

New Feet

Elizabeth Edwards

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of

English

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## ABSTRACT

New Feet

Elizabeth Edwards

This collection explores, in the words of Australian writer Beverley Farmer, “the experience of being foreign”. And whilst the majority of stories are rooted in some kind of travel experience, each sees its characters negotiating times of isolation or dislocation in their lives for which ‘the voyage’ – physical, emotional or psychological – is often a catalyst for entering into yet another ‘new’ space.

In the title story, “New feet”, Mrs Butler seeks a self-imposed isolation from her native cultural milieu, literally erasing her own footprints in her attempt to construct a new life for herself; whilst in “Kill the old red rooster when she comes,” two ‘intrepid women travellers’ in India complacently repeat the mistakes of their forebears until a natural event disorients them completely. For others, displacement, at least initially, occurs closer to home. The first-person narrator of “Dectomy” negotiates her way through a brief, disastrous, international marriage; and the children, Christopher (“Bubble-and-Squeak”), Mazie (“What any dog wants to hear”) and Eddie (“What the sea wants”) experience moments of foreignness that are disturbingly alienating.

As an overall concept, New Feet attempts to investigate characters who step into being strange and who rarely, within the scope of each story, ‘return’. In this sense, being foreign is not foreign in itself, but something which, like the skin of one’s feet, the characters across the collection must continually grow into and out of.

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To Ian

**New Feet**  
**by Elizabeth Edwards**

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What every dog wants to hear ~ 87

## What the sea wants

*What the sea wants, the sea will have.*

Sarah Blasko

The sea cradled him to Fremantle – with his shiny shoes and a part dividing his head into two unequal hemispheres.

*You listen to me, now, Ed, and he could feel Ma's words landing in puffs on his face, the bones of her fingers wrought around the bones of his arms. You're a good boy. She shook him. You're a very good boy. Her nose was winter-red, moist. She stooped, roping her arms around him, and mashed her small breasts against his ribcage. It's the powers that be, Eddie. The powers that be.*

Then, pushing him away, Ma rushed to the kitchen and to the heavy pot Eddie knew was boiling on the stove.

Eddie stayed standing by the wooden table, its polished gleam darkened by the shadow of the man left standing in the open

doorway of the cottage. A small hard rectangle appeared before his nose and Eddie looked up. It was a book, tied with brown kitchen twine, jutting out from the ends of Pa's long arms. *S'posed to be for your birthday, Eddie-boy.* Pa's voice sounded far away, but he laid his hand heavy on Eddie's head and gazed down at him; then he shot his eyes

THE TIMES JUNE 26 1935

### Farm Schools for Children

The Child Emigration Society—henceforth to be known officially as Fairbridge Farm Schools—had an encouraging report to give at its annual meeting yesterday. It was only a year ago that an appeal was launched by the PRINCE OF WALES and MR. BALDWIN to raise the funds required to establish in other parts of the Empire farm schools for children on the model of the original school founded by KINGSLEY FAIRBRIDGE in Western Australia. Already sufficient money has been raised to start work in Canada, and the Prince of Wales Fairbridge Farm School in British Columbia is an accomplished fact. The first cottages are being erected, and a party

towards the other man and, with a voice mean as Eddie had heard it, said: *Keep it safe, mind. Don't let no-one take it from you.*

The stranger put his hat on now and summoned the boy who stood by the table, his small suitcase at his side. *Say goodbye to Mr and Mrs Thompson, boy. Goodday, sir.* Goodday sir, good day sir; Eddie stepped with the words, and with them he climbed into the creamy leather smell of the man's car, clinging to the hard surface of his book. Ma! Pa! Eddie didn't let go his hold to wave to Rupe, whose teeth he glimpsed through the leaves, who whistled to Eddie from their tree – oh, marvellous tree – in the yard in front of the cottage. Eddie gripped his book as he was driven, by the great forces of the Empire, down the old farm road.

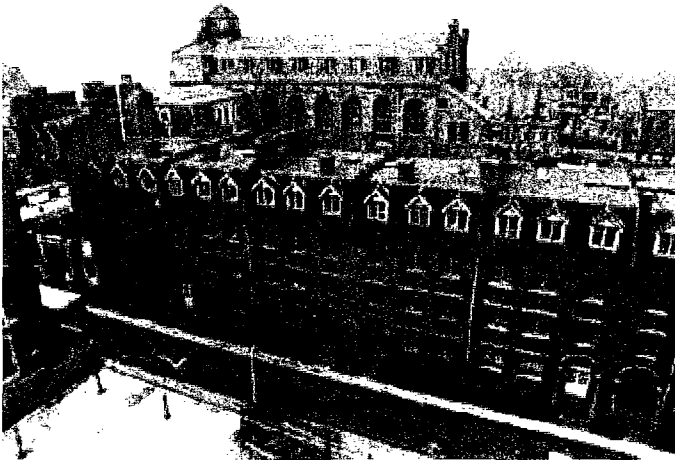
It's difficult to say how and when we learn the family stories that, through the telling, become a part of our own memories. Our myths of belonging. I certainly don't recall Grandpa telling me about London, nor about the people I'm calling the Thompsons. But on the rare occasions he did talk of his boyhood, rare to me at least, my grandfather had a habit of talking about a boy, of speaking of his child self in third person. At the time I took this to be some kind of odd convention of his age, but now I imagine the distance implied as how my grandfather, my father's father, saw the little boy from whom he had made himself. The boy who was considered – for all the documentation gathered on his behalf between the Mother Country and the New one – simply a more intelligent species of imperial cattle.

So this is a sketch he might have drawn in words, fingering through his box of old photographs and clippings, in the hopes of finding a real boy amongst the scraps of paper.



And this is how he might have written it, in his square hand, reaching into a self-formed lexicon, slipping idiosyncratically between tenses in a way that signalled where in the world he was at the moment of the telling: here, in the kitchen of his half-finished house, in one of Sydney's famous beachside suburbs; or right there on the deck of the P&O liner that carried him from London to Fremantle.

Stepney Causeway, London. They called it a Home, but the boy knew what home was. It



wasn't five towering storeys stretching seven, eight, nine buildings wide along a strange city road. It wasn't rows of gables staring down from the sky, all-seeing and unblinking. It wasn't a rickety narrow cot in a room with

seventy-nine other boys and their smells and their breaths and their nightmares.

Each night he added his own dream to the stale air, of an enormous river tumbling down over the cottage, the garden, swirling around Ma out feeding the chickens and Pa milking their two cows, picking them up off their feet, roaring down, and uprooting the tree with his brother still clinging to its branches beneath the water. Rupe! Ma! Pa! But when he woke, gasping and damp, alone, he knew it was he who was drowning in the empty grey light.

The matrons hissed. *Quiet down!* and *Don't be silly! You wouldn't be here if you had a real mammy and pappy!* and he groped for his book then, solid and warm under the

pillow. In the daytime he sidled between walls, obeying mealtimes, lessons, chores; and on occasion, when they ventured out in their small herds, the boys were followed by eyes and shreds of gossip. *Waifs and strays*, the church ladies murmured. *Bastards*, spat husbands under their breaths.

And he began hearing other whispers, also. The matrons plucked at his narrowing arms and urged him, *Eat boy! You must be strong for Canada!* He swallowed down their watery milk like it was medicine, and the pogeys, so thin he drank that, too. *Canada Canada* he heard, but his leanness turned to scrawn and his bones knocked and quivered beneath the flimsy bedclothes.

NAME: *Edward Jones* AGE: ~~9 yrs~~ 10 yrs HEIGHT: 48 Inches WEIGHT: 52 lbs MEASLES: *No*  
SCARLET FEVER: *No* DIPHTHERIA: ~~No~~ Yes WHOOPING COUGH: *No* TEETH: *F/G* GENERAL  
PHYSIQUE: *F/G Lymphatic Gland* MENTAL CONDITION: *Backward (does not know letters)*  
DISPOSITION: *Sullen, introverted*

He slept for three months; but slowly he became, sound by smell, conscious of her. The waft of apple-scented wind on his cheeks when she shook the thermometer, the ticking of her upside-down watch, the gentle tug at the tube in his throat. And he'd been aware of her, he now knew, from his chloroform cloud above the cot, through the thick grey slime of his throat; in the very same way he was aware of the hard shape of his book under the pillow. Gratefully, lovingly aware. *You nearly died, Bully-boy*, the nurse congratulated him when he opened his eyes one day, *but for that barrel chest of yours!* She knew he was miraculous, that the very shape of him, the curve of his ribs like ship's supports, had

destined him for life. But he knew better: twice now he had received the gift of breath and a beating heart from a woman who could not be his mother.

will soon be extended to New Zealand.

KINGSLEY FAIRBRIDGE'S methods are now universally recognized as the most satisfactory of the many which have been tried for encouraging emigration of the right kind to the Dominions. Every visitor to Pinjarra has been impressed by the happiness of the children, their alertness, and their disciplined independence. What is thought of their training by those best able to judge is shown by the fact that this year over 1,800 applications for Fairbridge children were received from employers, mostly farmers, while the normal number of boys and girls leaving the school in any one year is sixty-seven. No Fairbridge child has ever to look far for employment, and the interest taken by the society in his or her welfare, through a strong local committee, which is an essential part of the scheme, does not cease when he or she leaves school. The children have the advantage of growing up in their new country, and thus of becoming accustomed to its conditions during their most malleable years. The original school had to

But the nurse had given the boy something else besides. A tool to sharpen. When he descended from the fog and disgorged the worm of tubing from his swollen neck, she would pause at his bed to translate the marks on one or other of the pages of his book into sounds he recognised. *That one's boy. That's you. B-o-y. Boy.* He learned by heart her step and the rhythm of her rounds, and would ensure it was his left

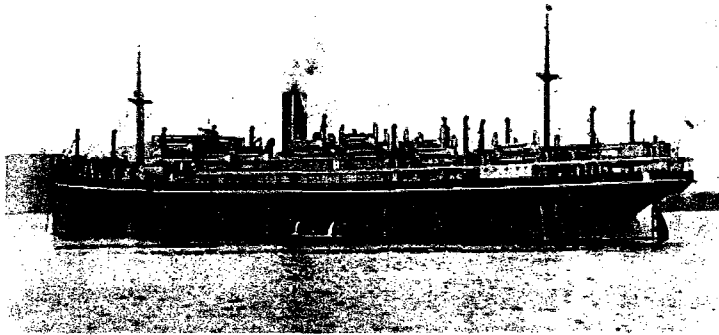
hand tracing the inky shapes as she neared: simply for the pleasure of her clicking tongue, of her hand reaching down under the blanket and drawing out his right one. Of her tsking, *Right is right* before moving off to the next bed.

*Canada Canada Canada.* He'd heard that chant on the tongues of the powers that be before he'd sickened. *Missed that boat, boy,* the superintendent disapproved, looking over his chart; and the man formed a new word, then, that slipped out from under his curled moustache: *Australia.*

And now, after breakfast and again after lunch, the boy leaves the ship's mess for the upper deck, takes out his book and, huddling between the boards of the deck and the bulwark with the wind whistling its myriad tunes, he mouths vowels that carry the wind, licks consonants thick with salt. His left forefinger blackens with the pinning down of

letters, capricious at first and then, over days, tamed into words. And now – with what secret delight he crouches on deck and pulls familiar sounds out of the ink, sharing them with a whispering sky over the great Atlantic.

Jackie Peel is the only boy onboard, besides himself, from Dr. Barnardo's



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Stepney Home. The others, and girls also, have all been swept up from streets and asylums, from orphanages and foster homes across London and Liverpool, across the entire

kingdom, to board ships to the colonies. At the evening meal, they toast God, the King, and Mr Fairbridge with real milk.

At first, sickened by the rolling of the hulking steamer, the boy was reduced once more to bed rest, barely aware of summonses to morning exercises on deck, of forcing himself to eat what would later be violently revisited. He knew only of the immense relief; of the islands of time in which he could return to his bunk and retreat under blankets.

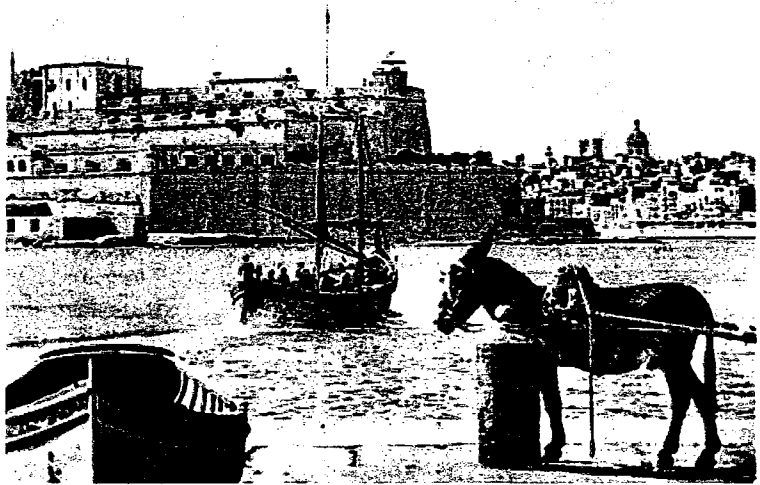
Then, after five days and five nights at sea, the boy awoke one morning in the green light before the dawn, eager to see the sun over the horizon. Perched on his bunk in his long-johns, he polished neglected shoes and hair and dressed carefully, pulling his socks up to his knees, knotting his striped woollen tie, buttoning his charcoal blazer up to its final buttonhole. Finally, the boy slipped his book down beneath his lapels, against his chest.

Illness had changed the shape of him and now his shoulders hunch, a pair of tired old men, over his ten year-old ribcage; but this morning he scurries out of his berth, into the passageway, along the bulkheads, up, up the companionway, and – at last – out to the upper deck. The cold April wind of the North Atlantic forces mouthfuls of breath down his throat. But the sea, oh, the sea is magnificent! Here and there it curls into small bowls of grey light, its glow heightened by contrast to a depth of colour he cannot fathom. And as he clings to the steel-cold gunwale and to the warm brick of book under his blazer, the surface of the ocean slithers, scaly, dark as snakes' eyes, and then smoothes and smoulders like burnished brass.

A cabin with only four boys, fresh milk, shoes so new they smell of leather: these small diamonds sink beneath the spell the sea has cast over him. He is entirely surrounded by water, and only the measure of hours does the boy weigh and truly value; and then simply to cast them into the waves, benevolent. The boy cuts himself a pattern from this: before every sunrise, he leaps up to meet the hours of the day that belong to him alone, before children and chaperones, jumping jacks and grits, crowd the daylight decks. And then after breakfast and again after lunch he feeds his other hunger; though he is not greedy: he kisses words like silvery fish and tosses them back into the sea.

One morning it is not the Atlantic wind but the Mediterranean sun, warming into late April, that lands on his cheeks. *Malta Malta*. He's never imagined such a place as the Grand Harbour with its fortified cliffs and strange blockish buildings climbing the hills to where spires and towers and tall fingers of stone stand up into the blue.

The ship docks in a frenzy of churning water, uncoiling ropes and men shouting, and finally the gangplank is lowered. But when his shoes touch the earth for the first time since



London, the boy is not now the wily ship's cat of his imaginings, prowling surefooted along the boards; he is a Tobacco Docks drunkard with buckling legs. *Aw, gerroff!* Jackie Peel shoves him away and he pitches book-down under the shadow of the steamboat. *Get up, boy! Come along, children.* And he gazes up, then, at the ship looming over him: notices the letters painted on her side. And reads them. *S.S. Ballarat.* Ballarat. A name.

Gathering his legs back under him, Eddie Jones stands and turns, scanning the harbour. Each of the vessels – every schooner, warship, freighter, every tugboat and rowboat – they all have names. Even the donkey, with his strong hairy neck bracing against the harness of a supply cart, has a name. Eddie gives it to him as their faces, pale and triangular, soft and dark, meet briefly on the docks; it is the name of the donkey in his book.

“Hullo Eeyore.”

Eeyore snorts and stamps a glum hoof as orderly lines of children retreat from the wharf, abandoning, for a few hours, the *S.S. Ballarat*, to the scurrings and hoistings of ant-men.

*Smile, boys and girls. Everybody say 'Australia'!* Some smiled, some cheered, the wind ruffled their hair. A camera recorded this: a ship's deck; 23 boys in matching striped ties, blazers buttoned up to the final buttonhole; 18 girls in rounded white collars and grey coats; 41 pairs of shiny shoes; 41 faces turned into the sun. Some smiled, some cheered, but on the docks the children huddle. Somewhere they have crossed a line. The white sun annihilates a whole dimension. The sea, the land, are cardboard flat, low buildings are cut-out thin, their shadows painted black. The few trees, seemingly composed of particles of dust, are silver and blue, rough shapes that barely rustle the enormous newspaper sky.

Eddie turns away from the *Ballarat*, now a sepia postcard, and files along behind the other children toward the truck, each bearing an identical black trunk that reads FAIRBRIDGE FARM SCHOOL, PINJARRA. It is a jaundiced plain and a cluster of wooden buildings, the air creaking with crows. The housemothers, treading along rows of children, collect shiny shoes into chests marked LONDON. Here winter is coming; but there, in the scent of May, Ma would be picking wildflowers, she and Pa planting the kitchen garden. And there, too, would be Rupe in the front yard, in their green green tree with its shiny new leaves.

Then in June Eddie rereads the words, written in Pa's slanted hand on the title page of his book: Manny Happy Returns. The sky above Pinjarra pins Eddie flat against the dry grass and the



*"Where children's feet are not deprived of their education, provided by Nature, free of cost."*

rocks that pierce his bare feet.

The children grow crusts on their soles, their skins burn and peel like the strange dusty trees whose bark they collect for the woodstoves the girls learn to cook on. At the hands of the Australians, Eddie learns how to shape a shoe for a horse from red-hot iron, to turn a grain of wheat into a golden field; he learns to birth a calf and to milk its mother. And in shop, Eddie stands at the lathe, luring bowls of light out of dead trees, unearthing petrified ripples of grain.

But at the end of the year, for Christmas holidays, with the sun baking the earth into hard cracked cakes, the children board the truck for Mandurah; and there, at last, Eddie meets the sea again, skims smooth, flat stones across its breezy surface. Every morning for a week he wakes in the green light before dawn to comb its sandy edges; and then after breakfast and again after lunch, Eddie Jones and Jackie Peel labour over a sailing dinghy they have salvaged from ruin on the bounds of the beach camp.

Year by year, the Australians hammer their wards into farmers of their unyielding earth;

<u>Date of leaving Fairbridge.</u> 29/6/38	but each summer, as
<u>Employer:</u> S.O.Holding, Esq., Katanning.	Eddie captains his
I write very highly of this boy. He was one of the best that have gone out from the Farm School in the last year. Stirling character, good keen worker and a boy who never gave us a bit of trouble.	barefoot crew on the
He is very keen to join the navy and I think he is admirably cut out for this. Whilst at the engine room with Mr. Young he showed great ability.	<i>Floating Bear</i> , the

ocean takes more of him away. Then one June, Eddie Jones turns 15 and is sent from Fairbridge Farm School to fulfil his fate on the land. And one year after that, disguising their tender ages, Eddie Jones and Jackie Peel join the Royal Australian Navy.



Not for them, the dusty cows and the cracked voices of thirsty crows. Eddie  
makes the sea his home, and of him the sea a son.

## **Kill the old red rooster when she comes**

### **Making a molehill out of a mountain**

The jeep wound up Hill Cart Road. There it went, through the mist that all but hid the train station on the left. Past the Buddhist temple squatting like a fat white dragon with its tufted golden ears and prayer flags tonguing the fog. And into Darjeeling, where the jeep turned into the narrowing streets of the town proper.

Through the window two women could be seen, matching silver perms bobbing for a glimpse of the town. The jeep stopped frequently for glowing taxi signs; for heads, dogs, bicyclists, floating, disembodied, out of the chill air; even so, it seemed quieter already, less frantic than down on the plains. And finally they pulled off the street into a low, dark garage. The women squeezed out of the vehicle and one stretched her arms into a wide V.

“Goodness! Good to get out of that jeep.” Then, “Vicky, would you look at the time?”

Vicky was still humming “Coming Round the Mountain” and fiddling with the straps on her backpack. She clicked the last one into place and unzipped her tote bag. “I’d have thought you’d be used to it by now. What about that train to Calcutta? Eight hours behind, it was.”

“Those trains haven’t run on time since 1947,” said her cousin. “What are you looking for?”

“Hmm? Oh, my- here it is. My passport.”

“Yes, don’t let’s lose our little ‘portals to the world’. And speaking of trains, I’m sure we could’ve arrived much earlier if it weren’t for that ridiculous little steam train crossing over the road.”

“Oh, Vic. That ‘ridiculous little steam train’ as you put it, is the Toy Train. A Darjeeling institution. A World Her-.”

“Yes, yes, Miss Baedeker. You mentioned that already.”

“Well, what’s more, we’ll be taking that ‘ridiculous little train’ back down to Siliguri.”

“Oh goodie. We’ve just arrived, I’m green to the gills from that godawful road doing loop-de-loops around the hillside -” yes, and she’d been wondering, on and off, why they were called ‘hill stations,’ these towns perched on the slopes of the highest mountains in the world, “-and you’re already talking about leaving. Which reminds me, Vicky, why-”

“Oh, but I do love to be on a train. There’s something very...I don’t know, romantic? Old World, about trains?”

“Ah, yes,” Vic forgot her question, “the romance. The romance of hundreds of people and their smelly food and their awful children crammed like cattle into small metal boxes for days on end.”

“But trains were the triumph of India, Victoria. First came the trains, then, thank heavens, came the tea. Besides, the Toy Train is just a little red steam train.”

“And a disgusting hole that opens straight onto the tracks.”

“On the Toy Train?”

“No, the other trains. Their so-called toilets.”

Vicky paid the driver their fares, forgetting until it was too late not to use her left hand. “Hmmm. I think Somebody needs a cup of tea and a good rest.”

“And how many farmers simply squatting in their fields as the train goes by, right there in plain view, with all those people looking on?” Vic shuddered.

“I think we both need a rest to recover from Calcutta.”

“From Calcutta! I need a rest full-stop-”

“Go on, then.” Her cousin interrupted, pushing at her elbow, and the two women entered the cool underwater gloom of the hill station.



### **Very many Picturesque views**

Vicky heaved against the door of their room at the Hotel Xanadu, slamming it open against the wall. The air inside was wet and smelt of insect spray and soap. “Vic? It’s only me.” She closed the door and inspected the wall, noting an accumulation of old door-handle-shaped dents, covered over. And now the new flaky depression she had just made.

“Hello me,” Vic sang out from within a cloud of steam roiling out of the open bathroom door.

“Well, you sound a bit chirpier, at least.” Vicky crossed the room, past the bed with its faded elephants plodding trunk-to-tail across it, the Nathmulls Tea calendar on the wall.

“Well, I’m clean as a whistle. A new woman. What took you so long?”

Vicky opened the window; the din of the street noise below flowed up into the room, cut through by a yelp and the sharp smell of frying onions. It didn't take much to raise Vic's spirits. Or lower them. Vicky frowned down onto the dirty, occasionally striped awnings of the stalls jumbled along the Mall. "Many very Picturesque views, indeed," she declared.

The pipes juddered as Vic turned on a tap and water swished along their hollow insides. "Picturesque? Oh, Vicky – you are joking?"

"Quoting, actually. Thomas Daniell. Or was it William said that?" When she looked up from the street she saw herself across the way, reflected in the dust-spotted panes of the adjacent building, and looking old, looking her full sixty eight years. The glass of her own window also reflected, so that she looked like a woman at the bottom of a lake. "Maybe it was William."

"William who? Whatever are you talking about?"

"William Daniell. Oh, never mind." But she had begun the thought, and so she continued. "They were cousins. No, no: uncle and nephew. Travelled all around India painting landscapes together. Watercolours. The one did the outlines and the other – I don't remember who did what, now – painted the details. Signed all their paintings together, too," Vicky added, and waved a rippling, obsidian wave to her reflection before shutting out the noise from the Mall below.

Instead, she could hear her cousin unscrewing the lid off one of her potions and clacking it against the bathroom basin; imagined her applying it to her face in the circular motion the Avon lady had told her reduced the effects of gravity.

"Interesting. When was this, then?"

“Oh, the eighties or the nineties, I think. Maybe even later.”

“Only in the last two decades or so? I’ve never heard of them. British?” Vic’s cream-whitened face appeared in the doorway for a moment. She blinked at her cousin and disappeared into the bathroom again.

“No, the *seventeen* eighties, silly. They painted Views for the Raj in the picturesque style – ruins and coolies and exotic trees, that sort of thing. Changed the way people saw India, really. Christie’s auctions them for thousands and thousands of pounds now, of course.” Vicky drew the curtains. “Anyway, *this* is not ‘picturesque’, and nor is it the ‘breathtaking view of the majestic Kanchenjunga, jewel of the Himalayas’ promised here.” She let her guidebook fall and followed it, collapsing on to the sheer elephants covering the double bed.

“Indeed,” Vic agreed. “Can’t we change rooms, then? Go up a level?”

“Well, I did book the top floor over the internet. Not realising, silly me, that what used to be the top floor, as well as the one below it, were removed three years ago so that the swank new hotel behind could have a better view! The girl at reception told me.”

“Three years – what a rort! And they haven’t updated their website, yet?” The toilet flushed and the sound of rushing water caused Vic to raise her voice. “So this is the new top floor, then?”

“Pretty much, unless we plan to sleep under the tables in the Restaurant Shangrila.”

“Shall we move, then?”

“But Vic, what’s the point? I booked months ago. I’m sure there’s nowhere else. And if there were, it would probably be the same story. This is India, after all.”

“So then what?” Vic finally emerged from the bathroom, naked. Her cousin had been The Beautiful One in their youth, Vicky recalled, and she herself The Bright One; but time had told which was the more enduring quality. Oh, but that was being uncharitable: at sixty seven Vic retained, in her straight-sloping nose and fine cheekbones, a certain beauty – even if it was more in the order of a watercolour these days than an oil painting.

“Hello? Vicky? Wakey-wakey.”

Vicky turned to watch her cousin struggling with the lock of her ancient suitcase.

“Well, I had to go through the whole Victorias thing.”

“Again?”

“Again. You know, you really have to know how to talk to these people.”

“Oh, I know.”

“‘I will only repeat myself once,’ I told her. ‘We are both called Victoria, yes, like the queen. Both Shepherd, as in Miss Bo Beep’s profession. And we are both staying in the room I have booked.’”

“Only this isn’t quite the room we th-”

“Then she said, bobbing her head around the way they do, ‘I’m so sorry. I’ll have to call the manager.’”

“Oh, goodness. Are you having a shower?”

“‘Ridiculous!’ I said. ‘The manager doesn’t know us any better than you do.’”

“Oh, good for you, Vicky.”

“And then guess what she said?”

“I can’t think. You’d better have your shower now, though, if you plan on having one today – look.” She was in her petticoat now, and held a laminated sign out to her cousin. “There’s a drought on, apparently, and they only have hot running water from eight to nine in the morning and three to four in the afternoon.” She picked up her watch from the night table. “And it’s half past three now.”

“Go on, guess what she said.”

“I can’t.”

“She said, ‘But it’s very *irregular* to have two guests with only one name’.”

“Irregular? Absurd!”

“‘Irregular.’” She snorted and rolled to her side. “Have you left me some water, then?”

“Well, I may have indulged a little,” Vic began, but catching her cousin’s sharp look said airily, “a drought – imagine. With all that green, green tea out there.” She waved the sign vaguely towards the window with its view of windows. “Purportedly out there,” she corrected herself. And then she grinned at her cousin. “But we all know there’s no ‘t’ in ‘Darjeeling’...” She waited.

“...because it all gets shipped to England,” Vicky finished.



### **Wonderful service**

The waiter shooed a persistent and rather dirty little boy away as the cousins entered the tea room and settled into a window seat looking out onto the Mall.



“What did that receptionist think the manager was going to do, Vicky? Come and identify us by our teeth?”

Vicky snorted. After so many years together they could drop threads of conversation and pick them up again at will. Sometimes it even seemed they could hold two conversations at once; though Vicky suspected at times that these were simply parallel monologues.

“Well, the view’s certainly no better from here, is it?” Vic continued. “All we can see is our marvellous topless hotel and a few vegetable stalls.”

“Well, we should be used to it by now, I suppose.”

“What, no view?”

“No, the Victoria Victoria thing.”

“Yes, I suppose. But what about that terribly rude man on the train to Calcutta?”

“Yes, he certainly was a bore, wasn’t he?”

“Makes you wonder if it’s worth it, really. All this roaming around. Why do we bother?”

“Oh, come on, Vic. Buck up. We’re the intrepid women travellers, remember?”

“And the train was late.”

“Besides, he did bring us chai in those little terracotta cups by way of apology.”

“Only after his superior had been dragged in. After all that kerfuffle – and trying to put someone else in your sleeper.” Vic sniffed and tilted her head, first one way and then the other.

“Oh, *my* sleeper, was it, Victoria Shepherd? Besides, it was only eight hours late and we won in the end and you slept most of the way.”

“Oh yes - *only* eight hours. Anyway, I was exhausted – this travelling is hard work, you know. My neck is k-”

“Oh, would you look at that.” Vicky nodded at the window and both women gazed through faint images of themselves at a group of stall-holders outside. They were huddled over an old tin-can brazier, boiling their spiced chai in a knobby aluminium pot.

“How authentic,” Vic murmured, and Vicky began singing that blasted song that had been in her head since Siliguri, keeping time with her fingers against the table. “She’ll be riding six white horses when she comes, dum-de-dum, she’ll be rid-” she interrupted herself and patted her cousin’s hand as the smiling waiter arrived with a shiny, steaming pot on a tray and two china cups rattling on their saucers. He placed the objects one by one on the table.

“Madam?” The waiter addressed Vic first, his hand indicating her choice with a small flourish. “Lemon or milk for you?”

“Oh, milk, please. Definitely milk.”

He poured a dash of milk into the bottom of one of the cups and filled it with tea.

“Shall we visit a plantation tomorrow, or go to the zoo?”

“Sugar, madam?” The waiter’s hand was already on the small silver tongs.

“Oh, yes, please. Just one, thank you.” She beamed at him as he dropped a sugar cube into the cup, without making the slightest splash. “Oh, must we?”

“And, for you, madam?” Another flourish.

“Oh, I’ll have lemon, thank you. I hear this tea has a very subtle liquor.” She glanced at Vic. “I wouldn’t like to ruin it with milk.” Her cousin’s mouth tightened.

The waiter smiled. “Very good, madam,” he said and squeezed a lemon wedge between the tongs’ tiny teeth, its drops clouding the cup with grey and then dissolving.

“The zoo and the Mountaineering Museum are in the same place. No sugar, thank you,” Vicky placed her hand over the rim. The waiter smiled and bowed, retreated with the tray.

“Such wonderful service!” Vic exclaimed, the goad forgotten. “And with a smile. Not like down the hill.” Here she frowned again. “Or back home for that matter – some horrible scowling little miss sawing away at a mouthful of gum and slamming things around.” But then she remembered where she was; up here, up in Darjeeling, up in the clouds in the land of tea. She turned back to her cousin. “The Mountain Museum, is that the Edmund Hillary thing?”

“Yes, there’s an Everest exhibit. And apparently there’s a monument to Tenzig Norgay, too.”

“Who? Oh, the Shompa?”

“Sherpa, Vic.”

“Oh, Shompa-Sherpa, Potayto-Potaato. Let’s-” Vic thought fleetingly of her little bed at home. “Well.” She pinched the tiny handle of her teacup, curving her pinky out into an elegant arc, and raised it to her cousin. “Well, cheers, big ears.”

“Yes, cheers – to the Victorias!”

They clinked cups, and each took a sip from the delicate-edged china. Silence fell for the first time that day, and Vic looked around at the pictures on the walls, of lush, orderly rows of tea with – she squinted – with a few brown specks in the distance. Tea-pickers, she assumed.

Vicky pondered the words of the ditty that had implanted itself in her head. Her grade five music teacher was a woman with wide square hips and pouchy breasts that joggled, as she conducted, the gold cross hanging over them. “This song, girls” she told them, “was sung by the railway gangs in the Appalachians. That’s in A-merica, children!” And it had come from an even earlier song, an old black gospel, something about Jesus in a chariot and the end of the world. Little Vicky sat on the floor with her legs crossed and, as Miss Willis waved her arms in the air, a moving-picture shunted its way through her mind: a gleaming steam train on a snowy mountain pass tootling its jaunty way toward the mouth of a gaping black tunnel. Jesus sitting astride it with a horsewhip, urging it along with ecstatic cries of “Oh, Lord!” and “Yee-haa!”

“Vicky! You’re daydreaming again. Not listening to a word. Where were you?”

“Oh, off. In another world.” She lifted the pot to feel its weight and poured more tea into their cups.

“Well, as I was saying, my vote is for the tea farm.”



## **Ruins**

They teetered on the edge of the road, buffeted by the hurricane of buses hurtling past with their brain-crackingly loud horns and attempting, it seemed to Vic, to knock them off the side of the mountain. What a godawful noise. Her nerves were in ruins.

“The guidebook describes them as ‘colourful smarties spilled onto a bright green lawn,’” Vicky called back. “Don’t give up now. We have to see that!”

“Smarties? What?” Vic shouted into the widening gap between them.

“Not ‘what’, ‘who’. You’ll see,” and she disappeared around a bend in the road.

The mist had subsided. When she turned around, Vic could see Darjeeling, sat up on the hillside like a queen, surveying the rich, green rows of tea plantations that frilled down into the valley. But the town still looked so close, despite the good half hour they’d spent on the verge of this darned road, and she turned her back on it and followed in Vicky’s wake.

A slightly higher embankment on the edge of the hill to the left had prevented her from seeing the cemetery until now; a grassy ledge at a five metre drop below the road. It was small, probably a private family plot once upon a time. British of course; she didn’t know what the Indians did with their dead. But now the white granite headstones were green, the limestone ones smoothing over their epitaphs, others cracked or beheaded completely. Vicky was right, there was something picturesque about a ruin.

As Vic neared, however, she saw that the graveyard was old, but not disused; there appeared to be slum dwellers living in it now, in a tin and blue plastic shanty abutting the rock into which the cemetery had been cut. A young woman was lazing on the grass in the sun as tattered washing, strung up on lines joining the tumble-down graves, dried in the temperate air. She had a long stick which she used occasionally to swat the goat straining on its rope, its prehensile lips attempting to graze at a pair of colourless cotton pants hanging in the air before its face. A younger girl sat on a gravestone, picking through rice, removing stones and throwing them in invisible arcs down the hillside. Well, at least someone’s doing some work, thought Vic, deciding that the quaint little scene deserved a picture.

‘A land of contrasts’ was how Vicky’s guidebook described this country, and Vic had to concede that it was true: in her frame, the shabby little shack amidst tumbledown graves in the foreground was thrown into high relief against the greens and drought browns of the landscape beyond. The marvel was, she thought, that a photo would fit all that grandeur into a plastic pocket in her album. She pressed the button for auto-focus and was about to fully depress the shutter when she noticed that the centre of her lens was trained directly onto the slim, naked torso of a young man washing himself from a bucket beside the shack. How had she not seen him before? Vic paused for a moment and then took her picture. “If people *will* live their private lives in public view,” she thought, and spun on her toes on the dirt of the road. Her eyes shifted forward and up but it seemed that despite the clearing of the mist, today it was the clouds that conspired to screen the peak of Kanchenjunga from her. Would she have to buy a postcard after coming all this way?



### **Plantation machinery**

“Here we are,” Vicky finally hailed, standing at the top of a muddy path that slithered down the hill. “Happy Valley Tea Plantation. See? It says it on the roof of that building.” She pointed and Vic followed her gaze to a rusty decrepit-looking shed. Its wide base was nestled in amongst the manicured humps and rills of tea bushes. To the right of this shed was a taller sinister-looking construction, also made of aged corrugated iron, and Vic could just make out a flaky wooden sign that read, Sorting Shed. Ancient

tractors and forklifts and other pieces of farming equipment she couldn't begin to name lurked around the two structures like barely-tamed beasts.

“Well, it says ‘happy’ something, certainly, but the rest I’ll leave to your imagination, dear,” she said and folded down to rub the throbbing veins behind her knees. “Are you sure Harrod’s gets their tea from here?”

“The very finest. Oh, come on Vic. It’s just down the hill.” Vicky cupped her cousin’s elbow encouragingly, and Vic straightened.

“But what’s all this about smarties?” she suddenly remembered. “Will there be smarties, Victoria?” Vic raised her eyebrows.

“Well, we’ll have to wait and see, Victoria. But there will be tea, and that’s for sure.”

“Ah. That’s settled then,” and they started gingerly down the slope.

But they had only taken a few steps when Vicky dropped her guidebook and roared, “Jesus Christ!”

“What!” Vic shrieked, “On God’s green earth is that noise?”

Some kind of battle of armageddon had clearly started up below them, and the two cousins now began scuttling crablike back up the hill. The sound seemed to paralyse their legs, however, and instead of retreating they fell into simultaneous crouches with their hands clamped over their ears. Vic squeezed her eyes shut, but Vicky scanned the scene below for the source of the noise, spotting a large conical speaker fixed to a watchtower pointing out of the top of the sorting shed. The waves of the siren, it seemed to her, sent out an almost visible mirage of sound. It grew impossibly louder, reaching a pitch and volume that penetrated their skulls; and then, breaking through the banking

clouds, reaching its triumphant peak, waving its flag and staking its claim to the top of the world, the noise began to fall, fade, and quiver away.

Vicky's sweat turned cold as she stood up. The plantation below, which until then, she suddenly realised, had been empty, now began filling with brightly-clad girls and women. They streamed out from a huddle of tiny shelters in the middle distance, past the hulks of old tractors, their black hair snaking out from under colourful head-scarves and basket straps hooked over their foreheads. They were the real plantation machinery.

“Stand up, silly!” Vicky hissed at her cousin, tugging at her elbow. “It was just the end-of-lunch bell!” She snorted, shrugging off her own terror, and helped her cousin to stand.

Vic was shaking, the ridges of her beautiful cheeks bright pink. She straightened and smoothed her dress in a way that also allowed her to wipe the moisture from her palms. “Goodness me! I've never heard such a sound in my life,” she tittered. “It scared me half to death.”

Vicky surveyed the scene again, watching a clump of women moving sedately through the bushes. “Didn't seem to bother them, though.” They all wore identical blue gumboots and their necks seemed to have drawn back into their shoulders under the weight of all the tea they carried around on their heads. “I suppose they're used to it,” she mused aloud, turning to her cousin. “Well, Victoria,” she said. “After a hard days' exploring – not to mention a terrible fright – I think we've earned that cup of tea, don't you?”

“Well, yes, Victoria, I do indeed.” Vic's voice still trembled slightly.



“And look,” Vicky pointed to the gorgeous heads bobbing up and down the bright green rows of tea. “Smarties!” And she led the way down the hill, marching and singing, “And we’ll kill the old red rooster when she comes, dum-de-dum.”



### **A strange Indian**

“Let’s eat at the Restaurant Shangrila tonight,” said Vic, stretched out on the bed after her shower. “I’d hate to get the trots like I had in Calcutta. Especially before boarding our little train tomorrow.” She looked in her cousin’s direction. “I hope it’s not late, though it probably will be. These trains haven’t been on time since Independence. I bet they’ve been regretting *that* decision ever since.” She clicked her tongue. “Vicky, you’re not listening to a word. I can’t believe we’ve been here a whole week. And not a glimpse of that mountain.”

Vicky finally glanced from the window at her naked cousin and turned back.

“Yes,” she said absently, “a week.”

“We’d be well within our rights to demand a refund. Well, what do you say? At least we know they wash their hands. And I do like the old colonial feel of it.”

Vicky looked back briefly. “All those stuffed heads on the walls? Fine,” she said. She gave herself another watery-glassy wave, reflected in the pane across the way, and then jumped and screamed. “Victoria Shepherd! Cover yourself!” She fumbled at the thin cotton curtains, pulling them together.

“Why? What is it? What’s wrong? Is it a mouse?” Vic scrambled up to standing on the bed, grasping the edge of the bedspread at her neck.

“A mouse?” Vicky dashed from the window to the bed. “No, it’s not a mouse, Vic. It’s a man! It’s an Indian man.”

“Oh my goodness! A man! An Indian? What’s he doing? What did he do?”

“I don’t kn- he waved. He waved right at me.”

“He waved? Why?”

Vicky inched back towards the window and peeked out between the curtains. She looked into the window across the street. She couldn’t see anyone there, except her own image peering back.

“Why, Vicky?” Vic repeated.

“Why what?”

“Why did he wave?”

“Because, well, because I waved.”

“You wav- Why did you do that? Why did you wave? Why were you, Victoria Shepherd, waving at strange Indian men, while I, Victoria Shepherd, was lying here exposed?” Vic held the bedspread up to her neck with one hand, and with the other she pointed at her cousin.

“Man, not men.” Vicky turned to face Vic. “I was waving at myself.” She noticed her cousin had turned the colour of milk. “And you, Victoria Shepherd, were exposing yourself.”

Vic shuddered. “I didn’t know I was. I didn’t know I was on public display while you were standing there waving at strange Indians.”

There was a silence between them, during which Vic, frozen, pointing, and Vicky, clutching at the edge of the curtain, looked, each at the other's face. And each face seemed so familiar, in that instant, as to be almost unrecognisable to the other. Then Vicky burst out laughing, bending down as if to prevent incontinence.

"You should see yourself!" she hooted. "You look like Banquo's ghost, Vic. Or Captain Cook or somebody." She straightened and pointed. "Land ahoy!"

Vic looked down at herself, dropping her arm and the bedspread and then collapsing onto the bed. She gave a prim, humourless laugh and crawled under the covers, pulling them up over her face.

"You scared me half to death," she whimpered from beneath the bedspread.

Vicky sighed, her smile turning sour. "Well, as long as it's only half, there's hope." She said it brusquely, knowing well how these trips must end. Vic collected little hurts like Vicky did souvenirs. Along with miniature bronze hanumans and sequined elephants and lipstick cases made from locally-dyed fabrics, when they got home there was always a point in their reminiscences when Vic would sigh significantly. Or there would be a photo in the album that held, outside the frame but within the sharp tilt of Vic's head, the story of one of Vicky's small villainies. "I know you're tired," she said, finally, to Vic's shape on the bed. "But it'll all be over soon."

"Not soon enough," came the muffled reply.



## **The end carriage**

The two women wrestled their various bags up the aisle of the narrow end carriage, past the legs and children of Indian tourists, and crammed themselves into their seats.

“Wasn’t that strange?” said Vic, determined to be civil, despite last night’s incident. “Don’t you think, Vicky? How that coolie wouldn’t help me with my suitcase but he was willing to carry your backpack?”

Vicky was rustling through her tote bag, occasionally elbowing her cousin. “He’s Hindu, Vic.”

“Ouch. Careful.” And then: “But not all Hindus are rude, surely? There was that nice man at the tea hou- Oh, Vicky, whatever are you looking for?”

Vicky didn’t reply, but the train gave a cheerful whistle, then groaned and clanked and began to pull out of the station.

“Goodness, what a noise,” said Vic. “But I think we’re actually on time for once. It’s a miracle.” She clicked her tongue and squeezed herself against the seat in an attempt to avoid her cousin’s wayward elbow. “Vicky, what are you loo-?”

“Oh, what do you think? My passport,” Vicky snapped. “I know it’s here somewhere. How annoying to have to go through this every time.” Then she stopped what she was doing and sat up to look at her cousin, as if just hearing her earlier remark. “No, I mean, he’s Hindu and your suitcase is leather. You were asking him to embrace the skin of a slaughtered sacred cow stuffed full of ladies’ apparel.”

“Oh!” Vic’s eyes widened, and then she giggled. “Well, yes, when you put it that way. I’d forgotten about that.”

“Here it is.” Vicky waved her passport in the air like a small flag. “Thank heavens. I wouldn’t have been able to relax if I hadn’t dug it out.”

“Yes. Imagine that. Losing your passport and being stuck here for the rest of your life, with the monkeys. And all these people. Like those awful ones at the temple, remember?”

“Awful people?”

“No. The monkeys. Look. The mist is back.”

She glanced at the window. “Oh, so it is. How disappointing. We won’t be able to see a thing if this doesn’t clear.”

“Well, that would hardly be unusual. A whole week in Darjeeling and we had to buy a postcard of Kach- the mountain whose name I can never pronounce.”

“It’s written on the postcard, wherever it is, but anyway, it’s: ‘Mount Kanchenjunga from Darjeeling’ by Edward Lear. A wonderful example of the sublime aesth-”

“Yes, yes, Ms Baedeker. You mentioned that already. And he was the ‘Owl and the Pussycat’ man.”

“Yes, but he was a magnificent painter. The Daniells didn’t do any of this area, to compare, but anyway they preferred the picturesque. Now where is that postcard?” She peeked into her bag once more. “It really is stunning, don’t you think? The light coming down from the mountain, the deep, dark gorge. Quite thrilling, quite – terrifying.”

“You have it somewhere. But what I find most terrifying is the monkeys. Those, and the people, oh – and let’s not forget the array of exotic diseases.” Vic placed a delicate hand on her stomach to remind them both how exotically sick she’d been in

Calcutta: due to a dish, let it not be forgotten, that Vicky had recommended. "And the sacred bloody cows." She tittered.

"Shush, Vic! Someone might hear you," Vicky nudged her cousin and bent over to rifle through her bag. "It must be in here."

"Who's going to hear me? And if they do, who will understand?" said Vic, but her voice came to Vicky's ears muffled through the canvas of her tote. "Vicky?"

"Mmmm?" Vicky wished she'd gotten herself a new bag. One with pockets. "Have you seen my guidebook? I think I've got the card tucked away in there."

"Vicky?" Her cousin tapped her on the shoulder.

The train was not fast by any stretch, but Vicky could feel it picking up to a steady pace.

"Toot! Toot!" it seemed to say in farewell to the hill station. "Toot! Toot!" it seemed to say to the dragon glowering through the mist. "Toot! Toot!" it said to Vicky, who, giving up on trying to find either postcard or guidebook, suddenly broke into song.

"King Jesus, he'll be the driver when she comes, toot! toot!" The line slipped through her lips, though Vicky couldn't remember ever having known that verse of the song. And there it was again, the moving-picture: a gleaming steam train on a misty mountain pass tootling its jaunty way toward the mouth of a gaping black tunnel.

And suddenly, as if on cue, they were thrust into darkness. The wind whooshed up and around, buffeting the train. The shunting of pistons and a high-pitched metallic squeal magnified their volume in the closed space.

"Ooh. Vicky?"

"What?" She felt a light punch on her shoulder. "What is it, Vic?"

“It’s so dark.”

“What? I can’t hear you.”

“I said it’s dark.”

“Well we’re in a tunnel, silly. But good heavens, what a noise.”

“I know. But it’s really a very dark tunnel, isn’t it, Vicky?”

“Well, what do you keep hitting me for? I can’t do anything about it.”

“I’m not hitting you, don’t exaggerate. I tapped you once.”

“Vic, I can feel it. Just because I can’t see a darned thing, doesn’t me-” The train jerked.

“Goodness! Vicky, what was that?”

“I’m not sure, but -”

“So loud!”

“I wonder if we ran over something. A rat, perhaps.”

“Oh, Vicky – it would have to have been an enormous rat. It sounded more like a very big ca-chunk.”

“Well, that’s it, then. Mystery solved. Everybody, we’ve run over a very big ca-chunk in the tunnel.”

“Oh, Vicky, that’s not what I meant. Why do you always twist things?”

The train juddered and pitched again and then the shunting and the squeal subsided, and the noise of the wind died down.

“Ooh. Vicky? I feel like we’re floating. Don’t you? Like we’re not even on the tracks any more. Listen. What’s that sound?”

“Absolutely nothing. Vic, what are you doing?”

“Hold my hand. It’s cold in here.”

“Well, does somebody have the window open? It’s awfully smoky all of a sudden.”

“Pouf. It is. Don’t breathe. It’s so thick I can almost see it in the dark. Oh, look, at last. Phew. There’s the light at the end of the tunnel.”

There was a faint glimmer in the far-off distance.

“Where? Oh, that? Are you sure it’s not just your eyes playing tricks on you?”

“Well, you see it, too, don’t you?”

“Our eyes, then. Oh-” Vicky coughed as smoke whirled through the car.

“What is that?”

“It’s the steam from the train, I think.” Outside, a grey light filtered through from behind the steam, and the quality of the air changed.

“No, not that. Ca-? Vicky, can you see that?”

They peered through the haze. The shunting of the pistons became audible again.

“I think we’ve left the tunnel, Vic.”

“But it’s still so dark. Except for- look! Do you see it?”

And, as though coming from within the very centre of the fog, both women could now make out a shape flying towards them, growing from a speck of moisture, and moulding itself out of the vaporous air. Vic gripped her cousin’s arm as a man with a tea-tray loomed out of the fog, his oversized teapot coming loose from its tray and smashing itself to smithereens against the window, followed by a tattoo of china cups. Smash, smash, smash.

“What was that? It feels like the whole carriage is going to tip.”



“I don’t know, but what a godawful noise. What on earth is going on here?”

“Well, there’s something going on, Vicky, isn’t there? I mean, you saw that, didn’t you? Are we dead? Are we still in the tunnel?”

“Maybe we’ve finally lost all our marbles, Vic! There’s just so much steam, or mist, or whatever it is. And where is everybody? I don’t understand how we can see out there, but it’s completely pitch-black in here.”

“So strange- Vicky, wha- Where are you going? Don’t leave me.”

“I- I’m just getting down here behind the suitcases. You can come, too, if you li- Oh! Vic, watch out, it’s the guide-”

And as she spoke a giant guidebook whumped the side of the train, causing it to rock, and the wind whooshed around them in a low moan at first, then rising into the howl of the end-of-lunch siren and filling the car. A stream of bent-backed tea-pickers flooded past. The women shrank back against their luggage with their hands over their ears, unable to see one another, unable to hear one another, able only to cringe closer together and stare out of the window where six white horses whipped themselves up out of the roiling fog and thundered over the top of the carriage followed by a giant red rooster crowing and spattering milky blood out of his neck onto the mist.

The siren died away, leaving the women speechless and cowering in the aisle behind their bags. Vic grabbed Vicky’s hand and pointed it toward the cow flying at them. It opened its mouth, full to brimming with petticoats, and tried to moo before disappearing under the train. The words ‘Happy Valley’ rusted themselves on to the haze outside and the hulks of malevolent farm machinery emerged, gathering pace, and slammed into the tottering train before disintegrating into red iron flakes. And then

Victoria herself, Empress of India, emerged regally out of the fog and approached at alarming speed before beheading herself against the wheels of the carriage.

“Toot! Toot!” the train seemed to say. And, just as suddenly as the onslaught began, it stopped. The carriage fell silent and the fog fell away like a curtain. Greenish light streamed into the carriage through the window, where the two Victorias could be seen clinging to each other in the aisle of the carriage. Around them, families, young couples, older men travelling in pairs and clutches of women had stood up where they could in the carriage, and were clapping and singing. A man with his head thrust out an open window pulled it back in and, grinning, patted the wet hair stuck to his scalp.

“Rain!” said a young woman in English, looking down briefly at the two white ladies on the floor of the car. She pointed through the streaming windows to the passing storm and to the heavy clouds bellying the mountain.

And there it was; the sublime majesty of Kanchenjunga, and the slanting rays of the sun illuminating its five snowy treasures where they broke through the ruinous clouds and basked in the clear light.

The jubilation died down slowly. The woman turned back to her young family and together they opened out their tiffins in preparation for lunch. A small boy on the other side of the car, still over-excited from the storm, leapt onto his father’s back while two old men slipped off their shoes and crossed their legs on their seats, sitting back to share a packet of spiced peanuts between them. Peering down the length of the car at the white women, still clutching each other on the floor of the train and staring up at Kanchenjunga, were two older women who remained standing at its far end. One of them, a length of shiny black hair escaping from her bright orange scarf, tossed her head back

and chuckled, slapping her friend who also burst into bemused giggles. Had these strangers never seen rain before? Never a mountain?

They watched as the two strange women helped each other up. One of them, the ridges of her cheeks shining pinkly, wiped her hands over and over down her dress, looking around like a nervous bird. The other woman, sitting there in her man's pants, snatched up a carry-bag and stuffed her hand into it. Then she turned to the other, who was still standing, and held out a small rectangle of card, which, in a gust from the open window, she lost hold of. It swirled through the car and out.

The Toy Train wound its way down the mountain. There it went, through the rain-bright sky. And out of the open window fluttered the postcard, a tiny mountain, floating endlessly down along the sharp slope of the ravine.

## Bubble-and-Squeak

Christopher rubbed the side of his head where the older boy had supercharged the Tonka truck into him. Its big rubber tyres had sprayed sand into his eyes, but he knew better than to rub them. Clayton would think he was crying. He blinked and drove his splayed hands into the cool sand, leaving a ruffled tuft of hair above his right ear. There would be an egg there later.

A kookaburra landed on the lowest branch of the gum near the sandpit, cocking its head and staring down the blade of its beak. The clump of feathers on its head made it look as if it had just gotten out of bed. Its blue-streaked wings stood out against the silver of the tree's trunk. *Kookaburra sits in the old gum tree-ee.* Christopher watched ants scurrying up and down the scribbled bark, stopping as if greeting every oncoming ant. *Must be tiring, saying hello to everyone.*

“What?” demanded Clayton. “You talkin’ to yourself again? Moron.” Then the older boy followed Christopher’s gaze to the bird on the branch. “What a bloo-dy beauty!” He emphasised the word the way he’d heard his dad do it, and aimed an imaginary sling-shot.

Christopher broke his stare. “Can I have a go of the truck now?”

“Nup.”

“But it’s my birthday present. I haven’t even had a go yet,” the younger boy protested.

“But it’s my birthday present and I haven’t even had a go.” Clayton waggled his head and stuck out his chin. “And I’m a big baby.” He looked big.

Christopher dug through the sand to find his plastic farm animals, unearthing them and lining them up along the wooden edges of the pit. He breathed in and thought being eight might not be any easier than being seven.

“I can hold my breath longer than you,” said Clayton. He inhaled deeply into his chest, swelling out, then launched himself off the edge of the sandpit and gave Christopher a swift punch in the stomach. Christopher felt the wind rush out of him and when he went to breathe in again found he could only take short gulps. It hurt in his chest like when he accidentally ate peanuts. He rolled onto his side, his cheek pressing the sand, his knees hard up against his chest, making himself small. He’d had a goldfish once that had jumped out of its tank. He’d found it on the floor with dust sticking to it, its gills gasping for water, its tail only feebly slapping the tiles.

“Aw, this is boring.” Clayton rammed the Tonka truck into the animals on the side of the sandpit, halting their march and scattering them on the grass on the other side. Then he tipped the truck upside down, making crashing noises. “Some birthday party,” he muttered, and spat in the sand.

Christopher’s mum came out in to the yard, and called brightly. “Time for some yummy treats, boys!”

When they entered the house, Christopher could see his mum had been busy. She’d folded up the trellis table and removed all but a couple of the bowls of lollies and chips and plates of fairy bread she’d laid out in anticipation of the fifteen boys and girls Christopher had carefully written invitations to. She’d hidden all but three of the brightly-coloured party hats and had cut the paper ‘Congratulations Birthday Boy!’ tablecloth to a third its original size. There it was, on Christopher’s low craft table, with the snacks on it.

Two small chairs faced each other across the party table. A foaming cup of fizzy drink sat in front of each chair. Mum came out from the kitchen wearing a party hat, carrying a plate of steaming party pies and a bottle of tomato sauce. Her big smile made Christopher feel very small.

“There you go, boys!” she said as she laid the plate down on the table. “Plenty more if you finish that!” She bent down over the table and picked up the party hat in front of Christopher. She opened it out into a cone and put it on his head, pulling the elastic down over his chin. “There you go!” she said again. Everything she said today seemed to have an exclamation mark. The cicadas started up outside in the trees, as if they’d all agreed the day was too quiet, and Christopher’s mum went back into the kitchen.

“I’m not wearing a hat.” Clayton reached across the table and pulled the elastic under Christopher’s chin, letting it snap back with a sting. “Hats are for girls.”

Christopher breathed in. He’d like to take it off, but he couldn’t. He could hear his mum in the kitchen. He saw Clayton watching him and breathed out hurriedly, reaching over to take a slice of fairy bread. It was a special treat, and he’d helped his mum make it – spreading the butter nice and thick over the slices of white bread, so the hundreds-and-thousands would stick and not roll off. Hundreds-and-thousands. He’d relished the name of the tiny, multicoloured balls of sugar almost as much as he anticipated the eating of them.

“And fairy bread is for fairies.” Clayton smirked, and said softly under his breath, “fuckin’ fairy”. He grabbed a party pie and smothered it in sauce. He stuck his finger in the sauce and held it under Christopher’s nose. “This is fairy blood.” He stuffed the whole pie into his mouth and snorted at his joke. Two strings of snot shot out of his nose

and then went back up into his nostrils when he sniffed. His cheeks were swollen and feathery flakes of pastry and greyish chunks of mince fell out of his open mouth.

The uneaten fairy bread sat on Christopher's plate, butter gleaming in the sunlight coming through the curtains. The cicadas outside paused collectively, as if holding their breaths, and then began their torrent of sound anew. His mum ran some water in the kitchen, her rings clinking against the metal sink. Christopher plucked some Cheezels from a bowl and looped them over his fingertips. *Rings on her fingers and bells on her toes.* He sucked them off, one by one, as Clayton gobbled party pies. The kookaburra briefly started up its maniacal laugh from the gum tree outside: then stopped as suddenly as it had begun.

Mum came out of the kitchen, and went over to the stereo. "We forgot the music!" she said, and set *The Wiggles* up in competition with the cicadas. The music was supposed to be for the games: pass-the-parcel, musical chairs. "Can't spoil the surprise!" she'd said this morning when he'd asked if he could wrap the prizes. But she'd let him do the outer layers of newspaper and tape and more newspaper and more tape. After that she'd kept checking her watch, and looking out the window onto the street.

The fizzy drink bubbled in Christopher's throat and through his body, pouring, from the inside, into his hands and feet. His heart seemed to beat just a little bit faster, and he didn't think he could sit in his chair any more. Clayton was wiping his sauce-smearred hands on the curtains. Christopher was already standing, jumping in time with the music to keep his feet from running away with him. He clapped his hands and waggled his head as the bubbles frothed up and down his limbs.

"Is that your special birthday fairy dance?"

Clayton had pastry stuck to his teeth.

Christopher couldn't stop his arms and legs. "Let's go back outside and play." His teeth chattered.

"Yeah. This music sucks." Clayton downed the cup of fizzy drink in front of him and burped loudly. Christopher laughed. Clayton burped again. He laughed harder. Clayton farted. Christopher didn't think he could stop laughing. *Laugh, kookaburra, laugh.*

Clayton pushed Christopher over and sat on his head. He farted again. Christopher laughed, but he wished he could stop. His chest hurt. He rolled out from under Clayton and ran, bursting through the fly wire into the yard. The kookaburra had flown away. Christopher jumped up and down on the spot, singing out loud. "Kookaburra sits in the old gum tree-ee, Eating all the gum nuts he can see-ee, Laugh, Kookaburra! Laugh, Kookaburra! Gay your life must be!"

"Gay's right." Clayton launched himself at Christopher again, but the sugar in the younger boy's veins was rocket fuel. He zigged and zagged and sprinted around in circles. He felt dizzy. He didn't think he could stop running.

"Last one to the chicken coop's a rotten egg," he yelled, and sped off down to the end of the yard. Clayton lumbered after him. "First one there's a chicken," he bellowed, panting and red-faced. "You're a chicken. Christopher's a chicken shit."

Christopher stopped on the grass in front of the enclosure and hooked his shaking fingers through the hexagons of wire. He suddenly felt anxious. He shouldn't have run so fast. The other boy approached: a Tonka truck, built for strength, not speed. Christopher watched his shadow darken the grass.



Clayton heaved, sweat streaming from his hairline, shoulders sagging.

Christopher almost patted him on the back.

“You can play with my truck,” he said.

“Fuck-the-truck,” Clayton sulked. “It’s a-chicken-shit’s-truck.” He punctuated the statement with heavy breaths and yanked on the wire. It cut into Christopher’s fingers.

“It’s a fuckin’-chicken-gay-fairy-truck.” He wiped his forehead. “I’m goin’.”

Christopher’s mother put her head out the door and called down the yard. “Having fun, boys? Cake’ll be ready soon!”

“Mum’s got cake!” Christopher echoed. Mum’s got cake. They had too much food, and games they couldn’t play, and prizes no-one would win. Clayton couldn’t leave now. Mum had cake. He looked at the red marks on his fingers where they’d been caught in the chicken wire.

*Chickens.*

Clayton scowled at him, his breathing almost normal. “Did you call me a chicken, chicken?”

Christopher exhaled in a nervous titter. “No! I *have* chickens. Chicks. Do you want to see them?”

The older boy wrinkled his nose, but didn’t say no, so Christopher hurried round to the coop door and unlatched it. “I’ll bring them out,” he said. “They’re only little.” And, because Clayton didn’t say anything, “I helped them to hatch, and I feed them every day,” Christopher chattered on. “They think I’m their mum.”

He went to the back of the enclosure where the two chicks were cheeping in their bed of hay in a smaller cage his mum had helped him build. She’d told him about pecking

order. He'd cupped them in his palm and felt their small hearts trembling against his skin as his mum hammered the last corner of wire down. He lifted the frame and picked them up now, holding them carefully to his chest so they didn't drop to the ground.

"They're called Bubble-and-Squeak." He stepped gently over the hay and slipped out of the door, latching it behind him. "You can touch them if you like."

No-one else had touched them, except Mum. Clayton jabbed a blunt finger at one of them, and Christopher noticed the tomato sauce semi-circles along the edges of his fingernails. "That's Squeak."

Clayton tapped it and its head bowed under the pressure.

"Um, Mum says you've got to be soft with them when they're little," Christopher looked up into Clayton's nostrils. "I mean, not *you*, but, anyone ..."

"Oh yeah?" Clayton snorted, speaking at last. "And you're the chooks' mother, I s'pose? My mum says you're soft," he added. "In the head," and he pulled at a wing, feeling its snappable bone.

"Poor kid. No wonder he's the way he is." That's what Christopher's mum had said to one of her friends about Clayton. And she'd said some things about Clayton's dad, too, but Christopher didn't want to say. He didn't think he was supposed to hear.

Clayton cocked his head and looked at Christopher down the length of his grubby nose. "I'll play with your truck now if you like."

"Okay!" Christopher brightened. "I'll just put Bubble-and-Squeak away."

"No." Clayton paused. "I said it's a chook truck. We need chooks for a chook truck."

Christopher breathed in. The cicadas' screech was deafening in the heat of the afternoon. It made the day feel even hotter than it was. It made it hard to think.

"I'm goin'." Clayton raised his eyebrows and crossed his arms over his big chest.

Christopher breathed out, and said quickly, "No, don't go. You can play with the truck all by yourself. I won't even ask if I can have a go."

"Nup. It's boring without chooks. I'm goin'."

The cake would be ready soon. His mum would call them in any minute.

"Okay." He didn't want to say it. "But I want to carry them."

The big boy shrugged. "Suit yourself."

When they reached the sandpit, Clayton picked the truck up from where he'd crashed it in the grass. He placed it upright on the uneven terrain of the sand. "Alright," he directed. "In they go."

Christopher felt the two frail ribcages against his fingers as he knelt in the pit and lifted the chicks into the tray of the truck. He put them down against the cold metal and they cheeped softly.

"I'm the driver," said Clayton, making rumbling engine noises. He moved the truck slowly forward, revving slightly and increasing the engine's pitch in his throat. The chicks swayed as the truck drove over some small mounds. The engine pitch heightened, then fell back as the truck changed gears. It was gaining speed. Christopher looked into Clayton's face as he drove the truck, admiring how he could make those engine sounds in the back of his throat. The truck sped up. One of the chicks lost its balance and rolled into the other, its legs in the air. It struggled to stand upright, sliding its way into the corner of the truck bed where it pushed against the sides to get its footing.

The truck grew louder as it got faster. It dipped and bucked over the rough surface. Both chicks had fallen over and were sliding around in the truck bed, cheeping urgently.

“Shouldn’t you slow down?” Christopher tried to make himself heard over the cicadas and the chicks and the truck.

Clayton pushed the truck faster, flecks of spit forming on his lips, his lips blurred with the reverberations of the engine. It was roaring now, battering its way up dunes and down into chasms. Christopher looked desperately towards the fly wire, hoping to see the outline of his mum in the doorway.

“I think Mum’s got the cake ready,” he said. He hopped up and leaped over to the other side of the sandpit, trying to stop the truck in its erratic path. “I said, MUM’S GOT THE CAKE READY!”

Christopher looked down and saw sweat standing out on the older boy’s nose. Saliva speckled his mouth. The truck braked suddenly and the chicks skidded along the length of the bed and flew off into the sand, heads together, panting in fright. Christopher’s right foot was buried and partly twisted, his left leg lifted in the air and suspended above the tiny huddled bodies. He couldn’t fall! He propelled himself, flapping his arms, towards Clayton and away from the truck. Away from the chicks in their nest of sand. He landed like a rocket on the older boy.

“Get off me, you fucking gay fairy,” Clayton snarled, and heaved against him. Christopher made a backwards arc in the air and put his arm out behind him to catch himself.

Briefly, he felt the twin eggshell skulls against his hand before he forced them roughly into the sand with the heel of his palm. He felt something break open. Still he was falling, falling; the full weight of his body crashing down. He couldn't stop falling.

When he finally stopped falling, Christopher rolled to his side and lifted his palm to his face. There was blood there, and something greyish, and a tiny yellow feather. He breathed in and in and in. He choked on the sand Clayton brushed onto his face, but he kept breathing in. He couldn't stop breathing in.

Clayton glared down at him from very high up. "Some birthday party. I'm goin' home."

With his cheek in the sand, Christopher watched Clayton's back recede, sideways. He heard the spring of the fly wire door as his mum stuck her head out. "Cake's ready, boys!" The door swung back, clattering shut. The cicadas held their collective breaths for a moment before breaking the day open once more.

## New feet

Mrs Butler has begun referring to herself as Mrs Butler. Back in Australia, of course, she'd be Sally or Sal or Love or Sweetheart, or some other cutesy name that implied that she was somebody's mate. An Aussie chick. *Pouf, Mrs Butler, is what we think of that.*

Mrs Butler thinks of her fellow citizens, if at all, as a swarm of red-faced fools whipping their Victa 2-strokes into Saturday morning frenzies, mowing down overfed lawns onto which they throw water-filled soft drink bottles in the soft-headed belief that this will keep dogs from doing their business on the grass. That's one way she sees things.

Or the lot of them, the white suburbanites, snapping their tongues over fat-dripping barbies and roaring at the cricket – that most riveting of games – in national synchrony. And all the people who look like her all voting for Howard – even the ladies in the book club in Adelaide. And now- she shudders. Mrs Butler sips her tea and reminds herself – for who else would she remind? – why she'd finally run off at the beginning of this year, the year 2000. The year of the blessed Sydney Olympics. The year when all eyes, so said the media, would be on their 'fair' nation. *All eyes, Mrs Butler, she tells herself, we can do without.*

*Now, calm down, Mrs Butler.* She sips her tea. Above the city of Jeju, though she can't see it in its entirety from her window, Mt. Halla slopes gradually toward the sky, soft white edges merging into cloud. *A mountain only has a shape when viewed from a distance,* she muses, breathing in steam and peering at the slices of the mountain she can see, framed between new apartment buildings that, in this neighbourhood, look rust-stripped and rundown before they are even lived in. *Close up, a mountain is surface and*

*texture*; and one day she might even see it up close. Then again, the literature had said, “Some say Jeju is Mount Halla and Mount Halla is Jeju Island”: *which would mean, Mrs Butler, that you’re standing on it right now!*

Mrs Butler had researched the island before arriving: “The name Halla means a mountain high enough to capture the Milky Way.” Now she peers up to where the tip of the mountain disappears and concedes this could well be true – after two months she still hadn’t seen its peak clearly. “It is a symbol of perpetuity and motherly warmth to the people of Jeju,” the brochure continued. “Mt. Halla might at first seem feminine due to its springtime colours. But a closer look will show a more masculine and ruggedly shaped topology.”

At the time, reading it in her Adelaide flat, perched at the top of a precipitous metal staircase that gave her feet absolute curry to climb, Mrs Butler had wondered what on earth to make of these mixed images. Now she finds the contrast somewhat reassuring. Motherly and rugged. Colourful and masculine. *Not what it seems, Mrs Butler.* And then she’d turned the pages on to pictures of the spring’s flamboyant runs, up and down the slopes, of wildflowers and canola flowers and azaleas. It is as if, she’d thought at the time, the dormant volcano’s recollections of its tumultuous youth can no longer be contained, and it spews forth its ancient memories in spumes of glossy leaves and bright, bossy flowers for those few months every year. *So dramatic, Mrs Butler!*

Mrs Butler turns from the window. She shuffles out of the kitchen to the doorway in her mop slippers and plops herself down on the stool next to the shoe cabinet, reaching inside it for the shoe-horn and her orthopaedic shoes. And that’s one thing she would never have done in Australia – all this on and off of shoes – *but it’s a jolly good idea.*

Less cleaning, for one. *And if you have to live in a flat, you can do without boots and high-heels clapping about above your head.* She pulls off her mop slippers, admiring them again. She bought them from an *ajuma* at the market for 2000 won, but she doesn't know what they're really called, so she's made up a name of her own. Formless, elastic-sided, cotton slip-ons whose thick soles are made of looped mop fibres: mop slippers. *Clean as you walk, Mrs Butler* – and they're gentle on her feet. They are why she's taken to shuffling around the edges of the rooms, poking mop-clad toes into dusty corners.

She slips bare toes into her shoes, one by one sliding her heels against the plastic shoe-horn and pushing her tender feet down against the inner soles of her sensible footwear. Here, the *ajuma* wear brash colours that clang together, and on their feet, bright rubber slippers, so it seems a pity that sensible has to mean dull where Mrs Butler comes from. But she'd been forewarned that size 10 orthopaedic shoes were something she wouldn't find in South Korea, let alone Jeju, so had sent herself four pairs – all black – before she'd left.

Outside the door, the landlady's kimchi pots gleam like pupas, huddled along the low, greening concrete wall. Damp air and a rush of light crowd around Mrs Butler like the children she was brought here two months ago to teach. A breeze tickles the hairs on her forearm. Hong-su had been fascinated on that first day of class, sidling up to her chair from behind left, reaching out his stubby fingers and stroking her arms. Tentative at first, and then with a kind of fervent patting, as though she were a strange dog. The other children detected his curiosity, then, and bunched around, reaching out their own hairless arms to hers. So close and uninhibited. So sweaty and squirmy. Like kids anywhere, they smelt of bananas and hot hair.



Mrs Butler, in her modest apartment building flanked by old-style houses, shares in the pleasures of neighbours' small, neat yards. Birds – *you must look them up, Mrs Butler, to see what they are* – flock to the trees that will soon fruit mandarins, loquats, persimmons; swallows build their mudbrick nests under eaves; bare azalea shrubs are topiaried into leafy bubbles and the dramatic limbs of junipers lean like wiry farmers on long bamboo stakes.

Beyond, her view of the city is a jumble of rooftops: glazed terracotta tiles curling up to the sky; or flat concrete expanses carpeted with drying seaweed, garlic, chillies, and scattered with children's tricycles. Washing lines flap with clothes or, where the fishermen live, droop with identical rows of squid, like clones of themselves hanging out to dry. And the mountain stands over them, the whole reason there's an island there at all.

She limps down the flight of concrete steps, through the barred iron gate, which is never locked, and onto the street. From here Mrs Butler can see the appalling coils of electric wiring that veer from pole to pole to house, slumping over high stone fences and slithering their way inside through holes in people's walls. The last of the cherry blossoms are turning brown on the road, where they spread themselves after their brief blooming. Here, they warrant a festival: people had lined the main road near the bus depot with food stalls and *soju* tents. Pigs roasted on spits and people dressed as clowns snapped their tongues and sold pieces of the sticky nougat rolled and stretched on the backs of their carts. There was music and dancing, *and all for blossoms!*

Mrs Butler has several exquisite little specimens herself, flattened and drying between the pages of her flower press. Now, tiny yellow forsythia peep out of their buds and the magnolias are budding forth from the twiggy fingers of their trees, creamy and

extravagantly scented. Mrs Butler will take some of those too, before they die off petal by petal, and after them, the waiting azaleas will burst out in reds and purples and pinks across the city and up the slant of the mountain. Mrs Butler has read ahead and knows what to expect.

Mrs Butler makes her way to the corner store, which smells of an odd mix of kimchi, washing-up detergent and puffed wheat. There, on the linoleum-covered platform that serves as table, day-bed, and as playpen for her grandson, the *ajuma* is stretched out beside the small sleeping boy and snoring. *Ajuma*, singular: a member of the bustling army of middle-aged women – *ajuma*, plural – who carry the country on their rounding shoulders, five feet nothing off the ground. Mrs Butler has seen them anywhere there's work to be done: hauling wheelbarrows of rubble across building sites, plucking garbage off the streets with long-handled tongs, muddled in garish clutches against the bright grass and cutting it with miniature scythes. *No lawnmowers here, Mrs Butler*, she had noted with sincere approval.

*But work!* These women, as far as she can see, rear their own children, then their children's children, all the while cooking and cleaning for husbands and adult sons. And she has heard them, laughing and labouring over every restaurant stove and in every corner store, marketplace and field. *But they do have their hard-earned rights, Mrs Butler.* Queues dissolve at the sharp ends of their elbows, and on weekends, tour buses equipped with karaoke and flashing lights throb to the rhythm of raucous *ajuma* voices, juiced with *soju*. Life is wrung out of every scrap of spare time they can scrape together. Divorce is even an option now. *For all their labours*, she thinks, *they own themselves.*

Mrs Butler enjoys the increasingly familiar cadences of the shop *ajuma*'s voice, and is disappointed that she is asleep. In the tiny space near the entrance, she counts out 900 won in 100 won pieces and leaves them in a shiny pillar on the edge of the platform, then turns tightly and prises the small fridge open. Vials of Bacchus – a brown, foul-smelling liquid purporting to have medicinal qualities – rattle together on a shelf inside its door.

“Ottoke?” The *ajuma*, woken by the sound, swings up abruptly from her sleep, rubs her face, and sits looking up at Mrs Butler for a few seconds. “Oh, Sonaengnim!” she says, finally recognising the teacher and the only foreigner living on the street. She blinks a few more times and then cackles at Mrs Butler, who takes out a carton of milk and holds it up, pointing to the coins that have slithered into a pile on the edge of the platform.

“Ne, ne.” The woman nods, standing, and pats Mrs Butler on the arm. She has to reach up and her hand is rough on Mrs Butler's skin, but warm, and then she says something with an upward inflection – *a question?* – and waits. But Mrs Butler can only shake her head and falter over, as always, her few necessary Korean words. “Hang-kuk-mal mot-hea-yo”: *I don't speak Korean*. But Mrs Butler, English language teacher, doesn't even know which parts of what she just said are words and which are merely syllables that make up words.

Unperturbed, the other woman carries on a little louder, her face – unlike those of the ladies in the book club – open and unguarded. She talks and talks and laughs and talks, and as Mrs Butler stands there with the cold carton beginning to condense in her hands, it suddenly occurs to her, after weeks – months, now – of these one-sided conversations,

that in the presence of this woman, there is no language barrier. Or at least no barrier. *No barrier.* It's a revelation: all this time spent nodding dumbly, wishing she could communicate, when all she has to do is follow suit and speak. *Speak, Mrs Butler!*

So now, as though making up for those intervening months, she can barely wait for a pause in the *ajuma's* chatter, before: "I like those," she blurts, pointing at the other woman's slippers. "Hot pink? I like that colour. Not like mine." She smiles and taps a black shoe.

The *ajuma* looks down at her own feet. If she is surprised at Mrs Butler's unusual contribution to the conversation, she doesn't show it. "Igo?" She asks, waving a pink slipper. "Igo?"

Mrs Butler nods. "And so small. Not like me. I have big feet. Big feet," she mimes, grinning, and the other woman throws her head back and laughs. "Clodhoppers!" Mrs Butler splutters.

The *ajuma* angles one of her pink slippers towards Mrs Butler's, perhaps by way of comparison, and then resumes her discussion. By now Mrs Butler knows the patterns of the other woman's intonation, so matter-of-fact-sounding, and the next time her friend pauses Mrs Butler interjects – "And they hurt. My feet. I burnt them."

Well. Mrs Butler looks quickly at her friend. She hasn't quite meant to say this, but there it is, said, and the other woman is still smiling. There is no shocked gasp, no concerned frown. *After two months of "hang-kuk-mal mot-hea-yo" here we are having a conversation, Mrs Butler!* And the *ajuma* is still looking at her, permed head cocked, as though waiting for her to continue.

Mrs Butler could go on. She could. *You could, Mrs Butler. Speak!* But she knows she can't; that there are some things she cannot say aloud. And so, as the other woman continues talking, Mrs Butler imagines the two of them, in her own little flat with its wood-panelled walls and a pot of tea between them. "Yes, I burnt them," she sees herself saying, removing a mop slipper to reveal the odd-shaped ridges of scar tissue on the sole of her foot. "With the hot metal part of a lighter." She would match the head of a lighter to the patterns on her skin in demonstration, and the other woman might sip her tea and nod, maybe even frown, but there would be no needling questions. *No whys and wherefores.* "But it's not merely scarring – I also caused some nerve damage underneath," Mrs Butler would explain simply, lifting the elastic of her mop slipper back over her ankle, enjoying the snugness and the softness of it. And she would stand, then, and limp a little to the kitchen to switch on the kettle, calling, cheerfully enough, "So it still hurts to walk a bit, see?"

The *ajuma* slaps Mrs Butler lightly on the arm, smiling, but perhaps sensing that the *sonsaengnim's* thoughts have wandered beyond the tiny store; and suddenly she steps towards Mrs Butler and stands herself close, her curls seeming to nestle into the crook of Mrs Butler's arm. *Does she want a cuddle, Mrs Butler?* she wonders, looking down. But the *ajuma* straightens her back and takes a measurement with the side of her hand against Mrs Butler's arm, then stands back, one hand still marking the place where her head had been. She looks up to the top of Mrs Butler's head and back down to her own hand and bursts into her warm laugh, exclaiming in a string of sound.

"Yes, I am tall. Tall with big feet." Mrs Butler laughs, too, and at that the other woman turns abruptly, steps up onto the platform where her grandchild still, miraculously,

sleeps, and takes a small green bottle from the shelf. Bamboo brand *soju*, 20% alc. vol. Mrs Butler's favourite. She steps down and thrusts the bottle into Mrs Butler's hands.

Mrs Butler feels its cold smoothness in her palm. "Oh yes, well, alright," she agrees. She pats her pocket in search of more change, but the *ajuma* waves her hand.

"Anio!" she chastises. "Serbice! Serbice!" And before Mrs Butler can protest, the other woman pushes her, with the *soju* and the milk carton sweating in her hands, toward the door.

Mrs Butler is propelled back out into the sunshiny day.

"Goo-morning Missus Butterer!" the children sing in response to their teacher. "I fine thank-oo anyoo?" There is a timid knock, and Min-ji appears at the doorway, late, followed by her mother's anxious face. *This English is serious business, Mrs Butler.* Mrs Han pushes the back of her daughter's head and Min-ji folds into an obedient bow.

"Chaesuhamnida, Sonsaengnim," Mrs Han apologises, also bowing.

"Not to worry," Mrs Butler says, then hurriedly returns the gesture, though graceless and alien. "Come in, Min-ji. Sit down everybody."

Fifteen chubby faces turn her way as she calls the roll, fifteen pairs of socked toes wriggle, fifteen little bottoms perch on the carpet. Hong-su is having difficulty keeping his on the floor, and before long he's up on his stumpy legs, a tiny piece of fluff tweezered between his fingers. "Trashee," he explains, hopping his way to the bin by the door of the classroom.

"Okay, stand up everybody," Mrs Butler heaves herself up off her chair.

"Game! Game! Gayeem!" fifteen voices clamour "Game, Missus Butterer!"

“Yes, yes. Tae-hoon, no. Don’t do that.” Tae-hoon is flicking the tip of Jin-su’s reddening nose and Mrs Butler holds her arms up in an exaggerated X. “Stand here. Good boy. Okay, ‘Mrs Butler says’. Are you ready?”

“Ready, yes! Game! Korea fighting!”

“Alright, then. Mrs Butler says-” But Mrs Butler suddenly thinks of the things she didn’t tell the *ajuma* in the shop the day before yesterday. That she would like, somehow, for her to know. And then she thinks of the colour of the woman’s voice. The texture of her chapped hand. The small secrets she could hold for Mrs Butler to keep her safe. *If only you’d simply say it, Mrs Butler!*

She looks down at the fifteen pairs of ears straining for her voice.

“Alright. Mrs Butler says, ‘touch your nose.’” Ten fingers go to ten noses. Tae-hoon looks furtively to his left before he brings his hand to the middle of his face. A couple of the other children are busy switching facial features, finally settling on the right one. Hong-su is bent over to the floor. “Hong-su, *nose not toes!*”

Hong-su straightens, grinning out from behind his palm. “Oh, teacher! Nose nose nose!”

The children hear footsteps outside the classroom and all look towards the door as Director Kim appears there, smiling curtly and nodding his head. He wishes to speak with their teacher.

“Okay, we’ll finish the game later. Finish later.” There is a cacophony of protest, but the director holds up his palm, and the noise peters out. “Finish later, I promise. Open your alphabet books, and do writing. Writing. No colour, Min-ji. Write. Good girl.”

Mrs Butler steps out of the doorway, conscious of still wearing her classroom slippers. She bows, but when Mr Kim puts his hand up Mrs Butler flushes, guessing too late that her bow was inappropriate.

“My wife would like you to come for drive,” the director says.

“Ah, your wife? Oh, well, thank you. Yes. That would be love-”

“To Hallasan.”

“Oh, lovely. Well, thank your wife for me. And will you al-?”

“When is good time for you?”

“Ah, well. What time is-”

“Monday is okay? Is public holiday.”

“Well, that’s very ki-”

“Okay. I will tell my wife. Have good day.”

The invitation is delivered and kind Mr Kim shoves her gently back into the classroom.

“*Ajuma!*” Mrs Butler tries out the familiar greeting for the first time as she steps into the store that evening. “An-nyeong ha-se-yo.”

“Ne, annyeong haseyo, Sonaengnim.” The woman is seated cross-legged on her platform, slipping spoonfuls of fishy-smelling porridge into her grandson’s mouth. She is wearing loose purple pants that remind Mrs Butler of knickerbockers and a splashy pink and yellow blouse. Her slippers today are blue. She looks in Mrs Butler’s direction, cackles and tells her something in her cheerful shout, making an emphatic growl in her



throat. *Perhaps*, Mrs Butler thinks, *she is telling me about the antics of the boy, or about something her husband has gone and done.*

Mrs Butler nods genially, and leans against the small fridge to rest at least one of her aching feet. As usual, she listens to the woman speak, but when the *ajuma* pauses to fill the open mouth in front of her, Mrs Butler tells her, “My kids – my students – are so funny. But they’re so small, I do worry about them. Will they be alright?”

The woman nods towards the little boy and chuckles.

“It’s hard for them: school all day, English class in the afternoon. Then maths and science and violin lessons. And homework. I don’t know, do they sleep?” Mrs Butler shakes her head, but the *ajuma* shouts something and laughs, rocking her compact body back and forth as her grandson gurgles happily through his gruel.

“Well, I suppose they’ll be alright,” Mrs Butler pauses, “if only because of their grandmothers.” She looks at the woman sideways as she pays her the compliment, then smiles at the little boy with the grey lumps bubbling down his chin. “You’re a lucky boy,” she tells him. From where she stands, Mrs Butler can see glimpses of the other woman’s scalp through her tight perm as her head bobs along with her voice.

“Big feet,” the other woman suddenly says, laughing up at the *sonsaengnim* who smiles, sensing that the *ajuma* is waiting for something more.

*Speak, Mrs Butler*, she urges; but again she stops herself, instead envisaging the two of them, this time sitting on the concrete wall outside her front door, by the cluster of kimchi jars. “I told you about my feet,” she might begin, “but it really started with cutting.” And she wouldn’t lift the sleeves of her blouse, but she would point to the soft

skin near her armpits, and then to her inner thigh, explaining how she'd wanted to keep the scars out of sight.

The *ajuma* is scraping lumps of grey from her grandson's chin and up into his mouth; but she looks up, briefly, as though in acknowledgement of Mrs Butler's thoughts, and then speaks, nods emphatically, and turns back to the plastic bowl in her lap. Her grandson spits porridge down the front of his shirt and the *ajuma* exclaims loudly:

"Aieesh!"

"Well, maybe it started earlier than that," Mrs Butler imagines saying. She spies a roll of toilet paper on the shelf above the platform and reaches across, taking it down and handing it to the *ajuma*. Maybe the boy would even be there with them, playing busily as she told his grandmother, "my mother had these long, beautiful scars winding around her legs. She said they were from running through razor grass when she was a child. I used to love stroking them." And she would watch the other woman's fingers gripping the boy's chubby arms to keep him from falling over the concrete wall. "It was like playing a harp."

But he is getting restless, now, and starting to whine, so his grandmother wipes his face with the toilet paper one more time, puts the bowl and spoon on a shelf next to a stack of tinned chicken, and passes him a speaking book with buttons he can press.

"Cow," it says in English, and moos. The *ajuma* grins up at Mrs Butler and says, "cow!" as though it's all a marvellous joke. Her grandson shrieks and repeats it: "cow, cow, cow."

"Horse, neigh," says the book.

"Hoss, hoss, whee-hee," says the boy.

“Rooster,” Mrs Butler beams, leaning down and pressing the button: “Rooster, cock-a-doodle-doo!” She and the *ajuma* and the little boy chortle together until Mrs Butler glimpses the clock on the wall. “Seven o’clock!” She straightens. “Well, nice chatting with you, but I suppose I must be off. *Soju*, please,” and she holds up two fingers.

Mrs Butler leaves the store and is about to cross the road when she suddenly spies two flowering magnolias down a side street. *Would you look at that, Mrs Butler.* They are saplings, low to the ground, but flowering early, one pink and one cream, and on closer inspection, she finds they are perfect. Mrs Butler takes a sample of each for her press, tucking the milk carton under one arm and cupping the blooms in her palm.

Back at her flat, Mrs Butler replaces orthopaedics for mop slippers. In her room, she undresses, hanging her teacherly clothes – black slacks and a light pink blouse – in the closet, flinging underwear into the laundry basket, and donning her green and purple mumu. A breeze flutters up under the cotton dress and Friday evening stretches out before her.

Mrs Butler cracks the aluminium seal of the *soju* bottle and slops a good dram into a glass. She knows locals drink it in straight shots, over sizzling plates of meat, but Mrs Butler pulls the ice-cube tray from the freezer. She bends into the fridge and takes out the pomegranate juice. She pops the cubes out of their moulds, one by one, and they clatter against the glass. The juice glugs and swirls. In this early evening light, Mrs Butler’s existence consists of bubbles of colour: a green bottle, a jewel of pinky-red liquid infusing its hue into lozenges of ice, gleaming teal tiles on the surrounding kitchen

walls. She raises her glass to the window, to the sun setting to the right of the mountain, to all the *ajuma*. *To all the ajuma!*

Two drinks later, Mrs Butler remembers the perfect magnolias she left by the door. She finds some fresh pages in her press and arranges the flowers carefully between them before replacing the board and screwing the butterfly nuts in. *Nice and tight, Mrs Butler.*

After her fourth drink, the bottle becomes a microphone, sloshing as she points it at herself and then away.

Mrs Butler: “Well, pardon me for not introducing myself earlier. I’m Mrs Butler, and you must be...”

Mrs Butler: “Mrs Moon? What a lovely name! I’m Mrs Bu- Oh, but I already said that, didn’t I? Silly me!”

Mrs Butler: “Yes, I like your slippers a lot. They look so comfortable. I don’t suppose they have them in size 10?”

Mrs Butler: “More *soju*? Don’t mind if I do. Oops, there goes our microphone! Hmm. And some washing-up detergent for blowing bubbles? Yes. How delightful.”

Mrs Butler: “No, no. *You’re* young at heart. *I’m* young. 34 would you believe?”

Mrs Butler: “Well, I tried to kill myself when I was 17, so I suppose I’m older than I should be. Ha ha. Yes, not very successful, I’m afraid.”

Mrs Butler: “A funny story, really. Shall I tell it?”

Mrs Butler: “Okay, I’ll be brief. Well, my mother, before she died- well, she died of cancer. Terribly long and drawn out, actually- but that’s not the story. The story is: my mother, before she died, cured my dad-”

Mrs Butler: “No, he didn’t have cancer – he got seasick! He used to get terribly seasick. And once, before she died, my mother cured my father’s seasickness with the contraceptive pill. That’s the story! The pill. Would you believe it? We went boat-fishing and we didn’t have his usual medicine, so Mum gave him the pill and he didn’t feel a thing. Ha ha. ‘Didn’t get pregnant, either!’ my mum said.”

Mrs Butler: “Well, yes, the other part of the story is that I thought that might work for me. Suicide by placebo – imagine. Took two whole months’ worth with a bottle of Dad’s bourbon. Cheers. *Kon-be.*”

Mrs Butler: “Joke of the entire ward, of course.”

Mrs Butler: “Very limited placebo effect. And it doesn’t cure cancer, either. Just so you know.”

Mrs Butler: “But enough about me, Mrs Moon. Tell me about yourself.”

Mrs Butler: “More *soju*? Well, it might tip me over, but- what the heck! And more bubbles, too. Bubbles, I mean! Bub-bels.”

The second empty bottle clinks on the floor. *Sssshhhh! Silly.* Mrs Butler puts the bottle straight, kicks it over, it roooolllllls roll roll rolls across the floor. *Mishush Butterer sayz sssshhhh! Hihhi. Sayz tousch your noshe toesh noshe toesh* Mrs Butler can’t see her toes the lightswitch the toilet bowl, ooh beautiful cold floor *bewdiful cooollld flooooooor*

On Saturday there is vomit on the bathroom floor next to the toilet bowl, and there is also Mrs Butler. She opens an eye and closes it. *Not again, Mrs Butler.*

On Sunday, Mrs Butler stands in the doorway of her bedroom. The living room floor is sticky, a thick puddle of green detergent seeping under the couch. She shuffles

into the kitchen where the ice-cube tray lies in the sink, cracked up the middle. Empty juice bottles, empty *soju* bottles, a broken glass in the bin. She follows her nose to the vomit drying on the bathroom floor. She is still shaky, and has to lean up against the door jamb. *Disgusting, Mrs Butler. You ought to be ashamed.* She sighs. *I am, Mrs Butler, I am.*

*There is something wrong with you, you know,* Mrs Butler tells herself. She mops up the mess by the toilet bowl. *But I'm not hurting anyone,* Mrs Butler reasons. She showers and brushes her teeth. *Nobody but yourself, Mrs Butler.* She shakes her head and wipes the detergent from the living room floor with her towel. *You said last time was the last time,* Mrs Butler reminds herself, as she puts her dirty laundry into the machine. *You're sick.* She scrubs the bathroom, dizzy from bending down. *I just got drunk. It's not the end of the world.* Mrs Butler cleans the kitchen. *Oh, stop making excuses. It's pathetic.* She makes her bed and dusts the dressing table. *But why, Mrs Butler?* She hangs the laundry on a drying rack in the small space outside her front door. *You came here to clean up your act.* She sweeps the floors, *it's lonely,* and sprays them with disinfectant; breathes in its sharp, bright scent.

Finally sick of her own voice, Mrs Butler tunes her radio to the classical station and turns up the volume. She turns to her reflection in the window – “Clean as you walk, Mrs Butler” – and sashays across the living room floor in her mop slippers, slowly, so as not to hurt her feet. Into the corners and out. Skirting the edges of each room and swiping her feet back to the centre. Spray, swish swish. Spray, spray, swish swish. Her dance takes her from the living area into the kitchen, back into the living area and into her bedroom, out into the living area again and then branching off once more into the

bathroom. Mrs Butler stops and surveys her small home. She can see where she's been because there is nothing there to see. Mrs Butler showers again, dries herself with a clean towel, and puts on fresh clothes.

Afterwards, Mrs Butler makes a pot of black tea, adds a good splash of milk, and stands at the window. She gazes, beyond the high-rises, at Halla. Her director and his wife have promised to drive her to the mountain tomorrow. "For picnic only" he'd said kindly when she'd told him, after class, that walking hurt her feet. *For surface and texture, Mrs Butler.* She sips her tea.

On Monday morning, Mrs Butler walks to the corner store.

"An-nyeong-ha-se-yo," she greets the *ajuma* – *Mrs Moon, is it, or have we made that up, Mrs Butler?* Her friend's back is turned and she is adjusting her grandson's pants over his nappy.

Without waiting for a reply, Mrs Butler goes to the shelves to select gifts for her hosts. Family packs of Spam are a Korean favourite that she still cannot bring herself to buy; instead she chooses bottles of aloe juice and drinking yoghurt, and vials of something called Vita-C, which, like Bacchus, also purports to have medicinal qualities. Mrs Butler takes down boxes of cookies and choco-pies for Mr Kim's boys, Hyun-Ki and Hyun-Shik. Lastly, she heaves at an industrial-sized box of laundry powder. *Good for you, Mrs Butler.* She congratulates herself on knowing that this odd assortment of items makes for an appropriate gift here in her new home.

Mrs Butler limps under the weight of the goods, dropping them heavily onto the tiny counter next to the *ajuma*'s platform. Her friend is there, chatting to her grandson, but she turns and says with her usual good cheer, "Annyeong haseyo, sonsaengnim."

Mrs Butler smiles around her pile of boxes and bottles, "An-nyeo-" but lets out an involuntary gasp when she sees the other woman's purple eye, freshly swollen, the taut skin around it pulling one side of her mouth slightly upwards into a lopsided grin.

"Mrs Moon!" she exclaims. "What on earth happened?" Mrs Butler stares, but the *ajuma* makes no attempt to hide her face, even lifting her palm to her eye as if only just reminded by Mrs Butler's horror that something is amiss. She shakes her head a little ruefully, but continues to chat to Mrs Butler, chuckling and nodding in her customary fashion.

But Mrs Butler can only nod and shake her head in turns, listening intently to the familiar cracked voice and jaunty intonation of the woman in front of her. Understanding nothing. And this time, when the *ajuma* pats her arm, Mrs Butler briefly captures the other woman's hand, dry and lined, and squeezes it. But her friend needs it to rustle the juice and biscuits into plastic bags, to take money and to give change. She needs it to pick a pink lighter from a box on the counter and slip it in amongst the purchases. "Serbice!" she beams, and Mrs Butler, with her bags and her carry-box of laundry powder, is pushed, not ungently, out into the street.

Mrs Butler's eyes smart from the sun and her feet twinge. On her way back to the flat to wait for Mr Kim and his family, Mrs Butler is forced to stop constantly with her heavy load. She drops her bags and eyes the desiccated remains of a vomit puddle ground into the road. The overly frequent presence of these splatters had puzzled Mrs Butler for



weeks after her arrival in Jeju; until the evening she'd witnessed three businessmen rolling hand-in-hand down the street, stopping briefly while one of them doubled over and threw up, casually, onto the tar, before continuing on bellowing and singing to the next bar.

Mrs Butler stops again, watches a tailless cat sidle under a car and watch her in return. She imagines the *ajuma* she just left, backed into a corner, her weathered hands held up in front of her face; her able hands failing, nevertheless, to stop the swing of a fist. Whoever did it – her husband? – stumbling back, spent; falling unconscious where he lies. Mrs Butler envisages the other woman dressing for the day, donning her bright clothes and her brave face, and leaving breakfast on the low, folding table for the husband who is still sleeping it off. Mrs Butler gathers her bags and plods on, imagining the daughter-in-law stopping by long enough to drop the child off on her way to her job at a bank or in an office somewhere in the city, but not long enough to share a cup of tea. And *they own themselves*, Mrs Butler had thought.

She pauses with her bundle again. *But Mrs Butler*, she tells herself – for who else can she tell? – *you're jumping to conclusions. You know nothing. Perhaps she walked into a door.* And Mrs Butler starts off again, one last time, treading over the rotted petals of the cherry blossoms on the road. She crosses the road to her low-rise apartment block where the sun is warming, rising, touching the tips of the leaves in the neighbours' yards.

*The beach was lovely, but it wasn't the mountain, Mrs Butler.* She arrives back at the iron gate that evening, waving her hosts goodbye and still puzzling over the confusion. She'd felt sure they'd made arrangements to go to the mountain. Instead, the beach, not yet

open for the swimming season, had been at low tide, and she and Mr Kim's family had walked a long way out across the painfully uneven surface of the tidal flat. Mrs Butler had had to stop to rest her feet; and when she did, had glanced back beyond the sand to Halla, as far away as ever.

Now, as she finally limps her way to the top of the stairs, Mrs Butler is startled to see the *ajuma* from the store squatting by the landlady's kimchi jars, her head nodded in sleep.

"Well, this is a surprise," says Mrs Butler, though not unhappily; but as the *ajuma* wakes and looks up, she remembers, with renewed shock, the woman's puffy eye.

"Annyeong haseyo, sonsaengnim," the *ajuma* says, but she is unusually subdued and there is effort involved in her greeting.

"Oh, goodness. That looks terrible. How long have you been sitting here? Come in, come in."

Mrs Butler hurries to unlock her door and usher the woman inside, but as she sits on the stool by the door to remove her shoes, the *ajuma*, having stepped out of her street slippers, stands uncertainly at the threshold in her bare feet.

"Oh, I don't have any indoor slippers," says Mrs Butler. "But I do have..." she gropes around inside the shoe cabinet and pulls out a new pair of mop slippers, still in their plastic, "...some of these." She tears the plastic open.

It is the other woman's turn to look surprised as she takes the footwear offered to her, but Mrs Butler dons her own pair and steps on to the spotless floor. The *ajuma* smiles, then, and slips them over her feet.

"There you go. Come on in. Here, give me your bag. That's it. Welcome."

The *ajuma* follows Mrs Butler into the living room, and Mrs Butler, watching the curious tilt of her head as she scans the room, realises how foreign her home is. And how, for the first time, she is the host and someone from here is the visitor. But the other woman is unusually silent, and so Mrs Butler finds herself narrating as they walk through the *waegookin's* flat.

“Well, that’s the couch. I don’t know where Mr Kim found it, but there it is. I’ll just put your bag there.” Mrs Butler places the bag on its arm and watches the other woman’s eyes travelling across the room. “Table and chairs, too, yes. Not that I really need four chairs, being here by myself. Please, sit, and I’ll put the jug on. Oh, but I hope I have something other than black tea here.” The woman remains standing, looking at a picture on the wall. “Oh that? That’s a-”

“Kangaru! *Huju!*” Her friend is suddenly animated again.

“*Huju* – Australia. Yes. Well, it’s a walleroo, actually, much smaller than a kangaroo, but the same idea, I suppose.”

“You Austeralia. Sydony Olympics.”

“Ah, yes. The good old Olympics.”

“Austeralia – fighting!” The *ajuma* raises a fist into the air. Mrs Butler has heard her kids shouting “Korea fighting!” as a battle cry in support of the Korean soccer team; in two years’ time Korea and Japan will co-host the World Cup and it is cause for wholesale national pride. *And national pride is not my thing*, but Mrs Butler is nonetheless moved by her friend’s gesture of equality.

“Austeralia fighting!” she says it again.

“Well, thank you. Thank you. And this, come this way, this is my room. I don’t sleep on a futon, a, what is it here, a *yo*? No *yo*. I have a bed, like in a hotel. Yes, you can sit on it, of course. Ha ha. Your feet don’t touch the ground, do they?” Both women chuckle as the *ajuma* swings her legs from the height of the bed. “Anyway, that’s about it. I’m going to make some tea. Tea? *Cha*?”

The *ajuma* nods and follows Mrs Butler into the teal kitchen. “I’m afraid I only have black tea. Is black tea going to be okay?” Mrs Butler spoons some loose leaves into her teapot and as the water reboils she pours it over them. The other woman leans in, then, and peers into the steaming pot.

“For green tea the water must be cooled first, I think?” Mrs Butler looks at her. “But for black tea it must be very very hot.” She puts the lid on and finally turns to the *ajuma* and looks into her swollen face. They stand for a few seconds, face to face, and then Mrs Butler points to herself.

“Well, I should’ve introduced myself earlier, but I’m Mrs Butler. Mrs Butler.” The woman nods and Mrs Butler gestures to her with an open palm. “And you must be...”

“Choi, Ji-yeon. Choi.”

“Chae. Um, I’m not sure if I can say that. Chwae. Mrs Chwae, is that right?”

Mrs Choi nods. “Sonsaengnim,” she says, touching Mrs Butler’s arm.

“Well, perhaps Mrs Butler is a bit difficult to say? What about Sally? You could call me Sally, if you like. Sally.”

Mrs Choi shakes her head and says again, “Sonsaengnim.”

“Fine. Sonaengnim is fine, Mrs Chwae. Now, would you like milk in your tea? Um, how do you say ‘milk’? Oh, it doesn’t matter.”

Mrs Butler makes tea and Mrs Choi pulls a packet of biscuits and two nashi pears from her bag. The kitchen is not a *waegookin* kitchen, and Mrs Butler has left it as she found it, so Mrs Choi knows her way around, pulling a sharp knife from the top drawer, a plate from the cupboard, and slicing the pears into crescents. As she does, she begins talking again, and when Mrs Butler hands her a cup of milky black tea, Mrs Choi sips at it, exclaims loudly, and then chuckles.

They sit at the table and chairs with Mrs Choi’s biscuits and fruit and some chocolate-coated macadamias from Australia, which Mrs Butler has been keeping in the freezer. Mrs Choi sips and nibbles and looks around the room. Her eyes land on small things – the glass echidna-shaped paperweight on the coffee table, the Australian flora calendar with its picture of a banksia nut, the batik sarong draped over the back of the couch – and she talks.

Finally, when the talk is done, Mrs Choi gets up to leave; but before she does, Mrs Butler goes to her room and takes out her flower press. She unscrews it and removes a page from near the bottom. A Sturt’s Desert Pea, floral emblem of South Australia, perfectly preserved. She returns to the lounge room and gives it to her friend.

Too full of tea even to sit, Mrs Butler watches from the top of the stairs, across the neighbours’ rooves, as Mrs Choi’s head disappears up the street. She smells the warm spice of dinners being cooked beneath those rooves, hears pockets of speech, that she might almost understand, drifting up out of windows. She turns, then, to watch the sun

setting to the right of Hallasan, and thinks, *soon enough, Mrs Butler. That mountain's not going anywhere.*

And she imagines the mountain as it will look soon – motherly and rugged, colourful and masculine – wearing flowering azaleas like a spring frock over knobbly stone knees. And she anticipates how, in the shiny bubble of Mr Kim's car, they will drive closer and closer to the mountain; and how she will watch as the sprinkles of colour on patches of greens become petals and leaves, branches and bark, rock and scree. Surface and texture.

## Dectomy

The flowers lie on the doormat. Only, they're not really flowers. They're a kind of sentence. Or a sum.

One. There are flowers.

Two. They are white chrysanthemums.

Three. They're from my husband.

We have our own algebra of flowers.

Oh, and I almost forgot – did forget – Four. It's our wedding anniversary.

It's a kind of exponential equation. A long story.

I got warts the first time we tried to have sex. Condoms only go on hard things, like bananas and fresh cucumbers.

“Don't worry,” I said, trying to cheer them both – him and his flagging member – up. “Shakespeare had that problem, too.” And I clambered on, equally as drunk, and wiggled around in his lap. Not enough to get him hard, but enough to get me viral.

The bar where we met was the bar I went to if I went to a bar; the jeans, boots and Shania Twain of regular Cow-Town saloons surrender to waifs in dark, ankle-length skirts, long-haired men in wooden-bone vests and spike-faced girls carving out their black-taloned moves to *Nine Inch Nails* and *The Cure*.

In Delusion, Jim and his two buddies, in matching beige chinos and two-toned green-striped golf-shirts, stuck out like sore thumbs. “Like a dead dingo's donger!” was Jim's own take on it, later. But as it turned out, all three of them had just come off shift

from Scrums – one of those sports bars springing up around Calgary’s outer suburbs – which explained the jock-wear: it was the kind of place, Jim half-boasted, where you could watch hockey, drink beer, play Keno and have a round of putt-putt all at the same time.

Earlier on, leaning up against the bar where I was ordering a Caesar, Jim’s pick-up line had been, “Hey, have you got a little Aussie in ya?” Only he’d had to repeat it over “Love Cats.”

“I said, ‘have you got a little Aussie in ya?’”

“Are you Chinese?” was what I was used to, to which I had my standard come-back: “You mean, do I eat spaghetti with chopsticks?” But Australian? Caught off-guard, I told the truth. “No, one of my grandmothers was Korean.”

But Jim, as it turned out, wasn’t enquiring about my heritage; he was already getting to his punch line. “Would you *like* a little Aussie in ya?” He delivered it and bellowed, apparently unaware of the stares he was getting, then winked at me.

Anyway, the “little” Aussie part of the joke I got later, in bed. But the “in you” bit, well, that one was on me, and Jim was strangely – kind of cheerfully – unembarrassed about his lack of performance. I guess it was that cheerfulness – that and the accent – that really roped me in: a matter not so much of what Jim said but of how he said it. And I remember the first time he called and left a message on the machine, how me and my roomie Luce saved it and replayed it over and over just for kicks.

But Jim was kind of down-to-earth, too: he laughed loudly and didn’t care, and that made a change from the oilmen and the wannabe cowboys, and the occasional Goth I’d brought home from Delusion. And his warts weren’t visible to the naked eye. So by



the time, a couple of months later, the nurse at the STD clinic had burnt mine off with liquid nitrogen and given me a nasty pamphlet as a souvenir, we'd already become an item of sorts. "The short and the tall of it," said Jim, who was a whole foot taller than me.

By then, too, BBQs, beers and Caesars had become 'barbies', 'beya' and 'Bloody Maries' – "and no bloody clam juice!" – on the balcony of the 'flat' he shared with the other Aussies on seasonal leave from Whistler. These guys were their own sub-culture, with their own dialect and social systems. They all called each other 'dickhead' and 'fuck-knuckle', but as long as they smiled when they said it, it meant they were the best of 'mates'.

So Jim was what we might call an 'exotic' in the flower store – though he was not really a flower man, himself – and when he suggested a trip to Brisbane to meet his mother, I couldn't wait to see him on his own home turf. In mid-June we both took a week off and, armed with my boss' catalogue of Australian native plants and various Brisbane garden centres where I could find them, we set off. I'd been to the States with Mom and Dad once, and on a trip to Mexico with some girls from the floral design course, but at twenty I'd never really been overseas; and never to the land Down under, and never ever with my own Australian native.

I had seen, on TV, how when you arrive from overseas there are people with flowers and balloons at the airport, but we were only met by customs officials with sniffer dogs – and my catalogue, then my whole bag, was searched for seeds and leaves. And when we finally got through all that there was no-one in the waiting area to meet us, so we caught a taxi to Jim's mother's house.

Squinting out through wet-looking eyes, she said “HEL-LO” to me in the doorway. Jim, though, pushed through with our bags, and when he bent down to give his mother a peck on the cheek, she pulled at his t-shirt, and, not quite out of earshot, snapped in his ear, “I thought you told me she was Canaydian. Hope she’s housetrained.”

I froze where I was, bent over to take off my shoes, and Jim looked round at me quickly. “Don’t worry about that,” he pretended to point at my feet, but winked sheepishly. “You can keep your shoes on.” He turned to his mother and nudged her into the next room, whispering, “Course she bloody is, Ma,” and after a few seconds of sharp but muffled exchanges, his voice and hers, mother and son returned. She smiled coldly while Jim grabbed our suitcases and headed up the stairs, shouting “I’ll leave you lovely ladies to introduce yourselves.”

But Mrs Peters barely listened for my name before she waved at me to follow her through the large square house built by her ex-husband. They both smelled of Febreze – the mother and the house, I mean. I never met Jim’s father. All I knew of him, what little Jim had told me, was that he was a Vietnam vet who had terrible nightmares and a lifelong problem with all things Asian – something, aside from a son and the ownership of a large square house, which apparently he still shared with his ex-wife.

She listed off the house’s features as she walked carefully between its white walls.

“Living room.

Dining room.

Kitchen.

Bedroom 1. Mine.”

*Hers*, I guessed, only the way she said it, I heard *mine*, as in *landmine*.

“Study.

Bathroom.

Separate toilet.

Laundry.

No basement. Not in this country. Deck, though.” She waved. “For barbies.

Upstairs.”

She clung to the banister and I followed.

“Master bedroom. Empty.

“B2. *Jim* can have this one.” *His*.

“B3. No sex in ten years.” I wasn’t sure I’d heard right, but I stopped and looked up. The woman who had just insulted me wasn’t now confiding in me? No. Mrs Peters shook her head, muttering something inaudible and stumbling against the wall. She grabbed at the doorjamb of the next room for support before finishing the tour.

“B4. You’ll sleep there. You.”

She looked and pointed at me. *You*.

“Bathroom with toilet.”

This was the most intimate conversation we had, and the longest; and, yelling to Jim as she half-fell down the stairs, she went off, most probably to lie down in *mine*. I stood in the upstairs hall where she left me, listening for where in the house Jim might be; but not hearing anything, I went quickly back to B3, curious to see what had caused Mrs Peters’ weird admission: curious what no sex for ten years might look like. I opened the door, peering in to a twin bed with a thin yellow cover and the smell of chemical faux-flowers, and then I closed it again.

“Sorry about that, babe.” I found Jim on the deck with a beer already.

“Which part?”

“She didn’t mean it.”

“Like hell.”

“C’mon, babe,” he pulled me close. “It’s just for a week. And she is me Mum.”

Changing the subject, he told me the house was on the market, which explained, he said, the careful walking and the Febreze. People could – though they didn’t – drop by for a viewing at any time, and the place had to be kept “spic and span and reeking of roses.”

“Tell her,” his mother barked before she retired to her room, and now he told me: when I left a room I had to make sure it looked and smelled like I hadn’t been there. Any dishes I used had to be washed, wiped and put away immediately. There was a dust-buster in the kitchen for any dropped crumbs. I should scrub the toilet bowl every time I went and spray with Febreze.

He didn’t tell me to, but all that week I slept on top of the bed in B4, still and straight, and made regular trips to the ‘wheelie bin’ to get rid of any evidence of myself from the house: as if I’d developed some kind of voodoo paranoia, I bundled up my DNA in tissue paper – pulling strands of my hair from plugholes and jumping on them when I saw them land – and took it to the trash. When I did, despite the fact that we only drank water at mealtimes, and Jim only ever drank beer, I noticed the contents of the recycling box beside the garbage can growing. And it grew, gin bottle by wine bottle, day by day, over the week. Jim didn’t mention it, so I didn’t either, but that, it seemed to me,

explained the careful walking and the Febreze, the red eyes and the loose tongue. And I figured: for a week, for Jim's sake, I could deal with it.

There was one print in the whole house, a wood-backed poster. The walls had been redone before going on the market, so there were no nails allowed: just one for the poster because it had been a gift from Jim to his mother when he was a kid. It was hanging in the dining room on the blank wall above the pine table where we ate boiled vegetables and fat, grey sausages every night. Jim's mother only addressed him – in the kind of chopped-up shorthand I'd heard him using with his Aussie mates in Calgary, but now with references to 'rellies' in 'hossie' and 'chrissie pressies'. Across the table from me, seeing my complete lack of interest, Jim didn't bother translating his mother's nasal drone, so my escape from suppertime conversation gave me plenty of time to contemplate that picture.

It was a print of a still life, originally painted in flat, thin strokes: a pear with the slightest blush of yellow, pallid off-green grapes, and something that looked like a misshapen nose – though it might have been either a small squash or a choko – arranged awkwardly in a straw basket amongst a smattering of white-but-yellowing chrysanthemums. Insipid? A little. But this testament to household repression might have all but faded quietly away into its avocado cream background, but for the outsized photo of a black Scottish terrier, superimposed on the painting to look as if it was squatting to the left of the basket. It wore a red and green tartan bowtie and matching tam, its small sharp teeth showing in a kind of embarrassed-looking simper, and its right paw flung

over the hooped wicker handle. And beneath that, splashed across the bottom of the print in a loud, hot pink font, were the words:

**Ach! Latha na Màthar sona dhut!**

The sausage-fat on my plate clotted as their accents – an attractive novelty in Jim, but in Mrs Peters’ mouth an ugly, flat whine – carried on over knife-scrapes and water glasses; and in a way, unhappy as I was, I kind of admired Jim for loving such an unlovable woman. I remembered what Luce had read about how you should never marry a man until you saw how he was around his mom: if he was mean to her, he’d be mean to you; if he expected her to pick up after him, he’d sure as hell be expecting that from you the minute that ring was on your finger; but if he was ok with mommy, then he’d probably be okay with wifey. Luce dispensed her wisdom as she gathered it from her magazines, but this insight was only ever going to be hypothetical, anyway: we were *never* getting married.

But still, I noticed how Jim cleared the table after dinner and scoured the grease off the plates, how he took the garbage out every day and was quiet when his mother was ‘feeling crook.’ As for our great Australian vacation, Jim and I slept in, or on, our single beds, and that was how the week went. Mrs Peters didn’t own a car and anyway Jim had to fix his up so he could get it out of the garage in case the house got sold, so I went alone by bus to nurseries that weren’t too far away. And on the day before we left, I caught the rivercat to the Botanical Gardens early in the morning, looking for flowers that even here, in their home country, looked exotic. From there, I walked the path along the river, crossed the footbridge over to Vulture Street, and strolled along South Bank, watching locals on the fake beach huddled in sweaters against the mild Brisbane winter. I didn’t

even know – until we got back to Calgary and looked on a map – how close the real beaches were, or I might have gone.

That last day, when I got back to the house too late for supper, and Mrs Peters was already in bed, I let myself in and just stood before the picture one last time, amazed that someone would purposely create something so awful. After a few minutes, beer in hand, Jim joined me by the table and put his arm across my shoulder.

“I got it for Mum for Mother’s Day one year,” he leaned on me, and I smelt the booze heavy on his breath. “It says ‘Happy Mother’s Day’ in Scots,” he added.

He looked so proud, I tried not to laugh; and maybe it was the brightness of the pink, the fact that we were leaving the next day, or the fact that I had to bite my tongue over that hideous picture, but I suddenly felt giddy and silly. I put my hand on his ass and squeezed it: “Why, Jim,” I giggled, “have you got a little Scots in you?” and I grinned at him.

But Jim frowned down at me and reached around, pushing my hand away. I didn’t know what I’d said – Jim could be moody on the booze – but I was too tired to figure it out, so I put my hands in my pockets, nodded toward the picture, and told him that in Korea those flowers, white ones, are for funerals. Then I went up to B4, by myself, for the last time; but I guess he remembered about the chrysanthemums.

“Wanna be my ball and chain?” He reeked of beer and smoke from the night before, but when Jim proposed, a month or so after our trip, I had to laugh: as usual with Jim, it wasn’t what he said but how he said it. His Working Holiday visa was about to run

out, he pointed out, and getting hitched might speed up his permanent resident application. “Plus,” he said, “you’re cute and I like ya.”

“That’s great,” I teased, rolling over and drilling my finger into his chest. “But what the hell’s in it for me?”

Then suddenly, grinning like an idiot, he jumped up on the bed, grabbed the cheap plastic Australian flag he had poking out of the tube of the curtain rod, stuck the pole between his ass cheeks, and wagged his butt in the air to make the flag wave. “You get,” he yelled, “your very own, true-blue, Aussie bloke!”

“Okay, okay.” I mock-glared at him. “But the warts go or I go. Deal?”

“Deal.”

Well, it was more like winning the consolation prize than a deal, but I was willing to try most things once – even after the hangover wore off. And we both knew it probably wouldn’t be forever, but maybe I’d get myself an Australian visa, too. Or maybe we’d make beautiful Asian-looking grandkids for the Peters family album.

So we got married in Calgary: no point in flying all the way back to Australia for a wedding his mother wouldn’t attend – or if she did, I told Jim, I wouldn’t. And my parents didn’t come, either. They didn’t approve of most of the choices I made – black clothes over pastels, Calgary over Vancouver, arranging flowers over a BA in English Lit – and I wasn’t sure marrying Jim was going to break that habit. Besides, Vancouver was far enough away not to have to tell them.

And there were no rings or flowers. We just signed the papers in our lunchbreaks with a couple of Jim’s mates as witnesses. My own girlfriends had thinned out, and even Luce – reminding me of our strict non-marriage vows – said there was no way in hell she



was perjuring herself by signing me away to Jim. She said she'd keep my room for as long as she could, and on that morning she'd called to tell me that according to the horoscope in the *Herald*, my planets weren't positioned well for love. Well, she did try to tell me, but that day, my wedding day, I felt strangely excited. Like maybe it could be forever.

I went back to work after lunch, and – like some kind of soft-headed Ophelia – spent the afternoon in and out of the fridges, making a charm out of flowers. I began with pink carnations, for a woman's love, and light pink roses for passion. I interspersed some lilac sprigs because their tiny four-lobed flowers, gathered closely into a long purple cob, stuck out against the big creamy-pink blooms of the roses and carnations. And because they, too, symbolise love. And then I wanted something bold and brave, but at the same time exquisite. Sunflowers and tulips. Sunflowers, with their slender-but-hairy necks and their good humour. And red tulips: the crisp lines of their shy heads together with leaves and stems of a green that is the single secret of tulips on earth.

These buds, these blossoms, these floral hearts, cost me half my week in wages; but still I arranged them with feverish fingers. A charm. And against my army of tulip red, I needed a draping of honeysuckle, for the bonds of love, for their unbelievable scent, for their white, trembling fragility. And finally, as though I'd completely lost the plot, I scattered the arrangement with herbs: eucalyptus for my Australian husband, thyme for thrift, rosemary for remembrance, and witch-hazel to bind the whole colourful, fragrant spell together. Inside me was a small, waiting bloom.

Knowing Jim didn't like the smell of pussy, I bought a spray on the way to Scrums, fighting my way through the pharmacy with my bouquet, fending off shopping carts with my elbows and knees. He wasn't expecting me and I'd never been before, but when I arrived, I recognised the two guys who were there at City Hall to witness the papers, Jeff and Dave. There were two or three others who also worked there, all standing on one side of the bar or the other, depending on whether they were on or off shift.

Jeff saw me first, and threw his head back and yelled, "Oi, Jim! It's ya missus!" To the tune of "Here Comes the Bride", he waved his arms in the air and sang, "Daa, dut, da, daaa."

Jim was just coming out of the can, and I watched him making his way carefully across the room.

"We're having a little reception," said one of the other guys, "to celebrate the big occasion."

"Are those flowers for me?" said another one. "Aww, you shouldn't have."

Dave, the other witness, pulled out a stool for me and offered me a drink, laughing when I asked if they had champagne. He ordered me a white wine across the bar, and Jeff asked, "What is it you do, anyway?" just as Jim arrived at the table, red-cheeked and top-heavy.

At Jeff's question, Jim raised his thick eyebrows. He looked at me, and he looked at the flowers I was holding, his head weaving in the low light, and then he turned back to his mate, nodding sideways at the bouquet, and grunted: "Clearly she's a fuckin' bricklayer, Einstein."

The guys, Jeff included, all cracked up laughing. My wine arrived on the bar and I sipped at something resembling grape syrup, wishing I'd just asked for a Caesar. I thought of ordering one anyway, but Jim had an audience now, all watching him, and he looked around at them. "You do know what a flower is, don't ya?" he asked them. They waited. He winked at me: "Do you?"

I smiled, kind of, but I guessed he wasn't going to say, "They're an alphabet, a language in and of themselves." No.

No. Jim looked at me and he looked at the ceiling and he looked around at the boys again, and then he announced, for the benefit of everybody in the bar who had ears, "they're a plant's sex bits!" He wiggled his eyebrows, provoking more bellows of mirth, and I could only shrug. It was true. In a way.

Then he reached over, wobbling – I realised then how pissed he was – and took the bouquet from me; and with the mock-ceremony of a court jester, he swept my love-spell around in a half-circle in front of him.

"And this," he stopped and pointed them at his friends, "is just like you lot." He paused, then dragged each word out: "A great. Big. Hairy. Bunch. Of cunts!"

The guys roared and banged the bar with their hands. It was all the encouragement Jim needed; he shoved his face into the heart of my arrangement, gobbling and slurping and rubbing his stubble against the soft petals. He came up for air, grinning, and then, with repeated facial thrusts, grunting and moaning, he crushed my flowers into his nose, into his forehead, into his cheeks, taking in huge, disgusting whiffs of their fragrance.

Dave saw me get up to go and gave me an apologetic grin. As I reached the threshold, between the wooden bar behind and the car park beyond, I heard Dave laugh and say, “Poor girl. It’s true, ya know, you are a bunch of cunts. You ‘specially, Jim.”

And so. There are the flowers, on mine and Luce’s welcome mat. A bunch of white chrysanthemums from my husband on our first and final wedding anniversary. I guess he must have ordered them online, now that he’s back in Australia; and god only knows what he’s asked some other poor girl in a flower shop to write on the card.

But I figure there’s one way to find out – and he’ll never know. I pull the card out of its envelope and there it is, his sentence, written out in someone else’s hand.

I have had the reproductive  
organs of a plant removed  
in honour of our anniversary.

Jim.

Well, it always was how he said it. But I do believe in spells – and curses – and I can only thank my stars that that day in June, alone at the top of the stairs in his mother’s house in Brisbane, I closed the door on that room with the twin bed and the thin yellow cover and the smell of chemical faux-flowers.

## What any dog wants to hear

I pass by here often enough this time a night and that dog never fails to bark, giving me the evil eye through the fence. And then, every single time, someone inside wakes up from their sleep. His sleep. It's a man's voice, coming from the far end of the house. And he yells, "Shuttup Gruff, ya stupid dog!" Dog's only doing his job, but. And then I guess he rolls over – the ole fulla, not the dog – and chucks an arm over the missus and goes back to sleep. Snores like a fucken train.

One time a light come on, and I squatted down behind the bottlebrush bush growing near the fence. The light come on in the kitchen, this end a the house, and I seen the ole lady pass by the window in her sarong, but she never even looked out. Went to the sink and got herself a glass a water and back to bed. That's the only time, but.

It's about halfway between me two locals – Lim's, which is me watering hole, and the Nightcliff Hotel, ay kay ay the Nightie, where I live. Nothing special bout the place, but, except the dog. He never fails to bark, but he doesn't mind a bit a sausage or steak fat or the bone from a lamb chop I save from me dinner. He barks and gives me his mean ole look, and the ole fart in the far bedroom shouts, "Shuttup Gruff, ya stupid dog!" And then I tell him, "S'alright, Gruff. Good boy, Gruffie." And I pass him a bit of a treat through the fence and he licks his chops and smiles the way dogs do and I let him sniff me hand and I tell him again, "Good boy, Gruffie." Which is what any dog wants to hear.

He's good at his job, but, I'll give him that. Takes a bit before he lets me give him a good scratch behind the ears, but I'm patient. And we go through our little ole routine, and then one night I slip inside and I have a extra piece a meat for him, and I rub his

rump a bit and then I push him, real gentle. And he lays down and rolls over so as I can scratch his belly, and then I know we're good, Gruff and me. The buckle on his collar scrapes on the driveway where the ole Holden Jackeroo is parked. But no lights come on. Four-wheel-drive's locked. Though it wouldn't be too hard to get in if there was something a worth inside. Not even a dollar, but, or even a fucken cigarette. Just a empty packet.

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So itchy! I got those funny lumps on me again today. I showed Ms Major, but in private because they were on my belly, and she looked at them and said, "Did you eat tomatoes again, Mazie?" And I practiced my innocent face and I said, "Tomatoes? Me, eat tomatoes?" Because tomatoes always make me itchy and lumpy. But I got some calamine lotion from the school nurse, which is pretty great because I love the smell of that stuff, and it's really cool on my skin. And now I can show the Endangered Species when I get home.

Mum and Dad call themselves the Endangered Species on account of them still being married. To each other. And I call them that, too, only not in front of Bronnie, because her parents are divorced, and not in front of Ms Major, either, because I don't think being married three times counts. At home I practice making faces and doing dances in front of the mirror, and at school we're learning that song "Greatest Love of All" by Whitney Houston, and I can even practice that with the tape player on loud because I have my own room now. I used to sleep in the corner of the living room because the Endangered Species said Janie couldn't be expected to share with a little sister half her age, but when Janie moved out I got her room, which is right next door to

Alex's. Sometimes when I'm singing he bangs on the wall and tells me to stop yowling. But he says he's moving out soon, too, when he's got a bit more money saved up, so then it'll just be me and the ES (Endangered Species for short). Janie and Alex used to tease me and say I was a mistake, so that's why I'm so young and different-looking compared to them, but they were only kidding, and I told them, "Then I'm the best mistake the ES ever made!" And Mum heard me and shook her head and said I was a poor little child with terrible self-esteem.

In silent reading hour someone farted. I reckon it was Satish because he laughed the loudest, and Ms Major said, "Alright, settle down, everybody," but even she was trying not to smile. But it really stunk and I got mad because I was reading *Bridge to Terabithia*, which is one of my favourite books, and I've read it three times already, and I was at that part where Jesse throws all the paints and paper Leslie gave him into the creek where she drowned, which is pretty sad. And you can't be sad and smell stinky farts at the same time.

Janie's an *artiste*, that's how she says it, so the floor in my room is covered in splotches where she's knocked over her paintbrush jar a hundred times and dripped melted wax into the carpet. Even the curtains have marks from where she wiped her brushes dry on them. There's a big built-in wardrobe against the wall where the door is, and so when the ES tell me to clean up my pigsty I just chuck everything in there and close the door and they hardly ever check in there. I even have some old barbies in a box in the bottom that I don't like anymore, and now Janie says she wants them to make some kind of art with. That would be okay. I saw one she did where she melted a barbie's feet

and scorched all up her legs and then wrapped her in barbed wire and took her head off and put a real bird's skull on there. She called it "Barbed Fire".

There's a big pink teddy bear named Pinky on top of the wardrobe in my room. It's not mine, though, it's Janie's that she's had since she was little (even Pinky's older than me!), but she says there's not enough room in her and Arnie's flat for it, so I'm looking after it for her. I walk to her flat with Gruffie sometimes and have tea there with her and Arnie and then she walks me home after. Janie cooks different stuff to what Dad makes, but it's good, though. Mum and Dad and even Alex come sometimes too, but I like it when it's just me. Gruff waits outside and looks in through the screen door. Tonight I gave him some leftover rice, but he just sniffed it. He looked pretty disappointed.

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Darwin's a fucken hell-hole again tonight. The rains still haven't come yet and I'm half-cut from a big night drinking with the boys at Lim's and kinda horny, too, from catching a bit a the mud-wrestling they got going on there of a Thursday night. Anyways, I'm heading back to me room at the Nightie, just passing by, minding me own business, and there's ole Gruffie barking his head off and eyeing me through the fence, and the ole fulla yelling "Shuttup Gruff, ya stupid dog!" And I think, seeing as how I'm here anyways – with a sausage in me pocket, wouldn't ya know it – and seeing as how they prob'ly got a bit a booze in there to cool a body down, and maybe a few bucks lying around, I may's well have a little look-see just on the off-chance. There's a window I seen under the fig tree, which only has a mozzie screen, not even a grate over it, and the glass bit is always open cause it's 30 fucken degrees at night this time a year and about a hundred and fifty



percent humid, and them prick-teasing clouds not giving up even a millimetre of rain. It's no fucken wonder to me at all why they call it suicide season. Homicide season.

“S'alright, Gruff. Good boy, Gruffie,” I tell him and I give him his treat and he wags his tail and tonight he lets me in and follows me round to the window near the fish tank. He's sniffing at the pocket where I had his snag wrapped up in a bit a paper napkin. I get out me knife and cut a nice neat hole in the wire, stopping every so often to listen. The ole fulla's snoring pretty loud, as per usual, but I can't hear anything else, and I stick me hand through the hole – making it a bit wider – and up inside I undo the latch and slide the screen across real gentle. The ledge is nice and low and I got long legs, so I just step over onto the tiles. First things first, I cross the living room, go through the kitchen, and open the front door wide so as I got somewhere to run out of. Dog looks at me like he wants to get in, but I tell him, real quiet, “No,” and he goes and lies down on the concrete.

When I open the fridge it makes a bit of a noise when the seal breaks, and the light clicks when it comes on. But the snoring drowns out any noise I can make, and ay walla – as the French would say – there's a nice cold box of Riesling, thank you kindly, and a six-pack of tinnies still in their rings, minus one. Only when I pick up the box it's mostly empty so I just take out the beers and put em by the door and when I do Gruffie bangs his tail on the ground. There's a noise from the room at the other end of the house and the snore stops for a few seconds, and I wait near the door. Ready. But then it starts up again. And I wait a bit longer, but there's no other noises.

There's 20 bucks on the counter with a shopping list (bread, milk, cigarettes, toilet paper, sandwich ham), and I pocket em both. Wish I could see em tomorrow, but, hey? The ole fart or his missus – “Where's my shopping list? Why did he take the shopping

list?” Just for a bit of a head-fuck is all. I hear the scrape of Gruff’s collar on the concrete and figure he’s rolled over on his side. And I’m thinking I should get going while the going’s good, but it’s kinda nice being in a real home with a yard and a dog and all.

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Recess was cool, though, because I won back all my marbles that Trevor won off me yesterday. Strategy! We play under the coconut palms because there’s good dirt there, and we’ve made our course with all these hills and holes and ditches. They didn’t want us playing under there in case a coconut fell on somebody’s coconut, but we were always sneaking over there, so they got Mr Peters the janitor to climb up on a ladder and cut the coconuts down and we’re going to sell them at the school fete (sounds like school fate!) for fifty cents each. I’m going to get one for Dad.

Sometimes I get pains in my legs and my arms, and when I told Mum about them she called them ‘growing pains’. But today, I wanted to trick Gruffie when I got home, so instead of coming in the gate, I climbed over the fence. And I pulled myself up and while I was trying to get over, I suddenly felt this terrible pain right across my chest, like I’ve never felt there before. And I was stuck up there, and Bronnie was laughing at me because she could see my knickers and I couldn’t get down. But then I fell on the ground inside the yard and Bronnie said, “You’re okay. See you tomorrow, Crazie,” and then Gruff came and found me and licked me all over my face, which he always does if my face is close to his. “Yuck!” I said to him, but actually I love it.

I told Mum about the pain and she looked at me with a funny kind of smile and said, “We might have to go bra shopping soon.” I felt shy, but pretty pleased, too. There’s only one other girl in my class who has a bra, Shelly, but she got her period when she

was nine and I don't have mine yet. And I fed the fish, mostly guppies and neon tetras, in the tank under the fig tree and then me and Gruffie played the tree game. What I do is I take him round to the front yard and make him stay, and then I go and climb the fig tree, which is in a kind of courtyard off the side of the house. Today I climbed it pretty carefully so I didn't hurt my chest. And then I always call Gruff's name in a funny high voice and he races around the whole house and yard looking for me.

From where I am in the fig tree I can see Dad through one window, cooking dinner in the kitchen, and I can see Mum through another window at the other end of the house, reading in hers and Dad's room. They call it the Endangered Species Museum because when I go in there I have to be quiet and still, especially now that I have my own room to be noisy in. And Gruffie's so smart and funny! He knows where I am, because I'm always in the same place, but he pretends he doesn't, and he runs around, looking up the mango tree, sniffing around the bottlebrush near the fence, and when I can't see him I can hear him rustling through the bushes on the other side of the house. I keep calling him and calling him, but he only comes to the fig tree when he hears me laughing and then he stands there all wriggly, looking up at me and wagging his whole body. "Good boy, Gruff!" I tell him, and I climb down. And usually I give him a Bonio I have hidden in my pocket.

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But it's so fucken hot and I can't hardly go round turning all the fans on, so I grab the booze and take it out to the gate, and Gruffie follows me, and while I'm out here I crack open a cold one and just sorta empty it down me throat. Barely even feel it going down, so I crack open another one, and I'm giving Gruff a good ole scratch and I start thinking

about what it would be like if I just took off with him. Always wanted a dog, and me and Gruff are mates. “We’re mates, aren’t we, Gruffie? Hey? Good boy, Gruff,” I say. But I can’t hardly have a dog in the pub, can I, and he’d prob’ly come back here, anyways, cause he’s a dog, which means he’s loyal – even if he gets yelled at every stinking night. “I wouldn’t yell at ya, Gruff,” I tell him and he bangs his tail on the concrete. But if I had a place of me own and a missus and a yard I’d nick off with him for sure. And I go to take another swig but me beer’s gone already, and so I start on another one, and I’m talking to Gruff and it’s so hot and then there’s no beers left and I’m trying to remember if maybe there’s some wine in that fridge or a beer I didn’t see the first time round?

And there’s that box a Riesling I passed up, sitting there in the fridge, only I forgot about it. And I grab it and I’m just about to open the hatch and pour it down the ole cakehole and I hear a noise coming from a different part a the house to where the snoring is. Just like a sigh, so I wait. Ready. But nothing happens, so I go round the corner of the kitchen and there’s a door I never even noticed on me way in, and it’s open, and maybe there’s someone in there, but maybe there’s a few bucks lying around, too. So I just walk up to the door, real gentle. Anyways, I’m aiming for that, but suddenly all the beers hit me and I’m feeling pretty fucken smashed, and thinking I really should just get the fuck outta there before I fall over. And I grab onto the door frame and the door’s open a bit, so I’m staring in there but I can’t hardly see a fucken thing with me beer goggles on.

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I read a bit more of *Terabithia* (nearly finished it for the fourth time!) before I go to sleep, but it’s so hot I turn the fan up full bore and I leave my bedroom door open to let the air flow, like Mum says. If hot air was orange and cool air was blue, there’d just be a little

bit of blue like a willy willy coming down out of the fan and hitting my bed, but the rest would be orange, orange, orange.

Then, I don't know if I'm awake or asleep, or what time it is, but the light's off in my room, except for my nightlight, and I get this funny feeling that there's two of me in the room, and one of me is sitting up on the top of the wardrobe next to Pinky. Pinky's got marbles for eyes, and they're shining and looking down so I look down, too, and there's the other me on the bed, and a dark paint stain on the carpet just next to it, and there's a shadow in the room. The shadow is long and still, but then it gets longer and closer and the me on the wardrobe thinks "There's Mum coming to check on me," and then my door opens wider and suddenly the shadow turns into a man, but I don't recognise him at all, and he smells funny, but I don't know how I really know that, it's just a feeling I have. I'm having all sorts of feelings, spidery feelings, like I walked into a web and now it's all sticking to me, and the me on the bed moves a bit, and the man stops and his shoulders go up like he's holding his breath, and then when the me on the bed gets still again, the man creeps up closer until he is standing over the me on the bed and the me on the wardrobe can't see what he's doing, only the me on the bed, still sleeping, starts to feel spidery, too. It's so funny how I can feel in two places at once. Spidery legs crawling over the parts where the calamine lotion is, and the me on the wardrobe just sees the back of the man's head and the me on the wardrobe starts screaming "Wake up, wake up!" but it's like in those dreams where you want to scream and you can't because your voice won't work, and then suddenly, finally, the me on the bed jumps straight up, looking around like I'm blind, screaming "Wake up, wake up!" for real this time, and

loud, and the man runs into the wall and then out of the door, and then there's only one of me and I have my bed sheet around me and all the lights in the house are on.

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And then, fucken I dunno what, but I'm fucken running out a door I don't even remember going into and there's screaming and lights coming on and Gruff just about trips me up on me way out the gate and then I'm just running and sweat's pissing off me and then suddenly it's daylight and I wake up in me bed with a sore head and the music from the lunchtime gig banging away downstairs and I wake up a bit more and see I'm still in me clothes but there's grass stuck to me shirt and then I pat meself down and it looks as if I've taken some skin off me palm and then I find twenty bucks and a fucken shopping list in me pocket. Bread, milk, cigarettes, toilet paper, sandwich ham.

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The lights are all on. Mum usually says "Turn some lights off. This place is lit up like a bloody Christmas tree!" but tonight, when Dad forgets and turns one light off, she just looks at him and he switches it back on. Dad's smoking inside, which is against the rules, too, but Mum just takes a drag every time he walks past. He's brewing a pot of tea between laps of the living room, boiling the jug, walking, warming the pot, walking, measuring the tea, walking, and Mum is sitting with me on the tile floor. I really want to move, to walk around like Dad, but I don't want to hurt her feelings. Gruffie's got his tail curled up along his belly, looking pretty sad, but Alex tells him, "Good boy, Gruffie," and he comes inside, which he's never allowed to do. And I pat him and let him lick my face all over until Mum pushes him away so I can drink my tea. I hear Alex and Dad talking, even though Mum keeps putting her fingers to her lips, and Alex saying to Dad,

“Bastard was drinking my beers just outside. I found the empties. Polished off the wine, too.”

And Dad’s big, terrible silence.

“I’m sorry,” I tell Mum, and she starts shaking like she’s laughing but no sound comes out, and then Dad says in a voice like I’m in trouble, “You have nothing to be sorry about, Mazie,” and he takes me from Mum and helps her up from the floor.

And then the cops come and sit at the kitchen table and ask me what happened but I can’t sit now, and I walk around and around the table where everyone else is sitting, touching Dad on his hair and Mum on her shoulders, and even Alex, on his fist. And when I do, I say in my head, “I’m sorry, Dad, I’m sorry, Mum, I’m sorry, Alex,” because I am. The police officers, a man and a woman, ask me if I can remember the man’s face, but I tell them I can remember his smell but I only saw the back of his head from the top of the wardrobe. And I tell them Pinky saw him, too. And then they ask me a question, about down there, and it’s like they’ve been waiting to ask me it, and it seems like everyone, Mum and Dad and Alex, are holding their breaths, and I say, “No,” and Mum bursts into tears and grabs me when I try to walk past her, and squeezes me again. The police tell me I did the right thing to scream like that.

Alex gets out a deck of cards and we play snap while Mum and Dad talk to the police. They think I can’t hear, but Alex is listening, too, and he stops shuffling when the cops say something about security screens for the windows in case the man comes back. But then Alex sees me listening and coughs and slaps the cards down on the table, and the talking goes away. Car doors slam. Mum and Dad come back inside, and Mum jumps

when she sees the hole in the wire, as if it's the first time she's seen it, and Dad's face screws up like he just slammed his fingers in a door.

"We can't touch the window, kids," he tells us after a bit. "They're coming round as soon as they can to look for fingerprints." But it looks more like a big open mouth with sharp teeth.

Janie comes around as soon as the sun comes up, and brings some paints and some paper. She says I don't have to say anything if I don't want, but she's been wanting to teach me how to paint. But in my head I see the paints and the fresh white paper swirling down the creek, like how I imagined it in *Terabithia*, and it makes me feel like I'm maybe drowning, too, so I tell Janie I just want to play with barbies. Which I don't, but I don't want to hurt her feelings about not painting. And it's funny because I haven't slept, but I'm not even tired. The day gets so hot and bright. Mum calls Ms Major from the phone in the Museum, but I still hear her saying, "There was a man in her room, but no. Not that." When she says the word 'man' I get that picture again, like I'm the me on top of the wardrobe, and I feel all spidery all over and Janie says, "Let's get out the barbies," so we get them and bring them into the living room. And the Endangered Species take a day off work and it's kind of like a public holiday with everyone there, only Alex has to go to the Technical College, and Bronnie still has to go to school.

Dad meets her at the gate and I hear him telling her, "Mazie's not catching the bus today, love. Will you be right to walk on your own?" But he walks her to the bus-stop, even though she says yes, and he's gone a while and he comes back with Sprite and extra strong mints, which is what he buys me when I've got gastro.



Then suddenly Mum says, “Where’s my shopping list?” And she just stands there, for a few seconds, in the middle of the room, like she’s waiting for something or trying to remember something. Then she just goes to the kitchen table, and all the tea mugs are still there, and a Darwin Police Force pen, and a piece of paper with all different-looking eyes on it, and she sits down and turns the paper over and starts writing another list.

\* \* \*

When I get home from my visit to Dr. Sue, this lady my mum took me to see, Dad’s on the phone getting quotes for security screens. The old screen with the hole in it is gone, and also there’s grey dust all over the glass window and the windowsill in the living room, and there’s shiny fingerprints everywhere that look like a heap of tiny silver whirlpools. Ms Major said in class one time that mother zebras can recognise their babies by their stripes, which are kind of like a big fingerprint all over their body, so now I think of a baby zebra looking at its own reflection in a waterhole. And there’s some in my room, too, but Mum gets out the vacuum and sucks up all the dust and wipes off the prints with a pair of her old undies from the rag-bag.

After I feed the guppies and tetras, I play the tree game with Gruff. Well, I try, but he’s acting all funny now, and not the good kind of funny, and he comes straight over to the fig-tree and just sits there, which makes it a not very fun game. He’s so smart, which is how come he knows something bad happened. So I tell him, “You have nothing to be sorry about, Gruff,” but he puts on his worried eyebrows, so then I have to say, “Good boy, Gruffie” and he understands that and wags his tail again. But he won’t play properly,

which is pretty boring, so I tell the ES I'm going to take him for a walk to Janie's flat. But they say it's okay, Janie's going to come round for dinner later, and she's going to bring her stuff and maybe stay in my room for a while. And I get mad and I tell them it's like it's not even my room anymore because anybody can just go in there whenever they feel like it all the time, and then I say, "Well, I suppose I have to sleep in the corner again?" But Dad says Janie's going to sleep on a mattress on the floor next to my bed, if that's okay, and it will be kind of like a sleepover. And that sounds like it could be okay. But I still feel mad and bored and I can't do anything like play with Gruff or go for a walk, and it's too hot anyway because it's the build-up season, which means the rains still haven't come yet, even though it's so hot. We call it Mango Madness because people go really crazy.

The air in my room is orange, orange, orange, so I go into the Endangered Species Museum because Mum and Dad have a walk-in wardrobe. Mum even gets dressed in there because she reckons it's the coolest room in the whole house, and so I go in and shut the door and lie on the floor, and then I say "shit" and "bloody" because Dr Sue said I can say swears if I feel mad, but it's better if I do it in private. It's funny, though, because she also said I should imagine a pair of shoes with big spikes on and then in my head I could put them on and then pretend to kick the man who came into my room. But now my face is next to the floor I can see where Dad keeps his golf shoes, and they already have big spikes on them, and if you can see something, then you don't need to imagine it. But anyway, if I put on Dad's golf shoes I still wouldn't be able to kick that man, because, even pretending, he's only just a shadow without a face.

\*

It's no fucken joke being a brickie in Darwin in the build-up, so the boys from the site don't get why I'm off the booze. And I'm sitting there at Lim's after the job, just minding me own business over a plate a steak and chips, and me ole fucken man comes over and gets in me ear about being a pussy and shit cause I don't want to have a drink with the boys. Says maybe I want some of Mum's tittie milk instead, cause he's a fucken filthy-mouthed prick talking about his own missus like that. But my ole man just so happens to be the foreman on our site, Chief Fucken Bricklayer, and I need the dough, so I don't say nothing, but just finish off me dinner, real quiet, and head on back to the Nightie. Just outta habit, but, I pocket the fat from me steak.

But I'm taking the long way round this last couple a days, laying low, even though I can't hardly stop meself from going back to that place to see me little mate, Gruff. And to see if I can put together anything about the other night, cause so far there's been nothing in the papers to tell if I even done anything. But I know I must of cause I do remember this screaming. Screaming and screaming, and I got it going round in me head. But even though it's fucken hot as hell and a drink or ten never fails to knock a nasty thought out of a bloke's head, I'm not game to touch even a drop in case I do something stupid again. Like that other time I got so smashed they reckon I tried to join in the mud wrestling, which I never even remembered doing, and only found out cause I got meself banned from Lim's for a whole month.

There's a couple a barkers on this route, too, but when I get back to the Nightie I chuck the steak-fat to some mangy cat scrounging around in the bins behind the kitchen. And the ACDC cover-band in the front bar is shit, so I just go up to me room above the kitchen, and even though I should be used to it by now, tonight I can really smell all that

burnt grease smoke coming up outta the vents and sticking to me and what with this heat and the fucken racket from downstairs, I reckon this must be what hell's like. And I'm just laying there and laying there and laying there and I'm thinking how this is fucken it, and how I'm never going to have that house with a yard and a dog – three fucken dogs – and a missus. Not even a missus I can treat good and tell her I'm never going to hit her, not even just once.

\*

Mum opens the wardrobe door and I wake up, but Mum's crying and when she sees me she starts yelling, "Mazie, what are you doing in here? We've been worried sick," and she drags me out and squeezes me but she keeps on yelling and yelling about how they've been looking everywhere for me and didn't I hear them calling me, and then I start crying, too, because I didn't even mean to go to sleep, but at night time I have to stay awake because otherwise I have this dream I call the spaghetti dream and I call it that because it's like there's all these bendy lines like spaghetti, everywhere in the world, and no air anymore, but then Dad comes in and Mum stops squeezing me and yelling at me and now she's just crying, and I'm saying "I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm bloody bloody shit bloody sorry" and Dad starts crying too, which he hardly ever does, and saying "don't be sorry," but I am because I know this is all my fault, Mum crying and Dad crying and Gruff acting all funny, and I don't know why but I reach back into the wardrobe and pick up Dad's golf shoes and I chuck them as hard as I can at the bedroom wall. And then we all just stop talking and stare at the scratches in the paint.

When Janie comes around, Dad's making dinner and me and Mum are on the couch watching telly. She's holding my hand and I'm trying really hard to breathe in one

long breath without it getting all stuck in my throat. "Look, your big sissie's here now," says Mum and then Janie comes in and she has a really big bag, but she says it's mostly art stuff so she can keep working even if she's not in her and Arnie's flat. "Is it okay if I stay in your room with you, Mazie?" she asks me, and I tell her it's okay.

Janie never sleeps at night, so Alex reckons she's a vampire, and now I'm a vampire, too, and after everybody goes to bed I get out my barbies and Janie and me play with them for a while, changing their clothes and stuff like that. But it gets kind of boring, and I remember why I stuck them in that box in the bottom of the wardrobe, so then I just pull the head off the one I have in my hands and make her walk around without a head on, and talk out of her neck, which is pretty funny. And then Janie says "That gives me an idea," and she starts pulling things out of her big bag, like candles and buttons and bits of cloth and she says how about we do some barbie art. She says all I have to do is imagine the craziest barbie I can and then we'll make her together. I can't think of anything, though, but Janie has lots of good ideas all the time and she shows me how to make a new head out of an old stocking, kind of like a sock puppet, and I can kind of sew a bit, and it's really fun, and then suddenly I do have an idea. And it's a Big Idea and I need Janie to help me.

\* \* \*

Can't stand being at Lim's with the boys cause me ole man's just throwing his fucken weight around and giving me shit, and I can't hardly stand the Nightie no more, either, so I just been walking along the dark streets, listening and looking. Seems like everyone in

the whole fucken city's got their doors and windows open to let the air in, and it's like we're all just living our lives outside and waiting for the rain. There's people laughing and people fighting and little kids crying when they should be in bed asleep, and here and there an ole bloke sitting out the front under a fluorescent tube, smoking, while all the moths come together and fly round their heads. And I keep walking and I hear the sounds of people loving each other coming outta the dark and then I spot a square a light and I can see somebody talking on the phone or watching the telly, and someone somewhere coughs and it's like we're all just people doing what we can to survive. Even the dogs, barking and chewing at their fleas or lying flat out frog-bellied on the concrete, they're people. The band at the Nightie the other night did a song and the words went something like, *dogs are the best people*, and I reckon they got that one fucken spot-on.

This gets me thinking about one time, Dad had me on a job when I was a kid, maybe thirteen, showing me the ropes, he said. And after a long, hot, boring fucken day wheeling barrows a broken-up bricks and shit around the site, and being told what to fucken do every minute, and being told I'm gonna have to learn to work like a man, he asks me in front a all his crew what I wanna be when I grow up. Prob'ly expected me to say I wanna be a foreman like me ole man, but I piped up quick as a flash and all proud and said "I'm gonna be a dog-trainer for the police." Got the biggest hiding of me life back home, and the ole man saying over his dead body was any son of his gonna be a fucken pig, and wasn't being a brickie good enough for me, and Mum copping it, too, trying to get him to stop, and then suddenly I'm walking up to that place again.

Don't even know I'm doing it. One minute I'm just walking round in the dark, pissing sweat, and then I'm right there on the corner of the street. And I look over to see

if Gruffie's there eyeing me through the fence, as per usual, but I can't see him and I don't wanna get too near the fence and get him going barking his head off. But now I'm looking at it, the fence looks a bit different, like they did something to it, added a few inches, maybe, to make it higher or something. But it don't really look like that, either, cause it's all crooked and shit, and I gotta cross the road to see better and before I know it I'm right up close, checking it out and then- fucken hell, I suddenly realise what I'm looking at. A whole bunch a barbie dolls tied to the top a the fence! And not just any barbie dolls, but really fucked up ones, like the one I'm eyeing up real close, it has a sock for a head with different-size buttons for eyes and its mouth all stitched up and no hair or nothing, like one a them horror-movie dolls that comes to life and goes round killing people and shit. It's creepy as hell, and every couple fence posts there's another one and another one, all different, and I'm just looking at em. And I get this feeling like me guts are trying to tell me something, but I don't pay no attention cause this one I'm looking at now has some kinda animal skull where the head should be and its legs are all twisted and it's fixed on to the fence with barbed wire and if it wasn't so fucken freaky it'd be kind of cool and then I hear the tinkle of Gruffie's collar and I realise I didn't hardly even notice how Gruffie wasn't barking, but now something's pulling at me leg and so I say, kinda automatic, "Gruffie, mate, let go of me fucken leg." But then I hear this little voice saying, real soft, "Don't run or I'll scream."

Jesus Fucken Christ, that gives me the fucken heebie-jeebie's, cause now I remember all over again that screaming and then running out the door and almost flying over Gruff. And now me guts are telling me I just gotta fuck off outta here again, only something's got me leg, but, and I fall flat on me arse instead.

\*

Janie said if he did come back I didn't have to do it, and that she'd still think I was brave and clever for thinking of it, and we could just go back to bed, but then I told her if I did that I might never find out and it would be like waiting forever. And I've already been waiting two weeks. Anyway, I heard the police say he'd be back, and now he's on our corner, just standing there, or somebody is, and it could be him, and so Janie keeps a hold of Gruffie while I creep out the door and take up my position. Just in case it's that man from before. And when he looks over the road it's like he's looking straight at me, but I know he can't see me and he doesn't know I'm watching him and he doesn't know about the Trap. And then he crosses the street and all of a sudden he's really close to the fence, looking at "Barbed Fire", but then I know for sure it's him because of his smell.

My heart is going so fast! So I have to hold my breath, and then even though my whole body's shaking, I stick Gruffie's collar out through the fence, quiet as a mouse, and then loop it around his ankle, without touching, and then pull it quickly back inside the fence and through the buckle, like I practiced on Janie. Only I wasn't scared when I did it on her. I pull hard on Gruff's collar and it goes tight around his leg and makes a tinkling noise, but I have hold of the end, and so now he's tied to the fence. He says Gruff's name, and then he tries to pull his leg away, but it just makes the collar tighter, and then he falls over on his bum. I let out all my breath, but he's breathing really loudly, too, and whispering swears, and he starts kicking the fence with his free leg, but I can't really make my voice work, so I just tell him, "Shh!"

He stops. His eyes are shining from the streetlight but the rest of him is in the dark and I only know he's skinny from seeing him across the street. Though I can kind of see



the shape of him, lying back on his elbows from when he fell over, and he's just breathing and looking between the fence palings, but I don't think he can see me, though, because I'm still behind the bottlebrush.

"Who the fuck are you?"

I hold in my breath for a bit and then I find my voice again. "You don't know me?" My heart is all fast again.

"No, I don't fucking know you. Can't even see you, can I?"

"No need to swear," I tell him, but I come out from behind the bush, just a little bit, though I'm not letting go of the end of Gruffie's collar, that's for sure. "There," I say, and he sits up a bit more and looks through the fence, and finally I see his face, and he says, "Jeez, you're not very old, are ya? Shouldn't you be in bed?"

\*

Hard to tell with girls how old they are, but the kid sounds about fucken 10, like she should be curled up counting sheep and not sitting out in the yard tying blokes to fences, and then she kinda pops her head out from behind that bottlebrush, and she looks real serious, but all as I'm trying to do is see if I can't reckonise her face, and I'm thinking she's maybe olderen 10, but then she tells me she's 12 and the way she says it, all proud and shit, now she sounds like she's 15. But she's just there eyeing me through the fence and then suddenly it hits me.

\*

He looks like he's maybe the same age as Alex, but with more hair on his face. I can only see half of it in the light. His one eye is looking at me, straight at me now, and it's not wide but not squinty and it droops down in the corner, but he's got really long eyelashes

for a boy and when he looks up at the fence I can see the shadows of them on his eyelid as if they're painted on, like barbie's lashes. His face is skinny, but he has a pretty big nose for the size of his face, and it's crooked, and his fringe is too long and it twitches when he blinks. The rest of his hair (brown) is kind of clumpy and goes down past his shoulders. I've been waiting two weeks already, but now I'm pretty sure I could tell the cops what he looked like if they asked me again. And I'm pretty sure, too, that if I put on Dad's golf shoes I would have more than a shadow to kick. But anyway, I've got something better and I made it myself: I've got a Barbie Trap.

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And then suddenly it's like there's two of me. There's the me sitting out on the street, tied to a fence with barbie dolls on it, talking to some strange little girl, and then there's some other me, horny and pissed and pissed off, going into a room and seeing some chick in there and then- fuck, ah fuck, now I see, now I know what I done and what I been checking the newspaper all week to find out, and the me on the street closes his eyes and I feel something coming up inside me, but the me in the room can't shut his eyes, but that can't be me, she's only fucken 12, Jesus fucken Christ, and she wakes up with me standing over her and she looks scared and for a second that makes me feel real big, and then there's screaming and I hit a wall on the way out and the lights are on and Gruff's running round like it's all a big fucken game and then, now, there's the me on the street looking at this face through the fence, and I don't fucken know what, but I just roll over as much as I can and spew up all over the grass. All the fucken shit inside just coming up and out, out me mouth, me nose, me eyes, and when I'm done blubbering and throwing me guts up, all the lights in the house are on, and there's doors banging and ole Gruffie's

there barking his head off through the fence, and I see the ole red and blue flashing up a storm at the end a the street. The little girl stands up and I see there's another one there, older, standing beside her, and ole Gruffie, too. And I can hear the cop car behind me, but I see the little girl with her face flashing under the lights. She reaches down and gives Gruff a good ole scratch behind the ears, and then she says, "Good boy, Gruffie." Which is what any dog wants to hear.