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ALBATROSS

THREE STORIES

CAROLYN MCCURDIE

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..... CAROLYN McCURDIE .....

Carolyn McCurdie is a Dunedin writer. Her short stories have been published in *Landfall*, *Takahe* and broadcast on Radio New Zealand. She also writes children's fiction. Her first children's novel *The Unquiet* was published by Longacre Press Ltd in 2006 and was named one of the Storylines Trust's 'Notable Books' for 2007. Her poems have been widely published in print and online, in particular at Deep South and Tuesday Poem and have won the D-scene prize in the Poetry in Waiting Rooms 2012 competition, judge Kay McKenzie-Cook; a highly commended in the 2012 Caselberg Trust Poetry Competition, judge James Brown; first prize and commended in the 2013 NZ Poetry Society International Poetry Competition, judge Vincent O'Sullivan.

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For Steve and Ronda

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ALBATROSS

The weather office had issued storm warnings, and if you didn't hear them, the bush telegraph passed them on. All the talk in the hairdresser's and at the grocery checkout was about the weather, and the butcher and the hardware shop owners closed their doors early. No customers. And that was a blessing, because at home there was a sheet of loose iron that needed a nail, and the sweet peas had to be tied to the trellis. Afternoon bustle trickled away, leaving streets empty. The air grew heavy with waiting.

Evan Brody was down on his boat, giving his mooring a last-minute check. His hands lingered on rope, on wood, as he enjoyed that sense of being ready, of readiness about to be tested. His cell phone interrupted.

'Is that the constable? I think you should know that Miss Flockton's about to commit suicide. She's alone in a tiny boat and heading into the Pacific Ocean.'

Evan sighed. Why is it always me?

Then another call. 'Evan? Evan, it's that Flockton woman. She's putting out to sea. I've got the binoculars on her now. Just out from you. Can you head her off? She'll never come back alive.'

'Right, mate,' he said. 'I'm onto it.'

Again, the phone. 'Mate, I know it's your week off, but Ina Flockton's just lost her marbles.'

So his motor roared like a walrus with toothache. He enjoyed the bad temper of it. As he headed out of the bay, he thought of the Friday night

crowd at the boat club and the stool at the bar that should be his. Everyone'd be there for the rugby on the big screen; there'd be so much noise, so much beer, jostling, jokes and argument. Where would he be? Somewhere cold and wet was a good bet. Sylvie and the kids were right: he should have retired years ago. Except then they'd have to shift, or the phone calls would just keep coming. She'd hate it. Either way. So you had to laugh, thought Evan.

He'd left the shelter of Penguin Point, and the ocean swell was meeting his hull with rhythmic violence. If this bloody woman didn't drown herself, he might just bloody do it for her. If he could catch her; if he could see her. But then with every fourth or fifth rise on the water, there she was, also at a high point, the orange of her life jacket briefly against the ocean. He let out a long, relieved breath. She wasn't suicidal then.

He wondered what had come over Ina Flockton, but couldn't guess, because he didn't know that much about her. She kept to herself; lived alone; lived quietly. Except for late summer, when the local kids liked to raid her plum tree and sometimes trampled her vegetable garden in the dark. She complained to him every year about that. He didn't mind because it reminded him of the old days when the town was just a village, the police station the size of a garage with only him in it. Not the flash crowded place they had now. She needed to get out more, he'd told her, mix with people, have some laughs. She'd threatened to complain about him. The same threat every year.

He tasted salt at the back of his throat and on his tongue and decided that he wasn't bad tempered any more. This was what the sea did to you. This was being alive. Here he was, riding the hugeness of water, and scanning the horizon like a hunter. He was a hunter. This, this was living. It'd be better, even better, if there were other boats, a team, if he could look and see Chris over there, Rog and Brownie over that way. They'd be in contact, with a plan, and understanding each other, like wolves. Smart and together, like wolves. Luckily, it's just me, he thought. Poor bloody woman,

if all of us chased her, she'd be best just to lie down quiet in the frying pan and put a slice of onion over herself.

Then he was on the sixth wave and he thought he'd lost the prey. Shit! Where was she? Stupid daydreaming bastard. In front of him, the sea, heaving-up, swallowing-down, grey upon folding grey, as if no other colour had ever existed. Then an orange dot flicked, disappeared over to the left. Way over. And then he knew where she was going. He'd forgotten about Tawhiti Island. She'd be okay there, might not even need rescuing, so he'd just check that she was safely ashore and likely to stay put till the storm had passed, and what would that take, an hour? And then … he looked behind him. And cursed. The storm had come. Creeping and sullen, there it crouched; it had eaten the mainland and now it came for him. He'd have to make a run for Tawhiti.

Now the need for speed was urgent. His mind withdrew, and an ancient knowledge of how to survive took control of his hands, eyes, knees, and the rhythm of breathing. Evan had no idea how long it took till he rounded the point, and rode the tide into the shallows on the lee side of the island. And as he dropped his anchor, who was this wading out to grab his mooring line, splashing back to tie it to a kanuka trunk? None other than Ina bloody Flockton. Her dinghy was upturned in a hollow of the paddock, near a giant pohutukawa. He presumed her outboard was stowed underneath.

'Didn't you realise the storm was so close?' Her voice was sharp. 'You were lucky. Another few minutes and I wouldn't have liked your chances.'

He said nothing. At the kanuka, he ripped apart the knot she'd tied, and retied it, ignoring her small offended grunt. He kept his back to her, and at the pohutukawa, discovered her supplies. A bag with a thermos poking out of the top, a blanket and a tarpaulin were stashed in a deep cleft under the roots of the old tree. A small person could fit under there and be quite dry. Not comfortable but dry.

When he turned, she was watching, arms folded, eyes narrowed. Ina was small, too small for her parka; her skin was weather-beaten and her

grey hair sat up in spikes of surprise. He thought she had a flotsam look about her. Or jetsam, more like. She indicated her tree root shelter.

'If I invited you in, you wouldn't fit. I'm the only one who'll fit in there.'

'Is that how you read this situation?' Evan asked. 'That I'm just popping in for a cup of tea? Don't bother with the chocolate bloody éclairs, Ina; I'm only here because people noticed you coming out here to drown yourself. They thought you were bloody irresponsible. They were right. So to keep you alive, I followed you out; that's the only reason I'm bloody here.'

The sky was lowering like a black feathered belly into a nest. Then boom! Wind hit the ridge behind the beach, trees at the top bent to their roots, and rain surged over and down the hillside. He leapt into his boat, into the shelter of the cabin and turned to see her still standing, staring after him.

'Get in here, or under your tree!' he yelled. 'Get into shelter!'

He took off his parka, hung it up and looked outside again. No sign of her. He secured the hatch and lay back on one of the rubber squabs. His head was filled with the roar of wind and rain; he shivered as the boat rocked and the timbers flinched. What a strange person. What did she think, that he'd arrived on the beach for a picnic? It looked as if that was why she'd come. For a picnic. He started to laugh. Cold and cramped, sitting all by yourself in the pissing rain; it was a wonder more people didn't do it.

He got up and lit the kerosene stove to make a cup of tea, and while the water boiled he had a crackling and unsatisfactory phone conversation with his wife. The frustration of that put him back in a bad mood. The hot enamel mug burned his mouth. Shit. Bloody shit. And he hadn't mentioned that he was safe, he realised, or where he was. Just the rugby, those words, rugby, record, she'd got those. Well, if that didn't make it clear enough … She'd be peeved though. He'd be in strife with Sylvie when he got back.

But the tea warmed him. Outside was now pitch dark. The boat rocked with the occasional gust, but the bay was sheltered from the wind if not from the rain. So far the little boat seemed weather-tight. Good maintenance, that was the secret. His mood improved. The flame on the stove slurped and flickered its light and warmth round the cabin. Snug. Smelly, cramped, and beginning to keel-bump and tilt as the tide slid away. But snug. Must be tea time, he thought. What have we got? Baked beans, dried spud, a packet of bacon, and some eggs. He held the eggs at arm's length and sniffed, trying to calculate how old they must be. On went the pan for a meal and he rubbed his hands. What a waste, a great feed coming up and no one to share it with. He thought of other nights, fish in the pan, beer, or wine if it was Rog, the stink, the voices, full of bullshit, full of lies and laughter. A full belly and good mates. If you had that, you had everything. He peered out into the darkness. Who'd believe another human being was out there? A strong gust belted the cabin. He shivered. Maybe she wasn't human. His Scottish father used to sing of something mythical, half human, half seal. But what the hell, even seals had to eat. He opened the hatch and bellowed.

'Ina, get over here for some tea!'

Bugger it. Soaked, cold, his nose and mouth running with water, and there was no chance she'd have heard him anyway. Bloody idiot. He rubbed himself down with a towel, and was changing into a spare jersey when a scrabbly thump announced the arrival of someone on the deck. She slid open the hatch. Water streamed from the hood of her parka.

'Are you all right? I thought I heard a yell. Did you want help?'

'I do. Yes. I need someone to help me eat this. And to close the damned hatch.'

Hurriedly she pulled it shut behind her and put her parka on a hook to drain. She looked at the pan with its spitting bacon and four eggs.

'I'm vegetarian. Including eggs; I don't eat eggs.'

‘Good.’ Evan clattered the two enamel plates on to the table and began dishing. ‘You’ll be crying out for some beans and mashed spud then.’ He passed her the plate and a fork. ‘You can eat beans, can you, without hurting their feelings?’

Ina balanced the plate on her knees and was staring at it with distaste.

‘I thought you were in trouble.’

‘Sorry,’ he said. ‘I suppose you’d be happier if I’d broken my leg or something?’

‘So I’m here for no reason? You got me here for polite conversation? To hold my fork like a lady and say, “Very nice, thank you, very tasty beans”?’

‘They’re getting cold.’ He’d have enjoyed this meal better by himself.

‘The one thing I felt sure of, was that by coming out here, I’d be free of all that. I keep forgetting how nosy people can be.’

He swallowed a piece of bacon fat whole. Nosy? It was best not to look at her. He took a breath.

‘People look out of their window and see a storm coming. They see everything, birds, animals, people, everyone’s heading for shelter, except one. And that one’s heading for danger. They try to do something about it. That’s not nosy. That’s called decency. Ordinary civilised decency. People are like that.’

She was quiet. She was staring at the blackness that wobbled beyond the glass of the portholes and her plate rocked back and forth from one knee to the other.

‘All right,’ she said after a while. Then a while later, ‘All right, I see that. And you’re here because of that. At some risk. I see that.’

‘Good.’ He leaned over and took her plate and scraped the contents back into the pot on the stove. ‘If you don’t want that, I’ll have it. I don’t like waste.’

With the plate gone, she didn't know what to do with her hands; they rubbed her knees, they disappeared up the sleeves of her jersey, she took them back out again and sat on them.

'So. I owe you something. An explanation at the very least.'

He shrugged. 'Don't worry about it. It's my job.' From the corner of his eye he was watching her twitching. With her spiky hair, she looked like a cartoon parrot that might start at any minute to shed feathers in a blizzard of unhappiness. He hoped he wouldn't laugh.

'To be free of games. "How are you?" "I'm fine." All the lies and pretending. All the words with no meaning. I'm looking for absolute solitude. Perhaps even absolute fear.' She was intent on poking a loose piece of wool back into her sleeve. 'Then you find meaning. Then you might see something stark. And true. Face to face with something towering; that's when life seems real, when there's something at stake.' She looked up, her face pink with truculence. 'Safety and comfortableness, you can die from that. I don't expect you to know what I mean. I expect that you're thinking that I'm quite insane.'

'Not a bit of it.' He licked his fork. 'All kinds of people feel like that, and there are all kinds of ways of resolving it. You might go mountaineering. Or become a doctor. Or even raise a family. Lots of risks, lots at stake. You might become a cop. Don't think you're as unique as all that.' Shit, her attitude bloody annoyed him. 'Sometimes people look for something big in their lives without it being at other people's expense.'

Abruptly she stood up, slid back the hatch and disappeared, leaving her parka still on the peg where she'd hung it.

Bloody hell, he thought. She'll get pneumonia. She'll be pissed off with me if she dies of that.

She was back before he'd finished stacking the dirty dishes and wiping down the table top.

'Well, hello,' he said. 'A drowned parrot.'

‘A gift.’ She was holding out a flask. ‘Brandy. I nearly forgot I had it. My brother gave it to me years ago. For emergencies. He put it into the side pocket of my haversack and I’ve never even taken it out till now. For you.’

‘That’s more like it. That’s what we need.’ Evan took plastic cups from the cupboard, checked they’d been washed, and set them on the table.

‘Not for me,’ she said. ‘It’s for you. I’ll get back to my camp and leave you to it.’

‘You bloody well won’t.’ He was appalled. ‘What’s the good of this on my own? You can stay and drink it with me or you can put it back in your bag for another hundred years. Are you trying to make amends or aren’t you?’

She sat down. ‘I didn’t ask you to follow me. I’m a very unsociable person. I’m no good at carousing.’

‘That’s all right.’ Only one sip and Evan felt warm and benevolent. ‘You just sit there and I’ll be riotous for both of us. You’d better be dry though.’ He threw her a towel, then a blanket and Sylvie’s fishing jersey. ‘Keep warm with these.’

Ina changed with all the awkwardness of remaining modest in a cramped space, and then she sat holding her cup as if it was a small but dangerous animal. After its rub with the towel, her hair looked spikier than ever.

‘Your hair looks better,’ said Evan. ‘Not plastered down like when you came back just now. I’d just been thinking that you were probably half seal, half human, and sure enough, that’s exactly what you looked like.’

She glowed. He remembered it later as his most successful compliment to a woman. And she laughed in an odd way. No noise, a half smile, but exuding delight and warmth that filled the cabin and made him rack his brains for some other clever thing to say.

‘I’d love to be that,’ she said. ‘Imagine the freedom of that. But not half seal, more like half albatross. Out on the ocean, right out there, for months and months. I might not come back for years.’

It didn't sound like much fun to Evan, but he said nothing because she'd become suddenly shy and had leant her head back and closed her eyes. He refilled his cup, then replaced the stopper and put the flask in the cupboard.

The talking had filled up the space in the cabin, and when it stopped, it left a hole that other noises rushed to fill: the drumming rain, the rising-falling-rising roar of wind. Smells of bacon and kerosene mingled with wet oilskin and brandy, making the air thick.

'Can albatrosses see in the dark?' Evan asked. 'I was just thinking, it wouldn't be bad to be an albatross right now, at least the air would be fresh. But not if you couldn't see in the dark.'

Ina opened her eyes and stared at him. Then she stood up and took her parka from its peg. 'I don't know,' she said. 'But if they're scared of the dark, they should stay at home and keep the light switched on.' She was struggling with the zip, trying to get it up over the borrowed jersey. 'Safe and warm. Burbling nonsense. It's not what I came for.' And she left.

What did I say? Evan wondered. He unrolled his sleeping bag, climbed into it, and turned off the flame on the stove. The darkness was total. As he closed his eyes, the picture he'd imagined earlier returned. An albatross flying over ocean in the dark. The brandy had made his mind swim a little; it floated off and became the albatross, balancing, from one wing tip to the other, aware of air pushing up against the wings, and aware of feet, tail and neck held in a line of light, athletic poise. With no effort, he slid along the streaming of the wind. It carried him towards the horizon, and to the next horizon and the next. His eyes marked where that horizon was, and then the line slipped away and was somewhere else, a trick of the ocean that stretched around and away to the stars. To infinity. His mind tottered; he gasped with aloneness, and panic jerked him back to the sleeping bag.

He half woke. The walls of the cabin pressed in; the space they enclosed felt crushingly small and his body loomed, out of scale. It occurred to Evan that he would experience what was vast only by accepting

a smallness so extreme that it carried with it the risk of disappearing altogether. He might cease to exist. His head ducked for comfort into the sleeping bag, but came back out to breathe. Breathing had to be done. He resumed flying. As he soared and the ocean dropped, he became aware of calmness within the albatross body. He felt the sinews, the bones. Carried in the bones was a knowledge of sea currents, of winds and the patterns of stars. These eyes knew where fish moved. And tucked under his belly were his feet, and what the feet held was a knowledge of land, of that cliff, that clump of grass, and the return to the nest site where his mate would arrive to meet him. He held the feet close into his warmth, and slept.

Her outboard motor woke him. The cord pulled raggedly, once, twice, and then the roar of departure. Like a whale farting, he thought grumpily, then let off one of his own and felt better. It took him a few seconds to put together the change that had come with the morning. The silence. No wind, no rain. Tentative bird song, and water cautiously slipping past sand, as if a questioning air was arising, politely doubting the bully-boy certainty of last night's storm. That seemed right to Evan; it seemed hopeful. He lay for a while, feeling the gentleness of water under the hull, the lifting, the slow restoration of horizontal.

He reached for a pot and a match to light the stove. But no. Better still, he'd go home; if he hurried he'd get back before Sylvie was out of bed. He could put over a line in one of the bays on the way home and take her breakfast in bed. Fish, fried tomato and onion.

Out of the shelter of Tawhiti, the seas were still high but the sun was coming through. He looked around for Ina's boat, and saw it bouncing and heading in the opposite direction. Chasing the storm, he thought, learning to be a human being by trying to be a storm bird. Perverse approach, but he could see the necessity. And brave. Though he might not mention that to anyone else.

As he walked along the road up from his mooring, a car passed him. Surfboards, kids in wetsuits.

‘Gidday, Evan!’ they yelled. ‘Call that a fish?’

Heading for the exposed northern beaches.

Then he changed his mind. Yeah, of course he’d mention it.

COLLISION

Rock music. Pounding percussion from one floor down and two flats along, but the good thing about it is that it drowns out the TV from next door. The good thing about the TV, before the rock music started, was that it drowned out the traffic noise from the street below. Chrissie pulls the sheet up over her head. The next good thing to happen, she thinks, has to be a jackhammer starting up across the road to drown out the whole bloody lot of them. The small tent of sheet becomes hot and airless, and the music is as loud as if the band has set up a stage somewhere near her toes. She throws the sheet back. If you don't sleep, she thinks, you go mad. Then after that, you die. And it's not possible that anyone in these flats, anyone for streets around, is sleeping. It says a lot about them. It says all you have to know about Reg. Let the old bugger die, she thinks. It's what he wants to do. I'll tell Brendan that.

She smells rather than hears Brendan tiptoe into the room – a change of air as he opens and closes the door, and the quiet smells of undressing – his socks, then the slight dampness of his chest as he takes off his shirt. You'd love that smell any other time, Chrissie thinks, but not tonight. Too hot. Too noisy. Too bad-tempered.

'You asleep?' Brendan asks, as his arm slides around her waist. She lies still and breathes deeply. 'Who's this?' He's laughing. 'Am I in the wrong bed? Is this the same woman who complains at home about a morepork keeping her awake?'

‘Are you sure he’s your father?’ Sharp voice, sharp knees, sharp elbows. ‘Is he even a human being? No one can live like this. How does he sleep?’

‘Sleeping – not a problem. He flopped straight on to the couch when we came in, and the snoring had started by the time I came out of the bathroom.’

‘Oh God. Snoring. Well, I hope it was worth it, this boys’ night out. Did you convince him he should go to a doctor, give up unhealthy habits, and can we go home now?’

‘We’ve only just got here.’ Brendan withdraws his arm. ‘It’ll take time. We’re not going to help him if we can’t be patient.’

Chrissie makes an effort not to sigh. ‘So how did it go?’ she asks. ‘Off to a good start?’

‘Don’t think so. First, he was embarrassed by me. Shit, that pissed me off. He introduced me to his mates and then he said that I was in the book trade. “Poetry,” I said very loudly, “I’m a poet.” He was livid, bloody livid. But he seems to like being livid. He sat me down after that, very friendly, and wanted to buy me a beer. But I said, “No thanks, just orange juice.”’

‘Why, for God’s sake? What’s a pub for?’

‘Every single word I’ve spoken since we got here has been wrong. He curls his lip or goes into a huff. So I’m trying hard to be tactful. If I wasn’t sober I’d never manage it.’ Brendan stops and he kicks against her leg. ‘Did you say “huh”? What do you mean, “huh”?’

‘It’s hopeless anyway. Drunk, sober, you’re just incompatible and all you’re doing is making him miserable. Let’s go home in the morning and give the poor old man his bed back.’

‘I can’t. How can I?’ His voice is muffled. ‘He’s sick and he needs looking after. It might be the last chance I get.’

By now he’s rolled to the edge of the bed with his back to Chrissie. It’s a relief. Her skin twitches to be separate and cool, and she moves towards the other edge to widen the gap between their bodies. Air flows into the

space, fresh and light for all too brief a moment. Again the heat settles, Brendan sleeps, and Chrissie wonders how he does it.

She stares at the curtains. Flimsy, cheap, they fail to keep out the light from the street just as they fail to keep out the noise. She closes her eyes and tries to conjure the darkness of home, its chill and its silence. Thump, thump, beats the inside of her head. She gives up. From nowhere a police siren pounces into the night, and as it speeds up the road that passes their window it seizes all territory. Unchallenged. Red and blue lights gatecrash the room, then leave.

Chrissie gets out of bed and parts the curtains slightly, peering to see where the police car has gone and what the problem is. High orange lamps give the street a look that's blank, indifferent to a distant street's calamity. One car passes, then another, and a solitary man waiting at a bus shelter lights a cigarette, sucking deeply, and throwing the match into the roadway. Chrissie realises that the TV noise has shut down and so has the music, leaving the street bereft. It makes her vaguely mournful. She lets the curtain drop and gets back into bed where Brendan has rolled on to his back and is beginning a snuffle that might build to a snore. She kicks and pushes to make room. In the street a bus squeaks to a halt and stays, panting, for a few seconds before moving off towards the city. Chrissie imagines the bus stop now, peopled only by black and orange shadows.

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'Are you awake?' Brendan asks just before 7 o'clock, and he reels from the fury of words that have been lying in wait.

'Are you serious? Is anybody not awake? The traffic never stopped, the first radio began hours ago, and if anyone else turns on that mindless drivel I'll break their bloody door down and chuck their radio through a window.'

'Keep your voice down,' says Brendan. 'I should mention that he's making us breakfast. He's bringing it in. He told me last night that he

would. He'll be here any minute now, so get your elbow out of my ribs and try not to be so damned grumpy.'

There's a knock on the door and then it's flung open. Reg struggles through with a tray, watching that nothing tips, nothing spills, feeling his way with his feet. His hands are shaking, and his knees are tottering, as they always seem to, and Chrissie is about to leap to the door to help him till she notices the old man's face, and how fierce is his concentration. She stays where she is. Brendan reaches out to take the tray and Reg nods at Chrissie.

'I've given you the big cup. I know how women like tea.' He takes a step back to admire the tray. 'There's bacon, eggs, fried bread, and mushrooms. I was going to fry up some spuds, but I ran out of room in the pan.'

'Wow,' says Chrissie. 'This takes me back. My father used to cook up breakfasts like this on wet Sundays. Work of art, Reg.'

Reg looks at Brendan for his response.

'Thank you, Dad,' says Brendan without looking up.

'If you want more, or if you want something else, just sing out. I'll be in the kitchen.'

'What was he waiting for?' Brendan asks when the door has closed. 'Applause?'

'What's wrong with you? He's gone to so much trouble. I thought this would be the kind of thing you'd be wanting.'

Brendan continues eating, and then he says, 'At our place on Sundays, Mum cooked the breakfast, just like she did everything else. At our place at Christmas, some years he sent a present; some years he forgot. This does not take me back. It's food. As far as I'm concerned, it's just food.'

'So what do you want?'

'I don't want bullshit. It was better last night when he was trying to pick a fight every five minutes. At least that was honest. This – "whatever you want, just sing out" – that's for your benefit. It's shit.'

Chrissie discovers she doesn't feel like eating after all. Weariness gives her mouth a hollow dryness. Food doesn't belong there. Brendan, on the other hand, is stabbing and tearing at the mushrooms with his fork and piling them into a mouth that's working doggedly. He waves a piece of fried bread on the fork.

'Look at this. How's this for healthy eating? He's got no idea. What we should do is invite him to stay with us for a while. Fresh air. Good food. Perhaps even exercise.'

Chrissie shakes her head. 'You must be mad. He'll never come.'

'We'll see.' Brendan finishes eating and passes Chrissie her cup of tea. 'I'm going to talk to him.' He takes the tray with him into the kitchen.

Chrissie tries to eavesdrop but the rise and fall of street noises defeats her. She sprawls across the bed, closes her eyes and tries to relax. She thinks again of home and its quiet. But no, of course, it's never soundless. The creek spilling over its wobbling rocks, the wind in the pines: those sounds are constant. And then the birds, they're not always melodic, or even peaceable. She thinks of lying awake, hearing the morepork, and the waiting, the long vulnerable wait till the answering call. Or no answering call. Just a silence that searches, till it grows so thin and empty that it falls inward to start over again. Brendan has to get over this, she thinks. He has to see that some dreams aren't possible, give it up and move on.

'I'm going out,' Brendan says, coming into the room. He bundles up his clothes and heads for the shower. 'I'm going for a walk.' He's pale around the eyes and mouth. From across the hallway the shower rattles on, then off, and when he comes back there's water running from the hair behind his ears and into his collar.

'Dry yourself,' says Chrissie.

'He's a bastard, a stubborn old bastard.' He goes to the door. 'I won't be long.'

Everything seems quiet suddenly, after the slamming of the outside door.

Reg is hovering just outside the bedroom. ‘More tea?’ he asks. ‘I’ve got the jug on.’

The cup he brings in is only half-filled, so that less tea will slop in the saucer. Then he sits awkwardly on the end of the bed, examining his slippers and playing with a half-empty cigarette packet.

‘I’ve upset him. I’m always upsetting him.’

‘Funny. He thinks he’s always upsetting you.’

‘Well, he’s right about that. He is.’ A dry laugh turns into a cough and one hand rubs at the back of his neck, dishevelling the sparse hairs then smoothing them again. ‘Nothing he can do about that. Nothing I can do. It was the same with his mother; they’re very alike. He thinks if I’d been around more he’d have had a better childhood. He wouldn’t. It would have been just like this, only years of it.’ The hand falls to his knee in a gesture of helplessness. ‘He wants things to be true that can’t be true.’

‘He does. Yeah. I told him that.’

‘Did you? Well. Did you just?’ He pulls out a cigarette and lights it. A quick flick of his eyes in her direction and she knows that he knows she’s noticing the stained fingers and the tremor. He makes an exhibition out of inhaling, and breathing out a ring of smoke. A coughing fit spoils the effect. He gasps, wheezes, recovers. ‘Look, I’m not a bad bastard. I just won’t keep backing a losing horse. If I’m making people miserable, why stay? If they make me miserable, why stay?’ He turns to glare at her. ‘You’re staying, I notice.’

Chrissie laughs. ‘I don’t enjoy being miserable, don’t worry. We’ll be off as soon as I can convince Brendan he’s wasting his time.’

‘Good.’ Reg stands up. Chrissie feels some satisfaction to see he’s heard the edge to her voice and that he’s irked by her judgement. He stares at his feet. ‘He’s a poet.’ This is also a judgement. ‘What the hell’s that? Would I like his stuff? What’s it like?’

‘It’s good, as a matter of fact. Very good. What he writes is quite structured …’

‘Structured! That’s it! I’d hate it. That’s what he wants to do to me and my life. “A bit of discipline,” he calls it. Give up this and stop doing that. No fun, and weak and sick so he can tell me what to do. Does he do that all the time? Wants to reshape everyone to be a tense bastard like he is?’

‘He’d like to be necessary, yes. But alive, that’s the main thing he wants you to be.’ She passes over her saucer for him to use as an ashtray. ‘Which, I can see, isn’t what you want. I wouldn’t have thought slow and lingering would be the death to suit you. Throwing yourself into the traffic like I saw you do yesterday, that’d be more your style. Head on. Brendan’s like that.’

‘I’d noticed.’ He pauses at the door. ‘You’re okay though. That’s a surprise. I didn’t think I’d like you. He must have something going for him.’

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A bit later, Chrissie’s in the shower. She intended to help with the dishes but her way was barred. ‘No women,’ he said. ‘I won’t have women in my kitchen.’ She’s too tired to be really annoyed, but she’s saving it up to be angry later. Pushing people away, she thinks. Everywhere’s a no-go area. She’s fuzzy with sleeplessness, but the water wraps her up in its warmth so that the pores of her skin are alive and nothing else matters. Then she yells as the water turns suddenly cold.

‘Sorry,’ calls Reg. ‘I forgot.’ And he turns off the hot tap in the kitchen.

But the shower’s ruined. Chrissie hurries to finish. She notices that she’s using a fresh cake of soap, and one of three clean towels. Ready for us, she thinks. When he knew we were coming, he rushed around and got the place ready. I’ll bet Brendan didn’t notice that. Then she wonders where Brendan is. She lingers over dressing, reluctant to face the effort of making conversation, of filling in time, waiting. Where the bloody hell is he? Lost?

He needn't think I'm waiting round here for hours till he decides to come back.

She's glad when she hears the noise of someone arriving and she goes into the living room. But it's not Brendan. A young woman is standing at the front door, holding a child.

'I knew he was staying here,' the woman says to Reg, 'because Clive next door saw him come home with you last night. He was telling me this morning. Then I saw him go out a while ago.'

Reg's hands hanging by his sides are pink and boiled by the hot dishwater. They hold some soapy cutlery that steams quietly, and the woman talks disjointedly as if to no one in particular. 'When I went past, someone had already rung one-one-one, but nobody knew who he was. So I thought I'd better come and tell you because I recognised him. I don't know how badly hurt he is. The driver, the guy in the car, he was crying, but he didn't seem hurt.'

For a moment it seems to Chrissie that all noise has stopped, mouths moving, the spoons in Reg's hand falling to the floor in silence. Then an ambulance siren screams thinly in the distance, and for a farcical moment all four jam together in the doorway. It's Reg's slippers that seem to speed down the stairs the fastest, infinitesimally ahead of his feet at each step. 'Please God,' prays Chrissie, 'don't let him fall out of his slippers.'

The traffic is slowing, some has stopped, and through it the ambulance siren forces open a gap. The sound takes charge; it draws a line in the air that promises continuance, certainty, and help coming quickly. Then it stops.

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And the world just goes on, just goes on. Chrissie's back in the same bed in the early morning, staring at the same curtains. It's as if yesterday didn't happen. Again she's hot. She hasn't slept. But it's got nothing to do with music this time; this time the noise has been inside her head, jangling,

racketing all night long. Remembering. And finding great holes in her memory – like arriving at the hospital – she can't remember that. Waiting for x-ray results, waiting for test results, cups of tea, faces, words, and sitting and waiting. She can't remember what anybody said. Brendan, so pale, so not-quite-Brendan, part of the hospital machinery, hooked up, plugged in. Solid, though. Solid and familiar, and she tried to say something about that to Reg, to be reassuring. But he misunderstood.

'Solid all right,' he said. 'Luckily. Probably wrecked that poor bugger's car.' He was sitting on the other side of the bed, as shrunken as a sparrow in the winter rain.

Nothing wrong then, nothing major. In for overnight observation and then home in the morning. So why isn't she glad? Because of what Brendan said when Reg nipped out for a smoke.

'Don't tell me what a thick bastard I am. I already know. It's all I've been thinking about. Not just that I can't cross a goddam road, but I can't face basic obvious facts. Keep banging my head till my head gets smashed in. Time to stop. Like you're always saying, time to move on.'

'Reg was upset …' she started to say, but something tight in his face made her stop. Something unsquashable has just been squashed and it leaves Chrissie shaken. So now she's lying on her back, staring at the ceiling, and wondering why her head feels so clogged. Then she remembers. She takes the earplugs out of her ears. Sound, crisp and alive, flows back in, reconnecting her to the world, so that she feels again that her blood is flowing, her lungs are breathing, and some of the deadness disappears.

She begins to listen. She begins to untangle each frayed piece of sound to form a ragged picture. Against the background of traffic, high-pitched intermittent machinery marks the nearby industrial area; downstairs a baby cries, then eases off, and an altercation between a mother and a toddler is brief but passionate. Upstairs a door slams, footsteps clatter and out in the

street a car engine, voices, someone whistling. Downstairs the mother sings.

Chrissie's out of bed by now. The working day is well under way, and she wants to avoid another gift of breakfast in bed, any interruption, any inconsequential thing that might delay getting Brendan out of hospital and on the way home. The flat seems to be empty though, as she showers and gets dressed, and it's only when she's in the kitchen, wondering where he keeps the tea, that Reg appears through the front door.

'I went for a walk,' he says. 'You were fast asleep, so I thought I'd let you rest. You were looking as if you needed it last night.'

'You don't look that great yourself. Sit down. I've got the jug on.'

He's about to protest, but smiles slightly, sits at the table and lights a cigarette. 'Tea caddy to your left. Blue. Picture of the queen.' Then he's watching her, directing, instructing. 'Warm the pot first, warm it. Don't you do that? Don't you know how to make tea? Bread's in the cupboard over there, butter's in that one. With the jam.' Through a haze of smoke. 'My second smoke of the day. Cutting back. Usually I'd have had four by now.'

There's something different about him that makes it difficult to be angry, and she wants to be angry, she wants to punish him. So she's crashing about in his kitchen, taking over his space, but it's not working because he's allowing it, being helpful. She can't be angry, not even triumphant at this small victory. It's because of yesterday, she realises. Yesterday, they sat by Brendan's bed, like the visitors round the other beds, and when the shock subsided, they were visited themselves, first by a sense of fragility, and then, more and more as the day went on, by a sense of reprieve.

It's powerful. It makes them want to be different, to be better. For this short time, they're both the same, both ripe for promises and new beginnings. So there it is. They sit on opposite sides of the table, buttering toast, spooning sugar, with an awkwardness and a tenderness, like a

mismatched couple on the morning after, wondering how the intimacy took place.

'This place is growing on me,' says Chrissie. 'I'm starting to see why you like it.' It's an exaggeration, but it's out before she has time to correct it.

Reg grunts. 'It suits me,' he says. 'Not for Brendan though. You'll be happy to get him home again. He can lie around, gazing at the clouds and writing poetry. Do him good.'

'Mm.' She nods. She hates this sort of talk – eager to please, not quite honest.

'And poetry – there's no market for it, is there? No money in it. So naturally, that's what he chooses to do.' He's laughing. 'I like that about him.'

'It drives his mother crazy.' Chrissie knows she shouldn't say this. 'Pamela finds Brendan's choices difficult. Like me. She can't see why he chooses me.'

'No?' Reg stares. 'Is that right?' He keeps on staring. Then slowly he starts stacking plates, scraping off crumbs and blobs of jam, and there's a stillness about him that makes Chrissie hold her tongue. He's absorbing something; he's readjusting something in his mind. 'Well,' he says. 'Well, well. They always seemed to be a team. No differences. It always seemed a simple thing, black and white. On the one side, mother and child, part of each other, and on the outside – me. The devil himself.'

He starts washing dishes, and Chrissie can see he doesn't like it when she picks up the tea towel. She dries a cup and puts it in the cupboard with the others on their row of hooks.

'Dammit,' he says. 'I know what'll happen tomorrow. I won't be able to find anything. Every bloody thing put in the wrong place.'

She dries a glass and opens a cupboard door. On the second shelf is a row of pill bottles, and she turns to him, startled. 'Are these yours?'

‘Well, they’re probably not yours. Do I look stupid? Bloody Brendan. Sees me in town, in front of the town hall. “You look as if you’re dying,” he says. “You need looking after. Coming round in the weekend.” Then he gets here. “You have to go to the doctor,” he says, as if I’d never have thought of that myself. Don’t you bloody tell him. He’d think it just proves he was right.’ It’s her turn to laugh; her turn to absorb information.

After a while, she says, ‘It’s really quiet at our place. Really quiet. You’d hate it.’

‘Don’t push your luck.’

He’s laughing; they’re both laughing.

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Chrissie’s on the way to the hospital, and she sits in the car at the traffic lights, her fingers tapping an anxious rhythm on the steering wheel. She hates driving through traffic. And she doesn’t know what she’ll say to Brendan. How do you talk about possibilities when they’re so new, so fragile, that just to discuss them might be too clumsy? Can Brendan be that careful? Can Reg? Can she? She yawns till her jaw cracks. Home soon, both in their own bed. Soon, the lullaby sound of pine trees, the soft, gentle dark, and far away in the darkness, the morepork calling, its call like a note of warning, a word of yearning over a grave. Be warned. No, she won’t tell him that. He already knows.

The lights turn green. By a pedestrian crossing outside a school, three young women stand with groups of five-year-olds, giving lessons on how to cross roads. Chrissie stops for them. As they cross, some scowl at her, some smile and wave. She waves. There’s the class I should book Brendan into, she thinks. I’ll tell him that. Stop, wait, listen. That’s for him; write it out a hundred times. Wait, judge the moment; that’s for me. And she’s grinning as she turns into the hospital car park.

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WINGS OF STONE

Painful emotion left dangling – is that what a ghost is? A remnant, like dust between floorboards, like bright shapes that stay when the eyes are shut? Seen and not seen.

When Evie Dexter died, most people went to the funeral. When everyone was seated, Sam stood up by her coffin and placed on it a framed photo of their wedding day. There was a shiver in the church, as if some propriety had been breached.

'Was it his fault?' someone asked in the back pew. 'How did she die?'

'Stroke,' said somebody else, and others nodded. A vital pathway blocked. That made sense in more ways than one.

Sam's eyes and ears became acute. Their sensitivity was close to pain, as if something self-protective had been broken. He stood up to say how fine she'd been, how light, like the wind that ruffled the lace on her sleeve. There was a faltering in his mind and he wondered why that lightness seemed so long ago and out of reach. His fingers holding the photograph made hot marks on the glass.

'It's like a dream,' he said. 'A bad, bad dream.'

He said that because of the eyes that faced him in rows. He saw that each eye held an image of Evie, and each face held her up like an accusation. There she was, fat and lumbering, with her stockings round her ankles, and there, close by, where he smelled her unwashed hair, and

brandy. In every aisle, he saw her standing, bruised with a heaviness that pulled her back to the earth. The clarity of his sight made Sam sit down.

'Remember how she used to be? A pretty girl, once. You'd have to blame him, the bugger, wouldn't you?'

Sam heard that as if he'd said it himself.

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As time went by, he continued to behave like a man who'd been shocked into wakefulness and who'd never recovered from that befuddlement. He stared at everything and everyone as if he couldn't quite believe what he saw. His quick energy became unfocussed. At the boat-builders' yard, they waited for him to come back to work, and then, eventually, they advertised his job. So the payments on the house lapsed. The bank took possession. Sam moved a caravan on to a piece of land near the house, at the place where the metal road that passed the house gave up the journey and became a track to nowhere in particular.

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No one would buy the house. No one would even rent it. People on the main road, whether leaving town or arriving, could see the house tucked just around the corner, and almost always, they saw Sam. On the front porch. Wandering round from the back and peering in a window.

'Looking for a ghost,' they'd shake their heads. 'Serve him right.'

'You sometimes forget,' they said to each other, 'that when you buy a place, along with the rural vista and the lead-light windows, you also get the borer and the ragwort. And in this case, you get Sam.'

Ragwort was the problem. Evie had once planned a rose garden at the back. It had never happened, but in the weeks after the funeral, Sam, carrying her ashes, decided at that late stage to make her the garden she'd dreamed of. He cleared the ground and spread the ashes, and then saw that he'd been a fool. He should have put the ashes last. Not knowing quite

where she was, he put the spade away and then watched the ragwort come, and the dock. He blamed himself for that.

Years passed, and the grass and gorse self-seeded around the house and the caravan, until from the main road it looked as if nobody lived there. Leaves fell from the poplars along the road and from the fruit trees in the old garden. New layers of soil formed and covered up the old layers. New layers of stories covered up old ones, and the talk about Sam seemed to stop.

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Then Dell Donovan bought the house. She found it on a bright winter's day, when the town shone with welcome and the house seemed shy and smiling. Then she looked more closely. What a mess, she thought, but cheap. She loved the coal range, the nooks behind the doors and the hidden cupboards, and she loved the tangle of trees at the back and the long slope down to the creek. This is it, thought Dell. Empty and waiting for me and my girls; here's where happy childhoods begin.

It wasn't empty of course. Well-fed spiders lay in ambush behind the webs of their forbears. Tribes of mice had staked out territory under the bath and behind the stove, and there was a wasps' nest in the laundry. Dell swept and scrubbed till the small hours. Then Jessie and Lana arrived from their grandmother's, and as she watched them choosing colours for their rooms, Dell reflected that happy childhoods were long overdue.

Dell found part-time work cleaning houses for some of the town's older residents, and Jessie was chosen for the school netball team, and Lana for the junior choir.

'What does your father do?' the other children asked.

'We haven't got a father,' said Jessie.

'He's dead,' said Lana.

It was what Dell had taught them to say about Nick.

Turn your back on a person; blot him out. But he won't go away. He crouches below the horizon, infecting the weather, distorting the shape of the darkness. A worse shape, thinks Dell after years and years, than if I just turned around and looked.

'This house is haunted,' said Lana. They were playing scrabble.

'No it isn't,' said Dell.

'It's an old man. Sort of grey and hairy. He's got staring eyes and floats around the windows. I think he's got a flying broomstick.'

Dell had seen him that morning when she'd gone out for the newspaper. He'd seemed to be part of the early stillness, standing as still as the grass on the other side of the road, and his eye, fixed on the house, hadn't wavered when she'd called out a greeting.

'That's just the old man up the road,' she said. 'And if he can fly on a broomstick, I can probably fly on a clothes peg.'

'I know all about him,' said Jessie. 'His name's Sam Dexter. Zara told me. Her grandmother used to know him. He murdered his wife. Zara says she wouldn't live in his house or anywhere near him. She wouldn't even come here to visit.'

Dell recognised the anxiety in her daughter's voice. The judgement of a Zara or a Krystal or a Meg. Next to that, a murder was nothing. She'd noticed that Jessie had developed a strategy for dealing with all the movings in their life. In each new community, she took a little time to sum up what was involved in being a local, and then, she became one. My little chameleon, thought Dell every time, and every time she felt the same misgivings.

'Who says he's a murderer?' she asked. 'A judge? A jury? Was anyone even murdered?'

'Everyone knows. Everyone says. Zara says she doesn't know how we can live here.'

Lana was different. Her friendships were rare but strong, and at their last address Dell had realised that she too had found a way of coping with change. She'd stopped making friends.

'Is that what we'll do then?' Lana demanded. 'Shift?'

'No,' said Dell. 'Definitely not.'

Then later, to reinforce the point, she showed Jessie and Lana the packets of seeds that she'd bought and described what they'd be eating next year – sweet corn dripping with butter, pumpkin soup, strawberries and ice-cream. They were enchanted by the idea of such things coming out of the dirt.

Table-smashing rages. A chair smashed, and the air taut and electric and crackling on everyone's skin. And then when it's over, the quiet noises. The sobbing. Like water running in the gutter at the end of a storm. Like rain in the trees that falls and falls, long after the sky is clear.

Dell was a hard worker. She rubbed the finger marks from Mrs Bennett's kitchen door; she removed the black gunk from Mr Maitland's stove; the dust balls from under Mrs Knowles' bed. They liked her company. They were glad to ransack their memories; it was rare to find someone who wanted to know.

'I knew Evie,' said Mrs Bennett on Monday morning, spooning sugar into her tea. 'I sat beside her at school and helped her with her homework. She was a good, soft creature. She only wanted one thing. To be a wife. Her heart set on just that.'

When the scones were buttered, Mrs Bennett seemed lost in the quiet of her tea leaves. 'It seemed to me,' she said, 'that she'd died before, much earlier. Like a small animal shut outside that dies of the cold. When a little kindness was all she needed. That's not much, is it?'

Mr Maitland lit the fire on Tuesdays. He liked the house to be welcoming when Dell was due. 'I never got on with Sam,' he said. 'Never happy without an argument. For no reason. Just for winning.' He stared into

the flames, big hands dangling like washing from his knees. ‘But conversation with her – not possible. Smiled. Smiled. Said nothing.’ He watched Dell dusting the mantelpiece. Dell had learned to be quiet, to wait. ‘Mismatched. But that doesn’t mean he killed her. People got excited at the time, but people do that. People like to get excited. They soon calm down.’

Mrs Knowles had photos. On Wednesday she had Dell burrowing into the back of the wardrobe to pull out old shoe boxes full of her photos.

‘This one,’ she said. ‘Me and Evie.’ In gym slips and rumpled socks, with their arms around each other’s shoulders and squinting in the sun. ‘You can see how pretty she was. I wasn’t surprised when she married young. But then you saw them together, and he never looked at her or spoke. That was cruel. And her ashes – he just dumped them any-old-where. No feeling. So who can know?’ She pursed her lips. ‘Who knows what he did back then.’

Who knows? Who knows?

The opinions, the memories buzzed in Dell’s head like old newsreels all running at once. After lunch, she took the spade into the garden to try to assert some order. The carrots would go there, the courgettes in the opposite corner. She wished they hadn’t mentioned the ashes. No one had known exactly where, so every slice of the spade was setting off land mines of guilt. I’m not soft, thought Dell. And this has to be done. I’m not soft or good and that’s lucky for me. If I’d been like that, I might never have left.

The opinions had seemed to agree that Sam wasn’t dangerous, but Dell’s worries remained. She pounded the spade on a clod, up and down, till the clay broke. Once again, she thought, once again. One daughter ashamed. The other afraid.

It felt like a fight. All afternoon she swung the spade till the garden was flat and crumbed as a flounder. Then in the kitchen Dell made a cup of tea and studied the self-portraits that the girls had stuck on the fridge door with magnets. Jessie’s was huge eyes and wild hair, with a ferocity that Dell

suddenly recognised as Nick's. Bloody hell, she thought. It was there too in Lana's portrait, but less in the hair and more in the arms and legs that swung in all directions, perhaps in dancing or perhaps leaping from mountain peak to mountain peak. They had put their names in careful print at the bottom.

Dell pulled out a photograph album and flicked through the pages. Wedding photos, Jessie holding newborn Lana, and the four of them together: mother, father, two girls. Nick was smiling in that one. Family man. He'd been furious when he'd seen that photo, the scowls on the children's faces and her own tense expression, and now it gave her a shock to see herself, and them, all of them, as they'd been. You can't blame him for being upset to see that, she thought. It was a hard truth to find on his own kitchen table.

What if, she wondered, what if I put their self-portraits in an envelope and posted them to him from Mum's place? She looked again at the faces in the photo. Why should I? What good did I ever get from him?

Then suddenly the girls were coming in from the school bus, and the album was still in front of Dell on the table.

'Ah. Let me see,' they said, and Jessie pulled up a chair while Lana put one arm around Dell's neck and leaned against her, with her chin sharp on her mother's shoulder.

'There's me. That fat baby, Jessie, that's you.'

'This baby, big mouth and no teeth. That's you.'

When they came to the photos of Nick, the girls became quiet. Lana continued to lean but Dell felt a stiffness in the leaning that was hard to interpret.

'Do you remember him?' she asked.

'I do.' Jessie frowned. 'A bit. Is he dead?'

'No, he's not dead. I say that sometimes to shut people up. So they won't ask.'

'We hate him, don't we? Is that why we say he's dead?'

‘But what if I want to ask?’ Lana demanded. ‘Was he bad? Why don’t we know him?’

Dell took a deep breath. ‘We don’t hate him. No, certainly not.’ She had thought about this; she was ready for it. ‘He was good. In lots of ways. He worked hard; he was a generous person and he had lots of friends. But at other times he hurt people. He would get so angry and hurt people. Like me. I was afraid that one day he might hurt you.’

It sounded rehearsed. Because it was rehearsed. She had planned to be strong, calm, reassuring. Not false. She stared at her daughters in confusion. They looked back with eyes that were guarded, and puzzled, and waiting for the thing she would say that would make it clear and right. Dell had no idea what that might be.

Is he good? Is he bad? Is he a package of inventions, his own, mine, and behind all that, some truth, like a phantom? Children need more than a phantom, thinks Dell.

It was a busy time. Next month the school was putting on a concert and the girls were fully occupied with rehearsals and their own importance. It was the garden that occupied Dell. She had marked her rows with pegs and string but the seeds had taken no notice and had appeared in haphazard dots and bunches. The plants amazed her. The small perfection of a cabbage seedling.

One morning the carrot seedlings had been scooped out of the ground. They lay limp and half buried by the soil.

‘Looks like a dog to me,’ said Dell. ‘I don’t think birds would do that.’

‘No one round here’s got a dog,’ said Jessie.

Lana wrinkled her forehead and said nothing.

The next morning the beetroot was gone and some of the broccoli flattened.

‘Zara says I can stay at her place,’ said Jessie. ‘But I won’t. I’ll stay here.’

‘Don’t you want to stay the night?’ asked Dell.

‘Don’t,’ said Lana. ‘Don’t go.’

‘You don’t have to be worried,’ Jessie told her. ‘Evie won’t hurt you. If she’s mad at someone, it won’t be you.’

‘I think it’s possums,’ said Dell. It’s my fault, she thought. I shouldn’t have dug in the garden. She felt she was groping for a common sense that had turned slippery.

That night the whole house was punched awake by Lana’s nightmare. Both Dell and Jessie flung themselves onto her bed, their arms reaching to snatch her out of her screaming. Wet and sobbing, she clung.

‘It’s all right,’ said Dell, over and over. ‘Nothing can hurt you.’

‘It won’t go away,’ said Lana. ‘The ghost. It keeps coming. It keeps coming.’

‘See?’ said Jessie. ‘It is haunted. Zara said that Evie’s ghost … ‘

‘No.’ Lana pulled away. ‘The man. With spiders. Big white spiders. He keeps them in his ears and in his eyes. They live inside his head.’ All of her fingers dug into Dell. ‘They creep around stealing our food. They jump out. I want them to go away.’

‘Shush,’ said Dell. ‘Shush. Sam’s not a ghost. He’s an ordinary old man with lots of white hair. Everywhere. Ears, eyebrows. Just eyebrows. He’s our neighbour. Perhaps we should go and visit him and then you’ll see there’s nothing to be afraid of.’

‘What?’ Jessie rolled to the edge of the bed. ‘We can’t do that. We can’t go visiting murderers.’

‘For God’s sake, Jessie, not this again. Not now. It’s too late, we’re too tired, and I don’t want to hear that garbage from you again. Other people might gossip and tell lies but you’re not to. Do you hear me?’

Jessie exploded. ‘But you lie – you say our father’s dead. And we live miles away from him because he hurts people. And now we live here, near to Sam Dexter who killed his wife, and now you say that he’s all right. You

… you're not even true!' Then she was running, in a rush of tears, back to her own room.

Dell rocked back and forth, stroking the top of Lana's head. 'It's all right,' she said again and again. 'Everything's all right.'

A long time passed before Lana's trembling stopped and she relaxed into sleep.

•

Early the next morning Dell was woken by a disturbance like moths in the hallway. She followed the noise. In the kitchen, Lana hovered in the middle of the room with her fists bunched and clutching the sides of her nightie, while Jessie stood at the open back door hissing instructions at her.

'Yell to Mum. Stay back. Yell to Mum!'

'What is it?' Dell's ordinary voice made the three of them jump. 'What's the matter?'

'Him!' Jessie squeaked. 'In our garden!'

'Stay inside.' Dell hitched up the hem of her own nightie the better to stride out the back door. 'What the hell do you think you're doing?'

Sam didn't hear. He was in the lettuce patch, swinging his arms and grunting and pulling like a tethered bull. The coolness of the air reminded Dell of her lack of clothes. She looked for protection, saw the hoe against the back wall, and at the same moment saw her daughters on the back verandah. Their hair still tangled with sleep, they stood close together as if trying to merge, and in their eyes she saw the fear that made her breath clot in her throat. She'd never wanted to see that look in their eyes again. To exorcise that look and her every memory of that look, she swung the hoe and charged into the garden. She screamed. The air hit her tonsils like a cold thirst for blood.

Sam stopped. His mouth fell open. He waved a hand in her direction, and Dell noticed that his arms and ankles were tangled with the string that had marked her newly sown rows. He looked like a fly caught in a web.

Her Valkyrie moment popped and vanished. Up close, Dell could see Sam was trembling, and about to totter and fall.

'Salad!' he said, indicating the limp remnants of lettuce and radish. 'Not salad!'

That seemed all there was to be said. Dell dropped the hoe in confusion, and stood back as he hobbled towards the path. The wet clay fell from his shoes and made a trail behind him, but as he passed the verandah, Jessie leapt down the steps, gathered a handful of the clay, and threw it against his back. It thumped and fell, leaving a yellow mark on his jacket.

'Get out,' she called after him. 'Horrible man. We don't want you here.'

Lana scrambled to join in. Her clay missed but she stood with her feet wide and her back stiff with venom. 'You're not allowed here, you horrible man!' she yelled. 'We hate you! You horrible spidery man!'

'Stop that!' shouted Dell. 'Get back inside. Look at that mud. Get in the shower.'

The mood at breakfast was triumphal.

'I don't think he'll come back,' said Jessie. 'He'll be too scared. He might think we'll kill him next time.'

'He might think we've got axes and guns.' Lana took a happy bite of her toast. 'He'll be worried we all might attack him, like Mum.'

'I didn't attack him,' said Dell. 'He's no threat to us. You saw that, and there's five minutes before the bus comes, and you've both got jam all over your faces. Come here.'

As she wiped the cloth over their chins, they stood with upturned faces, waiting, trusting. Their trust left her numb with astonishment.

Feet of clay.
Thinks Dell.

'Something has to be done,' said Dell after tea. 'Peace talks have to be held. If we can't work something out, we'll have to shift. Again.'

There was silence except for the clink and slither of dishes. Dell was washing and the girls were drying.

‘He might shift,’ said Lana. ‘Or he might die quite soon.’

‘What do we have to do?’ asked Jessie. ‘I think he hates us. He doesn’t want us to be here.’

‘We could try visiting him. And talking. Are we brave enough?’

‘When?’

‘Why not now?’

It has to be now, thought Dell. The only courage she doubted was her own, and pretending to be in charge could last only so long.

As they set out, Jessie took Dell’s hand.

‘There’s three of us,’ she said, ‘and only one of him.’

From the roadway they followed the track that wound down through grass, gorse and manuka to an open area where Sam had his home. Three old pine trees stood to the side of the caravan, sheltering it from the wind. No one spoke as they walked down, but even so, Sam seemed to know they were coming. He sat on the raised knobs at the roots of the central pine, facing the track, so that when Dell and the girls turned the corner into the clearing, he was waiting with his forces marshalled, his three trees venerably staunch. All the intensities of evening shadow were in his eyes and eyebrows. Rasputin eyes, thought Dell.

They stopped.

‘I’m a well-known killer,’ he said.

‘That’s all right,’ said Dell. ‘We’re well-known armed warriors.’

‘And well-known fugitives from the law, so I’m told. Full of secrets. You must have done something really bad, I suppose.’

‘What?’ said Dell.

‘Just some of the things I heard when you first came.’ He seemed to be laughing at her. ‘I didn’t believe them.’

Dell took a breath. ‘Mr Dexter,’ she began, and she launched into the speech she’d prepared as they walked along the road.

But Sam wasn’t listening; he was watching Lana. With the outbreak of adult conversation, Lana had become bored, and she skipped around the caravan, fear forgotten in the glee of exploring, of lifting up boxes and old sacks, and opening the door of the outside dunny. Dell saw how it entranced the old man. Like a day with no wind, she thought, when a speck of light dances on water. Lana’s like that speck of light. And her own voice went on and on, becoming background noise, like the swaying shush of the pines.

‘Look,’ said Lana.

She was coming out of the caravan holding a framed photo. She brought it to Dell and Jessie. It was a wedding photo, the bride and the groom on the church steps, and the frame could hardly contain the young woman’s happiness. Her cheeks shone. Something in her stance said, ‘This is my success. This is my day.’ Presumably the young man was Sam. He was hardly there. Standing slightly back, and gazing absently to the side, he might have been picked at random from passersby. It was the saddest wedding photo Dell had ever seen.

‘It’s beautiful,’ said Jessie.

‘Happiest day of my life.’ Sam was looking over their shoulders. ‘And hers. See? See? You can see how happy she was.’

Dell nodded. She could.

‘Inside. There are more photos inside.’ They found themselves being pushed, Sam’s hands urgently on the small of Dell’s back and on Jessie’s shoulder. Lana was already up the steps.

Inside the caravan the tiny space had been divided in half. Nearest the door was Sam’s living space. There were shelves, a cupboard, a bench with a plastic bowl and a dish mop, and on the other side an old sea chest and an armchair. The other space, against the back window, was entirely taken up by a large table draped with blue velvet. On it were ranks of framed

photographs, some yellowed lacy items, a book, a bundle of folded handwritten papers. Everything was carefully placed, carefully dusted. Bloody hell, thought Dell, it's a shrine.

She picked up a framed photo from the centre of the display. A young woman in a chair, looking up. A young man with his hand on the back of the chair, looking down and smiling. A moment of connection and the camera had caught it before it slipped and changed. Dell could understand why Sam would give it a central place.

'What I really came to say,' she said, 'was that I'm going to shift the vegetable garden. Put it somewhere else.'

Select and focus, thinks Dell. Then put it in a frame and polish it. It won't be true, not completely. It won't be untrue. It might as well be kind.

After they'd gone, the emotion of it made Sam's hand rub and pull at his face and lips as if, with a bit more work, he could knead them to a better shape. Then he let them go, let them be their own shapes, and he reached under the caravan to the cool dark place where his home-brew was stashed. For a long time, he sat on his step, holding a bottle between his hands and rolling it, back and forth, back and forth, until the rolling stopped, and he could taste the beer, its bite, and could feel the wind on the backs of his hands and lightly round his forehead. He remembered that Evie touched him like that. At this time of day, he always remembered that.

'Did you see her face?' Sam said to the wind. 'That woman. Did you see her gulp?' His head began to bob. 'She wasn't expecting that, you could tell. Took the bloody wind out of her sails.' His shoulders shook. 'And the kids, they liked it. They liked it. And she just stood there, nodding her head, nothing to say, not a single word. Such loveliness. The sheer loveliness; it got to her.'

Sam and the wind fell about laughing.

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And meanwhile, the sun was preparing to set. Dell and her daughters were walking back down the road, striped by the shadows of poplar trees that lay across their path. As the girls chattered in front of her, Dell watched them moving in and out of glowing and sombre. She was angry. What the hell made me say that about the garden? All that bloody digging. Again. I didn't mean to say that. The shadows were full of ghosts. She suspected Evie. It was Evie who'd seen a vulnerable moment and given her those words.

'She lives there,' Lana was saying. 'She doesn't live at our place. She lives there.'

They hopped and skipped, oblivious of shadows.

'It's awful,' said Jessie. 'He must sleep in that chair; he didn't have room for a bed.'

Old liar, thought Dell. But – the photos. You couldn't argue with photos. Happiness comes and goes, she thought. And comes again. So does blame. And the idea of punishment starts to look like a child's moment of spite that's sometimes followed by magnanimity that takes your breath away.

'What we could do,' said Jessie, 'is give him a bit of our garden where she used to go. We've got room. He could put up something that had a roof and put all that stuff in it. Then he'd have room for a bed.'

'He should have a proper graveyard.' Lana gave an extra hop. 'Down by the creek. He could put a statue there. An angel.'

'A big stone one.' Jessie grinned at her sister. 'With wings.'

Now they're being silly, thought Dell. But she was remembering that that was one of the things she'd loved first about Nick. His wild imaginings.

Then she made a decision. To post the portraits. Maybe even notes from the girls. 'Dear Dad …'

Dear Dad? The fear again. The rage.

Lana whooped and spread her arms wide to run up the road. 'Watch me,' she called. 'I've got wings. I'm an angel.'

Jessie broke into a run after her. ‘Wings made of stone.’ She was laughing and spreading her arms too. ‘How far could you fly? Not far.’

They shrieked and swooped on imaginary updrafts, and then they were running back towards her, their chins high, fingertips stretched and up-tilted for flight.

A heaviness on her shoulders cracks, crumbles into the dust on the road, as if some ghost of her own is letting go, is giving up the haunting. She opens her arms, gathers the girls up, swinging their feet into the air. Here it is, she thinks. She twirls, stumbles briefly and twirls. Here. True.

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