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UNVOICED:

A Fairytale

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

of

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at

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by

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Abstract

Unvoiced: A Fairytale

Outside the apartment, the Catastrophe is raging. After the Emergency six years before, a combination of nuclear ruin, atmospheric deterioration, epidemic disease and internecine warfare has emptied the City streets. Only children, curiously immune to both the crippling illness and war politics, venture out through the urban pollution to collect supplies and conduct business, ostensibly in their parents' names.

Anna, mother of two teenage boys, is holed up inside and attempting to stay sane. Formerly a lawyer and relapsing frequently with the new disease, she conducts online affairs under a pseudonym, promoting the underground spread of health-preserving vaccines. Her absent husband, Seb, has long been conscripted to the Front. Anna's mothering of her children is inflected by complex interdependence and power inversions, honed through long years of domestic isolation. One of her two boys is a daughter, Honey, whose distorted childhood freedom of the street is now threatened by her oncoming puberty. Honey assumes the boyish identity, Jack, which allows her to keep leaving the house, but this places her at risk of infection as well as on-street conscription if identified as an adult. Jack's relationship with her mother becomes strained, as she grapples with her own maturing body, her mother's ill-health, the looming restrictions of adulthood and her delegated role as her mother's Voice.

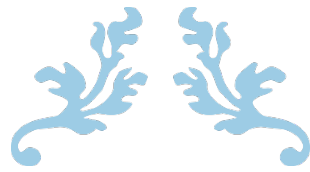
Meanwhile, in a setting as yet untouched by the Catastrophe, Southland Kiwi farmer Nick views the global situation pragmatically, with an agricultural eye. Only partially aware of the dystopia outside the still-locked borders of New Zealand, Nick's isolated rural community seems far-distanced from such cataclysmic events. Now suddenly, a strange new disease begins spreading amongst the young cattle Nick is grazing on his family farm. Suspecting that some part of the Catastrophe has reached the far South, Nick begins to research online, and he becomes obsessed with the disasters occurring outside New Zealand. As he invests more in his online persona, the international Catastrophe and the people living through it become more urgent to him than the issues of his own farm and family.

Spanning the fractured global story of our times, *Unvoiced: A Fairytale* draws on a range of voices from our post-pandemic moment. This unfurling dramaturgy of disorder juxtaposes divergent perspectives, news-clippings, flashbacks and fever dreams to weave a twisted fairytale in five Acts. Its flickering reportage of tentatively connected storylines explores a near-future in which disaster-hardened adults become entrapped in worlds of their own making, while the younger generation become carriers of disease, sexual violence, cynicism and disabling propaganda. Personal and social trauma embeds in family narratives and becomes intergenerational. New forms of identity and relationships unfold in the digital landscapes which connect us loosely, shaping personalities and raising troubling questions about who and where we really are. Which parts of our lives are merely invented, and by whom? What do we really know about our world, and how do we know it? Is the Catastrophe already upon us, or has it been fabricated online, and within us, by paranoid and sickening minds?

Through haunting fragments and unfinished stories, woven with wistful nostalgia for what we have already lost, *Unvoiced: A Fairytale* warns of the potential human devastation arising out of the nightmarish conflagration of war, politics, disease and climate catastrophe.

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UNVOICED

A FAIRYTALE



RUTH KEELING

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Editorial Note: Several Māori-origin words appear in italics in this text, which is no longer common practice in Aotearoa | New Zealand, where the indigenous language is widely understood and respected. In the present work, however, some key Māori words have been italicised as a visual cue to aid interpretation by readers unfamiliar with the widespread use of these concepts in New Zealand English.



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Life will be exactly the same but worse.

– Michel Houellebecq, 2021

Prelude

Each wakening, I watch as she grows more into herself. Her wandering fingers dance in slow ecstatic circles and scratch her cheeks with tiny nails. Granite blue eyes, unblinking.

The light holds no meaning for either of us. I hold my eyes open, too, in the darkness.

Out of the night's depths, I pull awake as if gasping. The dream slides off the chair underneath me, piling against the wall, ominous and shapeless. My body has stabilised into a position which only makes sense to itself, and to the small body of sleep in my arms.

The milky smell of her and me seems to float between us, as she breathes it in again with her short puffing breaths. The edges of the room fade off into the same darkness as the dream. The babylight is dripping honeyed wax-runs onto my skin.

I wrap her in myself. My body has no edges which are not her.

I trace the maplines of distance in my mind, from the baby outwards to the ends of the world. Her lacy spider's net shimmers a low heat around her. Her delicate breath is a shallow heartbeat at its centre.

Sleep rises over us like a wave. Under this dream-surf, I still feel those faint frothy tremors of her web, its trailing threads floating loosely above us.

The baby squawks and bubbles, softly. My tiny daughter is not yet ready. Her lips are quiet, still flicker-swimming like shrimps in her milkpond of sleep.

The daylight is a transparent mother-of-pearl, empty of heat or time. The window casts a yellowed, streaky shape across the baby's face. She looks almost jaundiced, lying low-breathed in that filtered sun.

When she turns towards the breast, the colour of her cheek is suddenly black-blue. Almost bruised.



BREATHING

ACT I



What has to be taught first, is the breath.

– Confucius

The last room always takes the longest. This is where the apartment frays. It is harder to secure the edges here.

The other rooms she can darken quickly; a swift tug and the material rolls down. Anna draws the curtains along the wall with an efficient hand, straightening and smoothing as she goes, settling the weights along the bottom. Some are brightly patterned, as curtains were before, with tasselled ties and piped edges to loop them back. Others are the regulation blackout sheen, with the metallic backing shimmering through. These hang flatter, like thick sheets of seaweed, giving the rooms an oily gleam.

Anna moves quietly along the windows, marking her territory as she does every evening, closing off the day and opening the night. Her bedroom first, scuttling herself around the bay window, tucking the loose edges, her fingers moving beetle-like. She keeps the room almost empty, so she can be anyone here. Still, Seb's absence is obsidian, a dark solid shape in the bed. She avoids turning sleepily this way in her nights. Instead, she lies tight along the bed-edge outward, stubbornly. It's been four years.

In the next room, Christian is already asleep, buried low in the bedding, but Anna unpins the curtains above him and shakes down the night behind his pillow. He turns his head crookedly towards her hand as she brushes against his curled hair - a toddler's instinct although he's almost twelve. Anna backs out of the room as she did then after a night feed, not breathing until she is back in the hallway.

She moves further through the house like a night-cat, eyes blanked against the darkness. The dining room is hung with familiar shadows, which

she feels with her hips, shins and toes as she moves along the wall. Anna runs her fingers gently across her cello as she passes it, making sure not to let the strings sound. Then the Long Room with its simple blinds that rattle down to make a wall of the window. She can smell the green of warm-damp ferns, but their tickling shadow-shapes are silenced by the dark. Yellow light smudges around Honey's closed bedroom door, so Anna raps at it but doesn't enter. The light clicks and the hallway grey deepens.

The kitchen has a bright radiance. Bringing down the shutters here turns the colour inwards, placing her inside a terracotta bowl. Sometimes this is a comfort, but tonight it leaves her stifled and Anna moves on hurriedly. She enters the family bathroom, then the unused guest toilet, then the storage room with its awkward shelving. The blackouts drop into place, theatrically. Anna wonders if the National Theatre's red plush curtains have been Reclaimed, and which rooms they are protecting now.

The room they call the Office is the most difficult to darken, and Anna spends angry minutes here trying to settle the shades. The messy piles of papers and stacked boxes don't help, but she knows it is her inner discomfort which makes the room so untidy. This is where the last few years are layered most thickly. Once the curtains are down, she finds it hard to move, as if the air has gelatine in it.

Back in the hallway, the long shadows unwind again. Anna imagines she has just come briskly through the apartment's entrance, holding the new-cut keys and the rental agreement. The long corridor is sparsely furnished, and so this space has remained wide with possibilities, even now. She runs her fingers along the narrow desktop by the door, straightening the letters and small objects which have gathered there.

The main entrance is undoubtedly original. The elegant wood panelling

on the outside, at the turn in the staircase, had sold her on the place even before she'd stepped indoors. *Yes, we'll take it.* Anna's quick signature and her bond, in exchange for a small brass key. The oversized door to this now-narrowed realm is historical and storied, with sweeping carved foliage. It has a well-established heaviness. Ship's oak, probably. Journeyed. Metal-lined on the inside, as they were in those times, so now there is no need for blackout covering here.

This is the final move of her night-dance. Anna turns the old locking mechanism which runs through the inside of the ancient door, bolting it vertically, noisily, as well as horizontally. It has four mismatching locks, but only the latchkey still works, and this is the single key they have now. They only need the one, anyway, and even this they could do without, as she is always home. There had once been a burglar alarm, if the wires threaded through the hinges meant anything, but those might also have been the heating sensor, or maybe the fire alarm? There is a brass name plate on the outside,

≈ Millan ≈

and a knocker, both now without purpose. Anna stands by the door, quietly reminded of old habits and different thresholds.

With the curtains drawn, the outside releases its grip, slipping off into its deeper darkness. The real world is here now, between the roughened floor planks and the high-ceilinged sky. She hears the house breathing. The bubble-world of the apartment around her shimmers and flexes as it disconnects, at last, from the outside. Anna listens for its ending, the enclosure complete. A determined, metallic snap.

The eager wind cuts under the jacket hood, and Honey turns her cheek to it. Jack always wears a layer too much. The rubber of her mask sits edgily

around her mouth, but Honey pretends that the wind is her breath, flesh-raw and scratching her cheekbones.

She keeps close to the outer walls, sidling tighter against them whenever there is movement on the street. Mostly this is just other bundles of children, trudging similarly at the road's edges. The pavements between them stretch wide-cobbled and unwalked, and the wet road between these is a darkened river. The wind drives along it, tunnelling, beating like breaststroke against the shallow stream. Honey avoids the underfoot, but some blacker parts of the path are still spongy and grip at her sneakers. The sky's deep purple swallows her sight.

Honey, look up! Her mother's voice breaks through with the memory of the same street in the late afternoon sun. Honey was riding her bike, the new birthday one, blueshine and metal clasps. The street's colours merge into a glittering harpsichord of crisscrossing city-sounds, which intensify the bloom of streetwarmth on her bare legs. That was back when there were seasons, long summer days which slid easefully into brassy autumn and chestnuts. The chestnut casings have long since rotted into the underfoot, although the trees still stand like tense silver soldiers along the road.

Honey moves more quickly once she turns from the sheltering walls to cut straight across the old intersection. The hour must be used efficiently. The paths made by others walking are green-grey ribbons that plait impatiently across the broad streets. It is her almost daily circuit.

She notices that she has become one of the taller ones. The streetscapes hold their mature proportions, but the people who move in them are dwarfed. The city's distances now need more strides to walk them. *Children under 14 years of age with the appropriate Accreditation are exempt from the Curfew.* Honey shifts the weighted rucksack of paperwork on her back with a small wriggle.

Honey remembers how, once upon a time, when she too was small, the streets had seemed longer to her, with taller houses. And more compressed, their pavements cluttered with people. Busy passers-by dodging oncomers, or pausing to chat. Adjusting their handbags, nodding about the weather, waiting for the small dog to finish its business. Just standing about, really. No-one stands around now. You are only outside to get back in. Now people hustle along like shadows themselves, the emptinesses between them deliberately held apart, spanned according to the required distance. The city was built for many more.

So many had died, of course. Hundreds of thousands of thousands, many right next door, in unlikely graphs and info-charts that burst and undulated in the first Waves. The elderly, the Sheltered. It was probably better that way, since there were so few now who could still walk the streets. Those without children buy their courier services from the gangs, or manage through the tunnelling that connects buildings, sometimes whole neighbourhoods, in long underground bazaars.

The collection hall is brightly lit with long neon strips across the wide ceiling. After the thick dark air outside, Honey winces against the artificial light as she takes her place in the shuffling queue. Behind the plexiglass, the masked woman with the plastic face-shield only moves her eyes slightly, and her words come through the microphone with a second's delay.

"Name and district?"

She answers. "Jack Millan. S-W-2"

"Voice of?"

"Anna Millan. My mother."

Look up, she said. Look the way you can't fall, and look at the gap. See the airspace. Not the edges you might hit. Then the light will hold you. Yes! Good girl, that's it.

Now, pedal hard! That's my girl. Look at you! Wow. Wouldn't your grandpa be proud?

The first time, the rising panic and the squeezing came without understanding. The apartment's walls seemed to swell inwards and shrink the airspace into a viscous thickening like curdled milk. Anna had not realised how much her snot-congested chest had already restricted her inward breath. It was the sudden full-blocking of her breath's outward release that made a new terror rise through her throat to scream in her ears.

To clear her head, she coughs, trying to force the air both out and in at once. Black clouds flicker as her eyes bulge against the pressure of sinus pain, which grips her ribs as well as her temples. Anna's blood pounds audibly. It builds to a screeching cathedral-sized crescendo. Struggling against it, she tries to cough again. Instead of an easing breath comes the warm shame of the incontinence rush between her legs. This is a sick waterbirth, a miscarriage of moisture, while her chest contracts helplessly against her swollen pus-lined lung-womb. The apartment spins, a jaunty carousel, around her.

Anna clutches at nothing, feeling the floor rise up under her as her closely-packed gasps batter and stumble. She tries to make her heavy chest sound them – her breath searching, panting emptily for the full-stop that doesn't seem to come. *Acquired Respiratory Distress. Dyspnoea.* The twisting pain in her caged breast winds tighter like heart-stitch, squeezing her fear deep into her brain. *Hypoxemia.* It batters angrily there, a wild bird. These are new sensations, the first time, shimmering with the shock of finding herself in this dreaded body at last. Anna realises with a start that the noises she is hearing, these animal alert-cries, are her own. That was the first time. Later, you learn to play dead.

After you had it that first time, you then crossed over to a new way of

living. You joined the new world, which had stopped pretending there was a way back. Before, you spent your efforts trying to avoid infection, to push it into the future - a week, a day. The obsession was individual and idiosyncratic, each person with their own theories and tricks for warding off the fear. Talismans of compulsion.

Afterwards, breathing became a communal obsession, and recovery was no more individual than it was complete. Everyone was one of the Recovered and shared in this common body-knowledge. *Recovery is deemed once an Abatement Certificate is issued, or 23 days after the Registration of Onset.* Everyone had scabbled ashore, gasping and shaking, out of their half-drowned deepdive into scrambled temporalities and interrupted breath.

Anna wondered about the Essentials, though. How it felt for them to recover in a bright white ward, with medicines and meals offered by gentle voices and watchful eyes. Even illness is softened, when you don't face it in isolation. They'd had to give up their children, of course, the Essentials. So that they could keep working – for all of us, keeping everything on track and ticking along. The Re-Homed were well-cared for, obviously. The large sports stadiums had been rapidly repurposed as Homes, for hundreds of children who could be schooled and housed together, while their parents worked. It was all for the best, freeing adults with needed skills from the burden and the risks of their children.

It was essential to focus capacity. Waves of the new illness played social triads of complexity across the Catastrophe's climatic overture. The first Emergency was only the beginning: an environmental paroxysm which had brought sudden night to everyone's everyday. It had long been predicted but still caught the world unawares. The calamitous upheaval of the Emergency was abrupt, an integer bit-shift. That terrifying cataclysm had swept up all its

weathers at once and dumped them downwards. Fanned by nuclear winds, the torrid rains scalded and blistered a scorchline across the Continent. After the explosion of the skies shook the earth, illness and its public administration had crawled quickly out of the devastation.

Sickness might have come from the underfoot, was the theory. A bacterial crossover, sporing from the seething goulash that had leaked through the street deposits, some months after the City Authorities had ceased their daily show of public waste control. The heated city had cooled, and the hot floodwaters had congealed with other effluent. Now the underfoot was slow-releasing wet infectious odours, which had been soaked in the stewpot formed by the climate disaster. The science of this was a little unclear, and anyway, interest in the miasmatic conspiracy had faded quickly under the impact of dealing with its consequences. After her first time, Anna had given up reading the news.

Families split by border restrictions

The New Zealand Herald / RNZ

20 Apr, 2020 11:46 AM

Most of the requests for exceptions to the country's tough border restrictions are being refused, according to figures from Immigration New Zealand. Since March 20, the New Zealand border has been closed to all but citizens and residents, and immediate family members travelling with them. Immigration New Zealand has so far received almost 3500 exemption requests. Of the more than 3100 that have been decided, 80 per cent have been refused. There is no way to appeal a decision made under the exception request process.

The dam was his father's idea. He'd wanted to create a pond, for duck shooting. Maybe even introduce some fish into it, with a picnicking spot off the dirt road. They did that in a few places up the Catlins, and it brought the tourists, said Dad. Never been very clear about who he thought would come, and why. Improvements. Gotta keep improving the place. Southland might be a bit off the track for the rest of New Zealand, but that's no reason to let things stagnate. Anyway, Dad's dam had backstopped some of the surface run-off.

The dam was where Nick came when he needed his peace. Every couple of days, just to turn off the brain-chatter for a bit. Hop on the Yamaha and putter down. It was so much routine now that if he didn't come, it niggled as if he'd left something important off his list. Nothing to do, or check, or fix, down by the dam. Nick simply sat there on the bank. Breathing in the evening or breathing out into the early morning, as he had done since he was a teenager. Listening to the quiet. To be honest, the whole farm was more or less peaceful anyway, now that he'd stopped having the seasonals and did it all himself. Just him and the dogs.

But he liked the particular quietness down by the dam. It was actually only true-quiet for a few moments after he turned off the bike. Then he'd slowly become aware of the bizzing insects, and the swelling belches of the frogs, and even the low moaning of the heifers floating over from the high field. Far off, he could hear the occasional car move across the main road intersection, heading down to Invercargill probably, and it was like an ocean wave breaking from the same direction. The coast was a few kilometres further back than even that, but Nick smelt it sometimes when it rained.

It was dusty-dry tonight, and the pond gave off a gentle whiff of green and absorbed the sounds. Tiny midges tickled noiselessly over its thick wet surface. Nick liked to imagine he was in an orchestra pit, gently coaching the

bird trills from his right, and flicking down with an impatient left hand the rustling of the wind through the break hedge. The music down by the dam is a naturalist's fugue. Always recognisably the same piece, but it sounded slightly different every time he listened to it.

"Will you be coming down?" he asks.

His daughter snorts and pans the camera. She's at Long Beach, with its wind-riven streaks of sand stretching behind her. Nick squints at the surf-sparkles darkening her screen as the phone adjusts. The girl's face is now a deep brown stain with blurred edges, eyes shadowed black. The voice is sharply hers, though.

"Yeah, well. Not sure."

"Eating ok?" he asks.

"Dunno." she replies and clicks off.

>> Recent Call: **Lyla** <<

Her bright profile picture gives him a pouty wink.

Nick looks down at the small beetle crawling over the hairs of his ankle. "Just like her mother," he tells it, and the patina-backed critter waves its legs in silent reply. Really, just like her mother. Although anyone can tell that Lyla's from the Stewart's stock just by looking at her. They were all born looking exactly like Granny. Even Granny herself in that sepia photo of her own ancient grandmother holding the lacy swaddle.

Nick can still remember Lyla's crumpled lamb-face hollering red at him, her angry bleating rising from her downy-grey shoulders as he'd lifted her from that farm mess on the hospital floor. She'd arched her length with miniature fists waving, still connected by bloody rope to her mother's darkness. Lyla'd had no trouble with the eating back then, suckling noisily into his neck as if her

life depended on him. Nick's salted sweat was the first sustenance his daughter had tasted in this world.

Lyla's mother Jeanette works at a pharmacy up in Mosgiel these days. Full-time, now that Lyla's a bit older, and every second Saturday too. Jeanette's quite the pharmacy lady now, all crisp colourful blouses, too much makeup and perfume. She really looks the part, does Jeanette. Like a mother. Actually, like her own mother, that mad old goat Irene. Jeanette's got the same saggy-jowled determination that you wouldn't want to cross. Efficient. Lets you know promptly when the multivitamins are back in stock.

Crazy to think that the billowing woman at City Dispensary was that once-laughing girl on the farm verandah, never in a hurry to go anywhere. Wearing Nick's checked shirt, with her legs tucked up under her and the acne shading her face.

She starts early, even when it is not daytime where she is. Someone else's morning enters Anna's night dream, and wakes her, with a scuttering tip-tapping across her computer screen. She rolls towards the sound, forcing her eyes open.

Are you there? Did I wake you?

Morning

Yes

You're early?

Almost. Not really.

I was thinking of you, just now.

In my dream.

?

Because of the rain.

Is it blackraining with you?

Yes

But not now. I'm stuck w. the 27th

I need the shipment latest 24th

I know. But I'm not sure? With this rain.

They want to move all of it by then



I'll sort it.

Good girl.

Anna pauses, waiting for the flicker of new words on her screen. He seems to want connection now. Her heartbeat ticks tightly with each typing tap. Perhaps a photo? No. She waits.

It's always a shock when it comes. The window into his space opening up, and the sight of him in the half-light. He is called Meesha. Or so he told her. Foreign yet familiar. He is a general of some sort, which would have been man-hot if it came with a uniform. But who wears a uniform, now? And certainly not for sleeping. He wears a dark khaki t-shirt like they all do, his bleak authority and his allegiance only readable in his eyes. They write English to each other, of course, but his sentences inflect to the East. Anna doesn't know his family name, his paternal surname. Only his code.

He's already removed the t-shirt. She sees the familiar cross-shaped scar across his chest, one bar looping pink just below his nipples, slashing across to his armpits. The other is puckered pale like a finger-ladder from just below his belly button up his chest towards his throat. She imagines she is sliding her hand along it, tucked tightly against him. She knows how it feels, the tiny soft ripples under her forefinger along the line where his body has to stretch to meet itself. Her own skin feels pressed into him, opening in deep moist intimacy. Her

words lick down his body. She wonders, again, how he smells.

She follows her thoughts like a stranger along that scarline. Anna knows that once their chat falls silent again, this man will give blunt orders to other men she has never seen. Men who surely do not call him Meesha, the way his mother did as she tied his toddler's shoelaces. This man is now hardened, his muscles knotted by grim years of spartan fortitude, in basements and on battlefields. His mind has been shaped by this, too. His simple "activation of immediate elimination of enemy advantage" will kindle a tiny violent flame, which will roar into a sudden firestorm under the right conditions. Through long chains of circumstance, such plain words will leach black-burnt fumes to enter shattered buildings where Seb, and other men she might have known, are crouching. Anna blocks that thought, stiffly, as if swallowing her own breath.

W*ho the hell does she think she is? No! I'm not going to cool it. I'm not the third grader here!* Her mother's anger fans the air hotly, casting a rippling heatshade over Honey's recollection of those days. Half a decade – almost half a lifetime ago. The street-cracking heat of the Emergency outdoors has already dissipated and taken all heroism with it. What is left is a glutinous, permeating stagnation which many call the Catastrophe, and her mother's white-hot ferocity. Survival has begun to systematise in the city, and new authorities have stepped in to stamp their claims on these systems.

It feels like perhaps just last week to Honey, despite the years that have passed. The suppressed anger of that time simmers under the studied quietness which has settled over the apartment since. The small girl that she was then is still spun by the churning frustration which had boiled around her. The biting adult words, back and forth. *Obligatory. Mandatory. Compulsory.* She recalls how polite female fury swirled between grade-school teachers, her mother and the

various associated adults that Honey was aware of at the edges of her experience. Honey can still hear how Mama speaks tightly to Papa, with angry eyes, in the few moments that he leaves the Office to use the bathroom.

There is something furious in these small surges of conversation which swirl and drag the new reasonings. *Critical. Essential. Required.* Adult words mold logics and spit arguments which Honey can't interpret. *Due to failure to meet the necessary criteria.* Real meaning is hidden somewhere behind the annoyance, and the maths exercises, and the sentence-essays, which her mother coaxes impatiently out of her. Honey has learned to read the clockface on Mama's wristwatch, spinning the dial to make the hands point to a series of imaginary deadlines. She can mark out a whole day in five minutes, even though each week takes a year.

This is the most important thing right now, Honey. This is about your future. I need you to focus.

Mama's own attention to these tasks is only partial and fleeting. There are shut doors and loud words behind these. Honey absorbs this indignation with the curriculum, waiting for it to make sense eventually, or perhaps to fade.

Then the school – or at least its messaging – is swallowed up by the Education Department, and then by the Vocation Department, and the curriculum is Revised. The Re-Homed children of Essentials are re-classified as Priority Pupils, and the At-Home are no longer eligible for online lessons. There is no-one specific to rage against anymore. Mama stubbornly continues to teach the old knowledges, printouts of Social Studies, the Life Cycle of Butterflies, geographies of smiling children holding hands around the world. Their mother insists on daily journaling and music practice to keep the outside at bay. Honey is recital-ready, although her violin teacher no longer replies to their text messages.

Christian and Honey became ineligible for schooling the same summer that final graduation exams were cancelled as well. *For the coming year*, the Board announced, as if this were a temporary situation. For Honey, it has no relevance anyway. No-one thinks to explain to her what *university entrance* would even mean, when higher education is *for the meantime suspended*. Honey slides herself loosely over the reported decisions that seem to have such adult significance and cause the grown-ups such outrage.

She doesn't really understand the Bulletins, with their close-text Announcements and Amendments. These decisions often apply retrospectively, making it hard to follow what is actually happening now, or to untangle this from what happened before but is now redefined. *Urgent and Immediate Reclassification. Validity: last Friday – until further notice*. When Anna slams her bedroom door and disappears again for several days, Honey signs her mother's name and uploads the form that she has completed her compulsory swimming lessons online.

All the adults they know are anyway sick or recovering. Papa got it first, but it gets Mama harder, and often. The basic ordering of every day slowly slides for their children into listless, unattended hours, pretending to read the set texts, while ignoring the fearful sounds that come from their mother's sickroom. Christian keeps his head down, huddled over his computer, and Papa withdraws too, eating simple meals at his desk. They have four or five main meal alternatives to choose from, which they cycle through every two days. Pasta, beans, chickpeas, powdered potato, in various brown sauces. The long-soaked lentils stick in Honey's throat.

As far as she can remember, it was during that earliest Wave of illness that she first went outside alone. She'd worn some kind of makeshift hazmat suit over her clothes, plasticated and provisional. Honey recalls how giddy

realisation lifted her, suddenly, down the entry steps onto the road, as she senses herself disconnect from her mother and the inside. As she reaches the end of the shadowed street with deliberate steps, she giggles nervously, hyperventilating slightly under the mask. She knows she is doing something forbidden, under the rules of the past, as she follows her mother's bidding according to the pencilled list. Medications, milk, don't take the red-labelled ones.

Or maybe that first time she still had a phone? Perhaps Mama had talked her through those baby steps into the once-adult world, piloting her remotely, telling her where she was, and where she should go next? She can't remember now when those systems collapsed.

There was obviously the big data wipe, when the international servers simultaneously corrupted with some piece of coding which had boundary-hopped from an innocuous part of the internet. Already crippled by the abrupt loss of network satellites during the Emergency, what had once been called Artificial Intelligence now also ground to a halt, stupidly, along with the last remnants of a more global connectedness. Everyone's circles of sense-making became street-local and domestic. Common sense stretched a few metres only.

With that sudden data wipe, they all lost access to the past. Mama's careful chronicling of their childhood, the thousands of photos, the mails, the medical records. Behind the metal-clad door of the apartment, their family's memory-losses loom larger and more painfully than the wider international ones. Christian and Honey now exist only in the present, which is slippery as well. All the baby photos they have left are of Anna, in the old gingham-encased, black-paged album her grandmother made, long before anything was stored online. Tangible little squares of the past, with transparent glue showing around the white margins. These old photographs make a decent proxy, her

mother pretends to them, as *all our family's babies look the same*.

When the internet was reconstructed, piecemeal, it hitched together localised cells of information. Mama complains that that was when people's minds got locked down, as well as the neighbourhood. She tries to explain to her children how science stopped making sense, as international collaboration was brutally disrupted. Much of the early knowledge about the consequences of the environmental Emergency was lost into this new digital disaster. But who would have had time to read scientific papers anyway, with the universities closed and the hospitals too? The resulting e-vacuum thickened the smoke and confusion of the wider social firestorms. As the Catastrophe deepened, the more limited internet connectivity still lubricated digital talk, but did not collect anymore in data pools. The new e-present was always momentary, with little left to delete. It was safer that way.

He should have turned off the phone. Nick's unsettled now – it's as if they've all followed him down to the duckpond: Jeanette and Lyla, and his own mother, all talking too loudly about what was on sale at the supermarket and why that means the lasagne might taste funny. He prefers that there's no chat here by the water. Just the birds and the frogs and the insects, waltzing their music around him without words. Nick doesn't even bring the dogs down here; they'd just stir everything up and make the house smell like pondwater later. And he'd have to bark at them too, telling them to get down or what've you got now in your mouth, y'mongrel. It's hard to feel like you're in a concert hall when you hear the sound of your own grouchiness interrupting.

True story – he is a man of few words. There's no need to go on and on about stuff. Just cut to the chase, say what's important and otherwise keep your

own counsel. Jim-Boy at the Country Club says Nick's like his grandfather like that, like his uncle Brewster. Nick wonders if he was born quiet, or if there just hadn't been space for his words, what with Mum and his sisters at it like hammer-and-tongs all day long, and Dad yarning on, whether or not anyone was listening.

Nick's thoughts tickle over the grey water of the duckpond, sparkling gunmetal and chrome. The pond behind Dad's dam is definitely Nick's place now: more than the farm, or the house, or the sheds. It's probably the only thing he'd miss, if he went away. He doesn't think he could stand living in Dunedin, or Invercargill or 'Clutha. In some little wooden house pretty much like the farmhouse, but with the neighbours only eight feet away across the fence.

His sisters had both left, while Nick was still at high school. Going first to PolyTech in Dunedin and then staying there for the sequence of jobs and promotions that he hadn't quite followed: Jill in dental support and Meg in accounts at the Automobile Association. Nick doesn't bother going up to Dunedin much, except for Lyla's school prizegivings each year. Otherwise only if he has something to get done at the bank or with the cars that he can't sort down South. The girls turn up at the farm on the odd weekend, and at Christmas of course.

The farmhouse belongs to the family, really. No-one ever asks him if it suits, they all just waltz in, stuff things in the fridge and carry on as if it were still Mum and Dad's. *You've still got Mum's chutney at the back here, you know that, right?* They even stick to their old places on the couch. They used to bring Mum up from the Home, but not the last couple of years, especially since the pandemic and all those contact restrictions. It's too much for her now, so Jill and Meg just join her down there for a cuppa and take a Christmas photo with paper hats.

He probably should go too, if you think about it, but no-one has ever asked. Just like Dad, just like Granddad. The bloke always stays at the farm; no point larking around paying courtesy calls, even at Christmas. So, Nick stays back at the farm, too. In case.

The greenhouse was what Papa called *a lucky break*. Like their first protection masks, which they happened to find in the bottom of the metal toolkit, splashed murkily with DIY projects from a different lifetime.

Honey knows that this luck was entirely accidental. Her father had built the small glasshouse on the balcony long before the Emergency broke the sky over them. It was a tiny playgarden for her and Christian, for their patty-cake messes and the insects they brought home from the park. Papa had known the proper scientific terms as well as Honey's cute nicknames for each of these tiny creatures. Her father insisted that *Sniffoo* and *pyrrhocoris apterus* be kept in their terrarium, just outside the greenhouse. Beating and creeping, the bugs scuttled against the plastic walls of their enclosure. Honey would observe them for long minutes making their pointless, yet deliberate, circuits around their miniature world.

Even in the time before, the greenhouse was an unlikely small landscape to have suspended outside the apartment, hovering mid-air above the pavement. But Papa wanted her to learn to garden, as his father and his father's father had taught him. He had confronted Honey's wild-insect curiosity with gentle paternalism, training her with his usual persistence to train the runner beans in tidy rows up the splayed stalk-framing that he set up along the back of the glasshouse.

As the outside roared and flared during the first days of the Emergency, her father had brought the wood-and-glass structure indoors. Although he had

a desk job at *The Mirror*, Papa was a natural craftsman, and he re-built the small greenhouse inside the apartment with an obsessive exactness. The strain of those strangest days is preserved in its framework: in those sanded right-angles without visible joins. While Mama repeatedly shut kitchen drawers and doors too-loudly, and blackpapered the windows, their father spent hours brushing the dirt meticulously back into the plant-boxes. Papa set the greenhouse against the windows in the Long Room, so that it appeared from inside to be outside.

The wilding tomatoes, the raspberry stalks, the miniature peppers with their unlikely bursts of colour have made a patchwork of his earlier curation. Sometimes now Honey just sits inside this little lung, breathing in its untidy greenness. Its glorious succulence has long pushed out Papa's ordered lessons. It grows its wilderness fortuitously at the edge of their neatly ordered apartment. It flowers and fruits according to unpredictable rhythms now that the seasons have gone. Other times, Honey sits outside it, looking in, watching it like a computer screen, the bronzed light writhing and iridescent through the foliage.

Her past here was a leafy growth, breathing dark-green and quiet inside this bubble. Slowly growing those glow-neon fronds and the tiniest delicate flowers, even as the outdoors darkened and rotted. Honey remembers the childish medieval-magic of princesses in their secret gardens. She thinks of the improbably curling vines which entangle golden hair tenderly and ripple down the page. Their greenhouse is a glitter-globe, and its miniature fairytale forest is now the largest wilderness she knows.



RELAPSE

ACT II



Deep in my head, unslept

Dulled in dullness and distress...

– William Dunbar

Nick wakes into himself slowly. He hasn't used an alarm clock in years; the farm's waking is enough. He hears the dog-collar rattling as Digger settles himself in his basket on the porch. After the chattering news-clips of Nick's dreams, the house is now peacefully empty.

He will go and see Mum. There's really no reason not to, once the feed is out. Those fences round the bottom of the lower paddock aren't urgent. Nick gathers himself in the duvet and rolls himself upright. This is his small trick to avoid the chilly edge of the air becoming the reason not to get up.

Once his body is vertical, everything clicks into place: body circulation, instant coffee (milk & two), porridge on low. Then he's in under a gaspingly hot shower. The fan heater next to the bathroom window mixes the air with condensation into a subtropical paste, which is the breath of the old wooden house.

Under the scalding waterfall, the rubber shower radio competes against the noisy pumping of the changing pressure in the tap system. Nick dries himself down to the tinny, half-sentenced nonsense of Ezy-FM Breakfast Show. With reluctance, he throws open the bathroom window to let in the morning, which bites and ripples his naked skin. There is black mould in the bathroom's creases, lifting the paint on the windowsill in long flaky ridges.

Far too early to ring ahead. He's fairly sure the night shift went off at 6:30 am, but the morning staff would be flat-tack with the breakfast rounds, so he won't bother. Unless it's Outing Day, Mum will be around somewhere.

The TV now natters on where the bathroom radio has left off. Unlike the waterproof radio in the shower with its awkwardly encased batteries, Nick has

no pressing reason to flick off the TV's power. Instead, the television simmers like the porridge, on a slow boil throughout the day. News, mainly. Headlines and earnest twenty-second analyses from concerned-looking reporters who look too young to be genuinely interested. There are various inter-island high school sports events and recycling initiatives, dramatically narrated. A bit of low-level crime on the West Coast. Latest from the Catastrophe abroad, in segments that expect you to have been following developments for weeks. And a sunny front coming in from the North, bringing Unseasonable Highs by Wednesday!

Nick leaves the last of the porridge in the bowl for the dogs' dinner later. Scuttling overhead. Rats in the roof. He really must get up there, lay some bait.

Honey can't quite place the moment she realised that she needed Jack. Her breasts had been budding slowly but she was still the narrow *gangly gazelle* that Papa had called her as a girl. Mama had long given up persuading her into anything but the next size of her favourite trackpants and the thick grey hoodie she pulled over her head while sleeping. Honey was small for her age, and perhaps stunted by indoors. Her period caught them unawares. Mama had tried awkwardly to voice the words to mark Honey's transition as something rich and full-bodied, but it was hard to celebrate there now being two women caged and circling.

With nothing else to mark the change, becoming Christian's brother was comparatively simple. Honey already had all the credentials and codes as her mother's Voice.

RESIDENT (long-term rental) : MILLAN, Anna | Gainfully employed |

Register #7255302. | Married: ref. #7047613 | Two (2) dependants

under 14 years | Household: Four (4).

As the authenticity of these details could be verified, her new selfhood was easy to implement. After a few double-steps and transactions, Honey continued her daily rounds as her mother's son.

Mama never mentioned Jack, ignoring him as she pointedly ignored all the official steps of correspondence and modes of interaction with the systems outside. Anna continued to speak in the first person about household purchases, the finances and the small administration she had to do every day, as if Honey's trips to the collection hall on her behalf didn't really happen. She would stand in the kitchen, musing aloud:

"I think I got us enough bread yesterday. Must remember to restock toilet paper when I'm next ordering shampoo."

Nobody ever mentions Papa's absence, either. There are still four Millans drawing on the household allocation.

It is certainly easier for Honey to move as a younger Jack. The gangs have enough youngsters willing to be pushy with their services to bother approaching a lone and scuttering boy who was clearly already bound. And the dangers of sudden street-sweeps for conscripts are obvious to any teenager going about an adult's business. Recruitment for fighters has intensified recently. The militaries at the Front need reinforcements, and Honey had been caught up four times already with the sudden glare of laser lighting illuminating the street, as fully-masked soldiers hustled the adults they'd caught between the electric barricades into waiting vans. Being of-age and outside was proof enough of fitness to serve.

Infection with adult sickness was another risk too, of course. Honey knew her pre-teen immunity would be waning, but for now she adjusts her mask with precise and easy confidence. Most on the streets are children, in any case.

Heifer Feedplan Adjustments - how? >>> Dairy heifer nutrition >>>
Macdonald, et al (2005) >>> NZ Dairy Statistics (2016-2019) >>>
Proceedings of the New Zealand Society of Animal Production (2016) >>>
Waugh (2021): Rearing replacement heifers, a cost, or an investment? >>>
 While herds **must** be kept strictly apart to avoid cross contamination (nematodes, liver flukes, bacterial agents, bovine viruses), it is **essential** nonetheless that feed plans ensure **even distribution of nutritional advantage** on the property. Feed and nutrition is the key factor in heifer growth into puberty, and essential to their **adult role** in breeding and milk production. Elements for growth and maintenance include: energy, protein, minerals, water. **Natural pasture** can generally meet the needs of well-grown heifers (before 50% mature liveweight), given advantageous fertilizer history and possible feed quality adjustments for steep or inhospitable land. **Liveweight** should be gained between 15 months to two years targeting: 90% of mature liveweight at 22 months and 5.5 body condition score pre-calving. Cow condition reflects **feed quality** for the last 6-8 weeks, whereas body weight relative to liveweight targets mark how the heifer has been fed over her life. **Compensatory growth** rarely makes up the difference for mobs to meet target weights and **fails** to close liveweight gaps...

G idday there Mum, how's it going?"

Nick tries to inject a casual note into his voice, to hide how uncomfortable the place makes him. The crocheted patterning of the bed-throw tickles the back of his legs, as if imprinting the familiar mixed-wool squares onto his skin. Stupid how there's only one chair in here, unless you want to crouch on the footstool.

"You had your morning tea yet?"

"Nicholas. Dad let you come visit, or did you just sneak off so you didn't have to help with the de-worming?"

“Mum, I’m boss now. You know that. And the drenching’s all been taken care of, and the top-up vaccinations too.”

For a split second he hears cattle in the shed, complaining mournfully.

“We’ve got seven-hundred head these days. It’s quite a job but it’s all done now for the season.”

“Did you bring any carrot cake?”

She is sitting curiously upright in the chair, with her eyebrows high. Mum never used to sit still, or even sit down, and her quick eyes remember this.

“Mum, no. I just came in to see you.”

“You know I’m partial to a bit of carrot cake. Or some ginger crunch. We never have ginger crunch here you know. Just digestives.”

“I’ll bring you some next time, I promise. Or we’ll go out for a cup of tea and a slice of something, how about that?”

Nick wants to get away from the suffocating citrusness overlaying the farm odours of the tiny bedsuite. Shit and sweat only smell bad when you try to cover them.

“Would you like that, Mum? We could go for a bit of a drive, if you want.”

He glances around, trying again not to let on how the place has him on edge. He attempts to master his face, to look more like a man than a skittery boy.

“Say hello to Christopher, now. You haven’t even asked for a hold. He’s looking a bit peaky this morning. Off his food.”

Mum will get distressed if he tells her it’s just a doll. He looks dutifully at the bundle in her lap and pats its head as if it were a lapdog, murmuring a greeting. The doll is looking a bit worse for wear. Its bovine eyes are

improbably black-lashed and one eyelid is jammed half shut. Might be time to replace it? You can see why the carers had advised getting a couple of duplicates so it can be easily washed or swapped out.

“How about it, Mum? We can head out to the beach if you like, there’s a wee cafe down there now, and I’m sure they’ll have a bit of baking.”

She looks at him doubtfully. Not surprising really. Since when did he and Mum go on excursions?

He tries to remember what they did do together when he was a kid. Cooking jam in great battered pots. He can still taste the scalding sticky sweetness, searing his mouth and leaving a skin-flap. Washing the windows. His special job was the glass door onto the porch. Mum, impatient, diluting the thick soapy suds he’d whipped up and then drying off the streaks with a practised hand. He vaguely remembers helping her make patchwork quilts for the Show. Her threading a needle, and twisting the double knot between her pinched fingers. She used to scrub him down roughly like those windows, with a towelling facecloth in the bath, after he brought the farm inside with him.

She is strangely faceless in these memories. It is her browned, sun-dried arms and pixie hands – stirring, rubbing, wiping, washing – which he remembers. He looks now at those small wizened hands, with their blunt flat nails, gently caressing the babydoll’s face. A firm, familiar touch. He suddenly wishes he could put his head in her lap again, and feel those fingers stroking his hair.

This goddamn place is enough to drive anyone potty, clearly.

The visit to Jinny’s wasn’t strictly necessary, of course. Jinny still held the required permits to get her own supplies, and her small kitchen apparently got regular deliveries. She even had liquid milk, sometimes, which

Mama had given up trying to source.

Nevertheless, Honey always finished her walking route by turning into the short street behind her own building, then pushing through the broken-locked entrance hallway into the empty back courtyard of the old apartment set. She wasn't sure how many of these apartments were still occupied, but Jinny's on the ground floor let a warm light onto the courtyard's strangely swept paving. The girl's lack of blackouts wasn't evident from the street.

Jinny and Honey had been classmates, although never in an actual classroom. In another life, they would have been best friends. Birthday parties, sports competitions, maybe even holiday camps. Sometimes they had pretended these, in longwinded e-conversations which were almost storylines. *Do you remember how we nearly did that? That sounds like us, doesn't it?* The memories they have written into existence were in any case shared. They had, for a short time, walked the supply route together.

That was before Jinny's parents had disappeared, leaving her in front of a locked door, with no way to get in to know if it was the sickness or the patrols which had taken them. Jinny had acted pragmatically, as was her way. She'd acquired the downstairs apartment by moving in with an elderly neighbour who had promptly died. Jinny had shifted the body for the collections, as though it were a Christmas tree. With no-one left to infect now, Jinny settled herself into the small space as if it had always been her own.

To Honey, Jinny is a Peter Pan, with her theatrical smiles and flaunty way of posing herself, whether or not the cameras are on. She greets Honey with a lively pout and a wink, nodding her in without speaking. They make tea together as if it were a whole meal, revelling in the complicated drama of laying out the cups and heating the water. The girls were accustomed to filling time like a kettle, and watching it boil. Honey only removed her mask when the tea

was steaming in the mug in front of her, but Jinny never flinched. They didn't say much, far less than they wrote to each other normally. They just drank the tea slowly in companionable silence, as if they were sisters or lovers.

Through the kitchen door, Honey can see the bed, floodlit with the camera lighting. Now that she can't go out anymore, Jinny offers different services. Her CamGirl account is loosely visible to Honey's chatline, but Honey has never opened it. She knows this pointed avoidance is part of her own delaying, along with her digital snipping-off of other friendships from their former online class. Honey wants to keep up her mother's pretence as long as possible, that her education has prepared her for a different world than Jinny's and the others'.

Still, she needs these visits to Jinny to remind her that there are lifeways that she and her mother are ignoring by their careful crafting of their small reality. It leaves Honey exhilarated, Jinny and her together and alone, hands almost touching, drinking tea like adults. Unmasked and sitting in the forbidden light which pools around them like a spotlight. It makes her neck flush, as if stroked.

The Office became the Schoolroom once Papa was gone.

Mama tries to make her lessons open windows to the world. It is difficult when their own windows have been painted shut to keep out the Emergency's first heat. Mama insists on careful cursive, and finger guides and needle-sharp pencils. She marks work with a green pen. Her written comments are anonymous, pretending not to have seen the clunky cadence, assisted syntax and interrupted effort of Honey and Christian's drooping days. Worksheets. More worksheets. The paper curls under sweaty childish fingers, and hot quiet tears.

Single alphabet letters become joined-up words. Three sentences make a paragraph. Seven paragraphs are an essay. Honey learns that all Fairy Tales are woven in magic circles of threes and sevens. Three daughters, three wishes, three attempts to overcome. The golden orb, the poisoned apple, the magic pea. A single drop of blood on snow. The seven Swabians, the seven dwarves. Mama conjures the bright magic of metaphor for her children. She speaks of etymology, imagery, the music of rhyme, the essential work of verbs – or their lack. *Mirror Mirror, on the wall*. Alliterative ellipses. The enchanted night-rose and its thorn.

“Tonight tonight, my plans I make,
tomorrow tomorrow, the baby I take.
The queen will never win the game,
for *Rumpelstiltskin* is my name”.

Honey writes haltingly her own fairy-stories from the trigger words Mama gives her on little slips of card. The Wild Hunt, the Witch and her spindle, the White Widows who left sickening changelings in the cot-warmth of human babes. The Sirens and the Harpies with their women’s songs. Lo-re-lei, Lo-re-lei. The *Doppelgänger* haunting its own flesh. Fairy children wander through dank forests, following breadcrumbs and hiding from trolls. Mama plays *Peter and the Wolf* in the background, until Honey’s dreams become chasing crescendos of fear, driven by Prokofiev’s oboe.

The Rat-Catcher.

I can’t really remember what she looked like, now. I just remember the smell of her. The warm yeasty scent of long-baked bread and sour milk and sweat. In the daytime, she was only one of the smells which filled my childhood, mixing with the dark wet greenness at the back of the house, the hot dusty sand of the Street and the damp dirt-scuffed planks around the

Well. But at night, the warmth of her body would become the warmth inside the house, and every crevice of the kitchen, the hearth and my sleep would come to smell of her.

The Mayor warned us about the rats. The Crier would read out his sombre analysis, the daily numbers, the spread. We'd never seen the rats, but we'd heard them - the rustling in the walls, the shuffling movements on the roof. The Mayor said they were everywhere, already, scattering hastily through the Town. Poisoning everything they touched, and only going to get worse, multiplying into an undulating carpet which would carry us all away. He urged us not to worry, to breathe calmly and to Trust in Him, he was meeting with the Councillors, there was a Plan. In the meantime, we were to try to avoid seeing them, accidentally touching them, to stay close to the house and turn our heads from their sliding, scuffling sounds.

Mother worried about the rats, although the Mayor said not to; she was worried about the flour, the droppings in the storehouse. She'd heard they'd nibble on babies' toes and the Baby wouldn't cry out because the poison in the rats' saliva would numb Baby's feet, unless Mother lay half-sitting next to the cot all night in case the rats came. The rats ran across our dreams, anyway, even when we tried to hold our eyes open. Hotly, tiredly staring at the low flames in the hearth, which flickered a reply to Mother's wordless questions to Baby...

Thank you Christopher. Date of birth?"

"It's Nick, actually. February 16, '79."

The cop grunts as he turns over the card, highlighting it with his LED torch in the half-light.

"Christopher Nicholas Stewart, 16-oh-two-19-79. You were on my camera at 24 Ks over, as you hit the bend. That's a fine and a demerit point.

Your address still the same as on your licence?"

"Yup, that's the Stewarts' farm." Bugger. He needed that point.

The drive back afterwards felt like limping. Nick kept his eyes on the speedo more than the road, holding the quivering needle just above the red 100. The fading light from the coastside flushed the sky with an angry blush, which blurred black as soon as he pulled away over the hill inland. Stupid. The last thing he needed was to lose his licence again, now that there were no casuals on hire.

He turns off the gravel road and judders over the cow-stop grate. The house is so deeply lost in the night, with only a single lightbulb illuminating the corner of the roof, that he could have left it fifty years ago and not just this morning. He half-expects Meg or his mum to flick on the porchlight and come out in an old dressing gown, but there is only the dog there, whining in her basket.

His sister Meg is Margaret Nancy, and Mum is Nancy Margaret. The dark-blue dressing gown was the same one, too, passed down and belonging to no-one. Family names, passed down, flipped around, left hanging on a nail by the door. Uncle Nick, Grandpa Nick, cousin Chris, uncle Chris who-was-Mum's-cousin. Nick thinks of the new teacher arrived from Hamilton at school, trying to make them all draw their family trees at the front of their exercise books, and Mr Morgan's incredulous look at how the Nancys and Tonys, Nicholases and Christophers repeated. He remembers the headmaster's hushed voice admonishing Mr Morgan in the corridor. *Look, you don't ask too closely, down here in Southland.*

Nick had stared at the coat-of-arms on the plasticised cover of his exercise book. The two heraldic figures of Zealandia and a Māori chieftain looked as fantastical to him as a unicorn or a gryphon. His own Stewart genealogy, as far

as he could figure it, was just a thin-pencilled spider's web down the 1B4-sized page, with the generations marked tentatively by blue checked squares. Nick and his sisters dangle below the names of his parents, Nancy and Robert. His uncle Nick and grandpa Nicholas are flanked by several female Nicola in the maternal line. Robbie, Rob, Bob, Bert – his father's name features in both branches, and in every generation. Nick blurs the pencil line where he is unsure how the names relate. In any case, Nick's wavering *whakapapa* had nothing to do with the yellow-haired daughter of Britannia or the proud chief with upright feathers in his hair, standing on a fern on the schoolbook's cover.

The clan of Stewart didn't need a motto in Latin or a Golden Fleece, sheaves of wheat or a many-masted ship. The Stewarts' heritage is felt in the undulations of the farm, in the bales of silage, and by the stubborn persistence of the ancient outboard motor on Jim's dinghy. The outboard now lies rusting in the shed amongst the cracked lengths of builders' wood, the old plastic feed buckets and the shearing gear. Nick's gear, Chris's gear, Bill and Rob and Mike's. Blue checkered, red-and-black checkered, windbreakers and old oiled hats. No white toga-dresses or feathered cloaks, that's for sure. The Empire is only a battered biscuit tin. Its dominions flavour Mum's spice rack, under the corkboard on the kitchen wall. Decades-old now, but those unmarked glass jars containing the cheap sweepings of a Delhi market can still make a Sunday chicken roast taste like home.

The kitchen is cold now under the harsh light, and the dishes in the sink have a film of grey over them. The mice have left droppings around the cat food in the saucer on the floor. Nick drinks milk straight from the plastic jug jammed inside the fridge door and looks helplessly into the wilted vegetable drawer for inspiration. It'll be cereal for dinner, the last crumbs from the Weetbix box and some old muesli with the raisins already picked out. Fuck, sometimes it

sucks living alone.

Nick goes out with the cereal bowl onto the front verandah. Holly hovers, tail wagging hopefully under the bowl that glows bright white in the dark. Digger follows languidly, showing little interest in either of them. Nick settles himself on the dogs' favourite couch with its raw-wood arms and the wire-sprung back. The old sofa must have belonged to Nick's grandfather, if not Grandpa Nick's parents. 1930s, probably. And now a hideous threadbare mustard-colour, which gives no hint of what the upholstery had looked like when it was an inside furnishing.

It's chilly outside, but a more open, fresh kind of cold than the condensation in the house. Nick looks out into the darkness and tries to trace the hillside against the liquorice sky. The heifers are up there somewhere, weaving their slow, dozing dance as they settle for the night. The jazz lines of a double-bass pluck a freestyle against the steady beat of his heart. Bom, di-da-bom. Bom. Scatter and ride. Man, it's good to be home.

Anna has refined her procedures for sickness. These days, she is attuned to its coming. Honey would see her tip her head, her mother's eyes blanking as she looks inward. Sickness whispers to Anna with its slight tightening of breath, and a warm humming where her skull grates against her neckbones. Anna swallows, feeling the familiar thickening at the back of her mouth. It is a dusty drying thirst: salt in her ears and her tongue swelling in its bitter-tasting cavern.

Relapse or a new infection? It didn't really matter anyway, as there were no further contact restrictions they could implement, and nothing they could do to stop it unfolding. Anna would go mute, and start arranging her sickroom with the methodical deliberateness of a chess player setting up the board.

Towels, a small kettle, the bucket in the corner. Honey would mimic her mother's automated movements, taking over in the kitchen, slicing vegetables for soup and laying out breakfast for two not three. Christian takes his meals to his computer, and Honey now eats alone.

Anna's breathing is the timekeeper for them all. Honey listens like a midwife for its changes and its warnings. Alert as a watchdog, she would hear the raw sawing of inward air, and the tight outward whistle, slowly filling the space around her mother. For the first few hours, this would merely signal which room Anna was in. She paces the apartment, restlessly, as if searching for air. But as the sucking and whistling became more squeezed and rapid, Anna would retreat behind her bedroom door and lock it from the inside.

It would be several days before the door opened again, and the soup on the threshold would congeal into a cold beige sludge. When the door opened a handbreadth, Honey would replace the soup and add some honey and plain biscuits. After a few more days of this silent communication, her mother would come out at night, empty the putrid bucket into the toilet, clean her hair over the handbasin, hang the towels and wash all the dishes by hand. In the morning, they would pretend nothing had happened.

No-one knows why children don't get sick. There are many theories, and for every theory a politics. The recognition of childhood immunity was fragmented and uncertain, in those first years after the Emergency. The international data wipe of early research findings didn't help. That children were not at risk of infection was perhaps confirmed officially sometime during the second – or third – Waves? It's hard to remember the exact chronology of chaos now. Despite the paucity of statistical data, the death vans' collections slowly made these demographics more daily-obvious to everyone. The hardiness of childhood was an unfurling revelation within the composting of

adult despair. Children's immunity is a miracle. A blessing. And a new inverted duty, once the sickening elders have all but deserted their posts.

...When the wind blows, the cradle will rock. When the bough breaks the cradle will fall... The daughter hums her headsong as she bustles like a mother in the kitchen. For Mama's sake, Honey pretends she and Christian know nothing of holding breath until it hurts, or the body terror that makes a leg shake, or the wet-gush of cathartic tears once the fever breaks. Children are immune, but not against fear.

After she has run out of ways of tidying the kitchen, Honey lies in bed, still humming to herself. She listens restlessly for the muffled clinks and pushes of Anna's secret nightwalk as her mother reclaims herself in the dark. The door budes, the cradle-song stills. The release from sickness is liquid, an oily warmth as blood fills with oxygen. The woman, and so the girl, breathe more easily.

Until it comes again.

It's a man's job to lay a good fire. A woman can light it, tend it, bank it, but it's always her man's job to lay it. With soot-blackened fingers, Robert stacks the kindling that he has cut and shredded over the crushed handfuls of newspaper, interspersed with dry moss and pinecones. He builds a small structure which will burn strong on a single match-strike. The farmer leaves the matches on the hearth-bricks, sweeps aside the ashes and crumbles two fire starters from the coal bucket over the little pile in the cast-iron grate. She will only need to strike and toss the match, and the warmth he has lain for her will crackle into life. There is a kind of lovemaking in a well-laid fire.

His father had taught him to lay a good fire, and one day he will teach his son. Like his father, and his grandfather, he piles the ragged squares of

newspaper neatly next to the wood bucket. There are hieroglyphs of meaning in the sequencing of the matchbox, the fire starters, the coal shovel and the newspaper squares, laid out in scruffy order before the grate. He keeps aside a couple of larger two-paged rectangles of newsprint to hold carefully in front of the fireplace to catch and channel the chimney-draft.

Robert reads the headlines absentmindedly, upside down and sideways. Piece by torn piece, these news articles from far-off places will feed the warm and hungry heart of the solitary farmhouse. The rousing of the fire banishes the empty night's clamminess. Its snapping and flaring before breakfast is what calls awake the weak sun outside. Their most private underthings dry on the wire fireguard. His dogs lie next to his fire, loyally.

When they have been away for a few days, they return to a cold house which smells dead and strangely unfamiliar. That is, until his new-laid fire sends up its wisping grey whisper that the Stewarts are home. Signalling the news over the farm's corrugated rooftop, with shreds of *The Otago Daily*, the *Southland Press*. Somehow here the world's stories converge and tangle, before going up in smoke.

Karitane Home: Opened by Duchess of York

Wairarapa Daily Times, 8 March 1927, Page 5

Telegraph-Press Association, WELLINGTON: In the presence of a distinguished gathering, Her Royal Highness the Duchess of York to-day opened the new Truby King Karitane Home. With the weather at its best, it was a picturesque scene.

After a tour of inspection through the hospital, the Duchess went up to Sir Truby King's home, and while there saw a small kindergarden. She was much interested in the work of the little ones, and was heard to remark: "I've seen such lovely babies here"; but perhaps there were thoughts just then of another little baby - a little Elizabeth - far away in the Queen's good care.

A number of Karitane nurses formed a fitting guard of honour. The Duchess expressed her pleasure at being asked to perform the ceremony. In a few brief words to Sir Truby King, she complimented him on his great work. The Duchess then opened the main door with a gold key, and the official party made a tour of inspection of the Home, Her Royal Highness again complimenting.

The Duchess also consented to make a brief appearance on the balcony, and from this point she was given a rousing reception by the large crowd. This she graciously acknowledged. As she left the Home, the Duchess was again hailed with joy by the large crowd which lined the road.

The arrival of a baby is always heralded with bunting and flags, long billowing sheets which lift and wave in the wind. Each corner neatly pegged, rows and lines of whiteness. Bubsie escapes into these labyrinths of brilliant winding sheets and squares of nappies, soaked in the sudsy foam of NappySan. Winding down the pinwheel clothesline, a windmill of wires, she submerges herself in the twisting and swelling white sheets. She feels herself flush behind these stage curtains, readying herself for the performance. The sun is cold, but the wind plays cheekily across her washing. Here down South, the north-westerly wind is a mother's friend. Two hours, maybe three, another feed and a cup of tea, and she'll be able to fight and fold it off the line, filling her washing basket with puffs of fabric like cotton wool, like candy floss.

This feels so natural, this tangling with the wind. Bubs is a dancer, swirling amongst the cloud-smoke and silken streamers. She remembers stretching her chubby arms up to pass the clothes pegs, for her mother to clip the same sheets into place. Mother would hug aside the pillowcases and smile down at her, rewarding her for her dutifulness, for being *a helpful little lady*. She waves and curtsies back, her pinafore outstretched.

Plunket Society: Progress of Work - Beginning in Dunedin.

Otago Daily Times, 10 May 1948, Page 4

Issue 26767: Sir Truby King, during his period as medical superintendent of the Mental Hospital at Seacliff, Otago, had under his management the farm attached to the hospital. His natural instinct for research and his scientific approach to any new problem led him to make investigations into breeding and farm production, with results that brought fame and remarkable success to the farm in agricultural circles. His studies in the laws of Nature as applied to the vegetable and animal world led Sir Truby to investigate the rearing of human babies and the problems of how far the wastage of infant life could be avoided and combated.

Unlike the mothers of the animal kingdom, the human mother had little natural instinctive knowledge of her role; she had to learn her mothercraft like many of the other lessons of life. Indeed, it was to this unpreparedness and want of knowledge in mothers that Sir Truby's early investigations soon traced most of the causes for the loss of many babies, and the failure to thrive of so many more. "When it is realised that 80 per cent. of the babies born in New Zealand usually come under the care of the Plunket Society, the scope of the work will be realised."

Her mother could read the tea leaves. Some woman from her Plunket group had shown her. You had to tap the tea strainer against the cup into the last sips of liquid, then slosh the remains into the saucer. Mother's grey hair-parting was a pale arrow pointing down, as she read the cup clockwise, quizzically – the knots and chains, the axe, the luck, the clouds and wheels. Her miniature astrology sometimes spun a Milky Way, star-spangled from the white witchblood of Hera's breasts, inside the small teacup in her palms. Mother could see the swirling of an entire universe against the porcelain bowl.

Lady Baden-Powell said, turn the teapot, three times, let the leaves swirl. Rinse the cups first with boiling water from the Zip water heater or just a splash

from the kettle. If you drip the milk down the edge of the teacup, it returns in cloudy swirls from the cupbase like a milky volcano under the surface. The smoke-signals of *Rūaumoko*, Papatūānuku's volcano-child. Now two squares of sugar from the silver tongs. Drink from hot to sweet.

The pictures on the tea box are exotic and flavoursome. Masala Chai, Cantonese Dutch. Teh Tarik, Builder's Tea and Doodh Pati Chai. Kenyan, Ceylon or Hong Kong style. Even the flatland Frisians cut the tannins of their Hanseatic imports with a thick dairy cream. The foreign black dust which smells of years, oak and ships, can be magicked with just a little hot water and a cream-cloud into a sweetened velvet that tastes specifically of your own mother's kitchen.

If you're feeding, a milky tea will restore vitality and warm the blood. The posset, the eggnog, thickened pap, syllabub, a spiced panada. The baby makes its own possets too, white curds on cheesecloth. The grandmothers of the mothers were witches and goodwives. Their knowledges were the ancient sciences of tea leaves and abortifacients.

Karitane Hospitals to Close

The Press, 4 April 1978, Page 1

Press Association, DUNEDIN: New Zealand's six Karitane hospitals will be phased out during the next 12 months, but the Plunket Society will honour its obligations to its trainee nurses. The society's national president said in Dunedin yesterday that it was hoped many of the Karitane trainees would be able to work in other Plunket services which would replace the hospitals.

The Karitane hospitals had become outdated and uneconomic. "They are not dealing effectively with all problems confronting parents of young families and the need for change is obvious," she said. Many mothers "prefer a close-to-home service which is flexible enough to cater for a variety of social, emotional and environmental

problems as well as providing medical back-up." The Society had detected a growing need in the last few years for the Karitane service to adopt a broader approach to support the family as a whole.

Peter calls himself a Street Sweeper, when he's asked to record his employment status. He's not actually employed by anyone, but he is certainly not the first to have formalised an occupation out of necessity and a few random tasks. Originally, before the Emergency, he'd been responsible for putting the rubbish bins out on a Wednesday for his apartment block. That wasn't a job, obviously; that was just something that came with living in the ground-floor apartment, much like receiving mail for the neighbours when the DHL man couldn't be bothered going up two further flights of stairs. After they'd dug the main front entrance out of the first mudflooding, Peter had been given a high-visibility vest by some Civil Defence officials and told to await instructions. None ever came, but the vest lent him authority over the neighbours, so from then on, he was understood as Nominated.

These days, Peter feels authorised as well as obliged to do various odd jobs for the two neighbouring apartment blocks on the left-side of their street. He sends disaster reports, and Summons for Clearance, loads the deceased into the death collection vans, verifies identities for the recruitment patrols, breaks the locks if an apartment needs Clearing. He scrapes off the moss growing on the entrance steps so that the errand-runners can enter the building without dragging the underfoot into the staircase. Peter also sweeps the stairwells with a stiff brush each morning, and with a mop twice a week. Every second Saturday, after the runners deliver, Peter pins the large-print official Bulletins onto the internal noticeboard by the entrance, posts individual copies into the otherwise empty postboxes, and then glues another large-format copy of the

latest Bulletin onto the advertising board outside on the street.

The advertising billboard on the exterior wall is thickly layered with curling old posters, rain-burnt and stained with fungal spotting. Before everything changed, the billboard used to boast a line-up of adverts for the latest shows and art exhibitions, a bit of loose graffiti and the occasional request for singing lessons or information about a disappeared pet. The very top of the huge billboard still shows colourful remnants of that lost time, although these are scrapped by the weathers and peeling now.

Peter gazes up at the glossy layered plastering of *Star Wars: The Rise of Skywalker* with its photosensitivity trigger warnings, and Harrison Ford's *The Call of the Wild*. The CGI dogs stare out of the enormous poster with shining human eyes. These eyes have been watching the unfolding Catastrophe for years now. The cinemas and the theatres never reopened, although there were the occasional scandals of boot-leg performances with live audiences in darkened cellars. The old posters on the billboard signpost a glistening unhappened future of global blockbusters. Their projected worldwide audience reception is now as sci-fi as the films. Life's got a lot more local, since.

Further down the large advertising board, the postings are more recent. From mid-height, Peter has been conscientiously pasting the Bulletins, in ordered rows according to date of issue. The oldest is probably the one marked in bold, **Urgent Announcement: May 11**, on the middle left of the board. The year is obscured, but it must have been already three or four years after the Emergency, once the Bulletins were issued more regularly. Peter's not sure if anyone ever stops to read the Bulletins on the street, but it feels important to know that the information is out there, should anyone need to look.

Urgent Announcement: Review of Household Procurement

The Bulletin, May 11, [illegible]

Residents should note the conclusions of the Official Review into Household Procurement and Provisioning. All Households (as defined and locally Verified) are responsible for submitting their provisioning requirements in advance of Collection on the newly issued Application D-782. Residents who on account of illness or incapacity... [illegible]... may Nominate an authorised Collection by an individual OR household...

Essential Announcement: Registration of Death or Departure

The Bulletin, Revised & Retrospective, Year in Review

All Residents are to note that the formal requirement to register the Death or Departure of a member of their Household has lapsed. The Verifiers are to intensify efforts to verify Household requirements on a per case basis. Death / Departure certificates will no longer be issued and cannot be used for Verification purposes. Residents in possession of [illegible]... entitlement for the remainder of this calendar year...

Peter wipes down the curling edges of the postings with their dull-yellow notification banners, trying to make them stick flat again. It looks good, his billboard, with its tidy squares of information. Satisfying, somehow. An archive of his activities for the street. It's a strange kind of gardening: clipping and weeding out the scruffiest notices.

Peter does enjoy the sense of purpose he gets from being one of the Nominated. He changes the lightbulbs in the stairwells, keeps the door hinges oiled with bicycle spray. He disposed of all the bicycles a year or two ago, and the courtyard looks much neater for it. The twisted metal frames had corroded away and sunken into the sludge, anyway, as had most of their original owners. It's a lot simpler now that there are no children wanting to play in the yard,

messing things up, falling accidentally into the potted plants. There are no potted plants needing to be watered either. Peter can sleep easy after checking all the tick-boxes round the place, keeping things neat. In fact, he quite appreciates how few open-ended decisions he has to make these days.

He's in a chat group with others who have found similar roles for themselves, for this part of the city. The Guardians of Local Values, they call themselves. The chat group is a good spot for seeking advice about the smoothest technique for breaking through an old-style window (car jack or hydraulic cable cutters?) or for exchanging commentary about those causing mischief in the neighbourhood. Curfew breakers, the call-up dodgers or vaccine thieves. It's mainly the solo ladies who cause trouble round here, getting all stroppy and resistant, not accepting things the way they are. Peter prefers the women sent out to him every couple of weeks on service. Those girls keep their portable oxygen masks on, so they don't chit-chat. No reason local ladies couldn't get on the allocation lists for that, if they wanted to get out of the house. One of the Guardians mentioned that it's quite straightforward, really. Peter gets a lot of reassurance from the other Guardians, they're great at making things make sense, speaking plain whenever things get complicated. Good to know you have people at your back, with the world the way it is nowadays.

Not that you'd know them, if they passed you on the street. It's a secret society, those upholding the neighbourhood. Peter wears his neon vest under his coat. Only need to show it, discreetly, by undoing the top button if there's an Inspection. And usually better not to attract attention, if you have to be outside. Everyone in this neighbourhood already knows the Street Sweeper, anyway. That's why they turn away, letting him go first, about their business.

It always happens on a sunny day. Never in the drenching rain or when the wet snow-sleet is driving into your face, when you're properly braced for it. The world only ever slides into a shimmering fearscape on those days when the sun is warm on your neck and you've had a good breakfast, and been slow out of the shower.

Nick had been reluctant to come up to the third paddock. The sunshine had heated the couch leather through the sliding glass doors, and he'd lain in its puddle, and wondered about going back to bed. That's the trouble with not having staff. You stop being your own boss as well. But he'd pulled on his work boots, and a thermal vest, and tried to make himself look like a farmer. Imagine if Dad had walked in and seen him slouching there on the crocheted cushions, with a hole in his sock and seven-hundred head waiting for him to open up new feed bales?

He'd whistled up the dogs, hopped on the farm bike and was halfway-up the hill, when he saw the first one down. Lying on her side with her head bent back at an odd angle. The others were avoiding her, but sticking close together, watching Nick with low eyes.

"Hey ol' girl, what's up with you then?" His tender words start before he's even off the bike, the dogs hanging back without him asking. Hunkering down on his haunches, Nick takes the heifer's heavy snout in his hands and looks her square-on. She looks back at him, sadly. Her eyes are dull, and not moving much, but there is a panicked sheen of recognition at the back of them. The animal's breathing is laboured and her eyelids swollen with some kind of gunk. Respiratory, then. Flaring nostrils with an ugly discharge. But what about those scours? Also looking nasty, along with her overall condition – droopy ears, bloated abdomen. Enteritis?

He glances round at the others and can see a couple of them are also

looking strangely peaky. A gaunt and bouncing gait, and with sweat on their coats that doesn't fit to quiet grazing. His hands run over this heifer's belly, as he tries to feel what's griping unusually inside. He feels round her mouth too, to see if she's clenching or if it's somehow her head that's bothering her, but it's her floppy passivity which alarms him most. She does see him though, he's sure of that.

"Poor old thing – what's got into you today, m'lady? Let's get you up on your feet, eh? Come on, Missie, up! Up!" He gives the beast a sharp shove to get her moving. The dogs circle in, but there's no shifting her. Nick's not that convinced about brute animal ignorance. This one's stubbornness is clearly sourced in some inner knowledge that she won't be getting up again in a hurry. He'll have to leave her for now, get the others out the way, come back in a bit and see if he can get her to drink something.

He brings the dogs on side, kickstarts the AG, and they move on together as a buzzing pack down the paddock to get on with things. His new fences glint their silver cording very satisfactorily, and the growth is looking better than expected, even on this less-productive side of the hill. Can't spend too long on a single cow that doesn't feel like standing up.

But he's worried. It would really suck if it were something lingering in the liver or spleen that might lead that sick cow to miscarry, just before she's due to go back to her milk-owner. Worse still if she's spreading whatever it is amongst her sisters. Sick mothers make for dead babies. Not a great look for your grazing business, since that's what these teen girls are farmed out to you for: to get nicely fattened and fertile on your pastures, ready for a lifetime of milking. There are always a couple of carryovers each season, of course, who'll slip their calf too early or just don't get up the duff. But it would help if he felt a bit more confident now. Hopefully, it's only the one of his girls off-colour.

Imagine if they all fall crook?

Nick tries to shake off his thoughts with the dry feed. Good food, clean water, fresh air. You can't do much more, that's what Dad would say. It's all there, from the land. There are all kinds of fancy supplements and medical quackery these days, but really, if you just keep them healthy, parasite-free and unstressed, they'll pop out calves and drip milk by the litre without much intervention. Farmers have been doing that already for centuries, haven't they? That's the real art of farming, not the science.

Mice have got into the feed-buckets he left up here, he can see their mess. Bloody oath. Just another grotty thing to have to deal with. Not a big deal. So why is he feeling so damn jittery?

Anna has stopped counting the days, hours, or seconds between breaths, after the door is bolted shut. The muggy sickness arrests her bodyclock. Alone in the bedroom, she is trapped in a disintegrating present. There is no time movement. Digital graphics of fireworks explode without rhythm at the sides of her sight. Her thoughts tangle and cannot be smoothed into any order. In a kind of brain blindness, the edges of her mind turn white and she loses her perception of depth. The sounds she hears now are tinnitus cyber-screams. Her brain is an entanglement of circuitry waste, shorting and melting in unpredictable flashes. There is the salted taste of burnt metal in her mouth.

She braces herself for the fever cramp, which contracts in her mind long immobile moments before her body begins to shudder. Although she has placed them there with exaggerated care, Anna now can't feel the ice packs under her neck or lying on her groin. Instead, there is a black blankness of sensation which weighs like thick polluted smoke over the places where her body should be. Bizarrely, she can feel the individual hot drips of sweat off her

elbows and the clammy cool press of the damp sheet underneath her. She knows her body is somehow the cause of the hothouse thickness which surrounds her, but that body is not talking directly to her mind anymore. The stifling humidity curls tightly like thick wire around the trachea, garrotting her breath.

When the worst has passed, Anna lies as if pummelled flat with a flesh-hammer. She begins to paddle feebly back to a sodden consciousness. She has to force herself to come back into her body. She thinks of birthing Honey, as she always does at these moments, seeking to find herself again within that more powerful femaleness, where fear had charged progress. She had roared like a lioness, as Honey breached, and her lungs and throat had ached for days afterwards with the after-clang of that deep raw echo.

Now she cannot roar; she cannot even whisper. There is no air inside her; it is all thickened mucus. Her heart races in skipping erratic charges through her bloodstream: a crazed PacMan seeking the exit, gulping his fishmouth soundlessly.

When Christian came, three years after Honey, the lioness in her had stretched again, muscles bloodtaut and ripe-ready, coiled. Anna had felt the feline move within her legs and rump, her core rippling with this hidden flowing bodyfire. Her brain had then shrunk to a walnut, hard and woody, protecting her consciousness deep inside as the animal instinct filled her. She had felt the lactic roaring in her limbs, from her marrow out to the underside of her skin.

Now she does not know if she has legs. From the groin down, there is only a nerving electrical pain that sends morse-code surges up her spine. She has torn something there again, from the juddering cramping, and it is searing a jagged hole through her pelvis now, folding her like a stapler in the bed. When

she vomits, she doesn't even know if her stomach has emptied up or down.

Anna had miscarried right after the first time she got sick. Sticky and unwashed, three days after the fever finally broke, she had crawled hunched over to the bathroom in her sweated flannel pyjamas to discover she was bleeding. She peeled the stained pyjamas off, a cicada moulting. Crouched naked on the bathroom floor, the relief spread over her like the cool air on her skin. The pregnancy was not far along, and she had ignored the signs with the stubborn petulance which had characterised her response to the first Emergency and the Catastrophe in general. In those terrifying first weeks of sudden imprisonment, it had seemed impossible to her that her body could be measuring a different timekeeping while the rest of the world confronted its strange new chronology.

Seb had said once or twice, vaguely, that they would welcome a third child, but they had always avoided the risky dates. Almost six years had passed since Christian's birth without her ever being more than a day late. *We have time, Bunny. Plenty of time.* The Emergency had then upended all sense of rhythm or days passing. And Anna's first knife-battle with the disease had cut abruptly the cord connecting her to the bodypatterns of her past.

Now behind the buzzing that squeezed her head, Anna had heard a steady drip like a tap, splotching at the same slow pace as the heartbeat in her ears. Still squatting low, head down with elbows on her knees, her mind tried crustily to orient towards the sound. As she looked down at the deep-red pool spreading obscenely on the bathroom floor, she knew it was the lioness who had died inside her.



FAIRYTALES

ACT III



...and if they haven't died yet, then they are still living now.

– German Traditional
(see Brothers Grimm, *Children's and Household Tales*)

Seb hadn't known how much of war is waiting. Waiting for orders, waiting for food to cook, waiting for the nightwatch to end in hungry sleep. Waiting for news to arrive from somewhere distant, waiting for permission to go wash. It is strange, when the crackling tension is strung so tight that your brain hums incessantly, that there is nothing to do except listen to your own stress singing, and wait.

He supposes soldiering has always been like this. Bursts of explosive violence cushioned by sticky waiting, so that it was almost a relief when it finally came – the nightmare crackling into life for a brief instant of pure psychedelic terror. Better perhaps to be burning on that sudden pyre of your senses, smelling the roast, than to bear still more numbing hours of waiting, waiting.

He's in an old bakery. At least, that's what it might have been, before it was refigured into some kind of casual restaurant, with mismatching chairs and cheap plastic decor. Fake vineplants curling on the walls. Now it's used for sleeping and bottled-water storage. The awkwardly placed sink-tubs behind the walls of water-bottles have been useful for washing clothes. No soap, but his crunchily air-dried t-shirt feels like luxury silk to his skin after weeks of filth. There's been a cramped space to breathe in, to take stock of clothing and the thin body inside it. To cover small wounds, shave, test different ways of moving and putting weight on pain.

Not that you can really prepare yourself for the white metallic heat of the battle-moment. The molten quicksilver that shreds flesh and brain-matter with scalding liquid fire, feeding bright on pain. Scrambling hastily across the

blackened crusts of the once-living, rigid in their unexpected death-poses. You know battle will come, eventually, but in the meantime the dull heat and the dust leach into the waiting, making you soporific like a lizard.

Seb believes that once he had a quick mind. He was a journalist, apparently. He'd made a sparkling career out of writing fluent, taut sense into the small chaos of daily experience. *The Mirror's* star correspondent, Sebastian Millan, with his weekly column and bi-monthly long-piece of political analysis. Now Seb has gotten used to living without narrative, accepting that horror happens erratically, without warning or interpretation. It throws you into a senseless hurricane of confusion, fear and pain, whipped up out of nowhere, and unconnected with any wider arc of meaning. He doesn't even know the real names of his comrades, let alone his enemies.

You cannot write cleanly or succinctly about war, tidy it up into comprehensible sentences. The poets and the songwriters come the closest, and then only when they write the pauses that let agonised silences linger, once the firing stops. Sometimes, they manage to capture the empty screams that have vanished abruptly from the burnt ground, and the tiny snap of torn clothing flapping in the wind. But there is certainly no purpose to Seb's kind of journalism now.

He doesn't write at all anymore, any kind of writing. He's become illiterate. Even if he had some way to put words down, he doesn't see the point of trying to communicate anything to anyone. He understands now why the old military postcards only had tick-box options: *I am well. I am wounded. I am in hospital.* It is beyond his comprehension that someone out there would want to know more. He simply fights, with his sinews lacerating, with furious helpless potency and without conviction. Fights, then waits. Then fights again, each time a breath closer to the end.

Only sometimes he thinks of Anna, but more as a sensation than a full-bodied memory. He feels her coolness wrap wistfully around his heated pain. He thinks of shaped hedgerows and bookpages, quince jelly and her pale fingers typing a simple waver from her cello on a grey-lit day. He can't imagine that she is still out there, in a parallel present, or that he could talk across this distance, even via a tick box. What would you say to the whisper of prickling hedge-leaves or to the soft-spice scent of jam?

They had never written to each other anyway, not even a scrapped note on the kitchen counter or a text message longer than *late meeting – ETA Home 17:30*. Their written words were always for others: clever and artificial. Seb's care for Anna had come from his hands, his slow crafting of a home. After the Emergency, the seams of this had begun to give, to crack and warp and leak. And now that he cannot touch her, Anna has vanished as if the life they had built, slowly carved and sandpapered smooth, had never actually existed. He has nothing to hold, no small artefacts of this past. Nothing to prove materially that he was alive before.

His bakery has landed somehow through the tornado of war onto an enormous midden pile: a scrapheap of architectural terror and disconnected residues of humanity. Latexed fibreglass flecked with caesium, autoclaved concrete and twisted steel. The built world around him has shattered into thousands of displaced pieces, and Seb can only imagine that somewhere underneath it all, perhaps last week or a very long time ago, there was a meaningful landscape. A place where bread was baked every morning, for a new day.

Archaeologists perhaps, with a trained eye, could trace amongst these puzzle pieces a coherent story. He supposes that he is precariously crouched on top of some shifting part of the liminal transcaucasian stretch. The

compacted peat under him is formed from ancient landpieces upon which his forefathers were also banished, resettled and shoved. Seb is perched on a tiny speck of the vast wasteland overcovering the balkan, slavic, kartvelian, moscovic steppes, which themselves slipped and slithered across the Continent like geocultural plates, grinding over each other. Only if you dig down through the stirred remnants on the surface will you uncover this layering. A broken toilet bowl. A helicopter blade. A mammoth's foot, made of glass. Seb's aching body now lies awkwardly amongst the crumbling land-shards which have pierced from the past below.

He knows that his family's stories have traced orientation through such chaotic, violent splinterscapes before. Probably their sense-making came afterwards though, as you only have the luxury of making meaning if you wake up from a nightmare. Long after wordless pain had crushed them into a new reality, the brief spider-script letters of ancient kinsmen still vibrate with displacement, loss and the search for narrative. *My dear one, I hardly know what to write.*

His family had protectively stored these fragile diaries amongst the old laced linens, and over decades wove them into anecdotes connecting their rootstock to the present. For Seb before, this genealogical sensibility only twinged lightly when visiting his mother. He would react impatiently to her old wives' ways, which emplaced him in lineages of men and marriages before him. *That's the way it was then, terrible. It was like that for all of us in those years.* His irritation with her history-mongering left a guilty taste which Seb would try to dismiss by eating international takeout on the way home afterwards. He didn't want to belong to the past, to superstition or obligation, or to old women's stories. He had shared little of this with his children.

Now, lying on one hard hip with his grazed legs stretched out on the

half-tiled, half-plaster floor at the bakery's entrance, he wishes he could share again in a worldview outside his own mind. He looks up at the underside of a cork-lined table and imagines he can hear the light conversations which once filled this room. He does not know which language would have been spoken here, or what food would have been offered, but he can sense there was a time when meeting and eating together in this space was a simple norm. When faces and their expressions were shown without coverings or hesitation. Lemon tea and black coffee would have been served and drunk hot, like the talk. Everyone presuming the ground would not start to shake or the ceiling fall into the colourful soups and salads.

He would have belonged here, he thinks. There would have been bread. And no-one would have found that surprising, or worth fighting for.

The visit to Mum has stirred him up. Nick now remembers why he didn't actually want to go there in the first place. It just makes the usual Saturday clean-up round the house feel weighted with unnecessary meaning. All the old objects and bits of furniture seem to be talking to him, as if the house has suddenly filled with family again, nattering away nineteen-to-the-dozen and you can't get a word in edgewise.

Not helped by the cardboard carton he'd found at the back of the hot water cupboard. Kept bone-dry beneath the mixed linens and rough old towels. The carton is filled with photos, old negatives, square dia-film slides and yellowed paper envelopes. Nick stirs this mixture gingerly and lifts out a cluster of prints from the pile jammed vertically at the side of the box.

They're not from the same roll of film, or even the same camera. The box has been rifled through so many times that Balclutha crowds cheering *The Coronation Tour* lie next to monochrome *A&P Show – Year Before Last* pictures

and someone's *School Pet Day*. There is the occasional studio portrait of an uncomfortable family member wearing unlikely textiles buttoned up tight. Multiple shots of picnicking people leaning against an ancient car with a precariously balanced thermette on the blanket between them.

There are a few carefully cut-out shapes of newspaper, which might help to date the pictures, if only the day printed had been scrawled on them, which it mostly wasn't. Nick flicks through these, unfolding the long legs of the article columns, but he finds only dry texts about farming, about fertilisers and spray actions, hormonal growth promotants and weedkillers, new bio-restrictions and regulations. He weeds through the news articles, trying to find a publication date, but the local politics and the associated outrage are long past.

Nick tries to filter out the prints which make sense to him. School photos, Christmas Day line-ups, new-old cars parked proudly and shining on town streets. Babies held by aunties with 'event' hairdos and maternal eyes. The photo captions are mostly meaningless or confusing. *Nobbin's Symphony* is written on the back of the miniature snapshot of an army tent. *Jillian Margaret & Christopher Nicholas* is scrawled across the back of another in light pencil, when the little wild-curlled toddler clutching the baby must be Meg actually. One of the newspaper clippings is the announcement of a new school class opening, and Nick sees his own grin amongst the laughing group of children in front of the weatherboard Standard One prefab.

There are lots of photos of Jill, and still more of Jill with Meg. Less of him, and hardly any of Dad, who was mostly up the back working when the camera came out. Jillian was the eldest, so Nick can trace in the pictures of her how the family's generic white-blonde look slowly faded over time to the tangled mousey-brown of his own cowlick. Now Jill has dyed her hair midnight black with a heavy fringe, and Meg's hair is an unusually brilliant orange with grey

roots. He finds it hard to imagine that he's related to his sisters these days.

They were the *drill bits* as kids: three in a row in different sizes. The same shock of hair that was the colour of their suntans, with gawky smiles and eyes squinted at the camera. Identical bowl haircuts, and hand-me-down pullovers. One envelope of mixed family photos has accidentally collated a series of different blonde five-year olds wearing the same knitted vest and tiny shorts, helping Dad re-stain the verandah planks each summer.

DRILL-BIT 3-PIECE SET – do not split.

Nick keeps his hair buzzcut-short now, except on top, where the middle-aged remnants of those baby curls matt into a soft, velveteen fuzz.

Honey can't decide what to do with the *Q(u)*. She turns it over in her fingers, rubbing it like a charm. Should she save it for a dashing "equitable" or an impressive "quinine"? Dunk it in "aqua"? Or toss and re-draw, in the hopes of landing something less brazen but more flexible, like a *Y* or a *D* or a *S(h)*?

She and Mama play the Word Game together. Although together does not mean at the same time. They play in sequence, when the other one is not looking. It's not quite Scrabble, not Upwords. It didn't come in a cardboard display box. They use the Mahjong pieces from Grandmother's old ivory set. Back when HomeSchool structured their days, Mama had drawn the 26 alphabet letters, and the 44 phonemes – *ck, zh, igh* – on the bamboo tops with a black marker. The most common sounds are repeated, with their various spellings. The Mahjong bricks are greyed with shadows of the inked corrections that have been necessary to make the Game work: *ei, ee, ie, ey*.

Mama and Honey play against each other, collaboratively. The Game lies out on the hallway desk, waiting for someone to make the next move. The rules

have evolved to fit the thin rectangular shape of the table. The silly thing is, they constantly switch sides, just play whoever's turn it is, whenever they are standing by the board. Honey's puzzling now how she can work herself out of the dead corner they've somehow wedged themselves into.

L-O-N-E

Honey traces her loneliness with her finger, along the letter-squares.

A-lone? Lone-ly?

She's stuck again. She might be a *lonesome loner*, but without the right letters she cannot express this. Perhaps, simply, **L-O-N-G**? Honey piles the letters carefully over each other, straightening the lines with a nudging finger-knuckle.

The Game has gotten more complex, over the years. The interplay of its strategies and riddles has become ever more dense, criss-crossing Honey's expanding lexicon and stretching layered landscapes of vocabulary to the table's chamfered edges. What Mama had crafted as a basic literacy tool for a small child has become essential to the way Anna communicates with her daughter now.

They never talk directly of their adventures together. Honey's finger traces the latest plot trail of their meandering exploration to the edge of language. Their expeditions on the hallway desk go on for weeks and months before reaching an impasse, doubling back to strike out anew – this is their shared domestic history. There is hidden courage and daring, tickling foolery and camaraderie (**c-o-m-r-a-d-e-r-y** !) in these quiet interactions on the board.

The Word Game is Honey's window into Mama's inner, unspoken world. Word by word, the girl has learned much about the woman's mind behind the maternal: how her mother processes, how she constructs solutions, the colourful patterning and the associations which fall together in her

thoughts. Mama sprinkles her garnish of words, liberally and without commentary, scattering clues to her suppressed appetites, her private delights and even her wry humour.

Honey has learned “brisket”, “savour”, “sanguine”, “élan”, the tongue-tip difference between “whisky” and “whiskey”, the mocking elision between “gout” and “goût”. The board is peppered with “umami”, “papaya”, “sauté” and “satay”. The flavours of her mother’s mind sparkle on the palate. Honey’s gastronomic education has been a literary one, but she has eaten well at the Word Game table.

Anna dances with vigour and style across the wordboard with “retrograde”, “inversion”, “avant-garde” and “understudy”. She unrolls both “monologue” and “proscenium”, theatrically. Honey imagines her mother taking a comic bow with a flourishing hand, her eyes sparkling. “Baroque”, “brusque” and “cadenza” skip lightly, the eye leading the ear into operatic invocations of “auditoria”. Hushed voices murmuring, and their “crescendos” of applause. Honey can feel the blooming space, filled with humming people, music and crackling anticipation, around her mother’s typeset words.

Anna’s thoughts craft small stepping-stones of philosophy and ethics for her daughter. She throws down “deontological”, “fidelity”, “altruistic” and “consequentialist”. She places the “?” and “!” strategically, nudging Honey to form her own opinion. Mama’s heavily tabbed student *Dictionary of Legal Scholarship* lies open next to the board, as both judge and witness.

Honey’s own wordplays are still adolescent, from smaller stores of creativity and experience. Through her mother, the girl has read much wider than she has ever felt on her own skin. Honey’s word-poetry is often uncertain, and limps across the alphabet steps with dragging feet. Drifting her thoughts *along* the small stacks of ivory squares, Honey suddenly strikes the unexpected

longing to move the Game forward in a new way.

The boney edges of the letter-cubes have split like roughened nicotine fingernails, but they still stack neatly. Honey lines them into a small construction at the edge of the desk. It looks like she is building a yellowed city of blocks, honey-glazed. She looks down into the tiny streets. Empty, except for her bold-printed words, which signpost disconnected shreds of meaning like advertising billboards. She is the architect of this new world.

C-L-O-N-E, she spells. **A-L-O-N-E**.

She is rowing the Amazonas. Smudging light plays across her hands, speckling green-gold-black, as she pulls the oars towards her rib-line in a clean, strong tug. The slight gummy resistance of the current is organic and swirling. Anna breathes. Her stroke is even and practised, skimming her wetly along the surface. Moist greenery skiffs across her cheek as she comes into the shallows. Light tickles the nape of her neck, tracking the sweat line. *One-and-two-Mississippi, three-and-four-Mississippi*. Her back stretches and pulls.

The glasshouse shakes slightly as she adjusts her seating. Anna lengthens her limbs out like a grasshopper and tilts herself to centre better. The first fifteen minutes are always a clammy wrestle between her body and the machine; afterwards she finds her flow. She looks quizzically at the stats. Her heart rate and her speed-strain quiver and hum on the screen.

Anna had mocked Seb, a little, when he'd bought the rowing machine. Its simple mechanics – the chain, the pull-back, the whirr – seemed to her a crude masculine stretch within her curation of their home. It edged against her designs of domesticity: neither elegant nor functional. Horrendously expensive and couldn't you just go outside in the real world for a run? There was nowhere to put it where you didn't trip over it. Plus that annoying noise that woke the

children in the late evening, pressing a monotonous churn-chugging into their dreams. Covering the rowing machine only made it lurk threateningly against the wall, daring you to turn it on, with a soft digital trill as it loaded up its bright screen. The green glow of a night animal's stare.

Seb was determined, however. The stubborn line of his shiny-shaven jaw was not to be argued with. This was his need, and he held to it.

His wife has read through his rowing records on the machine now so many times. Analysing them. Mapping those little earthquake tremor-lines to what she can remember of their life before the Emergency. His row-strokes, ordered by date and time, record the inner workings of that once-so-familiar body. Anna reviews the timeline of data sheets and the calendar of his sessions obsessively as if she could influence them now. Sometimes she wonders if she ever listened to him and his body at the time.

The first year or so after he bought the machine, his efforts were cautious but regular. Christian had just started school, she thinks? In any case, their life was mundane but overfilled. She can see Seb practising himself into a small routine, just half an hour, or three-quarters, in the mornings before work. Anna has mindflashes of two cooling coffees on the breakfast table and their hurried exchanges before their showers. The time before.

After the Emergency, there is a rupturing in his rowing records. Long empty spaces and jagged moments of intense and pained overstrain. The rowing data sheets saved in miniature on the screen show how Seb battled his body, as the world came adrift. His peaks and failures ebb like moontides across the black months which became the Catastrophe.

She feels the shadows of her own pain traced in his sudden over-efforts. Her first illness, and the baby that wasn't, marked by unlikely hours of rowing, rowing, rowing. Anna senses Seb circling and struggling to get back to the

rhythms of their time before, and she can trace the tiredness, the arm-shaking fear and the angry courage of his attempts. It is a delayed intimacy that she had missed in his body when it slept next to her.

Seb's rowing records shift from the mornings to the late evenings. She remembers how he had left their bed, often after midnight, to let her rest. *Hush, Bunny. Try to sleep.* She had heard the whizz and burr of the machine sometimes, as she had heard the toilet flush or the water run. Now Anna sees how he had rowed through those long nights. She feels how he tried to row himself out of their prison. Through Amazonia, down the Great Missouri, the Yangtze River. It is a diary of his midnight infidelity to her, and his ever-growing distance from the kids. It is a logbook of his faithfulness to himself, amongst the chaos. By the time his records stop, abruptly, she can see he was already long gone.

She wonders where she was herself, at some of the strangest blips of his effort and intensity – probably in the kitchen, no more than a few metres away. He must have been bathed in sweat, heart pumping and muscles roaring. She feels closer to him now than she did then. She knows how his fibrous back had rippled as he drew the backstroke. Her own muscles have taken up his story.

Some time after Seb disappeared to the Front, Anna moved the rowing machine into the greenhouse and began her own river journey. She follows the routes on the screen into the mangroves of her memory. She adds herself again to his timeline. Each stretch and pull lifts her out of herself and closer to Seb again.

She leans back into his lap. His chest is warm and solid behind her, pressing along her tired spine. Anna's breath slowly synchronises with his. She feels his wiry muscled arms wrap around her, close over her hands. Helping her pull.

Honey walks differently as Jack. Her stride is longer, and she doesn't hold her limbs in quite so tightly. Her arms swing from broadened shoulders. The shapeshifter studies herself in the tarnished hallway mirror, after the oak door to the apartment has swung heavily behind her. The cocky shape looking back at her with sharp eyes is not quite her own reflection. Honey lifts her mask to smile a welcome at this boy-player and then reddens at the confident look he gives her.

As a boy, Honey is both younger and older than herself. Jack may walk the streets with the freedom of a child, speaking in her mother's Voice to claim the privileges of the adult world. The boy speaks lower than Honey does, and with fewer hesitations. Jack has no history and so has learned nothing from the past. He turns back Honey's inner clock, arresting and reversing the soft spreading of her womanhood. This impudent child-boy with his cheeky wink stops her turning into her mother.

Honey-as-Jack is a chimera; she feels this in her marrow. She is a cat with two-coloured eyes, her DNA hopping from one part of her genome to reattach at another. A mosaic of consanguineal foetal cells, first baked into loose and provisional form in her mother's womb. Honey has become hybrid, a fused mingling of cell lines and intersex possibilities, through becoming her own brother.

The bi-weekly Announcements sometimes reference theories like these, as justification for new regulation. Honey smiles at that thought. *"Perhaps this acquired hermaphroditism in fact enhances the immunological tolerance of her still child-like body?"* How else to explain her rude good health alongside her mother's fading? In any case, Honey feels bulletproof in Jack's clothes. Their steady footsteps echo down the wooden staircase as she walks toward the main entrance of their building and out onto the dimly lit street.

There are flickers of life moving in startled scuttles, in this dampened world. Children move along the sodden underfoot, passing each other without speaking, but with a shadowed purpose in their steps. Here, on the outside, they hold rights and responsibilities packaged tidily in the document bags they carry. Their eyes flash a kind of recognition above their masks. Honey imagines herself as part of a shoal of shining rainbow fish, flexing and sliding across each other in shimmering curtains which reflect in the darkness.

Honey feels submerged underwater, as she moves Jack along the obscure paths she has made for herself. She weaves his way gently between the possible routes she can take to reach the former subway entrance that leads down to the local collection hall. She seldom crosses vehicles on the road, and she ducks away from those she sees. Trucks, vans and especially cars can really only mean death, danger or deportation, if you are not Essential.

Most days, Jack collects various small requirements and delivers several necessary papers for their small household. The Instructions from her mother are laced carefully into the black concertina file in her rucksack: each document laid out on a separate dividing sheet so they can be quickly assessed. Honey doesn't bother to read them unless the Verifiers ask questions, which they usually don't. There is nothing very controversial about their simple household needs, it's all according to the Guidelines. The shoulder straps of the backpack are adjusted to sit precisely, the zip pulled to the left. Honey has identified the optimal tension for herself and no longer considers alternative ways of wearing the bag.

She turns herself, as Jack, towards the next bend in the road. This swimming sensation reminds her how she is actually being carried along by the slipstream of her mother's will. Her mother's presence is like a blue whale rising beneath her, a shadowed mass under the surface, creating a watery uplift

that raises her baby above the waterline to breathe. The giant dolphin and its nursing calf were evolved for a different kind of world than these dark cold oceans. Their warm blood circulates under acquired blubber, and warmer milk sprays in lacy clouds into the salt water, when the calf releases its suckling hold. Now Honey and her mother also swim together through the city's streets, invisibly bonded by the silent echo between them.

There is another, smaller file of papers, which hides behind the main one in the rucksack. This one Honey will leave behind a door, at a different house, according to her mother's scribbled request on the hallway notepad, and without any official authentication. Anna will not ask her whether her delivery is successful, and she will not ask her mother the purpose of this Errand, either. She is only the courier for this task, and not the Voice. It is her mother's Project.

Jack whistles quietly to himself under his mask, a dolphin's song.



The ancient Slavs called their swaddled infants the Unvoiced. The ones who do not speak. The old and cultured Poles named their Teutonic neighbours ‘the babblers’, those who speak like fools. We are born Barbarian, and our words, our songs, are what lift us from the soil. We scream our first word through the cervical kiss of thickened fluid and our mother’s blood. *In the beginning, was the Word.* في البدء كان الكلمة. The umbilical cord twists and turns white, as the first sounds press through our blocked ears to pump through our blue and transparent veins.

Our mothers sing us into life, on the homing calls their grandmothers’ mothers’ bodies knew: *ko te roimata e heke ki runga i a Papatūānuku – Aue – Aue – Aue.* We are birthed into song, nursed hungrily on whispered lullabies. Haltingly, we grow but-slowly into our own voices. Our childish languages crackle and break, stumble on tone and slide deeper into our adult selves. We forget how to think without speech.

And when then our words fail us, suddenly, with no-one there to listen? When no-one is there to sing us home again, on an orca’s pulsing call? Our thoughts stutter. Our breath flattens and stonepresses the heartbeat. In silent and slow-squeezing agony, we are unvoiced once more.



The Country Club has Italian Night on Thursdays. You can get sliced pizza with all the toppings, and *pasta alla Mista*, which is real good value. Best cappuccino around, and not just on Thursdays either. People like their coffees milky here.

Nick's not really a fan of Italian Night, but he prefers it to Country & Swing, or Quiz Night, for sure. Still, he's mainly here because he wants to talk to Simon about the heifers without word getting out. If Nick turned up at the vet surgery, or, worse, called in Simon to take a look, the news would be all through the neighbours by the end of the afternoon. Nothing like a loose rumour to put your grazing contracts at risk. Better just to have a quiet word at the Club, and then follow-up later in the season when Simon comes around anyway. Rolling up in his branded green truck, in short sleeves to do the pregnancy scanning before the girls go back to their milk-owners to calve.

The Country Club is a good place to make a conversation look like an accident: just a couple of old business mates chatting. Everyone who is anyone around here turns up now and again, for a feed and a bit of a natter. Still, Nick's finding it hard to figure out how to place his particular questions lightly, what with the whole community watching over their pizza slices. If Nick were more of a young one, low on experience and confidence, who called in the vet on a dime and the smell of an oily rag, then maybe. Then he could have just asked Simon round to the house for a quick chat and be done with it.

But the Stewarts are an old farming family, who've been more than a few times round the farmblock. They've run four cattle mobs, mostly, getting the new weaners in just before Christmas and feeding them up over two winters till the girls are ready to go back to calve and milk. Contract grazing. Seven- or eight-hundred head of cattle, cycling through. That's a fair number, over time, growing off Stewart land. It's a lot of dollars per kilo of liveweight gain. So

Nick's family has seen most things crop up once or twice, and mostly they handle it themselves. No need for too many doctors; that's the way life goes. Everyone knows if Simon's green truck unexpectedly rolls up the oiled road to the Stewarts' place in a dust cloud, then it must be serious.

All the grazers go through Simon, anyway, so the vet's is quite the gossip-hive. You do have to be careful what you bring him in for. Dad was always a bit nervy about vets poking their noses in unnecessarily. Before you know it, they'll be declaring a bio-hazard – TB, M-Bovis, Johne's – and then half your cattle is written off your books and not even to the freezing works.

It's doubly tricky since Nick really wants to ask Simon about the farming implications of the medley of vaccinations trialled now overseas against the Catastrophe. Hard to just casually drop that kind of not-very-local query. The nation's borders have stayed shut for a reason, after all, and it's best to keep even your questions close to home. But Nick wants to get it straight in his head, the bioscience of it. There are so many new vaccines, illicit black-market copies, biomagnification, molecular mirroring and ribonucleic modification. There have been inoculation mandates and all sorts of haphazard deployment programmes rolled out globally, apparently against the science. Could one strand of that madcap biological variety injected into millions of human and animal cells, ostensibly to produce immune triggers and prevent social dysfunction, somehow be the cause of crippling disease? Something very new and mismanaged has got to be at the heart of it, surely.

It's hard enough to talk vaccines these days without flaring tempers. Lots of people have worked up cranky ideas about vax shots, since the borders closed. All that sensible policy-talk of 95% immunisation rates for the Team of Five Million, while the world burned? Got drowned out in the end by fussy teacher ladies, who were allergic to needles and being told what to do. And

since the borders stayed shut anyway, those fusspots never really had to face any of the crap which brought the rest of the planet to its knees.

The anti-vaxers really rub Nick up the wrong way. Blokes like him prefer to say it like it is. And it defies common sense, as a farmer, that you'd expose your productive units to all the wildest forms of bloody evil pathogens. Or indeed yourself! Just to avoid injecting simple solutions that are mostly as old as the hills. Anyone with a herd knows what herd immunity is.

Nick watches the crowd around him masticating, the soft bubbling of conversation and glasses chinking. It's a sophisticated veneer: the glow-white walls of the club and the burgundy plush chairs, which get rearranged for church functions and the Anzac service as well. Nick feels poised and on edge, held gently in his space by the deep social roots spreading underneath the rolling chatter like a fungus.

The pizza last night didn't sit good. He's got the runs and so have two more of his girls. Their sweated sides heave with pain as Nick tries to move them away from the others.

It doesn't make sense to him. They've always kept the different stockowners' herds so strictly separated, even on the one property – how can this be spreading? Nick glances across the rough-chopped hillside, where a carved ditch of dirt road divides the Robinson's lot from the front paddock. How did it jump the gap? Sabotage? Maybe. It feels so deliberate.

There is something purposeful to this seeding of mangled bloody excrement splattered through the grass. Someone who knows what they're doing, while making it look accidental. Like when the fire warnings go out in the area, and everyone local pretends that foreign picnickers must be the source of the burn-offs gone wild. Who though? Who is lighting these bushfires under

his animals, inside their guts? The hot forewind of fear burns Nick's wind-scuffed cheeks.

He has seen all types of disease in his heifers before. Usually only production-limiting, but occasionally fatal. There's airborne anthrax and its ugly bleeding-out. Or sometimes it's ergot poisoning – consuming hooves and forelegs in a slow agonising rot. One or two of the pre-breeders sicken with something hefty each season. You just deal with it. Look it up, talk it over maybe, and then make a quick call what to do. Refugia, parasite resistance, secondary infections, it's all been seen before. Nick has read up heaps on animal contagion. The farm histories, the mistaken diagnoses, the little catastrophes that sweep through people's bog-standard lives, sharpening the research and subsequent farming practice. The old articles in *NZ Vet Quarterly* are dry and calmly precise: "Seasonal outcomes must account for the potential loss of 37% productive units over the four highest-yield months". Nick's attention to these topics has been curious but never particularly churned.

But this is different. So many sick at once. And so violently that it's leaking out of them. Even the dogs are keeping wide of the scummy pools of shit in the grass. The cheese-filled drooling of his livestock drips a helpless fury in Nick's own intestines. Nauseous, he feels like stumbling himself when their legs give way.

This is no coincidence of luck. It can't be accidental. Something evil is grimly pursuing his girls, griping their guts, and it isn't the pizza fungi. Simon was no bloody help; he'd just got stuck listing all the run-of-the-mill possibilities that didn't add up to anything sensible. Nick can't see rhyme nor reason to this outbreak amongst his cattle mobs. It's even spreading between the herds now. But they're grazed outside, for hell's sake – none of the usual risks faced by housed animals in the old Northern Hemisphere.

The front paddock looks as it always has done. A slight angling towards the house; grass that grows better in the top half. Nothing's changed to explain his cows' terrified bloodied eyes. The farm's terrain and its saturation have predictable fluctuations between the dry season and the wet, especially since Dad redirected the groundwater a bit to keep it away from the farmhouse. Nick can usually smell if something's off or altered. He grew up on this land, from this soil.

This new disease in Nick's herds is cruelly inorganic, somehow. It's spreading, leaching, in asymmetric and erratic patterns that transcend the usual simple pathways of direct infection. The crossbreeds are normally strappingly healthy and not so prone to catching whatever's spreading. But this now is bubbling up irregularly all over the bloody place, everywhere he looks. Grasping and surprising, it's squeezing through his heifers' orifices, spilling poisonous muckfluids as if the poor things are being turned inside-out. A black death, indeed. But why?

One thing is certain. Nick feels it viscerally, under the rock of disgust and jellied terror that sits low in his belly, as he shifts another fallen body away from her sisters. Some part of the once-distant Catastrophe has at last reached the South, and his family's farm.

The wastewater permeates the Catastrophe for Anna. The smell of the city has eaten its way deep into every house wall, sunken into the brick, leached through the mortar and the stucco. Its constant odoriferous presence lies thickly across her days. It lines her heavy memories, her weighted dreams and even her breathing. It has squeezed out all other smells, so she can no longer even conjure up other scents she knew once existed: of cooling gingerbread, just-opening roses, sharp curry, caramelised sugar, ripe mango,

new soap, sliced grass-cuttings, the heavy swell of ocean, or the ozone-filled petrichor as the sun comes out after freshening storm rains. The blackouts do little against the stink of the wastewater. Its stench curls through every crack. Concrete and curtains do block sound, but they both absorb smell.

The thickened fetor smells to Anna like every damn thing which stopped working since the first Emergency. Each desperate response to the collapsing climate has released a belching breath of rancid corruption and disease. The odorous honeycomb under the city has infused its rotten sweetness into human consciousness of how to survive.

In the very first days of what became the Catastrophe, the wastewater with its swelling jellied backwash formed a liquid bridge between their family's high nest and the calamitous meltdown outdoors, bringing the monstrous stink in. The toilets flooding onto the bathroom tiles, the bath burping an evil mud. The washing machine back-filling with a calcifying silt. With the flood surges, the streets had become a boiling river, gushing down the steps of the subway, and bubbling back out of cellars and lowered gratings. The wastewater caverns, blocked with their fatbergs, fed back their rot into the underfoot, from underneath, percolating the bog with the decaying waste of the sick and the dying.

Her husband had spent long hours designing clumsy domestic workarounds, reconnecting their drainage pipes so that these emptied down the outside walls in thick oozy trails to the street. Anna and Seb, like everyone else, figured out mechanisms to make do, how to push down and live next to their own sewage. These days, Anna sluices Seb's makeshift plumbing every second day, but doesn't further adjust the waste streams. The nineteenth-century canals, which had pumped social hygiene into the slums, now glue together the remains of a modern population with their own excrement. Over

time, the wastewater has impregnated life throughout the city. It has steeped into every tiny movement, carried into every corner on the shoes of the humans who scurry through the saturated streets.

It is the smell of survival, of life that has overcome and now lives off death. This is no stonefrozen Pompeii. The empire's creatures are still moving, creeping, trying to breathe under the ashes' sludge. Their shit is the stubborn stink of the living amongst the rot.

It's becoming an obsession: he can feel the inner itch of his compulsively washed thoughts. Nick is scraping the internet repeatedly for descriptions of catastrophic illness and its recent Spread. He scratches the pockmarks of modern plagues and ancient epidemics, pondering their transmission. Clicking through the news articles, cross-referencing each other, ever-deeper and older, searching for unbroken links, trying to find the moment when the logic completes its circle and he comes back to the beginning again.

There are so many gaps. There is no collated history. Each search throws up new answers, even when the search wording is the same. You can never click in the same direction twice – you slip through another portal and can't find your way back.

>> vaccination >> immunological distribution >> wholesale common problems with >> difficulties vaccines >> damage in children >> vaccine roll-out >> biomedical disposal >> corruption in animals >> corruption political >> corruption pharmaceutical >> antigens >> dosage concerns

All the information from overseas seems to have ragged edges and doesn't fit together the way Nick is used to. New Zealand style, he has low tolerance for

bollocks and complexity without purpose. He wants that sweet resolution, when everything answers everything else, and he can call it Truth. Tidied up, like the six o'clock news, into a five-minute soundbite read by a calm authority with a Kiwi voice.

Just one more online article, another expert, a pertinent self-soothing quote, and then he can sleep. Nick wants to grasp the Catastrophe and squeeze out its conclusions. It's a kind of mental masturbation, jacking off his internal agitation, the rush the crash the search, building again. Somewhere here in this online bog of experience, humiliation and lessons-learned, over and over, he knows he'll find his answer.

There are so many statistics – most of them incoherent or contradictory. Numbers dead is only the beginning. The R-rate, the speed of incubation, the soft pulses which show where the early vaccines writhed and left their mark. There is much outrage, such ugly traitorism, exploitation, politics. *Certainly, everyone must play their part. Be Steadfast, and Kind.* Nick flicks through a multitude of shrill e-opinions by the shame-mongers and the shamed, with dozens of responses that fade away from the original indignation.

He is searching for definitions and reliable facts but is unsure when he finds them. Words vibrate, and drift from their meanings. *Protection. Secured area. Transmission Lines and Breaks. Contagion. Track-Tracing, Stockpiling. Quarantaffiking. Recovered.* The bacterium lies thick and crusted over the curious vocabulary which describes it.

Under it all, Nick tastes the deaths. It's like those mist-filled morning checks during calving, when he can sense from twenty paces that something has died in the night. The animals around emit a scent of fear which is stronger than any smell from the dead beast. You know where death has walked among the living.

Nick hunts desperately for the *why* amongst the *when* and *who* and *which* and *how many*. Somewhere in this online quag of human misery in digital form, there must be a reasoning which will explain his cows' lowing despair. If he mouse-clicks deep enough, long enough, and frames the precisely correct search enquiry which excludes all chaff. His neck twinges. Nick wants a simple pill, a one-shot vaccine, an easy solution to his inner turbulence. A hygienic and clinical response to the bloodied shit and fearful desperate eyes in front of him. *Who the fuck is in charge here?*

Nick wakes in the early dawn still clicking through his thoughts, shattered and migrainous as if he mixed his drinks and fell asleep without downing a large glass of water afterwards.

Like a gremlin, Nick's agitation follows him everywhere – in the shower, the shed, out the back shifting the feed bales. The only place he finds a short ejaculatory release from his racing long-nailed thoughts is down by the dam.

He has always felt most a man simply when standing on its banks. The rest of the farm is fecundly female, and he must coax organic lifegrowth and milk potential from his herds. These rhythms are seasonal and circular, a longwave of fertile ripening and gestation. At the dam, he can relax into a more masculine consciousness. His sightlines reach further; he stands straighter and breathes more evenly. One day at a time. Sufficient unto himself. He'd never really come down here with anyone else, but he often felt Dad's presence when he did.

The wind scuttering over the pondwater sings now to Nick of his dad and his left-hand-strung guitar. The way Dad would play with the bridge and the hook, the sounds repeating and blurring as he finger-tested different chords. Dad's musicology was an eclectic mishmash, from the radio mainly. *Poi E*, Straitjacket Fits and The Chills. Dad would sit out on the verandah, his half-

hummed lyrics twisting the modern folksongs with the shadows of older microtonal laments. *Waiata tangi*, American blues and *ceòl gàidhealach*. Wide sonoral expanses of sadness and separation. Dad had filled his son's head with those pitch-shifts, with discerning transpositions and vocal texture. Even now, the songs in Nick's head are sung by his father's voice.

Dad always said he was *going to talk to Molly*, when he'd headed out to the duckpond. The mutt was buried with her dead litter somewhere under the earthbanks. It was Dad's kind of confessional, to spend some time with the old girl. You always find nature grows best on the blood-and-bone of her children. You can really sense that here. In the same way, the best stonefruit on the property drew its sugary plumpness from the shallow grave of those triplet unweaned calves, which they couldn't – for love nor money – get to hold onto life above ground.

And so, Nick imagines that Dad felt Molly's rough nape under his hands again, as he sat on the prickly dry grass by the water. The past beats a heartbeat into the soil. Nick feels his father's hands on his shoulder, correcting his fly line, as he looks out over the insect-laden waterspan, watching for the fish to jump.

They don't usually video-chat. Writing is quicker. The professor's speedily typed texts become lengthy paragraphs. His long lines of pushy words must keep their elbows in to squeeze their meaning into the narrow columns of the chatline. This man of science thinks in chapters, sequences, he cross-references earlier statements. He prefers to write things down.

Even when he is in front of a camera, he gestures as if addressing a full lecture hall. Although they are alone, his eyes flick past Anna, thoughtfully, and then snap back to his screen-texts and the handwritten notes in front of him. Anna watches him type, and his shoulders hunch in as he taps out each

word with two fingers. The professor forgets to look at her while he is typing, even when his text is addressed only to her and she is watching.

He's from the South, small and muscular, wide-chested but tightly contained. He makes Anna think of Popeye, except for the shock of black hair which holds its shape in alarm when he runs his hands through it. He ruffles up his hair absentmindedly, when they are debating back and forth and he is analysing the possibilities of vaccine distribution – or afterwards, when he steps back to admire her naked shape, just before she hangs up.

“Beaut-i-ful. Beaut-i-ful”, he says, almost reverently. She's heard him say it too, when the formula works out, when the numbers click into place, and the conclusions are confirmed. *Beaut-i-ful, do you see?*

Their conversations are formal, business-like, despite the nakedness on both sides. Their intimacy is mostly intellectual. Anna stretches within her old intelligences, speaks precisely and with determination. He knows the science, which she re-positions within her confident legal framings of procedure and justification. She must make him feel he is in the right.

The small pallets of vaccines, which they are liberating now in quiet pulses to the unauthorised, flow like warm fluids of connection between them. They are smugglers, thieves and Merry Men. Together, they write their own judgments and grant a secret immunity to the ineligible.

His ragged-raw outrage at manipulation and politics surprised her in their earliest encounters. Anna was used to people being persuasive and persuadable.

“That's verifiably false”, he says simply. “No question.”

His indignance is incorruptible but limited tightly by his perspective, which is no wider than his shoulderline across the computer screen. Spreadsheets are his Bible, which he quotes from freely, without bothering to

open the relevant tabs.

“Look at the figures here – it’s plainly obvious,” he states. “The facts speak for themselves.”

Anna has learned his logics, as she has learned his body, and she now knows how to weave his loyalties to the climax she seeks from him. With a few choice words, she can make him leak his vaccines wherever she desires.

Anna knows his story too, how he has been part of the research behind the vaccines since the very beginning. Science and politics had quickstepped carefully with each other then. When the professor recited his early facts to a desperate public, no-one had asked which part was his opinion. She knows how his anger has since thickened, how it has been deep-poached on a low flame under that mop of hair. Others have dirtied his beautiful clear results and the luminous conclusions that he worked to coax into the open. Others have stolen the work of his years of nights in underground laboratories. These were his conclusions, his property and his bequest, and the misuse of the science since is a theft to him.

“The bastards. All of them.”

She knows the Essentials lost his fealty long ago. The professor is a Truth-Warrior, with disdain for the filthy politics of infection control.

His allegiance to Anna is precarious and held together by the understanding that they both belong to the Vaccine Project, each playing their part, without enquiring too deeply into the worlds of the other. They both make far-reaching demands, which the flimsiness of their personal connection does not support. Their sex is simply their way of communicating the *must* and *have to* and *urgency* of their private mission. Immunity is their kink, the secret drive which pushes them to connect bodily with so many others in hiding, who are otherwise unknown to them.

The professor is filtering out *shipments*, which are actually only small boxes, and his spreadsheets resolve the gaps. He smooths the lack of critical materials by mathematical tricks which make rounding errors at the sixth decimal place of exponential numbers, so that a secret mass of vaccine-ready impedimenta can disappear onto the streets.

What happens next, he does not know. His expertise does not reach so far, and Anna must assure him, with her winsome lawyer-words and her submissive body, that his wishes for his vaccines are being fulfilled by her. Anna tricks him with the comfort of their relationship that she is loyal to him in the old way. He trusts her, in the new way. She must trust him too, because if he were to turn, their tentatively mutual cause would fail.

Their debates belong to an underworld of righteousness, but there are no courts or advocates to rely on for judgement.

“Anyone with any sense can see that I’m right,” he claims.

Yet everyone’s ethics in this new world are slippery and contingent, and the rogue scientist knows this as well as Anna. The vials of black-market vaccine sliding somewhere into strangers’ arms are the only real evidence of their connection. The cell-structure of these secret conversations, linking them all one to the other, is viscous and loose-bound, amorphous.

The professor and Anna are simply connectors, transistors, and together they push their cause as far as they can, until another takes it on and shifts the vaccines further. Anna does not know if these reach the Front, or some other groups who are pinned in place by illness and despair. She only knows that they are not available anymore to the Essentials and their systems, and this is enough for her.



THE KNOWLEDGE

ACT IV



Knowledge comes, but wisdom lingers.

– Alfred, Lord Tennyson

The biologist has a steady hand and an even steadier voice. A winning smile into the camera and an authoritative resonance to the academic soundbites. This is how scientific knowledge is disseminated these days, now that it's been untethered from formal associations and institutions. Tenure has transformed into YouTube LiveTalks, to thousands of followers. Most of them are freeviewers, like Nick, but some of them clearly pay for the right to comment.

The doctor (*DSc. phil. nat.*) is waving loosely at charts to the side, explaining the bioscience in simplified bullets. These roll down the right-hand side of the screen, while the bottom banner is a flickering comments ticker. The empty auditorium, in fact, is full. Online, the live followers are acknowledged clocking in and out, through endless tics of greeting:

“...hey there Lucia, Michaela, Jens, glad you could join us... and Richard! Now the factors that impede efforts to establish causal relationships in cases of vaccine-related injury depend on, firstly, the distinction between temporal association and wider epidemiological responses... Susanne! Christie, and Rogan, yes – is that Jacqueline from the Northern Heights? ...Welcome and hello to you down there today...”

The biologist is rather like a smooth-talking ringmaster in an intellectual circus. Nick has clicked through the most popular of the vlogs and TikTalks which have popped up to his queries, and Dr. Veena *what's-his-face* with the fifteen-lettered surname is repeatedly suggested. Impeccable crisp shirt, Bengal Stripe, and the curve of bust underneath. Fingernails manicured in a chic but discrete aqua. Only the cocked top-hat is missing to pull off the whole show.

Nick really doesn't get why other blokes get so riled up about hermaphrodites. Everyone knows that pops out now and again, in a wet pile during the calving. Happens often enough that you're not that fussed, and it just means you send them off as beef with the rest of the boys. Nick doesn't feel much female himself, of course, but he knows what it would look like, if his genes were shaken out into a blouse. There's Meg, and Mum, Jill and Lyla and all the aunts, to show you the lady-version of a Stewart. And besides, Nick's not the teensiest bit interested in what's under the Bengal Stripe. He's here to be educated from the cutting-edge of the Catastrophe, and Dr. Veena is his e-gateway in.

But it's the comments ticker which has grabbed Nick's attention, because it moves like a conveyer belt, each comment deleting before the full sentence shows. It's like watching the fruit gums in an old-style slot machine, bright and whirring sugar-rushes that won't let you look away. Most of these short text messages relate to the ongoing lecture-talk above, but the longer Nick watches, the more often he notices a slight subtext of conversation going on between two or three answering voices, hiding amongst the chatter.

He tries to figure out if Dr. Veena notices this, too. This becomes a project of several evenings, when Nick should actually have been cross-checking the farm accounts. Nick becomes a kind of DJ-mixer of the bioscientist's performances. He even works out how to make his computer slow the play-speed by a half, so he can pinpoint if Dr. Veena's face reacts to anything going on in the comments. There's definitely some interaction down there that is not attached to the main flow of discussion and debate. Sequences, or maybe dates?

Nick decides to map if Dr. Veena knows the names of those cryptic mini-commentators. It takes him several patient hours, with only a couple of loo breaks, but eventually he catches the biologist acknowledging one of the

comment-speakers. It's an unusually personal address, even for the friendly flamboyance which characterises the LiveTalk tone. Dr. Veena stops mid-sentence to slip in a gently familiar, "Hi there, hun."

It's not a name, but it is a connection. The texter is a woman, evidently, or woman-like. Nick decides to register for the payview version, despite the niggle about sending payment details outside New Zealand. His hand trembles a little at this audacity as he punches in his card numbers. Digger stretches his pawclaws against the old cushions and watches Nick's discomfort from the couch. Once his account is verified with a green tick, Nick reaches out the next time 'Hun' begins to type. He writes:

Tell me when, and why.

It was just like fishing. He feels her pause for a millisecond, then cautiously tug on the line.

Wednesday. That's why.

Oh? Are you sure?

I am. Are you?

Another voice steps in.

I can't do Wed.

Hun sends a thumbs up, and the chatter patters on. Nick stays hunched towards the screen, eyes scanning the rolling texts, but nothing further comes from either Hun or the other voice.

A good ten minutes of Dr. Veena's explanations tick by, uneventfully. Nick senses the ripples of something larger under the surface though, and so he waits, with his flyline at the ready. He knows not to rush when the fish start to nibble. His arms flex and relax, slowly, stretching behind his head. Digger is watching Nick's calm readiness from the couch. Quizzically, the brown-and-

white head peers over the crocheted squab, head in his paws with attentive ears up. The dog's breath has slowed too.

Above the comments ticker, Dr. Veena's vibrant monologue begins in looping circles of argument to come to a catchy and convincing endpoint.

"So, to conclude, better distribution of resistance through the tested population significantly hindered this microbial flourishing, which itself promotes mutational variation."

Turning off the overlain info-slides, the biologist begins the slow sign-off from their followers: "See you next week... catch you next time... keep safe."

"Hope you found it useful?" The biologist's open question is unexpected, thrown lightly into the ether. Nick feels compelled to answer this sudden enquiry, as if he has been personally addressed.

Yes. Hope others did too?

He can see Hun's chatline open again, type, pause, and then not respond.

Can we talk?

He feels bold, but what does he have to lose? They've got his credit card details now anyway.

Can we keep talking? After this?

Another pause.

Ok. PM me.

Ok, here?

He places the cursor carefully over the tiny profile circle, and right-clicks.

Hi

Not here.

She clicks back on his ID-dot, and opens another messaging screen.

Who is this? What did you want to say?

I have some questions.

For me? What about? Why?

I don't really know where to start.

Nick realises that he is not as anonymous as he'd imagined. His tiny profile dot is that old photo of the characteristic dip-cleft of the hill above the farm. A geological wound in the grass. Bracken-covered and unproductive, except as a landmark. Nick feels suddenly exposed up there, with the chill wind whipping around the nape of his neck. There is no point hiding on a hilltop.

My name is Stewart.

I have a farm here down South.

New Zealand.

My cows are sick.

Sounds ridiculous. What the hell is he doing? Everyone knows you're not supposed to give out personal information online. The internet's full of crooks and he's just revealed to some e-stranger the key to his exact location, a half hour after typing in his card details. He feels like a mug.

Idyllic. Far away.

And you think I can help?

I'm trying to understand

what's going on where you are -

That's all.

I don't think any of us here know.

But you are trying to do something

about it?

There is a long pause.

I'm not trying to trap you.

I just want to talk.

**We don't have much to do with
that whole Catastrophe business
down here.**

That's what we thought too.

Tell me? I'm interested.

Tell you what?

Who are you anyway?

Their conversation is long and halting. Neither is quite sure of their own purpose or that of the other. She is suspicious, and even once this hesitance passes, she is reluctant to give him information that she is usually paid for.

Nick's questioning is unfocussed and appears sweetly innocent to her. He speaks matter-of-factly about vaccine efficacy, as if this is an ordinary, unweighted topic. It is as if they are sitting together on a riverbank, with nowhere to go in a hurry. Skimming stones. His lightly probing questions settle, like pebbles drifting down, sedimenting deep inside her. She feels his gentle concern, his texts caressing her with his interest.

Maybe I can help

Maybe?

Do you know why?

She senses a strange tenderness in the way he processes her answers, trying to figure out what her Knowledge means for his herds. She can't believe there is somewhere where grass still grows.

Her answers are cruelly efficient and also softly longing:

“...It always takes a week, you know. Until you’re sure it has caught. Sometimes eight or maybe nine days, if you’re unlucky. But it depends.”

This urbane creature has a farmer’s way to her, with her blunt understandings of agricultural truth, mixed with a glaze-fired passion to protect the vulnerable. For her, the true Catastrophe is a human one, caused by incompetence, corruption and systems unmoored from sense. Her own herds are ill-defined congregations of the Hidden, but her Vaccine Project is more than a theory. She frames her story as an existential quest, with its own chivalric truths and honour codes. Her vaccines are tangible, explosive packages of politics and hope.

Her quick-typed texts are packed with ambition, outrage and ideas which are new to Nick. Her urgencies are infectious. He imagines her as Joan of Arc, or the Marianne, forging brightly through her darkened streets. She has insight into a thousand places, parsing opinion and fencing with the power of different and dangerous perspectives. Cosmopolitan, international, multivalent, despite her small cage.

“...Well, that was that, really. After that, we worked differently. After the Redistribution. We had to, because that workaround wasn’t tight enough anymore, you see?”

Her impact seems to ripple through the wider story around her, as the vaccines she releases begin to reshape her environment from inside the bodies trapped in it. She is casually off-hand about the disappointments and crude betrayals.

“...He had his own agenda, yes? So he shafted us with that shipment – but we just pivoted after that...”

She dismisses risks that Nick can’t unsee once she has spoken them. He cannot fathom that so many worlds could live within one voice.

Finally, well after 2 am, Nick pulls himself away from the computer desk with a promise to reconnect in precisely eighteen hours. She says “yes, maybe”, but he knows, somehow, that she doesn’t do maybes. Digger has long ago fallen into a night-sleep on the couch cushions, so Nick leaves him there. He goes out to check the gates and takes a leak behind the hedge by the rural delivery box. The night is crisp and solid black. Somewhere out there, a million lightyears behind the night, is her day.

Nick will sleep easier; his internal gravity has restabilised somewhere deep in his core. It is as if the stone inside him has stopped spinning. The bed is solid and comforting. He stretches his toes to the cool ends of the sheets and lets the duvet creep sleep slowly over him. He’s found the source of his answers. Her name is Anna.

You’re curious, aren’t you?” she says cautiously. “You really do want to know?”

“I want to understand what’s killing my cows.”

Nick looks at her. Anna is sitting too close to the camera, and it distorts her skin tone into a digitally mottled palette. Her thin face with its quick eyes reminds him somehow of his mother.

“I want to understand.” he repeats. “I want to understand what’s killing you.”

And so, she tells him. It spills out of her like a bursting pimple, the belching gateway to a deeper carbuncle. Her face is quartered by the screen as she leans in closer. With a click, Anna blanks the video connection and begins to text-talk. Stumbling screeds, looping logics. In real-time, the auto-delete removing her words almost faster than Nick can read them.

She tells him of the feral anger. The gut-fear. The first sentiments in those

early days after the skies darkened, which still felt somewhat like the emotions one had known before. Before she started leading somebody else's life. Anna remembers when they all thought the Emergency was a single moment, which could be recovered from.

She tells him of Seb. How her husband tried to accommodate the fallout when he could no longer protect them from it. His stubborn belief that the sunshine would return. The oasis he built in their living room. Anna tells of Seb's departure, in various versions. Of how he was robbed from them, how he abandoned them, betrayed them, saved them, left them, but to defend them. Seb is both her hero and a traitor, sent to the Front to fight for a cause that she could never explain. She doesn't even know where the Front is now.

Anna tells Nick of the liquid goldrush which followed the first vaccines.

A dam in her has breached. Her tumbling words batter against each other, hurriedly, swept along by her gushy flow. Her ideas entangle themselves in long rubbery sinews of text, like riverweed. Nick feels these rope around him, drawing him in and leaving marks.

And then, there was the Re-Set

Everything changed again

After the Incursion

You see?

So, we had to. Quickly.

Her tales are neither chronological nor geographical. They trace a history that seems fantastical to him. She orates an Anglo-Saxon or Berserker chronicle that only connects at points with his modern understanding, but which triggers an ancient bodycall inside. Wild paint-streaks of Anna's emotion splash across Nick as he tries to grasp hold of her strange, slippery storylines. She speaks

without restraint, without strategy, without purpose.

Anna wants to tell Nick she understands his logics. She tries to think her way back, tentatively stepping into his sightpaths of viewing the world. His peculiar unassuming common sense.

“Well. That’s just bullshit, isn’t it? Bullshit. What a shitstorm!” he says.

His perspective is quaintly antiquated, and yet so familiar – long ago and very far away, before the Emergency and the fallout stripped away the world outside. Before the pollution penetrated the houses and minds of the people sheltering from it inside.

Nick’s logics are embedded in an oxygen-rich placenta of thought, which has somehow come away from the walls of her understanding. He is not useful to her, not now, in this reality. This realisation is a release. Anna’s thoughts become as unbuttoned as her dress.

There is a new kind of nakedness between them.

“When did you get vaccinated then?”

“I didn’t.”

He sees his own puzzlement ripple across his screenface. Was she Against? He thinks of his cattle, lined for the vax syringes, and wonders what his cows would choose, if he asked them.

“I can’t. I’m not Essential.”

She tries to explain. There had been a short window when Anna might have been vaccine-valuable. A lucky strike, as the quota for immunisation was tightly regulated. The eligibility had been extended again, as more of the Sheltered had died and priorities and supplies were reallocated. This time, to protect pregnant women, who couldn’t of course be directly vaccinated, *with all the unknown side effects for the unborn child*, etc. etc. For herd immunity, three (3)

close contacts of each confirmed pregnancy became eligible. Seb came looking for her then, in the nights, with more interest than he'd shown for months.

There were stories of course. There had been rogue gynaecologists who had vaccinated close contacts for a price, after hours, and resolved the paperwork later. The girl who'd suddenly disappeared from Honey's online class to await her newborn. The class parents sent e-congratulations, signed by all the families under the cutesy images of a balloon, confetti and crocheted booties. It wasn't clear whether the congratulations were because of the addition to the family, or for their newly acquired immunity. No one mentioned in the class chat how the lucky girl expecting had been locked down for months with only her father and two brothers.

The window of opportunity had been brief. Once it was clear that babies and children were not at risk, the official pregnancy bonus had lapsed. Expectant mothers remained unvaccinated, regardless. Stretched taut between the death outside and the growth within.

Nick's face has frozen in the video frame. His eyes are looking down, the baseball cap crammed on his fuzztop. His image is like an early Renaissance painting, with lines of perspective stretching backwards from his face. Anna holds her breath too, hoping his expression will move again, but the connection between them has dropped. Their two profiles are jammed, mouths half-open, eyes unblinking, on the same screen.

It is always surprising to Honey to meet her own brother on the streets. He seems smaller than he does in their apartment, despite being thickly wrapped in the outside layers that keep out the unpredictable elements, whether the baking heat or driving blackrain. The coarse wool of their father's winter coat skims the ground, hiding his feet.

Christian evidently lives long hours in that coat, as its now-frayed bottom is filthy from the underfoot. He must keep the heavy overcoat outside the apartment, perhaps under the stairs in front of the main entrance. Honey hasn't seen it indoors since their father left.

Outside, Christian looks like any of the boys who are runners. Black rodents with sharp eyes and shadowed shapes. His curls peek out from under his hoodie, hinting at the familiar thin face like her own, like Jack's, under the mask. She supposes he does Errands. She's not actually sure how he fills his days, since Anna no longer pretends to teach them, and Honey is the one with her mother's credentials on the outside. But her brother is safe from infection. His twelve-year old body has a gladiator's strength in this dim-lit world.

The city streets beckon to a boy, as Jack has told her many times. There is freedom from the past in the thick caustic air. Christian might not even be in his room, when she assumes he is. The computer screen will anyway glow its ethereal phosphorescence, dithering a cyan-and-yellow glimmer, even if he is not there to look at it. Her brother has little patience for her mother's word games, for online instruction, or for the indoors.

Christian and Honey have moved to the same side of the street, for the same reason. A hitman has stridden to a meeting point on the opposite corner and is receiving his envoys. The hitmen obscure their faces with boldly red masks, which only reveal their eyes. Most are helmeted as well, with plastic visors that add another disfiguring layer to their appearance. Some were thugs, policemen, publicans or politicians in a former life; others have achieved their standing within the new constellations of power since the outbreak of the Emergency. Their tattoos are hidden, and anyway unnecessary in this new world. The hitmen's common and identifying feature is their arrogance, as well as the ripples of avoidance they create as they move.

Their slick connections to the Essentials are dangerous, and loosely jointed. You cannot predict whose side these men are on, as their allegiance is to simple power. *Surdu, orbu e taci*. The hitmen protect themselves through their armies of errand-runners, who claim neighbourhoods for themselves. Those who cannot run their own Errands are caught like blackflies in these protection-racket webs. Punishment can be quietly meted out by simply failing – for days or weeks – to deliver supplies.

From across the street, Christian and Honey watch as an oncoming boy dips his knee and his head, sliding the streetlord his obeisance in a single quick movement.

Bloody ridiculous, that he's digging a grave for a goat. Admittedly, it is partly out of caution, since that little fucker got in amongst the infected heifers only a few days ago. Damn nuisance in life as in death, wasn't he? Right wee ratbag.

Come to think of it, Nick doesn't even know why he had a goat. Turkish Mohair, no less. He was kinda cute, you have to give that to him. Cheeky bugger; didn't know whether he was a dog or a cow. But he didn't really have any purpose, other than keeping the grass edges down a bit. Still, Nick had gone all sappy, when that scrawny goblin-face looked at him with pained eyes, and could only get up on its front legs. It didn't take long – only a bit more than two nights and a day between – before the little manbeast gave up the ghost. Couldn't eat, couldn't stand. Was a mercy it went quick.

So now Nick's up here on the back paddock, with a hundred and one other things to do, digging a grave for a large animal. Almost human-sized. The sweat itches down his back, where his t-shirt sticks. He'd underestimated what it would take to lift out enough clods and pack the edges to make a decent

eternal resting place for the wee fella, without risking something foul leaking down later into the water system.

It feels like the right place for a burial, though. Up here, with the bracken at his back, Nick's got a full view down the hillside, with the house and the curved oil road at the bottom. On all sides, you can see the neighbouring farms, the blocks of land divided with feed rows, and fences, and dirt tracks. The steepest fields are dragged by ageing stretchlines of erosion. The paddocks with new growth are an unlikely luminous green, from above. Other bits of turf are purple-flushed and textured, like rippling shame in the neckline of a shy girl.

Most of the shaping of the land across this huge panorama is only a century old, but from this height, it looks like giants sculpted it all with tender but clumsy hands, hundreds of years ago. Somewhere in the distance where the light blurs, Nick knows the petrified arms of the lost forests are stretching sadly to their lover, the Ocean. Inland, the irish-green of pasture glows brightly out of the dark mossy soil, enriched by the ashes of ancient bush and the limestone of a million shells.

The tidal currents have shaped and reshaped the curving coastline: imperceptibly slow, sweeping the beaches clear. Over and again, new peoples have been washed up like driftwood. Man-Stewart, Nick's ancestor, was swept ashore from the rough salt-sea on a whale bone. The Stewart boys stravaiged round, trading and farming, sharing hot *kai* and a warming bed with the *whakapapa o te whenua* of the South until the genealogical contours blurred off into a haze like the horizon.

If Nick turns his mind to it though, he can see the clear lines of his family, and other families, crisscrossing this landscape with their stories. Down to Nick's left are the refigured earthworks around the dam. The oyster-coloured water looks like it has bubbled up naturally, a dull volcanic mud. But the banks

are too carefully shaped, and Dad's deliberate planning is easily visible from this height. The farmhouse itself looks like a miniature toy, with vehicles tossed about the sandy driveway by a distracted child.

Nick does actually know why there was a goat. There's always been a goat here on the farm. Often two or three. Mum was awfully fond of the spindly-legged things, and she especially loved to work their wool. She had one of those old-style spinning wheels, and she really did make her knitting and crocheting skeins from scratch. Twisting and winding the yarn for hours through her small roughened fingertips.

Nick wonders if that's maybe why he's granting a proper funeral to this particular animal now. Giving him a real send-off up here, at the top of the world. Then he'll pack down the earth afterwards and build him back into the hillside. Because if the goat's gone, then it really does mean Mum won't be coming home.

Earth to earth, ashes to ashes. Fertilising the future.

Her mother had insisted. Honey sat with her in the kitchen, after another bout, watching her shakily attempt the soup.

Anna's lips are blood-cracked and raw, and she is reluctant to bring the hot metal spoon into her mouth. Her tired voice is slow and hoarse; her cough has left her with vocal strain. But her urgency is still pitched with her usual commanding resonance and Honey knows she will do what her mother tells her. Anna's weakness has become the source of her authority:

"Of course, Mama, I'll do it for you." There is no sense to any other path. "Just please eat something, first."

Anna knows a man. He vaccinates without the credentials, his own or those of his patients. He might once have been a doctor, although most of them

are dead or Essential now. But there are the pharmacists, the vets, the sports physios, the tattooists and the botox medical-makeup ladies, as well as those who used to walk the streets. It turns out many have the Knowledge.

Honey has to hunt for three-quarters of an hour before she finds the entrance to his rooms. She enters through a low side door from an inner courtyard. The vaccinator is waiting in the long ground-floor apartment, with the representative rooms at the front now converted into curtain-hung living quarters. It might have been a doctor's surgery before, or an architect's, or a notary's. The strip-lighting along the walls is not domestic.

He leads her down the narrow corridor to the smaller spaces at the back, which are lined with office chairs where once, perhaps, the book-keeping was managed. The filing shelves are empty now. There are no records to keep.

He is a strikingly beautiful man. With a Mediterranean gaze. Greying hair slightly too long to have sat so prettily without careful styling. His eyes laugh with bright sharpness as he compliments Honey, belying his sincerity. He appears educated, in the old way, but his new streetwise status sits restlessly on him. The gentleman speaks hastily, unmasked yet stripped of the elegant habits which used to make him easeful. "My dear," he calls her courteously, but he knows he doesn't sit within the power conformation anymore.

The procedure is quick, as there are no prerequisites to substantiate nor precautions to follow. The syringe lies drawn next to a plaster on a small metal tray. Honey bares her arm and watches the needle go in. She has no idea if the mix has been whirled up today or days ago. It seems to have come from a small refrigerator under the bench behind him, but she never saw him take it out.

On the bench, there are six glass vials in a small metal cage, so she knows that today she has five new blood-siblings who will share in the frothing multiplication of sickness under her skin. There are new relationships of

connection now. Genetics and infection whooshed together in a kitchen mixer and sent out again into the world. If she is lucky, Honey's thin teen body will soon be better armoured against adult dangers. And for now, at least, she still has Jack.

The vaccinator ushers her hurriedly back into the deep-shadowed courtyard, sending his polite regards to her most-charming mother. He hasn't asked Honey to sign anything on her own or Anna's behalf.

Nick can't stop thinking of her eyes. They seem too big for her face, somehow. Deep-set and glistening like wet *pounamu*, greenstones rippled by streamwater. They are cows' eyes, animal eyes. Fever eyes. Lovers' eyes. He stands in the old sheep shed, sorting the rough and rusted equipment, feeling Anna's eyes on him.

He knows she will be back online at certain times. Nick senses the daily cycles of her patterns, but the logic behind Anna's chronologies is impenetrable to him. The farmboy who has never worn a watch finds himself eyeing the clock, anticipating the minute when he should check again. He wants to be already there when she arrives.

They talk about the vaccines' effective pathways and their weaknesses: adjuvants, injectables, the trembling supply chains, the failures. He asks about symptoms, inflammation, about Spread, contagious flow and stages of Rebound. They mutter together over the fools' accidents and the stupidity. The landscape of vaccination and its contamination has become their shared home.

"Why are you here?" Anna asks softly, after she has told him all she knows, and he is still on the line. He doesn't really know, himself. It isn't e-sexual. They had danced that dance, cautiously, at their beginning, but her fade-back from the erotics had been obvious. Besides, he wanted something

else from her. His prodding flirtation is with her particular knowledges, not her body. He is looking for clarity, for insight and direction, so he needs her presence: close and vivid and unshaded. Penetrative, not giving.

Nick nudges her, like his cattle, gently.

“Tell me. Please. Is it the vaccine shipments again? Why? What went wrong this time? What do you think? How do you know?”

Her judging sharpness when she speaks on these topics is convincing, drawing him in. Nick feels pulled into her community of purpose. Without realising, he leans his chest towards the screen and squares his shoulders. He pursues her with a determination that is doggedly male but focussed on something larger than his own pleasure. He feels she has not only answers but perspective that somehow permeates. She tames the Catastrophe for him with her explanations, allowing him to come closer to it.

“We had to protect them from the worst of it, you know? I mean, what kind of people are we, otherwise?” she tells him.

Anna weaves strands of sense, cross-binding the chaos with thin-but-strong ropes of meaning and resolve.

“After all, what would be the point, if we lost that? So, we had to step up, despite everything. We still have to.”

Contagion is the enemy, and she is fighting it with all the tools and skills she has.

The Vikings needed their women to weave their wars, to stay at home pushing their magic blood-narratives like a wooden shuttle under the warp. Anna calls herself a Truth-Warrior, as if this is a profession, like the ancient Wise-Women or the ones who dressed the dead. For Nick, Anna is rather a faery, of the Nordic or Gaelic kind. She is wizened and youthful at once, holding a golden key and lighting up her e-surroundings like a firefly. She sits,

a shaman in her cave, humming her oracle to him.

“Do you wonder sometimes if we could have stopped all this?”

Anna gestures around her shadowed room, taking in everything – the blackout curtains, the war, the deaths on the street, the vaccine hype, her home, her empty bed.

“When was that moment that it couldn’t be wound back? It was a long time ago, I think. Years, probably, before the Emergency. We programmed it, buried it, and then kept living on top. Don’t you think?”

Nick shrugs. He has no words for her.

There are no words for this, she knows it. The question is an itch which can’t be scratched.

“We wouldn’t have met, would we?”

She has slipped off the path of her thoughts now, and her voice catches as her chest hardens against her low cough.

“There is nothing to connect us, otherwise.”

Nick looks at her then, full-faced, with suddenly silent eyes. Her nothing is a lot of something to him, it’s clear.

Primordial, almost primate-like, their words trail and finish. They turn to each other dreamily through the glass. Sharpening their ears to each other’s softened voices, they listen to each other’s quiet. Tracing it. She can see the shape of his breath misting in his kitchen. It is cold where he is. The chill she cannot feel ripples across her skin.

Humans were built for groups, but small ones. Isolation, icy expanses and days of travel between. A hearth and thick furs against the wide cold sky. Vast stretches of snow surrounding small warm breathspaces of humanity.

“We were built for this, I think,” he whispers.

He looks at her out of his glassed-in world, with those monkey eyes, and

she knows he is with her, inside her. She bends to his comfort. Her body glows as if he has touched her.

That tiny moment of human connection electrifies, in a sudden instant. It lights up her whole frozen world, brilliant, like a storm flash.

The photos stick together slightly, and he has to ease them carefully apart. It's one of those rusty-coloured pics from the mid-seventies, which are almost sepia now. Nick turns it over to read the faded biro description on the back. *The Dam*, it says. Typical Dad. Writes the one thing that's bleeding obvious and otherwise doesn't give you even the date or the names of the other three guys.

There's Dad, of course. You can't see his face clearly, but it's him, wearing his too-short farm shorts and workboots, his chest bare, holding his spade handle like a trident. The men are working hard, naked from the waist up, deeply tanned, and all with the short-back-and-sides haircuts that Kiwi farmboys have worn for generations. One of them looks up in a blurred question. It's only in Nick's lifetime that men's crewcuts have changed slightly: got longer, messier, rat's tails and fringes. Woodstock would reach the deep South by the early eighties, but its styles only brushed lightly over the sons of farm blokes, who still let their mums cut their hair into their late teens. With that crop of hair, and his days'-old stubble, Dad could have been digging kauri gum, a century before, if the Dalmatians had had their Polaroids to hand.

The photograph is off-centre, undecided about its subject. If he squints, Nick can see the freshly dug outline of the duckpond and its earthbank, if he first covers the rough earth sods with tussocky grasses, and angles himself from the position of the photographer. Who took it? Mum maybe? She was the camerawoman of the family: the only one who could change the film canister

under the bedclothes with quick fingers so that no light got in.

Holly nudges her muzzle into his crotch. Nick absentmindedly strokes her elegant skull and waggles her ears. *Soon, girl. Stop your mooching*, he thinks. *I know you want your dinner.*

The next but one photograph is the extended family on the porch, squinting into the sun. Twelve or thirteen people, and Nick's only sure about a couple of them. Dad and Mum, young and thin, on opposite sides of the photograph. The men all standing, legs wide, and Grannie Joan and her sister (Maeve? Maud?) in the front, wearing their own knitting. There's a baby in its white cane basket by Mum's feet.

Actually, it's the dogs that date the pictures, without the need for identifying scribbles. Here he sees Dibbs, who lived for twenty years with Grandpa Nick and then just disappeared over the hill shortly after the funeral. Marcus-Antony and Samkin. Black-white scruffs with lolling tongues. Litter brothers who did everything together, including the roadkill rushes which eventually caught up with them both. Molly, the long-eared dam with mournful eyes, who died with all her pups shortly before Nick was born.

The dogs are in almost every photograph, one way or another, although often just their butt-ends with tails high, or trotting forward with streaked ears, or lying like a pangolin in the long grass. Anywhere there's work to be done round the place, there's a dog helping do it, or another one getting in the bloody way. Farm dogs are *whanau*, kith and kin to farming folk. Whereas the housecats are basically feral, and don't even have names, unless the neighbouring farms that also feed them call them something. Dog-generations are the time-markers for the family's stories and for the farm plans. You'll usually get two-maybe-three sharemilking or grazing cycles out of a working dog. Then they'll go into grouchy retirement, snapping at the younger

replacement if it gets uppity.

Holly is his favourite now, Nick has to admit. Digger is a lanky teenager, but Holly has the eyes of a woman, laughing at him when he snaffles her head in his hands and ruffles her. She will stalk away without a backward glance, if he catches her in the cat food or eating a muddied clump of something in the back paddock. He wonders if she can still smell the dogs who have lived here before her, and if she names their scents for herself, or if she thinks these are somehow her own.

Bloody rats again. Those pellets are just useless. Next time, he should take Holly up with him into the roof.

Lyla wakes into the pale sunlight stroking her cheek. The room smells of Jake, although he left hours ago. She wraps the coverlet around her, so that her own warmth feels like a cuddle. The quiet of the bed-space echoes through the room, although there are several agitated birds shrilly debating the day outside. Her careful stretching rustles the bedcovers, as Lyla arranges herself seated up against the pillows. She winces in mild annoyance when her hair catches in the peeling seam of wallpaper above the bedhead.

She loves looking out through the bay window, with its five perspectives onto the world. It is an astigmatic picture: the same view slightly blurred and multiplied, through crooked angles. It reminds her of a cut-glass kaleidoscope, with spiralling tree leaves from the bushes opposite instead of coloured beads. The larger central pane with its old glass shimmers these irregularities further. Lyla smiles a hello at the little vine of growth that is pushing its way through the broken window frame, bringing a cheeky frond of the Gardens indoors.

Jake was off working at the petrol station; he'd had the early shift this morning. Usually in term-time, he worked nights instead. Then he got in at

1:30 am with whatever hadn't sold from the pie-warmer, and a hard-on. But university exams were over for the year now, and so the weekends looked much like the weeks, and Jake could take a few more dayshifts instead. He was saving a bit of loose cash for New Year's.

Otherwise, nothing much changed for Lyla in the wooden house on Leith Street at the bottom end of the Gardens. The other guys drifted in and out throughout the day, there was occasional loud music in the lounge, a bit of drugs. You could make a cup of tea and jam toast if you were peckish. The bread for that was kept in the freezer bin, as you never know about the rats so close to the river.

Lyla liked that the student flat was not on the noisy party mile of Castle Street, although the house looked like it could've been comfortable on any of the long stretches of colonial cottages down from the One Ways. Its latticed verandah could have been facing the sun in Rhodesia or the Australian outback, except you knew it was Dunedin, from the way it overlooked the damp growth of the Leith, shaded by the hillside opposite. There was something lush and putrid in its sagging wood, the flecks of mould scattering over the flaking paintwork of the porch.

The landlord hadn't put the rent up in the last few years, as far as anyone could reconstruct. Not that there were a lot of time-deep memories to draw on, as the group of flatmates always changed on January First anyway – along with the furniture, except for the scrappiest bits left for the rubbish collectors on the footpath outside. But someone had gone out with the brother of someone who lived here four or five years back, and they'd said the rent was still the same. It doesn't affect Lyla anyway, as she was still at school and living with Mum. The flat was just where she hung out, most days and a few nights here and there.

Last year, she had been with Mike, of course, when he was living here.

Somehow, Lyla feels more attached to this room than the boy inside it. She'd been coming here during the school breaks, and sometimes when she should have been in class. It had all been very casual and laid-back, accompanied by a giggling clutch of similarly drifting girlfriends in Year Ten.

But then about this same time of the year – November – Lyla's meekly plodding childhood, which had been sliding without complication into its teens, suddenly collapsed with her in the school toilets. Mum had driven her straight from school down the One Ways to the hospital. Lyla was still wearing her school uniform when the impatient doctor did the first round of examinations that led Lyla to spend the rest of that summer on the Eating Disorder Intervention (Teens & Young Adults) rehab programme. There were no more lazy unstructured days at the flat for a while, as Lyla had to eat her meals at home, under Mum's suspicious supervision.

By the time she went back to school in February, Mike had moved to Rangiora for some transport logistics job, and Jake was living in the room with the bay window. But Lyla wasn't a kid anymore. A lot changed over that last summer. Mum got all purposeful now she had a daughter going off the rails. It wasn't just about the eating, although that topic took up a lot of airtime between them. Mum was on a speed-mission to turn Lyla into an adult, including bralettes. Perhaps she thought Lyla could only be trusted to make sensible eating choices if she were a grown-up instead of a child.

In any case, Mum organised Lyla to get her driver's licence, starting that summer: first her Learner's, the lessons, the Theory part, the boring night classes. Once she got her Restricted, then Mum rang the school and got her a parking permit for the school parking lot, all official. As if Lyla were an actual teacher, and not just a sickly sixteen-year-old who'd had to get her school marks on Compassionate that year.

It was Mum who'd talked Lyla into driving down to visit Nana and see Dad that one time. Organised her into it, more like. Making it sound like she was at the end of her tether from driving up and down South each damn weekend, when really Mum hadn't taken her there for probably years.

"I shouldn't have to keep driving you all the way down there, now you've got your Restricted. You can just go yourself."

Of course, Mum didn't let Lyla go on her own; she drove with her as far as Clinton on the main road ("all those passing lanes are an absolute hazard if you don't know what you're doing") before pointing Lyla down the secondary roads and waving her off. Mum was hitching a ride with an old school friend back to Dunedin after lunch:

"...and you can't go wrong from here, one way or another you'll end up at your dad's."

Lyla felt weirdly alone in the car, bouncing over the dirt roads with the tyres sliding loosely in the gravel. If she had some kind of accident, dropped into a side-ditch, it could be literally hours before anyone else would happen to drive by. She drives on autopilot, detached from herself, as if Mum is still the one holding the steering wheel. Lyla knows by the time she gets to Dad's, she'll have driven beyond her childhood.

Dad didn't even let her stop the engine when she finally pulled into the drive by the farmhouse. She had glided to a halt, and was trying to tell her brain how to turn off the car without stalling, when he jumped his big shadow into the seat next to her and explained reverse. He manoeuvres her with his voice, his fingers lightly on the handbrake, explaining the curve of the drive and its concrete edging. He doesn't seem fazed by her newly adult self; it's as if he's been long waiting for this version of Lyla to pull into the driveway. He is knowingly comfortable with her, even though she's still a stranger to herself.

“Let’s pop down to your Nana’s, eh?” he says, leaning his head back into the car doorframe so that he can look at her without turning. “She’d like to see you looking so bonny, I’m sure. *My bonny lass*, as Granny used to say to your Auntie Jill. We can take the back roads and practise some hill starts.”

Dad’s driving instruction is much more pragmatic than Mum’s. Mum talks about the regulations, and the three-second rule, and what the test will contain. Dad explains driving as if it is instinct being awoken, saying,

“So, you feel... that! Then you hear... And when you notice that wee rumble? ...then *bam*, lift your foot and just go.”

For him, driving is a body-movement to music, like dancing. He doesn’t actually say much, but he explains with his rough hand over hers on the wheel, tapping the speedo, looking over his shoulder to demonstrate the tiny moment when you feel that you can see past the blind spot. Lyla leans into his low-pitched experience, and her new confidence controls the swerve around each bend. She feels as if she is somehow a younger him, under her skin, as he guides her movements from the inside. Only when they are parked outside Nana’s rest home, does he ask why it’s called Restricted.

“Because I can’t drive any passengers without a licensed adult driver accompanying me, else the car’s not insured.”

“Ah. Don’t tell your mum, then.”

The pillows have slid down so that her head is touching the wallpaper again. Lyla leans back into the quietness of the old room and tries to re-settle. She imagines the fussing birds outside the window are the real cause of the fluttery jumping low in her belly. A tiny feathered chick is shuffling itself there, gaping its little mouth for food. What is it now? Fourteen weeks? Her girlfriends could probably tell her how long it has now been since their collective rush of excited

activity had filled her belly with watery panic.

Before the eight-week mark, they had all tried to be deliberately grown-up about it, and to book an anonymous appointment at Family Planning. It had turned out to be too complicated to navigate without Mum knowing, so beyond all the angst-filled whispering about how impossible it would be to actually have a baby, Lyla had done nothing about it. Her girlfriends didn't mention the topic now. It had simply passed, like the last episode of any of those dramatic online TV series they hot-followed as a group. It didn't seem likely to anyone that Lyla was pregnant if nobody talked about it.

Lyla's mental calculations of the passing weeks inside her are now not really tethered to her everyday. This ticks along according to an entirely different schedule. January First means life will look quite different for everyone from the New Year, anyway. Jake reckons he's heading North, to Auckland.

For now though, the varsity boys sit on the verandah, discussing the bollocksing behind their essay extensions and the sham of prerequisite requirements. They get high, sing badly to an untuned guitar, and Jake brings them home squashed slow-heated pies from work. Lyla spends her days at the flat with them, eats jam on defrosted toast and calls her mother to report what she's eating. She'll be six months gone come February next year, when school goes back. Going back to Year Twelve. Big assessments, actual exams with external supervision. The three-week Modern Sciences project. The drama festival. *Kapa Haka*. The year-level camping trip for the whole class, just before the summer.

She imagines that life taking place without her in it. It is difficult to think into a future beyond the moment now, beyond the early summer's sun shining through the bay window. Year Twelve will happen, certainly. January First,

and then Year Twelve. This seems more real than the tiny fluttering inside her, under the covers.

Anna has been sick again, for sure. She doesn't mention it, but her face has aged another decade in just three days. Nick notices the ridges of her skull around her eye-sockets. The screen-shadows around her throw grey across her yellowed expression. After adjusting the light down, with a brief squint that might have been an irritated scowl, Anna flicks off the camera with a snap and instead writes her mind.

I can't talk. I'm sorry.

That's ok.

It's too hard.

I know.

Nick feels through her typed words how the crusted nodules have turned her voice to a thick rasp. Deep in his chest, he senses how the cough racks against her ribs when she shifts position. She plainly doesn't want to see her own discomfort moving across her reflected face. She is hiding from him, and from herself, and the blanked video is a shroud.

Try to rest.

Ok.

That's hard too.

To fill the empty pauses, Nick tells her absently of his cows, a bovine lullaby of how they nudge each other when he comes with the supplementary feed. He doesn't write of sickness, neither on the farm nor her own. Anna's replies are simple, with some delay, as if she is only half-listening. She seems to be marinating in her thoughts. Nick speaks with his lowest dog-voice. He's not

used to sounding like this to another human. The gentle clicking of his typing makes a soothing sound, too.

She had liked the little stories of his lumbering heifers, remembering their names, which he had invented for her, quickly: Blackie, Spots, Sweetcud, Natalia. She often asks what they think, as if he knows. Now she is hushed, like they are, chewing her cud without vocalising. He tries to stir her with his questions about the next vaccine shipments, but her text answers are vague. It is as if she doesn't care about her own world now or doesn't know the answers anymore. Anna's deep flow is splitting into shallow tributaries of thought. He wonders if she is micro-sleeping between her replies.

With her voice silenced, and her body hidden behind the dark, Nick finds he is more tender. He begins to lead their tip-typing slowdance. He gently strokes her with his text-words, imagining he can feel her skin trembling. She is beautiful to him, although he cannot now see her face. They lie together in their quietness. He senses there is something earthy in the space between them, some thickened human smell. It is the musty marital smell of under the bedsheets, which holds long after the voices have left the room.

This is the first of the whisper-quiet between them, where spaces and the blanks speak their meaning though the silence.



HONEYPOT

ACT V



Our truest life is when we are in dreams awake.

– Henry Thoreau

Nick doesn't go down the pub much these days. Bloody money sinkhole. You can piss a fortnight's wages down the toilet and not even notice you've done it. Totally different economy to the careful scrimping and recycling on the farm. Of course, when you have staff, even casuals, you have to go throw down a couple of hundred on a Friday night. That's what it means to be the boss around here.

And, you must admit, the pub's gone a bit flasher since the Mrs got her divorce through and took over. The old hotel still looks basically like Jim kept it: a cavern of dark brown-painted-over wallpaper with the skirting-runners kicked in. The yeasty smells of years of bar fights and big-screen footie. But there's always toilet paper in the loos now, and you can get a Daily Special which is a proper feed, not just a packet of chips. It isn't enough to attract anyone not local, but the locals have taken Sharon's side and kept to their old habits. Jim always was a right old bastard, and a cheapskate to boot.

Meg and Jill will be here in a minute. They want to talk about Mum, that much is obvious. How she's folded in on herself, and the doc wants to change her medication. They're on a sisterly mission, all kitted out and coming down in a single car, to reach a family agreement on Next Steps. Nick wishes they didn't make such a drama of it. It's upsetting enough telling Mum by phone twice a week that he's bringing her home "in the morning", knowing she'll forget by then.

He wonders if Dad noticed when he became the property of his children. It happened so much faster with him. Dad's attention was probably focussed just on breathing, as the emphysema turned his rickety chest into a rusted

machine you could hear in the next room. In any case, Nick doesn't remember Dad's last days blurring the edges of his person like this. Now he's not sure if it's really about Mum tonight, or just the girls' opinions of "how she must *feel* in that awful place" that he's got to attend to.

Nick's a bit jittery, truth be told. He should mention to his sisters that wee story going on with the heifers. Not that they're likely to give a rat's arse. They'll be more worried about Mum, and probably rightly so, although if his overheads stay the way they are, and he loses one of the herding contracts? Then they'll get their knickers in a bundle quick enough, as Mum's care bills are covered by the farm account. Jill and Meg even bill him their petrol for their trips down South, not that he cares. It's all for Mum anyway. Dad set it up that way.

"Nick! God, you do look funny sitting by yourself – haven't you ordered something?"

Meg is stripping off her bulky jacket from her bulkier chest as she talks, waving her eyebrows cheerily at the guys at the bar. Probably knows them from school still, even though she hasn't lived down here for decades now.

"Jill's just using the loo. You realise what a bloody long way it is to get here once you're middle-aged like us and the bladder doesn't hold on the gravel."

Nick winces at this unnecessary intimacy. Their whole adult lives, the three of them have been trying to work out how to sibling. It is hard to know how to be themselves without falling into old family patterns. They mix crude commentary with stiff hugs, and a know-it-allness about each other, which each finds equally irritating. Nick doesn't much like the bloke he thinks the girls think he is. They treat him like an old beef cow, whose only use is to clean up the grass in the gullies, the roughstuff and the road edges. So he finds himself

being that kind of *surly*, which his mother had always objected to, whenever his sisters start organising him. Meg has already organised him a drink (pale lager, without asking) along with a white wine half-bottle for her and Jill. He doesn't want to ask which of them is driving back, as whoever it is, they'll take it bad.

The girls are the experts tonight. It's their topic: ageing and womanhood – he obviously can't be expected to have the foggiest. Jill and Meg have all the stories to hand from way-back-when; the knowledge that Mum's urinary tract infections have been getting worse, "though they've always plagued her, haven't they, since her pregnancies?" Her migraines are a Real Concern, since the doctor says they might actually be mini-strokes and Affecting Capacity.

Nick wonders how anyone knows anything about Mum's migraines. She always kept tight-lipped about them, even as her voice slurred and her tongue thickened. She'd retreat under her eiderdown, with a wet facecloth over her puffy reddened eyes. Dad would defrost a hunk of corned beef from the deepfreeze, and serve it boiled to the kids with limp silverbeet and softened carrot. The next day, they'd have hot gummy slices of the silverside in bread for dinner, and by day three, Mum would be back on her feet and chop the last of it into a thick soup.

Nick has a sudden urge to suggest maybe a decent meal of corned beef would help Mum's migraines now, instead of fiddling around with her pills, but he knows his sisters won't appreciate the comedy. He's going to stick his foot in it, regardless. That's what's expected of him. They'll drive back to Dunedin in the thick blackness, complaining about him, comparing him to Dad and his uncles, whatever he says now.

So he doesn't say much. Pays the bill at the end and promises to follow up with Mum's GP surgery about the referral. It's just easiest that way.

Mrs Long always chooses the necklace first. Her jewellery collection fills the vertical wooden panel in the hanging section of her walk-in dressing room. The inset lighting in the cupboard is discreet but illuminates every corner. The necklaces drape loosely from their hooks in long strands, sorted by colour and shade. She flicks her pale fingers through the deepest ruby reds through pastels to bold-and-bulky black and white.

Everything in this small space displays quality craftsmanship. The sleek wood veneers of the shelving are bespoke. The drawers slide out with soft precision on their runners. A goldsmith has affixed tiny filigree swirls against milky shell-shapes. The brightest colours on the jewellery board shimmer with their complex alloying, winking as if asking to be chosen.

Mrs Long builds her daily attire around her necklace. For each chunky beadwork or tasselled silver piece, there is a decently matching shawl, the soft drape of a blouse or a cashmere wrap. The cashmere and the cardigans are kept wrapped in tissue and then in plastic foil, to keep out the moths and the city's smells. Even the oldest of the fabrics still holds the mousey lusciousness of now-elderly wealth. Finally, Mrs Long selects darkly hanging slacks, or prim skirts or flowing chiffon, which all reflect back to her selected centrepiece, the necklace. Her shoes and handbags complement the necklace, however they are matched. She never repeats quite the same outfit.

Mrs Long dresses herself each day for visitors. She lays out small dry cakes on fine china, boils water in the samovar and has the tea display precisely set when the hanging clock chimes briefly for half past three. It takes her longer than it used to, with her slow shuffle, so she starts earlier so as not to be rushed.

The parcel is usually there by one. A small pack of dried goods, just the basics, always the same. At one point she had left money out, from the safebox inside her bedside table. Sometime over a year ago, as the pile of notes grew

thin, she had stopped. The paper-wrapped parcels kept arriving each day on her doormat. There are never any surprises, nor small tokens of recognition, but the contents are adequate to her scant daily needs. She's not even sure if it's the same people who do her deliveries, although she suspects it's the family upstairs. The Millans, they were called, if they're still there. Although maybe someone else is there now and has taken over her deliveries, as if she is the stray cat who comes with the property. In any case, someone regularly fills her small saucer of milk.

Footsteps above walk across her thoughts. Mrs Long tries to construct a meaningful narrative from those shuddering echoes in the apartment overhead. She has spent long hours pondering the specificities of these ghost-noises. Like a switchboard telephonist, she is now adept at recognising human sounds – walking steps, muffled speech, patterned tapping – from inanimate objects being dropped or shoved. She discounts the mechanical rhythmic dragging, or the whistling and knocking in the pipes in the walls, as she develops whole playlines of interaction from the smallest of human sounds which penetrate from above.

Mrs Long can enliven long minutes of imagined conversation with these shadow-sounds. She thinks she might have heard laughter, once or twice. Certainly, there has been shouting. Sometimes she reminds herself, *Children's noise is not legally considered 'noise'*. But it is hard to tell adult noise from children's noise through an oaken floor, a gap and then a stuccoed ceiling. It is hard to distinguish noise from sound, even if there had still been an appropriate authority to register the disturbance and *the disproportionate impact on quality of life*.

In her own apartment, Mrs Long is the only one whose movements make sounds now. She is the breeze that flutters the doors and rustles the furnishings.

She had once had a small lapdog, already for a few years before the Emergency. A thin-bodied, coarse-haired beige princess, with blackened bat ears and a crooked way of wrinkling her button nose which was most endearing. Her name was Pebble. Pebble had a rasping breath, sneezed politely and welped then in surprise, and her tiny claws tipped scatteringly across the parquet.

Afterwards, obviously, there had been nothing much to feed her, and eventually Pebble had not woken up one morning. Mrs Long had taken the stiffened shape up out of the cane basket and sat primly for several hours with Pebble's tiny weight on her lap. She had stared intently at the unmoving folds of the drawing room curtains, patting Pebble's short bristly hairs and scrunching the softness behind the dog's ears for the last time. Then she had tossed the little body out with the kitchen waste. There was nothing else she could do for her small friend, after all.

Mrs Long had had grandchildren, and a daughter who lived an hour and a half's drive away. It was a quite pleasant Sunday train-ride, if you felt like it, and back in the early evening. They used to telephone, before the service provider stopped providing service. The mobile phone her daughter had always topped up for her stopped working long ago, and it lies a black brick in her bedside drawer. It has no charge, and no charger, but she keeps it close in case it rings.

Her loneliness is a writhing snake in her belly, which threatens to wiggle its way up her oesophagus, stopping her breath. Mrs Long holds it, by the neck, breathing firmly out her nose, until it settles again and her stomach gurgles gently over the watery churn the fear-snake has thrashed there. Sometimes she needs several minutes until the angry animal sinks back fully under the black waterpool at her core. While she waits, she plays with the necklace and admires her nails against the teacup, enjoying the scalding of her soft wrinkled

fingertips, which brings her out of herself and away from the snake.

Afterwards, she will place everything carefully on a small floral tray and wash up with the minimum of water in the kitchen. Then she will shed her elegant layers, piece by piece returning them to their specific cubicles in the dressing room, until she is left, small and drooping in pantyhose and simple chemise. In the cluttered bathroom, she wipes down her creases awkwardly with a barely damp cloth. She uses old powders and rubs off caked foundation, under hot lamps that look like they belong to a film set. Her skin is an odd grey, once the lipstick and blush are wiped away. With care, she sets her thin white hair under a silk headscarf, tying this back with the loose ends tucked under. She knows the bathroom must smell of piss.

Somehow, the clear-up will take her until bedtime. She will act startled at the clock's chiming of six-thirty. Then with slow precision, she will turn down the bedsheets and murmur a few words to Mr Long, acknowledging that once, several decades ago, she didn't go to bed alone. She used to take medications in the evenings; she can't remember what for now. They ran out long ago, but somehow she is still here. She will lie with open eyes in the darkness, and – as every evening – think of nothing.

But now, as the clock chimes its sweet tinkle for four o'clock, she pours her own tea with a flourish into the thin gold-touched china. The bronzed liquid steams like a tiny genie, and she sips it, delicate as a kitten.

Jillian knows she's not allowed the chocolate truffles. Mum fills the entire house with their smell of caramelising chocolate, with a burnt edge. Stirs in the crystallised fruit, sometimes even ginger. Jill's not even allowed to help roll them. *Fingers off, Jilly.* The little round balls on the tray take up a whole shelf in the fridge while they harden. Then Mum turns them gently in the dried coconut

and lays them in careful lines in the Tupperware, as if they were fragile Christmas baubles.

Tonight though, it's fair enough that she's pinched some. Jill's still feeling pretty shaky, like she's going to throw up any second. Her tummy churns. It had all happened out of nowhere. One minute, she and Meg were bouncing up and down in the back of the stationwagon, warbling "Girls Just Wanna" over Nick's pudgy legs in his booster with the five-point security harness. Then the music slid into a hideous screech of tearing metal and the sound of the road disintegrating under them.

The heavy bumping that came straight afterwards was almost worse. Careering into the tussocked bank beyond the road-verge, the cliff-face kicking the car windows with thudding clods of earth and rock. It went on for minutes somehow; Jill couldn't even close her eyes because the dusty-brown wall of sandy rock kept coming at her.

Things only got really scary though, once the car shuddered to a halt with one wheel in the ditch but otherwise neatly parked on the roadside. Mum spun around in the driver's seat and stared at the kids. The pupils of her wild eyes had somehow swallowed their usual framing colours, and her gaze was completely black. Mum had leaned between the seats, unclicking Nick's seat buckle with panicking fingers that were dancing like they were playing piano. She yanked him straight over the gearstick to the front seat, paying no mind to how his legs caught and tangled on the handbrake, and ignoring his siren screams. Somehow, Mum scrambled with Nick pressed to her chest out of the passenger side. Even now, Jill couldn't figure out how on earth she'd managed that.

"Get OUT!" Mum roared, one hand opening the back-seat door and the other arm clasping the child to her, who was really far too big to be carried at

all. His legs were pumping like a frog's in fright and his bellowing was worse than a police siren. Mum's shout was animal, a gorilla's scream.

"Get. Out. Now." Her voice dropped suddenly, hoarse and low. Mum's face looked drawn and unfamiliar, a deep-wrinkled crone staring black-eyed at the girls. Terrified, Meg and Jilly had both fought their seatbelts to obey, tumbling onto the roadside, hyperventilating their haste.

Mum gets like this sometimes. Not usually round the kids, but now and again Dad cops it. Jill remembers vaguely being in a room with Mum in this state before, but the specifics escape her now. She must have been only three or four back then, when Mum last really lost it like this. Jill had cowered under that same confounding sense of loss, and danger, and something broken which could not be fixed. Mum's crazed hysteria had unleashed fear that was cold liquid splashing in Jill's belly.

Jill's got the smallest of the square Tupperware under her bedclothes now. She's jammed the plastic box between her thighs, so its shape won't be obvious if Mum or Dad come in to check on her. Not that they're likely to. Her parents usually eat dinner later than the kids, after Dad's got in from seeing to things up the back. At the moment, they're busy arguing anyway.

Mum's got all worked up again about today's accident since Dad walked in. Jill can hear her crashing around the kitchen, yanking on drawers and cupboard doors. Her movements are shouting louder than words. She's discovered some urgency about the lack of baking soda, and she's burnt the top of the rhubarb crumble, adding a sour black note to the kitchen smells. This is Dad's fault, obviously.

Dad's tired voice is adding to Mum's annoyance. He must be seated at the dining table, still only halfway through his meal. He's trying unsuccessfully to wind down Mum's whirl from across the room. From the bedroom, Jill can

hear his grouching better than her mother probably does, given that Mum is slamming the oven trays onto the kitchen bench and cascading water into the sink. Dad's pissed off about the damage to the car door. After that much of a side-swipe, it's going to need a panelbeater to have a go, and that won't come cheap. And a new side mirror.

"I'm sick of this, Bubs. Do ya hear me, Nancy? It doesn't matter what happened out there today – you *know* you've got to keep damn well clear of that sherry. Not before five at night, and then only with a mixer. We've been through this already, a hundred times."

The oven door slams shut with a clatter of metal trays.

"You promised, Nance. It's just got to stop, alright? It's enough."

Mum is crying, big snotty gulps. Her fury has turned inwards, and she is lacerating herself with self-recrimination. Jill winces as if she can see Mum grating herself with the rusty cheese-grater. It's not about the accident now; there is something bigger in the kitchen, clawing at her mother and casting fearful shadows. Jill sinks lower under the covers. Her mother's mysterious pain is obscured by the raw-flesh violence wrapped around it. She's burned herself somehow, on the oven tray, and Jill can hear her swearing as she turns the sink-tap on harder to cool it.

"Rob, I don't know what to do, I don't – I can't go through this again, I just can't live with myself... how my babies keep... getting ... hurt..."

Mum's swallowing for breath as she hiccups her words. Her desperation is clutching clumsily at her husband.

"He's so little, Rob, you should have heard him screaming. All I could think was... it's happened again. You know when we found the wee one? That was so deathly silent – no sound at all – and today, Nick just couldn't stop screaming! When I lost the first one, I only heard my own voice... I thought my

heart was going to turn inside out, going through that again.”

Dad’s impatience has slipped into anger now.

“For god’s sake Nancy, you’ve got to get a grip. He’s absolutely fine. Not a scratch on him. Fucking hell, I can’t handle this drama.”

He pushes back his chair, grinding its legs squeakily along the lino.

“Maybe this time it actually was your bloody fault!”

Don’t you go eating the truffles, my girl. They’re not for kids, Jill knows that. They taste adult, and dangerous. Their golden smokiness fills the inside of your cheeks with a rusted flavour. Jilly presses the last of the gloopy chocolate mass against the roof of her mouth with her tongue. Squeezing the forbidden tang out of the sticky sweetness.

The roof-space is not quite an attic, more like a storage cave under low-hanging beams and clumps of old Batts. Nick’s up here looking for more photo boxes, but the dust-lined cardboard cartons are filled with all kinds of junk and textiles that smell of must and rot, not memories. Even shifting them out of the way releases a pungency of the past which really belongs in the landfill. The soft corrugated cardboard blows puffy babykisses when he moves the cartons, hinting that the damp is causing more problems here than the rodents.

There’s an old brown suitcase, medium-sized with brass-edged corners. It’s wedged under the Singer table, stopping the cast-iron foot-pedal from rocking without the sewing machine in place. A real old-fashioned travelling portmanteau: leather casing with beige paper destination labels glued on. Dunedin, Gisborne. Imagine lugging that around?

The rats have even chewed through the suitcase. Incredible, there’s an actual hole right through the outer leather, you can see the light blue glue-and-

cardboard inner. Ugh. Perhaps he should shove some of the poison pellets in it, although he has no idea how long ago the hole was made. Or just chuck it. The brass clasps are locked, and who knows where the keys would be now?

Funny that it's locked, actually. Most of the tired leather trunks round the place are filled with hoary old felted blankets or ancient men's suits and ladies' outfits worn only once or twice for weddings or funerals. Nothing worth locking away. Maybe it's letters, or more photographs? Nick pulls the suitcase out properly and shakes it, but it doesn't sound like papers. More like bedding, perhaps.

He looks around for something to prise open the locks, or make the hole a bit bigger, but there's nothing useful to hand. Take it downstairs then, have a look and then dump it. It's probably too old for him to be able to make sense of the contents, even if it is photos.

He'll take the larger carton of photos down too, and that venerable vintage vacuum cleaner – although if that doesn't work, it's going straight out. He doesn't want to become like his old man, storing crusted appliances and bits of electronics in case one day he needs them for parts. It was bad enough clearing out the garage after Dad died; he doesn't need to refill it now with more of the same crap.

He half-chuckles, thinking his dad probably moved the vacuum cleaner from the house to the garage in the first place, then sometime after that put it up here in the roof to decide about later. Dad was always reshuffling his stuff but never threw any of it away. Might be useful someday, you never know.

Nick can't imagine how you'd know when that day came: when all the old camping gear, and dusty-crud kitchenware, and the antiquated sports equipment would suddenly become desirable again. He imagines Dad on that Great Day, kitted up in age-yellowed cricket whites, with leather-strapped shin

pads, and brandishing that ancient vacuum cleaner. The picture makes him smile. He realises he probably will keep the bloody thing, just for Dad's sake.

Mama's dead." Nick can barely hear the words, as Honey has dropped her face down away from the mic. Her meaning slithers slowly into his mind. The world starts to shift under him, and the sweat prickles his palms. The yellow overhead light in his kitchen suddenly glows mustard. On the darkened screen, she lifts her head and stares at him, with Anna's eyes.

"She's dead."

"When..." It's not even a question, as there is no answer that will make sense.

"I don't know."

"What do you mean, you don't know?" Nick shudders at his own half-shout.

"She didn't come out. She was sick again. And then she didn't come out. The door is locked."

When was she sick again? When was it? Two weeks, three? Nick is slowflooded with the leaching knowledge that it has been a month or more, maybe even two. Weeks of confusion and half-sentences. Quiet text-touching, her face invisible to him. Broken lines of words, full of spelling mistakes. On mute, the whole time. It's true, he has been talking to a ghost. He thinks of their moments of closeness, and his stomach starts to heave.

He can't straighten his thoughts, the buzzing in his ears is shuffling the sudden flashbacks into a strobe-lit flicker – what did they talk about, when he thought they were alone? Was she even in the room with him, or was it someone else? How did he not know? How does he know now?

“Honey.” His voice comes out patiently now, like a father. Like Lyla’s father, when he knows she has broken some rule, but wants to coax her to tell the truth herself.

“Honey, I need to talk to your mother.”

“You can’t. She’s gone.”

“You can’t be serious. She’s still posting everywhere. The shipments – she’s been paid.”

“I’m her Voice, anyway. I have the credentials.”

“For groceries, yes. But for that?”

She shrugs. “Who’s checking?”

“Where is she now?”

He tries to calm his words, to speak as if he were amongst the calving. Don’t startle her, or she’ll hang up. He counts a slow breath, to let Honey breathe too. He feels the oxygen prickling under his skin. His whole body wants to climb forcefully through the screen, smash into the apartment, bang down the bedroom door, haul Anna out – breathing badly but still breathing.

“You must have tried to get to her?”

“No.” Honey’s voice is soft, but completely steady. “What could we have done?”

The hero scripts of Anna’s whispered fairytales are useless now. The damsel is dead.

“This is insane!” His fury bubbles up, frothing like pondwater. “Truly. Fucking. Insane. You’re telling me, your mother has died – weeks ago – and you’ve done absolutely fuck-all about it?”

Honey says nothing.

He knows, abruptly. She has.

Anna's suddenly silent world is a black hole that drags Nick's thoughts, no matter how he tries to cling to the small trappings of his own life. He is living through a migraine himself, the aura sparking at the peripheries as the middle-focus blurs. His fingers and toes tingle uncomfortably, turning white-
numb.

Concussed, Nick narrows his mind to the most local of concerns. Paddock rotation. Adjusting the feed budget for the newly weaned. Refilling the diesel on the ride-on, pumping its flattening tyre. Nick's knuckles crack and bleed as he tightens the loosened valve cap onto the machine. It needs to grip just right: he screws it up too-tightly, one rotation more than necessary. This compulsive dulling and squashing down of anything that makes him jumpy makes him even jumpier. Nick flicks off the car radio, the television and even his audio song library. The music goes out of his life, leaving a tinnitus squeal.

In the evenings, he tries e-submersion, to swim through the murky stiltedness of the internet. Nick's farm-toughened shoulders hunch painfully over the computer keyboard as he pokes his way through the marshy floodwaters.

SEARCH: *Registering onset, death, latest rules - how to?*

The online world of the Catastrophe is sodden, flexing with dangerous electrical pulses.

SEARCH: *Recovery, with without vaccination - chances?*

His digital searches for Anna's shadow toss up other traumatised bodies, other lonely stories. Again and again, Nick stumbles over submerged middens of unhappiness, tripping over sunken tangles of pneumatophoric roots trying to breathe above the surface.

SEARCH: *Anna Millan - law - legal - lawyer#*

There are thousands of Anna Millans. Most are naked.

SEARCH: *anna.millan@ a.millan@ ?*

Nick hesitates to touch the nervy ideas which are beginning to flicker across his awareness of Anna's swamp-world. He tries to lift her sunken principles back into the light, to find her, to place her above the gangrene and rusted mud.

SEARCH: *Scholarly articles for Vaccine Distribution, Millan#*

>> Health passes: practical and ethical issues - Ortiz-Millán - Cited by 7#

>> Ethical and Practical Considerations for an Agreement to ...#

>> International Journal of Health Policy and Management (IJHPM)

by G Ortiz-Millán · 2024 · Cited by 2 – This paper discusses the potential of an international agreement to ensure equitable vaccine distribution, addressing the failures witnessed#

Nick hunts for his Anna in the sidebars of the Catastrophe, trying to locate the still-warm hearth-ashes of her tiny human life.

SEARCH: *Residency registration, where do you live - rules regulations access to information?*

But her spark has gone. Link by link, click by click, Nick gently prods through the rotten connections spanning out around Anna's sudden absence, and it's ugly.

>> Guardians Alert! Log-in for Latest Updates, he reads. He clicks again.

Nick recoils from the bare hints of Anna's life that he keeps bumping against: the sickly fronds and twisted knots of a small and misshapen existence. Her shadow is embedded in a moss-gnarled terrain of human desolation.

Emergency Summons:

All surviving residents are to report by Friday 12 noon for Verification.

He circles around her e-neighbourhood, feeling dizzy and nauseous, trying to hold his footing in the slippery muck. Scattered around Anna, there

are lies and distorted half-stories, and other men. Fake news, false facts, real facts, OUTRAGE! Dirty secrets and broken chains of reasoning. CLICK [here](#) FOR MORE! Anna's burnished brightness begins to oxidise for Nick, and there are green calcifications on every tentacle he follows. There is nothing scholarly and sophisticated here.

The more he looks, the less of Anna he finds. Each time Nick thinks he brushes against her, it doubles back: to Honey – perhaps – or to other trapped women, or girls, or to no-one. There are thousands of cross-linked swamp-trails leading everywhere and nowhere. Hundreds of women. More hundreds. Some perhaps sleeping, others with drug eyes. Girl-women. Girl-boys. Children in adult no-spaces. Spaces that splinter. Places that submerge, slowly, as you watch them. Prisons with walls of screens. Do these bodies even exist between the strobe-lit pulsing? What happens in those dark moments after the camera flashes? Which part of this was real?

He clicks further. Guerrilla warriors. Sick terrorists spreading their venal degeneration – and their legs. Criminals. *Operating without authorisation*. Nick's skin scratches him, from the inside. Sex trafficking, vaccine abusers. Honey pots. Offenders or victims? Or possibly both? In the click-space around Anna and Honey, Nick finds the names of Jinny-Doll, Tina-Teen, Lalita and several others, whose fast-flickering PayOnly fan-sites hint at scenarios he doesn't want to open on his computer – or in his mind.

Nick stands under his scalding hot shower and interrogates himself cruelly. *You fucking dickhead – how can you miss someone who wasn't ever really there?* What actually happened? Can he call any of this something that 'happened', when it was just a whole lot of words, really? Twisted algorithms feeding him back his own thoughts, in seductive female form.

He wonders about the Project. Whose project was it? His own? Whose

needs were being serviced, which addictions fed through talk of needles and salvation? Which values were lost, abandoned, or sold? She had spoken of *inoculation* as beatification, a moral annunciation through the simple prick of a needle. But whose bodies were used for this, and for what purpose? Whose nakedness? Whose shame? The unsteady pixellated images from awkward angles make Nick's stomach turn. Whose conspiracy is this? Everything about it is honey-glazed, coated in the thickened viscid fluids of sickness and sex.

Nick's stiffened towel scratches uncomfortably as his anger scrubs himself dry. He wants to cover his nakedness quickly, layer back the safety of his clothes. Perhaps all this damn vaccine action was really just reaction: e-noise echoing through the chamber of his own obsession. He's mad at himself for getting swept along on the drama and the crisis of it all. *For fuck's sake – who were the fucking adults in the room?* That's a question he can't let himself contemplate, let alone answer.

He shudders when he thinks of Honey. Sticky and congealing, leaving a messy trail.

Honey moves quickly now, through the treacle of her days. She inhabits her mother, using her Voice as if it were her own. Her mother is unnecessary to her. She is the woman now. On the streets, she moves the way Mama could not. With intention and without fear. It is easy, since the worst has happened. Her shoulders are wide, and Honey breathes evenly under the mask. Her footsteps press into the underfoot, packing it tighter, pushing down the past.

A man is masturbating on the street corner. He is without a mask, his mouth an "O". Unmasked on the street! She hurries past this obscenity.

She can't hold it back though for more than an afternoon before the overwhelm cascades over her again. Honey spends her evenings in the Office, hunting for her mother in the papers and the piles. This way she doesn't have to listen to the silence in the hallway now that no-one else is shuffling the night.

Somewhere in here her mother must have left a list? A plan? Mama always thought along the length of the way, pointing the direction and lighting it, even as she pushed you along, stumbling on your own two feet. There is a bookshelf marked *Honey*. But this only lusters the way behind them, murkily. The exercise books, the small mementoes, the crooked handwritten notes, the scrapbooks. Honey senses her mother's hands crafting and preserving these – but not for what purpose. She has lost her mother's line of sight, and her vision glistens with myopic tears.

Her earliest flower pressings were projects guided by Mama, in the time before. She taught Honey how to lift the finished pieces on the back of a knife, and to blow them into position on tiny drips of glue. Dried oval leaves to shape a lion's face, and a sunflower's mane. Honey's wonky coloured fingerprints splotch across the paper, forming a row of cheerful birds on a twig. The crooked tiny branch also flowers brightly with small pressed shapes plucked from the grass.

Honey turns the album page carefully, clinging to her mother. They used to walk to the park together, hand in small dirty hand. There is a daisy chain of woven stems, with buttercups and clover, which Mama had once tied around her head like a halo. It's possible that some of the tiny fibres twisting are actually her own toddler hair.

My Honey, if you just stop whirling you'll see. Sometimes you have to step lightly, or you'll miss it. If you look closely, you can see how it's grown. Look – at those little unfolding spirals, and the life inside?

The later pages of the flower album are more ambitious and characterful. The work of two artists now, dancing their *pas de deux* and its variations through the petals strewn across the page. Mama still pointed out new wildflowers or interesting ferns and leaf shapes, making small floral offerings to her daughter. Honey had gathered these in her press, trying to coax something freshly original from the limp organic trimmings of those simple walks together.

The girl she was then shaped these cuttings into fantastical patterns: teardrops, diamonds and paisley swirls. Loose bouquets pinching and preserving youth and promise, now un-ageing and timeless on the page. The tiny flourishes could have been pressed yesterday, if it wasn't for the Emergency. Honey traces the thin aristocratic neck of a tender bluebell with her lightest fingertip.

Dead flowers, skin-prints and baby hair. Wizened relics pressed against white sheets. Didn't they find the first evidence of human thought by the pollen dust lying reverently across the skeletons of the dead? Didn't Mama tell her that, from her ancient stores of dried knowledge from another time?

Honey has since tried many times to press the greenhouse leaves, but most of these are rubbery and waxen, and they turn a sickly green-brown and crack under the translucent paper. The tiny fruit-flowers are too frangible to survive the press. She has no wild crocuses or snowdrops, fanciful marigolds or daisies to safeguard between the sheets now.

Honey keeps returning to the book's beginning. The early pages of the album are filled with explosions of buttercups – their tiny joint trophies, like golden laurels. *Let me see if you like butter, Mama. Hold still.* She can feel her mother's soft chin glowing tender yellow under her fingers, a delicacy impressed now into the thick-webbed paper. On one sheet, of a bursting tangled flowerbeast, the girl Honey has captured a butterfly wing. Its blue-

violet shimmers in delicate flight, as if it were moving on the page.

She likes to imagine the world will wake again from its sleep. Peel away the red skies and let sunlight softly through. The rose thorns will bud improbably from their woody shells and bloom soft velvet petals like a dog's nose. The world beneath will stretch and open its sleep-crusted eyes. There will be cornfields and waving acres of wheat tickling the blue blue sky.

This quiet time is a pupation, Mama said. Under the skin, you are changing form. You will emerge a butterfly.

She will live in that world her mother promised her. She will study, travel, there will be two kids and a dog. Honey knows the narratives, from the small, hard-edged books she read to Mama long ago. *Run Dog Run! Wait, Jane. Wait for Dick.*

It is the morning of a new day.

The sun is shining.

Honey will stride through bright streets, past a drugstore, a bookstore, a barber shop and a sidewalk cafe. In the subways, no one will walk along the tracks to avoid the underfoot. There will be cars and trucks and things that fly. Firemen and policemen will come to the rescue.

It is time to go home for supper.

Mama promised her this.

In those childhood stories, the excitement and delight always happen *while Mother is out*. The house is upturned in cheerful chaos; the dogs run loose, the cheeky things. There is a Terrible Mess and a Grand Adventure. But Mother always comes home at the end, to make the supper. Honey can barely remember *when Mother was out*. Now, she will not come home for supper, either.

These fairytales have folded shut around their ever-after.

Her mother's dutiful daughter is wound inside like a dynamo coil, ready to release. Honey's heart already beats in flight. *Run, Jack, Run! Fly, up up up, fly!* Yet there is no gentle uplift. Her honeyed wings are still wet. Folded and sticky, under a cold sky.

Now that Mama's gone, the dream is gone too. Honey's future stretches out ahead of her, empty-vast and unpopulated.

It was several days before Nick got round to breaking open the suitcase. He'd left the dusty leather trunk lying awkwardly on the kitchen bench, with unopened bills and advertising pamphlets soon piling on top, making it seem less urgent.

Anna's absence takes up more space in his mind than the suitcase. Nick turns her stony silence over, looking at it from all angles, again and again. Anna's empty stillness shouts at him, every time he turns his head. The lowing of sick cows is another constant groan in his ears. His daily phone-call to his mother barely interrupts this droning rumination. The whine of the engaged signal ends in a triple beep:

"Heh Mum, it's me – wanted to say hi – you've got that damn phone off the hook again... get the ladies to help fix it for you, eh?"

With his thoughts slurring, Nick has begun obsessing over non-essential home repairs. Siliconing the seal on the shower door. Changing the fire alarm batteries and the main lightbulb in the shed. The metal ladder needs a new foot-stopper, definitely. Flitting between these meaningless small tasks, Nick crafts a crooked wall to keep out his thoughts. It was only after he'd had to get out a heavy-duty screwdriver to re-fix the hinge on the cabinet door under the sink that he decided to wrench the suitcase's clasps open and see what's inside.

As he opens it, the old trunk releases a greasy, musky smell like rat-shit.

The damaged case lid has scattered tiny bits of blue cardboard over the suitcase's contents. Inside, there are two odd bundles, each sewn squared like a cushion. The wool stitching has been eaten by the rats and has partially unravelled in long trails. The moulded textile wads are matted, crusted into waving shapes that hint at ancient moisture long evaporated. The fabric colours have bled into each other. So have their smells.

The kitchen clock ticks loudly, but Nick feels somehow his blood has ceased beating. His fingers tingle. His breathing stops somewhere above his heart and before his throat, and he has to swallow deliberately – both to restart his breath and to keep from vomiting. The click-snap of the suitcase clasp rebounds belatedly, and echoes in his heaving oesophagus. His body judders against its own sonic charge.

The weird stench is a puzzlement, which Nick has never smelt quite like this before. But he knows exactly what these two crafted bundles are, because he has his own. He has Jillian's. He has Meg's. Jeanette must have Lyla's baby cushion, somewhere. Mum had made blankets for each of her newborns. Patchworks of fabrics from different materials: her own wedding dress, Nana's travelling suit, the curtains from Great Auntie Ruth's. Each swatch of material would be sewn neatly into a small hexagon, then crocheted around with a warm wool yarn, and the whole blanket backed with soft flannel. A cot-sized rectangle of homespun warmth, with a patterned honeycomb of history in the centre. Months in the making. Once the children had grown into a bigger bed, Mum folded the baby blanket in half and stuffed it. Gently plumping out the cushion's square with puffs of soft cotton filler and hand-washed clumps of useless wool she'd gathered from the shearing shed.

The couch in the lounge has three of these familiar cushions. He can see them if he turns his head, but he doesn't. Tatty now, of course, but obviously

can't be thrown away. Each personal but following the same pattern, and reusing similar scraps. Mum's way of bundling her babies into their family, wrapping them in the coarsely knitted memories of her sisters and her aunts, and the gaelic grandmothers who had taught her to *waste not, want not*.

These cushions here in the suitcase are not stuffed plumply with cotton filler, that's the sure. The high-pitched whine from the dog at his feet is proof of that. Nick knows that these handcrafted pillows are tiny crumpled sarcophagi. The name panel on one cushion is blank, but the other says **C-N-S**, just like his own. *Christopher Nicholas*. Embroidered brightly onto Auntie Ruthie's guest curtain scraps, with his mother's careful and familiar golden stitch. The cushion fillings have collapsed inwards, as if vacuum-packed, but he cannot bear to lift them now from the case. It is his brother, and another. The knowledge of this is a thick power-punch between the ribs, but it is Holly's frantic reaction against his leg which confirms it.

Nick only just manages to turn his head away before his vomit splashes against the kitchen lino.

He's not sure if they need to deal with the body. This is a peculiarly adult question, not one that a teenager can answer. If the door stays locked on the inside, it's perhaps its own dry tomb? He doesn't really know how organic material corrupts. In films, there are writhing maggots, squirming parasites and alien mechanics that reveal the unhuman underneath. Dark black blood everywhere, and entrails – the inside on the outside. Death is then a plot mechanism; it is active and disturbing, and its horror charges change.

But this? It is just silence. Where Mama was, there is nothing but quiet. Perhaps she is not even there at all. Particularly if he ignores that silence. Silences it with his own. Christian knows all too well how you can be there, and

not be there.

This all feels like the kind of irritant issue that Mama would have had an opinion about. Ethical, strident, frustrated. Using slippery words which don't add up to anything, logically. Christian can't remember if Mama's concerns ever mapped to his own. Now she's no longer framing his picture, it doesn't matter either. He feels she has wrapped him often enough in storytales, which envelope him like a spiders' web, until he cannot breathe.

He was constantly squirming and twisting to keep an arm free, a leg. Shaking himself away from her, itching off her irritating visions and the cloying air of the apartment, to wriggle himself with a scuttling side-crawl into the freedom of the street. It'll be easier now she's gone. He won't have to keep trying to use her billowy old-fashioned words to translate his own.

Hans-Olaf, Anders, Piper. The runners. Among them, Christian feels at home. They're the ones who really understand how all this works. How worlds are built and battles slain in the corners of them. The rules and the extensions, how you gather reward to invest in further complication. Their Crusades are what actually count.

The hitmen call them city rats. Artfully dodging their ways through the streets. Adults have such picturesque ways for describing the world. They seem to think it has only one layer, and if you control what you call it, you control the world. Kind of cute, really. Grown-ups don't seem to realise how many transparent sheets of meaning are overlain over the one streetscape. How these can melt together or separate out, and you can move in between them, if you know the shrewd ways to manoeuvre.

His mother's world, in which a brass-haired Rapunzel could be a protagonist, is gone, if it ever was. And this flexing world that's left does not belong to all, only to those who move, and climb. Always moving. There is only

space now for some. The Biter. The Snitch. It is the Crusaders who will inherit the earth. The ones who ride their impulses like motorcycles, tail high and bent forward with their faces pressed against the speed.

They were so stupidly blind to this reality of his, right under their noses. Mama, and Honey too. Complaining about the thugs and unfairness, as if these values mattered. Playing their silly games, stitching their clever plans and small conspiracies which were as see-through as a leaking plastic bag. Tiptoeing about the city with their little daily urgencies. As if anyone was looking, as if anyone cared.

Mama had had no idea about the real weight of her values. How her needles were actually worth fifty times more than she was pushing them for. Luckily, Christian's been getting the street value of her vaccine shipments, when he channels them to the right contacts. He has to pay off a cut, of course, but it's still far beyond any reward Mama would ever have generated. She truly had no understanding about any of this real business. None of her online carriers have a fucking clue either – they'll believe anything she says, even when it's not her on the other side of the screen. And she's not necessary to it anymore, her teen son will just keep running her lines for her now.

Rodent pelt lines the inside of the black coat. Christian is warm inside its nest. He is a sexton beetle, clambering out of his fur-lined crypt. His stunted wing-body moves over bone and connective tissue, with his shiny-black-orange patterning a jagged electric buzz line, creeping. He pupated in the underfoot, from carnivorous larvae nested in hollowed-out carrion. Only a very few like him have survived the filial culling of their rotting childhood. Of these, most now serve. A black jointed helmet hunches over his squared black neck, thick club antenna detecting death from a distance. The sexton beetle makes a nursery of a rat-carcass, secreting numbing fluids to slow decay. There is

nourishment in this toxic stew.

Children like these are not milk-fed. He saw one in amber once, millions of years old. *Nicrophorus vespilloides*. Papa would have known that.

Townies are always funny about the deadhole. The farm kids, they know that everyone has a pit at home where refuse of all types gets chucked. Old tyres, wood planks with too many nails to be useful, even as firewood. Rotted feed, silage remains, dead lambs. You have to be a bit more careful with liquids these days, diesel cans or growth-promoting antibiotics. Can't get the *iwi* riled up, with their fussing about waterways and wanting to bless things. People get all nervy, since Opuha.

Investigation into toxic chemical under dam launched

Otago Daily Times, 24 May 2011

NZPA: Environment Canterbury (ECan) is investigating claims that drums of a toxic chemical used to make agent orange are buried under a dam lake near the town of Fairlie. The investigation comes after a man who worked on the Opuha Dam's construction in 1994 told ECan drums containing the chemical 245T were buried at four sites during its construction, The Press reported. The Opuha Dam chief executive said burying chemicals such as 245T was not an uncommon practice at the time when the dam was built.

245T dioxins burping out of metal drums into the aquifer, up near Timaru. Toxic algae in the catchment. All those hygienic procedures and ethical committees, public hearings and drawn-out planning permissions. Nothing actually preventing nasty chemical waste searing through into the water supplies, bonding with biological muck and muscle.

Possible dioxin poisoning in cattle.

The Veterinary Record, 31 August 1985, Page 207

...Some calves were born alive but weak and died within a few days exhibiting signs of severe clinical jaundice. Others remained alive from two to four weeks before dying with signs of pneumonia or enteritis. Total calf losses numbered 48 out of 77 (63 per cent). Fresh fetal liver and spleen were inoculated intraperitoneally into guinea pigs and hamsters to attempt isolation of leptospiral organisms. The centrilobular necrosis suggested that a blood-borne toxic compound might be the cause. The adjacent large cereal paddocks had been aerially sprayed with a defoliant herbicide on June 27, 1980...

Bet Dad didn't worry about all that, when he blocked off the catchment to make his duckpond. He'd had other worries on his mind: Mum pregnant, and Molly-Dog, and the future of the farm. He'd built a dam over the old deadhole. Car batteries, pesticides, leaded pipes and empty paint tins. A seething beetlejuice, thickened with earth sods. Lined with an old tarpaulin and a pile of newsprint. Just like this one.

Nick throws the suitcase into it, without looking where it lands.

Epilogue

“Mrs Stewart? I’m on duty tonight. Do you need some help getting to the toilet?”

No. No. It’s kind you ask. I was just... I think I had a dream... about. Well. Where are you, little man? Hey. Where’s my boy? Now. Oh, I don’t know. I really thought... Oh. You are there, little one. Come here. I’ve got you, my wee babe. Snuggle in. Let’s sleep some more.

“Alright Mrs Stewart, but if you need anything, you know where the buzzer is, don’t you?”

I didn’t know! I didn’t. I never asked. And Rob didn’t tell me about the calves getting sick. He said, he didn’t want me to worry. He knew I was tired, what with wee Jillian and the baby. He didn’t want me blaming myself, blaming him. I know that. So, he took care of it, buried it. He got rid of that poison killing the calves.

“You’re fine, Mrs. Stewart. You’ve just had an adjustment to your evening pills. Might make you feel a bit wobbly for a few days.”

Molly was with me, anyway. Two pregnant bitches, that’s what we were. Growing our litters. Hmm! Lying in the sun, getting fatter and slow. The sunshine disinfects, you know? Oh, what’s got into you, that poor wee belly? Such gripey gurgly guts, my sweet. Hush, little baby, don’t say a word, Mama’s gonna buy you a... looking glass? And if that baby. Yes. That baby.

“That’s a lovely lullaby. Bet your kids loved being sung to sleep, Mrs Stewart.”

Hush, little baby. Baby-mine, I know it hurts. Mummy knows it’s not right. Shush now. Colicky twisting, you poor thing. Come here, try to drink. Hey, hey, shush. Latch on, that’s it, don’t cry, don’t fuss. My wee changeling child. Scrawny wee elbows. Fat wee tum. Little elf, little fairy. Fairy-tied tongue, drink now. Please. Shush, little baby, don’t you cry...

“Right, well I’m just at the nurse’s desk, ok? Sleep well, Mrs Stewart. Sweet dreams.”



Appendix

Extended Table of Contents

Unvoiced: A Fairytale is a creative practice thesis, which is formatted as a novel in five Acts. Scene descriptions, working chapter titles and the corresponding page numbers are provided here to the examiners for ease of reference. This appended overview, however, is not a constituent element of the novel’s storytelling and is not intended for wider publication.

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