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Dog Wars

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DOG WARS

This land is a traitor
and can't be trusted.
This land doesn't remember love.
This land is a whore
holding out a hand to the years,
as it manages a ballroom
on the harbor pier –
it laughs in every language
and bit by bit, with its hip
feeds all who come to it

...

This land denies,
cheats and betrays us;
we're too much for it;
it grumbles about us –
detests us.

Its newcomers,
sailors and usurpers,
uproot the backyard gardens,
burying the trees.

- from *Ambergris*, by Taha Muhammad Ali

It was really the world that was one's brutal mother, the one that nursed and neglected you, and your own mother was only your sibling in that world. Abby lifted her glass. "May the worst always be behind you. May the sun daily warm your arms..."

- from *Which Is More Than I Can Say About Some People*, by Lorrie Moore

PART I

This scar that wrinkles round my elbow and half way down my forearm is from a pitbull who once exposed the bone of the elbow. Later, my auntie told me that since a dog's heart sits between its forelegs, pulling the legs apart with a hard jerk will kill it instantly.

Thinking about carrying out her advice gives me a jolt. For the violence of it. But how, I keep wondering, can you reach both forelegs without putting your own face in its jaws?

– 1 –

We move to the city.

“A new start,” Dad says the evening we move in, as we unpack from our few bags and boxes possessions that are useless in this new place. Shearing blades and gumboots, tweezers and flannel work shirts, a shovel, the .22 and the sheep-drenching gun. The house, which smells of cleaning detergents and new paint, is tightly packed in among similar brick box houses, with not even spitting distance to the high boundary fences.

“Dad,” I say. “How is Mum going to find us?”

“Oh, she’ll find us quick enough if she wants to.”

“But *Dad*. Does she have this address?”

“No,” he says, putting shirts in one drawer and white singlets and

undies in another.

“Can’t we write to her to give it to her?”

“Alright, alright. Write her a letter and I’ll post it tomorrow.”

I tear May off the calendar since May has long passed. On the back of the picture of two lines of golden poplars that run along each side of a narrow road, I write the letter.

Dear Mum,

We just arrived in this new house. It’s in the city. There’s not much space and so we had to leave Shep and Judy with the Greens. So this is the address where we are living now:

1959 Karlton Avenue

Pekaput

We are waiting for you to come and get us. Please hurry. And what about Dad?

Love from Rona. xxx

Because we don’t have any envelopes, Dad says he’ll go to the post office tomorrow and get one and post it.

“How long does it take for a letter to get to Perth?” I ask.

“Maybe a week. But I’ll ask them at the post office.” He folds the

letter and puts it in his jacket pocket.

“All these houses, cheek by jowl,” says Dad, as Rich and me walk with him along Karlton Avenue. Houses line the busy, four-laned avenue we live on as far as I can see. When we pass a side street, I see more houses, each in its fenced off section.

“All these cars, exhaust pipe by exhaust pipe,” says Rich, as cars roar by us, leaving gusts of exhaust for us to breathe. Miles ahead I can see the tall buildings of center city.

“Hells bells,” says Dad. A man and a boy are walking towards us. “A bad penny always turns up.”

“Took the words right out of my mouth,” says the man, stopping. Neither of them is smiling. “What brings you to town?”

“Moved here,” says Dad.

“Gonna be a city boy now, eh?” The man nods his head, looking at Dad. “And — ah, where is...”

“She split. Scarpered off to Aus just before I lost the farm.”

“Is that right?” the man says, still nodding and considering. “And you lost the farm too, eh.”

“Bloody interest rates killed me. So I’m here with the kids.”

“Don’t look much like her,” he says, pointing his chin at Rich and me. “Well, maybe the girl has her mother’s mouth.” I look at the soft hair on the chin of the man’s dark brown face, as he inspects me, and try to remember what Mum’s mouth looks like. Rich scowls at him.

“Yours neither,” says Dad. A screech interrupts him, and I look around for fowl of some kind, but it is the boy. He has wandered away and is crouching by someone’s diamond-link fence, blowing through a blade of grass he has stretched between his clamped thumbs. Rich and me go over to him.

“What’s your name?” Rich asks.

“Fallu,” he says, and picks a choice green blade, tearing it longwise to get rid of the central ridge. Rich and I squat beside him and follow suit. We make a crouching, screech-grass band.

Fallu keeps a fair number of things in his springy black hair – a pencil, a long-toothed wooden comb, and a dart. He has the longest eyelashes I have ever seen, and his smile shows happily-splayed gappy teeth.

“Is that your dad?” Rich asks.

“Yep,” says Fallu.

“Got any brothers or sisters?”

“Sister.”

“You don’t talk that much, eh.”

“And you two, I suppose,” he says, and blows another screech. Then his dad calls out.

“Come on, you. You can stop that racket — we’re off now.”

Fallu stands up and drops his blade of grass.

“Gotta go,” he says. When he and his dad turn to go, I see the black box that Fallu has on a strap on his back.

“Listen.” His dad turns back to us. “You know about these rods in the lampposts?” We look at the lamppost he is pointing to, which has metal rods inserted on each side all the way up to the light, and we shake our heads.

“Dogs round here can get a bit out of hand,” he says. “If you see them coming for you, especially if it’s a pack of them, you climb up a post that has the rods. Mostly, they have ‘em.”

“Good to know,” says Dad. “See that you two?” he says to us.

“Who were they?” Rich asks Dad after they go.

“Kamisesse, I know from years ago, and his boy,” says Dad.

The next day, Rich and I see from the street that our next-door neighbor has a tree whose round, red plums are starting to drop ripely on the

ground. Naturally, we climb the six-foot wooden fence between the two properties to nick some, and being taller, Rich hoists himself up and over faster than me. Two pitbulls roar around the side of the house towards us before he can reach even one plum. Though it takes only seconds, it feels like slow motion, like when they repeat the shot of a rugby player on the tele scoring a try. The noise of the barking shocks us both. I freeze on my stomach on the top of the fence, one leg and arm clamped on each side. Rich stops short. Blinks at them – then turns – reaches – reaches up to grab the fence. One dog lunges, sinks teeth into Rich’s thigh as he tries to pull himself up. Rich’s howl cuts like a power saw through their ferocious snarling. Only then do I see the open face of the other dog rushing up at me, a shorn, boiled-egg-coloured face, with scar-pink scalp and lips, and a dark bottomless throat -- and the teeth, teeth with drool flying -- that fanged, open jaw coming straight up off the ground towards my face -- but somehow, it seems like by itself, my elbow intervenes. The teeth close on it, gouging parallel channels down my arm. But by now I have lost my balance and I fall away from the dog, rolling back, and I land on one knee and both hands on our side of the fence, on our moss-edged concrete path, my wound strangely white for a few seconds before the blood runs over the exposed bone. Rich is half up the fence, his head visible.

“A stick – get me a stick!” he screams. Blood freely running down

one arm and hand, I scramble up and run inside to the hall cupboard and grab the shovel, but when I get back, Rich has already somehow shaken off the dog and landed on our path. He lies half-leaning against the rough wood of the fence, a bloody hole torn from his thigh. But the color of his face scares me more than that. On the other side, the dogs leap and snarl and scrape their nails down the wood without let-up.

“Dad!” I yell. “Dad!” But Dad has gone out somewhere. The ute is not parked in front of the house.

“999,” Rich whispers. “Ring 999.”

We go to hospital. I get stitches and come home, but Rich has to stay in for observation since he lost a lot of blood. Dad has gone out again, and with not much else to do, I sit on the back steps with my socks, one-handedly picking out the barley grass whose tiny serrations cling to the yarn and irritate my ankles. My mind runs and reruns the dog attack. I try to stop the thoughts, but they keep coming back. My palms sweat from thinking about it and my arm under the bandage throbs harder. Then I overhear the neighbours on the other side of the fence say Rich shouldn't have been taking the plums.

“Pitbulls have a lovely disposition unless they're tormented.”

“A sharp lesson to him.”

“The kids around here are getting worse and worse. Think they own the place.”

They weren't even eating the bloody plums, I think. They were letting them fall on the ground.

Rich beat me home after we were dropped off by the school bus half a mile away.

“Ha!” he shouted as he slammed against the side of our pre-fab Power Board house eight seconds ahead of me.

Mum was in the garden. She was there every day when we came home, though not always gardening. Some days she lay on the ground of the fallow quarter looking up at the clouds, and she’d point out to us the fantails in the apple and pear trees, and the German owls, and the gouges on the tree bark that possums had made. Sometimes she strode around the graveled paths singing kids’ songs like Humpty Dumpty or Ring-A-Ring-A-Rosie or I Love To Be A Wanderer. Sometimes she weeded a patch, often in a circle that got bigger and bigger until she stopped. That day she was thinning the carrots.

“Why don’t you finish one row before you start another one?” asked Rich.

“Yes, I could do that I suppose, “ said Mum, as she continued to work in the middle of the second and third rows of carrots. I could see why she didn’t. Where the row started, the carrots and lettuces were lost amongst gone-to-seed docks and cooch grass and fat hen that came up to my waist.

When Dad got back to the house, he put the sprinkler on the garden since Mum didn't usually think of it, or if she did, she'd forget to move it and drown the veges. It had used to hose him off, but by then he would just say,

"I suppose I should go and move the sprinkler since no one else will."

The sprinkler was not his only sore point. One day, Mum decided the hens shouldn't be kept inside, and opened the door to the hen house. The hens seemed surprised at first, but once they realised it was for real, they made their hop-step escape over the wooden threshold with a chuckle-chirp, pecking and jerking their narrow heads as they went.

"What? You left it open on purpose!" Dad said.

"It was too small and smelly for them in there," said Mum. "They are much happier out in the air."

"We keep chooks for the eggs! This is not their holiday home."

"They'll still lay," said Mum. "Calm down George. The eggs might even taste better."

Within a few days, the hens found a way through the fence into the garden, and started pecking at the lettuces. Dad chased them back and put up chicken netting around the garden. They stopped laying their eggs in the hen house and just laid them any old where, so we had to hunt for them.

Sometimes they were rotten by the time we found them. After the second stink-bomb egg – we were supposed to be having tomato omelette for lunch – Rich and I ran out of the kitchen, put clothes pegs on our noses, and walked around making honking noises until the pegs hurt too much.

Dad said he'd had enough of this nonsense and went out to catch the hens. He called the dogs, Shep and Judy, to help, but the hens were not sheep, and didn't run the right way. They got flustered. Shep snapped at one and got a few feathers in his mouth and then shied at all the squawking and flapping. One hen even flew a little, way up in the air, even though her wing was supposed to be clipped. Judy ran and barked up at her and she cackled and fell. The other hens fluttered and screeched in panic. The panic spread to the dogs who barked crazily and backed off.

“Useless black and white bastard,” Dad shouted at Judy. He went to the shed and brought back the .22, aimed at the hen that had flown up in Judy's face and was now pecking a cabbage. He missed and hit the cabbage, which made Rich laugh.

“Shut up, boy.” Dad turned on his heel towards Rich. Mum showed up.

“George. Stop a minute.” Mum spoke very quietly in her special voice for Dad, as she put her hand on the side of his face, sliding her pinkie around the back of his ear. “This is not the hens doing this to you. They are

just birds after all. Let's go check the race gates and leave the chooks for now."

Dad's face relaxed suddenly and showed something else. Pain maybe, I couldn't tell. He exhaled heavily. But he put the gun back and went off with Mum.

Everything is different in the city. And it all seems to be about the dogs. After they attacked us yesterday – Rich and me – Rich is still in hospital, and this morning, Dad and I take a walk. I like that, having him to myself. No Mum, no Rich. *Transition time* Dad calls it. We moved to this city the day before yesterday and have not yet looked for the high school.

“There might be more than one, Rona,” Dad says. “You might get to choose.” He still talks to me like I’m ten, but I don’t mind. My father and I go out walking because I don’t have school yet and he doesn’t have to go work on the farm, since the farm is not ours any more. So our life is not our old life. And on this special morning we do this strange thing that farm people never do. We take a walk with no particular purpose.

Climbing roses and honeysuckle fall over and sprout through the wood fences that line both sides of the path. The houses here are old wooden ones with sash windows. Flame-orange cemetery flowers and bright dandelions pop up among the broadleafed docks along the verges. My father laughs at the ways of city people.

“Could use a bit of weedkiller on the edges,” he says.

I see movement way ahead, coming our way. Not people. Animals, running towards us. Two dogs. They don’t sit or lie like farm dogs with one ear always pricked for an instruction. These dogs are large, ferocious and

off the leash. One is a brindled, mix-breed mastiff and the other a heavy, black-and-tan-faced rottweiler. I grab my father's arm with both hands.

“Don't show fear,” my father says roughly, pushing my hands off him, “and don't look them directly in the eye,” and we walk fast and unblinking forward, towards them. As the dogs come upon us, panting, I see their hot breath in the air. I see the wet vinyl look of their nostrils, froth on their muzzles, and their teeth sunk in mottled, blackish gums. They whoosh past us, leaving a cloud of their sweat-dog stink. I gasp. When I turn, I see one of them look back. The mix-breed. With snarl folds in its upper lip, and a face full of canines.

The morning has broken its promise. Dogs have spoiled this too. The freshness has been lost behind glaring white cloud, and Dad pushed me away, even though I have stitches and a bandage around my arm. We squint in the bleak, bright cold, my father and I, and we walk. The pretty houses turn industrial. A fertilizer factory. White dust from the piles of lime blows into my eyes. The wood fence ends on our right and a hilly, stony field expands in its place. Way in the distance is a large spreading oak.

“Pretty poor soil,” says Dad, scuffing at stringy grass and patches of white clay.

A lot of dogs roam this open ground. All semi-wild. Smooth stones, with layers white and ash gray, lie alongside the path, and periodically we

pass scatterings of bones that remind me of peeled willow branches.

Reaching the far corner of the field, we find a rough shallow cave, in whitish clay, almost like a sound shell, or an enlarged version of a seashell you could hold to your ear. I imagine my mother standing there in the middle, her arms out, doing a great incantation, her voice powerful - mythic - thrilling... And I see my mother as a stranger might, my mother in her Indonesian toe sandals and her gardening jeans with one of my father's checked work shirts hanging on her like a dress, and her shorn hair loose and springing around the face so unnaturally pale, and so punctured by black hollowed eyes.

Her speaking is not slowed by breath and her voice flows from her like a great wind and she calls on the planets and the red dwarfs and the black holes and the meteors and comets to rain down and exact justice on the greedy of the earth - the bankers and bandits of the world, the lawmakers and warmakers, who take and take, and lie to take, and kill to take...

While there's fire in my lungs like there's fire in the sun

I'll call on you. Rain down, rain down

*While there's stones beneath my feet like there's stones beneath
their ribs*

I'll call on you

While there's wind in my throat....

A breeze blows up my shirtsleeves and all my hairs stand on tiptoes. Even up to those on the back of my ears.

If only my mother really did that. If only my mother were that fierce. If only my mother were *here*. I call out to her but she is too far away, and we turn back. To keep her in sight, I walk backwards across the field my good arm linked with forward-walking Dad. I see the dogs, in ones and twos, converging on her and I see my mother for the last time, before she disappears behind a curve of land.

I pick out a bone that is long and strong with a flat paddle-like end, and swing it around imagining defending myself against a dog.

When Rich comes out of hospital, we wander down Karlson Avenue, very slowly and stopping often since he has crutches and a lot of stitches. A few blocks down we reach a big park. It is much greener than the farm and has a stream and a lot of trees down one side, and a football field in the middle, with large H-shaped goal posts. At the near end, in a fenced-off playground for little kids, a tall thin girl is walking along the top of the monkey bars, only one arm out for balance. Rich and me go a bit closer and see that her other arm is bandaged to the front of her body. When she sees us, the girl makes a deep, slow knee-bend, and somersaults onto the ground

landing with easy control.

“Wow,” I say to Rich.

She saunters over, finger-combing her long black hair out of her face. She wears a crocheted, white skull cap clipped on her hair, and looks about Rich’s age.

“What are you doing here?” she asks.

“Who’s asking?” Rich throws back at her.

“Gymnastics police. That’s who.” She nods at our bandages. “You guys picked the wrong team, huh?”

“You can talk,” says Rich, lifting his chin.

“What happened to your arm?” I ask her.

“Dislocated shoulder. They say not to do gymnastics, but too bad. You can do a lot of things with only one arm.” She demonstrates by doing a couple of one-handed cartwheels.

“Who’s they?” I ask. “Your Mum and Dad?”

“Ha!” she laughs. “Dad was the one who did it. And Mum is long gone.”

I think about my Mum then. How she looked frazzled and old the day she left.

“She left when I was a baby,” continues the girl. “She used to come back and stay for a couple of weeks now and then, but then she’d leave

again. And then I got fostered, but the foster mother left too, so then the foster father kept me. That's my dad now." She sounds not very interested in her story, like she has told it a lot of times.

"Our Mum left too," says Rich.

"Yes, but she's coming to get us soon," I say, "so it's not the same."

"But that's what mothers do. They leave," says the girl. "My mother had another kid right after me, a boy, and she left him too."

"*Your* mother maybe," I say.

"Whatever you say, babyface." She laughs and springs another one-handed cartwheel.

After a wet spring, the rain ran out and the grass died. Rich and I went out walking with Mum, scouting for horse mushrooms to add to her lamb stew, without much success. We would have to make do with wild thyme until the next rain. Some sheep and lambs poked their noses sideways under the fence to get mouthfuls of the lucerne, growing much greener and taller than normal grass, in the next paddock. Dad grew lucerne because its roots reached down a mile looking for water, and so didn't require so much irrigation. He usually baled it once early in the summer and again at the end of the growing season. After the bales dried out, he stacked some in a big haystack covered with a blue tarp for winter feed, but most of it he sold.

Mum pointed out that the sheep were eating the grass down to the ground, their whiskery lips brushing against the dirt.

“They look hungry,” she said, and she walked over to the gate and unhitched it. The gatepost had leaned over so it wouldn't swing open by itself so Mum lifted the old wooden gate and carried it open.

“What about the baling?” said Rich.

“Maybe we should ask Dad, first?” I said.

Mum smiled and shrugged.

“Be generous,” she said. “The sheep want a good square meal, just like all of us. Let's leave them to it.”

We walked single file along the fenceline towards the house and I lagged behind and turned to see the first two sheep notice the open gate. They both bleated, and jumped across the line where the gate had been. The rest of the flock looked up. They all started bleating and picked up their feet to trot in a great mass through to the lucerne paddock, like water flooding out through a race gate. Their grubby white backs were visible, but not their legs, which disappeared into the tall, bright lucerne. By morning, it would all be trampled flat.

“Look how happy they are to escape that stony paddock,” I heard Mum say to Rich. The two of them had stopped further on than me.

“And get some good food,” agreed Rich.

Mum and I were out in the garden digging potatoes just before dinner, when Dad strode up to the house fast.

“Who opened the gate?” he demanded.

“The sheep were hungry, George. There wasn’t a blade of grass left in that paddock,” said Mum.

Dad went red in the face and grabbed her shoulders, his thumbs pushing into the base of her neck, and he shook her, shouting,

“What are you trying to do? Destroy me?!”

Mum’s body flopped around like she had no bones. And then, in a quick second, she stiffened and kneed Dad in the balls. He let her go with a

groan, and folded into a crouch, while Mum walked briskly round the back of the house, up the hill, and away.

Mum accompanied us along the gravel road to the start of the tarseal, where the school bus stopped. She was carrying her blue tartan suitcase.

“I’m going visiting,” she told us.

“To the city?” I asked.

She nodded, but didn’t need to because I could always tell. By the way her eyes looked over my head. And by the suitcase. She usually went for a few weeks, and when she came back, she would open her arms, take big breaths, and say, “Oh it’s good to be back in the fresh air!” And then she’d pull our faces up close to look at us, and give us hugs. And I would hold her tightly and smell in her clothes the asphalt of the city as well as her own smell.

Before we moved to the city, all the talk was about rising interest rates and how farmers whose mortgages were large or recent were in deep shit.

Mum and Dad were out one day when me and Rich got home. We looked around for them. Mum was not in the garden, Shep and Judy were

tied up by their kennels, the tractor was in the shed, but the ute was not. So we checked the freezer for ice cream.

“Only plain homemade,” I said. “No bought ice cream.” But we scooped it out of the tray nevertheless.

“Hey, hey, that’s them coming,” Rich said, as we heard the ute drive up. We quickly put back the ice cream, wiped our spoons on a teatowel, and put them back in the drawer.

Dad was wearing a suit when he came in, and Mum had lipstick and a fluttering scarf. They looked like film stars from some olden-day film.

“Is that new, that orange scarf?” I asked.

“No dear, it’s not new, and it’s not orange either — it’s peach.”

“Peach!” I laughed. “Not apple or apricot?”

“No, I think it’s a nectarine scarf,” said Rich.

“No, it’s a pineapple scarf,” I said.

“No, it’s a pumpkin scarf.”

“No, it’s a cabbage scarf.”

“Cabbages are green, stupid.”

“Would you two dry up,” said Dad, sliding one end of his tie out of its knot. “I’ve heard more than enough bullshit for one day.” He rolled up his sleeves. “I could use a beer.”

Dad got a phone call from a neighbour, Mr. Green. Our other

neighbour from a mile up the road, Jack Sanderson, had drunk weedkiller - the one that even one drop on your skin could make you so sick you die or almost die. Paraquat. The third suicide in the last six months.

“They found him lying on the floor holding the receiver of the phone,” Dad said to Mum.

“Holding the receiver?”

“Looks like he changed his bloody mind, doesn't it.” Dad swore when he was upset.

“I'll call old Johnson and see if I can get work for a month or so,” said Dad later on. “Get some cash, since that flyblown bastard at the bank is good for nothing except taking up space.”

“Would you stop swearing in front of the kids,” Mum said.

A couple of days later, Dad threw a carton of his clothes and a sleeping bag in the passenger seat of the ute.

“George,” said Mum, putting a hand up on his bulky shoulder, and rubbing the flannel of his shirt, “is this really necessary?”

“Let's put it this way,” said Dad. “I prefer the taste of beer to paraquat.” He whistled to the collies to jump up onto the bed of the ute, got into the cab, and off he drove to go shearing. Shep and Judy stood with their legs well planted, their noses stretched out to sniff the wind.

“Everything is not about money, George,” Mum said to the tail lights as they disappeared around the corner of the drive. She looked up at the clouds.

“Looks like rain. Smells like it too. Can you smell it?” she asked us. Rich and me sniff the air like Shep and Judy. It smells colder maybe.

“Come on, let’s go in.”

A gale blew up that evening making the windows rattle and dust swirl around, and making the poplars along the driveway turn dark and bend way over. The sky was full of blue-vein lightning and dry thunder. Mum went outside and walked up the hill at the back of us, leaning into the wind, with her long crinkly brown hair blowing in all directions. I watched her from the back door. It started to rain — sharp, diagonal rain without much water in it — and she opened up her arms and put her face upwards into it and stood there swaying for a long time. She must be singing I thought.

The next morning, she got us up early, at sunrise, and we went outside in our PJs and gumboots.

“Look – jewels,” she said, pointing to a huge spider web between two apple trees, with hundreds of raindrops dangling from it, each one alight with low, orange-pink sunrays. “The most gorgeous jewels in the world,” she said. “I had to get you up before the light changed colour and

they dried up.”

“Yeah,” we said, looking at the sparkling drops. “Wow.” We looked from the jewels to Mum, with the colours of the rising sun glowing on her face. She was so happy with them she didn’t notice us any more, so we looked back at the light-filled raindrops too and I thought about how beautiful they were and how they would soon disappear.

The web had also caught a wasp, which had given up struggling.

“Breakfast for Mrs. Spider,” said Mum. “Now, how about breakfast for us.”

Mum walked with us to the school bus stop. She was dressed up, with the peach scarf, but not carrying her blue tartan suitcase.

“Going to the city?” I asked.

“No, not this time, dear. I’m going to a job interview at the Cherry Flats Nursery.”

“A job?” Rich asked.

Mum smiled. “Most people have to have jobs. I just hope I get to work with seedlings, and not in the supermarket.”

She told us that evening she would be working for the nursery, but in another branch that was far, an hour by car, and Dad had the ute, so she’d have to stay out there. She got a lift into town on the school bus the next

day.

“Bye love,” she said to both of us when everyone got off at the school gates, and she patted Rich on the cheek and kissed the top of my head. Rich raced into school with the other kids, but I watched Mum walk down the street until she turned the corner toward the milkbar where the nursery people were to supposed to pick her up. Then I turned around and went through the school gates to class. Rich and I were to be responsible Mum had told us, and take turns cooking and washing up until Dad got back.

Our footsteps sounded different in the house when we got home because all the windows were closed. Mum usually left all the windows and doors wide open. Rich cupped his hands together to make deep whaw-whaw morepork calls so the sound of the small owl echoed around the house, but I didn't join in. I sat on the old tweedy couch and turned up the tele loud to drown out the empty sounds of the house. Rich joined me and stretched his legs out taking most of the room.

“Keep on your own half,” I said, pushing his feet off me.

“I'll take as much as I want,” he said. He bent his legs up a bit, but he was still taking up most of the couch.

After a few hours we got hungry, and argued about who should make dinner.

“You’re the girl,” said Rich.

“You’re the oldest.”

“Makes no difference,” he said.

“Does if you’re hungry,” I said, watching Hogan’s Heroes like it was more interesting than food.

Rich sat up and put his feet on the floor. He punched me on the arm.

“You’re making dinner.”

“No, I’m not.”

He punched me again, harder. But I knew what to do. I punched back as hard as I could, aiming between his legs. My fist met an unstable combination of soft and solid.

“Aagh!” His torso collapsed against his thighs.

I got up and went while I could. Outside, I jumped the back boundary fence and headed uphill on the station land for a while. I chose a rock to sit on and watched the streaky wind clouds brighten to orange and pink then fade, and I watched the sun inch out of sight, and the edge of the top range go dark. Before the sky turned totally black, I walked back down.

The smell of cheesy toast filled the kitchen, so I turned the grill back on and made two slices for myself, one plain with a lot of salt and one with Mum’s apricot chutney. Then I sat at the table in the living room to eat it and let Rich have the whole couch. We didn’t mention the fight.

We arrived home from school a few days later to find a woman, not our mother, sitting on the couch reading.

“Who are you?” we asked.

“Good to meet you too,” she said.

Dad’s half-sister, Auntie Myrtle, had come to take care of us although she was not enthusiastic about it. Rich and I didn’t want her either. She talked like a pom because she grew up in London. She drank sherry poured from a two-litre flagon into a coffee mug, she dyed her hair red, and she read foreign books. Vonnegut and Kafka. We called her Auntie Turtle, but she just laughed when she overheard us.

“Know what? You’re the first people to ever call me that.” She laughed again and went back to her book. Rich and I didn’t see what was so funny.

“Don’t you ever watch TV?” I said after a few days.

“Not usually when there isn’t one.”

I spun round and saw the corner was empty.

“Where’s the tele?” I shouted. “What did you do with the tele?”
Everything was gone.

“Calm down. Your mum came and picked it up this morning, and a few other things too, after you left for school,” she said.

“Mum was here?”

“It sucks, I know. But it’s not my tele. Here, try a book. This one’s about a man who turns into a cockroach.”

“What’s a cockroach again?”

“An ugly bug. You get them up north. Almost as creepy as a weta but not quite.”

“Eew, gross,” I said, since she expected it, but I’d never seen a weta either. “When’s Mum coming back to live at home?”

“Don’t ask me, Sunshine. I’m the last to know,” said Myrtle the Turtle. “But I wouldn’t hold my breath if I were you.”

Me and Rich split. We wagged school and went up into the station, the un-irrigated land that stretched up the mountain range from the edge of our place. Rich brought Dad’s .22. He was a lousy shot, but the station was crawling with rabbits so he hit one while he was aiming at another. He hacked off its head with his pocket knife, and I helped get the skin off, which wasn’t easy, but once we got the first part, it peeled off like a very tight fur glove. We made a fire to cook the rabbit, but it took ages and then it was too tough to eat. You could kind of chew on it for a long time and suck out the taste, and then you had to spit it out. And we got water from the race, which wound its slow way down towards the farms, and picked rosehips for

rosehip tea. That was pretty disgusting too. We took turns practicing with the gun, and we hit a few more rabbits and missed a lot more, until we were out of shells. But after that, there wasn't that much to do.

We could see our place below, and the border of tall narrow poplars between our driveway and the Green's place next door, and over from them the Sandersons', where Mr. Sanderson used to live before he drank the paraquat and changed his mind, and which the bank was going to take off Mrs. Sanderson pretty soon, and sell. Next to them was the house with no land that belonged to the vet, and then far in the distance you could see the edge of the station's old farmhouse and their huge new yards, big enough for 8,000 sheep at a time said Rich, who liked to remember numbers.

In the evening, Rich threw rocks at the rabbits, and then at a big schist tor. His little rocks ricocheted off the giant one and smashed apart in flat slices that fell on the bald, hard-packed ground. We were cold overnight and uncomfortable even though we'd brought sleeping bags. After a day and a half, we trekked home to Auntie Turtle because we were hungry.

"Next time you wag school, at least take your books so they can't blame me," she said. "That way I can say I saw you going to the bus." Hadn't she noticed we were away for a night?

She had weird music. The Clash and Aida. Twice a day she played it

at top volume — The Clash in the morning and Aida in the evening — and wouldn't talk to us while she stood up to listen and smoked three cigarettes in a row. Six a day. She was a bit whack me and Rich reckoned. But The Clash was kind of cool. Too cool for the radio to play it even.

Rich:

For a long time I sleep on my stomach or on my left side. I sleep a lot. The painkillers mostly kill the pain and I drift in and out. Rona comes in to see me. Creeps in. I really hate that anxious look of hers.

“What d'you want!” I snap, and close my eyes against her.

I often wake up sweating. One time, the silhouette of Mum appears in the doorway.

“Nightie night, love.” – I almost hear her say it. But no. It's just a memory knotted up with the sheets and with the medicine. Then there's another shadow at the door. Shorter. Rona, with her arm in a sling, looking timid.

“You feeling better?” she says.

“Bugger off, why can't you.”

The wound itself I don't look at. It mostly feels hot and tight, but aches when the painkillers wear off. I can't put on trousers or shorts or even PJ's, and so I wrap a towel round me to go to the loo.

In the doctor's office, there's a poster behind the door with all the muscles labeled and the student doctor tests me on the main muscle groups while we wait for the anesthetic to kick in: trapezius, deltoids, biceps,

pectoralis, abdominals, quadriceps, hamstrings... The doctor comes in to look at the bite. Bites are messy, he tells me, not like a clean cut that mends well, and the hamstrings on my leg were pretty well chomped up.

“But the great thing is you're young, so it'll heal up 1-2-3,” he says. “It won't look pretty, even with the graft – so you'll never get to wear that bikini again.” He pauses expecting a laugh. “Don't look so worried, sport,” he says. “You'll be right as rain.” The student doctor puts his hand on my shoulder without saying anything.

By the time I'm able to get around more, Rona is well into this thing where she whinges on and on about Mum coming back or Mum writing or Mum in Australia, which drives me crazy, and I punch her on the arm to shut her up. I'm still not going to school and I only get out of the house when Dad drops me at my appointments at the hospital, or I wait for him in the parked ute while he goes to the dole office, or the bottle store, or the supermarket. In that order.

It's stupid, but I keep seeing women that look like Mum out of the corner of my eye. And then I crane my neck, or even slide out of the cab and limp as fast as possible to catch up with whichever one it is, and then the woman turns her head and I see her face is nothing like Mum's. And that's a feeling like someone punched me on the arm. A jolt, followed by a sore feeling that's deep in the deltoid muscle. And I feel like dickhead. So I

hit Rona harder when I see her.

“This is a limited time situation,” Dad says several times as he gets in behind the wheel and turns the key in the ignition. He's taken to muttering to himself. “Begging some up-herself twit for an extra damn dollar... Once I get a couple of bucks together it's going to be a different story. Yes sir, it is. A different bloody story.” As he backs out of the parking spot, he glances over and apparently remembers I'm sitting there. “Right Rich?” he says. “A different story alright. Boot'll be on the other foot.”

“Right,” I say. I adjust my sitting style from half-lying on the side of my good leg to kneeling on it sideways on the seat.

Soon enough, he gets an under-the-table job moving someone's lathe and carpentry tools on the back of the ute.

“Could have used you today, Rich,” he says when he comes in that evening. “Just a matter of time,” he says, “My own business, be my own boss...and bugger the tax man.” He sits in the only chair. “Should never have listened to her. Ruined the whole shebang, didn't she. Well not this time. Not on your life, Nelly. This is going to be a totally different story.”

“I thought it was the interest rates that made us lose the farm,” says Rona.

“It was a lot of things,” says Dad, “including the straw that broke the

camel's back.”

“How did she?” says Rona, who can't shut up about Mum for even one second. I punch her on the arm, hard.

“Ow! Stop hitting me. Dad! Rich keeps punching me.”

“You kids stop your squabbling,” Dad says as he goes through to have a shower. “I've got enough to worry about without you two.”

Rona:

Since Rich has to rest for the first few weeks, I have to walk by myself to the school, the only time I have ever been the first. Rich is always first, being older, but things aren't very fun by yourself. I walk down Karlson Avenue past the park, its playground, football field and the bush-covered hilly area at the end, and continue a mile or so into the flat grid of streets. On every block along the way, I count the lampposts that have the metal climbing rods for escaping from roaming dogs. I make a habit of marking in my mind the location of the closest lamppost as I walk along. Within a week, I know every half-way mark — the points at which the closest lamppost changes — on the route between school and home.

The school is bigger than I thought possible, being made up of a dozen two-storey buildings and a lot of asphalt. Every corner you turn, there

is another wall. During intervals and lunch, I pace the circumference though I know there is no getting out before 3:00 pm since they lock the school gates. A four-metre chainlink fence divides the school property from unused land on one side and the street at the front. The other two sides are separated from family-sized box houses with high concrete walls that feature thick glass blocks in an intermittent line just above head height. There are no sports fields, no netball or tennis courts, and with all the walls and fences, I feel like I am in jail.

Next to the signs on the inside of the gates that read, *Caution: Roaming Mastiffs*, I pass some kids comparing their pepper sprays.

“You have to get the straight stream kind.”

“Nah, I got the fogging kind. Better coverage so as you don’t miss them.”

“Only if you can’t aim. My brother got the stream kind last week – it can shoot three metres, so you can hit that beast before it gets anywhere close to you. Foggers suck ‘cos you gotta wait until they’re almost on you.”

Other kids have whistles so high-pitched that people can’t hear them, but dogs are supposed to hate them and run away.

“Them ones don’t always work,” says one girl.

“Mostly they do,” says another kid. “And get this, this is the new type — Mark II Ultrasonic. Brushed steel and everything.”

“Yeah, but some dogs can’t hear them. Don’t you remember that kid Daniel last year — got 200 stitches on his face or something.”

“He was a complete derbrain. No one tries it out in the middle of the park. I mean, *duh*.”

“How many times is that girl gonna walk round the school?” They both look at me and I stare through them.

“Yeah, I know,” says the other kid. “What a weirdo.”

I ignore them. I walk among all the students as though they are stupid breed of sheep with no thoughts, and mostly they ignore me too.

Sometimes someone says, “You’re new.”

“Yep,” I say, focusing on something behind them, so they turn to see what I am looking at.

“Where are y’ from?”

“The south.”

They don’t pursue conversation and neither do I. Why would I waste my time? I’ll be leaving soon for Perth. I’ll be in my mother’s new garden, and we’ll sing, and watch the clouds, and look at different birds and spider webs.

“Welcome to the class, Rona,” teachers say. They all blend together in my mind since I don’t pay attention to their names. I smile a plastic

smile. Keep it brief. The actual classes I treat as I did in my old school. I listen, answer only if directly questioned. I do homework in class or while waiting for the teacher at the beginning of the next period. Outside school, I never look at the books. Sometimes though, I wonder about Perth and what it is like there, but we don't do that topic. We do apartheid and Stalin, typing and art, athletics and vectors and *Lord of the Flies*. Rich, when he starts school, has metalwork, but I couldn't get into that class, which is mostly boys. I don't see him that much at school.

There is one tall girl I notice around the school, the same girl me and Rich saw doing one-handed cartwheels in the little kids' playground. She still has the bandage holding her arm against her body and the doily thing on her head, and she goes round with a gang of kids who come and go from school by throwing a rope tied to a hook over the chainlink fence, and then hauling themselves up and over. I envy their swagger, and wonder how hard it would be to aim the hook, and how strong you would have to be to get over. They mostly wear long, loose mens shirts over narrow pants or leggings, and thick-soled boots. Some of them wear headbands or scarves on their hair which hangs long down their backs, and they have shadows round their eyes and mouths. The other kids avoid the gang I notice.

One day, the girl walks up to me and stares at my face. She has very thick black eyebrows that almost meet in the middle.

“Hey sis,” she says, challenging. She puts her free hand on her hip, and the gang stops too and gathers around, all staring at me.

“Giddy,” I say, staring right back. “And my name’s *Rona*.” I clench my fist, but I worry about my useless bandaged arm. She laughs suddenly, startling me.

“Rona, huh. – Hey guys, this is *Rona*.” Then she laughs again, and turns and leaves. The gang looks back and forward between us, and then swings on after her, their long hair swaying behind them. I notice some other kids watching, and then they look away quickly, afraid to catch my eye, and that puts a sweet taste in my mouth.

One part of my school circuit takes me alongside a property with huge abandoned concrete tanks. Weeds, some with tiny tooth-coloured flowers, some the size of small bushes, grow out of the cracks in the old concrete surrounding them. Behind the tanks are great mounds of bulldozed dirt and gravel and discarded fuseboxes, wire and hubcabs, and behind that, a few tree ferns, moth plants and a couple of large trees. Bones, both white and stained, many broken, are scattered all around. They don’t look like sheep bones. They must be dog bones, though many of them are very big. And everything is entwined with old man’s beard, whose flower spirals and tendrils cling to the fence and climb the piles of dirt. City dogs on the loose often congregate here, and despite the high chain link fence between them

and me, I have to force myself to walk this stretch. My mouth gets dry and I breathe slowly and deeply trying not to flinch when a dog barks at me, and also trying not to rerun the scene of dog jaws rushing towards my face. But it doesn't work. If the dogs rush the fence, my stomach jumps like I'm going to throw up. But I keep walking, so I will get used to it and toughen up. But I am not that tough, and I wish I were back on the farm.

Going to sleep at night is the worst. I have to try to sleep with my eyes open, because if I close them, the jaws always rush at me, and I yell out. Rich says at breakfast that I yell out anyway, in the night, and wake him up.

“What’s the problem Rona?” Dad says. “There’s nothing to be scared of. All you need to do is stay out of other people’s property and you’ll be perfectly safe.”

“I *wasn't* on their property. I was on the fence. And the fence is half ours.”

“Yes,” says Dad. “And half theirs too as you found out.” He swallows the last of his tea and takes his dishes through to the sink. He has a few days work with a landscape gardener. “Stay inside the gate and everything’ll be good as gold.” He puts a hand on my shoulder and squeezes gently. “See you both tonight.” He picks up his keys and leaves.

“Don’t you get scared when you see dogs now?” I ask Rich.

“Nah,” says Rich and takes an aggressive bite of toast. “Next time I’ll be ready.” But I know he doesn’t sleep much either. He’s always nodding off when he sits down.

We didn't eat at the table when Mum wasn't there. We sat around on the couch without our tele. Auntie Turtle cooked wierd food. Vegetarian.

Eventually Dad came back home to the farm, looking pale from all those weeks being inside shearing.

"What's this?" he said when he saw his plate. "Why's it cold?"

"Fava bean salad – served Turkish style, at room temperature."

"Where's the meat?" demanded Rich.

"Still skipping around the paddock enjoying its life, I suppose," said Auntie Turtle.

Sometimes Auntie Turtle couldn't be bothered with dinner and put out breakfast food – weetbix, milk, toast and jam and marmite.

"It's not breakfast time," said Rich.

"Yes it is. It's come early."

"Well, if I have to have another breakfast, I want brown sugar."

"Whatever you can find Richie-boy," said Auntie Turtle. She stroked the sides of her coffee mug like she was considering something. Then she got up and reached for the flagon of sherry that she kept on top of the fridge, and sloshed a big dollop into her coffee.

The crutching hadn't been done of course, so we did that. Me, Dad and Rich. Since spring had turned so wet, a lot of the sheep and lambs had

serious flyblow and some had footrot so bad they had to kneel in the paddocks to graze. With Shep and Judy, we rounded them up and into the yards. Rich and I took turns with the job of yelling and pushing the sheep through the outside pens, forcing gates closed, to keep the holding pen full, and the stinkier job of sweeping the wool and dags off the board inside the shearing shed, and separating them into bales. Dad dragged them on their backs from the holding pen and sheared off the sharp-smelling, urine-stained wool around their tail stubs. For the worst cases, we squirted this white watery stuff on the bloody back ends and eaten-out hooves to clear out the maggots before they staggered out of the shearing shed. Most of them recovered. After Dad pushed them out through the hole in the shed wall, the healthy ones sometimes skipped, all hooves off the ground, with the unexpected luck of escape.

At the end of the day, walking back up to the house, we could see in the paddocks all the clean, white, shorn patches on the sheep bums.

“Good job, you two,” said Dad. “We left it a bit late, but better late than never.” He got Auntie Turtle to cook sausages for dinner and spaghetti out of a tin. Yum, my favorite. Then we had bought ice cream — hokey pokey. We took turns that evening with the tweezers and a needle, sterilized in steam from the electric jug, digging and squeezing thistles out of our lanolin-softened hands.

Auntie Turtle had just finished listening to opera, and she strode about out front, taking very long steps and kicking her feet high in front of her. She talked, as she often did, about the mossy fountain she wanted in the middle of our lawn that had no grass.

“I want water fuscias round it, and rhododendrons, and rhubarb thick as your arm. That’s what I want.” She took another hard drag on her cigarette. “Can’t you just see it?” she continued, but she wasn’t talking to us. “Oh, and lotuses! Yes.” She blew a focused vent of smoke out a narrow gap between her lips.

“What are lotuses?” I asked her.

“Ah! — ‘The Lotos blooms below the barren peak, The Lotos blows by every winding creek...’” She sighed a dreamy “Mmm” and her eyes switched off.

Well that explains everything, I thought. Rich rolled his eyes.

“Georgie Porgie,” Auntie Turtle said to Dad when he comes back from setting up the lucerne irrigation. “Do you think you could dig a little hole in the lawn and send some water over to it?”

“What?”

“A little channel. You know, for a fountain.”

“A fountain!” Dad looked at her like she had grown a couple more ears.

“Why not? It’d be idyllic out here with a fountain.”

“Right you are then,” said Dad. “I’ll get onto it right away, redirect the water from the lucerne. And I’ll put in some Peter Pan statues too, shall I? And maybe a couple of golf courses. What do you say?” his voice rising.

“Everything does not have to be so functional!” This was the first time I had seen Auntie Turtle get mad. “There is no reason to live in ugliness.”

“We live in a virtual desert in case you hadn’t noticed,” said Dad.

Auntie Turtle took a deep slow breath and said quietly, “So could we not create a little oasis, in this desert, to enrich our lives and those of your children? – With the sound of running water, the smell of flowers, and moss, and damp earth...”

“You’re away with the bloody fairies!” said Dad, stomping off.

“Even if you got a fountain,” I said. “It would only work Tuesdays and Wednesdays.”

“What do you mean?” asked Auntie Turtle.

“We only have water rights for those days,” said Rich, “and then the waterman shuts our race gates. The Greens get Thursdays and Fridays, and the Sandersons get the rest of the week.”

“Is that right?” said Auntie Turtle. “Well that puts a spanner in the works.”

When we got home from school, we found Dad at home wearing suit trousers and an ironed shirt. He rolled up his sleeves. A tie was hanging over the back of a chair. Auntie Turtle brought in coffee.

“Uh-oh,” said Rich, “Dad’s been to the bank again.”

“Uh-oh,” I said.

“Uh-oh, uh-oh, uh-oh,” we both repeated over and over, in high tones, then low. The sound changed, after many repetitions, into a forced hiccup, “UH--oh, UH--oh, UH--oh.”

“How long does it take to civilise the little beasts?” Auntie Turtle asked Dad.

“Pipe down, you two, or you can go outside,” he said to Rich and me.

“Go see if there’s anything in the biscuit tins,” she told us. So we went into the kitchen.

“Food is a miracle minder,” I heard her say to Dad in the dining room while Rich and I opened the biscuit cupboard and started pulling out the tins.

“I’m going to have to cull early,” said Dad to Auntie Turtle in the

next room. I moved closer to the doorway to listen, while Rich rummaged for the biscuits that were most likely not there.

“And culling would be some sort of quaint seasonal yodelling?” asked Auntie Turtle.

“Good one, Myrt. No, it’s separating out the animals that are for the works. But we won’t get much for them – the lambs are only half grown. No meat on them.”

“Mortgage payment?”

“Bastard at the bank won’t budge on it.”

“Would a sherry help?” she said. “I find it’s good for most things.”

“That sweet muck? No, some Johnnie Walker though. Might cheer up this coffee.”

I moved back beside Rich before Dad came in for the scotch. Sure enough, there was nothing in the tins, not even crumbs.

We did the culling. And the bank foreclosed anyway, a few weeks later.

With knees spread wide, Kamisese and Dad are out the back sitting on plastic chairs with a six-pack of cold stubbies between them. They have taken several trips back to the refrigerator already. The side fence is high enough and close enough to the house to allow access to the roof and I am lying on my stomach looking down on them over the white plastic guttering of the porch roof. Dad has a bit of pink scalp showing through brown hair on the top of his head but Kamisese's head is well protected with his pom-pom of black, curly, curly hair. It rained this morning and is now hot and muggy.

“There was a letter from those nursery people,” says Dad.

I realize it must have been in that packet that arrived yesterday, the one that was forwarded from the farm. I have to check if Mum's address is on it.

“Plants grow for her, they always did, eh,” says Kamisese, “but she has her ways...”

“...that don't always fly in a business setting,” finishes Dad, taking a mouthful of his beer. “They got word from her,” says Dad. “Those nursery people. Seems like there is no new guy this time. She's on her own.”

“Unlikely,” says Kamisese. “She always needed a guy, eh.”

A moment of silence. I look out over the patchwork of rooves, rusty

reds, grey and unpainted tin, that spreads out from the grey roof I'm lying on. In between are high fences and trees and clothes lines.

"I dunno. Wasn't that always the problem?" Dad's speech is slurred. "She *didn't* need us. None of us."

"God knows what the problem was. Or is." Kamisese wipes his eyes with the back of his wrist.

"Well maybe she does need someone now, being that she's sick... She didn't tell them what it is."

My skin is sticky on the corrugated iron, and so is the air sticky. I find it an effort to breathe. *What could be wrong with her?*

"It can't be good, eh," says Kamisese. "She was wasting away last time I saw her." He sniffs deeply.

"Ah, to hell with her," says Dad, and puts his head in his hands. They stop talking for a while, and I listen to the dull clink of their bottles on the concrete after each mouthful.

"She couldn't give a flying fuck about anyone," says Kamisese, and slams down his bottle, which cracks. "She had it coming."

As quietly as possible, I roll over on the corrugations of the hot roof iron to lie on my back. *Wasting away*, I think to myself, looking up into the glary sun through the heat haze. Sweat gathers and runs along my face and back, and my shirt sticks to my skin. The bandage round my arm is damp

and itchy.

“Dad, when are we getting a tele?” asks Rich that evening when we’re sitting round the dining table. There is not much to do here in the evenings. Our fingernails are cleaner than I ever knew they could be, and the skin of our hands very smooth and soft. “It’s boring here,” he says.

“Money doesn’t grow on trees,” Dad says.

“But Mum’s got our TV.”

“Uh-huh.”

“Did you post that letter to Mum?” I ask Dad “It’s been much more than two weeks.”

“I told you she’ll find you if she wants to.”

“But did you post it?” I say.

“Didn’t I say I would?”

“Well you might not have got around to it.”

“Very suspicious, aren’t we,” he says smiling. “But the answer is yes, Y, E, S, I did get around to posting your precious letter.”

“So when do you think we can get a new tele?” asks Rich.

“She said she was coming back for us.” I say. But Dad has left the room.

I write to Mum again. This time I use the June calendar, which has a picture of an iced-over tarn in the high country with thin, scraggy grass around. You can see it's windy up there, and it looks down on the dark green tops of the trees at the bushline. On the back, I write one word in each day's box. "*Dear Mum, when are you coming to get us? I am waiting and waiting for you. Are you sick? I heard Dad say that. I hope you are better now.*" Thirty words for thirty days. Under the boxes I write, "*Love from Rona. xxx*".

I use the same address for Perth that Dad used last time since the packet from the Cherry Flats Nursery had no address for Mum when I checked. This time I don't tell Dad. Instead, I nick some coins from his yesterday's jeans hanging over the back of the chair in his bedroom.

At the gate, I look both ways along the avenue for dogs, and then head away from the park and school towards the post office and the city centre. At each lamppost, I check ahead and behind for dogs. After a mile or so, I see three dogs in the distance. They don't look big, but to be on the safe side, I hoist myself up a lamppost, high enough to be out of reach. As the dogs get closer, I see they are dobermans. With each stride, light slides like water over their sleek shoulders, and there is something beautiful about them. But when they catch sight of me and leap up with murder in their barking, I forget that pretty quick and climb higher. With my feet astride the

pole on the metal prongs, I hug the splintery wood and keep the dobermans in my peripheral vision, careful not to stare down directly, trying not to pay attention to their guttural snarls. After a while, they lose interest and run off. I climb down and sit for a few minutes on the curb to let the shaking in my hands and legs stop, and to let my breathing settle back to normal.

At the post office, I ask how long it takes for a letter to get to Perth.

“Four to six days,” says the lady at the window. Mum must not have got the letter.

“Do letters get lost sometimes?” I ask.

“Occasionally, they get misdirected and arrive late,” she said, “but to be completely lost is rare.” There is a little crease in her forehead just above the bridge of her glasses. “Usually, we find that the person has moved, or the sender finds the letter at home because they forgot to post it. But, if you think something has been lost, dear, you can always file a complaint.”

Could she have moved again? I wonder.

“I’ll just send her this other one,” I say and hand her the latest letter.

Mum came home to pack some more things on a Saturday while Dad was out checking on all the fences he would never mend again. The Cherry Flats Nursery van sat outside the house with someone's elbow sticking out the driver's window. Twin cherries with an attached leaf were painted on the side of the van. Mum brought a big suitcase out of their bedroom. Her face seemed all tight and scrunched on one side, her long hair had been cut short and it was very thin, and her body, too, was thin. And she was jumpy.

"Mum, why do you have to go back to that job?" I asked. She had already been away a long time.

"It's only for a week or two more. I don't like how they work out there. It's like a factory for trees." Mum looked old. She carried the case out to the van and put it in the back. Rich and I followed her outside. Then she told us she was moving to Australia, across the desert in Perth. She said we would come over later, me and Rich, when she got custody.

"Can't stop now," she said. I thought she was going to cry.

"What do you mean!" Rich said. "When are you getting custody?"

"I'm doing everything I can, now don't give me a hard time about it, Rich, okay. I'm under a LOT of pressure."

"Is Dad coming too?" I asked.

"No, stupid," said Rich. "Dad lives here." One of the hens was

pecking along the edge of the driveway like nothing was happening.

Mum kissed us and said we'd be together soon. As the van drove off, Mum's hand fluttered out the passenger window.

"Mum! No. Wait!" I shouted and I ran after her hand. "Wait!" Everything was too fast. She couldn't just go away. This was where we lived.

But the van turned the corner and she was gone.

My lungs had cramp. I felt like I'd just swallowed something too big and too dry and I couldn't get it down my throat. I took in short noisy swallows of air.

"Australia," said Rich. I waited for him to say something else, but he didn't. He just went back inside.

My strange hiccups died down, but I didn't feel like going inside. And I didn't want to be outside either. There was nothing I wanted. I picked up a stone from the gravel drive and threw it at the hen as hard as I could. It missed.

Dad was like a bear with a sore head, said Myrtle the turtle.

"Give it a bloody rest, Myrt," Dad said.

"What did you expect?" Auntie Turtle said. "What did she know about farm life? At least I'd read enough about rural idiocy to know I

wouldn't like it. Tess of the D'Urbervilles pulling turnips with cold hands was warning enough for me."

"Rural idiocy nothing doing. Try rural usury by the Rural bloody Bank."

"Well rural whatever, I'm not sad to be going back to my own life, far from all this," says Auntie Turtle, who was not moving to the city with us. She got up and put on one of her two records, and we heard the raucous tones of *The Clash*, which I kind of liked by then.

London calling to the faraway towns

Now war is declared - and battle come down

London calling to the underworld

Come out of the cupboard, you boys and girls...

"You kids are the best thing she gave me. The only thing." Dad half hugged us, one arm each. — Was that tears in his eyes? — Then he let go, after the world's fastest half-second. "Okay. Let's get packed and we can get out of here."

The problem with the city is there's nothing to do and nowhere to go to, just streets, streets, streets. After school one day, me and Rich get out the .22 and we take turns shooting at the top-most of next door's plums, those that we can see over the fence.

"Missed!" Rich says.

"Not as many as you."

"You need glasses."

"I *hit* that one. You need new eyes."

"No you didn't. That was just leaves. The plum is still there. Duh. "

"I hit the one *next* to it. You're so blind you need a guide dog."

"Okay, we'll make a tally..."

We hear next door's front door open and the neighbour lady comes out and starts shouting, so we run inside. Then we aim at the plums from the kitchen window, ducking below the sill at the sound of her front door – not that she can see us through the fence – trying not to burst out laughing.

"Your father is going to hear about this," she shouts. Her pitbulls run up to the fence barking.

"So what," says Rich under his breath. "You're lucky your damn *dogs* don't get shot."

"If that fence wasn't in the way," I say. "Hey. What about..."

“Yes,” Rich interrupts. “The roof.”

We wait quietly until we hear the lady and her dogs go inside again. Rich goes first. It is tricky for him with his torn-up leg to climb the fence and step across onto the roof. He makes it, but for a few moments he rocks on one haunch, with his bad leg outstretched, his eyes and fists scrunched up with pain. From the top of the fence, I pass the gun and toss over a box of shells before following him onto the roof. My arm also hurts, but not as much.

“Get a load of the plums” says Rich with a pained smile. From here we can see the smashed and half-smashed plums splattered all over the neighbour’s tiny lawn like burst blood blisters. We lie flat and take pot shots at the plums again.

“Here they come,” says Rich when the neighbour and her pitbulls come out. Stepping down her two concrete front steps, she looks about as ordinary and respectable as could be, with short brown hair and a plain blue skirt and pale blue collared shirt. She and her dogs don’t see us since they don’t look upwards.

“Now you can kiss your arse goodbye,” Rich says under his breath, taking aim at the tan dog that mauled him. He fires. The bullet buries itself in the neighbour-lady’s lawn right next to the dog, and hearing the shot, both dogs look up and start barking at us.

“You’re only supposed to close *one* eye. Not both,” I say.

“Shut up, Ro,” says Rich.

The woman runs to her door, shouting at a much higher pitch than before about the police. At that moment, we hear the click of our gate closing as Dad arrives home.

“What is she shouting about now?” he says. “Rich, Rona, where are you?”

“Up here,” calls Rich.

Dad looks up and sees us with the gun.

“Get down here now!” Dad shouts, going red in the face. “What the hell do you think you’re doing!”

“But Dad...” Rich says.

“You *do not touch* this gun. Or any gun.” Dad’s voice is low and angry. “This is the city. And if I see either one of you with it ever again, I’ll tan both your hides within an inch of your life. Make no mistake, I will.”

Rich turns to me and rolls his eyes.

“Now get down here now,” Dad says. “The pair of you!” So we make our painful way down and give him the .22, which he takes inside and locks in the hall cupboard with the shells. He pockets the key.

“How can you be such a terrible shot,” I say to Rich. “*I* should have done it.”

“Shut up,” he says.

I wish I had shot that white one. Maybe that action-replay of the dog-bite would stop if I knew the dog was dead.

Rich’s wound heals gradually, though he never loses his limp and he won’t ever wear shorts no matter how hot it gets. His dog-bite must look really disgusting. One day, out of restlessness, we set out to follow the perimeter of the park. At the top end of the park, along the boundary closest to our house, we pass the empty fenced-off children’s playground with roundabout, slides, monkey bars, jungle gym and a six-seater rocking horse.

“Do you think the dogs can get us here?” I ask Rich. “There’s no lampposts.”

He stops and frowns.

“Nah,” he says. “I never saw any dogs in the park.”

“Don’t you think it’s weird that no one ever uses the park?”

“I saw them play football once,” he says. “But you could keep a look out if you’re that worried.”

You faker, I think, and keep checking for dogs, and I see that he does too. We continue walking until we reach some tall weeds that hide a slow, smelly stream bordering the far side of the park. Even after pushing through the weeds, we can’t get too close to the water because, between it and the

steep fall-off from the bank we are standing on, stands four metres of oily sludge.

“*Man*, that stinks,” says Rich.

Partially submerged in the sludge, we can see soft drink cans, Juicy Fruit wrappers, empty gold Benson & Hedges packets and old bones. On the other side of the stream, set way back from the mud and the water, are closely-built houses on stilts.

“Mosquitos are bad too,” I say slapping at one on my leg and waving away another whose legs dangle down as it flies towards me. Sweat runs down the side of my face and neck.

“Rich, when do you think Mum’s coming back for us?”

“How would I know?” he says.

“I heard Dad say to Kamisese that she’s sick.”

He turns to look at me. “When? What kind of sick?” He’s not tall for thirteen, but he has solid shoulders and a broad frowning face spattered with large pale freckles. His uncut curls are the colour and diameter of three-quarter-inch copper piping.

“Don’t think they know. But they said she was *wasting away*.”

“Whatever that means. It would be nice if someone would tell us what the hell is going on.”

He seems grumpy now, and throws stones angrily into the stream

sludge, and we watch them sink and the gloop close over them.

We make our way along the bank towards a foot bridge that passes overhead. A few kids are hanging around underneath. Getting closer, we see they are wild-haired and skinny with filthy clothes, and they each hold a plastic bag. Dirty blankets lie heaped next to one of the concrete struts of the bridge.

“Hi,” we say, curious about their shiny eyes.

Immediately, one little boy, with a white pointy face and matted hair, vomits in our direction, and the others all laugh at our shock. It is not the vomiting, but their laughing — fast, high-pitched and out-of-control — that makes me and Rich retreat into the park, and circumnavigate the end of the footbridge to meet the bank well upstream of the kids.

Right at the far end of the park, the dirty stream disappears into a dense hilly patch of bush. We follow its uneven edge until we reach a grassy track leading into the bush, a hook-shaped path invisible from the road and the rest of the park. Rounding the corner at the end of it, we find a dozen or so old guys and haggard ladies sitting in a clearing, under big colourful sun umbrellas with multiple broken ribs.

They wave us over.

“Well let’s see if these guys are as nuts as those kids,” says Rich, taking the lead.

Several are playing cards, and one old man seems to have fallen asleep with his open newspaper, lying on some browned-off fallen fern fronds in the shade at the edge of the bush. Some are smoking or staring into space and others are chatting. One old lady invites us to join them and introduces herself as Laurelie, and so we sit down on some rickety beer crates under one of the umbrellas and tell them about the crazy kids under the bridge.

“Ah yes,” says Laurelie fanning herself with a newspaper, “the runaways.” She has thick white hair, and a cream-coloured dress with blue trim that drapes over her little pot-belly.

“They all sniff glue,” says an old guy, and takes a slug from his bottle. “That’s why their eyes look like no one’s home.” His own eyes are bloodshot, and his big nose and cheeks patterned with fine red and purple veins.

“Yeah,” I say, “really shiny.”

“Like someone painted them with polyurethane,” says Rich. Laurelie laughs a little.

“That reminds me of the jewels story,” she says, “and an old friend of mine who was partial to peaches and apples. A lovely man, six-foot-three, with a big beard.” She smiles rememberingly. The cardplayers pause their game and look over to her.

“Look out! Here she goes,” says a guy with a ginger and grey beard.
“A peach of a story coming up.”

“Why waste a brand new audience,” says another. A few of them
laugh, but I notice they turn our way.

“In the place where he lived,” says Laurelie, ignoring them, “people
didn’t want jewels, especially rings, and they threw away all their diamonds
and gold and sapphires and rubies, even if they had been passed down from
their great great grandmothers, because they were bad luck, because a
mongoose bit people’s fingers off to get the jewels.”

“A mongoose?” says Rich.

“Oh right,” says Laurelie, “you wouldn’t have heard of a mongoose
— it’s a small, furry, boring-looking animal with shockingly sharp teeth.
We’re lucky not to have them here. You don’t want to try and touch one.
Has teeth sharp enough to kill a snake.

“So one day after it rained and the morning was fresh and washed
clean, he noticed the sun shining through the drops on the fruit trees and on
the apples and peaches, and he showed everyone how these raindrops were
more beautiful than the old mongoose jewels, and more precious, and more
shiny, and he said these could be their new jewels which would be new
again everytime the sun shone after it rained. And his friends and
neighbours laughed at him, but his happiness over the new jewels was so

infectious, it became a thing to go over and have peaches and jokes at his place at daybreak, and they nicknamed him *the bishop* because he was so religious and serious about it.”

“Our mother did that with us one time,” I say. “Got us up early to look at raindrops. But they were on a spiderweb.”

“Well next time, tell her about my friend the bishop,” says Laurelie.

“That’s right, Laurelie,” says the guy with bloodshot eyes. “Feed the kids fairytales why don’t you. Good triumphs over evil codswallop.”

“Now and then it does,” says Laurelie.

“Not if you tell them the next installment it doesn’t.”

“There’s always a next installment,” says Laurelie, “and one at a time is good fishing, you grumpy old bugger.”

I look at Rich to see if he knows what they are talking about, but he shrugs back at me. The bush beside us gives out a fresh peppery smell, and a bird now and then rustles around under the low-growing ferns.

“Well ta very much, mate,” a sunken-cheeked, long-chinned card player says to the dealer. “A *peach* of a hand. Rest of youse may as well fold right now.”

“Heard that before, eh,” says Ginger Beard, and burps.

“Yeah, the *last* time he had one pair,” says a lady with jet black hair and pearls.

“Ah-ha,” says another. “You bring on the peaches mate, and I’ll show you my *mongoose*.” They all laugh.

“Keep it decent, keep it decent.”

We sit out of the direct sun, watching the card game for a while longer before we get up to leave.

“Stop by and visit again,” says Laurelie. “We’re always here.”

“What was that guy drinking?” I say. “Whiskey?”

“Smelt kind of like that,” says Rich, as we wander out into the main grass part of the park near the football field. “Probably he’s an alcoholic.”

“They’re really old fogies, eh.”

“Least they’re not spazzos like those kids,” says Rich.

“The runaways.”

“Yeah, the fogies are the stay-behinds, more like,” says Rich.

“The left-overs.”

“The remember-whens.” He glances towards the road. “*Shit!*” he says. And I see them. Two dogs running flat out towards us.

“*Run!*” We sprint to an old manuka tree nearby, and haul ourselves up into its wiry, black-lichened branches in time to avoid their jaws. Spit jumps out of the dogs’ mouths as they bark up at us, snouts wrinkled with ferocity. Hackles vertical. I can see every hair follicle on their snouts.

“Thank god for this tree,” I say, breathing hard. The sharp-angled join between branch and trunk is squeezing one foot, which is wedged between, and the leg that is taking my weight is shaking. My other leg and arms are curled around the narrow trunk above Rich. He was slower than me because of his bitten leg.

“We’d ’ve been dead meat,” says Rich, between pants. “Dogs round here are out of fucken control.” He has a white rim of fear above his top lip, and drops of sweat on his forehead.

Auntie Turtle comes to the city to stay with us again, which is a bad sign. I suspect it means Mum's not coming back soon. But even so, when she walks in the front door with her suitcases, I am strangely excited to see her — her and her orange hair and shiny red lips. Someone familiar.

"You've been in the wars, haven't you," she says inspecting my scar.

"Rich got bit worse than me," I say.

"Well you're a couple of tearaways, that's one thing for sure." She tousles my hair.

"Where've you been all this time?" asks Rich, coming into the living room.

"Oh you know," says Auntie Turtle, "calling on my rich gentleman admirers."

"So why'd you come here?" I ask.

"To stop you two running wild," she says.

"Running wilder," says Dad, and pats me on the shoulder.

"You haven't heard from..." says Auntie Turtle to Dad. She pauses.

"Not a word," says Dad. "Not a one."

"There's money to be made here," Dad tells Auntie Turtle over

dinner, “and on top of that I’m not the mug who does all the work and takes all the risk anymore. Whatever the price the grower gets, however high his interest rates, he still has to pay to transport his goods.”

“So you’re not missing the farm and the fresh air I take it,” says Auntie Turtle, taking a sip from her coffee mug.

“It’s a mugs game,” Dad repeats, taking another forkful of the fish kedgeree that Auntie Turtle made. “At the moment it’s just wage work when I can get it, which isn’t so hot. The way to go is to own the truck yourself. Wait a sec. Let me show you something...” He goes into his bedroom and brings back a brochure. He points out for Auntie Turtle the picture of the truck he wants, and me and Rich get up from our seats and lean in to look. It is a black 18-wheeler.

“Kenworth, tandem-axle, 350-horsepower,” Rich reads from the specs under the picture.

“I’ve done my time at the bottom of the food chain. But no more. The tide is about to turn,” says Dad.

Auntie Turtle takes over the budgeting to help Dad save for his truck deposit. She decides there will be rules about food. No eating between meals and no seconds, but she cooks dinner for us, which is a nice change from toast and tinned food. She doesn’t cook meat every day. Sometimes

dinner is only rice pudding, sometimes macaroni and cheese.

I follow her around a lot for the first few days. Rich does too, but pretends he's not. Auntie Turtle moves into my room and takes the bed by the window. She gets Rich to pin up a red satin sheet, so she can have some privacy she says. All her sheets are satin, not cotton like ours, and cool against my cheek when I investigate.

"A body *deserves* satin at the end of a long day," she says. At night, her bedside lamp glows red through the sheet hanging between us and I hear the comforting rustle of a page turn now and then before I fall asleep.

I never see Laurelie and the other fogies leave their spot in the park — even when it's raining. And it often rains here. So we often come down here and hang around with them while they argue and joke, cough and spit phlegm. For us, it is something to do. We are careful now in the open, high-risk area of the park, before we reach and follow the curved path through the bush, which is dense with vines and saplings, fallen trees and blackened fern fronds piled up on the ground. The turf in the fogies' clearing is soft underfoot and the sky overcast with some spits of rain.

"Been to school?" asks Laurelie. "How was it?"

"Boring, boring," I say.

"Hasn't changed then." She shakes her head.

“It’s not like our old school,” says Rich. We never had dogs like here. Not mean ones.

“Ah well,” she says. “They’ve always been bad here, eh. Even in my time.” She unscrews the tin lid from her thermos and pours herself hot tea into the plastic top. “The dogs don’t bother us much now though. Nothing to bring ‘em over here by us. They like the school and all that *young blood*.” She cackles and some of the others do too. Her helmet of thick white hair doesn’t move in the very faint breeze, and she leans to her right and spits a white gob right onto a toadstool-looking fungus a metre away.

“Good shot,” says Rich, impressed. So we try to spit on it too. After two spits we have no spit left, so Laurelie reluctantly lets us have a sip of her sweet milky tea.

“Not too much, mind,” she says. “Leave some for me or there’ll be real trouble.”

“Laurelie,” I ask, “why don’t the dogs get the runaways? They’re young.”

“They’re all skin and bones. Too skinny for the dogs to bother with,” calls out an old lady with pearls who, with five others, is playing liar dice at a small card table.

“Also, they say the smell of the glue repels them,” says Laurelie.

“So we should just carry round bags of glue,” says Rich. “Then we

wouldn't have to worry."

"People have done that. Only thing is, they say the smell has to go through your whole system and come out your pores."

"Oh," says Rich, "and then you lose your mind as well."

"Yes, it's a pity, isn't it," says Laurelie.

Coming along the path towards us we see that boy, Kamisese's son, the one with the black box on his back and all the things in his hair. Fallu. He waves as he walks towards us.

"Giddy," we all say, and I move over to share a beer crate with Rich. Fallu takes mine and pulls it under Laurelie's blue and white umbrella. He has to sit on the edge because one of the boards has broken.

"So what's in the box?" I ask him.

"My accordion."

"Bring it out kid, and giz a song," says Laurelie, flashing a dead front tooth in her smile, "cheer up this drizzly day." Her sun-toughened skin wrinkles horizontally under her nose, and a few wiry white hairs sprout from the edges of her mouth and from her chin.

"I only got two songs," says Fallu to me and Rich.

"So let's hear them then," says Rich. So Fallu smiles and gets out his accordion, which is a swirly, marbled, deep blue color with piano keys. He plays a sad song he says is about a soldier in Yugoslavia who comes

back from war and can't find his family. He frowns between his eyes as he plays, twisting his mouth, while his long clean fingers either move quick-quick like running spider legs, or press long and hard until his pink fingernails turn white at the tips with the pressure. When he sings, the sadness of the song soaks through my skin into me. All the old fogies have stopped talking and playing dice, and they listen to Fallu and the foreign words that we none of us can understand. Laurelie harmonizes in a quavery voice, and Ginger has tears running over his cheekbones and getting lost in his ginger and grey whiskers. When the song stops they shout out,

“Good job kid, good job.”

“One of the old fullas that used to come round here, Hugo, he showed me that song,” Fallu says to us. “So these guys all know it. — He’s gone now.”

“Gone where?” asks Rich.

“Dunno. Wherever old fogies go.”

“Hey!” says Laurelie, “nuffa that!” making Fallu giggle.

“You know that song reminds me of my old mate Ludwig,” says Laurelie. “He was a soldier too, in Africa – I wish I could tell you exactly where, he did say – somewhere south of the Mediterranean – I was never good at geography.”

“Yes, well that would be Africa,” says Mr. Long Chin, rolling his

eyes.

“He spoke several languages,” says Laurelie, talking over him.

“Two or three African languages and a European one, and he had excellent hearing, though he never played piano to my knowledge.”

Fallu laughs then and leans back on one arm for her story.

“Why would he?” says Rich.

“Oh he wouldn’t,” says Laurelie. “He was a soldier, and although he was rugged, I can’t imagine him hauling a piano round with him. That doesn’t seem convenient at all.

“He and the other soldiers all lived in a farm town called the *Town of Upright People*, which was something of a mouthful, and I suppose everyone just called it *Upright* for short. Everyone had to have very straight backs which can’t have been easy since the town was very rural and people must have had a hard time planting and hoeing while remaining upright. But that was not their worst problem. Their worst problem was vultures. Now we don’t have vultures here, but they are like the rubbishmen over there, or the funeral directors. Whatever is dead or thrown out, they fly in and eat it, which is pretty helpful for keeping up a place. Only problem was, in Upright, the vultures were overstepping the mark. They were taking more than they should. First it was people’s live chickens, and then they took people’s babies. Well, as you can imagine, people were terrified, and no one

would leave their animals or babies to go to work, the kids didn't go to school, the sand blew in and the farms turned into desert, and they were very hungry. And there were a lot of other complications and things just got worse and worse."

Raindrops patter on Laurelie's umbrella and she pauses while we kids pull our crates in to huddle closer to avoid the runoff.

"So back to Africa," Laurelie continues, a little louder so the others under the other umbrellas can hear over the rain. "Ludwig and his soldier friends talked about their problems just as everyone did. Talk, talk, talk, and more talk. You know how people are -- they just love talking about problems. But Ludwig decided that he would stop it, and his friend Bernie wanted to help too. So they got some soldier friends together and they all went down to the town hall and told the mayor he was fired, and Ludwig became Mayor Ludwig. The old mayor and his friends got pretty grumpy about it, but there was nothing they could do. Ludwig rode around town on his motorcycle with his motorcycle guard of all women, which got a lot of comments, and called out to all the townspeople to meet in the town square. They didn't want to come out of their houses, but he said, 'Okay, okay, bring your kids and your chickens if you must, but bring your hoes too,' and they came. Then Ludwig gave them all a big pep-talk and all together, with their hoes, they killed a few vultures and drove the rest out of town, and

Ludwig was of course the hero.

“But that was only the first problem, all the other problems were still there. It took a much longer time to push back the sand from the farms, and plant, and get enough food, and a few people who were friends with the old mayor, started to say bad things about Ludwig, like he was gone in the head. ‘Yup,’ said Ludwig, ‘pretty soft upstairs. You have to be. Otherwise nothing would change around here.’ And all the people who loved Ludwig had a chuckle over that and told each other what he’d said.

“But his old mate Bernie was getting jealous of Ludwig, and he started talking to the friends of the old mayor, and one fine blue morning, they came up behind Ludwig and shot him. Dead.”

Laurelie stops talking. The rain stops too and everything is quiet except for a very high-pitched bird call in the bush beside us.

“That’s the *end*?” I say.

“The end of Ludwig, anyway,” says Laurelie.

“That’s awful. I thought kids’ stories were supposed to have happy endings.”

“Who said it was a kids’ story,” snarls Laurelie, suddenly turning on me, and giving me a fright. She reaches into her handbag for a bottle, takes a swig, and closes her eyes. “Yes,” she says, and breathes deeply, “I worked up quite a thirst with that one.” She has a few tears running down her face,

but she doesn't wipe them away. No one speaks. Rich squints into the distance, Fallu fiddles with the strap on his accordion, a few of the fogies nearby yawn or spit. I wait for a minute.

“What about Bernie?” I ask. “Did he go to jail?”

Laurelie cough-laughes.

“Oh no. He became the new mayor, Mayor Bernie.”

“The *new mayor*,” I say. “That isn't fair.” But no one is listening.

Fallu starts playing the Yugoslavian song again, and the sadness of it spreads inside me and makes my body so heavy and tired that I need to lie down. But the ground here is sodden like always. I look up. Seagulls float in a dull sky, so low it is almost on top of us. Clouds are building up for the next lot of rain. I am sandwiched in dampness.

“I'm off,” I say. I don't want to hear any more of his songs.

“What's eating *her*?” I hear Ginger Beard ask as I leave.

“No idea,” Rich says. He stays.

School is a thing to be endured. I don't bother to try and distinguish between my classmates, but during lunch and intervals, I keep an eye out for the tall girl. The kids don't have uniforms here, and I notice variations in clothes, like one group that wears mostly black with bunches of keys hanging off them. Another group wears clean jeans or short denim skirts and new t-shirts or rugby jerseys, and they look all fresh and healthy. Then there are the kids in faded clothes that were probably bought for someone else. Their eyes are shifty and their shoulders hunch forward with the embarrassment. Another lot also wears second-hand clothes, but they are not poor and they flaunt their old, oversized leather jackets and antique lace. Me and Rich have normal clothes -- lightweight collared shirts, and trousers that Mum made of navy or brown sailcloth.

Then I realize it is not about the clothes at all. It is about how they react to the dogs. There are really only three groups — the good kids, the bad kids and the no comment kids. The bad kids, like the tall girl and her gang, hate the dogs openly, and they throw stones at them and fight each other too. Most of the clean and fresh kids say that you should treat dogs with kindness, and that deep down they are man's best friend. They even feed the dogs. During breaks or after school, they might gather (safely behind the fence) with roast lamb or dripping cubes of porterhouse steak

that they have brought from home.

Once, as I am making my way to the front gate after last period, I pass half a dozen of them about to toss some meat over the fence to the dogs in the empty lot. The dogs have gone crazy with barking, froth and saliva collecting at the rubbery black corners of their mouths. The tall girl appears from nowhere with her gang, all of them skinny-legged with flowing hair and shirts. They are very coordinated. For each kid with meat, a gang member comes up behind and crooks an arm around the kid's neck. Another one takes the meat.

“You won't be needing that,” says one, and that's the only thing any of them say.

After a minute or so, they make tracks. One of the clean fresh porterhouse kids starts to run after them, but they pull knives and he stops.

“You fucking cowards,” he shouts after them.

“Well-fed cowards though,” the tall girl shouts back.

Rich:

The great thing about Auntie Turtle is that she's full of new ideas. And she's funny, and good looking. And she's read everything. She's all artistic and that – poetry, classical music – but no one can keep accounts,

work out taxes, calculate interest, probabilities, and estimated and actual profits like her. Who would have thought any of that could be interesting?

On several evenings, Auntie Turtle and Dad go into his room and sit at his big desk to go through his accounts.

“Turning a profit is first of all a science,” she says to the world in general, as she comes back to the living room from one of their finance meetings.

“I’m nobody’s fool,” Dad says, coming in behind her.

“I don’t know about *fool*,” she says, “but you’ve seen the maths. Until you own the truck, they profit from you via two additional channels.”

“They’re *not* getting away with this.” Dad starts thumping one fist into his other palm, and slams the door. Blood rushes up to his face.

“Calm down, Georgie,” says Auntie Turtle, who has returned to her usual chair by the window. “You’re giving me a headache.”

“You’ve got a headache? *YOU’VE GOT A HEADACHE!* Who puts the food on the table? Who pays the bills around here?”

“You know,” Auntie Turtle says, “there’s a film I’m going to be late for. Let’s see if I can still make it.” She gets up with a humour-free smile on her red lips, detours by the bedroom for her handbag and a shawl, and is out the door in less than a minute.

“You haven’t lost your touch, Dad,” I say under my breath. Rona,

also on the couch reading comics, gives me a look out of the side of her eye.

“Did you have something to say, Rich? *Did you?!*” He stands over me and pulls my head back by the front of my hair so I’m forced to look up at him.

“Nah,” I say. “Nothing, Dad. I’m just looking at a comic.”

This whole *fool* thing has got worse and worse with him since the farm. He’s determined to never be made a fool of again, and never be beholden to anyone. So if he’s not in control of every last thing, he does his nut. If he keeps on like this, he’ll drive Auntie Turtle away and then I’ll be stuck with just Rona and him.

Seeing how good Auntie Turtle is at accounts makes me decide to pay attention in maths class. In just a few weeks, I am far more into it than any other kid in the class, although I can’t work up much enthusiasm for sines and cosines, or quadratics.

“Learn all of it is my considered advice,” says Auntie Turtle. “These are your basic tools. Without them, you’re a babe in the woods.”

“Auntie Turtle,” I say one afternoon, experimentally. “Can you check my maths homework?” No one has ever checked my homework before, or noticed that I have any. She looks up, seeming unfocused, somewhere else for a moment. Then her focus clicks on to me.

“Absolutely,” she says. “Just give me a tic. Let me finish this section.” Five minutes later she bookmarks her place in *Gilgamesh* and sighs.

“I have the soul of a renaissance woman and the wanderlust of a minstrel (though god knows I can’t carry a tune.) Oh how I would *love* to see the cuneiform tablets at the Bagdad Museum...” She unfolds herself from the armchair by the front window and comes to sit next to me at the dining table. She’s wearing a narrow skirt with a split, and a striped navy and lime green blouse made of a silky material.

“Now let me see,” she says, and runs her finger slowly down the page of problems. Her hands are small with a writer’s callous on her left middle finger, and her forearms, extending from the three-quarter sleeves of her blouse, are very slender and pale. While she’s reading, I notice a faint perfume, which is fresh, but also something else. I sniff it covertly, but can’t recognize what it is. It’s something exotic. Auntie Turtle taps her finger at the quadratic equations.

“Not your favs?”

“They seem a bit pointless I suppose.”

“Quite the reverse in actual fact,” she says. “In business situations where you know the price of some things, but there are one or two unknowns, they become indispensable. But they’re also fun puzzles once

you get the rules. Rule one: equal treatment on each side of the equals sign. Rule two: cancel out the knowns by reversing the operator. See here, *plus five* cancels with *minus five*, and don't forget to subtract five on the other side. And so on."

We work through the first one, and she's right. It is kind of satisfying. I do the next one myself.

"Looks like you got it in one, Sunshine," she says going back to her book. "You've got a knack for it."

"You think Dad's going to make it with this trucking thing?" I ask when I'm finished.

"If he doesn't blow his top at his boss, he should do," she says. "It wouldn't hurt for him to be a bit Zen about the whole operation though."

"I don't think Zen rocks his boat right now," I say, making her giggle.

"You know," she says after a bit, "you can always get a jump on it while you're still at school. Start a little business of your own. Get a bit of pocket money." But of course I have no money, so she says if I'm interested in working for her for a while, she might find me a bit of seed money to see what I can do for myself.

"Okay, I'm in," I say. "And, um, would it be okay if I called you Myrtle now?"

She laughs. “It *is* my name.”

Her stylishness makes me notice what a dork I look, with my hair hippy-style overgrown like Mum liked it, and my cow-cocky-looking homemade clothes. Well I have no money for clothes, but I can ask Myrtle to cut my hair at least.

The tall girl comes round the corner into the bush clearing with her loose-legged stroll, her bandage now gone. She says hi to the fogies as she walks up, and turns to us.

“You’re here?” she says with that direct stare she has.

“Why shouldn’t we be?” says Rich.

She ignores him and looks at me with a remembering smile.

“Giddy,” I say.

“Rona, right?”

“Yeah. You?”

She tells us her name is Shama and that she and her foster father, Ariel, live on Karlton Ave. too, a few blocks closer to the town center. Her hair is so long and well-brushed I am tempted to touch it, to check if it really is as smooth as it looks.

“Where’s your gang?” I ask.

“Oh, you know, around. Probably scrounging food somewhere.”

“Seems as though everyone’s hungry these days,” Laurelie says.

“Reminds me of the story of this group of hungry women in a small town near the north pole.”

“No one tells this story like Laurelie,” says the long-chinned guy, looking up from his newspaper.

“And that’s not a compliment,” says the alchie.

“You know what, Alchie Joe? Feel free to put your twist on it when I’ve finished,” says Laurelie. “Now where was I? Right. So the women – not only were they hungry, but cold too,” she continues. “The hinges on the outside doors of the homes in their town were set so that the doors opened inwards because otherwise the deep snow against the doors would trap them inside. It was the dead of winter and there was hardly any bread in town. Some people had some withered old cabbages saved from the previous summer, but let’s face it, cabbage really doesn’t fill you up. These particular women worked on looms, weaving cloth, usually in plain dark colors. Wishing for wheat, they started to weave a pattern of yellow wheat into the cloth, which made their boss pretty angry, but hunger makes you stropky and they ignored him. They kept it up for a month. Then, when someone tore the month of February off the calendar, they changed to weaving sacks of ground flour into the cloth for the month of March. The new cloth was very popular so the boss kept his mouth shut. The next month they wove flour mills, then aprons, then mixing bowls, then yeast, then water, and then bread paddles then finally in October they wove ovens. You could tell by people’s clothes which month the cloth was made. Of course by then winter was long past and spring and summer also, and they all had enough bread to eat, but that year it tasted funny. Someone said because they didn’t put any

salt in it.

“After all that,” says Rich, “and it didn’t taste good.”

“Well I suppose funny-tasting bread is better than none,” says Laurelie.

“I never heard stories like yours before,” I say. “Do you just make them up?”

“Oh no, one of the weavers was an old cobber of mine,” says Laurelie, and some of the fogies laugh.

“Friends in high places, huh, Laurelie,” says Alchie Joe

“Friends in hungry places, you mean,” says Long Chin.

Shama says that speaking of hungry, she is going to pull some carrots from her garden and did we want some. Not needing more persuasion, me and Rich say *see you* to the fogies and wander off with her.

Shama’s house, four blocks past our place, is older than ours, has a lot more land around it, and backs onto a steep overgrown gully. Her garden is near the side fence and Ariel, her foster father, has his own garden right next to the house.

“My birthmother planted this garden first. She said the kumara was here already, growing wild, when she moved here, and she planted the first taro cuttings,” says Shama pointing them out. I never saw them before, but I recognize the carrot tops, lettuce, and cabbage. “And the peppers and

tomatoes my half-brother rescued for me when they sprouted in his Dad's scrap drum. The radishes and that, I planted from seed. And that passion fruit vine over there on the fence, my birthmother brought for me the last time I saw her."

"The only problem," says Shama, "is that our front fence is not high enough to keep out the bigger street dogs, and also my dad sometimes leaves the gate open and the dogs run all over the garden and dig holes and tear up stuff."

Everything is in straight rows and she points out where each crop is planted. Only the carrots are ready to eat, so we pull out a couple each and rinse them under the outside tap. The soil we wash off them surprises me. Despite the rain and lush vegetation here in the city, its quality is poor — pallid and claggy, almost clay.

"My birthmother loved gardening, or so Dad says," Shama says between munching, "so maybe it's genetic."

"So did our mother," I say.

"Yes, but she was a crazy gardener," Rich says. "Half the garden was weeded and the other half was weeds. Sometimes the veges were flooded and other times they would get no water for a week."

"Why don't you just shut your mouth," I say.

"Make me," he says.

“Mum used to sing while she gardened,” I say to Shama, who nods and munches.

“Mostly kids songs,” says Rich.

I feel like crying, but hold my breath to stop the feeling.

“And also another one, a foreign song,” I say, “that would make you think about wild windy places.”

“That’s not what it made Dad think about,” laughs Rich.

“Oh, a seduction song was it?” says Shama, and tells us her mother went from guy to guy. “My half-brother lives near here. Across the river, in one of those stilt houses. And it wouldn’t surprise me if there were others.”

“You saying your mum was a slut?” says Rich.

“My foster-dad says that,” says Shama, “and other people say she couldn’t make up her mind. But it wasn’t that.”

“What was it?”

“She just wouldn’t be owned. When I stopped thinking she was *mine*, that’s when I worked it out.”

Rich crunches on his carrot for a bit.

“But she *should* own her children,” he says, “and look after them.”

“Says who?” says Shama.

“I’m glad my mother is not like that,” I say.

On our way back down the avenue, we run into Fallu at the edge of

the park.

“Oh you fullas met each other,” he says, surprised to see us with Shama. He ducks his head out from under the strap of his accordion box and rests it on a bench.

“He brings it everywhere he goes,” says Shama. “And he plays the same two songs over and over.”

“We only heard one,” says Rich.

“So you know then,” Fallu says.

“Know what?”

“That Shama’s our half-sister.”

Rich and me try to absorb this news.

“Haven’t you worked it out yet,” says Shama. “We all have the same mother.”

“No,” I say. “No.”

“What do you mean *No*?” Shama laughs a bit.

Rich looks back and forth at them, squinting.

“It’s true,” says Fallu. “Dad told me ages ago there were other kids from Mum, another brother and sister.”

“She lived with you on the farm, and she would only visit us, and she then left all of us for good,” says Shama.

“So,” says Rich, “when Mum sometimes went away for a couple of

weeks, she was visiting you two?"

"She came sometimes," says Fallu

"Not that often," says Shama, "and not for that long. You know, a few days, a week."

No. No. No, I think. These weird kids my brother and sister? No.

"I asked her once why she was going to the city," says Rich slowly.

"And...?" says Shama.

"She said she just needed to get out and about. And she made some joke about the farm cramping her style."

"You got any proof?" I say to them. "I don't believe you. Maybe you do have another brother and sister, but it's not us."

"Go ask your dad," says Shama. "We got no reason to lie to you."

"If it's true," says Rich, "why's it such a big secret?"

I think back that first time we met Fallu, when his dad, Kamisese, said we didn't look much like Mum, but I had her mouth, and it gives me a horrible feeling that what they are saying might be true. And everyone knew except me and Rich.

Dad now has an on-call job driving for a delivery company. They ring him when they need another driver. Shama's foster-dad, Ariel, knew a guy that knew another guy who had just quit.

When Dad comes in that evening and flops on the couch, Rich says, “Fallu says he’s our half brother.”

“And this other girl, too,” I say, “called Shama.”

“Is that true?” asks Rich.

“Your mother was Fallu’s mother too,” says Dad. “And there’s a girl as well. Lives around here somewhere. The whole big bloody happy family except the one who caused it all — who has swanned off yet again.”

Rich and I recognize his mood and stop asking questions.

After dinner, I revisit the subject.

“How come you and Mum never mentioned this brother and sister?”

I ask Dad.

“Half-brother and -sister,” he says.

“Alright, half-brother and -sister then. How come we didn’t know about them?”

“Life would be very boring without any surprises,” says Dad.

I go check the mirror in the bathroom to see what my mouth looks like. But I can’t remember Mum’s mouth, so how do I know if mine looks like hers? Where is that picture of us? Of the family – what I thought was the family – Mum, Dad, me and Rich. I wonder about the mouths of Fallu and Shama. Do they look like Mum’s too? I hope not. I go back out to find

Dad, who is on his way out.

“Where’s that photo we had in the frame of all of us?” I ask.

“Buried somewhere. What do you want it for?”

“I can’t exactly remember what Mum’s face looks like.”

“Good job too. Just forget about her. And stay out of my bedroom

— I mean it,” he says.

Dad's latest job is how come he gets the big leather roller armchair and the TV.

"That's Ariel, I think," Rich says quietly nodding at a shortish man hauling in an armchair with Dad. "The one that dislocated Shama's shoulder."

We scrutinize the muscle bands that run thick and taut from neck to shoulder, and the other muscles that, with the weight of the chair, bulge out like an over-stretched inner tube from his upper arm and forearm. Curly grey hair sprouts patchily from his sun-browned back and shoulders. A black singlet stretches over the curve of his belly.

"Fell off the back of a truck, did they?" says Auntie Turtle, as Dad and Ariel manoeuvre the armchair down the hallway.

"Yeah, with a little help from Ariel," says Dad, grunting. Dad's gut hangs over the top of his jeans as it never used to.

"Idiots forgot to put them on the inventory list," says Ariel, in an unexpectedly rich voice. His face looks tanned and young even though his hair is mostly grey.

"Look out, look out. We want to leave the paint on," says Dad backing through the next doorway. They put the chair in his bedroom near the window that faces out to the back of the section, and the TV goes in the

living room, which is also the dining room.

“Have time for a cold one?” asks Dad.

“*Have I,*” says Ariel, and they take a six-pack of stubbies out back to the slab of concrete where the plastic chairs are. Through the kitchen window, Rich and me and Auntie Turtle can hear them guffawing at their own cleverness.

“What wouldn’t I give to see the look on their faces...”

“Be bloody priceless.”

Rich and Auntie Turtle plug in the TV and antenna, and I go into Dad’s room to sit on the new armchair whose leather feels supple, thick under my fingers. This is not the fine skin of slinkies, those lambs that survive only a few days. Cow hide I guess. Actually the leather smells not at all of animal, only the new smell of tanning and dye. I hear the tone of voice change in the conversation outside.

“I’ll need the money tomorrow,” says Ariel.

“We never agreed on that.”

“I want it, George. Don’t think you can screw me over now.”

“And don’t you think you’re the only game in town. You’ll get your cut when I’m good and ready.”

“You said...”

“I’m in charge here,” Dad interrupts. “Let’s be very clear about

that.”

I hear the *tink tink* of bottles put down on concrete.

“Listen George, don’t get mad. I know we didn’t say when.”

“So what’s your big hurry?”

“I need a new lawnmower and the Lochland Martin sale finishes midnight tomorrow,” says Ariel.

“Yeah?” says Dad. “Well, I did a job for them last week and they owe me one. What do you say we stop over there and we can probably work something out that will suit everybody?”

“Right-o then,” says Ariel, sounding more relaxed. “Good as gold.”

I scavenge around in Dad’s room for photos one afternoon when Rich is out helping Auntie Turtle with the groceries. Dad’s room is nicer than mine and Rich’s, and twice as big, with a real eiderdown on his big bed, the roller-arm armchair he never sits in, and a big window that lets in lots of sun. Besides his desk, he has a dressing table, four big cupboards and a walk-in wardrobe, so it takes a lot of searching to find the photo. I find other things, including the key to the hall cupboard, now called the gun cupboard. Eventually, I find the envelope with the photos too — in the bottom of a cardboard box with old electricity bills, at the back of his

wardrobe.

Mum and Dad never had a camera so there aren't many pictures. There are two school portraits, one of me and one of Rich. There is the silver-framed, black-and-white wedding photo that Mum left behind, and a photo that was in the newspaper once when the stock-and-station agent in town closed down. Our family is outside next to a big 'Last Chance Sale' sign in the window, with Rich standing small and serious on a stack of salt licks, and Dad, looking straight ahead, holds me in one arm and a new pair of gumboots for himself in his spare hand. He has almost no lips at all. Just a line. My eyes are looking towards Mum, who is laughing, her hair and face blurred because she is turning her head toward something outside the photo.

The last picture is in its own envelope. Mum, when she was young, is lying on the grass under a tree with leaf shadow patterns on her face and arms and side, her eyebrows and eyes dark, her lips relaxed and showing a little bit of two teeth, and her legs stretched out long and careless. The way the sun and shadows fall, her legs look like additional tree roots.

I take the photo to the bathroom and look back and forth from the photo to the mirror, to see if my mouth looks like hers. I relax my lips and turn my head on the side like the photo, but my lips are chapped, my face round, and the bathroom light too bright to tell.

Shama shows up looking for Fallu, and leans against the bathroom door frame.

“What are you doing?” she asks.

“Nothing much,” I say. I take a look at her lips, and note that they make a dark purplish edge around her wide mouth, which is always moving around and making a lot of shapes, even if she is not talking, just thinking.

“Mirror, mirror on the wall,” says Auntie Turtle, pausing as she passes the open bathroom door, grocery bag in hand. “I don’t suppose it crossed your mind to brush that shaggy mane of yours.”

I turn towards her — I hadn’t noticed my hair — and back to the mirror. My hair has grown on the sides down to my shoulders, brown and tangly. It’s a bit longer at the back. Auntie Turtle laughs.

“I suppose not, huh.”

“I like brushing hair,” Shama says. “I’ll do yours if you want. Anything to stop you staring at me.” She has a sudden way of speaking that I have to brace myself for, as though her decisiveness could knock me down. But then she smiles. When Shama smiles, which isn’t that often, you can see her gums above her teeth, and something about that visible strip of gum makes you want to smile back.

When I go to put the photo back, she puts her hand out.

“Giz a look at that?” she says. She looks at it for a while.

“Mum,” she says. “Well it’s an old picture. A nice one.”

I put it back and we go into the dining room where Shama divides her own hair like two curtains and loops them in a loose half knot behind her neck to keep it out of the way. I sit backwards astride a chair and Shama sits on a stool behind me with a bristle brush and works on one section at a time around my head. There are lots of tangles, which pull at the roots, and some of which she can pull apart, but a few times she gives up and cuts them out. Once they are all clear, she brushes from the scalp a hundred smooth times. There is something relaxing then about being brushed.

“Next time,” she says, “we should find some rosemary and make a hair rinse.”

“Does rosemary grow here?” I ask.

“Yes, but you have to know where to find it,” she says, “which I do. On the other hand, rosemary is for remembrance. We need to find you something for forgetting.”

“Ha ha,” I say as I rest my head on the back of the chair.

Fallu shows up right as Rich gets home.

“Giddy,” Fallu says with his wide smile. “Brought these to welcome youse to the family, eh.” And he passes me a bag of yellow mangos. I hesitate. *The family?* But the smell of ripe mangos is too much

for me.

“Ta very much,” I say.

Auntie Turtle doesn't want a mess in the house and tells us to go out back to eat them. As we sit cross-legged on the grass to eat the mangos, I take the opportunity to look at the mouths of my old brother and my new 'brother'. Rich's teeth are straight from wearing braces and a bit yellowed from some antibiotics he was given once, and he has thick, pink lips with freckles on them. Fallu's two-tone lips sort of roll over and their natural position is getting ready to do his big smile. Mum must have had a baby every year. Fallu, then Shama, then Rich, then me. Kamisese, then Ariel, then Dad. Doesn't seem anything like Mum.

After washing his face and mouth under the outside tap, Fallu opens his case and plays his other song, a happy song from Bolivia. I look at Rich. He isn't thinking how freaky this is. He nods his head enjoying the song. Fallu's smile is so free and the rhythm so jaunty that I wonder if I mind that much having him for a brother. Shama is walking on her hands, trying to dance in time to the song. Her legs jig in the air and she jumps up an inch or so from the ground, but her hands trip in all her hair that is dragging on the ground, and she has to fold into a forward roll, making Fallu and Rich laugh. Even I smile a bit. Fallu doesn't have another upbeat song, so he keeps playing that one over and over. Later, when I check an atlas at school

for Bolivia and Yugoslavia, it strikes me that the world has an unmanageably large number of countries. So many places I know nothing about.

Auntie Turtle comes out for music and a mango too, and brings a potato peeler, a plate, a knife, a fork and a damp flannel. She proceeds to peel her mango, cut it in pieces, wipe her hands and then eat it with a fork.

“Now I see why you don’t have a garden,” says Shama to Auntie Turtle.

“Oh no,” says Auntie Turtle. “That’s what green grocers are for. Or neighbours.” She laughs. “I’m told you have an extensive vege patch.”

“It was my mum’s... *our* mum’s garden originally, and Ariel took it over when he adopted me, but I still work in my bit.”

“She didn’t sell it to him? He just took it?” I say.

“Then she technically still owns it,” says Auntie Turtle.

“Possession is nine tenths of the law,” says Shama.

“Did she adopt you out voluntarily?” asks Auntie Turtle. “Or was she pressured because he wanted the land?”

“Yeah, and why’d she just up and go?” says Rich.

“Well that’s the 64-million-dollar question,” says Shama.

“Mum is not the type to squabble over who owns what,” says Rich.

“Yeah, she’s a hippy at heart, free love an’ all that.”

“But given you were so young,” says Auntie Turtle, “more than likely she had post-natal depression.”

“I bet,” says Shama, sarcastic.

We now sometimes hang around with Shama and Fallu and when Rich’s leg is as healed as it is going to be, we kick a ball around the park -- them two against me and Rich. The element of risk from being in the park gives me the heebie jeebies and Shama a thrill.

“What about rugby?” Rich says. “Soccer’s a poofy game.”

“Just because you don’t always win at soccer,” laughs Shama.

Because her foster father beats her pretty often, Shama is tough. So we continue to play soccer.

“Fucken bossy bitch,” Rich says under his breath.

“I like soccer,” I say. I like Shama too. I like how she shrugs and doesn’t care what anyone thinks.

When we are not arguing about a game, we usually argue about Mum. Shama and Fallu say they hardly ever saw her while they were growing up.

“What use is she?” says Shama. “I hardly even remember what she looks like. At least Dad has always been around.”

Fallu retreats from us, and doodles a few notes on his accordion.

“But what if Mum was the one you lived with? Wouldn’t that be better? Your foster-dad is so mean,” I say, not believing it possible she could really turn her back on Mum.

“What if,” Shama scoffs. “I grew out of fairytales a long time ago.”

“Shut up,” I say. It’s not like want to share Mum anyway.

Impatient for his truck deposit, Dad cuts off the hot water in the house, and gets mad when we have more than one light on. Now and then he gives the housekeeping money to Auntie Turtle a few days late so we don't have food. Sometimes if we're hungry we ask Fallu if we can visit his dad at the greengrocers where he works to scrounge some fruit. Like bananas. They're good if you're really hungry. If you can get a whole bunch.

"Yeah," Fallu says, when we ask him for some down at the fogies's spot, but he isn't paying much attention. His fingers repeat a pattern on keys at the low end of his keyboard. Sometimes he adds extra notes to it, or holds a note extra long but the tune stays more or less the same. When he is like that, you can't hurry him.

"So how'd your dad know Mum, anyway?" Rich asks him, trying to break his concentration. I wouldn't have asked, but since Rich has, I stay and listen, though I look away.

"Dad's family and neighbors all knew Mum," Fallu says looking up. He takes his hands out of the straps of his accordion, letting it sprawl across his knees. "She was always around, and he says she was always special to them. They were all fishing people back then. Lived on the coast up north."

"Yes," says Laurelie. "Everyone knew her back then. And everyone

loved her.”

“And not now?” I ask.

“The world has changed, sweet pea. She doesn’t fit in the city. She’s too restless here.”

“What do you mean?” I ask, irritated.

“She needs a lot of space and freedom, your mum,” says Laurelie.

“Otherwise something dies in her.”

“Let’s get out of here and get something to eat,” Rich says. I grind a hole in the sodden ground with my heel while Fallu takes his sweet time packing away his accordion.

“No one could hold her,” a bald bloke says to Laurelie. “Not a one.” The fogies aren’t paying us kids any attention by now.

“She needed a special kind of looking after, and men don’t come like that these days,” says Laurelie.

“Hey, hey, hey!” says Baldy.

“You know it’s true.”

“The minute she’s treated like real estate...” says Pearly.

“...she evaporates like gin with the lid off,” says Baldy. They all laugh like they have said something clever, and slap the card table.

“Yeah, but it’s bad for the kids, eh. They never really get to know her,” says Long Chin.

“Oh look! Blood!” says Alchie Joe, sliding his hand in his shirt over his chest. “Must be my bleeding heart.”

Evaporates, I think, as they laugh and bicker. When I think of Mum now, I can remember only that photo of her under the tree. I can’t recall her actual moving face, what she looked like when she was busy or laughing or distracted. It’s gone.

Finally Fallu is ready and we three escape off to see his dad at the greengrocers. We cross the coarse grass of the park and then the foot bridge over the the murky stream. The bridge is much longer than it usually needs to be because when the stream floods, it becomes as wide as the football field. When that happens, Fallu tells us, the runaway kids who live underneath sometimes get washed away.

“Do they die?”

“Probably. Then, after a while, new kids turn up under the bridge. It’s a kind of a cycle, eh.”

The bridge has a view of rooves and houses, bushes and clotheslines for miles in all directions. Fallu orients us. The stream, which Fallu calls a river, snakes its way around the bush area at the west end of the park, and in and out of our vision, on its way through a valley in the far hills to the sea. Running along the other side of the park, roughly parallel to the river, Karlson Avenue leads east towards our house, Shama’s house, and the tall

buildings of the centre city, and west near the school and out further towards the industrial outskirts. Looking north, the way we're walking, Fallu points out his own house quite close, among the others on stilts. It has a faded red corrugated roof and buckled siding. Lush weeds grow underneath, and mangroves sprout out of the wide belt of mud that lies between the stilts and the stream.

After a few blocks, we reach the small shopping center where the greengrocers is. Under the mildewy, corrugated, green plastic roof out front, Kamisese is setting out rock melons in even rows in a shallow box.

"Giddy," he says. "Two's company and three's trouble. What can I do you for?"

"They want to know about Mum when youse were living up north," says Fallu.

"Ah, you do, eh?" he says looking at us between placing melons in tent shaped piles. "Those were good days." He straightens up when he finishes with the melons. The sunlight through the translucent green roofing gives a strange cast to his brown face. "We didn't have shops like this. We got everything ourselves from fishing and gardening. Fish and a lot of types of shellfish, wild yams and sweet potatoes and puha and fruit. Everything.

"And Mum?" asks Rich.

"Your mum was happy then. We all were. Yeah. But after a while,

there were too many of us and not enough fish and we couldn't make it any more. So people started leaving. I came and started working here. Most of us ended up moving to one town or city or another – getting jobs around.”

“Did Mum leave then?” asks Rich.

“She came here with me, but her heart wasn't in it.” He shrugs. “She didn't last long at all.” He puts out the last melon, picks up the empty boxes and takes them out back.

“So Mum grew up by the sea. With fishing people,” says Rich.

“How come she never told us that?” I say. “I think it's a lie.”

“Well, where's your people from then?” asks Fallu.

“My people?” says Rich. “The farm I suppose. I dunno. Mum and Dad were always on the farm til now. Least I thought so. Never thought about it.”

“What about your grandmothers and grandfathers and cousins and uncles and that?”

“Don't have any,” says Rich, “except Auntie Myrtle.”

“And that's more than plenty if you ask me,” I say.

“Did you *hear* anyone asking you?” says Rich.

“And me and Shama,” says Fallu.

“Fallu, can't your Dad give us something to eat?” I say. “I'm hungry.”

Rich reads Auntie Turtle's books sometimes now, and hangs around listening to Aida and smoking. He calls her "Myrtle".

"What about Mum?" I say.

"What about her?" he says, looking up from his book.

"Are you just going to forget about her?"

"Time to move on," he says and goes back to *Animal Farm*, a book Auntie Turtle gave him.

If Auntie Turtle is good enough for him, then fine by me. But he doesn't seem like my brother any more. I am going right off him. I prowls through our small house kicking the doorways. Then I go outside and walk around outside the house and kick the struts of the fence as hard as I can.

Dogs snarl and snap at Auntie Turtle as she collects the mail from the box at our gate.

"Anything from Australia?" I ask routinely.

"Time to forget about her, Rona," she says, like she's sick of the question. "No letter is going to come from Australia."

I am going right off Auntie Turtle too.

The dogs intensify their barking as she takes in the mail, and I sit on the side doorstep — the one that faces the pitbull neighbors' fence — with

my hands over my ears to block out the noise. After a minute, the side door opens again and Auntie Turtle comes back out and hands me a letter.

“This came back for you,” she says. A purple stamp on the envelope says *UNKNOWN AT THIS ADDRESS*. I tear it open and find the letter I wrote to Mum on the back of the June calendar. I run inside and down the hall.

“I hope that makes you happy!” I shout at Auntie Turtle, who just shakes her head. Rich looks up from his book and rolls his eyes at me. I slam the living room door. And then slam the outside door.

Outside, the pack has moved on from our front gate and I hoist myself up so I can survey the avenue. The dogs are nearly out of sight and moving in the direction of town.

I head out in the opposite way, making for the edge of the city where I went with Dad that time, down the long path, past the fertilizer works, past the factories, to the bald open field and the white clay cave. The place is empty, the air humid and still, and the oak unnaturally green. I wipe the sweat off my face with my shirt and walk to the top of a low crest and look around. I don't see any dogs. Nor do I see my mother. In my mind, I can see her face in the photo, but can't hear the sound of her voice. However hard I try, I can't remember it. I am losing her piece by piece.

I don't stay. There seems no reason to be here. On the way back, I

meet Shama on Karlson Avenue.

“I don’t know why Mum hasn’t come to get me,” I say. “Probably she can’t find me. Maybe I’ll go back to the farm so she’ll be able to find me when she comes back from Aus.”

“How are you going to get there?” asks Shama.

“Hitchhike I suppose.”

“And how are you going to eat and everything?”

“I don’t know. Maybe get a job.”

“You’re what, twelve, thirteen? No one’s going to hire you. They’re going to make you go to school. And probably put you in foster care.”

I don’t answer.

“It sucks,” she says. “But you need a better plan.”

“I never asked to live here. Rich doesn’t care about Mum anymore,” I say. “And I hate Auntie Turtle, and I hate the city. And I hate how the dogs are always around and you always have to be worrying.”

“Listen,” says Shama. “I agree you can’t trust your auntie. She’s looking out for herself. Too scatty. But Rich is just infatuated for a bit. He’ll get over it. Why don’t you hang on a bit. And the dogs can’t stay like this forever.”

“Laurelie says they’ve been here since she was at school.”

Shama shrugs.

In the end I write another letter. This time I put it inside a bigger envelope and post it to the Cherry Flats Nursery people. I put in a note asking them to put Mum's address on it and post it to Australia.

Dear Mum,

Where are you? Are you in Perth? Sydney? Where? I have written you so many letters and they keep coming back. I miss you. When are you coming to pick us up?

Why can't you live with us all together? What did we do wrong? I suppose you know we are living in the city now. There is a park at least, but also heaps of mean dogs. I don't mind living just you and me in the desert in Australia if you want. Please write back.

Love from

Rona xxx

When our three fathers pretend to get along, they go down the road together on a Friday to *Wylie's Tavern & Oasthouse* near a huge concrete overpass where they play darts for money. The four of us kids wait for them outside the pub in the parking area, which is protected by Cyclone galvanized chainlink fencing and coils of barbed wire along the top. Bone splinters lie white and sharp amongst in the gravel at the base of the fence. Dogs gather outside around the perimeter and often separate into different packs. The dogfights there can be vicious, but we don't pay them much mind, instead keeping an eye on the winking, orange *WTO* sign above the door, and on the warm yellow light leaking through brown, nylon-mesh curtains. We play hacky sak or something to stay warm until our Dads bring out some chips or salted peanuts or marinated mussels in a plastic pottle. If they forget, we send Rich to ask since he is the favorite. If they tell him to bugger off, then we knock on the windows.

“Dad! We're hungry,” we call out. After a while, one of them comes to the door and tosses us a bag of salt-and-vinegar chips.

“And that's it,” he says. “Now shut the hell up.” Nothing I love more than the sour and the salt on my tongue and the crunch when I'm hungry. Saliva city. The rule is that whoever's Dad throws the bag, gets the most. Luckily for me and Rich, it's usually George.

We don't know exactly what goes on inside the pub. Often, though, we hear raised voices. One dad has lost money to another. Darts fly, along with accusations of cheating, as the door flies open and slams back against the white roughcast wall. The dads stumble drunkenly down the steps swinging at each other.

Two things happen if they fight. One, we have to side with our respective fathers and fight our half-siblings. It is like a job Rich and I have to do with Dad, just like we three used to work together to do the shearing, culling, or crutching. Dad's attention warms us and his bulk beside us reminds us that we belong together. With our real family.

"I call the shots around here," says Dad, his neck turning red and a vein down the side of it bulging out. A bluish light in his eye, perhaps reflected from the fly zapper they have in the pub window, makes him look crazed. He is much bigger than the other dads, but Shama fights hard and dirty — goes for eyes and balls, throws gravel, discarded tyre rims, whatever comes to hand. Ariel throws a fist at me, and orange street lights flash meteor-like across the curved trajectory of my punched head flung-back. I gulp, desperate to pull oxygen out of the night, and get a breath of Dad's safe, abrasive underarm smell beside me. For just a moment, his solid body hides me in his shadow. On the other side of me, Rich shouts and rushes against the dual inky shapes of Ariel and Shama. Fallu is useless, and

more than once I tackle and take him down, scraping his face along the asphalt. The dogs, in uproar outside the fence, jump up, snarling, barking, some on top of each other trying to get at us in the fight. A few might even be able to clear the top line of barbed wire and get in. Kamisese, as passive as his son, is easily beaten by Dad, and they quickly join our side. At which point Dad pounds Ariel's head and belly until he gives up or passes out cold, while the rest of us gang up on Shama. And then it is over.

With the rush halted, adrenalin leaves us shaky. Keeping a wary distance from each other, we inspect our injuries and note what aches, what stings and what throbs. In the meantime, Dad walks over to the fence and talks to the dogs, his tone monotonous and indecipherable. Gradually they calm down, and before long move off into the dark in small packs.

The second result of their fighting is that us kids get no food and go to bed hungry and bruised, regardless of whether our side wins or not.

After one such fight, Dad, Rich and I troop slowly home.

"We helped you," I say to Dad, as we come in the door. "Can't we get some food?"

"Stop your bloody whining. They ripped me off."

"But I'm *hungry*." I have a quaver in my voice.

"The cash is gone, you little moron," he snarls and he cuffs me so hard under the jaw that my feet leave the floor before I sprawl head first

onto the linoleum floor.

Auntie Turtle sees me go down.

“Is that *really* necessary?” she says.

“Keep your nose in your own affairs,” says Dad, “or I’ll show you the door. And you two,” he adds, “from now on, you stay away from those other kids.”

“But they’re family, Dad,” Rich says. He likes to have Fallu to boss around because I never do what he says any more.

“And Mum always said we could bring home whoever we wanted to be our friends,” I say from the floor. I have no intention of giving up Shama.

“Your mum is not here. Haven’t you noticed?” Dad’s face turns ugly red and vampirish. “I make the rules around here,” he says.

We stay home from school the next week to wait for the swellings and bruises to go down.

“The last thing we want is for Social Welfare to stick their noses in,” says Dad as he goes out to work.

“He was always a little uncouth,” Auntie Turtle says later, averting her eyes from my injuries, “but it’s getting completely out of hand.”

On Tuesday, Auntie Turtle goes out, for food we hope. Rich and I

hang out on Karlton Avenue waiting for her and seeing who can spit more times on the windscreen of passing cars. Shama and Fallu come mooching along. I guess they've been kept out of school too since Shama is limping and has a black eye, and Fallu has a gravel graze on one side of his face, plus a fat lip.

“Giddy,” I say cautiously.

They grunt and look across the avenue.

Rich and I spit a little more until our glasses of water are empty and we've run out of spit.

“You want to come in and watch tele?” Rich asks them.

“Why'd you have to beat us up so bad?” says Shama, kicking at a weed growing through a crack in the path. “What did we ever do to you?”

“It's not like we had a choice,” says Rich. “And Dad slammed Rona as well when we got home.”

“Same with us,” says Fallu, his enunciation muffled. “We both got another hiding, and Shama's foster-dad locked her in the garden shed all night.” He sighs.

“And the bastard broke Fallu's front tooth,” says Shama. Fallu pulls up his swollen top lip to show us the tooth that is now a triangle rather than a square.

There is silence for a while among us and we watch cars drive by us

until Auntie Turtle comes round the corner.

“Myrtle’s back,” says Rich, a lift in his voice, and all our eyes are drawn to her shopping bag.

“Hey guys,” she says. “Who’s coming in for bread and cheese?”

Right then I see Brindle, the same mix-breed I saw that first morning walking with my father, at the head of a pack, the rottweiler next to him, pounding down the footpath towards us, teeth bared.

“Get in!” I shout and we all push inside the fence and slam the gate just as they reach us. The dogs jump up, snarling and barking, their toenails scraping against the gate.

“Jesus!” says Auntie Turtle. “How can people live like this?”

She puts on the formica dining table a plate of sliced bread spread with marmite and another of sliced cheese. When she goes back to the kitchen for a pot of strong tea to wash it down, there is a scraping of chairs and shoving and shouldering as we dive for the plates.

“Wait a second,” Auntie Turtle says coming back in. “Shouldn’t you kids be figuring out how to get rid of the dogs instead of squabbling with each other?”

“Right,” says Shama. “I don’t see you doing anything to help.” And she stuffs her face with a huge mouthful of bread and cheese.

Auntie Turtle, her lips tight, looks at Shama for a second. I stop chewing. Have a sick feeling like someone is going to get hurt. But Auntie Turtle just shrugs.

“If you’ll all excuse me,” she says, “I’m just going to sit in the sun and read for a while,” and she curls up in the only armchair with a book and a slice of asparagus quiche, while we snatch up our food and guard it between the triangles of our forearms until we can eat it. Fallu takes the longest since he has to tear the food into small pieces so he can chew with just his molars.

“So how do you think we can get rid of the dogs?” Rich asks Auntie Turtle, when both plates are empty and all the tea is drunk.

“Their weak spot is their heart.” She turns in her chair to face us. “According to this German wildlife magazine I read once, if a dog attacks, just pull its front legs apart and it’s all over.”

“That simple, huh,” says Fallu, as he lifts his accordion from its case.

“Simple suicide,” says Rich. “That’s basically presenting your jugular to his jaws.”

“Well, if he’s attacking you, you’re gonna be dead anyway,” says Shama. “May as well take him down with you.” Then she puts a hand on my shoulder and looks straight at me with her almost-black eyes.

“What about you Rona?” she says. “You watch and listen, but what do you think?”

Caught off-guard, I blush and say I have to think about it.

Auntie Turtle vetoes the TV and suggests we play a board game.

“You too, Fallu,” she says. “You can stop hiding in your music for a just a short while. It’s not fatal you know. To disagree. Personally, I find it quite bracing.”

Fallu scratches his head in embarrassment and puts down his accordion, and we pull out the Monopoly set and lie on our stomachs on the fleur-de-lis carpet to play, all heads towards the board.

“Ha!” laughs Auntie Turtle, pouring herself a mug of sherry. “Now we’re really going to see who’s top dog.”

Fallu has never played before and keeps getting mad.

“No,” he says to me when he lands on Leicester Square and faces \$800 rent. “That’s not right! Last time it was \$22.”

“But now it has three houses,” I say.

“No, no! That’s not my problem.”

Shama has to show him the rates on the back to the Leicester Square card before he, sour-faced, will give up the cash.

Rich looks like he is going to be the rich one since he puts hotels on

Mayfair and Park Lane. Shama is the first to land on one. She has hardly any money, so I flick the red hotel off Mayfair and she catches it.

“No hotels,” she says, “so it’s only \$50.”

“Hands off my hotels,” says Rich.

“Okay, no hands,” she says, and puts it up one nostril.

“Snot hotel,” Fallu laughs, and Rich starts tickling Shama to get the hotel, and soon we are all rolling on the floor laughing and tickling each other and chasing the hotel, and the tokens and cards and houses and money get all messed up. So the Monopoly game is over.

“Just as well,” says Auntie Turtle looking up from her book. “That game normally ends in tears.”

“You always talk to us like we’re babies,” says Shama.

PART II

– 1 –

Autumn. I am now 14, and school has started again for the year. Our old life on the farm has been left further and further behind almost as though it's not real. I can hardly believe a year has passed since we arrived in Pekaput and I still know nothing about Mum. I have one theory that she is saving up her money to get a house we can live in. In the meantime, we are still living here in the glorified chicken-coop house, surrounded by dogs, and money is tighter than ever. We have no hot water, we are not allowed to have the light on in more than one room at a time, and Myrtle has put a chain and padlock on the fridge.

I warn myself against comparing old and new, but when I really hate things here, I still tell myself how it used to be, and how Mum will be here any day to pick me up and take me away. Not that I say it out loud any more. Last time I said it, Myrtle said,

“Here she goes again,” and Shama and Fallu and Rich didn't look at me or even answer. And I thought, *You wait, just you bloody wait – the lot of you.*

“Let me tell you for once and for all, Rona,” says Dad, finally. “She didn't leave us. We left her. She refused to live in the city.” He and I are at

the dining table at breakfast time. His stomach is so fat now that it fights against his shirt buttons.

“So why did we come here?” I say. “Why didn’t we go with her? Why didn’t someone ask us what *we* wanted?”

“I have to make a living, pet.” He turns to face me. “We need to eat. Your mother couldn’t get her head round that one.” He shakes his head slowly, his cheeks hanging sad and loose. But I don’t feel sorry for him. He deserves it. He should have worked it out with Mum.

“How about Fallu and Shama? Did they leave her too? They were still babies.”

“Could’ve been.” He turns back to his newspaper. No further information is available. I can’t even tell if he’s telling the truth. The other three have lost interest in these questions, “moved on,” as Rich says. I can’t decide if that’s disloyal, or just life.

Myrtle and Rich bring their toast and tea in from the kitchen. The smell of burnt toast and peanut butter wafts in with Rich as he sits at the table. Myrtle balances her plate and cup on the arm of the armchair over by the front window while she folds her legs under her and reaches for her book. She has orange marmalade on her toast, which she never burns.

“Listen to this.” Dad livens up and opens out the newspaper flat onto the table. “Some little kid, seven years old, wanders onto someone else’s

property – one of those stilt houses by the stream – and the dog on the property kills her.”

“I think the kids in this household have learned that lesson already,” says Myrtle, as Rich slides a hand under his thigh.

“Don’t jump the gun,” Dad says. “After the girl is killed, the teenage brother of the kid wades in with a four-by-two, kills the dog, but then bleeds out before they can get him to hospital.”

I can’t picture the fight at all. How could the brother get enough of a swing to kill the dog if it’s already on him? It would be too close. And if the dog wasn’t on him at first, how could a dead dog kill him?

“*And*, since the dog was on private property,” Dad continues, “the cops are talking about charging the parents with neglecting to supervise their kids.”

“Well fair enough, if the dog never left the property,” says Rich.

“I can’t even believe you said that,” I say. “Amnesia anyone?”

“Surely the parents been punished enough,” says Myrtle.

“The owners are demanding compensation for losing the dog,” says Dad.

“I don’t know,” says Myrtle. “The whole dog thing is so out of control... can’t they train them better?”

“I can just see it,” says Dad, standing up. “A 150-pound rottweiler

frothing at the mouth, and some little trainer fulla turning his back on it and saying *Heel! Heel, I say!*” We all laugh. Even me.

Dad backs the ute out of the driveway and heads out to the truck depot. He’s often away for a week at a time, as he hauls oil the length of the country in an elliptical tank trailer that looks like a slightly squashed toilet paper tube. Otherwise, he couples his cab and chassis to a refrigerated semi-trailer, to supply produce for city greengrocers, including Kamisese. I am not always happy to see him when he is around.

“Dad has changed for the worse,” I say.

“You don’t realize how hard it hit him lose the farm,” says Myrtle. “He worked down there for nearly twenty years and was kicked off with just the shirt on his back.”

“Yeah, well I liked him better when Mum was around,” I say.

“Well that could be part of it,” she says, looking up from her book. She thinks for a bit. “But a small part. I think it was farm life, more than your mother, that kept him human. You romanticize your mum far too much. She was fickle as a tipsy fantail. Always.”

“You didn’t even know her, so how would you know,” I say.

“Look at the evidence, Rona. You’re a bright girl. Look at the evidence.”

“What evidence?”

“Well, is she here? Did she come and get you? Has she rung you or written?”

“She’s sick. She can’t come.”

Myrtle rolls her eyes. “We all of us need our fictions I suppose.

I leave the room and slam the door. That’s not evidence. She doesn’t know what she’s talking about. This is the beginning of my not talking to her. At some point I gave up the “Auntie Turtle,” in favour of “Myrtle” but not out of familiarity as Rich did. She is not any family I want, and the joke was old and unfunny by the time I stopped. Rich and I gave up laughing about it ages ago. Gave up laughing together about anything come to that.

Dear Mum, I write.

It’s hard to have fun in the city with Rich and Dad. They are always serious and busy. Dad is away all the time and Rich is pretending he’s a grownup and only wants to be with Myrtle. And Myrtle is mean and won’t give us enough to eat. If you come back, they would go back to normal. Or if you don’t want to stay in Pekaiput, I could go with you and help you. I could get a job if we need money. Please ring me or write to me.

Love Rona xxx

PS. Watch out for the dogs. They are much worse now. People keep

leaving their gates open or their dogs get out and join packs in the street. Dad even got me and Rich dog spray to carry round, which is a complete miracle, because he never buys us anything.

= = =

Rich starts to go out places with Myrtle. He rushes home from school without looking for me. Or maybe he's found a way to get out, and wags last period. I wouldn't know. But I walk home by myself and often find the place empty. Or I meet them leaving as I arrive home.

At home by myself, I feel very crowded in by the sounds of the neighbors – their TVs and the barking of their dogs, and cars gunning down the straight stretch on the avenue. I watch tele or else go down and hang around with the old fogies for a few hours and listen to them talk about the old days. I always hope that Shama or Fallu will come by. Sometimes Rich is back by the time I get home, sometimes not. Sometimes he returns with Myrtle, sometimes alone. Either way, we don't mention it.

The Ronnie Rogers show is about to come on when Rich opens the outside door, and the wind bursts in with him, blows down the hall and slams the kitchen door. When he comes into the living room, I see he has

new clothes. A suit jacket, American basketball shoes, loose khaki pants. He swaggers a bit – as much as anyone with a limp can swagger – as he passes between me and the tele to put a carton of Rothmans smokes on the coffee table.

“Where’d you get them from?” I ask.

“I got a job.”

“What job?”

“Entrepreneur.”

“And what’s that when it’s at home?”

“You know, *business*,” he says. “Buy cheap, sell expensive. And keep the change. Is there any food around here? I’m starving.” Now he’s just showing off.

“Why would there be food just because you’ve got new clothes,” I say.

Fallu and Shama show up next, to watch the tele.

“Bro, bro, *bro!* Where’d you get this *gear!*?” says Shama, and she feels the cloth of Rich’s jacket and pats his shoulder, before taking a seat astride the sofa arm.

“Save it,” says Rich, who is completely unsuccessful in hiding his satisfaction.

“Sweet as,” says Fallu, nodding at Rich as he plops onto the sofa by me.

“He’s got a job,” I say.

On the tele, Ronnie Rogers is covering the stilt houses dog maulings. The camera pans over the stream and the muddy mangroves, and the falling-down fencing surrounding the stilt houses, and their hungry-looking mutts, and the rickety wooden ladders that lead up to their doors. I don’t see Fallu’s house.

“Wasn’t that over near your place?” I say to Fallu.

“Yeah. Bit close for comfort, eh. They’re upstream a bit from us, though.”

“Is this an issue of parental oversight or lack thereof,” Ronnie says, with a serious tweak of his eyebrow, “or, as some argue, an issue of self defense? And where do property rights fit into this picture? So, we take it to the street...”

“Thing that bugs me,” says Shama, “is that no one’s talking about the dead kids. They’re only making a fuss about if the parents should get done for it.”

“Yeah, see, but that kid,” says Fallu, “he used to hang around sometimes with them glue-sniffers, you know, under the bridge.”

“Oh,” says Shama, “so they think he got what was coming to him.”

“But the girl was only seven,” I say. I wonder how the girl died, whether the dog bit her little neck and it was quick.

“What is it with kids these days?” says an old pensioner guy in bowling whites on the tele. “When I was young, there was such a thing as respecting other people’s property.”

“Since when can parents control a teenager?” says a young woman in a tracksuit. “Name just one parent who can. Just *one*. How can they be blamed?”

“The parents dispute that the dog was actually on the property,” says Ronnie back in the TV studio. “They claim it had managed to get out, and their son was acting in self defense.”

“Brats! That’s all I have to say,” says a hoarse, fat man. “Brats! Got no more than they deserved.”

“The parents should get done,” says Rich, from his perch on the dining room table, “and then everyone should shut up about it.”

“Don’t you care about the kids? That wee girl?” I say.

“Shouldn’t have been in there. The dog was just doing its job. End of story,” says Rich.

“So what about us when we got torn up by next door’s dogs? That’s fine by you now?”

Rich lifts his chin. “We didn’t know the rules back then.”

“Since when,” says another interviewee of the Ronnie Rogers Show, shrill and short of breath, “do the coppers get involved with a...”

“Speaking of coppers getting involved, did youse hear there was another place firebombed over in East Pekauput last night?” Shama looks to Rich and me and back as she speaks.

“Firebombed? I never heard about a first one,” says Rich.

“Yeah, it’s bad, eh,” says Fallu. “A greengrocer last week and a dairy last night.”

“It kills me how ignorant you two are sometimes,” says Shama.

“Stuff you,” says Rich.

“George apparently has put a new tariff on top of the delivery prices,” she says. “They say he’s been blocking food to East Pekauput since the shops refused to pay it.”

“Bull,” says Rich. “Dad’s serious about business, but that’s not his style. Not at all.”

“It’s true,” says Fallu. “My dad’s looking for someone cheaper to freight in the produce, but all the other truckers are nervous about crossing your dad.”

“Oh I get it – the other truckers don’t like fair competition, and that makes Dad a firebomber,” says Rich. “I’m not listening to any more of your crap.”

“I for one never noticed you were such a big listener in the first place,” says Shama as Rich walks out of the room.

“So this job of Rich’s,” says Fallu to me, “you looking at the cops knocking on your door?”

“I don’t know any more than you do,” I say.

“Coupla nice toothy rotties should keep them at bay,” says Shama. “I just hope Rich doesn’t forget his rellies when it comes to nice clothes.”

“Don’t count on it,” I say.

“One day,” says Shama stretching out one arm so she’s half lying along the back of the sofa behind us, “there’s going to be *untold* blowback – and everyone’s going to, you know, go round blinking and wondering what the hell hit them.”

“Can we look at the other channel?” says Fallu.

Late one solitary afternoon, I notice Myrtle has left the padlock off the fridge and help myself to a big chunk of cheese. There is not much else in there besides Dad’s beer, so I take out a six-pack, which gives me the idea of pouring some of Myrtle’s sherry from its three-litre flagon into a milk bottle. Carrying them carefully, I go down to the bush end of the park to see the fogies. There are four umbrellas in the clearing this afternoon, but no one is sitting under them, everyone preferring the sun since there is a cool

edge in the air. Fallu and Shama are there, Shama practicing handsprings over a stack of milk crates. She does a run-up towards the stack, dives onto her hands and, bending her elbows, springs up and over the crates feet first.

“Another one,” she calls out, bending over, panting, hands on knees.

“Easy on,” Fallu says to her. “That’s getting wicked high. Sit down for a bit.”

“Giddyay,” I say.

“Giddyay,” Fallu and a couple of the fogies reply.

“I’ll put it on myself then,” says Shama and makes for the last crate, which I sit on quickly with a triumphant smile. Of course, she tips me off onto the damp grass in two shakes.

“*Careful*,” I say. “I got stuff here.” And I pick myself up, keeping the milk bottle upright.

“You guys want a beer or something?” I say to the fogies.

“Beer?” they say. Some of them roll their eyes.

“Piss water,” says Laurelie. “No thanks. But what’s in the milk bottle?”

“Sherry.”

“You beauty. Why didn’t you say so?” she says. “Pass it over then, lovey.” The others all laugh and wheeze and cough and call out,

“Lemme get a look at some-a that there milk.”

I pass it over to Laurelie, who has many hands reaching out towards her.

“Over here, chook, over here,” says Long Chin.

“Get away from me, you old soak. You drink too much anyway,” she says to Alchie Joe.

“Milk-o, Milk-o – tuppence for some milk-o,” sang out Baldy.

Then I ask Shama and Fallu if they want a beer.

“You drink beer?” Shama says to me.

“Why not?” I say. “Fallu?”

“Why not?” He laughs. His laugh is an overflowing version of his smile, unlike Shama’s which has no connection to anything happy. She shrugs and returns to her flips, and I pass Fallu one of the stubbies. He winks at me while we unscrew the tops. “Cheers.”

The first sip is pretty disgusting, but I pretend I like it and we clink bottles. Then we make different clink-patterns, like our own morse code, between sips, and I forget how bad it tastes, and soon the bottles are finished and we are giggling and being silly.

While we are drinking our second bottle, Fallu opens up his accordion box, and starts to play his happy Bolivian song and sing the foreign words. Some of the fogies join in and a few get up and start dancing on the grass.

“Is that Bolivian, that language you’re singing?” I ask. Fallu shakes his head and keeps singing. A couple of the fogies laugh.

“No, they speak *Spanish* over there,” says Pearly.

“They speak a lot of things over there.”

“Specially when they’re drinking their milk-o…” says Baldy

“Not such a dumb question,” Laurelie says to me. “The locals have at least two languages, sometimes more.”

The line between sunlight and shadow edges quickly up the trees until the last of the sun just catches the tips, and then is gone. I shiver, suddenly cold.

“What about a dance?” says Laurelie. So I get up and she shows me the dance hold.

“I’ll be the man if you like,” she says, and we dance on the spongy grass, and she twirls me round, and I lean for a moment against her, feeling her whiskery face, now familiar, and enjoying her smell of mothballs and lavender.

We take a break from the music while Fallu has a drink of beer. The bush enclosure is totally dark now except for the ends of one or two smokes and, in the sky above the trees, a faint orange glow from the street lights that start sparsely over on Karlson Avenue and spread way back from there. I lean back, palms behind me on the edge of the crate, and look up at the

sky, the stars for once not blocked by clouds. The air is damp as always, without the slightest breeze, and cold, but for a moment I want nothing to change. I love the fogies and Laurelie, and Fallu, and think if he's my brother, that really is okay with me, and I lean over and tell him that.

"Choice," he says, and smiles his toothiest smile, which is all I can clearly see of his face save the whites of his eyes. "It's okay with me too." Then he starts to play the Bolivian song again.

Shama shows up beside me.

"Drunk as you are," she says, "you can probably dance now." I take her to mean that we should dance together, which we do. Her style is not like Laurelie's and involves a lot of fast centrifugal swinging, and inside-out twists with our arms, until I am laughing and panting with the effort. At the final lines of the song, Fallu slows down the rhythm and repeats the verse several times, and Shama and I lean together with our arms around each other's waists, swaying until the end of the last note, listening to each other's pulses, our bellies touching with each inhale. In the dark, we can see the darker shadows of pairs of fogies doing the same.

"The glue kids pretty often start with drinking, you know," Shama says softly into the hair above my ear.

"A couple of beers, Shama. That's all."

"I know. I just don't want to see you like that. They're broken down

kids that can't be fixed."

"Re-lax."

After the music, the fogies tell stories in loud voices of dances they went to when they were young, how stunning their partners were, how difficult the steps.

"And you were the most dashing of them all, I suppose?" says one voice.

"Dashing and smashing..."

"I tell you one thing. Just one thing. All the girls came running."

"...and dancing and prancing."

Guffaws follow. "Prince Charming has come amongst us."

"Drinking too much of that milk-o."

"Running, I tell you. They-they-they came *running*. All the girls. All the girls I tell you."

Without light, the voices step out from their different locations, and have a thickness like actual bodies almost, while the shadows of bodies they belong to dissolve into the darker tree shadows behind them.

"They *went* running, you mean."

"Yeah, one look at that ugly mug of yours..." They laugh raucously.

"...and *off* they went."

I don't hear the footsteps on the grass.

“Rona?” Rich’s voice. He has come looking for me.

“Huh?”

“What are you doing down here?”

“What does it look like?”

“Well, seeing it’s pitch black out here, it doesn’t look like anything.

Myrtle told me to check down here for you.”

“Well, now you’ve checked,” I say, not moving.

“You’ve got to come home,” he says.

I don’t answer.

“Come on,” says Fallu. “We should all go back together and keep an eye out for dogs.” Fallu goes home the long way when it’s dark, sticking to the streets instead of risking the park and the footbridge.

“Yeah, okay,” says Shama, standing up. “Let’s make a move.”

So Rich gets his way and we call out *'night* to the fogies, and *spot ya*. Rich walks ahead with his lopsided gait, while Shama, Fallu and I follow, arm in arm, out of the bush and across the end of the park towards the lights of Karlson Avenue.

“So what’s so great about your auntie that you don’t hang around with us anymore,” asks Shama. Rich turns his head briefly.

“She’s classy,” he says.

“Oh yeah?” says Shama as though she’s honestly considering that

idea. “But you don’t expect her to stick around,” she adds, “when you really need her, do you?”

“I’m not looking for a nanny.”

“Uh-huh.”

“She’s traveled all over and I want to know what she knows. You learn piss all in school.”

“You learn to be an obedient little sheep,” says Shama. “Never underestimate that.” She laughs.

“The thing is...” Rich stops and faces us... “nothing’s safe, and no one will keep you safe. You got to take your chances where you can. And if you’re sharp about it, you might even do well.”

“Or you might not. Like those kids that were chewed up over by the stilt houses,” says Shama.

“Not that sharp though, were they?” says Rich.

“*Dogs!*” shouts Fallu just as we reach the avenue, and we sprint for the two nearest lampposts. Me and Fallu scramble up one, and Shama and Rich the other. Brindle, the same mix-breed I saw that morning walking with Dad, leads the pack as he often does. Brindle is superdog on Karlton Ave. Any dog he picks a fight with comes off second best.

Below us, the pack, mostly made up of large mongrels, barks and jumps and froths at the mouth. Our shadows, cast by the streetlights above

us, fall over the orange-lit, writhing, barking mass of them.

“People think that the dogs belong to people, but it’s the other way round,” says Shama.

“The dogs rule,” says Fallu to himself.