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CHALLENGING READERS' PERCEPTIONS OF OLDER WOMEN
AND THE CULTURAL NARRATIVE OF AGEISM

A critical and creative thesis presented in
partial fulfilment of the requirements
for the degree of

Master of Creative Writing

Massey University, Manawatu, New Zealand

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2018

Abstract

This Master of Creative Writing research project consists of a collection of short stories and an accompanying exegesis, “Challenging Readers’ Perceptions of Older Women and the Western Cultural Narrative of Ageism”. These works were written to explore how fiction narratives, short stories in particular, are able to portray women in Western society, past the age of fifty, in a way that reflects both the positive and negative aspects of her reality. One intention of my research is to challenge the negative cultural discourses which currently dominate the stereotypical way that younger people especially regard the older woman and her societal role. However, another intention is to challenge the older person’s internalised ageism which they have developed throughout their lives in a society that has perpetuated negative and destructive beliefs of and attitudes towards the older woman.

The exegesis investigates contemporary research conducted by gerontologists, psychologists and cultural activists who expose the damaging effects on the older person and society as a whole, of the cultural narratives that exist around old age. In particular, the research indicates that current narratives have emanated from medical research which defines older age as a time of physical, mental and often emotional decline. The global conversation which began in the last fifty years after Robert Butler first used the term “ageism” in a public forum, identifies the need for change if people are to live through all the life stages with a healthier view of the culminating phases of life. At present, people’s health is compromised because they have been conditioned by society to believe that old age equals frailty, impairment and social isolation. The research reveals one of the most powerful ways of altering negative cultural narratives, is through fiction narratives in which writers imaginatively engage the reader in considering the reality of living to older age.

The creative component further investigates the research in the narrative form of short stories which focus on the older woman or women as the protagonist. By championing the

vitalities, complexities and intelligence of the older woman, I aim to join the global conversation which has begun and is exploring ways to challenge and adapt the societal view of older and old women.

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Acknowledgements

Thank you to Dr Thom Conroy for his relentless inspiration and encouragement while supervising this thesis; to my sons Leo and Harry Allom who have maintained their unwavering belief in me.

**CHALLENGING READERS' PERCEPTIONS OF
OLDER WOMEN
AND THE WESTERN CULTURAL NARRATIVE
OF AGEISM**

Women in the Western world who live beyond fifty will, in varying degrees, confront and be challenged by ageist attitudes and stereotyping within their own families, their communities, their work places and wider society approximately ten years earlier than men. Either through a single event, or through a gradual process of discovery, women realise they are no longer regarded or valued as highly because they have crossed an age threshold. Unlike feminism and racism which have been identified, objected to and addressed for over a century, ageism has only in the last half century been exposed as a societal problem.

Ageism is pernicious because it is socially condoned and even unconsciously by those who are older themselves. As children we are raised to view old age as a time when we withdraw from the mainstream of society and accept we are no longer vital to a nation's health and well-being. Younger generations are rarely challenged to think of old age as anything but a time of asexuality, senility and physical disability and therefore grow to old age having internalised these ageist attitudes and beliefs. Research shows how damaging these pervasive and socially condoned attitudes are to the older person's health, and as the majority of us will grow to old age, it is vital that perceptions of aging and what it means to be old oneself, are challenged from our youth.

Recognising and then living with my own internalised ageism -- and consequently appreciating its potentially debilitating effects on my later years -- provided both the catalyst for researching ageism as a cultural and societal problem and the inspiration for the short stories which form the creative part of this project. Both the critical and creative projects address my research question: what is the potential for fiction, short stories in particular, to challenge and alter ageist attitudes towards women? Specifically the critical project sets out to investigate how the fear of aging has been perpetuated by a cultural discourse which portrays old age as being a time of physical and mental deterioration, without considering the complexities of the older person or the vitalities which they experience. This limiting

cultural discourse which grew from pessimistic medical reporting on research into older age, has created a fear of aging and being old. This fear has created and perpetuated negative societal attitudes towards this stage of life, rather than fostering attitudes which position old age as a phase like all the others, including both negative and positive aspects.

New cultural discourses are emerging in the global academic conversation about aging and my creative project is intended as a contribution to this conversation. The short stories investigate both the negative and positive aspects of what it means to be a woman past the age of fifty and I hope they will challenge and empower the reader to view their older years as a time of possibilities and new learning rather than a time of limitations and isolation.

Two aspects of my own earlier perceptions regarding old age remain vivid. My childhood and teenage mind set regarding growing old was simple: aging was not something that would affect me. I believed I was immune. I also remember both compassion and pity when becoming aware of, and interacting with, “elderly people” -- some of whom were possibly younger than I am today! I still believed, however, that youth and all its physical advantages would be mine forever. Even during my twenties, thirties and forties, I regarded bodily change as positive: facial features became “refined” and “characterful”; curves were “more feminine” and they responded well to exercise. I noted increased physical endurance because of acquired mental perseverance. Even my sexuality seemed enhanced through a personal confidence that came with maturity and self-acceptance. I felt attractive, noticed and relevant, and nothing in the cultural narratives to which I had been exposed prepared me for the inevitable: crossing the threshold to the shortest end of the life span and facing my own mortality.

While menopause and turning fifty were neither traumatic nor memorable, the shock of entering a life phase for which I was ill-prepared was exacerbated when I stopped dying

my hair, and, therefore, pretending to be younger than I was. Grey hair appeared to equal old age, and old age, as a woman, meant joining “the invisible generation” (Mantel in King, xi). I had walked through a portal into an unfamiliar world, through which there was no return. I became marginalized by, or invisible to, those in their early forties and younger. Simultaneously, my presence became more apparent to those of a similar or older age bracket, as if there was a tacit agreement that said, *you’re now one of us*. In spite of being *one of them* however, I was left alone to navigate my own route through a maze of later life anomalies.

My interest in writing short fiction to address the challenges of becoming an older woman in a society which favours the younger woman, came about after my youngest son left home for university study. Having been a solo parent since my children were five years old and under and totally devoted to parenthood knowing it was the single most important work of my lifetime, I felt bereft and obsolete. Even though I had a career, I no longer felt my life had purpose. I had no idea how to fill the void, there was no one at home to notice I existed, and I was becoming regarded as a grandmother figure by the students I taught. Moreover, colleagues my age were increasingly verbalising ageist attitudes. This was an alien world in which I felt I had no part. I had a dire need to regain my previous view of life in which living was an adventure, and I decided to explore writing my favourite type of fiction, short stories.

The adventure I chose to embark on to write short stories was the Master of Creative Writing. During the compulsory research paper, I read academic conversations which lead me to research my growing interest in ageist attitudes towards women. I came to understand that compared to the number of people writing short fiction, only a relatively small number of authors were writing the older woman as the protagonist. I was drawn to depicting the older woman in a way I believe to be accurate. While we are challenged by this time of life, we

want to be recognised as no different to our younger versions. We resist that an aging exterior is defining us and our role in society; and we continue to pursue careers, a place in society, love, affection and acceptance, as much as anyone else. Through writing us as I believe we truly are, I wanted to contribute to an emerging conversation which espouses the benefits to society when it adopts a realistic and life enhancing view of what it means to be an older woman.

In 1969, American born physician, psychiatrist and gerontologist Robert Butler coined the term “ageism”. His disgust at the treatment of the elderly began in medical school and he turned his ire into “political activism on behalf of the old (and the young)” (Achenbaum, 10). In 2008, at the end of a lifetime committed to combating ageism, Butler wrote:

...we continue to have embedded in our culture a fear of growing old, manifest by negative stereotypes and language that belittles the very nature of growing old, its complexities and tremendous variability (Butler in Achenbaum 11).

The “culture of fear of growing old” continues to permeate the Western culture, and the purpose of this study is twofold. Firstly I intend to examine how this “fear” results in women in particular accepting that aging is a negative experience, and internalising the “language that belittles” to their detriment. Secondly, I intend to examine and illuminate how the language of fiction, short stories in particular, may offer readers alternative ways for thinking about and understanding what it means for people to grow into old age and “its complexities and tremendous variability”. Fictional stories, through engaging readers in imaginative possibilities for aging women, may challenge this “fear of growing old” and help to counter

readers' negative beliefs and stereotyping of, and attitudes towards women in their fifties, sixties, seventies and beyond.

A review of pertinent non-fiction literature in which gerontologists, psychologists and cultural activists theorise on ageism's psychological, cultural and social impact on women reveals an emerging understanding of the complexities of aging. This new way of considering aging has the potential to beneficially alter the way people in the Western world are socialised to view the older woman, and improve the experience of older women and for society overall. There is also an emerging realisation by those involved in this academic conversation that one of the most engaging ways to challenge the derogatory language about aging is through fiction.

In my review of fiction literature below, firstly I examine how contemporary writers engage and challenge the readers' stereotyping of older women. In three short stories, "Mrs Turner Cutting the Grass" by Carol Shields, Lucia Berlin's "Bluebonnets" and Tessa Duder's "Vanessa", the protagonists are older women who are viewed negatively or in a stereotypical manner by younger characters. The main characters are portrayed as having a similar or in some instances an even greater zest for life than the younger ones who mock or challenge them. They are also portrayed as having an understanding of what is important in life in contrast to the youthful characters who seem superficial in comparison. Secondly I will discuss the contribution of my own short stories to this growing conversation. In my short fiction I aim to restore dignity to older women and portray them as empowered, intellectually complex, and sexually thriving people who approach life with the same sense of anticipation, apprehension and lust for living as they did when younger.

Ideas for this thesis evolved from two sources. First, I was influenced by my own experience of being treated differently and becoming increasingly more invisible as my fifties turned into my sixties. The second source was the research of Sally Chivers, whose *From*

Old Woman to Older Women: Contemporary Culture and Women's Narratives posits that “narrative fiction can encourage a re-imagining of social problems such as ubiquitous negative conceptions of late life” (99). In her work, Chivers explores “the possibilities that an interaction between text and reader can help to construct new narratives and new theories of aging.” (xxxix) While Chivers focuses mostly on the depiction of older women in novels, she concludes by suggesting other avenues of research which would “provide especially rich examinations of literary depictions of old age” that includes a “study of aging sexuality [which] could be particularly fruitful” (100). Chivers expresses a “hope ... that people will cease to invest in the binary opposition between youth and old age” and a desire that her study would encourage “reinterpretations so that [the adjective] *old* does not have to denote solely incapacity, frailty, decline, death, or dependence.” (98) The short stories in the creative element of my thesis explore the varied experiences of the older female protagonist. It is my hope that this work will contribute to this dialogue for the benefit of women across the age spectrum.

Ageism involves stereotyping and discriminating against people because of their age. While research on racism became prevalent in the early twentieth century and sexism research found its stride in the mid and late 1990s, ageism has been “under-investigated throughout the decades” (Nelson, 431). This fact seems incomprehensible as, unlike racism or sexism which involves specific groups, most people expect to live to their old age. In 2009, a year after Butler wrote that “we continue to have embedded in our [Western] culture a fear of growing old, manifest by negative stereotypes and language that belittles the very nature of growing old” (Butler in Achenbaum 2), Todd Nelson noted:

Although research on ageism is fairly nascent ... [it] is just hitting its stride and it could not be more timely. The baby-boomers have just begun to retire ... [and] that will greatly change the composition and look of our population ...

the number of people over 65 will double ... [and] researchers can bring to bear their skills in addressing the pervasive, pernicious and institutionalized form of prejudice to which we all will be subjected ... and specific ways to reduce or eliminate it. In so doing, such ageism research will enhance the quality of life for all older adults, present and future. (2009, 437).

Three years later, North & Fiske wrote about the “recent rise of research on the benefits of getting older” and noted that “this research has [also] begun to focus on ways to combat ageism’s negative effects” (984).

For women, who experience demarcation because of age nearly a decade earlier than men (Gullette 2011, 4) -- and who are often regarded as having little “social value” (Chivers 38) aside from as carers of grandchildren -- a combative approach to recognising and overcoming ageism is crucial. For most women, the first experience of age discrimination is likely to be shocking, as most people have either not heard of ageism or know the concept only as an indistinct idea (Palmore, Branch, Harris 2005, 332). Nelson suggests the prime reason that people are aware of sexism and racism and yet remain unaware of ageism is grounded in the fact that the latter form of discrimination has become part of the fabric of society (2009, 431), and is “one of the most socially condoned, institutionalized forms of prejudice in the world” (2002, ix). It is usually not until we reach old age ourselves that we begin to recognise how accepted and cankerous ageism is in our culture. Even in older age, we may discover people in our cohort who are unaware of the ageist attitudes they have accepted as fact and applied to their own lives. As all of us who reach older age will suffer this form of prejudice and discrimination, it is critical to understand the effects of ageism on our identity. Researchers have found that older people who experience ageism are more likely to suffer “serious [cognitive] impairments in the quality of life ... an increase in [physical] health problems ... and shorter longevity...” (Bodner 1009). Women, who will be

subjected to ageism so much younger than men, seem therefore to be particularly vulnerable, cognitively, physically and socially.

As a person's identity is dependent on our social groups and spheres (Laceulle & Baars, 36), the way older women perceive themselves, their "self-narratives", is directly related to the amount of "room provided by the cultural narratives about the group" to which they belong (36). If the cultural narratives about older women are limiting, and even toxic, the necessity therefore seems to be in "[seeking] cultural depictions that embrace and contribute to the complexity of old age" yet which also recognise "that physical changes [do] cause physical, social and emotional pain" (Chivers xxv-xxvi). For females especially, these changes in "cultural depictions" need to commence at a young age and, across the life span, become increasingly expansive and accommodating of women's value to society.

Until I began to research ageism, I did not understand why so few women of my age group seemed able or prepared to discuss the complexities of aging and ageism in relation to themselves. As Butler stated in 2008, "we continue to have embedded in our culture a fear of growing old" and on top of this "fear", research suggests it "may... be easier for individuals to not acknowledge that they have been designated, through ageist acts, as members of a stigmatized group: the old." (Levy 578). During a life time of socialisation, individuals are bombarded by the beauty standards of youth in magazines, on the catwalk, on the screen, and in literature. Our patriarchal society "[constructs] ... the female identity through continuous gaze and visible display" and this "identity" is the antithesis to the "older women's state of invisibility" (Velcic, 31). For women to acknowledge -- let alone become activists against their invisibility -- means running the risk of being further marginalized by the younger group. Older women are frequently stereotyped by younger women as "overemotional and slightly crazy... or dominating and difficult" (MacDonald with Rich, 127). Younger women do not identify with older women and their issues and view them much the same way as men

– “women who used to be women but aren’t any more” (122). As Levy suggests, there will be less conflict for older women if they feign indifference to age discrimination or avoid acknowledging their stigmatization by the younger group (578). The desire for older women to make life less complicated, rather than adding to its complexities, likely explains the apparent reluctance of older women to openly discuss the challenges of later life. By talking about becoming older women, they are acknowledging their membership of another sisterhood, one in which they are seen as “women who used to be women”. To become activists because of a desire to improve the quality of their older years further increases the risk and degree of ostracism.

In my own life, the challenge of stepping through that portal, leading from my familiar “identity” into an as yet unestablished identity, was compounded by the fact that my inner self felt no older than thirty-something. I was alienated by the younger members of society, though that is where I had been acclimatized to belong, and as a result, I felt an alien in the company of older women, so many of whom appeared to have accepted that older age came with unavoidable limitations. Research indicates that after a lifetime of being exposed to our culture’s age discrimination, older people do unconsciously internalise the age stereotyping (Levy 579). Experiences from my own life demonstrated this trend – the internalisation of stereotypes. For instance, a female work colleague of my age asked on a Friday afternoon if I was “going home to put my feet up?” When I replied in the negative, I had a university work deadline to meet, she suggested that at our age, it was “time to start taking things easy”. Another colleague, a woman in her early fifties, asked me why “at my time in life” I was changing employment. She seemed nonplussed that after nine years I needed a change and answered with, “I thought you’d stay put till you retired.” Neither of these women seemed to understand a need for a challenge and self-development into later life. In both colleagues’ words were the evidence of the internalised, “socially-condoned

nature of ageism, [which causes] it to be overlooked altogether as a form of prejudice” (Nelson & Palmore, in North & Fiske 1982). My colleagues saw themselves and me as needing to do less rather than continuing to face life’s adventures.

That portal into older age had been my entrance into territory where my cohort also became my enemy. The tacit agreement that made me *one of them*, also meant I needed to *behave like them*. Older people, older women especially, unconsciously stereotype each other because of age, a type of ageism Levy calls “implicit” (578). When older people then unknowingly turn “implicit ageism” inward, this can be damaging to a person’s cognitive, physical and emotional health (Levy 579). As it is probable that “95% [of older people participate] in “implicit ageism” (Banaji qtd in Levy 578), there seems little wonder that so many in my new sisterhood were unaware of their own self-limiting and ageist ideas, and that I did not feel a sense of identity in or belonging to the society of older women.

Out of the growing need to reconstruct a sense of identity and belonging, I discovered Social Identity Theory (SIT). According to SIT, people create a group identity from only a few indicators and then form prejudices which champion the group to which they belong (Tajfel qtd in Bodner 1005). In the field of social psychology, SIT helps us to understand some of the reasons behind ageism. According to Tajfel, “the group identity that participants formed was also part of their own self-identity”. Therefore “individuals [are] motivated to promote their own group...” (qtd in Bodner 1005). SIT theory suggests that young people assess their own group as having more positive characteristics than the older group and vice versa (Kite & Wagner qtd in Bodner, 1005). Using SIT theory to contextualise the attitudes of my colleagues, I conclude that their implicit ageism suggests they belong to the “ingroup” (Bodner, 1005). In turn, their opinions question the desire to tackle tasks perceived to be relevant to a different age group. SIT also suggests my own internalised ageist tendencies. Bodner explains that if a person belongs to a group that is seen as having a lower status than

another group, that person will engage in one or more strategies to maintain a positive and strong “self-identity” (1005). The strategy I adopted in order to preserve a positive self-identity, for instance, was to “[dis-identify]” with my “ingroup” and distance myself “by perceiving other older persons as a negative outgroup” (1005-1006). In the examples of my colleagues’ comments about my need to relax on the weekend, was the implication that I needed to join the “ingroup”, rather than valuing choices that would make my group identity different to theirs. As putting my feet up and taking it easy are anathema to me, I could not identify with the socially accepted ways of my “ingroup” and yet I was marginalized by the “outgroup” of which I had been a member for thirty to forty years and therefore identified with most naturally. I realized there must be many women whose experience of older age is exacerbated by this disinclination to accept the mores of their new “ingroup”. However, I began to ask myself, where are the narratives that expose this social identity crisis and that allow women to feel they belong to a group that feels disenfranchised?

After a lifetime of socialization in Western culture that idolizes youth and beauty, why should I be astonished that I have internalised our culture’s age bias, prejudices and fear of old age and growing old? Why should I be surprised that my fear of growing old manifests in my own negative stereotyping of the “ingroup” that I am expected to adopt as my own? And is it possible to successfully challenge the “cultural narratives ... that exist about aging” that oppress people and make them passively accept that older age equals irreparable dwindling mental and physical health (Laceulle & Baars, 36)? Women’s and age studies scholar and activist, Margaret Morganroth Gullette, contends in *Aged by Culture* (2004) that “Our age narratives become our virtual realities.” She suggests the narratives we live with become the lens through which we see ourselves and our world and ultimately determine the quality of life we experience, including how amenable we are to growing older. Gullette states that when cultural narratives of aging focus on “decline”, these stories “[tinge]

our expectations of the future (sensations, rewards, status, power, voice) with peril ... [and] tends to stain our experiences, our views of others, our explanatory systems, and then our retrospective judgments". (2004, 11). Yet how do we counter the Western cultural discourse which views older age as an inferior stage of life?

In *Aged by Culture* (2004) and *Agewise* (2011), Gullette creates a sense of urgency about the "crisis" of "ageism" (17) and calls for activism and revolution in the United States. Her words, however, could be applied to any Western culture in which ageism limits lives. She writes:

Anti-ageism needs a self-conscious popular movement behind it, a coalition of the concerned... a joint war against the regimes of decline [which] could prove heartening... The work laid out for people of goodwill is immense: raising ageism consciousness, cleansing subtle ageist stains from our own hearts and minds ... [and by] Coalescing into collective anti-ageist activism, we can learn to name the enemies ... [make] a progressive revolution in our society's mental imagination of the life course... provide a responsible model for the new longevity for the rest of the global twenty-first century (2011, 16-17).

Gullette suggests a "collective anti-ageist activism" could be guided by those who specialise in age studies, scholars who believe that all age groups are mutually joined and who are therefore committed to improving the quality of life for everyone across the life span and in all human domains (16). As the scourges of racism and sexism were improved through activism, history suggests such forceful action is necessary.

As well as challenging politicians, economists, physicians, lawyers and civic responsibility to take up the cause of "anti-ageism", Gullette calls for it to be "fought imaginatively through the illuminations of our best and longest-lasting stories". However

Gullette warns that “writers, including poets and journalists” are failing to “monitor lethal ageism and inveterate decline thinking and reflectively fight back”. She implies writers of all genres, along with those who have fought all the *-isms*, lack the gutsiness, fearlessness and greatheartedness to take up the fight. She calls for writers to “make the bitterness and perplexity and humiliations of decline real, but not only by describing bodily aging”. She wants writers to expose our ageist cultural narratives and to hold accountable those in positions of power who regard the issue as not their own, who turn a blind eye (2011, 223). Gullette reminds there is not one person who can say “Not my issue” (2004, 38). Her aim, to reverse the tide of our culture’s “decline ideology” (37) is shared by other scholars of women’s age and humanitarian studies, gerontologists, psychologists and social scientists and who agree that writers of fiction have an important role to play.

Sally Chivers concurs with Gullette’s thinking about how our cultural narratives shape our lives in the Western world. In response to Gullette, she says “Narrative provides the clues to the creation of the stereotypes that fix old age as a time of decline” (xxxvi). She suggests “we need new stories and readings of growing old” (xxvi), stories that “might provide a way to reconceptualise old age ... without flattening [it] merely into merely positive aging.” (xxxvii) Chivers notes that because so many people fear growing old, narrative fiction may hold the key to people engaging with age and rethinking their negative attitudes, yet in a gentle and progressive way (xxxvi).

In her preface to *From Old Woman to Older Women: Contemporary Culture and Women’s Narratives*, Chivers notes that in her work of women’s age studies, she “[faces] scrutiny and scepticism upon revealing that [her] topic is old age” (xi). Her questioners wonder either why someone so young would want to pursue such a morbid subject, or they invariably recount stories (which reveal their own youthful awkwardness within intergenerational relationships) of their elderly relatives who evoke pity, contempt,

amusement or embarrassment because they are hard of hearing, need assistance with physical tasks or divulge their sexual nature (xii). Chivers' response to such reactions is to subtly reveal their presupposition that "old age is too frequently thought of as tantamount to death is ... depressing or gloomy" (xi-xii). Chivers contends that by focusing stories on older women, writers have the potential to oppugn this stereotyping and counter the negative portrayals of older women which are widely accepted in our culture as reality (xvi). Readers therefore have other frames of reference, in fiction, for thinking about and understanding what it means to grow old. Hannah Zeilig, a gerontologist, claims that since a fictional story permits the reader to participate in a narrative's creation through imagination, the story allows the reader to call into question what they have accepted from all the cultural discourses on aging (21-29). Zeilig quotes Flannery O'Connor's comment on short stories:

A story is a way to say something that can't be said any other way, and it takes every word in the story to say what the meaning is. You tell a story because a statement would be inadequate. (O'Connor in Zeilig 29)

This potential power of narrative fiction to imaginatively challenge the reader, is what Chivers hopes will allow those involved in age studies, those who care for the aged and lay people alike to reinterpret cultural narratives so that the word *old*, rather than creating fear and ageist tendencies, will allow people to look on older age as a time of possibility and growth (99).

My experiences of transitioning from younger to older age have made me sensitive to the nuances of individuals' and my society's negative attitudes toward older women as well as increasing my sensitivity to my own ageist ideas. I am aware that people have taken a lifetime to construct their discriminating ageist beliefs and our Western world has taken centuries to develop the discourses that influence the inhabitants, and I have only one voice in a global dialogue. The research reveals that turning the tide on the pervading ideology of age

as a time of decline is a mammoth task. Nonetheless, I believe the more voices that join the dialogue, the greater the opportunities for challenging people's narrow perceptions of older women. Short stories, especially those written by women who wish to debunk their society's popular discourses on older women, or older women who know what it means to live as part of this invisible generation, have the potential to encourage people to imaginatively reconstruct their expectations and experiences of older age.

Women of my generation, known as the "baby boomers", were raised on a literary meal of children's stories and poems depicting older women and old age as terrifying. They ranged from the child eating, cannibal witch of "Hansel and Gretel", to the confused, child beating "Old Woman Who Lived in a Shoe", to the isolated and bed-ridden, frail grandmother who becomes wolf fodder in "Little Red Riding Hood". Once able to read for ourselves, the older women were either non-existent, as disturbing as those in the fairy tales, or else capable of magically becoming young again. The woman of my nightmares was the reclusive and eccentric Miss Havisham of *Great Expectations* who, following her jilting, spends her life in a darkened room in her rotting wedding attire. She vicariously seeks revenge on men through her adopted daughter Estella and breaks hearts and ruins lives. Chaucer's *The Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale* sees a wizened old woman (who has had many husbands) trick a young knight into marrying her. He is horrified on his wedding night yet ultimately he submits to the woman's wishes and, because he does, she turns into someone beautiful. As a result, he never has to embrace the wizened hag. The authors of such stories were mostly men, and few authors before the twentieth century chose older women as their protagonists.

It was during the twentieth century that more women began to write older women as protagonists. Although more of these stories were published in the latter half of the century, there remains a dearth of published novels and short stories in which the main character is an

older woman. Published fiction, therefore, mirrors either the invisibility or stigmatization of older women in Western society as “women who used to be women”, and it is only in recent decades that more female authors are confronting readers’ perceptions of this sisterhood. I will examine three short stories in which Shields, Berlin and Duder successfully challenge stereotypes and introduce a more expansive and diverse identity for older women. Carol Shields’ 1985 short story “Mrs Turner Cutting the Grass” portrays the older woman who is stigmatized as behaving inappropriately for her age, and Shields confronts those who judge others in this way. Lucia Berlin rose to literary fame posthumously, more than a decade after her death in 2004. That her published short stories in the late twentieth century did not receive public acclaim until the twenty-first, suggests the Western world was not ready for her honest depictions of older women. In “Bluebonnets”, first published in 1993, Berlin challenges her youthful society’s perception of the older woman as asexual. In “Vanessa”, published in 2008, Tessa Duder reveals a younger man’s fascination with a woman thirteen years older, although he cannot admit to himself that he has been, and is, moved by her. In each of these stories, the authors expose both their society’s prevalent attitudes to older women and the extent to which readers have acquired and internalised these prejudices.

In “Mrs Turner Cutting the Grass”, Shields’ characterisation of the protagonist and her critics, exposes people’s predilection for erroneously stereotyping others when they know little or nothing of the lives they judge. Mrs Turner, the unwitting victim of others’ criticism, is an older widow who enjoys each day to the full in spite of a lifetime of heartache and tragedy. Shields’ irony is that while her characters make fun of Mrs Turner, the author parodies those who criticise her appearance, her personality and the way she lives, and reveals their narrow mindedness and the tendency for people in society to see older women as a nuisance, or an eyesore – someone worthy of mockery and nothing more. Through satire, Shields uncovers both the toxicity of people who regard it as their right to stigmatize others

as well as the shallow ordinariness of the critics' lives when compared to the lives of those they are condemning. While Shields begins and ends the story with Mrs Turner's oblivion to the invective, ultimately Shields employs irony to reveal that Mrs Turner's critics are ignorant of their own shortcomings. Shields' narrative takes the reader from viewing Mrs Turner negatively through the eyes of others to whom she seems obnoxious and commonplace, and leaves the reader to see Mrs Turner as she truly is – an ordinary woman who has lived and lives an extraordinary and full life of potential.

At the story's opening, Shields positions the reader to negatively view the older woman as behaving indecorously for her age. Through a third person narrative point of view, we are made to see Mrs Turner through her neighbours' and society's eyes. Shields' diction, syntax and punctuation, combined with the point of view in the opening sentence, associate the reader with one of the woman's critics, even though we, like the neighbours, know nothing of her complexities. Shields writes:

Oh, Mrs Turner is a sight cutting the grass on a hot afternoon in June! She climbs into an ancient pair of shorts and ties on her halter top and wedges her feet into crepe-soled sandals and covers her red-grey frizz with Gord's old golf cap – Gord is dead now, ten years ago, a seizure on a Saturday night while winding the mantel clock. (27)

The disapproval in "Oh, Mrs Turner is a sight cutting the grass on a hot afternoon in June!" (Shields, 27) is emphasized with the exclamation mark and the initial "Oh", and combined with the statement that she "is a sight" makes society's harsh view appear as fact, even before Shields describes the woman's appearance and grass cutting attire. Shields positions the reader to believe the censure is justified when the narrator describes Mrs Turner as squeezed into her "ancient pair of shorts" and "halter top" which evokes images of ample flesh forced into inadequate coverage, suggesting something which should be hidden from public sight

rather than prominently displayed. Mrs Turner becomes an object of derision, that “[woman] who used to be [a woman]” but is no longer regarded as such (MacDonald with Rich, 122). When Shields completes the description by telling us that the protagonist stuffed the “frizz” into her late husband’s cap, the information about her widowhood does not endear us to her. Instead, Mrs Turner appears to cling to the trappings of her past – the “ancient” shorts and her dead husband’s hat. Shields has successfully positioned the reader to unconsciously stereotype the older woman and to view her choices with distaste. Yet, with the implication of her ongoing attachment to her husband, Shields also makes the reader feel a prickling guilt for judging someone based solely on appearance, unlike the younger neighbours who censure her public existence.

After Mrs Turner’s introduction, Shields’ narrative point of view becomes limited third person. As soon as the author makes us regard the woman through only her next door neighbours’ eyes, we realise how easily we have fallen into the trap of judging someone erroneously. Consequently, we understand that we are no better than Mrs Turners’ harshest critics. The reader, in turn, is encouraged to empathise with the protagonist as we hear the ageist attitudes emerge with the connotation of the words Shields chooses to reveal the Saschers’ and the girls’ disparaging thoughts and opinions. Roy and Sally Saschers’ disapproval of their neighbour is in direct contrast to their own self-approval:

Why doesn’t she use a catcher, the Saschers next door wonder. Everyone knows that leaving the clippings like that is bad for the lawn. Each fallen blade of grass throws a minute shadow which impedes growth and repair. The Saschers themselves use their clippings to make compost ... Mrs Turner’s carelessness over the clippings plucks away at Sally, but her husband Roy is far more concerned about the Killex that Mrs Turner dumps on her dandelions.

(27)

The couple view Mrs Turners' lawn mowing and gardening methods as inferior to their own. With the Saschers' generalisation that "everyone knows" the best way to mow lawns, Shields implies that the Saschers' view themselves as part of an "in group" who knows everything, while Mrs Turner emerges as the exception. The Saschers further marginalise the older woman when Shields uses the noun "carelessness" (27) to describe Sally's opinion of Mrs Turner not using a grass catcher. That the older woman's lackadaisical method "plucks away" (27) at Sally, implies she regards Mrs Turner's "carelessness" as an effrontery. The "plucks away" also suggests Sally is unaware of her own shortcomings, those of judging her neighbour's business and being unaware she allows her censure to incessantly rip at her thoughts. The implication, with Shields' choice of the verb "pluck", is that Sally, like a bird being prepared after slaughter, will soon have her shortcomings exposed. Shields makes the reader feel for Mrs Turner, the butt of her neighbour's bigoted opinions. We see that Sally has no right to stigmatize the older woman as she certainly is not "superior". In fact, the reader begins to see the Saschers as inferior for their contempt. Shields' satire portrays the couple as the clichéd, small-minded nosey neighbours.

Roy Sascher is also characterized as regarding Mrs Turner as *infra dig*. Shields depicts Roy's way of knowing "exactly how" to eradicate weeds by extracting them at their roots as the only way (27). His methods are in direct contrast to Mrs Turner's liberal poisoning of them. The Saschers see the woman's action as "abuse of the planet" but do not talk to her about it because "they're hoping she'll go into an old-folks home soon or maybe die, and then all will proceed as it should" (28). Shields' words -- that "all will proceed as it should" if Mrs Turner dies or disappears into a home -- shriek with the ageist attitudes of the Saschers and, in turn, of Western society in general. Mrs Turner is the older woman described in MacDonald and Rich's research: she is not only no longer regarded as a woman, she is no longer considered a human being worth engaging in conversation or a right to life.

Like her ample flesh, she needs to be hidden away. Through Roy's characterisation, Shields exposes the irony that the Saschers are the abusers, not Mrs Turner. Shields' limited third person narrative, when describing the young couple's opinions of their elderly neighbour, makes the reader understand how the younger generation have alienated and marginalized the older woman. They see themselves as the ones with the right to a life and see Mrs Turner as taking up space that younger people could occupy. Shields encourages the reader to see her description of the lawn mowing as a metaphor for how the younger generation see the older woman as a "fallen blade of grass ... which impedes [the] growth..." (27) of the younger "blades". Like her overgrown lawns, they feel Mrs Turner should be cut and cleanly disposed of.

Neither the Saschers nor the teenage girls view Mrs Turner as having the right to live the way she chooses on her own property, at least as long as she is in public view. Shields' sentences -- "At her age. Doesn't she realise?" -- mimic the high school girls' derogatory conversation about Mrs Turner's appearance and make the reader feel the girls' morbid fascination and disgust at the quantity of age-afflicted, lumpy flesh that the woman reveals on her "upper thighs" which, in their opinion, should be hidden (28). However, Shields' narrative point of view shifts again to omniscience as she describes the school girls' censure. The short sentences, which mimic the quick judgements made by young people with limited understanding, make the reader feel that the narrator is taking Mrs Turner's side in the story. They give the impression that the narrator views these striplings having no right to judge the older woman. The girls wish only to use their words to damage. They have no interest that the flesh which has them "shuddering" belongs to a woman whose name is "Geraldine" (29) and that this flesh hides secrets that Mrs Turner "keeps locked away inside" (32) because she does not wish to hurt another living soul with words. The "cellulite" is all they see, and that is the only aspect of Mrs Turner worthy of their comment. Shields' minor sentences, in place

of the girls' dialogue, makes us hear their teenage derision, immaturity and inability to express complete thoughts. Shields' narrator instead points out the truth behind their mockery: "[Mrs Turner's cellulite] makes them queasy; it makes them fear for the future."

(28) The teenage girls represent the youthful sisterhood who have already internalized their culture's fear of growing old and prefer the older woman to be invisible.

Like the Saschers who believe Mrs Turner should be banished from sight to a nursing home -- or better still die -- the girls believe that anything that looks old is ugly and should not be in public view. The irony in the girls' internalized ageism is that by the time they are Mrs Turner's age, they will likely have none of her zest for living. As Levy suggests, internalized ageism is anathema to an older person's cognitive, physical and emotional health. Shields has us understand that the older woman's visible existence makes her food to fill their own petty thoughts and lives, even though Mrs Turner remains oblivious. The narrator describes "The things Mrs Turner doesn't know [as able to] ... sink a ship ... [or] make her want to kill herself." This language suggests the good natured woman, who never thinks of harming others, cannot envisage others thinking ill of her. Shields positions the reader to see the toxicity of people's stereotyping tendencies based on minimal knowledge, when all people have equal rights to live their lives how they see fit. Shields' story reveals the truth of Chivers' contention that people think of being old as depressingly close to death. By creating characters who are overtly ageist, Shields' positions the reader to realise how ageist attitudes are self-limiting as well as self-fulfilling.

After being manipulated by Shields to judge Mrs Turner and then to realise we are as guilty as her neighbourhood, we learn about Geraldine's life of trial by fire. Once we know the truth about her, Mrs Turner becomes representative of all older women who no one in the younger generation seems to care about, in spite of the fact that these lives have been full of passion, hardship, courage, independence and compassion for others. After humiliating her

father with a one night stand with a married farmer, Shields implies that “Girly Fergus”, a small town girl, could not bear to disgrace her family. Because she feels her social responsibility to her family as a teenager, she slips away and travels from Winnipeg to New York City by bus and works for a year until she has a child with her “de facto” - a boyfriend who ultimately abandons her and their baby (31). She then deposits her child in a bassinet on the porch of a large house in a respectable neighbourhood because she knows she cannot raise her son alone. Finally, she works for another year to raise the funds to travel home to her parents and sisters. When her father says “Don’t ever leave us again” (32), she knows she has to once again make her escape as soon as she is able. Through the history of Girly Fergus, Shields portrays Geraldine as a person with an independent spirit who takes responsibility for her own misdemeanours. The narrator states the girl “tries not to think about the things she cannot guess at” and she regards “that she did the best she could under the circumstances” (32). With these words Shields portrays Girly Fergus as a person who minds her own business and believes that everyone, including her child, deserve the best chance to live their life well. At a young age, Shields characterises Girly Fergus as someone with more heart, soul and understanding of life than Mrs Turners’ neighbours. By refusing to employ emotive language during her review of the dramatic and traumatic events of Mrs Turner’s life, Shields creates a poignancy around her protagonist’s history. We see Mrs Turner’s life as she sees it, one deserving respect and privacy, one in which she did what had to be done to protect those she cared about. By the end of the account of Mrs Turner’s life, Shields has positioned the reader to view the protagonist with respect and empathy. Even Mrs Turner’s late husband “who loved every inch of his wife” (33) and whose grass she is mowing, was protected by her refusal to divulge her foundling.

Shields packs the remainder of the story with irony and humour, and finally, she makes the reader want to cheer out loud for Mrs Turner. Geraldine and her sisters,

following Mr Turner's demise, take a yearly trip abroad. Through her description of Mrs Turner's marvellous travels and her understanding of life which "comes to her as easily as bars of music floating out of a radio (37)", Shields portrays the older woman as someone who instinctively knows what life is about, even though she may remain unaware of her own knowledge. Shields suggests it is this living of life, without needing words to define the living or without too much self-consciousness, which makes for the richest experience. This older woman who the Saschers hope "will maybe die", and by whose flesh the school girls are repulsed, unknowingly becomes famous, immortalised in a professor's derogatory poem in an anthology that wins worldwide acclaim (38).

On the sisters' trip to Japan and the Golden Pavilion in Kyoto, all on the tour bus took photos, except for the man who was always scribbling in a note book. The three sisters called him the "professor" (34), not knowing who he was or that he was actually writing about them. The professor is incensed by the "three Midwestern lady tourists" (35) who talk loudly and ceaselessly about mundane life while visiting the Zen temple. He writes about the "three furies [whose] ... tastelessness formed a shattering counterpoint to [his own] state of transcendence" (36) and this poem becomes the one everyone asks for at his poetry readings (35). Just like Mrs Turners' neighbours, the professor portrays the older woman as inferior and himself as superior. Shields describes the professor as believing he has found in Japan "something spiritual ... authentic" (35), and ironically, he seems spiritually unaware, content to make money and gain fame for cruelly immortalising Mrs Turner and her sisters. When the professor reads to his students there is great applause because everyone has an "old Auntie Marigold or Auntie Flossie" who are "unspeakable tourists" (36). Shields suggests the "everyone" who laughs at the professor's poem, stereotype and derides the older woman. Ironically, Shields is also mocking Mrs Turner's critics. Shields reveals, through the irony of the professor making Mrs Turner world famous, that those who others deride, are often so

busy loving life that they are unaware of the stir they cause. Mrs Turner has never heard of “her” poem, and it is Shields’ characterisation of her oblivion to what other people think of her and life that makes her a far better person than those who judge her. Through narrative point of view, Shields has positioned the reader to transform from one of Mrs Turners’ critics to one of her staunchest supporters.

Shields concludes her story with words that call to mind the opening line. Instead of “Oh, Mrs Turner is a sight cutting the grass on a hot afternoon in June!”, the narrator ends with words that position the reader to see Mrs Turner’s magnificence. The narrator’s final comment on the older woman -- “Oh, what a sight is Mrs Turner cutting her grass and how, like an ornament she shines!” (38) -- mimics the readers’ thoughts of appreciation for her goodness and good will as “she waves to everyone she sees” (38). Mrs Turner even calls out to the Saschers and asks after their garden, not imagining that they wish her dead. Shields has made the reader understand that the older woman is too easily stigmatized and stereotyped yet, like Mrs Turner, “All she’s done is live her life.” (38) By describing Mrs Turner as an “ornament”, Shields’ makes the reader see her as the most lustrous and interesting feature of her suburbia. The poetic and ironic final line simultaneously induces the reader to think of Shakespeare’s Sonnet 18 and shout “Yes!” to all women everywhere who have struggled, suffered, and finally chosen to live life the way they choose. Shields affirms the women who are marginalised because of their age and makes the reader recognise beauty where previously they had seen none. The final laugh is at the expense of the neighbours and the professor, all of whom remain oblivious to their own contemptible morals and attitudes. Shields makes it clear that internalised ugliness is the true culprit of the story.

While Shields’ explicit use of satire and irony exposes the bigotry involved in ageist stereotyping, Berlin’s brief and subdued narrative in “Bluebonnets” counteracts the younger

generation's view of the older woman as predictable, asexual and in need of men for companionship. By initially portraying Maria as such a woman, Berlin positions the reader so that they are surprised when she indulges in passion with a man she meets for the first time.

Berlin's story is one of many in "A Manual for Cleaning Women" that successfully "embrace and contribute to [cultural depictions on] the complexity of old age" (Chivers xxv-xxvi). While Shields' story vigorously counters cultural narratives that erroneously stereotype the older woman for living the way she chooses, Berlin's story supports cultural discourses that allow older women freedom to accept and enjoy their sexuality. Her matter-of-fact, chronological portrayal of Maria's "fling", as her son derogatorily calls it (195), ultimately affirms older women's sexuality as equally as desirable and natural as younger women's. By structuring the narrative to begin and end in Oakland city, and juxtaposing the protagonist's urban life with her country sojourn, Berlin positions the reader to feel the social mores of city life as unnatural and constraining. It is only separated from these stark social conventions, that Maria, a fifties-something woman, loses her inhibitions and is able to live a spontaneous and passionate life.

In 'Bluebonnets', humans are portrayed as having devised -isms (ageism, sexism) as ways of compartmentalising life to make people fit into categories. Maria's son Nick reveals that he is blatantly sexist and ageist when he expresses his distaste for the possibility his mother might have sex with a man she's never met (195). Maria is moving beyond her habitual, and seemingly isolated life, and Nick feels the need to draw her attention to the fact. Berlin's story portrays this age categorising as unnatural and unhealthy when Maria has to defend herself to Nick. In contrast, in the Texan countryside, the older woman's sexuality seems as earthy and natural as the ebb and flow of life, the "rich green pasture" and the

“gently rolling hills, fragrant and lush with flowers” (197). In the Texan portion of the narrative Berlin affirms the older woman and her sexuality as sensual, vibrant and natural.

In the opening lines of Berlin’s story, the protagonist, a single woman in her fifties who has raised children on her own, is subjected to ageist discrimination by her adult son Nick:

Ma, I can’t believe you are doing this. You never even go out with anybody, and here you are spending a week with some stranger. He could be an axe murderer for all you know (194).

Nick’s protective concern masks both his disapproval and his acceptance of the “binary opposition between youth and old age” (Chivers 100). He views his mother as a creature of habit and unlikely to take risks. From the outset, however, Berlin positions the reader to take the side of the protagonist. The limited third person narrative point of view allows the reader to see Maria the way she sees herself: as an older woman censured by sons who “could be worse than parents, more judgmental, more old-fashioned when it came to her” (194). Berlin also makes the reader comprehend how easily the older woman has internalised the younger generation’s ageist attitudes when she feels the need to justify her actions to Nick by saying that she and the man “have written and spoken on the phone for years...” When Nick persists and says he “can’t imagine [her] doing this ... having some kind of fling ... in Texas” (195), Maria recognises the source of his perturbation: “that [his] mother might have sex, or that somebody in her fifties might.” (195) Berlin exposes the inability for the young to imagine older women indulging in behaviours that younger women do, especially when that person is one’s mother.

When Maria again justifies her trip as primarily to escape the city and accept Dixon’s invitation to walk in the countryside amongst the “bluebonnets”, a welcome respite in the natural world and away from her gruelling city hospital work, Berlin characterises Maria as

having so internalised her culture's ageist attitudes, she is unwilling to be truthful with her son. Berlin implies the older woman feels a degree of shame in having "in the back of her mind ... the idea of an affair" (195). In the opening portion of the story, then, Maria has come to accept her culture's attitude that women past their child bearing days are no longer regarded as sexual beings.

Berlin's characterisation of Maria as a recovering alcoholic who has been unable to be seen naked since she gave up drinking suggests she has felt so constrained by social stigma that she can only overcome her own and society's *betes noires* in a medicated state. In one of the few passages in the story where Berlin allows the reader to hear Maria's thoughts, we discover that she regards herself as "stuffy" and that the idea of stripping sober in front of a man is "terrifying". In this glimpse into her thoughts we witness her self-censure. When she tells herself to merely "enjoy the visit" because she's "going to Texas" (195), the reader feels it unlikely Maria will lower her defences and allow herself to be sexually vulnerable. Berlin, therefore, positions the reader to be surprised when Maria's sexuality emerges as unconstrained and organic as the flora and fauna in the Texan countryside.

The author's visceral language of description is similar to the subsequent, sensual descriptions of Maria and Dixon's sexual encounters:

The hot, perfumed air enveloped the cab. Huge thunderclouds had formed and the light grew yellow, giving miles of flowers an iridescent luminosity. Larks and meadowlarks, red-winged blackbirds darted above the ditches by the road; the singing of the birds rose ... Maria leaned out of the window ... the heavy Texan heat suffused her, the perfume of the flowers lulled like a drug (197).

Berlin portrays Maria as immersed from the outset in the hypnotic effect of rural Texas which enlivens her senses and awareness, unlike the alcohol she had previously used, presumably

for its anaesthetising effect. When Dixon invites her to “Lie down with [him]...” amongst his farmyard animals, so they can “[check] her out”, Maria is caressed and breathed upon by livestock, not trampled upon as she expects. Animal instinct is portrayed as naturally inquisitive. The gentle curiosity of the encircling goats and colt, as Maria lay on the ground with Dixon, is mirrored in the pair’s initial sexual encounter:

Clean, tired, she lay surrounded by the soft colors that blurred when the rain began and the wind swirled the leaves in the trees. Rain on a tin roof. Just as she fell asleep Dixon came and lay down beside her ... until she woke and they made love, simple as that (199).

All Dixon and Maria’s intimate encounters are raw and natural and surrounded by the sounds and sensations of the natural world. Berlin portrays their passion as equally as curious and instinctual as the animals and as energizing as the environment:

They made love wordlessly most of the night, in the sun porch to the sound of the rain. Before the rain they had heard the cry of a coyote, the squawk of the chickens as they roosted in the trees (202).

Because Berlin never lets us hear her protagonist’s thoughts about her intimate encounters, we are positioned to sense Maria’s acceptance of her sexuality and we understand that she feels unconstrained, uninhibited and free now that she is away from her urban existence.

On the other hand, because Dixon is prepared to be physical with Maria, but does not allow her any intimacy in his life, we also feel she has both gained and lost something of herself during her Texas visit. Like her son, Dixon is cruel and puts Maria down. He says her visit is a “farce” and makes it clear he thinks she has no understanding of him at all (200). Maria’s first sexual encounters with Dixon are contrasted with the way he shuts her out of his life, as if she has been an unwelcome intrusion, a blemish on his landscape. Berlin writes that

Dixon becomes incensed when Maria takes “Exactly. Two.” (202) steps onto the “white floor” (201) he has forbidden her to cross with her shoes on (198). Berlin positions the reader to view Dixon’s white floor as a symbol for how he sees himself as purer than Maria. Their ultimate sexual encounter, described by Berlin as a “[clash]” (202) makes the reader feel that this final battle is an acceptance that both characters are comfortable with their independence, lives and relative isolation.

Berlin’s final brief paragraph, after Maria returns to Oakland, calls the reader’s attention to the constraints of city life, portraying Maria as boxed in and compartmentalised in her “high-rise apartment” in a way that calls to mind the emotional constraints she felt within Dixon’s rules. Berlin omits Maria’s thoughts in the final sentence, and this omission allows the reader to feel Maria’s acceptance of her “rage” and “loss”. Berlin writes, “She went into the bedroom and lay down on her own bed”. Here we are aware of the sterility and paucity of freedom in her city life. Just as the “security guard” is the gatekeeper waiting at her apartment’s entrance, Dixon is the gatekeeper of his own soul. On the other hand, Berlin’s omission of the protagonist’s thoughts or feelings in the final paragraph, may suggest Maria’s fresh acceptance of her sexuality and her experience with Dixon. There is no younger person present to censure her and she is no longer justifying or suppressing her innate sexuality. Berlin successfully positions the reader to see the older woman’s sexual potential as unpredictable and limitless, so long as she is equally as free as the younger generation to express her sensuality. She has accepted herself, her limitations, and those of others, especially her son and her ex-lover Dixon. At the conclusion, the reader, along with Maria, remains detached from, and non-judgemental about the passionate encounter with Dixon. Berlin’s portrayal of Maria is of the fifty-something older woman’s complexities – the insecurities she initially feels when questioned by her son about her sexuality as well as the raw and natural sexuality she experiences with Dixon in the Texas rural landscape.

While Berlin challenges the reader to view the older woman as innately sexual and sensual, Tessa Duder's "Vanessa" advocates for the older woman's complexities and sensuality, by revealing the way she is stereotyped. Set in a small coastal town in New Zealand, Duder invites us to read the story of her eponymous, fifty-something heroine from an ironic perspective. Vanessa's story is narrated by the antagonist, Hugo Markham, an opinionated English school teacher, scriptwriter and actor in his late thirties at the time of his 'working relationship' with the older woman. Duder champions the wisdom, ambition, drive, intelligence, integrity and sex appeal of Vanessa through the irony and humour of the "subtext" of Hugo's narration. Reminiscing about his relationship with Vanessa a decade prior, Markham believes that, like most women, Vanessa was obsessed with him. Hugo's narcissistic tendencies are apparent to everyone but himself. Duder characterises the antagonist as oblivious to his own "subtext", in spite of the fact that he professes to be an expert in such matters as "a working scriptwriter" (160).

Although initially stereotyping Vanessa as "your standard issue archetypal librarian", Hugo is clearly enamoured with her many and surprising talents (130). Duder's characterisation of Markham as a younger man who believes he could not be attracted to an older woman reveals the "socially-condoned nature of ageism" (Nelson & Palmore, in North & Fisk 1). He sees no alternative but to consciously think about Vanessa as an older woman who must be desperate for the attentions of a younger man. Hugo describes Vanessa as the "archetypal" older woman: the irony being that he is the "archetypal" Western person who perceives Vanessa as one of those "women who used to be [a woman] but [isn't] any more" (MacDonald with Rich 122). His ageism is so ingrained that he perceives no other conscious choice but to view Vanessa as a target of his pity. Through Duder's characterisation of both Markham and Vanessa, she succeeds in encouraging the reader to understand that "the

bitterness and perplexity and humiliations of decline [are] real” (Gulette 2011, 223), especially when they are imposed on the older woman by those who regard her erroneously through their own unconscious prejudices.

From the opening, Duder positions the reader to understand that it is Hugo who is afflicted with the “erotomania” and the “self-indulgent perversity” (134) of which he accuses Vanessa. He was -- and at the story’s end still is -- obsessed with her. When he read of her death due to “alcohol poisoning” (136) he struggles to imagine what could have driven her to it. Hugo may narrate his story in a way that denigrates Vanessa, but we read past his intention to the story which espouses the beautiful intricacies of the “post-menopausal” woman.

Described by a lawyer character as “a conceited Pommie prat” (151) and an “arsehole” by an unknown who ransacks his office (154), Hugo thinks he is above those he lives amongst, “respectable small-town citizens, their lives unfolding to a totally predictable script” (133). Duder’s irony emanates from every page as Hugo, oblivious to his own psychological disorder, unknowingly and unashamedly reveals his innermost thoughts about his own intellectual superiority and physical desirability. In fact, it is his life that unfolds according to a “totally predictable script”. Hugo longs to stage *Twelfth Night* and play “the deliciously self-important Malvolio” (144) – which of course he ultimately does - while ignorant that he is a real life Malvolio who ranks himself highly in his own self-esteem. He is ultimately duped in ‘Vanessa’, not by others -- as was Malvolio -- but by his own self-conceit.

Hugo is unaware that it was he who suffers unfulfilled infatuation and lust rather than vice-versa. He never recognises his own feelings, even when he remembers the last time he saw Vanessa (long after he dumped their friendship because he thought she was too in love

with him). Hugo admits he is “a little puzzled, that [Vanessa’s] presence affected [him] as much as it did,” (156) yet he never considers that it may be because of his feelings for her. Duder has the story culminate with Hugo continuing to fantasize about a screenplay he intends to write, based on Vanessa’s unrequited “all-consuming love for [a] much younger and unavailable man” (159). In Duder’s story, she writes the older woman as an enigmatic fascination and object of desire for the younger man, the type of woman that Hugo believes inspires the writing of sensational screen plays – someone Hugo imagines as being played by one of the great female stars. He recalls reading about “ageing female stars in Hollywood, the Streeps and the Fondas and the Mirrens, [who] are absolutely desperate for good roles” and ponders the possibility of having a “Hollywood producer” (159) for his film. Duder creates a moment of pathos when the reader is invited to consider Hugo with the same degree of pity that he has bestowed on Vanessa. He seems pathetic in his blissful ignorance of his own shortcomings and delusions: that he regards successful Hollywood stars as “desperate” because they are “ageing”. He imagines Vanessa being played by a Hollywood “great”, but remains ignorant that he regards Vanessa as equally appealing as one of these famous women. While the narrator is conceited enough to think his ‘Vanessa’ story may give him the fame and glory he believes he deserves, he remains ignorant to the last that Vanessa was probably the “soul mate” (160) for which he yearned; he likewise remains ignorant that she was broken hearted (158) because he had spurned their friendship at a time when she needed it the most.

Duder’s use of first person narrative point of view and chummy language pretends to draw us into Hugo’s confessional as complicit listeners. Hugo addresses the reader and invites us at the story’s opening to “[w]ork [Vanessa’s infatuation with him] out...” (133). Ironically, our task as readers ultimately involves ‘working out’ Hugo’s unacknowledged infatuation with Vanessa. The reader is made to feel a sense of intimacy in their relationship

with the narrator, in spite of being totally aware that he is indeed “a game playing tosser”, as he surprisingly admits in one of his few moments of self-awareness (142). Duder’s story allows the reader to view Hugo as the affable, conceited rake who we both love for his wit and hate for his arrogance, as he narrates the tale about Vanessa’s obsession with him. In his telling, she is one of the many women whose shattered hearts he freely agrees, “leaves a trail” behind him (133) although by the story’s end, Duder has positioned us to view this “trail” as being a figment of Hugo’s egotistical imagination.

Hugo announces to the reader at the start that his guru is McKee, and that he, Hugo, “understands[s] subtext – what Robert McKee defines as ‘the life under the surface, the thoughts and feelings concealed by behaviour’” (133). Hugo professes to know all about the subtext within the plays he directs and produces, while entirely missing the “subtext” in his own life. When Vanessa tells him she is “a serious mess [because of her marriage difficulties and daughter with cancer]” (147), instead of being the friend she is looking for and expecting, he reads her confession as making him “an amorous target” and “briskly [dusts] off a stratagem used successfully once before” (148) to sidestep. Similarly, when his wife tells Hugo that she has heard he is having an affair with Vanessa, he dismisses her by speculating that the “probably menopausal” woman (149) has a “passing crush” (150). Hugo ends the conversation by declaring “Pu-leeze! She’s just about old enough to be my *mother*, for fuck’s sake” (150), Hugo’s remark invites the reader to hear his contempt at the suggestion that he could be attracted to someone who is “fifty-five if she’s a day” (149).

Hugo remains ignorant of his own subtext right to the end. Unable to be honest with himself, he relies on the audience to interpret his unstated subtext -- that it was he who was obsessed with the woman thirteen years his senior. Perhaps as a mechanism to distance himself from his own emotions, he describes his first meeting with Vanessa in a way that denigrates her:

...diffident, nervous, without charm ...dumpy, greying, glasses hanging off a chain, eager to please, dull of dress and demeanour, a chin whisker or six. Of menopausal age, but pleasant enough (137).

In his description of the older woman, Hugo reveals himself as one of those men who regard the older woman as someone who was once feminine. Duder's choices of words for Hugo in his initial description of the fifty-one year old -- "menopausal ... but pleasant enough" -- stereotypes Vanessa as a woman cursed by the change of life; no longer productive, and yet, surprisingly to him, tolerable. When Hugo sobs over a news broadcast about starving, orphaned Ethiopian children, after he reads of Vanessa's death in the "local rag" (160), he still remains blind to the depth of emotions he continues to harbour for a woman who surprised him at every turn. Far from being the stereotype Hugo had initially cast her to be, Vanessa emerges in Duder's story as a brilliant leading lady, stage advisor and rescuer. She is a woman he describes as having "Stamina... Commitment... Enthusiasm and Energy. In spades" (138). Hugo remains oblivious to the end that Vanessa was his muse. He is none the wiser that his motto, "When a show is over, it's over" (134, 153), does, in fact, not apply to him. Even after her death, Hugo finds himself thinking about how he can immortalise Vanessa through a screenplay. Duder's "Vanessa" reveals the injustices done to the older woman when made obsolete through stereotyping while simultaneously revealing her complexities, sexuality and beauty.

Shields, Berlin and Duder position their readers to recognise how ageist attitudes perpetuate erroneous negative views of and attitudes towards the older woman and therefore perpetuate the "decline ideology" which Gulette rails against. As long as these prejudiced views and attitudes continue, each generation of women will continue to face not only the natural challenges that occur with age, but also the damaging effects of both their own and society's negative perception of them. These three stories are successful in achieving what

Chivers believes is the potential for narrative fiction: “a reimagination of social problems such as ubiquitous negative conceptions of later life” and her “hope ... that people will cease to invest in the binary opposition between youth and old age”. Each of these stories also position the reader to understand that, as Gullette states, there is not one person who can say “Not my issue”.

There is an urgent need for all fiction writers to portray the older woman as she truly is – someone whose young heart is located inside a body showing the effects of a life time of experiences. Those experiences are ones that must be written about and celebrated, if younger generations of women are to grow to older age with a more affirming and joyous view of the anomalies of aging. With fiction writers lies the responsibility of helping to manifest revised and new cultural discourses for the older woman: what Chivers calls the creating of “new stories and readings of growing old” (xxvi). The benefits to society as a whole, once it adopts a healthier and more realistic understanding of what it means to be an older woman, seem to be exponential. Younger women will be able to grow to become the older women who are regarded as essential and valuable for their society’s well-being. As the research suggests, the younger women will grow to older age and be healthier – physically, emotionally and mentally – than their predecessors. These older women will, in turn, be regarded as more valuable in their professions, their sporting and recreational lives, as well as in their familial lives. These older women will have the influence to nurture and inspire younger generations to value all stages of life and to have the courage to accept and look forward to the challenges which older age provide.

Gullette’s sense of ageism as a “crisis” in the United States and her call to activism includes creative writers of all genres to “provide a responsible model for the new longevity for the rest of the global twenty-first century” (2011, 17). She sees it the responsibility of writers to hold accountable, all those who do not see ageism as an issue affecting them.

Discovering, interpreting, and celebrating writers who are challenging peoples' perceptions of the older woman, remains an important area for critical and creative research in short fiction. Related future research would extend to examining how contemporary male creative writers are portraying the older woman, or not portraying her, in short stories and in novels. If there is to be a cultural and societal change in both patriarchal and matriarchal ageist beliefs and attitudes, all writers are charged with this responsibility of exposing ageist attitudes. If our stories of older life resonate with the truth of its complexities, rather than portraying this life phase as one that must be dreaded, younger generations have a greater chance of engaging in positive discourses about their later years. The vision is for short fiction that works to promote a healthy Western society in which people view all the life stages and phases as unique, challenging and rewarding.

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Introduction

While Shields', Berlin's and Duder's stories depict younger people's tendencies to stereotype the older woman, the protagonists in my short stories are grappling with a wide range of issues that face older women in the decades following fifty. These issues are often exacerbated by the women's internalised ageist tendencies as they have been conditioned to unconsciously view themselves in older age as their youth affirming society sees them – irrelevant because they are closer to death and lacking the ambition, desires and longings of youth.

My short fiction is premised on the hope that older women will see themselves as individuals with the right to challenge the status quo of socially accepted ageism, through the way they live, the way they think and the choices they make. In each of my stories, set mostly in or with connections to contemporary New Zealand society, the protagonists face the real challenges of older age including: their own internalised and self-limiting ageist beliefs; the dire need for personal growth and development to ensure their lives are meaningful and fulfilling; the effects of life-altering events on their self-perception and self-worth; the attitudes of people their own age who have accepted society's view that their choices are limited; physical desires which they have been conditioned by societal stereotyping to suppress; the need and longing for relationships which are authentic and life-affirming; and the fears and insecurities associated with growing older, looking older and being closer to death.

There is a recurring question that consequently arises from the reading of each of the stories, which is: *how does the older woman find purpose, fulfilment and enjoyment in her later years when feeling the effects of societal and self-imposed ageist constraints?* None of

my stories choose to answer this question for the reader. Rather, my hope is that readers are imaginatively prompted or challenged to re-consider their attitudes towards the older woman. A goal of my short stories is for the reading to be taken beyond mere engagement with the texts to a more constructive understanding of the older woman. If my stories are successful in revealing what it means for women to grow into older age, then I will be achieving my overarching goal of joining a global conversation aimed at turning the tide on the damaging narrative constructs of ageing. If some of my readers recognise themselves in my protagonists, I will have achieved a personal goal of connecting with other older women, so they feel less alone at a time of life which, in today's ageist society, often feels isolating and daunting.

In order to appeal to the older woman who has become, or is becoming aware of the ageist society in which she lives, the protagonists in my stories are coming to terms with ways to deal with their own or others' negative beliefs. In 'One Small Adjustment', Bridget is jolted out of her gloomy outlook on her remaining years. 'Milking It' celebrates the ways women may create new meaning in life after the trauma of loss, and in 'Free Fall', a woman regains a healthier perspective after reflecting on the courage shown by women older than she is.

Bridget, the protagonist in 'One Small Adjustment', experiences internalised ageism, until her self-limiting beliefs are called into question by an unexpected source. When the story opens, Bridget is returning from nursing her terminally ill sibling, and she is consumed with thoughts of preparing for her own death. Already an orphan, her older sister's death means she now has to face the reality of being the only one alive from her immediate family. Her thinking is understandably both reflective and morbid. As she looks at herself in the aircraft toilet's mirror on her return home to New Zealand with some of her sister's ashes, she sees a woman whose "vitality... sense of adventure ... hormones, had disintegrated into the

ether.” However, over the course of the narrative, she discovers that she is one small adjustment away from becoming positive about the time she has remaining. A chance encounter with a younger man on the plane, makes her feel in ways she has not felt, and has not expected to feel, for an eternity. The younger man sees her as a sexual and attractive being, a way in which she has not considered herself for a long time. Moreover, because she is grieving the loss of her sister and what it means to be the last of her immediate family, she has not seen herself as anything but tired and ready to prepare for her own demise:

As she buckled herself back in, Bridget apologised for all the disturbances.

“You’re not disturbing me the way *you* think you are.” Remi ever so slightly touched her hand with the back of his. Bridget froze into wide-eyed surprise...

No. She must have misunderstood (67).

Bridget seems to have internalised her society’s views of the older woman as being asexual and unappealing as she initially refuses to believe, thinks she has “misunderstood”, his overt indication that he finds her sexy. She tells him she’s “old enough to be [his] mother” yet nonetheless flirts with him, which shocks her almost as much as his advances. She has not considered herself capable of either arousing a younger man or of feeling youthful naivete in the presence of a man. The younger man stirs her latent desires and ultimately the encounter serves as the catalyst that makes her view her future as full of possibilities rather than imminent death.

The narrator Sophie in ‘Milking It’, along with her mother Eleanor, are women who are suffering the losses and grief of older age yet have learned to create new joy and meaning in their lives. They refuse to accept the socially condoned, stereo-typical version of the older woman. At the narrative’s commencement, Sophie is hating being old and views it as a “disaster”. The mother and daughter unite in their grief and live together after they both lose

their husbands, one to death and the other to another woman. The mother is faced with a sexuality she is not sure what to do with after her husband's death and the daughter is grappling with both her husband's and her body's betrayal. Mother and daughter heal together and learn to celebrate life by developing and living with some extraordinary rituals:

Eleanor Diamond, my mother, loved to lie naked on her back lawn and roll
down the slope – breasts and buttocks slapping and wagging – to the creek
... Before she rolled she would lie on her back ... and feel the sun on her
pudenda... (46)

Both women choose to break away from what is perceived as the norm for the older woman and buy a cottage in an isolated part of the countryside. At first Sophie's siblings leave them to their own devices, which Eleanor thinks is because her sons are "secretly pleased to be *let off the hook from looking out for their elderly mother*". Ultimately, however, the brothers wish to challenge their mother's choices. Eleanor and Sophie abhor their opinion that there is a designated place for older people to live, a retirement village, and which the brothers think is where their mother (and older people) should be. The women will not bow to the pressure and continue to live their life the way they want and where they want.

The central theme in 'Free Fall' is the need for older women to be courageous enough to live their lives the way they see fit, in spite of the way society may erroneously judge them. Gabby, the narrator, is a fifty-three year old woman who has lost her confidence after a car accident. She is confronted with her own mortality and full of fear. To the narrator's surprise, her mother asks her to go to the funeral of a ninety-seven year old woman, Jane, who used to be their neighbour. The narrator had assumed Jane would have died a long time ago. Gabby then reminisces about her youth when she was full of cocky self-confidence and thought that Jane, because she had white hair, was ancient. Jane challenged and reinforced

the young Gabby's views of what it meant to be a woman, and an older woman. Both the younger and older woman were authentic in the way they lived their lives.

In recalling incidents in which Jane was involved, Gabby also reflects how people looked down their noses at her mother (a single, solo parent), at her (a bastard) and the older woman, the latter probably because of the way she refused to behave the way society expected her to behave at her age. Gabby recalls Jane flying down the road on her bike, feet off the pedals and legs stuck out; she remembers finding out that Jane road a motorbike in convoy with men; her skills as a carpenter and builder; and she recalls the older woman's ability to swear.

Mum was out when I heard the shouting. I went onto our deck to listen. *For fuck's sake! How many times do I have to tell you... Stop skidding your fucking bike in my driveway?* Up till then, the only person I'd heard say *fuck* was my mother (81).

Not only was the older woman unusual, Gabby also recalled her kindness and generosity. Over the course of the reminiscing and following Jane's funeral, the narrator regains the ability to face life. The reader is left to surmise that it is because of the extraordinary courage of the important women in her life, that Gabby finds the strength inside to move forward with her life again. Jane, like Eleanor in 'Milking It', is an older woman who refuses to bend to society's stereo-typing and instead embraces the complexities and vitalities of aging.

For me it was a liberating experience to explore issues regarding ageism and discover that my experience of becoming an older woman was documented and analysed in contemporary research. It was finding myself and the older women I knew in the pages of this research,

that provided the catalyst and inspiration for my body of short fiction. Chivers' and Gullette's work especially touched a chord with their conviction that it is in the imaginative writing of the older woman as she truly is, rather than as she is stereotyped to be, that will help move cultural discourses in a life-affirming direction for women across the age spectrum, and consequently for Western society as a whole.

Gullette's global challenge for all creative writers to become activists in challenging and altering society's attitudes towards older women which are currently debilitating, affirmed my desire to write the older woman protagonist into my short stories. Her call to action gave me the confidence to champion her. Not surprisingly, until reading Chivers' and Gullette's work, I thought the desire to explore women and ageism in fiction, was solely because of my experiences of older age and that I was one of a few who were feeling the ageist constraints of the society in which they live. I had thought briefly about writing such fiction beforehand, but had dismissed the thought because I believed few would want to read about the older women who society seemed to prefer to isolate, forget about, jeer at or feel pity for. I had no confidence to challenge the status quo and only realised in hindsight that this lack of self-esteem and confidence formed a part of my own internalised ageism. I believed at a deep level that my worth, what I had to say as an older woman, was not important or valuable. Looking forward, I also now understand that the more creative writers who advocate for the older women in fiction, the more momentum this oeuvre will gain to challenge and adjust the inaccurate societal beliefs of what it means to be a woman of fifty and over.

Milking It

Diamond women are creatures of habit. Later in life, Eleanor Diamond, my mother, loved to lie naked on her back lawn and roll down the slope - breasts and buttocks slapping and wagging - to the creek that divided her garden from the neighbour's. She tended her lawn especially so the grass was luxurious in its softness during summer. Before she rolled she would lie on her back, close her eyes and feel the sun on her pudenda. On a winter morning, Eleanor's bare feet cracked the frosted blades on her way for an icy dip to wake herself up. Whatever season, I'd hear the yell of delight as the heat or cold roused her sexuality. She was never concerned her neighbours would see or hear. Thick native bush covered the slope on the other side of the gully.

Ray Diamond, my father, died on their sixtieth wedding anniversary. We children arrived from three countries to celebrate and were drinking the last of the Champagne and eating cake indoors when Eleanor watched him topple backwards off the deck railings. His eyes held hers during the final moment of clinging, until he vanished to a thud and silence. She fled inside, grabbed the box of gift wrapping rubbish and ran out the backdoor yelling.

"I think your father's dead!"

We knew where she'd head and found Dad, winded, in his newly planted garden.

"I thought I could see the light at the end of the tunnel," he said when he could speak, "but it was the sun in my eyes. And stop your fussing. It's just my bloody back." The men helped him inside while I went to mother, who at moments of crisis burnt anything and everything in the garden incinerator.

“Dad’s ok. He landed on his back. He’s more concerned about the pansies and that you tried to do away with him - said you dared him to sit on the railings like he used to.”

“He’s a damned fool.” She said she would give him *a flea in his ear* for nearly giving her heart failure. She fussed around him instead and made him have *a zizz*. A few hours later she went to check on him, came out and said *your father’s gone and done it now* before she folded in a heap. His death certificate states cause of death as *massive intracerebral haemorrhage* and *ischaemic heart disease*. I used to lie awake at night and listen to the creek and wonder if he, like me that day, had a moment’s silent knowing it was over, that everything was about to change forever.

A half hour before mum announced my father’s death, I had crept down the hall to the bathroom so as not to wake him. In hindsight he may have already been dead. My bedroom door was closed and I heard Noel whispering on the phone, heard him call someone else *darling* - and then he said her name. *Esther*. Betrayed twice in one go. Husband and girlfriend had both become foes. When I touched Dad’s cool face with my lips an hour later, grief trickled quietly into the emptiness.

Mother sold before the first anniversary. She couldn’t bear to tend father’s herb garden, or the flower beds he recreated on a whim. She ached to have him back in her bed and in the kitchen turning his quinces to jelly, his horseradish to sauce. Mother kept essentials and sent the rest to hospice. She said she had to learn life anew. For both of us, the habits of years had created nothing except memories. Hers were sweet, mine tasted of bitterness.

Persistent anxiety was one of my habits. Noel was always patient. When I stressed, he would listen. The night before we had flown home for the sixtieth, I was having a moment.

“Old age is a disaster.” I’d climbed into bed after applying the vaginal oestrogen cream my GP had prescribed that day. “Even my joints lack lubrication. That’s why my aching shoulder won’t budge apparently.”

Noel looked at me over the top of his reading glasses and raised a brow, put his book down on the covers. He knew to be attentive until I’d spewed out the negativity. I bellyached about shrinking half an inch but still weighing the same, swollen ankles, the work that was going to pile up on my desk while we were away and the guilt I was now feeling for having left it too long to visit my parents.

“Are you done?” he said. I snuggled up to his legs and he resumed reading.

“Thank you for being my rock,” I said. Noel and I were solid. When we married, neither of us wanted children. On my thirty-eighth birthday, I told him I could hear a bomb ticking. He agreed to try, if being a mother was what I wanted. When we found he had issues with antibodies attacking his sperm, we decided against trying alternative means and to rejuvenate our business instead. Twenty years later I had twinges of regret, but at least I had Noel.

When I returned to Sydney after our father’s funeral to pack up my life and ship its remnants back to New Zealand, there was a message from the doctor. The test results were as bad as I had refused to fear. Open heart surgery was the only option. I think Mum liked me convalescing at home after my valve replacement.

“Looking after your wounded heart gives me a way to fix my own,” she’d say when I worried having me there was too much. I’d lie in the bath at night and look at the meaty scar which hacked its way down the centre of my chest while listening to the metallic thud. I wondered how long I would take to tune it out as I had the constant traffic noise outside our apartment in Rushcutter’s Bay. I saw myself as an old-fashioned telephone exchange and

three vital connections had been removed. I had no idea how I would plug the gaps. I was still making sense of how to operate in this different world, when mother said she wanted to sell. She found a cottage *out in the sticks* in Dovedale and together we dismantled sixty years.

“Listen to this,” she said. “Forty-five minutes from Nelson. Honeysuckle Cottage, Dovedale Road, Dovedale, RD. Two bedrooms, wetback, tastefully renovated, native timber flooring. Rewired. Easy care, private, borders Cozen’s Creek.”

Mother fell in love with the address before we’d seen the place. We passed the vineyards en route, discussed the ideal of Honeysuckle having a cellar, and were both smitten the moment we pulled up outside the picket fence.

“If we both love it, buy this with me, live with me,” she said.

“Let’s have a look first.” But it seemed the natural thing to do. When we told my siblings, they were critical and dubious, but Eleanor said she’d *put money on it* they were secretly pleased to be *let off the hook from looking out for their elderly mother*.

Eleanor announced over porridge, cream and molasses sugar one particularly frosty morning of our first winter, it was her mission to do everything and anything she fancied or had never done. That was the first day she stripped off and lay down in the creek. The following summer, she performed her first roll down the slope in the nude and the seasonal pattern was set.

Mother had always loved buying pottery and she took up classes two mornings a week in Nelson while I shopped or read. On the way home, we’d pick berries or stop at Moutere Inn for a pub lunch or visit a cellar door. Sometimes we’d do all three. Eleanor

would talk with animation over food or wine of her latest creation and extolled the therapeutic nature of digging her hands into soft, wet clay. Eventually she convinced me to join her.

The following year we converted part of the garden shed, bought a second-hand potters' wheel and created our studio. I made plates and mugs while mother sculpted artistic and erotic creations. We took the pieces into town to the studio to be fired. Eleanor dreamed of opening a pottery shop but we settled for hiring a stall every fourth Saturday at The Nelson Market. People loved or hated mother's erotica and her pieces either started conversations or sent people scurrying away with embarrassment. We made a profit sometimes, but money wasn't the goal.

We made accidental friends and a life and somewhere over those months of our first year. Wounds healed. Mother and I joined the Dovedale Residents' Association and after the AGM we often had people dropping in on their walks. I'd make scones and pots of tea, we'd talk for hours and be invited for dinners. Everyone in Dovedale was within walking distance and most were retired or some had a cottage industry. We met Charlie, who lived on the other side of the bush across the creek. He made knives and filled orders from people all over the Tasman district.

On the anniversary of our first year, I was soaking in the bath when I realised the scar had faded, the metallic thudding had ceased to bother me and I'd forgotten what anxiety felt like. Then I heard Eleanor yell. She came storming in with a letter in her hand.

"Listen to this, listen to this. It's from your brothers. *We thought we'd like to come and visit you soon. We are wondering if it's about time you and Sophie started planning for the reality of the future. We see there are a number of retirement village options in Nelson and thought we could look at these together.* Do you think they're right?"

“No, I don’t. Do you?”

“We’ll humour them then, if they visit.” And humour them we did.

Many years later, Eleanor died in her sleep in her bed at Honeysuckle. I took over her morning ritual. Lying on my back, I’d form a naked human torpedo - ankles crossed, arms out straight and fingers interlaced. Often a pair of kereru watched from the top of the kowhai tree or fantails squeaked and fluttered while waiting for my descent. The garden span around me and, after the final yell of ecstasy, I’d slip into the creek and just simply listen.

Night Flight

A half hour before touchdown, Bernice lifted her eye mask. The young woman adjacent was sleeping with her mouth and eyes slightly open. She examined the girl's profile. Perfection from her bare legs to her eyelashes. Apart from the snoring. Elegant hands rested on a lap pillow. She admired their smoothness and compared her own. Raised veins, rust patches. She grappled with her insecurities. The vagaries of age had descended as quickly as the children had grown up. One minute they'd needed her and the next they were leaving home. One minute she'd been desirable and the next she felt beauty had vacated and left a worn out shell. She told herself to snap out of the self-pity. Nothing attractive about feeling insipid and sorry for herself.

She wanted desperately to make the marriage work and partly blamed her ambivalence about sex for his deceit. She'd never wanted not to be married but she worried she no longer had what it took to hold a man - let alone win him back. She was still surprised that Simon had asked her to join him, had wanted to find out if they could retrieve their marriage. No better place to do it than the Caribbean. And it had been too long since she and Simon had sailed together.

She was young when she'd overheard stories of her great grandfather who'd worked for the British government on Tobago. Heat had affected his mental health and he'd been prematurely returned to England. But that didn't matter. Bernice's best dreams since childhood were of a sticky hot island place, wild with beauty, where she'd lose her mind, her inhibitions, and no one would care.

She peered through the porthole as the plane finished its descent into Vieux Fort. Jagged rain forest mountains pushed skyward through navy waters. Anticipation gripped her

insides. She felt more excited about the adventure, the sailing, than seeing Simon. She'd not protested when he'd told her to catch a taxi from Hewanorra to the marina. Her first impressions would not be tainted by his predictable remonstrations about equipment failures during the crossing. Bernice had followed the progress of his boat, *Night Flight*, in Simon's online log and was relieved she'd not been crewing.

Bernice sweltered as she crossed the tarmac and joined a queue that crept its way forward to an open-sided metal shed. She spotted the snorer emerging on the other side of border control. An equally gorgeous male was taking her in his arms, squeezing her ass, pressing her erotically against him as their mouths met. Bernice felt stirrings of her sexuality. If only. She couldn't remember the last time Simon had held her with any degree of raw lust - or roused any in her.

Bernice found her lift, climbed in the back seat. She gripped the door handle as the taxi swung along the St Lucia coast. Rainforest tangled to the road edge. Where density thinned, wooden shacks leant on the pot-holed verges and Caribs lounged on porches in wicker chairs, seemingly disinterested in who drove by. Through gaps in the foliage, Bernice caught glimpses of sea. Scattering the route were what she assumed must be the locals' bars; round posts supported flax roofs and men leaned on wooden benches, bottles in hands. She asked if they could stop to buy a drink.

From the car she watched the driver approach the bar. One of the men looked up and held her gaze as if he knew the truth about her, could see into her soul. Her guilt lurked. She had not been entirely honest with Simon, had dismissed her half-truths as justified when considering his infidelity.

As they descended towards the opposite coast and finished the last leg to the marina, Bernice struggled with her conscience. Was it Simon she wanted back or was she just too scared to make it on her own, to lose the life style she enjoyed? The taxi stopped and there he was to meet her. Toned, bronzed, weathered by weeks at sea. She searched his face for signs he was pleased to see her.

“Good flight?” He brushed her lips with a rough kiss.

“Uneventful. The ride over the island on the other hand.”

Simon grabbed Bernice’s sailing bag and duty free from the boot, paid the driver. He led her past the marina buildings and down to the slip where *Night Flight* was waiting. Even at fifty-eight he exuded an unkempt handsomeness. She wondered if he saw in her any remnant of beauty.

Simon stowed the wine in the galley while Bernice unpacked her bag up forward. She took a look at herself in the mirror, straightened her cropped greying hair and saw anxiousness in the eyes looking back at her. *Why have I come?* She wondered if he was already having second thoughts, wishing he hadn’t asked her to join him. She wasn’t that girl any more, the one that believed her mate would never abandon her.

“Bernie my girl. A rum punch at the bar or a shower at the Club?” She used to love the way he called her that.

“Shower. I need to feel clean.”

Bernice pulled out her toilet bag, shorts, a change of underwear and emerged to the smell of herbs, garlic and Simon stirring a warming pot.

“I’m ravenous though. What’s for supper?”

“Spag bol. Made it this morning. Thought we could sit on deck, drink some of your Montepulciano and have an early night. I think we’ll sail first light, find a beach and anchor for breakfast.”

In the Club House, she washed her hair, shaved what remained of her post menopause hair and exfoliated the skin she could reach. It had been a long time since Simon had touched her. She wanted to feel smooth. Ironical, she thought, as she towelled dry and rubbed in body butter. He was the one who had cheated. He should have been the one who needed to impress her. But here she was again, feeling the power of his proximity. When they’d married, that she was five years older had seemed like nothing. But now, all she could think was that other woman was so much younger than she was.

Her first Caribbean rum punch down, having updated Simon on the girls, the grandchildren, back on deck Bernice took alternate sips of sparkling water and wine. Simon crashed around in the galley, occasionally swore and one at a time handed up bowls of salad, bread, pasta and meat. Of all their boats, Bernice liked the exterior look of this one the least, and the saloon and galley the most. Below decks she was spacious and roomy with welcoming woodwork. She thought of the locals in their makeshift shacks in the darkness of the hills above. She scanned the nearby boats and surrounding masts, listened to clinking glasses and sailors in celebration mode. Something gnawed at her heart.

Simon emerged carrying plates and cutlery, sat, poured wine and raised a glass.

“To us. To new beginnings. Tuck in.”

“Where do we begin?” Bernice asked.

“I’d rather not go there tonight. Let’s ease into the tricky bits. If you don’t mind.”

Bernice watched, waited for more. Simon buckled under her gaze. “Come on Bernie. Let’s give ourselves a break tonight. Enjoy each other’s company. I’ve admitted to being an idiot.” He’d always been good at having the last word. Or maybe she’d just let him have it? She maintained her silence.

“I thought we’d gone over this,” he said. She still wouldn’t take her eyes off his face. Waited for more. He obliged. “I can’t make you trust me. It’ll take time.” She continued to search his face. “I’m anxious too. I told you I want this to work.”

She decided to feign insouciance to avoid a first night argument. And he did seem sincere. She took a rather large gulp of wine, helped herself to more salad. Simon gave her a rundown of the ports of call, the recommended moorings and the need to anchor in places with plenty of boats. He bemoaned the problems mid-Atlantic and gave a full account of all the repairs he’d undertaken and some maintenance still to complete. She refrained from pointing out she’d read it all online in his captain’s log.

After coffee Simon washed up, told her she could sit on deck and relax. Bernice felt resigned there would be no intimacy tonight. All she wanted was to feel Simon’s pleasure that she had joined him. No point in asking him. He would retort with “Of course I’m pleased.” Then she’d feel simpering and weak, even less attractive. No comfort or reassurance in that. And there was no satisfaction later. The cabin was humid and Simon’s love making was hurried and brash. Bernice doubted he noticed her polished skin, her need for tenderness.

She turned away from the already snoring Simon. She was in the place of her dreams. Tomorrow she would inhale the open sea and the two of them would be a team again. While she’d never been able to turn a boat on a dime, the way Simon did, he relied on her. There wasn’t an order he could give she wasn’t able to pre-empt or at least fulfil.

At daybreak, *Night Flight* motored out of Rodney Bay. Bernice wanted to swim and they anchored nearby. She jumped in and backstroked around the boat absorbing the blue clarity above while Simon prepared breakfast. After a feast of local fruits he'd bought at the market - *chocho, plaintain, breadfruit* – they set sail for Harmony Bay.

Bernice felt a girl again and *whoop whooped* when the first school of flying fish leapt and shimmered across the surface. At times they sailed close to the St Lucia coastline and Simon pointed out resorts nestling in palm coves. She imagined honeymooners making long hot love on top of cool white sheets. And from the dense overgrowth above, those men would be leaning on makeshift bars and watching them sail by.

In the shadow of the Pitons, the stony beach offered a local dining experience. At a secluded house on the southern end, Aleya cooked and her children helped. Laurette waited on tables, washed dishes. Right on the ordered time, Paz cut the throttle behind *Night Flight*. He escorted them in his dinghy to the shallows. Simon threw Bernice over his shoulder, whacked her bottom and carried her ashore. She squealed and was hopeful for other acts of familiarity.

On an open deck, they shared a table with other yachties. They all drank too much rum punch and feasted on coconut chicken stew. Darkness obscured the beach and the lights at the top of the masts resembled stars. The evening's heat was oppressive in the stillness and their dinner conversation began to compete with a rising crescendo of tree frogs. Bernice found Laurette charming. Clearly so did Simon. He seemed taken with her beauty and, on the other side of the red checked table cloth, Bernice felt old and unattractive. She drank even more rum punch and laughed a little too loudly.

Next morning she woke alone. While last night's setting had been perfect for acts of romance, there had been none. She had drunkenly accused Simon of being more interested in

the waitress than in working on their marriage. He had left her alone in the cabin and slept out in the saloon. She saw Simon snorkelling in the distance off the bow. On shore, a piece of faded material hung between two palm trees. It provided shelter for someone sleeping under a blanket on the stones. Bernice was sure the person hadn't been there when they'd set off for dinner.

Simon came up for air, removed his mask, yelled "Mornie Bernie girl! How's the head?" and continued to splash around. Bernice leapt off the bow and trod water. Simon was acting as though nothing had changed, that there'd been no hiatus in their thirty-four years of marriage. She wanted remonstrations of love, some bold move that made her know she was back in her rightful place. Being here with Simon meant she had to deny the part of herself she had started to discover. She had to be wife again, live up to someone else's expectations. She wondered if she'd ever feel the same way about him. While the sailing yesterday had been bliss, she'd forgotten how he could bark orders, how she'd always tolerated them.

But she did love him – always had – she was just still so devastated by what he'd done. She recalled her total naivete on her return from New Zealand and her father's funeral. She'd given his sincere apologies that he couldn't be there with them, that a work crisis had loomed and meant he had to stay behind. *Some work crisis!* A conference in Milan with his PA. His admission of being in love. And her secret retaliation. She knew he would be less forgiving.

Night Flight sailed the coastlines and between the islands of St Vincent and the Grenadines. With every mooring and trip ashore for supplies, Bernice wandered the street stalls buying giant pawpaw and home-made bread while Simon took their passports to border control. She loved the sounds of the island towns – reggae music, the Carib's accent. She wanted to spend

more time ashore exploring, wanted to hire a jeep, but Simon was always impatient and hurried her back to the boat so that he could tinker with repairs.

Leaving Bequia, Simon set a compass course for Mustique and a meeting with old university friends. After cocktails at a beach bar, they rode a jeep to Jack and Hilary's hillside villa and drank icy champagne around the pool while house servants went ahead to spread an opulent picnic under palm trees and a thatched lean-to on the shore.

Bernice watched the couple as they told the story of hiring the same villa, the same servants for a month, year after year and rubbing shoulder at parties with the rich and famous. The Carib women served the meal with a gentle grace, and Hilary ignored them. She didn't look happy. She clearly drank too much, ate too much, and Jack seemed disinterested in the conversation. Bernice had a gut feeling his interests lay elsewhere. She watched his eyes following the youngest woman. Maybe that was how she and Simon looked?

While the others ate desert and drank more wine, Bernice drifted off through the palms to the water's edge. No one around. She stripped off down to her bra and undies, slipped into the sea and floated on her back. She didn't want what Hilary and Jack had. Plenty of money that could buy boredom with each other, people to do their bidding in exotic places. But maybe that was all she had with Simon too -- or would have if their marriage survived.

Back on the mooring, below decks was sticky and uncomfortable. In spite of Simon's protesting, Bernice opted to sleep in the saloon where she could imagine cooler air entering the hatch door. In her knickers, feeling uncomfortable from too much food and wine, she finally drifted off.

She woke with a start. Something had lightly brushed her face and chest. There it was again. Feather-light and fleeting. She froze in the darkness, her heart thudding. She held her breath to listen. Above her, around her, the cabin felt alive with the movement of air. She felt on the shelf above for her glasses, squealed as something brushed her forearm. Then she saw them: tiny dark wings flicking in through the hatch. They circled, swooped at speed and exited again. She grabbed for the sheet to cover her body, shielded her face with her arms and kicked the light switch at the bunk end.

“Bloody bats Simon! Hundreds of them.”

“The fruit’s attracting them. Put it in the cupboard. And turn the damned light off.”

“I’m not bloody moving! You come and do it.”

Simon appeared. He grabbed the bananas off the fruit hammock, flung them on deck and returned the boat to darkness.

“Should’ve slept with me.”

Spooked by the bats, Bernice lay awake for hours and, in the light of dawn, she saw the walls, floor and fittings splattered with tiny bats’ droppings. She climbed on deck. Banana skin remnants lay all over the blackened cockpit. She set about cleaning the mess. Simon tinkered with the engine.

“If I’d slept with you, the mess in the saloon would’ve been worse,” she said. He continued to ignore her. When she’d finished, Bernice swam around the boat, showered and prepared brunch. Simon joined her.

“I’m sorry Bernie girl. I behaved badly last night. I was miffed you didn’t want to sleep with me.” She felt wild and couldn’t look at him. Wild with herself. She should’ve made him work harder to get her to go back. And instead, it was business as usual.

“And I should’ve helped clean. No excuse.” Still she couldn’t speak or look at him. She wanted to see what she had refused to see before. They ate and set sail for the Cays in silence - until Simon tried again.

“You’ll love this place. They say the waters are teeming with turtles. Fabulous snorkelling.”

“How long will you keep up this pretence Simon? When will we talk about what matters?”

“I thought we’d been doing ok.”

“Not for me. I can’t return to something that has nothing but potential – possibly. I don’t want to settle for mediocre with the chance of affairs.”

“I’ve told you I won’t make that mistake again.”

“I didn’t just mean you,” she said and held his gaze.

“Have you?”

“Not exactly. It was a revenge fuck.”

Simon looked like she’d slapped his face. “Do I know him?”

“No.” She could see he was struggling and left him to process.

Approaching the Cays was tricky. It took total concentration to manoeuvre around the shallow coral reefs and they worked seamlessly in silence. Bernice loved this part of their

relationship – it felt fluid and easy. Finally they anchored inside the lagoon with a dozen other yachts. Bernice counted five small islands around them. Simon still wasn't talking and started preparing the dinner.

“Would you like some help?” He ignored her. She knew he was waiting for her to make it right with him. Somehow. But that was what she'd always done, been the fixer when things had gone wrong. It was his turn to fix things now.

She dived off the bow, swam to the nearest island, walked across and around it in a couple of minutes. She sat in the shallows. A couple rowed in and pulled their inflatable up on the beach. Bernice watched them. Maybe a decade or so younger than she and Simon. They touched each other as they talked, laughed, kissed. There it was. What she wanted. Could she and Simon ever have that? They must have once, surely. Before the children. She wanted that back. Nothing less.

When she eventually swam back to Simon's meal preparations, he still wasn't talking. She knew he wanted her to talk him round, tell him it was nothing, that he was everything to her. Instead she chatted about the turtles she had followed, that she was sure she'd seen one of the islands in a movie. They shared a bottle of wine over dinner, did the dishes together and still he didn't talk. They retired early, and he rolled away from her. She wanted to scream, hit him. She faced reality instead and made a decision.

Simon looked across the pillow at Bernie's back and gently spoke her name, touched her hair. Hearing deep breathing, he thought it best to leave her alone. He'd done enough damage for one day but he couldn't bear to think of someone else having her. It would take time to rebuild what they had. Words couldn't fix what he'd broken. And he wanted desperately to fix it. Finally, after what felt like hours of contemplation, he felt himself drifting into sleep.

Simon woke with a start to broad daylight. Bernie was already up and he went on deck to find her. She wasn't on board. She would've gone for a swim. He looked to the islands but couldn't see her. Perhaps she'd walked to the other side. Simon noticed some of the yachts had already departed or were motoring out.

He dived in, swam to last night's island and walked the shoreline. No one around. He swam back and dived under the hull to carry out an inspection. He'd need to get his snorkel and mask. Instead, he went below and grabbed the binoculars. Simon scanned the lagoon, other islands and the boats. He told himself he struggled to see her because it was choppy. He went below and put on the billy. If she was coming back from a long swim, she'd need a hot cuppa.

He drained his mug and repeated the search. Nothing. Bernie was a strong swimmer, better than him, but if she'd developed a cramp – or something worse. No. That was not an option he was prepared to consider. There were enough boats anchored within swimming distance.

Simon went below and pulled out Bernie's sailing bag from the stow. No wallet, no passport. Her shoes had gone and some of her clothes. She wouldn't leave him to sail the boat on his own? And then he knew. He went back on deck. Another yacht was sailing out of the lagoon. He'd done it all wrong. He started the engine and cast off. He would catch up to her, he would follow her. How far away could she be?

One Small Adjustment

Bridget watched the other passengers begin the embarkation shuffle through the boarding gate. She prayed that whichever one sat beside her would be exhausted too. She wanted to be invisible, ignored. This was one of those times she didn't mind the fact that the older she was, the more transparent she became. Everything she'd needed to do on this side of the world was done. And the flight home would be her first chance in months to consider the future – what was left of it. What if she died suddenly? She didn't want to end up on life support like mother had. She decided she was feeling practical - certainly not morbid. She must visit her lawyer soon. Rewrite her will. She rolled her bag of special cargo to join the tail end of the diminishing queue. The end of an era. More than forty years of holidays in England. Hard to believe she'd never be visiting her sister again.

The young man's athletic breadth and height encroached into her Premium Economy air space. So much for paying extra. Bridget crossed her feet, clasped hands in her lap and looked down at the jig-saw of countryside. Finality caught in her throat. The pattern smudged and she stared into engulfing cloud.

"Are you ok?" The athlete's voice was mellow. Bridget didn't dare turn to answer. She'd had no intention of polite exchange merely because of proximity and even less while swallowing emotions. She pursed her lips, squeezed eyelids and nodded.

"I didn't mean to intrude." Well, Bridget thought, you are. She watched for cloud clearance and sunshine. With the glare she closed her eyes and picked up thoughts left back in Heathrow. An impromptu death would be inconvenient. Her filing cabinet needed ruthless re-organisation. And NZ1 had better not blow to pieces now she was finally heading back. The children mustn't suffer needlessly her scrambled storage system and years of

frankly somewhat embarrassing personal scrawling. She'd never been able to make sense of mother's. And Alzheimer's? Please, God, cross that from the list. Father's death from loneliness and a heart that broke. Old age: pure cruelty.

Bridget resurfaced. A tranquil-faced air steward was offering refreshments.

"Sparkling water please." Bridget took the drink and cashews and observed the steward's less composed manner as she served the hulk. He seemed oblivious. Bridget wondered how female air stewards always looked so perfect, so flawless. Maybe she'd looked like that thirty years ago? No. Hardly. She'd always had the sporty ready-for-anything look while being vaguely envious of those with sophistication.

Bridget's stomach gurgled. Embarrassing. She hadn't realised how hungry she was.

"Hungry?" Apparently, Hercules' physical prowess included his hearing. He leaned towards her and extended a hand. "I'm Remi."

"I was hoping you didn't hear that." She couldn't suppress a wry smile. "Bridget." Her hand disappeared into his. Rather soft and surprisingly smooth. Bridget adjusted her position slightly so she could see the young man's face. Dark eyes looked down at her.

"Sounds like you're heading home to Aotearoa too."

"Can't get there fast enough." She didn't mean to be curt. He seemed decent. Probably about the same age as her oldest. "It's been a long nine weeks."

"Not a holiday?"

"Family matters." Bridget needed to shift focus. She felt Bernice's ashes eavesdropping from the overhead locker. "And you?" She noticed the massive gold band as he drank. Could have been used for a napkin ring.

“Quick work trip. I can’t wait to get home to the whanau. I like delayed gratification though.”

“How many children?”

“Two little devils. What about you?”

“Three in various parts of the country.” Bridget felt the athlete’s scrutiny.

“And where’s home for you?” he asked.

“I recently moved to Nelson. Upper Moutere Valley, actually.”

“Ah! Work takes me to Nelson sometimes. I’ve holidayed in Ruby Bay. Sensational place.” Yes it was special but she didn’t want his talk any longer - she wanted her meal. She wanted to use the bathroom. She excused herself and Remi moved his massive legs to let her out.

Bridget washed her hands and checked herself in the mirror. Someone else’s eyes were staring back - dull, lifeless. Nothing like those of the twenty year old who had flown to England for her first OE. All those decades of to-ing and fro-ing and a changed reflection on every flight. And a disappointing diminishing choice of WC toiletries with every trip, she noted. Perhaps somewhere, forty thousand feet above the earth, she’d pushed the button and her joie de vivre had been sucked out along with the loo paper. The girl with the vitality, the sense of adventure, the hormones, had disintegrated into the ether.

Bridget ran fingers up through her grey bob and tried to reshape the mop. Apart from the colour, at least that was one thing that hadn’t changed. No. Who was she trying to kid? Everything was different. This reflection - she was it, head of the family. And *no one else but her to give a damn*, as mother used to say.

Over lamb, kumara mash and pinot noir, Bridget surprised herself. She found Remi's pre-meal karakia and conversation a welcome diversion. She couldn't work out what he did for a job but it had something to do with managing young Maori rugby players. He was willing to talk between mouthfuls, easily prompted by head nods and a few undemanding questions. He didn't mind Bridget wanted only to eat and listen before tilting her seat to doze the distance to Los Angeles, relieved there wouldn't be a new stranger beside her for the final leg.

As NZ1 commenced its descent into Auckland, Bridget excused herself yet again. Remi had turned down her offer of the window seat on the final leg and seemed sincere when he claimed to have more leg room on the aisle. As she buckled herself back in, Bridget apologised for all the disturbances.

"You're not disturbing me the way *you* think you are." Remi ever so slightly touched her hand with the back of his. Bridget froze into wide-eyed surprise. She stared at the porthole. All she could hear was the tinnitus ringing in her head. She realised she wasn't breathing. The light headedness forced her to inhale. No. She must have misunderstood. It was so long since someone flirted with her, she'd forgotten what it looked like, sounded like.

"I hope I haven't shocked you?" he asked quietly. Bridget couldn't bring herself to turn and look at him. She felt her eyelids were clamped open and she was on the operating table with her arms strapped to the plinth. She waited for the scalpel.

"I have shocked you, haven't I?"

Bridget took another breath and turned to face this young man she didn't know except for sharing meal conversation.

“Yes, you have shocked me,” Bridget enunciated slowly. “Apart from anything else, I’m old enough to be your mother!”

“How old do you think I am?” Now he seemed more than ever the young man she’d thought she’d been conversing with.

“About the same age as my son. Late thirties.”

“Forty-seven.”

“Still old enough to be your mother. And I don’t know how you manage to look so young.” Bridget realised she was reacting to Remi’s advances and she didn’t recognise this woman who was talking.

“You can’t be more than fifty-five.” Remi leaned into her and this time he gently touched her knee with the back of his hand. Desire. The sensation reminded her of the first time she had felt her insides churn. Seventeen. Her first love. She’d only had to look at him. They’d made love anywhere, anytime. Back of his Zephyr, front of his Zephyr. In sand dunes before her curfew. Hurriedly on his bed while his mother watched television and knitted in the living room next door. And she’d thought his love was for eternity.

“Sixty-three.” Yet she felt so naïve, so alive.

“Well I don’t know how *you* manage to look so young.” This time he touched her just above the knee, still with the back of his hand.

“I don’t know what to say.” But she knew what she wanted to do. Raw desire. She’d forgotten it existed. She’d thought wanting someone’s touch again was impossible. She couldn’t believe, for over a decade, her lust had only been lying dormant. “In some way, I think I’m flattered.” What the hell? She wasn’t going to tell him she felt a chemistry she’d thought had expired in her such a long time ago. And she was ignoring the voice inside

which told her he probably tried this with any woman he was forced to sit beside for hours on end. From her peripheral vision, Bridget saw Remi turn over the jacket on his lap and take out a wallet from the inside pocket.

“Here’s my card. When you get home, text me. I’ll phone you. I’d like to see you. When I’m next in the South Island.” She wanted to accuse, “But you’re married!” Instead, she wasn’t sure why, silently, she took the card.

Bridget gripped the railing as the ferry churned around the headland and Port Fitzroy vanished. Sea-salt wind whipped hair into her eyes. She inhaled the “rough magic” of the myriad bush clad islands sprinkled across the leeward passage. It seemed her sister’s voice whispered around her. *Not now. Wait till we’re right out in the Gulf.* So far she’d kept all the promises made, and she was going to see this one through to the last.

She’d wished she could have been with her nieces and nephew, when they’d face-timed yesterday from Gustavia. Bridget loved their snippets, their versions of dusting Bernice into the Caribbean Sea off St Barts. Amidst clinking rum punches, they’d reminisced about the family sailing holidays their mother loved so much. And now, it was her turn to finish the committal. Bernice had asked her to return a last time to Great Barrier where they’d tramped the tracks and searched the bays, exploring sites and memories from their father’s birthplace, and his father’s gold mining past. Whenever Bernice had returned from England for a holiday, they’d felt the island’s pull. Its rawness reminded them of a New Zealand from their off-the-beaten-track summer camping childhood. Each time they flew onto the island, she and Bernice would open yet another door to their history. And every time the ferry rounded Devonport Heads, they knew they must return to their present.

As the SeaLink gathered speed in open water, Bridget pulled Bernice from the backpack. It seemed an eternity since her sister's phone call. Together they had struggled with the prognosis. But Bernice was grateful she had time to prepare an exit, her sister a constant companion to cross t's, dot i's and fluff pillows. Just as well they were both efficient. Amidst the laughter, pain and frustration, the final weeks came suddenly. They'd been a shock. Bridget winced, remembering Bernice's first venomously yelled "Fuck off!" She'd thought her sister knew exactly what she was saying. She had packed and been ready to leave - until the specialist told her to brace herself. The cancer had spread to the brain's meninges and there would be more aberrations in her sister's personality. But she wouldn't think of Bernice that way. She would remember her over-whelming generosity, her elegance, impeccable dress sense, her dry humour, her adopted pompous English accent, punctiliousness, her energy.

It was time. Leaning over the railings, Bridget unscrewed the lid to the unceremonious plastic container and Bernice whirled and blew from the stern. There. She'd joined their parents. Perhaps one day they'd all fish the Noises again and picnic on Rangitoto. Bridget suddenly felt cold as she watched the wake churning, frothing and disappearing in the dusk. But she wanted to stay on deck till they docked. She was looking forward to returning to the present. There was a life wanting her to live it.

As she prepared for her flight to Great Barrier, Bridget wrestled with two voices each time she walked past Remi's card on the dressing table. He gave her the card because he had found her attractive. He gave her his card because that's what he did. He's what Bernice would call *a disappointment*. As she put the pack on her back and picked up the hotel room key, she made a choice. She was going to believe he'd given it because he wanted her, just as

she, for a moment, had wanted him. Bridget ripped the card in four, dropped it in the bin and locked the door behind her.

A Cure

The gate was still padlocked. She'd beaten them. Belinda wouldn't like it. Everything had to be her way. And she'd always acquiesced. And every year this weekend had become harder to bear. She parked roadside, climbed the fence and made her way to the front veranda.

Since the boys left home, and Frank had died, she longed for closeness with her sisters, but she couldn't continue the lie. The annual get-together had become a bugbear. *To thine own self be true*. Mother's favourite saying. But her final words, barely audible, *promise you'll never lose touch with your sisters*. Meg knew she could no longer honour both. And she'd never really belonged. *The black sheep*. Always that bit different and those extra years younger. Belinda and Rose had derided her for a sensitivity they swore they'd never had and picked on her till she cried. Mother would say *don't worry about the girls' teasing* – as if even she didn't think Meg was one of *the girls*. And she wasn't. The distance between them had remained a chasm.

The wind was offshore, the air was balmy. Meg peeled off her travelling gear down to bathers, and hid her clothes behind the stacked chairs. An hour to herself before they arrived on the dot. She padded over the grass and dug her toes into cool sand.

The beach was almost deserted. She picked her way over shells to the water's edge. An eternity ago, her mother had called her *elephant feet*. Wearing nothing but togs, her soles had hardened over summers as she searched rock pools or walked to the dairy for the weekend bread, Chuckles her Cairn, her loyal companion. Back then, her exterior had hidden the sensitivity. She'd kept everything to herself. Her skin had softened with age now, but her hide was tougher.

A group of children were building a sand fort, and a gathering of fairy terns rose and hovered as she approached. Meg didn't feel much older than the girl growing up on Waiake Beach who ran every day after school to the gnarly pohutukawa. She loved to play on its branches. The tree was her comfort, her refuge.

Meg paddled in the shallows toward the headland and found her favourite pohutukawa, its massive branches half buried in sand. She straddled the widest, spread her towel and lay down. She'd always loved searching for blue specks through the matrix of leaves – it gave her something to focus on when troubled. She'd hated being the youngest, being told her opinions didn't count. If they rejected her now, said she was crazy for the decisions she'd made, she knew what was real. And she didn't have to stay for the whole weekend.

On the way back to the beach house, Meg noticed that the children were decorating their castle with drift wood and broken shells. She stopped to give them a feather for the turret and heard one say something about the old lady. Meg recalled the first time she'd heard a child call her "an old person". How devastated she'd been. Only fifty, and as much as she'd thought herself ridiculous trying to rationalise the comment of a seven year old, she'd felt scared. She'd wasted so many years grappling with a gnawing feeling that her best years were spent.

The double French doors were latched open. Time to face *the girls*. Belinda was lugging a chilly bin, Rose close behind, laden with bags. Meg stepped onto the veranda.

"You've never arrived before us," Rose said, hugging her.

Belinda offered her usual peck on the cheek. "Where's your car?"

"You've seen my transport out front."

“In your dreams.”

Meg went outside, pulled her riding gear from behind the chairs. She carried in her bundle, leather boots, helmet on top. Belinda pursed her lips. What Meg had expected. Rose’s gaping eyes and mouth, however, turned into mirth as she threw back her head.

“You can’t be serious!” Rose took the helmet and tried to put it on. Belinda turned her back on them and began unpacking the chilly bin. Rose quietened, made eye contact with Meg and raised an eyebrow at their sister’s back, mouthed “Eric”.

“When did you learn to ride a bike?” she asked, “or is it a tricycle?”

“Trike. The boys got me started.”

“Will you take me for a ride?”

“For God’s sake!” Belinda said and disappeared outside.

“She’ll get over it,” Rose said, putting food away in the fridge. “I meant it, by the way. Take me for a spin?”

Vehicles unpacked and beds made, the sisters sat on the veranda with coffee. Normally they’d exchange pleasantries, but no one spoke. Meg could hear unspoken thoughts clanging in her ears. She couldn’t bear it.

“I have some news,” Meg said, “and something I need to talk about.”

“I have news too. I told Rose on the trip,” Belinda said. “And I want to apologise. For being so foul tempered.” Now Meg was surprised. She’d never heard Belinda apologise for anything.

“You’re Camp Mother. We know you detest anything that doesn’t go according to plan,” Rose said.

“Eric has prostate cancer,” Belinda said. “Definitely not part of the plan.”

“Since when?” said Meg.

“He’d had some trouble... pain, you know, and getting it to function properly. I suggested he went for a check-up. He hadn’t been to the doctor for years.”

Meg had never liked Belinda’s second husband with all his self-important posturing. But she didn’t want this for him. Or Belinda. Her announcement would have to wait. So would digging up the past.

“The prognosis?”

“Won’t know the full extent till after the operation.”

“And you. How are you coping?” Meg examined her sister’s face. Were those damp eyes?

“A mess. I need something stronger. Embarrassing...” She went inside and emerged with a bottle of Glenfiddich and glasses. Rose poured and they clinked glasses.

“What should be worrying me the most, is whether or not Eric makes it through all this. Right? I mean it’s his diagnosis, his illness, his course of treatment. But that’s not what’s bothering me the most.” Belinda took another swig. “Our sex life has become non-existent. It’s been over a year. Eric’s lost all interest. Could be the cancer of course. And apart from Eric dying, God forbid, the worst case scenario, the doctor says, is that Eric gets through all this but ends up with erectile dysfunction. I’m only sixty-eight. I might never have sex again.”

She took another gulp. "There! I've said it." More silence. "Say something! I feel like a horrible, selfish person."

"You're not horrible," Rose said. "I think it's perfectly natural to think about how all of this affects you. And I think there's very few of us who want to think our days of sexual life are over."

"But what if they are?"

"Let's be practical," Meg said, beginning to feel the whiskey's effect on an empty stomach. "Eric might be fine after his treatment. And if he does have a problem with getting it up, there's always Viagra."

"We already use that ... have done ... in the past. He lost interest in taking it."

"Then get yourself a bullet." This was the last conversation Meg had expected to be having.

"What?"

"A vibrating bullet. Small," Meg used her hands to show the size, "a bit bigger than an acorn. A friend bought me one a few years after Frank died."

"No thank you. I can look after myself," Belinda said.

"Right then. Option two: take a lover."

"I'm not sure I could do that. I couldn't tell him."

"Don't tell him! Think of it as something you have to do, one of your routines - like getting your hair done. He probably never notices that."

"But if he found out? It'd destroy him."

"Has to be option three then." Meg topped up the glasses. "Over to you, Rose."

“Leave Eric. Find someone else.”

“I know how bad what I’m about to say sounds,” Belinda said, “and I don’t want Eric to die. But if he did, I wouldn’t have to feel guilty about finding someone else. Afterwards, of course. Husband number three perhaps?” A smile tickled the corner of her lips.

“Not another one! I can’t afford another dress and present!” Meg began to laugh.

“Sounds like a great excuse for the three of us to go on a shopping spree in Melbourne,” Rose said.

“Be serious girls,” Belinda said, but Meg thought her sister’s mood had lightened.

“A girl’s gotta do what a girl’s gotta do,” Meg said. “I’m starting to.”

“The trike?” Rose asked.

“More than that. I’m facing my demons. Reinventing myself.” Meg thought she’d leave it at that, but then Belinda gave a nod.

“For starters, I’ve quit the practice,” Meg said, “balanced the books for the final time. I’m heading off on a road trip. On my trike.”

“I’ve taken a lover,” Rose announced. Four eyes looked her way. Maybe that’s why my sister is so serene, Meg thought.

“What about Dave?”

“You know how he loves his golf and fishing with his mates. While he does his thing, I do mine. Well, I do Marcus actually.”

Meg thought Rose’s eyes said it all. She said, “Does Dave know?”

“He’s oblivious. He comes home from golf and a beer, or the weekend’s fishing, and there I am. I think that’s all that matters to him.”

“Even his name sounds exotic,” Belinda said. “What’s he like?”

“Please! Save the gory details for lunch. I don’t know about you, but I’m starving,” Meg said. “Shall we walk to The Beach Café? My shout.”

Meg moved her trike onto the back lawn and dressed for lunch. Belinda with her guard down. She’d only seen it once before when she was little - had never forgotten it. Her sisters had been fighting, yelling at each other. Rose had found a weta, pretended it was alive. She’d chased Belinda with it in a pair of her father’s barbecue tongs. Her big sister had screamed and screamed as Rose raced after her up the stairs. Belinda had stayed in her bedroom for hours. Meg had knocked on the door, was worried. Belinda flung it open, grabbed Meg around the neck and almost throttled her, yelling in her face. Meg wouldn’t go near her after that. Mother had said it served her right.

“Meg! Rosie! You ready?” Belinda was calling from out front. “Can one of you bring the Taittinger? It’s on the fridge door.”

“I will!” Meg grabbed the bottle and joined her sisters outside.

“What are we drinking to?” Rose said.

“A cure,” Belinda said.

Meg followed her sisters through the dunes and onto the beach. The tide was coming in and the wind had picked up. The children had gone and remnants of their fort were being washed in froth. A cure. How simple that sounded, Meg thought. A cure for all that had gone awry, could still go awry. *No use burying your head in the sand my girl*, mother had loved to chide her when she didn’t want to face reality. Her sisters linked arms up ahead and Meg didn’t mind they seemed to have forgotten she was trailing them.

Free Fall

I was fifty-three when I lost my confidence. I spun out in the rain across the highway, wrote off my car, a farmer's fence and a clump of trees. Everyone said how lucky I'd been but that split-second when I lost control had done its damage. Anxiety set in. A year later I was still struggling when mother asked if I'd take her to Jane Barnett's funeral. I was flummoxed. She said I must remember, we lived next door in Rewi Street.

"Miss Barnett! I thought she was ancient back then," I said.

"Because of her white hair," my mother said. "She lived to ninety-seven. She was the only person who was kind to us, if you remember."

I agreed to go. Mother was right. Miss Barnett had been an anomaly, had challenged the status quo in our neighbourhood. I'd always had a degree of reverence for the way she risked her neck while everyone else was playing life safe.

When we moved to Torbay, every adult gave the three of us a wide berth. Mother said they disapproved of me for being *born out of wedlock*, her for being a *hussy* and Miss Barnett *just because*. Miss Barnett was a source of fascination to the kids in our neighbourhood. I found this out when Bryce sat next to me in the bus on the first day at my new school. I knew he lived on the corner but didn't know his name until the day before term started. I'd seen him riding his bike to the top of our hill and then careering down to the end of the cul-de-sac where he'd go flying up Miss Barnett's gravel driveway and skid to a stop.

"I live up the road from you," he said.

“I know,” I said. “I’ve seen you riding your bike.” I figured he was a year or two older than me.

“Did you hear the old lady yelling at me yesterday?”

“Hard not to.”

“I thought she was out - doing her swim round the bay.”

“She sure can swear,” I said. Mum was out when I heard the shouting. I went onto our deck to listen. *For fuck’s sake! How many times do I have to tell you, Bryce McDonnell. Stop skidding your fucking bike in my driveway?* Up till then, the only person I’d heard say *fuck* was my mother. When she came home, she told me I must have heard wrong, Miss Barnett wasn’t the swearing type. I said there was nothing wrong my hearing, thank you very much, and she told me off for being cheeky.

“She has boyfriends too,” Bryce said. “I’ve seen them visiting her.”

“She teaches piano,” I said. Miss Barnett made us pasties for our dinner, the night we moved in, and a chocolate cake. “She’s a real good cook.”

“That’s not what my Dad thinks. I heard him tell Mum that she’s teaching young men a thing or to. He said with her experience they can learn things that will make them into real men.”

“Like what?” I said. Bryce started jerking his hips back and forward.

Miss Barnett rode a pushbike too. A man’s one. It had high handlebars and a huge wicker basket strapped to them. I’d seen her at the local shops. Instead of tying her grey hair up in a bun as she usually did, she let it fly long. Sometimes when I was walking down the hill from school I’d watch her, legs peddling flat out and hair waving behind. As she hit the flat and entered her driveway, she’d take her feet off the peddles and stick them out at angles.

On one of these days I'd watched Miss Barnett's free fall, Mum told me I had to go next door.

"Miss Barnett wants to talk to you," she said. "Take her these afghans and thank her for the food she's made us."

"Do I have to?" I wanted to go sprat fishing off the rocks but my mother was adamant.

Miss Barnett was playing her piano. I rang the bell several times and was about to leave the biscuits on the step when the door opened. I hardly recognised her. Her wet hair cascaded over bare shoulders and she wore a colourful cloth draped round and tucked in above her boobs. I pushed the box of biscuits at her.

"Mum says thanks for the food you've given us."

"I need a favour Gabrielle."

"Gabby."

"I'm going away for a few weeks and wonder if you'd feed my cat and water the plants?"

"Sure." Maybe I'd earn a couple of dollars. I was saving for a pony, even though I knew I'd never be able to have one. She invited me in and made me sit at her butcher's block while she poured me a homemade ginger beer. Everything in her kitchen was magnificent. Shiny wooden surfaces, and pots and pans hanging from hooks on a wooden frame which hung from the ceiling. Strings of garlic bulbs hung around, and dried flowers. Her plates and cups were stacked on a wooden rack on the wall. Our kitchen was all green formica and grey linoleum. Her floor was polished wood.

"I like your kitchen," I said.

“It’s taken a while,” she said. We went to find Potato who was asleep in a sunny spot in the spare room. She showed me her pot plants and how to water them but said she’d leave instructions.

“How long for?” I said. She said a few weeks and she’d pay me fifty cents for every day till she returned. She must be rich I thought. She gave me a key and two dollars for the first four days and made me cross my heart not to let anyone else in her house except my mother. Her living room walls were lined with crammed book shelves and I asked if I could borrow some. She said we could help ourselves.

“And Gabby,” she called after me as I left, “make sure you keep the gate shut. I don’t want that Bryce mucking up my driveway.”

“Fuck no,” I said.

Every morning before school and each afternoon, I’d sneak through a gap in the hedge. I didn’t want Bryce and the others to know what I was doing. Bryce sometimes asked if I was going down the beach. I’d say Mum needed help with something. I’d curl up with a book and Potato until Mum called me for dinner. I loved it at Miss B’s. I could pretend I was a grownup in my own home. Sitting in the bay window, I’d look out over the garden to the sea and imagine the house and garden were mine. No one could tell me what to do.

After a few weeks, Miss Barnett rang from a phone booth in Queenstown. She said she didn’t have many coins, she had to talk fast and could I look after her place for another few weeks. I said sure, I didn’t mind how rich I became. She asked Mum to clean the house and do the weeding. A few days after that, Mum showed me a photo in the Herald. It had caught her eye on the stand in the dairy.

“What?” I said. There was a bunch of men straddling motorbikes outside some shop that had opened.

“Look closer,” she said, “at that one.”

“Reminds me of Miss B,” I said. “Fuck! It is her.”

“You’ve got to stop saying that Gabby.”

“If it’s good enough for Miss B...”

“Do as I say,” she said “and leave the paper with her mail, in case she doesn’t see it.”

That afternoon I talked to Potato for quite some time about how I was going to buy a motorbike when I was old enough and Miss B was going to teach me how to ride. I imagined myself in a leather jacket and boots and giving Bryce McDonnell the fingers as I flew past with my biker friends.

“I’m going to buy a motorbike one day,” I said to Mum. “You can ride behind me.”

“Bikes and boys. They’re both trouble. Take it from me.” I decided I’d have to talk to Miss Barnett about my aspirations. She’d understand.

On the contrary. When Miss Barnett returned and paid me thirteen dollars, she sent me packing when I said I wasn’t saving up for a pony any more, I was saving for a motorbike. I asked her what the big deal was and she told me to ask my mother. That was the day that a good and bad thing happened. Mum told me the truth about my father and Miss Barnett gave mum a regular gardening and house cleaning job. Mum had to catch a bus to all her other jobs. No one in our neighbourhood wanted her help.

Miss Barnett’s funeral was a revelation. Her four sons rode their motorbikes as a cavalcade when they left for the cemetery. Each had spoken of all she did while raising them. A

woman ahead of her time, she'd never taken her husband's name. He'd died when they were young. She learned carpentry, so she could teach them to be handymen. She had taught them how to cook, swim, ride bikes, mow lawns and sew. Some of her grandchildren spoke too.

We didn't stay after the hearse left.

"Some people are brave and we don't even realise," I said. "Anxiety is a waste of time." My mother didn't say a word. She didn't tell me she'd just found out she had between a month and a year. Four months later, I spoke about all my mother had done for me, for my children.

I was never one to drive at night again, but each day I got behind the wheel, no matter what the weather, courage, I knew, was the only way forward.

Relics

My Aunt Madelaine sold what was left of her husband George after listing him under Antiques and Collectibles. She didn't realise until long after she'd couriered him off. By then she didn't mind too much because she was having such a marvellous time. Madelaine was walking in the Cotswolds and said a prayer hoping she hadn't offended with her oversight. I know this because I was with her. She had persuaded me, under the guise of needing help to make sure she didn't get in a muddle, to join her on what she called *a final fling*. I think she thought I needed rescuing from an impasse after my mother died.

George and Madelaine had been inseparable from their first date. I had often heard them tell their own version of who chased who. Madelaine was a BNZ teller in Wellsford in the fifties when a revolver was kept in the branches. All staff had to attend shooting practice. When George came in to pester her, she'd threaten her gun skills and that he'd leave with a bullet in his bum. George's version was Madelaine used to give him *the look* while being painfully slow at counting all the money he was making with his concreting business. Auntie would retort *fiddlesticks* and that some days he'd bring in less than a pound. Then there was the day that George waited outside at closing time. Madelaine said he ran down the road after her. George said *you know that isn't true, you ran after me*. No matter how, he secured the date and before long they were engaged, married and had produced three children.

Staying with Auntie Madelaine when I was a growing up was the best thing in life, her love palpable in rituals. Auntie's pantry was full with tins of baking, bottled fruit and preserves. Dinner was always early after George came home from work and had showered all the concrete dust off. No matter what Auntie cooked, there was a plate of fresh white

bread, and I used to watch how Uncle would bite into hunks as if it tasted sublime. And best of all was chatting round the table over hot cocoa at supper time until we all went to bed.

Every morning, summer or winter, Uncle served porridge at six-thirty and then Auntie would stand on the doorstep and raise her face to be kissed. He'd say *So long pet* and she'd wave goodbye till he disappeared around the corner in his truck. I grew up wanting a love like that.

After these sojourns, I returned home reluctantly. Father worked late most nights and could be bad tempered. He made a fuss over purring Carmen, our Persian, as he came in - she waited dutifully for him on the hall stand - and barely spoke to mother or me. Mum would raise an eyebrow at me and say quietly if he was *in one of those moods*. I'd spend most of the evening in my bedroom reading. Sometimes I'd hear raised voices or bickering and on more than one occasion father drank too much and pushed furniture over. The worst time was when he threw his glass and it smashed my grandmother's antique plate in pieces. Mother was inconsolable.

It wasn't all bad. In father's better moods, he was gregarious, generous with time and money, making sure he did things to please mother and me. But I mourn for how my mother shrank in stature and confidence. She could have blossomed if cherished the way George adored her baby sister.

We'd been walking along the river between the Slaughters when Auntie Madelaine threw up her hands, dropped into the grass and cursed loudly.

"Damnation!" she said. "I forgot all about George." In clearing out the family home they'd lived in all their married life, my cousin had helped his mother sell the furniture she couldn't fit into their sleep-out. There was an old writing desk at which George always sat to

do his accounts. Sometimes he'd let us kids unlock drawers to find treats he'd secret in the hidden one. Auntie was loath to part with it but she'd agreed to sell to a bloke who restored furniture as a hobby.

"When we scattered his ashes," she said, "I couldn't part with all of them. I put his remnants in that drawer."

"What would he say, I wonder?"

"He would tease," she said. "Remember Scruffy and our walks to the store? I'd tie him to the post outside. More than once I forgot the dog and came home without him. The Four Square man would ring up and say *Mrs Stewart, you forgot your ruddy mongrel again*. George took the call once - teased me mercilessly, said one day I'd leave the children somewhere too."

We pulled out our sandwiches and I coaxed Madelaine to tell me more stories about George.

"I wanted him to be buried, but he insisted it would do neither him nor me any good. I think he wanted to make sure I wasn't tied down by a plot of wet earth."

"Why didn't you two ever travel?"

"He hated the idea of flying, confined spaces. But he knew I had a hankering for adventure and told me to make sure I chased dreams when he was gone." She patted the back of my old hand with an even older one. "That's what Sis would have wanted you to do."

"Let's not talk about Mum," I said. Mum's and George's ashes, both in the wrong place, had suddenly become too much. We sat in silence for a while.

“We’d better keep going,” Auntie said. “I’ll need my siesta or I won’t be able to enjoy our birthday knees up.” We shared the same birth date, twenty years apart, but she was on her feet before me and heading in the wrong direction when I called her back.

“Just as well you made me come with you,” I said.

When father had phoned to say mother was in ICU, I was working in London. I caught the first flight back, but he made the decision to turn off life support before I arrived. I felt bitter he’d stolen my goodbye. I’d been away for weeks and he’d not been honest with me how ill she’d been. I felt sure he kept me away on purpose, had wanted her to himself in the final days. He kept saying he wished he could have gone with her and in my anger, I told him no, she would have wanted me to go with her.

After the busyness of the funeral week, I became numb with grief and guilt. Father refused to let me drive him to the crematorium to pick up Mum’s ashes and he refused to let me collect them. We were at loggerheads when Auntie asked to see me about a chaperoning proposition.

Auntie Madelaine fell in love again while we were in England. On our final night, in the corner of the bar in our medieval inn, I drank too much wine, and she drank too much crème de menthe -- *George’s favourite tippie* -- and we laughed too loudly. She told me all about her new affair.

“I’m in love with the history of this country,” she said. “Look at this tiny cupboard door, for instance. I wonder who’s touched it over the centuries? And what’s been kept in it?” Auntie turned around and pulled the handle. The door came off in her hand. Amidst gales of our laughter, she jammed it back in the space.

“I see now why Marjorie adored the trips she made with your father.” I had never heard Madelaine call my mother anything but Sis. “She loved her exploring while your father was working, or with him.”

“Somewhere I still have the postcards she sent me. Ruins, churches or castles mostly,” I said.

“I remember them. All those times you lived with us,” she said.

“I have the best memories Auntie. They’re fresh, like yesterday. You and George. So much caring. I don’t even have the words.”

“There aren’t words,” she said. “There was a feeling, the knowing, that some things are meant to be.”

“Your mother loved your father, you know. The best of him. She had you. And I think she lived in hopeful expectation.”

“And I wasn’t there for her at the end.” Tears flowed from a tap that couldn’t be turned off. It was the first time. Madelaine waited for abatement. Finally, she lost patience.

“For God’s sake Maddy! Pull yourself together.” The tears stopped with the shock and I burst out laughing again.

“There,” she said. “You know she told me she’d given your father *strict instructions* not to worry you. Sis didn’t want you rushing back unnecessarily. And, she gave me *strict instructions* too that she made me promise I’d keep.”

“This trip,” I said.

“And when you’re ready to hear, she asked me to give you *strict instructions*.”

“I’m ready,” I said. Auntie opened her purse and pulled out a piece of paper.

“I had to write it down,” she said, “in case I forgot. She said tell Maddy her father loves her too, he just doesn’t know how to show it.” Madelaine looked up at me. “There’s a bit more. Make her promise she’ll put in even more energy, take more risks at this end of life, than she did at the first.”

Dad seemed pleased to see me on our return and asked if I’d help him sort through mother’s things.

“It’s just too much for me. Why don’t you start with her clothes while I make lunch?”

I used to tease mother she was OCD because of the orderly precision of her cupboards. When I opened her wardrobe, I knew Dad hadn’t touched a thing since we chose her outfit for the funeral director. I folded each item carefully as if she was there watching me take her life apart.

When I reached her winter clothes, I tried on her leather jacket with the tie belt and her herringbone coat. I found the mink stole she’d worn when I was a child. After a night out with Dad, she’d come in to see if I was awake and she’d stroke my cheek with it. I loved the coolness of its fur and that my parents were safe home. My face was pressed into it when Dad came in to say the fish pie was ready.

“Please may I keep these?”

“Mum would want you to.”

It took us several days and an afternoon with Madelaine to talk through and pack away the last of mother’s things. The day after our trip to the Sallies, the three of us picked up Mum’s ashes and drove to the top of Mt Eden. I’d never known before, but that was

where Dad had proposed on a clear day. He'd enticed Mum up there to savour the view across the Waitemata Harbour.

Longevity was prevalent in Dad's family and I expected him to live for years after Mum died. We'd grown closer and I wanted the time with him. I don't think he could stand the silence without her. Only once did he tell me how much he missed her and he seemed embarrassed that I saw him cry.

After his funeral, Madelaine and I went up to the top of Mt Eden again. On the way back to the car she took my arm to *steady herself*. Tears misting up his glasses, I remembered how Dad had done the same thing eight months earlier. I could still feel his grip on my arm. "I'm glad you're here my girl," he said. I tightened my hold on Madelaine.

Offerings

Chester purring on her lap at the kitchen bar, Rachel ate her pasta leftovers. Venison would have been preferable but it was accepting Mark's first present of game that had been her mistake. Tonight, standing in the porch, he'd looked offended. She felt a little guilty. Perhaps she'd also been too abrupt in turning down his offer to feed the cat. Chester. The one detail that had forced their lives to momentarily converge.

Rachel despised herself for lying, for being too weak to be direct. She leant on the wall and remembered her parting words at Mark's last attempt. *Find someone who's in the decade below, not the one above you.* She'd thought he'd finally heard her. Apparently not. Rachel checked her reflection in the hall mirror. Dishevelled grey curls, lines deepened from tension, glasses needing a clean and a smudge of Old Gold chocolate on her chin. She should be allowed to look a mess in her own home. She flicked off the porch light. Rachel loathed the scars of age. But why did she even care? All she wanted was for him to relegate her to the realms of invisible older woman or grandmother figure like every other man and his dog. Anonymity: the one benefit of turning grey.

Rachel caught up on email over coffee and checked Pacific Princess' progress. Right on time. Docking 7.00 am. She suddenly felt excited. Nervous even. It was one thing to be seeing Joan again. But Joan's new man? She couldn't imagine Joan with anyone but Glen. Hard to believe more than thirty years had passed since they'd first met and adopted her as their own. Her thirtieth birthday. They'd heard her wailing over their garden wall, come running. Joan's arms around her, more comforting, more accepting than her own mother's had ever felt. Trying to get the words out through choking grief. Glen putting the kettle on.

How they'd sat with her and understood. She'd been watching the Challenger launch when it exploded. Somehow the grief over her marriage breakup had finally poured out.

Rachel had never forgotten her mother's reaction to the news. *You stupid girl. Get straight back to him and start a family.* Rachel hadn't been surprised. Mother had kept her own promise – for better, for worse.

Rachel's loneliness fought for air. Her eyes welled.

Nearly four years since Glen had died. Hard to believe he'd been gone so long. No matter what she thought of this new man of Joan's -- and she couldn't imagine she would take to him easily -- for Joan's sake, Rachel knew she had to at least pretend. She'd managed to convince Joan over the phone, how excited she was to meet him. Now she had to do the same in person.

Rachel had seen the ship had already docked as she drove past Queens Wharf. She couldn't bear it if they had disembarked and she wasn't there. Joan still refused to own a cell phone. Maybe they'd miss each other. But of course maybe Colin had one. Why hadn't she thought to ask?

She arrived breathless at Shed 10. Only a few ship officials milling around and not a passenger in sight. Rachel walked back out, looked up at the bow towering above her. A few passengers, specks in the drizzle. Someone waved. She waved back.

She found a seat and watched the disembarking passengers being hugged and welcomed ashore. Rachel knew how lucky she was. Everyone else she knew had one mother, one woman who loved them more than life. For some reason, she'd been blessed with Joan. And Glen. When mother had died and she couldn't believe the world still turned

without her, Joan had phoned, reminded Rachel how much she was loved. She knew, in reality, that Joan and Glen couldn't possibly love her the way they loved their own daughter. But it never felt that way. Even when Glen had died. How would she and Colin feel about each other? All Joan had said was that he was two years older and great company.

Rachel felt her heart thud. There was Joan, looking frailer, smaller, than a year ago. Colin walked close, his hand offering support under her elbow. He was tall – almost as tall as Glen. He seemed kind. Rachel was surprised - she liked him immediately. They found a café and chatted through lunch and coffees. In rain jackets, they strolled the shops, she and Joan inseparable, arm-in-arm. Colin, always the gentleman, walked closest to the road. They found another café for a cuppa. Joan flirted a little. Rachel could see the desire between them, the intimacy. How she missed that. When she walked them back to meet their sailing curfew, she felt lightness, a changed perspective.

Chester's eyes caught in the headlights as Rachel turned into the driveway. He was waiting in his usual possie. He'd be starving. He smooched round her ankles as she unlocked the door and nearly tripped her as he ran ahead to wait for food. She flicked the hall light and felt the emptiness she'd built around her. A safe house, a country retreat.

"How old are you now? I've forgotten," Joan had said at the café earlier.

"You remember. Twenty-one years younger than you. Sixty-two early this year."

"I only remember what's important. You're a spring chicken," she said. "And what about romance? Anyone in your life yet?"

"I think I'm better off on my own, Joanie."

Rachel hung her coat and examined herself closely in the porch mirror. She had blamed the cancer, the mastectomy, for the marriage failure. Jim couldn't handle her decision not to have a reconstruction. Truth was, he couldn't cope with what she'd become. Terrified there'd been nothing he could do. She'd made it impossible for him to continue. He chose life. Even the children had visited less.

What if Mark had visitors? Could be perfect. Leave the cake, say how much she'd appreciated him taking Chester to the vets, the microchip, blah blah. That wouldn't sound odd. Rachel chained Mark's farm gate and drove past the sheds and up the hill. He had said this place was his hobby farm – she'd imagined something smaller.

She'd known from the start he was a decent man. He'd taken Chester to the vets when he'd found him after his wander, made sure the cat found his home. How would he react when he saw her today? She'd thrown out his number. *Call in for a brew some time.* That was before she'd deflected his attempts, been downright rude.

Only Mark's truck was parked out front. Wood splitting sounds out the back. Rachel felt the nervousness of looking a fool, of being rejected. Would serve her right. She could leave the cake, the note. It would be up to him if he wanted to see her again. Probably wouldn't.

Be brave, Joan had said. Rachel took the cake out, walked around the house. Mark hadn't heard her. He had his shirt off. He looked even better than she'd imagined. She'd only ever seen his face, his hands. Broad back, broad shouldered. She could still drop and run. He bent to pick up another, saw her, planted the axe in the block, walked towards her.

"Here," she said. "I wanted to say thank you. You've been nothing but kind to me and Chester."

“Looks delicious.”

“There’s a note too.” Rachel waited.

“Will you leave it inside? I need to finish.”

“Sure,” she said. “Leave you to it. Just wanted to apologise really.”

She couldn’t believe she fought back tears as she put the cake on his kitchen table. Three large balls of fluff were curled on the settee inside an alcove beside a pot belly stove. He’d said he was a cat person. Books covered one wall and a large wooden dresser filled another, an assortment of crockery stacking each shelf. The room was cosy. She imagined winter time, the fire burning and tea brewing. Rachel felt awkward and regret jammed into her throat. How long had she been standing there? Too long. She shut the door behind her and the wood splitting continued. She couldn’t do any more. Time to head home and start filling her life again.

Secrets

Bridget had the road to herself and planted her foot. She wasn't sure why she'd let Aroha talk her into this Saturday ritual. She loved walking along the beach - but the crack of dawn! Part of the reason for moving was to get away from alarms and schedules set by someone else. Drinking that third glass of wine had seemed a brilliant idea last night. By then she'd almost forgotten the reason for opening the bottle. She pulled into the car park.

"There you are!" Aroha emerged from her car looking immaculately groomed as always. "Ouch. What happened to you?"

"One glass too many."

"What were you celebrating?"

"Being told I had *granny moves* by some little shite. Even a banging head won't stop how much his words got to me." Bridget finished lacing her shoes and slammed the car door.

"Why didn't you phone? I would've come around. We could've had a laugh."

Bridget grimaced. "I was wallowing. And you know I don't like to invade your Friday nights." Even though Arthur had been the one who'd first planted the idea that moving to Nelson made sense, Bridget had said from the get go that she didn't want them to think she needed looking after. She followed Aroha down the track to the beach.

"Art wouldn't have minded." They emerged onto Tahuna which was scattered with people exercising in the early sun. "When I was eighteen I remember thinking twenty-two was ancient," Aroha said.

"No one here knows me. They take me as they find me. Which obviously is old."

“Are you regretting the move?”

“No. I love it here. And I love living closer to the kids.” Aroha poked her tongue out. “And you of course.”

When Bridget had told Max, Henry and Juliet that she was thinking of resigning and moving to Ruby Bay, they were encouraging. Bridget was realistic. She knew she was moving a safe enough distance to not be living in their pockets, partly it was because she’d be a cheap holiday destination and partly because she’d be more available for baby-sitting. And she wanted to be all those things.

“Is the relief teaching really worth it?” Aroha had always been a searcher for solutions, but Bridget knew there were none. What she wanted simply wasn’t hers any more.

“Maybe not.” She’d been ten years on her own and had felt it was time to retire from full-time teaching, even before she’d contemplated moving islands. Bridget knew being a stranger in a classroom would be hard. She thought she’d leapt onto the desk to sort the projector hanging from the ceiling. That’s when whatever-his-name had said *she’s breaking out the granny moves*. The other boys had snickered. There’d been an intake of breath from some of the girls.

“Let’s drop it eh?” Bridget said. “I’ve had my whinge. I’ll get over it eventually.” But this wasn’t that simple. From out of nowhere, someone had unveiled a truth that she’d avoided: *the best of life was over*. She’d had her prime and now she had to accept it. The boy had been right. She had no ammunition to retaliate.

“Arthur had better be doing his fry up this morning,” Bridget said.

“Remember those nights of our misbegotten youth when we could club till dawn and head straight to work after a feed at Harry’s Café de Wheels?” Aroha said.

“Oh for the stamina,” Bridget said.

“And the men! Hard to believe we shared a few,” Aroha said, “and no communicable diseases.”

Bridget had never told Aroha, when she introduced her to Arthur, about the night she’d spent in bed with him after going home with his flatmate. Whoever he was had passed out on the couch and she’d followed Arthur into his room. They’d fumbled around before falling asleep. A one-off total failure she’d been too embarrassed to tell even her best friend about. When Arthur and Aroha had hit it off immediately, the one thing she and Arthur were successful in was a silent communication that they’d never let on what happened.

They continued to reminisce about their Sydney flatting days while Aroha timed them to the turn-around point.

“Do you think they ever found who murdered Mrs Zigman?” Aroha said.

“I’d forgotten about her. Do you remember how you wouldn’t go into the apartment alone after that? You used to wait for me at the corner till I arrived home from work.”

“We had to pass her door!” Aroha said. “And I used to help carry her groceries.”

“You know what I miss the most?” Bridget said as they reached the cars. “Never thinking for one second that life was going to end. Even Mrs Zigman being stabbed to death with her sewing scissors didn’t register. Now the end seems too close.”

“That stupid boy has really got to you. I’ve never heard you talk like this.” And Aroha was right. He was just a fifteen year old boy but the wound was gaping.

Arthur's breakfasts were always a feast. He had laid the table out on the deck and they ate homemade hash browns, scrambled eggs and crispy bacon.

"Hair of the dog in your orange juice?" he said. "We're going up to Kaiteriteri. Why don't you come too?"

"No hair and I'll leave you two alone. I hate to admit but I still have unpacked boxes. Max and the girls are driving up next weekend," Bridget said. The truth was she didn't want to expose them to any more of her sullenness and being with them would only exacerbate it. Arthur doted on Aroha and her friend was secure knowing her husband would never let her down. Bridget could only imagine how that would be. Jealousy - how ugly.

Being on her own had become the norm in Auckland. When her colleagues had said she needed a man her life, she ought to *get back in the saddle*, she thought their ideas outdated. But now, her career, the pace of city life which had swallowed her waking moments had fallen away. She didn't want a man though. Barry leaving her for Hugh had slammed the door on her genitalia.

When she arrived home, there was a message from her sister. *Please phone when you get home*. Bridget was hopeful that she'd rung to say she'd booked to come back for Christmas. She dialled.

"It's me. What's happening?" Bridget said.

"I have news. It's not good. You know I told you I was going to the doctor because I'd had a sore stomach?" Bridget heard death. She knew its sound. Time dissolved into one moment. "It's liver cancer." Bridget watched the room's contents come into sharp focus.

"Bridge? Are you there?"

“You can’t go,” Bridget said.

“They say I have two to ten months tops.”

“I’ll book the first flight. How are the kids taking it?”

“Not good. They all want me to live with them. I said you’d come over.”

“How are you doing?” Bridget said. She couldn’t believe she’d wasted even a second on her own pathetic self-pity.

“I don’t know. I just want you here.”

When Bridget hung up, the years rolled back to when their parents died. There was some comfort in the familiarity of the numbness as she made the phone calls, began her checklist of everything she had to organise. Deaths required preparation, even though there was no fixed time of departure. They were much like births, Bridget decided. What would happen at the time was a vague notion of the reality. The only certainty was they both had “their exits and their entrances”.

Bridget was grateful when her friend turned up on the eve of her flight with a rotisserie chicken and salad, sleeping bag and dressed in cleaning clothes. Aroha set to work while Bridget finished packing and making final phone calls. Her sister Bernice sounded teary and Bridget realised their roles had switched. She had become the one to comfort, to reassure. Her sister wanted photos from the boxes they’d been meaning to sort each time Bernice flew back.

After dinner, Bridget pulled them out and tipped the contents onto the dining table. She and Aroha poured over them, sifting out all those that wouldn’t make the flight to England.

“I didn’t know you two rode,” Aroha said passing a photo of the sisters riding bareback in the surf. “How old were you there? You look hot in your boy leg two piece.”

“We’d ride the horses out to Okura River to take them swimming and Dad would launch the boat at Long Bay. Mum would pack a picnic and they’d come to meet us. I’d be about fourteen, Bernice seventeen, eighteen. That photo is definitely coming.”

“And who’s this serious young man?” She passed the sepia print of a young man in fatigues.

“Percy. Our great uncle on Mum’s side. All we really know is his name and that he died in World War One. I’ll tell you something I’ve never told anyone. Do you remember we went to see that clairvoyant in Sydney?”

“Vaguely.”

“She told me I had a guardian angel and his name was Percy and he was a family member. I thought she talked rubbish. I’d never even heard of the name Percy, let alone a relation. But I never forgot the name. When Dad died and we were sorting photos into the two families, Mum produced Percy.”

“I bet you never told her about what the clairvoyant said?”

“You know my parents. *What’s real is what you can see.* Mum would’ve thought I was nuts.”

“I like the idea,” Aroha said. “Someone watching over us.”

Bridget looked into Percy’s eyes staring questioningly at her as he posed in some distant room, life coursing through his body. *Please tell me I’ll live to be an old man?* She wished she could tell him that. How dare she had felt sorry for herself. She remembered

being bullied at high school, her father telling her off for being too sensitive. *Sticks and stones can break your bones Bridget girl, but words only hurt if you let them.*

“Are you ok?” Aroha said.

“I have to be. Bernice needs me. I just hope we get to share all our secrets. I wish I knew Percy’s.” Bridget put the photo in the *flight* pile.

She came to find her Jack Russell. *Jock was wont to take off*, she told my nephew through the ranch slider. We sat round the lunch table and listened. Or watched, like me. *I'm Dave Martineau*. The dog and his mistress must be new to the village. He made it his business to police all comings and goings. Even on holiday David couldn't doff his mantle as part of the constabulary.

Annette stuck her hand through the window for a shake. He seemed unmoved. I wasn't. Tall, broad shouldered and muscles toned, steely grey hair stylishly cropped. David said he'd keep his eye out for her dog. Genie muttered she wished people with animals would keep them under control.

"Runaway dog maybe, but gorgeous woman." Silence. David raised an eyebrow.

"I suppose she was quite striking once," Genie said.

"She's gorgeous now." Four eyes fixed on me. I'd said enough. I'd made the trip down for the annual Rock the Bach concert. Better not rock the boat as well. I didn't want to create family tensions this early into the frivolities. But David loved to tease.

"Auntie Vic! Don't tell me you've given up on men?"

"Don't tell me you're still homophobic?" But I told him what he wanted to hear.

"Don't worry. There'll be no lesbian wedding. I'm still waiting to get loved up by Keanu." I lied. Not about my lust for Mr Reeves. I still hankered after the fairy tale, a sexy brute in a Mustang, but I wasn't completely sure there'd be no lesbian wedding.

I'd seen only one other woman I'd wanted to love romantically. I was much younger then. My children were in primary school. That's where I met Margaux. She and her

husband were French physicians. Most women were attracted to Bastien. Not me. I had a crush on his wife. I told no one about my longing. Instead, each day, when I went to collect my babes from school, I'd look out for Margaux - admire her height, her cropped straight hair. I wanted to fall in love with her. Wanted her to fall in love with me. Margaux was a shock. I'd never questioned my desire for men. And for the first time in decades, I was surprised again. Maybe I'd never found another man I could love, after Murray passed, because in the recesses of my soul, I still longed for a Margaux.

"Auntie Wick?"

Maisie thrust *Where's Wally?* in my face, tugged at my blouse. Someone real to stop me from musing. I sat her on my knee and we poured the pages till one of us spotted the elusive character.

Loaded picnic basket, chilly bag with wine, blankets and insect repellent, we headed down to the lake shore amongst the summer holiday families. My grandnieces Ruby and Maisie skipped ahead with the other children. "Pistols and Peonies" were playing their opening number. Every year the same band – everyone adored them. Their covers of past hits made me feel a pulse that lay dormant. Genie sidled up, linked her free arm in mine.

"So Auntie. You going to see if you can dance the full three hours again?"

"Course she is," David answered for me. "The girls and I are relying on our dance partner."

"I need to prove to myself I can. Two hours is the goal. Any more's a bonus." I loved moving to great music. That had always been true, ever since Led Zeppelin played at Western Springs. We'd been in our last year at varsity. Murray and I became high from the

clouds of Mary-Jane smoke, thick above our heads. But now the dancing had become a measure of life force. Did I still have *it* - whatever *it* was? When I was young, I knew I was full of *it*. I felt connected to my body when rock music played. When Murray and I were passionate. When he unbuttoned my bell bottoms and peeled my tie-dyed tee shirt over my head. Curious... those single, lust-filled moments I recall. And with those other lovers, before marriage. It bothered me I could no longer remember faces, names. Or stir up that youthful passion. I was a promiscuous little tart back then. I knew it and I didn't care. My desire had been easily aroused. The touch of a hand, eyes looking into mine. But now it took someone I could never have.

"I'm counting on you, Auntie Vic. You know we only invite you for my benefit. I can't keep up with those two." We knew what Genie would be doing. Observing, wine in hand. David was the shaker of the two.

The girls were looking flummoxed when we reached the grassy area in front of the band's white tent. Another group had taken our usual spot. Newcomers. Annette and company.

"Let's squeeze in here," I said. "Let's be sociable."

"No. Up on the bank will do." No problem, I thought. Higher up meant a better place for watching during refreshment breaks.

We spread the blankets and Genie opened her beach chair and wine. The girls always took a few minutes for their shyness to dissipate as the gyrating flock grew in front of the musos. That gave David and me a moment to drink a glass with Genie before we left her for the jumping about. As we drank, I noticed that Annette was likely partnered to the Bohemian looking guy whose bent legs she was now leant against. Interesting. I quite fancied him too. They were my generation. I imagined him curling his bare legs around Annette and drawing

her closer into him. Only she became me. My heterosexual tendencies were apparently still firing.

Ruby and Maisie yanked on their father's hands and begged him to get up and dance. I handed him the rest of my glass to finish and ran towards the revellers. The girls chased after me.

"I'll be with you in a minute!" David called after us. I knew he would. But he needed *more lubrication*, as he called it. I enjoyed making a fool of myself. Alcohol not required. I gave David the thumbs up and saw the Bohemian pulling Annette to her feet. I manoeuvred the girls to where I could watch the way Annette moved.

David's dancing bordered on the grotesque and was accompanied by incessant grinning. He was in his element when doing anything with his *roguish girls*. The consummate father. If only we girls all had a father like Dave. We'd have grown up with our self-esteem intact. And the four of us danced with what my mother once called *gay abandon*. I could feel my heart thumping and was relieved when the break came. I could not admit defeat after such a short time.

"Help yourself," Genie said as she waved her hands over the spread out picnic. The girls tucked in but I noticed Annette was making her way towards the loos. I followed and joined the queue.

"Did you find Jock?"

"Yes! The devil. You were at the Martineau's?" We introduced ourselves and I lingered too long on the hand shake, searched her eyes. I remembered being pressed against a similar ablution block outside the local surf club, Murray's tongue shoved down my throat.

My father chose that moment, unknown to me, to drive by. Later, after Murray dropped me home, he shouted abuse and said if I *wanted to sleep with all the boys at the surf club, I needed to carry a packet of French letters in my pocket*. Still indignant. I said I was in love. *What would you know of love?*

“Your son and you look like you’re having more fun than the girls.” She had extricated her hand and my desire increased.

“Nephew, actually. You’re staying with family?”

“My brother-in-law has just bought a place here. He’s keen to fish. We all are.” The loos became free. In a rash moment I put both hands on her arm as she stepped forward.

“Do come and join me for a fly cast at dawn!”

All I heard was something about *my husband* as she hurried into the cubicle. Embarrassing. I’d almost grabbed her! I didn’t like to talk while I heard her weeing. Public loos. Crude. Hearing people tinkle who we don’t even know. I looked at the ten inches between the bottom of the door and the concrete floor. Another memory from varsity days. Among all the various phallic drawings, a scrawling that made me laugh out loud. *Beware of homosexual limbo dancers* and an arrow pointing to the gap. Annette was safe: my limbo dancing days were well over.

At dawn the next day, I made my way down to the stream. Just me, my fly rod and a few rising trout. Murray would have loved this morning. Glassy stillness and the waking birds. Last night’s effects, the post dancing exhaustion and a night full of dreams that woke me, had taken their toll. I didn’t cast for long before the thermos flask of tea appealed more. *Always comfort in a hot brew*, Murray would say.

I missed him now with a cold metal ache. Last night, watching the Amazon and her Bohemian, freshened the loss of love. And all those young families. I remembered Murray once saying that the grief feelings don't pass - we become more accustomed to coping with them. But sometimes the coping involves a diversion. Something that takes our fancy, reminds us we're still alive. My attraction to Annette had reminded me I was still a sexual being. I'd almost forgotten. But last night's dreams were troubling. Murray seemed so alive, so real. He undressed me, kissed me. But when it came to the act of sex, when I pulled down his jeans, he was female from the waist down. I had been desperate for him to take me, but he couldn't. I'd woken unfulfilled, frustrated.

"Any left in that flask?" It was David, fly rod and net in hand. Lost in reverie, I hadn't heard his approach.

"A mouthful." I passed him the thermos cup. "I'm glad you're here. I need the company."

We watched a trout rise and waded out. We cast in silence. Dave was the expert, his movements fluid. Before long he'd netted a rainbow. She was a beauty and I knew he'd want to smoke it.

"Don't kill it," I begged him. "I can't handle death today." Without a word, Dave unhooked the fish. With both hands he held her in the water. She lolled a few seconds and then swam away. I thanked him.

"Let's go back Auntie Vic. The girls will be up by now. I'll cook us bacon and eggs."

David carried my fishing gear and we began the uphill plod. I knew I would continue my road trip after breakfast. Every part of me wanted to return to the days when the children were young, when I was young. Life was so much more certain then, so easy, each day

dedicated to growing young people into adults. Everyone belonged. We all needed each other. I never imagined this end of life. Being alone, wanting constancy and family, intimacy, my sisters. Never imagined always having to reconcile being the last one standing and not wanting to overstay my welcome.

“What’s your next move Auntie? Heading south to look after the grandchildren?”

“I don’t know. Maybe for a while.”

I felt an overwhelming jealousy. David and Genie were living the life that I once had. It was their turn. I could visit, dip my toes in, but could never be immersed. Family, loved, but forever the outsider, the one that would come and go. It was the same at my sons’ homes. Excited to see me, but other women ran those households.

“You know we love you coming to stay, Auntie Vic. Any time.”

As I drove around the corner and the waving four went out of sight, I felt the hollowness of leaving all that love and family life behind. I wanted that feeling again, of belonging to someone, of knowing I’d be missed until I returned. I remembered the boys when they were little, running out to meet me, wrapping their arms around me and clinging like limpets. It was the first time I’d left them and I’d only been away for one night. In their world I was everything. I’d never felt more loved or needed. I knew at the time that nothing could ever come close to that feeling of returning home to my boys. I was right. Nothing ever had.

Springboard

Annie Jones' predictable life veered off at a tangent between dawn and dusk on one day. She made the usual espresso before opening her laptop. Her inbox contained two emails – one stirred her indignancy and the other her sense of adventure.

Frank's said that the marriage was over – if she wouldn't join him. Annie was shocked but not surprised. They shared a home, but rarely a life. Two things perturbed her though - his reason and his method. An ultimatum online. Not Frank's *modus operandi*. He abhorred the digital world. *Our grandchildren*, he harped after every gathering, *they can't communicate face-to-face*. She didn't like the children's incessant attachment to their phones either, but no use fretting. "All these drugs," her Mum had said when she was in her teens and went to The Rolling Stones, "what's the world coming to?" Just as well she hadn't been able to see, Annie thought.

She decided to email back. Dear Frank. Get stuffed. Love Annie. Or maybe that's what he'd expect. *You want to maintain your independence and all I want is a companion*. It was her *independence* he'd said made her so attractive when he fell in love with her. It was her *independence* in raising their children while he was away so much, for which he had been thankful. It was her *independence* he had encouraged when she was forlorn after the children left home. And now, it was her independence he didn't like at all.

I thought in this semi-retirement, you would accompany me on trips. Peru with time to spare. You would love Arequipa. We could be enjoying this place together. Instead, you seem to prefer the company of friends or spending time on your own. It was true. She enjoyed her freedom. Annie reread ... *and all I want is a companion*. Companion! It made her sound like paid help, not wife or lover.

Annie remembered the relief when he'd taken the consulting work after quitting the rigs. Home was hers again. Frank's masculinity returned and she didn't have to bump around with someone who knew the correct way to do what she'd been doing for forty years. She'd enjoyed moments of his first trip abroad, to be sure. There'd been a day or two to themselves and several meals. But she'd spent more time alone than with him, and in a city where she really didn't want to be.

This wasn't the first time Annie thought it possible that Frank had taken a lover. He used to be so physical. But she couldn't remember the last time they'd had sex. And making love was an eternity ago. Home from the rigs, the children busy playing, he couldn't wait to carry her upstairs, pull up her dress and have her. She'd needed him too, had never liked the empty bed. If she phoned and asked, she felt sure that he'd be honest. Maybe he was preparing her for the worst.

She stared at the screen. Three children and five grandchildren. Two emailed paragraphs and sayonara to forty-two years if she wouldn't acquiesce. Independence. It had never been hers. It was a myth Frank had created so that he could live the life he pleased. She'd known it all along, but it suited her. She'd never had aspirations outside her marriage. She was a family maker. Mum had warned her she was Frank's springboard, but she'd also said *if in doubt, do nothing*. Annie was unsure now.

And then there was the second email. The one she'd wanted to open first. She'd needed Frank's news to calm her. *That had worked out well*, she thought. Annie opened what she'd been waiting for. She crossed her heart and hoped her Mum would understand. While she was alive, Annie had never felt right about searching for her birth mother. And back then it all seemed too hard anyway. Dad said they were told nothing when they picked

her up from the now demolished home for single mothers – and they hadn't needed to know, they wanted her so much. Neither had they ever talked to her about their birth daughter Margaret. All she knew was there'd been an accident. But Annie's recent DNA results had invigorated the "insatiable curiosity" that her Mum said was congenital. On the website, Annie had found her birth family.

Dear Annie, I am your half-sister and your message came as a welcome surprise. (I'm a dressmaker too!) We had no idea Mum had another child. I'm sorry to inform you Aileen took her secrets with her when she died. But now we know about you, many things she did and said make sense. One thing was her insistence on going into a church if we passed an empty one. She wasn't a religious person but she'd kneel at the alter and pray for ages. There's so much to tell about Mum's marriages and your siblings but an email seems hardly the place for such matters. We could Skype, or better still we'd love to meet you. Are you able to come to Brisbane? Best wishes, Julia. P.S. And to answer your question, Aileen was born on Bartlett Street, Toronto, Ontario.

Annie remembered her Dad's wake with Mum being so annoyed when someone had said where one door closes, another one opens. "It's not true," she'd whispered, "a person has to want to open a door and to close one."

Annie felt like she was sitting in no-man's land, caught in the cross-fire between two doors partially ajar. She wanted them both wide open. She didn't want her marriage to be over – she'd always loved that her future brought Frank's return. But she longed to reclaim her past as well. Ever since she could remember, she'd wanted to know the truth. And Annie had been scared she'd die before she knew it. And her children had the right to know. If Mum had been there, she would have said, *Everything will become clear over a pot of strong tea.*

It was while she made herself a brew that Annie spotted another door. With every sip she became more convinced it was the perfect route to take. She skyped Julia who agreed to the plan and then phoned the travel agent. By evening, all the arrangements had been made.

She considered skyping Frank but decided his email deserved another - eventually. Besides, Annie was beginning to feel nervous about what she was embarking on. He might try and talk her out of it. She phoned the children and they gave their blessing. Thomas, the youngest, said he admired her *spunk*.

After a week of meeting family at Julia's, the two sisters flew to Vancouver. While they waited in a café to board their train for Toronto, Annie wrote the fifth and final attempt at her email to Frank.

The shock of your email has jolted me into taking decisive action. You've always said you admired my independent spirit. I'm with one of my half-sisters and we're hoping to find our mother's birth place. In the meantime, if it's a companion you're after, I hope you find one after our divorce. But if it's a wife you're after, we'll have to discuss whether you have what it takes to hang on to this one.

Flaws

I was lying naked under a sheet, Joy photographing the damage, when I had the epiphany. Her face was close and I could see every line. She looks like a grandmother type, I thought. Then it hit me: *I look like a grandmother type*. We'd discovered our birth days were six apart. When she had approached me in reception, I assumed she was older.

I suddenly understood how others looked at our hoary sisterhood - and judged us. And I was clearly still balancing the vanity of my youthful insecurities and the ones that come with wrinkles, grey hair and an evaporated sex appeal.

"When I turned thirty," Joy said, "life seemed to extend into eternity."

"I couldn't even imagine growing old," I said. "It was like trying to get my mind to see how far the universe stretches."

"Sixty suddenly made what's left of life too short."

I agreed. "Living becomes urgent." Joy's camera began to click over my face. "Maybe we love life more passionately with the end so much closer." I wanted to ask her if she was afraid of dying. But it's the one question I was too scared to discuss with anyone. I might discover I was alone with my terror. Or open a Pandora's box.

"You have two spots," she said, "with white stripes in them, and another that may have to be excised. I'll be discussing your photos with the doctor."

"What do the stripes mean?"

"We'll need to keep our eye on those ones."

"How long will you work for?"

“At least another ten years,” she said. “And you?”

“I can’t imagine not working. But there’s so much to cram into life.”

“We might have another thirty years,” she said. “My dad’s ninety-four.”

While I was driving home and contemplating living three more decades, Tim phoned from Dunedin.

“Are you going to the reunion?”

“What reunion?”

“Rangitoto’s sixtieth, next weekend.”

“Didn’t know there was one.” He said he’d sent me an email.

“If you’re going, I’ll go,” I said. I didn’t care if he was bringing the partner I’d never met. I wanted to see him – it had been years. And I was curious.

“Doesn’t seem like ten years since the last one,” I said. I had been married at the time, and Tim, newly divorced, had just returned from living in England. Back then he was angling to entice me away from my husband. Little had I known Richard was simultaneously being lured.

“If you’d seen my email and replied, I would have come alone.”

“You haven’t changed,” I said. “See you at the reunion. Maybe.”

I remembered the last one. It had been thirty-five years since I’d walked through the school gates. The campus had developed into a colossus, and the school hall in which I’d snickered with other girls through assemblies, had morphed into an auditorium. Wearing my colour-coded registration tag, I set off to find Tim and the classes of the late sixties. The first group

was too old so I began my stroll around the hall's periphery to find my colour match, past swarms of young boozing strangers and all the way back to where I'd started. Tim appeared out of the old batch to which we belonged and scooped me up. I felt the decades melt, the comforting familiarity of his arms. I couldn't believe how wonderful it was to lean into him as we chatted with people we'd once pushed and shoved in the corridors. He kissed me often, full on the mouth, just as he had on our first date – annoying, but his desire made me feel beautiful. There was no guilt. For that night, my other life ceased to exist. Tim had always taken over my being that way.

Steve Bruce, one of the naughty boys of our high school years, said we ought to get a room. Lorraine Mallinson, the blonde beauty who had filled all the boys' dreams with burning lust, now an earth mother type, assumed we were together.

"I can't believe you two are still so in love after all these years," she said to me while Tim and Steve chatted.

"We're not together."

"Well you should be," she said. "I always thought you two were a sure thing."

I'd thought nobody had noticed us. We had been too wrapped up in each other to give anyone else a moment's notice. Tim turned back to me at that point and pulled me in closer. I rested my head against his chest.

"Stay with me," he rasped into my ear, "always."

"Duty will prevail," I said. And in spite of how right we felt together, and in spite of how much he tried to convince me otherwise, I did return to Richard who showed little interest in my trip to Auckland and my return to childhood haunts. By the time we separated, Tim and his new woman had become de facto.

Within a week I was back on Joy's plinth. While she cut out the dodgy looking spot on my cheek, she said my previous visit had begun an unusual day. She'd seen three other women in their sixties and like us also studying to change their direction. "And then there was a fourth," she said, "a seventy-seven year old, who is the top real estate sales person with her company. It made me wonder how many of us are out there who are squeezing everything possible into this end of life."

I wasn't allowed to talk until she'd finished.

"Maybe," I said, "we should all start a club. Or a political party." I think she thought I was being flippant, and maybe I was. But there was something inside me that was beginning to wish it had a place to be heard.

I was too weak to stay away from the reunion and I examined my masochism on the drive from Whangarei. Self-flagellation would likely have been preferable. I considered doing a u-turn on the road -- and then considered it again when I walked into the auditorium.

I made sure I looked at the colour of the registration tags, not peoples' faces.

I found our group near the stage and there was no mistaking us this time. Apart from a few, I thought we all looked fairly fucked. But underneath all that thinning grey hair, the larger noses, ears and waistlines, I knew there was a bunch of kids who were out to reconnect.

And then Tim and Ellen arrived. She looked gorgeous, probably in her fifties. He looked proud. The fresh sutures on my face began to throb after she kissed me on both cheeks. Tim gave me a warm smile and a peck. Ellen and I did the blah blah of nice to meet you and I was about head off to find another drink when she touched me on the arm.

“It’s rather daunting meeting you,” she said. “Tim has talked about you so much, I feel as if I know you.”

I looked at Tim and he shrugged. “It’s true.”

“Bugger. That’s scary.” I began to feel some confidence return.

“When we first started seeing each other,” she said, “we nearly broke up because he talked so much about you.”

“What an idiot,” I said.

“He even told me he’d not stay with me if you left your husband.”

“How thoughtful of him.”

I was going to ask why she hadn’t walked, but I could see. Ellen exuded confidence in her own appeal. She had lashings while mine had come undone somewhere in the last few years.

“I was worried for a while,” she said, “when you and your husband separated.” I looked to Tim but couldn’t read his face. I hoped my silence didn’t tell the story. The last time I’d seen him was after Richard and I had split. We met in Wellington while Tim was there on business. I knew he and Ellen were talking of buying a house and I knew what I was doing was wrong. I stayed with him in his hotel room, and over dinner and breakfast he made the case for why we should be together. *The timing is all wrong* I told him. *It’s only months I’ve been on my own.* He said *we’ve never got it right. I’ve spent most of my life wondering if I’ll end up chasing you around a nursing home with my Zimmer frame.*

I could not connect with his morbid fantasy. On the flight home I was relieved I hadn’t let Tim do more than hold me while he masturbated. If I’d given my body, I knew I wouldn’t have been able to retrieve my heart.

“Ah well,” I said, hoping I hadn’t given anything away, “clearly you had nothing to worry about. I can see how much he adores you.”

“We’re rather similar though, don’t you think?” she said.

“I’m honestly flattered if you think that.”

Tim offered to find us a drink and desperate not to expose my thoughts, I steered Ellen over to Lorraine Mallinson’s group, did the introductions. Lorraine was still recovering from a mild stroke and considering herself fortunate. She also took me aside and asked what had happened with Tim and about the new woman *who looks remarkably like you by the way – same hair, same build, same cheekbones?*

“I think it’s a matter of wrong timing,” I said.

“Do you really? You don’t think that sometimes we’re just too scared to let ourselves have what we know we really want?”

“I wondered about that. Scared that something will work - or that it won’t.”

“Is it too late?”

Lorraine was holding my gaze and I could see, in spite of her altered facial features, she seemed to not allow the defect to change her pragmatic outlook on life.

“Well it is,” I said, “for Tim and I, that is.”

And then it hit me. Somewhere inside I was still clinging to some misguided nostalgia about our past. And then I said it. I asked the thing I was too scared to ask anyone.

“Are you afraid of dying?”

“Aren’t we all?” Lorraine said. I took some comfort from her question and spent the rest of the evening pretending to have a pleasant time, pretending I didn’t care that the last

time we'd been there, Tim hadn't been able to keep his hands off me. My glances to find Tim and Ellen were only intercepted once. Tim caught my eye and winked. And when he hugged me at the goodbyes, he whispered a thank you.

"Fuck you too," I said.

Next day I drove home thinking if Lorraine could be ballsy, so could I. That thing inside me that needed to be heard was this older version of me who I didn't want to accept. I knew I'd taken Richard back because I believed he, like everyone, deserved another chance – and of course Tim was happy with Ellen by that time. But the person I'd needed to give the second chance was me. There was too little life left to ever pretend again.

"Greetings," Richard said as he held the door open. He'd made dinner, opened the wine and made an effort to sound genuinely interested in my past life excursion. He's basically a good man, I thought. None of us are perfect, especially me.

"I've been trying to recapture something that evaporated a long time ago," I said.

"Your relationship with Tim?"

"Embarrassing to admit - but yes, he's a part of what I've been struggling with."

Richard waited patiently while I sifted through the plethora of insecurities I'd been accumulating.

"I've been letting all this deterioration on the outside, being scared of all this physical decline, affect the essence of who I am. I've lost the knowing of who I am. All those young bodies at the reunion. That was me once, feeling like I could conquer the world, have whatever I want. I don't know if I'm making an ounce of sense."

“Makes perfect sense. We want to recreate something we’ve lost. My affair for example. Can’t stand our bodies are starting to show all that life we’ve lived.”

“It makes me crazy,” I said.

“It makes us scared of dying,” he said.

Richard was way ahead of me in accepting the decay. I knew that was a starting point.

“Talking of which,” I said, “I should get the results of the biopsy tomorrow.”

“Worried?”

“A little. Maybe. No point really though. Nothing I can do about it.”

Lifelines

Snowing and him warm and waiting. So much for contriving to arrive after him, needing to seem like a woman who had her shit together. Large flakes turned to sludge against the wipers and Prue cursed herself. Of all the damned stupid things she'd done in her life. Tail lights up ahead, hopefully a snow plough.

She'd allowed an indulgent thought -- champagne chilling, king size bed -- but Clive said he'd booked the best rooms. *Plural*. He said they could fly cast. Fishing was safe. No talking required if they found too much life had passed. He was catching up with childhood mates and she happened to be one of them.

He'd loved her ass, always grabbed hold as he took her. The memory still sometimes made her ache. She'd taken it all for granted. And him emerging from the surf at Raglan, water dripping from sun-bleached curls. Sunk with him in a beanbag. She'd taste his skin while they smoked pot and played LPs. Prue sang to fill a void. *Remember what we've said and done and felt about each other. Don't let the past remind us of what we are not now...*

Prue crawled through the gorge and relaxed when the red lights reappeared. Her life - after life. Promiscuous twenties. Martin to the rescue. Motherhood – the best part. Her career. Nearly seventy and she'd lived only fragments of different lives. Maybe a punishment for her youth – her careless disregard for what really mattered. But Clive, he'd always been whole, knew who he was. Hardly surprising when she'd found him again online. Meridians Acupuncture and Chinese Medicine, Byron Bay. She'd never expected him to reply.

She worried he'd find she had no substance. Nothing had compared after mothering was over. Only a sharp point of emptiness had endured. Prue's stomach churned on the

descent towards Turangi. Would he be looking out for her? She'd have to stop at Z petrol station. No way was she pulling up to the lodge and making a dash for the bathroom.

She tinged the bell. A young woman appeared, gave her the key, the directions, *a carton of milk for a nice cup of tea – and I've turned the heater on in your room.* She accelerated slowly towards her unit. They'd have dinner together, maybe breakfast. She wouldn't drag out the stay. Clive wouldn't mind. And tomorrow night she'd arrive home, dignity intact.

Clive smelt snow as he found the narrow track following the river away from the lodge. Maybe an hour of light left and he needed the walk. He didn't know what to expect. She had seemed more shocked than pleased when he phoned from Auckland - her reaction the opposite to her enthusiasm when he'd called over the past however many years.

He wove his way around the tussocks of toetoe. He'd never told Jenny about his Christmas greetings' conversations from his practice. She'd been jealous enough when she'd discovered Prudence had found him on Facebook. What would she think of this meeting? This end of life was brutal and it was too easy to become maudlin. He had no right. He was better off than most of his mates, the living ones. He was fit and his mind sharp. And Prudence was prepared to change her plans for him, even if "of course we'll be in separate rooms!" had been in her tone.

Clive thought of her leaving him at Auckland Airport years ago. He'd played it over and over in his head. *Do you want me to wait for you?* and her *You do what you want. I am.* They hugged. She'd vanished. Nearly fifty years and he'd never forgotten the feel of her mouth on his body, her hair draped over his skin.

Clive had showered and changed for dinner when his phone rang.

“Good evening Prudence.” Could she hear his heart thudding? “You took your time. At least that’s one thing I know hasn’t changed.”

“Old habits.”

“Is thirty minutes enough before I pick you up for dinner? There’s a fire in the lounge - an aperitif?”

“Perfect. See you then.” She sounded incredibly calm, dismissive. Something else that hadn’t changed. He tried to read the newspaper while he finished his camomile tea.

Prue realised she was trembling as she dried herself. Only a wall separating them. She slid her stockings up. She reminded herself to breathe. He was the only person left who called her Prudence. He’d sounded business like, told her off. She’d forgotten he’d always chided her for her idiosyncrasies. Especially after he’d come in from surfing when he’d momentarily resist her. She stepped into her dress, smoothed it in front of the mirror. Looking good, in spite of the long drive.

If only she could stop shaking. Pretend confidence. She stepped up to her reflection and looked herself in the eyes. What would he see? A woman who’d lived a full life without him – or the girl he’d loved? Their first date. She couldn’t believe he’d asked her out and there he was, on her doorstep, tight black pants, black shirt laced loosely across his chest. Seventeen – the first time she’d felt desire in her depths – its power.

A knock. No escape. You can do this. Deep breath, shoulders down.

Prue opened the door. The love of her life. Her one regret.

“I’m so nervous,” he said. “You look wonderful.” His eyes still sparkled and there was his cheeky smile.

“You’re still the same,” she said. “I’ll get my coat and you can take me to dinner.”

They ambled towards the main building and she slid her arm through his.

“Stay close,” he said. “So little time.”

“I want to go home tomorrow,” she said.

“Hardly surprising. When have you ever stayed when I wanted you to?”

“The OE thing? You never asked me to.” All she’d wanted was that he’d pleaded with her, shown her the depth of his feeling. “And you didn’t wait for me.”

“You never asked.”

“That didn’t mean I didn’t want you to.” Clive opened the door. She stepped inside and turned for his cue as the maitre d’ approached. The door had closed and Clive hadn’t followed. Panic. She opened it – he was on the threshold. “Are you coming in?”

“Do you want me to?” he said. She put her hands in the prayer pose and he stepped inside.

“Plus ca change, plus c’est la meme chose,” he said. They took a seat by the fire and Clive ordered.

“Your accent’s great.”

“I spent time in France – after Jenny died,” he said. “Why won’t you stay two nights?”

“It’s a self-preservation thing.” She knew for sure now that she couldn’t stay. She never wanted to leave him again. And in two days he was travelling on, leaving her behind. She had to leave first. He had a strength she’d never had. He’d leave and take another fragment of her with him.

“Stay with me tonight. Let me hold you at least.” Clive put his palms together in the prayer pose. Prue shrugged her shoulders. She knew she would. She longed to lie with her face against his chest, hear his heart beating.

Clive feasted on the look of her. White hair piled on top of her head, that pointed chin he’d loved to cup as he kissed her. Her cheekbones, even more prominent, and frank eyes watching him closely. He managed to steer their dinner conversation in the vicinity of safe territory. He longed to share his pain, but didn’t want her pity. He wanted to tell her about his daughter’s suicide. His prognosis. He wanted more to take an untainted memory with him when he returned home.

It was freezing when they walked back to their rooms. He was pleased he’d brought his beanie. For all her teasing quips, she’d said nothing about his bald pate. Clive walked her to her room and wasn’t surprised when she asked him in. They’d never managed to keep distance between them. He pulled his toothbrush from his jacket pocket.

“Got floss?” he said. She punched him on the arm.

When he emerged from the bathroom, she was already in bed.

“I’d have liked to watch you undress,” he said.

“Too old. Night dress. But I can watch you. And keep your knickers on.”

She snuggled up to him and wrapped a leg around his.

“May I kiss you?” he said. She patted the top of her head.

“Just hold me,” she said. “I want to fall asleep listening to the sound of you.”

Clive tried to stay awake as long as he could. He felt her breathing deepen. It was best they hadn't delved past the surface of their lifetime apart. There'd been too much of it. And there was no need. He couldn't offer her anything – time was too short. She would leave after breakfast and that was just one more thing he had to face on his own.