Blue sky, sun. A pelican. Donkeys. Religious festival parades.

The locals largely ignored us, pesky foreigners with unscarfed heads, our androgynous shorts and t-shirts. We were a necessary inconvenience that bolstered the island economy. Once there, what to do? I have since always found this with small islands. You get there and then what...

On this island I sang.

A gaze in the door of an Orthodox church right on the waterfront, fishing vessels bobbing against the pier opposite, gave me the urge to enter. There was no-one around to say no. The church was empty apart from a couple of other tourists from my tour party. The cool stone walls and wooden pews were unadorned. They allowed resonance even in our sneakered footsteps. It made my ears buzz with want. Try not singing when the acoustics of a place seem to thrum your larynx. Try ignoring the space acting like a taut bow throwing itself on the cello string. I wanted to sing so bad, I had to throw my voice into the void and damn the consequences. I figured I would plead forgiveness, the holy spirit moved me or something, terribly sorry it's a Victorian Christmas carol and not a Millenia-old Orthodox hymn.

*'Once in Royal David's city, stood a lowly cattle shed...'*

I paused, listening to the echoes bounce dusty air molecules and wake them up. Voice upon place and place upon voice. The sound verberated, thrummed, alive and triumphant. Religion made sense. Spirituality made sense. The communion. The rituals of sacrifice and loss and forgiveness and hope and birth all made sense. The centuries, the pages, the registers of births and deaths and marriages. The eyes closed at prayer. The unison response Ahhhh-men.

'Was that you?'

I looked around. A girl from our group, open mouthed and staring.

'Yea-ass.'

She didn't know what to say next. She just kept staring as if I was a whole new person from the one she had followed in the door.

Perhaps I was.

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When my father was dying, in those last couple of days we gathered around his bed and sang. I forget what. Just gentle songs we all knew the lyrics to. We ate a dinner there together which we called The Last Supper through our tears. Toasted Dad with a whiskey he'd have had too if he could, then sat quiet, staring floorward. I listened to the uncertainty of his breathing. That metronome on which all was placed.

I think I may have started with a hum. Humming is perfect in its lack of confrontation. Others around you can ignore it or join in, as they will. I hummed for a bit and Mum and my siblings picked up the tune and hummed sporadically too. This slowly became worded in fragments as our grieving minds remembered a snatch of lyric here, a word there.

We were not a family to sit around and sing much apart from the odd chorus line flutter at a party.

I have memories of Dad singing to Lionel Ritchie and George Benson and Stevie Wonder. He loved their voices radiant with soul and joy. Dad got a speeding ticket once because he was so busy singing to Lionel in the car. What impressed me most was that he didn't even care he'd got a ticket. My dad was never ever a rule breaker so this insurgency was a delight to witness as a teenager.

I go back further to forgotten memories and there is me, at eight, standing beside Dad in church. We stand in First Church Dunedin to sing a hymn and it must be one Dad knows well because he anticipates the movement up or down of the next note to perfection and I wonder how he's doing that. He is booming, I can hear his voice above the mumblings of others and the sound makes me feel safe and his certainty about everything seems reinforced by his voice. Singing is the most expressive I ever see Dad.

When years later I stand at Wembley stadium surrounded by Welsh rugby supporters singing nonstop, I think how much Dad would love this.

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I sang to the Wombles record my sister gave me when I was four. I sang in the car and I knew who Barry Manilow and Karen Carpenter were before I knew the names of the neighbours. I sang with abandon, no one commented, no one minded.

I sang Pokarekare Ana on my hen's night in a Mt Eden restaurant as a dare and definitely on lots of buses. I always sang driving to work. I sang at my friend's wedding and solo at a Christmas concert.

I sang and sang and then I stopped.

I have gone mute like that stupid mermaid girl. I have silenced myself with busyness and responsibility. I have always sung my way back to myself. How is it we forget to do the things that bring us joy? Humanity singing. How ancient and contemporary it always is. On the note sits all our lives. I tell myself to make a promise...get back to it. But I also don't need any more added to the self-improvement hit list etched on the sky in front of me.

It'll keep. The tūi will remind me to get back to it one day.

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My middle child now sings.

His booming bass heard through the house as he builds computers in the garage. His voice in the shower distorts to sound underwater.

It sounds like whale calls from upstairs.

## **She Stood**

It was just after six-thirty a.m and she stood staring out the bathroom window. Late winter dawn, light bleeding in a little more each day to nudge spring along. 40 today and no-one but her was yet up. Husband snored on next door. Kids were still tucked up and wouldn't stir until she opened their doors to say the same thing she said each morning, *morning my Sam-the-man, time to get up*. She liked this ritual, shifting her tone to that place only used for her children.

She got ready for the working day choosing her favourite teal green silk dress, a thin layer over warmer ones. It made her eyes glow. She wanted to glow today. She took extra time over her makeup, searching for imperfections - a streak of unblended foundation on the side of the nose, a tiny smudge of mascara on her right eyelid. Hair straightened carefully to fall casually-controlled over shoulders. Hairline adjusted to camouflage errant greys. Now she stood, ready, and stared long out over the neighbouring rooftops, over the bare trees holding up their skeleton selves. Hiding nothing.

*Is this it?*

Strange question. She hadn't thought it. But it nudged its way up like an air bubble in an artery. Not good. Yet, good. She stood very still and listened. Not to the sparrows on the garage roof or the thin thread of distant traffic, nor the fridge's hum downstairs. Inwardly listening to all her ligaments, muscles, blood. They spoke a four decade Greek chorus.

*Is this what a life feels like?*

Creation of children, a home, all this learning. She felt her chest rise and fall of its own accord and on an in-breath, held all of her existence in one single, vast, hovering moment. Simultaneously knowing and ancient, new and revealing. It felt like she could see the edge of patterns, self-repeating, one long thought woven of everything alive and around her, for one expansive beat.

*What if this was all of it, if this was as much as you got?*

The questions didn't scare her. They weren't a death knell. Or if they were, that didn't seem to matter. But they felt familiar, as though a dusty corner of her mind had heard them before.

A car door slammed in the street. The questions passed and her body's answers to them were forgot. She couldn't feel her boundaries. Leaned to the right and saw her face in the mirror. Wobbled a little on black wedged boots then steadied herself, hands flat on the vanity. Hands with purple nails. Could be anybody's. After a moment, she stepped back to the window and tried to repeat what had just happened.

But the moment had used itself up.

She got on with the day of birthday cards with images of side profile Tūī, a woman parasailing above a cliff-edged sea, still-life lino print of tulips, figs and a coffee mug. Various presents. Books (lovely) champagne (sure, why not) kitchen crockery (oh well). Flowers from her best friend. Hugs from her family and messages of remembering from busy others. A workday of usualness and ferrying of kids from home to school to sports followed by the family dinner, cake, song. But that dawn moment made all other thoughts and actions seem pulled by strings.

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River walk a few days later with the dog, Lola, was when she next had time to think on the dawn questions. By now they had spread under her skin, a circulatory system of disturbance. Or had they, she asked herself, already been there, steadily taking shape and only now had she noticed.

Her mind started up like a gossip at the supermarket checkout. Do I have a degenerative disease like Dad and his Parkinson's? Cancer? Am I having a nervous breakdown? Am I having an enlightened epiphany? Was ist das? She loved how Lola snuffled with complete focus through the long grass down off the paved path, under the bridge, nosing her way toward ducks on the sandy water's edge. The ducks sounded their classless warning calls to each other and took to the water. The labrador strained on the leash, instincts wanting the taste of feathers. She unhooked the lead and Lola bounded forward towards the receding brown shapes. Oh to be a dog.

She'd read somewhere that dwelling on the past was the cause of depression and dwelling on the future created anxiety. That left just the blinkered present. She didn't know if she could narrow her focus that much. All that had happened made the now the flavour it was. All that was to come was all there was to orient oneself to. The future had to work. She had children, she had to function.

*Are you happy?*

Shit. She didn't want this one, the ultimate selfish bleating of a privileged person. Pushed it away, hard. Into the river you go, she thought. Float off like a broken branch. She considered happiness the way she considered the rest of life's lottery. Largely chance. She reached the river and poked a toe at the current. The river's seaward pull was so sure of itself. Light seemed to take pause to float with it, rippled fractures, joining this other element, becoming something new. The dog was heading along the water's edge upstream, tailing the ducks from the safety of shore. Lola wasn't a keen swimmer despite her ancestor's propensity

for it. Sometimes the dog would get right in, a nervous circular doggy paddle to cool down. But never in pursuit of a duck. Lola's usual depth was no further than where the water lapped her bowed belly. Beyond that seemed too destabilising.

She followed the dog's path, slowly, hadn't walked this way before and was distrustful of the eroding bank. It was hidden from the path above, tucked down the overgrown bank of scrappy trees and unmowed grass which shivered with hidden life. Crickets, mice. The body's busyness finding its way through the little wilderness relaxed her a little. She loved the smell of the damp grass and pocketed the dog lead so she could put her hands out to grip the trunk of a young sapling, finger grass seeds.

*Come on, you gotta face it.* Lay out life, turn over each part. She made columns in her head, playing patience with duality. Good and true, bad and false. She'd flirted with this before when feeling the grooves of her life grinding but had always forced her own hand to come out marketing the status quo. She had? *Yes. You know it.*

Good? The kids. I should call them the children, she corrected herself. Her brood of three. Busy happy creatures, tearing up the place. Enthusiastic about whatever crossed their paths. A snail. What happened if you dropped a bag of flour. The latest scary zombie knowledge in the playground. They talked and talked and she loved their humour, their devil may care attitude, their lack of concern at fashions, their appreciation of sausages for tea.

True? Life was functional. House, car, job, family. Everything worked.

Bad? These thoughts were bad. She moved straight on.

False? The word arced in her mind. Things were not great, he had been trying to improve himself lately but she could feel the drag back to default. All campaigns temporary, half-hearted. Another fitness regime begun, drifting back to nothing, leaving the garage full of decaying gym equipment and the pantry stuffed with bulk-purchase protein powder that tasted like chalk. Home improvement projects never quite started. A stack of fencing planks narrowing the path down the side of the house, tools on top of the dryer in the laundry. Opinions on the world that grew daily calcified, narrow, rich in blame and poor in insights. His views on stereotypes had turned him into one.

She'd been willing them to work for so long now she'd forgotten what it felt like when their relationship had its own energy, when they made the other feel like they could step out the door each day and return having changed the world. Just a little. Sure, kids changed things. It had changed her utterly. She remembered holding her eldest as a newborn and saying to him 'you're my life's work' and meaning it. Her commitment was to the tribe

now and whatever piece of herself she got to hold on to was a bonus. She had assumed the same orientation was required of him, that he wouldn't have a choice.

Something wet on her hand. Lola's nose. Mum, whaddya doin'?' She ran her hand over the dog's black, silky coat. Lola leaned against her leg, a dog hug and she silently thanked the animal knowing. Something else wet. She didn't want to cry. No wonder people took up crossfit and binge watching.

Anything to hide.

## Fragment Threads

Pink sky pauses on navy-hilled perfection

and an attack from an emotionally outraged human.

Mind turns foetal position of self-blame earmuffs  
are comfort

emotions trampoline the air.

Routines of house order (restock the pantry, clean the shower) soothes the confusion.

Shock oscillation transcendent to horrible, tranquilised not with complacency and  
wind bangs the door seeing him cry out when he saw the coffin the  
body yet it was ok  
and I wonder why my mind brings this up

we all

seek the lone note in a cathedral that astounds  
an energy of joy accepted

perfection

smell of the inside of an orange fresh-picked  
astringent creeping

autumn chill

I want to feel coolness on the soles of my feet.

The song chose the moment for us to sing it round you. Amazing Grace was it? Low  
hum of love Tūī

in the cherry tree the moment you went you  
don't have to know everything.

Undercurrent of awkward ignored professions of love,  
what even is that? Learned script

eroding disappointment

chronology a straightjacket tuned  
into small potential shifts always with the over-thinking

must ask questions rather than give answers.

## Leaving is the Chaos of Not Staying

I fell back on a well-worn narrative for the leaving.

*This is delving into dark recesses of the mind, can I face it?*

One used as the excuse by countless before me and that would continue its usefulness long after, for those who would also one day have to get out.

*The washing machine is finished. Oh good, a distraction.*

It was needed and necessary. Beginnings and middles of love narrations are well worn and dog-eared. Maybe we just don't like to admit that endings, even more than the other stages, need to jump onto a well-worn track to run towards chaos.

Leaving is the chaos of not staying.

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The beginning of the end is a cool morning. Early. Me hustling function through the household, dishwasher empty, the kids' lunchboxes filled. I step out the back door the weighted washing basket wedged on hip, worrying the ache from years of toddler's legs locked on my side. The ghost of one of their little arms still embraces a line across the back of my ribs. Those years, freshly gone. All at school now and for a decade I've barely looked up.

I feel the gain of autumn sting my ill-clad arms. Chiffon. Work clothes that drape an elegance. Should've put on a cardy, a scarf. Should've thought of that before I stepped outside. Two large cherry trees dominate the small backyard. Their bronze leaves glowed against the blue sky a few days ago, curling slowly in on themselves, preparing for the fall. Carpet, crush, rake, compost, earth, feed tree.

Today the leaves weigh heavy.

I hang the washing in the shed out back, protecting it from blustery late autumn rain clouds overhead. Peg, peg, peg, peg. I focus on my hands and the cold scrunched laundry. They work on autopilot. Shake out the creases.

Oh my God, I cannot stand this. I cannot bear my life. I cannot carry on for another wretched day yet here I stand and the world thinks it sees me function.

A vision of life 40 years into the future flashes its heartbeat across my mind. The same. Epiphany washes the sides of my stomach. Femurs feel the tremor and my mind is a tunnel-vision down to one simple point of truth.

You must earthquake your life.

I used to break things. Casserole dishes, glasses, teapot, weed whacker, the TV. I would always be the one who touched the thing last, the cursed hand. He took joy in telling me I broke it. I was the breaker, to blame.

*I'd like to take joy in telling I've not broken a thing, since.*

Failing in originality in the narrative of how to leave, an alternative man stumbles on stage. Not auditioned properly. Enter stage left. Not cast right. I know this in my most private thoughts but push those down deep into bedrock. I was good at doing that.

Friendliness becomes talking, becomes sharing favourite songs, becomes sharing songs with lyrics of note, becomes the night he sends one particular song with one particular chorus line and a one liner to accompany it, something along the lines of...this, yeah so, this is how I am feeling...

I lie in the bath staring at my phone, contemplating fate. A choice now. Jump to this mythical lifebuoy I have been thrown, or stay trapped. Two choices. Don't be ridiculous. ONE choice. I know if I stay, I will die.

So I leave.

*When your voice has been silenced, call your way back to yourself.*

What then follows is a blur of things that did and didn't happen. The thread of life hard to hold onto at times as the now ex rages and roars. The also immediately new-ex withers and slinks off in the harsh light of reality. His is only a fantasy wish. He does not like my brave new world. Neither of these behaviours deeply surprise me, they are storms to endure while I traverse the hard lands.

Now for the first time in years, I breathe in every particle of my new reality. Still, survival hypervigilance sees me check for permission, for safety assurances that I am allowed to exist. The words coming out of my mouth still stop at the gatehouse of another's opinions. Time and again this happens for the first few years, as each day I step further away from the past. Takes an age until I have walked far enough to be able to turn around and see how diminished I had become.

*This hurts to write. It hurts, it hurts. When you have lost your voice then finally, finally get it back, sing your song of healing, however it comes.*

My song of healing went like this:

And do you have a husband?

*Oh no, no no no*

*No*

*I*

*don't*

Oh.

(Instrumental)

Keep the colour chart to show your husband

*I don't have a husband*

I'm sorry

*Don't be sorry. I'll have the slate gray.*

Oh. Ok.

(Instrumental)

And what does your husband do?

*I don't have one of those*

*I don't have one of those*

*I don't*

*Have*

*One*

*Of*

*Those.*

(Sing it as if it were an Opera.)

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Years later the washing machine bleeps its completion. I read over this agony with small tears. I breathe the hurt in and then I breathe it out, getting up from my desk. I take today's load and stand in the winter wind pegging up a thousand forgotten socks my teenage son cleared off his floor last night, in a frenzy of cleansing.

They walk the westerly breeze to their own beat.

## The Yoghurt

I drive north, making up a silly song with snappy beats to help my end of the week mind focus on the motorway. To get away from it all, I'm going to Auckland. To my sister's empty house. Use it, she says. I'll hold the fort at your place. She arrives at mine and I leave for hers. The song's rock n'roll lyric line is 'Fix your undies at a hundred Ks' because that is what I am doing as one side starts to cut into the top of my left leg. Once I have sung that at a fast tempo, the rest of the song unfolds in words that rhyme with Ks. There is heavy use of hey, hey, hey and the song is bad and it makes me feel good.

I arrive at the local Countdown for some supplies before getting to the house. The apocalyptic yoghurt aisle has me confused. I go looking for the actual yoghurt aisle and can't find it so ask a young guy unpacking milk crates. He directs me back to the barren shelves and one expensive choice left. There's lots of yoghurt in Hamilton. This could be a new tourist attraction for us. Come to Hamilton. We have yoghurt.

Unpack the car, unlock front door and the stillness greets me. I see what welcomes my sister home each night, a cluttered cosy of books, needlework, paperwork, unused exercycle draped in stuff.

I have left her to run my life for the weekend. To be company for our mother. To get the kids from A to B as required. To keep up with the laundry and the eternal eating. She could see I needed it, snapping at my sixteen-year-old every time he opened his sixteen-year-old mouth to spout anything from the vintage of this year's sixteen-year-old harvest.

Take bags upstairs, find sheets, make up the spare bed, arrange my clothes for the morning, come down, unpack my groceries.

I do not want to think. Not just yet.

Get into bed and read the news on my phone, ignoring all the books I bought with me but picking up a new one my sister has bought. A picture book about Captain Sir Tom Moore and the laps of his garden to raise money for the NHS and all the little acts of goodness and kindness that others have done over the past two years. It is a warm fuzzy book of joy except for the bit where the sticker says one pound per book sale will be donated to charity. And the rest?

I am here to find my thoughts.

They've got clogged with fulltime work, fulltime familying, running a household, studying. They are sometimes clenched by past pain that likes to run under the surface looking for a faultline. They are distracted by the scrape of a spade over concrete next door, by news notifications on Ukraine which I can't not read. They oscillate between optimism,

hope, focus, and bleak anxiety. I am here to lay out a picnic rug over the top of it all in my sister's backyard, to lie and stare at the sky and let my thoughts flutter and land.

A moment of the past arrives. Thirty years ago exactly, I left home and came to live here in Auckland to go to University. I got to live in a Halls of Residence. A room of one's own and all the bliss that provided. All the freedoms - intellectual, physical, spiritual. I explored it all as you do when you are nineteen.

Then time travelled and nineteen is forty-nine. I am again in a room of one's own, for a weekend. I want to pack into it everything I hoped to do in the future when I stood looking at it back then, a hand shading eyes squinting into the sunlight. That's surely realistic.

I can't have predicted that the moments of calm over three decades would literally be just moments. Like when I had just bought *Possession* by A.S. Byatt with my own money and walked clutching its newness to my chest back up Symonds street crunching plane tree leaves underfoot. Standing on the deck of a Greek ferry crossing the Aegean and comparing it to the Interislander in the Marlborough Sounds. When the visitors had gone and it was just me and my newborn in the birthing centre room.

Now I measure calm by a lack of chaos in a day. Dappled light on my page, fridge hum. An unused brush and shovel just where I can grab it, if I need to. I wish people a boring weekend when I leave work on a Friday and they thank me because we both know we'd just love a vacuum of nothing into which to regain ourselves.

How has the voice even had time to still be there? I marvel that the self still carries you along, inside you, even when the blinds are drawn. Is it the privilege of age that our voice merges at last with what comes out our mouths?

I hope so.

## The Goodbye

Goodbye house, it is time for us to leave.

I'd single-handedly packed the life of myself and my children up over the previous three weeks. He had departed after I said it was over and it was us who now had to leave. I tried to buy the house but time and again, the process would not proceed. Buzzwords 'continuity' 'consistency' 'routine' rattled in my head. Same school, same bed for the kids. But it just would not come together.

I paused one night. What happens if I accept that I am not buying this house. What if I tell the Universe, ok, I accept that this is so? I had never been a hocus-pocus believer but it was highest level uncanny how the process unrolled smoothly and calmly after that. Delivered unto us was a different house to call home. I looked, I found, I offered, I was accepted, I arranged and it happened. He was now buying the house and we were now leaving.

After several frantic box packing weeks, all was done. My mother's garage was at capacity storage for our packed up life. To see your existence crammed up like that, concertinaed into a crush of stuff makes you feel disembodied.

I am not my stuff, yet I am.

The boxes were now all moved, the place clean. Now all done.

Yet not quite done.

I needed to say goodbye. A little ritual of goodbye blessings. My middle child accompanied. He wanted this too. We walked our way room to room, breathing little goodbyes to the spaces, asking the memories to follow us one by one, a conga trail of the past, swirling with us round corners.

Come. Come with us.

I left his side of the family's china teacups. Corner cupboard full of them. Dainty uselessness with gold rims that soon looked crap in the dishwasher and had stupid tiny handles. I left his fake black leather recliner. Arms on the rests like mission control. Feet up to visitors. It now sat, abandoned. A black rock in a sea of carpet. A penal colony. Quarantine station. Internment camp. Disused goldmine. Crumbling ruin.

I left the garage crap. The accumulations of yellowing comic books, the unused exercise equipment, the gunged up never-used tools. Fake army outfits. In the shed out back I left the black rubber safety mats, a piled up weighty bargain-of-the-century uselessness. Hard as turf. I left the BBQ used the once. Rusting, tourist hotel to cockroaches.

Hardest of all, the garden.

The irises, their intense petals of purple tissue paper soft. Heads wobbling side to side like little nuns. The huge blue-pink clematis, fingering its way up the trellis bursting surprise buds in the quiet shade. The little maple trees. Purple and green feathery leaves brushing at thigh height. They looked like the skirts of 1950s ballgowns, enduring the under eaves dryness with grace. The long river of hydrangeas sweeping over the wiggly path at the side of the house. Purple, pink, white, purple. Everyone always asked for cuttings from the purple ones and I could never get a cutting to replicate the rich violet. Always they turned blue.

We turned the last corner to face the back lawn.

Grass all gone. An untouched snowfall of blossom instead from the cherry trees blanketed all. We gasped. Never seen it look like that in all the years we'd been there. Such perfection. How did the cherry blossoms know to hold until that day?

We wept and hugged each other tight.

## Splinterbrain

What exactly is Putin up to? Will things go bananas in Europe? What about China? What move is it going to bust next? When will nuts in tents stop planting herb gardens and tapping the water mains of central Wellington for showers and bugger off home? Who is behind all this? Why was there barely any chicken for sale at Pak n' Save today?

I talk long about the chaos to my Uni student son. I ask him to pretend he's the Police Commissioner having to deal with the protestors on the front lawn of Parliament. It takes him so long to explain what his strategy would be that my mind loses the thread. I'm glad he's got it sorted in his head. Even if no one is asking his advice. *It's complex*, he explains.

I feel the weight of the world's dysfunction as if I am responsible for it. I worry at the crazies. Why are you so? Can't you go back and get busy with your kale? I worry at the despots. Haven't you got enough already? Why more? I worry at the war profiteers always at the start line, ready to sprint for the goodies that chaos throws up in a malevolent lolly scramble. I'm worried about global conflict like I never have before.

I want to phone Angela Merkel and have a phat yarn. Can QEII just give them all a slap and send them all skittering? Meanwhile the mes of this world are paying taxes. Unclogging the hospital. Walking to work. Staying off bollocks social media. Getting our close contact covid swabs. There are five million of us and we're not all dropping everything to have a tanty at Cindy.

Combobulation slips the daily grasp, lately. I sit down with a coffee (affordable cheap instant) and try to gather the grit of my thoughts. Christ! The washing machine finished ages ago and I need to get the second load on.

I go do that.

Shit! Must email bosses to tell them the problem about tomorrow is no longer a problem. Oh God! The bloody housework, showers and their soap scummed floors, the never clean for more than a minute toilet, the kitchen floor toast crustaceans. The groceries, the rubbish out, the neverending minutiae of household management which if committed to with passion that our foremothers had no choice but to exercise, would leave me fast making an informed choice to be a diazepam addict.

Anxiety Ming Vase Mind please shut up. Brittle precious. The thing about the Vase, as I refer to it for short, is its resonance. Flick your finger on real life fine china and you get that lovely momentary *ting*. An overtone of quality. My internal Vase is a high pitch tinnitus note not unlike the supermarket checkout beeper. Hell! Second load finished already. How am I getting so interrupted? I scan back over the past hour...

'Mum, what's that crane? Where is it?' Points out window.

'Dunno,' I hold a strand of thought, about to thread my needle idea.

'I'm gonna go on a bike ride to find it.'

'K.' Bike, something something remember to keep half an eye for her return,  
subconscious please keep track of how long she's out biking for.

...

'Mum, that keyboard I bought off Trademe has a value of \$300. I got it for \$60! All it  
needed was a clean. Can I show you?'

'No.'

'Oh but.'

'I'm working.'

'Sorry Mum.'

The Guilts descend.

...

'I'm back,'

'Hi.'

'Cup of Tea?'

'I'm fine. Had one just before. Thought you were staying on for morning tea there?'

'Thought I'd have one at home.'

The Arghhs descend. If one more precious member of this household interrupts  
me...but the other two are out for the day.

The only one left to interrupt me now is me.

## Lost and Found

It is a deep joy to have been lost and then be found again. I got lost through all the choices I could have made but didn't, did make but regretted, didn't make but ought to have. Regret is overlapping paths, intersecting, undercutting. The finding is a task I might not have begun if I'd known the extent of its demands. I'm glad I didn't know.

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It was a few months into living in my new house before I began to find myself. There's always of course a mess of boxes to unpack for weeks when you move. You can sidestep your thoughts while the new linen cupboard needs ordering. My first best excuse was that I could not find the flour and the sugar containers. That gave me a couple of weeks free pass from facing the explosion of my life, while I doggedly searched every evening after work for the right bloody box. It was only when I gave up that I found it. Placed upside down in the sewing room, the bottom of the box labelled 'fabric' from a previous usage. I opened it one radical night when slithers of creative urge made me put music on and enter the room. There were the flour and sugar containers, upside down in the upside down box. Their appearance was a shaking of my hand.

*Welcome.*

I only ran out of boxes to unpack because I started to find space to store them without unpacking them. I then set to arranging fabric on the bookshelf in my sewing room. I needed to see colour. I needed to set this tiniest of rooms up as a celebration, even if I barely ever used it. On the cold concrete wall, I attached a montage of items. A pen shaped like a trout. Magazine cut out of a Grayson Perry exhibition. Frida, of course. Photo of a pudgy Jack Russell asleep on a verandah. Beneath them sat an old tape deck I'd bought for \$1 at the kids' school fair so I could listen to the radio while I sewed.

The first friends who came over, commented on the light. The colour.

'Your old place,' they'd pause, searching for words. 'It was so much...darker...and I'm not talking about all those trees.'

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To be found means you've cohabited with loneliness, not shoed it out of the room but stood as it paints you scared. Keep standing for a moment more and then? A wondrous discovery. Loneliness recedes, like bears in the night.

Yes, it returns. And then you ask it to sit a while. Tea? Anything to eat? What do you want to talk about today, Loneliness?

The terrors attacked me at the clothesline if they were going to attack anywhere. *She has her arms up, pegging. Stick the knife in.* As I looked at the world in all its turnings away, I could feel what courage was.

Still on your feet.

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The house was a bit dirty. That was a statement to myself. Cobwebs, comical in the toilet (all good, toilet clean) and the new stove dirty already through love. Happy dirt. Feminist dirt. Only hurried on its way by crisis cleaning deployed if friends were coming over. I didn't find I had many friends over very often. I was fast evolving into a nun-hermit. Nunmit? Spiritual in my own disorganised-religion kind of a way. Lady Googiloo, as my kids called the internet, told me that nunmit was German for 'now with'. This seemed utterly appropriate as never had I lived more in the moment than now. The now is the very best of places.

It is the only place.

I stayed up late every night at first. Kids settled into bed, necessities done for the following day, I would take deep breaths of the decompressed air the house offered freely. Then my posture would start to slump out of habit, cringing in advance of the regular verbal evening instruction of my former life:

'Are you coming to bed? Why aren't you coming to bed? It's better if we go to bed at the same time.'

But it wasn't better for me.

It took frequent reminders to self that no verbal instructions would ever be heard again. Just beautiful silence. Once motherly duties were dispatched, I got to be me again and I came to understand my biggest barrier. I didn't know who I was anymore.

So that was my task in those late-night liberated hours. I would set up my painting easel in the kitchen, handy to the sink. Music on, I would paint. Didn't care the outcome. No one was there to sneer at a beginner tentatively playing at art's shoreline.

They were terrible paintings. Process paintings. Leaching of toxins paintings. The process was all I cared for. The colours, the sheen. The tonal richness.

Here is a gollup of lime green with a shimmer of silver next to it. Swoosh a curve down the canvas, blending both into a memory of spring. Now then. Cerulean blue, you deserve your name. Lift me skyward.

I am painting extreme close up. My memory is a blur of woodland once visited. Let that return and form itself on the blankness in front of me. To see it all like an infant.

I would dive into the palette and swim there till fatigue drove me to bed.

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The most dismaying discovery was the dearth of my own thoughts. Anytime my opinion on any issue was called for I would start, for the first year, to parrot a response. What even did I think about anything? I had an empty reference book to fill. Being just you again makes you realise people often aren't always just themselves. I could see the vulnerable dependency of people inside their long term marriages, just as I had been. Would you sort out the leak in the garage, the wifi, the blocked drain, the oil in the car, the kiwisaver. Living life like nothing is ever going to change. Living privilege and enjoying an easy life and not having a clue what would be required if all decisions were taken solo.

I was learning to do that.

What flavour everything do I like? Which movie? Which political party? What is my open air stance on religion and spirituality? Hello God, hello Universe, you still there? Every day a decision from yoghurt to power company to preferred existential philosopher was up for grabs and it was simultaneously daunting and delightful. Painting class? Sure! Go see a rock band? Of course. Buy a new coat? Do it.

I wrote swathes of rubbishy abstractedness. Mind like a centrifuge, thoughts splattered on the inside of my skull. I had journals and then other journals more private and then still other journals even more private than private so that all that I'd been and all that I wanted to become could gradually write itself out.

I went to a poetry workshop at the Auckland writer's festival just to sit for two hours in a room with people who believed in words. The class was good but the walk back to my car, even better. Up Wellesley street from the middle of the city I began to sense her. Across Albert park. Down Alfred street, scruffing my shoes through the carpet of plane tree leaves. On the corner of Alfred and Symonds street, there she was. My past self. Waiting to hitch a ride back home with me.

So young, so patient, waiting 23 years. Certain I would return.

It was a moment of clarity to see and feel who my former self was. That twenty year old student. A person with her own dreams, her own passions. She was bravely feeling her way into her future, innocent faith in things working out somehow. Her courage was to be my guiding compass as I walked the track back to myself.

She was my goal.

## Imagine

Sister and I sit and sift the past with mum. The present is diminishing in its importance these days so we welcome the past into the room more.

‘I’ve just asked Mum what her father’s father was like,’ sister updates me. I’m walking across the lounge with a coffee. Mum looks up at me. Her eyes say *I can’t really remember*.

‘Let’s find that book Pop’s sister wrote,’ I reply and start fossicking along the bookshelves. It’s a thin family history. Our Great Aunt wrote it back in the seventies. We read from it and for every statement I have a thousand more unanswered questions.

Divide yourself in two.

That’s your mother and your father. Go for quarters. That’s Grandma and Nana and Pop and Grandad. Go eighths and where are we now? We are a Wellington sea captain and his French descendent wife. We are a Scots immigrant farmer and his New Zealand born wife. We are the second wife of the son of a Welshman who followed Gold to Ballarat and Otago, like all the others. We are the son of early Presbyterian arrivals and his tough as boots Otago born wife.

I am none of them.

I am all of them.

It is real time travel. It is not until we face the imminent front of the oblivion queue that we pay attention to these inhabitants of our very cells. We like to think we are original. This is impossible and laughingly arrogant.

Think back over weird moments.

When that wasn’t my handwriting. When it wasn’t my voice coming out my mouth. When a place felt just right. When an arrival or departure was good and timely, even if it hurt.

Why is it that the echo of sound in a church stirs me so? Why do I hate most buttons so much? Why does stitching serve as meditation? Why do I have to climb hills?

There seems one cell inside the universe-self urging this experience to occur and when it happens, there is a quiet homecoming. The mind can’t remember the past some days and other days it’s all there. But what is in the body, stores itself in silence.

There. Quiet. Archived.

We can’t talk our ancestors but our bodies can. Proto language of familiarity.

## So Now it's Time

I've just told her what I am having to deal with, a long tail of spite, lashing. She is suitably horrified and confirms that this is not normal behaviour and is not acceptable by the standards of decent society and yes it is reasonable and to be expected that I would be distressed and upset.

So that's nice.

Only I knew that already, so where I was hoping for fresh insights, I am not hearing any, yet. I try to remind myself that at least this is further third-party confirmation of reality. That's never a bad thing. Especially when life has started to blur the lines between reality and nightmare. But I was looking for more today.

The psychologist is fairly young so I try to be forgiving. I need her neutrality. But her cardigan annoys me with its fuzzy dull pink mohair edges causing a blurring between her and the creamy background. I'd have preferred more clarity than that. Mental note to self. Go home and assess wardrobe for bum notes. Bad tonal choices, poor cut, anything nebulous. When rebuilding a sense of self, anything that can help is to be embraced or faced up to. The body must be forgiven its imperfections. It's that, or misery. Dressing like you're 28 when you're not... well, you're missing an opportunity to celebrate where you're at.

As she talks over stuff I feel a strange detachment, her spreadsheeting me into compartmentalised segments.

I am a dissected frog.

My life is categorised on the specimen tray, poked at by long-handled tweezers. Here is my identity, my life. Crazy? No. Distressed? Yes. Irresponsible? No. Irrational? No. Coping? Yes. Not coping? Yes. Has job? Yes. Has children? Yes. Has support? I no longer want to answer your bland tickbox questionnaire that some ancient professor wrote in his booklined snug thirty years ago. His wife makes his afternoon coffee and wants to spit in it some days. He'll never notice.

The afternoon sun strengthens through the office window's venetian blinds. I can see better the room behind her. Tiny scraps on the floor, a pilling on the carpet of the days and weeks of words tumbling dusty out of clients' mouths. All that distress, hurt, confusion, identity crises, dissonance, distortion. All these abstract concepts for concrete experiences of the human bodies caught in a thousand storms.

I am a client.

That is such a strange concept. This is my life we are talking about. My personal lived experience offered up today as a sacrifice to the clinical gods. I will be offered Response

Theory or whatever the hell they term their advice for how to get through this quagmire. I marvel at how entire fields of study rest their theoretical confections on basic common sense. The kind you could probably get summarised neatly by your elderly neighbour over the fence. But I am being disrespectful. I only have myself to blame for thinking that this would be helpful. I remind myself that the earlier third party confirmation was validating and I silently thank her again for that.

The carpet beyond gets further illuminated by more clearing of the clouds outside. I notice a long hair, a tissue fragment, a cobweb ball. You've not vacuumed in here for months! I am a slack vacuumer at home in the privacy of my own mess. Takes one to know one. Yet now, irritation rises in me.

'...and think of water flowing over rocks...'

What.

She is talking and I realise I stopped listening ages ago. My head is in the vacuum cleaner cupboard and she's telling me to stand in the middle of the Waimakariri. I follow her eyes until she is momentarily distracted then steal a look at my watch.

Five minutes to go.



I imagine the privilege of spending a week/month/season crafting a chapter like Chapter One of Ian McEwan's Atonement (I don't much like Chapter One or Part One for that matter) and I wonder if Ian cleans the loo at his house. I do like Ian McEwan. I do like Parts Two and Three a lot. I'm sure Ian will be most relieved to hear this. Please pass on to him that I know sure as eggs soon as I re-read Part One, I will love it with the same dedication and love I reserve for Winnie-the-Pooh. And Pippi Longstocking. And The Man Whose Mother Was a Pirate.

My Grandmother had a writing desire but her life and times suffocated this urge. I think of all those silenced women writers, millions of them over time. I'm sorry that happened to you, I think. Here we are now and still so many can't. So many are still too scared. I was one of them, once. The boot on the head. No more of that.

I was about to lose my rag on Wednesday morning when a little xxxx at school saved me by causing the school to shut for a day. That day was my breathing day, my survival day. It meant that I didn't cry at work on Thursday.

I am over overheating when drinking a cup of tea. This is an aspect of Menopause I want to file a formal complaint about with your committee. I mean come on. On the other hand, to be fair, I can drink tea any old time now and no caffeine trainwreck occurs. Thank for that.

Kind regards and thankyou. I feel strangely better now, vast, silent, Universe.

You're a good listener.

## Egg

She dreamt of being a traveller again. She imagined seeing the world through older eyes. On her terms. To revisit and visit a long list of places. Stonehenge. Moma. Ephesus. Monet damn him and his worn out waterlilies, gotta see that pond up close.

For now, instead, she had a garden of wildflowers and bees. A little orchard of black doris plums, ballarat apples, golden queen peaches, feijoas, lemons. Three red shavers were a recent addition although she worried her huckory-built chook house might collapse in on them.

There was bread, homemade. Smell that yeastyness, a sour curl of promise up the left nostril. This new place suited her new life. A room attached to the back of the garage was the clincher for her to choose it. A place to paint, radio always tuned to jazz. The view was of the wild garden and the rolling hills beyond, forming the start of Mt Pirongia.

She was loving a return to basics. Told herself and others this. Others believed it. Or smiled at least. Books now got read. No TV. Wood burner. Good for the kids when they came to stay for the weekend from their uni flats. The long drive into town to work each day made worth it by the arrival home. Also this place was cheap. All she could afford after the divorce. After he'd got a lawyer to take a scalpel to the capital, and bugged off to the Bay of Plenty. Plenty in-bloody-deed.

She made a self-pact to walk out to her studio every evening after work often imagining what it would be like if society valued her art more than her ability as a teacher. She didn't mind teaching. She often taught the foisty boy-heavy internals-only classes at the co-ed. This meant less marking or prep because the students hated writing and so sat, lumpen, announcing how many minutes to the hour when the bell would sound their escape, like rows of distorted mantelpiece clocks.

She didn't blame them. They had to go taste life, bury their noses in handfuls of action before a metaphor could ever make a glancing blow across their minds. While they faked writing their assessments on their laptops, she faked teaching them anything and doodled ideas for painting.

Hurt yielded and was given over to the wind in the roadside grass each afternoon as she drove home. The nearby bush track became her uphill fitness pilgrimage. What was the usual opposite of disappointment she asked herself as she sweated through the Nikau. A holding pattern of sameness? Illusion?

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Her nineteen year old stood looking at her. An almost man. Ready to fly. Off to Massey to try out for Vet school. The kid was pretty sharp so she guessed he might stand a chance. She'd been sending him to stay with her farmer cousin for the past seven years during school holidays, so anything was possible.

'Have you checked the chooks for mites?'

'Eh?'

'Chooks can get mites, Mum.'

'Oh.' She didn't know. Didn't she just have to house and feed and water? The boy looked at her, some dinosaur. She'd better Google chicken care later. She had been meaning to but, well, reasons.

'I'll sort them out.'

She hugged the boy. He was so unbelievably practical. He adored fixing things, being a solver of problems. His radar was always attuned to a problem-solution setting. He began most conversations with ...the problem was...

'I'll fix the chookhouse too.'

'Thanks luvvy.' He smiled and commented on how short she was these days.

That night she made herself do some sums. She hated sums. She was an English teacher not mathsy. She worked out the mortgage vs retirement pension, feeble amount that it was. Jeeesus, that'll take more than a side hustle of organic eggs to her workmates.

There was her painting. She'd been meaning to play with traditional tempera for ages.

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She'd never have imagined that chookies painted with tempera would be so appealing. Chook paintings and paintings of mountains and lush flowers. Your classic still life. Things that people still liked to buy. Beauty comforts. Socially acceptable on the walls of the northern suburbs. Even her abstract landscapes were selling these days.

She still got the biggest buzz walking past the gallery and seeing a piece of hers on the wall. She knew purists might sneer at her subject choices but who cared what the purists thought.

What made her decide to walk past the gallery that day she'd never know. But there he was. Mr Bay of Plenty himself, with some new gf. And what was this? He and she were nodding approval at the gallery owner to take down one of her pieces to buy. The ascending letters of her pseudonym, top of an f...an h...and a k coiled up from the bottom right corner of the painting, half-obscured by the curator's careful grip.

Lasaux, here I come, she thought.

## The Then

Dinner preparations done, she sat on the shaded deck at the back of the house sprawling her legs. No one here to play ladies in front of. The gin she drank was improved by a squeeze of lime and a little too easy to gulp in the heat. God it was good it was a big glass. The size justified the decent slug she preferred these days to enjoy the kick of juniper berry and botanicals, whatever they were. A short-stemmed little fishbowl of gin not quite large enough to solicit comment from onlookers. There weren't any of those anyway but somehow she still mentally prepared for their arrival. Ghosts of casters of judgement. Impromptu default defence of stance and status.

She sat staring at the tomatoes ripening one by one, the parsley going to seed, the rhubarb sprawling. She'd be happy to spend hours in the garden each day. The slow tending, the slow response. She loved her garden a little more each day without being able to say why. It wasn't exactly grand or fabulous. More small, scruffy and haphazard. Was this garden love the pull of genetic preference? Social narrative masquerading as choice? General self-indulgent brainwashing?

*Don't know, don't care*, she answered herself.

Late summer was burnishing the edges of leaves. Leggy dahlias still flickered their pink faces in the wind. Dust coated the deck and kitchen windows from days of dry heat. Her summer break was almost over and the manic world of work hid just around the corner. She wished she could stay like this. But life would rescind into chaos within the week if she didn't have a payslip each fortnight.

She thought of her liberties, the way she knew we're all supposed to. Audit your blessings when feeling sorry for self. She liked her job, and lived largely as she pleased, within budget. Beholden to her children for a few more teenage years and then...

...then...

The shock of the *then* slapped at her mind.

That word was a lot to take in.

Rising floodwaters of *then* demanded an answer. What *then*? She sat back creaking the garden chair. How had I not noticed this trundling towards me on life's conveyor belt, she asked the dahlias.

Then...return to the to do list...and then... look at the plan...and then...pull out the strategic goals...and then...execute order number 7659...and then...ask what do I want?

The wish to pursue her dreams had followed her around like a phantom ever since she'd had toddlers. By the time you were in the thicket of motherhood and stopped to take in the vista back to your former self, a continent had been traversed.

Aphorisms took their turn whispering in her ear: If you want something long enough, you don't. You can do anything. Go in the direction of your dreams. Something something attempt stuff you know you can't fail at.

She took a mouthful and put the gin down.

Deep breath in, deep breath out, close your eyes, keep 'em closed. In and out and in and out. But she knew she hated meditation. It made her feel like throwing plates against the wall. That old dysfunctional couple, Fantasy and Reality, were at it again, power struggling.

Then...

The word floated in front of her, a blueish haze of beckoning. Come here you, remember the things discarded? The side of the road belongings you abandoned through busyness, fatigue, compromise?

*I must be drunk*, she thought. But she knew she wasn't.

The oven beeper went. Dinner was had, teens up from their bedrooms, teens back down to their bedrooms. She finished off tidying up with the kitchen radio blasting. The presenter was talking about Mozart's music and how it encapsulated all of human experience, from despair to radiance. That was what the *then* felt part of.

Her kids' births lifted embodied memories up out of her torso and wrapped her head in the hand-stitched past. They had been radiant times. After the pain was over. She remembered her youngest's birth. Her, the birthing mother, at her most experienced.

*A wave hits. I stand and grip the bed ends. I bow my head, close eyes, sway slow the pain from side to side as a contraction does its necessary work. The others in the room can't tell where I am at or if anything is happening. Everything is happening. A quick check by the midwife and she is shocked I am 10cms and it's get in the birthing pool now or never. The others look as if they thought I was faking it up till now.*

And now that experience was back then and she is here in the now with the and *then*...sending its tentacles out into the future and her older and her children older and soon to be adults and then...

...and then,

*I guess I try to remember who I am.*

## Job Interview

My friend sets me up. Nice guy, she says. Numbers are swapped, polite text arrangements occur and suddenly it's early Saturday afternoon as we are about to have coffee. The lunch rush is still on so we are having to make do.

'Shall we sit there?' He gestures to the heavy-set picnic tables crouching low against the outside wall. It's winter and watery sun hits my sleeve through a sharp wind as I retreat back out the cafe's front doors.

'Sure.' I'm glad it's outside away from the crowds. I'm bound to see someone I know exactly when I don't want to. Also it's quieter. All the better to hear you with, I think to myself but embarrassment at my slow-creep deafness is superseded by wolf dressed as grandmother imagery and I look at him and imagine him a wolf. Yep, that'd make a good panto scene. A tall bald wolf.

'So. Tell me about yourself,' he asks and we're off and out of the starter blocks. He takes command of the conversation the way guys do. That presumption that what they want to talk about is what everyone wants to talk about. However, I forgive him this because you've got to start somewhere. The conversation waahs on and my arms are getting cold but I am grateful for my sleeveless puffer keeping the rest of me warm. He wears a cotton business shirt under a heavy tweed jacket. The casual weekend look. The smart corporate casual. His chest must be cold as fuck though, surely. I would be starting to feel sick if that was me. I'm a stickler for cosy.

Somehow the conversation drifts towards ex-husband as the required explanation for whatever question of his I am now answering. He at least has the sense to point out my drifting eyes.

'I can see you looking off into the distance, we probably shouldn't be talking about exes the first time we meet.'

'Mmmm,' I reply, awkward. He carries on and I start to feel the strain. This is like a bloody job interview.

Hello fellow middle class heterosexual personage.

Hello.

Are you a robot?

No.

Me neither. But some people have been fooled.

Really.

I am interested to know of your suitability for the opening we currently have available. I am interested to know your socio-economic background, bank balance, housing status, voting preferences, views of extremism, grocery buying habits, what you do with your fingernail clippings, whether you already have a working lawn mower, how many years, months, days and minutes it is until your last dependent leaves the nest, what fat percentage milk you buy, whether you've any worrying potential deformities, how old your car is, do you ever vacuum your car, what you like to talk about (when I have finished what I was saying), how you'd converse with my mother upon meeting her for the first time, can you iron my shirts, do you talk to strangers, can you control your drinking, do you have an undeveloped sense of dread, what are your waking habits, do you like to eat duck?

Oh Christ.

'Well, it has been nice to meet you,' *not*, I think, interrupting.

'Oh! Oh yes you too, I am sure you have lots of things you're needing to get done today.' Thankyou for granting me permission to grant myself permission to leave.

'Right well, see you later.'

'You have a car? I'll walk you to it.'

'No. I walked. I only live up the road.'

'Let me drive you. I insist.' You only want to suss out my place, I know.

'Ok,' I try not to sigh. I fail.

He seems surprised at the size of my house. This tells me that my house is bigger than his house.

'Thanks for the ride,' I slide out of the flash work vehicle as fast as I can.

'Oh, er, yes. Stay in touch.'

Whatevs. I'll add it to my to-do list. Right at the bottom.

## Lovers

I watch the young lovers. He is tall, lanky, an overgrown private schoolboy tennis player who now works in IT for a large corporate. The beige overpriced polo shirt. The long navy cargo shorts that seem to elongate his skinny pins. Strange nordic sandals. He rubs the back of his head, fingers enjoying the close clipped smoothness of a new haircut. He got it cut for her. Certain and focused, he watches the arrivals door sliding its glass silence. She is suddenly there. Her shaved head rush of joy at seeing him. Four booted steps and they crush up. Her mottled sea green dress cinches tight at her waist. I look away, granting them their fishbowl intimacy. Distract onto the status of the flight my mother is arriving on, ahead of schedule. Glad I arrived early.

The airport pumps people in, out, along, further, back there, now sit. Stand. Wait. I expect to see more joy, especially after the hiatus of travel these past pandemic years. But the airport staff are the usual crabby, travellers waiting for flights sit on rigid chairs staring straight ahead, their eyes suggesting a flat aspect behind masks. They can't all be going on a flight to somewhere they don't want to be. Most, at this time of year, will be on holiday. But there isn't much imminent joy twitching the corners of their eyes. This was supposed to be fun. Why is this not fun.

Destinations are chanted over the loudspeaker, the intonation suggestive of opinions the unseen voice has of the place:

*'Gizzzbin.' Nah. Not interested. Never even been there.*

*'Chri-stchurhhhh.' Not really. My aunty lives there but apart from that...*

*'Qaa-eenstowan.' Sigh.*

*'Www-eelling-tin.' Why would you. I mean, the wind.*

I assume the role of collector today. Of my mother off her flight. Of other people's moments. Of the faces and voices and opinions of strangers.

'Would the McLaren family please make their way to Gate 17 immediately? This is your final call. That's Tana and Jesse McLaren, your flight is about to depart.' Stragglers named and shamed. Even travellers who clearly aren't Tana and Jesse double their steps to ensure we all know it's not them. Maybe there is no Tana and Jesse. Maybe they just make up random names to squeeze all our nerves.

The lovers are tonguing each other, her arms committed in a tight lace around his neck, he stroking the back of her ribcage with a lazy finger. That furtive intensity. Can't see past it. It fills the room with bubble wrap you can't see through but suppose might cushion the future. How long must it have been since they last saw each other? Does he live here and

she not? Has she been away and is now home? Is he the one away and she has joined him there from home? Irrelevant questions. They are now together and the rest of the world does not matter. We don't exist. They are Eve and Adam and we are a scruffy Garden of Eden of plastic plants and intermittent voiceovers from the Airport Goddesses.

They seem such an odd mix my mind can't help but imagine their future. What happens when he wants their son to attend his old Catholic primary school and she is a newly minted Buddhist? What happens when her mother needs to come and live with them because her father has embezzled funds and done a runner to Oz? Does he like his future mother in law? Can she stand him? What about the siblings? The brother-in-law scything his narrow opinions across the Christmas table, his wife the alcoholic who no one ever calls an alcoholic because we'd all be an alcoholic if we were his wife. The sister who went on OE and never came back but still pulls on the parental purse strings from afar. The neighbours and their hatred of the fence-line ficus daring to cross the demilitarized zone and touch their sacred corokia topiary. The work colleagues flirting, needling in at the couple's desires. She wants to grow all their own food. He can't be bothered. He wants their children to all learn to ski. She doesn't like skiing. She wants to visit Machu Picchu. He wants to buy a brand new car.

The entire sprawling physics equation of two people plugging into each other waits, hovering. The particles of future time sit poised within every potential gesture of his hand, every almost ticking over of her thoughts, awaiting their big bang moment. Oops, a new universe of solutions and problems just got created there, oh and there, uh and over there as well.

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I watch her watching the young lovers. She seems to be finding their snog either nauseating (it is) or triggering of some past badly-ended former snog of her own. Who knows. I wouldn't mind snogging her but I'd imagine it would piss off Amanda. I really shouldn't have these fantasies. Part of me feels like Amanda knows I do this but the other part of me says *fuck it*, she's not in my brain.

I'd forgotten the fun of people watching. We've all been bogged down in our bubbles for so bloody long. I like people. Shit. I'd forgotten that I like people. Especially ones that look like they know some stuff about life. Weight of gravity, bodies full of stories. *And then I got back up. It took me five years to fully recover. I put up with so much for so long. Now I am free. Do I look like an idiot? I've got no time for bullshit. Life's tough and I've climbed a few mountains no-one even knows about.*

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Mum's plane has just landed so I get to still be standing here. This is normal and expected and I am not the freak. But those lovers haven't moved. Are they still lizarding each other's tongues and clasping each other's shoulder blades? I don't want to see it but I need to know what statuesque position they have now adopted. This is as much my arrivals lounge as theirs.

The kissing has stopped. She is fists under chin, arms tucked tight-winged against her chest, head tilted on him. Stares blindly out at the big world while he envelops her. Sex drive pause. The after. The will-you-keep-me-safe yes I-will-keep-you-safe. The I'll-protect-you. Old roles. Will they ever leave? His cheekbones stand prominent, probably soon to be lost in a beard. They will they make their reappearance decades from now as his genetics call him away. Looks just like his grandfather.

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'Who ya looking at?'

'No one. Everyone.'

'I don't like being around all these people again. It's weird. Who are they all. I don't like people anymore.'

*You never did, Amanda.*

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She should be here in a minute. I position myself where she'll see me and I'll see her when her wheelchair gets rolled through. And there she is. The airport staffer pushing her sees me waving and moving directly towards them and smiles that his part of the job is easily concluded. Mum looks cute in a navy and pink patterned dress. I am glad she didn't have to walk off the plane. She smiles and makes noises about I could have walked, really. I take over the pushing. We wheel straight between the lovers still impersonating statues and the seated crowd who look mostly brassed off. Some guy crinkles up his eyes behind his mask in a smile at mum and me. As if he knows us.

## Subversive Joy Gathering

*What the hell happened to the last 40 years?* The question curled around her head as she walked up the hill, home. Backpack digging into shoulders, she scanned ahead stepping sideways to avoid a sludge of junk mail, spewing out of a letterbox. The street was full of hurriedly parked cars and wheelie bins, their lids swung back, knocking in the wind. The steep slope pushed against her and slowed her pace near the top of the street, she watched for concrete edges to avoid, pushed up by an old Pōhutukawa tree at the crest of the hill, the only one she knew of in the area. She loved that tree.

‘I feel ten.’ Faaar out, *yes*, she agreed with herself, *I really do. Feels like I’m back where I started.* She turned the corner and walked along the ridge road, the sun bottom-heavy in the winter sky, soon to slide below the horizon. The inner city lay out before her to the west, its buildings softened by a canopy of mature trees, holding their leaves tight in denial of the season. This had to be some hormone bender she’d been on all these decades. Now, suddenly, she was one of the grumpy (wo)men at work. She knew she was pretty blunt these days but considered it efficient not to sugarcoat. She knew how the place worked, had seen endless new initiatives steamrolled out but still got the job done, in spite of them. She liked the fact that work was down on the flat and that she got to walk uphill home away from it each day.

Today’s out-of-sorts had started with an eye roll from Gareth. Wanker. Just because she hadn’t known that some new thing was a thing. Like the repatriation of macrame and crochet from the wasteland of the seventies. Bloody pot plants all the rage. Who the hell would be an idiot enough to pay thousands for a plant on TradeMe? And as for what Gareth was talking about, some new App the kids were all using. Whatever. It would come and go as fast as leg warmers. The millennials at work flirted in the kitchen talking about how awful the fees were at their children’s childcare centres, why they’d decided the kids needed to be taken to the South Island ski slopes rather than Ruapehu, blah blah blah. She tried not to grind her teeth while making an instant coffee. Single parents didn’t consider wasting money on this luxurious holiday shit. She’d often slowed her pace on the last two supermarket aisles on a Tuesday night, waiting for her salary to appear in her bank account just before 7pm so she could go through checkout. But the double-income gap between her and them wasn’t the worst thing. That was what it was.

Invisibility was the clincher.

When you’d found a way to cope with unwanted male attention for decades, it was a shock to realise one day that it had evaporated overnight. No warning. Knew she was leaving

the confines of the breeding years. She chuckled, imagining an old ewe gapping it through the wire fence up in the hills in Mangaweka, near the bushline. Sees the stock truck pull up through its horizontal pupils, bound for the meatworks and thinks, *nup, I'm outta here.*

'God, we're basically treated like stock,' she muttered to herself. A balding bearded man-in-puffer-jacket, taking one stride for her every two, passed her coming down the hill. He overheard her mutterings and shot her a frown. She sighed and trudged on, remembering her grandfather's funeral. Overhearing her uncle and his neighbour, two farmers, sons of sons of Scots colonial settlers, at the wake/aftermatch function. They were talking about her, 23 at the time.

'And it's people like her who should be breeding.' The neighbour pointed at her with his glass. *They're talking about me.* She walked straight over.

'Were you saying I should have kids?' They looked embarrassed. She wasn't. 'It's all right. I know what you're saying.' They both dropped their shoulders and started to drain their gins. She smiled at them. 'I'd be a good broodmare.' Her uncle choked on his mouthful.

'Yeah, it's just....' and on they went with their selective breeding programme of the New Zealand Pāhekā population. She wasn't listening. But she did feel the power of her apparently wellbred uterus.

Thing was she didn't feel attached to her uterus anymore. It'd given her nothing but grief over the past year until she'd finally agreed to a Mirena. She'd had her kids, done her bit to please the farmers. It was a malfunctioning botherance these days. Its redundancy was her redundancy. She thought about the gynecologist inserting the Mirena a few months back.

'Urrghhh, I remember that pain,' she'd remarked to the nurse assisting as her cervix was opened. The nurse gave her the childbirth-memory nod. The doctor looked up, surprised.

'It hurts?'

*Oh for fuck's sake,* she thought looking down at him from the weird obstetric throne she sat on, wondering why any male physician would think themselves qualified for this gig.

She didn't want to feel surplus, some historic church no-one prayed in anymore. She was fine being single, had her Jack Russell, Roger for unconditional love. And of course her kids, although their needs in these teenage years were more sporadic and entertaining, than draining. She didn't want to feel desired. That made her feel gross. Human bodies had become repulsive to her with their disappointing honesty, their public adherence to the rules of time and their allergies to human stupidity. Her most recent sexual experiences had been such epic disappointments, she couldn't bear the sight of one more naked body, sweating and

messing up her clean sheets. Couldn't people just be decent and non-manipulative? That was all. Her graduation from the University of Fertility coincided with her belief that she was now never going to meet anyone as there were no nice, normal, un-fucked-up single men left. She'd tried online dating for five minutes once. The man who first made unsolicited contact couldn't spell or punctuate and told her in his message that he wouldn't even mind if she needed someone to listen when she talked. Wow. Thankyou for advance permission to speak. Fail. She'd dated others in person a few times. Also fails. She knew if she was dumber and less picky (didn't mind not being listened to, didn't mind having no thoughts or opinions of her own, didn't mind them telling her their recycled funny stories over and over but never asking her one question about who she was) she might have scored herself a nice flabby tradie. Harsh.

'So here I am.' She unlocked the front door 'a hormone-free, free-range chicken.' She dumped her bags and walked into the kitchen.

'Hi Mummmm,' Alex called out, his voice dropping a little further into his sixteen-year-old boots each day. He was messing up the bench making a post-school smoothie.

'Helloooo,' she gave his overgrown grecian curls a tousle.

'Howzyourday?' He had the resonance of a foghorn.

'Fine.'

'You sure?' Alex liked to play counsellor. It was his act of love.

'Yep.'

'You sure sure?'

'Yes darling child. Fine.'

'You say it but...'

'Alex.'

'Sorry, sorry. Can Callum come stay this weekend?'

'Course.'

'Thanks.' Alex, realising he'd dribbled blueberry banana smoothie across the bench paused to suck it up.

'Alex!'

'Didn't want it to go to waste! That's what you always say.' He thundered off downstairs to his bedroom. She wiped the smears off the bench and watched the wind through the kitchen window. It was roughing up the star magnolia blossoms in the fading light. She checked the fridge, hopeful for leftovers from last night's dinner but the kids had downed them already. The freezer kindly revealed a packet of sausages that would defrost

pretty quick. She sighed and got on with the rest of the meal for the kids. She was catching up with her old friend Minka tonight but needed to leave the kids something to eat before she went out. She tried to spiral the potato peel but gave up in impatience, reverting to her usual blunt downward jabs, rotating the potato, a little boggly globe, between her fingers. She could spiral orange peels no worries, but never spuds. Her mother had always prepared an orange that way in her school lunches. A party trick to casually pull out in the playground.

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‘Oxytocin beer goggles.’

‘Eh?’

‘That’s what I call it.’ Minka waved her fork like a conductor’s baton. The two friends were sitting in a Turkish restaurant that night, catching up. The place was busy and they’d secured a corner spot where russet cushions lined the wall making the women feel they could sit cosily for hours. ‘That’s what’s happened. Your oxytocin beer goggles have...evaporated.’ The two old friends burst out laughing and the young couple at the next table stared at each other and smothered smirks. Minka looked directly at them, daring. They saw her and shrunk behind their phone screens.

‘And now I can see the world in all its stupidity?’ She chased an olive around her plate.

‘Sorry and yes and sorry,’ Minka had such an efficient way with words.

‘Do you suppose this is how those people who left Gloriavale felt? About their religion, I mean?’

‘Yes, yes, epiphany is as epiphany does. Religion, sex, racism, all the ignorances. It’s all about who’s got the power and control. Who has privilege.’ Minka took a mouthful of her Lamb Iskender.

‘It’s like talking to the Dalai Lama, talking with you.’ She imagined Minka in red robes and sandals, stomping around, spreading enlightenment.

‘Did you know his name means ‘ocean of wisdom’?’

‘See?!’

‘I don’t think I’d go that far, I’m more of a duckpond.’ Minka’s eyes closed in mirth and chuckled as the waiter offered them more wine.

‘So where to now?’ She paused before taking a sip of her water.

‘What do you mean?’ Minka rested her chin in a hand.

‘What do I do next? I need to refocus. Reinvent. Do something different, release all my hopes and dreams out into the world, save the planet, save myself, go work somewhere else, some town in the wops, rebirth or something.’

‘You plan to drag your kids to live in Taihape and become a hippie?’ Minka was doing that what-the-hell face.

‘I’ve got cousins there. They’re not hippies though.’ She thought of her farmer cousins, quad bike riders, competitive dog trialists.

‘You’d be bored.’

‘I know, I know. But think of the real estate. I could get a goat.’

‘A goat.’

‘Well anyway, you know I won’t up sticks. I don’t want to mess the kids’ lives up.’

‘Course not. So what are you going to do?’

‘I need to be meaningful and intentional in how I live my life. God I sound like Oprah. Experimental, I mean.’ She wanted her thoughts to sound so much better than this.

‘Experimental?’ Minka raised an eyebrow.

‘Yes.’

‘You’re going to try to look younger aren’t you.’

‘That wouldn’t be an experiment, that would just be acting like every other woman.’

‘I know! You’re going to *act* younger then, get hipster.’ Minka eyed the phone couple.

‘Oh bugger off, Minka.’

‘Come on then, hit me with it. Experimental how? This is exciting! I sense I am pushing you to the edge of your thoughts! This is awesome.’ They both felt a little giddy and each secretly wondered if it was the wine talking.

‘I want to live audaciously! Sorry, that sounds wanky.’ She stopped and frowned.

‘Don’t self-edit now! You’re on a roll! Keep going! You can apologise later!!’

‘Ok, ok! Well...if procreation was my former worth, what’s my current and future worth? Please don’t say nothing,’ she concentrated on forking her last falafel.

‘Of course I’m not going to say nothing! You’re talking about me and every other woman our age.’

‘You know, I don’t think the world has the faintest clue what worth we women over the halfway mark have.’ She leaned forward and lowered her voice. ‘Imagine the world functioning without us.’

‘It’d fall apart by morning tea.’ Minka slammed her hand on the table. ‘Seriously! If all women 40 plus around the world rescinded their responsibilities for just one freaking day...’

‘Imagine if that happened.’ She felt electric.

‘Wassail to that!’ Minka raised her glass. ‘I think we may have struck a faultline.’ She twiddled her fork. ‘Our key word is *procreation*, meaning in favour of creation. Sure. I’ll take the creation part and run with it. Then what to do with the pro part?’

‘Kick it into touch,’ Minka grinned. ‘Joking. Add it to ‘test’.’

‘Eh? So...create and pro-test? You mean call shit out, creatively, anti-oblivion?’

‘Yes! Rage, rage, against the dying of the night. What shit would you call out?’

Minka was game for this but the call-to-arms was sounding bigger by the minute.

‘All of it. It’s dying of the *light*, good old Dylan.’

‘Oh yeah, light. There’s a lot of shit girl, the to-do list will be long.’

‘Yeah. I know,’ she sighed. Minka looked at her, glass paused halfway to her mouth.

‘You’re talking about a quiet revolution?’

‘Yeah.’ She stared out the window at the darkening night. The street stood momentarily still under the greasy haze of the street lights, the spell broken by the next surge of traffic, all accelerating urgently to their next destination.

‘What do other women do when they feel like this?’

‘They yarn bomb trees.’ Both roared with laughter. The waiter looked up from polishing glasses behind the counter. He smiled and picked up the dessert menus, heading their way.

‘I love that stuff! Why the hell not? Did you know some people complain it’s a waste of perfectly good wool?’

‘Of course it is but who the hell cares, it’s not like there’s a shortage. Typical though, women go do something quirky and fun and the knives get pulled.’

‘Political textiles!’

‘Xactly.’

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She lay in bed the next morning, listening to a winter storm front pass, wrapping its windy gusts around the balcony, rearranging the drying racks into a contortion of pick-up-sticks. Minka had had that gleam in her eye the night before which always energised. It was what had made them friends in the sandpit back at playcentre when their kids were small. Now she stared at the growing light bleeding into her room and wished a clear-sighted angel

of epiphany would land with a thud at the end of her bed to give directions. She plumped up her pillows and sat up in bed to make a list.

#### Epiphany plan - draft one

1. Non-young women should be celebrated
2. Things should be more colourful
3. I want the world to function!
4. Our voice needs to be heard
5. We get all women over 40 to down tools for one entire 24-hour period and see how the world likes it.

‘There, done.’ She told her bed-hair self in the mirror. ‘Easy.’

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It was all very well feeling evangelical about change but meanwhile life rumbled on. Shower floors got filthy, kids had hockey training, work had one thousand petty demands on her time that came home with her every evening. The veges needed tossing out from the vege drawer. The milk ran out. The laundry drainpipe clogged with crap and next time she did the washing, the drainage pipe off the machine overflowed and soaked the potato sack and seeped under the ironing board. Bloody hell. She posted online to ask all the women she knew what they were doing to keep their mojo bobbing along. The results were predictable: I’m on this amazing new diet, it uses psychology, I’ve lost 4 kilos already! I’m training for an off-road half marathon. Trail running is so good for you. I’m going to a counsellor but please don’t tell anyone. I’ve just had my eyebrows tattooed on permanently. I just got a huge promotion at work so I’m sooo busy. I’ve just got a cleaner. I love it. And on and on until their achievements stacked up like the pile of unread mags on the coffee table. They were all joining things and doing stuff and being so *productive*. She posted again:

Calling all Women I know: Imagine if we all made the world listen to our voices for a change. I propose we spread the word and make 1 August a radical day of change for women all over the world. Let us down tools with all the things we do in our lives for once and say no, we are having the day off! Let’s make the world see how valuable we are to society. Can we do it girls?! Yes we can...

The response was pretty disappointing.

‘Hiya, so sorry, we’ll be away at a family reunion on that day. Would love to support your cause but...’

‘Oh Yes! Go you!’

‘Ummm, yeah I’m kinda working that day LOLLOL. Gotta pay the bills luvvy  
xxxx’

‘Is this a Wimmin’s thing? Hahahaha luv u Aunty xoxoxo’

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She took Roger for a walk that weekend to visit her Aunty Bea. They sat in her glassed-in sunporch, drinking tea and observing the windchimes sound gentle erratic notes in the bare-limbed cherry trees. The branches were loaded with tight spring buds, waiting for the signal. Roger snored on the rug, twitching his paws at imaginary prey. She looked at her elderly aunt, admiring how time had softened her features. What must it be like to have seen the world turn its mad dance for so long?

‘How did you feel when your hair started to go grey, Bea?’

‘I thought about dyeing it but Col said I should ‘grow old gracefully’,’ Bea pulled down the sides of her mouth.

‘How did that make you feel?’

‘Oh well, I don’t know. I didn’t get too het up about it. Had other things to worry about.’ Bea offered the biscuit plate.

‘I just feel like the world takes women for a ride. The older we get the more we’re ignored.’

‘Acch.’ Bea sounded the remnant note of her Celtic ancestors. ‘You just have to make peace with all the nonsense. Do the things that make you happy. Look after yourself. Ignore the rubbish.’

‘But it feels so passive.’

‘If the world’s going to ignore us, we can ignore it right back. If it needs us we will, probably, respond. Meanwhile, if everyone thinks they’re hunky dorey, good. I’m off to enjoy my bridge, have my friends over for lunch and make my quilts. You have a big job raising your kids single-handedly and working full time. That’s nothing to be sneezed at. Look after yourself. Have fun!’ She leaned forwards and put her hand on her niece’s arm. ‘I know the world’s an unfair place. It always has been. But as time passes, life gives you back yourself. You get to be more of who you are inside. It’s a great gift.’ Bea smiled. ‘Do the things that bring maximum joy as often as you can get away with it. Subversive Joy Gathering. S.J.G.’

‘Sounds *underground*.’

‘It is! Right now, in unsuspecting garden centre cafes country-wide, women with grey hair are gathering...’

‘Viva la revolution!’ She held her mug of tea aloft. Roger scratched his belly and rolled over.

## Passing Lane

Wind flattens the long grass, stretching paths of white blur through the brown, soon to be cut for hay. A brown field. A green maize crop beyond it. Then stands of macrocarpa and a slow rise of pines take over the soft hills. Willows and poplars punctuate the low rolling landscape to the east. A vineyard scrapes a pattern of long green lines across the undulations. The lines curve gradually around to the left. A slow ship's turn.

I am followed by my sister's red car, containing her and Mum. Mum likes to be behind us so she knows just where we are. Otherwise she frets. In the passenger seat beside me is my youngest child. The kids rotate daily, discussing or yelling about who's turn it is while we all pack the cars each morning at the latest motel.

I have taken my kids from Cape Reinga to Bluff on road trips. One every summer for eight or nine years in a row now. This summer we do a wobbly diamond flight path across Te Ika a Maui directed by certain roads we've decided we must drive.

Wairarapa's turn today. I want to feel connected to this region, Dad came from here. As a teenager, I had this kiwi gothic, Vincent Ward vibe from the Wairarapa. Must've been the collision of galloping adolescence and Vigil in my 1984 mind. God it is hard to shake the formative years template. I would look at the heavy grey sky, the blue moss whiskering the totara fence posts, bleak sheep standing sideways on hills, an uncertain looking mud crusted ute bobbling along through a paddock by the road and feel a disconnect between myself and this place.

I didn't want that.

I want to feel like I could live here. A welcome note played on the magpie's call. But I couldn't even pretend such a feeling existed.

We drive through the tiny town our father grew up in. Most shops are long closed. A few have reopened as cafes and one is a curious cross between an antique store and a two-dollar shop. S'pose that covers all the bases. These were thriving little market towns once, with little dairy factories and multiple banks. Now the nearest bank is at least an hour away. We cross the quiet railway line to go drive past the old house. I never stayed here as my grandparents had left before I was born. It is a big boned old homestead. Everything seems built on a larger scale than normal, so maybe once the original owner was tall or had tall ambitions for this little town. The front garden trees are all still there according to Mum and my sister. The monkey puzzle. The rhododendrons. Their eyes grow memory heavy.

I can only imagine.

Now we pause at our Grandparents' grave. It is a soldier's cemetery and finding its unsignposted location is dependent on Mum's muscle memory of where to turn off.

My kids have never visited a soldier's cemetery before so they are quite taken with the uniformity. How strangely pleasing to the eye to stand and observe diagonal patterns of perfect headstones. Such a quiet place.

A council worker is there weed eating edges and mowing. He nods approval at visitors. Knows he doesn't know us. Not locals. I step towards him to explain why we're here. And to admire the care and attention he is giving his work.

'They gave a lot to this country. They deserve it to look nice.' He smiles looking away down the rows and rests his arm on the handle of his implement.

We find our Grandfather's grave and note the later addition of our Grandmother's name. Wives had later permission to be buried with their soldier husbands. We say a few words to them both and the kids grow awkward at their mother, aunty and grandmother speaking to a piece of granite. They shift their feet, scuffing the dry grass and look away over the surrounding paddocks.

Later we drive over the Remutaka range. I tell the kids how the soldiers walked this long, steep, windswept, winding road from Featherston military camp to Trentham and on to waiting ships in Wellington. From this dramatic landscape our grandfather went to Egypt in World War One, like so many others. I think on how he returned to live through an Influenza Pandemic, the Great Depression another World War. Historical events to me and the kids, imaginings. Life for him.

## Honest

She wrote down all the excuses men had given her over the years why she should have a relationship with them or why they were backing out of a relationship with her:

And how does it feel to be made from Adam's rib? (WTF?)

And if I'm being completely honest with you, I do have herpes but it's easily cleaned up with acyclovir... (Ah. He speaks the drunken truth.)

We lead separate lives. (AKA comfortably in a long term relationship and wants one-off sex to satisfy an urge or possibly a long term affair, either is fine with him.)

Our relationship has been on the rocks for years. (Code for I haven't left my wife nor do I intend to.)

I'm feeling overwhelmed. (He hasn't thought this through. No, be straight up. He's a dick.)

I think I have feelings for... (Meaning, I don't have feelings for you, I'm on to the next good thing.)

But she's in love with... (He never actually told me he liked me, so now he's talking about me in the third person in front of me, expecting that I'm probably still not paying any attention.)

But I still love you. (Translation: I am lazy.)

I was really interested in you back then. (Never did anything about it, apart from tell me now.)

Ahhh...because you're beautiful. (Look on his face reads like duh. What. There is more to you than your body. Oh. Oh yeah. I hadn't thought of that.)

Do you know you, sitting here beside the river, you're a work of art? (You mean, let's have sex.)

My life has affected my mental health. (What you're saying is I'll be a temporary distraction that you can pretend never happened when you carry on with changing nothing.)

I have come to a decision. (You mean it doesn't matter what I think. As long as you have decided, we are set.)

I want to grow old with you. (Read: I want you to be my nurse.)

I always wondered what happened to you. (Why? To exercise your fantasy and have a one night stand with me?)

'How *are* you?' (Not knocked up I hope, is what you're really saying.)

‘And they wondered why I’d given up,’ she muttered to herself. How many lovely things had been said?

And if she was honest back?

- You are at least straight up. I know you are just being opportunistic.
- You are treating me like your friend’s offcast. It was your friend I liked, not you.
- Can’t you just be ballsy and say I’m not into this anymore?
- You’re only playing games.
- Your girlfriend is through the wall. What the hell.
- What? You feel more like a bro. I hadn’t seen this in you.
- You really are lazy, aren’t you?
- You are a raving liar. I am so duped.
- You are so shy, I am pained.
- You’re dreaming. I am not interested AT all.
- You are full-noise weird. How did I miss this?
- You are wimping out? Oh for God’s sake.

## Journey

And we're off. Middle child plays *The Raiders March* as we exit the city. Roadworks seem to have been here forever and re-route us on another temporary road. He has decided that if we go on a long car trip, it must start with John William's-style pomp. Is this my fault for making him learn the cornet? We all dum-da-dum along and imagine we are Indiana Jones off to Egypt or the Amazon. Pyramid to your left? Aztec ruin to your right? Nah, just Tamahere Eventide Rest Home. I can smell the boiled cabbage from here. Why do those places always smell of boiled cabbage? The music waaaaas on and we've all had enough after five minutes.

'Waddyawanna listen to now?' Middle child is taking requests. The kids debate whether it's likely I will like or tolerate Minecraft music. They decide no and instead suddenly we're listening to *Little Bitty Pretty One*. God knows how the algorithms threw that old one at a teenage boy's playlist. The song finishes and there is a pause.

'Maaaamm.''

The tone of this tells me something's up.

'Wot.'

Silence.

'Wot?'

'Look in the mirror,' says eldest child.

I look.

'You *didn't*.'

'He did!' Eldest child is triumphant and points at middle child.

'Bloody hell.'

Laughter bursts out of the three of them. They love it when they get me like this. Every summer I take my three kids on a roadtrip. Every bloody year, one of them smuggles this ridiculous book along for the trip. God knows why it's that one: *Guns and how they work*. Some shitty 1980s teenage boy idyll. None of them ever even look at the huge hardcover horror. They love that it drives me batty taking up space so it's now become a running joke that I take it out and try to leave it in the garage and they sneak it back in when I am distracted by the chilly bin. The car is packed to the gunwales as it is. This is always my argument. They always dismiss this reasoning and shove the book under a seat. I suppose it could be worse. I did once buy a giant glazed terracotta pot on day one of a trip up north which the kids then had to spend the next 10 days nestling against, on the back seat. I called him Boris.

The road yaws and stretches the distance between Tokoroa and Taupō more than I would like. The dark silence of the pine forests lining State Highway One sits at the periphery of my driver's vision. Full of the mournful past. Of men who planted the first trees here during the Public Works Schemes of the Great Depression. I suppose their first bitter plantings were milled long ago and now hold together the internal walls of state houses in Glenn Innes. Those houses are now being removed and barged north to the Bay of Islands. House on a boat. In the Bay of Islands I suppose they will be gentrified into fantasy country cottages for Aucklanders' weekend getaways. Or perhaps they will get reborn as sturdy family homes. I think of the Depression men and wonder what they would make of all this, what their sweat became. I imagine them, pint in hand, shaking their heads and turning to each other, their fellow cobbers from the Wellington Mounted Rifles. Their thoughts would turn to the War, the awfulness that they knew only each other understood. Then to return from such carnage and bloody wind up broke a decade later. Given a soldier's settlement farm so remote and rough that you'd had to walk off the land and wind up sharing a tent in the middle of the King Country with a snivelling townie who didn't even go to the Great War because he was 'sick'. Some days you just wanted to knock him flat. I grip the steering wheel tighter.

Travel is measured around loo breaks which usually matches how long I can concentrate for. Bladder brain. I like driving straight to Taupō and making that Stop Number One so I feel like I am making progress on the day's journey to the capital. Everyone else has the same idea at Wairakei and I can't even queue for petrol. I circle the petrol station twice looking for an angle in but give up and park the car. Morning tea first, petrol second, I tell the kids. None of them even look up. They all have ears on listening to downloads of whatever. *Actually Mum*, my eldest patronises, *I have downloaded two dystopian classics that I want to get read*. I don't know how I feel about Brave New World entering his consciousness via an audiobook. Something about that is creepy.

Wairakei BP is all brisk trade inside. Rather than harried, the two women on the tills look relieved. The relationship between overwork versus paying the rent has ploughed furrows across their brows and they've both given up the luxury-farce of hair dye. I can tell their knees are aching even though it's only 11.30am by the ginger steps taken left and right along the counter. Coffee machine to till to pie warmer to till to cigarette cupboard to till.

The man in front of me has truck-driver posture. Early sixties, he's comfortable with the drill and knows to ask for a flat white and a muffin. My brain thinks he looks like he'd much prefer a cup of tea and a pie but I'm the one out of date by thirty years. By the time I'm

up at the counter my body has skittered and doesn't want to stand here and I go for a cold drink instead of a coffee and no food because I think it's me who probably wants the cup of tea and a pie. I am afraid of pies.

It's my turn and my easy order seems a relief to the woman serving me. The kids pile the counter with their choices and she smiles in recognition.

Hungry mouths...

Yup.

By the time I leave it's *thanks luvvy, you have a nice day*.

Sorting the kids to have morning tea at an abandoned picnic table, I take the car back around to try and fill up. At least there is room to manoeuvre this time and I line up behind a vehicle with no driver, hopeful this means they're inside paying. The couple next to me have just inched up to the pump. He wears a hipster straw trilby and Hawaiian shirt. A tattoo encircles his pale right upper forearm and he moves with such unhurried slowness that I start to feel tense. He looks physically capable of more efficient haste. Perfectly capable but he seems to want to experience fully every movement, every motion. I chide myself for being so judgemental. I don't know his story. Maybe he has health issues. He sets the car to fill and begins to clean the front windscreen and then the back. His travelling companion disappears inside. She also takes her time. Wherever they are going, they are in no rush to reach their destination. I check to see if a car has pulled up behind them. I wonder if I could ever move without a sense of the clock ticking. What would it feel like to take as long as possible over the mundanities of getting petrol? I'm just not built that way. I live in fear of holding up strangers who aren't even queuing behind me.

It is a relief to be able to take the Taupō bypass. That is my goal this holiday, to stop at the quieter places, the unfashionable. I ask myself *why* as I pass an old caravan being towed too fast by a new double cab ute. The old caravan is swaying side to side ever so slightly. I wish the driver would go more carefully. I feel better being in front of him rather than behind. Aren't towed vehicles supposed to go slower? I feel certain the elders of the young man behind the wheel would tell him to take it easy, the ute might have the grunt but the caravan is a delicate piece of NZ kitsch. I could never tow a caravan.

I return to my internal unanswered question about where I will choose to stop, I know it isn't because of Covid and crowd avoidance. I just want to lower my baseline. Create more give in the system, more stress elasticity to come and go on. That's what going away on holiday is all about, isn't it? Unwind, destress, decompress, chill out, lax out, stop trying to

chase the completion of tasks, sleep in, slow down, breathe, get a change of scene, revisit, refresh, reinvent. Yeah yeah yeah.

Also I really like small towns. When you live in a city that seems to roar louder with traffic every day, small places look like utopias. I know they aren't really but the illusion holds up long enough for the thirty minutes we are there for. At home if the wind is blowing a certain way, traffic noise can wake me from 4.30am. I reckon it's the tradies of the Waikato all departing for their worksites. Wherever the job is and the pay is rolling in from. Whichever new utopia is needing building.

Next stop is Taihape.

Taihape looked at from certain angles fascinates me. Entering from the south on a good day, you can round the corner, past the cemetery, to be stunned by the town laid out before you, with the theatrical backdrop of Ruapehu, snow against the blue sky. Entering from the north, turning into the main street you know little has changed from what your grandparents would have seen 100 years ago, apart from the Maccas. Standing on the main street looking west, the township rises above you, houses dotting the hills, their view out east towards the Ruahines. If you look northwest in a final theatrical illusion of this little place, a dense stand of pristine native bush encroaches, ready to reclaim the town. This could be a description of a dozen other colonial settlements, established for the building of the main trunk line, a highway, a hydro-electric dam.

I feel more relaxed after lunch in Taihape. Either the carbohydrate coma is placating my nerves, I am starting to find my roadtrip rhythm, or my attention paid to the town has shut the self-absorption up. That's the one thing I detest about feeling stressed. The drawing back into this place where you find yourself sitting on your own shoulder giving unsolicited commentary on your status rather than being absorbed by life around you. We criticise distractions and say people are in denial but I've never met a person for whom obsessive self-reflection did them any favours.

The afternoon wears on as the Foxton straights loom and the car wants to speed up, a horse sensing the home stretch. But we still have a fair way to go and a couple of hours yet. Cops are onto it around here. They've been pinging drivers on this road since forever. The wind straight across the Manawatū plains helps me rein in the car as I have to control the buffets and keep Agnes on course. The kids hate that I call my newest car Agnes. The old one is Bessie. Instead of house cows, I have house cars. After all, with two kids at learner licence driver stage, you have to have plenty of wheels. Agnes was originally from a Manawatū car dealership and I wonder if she knows she is home.

We come round a corner and a dead halt of traffic and it's not till we're clear of Ōtaki that I understand that it's not roadworks, nor an accident. It's just Ōtaki. Bottleneck of Horowhenua. Like Huntly once was. Nothing doing, just outlet shops and traffic.

Finally Kāpiti appears to our right and we are on the home stretch to Wellington. The kids get excited and chatter. I need to focus on the motorway and the right lane to be in. I love that sweep out the bottom of the Ngauranga gorge. There she is. Fading sun on the harbour, the city is all lights and defiance. Vertical hills, bush grasps the edges. It's a crazy place for a city.

A movement in the back. Something thuds the window from the inside.

'Whaddya doing?'

'Just showing *Guns and how they work* the view.'

'Put it down!' I order. 'Otherwise they'll know we're from the Tron.'

## Motherhood, Scripted

*Three hockey mums stand in a line in long winter coats, beanies and big umbrellas. They look cold and are all staring, bored, in the same direction. Mum A arrives and joins them.*

Mum A: I was hiding in the car but the rain stopped so I had no more excuses.

Mum B: I wondered if you might appear in a minute.

Mum A: Well I'd rather still be in the car eating chips.

Mum B: I'd rather be at home by the fire, with a *wine* and chips.

Mum A: Ooo, yes lovely.

Mum C: I think your son just scored a goal.

Mum A: Oh God. Did he? I don't think I've actually seen him score a goal in eight years of watching these games.

*Laughter.*

Mum A: Shit. In fact, that might have been his first actual goal in eight years.

*More laughter.*

Mum A: So I'd better make sure I say "what a *great* goal son!"

Mum C: We won't let on.

Mum B: Remember to make it sound convincing.

Mum A: Any tips?

Mum B: It's all in the delivery. You know teenage sons, they only listen to key words.

Mum A & C: Huh?

Mum B: You know, if you said "Oh Adam, that was such a great goal tonight, well done you!" he will only hear "Adam, you."

Mum D: ...and have food ready to distract him with, in case he gets suspicious and starts to interrogate you for details.

Mum C: Excellent plan.

*Silence for a bit.*

Mum A: I'm thinking of that fire. I wish I had a fire at my place. It's not the same huddling round a central heating vent.

Mum B: Bet it heats the house well though?

Mum A: At great expense, yes. Mind you it still costs less to run than the fuel bill for feeding a teenager, especially Mr Sixteen year old.

Mum C: They never stop eating! I've had to find a new place to hide the treat food.

Mum A: I used the vege drawer for years, but they've found it now.

Mum D: I hide it in my bra drawer.

Mum B: I keep it in my wardrobe.

Mum C: My friend got so fed up how fast her son went through the fruit, she gave him his own fruit bowl.

Mum A: Did it work?

Mum C: Hopeless. By day two he was pilfering from the family bowl and moving it into his.

Mum B: I tried the overload approach, they kept eating bananas, so I kept doubling the amount I bought each week.

Mum A: Did it work?

Mum B: They suddenly went off eating them and I was left with a benchful of spotty bananas I had to shove in the freezer. Banana muffins for months.

Mum C: Oh. They scored again.

Mum B: Who got the goal?

Mum C: Dunno.

Mum A: It makes me so happy that you don't know.

Mum C: Cole made me feel guilty that I hadn't watched the last two games.

Mum A: Neither have I! Last week I hid in the car and watched abandoned dog rescue videos on my phone.

Mum B: When does the season end?

Mum A: Three or four more weeks?

Mum B: I won't miss the cold. Oh bugger, here it comes in again. It was raining from the other direction before. Look, the floodlights make it look quite pretty.

Mum A: When I didn't get out of the car straight away tonight, Sam said "You didn't come and watch me in the cross-country in Year 3 either."

Mum C: He's keeping tabs back that far?

Mum A: Apparently, I'm clearly just a failure as a mother (*chuckles*).

*Whistle sounds.*

Mum B: Half time!

Mum C: One-third time.

Mum B: What? Oh yeah, they're playing a game of three-thirds. So confusing.

Mum D: Got your hopes up didn't it?

Mum B: Well, my feet are cold already. Should've worn my boots.

Mum A: Why do they play in thirds?

Mum C: Dunno.

Mum B: It's to torture us with, makes the game drag out longer.

Mum A: That's not the torture. Torture will be driving home with sweaty, rain-soaked boys in the car.

*Collective groan.*

Mum B: The smell!

Mum D: Like wet Labradors.

Mum C: Why didn't I bring Jeff's car?

Mum A: I know, I am grieving my car upholstery, too.

Mum B: Well Tom drove me here in his car, now that he's got his restricted. So the smell will be his problem. He told me off for not cleaning *my* car the other day.

Mum D: Aww, car proud?

Mum B: He is! Cleans it every weekend inside and out.

Mum A: I haven't cleaned mine since I bought it.

Mum C: When was that?

Mum A: It was...I'm too embarrassed to say...

Mum D: Who has time for that?

Mum B: It's way down my priority list, I told Tom he was very welcome to clean it for me and guess what?

Mum C: What?

Mum B: He actually did it!

Mum C: That's so cute. It won't last.

Mum B: He keeps his room tidier than his sister now. Who even is this child?

Mum A: He's growing up.

Mum D: How tall is he now? I'm sure he wasn't that tall last week? Look at those long legs!

Mum B: I swear, he grows overnight. Every night.

Mum C: Can you believe they were just little fellas not long ago?

*Silence as they wistfully survey their teenage sons.*

Mum D: You know, this is my social life now.

Mum B: Oh yes! Me too.

Mum C: Work, hockey, groceries, that's my life. And I'd get rid of the groceries if I could.

Mum A: I hate shopping in all forms.

Mum C: Home grocery delivery, love it.

Mum A: I'm too scared they'll give me the wrong teabags. I can't stand the wrong teabags.

Mum D: All I want to do is stay home with a book and a cuppa.

Mum A: Sounds divine.

Mum B: And our kids think we're boring.

*Laughter.*

Mum A: I love boring.

Mum C: Boring is the best.

Mum B: I do love seeing them play though.

Mum A: Oh me too.

Mum C: Me too.

Mother D: We'd hate it if we couldn't stand here and freeze.

Mum A: Yeah.

*All nod.*

## Discuss

- What was his house like?
- There was a poster in the entranceway. (*That'll have to go.*)
- Of what? (*This sounds terrible already.*)
- A band I've never heard of. (*I don't know. It was old and ugly. The corners were curling up and the grey and black image was a sludge. I would only put it up in the garage. Under duress.*)
- Mmm. (*Sounds like a student flat.*) How big is the foyer? (*This'll indicate whether I should support or diss the guy already.*)
- He said he'd had it remodelled. It was dark and he'd got a skylight put in.
- Oh yeah. (*Potential.*) What's the house clad in?
- Brick. A pretty ordinary red. (*A boring naff red.*)
- Low maintenance. (*Conservative, dull.*) The roof?
- Umm, colour steel. I think. (*I barely looked.*)
- Aha. (*Conservative, dull.*) What about the kitchen?
- It's...all right. (*Just a kitchen, pretty blah and lifeless. I am thinking of the disappointment I felt at the reality compared to the real estate photos I found online from when it was last on the market, when he must have bought it.*)
- All right? (*I need more than this.*) What do you mean?
- Well it's fully functional and modern. Just not lived in.
- Does he cook? (*Uh oh.*)
- Yes. (*Does he?*) I think so. (*Shit, I don't know.*)
- What about the living areas? (*We'll have to let the kitchen go for now although I am not happy with it.*)
- There are two. One off the kitchen area and another is a separate room off that. (*They were awful.*)
- What are they like? (*She doesn't look impressed. I see no stars in her eyes.*)
- Fine. (*Really, not.*)
- Fine? (*She's holding back.*)
- One had a drying rack in it. (*I hate drying racks inside so much.*)
- Oh. (*Dear.*)
- Yeaass. Both rooms had couches and TVs. (*And no joi de vivre.*)
- Anything else? (*Sounds like a student flat.*)
- One had a bookshelf, with no books. (*I shouldn't have told her that.*)

- What was on the shelves then? (*I should've tried not to narrow my eyes but too late.*)
- Photos...stuff...(*I only remember photos and no books.*) The other bookshelf in the other room was full of DVDs. (*Of blockbusters, of middle of the road, unthinking, mass consumerism trash.*)
- An AV room? (*He doesn't read does he.*)
- 'Suppose so. (*I will go mad if I have to sit and watch five minutes of those shitty movies.*)
- How many bedrooms? (*I'm bored now.*)
- Three? Four? (*I haven't got that far yet.*)
- Bathrooms? (*Yawn.*)
- Two I suppose. (*Can she stop now.*)
- And a garage. (*Yawn, yawn.*)
- Yep. (*Two actually.*)
- And a big garden? (*She's screwed anyway, he has no books.*)
- Yep. (*Huge, overgrown, unkempt, it would break my back to bring to life.*)
- But he has no books. (*Let's get back to the problem, no point pretending.*)
- Not that I saw. (*He doesn't. I checked.*)
- Well then.
- Mmmm. (*I can't live in a house with no books. Although there are times when the choice would not be mine, cue apocalyptic options. I can't live in a house with no books. I can live in a pickle, for a while, but I can't live in a house with no books.*)
- So.
- Yeah. (*I can't live in a house with no books, I can't live in a house with no books, I can't live in a house with no books, I can't live in a house with no books, I can't live in a house with no books, I can't live in a house with no books, I can't live in a house with no books, I can't live in a house with no books. I just can't.*)
- Oh well, see how it goes. (*It won't, must make a note in diary. It'll be over in a fortnight, book in a dinner now, she'll need cheering up.*)
- Yeah. (*I can't live in a house with no books.*)

## Untitled DNA Dreamscape

Things in her DNA: Fine bone china. Sacred music sung a capella in a Cathedral. Bird song and wind. Good literature (no trash to be suffered). Small talk to warm the room. Nothing Pacific (which seems absurd). Nothing European (also absurd). Multi-lingualism. Strong dislike for liars and an excellent gut instinct, ignored at one's peril. A steely focus and determination that no-one has the measure of. Ginger loaf. Comfort by the sea, and the potential for travel (surprisingly relaxed). Likes Germany, France, Italy but not the Netherlands (sorry). Has read most unexpected tedious things.

Speaks silent family tree to those around her.

Also in her DNA, just realised: Diplomacy (mostly). An enthusiasm for photos of ornate bridges. Green linen curtains either side of tall french doors, open. A clipped oval lawn memory, round and round on a bike with no brakes. Penguin nests, A&P showgrounds and summer dust animal manure. A radio. Phillip Glass Etude No 2. A place for everything and there's too much everything. Not enough forest though. Need the forest inside me and around me and what else can heal and love like that?

And did you know that a trauma can rewrite DNA so that it's there, latent. So don't catch yourself thinking I didn't hear. Part of me is always listening. The mind sets itself to work the undercurrents. The sky is never empty. Karioi. Karori. Both important.

What kind of mantra prepares for the worst but hopes for the best? A sensible one, not to be mistaken for negativity. A pinecone opens. In his photo does he know that one hundred years later I long to understand?

## Friday Night Vignettes

Arrives unsmiling, pulling his mouth down to force a small frown to burrow between eyebrows. I wonder at the facials. They feel a little forced. Everyone else has shed the working week, sitting shaggy and slumped in front of their pints. He, by way of dissociation from the circle, wears his suit jacket over today's now tieless business shirt, top button released.

Nods his greetings and pulls up a chair with a ginger beer. Life's tough, I think, when you're one of the bosses and you feel you have to stick to a soft drink. I don't feel sorry for him of course, his salary is probably double mine, one of the proles. This thought gives me the urge I need to depart. Mustn't waste another dollar. He can arrive fashionably late and I can leave any old time.

Like right now.

The pub has filled up since I arrived and made a beeline for the beer garden with my colleagues. The inside is now full of gaggles of hi-viz tradies and emasculated office workers who seem shocked that a woman dares to walk amongst them. Each of their thoughts is a silent cartoon speech bubble above their head as they turn to stare.

*Oi.*

*Wot are you doing here.*

*Are you one of the boys or are you not.*

*I don't know you.*

*I know you don't I.*

*I don't know myself.*

I take in the room, freezeframed as I zigzag toward the exit. I try not to stare back at them and their speech bubble thoughts, here for a final hit of mateship before the fam calls them home. Do they want to go home? Does home feel theirs or the pub more so. Or are they building up a tension, a longing, to get home to the loving arms of partner/kids/or the parents they still live with. They seem in suspended animation. The friday feel, the weekend stretching out in front.

I make it to the front door and to my surprise a sixpack of ladies are crammed together at a picnic table by the entrance. What is this gender apartheid crap, I wonder to myself as I fish-step through the traffic to my car. I'm ready for the leaf-blown oxygen of this evening's autumn street. It's busy and buzzy. People flash smiles a little more freely, drive a little faster, talk a little louder. The plane trees are shedding their dinner plate leaves and the

street lights are sparking their radiance off the shop fronts. The sun's almost gone and dusk light softens the world.

I gun it for the sanctuary of home, free of this ridiculous bleak tension. I'm not getting any on Friday night and I don't even care. OK. Yes I do care. But Epiphany wasn't waiting for me at the pub. What am I talking about? Epiphany, pah. I mean Orgasm. I drive into my garage and feel bad that I judged all those hi-viz guys so harshly. They're not exactly doing apprenticeships in the Emotions.

It's a lot of pressure, leaning on a staunch elbow.

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Recent, at a party. Pissheads the lot of them. Even the posh ones. The party sprawled between the low slung house, its wide generous front deck and a marquee on the front lawn. It's always awkward being a single female at parties. Makes me wary. The married women default to a vague interest in conversation driven by a defensiveness they're not even aware blankets their actions. Secretly paranoid you might have a crack at their crusty husbands. The married men smugly flirt knowing it'll result in enraged reclaim-the-night shagging when they get home.

The single men aren't any fun tonight. They're either leering arse-grabbers or mute, terrified hermits. Where the hell is the middle of the boy bell curve? Not at this party. I give up and go talk to the ancient ones inside.

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'Nother party. A why-the-hell-do-I-do-this-to-myself kind of a party. The kind where all conversations are chux-cloth-on-formica-table level interesting. Phatic communion is good and all but where is the next step into something of depth. Like life.

The most interesting convo turns out to be with a guy whose partner is across the room. I had misidentified her as his daughter (oops). He is asking whether I think putting your children first in a relationship, is unreasonable. I look over at her and her tall curved back, youthful thighs, head cocked to one side to flatter the sleek bob. She is not the mother of his children. She is not the mother of any children. I wonder if he is aware that he will soon be the father of her children. Round two buddy. Remember those newborn months? The sleeted exhaustion, the crippling demands? Her uterus wompfs its silent signal. He seems to be unaware.

I hear it like saucepan clatter.

## Reframe

She stared past her laptop screen full of unanswered emails. Every unused watercolour pencil in her collection stared straight back. They clustered in a squat glass vase shoved at the back of her desk. Crisp orange necked earth brown. Hot pink looked down on dowdy plum, lime green impatiently sharp and iris blue overworked and underpaid. Meandering electronic music, the sort used to pacify beautician's clients and kids playing Minecraft, swirled the air in her room. It grated her nerves despite having chosen it herself. That old Buddhist dude online with the unpronounceable name Tict Nacht whatshisface, had today said: Meditate anytime. Anything, anywhere, can be a meditation.

'Even closing curtains?' She asked the sky as she got up from the work desk she slaved at every evening, doing more work which, she realised, made the term 'after work' seem like an obsolete archaism. She pulled one silvery curtain across, then the other. The leaf imprint on the satin curtain rippled a maybe in answer to her question and she moved around the house, continuing to shut curtains to keep the little warmth left. Sometimes the weirdness of dusk freaked her with its certain purgatory. She stomped one room to the next, a grief-walk for the day gone.

*Godsake, shake it off, she thought. Yes the day is gone, and that second and oops, yes, that one too. Life is not made watching time slip, unmoored. That's nihilism on toast.*

Unexpectedly, an image of her first high school English teacher formed in her head. Couldn't remember her name. British? Graduated bowl haircut which strangely suited her dark straight swinging hair. Sweet patience of a woman, always a sunny disposition. Had made them learn Frost by heart, bless her. She died young. She remembered finding this out decades later and how vicious of the world it seemed to not let her see an old age of book clubs and travel to RLS's Samoan gravesite, Heidi's Swiss Alps, the reconstructed Globe nudging the Thames.

*Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,/and sorry I could not travel both/and be one traveller, long I stood.* Tears welled, forcing a stop to her silent recitation. Edwards. Ms Edwards. Shit, would one of her own students do this in fifty years? Be unable to conjure her own name?

How idiotic we must have looked to our teacher back then, she thought. Thirteen is an inglorious age. Rest-home quality posture, bad hair days everyday, melodramatic yawning and goosey decision-making capacities (I am going to let a sandwich rot in my schoolbag, I am going to crank call the mother of a boy I like, I am going to spit on pedestrians below

from that tiny gap between perspex floor and wall upstairs in McDonalds). Christ, how did anyone like us? Especially a gentle, beauty-loving soul like Ms Edwards.

‘I am stale, that is the problem,’ she told the quiet night. ‘I wish I could play the piano. I wish I could bear to be vegetarian. I wish I could wear swishy skirts and not worry about how I will afford the cost of living as the cost of toilet paper and petrol climb. I want transcended peace, the artist’s sweet spot.’

*Don’t we all daahling*, her alter ego drawled. But all she felt was a pointless stasis of the I-fucking-hate-TV-gameshows variety.

Was this a sinking hormones problem? Most problems in humanity were hormonal. You needed go as far as global politics to have this point proven. Egos driven on testosterone rocketfuel.

She ran a cursory inventory. Career, yep. House, yep. Midlife crisis, yep (divorce). Kids, yep (almost-autonomous digital cyborgs, like all their mates). Hobbies, yeeaaap (lapsed projects littered the lounge, a hand quilted cushion cover in radiating roygbiv, 8 ply aqua hank of corriedale wool that was never going to end up cast on to any knitting needles in her lifetime, needlework cushion half stitched of three pink hibiscus flowers). Health, yep, fair to middling (tennis elbow, tinnitus, shitty eyesight, a liver that was fed up with third glasses of grog). Life was grand.

‘I’ve gotta change something.’ What. My hair (boring, predictable, who cares) my job (dammit I know but the kids) my habits (are you serious, that’s really pushing it).

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‘I’m going to share a poem with you today that means a lot to me.’ She stood in front of her seniors. Try it out on them first, she figured. Groaning. Vomit noise. She knew the culprit.

‘You know, it’s very upsetting for me to hear that kind of response when I spend hundreds of hours preparing lessons for you.’ All the students, apart from vomit-child flinched in recognition. Red flag. Pissy teacher. She read them Frost, giving her best passionate rendition. Silence. One of the already converted offered *Oh Wows* of thanks but hadn’t really been listening. Another asked a polite question. This was no good. They were too young to get what choice meant. How it could push you in a brakeless go-cart down a track for decades, gorse either side.

‘Ok now with the person you’re sitting next to, discuss what you think about the poem.’ The students eyed her, wary of what they’d be expected to do with this next.

‘Then in your groups or pairs, write a response especially to that first line of the poem. I will give you 10 minutes to talk then 20 minutes to write and then it’ll be time for assembly. We will share them next week.’ The students breathed out, relieved. These instructions were code for slap something together, I’m not going to flog you, I am going to leave you to it and maybe come back to this next week.

Or maybe not.

## Machete Dream

She trudges in. A room of people lounging around on pushed together low-back sofas. Weary legs splayed after a day's tramping. Walks straight in and across, aiming for the open door on the other side. It's behind one of the couches where a guy is sitting. She walks straight towards him. *Man. Couch. In the way. Keep going.* Monosyllabic exhaustion. She has a machete in her right hand and she's not stopping for any couch or any man. One booted foot on the seat and she's up and over, about to step out the door and onto the deck of the DOC hut. The body near her stirs to life, leaps up and vaults the couch to meet her.

'Hey! Oh my God.' His unmistakable voice, even after 30 years. The timbre of it kettledrums her diaphragm, pausing its rise. Minute cessation of oxygen. *Him.*

'Hey! How are you? Whatcha doing?'

Turns her head and there he is. Still the boyish grin, now a ravined face. And those eyes. Faded bluegreen, speckled now with tiny brown flecks. Underside of a bird's wing.

'Hey...'

'How are you?' He bends his knees outwards to drop to her eye level, takes her elbows in his hands. 'Ha! I can't believe it!' She can't either but there are strangers around and she has to finish her walk and his joy catches in her throat and hurts. He seems to understand all this before she's even finished thinking it because as she turns to walk, his quiet growl is in her ear.

'I'll walk with you.'

She jigs her pack back onto her hips and starts down the stairs off the deck that wraps itself around the hut.

'What's the goal? Summit?'

'Mm-mmm.' She is knackered from the day's climb. In shock to find him here. Embarrassed at her surliness. Embarrassed at her embarrassment.

'Coming back to sleep at the hut after? Wanna leave your stuff here and do the last bit travelling light?' He's probably already been up and back.

'Well...'. Well, she had been planning on kipping down in one of the communal bunkrooms. 'Yeah. I didn't want to stop till I got to the top. But yeah.' She knows the last bit is super steep, involving ladders and taking her full pack to the top is a stupid idea. She returns to the hut porch and leans her pack up against the wall.

'I can't believe it's you. My first week back in the country, I go bush and of all the tracks...' They're well clear of the hut now. Back in the forest where the path dips down and then up the last saddle before the summit. For so high up, the air is unexpectedly still today.

The distant echo of a waterfall sounds its hush. The trees here grow stunted, human height. Toughened to particular angles shaped by prevailing winds. Leaves grip the branches hard.

She stops. Hands on hips. Trying to garner strength from her stance to not mind that he will surely soon notice she's not the girl remembered in that head of his. Can't he see she's a sweat-drenched packhorse who's stomped her way up the mountain on her bloody own.

He stills himself. Feels her take him all in. Greying temples, receding hairline. Month's worth of beard. The old middle age spread. And she. Grey hair now. Still long. Silvery tendrils escaping a sunset sky coloured headscarf. Flushed cheeks, skin so smooth that he remembers wanting to run his thumb over her cheekbone once.

'You're just the same.'

'Pffft.' She raises her right eyebrow. Those one liners.

'You are! What's with the machete?'

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The Coromandel Ranges spread in all directions for miles around them, its rocky knees poking though a grabbed blanket of green forest. That last bit terrified her. She'd forgotten about it being so scary. Just as well. And just as well his appearance meant no way could she wimp out of getting right to the top again.

'It's a stunner. You been up here before?' His hands grip the rail of the lookout. Only enough room for half a dozen people at a time. Thankfully they're it, this afternoon. She stands beside him resting on her forearms, shoulders hunched up round her ears. It's late afternoon and the summer haze blurs the distant east coast.

'Yep. Ages ago.'

'You doing it on your own?'

'Yeah. Brought the kids last time. They're all grown up now though. I'd arranged to do it with my friend but she pulled out last night, sick. So I came anyway. You with a group?'

'Nah. Just me. Jesus, those ladders are intense.' So he is hanging on to his nerves too.

'Yeah.' She imagines her foot lowering itself into space, searching for the rung on the way down. She will have to work on keeping mentally calm for the descent. It would never have bothered her years ago.

'So fill me in on life. What happened next?'

'Since we last saw each other, you mean?' She looks sideways at him. That party. The beach. Cold moonlit sand on the small of her back.

‘Yeah. It was Dan and Sandi’s wedding wasn’t it?’ So it was. Years after the end-of-school beach party. By then in their early twenties, acting at grown-ups. A partner each, who eyed each other up like gladiators. She’d forgotten about that.

‘Did you marry him? What was his name?’

‘Yes. I prefer not to say his name now.’

‘Ah. How long did it last?’

‘Twenty-one years.’

‘Gave it a good crack then. I’m not going to say I’m sorry because that probably isn’t the right answer.’ He’s enjoying this flying by the seat of his pants interaction. Still a bit jet lagged and this all seems surreal.

‘That’d be right.’

She doesn’t say *what about you?* because she knows he’ll mansplain himself regardless. They always do. He’s eyeing the machete, secured in its leather pouch on her right thigh.

‘Time to go back?’

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They share their meals in the hut. Woodburner, wood crack noises as it burns, other trampers murmurings. His an expensive freeze dried pouch of just-add-water adult babyfood. Hers cooked mince which has defrosted on the way up with instant mashed potatoes. It’s what she always craves after a hard day’s exercise. Worth its weight in the pack once you’re up the top. The smell of the mince heating up turns heads of the youngies who just brought two minute noodles up the mountain. Ya live and learn, she thinks.

‘So I’m divorced now too.’ He offers his pouch of apricot crumble sludge. She pokes her spoon in.

‘Yeah I figured.’

‘Oh?’

‘Married men always slip a reference to their wife into the first three minutes of a conversation. Reverse scent marking.’

His lips roll inwards as he inhales and holds his breath, pulling back from the solid pine bench. She laughs at how he didn’t cope with that comment and then he does too and now anyone can say anything because they both feel the itching shortness of the day.

‘And no I’m not gay, or a nun. I am singularly me. And I love it even if I do come across a grumpy bitch.’

‘A grumpy bitch with a machete.’

‘With a machete,’ she confirms.

They go outside to share his hip flask of single malt while a Ruru patterns the night.

‘Bloody hell.’

‘Yeah.’

‘Who would’ve thought...’

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He’s not all that surprised to find her gone when he wakes. She’d left him sleeping in the sand dunes once, and now again, as far inland as you can go. He rolls over and his knee hits something hard through the sleeping bag. Her machete.

He notices it’s going a little rusty.

## Run

I run to feel good. Good is running past a woman meditating under a tree overlooking the football grounds that I'm circling. Eyes closed, crossed-legged, palms upwards, index finger and thumb forming an almond shape. She's deep into it, oblivious to me, a rusty Massey Ferguson chugging past in first gear. My only gear. I feel protective of this woman I have never met before. I could be some arsehole going for a run. A racist. A misogynist. But I don't suppose racist misogynist arseholes go for runs or maybe I am generalising.

Earlier I ran past a newly formed catchment pond beside the evolving road that will soon allow a faster exit from Hamilton if you're southbound. I like that people who don't want to be here will get to bugger off all the quicker. Go on then. Off to your parent's Waihi bach, your friend's house at Taupō. Staying in Hamilton over summer is treated as a personal failing by enough people to make the city a quiet leafy paradise in January. As I pass the pond, two bull mastiffs are swimming. Their owner stands and calls *come Millie, come George*. His faded jeans sag off his skinny backside, ragged cuffs touch the gravel path. From under his battered leather Crocodile Dundee hat scraggly grey hair covers his ears. I wonder who inspired the naming of his dogs. His grandparents? Millie would purse her WW2 lips at being memorialised as a mastiff.

I run past roading construction workers. They're standing around. They're always standing around. I never know how anything gets built. I suppose they'd say I looked the same when I teach a class. Standing around.

I return home, make homemade bread rolls and eat them for lunch with 100% enjoyment and 0% guilt because I ran 46 minutes today. If the squidgy middle still refuses to budge despite my running then I will keep running, keep eating homemade bread rolls and keep losing my waistline. I run for my head, for my heart. The deep inside of me. The outer parts that don't work as well are a bit annoying. Over the past hormone plummeting year, my calf muscles have decided to play up, taunting me with their tightness. Rigor mortis at the 30 minute mark. It took an imaginary conversation with the physio who teaches the pilates class I rarely attended to solve it:

'Jane. My calves play up these days when I run.'

'Do you stretch them?'

'No.'

'Yeah. Ya might wanna start doing that. Not when they're cold, run for a few mins then give them a stretch.'

'Aw yeah.' The *you dummy* look she gives me is delivered with imaginary hands on

imaginary hips.

You find your rhythm when out on a run. That's all you gotta find. My brother told me that. Some fitness trainer told him and then he told me and that's a rhythm in itself. He inspired me to run in the first place. I thought there was something magic about Dad taking him down to the Oval to do laps. I tried to copy in a pesky little sister kind of way. Soon he got good and would go for massive runs and then come home and eat half a loaf of Molenberg Marmite toasts which used to drive mum mad with the toaster pop racket and incessant crumbs. We used to clash swords a lot about stuff but I noticed he was always nicer to be around after a run. Went out and came back having found his sense of humour.

Attuned to perfect calibration.

I play a game when out running. It's called Neighbourhood Improvements. As I run past each house, I make a list of the jobs needing doing. Waterblast your fence, weed your garden, sort out that shitty excuse for a curtain, spray the weeds in your driveway, finish painting your house and on and on and it distracts me from the twinge in my left calf, the right hip ache, the tennis elbow throb. It's judgey as hell but no-one can hear my thoughts.

Each running step today nods to all the baby steps I have taken to rebuild my shattered adult self-esteem. I can't think too much about my personal version of the dark. It hurts too much. Being diminished and eroded and undermined till you either swallow yourself or tectonic upwards. I can only let myself think of the accommodations made for short bursts. Little chinks of dark let back into the light create the 3D depth of my life. But if I dwell, the chink forms a crevice which is easy to slip down and hard to clamber out of.

There. Done. Gotta get out. I'll take you there again one day soon, like a trip to the underworld. For now, outside in the apricot light, the late spring coolness welcomes my in-ah-in out-out breathing and my scuff scuff pace.

Running is a losing and a finding.

## Needles and Stuff

I am in a cheap cubicle at the expensive acupuncture clinic listening to the calming music on loop. It has a weird vocal lyric line that sounds like it is talking about *I love honey bees, I love, I love, honey bees, I love*. As the language is not English, this is of course not what it says. Who knows what it says. I am too embarrassed to ask the acupuncturist when he comes in. My hip has seized up, my uterus is malfunctioning. I need help.

He has placed the tiny needles in odd places along my arms and legs. By odd, I mean places that I wouldn't consider locations of interest. The inside of the elbow, mid front calf. How can this possibly work and yet, it does. I don't like that I don't understand. I get the chemical equation of body plus pharmaceuticals but needle messaging and the organ-imbalance-blaming poster on the wall does not compute in my brain.

Does it need to?

For some reason, pain is alleviated. The needle has unlocked something. A secret stash of endorphins positioned around the body exactly where needles are placed? I wrestle with my desire to understand the process versus a lazy default that tells me who the hell cares. Lazy wins and I revert to other mental problems needing solving.

The acupuncturist always sets you up then leaves you to it while he tends the next client in another cubicle. The dividing walls are tall but not to the roof so all noise travels. I eavesdrop unwillingly but none of the conversations are enlightening.

I shift inward to the back catalogue of unresolved issues needing figuring out in my head. It's like a return trolley at the library. Needs filing. What to do about... But my body, forced into stillness by having needles sticking out of it and a small terror of accidentally falling off the very narrow consulting bed, starts to jolt restlessness through me.

God I'm a tetchy being.

Can't I just visualise a calm Tibetan monk scrubbing the monastery floor. Be the monk. Be at one with the monk. But even in my forced visualisation, me the monk stands up from scrubbing the floor, hiffs the grubby cloth into the wooden bucket thus sloshing the meditative water all over the polished flagstones, hitches up the skirts of my *kāṣāya* and stomps off in my sandals.

I'm such a child.

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'How've you been?' My dentist pokes her nasty hooky thing and wee mirror around inside my mouth.

‘I’m better than I was,’ I reply but it probably sounds like ‘I earaa an I oz.’ She’s good at interpreting the un-enunciated and nods her head. ‘Yes you’ve had a lot to deal with this past year.’ I know my mother is a client of hers and would have filled her in on my life of late. She removes the tools from my mouth and sits back for a moment.

‘Can you see your client’s stress in their teeth?’ I ask.

‘Oh, YES.’ Her eyes widen as she nods.

Wow.

‘I can see you’ve been clenching your jaw. Not good. Bad for your teeth. Cuts off blood supply, can cause fractures in the enamel.’

Crikey. ‘How can you tell I clench?’

‘Let’s check your jaw muscles.’ She prods either side of my jaw. ‘As I suspected. Olympic level. You could represent the country,’ she laughs.

Maybe I’m part pit bull.

‘And you need to brush your gums more gently. I can see where your power stroke is,’ she points to a spot above my left incisor. ‘Woah!’

This is embarrassing.

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‘Ooo, lots of strrrress here. Your shoulders are verrrrry tight.’ The Kiwi-South African sports massage therapist pummels the hell out of me as he rolls his rrrrrs. It’s agony. I dare not complain but I do revert to birth-breathing. I am paying the guy to remove these knots. He knobles away at one very tender bit halfway along my trapezius. Yeeeyowzaa.

‘That’s sore ja?’

‘Yusss.’ I am determined to let him do his job. I will feel better after, I will feel better after, I will fffffff....’

‘You’ll feel better after,’ he assures me.

I want to tell him to go more gently. It takes me five minutes of ordering myself before I blurt out the words.

‘I must be getting more sensitive or less toughened or something. Do you think you could press a little more softly?’

He laughs.

‘If I press any more softly, it won’t do anything useful.’

‘I’d be fine with that,’ I reply but he just laughs.

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‘I haven’t seen you in ages.’ The physio smiles, hands on hips. ‘What’s misbehaving today?’

That’s the thing, isn’t it? Which part is it today, as opposed to yesterday or tomorrow.

‘It’s ma back.’ I sound like a character off a northern England TV soap.

‘What did you do?’

‘Pruned the camellia.’

She smiles. ‘Dangerous places gardens. You wouldn’t believe how many people do themselves an injury in the garden.’

I feel so flimsy, so weak, so damn liable to break. This is human fragility up close and what a weakling I seem to be. There are entire professions devoted to fixing the broken human body.

It’s like needing a hand to cross the road.

‘Let’s take a look.’

I relax slowly. I have to admit help is required. I can’t self-manage my body alone anymore.

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‘Lovely to see you again. It’s been a few weeks.’

Now this is one professional I do love to see. My beautician. She takes my face from formless to slightly sculptured. I love her for that. Just by tending to the needs of my eyebrows and lashes. Well, her work and some wonders of makeup. Oh and a decent magnifying mirror. Without the mirror, all hope is lost for competent makeup application.

‘It’s been too many weeks,’ I confess. ‘My eyebrows have almost disappeared.’

Where once our ancestors visited the wise woman, we now have beauticians and rooms that smell of witch hazel.

She laughs.

‘This time, I must make an advance appointment because you book up so fast.’

She nods. ‘We are very busy.’

Problem with advance bookings is all the other things that get in the way of me attending the ideal appointment times. Must soldier on and try to fit it all in.

‘How have you been?’ This is code for which event are you next most worried about looking good at. We talk about upcoming occasions, friend’s birthdays, work events. But really, I am most worried about looking good when I walk the dog. When I am choosing kiwifruit at the supermarket. When I have to talk to the insurance company on the phone.

Yes. On the phone.

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I am most scared of this.

What will she say? I am in fact too scared to go to my usual hairdresser. She will be cross that I no longer want to dye my hair. I am scared of the telling off, the emotional blackmail about how dyeing it will make me look *so much better*. It will. For five minutes. Then the grey roots will push through and mock my bank balance.

Today I let nature do her thing. I tie it up. I avoid the hairdresser. I know it makes me look horrible but oh well.

It could be worse.

## **It Didn't Work Out as Planned**

Narrative. Ingrained narrative, of the socio-normative variety. But then the way her life had panned out hadn't really been planned or expected. All just unfolded somehow. From leaving home to having rooms of one's own.

At which point did she catch herself and have a review or an explosion crisis or a quiet revelatory transformation?

Now seemed good. When things were no longer complying anyway.

Imagine if life actually complied, she asked herself. Christ, that'd be a dry weetbix life. Invent a plan. Execute plan. Life with consequences of plan. A beige fairytale nightmare.

Some people can't breastfeed. Others develop a debilitating addiction. To money. To religion. To being angry. Some have kids, some don't. Some have dogs, some don't. Some express their creative selves, badly or well (doesn't matter) others bottle it. Some don't cope with the basics of running a household. Others live a house and garden facade life.

We fumble our way through the turnstile. Can't turn back. Try the sitting on platform option, letting a few trains come and go but eventually a terrible noise forces action out of us.

She wanted to make peace with the lack of plan. This seemed to involve making a plan which she knew was ironic in the extreme but as she had not discussed any of this with anyone, there was no-one to laugh at her. What are all the things you want to do before you pop your clogs, before the cheese slides off your cracker, she asked herself.

She felt this moment ought to be dished up with a drink but there was none in the house. So too bad, honey, do it sober or don't do it at all. She grabbed the back of an envelope and wrote.

The list of things I really really want or do. Or else.

1. Wake up with a good person every morning.
2. Be super fit.
3. Read all the books.
4. Be debt free.
5. Invite music back into my life.
6. Travel!!!
7. Make the stuff I love making.

This didn't seem too extreme. Numbers two to seven were even possible. Number one was more in the laps of the goddesses. She hoped they would consider her request given that she promised to take care of the rest herself.

Best I start now then.

She googled what does it take to be really fit? The results were a little traumatising. Superfit grans with bulging veins, fitness establishments with merciless marketing that would make a goldfish want abs. It was intense out there in internetland. As usual. I need a nap to recover, she told herself. The late afternoon sun was warming half her bed. It seemed wasteful not to stretch out on it and pretend to be a solar panel. Sleep is a natural remedy for wellbeing, she reminded herself. I'll get to the exercise...in the morning.

Read all the books. This was easy. Ruthlessly decide which ones constitute *all* and read those. This turned out to be eight books out of the 800 or so in the house. Sweet. The categorisation process worked like this: which books will I still be hopping mad on my deathbed that I have not yet read? That sorted the meat from the gravy.

Debt free? Stop buying books that already hadn't made the essential eight. Easy fix. Plus keeping on working fulltime and keeping on the disciplinary budget blah boring blah. Yes OK of course you can still buy books lest your arteries freeze over.

Music. This was a screaming embarrassment. How could I have let this slip out of my life, she wondered. It was so easy to access for listening. Was being the consumer the problem? She needed to be a producer as well to be right inside it. Yeah. Get singing kid. Get jamming that piano.

Travel? Start saving. Get number four sorted and then...

Making stuff? Hmm. She had a house full of unfinished projects, UFPs. Imagine finishing them...or was the unfinished nature of them what she liked? The potential always allegedly there, ready to be activated. Or had her interests unmoored from the oil painting phase, the quilt pieces, the mosaic project in the garage. She didn't like to accept she wasn't a finisher.

It was such an ego-bleeder.

### **Postscript**

How is it that the process creates the change? The new dawn rewritten by the writing? Neglect was being replaced by care. Her eyes saw with a new clarity today. She was scared and he was nervous but what delicious tension this created. Who knew that not making eye contact could be so powerful as to let the picture paint itself? The chaos might be surfed and from that woven into tender beauty.

There was so much more to come.