‘Fish of New Zealand’

A thesis

submitted in partial fulfilment

of the requirements for the degree

of

Master of Professional Writing

at

The University of Waikato

by

Liam McBreen

THE UNIVERSITY OF
WAIKATO
Te Whare Wānanga o Waikato

2022

Abstract

'Get off the road you lycra-clad cunt!'

A bond is formed with a foul-mouthed kahawai hitchhiking along Surf Highway 45. A penis-riddled espionage colours a Catholic School's swimming sports. A group of children trek down the coast on the hunt for a washed-up whale carcass. A boat-stand attendant fetishizes a neon-lit performance artist. A Toyota Corolla cruises through Hamilton fog on its way to pick up the morning-after pill. Two feuding sisters take turns on a young boy's lizard.

Fish of New Zealand is a collection of short stories, constructed in shifting points of view and various formats — flash, stream-of-consciousness, instructional landscaping tips, medication fine print, email chains, and euthanasia consent forms. The collection plays out like a series of kiwiana vignettes, focusing and honing in on the unique experience of growing up in Aotearoa. The landscapes are familiar, the characters recognizable, and the tone of voice is matter-of-fact kiwi.

Although presented as a work of fiction, most of the stories here actually took place in some shape or form — as hard as that may be to believe. They have been plucked from my childhood, teenage experiences, and glimpses into the adult world, and molded into a literary mountain range. Fish of New Zealand traverses the strange, the wry, and the grotesque, in a story collection that reads like a black sand fever dream.

The stories in this collection are at once instantly recognizable, and yet entirely foreign. Picture the driver, cruising around the coast, who spots a kahawai without luggage and his flipper in the air. Or the disillusioned accountant in a board meeting, who floats up in a cloud of nicotine and hovers over the conference room table. The collection praises the kiwi utopia of friendly geckos and Weet-Bix cards, fresh-aired bush walks and ocean-side pōhutukawas — but doesn't shy away from the violence hidden within its roots.

At its core, *Fish of New Zealand* is a personal account of growing up in Aotearoa, although I hope the reader sees themselves somewhere within this collection. It shows what it means to be a New Zealander; the lives we lead and the relationships we form. How we are shaped by the place we grow up in.

Table of Contents

Riparian

Early morning. Dewy grass. You find yourself at the end of a shovel, digging the sharpened blade into rocky coastal soil. Crouched, a light bend in the knees, you lift the spade high into the air. Arms and shoulders forward, torso back to balance the shovel's weight, you line up the blade and whack it in the ground. One, two, three, four… shoulders extend, arms push downward. The shovel's weight should do most of the work. There is a strange satisfaction to the first hole of the day.

You are standing on a stream bank, in no-man's-land, between flowing water and electric fence. You are trying desperately not to lean too far either way. Again — one, two, three, four… and a fifth scoop-like motion to pick up the now divorced soil and corresponding patch of grass. You place the grass and the soil away from the hole. Away, but not too far. You will need that soil later on. The biggest mistake you can make is to place the soil too far from the hole.

Next to the hole — sometimes in the stream and sometimes over the fence, but ideally next to the hole — is a plant. A plant poised and ready to be thrust in the dewy ground. Pōhutukawa, carex, kauri, manuka, cabbage trees, flax. Perhaps in a particular order or maybe just at random, they are all spread out down the stream. They are waiting for you and your shovel.

Have you ever put a tab of acid under your eyelid?

The plants are all in plastic pots. You remove the pots before you put the plants in the ground. Sometimes this is easy and other times it is work. If the plants are left too long in the pots their roots grow through and tangle with the plastic. They become a mission to get off. Thankfully, there's an art to it. A twist and a pull. And if that doesn't work then whack the little fucker against a fencepost.

You de-pot the plant and place it gently in the ground. The soil is orange and prehistoric. With your shovel you scoop up what you can of the loose soil, sprinkle it over top

and stomp it down with your work-boot, keeping a safe distance from the stream and the fence as you do so. Your mind wanders in the repetition of it all.

'Careful, she's running hot today.' You look over to see Khiarn, holding a blade of grass against number eight wire, something he does every morning despite the fact that you have an electric fence tester in the car. One, two, three, four… de-pot the pōhutukawa and chuck it in the ground. Watch out for the fence. She's running hot today.

'Have you ever put a tab of acid under your eyelid?'

'Yeah. Have you rubbed MD on your taint?'

'Yeah. Have you ever…'

It's smoko. You are sitting on the back of the ute listening to one of Nick and Khiarn's daily conversations. Soon, Alice, who is new to Farm Environment Services, makes the mistake of joining in.

'What are the benefits of putting it under your eyelid?'

'Huh?'

'Well, why do you have to put it in your eye? Why can't you just put it on your tongue like normal?'

'It means you don't have to think about it, you can just relax and enjoy the ride. Like when it's on your tongue you get sick of having it there and you swallow it, which is a waste. If it's in your eye you can just leave it there. It's more relaxing.'

'It really doesn't sound that relaxing.'

An Anderson's Steak and Cheese with a Meal-Mate and Vegemite confection to top it off. The food tastes better after digging holes. You savour every second of your unpaid thirty minutes before traipsing back to the solemn stream. You push yourself up off a post and with fast twitch muscles clear the fence. Your shovel is right where you left it — stabbed in the ground where the planted trees end and the potted trees begin.

Alice tosses the plants from the back of the ute, Nick drives, while you and Khiarn work your way down either side of the stream. Try to work slightly faster, or slightly slower than Khiarn. He plays bad rap music through his blown I-pod speaker. Keep a safe distance or risk insanity. Sometimes the pots fly off when Alice throws them. They get caught in the wind and fly around the farm, over fences, into streams. You wonder how many more trees you need to plant to make up for the plastic you've unintentionally set out to sea.

After an hour or so you come across a dead calf lying in the water. This was most likely caused by the farm's poor fencing. The calf's stomach looks swollen and its hair is matted with didymo and dried blood. If you look closely you can almost see a tab of acid sticking out from under its rotting eyelid. You wonder how many trees the farmer has to plant to make up for the dead calf. Hopefully enough that you can keep your job and come back to plant again next season.

The calf, by then, will have mostly decayed, and the bones will catch the pots before they go out to sea. Fencing stream banks keeps stock out of waterways and the vegetation helps to filter the run-off from pasture. As the calf quietly decomposes, you imagine, optimistically, that the nutrients from its bloated body will somehow help the plants to grow. As if life is just one clumsy step towards another. The stream wanders in the repetition of it all.

One, two, three, four… a splash of dirt and you slip on the bank. You take a small step back to steady yourself and feel the number eight wire against your bare leg. 'Fuck.'

Khiarn looks over in glee. 'She's running hot ain't she!'

Stroke

The four cock-covered walls of the high school toilet cubicle. Cracked paint and wet concrete. Catholic school humidity.

There is laughter from beyond the stall. The playful, faux-bravado laughter of boys as they nervously undress. Towels wrapped around waists, they shimmy underwear down. Pick them up slyly, foot-to-hand, face the wall and don't dare drop the towel. I am standing in the cubicle getting changed into Adam Stevens' spare pair of speedos. This is what it all comes down to.

Wooden stalls that swell in the summer months. Horse-flies and forgotten lunchboxes. Most of the boys are in board shorts, while all the really good swimmers wear speedos. I opted for league shorts — the Warriors — as they don't create much drag in the water but also don't invite the same amount of bullying as wearing speedos to school swimming. Adam Stevens wears speedos but he never gets bullied. The blue and yellow ones — same as last year. He never gets bullied because Adam Stevens and his speedos are what wins swimming sports for our house year after year.

The smell of chlorine and between-class marijuana. Damp socks stuffed in leather shoes. Apple cores and maggot-ridden sandwiches with the crusts cut off. Adam and I are in Solomon — the red house — and I am getting changed into his speedos to compete in the house relay, the final event of the day. I am putting on his speedos because Loretto — the blue house — are neck-and-neck with Solomon, and it all comes down to the relay.

School chants muffled through the changing room door. *We've been everywhere, man. We've been everywhere. / We breathe the mountain air, man. We've been everywhere.*

It is standard practice to have your fastest swimmer go last so the team can finish strong and to have the second-fastest swimmer *first* so they can get out ahead and secure a lead. I am swimming first and Adam is swimming last. I am taking off my league shorts and putting on Adam's speedos because he says they will make me faster in the water. It all comes down to the relay.

Soft dicks scrawled in sharpie. Underwear draped on the toilet stall door. The blue rubber raised surface pattern of the changing room's anti slip mats. Adam's speedos are

already damp, as if he wore them earlier in the week. They are halfway up my leg when I hear a bang on the door.

'You in there? Do they fit alright?'

I pull them up and feel myself in them. I feel myself *with* them.

'Yeah all good man. Cheers for letting me use them.'

'No worries bro. I used them at squad training last night so they might still be a bit wet sorry.'

Erect dicks with vivid outlines — mostly circumcised. Comically large heads with very little ball hair. I adjust Adam's speedos, skin cold against the wet fabric. They are black and make my legs look paler than they already are. I open the door to the cubicle.

'Looking good. Must be the right size.'

Dicks carved in brick with a math compass. Scribbled on the cistern with a ball-point pen. Small dicks with students' names written beside them. *Big* dicks with students' names written beside them. A small circumcised dick engulfed within a larger uncircumcised dick. Penises so meticulously drawn, and with such eye for detail that I imagine they must have taken hours. And lazy dicks, with uneven shafts, sketched at speed between third and fourth period.

Adam takes a step forward and shuts the door behind him.

Long dicks that arc and spiral, their large balls hanging low like medallions of masculinity. Dicks that are wider than they are long, balls hairless and harrowing. *Saint John Baptist we your children / sing the glory of your name, hey!*

Balls, harrowing and hairless. A penis tied in a bow on the back of the cubicle door. Rows upon rows of cocks all shapes and sizes, an ever-growing monument to teenage ingenuity and toilet-stall boredom. Adam stands directly in front of me and very slowly gets down on his knees.

There's a patch of greenish-black mould in the corner of the ceiling. If I look at it for long enough, it almost starts to look like a penis too.

Whisper prayers into my waistband. Adam grabs a hold of the string at the front of the speedos and carefully ties them in a knot. 'You wouldn't want these coming down in front the whole school.'

Harrowing and hairless, the patch of mould changes with each exhalation. The image of Jesus on the cross.

Wood that swells in the summer months. The taste of chlorine on innocent skin. He stands up, pats me on the shoulder and opens the toilet door. ‘Look alive,’ he glances down at the speedos. ‘The relay’s about to start.’ He shuts the door and walks outside, leaving me alone in the stall. The relay is what it all comes down to.

I hit the sunny water as the starting gun fires. Mr Costello, our math teacher, shooting blanks from the corner of the swimming pool. Empty noise followed by an inconsistent splash. Loose goggles slowly filling with water. I remember the day he asked the two of us to collect rows of chairs from the chapel. We sat against the lectern and ate un-consecrated wafers, our stifled wails echoing through the empty pews.

With each breath I try to look sideways to see the other swimmers, but the goggles are so full of water now it’s all just a sunlight blur. I feel as though I have mistimed my underwater kicks and worry that I’m coming dead last.

Stained glass windows depict the fourteen stages of the cross. Jesus falls the second time; Veronica wipes the face of Christ; etcetera, etcetera. In math class Mr Costello taught us about the holy numbers, digits that reoccur throughout the Bible in association with the Lord. I gasp for air on every seventh stroke.

The second swimmer dives over me as I reach the end of the pool. I take my googles off and Adam helps me out of the water.

‘Good stuff,’ he says, ‘you got us out in front. I told you you’d be faster in speedos.’ I can barely hear him over the cheering, the whole school standing in the bleachers, waving multi-coloured flags as the second swimmers for each house make their way across the pool. I stand and smile, harrowing and hairless. This moment belongs only to us.

We lay on the red carpet looking up into steeple, alone in the empty chapel. Wet my hair with holy water. Bless my leather sandal straps.

The second swimmer reaches the far end of the pool and our third swimmer dives in, by the time he is halfway back Loretto have edged into the lead. ‘Don’t worry,’ Adam smirks, as he adjusts his goggles and puts on his swimming cap. ‘I’ll be able to pull it back.’

The cheers grow louder as the third Loretto swimmer finishes and their last swimmer dives in. Adam steps up to the platform. He bends his knees and leans forward over the water as our swimmer glides into the wall. By the time he gets there we are in last place.

The school erupts when Adam's body hits the water, as if they know they are about to witness something transcendent. They were here last year, and the year before that. We have all studied miracles. Adam Stevens and his speedos have come to save us once again.

The entire school, regardless of house, are yelling and cheering Adam's name from the bleachers; red banners full mast in the chlorinated sky. By the time he emerges for his first breath he is in third, a few more strokes and he's in second. The applause is deafening.

The Loretto swimmer is almost at the end of the pool, thrashing water to foam like a cornered porpoise. Adam just glides along the surface, barely making a splash. He overtakes the Loretto swimmer and reaches the end of the pool. This is what it has all come down to.

Adam makes his way back through the crowd, all high-fives and handshakes, a congratulatory pat on the back from Mr Costello. Bare feet hot on the poolside concrete, he is heading my way, through the bleachers and the students and the schoolyard chants. *We love him, we hate him, we love to masturbate him. / Here's to brother Adam who's drinking tonight.* Mr Costello looks up at the stands unimpressed.

'We're champions,' he says, with his steady-the-ship smile, putting his damp arm around my shoulder. 'Until Loretto beat us in house singing that is.' He shakes out his long hair, still dry thanks to the swimming cap; his green eyes bloodshot from the chlorine. 'Now,' he says, nodding to the changing sheds. 'Let's get you out of those speedos.'

Fish of New Zealand 1 - 2

Stew was livid. The machine he used for bailing the hay wouldn't bail the hay, and this made him livid.

It was sunny when they cut the hay, but it wasn't anymore. The rain fell hard and heavy, soaking into the grass, pooling in the middle of the paddock. The machine not working had something to do with the rain and grass being wet. The hay bailer could only make bails out of dry, cut grass. Wet grass, even once it was cut, clogged the bailer, and every couple of bails it would make this awful gurgling noise, like bovine drowning. Stew would have to get off his tractor — which he was using to tow the bailing machine — and pull clumps of saturated grass from the machinery. Taine and I watched from the back of the ute.

'He's not happy.'

'He seems kind of stressed. Do you think he knew it was going to rain?'

'Maybe someone should've told him.'

'Hey Stew!' Taine yells out, 'I don't think the rain's helping.'

Stew looks up from the hay bailer. Black singlet covered in wet grass. His arm wedged deep in the machinery, engine still running. He looks up exasperated and yells.

'About to throw all this fucking hay in the river. Then I'm heading to the pub to drown myself in beers.' He kicks one of the fenceposts, hard, and then he goes back to pulling grass from his hay machine.

Taine and I are sitting in the back of the ute. His dad has gone over to help Stew.

'Why is your dad bailing his hay in November? No wonder it's all fucking wet.'

Taine is holding a piece of hay between his teeth, looking out over the sodden farm. 'He didn't want to do it now. He had to. Stew's the only one in town with a bailing machine, and he's going on holiday till Christmas.'

A hare darts across the paddock. It stops with its white tail in the air to look at the humans, with their wet grass and their large machinery, and then darts off again.

'That thing's lucky I didn't bring my gun,' says Taine.

‘Why the hell would the only person in town with a hay bailer decide to go on holiday for the whole of bailing season?’

‘That’s exactly what dad asked him.’

‘And what did he say to your dad?’

‘He said: I’ve got to get a holiday too. Everyone but me gets a holiday. Why shouldn’t I get a Christmas break?’

‘Fair enough. What does Stew do the rest of the year round?’

‘He sits in the pub and waits for bailing season.’

*

Her name was Hayley and she sold pictures of her feet on the internet.

To strangers? somebody once asked her.

Well, that depends.

On what?

On who you would call a stranger.

She once told me a story about the time she met up with a man on the internet. He said he would pay her to dance with him. She went around to his address, didn’t tell anybody, figured it was an easy way to make a quick hundred bucks. It was in a neighborhood she’d never been to before, with street names she didn’t recognize. When he answered the door, he seemed nice enough, asked if she wanted a cup of tea. She said yes. And they sat together and drank tea at a small wooden table in his living room.

He put on a record. She told me she didn’t know the song, but it was an old soul record sung by a black woman [sic]. She said it was the most beautiful thing she’d ever heard. And he took her by the hands and they started slow dancing — the old fashioned way, she said, not how we dance today. And it was in this moment, she told me, that she became conscious

of the fact that this man was significantly larger than she was, and nobody knew she was there. And she was terrified. Because she knew that if he really wanted to, this man would be able to overpower her, and if anything was to happen, it was likely no one would find her. She told me that her hands started trembling and tears welled up in her eyes. She said she was so scared that she couldn't breathe. And she told me that she had this feeling, that if the man was to realize she was upset then he would stop dancing and do whatever it was that she was scared of him doing.

She remembers the faded blue carpet, the worn floral chairs, the way the afternoon light crept through the blinds and illuminated specks of dust like confetti at a funeral [sic]. And she told me that in this fear, she looked up, and she saw that he was crying too. This made her cry even more. And then the man cried even more. And they danced for a little while longer, in the sunlight and the dust, holding each other as they cried until the song ended and he picked the needle from the groove. Then he handed her the money and she left.

Zealandia

She didn't like zoos, so they went to the nature reserve. There were birds, more birds, and lizards. But they didn't get to see any of the lizards. It cost thirty dollars each — at the zoo they could both get in for twenty — but the cashier assured them their pass was valid for two days, so they could come back again tomorrow if they wished to, which they couldn't have done at the zoo.

The two-day-pass was a stamp on the wrist, which Isiah noticed had almost entirely rubbed off only halfway around the lake. He considered putting his hands in his jean pockets, out of fear that somebody might see his naked skin and subtly ask him to leave. Ammie was watching the trees. The sunlight through the flora. Leaves meticulously curated, like transparencies, creating an identikit image of…

'Duck shit. Look at all this fucking duck shit.' Isiah scraped his shoes along the gravel as he walked. 'He didn't tell us about all of *this* now did he. Didn't warn me to take my Yeezy's off at the door. No, he was too busy telling us about the fucking two-day pass. *Oh, don't worry, you can come back again tomorrow*. Ruin another brand-new pair of shoes.'

Light sunk through the leaves, dripping down the branches. It flickered in and out as she walked along the lake track. Ammie, eyes skyward, looking up at the yellow-green ceiling, while Isiah…

'Ah, for fuck sake. I've got some on my fucking hand.'

He met her in a damp Wellington flat where you could hear the colours through the walls. She lived in Brooklyn — not far from the wind turbine — up a steep and narrow road where houses clung to precipice. Where rent was through the roof and off-street parking was unheard of. Uni students would come and go, all times of the day, all days of the week, and from that sunset balcony would spill out, into those bohemian capital nights. Isiah was visiting from Thames, staying with a friend from high school in Island Bay. They were invited around to Ammie's for cheese and wine before the photography exhibition.

When Isiah first saw her she had Scrumpys taped to both hands, and was out on the balcony smoking a pre-rolled cigarette. It was love at first sight. They went to her bedroom and did lines on her desk, finding space amongst the books and indoor plants. Che Guevera

watched over from a bedside wall hanging, somewhat disapprovingly, in his patented guerrilla red. He was right next to a 'Meat is Murder' poster, blue-tacked over a patch of mould.

'I went vegan after hearing that album,' Ammie said, as she snorted through a five-dollar note. 'But I don't care for Morrisey anymore.' She sneezed a few times and then handed Isiah the rolled up Edmund Hillary. 'I always preferred Joy Division anyway.'

Isiah would end up visiting her often, either borrowing his dad's car for the weekend or taking the bus. And eventually he moved down. He remembered this first night as he circled the lake and it felt like forever ago. He hadn't listened to The Smiths in ages.

Isiah wiped his shoes on the grass by the lake, a courteous distance from the picnic rug. Ammie sat cross-legged. Pools of violet under her eyes. She had made cinnamon rolls that morning, especially for the picnic, but all-of-a-sudden wasn't hungry. Isiah had packed club sandwiches, and a thermos of hot milo, with a tablespoon of marijuana-infused coconut oil stirred in.

'Look, takahē,' Ammie called out, as a tussock of four or five of the birds approached their picnic rug.

'They look like pukekos to me.' Isiah, still tying up his laces.

'The colouring's different,' said Ammie, as she pulled out her phone to take a photo. 'And takahē are actually much larger.'

Isiah looked at the birds, rustling through the dead leaves, picking at the dirt. 'You're not fooling me,' he muttered, pulling the thermos from his backpack. 'There's lots of pukekos where I'm from. They're just not as well fed.'

When they had entered the reserve they had gone through two sets of doors, the second of which wouldn't open until the first was closed. The place between the doors felt strange. In limbo between one place and the next; the people they had been and the people they would become. It was all too much for a stoned Sunday afternoon.

They say the city is built on a fault line. Doomed to fall apart. Wellington sits on the Australian Tectonic Plate, on its relatively light continental crust, and the Australian Plate is riding over the dense oceanic crust of the Pacific plate. The main interface between the two plates — the space between the doors — slopes westward down beneath the city, about 25 to 30 kilometres below the surface of the North Island. The two plates edge slowly together,

pushing into each other at an average rate of 3.5 centimetres per year. The slow collision puts immense pressure on the crust, breaking the plate up into several large pieces, spanning out along the wavering fault line. These include the Wellington and Wairarapa faults, which extend well above the between-the-doors interface. The strain between blocks of crust is counteracted by the resistance that holds them together. Their sheer willingness not to crumble. They move in time, relative to each other, down beneath the surface of the earth — keeping the ground steady and the city whole. But when the movement overcomes the resistance, when the plates break apart and shift in opposite directions, that's when it will happen. When the plates give out and when there's nothing left holding them together. The jolt, the jarring, the quivering chaos. The city crumbles into Oriental Bay.

Every Sunday they would go to the harbourside market. There were stalls along the oceanside just outside of Te Papa and along to the stairwell over the wharf. They would look through the fresh fruit and vegetables and Ammie would often buy a jar of Manuka honey. They would eat Bodega-style sandwiches on the park bench looking for stingrays in the shallow water. If Isiah had remembered his towel, he would jump from the stairwell platform, standing in line with all the school children who escaped to the city for the weekend. He would make damn sure there were no stingrays beforehand.

In the summer, when the water was warm, they would walk along the waterfront to Oriental Bay. Past the gelato shop and the bike stand, along by the blue and white yacht sheds. Clambering over concrete, beach shorts and bikini, they would make their way to the usual spot, and spread their beach towels on the foreign white sand. Ammie didn't like to swim, so she would read her book, while Isiah dashed in and out of the ocean. She would take pictures of the aesthetic beach and put them on her Instagram, sometimes using the Clarendon filter, due to its slightly oversaturated look and high contrast effect.

Sometimes Ammie made Isiah go to the museum. He didn't mind parts of it but she usually wanted to spend time at the boring stuff — the history section, or the rooms about nature. Isiah preferred the giant squid. It's colossal beak and mantle, preserved in formaldehyde to stop the rot. Isiah read that it is an immature female from Antarctica, thawed out and examined in 2003. An ancient sea God from another world, laid out for all to see just past the spinning ball and the donations box.

They both enjoyed the Gallipoli exhibition. Ammie's great grandfather had fought in the first world war and Isiah had a wavering interest in special effects. He liked Peter Jackson's

work on Lord of the Rings but in all honesty he preferred his earlier, low-budget horror movies.

'She was a nurse in the war, stationed in one of the British hospitals in Cario.' Ammie, reading aloud from the informational notes on the wall. 'Wow, she travelled all the way from Otago. Lost her whole family in the war. Just imagine what it must have been like.'

'Check out the flies, and the hairs on her arm.' Isiah ignoring the *please don't touch* signage. 'Jesus, the fan's even making them move.'

Ammie, at the wall, was reading the real-life letters. She was experiencing the war through the eyes and words of New Zealanders who found themselves in exceptional circumstances — each held in a moment in time, at 2.4 times human scale. She read to herself while Isiah rushed from sculpture to sculpture, pushing past tourists and calling out to Ammie. 'Just look at the God damn fingernails!'

The museums, the markets, stingrays and gelato, they were all anchored in their regular weekend activities. But this was the first time they had been to Zealandia. Ammie saw it as a much needed break from a routine they had casually settled into. Isiah saw it as a more-expensive and less-exciting alternative to the zoo. There were birds where the lions could have been, and no lizards where the lizards *should* have been. It had been a long and trying walk around a muddy windswept lake.

They lay on the grass a while, sprawled out on the rug beside the water. Ammie had thrown her cinnamon rolls to the takahē, but even they didn't want them. Now they were being picked at by the ducks. She had posted the picture of the birds on her Instagram, with a link to a wildlife conservation site. She wondered how many takahē were still alive in the wild, and considered volunteering or making a donation of her own. She had always struggled at being able to spot a lost cause.

Isiah had finished his milo and was sitting on the picnic rug, looking out over the water. He couldn't stop thinking about the doors. Sometimes, it felt like Ammie was trying to walk through the second, while he was still busy fiddling with the first. He threw a club sandwich at the chonky pukekos.

The Stick

Down the dirt track same way we always would. Through the pine trees and past the shit ponds. The giant kauri, sporadically clad in patches of dull lichen and moss, the upper branches laid bare for possums that scratch at the bark. *Find me a stick,* Dad would say. *I'm going to hit you with it.*

Further down gully as heat drains from the day. A yellow Dolphin torch guides us through years of vines; the trauma they pull from the dirt. Red Bands over fallen trees tread harsh on rot and decay. Katipōs cast silken shadows, they scurry and flee light. *What about this one Dad?*

Too small. It'll snap when it hits you and won't hurt enough. Find something bigger.

We slip down further through kikuya itch and mossies, where clay banks collapse to swamp. Hands trembling, partly from fear — I find a snapped off totara branch and hand it to Dad. *No, too thick,* he says. *I want it to really sting.*

We walk alongside the willow-clogged stream and talk about what it was I had done: hit my brother, swore at Miss Hislop, missed a crucial tackle in the Saturday morning clash. We talk about this and then we talk about other things. He shines the torch in the water and we catch a glimpse of a long-fin eel slipping from its burrow. *They come awake in the night,* he tells me. Stars flicker. Kauri sways. Branches entwine the sky.

The more we talk the less I think about the stick. Dad shines the torch into the trees behind us, and we see a pair of red eyes in the glow. The air is cold but his rugged hand is warm. He conducts his moonlight sermon through piers of the darkening gully. His Swanndri is his gospel, his lectern the quiet winter night.

Fish of New Zealand 3 – 4

So you remember your uncle Rob right? He lived next to us at Pitcairn? Had a home studio where he made jewelry from paua shells? That's where your mother and I got our wedding rings. Well Rob had a little sausage dog named Barklay. And Barklay would sometimes sneak off in the nighttime and come back smelling of fish.

Rob, he didn't know where the hell Barklay had been off to. Probably down the beach but who knows? And he would walk by our house in the morning, with Barklay on a leash, and he'd say, as he always did: *Morning Pete.*

Morning Rob, I'd say.

And he'd say: *Hey, you see Barklay at all last night? We think he snuck off again.*

And I'd say: *No sorry Rob. Wouldn't have the faintest clue.*

And he'd say: *No worries Pete, you and the boys have a good one.* And him and Barklay would walk off down the road.

Now one night, Rob decided to follow Barklay to see where he'd been sneaking off to. He put Barklay to bed in his kennel, turned all the lights off, then stood in the darkness and watched him through the lounge window. It didn't take long. Soon enough, Barklay was out of his kennel and scrambling through a hole he'd dug under the fence. *That little shit,* Rob muttered, so he grabbed his torch, threw his shoes on, and headed out the front door to follow Barklay.

It didn't take Rob long to catch up to the dog. There he was, just up Pitcairn Street, his little sausage legs scampering for the beach. Rob followed him — from a safe distance — dying to know what his dear wee Barklay was getting up to every night.

What was Barklay getting up to?

He was sneaking down to the beach to eat little blue penguins.

Rob was shocked of course. Barklay, his little angel, down there in the black sand, butchering these poor penguins. He'd chase after them with his little legs and tear them limb from limb in the moonlight.

Naughty Barklay, he yelled. And Barklay trotted back to him.

He knew he'd been naughty, Rob told me, the next day when he walked by the house. Pointing his finger at the little sausage dog. *Naughty Barklay! Naughty.* And he looked up at me over the fence. *Pete,* he said, eyes wide. *You should have seen the feathers.*

*

The roommate with breasts is beneath him on the bed. Almost lying down — propped up by her elbow — her arm at an acute angle against the cotton comforter. With her free hand she brushes his short brown hair, fingertips running from the tip of his forehead down to behind his earlobes. He has taken off her shirt, an oversized band T-Shirt, and hung it on the silver doorhandle. Her breasts are contained within a blue brassiere. They are in a small dorm room on the third floor of the university hall. Around the room: blue-tacked polaroids, a cinnamon-scented candle, vinyl records on the bookshelf, paperbacks on the floor, used coffee mugs on the bedside table. There is also a novelty calendar on the wall over the bed, of animals in various yoga positions. It is pinned to the month of September, showing an alpaca in downward facing dog. She is his partner's college-roommate, and he has been staying with them for the long weekend. Everyone else has gone into town, some to go shopping and others to see a movie. They were deciding between *Licorice Pizza* and the new Batman. His partner's bed is on the other side of the room, opposite the calendar, past the wardrobe that overflows onto the faded grey carpet. The door is closed and locked, and they know both movies have a near three-hour runtime. But the danger makes it all the more exciting.

The clasp on her bra is in the center of her back. Double-hooked. Held over pale skin by blue straps and arched shoulder blades. In the early days, he could take most bras off one-handed — something of a party trick — but this one just won't budge. Must be out of practice, he decides, with his hand behind her back, thumbing loose elastic and underwire. She laughs, *here let me help you,* un-clips the bra and pulls it over his forehead; throws it onto the messy bedroom floor. Her breasts come free. The bra, moving over his forehead, a kind of waking up. Her breasts are unconfined. He has woken up to the topless roommate and a band tee

hanging off the silver doorhandle. Noises outside: hockey practice on the field, muffled conversations from the hallway, birds in the trees down below. He tells her that her breasts are nice, she smiles and continues stroking his head. He wants her to tell him that his hair is nice, and his face has a Pattinson-like quality. That he has a jawline fitted for the bat suit.

He thinks about his girlfriend. With the others, at the cinema, watching Cat Woman tiptoe through the male gaze. She hadn't even thought twice when she left the two of them together, and that offended him in some twisted way. As if he wasn't desirable enough for there to be any risk, and she was safe to leave him with her roommate and to go to the movies with her friends. In this way, he was able to justify it, almost. As if the act itself was a kind of I-told-you-so. The roommate lies back into the bed and pushes his head — with both hands now — down into her breasts. His forehead reddens. She clasps both hands behind her head and arches herself backwards. Why she'd shrugged off the movie, comments she'd made, the looks she'd given him over the course of the weekend — he thought they were in his own head. Some misled combination of vanity and desire. But her breasts cemented it. And when she'd put on music and offered him a cone, it was easy enough to just lie back and inhale.

The roommate's facial expression looks like something out of a movie. The kind of look someone might rehearse in the mirror. Her head is resting on poly-cluster pillow — pushing into foam, moving against silk, her clasped fist grasping at its hemmed edge. Her pale face, a silkscreen of moving expressions — tried-out and read-through time and time before. When she'd moved her hand to her chest and taken off her bra, a kind of waking up. His legs slightly trembling as she asks him to take off his shirt. The black T-Shirt joining the blue brassiere on his partner's worn-down carpet. Her freed breasts a dorm-room motion picture, he acts the way he'd seen characters do so in films. They are kissing. Her mouth, her neck, the skin just behind her ear, the indent of her shoulder. Arms at an obtuse angle he fondles her breasts, head down he kisses her pale collar bone. In a moment her body becomes almost still, and noticing this subtle change in body language, he raises his head to ask her: *what is it?* He's in her eyeline now — forehead creased, tips of ears reddened, she answers — *we should turn out the light.*

The light is a glowing salt lamp on his girlfriend's bedside table. The roommate and her breasts move across the room. Over T-shirt and blue brassiere, she turns off the lamp, while he rolls over and lies face up on the bed. It is not dark, there is a dim light through the blinds illuminating the room. Shouts from hockey practice on the far-below sports field. He

lies on the cotton comforter, roommate's breasts at bed-level gaze, and watches her tiptoe over. Smiling coyly, she walks in slow-motion, like something out of a film. His girlfriend, at the cinema, looking up at the projection screen, eating popcorn and cheering as Batman pummels The Riddler. Her roommate, climbing on top of him, her breasts like two perfectly formed bat signals. Breathing deep on top of each other in the mild darkness. The slow click of the lock and the silver door handle moving down.

Gary the Gecko

Charlotte is at the drinking fountain. Warm water spraying lazily from the metal pipe, splashing against her cheek, dripping down her chin. The smell of the school yard; hot asphalt air. Steam off concrete off lukewarm water. She is wearing all black.

Charlotte walks morosely through the school yard, feeling older than she is. Basketballs thrown chaotically across concrete. Paper planes hurtling in the gust. There is a line of school children against the back wall of room nine, playing some variation of dodgeball with a hard red cricket ball. The rule is to aim below the shoulder. There are horse girls on the patch of grass under the totara tree, who gallop and canter with imagined reins. Charlotte walks with one foot in front of the next. There are three boys in the bushes on the far side of the yard. They eye her up and whisper as she approaches. 'Oi Charlotte, show us your tits.' She pulls the finger. The same boy yells back. 'Don't be such a fucking prude.'

Caleb is one of the boys in the bushes. His friend Timothy is the one doing the yelling. He feels embarrassed when his friends yell at Charlotte. After all, his mum is friends with hers. But he never says or does anything to stop it. Caleb has known Charlotte since they were both three years old. He laughs when she pulls the finger at them. They were always in each other's classes, year after year, and would spend most afternoons playing together on the back field — until they reached the age when boys couldn't be friends with girls anymore. Now he spends most afternoons alone, listening to music on his Walkman, or hanging out under the bridge with Leo and Timothy. About a year ago Charlotte started getting a hard time at school — his mum would sometimes ask him about it. 'She's a nice girl,' his mum would say. 'I hope you're keeping an eye on her at school.' There were rumors — mostly stirred up by Timothy and his friends — but Caleb never paid them any mind. People started saying she gave a blowjob to a high schooler down at the rugby club. Soon enough they were saying it was the whole team.

'Don't be such a fucking prude,' the boy yells at her. She pulls the finger and walks on — one foot in front of the other. She used to feel embarrassed, humiliated, when kids called out at her like this. But she had gotten used to it now. Numb, she figures, turning the corner towards the library. The same kind of harassment that used to bring on tears now just

generated a silvery amusement. How could they call her both a slut and a prude in the same God damn breath? ‘Cretins,’ she mutters, opening the glass door beside the after-hours return chute, and taking a seat on the old green sofa in the non-fiction section. Caleb was in the bushes too, but she couldn’t tell if he was laughing. He was nicer than the other guys, like Timothy and the rest of them. He had more to talk about than tits and blowjobs.

Ever since she was a little girl, Emily wanted to be more like her sister. She had always admired her confidence. Emily is sitting at the dining-room table, watching her mother pace back and forth in the kitchen. ‘It’s six-thirty in the evening Charlotte. I’ve been worried sick.’

Charlotte is lying on the sofa in the living room, surfing languidly through various television channels. *One News. Malcom in the Middle. Shortland Street*. *Friends*. ‘Stop stressing Mum, I was studying at the library,’ she says truthfully. ‘I just like taking the later bus home.’

‘Well, a little notice would be nice. Emily and I were worried sick!’

Emily looks down at the wooden table. Emily didn’t know where Charlotte was because Charlotte ignores her at school. It is common courtesy at high school to act as if your sibling doesn’t exist. ‘I even called Claire’s house asking after you. Her mother had no idea either.’

‘Jesus Mum,’ Charlotte gets up from the sofa. ‘That’s so embarrassing. I haven’t hung around with Claire in months.’ She has settled on the music television station C4. Charlotte looks over at her sister. ‘Why the hell didn’t you stop her?’

Emily keeps looking down. The smooth wooden table. Her fingers trace the grain pattern, circle the small brown knots in the kauri. When she was younger, her and Charlotte would spend hours playing together in the yard. Invented games in imagined backyard worlds. Until Charlotte became too cool to hang out with her lame younger sister.

‘Don’t talk to your sister like that.’ The girls’ mum in the kitchen, pulling roast lamb from the oven with a folded tea towel in her hands.

Charlotte looks at Emily, then at her mother, and back to Emily again. ‘Fuck you.’

Her mum looks at her in disbelief. Emily is still looking down at the table. She is almost crying. ‘Grounded,’ says her mother. ‘One week. Want to try for two?’

Charlotte rolls her eyes and walks down the hallway to her room. Emily hears the door slam from the dining table. ‘Dinner’s ready Emily,’ her mum says softly. ‘Come and grab a plate sweetie. Dish up.’

‘Wanna see my lizard?’

Charlotte is waiting at the bus stop to catch the early bus home. It is a dry April afternoon. Caleb sits down next to her and starts to unzip his school bag. They haven’t talked in months. ‘Sure thing,’ says Charlotte, putting down the book she was reading, dog earing the page.

Caleb pulls out a plastic lunch box and unclips the blue clasps. There is a small green gecko inside. ‘Cool,’ says Charlotte, looking at the gecko. It is laying dead still in the corner of the lunch box. ‘Where’d you find him?’

‘He was sitting on that big tree where the weird horse girls hang out.’

‘The totara tree?’ Asks Charlotte.

‘Yeah, the big bushy one. Timothy and the others were trying to kill it. But I rescued him and put him in my lunch box. I’ve been carrying him around in my bag ever since.’

Charlotte gently pats the gecko’s head. ‘What’s his name?’

‘Gary.’

‘Cool. Gary the gecko.’ Charlotte pulls her hand away and the gecko crouches in the corner. ‘What does he eat?’

‘I feed him little bugs that I find in the garden.’ Caleb clips up the lunch box. ‘I put an earth worm in there the other night and when I woke up in the morning it was gone.’

‘Well I’m glad you’re looking after him,’ says Charlotte, putting one earphone in her far away ear. ‘I think geckos are endangered.’

‘Yeah, he doesn’t do much.’ Caleb gives the lunchbox a shake. The lizard scuttles to a different corner. ‘If you want to you can come to the park with me and we can set it free?’ He puts the lunchbox back in his school bag.

‘That sounds great,’ says Charlotte, pausing for a moment. ‘That sounds great but I’m grounded.’

‘Rough,’ says Caleb, zipping up his school bag.

‘Yeah, I can’t leave the house for one week.’

‘Well, I could come around if you like. We can set Gary free in your mum’s garden.’

Charlotte thinks for a moment, unsure if her mum will let her have a friend over. Unsure if Caleb's coming over as a *friend*. 'Come over tomorrow,' Charlotte tells him. 'Mum works late on Wednesdays.'

'Cool,' says Caleb, standing up. 'Gary and I will see you tomorrow.' He picks up his school bag, one strap over his shoulder, and walks down to the boys at the busy end of the bus stop. Gary the gecko jiggling about inside.

Emily is at the bus stop, away from her sister, waiting for the three-thirty bus. She is watching Charlotte, from a distance, eating one of the leftover Tim Tams from lunch. She eats around the edges first, then lifts the top off, and scrapes off the chocolatey center with her tongue. Charlotte is sitting next to Caleb on the wooden bench. He is showing her something in his school bag. Caleb used to come around all the time when they were younger, but Emily hadn't seen him in forever. He would play with her and Charlotte on the lawn while their mums drunk wine in the kitchen. Or him and Charlotte would shut themselves in her bedroom listening to music and they would tell Emily to *go away*.

Emily has started dressing like her sister — but she doesn't have enough black clothes to last her the week. She borrows Charlotte's band shirts sometimes, her skirts and boots as well. Sometimes she will even go into her room and use her make up. Charlotte yells at her and tells their mum whenever she finds out. She is wearing some of her lipstick today, and a small amount of eyeliner. Emily thinks the makeup makes her look older. Sometimes her teacher, Miss Wood, will give her funny looks in class which makes her worry that she's not putting it on right. Caleb has gone back to his friends now. They are all patting him on the back and laughing. She wonders what was in his school bag. Maybe drugs, she thinks. Maybe Charlotte bought drugs from Caleb. No, she decides, no. Charlotte wouldn't have the money for drugs. They are on the same allowance.

When the bus arrives at three-forty-five, Emily is one of the last to get on. She sits down the back, away from her sister. Neither Charlotte nor Caleb seems to notice her as she walks past. Her black clothes are hot in the trapped heat of the school bus. Her back feels warm and sticky. The smell of the exhaust and hot asphalt only seem to make it worse. The bus pulls away in a slow mechanical rumble and she leans her forehead against the window glass. It is dusty and dirty and there is the faint outline of a cock above the seat in front of her — drawn into the condensation that morning. Emily is thinking about her sister and Caleb —

how cool and laid back her sister seemed while talking to him. If it were her, she would have gotten nervous; said something embarrassing she didn't mean to. She would have gotten flustered, and rambled, and Caleb would have walked away. Or she would have gotten so nervous that she couldn't speak at all, and she'd just sit there in dumbfound silence — like she did at home or in the classroom. It was harder now she was older. She was always struggling to think of things to say. Emily watches smudges of paddocks roll by; silage bails, one-lane bridges; shallow streams; rusted sheds; horses; beer cans in grass gutters; willow trees; lawnmowers; then home.

They begin their walk up the gravel drive in silence. Charlotte, at a fast pace with both headphones in; Emily traipsing along behind her. They are one of the last stops and they don't usually get home until four-thirty. 'Caleb is coming over tomorrow and he is bringing his lizard.' Charlotte still has both headphones in, and she doesn't look at her sister when she speaks.

'Okay,' says Emily, kicking a stone along the road. There is a row of pine trees along the driveway, and she is trying to keep in the shade of them.

'If you tell mum on me I'm going to bash you.' Emily has lost track of the stone, messed it in with all the other gravel, and has moved over to the grass to be more in the shade. She worries the sun is making the eyeliner melt. She looks at Charlotte but doesn't say anything. She is thinking about Caleb and his lizard. Is lizard code for something, she wonders, maybe for drugs. She needs to ask her mum to increase her allowance. Or maybe its code for something else. She thinks about the cock drawn on the school bus window. 'And stop stealing my makeup. You look fucking ridiculous.' Emily keeps walking along the grass, looking down at the ground in front of her. One foot in front of the other.

Charlotte is sitting in an empty classroom playing solitaire. She is thinking about Caleb and his small green lizard. He really is quite stupid. Nice, she thinks, but stupid. It is lunch break, and all the other kids are playing outside. She has found three of the four aces. Bradley wasn't stupid, she thinks, but he definitely wasn't nice. He was in the beginning, when they first started talking, but she understands now why he was acting so kind. They talked about rugby, and school, and music — he was really into Creed. But mainly they would talk about sex. She hadn't told her mum about what had happened — or anybody for that matter. All her friends ghosted her after the day at the rugby club, so there wasn't really anybody *to* tell.

Charlotte hits an eight and places it onto the sequence she has going on the far-left column. Eight, she thinks, that was Bradley's rugby number. His faded blue-and-black jersey bound to the back of the scrum. Lifting in lineouts; fast from the kick-off. He described to her in detail the importance of being a loose forward. She remembers the clouded sky and the way the autumn leaves crunched beneath her back. She had to brush dead leaves from the fabric afterwards. It was fast, painful, and disappointing. She felt hollow and Bradley didn't talk to her at all on the drive home. She was fifteen and he was twenty-three. Bradley must have told his rugby mates, because everybody at school knew about it the next day. Soon enough there were dozens of stories going around and everybody thought she was a slut. All the boys thought she was easy but none of them would bother talking to her, other than yelling profanities from the bushes. Until Caleb spoke to her yesterday she had become a pariah at school, and she wasn't even sure *why* he was talking to her. She didn't think he really knew either.

Charlotte turns over a seven. No use. There's nowhere for her to put it. She turns over another set of three. Caleb walks in and chucks his school bag against the back wall. There is mud on his knees and elbows and grass stains on his shirt. Charlotte can't help but feel for Gary, getting battered around inside. She would find a nice spot for him in that garden this afternoon, free from Caleb and his deadly lunch box.

'What are you doing?' asks Caleb, sitting on one of the small wooden chairs. He is out of breath after running in from the field.

'Playing solitaire,' Charlotte, picking the cards up in threes. She is hunting for an ace of diamonds. Caleb is eating a sandwich. School yard sweat. Breath of Vegemite. 'Cool,' he says. 'Can I play?'

Charlotte looks up at him. 'It's solitaire?'

The glass door bangs open and Timothy and his friends walk in. They are loud and sweaty from playing ball rush on the field. Caleb goes quiet when they enter the room. Charlotte looks back down at the cards. She picks up two kings and a seven of clubs. These little bastards are kings of the school yard. Pathetic playing decks that peak in high school. Timothy throws his school bag down next to Caleb's and walks to the far side of the room, behind where Charlotte is sitting. All the other boys are looking at him. Charlotte feels trapped, stuck inside her own skin — the same way she felt on the rugby field. Her school shirt tight around the back of her neck, as if somebody forgot to poke air holes in it. She wishes

she could trade places with Gary in the lunch box. She could almost put up with the boys yelling and harassing her when she was by herself, walking to class or waiting for the bus. She was immune to all that now. She could breathe slow and make herself numb. But she didn't want it to happen in front of Caleb.

Timothy walks up behind Charlotte; she is still head down looking at the cards, trying to uncover her last ace. All the other boys are shoving each other and giggling, waiting for Timothy to try something. He walks up behind Charlotte and looks at Caleb. Caleb looks down at the desk. He lifts his hand to his mouth and pushes his cheek out with his tongue; starts moving his hand back and forth in time with it. Caleb blushes and the rest of the boys start laughing. 'Oh Caleb,' he is moaning. His stupid nasal voice. 'Oh Caleb, yeah, don't stop.' Caleb smirks. The boys' laughter grows louder. 'Oh Caleb, let me touch your lizard.' Charlotte stands up and shoves the desk away. Playing cards scatter on the floor. 'Why don't you just fuck off.' She picks up her school bag and storms out of the classroom. The boys erupt in laughter.

The bus ride home is stuffy and quiet. Caleb is sitting at the front of the bus next to Charlotte, with Emily towards the back. They barely say a word the entire trip. Caleb stays on past his usual spot and gets off with Charlotte and Emily at the red letterbox. The afternoon drying up into Gary's obligatory sendoff.

'I'm sorry about lunchtime,' Caleb says softly, as the three of them start up the drive. Steam off gravel. Pine tree shadows. Dead grass and seven wire fences.

'Don't worry about it,' Charlotte says, her bag slumped over her shoulders. She stops to let Emily walk ahead before carrying on. 'Your friends are assholes by the way.'

'I know,' says Caleb, putting his headphones in as he walks. Escaping into analog simplicity. They walk in silence for a while, the slow crunch of gravel underfoot. Birds in the trees and a soft breeze through the paddock.

'What are you listening to?' Charlotte asks, looking over at Caleb.

'The Mint Chicks,' says Caleb, taking one headphone out. 'My brother put me on to them. Have a listen.' Caleb hands her one of the earphones. Charlotte checks it for ear wax and puts it in.

'Sick,' says Charlotte, walking beside the Caleb. 'Those drums sound awesome.'

'Yeah,' says Caleb, nodding his head. 'The lyrics are pretty cool too.' Up the driveway, lizard in backpack. The headphone wire dangling between them.

Emily is sitting at the dining room table with Caleb. She is trying to think of something to say. Her sister, Charlotte, is rummaging through the pantry, finding nothing but stale chips and cereal. ‘There’s Weet-Bix?’ she asks, and Caleb nods his head. Charlotte gets three bowls out from one of the drawers and chucks two Weet-Bix in each. Emily is looking at Caleb. He has green eyes and short black hair. A faint suggestion of facial hair on his chin. She wants Caleb to notice her the way he notices Charlotte. But he is just sitting there fiddling with his Walkman. She is trying desperately to think of something to say. ‘Here,’ Charlotte puts the bowl down in front of Emily, milk splashing onto the kauri table. ‘There’s your food, Emily. Now leave us alone.’

‘But I want to see the lizard.’ Emily, picking up her bowl and her spoon.

‘We’re going to hang out for a while. We’ll come and get you before we let it go.’

‘You promise?’

‘Jesus, I promise. Now go away.’

Emily watches television while she eats her Weet-Bix — a Bro Town episode she’d seen before. The one where Vale finds a dead mouse in his pie and Fred Dagg is called in to protect the meat industry. Afterwards, she washes out her bowl and places it in the drying rack next to the sink. Charlotte and Caleb are still sitting at the dining table, they each have one earphone in. They are sitting closer together than her mum would have liked. Emily walks down the hallway and stops outside Charlotte’s bedroom — she can see her make up cabinet through the crack in the door. She listens closely and can still hear Caleb and her sister in the dining room. A lizard sendoff wouldn’t be complete without foundation and eyeliner.

Emily sits down at the makeup cabinet and very quietly opens the top drawer. There is lipstick, eyeliner, foundation, mascara, and plenty of other soft colorful devices that she does not know the names of or purposes for. She takes out a tube of Maybelline lipstick, takes off the lid, and twists the balm out. She begins to apply it to her lips — the colour is ruby red. Charlotte would murder her if she caught her doing this. Next, she picks out a thin pencil tube of eyeliner and brushes it onto her lashes — watching herself very closely in Charlotte’s vanity mirror. She pauses, the small black pencil tip against her eyelash, and listens. Footsteps down the hall. Quickly, she puts the makeup utensils back in the drawer, tiptoes to the far side of the room and gets in her sister’s wardrobe. Softly shutting the door just as Caleb and her sister walk in the room.

‘Sorry about the mess,’ says Charlotte. Closing the bedroom door behind her. Her mother would have told her to keep it open. ‘You can just sit on the bed if you like.’

‘No worries,’ says Caleb. Jumping up on the bed and sitting against the headboard. ‘You think this is messy, you should see my room.’

‘I’d like to,’ says Charlotte. Sitting next to Caleb on the unmade bed. The fluffy blue duvet. Her collection of plush throw pillows — all different kinds of animals she bought from the Warehouse. They are sitting even closer than they were in the kitchen. Close enough to give her mother a heart attack.

Emily stands in the darkness of the wardrobe, pressed up against drawers and the clothes rack. There are rows of white light shining through the wooden slits in the door. Very quietly, Emily bends down and looks through one of the cracks.

‘I’m surprised you want to hang out with me,’ says Charlotte. Her hands fumbling with the alpaca pillow. Her shoulder pressed up against Caleb’s.

‘What do you mean,’ says Caleb, awkwardly. ‘We’ve known each other forever.’

‘Only because our mums were friends. We’ve never hung out at school or anything. Until you showed me Gary the other day, we’d barely talked at all.’

Caleb fiddles with his Walkman, looking down at the bed. ‘I don’t know. I guess I thought we could be friends again.’

Emily’s face is pushed up against the door. She is watching her sister and Caleb on the bed. She wishes she could be more like her sister, talking to a boy in her bedroom. Laughing and smiling. The way he looks at her. The way she looks at him. She wishes she wasn’t the one shut in a fucking wardrobe.

‘Do you and your friends talk about me at school? You know, about the rugby field.’

Caleb goes quiet. He is fiddling with his headphones now, looking down at the bed. ‘Yeah, I guess so. Sometimes. I’ve heard a few things. But I know it’s mostly bullshit.’

Emily can hear their muffled voices but can’t make out what they’re talking about. Probably sex, she thinks. Probably drugs or sex. The wardrobe smells like her sister. Old clothes she’d buried in there. Clothes she never wore but would get mad at Emily for taking.

‘I didn’t want to do it you know.’ Charlotte looks down at the bed; throws the alpaca on the floor. ‘Thank you for showing me your lizard.’

Against the hard wood of the wardrobe door Emily sees her sister lean over and start kissing Caleb. They are kissing properly, like grown-ups. The way she’d seen in movies and on

television. Their mouths crashing into each other and hands moving recklessly over their bodies. Emily would be worried she'd chip a tooth. They lie down on the bed and keep kissing each other, scattering the plush toys over the mattress. Caleb puts his hands on her sister's breasts.

'Alright,' says Charlotte. Rolling over and adjusting her black top. 'I'll be back in a second. I'm just going to grab a glass of water. You want one?'

Caleb sits up on the bed. 'Got any Raro?'

'Sure, Raro. Then we better set Gary free. I promised Emily she could come too.' Charlotte walks out of the bedroom and shuts the door behind her as she goes. Caleb leans back against the headboard.

Emily isn't too sure what to make of what she just saw. She had heard her mother use the term *sexually active,* but it was a whole different thing to see it in action. She watches Caleb on the bed, looking at his Walkman, and thinks about how easy it would be to slide into her sister's place. They do look similar, after all. Their mother even said so. Her legs are tired from crouching down so long, so she takes a small step backwards to adjust the tension. Her butt bumps against the set of drawers and she stumbles forward, whacking her forehead against the wardrobe door.

Caleb hears a thud from Charlotte's wardrobe and looks up, startled. 'Hello?' he calls out, slowly getting off the bed.

'Fuck,' mutters Emily, shutting her eyes tightly. As if trying her best to just disappear.

'Who's there?' yells Caleb. Picking up the fuzzy alpaca and throwing it against the wardrobe.

Gigs up, thinks Emily. Might as well come out now before he calls out to Charlotte.

The wardrobe doors open and out steps Charlotte's little sister. She is dressed like Charlotte and even has make up on. Caleb had never really noticed her before.

'What the fuck?' Says Caleb. 'Have you been in there the whole time?'

'I'm sorry, I just—' Emily is startled. Her face goes red. She is trying to think of something to say. She only had time to put eyeliner on one eye — she must look fucking ridiculous. 'Can I see your lizard?' She blurts out. It was all she could think of.

Caleb's frazzled. Still not sure what the hell's going on. 'Ah sure, I guess.' He picks up his school bag and undoes the zipper. Pulls out his lunchbox from the bottom of the bag. Emily can see the small green thing inside. He walks over to Emily and takes off the plastic lid.

Emily looks at the creature, crouched at the corner of the box. Its coarse body. Its tiny green head. Caleb is standing right over her. His arms holding the lunchbox down at her waist. His too-big shirt hanging over chino shorts. She can smell his Lynx body spray. ‘Can I touch it?’ She asks.

‘Sure, go ahead.’

She places her fingertip on the lizard’s head, and slowly moves her hand down it’s body — much smoother than she thought it would be. Its curled-up tail with its tiny legs and feet. It seems to come to life at her touch. ‘Do you think he likes it?’

Caleb’s hands tremor while he’s holding out the lunchbox. Charlotte’s sister is leaning into him, pushing the lunchbox against his leg. He can smell her flowery perfume. ‘Oh yeah,’ he murmurs. ‘He definitely likes it.’

Emily’s hands caress the lizard. Its small body stiffening as she moves her fingers along it. ‘I think he *really* likes it.’ She smiles.

Suddenly, the bedroom the door. Charlotte pauses, taking in the scene. The two glasses of raro drop to the floor. ‘What the fuck is going on here?’

Caleb pulls away. Quickly shuts the lid of his lunchbox, closing Gary inside. ‘I swear it’s not what it looks like.’

The Paintings Have All Been Taken Down

'It's beautiful, isn't it?'

I am sitting with my father in the living room, watching summer rain through the open ranch slider. It falls in heavy ceaseless drops. He has made me a coffee — milk, no sugar, with a splash of vanilla syrup. He calls me a fag when I ask for vanilla syrup. I tell him he shouldn't use the word fag. He says I've been at university too long.

The rain is steady on the aluminium roof, the noise filling the room like an acoustic drum machine. Dad has turned the radio off. He says that if you need a speaker at the beach you are missing the point. The same must go for rainy Sunday afternoons. We sit, we listen, and we drink.

The paintings have all been taken down and the cupboards are empty. Dad had to fetch the coffee mugs from a cardboard box in the garage. God knows how long it took him to find the vanilla syrup. Most of the furniture has been taken away as well and we are left with the bare essentials: a table, a few chairs, a couch and the television. The room feels open and empty.

The old pizza oven is still outside on the deck, sitting idle in the pale rain. It must be too heavy to take away. On summer nights we would sit on deck chairs around the fire, listening to Dad tell old rugby stories and waiting for stone oven to heat up. Often, we would end up cooking the pizzas in the kitchen or just ordering Domino's. But it was nice enough just sitting around the fire for a while.

'How's the coffee?' he asks.

'I think I'm going to stay with mum over the summer.'

He nods like he knew it was coming. 'That bad huh?'

My father looks older in the empty house. There are little furniture dents in the carpet, where the coffee table and the other couches used to be. A small reminder of what once was. There are squares on the wall where the paintings used to hang, and the sunlight has faded the paint around them. It is a room without the *living* in it.

Rain falls hard in the monochrome silence. Dad put too much syrup in the coffee, and it gets sweeter and sweeter the more I drink. The storm has brought warmth with it, and the

open ranch slider makes the room feel almost tropical — if you can close your eyes and block out the rain that is.

'I love that smell,' says Dad, as he finishes his coffee. 'Fresh rain on pavement. There's nothing quite like it.'

'Petrichor,' I tell him.

'Huh?'

'Petrichor. It's the smell of rain after a dry spell.'

'I'm glad your English degree is teaching you something.'

Later, on the 6 o'clock news, we will hear that rain has flooded most of the region. Images of cars rolling violently awash; trampolines hurtling in the gust; a child clutching a plush toy stranded on a helpless footpath, trying his best to navigate the dripping chaos.

'It's beautiful isn't it,' Dad stands up and puts our mugs in the kitchen sink.

'Beautiful,' I nod in agreement.

'Well, not really,' he says. 'It's just rain.'

Fish of New Zealand 5 – 7

On the way back from the party she asked what I meant when I said that [redacted]. I said I wasn't really too sure. The huge moon was full, and it was close to the horizon. It out-shone the stars in that part of the sky.

The neon lights of various fast-food chains reflected and refracted through the window. The air was warm for that time of night. She sped up for the oranges and slowed down to the reds and greens. Some words can only mean one thing.

*

Her shape is in the mattress — made or unkempt. The weight of her is folded in the sheets.

The packet says take half a tablet, once, daily, for one week; then one tablet once a day thereafter. Curtains drawn. Sunlight seeps darkly. The morning folded in, with all the others gone to waste. I text in sick and my boss asks for a doctor's note. Says it's the third time this month grimace emoji. I know my doctor and I know I can get a note, but I know that would mean leaving the house. I reply at midday saying I can't get an appointment till tomorrow, and say that I'll probably be feeling better by then anyway. My boss replies with a thumbs up emoticon.

The worst is all the perfect weather. It would be easier if it was raining. Golden light illuminates the specks of dust; the window frame casts warm squares on the duvet. There is housework to be done: clothes on the floor, dishes in the sink, moping, bathrooms, and vacuuming. And they will be there to do again tomorrow. She was always better at keeping on top of the washing.

Go outside, she would always say. *You know it makes you feel better. A productive day always means leaving the house.* So we would go to the supermarket, or the second hand

bookstore, or even just a drive around the lake. And then we would come back home and clean.

I roll back into sheets and duvet. Socks under the covers, pillow without a pillowcase, the space she left has a temperature. Preloved books stacked atop the wardrobe — bookmarks on the pages where she'd given up. My boss texts me to let me know that there's a meeting tomorrow morning. I reply with an okay hand sign emoji. Her scent on the pillow — I breathe in and masturbate. It was always bigger in her hands. On quiet afternoons, she would whisper in my ear, *nothing turns me on more than fresh sheets.*

Used mugs on the bedside table — coffee stained and aching — push my face into the pillow, harder now. A still-warm, washing-powder whisper: *bend me over the dresser and read to me.*

I wish that we could talk about it, while we made the bed like we used to. There are bigger problems now than how to fold a God damn fitted sheet. Oscillate ceiling fan, vacuum the stairs, a haunted house is never scary in the daytime. Laundry poised for folding, piled naked on the bed. She's left her scent on every other garment.

By late afternoon it's all I can do just to keep my eyes open. I take another tablet — twice a day, thereafter. Fold away the day with a doctor's note. One by one, tidy up fragments and vacuum cleaner memories. Cleanse me of her. Place the bookmark in the page I gave up at.

*

I understood from a very young age that I would have to give a blowjob at some point in my life. I can't remember the exact day I worked this out, but thankfully it was a long time before I actually had to do it. Which I imagine, for a lot of girls, is not the case.

Penises I had seen up to this point in my life: my dad's; my brother's, when we were younger and used to bath together; my cousin Caleb's at the swimming hole when he was getting changed; Jason Segal's in the opening scene of *Forgetting Sarah Marshall.* I didn't

know a lot about penises then, and sometimes it feels like I know even less about them now. I knew that all boys had them, hanging between their legs, and I wondered how they were able to fit them in their underwear and move around all day. Sitting down at their desks, standing back up, running around on the back field playing scrag. I imagined it must have been uncomfortable. I was glad I wasn't a boy.

When I first found out about blowjobs, I was confused. I didn't understand the point of it. Boys wee from there. Why would I ever want to put it anywhere near my mouth? I also didn't entirely understand exactly what it was I was supposed to do. Do you blow on it? God, if only it were that easy. I knew that I would have sex one day, and that was to have children. I understood that a penis would go in my vagina, and I had come to terms with that. But now I had to put one in my mouth? I just didn't see the purpose.

As I got older the inevitability of blowjobs became more and more clear. Girls would talk about them, and boys would talk about getting them. *It was over the summer, at my parent's holiday home in Whangamatā. Nah, she doesn't live around here, you guys wouldn't know her.* I began to think that maybe I wouldn't have to do it, that I could somehow steer clear of blowjobs, keep them at arm's length — at least until I was much, much older. But soon enough I realized they were pretty much unavoidable — blowjobs were a forgone conclusion. Anal, at least, you can talk your way out of. Say that I'm just not that kind of girl. But in today's day and age, blowjobs are *de rigueur*.

Stacey was the first in my friend group to ever give a blowjob. Or at least the first one to tell anyone about it. It was with her boyfriend Curtis. They had been together for two weeks. She said it didn't last very long, and that it tasted like the ocean. They did it in her bedroom while her parents were out of the house. He took a shower afterwards and she sat in the lounge watching television. *Would you do it again?* Megan asked her. *Well, I've set the precedent now. I think I'm gonna have to.*

I didn't have a boyfriend, but I sat next to a boy named Ihaia every morning on the bus. We went to different schools. He got off at Spotswood College while I stayed on the bus to Girls' High. I would complain about my friends, or my sister, and he would tell me about the books he was reading or talk about skateboarding. One morning he asked if I wanted to come over on the weekend. *Yeah, my parents are away for the weekend. We could hang out, watch a movie. Only if you want to.*

Yeah, okay, I mean, definitely. I'd like to hang out and watch a movie. Sure!

Cool, just come around whenever. He put on his backpack, picked up his skateboard, and got off the crowded bus.

That night I googled the word 'blowjob'. I waited until everyone had gone to bed and I was alone in my room with the lights off. I grabbed my phone off the bedside table and plugged the word into google. It came up with images, and links to different videos on various porn sites. I had never watched porn before, and I was scared that my parents might find it in my search history. I decided that if they were to find it, I would act innocent and blame it on my sister. She has a boyfriend and I'm sure that she's watched porn before. I clicked on a video called 'Sloppy Deepthroat' and waited for it to load. The girl in the video had her shirt off and the man's penis was gigantic. She was on her knees and the man was laid back on the side of the bed. She put her hands on his knees and looked up at him with moon shaped eyes. I skipped the video forward. Now she was moving her head back and forward really fast, eyeliner running down her face. He was holding her hair in a makeshift ponytail and almost forcing her head up and down. I switched off my phone and threw it to the end of the bed. I am never giving a blowjob in my life. Never.

The following night, when I was feeling a little more brave, I decided to do more research. I picked up my phone and typed into the search bar: 'Tips for giving good blowjobs.' The results, this time, were much less overwhelming. There was a video with the thumbnail of a woman holding a banana, and articles from a few different websites I'd heard of. I clicked on the Cosmo article titled 'Orgasmic Blowjob: Tips to Make Your Man Explode.' The first tip was: *Don't rush. Take your time.* Piece of cake, I thought, I can do that one easy. The second tip: *Talk to him on your knees.* That one seemed relatively straightforward too. I kept scrolling through the different instructions and it made me a lot less nervous. One of the tips said: *remember, above everything else, blowjobs are for your own pleasure.* This made me strangely excited. I was almost looking forward to it now. And the final tip: *don't forget to cradle the balls.* The balls. My God. How could I forget about the balls!

The following day at school I decided to talk to Stacey. The tips I'd read online had calmed me down a bit, but I still wasn't sure what to expect. She was sitting alone on the bench beneath the kauri tree, scrolling through her phone and eating a ham sandwich. *Stacey,* I smiled, walking over to the tree. *Do you mind at all if I ask you something?*

She gulped down her sandwich and put her phone in her pocket. *Sure thing. Shoot.*

The thing is, I told her, sitting down on the bench. *The thing I want to ask is kind of personal.*

She looked at me, eyes wide, and opened her mouth. *Oh my God girl. What is it?*

Well, the thing is, I think that, well, I want to know how to give a blowjob.

Stacey started laughing. *Wow, okay. So, who's the lucky guy?*

Okay, it's not a sure thing. But there's this guy I sit with on the bus, who's really nice. I'm going round to his place this weekend and I just want to know what to do if anything happens.

Stacey grinned. *Girl, you have nothing to worry about. He'll just be happy you're touching it in the first place.*

But, like. I gripped the bench below me. *What if I do it wrong and hurt him or something.*

She started laughing again. *You're not going to hurt him. There's really no way to do it wrong. It'll probably only take a few seconds anyway.*

I gripped the seat nervously and looked at the ground. The yellow-brown leaves of the kauri tree.

Trust me. Stacey said. Through a mouthful of ham sandwich. *It's honestly a whole lot easier than you'd think.*

The school bell rang and we got up off the bench, leisurely making our way back to the classroom. *Just remember.* Stacey said, finishing the last of her sandwich. *Just act as if it's big, even if it's not. Just act like it's the biggest dick you've ever seen. Guys love that.*

We walked over the grass and up to the courtyard. *What if it is really big?*

She smiled. *You can only hope.* We walked into the classroom block. *I'm heading to math, I'll catch you later. And I want to hear details Monday morning!*

I got to Ihaia's around three-thirty. It was only a short walk from my house. He met me at the door and let me inside, telling me I could take a seat on the couch.

You want a drink? he asked. Walking into the kitchen. *We've got water, fizzy, or juice.*

I asked for an L&P and he poured me a tall glass, placing it on the coffee table in front of me. We talked for a while, about school and skateboarding — he said he'd show me the boards in his garage. I tried to keep cool, but my heart was racing and my hands shook as I held the fizzy drink.

Are you okay? He asked. When there was a pause in conversation. *You seem kind of different than you do on the school bus.*

I'm fine, I told him. Putting down my glass. *I just don't usually have fizzy drinks at home.*

We took a while flicking through Netflix trying to find a movie. He said that he'd seen most of them before. He asked what I liked and I told him I didn't really mind, so long as it wasn't too scary. We ended up settling on *What We Do in the Shadows.* It was about vampires but was more funny than scary. He'd seen it before but was happy to watch it again. Ihaia turned the lights off and started the movie; we sat together on the couch sharing a blanket.

Partway through the film, when the vampires were sneaking into a night club, Ihaia put his hand on my leg. He turned to me, his other arm over the couch. *I really like talking to you, you know.*

I turned into him and kissed him, lots of lips but not much tongue. I pulled back and whispered: *I really like talking to you too.*

The rest of the movie I don't really remember. We lay down on the couch and started making out under the blanket. I told him his parents should go away more often. He took off his shirt and I took off mine. A glimpse of a vampire projectile vomiting blood. I wrapped my legs over his hips, and we started kissing harder. He put one of his hands on my breasts. *Is this okay?* he whispered. I smiled and told him it felt good.

We made out for a while longer; he started kissing my neck. I ran my hands along his back. I stopped, sat up, and he asked what was wrong. I said nothing, but I could do with a drink of water. He said no problem and that he would grab it in a second. He sat on the couch with the blanket over his lap. I guess he must have liked the scene that was on.

When he got back from the kitchen he asked if I wanted to keep making out. I told him we could do something else if he liked. He grinned and sat down. *What did you have in mind?*

The vampires started arguing with a group of werewolves.

I can give you a blowjob if you like?

Blood on fur. Vampire teeth.

Do you mind if I go down on you instead?

The Whitebait Inn

We meet at a café in Mokau, an hour from New Plymouth and an hour-and-a-half from Te Awamutu. This is considered neutral ground. The cafè is called The Whitebait Inn, and it is hard to miss, with a large mural of a man in a yellow rain jacket displayed on the roof. He is scooping up a school of whitebait with a handheld net. I am sitting by a window and in the distance I can see Taranaki Maunga, thick with a coating of snow. An old married couple is sitting a few tables over, sharing a whitebait fritter. They look happy and it makes me miserable.

The box of Alex's belongings is on the seat next to me. There's her Fit-bit, her phone charger, the sweet pea and jasmine scented candle I got for her birthday, an old t-shirt covered in Double Spanish White paint from the hallway in Dad's new house, and two meerkats that Grandma knitted for her— not that you can tell they're meerkats from looking at them. Grandma has dementia and spends most of her time knitting and watching *The Chase*. She can remember Alex's favourite animal but can't seem to remember that we have broken up.

The waitress brings out two coffees: a large caramel latte with almond milk and a cappuccino with chocolate sprinkled on top rather than cinnamon. She places them gently on the bistro table and looks curiously at the meerkats as she does so.

What do we have here? she asks.

These? I say, turning the box to face her. *They're meerkats*.

Oh I see… I didn't realise meerkats had wings is all.

She smiles, awkwardly, and walks back into the kitchen. I sip my cappuccino and wait for Alex to arrive.

The day is cool and cloudless and the mountain stands staunch against the blue Taranaki sky. Dad's Hilux is parked outside. He let me borrow it for the day because my car doesn't have a warrant. *Whatever you've done,* he told me. *Whatever you said. She'll forgive you if she truly loves you.* It's been a month since we last saw each other. Since she stormed out of the flat

with tears in her eyes following a fight we had about something that now seems remarkably unimportant. Not long after she left, I started putting all her things in an empty shoebox.

Her converse shoes and her black summer dress. She left in such a hurry there was a lot she left behind. Her Fit-bit… her phone charger… I had to push the bed out to unplug it from the wall. The candle on the bedside table… I scanned the room for anything else she might have left behind. Her paint-covered t-shirt and an old pair of shorts. I had to pick them off the floor and fold them on the bed. My high school leaver's jersey that she liked to wear on cold nights — I decided it was better off with her anyway. Her shape in the mattress where she slept side on, dreaming of a future that maybe tangled with my own. I put this in the shoebox too. Her scent on the pillowcase— it took a while to scrape off, but it's in there, right between the birthday candle and the meerkats.

I searched the room for hours. Inside-out, head-to-toe, determined to collect anything that belonged to her, the shoebox bursting at the seams. Naturally, I thought about burning it— a pathetic ritual, but I couldn't bring myself to burn the meerkats. And anyway, I wanted my good pair of jeans back. Mostly, there was her absence. The space she had once taken up and now left behind. This seemed impossible to get rid of. It's hard fitting infinite space in a box designed for size ten Nikes.

Alex is twenty minutes late. She doesn't apologize, and says she had to drive for miles down the street because she didn't want to parallel park. She thanks me for the coffee, which is now cold, and sits down in the patch of sun across from me.

She's dyed her blonde hair pink. I tell her it looks pretty and that it suits her; she agrees and says she needed a change. She starts talking about her family and asks me questions about my own: *How's your dad's new house? Has he finished painting it yet? Is your grandma doing okay?* I try to answer but keep getting distracted by the meerkats. I can't remember whether or not they're supposed to have tails.

I have some of your clothes by the way. She hands over denim jeans and a plain black top, both washed and folded. I say thanks and pass her the shoebox. *What are these?* she says, eyeing up the meerkats sitting on top of her shirt.

They're meerkats. Grandma knitted them for you.

Well, tell her thanks. Alex brushes a strand of pink hair from her eyes. *Why do they have such large fangs?*

I'm not sure if grandma knows what a meerkat is.

We both laugh and Alex places the box on the far end of the table. The older couple have finished their whitebait fritter, and are standing by the counter settling their bill. While the man is paying I notice the woman looking over at the meerkats.

Wow, those are marvellous, she says to Alex. *Did you knit them yourself? It's a wonderful hobby.*

Oh no, these were a gift. My mother tried to teach me once, but I wasn't any good. I never had the patience for it.

Well they look wonderful. I've never seen giraffes made with such detail!

Oh, thank you. Alex smiles.

You're a beautiful couple by the way. How long have you been together?

Alex gives me a look. Neither of us too sure what to say. I go to answer but Alex beats me to it. *Thank you, but no, we're just friends.*

Well I think you would make a marvellous couple, if you don't mind me saying so.

Alex thanks the woman and she waves us goodbye as she walks out the front door with her husband.

Did you find the place alright? I ask. *The man with the net makes it pretty easy.*

Yeah, I did, but he could do with a paint job. And I guess nobody told him whitebait season finished a month ago.

We sit for a while, talking, laughing, drinking our coffees, and soon enough the waitress comes to clear the table and we both know that it's time for us go. We hug and say goodbye outside, underneath the man with the whitebait net. As I jump in the car, ready to head back to New Plymouth, I watch Alex in the rear-view mirror. She is walking down the main street, shoebox-in-hand, pink hair blowing free in the cold mountain wind.

Big Blue

A black and white photograph on the cover of the *Taranaki Daily Times* — this is how we all first saw it. It was talked about at the Four Square checkout, Saturday rugby sidelines, and middle-aged morning walks. It was big news for a small town. There were discussions on what might happen to the body, and a rahui was placed on the area, restricting fishing and the collection of shellfish until a decision was reached. In the end it just sat and decomposed. Perhaps if it had washed up on a busier section of the beach, there would have been a little more urgency, but getting to the whale was quite an expedition. Where the body lay was all cliff face and farmland, and the closest beach access was Paratutu Rock (North) or Tapawai Beach (South), both of which were about an hour's walk from the carcass and had to be made at low tide. So, because it wasn't in the way, and there was no one near enough to complain about the stench, it was left alone to quietly rot.

There was a school assembly. Miss Taylor talked about the whale and advised the students not go and see it, and if we did, we should *only* go with our parents, and under no circumstance should we touch it. Mrs Hislop, our Room 2 teacher, did a whole topic about whales, inspired by the carcass. We each drew a big blue fish on our cover page and spent a few weeks learning about their life cycle. She told us that whale vomit was used in our mothers' perfume and was worth millions and millions of dollars. The vomit was called *ambergris*. The idea that grown-ups would pay so much money for whale vomit was hard to comprehend, but we all trusted Mrs Hislop. She was one of the good ones.

It was a dry Saturday afternoon when we decided to go see the whale. Half of the town was down at the Kaitaki rugby club. Yellow cards and side-line meat raffles. We had played in the morning — losing 42-5 — and now the senior thirds game was on. Afterwards, our parents would spend the rest of the afternoon in the clubrooms, for jugs of Export and man-of-the-match speeches. While the game was on, most of us kids were on the back field, jumping from the goal posts into piles of tackle bags. Hardened bare feet and muddy elbows.

‘Let’s go see Big Blue.’ It was Atalya who came up with the idea. Pushing off the tackle bags after she’d leapt from the cross bar. She had curly black hair and was the best tackler on the team.

‘Screw that,’ said Devin. ‘The whale’s ages away. I’m not walking that far to see a dead fish.’

‘Aw come on, it can’t be that far.’ Atalya picked up a blue tackle bag and chucked it back into the pile. Carpet burn on her elbows from the plastic cover. ‘You remember what Mrs Hislop said about the vomit? We could all be billionaires by tomorrow.’

‘Yeah, let’s do it.’ Nikau was leaning against the goal posts, eating a bag of Blue Bird salt-and-vinegar chips. ‘I swear it’s not that far. My dad goes musseling at Tapawai all the time.’

‘Fine,’ said Devin. He was our team’s first-five, and he never once made a conversion. ‘I’ll just have to check with Dad.’

‘Stuff that,’ said Atalya, ‘he’s just going to say no. Our parents will be drunk by now anyway, they won’t even notice we’re gone.’

And so we went. Across the back field and the hard summer dirt. Slyly past the rugby club, ducking under the window that looked in on the speeches — paper raffle tickets drawn from a Lion Red cap. Past the changing sheds, that smelt of tackle bags and hard-fought sweat. Over the small wooden fence, and across the gravel car park, to the dirt track that ran alongside the river.

Over fallen bark, P.M. heat, coins of sunlight through the trees. The ale-brown river, stretching down from the distant Maunga, cutting through farmland and flowing out to sea. We walked single file, pushing through shrubbery and watching for sticky-out roots, dreaming of ancient fish and million-dollar vomit. Across the river, the dilapidated marae, sitting idle and neglected between green hills. Beams of red, white, and black on the low-down *whares*, whispered pōwhiri long ago sung. In kindergarten, we stayed overnight — ate pork and kumara from the hangi and slept on the floor. Our supervisor, Matua Priest, told us a taniwha lived in the river, just beneath the waterfall coming down by the bridge. We all woke up early and threw rocks at it the next day.

Leaves of flax, stinging nettle, old boulders held in clay. We trekked farther down the hidden track, bending down along the river. Atalya was out ahead, pushing through the overgrown bush, a trail of fellow schoolchildren following behind her. Sodden vines and seeds

of gravel. Damp birdsong in the air. There were sections of the track that had crumbled away into the river — probably during a flood — and other parts that were blocked by fallen trees, so we often had to go offtrack. Devin cut through the dense bush with a bamboo stick, and Atayla shoulder barged through flax. There we sections so overgrown that we lost the path altogether, but carrying along close to the river we were always able to find it again. Sheets of water moving gently along the river's surface, pooling in the corners and lapping against the rocks. We kept an eye out for taniwhas through the gaps in the trees. Nikau held a blade of grass between his thumbs and whistled to the birds in the flora — kereru getting drunk on berries and piwhakawhaka darting about in the skinny branches. Finally, towards the end of the track, the trees began to open up, and the dirt faded to sand as we turned the bend at the river mouth.

The tide was out when we got to the beach. Clambering over the dunes, we saw mussel-covered rocks sticking out from the water in the whitewash. We ran across the black sand and splashed about in the cool water. Open sky and salty air.

'Did anyone bring sunblock?' Devin yelled out. 'My mum's going to kill me if I come home burnt again.'

'Hurry up, let's get a move on.' Atalya was already off down the beach, away from the river and alongside the white cliffs. 'We've got to make sure we're back before the tide comes in.'

She was right. The high-water mark of driftwood and seashells wasn't far from the entrance of the track — far above the jagged cliffs further down the beach. Miss Taylor was right about going at low tide. We all got out of the water and followed Atalya down the beach. The sun was still high in the sky, and it beat down heavy. We had to walk on the wet sand by the ocean so our feet didn't burn, our footprints washing away with the rise and fall of every wave.

'I'm going to buy a bunch of Weet-Bix packets, so I can collect all the All Black's cards.' Nikau had his shirt on his head, draping down the back of his neck. 'I can finally get the Legend Edition Jonah Lomu.'

'I'm getting a new motorbike,' said Devin.

'What's the point? You don't have a driver's license.'

‘I could still use it on the farm, and I’m sure Dad would let me drive it to school some mornings.’

‘We should save some of the vomit for Miss Hislop. She can use it as perfume.’

‘Gross!’ said Devin, dragging his bamboo through the sand. ‘She smells bad enough already.’

‘It’s called ambergris,’ said Atalya, shoving Devin on the shoulder. ‘And I’m sure it smells really good.’

‘Well let’s hope so, because she’s going to need a lot of it.’

Atalya grabbed the bamboo stick off Devin, snapped it over her knee, and threw both shards out into the ocean.

The cliffs dipped in and out as we made our way down the beach, revealing new bays and inlets as we rounded every corner, each one different from the last. There were caves in the cliff face too, some tunnelling straight inwards to a dead end and others bending around and coming back out again further along the cliffs. Atalya told us not to go too close to the cave entrances, as they were known to sometimes collapse. But most of us ignored her, daring each other to run in and out as we trekked along the coast.

Rounding one of the corners we came across a hut made of driftwood. Swollen wood made smooth by the ocean, tied together with spinifex and flax. We had seen stick huts before, and sometimes made tee-pees ourselves in the bushes by the skatepark or down Oakura beach, but this was the most impressive hut we had ever seen.

‘It must be Erik’s hut.’

Erik was a homeless man who lived on the beach. The paper called him The Homeless Oracle. He often hung around the rugby club and was forever seen walking barefoot along State Highway 45. Sometimes we threw rocks at him from the school bus.

‘No, it’s not. Erik lives at Tupuae beach. Me and Dad saw his stick house when I went musseling there.’

‘He used to live there,’ said Atayla. ‘The locals tore his house down and made him move down the beach.’

It was true. The papers said the fifty-eight-year-old sickness beneficiary was evicted from his home, of driftwood and tarpaulins, late last year. The district council received a letter, signed by the residents of the Tupuae country estate, complaining about his dangerous behaviour. The dangerous behaviour being drinking beer on the beach, smoking illegal

substances, and sometimes walking around naked. We had seen Erik a bunch of times, at the rugby club and trudging down the main road, and he always seemed pretty friendly — even when we threw rocks at him. Erik received a letter from the district council, ordering him to vacate the stick hut. When he refused, the locals took it upon themselves — pulling apart the sticks and letting the tarps tumble to the sand.

'If this is Erik's hut then where's Erik?'

The hut was two stories high and had a driftwood balcony on the top level. The grandiose front door was constructed of timber, with a mahogany door handle. The welcome mat was the words 'Kia ora' drawn into the sand. There were long line fishing hooks and a few pairs of wet board shorts on the clothesline outside.

'He's at the footy game. I saw him hanging around the clubrooms before we left.'

'Let's go inside.' Devin was halfway through the door before he said it. The kitchen bench a washed up sheet of metal. The living room sofa a large hunk of driftwood.

'We can't just let ourselves in. This is his house for God's sake.' Atalya pulled Devin back out the door. 'We have to hurry up anyway guys. The tide's started to turn.'

So we left the driftwood mansion, and carried along through the bays. Step-by-step in weekend excitement, slowly making our way to the cold dead whale.

Soon enough we reached Tapuae Beach, which meant we knew we were close. There was a mown grass track that came down from the roadside, and a small stream flowing out to the sea. There were large rocks sticking out by the river mouth, where Nikau and his dad went musseling. There were houses on the grassy hills — part of the country estate up the track. Multi-storied and wide, the homes had large glass windows overlooking the ocean, very different from the pile of sticks we'd seen earlier. We waded through the knee-deep stream, splashing each other in our trail, the river water much colder than the ocean.

'I wonder if we'll see any naked people.' Devin was out ahead now. Eagerly crossing the stream and making his way over to the spinifex-covered dunes around the bend, patterned by the indents of erosion. Out from the dunes at the corner of the beach, was a small rocky hill, Nikau told us it was the remains of an ancient volcano. The sand had built up around it, so it stuck out of the land into the ocean, the harsh waves crashing all around it.

'Why the hell would we see any naked people?' Atalya asked.

'Well, because this is a nude beach.'

Atalya looked confused. ‘What makes you think this is a nude beach Devin?’

‘Because of all the naked people.’

Atalya looked around the empty beach, and turned back to Devin. ‘Devin. There are no bloody naked people. This isn’t a nude beach.’

We carried on through the sand and up to the dunes. Devin walked ahead confidently. ‘See that sticky-outy bit just there?’ He pointed at the ancient volcano.

‘The peninsula?’ Atalya asked.

‘Yeah that sticky-outy bit, just around there. That’s where the nude beach is.’

We made it to the dunes and treaded through the spinifex, the sand collapsing away beneath our feet. Nikau had picked up a rock from the stream and was tossing it from hand to hand. ‘Devin, I’ve been here quite a bit, musseling with dad. Not once have we seen any naked people.’

‘Well, do you go musseling around the sticky-outy bit?’

‘No, it’s a marine reserve.’

‘Well there you go. That’s why you haven’t seen any naked people.’

Devin reached the top of the dune first. He looked out over the beach in front of us and his face lit up in excitement. ‘There, there. Look!’ He was pointing. We followed up behind him, trudging through the soft sand — scorching hot on our bare feet. When we reached the top we saw what he was pointing at. Atalya stood in disbelief. Nikua dropped his rock on the ground.

There were two topless sunbathers, lying on rainbow-coloured beach towels. They lay with their feet to the ocean, and their backs to the dunes; their large breasts displayed free under the sun. They were wearing underwear, so Devin wasn’t entirely right, but none of us were going to complain. They lay there half naked, the harsh sun beating down. The smell of salt and summer air. The only sound the crashing waves.

‘Jesus, you were right.’

‘Of course I’m right. It’s a nude beach.’

‘Two woman with their tops off doesn’t make it a nude beach.’ Atalya stood at the top of the dune, her pink and black rugby shorts still damp from the stream.

‘Tell me any other beach where you would see two women with their tops off,’ said Devin, looking down over the sunbathers. ‘Tell me Atalya. Because I’d sure like to know.’

Nikau tied his shirt around the back of his head, to stop it from draping over his eyes. ‘I hope the two of them are wearing sunblock.’

‘Come on,’ Atalya said. Walking down the other side of the dune. ‘We can’t just stand here and stare at them. We’ve got to get to that whale.’

We stood at the top of the dune awhile longer, taking in the view. For most of us it was the first pair of breasts we’d ever seen, other than our mother’s and women in R rated movies. What we saw on the beach was a kind of waking up. We took it in, tried our best to process it, and followed Atalya down the black sand dune.

We passed the women in absolute silence. Moved through the sand in single file, avoiding eye-contact and not uttering a word. One of the women turned and looked at us as we passed. She laughed, turned back, and said something to her companion. We walked on and turned the bend, leaving the topless sunbathers in peace, around to the next hidden bay along the coast.

Once we were clear of the sunbathers we erupted in excited chatter. ‘Holy shit. Did you see them? That was amazing.’

‘I didn’t know they would look like that.’

‘We should come back every weekend.’

‘I can’t wait to tell my brother.’

‘They’re just nipples,’ said Atalya. ‘We’ve all got them, you know.’

‘Yeah, but didn’t you see,’ said Devin, a huge grin plastered on his face. ‘Her ones were blimmin’ massive!’

It’s almost as if we could sense the whale was closer. Around each turn, we expected to see it, the glorious hump in the sand. The long-awaited otherworldly corpse. A few times we thought we had spotted it, but we ran over to find only large smoothed-out rocks. The excited cheers lapsing to disappointed sighs. We were tired. The walk was much longer than we expected. The afternoon was closing in and the tide had started to rise.

We made quiet conversation as we walked — *who’s your favourite teacher?* and *my dad can eat more Weet-Bix than your dad*. We thought about our parents at the rugby club, drowning in Export and thumbing through raffle tickets. Some lucky bugger going home with a meat pack. We chattered over whether they would have noticed we were missing yet, and

collectively decided, probably not. We couldn't wait to tell Mrs Hislop about the whale at school on Monday.

With each empty bay we started to question whether there even was a whale. Maybe we had left it too long, and it had already washed out to sea. Had the whale already decomposed, to just a black puddle of bones we had missed somewhere along the rocky beach? Maybe Erik had come along one night, drunk on piss and high on marijuana, quiet and naked in the star light. Perhaps he had walked along one night, and stolen the vomit for himself — to abandon his beachside stick hut, and put a mansion up in the hills at Tupuae estate. We thought about turning back, but Atayla urged us to trek on. Our tired worn-out footsteps sound-tracked by the chorus of crashing west coast waves.

We could smell it long before we could see it. A horrible choking smell. 'Jesus,' said Nikau. 'Was that one of you?'

'No,' said Atalya. 'It must be Big Blue.'

With each bend in the cliffs the smell grew stronger. A coughing wet dumpster. Salty aired landfill. Not the kind of smell you could get used to. 'I can't stand it,' said Devin. Pinching his nose with his fingers. 'Why the hell would someone spray that on their body?'

'Hard out,' said Nikau. Spluttering into the sand. 'That smells worse than the dead cows we get on the farm.'

We walked on hard, straight into the stench. The sea breeze picking up ahead of us. We could see the sugar loaves — the set of islands out at sea — and Paratutu Rock in the skyline at the end of the cliffs. 'Man,' said Atalya. 'We've almost made it all the way to town.'

We were all exhausted. The chatter started to quiet. The beach became rockier, and it took longer to make it through each of the bays, the incoming tide leaving less sand for us to walk on. The cliff face became steeper, and we could no longer see the green hills above them. Every now and then pebbles would fall around us, and we would all quickly jump out of the way expecting a boulder to roll down behind them. We huddled together as we walked into the wind, tired legs and wind-burnt cheeks. The incoming tide and the unceasing stench of the whale.

Atalya was the first to see it. It looked just like a rock. She paused, pointed, and we all sprinted over, skidding into the sand and crowding around the giant stinking whale. Big Blue wasn't blue. He was drained and grey. He looked nothing like the pictures we had drawn in the

classroom. Sand had built up around him and his tail was buried entirely. We couldn't stand right next to him for too long because of the God awful smell.

'Let's climb it,' said Devin. Pinching his nose and stepping onto the sand that covered the tail. 'How often do you get the chance to stand on top of a whale?'

'Don't,' said Atalya. 'That's disrespectful. Miss Taylor told us we shouldn't even touch it.'

'Yeah, I wouldn't do that man,' said Nikau. Taking a big step back. 'It's skin's all decaying. You'll probably fall right in. I'm not walking all the way home with you stinking of whale goo.'

The waves were rolling increasingly high up the shoreline. Each time there was a big surge, the waves would come all the way up and lap against Big Blue. 'Alright,' said Atalya. 'We better hurry up. Someone grab some of the vomit and let's head back.'

We all looked at each other. 'How the hell do we get it to vomit?'

Nikau picked up a stick and poked it into the whale's mouth. Nothing happened. He wiggled it back and forth, trying to shimmy it in-between the colossal lips. He took a step back. 'Jesus Christ. I can't handle this guys. Someone else has got to do it.'

Devin tried next, ramming the stick in harder. It snapped in half against the whale's mouth. 'Dammit.' He muttered. Turning and wandering the beach, trying to find a thicker stick to poke it with.

Atalya stepped up to the whale and put her hand on the whale's mouth. She turned her face away and tried her best not to vomit. The rest of us all started dry retching. She put her hand inside its mouth and felt its blubbery lips. She reached in further, as far as she could, her arm was in all the way up to her elbow. 'Ew, ew, ew, ew, ew, ew, ew.' She pulled her arm out and ran into the sea. The whale lips closed with a mushy thud. She scrubbed her hands clean with salt water in the white wash.

'I think the vomit's all gone guys. Maybe some scientists took it when he first washed up.'

We stood there and looked at the whale, trying our best to ignore the stench. There were tracks around the sand where people had walked. It felt odd to see something so foreign on a beach so close to home. The carcass looked alien. Something otherworldly. Torn from its far away home and thrown onto the deadly shoreline. Its eye was a saucer of mucky yellow

gunge — a milk bowl gone spoilt in the sun. Deep black irises like pools of tar, a thin layer of slime keeping them enclosed.

'Just think,' said Atalya. Looking into the plates of black. 'Just think of what those giant eyes have seen.'

Specks of red, blood freckles in the mire. Devin poked the eye with a stick.

We turned and left, followed our footsteps down the sand, carrying the weight of vomit-less disappointment. Nikau nudged Atalya and she pushed him pack. 'Oh well. It was worth it just to see Big Blue.'

Back down the beach past familiar white cliffs, tripping and fumbling over rocks. We clambered along them as fast as we could, keeping one eye on the incoming tide. Around the same bends we had been through before, some places our footsteps had been washed away by the ocean. The sun had dropped low and the heat drained out of the day. Nikau put his shirt back on to keep warm. 'Hurry up!' Atalya kept yelling, urging us all to get a move on.

'I'm tired.' Devin complained. Moving along slowly. 'Can't we just stop for a quick break?'

Atalya looked at the ocean and then back at Devin. 'Unless you want to end up like Big Blue, I suggest you try to keep up.'

We passed the same caves digging into the cliff face. But no one had the energy to run into them. We just wanted to get back to the rugby club or be back at home in bed. To collapse in exhaustion and dream of ancient creatures on black sand.

We made it to Tapuae and crossed the shallow stream. The topless sunbathers had packed up and gone home. The rocks where Nikau went musseling were completely underwater and the ancient volcano was entirely out at sea. There was talk of going up the grass track and walking to the main road, maybe asking someone at the estate to call our parents. In the end we decided to put our heads down and carry onwards — our parents scorn much more feared than the rapidly approaching ocean.

We passed Erik's stick hut, in the gap in the cliff face. A few of us even considered staying there. We knew the waves didn't get up that high because the hut was still in one piece, and it was probably the last place until the rugby club that the ocean wouldn't get us. But then we pictured Erik coming home and seeing us all there, the kids who threw rocks at

him from the school bus. He would probably chase us away with a stick, or order us out into the ocean.

The water, by this point, was almost at the cliff face. We had to walk along directly beneath the bank. We kept an eye on the cliffs to watch out for falling rocks, while the ocean slowly wrapped itself around our hurried feet.

'How much further to go?' Someone called out to Atalya, who was pacing ahead while telling everyone to keep up.

'Just a few more bays, I think.' She didn't look sure of herself. Her confidence had started to fade after the daylong marathon. We reached a corner on the jagged cliffs, where the waves were already washing up against the rocks at the bottom. Atalya turned back to us. 'I don't think we're going to make it.'

'Well,' said Devin. Standing on a rock as the waves broke around it. 'What are we going to do?'

We all looked at Atalya. She sat down, cross legged on the rocky ground, and looked at the ocean. 'I don't know.'

We had been told, that when in situations such as this one, the number one rule was not to panic. Devin looked up the cliffs and at the breaking waves. 'We're all going to die!' he yelled. 'This was your idea Atalya. I told you guys I didn't even want to go.'

'Shut up Devin,' said Nikau. Leaning against the cliff face. 'How about we back track and see if we can make it back to Tupuae?'

'There's no way we're making it back that far. The tide's come in a mile since we were there.'

Atalya stood up and stepped down off the rock. 'Let's head back and see how far we can get. Maybe there's somewhere the cliffs are low enough for us to climb up.'

We made it back around the first bend without getting too wet, but the cliffs were still too steep for us to climb them. 'Let's go around to the next bay,' said Atalya. 'We'll try find a low point to climb up.'

The next corner was much harder to get around. The waves were already smashing into the rocks and nearly all the sand was submerged in water. We waded out, knee deep, and peered around the cliff face.

‘Look, over there.’ Atalya pointed. On the far side of the bay the cliffs dropped down, and we could see the grassy paddocks on top of it. But the waves had almost reached the banks there too. ‘We’re going to have to hurry.’

‘We’re not getting around this corner,’ said Devin. Watching the waves smash against the cliff face.

Atalya looked at him. ‘I think we’re going to have to.’ She studied the ocean and looked up at the banks. ‘If we time it right, I think we’ll be able to run through.’

‘My dad says that waves come in sets of seven,’ said Nikau. ‘If we count them we might be able to run through in a gap.’

We waited, counting, but it almost seemed pointless. There was a lull every now and then when the ocean was calm, but it was impossible to tell when it was going to happen. Nikau was counting, under his breath, watching the increasing waves rolling in on each other. He counted, watched, waited, and all of a sudden screamed: ‘Now!’

We each sprinted through the water as fast as we could, violent splashes in our wake. Nikau was right, there was a lull in the waves, but a new set was quickly approaching. We moved through the water and over the rocks as fast as our tired legs would take us, and just made it out the other side before a new wave crashed into the bank. ‘Come on,’ Atalya yelled, running along the beach. ‘We’ve still got to make it up that cliff.’

By the time we got there, the water was up against the bank. We helped each other up, finding footholds in the clay, pulling on rocks and tree roots. Devin stood on a layer of clay and pushed himself up in one big step, but as he shifted his weight the ground crumbled away beneath him. Nikau grabbed ahold of his shirt and pulled him onto the bank, and they watched the pebbles hit the water below. ‘Wow,’ said Devin, almost out of breath. ‘Thanks man, that was really close.’

We got halfway up the bank, away from the immediate danger of the waves, but it got a lot steeper towards the top. We struggled to find places to stand, and roots to hold onto, and the bank kept crumbling around us. We were stalled halfway up the precipice.

‘This is it,’ said Devin. ‘Oh my God, this is it. I didn’t even get the chance to get my driver’s license.’

‘Man,’ said Nikau. Looking down at the water below. ‘We really should have listened to Miss Taylor.’

We stayed there for what felt like hours, trapped against the bank, while the ocean slowly rose beneath us. We considered jumping in and trying to swim back, but Nikau told us it wasn't worth a shot. 'The waves are breaking too far out, and there's so much back wash. You jump in there and you'll get smashed against the cliffs. I don't care how good of a swimmer you are.'

'I'm sorry, guys,' said Atalya, clinging to the rocks. 'I guess this wasn't the best idea after all. We didn't even get any of the vomit.'

Devin looked down at the water, he was almost crying. 'Actually Atalya, it's called ambergris.'

'What the hell are you kids doing?' The voice came out of nowhere. We looked around the barren cliffs in shock. Above us, a face peered over the ledge. It was Erik on his way back from the footy.

'Help!' We all screamed. 'Help, please help!'

'Yeah, yeah, yeah,' said Erik. 'I guess I'll go fetch a rope.'

He was back in a few minutes, with a thick piece of bailing twine. He climbed down the bank as far as he could, holding tight to tufts of grass. 'Grab onto this,' he called out, lowering the rope. 'And don't any of you kids bloody fall.'

One by one he pulled us up the bank, chucking us onto the grass at the top. He looked relaxed on this cliff, like he'd climbed it before, while all of us were clinging on for dear life. Once we were all back on solid ground, we hugged each other and rolled around in the grass. Devin's cries had turned to tears of joy. Erik pulled himself up the bank and stood above us in the paddock. 'What the hell were you kids doing down there? Your parents are all looking for you at the rugby club.'

'We were going to see Big Blue.'

'The stinkin' whale? Why were you looking for that?'

We stood up one by one and brushed the grass from our clothes. 'We wanted to get the vomit.'

'Whale vomit? Yeah I've heard about that.' Erik looked at us thoughtfully. 'I think you can only get that from the live ones.'

We all started laughing.

'Come on,' said Erik. 'I guess I better show you the way back.'

Erik knew a track through the paddocks that went right back to the rugby club. We guessed that was so he could still make the walk there at low tide. He helped us under fences and guided us over stiles, following the stomped down grass of Erik's self-made farm track.

'I'm sorry you had to move your home,' said Atalya, as we walked. The sun dropping low on the watery horizon.

'It's alright,' said Erik, walking straight ahead. 'I managed to find a nice new spot for it. The fishing's better there anyway.'

'Is it true you walk around naked?' Devin ran along to catch up. 'The newspaper said that's why you got kicked out.

Erik stepped over an electric fence while we all crawled under. 'They're the ones who told me it was a damn nude beach.'

When we got back to the rugby club our parents ran up to hug us, their drunkenness having worn off in the panic of the last couple hours. There were two police cars there with their sirens going — apparently they were about to send out a search party. We thought they would be mad but they were mainly just relieved. Although Devin's dad said he was going to kick his ass tomorrow. Atalya's mum was crying and she asked us what had happened, why we'd all wandered off without telling them. We told them all about the whale and the topless sunbathers and how Erik had saved us by lifting us up the bank. Our mum's all went up and hugged him and a few of our dads' shook his hand. Erik said it wasn't any trouble.

We wrote stories about our adventure at school on Monday, and all the other kids asked us questions. It was difficult to write about the smell. We said sorry to Mrs Hislop because we didn't get her any vomit; she told us she was just pleased we were okay. We made the papers too. They wrote all about our adventure — they left out the part about the topless women though. Erik made the paper too, they called him a hero; said that if it wasn't for him we all might have drowned.

We never went back to visit Big Blue. He is probably all decomposed by now, his rotten body given back to the ocean. Nikau told us that each time he goes musselling with his dad, he runs around the peninsula to check for naked people. He hasn't seen any more of them yet but tells us that he'll keep us posted. We see Erik every now and then, at the footy club or walking down the main road. None of us throw rocks at him anymore.

Tuesday's Shirt

The writer wakes earlier than usual one sunny morning and puts on Tuesday's shirt. He puts on this shirt because it's a Tuesday.

The shirt is white with blue patterning; leaves and branches entwined, with midnight squirrels jumping to and fro. It is a business shirt with a collar — no tie — tucked into navy trousers with a brown belt and matching shoes. He doesn't wear a tie because nobody wears ties anymore. He sits at the kitchen counter in Tuesday's shirt, drinking his coffee and looking out of the picture window over the kitchen sink.

Out of the window are a few trees, a tūī darting about the branches, power lines, the neighbour's satellite dish, cars parked along the roadside. From the kitchen window the writer can also see into the neighbour's upstairs bedroom — they usually keep their curtains closed but this morning they are open.

Tuesday's shirt is also the writer's lucky shirt, and this means he will often have a very charmed Tuesday. He has learnt to just sit back, take everything in, and wait for the good luck to come.

The writer also gets a lot of compliments when he's wearing Tuesday's shirt. He has received a total of three compliments while wearing the shirt and absolutely no compliments whatsoever while wearing any of the shirts belonging to the other days of the week. The third compliment came from the girl working at the Coca-Cola stand in the supermarket. She said: *Hey, that's a nice shirt. Want to buy some Coca-Cola?*

There is a woman at the window in the neighbour's house. She is standing in her dressing gown, with her hair wrapped in a towel. She is looking at the birds and the trees and the power lines.

The first compliment was from the woman at Hallenstein's who sold him the shirt. When he emerged from the changing room she said: *Wow, that's a really nice shirt.*

Thanks, said the writer. *It's for a job interview. Wish me luck!*

The woman from next door unravels the towel. She shakes out her dark hair, still wet from the shower, and lets it fall glossy against her dressing gown.

The interview was a success! He got the job and his new boss even complimented his shirt on the way out. *Nice shirt by the way, it shows confidence. Are those takahē?* He points at the little blotches amid the branches and the leaves.

They're squirrels.

Well, I like it, show's a lot of confidence. Next time don't wear a tie though. Nobody wears ties anymore.

The woman twirls a strand of her wet black hair with her index finger, looking out into the velvet morning. The writer watches her, admires her, while he thinks about the day to come. And as he's lost in the thought of the morning and the woman in the window he realises she's looking straight back at him.

He quickly turns and looks at the wall, takes a sip of coffee, a sorry attempt to make up for his haphazard voyeurism. He looks back at the woman, and she is still looking at him. She doesn't seem shocked or unimpressed, in fact she doesn't seem to be bothered at all. She just stands there, looking down at the writer, and very slowly starts to take off her gown.

She starts by pulling away the sash and letting the gown fall open. The writer puts down his coffee mug and looks up at the window in awe. She is still looking directly at him.

The woman pulls the gown over her shoulders and lets it fall to the bedroom floor. She stands at the window perfectly poised, there for the writer to see, like an upstairs goddess in the golden light of the blessed Tuesday morning. The writer thinks to himself *wow, this would make for a fantastic short story.*

The woman's black hair reaches down to her breasts, her smooth skin still damp from the shower. The writer tries to imagine what her shampoo might smell like. She turns and reaches into her wardrobe drawer, acknowledging the writer with a coy glance over the shoulder.

The writer may try and put a creative non-fiction spin on this piece, he thinks, purely for audience appeal rather than any artistic reason. In the words of his boss at the publishing house he recently started at: *that memoir bullshit sells.*

The woman pulls out a pair of matching bra and underwear and puts them on in front of the window. The writer begins to worry that the story may come across as sexist or misogynistic, and he wonders if perhaps *he* should be the one getting undressed, to challenge the gender roles of the 'neighbour's window' cliché.

She parades around the bedroom like a taboo runway show. Trying on different outfits, thongs and heels, all for the writer to see. Or is it all just for her? She is old enough to be a mother, she is old enough to be *his* mother. She is a *good* mother and has dedicated her life to her family. She is trapped in a loveless marriage with a careless husband, and is it all that she wants just to be seen? Even if just by some lonely writer in a kitchen window, drinking coffee and wearing Tuesday's shirt.

The woman is now holding up two bras, one white and one blue, both of which have corresponding pairs of underwear. She holds the white one against her chest, and then the blue. She then holds them both up to either side in a shrug-like motion, as if signalling to the writer, *which do you like best?*

The writer points to the white pair on the left.

As he's looking up at the woman in the window the writer wonders why he feels the need to convert everything he experiences into words, why can he not simply enjoy the spellbound moment? The writer believes that this may have something to do with a deep-seated fear of death, a fear that we all have, a fear that we each deal with in our own unique and pointless way. He thinks that writing may just be a sorry attempt at immortality. The writer quickly jots this down in his notebook.

When he looks back up at the window the woman is gone and her bedroom is empty. He sits in the kitchen silence, alone with the birds and the trees and the power lines. He picks up his coffee mug to take a sip and mistakenly spills coffee all down Tuesday's shirt.

Fish of New Zealand 8 – 10

I keep having this dream and it's the same every time. We are up in the sand dunes at Kaupokonui, you know, the ones we used to explore when we were younger. Dad called it the bad lands. So, we are in the sand dunes, really in them, further from the bach than we had ever been before. Do you remember the day we came across the cemetery? You were pretty young then, and so was I. You mightn't remember.

I remember.

It was in the heart of the bad lands, through box thorn and gorse. Brown grass smothering the sand. The cemetery had this small white fence around it, with bottles and cans banging against the wires in the wind. It was pretty small — only ten or so gravestones — but it was bizarre, a cemetery in the middle of this forgotten sand dune.

It was creepy.

It was bizarre. We used to be in those dunes all the time, sliding down hills and tracking the wild cattle up there, following their crescent footsteps in the sand, coming back home with boxthorn scars — but we'd never seen that cemetery before. The wire gate was swinging in the wind, creaking loudly on its rusted hinges. We looked at each other and decided to go in. We washed our hands in the plastic bucket left at the gate, the green algae water. We looked at the gravestones and realized it was—

It was an imperial cemetery.

The graves all belonged to British soldiers that had died during the land wars. Epitaphs that read: 'Here lies sergeant so and so. Killed by Māori savages.' They had clearly been forgotten about because the graves were falling to pieces. Heaps of cement had dropped off and scattered the grass beneath them; the headstones overgrown with vines and kikuyu. I told you not to touch anything.

So in this dream you are standing right there, behind the arc of a headstone. And we hear this noise. It's not the cans or the bottles or the sound of the gate. It was coming from behind a hedge of boxthorn, on the far side of the graveyard. I don't know if you remember.

It would have been the cattle. A bull maybe. We knew they were up there. We'd seen them before.

But it didn't sound like cattle. We knew what the cows sounded like in the dunes, we used to follow them for God's sake. And we both agreed, at the time, that it definitely wasn't a cow.

It was someone trying to scare us.

In the middle of the sand dunes? We used to spend whole days up there, and we never came across anyone. We knew the bad lands. They were our territory. We had never seen anyone up there and we had never come across that cemetery before. That sound. A moan. A gurgling. A territorial bellow. I'd never heard that sound before in my life.

And in this dream, you climb over the white fence, and you walk towards the boxthorn hedge. I call out and tell you to stop. You turn, look at me, turn back to the hedge, and carry on. You walk slowly with your hand out in front of you. That sound. That sound wasn't animal. You walk over to the boxthorn and make your way around it. Slowly. With your hand out. Make your way around. You saw something.

I didn't see anything.

You saw something. You stopped in your tracks and you stared. Your hand dropped to your waist. You saw something.

It was a dream.

And in this dream you are peering behind the boxthorn, staring at this thing. You turn back and look at me. I am still in the cemetery. You turned back to look at me and your face. My God, your face. I don't know if you remember.

I remember.

I will never in my life forget that look on your face.

*

Subject: Trampoline
Sat, 23rd April 2011 at 10:23
<gillespe123@outlook.com>

Dear Peter,

If you are looking for your trampoline it is in our paddock. There was a hell of a storm last night and it must have blown over in the wind. You will be pleased to know it still looks all in one piece. If you and the kids could come and take it back at your earliest convenience, that would be much appreciated — we are looking at moving the horses to that paddock this arvo.

Thank you again for the fresh fish. Murray and I had it for dinner last night and it was absolutely delicious, crumbed with just a splash of lemon juice. We gave our little poodle Jim Hickey the leftovers and he very much enjoyed it too ☺

Thanks again,
Paula.

RE: Trampoline
Sat, 23rd April 2011 at 16:04
<pllamcbreen@hotmail.com>

Dear Paula,

Apologies, we've just been out at Liam's footy game. (Waste of bloody time. They were thrashed about a hundred to nil.) We'll pop over now and grab it.

Glad you and Murray enjoyed the fish — as well as little Jim Hickey. It was snapper caught just around the islands. It's amazing how little flavour you need to add when its fresh, a splash of lemon juice sounds just right. I'll get the kids to drop some more around when I'm next out on the boat.

p.s. I hope you're recovering well from the hip surgery. Wishing you the best.

Cheers,
Pete.

Subject: Your Trampoline
Wed, 11th May 2011 at 09:45
<gillespe123@outlook.com>

Hello Peter,

The trampoline has flown over the fence again. It looks like it may have damaged some of the fences and the horses are all bloody spooked. They managed to get out of the paddock but thankfully Murray spotted them before they made it to the roadside. If you could please come and get the trampoline at your earliest convenience. (Perhaps you could consider tying the tramp down so this doesn't happen again.)

The recovery is going well thank you for asking. I definitely miss my morning walks, but hopefully I'll be back to walking to the letterbox in no time.

p.s. still looking forward to the next lot of fish.

Kind regards,
Paula.

RE: Your Trampoline
Wed, 11th May 2011 at 17:32
<pllamcbreen@hotmail.com>

Hi Paula,

Again, apologies for this, that wind has really been getting up there lately hasn't it. I told Liam to chuck some tent pegs over the base to hold it down but the little shit must have forgotten about it.

Very sorry about the horses and the fence. I'll pop over with some tools this arvo and fix it up for you, and I'm sending the boys over to get the trampoline now.

The next lot of fish is still on its way. Not sure if I'll be getting out on the boat anytime soon in this bloody wind.

Thanks,
Pete.

Subject: The Fucking Trampoline Again
Sat, 28th May 2011 at 9:32
<gillespe123@outlook.com>

Hi Pete,

Honestly getting quite fed up with this. Not sure that you folks should even have a trampoline if you're struggling this much to keep it on your own property.

It has flown over the fence again INTO the paddock the horses were in. It's bowled through the fence, and they got out onto the roadside. Thankfully Murray, Jim Hickey, and a few of the neighbors were able to round them up and get them back in. It took about an hour as they were quite spooked, on account of the giant trampoline that had hurtled towards them. This is as become a safety issue now and I'd like you to consider getting rid of the trampoline — it doesn't seem as if the kids use it much anyway.

Yours sincerely,
Paula.

RE: The Fucking Trampoline Again
Sat, 28th May 2011 at 13:05
<pllamcbreen@hotmail.com>

Hi Paula, I don't appreciate the tone.

For your information we did have the trampoline held down with tent pegs. The wind was so bad last night it pulled them all from the ground. Freak weather incidents are not within my control.

Also, it is none of your concern how often our children use the trampoline. It was a Christmas present to the kids a few years back and I have no intention of getting rid of it. We have tied down the trampoline now, to the deck with some bailing twine, so it won't happen again.

I will pop over tomorrow and fix up the fence.

Cheers,
Pete.

Subject: The Fucking Trampoline Again
Sun, 29th May 2011 at 8:47
<gillespe123@outlook.com>

Good morning Pete,

Apologies, emotions were running high yesterday as we were all in quite a panic. However, this is the third time this has happened, and I would expect for you to take some responsibility.

With all due respect, Murray is going to fix the fence. I would appreciate it if you, along with your trampoline, could stay off my property.

Many thanks,
Paula.

Subject: Property Damage
Thu, 2nd June 2011 at 11: 26
<gillespe123@outlook.com>

Hello Peter,

Murray has fixed the fence in the horse's paddock, and it took quite a bit of work. We had to purchase a lot of materials and the task took easily five hours of labour.

Please see attached the Bunnings receipt for the wire and the fence posts, I would appreciate it if we could be reimbursed. Perhaps you could have one of the kids drop off the cash when they bring the next lot of fish around.

Kind regards,
Paula.

Subject: Property Damage
Mon, 6th June 2011 at 12:16
<pllamcbreen@hotmail.com>

Hi Paula,

I am not reimbursing you for anything. I saw what happened to the fence when I collected the trampoline and it looked like very minor damage. I also offered to fix the fence myself, which you rudely declined. I had all the materials needed here in my toolshed; it would have been a very easy fix. It is not my fault your husband isn't a very good handyman.

On another note, the kids will not be dropping anything round with the next lot of fish, as I am not giving you any more fish. Little Jim Hickey will have to get used to dog roll.

Sincerely,
Fuck you.

Subject: Your Stupid Fucking Trampoline, Jesus Christ
Fri, 29th July 2011 at 7:32
<gillespe123@outlook.com>

Hi,

It's happened again. Looks like your bailing twine didn't work one bit. It's flown over the horses paddock this time, and into our garden. It's smashed through the wooden fence and landed on Jim Hickey's kennel. He is VERY shaken up. Please come and collect the trampoline NOW, otherwise Murray will be driving it to the tip.

The repeating trampoline incidents have caused Murray, Jim Hickey and I quite a lot of undue stress — especially while I am trying to rest and recover from surgery. We will be expecting you to cover the cost of the damages incurred.

Kind regards,
Dickhead.

Subject: Your Stupid Fucking Trampoline, Jesus Christ
Fri, 29th July 2011 at 2:51
<pllamcbreen@hotmail.com>

Hi Paula,

I will not be paying for damages, but I am happy to come around and fix the fence if you'd like. However, when I collected the trampoline, it looked as if there were little to no damages to your property — it seems to me, at this point, you are trying to scam me and my family out of money, and I will not be giving in to your frivolous claims.

Also, the surgery was months ago. My trampoline is not the reason you can't make it to the letterbox.

Many thanks,
Pete.

Subject: Damages Incurred From Flying Trampoline
Thu, 18th August 2011 at 2:51
<gillespe123@outlook.com>
Cc: <bdekker@gqlaw.nz>

Kia ora Peter,

We have had builders and landscapers around to fix the damage to our property caused by your trampoline. I have included our lawyer in this email as you have expressed in previous correspondence that you do not intend to reimburse us for the damage caused by your negligence.

Please see attached the builder's invoice along with the receipt from the landscapers. These come to a total of $469.28. Please also see attached images of the damage caused to our garden before the repairs took place.

We look forward to your speedy response.

Nga mihi nui,
Paula.

Subject: Damages Incurred From Flying Trampoline
Wed, 7th September 2011 at 3:03
<pllamcbreen@hotmail.com>
Cc: <bdekker@gqlaw.nz> <furryfur@iamalawyer.com>

Kia ora Paula,

I will not be paying for anything. Please direct all further correspondence to my lawyer who I have included in the email.

Kind regards,
Pete.

Subject: Paula's Memorial Service
Thu, 20th October 2011 at 2:51
<gillespe123@outlook.com>

Afternoon Pete,

Murray here.

As you may have heard Paula passed away last week. She went peacefully in her sleep, sitting on her favourite chair, snuggled up with little Jim Hickey.

Her funeral service will be held next Wednesday, I would love it if you and the boys could make it along. Also, please forget about all this trampoline nonsense. No need to worry about the money.

Kind regards,
Murray.

Subject: Paula's Memorial Service
Fri, 21st October 2011 at 2:51
<pllamcbreen@hotmail.com>

Good morning Murray,

I am very sorry for your loss. The boys and I will see you next Wednesday at the funeral.

I am sending Liam around now with the money for the trampoline along with a couple fillets of fresh gurnard.

Best wishes,
Pete.

Subject: Trampoline
Sun, 25th December 2011 at 9:17
<pllamcbreen@hotmail.com>

Morning Pete, Merry Christmas!

It seems as if your trampoline is in my front lawn. Feel free to pick it up at your convenience. In fact, if you would like, pop in for a beer while you're here. Feel free to bring the boys with you too. Little Jim Hickey is overdue for a good runaround.

Cheers,
Murray.

*

I'm not sexually attracted to you anymore. Don't get me wrong, I still find you attractive. I mean, when I look at you, I can recognize that you are an attractive person. Your face structure, your hair, you keep yourself in pretty good shape — better shape than I do anyway, and you've always had a pretty good fashion sense — which has never really been the case with most of the men I've dated. I can still look at you and understand that you're objectively a good-looking person. I'm attracted to you, sure. It's just that I'm not *sexually* attracted to you. Not like I used to be anyway. You remember those first few months. We literally couldn't keep our hands off each other. You, just turned eighteen, and me, twenty three years old. All my friends thought I was crazy for dating somebody so young. But you seemed pretty mature for your age. And the sex. My God, the sex. You really did know what you were doing for someone so young. We would go for hours. I mean long, hot hours into the morning. I think the first night we met we fucked until the sun came up. Literally until the sun came up. And then we lay in bed and I put on *The Hills Have Eyes* and when that scene with the baby came on you had to go throw up in the garden. Didn't help that we'd been out till three the night before, drinking as many Jäger and Red Bull's as we had the money for. And then both of our cards declined when we went to get a taxi and we laughed because we really had spent every cent we had on Jäger and Red Bulls. And so we walked home. Six kilometers if I remember right. And we called everyone we knew to try and get a ride but noboby picked up because it was three in the fucking morning, and those who did pick up had been drinking as well. So we walked. Six Kilometers. Out of town and past the Hautapu clubrooms. Down those long straight country roads, reaching out forever into the mist. I remember we went past a graveyard, or maybe I dreamt it, and you told me your grandfather was buried there. I don't know, you were drunk, or like I said, maybe it was just a dream.

I'm not sure if it's something to do with the birth control, or the anti-depressants. But I've been feeling this way for a while now, and I just thought it wouldn't be fair for me to keep you in the dark. Do you have anything to say? No? I guess I have kind of sprung this on you, and I suppose there isn't really anything *to* say. I just thought I should tell you. It didn't feel right keeping this to myself. I mean, we are in a relationship, we are in this together. There is always going to be challenges along the way. My councilor tells me things come in waves and that *this too shall pass.* I hope it will. I really like you. Maybe it's as simple as changing my birth control. Or maybe changing my anti-depressants. Sometimes I consider just stopping it

altogether. The anti-depressants that is — not the birth control. Wouldn't that be a fucking hoot. They say it's all just a process of trial and error.

But there is another thing, and I hope you don't overreact. I hope you don't overreact because this *other* thing is somewhat related to the first thing. And I thought that — I thought if I explained the first thing to you then you would have a better chance of understanding the second thing, and not overreacting. Because the other thing is, well, I guess it's better just to say it. But please try and think of this other thing in the context of the first thing, you know, so you can better understand it. The thing is, well, it's just that—. Before I tell you, please remember that I love you, we are in this together, and like my councilor says: *this too shall pass.* Okay, here goes. I fucked your brother last weekend.

Best Life

I wake up tired; snooze the alarm. Wake up more tired ten minutes later.

I have the shower scorching hot. Scrape the sleep from my eyes with Earthwise body wash. Steam rises. Soapy water circles the shower drain. Humidity builds on the already thick layer of mold, up the wall and in the corner of the bathroom ceiling. I should turn the fan on. But I don't. I let the steam build, fill the room, and sweat out the weight from days past. I would put on music but my Bluetooth speaker is out of battery. Instead, I stand and soak in the heat— write positive affirmations on the shower door with my index finger. Next, I shave my face in the mirror and see a funeral looking back at me. Just hanging on by the rings under my eyes. Little black hairs fall on the side of the sink, building on the little black hairs from days before. *Every day*, I say out loud, spitting toothpaste into the sink. *Every day, I am getting better, in every way.*

Cold. So cold I can see my own breath. My own lazy breath as it floats out and upward, dissipates into the weighty blanket of Monday fog. It is like this every morning. Every morning: cold and fog. I pour jug water on my windshield and let the engine warm before I drive. I let it warm for long enough that when I check my phone I'm running very late for work. Every morning: late and cold and fog.

A rushed job leaves me near blind as I pull out of the driveway, barely able to see through the glare and the ice. This would be dangerous if I were to ever pick up any speed, but thankfully the traffic is bumper to bumper. I am safe and cold in air-conditioned gridlock. The wipers don't help either. The worn-out rubber only smudging dirt along the glass, creating a silkscreen of muddied frost on the windshield. Again, this might be dangerous if I were to ever *drive* at any point on my commute, but I am safe and whole in the traffic-arc of red-light standstill. The woman in the people mover across from me is picking her nose, while the limbs of school children flail in the back seat. She is bopping along to something on the car stereo, Taylor Swift perhaps, Lorde maybe. She looks over at me and smiles— a gentle recognition of our shared inconvenience. We are together, alone.

Clouds of exhaust splutter out of the diesel truck ahead, so I press the little button on the dash that makes the air recirculate. One click and I'm in my own ecosystem— an air dome

of engine coolant and auto-upholstery. I turn the radio on, just in time to hear the newsreader say something about the climate emergency, but not in time to hear any of the context. I look at the diesel truck ahead and wonder if he's on the same station. If he'll consider trading it in for a Prius. Somehow, I think not. I think he'd say something along the lines of *farmers are the backbone of the country's economy,* and he'd speed off into the gas death of the gentle Tuesday morning. The news fades into a sting for a radio competition. They are giving away flights to Hawaii and a brand-new Toyota Hilux, ideal for your morning commute.

Held in red light, I turn the radio off and connect my phone to the Bluetooth. I go into my meditation app and play Lesson 5: Having no Head. *Having No head*, I think, *sounds like my ex-girlfriend.* I am asked, by the voice of a D-list celebrity, to look for one who is seeing. To train the mind, he continues, one must sit down and examine it. Especially if you are the distracted type, he says, you need to train the mind to stay on one physical or mental object. I turn off my meditation app and put on 'Can't Keep Checking My Phone' by Unknown Mortal Orchestra. In my rearview I can see a middle-aged man in a freshly-washed Porsche. He is wearing a charcoal suit jacket over a clean white dress shirt. Think Danny DeVito playing Patrick Bateman. From the small rectangular image I have of him, I already know it all. He has a quiet wife and a steady job, with a nothing-to-be-scoffed-at income. He plays golf on weekends and has a very nice business card. He'd trade it all in for a full head of hair.

In the cold light of the office space I am no longer a human being. I am trapped, in a sellotaped computer chair, listening to my boss, Michelle, talk about the youth of today. She has short frizzy hair and is forever wearing a new dress suit. *It's because they've never experienced any hardship,* she says, *and so they feel this need to find something to complain about. Their grandfathers were fighting in wars. Now they're fighting for pronouns.*

Where are you off to for weekend, I ask her. *The bach in Papamoa? Or the condo up in Herne Bay?*

No, we've sold the condo. David and I are looking at getting a yacht!

I drink instant coffee from my David Bowie mug. A small glimmer of personality in an otherwise soul-killing environment. A last gasp of self-expression, in the form of caffeine-stained makeup and cold brew eyeliner. Michelle still thinks it's the lead singer from Kiss. I start the day by checking my emails. 'To whom it may concern's and 'I hope this email finds you well. A brief outline on the soon-to-take-place Wednesday morning meeting — 10am

sharp in conference room B. I have been cc'd in, for my information, and that would be very much appreciated. Words in email correspondence soon start to lose all meaning, I much prefer a brief and friendly phone call. Clear, unambiguous questions soon turn to ASAP's and snarky smiley faces— a fuck you colon followed by a middle finger closing bracket. We look forward to your response :-) .

The light from the computer screen hurts my eyes, so I take a quick break by the water cooler. I fill up my bottle from the blue tap like I always do, as opposed using the white one, despite there being no discernable difference in the water quality or temperature between the two of them. The water glugs and bubbles as my bottle fills. I can hear it but I can't see it, as there is a cover on protecting the water from sunlight. The words on the cover read 'natural spring water' in bold blue lettering, but I see the cleaner refill the water container from the kitchen tap every morning. Natural spring water from the building's old metal pipes. A swimming hole of desk chairs and telephone wires.

The morning meeting starts at 10:15 sharp because Michelle had difficulty signing into the conference room computer. Her home screen is projected on the wall. She talks and my colleagues and I make notes. Operations grants and bank reconciliations. Cyclical maintenance and lease paperwork. The end of year financials are coming up, and we will all have to put in overtime. Extra hours that are met with a smile at our yearly salary review. In the conference room I feel outside of my own body. I can hear Michelle talk and my colleagues respond, and I nod my head and write little notes on my A5 pad of paper. I float upwards and out of myself; hover above the oval-shaped conference table. I look down at myself as I scribble in black ink: *every day, I am getting better, in every way.*

I am so tired after the meeting I can barely keep my eyes open. I take my morning tea break around the back of the building; pull the e-cigarette from my trouser pocket. A sigh of nicotine floats out into the cold concrete air. I check the time on my phone, the cracked screen telling me I still have ten minutes left. I've been known to go a little over and Michelle says we'll be having words if it happens again. There is a mechanic shop next to our office building, and I can hear the clatter of metal and ACDC guitar blaring as I ease into my Thursday morning break. A young mechanic leaves the workshop and walks over to me. He is wearing grease-stained jeans and a torn black shirt. He gives me a nod and leans against the brick wall just down from me, pulls a pack of Malboro Reds from his pocket. *Working hard?* He smiles, *or hardly working?*

I laugh and take a long draw from my vape.

How long have you been doing that for? He nods at the red and black e-cig. The large smoke clouds much less subtle than his ciggies.

I bought it during the first lockdown, I say. *Been hooked ever since.*

Sounds about right. He smirks. *I'd rather stick to these things.* He holds up the pack of cigarettes. *At least I know what's in them. Plus the boys would all give me shit at work if I turned up with one of those. The boss says the only thing gayer than sucking a dick is sucking on a bloody vape.*

I check my phone and I've gone over my fifteen minutes. I nod at the mechanic, *have a good one mate.* And walk back around the corner to the solemn doors of the office building.

Michelle gives me a dirty look when I walk through the door. She is on the phone with a client, so I sit at my desk and put my airpods in before she has the chance to tear me to shreds. I open a few documents, put on my blue light glasses. They are supposed to help with the eyestrain of staring at a computer screen all day, but so far I haven't noticed any difference. I clear my emails, check the calendar, make a few calls, and enter figures on my spreadsheet. Attachments upon attachments, word docs and pdfs. Passwords sent out for the shared google drive. Follow up on questions from the auditors — glorified fact checkers Michelle calls them. Current assets, depreciation, and working capital. I use my stand-up desk intermittently, clicking in and out of multiple tabs. Hidden passwords for protected documents. Thank God for my double monitor, my stress ball, and my desk fan. Multiple windows of death-defying boredom. Have you ever fallen headfirst into an excel spreadsheet? Infinite cells upon infinite cells — they stretch out of the screen and wrap themselves around me. I slide into them. Lose myself in financial figures. Carried forward balances and self-populated codes. Swim around in the available funds forecast. And just as I am about to lose all sense of self, slit my wrists with the mouse pad and bleed into the keyboard, the twelve-thirty alarm goes off and it's time for my lunch break.

Thirty minutes, unpaid, I have to leave the building. Gain some perspective in the outside world. Teach myself I'm still a human being. I drive to Sports Junkie Nutrition Store; parallel park just over the road. The walls are stacked with pre-workout and protein powder. T-shirts for myriad gym brands and contact details for personal trainers on the countertop. The smell of artificial fruit and powdery milk. There is a blonde girl ahead of me, wearing a

white singlet and gym leggings. She is enquiring about caffeine-free pre-workouts — she often goes to the gym quite late and doesn't want anything that will keep her up at night. The owner sells her a tub of Genius Pre — passionfruit flavour — and sends her on her way. *What can I do for you?* he asks, *leaning forward with both hands on the wooden counter.*

I'll grab a vegan protein shake, I say, looking at the supplements that line the wall. Colorful packaging with small print warning notices.

Vegan, nice. he says, grabbing a plastic cup from the cupboard and filling it with a chocolatey powder. *You know we're the only mammal that drinks another animal's milk.* He looks at me deadly serious. *You don't see any damn lambs sucking on cow titties, do you.* Cars pass by outside. The slow click of the ice maker in work. *Now, which milk do you want? We've got almond, coconut and hemp.*

You don't have any breastmilk? I ask. He doesn't laugh. I point to the hemp and he fills the plastic cup. There is a sign above one of the stands that says nootropics — for when you need a brain boost. He whizzes the ice and milk around in the blender, the nutri-bullet sounds like a chainsaw. *You got anything that will help me focus?* I ask.

Yeah man, nootropics. These things are a God send when you've got work to do.

You mean like from Joe Rogan?

He laughs. *Yeah most people hear about them from there. But these ones are much more subtle. If I give you the stuff that he takes you'll be methed out for the week.* He hands me the protein shake and grabs a container of pills from the wall. *Here, take this.* The container reads: Braingasm — Increase memory & focus, decrease procrastination, increase motivation. *Free sample,* he smiles. *On the house.*

Thanks, I say. Taking two capsules with a mouthful of protein shake.

No worries brother. If you like it come back and buy more.

I head back across the road and jump in my un-washed car, drive wide-eyed through the steady Auckland traffic. When I get back to the office, I check the time on my phone — I've gone over my damn thirty-minutes again. *Every day,* I mouth, making my way up the stairs. *Every day I am getting better, in every way.*

I sit at my desk and put a podcast on through my airpods, somehow managing to dodge Michelle again. I open my computer to see a new email she sent to 'all users'. The subject line reads: EXCITING NEWS in all capital letters. I have no way of knowing if she did this to emphasize the excitement of the news or whether she accidentally left her caps lock

on. This is something Michelle does quite commonly. The email goes on to say that the folks at head office have introduced a new initiative to increase moral. There will now be a bowl of fresh fruit kept stocked on the break room table, and we are encouraged to HELP OURSELVES.

It is Friday afternoon, and all of my colleagues are talking about their plans for the weekend. They are all at least ten years older than me. Andrea is taking her daughter to an equestrian event — this weekend is the finals which is *very* important. Saanvi is going away with her husband, Adrian is going to a finance conference, and Greg is going duck shooting.

What are you doing for the weekend? Andrea asks me. She is drinking from a coffee mug that reads: blow me, I'm hot.

I'll probably go for a hike, I tell her. *Meet up with some friends for brunch. Might even head for a surf out at Orewa.* She smiles and says that sounds lovely, and turns back to the blue light of her computer screen. In truth, I'm just going to get high and watch movies. Maybe fuck around and fall into a deep pit of depression, one that I have to crawl back out of for my seven-thirty start on Monday. But I I didn't have the heart or the balls to tell them that. I try to get back into my work but the energy just isn't there. Lousy Joe Rogan pills, I'd be pissed off if I didn't get them free. I read the back of the container while I sit at my desk:

> Hail Valhalla, for I am awaited! Braingasm is designed to increase focus, boost your memory and enhance your mood. The core matrix of our most potent nootropic compounds and adaptagenic herbs will keep you going, even in the most stressful of situations. Then I myself will see you at the gates of Vahalla — shiny and chrome.

Jesus Christ, I mutter, going on to read the fine print in much smaller lettering.

> WARNING: This product is intended to be consumed by healthy humans, 18 years of age or older.
>
> Do not use if you are pregnant or nursing. Do not use this product if you have any serious medical conditions. Before using this product, consult with a medical professional, including but not limited to, if you suspect you have or been treated for, diagnosed with or have a family history of any medical condition, or if you are using any prescription or over the counter medication. Immediately discontinue use 2 weeks

prior to surgery or experiencing any unusual symptoms. This product may vary in colour. This does not reflect a variation in potency.

Side effects may include nausea, heartburn, fatigue, dizziness, hair growth, groinal rash, profuse sweating, blurred vision, demonic possession, chest pain, loss of appetite, congenital disability, a funny whacky smell, constipation, tinnitus, upset stomach, the sudden urge to listen to the band Creed, migraines, organ damage, perforation, anxiety, period disruption, unwanted erections, fever, weight gain and death. All hail Valhalla!

I stare at my computer screen and I still don't feel anything. The gentle obtuse angle of my double monitor. It struggled to take effect, I think, because of all the other substances I put in my body. Nicotine, anti-depressants, marijuana, and about ten cups of black coffee a day. As always, I decide, Joe Rogan doesn't know what the fuck he's talking about.

There is an hour left in the workday and it drags out like mass at Catholic school. I type, enter figures, file reports, send friendly emails, check the calendar — about a dozen times — finding anything I can to make up the time. I end up doing the Stuff quiz, hoping that Michelle doesn't look over my shoulder. I prolifically get fifteen out of fifteen, although sometimes it takes me two or three goes. The blue light glasses aren't helping, and I can barely keep my eyes open. Spreadsheet cells merge into one another, and all the figures start to look the same. Huperzine eyes tied to paper-weight memories. A4 sheets still fresh warm the printer. The horizontal light of the scanner makes my eyes squint, and the slow hum of the office air con is giving me a headache. Finally, the clock ticks over to 4 o'clock, I fill out my time sheet, and walk out the door. The harsh weight of the work week stretching out into weekend.

When I walk out of the building there is a homeless man laying against the brick wall. He looks cold and fidgety. As I walk towards the car he calls out for some money. *Got any change?* He says, hopefully, leaning out from the wall. *Come on, look at your suit. You must have some God damn change.*

I could do with a change too, I mutter, handing the man a scrunched up five-dollar bill. He stuffs it down his jacket pocket and thanks me. Sits back muttering against the wall. I

wonder if he'll get any money out of Michelle, or whether she'll have a go at him and run to her car. I consider telling him not to bother.

When I get home it's all I can do just to keep my eyes open. I stumble through the door and make my way to my room, leaving a trail of tired clothes up the staircase. I shut both of the curtains and collapse on the bed; tuck myself in with my vape. I left all of myself in the office, between the printer and the filing cabinets — my soul exists only in blue light spreadsheets. My eyes are sore and I'm too tired to even think. Equestrian finals and guns aimed at ducks. A forgotten five dollars and a brand new yacht. I roll over and inhale, thinking only of the too soon Monday morning — traffic mediations and fog. Through nicotine sleep I dream of Valhalla, on his chrome and shiny throne; Michelle's frizzy hair in the boardroom; protein powder spreadsheets. And when I arrive on Monday, bloodshot and tired, and Andrea asks how my weekend was. I will tell her, the utmost confidence, that every day, I am getting better, in every way.

Milk

She finishes the last of her Baileys and tips the ice down the sink. Washes out the short glass and puts it on the drying rack. The house is quiet and the sliding doors are open. It's cold, but she keeps the door open on the off chance the stray cat might scurry by along the fence — as it did on occasion — and she had left a small plate of milk on the barbeque in an attempt to slowly start luring it inside. All attempts thus far had been unsuccessful, on account of that stray cat's hesitant and skittery nature.

She turns off the television and makes her way around the open plan kitchen and living room, turning off all the lights. She is just about to head upstairs and call it a night, when she hears the rustling of keys from a purse outside. She switches the kitchen lights back on and opens the front door.

You're back early, date didn't go well?

He looked nothing like his pictures.

Want a drink?

Amber nods and lets out a deep sigh. She closes the front door behind her, throws her hand bag on the kitchen bench, and takes a seat on the sofa in the living room opposite the black television screen.

Baileys?

God no.

Wine?

Something stronger.

Whisky it is.

Jess picks up her glass from the drying rack and gets another from the top drawer. She opens the freezer, removes the ice tray, and slams it down on the counter top.

So, how was your evening? Amber asks. Laying back on the sofa and switching on the television.

Pretty uneventful. Just watched the cricket. I was going to head to Heta's leaving party out in Tauranga but I got a flat tyre. It was a saving grace really because I honestly don't think I would have been up for it.

Was Alex going?

Yeah but that would have been fine. She was there with her new boyfriend.

Who was playing?

Jess places two cubes of ice in each glass, fills one with Baileys and the other with Jim Beam. She picks up one glass in each hand and carries them down to the coffee table, taking a seat on the couch next to Amber.

It was rugby versus cricket. They do it every year. One team of rugby players— McCaw, Beaudy, Kieran Read— and the other team is made up of retired cricket players.

Sounds interesting. Who won?

The rugby team surprisingly enough. Cricket were out for 203 so I thought they had it. But Geordie Barret smashed Vittori for six in the last over and won them the match.

I fucking hate cricket— but it sounds like your night was better than mine.

That bad, huh?

He wouldn't stop talking about NFTs. He said *at my age* I needed to have started an investment portfolio and wouldn't stop talking about which stocks I should be looking at.

God, that sounds awful.

The worst part was when the bill came he told me that he was a feminist and would *let* me pay for my own drinks. And because of all the punishing finance chat I ended up getting *a lot* of drinks.

Did you uber home?

Yeah, it wasn't too bad. I left early enough so that they hadn't bumped the prices up yet, with all the freshers heading into town for O week.

You should have called me.

I figured you'd be high.

You figured right.

Amber scrolls through the various channels and settles on TV1. The newsreader is covering a story on the burn pits in Iraq.

You're lucky Jerome's not here. He'd have your ass for not using a coaster.

Huge waste burning dumps, the size of football fields, exposure to which was common among servicemembers touring Iraq and Afghanistan. Veterans now say that exposure to these pits is killing them and are asking the government to take responsibility.

Fuck him and his coasters. If I wanted to get bitched at twenty-four-seven I wouldn't have broken up with Alex.

I thought she broke up with you?

Yeah but that's not the point. She was crazy.

Crazy how?

She got super paranoid towards the end. Kept going through my phone, calling me non-stop when I was out with the girls. She got it in her head that I was cheating on her and no matter what I said I couldn't convince her otherwise.

Well, you *were* cheating on her.

Yeah, but that's not the point.

Rotting food; old uniforms; amputated limbs; ammunition; nuclear waste; metric tonnes of human faeces. They would use the pits to dispose of just about anything.

A cool wind blows through the open ranch slider and rustles the curtains by the television screen. The orange glow of the overhead streetlight. Damp washing on a Kmart clothes hanger.

Got any more weed?

I smoked the last of it sorry.

Cigarettes?

On the bench beside the fruit bowl.

Before I joined the service I could run five miles like it was nothing. Now I struggle to breathe at night.

Amber gets up and walks into the kitchen. She picks up the lighter, takes out one of the menthol cigarettes, and walks outside through the ranch slider. Her small figure, visible to Jess, as she walks around the darkened patio. The cold wind through the trees. Lunar milk bowl. The lit tip of Amber's cigarette.

Asthma, lung cancer, constrictive bronchitis. Soldiers who lived and slept mere metres from these fiery trash heaps. And now the US government are denying these veterans health care.

Amber is wearing a black dress with converse shoes. She had put on a thin base of primer, followed up with a light-to-medium coverage of foundation, Two Face 'Better Than Sex' mascara, and a watermelon lip balm. She didn't wear makeup often but had decided to go 'all out' for the date. The decision hadn't paid off.

So, she says, tapping loose ash from her cigarette. Is Alex's new boyfriend cute?

He's tall and handsome. That's why I'm drinking.

That's weird. Doesn't really sound like her type.

Jess laughs and stretches out on the couch. Finishes the last of her Baileys in two big gulps. The coverage of the burn pits had finished and now the newsreaders are talking about the singer Meatloaf's death.

I never really got into his music, but I thought he was quite good in Fight Club. Jess gets up from the couch and walks out to the patio.

That's because it's a David Fincher movie. He probably made him do a hundred takes for every scene — anyone can be good with that many takes. Hell, even Jared Leto was okay in Fight Club.

Bat out of Hell plays as they go into an add break.

Well at least we both had a miserable night. Amber hands Jess the cigarette and looks up into the stars, barely visible under the harsh glow of the streetlight.

Speak for yourself, says Jess. I made a hundred bucks. Rugby were five-to-one underdogs.

Amber laughs and punches Jess on the shoulder. The old barbeque creaks in the wind. Amber shivers. You're cold, Jess says, handing her back the cigarette. Let me give you some of my warmth. Jess wraps her arms around Amber, the baggy sleeves of her too-big hoodie. The smell of menthol and damp washing. Hamilton fog and rich perfume. A soft metallic thud on the rusted barbeque. Amber's shoulders tighten and she lifts up her head.

What is it? Jess whispers.

Look!

Jess looks over Amber's shoulder to see a skinny grey cat perched on the side of the barbeque. Eyes wide, tail in the air. Drinking delicately from a small plate of milk.

Fish of New Zealand 11 – 13

Call me Liam-Fish. They did, anyway. On account of my affinity for the water.

Growing up, Mum would always have a hard time getting me to come out. She'd be standing at the side of the pool, or on the sand at the beach or the bankside of the river, holding my towel, yelling: *Liam, Liam, get the hell out of there!* And in the winter: *Time to get out now. You're going to catch yourself a cold.*

I did get a lot of colds growing up, and ear infections too, from swimming in the river. I took more sick days than anybody else I knew. They say you don't get colds from being outside, you catch the cold from being inside and it is exacerbated by the being outside. I don't know about all that, but I do know this: the ear infections were most definitely from the river.

Often times, I would get a cold and an ear infection at the same time, which made both the cold and the ear infection significantly worse. Dad taught me the scuba diver's trick of holding onto your nose and blowing out of your ears — this helped to clear everything out. I remember showing my friends at school and getting them to do it, they would say that it hurt. Maybe it's because they didn't have anything to blow out of their ears. They hadn't been swimming in the river.

Mum was convinced that my colds and my ear infections were inexplicably linked because I refused to blow my nose. I would just sniff or do the ear-popping trick. She said that it wasn't healthy to be sniffing the snot all back up into my sinuses and that this is what was causing the ear infection. She'd never been far enough upstream. She'd never seen the cow-shit run off into the river.

They called me Liam-Fish because I liked the water, and I really could spend all day in there. I remember going to my Aunty Fee's and spending all day in the swimming pool on the back lawn. She said: *wow, he's like a fish… Liam-Fish.* And I suppose it just caught on from there.

I don't know if the salt water helped all that much with the ear infections either. I once spoke to an old surfer in Ōpunake who told me that he was losing his hearing to the ocean. A form of evolution, he said. All that salt in your ears, and the ear drums begin to develop a kind

of protective barrier. I asked him if he'd tried the scuba diving trick. *Spend long enough in there*, he said, *and you'll start to grow gills*.

Liam-Fish started with my Aunty Fee and it just caught on from there. The pool on her back lawn, in the late afternoon. Eyes reddened from the chlorine. I, myself, prefer the salt water pools. But I couldn't tell the difference back then. Couldn't tell the difference and couldn't even care.

Liam-Fish, they'd say, even at school. He could spend all day in the water. Often times I will have dreams where I'm not in the water, but I can push off and float upward as if I am. Like I'm underwater, on the field at school or the living-room where I grew up. I can push off the carpet and breaststroke to the stars.

What's the record? I would say. Whenever I was in a new swimming pool. At a friend's house or on holiday somewhere with the family. And they would say: *record for what?*

Underwater lengths. What's the record? And I would always make sure I beat it, even if it took a couple tries. And if there wasn't a record, I would set a new one. One that wouldn't be beat anytime soon.

Charlie dog, he died when I was eight years old. But he liked the water almost as much as me. *Liam-Fish and Charlie dog*, the would say, *the magnificent duo. Why, they could be in the water all day long.*

I would take him up the bank saying, *come along, Charlie dog*. And I would throw a stick into the river and he would jump off the highest rock — until he got older and he couldn't swim anymore, and he needed a step to get onto the bed. Where he would lie in his underwater dreams, leaping off the highest rock and floating up, up, up.

Liam-Fish, that's what they called me. I really could be in there all day long. Pool, beach, river, it didn't really matter. So long as it was cool and wet. But it wasn't always that way.

On the side of the pool, Dad holding me over the water. Mum calling out from the other side. *He can't swim Pete, what are you doing?*

Well he's going to damn well try.

As I got older it wasn't enough just being in the water, and I had to find different ways to keep it interesting. There was a bank at the river where Charlie dog used to jump off. Kids would do bombs from the highest rock. Manus, staples, all of the classics. They would line along the bank for the biggest splash. If you hold a plastic bottle when you jump in, and let go

of it at just the right time, you can get it to fly up into the air. The 600mL bottles work best, but I knew a couple guys who could get the 1.5L and 2.25L bottles to fly up, too. It was always a contest. Kids from school lined up along the riverbank, shooting empty L&Ps into the sky.

Above the bank was a pōhutukawa tree that branched out over the river. Those who were brave enough — Liam-fish included — would climb the bank and walk out on the tree, leap into the river from the outer branch. It was only safe to do this at high tide when the river was full. I got quite good at jumping out of the tree — I could bomb, three-sixty and flip. Twisting my body through the air like a riverside contortionist, rolling and bending as much as I could to try and impress my friends.

One day, after school, a group of us went down to the river. We stopped at the Four Square on the way for lime milkshakes. We followed the track and crossed over the bridge, chucked our school bags in the sand by the river bank. Kate was new at school and hadn't been to the river before, we convinced her to try jumping off. She stood on the highest rock, nervously shivering, before finally jumping in. An awkward pin drop, mediocre splash, we all cheered for her when she swam back to the shore. Next thing, I told her, she should try jumping from the tree.

The track up from the bank was wet and muddy, on account of all the previous jumpers footsteps. I helped her up the bank, showed her the roots and footholds, as we clambered up to the tree. It was summertime and the pōhutukawa was in bloom. Thin red nettles littered the water below. I walked out on the branch first, showed her where to stand. It was a little bit slippery from the jumper before. She asked me if it was dangerous and I told her *not really, your body almost glides out by itself.* I jumped in first, ripple water splash, I swam down and told her it was deep enough. Said I'd wait for her here in the water. Her body never made it that far.

First there was a crack, the pōhutukawa branch snapping, next there was a thud against the rocks. I will never in my life forget that sound. She had slipped on the branch and snapped it with her body, fell directly downwards into the bank. It was her head that hit the rocks first. An earthshattering crack. The unforgiving permanence of gravity. Then there was silence. We all turned and stared. We all stood still, not moving an inch, none of us knowing exactly what to do. The red nettles fell around her like confetti. Her body started writhing, gurgling against the rocks. She vomited lime milkshake and blood onto the clay. An art teacher will tell you that when you combine red with green, it forms a shade of brown. I will tell you

it makes a deep, thick black. She shook on the rocks, in milkshake tar, saying words and sounds that made no sense. Still. We all just stood there and stared.

A doctor in a bikini came running along the beach — it may sound too good to be true, but I promise this is how it went down. *Jesus,* she said, looking down at the heap of Kate, *what the fuck were you kids thinking going up there?* She instructed Jahn to run up to a house and call 111 and told the rest of us to grab the boogie boards. She was lying on the wrong side of the river for an ambulance to have access. We had to get her body across.

She vomited more lime milkshake, a little less blood this time, while we put one boogie board on top of the other. The doctor told us to move her as little as possible, to keep her head and neck exactly as they are. We lifted her down from the bank and onto the boards. She wasn't talking or moving at all by this point. We all treaded water around the boogie boards, the doctor floating at the front end. We floated her across in the makeshift life raft, lying her gently in the darkened sand.

Her mum was there screaming when the ambulance arrived, she must have gotten word of the accident somehow. *You've killed my daughter,* she cried out, as Kate was loaded in and strapped to a gurney. *You stupid kids have killed my daughter.* When the ambulance pulled away we stood there dumbfounded. Jahn's mum offered me a ride home. I said I had my longboard so I was fine on my own. She told me I was in shock and to get in the car. I didn't feel in shock, I didn't know *what* to feel. Come to think of it I didn't feel anything at all.

Liam-fish, that's what they call me. The one who told her to jump. I didn't swim at the river much after that.

*

The sex lasted three BROCKHAMPTON songs — which was much longer than usual. We made out and she went down on me, then I went down on her and we fucked in missionary while she hooked both of her legs over my shoulders and bent herself back into the headboard. Once we had finished, I collapsed into her, and our bodies melted into one as we caught our collective breath on the unmade bed. My weight of my body against hers, we lay there as one. I inhaled on her exhale and vice versa, in a syncopated bedroom meditation. The rhythm had knocked the mattress sideways, so it was hanging off the bed, and her body had fallen down between the headboard and the mattress. We had to adjust it back afterwards. The blankets too. *You don't make any noise when you come,* she told me, lighting a cigarette on *her* side of the bed. I told her I'm pretty sure that was just a guy thing. *We've been doing it for years, ever since we learned what it was. In darkened bedrooms, toilet stalls, friend's sleepovers and changing rooms. Hell, I even did it in a long drop once — because the urge came on. We've just learned to be quiet, I guess. We've had more practice.* She exhales soft O's into the stuffy bedroom, sitting on the duvet in just an old T-shirt. She smirks. *What makes you think I don't masturbate?*

Afterwards, we shower together. She likes the water much hotter than I do. Huddled in steam; the lousy pressure. Her bare ass pressed up against condensation. I stand behind her in the water and wash her back. Her back, her shoulders, soap her upper arms. And then I move to her ass. Where I linger for much longer than I really need to. Then she gets out and I turn the water down. As cold as it will go. I lean back under the shower head and let the coolness wash over. Erection simmers. I focus on the sound. The water's echo. A soundscape of cold falling droplets. I shut my eyes and the sounds get louder. Water hitting the shower base. The hum of the extractor fan. The bathroom's muffled echo. The Bluetooth speaker in the bedroom, Spotify on shuffle — it is playing Death Grips now. I hear her dry herself at the sink and turn the hair dryer on. Quiet burning smell. Her wet feet on the shower mat, wrinkled and soft in the bathroom's damp heat. And what if I stay here, just a little while longer? In the cold echo. What if I just stay?

*

This one's called Once Upon a Time in Koupocanui. You mightn't believe me, but I swear to God, every word is true. That is, except for the parts about the fish.

It was a dry Saturday afternoon, and with nothing to do I decided to take the Corolla around the mountain. Out of New Plymouth and around the coast to the family bach in Kaupoconui. It would have been faster on the backroads, which I knew like the back of my hand, but I decided to stick to the coastal highway for scenic purposes. The first twenty minutes went by smoothly. Out of the big smoke, into clean country air — 90, 100, 115 and through. The old corolla sounded like a meat grinder. Bumping up and down along the poorly paved road and spluttering smoke into the hot afternoon. Slowing into Oakura, over the Kaitaki river. Farmers on quad bikes and road-side avocado stands. I accelerated out of the beachside town, past rows of pine trees and the Kaitaki golf course. Big yellow buckets and honesty boxes. The signal on the car stereo slowly turned to static so I fiddled the tuner to 90fm — Jukebox Saturday Night on Classic Hits.

Slowing into Okato, I noticed a hitchhiker on the side of the road. He was standing on his tail with one flipper in the air. He didn't have any luggage. I pulled onto the messy gravel and rolled down the passenger window. 'How far are you going?' I asked him.

'Well,' he said, leaning down into the car. 'I'm heading where the roads aren't paved.'

'I'm going to Koupocanui, just around from Opanaki,' I told him. 'So I can take you that far. Wouldn't mind splitting the gas with somebody.'

'I guess I'm going thataway,' his gills opened and closed as he spoke. 'Any chance you could drop me at the river mouth?'

'No problem,' I said. Leaning over and opening the passenger door. 'Jump in and we'll get you there.'

Getting a fish in a Corolla is harder than you'd think. And if you think it would be hard then it's even harder than that. The seatbelt wouldn't fit — he said it rubbed against his scales— and when it tightened it would turn him side-on. He told me he got car-sick in the back seat but would make do without the seat belt. I leant him against the center console, propping his wet body up with a few tarps I found in the boot.

'Mind if I smoke?' he asked me, as we pulled out onto the road. Gravel spraying out behind the spinning tyres.

'No problem,' I told him. 'Just keep the window down. I'm looking to sell this soon.'

‘You should look into those electric vehicles,’ he told me. Blowing thick mouthfuls of smoke out of the window. ‘These things are horrible on the environment.’

I pulled into the servo in Rahutu. They were just closing up. I looked at the fish, hopefully, propped up on the dirty tarpaulins. But he told me he didn’t have any petrol money. I rolled my eyes at him, turned, and filled the tank up with 91. I grabbed a Blue V and a pack of durries, paid for the petrol, then we drove on into the darkening countryside.

‘So, what kind of fish are you anyway?’ I cracked open my energy drink and put it in the cupholder.

‘I guess you could say I’m a kahawai.’ He smiled. ‘Bit of a crossbreed, I’m afraid. My father was kahawai through and through, but my mother was a promiscuous Hapuku.’

I looked at him thoughtfully, turning the demisters on. The sun ducking slow behind the volcanic horizon.

‘Don’t even think about it,’ he frowned. Turning around on the dirty tarps to face me. ‘I’ll have coast-watch onto you in a heartbeat. Can’t you tell I’m undersized?’

We drove on steadily into the darkening evening. The right tyres rolling down the centerline. Paddocks identical to paddocks previous, which look just like the paddocks ahead. There was a cyclist up ahead, peddling frantically into the night. He rode so far out onto the road that I had to move to the far lane to get around him. The fish leant right out of the window and yelled out as we drove past. ‘Get off the road you lycra-clad cunt!’

‘So, what are you doing here anyway?’ I asked him. ‘Most fish that I’ve come across don’t make a habit of spending time on land.’ I looked at him. He wasn’t amused.

‘I got pulled up on a long line; left for dead when they saw I was undersized. The bastards were so lazy they didn’t even kayak the line out, had some big red plastic thing they sent out on a motor.’

‘A Contiki.’ I turned the corner and slowed into Opanaki.

‘I don’t give a shit what you call it. It just ain’t fishing to me.’

I gestured to the Four Square as we cruised down the boulevard. ‘Need anything? Last stop before the river.’ He shook his head and we drove straight on.

‘Anyway, next thing I know I’m resuscitated by this seagull. And as I go to thank him, you know, for saving my life, I realize he’s not trying to save me at all — the big-billed fucker’s trying to eat me. So I fight him off, flap along the sand, and find a small stream to hide in. I hide out there for a day or two, thinking I’ll eventually make my way back into the ocean. But

then I decide, alright, I'll hang around on the land for a bit. See what the dry life's all about. They accepted me at Victoria University as the writer in residence. So I parked up there for a while — did a few talks at lectures and things, I even got an invitation to speak at parliament on the new Climate Related Disclosures Bill. But the city life's quite different to the open ocean, so when my residence ran out I decided to see some more of the country. I went down south for a while — worked in a pub in Omakau, manned the ski lift in Coronet. Went for a roadie to bluff, saw the Moeraki Boulders — bit overrated if you ask me, they're just a few lousy rocks. Then when I got sick of eating cheese rolls I came back up north.'

'What else did you see?' I drunk my V and listened to the fish talk. Turned right at a sign that read: Surf Beach 3km.

'A bunch of giant fucking fruit and vegetables. Pretty weird if you ask me. It's like you kiwis have some kind of sick fruit fetish. I saw a tourist damn near jizz in his pants taking pictures of the Ohakune carrot.'

'Produce-related overcompensation.'

'Yeah something like that. Anyway, I saw what the country had to offer — from the land that is — but now it's time for me to go home.

I pulled into the campground and parked beneath a pōhutukawa tree right outside the bach. 'Here we are,' I told him. 'I'll walk you to the water.'

The family bach was painted like a Speights label — the dark blue decking, yellow walls, and an orange interior. We locked up the car and walked through the campground towards the river. There were rows of dome tents and Nissan's parked by the stream. Dave Dobbyn somewhere on the stereo. A large group of capers had gathered around the games room where the All Black's game was projected on the wall. 'Go you big black bastard,' I heard someone yell, as a black number eleven jersey dived over the try line. We walked past the fenced off metal slides to the bridge that crossed over the river. I asked if this was an alright spot but he told me he preferred the salt. Numberplate vacancies rolled out along the river. Surfboards piled in the watery dusk.

'I've been thinking a lot about flax,' he told me. Lighting a cigarette as we crossed over the bridge. 'You know, when the sun hits it just right — and it shines all gauzy and dreamlike — you feel you could just about cry.'

The sand had an eerie white glow and driftwood stuck out like moa bones from the windswept dunes. Formations in the stars would appear, vanish, then reappear, between the

broken and fast-moving clouds. We could make out the Southern Cross and we argued over the bright star off to the east. He said it was Sirius but I thought it was just a planet. Venus, maybe. As we made our way down the beach we came across a run-down whare, slowly crumbling into the riverbank. Outside, a large family sat around a bonfire. A young boy was playing a Hello Sailor song on acoustic guitar while children roasted marshmallows on the ends of twigs. The fish sang along as we walked by: *My luck in the gutter black/ I guess I'm running back.* Embers flickered in his old dark eyes. *Hey bros*, the boy yelled out to us. *Do you wanna have a jam?*

I warmed my hands on the bonfire while the boy taught the fish the chords for 'Always On My Mind'. To his credit, he picked it up quite fast. 'The key to toasting marshmallows,' the fish told the children, 'is to hold it at the base of the flame. This heats the marshmallow evenly, softening the insides just right, without burning it to a crisp.'

Once the marshmallows were finished a few of the kids began frantically digging in the sand.

'What're you looking for?' The fish asked.

'Huhu grubs,' they explained. 'Wanna try one?'

'Ew! God no.'

'You'll like them. They taste just like chicken.'

'You people say everything tastes like chicken.'

Smoke rose from the bonfire and drifted upstream towards the bridge, where Koupoconui River wound its way down from the distant maunga. Cutting through farmland, weaving around dunes, and out, out, way out, into the ocean. An older man walked over to the bonfire and took a seat on a large piece of driftwood. He was holding a plate of hot meat. He gestured to me. 'You want some?'

A crate bottle of Lion Red had been pushed into the black sand; twisted back and forth to form a makeshift cupholder. 'Sure, what is it?'

'Tuna.'

'Tuna? Hell yeah, I'll have some tuna.'

The fish started laughing. I took the biggest piece of tuna there was and chucked it in my mouth. Immediately, I noticed something was off. The meat was all chewy and smelt like a barbeque that hadn't been cleaned in a long time. I'd have almost preferred the huhu grubs.

‘Thanks,’ I said. Struggling not to vomit. The fish was laughing even more now and I noticed that even some of the kids were laughing too. The old man started offering the so-called tuna around to everyone else while I struggled to gulp the last of it down. I turned and whispered to the fish. ‘What’s so funny?’

‘*Tuna* is Māori for eel.’ He was still laughing. ‘It’s not tuna you’re eating. It’s eel from the river, you egg.’

‘Ugh.’ I spat onto the sand. The old man handed me his Lion Red. The bloody fish was in hysterics.

After a couple of beers and a few acoustic singalongs we carried on to the ocean. The waves were breaking quite far out, and rolling in to crash against the mussel-covered rocks that line the beachfront. ‘Are you going to be alright?’ I asked him.

He stuffed his pack of cigarettes behind a flax bush. ‘I’ll be alright. Soon enough this whole damn place will be underwater.’ He winked at me. ‘Cheers for the ride.’ And waded out into the water.

I remember him naked. Head and bare shoulders afloat as he swam out through the breakers. Moonlit ripples lapped his shiny collarbone. His scaly body weightless in salt. I watched him, for as long as I could, in the wind and the starlight. Standing safely above the high-water mark back on shore. When he was gone, I grabbed his cigarettes from the flax bush and lit one up in the cold ocean air. I looked at the flax bush and thought about the hitchhiking fish. The light must have been hitting it just right. Because it shone. All gauzy and dreamlike. I felt I could just about cry.

The Boat Stand

I'd been working at the boat stand for about a month, I guess. It was a night shift, five to eleven, and with nothing to do but rearrange the life jackets, I went over to find Furry, a good friend of mine, who worked at the popcorn stand nearby. He was running around the small caravan with a mop and a blue and black tea towel. 'Are you still doing that?' I asked.

'All this God damn butter,' he complained.

'Looks pretty clean to me.'

'It's everywhere,' he yelled. 'What the hell were the day staff doing?'

'Making popcorn.' I told him. 'Buttery popcorn. I think it's just part of the job man.'

He leaned his mop against the popcorn machine and threw his hands in the air. 'Part of the job, huh? Part of the job, he says. You try getting laid stinking of damn butter.'

We walked up to the Tea House, past the boat stand and away from the buttery popcorn. Nina was working front of house — standing at the cash register between the food cabinet and the coffee machine. Furry walked in the door and leaned over the counter. 'Hey girl, busy night?'

Nina rolled her eyes. 'Not really. It's only six.'

'Tell me about it,' said Furry. Eyeing up the food in the cabinet. 'So, you come here often?'

'It's my—' Nina stops herself. 'Jesus Christ, what is that smell?'

'It could be my cologne.'

'God no. Ew, it smells like butter. Like month-old rotten butter.'

'Anyway, we'd better be off. I've got to help Liam out at the boat stand.'

The only customers I'd had that night were a couple of teenagers, who were still floating about on the lake. They were blatantly ignoring the no-standing-up rule and had been out for well over the assigned twenty minutes. 'Oi, get back in here,' I yelled at the kids. The older one pulled the finger at me. 'Little shits,' I muttered. Before calling back out, 'Well at least sit down, you're going to get me in trouble.'

Furry and I smoked a joint behind the boat stand, keeping a watchful eye for approaching customers. I was worried about the boss smelling the weed on my clothes. Furry

was just happy to have something that would cover up the butter. ‘You need to stop hitting on Nina bro,’ I told him, exhaling into the park. ‘At this stage you’re just embarrassing yourself.’

‘I know what I’m doing,’ smiled Furry, as I handed him the joint. ‘She plays hard to get, sure, but I can tell she wants it. At the very least I’m livening up her night.’

The next customers were an older woman with her granddaughter. They wanted to hire the big yellow boat. ‘It’s pretty difficult to paddle,’ I told them. ‘Are you sure you don’t want a smaller one?’

‘We’ll be fine,’ the older woman said. ‘My father used to say I was first in line at the legs market.’

Furry and I pushed the boat out into the water while the old lady fumbled with the oars. Her granddaughter started crying as water splashed up onto the boat. ‘Grandma,’ she yelled. ‘Grandma you’re getting me all wet.’

‘Don’t worry sweetie,’ the old lady called out. ‘Don’t worry hun, I’m just getting the hang of it.’

The boat spun around in circles while water splashed everywhere. I grabbed onto the park bench on the edge of the lake. ‘I can get you guys a smaller boat?’

Furry was picking at his fingernails. Biting them with his teeth. ‘This butter gets fucking everywhere, man.’

The woman steadied the oars and paddled further into the lake. ‘See honey, nana knows what she’s doing.’ The little girl stopped crying; dried her face with the sleeve of her sweatshirt, as the boat drifted slowly out into the lake.

‘I should keep an eye on them,’ I told Furry. Taking a seat on the bench.

‘No way man, she’ll be right. Didn’t you hear? Her father said she was first in line at the legs market.’

Over at the Tea House, Nina was serving a customer at the register, while Angie, the boss, was on the coffee machine. Furry and I walked in and took a seat at one of the tables. ‘Bit early for your break isn’t it, boys?’ Angie, steaming the milk, pushing hot water through the ground coffee beans.

‘No worries, Ange,’ Furry called out. ‘The park’s pretty quiet tonight. I’ve just been helping Liam out at the boat stand.’

‘Well, I hope you’ve got the cart all prepped. You’re going to get pumped later on when the concert starts.’ She sifted the milk into the mug — smooth and velvety — shaking out a leaf-shape in the foam.

‘Who’s playing?’ I asked.

‘Tom Batchelor. Should get pretty busy.’

‘Who the fuck is Tom Batchelor?’

‘He came seventh in the X-Factor a few years back.’ Nina, plating two cheese and onion scones fresh from the microwave.

‘Jesus Christ,’ yelled Furry. ‘We couldn’t even get someone from the top five? No wonder we’re not selling any bloody popcorn.’

‘Seventh place or not people love a show.’ Angie handed me the warm cappuccino. ‘I can always send Nina down if you need a restock.’

‘I’ll keep that in mind,’ winked Furry. Grabbing one of the scones from over the counter and walking outside towards the lake. I got up to join him.

‘Oh and Liam,’ Angie called out from behind the coffee machine. ‘Try your best not to fall in tonight.’

Furry and I are sitting at the boat stand, smoking another joint. The woman and her granddaughter are still bobbing about on the water and the teenagers have stopped and gotten off on one of the islands, which is also against the rules. It’s getting dark and the lights are going to turn on soon. Every summer, the council puts colorful neon lights in all the trees in the park. It’s called the festival of lights. There are concerts and movies and attractions on at the park all summer — even the boats have lights on the back of them. During the festival, the Tea House hires a bunch of extra staff — mostly university students back for the summer — to help out with all the additional work on the night shift. That’s how Furry and I got the job.

The big yellow boat is slowly making its way back in, bobbing slowly along the polluted water. ‘How was it?’ I called out. Grabbing ahold of the bench and leaning out over the water.

‘Marvelous,’ said the old lady. ‘Just the way it was when I was younger.’

Furry wandered back to the popcorn stand while I hung out at the boats. I made sure they were all tied up properly — five to the clip on the left and four to the clip on the right. There were nine fiber glass boats along with the big wooden yellow one. The boats all used

to be wooden but the council were replacing them one by one with newer models — the yellow boat was the only old one left. At six-thirty the lights flicked on. Red above the boat stand, blue over the café, green lights in the kauri over the popcorn stand. They lit up faster than I could blink; in time with the flash-sync of my eyes. Tangerine over the waterfall. Vivid ferns. Stage-lit vermillion. Neon geometry. A deep blue coming off the bridge.

'Jesus,' said Furry. Back from the popcorn stand. 'Have you seen the crowd down on hatchery lawn?'

'Wouldn't have thought seventh place would get this much attention.'

'Just imagine if they nabbed the guy who came first.'

Tom Batchelor opened with *Rain* by Dragon, then went into *Bliss* by The Dudes. The lawn by the stage was packed with picnic blankets and chilly bins; families piled into the neon dusk. The boats weren't too busy because everyone was at the concert, so I helped Furry out at the popcorn stand. He was leaning back on the cabinet waiting for the popcorn to pop. 'Can you hurry this up,' someone called out. 'We're going to lose our seats.' Furry told him that you can't rush perfection.

Back at the boat stand a line had built up. Some of them had even started putting on life jackets. The customers would pay for the boat rides at the Tea House and then head over to me for the tickets. They do it this way because the last boat guy kept getting mugged. I realized quite soon on that the Tea House sold much fewer tickets than there were boat rides, and if I got the customers on and off fast enough there were spare boats. The boats were the most popular attraction in the park, so there was always a queue. If I kept a few boats spare, and just charged cash to the customers without tickets, I worked out I could go home with an extra couple hundred dollars each night. But when I did my boat count, I realized there was one missing. 'Those little fuckers,' I muttered.

I scrambled past the lifejacket stand and pushed through the crowd of customers. The teenagers' boat was still parked up on the island. 'Just hold on a second,' I told the crowd, jumping into the nearest white boat. I un-hooked from the wharf, clipped in the oars, and hit the water with speed. I got to the island pretty fast — lots of practice I guess — and saw the two kids sitting in the middle of it beneath a lit-up fern. They stood up as I approached. 'Get on your boat and go back to the wharf.'

'Piss off.' The older one yelled. Pulling the finger at me while the younger one laughed.

I crashed my boat into the island next to theirs. ‘Suit yourself dickhead.’ I clipped their boat to the back of mine and pushed off from the bank.

‘Oi, come back!’ One of them yelled.

‘I hope you fuckwits can swim.’

I paddled hard back towards the wharf while pebbles hit the water around me. I wasn’t missing out on two-hundred dollars because of two little snot-nosed teenagers.

When I got back to the wharf I clipped both of the boats up and started helping the passengers in. ‘Keep your life jackets on and stay sitting down,’ I told them. Checking the names off my clipboard. ‘Back in twenty minutes. Keep your hands in the boat. And don’t go anywhere near that fucking island.’

Furry came up from the popcorn stand stinking of butter. ‘Tom Batchelor is fucking awesome man. Those other six guys must have been amazing.’ The park was full and the people were colorful. Acoustic strings of kiwi singalongs echoed through the electric park. ‘How much have you made so far?’ Furry asked. Picking up a pair of oars and chucking them in a boat. I usually gave him a cut of the extra cash. In return he’d pop up every now and again and make it look as if he was helping.

‘About one-twenty so far. Hopefully get two hundred by the end of the night. How’s the popcorn?’

‘Hot and buttery,’ he told me. ‘Just heading up to ask Nina for a restock.’

‘Why’s that?’ I asked. ‘Are you running out?’

‘Hell no. There’s enough damn popcorn to last the week.’

Later, at the boat stand, I was helping a large family into one of the boats. By large family I mean there were lots of them, and each one was individually large. ‘There’s a bigger boat if you want it.’ I told them. Holding the boat against the wharf. ‘That big yellow one’s due back in soon.’

‘We’ll be fine,’ said the father, helping his quivering son to the back of the boat.

‘Okay,’ I said, handing him the oars. ‘I guess just try not to move around too much.’

When his wife hopped in the poor little boat was almost underwater.

‘You’re piling the boats up too much,’ Angie told me, bringing out a hot chocolate from the Tea House. ‘That one there’s on the verge of sinking.’ She gestured to the large family in the little white boat.

‘It’s not my fault,’ I told her, sipping the chocolatey milk. ‘You’re the one selling them the damn tickets.

Angie rolled her eyes and walked back to the Tea House, handing a five dollar note to a juggling busker along the way. The Festival of Lights gets a lot of buskers. There were jugglers, magicians, men on stilts and unicycles. There wass even a man who dresses as a gorilla and swings from tree to tree on a harness. I’ve met him, and he’s a really nice guy. He lives next door to my mum and works as an arborist. They are all hired by the council, so I suppose they’re not actually buskers. Independent contractors might be a more accurate term. But people do give them money. Perhaps, like me, they’re making a bit of coin doing cash jobs on the side.

By the boat stand, a large group of people started gathering around the rotunda — there was a girl at the center of it dancing with a hula hoop. She was hula-ing the hoop around her stomach. The music from the stage carried through the trees — Tom Batchelor was covering ‘Anchor Me’ by the Mutton Birds. Her body moved fast as the hoop rolled itself around her, pressing violently into her stomach. She arched her back and the hoop moved upwards. Stomach. Chest. Neck. She ducked her head and moved the hoop to her arm, spinning it round so the hoop moved faster — her body still gyrating to the music. The neon lights on the rotunda flashed myriad colours, to the deep stage base through the trees. Blue light shoulder blades, flashing green stomach. She moved the hoop back to her blood red collarbone. No one in the crowd could look away.

Once she was done, everyone applauded, and the crowd slowly dispersed. She came and stood by the boat stand holding the hoop by her side. ‘Nice work,’ I said. Sorting the life jackets on the rack from smallest to biggest. ‘How long have you been doing that for?’

‘Two years,’ she told me. ‘It’s mainly just a hobby.’

‘How come you’re not wearing one of the shirts?’ I pointed at my chest. Everyone hired by the council to work at the festival — Furry and myself included — were given a blue T-shirt with white glow-in-the-dark lettering that read: I <3 FOL — meaning Festival of Lights. Whenever a customer asked what it stood for Furry would tell them *fingering old ladies*, and — if she was nearby — wink at Angie.

‘I haven’t been hired or anything,’ she told me. She was wearing a white crop-top with denim shorts.

‘You better keep it on the down low then,’ I told her. ‘The council doesn’t like anyone else making a buck here. They’ll probably boot you out if they catch you.’

‘I don’t ask for money. I just do it for fun.’

‘For fun? How often do you come here?’

‘Maybe three nights a week. Just when it’s busy.’

‘You drive here three nights a week to dance around with a hula hoop, just for fun?

‘No, I walk. I only live just up the road.’

I smiled and turned back to the lifejacket stand, moving the small jackets to the left and the large jackets to the right.

‘What?’ She laughed. Walking around me and leaning on the rack. ‘How long have you been doing this for?’ She asked, pointing to the boats.

‘About a month, I guess. Just making a bit of money while I’m back from uni.’

She smiled. ‘You’re not the guy who fell in are you?’

I frowned. ‘Where’d you hear that?’

‘Everyone was talking about it. The boat guy who fell in on his first day.’

I turned my back on her and started sorting the lifejackets at the other end of the stand. She circled around me again.

‘Oh my God. It was you, wasn’t it?’

I walked over to the boats.

‘Jesus, I’m surprised they let you keep the job.’ She followed me over to the lake. ‘I mean, surely that’s the number one rule, right? Don’t fall in the water. How did you even manage that anyway?’

‘Look,’ I told her. ‘See those white boats? That’s fiberglass. That stuff’s slippery as shit. At the end of the night I have to clamber over all the boats and tie them together. That’s ten boats. Two lots of five. And no-one told me how to do it — so of course I fell in.’

She started laughing.

‘They didn’t even let me go home afterwards. I still had to row the boats back. They didn’t give me a change of clothes or anything. I rowed them, locked them up, and walked back soaking wet. And have you seen that water? It’s fucking disgusting. I had an ear infection

for about a week afterwards. Fucked my new I-Phone. If anything, it's a health and safety violation. I should damn well sue.'

'Was it cold?'

'No, that's the gross part. The water was almost hot — I guess because of all the algae and bacteria and shit. That's why they've got all those *no swimming* signs around.'

There were *no swimming* signs around the lake, and a kind of traffic light system that put the water quality at red. The lake used to be swimmable — I've seen the black and white pictures at the Tea House. The local schools would have their swimming sports here, firing a starting gun from the top of Cannon Hill which now overlooked the concert stage. Tom Batchelor was still playing — a slowed down cover of 'I Got You' by Split Enz. Cheers from the drunken crowd carried through the trees. They would soon charge up from hatchery lawn, with cups of buttery popcorn asking for sold-out boat rides for which I would charge them cash. Right then, all the lights in the park turned a golden, orange, red.

'What's your name anyway?' I asked. Checking through the bookings on my clip board.

'What's it to you?' She walked over to the lake. Canvas shoes. Cherry-colour hair band.

I laughed. 'Just making conversation.'

'Is that what your job is? Making conversation to strange girls in the park?'

'Yeah pretty much.' I fingered the cash in my right pocket. 'Are you seriously not going to tell me your name?'

'Where do you take the boats?' She asked. 'You know, at the end of the night. Where do they go?'

'The boat shed.'

'Lucky!' she said. 'I've wanted to go in there since I was little. It's always locked up when I walk past.'

The boat shed was an old wooden hut on the far side of the lake. It was full of waist-deep water with a corroding wooden boardwalk around the inside. Every night I rowed the boats back, pulled them into the shed through the sliding wooden door, and plugged them in at the back to charge the lights. There was only just enough room for all ten boats, so it was quite difficult fitting them in there. It was like a game of floating Tetris. Most nights, Furry would row some of the boats back with me to help stack them.

'Can I come with you?'

'To the boat shed? No.'

‘Come on, why not? I’ve always wanted to go.’

‘It’s dangerous. If I take you in there and something happens, it’s on me. I could lose my job.’

‘With all due respect, I’m not the one who fell in the lake.’

Two of the white boats pulled up to the wharf. I clipped them up at opposite sides and held the back of each boat against the wharf in the middle. ‘How was the row?’ I asked one of the groups. A couple, quite young. The man was rowing and the girl was sat at the back against the flickering neon lights.

‘Good thanks mate,’ said the man. Stepping onto the wharf. ‘I think there’s a few people stuck on the island though. We heard a few people yelling at us.’

‘Native bird sounds,’ I told them. ‘Pretty impressive huh? The council put some speakers in the trees up there.’ The man looked at me, confused, and helped his girlfriend off the boat.

‘I can help.’ The hula hoop girl told me once the customers had left. ‘I can help row some of the boats back.’

‘No, you’re just going to get in the way.’

‘Okay, I won’t help. I’ll just sit in a boat. Stay out of the way. You won’t even know I’m there.’ She put the hula hoop over her head and held it at her waist.

I looked at her. ‘How old are you anyway?’

‘I’m old enough.’

I laughed. ‘Old enough for what?’

Furry walked up the track from the popcorn stand, circled the rotunda, and sat down the bench at boat stand. ‘Hey,’ he called out, to the hula hoop girl. ‘How come you’re not wearing one of the shirts?’

‘Fine,’ I said. Turning back to the lifejackets. ‘Just come back here around ten.’

She smiled and turned, the hula hoop around her, and walked into the crowd by the waterfall.

Furry and I walked back to the Tea House for our fifteen-minute break, chucking *a temporarily closed* sign on the boat stand. The café was packed because the concert had just finished. Music lovers after hot chips and warm drinks.

Furry had smoked another joint in the bushes behind the boat stand. I had declined as I was still feeling the effects of the first two. From the state of Furry afterwards, I realized I had made the right choice. 'How's it going on the popcorn stand?' Angie asked, as we walked in.

Furry sat down at one of the tables. 'Are you talking to me?'

Angie was serving customers, handing plates and drinks over the counter. Nina ran around prepping the food in the kitchen.

'Is this a café? Do you work at the popcorn stand?'

Furry turned to me. 'The lights in here are just too much man.'

'Hey, have you guys seen a girl with a hula hoop around?' I asked. Butting into the conversation. 'She's been hanging around at the boats.'

'Yeah, I've seen her around,' said Nina. Walking out of the kitchen and handing Furry a pottle of chips. 'Eat up buddy. It looks like you need it.'

'Does she come around here much?' I asked.

'Yeah, she's here most nights. Sometimes comes in for a coffee.'

'Do you know her name?'

'Nah, I guess not. The day staff all just call her hula girl.'

I took one of the chips from Furry's pottle. 'Do you know how old she is?' Nina gave me a dirty look and walked back into the kitchen.

Angie looked over at me. 'Hey Liam?'

I gulped down my chip. 'Yeah, what's up?'

'We've had a few customers come in saying they heard people calling out from the island.' Angie opened the cash register. 'Would you know anything about that?'

I tapped Furry on the arm and stood up from the table. 'Must be that new sound system they've got going. Pretty impressive huh?' Furry and I left and walked back to the boat stand.

I did a few more cashies before closing up and tying all the boats up to the wharf. I counted up the money, two-hundred and forty, not bad for seventh place in X-Factor. Furry had shut up the popcorn stand and wiped it all down, so he was sitting by the lifejackets stinking of butter. 'She wants it man. I tell you she *wants* it. She plays hard to get, sure, but I know she wants it.'

The mosquitos on the island get out of control at night. I know this because Furry and I parked up and smoked a joint there once. The hula hoop girl was late and the crowds were still dispersing, so I chucked on a life jacket and asked Furry to keep an eye on the boats.

'No problem man, I'm all over it. Just don't go falling in on me again.'

I rowed fast across the lit up water and cautiously slowed into the island. 'Hello,' I called out. Looking into the trees. 'Hello? Is anyone there?'

The two kids stood up and looked at me. They were both huddled beneath one of the ferns.

'You fellas need a ride?'

The kids sat in silence at the back of the boat, while I pushed off the rocks along the water. They were both shivering and itching mosquito bites up their arms. Furry grabbed the boat as I pulled into the land and clipped the front up to the wharf. We both helped the kids up onto dry land and put their lifejackets on the rack. Furry put his arms around the shivering teenagers. 'Looks like you kids could use a joint.'

Nina came to the boat stand with a hot chocolate for each of us and sat down at the boat stand next to Furry. 'You two reek of weed, you know that right? You don't think Angie knows what you're doing?'

'Angie doesn't mind,' said Furry, putting his arm around Nina. 'I'm sure she did a few things too back in the day.

Nina pushed Furry away. 'Sure, she'll let it slide if you're doing your jobs right. Not if you're covering yourself with butter and falling in the lake.'

The hula hoop girl walked over, spinning the hoop in her hand, and leaned against the fence by the lake. She looked at the three of us. 'Ready to go?'

The four of us worked together, clipping up the boats. Five on the left side and five on the right side, chucking the life jackets in the boat at the back. 'Coming for a ride?' Furry asked Nina. Throwing on and zipping up a large life jacket.

'The café's all cleaned and Angie's just counting up the register.' Nina smiled. 'I don't see why not.'

Furry and I helped the girls into the boats. Nina in one and hula girl in the other — she kept the hoop on when she stepped in. Furry took me aside before we got it.

'Tell her the bridge story.'

‘Huh?’

‘Tell her the bridge story, man. I promise you it works every time.’

‘I’m not trying to get with her or anything dude. She just wants to see the boat shed. You just got that stupid story from the information book anyway.’

‘Whatever you say.’ He winked at me and got in the boat. ‘Trust me dude. Works every time.’

We pushed off from the wharf and paddled out into the lake. Two chains of five glowing boats. I let Nina and Furry get out ahead and settled into a rhythm with the hula girl sitting opposite me. We moved slowly past the island, the glowing red ferns, the monotone hum of mosquitos. The lights in the trees reflected off the water — making graphic ripples in the fiberglass wake.

‘So,’ I said. Making circles with the oars. ‘How old are you really?’

The hula girl thumbed the hoop, curling it through her hands. Silently looking out over the water.

‘Well I know you don’t drive. You walked here. Are you old enough to get your license?’

She kept on turning the hoop. ‘What does it matter? I won’t get you fired if that’s what you think.’

‘I don’t give a shit; this is a part time job. I’m barely getting minimum wage. Believe it or not I have a moral code that extends beyond my part time employment.’

She looked over my shoulder. We were coming up to the bridge. Furry and Nina had already turned the corner ahead of us, where the lake bends around to the boat shed.

‘You know what that’s called?’ said hula girl, pointing to the bridge. There were still a few people walking over it, slowly making their way out of the park.

‘Yeah, I do. It’s called Poet’s Bridge.’ I told her.

‘Do you know why it’s called that?’

I smiled. ‘No. Why’s it called that?’

The bridge is lit up in myriad colours. It is one of the main attractions of the festival. The lights move in waves in time with the music. Electronic sounds booming from the piers. Red and orange flickers in the arches.

‘So there was guy, I forget his name, but he was a local guy. He liked helping out with things in the community and stuff like that. He lived somewhere near the park. So this guy,

he spent a lot of time at the tracks, drinking beer and betting on the horses. He went up there most days and walked home at night through the park. And one day, this guy wins big. He bets on this horse, it's called The Poet, and it must have been a dog in the race because the payoff was huge. I don't know how much but it was a ton of money. He decides to use the money to give back to the community. They were doing a bunch of work in the park back then, it looked completely different, I've seen the photos. And he decides to use the money to build a bridge over the lake. This way he is putting the money towards the community, but it also means he doesn't have to walk all the way around the lake each time he goes home. A very expensive shortcut if you ask me. So they build this bridge and when the time comes to name it they ask this guy what he would like. He names it Poet's Bridge, after the horse you know, the one that made him all the money in the first place.'

The oars move gently through the water in the blue and green ripple. We are passing right beneath the bridge now. Our faces lit turquoise through the beams and girders.

'But sadly, the story doesn't end there. This guy, who paid for the bridge, is walking home from the tracks. Late at night, walking home through the park. He's been drinking all day, you know, the way you do at the race. And he's stumbling through the darkened tracks and shrubbery. They didn't have all the lights back then you know. And I guess something must have happened, because he fell in the lake. Some combination of the drunkenness and darkness. He drowned. Here in the lake, right beneath us. They found his body there the next morning. Right beneath Poet's Bridge.'

I stop paddling and let the boat glide by itself. The pulsing lights reflecting off the water. Neon stream breeze. Warm algae smell. The four other boats towed along behind us.

When we pulled into the shed Nina and Furry were making out in one of the boats, clattering about in the warm dark water. I guess the bridge story worked after all. Once they saw us they stopped, Nina pushing Furry away, and they helped us ease our boats into the shed. 'You guys wanna smoke?' Furry asked.

I looked at Nina. 'Not until we've plugged all the lights in.'

The four of us clambered through the shed, handing waterproof wires from boat to boat and plugging them in at the electrical box. The boats clanged and banged as we moved across them, plugging the wires into the small slit beneath the lights. Slow crowds moved by outside,

peaking through the slits in the mystery walls. ‘Dad,’ a girl called out from the track outside. ‘Dad, you won’t believe it. They’ve got all the boats in there.’

‘Yes sweetie.’ The voices moved away. ‘They’re tucking all the boats in for bed.’

The water settled. We stood on the boardwalk by the electrical box while Furry lit the joint. We kept the door locked and stayed quiet when we heard people walking by. We talked and laughed in the crimson shed — exhaling softly in the blood red air. The muddy water lapping against the boardwalk.

‘These lights,’ said Furry. Coughing and passing the joint to Nina. ‘These lights are just too much man.’

Nina took the joint and held it in her mouth. Furry lit it while she breathed in, covering the lighter with the other hand. ‘I’m sick of these stupid joints man. We’ve gotta stash a bong in here somewhere.’

Nina coughed and started laughing. ‘I bet Angie’s got one hidden at the Tea House.’

Hula girl took the joint next. She still had the hoop on, resting over her shoulders. I told her she didn’t have to do it if she didn’t want to, but she ignored me and did it anyway. She coughed a lot, and apologized for it, but Furry told her that was normal. We heard a group walking by so we all hushed ourselves quiet. The soft press of footsteps on the gravel track. ‘Jesus,’ someone said, as they passed by the boat shed. ‘It reeks of butter in there.’

Nina lifted herself up and sat on the work bench, her legs dangling over the water. ‘I’m going to miss you guys when you head back to uni.’

‘Ah don’t worry about it,’ said Furry, taking the joint from hula girl. ‘We’ll be back again next summer.’

Hula girl looked at me. ‘You promise?’

The lights over the lake eased from colour to colour — showered through the slits in the boat shed walls. The smoke from the joint rose in a lemon-green glow — an aurora borealis of boat shed marijuana. The boardwalk turned maroon while waves of emerald danced along the water.

‘This weed’s on another level, man. Real good stuff.’ Furry handed me the joint.’ I’ll grab us another fifty bag with the boat money.’

Nina looked at him. ‘What boat money?’

‘Alright guys,’ I said. ‘It’s getting late. We better head back to the café.’ I took a quick puff and stubbed the joint out on the bench. We locked the creaky wooden door behind us.

The lights flicked off as we were walking back to the Tea House. It must have been eleven. All the leaves in the trees went dark and the multi-coloured water turned to black. Furry put his phone torch on to guide us. He and Nina walked ahead while the hula hoop girl and I trailed behind them.

'It's pretty late,' I told her. 'Do your family not get worried when you stay out? The park can be pretty dangerous.'

'I just live with my dad and he doesn't give a shit. Doesn't even ask me where I'm going.'

'You know a bunch of homeless people live in the park. You probably shouldn't walk home through here, especially with all the lights off.'

'I know all the homeless people and they're all quite nice. It's just a nice place to sleep out of the city.'

'Yeah, I guess so. But there's a bunch of muggings here too.'

'If I get mugged I'll just call out to the homeless people.'

We walked past Poet's Bridge, its red wooden arches. The hula hoop girl turned towards it. 'My house is this way.'

I stopped. 'I can give you a ride if you like?'

'Nah, it's fine. My house is honestly just up there.' She pointed into the trees.

Furry and Nina stopped up ahead. 'What's up?'

'You guys go ahead,' I called out. 'I'll catch up.'

We stood at the bridge while Furry and Nina walked ahead.

'Thanks for the weed?' She smiled.

'No worries. Just don't go getting me in trouble.'

'You just worry about not falling in the lake. You know what happened to the other guy.' She pointed at the dark water beneath the bridge.

'Have a good night.' I said, as she turned to walk away.

'You too.' She smiled. 'Might see you round.'

I watched her cross the bridge. Soft wooden footsteps. The hula hoop draped around her neck. When she got to the other side she turned back around.

'Matilda,' she yelled.

'What's that?' I called out.

‘My name. It’s Matilda.’

I smiled and waved goodbye. She spun the hula hoop around her waist and floated up into the trees.

A Game of Two Halves

It's 2017. The air is warm and heavy and there are very few clouds in the sky. Phillip Baxter floats in a swimming pool in Te Awamutu, sipping a tall glass of gin and tonic.

His granddaughter, Ruby, is on all fours. She is playing tug-of-war with the dog in the living room. The dog is stronger than he looks.

The porcelain tiles around the pool are slowly drying off, from the splashes of chlorinated water that escape each time Baxter gets off-and-on of his inflatable flamingo. He reclines in his damp XL board shorts, pressed into the ride-on PVC pool toy, sipping his gin and tonic in the sun.

Phillip Baxter, the now fifty-two-year-old retired rugby player bobs around the swimming pool on his flamingo. Sunglasses and board shorts, he skirts along the surface, his gin glass held in place between his thigh and the flamingo's pink plastic wing. The retired All Black with ninety-two test caps, fifty-one as skipper, leans back on the flamingo's neck and lets his hand run through the cool water. Widely regarded as one of the greatest players to emanate from the 'Land of the Long white Cloud', also wearing jandals, one hand behind his head and the other dangling off the flamingo into the water, occasionally using his toes to gently push off from the pool's edge to float back out to the centre, legs spread out hanging over the water, through the hexagonal shade of the patio umbrella, the afternoon sun slowly moving towards the hedge of Lilly Pilly.

Ruby is playing tug-of-war with the dog. They are each holding opposite ends of a thick piece of rope. Two hands. One Mouth. Cautious of the leather sofas, manoeuvring around the stone coffee table, keeping a safe distance from the wall-mounted Panasonic flat screen, she tugs against the dog. 'He's stronger than he looks,' her grandfather assures her, as he makes his way to the kitchen to pour another gin and tonic. It is important to him that she knows this. The dog is stronger than he looks.

It is 1973. Baxter and his father are tossing an oval ball back and forth over the unmown back lawn. His father tells him *point your fingers where you want the ball to go.*

He floats around his kidney-shaped pool in what is very nearly silence. Only the soft gurgle of the pool's filtration system; the rustle of summer breeze through garden shrubbery;

the violent splashes of Baxter hoping in-and-out of his inflatable flamingo to refill his glass of gin and tonic. Six Bledisloe Cup wins, one World Cup, eight National Provincial Championships, often within the conversation of the greatest player to ever don the number two jersey. Wet skin on plastic. Droplets of perspiration on his well-tanned chest. Three dislocated fingers, five broken bones, myriad ligament injuries, collarbone fracture, his neck strained to the point that he can barely turn his head from years of hard fought scrummaging. His nose crooked from the time he charged down a twenty-two and caught the regulation Size-5 rugby ball right in the snout. Horrific cauliflower ear despite them having been drained multiple times and treated with antibiotics. Countless and interminable concussions. He takes a sip of gin and places the glass on his Steinlager-official-sponsor-of-the-All-Blacks beer gut. The breeze dies down; there isn't a sound. Only the watery hum of the pool jets, a distant lawnmower, and the yelps and oomph's of living-room tug-of-war.

It is 1978. The height of spring. The evening sun moving down over the golden farmlet. He's turned the outdoor lights on. Phillip Baxter is practicing line-out throws against the back wall of the family home on the outskirts of Te Kuiti. His father had told him *pick a spot in the sky and aim for it.* He studies the arc of the rugby ball through the cool evening air. Hits the yellowy-brown spot on the cypress wall with every throw. Mosquitoes quiver around the exterior light above him. There is the right power hand at the back of the ball, and the left guiding hand on the side. He gets carried away. Too much power hand not enough guidance. Throws the ball too hard, too high, too many Weet-Bix, and smashes the outside light. The world goes dark. He runs. His father his going to kill him.

The clouds now burnt off, the sky wholly blue. Specks of condensation on the cool surface of the gin glass, cold against Baxter's stomach. He reaches a wrinkled hand and wipes sweat from his forehead, skin hard and leathery from the sun. A legend of the sport. He has his own Weet-Bix card with maxed out stats. Height: 176cm. Weight: 90kgs. Test caps: 92. Test Points: 55. All Black's Number: 871. Success Rate: 76%. Weet-Bix Eaten: 7. Phillip Baxter, an all-time great, recently diagnosed with dementia, stretches out on his flamingo in the sun. Daily headaches, long stretches of depression and drinking alone in his pool, he skirts along the surface. A seemingly impossible to defend scrummaging technique, impeccable ball carrying skills, and a much imitated but rarely emulated lineout throw. A recent medical CTE diagnoses. His granddaughter plays with the family dog in the living room.

It is 2009. Phillip Baxter is reapplying for his granddaughter's passport, filling out an online form. They are planning a family holiday to Sydney. He types figures and checks boxes — moves along and clicks through the electronic forms. He stops. Racks his brain. Trying for something he can't remember. Reaching for something that isn't there. He slams the laptop shut and swears. He has forgotten her God damn name.

It is 2010. Phillip Baxter is suing the New Zealand Rugby Commission and the wider World Rugby Commission for injuries he sustained during his career. He is fronting a class action lawsuit to the Queen's Bench division of the High Court seeking damages from the various rugby commissions. Baxter's lawyer would not yet speculate on how much these damages may be, but suspects they would likely total millions of dollars, given the size of the class action and the fact that the claimants who have gone public, such as Baxter, are relatively young men who could potentially face decades of treatment and care. The lawyer representing Baxter along with the other claimants has rejected comments made by the All Black's doctor as a futile attempt to insulate rugby from what he describes as an epidemic of long-term head injuries that exists in almost all contact sports. Matthew Salisbury, who served as the official All Black's doctor between 1979 and 1995, has pointed to excessive alcohol use and family history as possible factors that could account for the diagnoses rather than any injuries suffered while playing the sport. Baxter's lawyer has emphasised that focusing on specific examples such as these misses the point entirely and belittles the epidemic that exists within every contact sport across the world.

Not a cloud in the sky, Baxter, on his pink flamingo, moves across the swimming pool, in what is truly nearly almost silence. The sun, now dipped behind the hedge of Lilly Pilly, spills shade across the south-east corner of the patio. The poolside umbrella, creaks against the thicker hole and cap set in the wooden table. Pollen in the air, the warm smell of distant silage, the slow hum of pool's filtration. Baxter takes a sip of his gin and tonic, now half empty, and leans back into the flamingo. The fine hairs on his chest and arms wet from chlorine, hand dangling just over the water's flat surface. Looking to the sky. Trucks rolling past on the highway, a few paddocks over. Still truly close to silence. Calm and undisturbed, the pool and poolside patio contained within its ecosystem — held in and separate from the outside world.

'Sure he's not as fast as he once was,' her grandfather had told her. 'But he's strong. You mightn't think it just looking at him, but *man* is he strong.' It is important to him that she knows this. Ruby and the dog are still playing with the rope. Ruby is on her knees beside the

dining room table, while the dog dances around the centre of the room. Her grandfather is floating in the swimming pool, gin and tonic in hand, looking up at the blue in the sky. With one well-timed-four-legged-push the dog yanks the rope backwards. Ruby, caught off balance, topples forward and lands sprawled out on the living room floor. She collects herself and stands back up while the dog lets out a few victory barks. Her granddad was right. The dog is stronger than he looks.

Phillip Baxter, in a swimming pool in Te Awamutu, lies on a pink flamingo looking up at the sky. Not a cloud, not a cloud, not a cloud.

Fish of New Zealand 14 — 16

I knew a guy in high school who fucked a cow. Everybody called him Johnny-Cowfucker and they would moo at him as he made his way down the hallway. I felt sorry for him, sometimes, but at the end of the day he's the one who decided to fuck a cow.

*

Have I ever told you about the time we made the semi-final?

Only about a million times.

We were playing for Hautapu — under twenty-ones — and it was the first time any of our teams had ever made the playoffs, which was a *big* deal for the club.

We'd had a perfect year — fourteen games unbeaten — the strongest team the club had ever had. But the team we were set to face — Te Awamutu United — had won the cup last year and were renowned for their toughness and intimidation, in particular their forward pack who were easily the best in the division. In fact, two of their players were brothers — Steve and Rob Gordon, a lock and a loose forward — who went on to play for the All Blacks. So that's how good they were.

We were told throughout the week, by our coaches, parents, and teachers, how important of a game this was; how we all had to come together, play our hearts out, and never take a backwards step. Then on Thursday at training, we were all in the changing sheds, and they brought in the tight-head prop, Joey Kalin, from senior thirds to come and talk to us. He was a rep and all that, used to play for Wairarapa Bush, and everyone knew old Joey. And anyway, he really gave us all a good rev up. He came in and told us a tale, about the time he

saw one of his players get kicked in the head at the bottom of a ruck. He told us how he rushed in, and barred up, you know, thinking it was all on. Had one of the other team's players by the collar. And he looked around, ready for the rest of his team to follow him in. Next minute, there were three of their guys onto him, and when he turned around… no one there. He said it was the loneliest he'd felt in his life.

So, he told us. If you're in, you're all in. Always have each other's backs out there and always go down fighting. Don't ever let a player feel like I did out there. All on my own and no one having my back. That's how you play, boys. You're brothers in arms. All in and all in together.

This happened on Thursday. So it goes without saying, none of us slept that night and none of us slept the night after. We were fizzing at the bunghole come Saturday morning. We were talking to each other at school throughout the week: *Oh man, if one of those Te Awamutu bastards if touches me I'm going to kill him. Mark my words, I'll damn well kill him.* And in the warmups and in the sheds we're all amped up and buzzing, ready send those pansies sulking back to TA.

So finally, at kickoff, the ball goes straight to big tony — who catches it and kicks it straight out. So its a line out, both forward packs lined up. And you know, their loose head prop at the front of the line out, he makes a mark on the five-metre line and chucks his arm out to make space between our prop. Nudges him on the shoulder and that's that. All it took. *Jesus boys, did you see that. He bumped me on the bloody shoulder.* Next minute we're all in there; it's all on. Punches are flying everywhere; we're picking their players up and dumping them on the ground. We had players running in from all over the field and just fucking cleaned house. Hell, even our bloody wingers and full back came running over to get in the thick of it. Their poor team didn't know what the hell was going on. They would have been thinking, *why the hell are they all attacking us.* But they sure got a bloody good hiding.

And after all that the ref just blew his whistle and called the whole game off. He was confused as all hell and said: *well, this is just bullshit. I'm not refereeing this. Game's off, you're gone.* And that was our semi-final over and done with. It was a long and quiet bus ride home. But back in the clubrooms, we all told old Joey, very proudly, that we sure as hell had each other's backs out there. He just laughed and smiled and said, *yeah, good one boys.* Bet he was gutted he missed out on the scrap.

So did you end up making the final?

Well, no. Te Awamutu were ahead on the table, so they went onto the next stage — ended up beating Otorohanga in the championship.

So you lost?

We sure beat the shit out of those Te Awamutu bastards.

*

I am standing on a bridge, watching dark water flow beneath me.

At the intersection of Oakura River and Surf Highway 45, where the main road crosses approximately ten meters over the water. An hour from now I will be up at Butler's Reef, the local pub, drinking Export Gold and watching the sun set in a flurry of red and orange. I will watch the sun as it melts into the horizon and think to myself: *again.* My entire life is just a collection of sunsets.

Further upstream, the greens of flax and toi toi float out along the water's surface and mix into the blue December sky. The greens and blues ripple and bend as they make their way downstream, slowly fading out as they draw closer to the bridge. The colours disappear in the deeper water, and looking down all I can see is a still black sheet of nothingness.

I am seven years old in the bush with my father. He is shining a yellow dolphin torch up into the trees behind our house. He whispers, *look closely,* and I spot a pair of glowing red eyes reflected in the cold glow of torchlight.

I am standing on a bridge and I swear I can feel the earth spinning. Cars race by on the open road, causing me to cling to the steel barrier, my bare feet trembling on the asphalt. I am on a geodome spacecraft travelling a thousand miles an hour round the sun. I imagine the earth as flat and feel as though I could jump right off of it.

Tonight I will fall asleep and dream of water.

I am ten years old sleeping on the floor of the marae next to the river. They used to tell us there was a taniwha that lived beneath the waterfall, the one that pours down the bank not far from the bridge. *Look closely*.

I am standing on a bridge as the tar seal melts and sticks to my feet. I look down at the dark water and see a pair of glowing red eyes looking back at me.

Decades from now I will remember the boy on the bridge and think to myself: *man, those were the days.*

Look closely, I think to myself, as the water flows on beneath me. The surface forever changing just to stay the same. I shut my eyes, grit my teeth and leap, leap free into the shimmering darkness.

In my dream I am way down deep, so I can't tell where my body ends and the water begins. Geometric patterns of reflective red eyes swirl around in the nothingness. Entering my mind. Dreaming inside my head.

Minutes from now I will pull myself from dark abyss, up onto the jagged rocks that line the riverbed. Using all of my strength I will hoist my body up the muddy track, pushing through flax and toi toi, up into the blue December sky. I will collapse on the grass in utter exhaustion and with my final breath I will cry: *again!*

Contra

Shasta gets in the front seat of Hudson's car when he pulls up the gravel drive. Out the front door, down swollen steps, she skips rocky puddles to Corolla. She is wearing one of his shirts, tied in a knot, and some red and blue sports leggings that remind Hudson of Wonder Woman. She kisses him on the cheek, he smiles, and the car rolls smooth down the driveway. Hudson uses the wing mirrors to reverse, doesn't even turn his head — he has done this all before.

Shasta has a Willy the Waiter tattoo on her ankle that she got as a garage dare. Her ex has one matching. The tattooed waiter glares at Hudson while Shasta ties Converse on the dash.

Oi, put your feet down.

Why? It's comfy.

It won't be comfy when I crash and the airbag blows your knees into your forehead. It won't be comfy when you wake up in hospital with a brain injury.

This car's a million years old Hudson. The airbags probably don't even work.

The first date took him four or five tries. He kept under steering and over correcting, inches from fence post and eucalyptus; the letterbox that comes *out of nowhere.* They had gone bowling. He picked her up for most of their dates — she was still on her learners, and every time he got better at backing down her drive. They drove to Raglan for fish 'n' chips, Duck Island sunset walks, cowgirl in the passenger seat at Karapiro. The driveway was no challenge to him now. The tracks were worn and familiar.

The Corolla slips early through Hamilton fog, down the country road, unravelling acre by acre to the city. Shasta watches raindrops race down the car window. Hudson fiddles with the radio dial. There is a dampness between them.

You know, you could have met me at the door.

Why? It's raining. No use in us both getting wet.

It's about respect Hudson. You should have talked to my dad and knocked instead of just tooting your horn.

This isn't prom night Shasta, I've met your dad before. I'm hungover, driving you to the pharmacy, which I wouldn't have to do if you'd just hurry up and get your restricted.

The arc of a cricket ball against the grey April morning. It's cold and Hudson doesn't like using the AC. Shasta pulls her shirt up to her chin, warms herself to the smell of cigarettes and stale chips. They cruise past the cricket pitch. Eleven teenagers dressed in white stare blankly at the dewy ground. Even the sun looks tired.

I'm sorry about the restricted thing, babe.

Rain on asphalt. Brown gutter grass. The pharmacy is surprisingly busy for this time of morning and Hudson has to park on the far side of the lot. He leaves the keys in one click so the radio still plays — he ended up settling on Hauraki, and he turns to Shasta with a smile.

Well, go on then.

Shasta frowns. *What the fuck do you mean 'go on then?'*

I mean, we're here. Go do what you gotta do.

Aren't you coming in? It's your fault too y'know?

Fine, I'll come. But you're the one talking to the counter lady.

Hudson hangs around the back of the store while Shasta waits in line. He feels like one side of a tossed coin. He stands next to the shelf of last minute birthday presents, then decides to go wait by the acne cream instead. Shasta soon walks over, gives him the nod, and they both head back out to the car. Shasta takes the pill with a sip of water from the scrunched up pump bottle in the back seat.

Hudson's car pulls away from the pharmacy, paracetamol and foot cream left in the dust. He drives heavy-footed, quickly up-to-speed and a little over to be sure. He takes the corners fast and gives it hell on the straights. The engine sounds like an abattoir. A song by Pluto comes on the radio and Hudson sees a flashing image of himself crashing into the telephone pole ahead. As he drives by he imagines the wreck. The grey Corolla bent in on itself. The James Bond explosion. He sees sirens, and Shasta's father crying, and he realises that the Hudson and Shasta that crashed into the telephone pole are no less real than the Hudson and Shasta that are driving away from it now. It feels as though he's killed off a part of himself. And the song goes: *cheap whores / fall asleep / walls.* Shasta puts her feet on the dash and looks to Hudson. *Maccas?*

Hudson smiles. *It's like you read my mind.*

The Gloaming

‘What are you thinking about?’

Her sweet pea and jasmine scented candle casts a flickering shadow on the wall. The silhouette of her head dances back and forth, twirls around in the Spanish White paint of her bedroom. It never stays in the same place too long. Just when I think I’ve caught it, when it appears to have settled in to some fixed shape, it will reimagine itself into a form completely new.

‘Babe, what are you thinking?’

White sheets and duvet turned away on her side. I can smell her coconut shampoo. *It’s getting late. I should go to sleep.* I’m watching her watch the door, wondering if she’s ever thought about leaving. Her shadow seems to be edging that way too.

‘Babe,’ I say, louder now. ‘Tell me, what’s on your mind?’

The night we met had the same light as this one. When I ran my hands down cellulite sides and prayed face first in memory foam. We kissed in heady twilight and fucked like a broken suicide pact. Coconut lingers. She belongs to the blackened candle’s flame.

‘Nothing,’ she rolls over slow, blankets rise and fall. ‘Nothing baby, I’m just tired.’

She turns away and pulls the covers up to her chin. Nestles warm into the pillow. Her dancing shadow mocks me. It dips and pirouettes. I want to punch a hole and pluck what’s mine from the drywall.

‘Why’s that?’ she says, half asleep. ‘What is it *you’re* thinking about?’

I study the back of her head. *What is she thinking? Is it about me? Is she dreaming of another guy? Another girl? Is there someone else’s name written on the inside of her skull?* I want to cave the sweet pea and jasmine candle into the side of her head to find out.

‘Nothing babe,’ the candle burns in pools of wax. ‘Nothing at all. Goodnight.’

I blow out the flame and her shadow disappears. It is swallowed whole in a deep nocturnal ocean. I lie awake in the darkness and watch the back of her sleeping head, its secrets and desires spilling out into the moonlight. Her insides flood the bedroom, revealing themselves to me like a thousand shimmering candles in the gloaming.

Hand Covers Bruise

The sun drops warmly over the Pinkett's back lawn. Letterbox 49, Wairua Road, street party. Cars collect on the driveway and overflow onto the grass as children dash to the back lawn and middle-aged women head inside with cellophaned bowls of coleslaw. There is a small gazebo set up on the lawn and a semi-circle of camping chairs spaced out in the shade. A Makita job site radio blasts 90 FM Classic Hits from the side of the deck. There are chilly bins full of loose beer cans and RTDs, as well as a few crates of Lion Red. Barney and Chester got there early to help James with the barbeque. They are contributing a bag of Hellers sausages and a few home-kill steaks. Barney and James have cracked open the first of the beers early because *it's always five o'clock somewhere.*

How you doing Chester? says James, popping the top off a Heineken bottle on the edge of the wooden leaner.

Good, says Chester, moving closer to his dad's side.

How's school? Going all good? You playing footy next year?

Chester moves behind his father. His dad answers for him. *School's alright, isn't it Chester? You like your teacher this year. He's not playing rugby yet, but I'm sure we'll get him out on the field next year.*

James nods and takes a sip of his Heineken. Looks at Chester. *Jesus, boy, your hairs getting long. You like having hair like that?*

Chester nods his head.

Well, I've got a set of hedge clippers in the shed. I can give it a trim later if you like.

Chester moves back behind his dad. James laughs and takes another mouthful of beer.

There are a group of children from the neighborhood spread out on the lawn. They are playing BYC with a green rubbish bin wicket on the patch of grass that runs down the side of the house — tossing a tennis ball and running back and forth between the rubbish bin and a kōwhai tree. Chester watches them play while his dad preps the food, cutting onions and marinating steak on the side of the barbeque; drinking beer with James on the deck. He observes the rules from the safety of his father's side — one hand one bounce; compulsory

runs on each hit; over the fence or into the bushes being out for six. Chester had always preferred bat down.

Chester's mother Susan is in the kitchen. She is putting a bowl of coleslaw she brought from home in the fridge. *You didn't have to do that,* says Mrs Pinkett. Handing a bottle of canola oil and a barbie boss to James through the pass-through window.

No problem, says Susan, shutting the fridge door. *And thank you for having us. Barney and I will have to host the street party at ours next year.*

The group of children is growing larger — more turns between bats, less overs bowled by each kid. Chester's dad gives him a pat on the back. *I'm all good here mate, how about you go join in?*

His dad's eyes are watery from the crisp slits of onion. *No worries,* says Chester, *I'm just watching.*

It's tippities, someone yells, *you gotta run.* As the bat is thrown down and bare feet sprint for kōwhai — diving into crease as the tennis ball thuds into the rubbish bin. *Howzat!* the bowler yells, and the batsmen make a perfunctory handover.

Don't be silly mate, go join in. There's a bunch of kids playing now.

Chester thumbs the Hot Wheels car in his short's pocket, given to him by his dad the morning of the street party — a green and yellow Mazda RX3. *Nah, I'm alright. I don't know anyone here.*

As the steak marinates, Barney chucks the prepped onions into a large ceramic bowl, brushing the cut-offs into the compost bin at the side of the deck. *Aw come on Chester. It'll be more fun than hanging 'round here.*

It's fine. I don't really want to play. The small tire spins on its axis. The rough and pointy headlights; the smooth metallic bonnet.

His father gives him a light shove. *Go on mate. You might even make some friends.*

Chester shuffles off the deck and cautiously makes his way over to the other kids. He stops at the outskirts while the bowler runs up to the crease. Thwack. The batsman got a hold of it, down cover drive. Over the bright-eyed fielders and into the bushes for six. The batsman proudly hands the bat to the bowler and finds space to stand in the field.

Chester runs up to him. *Is it alright if I play?*

Sure. Stand over there and you can have a bat in a minute.

He stands on the soft grass with his hands on his knees, waiting patiently for the tennis ball to fly his way.

Emma Pinkett and her best friend Aria are perched on the bed in Emma's room, their feet hanging over the foam mattress where Aria has set up her sleeping bag. The pink Sony stereo on the dresser is playing the same song, *Tears* by The Crocodiles, for like the tenth time that night. They are each holding a small plastic bottle of soft drink that they got from the assorted value pack in the fridge — Emma has opted for orange flavour while Aria went with the raspberry.

Cola always runs out first, says Aria, sipping her drink. *So we probably should have gone for those.*

Don't worry, smiles Emma. Her tongue turning orange. *I hid a couple in the garage fridge for later.*

They can hear laughter from outside of the window, and the cattle-herd sounds of families gathering on the lawn. The clinks of beer bottles and the big noisy cricket game down the side of the house. The Crocodiles song has come to an end, so Emma gets up off the bed and starts the track over.

Did you want to go and play cricket? asks Aria. Standing up and walking over to the window. There must have been a wicket because there is suddenly a lot of yelling from the lawn.

No way, says Emma, as the song starts over. *There's a bunch of boys out there.*

Ew boys, laughs Aria. Screwing up her face.

Yes — gross, stinky boys.

Foul, disgusting boys.

Exactly, Emma smiles. *And they probably wouldn't let us have a turn anyway.*

Aria finishes her drink and puts the empty bottle on the dresser. Emma is singing along to the song. Her room is cleaner than usual, Aria notices, it's usually a pig sty. Her mother must have made her clean it for the party. There are clothes poking out of the cupboard, as if they were tossed in at speed; makeup on the dresser, which she must have stolen from her mother; a Katy Perry poster on the wall over the bed, old and torn at the edges — Aria knows Emma doesn't really listen to her anymore. Aria picks up a bright red hairbrush and runs it through her hair.

Is there rugby on tonight? Emma asks. *God, I hope there's no rugby on tonight.*

I hope not, says Aria, swaying along to the song. *Those games go on forever.*

I know, right? And Dad always gets drunk and makes us do the haka.

Aria laughs.

No, it's so embarrassing. Mum reckons he's worse when Barney comes over. Calls him a bad influence.

Does he come over a lot?

Yeah, Dad wouldn't admit it, but they are best friends. Barney's always the last one to leave after a party. Even when it's obvious Chester and his mum want to go home. You know it's going to be a big one when they start drinking from the top shelf.

Aria puts down the hairbrush and gets up on the bed. *What's the top shelf?*

It's what they say when they start drinking bourbon. They think it's funny. It's not even on the top shelf. Dad keeps the spirits under the dishwasher.

A pause. The Crocodiles song goes off all of a sudden and at the same time there's a knock on the door. Emma's mum opens it. *Come on girls, you're being anti-social. Why don't you come out and join the party?*

Emma looks at Aria. Makes a face. *But mum, there's boys out there. Dirty, gross, smelly, stinky boys.*

The girls both laugh.

Don't be silly. Now come out of your room. Your dad's started the barbeque so dinner should be up soon.

Fine. We'll come out after the song.

Mrs Pinkett walks back into the kitchen. Leaves the door open. Emma and Aria start jumping up and down on the bed, flailing their arms and singing along to the song. *Tears, I feel them down my cheek / tears, I've been this way for weeks.* They both, dive off the bed and onto the foam mattress as the chorus comes to an end.

Susan and Mrs Pinkett are in the kitchen putting bowls of neighborhood coleslaw in the fridge and handing plates of meat out to Barney and James on the deck. They pour wines for the ladies in the living room and fetch fizzys for the kids on the lawn — Mrs Pinkett doesn't know how the hell they've already run out of cola. Chicken kebabs warm in the oven and paper plates are set on the outdoor table. Empty beer bottles from Barney and James are graciously

tossed in the recycling. *Hey, woman,* Barney yells, half-ironically. *Be a doll and fetch me another beer, would ya.*

Susan rolls her eyes and hands out another bottle of Steinlager, which Barney opens on the side of the wooden leaner.

Jesus, Barney, yells Mrs Pinkett. *We've got a bottle opener right here.*

Barney yells back. *Any man who surrenders to using a bottle opener should no longer call themselves a man.* He snorts and walks back to the barbeque.

Susan pours herself a glass of merlot and leans against the kitchen counter. *They spend ten minutes standing at the grill and act like they've done all the hard work. Who do they think does all the bloody dishes!*

Haven't you heard? Mrs Pinkett tells her. *There are fairies that float around after them, picking up the trail of mess. The dishes, the washing, vacuuming as well. They don't have to worry about all of that because the fairies take care of it for them.*

Must be nice, laughs Susan. *But what if the fairies went on strike? What if they got fed up and just left them to it?*

Well, they'd be screwed. Says Mrs Pinkett, pulling a tray of chicken from the oven. *It would be complete and utter chaos. But I don't think they've ever considered that possibility.*

The deck, the lawn, and the living room are full of people now. There is loud chatter, and drinking, and mingling both outside and inside the house. Mrs Pinkett sees Emma and Aria dart past the kitchen and out onto the deck. As quick as they can to ensure she doesn't ask them to help with anything.

So, says Susan, leaning back against the bench. *I've been meaning to ask you. Have you heard about the Anderson's?*

Mrs Pinkett's eyes get all wide. *She was at the fundraiser the other week.* She makes a face. *No Mr Pinkett.*

No Mr Pinkett indeed.

So, what happened there?

Susan leans in. *So I've heard — and it's only a rumour — that it has something to do with a scuba diving instructor.*

Mrs Pinkett raises her eyebrows.

A much, much younger scuba diving instructor.

Mrs Pinkett bursts out laughing. *Oh God no, really?*

Sue nods. *That's what I've heard.*

Oh, poor Jackie. Mrs Pinkett hands a fizzy to a kid. *I just really feel for the kids too, you know.*

They shush themselves quiet as a lady makes her way into the kitchen. A child has stood on a prickle, so she is after a pair of tweezers. Mrs Pinkett leads her into another room to look for them. Susan stays in the kitchen and drinks her wine, not yet ready for the bustle of the party outside. The clinks of glass echo in the copper and tile, and the party's chatter moves across the room. Warm air flows through the fold-out window. Draws of cutlery hang open; the large walk-in pantry; windowsills wiped down for the party. The woman rushes by with a pair of black tweezers and Mrs Pinkett comes back to pour another wine. Susan watches the men on the deck, laughing nonsense on their barbeque throne. She had never been scuba diving herself. Barney and Chester went in Fiji but she waited on the sand, worried about the depth and the pressure. Copper and tile; the clean surface echo — the sounds of the party build up around her. There's *how's the job? How's the kids?* in feedback distortion. She considers pinching her nose to equalize.

Barney walks over to the window and passes through a chopping board of bloody steaks. Susan eyes them up, the thick cuts of beef. There is blood dripping off the board onto the bench.

Could you cook them a little longer please Barney? I don't like mine red in the middle.

He thrusts the board at her. *For God's sake, Susan, these are eye-fillets. I'm not going to fucking ruin them.*

Susan takes the board and starts plating the meat. She lets out an exasperated sigh.

Mrs Pinkett gives her a knowing smile. *Maybe Jackie won't be bad off after all.*

Chester is standing at the crease, bat in hand, eyeing up the far-too-close bowler. He had made a catch — one hand one bounce — so had finally got a turn to bat. The kid who he got out is fielding where he stood before and looks as if he's taking the game far too seriously. Chester grips the bat firmly, tapping at the crease. A quick over the shoulder glace at the rubbish bin wicket. The backyard is full of neighborhood kids so there are very few gaps in the field. The key is, he thinks, to let the ball come down just shy of the back fence; that should give him more than enough time to make it to the kōwhai tree.

Batter up. Somebody yells. And the bowler moves back in preparation for his run up.

The kid who Chester got out has moved even closer. Hands on his knees, his eyes fixed on Chester, he stands ready on the offside of the lawn. *He looks like a girl*, the kid yells*. Let's see if he hits like one too.*

The rest of the kids start laughing.

Chester taps the crease again and grips the bat tight. Hands slightly shaking; the hair on the back of his neck; legs unsteady on the dewy grass. He looks at the bowler, then at the kōwhai tree, then back at the bowler again. The bowler makes his run up. Three or four quick steps, elbow up, the bowling hand moves over. It is pitched at short length — a bouncer — with absolutely no spin. Chester steps towards the ball and swings. The tennis ball bounces higher than he thought it would; he has swung too low. His body twists around and the ball moves just over the bat; floats by the left-hand side of the bin.

Dot ball. Someone calls, as the wicket keeper tosses the ball to the bowler. Chester sets up again for the next bowl.

The kid in the field moves even closer. *Big swing, no ding.* He smirks, and crouches ready for the hit.

He bowler runs up; releases the ball. Chester has read him like a book. It is the exactly the same bowl — a short length bouncer — and Chester is already stepping in before it leaves his hand. He connects well, really gets a hold of it, and the tennis ball sails over the kid in the field. Well over the kid in the field and over the back fence. The kids on the lawn stand in awe.

The bowler looks at him. *That was our last tennis ball.*

The kid in the field. *There's no way we're finding that one. You've ruined the game.*

Chester ignores them and makes an unnecessary run to the kōwhai tree. His dad would be proud.

Susan and Mrs Pinkett plate up the dinner on the deck. Plates of sizzlers, steaks, chicken kebabs, bread rolls, drumsticks, Hellers buttys, and New World deli pasta roll out from the trestle table and are carried onto the lawn. The majority of the coleslaw remains untouched. Chester grabs three bread rolls and a chicken kebab — his father urges him to grab some of the sausages and to eat *all* of the meat first. Aria has gone for mostly sausages while Emma has more of a variety — she pokes at the fleshy steak with her plastic fork. Susan and Mrs Pinkett plate up last, getting mostly what is left of the kebabs and salad.

The Wairua Road residents eat their food, reclining in deck chairs as the sun goes down, soundtracked by the low-battery Makita radio. Barney and James have moved onto the crate bottles now, and they move around the lawn as partygoers compliment their eye-fillets. *Beautifully charred on the outside,* they tell them. *While still nice and pink in the middle.* Blood drips down the paper plates and onto the dewy lawn below. The cricket game has come to a halt, with the lost tennis ball and the call for dinner, so the kids huddle in groups with paper plates resting on their knees. Chester chooses to sit with Emma and Aria on the deck.

Were you playing cricket? Aria asks him, nibbling on her chicken kebab.

Chester nods and bites into his bread roll.

Are you any good?

Chester pauses, finishing his mouthful. *Too good,* he lets out. Taking another bite.

Like cattle, the partygoers make their way to and from the trestle table, plating up seconds, thirds, fourths and beyond. Still barely making a dent in the mass of coleslaw. Kebab sticks, paper plates, and plastic cutlery, to save on dishes, are tossed straight in the bin. The recycling is full of empty beer bottles and any leftovers are scraped into the compost. The sun, now fully set. The outdoor lights turned on. 90 FM Jukebox Saturday Night turned all the way up — the workplace radio refreshed with a fully charged battery.

Most of the families leave after dinner, to put worn-out children to bed — thanking Mr and Mrs Pinkett on the way out and backing half-drunk down the driveway. The rest of the party moves into the living room to watch the footy. James is in his usual chair. Barney on the couch. The women are in the kitchen, clearing up the dishes, while the children scatter cross-legged on the floor. Barney makes everyone stand for the National Anthem, mumbling through the Māori verse and belting out the rest. But they can sit down for the next one because *it's just the bloody poms.* Emma and Aria slink out before James makes them do the haka. When his dad's back is turned Chester quietly follows.

Wanna sit down? says Aria, pointing to the bed.

Chester sits down next to the wardrobe and Emma turns on the stereo, skipping forward to her favorite song.

Don't you like rugby? asks Aria, looking at Chester.

Chester shakes his head. *Nah, it's boring. Goes on for too long.*

Tell me about it, says Emma, sitting on the far side of the bed. *And most of the time the players are all just standing around anyway.*

There is a large cheer from the lounge — the All Blacks must have scored. There is a lot of clapping and the loud thumps of someone stomping their foot on the floor. Chester pulls the Hot Wheels car from his pocket and runs it along the wardrobe. The hard wood of the dresser, he lines up and stunt jumps over a hairbrush. The Crocodiles song builds from the first verse into the chorus.

Aria is swaying along to the music and Emma is tapping her foot against the sleeping bag. Chester drives around and along various objects on the dresser. Emma looks at him. *Wow Chester, your hair's so long.*

Chester nods.

Can we brush it?

Chester gives her a look. Nervous. *Ah yeah, I guess.*

Emma darts up off the bed and grabs the hairbrush. *Okay, sit on the floor.*

Chester scooches forward and sits down beside the bed. Emma moves onto the mattress and starts running the bright red brush through his hair.

Condensation has built up on the bedroom window; the lawn outside looks dark and cold. There are makeup utensils scattered on the dresser, various tools that Chester doesn't know the names of or uses for. The Crocodiles song is over again so Emma gets up to turn the track back, handing the brush to Aria who starts moving it through Chester's hair. *Oh my God,* says Emma, picking up a purple scrunchie from the dresser. *Chester, can we braid your hair?*

I don't know, says Chester, he twitches his leg uncomfortably. Spins the wheel of the Mazda RX3 in his pocket.

Come on, Aria nudges him, *it'll look so cool!*

Chester can feel her hand on the back of his neck. The bedroom warmth. The soft weight of the hairbrush. He turns his head and looks at her. She is smiling. Not with her mouth but with her eyes — the brightness around the brown.

Fine, he nods, *you can braid it.*

Emma jumps up and down with the purple scrunchie, runs up and leaps onto the bed. The Crocodiles song finishes as they're tying up his hair, but this time the album plays out, into Dave Dobbyn, Split Enz, then Shihad.

It is halftime in the footy and the All Blacks are up by thirteen points. The parents have gotten up off their chairs and have gone into kitchen to refill their drinks. The women pour merlots, or vodka and soda, while the men polish off the last of the crate bottles. James nudges Barney and gives him a look. *Top shelf?*

Barney smiles. *I think it's time for the top shelf.*

James grabs the bourbon from under the dishwasher.

A few of the families leave at halftime, their children asleep in their arms. They thank Mr and Mrs Pinkett and walk themselves home. Barney calls them all a bunch of pansies. James chucks some ice in the two short glasses and fills them half up with bourbon. He pulls open the fridge and looks up and down. *How the hell are we already out of cola?*

Mrs Pinkett rolls her eyes and walks back to the living room; sits next to Susan who's falling asleep on the couch. The halftime ads play with the volume down. They are watching an infomercial for erectile dysfunction. Mrs Pinkett looks over at Susan who's struggling to keep her eyes open. *You can stay in the spare room if you'd like.*

No, no. It's fine. She smiles politely. *We only live just down the road.*

Well then you head off and I'll take care of the boys for you. The men have just cracked into the top shelf.

Susan rolls her eyes. *No, it's fine. Thank you but I'll stay and keep an eye on Chester.* She leans back into the couch as the red pill ad finishes. Dan Carter lines up the opening kick.

James has given up on finding the cola and has settled for ginger ale, although Barney was more than happy to drink his straight. The bourbon swirls in the glass and goes down smooth, the ice clinks together as they drink.

We've got to keep it in the forwards, growls Barney, slumping into the couch. *And we've got to stop kicking the bloody ball away.*

James agrees by aggressively nodding his head. *The damn ref's not doing us any favours either.*

Mrs Pinkett thinks that if the men had paid as much attention to the infomercials as they had to the game, then they mightn't have all this pent-up anger. She considers sharing this with Susan, but notices she's almost asleep, so she takes another sip of merlot and pretends to be interested in the rugby.

Chester is sitting on the ground while the girls braid his hair. They have each taken ahold of three large strands, and they sit on either side of him weaving them together. His brown hair feels lighter after the brushing, not so heavy and damp. With each pull he feels it tug against his scalp. He grimaces. *Are you guys almost done?*

Getting there, says Emma, holding the strands apart with her fingers. She crosses the strand on the left-side into the middle, and then does the same again with the right. She does this over and over, the scrunchie around her wrist, keeping a firm base against the back of Chester's head.

Mine's better than yours, laughs Aria, pinching the end of the braid and doubling over the scrunchie. *Plus, I finished first, too.*

Not everything's a competition. Emma smirks. *Boys' hair is harder to braid than girls'.*

Emma and Aria finish doing the hair and stand back to look at Chester. He has two long braids trailing either side of his head, a purple scrunchie on the left and a yellow one on the right. *It looks good,* says Emma.

Yeah, really cute.

Chester stands up and looks it the mirror. Fiddles with the braid on the left. *Yeah, it does look sort of cool,* says Chester, turning his head to either side. *But I do think Aria's looks better.*

Emma asks if anyone wants a cola, the other two say yes, so she fetches the drinks from the garage fridge. They have started the CD over, from the beginning this time, and they sit on the bedroom floor sipping their fizzy. The cheering in the living room is getting louder, the All Blacks must be ahead. Barney and James are probably a lot more drunk than before too. Emma looks at Chester, his long brown braids. She gets up and walks over to the dresser.

What are you doing? asks Aria, looking up at her friend. She is rummaging through the mess on top of the wardrobe.

Emma turns around, utensils in each hand. *Now it's time for makeup.*

Aria starts laughing.

Chester looks at her. *No way. No fricking way!*

Aw come on, says Emma. *The hair was the hard part. Might as well give you the full makeover.*

Aria nudges him. *Come on Chester, it'll be fun.*

Chester groans. *Fine. But I'm taking it all off right after.*

The girls sit him up by the mirror and start sorting through the makeup. Chester thumbs the Hot Wheels in his pocket. The CD moves through familiar kiwi songs — the Nature's Best album Emma stole from her parents CD cabinet. *Okay,* says Emma. *We'll start with foundation then move onto the rest.*

Chester likes the way his hair looks, tight against his head. The shape of it and the bright squishy colours. He also likes the attention; the way the girls fuss over him. It's much more fun than watching the stinking rugby. The foundation feels cold against his face, and the brush tickles his skin. The girls are laughing as they put it on. *All done,* smiles Emma, chucking the brush back on the dresser. She picks up a thin pencil of eyeliner.

Stay still Chester this will only take a second. She twists the lid open and rests her hand on his forehead, delicately brushing it over his lashes.

Your eyelashes are long for a boy, says Aria, leaning over his shoulder and watching Emma apply the makeup. *You're lucky, they're even longer than mine.*

Chester sits still while the girls brush on the eyeliner. Emma's hand feels warm against his forehead. She's finished with the left eye and has moved onto the right. *Are you almost done?* He asks.

One second. Emma concentrates. Takes a step back. *There,* she smiles, *all done.*

Chester looks in the mirror. It looks different than he thought it would. His eyes look brighter.

Alright, says Aria. Now just some eye shadow and then we're done.

What's eye shadow? Asks Chester.

Emma pulls a pink box from her sock drawer. She opens it up. There are nine squares of powdery colour. Each with a specific and seemingly unrelated name.

Which colour do you like? Asks Aria.

Chester points to the rich dark green. The makeup box says it's called 'Dinosaur'.

Emerald it is, she smiles, and rubs it onto the prickly brush. She places her hand on Chester's head and rubs it above his eyes.

Once she's finished, Chester has a look in the mirror, turning his face from side to side in the warm bedroom light. The girls are giggling with joy.

His cheeks flush red. *You don't think it looks weird, do you?*

Weird? No way, you look like a rock star or something.

Chester smiles. The girls both laugh. The album is up to The Crocodiles song again, and both the girls start dancing. Chester sits down and watches them both jump on the bed. Hands in the air, they're messing up the blankets, mouthing along to the words. At the climax of the chorus, they both dive off the bed, and crash down into the sleeping bag and foam mattress in hysterics.

The final whistle blows and the players shake hands. The All Blacks have won the game 40 to 17. *Great match,* says James, getting up to fill the glasses. *We really pulled away in the second half.*

Damn right we did, snorts Barney. *Those stupid poms didn't know what hit 'em.*

Alright, Susan sits up. *Are we ready to head off?*

One more drink. Barney stands and stretches.

James pours two large bourbons and hands one to Barney. On the TV, the team captains are giving speeches: *Great game; they fought well; we have a few things to go home and work on.*

Barney stands up and chucks his glass on the stone coffee table. *Alright James, get over here. We're gonna lay down a scrum.* He tucks his shirt into his pants and stands up straight by the coffee table. *Bind up James, you're the tight head!*

James stands next to him and grabs a scruff of his shirt.

Be careful, yells Mrs Pinkett. *You men are drunk, you're going to break something. If not the furniture, then yourselves.*

We know what we're doing, says James, binding his arm around Barney and planting his feet.

Where the hell's Chester? Says Barney. *Let's get him out here too.*

You leave that boy out of your nonsense, says Mrs Pinkett. *It's bad enough just the two of you.*

But we need three of us. He's supposed to be our hooker.

Susan wakes up and sits forward on the couch.

Chester! Barney yells. *Chester, get the hell out here.*

Chester emerges from the hallway, both girls trailing behind him. He has his hair in two separate braids, falling over either shoulder — a purple scrunchie on one side and a yellow on the other. He has thick black eyeliner and a dark green shade of eyeshadow.

Looks like a hooker alright, smirks James, still bound onto Barney. Barney just stands there and stares.

Oh my gosh, says Mrs Pinkett. *What have those girls done to you? I knew they'd be up to no good.* She walks over to Chester and examines the makeover. *But I must say you girls have done a wonderful job.*

What the fuck are you wearing? Barney lets out, pushing off James and walking over to the kids. *You'd rather dress up like a girl than watch the footy?*

Chester stands there. The room goes quiet.

Aw come on Barney, they're just having fun.

There's nothing funny about it. He looks like a bloody homo.

Mrs Pinkett looks at him in shock.

Barney grabs Chester by the collar and yanks him across the room. *Wash that shit off your face then we're going home.*

Both of the girls step back into the hallway. Chester has started crying.

Get the hell off of him, yells Susan. She gets off the couch and rushes over to the Barney. Grabs him by the shoulder and pulls him away from their son.

Barney turns and shoves her, hard. She falls back into the coffee table. The glass of bourbon shatters on the floor.

Jesus Christ Barney, what the hell are you doing? Mrs Pinkett rushes over to check on Susan. She is slowly getting up off the floor.

James just stands there and watches.

Get a hold of yourself, Barney. She kneels down next to Susan. *My gosh, look what you've done. She's bleeding!*

Where the hell are my keys? Barney, stumbling into the kitchen. Knocking plates and cutlery off the bench.

Emma. Aria. Go to your room. She helps Susan up onto the sofa.

Chester backs into the hallway, makeup running down his face. The girls rush into the bedroom and shut the door.

Barney, in the kitchen, finds his car keys on the windowsill. He storms outside and slams the door behind him.

He can't drive, he's wasted. Jamie, go out there and stop him.

James sits down in his chair with the bourbon.

The car starts in a roar, and they hear it speed down the driveway — skid out and take off onto the road.

I'm calling the police, says Mrs Pinkett, rushing to the kitchen. She picks up the phone and dials 111.

Chester's cheeks are wet and the makeup is burning his eyes. He watches his mother crying on the couch.

Hello, police, he hears. The makeup is burning. He walks over and sits next to his mum.

Letterbox 49, Wairua Road. Yes, he's only left just now.

James sits there blank and stares at the TV.

Chester watches his mother, crouched over, sobbing into her hands. The television blaring; broken glass on the carpet; blood down the side of his mother's head.

I'm sorry, he says. He clutches the Hot Wheels in his pocket.

She turns to him. *Oh sweetie, it's not your fault.*

I'm sorry. He turns the car round in his hand.

Fish of New Zealand 17 – 19

Taine is chewing on the piece of hay between his teeth. The engine is off. All we can hear is the rain and the stream and Stew swearing at machinery.

'Did you hear about the time Stew got into a fight?'

'No. What happened?'

'Dad told me about it. So it was a Friday night and the oldies were all sitting out the back of Butler's as they do, and this van pulls up. It's full of young guys. They're doing a pub crawl around the mountain. A stag do or something. And these guys are all drunk and they stay at Butlers a while, and I don't know I guess they were being loud and obnoxious, rude to the wait staff, you know how it is. And I don't know how it all started, but Stew heads over to confront one of the guys.'

'Stew's a big guy. I'm not sure he's the kind of person I'd want to take on in a pub fight.'

'Oh, for sure. So this guy's up in Stew's face, swearing, shoving him and all that. And Stew's an old fashioned guy, not much of a fighter, but definitely willing to throw hands if that's what it comes to, so they agree to take it outside. So they head out back and this young guy's ready to go — shuffling back and forth, he's got his hands up, ready to give it to him. Meanwhile Stew's busy taking off his Swanndri, unbuckling his work boots. And so he puts his boots and his clothes in a pile and turns to the younger guy. Immediately, this young buck just runs around Stew, picks up all of his clothes and runs off with them — good work boots you know — and all the younger guys run off to their van and speed off down the road. Away laughing to the next pub on the crawl, while Stew's standing on the footpath in his bare feet.'

*

When I arrive at Sean's he is parked on the driveway, black Holden commodore, engine running. Kyne is in the front seat with guns in both hands. 'You're late,' he yells, from the passenger window. 'Fill up your guns and get in the car.'

I use the tap around the side of the house. Angle the gun downward until the air bubbles stop, and then I fill up the next. We are all guns akimbo. Sean's are blue, Kyne's are red, mine are green, and Furry's are yellow. Once both guns are full, I turn off the tap and get in the car. One of the guns still has the $1 price tag on. I tear it off and chuck it on the mat at my feet.

Sean is tapping both hands on the steering wheel, drumming along to Jesus I was Evil by Darcy Clay. 'Where the hell is Furry? We only get a small window for this, boys. If we miss it we're screwed.'

Furry is ten minutes late. He gets out of his car slowly and walks over to the window.

'Hurry the fuck up Furry, get in the car!'

'Hold your horses,' Furry pulls two yellow guns from his trouser pockets. 'I've still got to fill them up.'

'There's no time, get in. You can fill them up when we get there.'

With a slam of a door and the ratatat of gravel flicked from tyres, we are off. The black commodore smooth and fast down quiet suburban streets. 'How we going for time?' I ask.

Sean seems tense. 'I think we'll be okay. Bex said he's dropping his mother off at work now. We'd be doing better if this fat fuck showed up on time with his guns filled up.'

Furry snatches the gun from my hand and points it at Sean. 'Careful what you're saying buddy, wouldn't want things to get… messy.' Furry pulls the trigger and squirts Sean in the back of the ear. Sean immediately turns around and tries to hit Furry. Kyne grabs a hold of the steering wheel.

'Boys, boys, boys… come on, what are we doing?' I grab my gun back from Furry and push Sean into the front seat. 'Let's not lose track of why we're all here. We've got to get the bastard. Every year we think we're going to get him and every year he out maneuvers us. Like Sean said, we only get one shot at this. He knows it's Labour Day, he's going to be alert. We've got to focus up or we're going to miss our shot once again.'

'Yeah, come on boys,' says Kyne. 'This is our year. This is our fucking Labour Day. Let's get the little fucker.'

We park a fair way down the street so he won't recognize the car. Bex is still asleep when we get to Jacob's. She answers the door with sleep in her eyes, still wearing town clothes from the night before. 'Hurry up Bex, get inside. Stay quiet and make sure you duck down.' Sean jumps straight in the wardrobe and I hide behind the bed. 'Hold on, hold on,' Furry yells out as he's putting on the wig. 'Bex, what side of the bed's yours?'

'The left.' Bex slams the door to the sleep out and heads into the main house. Furry gets in on the left side of the bed and pulls the covers up so it's just the wig showing. Kyne is standing at the door ready to turn out the light.

'Am I hidden?' Sean calls from the cupboard.

'You're hidden mate. Although Furry, you're quite big. Are you sure he's going to fall for it?'

'He'll fall for it alright. You just worry about your own damn job.'

'Alright, alright. Let's go boys. I'll see you on the other side.' Kyne turns out the light and pulls the door shut. He is going outside to hide in the bushes. Sean, Furry and I, lie quiet in the darkness.

Sean whispers. 'Did you see what Bex was wearing?'

'Yeah, not bad… do you think she put it on for us?'

'I think she just heard us knock and chucked on her clothes from the night before.'

'I like Furry's explanation better.'

A beam of light shifts across the room, moving sideways through the blinds. 'Ssshhh,' Sean yells, 'he's here!' We sit in the dark and wait. We hear the slam of a car door, a fiddling of keys, and an unlocking. We hear the bedroom door creak open. I duck my head down further.

'Bex?' we hear Jacob whisper. 'Bex, are you up?' We hear him walk towards the bed. I peek up. I see a hand reaching towards Fury's wig. He strokes the pretend hair. 'Bex?'

In one swift motion Furry spins around, guns in both hands, and points them straight at Jacob. Sean leaps out of the wardrobe and I jump up from behind the bed. Gotcha.

Jacob immediately turns and runs. He is fast, faster than we all thought. Before we even get the chance to shoot him, he is already out of the bedroom and heading for the main door. We each chase after him: Sean with his blue guns, me with my green guns, and Furry with his yellow guns. We all make it to the front door, just in time to see Kyne make one of

the most spectacular rugby tackles I've seen in my life. With guns in both hands he steps out of the flax bush, ahead of where Jacob is running. Jacob, looking back at us, doesn't see him. Kyne bends his knees, drops low, and slams Jacob to the ground. All while still holding both water pistols. He stands up and dusts himself off while Jacob is still trying to catch his breath on the lawn. 'Not this year, buddy. Not this year.' And we all squirt him with water pistols.

*

'Why do they call you Furry? Is it something to do with that fetish? You know, the animal one? The one where people like to dress up as cats and shit? Cats and dogs and rabbits and shit? Do you like to dress up as a rabbit?'

'No. My last name's Fur.'

Death is Not the End

New Plymouth Veterinary Clinic. P O Box 209, New Plymouth Ph: (06) 758-4406

Euthanasia Consent Form

(Euthanasia – The Humane Ending of Life)

For: Double Trouble
14 year(s) and 4 month(s)
Domestic Short Hair, Cat
Orange Male

Owner: Linda McBreen
7 Honnor Drive
New Plymouth

We understand that this is a difficult decision and would like to make it as stress free as possible.

Double Trouble will be given an overdose of anesthetic by intravenous injection.

The effect of this injection can be nearly instant. If your pet is anxious, we can give a light sedation first, so the procedure goes more smoothly.

After the injection is given, Double Trouble may take some breaths or make some movements. This is normal, especially in older or sick pets.

If you have any special requirements, like keeping Double Trouble's collar, a lock of hair, or would like to spend more time with Double Trouble to say goodbye, please let us know.

I would like:

- Double Trouble cremated and returned in a casket.

  Plaque details: _____

- Double Trouble cremated and ashes returned for sprinkling.
- To make my own arrangements for Double Trouble to be buried.
- The clinic to bury Double Trouble on my behalf in a communal burial.

Signature: _____

*

Blue, latex, powder-free, surgical gloves. The cold surface of the stainless steel cut-away examination table. A large walk-on scale with four pawprint outlines. Double Trouble is circling the treatment room. Out of place, unfamiliar, he circles— restless, irritable, all the while letting out deep, guttural yowls. Circling. Taking it in, trying to figure out what to make of it. The door of the cat cage had broken off, so we improvised with plastic and sellotape. The cat cage on the floor, open, he circles the room. Each deep, uncomfortable yowl, a punch to the stomach. Blood collection tubes. A pen light. Microscope slides. Mum goes to pat Double Trouble as he passes by, circling, but he's uninterested. Tense, uneasy, he surveys the room. Sniffs the thin white light along the base of the treatment room door.

I was at Wai-iti Beach, putting out the long line, when I got the text from Mum. *Double Trouble is getting put down. The appointment's at 10:45. Come around beforehand if you want to say goodbye.*

I replied: *I'm busy this morning. Can you change the time?* Mum immediately called back. When I answered there was only muffled static. Shitty beach reception. 'One second,' I yelled into the empty phone, scrambling up the dunes to the campground. Pulling myself onto up onto the grass with handfuls of kakuya, I spotted the picnic table in the middle of a semi-circle of small wooden baches. I stood on the table and held my phone to the sky.

'Listen, Liam, you've known this was going to happen for weeks. I really don't want to put this off for any longer than I have to.'

'We just put the longline out. I won't make it back in time. Dad's going to need my help pulling it back in.'

Silence.

'Fine, I'll ask the vet. Call you back soon.'

Leaves of pōhutukawa. January bloom. I sat cross-legged on the picnic table and waited for Mum to call. A middle-aged man stepped out from one of the baches onto his timber deck. He looked at me, muttered something, and went back inside. I could see the red torpedo from the picnic table, tied to end of the long line. It was out on the horizon, the flag dipping in and out of view. Caught in the deep ebb and flow of the Tasman Sea. The man walked back outside, with binoculars this time. He was looking out at the ocean, maybe trying to spot our torpedo. A text from Mum: *the appointment's 4:20. I'll see you soon.*

I get to Mum's around 3:30. Double Trouble is asleep on the window seat in the lounge. I go to pat him on the chin; he wakes and bites my hand. I can smell the incense Mum uses— something eastern— the smoke wafts out from a small wooden stick by the television. It makes the room feel warm.

'Are you sure we have to go through with this? Double Trouble is the only pet I actually like.'

Mum is in the kitchen, emptying the dishwasher and cleaning the larger pots and pans in the sink. 'He's been pissing inside, Liam. I don't want a house that smells of cat piss.' She pulls out a damp salad bowl, pats it down with a checkered kitchen towel, and puts it away in the cupboard. I walk into the kitchen and Mum hands me one of the dinner plates.

'Can't you just get a litterbox?'

'I have a litterbox. He doesn't use it. He barely moves from the window seat.' She hands me the salad tongs and places the roasting dish in the wire rack by the sink. Silent for a moment now, wiping down the cast iron pan with a sponge. 'It's a very difficult decision Liam. And a little bit of support would go a long way.' Mum hands me the sponge and rushes out of the room. I hear her bedroom door slam shut. There is incense burning in the kitchen too, probably to cover up the smell of cat piss. I finish emptying the dishwasher myself. Out of the window, tūīs on the bird feeder. The rustling of trees in the calm summer wind.

A desktop computer on standby. A flea comb. Cotton tip buds fanned out in a pen holder. Circling, doing his best. A cold sanitized room so far from the lounge window seat. He pisses on the floor. Mum pulls the towel from the cat cage and puts it on the examination table, laying it out and folding it over once. I pick up Double Trouble, he tries to bite me, and I put him on the towel. Mum has always said that Double Trouble isn't a people person, or a cat person for that matter too. He doesn't get along with any of Mum's other pets and if anyone tries to pat him, he *will* bite them. I was seven years old when Double Trouble was born. His mother was my cat Trouble. We set Trouble up on a cat bed in the corner of my room, and she stayed there for a week or so when she was due. I remember coming home from school one day, going into my room, and seeing that Trouble was missing. She wasn't in her usual spot, on the cat bed in the corner, which she had barely moved from all week. I remember calling out for Mum. We searched the house, thinking she couldn't have gone far. The laundry, her warm spot the dryer; Mum and Dad's walk in wardrobe; the games cupboard; behind the

couch. Then outside: under the deck; down the driveway; in the hay shed by the firewood. We couldn't find her anywhere. Then, just as we were giving up hope, we heard a faint meow coming from the attic.

There were three kittens: one grey, one tortoiseshell, and one ginger the same as Trouble. Since Trouble was my cat, I got to name them all. The grey one, Pancake, because she was squished at the bottom. The tortoiseshell was Marmite, because she was in the middle. And the biggest cat, Double Trouble, because he looked just like his mother. The cats stayed up in the attic for a couple of weeks. I would rush home from school and climb Dad's old extension-ladder into the small room in the ceiling. Trouble eventually lost interest in the kittens— which apparently is normal— so we carried them down the ladder, one by one, and kept them in the lounge next to a litter tray.

When the cats got older, we gave two away, but kept Double Trouble. Marmite went to live on a dairy farm with my cousins Ruth and Michael, and Pancake went to my Aunty Frances. Neither Trouble, nor Double Trouble, seemed to notice the absence of the other two kittens, and they mostly kept to themselves. Trouble loved the outdoors, and it wasn't uncommon for her to bring in half-eaten rats, birds, and lizards, at all hours of the night, leaving them for Mum to clean up in the morning. Trouble would sometimes go away for months on end, we thought probably up into the bush— our property backed on to the Kaitaki ranges— where she lived on a steady diet of rabbits and native birds. Double Trouble mostly stayed under the deck, only coming out for cat biscuits and to bite people who tried to pat him.

When Mum and Dad got divorced, we moved away from the house in the country. Double Trouble went to Mum, and he went with us to the house in town. We moved out during one of Trouble's long stays in the bush, and so we left her there. We didn't think she would have been happy living in town anyway, without any rabbits or native birds to hunt. Double Trouble didn't seem to miss her. He mostly just stayed under the new couch and eventually ventured out to the window seat. Mum went on to get two new cats meanwhile Dad got a couple of dogs. Double Trouble is the only pet from before the divorce that we still have and is still alive.

An otoscope. A stethoscope. The overwhelming smell of disinfectant bleach. An unhinged door of a cat carrier cage drenched in nervous piss. Double Trouble has settled down now. He

is lying on the towel on the examination table. Mum and I are both patting him, while he lies there breathing heavily. At no point does he try to bite us.

The door to the examination room opens. White light rushes in. The nurse's name is Ben and speaks to us as if he had been trained to speak to us a certain way.

'Hey guys,' he says, 'I hope you are doing okay, given the circumstance.' He walks over to the exam table and pats Double Trouble on the forehead. Double Trouble rears his head back to bite him and Ben quickly pulls his hand away. 'So, I'm going to get Double Trouble prepped, and then the vet will come in to finish the procedure. Now, have you decided what you want to happen to Double Trouble afterwards? Would you like to take him back home?'

Mum and I look at each other. Then Mum answers: 'No, I think we will be alright, thank you.'

'In that case,' says Ben, 'the vet group has a mass burial about once a month, and we can take care of Double Trouble in that way.'

Mum looks at me again. 'Yes, I think that would be good.'

'Okay, so now I'm just going shave part of Double Trouble's leg. Just to make it easier for the vet to give the injection.' Ben looks down at the cat, seemingly weighing up his chances of getting bitten. He looks up at us. 'Would one of you mind holding Double Trouble still for me?'

The shaver is loud, but Double Trouble doesn't seem to mind it too much. I hold him under his front legs while Ben shaves a spot on his right back leg. Once he's finished he enters some information into the computer. Mum and I pat Double Trouble while he lies on the folded beach towel. 'Alright,' says Ben, 'I'll give you some time alone with Double Trouble to say your goodbyes. I'll be back soon with the vet.' He exits the examination room into the bright light behind the doorway.

A desk drawer full of syringes. Needles in vacuum-sealed bags. A small patch on Double Trouble's leg, shaved down to the skin. Mum and I are both patting him, waiting for the vet and the nurse to return. 'Ah, silence,' mum says. 'The silence is so God damn loud.'

'Do you think Trouble's still alive?' I ask mum.

'I'm sure she's still out there, chasing after rabbits, feasting on native birds. Wherever that might be.'

‘We were there at the very beginning,’ I say, scratching Double Trouble’s chin. ‘And now we’re here at the very end. It really is a privilege, isn’t it?

‘Yes,’ says mum, her voice cracking slightly. ‘It really is Liam. It really is.’

The exam room door clicks open and Ben walks in followed by the vet. The vet’s name is Tayla and she is holding a clipboard, reading through the information Ben entered into the computer earlier. She introduces herself and pats Double Trouble— he doesn’t try to bite her.

‘Hello guys,’ she says, ‘I hope you are both doing okay, you know, given the circumstance. So, I am going to give Double Trouble an injection. The effects will take place immediately, and he won’t feel any pain. Now, after the injection, Double Trouble may twitch or move slightly, or even make some noises, but there is no need to worry. This is completely natural. These are just his nerves reacting as his body is shutting down.’ She looks up from her clipboard. ‘In most instances, the cat will just fall asleep. We just like to give you fair warning, so you’re not alarmed if he does make any movements after the injection.’ She places the clipboard on the table.

‘You’ve indicated that you would like the clinic to take care of the burial. If you change your mind on this, just let us know — if you would like Double Trouble cremated, we can even provide you with an urn which you can pick up later.

Mum looks at me. ‘I think we’ll be okay.’

‘Would one of you like to hold Double Trouble while I give him the injection?’

I step forward and hold Double Trouble’s shoulder; gently scratch him under the chin. The nurse opens one of the desk drawers and starts to prep the injection. ‘Now,’ she says, opening one of the vacuum sealed bags. ‘I will try to give Double Trouble the injection, but if he struggles or moves around and it becomes too difficult, we can give him some anesthesia first just to relax him.’ The vet flicks the syringe a few times and asks us if we are ready. Mum pats Double Trouble on the head and then tells the vet yes.

Double Trouble doesn’t struggle at all. The nurse rests one hand on him and pushes the needle into the shaved patch on his leg. Mum turns around. I watch the needle push the skin on his leg inwards. Double Trouble doesn’t even flinch. The vet pulls the needle back and then tries to push the needle in again. It pushes the skin down, but it doesn’t go in.

‘I’m sorry guys,’ says the vet. ‘This catheter is just a little blunt. I’ll try another one.’

The vet unscrews the catheter and gets another one from the desk drawer. The removes it from the sealed bag and screws it into the syringe. She pauses, pats Double Trouble's back, and pushes the needle into his leg.

It happens at once. This time the needle goes in fine. Double Trouble stretches back into my hand and lies on the folded beach towel. He doesn't move around and he doesn't make any noises.

'Okay,' says the vet. 'That should be it, but I'm just going to check his heartbeat to confirm that he has passed on.'

Mum has turned back around. I am still patting Double Trouble. The vet puts on a stethoscope and places the headpiece against his chest. She listens for a few seconds and takes out the earpieces. 'That's it,' she says. 'Would you like a moment alone with him?'

I look back at mum. 'No,' I say. 'I think we're alright.'

We leave the examination room with Ben and Tayla, Double Trouble still lying on the beach towel on the exam table. The nurse tells Mum not to worry about payment and that she can come and sort that out another day. Mum says she'd rather just pay now.

We decide to have a wake for Double Trouble, so the two of us go to Good George Pub which is just down the road from the vet clinic. Mum orders a rosè cider and I get a Hazy IPA. We also get a bowl of chips and some calamari. Neither of us talk much about Double Trouble.

'You know,' says mum. 'You could use this for one of your stories.'

'Yeah?' I grab a piece of calamari. 'I don't know. I'm not sure I'd get it right.'

That night Dad and I decide to go swimming at Wai-iti beach, after the sun had gone down. We go in the same spot we had put the longline out earlier that day. We both wade in slow and dive under the waves, swim out past the breakers. The moon is almost full and it illuminates the beach, and the white cliffs along from the bay. The water is warm and stars litter the cloudless sky.

'Holy shit,' says Dad. He is running his hands back and forth along the surface of the water. 'Liam, look at this.'

I watch his hands and see that the water around them is lighting up blue. I do the same with my hands, and where I disturb the water it lights up— a bright phosphorescent blue. We look back at the breaking waves and see that as they crash sparks of blue splash up from the ocean. 'I've heard about this,' says Dad. 'Bioluminescence — or something like that. I've heard

about it, but I've never seen it before in my life. Something to do with the phytoplankton, I think. It's supposed to be incredibly rare. It will probably be gone by tomorrow.'

The beach is entirely empty apart from the two of us. We are the only ones there to witness it. 'Mum won't believe us,' I yell out to Dad, and he starts laughing. We both splash around in the warm water and watch its phosphorescent glow. Only us, the stars, and the moonlit beach. I lie back in the water and look up at the sky — run my hands along the secret blue and stretch back into nothing.