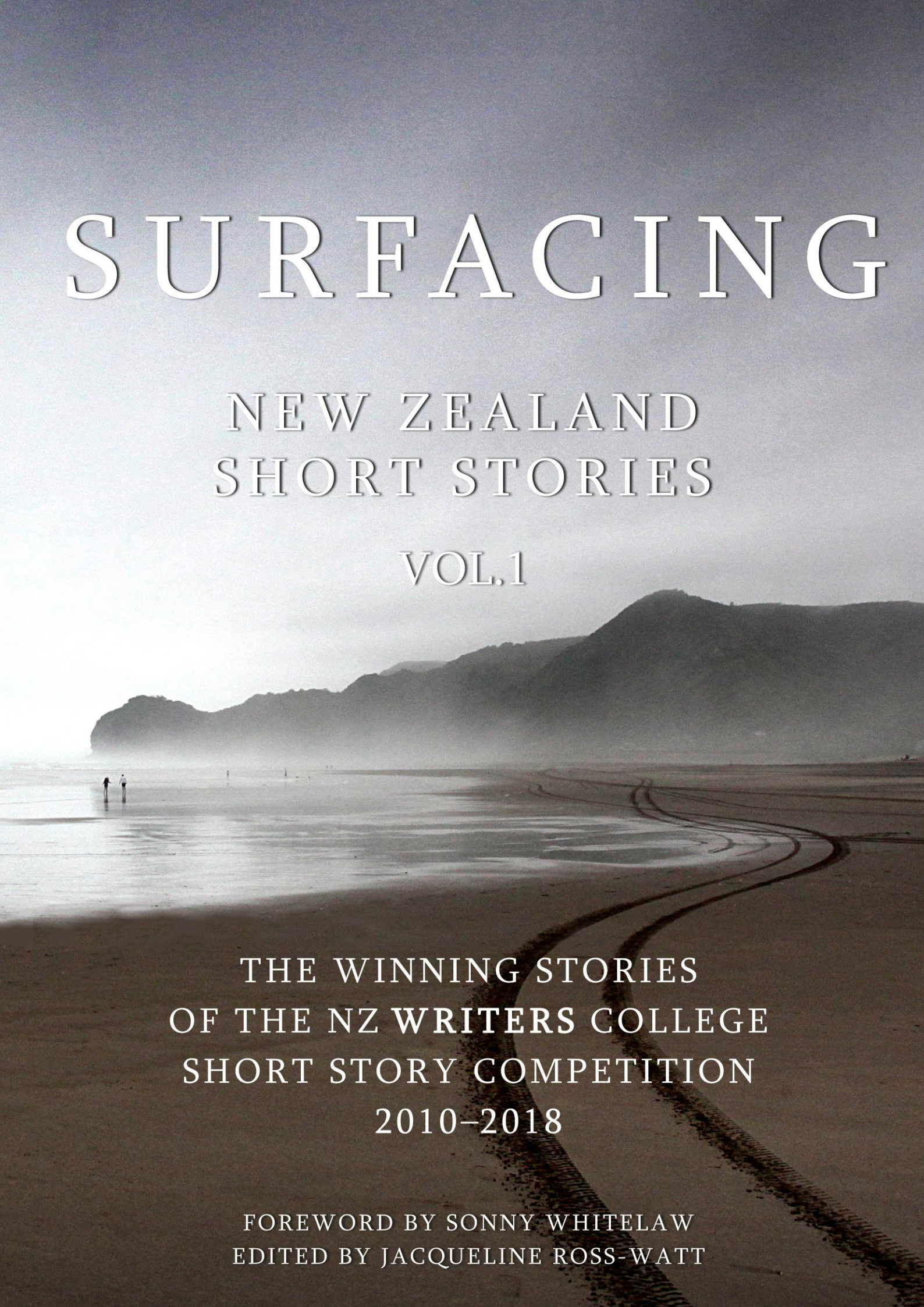
SURFACING
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FOREWORD BY SONNY WHITELAW
EDITED BY JACQUELINE ROSS-WATT

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FOREWORD

Magical thinking is a term used by anthropologists and psychologists for the belief that one's thoughts or desires have the power to influence the world. It's common in young children, but as they age, magical thinking is stripped away by the realities of a grown-up world: pesky things like the laws of physics and chemistry, and teachers telling children to stop dreaming and focus on passing exams. In adults, magical thinking is considered irrational and so the belief in the impossible, and the extraordinary imagination and creativity that once filled childhood, fades into the shadows. Only dreams – and sometimes just the echoes of dreams – remain.

But here's the thing. Magical thinking is real. It's not irrational. We have the proof right in front of us, in black and white. We only have to consider the power of stories.

Stories hold a simple truth: a cup of creativity plus a good dollop of imagination equals possibility. What was once deemed a flight of fancy or an irrational notion – like space travel or cloning - is now history. A fanciful

world, conjured up in the pages of an American comic strip in 1946, allows me to stand on a glacier in Greenland today, roll back my sleeves and FaceTime a friend in New Zealand. The world we take for granted today came about because storytellers kindled childhood imaginations and creativity. Storytellers' visions really do influence the way we think and thus have the power to change the world.

Stories come in many forms. Novel writers have time to enchant their readers, to draw them into multi-layered tales that capture the attention for hours, sometimes for days. Short story writers, on the other hand, have a different kind of power. Their seduction wastes no words. They grab the reader's attention, only to abandon them minutes later to deal with the thoughts and feelings evoked by the story, be it delight, unease or a touch of melancholy.

The storytellers in this anthology may not have set out to change the world. But in the brief time that they take hold of our imagination, they have the power to change the way we feel. After reading Moira Lomas' 'Crabs', I will never again be able to look at crabs in quite the same way.

Writing in styles that range from literary to speculative fiction, some of these storytellers peel away our protective layers with great subtlety; others flay open our emotions with a broadsword. No matter their style, every one of them is an alchemist, rekindling the magical thinking of our childhood as they transform the mundanity of 'what is' into the wonder of 'what if'.

In ‘Regrets’, Aaron Ure explores the pain of love denied, and how to find peace by replacing regret with acceptance.

Regret also takes centre stage in Regan Drew Barsdell’s ‘The Hole’. It’s not a particularly deep hole, but it accommodates a burden heavy enough to destroy a man.

Feby Idrus carries us on a poignant journey back in time in ‘Tell Me About the Love of Your Life’. Peeking out through spoken memories, the truth of a love unrecognised is only truly made manifest through her character’s dreams.

With ‘Expunge’, John Drennan deals with another form of regret, a lifelong regret about an injustice unwillingly perpetrated, a regret that can only be expunged through a dramatic final reckoning.

From a courthouse to the pine-scented backwoods of a logging camp, Colin Minnaar deals with a situation where regret is a matter of too little too late. ‘A Certain Hardness’ questions who is responsible for the heinous actions of someone who has been victimised and abused?

When does growing older mean you don’t count anymore? Monique Reymer’s moving tale, ‘Not My Daughter’, is about taking control by letting go of the little that is left.

Similarly, Lizzie Nelson's character in 'The Invisible Woman' feels irrelevant and discarded by society until she shrewdly turns her insignificance to her advantage.

James MacTaggart explores the aging of an ailing parent in 'Out to Sea'. In this story, a son confronts his doubts, confusion and pain while taking care of a father who no longer recognises him.

In 'Being a Ghost', Abby Jackson presents a regret too powerful to resolve, even after death.

The superficial display of 'regret' that sometimes presents itself at funerals is cunningly exposed in Suzanne Main's 'Till Death Do Us Part'.

A tale of death, when told from the perspective of two different cultures, results in contrasting narratives in Jade du Preez's 'The President, the Ski-Instructor and the Watermelon'. But however the story is told, regret is still the only option available to the narrator.

Differing cultural perspectives are also at the core of how death is regarded in Victoria Louise Lawrence's artfully written 'White Boy Wonder', but here sadness and confusion present an opportunity for genuine understanding.

Staying with the theme of cultural dissonance, Jeff Taylor's 'Aroha' is set during a difficult time that also marked my own life: the aftermath of the earthquakes that devastated Christchurch in 2011. Here the main character

discovers the importance of kindness and compassion, the power of guiding someone from a very different background along the path to redemption.

Acts of kindness are an extraordinary and often overlooked gift. The character that Lizzie Nelson crafts in ‘Norman's Letter’, her second winning entry, displays an unexpected kindness and a sharp wit that gives voice and dignity to one who cannot speak.

In Timothy McGiven’s ‘The Barrier’, the excitement of new beginnings in a place with no fixed address gives way to nostalgic regret as an aging Hippie rides out in a dinghy into the storm-swept seas of Awana Bay.

There’s nothing quite like the thought of a high school reunion to expose midlife disillusionment and failed dreams, something that Nicholas Buck cleverly employs in ‘Moving Pattern’. But sometimes success can be measured in simpler, more meaningful ways, like establishing new friendships at a weekly ballgame.

In contrast to this, Sacha Norrie’s ‘The Effects of Cancellation’ is about loneliness, isolation, extinction and a haunting mystery that exposes the darkest places of the mind.

Through the eyes of a teenager, R.L. Jeffs considers the struggle to articulate a sense of injustice. ‘Golden’ asks the question: What if a hero falls from his pedestal? What then do we, mortal creatures, have left to hope for?

Stories contain hope. No matter how difficult the subject matter, they present the possibility of redemption, acceptance and understanding. I invite you to sit back and enjoy the worlds created by these magical thinkers.

Sonny Whitelaw

February 2019

PREFACE

Surfacing is an anthology of the winning short stories of the annual New Zealand Writers College Short Story Competition. Spanning nine years, *Surfacing* is the culmination of hundreds of hours of writing, reading and critiquing.

Writing contests for established writers abound, but ours is a competition for the novice writer in New Zealand. We've titled the anthology *Surfacing* to reflect the emerging talent that these Kiwi writers represent.

Many of our top entrants have gone on to win other writing competitions. Feby Idrus, our 2010 winner for her exquisite story 'Tell Me About the Love of Your Life', has since either won, placed or been shortlisted for the Page & Blackmore Short Story Competition, the Cooney Insurance Short Story Competition and the Rangitawa Publishing Short Story Competition. She has also been published in the literary journals *takahē* and *Headland.*

Another writer who has continued to achieve success is Jade du Preez, the 2013 winner of the New Zealand Writers College Short Story Competition. Jade was published in the short story anthology *Counting Down the Seconds* and won the Wallace Foundation Short Fiction Contest in 2016. We are proud to have provided a stepping stone to further literary achievements for these writers.

The title of the anthology also reflects the themes brought to the surface by the writers of these stories – often issues of regret, loss, confusion, violence and self-destruction. It is not surprising that these themes feature prominently in these stories. With the highest rates of domestic violence, sexual violence and teen suicide of the 22 countries in the Organisation for Co-operation and Economic Development (OECD), New Zealanders know all too well what darkness lurks beneath the seemingly tranquil surface of our island life. These writers have shown, with great subtlety, some of the uncomfortable truths about the shadow side of humanity. Their stories have also shown the role of art – to transform darkness into meaning and self-insight.

A huge thank you to our outstanding judges, all notable writers from around the world: Ginny Swart, Alex Smith, Karen Jeynes, Sonny Whitelaw, Andrew Salomon, Fiona Ingram, to name just a few.

Layout and typesetting were done by Koos Turenhout, who also supplied the beautiful photo of Piha beach for the cover of the anthology. Editing was done by one of our graduate students, Jacqueline Ross-Watt.

Thank you for all your hard work in making this publication possible.

Nichola Meyer (Principal of NZ Writers College)

February 2019

CRABS

Moira Lomas

I started the fire the way Dad had taught me to. First, I set light to the dried pīngao I'd collected, my hands cupped round the grass as a makeshift windbreak, protecting the baby flames. Then small twigs, which I carefully placed, one by one, gradually adding larger and larger pieces as the fire took hold. Once there was a solid base, with flames that danced and laughed in the wind, I added pieces of driftwood from the stack. Dry and white like old bones, they crackled with an orange flame.

'Hey, Jackson! Is it going yet? Can you gimme a hand?'

I looked up. Alex was knee-deep in the ocean, his arms wrapped around the old yellow net. I ran down to help him drag it out of the shallows and onto the sand.

Crabs don't like much. They didn't like being pulled out from the ocean. They didn't like being caught up amongst the old net. They didn't

like me disentangling them, no matter how careful I was. I plopped them in the bucket where the first few scuttled round the edges, looking for somewhere to hide. They didn't like being there either. The only things they seemed to like were chicken carcasses and being under water.

When I got back to the fire, Dad was sitting beside it. He looked at me with hooded, bloodshot eyes, the familiar sweet smell of alcohol on his breath.

'Crabs,' Dad said.

'Yup, crabs.' I put my shirt over the bucket to keep them shaded.

'Overfishing,' he muttered as he dragged on his cigarette. 'No snapper to keep them down. Nasty little fuckers.' He flicked his cigarette butt into the fire. I went back to the sea to fill the boil-up pot. When I got back, he was gone.

It was hard to keep the pot steady on the fire. I laid a couple of larger, straighter pieces of wood over the coals to rest it on, but it was still pretty wobbly. Especially when we dropped the crabs in. The crabs didn't like the boiling water either. They jumped around like crazy when we dropped them in. After our feed, we returned to the sea, diving under to wash our hands and mouths. We dropped the shells back where the crabs had been pulled from. I wondered if crabs liked eating the scraps of their friends and family. Did they even know it was them?

Dad and I lived in the house he'd grown up in. My room was Dad's old room, and I slept in Dad's old bed. At night, salty and dry, I ran my fingers over the Han Solo sticker on the edge of the top bunk. As the sound of the waves lulled me to sleep, I thought about what Dad must have been like when he was a kid. The sticker made me feel closer to him.

I was woken by the heavy drumming of rain on the roof. Flashes of light came through the crack in the curtains. I reached down and pulled the blankets up around my neck. I felt safe and dry in the dark. Is this how the crabs felt before we pulled them out into the heat and the light?

The storm brought welcome relief from the heat, and from Alex. It was a good excuse to stay in bed and play on my phone. We had certain rituals when Alex came to stay over the summer. Crabs was one of them. Getting a little respite from him when the storms came was another. I wasn't used to being around people. Dad didn't come home on the days it was stormy. I didn't miss him. He was probably holed up at a mate's place, on the piss. The weather was too filthy for anyone to go anywhere.

My mattress jerked upwards, startling me.

'Stop kicking or I'm gonna come down there and beat your ass,' I hissed at Alex.

'Shut up, dick! It's stopped raining.' He shoved his feet into my mattress again. 'Get up. We need to look for ambergris.'

Ambergris-hunting was another of our annual rituals. When we were younger, we thought we would find enough to make ourselves millionaires. Now we both knew there was about zero chance of finding any, but we didn't want to admit it.

The bay curved out wide in front of us, the clouds retreating from the whitecaps. We walked along the high-tide mark, looking at the treasures the sea had brought in. More driftwood, seaweed of different colours and shapes, scallops dredged up by the storm and dying in the sun. A cast of hermit crabs moved slowly in a shallow puddle. Some had lost their shells and were challenging those who still had homes on their backs. They were vulnerable with their soft, curled bodies on display.

'Come on.' Alex thrust his hands deep into his hoodie pockets as he walked off.

'In a minute.' I collected a few whelk shells and carefully placed them near the naked crabs.

'Leave them.'

'Nah, something could come and eat them.' I waited, watching the crabs test the fit of the shells with their claws, then try them on for size. I wanted to be sure they were safe.

Our shadows disappeared as the sun drove the moisture from the air. We stopped for a break, sitting on our hoodies and enjoying the heat on our arms and backs. It was our usual place to stop, near the remains of our fire

from a few days before. I looked at the charred wood, contrasting with the white sand, and smiled at the memory. It was pretty good having Alex here.

We were nearly at the rocks at the end of the bay when Alex spotted it.

'Shit! What's that?'

Something big rested where the tide had retreated.

'A seal maybe.' I strained my eyes to make out what it was. 'Or a massive pile of ambergris.'

'You're such a dick.' Alex punched me on the arm.

We made our way towards it, its form becoming clearer, and then broke into a run.

'Shit.' Alex and I stood together, trying to comprehend what was in front of us. There were heaps of crabs. Big ones. More than I had ever seen at once. They surrounded a body, the face buried in the damp sand. The skin was a greyish white and swollen tight with gas. I was tempted to poke it with a stick, but I knew we'd get hot air and guts spewing all over us. Across the bloated shoulder was a pattern of black swirls. I stared at the familiar design, feeling a tightness in my stomach and in my fists.

'Shit,' repeated Alex.

I turned and stared out to sea, thinking about the tattoo and the Star Wars sticker on the bunk. And the crabs.

Nasty little fuckers.

Moira Lomas

Moira Lomas has been a high school teacher as well as a food technologist. She also runs a recipe blog for friends, where she occasionally posts what she's been eating.

A post on Facebook inspired her to give writing a try. As she lives at the beach, she thought she'd write about what she knows. 'Crabs' is the first piece of fiction she has written since she was at school thirty years ago.

'Crabs' was the winner of the 2018 New Zealand Writers College Short Story Competition.

REGRETS

Aaron Ure

Journal Entry

22 February 2010

11 a.m.

Hell found me. Nope, I don't like that title.

Hell will find you. No, not that either.

After narrowing it down and refining it time and time again, I keep coming back to the same title. Hell found me. I am tired of these words buzzing around my cerebral vacuum. The thought has tormented me from the moment I saw him. In my bloody town, at my bloody church.

Since his untimely arrival, my journal has become a serious novel. So little time has passed since I saw him, yet there are more entries now than in the last two years. Before his return, life had become settled and divinely

routine. Each day was well-ordered and timed to avoid too many hours alone – thinking, reminiscing, debating with myself. Have I made the right decision? A single glimpse of him brought back every second of our lives together, a needle piercing and reopening an old wound.

Three years ago, I had told him, 'No more. I can't do this anymore.'

I was going to leave that night and return to the church that raised me, chastised me and poured guilt over me at every mass.

I still see the look of total disbelief on his face, as if I had just shipwrecked his life on the way to the Promised Land. He stood there in his washed out denims and crisp white T-shirt, the cashmere scarf I had bought him casually draped over his shoulders. A little god to most but a sizeable G to me. As the tears welled up in his beautiful brown eyes, I saw my reflection clearly. I felt like a monster.

That final moment has never left me. For three years, the memory of him has challenged my every idle thought and chastened my dreams, causing sin to spill into my sheets time and again.

His body, so young and tender, matching my every move as we danced. The electric charge as we touched, at first sparking excitement, then energising passion. The afterglow, lying with my head on his chest as it gently rose and fell, my hands caressing and holding him. Yes, the title was right after all. Hell found me. But only I can call it hell. No one else will understand.

They will see a mild, shorter man with a wry smile and engaging eyes.

I will see three years of heartache standing in front of me.

They will embrace his hand and shoulder as a friend and brother.

I will stand back for fear of losing my sobriety.

They will exchange civilities and invite him to stay a while.

I will cry for release from my torment with every moment he chooses to stay.

They will sit beside him in the pew, smiling at the potential new disciple.

I will burn with rage and jealous desire as they sit too close.

Hell has found me, and I will know no reprieve.

As if this is not enough, he now makes his way towards me – smiling at me, disarming me, melting me.

'Markus, it is great to see you again. How have you been?' his voice chimes, as if no time has passed between us.

'Thomas, it has been a while.' My hand reaches out for his, and I feel my heart stumble. Then that spark as our flesh meets, igniting dormant passion. 'I hope you have a pleasant stay' is all I can manage before I turn to leave. Again.

Thank God that's over. At home, amidst my statues and candles, I try to find comfort from the turmoil brewing inside me. I pace the house in a fog, shuffling in and out of every room, scheming, planning how not to fall apart.

Somewhere in the back of my mind, I am aware of bells ringing. Assuming it is my inbuilt alarm system on full tilt, I dismiss it repeatedly. At last it stops. I slump to the hall floor to find a moment's reprieve, some breathing space. I hear soft footsteps come to the front door. There's a light knock. A hand presses against the glass and then fades away into the afternoon light. A note has been slipped beneath the door jamb.

Note to self: repair the gap under the door. I had had my eyes glued to the hand at the window.

The note was restrained. *We need to talk. I will be at the Beat Café at three*.

It wasn't signed, but it didn't need a signature. Bile rose to my mouth. I could not hide any longer. I had to face him if I were ever to be free.

2.30 p.m.

Okay. Standing in front of the mirror practising my 'no thanks, I am truly happy' speech is a waste of time. Thirty-five minutes of wasted time, to be exact. I look fantastic though. I have chosen a light tan ensemble of three-quarter shorts, a muslin top and a light-knit jersey arranged over my

shoulders, tied loosely at mid-chest. I look relaxed and happy, content in everything except my own skin. The outward appearance is dashing. Underneath, I am a mess.

Walking up to the café, I note the pavements are inundated with local parishioners going about their lives. A tip of a hat here, a wave of the hand there, all smiling and unaware of my mounting fears. My mind races through scenario after scenario of what might go wrong in such a public setting.

Time stands still as my eyes alight on the tender face of love. I drop my head to the side. I blush. Dear God, here I go again, the giddy schoolgirl off for a secret rendezvous.

Composing myself as I arrive at the table out front of the café, I am back in adult mode.

'Thomas,' I say lightly, my voice without a tremble. 'Are you keeping well?'

'As well as can be expected, old friend. Are you okay to talk here?'

The note of caution and concern in his voice worries me. Thomas is not one given to caution. He is more of a gush-and-overflow sort of guy, emotional and truly out there. This change in his approach is unexpected. I sit deeper into my chair, studying him. Though still gorgeous as ever, Thomas has lost weight and is paler than I remember. He is obviously still physically strong, yet somehow inwardly frailer.

Waiting a moment before answering, I acknowledge that this is a suitable place to talk, and we enter into a conversation I had not expected.

'Two coffees, please. One white, with raw sugar. Markus will have his black, strong and as hot as you can make it.' Turning, he manages a weak smile. 'Some things you just don't forget.'

As I return his smile, the thought runs through my mind that some people you never forget, no matter how hard you try.

As Thomas talks of his journey over the last three years, I learn of his pain at our break-up and the devastation its abruptness had caused. Listening to how I had hurt him is painful. I ache to my core. We speak openly, as adults, of his feelings and the changes in his life.

Then Thomas breaks the news of why he has come here, why he has invaded my solitude.

'I have cancer,' he says.

I remain silent, unable to respond as he explains. He has liver cancer, diagnosed eight months after I had left him. Now he is trying to tie up loose ends, looking for closure. His voice is shaking and I know he is desperate for me to say something, but I cannot. I listen, struggling to hold myself together and remain aloof, professional. I nod sympathetically, voicing the occasional 'Oh, how was that?' as I was trained to do as parish counsellor.

Tears seep from his beautiful eyes and pool at the corners, before flowing down the lines of his face. Unable to maintain any degree of

aloofness, I instinctively reach across the table and thumb his tears away. With my free hand, I clasp his hands. Suddenly, I don't care who may be watching.

We talk until the café is due to close and then we walk through town. Silence is interwoven with short conversations and looks that move far beyond physical desire or youthful passion.

Thomas. I look at him, and I see a man I can love and respect, a man whose life was once an open book to me. A strong man, yet vulnerable enough to ask for help. My giddy schoolgirl response and my initial thought of hell having found me are gone.

In fact, I think heaven has opened up and smiles down upon me.

Journal Entry

14 August 2010

9 a.m.

I'm amazed that six months have passed. The time has slipped by, and my journal is now fuller than at any other time. It looks like a replica of some old manuscript – scribblings, worn pages with dog-eared edges poking out at odd angles, photos added here and there, handwritten notes from a friend and soulmate.

Thomas and I reconciled quickly. Three weeks after that first cup of coffee, he moved in with me, sharing my home, my heart and my bed. Together, we attended church and community meetings, with the surprising support of our little hamlet. Over the last few months, we have grown beyond ourselves, beyond labels, and have arrived back where we started. We are just two human beings who have found agreeable company and unconditional friendship in each other's presence.

Thomas looks smashing today. The casual elegance of cashmere always suited him. His hair, slightly thinner six months on, is brushed neatly across his right brow. Those feature cheekbones, as youthful and as clear-cut as ever.

As for me, I feel a little old and tired, but contented that the decisions made over these last few months have all been worthwhile. I stand here, dressed as comfortably as I can for our big day. We are surrounded this morning by so many people. I can't remember when I last saw half of them – probably never in a church. Yet here we are – Thomas and me, family and old friends, church and street mingling. Things are just as they should be.

10.30 a.m.

I'm shaking all over as I stand here, wondering if the pulpit's microphone will pick up the knocking of my knees. Contemplating the last six months as I look over at Thomas, I am amazed at how he brings out the strength in me. Going public on any matter has never been an option for me.

I have always preferred the background, allowing others to bloom my specialty. Now I stand here, in front of so many people, feeling neither fear nor judgement. Only peace. My mind is clear. The aroma of lavender and Chelsea roses fills the room. I am surrounded by beauty. I gaze at the flowers in all their splendour and consider what wonders the future may hold.

Then I look at Thomas, his strength still enabling me. I smile, contemplating my good fortune as I step down from the pulpit to be by his side.

A myriad of hymns and tributes follow our short service, with many well-wishers following behind as Thomas and I make our way out of the church. As the throng gathers around us, I kneel on one knee, hands gently resting on his coffin.

'Make sure my coffee is strong and hot when I get there,' I say. 'Don't forget now.'

Aaron Ure

I have always enjoyed telling stories to my children, and now to my grandchild as well. Storytelling is about expressing complex inner worlds in a way that allows listeners and readers to appreciate their own lives in new ways and become their own heroes. Without the support of my wife and children, many of my inner worlds would still be shrouded in darkness. At fifty-seven, I am still very much an adventurer at heart, exploring new worlds and listening out for voices that rise above the many.

'Regrets' was the winner of the 2011 New Zealand Writers College Short Story Competition.

THE HOLE

Regan Drew Barsdell

I hear movement and glance up, but it's just a fantail dancing in the branches of an old kāmahi. I lean into the shovel, wipe the sweat from my forehead, and the sun lights up the tiny droplets of toil riding my forearm hairs. Shit, look how deep that handle sinks into my gut. They say that grief adds pounds, but I'm pretty sure it's the bachelor's diet of oven chips and two-dollar pies.

Never had the patience for cooking. The boy took it over when Sharon left. Pretty good at it too. Leaves me a plate in the fridge. Half a tajine, a portion of meat-free shepherd's pie, maybe a pumpkin curry.

Okay, let's dip the spade in and see how deep we've got. Mm, needs to be maybe a foot deeper. Gotta bury your sorrow deep enough so that you aren't tempted to dig it back up again.

Leaning over the hole, I think about the other six families who've been doing the same thing, pitching their misery and regret into the earth.

All those displaced souls, standing in their backyards beside unridden skateboards, untouched bikes, collapsed scooters. Looking up at the bright sun and wondering why they can't feel its warmth.

Maybe some of them have vowed to ease up on the blame game, but I know it ain't easy. Blame is like bad advice or a freshly carved Christmas ham. Once you start dishing it out, it's hard to stop. You start off singling out individuals, but pretty soon you're spreading it far and wide – the school, the police, the government. And while you're going wide, why not blame America? They've been popularising this sort of shit for generations now – serial killers, terrorism. And now high school shootings.

Eventually, you realise that trying to shift blame to another nation, to another generation, to the things you can't control is shortcut thinking. Really, the only person you've got the right to deal out blame to is yourself.

I'm almost down another foot or so, but I'm fetching a scolding. Three distinguished looking tūī are perched above me, black-suited preachers in white collars speaking in tongues. Reckon a cluster of them's gotta be called an inquisition. There's a pause in their interrogation, and in the silence, I guess emotion overwhelms intent.

The simple truth is that we all knew those two dark souls would spawn something like this. Between them, they tick every box on the psychopath checklist. Everyone knows the Spencer kid skinned the Peterson's shih tzu. Kidnapped it, tied it to a clothes line and then skinned the poor thing. And no one doubts that that smug prick, Michael Barrett,

burnt down the Maybury Street dairy and most likely lit up the back end of the day care centre a couple years back. But the courts don't convict on common knowledge.

The surest indicator though is the abuse. The Barrett boy's dad was jailed eight years ago for beating six pints of resistance out of his wife. And God knows no wife-beater ever got arrested on the first swing. That kid must've witnessed some brutal stuff from the sidelines. And I know Jacko Spencer from a brief stint in the slaughterhouse. He's a drunk and a coward, incapable of stemming the trickle-down effect of his wife's emotional abuse.

When those boys found each other, they became an interlocking yin-yang. Except both sides were black. Between them, they seeded evil, and now six people are dead.

I find my way back to the digging, shifting another sixty, seventy kilos of dark earth from between root and stem. It's cooling down now. A breeze lifts from the creek below, carrying damp smells and rustling leaves. I step up from the pit, needing to feel the sun on my neck again, even if just for the goosebumps. Too easy to spend all your time in the shade.

I walk a slow circle around the hole, crossing the thick roots of a totara, running a hand up the peeling bark of a kahikatea. I turn and lean back against its mossy trunk, peering up between the branches at a cloudless spring sky. I think of the boy, maybe eight-years-old at the time, lying next to me in the shade of a beach macrocarpa, his bare feet wiggling back and

forth. He'd asked me something about the bleached logs strewn along the sands, but I was distracted. He sat up a little and looked down at me.

'I reckon they're dinosaur bones. Old man dinosaur bones.'

I didn't reply, just let him tire of my silence. Then I heard him jump up and go running through that wind-licked boneyard, frightening seagulls with his strange cries. Dinosaur noises, I guess. Voices of the dead. At times like these, hindsight makes you flinch.

I step back down into the pit, shoring up tears at the corners of my eyes with my shirtsleeve.

Yeah, those boys began engineering this a long time ago. Must be two years since the boy first came to us. Well, to Sharon. But I overheard them from the kitchen. He told her they'd made the ginger-topped Cunningham kid strip down to his underwear, then held him to the ground and made him wriggle and cry. And as he's telling it, in the back of my head I'm imagining him, I'm picturing my overweight son at their feet, tears trembling at the base of his chin and …Well, I guess I might have pictured myself too.

I don't know what Sharon thought, but she ended up paying out grocery money on karate lessons down at the Baptist hall. Me, I'd have gone with boxing, but I'm not around enough to have much of a say. Long hours, night shifts. I'm out of sync with the kids' lives and insecurities. With Sharon's too.

It ain't easy feeling alone in the midst of a family, but then my dad left me to grow up with minimal tending. Mum, she left Dad for Cancer when I was four years old, and after that, the old man only ever got excited about two things – the unions and title fights. Then the unions were killed off by privatisation and globalisation, and boxing became a pay-per-view joke. So, most of Dad's last years were spent some place between apathy and despair. I guess it was inevitable I'd catch a little of what he had.

Suddenly, I'm running at the totara, taking a big swing with the spade. Bam! My hands explode in a shuddering ache. The tool flips and tumbles into the ferns, and I'm left shaking the shock and sting out of my wrists. I bark out a curse that silences the birds and stills the wind. This shit hurts so much.

I was actually disgusted by my son sometimes, by his gentleness, his weirdness. I withdrew from him early on, scared I'd infected him. But Sharon always stuck by him, by both the kids. I look up, expecting one of the preacher birds to be eyeing me up, but even the sun's decided to steer clear of me, dipping behind the hills.

Sharon saw those two degenerates even more clearly than I did, saw their impact on the community. So, six months ago, she marches up to Jack Spencer and gives him both barrels. Told him everyone knew his kid and the Barrett boy were into all sorts – bullying, thieving, drugs. Told him someone needed to rein them in, or there'd be harm done. Real harm.

Only problem was that she did this at the pub on a Friday night. She did it in front of me, and Eggy Sands, and Barry O'Neill. So, when she runs out of words and looks to me, what the fuck can I do?

'Boys'll be boys, Sharon.'

And even as I said it, I felt my heart shrink a size or two. She stood there for a few seconds, looking like she was eating her own teeth. Then she stormed out, and I knew that all her suspicions about me had turned from a gas to a solid. Two weeks later, I'm standing at the door telling Sharon she can piss off to her mum's if she wants, take Georgia and all, but that the boy and I are staying right here.

I should have let her take him. He'd be alive now. He'd still be breathing. They all would. I told him we'd spend more time together, and I thought he looked hopeful. But I wonder now if that look was actually doubt, if maybe the hope was all mine. I meant to do it, spend more time with him, but I was working overtime because we'd become a single-income family. I'd get home late. He'd leave the house early. And I'm not stupid. I knew I was gonna lose him – to a gang, or a religion, or a bottle of pills – unless something changed.

So, when he just asked me out of the blue, I didn't think it through. I didn't pause to wonder why this semi-vegetarian, caring, sensitive kid wanted to learn the art of killing. All I saw was a chance to build a bond. An opportunity to offer guidance, and yeah, maybe to show him I was good at

something. I honestly saw myself teaching him to put a hole in a target at fifty metres as the last best chance we had.

So, I didn't offer to teach him something else – fishing or bush skills or wood carving. No, I taught him to squeeze the trigger gently. I asked him if the safety was on. But I didn't ask him if he was okay. And I didn't much mind that he was there as I locked the guns away in the safe, didn't care that he'd see the combination. It wasn't him who was kidnapping animals or flicking matches. He'd never been abused, didn't drink. Sure, he was a quiet kid, kept to himself. But fuck, that's genetics. I thought maybe if we'd shared an interest, we'd both have come out of our shells a little.

I told him he couldn't touch the assault rifle until he got his license, and he was cool with that, just shrugged and gave a little smile. But I showed him how to use it. I did what the law says. I locked up the ammo separate from the guns. But the combination on the ammo box is my birthdate, which is the same as the PIN number for my bank card, which is … Well, it's the same as the combo on the gun safe.

I imagined us firing off a few shots while he chatted about his day. I imagined offering the odd bit of advice. Mostly just listening. But we didn't converse. I'd just say 'good shot' or 'always check your target'. He had a good eye, a steady hand, and he listened. In just a couple of months, he was shooting better than me. Pretty soon, we were just lying next to one another, staring down a barrel and ignoring the periphery. And now, in the shadow of it, I understand that for him it was never about building bridges.

I sink to a position of subservience before the hole, the cool earth quickly chilling my knees. This gun, the only one he didn't take, is a dreadful weight in my hands. I lean forward, tilting, letting the rifle roll into the pit. It rests there, relaxed in its power. I get up unsteadily to one knee, then use my hands to push myself the rest of the way up. I look about once more for the tūī, or even the fantail, but I'm alone. I draw up the spade and begin laying the earth back down.

He left a note, but it didn't say a whole lot. Said he wanted to be cremated, didn't want to be a burden to the earth. But I'm thinking a man has to bury something if he's to move on from this.

Regan Drew Barsdell

Regan is a novice writer, based near the seaside in Wellington on weekdays and under the mountains in a house truck on the weekends. He believes that the key to writing evocative and original stories is to draw on personal experience. This gives him license to try anything and everything at least once. Unfortunately, it also means that his debut novel, *Space Unicorns on Mars*, has been shelved for now.

'The Hole' was the runner-up in the 2017 New Zealand Writers College Short Story Competition.

TELL ME ABOUT THE LOVE OF YOUR LIFE

Feby Idrus

Eh? The love of my life? What's that got to do with your thesis? Boy, if I went about asking my elders cheeky questions like that when I was your age, I'd have gotten the strap.

All right, all right. If it's Ruthie you want to talk about – that's Grandma to you – you'll have to bear with me if I get a bit mixed up. She's been gone a long time now, you see, and when you're my age, you'll understand how the old memory gets a bit run-down. Things get blurry round the edges. But even if I forget everything else about her, the one thing I'll never forget is her laugh. Nearly gave me a bloody heart attack, hearing her laugh for the first time. It was just like her brother George's laugh. It's because of George that I met Ruth at all, you see. I'd served in the war with George, and we'd promised each other that if one of us copped it, we'd go pay our respects to the other's family. That's how I met Ruth, carrying out

his last wish … Funny to think George and I were strangers before the war. And now, here I am, still thinking about him. Missing him like hell.

Now, don't you look at me like that, boy. There was no funny business going on. You kids, you've got no idea what it was like during the war. When you go through something like that together … Well, let me put it to you this way. If you met a man who would've died for you, who you would've died for, you'd miss him too, wouldn't you? That's all it was, all right? Just two normal blokes.

What kind of question's that? Normal? You know what I mean by normal. I mean, back then, there was none of this 'men staying at home to look after the kids' nonsense. A man knew where he stood and what he was supposed to do, and he did it, no questions asked. It was easy. You didn't have to wonder, 'Am I supposed to be doing this? Is this the right thing to do?' No, you just knew you were supposed to work hard, get yourself a wife and provide for your family. Those were the things you had to do, and you just went away and did them. See? Simple.

Sorry. Didn't mean to grizzle.

Well, I met George at boot camp. I can still remember the first time I saw him – on his bike, riding down a hill towards us recruits. Even from far away, I could see he was smiling. The widest grin in the world, had George. And bright, bright as anything. Smile like a crescent moon, he had … And then he whizzed past us all, laughing.

George was one of those people who was good at everything. A crack shot. Played the bugle. Hell of a runner. And boy, when it came to football, he could give those Greek chaps a run for their money.

I remember once, we were stationed outside this wee Greek village, on our way to the front line. The moon was so full and so bright that night, none of us could get any sleep. It was like trying to sleep at ten in the morning. So, I stuck my head out of barracks, and what do you know? George's gone and started a midnight football match with the village boys! All those skinny little chaps, running round yelping and yahooing, and George roaring with laughter, scooping them up under his arms. Even after all these years, I can still see it. It's like a photograph in my head. Funny the things that stay with you, eh? Gosh, those boys were cheeky. One of them even booted the ball right at me! It went soaring past me before I could catch it, and George and I had to run after it before it rolled into a pigsty or some such. And then …

You know, boy, I'm a bit tired. Do you mind coming back tomorrow?

The old man lies in bed, lost in a swoon of dream and memory. At his age, the two seem always intermixed, like milk in coffee, a plume of one billowing and blending into the other. He is back in that Greek hamlet, watching George, a lean silhouette darting between the children, cast in shadow by that round moon with its silken light. That much is memory. That he knows for sure. But only dreams have this kind of sensory overflow. The edges of shadows have razor-cut clarity, and the air is steeped in the

smells of lavender and fresh bread. He himself is brimming over. The walls of duty and family and propriety he so carefully built, and poured himself into like oil into a jar, are now membrane-thin. Through them, he senses both the bracing cold of the night and the spike of lightning he always felt when George was near.

The boy has kicked the ball past him, and he and George chase it. It has rolled into the doorway of someone's kitchen. Through the open door, he can see a woman sliding a loaf of bread out of the oven. George picks up the ball, and with that incandescent smile of his, steps forward, offering him the ball. His eyes have circles of light in them, reflections of the moon. George takes his hand and pulls him closer, says he may die tomorrow (the old man remembers him lying in a red puddle, eyes dull) and doesn't want to die wondering. This is the last thing he wants to do, his last wish. Over George's shoulder, he sees the woman in the kitchen turn. Slowly, her face unblurs, her features sharpen. He recognises her. It's his wife Ruth, the accusation stark in her hard eyes, as if she knows who was really the love of his life, knew all along the real reason why he'd married her.

But then he blinks, and he sees that Ruth is smiling, her smile so like George's (but not quite, never quite the same). He looks back into George's luminous eyes, and is dimly aware that he, the old man in bed, is crying. He takes the ball from him, and George pulls him into his arms (and, as if through a loosely woven veil, he glimpses the memory of what really happened, how he pushed George back, how he struck him and walked away).

But this time, he recognises the swooping feeling in his belly for what it is – freedom. And he recognises that the normal, the simple and the easy thing to do is not to build walls, but to break them down.

Under that warm full moon, George leans forward and kisses him, and this time, he doesn't push him away.

Feby Idrus

Feby Idrus placed first in the 2010 New Zealand Writers College Short Story Competition for her story 'Tell Me About the Love of Your Life'. Since then, she has been published in the literary journals *takahē* and *Headland,* and has either won, placed or been shortlisted for the Page & Blackmore Short Story Competition, the Cooney Insurance Short Story Competition and the Rangitawa Publishing Short Story Competition. In 2018, she was selected as one of four emerging playwrights to be mentored in the Fortune Theatre's 4X4 Emerging Playwrights Initiative. Her play *LOveLetters* was workshopped during this programme and given a staged reading. In August 2019, her new play *Love and Care* (working title) will be premiered at a festival in Dunedin that celebrates and promotes the work of female playwrights.

'Tell Me About the Love of Your Life' was the winner of the 2010 New Zealand Writers College Short Story Competition.

EXPUNGE

John Drennan

George was a lucky man. He looked over his fence at the destruction next door. Not so lucky. His neighbours' house was unrecognisable. Ex-neighbours. God. Only the colour of the bricks, the weatherboards and the bits of iron roof amongst the rubble tied in with his memory of it. He exhaled noisily and leaned on the freshly stained fence. Nothing wrong with it at all. Not even a mark. And yet, just metres away … Well, it was heartbreaking.

They weren't sure where the Montgomerys were when it hit, but at half past three in the morning, they were probably in bed and knew very little about it. They brought in a dog to sniff them out and then dug them up later that morning. Took three blue bags away on stretchers, and that was that. It was on the news, of course. Tornado. Small northern community, three killed, one house destroyed (pictures of), power lines down, unusual weather event, residents in shock. That was George. People he had known for years had been squashed flat right under his nose. It was shocking.

Ironically, up until a few days ago, Al Montgomery was almost perfectly round. The man was a human beach ball. In certain lights, he had a cartoon-like appearance that begged a photo, and a nasal profile any Roman would covet. He blamed his portly figure on his wife, Cath, for feeding him three huge meals a day and introducing him to pay-TV sports on comfy sofas. It's probable that the abnormal amount of beer they both consumed, while watching sport on comfy sofas, also contributed. At one point, his doctor advised him to start dieting and stop drinking immediately or face certain death within two years. He was more than a decade out, as it happens, but this shook Al up enough to take notice. He reasoned that beer was fattening, but certain other brews were less so. White wine, for instance. And gin. Al chose gin, and as a man incapable of sipping anything, this was a dangerous move. One pumped stomach and an ambulance later, he acquired an aversion to anything vaguely gin-like, including water. Beer, mate?

Al met Cath at the first and last speed dating night at the Memorial Hall in town. Five hopefuls turned out. It was extremely speedy. He said he was struck by her looks the first time he saw her, which just goes to show there can be no accounting for taste. She was a small, thickset woman, with those weird light-blue eyes, set a bit too far apart. No cheekbones at all. Without fail, she wore her blonde hair in a bun on top of her head. Said it made her look taller. Nice woman, Cath. Very caring, beautiful voice. Hard case too. Al reckoned she was way too good for him, and he was probably right.

Then, three years ago, Al's dad, Monty, came to stay with them. Al's full name was actually Allen Montgomery II, his father being the original. What that was about is anyone's guess. Monty was steadily losing his marbles and could no longer live on his own. Cath was not impressed, and who could blame her? But they couldn't afford professional care for the old man. There was no other option.

Unlike his son, Monty was tall. With a full head of wiry white hair, false teeth several sizes too large for his mouth, and the biggest hump since Quasimodo, he was certainly a striking figure. And he could talk when he felt like it. When he was in the mood, anyone straying too close to Monty was baled up and subjected to seemingly endless monologues about anything from shoe polish to fertilizer. There was no question of getting a word in edgeways. Back away, and he followed you, oblivious. The only chance of escape was to point one way and run the other. He even threw his teeth at George one day. Well, lobbed his teeth. Denture grenade. Did a lot of nocturnal wandering, a bit of banging, let out the occasional wail. Peed in the chest freezer in George's shed once. Al tried locking him in his room at night, but the old bugger attempted to dig his way out. Got the carpet up all right, but needed a crowbar or a claw hammer for the floorboards. Al's golf clubs kept breaking. That's got to be upsetting. You might say that Monty was going over the wall, but he wasn't going quietly.

To give Cath a break, Al took Monty to the RSA on Saturday afternoons, to have a chat with the only other World War II veteran left in the district. His old friend Malcolm was a communist from way back. Used

to write endless letters to the editor, denouncing America and quoting inspiring Soviet ideals. Thought Brezhnev was the business and Stalin a great dictatorial success – never mind the butchery of millions. When the Wall fell, Malcolm was distraught. He hit the booze for a messy year and a half and ended up in a wheelchair. A couple of organs collapsed. Lucky to survive, by all accounts. Didn't have much to say after that, just sat in his chair all day being crushingly disappointed.

Monty's war lasted about eleven months. Doesn't sound like a long time, but Monty said it was plenty. It ended when he fell through a partially collapsed wall, landing on rubble several feet below. Broke his pelvis. Malcolm reckoned he was a lucky bastard. Last thing he said to him before he was stretchered away. He did another year before he could make it home.

Anyway …

George stood up and stretched. His back and arms were stiff and sore. Wasn't sure how long he'd been staring into space, but the light was fading and it was getting chilly. He looked at his watch. Time for a good, stiff drink. Give 'em a toast or two. Yeah, what the hell. He turned and went inside.

Monty awoke in alarm to total darkness. Heavy rain lashed the iron roof in blasts, driven by vicious gusts of wind. For a few moments, he was completely lost – adrift, blind, cartwheeling, with a sour fear lurching in his stomach. He flinched as the window pane rattled, sounding like a volley of shots.

He stood in a small cobbled courtyard, dragging deeply on the French cigarette Haines had lit for him. There were four of them – Monty, Butler, Haines and Captain Lucke – stamping their feet, rifles slung over their shoulders. It was cold. Bloody cold. Small drifts of snow remained along the base of the stone walls. Cigarette smoke hung in lazy, dense clouds above their heads. In front of the far wall, stood a six-foot post. Several cobbles had been removed and the post had been driven into the ground. It was splintered around the edges and pockmarked with bullet holes. Dark stains ran its length. Someone was going to be tied to it and shot. By Privates Montgomery, Butler and Haines. Good morning, and welcome to today's firing squad. Thanks for coming.

It was not that Monty had never shot anyone before. He had. You pretty much had to shoot them before they shot you. Nice and simple for the troops. Live or die. He did remember the momentary shock of the first – the soldier walking into the ground like someone pretending to disappear down a flight of stairs behind a desk. No time to think about it until later. Some didn't think about it at all. This though. This was different. He hoped it wasn't one of theirs. Could be a deserter, he thought. Bloody hell. Heavy footsteps approaching from around the corner. Hobnails. Here we go then.

'Form up.'

Lucke's command echoed off the surrounding walls. They shuffled into a line, unslinging their rifles. Two soldiers marched into the courtyard and over to the post, a prisoner between them. Short and slightly built,

baggy brown trousers, grubby white shirt, worn grey pinstriped jacket, shorn brown hair. He was truly shocked to realise it was a woman, maybe twenty, maybe even younger. Oh no. They tied her hands to the wood behind her back. One of them took a black cloth from his pocket and secured it around her head. Then they stepped away to either side of the wall. Took less than ten seconds. Efficient.

'Ready?'

The three men loaded a round in each chamber. Monty stole a look at Lucke. His eyes were fixed on the woman, motionless except for her laboured breathing, head up. Trapped. Thanks God. Thanks for this.

'Aim.'

Monty raised his gun to his shoulder. Everything was slowing down. Heat prickled his back as he peered along the barrel to a spot between her breasts, his finger resting on the trigger. Thought about closing his eyes …

'Fire.'

Monty groped around for the lamp on his nightstand and flicked it on. He was awash with sweat. Damn it. He'd seen that day enough. He was sick to see it. That and others. They wouldn't leave him alone. Now his back pain was intense, his tortured spine in agony. Rain turned to hail, thundering against the roof. He eased his legs out of bed and slowly, painfully stood up, panting with the effort. He limped down the hall and into the kitchen for a glass of water. The house was shaking badly in the violent gusts. He turned

and squinted through the large kitchen window. A flurry of movement in the blackness. Then flashes of fizzing blue light as it approached. The lights went out. There was a smack as the garden shed exploded at the bottom of the property. Pressure squeezed his skull. Everything shook. Darkness rose above the old man.

About bloody time, was all he thought.

John Drennan

John Drennan was placed first runner-up by the judges in the 2010 New Zealand Writers College Short Story Competition.

The judges commented that his story 'Expunge' was 'very entertaining', with 'vivid imagery' and 'everything a good story needs'. This was the first story John had ever submitted to a competition.

John worked in newspapers as a typographer (pre-press production) for several years, then in logistics, and is currently a fundraiser for Kidney Health New Zealand.

John had this to say about his win: 'This has given me a huge boost to continue writing and, once again, all people involved have my sincere thanks for their attention and appreciation.'

'Expunge' was the runner-up in the 2010 New Zealand Writers College Short Story Competition.

A CERTAIN HARDNESS

Collin Minnaar

The prosecutor asked about his demeanour. Was there anything about the way he acted in the days before the incident that sounded a warning? I suppose the prosecutor wanted to know if Jimmy was sane.

He's in jail now, has been for many, many years. Rotting in jail. Because that's what you do in jail. You rot away – your mind, your heart. Believe me, I know. I did time too. But that was before I learnt to use my brain instead of my fists.

I'm the only one that goes out there to see him. I take him things. What bothers me sometimes is that I might have been able to stop it, could have stopped it.

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I would always put up an advert on the local notice board at the dairy. Men wanted.

Now, I can tell you it takes a special breed of man to do this kind of work. A certain hardness, a certain drive and heart. You have to get up at five and drive into the forest. You work a full day, six or seven days straight, with half an hour's break if you want one. At home, you pack your sandwiches for the next day.

Sometimes we remained in the woods for almost three weeks. Just you, surrounded by giant trees in that filtered light. And the smell, the eternal smell of freshly cut wood.

We would always gather at the edge of the forest before dawn on Mondays. They would materialise out of the dark, raising the chin in greeting. I could always use extra men, boys who needed money over and above the benefit.

The work attracted a lot of jailbirds somehow. I suppose it was a lot like jail. Men only. You're locked up in the forest all day, and the rules are clear.

So, I would pick them carefully. Often guys would come up from some hard place where they'd been sleeping, one bottle away from a relapse. Or they'd be fresh out of the big house, looking like they'd rather be back. Others were ready, willing, but not able. Or able, willing, but not ready. You needed all three. If a man showed up before dawn on a Monday morning

with overalls on, it was a good start. But you know what they say about good intentions.

Some guys got picked straight away. Others you felt sorry for, or something about them spoke to your heart. Jimmy Ginepri you could not help but notice. He stood with his hands in his pockets, eyes averted, shivering a bit.

Jimmy was a string bean. Perhaps a few eyebrows were raised when I gave him his gloves and told him to get in the ute. I asked him where he was from. Ginepri's an unusual name for these parts. He said he didn't know, but it turns out his dad had been a boxer of some description and his mum a passing admirer. She gave him up when he was little, and he had been in and out of the system ever since. Jimmy didn't tell me. I heard.

But you could see it in his eyes, or the way his shoulders turned bony when you approached. He had curly black hair and was almost Italian-looking with those dark brown eyes.

Jimmy's eyes. Boy, what a drawback. It was as if he couldn't hide what he held inside. Most men can. They've got their ways. We all develop our outside face. The world's too hard a place to walk around in so exposed, so open.

Sometimes things went wrong. That's normal.

There were tensions, a few fights every year. The worst that ever happens is someone breaks a limb. The guys are keen to behave like men.

That's what men do when they're together. It's natural. You sort things out amongst yourselves. We're tribal, and it becomes a lot more obvious when things are pared down.

We worked with axes and chainsaws, chains. You got right into it, first day. It's not the Siberian gulags that I've been reading about lately, but close. We didn't fuck around. You knew what it meant to be in my gang. I paid well. I always did. But I wanted to see the fruits of my generosity. At the end of the day, that's the only thing that makes a man stand on his own two feet on this earth, with a sense of being somebody. If you can feel the muscles in your body talk, that's when you know you have weight and substance.

Some guys would struggle to keep up, so I'd have to make a plan.

After a while, Jimmy couldn't hack the pace, so I put him higher up on the slopes. I hid him away a bit and made him do odd jobs. Maybe there were a few sideways glances, but no one ever, ever messed with me. I demanded loyalty. I could have broken every one of those men back then, big brutes as they were, men who had known only heavy work. They knew all about me.

I don't know how it happened, but a man gets lonely out there. You're away from home for far too long.

Jimmy did not do a full day's work, but I paid him a full day's wages. At night, his tent was set apart. How else was he supposed to pay me back?

I guess Marsh heard us when he went for a piss early one morning. He saw me coming out of the tent, and his eyes held mine in the late moonlight, the dark trees bending towards me.

A few days later, we were high up on the slopes, a difficult job. We'd just got a beast of a tree down, and I walked to a clearing to get some air, standing there drinking from my flask. I hadn't even noticed Marsh up ahead, regarding me. He moved close enough for me to hear him breathing.

He was quiet for a long while, and I stood there waiting. Some boys want in, he said to the side of my face.

I remember looking up, up through the canopy to the clouds building up, before turning to Marsh. His eyes were hard.

I headed back.

I didn't go to Jimmy again, but I saw him in the mornings, looking haggard. The guys tried to cheer him up at breakfast, jostling him about, messing up his hair, treating him like the team mascot. He would disappear during the day and slink back at night like a fox looking for food.

One morning, I felt him staring at me, and when I turned, he stood there motionless, confident, framed by two giant pines. The look on his face made me turn away. So odd and twisted, yet smiling.

That's when I should have stepped in. We've all had moments, forever frozen in time like comic book pictures. I might have been able to make things right. I had the power. He would have listened to me. I'm sure of it.

Anyway. He walked away. I watched him climb all the way up the hill between the trees, flickering in and out of existence, until all that remained was the image of him imprinted on my brain.

You've heard the expression 'going bush'? Well, I'll tell you. They say when you crash, it's all trees and shadows.

It was almost time to pack up and go. It had been a long stretch of work. We were just about finished with lunch when he came running down the slope, blood-eyed. He jumped onto a dead log above us, feral, chainsaw in hand, its teeth circling.

I saw him cock his head, animal-like, the light slanting around him in shards. He stood there above us like a statue on a plinth. All powerful. When he jumped, I swear I have never heard a sound like that come out of a man. Raging, cutting and killing.

There were three bodies before we could get to him. He swung the saw at Marsh and buried it deep into his leg. That's when I jumped him with the saw. He was crazy strong, clawing at my face, a beast on those slopes. It took four guys to hold him down.

I still carry the scar above my eye.

When he finally went slack and his eyes grew glassy, we were able to tie him to a tree. In the hours before the police arrived, I waited for him to look like he could hear me. His head was sort of slumped to the side, but his eyes were wide open, as if he were dead. I spoke urgent words into his ear,

kneeling next to him. I said those words over and over so that they became the only truth. He didn't move, didn't blink, but I knew he understood.

When the police had left, I gathered the boys. They were compliant. I spoke slowly, with a low voice, so that they had to lean in. I looked from face to face. This is a circle, I said. It's a chain. There should be no weak link in this chain. What's inside the circle shall remain inside. Jimmy is different. We couldn't have known.

Just to make sure, I made us all hold hands, arms across our bodies, eyeing each other. Nobody said a thing.

Nor did Jimmy in the courthouse.

***

Was there a warning? Maybe in dreams. Maybe that's why you dream, to sort things out. Your brain needs to shuffle the cards, the pictures of the day. Reorganise the events, fill in the missing pieces.

Maybe. But this is what I've learnt. Acts of madness have their own logic, their own beauty. All you are left with is raw fact. You can try to piece things together all you like and make high-minded pronouncements that mean nothing at all. There is no need to justify. Whose justice? I can't justify things. Shouldn't have to. I took the good with the bad. I followed the internal design, played my part. You are welcome to view it through your eyes, your law. Feel free.

The strong man acts. He slakes his thirst. He does good things and terrible things.

I take Jimmy things he needs. Nobody else cares about him. He's an old man now, and we share the past. Sometimes he doesn't come when I visit. And sometimes, when no one is looking, I hold his hands across the table. To show I care.

But it's also in case he forgets that he is part of the circle. His hands are limp and unresponsive, his eyes downcast. He never speaks apart from yes and no.

It's not surprising I suppose.

Collin Minnaar

Collin works as a legal and policy contractor for the government, mostly writing policy papers for ministers. He lives on the Kapiti Coast and thinks of plots for short stories on the train home from work. His stories have made it onto various shortlists.

Collin spends most of his free time with his kids and so doesn't get as much time as he would like to write. One day he would like to complete the novel he has started.

'A Certain Hardness' was the runner-up in the 2012 New Zealand Writers College Short Story Competition.

NOT MY DAUGHTER

Monique Reymer

The Whitecoat stood around at the end of the bed, one hand in his coat pocket, the other fiddling with the stethoscope around his neck. Legs crossed, my sandalled foot subconsciously kept time with the rhythmic beeping and jagged line of the machine. Pipes and wires, bags of clear liquid, luers and tubes spaghettied around the motionless body in ordered chaos, funnelling down to a single electrical socket on the wall behind the bed. Mousy brown hair lay fanned out in limp beauty against the hospital-white pillowcase, a halo around the pale sleeping face. Just the chest stirred, faintly rising and falling in time to the wheeze of the ventilator.

'I need to talk to the family, please. If you'll follow me to the family conference room, second left down the hall.'

Reaching to pick up my handbag, I rose to follow the doctor.

'Not you, Mum.' Roger pushed me gently back towards the bedside as he got up to pass me.

I stood still, riveted to the spot. My jaw hung slack, unspoken words stuck in my mouth. My outreached hand stopped dead in mid-air, as if to catch the frozen words should they fall. I blinked. My blood ran cold. A chill crept up my spine, transforming into a flush of fury, disbelief and anger as it reached my face. Blinking back hot tears, I sat down on the waiting chair to prevent myself from falling. All the energy had drained from my legs.

Had I heard right? Had I really just been told I was not part of my daughter's family?

The others shuffled out the room, sidling past me, murmuring secret platitudes amongst themselves. My son-in-law, my granddaughters – grown-up and gorgeous – shuffled past me as if I were no more than an unused piece of furniture.

The room empty but for my daughter's body lying on the bed, I stared at her face. Her dark eyebrows that always defied shaping, her small mouth, her lips pale and dry. I stroked her cheek and sought her hand. Her fingers lay curled and limp, unresponsive.

I closed my eyes, just for a moment, and saw the ruddy round-faced baby; the dancing four-year-old in her tutu and ridiculous feather boa, lining her teddies up on the couch so that she could put on a performance for them; the adventurous eight-year-old climbing the peach tree, yelling at me to look how high she was, just as she fell, landing with a thump and a broken arm to show for it. I remembered her dressed, prim and smart, in her first high school uniform; her university graduation; her wedding day,

triumphant alongside this man she had fallen so madly in love with; her swollen pregnant belly; the glow on her face when she proudly showed off her firstborn. Just at what point had she ceased to be my daughter?

I opened my eyes. There she lay, the creeping wrinkles at her eyes illustrating the years of laughter she had had. Fifty-two years old. Fifty-two years young. I sighed, weary myself in a body thirty years older than hers, equally unable to do what once it could. It was my life that should be ending, not hers. I would happily swap places with her. But this body, having only a few years left, was of as little use to her as the one she was in. Guilt surged through me, draining the blood from my head, sinking deep into my belly where it churned and congealed.

It is not natural for your children to die before you. But this was not a life – her body changed in an instant. A moment's distraction when driving, gravel on the side of the road, a power pole in just the wrong place. My daughter was no longer inside this shell being kept alive by the workings of a simple machine, connected by a single wire to an electric socket. I had given her life, but not this one.

The faces re-emerged in the room, huddling guiltily in clusters.

'We can't do it, Nana,' the youngest one sobbed. 'They want us to kill her! They want to turn the machine off!'

Her father looked at me shadily, as if reluctant to share the secret his daughter had already revealed.

'We've decided to keep trying. You never know. She might recover. Medical breakthroughs and stuff.'

I looked at him through shaded eyes. My opinion was not being sought. I was being told what would happen to my daughter. Weeks of waiting and hoping had not brought any change. The MRI scans showed no cerebral activity other than that incited by the machines that kept her breathing. I shook my head silently. They left, unable to keep living in a room so full of dying.

Night crept into the silent room like a reluctant stranger. The curtains hung open to the darkened sky. It made no difference to the central occupant anyway. A chill descended. Only the pulsing line on the machine relieved the darkness. Her chest obediently rose and fell, rose and fell. The corridors echoed as staff hurried off to attend to lives that remained in the realm of the living. I sat as I had for hours, days, weeks – watching, waiting, knowing there was nothing to wait for. Emptiness resounded in our comparable lives: hers, prostrate on the bed; mine, slumped at her side.

There was nothing here for me, inside or outside of these walls.

With barely a further thought, I stretched out my left foot and flicked the switch with the toe of my sandal.

Monique Reymer

Monique has dabbled in writing in between raising four raucous children and wrestling a lifestyle block with a domestic zoo and an out-of-control garden.

A self-confessed coffee-snob and logophile, she enjoys showing off with cryptic crosswords. In her spare time, she has created *Zenders* with her two sisters, a Dutch farmhouse café just outside Hamilton. Monique has also been involved in property management to make it look like she's working, when all she really wants to do is write children's stories, junior novels, short stories and poetry.

'Not My Daughter' was placed third in the 2013 New Zealand Writers College Short Story Competition.

THE INVISIBLE WOMAN

Lizzie Nelson

On the first day of spring, Lydia Jones heads for town with a light step and a smile on her lips. She is going shopping, which is always pleasurable, but this time she has a purpose. For the past six months, Lydia has been looking for a job. But, for this morning at least, she is going to forget about CVs, interviews and rejection letters, and concentrate on finding a dress.

Her son Gregory is turning thirty, and Lydia needs something to wear to the party. Gregory and his partner Lionel are famous for large and lavish gatherings, where she knows their friends will dance with her and tell her she doesn't look old enough to have a thirty-year-old son. They will play disco music and serve proper champagne. There will be canapés with smoked duck and onion marmalade, and tiny slices of sushi on porcelain spoons. With any luck, there'll be a glitter ball.

Lydia doesn't mind that Gregory is gay and has adjusted to the fact she may never be a grandmother. And there are many advantages to having a gay son, although she has learned to ignore Gregory's advice on fashion. Once, he had her convinced she could still wear white jeans. He was wrong. He was mistaken about false eyelashes and eyeliner too. Instead of the ingénue look, they exaggerated her crow's feet. Instead of a doe-eyed beauty, she looked more like an aging Marion Manson.

No, Lydia is not going to appear foolish at Gregory's birthday party. She will purchase something subtle and becoming, something stylish and appropriate for her age. She has an image of floating fabric in shades of azure and cream to complement her skin tone and match the turquoise necklace Gregory gave her for Christmas.

She enters the first shop feeling confident, only to find exposed concrete floors with sisal rugs and an industrial bench instead of a counter. They're playing jazz – she hates jazz – and it's cold. She should have known better than to go into a place called Cutting Edge Design. But, once there, she can do little more than straighten her shoulders, and head for the clothes racks. After a few face-saving moments, flicking through sequinned singlets and white leather miniskirts, she will leave for the chain stores in the mall.

Lydia looks up to see a tall, pale girl with long blonde hair and emaciated arms, wearing a tube of black Lycra.

'How is your day going?' the girl asks with an empty smile, her eyes on her own reflection in the mirror.

How's my day going? Like she really wants to know. The chasm between them yawns dangerously, and she is tempted to mention varicose veins.

In the next shop, two salesgirls are deep in conversation. 'That sucks,' one says to the other before greeting Lydia with a yawn. 'Sorry,' she says, then blinks. 'Late night.'

In Hester's Couture, when no one comes to help, she tries on a blue silk skirt that is too small and a pair of earrings she likes but doesn't need. At Style Queen, she is ignored by the sales assistant, which is just as well as nothing is under five hundred dollars.

By then she is exhausted, so she treats herself to an éclair and a cup of coffee in a café. The waiter, who looks a bit like Gregory, brings a flat white to her table.

'Anything else?' he asks, staring into the distance.

As Lydia sips her coffee, she wonders what is wrong with her. Why does she suddenly feel invisible? Is it just her? Is there something wrong with *her*? Is this the reason she can't get a job? At the next table, a woman her age has hair dyed bright red and spectacles with lime-green frames. Perhaps she should get a makeover. She could buy shape-maker underwear and figure-hugging clothes to accentuate her curves. She could try a denim jacket or tight jeans tucked into knee-high boots. Is that the answer? Will she get noticed then?

While she is thinking about these things, the café starts getting crowded, and a man sits at her table, without asking, and opens a newspaper. He stirs sugar into his coffee and bites into a salmon bagel. He reads his newspaper, checks the time on his watch, but not once does he look at her. She might as well be invisible.

Lydia frowns, then stands up and leaves. Lost in her own despondency – no one notices her, she can't get a job – it isn't until she is out of the mall that she realises she's forgotten to pay for her coffee. She turns around, half expecting to see the waiter calling after her, but no one is there. Lydia is about to go back when it occurs to her that nobody will have noticed. Of course they won't have noticed. She is invisible. The idea makes her smile and gives her a strange sense of exhilaration. It was only a cup of coffee after all. So, she takes a deep breath and keeps walking – not too fast, not too slow. The invisible woman making her way to the carpark.

When she arrives home, the first thing Lydia does is check her emails to see if she's had any luck with her job applications. Waiting in her inbox is an email from the local council, where she applied for an administrative position. When she opens it, her earlier sense of exhilaration fades. She has been rejected. Again.

The evening newspaper contains the usual vacancies, most of them unsuitable. The few jobs that might appeal involve a long commute, and one, a personal assistant to a financial consultant, is probably not worth applying for. Dejected, she pours herself a glass of wine and thinks about the type of

competition she would be up against for the PA job – all those leggy blondes and eager new grads.

She is finishing off the sudoku when she spots a small advertisement at the bottom of the page. She reads it twice, then stares into the distance, biting on the end of her pen. I could do that, she thinks, and it might even be fun. Finishing off her wine, it occurs to Lydia that she has reached a time in her life when she deserves a little fun.

The next morning, Lydia gets up early. There is no way she is going to send in her CV for *this* job because they will just put it to one side and ignore it. She will have to see them in person and insist on an interview. Too bad if she doesn't get it. At least she will have given it a try.

It takes her a long time to get ready. She tries on one outfit after another. By the time she leaves the house, her bedroom is covered in discarded choices. And when she gets to the city centre, it takes ages to find the offices of Sanderson and Associates: Private Detective Services. They are hidden away at the top of a dusty staircase, above an Indian takeaway and alongside a dentist.

Lydia knocks on the door, breathing in a heady mix of onion bhajis and methylated spirits.

'Come in,' a male voice says.

She steps into a large office. Sunlight forces its way through grimy windows onto the bare floorboards and the walls lined with files. The man

who has summoned her is sitting behind a desk, shuffling through papers. He is thickset and balding, with bulldog jowls.

He gives her a quick glance. 'Yes?' he says.

She clears her throat, introduces herself, and tells him she's come about the job. She takes a seat opposite him before he has a chance to say anything. 'You're Mr Sanderson, I presume?' she asks in a pleasant voice.

'Yes,' he says impatiently. 'Look, er, Mrs …'

'Jones.'

He scratches his chin and sighs. 'The sort of person we're looking for …,' he begins.

Lydia can't afford to let this happen, so she interrupts. 'I know,' she says. 'I know you're probably looking for a man. And someone younger, but …'

'I don't want to waste your time, Mrs, er …'

'Jones.' She smiles to show him it doesn't matter that he's twice forgotten her name, but he isn't looking at her. 'I don't want to waste your time either, Mr Sanderson, but I'd like to offer you a deal.'

'I don't do deals, Mrs Jones,' he says. His eyes glaze over, and he takes a deep breath, stifling a yawn.

'It will only take a minute,' she replies. 'And then, if you don't want to hire me, I'll go.'

Reluctantly, he agrees.

'Close your eyes,' she says.

'What?'

'Please, just close your eyes for a moment.'

With a groan, he shuts his eyes. 'Now what?'

Lydia can't help but smile. 'Now,' she says. 'I'd like you to describe me – the colour of my hair, the colour of my eyes, the clothes I'm wearing. Don't look,' she adds quickly when she sees his eyelids flicker.

He is silent for a few moments. When he opens his eyes, he slowly shakes his head. 'I can't,' he sighs.

Excitement bubbles up inside her. 'I know,' she says. 'It's amazing, isn't it?' She pulls his newspaper advertisement out of her pocket and reads, 'Sanderson and Associates. Seeking trustworthy person for personal surveillance work. Discretion essential.' She waits for him to grasp what she is getting at.

He stares at her, then blinks. After a few seconds, his jowls tremble and he begins to guffaw. He laughs so much he has to take out a handkerchief and wipe his eyes.

She hadn't thought she was *that* amusing, but Lydia knows when to press her point. 'It's funny, isn't it? People don't seem to see me anymore. It's

as if I'm invisible. I saw your ad and I thought, that's perfect. I'm exactly the person he needs.' She pauses. 'So, you'll give me a try?'

He returns his handkerchief to his pocket, all the while studying her face, then gives another snort of laughter. 'Okay,' he says. 'What the hell. A ninety-day trial. What do you say, Mrs Jones?' He stands up and shakes her hand.

When she receives her first pay cheque, Lydia goes to Style Queen and buys a red satin dress to wear to Gregory's thirtieth birthday party. His friends have hired the West Haven Yacht Club and a Freddie Mercury tribute band for the evening. This is one occasion she doesn't want to be invisible. On the night of the party, she dances for hours under the giant glitter ball, drinks pink champagne from a tall, chilled glass, and eats whitebait fritters with wasabi cream, fresh Bluff oysters, and strawberries dipped in dark velvet chocolate.

Late in the evening, Gregory links his arm through hers and takes her out on the balcony to look at the moon shining over the water. As they stand side by side, breathing in the fresh sea air and listening to the fading sounds of the music, Lydia smiles quietly to herself. With a rush of happiness and tenderness towards the world, she stands on her tiptoes and kisses his cheek.

Lizzie Nelson

Lizzie holds a degree in psychology and writes because she loves to explore the way people react to their circumstances and to each other. Her aim is to produce stories that both entertain and make people think.

The judges commended 'The Invisible Woman' on its 'astutely observed detail' and 'elegant phrasing', and found the short story to be 'thoroughly entertaining'.

Lizzie is grateful for the feedback provided by the judges and delighted to receive the award.

'The Invisible Woman' was the runner-up in the 2013 New Zealand Writers College Short Story Competition.

OUT TO SEA

James MacTaggart

He woke up on the wrong side of the bed again. Literally. When he tried to swing his legs out of bed, they slammed against the wall. There used to be a nightstand and a bit of a walkway, but he had no use for either after his wife passed away. He'd moved her old nightstand into the spare room and pushed the bed up against the wall, but now he wound up sleeping on her side of the mattress. Funny how that worked.

Of all the things he'll never forget, the drudgery of a morning routine in its forty-fifth year is probably one of them. Same shit, different pair of mismatched socks. One is a merino work sock with a hole in the heel, the other has polka dots and barely comes up to his ankle. It wouldn't be the ideal combo for a job interview or any set of dress pants liable to ride up his leg, but it'd manage the daybreak shuffle into the kitchen. He flicks the jug on and fishes a mug out of the sink. The jug is bone dry, but he won't realise this until he catches a whiff of the element frying its guts out.

The carpet is damp from the cold, and the wallpaper is shaded with soot. The coal range will solve one of these problems and worsen the other. Beggars can't be choosers, and the coal range also heats the water cylinder. So, unless he wants to ferry jug after jug of boiling water from the kitchen to the bathtub, he has to get his hands dirty. There's no guarantee the jug still works anyway.

Electronics have a habit of shitting themselves around here. He reckons it's the sea air rusting up all the wiring, and he's too old to bother changing his mind now. He'll stick with this theory even on occasions when a deceased appliance has clearly been helped to the grave by user error, like leaving a metal fork in the microwave. It's always easier to blame someone else.

The door sticks on the coal range, jamming into place so that his hand whacks against the kindling box. He swears, and rightly so. That same damn spot has been taking a beating. A crimson blot appears on the bandage around his knuckles. Same damn spot, every damn morning. 'Lift and pull, lift and pull,' he mutters twenty seconds and a thimble of blood too late.

There's not a speck of dust left in the range after he's finished sweeping it out. You could eat your dinner off it if you wanted your dinner to taste like shit. He's always been fastidious about maintaining the thing. It probably helps him reconcile himself to the fact that he's been pumping coal fumes up, up and away for the better part of his environmentalist career. It

used to be a bone of contention every time he ran into a pack of dreadlock-sporting hippies, protesting outside the local coal yard.

He doesn't run into much of anything or anyone these days, but it doesn't seem to bother him. He's a creature of habit, even if those habits have changed. Take the old carving bench he wanders past on his way to empty the ash pan outside. It used to be covered with pounamu dust and wood shavings. Now it's just dust from neglect and spider webs spun between a scattering of old chisels and worn rock paper. His face twitches right on cue, and his bloodshot eyes flit towards the bench. A jerky face doesn't break his scuffing stride.

He empties the ashes into an old Talley's fish bin. One side of the bin is warped from the time when the embers were still red-hot. He spots the axe embedded in a nearby round of rotting pine which doubles as a chopping block. The axe hasn't cut deep enough to stop him wrenching it free. He's an old hand at this wood-cutting gig, and a wiry strength has stuck with him against all elderly, arthritic odds.

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I let him leave. Usually this is the point where I'd have to get involved and break the news that mismatched socks aren't really OSH-approved footwear for a retired woodchopper. It's the first day of summer though. The ground is warm enough, so he should be all right. Thank Christ. I'm happy to remain a fly on the wall this morning.

I stick around long enough to make sure he doesn't stray off the beaten path – through the back paddock, up the sand dunes, down the sand dunes, and on to driftwood city. I sigh and run a hand up my forehead, probing for any trace of a passable hairline. It's not good news, so I head back to the house to turn off the jug before things get any worse.

It's not just my sixhead that has taken the jam out of the doughnut. Every single day sort of does that by default, right around six in the morning when my dad forgets that he is about to knee strike the side of his bedroom wall.

'Forget' and 'Dad' are pretty much synonymous for me these days. I'm definitely not the first guy to watch his father rot away on Alzheimer's autopilot, but being the next sheep in line to get savaged by the wolf is piss poor comfort.

If he'd been reduced to a mewling, ranting mess, then things might have been different, less surreal maybe. Not like this shit. A robot of a man, with all of his character deemed surplus to programming requirements. No more environmental high horse or philosophical mumbo jumbo to go hurtling straight over my head. No more dominoes, Blackadder binges or Baileys with ice. This wasn't the man who taught me how to dribble a soccer ball and carve a toki. All he has left is a mastery for going through the motions, following the same damn routine that had been nagged into him for decades.

I know I'm not the best man for this job. I can see it in the unmown lawn and my unkempt reflection. I won't pick up the dead rhododendron flowers because if everything else in this shithole is dying, then they can too. His other kids might have done things differently, tried to talk to him, made an effort to reach him through the haze. Sam was always his favourite. She wouldn't have written him off. But they aren't here. They have lives to live. Whereas I've got a sickness benefit and all the time in the world.

I just can't stand it when he doesn't recognise me. Sure, my hair is a bit longer and my jacket could use a wash, but I can still see him through his trench line of wrinkles and dandelion patches of beard. If I could find the hole in his head where it was all leaking out, I would plug it with my fucking heart. I just figure that when a man spends the best years of his life sticking his neck out for you, you owe him some serious payback somewhere down the track.

A couple of Dad's lessons have stuck out to me more than others. I remember him getting angry on the car ride home from visiting pōua in the nursing home.

'If I ever get like that, then you better point me in the right direction and let me walk into the sea,' he had told us kids. He had a couple more that weren't quite as dark. 'Don't ever steal your best friend's missus' or 'relatives are all well and good in their place, as long as that place is on the other side of the door when you shut it at night'. Bonus points for being able to impart such wisdom after sinking that many glasses of Baileys.

Maybe he had a point. When I go down to the beach to check on him later, I could always try and point him out to sea. It wouldn't take much of a wave to knock him over these days. There's also option number two. Maybe he's better off on the other side of the door when I close it at night. Maybe he'd want that. I'll think it over while I sit here and stare at the rhododendron bush. I think I owe him that much.

James MacTaggart

Kia ora.

It's probably no coincidence that one of the first short stories I ever wrote was about a father and son. My father has been my biggest storytelling role model, and I blame him for getting me into the habit of staying up far too late with my nose in a book or my fingers on the keyboard. I also inherited his procrastinating nature, which is why I didn't write this story until my late twenties. So, here's to my Dad. And passing the buck. Chur.

'Out to Sea' was the runner-up in the 2015 New Zealand Writers College Short Story Competition.

BEING A GHOST

Abby Jackson

There is a cold wind brushing over me, but I cannot feel it. The only way I know it is cold is by the way she wraps her grey cardie tighter round her body and trembles as if feeling a chill.

She is beautiful. Large cupid-bow lips and almond-shaped bright blue eyes. But it is not her features that make her beautiful. It is her overwhelming sadness. I can see it coming out of her in waves, beating in tune with her heart.

Pink, boom, boom, boom.

Yellow, boom, boom, boom.

Blue, boom, boom, boom.

A rainbow of grief.

She has come to the Ulverston train station three times this week now. Usually around four in the afternoon, and for no longer than an hour. She stares at the tracks or down the platform, seeming not to notice the people around her or to be waiting for anyone. She is just there. Watching. She could be a ghost if it wasn't for that heart-thumping cloak of multicoloured sadness. Ghosts don't have colour like that.

This time, I think she feels me staring at her. I want to look away to be polite and not seem odd, but my eyes won't leave her. She looks my way out of the corner of her eye and drops her hands heavily at her sides. A line from a poem I used to love springs to mind: ten frozen parsnips hanging in the weather.

A bright light catches my attention and I turn towards it, losing myself for a second. Quickly, I whirl back round, angry at the distraction, but she is gone. The station is back to its usual rush of life, as if somehow she made time stand still. There is an old man sitting across from me on the opposite platform. He is looking at me so intently that I feel uncomfortable and decide to leave. But not before shooting him a dirty look to let him know that I do not appreciate his scrutiny. He just smiles and tilts his hat, continues to stare as I walk to the exit. Weird old man in his weird old outfit.

I think I will go home and lie close to my wife.

As I reach the station's exit and try to step out onto the pavement, my foot seems to pause in mid-air. For a second, I feel like I am floating. I am looking directly into her swimming pool eyes.

'I know you're watching me,' she whispers. Her whisper pours into my ear and spins around in my head like a yell. I can't say anything. I am frightened of her misery, her beauty and her anger at me, so I just float around in silence until she turns away and stomps down the street towards town, a wave of colours beating behind her.

I cannot breathe. I will my lungs to breathe and my heart to pump blood through my veins, but they do not comply. Yet my feet are working, and they start walking my empty shell of a body the ten-minute route through town and home to 9 Queen Street.

Walking through the door, I realise that my wife must already be home and out in the back garden. The kettle is boiling, and the back door stands wide open. I should've been a detective.

I don't want to see her just yet. Instead, I'll use the time to sit in my study and process the encounter at the station. The fact that she saw me and spoke to me has left me both unsettled and extremely happy. Sitting on an old brown leather chair that dominates my small front room study, I look around the room at all my books. I had always wanted a library filled floor to ceiling with poetry and books on philosophy, a solid oak desk and perhaps a three-storey view out onto the sprawling gardens of a manor. My career as a journalist had not earned me the pounds for a large library or any kind of

sprawling anything, so instead I turned the front room of our two-storey town house from an IKEA dining room into an IKEA library, with an old armchair for added sophistication. I loved being surrounded by my books with their papery souls. My study brought me peace of mind and great thinking ability.

Why does she make me feel so foolish? I am what people consider a wise man. I know people see me this way because they have told me so on many occasions. I have made it my business to be wise. I spend any free time I have reading, and writing about what I read. I have managed to build a life on this. People come to me for advice. The mayor asks me my opinion on politics for Christ's sake! I am not a foolish man! Yet I always look out for her at the station. I want her to come, so much so that I feel like I am almost summoning her. Her sadness takes me there, it keeps me there, and it keeps me in my study in my old leather chair, looking at my books and listening out for my wife.

I hear her come into the kitchen and start opening cupboards. I know that her familiar warmth will make me feel better and more like my old self again. I think of what I will tell her about today. Maybe I won't tell her anything. Maybe it's best left a secret that I was at the station today. After all, I'm not supposed to go there anymore. Decision made, I get up and head into the kitchen.

Christina

People who say that peppermint tea is good for a sore tummy are wrong. I think it makes my stomach worse. It feels like it's full of prickles. Tipping the cup down the sink, with a sigh that reaches all the way to my toes, I grab my long grey cardie and my house keys and head outside. I walk briskly to avoid the chill that doesn't seem to leave me, no matter how warm the day or how many layers I wear. It's like my bones are frozen.

I stomp down the street towards Ulverston town centre. Stomping. That's what Leo calls it. He says if I were a cat, I would starve to death because the mice would be warned off. I don't really see his point because I'm not a cat. It's a silly comparison. He finds it funny just the same. Leo …

It takes a suitcase on wheels scuffing the back of my ankle, making me jump and look around, before I realise I'm at the train station again. I've done it again! I swore to myself that I would never come to this place again, that yesterday was the last time I would 'wake up' to find myself on the same platform, staring down the same tracks. I don't want to be here. I don't even know why I'm here.

I am so sad. The sadness hurts me. It's in my blood, it's in my skin and, by god, it is in my heart. I cannot smile. I will never smile again. The pain is too great, the emptiness is too deep. The only thing I feel is that damn prickly peppermint tea. I clutch my cardie closer to my body, wishing it was a thick blanket I could wrap over my head and hide in, magically disappear, fall down a black hole and never have to feel again.

His eyes are on me. I can feel them, but I don't turn around to look. I don't really want to see. I want him to stop watching me. The helplessness of it all makes my body feel weak. I need to leave.

I don't want to go home, but I don't know where else to go. I miss Leo, and I'm so angry at this. This needs to stop. I cannot live with all this sadness and fear. There is no room left in me for any other emotions. I feel him chasing after me and turn around angrily to confront him, to let him know that I see him.

'I know you're watching me.'

Reaching the front door of our house, I hesitate a few seconds before going in. I feel a little afraid. Pushing myself past the discomfort, I head in. I go straight to the kitchen, put a peppermint teabag into my cup and flick on the jug. If I sit in the garden, I think I might feel more at peace, warmer maybe. The house gets so cold now, especially in the study, though I no longer go in there.

A noise in the house distracts me from the grapefruit tree I have been staring at for the last couple of minutes, as if the sour fruits will burst open with suggestions on how to cope with imagining, over and over again, how he could have fallen onto those tracks, how he could not have gotten up to get out of the way. Not even for me. Was I not strength enough to help him clear his groggy head and ignore the broken collarbone? Was I not enough to live for?

I know what that noise is. I know who it is. I don't want to be afraid, but I am because I don't know what to do, who to be, what to think about all of this. I am so lost that I feel like I'm swirling round and round like water in a bathtub when the plug's pulled out.

Walking back – stomping – into the kitchen, I pick up the phone and dial the number my friend Gemma gave me after I told her I couldn't sleep. After the third ring, a woman picks up. 'Hello. Janet speaking.'

I swallow to moisten my dry throat. 'Hi, Janet. I was given your number by my friend. My name is Christina Priel, and I am being haunted by my dead husband.'

I jump as a book falls off the shelf in the study.

Abby Jackson

As a kid growing up in the King Country, I was always writing. My first love was poetry, and I used to write poems all the time while I was growing up – about life on the farm and the weird things kids think about. I didn't really get back into it again until my early twenties when I studied at Wintec in Hamilton to become a journalist. I only worked for a few months as a journo for the DHB, covering their meningococcal campaign. Then I started working in public relations and never went back. So, I guess I've always been a writer, but I've never followed up on my big dream to become an author. Entering this competition was a step back into the world of writing, and it has given me the confidence to think I might actually still be okay at this. And now I want more!

'Being a Ghost' was the runner-up in the 2014 New Zealand Writers College Short Story Competition.

TILL DEATH DO US PART

Suzanne Main

Agatha hugs her arms around her aching body. The hard pew resists her bruised flesh. She holds herself still. The discomfort feels necessary, like that of the late-night driver who cracks open the window to invite the freezing air inside, in an effort to stay alert.

'The Lord is righteous in all His ways and kind in all His deeds.'

Head bowed, she can't see the pastor. Barely knows the man. They have never been church people. The pastor's baritone words hang damply in the cold air, drifting in and out of her consciousness like shadows.

With a start, Agatha realises that the room has fallen quiet. She runs her mind back over the pastor's last words. She has heard the words without absorbing them. The pastor asks again if anyone would care to say a few words about Peter.

There is an embarrassed shuffling behind her. Peter's service has been put together at short notice. A handful of people are dotted like outcrops amongst the pews.

Agatha sits alone in the front pew, reserved for family and the closest of friends. No one puts an arm around her or whispers comforting words in her ear. Peter has dominated Agatha's life for thirty years. Any friends she may once have had have dropped away like the sides of a crumbling cliff.

In front, at the corner of her vision, is the solid oak coffin Agatha has chosen. It is an extravagance she can barely afford.

Footsteps sound on the hollow floor. Someone is approaching the pulpit. Agatha draws a breath of surprise. A whiff of stale beer and cigarettes moves past her. Damn. It's Rocky. Real name: 'Just call me Rocky'. He is one of Peter's drinking mates. Was.

The pastor steps aside so that Rocky can take the pulpit. It's clear that Rocky hasn't prepared a speech. He clears his throat and shifts his weight from one foot to the other. Agatha watches him from behind her long fringe – a useful style that has hidden a multitude of sins over the years. She doesn't want to catch Rocky's eye.

Rocky begins. He mumbles something about the good mate Peter was. He picks up confidence. He espouses the great times they spent together in the pub. The laughs, the camaraderie. He doesn't say camaraderie. That's not the sort of thing Rocky would say. Agatha picks at a hardened hangnail on

her thumb. She twists her forearm towards her, bringing her watch face into view. She hasn't allowed time for Rocky. Hadn't anticipated this at all.

Thankfully, Rocky seems to be running out of ideas. After all, what did he and Peter share except pints? Not the actual pints, but the experience of drinking them together. Unexpectedly, Rocky picks up steam again. He remembers to do what people often do at funerals. He decides to share a story that isn't quite so flattering. To make the deceased seem more real, to lend more weight to the relationship.

'To others he was like this tough guy, but he was kind of a pussy too.' Rocky pauses. He looks pleased with himself. Agatha frowns at the thinness of her fingers.

'One time, I found a rotten pile under the house. Pete said he'd give me a hand to fix it.' Rocky's sniff reverberates in the cavernous space. Agatha sneaks another look at her watch.

'Anyway, under the house we went. It's a bit tight under there, but bugger me …' Rocky halts. He pulls an apologetic face. The pastor grimaces but says nothing. Rocky continues, 'Shit, sorry about that folks. Anyway, poor old Pete did not like being under the house. He got himself out right quick, didn't he? The boys took the mickey out of him something wicked that night.'

Agatha remembers. Peter had been humiliated. He'd come home from the pub earlier than usual. She can still hear the angry crunch of his boots on the gravel of their front path.

Rocky turns his rheumy, bloodshot eyes towards the large coffin. He takes a deep breath. ‘Pete, me old mate, I know how much you hated them tight spaces. I hope to Christ you’re good and dead in there.’

A chorus of gasps and embarrassed coughs ring through the church. Agatha’s hand flies to her throat, her fingers flutter against the high collar of her shirt. She forces them back onto her lap and clasps them there.

Rocky salutes the coffin. ‘Rest in peace, brother,’ he says, before stumbling his way back to his seat.

The pastor steps forward to reclaim the pulpit. Shaking his greyed head slightly, he opens his folder and resumes.

***

The service is finally over. The pastor invites the congregated mourners to follow the hearse to the nearby graveyard for the burial. This to be followed by morning tea in the church hall.

Several men come forward to carry the coffin. Rocky insists on taking one corner. They hoist up the heavy cargo and carry it solemnly down the centre aisle to the hearse waiting outside. As Agatha rises, a pain stabs at her chest. She straightens and carefully smooths the crinkles from her long skirt. She is black from head to toe. Catching her breath, she joins the procession.

When the pall-bearers reach the hearse, there is a little trouble juggling the coffin’s weight from shoulders onto open tailgate. Rocky

stumbles. The coffin tilts momentarily. A thud sounds from inside the box. Agatha's heart stops. Then the coffin is righted and on its final journey.

They travel in separate cars to the cemetery. Agatha has purchased (further expense) a double plot. When Agatha dies, they will dig a shallower hole above Peter and lay her to rest there.

The small group gathers around a precipitous hole. The green felt lining its edges does little to disguise the dank smell of dug earth. Meaningless words are spoken. The coffin descends on a contraption of pulleys and ropes. Someone presses a spade into Agatha's hand, holding a bucket of dirt out to her. Agatha takes a scoop of dark earth and lets it drop onto the varnished wood. *One Mississippi, two.* It lands with a hollow thud.

On the way back to her car, Agatha turns and looks back across the expanse of grass and granite headstones. Two cemetery workers are filling in Peter's hole. Their shovels work in a steady rhythm, raining dirt on Peter.

***

For Agatha's promised and generous donation, several of the church ladies have put together a table of baking. They serve stewed black tea from oversized teapots into chipped mugs. There is too much food for the assembled crowd, who have taken on an air of forced joviality now the formal proceedings are finished.

Somebody presses a cup of tea into Agatha's hand. Margaret, who lives two doors down from Agatha, approaches with her grown-up daughter.

Agatha cannot remember the girl's name. Margaret remarks on the lovely service. As they walk away, Agatha overhears Margaret say to her daughter, 'Poor woman. She's too shell-shocked to cry. The tears will come later, no doubt. It was so sudden. So unexpected.'

A hand grips Agatha's elbow. She tries not to flinch at the unexpected contact.

'How are you?'

Agatha turns. Doc McCarthy's morning-after breath envelopes her. *Are all men this way? Unable to lay off the bottle?* Years ago, she and Doc McCarthy had worked together at the same hospital. Agatha had been fresh out of nurse's training. The Doc had been sweet on her, but before it could come to anything, Peter had arrived in the emergency department. Agatha had bandaged Peter's severed finger. Three months later, he put a ring on hers, sealing her fate.

The Doc had been a bit miffed at the time. But Peter or no Peter, Agatha had known Doc wasn't the man for her. It wasn't just his excessive drinking. Back then, controls in the hospital had been a lot more lax. Staff regularly raided the pharmaceutical storerooms to top up their medicine cabinets at home. The Doc took the pilfering a step further, using the hospital's pharmaceutical supply for recreational purposes.

This borrowing from the hospital's drug supplies was rife. A few years after her marriage, Agatha herself would do it. At first, painkillers. Later, other things that she hid inside an old shoebox.

It was Doc that Agatha had called two nights ago. She'd reached him on his cell phone. The sound of glasses clinking and background music made it hard for him to hear her. Eventually, she'd made herself understood. He'd arrived at her doorstep a little later.

Taking in Peter's body lying on the hard concrete of the garage floor, Doc had taken hold of the nearby workbench and lowered one knee to the concrete floor, reaching for Peter's wrist.

'For god's sake, Mike. I was a nurse. He's dead,' she'd said.

After an evening of beer with whisky chasers, Doc was unsteady on his feet. Kneeling was further upsetting his equilibrium. He had gratefully heaved himself back to a standing position, the exertion causing spittle to form in the corners of his mouth. 'Heart attack?' he'd asked, wiping his lips on the back of his jacket sleeve.

Agatha knew by then how to keep revulsion from her face. 'Peter had been complaining of a dead arm lately. I begged him to see his doctor, but he never got round to it.'

Doc had nodded. 'I'll put that on the death certificate then.'

As Agatha had shown Doc out, he'd asked if she wanted him to call a funeral director. Some help to move the body perhaps? No, she'd replied. She'd do it herself. She wanted to keep Peter here with her until the funeral. A wake of sorts. She'd been a nurse once and was quite accustomed to death.

Agatha had all but pushed Doc out the door that night.

Now Doc was making small talk, offers of help around the place and a shoulder to cry on. 'Will you be all right on your own tonight? I could come over and keep you company.' He looked into her eyes.

The combination of whisky and jam pikelets on Doc's breath turned Agatha's stomach. 'Thank you. That's a kind offer,' she said, gently extracting her elbow from his grasp, 'but I already have plans.'

And she does.

Tonight, when the men have returned to the pub, and the rest of the world have taken to their beds, Agatha will return to Peter one last time.

She will lie atop the freshly filled grave and press her cheek to the dark soil.

She will imagine she hears Peter gasping for air, begging for release. She doesn't know exactly how long the Baclofen will take to wear off, nor how far Peter's sounds might travel through oak and earth.

Despite this, she will send her words burrowing like worms to reach him.

She will ask him how he likes it.

Suzanne Main

Hi. Here's a little bit about me, Suzanne Main.

I love reading. As a kid, most of my time was spent with my nose buried in a book, much to the disgust of my little sister who was always trying to get me to play with her.

Despite my love of reading, I chose a career path that led me away from words – training and working as an accountant. I have a love for numbers and logic too.

It wasn't until much later in life that I decided to try creative writing. In 2011, I completed the New Zealand Writers College Basics of Creative Writing course, tutored by the wonderful Helen Brain. This was followed by a weekend novel-writing course, where the idea for a junior fiction novel was born. Spurred on by the encouraging remarks of my tutors, and without so much as a short story to my name, I gamely, and rather naively, set out to

write it. Miraculously, albeit slowly, I finished *How I Alienated my Grandma* in late 2012.

In 2013, I entered my children's book manuscript for the Storylines Tom Fitzgibbon Award. Five months later, I was visiting my mother-in-law in hospital when my phone rang. It was Storylines. I had won the Tom Fitzgibbon Award. I was so excited!

How I Alienated my Grandma was published by Scholastic in 2015. It was shortlisted for the 2015 New Zealand Book Awards for Children and Young Adults in the Children's Choice Junior Fiction category. In 2016, it was awarded a Storylines Notable Book Award. It's currently on its fourth print run and is being released internationally in 2018. A follow-on novel is due to be published by Scholastic in late 2017.

In 2016, I began a Diploma in Creative Writing with Whitireia, and it was while completing the short story paper that I wrote 'Till Death Do Us Part'. I wanted to challenge myself to write something very different to my children's fiction, and I think I've achieved that! I am thrilled that this story has won the 2016 New Zealand Writers College Short Story Competition, and I am grateful to the college for giving me such a good start to my writing career.

'Till Death Do Us Part' was the winner of the 2016 New Zealand Writers College Short Story Competition.

THE PRESIDENT, THE SKI INSTRUCTOR AND THE WATERMELON

Jade du Preez

The watermelon hurtled through space. Like a perfect rugby pass, it spun on its longitudinal axis, striations blurring to a mid-green. Imagine it now with momentum slowed. One might even call it graceful. It was pregnant with black seeds, ignorant as astronauts as to the direction of up. But slow it was not. The melon barrelled onwards, a shock to the naked eye in the stillness of the morning. It was annihilated in 1983 on a sidewalk in Queenstown, pink innards splattered in a 1.5 metre radius, the rind split into seven tectonic segments.

From eight storeys above, a short woman beheld the landing and exhaled dragon's breath into the wintery air. She looked back inside.

'*Uso! Uso-tsuki!*' she condemned my father. Lie! Liar!

This event, the splitting of the melon, is largely theoretical. The blueprint for the story was provided by my father. I have simply coloured it in, and sometimes over the lines. We all need our backstories. Snow White had her apple, didn't she?

My father sat on the bed. His fingers were neatly lace, his mind shut off to the rebuke of his former lover. To his knowledge, no lie had been told. It was the truth that she disliked. The truth was that he had met my mother, that he intended to continue meeting her. He felt no distress over the watermelon. He was only present in body in that hotel room. His cogitations had been reassigned, diverted to orbit the topography of my mother's bosom. When I feel generous, I say it was simply his nature. A successful businessman does not occupy himself with regret. He moves steadily onward, no reverse gear in his manufacture. Always onward, always next.

The watermelon had been purchased as half of a pair for comedic reasons. I don't suppose they kept the photos. So funny, so decadent to purchase in exactly the wrong season! *Suika* it is called in Japanese.

'*Suika*,' the wronged woman had whispered to my father only the night before.

And it was only the night before that she had kissed his undeserving knuckles and complimented him on his heroic buttocks. In fairness, he could have raised the whole thing earlier. In fairness. That's easy to say when the parties involved are murky suppositions. At times I wonder if I have ever passed this woman, the melon's murderess, in the subway.

But with that action, her part ends. On the next flight, with make-up fixed and promises broken, she was zipped back to Tokyo. My father was left with a pants press, a walker's guide and his own conscience. He responded to these stimuli by fastening his perfectly pressed pants, tying up his walking shoes and striding from the building at a determined pace. Outside, the watermelon flesh had been cleaned away. Only ants traced the spilt juices of the crime of passion.

A benevolent council of mountains looked on as my father took his scheduled walk. It was a strange place, he considered. Roads and parks yawning with space, boys who played at thuggish mud sport, then skipped across harsh pavements, cleats swinging in plastic bags. It was all unordered and unoccupied enough to make a change in. The air sang with possibility. It was his first holiday in seven years, and it was worth it. To him nothing was, nor is, greater than balance. What could be finer than a destination mirrored in hemisphere and matched in suicide rate? Two long, thin islands rich in alpine retreats and lonely hearts. Queenstown, fit for a queen, with its buildings of stone, hats of wool and people of grim countenance. It was like stepping outside of real time.

My mother was a ski instructor. She used to drop down slopes. This combination of profession and gender was impossibly exotic to my father. Her hair was whisky-coloured. Her laughter, provoked by his mispronunciation, was loud, abrupt and somehow forgiving. She slapped his back for encouragement. He shakily remained upright. He winced at her example as it travelled into whiteness. She balanced lightness, momentum

and certainty. The curves of her body were rewritten in serpentine tracks. Far, far below she finished with a breakneck twist and a wave of powder. The swoosh whispered long afterwards.

Had she moved slower, she would have melted her way down. Her smile alone sent wisps of steam rising from my father's head. She was coal-fire radiant. My father clapped, though not too loudly. He suffered from a fear of avalanches and an exaggerated opinion of his abilities.

Over hot drinks and open fires, he asked after the Earnslaw, which was too difficult to pronounce, and became instead *The Rady of the Rake*. They touched on shingle groundings and strong-armed captains. The Māori names for things worked out better, the vowel sounds familiar to my father's ear.

'*Tahuna*,' he said.

'*Tahuna*,' she agreed.

He promised horizons of legendary Fuji and the mystical East. My father, diminutive in stature and magnanimous in bank balance, plucked my mother from that mountain as though she were nowhere near six feet tall.

Done.

Sold.

Next.

Upon arrival at Narita, my mother was full of expectation and growing fuller of me. Six months into her stay, the stream of old school friends and family members grew to a trickle. Then a drip. Airplanes weren't for everyone. Soon I was the only arrival to look forward to.

I arrived on time, born in the reverse order of dying. I moved towards the light, then into the gore. I moved away from the calming thrum of our combined heartbeats. We all have to take responsibility at some point. I took responsibility at birth.

I was the perfect combination of my antithetical parents, which is to say I looked like neither of them. More importantly, I sounded like neither of them. I took a good, long time to begin saying anything at all. It raised concern and motivated medical testing. Had I been quicker, things might have been different. Of course, no one considered the difficulties of receiving your life lessons in Japanese and your nursery rhymes in English. One must first differentiate the wood block from the marimba. I suspect such expectations are prompted by the unusual ratios of infancy – small of body, large of brain. Surely the first year could only be spent in shock at a world unshaded, unmuffled and utterly disjointed?

Had I spoken sooner, would I have said the right thing?

I will tell the story of my mother and her curse like this. One morning, when I was about five, my mother gave me a pat on the head and a packed lunch. My lunch included tasty rice, a flower-shaped egg half, a seaweed salad and plum pickles. The last were spring-green.

My mother said, ‘Be good.’

Off I went.

When the house had been quiet an hour, she pulled on her boots and spoke solemnly to the empty kitchen.

‘I have to go,

I cannot stay,

It’s time that I should go away.’

And she strode to the front door, grasped its handle, stepped one foot outside the door and then changed her mind.

Too much to ask.

On the morning of the next day, I was given a pat on the head and my packed lunch. This lunch had tasty rice, a flower-shaped egg half, a seaweed salad and turnip pickles. The last were summer-yellow.

My mother said, ‘Be brave.’

Off I went.

When the house had been quiet an hour, she pulled on her boots and spoke solemnly to the empty kitchen.

‘I have to go,

I cannot stay,

It’s time that I should go away.’

And she strode to the front door, grasped its handle and went through. She stomped her large feet, in their large boots, all the way to the first traffic intersection and strained to look over the tall buildings, trying to remember the direction of Mount Fuji. But the skyscrapers seemed bigger than mountains, more eternal than a forest, and she changed her mind.

Too much to imagine.

On the morning of the following day, I was given a pat on the head and my packed lunch. The lunch had tasty rice, a flower-shaped egg half, a seaweed salad and cabbage pickles. They were autumn-red.

She said, 'Be patient.'

Off I went.

When the house had been quiet an hour, she pulled on her boots and spoke solemnly to the empty kitchen:

'I have to go,

I cannot stay,

It's time that I should go away.'

And she strode to the front door, grasped its handle and went through. She stomped her large feet, in their large boots, all the way to the first traffic intersection and crossed it. She walked on until the buildings grew shorter and Mount Fuji became visible!

She was so focused on that mountain that she didn't notice her boots wearing down. The soles rubbed off like eraser shavings. She didn't notice when her feet went the same way, rubbed to dust as she quested on. And as her ankles, knees and thighs disappeared, she had some vague notion of the world around her growing taller, but she inched on nonetheless. When she was worn down to a limbless and gutless and breathless remnant, her body, still firm in its purpose, soldiered on, rubbing and rubbing away. In the end, there was only dust. To her great fortune, the wind took pity on her and blew the dust home to the mountain, and it swirled and sparkled in the snow.

There it is. The end of the story. But being divided in parentage, it is only fair that I tell it the other way.

My mother was a ski instructor. She used to drop down slopes. She felt alone in crowded streets and polite situations, and never remembered to remove her shoes. When she did, they dwarfed the footwear around them. It was true. She did yearn for Fuji. She wanted something bigger than herself. My father was so small, and I was even smaller. With her miraculous internal combustion, my mother could sustain temperatures well below zero. It was endless, meaningless courtesy that left her cold.

One morning, she braved Shinjuku station to find a train to Hakone, to Fuji. Her red head bounced above all the black ones, a lit match amongst the burnt out. Everyone was so busy and so purposeful. Everything was already organised, but not for her. And the more she thought about it, what was

there to do? Climb the mountain? Climb back down? The longer she thought about it, the more Sisyphean it seemed.

In the end, she did meet the train to Fuji. As the express hurtled into the station, my mother balanced lightness, momentum and certainty, and dropped from the platform.

It wasn't a curse. It was an error in judgement. My mother's fault was to yearn for peace. Peace! Peace in clear skies and rippling water. Peace as declared by photo calendars. It isn't a realistic desire for the living. To live is to have your every atom aquiver. There is no peace in the swan-filled lake. It belongs in a river traversed by an impassive boatman. My father tells me useless things like this.

He once said, 'She sung you songs. Don't you remember?'

I said, 'Of course not.'

'You know it. You know the one.' He said, 'Something, something, *Aloha*.'

I said, 'She wasn't Hawaiian.'

I have had many such discussions with him, using words that divide and repeat. I return again and again to wondering: had I spoken sooner, would I have said the right thing? What language would we have shared? What would I say if I were to meet her?

Jade du Preez

Jade du Preez is a solicitor. She has a background in visual art and an ongoing ambition to complete her first novel, *The Prince Who Would Not Be King*.

She won the Wallace Foundation Short Fiction Contest in 2016.

'The President, the Ski Instructor and the Watermelon' was the winner of the 2013 New Zealand Writers College Short Story Competition.

WHITE BOY WONDER

Victoria Louise Lawrence

Two on the ace.

Click.

Red queen on black king.

Click. Click. Click.

Black seven on red eight.

This was shit. I closed the game as Donna walked past, brushing lunch crumbs off her white shirt.

'Jake. You look … misplaced. Don't you have an aide-memoire to send to MFAT?' She rocked back on her sensible heels. Was there a special shop somewhere in Wellington for single, middle-aged, middle management public servants, posted to the Pacific Islands?

'Done.'

'What about the prep for the High Commissioner's visit to Savai'i?'

'Done.' I scratched behind my ear.

'Monthly Fisheries Project report?'

'Done.'

'Efficient today.' She squinted at my workstation. 'Why?'

'Cos I eats me spinach.'

'Hmm. You annoy me when you're idle.' She folded her arms across her chest. 'How 'bout a site visit? Get out in the Hilux. See your friends at the Ministry of Health?' She grinned.

'Now you're just being mean.' I was giving that lot a wide berth until the gossip died down. I glanced over at Semisi's empty desk. Can't roll without my bro.

'Nah,' was all I offered her.

'Aww,' Donna pouted, tilting her head. 'You're lonely! Someone missing his big buddy?'

Eye roll.

'White Boy Wonder lost without his Dark Knight?' she taunted.

'Don't be sexist.' I rocked back on my office chair, then shot forward as something cracked under the seat. 'Where is Sem?'

'Sick leave.' She turned towards her office.

'Three days in a row? He's never sick. What's wrong with him?'

'Dunno,' she said over her shoulder. 'Haven't heard from him since Monday.'

'You'd sack me for that,' I said.

'You're not Semisi.'

I swung round on my chair. 'Don't like it. It's not how he rolls.'

'Having to do all your work by yourself, princess?' She was enjoying this.

'I'm going to find out what's up,' I said.

'Quick, to the Batpole!' Donna grinned as she shut her office door.

Rubbish bin basketball was no fun without him. Rubber-banding the IT guy was no fun without him. Lunch wasn't happening without him and his wife's superb leftovers.

What. To. Do.

Fuck it. It took six rings before Semisi answered.

'Hey, Sem. Whatcha doing?' I slouched down in my creaky office chair.

'Hey. What do you need?'

I shot a quick look at Donna's office door. 'Uh … you got the Monthly Fisheries report done? Donna's on the warpath.'

'Last week.' Semisi paused. 'Anything else?'

'You catch the rugby last night?' I spun the chair with my foot and got three and a half rotations. Record!

'No, mate. I got to go. Report's in your tray.' He hung up.

Huh? I slouched into the kitchen and washed my cup under the tap.

Fetu, the High Com driver, nodded as he walked in and headed for the fridge. 'Jake.'

'Fetu.' I nodded back.

'Catch the game?' He opened the fridge door and leaned in.

'Yup. Hey, you're related to Semisi, right?'

'Brother-cousin.'

What the hell did that mean? 'You seen him since Friday?'

'Nope, but Mum's been over to their place.' He slapped a huge wad of butter on a slice of bread.

I watched him for a couple of beats. 'Anything up with him?'

'Why?' The whole piece disappeared in one go.

'He's been off work three days,' I said.

'Huff kif's fick.'

'His kid's sick?' I threw some coffee granules in the cup and sloshed in some hot water from the jug.

Fetu nodded, chewing.

'When's he coming back to work?'

'Hef in Hoffital. Priffat.'

'Thanks. Watch that carb intake, man.' I emptied the coffee into the sink, dropped the cup in after it and winked at the 'Clean it yourself!' sign.

Huh? Better get on the bat phone. Private hospital was for expats and politicians. If Sem's family needed to pay, there was something wrong. The man had half a village relying on his pay packet.

I left a Post-it on Donna's door. *Alfred. Out for the arvo. Kisses. White Boy Wonder*.

***

The hospital waiting room was empty. At least this one smelt like a hospital. 'Semisi Latu,' I said again, reminding the receptionist of my existence as she continued to click away on her keyboard.

I dinged the bell on the desk and grinned at her. She didn't flinch.

The pink toy pig clamped under my arm oinked and vibrated happily. Annoying little bastard. I stuffed the envelope of money into my back pocket while I fumbled around the pig's bum looking for a switch.

'Not here.' The receptionist finally looked up, adjusting the enormous red hibiscus in the knot of black hair on top of her head.

'You sure?'

'Not here.'

'Wait.' Head slap. 'Semisi is the dad. Kid's name is … Latu is the last name.'

She sighed, eyes still on the screen. 'Here this morning.'

'This morning?' I said.

'Not now.' She blinked.

I whistled in frustration. The pig jiggled and snorted. Must be sound-activated. 'Can I at least drop this toy off in the kid's room?'

Nothing.

'Have they gone home?' I raised my voice to get some kind of reaction.

Silence.

'Did they check out this morning or is the kid still here?' Bloody hell.

She shot a glance at the office door to the right of reception. 'He died.'

All the air sucked out of the room. 'What?'

'He. Died,' she said, indicating with a flick of her head that I was to get lost now.

Electricity shot from my nerve endings. ‘How?’

‘Meningitis. He was sick for two weeks. Admitted yesterday morning. Too late.’

Fuck.

No.

Fuck!

‘I need their address.’

‘Not allowed.’ She turned back to her computer.

Fuck.

***

‘Fetu, what do I do? I need to find him,’ my voice cracked. I slapped the waiting room wall and ground the phone to my ear. ‘I need to … Shit, I dunno … give him money for the hospital. And maybe some food. Is that what you do? Casseroles?’ I dragged a sweaty hand down my face. ‘Where does he live?’

‘The family will look after it,’ Fetu said.

‘Kid was sick for two weeks! Why didn’t he say anything?’

Fetu’s silence hurled me to an airless mountain top.

I tried to think but came up empty. ‘I’ve got a toy.’

‘Funeral’s tomorrow,’ he said.

Funeral. I choked back a lump. ‘Tomorrow? So soon?’

‘It’s tradition.’

Goddamn. ‘I’ve got some money for him.’

Fetu answered slowly. ‘It’s not the right thing. I talked to Donna. The office is going as a group with a fa’alavelave.’

‘What?’ I took a deep breath. My chest fucking hurt.

‘We are all putting in money for tinned fish and lace.’

‘But he needs … Lace? Are you kidding me? What good is that going to …?’

‘Jake!’ Fetu’s tone caught me in the stomach. ‘It’s tradition. You want to do something for him? Join in with us.’

‘But he’s my best mate!’ I stuffed the damp envelope back in my pocket. Two hundred bucks. Bits of stupid paper.

The line was quiet for a couple of seconds. Fetu’s voice sounded far away. ‘He doesn’t need you. Come to work tomorrow. We’ll all go together.’

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I sat cross-legged, kneading the toy’s head in sweaty hands, staring at Semisi’s knee. Dark scars and welts clouded his coffee-coloured skin. Couldn’t look him in the eye. Tina, his wife, sat beside him, gently rocking their other little boy on her lap. Face tucked into her husband’s shoulder. How do you explain this to a four-year-old?

Words I didn't understand. Keening that made my jaw clench. Women with dark, liquid eyes came and went, placing bolts of bright floral cloth and white lace in a pile in front of the family. Boxes of tinned beef and fish stood sentinel in the corner.

A small white coffin lay on the tabletop, open but draped with a piece of white lace. I didn't dare look at it. But their pain kept taunting me to.

Elders took turns speaking. I glanced across the room at Donna, trying to catch her eye. Should I say something? On behalf of his New Zealand colleagues? What would make any sense? On some unspoken cue, Fetu nudged Donna. She moved to add our offering to the pile. Fetu spoke soft words and gestured gently with chiselled hands. Those hands could fix anything. Not this. We dipped our heads as Semisi's mother murmured a hypnotic reply in Samoan.

For a time, no one spoke. A small, bare living room. Fifty people cross-legged on the smooth concrete floor, shoulder to shoulder in echoing silence, save a gentle, sad hum and the wind in the palm fronds outside. It was killing me, the silence. Worse than the anguished sobs, the foreign words. Worse than the keening. Because I could hear my own worthless heart beating. I stared at Semisi's big toe, jutting out past the end of his battered jandal.

Finally, we all stood and formed a ragged line.

Oh no. This was not happening. But it was. Everyone filed slowly past the table. The miniature white coffin. Lace gone.

Men nodded soothingly and laid open palms gently in the box for a moment. Women clutched their hands and whispered to their God.

We shuffled forward. In front of me, Donna bent her head for a few seconds, glanced down and smiled tenderly. She straightened and looked back at me with aching eyes. No. I couldn't. I just …

I shuffled forward and looked down.

Faded Batman pyjamas. Tiny little hands.

I blinked hard. Clenched my teeth, mashed my lips together. My first ragged breath ripped the lid off the ache. I jammed the heels of my palms against my eyes and moved away. Stood by the window, breathing in serrated gulps.

Don't know how much later, but Donna finally tugged at my sleeve. I sucked in air and turned.

Semisi, head bent, cradling the little white box in his arms. His boy.

They surrounded him. Everyone. Guided him out the door, into the fierce glare radiating off the crushed coral in the front yard. They sang as he bent over a concrete slab and gently laid the coffin in the leaf-lined grave.

Tina shook as she put a tiny pair of dusty jandals in the hole. Others filed past, bending to place their own mementos. A tatty picture book. A bright rubber ball.

I looked down at the pig in my hand. A rush of blood propelled me forward to add it to the collection.

More words. More songs. Then a group of men moved forward to lift a concrete slab and manoeuvre it towards the grave. Tina cried out, wrenching in Semisi's arms.

And the fucking pig started oinking.

My blood drained to my feet. Oh God. No.

Next thing I knew, I was standing inside the house being offered cake. I had to go. Needed to get out. Fucking, fucking moron. But I had to see Semisi. Found him outside, down the side of the house, leaning against the canary-yellow wall. Staring at the concrete slab.

He nodded once when he saw me.

'Mate,' I shrugged, blinking. 'I ruined it. With the …'

'Thanks for coming, Jake.'

Shit. I rolled the corner of the envelope between my thumb and finger, searching for words. 'I got this. For you. But I don't know if it's the right …'

He reached forward, took my hand in both of his for a moment, closing his eyes. When he leaned back, the envelope was gone.

Should I hug him? Should I drop at his feet? 'Take as much time off work as you need,' I stammered.

'I'll be back on Monday,' he said quietly.

'No, man. You got three days compassionate leave, but Donna will sign you off on leave without pay. Take some time. I can cover you.' I jammed my hands in my pockets.

Semisi took a deep breath and smiled. 'Jake, I'll see you on Monday.'

I started to cry. Head bowed.

'It's all right, brother,' he whispered. 'It's just how it is.'

Victoria Louise Lawrence

Victoria Lawrence is a Queenstown-based project manager, who discovered early in her career that corporate reports are not the place for black comedy. Drawing on her background in social anthropology, her research into rites of passage, and fifteen years' experience in development aid in the Pacific, she enjoys writing about the interplay of cultures and identity. Victoria wrote a master's thesis on modern funeral rituals, contributed to an e-anthology of short stories, and has self-published a work of fiction flavoured with a hint of madness.

'White Boy Wonder' was the winner of the 2017 New Zealand Writers College Short Story Competition.

AROHA

Jeff Taylor

Whoa! Anyone can come, but surely this person has no business here? She's wearing this feather cloak over an expensive-looking, long black dress and is festooned with more pāua jewellery and bone carvings than an Auckland Airport souvenir shop.

We've been in these temporary council rooms since the earthquake, and while a gallery of past city fathers frown down at the intrusion, a young Queen Elizabeth smiles from her coronation photo, oblivious to future grievances.

'Welcome,' I say. 'I'm Aaron. Have a seat.'

She looks around the room. '*Kia ora. Tēnā koutou katoa*.' The words hang in the air like Rotorua on a bad day. I know what they're all thinking. There's just been this announcement about another big Treaty settlement,

while at the same time, benefit eligibility has been made tougher. This is definitely no place for tangata whenua.

She's certainly a looker – poised and elegant, tall and slim, mid-twenties. And there's something…? Aha! That's it. She looks strikingly like a young Dame Kiri.

Later, I ask her to introduce herself, and she speaks with a throaty, musical voice that could definitely deliver a decent Pokarekare Ana. She stands, nervously twirling a strand of long black hair.

'My name is Aroha, and I've got, um, a problem with alcohol. It'll devastate my whānau if they find out.' She looks directly at me with those big, dark eyes, and from that moment, I'm pretty much done for.

'I've been in Sydney, and I'm due back in Waikato soon.'

'Why Christchurch?' I ask.

'The distance mainly. Somewhere well away from home. I don't want to run into anyone who knows me.'

She tells us she's got royal Māori blood and a degree in business management. Both her parents died when she was young, and she'd been brought up by whānau. There'd been a bust up with an Aussie boyfriend, and she substituted him with a vodka habit. A bottle a day.

The other women in the AA meeting give her a hard time because of what they perceive to be a privileged background, evident in her impeccable manners, her clothes and her grooming. Their standard dress code is

decidedly shabby. If clothes had feelings, theirs would be embarrassed, while Aroha's seem to drape her body with pride.

They don't hold back. Lucy, the hairdresser with the tremor, who you'd never want scissoring anywhere near your vital arteries, is first. 'Where'd you go to school then?' she asks with a sneer.

'I went to a private school on a grant,' Aroha explains. The room goes quiet. You could have heard a settlement cheque drop in the parliament buildings.

Mandy, a part-time cleaner with teeth like lopsided tombstones, throws another spiteful challenge. 'Treaty money, I suppose?' I hold my breath, but Aroha just smiles and doesn't seem fazed.

'The old gravy train,' Megan, one of the fallen housewives, snipes. She should talk. Solo with two kids, husband in jail, on the benefit.

'Taxpayer money.' Tina, the other one. Late twenties, solo with one kid, several partners, on the benefit. She should also talk.

I can't believe this spitefulness. 'Hey, come on, it was their land after all!' I reason, surprising even myself. 'And the seabed and the foreshore. That's actually theirs too!' I'm on shaky ground here, my experience of water rights being restricted to distant memories of scuffles with Rangi Matenga after school for turns on the river bank swing. It hardly makes me an authority. 'And you all have your opportunities. There are grants out there, no matter your race or religion.'

She smiles at me gratefully, then says. ‘Please everyone. Aroha means love.’

The bitterness seems to settle somewhat with those words.

The guys in the group don’t say much. Stan, the ex-publican who drank more than he sold, is gawping. Harold, the struck-off middle-aged doctor with a preference for the top shelf, is trying to uphold his image of aloof indifference. Donald, the merchant seaman who’d found a bar in every port he’d ever visited, is leering at her. Bloody rude! But I suppose they might see something in my eyes as well. And if I’m not mistaken, she does seem to reserve a smile for me, one that holds hidden promise.

‘I need to go back soon. They’re holding a position for me as tribal secretary. There’s no alcohol allowed on the marae, which’ll help, but I’ve got to beat it first.’

It’s overwhelming. I’ve never been smitten like this before, and one or two of them have come on to me over the years. They know my history. A fifty-two-year-old recovered alcoholic, an ex-accountant who drank his way to divorce and estranged his two teenage kids. I’m no catch either, being short, rotund and bald. Five years dry now, I’m an AA success story and a counsellor for Community Alcohol Services.

Aroha tells us she receives a generous allowance from the tribe. I love hearing her talk, but know I must hold back on anything other than counselling. For now. She’s just a damaged soul sent to me by fate – to fix, to save.

It becomes my crusade, and it consumes me. I tell myself that important matters depend on her recovery. I fantasise that I will single-handedly save the Kīngitanga movement.

She seems determined. 'I can do this, Aaron. I have the spirits of my whakapapa with me.'

So, I work out a programme for her. The bigotry and jealousy festers away, surfacing only from time to time among the group. It's like that volcanic and seismic stuff you know is simmering away beneath Aotearoa's crust, threatening to suddenly show itself. The quakes, the eruptions. Now you see it, now you don't. But ignore it at your peril.

Slowly, and incredibly, the others warm to her. She wins them over and even introduces them to some basic te reo Māori. Her serenity and calmness somehow rubs off on them. Soon we're starting our sessions with a prayer called a karakia, with not a snigger from anyone. I reckon it's only a matter of time before she'll have us all doing flax weaving and poi twirling.

I help her through her darkest moments. On her own, in a small flat, she struggles with her demons. I give her my cell number, and she calls at all hours, crying down the line. I go through every moment with her.

And it's all going well, until one day this Tommy creep turns up at meetings. A bronzed, good-looking guy about her age, who sees she's got money and hits on her. I see her responding and plead with her to have nothing to do with him.

She just smiles at me. ‘I can look after myself, Aaron.’

Tommy’s determined and cunning, and works on her weaknesses. The signs are soon there, and eventually she can no longer look me in the eye. Then her phone calls stop. I decide there’s nothing for it but to confront him. Psyching myself up, I tell him to stay away from her. He just sneers, and they both drop out of the programme.

I’m devastated. I try to put her out of my mind, but she haunts me. It takes every ounce of willpower to stay dry, to refrain from trying to track her down and contact her. Worryingly, I sometimes find myself walking into a bar and quickly have to get out of there.

Six weeks later, I see her. It’s by chance, on one of the river paths, at a known gathering point for local dropouts. She’s on her own, lying scrawny and wasted on the bench like a pretzel, curled into a foetal ball. She appears to be out of it. I can smell the failure on her breath as I gently nudge her.

‘Hello, Aroha.’

She lifts her head slightly and peers uncomprehendingly at me through dark glasses, from beneath a peaked cap. Her hand goes to her mouth.

‘Hey, Aaron. You frightened the shit out of me.’

Taking a swig of something out of a Coke bottle, she wipes her mouth with the sleeve of an old grey sweatshirt. She would never have worn

anything as tacky as that before. I notice how her skin has deteriorated, the tremor in her hands.

'You're still with him?' I can feel bile rising in my stomach.

She won't look me in the eye. 'Tommy? Sort of, I guess.'

Then I notice. 'You okay, Aroha? Everything okay?' She drops her head. 'Hey, let's have a look.' I gently pull her hand away from her face and remove her sunglasses. Her eyes are dark moons sitting in bruised sockets.

'Shit, Aroha! Did Tommy do this?' Her silence gives me all the answer I need. Then she's sobbing, fast and heavy, and I can feel the fury building up inside me.

'Come on. I'll get you a coffee and a sandwich.' I take her arm. 'You can tell me all about it.'

She shakes her head, mumbles something, then looks up at me. 'Thanks though.' She keeps glancing down the street, jumpy about something. 'Tommy's coming soon.'

'I'm not worried about him.' I look down at her, hunched on this bench on the bank of the Avon, the creek that aspires to be a river. 'Your whānau still don't know then?'

'I can't face them.'

'You could have made it, you know. He's dragging you down with him.' I'm appalled by her physical deterioration. It's gut-wrenching, and I

can't hide my hurt. I look away, and neither of us speaks for a long time. 'Good luck then,' I say, and reluctantly turn away. There's nothing more I can say.

I leave her there and walk the streets for hours. Then I do what I should have done at the start. It takes a couple of calls before I get the people I want. We speak for a long time. My heart as low as it has ever been, I go home and wait.

They come in a minivan to claim her. There are four of them, and they've driven for two days. I take them straight to the place. Thankfully, she's there, with some other no-hopers who quickly drift away when they see us coming. There's no sign of Tommy.

Her eyes widen. Then she stands and starts to recite something, words I don't understand, in a sort of warbling, wailing cry. I remain in the background as she collapses sobbing into the arms of her grey-haired kuia. A kaumātua in a suit and tie starts to chant as well. Two men, tribal elders, complete the solemn group. They all join in, and the prayer soars to the heavens.

There's this eerie sensation, hard to describe. I swear there's something spiritual in the air. I have goosebumps, much like the time when I watched *Whale Rider* and the Māori Queen's funeral on TV.

They had been a rocked by what I'd told them, but grateful. It seems that she is a kahurangi, a tribal prize jewel, and they have big plans for her. There is an intense, animated discussion. I hold my breath. I know this could

go either way. Eventually, to my relief, they encourage her into the van. I hongi with them in silence. No words seem necessary.

Aroha gives me a little wave and a smile as they drive away, and I'm sure she will be okay now. I stare at the bottle of vodka I'd brought along. If she'd refused to go with them, I'd had visions of sharing it with her.

I empty it out on the ground, toss it in the trash can and walk away with my heart soaring.

Jeff Taylor

Jeff Taylor is a retired pharmacist living in Hamilton. A late starter to writing, he enjoys writing short stories and flash fiction, using humour wherever possible. Writing about his experiences with drug addicts, he has started to receive recognition in writing competitions. The idea for 'Aroha' came from his childhood in Huntly, where Tainui have a strong presence.

'Aroha' was the winner of the 2015 New Zealand Writers College Short Story Competition.

NORMAN'S LETTER

Lizzie Nelson

At five o'clock on a winter morning, Norman sat on the edge of his bed and began to write a letter. Balancing a pad of white Basildon Bond on his pyjamaed knee, he scribbled on the cardboard backing to get the ink of his ballpoint flowing. He wrote for several minutes. Then he held the page to the light and pushed back the bridge of his glasses with his thumb. As he began to read, he felt disappointed, realising that his words were too accusatory, too disjointed, and that he wasn't giving the impression he wished to convey.

A paragraph or two should be all that was required. Some initial words to express his gratitude (something he had always found advisable) before getting down to the list of complaints. For instance: the draught coming through the gap beneath his window was unacceptable, especially in this weather; the light above the vanity didn't work; there was a hole in the linoleum near the doorway; the wardrobe door didn't shut properly.

Admittedly, these were all small concerns, but that wasn't the point. Someone should be held responsible. Someone should be held to account. If only Norman were running the place, things would soon be sorted.

He tried again, listing his complaints as bullet points and adding a few more: the dripping tap in the bathroom, the squeaky wheel on the meal trolley, the incessant noise from the radio in the nurses station. Really, when he thought about it, the list was endless. He went through several sheets of paper, screwing up the failed attempts and throwing them in the wastepaper bin where they lay amongst crumpled tissues and the strands of hair he had removed from his comb the previous evening.

For a while, he abandoned the task of writing and concentrated on polishing his shoes the old-fashioned way, with a brush and proper boot wax, a muslin cloth for buffing the leather. When one shoe was polished to his satisfaction – the other one he forgot about – Norman took a tweed jacket from the wardrobe and laid it on the bed. He added a pair of socks from the dresser and a flannel shirt from the drawer below. As he did these things, his mind wandered over the structure of the letter and the question of whether a quotation might provide an instructive footnote. George Washington came to mind. Nothing can be more hurtful to service than the neglect of discipline. But he couldn't remember the rest of the quote and feared it might actually have been Churchill.

As he worried about his fading memory and his failure to complete the letter, Norman sat on the bed twisting a button on the sleeve of his tweed

jacket until a thread came loose and began to unravel. After a while, he heard the sound of footsteps and chattering voices and could smell toast and bacon, unmistakable signs that the day was getting underway. The topic of food had been left off Norman's list of complaints, not because it was particularly good, but because it seemed beyond his area of expertise. When he lived at home, his wife, Emily, was in charge of the kitchen. After she died, Norman existed for several years on tinned soup and crackers, so the meals provided at the Everton Rest Home were something of a novelty. It had been a long time since he'd had stewed apples, for instance, and he had to admit that he looked forward to the scones and raspberry jam at morning tea time.

Soon the nurse would come to help him shower and dress, and Norman was unhappy that he didn't have the letter ready to show her. Perhaps he should make one last attempt before she arrived. With a heavy sigh, he picked up the pen and turned to a fresh sheet of paper, writing quickly before he forgot what was on his mind.

'Good morning, Norman,' said the nurse – or nurse aide (he could never figure these things out) – as she pushed open the door. It was Angie with the bad skin and laddered stockings, who smelt of peppermint gum and wore fluorescent sneakers on her feet.

'I've brought someone with me today,' she continued, indicating the girl who had followed her in, a teenager whose peroxided hair was a startling contrast to her blackened eyes.

‘Chantal has come in to help me. She’s studying to be a care worker and she’s here on assignment, aren’t you Chantal?’ she said without waiting for a response. ‘Now, why don’t you take Norman’s clothes and we’ll help him along to the bathroom.’

Chantal gave a sniff and wiped her nose with the back of her hand. Norman wondered if he should offer this strange creature a handkerchief – there was a stack of them in his top drawer. Although, admittedly, some were stained. He made a mental note to suggest improvements to the laundry service. Surely it wouldn’t be too difficult to add a little bleach to the wash? Norman was enthusiastic about bleach, having discovered, after Emily died, the magical properties of a dash of Janola added to the final rinse cycle.

Chantal regarded Norman for a few moments, her gaze steady and unhurried. Then she bent over to pick up his last attempt at letter-writing lying at his feet.

‘What’s this?’ she asked.

Angie frowned. ‘I told you before, Chantal, but I don’t think you were listening. Norman’s had a stroke and he can’t talk, can you Norman?’ She spoke the last words extra loudly as if he had a hearing problem as well.

Chantal, meanwhile, had taken several of the other screwed up pages from the wastepaper bin and was removing the creases, pulling at the edges with her nail-bitten fingers.

‘They’re his drawings,’ said Angie, glancing at one of the pages. ‘He does them all the time. Come on, or we’ll be late.’

Chantal ignored her and laid the pages out over the bedspread. ‘He’s been writing something. See here,’ she said. ‘Look at this.’

Norman blinked and looked at where her finger was pointing, the blots and lines and barely decipherable scribbles, the inky circles that defined his bullet points. With great intensity, he stared at his work, trying to remember what he had been doing, what it had all been about. After a while, the effort of concentrating began to make him feel dizzy, and it was all he could do not to close his eyes.

‘Those aren’t drawings,’ Chantal said with contempt. Then she addressed Norman. ‘You’ve been trying to write something, haven’t ya, granddad?’

Norman blinked. He couldn’t remember ever being called granddad before, and now this girl was staring into his eyes, urging him to respond. Disconcerted by all the attention, he opened his mouth to speak, but all he could manage was a stifled grunt.

Angie shoved a possessive forearm underneath Norman’s armpit and gave him an uncomfortable tug. ‘Ready are we, darling?’

Unable to resist, Norman rose to his feet and took an unsteady step forward. Angie then escorted him down the corridor to the bathroom, where he shivered under a lukewarm shower until she returned with a thin

grey towel. The mirror is cracked, he thought to himself, as she helped him shave. And there is mould growing on the ceiling. There was a certain satisfaction to discovering these things, a sense of purpose, a sense of responsibility, and the pleasurable burden of committing it all to memory.

Back in his room, Norman sat on the edge of his bed, picked up his pen and held it between his knobbly fingers. Mould on ceiling, he wrote, followed by an unsteady exclamation mark. Crack in mirror. As he continued to write, his hands shook and his forehead creased with concentration. Perspiration moistened the furrows in his skin.

He rapped the pen against his teeth and stared at the picture of his wife on the dressing table. Then he breathed a deep, long sigh and slept for a while.

Later that morning, when Norman was in the cafeteria, seated at a Formica table with a mug of tea and a jigsaw puzzle, Chantal approached him. 'I got you a scone,' she said, placing it on the table before taking a seat, positioning herself so that her legs stuck out in front of her. 'I'm not allowed to call you granddad,' she said, then paused to take a noisy slurp from her coffee mug. 'That old cow, Angie, told me it's disrespectful, said I need to mind my manners. But then she doesn't mind asking me to stay and help her with the lunches, even though I'm only supposed to be here 'til twelve. I've got to do two more weeks here before I can get my diploma. I should have gone to Beachhaven. I only came here 'cos it's closer to home, and I don't have to get the bus.'

Norman wasn't concentrating on what she was saying because he was distracted by a layer of Formica that had come loose from the edge of the table. He sighed and pressed it down with his thumb, reflecting that it would be such a simple thing to fix, if only he had the tools.

Another thing he had noticed was that the curtain rail above the ranch slider had come loose. If someone didn't attend to it soon, the whole thing was likely to collapse.

Chantal's eyes travelled from Norman's thumb, which was still pressed against the Formica, to the collapsing curtain rail at which he had been staring.

'It pisses you off, doesn't it?' she said shrewdly. 'This place pisses you off. All the stuff that's wrong. It's a dump, isn't it? They shouldn't be allowed to get away with it.'

Norman looked down at his thumb, which seemed unable to release itself from the edge of the table.

'You know what we should do?' Chantal said, leaning towards him so that he caught a confusing glimpse of what seemed to be a metal stud in her tongue.

Norman moved his lips but couldn't seem to form any words in response.

'I've got an idea for you, Norm,' she said conspiratorially. 'How about you and I write down a list of all the things that are wrong with this dump?

Like that chair over there, for instance, the one with the rip in the arm. You can see all the foam rubber coming out of the hole.'

Norman looked in the direction she had nodded and was surprised to see that she was right. He hadn't noticed that rip in the armchair before.

'So, what do ya think?' Chantal continued after another noisy slurp. 'How about I help you write a letter? We can put down all the things that are wrong with this place, and you can make them to do something about it. They can fix all this stupid crap that's broken and falling apart.' She swirled the remains of the coffee in her mug and swallowed it down, then raised a blackened eyebrow to ask what he thought.

Norman nodded. Encouraged by the mischievous glint in her eyes, he even managed a smile.

It seemed that they were about to write a letter together and, although he was almost sure he had already written one, he couldn't see how it would hurt to do it again.

Lizzie Nelson

A late starter to writing, Lizzie aims to create stories that are both entertaining and give cause for reflection.

'Norman's Letter' was inspired by Lizzie's musings on the methods we use to communicate with each other and how we find resilience and hope in unexpected places.

The judges called ‘Norman’s Letter’ ‘a story about help and helplessness that succeeds because of its use of detail and strong characterisation’. They also found it ‘surprisingly powerful and uplifting’.

Lizzie is grateful for the opportunity provided by the New Zealand Writers College and for the positive feedback from the judges. She is delighted and encouraged by the award.

‘Norman’s Letter’ was the winner of the 2014 New Zealand Writers College Short Story Competition.

THE BARRIER

Timothy McGiven

Sleet rain hammered the old hippie. It traced the chasms of his face like a flash flood through a parched riverbed. He sat in his six-foot dinghy, stranded in the sand, patiently waiting on the tide.

As he gripped the oars, a storm petrel fell to the beach behind him. He watched the little bird pick itself up, fold its wings and stumble towards the tussock land past the dunes. It knew what was coming. So did The Hippie. He had satellite TV.

The Hippie lived in a ’62 Leyland bus by the estuary that bled into Awana Bay. A remnant of a naturalist revival in the late seventies, he had stayed on Aotea while the rest of them switched their tie-dies for neckties. Forty years down the track, he was a changed man, whose tomato plants now grew tomatoes.

‘What are you doing?’

The Hippie swore, dropping a paddle. A flat-faced boy carrying a big stick was eyeing him up. He recognised the boy. He was the son of a pot farmer from up north by the Rangiwhakaea rocks.

'Piss off, boy.'

'What are you doing?'

'I've never travelled,' said The Hippie. 'So, I'm off to Australia. Now piss off. You're too young to be out in this weather.'

The boy nodded, finding no fallacy in The Hippie's logic, and headed up the dunes without a word. He was an odd kid. Nice mum though. Good baker.

The Hippie had been married once. It wasn't one of his fondest memories. Colours fade, wounds heal, memories are lost, but for the life of him, he couldn't get that damn stain out of the carpet.

The Hippie shivered. He could feel the water lapping at the boat, working it free from the sand. He was ready for the ocean. It stretched out before him as if to infinity. The Hippie understood infinity. It was only two steps past the horizon, right beside contentment. You could reach it if you were able to watch yourself from a distance. That's the problem with a body. It limits your point of view.

He often wondered how he had become such a sad little man. He put it down to old age and kidney stones.

His back straightened as he felt a sudden buoyancy embrace the dinghy. White water assaulted the little boat, steering it to the side. The Hippie dipped his oars into the shallows, nodded at the bow and started to row through the waves. He was heading for the horizon. Digging deep, he ascended the breakers. Sinews taut, back aching, he dug in with his shoulders. With each crest, he came a little closer to the relative calm of the open water.

And then it was still. The Hippie docked his oars and sat silently in the drizzle, amidst the tasteless greys. The coast wound out behind him like the lace trim of a giant's hem. He could see the rocks where he had caught a kahawai the size of a goat. It was just last week. One of the island's two policemen had joined him for dinner that night. They picked the ribs clean, drank Diet Coke and reminisced. They had come to Aotea on the same ferry.

The Hippie had spent his first night on The Barrier under the stars, screaming at the moon with a bunch of twenty-year-olds. They sang and drank like only the directionless can. They didn't know what the hell they were going to do when the sun rose. They had nothing but a patch of land and the hand luggage they'd brought with them on the ferry. But that was what made it so good. It was the beginning. They were finally living. Stitched-on smiles were forgotten, left somewhere beyond the gasping waves.

He met his wife that night. He tried not to think about that too often. Nostalgia is like a drug. You get hooked, and then reality becomes tasteless.

She moved to Cambridge a while back. Last time he heard, she was living with an accountant who wore bow ties and followed horse racing.

The sea was growing restless, so The Hippie slouched lower into his dinghy and stared up into the clouds. Raindrops collided with his upturned face like liquid train wrecks. He felt strangely calm. This was how he had imagined it. He was forcing fate's hand. If God wouldn't come to The Hippie, then The Hippie would go to God.

He didn't particularly mind which god. He'd settle for Michael Jackson's white glove if it brought him contentment. After all, he'd spent his whole life chasing contentment, along with fulfilment, purpose and all those other clichés.

He had chased love once too. It had led him on a merry dance. First down the rabbit hole, then through a multitude of legal processes. When he resurfaced, he realised it was faster than he was. It also had teeth. Surgically sharp teeth. They were still the best years of his life.

Sea spray caressed his face like the frozen fingers of a lifeless lover. The storm was coming for him. The Hippie started to tap his feet and hum softly to himself. His baritone notes were drowned out by the ocean's throes. He was horizontal now.

'Come at me, you little shit.'

The water pooling below his spine made him tremble, an old man's tremble, traversing his entire body. The Hippie cast insults and cracked

words towards the clouds. He almost found it strange when they did not reply.

The rain began to sting his skin, but his lips drew back in a smile, his anger subsiding. Folding his arms across his chest, he squared his shoulders and closed his eyes. His bloodless hands were still.

The Hippie started to laugh.

Behind his eyelids, he was seven again. Tall men in black suits, and wet-nosed women holding handkerchiefs to their faces, surrounded him. The sun was shining outside, but he was inside the church hall, waiting in line. He took a flower from a wicker basket and tentatively approached the wooden box. He had to stand on tippy-toes to peer over the lip and into the casket. Within lay prickly Missus Adams, the church organist. Her eyes were closed, her hands were white and her arms were folded across her chest.

He opened his eyes. The dinghy's lip was nearly level with the surface of the water, as if eager to taste its depths. He was still laughing, desperately so. Floating in his coffin. Tossed about in the undulating swells, he kept laughing.

Desperately so.

The Hippie was going to die. But he didn't want to die. He could make it back to shore if the currents cooperated. But The Hippie also *wanted* to die.

In the end, he just lay there and laughed. It seemed the most appropriate course of action.

'Damn,' he whispered. He had forgotten to leave food out for his cat. It wasn't really his cat. It was a stray that hung around the bus. He suspected it was hiding kittens in the engine block.

The Hippie was mildly surprised to discover that he was now floating in the water. The dinghy had fallen away, slinking down towards the ocean floor.

'Damn,' he said again, softly.

After three seconds of serenity, he was lost to the waves. The Hippie was thankful for the silence that enveloped him as he drifted this way and that, caught in conflicting currents. With bursting lungs, he took a breath of water and gave in to the dark.

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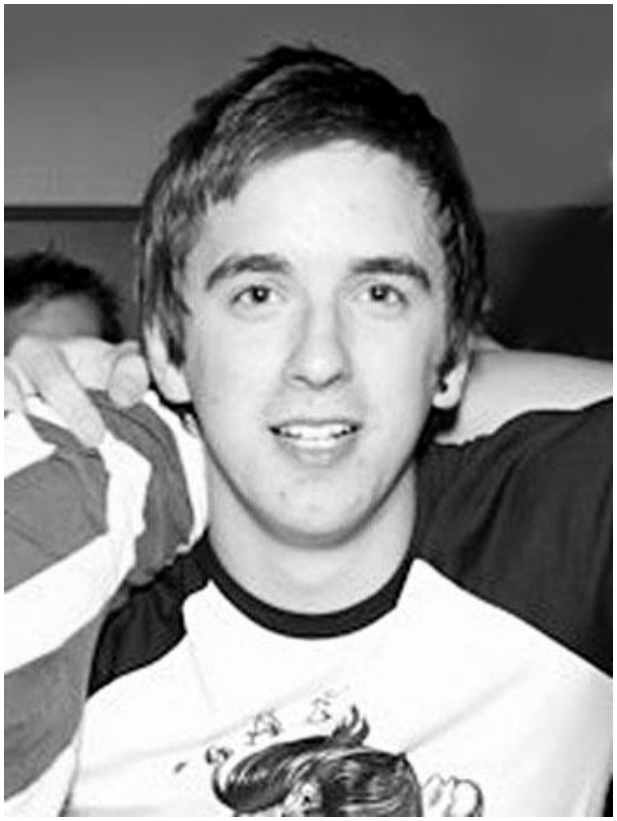
The Hippie opened his eyes to a blinding light. He took a moment to realise that he was sprawled on a sandy white beach, the sun warm on his back. He watched in expectation as a pair of tanned feet approached.

'How was Australia?'

The Hippie eased himself to his feet and, unable to hide his smile, he said, 'Cheeky bastard, aren't you?' Then to the boy, 'Now help me back to my bus.'

As the two figures hobbled down the beach, a storm petrel took to the sky and headed out to sea.

Timothy McGiven



I'm nineteen and currently a student at Waikato University, studying a Bachelor of Science with a major in psychology. I have done a creative writing course at university, but the person I would credit with pushing me to write would be my English teacher from high school, Miss Arnold.

When I was in seventh form, I won the Secondary School Division of the Sunday Star-Times Short Story Awards and was shortlisted for the Secondary School Division of the Katherine Mansfield Award. Last year, I won a Waikato University writing competition as well.

This is the first time I have received a placing where there was no age limit on the entrants. A big thanks to the New Zealand Writers College and the judges for putting this on. It's a huge help to wannabe writers like me.

‘Out to Sea’ was the winner of the 2012 New Zealand Writers College Short Story Competition.

MOVING PATTERN

Nicholas Buck

Kim's teenage self knew who she would become. Visually, like Kristin Scott Thomas, with a blue Lotus and a wardrobe crammed with Karen Walker. She would top her creative writing class at Oberlin, then start an agency in Malibu. She would grow up in Wellington, do her undergrad in DC but never take a job in the public sector, let alone in (bleurgh) policy. There would be no children or husband but a long-term partner with plenty of American teeth and hair, and a last name for a first name like Blaine or Blake – a Bradley Cooper doppelgänger who runs operations at, let's say, Oxfam North America.

Kim, this will be your life.

When asked, she'll say she feels lucky, that good parents, good genes (whiteness) and privilege handed her life on a plate. This pretending that she didn't create her own success will be her only conceit.

As with every other aspect of her teen worldview, Kim was wrong about her future. It ruined her planned return (twenty years in the making) to Wellington, the prodigal adult coming home for Kelburn School's centenary celebration. A day on school grounds; jaundiced photo albums (rayon, tie-dye, bowl cuts, side ponytails, Reebok pumps); the sweet but positively terrible school orchestra; the buildings in miniature clanging against her pre-teen memories of massiveness. She even imagined the moment she would realise that the school grounds were, obviously, the same size as they were in 1994, just tangible proof that her worldview had enlarged.

In her dream centenary, the evening would bring room temperature drinks and teacher peck-on-cheeking in the school hall. There would be classmates, but no social anxiety, because Kim would have met or exceeded the promise of her early adolescence. There would be no one to whom her 1994 persona would be held accountable, no one to judge her. No judgment at a reunion – the dreamiest of dreams.

And then the dream's climax. Dusky twilight, walking down Upland Road and towards Alex Delaney's afterparty. Alex, like Kim, would have fulfilled his destiny. He would have made money in merchant banking, before buying in Wellington to remotely manage the business he started in Zürich. It had to be Switzerland because Kim did not anticipate the internet and the redundancy of place in global e-commerce. Alex could've done what he did from Kawakawa, but who cares? Zürich is a far more romantic backdrop for a dream. Alex's wife is a Teutonic blonde architect. She has

strong cheek and collarbones, a woman built with a set square, a Nazi visage that belongs on a recruitment poster for Hitler Youth. Like everything else in the dream, Alex's wife is someone's idea of perfection.

Despite twenty years having passed, Kim's old friends are immediately recognisable when she walks into Alex's house. Everyone is visibly older but only in life-affirming ways – no balding or crow's feet, extra pounds or poor taste in clothing. Immaculate aging in the manner of Sigourney Weaver or Temuera Morrison. Everyone's drinking an ironic nineties throwback. The men drink Double Brown. The women, $20-a-slab RTDs. Smash Mouth is playing as loudly as it did back in 1994. No one speaks, but everyone knows that everyone else is a Success. There are no exceptions. In her dream, they have all arrived at the resting place of their earlier aspirations.

***

Kim loved creative writing at school, at Kelburn School. It was the subject with the fewest rules, the main one being not to end with the finisher, 'she woke up and it was all a dream'. She took this seriously, crafting elaborate and perceptive twists into the final paragraphs of her 200-word essays.

But as she got older, the need to articulate her dream demanded an outlet, so she committed her waking life to the idea of one day doing enough to feel like she belonged. Kim became an objectively successful adult (career, health, money, lover, loved) who always felt like she was falling short, fucking up, drowning close to shore.

Which is why her actual return to Wellington felt like a wretched capitulation. She cried hot, nostalgic tears as the Civic (worth the price of a Lotus cupholder) emerged from Ngauranga Gorge and she beheld the toytown panorama of the harbour, Mount Victoria and Thorndon. She loved this town so much it made her sick, but this was not the plan.

She had been offered a job relocation from Auckland and jumped at the opportunity, on the pretence of wanting to create space between herself and Jeff. The truth was that he'd been all but erased from memory the moment he took his blender from the kitchen and the Van Halen poster off her living room wall. He'd driven off into the sunset, probably swiping right before he'd changed out of first. To Kim, Jeff was a failed project, evocative of nothing, as he'd always been.

Kim's parents had a granny flat attached to their quarter acre, ex-state house in Brooklyn. For now, it was hers, the fit-out untouched since 1975. The centrepiece of the studio was a pistachio two-seater covered in tessellated, faded hyacinth velour. The rooms looked like she felt – staid, withered, belonging to another era. Overall, it seemed like the speculative fit-out of a psychopath trying to think and decorate like a normal person. She dubbed the flat the Murder Box.

On this particular day, a Saturday, she sat on the hyacinths in the Murder Box, drinking Red Ribbon Roast. She looked across Aro Valley, riveted by her view of Boyd-Wilson Field. In 2002, that field was a swamp that offered nothing but looming subsidence to the neighbouring university

on the side of the hill. Now it was neat, AstroTurfed, floodlit and manicured. Fit teens and twenty-somethings played there with ludicrous intensity – an energy that required formal organisation to burn off. An excess of energy. Unthinkable.

On another day, Kim decides to carry her mug outside, down Ohiro Road and onto Aro Street. The Valley is overcast but energised, crackling with the pent-up midlife crises of public servants loosed on their macchiatos and mountain bikes. The air is warm. There is a brewery in place of the Shell station. Odd. She climbs Devon Street, that zigzagging goat track prick with a personality that wants to kill you. She crests and is down the other side, through the Uni Quad and down onto Boyd-Wilson. It's too early for the sports-uniformed hard-outs, but there are people on the field. She sits and watches.

A dollar bag of kooks and weirdos. Varying ages. Ill-fitting trackies. Men (8), woman (1). Short and tall, white and brown, office worker arms. Laughing, perspiring, hollering middle-aged spreaders, running unathletically in defence/attack on (hard to say) an electric lavender Nerf ball. Touch perhaps, or gridiron, or their own brand of balls-driven mayhem. Their most striking feature is that they are emphatically not the park's target market, their presence a joyful and incidental contempt.

'Care to join?'

'What me? No. Thank you. No, I …'

'Go on. You're already in uniform, so …'

Kim looked at the others on the field, then down at her hoodie and her Betty Boop pyjama twinset. She knew he was right. The man addressing her was perfectly nondescript, a human grey tie, 180 cm, forty-five, tired eyes, shapeless brown hair, crow's feet that extended down to his jaw, rounded features, sweaty in context.

'I suppose.' She laughed nervously. 'It's been a while since I've done, well, anything.' This was closer to the truth than she cared to admit. 'I mean anything exercise-wise.'

He smiled. 'Don't let that hold you back. We're all useless.'

'Yes. I mean, uh, that it's nice that you're out here.'

'It keeps us off the crack. C'mon.'

He turned halfway back towards the field, waiting and knowing she would comply.

Kim complied. At first, she just stood there, watching as the Nerf buzzed and flipped out of reach. Without knowing how it ought it to be thrown, she knew their rotating pie-lobs did not fully exploit the Nerf's physics.

Then the Nerf dribbled to her feet and she scooped it up. The other woman semaphored at her to throw. Beginner's luck. The ball rotated neatly on its horizontal axis, moving in a tight, flat arc right into the woman's mitt. There was a little celebration, a point scored. Kim felt immortal in that moment. Then ashamed. Because shame was hers, womankind's most

abundant emotional commodity and surely, surely it's forbidden to feel joy that basic and unedited.

But she made it a habit.

On Saturdays, Kim would walk down and up the Valley at half past eight in the morning, with cold, thawing limbs. She would play forty minutes of Nerflex before the kids took over the park. She learnt the kooks' names and the game's rules, a hybrid of seemingly every ball sport ever invented. Afterward, they went back to the Quad to drink $2 vending machine coffee and talk about their jobs in that spirit of the disinterested employee. They did not work together. They were not related. But they cohered. To Kim, their easy friendship felt strong, tribal and very non-Western. She did not ask why this was so in case she broke the spell.

In her ninth week, she woke to horizontal rain sleeting at her bedroom window. She walked out anyway, meeting up with the same group she had joined for the last two months. She played Nerflex, running asymmetrical zigzags across Boyd-Wilson, aiming that tatty missile towards the 'in-zone' whenever she could. Time was called. The real, low-fat sportspeople started to show up. She rested, hands on knees, breathless but luxuriating in her covering of rain-sweat cocktail. Kim was comprehensively clean, as if mere exercise and a bit of rain had the power to scrub away her pessimism.

'You might like to know, Kim,' said Grey Tie as they walked towards the Quad, 'that you're the first addition to the Nerflex Club since 2014.'

She smiled and made a gently mocking fist pump. ‘Well, that really is an honour. You do all seem, well, tight-knit.’

‘We are. We needed to be insular for a time, for our rehabilitation. But I remembered you from school and knew you’d fit right in.’

‘We know each other?’

‘My last name is Cullinan. Tim Cullinan. From Kelburn School. I’m younger than you, but my sister was in your year.’

Kim remembered Mona Cullinan well. Like her brother, she was noteworthy for being nondescript – average looker, middling student, a predestined wallflower.

‘I remember. She was a nice person.’ They continued walking. ‘I’m sorry, but did you say you were *younger?*’

‘Yes, I know. I look old. I feel old. As in decrepit and exhausted. This really is my – our – rehab. Because gyms are shit and walking is too easy to quit. You’ve got to keep moving. I’ve had …’ He paused, stopping to look into the middle distance. ‘It’s been a difficult ten years, Kim.’

‘Oh, I’m sure.’ She wanted to punch herself in the face for sounding so trite. They continued to climb the gentle slope towards the Quad, trailing the others.

‘Tim, will you go to the centenary next week? Are you curious to see how you turned out? I mean …’

‘I know exactly what you mean. “Turning out” is a relative term, isn’t it?’

‘Yes,’ said Kim. ‘I suppose so.’

‘I need to see everyone and calibrate my life accordingly,’ he laughed. ‘Thank you for helping me make up my mind. I’m there. Are you going?’

‘Maybe. I’d given it some thought.’ The enormity of the understatement was, of course, lost on Tim. They kept walking.

‘I’ll give it some more thought.’ said Kim.

‘Cool,’ said Tim. ‘It might be good.’

‘Yeah. It might be good.’

Nicholas Buck

Nicholas Buck has been writing recreationally since 2007, blogging about current events and the exhilarating culture shock of living off Ponsonby Road. Since 2013, his focus has turned to fiction. He has written a number of short stories as well as a self-published novella, *Disappear Here*. Nicholas currently resides in Wellington.

'Moving Pattern' was the runner-up in the 2016 New Zealand Writers College Short Story Competition.

THE EFFECTS OF CANCELLATION

Sacha Norrie

She gave gifts.

Nobody really knew why. But without fail, each afternoon, she would shuffle along the sand with a smeared grey cotton bag that may have once been white, one couldn't really tell. Slightly paunched, slack mouthed, an infantile gum-smile constantly on her face. She'd hand out small trinkets to the beachgoers, their brightly coloured towels a petulant salute to the grey slates of a metallic sea, bruising the black sand – a child pulling the finger behind his mother's back.

A broken frisbee to the small boy with the urchin eyes and a string of shells, threaded with a tangled nest of fishing line, to the newly engaged couple, stealing each other's breath from lips of expectation not yet extinguished. Without so much as a word, just that gum-soaked grin and a pat on the arm of the sun bride, met with an awkward shuffle to the back of the towel. But phew, there she totters off down the shoreline and around the point.

Nobody went round the point. It was tapu or something, an old ghost story about a scorned lover, Papatūānuku, mother of all creation. In a jealous rage, she committed infanticide on all the bush creatures so that the seas and the skies might be warned never to cross her again. Or something like that. An ever-changing myth that the locals told with embellished vigour to the city-slicked summer trade that rolled in like clockwork every year.

It's a real bad spot.

Nobody goes there since them Māoris were marched off the pā back in the Land Wars. It's hell of a dangerous anyway. Those waves just rip round the point and punch the bushline – punch punch punch – 'til the bank's lip is bruised and bleeding a little from the side.

But when nobody was paying much attention, the local surfers would sneak over the hill and catch the best right-hand break. Apart from that – not that they'd care to admit it – they half believed their own tales and collected their pipi from the other end of the beach. But always, always protecting their own from the infestation of those fucking yuppies who threatened their microcosm of a generation, sighing its way into the tide.

Yep, for as long as anyone around these parts could remember, she gave gifts. Junk mostly. Trinkets and jetsam. And mute, with that slack smile of hers, she would hand out her prizes, give a pat or a gurgled chuckle, and shuffle off. Nobody really knew why. They just watched and tolerated in that supportive, community way, keeping just enough distance – embracing the sick child but taking care not catch its flu.

***

Ah, goddam it all to heck and hellfire, I spit next to the skeleton. And the black sand opens up and swallows the globule with the unquestioning absorption of a blind devotee. Tāiko chick, most likely just hatched before the cold got to it.

Hmm. Strange that the egg was so far from the colony. Stoats maybe. Fuckers. But why steal a hoard and leave part of your dinner behind on the dune? The *pièce de résistance* perfectly ossified in a foetal spiral, beak tucked into spine tucked into claw. That makes five now. All separated from the nest. All pristine in a final frozen shrink towards themselves, almost as if they were guarded from predators in their isolation, protected until they hatched and were left to die.

With my left hand, I take out the logbook from my thermal pocket. The steel claw on my right scissors open slightly and I slot the pencil in, hooking my arm round to the angle I need to scrawl numbers into the grid. My left index finger brushes the cruel silver of the metal and a shiver webs down my chest. It is a cold I still haven't got used to. But at the very least, my writing is becoming almost legible.

I've been here for seven weeks now. DOC had me signed up to fieldwork I didn't want to do, for a thesis I didn't know how to write, on some butthole West Coast peninsula, a scathingly cold and raw piece of coastline. Nothing like sunny California. I'm pretty much in isolation out

here, but it isn't a biggie. Research of avian malaria in coast-dwelling birds has always been a conversation killer with the ladies anyway.

So, what is that? Like bird STDs? Followed by a round of guffaws or feigned interest by those conversational martyrs who swoop in with their thinly veiled compassion.

Oh, yeah, that sounds really interesting. I never was much of a bird person myself. My PhD is on the social effects of theatre in diasporic communities …

How fascinating! I'd simper, and raise the hook to my chin as if in beguiled awe. That'll fuckin' learn ya, I'd think, as they all slightly retracted from the physical space around me, looking everywhere else – drinks, feet, tits, anywhere. And then I'd just get drunk outside, smoke a joint on the deck, where there was always someone willing to separate the herb from the trees. I didn't mind that much. It made things less complicated.

Today, I saw her again. I crouched very quietly over the chicken wire I was cutting to make a shelter for one of the nests. There was something about the way she pottered around the point and across the small bay, to a track leading into the bush, that made me feel as though I was invading *her* privacy somehow, like I was whispering a dirty secret about something I didn't yet understand, but knew it was dirty and shouldn't be spoken aloud. Of course, I had heard the rumours down in the town.

She's an odd one, that one. Definitely not the full lunchbox, if you know what I'm talkin' about.

I heard her old lady was a, you know, *entertaining* lady. But then she just upped and left one day, left that wee miserly scrap of a girl collecting junk from the beach.

I reckon it was 'cos she's, you know … simple. Not that I have a problem with that, but I don't know if I could handle it all on my own.

So, she's just been living round the point in a shack she's got there. Oh sure, she copes on her own. Comes into town each week to get her groceries. Scares the tourists sometimes. I don't think they know what to do, but then they wouldn't.

I heard she's one of the women who got attacked by that sleazy pig of a tourist last summer. But that's all just gossip.

And the way she's always smiling and gurgling like that, some say she's *possessed*. You know, with the spirits up there on the ridge, from the war.

But I don't go in for that small town, small talk bullshit. That's why I stick to the birds. They listen without sharing their opinion. I actually quite like working with the tāiko colonies, though I haven't found out their English name yet.

Tae-ee-iyah-koh. The syllables feel chubby and swollen on my tongue, and I'm sure I'm not getting it quite right. Oh well. When I arrived, the locals looked as though they weren't going to forgive my accent. Until I took off my hat at the pub to re-knot my gauze of flaming dreadlocks. The

universal trump card, a dude with dreads. And the fact that they are unashamedly orange usually makes people feel at ease, like they're not on the back foot or something. But mostly I keep to my hut behind the dunes, halfway between the simpleton and the simple town. A fine balance between hope and despair.

The tāiko inhabits much the same breeding range as it did prior to human habitation. For some reason, I kind of respect this stubborn refusal to migrate and save oneself. The academics wank on that the survival of its species has great significance to the bird world since they are the last remnant of a unique ecosystem. Whatever lets you sleep at night, right? My job here, as brave warrior for its survival, consists in taping fences around the nests, setting stoat traps, and sitting atop tussock-speckled dunes smoking cigarettes, audience to the dying grey-on-grey sun over the ridge that separates the village from us, me and my one hundred and four leg-banded, sex-keening brothers and sisters.

But it was kinda spooky. Something was making me feel as though the soles of my feet were covered with tiny electric tendrils, rippling over the surface of that gritty shore, at the hallowed hour before dawn when the mind becomes both lucid lover and vulture circling the bones of the soul. As if I was being watched. And in that teetering and fragile half moment before the sun splits the seams between then and maybe, as the ocean takes a pause between a sharp inhalation and its crashing fist, the lines of the mind cease to trace hooked edges around routine. There are no hands. There is only salt.

Ah hell, this place is getting to me.

As I trudge back up the sand towards the promise of porridge and a cigarette, something in the sudden stillness of the wind makes me stop and turn towards the wall of pōhutakawa. A flicker of light. And then, nothing. Just the solemn interlaced fingers of the bush standing guard. But it calls me forward, away from the shore, away from the nest. And then it sees me.

Another one. About an equal distance from the nest, but in the other direction. The skeleton of an infant. Perfectly frozen in an inward curl, fist-sized skull tucked into spine tucked into foot.

Sacha Norrie

Sacha Norrie is twenty-two years old and in her fourth year of a conjoint degree in Law and English at the University of Auckland. She is a spoken word poet and an active member of the poetry community, both within and outside the university. She writes with one foot in the law library and the other in the black sand of the West Coast.

Earlier this year, Sacha placed second in the Rising Voices Poetry Slam in the Auckland Town Hall, having been part of the community-based Rising Voices Spoken Word Collective. 'The Effects of Cancellation' was written as an assignment in a creative writing class last year.

Ngā mihi,

Sacha

'The Effects of Cancellation' was the runner-up in the 2011 New Zealand Writers College Short Story Competition

GOLDEN

R. L. Jeffs

First, it was a whisper.

'No fucking way.'

I glanced over my shoulder, but the teacher walked in and their hushed conversation died in a flurry of shh!-ing and elbows.

But the whisper didn't die. It grew through History, across interval, rose steadily in the background of Biology and Maths.

By lunchtime, I was almost starting to get curious.

'Yeesh,' I greet Kian and Aroha as we flump into our usual spot behind the library. 'What the hell is going on today?'

'I know!' K throws up his hands, almost losing his sandwiches. 'It's starting to freak me out.'

I start nodding, but Aroha interrupts.

'You haven't heard?' She's buzzing in a weirdly restrained way. Bees in a bottle. 'You know Matthew Linton?'

We nod, even though we don't. Well, we do. Everyone knows Matthew. But we don't *really* know him.

'Someone heard that he tried to *kill himself* last night.'

Some of her bees have escaped. They're buzzing in my ears. White noise. Someone's shaking the bottle and they can't get away.

Far away, Kian is emoting.

'No fucking way.' Not a whisper this time. A cry. A ringing in my brain. *'Matthew Linton?'*

It doesn't seem real, possible. But all I know about Matthew Linton is that he's some sort of a hard-core swimmer or something. Water polo maybe. The underwater hockey team? Something that means he's always on the front of the newsletter in a Speedo. He won some epic medal at the World Champs last year. Everyone was going on about how he'd hafta go to the Olympics and all that. But he just laughed and shrugged. Cos, y'know, he's Matt.

Aroha keeps talking. Someone's brother or cousin or aunt works in the hospital or ambulance or takes 111 calls, and Matthew Linton, from our school, the blonde one, with the swimming, he did, he really did, they saw, or heard, they *said…*

'Hey,' Kian says, poking me. 'Hey, didn't you know him? Weren't you guys like best friends?'

'Dude, like when we were *ten*.' I try to make my voice sound normal. It doesn't work. 'I don't even remember being ten. I knew him as well as you do, man.'

Know. Not knew. *Know*.

Right?

***

We have Classics last period, which I usually love. But today my head's full of bottled bees.

'The teachers are having a special meeting.'

Somewhere between the humming *he-did-what-he-did-what-he-did-what* and the drone of the teacher, I can hear Katie and Tui whispering behind me.

'I heard … *drugs …*'

There's a bunch of posters on the wall, myths and legends and *The Mummy Returns*, for some reason. I'm staring at Prometheus. He's giving the fire he stole from the gods to humanity.

'He was totally gonna go to the *Olympics* …'

Matthew Linton.

Matthew Linton makes me think of summer. I dunno, maybe it's just the swimming thing. Memories from when we were ten, lived next door to each other and swam in his pool all the time. Maybe it's the long sunshine hair. And his eyes. Blue-sky eyes.

'And now Hailey's going out with *Paul …*'

Didn't go well for him, Prometheus. He's the one who ended up chained to the rock with some giant bird of prey clawing at his guts, ripping out his insides, every day, for all eternity.

'Totally not a coincidence …'

Finally, finally the bell rings.

The halls are a stampede, as they always are. It's probably my imagination, but it seems slower, louder, closer today. Everything seems to be *ohmygosh* and *didyouhear and Matthew, Matt, Lindy.*

Down by the fire exit doors, Paul and Hailey are huddled. Understandably. They're Matt's best friends. This is reasonable. This is …

But all I can think about is Monday night, just the other night, waiting on the steps for Kian to finish detention because he turned water molecules into Mickey Mouse. Hearing laughter and knowing I shouldn't look. Because it was *that* kind of laughter, not laughter for sharing. Different. Private. But I looked. I looked, and it was Paul and Matthew Linton. They were standing in the car park, which was fine, normal, totally un-noteworthy. The sun was going down. The slanted amber light, which turns the world into a postcard

from Tuscany, was cast over cars, trees, chain-link fences and two boys. Laughing. Standing close. Noses-touching close.

Mr Sandford told us once in Chemistry about this stuff they thought existed, back when chemists had barely lost the 'al' in front. They thought there was some form of fire inside things, something that turned into smoke when it burnt, like water turning to steam.

At that moment, sitting on those steps, I felt like maybe they'd been the ones to get it right. Because I could feel it, inside me, in my chest, in my hands, rushing in my blood.

I can feel it again now. Paul makes vacant 'oh yes, a person' eye contact and I'm full of phlogiston, just under my skin, on the edge of combustion. I realise I'm staring and flee. To light, to air, to the scent of something other than too many teenagers in too little space – sweat and feet and cloying supermarket body spray.

***

Lying on Aroha's bed on Friday afternoon, I can almost, finally, breathe. There's been nothing new to add to the story, but there's no way anyone's talking about anything else at school. So, it's just going over and over the same puzzle pieces, flipping them, turning them round. Trying to find the edges.

It's a relief to just lie here and breathe. Her room always smells like Glade, something exotic and unidentifiable. Ornamental Sage and White

Raspberry, or something. Tiny sparkly lights spill down the wall, creating a curtain, a waterfall. I sometimes think you could slip through them and there'd be a doorway, a portal to somewhere else. Somewhere better. Narnia perhaps. Or Finland.

Aroha charges in, swatting her door closed with the hand not holding the snacks.

'Green Onion or Peking Duck?'

'Quack.'

A packet of chips hits me in the face. I lift a single finger in her direction. The bed dips and rolls as she sprawls next to me.

'Why do you think he did it?' She rolls her head towards me.

'I dunno.' I don't bother asking who. I don't try to clarify what.

'Yeah.' She rolls her head back, looking up at the glow-in-the-dark constellations. 'Neither.'

I wonder if, maybe, she's lying a little bit.

I wonder if, maybe, we both are.

***

We're on our phones, lulled into serenity by the scent of Etruscan Pomegranate, when Kian explodes into the room.

'Did you hear? Did you see?'

Aroha groans, which kinda makes me laugh. Because, yes, it's *that* again.

'What, K?'

'Matthew Linton didn't do it.'

It sounds like a line from a murder mystery. Which is … too weird. I wrangle my focus back. 'He *what?'*

'He's out of hospital and back online, and *ohmygoodness*, it's so funny.' K's bubbling, bursting. A shaken Coke cracked open. Too much trying to get out all at once. 'He cut his wrist on the pool gate, and the hospital got all dramatic, and then everyone was all *ohmygod Matt*, and he's just laughing …'

We're laughing too. Oxygen is helium and we're high. We're floating, gravity but a mild inconvenience. Prometheus freed.

'Oh my *god*,' Aroha laughs.

'I can't believe it,' I marvel. With only a slight shiver. Refusing to acknowledge, just now, the truth in that statement.

'*I know, right?'* Kian sprawls between us, steals chips, crunches. 'Xbox?'

It's a race for the controllers.

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The air at school has the same helium-high quality, as though we all just discovered our boring classrooms were secretly hot air balloons the whole time. Everyone caught between delight and a deep-down tension. *Don't burst the balloon anyone! Open flame!*

But there's only so long people can keep up eggshell-dancing. Sooner or later you're going to catch yourself chatting excitedly about the latest episode of Something-or-Other on Netflix. I get told off for not having one of my shirt tails tucked in, while Aroha's somehow getting away with wearing her brother's leather jacket and earrings that, quite frankly, make me question what Ms Lyons has been teaching us about the laws of physics.

Business as usual.

Then, on Wednesday, Matt comes back.

This time, it's not my imagination. Everyone is more aware, more awake. Kian's fizzing soda can with Mentos added.

Matthew is the fizziest of them all. Even the teachers laugh with him. The sun shines brighter on him. He's glowing, laughing at all his almost-mourners. And we all laugh along, unable to help ourselves. He draws us in, the centre of attention, finding it all a great lark. I'm staring at him across the classroom. We all are. He looks like Helios, the sun god, set free after being trapped by … Māui? Shit, I should really start paying attention in Classics again.

You can't even see the bandage on his wrist. Wouldn't even know it was there unless you saw him with his sleeves rolled up. Say you happened to duck into the bathroom after final bell to suddenly find yourself alone with him.

I see him before he sees me. I can tell because he's not smiling, not laughing, not … anything. Just sort of gazing somewhere into the middle distance. The bandage on his arm goes from wrist to elbow. It flits through my mind – how did he do that on a gate?

Then he moves. I flinch as he slams his fist into the mirror.

He makes a noise and grabs his hand. I make a noise, half step forward. Our eyes meet in the mirror, lock and freeze. Trapped in that instant between starting pistol and race, the adrenal tipping point. There's a giant fracture down the glass. He's split in two, the halves slightly out of kilter. Both managing to glare at me with equal shock and animosity.

I open my mouth to say … Shit, I dunno what to say.

He finds it less difficult to decide on a course of action, rounds on me, grabs my shoulder and shoves me hard into the wall.

'*Oof.*'

'What are you looking at?'

His eyes aren't so blue-sky right now. More like Yeats' dreams if he left them out in the sun too long. Washed out, faded, and just done with being walked over.

'I said,' he says, stamped-down eyes hard and flat, *'What do you think you're looking at?'*

All the words I can't say choke me. I can't breathe. My throat is thick with lost chances.

I shake my head. 'Nothing, man.'

He gives me one last shove for good measure, like *yeah, you got that right*. Then it's just the echoing tiles and me and my unspeakable words, breathing too fast and fighting nausea.

Maybe it's motion sickness. Vertigo. Falling, falling. I flew too close and now the wax has melted.

I stumble back out into the sunshine, breathing deeply. Cut grass, car horns and the end of another school day. Over in the student car park, the crowd tells me where Matthew went. They're still too loud, edgy, brittle. Laughter newly aware of its fragility.

I wasn't lying when I said I barely remember when we were friends. I remember it was summer, somehow always summer, for about four years. He had blue swimming trunks with purple flowers that I thought were awesome, so, of course, teased the crap out of him for wearing them.

And I remember the day he told me about the new swimming coach he would be working with, about how they were talking serious competitions, proper training and *big things for his future*. He just shrugged

when I asked him if he was excited. I laughed and called him Golden Boy. And he just sort of laughed too.

The scene in the car park wavers, shimmers like a mirage. It's just the heat on the tarmac. That's what a mirage is, right? Seeing water when there is none.

I blink hard enough and it's gone.

Matthew's laughter draws me in. Still. His crowd is dispersing. Backslaps all round.

'Matt, you're good, right?'

Podium-ready camera-flash grin. He laughs and shrugs.

'Golden,' he says.

R. L. Jeffs

Ruth L. Jeffs has been telling stories for quite some time. Naturally somewhat of a hermit, she can occasionally be found at the Ara Institute of Canterbury in Christchurch, volunteering at the Next Step Centre for Women. She is also working towards a qualification in teaching and education.

As for telling stories, this is an ongoing endeavour. So far, she has upward of a dozen novel manuscripts on the go, has drunk a lot of coffee, and spent a larger-than-average percentage of her life wearing pyjamas.

'Golden' was the runner-up in the 2018 New Zealand Writers College Short Story Competition.

The New Zealand Writers College Short Story Competition closes on 30 September each year. It is open to any novice writer residing in New Zealand. Visit our website at www.nzwriterscollege.co.nz.