

THE REAL STORY

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The Real Story

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Attestation of Authorship

I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material previously published or written by another person (except where explicitly defined in the acknowledgements), nor material which to a substantial extent has been submitted for the award of any other degree or diploma of a university or other institution of higher learning.

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Abstract

The Real Story, set in contemporary Auckland, is told from three third-person perspectives, framing the lives of three generations of women. The central catalysing event is the death of the son-in-law, husband, father (respectively) of these three protagonists, and leads to an irrevocable unraveling of life's certainties.

The novel explores themes of loss, grief, acceptance and the nature of memory itself but above all is about the importance of human relationships and the unbreakable bond between mothers and daughters.

The Real Story

By Maxine Fleming

You never stop waiting for the real story to start, because the only real story, in the end, is that you die.”

— Jonathan Franzen, *The Discomfort Zone: A Personal History*

The Beginning

I was born between two rivers, the rivers of my childhood, where I spent all my days, all those golden days, the colour of quinces, and I remember the smell of those rivers on my warm skin still. And now I smell the river again – the cool, brackened scent of the river. Calling me home.

All my best memories have a scent to them – the skin of an apple just before you take the first bite, my mother’s lavender soap when she leant to kiss me goodnight, the sweet smell of my newborn baby daughter’s head when I first held her in my arms.

My death was not sudden. But it came too soon. Death is like that. You’re so busy building a life you forget that the only certainty in that life is that it will come to an end - sometimes sooner rather than later. As it turned out.

But this is not my story. Not yet. This is the story of those who were left behind – the ones I loved most, anyway. I feature occasionally, although no one can ever really be sure it’s me. That’s the trouble with being dead. It’s hard to convince anyone that you really do still exist. I’m not even sure of that myself.

I just know I was. And I still am. And I’m waiting for the new story to begin.

1. *Losing Things . . .*

It must have rained while Alice was in the mall, humid air now rising off the car park's damp asphalt giving off that sulphurous smell, as the late autumn sun burst through and cast everything in a sickly yellow light. Alice, having just emerged from the mall's sealed, artificial depths, stood there blinking in confusion, trying to remember where she'd parked her car.

She was carrying a recycled paper bag containing a brass urn – an urn in which she planned to store the remains of her husband, Harry (whose ashes were currently in a plastic box on the mantelpiece) until she found the right time to send him off down his river to the sea, as requested.

Alice had bought the urn in one of those new-age type gift shops where everything looked like it came from India but was, on closer inspection, nearly all made in China. She had even remarked on this to the young, bored girl chewing gum behind the counter.

"I suppose with all those millions of people they can just do everything cheaper than anyone else," she'd said, attempting to make conversation as she paid for it.

"Whatever," the girl had shrugged, picking at the stud in her nose as she tossed the urn into the bag and handed Alice's card back with the receipt.

Alice had fought the sudden urge to slap her then, before hurrying out of the shop, suddenly desperate for natural light and fresh air, pushing her way past dazed shoppers hunting for end of season bargains and the ceaseless wanting, buying, wanting of it all under fluorescent lights and piped muzak and sugar-fed children crying. She'd almost fallen through the sliding glass doors in her rush to escape.

Now, after a futile walk down another lane of cars, there was still no sign of Alice's silver Volvo, the car Harry had suggested they buy her a few years back because she wasn't the best of drivers and it was a built like a tank.

The Volvo symbol, he'd informed her, was actually an ancient chemistry symbol for iron and Sweden, makers of the tank, were known for their use of quality iron. Harry knew a lot about everything, all kinds of useless and useful information for any occasion. It was one of the many things she missed about

him. But she didn't want to think about that now. She just wanted to find her car and retreat home. Too late – tears born from her sense of helplessness were pricking at the corner of her eyes. Why did she keep forgetting things?

Yesterday, when she was leaving a message for the plumber to come and fix a leaking water pipe (a problem that Harry, practical man that he was, would have easily solved), she couldn't even remember her own phone number. Maybe she was losing her mind. Early onset dementia. After all, it did run in the family. She thought of her mother now, lost in a maze of memories, living out the rest of her days unhappily in a Herne Bay rest home. This, too, made Alice feel sad – and guilty. Every time she visited her there the guilt plagued her. She didn't want to think about her either.

A lone seagull circled above Alice, then swooped down on the discarded remnants of a *Kentucky Fried Chicken* box near her feet, boldly picking at the bones of the fried chicken before taking off with its remains. There was something gross about a bird eating another bird, Alice thought, something cruel and barbaric. A chill wind blew across the car park, taking the takeaway box with it. Alice pulled her thin, black cardigan closer around her, scurrying across the car park, scanning every row of cars, until finally she spotted the Volvo in the distance and broke into a run, forcing an emerging driver to slam on the brakes to avoid hitting her.

Alice mouthed a quick 'sorry' at the woman, who still shook her head in that righteous way drivers did, which made Alice feel another sudden surge of irrational anger.

"Watch where you're bloody going then," she shouted back at her, even though she knew it wasn't the woman's fault and already felt foolish for reacting like this. The woman shook her head again and drove on.

Finally, back in the ironclad tank, Alice breathed a sigh of relief. A new text flashed on her cell phone, left on the passenger seat, from her daughter, Maddy. Alice was still getting used to this new phone which Maddy had talked her into buying on a recent shopping trip, having declared it time she got rid of the antiquated old thing she'd been using for years, the screen so scratched she could barely read her texts.

But when it came to technology, Alice was always resistant to change. It was easy for Maddy's generation - they'd been practically born with remotes and cell phones in their hands, genetically evolved to deal with all those buttons and

apps or whatever they were called. Alice, on the other hand, remembered black and white televisions, typewriters, party lines on the telephone where you had to say “working” and wait for neighbours down the road to finish their call.

Now, with clumsy, tentative fingers, she picked up Maddy’s message. *Came over with washing. Wea r u?* Her daughter, in the second year of an Arts degree - “because I can’t think of anything else” - had left home just months before they got the bad news about Harry.

But Maddy’s grungy old flat in Arch Hill didn’t have a washing machine so every fortnight or so, she would lug a pile of dirty clothes over in her little, battered Honda, raid the fridge, fill Alice in on her life (or at least the parts she wanted her to know about). Alice didn’t mind. She missed her – and had seen precious little of her since Harry’s funeral. Her visits had been brief, as if she was already planning to leave when she got there, and usually involved washing or using the Internet or anything that prevented Alice from getting too close. This is not how things used to be. Maddy had gone somewhere, and Alice was waiting for her only child to come back.

Alice texted her, slowly, with one finger, squinting at the screen because she couldn’t be bothered fishing around in her bag for her glasses. *‘Home soon. Wait!’* But by the time she pulled up in the cobble-stoned brick driveway of their large, sprawling villa in Grey Lynn, the home she and Harry had bought long before it had become the trendy, expensive inner city suburb it was now, there was no sign of Maddy’s car. Stepping from the car, Alice almost tripped on a loose brick, forced from its base by the Kikuyu grass growing up through the cracks across the driveway. It needed spraying – another of Harry’s old jobs she hadn’t got round to doing. Alice sighed as she headed up the steps with the urn, wondering if eventually this house she loved would prove too much for her. It pained her to think of selling it.

Inside, there was just the hum of the washing machine in the laundry and a note on the kitchen table that read, “Back later to collect. Love you. M xox”.

Alice was disappointed. Her footsteps echoed when she moved from room to room, rooms full of things that no longer made any real sense to her – those photographs, that pile of books on the coffee table, the artwork she’d collected with Harry over the years. It had all been drained of meaning. The house seemed cavernous, with its high plaster ceilings and wide hallway, and she

was lost in it, rattling around like an old bottle top, small and insignificant. Some times she felt like it could swallow her up.

Maybe she should sell it. The Richardsons next door had just sold their house for well over a million and it wasn't anywhere near as big as theirs. Hers. It was just hers now. Singular. It was hard to think as I when you'd spent twenty-three years as we. Alice and Harry. Harry and Alice. The Duncans. An entity all of its own. But she wasn't ready to think about anything as big as selling a house. She wasn't ready for anything much at all. The duvet was calling again. She wanted to slide back down under its comforting feathers, flick on the electric blanket and drift off to oblivion. She had done a lot of sleeping in the past few weeks but also found herself wide awake at strange hours of the night, wandering around the house like a restless ghost.

Archie, their big, old ginger cat, whined and rubbed at her ankles to be fed. And the phone started ringing. But Alice didn't feel like talking to anyone either. Except Harry. She'd give anything to see him walk through the door now, jacket over his shoulder, and announce with that comical grin of his that it was all a joke, a bad dream, like Bobby Ewing's death in *Dallas*.

The phone finally stopped ringing and Alice remembered the urn and pulled it out of the bag, admiring its simple curved form, inlaid here and there with mother-of-pearl and tiny green stones.

It made her think of backpacking all through Asia and India with Harry on their big "OE" to London, back when they were young. So young. Invincible then - immortal youths who never even contemplated the prospect of death. It seemed a long way from them. Now here she was, about to put his ashes in a little piece of India made in China. Alice reached for the plastic box on the mantelpiece, the one his ashes had been sent home in after the cremation. Alice had hated it on sight and had been meaning to find a more fitting vessel, at least until she found the right time to send him off down his beloved waterfall at Piha.

But not yet. It still felt too soon to let him go. And when she'd try to raise the issue with Maddy, she'd snapped at her that she didn't want to think about that. So she'd leave it for a while - until they were both ready. But when would she ever be ready to let him go?

Alice opened the box at the back and pulled out the plastic bag containing his ashes, surprisingly heavy. Alice reached in and felt the texture of them, more

like white and grey crushed shells than ashes. His body reduced to this. So strange.

Then she poured it all into the urn, spilling a little on the bench and cursing under her breath. A silent apology.

Sorry, Harry.

She could hear him telling her to use a funnel. Alice heard his voice often, disembodied, in her head, like she had split in two and one half of her was Harry, talking back at herself. It was strange and soothing at the same time. She wiped the last of the ashes up with her fingers and peered at the little pieces of him in her hand, putting them to her lips briefly before sprinkling the last fragments of bone into the urn. Ashes to ashes. The End.

Alice wanted to cry again. She had felt it bubbling up in her since she forced herself to go the mall but she was so tired of crying that she pushed it back down, the gnawing, endless grief that kept bobbing to the surface. She then forced the cork stopper hard into the urn, making sure it was tight, as if this might also stop her feeling anything, and carried it up to her bedroom, past all the deserted rooms and the echoes of a once busy family life. Slipping off her shoes, she crawled back under the duvet, still holding the urn, curled up on her side of the bed and hoped for the temporary comfort of sleep.

Come back, Harry. Please come back.

The brass felt cold against her chest as the house wrapped its silence around her, and let her weep.

2. Party On

“Go on, girl. What are you waiting for?”

Maddy was crammed into the dingy toilets of a new bar on Karangahape Rd with her best friends, Violet and Tom. Already wide-eyed from the line of speed he’d just snorted off his passport cover, Tom was offering a rolled-up five-dollar note to Maddy, who was perched on the edge of the toilet seat, feeling anxious.

The last time she’d done speed had been just a few days after her Dad died. Bad idea. She’d lost track of all her friends at the club and woken up in a field all on her own, having only a vague idea how she ended up there. Although she laughed it off later, it had scared her.

Violet, peering out from under her dark fringe, had already had a line and was now leaning up against the cubicle wall, puffing on a Lucky Strike, and singing along to Rihanna’s *Only Girl (In the World)*, now pounding through the thin walls. “*You’re gonna make me feel like I’m the only girl in the world . . .*”

She was wearing a cream and silver sequinned top of Maddy’s that shimmered as she moved, even under the dingy bathroom light, while Maddy had squeezed herself into a black *Topshop* dress of Violet’s that pinched at the waist but made her look thinner and taller, tottering on the vintage platforms she’d found in a dumpster outside their flat. Tranny shoes, Tom had called them. Fit for a queen. He, meanwhile, was getting impatient, waving the note at Maddy while he texted with his free hand.

“Come *on*. Jamie’s here! I gotta go.”

Still, Maddy waivered.

“I’ve got a History essay due on Monday and I haven’t even started!”

She knew this sounded lame, and it wasn’t the real reason. She just didn’t want to admit she was scared she’d freak out again. Maddy didn’t really talk to her friends about her Dad dying, fiercely afraid of sounding like some tragic victim. In fact, she did her best not to think much about it at all. So, what the hell? She didn’t want to be left out. The essay was only a thousand words. She could catch up with the lecture notes online, bash it out and probably still get a B, at least.

“That’s my girl,” Tom grinned, as Maddy stuck the five-dollar note in her nose and hoovered down the last lines left on Tom’s passport. She grimaced slightly at the weird, chemical taste at the back of her throat and felt a wave of nausea almost instantly. Violet passed the cigarette to Maddy and kissed her on the cheek, and they were both singing now. *“Forget about the world, it’s gonna be about you and me tonight . . .”*

Maddy blew a perfectly formed smoke ring at her friend, highlighting the cheekbones in her elfin face, and felt a warm rush of fleeting well-being there in that toilet cubicle with her best friends – like they had super powers and could do anything together. Maddy loved her friends. They meant more to her than anything – sometimes, she thought guiltily – even more than her parents.

Tom was now staring at himself in the mirror above the basin, frowning at a small pimple forming on his chin.

“Fuck! Why is God so cruel? I have got a boy to catch!”

The girls giggled at his histrionics. Tom had been talking obsessively about Jamie all week, ever since he’d met him at the Family Bar last weekend. Having given him his number, he’d then checked his phone obsessively until finally Jamie had deigned to text him back and told him about the new bar opening. The girls, used to Tom’s dramatic outbursts, cracked up laughing as he tried to deal with the offending pimple.

“Don’t squeeze it, Tom,” Maddy advised. “You’ll just make it worse.”

“I am not going back out there with this creature on my face!” he pronounced, then proceeded to burst the tiny pimple and dab at his chin with a piece of toilet paper. Once that crisis was averted, the girls took over in front of the mirror, smearing on fresh pink lip gloss. Maddy peered into her eyes, her pupils already dilating. A wave of anxiety flooded over her then, her stomach bubbling and churning as the chemicals surged through her body.

“You okay, Mads?”

Violet peered at Maddy’s pale face as she nodded, swallowing down the bile rising in her throat and the ominous feeling that had been chasing her ever since her Dad died. *No*, she told herself. *Stop it.*

“Sweet as,” she smiled at Violet. “Let’s go!”

Violet grabbed her hand as they swung through the toilet doors after Tom into a blaze of loud music, lights – and people crammed into the tiny, narrow space dancing like crazy wherever they could find a spot. Tom made a

beeline for Jamie at the far end of the bar while she followed Violet into a group of their friends, all dancing and hanging out in front of the DJ's booth. The place was going off. The temple of youth, worshipping at the altar of hedonism.

But Maddy found herself thinking about her mother then, and feeling guilty for not returning to collect her washing and hang out with her. But the truth was, she actually found it hard being around her these days. It reminded her too much of all *that* and her mother always wanted to know how she was *really* and kept suggesting it might be a good idea to do some grief counselling. *Fuck that!* Shit happened. Really shitty shit. But so what? There's no way she was going to talk to some fucking stranger about it.

"Hey!" Violet was shouting at her above the music but she couldn't hear anything she was saying as she grabbed Maddy by the arms and pulled her into the centre of the circle, snapping her out of the spiral she was heading down and forcing her to dance. Violet raised her hands up high, waving them in time with her friend's. She looked just like that super model from the nineties, Maddy thought then – Helena Christensen. She looked like a superstar. Maddy pulled her into a hug, squealing "Britney, bitch!" into her ear and then Tom appeared, with cute Jamie in tow, and poured vodka shots down their throats and everything sped up, like it was on fast forward, and Maddy danced away her sorrows until the sun came up and they all tumbled out into the dingy K' Rd dawn like young vampires, squinting in the light.

*

She was woken late on Sunday afternoon in her ruffled bed, still wearing her party clothes, by a call from her mother, which she forced herself to answer with a weary greeting.

"Hey Mum."

"Maddy? Did I wake you?"

Maddy could hear the judgement in her mother's tone and regretted picking up the call. Her head was pounding, her mouth full of sawdust.

"No, no," she lied. "What's up?"

"I was just thinking of putting a chicken on. Do you want to come for dinner? Your washing's all done."

Now she could hear the loneliness in Alice's voice and felt sorry for her. And, when she thought about it, she was starving since all she'd eaten was a bowl of instant noodles many hours ago.

“It’ll be ready about six,” her mother said. “But you can come over sooner if you like.”

Maddy sighed as she ended the call. Some times she wished she had a brother or sister so she wasn’t the only one who felt responsible for keeping her mother happy. It was a burden, being an only child, especially now that her father was gone. Maddy knew it was selfish to think like this but she couldn’t help it. She was nineteen, twenty next month, and she just wanted to have fun. Was that so bad?

Maddy stumbled over the clothes and dirty plates and books strewn across her room and out to the kitchen where there were more dishes and rubbish bags stuffed in the corner and beer bottles everywhere. She should clean up. Their new flatmate was supposed to be moving in that night but there was no sign of him yet – or of her other flatmate, Ellen, who had gone away for the weekend with her boyfriend, leaving her with all the mess.

Deciding she couldn’t face it on her own, she grabbed the juice from the fridge and drank it straight from the carton, before heading for the shower and letting the hot water wash over her until it ran cold.

By the time she finally made it home, her mother was setting the table and gave her an appraising look, tinged with disappointment.

“You made it,” she said.

Maddy had to force herself not to snap at her.

“Sorry. Had a big night last night so I’m a bit slow.”

She regretted this as soon as she said it. Her mother looked worried.

“Are you okay?”

Maddy hated the way her mother looked at her like she was trying to read her soul.

“I’m fine, Mum,” she said, stuffing down a kumara, smothered in gravy.

“But you’re coping okay, with uni and everything. You’re not partying too much?”

“Seriously, I’m fine. What about you?”

Her mother looked tired, and Maddy could see fine strands of grey in her mother’s faded blond hair she’d never noticed before.

“I haven’t been sleeping so well,” Alice admitted. “Or maybe I’ve been sleeping too well but at the wrong times and then I’m awake half the night . . .”

Her mother’s voice faltered.

“It’s just strange rattling around in this house, on my own.”

“I’ll come and stay for a bit, okay? I said I would.”

Maddy felt she had to offer even though she didn’t really want to.

“No, no,” Alice protested. “I’ll get used to it. You’ve got to get on with your life.”

Maddy felt a surge of anger then. Her mother could be such a martyr some times so she didn’t press the point. She wanted to go. Everything about this house reminded her of her father, of the hole where he used to be.

After dinner, her mother showed her the urn she’d bought for his ashes and again talked of when they might go out to their family bach at Piha and send him off out to sea.

Maddy shrugged.

“I don’t know. I’m pretty busy. After exams maybe.”

“It’s important, Maddy. We have to do this some time.”

“Okay, Mum.”

Maddy knew she sounded irritable but the truth was, she didn’t really care what they did with the ashes. He was gone. It was over.

“I better go. I’ve got an essay to finish.”

Alice followed her as she hurried down the hallway with her laundry basket.

She kissed her mother quickly on the cheek instead, murmuring a quick “love you” and made the dash for her car, stuffing the laundry into the back seat. From the verandah, Alice called out as Maddy fossicked in her messy shoulder bag for her keys.

“Taking Gran out tomorrow. Don’t want to come, I suppose?”

Damn. Why did she do this to Maddy?

“I can’t, Mum. I really do have an essay due on Monday. Next time. Give her my love. ”

She was relieved to escape and arrived home to find an impromptu flat party in full flow. Her new flatmate, Jed, a friend of Ellen’s boyfriend, had arrived and Maddy gave him a welcoming hug as he grinned and passed her a joint.

“Sorry,” she said. “We should have cleaned up.”

“All good,” said Jed, who had the most beautiful smile, Maddy thought. Then Tom turned up, with Jamie in tow, and offered her the last of his speed.

Maddy didn't even hesitate, and washed away the nasty chemical taste with a few hefty swigs of vodka, feeling it burn all the way down until that soothing warmth began to spread from the pit of her stomach. Pooling all their cash, a bunch of them headed off down the hill to the nearest bottle store in Kingsland for more alcohol, and Maddy felt like she belonged and nothing else mattered except this moment with these friends on this night.

She never did write the essay. They all ended up lying out on the back lawn watching the sun come up. And the weird thing was, when she failed to hand it in on Monday, she didn't even really care . .

3. *Global Warming in the Rest Home*

The ugly, old clock on the lounge wall told Eleanor it was 10.15. Everything about this place was ugly, Eleanor thought, as an old man she vaguely recognised shuffled past her on his walking frame, huffing from the sheer effort of moving from one side of the dowdy room to the other. Eleanor wondered why he bothered. Where did he think he was going?

She wanted desperately to go home, home to the beloved garden she had tended all her married life, home to her kitchen where she had spent years cooking and baking and preserving while she listened to the National programme and looked out on to her garden, crammed with the roses she loved – Albertine, Old Blush, Ophelia. So many roses, yet she remembered each and every one. (Nothing wrong with her memory there!)

There were no flowers here, except artificial ones or awful bouquets, often more prolific after one of the residents had died - solemn reminders that life here in the Mavis Goodwin Residential Home was tenuous at best. And there were those awful dried flower arrangements, like the abomination sitting on a crocheted tablemat on the coffee table in front of her.

Eleanor thought then of her own antique yewl coffee table in the drawing room at home. It was such a lovely room, full of all her best furniture, where she'd loved to sit in the late mornings, sun pouring in through the French doors that opened out on to her oval rose garden in all its pink and lilac glory. She could see it so clearly, bees hovering over the lavender and honeywort flowers, the great old liquid amber that changed colour with the seasons, the quince tree golden with fruit.

So lost was Eleanor in the vivid detail of this memory, that it took her a few moments to realise where she was, here, in this place that smelt of roasted meat and damp towels and something else . . . something old, past its use-by date.

Eleanor was in her usual place in the rest home's conservatory, morning sun filtering through the tacky lace curtains, holding the *Herald* in front of her like a shield to stop any of these people trying to converse with her about the same old nonsense – the weather, the meals, the grandson who had been to visit.

She had been reading the same article for some time, trying to absorb whatever facts it offered her about this global warming business as world leaders

gathered in Sweden or somewhere in Europe to discuss the solutions. Apparently, it was all happening so fast that plant life wouldn't adapt in time to survive. In other words, she thought, they were all doomed. And no amount of new-fangled technology and computers and those silly cellphones everyone carried around all the time now could stop it. In fact, they were part of the problem apparently. Eleanor didn't really care, she realised, since she doubted she'd be around long enough to see the worst of it – knew it, in fact. And like the plants, it was too late for her to adapt! She felt sorry for her children though, and her only grandchild. Marianne. No, Madeleine. That was her name. Of course it was.

Eleanor sighed with frustration. Her memory on some subjects wasn't what it used to be. She put this down to the stress of losing her husband, Len, (although this was six years ago) and now her poor son-in-law . . . Harry, that was his name. A lovely man, such a shame. Alice had done well, marrying a doctor. If only Kate had been so sensible. But she'd always been a flighty one, that Kate . . .

Where was Alice, Eleanor wondered. She hadn't seen her for months and she only lived a few blocks away. She felt a hot surge of anger then, cursing her daughters for dumping her in this terrible place and forgetting all about their silly, old mother. It wasn't the way her generation had done things. She had looked after her own mother for the last eight years of her life. Len had got his men to build a small cottage at the back of the house looking out on the farm and the hills beyond where Maisie had mostly enjoyed her final years, more or less until the day she turned her face to the wall, announced she was going to die and promptly did.

“Would you like a cup of tea, Mrs Anderson?”

Lost in her thoughts, Eleanor jumped slightly when the fat, little woman pushing the tea trolley stopped in front of her. Eleanor peered at the nametag on her pale green smock. Olga. That's right. She was from Russia. Or was it Romania? Eleanor gave her a crisp, slightly imperious nod.

“Thank you, Olga. That would be lovely”.

The tea here was made with tea bags, Eleanor knew, and she loathed it. She eyed the scones on the serving plate, thinly smeared with dabs of jam and tiny speckles of cream. They looked dry and crumbly – the food in this place was poor, to say the least. Eleanor had always loved cooking, prided herself on it, and

her cakes and preserves were famous in the district. But she pointed at the miserable scones anyway as Olga passed her a cup of weak, watery tea.

“And one of those delicious looking scones, thank you.”

There was no point being rude to the poor staff here. It wasn't their fault. Olga, her fleshy fingers stuffed in thin, rubber gloves like sausages, placed a scone on a brown plate – chipped on the rim, Eleanor noted – and handed it to her with a forced smile.

“Did you enjoy your outing with your daughter yesterday, Mrs Anderson?”

Eleanor had to strain to comprehend her thick Russian (or possibly Romanian) accent. But as the question slowly registered, she coughed slightly, and then took a hurried sip of her tea, trying to compose herself.

“Alice?” Olga offered. “I think this is her name.”

“Yes,” Eleanor nodded, having no recollection of this event whatsoever. (The stress again). She flicked several scone crumbs out of the pleat of her best, navy skirt, giving herself time to gather her scrambled thoughts.

“It's always lovely to see the family.”

Olga smiled agreement before rattling off with the tea trolley towards the old man on the walking frame who was now trying to settle himself into a seat with the aid of a nurse.

Eleanor promptly dropped her tight smile and went back to the shelter of her newspaper. She focussed on a headline that read “Global warming summit warns of disaster.” It was about some gathering of world leaders in Sweden.

The planet was burning up. Apparently, it was all happening so fast that plants wouldn't stand a chance of adapting in time to survive . .

4. *Better Off Dead*

Alice woke with a blinding migraine and for a few bleak moments, actually wished she was dead herself. “At rest”. “At peace”. With Harry. But would she ever be with him again? What if there really was nothing after death? (As Maddy had insisted more than once). The thought of never seeing Harry again seemed unbearable to Alice but perhaps thinking otherwise was just another form of denial.

In India, she knew, women once threw themselves onto the funeral pyre after their husbands died. Sati, it was called, and, if the widow was virtuous, it meant she would join her husband in Heaven. Alice, who had no religious upbringing at all, now wished she believed in *something*. Maybe she should shave her head like many Indian widows still did to make themselves sexless, undesirable to other men, faithful to their dead husbands. The thought almost made her smile as she pictured herself suddenly going bald and the reaction this would cause. She had half a mind to do it, just to jolt her out of the rabbit hole she seemed to have fallen into. Alice in Griefland.

Alice forced herself out of bed to go in search of Panadol, which she found in the bathroom cabinet, amongst the jumbled packets and bottles of medication left over from Harry’s illness. She’d given all the strong medications to the hospice nurse just after Harry died – the capsules of morphine in the fridge, all the packets of OxyNorm – “oxymoron”, Harry had called it, because the drug made her clever husband feel stupid. But now she found a half full packet of it and considered taking one or two. Why not? Numb all the pain. In her head, and in her heart. But if she took two, she may as well take three, or four . . . or ten, and this thought frightened Alice, mainly because the idea of oblivion seemed so appealing these days. So she dumped it in the bin by the toilet and swallowed down a couple of headache tablets with water from the basin tap instead, peering at her drawn face in the mirror. Deep lines were etched across her forehead, lines she’d never noticed before. When had they appeared?

Heading down to the kitchen to make a strong plunger of coffee, Alice still felt heavy with the events of yesterday which was probably how she had ended up with a migraine in the first place.

The day had started out well enough. When Alice arrived at the home, her mother was sitting on the bed in her room, ready to go, and perfectly cheerful. She was wearing her “wedding pearls” and her best lilac dress, greeting Alice with a kiss on the cheek and a sweet smile.

It was so good of Alice to make the time for her, she’d said – she knew how busy she was with work and the children and Harry . . . Eleanor had stopped herself then, realising her mistake. “No, not Harry. Of course . . .”

It wasn’t the first time she’d forgotten but Alice rarely ever corrected her, knowing these memory lapses must be confusing enough without having them pointed out all the time. Besides, even if she did remind her, Eleanor could easily forget all over again so what was the point? She knew it distressed her mother, even if she insisted her forgetfulness was just a symptom of stress and that it would pass. But it had not passed.

Things slowly but steadily got worse, as did the denial. And the outbursts of anger. Once, when she and Harry were trying to explain why it was no longer safe for her to live on her own at home, Eleanor had actually physically attacked Alice, trying to strike her with her closed fist until Harry intervened and calmed her down. Later, she’d been full of remorse, painfully aware something had gone very wrong but not entirely sure what she’d done. This only made her more upset. Dementia was a horrible illness.

Still, as they’d set off for the Parnell Rose Gardens on that bright early Autumn morning, Eleanor had cheered again as she reminisced about a trip to the gardens many years before with her own mother and beloved sister, Margaret, who’d died in her twenties of an epileptic seizure. “She was always such a clever little thing,” Eleanor remarked. “And played the piano so beautifully.”

As Eleanor remembered the trip to Auckland in vivid detail, right down to the lunch they’d eaten at a café in the museum afterwards (shrimp cocktails and Scotch eggs and pavlova with fruit salad), Alice was once again struck by the strange way the illness affected her mother, the mystery of how her memory now worked. She could recall people and events from her distant past in great detail. But she could forget what happened yesterday or even a question she’d asked five minutes ago and then repeat it endlessly until they were both exhausted from it.

“So remind me what Madeleine’s doing at university again?” she’d ask, and when Alice told her she’d smile and always give the same response.

“Lovely. She always was a smart little thing . . .”

And then five or ten minutes later, she'd ask after her again and on they'd go, in ever-decreasing circles, back to the beginning, like a tape stuck on a loop. The sheer effort of holding a conversation for any length of time must have been exhausting for her mother but she kept trying, and Alice found this quite heart breaking.

*

The first sign that things were going awry yesterday happened not long after they had circled the rose gardens, Eleanor pointing out all the late bloomers, recalling the names of every one. Alice recognised some of them from her mother's own garden so they'd had a companionable time together, strolling around the pretty park nestled above Judge's Bay with Eleanor, in her element, playing the knowledgeable guide. Alice cherished times like this, when things almost seemed normal again.

But as they were heading back to the car, her mother started talking about her own roses, getting more and more agitated. Who was looking after the garden again? This was the conversation Alice always hated, when she had to remind Eleanor that they'd had to let go the farm manager and sell the family farm after they'd moved her into the rest home.

"Have we heard from Maurie and Joan lately?" Eleanor fretted, peering at Alice with her piercing blue eyes. Maurie was the farm manager, taken on after her father had died, and Joan his stocky, capable wife. They had been good to Eleanor, keeping an eye on her until it became clear she needed more round-the-clock care. Alice shook her head. Here she had the choice to tell her the truth and risk upsetting her all over again, or just slide over it. She chose the latter, not wanting to spoil their time out.

"Not for a while but everything's fine," she lied as she helped Eleanor with her seat belt. "Now where shall we go for lunch?" She had already planned to take her mother to the café in the Domain but the question successfully distracted her for the time being.

"Oh, let's go to that one at the Domain, you know – the one by that little lake."

Relieved, Alice smiled as they drove off and up through Parnell with its dinky little designer shops built like settler cottages, and on through the sprawling grounds of the Domain, where the monolithic Auckland Museum stood guard on the hill. Winding their way along the narrow road, Eleanor seemed content then

just to stare out at the gardens and sprawling trees, now losing their leaves in the first chill winds of Autumn.

“Such a pretty park,” Eleanor smiled. “Did I tell you about the time I visited with Mother and Margaret? She was such a clever thing and she played the piano so beautifully . . .”

Alice listened to the story again in all its detail until they pulled up into the café carpark. Eleanor, still in a buoyant mood, had practically skipped across the clipped lawn inside.

But as they settled in for lunch over quiche and salad – and a scone for Eleanor loaded with jam and cream (“not like those mean little things we get at that place”) – she started up again about her roses and how much she hated the rest home.

Alice made soothing noises but Eleanor had suddenly banged her hand on the table, rattling her teacup in its saucer. She wanted to go home and if Alice wouldn't help her, *she would bloody well get there by herself, thank you very much!* An elderly couple at the next table turned and stared at Alice with what she felt were accusing eyes as her mother glared at her, demanding to know if Alice was going to take her home or not. Alice did her best to deflect and change the subject but in the end was forced to remind her mother that she couldn't go home because it had been sold a year ago and she, Alice, now had power of attorney over her mother's finances so that was that.

Eleanor had gone very cold then, much like Alice did when she was angry, and announced loudly mid-meal that she wanted to go back to “that place” now, *thank you*, then promptly rose and walked out. She refused to speak on the drive back to the home and declined Alice's offer to see her safely back inside, fixing her with a steely gaze as they stood at the iron gate.

“I hope the same thing doesn't happen to you when you reach my age, dear,” she'd said. “I'd be better off dead.”

Alice had tried to apologise but Eleanor had pulled away and, after a brief struggle with the gate latch, marched back into the hushed halls of the home, leaving Alice standing on the path, ridden with guilt.

They had talked about having her mother live with them, her and Harry, but as the symptoms of Eleanor's illness worsened, it became clear this would not be possible without full-time care. The last time she had stayed with them, while Alice made a quick dash to the supermarket, Eleanor had almost set the kitchen

on fire after leaving a pan of burning oil on the stove and forgetting about it. When Alice had returned, smoke was billowing down the hallway, smoke alarms blaring futilely. She found Eleanor calmly sitting in front of the television, knitting a jersey for Maddy, and watching a cooking programme. She couldn't even remember why she'd put the pan on the stove in the first place.

Then they'd talked about Alice giving up her job as a nurse at a family planning clinic in the city, a job she actually really enjoyed, to care for her mother but Harry couldn't see how she would cope with this.

"You'll go bloody mad cooped up here with her all day," he'd said, and Alice had to reluctantly admit this was probably true. Plus, Harry had reasoned, Eleanor would be much happier in the company of other elderly people, and might even make some new friends.

This had not turned out to be the case. Eleanor hated everyone there it seemed, and, apart from her morning excursions to read the newspaper in the conservatory, largely kept to her room.

Driving home through the narrow, back streets of Ponsonby, past rows of smoky blue and marble coloured cottages stacked close together, Alice again considered quitting her job and taking care of her mother herself. She had taken bereavement leave after Harry died but was due back after Easter and had been thinking it was time she tried to return to normal life. All that time spent on her own in the weeks since the funeral had not really done her any good and, even though the idea of working again seemed strange, at least it might make her feel useful. And, to be honest, the idea of caring for her mother full-time filled her with dread. But she was so unhappy in there . . .

By the time she arrived home, Alice was already worrying her way into the first signs of a migraine, and had taken herself to bed again, to the restless comfort of the duvet, and more dreams of Harry and her mother and the house burning down while she ran through the rooms calling for them.

Now, as she stood in her back garden sipping on her tepid coffee, Alice lifted her face to the weak morning sun, fighting small waves of nausea brought on by the migraine – and the strong urge to go back to bed. She had to get a grip on herself.

Alice wandered aimlessly around the garden, a lush sub-tropical haven she and Harry had planted all those years ago with cabbage trees and flax and colourful vireyas and hibiscus trees. There was still a cluster of banana and taro

plants in one corner, grown by the previous residents, a Samoan family who had long since left Grey Lynn, like so many Islanders, and moved to cheaper housing in South Auckland. Tropical birds, migrating south.

They still returned in van loads on Sundays though to worship in their church, housed in a rambling bungalow on the street corner, dressed in their best white clothes, their children clambering up trees, playing on the street. Alice loved listening to their sweet harmonies as she lay in bed, reading the Sunday newspapers. It was one of the things she would miss if she ever left this neighbourhood. But she had heard property developers were circling. Inner city real estate was the new gold. Soon the church, too, would be gone.

The garden looked unkempt, unloved. A branch of the plum tree, where the old wooden swing once hung, had blown down in a recent thunderstorm and now lay splintered and broken across the tin shed. Fallen red hibiscus flowers littered the long grass like bloody tissues. The lawn needed mowing.

Alice decided she would tackle this, and was just pulling the mower out from under the house when she heard the phone ringing above her. Again, she was tempted to leave it but if she really was going to attempt to rejoin the human race, she told herself, she should start with answering the bloody phone. Leaving the mower stuck in the basement doorway, Alice hurried back up into the kitchen and answered with a breathless hello.

It was her younger sister, Kate, phoning from Melbourne. Alice was surprised. They were three hours ahead in Auckland. What was Kate doing phoning at that hour? Kate, sounding a little on edge, brightly claimed she was often up early these days, going to the gym before her classes started. When her last relationship had ended – there had been a string of failures – Kate had announced she was off to art school to “follow her dreams”. It was the first Alice and Harry had heard of this “dream” but Kate, who’d always worked in temp jobs in between chasing various men around the planet, insisted she’d always wanted to be a real artist and that now, having just turned forty, it was time to get on with it.

When her older, more pragmatic sister had asked how she planned to survive financially, Kate had airily insisted that the universe would give her what she needed – and that it was totally tragic spending your whole life worrying about money until it was too late to do anything but sit in a rest home waiting to die. Well, she had a point there.

“Are you alright, darling? How’s Maddy? Is everything okay?”

A rush of questions that Alice suspected Kate was only firing at her as a precursor to something else. And sure enough, once they’d got the niceties out of the way, Kate got to the point.

“I was wondering if I could borrow a couple of grand, darl. Just for a few months. I’ll pay you back once I’ve had my first big exhibition – got a gallery interested already, you know – before I’ve even graduated.”

As Kate bumbled on about her wonderful prospects when she finally finished her degree that year, Alice could almost see Harry sitting there, shaking his head and mouthing at her to say no. It wasn’t the first time Kate had asked for money and she’d only ever paid it back grudgingly, as if it was mean of them to ask for it back. She had a bloody cheek asking, Alice thought, especially now when she was on her own herself.

“I’ll have to think about it,” Alice blurted finally. She always found it hard to say no, and felt some weird sense of obligation to her younger sister who, she felt, had somehow always been incapable of making the right choices in life.

“But you’re okay for cash aren’t you, Alice? I mean, the insurance and everything.”

This really raised Alice’s heckles. While it was true that Harry’s life insurance policy meant the house was now paid off and she had funds in the bank, Alice still had a child at university to support, as well as herself. And her mother’s funds from the sale of the farm, mostly now in trust, might not support her forever either if she lived on beyond their limits.

“I said I’ll have to think about it, Katie. Okay?” Her tone was more terse than she intended but Kate really was pushing it.

“O-kay.” Her sister sounded sulky, a little plaintive. “You do that. But get back to me soon, yeah? I really could do with the support.”

So could she, Alice thought. But what was the point of telling her younger sister that? That had never been the way their relationship worked and it wasn’t going to change now. Alice could tell Kate was barely listening when she talked about Harry and whether Kate might like to come home to help spread his ashes at Piha. She claimed she would love to be there but “couldn’t afford it - obviously”.

And when Alice tried to share her concerns about their mother, Kate brushed it off with a glib “what else can we do?” and said she had to go or she’d

be late for a gym class. After she'd hung up, Alice wondered how she could afford to pay for the gym.

The whole conversation had left a bitter taste in her mouth. Alice no longer felt like mowing the lawn. She needed to get out before she crawled back under the duvet, disembarked from life again. So she grabbed her car keys and a light jacket and, having no idea where she was heading, hurried out of the house.

As she passed the mirror in the hallway, she caught sight of herself, again startled by her own appearance – a thin, middle-aged woman stared back, a woman she barely recognised. And Alice saw something else . . . a brief flicker, a shadow, something she barely registered out the corner of her eye. She turned, half expecting to see someone behind her and then, when she realised there was no one, chided herself for being so jumpy. She really had spent far too much time on her own lately. It was time to try and rejoin the world, to start the clocks again.

Out she went, and the sound of the front door closing echoed down the empty hallway like a long sigh, as if the walls themselves were breathing out, relieved, temporarily at least, of their heavy burden.

5. *Off To Windy Wellington . . .*

Eleanor was having a perfectly lovely time, staring out the window of the Silver Fern as it chugged past paddocks and forests and the “backsides” of towns where you could see washing on the line and people’s backyards and women with babies on their hips talking to other women over the fence. You could tell a lot about people and a town by their back yards, she thought. It was there that the care – or lack of it – for a place really showed.

Eleanor was in the dining car waiting for the tea she’d ordered, her fingers working furiously on the new red cable jersey she was knitting for Kate, who was down in the carriage with Len and Alice, engrossed in a game of cards.

The family was taking a rare break from the farm, seeing Alice off safely to her cousin Jennifer’s flat in Brooklyn and her new life as a nursing student at Wellington Hospital. It would be strange not having Alice living with them any more. She had always been such a help around the place and, being seven years older than Katie, a kind of second mother to her when Eleanor had been busy helping Len on the farm or off at one of her many meetings with the local Women’s Division of Federated Farmers. Eleanor always liked to keep busy, even if it was just knitting while waiting as she was now, and could never understand when Kate – never Alice - complained of being bored, especially when they lived on a farm and had all sorts of places to explore and play games.

“But there’s so much to do!” she’d exclaim as she busied herself with preserving fruit and darning socks and all the many to-do’s of the day, listening to the National programme on the old, battered radio by the fridge. So many things to do that Eleanor some times didn’t know how to stop, her mind ticking over with tomorrow’s tasks, things she had forgotten, people she needed to phone.

“Like what?”

Katie would pout and lean up against the fridge, always leaving smears where she trailed a bored hand down the fridge door. Eleanor would automatically move to wipe down the smear – she couldn’t stand dirt – and gently push Kate off towards the back door.

“Go outside and play!” she would say as Kate dramatically stomped her feet all the way out, complaining there was no one to play with and Eleanor was

sorry that this was true. There had been another baby, a boy they'd called Peter, between Alice and Kate who, she was sure, would have been close enough in age to happily play with his younger sister. But he'd been born with a heart defect and only lived three months.

Eleanor didn't like to think about her dear little boy, his tiny hands curled up in stiff balls when she'd found him in his cot that morning, and sighed as she realised she'd dropped a stitch, deftly picking it up again and knitting furiously to banish her sadness. Some times Eleanor was afraid that if she ever did stop, she'd be so overwhelmed by feelings that her heart would explode then and there. No, it didn't pay to dwell too much in the past, the shadow lands of her life, where disappointments and regrets lurked like small monsters waiting to pounce and drag her into the murky undercurrent.

Eleanor glanced up the carriage to see if there was any sign of her tea but it was busy on this Friday morning run to Wellington and she could see the waiters, in their smart New Zealand Rail uniforms, had their hands full dealing with a large group of German tourists taking up most of the tables, with maps of the South Island in front of them, talking of the 'Abel Tasman' and Milford Track and other places Eleanor had never been and probably never would.

She took a deep breath then and returned to the scenery, watching sad-eyed cows standing woefully in the middle of paddocks as rain drifted down gradually from the clay-scarred hills beyond. Poor cows. Len said they were all dumb as door nails but sometimes Eleanor thought that they too could feel things and, like her, had learnt not to show or express them, keeping themselves busy instead with the mundane, daily tasks of survival.

She'd let the girls keep several calves as pets over the years, the ones who'd lost their mothers and needed to be bottle-fed, and Alice, when she was younger, had won more than her share of awards at the local A and P show with her prize animals. Not Kate, though. She'd never shown any interest in animals or, indeed, anything to do with the farm, living for the days when they drove through from Matamata to the "big shops" in Hamilton, or sometimes even Auckland at Christmas to visit Farmers' big department store down by the harbour and the wonderful Toyland on the top floor, the huge Santa out front with his mechanical finger beckoning excited children inside.

Some times Eleanor worried about what would become of Kate. There was something restless and flighty about her, as if she was always wanted to be

anywhere else than she actually was while Alice had always been more easily occupied, more content in herself. Eleanor was glad Alice was off to train as a nurse, just as she had, only she stopped working as soon as she married Len and moved to his family's farm, adapting to her new life there slowly, missing her old nursing friends at first, the fun they'd had at the nursing home, the laughs!

These days girls continued working after they married, even after they had children, although Eleanor wasn't sure she approved of that. Who better to look after a child than its own mother? But no, things were changing. Len was always going on about the women's libbers they saw on the six o'clock news, burning their bras and carrying on about equal rights. A woman's place was at home, he said, looking after the family and, while Eleanor didn't openly disagree with him, she secretly envied these women who were getting degrees and had interesting jobs and let their breasts hang free, although she still wasn't sure exactly what that had to do with anything.

She even envied Alice setting off into her new life in a changing world where, she imagined, she would meet all sorts of interesting people and travel, as she planned to do when she finished her training and had saved enough funds for her big O.E. (Overseas experience, Alice had explained, when Eleanor queried this expression.) It was, it seemed, every young New Zealander's goal these days to travel back to the "mother country", to England, and see as much of the rest of the world as possible while they were at it.

Eleanor just hoped Alice might meet and marry a doctor (like the one she had loved and lost to her former best friend, Nancy) but when she mentioned this to her eldest daughter, she had huffed loudly and told her it wasn't all about getting married and settling down any more. She had more choices than that! The bra-burning bug, it seemed, was spreading in the early seventies, even to rural Matamata.

Eleanor closed her eyes then, lulled into drowsiness by the train's gentle rocking, and allowed her mind to empty itself finally of its endless parade of things and people and words said or not said, the ceaseless chatter that so often kept her from ever truly relaxing. Now she was drifting off to that warm, timeless place where nothing mattered much, where she could find a little peace.

Only she was woken moments later, it seemed, by a gentle hand shaking her shoulder.

"Mrs Anderson? Your cup of tea?"

Eleanor opened her eyes, startled by the sight of the strange little woman in a green smock offering her a cup of tea. Something was very wrong here but she couldn't quite put her finger on it as she looked around her with a sense of rising panic and bewilderment.

She wasn't on the train any more but slumped in a chair in a small room painted an awful shade of yellow with this woman, this Olga – according to the name tag on her grubby smock – hovering over her with a tea cup.

“It's very warm in here, Mrs Anderson. Shall I turn the heater down a little?”

Before Eleanor could even answer, the woman, who spoke with a Russian-sounding accent, put the tea down on the bedside table and bustled over to the heater on the wall, turning down the thermostat.

“No wonder you dozed off! Is like an oven in here!”

Eleanor felt like she had been turned upside down or spun around so fast she could no longer focus on anything in the room, except the woman's fat little fingers stuffed into plastic gloves now offering her two thin, burnt-looking pikelets on a brown plate.

Still, she did her best to gather herself together, straightening her back and giving this Olga person an imperious glare down her long nose.

“Who are you and what are you doing in my room?” (Not that Eleanor thought this was her room. She had no idea where she was.)

“I'm Olga,” the woman explained, as gently as she could. “And it's afternoon tea time. You weren't in the conservatory so – “

“I have no idea what you're talking about,” Eleanor cut in, desperate to be rid of this stranger and regain some control of the situation.

“But I want you to leave. Now!”

As she said this, Eleanor swept her arm out in the direction of the door, knocking her tea off the side table in the process and suddenly feeling a searing pain in her shin as the scalding spilt tea soaked through her stocking.

She heard a high-pitched cry then and realised the sound was coming from her own throat as she pulled at the steaming nylon, trying to wrench it away from her skin and stop the pain now coursing up her leg, bringing tears to her eyes.

“Oh, Mrs Anderson! No!”

Olga was trying to help in some way, although it was clear she wasn't sure what to do, but all Eleanor could see were those fat little sausage fingers crawling up her leg and so she grabbed them then and stuffed them in her mouth, biting down as hard as she could, and the rubber taste from the gloves reminded her of blowing up balloons for the girls' birthday parties and she remembered a song then, an old song she had heard a woman singing to her child on the Silver Fern all those years ago . . .

"I went to windy Wellington on the Silver Star. It huffed and puffed along the tracks much faster than a car . . ."

But now Olga was screaming too, yelling at Eleanor to "let go, let go" but she wasn't sure what she was supposed to let go of, and she was frightened and wanted to go home, home to the farm and the sad-eyed cows and the gumboots all lined up in a row on the back porch in pairs, marching two by two off to war. And her roses, her lovely, lovely roses everywhere.

And then there was a tall man in the room, a doctor he must be, with a stethoscope around in his neck, who tugged the rubber sausages out of Eleanor's mouth and spoke in a calm, reassuring tone that made her feel like everything would be alright.

She smiled up at him, recognising him now, already forgetting the yelling and the pain in her leg and the upside down room where everything finally stopped spinning at last.

"Harry," she said. "It's so nice to see you."

And after that everything went grey and blurry and people moved around her, saying things she didn't understand, and moving her on to the bed, and making her swallow some pills with a little water that washed the taste of balloons out of her mouth, and then she was dozing off on the train again, on her way to windy Wellington.

6. *Be a Good Girl*

Alice drove and drove and drove, through streets she knew and streets she didn't, sometimes having to double back to get her bearings again, through one suburb after another - the leafy streets of Epsom, the bleaker roads of Mt Roskill – and on until they all blurred into one and she had no idea where she was any more. Or where she was going.

When she finally stopped, Alice found herself outside the Auckland International Airport car park and could barely recall the rest of her long, aimless drive. Or why she had ended up here. Perhaps her subconscious was trying to tell her something. Get on a plane and go somewhere, anywhere that is not here, where everything just leads back to Harry. Harry, Harry, Harry. Damn you, Harry! Damn you for dying.

Alice realised she was crying then and, in the safety of her car, let it all out, howling like a baby until there was nothing left but an ache in her heart and a dull thud in her head.

Then she watched as a young family trundled past with their suitcases, the children skipping ahead of their parents, off on holiday somewhere exotic no doubt, and she envied them. That had been them once – her and Harry and Maddy – off to Bali or Fiji or Australia. A normal, happy family. She had boxes of photographs of such holidays at home, proof they had once been just like them.

She wanted to wind down the window and call out to them, warn them to make the most of it because it might not last forever, this family of theirs, intact and whole and complete. They should watch out! Bad things did happen to good people! But she didn't. Of course she didn't. She had learnt years ago to keep quiet, not be any trouble, a good girl.

“Be a good girl now and help your mother,” her father would say, as he appeared at the back door, kicking off his gumboots and stepping into the kitchen where Eleanor would be toiling over numerous pots on the stove and Katie banging her spoon on her high chair and crying for ‘more, more, more!’

Alice could almost smell that kitchen now, all these years later, the sour, vinegary smells of corned beef and cabbage, boiled to death, overlaid with that of something sweet cooking in the oven for pudding. (It was always pudding, never

dessert). And Alice would rise from her homework or her drawing or whatever she was doing near the old cold range, and go and help Eleanor, whose face would always be set by then with flushed, grim determination and something else, something hidden that Alice sensed told a different story about who her mother really was.

Someone tooted behind Alice then, making her jump. The driver wanted her park and for a moment, Alice considered sitting there defiantly, just for the sake of it, but of course she didn't. *Because Alice was a good girl who always helped her mother.*

So she drove off, with a sudden intense yearning for company, and headed off back down the motorway into town, even though she still had no real destination in mind. But as she turned off down Dominion Rd, she realised how much she'd been missing her work mates – the other nurses and doctors and their loud, Irish receptionist, Brenda, who's raucous sense of humour could throw light into the bleakest of corners. From teen pregnancies to sexually transmitted diseases, nothing was safe from Brenda's particularly bent point of view and suddenly Alice craved her company so badly she could almost see her doubled over with laughter behind the desk.

And that's almost how she found her as Alice walked up the stairs into the busy clinic, already hearing Brenda's lilting voice on the telephone as she climbed the stairs.

"No, love. That doesn't sound like gonorrhoea." There was Brenda behind the desk, resplendent in red and purple, sucking on a pen like it was a cigarette (having finally given up smoking reluctantly some months ago.)

"Probably thrush, I'd say. But if you'd like to make an appointment - "

Brenda rolled her eyes at Alice when she caught sight of her as the anxious caller interrupted.

"I seriously doubt it's syphilis either but if you get yourself in here at ten tomorrow, we'll soon see what's what."

Alice couldn't help smiling as Brenda circled her ear, indicating the caller was crazy.

"Righto, love. See you then."

Brenda hung up with a loud cackle and grinned at Alice.

"Nothing's changed here, love! And it's about time we saw you."

Brenda, looking like she'd gained weight again – she was forever on some kind of mad diet that lead, inevitably, to a furious chocolate binge - heaved herself out of her chair as Alice moved around the desk to greet her.

“I was just passing so I thought - ”

Brenda didn't let her finish, tapping her nose lightly with the end of her pen.

“We were about to send out a search party,” she admonished. “You haven't been returning our phone calls. And you've been starving yourself to death, by the looks of things.”

Under Brenda's hawk-eyed scrutiny, Alice suddenly felt very small and vulnerable and she wanted to cry again, so she pursed her mouth and looked away as one of Alice's favourite nurses and best friends, Suzy, came through with a patient.

“Just give this to Brenda here and she'll sort you out,” she told the awkward teenage girl, her face flushed with acne and embarrassment, as Brenda peered at the form and smiled.

“The Monday After Pill it is then,” she said loudly enough for everyone in the waiting room to hear. “Hope he was worth it!”

Suzy shook her head at Brenda's usual lack of discretion as she drew Alice aside, linking her arm through hers and giving it a squeeze.

“I've missed you! Did you get my message – about lunch on Sunday?”

Alice hadn't been checking her answer phone messages but she tried to cover this.

“Yes, yes I did. I think I can come. I'll just have to check . . .”

She trailed off then. Alice wasn't good at lying.

“Check what exactly ?” Suzy asked. “It's Ravi's birthday and he'd love to see you. We all would – even those awful children of mine.”

“I'd love to see them too but . . .” Alice shrugged then, afraid, that as fond as she was of Suzy and her family, it would just be too much effort putting on a brave face at a social occasion.

“I might have something on, sorry. I'll let you know, okay?”

Suzy probably knew she was making excuses but she had the grace not to push it. Alice could tell she understood – which only made her feel worse.

“I’ve got one more patient to see,” Suzy glanced across at a Samoan girl hiding behind a *Who Weekly*. “And then I can take a quick break and catch up, okay?”

Suzy had that determined look on her face that Alice knew meant she wasn’t taking no for an answer. So she nodded meekly and moved over to the waiting area, tidying the magazines to keep herself busy.

“If you want to make yourself useful, you could get over here and file some of these blood results for me,” Brenda said, her mouth full of the peanut slab she’d just devoured.

“Sure,” said Alice, happy to help, and, as she set to work, finding it oddly satisfying filing all the results in the right doctors’ folders.

“That’s it,” Brenda sighed. “I’m going on that new fast diet tomorrow.”

Alice couldn’t help smiling.

“You’re going to fast, Brenda?”

“Apparently you eat your normal diet for five days of the week then fast for two different ones.”

“Depends on what your ‘normal’ diet is, I’d say.”

Brenda huffed at this.

“Don’t you be trying to tell me about dieting, Skinnymalink. A strong wind and you’d blow over.”

“The grief diet. It works!”

Alice had said this lightly enough but it sobered Brenda enough to make her give Alice a sympathetic smile and a quick pat on the hand.

“You’ll be alright, love. We’ll see to that.”

And then she flicked back to bolshie Brenda as she took another phone call, and Alice got on with filing the blood results, enjoying the normality of it all now - the ringing phones, the patients coming in, the familiar faces of all the clinic staff as they welcomed her back and stopped to chat. Time passed quickly, far more quickly than it had in these past few weeks at home, and Alice knew it was definitely time to get back to work. In fact, she couldn’t wait now.

As Suzy finished with her last patient and they headed across the road for a coffee, arm in arm, Alice said as much, admitting she’d recently had trouble getting out of bed or even answering the phone.

Suzy nodded, her neat, short bob swinging around her dark almond face.

“I’ve been worried about you,” she said, as they stepped out of the wind into the shelter of the busy café. “And I’m glad you’re coming back,” she smiled then. “Someone has to keep that Brenda under control.”

Alice smiled too, feeling like she was using facial muscles she hadn’t used in months.

“No one can control, Brenda,” she said. “Not even Brenda!”

And they laughed together then as they joined the small queue and Alice was enjoying the simple sensation brought on by a shared joke, and the warmth of the crowded café, the hum of conversation, the clinking of cups and cutlery and people getting on with their lives. It made her realise how lonely she’d been, isolated in her grief, living under a bell jar watching the world around her go by. It was time for it to stop.

Then her cellphone rang and she rummaged around in her handbag to answer it.

It was the rest home. Alice’s face fell as she took the brief call, then hung up and turned to Suzy.

“Sorry, Suze. I have to go.”

“What’s wrong, hon?” Suzy asked, seeing that Alice looked shaken and putting a protective arm around her.

“It’s Mum,” Alice said, doing her best to sound calm even though she felt a sense of impending doom. “Something’s happened. They want me to come in.”

7. *Roast Pork and Cabbage*

Eleanor was still fast asleep when Alice arrived, her leg now covered in a dressing, resting on a pillow on the dark floral bedspread. The smell of roasting pork wafted down the rest home's overheated halls, making Alice feel slightly nauseous as she hovered at the end of the bed with Dr Harrison, who had just explained what had happened.

Alice was appalled.

"She actually bit this poor woman? Why on earth would she do that?"

The doctor, who reminded Alice a little of Harry, tapped his pen on the clipboard of notes he was holding.

"She was in pain and very confused. I doubt she even realised what she was doing."

Alice shook her head in disbelief. Eleanor had certainly got angry at times but she had never bitten anyone before.

"We'll have to keep an eye on that burn for infection," he added. "But I don't think she'll have to be hospitalised at this stage."

"And poor Olga? How is she?"

"I've given her a tetanus shot just to be on the safe side and sent her home for the rest of the day. But she'll fine. She was more worried about your mother than herself."

Alice looked down at the errant biter, now sleeping as innocently as a child, one hand curled up beside her face which, Alice realised then, was surprisingly smooth for someone of her age. Long before warnings about the huge hole in the ozone layer and melanoma resounded up and down the nation, Eleanor had always worn a hat when she was outdoors. Clearly, this had paid off and Alice wished she'd heeded her warnings about ruining her skin when she and her friends had sunbathed on the deck as teenagers, plastered in baby oil.

"I'm so sorry," Alice murmured, wondering where this would all end.

Dr Harrison gave her a kindly pat on the shoulder and Alice, for some reason, noticed then he wasn't wearing a wedding ring and found herself wondering whether he was a widower or divorced. She stopped herself then, questioning why she was even having such thoughts. It's not that she was

attracted to him, or she didn't think she was. It was more to do with looking for other loners like her new self, a need to reassure herself she wasn't the only one.

"It's not your fault, Mrs Duncan. Par for the course with Alzheimer's, I'm afraid."

Eleanor stirred slightly, muttering something about tea.

"I'll leave you to it and finish my rounds," Dr Harrison said, sticking his pen behind his ear.

"Right. Thank you, Doctor," Alice said as she moved to sit at Eleanor's bedside.

But he'd stopped in the doorway, so tall his head almost grazed the top of it.

"Who's Harry, by the way?"

Alice felt that familiar lump forming in her throat as she explained.

"Harry was my husband. He passed away three months ago. Why?"

Dr Harrison took this in, nodding in sympathy.

"Your mother thought I was him for some reason. Kept thanking me for coming."

"He was a doctor too," Alice said quietly. "She was very fond of him."

"Sorry for your loss," this doctor said kindly. "You've got a lot on your plate."

He left then as Alice absorbed this. Yes, she did have a "lot on her plate" but she refused to feel sorry for herself. It did her no good. She was going back to work. Things would be okay. Her sympathies turned instead to her poor mother with her burnt leg, her fear and confusion so great it had made her bite someone's fingers. She took her hand then, covered in age spots, and gently kissed it.

Eleanor's eyes sprung open, looking directly into hers.

"Hallo, dear," she said. "How nice of you to drop in."

As Alice helped her mother to sit up, propping a pillow behind her back, it became clear Eleanor had little recollection of the events that had lead to Alice's visit and perhaps this was some small mercy, Alice thought.

"Oh my goodness," Eleanor declared as she tried to move her leg, wincing at the pain. "What have I done to myself?"

"You spilt your tea on it, Mum. But the doctor thinks you'll be okay."

"Silly me," Eleanor shook her head. "I'm getting so clumsy."

And that was all she said on the subject, turning her attentions to Alice instead.

“You’re looking so thin, dear,” she said. “Have you not been well?”

It was not the first time Eleanor had commented on her weight loss but Alice didn’t see the point in trying to explain.

“I’m fine, Mum. It’s you I’m worried about.”

Eleanor waved this off, patting Alice on the hand.

“Don’t worry about me, Alice,” she said. “You can’t kill weeds!”

Her mother actually laughed then, in surprisingly good spirits for someone who had just burnt herself and bitten a rest home assistant.

“Tell me all the news,” Eleanor made herself comfortable and reached for her knitting.

Alice noted Eleanor was knitting a red peggy square but she’d dropped a number of stitches, resulting in a small hole in the centre of it.

“How is Madeleine?”

For the hundredth time, Alice filled her in on what Maddy was studying and where she was living, and then Eleanor reminisced about the train trip they’d taken years ago to see Alice off to nursing school in Wellington.

Once again, Alice was struck by Eleanor’s vivid recall of this trip, as if it had only happened yesterday – and yet she couldn’t remember what had just happened in this very room.

Eleanor had talked on until she was tired again and Alice stayed with her until she dozed off back to sleep, tucking her in like she was the child and Alice the mother. Not for the first time, Alice thought they had almost reversed roles and wondered if one day Maddy would do the same for her.

The other residents were all sitting down to their roast lunch when Alice passed through reception on the way out. As she signed out in the visitors’ book, Neil Connelly, the rest home’s manager, sprung out of his office. Alice again felt the need to apologise for her mother’s behaviour.

“Actually,” he said, pulling nervously on his ginger moustache. “I think we need to have a word about that.”

He gestured for Alice to follow him into his small, cramped office. As she took a seat, Alice saw her mother’s name on the file on his desk while he stood, hands clasped behind his back like a headmaster for a moment, before

plonking himself down in his swivel chair, forcing out a tiny hiss of released air that matched his own sigh.

“Is there a problem, Neil?” she asked, since he clearly seemed reluctant to “have a word” after all.

“I’m afraid there is really,” he said, now pulling at the other end of his moustache. Alice could see ginger hairs sprinkled all over the paper work on his desk. It was obviously a favourite past time.

“Given what’s just happened, I don’t think our rest home is the right care facility for your mother any longer.” Alice stared at him in disbelief as he stumbled on. “The level of care she needs . . . It’s just not . . . it’s not safe for her any more, or for our staff you see. I’m sorry . . .”

“You’re kicking her out?” Alice managed to ask eventually, barely able to comprehend this development.

“Well, I wouldn’t put it quite like that, Mrs . . .”

He glanced in the file then to check her name.

“Mrs Duncan. Yes. I think we need to look at transferring her to a more appropriate facility, a dementia unit with more nursing care.”

Alice blinked at him.

“But why? Obviously, she didn’t mean to bite any one. The doctor said - ”

“It’s not just that, Mrs Duncan. There have been other . . . incidents.” He pulled at his moustache again and Alice felt like ripping it right off his smug little officious face. “She’s attempted to leave several times and go home, as you’re probably aware - ”

“When? Why wasn’t I told?”

“It’s all in her notes here,” he gestured at the file, ignoring the question. “And she has been verbally abusive on a number of occasions with both staff and other residents, including, I believe, use of the c-word in the case of poor old Mr Wilson.”

Alice took this in, not knowing whether to laugh or cry. The thought of her mother using the “c-word” was shocking but given how she could behave when feeling threatened or confused, believable.

“So,” Mr Connelly said, closing the file firmly. “We really think she’d be better off somewhere else.”

Alice, knowing how hard it had been to find Eleanor a decent rest home in the first place, felt a cold spike of anger run down her spine.

“And where would you suggest that might be, Mr Connelly?”

Her icy glare made him swing back and forth on his swivel chair uncomfortably as he thrust a pile of pamphlets at her.

“There are a number of places you could consider,” he said. “But, at the end of the day, that’s not really our problem. I’m sure you’ll find somewhere,” he added, giving her a thin smile.

Alice stood then, coldly thanked him and, deliberately leaving the rest home pamphlets on his desk, walked out of the office, putting her hand over her nose to keep out the smell of roast pork and cabbage that hit her on the way out.

But as she fumbled in her bag for her car keys, Alice was hit by a wave of nausea and threw up on the pavement, surprising herself - and the elderly couple passing on their way back into the home.

Embarrassed, she disappeared into the refuge of the car as quickly as she could and sped off down the road home. As she reached the intersection at the bottom of the hill, the lights were changing to red. Alice planted her foot and ran right through them, finding it oddly liberating as a car tooted behind her and the driver gave her the finger.

Then Alice did something she had never done before in her life. She stuck her hand out the window and gave the driver, a man in a big sedan, the finger back.

It felt good to be bad, adrenaline pulsing through her veins. Alice planted her foot and sped off over the harbour bridge and on, heading north, as far away as she could from her mother and her dead husband and the smell of pork and boiled cabbage. She would just keep going, she thought, and never come back.

But she only got as far as Orewa before she came to her senses and turned around.

When she got home, the cat was sitting on the verandah, waiting for her. It started to rain, suddenly and ferociously, the way it did in Auckland when winter finally struck. Alice huddled in the car, watching it stream down the windscreen.

And decided there would be no more rest homes. She would do the right thing and bring her mother home to live with her. Because she *was* a good girl who *always* helped her mother.

8. *Just another Monday.*

Maddy was woken by the grunty sounds of the neighbour's lawnmower. For a few confusing moments, she thought she was in her old room at her parents' house, where Mr Johnson next door always mowed his lawn at the crack of dawn on Saturday.

But, as she forced herself into consciousness, she took in the familiar sight of the green floral wallpaper peeling off the wall near the door and somewhere down the hall, one of her flatmates playing Morrissey. Ellen, probably. She'd split up with her boyfriend again and had been holed up in her room since the weekend, only emerging briefly to make herself toast and elicit a little grudging sympathy from Maddy. Morrissey's doleful tones in *Girlfriend in a Coma*, combined with the lawnmower now passing close under Maddy's window, made her groan as she pulled the pillow over her head and tossed on to her side, screaming inwardly. *What the fuck!*

But there was no escaping the noise and Maddy, remembering finally that it was Monday morning, reached for her phone with another groan to check the time. Shit. She hadn't set her alarm and it was now 10.30. She had a lecture in an hour and she hadn't even done the reading for it, choosing instead to stay up late watching old episodes of *True Blood* with Violet and Jed, who Maddy definitely had a crush on, even though she was pretty sure he was more into Violet. Fair enough, thought Maddy. Violet was so amazing. And it probably wasn't a good idea to sleep with flatmates, even ones as cute as Jed.

As the lawnmower powered by again, Maddy forced herself out of bed and stumbled down to the shower, hoping there was still some hot water left after the morning rush. Jed emerged from the steam, his tall, thin form, covered only with a thin towel, and Maddy found herself blushing as they almost collided in the doorway.

"Hey," said Jed.

"Hey", said Maddy back, trying to sound as cool as he did but her greeting emerged high and squeaky. "Any hot water left?"

"You might be lucky," Jed shrugged, as Maddy watched water dribble down his neck from his dark, wet hair, and found herself wondering what it would be like to sink her teeth into his flesh like a vampire.

“You okay there?” Jed grinned as Maddy realised she was staring.

“Yes! I’m just . . . late!”

And she dived into the bathroom, closing the door behind her and leaning up against a pile of damp towels, cursing herself for being so uncool.

When she stepped into the mouldy shower, the water was only just lukewarm and Maddy shivered as she leaned her head back to wash her hair, only to find then that someone had used the last of her good shampoo – probably Jed, because none of her other flatmates would dare after the scene she caused last time it happened. And, come to think of it, she’d smelt the shampoo’s particular vanilla scent on his damp locks as he passed.

Since the water was now freezing, Maddy cursed loudly and abandoned the whole operation. If she hurried, she might still make her class on time.

But by the time she’d managed to find an acceptable outfit from the pile of clothes on the floor – and had a brief chat with her other flatmate, Ellen, on the way out (Maddy was so over talking about Ellen’s boyfriend troubles) – she was running late for the bus, already pulling in to the stop up on the corner. It was raining hard by the time she actually reached the bus shelter, only to watch the doors close and the bus driver impervious to her pleas as he swung the bus off up the hill.

Maddy crouched in the bus shelter, out of the rain, and considered her options. If she made a dash for it, she could probably almost make it to class on foot. But she’d also get soaked. So she decided to skip her class and pick up the notes later online. She’d been doing this a lot lately. And the truth was, she was falling further and further behind. Maybe she should just drop out altogether and get herself a job, have another go next year or just save up enough money to go somewhere. New York, London, or even just Melbourne, where her crazy Auntie Kate lived, and pick up a job waitressing or whatever, then head up through Asia when she’d saved some cash.

Two of her old school friends were living in Hanoi, teaching English and travelling around, skypeing her from all sorts of cool places she’d love to go – Cambodia, Burma, Laos. Exotic places with golden temples and elephants and young monks in orange robes everywhere. The year before her Dad died, Maddy had gone to Thailand with her parents and they’d taken to her to an island they’d been to years before, staying in a little bamboo cottage right on the beach. She’d loved it there and imagined herself now swimming in the warm, crystal

clear water again, magical in the moonlight when the water was lit up with tiny bubbles of light. She remembered her father holding her afloat while she looked up at the stars and her eyes stung with tears then but she blinked them away, refusing to let the sadness in again.

“Maddy D! You want a ride?”

Maddy looked up to see Tom leaning out the passenger window of Jamie’s nifty little jeep and she grinned with relief as she made a dash through the rain for the back seat.

“Oh my God, it’s pissing down!”

“Watch out for that van,” said Tom, as Jamie put the windscreen wipers on full and steered back out in to the traffic, cutting in front of a courier van, the driver forced to brake to let him in.

“Jesus, Jamie! Stop doing that!”

Jamie just laughed and told Tom to chill out. Maddy could see Tom’s jaw tighten with tension. She gave it another week at most – it was never long before the habits of Tom’s boyfriends got on his nerves and he dumped them unceremoniously and without warning.

“We’re heading up K Rd for brunch if you want to come with,” Tom suggested, and Maddy shrugged agreement.

“Why not? Too late for my class now anyway. Except I’m broke ‘cos I blew all my money on that stupid birthday dinner for Charlotte.”

“My shout, honey,” Tom offered. “I still owe you for her present anyway.”

“Thanks. I’m starving.”

Maddy wiped the condensation of the window and peered out as they cruised up Great North Rd and stopped at the lights. The same homeless man she often saw on her way into the city was crouched under an umbrella on the corner of Ponsonby Rd, listening to his transistor radio, all his possessions in a big carry bag beside him. A tall man in a dark coat stopped to give him change and there was something about him that made Maddy turn back and stare through the back window as the lights changed. He looked just like her father, so much so that it made her give a small gasp of surprise even as she realised it couldn’t possibly be him. But she kept staring anyway until he was just a blur in the distance. Maddy shivered. The sadness kept seeping in around the edges today, making her feel gloomy and maudlin, and she didn’t like it one bit.

The rain was easing as they headed down Karangahape Road, past the old sex shops and the trannies huddled near the bus stop sharing a cigarette, keeping one eye out for business, even on this grey, dismal morning. The old stone facades above the shops harked back to a time long gone when this road had been a bustling hub for more legitimate businesses than the ones it was famous for now – strip clubs at one end, bars and nightclubs in the middle, and a block of shops, mainly vintage stores and cafes, at the other. Maddy usually enjoyed its colourful, edgy atmosphere but today it just looked tired and dirty and made her wish she was back home in bed.

By the time they found a park down a side street, the boys were bickering again over who had change for the parking meter. Jamie ended up walking off in a huff while Tom lagged behind with Maddy.

“I am so over him,” he muttered.

“No kidding,” Maddy linked her arm through his as they splashed through puddles on their way across the road. “Maybe you could try being nice?”

Tom didn’t say anything to this and Maddy didn’t press the point. They found Jamie at a table in St Kevin’s Arcade, busy texting on his *iPhone*.

“I’ve already ordered,” he said, barely looking up from his phone as Tom rolled his eyes at Maddy.

“What do you want, Mads?”

But Maddy suddenly found the thought of putting up with all this tension really unappealing, even if she was hungry. Normally, Tom’s tiffs with his various boyfriends didn’t bother her – sometimes she even found them funny. But today, and most of the time lately when she thought about it, she felt like she was missing a layer of skin, like she’d been rubbed raw, and couldn’t handle any kind of tension or conflict.

“Actually, I might skip it. Maybe see you at Violet’s later?”

Tom shrugged, although Maddy could see he didn’t really want her to leave him alone with Jamie.

“Suit yourself, babes. Later.”

She left them to it, wandering through the arcade and idly checking out clothes on the racks outside the vintage stores. A cool old red velvet jacket caught her eye but since she’d spent all her student allowance that week, she knew she couldn’t afford it – even at second-hand prices. Then she noticed that the shop door was closed, with a sign on it saying “Back in Five Minutes.”

Maddy glanced around, to see if anyone was keeping an eye on the place but there appeared to be no one. Her heart racing, she quickly dragged the jacket off the hanger into her open bag and hurried off, fearing someone might stop her any second. She'd never shoplifted anything before and was still surprised she'd actually done it but she liked the adrenaline rush it gave her, the sheer thrill of taking something without paying for it.

As she headed back onto K Rd, a girl in a bright green vintage dress with henna red hair passed her carrying a takeaway coffee. Maddy recognised her as the vintage shop owner, actually a friend of Tom's sister, Ella, and for a few brief paranoid seconds feared she had seen her after all. But she just gave Maddy a quick smile and carried on.

Maddy's heart was still pounding as she hurried across the road to the bus stop, deciding to retreat home and stash the jacket just in case. While it had left her feeling a strange kind of high, she also knew it was wrong and couldn't even really understand why she had actually acted on the impulse to take it. But it did give her a sense of release - a bit like the time she'd cut her arm with a razor when her Dad was really sick, watching the blood trickle slowly down her arm in the bathroom, and then having to hide the cuts from her mother who would die if she knew.

Causing pain to take away the pain, she'd written in her diary at the time, and then torn the page out in case anyone - especially her mother - had found the diary and read it. She was never seriously into self-harm, like some of the girls at school were, but she was curious and, at the time, was desperate to find any way she could to feel and release the pain. A dying father was no fun.

It had started raining heavily again as a bus to Herne Bay pulled up and Maddy made a spontaneous decision to jump on and go and visit her grandmother at the rest home. She hadn't seen her for ages and, since she didn't have another lecture until mid-afternoon, figured it would pass some time - and maybe ease the niggling guilt she was still feeling for stealing the jacket.

As the bus moved slowly down past the trendy designer stores and cafes of Ponsonby Rd, Maddy fingered the soft velvet in her bag, still on something of a high, and listened to her *iPod*, shutting out the crying toddler squirming in the lap of his young mother across from her. The girl, not much older than Maddy, was trying to distract the boy with her keys but he wasn't buying it and threw them onto the floor in a rage, banging his head hard against her chest. She

gasped and held him tight, her face set with resignation. Maddy didn't think she'd ever want kids – it looked way too hard – and she turned away from them and lost herself in her music, glad she was young and single and free.

The music lifted her mood and she got so lost in her daydreaming that she almost missed the stop on Jervois Rd nearest the rest home, hitting the button at the last minute, and stepping out onto the broad street, lined with huge, two-storied villas with their manicured hedges and tall fences designed, she imagined, to keep the less fortunate at bay.

A blonde woman in expensive gym gear jogged past her behind a high-tech pushchair, and then another almost identical one, her hair pulled back in the same, tight pony tail – designer mummies with their designer babies jogging up and down the busy road with determination before disappearing back behind the tall gates of their huge villas with their equally huge mortgages. Not a life Maddy would choose either. But what did she want?

This was a question that preoccupied her as she hurried down the street to the rest home, stopping briefly to shelter under a huge old jacaranda tree until the rain finally eased again. She didn't know the answer yet and wished she could be more focussed and driven like Tom was. He had his eye on making it big in the fashion marketing world and had already landed a sought-after internship with a major company. “Play hard and work harder,” he'd say, but Maddy felt she wasn't very good at either and that, somehow, the fabulous life she imagined for herself while still at high school was slipping away from her even before it started.

*

Eleanor was sitting up in bed, reading the newspaper, her bandaged leg resting on a pillow, when Maddy arrived, dripping water on to the mustard-coloured bedspread as she gave her grandmother a kiss on the cheek.

“What have you done to yourself, Gran?” she asked, as Eleanor fussed over her, making her get a towel from the rack near her basin and drying her hair for her like she had when they were small.

Eleanor dismissed it with an airy wave and patted the bed, clearly delighted to see her.

“Something silly as usual, Madeleine. But look at you! Hasn't your hair grown!”

And she held up Maddy's damp locks, peering into her face.

“My God. You look more and more like your father every day. The spitting image!”

“Do you think so, Gran?”

Maddy liked hearing this and snuggled in beside Eleanor, taking care not to bump her leg. She’d have to ask her mother what had happened since clearly her Gran didn’t remember.

“He was such a handsome devil when he was younger. Your mother was very lucky to catch him.”

“He used to say the same about Mum,” Maddy recalled, suddenly feeling sad again for her mother.

“I worry about your mother, dear,” Eleanor said, almost as if she could read Maddy’s thoughts. “She’s lost so much weight. You make sure she eats, you hear me?”

Maddy agreed to try, resolving to make more of an effort with Alice and stop avoiding her so much, then spent a companionable time with her Gran and, in the process, felt more connected to herself than she had for some time. Even though her Gran asked her the same questions repeatedly, Maddy didn’t mind, although some times she changed the answers just to make it interesting for herself.

But, when she eventually got up to leave, Eleanor’s mood suddenly darkened as she gripped Maddy by the arm.

“Please don’t leave me here, Madeleine. Help me to get home.”

Maddy didn’t know what to say to this other than to try and soothe that this was place wasn’t so bad and that she would come and visit again soon.

“I might not be here next time you come,” Eleanor said darkly as Maddy was half way out the door.

“What do you mean, Gran?”

Eleanor just folded her arms and gave a little sniff.

“Thank you for visiting though. It was lovely to see you.”

She picked up the newspaper then, giving Maddy the clear message she wanted her to leave.

“Please don’t do anything silly,” Maddy said. “Promise.”

Eleanor ignored this, apparently engrossed in the newspaper so Maddy left, resolving to talk to her mother about the situation.

It had stopped raining by the time Maddy left the home but there was now a real winter chill in the air so she pulled the stolen jacket out of her bag and put it on. It was a little short in the sleeves but otherwise fitted perfectly. She did feel another small pang of guilt as she trudged up through the wet leaves back up to the bus, not helped by the fact that a police car happened to cruise past slowly as she reached the bus stop at the top, then told herself it was ridiculous to be so paranoid. She was pretty sure they wouldn't be wasting time out looking for a girl in a stolen red jacket.

Her thoughts turned back to her grandmother, trapped in the rest home, wanting to escape. It was so sad. That was enough of family for one day, Maddy thought. They had this way of dragging her in and pulling her under and she could understand some times why her Auntie Kate stayed as far away as possible.

As she waited for the bus, Maddy found she'd missed several texts from Violet. One of their friends was having an exhibition at a small gallery in Newton that afternoon – free drinks and food! And the relief of her friends' company again. She texted back that she'd meet her there soon, then remembered her sociology lecture.

But by the time the bus arrived, Maddy decided she'd skip that lecture too. So she went home and got stoned with Jed instead, who was sitting in a broken old couch on the front porch playing guitar. She told him about stealing the jacket. He just laughed and said he'd stolen heaps of things and never got caught, it was no big deal.

The rain had finally stopped. Everything smelt damp and new. Maddy filled her lungs with cannabis smoke and exhaled slowly, staring dreamily off to the horizon.

“That's what I used to imagine God was,” she said, gesturing at the point where the late afternoon sun was breaking through the clouds out west. “Those big rays of light there.”

Jed nodded slowly, understanding.

“And then his big voice comes booming down . . .”

Maddy laughed, passing him back the joint.

“Maddy, you have been a very bad girl,” she said, in a deep, God-like voice. “You will go straight to hell.”

“For stealing that jacket – and all your other sins,” Jed added, in an even deeper voice, and they both laughed some more, and then went silent for a while, each lost in their own stoned thoughts.

“Do you still believe in God?” Jed asked eventually, his long, pale hands resting on his guitar.

She shook her head.

“I never did really. It was just something I used to wonder about . . .”

“We don’t need God to give us answers any more, eh?” Jed said. “We just Google.”

“Yeah,” Maddy agreed. “God is Google.”

“And Google is good,” he added, hovering down the last of the joint and flicking the roach out onto the muddy lawn. He really was cute, she thought, her hot vampire flatmate, and suddenly she longed for a real boyfriend, not just some dumb guy you slept with for the sake of it, a proper boyfriend who adored her and made her feel good about herself.

“You okay, Mads?” Jed was leaning up against the rickety verandah post, watching her, and she almost felt like he could read her thoughts. She wondered then what it would be like just to tell him, to say “*I am lost and lonely and want to be loved.*” To take that risk, even if he just laughed in her face. But she didn’t say it, she’d rather die than say it, so she just shrugged and said she was fine and looked away, avoiding his eyes.

It was getting dark now, and cold with it, so they retreated inside, raiding Ellen’s beers in the fridge and her leftover Thai curry.

Then Violet texted again. *We a r u?*

And they jumped in a taxi and stayed out until dawn, all three of them falling asleep on the couch under a duvet watching more episodes of *True Blood*.

When she finally crawled into her own bed, Maddy dreamed of vampires and Jed and her Dad, who was wearing her red jacket and playing a Smiths’ song on a guitar with no strings.

They were all at a party in some strange house and when Maddy asked her Dad what he was doing there, he said it was his birthday party. Had she forgotten? And then she lost him, and she couldn’t find Jed, so she was all alone with the vampires and ran off down the street, running and running but not getting anywhere.

Why did that always happen in dreams?

9. *The Visit*

Alice was also dreaming about Harry. He was sitting on the end of her bed, wearing the suit he'd worn on their wedding day only he was the age he was when he died, before the cancer wasted him away to skin and bone.

"Hello, Alice," he said, as if this appearance was the most normal thing in the world.

"What are you doing here?" Alice asked. "You're supposed to be dead."

Harry gave a dry smile. "Yes. Sorry about that."

Alice stared at him. He seemed so real, so *present*, that it didn't feel like a dream at all.

And then they were on a beach in the moonlight and Alice recognised it as a place on Kho Phangan Island they had stayed many years ago, before Maddy was born, when they were travelling through Thailand on their way to India. They had returned there, at Harry's suggestion, with Maddy the year before he died and had a wonderful holiday, finding the place more or less as it had been nearly twenty years before although the bamboo beach huts they'd stayed in had been blown away in a cyclone and been replaced with sturdier ones.

Harry was standing at the edge of the water, beckoning to her. Now she was following him into the warm sea, and she was laughing, and so was he, as they dove through the phosphorescent water, the sea plankton glittering like Christmas lights all around them, just as it had been all those years ago, and she was lost in the wonder of it all and forgot all about Harry who had disappeared somewhere in the distance. It was just her now, all alone in the vast, moonlit sea. She was so happy to be back in this place, floating on her back, staring up at the huge moon, the phosphorescent plankton dancing on the ends of her fingertips as she glided through the water. She wanted to stay there forever. Free . . .

Alice woke, in the early hours of the morning, shivering, remembering the dream. It had been so vivid she actually sat up and checked the end of the bed to see if Harry was still sitting there but there was only the cat, who stirred as she pulled the duvet up around her, trying to get warm.

"Sorry, Alf," she said, as he let out a small miaow of complaint when she rubbed her feet up and down the sheets in an effort to warm them up. The bed felt too big for her now and she still slept curled up on the side she'd always slept

on, as if she was still making room for Harry who liked to stretch out flat on his back, arms flung wide.

She was too cold now to go back to sleep, and the dream, as pleasant as it had been, had left her with that hollow feeling in the pit of her stomach, another happy memory, now made bittersweet by his death. Sometimes Alice felt like she had dreamt their whole life together and the only reality was her now, alone, in this big house, slowly disappearing.

“Enough!” Alice actually said this out loud, tired of her own morbid thoughts, as she flung back the duvet, pulled on a robe and padded down the chilly hallway to make coffee. The sun was just coming up and, while the kettle came to the boil, she watched moisture slide down the kitchen window like tears.

It was then that she felt it, a kind of feathery sensation on the nape of her neck that made her skin tingle. She stood perfectly still, barely daring to move. It felt like a baby’s breath, or the lightest of fingertips moving up and down her skin and she sensed a presence, something *other* very close to her, and all around her and closed her eyes, not wanting it to stop – whatever this was. The feeling lasted for a few more precious moments before it ended as quickly as it began, and Alice opened her eyes again and the kettle was boiling and she went about making coffee as if nothing had happened, even trying to tell herself this. *It was nothing, Alice. You just imagined it.*

But she felt different somehow, comforted by the experience, which she resolved not to discuss with anyone in case they dismissed it as nothing too, as something silly or superstitious. Alice knew what she thought it was, however irrational others might think she was being. No, it would be her secret. She wouldn’t ruin it by trying to explain it to anyone. She would keep it close.

*

But later, having gone to Ravi’s birthday party after all, she was sitting with Suzy out on their deck and, feeling loosened by the wine, sun and good company, asked her if she’d ever had any kind of supernatural experiences. Suzy sipped on her wine and looked at Alice for a moment, which made her start to regret even asking the question.

“I used to wake up when I was a kid and think I saw my grandmother at the end of the bed after she’d died.”

Alice nodded. “I’ve had that with Harry. Just last night actually. And then this morning - ”

Alice stopped. She felt slightly heady from the wine, having drunk more than she meant to when she arrived, just to get over her nerves. All of Ravi's extended family were there, along with a number of mutual friends Alice hadn't seen since Harry's funeral.

It was hard for her, and hard for some of them, she felt. No one really wanted to talk about *it*. And so she had stood back for a while, watching everyone and slugging back the wine, until Suzy had found her and whisked her off out to the deck with a plate of food and apologies for leaving her on her own for so long.

Alice put her glass down now and reached for one of Suzy's cigarettes. She'd given up smoking years ago, before she had Maddy, but still had one every now and then, usually when she'd had a few drinks.

"This morning, what?" Suzy asked, as she passed Alice her lighter.

"It was probably nothing, really . . ." Anna inhaled, coughing slightly, before blowing out a thin trail of smoke.

"But I thought . . . I felt that Harry was there with me, in the kitchen. It was the strangest, nicest thing."

Suzy just nodded, watching Anna with sympathy.

"I imagine that's pretty normal, when someone's passed – to feel like they're still with you - "

"It was more than that, Suze. It felt real. I could feel it!"

Alice had said this more vehemently than she meant to and could see Suzy looking at her like she was fragile and needed to be handled with care.

"Sorry. I shouldn't have mentioned it. It's silly, I know."

"It's not silly, Alice," said Suzy, stroking her friend's arm as Alice stubbed out the foul-tasting cigarette. "But I worry about you."

Ravi interrupted then, asking Suzy where he could find the paper towels – one of his nephews had spilt tomato sauce all over the kitchen floor – and she headed off to help find it, after checking Alice would be okay on her own.

But after sitting for a few moments, watching the children filling balloons with water and tearing around the garden throwing them at each other, Alice decided she had had enough of socialising for one day, exhausted by the sheer effort of trying to act normal.

Suzy saw her to the door, one arm loosely around her shoulders. She smelt of gardenias and kindness, Alice thought. She smelt good.

“You sure you don’t want me to give you a lift home?” Suzy asked, but Alice dismissed this with a wave.

“I didn’t drink that much, Suze. I’ll be fine. Honestly.”

Suzy accepted this and kissed Alice on the cheek.

“See you next week at work then?”

Alice hesitated. She hadn’t talked about her plans for her mother, partly because she still wasn’t sure how it was all going to work yet.

“Probably, yes,” she said. “I just have to sort out a few things for Mum first.”

“Sort out what exactly?” Suzy asked, with some concern. “Is she okay?”

When Alice told her about the biting incident and how she was now planning to bring her home to live with her, Suzy was really worried.

“But how’s that going to work, hon? It’ll be too much for you on your own.”

Alice was adamant she would cope, that she would find some kind of temporary part-time nursing care for the days she was at work - it would probably cost less than a rest home and her mother would be a lot happier, she figured.

“But what about you, Alice? What’s it going to be like for you, especially without Harry there - ”

“ Well, Harry’s never going to be there, is he?” Alice snapped suddenly. “So I may as well just get on with it.”

As soon as she said this, Alice regretted it. Suzy cared about her, she knew this.

“Sorry, Suze. Sorry for snapping. I haven’t been sleeping well -”

“It’s okay. I understand. But I still think it’s a big thing to take on, that’s all, when you’ve already been through so much.”

Alice nodded and agreed she needed to think about it some more but, as she trudged down the street to her car through sodden leaves that stuck to the soles of her shoes, she knew her mind was already made up. There was nothing anyone could say to stop her. Alice knew what she was doing. She couldn’t save her husband so she was going to do her utmost to save her mother, no matter what the cost.

A biting cold breeze surged up the hill, cutting through Alice’s thin jacket, making her face ache and her eyes sting. By the time she made it to the

car, which she'd had to park some way down the road, Alice was cold to the bone, her hands so stiff she fumbled to even get the keys in the ignition.

She took a wrong turning on the way home from Suzy's place in Onehunga and got lost for a while in unfamiliar, industrial back streets, cursing her poor sense of direction. *Yes, Harry. I should use the GPS. But I hardly know how to work it. Learn.*

It was getting dark when she pulled into the driveway, Alfie waiting on the front step as always like a small, trusty sentinel. He ran after her as Alice hurried down the shadowy hallway to the kitchen, winding himself around her legs as she flicked the kettle on, holding her hands against it to warm them up.

As she stood there, Alice willed the feeling she'd had that morning to come back. Whatever it was, it had made her feel safe and warm and whole again.

But there was nothing. The kettle boiled, the cat whined, and Alice disappeared into herself, down the rabbit hole again.

10. Going Home

Eleanor stared out the window at the wide, unfamiliar streets. This city was so big and busy that she wondered how any one could ever find their way around at all. Big yellow buses pulled out in front at random, cyclists hurtled past at breakneck speed, and pedestrians braved crossing the roads, it seemed, at their own peril.

Eleanor turned to the woman driving. She looked thin and gaunt and unfamiliar. Then, as she pulled her hair back off her face, she realised it was her own daughter, Alice, who glanced across at her now and smiled.

“Nearly there, Mum.”

Eleanor had no idea where ‘there’ was although she had a vague recollection now of someone packing her suitcases and looking for her wedding pearls.

“Where are my pearls, dear? Did we find them?”

“Yes, Mum. They’re in my bag.”

Her anxiety quietened only briefly, her mind full of half formed questions and thoughts she struggled to catch and hold on to.

“And where are we going again, dear?” she asked.

“Home, Mum. We’re going home.”

Eleanor smiled and sat back, now feeling a huge rush of relief. She was going home. At last.

She imagined herself now, sitting on her front porch with a cup of tea, or in the evening a nice gin and tonic with a slice of lime from her own tree, looking out over her lovely garden. It was winter now so the roses would all be finished but the magnolias would be coming into bloom, as would the camellias and the Daphne by the back door, with its pretty scent that always made her think of her mother who wore a perfume that smelled just like it when she went out in the evenings with her father to a concert.

“Nini, Nini,” she’d call, “I’m getting ready now.” Nini was Eleanor’s nickname as a child, the name she’d given herself when she was too young to say her proper name, and it was what her mother had always called her, even when she was grown. Eleanor would love to come and sit on the edge of her parent’s bed and watch her mother get dressed to go out, clipping on her sapphire earrings

and the perfume that smelled like Daphne and heading out on her handsome father's arm, glamorous as a movie star.

Some times she would spray a little of the perfume behind Nini's ears before she left and Eleanor loved the way the scent stayed with her so that when she went to bed she could still smell her mother, her sweet mother, who never raised a hand to her or said a harsh word even when her father drank away all their money and they had to leave their dear little cottage and move into a flat in town.

"Don't ever choose a man who likes the drink," her mother had warned her as she struggled to raise Nini and Margaret on her own in the years just after the Depression in the dark, musty little flat that smelt like vinegar, with a picture of Mickey Savage, the Labour prime minister her mother and many others idolised, above the fireplace. And Eleanor had taken this to heart and chosen Len, who hardly ever drank, except on birthdays or at Christmas, and even then only had a glass or two of spirits, and would never leave like her own father had, stumbling out the door one morning with a brown leather suitcase and a bottle under his arm, never to be seen or heard from again.

"Here we are," Alice said suddenly. "I'll just get your bags."

And Eleanor saw they had arrived in front of a big, white villa, which looked vaguely familiar, but was not her home on the farm. This was all wrong, wrong, wrong. She felt the beginnings of the rage again that she sometimes feared would consume her, the helpless rage that simmered and festered until it became something hot and dangerous that could boil over and hurt anyone who came close.

Alice's face appeared at the window, which had fogged up with Eleanor's hot breath in the time she'd been left sitting there, making her jump. Finally, she recognised her daughter in the strange, ghostly features of the face peering in at her. But Eleanor didn't want to get out of the car. She didn't want to go into this house that was not her home, in this city that was too big. She wanted to go back to the cottage where she lived with her mother who smelt of Daphne and never said a harsh word, even after her father left.

But Alice was opening the door and reaching in to help her out and up the steps, her leg aching as she lifted it, up into the strange house with the wide hallway, past the piano where Eleanor saw photos of Alice and the children and Harry, and one of her and Len in her garden at home.

Eleanor stopped then and picked it up, and Alice reminded her when the photograph was taken, on her and Len's 50th wedding anniversary.

"You remember, Mum? We had a big party," she said, and Eleanor nodded, even though she didn't remember, not really, but she was looking at Len, tall and broad with his thick head of grey hair and big farmer's hands, and remembering their wedding day.

"Wasn't your father handsome?" she said. And she picked up another photograph now, a wedding photo, but then realised it was one of Alice and Harry, arms around each other, beaming into the camera.

"Is Harry home?" she asked then but Alice didn't respond, other than to suggest she make Eleanor a cup of tea and lead her down into the kitchen, settling her into a chair and flicking the gas heater on to warm the chilly room.

Eleanor watched her daughter as she moved around in the kitchen, putting tea leaves in to the pot, afghan biscuits on a pretty, blue plate. She looked so thin and drawn, Eleanor thought, as she stood there by the kettle, a distant look in her eyes.

"Have you been ill, dear? You don't look very well," she asked as Alice brought the tray of tea and biscuits over to the table.

"I'm fine, Mum, really – and I'm glad you've come to stay."

This was news to Eleanor but she was not going to panic, not today, forcing herself to breathe deeply instead, telling herself to stay calm, as Alice poured the tea.

"Just for a few days then," she said. "And then I really must get home."

Alice said nothing to this as Eleanor took her first sip of tea – proper, home-brewed tea it was, not like in that hospital or whatever it was where she hoped she'd never step foot again. Something was bothering her though, something to do with that Russian woman, the one with the fat, sausage fingers who used to bring her the watery tea. Something bad had happened. Before the doctor came.

"Did I do something wrong, dear?" she asked suddenly. "At that awful place?"

Alice looked slightly startled by the question, then pulled at a strand of her hair, winding it round and round her finger, the way she had as a child when she was daydreaming. She stared at her mother, or rather, stared right through

her it seemed, and Eleanor could see she was blinking back tears and that something was really not right with her at all.

“No, Mum, of course you didn’t,” she said finally, forcing herself to smile.

But Eleanor didn’t believe her. And then she couldn’t even remember what it was she had wanted to know in the first place. If only she could hold on to a thought long enough to follow it through and get to the bottom of things. But her thoughts were like the seed heads of dandelions, floating in the breeze – as soon as she reached out to touch one it dispersed and blew away.

“Nice cup of tea, dear,” she found herself saying, just to fill the uneasy silence that had settled on the room. “Is Harry home?”

11. *Secrets and Surprises*

Life with Eleanor in the house soon settled into a rhythm that Alice found easier to adjust to than she had imagined. Yes, there were the constant, repetitive questions and answers – conversations that some times went round in ever decreasing circles and could be exasperating when Alice was tired – but, overall, she found this less stressful than worrying about her in the rest home. And she no longer felt that constant, nagging sense of guilt that she'd abandoned her mother, that she was a bad daughter.

After a few days, Eleanor stopped asking when she was going home to the farm and seemed to accept she was staying with Alice indefinitely because she needed her after losing Harry. (It also seemed to have finally sunk in that Harry had died). Alice let her think this because she knew that, like her, Eleanor needed to feel useful. Always a keen gardener, her mother enjoyed getting outdoors to “tidy things up a bit” and, together, they weeded and clipped and pruned, putting the garden “to bed” for winter and making plans for new plantings in the spring.

It actually felt good to get her hands in the dirt and make the garden look fresh again. It had been so neglected. Like everything. The clocks really do stop.

Alice spoke to her clinic manager, delaying her return to work until she had found the right caregiver and, after interviewing a number of applicants through a nursing agency, settled on a middle-aged Scottish woman called Nettie, who reminded Alice of Robin Williams in *Mrs Doubtfire*, and had experience with dementia patients. She seemed to have a patient, no-nonsense approach to dealing with her mother.

“Good routines and clear, simple communication,” she told Alice, as they watched Eleanor pottering about in the garden. “Don't worry, we'll be fine.”

For her part, Eleanor seemed to think Nettie had been hired as some kind of housekeeper to keep the place in order when Alice went back to work and wondered how she could afford this.

“I would have been fine doing all the cooking and cleaning myself, dear,” she insisted over dinner in front of the six o'clock news that night. “You didn't need to hire that woman.”

Alice had already found a pot boiling dry on the stove after her mother had forgotten she was boiling some eggs. And odd things in the fridge, like the pot scrubber in the cheese box and a bag of onions in the freezer.

Alice claimed that Eleanor was already doing more than her share with the garden and her mother conceded there was still an “awful lot to do out there.”

“Besides, Nettie will be good company for you when I’m at work,” Alice added, watching closely for her mother’s reaction.

“If you say so, dear,” Eleanor sniffed.

Alice, having told Nettie about the biting incident at the home, prayed she would fare better with her mother than poor Olga had.

“Don’t worry about that either,” Nettie had reassured. “I’ve dealt with more than my share of biters and bashers and flashers in my time. Can see it coming a mile off now.”

Alice supposed it was a small blessing that her mother hadn’t taken to flashing yet and wondered, but didn’t ask, how exactly Nettie dealt with them.

After dinner, Maddy dropped in for a quick visit on her way to a party. She was all dressed up in a vintage silver dress and high heels she’d glued with glitter. Eleanor made a fuss of her, declaring her grand daughter as beautiful as her own mother was when she dressed up to go to a concert and Maddy hugged her close, kissing her on the cheek.

“Better than that smelly old folks home, eh Gran?”

Alice couldn’t help herself and had to say she hoped they’d see a little more of Maddy now that Gran was here and Maddy gave her that look, the one that said “don’t start, Mum”. Alice backed off and offered Maddy food instead, hoping to keep her there a little longer, but Maddy’s friends were waiting for her in the car.

“I’ll come for dinner soon, Mum. Okay?”

Maddy’s party was fancy dress with a heaven or hell theme so she’d come to pick up a pair of angel wings Alice had made for a Christmas school concert years before. As Alice retrieved them from the shelf in Maddy’s old wardrobe, Maddy realised Eleanor was now installed in her room and frowned with annoyance.

“Why isn’t she in the spare room, Mum? That’s where she usually stays.”

Alice, suppressing her own annoyance, explained that it was closer to Alice’s room in case she fell or went wandering in the night.

“Besides,” Alice argued as she handed Maddy the wings, “What difference does it make? You don’t live here any more.”

“But what if I need to move home again – if we have to move out of the flat or something?”

Alice supposed they would cross that bridge if or when they came to it, then asked if Maddy was having problems at her flat.

Maddy denied this but, as had often been the case lately, Alice sensed Maddy wasn’t letting her into life in the way she used to, that it was a no-go zone she could only enter occasionally with a special clearance. Helping her clip on the wings, Alice, aware Maddy must have exams coming up, asked how her studies were going. When was her first exam?

Maddy shrugged that her first one was next week but she wasn’t too worried about it – “it was only stupid old sociology.” When Alice, worried by her vagueness, pressed for an actual day, Maddy got defensive and snapped at her not to worry about it – she had it all under control.

Then, after giving Eleanor a quick hug and promising to come and visit again soon, Maddy hurried out the door to her car, crammed with all her friends, an angel rushing off into the night with all her secrets.

Alice sighed as she joined her mother back on the couch, where she was watching that “nice man, John Campbell” on “*Campbell Live*” interview an elderly couple still waiting for an insurance payout on their home ruined in the Christchurch earthquakes.

“That’s right, John. Shocking business.”

Then, when the ads were on, Eleanor turned to Alice, watching her for a moment.

“She’s a dark horse these days, that Madeleine,” she pronounced suddenly. “I’d keep an eye on her if I was you.”

Alice was surprised by how astute her mother could still be and agreed that she was worried about her.

“She just doesn’t let me in any more, Mum, especially since Harry died. I just feel like she’s running away from everything and doesn’t want to stop.”

“It’ll all come out in the wash in the end, dear,” Eleanor said. “These things always do. And then you’ll be there for her when it does.”

Alice took some comfort from this and, perhaps for the first time since she’d come to stay, felt grateful – really grateful – that her mother was there with

her. But with that, came another wave of grief for the mother she used to have – this one she now only saw in brief flashes, like an image going in and out of focus, and then fading out altogether.

Later, after Eleanor had gone to bed with a hot water bottle, Alice sat at the kitchen table with her laptop and found herself on Facebook, scouring Maddy's messages and posts for any clues to what was really going on in her life. She didn't feel great doing this – Maddy had only allowed her to be "friends" on the grounds that she never commented on any of her posts or posted anything herself.

"It's not really for old people, Mum," she'd said at the time Alice had first started out on the social page herself, although since then Facebook had increasingly become very popular with "old people" while the younger ones moved on to other networking sites like Twitter and ones Alice had never heard of.

"And please don't stalk me on there," Maddy had warned, "or I will defriend you."

But that's what Alice was doing now, "stalking" her daughter in Cyberspace, and justifying it by telling herself that if Maddy hadn't become so secretive, she wouldn't have to resort to this.

Many of the posts on Maddy's page seemed cryptic, almost as if they were written in another language that Alice was too old to understand. But the photos told a clearer story, many of them taken at parties where Maddy had a beer or shot glass in her hand - or even what definitely looked like a joint in one or two. Alice knew Maddy had experimented with drugs – the red-eyed late night raids of the fridge when she was still living at home were testimony to that – and Maddy had admitted she had tried acid and ecstasy, enduring Alice and Harry's warnings about the dangers of taking drugs even though they, of course, had tried all kinds of chemicals when they were younger too and reassured themselves that this was normal teenage behaviour.

But now she wondered about the extent of her drug dependence and whether this explained how distant and avoidant she had become. Here she was in one photo, bleary eyed, her arm around her gay friend, Tom, blowing kisses at the camera. And there she was in another, giving one of those gangster-type hand signals Alice didn't really get, looking as high as a kite.

And now she flicked to one of Maddy lying in the sand in her bikini, making angel wings with Violet, laughing up into the lense – her girl, her beautiful baby girl, now all grown up and gone away. But where had she gone?

Alice found herself getting teary then. She could see so much of Harry in her daughter – her eyes, the shape of her nose, even the expression around her mouth was his. And she could also see a little of herself in her sharp cheekbones, the shape of her brow. But she also saw a stranger, a girl who now inhabited an alien world that was a mystery to her. And in all this partying, Alice wondered, where did Maddy ever find time to study?

It was normal, she supposed, at her age, and of course there weren't going to be any pictures of her studying on there, or doing anything that didn't involve having a good time – that was what Facebook was all about it, wasn't it? Social networking. But still Alice was left with a nagging sense that Maddy, once so studious and driven, was losing herself in an endless round of drinking and drug taking to avoid the pain of losing her father. Deciding none of this was helping, Alice closed down the page, trying to reassure herself that her mother was right – the truth would come out in the end and she would be there for Maddy when it did. In the mean time, she just had to hope that she'd be okay. What else could she do?

Alice was about to shut down the laptop, Harry's old computer, when she decided to look for some photographs she'd promised to show her mother that Harry had taken during the last Christmas they'd all spent at the farm together.

Hunting through all the files he had meticulously categorised before he became really ill, Alice clicked on one that was labelled "Xmas 2011" only to find it didn't contain photographs at all but a letter from Harry's oncologist, Lloyd Richards, outlining the nature of his colon cancer in the grim medical language that Alice had come to know only too well in the months before he died.

But it was the date of the letter that caught her eye – December 6, 2011 – nearly a year before the dreadful day she and Harry had sat in Lloyd's office receiving the awful news that her husband was basically looking at a death sentence. This hit her like a sharp rock in the chest as she re-read every detail of the letter that ended with the words "Let's make a time to discuss your treatment options". Harry, and Lloyd obviously, had known just how bad things were long

before he let her into the picture. Why had he done this? Or, more importantly, why had he *not* done anything about it sooner?

Her mind reeling, Alice snapped the laptop shut as if she was trying to put the lid back on some vile thing she'd discovered when she opened a jar. Pandora's Box. But it was too late. It seemed Maddy wasn't the only secret keeper in the family. Harry's secret was out and she couldn't even confront him about it.

Damn you, Harry. Damn you for dying. Damn you for *choosing* to die. Is that, Alice wondered in amazement, what he had done?

*

The next morning, as Alice prepared for her first day at work, forcing down her toast and tea in stony silence, Eleanor looked up from the newspaper and asked if she had slept well.

Alice claimed she had, although in fact she'd spent most of the night tossing and turning, going over and over the events of the past year or more, and cursing Harry for what she basically felt was a betrayal of her trust. A lie of omission. A fatal lie? It would have been easier to accept the discovery he'd cheated on her, she felt, than this.

"I didn't sleep well at all," Eleanor said then. "But I had a nice, long chat to Harry in the middle of the night. He's such a dear man."

Alice stared at her then, fighting the urge to snap at her that he was dead. When was she going to get that into her head?

"Really," was all she said, in no mood to discuss Harry at all.

"Yes, he sat there on the end of my bed and kept me company until I drifted off to sleep again. So sweet."

Now, a slight shiver went down Alice's spine, and she opened her mouth to say something but thought better of it.

"Are you alright, dear? You look terribly pale," Eleanor said, as Alice, unable to absorb the possibility that Eleanor might have had a "visit" from Harry, suddenly leapt up from the table, glancing at the kitchen clock.

"Where is Nettie? I have to go in five minutes."

"Who's Nettie? And where are you going again?"

"Work, Mum! I told you!" Alice snapped, as she heard a quick knock on the door and Nettie's voice down the hallway as she let herself in.

"Hello. It's just me!"

Looking slightly wounded, Eleanor buried her face behind the newspaper again as Nettie bustled in, apologising.

“I’m so sorry. I always like to come early, especially on my first day, but there was a shocking accident on the motorway and it took forever.”

“It’s alright, Nettie,” Alice said, stuffing the breakfast dishes in the dishwasher, suddenly very keen to escape.

“My numbers are all there on the bench if there are any problems.”

“We’ll be just fine, won’t we Eleanor?” Nettie smiled at the head behind the newspaper. “Since it’s a nice morning, I thought we might go and have coffee at that garden centre up the road. I see they’ve got a sale on if there’s anything you’d like to get.”

This got Eleanor’s attention and Alice, after promising to call at lunchtime, left them discussing plants for the front garden which, Eleanor declared, could do with some “brightening up.”

By the time Alice made it to the car, after a brief, frantic search for her keys, she was running late for work herself but tried to take a moment to calm herself before driving off into the busy morning traffic. The spectre of Harry was looming large on many fronts and Alice still felt shaken by her discovery on his laptop. And now her mother claimed to be talking to him during the night. Alice would certainly like to have words with him and, since that obviously wasn’t possible, would definitely be following up on that letter. When she got a moment at work today, she would phone and make a time to see Lloyd Richards. A phone conversation wasn’t enough. She wanted to look him in the eye and ask why he colluded with Harry to keep this terrible knowledge from his own wife.

Apart from her anxiety about leaving her mother - allayed mostly now she had hired Nettie - Alice had been looking forward to going back to work, especially since she had left home recently only for brief shopping trips or outings and worried when she did leave on her own that Eleanor would wander off or burn the house down.

But as the morning wore on, Alice struggled with even simple procedures that were once second nature and had to be prompted on several occasions by the doctors, or reminded where to find instruments and contraceptive supplies she could usually put her finger on in a second. And her mind kept going back to that letter until she was sick of thinking about it. *Let’s make a time to meet and discuss your options . . .*

What option did they agree on? Option A: Do nothing until it was too late?

When Suzy caught up with her in the clinic supply room, where Alice was hunting for a contraceptive pill that was right in front of her, she admitted she wasn't coping that well.

"I feel like I did on my first day here, Suze. It's ridiculous!"

"Don't be so hard on yourself," Suzy reassured. "It'll all come back to you soon enough. Just take it easy – and ask for help when you need it."

But Alice, always a perfectionist, *was* hard on herself and when Judith, a new doctor at the clinic, barked at Alice to hurry during one examination, she almost burst into tears and had to spend a few minutes in the staff bathroom afterwards pulling herself together.

"You right there, love?" eagle-eyed Brenda asked as she passed back through reception.

"Fine," Alice claimed, as she collected another patient, a teenage girl who looked like she was about to burst into tears herself, and reminded Alice a little of Maddy.

"Take a lunch break soon, eh," Brenda called after her, clearly sensing she wasn't fine at all. "You're still as thin as a pin."

"I think I might be pregnant," the girl, Emma, said as Alice showed her into the surgery. "But I don't want to have it."

And then she did burst into tears and Alice did her best to console her as she called through for the doctor and got things organised for a pregnancy test.

"It's okay, hon. We can discuss your options once we know for sure," Alice said. Discuss your options. There it was again. The choices we have to make in life. To have a baby or not. To live. Or to die.

On her lunch break, Alice phoned Lloyd's office at the hospital and asked his receptionist if she could make an appointment to see him. When asked if she had a referral from a doctor, Alice explained her late husband, Harry Duncan, had been a patient but she needed to discuss some "issues" with him.

His receptionist tried to fob her off then, or so Alice felt, insisting he was booked up with patients for the next two weeks.

"It's quite urgent," Alice insisted back. "I really need to speak to him soon if I can."

“I’ll have to ask him when he’s free, Mrs Duncan, but that won’t be until after four at least.”

Alice had to accept this and left her contact numbers, deciding that if he didn’t call her back she would just go up to the hospital and wait until he would see her.

Then she phoned home and, after a long wait, Nettie finally answered, sounding breathless.

“Is everything okay there, Nettie?” Alice asked, already fretting that something had gone wrong.

“Fine and dandy,” Nettie reassured. “She’s ordering me about out there in the garden like I’m the hired help which is fine by me. She knows what she wants, your mother.”

Alice agreed and had to laugh – at least things on the home front seemed to be going smoothly.

“Something’s come up and I might be a little late home tonight, Nettie, if that’s okay? I’ll pay you for the extra time, of course.”

Nettie assured it would be and that they were planning to watch Helen Mirren in *The Queen* that afternoon as it was one of her favourite films and Eleanor said she had never seen it.

“She has, actually,” Alice said. “We watched it last weekend but go right ahead.”

Alice could hear Eleanor in the background then, calling out to Nettie to bring her a bucket and Nettie said she better go – “her Majesty was calling” – and Alice chuckled and left them to it, resolving to stop worrying about her mother so much. Nettie clearly had things under control.

Now she just had to get through the rest of the day at work and talk to Lloyd. She wanted answers. And she wasn’t going to rest until she got them.

12. Falling . . .

The day after the Heaven and Hell party, Maddy had such a bad hangover she couldn't get out of bed all day, except to rush to the toilet to throw up again. By the end of the day, even though there was nothing left in her stomach, she was still dry retching into a bowl Jed had kindly brought her, along with a cold flannel he tenderly placed on her forehead – *oh Jed, I wish you were my boyfriend* - feeling very sorry for herself.

Her angel wings lay crumpled and muddy on the floor, the result of falling down a bank at some stage during the party and lying at the bottom, spinning out, until Tom and Violet had found her and hauled the drunken angel up into a waiting taxi. Then she had promptly thrown up all over the back seat and the taxi driver stopped and ordered them all out.

They'd walked all the way home from Waterview to Kingsland and somewhere along the way she and Violet had an argument about Jake, the contents of which Maddy couldn't really remember, except she could recall Violet screaming at her that she had a major problem before storming off ahead of them into the night.

Now it was late on Monday morning and Maddy was sitting at her desk, her sociology notes and text books in front of her, attempting to study. But her brain felt leaden and empty and she couldn't concentrate, even for a second. Plus, she'd missed so many lectures in the last semester that it would take ages online just catching up on the notes. And she didn't even want to think about how she was going to face studying for English and History. Her head was full of totally negative self-talk she just couldn't shut up.

You've really fucked up this time . . . You may as well just give up now.

Maddy reached for her phone to see if there were any messages from Violet. Nothing. There was one from Tom, sent late last night when Maddy had finally fallen into a restless sleep. *R u ok?* No, she was not okay. She was losing it. Violet was right. She did have a problem. A big problem. She didn't want to face anything any more. She just wanted to . . . what? Not die, but be anywhere than where she was, inside her own skin, her prickly, uncomfortable, restless skin.

Maddy thought about texting Violet then, saying sorry. She'd been best friends with her since intermediate school and it wasn't cool to fight with her, especially over a boy, even if that boy was Jed who she'd watched Violet flirt with all night at the party while she downed shots and smoked more weed and danced until the whole party was spinning like a Baz Lurhman film on fast forward. Out of control.

She started to text . . . *R u still mad at me?* And then decided that just sounded lame and deleted it. Of course she was mad at her. Maddy needed to say sorry, for whatever she'd said out of stupid, drunken jealousy. But it would be better to say it in person, when she saw her, and she couldn't quite face that yet so she tossed her phone aside again and went back to staring at her notes.

The words might as well be in Chinese for all the sense they made to her. And now they were swimming in front of her. Oh Jesus. She wasn't going to cry. No way. Maddy hated crying. She'd only cried once since her dad died, when she saw him lying on her parents' bed in the early hours of the morning just after he'd gone.

Her mother was curled up beside him, stroking his face, which already looked oddly wooden, while the doctor sat in the chair beside him, writing the death certificate or whatever he was doing, and Maddy had stood there, looking down at this man who had slowly faded away before her eyes – she had hated that – until there was nothing left of him but this . . . this skeleton covered in pale, cold skin. She had touched him briefly on the hand, which already felt like wax, and then pulled back and rushed from the room sobbing, her mother coming after her, but she didn't want her there and dived under the duvet in her old room, telling her to leave her alone. She wanted to be alone, crying until she almost made herself sick and her heart ached so much she thought she would die too. *Daddy, my daddy.*

And then all the people had come, so many people, friends and relatives she knew or hadn't seen in years, bringing food, so much food, and cleaning and cooking and planning the funeral while Maddy holed up in her room with Violet and Tom and her other friends, wishing they would all go away. And they did – after the funeral, which Maddy could barely remember, as she sat there, frozen, next to her mother and grandmother, who leaned over to her at one stage and whispered loudly, "*Who's died again, dear?*"

They all went away, along with all the food, and it was just her and her mother moving around each other in that big, empty house, until Maddy couldn't stand it any more and went back to her flat where she could pretend everything was normal and refused to talk any more about the *worst thing that had ever happened to her in her life*.

No, she wasn't going to start crying now like some poor, tragic victim, so she sucked it all up again and then Jed popped his head around the door, just back from the dairy with supplies, and asked her if she was up for bacon and eggs and Maddy smiled at him and said yes, she was starving. And she was, she was so hungry she could just eat and eat until she was stuffed full, with no room left for any feelings, not even boredom.

She gladly left her room and her text books behind, telling herself she would study after she'd eaten, after she'd hung out with Jed who she wished was her boyfriend.

She didn't do any study that day, or that night, or the next morning before her exam. And she told herself she didn't care. It didn't matter. Nothing did.

13. *In the Lap of the Gods*

It was strange getting into the hospital lift and pressing the button for the oncology ward after all these months, strange because it was so oddly familiar. How many times had she been up and down in this lift after Harry's diagnosis? (or, rather, when she *knew* about his diagnosis.)

He'd been in and out of the ward so often that Alice had lost count – she just always seemed to be packing and unpacking bags for him, or bringing his laptop and a pile of DVD's to pass the time, or Maddy when she could be persuaded to visit him there. (Maddy hated the hospital, hated the fact that her father was sick at all.)

Harry's cancer was found in his colon, a tumour so large and inaccessible that surgery had been ruled out almost immediately while radiation treatment failed to make any real difference to its size. Then it was found to have spread – metastasised (such an ugly word) – to his stomach and then came the nephrostomy bags to expel the urine and the colostomy bag for his faeces.

"I don't need a doctor, I need a good plumber," Harry had said stoically as he headed off once again to surgery.

And Alice, who hadn't practiced as a hospital nurse for years, re-learnt how to empty and replace the bags when they were full although Harry, until he was really ill, always insisted on changing his own colostomy bag.

"There's a reason God put our rectums at the back," he'd joked one particularly messy night at home towards the end when the bag had burst and gone all over him and the sheets. "No one wants to see their own shit, Alice."

And they'd laughed together then, actually laughed, as she changed the sheets after they'd cleaned him up, and she loved him for still keeping his sense of humour even through the worst of it. She loved him, but right now she was also angry with him.

The lift bell dinged and Alice stepped out purposefully into the nearly empty waiting area. When Lloyd's receptionist had finally called her back near the end of the day, she'd said he could only see Alice briefly and she had to be there before five or she'd miss him. Probably going off for a game of golf, Alice had thought unkindly, as she'd sped through the commuter traffic, almost

clipping a cyclist who'd shaken his fist at her and called her a "fucking cunt". (They really were full of rage, those cyclists.)

Alice spotted Lloyd's short, stocky frame ahead, seeing out a patient, a woman in her forties who, judging by the scarf on her head, was undergoing chemotherapy. Alice wondered what her chances were and couldn't help giving her what she hoped was an encouraging smile as she passed. The woman just stared back at her. She had no energy left for social niceties.

Lloyd was disappearing back into his office as Alice, bypassing his guard dog receptionist, called after him.

"Lloyd, do you have a minute now to see me?"

Lloyd stopped and Alice wasn't sure he recognised her as his receptionist tried to intercept.

"Excuse me, do you have an appointment?"

"It's alright, Robyn. It's Mrs Duncan. Come in . . . Alice, isn't it?"

Alice nodded, her mouth dry as chalk. While he must have been wondering why she'd needed to see him so urgently, Lloyd showed no perceptible signs of being bothered by her visit as he showed her into his cramped, grey office, brightened only with some children's paintings above his desk.

"I didn't recognise you there for a second, Alice," he said, as she took a seat. "You've lost weight."

"Yes," Alice agreed. "So people keep telling me."

"How have you been coping?" he asked then.

Alice noticed people also asked her this often since Harry died - not how she was, or what she'd been up to, but how she was "coping". As if that was the best that could be hoped for in the aftermath of a death - which, she supposed, it was. Not living. Coping.

Alice took a deep breath, hoping she could stay calm and rational and get the answers she wanted.

"Well, I was *coping* quite well, I suppose - until I found this letter from you on Harry's computer."

Alice paused then, gauging his reaction, but Lloyd just leaned back in his swivel chair, hands clasped together, waiting for her to go on.

"About all his test results. How it had metastasised. Meeting with you to discuss his options . . ."

Lloyd nodded now and Alice detected a slight shift in his demeanour, a wall slowly going up.

“Yes, I recall the letter – and our subsequent appointment.”

“But the thing is, Lloyd – Dr Richards – it’s dated a good year before Harry told me that he had cancer and that it was largely untreatable. Before we both met you that day . . .”

Alice felt a hot flush surge through her then, breaking into a sweat that made her want to pull her jacket off. God, was this some menopausal thing now? That’s all she needed. She wiped her forehead with her hand, hoping he didn’t notice the beads of sweat breaking out everywhere.

“Yes, I’m aware of that,” was all he said.

“But why?” she asked, her tone no longer calm. “Why didn’t he tell me then? Surely, I should have known. All that time . . .”

Lloyd pressed his fingers together, rubbed them back and forth across the grey stubble on his upper lip, and watched her for a moment.

The sweat was dripping down the back of her shirt now, under her arms, rivers of it, running everywhere. The room felt airless, claustrophobic and she was desperate for a glass of water.

“I can’t speak for Harry and, as you’re probably well aware, any discussions between myself and my patients are entirely confidential - ”

“But I need to know why he didn’t tell me, why he didn’t do anything about it sooner, for God’s sake!”

Lloyd held up his hand then, like he was calming an angry child.

“Let me finish, Mrs Duncan. Our discussions were confidential and I cannot – will not – disclose the nature of them. But I will say this - ”

He regarded her now with what looked like pity as Alice, having found a tissue in her bag, frantically wiped her forehead and the back of her neck.

“As a doctor, Harry was well aware that any form of treatment having any success with the kind of cancer he had - and where it was positioned – were not . . . good.”

“But the radiation . . . surely, if he’d started all this sooner . . .”

Alice shook her head. She just couldn’t make sense of this.

“I’ll only speak generally now because I’ve already said more than enough.”

No you haven’t, you arrogant bastard. Tell me. Tell me everything.

“Sometimes my patients feel a lot of pressure from their families to undergo treatment they don’t really want to have when all they really want to do is make the most of the time they have left while they’re still well and enjoying life.”

Alice thought then of all the things they’d done that year – walking the Milford Track at Christmas, swimming and bush walking nearly every weekend at Piha, taking Maddy to Thailand and visiting all the places they’d been when they were young. Swimming in the moonlight on Kho Phangan in the phosphorescent water. Harry’s joy as Maddy squealed with delight as they swam together. Making quiet, tender love later in their little bungalow on the beach when Maddy had finally fallen asleep . . .

And she wondered then. Would she have wanted to do all that if she knew how ill he was?

“But still,” she murmured, her eyes swimming with tears. “If he’d just told me, we could have talked about it . . .”

“He told you when he wanted you to know, Alice - that’s all I can say about that,” Lloyd said then, and glanced at his watch. Clearly, her time was up.

“When it was too late,” she said, as she stood, now desperate for cool air.

Lloyd didn’t comment on this as he saw her to the door but his face said it all. It was always too late. His brow was furrowed, wrestling with something, as he looked out over the waiting area, now empty for the day apart from a cleaner, where so many people came to hear good news or bad.

“You know, Alice, it’s humbling to think, as an oncologist, that one day they’ll look back on the way we treated cancer and think it was largely pointless and archaic, like bleeding people or putting leeches on them to release a fever.”

Alice was surprised by this humble admission.

“But sometimes treatment works, people do go into remission.”

“Yes,” Lloyd agreed. “If we get to it soon enough.”

Obviously, he didn’t think that was the case with Harry.

“Otherwise, apart from a stroke of luck here and there, it’s in the lap of the Gods, I’m afraid.”

Alice, suddenly feeling very drained, thanked him for making the time to see her and walked back into the lift, crowded with hospital staff finishing their shift. The doctor next to her looked grey with exhaustion, dead on his feet. Their

eyes met briefly, the way they do in lifts, a sideways glance before looking back at the doors again, too close for comfort.

As they neared the ground floor, Alice felt that prickly, baby's breath sensation again on the back of her damp neck, spreading slowly down her spine. It enveloped her this time, making her feel like she was being wrapped in a soft blanket. She closed her eyes for a moment, relishing the sensation.

Yes, Harry. I know you're there. I'm trying to understand.

14. Old Wounds and New Ones . . .

All was quiet when Alice finally arrived home, eerily quiet in fact, which worried her as she moved down the hallway, peering into the lounge where she expected her mother and Nettie might be, and on to the kitchen, calling as she went.

“Mum! Nettie! I’m home!”

They weren’t in the kitchen either but there were signs of recent activity there – a tray of freshly baked shortbread, one of her mother’s specialties, was cooling on the bench, the smell making her mouth water. She couldn’t resist taking one, the warm, buttery crumbs melting in her mouth as she called out again and then spotted them outside, sitting in the garden seat up the back in the last of the winter’s evening light, chatting away over tea and biscuits like old friends.

“There you are,” Alice said as she stepped through the French doors to join them, noting that Nettie had tucked a rug around Eleanor’s legs to ward off the evening chill.

“What are you doing out here?”

“Planning, dear,” said Eleanor airily, nibbling on her shortbread.

“Your mother has big plans for this garden, Alice. Watch out!” Nettie chuckled.

“I just think it needs more colour. All this green, tropical planting is all very well but it’s looking a little tired. And we need to do something about that,” Eleanor pointed at the fallen branch on the garden shed, “before the whole shed falls down.”

Alice noted the use of the word “we” – her mother was clearly taking ownership of the place with her – and thought this was actually a good sign. She wanted Eleanor to feel settled here, that this was her home too, and while she knew living with a parent, let alone one with dementia, presented many challenges, was beginning to feel hopeful that this would work out after all.

“Righto, Your Majesty,” she said, winking at Nettie. “I’ll give our tree man a call tomorrow.”

Then she smiled at Nettie, thanking her for staying late at such short notice.

“That’s alright,” said Nettie. “We’ve had a great afternoon. How was your first day back?”

“It was . . . challenging but I’ll get used to it all again. Had a few things on my mind which didn’t help.”

Nettie, who knew about Harry’s death and had lost her husband a few years back too, nodded sympathetically.

“It takes a good year or two before you really start feeling like yourself again. Don’t be too hard on yourself.”

Alice gave a wry smile.

“That’s exactly what my friend at work said. So I’ll try and take that on board.”

Nettie stood then and smiled down at Eleanor.

“Okay, my dear, let’s get you inside. It’s getting a little chilly out here.”

Nettie took the rug and offered Eleanor her arm and Alice saw that her mother took it willingly, chatting away happily as they headed back inside.

Alice stood in the garden for a few moments, allowing the night air to cool away the last of the hot flush, if that is what it was. Menopause. Widowhood. An ailing parent. A teenager she was worried about. No wonder everyone dreaded getting older.

As she left, Nettie stopped on the verandah, putting her hand to her forehead.

“That’s right. I forgot. A doctor from the home dropped by to see how you and Eleanor were doing. Doctor Harrison, that was his name.”

Alice was pleasantly surprised to hear this.

“Oh, that was nice of him. I didn’t expect a visit.”

“No, he said he was just in the neighbourhood and thought he’d pop in to check on Eleanor’s leg and see if you were managing okay. He left his card. It’s on the bench. Said you were welcome to call any time, even if it was just to talk.”

Alice took this in, not sure what to make of it.

“A very nice man, I thought,” said Nettie, smiling. “I got the feeling he was very keen to offer you his support.”

“Well,” said Alice, actually blushing slightly, even though she told herself there was no reason to. “That is . . . very kind of him. And thank you, Nettie. I can see you and Mum are going to be just fine together.”

Nettie agreed, assuring Alice she'd looked after far more difficult patients, and headed off into the night in her little yellow Mini Cooper, tooting cheerily as she went.

Later, after Eleanor was settled in front of the news with a stiff gin and tonic, Alice ran herself a bath, pouring in half a bottle of lavender gel (calming, soothing, the bottle's label promised) and lay there, mulling over her roller coaster of a day.

Her first day back at work had not been the best but it would get easier, she felt, once she got used to all the routines again and relaxed back into it. Her mind had been pre-occupied with worrying about how Nettie would cope with Eleanor and, clearly, that was not going to be a problem – in fact, from what she had seen so far, Nettie coped with her mother's demands and forgetfulness far better than she did.

And then there was the even more distracting issue of Harry's deception, for that is what she still felt it was - even though her meeting with Lloyd had gone some way to helping her understand why he had kept his diagnosis from her, she still felt angry that he hadn't trusted her enough to tell her at the time and "discuss his options" with her.

Did he really think she would have forced him to undergo treatments he didn't want to have? It wasn't as if she'd even been a dominating, control freak in their marriage. They had by and large always listened to each other and made compromises when necessary, apart from the occasional stalemate or disagreement that had eventually been worked out when one of them gave in and let the other have their way. That is what you did when you were married, wasn't it? That is how they had stayed married so long and, generally, so happily because, Lord knows, it wasn't always easy.

They'd seen many of their friends go through the pain and disruption of separation and divorce, their kids' lives uprooted as they were forced to move from one parent's home to the other, watching their parents fight bitterly over property, money, new partners. Even if the splits were "amicable, for the kids' sakes," it still came at a cost and she and Harry had done everything they could to ensure that never happened to them, or Maddy. They had worked at their marriage, even gone to counselling at one stage several years ago when Harry had admitted he had "feelings" for a new doctor he was working with from the UK – Genevieve, her name was – who he'd had lunch with a few times before

confessing she'd invited him away for the weekend and that he had been tempted to take her up on this.

Harry had sworn then, and throughout the counselling sessions, that their relationship had never become physical, that he had never exchanged more than a brief hug and farewell kiss on the cheek with her, and Alice had believed him, even though she had been hurt by this betrayal of his heart, and they had focussed on repairing the cracks in their relationship so that he – or she, for that matter – wasn't tempted again.

But now she wondered whether he had really been telling the truth about this – had been other lies of omission? Because if he could not tell her he had cancer, terminal cancer as it turned out, for a whole year to protect himself from her anguish, what else was he capable of leaving out of the picture?

So many questions. So many bloody questions. Round and round, she went, back and forth and over and over, until she felt the heat rising in her again, and reached down with her toes to turn on the cold tap to cool herself off. She had to let it be somehow, find a way to accept that he had his reasons for doing things the way he did, whether she liked it or not – and, really, if he had told her way back then, would she have let him carry on the way he did without medical intervention sooner? Perhaps not. Still, she had the right to know, didn't she?

As Alice turned the cold tap off again, she heard the sound of breaking glass and a cry from her mother – “oh dear!” – and stood up, almost slipping over as she stepped out of the bath, feeling slightly woozy from the heat as she wrapped a towel around herself.

“Alice? Are you there?” her mother called to her.

“Coming, Mum!”

Alice rushed into the lounge, and almost instantly felt a sharp pain tear through her foot that made her cry out in agony. Eleanor had knocked her gin glass off the table and was trying to pick up the shards of glass.

“I'm so sorry, dear. I don't know how that happened - ”

“Leave it, Mum! Just leave it!”

Alice's tone was sharpened by the pain as she pushed her mother back down on to the couch and dropped down beside her to examine her foot. Blood was now pouring everywhere as she pulled the large shard out of the tender part of her foot, pressing her thumb on the cut to try and stem the flow.

Eleanor's face was as pale as hers as she stared at all the blood, now forming a small pool on the floor, and then she sprung into action.

"I'll get a tea towel or something, dear. Hang on."

And she scurried out, carefully going around all the shattered glass, and returned moments later with a hand towel from the bathroom.

"Thanks, Mum," said Alice, wrapping her foot tightly with the towel. "Sorry for snapping at you."

"That's alright," conceded Eleanor. "You must be in a lot of pain. And I am sorry for being so clumsy. I get so confused about things some times, don't I?"

Alice felt a rush of compassion for her mother then, looking so vulnerable and fragile, while her foot throbbed and ached, the blood seeping through and spreading into a large dark stain on the white bath towel.

"Is there something wrong with my mind, Alice?" she asked then, the first time she had ever actually asked this question.

Yes, Mum, you have Alzheimer's and it will progress until one day you won't even know who I am or even who you are.

Alice just couldn't bring herself to say it, not now. She had tried once, with Harry, to explain but Eleanor had refused to accept it, insisting it was just the stress of losing Len, of getting old. They'd forget things too when they were her age, she'd said. You just wait and see.

"You're just tired, Mum. You've had a busy day. I get clumsy when I'm tired too."

There it was. A lie, as simple and easy as that. Some times we choose not to tell people the truth to protect them. And she thought of Harry again, and she knew why he'd done it – to protect her, to protect Maddy – to live a normal life for as long as he could without anyone treating him like a sick, dying person.

She remembered a day when an old friend of his from medical school days, Peter Evans, had come to visit just a few days before he died.

After he'd gone, with Harry insisting on seeing him to the door even though he was in a lot of pain, he'd leaned on Alice as they returned to the bedroom and sighed with exhaustion.

"Sometimes I think people expect me to say something profound to them because I'm dying," he'd said. "But the truth is, I really have no idea what to say about it all. And I feel like they leave disappointed."

By keeping his illness to himself, he had spared himself months of that. He had carried on as normal, not as one of the dying, for as long as he could.

“How is your foot now, dear?” Eleanor asked, peering at the growing stain with concern.

Alice peeled the towel off, wiping away the congealing blood as carefully as she could, and saw that the cut ran deep and probably needed stitches.

“We might have to drive to A and E, Mum. It’s pretty deep.”

“But you can’t drive like that, can you? Why don’t we call a doctor?”

“Doctors don’t really make house calls in the city. I’ll just get my keys.”

Alice got to her feet, grimacing as she hobbled towards the door.

“Nonsense,” Eleanor said, suddenly looking as sharp as a tack again. “What about that nice doctor who called in today? He obviously makes house calls.”

Her mother’s ability to recall certain details, while forgetting others – like Harry’s death - still amazed her.

“No, Mum, I can’t bother Dr Harrison with this. I can drive.”

Eleanor gave her that imperious ‘I am still your mother’ look.

“Call him, Alice. He won’t mind.”

*

And sure enough, Dr Harrison – “Please, call me Kevin” – seemed more than happy to drop in after dinner with his surgical bag and, as he inspected the crescent-shaped cut, agree that Alice did indeed need stitches and did the job then and there, with Alice resting her foot up on a kitchen chair while Eleanor fussed around in the background making tea and serving him up several pieces of her shortbread with a big smile.

“That’s the way we do it in the country, Kevin,” she said, actually flirting with him a little, Alice noted. Her voice had gone all light and girly all of a sudden.

“You see, Alice, I told you he would come.”

Alice smiled shyly at Dr Harrison as he bandaged her foot and thanked him again for coming.

“It really was kind of you to make a house call over a silly cut foot.”

“Not at all,” he smiled as he wrote her a prescription for antibiotic cream.

“It’s really quite a nasty cut and I did say to call if you needed anything.”

Alice couldn't help wondering what his motives were – it wasn't usual for doctors to offer their services after hours, even ones as nice as he obviously was. But then she chided herself for questioning him at all. Some people really did just want to help others.

“Now if you'd point me to the bathroom – don't get up – I'll wash my hands so I can try a piece of that shortbread, Eleanor. It looks delicious.”

“My secret recipe,” Eleanor giggled. She actually giggled - like a schoolgirl. Maybe it was the stiff gin Alice had made her.

Alice directed him to the bathroom while Eleanor poured the tea, looking very pleased with herself.

“What, Mum?”

“He's just so nice, isn't he?”

Then she leaned in, talking in a loud stage whisper.

“Although he does remind me a little of Adrian – you know, the doctor who broke my heart before I met your father.”

“Shh, Mum.”

Alice had decided Eleanor really was quite tiddly and resolved to make her next pre-dinner drink more tonic and less gin. It probably wasn't wise with all the meds she was on.

After helping himself to a second piece of shortbread, Kevin declared it the best he'd ever tasted – even better than his wife's, and she had been a great cook.

Alice noted the use of past tense but before she could find a tactful way to ask about her, Kevin revealed that she'd passed away about three years ago.

“Breast cancer. Very fast. It's a shock, isn't it?”

He looked to Alice, knowing she would commiserate.

She nodded and said she was sorry to hear it.

“Alice's husband died of cancer too,” Eleanor offered. (Now she remembered!) “Lovely man, my son-in-law. A doctor, like you.”

“He knows that, Mum. I told him – when you were at the home.”

Eleanor pulled a face – now that was something she didn't want to be reminded of.

“I didn't know it was cancer though. It's an awful, bloody thing, isn't it?”

Alice could see the pain written deep in his face, and while she did very much commiserate, it wasn't a topic she really wanted to dive into now, especially after she'd been thinking about practically nothing else all day.

"It is – but you have to find a way to move on, don't you? I mean, we all have to die of something!"

She couldn't believe she'd just said that – it sounded so glib and dismissive – but she wanted to shut the conversation down before she and Kevin ended up exchanging all the morbid details of their respective spouses' illnesses.

Kevin looked slightly taken aback.

"It was quite recent, wasn't it? Your husband's death?"

"Just over three months ago, yes. I just meant . . . I'm trying to get on with things, that's all."

"Yes, yes, of course," Kevin said quickly, then stood, shaking the crumbs from his jacket and picking up his surgical bag.

"I should get going, early start tomorrow."

Alice felt mean then, as if she'd pushed him away somehow, as he turned to Eleanor.

"Thank you very much the supper, Mrs Anderson. Good to see you're doing so well."

"Thank you."

Her eyes had that blank, confused look suddenly.

"Sorry. Who are you again?"

"It's Doctor Harrison, Mum."

"Harry? It's not Harry, dear."

"Harrison," Kevin explained. "I've just put stitches in Alice's foot."

Eleanor stared at Alice's foot, puzzled. The memory tape had clearly been wiped again. It was probably time Alice got her off to bed, and she had work again in the morning herself.

"I won't be a second, Mum."

Alice insisted on seeing Kevin to the door, in spite of his protests, and thanked him once again for coming. She really did appreciate it.

He looked down at her then and, again, she saw the anguish in his eyes, the desperate loneliness lurking behind his cheerful facade. Was that how she looked, she wondered.

“What you’re doing for your mother, I think it’s very admirable, Alice, especially given what you must be going through yourself.”

Alice tried to shrug this off but the good Doctor Harrison persisted.

“So if you ever need a break – coffee, or maybe even dinner . . .”

There it was then. Was he asking her out?

“Don’t hesitate to call me, you know, when the time is right.”

Alice really didn’t know what to say to this other than to thank him and wish him good night.

When the time was right. When, she wondered, would that ever be?

*

Before taking herself off to bed, Eleanor made it clear that Alice should foster the friendship with Dr Harrison.

“Such a nice man - even looks a bit like Harry, don’t you think?”

Alice made no comment, other than wishing her mother a good night’s sleep before limping off to bed herself. As she undressed, Alice caught sight of herself in the bedroom mirror, almost naked, her skin hanging loosely in places on her thinner frame in a way she’d never seen before. When had this happened?

Somehow, almost overnight, she looked like she had reached middle age and the thought of anyone else ever seeing her naked flesh again was faintly ridiculous. As Alice hurriedly pulled on an old t-shirt, one of Harry’s that still smelt vaguely like him, she saw something behind her in the mirror - a flash of something that made her freeze for a moment. Alice spun round, scanning the darkened room, as Alfie sprung up on to the bed, making her jump.

It took her a moment to calm down, catch her breath.

(Sometimes she wondered if she was going mad.)

“Was that you, Alfie?”

It had to be. Still, she scanned the room, not entirely convinced it was the cat. Maybe she should go and see a psychic, like Suzy suggested once. Alice had laughed at the idea but Suzy argued, if nothing else, it might give her some comfort, make her feel like Harry was still there, somewhere. But what was the point if he wasn’t here now?

Alice shivered as she climbed into the cold sheets, curling up into a ball in a vain attempt to get warm. She lay there for a long time, unable to sleep even though she was exhausted, her foot throbbing under the tight bandage.

And she remembered something Harry had said one afternoon when they were driving back from a weekend at Piha – about a year ago it must have been, now that she thought about it.

“If I die before you, Alice, I would want you to find someone else.”

And she’d laughed at him then and said it was nonsense – they would grow old together and he’d probably outlive her.

“We’ll see,” he’d said.

But he knew then. He knew.

He wanted to write his own ending. Could she begrudge him that?

15. *Broken at Last*

Maddy stared at the clock, willing the time to pass. Every minute ached. She had been sitting in her Sociology exam now for the best part of ten minutes and she hadn't written a word, had barely even looked at the questions. None of it made any sense.

She looked around her, at all the students diligently bending over their desks, scribbling away. They didn't make any sense either. Then she looked at the clock again and saw the minute hand move to ten. Ten past two. In another twenty minutes, she could leave the exam room. Twenty whole minutes. She couldn't wait that long.

So she put up her hand and asked the elderly supervisor if she could go to the toilet. Another supervisor, a stern woman watching them all with a superstitious eye, followed Maddy out and waited outside the cubicle while she sat on the toilet, not even needing to go, but going through the motions of flushing and washing her hands afterwards before dragging herself back to the hot, airless exam room.

She spent the next fifteen minutes drawing fangs all over her paper, some of them dripping blood, then quietly put her pen down, handed in her paper and escaped out into the cool air, filling her lungs with great mouthfuls of it, as if she'd been holding her breath under water for too long. Drowning.

Something was very wrong with her, she thought. On the bus home, Maddy felt like everyone was staring at her and she started to panic, hitting the buzzer several stops before her street just to get away from them all. She ran all the way home, feeling like she was being followed, like something really bad was about to happen, and rushed into her flat, locking the door behind her.

She leaned up against the wall, trying to catch her breath, her heart thumping in her chest. Ka-boom, ka-boom, ka-boom.

Music was coming from Jed's room, and voices. A female voice murmuring softly. Violet's voice. Violet's laughter. So she was with Jed after all. Well, *fuck her. Fuck everyone.*

Maddy crept past his bedroom, into her own, pulling the duvet over her head, and eventually must have fallen asleep because when she finally emerged everything had gone dark and quiet. She was alone in the house, she was sure,

and the night closed in around her like a great, dark blanket and she lay there for a long time, numb to any sensation or feeling or thought.

Maddy couldn't stand it any longer, this nothing, this great chasm inside her that felt like it was getting wider and deeper, swallowing her up, making it so hard to breathe. And she thought of him then, her kind, loving father as he was when she was young, swooping her up into his arms and swinging her upside down when he came home from work, running behind her when she learnt to ride her bike as she yelled at him. *"Don't let go, Dad. Don't let go."* But he did let go and she rode that bike by herself while he raised his hands in the air in triumph. *"Go Maddy! Go!"*

He let go. Something broke inside her then and she started to cry like she'd never cried before until her pillowcase was soaked. She wanted her mother so badly and somehow managed to pull herself together enough to find her keys and drive through the dark, empty streets home. Home. She banged on the door and her mother opened it, and Maddy fell inside and cried until dawn in her mother's arms in the bed where her father used to be, cried until there was nothing left in her.

And Alice held her, murmuring comfort, stroking her hair, her face, her back, until she fell into a deep, dreamless sleep. Broken at last.

16. *Visits in the Night*

Eleanor had woken to the sounds of someone crying, a girl, in the night and thought it was Katie, who had always had bad dreams as a child and often woke and called out for her mother.

I'm here. It's alright. Mummy's here.

It was good to feel needed, wanted, loved . . . useful. Did she ever feel like that now? It was a strange business, getting old – becoming a faded, shadowy thing. Like a ghost, haunting her own life.

The crying went on and on and she thought of getting out of bed then to see what the matter was but the truth was, she felt afraid to get up in the night in case she couldn't find her way back to her room. It had happened before.

One night, recently it must have been, she got confused on her way back from the bathroom and found herself out in the back garden, in the middle of the night, until Alice – was it Alice? Or Katie? – found her and led her back to bed, like a child. A child. Was that what she was becoming?

The crying subsided to an occasional sob, and Eleanor could hear Alice's voice now, quiet, soothing. Who was she talking to? Was it Madeleine? Yes, Eleanor heard her grand daughter's voice now, sounding anguished. What was wrong with her? Something had happened, Eleanor knew. Something to break her in two. Her father dying, of course that's what it was. Poor child. But at least Harry had been there for her, always there, not like her own who walked out on them one day with his brown suitcase and never came back. To grieve for someone was to know that you loved them.

Like Eleanor had loved her little boy. And Len. Theirs had not always been an easy marriage but what marriage was in the end? They had grown into each other in the end, like vines on a tree, working alongside each other all those years to make a life that, while not remarkable in any way, had been a good life, turning with the seasons, one by one, until the day she had found Len face down in a paddock, the tractor still running, his face contracted in pain.

It was the second stroke in hospital that finished him off and Eleanor hadn't seen it coming, nor had the doctors, who said he'd pull through. And Eleanor had sat there beside his bed stroking his forehead, a large bruise forming from where he must have struck his head on the tractor before falling, until he

went cold. Her Len. Gone. And with it, in the end, that life they had built together, the farm, the fruit trees, the gardens, all of it, disappearing like a mirage even as she struggled to hold on to it.

Now here she was, in a strange room, in her daughter's house, having given up the fight. Because what was the point? No, she mustn't think like that. She would be grateful for small mercies, whatever they might be. She wasn't in that awful home any more, the home that smelt of dying flowers and roast meat. Or was that just a bad dream? Had she ever really been there?

Madeleine's sobbing had stopped now, finally. Or had she imagined that too?

"Hallo, Eleanor. Can't sleep?"

It was Harry, sitting on the end of the bed again, smiling at her.

"No," she said. "I didn't hear you come in."

Harry said nothing to this, said very little at all in fact, but Eleanor found it comforting just knowing he was there, keeping her company until she drifted back to sleep.

In the morning, when Alice asked her how she slept, Eleanor didn't mention Harry's visit. It seemed to make Alice angry if she did so she kept it to herself.

"Very well, dear. And you?"

Alice shook her head, weary and worried. Something must have happened, Eleanor thought. That's right. Madeleine, crying in the night. Or was it Katie? She couldn't remember. If only she could remember . . .

17. *After the Dawn*

Maddy didn't want to go back to her flat again after that night so Alice moved Eleanor into the spare room and let her have her old room back, and that weekend they went back to her flat to pick up her things.

Maddy was tetchy when they arrived and told her mother she'd text her when she was done, refusing to let Alice come in and help.

"Okay," Alice sighed, in that vaguely hurt tone she used when she felt left out or unwanted. Already edgy enough, Maddy walked off with gritted teeth, lugging boxes and big plastic bags for her clothes up the old concrete steps, hoping no one would be home and she could get out of there fast. But as she fumbled for the key in her bag, the back door swung open and there was Jed, munching on a piece of toast smeared in vegemite.

"Hey, Maddy." He seemed genuinely pleased to see her as he ushered her in and Maddy did her best to act like everything was cool between them.

"I've just come to get, you know, my stuff ." She gestured awkwardly towards her old room, half expecting Violet to appear.

As if he sensed this, Jed assured her he was the only one home and offered to give her a hand but Maddy insisted it wouldn't take long and, after an awkward moment when she tried to say something about her sudden departure but couldn't find any words, hurried off to her room, closing the door behind her and taking a deep breath.

The room smelt musty and slightly sour, like rotting fruit. Ants were crawling all over a half-eaten apple Maddy had left on her bedside table and a bottle of opened beer had spilled over a pile of her clothes in the corner. She must have knocked it over in her rush to escape that night.

A wave of regret washed over her. She had loved living here, her first taste of flatting life, of independence, and now she was going backwards again. Home to Mummy. *What a loser.*

Maddy packed in a frenzy, stuffing clothes into the bags and books and photos and shoes into the boxes until it was all done and the only thing left in the room was the bed, which belonged to Ellen's sister so would stay behind. Maddy plonked herself down on it, feeling the old springs creak beneath her, and texted Alice to collect her. She peered out the old sash window, cracked in one corner

and covered in cobwebs, and spotted a Polaroid photo of her and Violet stuck to the glass with blue tack. It was taken the night they went to that new club on K Rd, their shining, happy faces up close together. Best friends forever.

Fuelled by a sudden flash of anger, Maddy yanked the window up and tossed the photo out onto the narrow street, watching it blow down the road and under the wheel of an approaching car. Good, Maddy thought, knowing it was childish but determined to prove she could get by fine without Violet. And Jed. And all of her friends, except maybe Tom, who had actually been phoning and texting her heaps since she fled back home and was coming round that night to hang out.

It wasn't long before Maddy saw Alice pull up outside and hurried out, lugging as many bags as she could. Loading herself up with bags, Maddy hurried out, with Jed insisting he could help and following her out with the rest of the boxes.

Maddy said very little as he introduced himself to Alice and chatted away to her as they loaded it all into the boot and back seat. Once it was done, Maddy murmured a quick farewell and disappeared into the car, leaving a puzzled Alice to thank Jed for his help.

Alice gave Maddy a questioning look when she got into the car, prompting her to snap at her mother.

“What?”

“He seemed like a nice guy, that's all.”

Maddy stared straight ahead.

“He is. Let's go.”

Alice sighed – the sigh again - and started up the car as Jed came running back out with the stolen red jacket and handed it through the window to Maddy.

“Your magic jacket,” he smiled. Maddy tossed it over on the back seat, murmuring thanks, but unable to look him in the eye because she was afraid she was about to cry again.

Alice gave him a little wave, then, as they drove away, turned to Maddy as she hurriedly wiped away tears with the sleeve of her old denim shirt.

“Things will get better, love,” Alice said.

“Really?”

An edge of sarcasm in Maddy's tone. She wasn't in the mood for her mother's platitudes.

"The doctor's right," Alice pressed on. "It really would be good for you to see a counsellor."

Maddy had told Alice about flunking out at university and had withdrawn for the rest of the year on medical grounds. The family doctor had suggested antidepressants, which Maddy refused, and then given Alice the details of a counsellor who he insisted Maddy should see.

"I've told you a hundred times, Mum. I don't need to fucking talk to anyone!"

"No need to speak to me like that," Alice said crisply as they reached the top of Bond St, waiting for the lights to change. "I'm just trying to help."

"Well, stop fucking trying. Please!"

Alice clammed up with a wounded look and they drove the rest of the way home in tense silence. Maddy knew she should apologise but her mother tore off inside as soon as they arrived, pointedly leaving her to deal with all her gear.

Later, Maddy finally phoned and made an appointment with the counsellor, Angela, and reported this to her mother who she found sorting through the wardrobe where her father's shirts and suits still hung.

"Good," said Alice, taking out a favourite shirt of Harry's and sniffing the collar with relish. And Maddy softened then, feeling her mother's loss.

"I love you, Mum," said Maddy, giving her an unexpected but welcome hug.

"I love you too, Maddy," Alice murmured into her hair. And they stood there together in the fading evening light, the air perfumed with the musky, faded scent of Harry's after shave, a shadow dancing playfully on the floor behind them. The room turned golden, the colour of quinces.

With Eleanor and Maddy living in the house, Alice was no longer rattling around on her own and there certainly wasn't much time left for dwelling on her own sadness, even though it still caught up with her in unguarded moments – driving home from work when a sad song came on the radio, or in the supermarket of all places. There was something about pushing a trolley around the aisles on her own that made her miss Harry. Once, in the early days after his death, she'd been so overwhelmed by grief that she'd abandoned her half-filled trolley in the pet food aisle and rushed out past puzzled shoppers, tears streaming down her face.

But by and large, the sense of loss had settled into a dull ache she had almost grown used to, like a mild toothache that occasionally reared up into something more painful. And she was learning how to read the signs enough to know when to retreat before it got the better of her. Mostly . . .

Nettie still came to care for Eleanor three days a week while Alice was at work and kept an eye on Maddy, drawing her out of her room for meals and encouraging her out on walks with her grandmother now and then. Maddy didn't seem to want to go out much or see many of her friends and this worried Alice. But she let her be, trusting that in time she would come right again.

One Friday, Suzy persuaded Alice to go for a drink after work, insisting that Maddy could keep an eye on Eleanor and that she needed to get out occasionally.

“You need to get a life, Alice,” Suzy insisted. “So I'm not taking no for an answer.”

And so, once Alice was satisfied Maddy would be home when Nettie left for the day, they settled in over a glass of wine at a little bar in Grey Lynn she and Harry used to drop in to occasionally. She hadn't been there for months and the bar owner, Roddy, a convivial former lawyer who knew his wines and loved them just a little too much, welcomed her like a long, lost friend.

“Alice. Where the hell have you been?”

And then he stopped, as he remembered, and shook his head.

“Bloody tragedy. So sorry.”

Then he pointed to a small table in the corner where a couple were getting up to leave and smiled at Suzy. Roddy always had an eye for the ladies and Suzy, who looked younger than her forty-something years, had obviously caught his eye.

“That one’s yours, ladies. And the wines are on me.”

Ignoring Alice’s protests, Roddy barked orders at the young barman while they settled in at the corner and cast an eye over the small crowd of trendy locals – young television and advertising types mainly, although Alice recognised the odd older local like her among them and nodded at one or two. They looked little out of place in this sea of black designer clothes and leather jackets, fingers twitching over iPhones on every table. The bar, like the neighbourhood, was changing. Soon, none of them would be here, she supposed – they’d sell off and use the funds to subsidise their retirements in quieter places where everything wasn’t about making the next deal or promotion. Where would she go, she wondered. She and Harry had talked about selling up and moving north to Matakana, buying a few acres in the country and a small GP practice where they could both work until it was time to just sit back and watch the olive trees grow. A perfectly middle-class retirement. She couldn’t imagine doing that now, not on her own.

“Come in, Alice.”

It was Suzy, calling her back to the table.

“Sorry. Miles away. Thinking about my retirement.”

“Getting a little ahead of yourself there, don’t you think?”

Suzy laughed. So did Alice.

“Yep. Still got a mother and a daughter to support. Next thing, Katie’ll be turning up broke and needing somewhere to stay.”

“Don’t even say it,” Suzy warned, having seen Alice’s sister come and go over the years in various states of disarray.

“Honestly, you don’t need any more to deal with than you already have.”

Alice just shrugged as the barman delivered two balloon glasses full of Roger’s best pinot gris with a harried smile, and raised her glass to Suzy.

“Here’s to the end of another week of smear tests and girls needing the morning after pill.”

“There’ll be a fresh lot in on Monday,” Suzy said, and leaned in so she talk to Alice over the hum of voices and laughter. “What have you got planned for the weekend?”

“Not a lot,” said Alice. “I’ll probably take Mum out somewhere on Sunday. She likes going to the Domain. And Maddy’s going out to Piha with her friend, Tom, I think – getting out of the house at last!”

Suzy shook her head.

“And what about you, Alice? What are you going to do for you?”

“Stop it, Suze. You sound like one of those new-agey types always going on about ‘self-care’ and ‘me time.’ I’m okay.”

Clearly, Suzy didn’t buy this.

“I am,” Alice insisted. “I mean, yeah, having Mum at home has clipped the old wings a bit, and I am still worried about Maddy - ”

“And I worry about you, Alice. Who cares for the caregiver, hmm? When do you get to have a break?”

“Work’s a break – in a way,” Alice said, slugging back some wine and feeling a little defensive. “And anyway, what can I do about it? It’s just the way things have worked out.”

Suzy argued that taking on her mother’s care was still more than Alice could manage, even with Nettie’s help, and that she should consider finding a better rest home for her before she really went down hill but Alice refused to even consider this. Eleanor was happier with her. She would cope, and that was that.

Suzy let the subject drop and they moved on to other things – Brenda’s latest antics at work, Suzy’s kids, Ravi’s new job and then, as they started in on their second glasses of wine, more intimate, personal talk – the little confessions and revelations that old friends exchange about their inner lives, how they really feel and think, their hopes and fears, their truths.

By the third glass, which Suzy persuaded Alice to have when she made noises about getting home, Alice had told her all about Dr Harrison’s interest in her and finally, when she had really let her guard down, about finding out Harry had known about his cancer a year before he told her.

Suzy’s mouth fell open with shock.

“Wow. He kept it to himself all that time.”

She sipped on her wine, rubbing her lips together as she processed this.

“Why, do you think?”

“I went and saw Lloyd Richards – you know, his oncologist – and he more or less said that Harry didn’t want to feel pressured into having treatment he thought was pointless.”

“By you, do you mean?”

“I guess,” Alice shrugged.

“I don’t know how I’d feel if Ravi kept something like that from me.”

Suzy’s dark eyes glittered above the candle, now flickering on the table. It had grown dark since they arrived and Alice had started fretting about getting home.

“I was angry at first but . . . I think I get it now. He didn’t want to be treated like a dying man, I suppose. He hated that, even at the end.”

Suzy, close to tears, put her hand over Alice’s then.

“Oh, Alice,” was all she said.

“Stop it, Suze. Or we’ll both be crying. And I really should get home before Mum burns the house down.”

After the clammy warmth of the crowded bar, the cold air outside bit into Alice’s hands and cheeks, and they huddled together against the biting wind as they hurried down Hakanoa Street.

Reaching Alice’s car, Suzy gave her a hug and then peered into her face, worried.

“You’ve got so thin, Alice. You need to eat more!”

“I wish people would stop saying that. I can’t help it, Suze.”

“You should give that nice doctor a call, go out for dinner or something, have some fun.”

Alice was surprised by this. She had already explained to Suzy that she wasn’t interested. End of discussion.

“I told you, Suze. It’s too soon! And he’s probably just desperate for company.”

“So, what’s wrong with that? I’m not saying you should get into a relationship with him, but wouldn’t it be good to get out?”

Alice just shook her head. Suzy was like a dog with a bone sometimes when she got going.

“I have to go, Suze.”

As she retreated into the car, Suzy delivered a parting shot.

“Call him, Alice. Go on! It will do you good.”

But Alice was making no such promises. She waited until Suzy had reached her car safely further down the hill before turning and heading back up back up the road towards home. The wine had made her feel giddy and, she suspected, not entirely fit for driving but it was freezing and she was anxious now to get back.

As she turned down their street, Alice half feared she'd see a fire engine outside, or an ambulance, but told herself she was just being neurotic as she got closer to home. Still, she was relieved to pull into their drive and see that all looked well on the outside at least.

Would it always be like this now, she wondered, as she hurried up the steps inside - her scurrying home to her mother like this? Maddy wouldn't be there forever. She was already talking about looking for a new flat with Tom and finding herself a part-time job to see out the year. How long could Alice really live this way? Her generation, the baby boomers, weren't like her mother's - they weren't built for self-sacrifice and obligation, for 'making do'. They wanted freedom, independence, everything. Eleanor had cared for her own mother at home for nearly a decade, mostly without complaint, but the thought of doing the same for years and years suddenly filled Alice with dread. It was the wine, she told herself, as she let herself in. It was making her maudlin, as did looking into the future (or the past, for that matter.)

She found Maddy and Eleanor curled up under a blanket, eating the smoked fish pie she'd made, watching vampires run around on television.

Maddy, with some help from Eleanor, had managed to light the fire and was now explaining various plot points to her bemused grandmother, who kept shaking her head and saying "*what a thing!*"

Recognising the main characters, Alice had to laugh.

"I'm not sure 'True Blood' is really Gran's thing."

"She's loving it! Aren't you, Gran?"

"What's it called again, dear?"

"See?"

Maddy laughed, sounding more like her old self, and this gladdened Alice's heart as she warmed up a bowl of the pie and joined them on the couch, reminding herself to feel grateful for the little moments like this - brief spells of well being before another storm of anxiety blew in.

The warm fire made them all drowsy and before long, Eleanor, was snoring on the other end of the couch while she and Maddy snuggled in together, Maddy resting her head on Alice and sucking on her own little finger the way she had as a child.

And it was enough then, just to stay like this, not talking, not even really watching the vampire drama unfold in front of them, although Alice did find it

fascinating that their own Anna Paquin, the cute, little Oscar winner from *The Piano*, had grown up to star in such a dark tale of desire and death. Maddy informed her that she lived with her co-star, Stephen Moyer, in real life.

“He’s so hot,” Maddy said.

And Alice agreed he was – for a vampire.

Later, after Alice had helped settle Eleanor in bed, she found Maddy curled up in front of the fire toasting some marshmallows she’d found at the back of the pantry.

She offered Alice one on the end of a stick, blackened on one edge where it had caught alight but delicious all the same.

“They always remind me of our camping trips,” Maddy said, her face glowing in the firelight as she leaned in to toast another one for herself.

“And Piha,” said Alice. “That great outdoor fire your Dad built.”

Alice studied her daughter’s face, flushed in the firelight, but more relaxed than she’d seen her for a while.

“Are you feeling okay now, love?”

Maddy stared into the fire, and Alice started to fret that she shouldn’t have pushed it. But Maddy shrugged and turned back to her.

“I will be, Mum. It just all got too much.”

“Were you . . .,” Alice trailed off. God, she just couldn’t help herself.

But Maddy knew where she was going and smiled.

“Partying too hard, Mum? Yeah, I was. That was part of it.”

Alice waited, decided to just let Maddy talk if she wanted to.

“I just had this feeling, like I was running all the time.”

Alice could see Maddy was fighting back tears again, fighting hard.

“I hate it that Dad died. It totally sucks.”

“I know, Mads, but . . .”

“No buts, Mum. Yeah, life goes on and all that. But it still sucks. It really does.”

Silence, apart from the crackling comfort of the fire. Alice agreed with her – absolutely. She would leave her butts and her rallying words of comfort for another time. Maddy was right. It sucked.

Maddy yawned then, stretching out like a drowsy cat, her long, auburn hair falling across her pale face. Alice felt a surge of love for her so fierce it

made her eyes sting. There was nothing worse than seeing your child's pain and being powerless to fix it.

"I should get to bed. Tom's picking me up early."

They were off to spend the weekend at the family bach. Alice hadn't been there for weeks. She had gone out once since Harry died but couldn't stand being out there on her own with all her memories and had hurried back the next day.

"Is it just you two going?"

"Yep," Maddy said. "He's finally split up with Jamie, thank God."

"But not Violet?"

Alice couldn't help herself but soon regretted asking as she watched Maddy's face close and harden.

"No."

Maddy stood then, making it clear their cosy conversation was over.

"Night, Mum. Wake me up in the morning?"

Alice nodded, disappointed that Maddy was retreating once again. Mothers and their daughters. There was such a strong thread between them but it was pulled so tight, it snapped with the slightest provocation. And any words she chose now could easily make it worse.

"Sure, love," was all she said then. "'Night."

Once she'd gone, Alice curled up in the armchair, watching the flames slowly retreating into the embers, the glittery sparks thrown up on to the old, charred bricks every now and then forming delicate patterns, tiny fairy lights in a charcoal sky.

As always, when left alone, she found herself drifting back into the past, memories forming of nights in front of the fire with Harry, or driving out west to get a cheap trailer load of firewood from Kumeu, loading up on fresh fruit and vegetables on the way home . . .

And there she went again, Alice realised. Back into the past, as if that was the only place where there was any comfort to be had. She thought then of Thoreau, that line of his that Harry was fond of quoting in mock sombre tones at the end of a long day . . . "*the mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation.*" And something about taking their songs quietly to the grave.

Alice had never really questioned her existence before – it all seemed so certain, there was no need. But now there was nothing but uncertainty, which

then led her to think that all that had gone before was all a mirage, that she had been lulled into a false sense of security by all the hallmarks of a stable life – a house, a job, a husband, a family – and never stopped to ask herself once: “*What is this all about?*” If it was all taken away, piece by piece, what would she have left? *Who was she?*

Flicking off the lamp, Alice sat watching the fire dying down until it was a pile of glowing embers. The house creaked and groaned around her, its old bones settling in for the night, and Alice drifted off in the chair, dreaming of Harry again. He was walking ahead of her up a mountain and she was telling him all her troubles as they climbed. He listened but said nothing and then disappeared into the bush while she kept going, one foot wearily in front of the other, all the way to the top.

Alice woke from the dream just before dawn, stiff from sleeping slumped in the armchair. She thought about the dream and how, whenever she dreamt of Harry, he always disappeared. Where did he go? This, of course, reflected the bigger question she’d had ever since he died about whether she’d ever see him again in some form. But then, hadn’t she already? Sensed him, at least. And she’d seen something. It was possible, she supposed, that he did still exist in some form that was not physical. She could hear Harry, pragmatic scientist that he was, laughing at this. Crackpots and nutters, he’d say, of psychics and astrology and anything that wasn’t rooted in rational thought.

I miss you, Harry.

Get on with your life.

I miss you.

Later that morning, after Maddy had finally gone off to Piha with Tom and Eleanor was busy in the back garden, Alice, acting on an odd impulse, fished Kevin’s card out of in her handbag and, quickly dialled his cellphone number. She almost hung up when he answered but took a deep breath and burred that she’d taken a large leg of lamb out of the freezer that morning and, since there was only her mother and her to eat it, she wondered if he would like to join them although she imagined he already had plans.

Kevin laughed at this, and assured Alice he had no other plans.

Eleanor, clutching the secateurs, wandered in as Alice was winding up the call, her radar apparently right up.

“Who was that, dear?”

“Kevin. Dr Harrison,” she said quickly. “I’ve asked him for dinner.”

“Lovely,” Eleanor smiled, although it wasn’t clear if she remembered who this was. “We could do with some company, couldn’t we?”

Alice was relieved when Eleanor left it at that, her mind now moving on to other matters.

“Was that chap Madeleine’s boyfriend? The one who came to pick her up?”

“No, Mum,” Alice smiled. “That’s Tom. He’s gay, as far as I know.”

“Thought so,” said Eleanor, looking quite pleased with herself for spotting this. “I imagine he’s quite promiscuous then.”

“Mum!”

“Well they all are, dear – the homosexuals. It’s in their nature!”

Alice, aware of her mother’s ingrained views on this subject, just shook her head with a faint smile.

Meanwhile, Eleanor was looking puzzled again.

“Now what did I come in here for?”

*

The rest of the day passed in a busy blur as Alice shopped and cooked and cleaned, her anxiety growing as the afternoon wore on.

It didn’t help that Eleanor insisted on helping, and then forgetting what task she’d been set so Alice would have to explain all over again, or just tactfully take over where she could. After finding the egg beater in the freezer – “I’m sure I didn’t put it in there, dear” – Alice sent her mother off to the lounge with a gin and tonic and, once the vegetables were all finally in around the roasting lamb, poured a stiff gin for herself and phoned Suzy.

“He’s coming for dinner. I hope you’re happy.”

“That’s great,” Suzy chuckled.

“It’s not. Mum’s been driving me mad and I’m really nervous.”

“Just think of him as a new friend, Alice. Some nice company on a Saturday night.”

Alice sipped her gin and took a deep breath. Some times she wished she still smoked.

“Okay. I’ll try.”

After promising to call Suzy with an update, Alice ended the call and had a quick shower, hurrying to get dressed on the chilly evening in her favourite blue

cashmere sweater – a birthday present from Harry – and her best jeans which hung off her a little but would have to do. She even put on a dash of blush and mascara, chiding herself for doing it at the same time. She didn't need to make any special effort. This was not a date. They would just get to know each other as friends. It was no big deal.

Even so, she still felt nervous and poured herself another strong gin before popping in to check on Eleanor, who was stabbing at the television helplessly with the remote.

“I was trying to change channels and this happened!”

Static blared from the television until Alice managed to fix the problem so that Eleanor could catch the end of the news and the weather.

“You've got to know what's coming when you're running a farm,” she had told Alice one night recently, as if this was still the case.

On the screen, the weather presenter pointed to graphics of ominous rainy clouds and lightning. Eleanor clicked her tongue.

“Thunderstorms tonight, they're saying. I thought so. Could feel it in the air.”

Alice glanced at her watch. It was 6.30. He would be here soon.

“I'll just go and check on the roast, Mum.”

“Do you need a hand, dear?”

“No.”

Alice tried to soften her sharp tone.

“I mean I'm fine. You just relax.”

She'd just got everything on to serving dishes and set the table when she heard a knock at the door and, as she hurried to wash her hands in the kitchen sink, voices in the hallway.

“What a surprise!” she heard her mother say, presenting Kevin to Alice like a long, lost friend.

“Look who's dropped in, Alice! Doctor . . . I'm sorry. I've forgotten your name.”

“Kevin. Kevin Harrison. Evening.”

He gave Alice a shy nod and handed her a bottle of red wine.

“Smells good, Alice.”

“Oh, is he staying for dinner, dear?”

Eleanor was confused. Alice, cracking open the wine, confirmed he was.

Eleanor twisted the wedding ring on her finger, unsettled.

“Sorry. My memory’s not what it was. The stress . . .”

“That’s alright,” said Kevin. “Mine’s not the best either. And I don’t have any excuse.”

He smiled at Alice. He looked nice when he smiled, she thought. A good man. A good man who had lost his wife. She felt a wave of compassion for him then. He deserved to be treated with kindness.

After they’d all been served, Alice raised her glass, flushed with the effort of making this all happen – and quietly patted herself on the back for not backing out.

Small steps, she thought. Small steps back into the world, one foot in front of the other, until she could run again.

*

Dinner was barely over when Eleanor, worn out from the sheer effort of holding a coherent conversation with their guest, excused herself and went off to bed early, leaving Alice to relax a little and, urged on by Kevin, drink more than her usual share of the wine.

Kevin talked a little about his wife’s illness and death and how he was only now, three years later, coming to terms with it.

“It’s just the thought of never seeing her again. I still can’t believe it.”

Alice nodded fervent agreement.

“So that doesn’t change?”

“If anything, I’m sorry to say, it gets worse as time goes on.”

Alice emptied her glass of wine and shook her head.

“Is there any good news here, Kevin?”

Kevin reached across then, lightly putting his hand over hers. It felt a little odd but also warm, reassuring.

“It’s a cliché, I suppose, but we have to go on living.”

Alice looked at him then, saw the sea of possibilities lurking in his eyes. And then she said something that surprised both of them.

“Would you like to stay the night? With me?”

The room suddenly felt drained of all air. Alice heard a crack of thunder in the distance – an ominous sign perhaps but it was too late to take it back out now.

“Yes,” he said, still sounding quite surprised by the offer. “Yes, I would.”

And they left everything there, the remnants of dinner, half drunk glasses of wine. Alice felt a little unsteady on her feet as she led Kevin down to her bedroom, realising this could be a very bad idea. What had come over her? She was as nervous as a teenager and Kevin, when they kissed – so strange kissing someone else after all these years – gave an anxious laugh.

They were awkward and shy as they pulled off their clothes and explored each other's soft, middle-aged bodies. The sky outside the bay window crackled and flashed with lightning, and the rain pelted down, covering the sounds of their quiet lovemaking. The room was alive with frenetic, dancing shadows as the trees outside were battered back and forth by the fierce wind. Alice watched them, seeing strange shapes and figures in the shadows, as Kevin moved in and out of her, his face above hers oddly familiar. He could almost be Harry, if she squinted her eyes half shut.

It was neither earth shattering or unpleasant, this unexpected coupling with Kevin, and as familiar in some ways as it was strange. It felt good to be held again, she knew that, after it was over as they lay together, listening to the storm rage outside. Kevin stroked the side of her head and thanked her, as if she had performed some kind of favour.

She tried not to think of Harry, even though her eyes kept drifting to the urn on her dresser, glinting every time the room lit up with lightning, half expecting a "visit" from him again. She wondered if Kevin was thinking of his wife.

Then she thought of Maddy, out on the wild west coast, where the storm would be battering their little bach. What would she make of this? God, what if they came early and she found her mother in bed with another man? And how would she explain this to Eleanor in the morning?

Regret was starting to creep in already and she wanted him to go now, this strange man who she had just had sex with in her marital bed. But she couldn't bring herself to send him off out into the storm and so, when he stretched out his arm to enfold her, Alice tried to let go and let herself be held.

Kevin, perhaps reading her thoughts, looked down at her then.

"Do you want me to go?"

Alice hesitated, then shook her head.

"No," she said. "It's okay."

And it was, in a way, if she pushed all her other thoughts away and stayed in this moment, in this bed, with this man who was not Harry, listening to the storm roar on outside.

She heard something bang in the distance, a door perhaps, and wondered if she should get up and check but she didn't want to move and break the spell of warm skin against warm skin and the simple, comforting sound of another human's breathing lulling her off to sleep.

19. *Out in The Storm*

Eleanor trudged across the paddock on that terrible, stormy night, looking for Len. He hadn't come in for his tea after milking the cows and it wasn't like him – he liked his dinner on the table at 5.30 so they could be finished in time to watch the six o'clock news. Something was wrong, she knew it.

Her mother always said she had a sixth sense about things, like her Granny Nola, who once came to visit her after she died and sat on her bed and told her what it was like on the “other side”. Like a beautiful garden, she'd said, where she was never hungry or tired or felt any pain. She would see one day, when it was her time.

Thunder rumbled down the hills to the south, followed by a sharp crack of lightning that sent Eleanor hurrying towards a glade of trees as the rain started pelting down, the drops stinging her face like sharp little bullets. She caught her breath under the ancient pine trees as another crack of lightning lit up the paddocks around her and then she saw it, the tractor down the bank, and Len slumped over beside it, and she ran and ran in the rain but she never seemed to get any closer . . .

Eleanor felt a sharp twist in her ankle then as she slid in the mud all the way down the bank, landing at the bottom with a sharp thud. It knocked the wind out of her and when she tried to sit up, she felt another deeper pain in her hip that tore right through her. Peering around in the darkness, Eleanor realised she wasn't on the farm at all. She was in some strange park, wearing only her nightie, soaked to the skin.

I am going to die here.

The thought came to her, clear as a bell, as if someone had spoken it out loud, and with it came a dawning sense of acceptance that stopped her from panicking or crying out or struggling in any way.

She just lay back on the sodden grass and let the wind howl and the thunder roar and the heavens pour down on her. And felt a strange kind of peace.

Eleanor was tired of fighting. It was time to go home, to her garden and her mother and her lovely sister, Margaret, who played the piano so beautifully. Chopin, she'd play at night. What was the name of that tune again? And her dear little boy, Peter, with his curled up fists she would unclench and kiss and

make warm again; and her Len, a good man who hardly ever drank, and always came home for tea and kept his promises.

She could see someone running through the rain towards her then – a man, she thought. But it was too dark to see until the sky lit up all around him and she saw it was Harry, dear Harry, come to take her home. And then everything went blacker than black.

20. *Seeing Things . . .*

Maddy and Tom were huddled together in her parents' bed at the bach while the storm raged around them, counting the moments between thunder and lightning to figure out how far away it was.

"One, two, three . . ."

A bright flash of lightning lit up the bedroom.

"Three miles away," Maddy said. "It's getting closer!"

"Is it miles or kilometres? Like, do we need to convert it or something?"

Maddy laughed.

"Does it matter? It's really close!"

Tom, wrapped up in a beanie and scarf, huddled under the covers as another deep growl of thunder hit, so loud that it actually rattled the windows.

"Jesus Christ! We're going to die out here!"

"One, two . . .", Maddy counted.

Another bright flash of lightning, followed by an even louder boom of thunder, made them both shriek as Maddy, too, dived under the blankets, wriggling to make Tom move over and give her more room.

"Aargh! Your feet are freezing," Tom complained as Maddy rubbed them against his to warm them up.

He turned on his side and she snuggled into his back, still trying to warm up. They had often ended up sleeping together after a night out without it ever seeming weird and some times joked they'd make the perfect couple.

"I love it when you don't have a boyfriend, Tom."

"I know," he agreed. "I'm a way nicer person."

Maddy smiled into his back.

"You are," she said. "You're my Tom again."

"My therapist says I need to be on my own and learn how to have a relationship with myself."

Maddy had to laugh at this.

"You had to pay someone to tell you that?"

"Mum paid. But yeah, tell me something I don't know."

Maddy told him she, too, was now seeing a counsellor at her mother's insistence.

“To deal with the grief. Like talking about it helps.”

“It might, babe. You have been pretty out there since he died.”

This comment took Maddy by surprise (even though she knew it was true.) And made her a little defensive.

“So, who wouldn’t be when shit like that happens?”

“See? It makes you angry. And when you party on top of that - ”

“Okay. I get it. I’ve been a pain in the arse.”

She turned over then, away from him, tugging at the blankets as she went, and came face to face with a photograph of her Dad on the dresser, taken a few summers ago out on the bach deck, in his favourite old pink shirt. Even in the dimly lit bedroom, she could see his kind eyes twinkling at her, his kind, patient eyes. God, she missed him so much. She waited then, for the pain of it to grip her again, send her spinning away in a panic, struggling to get her breath. But it was more like a soft punch in the chest this time, and she took a few deep breaths through her nose – as her counsellor had shown her – riding it like a wave until she came out the other side – still intact. She sat up then, pulling her knees up to her chest, listening to the storm moving further away out to sea now, although it was still raining hard.

Tom scabbled at the blankets, pulling them tight around him again, with a little huff of displeasure. She didn’t want to argue with him. He was right. And he only said it because he cared, she knew that.

“I’m sorry, Tom. You’re right. And I need to say sorry to Violet too. I miss her.”

This admission tumbled out of her unexpectedly but she knew it was true. And she also knew she needed to face up to her problems, with her grief or anger or whatever the hell it was, and stop trying to run away. It only hunted her down in the end, like the vampires in her dreams, so she may as well just turn and face it. And hope she’d be left standing.

“It’s okay, Bubble Butt”, Tom said, already sounding drowsy. “We still love you.”

“Yeah,” said Maddy, in a small voice, as she snuggled back down beside him, listening to the rain on the old tin roof and, before long, the sound of Tom’s gentle snoring and the occasional murmuring in his sleep.

It took a long time for her to drift off though, and even then she only dozed, her head full of thoughts of her Dad, and her mother too, and all the

summers they'd spent in this bach – the endless, blissful summers that one day, almost without warning, just came to an end. And yes, that made her angry but there was no more point raging against it than there was against the storm outside. Nothing ever stays the same. Good things came to an end – but so, thankfully, did bad things. Her last thoughts before she drifted off into a restless sleep were troubled ones of her mother, of how much she had done for Maddy and how little she had done in return.

Early the next morning, not long after she'd finally fallen asleep, Maddy woke to the croak-croak of her cellphone's ring tone and scrambled around to find it. Tom stirred and groaned beside her and Maddy murmured apologies as she saw the call was from her mother. God. What time was it? 6.30 a.m, her phone said. She was briefly tempted to let it ring – did her mother not know how early it was? But something told her all was not right if she was calling then. She had to answer it.

Her mother was so distressed it sounded like she was speaking in tongues, and it took Maddy a little while to understand what she was saying as the words sprayed out in spurts and gulps, punctuated by deep, heaving breaths for air. When she finally did understand what had happened, Maddy went strangely calm and remembered the dream she'd just been having then where her Gran was brushing her hair and telling her to be a good girl. Be a good girl, she'd said, *and always help your mother.*

“It's all my fault. It's all my fault.”

Her mother kept saying this until Maddy had to tell her quite sharply to stop. It was not her fault, of course it wasn't. And then Alice started crying and Maddy did her best to soothe her.

“It's okay, Mum. I'm coming.”

Promising to be there as soon as she could, Maddy ended the call.

Maddy, wearing only an old Violent Femmes tee-shirt of her Dads she'd found in his drawer, (it smelt of him) shivered in the chill morning air. Outside, the storm had left the sky a dull milky grey, the Tasman sea a boiling mass of indignation.

As Maddy grabbed her black jersey off the kitchen chair, she was suddenly struck by a sharp image of her father sitting in that very chair, as he always had, a memory so vivid it almost seemed real.

“Dad?”

The hairs stood up on the back of her neck, her feet frozen to the floor. She barely dared breathe.

I'm here, Maddy. I'm always here.

And then it was gone, whatever it was, and Maddy told herself she was seeing things, it was the lack of sleep, the shock of the news.

“What’s up with all the noise?”

Tom emerged from the blankets, rumpled, his blond hair sticking up in tufts like Sonic the Hedgehog’s.

“It’s my Gran,” she said, pulling on the jersey and trying to shake off the vision of her Dad.

“I have to go back.”

21. *Hanging On*

It was Kevin who had found her, lying like a sodden rag doll in the park two blocks away, after Alice had discovered the French doors wide open in the early morning and no sign of Eleanor in her bed.

She should have got up when she heard the door banging during the storm. *It was all her fault.*

In the blurred panic that followed, Alice, after searching all around the house with Kevin, started phoning the police and hospitals while he set off out into the torrential rain again to look for her, armed with a torch. The police had just arrived when he phoned to say he had found her – in the park of all places – and was now waiting for an ambulance.

“So she’s . . . she’s okay?” Alice had asked, having feared the worst.

“She’s alive,” he’d said. “But she’s not in a good way.”

And then the ambulance had arrived and Kevin told her to meet him at Auckland Hospital and the young policemen, seeing how shaken Alice was, kindly drove her to the hospital and she hurried into the swirl of bright lights and lifts and corridors, endless corridors, until she finally found them in Intensive Care, where Kevin hovered, soaked to the skin, waiting for her.

They were “working” on her, he said, to get her breathing again. Alice caught a sob in her throat, swallowing it back down like a lump of potato. Her mother was in shock from the fall, he said, and possibly had a fractured hip, along with pneumonia. It didn’t sound good.

And now, as they waited together for news of her condition, Alice wanted Kevin to go before Maddy came and asked awkward questions. And because, as grateful as she was that he had found her, she also couldn’t stand the thought that her mother had disappeared out into that awful, stormy night while she slept with him. If Alice had been religious at all, she would have thought she was being punished for her sins. As it was, she couldn’t help blaming herself and, to a lesser extent, him.

“My daughter will be here soon,” she said, a little ashamed of the coldness in her tone.

And Kevin understood this was his cue to go.

“Right,” he said. “Let me just try and check on things before I go.”

He brought a young Asian doctor back with him shortly afterwards and the news was still not good.

Eleanor was on a ventilator now, with severe pneumonia, and her hip was fractured in several places and would need surgery if she stabilised.

Alice seized on the word *if*.

“If?” she said, in a small voice. “Is she going to die?”

The two doctors exchanged looks then and Alice resented this, as if they were dealing with a small child who must be protected from the truth. She spoke more firmly now, wanting some control of the situation.

“I’m a nurse. What’s the prognosis, Doctor?”

The doctor, pulled up by her tone, blinked at her through his thick lenses.

“I’d say she has about a 50 per cent of pulling through, maybe less.”

Alice’s heart sank.

“Was she a smoker, your mother?”

Alice shook her head.

“No, never.”

“Okay, well that betters the odds slightly. We’ll just have to see how she goes. You can come through and see her if you like but she’s not conscious yet.”

Kevin put his arm around her lightly then and Alice wanted to shrug it off.

“Do you want me to come with you?”

“No,” she said. “But thanks. Thanks for everything.”

Kevin offered a brief, awkward hug. But Alice could barely look at him now and, once he’d gone, hurried off down the corridor after the doctor without a backward glance. She would never see him again, she told herself. *It was all her fault.*

Her mother lay in the curtained-off bed in a green hospital gown that was too big, tubes down her mouth and in her arms putting morphine and antibiotics into her system, while the ventilator machine huffed in and out, doing her breathing for her. A nurse finished putting another lure into her pale, translucent arm where Alice could see bruises forming in her paper thin skin, and left, telling Alice she would be back shortly. Shocked by her mother’s fragile state, Alice took the seat beside the bed and took hold of her hand, careful not to touch the needle that fed another tube into her tired old veins.

“I’m here, Mum. I’m so sorry.”

Alice bowed her head down on the bed, beside her mother's chest, willing her to breathe life back into herself, wishing she could turn back the clock, back before she'd made all the stupid decisions that had led to this. Suzy had been right. It was too much for Alice taking care of her mother. She had made a mess of things. Her best intentions had led to her mother being found near death in a public park. *It was all her fault.* Alice started to cry softly then, not wanting to disturb her mother, even though she knew she was probably too far away to hear her.

Please come back, Mum. I don't want you to go.

Not yet. Not like this.

But Alice knew her mother's fate was out of her control, just as Harry's had been. And that awful sense of powerlessness she'd felt when he was dying washed over her then, like a huge wave, surging and pulling her out to sea, and she was nothing but a flimsy piece of drift wood completely at its mercy. And still, it was so hard to let go. *Come back.*

Some time later – Alice couldn't be sure how long since time spent in hospitals had a pace all of its own - she felt a hand on her back and heard Maddy's soft voice behind her. Alice buried her face in her daughter's vanilla-scented hair and held her tight.

"At least she's still alive, Mama," Maddy said, and Alice cried and laughed all at the same time, she was so glad to see Maddy, her Maddy, the one who called her Mama and let her hold her tight. She was back. Alice could feel it. Her lovely, loving fairy of a girl was back.

Later, Maddy bought her coffee in a paper cup and a berry muffin she could barely swallow and they talked quietly together while the ventilator rasped on and nurses came and went and Eleanor remained unconscious, still and ghost-like on the narrow hospital bed.

"Don't blame yourself, Mum. It isn't your fault this happened," Maddy said.

If only you knew. Alice couldn't bring herself to tell Maddy about sleeping with Kevin and, when she asked, lied that someone just happened to find her in the park, although even as she said it she felt like she was betraying him.

"If she makes it through, Mum –"

"Don't say that, Maddy. I don't want her to go."

“If she does,” Maddy insisted, “I don’t think Gran should stay with you any more. She needs to be in a home where she’s safe. And where you don’t have to worry about her all the time.”

Alice stared at Maddy hard. Something about her facial expression then reminded her so much of Harry. Even the reassured tone was his. She had never seen or heard it so clearly before.

“You sound different, love. Has something happened?”

Alice saw a shift in Maddy’s expression then. There was something, she could tell, but she could also see Maddy struggling with whether to tell her or not.

“It was weird being out at the bach again,” Maddy said eventually. “I thought about Dad a lot. And I . . .”

She shook her head then. Whatever it was, Alice knew she wasn’t going to share it.

“Anyway, it made me realise a few things.”

Maddy glanced at Eleanor then as she gave a slight groan, her head shifting slightly to one side.

“I’m sorry, Mum. Sorry I haven’t been there.”

“That’s alright, my love,” Alice said, squeezing her hand. “You’re here now.”

Maddy nodded, studying the chipped yellow nail polish on her fingers, deep in thought. Alice could definitely see a change in her, as if she’d aged several years in just a few hours, like she’d grown up when Alice turned her head, as children did.

They sat together in silence for a while until Eleanor stirred and groaned, her forehead hot to the touch. Alice, her nursing instincts kicking in, sponged her with a soft flannel and took her temperature which, when she checked her chart, was rising fast.

By nightfall, her temperature was dangerously high but the doctor, when he finally came, said there was little else they could do but wait and see. She would either pull through now or not. Medicine bowing down to the Gods. Again.

Alice suggested Maddy go home and get some sleep while she stayed here with Eleanor but Maddy refused to leave.

“I had a dream about Gran last night,” she said. “She told me I had to be good and help you.”

“Wow,” Alice said. “That’s so spooky.”

“Yeah. It was. When you phoned, I really thought she must have died.”

“It was awful, Maddy. Finding her gone, the door wide open - ”

“Don’t, Mum. There’s no point.”

Beating herself up again, she meant. Alice shook her head. She would never forgive herself for this. Ever.

And now all they could do was wait. You can’t kill weeds, her mother had said. But you could.

“You might not like me saying this,” Maddy said then. “But maybe Gran would be better off . . . ”

She didn’t say the word. She didn’t need to. Eleanor had said it herself once, back on that day when their outing had turned septic and she returned her to the rest home she hated, angry with Alice, angry with life itself.

Alice closed her eyes then and saw her mother toiling in her garden at home in her old straw hat, cutting and weeding and planting, roses clambering everywhere, reaching for the light.

22. *Home at Last*

Eleanor was floating under water, her limbs leaden, breathing through a strange tube lodged down her throat, and somewhere above her where the light struck the water she could hear voices. Female voices. All her life it had been women's voices she had heard everywhere – her mother's and her sister's and her daughters and her granddaughter's. The men stood largely silent in the background, letting the woman talk and talk, or disappeared altogether, like her father. She had lived in a world of women. Women with their truths and secrets, taking their signals from each other, signals that men were never aware of – or very rarely anyway.

Something soft and warm brushed across her forehead then and she tried to reach up and touch it but her arms were pinned to her sides somehow and she was sinking, further and further into the murky depths, trails of mud lifting where she scraped against the bottom, moving faster now in the current, bumping over stones and rocks until suddenly she was tossed up onto a bank where she lay gasping like a fish, the tube dislodged from her throat, blinking in the bright summer light.

And then, to her delight, Eleanor saw that she was in her garden, the roses in full bloom – Albertine, Ophelia and Old Blush, all of them out to greet her – and she pulled herself up to her knees, scraping off all the leaves and weeds she had collected along the way – and lifted her face to the sun, unfurling, the weight of all the years and all the sorrows falling away.

Everything was clear to her then – clearer than it had been for months or even years. The confusion that had plagued her every waking moment for so long, filling her with fear and some times blind terror, was gone.

She knew who she was and how she had lived. And most importantly, who she had loved.

Do you know who you are?

The voice sounded just like Eleanor's, only she hadn't spoken the words.

Yes, she said.

Then come with me.

And Eleanor stood then, her limbs light and young again, her breathing easy, holding her arms up to the sun as the garden dissolved around her in a blaze of radiant light.

23. *Letting Go*

The funeral was to be held in Eleanor's old home town of Matamata and Alice had left much of the organising to Katie, who had flown over from Melbourne the day after Eleanor died, sweeping back into their lives in her arty black clothes, dyed black hair and dark red lipstick. Alice had paid for her ticket.

"I will pay you back, darling. I promise."

Her great plans for an exhibition had fallen through apparently and she had now set her sights on breaking into the art scene in Auckland.

"You don't mind if I stay for a little while, do you?" she'd said. "You've got plenty of room and I'm still broke."

Alice did mind and, for once, actually said so.

"When are you going to grow up, Katie, and actually take some responsibility for things?"

Katie had taken offence at this but it didn't stop Alice, fuelled by grief and guilt, from ripping into her in a way she never had before on the drive back in from the airport.

"You were bloody never here for Mum – or me! Why should I help you?"

In retaliation, Katie accused Alice of being a control freak who always took the moral high ground and had to do everything herself.

"Your problem, Alice, is you never give any one else a chance."

"Fine," Alice had said then. "You organise Mum's funeral then."

And Katie did, with some help from Maddy, who was pleased to have her crazy aunty back in her life, while Alice retreated to her room, only emerging briefly to eat or see the odd visitor like Nettie, who Alice had phoned the day after her mother died.

Nettie was upset when she heard what had happened to Eleanor.

"So, were the French doors not locked then?" she asked, and Alice squirmed and wished she hadn't come. Nettie had urged her to lock up carefully at night so that Eleanor couldn't wander off and Alice found herself saying that she thought she had but she wasn't sure now - and then pleading exhaustion to escape.

It was all too much to bear and she couldn't bring herself to unburden her guilt on any one, not even Suzy, even though she knew she wouldn't judge her, because she simply wasn't ready to forgive herself, and doubted she ever would. From the moment Eleanor had been pronounced dead at the end of that long, awful night, Alice had just tried not to think about any of it. She hadn't even been to see her mother at the funeral home. Now she understood how Maddy had dealt with Harry's death. Denial. It just wasn't happening.

And now they were on the way to their old hometown, across the endless flat paddocks of the Hauraki Plains to Matamata, now famous as the sight of Peter Jackson's 'Hobbiton' where they filmed scenes for both his 'Lord of the Rings' film trilogy and 'The Hobbit.'

"Home of the Hobbits," said Katie as they drove past the sign for 'Hobbiton', now a tourist attraction. "Who would have thought?"

Alice was remembering her last trip to Matamata with Harry to pack up the farmhouse after it was sold and Eleanor had been installed in the rest home.

Would it have been better, she wondered, to let Eleanor live on in her muddled confusion in the farmhouse until whatever crisis occurred that finally forced her out? Because it seemed to her now that nothing she had done had made things any better for her – and she'd died anyway, under Alice's care.

"Look," said Maddy, pointing out the window. "Little lambs!"

Alice gazed in the direction Maddy was pointing and there were indeed tiny lambs, shaky on their newborn legs, sticking close to their mothers. There were signs of early Spring everywhere – daffodils, new buds and blossoms on the trees – and normally this would fill Alice with delight. But not today. Or any day soon, she imagined. She could feel the first signs of another migraine forming and almost missed the turn off to the church until Katie pointed it out.

"Down there, isn't it? God, it's so weird coming back here."

"I loved staying on the farm," Maddy said. "I miss it."

And she did. Spoilt rotten by her grandfather and fussed over by her grandmother, Maddy had been the centre of their world ever since she was born.

The funeral service passed in a blur for Alice as various old friends and relatives paid tribute to Eleanor, ending with a touching little eulogy from Maddy about the things she loved about her Gran.

Eleanor's coffin was smothered in the first of the spring roses that Katie had ordered from somewhere (with the use of Alice's credit card). The scent, as

they followed the coffin out to the waiting hearse, reminded her so much of her mother that it was almost like she was there. Perhaps she was. Alice's world seemed crowded with ghosts now – her father, her husband, and now her mother, all gone in the space of a few years. There were as many dead people now in her immediate family as there were living ones. How quickly things could change – certainties became uncertainties in the blink of an eye. What was it the Buddhists believed? Something about the impermanence of being, of death being the only certainty in life. Perhaps it was time Alice started to accept that. But acceptance, she already knew, took its own time coming and even when you thought you were grasping it in your hands, it could slip away again, like an oily fish, and back would come the regret or the bargaining. If only, if only . . .

Alice had gone somewhere, to that place where the living go in the hope of seeing the dead again, a kind of living limbo land. Since her mother had died that night – after murmuring the word “yes” and letting her last breath go with a gentle sigh – Alice had felt like she was floating somewhere above her life, watching it all go on below and around her without really taking part in it all. She thought of Kevin again then, and sighed.

He'd phoned to offer his condolences and to let her know he was there if she needed anything. Alice thanked him. But she knew she wouldn't be calling. She didn't even let him know about the funeral. And even though she knew this was unfair and irrational, she could not stop thinking about her impulsive, wine-fuelled decision to sleep with him and what it had led to . . .

This. Here they were, at the old cemetery in town, lowering her mother's coffin down beside her father's: *Leonard (Len) John Anderson, loving husband of Eleanor and beloved father of Alice and Katherine.*

Soon to be joined by Eleanor Louise Anderson, loving wife of the above. Eleanor, frugal to her core, had insisted on getting only one headstone and leaving space for her details when the day came. She'd even paid for the engraving.

Katie and Maddy were crying openly, arms around each other, but Alice, still feeling disembodied, just stared at the hole in the ground, swallowing up her mother as it started to rain, lightly at first, and then more heavily, sending little rivers of mud sliding down into the grave, until Suzy, who'd driven down with Ravi, put an arm around her and an umbrella over her head and led her away.

Before leaving, they drove past the old farmhouse, set back from the road down a long drive. There was a woman out working in the garden in an old straw hat. When Alice looked back at her, she gave her a small wave. The car smelt strongly of roses.

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The night after Eleanor's funeral, Alice had another dream about Harry where she ran into him at a birthday party for Suzy, putting on his coat to leave.

"Why do you always disappear like this without saying good-bye?" she said.

"Because you wouldn't let me go if I did. So it's better to just leave."

Alice chased him down the road then, demanding to know why he hadn't told her he was ill for so long.

"Same reason," said Harry. "You wouldn't let me go if you knew."

Alice's anger built to a sudden fury, yelling at Harry in the street, berating him for leaving her, until her mother appeared from somewhere and told her to let him go, to let them all go and stop blaming herself for their loss.

It wasn't her fault.

When Alice woke at dawn, her pillowcase was soaked with tears, and Maddy was there, holding her.

"It's okay, Mama. I'm still here," she said, and Alice slept then for hours and hours, and when she woke it was night time and she found Katie and Maddy in the kitchen, making dinner and playing music. Life was still going on.

It was Maddy's twentieth birthday. Alice was mortified for forgetting – well, not forgetting exactly, but losing track of the days until here it was and she hadn't even got Maddy a present. Maddy shrugged this off and Alice hugged her tight, her baby, her only child, turning twenty. She was sorry Harry was not here to celebrate with them, or Eleanor. Katie must have seen the tears pooling in Alice's eyes and, determined to make this a happy occasion, shoved a glass of champagne in her hand so they could toast Maddy.

"Happy birthday, beautiful girl! Cheers!"

"Yes, happy birthday, darling," Alice said as they settled in at the table around bowls laden with rice and Maddy's favourite lamb curry she had made herself from Alice's old recipe.

"I'm no longer a teenager! Yay!" Maddy laughed and Alice looked at her lovely face, luminous in the candlelight, her and Harry's child who had a life

ahead of her that would go on long after they were ashes in a river or the sea. She was her after life. Hers and Harry's – and Eleanor's too. That was how they lived on.

After dinner, they made Alice dance with them around the lounge even though she felt silly and out of practice. But the more she moved, the better she felt. It had been a long time since Alice danced. And then Tom turned up with Violet to take Maddy out and Alice was pleased to see Maddy had obviously made peace with her old friend as they disappeared off to her room to get ready.

After they'd gone, the sisters stayed up late talking and drinking Katie's duty-free gin as she filled Alice in on all the ups and downs of her life in Melbourne, and even though it hadn't worked out the way she planned, Alice had to give her sister credit for giving it a shot because Katie was right about one thing for sure: life was short.

And they talked about Eleanor, and how Katie had always been her favourite and got all the attention. But Katie admitted she hated that.

"Why do you think I spent half my life running as far away from her as I could? It was so stifling."

Alice suspected Eleanor had turned into a different kind of mother after her little brother died and that Katie, as the new baby and the last, had probably born the brunt of her anxieties. Still, she said, Katie could have visited Eleanor more often than she did – it would have made Eleanor so happy.

Katie conceded this was true and was sorry she hadn't been to see her before she died. It was selfish of her, she knew that, selfish to leave Alice to deal with everything.

"Maybe I'll finally grow up now the old girl's gone," she said.

"I'd like to spend more time with you guys though. Maddy's so cool now, isn't she?"

Alice agreed she was but that she'd struggled since Harry died and dropped out of university.

"I know. She told me," Katie said. "But she'll be okay. She wants to go travelling, you know. It'd be good for her – help her figure out what she really wants to do."

This was the first Alice had heard of it and it annoyed her that Maddy had confided her plans in Katie, rather than her. Reading her sister like a book, Katie realised she hadn't told Alice and went into defence mode.

“She loves you, Alice. And she probably feels like she shouldn’t leave you.”

“No, she should,” said Alice, with a dark look in her eye. “She should get as far away from me as possible.”

“Oh, come on. Is this the gin talking or what? Why should she get away from you?”

And then it all came tumbling out – how Alice had slept with Kevin on the night Eleanor went missing and why she blamed herself for what happened.

“I’m a bad, bad person – make no mistake.”

Katie, once she got her head around the idea of her goody two-shoes sister doing something as radical and out of character as suddenly sleeping with someone else, rubbished this idea as “total bullshit.”

“It’s not, Katie. I didn’t lock the doors and when I heard the door banging I didn’t get up and go and check. So it is my fault. It’s my fault she died. I should have left her in the rest home. She was safe there.”

Katie shook her head in amazement.

“Wow. Next thing you’ll be telling me it’s your fault Harry got cancer.”

Alice went quiet then, spinning her empty glass around with her finger, her face flushed, haunted.

“You don’t think that too, do you, Sis?”

“If I’d known . . .”

But Alice suddenly didn’t see the point in explaining all about Harry keeping his deadly secret.

“I do wish I could have saved him, yes. That I could have done more . . . sooner.”

Katie grabbed Alice by the arm then, gripping it hard enough to make Alice wince.

“Listen to me, Alice. For once. I know I’m your useless younger sister and I haven’t been around when I should have been and that, basically, I haven’t got much to show for myself except a string of broken relationships and a very bad credit rating . . . but you have got to stop blaming yourself for everything that happens and let it go.”

Alice stopped spinning the glass, amazed by the force of Katie’s outburst.

“Wow,” was all she managed to say.

“You’re still alive. Enough said,” Katie said, and started rolling herself a cigarette.

There was a long silence between them, old opponents retreating to their corners, the balance between them shifting, reshaping into something new.

“Can I have one of those?” Alice said after a moment, actually feeling hugely relieved she’d got all that off her chest.

“Help yourself,” said Katie, pushing the tobacco pouch towards her.

“As long as you promise me you won’t start beating yourself up about it tomorrow.”

“I promise. And Katie?”

“Hmm”, said Katie, pulling a stray piece of tobacco out of her teeth as she puffed away on her rollie.

“Thanks. I needed that.”

Katie smiled.

“Does this mean I can stay then?”

Alice had to smile.

“Do I have a choice?”

“Not really. I’m your only flesh and blood now – apart from Maddy!”

It was true, Alice thought. And her thoughts slipped off into the future suddenly.

“I think I want to do something new with my life,” she said then.

“Like what?”

Alice shook her head, not knowing yet what it was – just a feeling bubbling up in her that she needed to start again somehow. She could take the past with her but she had to stop living in it.

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The next day, Maddy found Alice, a little hungover, standing in her back garden, staring at the border of spring plants her mother had planted – daffodils were springing up in a sea of pretty blue forget-me-nots while the first roses were coming into bloom. Alice wished she could remember the roses’ names.

“You okay, Mum?”

“I think I might sell this house,” Alice said, not knowing until then she was even thinking this. “What do you think?”

Maddy shrugged, eyeing her mother doubtfully.

“You don’t think it’s too soon?”

“Too soon for what?”

“Well, to make big decisions like that.”

Alice thought about this. It was just five months since Harry had died and, yes, they’d only just buried her mother. But what was she waiting for?

The world held possibilities she had never even considered before - travelling the world, learning a new language, living somewhere else altogether - maybe a whole new career if she went back and studied.

“We’d get a lot for this place and I could buy something smaller and then we could both use some money to travel.”

Alice waited for Maddy to tell her of her plans but she said nothing, awkwardly scuffing at a piece of moss growing through the bricks with the edge of her sneaker.

“You don’t have to worry about me, Maddy. I will get over all this. And I want you to get on with your life . . . and go see the world, if that’s what you want.”

Maddy gave Alice a sideways glance, still scuffing at the moss.

“Aunty Kate told you, right?”

Alice nodded.

“It’s just a vague plan. Tom and me were talking about it Piha. Going to London, maybe Asia and India on the way.”

“Just like me and your Dad did. That’s great.”

“Yeah?”

Maddy peered at her mother, checking she really meant it.

“Yeah,” Alice assured her. “Hey, maybe we could meet up somewhere in the world. I quite fancy Italy. ‘Under the Tuscan Sun’ and all that. ”

“That would be cool.”

Alice smiled, smelling the almost sickly sweet scent of jasmine in the air. A chorus of lawnmowers had started up around the neighbourhood, so soon the smell of freshly mown grass would be added to the mix. Spring, at last.

It had been a long, hard winter. But if there was one good thing to come from all this loss and uncertainty, it was knowing that it was worth taking risks because nothing lasted forever. And did she really want to spend the rest of her days rattling around in the same house, in the same street, when that life as she knew it was over? She did not want to be Miss Haversham, in her moth-eaten

wedding finery, living in the rat-infested, cobwebbed past, regretting what might have been.

But she also didn't want to make any rash decisions, aware her thinking was still shaky.

"Maybe it is too soon though," Alice worried.

"Maybe. On the other hand," said Maddy, "you should do whatever you want, Mum. You've done enough for everyone else."

"Enough of the martyr act already, huh?"

Katie emerged into the morning sunshine, brandishing a plunger of coffee and cups and plonking it down on the outside table.

"Good day for Piha, don't you think, ladies?" she said, pulling her sunglasses down over her mascara-smudged eyes and rolling herself a cigarette.

"Let's go put those ashes in the river, eh?"

Alice was surprised Katie had remembered. It was very late and they were both quite drunk when the subject of Harry's ashes had come up again last night.

"Sure!" Katie had blithely said, pouring herself another gin. "Let's go do it!"

Alice had to admire her sister's manic energy – she couldn't help getting swept up in it, like grabbing on to a log in a fast moving river.

And so they piled into Alice's Volvo, with Maddy nursing the urn in her lap and peering inside it with interest as they headed out west.

"It looks really gritty," she said, and Alice agreed.

"More like shells than ashes."

"Good old Harry," said Katie. "He was such good fun."

On the way, Katie regaled Maddy with the story of her and Harry heading up Piha's treacherous Lion Rock one New Year's Eve before she was born and convincing him to take some LSD.

"Don't tell her that story!" Alice remonstrated, but Maddy wanted to hear it and Katie told her about how Harry freaked out when the acid came on and they'd stayed up there for hours while he clung to a tree and refused to come down.

"I had to half carry him down in the end," Katie said. "Your mother was furious."

"I had no idea where you guys were!"

Katie laugh's was deep and raucous.

"It was so funny. Mind you, I did start getting worried when he suggested the only way down was to fly."

"People have fallen off that rock and died," Alice reminded her.

But Maddy loved the story since it put her father in a different light to the one she knew him in and they talked about Harry all the way over the shimmering silver green hills of the Waitakeres, dotted with nikau palms and cabbage trees, until they reached the sight Alice loved best – the vast Tasman Sea suddenly spreading before them as they turned the corner, huge waves breaking onto the wide stretch of black sand below.

Katie seemed to agree.

"God, I'd forgotten how stunning this place is."

And, as they wound their way down the steep hill into the tiny coastal town, Alice's mind went into fast forward, flashing through all the years they had ever come here, all the glittering, precious years, that were with her still, every one of them.

They bypassed the bach and drove straight to the track that led to the waterfall, a walk they had done so many times over so many summers to take a quick dip in the chilly pool below the falls. Harry had always loved it here, floating on his back on lazy summer afternoons, swimming under the falls with Maddy. It was as close to feeling spiritual as he got, he once said.

They could hear the waterfall's powerful force long before they could see it, over the sounds of their feet on the gravel, their breathing getting heavier as they climbed – each lost in their own thoughts, stopping to catch their breath when they finally reached the falls, and admiring the sheer force of it as it hit the deep pool below.

Alice lead them on, clambering up the rocky path to the top, with Katie and Maddy huffing up behind her. She stopped again to catch her breath and could almost smell the history of the place in the damp, brackened air.

Huge kauri logs, centuries old, had once been felled and sent over the dammed river here, crashing their way over the falls and down through the thundering waters to the bottom where they were shipped out by sea to the timber mills, and were eventually used to build houses in new suburbs like Grey Lynn and Mt Eden, houses like the century-old villa Alice and Harry owned. She liked thinking of it like that, as if there was a connection between everything that went

on and on, endlessly, and could never really be broken, even by death. It was comforting.

“Now what?” said Katie, her face glistening with spray from the falls as she leaned against a rock and rolled herself a cigarette.

“Should we say a poem or something before we send him off?”

Alice hadn't really thought about this but then Maddy remembered one of Harry's favourite poems was “*Do Not Go Gentle into that Good Night*”, which he'd love to recite in deep, Dylan Thomas-like tones occasionally, and between them they stumbled through the words, awkward at first, until they got to the final verse which Maddy now remembered word for word, reciting it softly as the waterfall bellowed and roared all around them.

“And you, my father, there on the sad height,
Curse, bless, me now with your fierce tears, I pray.
Do not go gentle into that good night.
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.”

Alice held the urn out uncertainly over the water, as if she wasn't sure now if she were ready for this. *Let go. I don't want to. Let go.*

She tipped the urn on its side then and shook it quickly as a gust of wind blew up, forcing them all to duck out of the way as Harry's ashes started blowing backwards.

“Jesus, Alice! Careful!”

In her efforts to avoid being showered with ashes, Katie had almost fallen in the water and clambered back on to her rock, keeping a safe distance, while Maddy couldn't help giggling. Even Alice had to smile.

She waited for the wind to drop again and sprinkled his remains into the river, tentative at first, and then tossing the rest with a wide swing of her arm out over the rocks into the deepest pool. They watched them swirl and eddy, eventually taken by the current over the waterfall and off down the river to the distant sea. And Alice felt a pull at her heart then that made her give a sharp intake of breath before she finally let it go, the breath itself like a little death. *Goodbye Harry. Love of my life. And she heard it then, clear as day. I am still here.*

She and Maddy both cried then as he was washed away, while they remained behind, arms around each other, on the edge of a raw, new world.

The Beginning (Again)

The river, all around me. Cold, sharp bite of water, crack of sunlight, ache of sadness and of joy as the trickle becomes a roar and I am falling, falling into the bliss and terror of the unknown. I hear them weeping as the river carries me away but my suffering is over. I feel no pain.

Goodbye, my loves. If you look closely enough, you will see me here and there in the flickering shadows, and the glaring light, or hear me in a song, or smell me in a scented memory, or feel my faint breath on your skin if you stand still long enough.

I am in the face of my child, in her expressions and her thoughts, in everything I taught her, in her blood itself. I am in the love I gave and the love I received.

I am still here. My story is just beginning, even as it ends.

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Exegesis

Maxine Fleming – MCW 2014

Writing The “Real” Story:

This exegesis accompanies my thesis, a novel titled *The Real Story*. *The Real Story*, set in contemporary Auckland, is told from three third-person perspectives, framing the lives of three generations of women. The central catalysing event is the death of the son-in-law, husband, father (respectively) of these three female protagonists, and leads to an irrevocable unraveling of life’s certainties. Underpinning this, from the point-of-view of my own writing practice, was a desire to use elements of two very different genres – literary realism and the supernatural or “ghost story” – to explore what is “real” in fiction. I was also interested in telling this story in multiple narrative form, with three different New Zealand generational female perspectives, in order to explore the varying states of consciousness arising from the catalyzing event and how this impacts on the characters’ relationships with each other and their own understanding of themselves. Finally, I wanted to explore the use of ghosts, dreams and vivid flashbacks in my text, partly to disturb the text’s realism but also to chart my characters’ psychic journeys through their grief and loss.

The exegesis triangulates three focal points of my research to help frame the production of my thesis. The first section, Text-to-Self locates my thesis in my own experience of grieving, along with my interests as a writer in women’s relationships and the workings of both the conscious and the unconscious mind, and how to convey this through the use of various narrative modes. The second section, Text-to-Text, discusses my research practices and draws my own work into a conversation with other texts such as Michael Cunningham’s *The Hours*, Jonathan Franzen’s *The Corrections* and *Beloved* by Toni Morrison. It will also bring my work into dialogue with the work of philosophers and psychologists like Carl Jung and Sigmund Freud in relation to ideas around the subconscious, notions of the after life, dreams and symbolism and the uncanny, all of which feature strongly in my text. Other non-fiction works related to grief and mortality, such as Joyce Carol Oates’ memoir, *A Widow’s Story*, are also brought into the discussion. The third section, Text-to-World, assesses the extent to which my voice adds to the understanding of these experiences and considers the possible audience or target market for the novel which, with its focus on female lives and their relationships with each other, would most strongly appeal to female readers. It

concludes that the “real story” in literature, as in life, varies in perspective as widely as those telling it, and that reality itself is a fragile concept which, when disturbed, can open up the possibilities of many realities beyond the conscious.

Text-to-Self

In 2008, I lost my husband to cancer, having lost my mother to the same type of cancer two years prior to that. In the wake of his death, I went through many of the processes described in my text, particularly in relation to the character of Alice. While my family struggled to come to terms with his death, my mother-in-law, in the mid-stages of Alzheimers, struggled initially, like the character of Eleanor, to remember her only son had died and when she did was thrown into a state of distress all over again. My children, then teenagers, responded in different ways but my daughter, in particular, attempted to get on with teen life as if nothing had happened until, like the character of Maddy, her grief caught up with her and caused a period of nervous collapse. My son, on the other hand, talked about his father constantly and often reported vivid dreams where he had conversations with him while I had a number of experiences, rarely discussed, where I heard his voice or felt his presence on some metaphysical level.

All of these experiences and the questions they raise, not just about our mortality and notions of an afterlife, but about our conscious and unconscious lives and the concept of reality itself have been channeled into my work in one form or another, and have also given it its somewhat ironic title, *The Real Story*. For in the aftermath of the death of loved ones, it can be difficult to distinguish the real from the unreal and the concept of reality itself becomes questionable. The title is also drawn from a quote by Jonathan Franzen in his work, *The Discomfort Zone: A Personal History*, in which he states, “You never stop waiting for the real story to start, because the only real story, in the end, is that you die” (Franzen, 2007, p. 27). This struck me as an interesting statement and, to an extent, contributed to the presence of Harry, the dead husband, speaking in first person at the beginning and end of my text where his own “real story” is just beginning. Death, particularly of those close to us, inevitably leads to questions about what happens to us when we die and while there are numerous conceptions of the afterlife in every religion and culture, there is no proof that we continue to exist in any conscious form at all. And, since this is a question that could perhaps only ever truly be answered by those ‘experiencing’ it, remains unanswered and perhaps unanswerable.

But my text certainly raises the possibilities that there are other states of consciousness, based on my own experiences and others who have shared their views and beliefs on this subject.

So, my novel, then, is a fictionalised exploration of the conscious and unconscious mind, from multiple perspectives, fragmented in the wake of a death, and rooted in my own experiences and of those close to me.

It also very deliberately focuses these experiences from three different generational perspectives, all female, all related to each other as mother and daughter, to explore specifically the differences – and similarities – in those relationships and how they might be affected by the catalyzing event (Harry's death), as well as providing a platform to examine different generational attitudes in broader terms. Eleanor, from the post-war generation, came of age at a time when young women stopped working when they married and had children and became housewives. Her daughter, Alice, Harry's widow, is a baby boomer who grew up in the wake of feminism and the changing roles of women. And her daughter, Maddy, is becoming an adult in a third wave feminist world where, arguably, technology is currently the key influence in social change.

Text-to-text

A novel is always an interweaving of other voices and text that the writer has encountered, internalized (consciously or unconsciously) or even critiqued or rejected. In the following section I review some of the influences, both literary and otherwise, that are imbricated in my own writing.

Eleanor, the ageing matriarch of my story, is losing her mind to Alzheimers, throwing her concepts of reality into total disarray. Similarly, Arthur, the patriarch of the Midwestern family at the centre of Jonathan Franzen's *The Corrections*, is losing his ability to interpret reality to Parkinson's disease. For me, both these characters serve to throw into question the very nature of literary realism and how it can be subverted by other patterns of thought, posing the question: "what is reality in fiction?"

In her article, "*The Tyranny of the Probable – Crackpot Realism and Jonathan Franzen's 'The Corrections'*", Susan Rohr states that *The Corrections* "follows the narrative conventions of literary realism but metaphorically uses the symptoms of the father's Parkinson's disease – that is the patient's eroding capacity to meaningfully interpret reality – to develop a fictional world of collapsing order, general

disorientation, insecurity and imbalance within the bands of a seemingly known and familiar world.” (Rohr , 2004, p.91). Eleanor’s function then, as with Arthur’s, is to challenge the conventions of the fictional reality I have created, causing it to constantly fall apart and rebuild itself. Rohr uses the term “crackpot realism” to describe what literary critics have called the new conventionalism of Franzen’s work, defining it as “literature which has the power to cut underneath the skin, into the very marrow of how we perceive the new world we suddenly occupy . . .” (Rohr, p.92). In writing Eleanor, I sought to create the same effect as I charted the waters of her fragmented memory constantly capsizing on itself. One minute, she is on a train to Wellington in the seventies lulled into comfort, the next she finds herself stuck in a room she doesn’t recognize (in an old folk’s home) – terrified by this new reality. “Eleanor opened her eyes, startled by the sight of the strange little woman in a green smock offering her a cup of tea. Something was very wrong here but she couldn’t quite put her finger on it as she looked around her with a sense of rising panic and bewilderment.” (Fleming, 2013, p.28)

Franzen explores similar spaces through the character of Arthur, who struggles even to complete a sentence without becoming lost, describing it thus: “but in the instant of realizing he was lost, time became marvelously slow and he discovered hitherto unguessed eternities in the space between one word and the next, or rather he became trapped in that space between words and could only stand and watch as time sped on without him.” (Franzen, 2001, p.11).

Through the character of Eleanor, I found it possible to play with the conventions of time and space that exist in the general realism of this novel, subverting the genre into something different that might loosely fall under that definition of “crackpot realism.” Eleanor is often chronologically displaced and by writing her interior monologues with no intervention from an authorial voice, I have attempted to convey her confusion to the reader as she experiences it. She cannot rely on “reality” because, for her, there isn’t one and her condition and consequent state of being is a kind of extreme statement of the often fragmented, atemporal nature of human consciousness and how it can impact on narrative. The narrative may be rooted in realism but her unreliable voice taints it with uncertainty.

Through the interior monologues of all of my characters, I have attempted to show how the “real world” becomes “unreal” when dealing with strong emotions like grief or loss. Joyce Carol Oates describes this warped perception of the world eloquently in her memoir, *A Widow’s Story*, a work I returned to while writing this

novel. Her work served as an inspiration for Alice's journey in particular, reminding me of how those raw, early stages of grief cast the normal world in a very surreal light.

In the chapter entitled '*The Real World*' she writes: "Outside the bell jar of the widow's slow-suffocating life is the "real world" at a distance remote and antic in its ever-shifting contortions – glimpsed in newspaper headlines, fragments of television news – avoided by the widow as one might avoid staring at the blinding sun during an eclipse." (Oates, 2012, p.65). Interestingly, Oates has also used a kind of interior monologue within her first-person text, using italics to indicate this, to explore the kind of thoughts that are being thrown up by her unconscious mind as she attempts to go about her life. Often, these illustrate her darker thoughts at the time. "*I am not going to commit suicide. I have not any clear, coherent plan.*" (Oates, 2012, p.232) or this: "*Thinking I don't really have a home. It doesn't matter where I am, I am homeless now.*" (Oates, 2012, p.226). These thoughts within her thoughts help create that sense of fragmented consciousness that comes with grief, and of the struggle to find meaning again in a life that has changed irrevocably. "For no things contain *meaning* – we are surrounded by mere things into which *meaning* has been injected, and invested. Things hold us in thrall as in a kind of hypnosis, hallucination" (Oates, 2012, p.232). This sense of meaninglessness pervades Alice's world in the early stages of the text as she struggles to come to terms with the new reality she finds herself in as a widow. "The house felt empty and far too big for her. Her footsteps echoed when she moved from room to room, rooms full of things that no longer made any real sense to her – those photographs, that pile of books on the coffee table, the artwork she'd collected with Harry over the years. It had all been drained of meaning." (Fleming, 2013, p. 4).

Alice's consciousness may not be as fragmented as Eleanor's but grief has affected her perceptions of reality and this offered ways to explore other levels of consciousness – dreams, sensory experiences, even 'seeing things' – throughout the text.

In trying to find ways to express the workings of the unconscious mind, I looked to the work of Carl Jung in his biography, *Memories, Dreams and Reflections* – in particular the chapter, *Life after Death*. Jung, as he states in the prologue, believed his life was "a story of the self-realization of the unconscious" (Jung, 2010, p.3) and that "we are a psychic process which we do not control, or only partly direct." (Jung, 2010, p.4). It is exactly this kind of process which the literary mode of stream of consciousness attempts to express, attempting as it does to capture thoughts as they occur without the apparent intervention of a summarizing and selecting narrator. The

term itself – stream of consciousness – was coined by another philosopher and psychologist, William James, in *The Principles of Psychology*. It was then adopted into use as a literary mode in the early twentieth century, most notably in modernist works like James Joyce's *Ulysses* and in many of Virginia Woolf's novels, including *To the Lighthouse* and *Mrs Dalloway*.

While some distinctions are made generally between stream of consciousness and interior monologue – with the former usually characterized by associative leaps in thought and lack of punctuation – both modes serve to capture the psychic processes or “inner experiences” Jung spoke of.

He also paid particular attention to dreams and visions as ways of reading or understanding the unconscious mind – and as proof that “the psyche at times functions outside of the spatio-temporal law of causality” (Jung, 2010, p.304). While he does not categorically state these experiences are proof of an afterlife, Jung argues that rationalists who discount the existence of other dimensions beyond our own are, with limited conceptions of space and time, incapable of seeing the full picture. Dreams, he believed, were an important gateway to a greater consciousness and, possibly, an afterlife. “Not only my own dreams, but also occasionally the dreams of others, helped to shape, revise, or confirm my views on life after death.” (Jung, 2010, p.305).

Maddy, in the worst stages of denial, dreams of running into her father at a party and then losing him. She runs off in a panic, pursued by vampires. But she can't escape what has happened, even in her dreams. In the latter stages of the novel, when she is beginning to acknowledge his loss, she actually thinks she sees her father sitting in a chair and hears his words of reassurance in her mind. When her mother calls her in a distressed state over her dying grandmother, Maddy recalls a dream she has just had where her grandmother urges her to take care of her mother. This dream, of a prescient nature, also reflects Maddy's growing conscious realization that she has to face up to what has happened and become present in her life again.

Eleanor's consciousness, as already discussed, is so fragmented by her Alzheimers condition that she functions mostly outside Jung's “spacio-temporal law of causality” altogether and therefore defies most of the conventional conceptions of time and space. Her dreams of Harry are “real” – she converses with him as he sits on the end of her bed, or believes she sees him when she's dying, and is not conscious of any difference between these experiences and “real” ones. In fact, from her perspective, real life is seen as just as odd and other-worldly as any dream, intensified by the memory glitches of her dementia which take her back and forth in time at random and

leave her stranded in the spaces between one reality and another.

Alice not only dreams of Harry but also has experiences where she believes she senses his presence and even “sees” things she cannot explain rationally. Her dreams of him also reflect her changing psychological state as her grief progresses. Initially, she is glad to see him in a dream – a dream reminiscent of a happy time they had together when they were younger - but then she becomes increasingly frustrated as Harry keeps disappearing in the dreams and she struggles with the realization that, wherever he has gone, she cannot follow. In the end, as Alice is still struggling to accept his loss, she dreams that she confronts him about leaving and he tells her to let go which, finally, she begins to do. So the dreams in my text to an extent tell a story within the story at a level of consciousness below that of waking life.

Free from naturalist rules, the supernatural elements in my text offered another way to subvert the realism of the narrative and explore the psychic states of my characters since supernatural events – in literature or life – can indicate disturbance in those experiencing them. As a psychoanalytical study, Sigmund Freud singled out supernatural literature to discuss at length in his essay first published in 1919, *The Uncanny*. Freud calls the uncanny that “class of the frightening which leads back to what is know of old and long familiar” (Freud, 2003, p.220). He attributes this to two major sources: animistic beliefs and infantile complexes. Animistic beliefs include belief in the return of the dead, in magic, and in what Freud calls “the omnipotence of thoughts”, the power of mind over matter. (Freud, 2003, p.243). He was perhaps the first to foreground the distinctive nature of the uncanny as a feeling of something not simply weird or mysterious but, more specifically, as something strangely familiar. Ghosts, he suggests, are the product of our imaginations, often signalling repressed trauma. “An uncanny effect is often and easily produced when the distinction between imagination and reality is effaced, and when something that we have hitherto regarded as imaginary appears before us in reality . . .” (Freud, 2003, p.256).

Many works of literature feature ghosts in dreams, often functioning as a portal of discovery into other possible worlds. They also often serve to invoke grief or guilt for the characters experiencing them, most notably in works like Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* (1987) where the ghost of a dead baby haunts the home of the protagonist, Sethe, who escaped slavery with her children and killed one of them when they were caught. This postmodern narrative has gothic elements and is reminiscent of a traditional ghost story – the haunted house, the baby ghost, the dead returning to the living – with its memorable opening lines setting the tone of terror that pervades the

story. “124 was spiteful. Full of a baby’s venom. The women in the house knew it and so did the children.” (Morrison, 1987, p.1).

But the ghostly haunting in the text also functions on much deeper levels where it is emblematic of unresolved trauma and of a silenced history, while the physical return of the ghost as a young woman, Beloved, forces Sethe to deal with her traumatic past. In re-reading *Beloved*, I recognised the value of ghostly characters functioning to bring protagonists to some kind of crisis or realization – in Alice’s case, that she needs to let go and accept that her husband has gone (from the physical world anyway).

Initially, I had intended to give the ghost in my text – Alice’s husband, Harry – more of an ongoing narrative in the text as he negotiated the new boundaries of time and space in the “afterlife” or next state of his existence. But as I began to write, I found that it was enough to merely hint at his existence through the perspective of my three protagonists, the grieving women. I chose instead to give him a first-person perspective that bookends the main narrative and builds a sense of the ongoing nature of life in a different state of consciousness and through those that are left behind. But even though the “ghost story” became smaller than intended, I found it to be a valuable device in the right places to explore the state of the character’s minds.

In terms of structure and style, I looked closely at the work of Michael Cunningham in *The Hours*, which recasts Virginia Woolf’s classic story *Mrs Dalloway* in a new light. As with my text, *The Hours*, is told from three different female third-person perspectives. Although the characters are not related in any way, other than through the story of *Mrs Dalloway*, and the stories are all set in different times, their lives are intertwined and connected thematically through shared concerns about mortality and finding meaning in life. I was drawn to this triptych form of structure as a way of exploring many facets of the same issues, primarily grief and loss, from differing generational female perspectives in order to offer a kaleidoscopic view of events as they unfold.

The Hours refracts the lives of its three women, Virginia Woolf, Clarissa and Laura, through the prism of a single day, as they all attend to their domestic lives while troubled in various ways by thoughts of mortality and suicide. My narrative takes place over several weeks but I sought to achieve a similar “prism” effect as my characters struggle, largely through their internal dialogue, to come to terms with their loss and attempt to get on with their lives.

In terms of style, my text at times reflects the stream of consciousness narrative mode used in *The Hours*, which in turn reflects that of Woolf’s style in *Mrs Dalloway*,

as a way of showing how the characters' patterns of thoughts function in a state of flux, thinking and emoting as they go about their "normal" lives. They react to their surroundings in ways that mirror actual human experience where, even when performing simple domestic acts, deeper thoughts about the meaning of life can run through the mind – or one thought overlaps another, with no apparent connection.

This stream of consciousness style was particularly useful in illustrating the internal dialogue of Eleanor to show how her thoughts could leap, not just from one subject to another, but in and out of various time frames, the confusion of her dementia playing havoc with the normal concepts of reality.

In *The Hours*, Virginia Woolf wakes thinking of the story she is writing (*Mrs Dalloway*) but the text shifts swiftly into a different consciousness as she falls back to sleep without being aware of it. "It seems, suddenly, that she is not in her bed but in a park; a park impossibly verdant, green beyond green – a Platonic vision of a park . . ." (Cunningham, 1999, p.29). We, the readers, are with Virginia in real time (*The Hours*, notably, is all written in present tense) as she floats through the park and slowly becomes aware that "another park lies beneath this one, a park of the underworld, more marvelous and terrible than this . . ." (Cunningham, 1999, p.30). The interior monologue here draws the reader into Woolf's perception of other realities, into the *possibility* that there are other realities beyond those of the conscious mind that can cross the normal boundaries of time and space.

Alice, like the character of Clarissa in *The Hours*, is perhaps a more reliable narrator although both their conscious states have been affected by mourning for their lost loves – Alice's late husband, Harry, and Clarissa's dying ex-lover, Richard, respectively. Alice longs for her husband to walk through the door at the end of the day, still alive, while Clarissa mourns the conversations she would have had with Richard if he was not so ill. To an extent, they are both trapped in the past by their longing for it, their interior monologues constantly reflecting this as they go about their daily lives. "Clarissa wishes, suddenly and with surprising urgency, that Richard were here beside her, right now – not Richard as he's become but the Richard of ten years ago; Richard the fearless, ceaseless talker; Richard the gadfly." (Cunningham, 1999, p.19). Clarissa, at this point, is out buying flowers for a party she is throwing for Richard, a celebrated author. Alice, when we first meet her, has been to the mall to buy an urn for Harry's ashes, an activity that also sends her thoughts back to the past. "It made her think of India, backpacking the length and breadth of it with Harry back when they were young. So young. Invincible then." (Fleming, 2013, p.5) Alice's interior

monologues reveal how her memories cause her to constantly return to the past, so she too in a sense is chronologically displaced, unable to make sense of the reality she is suddenly faced with – that she is a widow and she is alone.

Dreams, memories, visions and psychic or prescient experiences are woven through my text and an afterlife is certainly hinted at through Harry's presence throughout – real or imagined. Again, I looked to Jung's *Memories, Dreams, Reflections* to inform and substantiate some of my ideas. He wrote that “although there is no way to marshal valid proof of continuance of the soul after death, there are nevertheless experiences which make us thoughtful. I take them as hints, and do not presume to ascribe to them the significance of insights. (Jung, 2010, p.312). Throughout my text, I have hinted at an afterlife, or at least the idea that it is possible to have experiences with the dead on some other level of consciousness - whether it's through dreams or imagined visits or memories – taking the view, like Jung, that my characters have experiences that make them “thoughtful” about the possibility of an afterlife. Jung writes of his own experiences of this, describing how, while lying awake, he sensed the presence at the foot of his bed of a friend who had died recently. “I did not have the feeling of an apparition; rather, it was an inner visual image of him, which I explained to myself as fantasy. But in all honesty I had to ask myself, “Do I have any proof this is a fantasy?” (Jung, 2010, p.312). Do we have any proof? What is real?

In my initial outline for this project, I stated that I wished to explore the “realism of the metaphysical and surrealism of the physical worlds” using a variety of literary modes and supernatural elements. As a writer, the lack of boundaries in time and space were liberating and enabled me to take the characters on a journey through a landscape that was both psychic and physical, constantly renegotiating the space in between realism, the subconscious and the supernatural.

Text-to-World

“There is a category of fiction written for women – ‘the women’s novel . . .’” writes Nicola Beauman in her study of women’s writing, *A Very Great Profession: The Woman’s Novel 1914-39*. “They generally have little action and less histrionics – they are about the ‘drama of the undramatic’, the steadfast dailyness of a life that brings its own rewards, the intensity of the emotions and, above all, the importance of human relationships. (Beauman, 1983, p.5)

By this definition, my text sits in the category of “the woman’s novel” or women’s fiction and, since all its protagonists are female, would most likely appeal primarily to a female readership. It potentially has quite a broad audience within that market, given the different ages and points of view of the three female protagonists, but would probably appeal most to a thirty-plus age range because of its subject matter and themes. Once I have written another draft over the coming year, I am hopeful of interesting a publisher focused on this niche market.

Thematically, my novel deals primarily with grief, loss, change and the nature of memory but, as Beauman’s definition of the women’s novel suggests, it is above all about the importance of human relationships. The nature of those relationships is what interests me most as a writer, particularly the dynamics that exist between mothers, daughters, sisters and female friends, and are the central focus of this novel. In the introduction to her text, *Women’s Fiction 1945-2005*, author Deborah Philips states that “the ‘women’s novel’ is preoccupied with the domestic and with personal relationships.” (Philips, 2006, p.3.) She uses the term *Aga-saga* to describe a form defined by the ‘drama of the undramatic’.

But that is not to say they are without social or political significance. “Because these novels are largely about personal relationships does not mean to say that they are inconsequential; that the personal is political was a central rallying call of the women’s movement. And in their focus on female experience and their concerns with love, family and marriage, these narratives cannot but be concerned with power relations between the genders.” (Philips, 2006, p.3).

My text adds to the voice of “female experience” of New Zealand women from the post-war period to the present day and concerns itself in varying ways with the nature of social and political change for women throughout that time. While many of those experiences are, of course, universal to all women, I have attempted to give this “Aga-saga” a particularly New Zealand feel to it, charting the kinds of personal and domestic changes that have taken place for women over the past sixty years or more in our own social history.

And so I would hope this novel would resonate particularly for New Zealand women but also appeal to a wider audience through its universal themes and experiences of loss and love.

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