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# THE DESERT ROAD

..... A NOVELLA .....

LYNN DAVIDSON



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## ..... LYNN DAVIDSON .....

Lynn Davidson has had published four collections of poetry, most recently [Common Land](#) in 2012 by Victoria University Press. Her novel, *Ghost Net* was published by Otago University Press and her short stories have been published widely and adapted for radio. Lynn's work has appeared in *Sport, Snorkel*, [Best of Best New Zealand Poems](#), *Big Weather: Poems of Wellington*, *Dear Heart*, *150 New Zealand Love Poems*, and *PN Review*.

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# THE DESERT ROAD

NOW

I lie in my old single bed with my hands, in prayer position, slipped between my thighs. The dark house seems to circle me, reluctant to lie down. I shake a few drops of homeopathic *relaxing sleep aid* onto my tongue and, half believing it will work, start to drift.

Flying home across the world for the first time in eight years, I saw from my window the biblical, stony emptiness of the Middle East, then vast Siberia where a mine made long steps in the earth leading down to a gaping centre. I pulled the plastic blind shut against this fearful sight and watched a movie. Later I saw the dark green of Indonesia and the big red interior of Australia and I thought how great it is that the information is, well, true. Seen from above, Siberia is vast and scary, the Middle East is rocky and biblical, the Pacific Islands are shapely and dark green. Hallelujah! I also noticed the rivers; their silvery shimmers. Earth is the universe's own disco ball.

I wake smelling the cold. It has the iron and dirt smell of a river. I hold the curtain out and look. The trees are crimson and yellow and orange and shiny with dew. I hear the noises of the house. It makes nibbling sounds, always has done, as though it's grooming itself. I hear Mum shuffle along the hallway in her slippers.

‘Breakfast,’ she announces as she bumps the door open with her hip. She has a little frown of concentration. ‘You should leave that curtain drawn or you’ll lose the warmth of the room,’ she says, half friendly, half awkward and brisk.

I sit up and settle the tray.

She stands there, one hand pleating her apron, the other in a loose fist. ‘It’s lovely to have you home again,’ she says.

‘Thanks, Mum,’ I say. And I do mean it. ‘Thanks.’ I feel hot tears, those tired tears, pricking my eyes.

‘Your father’s still in bed.’

‘Oh.’

‘His lungs keep him in bed sometimes.’

I feel a clout of fear. ‘He’s not ...’

‘It’s nothing serious,’ she replies quickly. ‘We’re just old, Teresa.’ She smiles, a hint of irony, a hint of tease, a hint of my mother. Then a pause and, ‘You’ll be going to see Jeanie soon?’

‘Yes. Today probably.’

‘We don’t see that much of Jeanie. She, well, they, have an odd sort of life.’ Just that, as though she herself had nothing to do with it.

I pick up my cup, take a sip and swallow hard. This is why I haven’t been home. My mother’s lips tremble and she glances away.

I pull the curtains back and watch the light on the silver birches.

‘Is that enough?’ she asks, gesturing to the tray with its tea and toast. I want to say no, it’s not enough, but I just nod and even smile a little without looking at her. ‘It’s fine.’

When she gets to the door I can’t help saying, ‘Maria’s coming up from Wellington.’

‘Yes. Lovely.’

‘I guess she’s staying here?’

My mother stands there for a moment before shuffling back down the hall. It's eight years since my last visit but right now it feels like days. I came back eight years ago because my parents had started to sound old when I spoke to them on the phone. Dad had lost the deep cello in his voice and what was left sounded thready and uneven. This time it's still the vanishing voices of my parents, but also there is a new tug in me, a hankering. If I didn't know better I might call it homesickness.

•

Most of my growing up was done here. I was seven when we shifted from Mangakino to Turangi. Maria six and Jeanie just four. I was a skinny knees-and-elbows kid, daydreamy, gullible and generally ill-equipped for the duties of an eldest child. It was 1966 and Dad had work on the Tongariro Power Project. He was taken on as a translator and mediator between the tunnellers and management. Most of the tunnellers on the project were, like Dad, northern Italians, and experts in mining and tunnelling. Dad was a confident man, some said charismatic. Maybe that means he was never off duty. After hours he propped up homesick young Italians; most nights we had extras for dinner. He grew the lemons and herbs and tomatoes they all missed. Some nights he made a fire in a drum at the far end of the back garden and there would be a party. Even so, a few of the young men went back home to Italy before the job was done, and you could hardly blame them. Even as a kid in the heart of my family I wanted to leave Turangi pretty much as soon as we arrived. But that changed.

Turangi sits on tussock land – our desert – where winds sheet, low and vicious. Rivers and clouds pour through the golden-brown valleys. Beyond the valleys three volcanic mountains claim ground and sky: Tongariro, Ngauruhoe and Ruapehu. Members of the local iwi, Tuwharetoa, would avert their eyes while passing these three mountains because they were sacred. Tapu. On the plateau, even on the coldest days, hot steam billows from yellow-lipped cracks in the ground. On a still day you can hear the ground hiss. We are not a family prone to bouts of silence, but I think we

spent the first difficult weeks there quietly taking stock. The land hissed and thundered, stopped and started like a Victorian machine. In counterpoint, the purpose-built Ministry of Works town was orderly and matter-of-fact. The houses and shops were boxy and temporary-looking, the backyards scraped and spare and the neighbours eyed you up. Even as little girls we knew that the place would eventually decide on us, not us on it. We felt imposed, like a new religion. At best, I suppose, we hoped to become something believable.

At least we new kids in the new town had the hills, the mountains, the trees, the rivers, the gullies and the weather. All old beyond imagining. The weather in winter seemed ancient, medieval. On the worst days, prehistoric. Sometimes we rode our small, hairy, unglamorous horses up the forestry tracks but mostly we explored around the rivers and streams. Shallow streams that slicked over stones and deep rivers that made their way through gullies lined with black mountain beech. When the sun went down and we didn't want to leave yet, we'd put our hands and faces against the still-warm stones.

While we explored, Dad was cutting his way through Mt Tihia between the mountains and Lake Taupo. Dad's tunnel, the Tokaanu tunnel, starts at Lake Roto-a-ira at the foot of Mt Tongariro. You can go to the lake now and see water pouring through thick bars into the mountain.

Dad taught us the names of the rivers. It seemed as though they belonged to him, and, if we behaved, that they might belong to us. The Maori names rolled off his Italian tongue as though the two languages met and mingled naturally. He'd look over our heads as though he was going to sing, and recite: Awapatu, Parakakariki, Tangau, Mangatepopo, Whakapapanui, Ngawakaakauae, Te Piri Piri. Then he would stop for a high-drama moment before saying our river, *Tongariro*, and finally Moawhango, Whanganui and Whakapapa. Depending on place or mood or time of day, these names sounded like the run and flow of the rivers themselves, or kinds of magic charm with light and dark inside them. Just

before I left for London to start at the conservatorium I learned the names of the rivers by heart and they have stayed with me.

Jeanie thought a conservatorium sounded like a place you would go to if you wanted to live forever. She repeated the word at every opportunity until even I was sick of it.

•

A car in the driveway. I'm up, dancing in the cold room – clothes, clothes. Dressing gown will have to do. The door slams and she's already screeching and Dad's saying, 'Stop the screeching. You'll scare her away again and we've just got her back.'

Prodigal daughter.

'Maria, settle down,' my mother murmurs lovingly. I run out of my old bedroom and we meet in the hall, two middle-aged sisters shedding years like old clothes. She's wearing a fitting, dark green skirt and still has shoulder-length hair. She pulls me against her, my chin jabbing her shoulder. 'You should have flown in to Wellington,' she says, 'you could have stayed with us. We could have driven up here together.' And that's the invitation. 'I hope you're leaving from Wellington.'

'I think I'm leaving from Wellington.'

'For goodness' sake, she's just got here,' from my father in his dressing gown, his hand on my mother's shoulder.

It's two years since I saw Maria and Robbie, when they visited me in London. She is still so pretty with her neat figure and dark hair and a smile that makes deep dimples at the corners of her mouth. The red carpet runner in the hall remembers us, our bare feet up and down its length. Dad's socked feet. Mum's slippers. We are, with our syncopated drumming, conjuring up the past. *Time to get up, time for bed, time for lights out, time for sleep, time to get cracking, time enough, time this, time that.* Dad comes up to join in the hug. He kisses me on the cheek, then Maria. 'My beautiful girls,' he says, his eyes growing moist. 'My beautiful beautiful girls.'

When we are settled in the lounge we ask after Maria's two boys and as I listen to her describe their school and university, their quirks and their loves, I think how we in this room and the room itself are like a happiness machine, and right now all of the parts are working. As soon as I think this, the machine starts to sputter. There's a loud bash at the door and Dad levers himself out of his chair and through the kitchen to answer it. It's the lawns guy. Dad sounds awkward, as though he's embarrassed for us to hear that he can't cut his own lawns anymore. Mum stands behind Maria's chair and bends forward, frowning, to see the latest photos of her grandsons. Maria clicks slowly through eight or nine photos on her phone and Mum squints and smiles but I wonder if she can see them properly. Dad comes back in, lifts the handle on the door of the woodburner and it groans as it swings open. He feeds it a lump of wood then some twigs from the bottom of the wood basket. Still half bent over, he makes his way to his chair and drops down into it. Maria pulls her chair closer to his and starts to show him the photos.

I follow Mum into the kitchen. She lifts the jug slowly and her wrist strains as she fills it with water. It's been ages since I saw them, but it feels sudden, the way they look like children trying to do grownups' jobs. Everything a little too heavy or too high. I get four cups and put them on the table. My mother and I stand side by side. She watches the jug and I adjust the cups so the handles all point the same way. Mum's thick red hair is now grey and thin. Her solid shoulders are reduced and uneven so her dress sits slightly above them.

'I'm playing flute in a new orchestra,' I announce brightly to my mother's profile.

'You're already in two orchestras.' She sounds puzzled.

'I rehearse six nights a week,' I say a little too loudly. 'My new orchestra is kind of avant-garde. Modern.' There is a pause and the jug gurgles into the silence.



‘What’s she doing?’ Dad yells from the lounge. ‘What are you doing, sweetheart?’ he yells to me.

‘Playing in another orchestra, Dad.’

‘It’s not enough to play in two orchestras?’

‘It’s extra money and it’s ... fun’.

‘Fun, eh?’ I hear him smile. ‘My daughter has work that is *fun*. Well, the children should do better than the parents.’

‘Well, when I say *fun*, it’s not all beer and skittles,’ I reply, balancing cups of potent Italian coffee on a tray. Mum drops a small creamy winter rose between them. I walk ahead of her to the lounge. ‘We don’t earn much for all our efforts.’

‘You’re making a living from music,’ he smiles, ‘just like you wanted to.’ He keeps looking at me. ‘You were a sweet girl. Always sewing something ... wasn’t she, Meggie?’

‘Yes. Always sewing something.’

‘Or playing that damned flute.’ He gives a theatrical sigh. ‘A man shouldn’t have so many daughters.’

‘I did my best,’ my mother jokes.

Maria lifts her eyebrows at me. She is smiling, but the smile is showing signs of wear.

‘Trying to keep the boys away from you all the time,’ he grumbles. ‘Had to keep a big stick just inside the door!’ My mother, Maria and I look at our hands. ‘Sixteen-hour shifts in the tunnel and then three daughters to worry about when I came home!’

‘Not easy, Dad,’ I say.

I put the tray on a fold-out table at the centre of our chairs and we all reach out and take a tiny cup, perfect in its fragrance, colour, weight. The ritual makes us graceful.

When we have finished there is a silence that pulses in the room. Jeanie seems to be there, squeezing between us, telling us it’s ‘cold as a well-

digger's arse outside'. Bringing her energy and opinions to the table. We shuffle a little, trying to repair the circle. Mum goes to the fire, opens the heavy door and pokes at it with a stick. 'It's not drawing properly,' she says.

'Leave it alone, woman,' my father snaps. 'I'll get some more wood.' He shuffles to open the door and cold air rolls in. It is a different cold here. More top notes. I push the door closed and Mum tells me to leave it open, for Dad. I stand holding the door open a crack, trying to keep Mum warm as Dad shuffles towards me over uneven ground cradling four lumps of wood.

After lunch, when Maria and I say we are going out, there's another difficult moment. I feel like I'm walking a foot above the ground, not in a miraculous way, just unable to get any traction. In a moment of confusion Dad unhooks his keys from beside the door and offers his car.

'We've got Maria's car, Dad,' I say. 'We're going in her car.'

'Of course,' he says. 'Go, go,' he flicks us away. 'And be careful on the road.'

We leave the house awkwardly, one bumping into the other, like slightly shamed rebellious teenagers. 'We'll be back for dinner, Mum,' I call.

'We'll bring dinner,' Maria says and I feel a wave of embarrassment at my assumption. Mum stands at the lounge door.

'What would you like?' I ask her. 'What do you feel like?'

'I'll make something,' she says.

'No, we'll get something. Make it easy.'

'I can still cook for my family. I'll make something.'

'We'll bring wine and dessert then,' I say.

'I forget they're so old,' I mutter to Maria in the car.

'I see them every couple of months and it still surprises me,' Maria says. 'Don't feel bad.'

We drive on in a silence for a while, and I struggle not to let Maria's 'don't feel bad' get too far under my skin. I don't want to be annoyed with her.

'Remember how Jeanie could always get Dad onside,' I say to Maria, and watch her face relax a bit. I sing a few bars of Ivor Novello's 'Waltz of my Heart' and Maria laughs. On one of his bad-tempered days Jeanie would hook a scroll inside the wide, square mouth of our player piano and Dad would sigh theatrically and clap one hand to his head. Chin tilted up, Jeanie would press the big pedals softly at first, till they huffed and pushed back, then faster and faster till the scroll with its hundreds of raised dots would flutter and shift and wind over onto another roller and the music would start to play. Jeanie sat with her hands on her thighs, legs going like pistons, while 'Waltz of my Heart' played itself, emphasis coming and going, tempo surging and receding. Then Dad couldn't help singing, 'Waltz of my heart! Haunting and gay! Calling enthrallingly, waltzing away! Joy fans a fire in me ...' And Mum would reach through from the hallway and gently shut the lounge door.

'Jeanie always loved it here,' Maria said quietly, 'she never wanted to leave, not like we did.'

I'm not sure it's that black and white but I keep my counsel.

'No wonder she and Finn ended up together. Both people of the land.' She makes this sound ridiculous.

'Jeanie was more in love with you than with Finn,' I say and Maria blushes.

'What do you mean?'

'She idolized you, Maria. In fact I was probably the one person in Turangi who didn't idolize you. You were cool and beautiful and ...' I want to say 'spirited' but that feels corny. 'Dad never forgave Jeanie because, in his world, she stole Finn from you, for no good reason.'

'And cohabited with a man before the age of consent.'

'There is that.'

‘Does Jeanie know that you told me what happened?’

‘Yep. I sent her a letter too.’

‘Christ, we kept you busy, didn’t we, Tess.’

‘It was two letters. I survived.’

Twenty minutes from Turangi, out the back of Tokaanu, we pull off the small, twisting road onto the driveway of Jeanie’s place. I’m shocked at how basic and scruffy it is. It looks to me, with its dirt road and 70s caravan behind the blistered weatherboard house, like a photo in a National Geographic. There is a forlorn-looking washing line in a paddock.

‘Christ,’ Maria mutters.

‘Think there’s much kin marryin’ kin out here?’ I say and Maria gives a snorting anxious laugh.

We park by the house and climb out of the car to see Jeanie, on horseback, trotting up the drive to meet us. It seems orchestrated. She dismounts and we glance at each other and kind of laugh, for want of anything sensible to say. Jeanie points due northeast and says, ‘We’re in direct line of Rangipo prison. On a quiet night we can hear them making pencil cases out of matchsticks.’ Again we laugh, and weirdly enough the ice has been broken. Jeanie dismounts and starts to unsaddle the horse. She looks thinner, lean and hard. We don’t hug, but if we did I think she would feel hard. The soft lines, the way she looked like Mum, that’s gone.

It’s so exposing, this climate, and this view. I remember that cracked-open feeling when the sharp-edged mountains cut another day out of a soft, black night. My heart thumps and thumps and I think my sisters must be able to hear it. I feel Maria’s hand on my arm. I stand in the middle of Jeanie’s driveway trying not to breathe this thing that absorbs colour; the sky and rivers leeches and grey as a piece of old towel.

Inside it is dim, but dry and cosy. There’s little decoration, but comfort has been considered and attended to. And somehow, as Jeanie makes coffee and we start to talk, we seem like ourselves again. What was empty fills up: my arms, my legs, my hands, my shoulders. Then I remember how our

lives have collapsed and reformed since last we were all together in the same room. Maria and I have heard about Finn and Jeanie's guerilla planting tactics, but it's so strange to think of it with Jeanie right here. Their plan was, is, to re-plant the Rangipo desert where army manoeuvres have torn things up. They plant seedling snowberries and snow totara into small finger-dug holes. After eruption and erosion, this small craziness sets things growing again. She plants a cup in front of me, her long freckled fingers lined with dirt.

## THEN

Maria, Finn and I practically had to beg to get the car. In the end Dad just wanted a quiet Sunday afternoon so he said yes as long as we took Jeanie with us. So here we are in a lay-by off the Desert Road: Maria, Finn and I trying to have a sneaky ciggie away from the car so Dad won't smell the smoke. It's all fine until we hear thumping behind us and turn to see Jeanie who has climbed onto the roof of the Humber. As we turn, she begins to jump. As she jumps her dark red hair spreads out and then flattens around her head – a David Attenborough-esque flower opening and closing on time-lapse. We stumble back into icy tussock and yell at her to stop. She thinks it's funny. Of course she does because Dad's going to kill us not her. The jagged mountain at her right shoulder comes and goes. Then she slips sideways and falls past the front passenger window feet-first to crumple into a ball beside the front wheel, her red hair like blood on the snow.

I drop my smoke, pull her to her feet and she stands there, shaking, as I run my hands down her jeans, dusting off snow and black dirt and tiny balls of pumice. Finn holds a white polo shirt against the side of her head where a cut is bleeding and walks her to the back door of the car. For a few moments, Jeanie stands there, holding the door and wavering on her feet.

Maria is furious and on the drive home leans out the window sucking viciously on a cigarette, trying with ineffective waves of her hand to stop the smoke trailing back into the car. I sit next to Jeanie and we rehearse a story to tell Dad. She is pale and sorry. I lick my finger and rub at one of the drying lines of blood on her cheek.

‘What happened?’ Dad yells as we guide Jeanie inside. ‘Baby?’ he says softly, resting one hand gently on her head. New trails of blood make red wisps across her face.

She remembers my schooling. ‘We were throwing snowballs and I fell and banged my head on the car. I need to lie down now.’ Genuflecting to an overstuffed armchair and sinking into it. Mum brings a bowl of warm water with a cloud of Dettol and a flannel. She pushes past us and leans over Jeanie, wiping the blood away. Dad won’t talk to us. We haven’t looked after his *baby*. There goes the car for the next few weeks. We put ‘submissive’ and ‘sorry’ on our faces but in our minds we are building a spiked fence with rolls of razor wire along the top, making absolutely sure that Jeanie is on the other side to us.

•

Maria sneaks out at night to see Finn. When all of the house lights are off, she gets out of her bed in our shared room and steps into her jeans, leaning back a little to pull up the fly. Everything is exaggerated and funny. We laugh in heaves of wheezy breath and snorts. I’m not jealous of her secret because I have my own plans. Which will start soon. I try not to think about what will happen if Maria is sprung sneaking out. Even more heart-stopping is the thought of Finn being caught by his parents. His mother, Rena, doesn’t approve of our family. She thinks we are some sort of Italian-Kiwi hybrid lowlife. *My son’s* not home right now, as though she owned him. She has pale brown hair going grey in strands, a long, thin face and a sarcastic-looking mouth that tilts up on one side. One day Maria and I went to Finn’s house, and Rena stood, one hand against the doorframe, looking at us standing on her wide half-round concrete steps encrusted with broken

white shells. Maria smiled so prettily and asked if Finn was home. Rena glanced over her shoulder briefly, as if she might or might not tell us. I could hear Finn's sister, Liz, practising her netball shots out the back, the slap of ball on concrete, the creak of the post and rusty hoop when the ball hit it. Maria is braver than me. Rena would scare me off.

Above his bed, Finn has a poster of Kahlil Gibran's 'On Children', which starts, 'Your children are not your children.' I've seen his mother glare at it as she pokes the black snout of the vacuum cleaner under his bed. She takes it as a personal insult. Which is sensible of her. Rena thinks Turangi and her family is all that's important in the world. She thinks that this is it. She doesn't even try to be pretty. I never saw her try flirting. And flirting is big in the middle classes of Turangi. My parents flirt with other kids' parents and with each other. Sometimes they flirt with old people, or young people, or even someone's dog. Not Rena though. For Rena, everything happens at home.

Rena and Don make a scary husband-and-wife team. Don is Project Manager of the Power Project. At community events, after a few drinks, Don starts to pontificate about some local issue or other. Turning red he slaps the desk or table for emphasis. When we were younger we watched our parents' faces, whether they smiled or nodded or, in the case of my father and his mates, rolled their eyes, to see how we should feel. Dad's reaction always released us from a strange sort of obligation to Don's grown-up and punitive world view. Now I think that Rena and Don are collaborators protecting each other's powerful position. Their kind of anger could bury valleys, darken skies, cause temperatures to drop. As I said, Maria is braver than me.

•

I have finished college. I have finished college and am free. I run home, throw my bag across my bedroom, take off my uniform and pull on cords and a cheesecloth shirt, grab my flute and run to the top of the paddock out the back to play Bartok. Bartok! Poor sheep. Poor silver sky. Poor blue

mountain. The notes fall into the grass like little glass commas, making the poor sheep pause. Things start to feel fluid and exciting. I am in my opportunity now, not just looking forward to it.

Maria grows quieter and we giggle less when she climbs awkwardly out the window, the dark pulling her with her blacker-than-black hair against its great big chest.

Finn has a summer job as a cleaner in the kitchen at the Tokaanu tunnel site. He is philosophical about it, which is maddening to Maria. 'If you weren't doing that,' she asks him, 'what would you do? If you could do *anything* what would you do?'

Maria, Finn and I and a couple of boys from school are sitting outside the fish and chip shop. The sun is harsh above our heads and Finn's white hair is almost too bright to look at. His eyes look like blue clouds in a white sky. 'I wouldn't mind being a draughtsman,' he says, after a while. 'I like drawing and maths and buildings. So I wouldn't mind doing that.'

Old Mrs Jefferies from the street parallel to ours walks past; she holds her handbag tight against her stomach. 'You children on holiday now?' she asks.

We smile and nod and say, 'Yeah.'

She says, 'Goodness me,' as though there is something utterly surprising about that.

'You could be a draughtsman,' Maria says, leaning forward. She wants to leave college early. She wants to go to Wellington, with Finn.

We are sitting on an outside seat meant for old people. A pink cardboard bus ticket is blown, tap-tap, along the footpath. Two men who've finished a shift at the dam have bought fish and chips for lunch. They walk past us clutching their newspaper parcels, and I can smell cold drenched earth and explosives.

'We could go and live in Wellington and you could train to be a draughtsman.'



‘Maria,’ Finn says, touching her fringe (which she has cut the night before with my dressmaking scissors). ‘Why are you in such a hurry to decide everything now? Can’t we just relax for a bit?’

Maria stands up and strikes a pose in her orange shift, hand on hip. ‘Finn, oh Finn,’ she says, ‘Oh fair one, my white warrior’ (we are into researching the meanings of our names), ‘come on an adventure with me. Come with me to the great city of Wellington and hear bands and meet interesting people and suchlike and so forth. Or stay here and be bored and become boring!’ She plunks herself down on his lap.

He laughs.

‘What if Pink Floyd comes to Wellington?’ she pleads.

‘We’ll catch a bus, or borrow a car and go and see them.’

I have been accepted into a music school in London. For weeks she has been watching me prepare to go. I can imagine what that feels like.

‘I’m desperate,’ she says, desperately.

And he is in love with her. So he says he’ll think about it. He says, if they are going away, maybe they should get engaged. Maria says people don’t have to get engaged to go away together these days. He pulls her head against his shoulder. He looks a bit scared, like he is setting out for some far away foreign place and all he’s got in his backpack are condoms, chocolates and a heart on a chain that he hopes she will like.

That night is the first in the festival of Santa Barbara. She is the saint invoked to protect against accidents when working with gunpowder, among other things; she’s revered by those who risk sudden and violent death at work. The Italian tunnellers take her very seriously. Early this morning Santa Barbara was blessed. I watched the men in their white shirts and good trousers lift their faces, their clear, dark eyes to where she nests birdlike in her grotto above the tunnel. At their throats, something else birdlike: the open collars of their shirts, the soft pulse at the pit of the neck, the flutter of hands to forehead, heart, shoulder to shoulder. My own heart seemed to beat there, in that small pit. At a distance from the tunnellers are

the engineers, the Ministry of Works men and our Prime Minister with his strange, squat face, for whom the podium was built at the mouth of the tunnel. Such a small, ugly man. A duck among swans. We looked past him as he made his speech, into the darkness behind him.

At the camp, sheep have been gutted and butterflied, and rest one against another over a wide fire, the little neck stumps arching back as though trying to get clear of the smoke. In a huge pot on another fire the dark red putanesca releases its anchovy notes.

I head over to Maria and Finn who are edging away from Don who is drinking at one of the makeshift bars. Don is blathering on as usual; he has an engineer backed up against the bar.

‘They hired helicopters to get this lot.’ He gestures to the venison and pig sizzling and dripping. ‘They think nothing of hiring helicopters and bagging themselves some wildlife. Can’t get it like this in Italy.’

Beside the fire with the pyramid of sheep, Jeanie is chatting to one of the tunnellers. His mouth and hers are white when they smile, the rest is shadowy because night is closing in. She lifts her arms to her hair (they call her Little Mama because of her red hair, like Mum’s) then touches the man, one hand on each shoulder, a slice of bare, white flesh around her middle where her jumper lifts above her skirt. I shiver at the whiteness of it. She’s like a puppy, too eager and always underfoot. I turn back to hear Don’s gruesome description of the slaughter of one of the pigs. Finn looks bored and Maria smiles politely. We all know the high-pitched, two-note screech of a pig in its death throes. Don takes pulls of beer between scenes. The three of us sidle away from the bar and Don and his moist conversation, and it seems suddenly quiet.

It isn’t. Some of the men and their families are singing. Someone is cutting long, red-brown slices of venison from a carcass and shouting its praises. Italian mixes with English and the women laugh. And always, somewhere, is the sharp click of stone against stone. One time, when we

went in a small boat on Lake Taupo, I put my face against the bottom of the boat and heard a kind of clicking. Maybe the whole world clicks.

We sit by a fire. Maria between Finn's legs, resting against him. Me next to a friend from school, a shy boy who, like me, was in the school orchestra. He slips his arm around my shoulders.

Then I feel Jeanie's hand on my arm, its demanding push. 'That guy, Mario?' she giggles and lowers her head.

'What?'

'He wants to take me out.'

'They *all* say that.'

Jeanie looks offended. 'No,' she says, 'he really meant it.'

'If you'd hung on for five minutes he'd have asked you to marry him,' Maria says, deadpan. Finn laughs softly.

'I *would* marry him, if he asked me,' she says, equally softly. 'And go away to Italy with him and never see any of my crappy family again.' She walks away.

'Arrivederci,' I call.

The little slice of bare white flesh comes back to me. We fill up our plates and eat and eat. The fires suck and snap and curve. The mountain at our back flickers blue like TV.

Late that night Dad finds me, finds all his daughters, and drives us home, weaving onto pumice streets that spit and crackle beneath us. In this crunchy dark and into our tired ears, Dad starts talking about those long shifts in the tunnel where sometimes things happened. When it was mostly Italians doing the tunnelling (this is known as *the good old days*), it might be an argument, the glint of a knife in the dark. When the unions stepped in, it was around shorter days and less pay. The Italians wanted their long days and fat pay cheques. When they took on Kiwis, who didn't want to be told – Dad shrugs – there were accidents. He tells us the men like him. The managers know they need him. Don knows he needs him – the prick. He forgets who he is talking to, thinks he is talking to himself. As family we

get to enjoy the full spectrum of Dad's moods and emotions, which as a spectrum is not unlike the country music genre. Sometimes he's restless and yearning, wanting to be off riding the range, sometimes he's funny and expansive and everyone wants to sing along and other times he wants to gun down the man who named him Sue, if you get what I mean. He rattles into our driveway and stops suddenly. We exaggerate with wobbly heads and lurching bodies and tell Dad he is drunk and nearly killed us. He says he'll try harder next time, but holds the door open for us as we tumble out. A gentleman. A gentle man who wants to live three lives, not just the one.

Between leaving college and leaving Turangi there are some long and uneventful days and evenings that I fill, whenever I can, by driving. I love driving. I sit on the cold, leather seat of the Humber, stretch my arm along the seat and twist round to back down the drive. I have told Mum and Dad that I'm visiting a friend, but I'm not. I drive to the bus station just to watch people arrive and leave on the night bus. Behind the station, trees wave raggy arms in the dark. The ticket guy looks grey and heavy like the big sighing buses. Passengers disembark, some wrapped in long coats, someone with a wide-brimmed hat in their hand, a couple holding hands and a frowning woman hugging herself for lack of a better alternative. The cold creeps through the soles of my shoes and inches up my shins.

Back home, Mum, Dad and someone from Dad's work are playing poker around the green card table, Dad and his friend with fat glasses of red wine beside them, Mum with a smaller glass of white. While they play, I take my flute to pieces and run a soft rag through its parts. Maria picks at the hems of her jeans with their raw edges, which is how she likes them, not sewn, not turned up, but furry with threads. Jeanie lies on the floor building a house out of cards. Her little, chubby fingers with the bitten-down nails add a card quickly then pull back, spreading and holding like crabs on attack. I suppose this is an average night for us.

Just before I leave I am allowed to drive Dad up to work where he's needed to sort out some sort of stoush between the men. It feels like a

going-away present. I ease the car out of the drive, off the concrete and onto the pumice road. It's a dull day and yellow clouds circle the hills. Dad sits beside me with his hands on his knees. He is, for once, not saying anything, and as the silence grows I start to feel I should apologise for growing up. I turn off onto a steep narrow road and curve slowly upwards. Dad starts to whistle through his teeth. I stop behind a truck with an empty tray, pull my jacket close around me and walk with Dad towards the tunnel entrance, my shoes sucking mud.

The men on Dad's shift are sitting in a semicircle in the makeshift kitchen eating big plates of the Italian pasta, tomatoes, olive oil and tuna that they are allowed to import as long as they cook and eat it at the camp. The men's faces are ashy from the dynamite, their lips glossy with sauce. One or two look up from their plates to smile and wink at me. As soon as Dad sees this his face tightens. 'Wait for me at the car,' he says quietly. I look down at his boots, mud-caked and laced hard against his ankles. He puts a hand on my shoulder and turns me around. I glance back and some of the men are looking at me, forks paused in mid-scoop. Their white faces and glossy lips make them look like boys and ghosts together. I feel embarrassed to see them like this. Dad sits down with the men and speaks to them in Italian and I see how they listen to my father, how they respect him. In the car I wind up the windows against the smell of brackish water and dynamite.

Back home I go to my room and there on the bed is the long, written list of things to do and to pack before I go. It curls up at either end and looks more important than it is, like some kind of papal decree. Without taking off my jacket, I run out of the house, down the drive and back towards the college grounds with its empty classrooms. Before I get there I hear a game of softball on the go. I run faster, hoping I'm not too late to join in.

•

The next day everything has changed and not parents or sisters or friends can restore what is lost. I am standing at the lounge window when the sun

lights the crest of the hill beyond the garden, leaving the slope dark. I see a stone fly through the air and hit Jeanie's pony, Pebbles, on the shoulder. I am lost enough to know who threw the stone. And sure enough, there is Jeanie at the top of the hill clutching her mouth. Pebbles arches around, her front legs off the ground, raking the air, mane lifting and edged with sun. My breath mists the glass. Pebbles gallops towards the house, gathers her small, muscly body and jumps the fence into our backyard. She comes straight at the sliding doors of the rumpus room, next to the lounge where I am. By some trick of light, Pebbles can't see the glass but only a dark space, a refuge. I feel the window shiver to the highest notes of shattering glass and a terrified scream that is almost human. It could be me. I am screaming. And Mum is already running into the room yelling, 'What! What!' as though I caused this. We stare at one another as the horrible thudding and smashing continues. Then it's quiet, just Pebbles' breath in the next room shuddering as though it were bumping over corrugated iron.

Jeanie runs up the drive and slumps down beside Pebbles, one hand on her shaking neck. Pebbles' legs are crossed elegantly at the ankle, ladylike, while long tears on her shoulder, stomach and rump bleed and bleed onto the chipboard floor. Her white teeth are bared as though she's smiling. I faint and when I come round Mum is kneeling beside me. She helps me to bed. A friend from school who works part-time slaughtering horses at the pet food factory told me how he cupped his hand over the pulsing muzzle of the horse before he finished it off, that this comforted the horse before he shot it with the stun gun. I think about him talking softly to the trembling animal and then the shot and everything about the horse stopping suddenly, as though concrete had hardened inside it. And then the ballerina collapse of legs and back and long neck. And that's what comes to me as Mum quietly shuts my bedroom door and leaves me to recover. I think how that is better than fleeing your fear through long shards of glass, and dying in a family room.

Dad's friends help move the corpse with its high-drama smile in the slow journey across the sparkling floor. I stand at the edge of my bedroom window and watch. Outside, they use a small front-end loader to lift her high enough to be shuffled into the back of someone's truck. There is the unrhythmic sound of her hitting the tray, the offbeat of her hooves, the thud of the head, the thump of body.

Jeanie runs away from home, but lacking Maria's cunning she leaves a trail. Dad brings her back. She sits next to him in the big soft front seat of the Humber, her head down and parka hood up. Dad drives with one hand on the wheel and one arm around her shoulders. 'She was sitting at the bus stop,' he whispers to Mum, and waits for a moment, expecting a response. But Mum is tight-lipped and pale and turns away without replying. My father stands there for a moment, confused. All night we hear the pocking and snapping of the tarpaulin pinned up over the broken sliding doors in the rumpus room. Mum tries to mend things by cooking one of Dad's favourite northern Italian meals with ingredients Dad has regularly smuggled down from the campsite. It covers the smell of outside. My mother doesn't want to know what has changed and why.

The days click together like lego blocks, making a bridge towards my leaving day. Finally, we are heading, the whole miserable lot of us, to Wellington airport. After the Desert Road we stop at a cafe in Waiouru. Dad is outside, pacing. Out of patience with our silence. Confused by it, I imagine. The rest of us sit at a Formica-topped table with our drinks. I'm glad to be going, but no longer excited. Jeanie sucks on a milkshake – staring down into its brown depths. Across the road, sun throws a yellow service station into relief, like a stage set. Maria is pale and resentful. She didn't want to come. I try to stop my fingers trembling on the tabletop; I press them hard around the teacup then tuck them inside my pockets. Last night, Maria stood at the doorway to our room and just looked at me. The place beside her, where Finn wasn't, made me dizzy and scared. It was so empty, so left. Mum said I wasn't allowed to tell Maria what had happened

and why Finn had gone. I can only imagine how she felt with everything, everyone, slipping away at once. I shouldn't have to lie to my sister.

On the plane to Christchurch, changes take place. I sit in the plasticky seat, click my seatbelt shut, put my fake leather handbag on my lap and begin to change. I tell myself that when I get on the plane to Los Angeles and then London I will be completely different. On the plane to Los Angeles I pull the courtesy blanket around me, to hide my transformation.

•

Some days I miss class at the conservatorium because I have that dream, the one where all the windows are breaking and all the doors are slamming. I'm frightened all the time but no one guesses. My sisters write to me: their thin blue letters drift through the slot in the door like snow. I snatch them up before they melt and disappear. I hope they are okay. I think they are okay. Out of Mum's orbit, I write a letter to Maria and tell her what happened. Then I work on forgetting.

I get a boyfriend straight away, well almost straight away, but he finds god. God. He, not God, has an electric-blue Mohawk, but he wears track shoes instead of boots so isn't the real deal punk. He has a remote-control boat that he sails on a lake at a park by his place. He crouches down at the water's edge and hunches, his thin ripped tee shirt showing the bumps of his vertebrae, fingering the remote. I hope it wasn't something I said that made him run from me into the arms of God, but he joins one of those Pentecostal churches. He last sees me slipping out of the church aisle and out of his life. Not for me the blind lurch of faith or the open-mouthed attention to the puffy preacher-man. I only went with him to the church that one time because he was wearing a shirt. A white shirt. It had a too-big collar that stood out, a bit pathetically, around his neck, as though his body had a halo but his head wasn't good enough yet.

After this I bring a lot of men to my bed. What amazes me is the variety – their different bodies, smells and textures of skin. Men who are confident in their bodies stride around my room, cocks swinging, while the uneasy



ones seem to perch on their own hiked-up shoulders. Then there is the odd compelling boy whose pale and beaky head juts over his body like a gargoyle over a church door. These are the ones I could love.

I don't have time for love. Not with my music and my devotion to men. To fall in love there has to be a moment where you are comfortable to be across the table from someone, in your dressing gown or, even more shockingly, in the soft-collar, baggy, pungent suit called pyjamas. I have never, ever felt comfortable in halfway-house clothes. I also don't like the idea of lounge pants, a house dress or a smoking jacket. I prefer to be naked or dressed. That's why I like London: there's not much that's cosy about it – it's either naked or dressed. You know what you're getting. I like that sort of formality.

## NOW

Shaking, I leave the table, pull on my coat and walk quietly to the back door.

Jeanie calls after me, 'Tess?'

I shut the door behind me and sit on the steps of the house, listening. There is a small, cold wind that bends the grass around the horse float and rattles the top, thin branches of the pines. In the distance, beyond paddocks and pines and foothills, are the mountains. Tonight, on their tops, droplets of water caught in the crevices of rocks will freeze. When they freeze, the droplets will expand and send out slivers of ice, like spiders. These spiders will lift loose dirt and stone with their little legs. In the morning, when the ice melts, tonnes of fragments will be washed down the mountain inside trickles of icy water. Eventually the trickles will run into creeks that run into the rivers whose names I know by heart.

Here's another thing I know by heart. I usually only tell this story to myself, and I tell it slowly, with something under my belt. A drink, a joint, a joke. The day it happened, Finn had been helping Dad chop wood. Well, Dad chopped and Finn stacked. Dad's strength across his shoulders, Finn's strength through his whole body. It was cold and Finn's face had an open, fluid look. Jeanie climbed up the wood stack under the sloping roof of the wood shed. Dad told Jeanie to get down, but she didn't, and they became a team. Dad chopped, Finn threw the chopped logs, Jeanie caught them, all golden and sappy, and piled them back against the shed wall. Even though there wasn't room to stand up, she caught the logs cleanly and stacked them quickly. Sometimes Finn would stop and let Dad chop on for a while, waiting for the wood to gather around him. One time while Finn stood waiting, Maria, in tight blue trousers, a man's shirt and sandals, crept up behind him and put her arms around his waist. He twisted back and pulled her in beside him. He put one hand against her shining black hair.

'Afternoon tea!' I called, from the back door of the house.

We sat around the oblong, white-painted table with the floral cloth diamond-wise across it.

'Teresa made the cake,' Mum told Finn, pushing the walnut and apple cake towards him.

'Don't eat it!' Maria and Jeanie said together. It was corny, how happy we seemed. I watched Maria watch Finn. Saw them smile at each other. They were all shiny planes, jaw lines, talking mouths, arms and sleeves and buzz buzz buzz under their skin. All of us facing one another around the table. I felt a quick, terrifying unravelling inside me at the thought of going away.

I left to go to a music lesson. I walked to my teacher Mrs Shaw's house swinging my flute case and with my cardigan tied around my waist – a real geeky girl happily going about her business. When I first started lessons in Mrs Shaw's tidy music room with the busts of Mozart, Bach and Haydn

lined up on her piano, I was embarrassed at the rude noises I made when I missed a note.

‘It doesn’t matter,’ Mrs Shaw smiled encouragingly, ‘make it fart!’

So together we got past that awkward early time of farts and burps. I was impressed that a grown woman, who was moved to tears by music, would encourage me to make farting noises. She said if I was going to make a mistake I should make it a good one.

Don was leaning on the gate. He was a big man, easy in his body. He rested on his forearms. His big smile, his direct look could not be ignored. I could not pretend that I hadn’t seen him. I was surprised and confused by his attention. He had maybe just come back from a meeting. He had on a white shirt, the tie in his pocket, and he had some papers in his hand. He invited me in and although I didn’t want to, and would have given a lot not to, I was too shy to say no. Blazing with embarrassment I walked around the gate. He said he had something to show me, something that would amuse me, in the garden shed. Before following him I put my flute on the front step of the house. Just in case, I thought. In case of what, I didn’t know. But then maybe I did. Because even young girls somehow know that this might be the way it goes. When I got to the door of the shed he put the flat of his hand against the small of my back and pushed me in. He had thought it out.

I had been walking along, full of notes and music, lilt and cadence. All purpose, all sensitivity, all *conservatorium*. Oh, the promise of that word. That’s what you realise when it’s gone. What store you placed on one lovely, essentially good and mostly innocent thing – the opening out of your future.

•

At the table that day, Jeanie saw Finn slip his hand under Maria’s hair and touch her neck. I saw her watching, I saw her feel them shift – away from her, from us, and towards their separate life. That’s why she got up, too, and

ran outside when I left the table to get ready for my music lesson, and was swinging on the gate as I left. That's why she was still swinging there when Finn walked past to go home. That's why she watched him round the corner and then followed him from a distance. She saw that things were changing. So she followed Finn home and saw what she saw.

She watched Finn walk to his own street. Saw him stand a moment by his gate, as though afraid to go in. She crouched down behind the fence with the wintry daisy bushes pressing through it and watched him stop and stare at something on the steps leading to the front door. Saw him stand there, head bent. Watched him change direction and walk around the side of the house to the shed. He stood there for a moment. Then he opened the shed door, and she saw past Finn's back to where Don was pressing me against the garden bench (bailing twine, a tidy row of tools, glue, slivers of wood, an old, stained piece of towel). My blue and white shift rucked up. Bright pink knickers loosely hooked around one ankle, his meaty body pumping between those shamefully parted white legs. Saw my face, my head wobbling on my neck. Finn glancing back to yell, 'Go away. Go home, Jeanie.' He was making deep, coughing sobs. He thumped two hands down on his father's shoulders and pulled him back. Like separating dogs.

She didn't go home. She sat on the footpath against the fence with the scrappy daisy bushes and I ran past her without stopping. She looked such a little girl, holding onto the fence with one hand, in a crouch, like she was taking a pee on the footpath. Most kids would have run away. She sat there, her throat coated with pumice dust, her hair clinging to the back of her neck.

I ran past the squat houses with their fragrant chimney smoke. I ran down the main road getting colder and colder. It was dusk and the mountains were doing their fragile thing. Turning into blown glass. You could flick them lightly with your finger and they would shatter.

I go back inside and Jeanie and Maria pretend I never left the table. Maria is telling Jeanie about her boys. With her right hand, Jeanie is ticking her thumb along her fingers, as though counting something. But she is doing it over and over again and Maria is ignoring this nervous action and going into elaborate detail about her oldest son's girlfriend. Jeanie's freckles are darker than they used to be, and there is a spray of wrinkles around her eyes. Hers is the face of someone who spends most of her days outside. She's turned into one of those women who, when they put on a dress to go out, look vulnerable, kind of skinned.

Maria finishes her anecdote about the *lovely young woman* who is dating her son, and seems to tire. She runs one shaky hand through her hair. Jeanie turns to me and asks about my work. I start telling her about my orchestras and how we played in Berlin just before I came over, but Maria breaks in, saying all in a rush that maybe it should have been talked about – that things may have been better if the facts were out in the open.

Jeanie's lips tighten, she leaves the table, seems to be going to storm outside, but stops in the doorway, looking back at us. 'Of course it wouldn't have been better if it were all *out in the open*,' she snaps.

I can't help but admire her; she looks so tough, so definite.

'Can you imagine?'

The wind picks up, Jeanie pushes the door shut and the house creaks.

'Dad would have murdered Don.'

She is not speaking figuratively, so we acknowledge this truth with silence.

'And Tess, you would *never* have got to London. And Maria ...'

Maria's face is tight, so tight. I can only imagine the words she is not saying.

There is a long, complicated silence. I don't feel any sort of confidence about what should have been done. I agree and disagree with both of them.

'I did tell Mum about it,' I say, finally.

Maria knows this already, but her eyes fill with tears. For me, I think, and want to hug her.

‘She kept it quiet. She thought it was best for me that I was going away.’

Jeanie, who has just sat down, gets up and walks to the kitchen bench and looks out of the small grubby window. ‘I told Mum, too,’ she says. ‘And that’s the response I got: keep it quiet. That’s why I had to go. It was just ... like it hadn’t happened.’

Another flat-out silence.

Jeanie leans against the dark wood kitchen unit with its grubby curtains lumpy over pots and oven trays. ‘I found Finn through a friend.’ Jeanie looks at Maria who has her fist pressed against her mouth. ‘He was in a flat in Wellington. I hitched ... and there he was, drinking whisky and smoking pot and listening to The Wall.’

Long complicated silence.

‘I learned all the words.’ Jeanie lifted her hair with one hand, baring her startlingly white neck. ‘We got drunk and stoned and listened to music in his bedroom.’

‘Very cutting-edge,’ I say.

‘It was, for the time.’ Jeanie gives a quick, hard laugh but flushes miserably.

I think about how young she was. What was he thinking?

We finish our coffee in silence then the three of us wander outside, ignoring the Finn-shaped coat hanging by the door. We stand at the edge of the horse paddock. Jeanie leans forward and calls in a soft, coaxing voice to the oldest-looking horse. ‘Jazz,’ she calls. Jazz looks up, swings her head towards us. We rest our arms lightly against the top wire of the fence. In the chill breeze Jeanie’s jacket billows and snaps, a noise that always sounds to me like the tarpaulin snapping and sucking over the broken doors, which brings back the gritty sound of bloody shards loose in their rubber casings.

‘He should be in Rangipo prison making pencil cases out of matches,’ Jeanie says quietly, ‘for what he did to you, Tess.’

‘To our whole family,’ Maria adds, an unfamiliar bitter tone in her voice.

‘And to Finn,’ Jeanie says.

Silence again: it seems there’s no more to be said. I feel a real, sorrowing pity for Jeanie. Her life seems so ... punishing. She turns her back to the breeze and rolls a neat little cigarette. She lights it and turns back to the fence. ‘Jazz,’ she calls, ‘hey, Jazz, come and meet the aunties.’

We laugh as Jazz shakes her head and turns away.

Then suddenly Maria is crying. ‘I shouldn’t have come here.’ She turns to me, ‘This was a bad idea.’

Jeanie breathes out hard, almost in relief, as if she’s been expecting this and is relieved now it is here. ‘Oh Maria,’ she snaps. ‘Still wanting your fantasy life?’

‘No,’ she says quietly, ‘but you might have contacted me. Talked to me.’

‘We weren’t given the option of telling the truth. There was *too much at stake*.’

‘Tess did. Tess told me the truth. Eventually.’

I feel things go into slow motion.

Jeanie treads her cigarette butt into the dirt. ‘I was told not to tell you what had happened. Maria should be protected, apparently. Fuck knows why.’

‘Yeah, it was real fun being the one who didn’t know anything. Real fun.’

‘It’s past. We can’t change it,’ Jeanie says.

‘How tidy,’ Maria says, ‘how resolved.’ She flicks one hand into the air in a very Italian gesture.

‘No, Maria,’ Jeanie says, ‘nothing is *resolved*. I saw it, you know. I was there and I saw it. And you don’t forget. And I can’t ... I couldn’t get anyone to do anything. I couldn’t get Mum to *do anything*.’ She starts to jog back to the house, her face splotchy and red and distressed. ‘Sorry, Tess,’ she calls back. ‘I’m so sorry.’

Maria catches her breath. ‘Tess, we shouldn’t have ...’ She looks at me. ‘Are you okay?’

I feel like a little girl with her skirt batting against her legs. Like I have been standing on the dusty road for ages, waiting for them to get here.

Maria and I wait for a long time, maybe twenty minutes. Eventually Jeanie comes out again. We line up against the fence. The horses tear at the grass or huff along one another’s backs. I am standing between Maria and Jeanie. Maria has her hands in her pockets and her head tipped down. Jeanie has one booted foot on the second wire of the fence. She is wearing trousers with pockets in the legs. ‘Well, this is fun,’ she says. She tucks a hank of grey-speckled red hair behind one ear. She wants us to go so she can get on with her odd life. While I am considering this I think of the young Jeanie; I get a vivid picture of her at nine or ten with her dark red hair, not the wispy fuse-wire red of pale and delicate children, but the type of thick red hair that looks impenetrable. I see her running home from the dairy, the pumice road cracked and puffing out into grey dust under her sandals. The woollen fringe on her brown poncho flicks up as she cuts a corner to run diagonally across the road and into our driveway. I have a cold feeling inside me. I see that Jeanie and I have, in some ways, led similar lives. Like people whose health has collapsed we have become most uncompromisingly ourselves. I shift along the fence a bit closer to Jeanie. The fingernails are bitten down on her dry, freckly hands.

‘Well, if it’s all the same to you two, I’m going to pot up some seedlings,’ Jeanie says, stepping back from the fence.

‘No you’re not,’ I say, ‘you’re coming for a drive.’



‘You are *not* thinking of confronting Mum and Dad,’ Maria snapped.

‘No. I’m going back to where it happened. And you two are coming with me.’

We drive to the house that was once the smartest on the street. Inside, Redemption Song is playing and someone is smoking a joint. A thin woman flickers in the doorway and retreats. In her place a beefy man in a wife-beater top lounges, arms crossed, staring us down.

Maria snorts, ‘Songs of freedom, yeah right.’

Jeanie says, ‘Still gang headquarters. Can we go now, please?’

The shed is covered with clematis and honeysuckle and seems to be humming.

We drive away. It’s not resolving, but I do feel pity for all of our young selves: Jeanie squatting down beside the fence as I run past her. Maria at home, not knowing. Finn, facing the brute who is his father. Me. Running.

‘You were going to the conservatorium,’ Maria says gently, ‘and you thought you were the cat’s pyjamas. So annoying.’

‘I thought it was some sort of cryogenics lab.’ Jeanie.

‘Turns out it kind of was.’

We park in the first lay-by on the Desert Road. It’s late afternoon and the mountains are growing delicate and particular. We sit outside in the chill air ‘practising the art of conversation’, as Jeanie says, in this way she has developed of describing awkwardness. A desert-coloured Unimog roars past with a load of firewood on the back.

‘Va army still makin’ itself useful then,’ I say. Old joke.

We glance at each other and smile. Small hard-life smiles. We sit there until purple shadows pour down the mountains and across the tussock land. All of us sit with our legs stretched out and crossed at the ankles, as though we were gathered around a small heater.



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