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# So Let it Fall

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the  
requirements for the degree of

Master of Creative Writing

Massey University, Wellington, New Zealand

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## **Abstract**

*What are you?* This Master of Creative writing thesis seeks to explore this question and other questions it leads to. The thesis consists of a collection of linked autobiographical stories that explore identity, “So Let it Fall” (80%), and an accompanying exegesis, “What Are You?” (20%).

Through the writing of “So Let it Fall” I tell the story of my own experiences as a multi-ethnic woman growing up in New Zealand with mixed Māori, Chinese and Pākehā heritage. I explore this mixed identity throughout my project through evoking contrasts and contradictions within my own personal experiences. Specifically, I tell a story of living between two parents, and I focus on the separations that developed within my life and my identity as a result of living between two cultural upbringings. When evoking different identities in “So Let it Fall,” I wrote in scene to highlight formative moments in my life as well as scenes that illustrate important characteristics in each of my parents that have been formative of my own identity. In the creative work as a whole I delve into the different roles that I have moved through as I grew up, and by doing so discover who I am.

The accompanying exegesis “What Are You?” places “So Let it Fall” in context by exploring the driving questions behind this project and explicating the creative process involved. The purpose of this exegesis is to

illuminate the ideas and research that went into the production of “So Let it Fall.” This is done first by outlining why I chose the the form of autobiography, then examining a range of recent autobiographical writing in New Zealand and the various perspectives these works offer. Specifically, I discuss how the nonfiction writing of Witi Ihimaera, Manying Ip, Alice Te Punga-Somerville, Tina Makereti, Tze Ming Mok, Ashleigh Young and Tracey Slaughter have informed my work.

The intent of this combined creative and critical project is to find value in personal experiences and to create a wider pool of experiences within creative nonfiction writing in New Zealand. This thesis is not constructed to represent or speak for any ethnic groups or identities. This is formation of an identity through autobiographical writing that is my own.

*For Jordan,  
who encouraged me.*

*A special thanks to my parents,  
Charlotte Porter, Terry Greeks and Robyn Greeks,  
who without, I would have nothing to say.*

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## Part One: Creative Work

### **So Let it Fall**



## Preface

When I'm at Dad's the rain smells like freshly cut grass and wood smoke. First thing in the morning Dad checks the weather. "Supposed to rain later, better get out there and mow the lawns. I can see the flowers." Robyn gets up and wraps her fluffy robe around her. "How about I light the fire?" I flip on the jug and make us all cups of tea. The fire's roaring by the time Dad comes in smelling like grass and petrol. "Go have a shower Terry, you stink," Robyn calls from the kitchen. The rain starts to fall. The sweetness of the decapitated daisies fills the house and as I open the door to the fire to place more wood on the flames, the smoke seeps out with the heat. I lie on the rug in front of the fire and sip my tea.

At Mum's the rain smells like her mood. She rushes in from the car after being at work, going to the gym and stopping by a friend's. She flicks on the heat pump immediately as high as it can go. I bring in a basket full of slightly damp logs and somehow Mum manages to get the fire in the lounge started before lighting the other fire in the dining room. "It's so cold." She shivers as she throws on a chunky jumper. She places a small dish of water and oil on top of the fire to humidify and scent the house. Some special blend of essential oils to perk her up or calm her down. She runs a bath and adds the oils to it as well. She soaks for an hour or so and I lean against the basin while we chat.

In the bush by the Mōhaka River the rain smells like dirt. As we wind

through the trees and claw our way up cliffs I breathe it in. As we cross a stream I notice the water is running harder, faster. Even with the rain I'm tempted to swim. If it wasn't for the phone in the pocket of Dad's hunting coat I'm wearing, I'd lie down and let the water take me. Or at the very least fall in accidentally.

At Waipātiki, the waves crash down on the sand and the wind whips through the pine trees and as the rain falls and combines, the air becomes heavy. Along the dirt track that coils around the rocky coast the sea spray hits my lungs, the dirt becomes mud, making a precarious walk even more dubious. In some places the track falls off the cliff and as I side step along it I can see the white foamy sea encroaching on the rocks below.

Here, in Welly, the rain smells like concrete. The buildings loom above me, reaching up into the dark clouds overhead as I hurry along the streets. Once inside it smells like fresh linen tumbling in the dryer. It smells like scented wood-smoke candles and nights wrapped up on the couch with my fiancé, Jordan, in itchy wool blankets. It smells like hot cocoa being whisked fervently on the stove, it smells like wet wool coats hanging on the doorknob, it smells like home.

Whatever the scent I find it intoxicating, these small drops of water reacting with my surroundings. All these smells speak of the people and the places I love, that I belong to. They take me through time and space. From my gangly childhood, to my now, my tomorrow. These places have changed though, both physically and what they mean to me. But they still

smell the same when it rains. Rain is supposed to be cleansing, supposed to represent fresh beginnings. But for me, when I am caught in the rain, I am covered in memory. Each drop a moment. Some I like to remember, some I'd rather forget. But they are mine. They seep into my skin until I am soaked. That's if I step outside.

As I'm writing this, the rain is falling. I can hear it. A gentle, rhythmic pattering with concentrated gushes falling from the gutter to the wooden steps outside. Occasionally the wind picks up and the rain slaps against the windows before being tossed in another direction. These drops of water try to reach the land, try to nourish the earth, try to do their job. They combine to do something bigger than one drop is capable of. Like words coming together to create sentences, sentences paragraphs, paragraphs becoming a story, part of a voice, part of something more than its writer.

When I started writing this I thought it might enable me to have some kind of cultural epiphany, allow me to work towards an understanding of myself, of where I exist in this world. For a lot of my life I've never been completely at peace with my ethnic identity. It's hard, weighing up an identity that has so much historical context. An identity that has been born from those in power and those without, each of those sides catching me in their current and pulling, pulling, pulling. I think that might be why I've become so adept at change, changing my mask to suit a situation, rolling with the punches.

That isn't what this has become though, this is something wider. Experiences pooling together to become a story. It's about my family. It's



about home. It's about belonging. It's about the things in life that follow you and that form you. I realised something along the way too. I realised there's not necessarily a right way or a wrong way to be multicultural. I realised that all my hang-ups on not being enough, were mine. I realised I could stop dwelling on what I could have, should have, would have done to be better, and I let it go. By doing this I allowed myself to stop searching for this elusive self-acceptance and just soak in what was, what is.

Rivers are birthed and maintained by regular rain, and this story will grow, word-by-word. The rain is becoming a stream. The drops reach out to each other to combine, each drop rolling into the next, becoming bigger, becoming more. It's moving constantly, gathering speed.

I wonder when the rain outside will stop. It seems to have been going on forever. I know not everyone likes the rain. Kiwis seem to like to complain about it all the time. But I love the rain. I love creating a space in which I can see, hear and smell the rain but it can't physically touch me. It's streaking against the window running into mini-rivers along the panes, but I am safe. Sometimes I'm tempted to run outside. Tempted to break out of my cocoon and let the rain run over me. I can see myself out there, standing with my face and palms upturned. The droplets beading on my skin, my hair plastered to my back, my clothes clinging to my body. Just the rain and me.

I stand on my doorstep looking out. The sheets of water waver in the wind, the sound surrounds me, building. I take a step out. Still sheltered I

hesitate, like the spindly naked tree outside my door I shiver in the wind. I know if I keep going, it'll get to me, it'll take me back in time. I don't know if I want to go there, to think about it, relive it, but I know that I need to.

So let it fall.



## Family Tree

### To start there are my parents:

Terry Raymond Greeks

B. 11.12.1968

Charlotte Renee Porter

B. 05.09.1972

### Then there are their parents, my grandparents:

John Edward Greeks

B. 1927

D. 2003

Graham Porter

B. 1936

D. 2000

Pirihira (Emily) Greeks (Hōri)

B. 1925

D. 1995

Robin Porter (Dahm)

B. 1942

Alive

### Then there are my grandparents' parents, my great-grandparents:

#### John's parents:

Phylis Elizabeth Greeks (Abbott)

B. 1909

Ran away

George Edward Eversfield Greeks

B. 1906

D. 1974

#### Graham's parents:

Karen Jane Porter

B. 1912

D. 1995

Henry James Porter

B. 1902

D. 1986

#### Emily's parents:

Maraea Hōri (Pairama-Mu)

B. 1903

D. 1968

Kawhi Hamahona Hōri

B. 1889

D. 1968

#### Robin's parents:

Ella Charlotte Dahm (Pearce)

B. 1908

D. 2004

John (Jack) Harris Dahm

B. 1900

D. 1980



# **Whakapapa**



### *Family facts and fiction*

Before you read my stories it's important you know what came before me, who came before me. I'm still learning about my whakapapa; there are gaps that need to be filled, questions that need to be asked. The more I learn about my ancestors the more I realise I have no clue who they were and what their lives were like. When I was little I was told so much surface information. On my dad's side you would often hear.

"Your grandmother was Māori-Chinese."

"Your grandad was Scottish."

"Our tribe is up north, Ngāpuhi I think."

I have always had an overactive imagination and used this information as the basis to create what I now "know" about my family. I took these off-hand remarks to mean that my grandmother was half-Māori and half-Chinese, but always wondered why there are no remnants of Chinese culture in my family, why we are more Māori-European. I searched my mind, wading through memories, trying to remember. I started striking up casual conversations with my dad, with the purpose of finding answers. Trying to know what he knows. I kept coming up short, either asking the wrong questions or shying away from the task.

On a recent trip home my fiancé looked at my great-grandfather and great-grandmother's portrait that hangs in the hallway next to that of Nana and Grandad. He asked which of them was which, because I had told him



that one was Māori and one was Chinese. I glanced casually up and said my great-grandfather was Chinese and walked away to my room. At the same time Dad called from the lounge that it was my great-grandmother who was Chinese. I stopped in the doorway.

I couldn't believe it. Hadn't he told me it was the other way around? I realised I had looked at the same portraits and a younger me had decided that with his high cheek-bones and almond eyes it must have been my great-grandfather, Kawhi, who was Chinese. My great-grandmother, Maraea, had softer features and smiling eyes and I had assumed she was Māori. I was wrong.

I was even wrong about Nana's origins. Maraea was half-Māori/half-Chinese and Kawhi was Māori. This meant that Nana who I had always thought was half-Māori/half-Chinese, was in fact only a quarter Chinese, making my dad an eighth Chinese and me one-sixteenth Chinese.

I was oddly relieved by this revelation. The reasons my family has lost touch with its Chinese identity made more sense to me. It is common for mixed culture families to pick one main ethnic identity and since my great-grandfather was Māori and my great-grandmother half Māori, their choice to identify as Māori felt logical. I felt like these numbers meant it was okay and that I wasn't at fault for not having a connection to my Chinese ancestry. When really these numbers don't mean anything. Instead of feeling relief for not having to live up to my Chinese heritage, I should feel sadness about the loss of that cultural identity and how that might

have felt in my great-grandmother Maraea's time or even my nana Emily's time. Did they feel that loss or was it a natural movement, or perhaps were there external pressures that drove them away from a Chinese identity?

When I ask myself why it matters, one half this, one quarter that, one eighteenth this, I realise it comes from being asked. When someone finds out what my different ethnicities are, they seem to immediately want to know how much of each and what side did it come from. It also comes internally. Distant cousins would boast that they were half-Māori, so that meant they were more Māori than I. More. We boast about being more when our children have no option other than to be less if we keep placing the strength of our culture in the strength of our blood quantities. My own discomfort doesn't come from the numbers though, instead it comes from my actions (or lack of). I do not speak Māori, I am not physically connected with my iwi and I do not know where my Chinese ancestors come from. It wasn't until recently that I began to see the tragedy in that, and began to try to remedy it.

People often talk about "white guilt" but what we don't talk about is the guilt that multicultural individuals feel when they have seemingly abandoned one aspect of their ethnic identity. This is the type of guilt that rises when I see other multi-ethnic people show how proficient they are at being one culture or another, when I struggle to be anything. When this happens I wonder whether there was more I could have done to be a better Māori, to know more about my Chinese heritage. And, of course, there was.

I can see clearly moments in my life when I turned away from my heritage to pursue being more normal, more mainstream, more white.

On my mother's side the stories were different but still just as vague.

"Your great-grandmother was a witch."

"I think there's some Māori heritage somewhere, way back. Ngāti Kahungunu, maybe."

"Our family came from England. We're just European mutts."

But the vagueness didn't seem to matter, didn't seem to bother any one. We always had a strong family identity. You could hear anyone of us say "The Porters are fucking nutters" and it wouldn't be an insult, it was almost a boast. "My family is more whacky than yours." The craziness was the cord that linked us all.

It wasn't unusual for someone to get punched in the face at Christmas. Usually it was between my aunties. One Christmas, two of my aunties decided to "take it outside," which ended up with two large women rolling around in the mud and rain. Another time, when I was eleven, my cousin called me a "black bitch" after I dropped a bed base on myself. I retaliated that she was a "fat cow" and she responded by picking me up by my hair and throwing me into a pot plant. Another Christmas at my aunty's house I was pouring a glass of coke. My aunty's then-husband proceeded to yell, "You better not be drinking any of the alcohol." I gestured to the coke. He decided to carry on, "You kids are just a bunch of fucking leeches." My

cousin, Jordan and I then left with the word “cunt” on our lips and our middle fingers in the air. Happy Christmas! We usually forgave each other though, put it down to our family’s quirkiness and moved on. Usually.

I don’t know where our collective crazy comes from. Nana Robin has always been an eccentric woman. I can remember staying with her in her Tauranga home. She’d wake us up in the middle of the night to drive by her boyfriend’s house, as she was certain he was cheating on her. It was probably my grandad’s fault that she felt so insecure.

I didn’t really get to know my mother’s father, Graham. He died when I was around twelve and before that my meetings with him were in large family situations. He was the father of fourteen children and the grandfather of over twenty, so I wasn’t very special to him and he wasn’t very special to me.

When Graham died he was laid out in my uncle’s home for people to come see him before the funeral. I stood there looking at him, my arm linked with my cousin Alexis’. We stood awkwardly in the room unsure of what to do. Then his best friend Basil came in. Basil was Greek and had been friends with my grandad since he had come to New Zealand. When Basil saw Graham, he dropped to his knees, “Oh Matey,” he cried. He dragged himself to the coffin and flung himself over my grandad’s body. He sobbed loudly, repeating “Oh Matey” over and over, his body shaking violently as he pawed at the coffin. I cried then, but it wasn’t for my grandad, it was for Basil.

This is just the surface though. It's the things we don't talk about that are more interesting. When I started asking questions, pestering my parents, I realised that there are so many more stories I could tell. My imagination got the better of me and at times I couldn't help but get swept up in stories that might bear no resemblance to what actually happened.

*History? It's me, Stevie.*

Sue, born Huhana, was one of seven daughters to Kawhi and Maraea. She met and fell in love with a boy named John Greeks, my grandad. My grandad worked on farms as a labourer throughout the countryside, moving to where the work was with his identical twin brother Doug. Sue's parents refused to let my grandad marry her. They didn't let her leave the house and would not allow my grandad to visit her.

Sue killed herself.

I wish I had a picture of Sue. I wish I could tell you she was beautiful or that she was talented. I wish I could tell you what she was like, but I can't. Instead I can only imagine.

I can imagine her and her sisters walking down the road to school. Their hair carefully curled against their heads, their smooth brown skin glowing as the sun beat down on them, in their thick woollen dresses. Sue's brown, almond eyes would catch my grandad's blue ones and coyly glance away. Her older sisters being protective of her would tell her to stop looking at the sweaty, redheaded farm-boy who leaned against the fence as they walked by.

Perhaps Sue found an excuse to walk that road alone. Finding him fresh from bathing in a nearby river, his red hair slicked back and a bunch of flowers in his hand. Stolen kisses on the side of the road as the sun set, or maybe they lay down in a nearby paddock, her cheeks flushed as they

pressed into the dew drop grass. Then she'd have to rush home, unable to meet her parents' eyes when they asked her where she had been and why she was so late.

I can see Kawhi and Maraea's faces when Sue presented them with my grandad, John. Kawhi's lips white as he pressed them together and set his jaw. Maraea's eyes wide and lower lip loose. My grandad a scruffy farm-boy who wouldn't be able to give Sue the life they wanted for her, wouldn't be able to look after her. "We want to get married."

In my mind Sue's hopeful eyes, plead with her parents. Kawhi, strong and lean, snapping and grabbing Grandad by the collar of his shirt and throwing him out. Then heading back inside to banish Sue to her room. "You can stay in there until you get your head straightened out." He'd pace the hallway outside.

For weeks perhaps Sue locked herself in her room. Refusing to talk to anyone unless they let her marry John. Kawhi would bang on her door every day and ask if she'd changed her mind. Sue would sob and beg and plead with her father. "Please Dad, please let me marry him. I love him." Her sisters would watch as her father walked away shaking her head.

Maraea might retreat to the kitchen, avoiding the drama by cooking a meal, attempting to bring the family together with food. She'd knock gently on the door before placing a plate outside Sue's room. "Have some kai my love. Food will make you feel better."

I can see Sue slip out one night. Sneaking down the hallway, out the

back door, to the moonlit porch. I can see her pick up her father's shotgun that rested near the backdoor before walking out to the shed. Here she'd find a box of bullets, slide back the bolt, insert a blood-red cartridge before locking it back in place. She'd slide the barrel between her lips stretching her arms to reach the trigger. Her hands trembling. Maybe she walked out into the garden, looked up at the stars before closing her eyes and pulling the trigger.

The family, crowding around the kitchen, her brothers fighting over the largest cuts of meat, her sisters chatting as they dished up, would freeze at the sound. Confused they might head outside, Kawhi in the lead. He would reach for his shotgun as he walked outside and notice it missing. Then he would panic. "Get back inside, make sure Sue's in her room." He would run then, out towards the shed and see his daughter, lying still on the grass.

Days later, I can imagine my grandad's face when he turned up; hat in hand, to beg for Sue's hand. Perhaps Kawhi offered him his hand and lead him inside the house, where they would have a cup of tea together. Walking past Sue's coffin in the lounge, her sisters and mother surrounding the closed coffin with bowed heads.

Perhaps Grandad showed up at Kawhi's house once a week after that, offering to help around the house or just dropping off a fresh kill for the family. I can see Kawhi and Maraea falling in love with him, because he was easy to fall in love with. I can see them seeing what Sue saw, realising their



mistake. At night, maybe Kawhi and Maraea would lie in bed together, their arms and legs intertwining, talking about John and making plans. Like I said though, I can only imagine.

Dad told me that Kawhi and Maraea forced one of Sue's older sisters to marry my grandfather, John. Her name was Pirihiira, but she was known as Emily. She was my grandmother.

When telling me the story my dad says, "the rest is history" like it all worked out or it was a simple tale of love. I can't imagine what it would have been like to be in my nana's position. A woman who had her own life, her own trajectory. A woman who might have been in love with someone else. A woman who may have had dreams that did not coincide with marriage to a farmhand. A woman who was forced to live her sister's life. A woman who was not given the choice.

But maybe it wasn't like that. Maybe Emily wasn't against the marriage. Maybe she had noticed John too, had developed a crush on him, and maybe even loved him from a distance. They might have known each other before hand and when Kawhi and Maraea told them to get married, maybe they agreed to make the most of it, to give it a real try. Or perhaps she married him for Sue.

22 years after her daughter married my grandfather, in 1968, Maraea passed away at the age of 64. Kawhi pined for her on the porch of their home for six weeks until at age 79, he cried himself to sleep on his porch

and did not wake up. They say he died of a broken heart. My dad was born later that same year. What he knows about Kawhi and Maraea is through stories and photographs and what I know about them is through him.

John and Emily moved to Napier, had four children, three boys and a girl. My dad, Terry, was the youngest by far, twenty years younger than his eldest brother. My dad doesn't really remember his dad having much to do with him until he was about 6 or 7. He remembers that his redheaded father followed the work, lived where he found it, and would occasionally visit them on the weekend. They then moved into the country and lived a 'simple life'.

I wonder if Sue followed them there.

Dad's siblings were all grown up by this time, so he was often by himself. His father taught him to drive at age 9, and Dad would help him with work when he wasn't at school. They would hunt and fish every weekend to help supplement their groceries, as money was scarce. This has stuck with Dad, the need to hunt and gather, to provide food for the family.

When my dad was 10, the family moved back to Napier, and their house in Bayview would be one that I would eventually come to know. Once my dad left high school, where he was a self-proclaimed beast on the rugby field and cricket pitch, as well as a high-achiever academically, Dad began an apprenticeship as a carpenter. A year or so later he met Charlotte, my mum.

My mother's early years also feature poverty and a missing father. As the seventh child of nine, resources were spread thin and my Nana, Robin, had to work hard to feed them all. My grandad, Graham, was in and out of their lives, moving between my nana and another woman, Lorraine, with whom he had a second family. Why Nana kept taking him back I'll never understand, but I know she felt strongly about her duty to her husband and to her faith.

Mum was brought up mainly vegetarian due to Nana's religious beliefs, as a devout Seventh Day Adventist, Nana was strict with her dietary requirements. Nana Robin was a talented sewer and knitter, and my mother and her siblings were always well dressed, even if it was dresses made from curtain à la "The Sound of Music." Even now my aunties and uncles receive parcels from Nana full of knitted beanies and scarves. Nana also took to working on orchards and farms where she had access to unlimited corn and other vegetables. My mother still grimaces at the sight of the golden cobs.

When she was fourteen Mum moved in with her older sister Jacqui after Nana moved out to the country, because she hated country living. She stayed with Jacqui in Napier, where she attended high school and helped look after Jacqui's children. She enjoyed English and history classes but wanted to be a beautician. At her new school she found herself often in detention where she was made to copy out pages from the dictionary,

which wasn't really a punishment for her. She, like me, loves words and meanings. She was "a little bit naughty" and that was probably why she found herself attracted to the boy next door. The boy next door with blonde streaks, pierced ears, a motorbike and a six-pack.

I often refer to myself as a mistake, but Mum likes to say I was more of a surprise. She was fifteen when she found out she was pregnant with me. Nana Robin was horrified and stopped talking to my mum for quite some time. My parents had their own little flat on Bluff Hill, Napier but moved in with Dad's parents, John and Emily, to save up some money for the move. At twenty-one Dad, like many Kiwis, decided to chase the money Australia offered. Mum, almost seventeen, looked at the move as a new opportunity, a chance to be someone else. And with that we jumped the ditch.

My own memories of Sydney as a child are a blur of big buildings, buses, and trains. There are moments that stand out. Moments that I can see clearly, can almost reach out and touch. I can see the brightly coloured Bondi Beach, with its tan bodies lined up like sardines; I can see the big, rolling surf of Tamarama crashing down around me as I cling to my mother's hand; I can see the Hawkesbury River oil-slick smooth as Dad drags his oars through the water; and I can see the cliffs of The Gap overlooking the Tasman Sea as I crane my neck to look out of the airplane window.

## *Snapdragons*

"You okay?" Mum leans against my doorway and watches me.

I shrug and continue to play with my fairies. My fingers hold them delicately by their porcelain wings.

"You ready to go?" Mum looks down at me with a lipstick smile.

"Yup," I turn and grab the handle of my wheelie suitcase.

"Come here," she hugs me and kisses my cheek. I squirm from her grip and rub at my face where I know there's a smudge. "Be a good girl okay?"

I nod.

"Go tell your dad I'm ready to go." She grabs my suitcase and backpack and makes her way to the dining room.

I wander down the hallway to Mum and Dad's room. In the room Dad sits on the edge of their iron-framed bed. His shoulders are slumped, his elbows cut into his knees and his head hangs in his hands. Should I go in? I hesitate at the door and watch a moment. His breaths are slow and heavy, muffled slightly from his hands.

"Dad?" His head snaps to me. His eyes are unfocused and his features pulled into the centre of his face. "Mum's ready to go." He nods and clears his throat a few times before speaking.

"Alright, I'll be out soon." I leave him sitting there staring at a wall and walk back to Mum.

"Is he coming?" she asks.

I nod and she sighs, leaning against the front door. Dad stalks into the entryway and Mum crosses her arms. "Ready?" she asks him. He nods and picks up all of our bags. She opens the door and walks out ahead of us. "Let's go then, I have to get to Leichardt by five."

Mum hops into the driver's seat of our dark green car and I sit behind her. Dad gets into the passenger seat. They immediately wind down their windows and roll cigarettes. Mum lights up and starts the car; Dad lights up too and turns the radio up. She drives fast and sings badly to the radio, which makes me laugh. Dad taps his fingers on the dash and I join in on the chorus because I know that part.

We pull up to the airport and Mum turns to me, "You be good, alright." I nod and tell her I will. She kisses her fingers and touches them to my cheek. I get out and watch as she places her hand on Dad's shoulder and they say their goodbyes, he shrugs his shoulders and she shakes her head. Cars are tooting and Mum pulls the fingers at anyone tooting at her. Dad hops out and Mum leans out the window. "Love you," she yells, as she pulls the car into the frantic, beeping swarm.

"Come on Rangi. This way," Dad tightens his grip on my hand and leads me through the crowd. Beautiful men and women smile as we pass, waving their hands toward the walls of perfume behind them. The people in the crowd are like Dad. Their eyebrows are raised as they look left to right,

scanning the lists of planes and their destinations on the walls, then following arrows that lead them to different numbered gates.

There are so many people and they all look grumpy, except for the ones whose smiles are painted on their faces as they spritz their customers. I catch the narrowed eyes of a mother dragging three children through the crowd. The children screech and squawk and fight, trying to twist out of her grip. For a second I imagine she is a witch stealing the children to turn them into pies. The lights are bright and everything glimmers. The white walls, the tiled floor and the glass cases all shine.

We stop by another list and Dad stares at the flickering numbers and words. He lets go of my hand and I turn on the spot. There, a giant pyramid of Toblerone rises above the crowd. Dad always buys me a Toblerone when we go flying. I make my way toward it, people bumping into me as they hurry past, my eyes fixed on the Toblerone and my mouth watering. A man staggers past, his steps jerky and unsure. I bump into him and his head snaps in my direction. I scream and run to the Toblerone. I reach the perfectly stacked chocolate and turn to find Dad to tell him what I've found. He's not there.

People rush by with suitcases and pillows, babies cry, voices sound out on the overhead speaker. I look about me, searching the crowd for Dad. Which way did I come from? I look back to the direction I thought I came but faceless people look back at me before hurrying on.

My eyes start to sting and my heart thuds in my chest. I blink and a

boiling tear tumbles down my cheek. My body is ice. I can't move. I can barely breathe. The more I think about my breathing the harder it gets until I'm gasping for air but none of the faceless people seem to care as they rush past. The lights pulse in my ears and I can't hear or see or do anything.

Giant hands swoop from the crowd and attach to my waist, I am flying through the air toward Dad. He smiles at me but breathes heavily as he pulls me into a hug.

"You bloody scared the shit out of me," he holds me close to his chest. I say I'm sorry and look at the floor, then back up to the majestic, golden pyramid next to us. Dad gives me a squeeze and the ice melts in my body and I can move and breathe and hear and see.

"Toblerone," he laughs. "Come on then, let's get some for the trip." He pops me on his shoulders and holds my ankles like backpack straps.

I grip his dark curls and look about me as he makes his way to the lollies. From up here, with Dad, the people look less scary. A queen on my throne, I sit and watch as they hurry by. They no longer look like they could swallow me whole, like faceless zombies looking for children to feast on. They are just people.

We reach a room with chairs lined up in rows full of people, some of them are seated and some are lined up at the desk by the hallway that leads to the plane.



“We’ve still got time,” Dad lifts me from his shoulders, plonks me on a chair and sits next to me. He takes out the giant Toblerone and I grin. He peels the cardboard back at one end and slides out the silver foiled prism. My mouth waters as he snaps the end piece off, foil and all and hands it to me. I unwrap the chocolate triangle and bite the peak off hungrily. The chocolate melts in my mouth as I chew on the white candy inside.

“Could all remaining passengers flying from Sydney to Auckland with Qantas on flight QT265 please make your way to the boarding gate now.”

“Come on Rang, we better go.” Dad gets up and takes my hand. I stuff the rest of the chocolate in my mouth as he leads me to the polished people at the gate. We make our way down the tunnel and at the door of the plane Dad hands his tickets to a uniformed man.

“Welcome aboard Sir.” He turns to me. “Have a good flight little lady.” I snort because Dad isn’t a sir, he’s a dad and I’m not a lady, I’m a Rangī.

Two flights later we land in a much smaller plane at a much smaller airport. Dad takes my hand again as we take the stairs to the tarmac and follow the painted lines toward the two-storey building that is Napier’s airport. Behind the building hills rise up like a giant’s knees. As we step through the door there are clusters of people waiting. I scan the unfamiliar faces whose eyes look past me. They search for their person, whose person are we?

I follow Dad who walks past the waiting group; he walks straight up

to an older man with faded red hair and twinkly blue eyes and sweeps him into a big hug.

“Terry,” the man smiles and when he does his whole face crinkles. The rivets in his nose deepen like the sand in the Australian outback.

“Johnny,” Dad nods back, his body relaxes as he takes in a deep breath. “It’s good to be home, Dad.”

“It’s good to have you,” Johnny looks down at me and I tuck myself into Dad’s side. “Come here, girl.” He opens his arms to me and I look to Dad instead.

“Go on,” Dad nods towards Johnny. “Give your grandad a kiss.” He pushes me forward and I reach my arms up to Grandad.

He picks me up and holds me at arms’ length. “Well aren’t you pretty,” he says and then pulls me in to a hug. He kisses my cheek and his rough, bristly face scratches me. He slides me onto his back and piggybacks me as we make our way over to the bags. They talk as we wait for the trailer of bags to be dropped off and I cling to the checked shoulders of the grandad I barely remember.

Later we pull up the drive behind a small cottage surrounded by trees and flowers. There are five other cars parked in the garden and sheds so Grandad drives his ute around them. I look out the window and am in awe of all the trees and flowers. They live here in the middle of this beautiful garden? The only garden we’ve ever had has been made up of a collection of pot plants and herb gardens on our apartment balconies. I get out of the

ute and walk to the closest plant.

I reach out and pick one, spellbound by the way the petals curve and the colour, bright purple with white running through. Grandad crunches the gravel behind me and I turn to him with my flower.

“Ah I see you’ve picked yourself a snapdragon.”

“Snapdragon?” I ask.

“Yes, look.” He places his fingers on the sides of the flower and squeezes gently. “It looks like a snapping dragon.” I laugh, making the flower’s mouth open and close. I think of Alice in Wonderland and the bossy singing flowers and start to sing as the flower opens and closes its mouth. “Come on Stevie, your nana is waiting to see you.” I nod my head and follow him inside.

We squeeze past the small kitchen area to the dining room, here people are sipping from mugs and eating biscuits.

“Terry,” a woman with softly curling dark hair and soft eyes floats from her chair and embraces my dad.

“Hey Sis,” he kisses her cheek. “How are you, Kath?” her smile falters and she looks behind her into the hallway and shrugs her shoulders. She looks down at me and beams.

“Look at you, when I saw you last you, you were just a wee girl. You’ve grown so much. How old are you now?”

“Six.” The others look at us smiling, while Dad and I make the rounds kissing them all on the cheek.

“She in your room?” Dad asks Grandad, who nods in reply. “Come on Stevie.”

Grandad grazes his knuckles gently on the doorway. “Emily, you’ve got some visitors.” He looks in at her from the doorway, she smiles up at John and he gives her one in return. “I’ll let you talk.”

Dad takes my hand and leads me to the room. He walks in first, I wait by the door. “Mum?” his voice is barely over a whisper as he peers into the room. The setting sun shines through the pink curtain casting the room in a candyfloss hue. Tucked tightly into a frilly pink bedspread is my Nana. She pushes herself up shakily and reaches toward Dad.

“You came,” she smiles.

“Of course I did,” he kisses her on the cheek. “Come on Rang, come say hi.” I clutch my flower to my chest and step into the room.

“Come closer,” she says, “Let me see you.” I step closer and she smiles, a wide, gummy smile. “Don’t worry, I won’t bite. Besides, I can’t right now anyways.” She laughs and motions to the glass next to her bed. Straight teeth and pink gums float in what looks like water and I laugh too. She pats her bed, “Come up here and give Nana a kiss.”

I scramble up onto the bed, tugging on the pink quilted fabric and sit next to her. Once closer to her I notice that her once chocolaty skin has turned yellow. Maybe that’s what happens when you die, maybe that’s how you know it’s coming. I lean over and kiss her cheek, it’s soft, the type of soft that seems to happen when you get old. Dad and Nana speak quietly; in

the hushed household their voices are loud. I sit by her side. Her hand grips mine as though she's afraid I'll run away. I fidget while they talk, picking at a loose thread in the pink quilting. Her grip doesn't falter and my hand starts to sweat.

Through the open door I see Aunty Kath carry a cake into the lounge and look after it longingly. Nana chuckles and motions out the door.

"Go on, go eat. We'll talk tomorrow."

I kiss her cheek and slide off the bed, landing with a clunk that echoes through the house. "Night, Nana."

"Night, dear." She smiles down at me through her glasses and I can't remember if she has ever smiled at me like that before. I hand her the snapdragon I picked earlier and she smiles again. "Thank you." I scramble out of the room leaving Dad and Nana to talk, and go to get some of that cake.

I awake on an old fashioned couch and look around. On the wall above me are pictures of Nana and Grandad. Individual portraits hung together, they are black and white and look like a weird mix between a photograph and a drawing. I stare at the pictures struck by how young they look. Grandad's smile looks easy like he did it a lot. The smiles I had seen from him so far are slow and small. Nana, while too white in the picture, has her lips quirked as though she is trying not to smile and her eyes look at me secretively, like she knows something I don't. I slip into the dining room

and watch everyone whisper as they drink cups of tea and shake their heads gently. I find Dad in the doorway to Nana's room.

"Dad," I tug on the bottom of his t-shirt. He turns to me, his jaw and shoulders tight, his eyes unseeing, lost. As I peek around Dad into the room I see Nana. Tucked into the same frilly pink duvet, her hands overlap on her stomach, her head sinks into her frilly pink pillows. Her eyes are closed. She looks as though she is sleeping, as though she might wake up any moment and give me another gummy smile.

"She's gone." Dad's voice shakes. I nod in reply because I don't know what to say. "Come on, let's give her a kiss." I nod again and approach the bed. I tiptoe to reach her at the centre and kiss her cheek. It's even softer than the night before. Dad bends down and kisses his mum on the opposite cheek and looks at me, his eyes twice the size they usually are. "Are you okay?" he asks.

"Yes." I look down because I can see that he is sad, and I know I should be too. The snapdragon I picked the day before is on the brown patterned carpet and I pick it up, its purple petals almost blend into the brown carpet bruised and veiny in places. I try to make it sing but its mouth just hangs open limply. I place it near Nana's hand and watch, almost expecting her to pick it up. "I love you Dad."

"I love you too." He shuffles around the bed and pulls me into his side. We stand there looking at Nana. Dad's face crumples and expands while he takes deep breaths.

Family and strangers and family strangers come and go. I meet aunties who I've never heard of before and cousins who I'm desperate to play with. We play hide and seek and tag. The adults seem to just sit on a constant train of tea drinking, cooking, crying and story telling.

They place Nana in the lounge room. She lies there dark against the white satin lining of the coffin. She's been dressed in her Māori Warden uniform.

I will later wonder whether she thought of Sue towards the end. Did she believe in an afterlife? Would she be worried about facing her sister after living a lifetime with the man she loved? Or will she hold her head high, proud of the life she made?

But in the moment I notice how the crisp navy uniform with shiny silver buttons contrasts with the tired room she lies in. She has red lipstick on and I wonder whether she has her teeth on under there.

The women and girls sit with her. I lean on a cushion against the wall near the head of the coffin. I watch the women talk quietly to one another, feeling like I don't really belong here, here near Nana's head. It's just us girls, Aunty Kath, Nana's cousin, and some of my cousins. I don't know why we sit here, or why Nana has to stay in the lounge, or where the men are. I get the feeling that that's just the way it is, so I go along with it.

The breeze ripples along the top of the marquee and I watch the silhouette

of the sun through the thick white fabric. Dad stands by my side and I lean into him. My eyes wander and I look to the front where Nana lies in her coffin on the grass. People press into the open sides of the marquee trying to shade themselves from the harsh sun. Beyond them the flowers and trees encircle us. The fruit on the plum and apricot trees is ripe and ready to be eaten and the flowers are vibrant. It's all so bright, vivid and alive.

People rise from their seats to say words. Some are solemn, some barely hold it together and some make me laugh. When we've said our goodbyes and I give Nana one last kiss, the lid is placed on her coffin and the bolts twisted into place. Dad, his brothers and some others pick her up and place her into the back of a large black car and people begin to place flowers in the car for her. I run to the nearest shrub and pick a snapdragon for her and place it in amongst the lush bunches of flowers from the other guests. We walk behind the black car as it slowly drives down the gravel driveway. A woman in black begins to wail.

In a field full of graves we stand watching Nana's closed coffin being lowered into the ground. I grip the fabric of Dad's pants and he pets my head. When she reaches the bottom Grandad, Dad and his brothers step forward and each pick up soil from the freshly dug pile and scatter it over Nana's coffin. The soil lands in a muddy kaleidoscope as more and more people step forward to take their turn. Dad gently pushes me forward and I scoop up some soil in my hand. I clench the soil in my fist and it imbeds



under my fingernails. I throw down the soil I have in my hands, the tiny amount of soil isn't enough. Would she know? Could she see me now? Was she in heaven like some of the older ladies said she would be?

We walk in a slow procession back to the road through rows of headstones. Names and faces of people I don't know etched in stone pass by, my nana now amongst them. Dad kneels slightly and turns on a trickling tap.

"Come here Rang," I walk over and watch as he rinses his hands with the water. The soil from Nana's grave returns to the earth. "Wash your hands."

"Why?" I ask as I spread my fingers under the tap. The water tickles and tingles in the summer heat.

"Tapu." I frown at him trying to understand what he's saying. "That's just what you do, okay."

On the drive home Dad stares out his window while Grandad drives us.

"She deserves more." Dad raps his fist against the window.

Grandad nods silently in reply and continues to drive. When we pull up Auntie Kath is already on the porch sipping tea. Dad jumps out of the ute and takes off to the shed. I sit next to Auntie Kath on the porch and watch him, the springs in the old couch pressing into my back and bum. He returns with a spade in his hand. He leans it up against the side of the house and unbuttons his suit jacket. He flings the jacket over one of the

worn patterned chairs on the porch and rolls up the sleeves of his stiff, white shirt. He picks up the spade and walks to the centre of the front lawn. He pushes the spade into the dirt and starts to dig.

“Terry?” Aunty Kath calls to him.

“We’re having a hāngi for Christmas, for Mum.” He keeps digging.

“Okay.”

“Dad, will Santa know how to find me here?” I pipe up, excited at the reminder that Christmas is only two days away. He nods and continues to dig. Uncle George and Uncle Darryl arrive, and they remove their jackets and find more spades in the shed. Grandad sits next to me and takes my hand. We watch as they dig and smoke cigarettes. They stop to scull the Tui and the cups of tea that Aunty Kath brings them. Grandad offers me his cup of tea and I take it and sip. It’s sweet and milky and the pale blue enamel mug warms my fingers as the sun begins to set, turning the clouds into balls of fire.



## **Water Baby**



### *We are Water Babies*

When I sit down to write I am immersed. Sometimes I walk along the riverside and watch from a safe distance as the memories float by. Sometimes I fall in and am pulled under against my will. Scents and sensations swirl around me. They press into my skin, fill my nostrils until I am no longer here but rushing toward the past. The past is a deep pool of water and my memory, a river wanting to fill it. As the current takes me toward the pool I can see the ripples in the surface. Ripples that link one memory to another, one thought to another, one face to another. The river reminds me of the mighty Mōhaka, specifically a section that circles around a mountain in the shape of a horseshoe. Two points trying to touch but are separated by a pesky piece of land. I wonder what would happen if the two ends of the horseshoe met, would it change everything?

It is easy to lose myself in the waters of memory. Currents, tides and whirlpools pick me up as though I am weightless and take me where they will. Instead I will sit by the pool of my past and lower my fishing line. I hope I catch something that is big enough to take home and eat. Something with enough meat to make it worth your time.

Before I was old enough to go to school Dad would take me to one of the Sydney piers and we'd fish. I don't remember if he taught me life lessons as

he baited my hooks and lowered the lines over the edge or if we sat in a comfortable silence. I can only remember the joy I experienced as we reeled in our tiny snapper. Their vibrant, red bodies slapping against the sun-warmed wood of the pier before Dad removed the hooks, gave them a kiss and threw them back in the water. "We'll be back for you in a few years," he'd cry as the snapper slipped seamlessly back into the water, swimming as though they had never stopped.

Before I learnt how to swim I wore inflatable rings around my arms. Dad tossed me into the water when we went to the pools and I wriggled and flailed and laughed. He would stand on the side and watch me, telling me I could do it. "Kick, kick, just keep kicking."

Mum would hold me in her arms as she stood in the shallow end. When she wanted to swim she'd put me on her back and tell me to hold on. I laced my fingers together and she wore me like a cape. "I'm a dolphin," she'd say, before letting out a high-pitched squeal and diving under the water. She'd squeal every time we came up for air and I tried to imitate her. Over and over again she'd dive to the bottom of the pool and we'd do lap after lap, the water pouring into my underwater smiles.

Bath time meant bubbles. I'd dump out my bucket of Barbies and have make-believe conversations, copy scenarios I had seen on television. Other times they became mermaids. They dove into the depths of the bath, perched on the edge, and combed their hair, singing like Ariel.

While singing, I heard the rumble of Dad's voice in a low, deep, growl

that he never used with me. Mum's voice rose in retaliation. Back and forth their voices raced. Doors slammed, glasses smashed and there were sobs. When that happened I would try to get away. I lay back in the bath with the bubbles surrounding my ears, the swishing water softening the world.

Dad and I'd drive out of central Sydney to the Hawkesbury River where Dad rowed us up to a hut with an old jetty sticking out over the river on spindly legs. Sometimes we'd walk through the bush. I can't remember whether we were hunting or just walking, but I don't think we ever got anything. Other times we'd fish off the jetty, we'd laze in the sun watching our rods and occasionally catching something. When the tide went out Dad waded out into the mud, plunging his hands down holes and pulling out crabs that we'd boil up in a big pot and crack into for dinner. I think Dad just wanted to get away, from the city, from all the people, maybe from Mum.



### *Singing in the Rain*

The rain pings off the bottom of the small, tin dinghy and I tuck my body as far into the bow as I can manage. Dad's silhouette is black against a deep plum sky. His hands grip the worn, wooden oars and his body moves mechanically, propelling us through the choppy river. I look over the edge of the boat into the murky depths. I've never seen the river look so dark, so rough, and so unknown. I imagine the monster that lives under the water that changes colour with the sky so you can't see it lurking below. It's watching us, waiting. The boat jerks with the current and I wonder if the monster is trying to capsize us. I can't recognise where we are or how far we have to go, the riverbanks are hidden on the dark horizon. As the boat turns a bend in the river we start to sway again.

"Hold on," Dad's voice is gruff against the rush of the river. I grasp the cold metal sides of the boat and try to see beyond but the rain pelts my eyes and I lower them from the sting. The current becomes rougher and the rain changes from a tinny ping to a roar. Maybe that's the monster's roar, warning us of the attack it's about to make. I look at Dad and can tell he's struggling. His usually relaxed manner as he rows down the river in the little light the setting sun has left, has been replaced with hunched shoulders, white knuckles and his brow rippling under the raindrops.

I pull the heavy oilskin hood over my face as the water drowns out my vision further.

“How far, Dad?” I call out over the rumble of the river.

He looks at me and smiles, “Can’t handle a little rain aye Rangi?”

I poke out my tongue and he laughs.

He starts to sing, “Life is a breeze,” and then I join in, I love *Pippi Longstocking*.

“We do it for fun. No apologies, to anyone. We live on the seas, we do as we please.”

We continue singing until Dad manoeuvres the boat toward the left side of the river. I peer behind me into the shadows and see the shape of the jetty jutting out into the river.

“We can’t land on the jetty. It’s too rough, okay?” Dad calls as he struggles with the current that’s trying to push us out into the middle of the Hawkesbury River.

I nod, not watching him, but the jetty.

Dad turns the boat around so that he is closest to the bank and rows at full speed. He jumps out into the shallows holding the side of the boat as the river plays tug-of-war with him, or maybe it’s the monster. For a moment I think of what might happen if he let go.

Before I can think about it too much, the bottom of the dinghy scrapes on solid ground. Dad breathes heavily as he pulls the boat up the bank with me inside. We throw on our backpacks and Dad grabs the esky.

I stumble as we walk through the bush toward the hut. The hood of my oilskin coat falls over my eyes and the sleeves hang well below my

hands. Through the dense bush I can see light dancing in the darkness as we move closer to the hut.

“Think quick!” Chris’ voice cries out as we enter. A can of VB flies through the air toward Dad, which he catches and cracks open.

“Thanks mate, actually worked up a bit of thirst on the river.”

“She rough?”

“Yeah she is.” Dad drops the esky near the kitchen area before sitting down at the table.

“She wasn’t scared?” he nods in my direction and Dad shrugs his shoulders noncommittally. “How you going girl?”

I smile shyly, mumbling, “I’m good,” then go and unpack. I hang my coat on a hook by the door and kick off my muddy trainers. Dragging my feet along the wooden floorboards trying to dry them. I change into my PJs and unroll my sleeping-bag in front of the potbelly fire and burrow into it wriggling around like the very hungry caterpillar.

“You’re not sleeping on the floor, you’ll catch the draft down there.”

“Yeah, yeah.” I open my book, *The Enchanted Wood*, at the folded down corner where Silky and Moonface take me to a new land at the top of the faraway tree.

Chris deals out cards on the table and Dad rolls a cigarette before lighting it and picking up his cards. “I’m surprised you guys made it out tonight. She’s a brave little grub.”

Dad mutters a response.

While they talk I watch the flames licking the glass, and the warmth of the fire on my face makes me sleepy. I hadn't been brave. I hadn't realised there was any need to be.

They place cards on the table as the rain pounds the roof of the hut. Dad glances out the window shaking his head from side to side. Every now and then things get heated and they call each other bastards and cunts, followed by a lot of laughing. I glance up before slipping back into my book.

My body melts into the wood and I struggle to read another word from the orange, flickering pages of my book. The smell of tobacco and pine warm the air and I fall asleep. From my dreams I can hear Dad sigh as he picks me up, sleeping-bag and all. He places me on the top bunk and kisses the top of my head.

"Night Dad."

"Night Rang."

The scent of bacon hangs in the air as Dad shakes me awake. I rub my eyes as I walk over to the table and he sets a plate with far too much food on it in front of me. Through the small window I can see that the rain has stopped and the sun is rising, reflecting like fire on the river.

"Thanks Dad," I mumble with my mouth full of bacon and eggs.

"Eat up," he replies. "We'll go for a tiki tour soon, k? Chris has gone for a kayak."

I nod and inhale my food. When I can't eat anymore I slide my plate across to him to finish and scramble to get dressed. I pull on purple leggings with pink polka dots and a pink sweater. I pull my hair into spikey pigtails using my turquoise and silver sparkly butterfly clips to keep my fringe off my face. When I run back to Dad pulling on my damp trainers from the night before, he shakes his head at me trying not to laugh.

"You know you're just going to get dirty right?" He grabs the oilskin off the hook and drapes it back over my shoulders and I slip my arms back into the too long sleeves. He rolls them up for me almost to my elbows. "Come on then."

We turn away from the river and walk through thick brush. I keep close to Dad so the branches he bends as he walks won't thwack me. The ground starts to slope upwards and the bush thins out. The dirt here is a rainbow of reds and oranges. The trees are thin and spread apart and it is easy to manoeuvre through them. I run ahead hiding behind too thin trunks and try to jump out and scare Dad. We keep going. I don't know where we are going or what we are looking for but it doesn't matter. It's nice here. Peaceful. We continue to crunch through the bush for what feels like forever.

"Dad," I whine. "I'm tired."

"Not far now," he replies.

"But I'm tired."

He looks at me and rolls his eyes. "I think I carried you too much

when you were a baby.” He picks me up and places me easily on his shoulders. “Old Rangi no-legs and no-taringas.”

“No,” I cry and hit the peak of his cap. “What’s a taringa?”

“Ears girl, it’s Māori for ears.”

“What other Māori do you know?”

He’s quiet for a few steps, then he takes a breath and starts to sing. “E tangi ana koe. Hine e hine. E ngenge ana koe. Hine e hine.” His words are rich and deep as he projects into the trees, the clack of the kookaburra joining in.

“What’s it about Dad?”

“It’s about a sad girl.”

“Where did you learn it?”

He’s quiet before he answers, “I don’t remember.” He starts another song and keeps singing as we break through the trees. At the top of the hill the dirt forms into craggy rocks. The sun in the sky burns bright as Dad places me down on a jutting red rock.

“Take a look at that, Girl,” he says, rolling a smoke, and I do. Sitting on this rock you can see down to the river being strangled by shrubs on our left and to the right another hill climbs higher than the one we have just conquered. The red rocks in the distance look back at us and I lean back and let the sun warm my face. Dad finishes his cigarette, careful to stub it out on the rock. He tosses it and it lands near my hand. I notice that it is still smoking slightly and reach out to stub it. Before I can grab it an ant

almost the size of the smoke picks it up and scuttles off.

“Look Dad,” I laugh at the ant with its cigarette. Then notice there are more of them scurrying over the rock we are sitting on.

Dad sees it and is immediately on his feet. He brushes down my shoulders and frantically turns me around. “Time to go Kiddo.” He flings me back over his shoulders and starts jogging downhill. Up on his shoulders I sway and hold on tight, almost being bucked off his shoulders. He keeps running, slowing down, as we get closer to the hut. It was so much faster getting back here. “Don’t want to fuck around with bull ants, Rangi, they hurt like hell and can do a lot of damage.”

We break through the brush and hear splashing so we make our way down to the jetty. Chris is climbing up the ladder, dripping wet.

“Hey mate,” Dad calls to Chris, who replies with a rude hand gesture and a whoop before running back off the jetty into the air above the river. “Bloody nutter,” Dad grumbles as we walk down to the end.

I sit on the edge, my oilskin jacket by my side and watch the water running under my feet. Chris climbs back up the ladder and jokingly pushes Dad toward the edge of the jetty. Chris is long and lanky and I giggle as he pushes on Dad whose arms are bigger than Chris’ legs. Dad pushes Chris into the water easily with a laugh before kicking off his boots and bombing on top of him. They play in the dark water, still murky from the rain the night before, splashing and dunking each other. I watch from above, egging them on. I’m not allowed to swim in the river. I wonder if the monster from

the night before is still out there. Maybe it's friendly.



### *Homecoming*

The river was a refuge for Dad. For me it was exciting. It was a big adventure, something that none of my friends did. It was special. We didn't always explore the bush. When the weather turned and the rain kept us in Dad and I would play cards, read books and sometimes Dad would sketch me. I used to marvel at these pictures. The way he captured my face with pencil and paper, I wish I'd kept them. I think for Dad he was just attempting to create a home away from home. A safe place, a place he could be himself, with people he could be himself with and I was one of them.

There were other rivers too. When we moved back to New Zealand Grandad would take me down to Esk River in the school holidays. He would cast out his nets for whitebait. We sat in foldout chairs reading: him a western and me historical fiction. Turning page after page while nature sang. The stream, a gentle hum as the birds and bugs joined their voices together to fill the silence. We sipped sweet tea and ate liquorice all-sorts until we had an ice cream container full of the silver slivers. I could never eat the fritters Dad made with them. The whitebaits eyes would watch me as I went to take a bite.

On the Mōhaka River I rode the big red raft straddling the inflatable sides so I could dip a foot in the river. Through the rapids and drops Dad's eyes found mine and he'd tell me to hold on. I would grin cheekily and lift my arms like I was flying over the water, and I was. The

other kids would squeal and hold on tight. As the rapids beat at the bottom of the raft and pulled us to their will, the water would whip our faces and we rode the river that bucked like a bull.

In the calm spots you could look over the side of the raft down into the depths and see the tops of boulders far below. This was the perfect place to bomb and dive or just float and look up at the cliff faces hanging from the sky on either side of the river. When we'd pull up on a stony bank for lunch I'd lie on the hot rocks drying out while the other kids played in the shallows. Dad and his friend Kinita would take their handmade spears and swim across to the shadowy bank and hold on to the side as they dove down and felt around for holes. There'd be an excited cry before the spear was raised above their heads, a big black eel writhing at the end of it. Sometimes they were the length of my gangly legs, other times they were longer than me. Their bodies were slick and glistening in the sun and slimy to touch.

The Mōhaka River was also the backdrop for the many hunting trips we took. If we weren't fishing on the weekend we had probably gone bush. We would park our ute under the tree before pulling all our gear out by the river. Dad stripped down to his undies and strode into the water upstream. When the water was deep he would swim fast against the current as the river pushed him back to where he intended on the other side. There the raft was kept out of sight. He'd drag it down to the water and row it over to us with ease. We'd then load up the raft and Dad would row us back over. If

it was hot I'd usually accidentally fall in so that I got a swim before we headed up to the hut.

On the other side we'd lug our stuff up to where Full Boar was parked. Full Boar was a 4WD that Dad and his friend had modified so that it had no roof. Instead thick steel poles were welded to arch over the seats so that it was easy to shoot from. We'd pile in, sometimes there were lots of us, sometimes there wasn't. Us kids would sit on top of the steel bars and hold on for dear life as Full Boar took the gravelly road up to the hut.

### *Superman Swims*

Dad stalks silently through the bush. How he manages to be so quiet I'll never know. I stumble behind him, tripping on roots and snapping branches with my steps. With every cracking branch Dad turns to me jaw clenched, finger to lips, then mouths.

"We're getting close."

I manage three silent steps before snapping another branch. He turns to me and rolls his eyes. We walk on until Dad finds a big tree and drops his bag beside it. Birds caw in the trees and I can hear the river running below. He leans his rifle against the tree and takes off his camo jumper laying it on the ground like a picnic mat. He takes out a coke bottle filled with cordial and has a scull before placing it in the shade of the tree.

"I'm going to leave you here okay?"

I nod. I'm already pulling my book out of his bag. This happens almost every weekend.

"I'll be back in one hour, okay? If I'm not, just wait here. If you hear a shot, it might take me a little longer to get back. Don't move okay?" I nod and take a sip of cordial. He takes out two chocolate bars and tosses them to me.

"You want a sandwich?" I shake my head and greedily open one of the chocolate bars. He kisses me on the forehead before taking off into the bush his black singlet and stubbies stained in sweat.

I open my book to the folded corner and begin to read Sweet Valley High. The green envelops me as I drift off into another world, a world where fashion and backstabbing are more prevalent than the trees that surround me.

Cicadas sing as I finish the last page and look about me. It's only been about forty minutes and now I have nothing to do. I take another swig of cordial and attempt to climb a tree. The bush is low and thick here so vantage points are hard to find. It's hot in the Hawke's Bay sun.

The river calls to me. I follow the bubbling back down the battered bush path Dad and I made earlier. Excited for a swim I kick off my shoes at separate intervals, I pull off my T-shirt when I see the water, and I wriggle out of my pants before stepping out onto a rock on the edge of the river. It's dark and fast but I've swum here before, I know this river. I know it well.

I dive in keeping close to the side where the current is lightest. The cold water welcomes me and I feel refreshed. I wriggle around in the water like the fat eels that lurk in the depths and let myself float gently.

I climb out and walk around the slippery edge of the rocks that take me further upstream before diving in and swimming across. The river pounds on me as I pull my arms through the water propelling my body across to the other side. When I hit the shallows puffing I roll onto my back and look back across the river.

Dad is standing there holding my book, the cordial, each of my shoes and my T-shirt.

“Ol’ Rangi,” he calls over to me, “Always looking for an excuse to go barefoot.”

I laugh and call back, “Do a bomb Dad.”

He drops his things and pulls off his top and boots and starts to climb up the cliff face. At the top he holds a branch and leans over the cliff. He cups his hand over his mouth and calls to the hills “Full boar or fuck them all” before leaping off the cliff.

As he falls through the air he is Superman.

### *Day and Night*

Back in Sydney, after the sunset, Dad and I walk hand in hand on the soft golden sand of Bondi. We stroll past the imprints of people who had been there earlier that day. I try fitting my own feet within the footprints already there. It is quiet, peaceful. We stop at some random point and take a seat, making our own imprints with our bums. Dad points out boats that go by and the lights along the coast glitter in a serene semicircle.

Dad pulls out the newspaper parcel he has held tucked under his arm and tears a hole in a corner. He works at the hole with his fingers until he grips a big, fat prawn and hands it to me. I immediately pull off the legs and rip the shell around the body in two. Once that's off I twist off the head and wipe away the "mustard" as Dad calls it, with my fingers and then wipe my fingers on my shorts. I bite into the critter and chew hungrily. Before I've swallowed I have my hand out for another.

Mum has always loved the beach, has always seemed at peace with the sand between her toes. In Sydney we spent time at Bondi and Tamarama beaches. Mum said the beach was one of the few places that reminded her of home, even though she didn't seem to like where she came from. We spent hours at the beach, the gentle waves of Bondi and the big, tumbling surf of Tamarama familiar to us.

Later, in New Zealand we always lived by the beach. These

beaches had shingle instead of sand and we weren't supposed to swim anywhere but between the flags at Westshore, but we did. Our house in Bayview, not far from Napier, backed right onto the beach, our backyard merging with the shingled coast. It was ours. We'd walk along in our Pyjamas, go swimming in our undies, and played games along the shore. On hot summer nights we lit bonfires and danced around them until we were tired and then we'd sit and watch the flames turn to embers.



### *Diamonds on Our Skin*

"Come on Cheeky," Mum bristles ahead of me as we walk through the car park. I break into a trot so I can be beside her. The cars line up like multi-coloured bricks in a wall and I can already tell the beach is going to be packed.

We pass the boardwalk. People walk, cycle and even rollerblade along. I point at the people on rollerblades, "Mum, can we do that?"

She eyes them with interest and smiles, "I used to skate when I was your age. Maybe Santa will bring you some for Christmas." I jump up and down excitedly before I remember that Christmas is still a month away. She starts scanning the beach stretching out in front of us. It curves around and seems to go on forever.

When we step off the edge of the boardwalk I kick off my thongs and wriggle my feet in the sand. I pick them up and follow Mum. She picks her way through throngs of sun worshippers finding a spot that's big enough for us to spread out.

The people are golden-skinned and smiling. Some are throwing neon Frisbees and balls, some are working out but most lie back, their smiles an offering to the sun. The ladies wear high-cut briefs that make their legs look long and lean. Some of their swimsuits shine and glitter in the sun like snakeskin. I blush and look the other way when I notice the very tan women who don't have any tops on. Mum sees me and grins to herself.

We find a spot that is close enough to the water so that we can keep an eye on our stuff when we swim. Mum unties her sarong and flicks it. The wind catches it, making it fly high like her very own flag. We lay out our large, multi-coloured beach towels and I strip down. Mum opens a large black umbrella and props it at the top of her towel before laying back with her face in the shade, her legs pale in the sunlight. She wears a black swimsuit in a sea of rainbow coloured bikinis. Her wide-brimmed, black sunhat tilts down, covering one side of her face and she smiles. "It's so hot today, must be over thirty."

I nod and stretch out next to her, my brown skin already tanned from the summer sun. I look down at my own swimsuit, which is also a black one piece. Mine is not low cut at the front though and has a print of coloured cats embossed in the fabric, with the spaghetti straps down my back matching the colour of the cats. I run my finger over them watching Mum as she pulls out her lipstick. She applies it precisely without looking at her reflection, her scarlet pout pulling into a smile when she sees me watching.

"Come here then," I scramble to her pouting my lips in expectation. "No, not like that. Like this." She pulls her lips into a forced toothy smile that stretches her bright red lips into smoothness. I copy as best I can while she puts it on me. I smack my lips together, pleased with myself, and feeling very grownup.

She pulls out a magazine from her bag and starts to read. I potter about in the sand, digging and scooping with the spade and bucket I

brought with me. When I get bored I lie back down next to Mum and read too. Mum glances over to me and asks, "Did you put sunblock on?" I shake my head in response. She sighs and sits up, pulling her large tote bag to her and pulling out the bottle. She rubs down my legs, arms and back then puts a blob in my hand so I can do my face. She knows I hate it when she gets it in my eyes.

"Mum, why do you stay in the shade?" I ask.

"Because I don't like getting too freckly."

"I like your freckles though."

"Well I don't. I used to get teased for them."

"Why?"

"The kids used to call me fly shit face."

"That's mean!"

"Yes, what's worse is that it was your uncle Gene who started that name. Bastard." I look at her and struggle to see how she was ever teased. She looks like the women in the black and white movies. "Come on then, let's go for a swim."

She throws her hat and sunglasses on her towel and shakes out her long, dark curls. I jump up beside her and we make our way to the water. When my toes touch the water I hesitate. It's cold. Mum picks up her pace. She wades in until the water is above her knees and dives below a cresting wave. She bursts from the sea landing softly on her feet. Her hair clings to her back. She pivots on the spot to find me, her eyes squinting in the sun.

When she spots me she beckons, her smile wide and serene.

I run in slow motion through the surf, my too-long-legs slowing me down. I see Mum watching me calmly as I stumble. As I near her, I reach out to her, laughing, but a wave catches me in the stomach. My feet are above me and I tumble over myself surrounded by blue and white bubbles. I turn over and over again until I'm slow enough to stand. I turn to see where Mum is and she is almost as far away as when I started. She laughs and beckons to me again. I run again. The sun glints off the sea like diamonds, shifting around Mum like she is wearing a glistening ball gown.

As I get close Mum calls, "Dive under the waves." She turns and dives under the next wave. "Like that." I dive down into the same wave but it still manages to push me back, filling my nose with water. I blow it out, determined now. I stride toward her and dive under the next wave before it breaks. I slip out on the other side like a seal and smile.

Close enough to Mum now I reach out my fingers to her. She takes them in hers and pulls me through the water. I wrap my arms and legs around her and she holds me in the water like she did when I was little. The sun glistens on my goose bumpy skin as I hold onto her, my fingers gripping and slipping. We gaze out at the water and watch as people and boats ebb and flow around us.

### *Jumping the Fence*

Back in New Zealand I cling to the metal gate of my primary school's pool, as Mum gives me a boost. Clad in our togs with towels wrapped around our waists we break in. Once over I drop nimbly onto the concrete, flip the lock and let her in. We are co-conspirators, we giggle and shhh as we lay our towels out like we belong. The smell of the chlorine baking on the concrete cocoons us as we stand on the ledge and dive in.

We swim in a world of blues. The turquoise painted pool and sky surround us as we splash. We have dolphin races, which Mum always wins. But I win the breath holding competitions. Even though I know I'm too big, I ask her to give me a dolphin ride like she did when I was little. She gives in and I clasp my fingers around her shoulders. She dives down and my lanky legs get in the way of her kicks but I refuse to let go. This is our thing.

We bake our skin while lying on the bleachers. When people with keys show up, they smile and say hello and we grin at each other like idiots. It's our little secret.

### *Picture Perfect*

Jordan, my fiancé, and I load up my Dad's jeep with suitcases and bags of presents. It's Christmas Eve 2014 and the usual chaos that comes with Christmas every year begins.

Dad leans in and kisses my cheek, the bristles of his chin tickle me.

"Have a shave, you hairy bitch," I say.

"Oh Rang," he grins. "Want a shot at the title?" He pulls me in for a bear hug.

"You make sure you drive safe," Robyn hugs me next. "There's crazies everywhere at this time of year."

"We will." Jordan and I reply in unison.

"So you're with us for a late lunch at Kate's?"

"Yeah, text us the times and stuff so we know," I call as Jordan and I get in the jeep. "Love you guys, see you tomorrow."

"Love you," Rob calls back. Dad raises his eyebrows and puckers his lips at us. Jordan pulls the jeep out his drive and toots the horn as we drive away.

We coil down the mountains towards the sea. There are pines lining the road here, the deep green needles add lushness to the earth. I pull out my phone as we near the next corner and take a picture of the first glimpse of the sea. With two mountains encircling the beach, the green pines clashing with the rock and sea, the view is picture perfect. Perfect for

Instagram at least.

Pulling up the drive the kids are on us before we unbuckle our seatbelts.

"Hey kidlets!" I wrap Sophia in a hug and ruffle Dimmi's hair. Molly, my fourteen-year-old-too-cool-half-sister watches from the doorway.

"Hey Molldoll."

"Hey." She nods her head at us before heading inside.

Jordan and I follow her inside laden with bags and presents. Just inside the door we drop our bags on the floor in the bedroom on the left before looking for Mum. She's sprawled out on the bed wrapped in a colourful sarong, flicking through a magazine.

"Hey Cheeky, hey Gordy." She closes her magazine and sits up. Her arms reach out to me and I lean in for a hug. "Let's go for a swim."

I nod in reply and Jordan and I rummage through our bags for our togs. We quickly change and assemble out the front of the back, except Jordan who forgot his togs.

"I'll just paddle." He grimaces.

We wander down the roads and paths to the beach, our jandals slapping the backs of our feet in applause. The kids hurry ahead as we all make our way and Mum links arms with me.

"It's good to see you." She says.

"Good to see you too Ma."

"It's good to be out here too, away from everything."

"Are you okay?" She shrugs noncommittally and her gaze fades into the surrounding hillside.

We cross over from gravel track to sand and as though choreographed, we all kick off our jandals and loop them through our fingers. We walk toward the water, my bright blue toenails sinking into the golden sand. When we are just out of reach of the waves foamy fingers, we plonk down on the sand and look out to sea.

The sun casts a harsh white light on the sand, the surrounding rocks and the sea. I push my sunglasses up onto the bridge of my nose to soften the glare. We spread out our towels and strip down to our togs. Mum orders the kids to apply sunblock but I avoid the bottle in hopes of getting a tan, between living in Wellington and doing extra hours at work I've missed out.

When we're too hot to sit around in the sun any longer, we run into the ocean's embrace. The waves are ice on the fire of our skin. With each step in, it reaches up our legs to our waist, causing our skin to prickle. Instead of prolonging the process I plunge head first under the next wave and it washes away the cold sting and replaces it with refreshing relief from the heat. As I emerge from the waves the sun warms my face and is a pleasant contrast to the ice and fire. I splash the others who are yet to take the plunge, their fists clenched, on their tippiest of toes. They shriek and I laugh diving again into the next wave.

We retreat back to our towels and lean back in the sun the salt drying



on our skin. We take smiling selfies. Me with Mum, me with Molly, me with Sophia and Molly, all the girls, and me with Jordan. We take videos too. Cartwheels in hyperlapse, the kids running and dancing and doing gymnastics. I get up and attempt a sexy hair flip in slow motion. In my retro, one-piece swimsuit I struggle to take myself seriously and finish with a giggle.

Back in the water Mum, Molly, Sophia and I hold hands as we jump over the waves for the camera. We smile in slow motion as the camera picks up our miss-timed jumps. The tingle of the cold water against my skin starts to sting. I look at my arms and peek down my swimsuit to see what's happening to my skin.

"Are you getting bitten or something too?" I ask the group. They start nodding and inspecting their bodies trying to find the invisible culprits. We all head back to our towels inspecting each other. Red welts begin to appear and we discuss what it could have been that got us. Sitting on the sand the stinging intensifies to a burn and we wrap our towels around us and run home.

We huddle on the wooden floorboards of the outside shower under the big brass showerhead. Molly, Sophia and I rub a creamy bar of soap on the welts, and the foam softens our pain.

Andy arrives and we watch the men peacock around the barbecue, their conversation about how best to cook a steak. I clink my glass of bubbles with Mum as we get the salads and sides ready for dinner. The kids

set the table. We all come together as the sun begins to dip behind the trees and feast on typical kiwi fare. Piles of steak, seafood and salad are set upon.

After dinner we move to the small lounge area and drape ourselves over kitsch coloured blankets and cushions. There's no TV or Wi-Fi out here so we play games. Tonight it's Pictionary, girls against boys. Mum, Molly, Soph and I lean against each other on the ground as we play. Jordan, Andy and Dimmi sit on the teal and mustard couches. We win, even though Mum struggles to get my picture of a boxer, a butterfly and a bee.

She keeps yelling, "Boxer, butterfly, bee," over and over again while everyone laughs at her.

"Mum," I squeal as the timer runs out. "Mohammad Ali! Floats like a butterfly and stings like a bee! Fuck!"

Since Andy's arrival Mum and he have been in a dance. Mum moves when Andy does, if he comes inside, she goes out, when he disappears, she appears. When they have to be in the same room as each other they are at the opposite ends. It's subtle but I see it. See them dancing while the kids can't see that everything is about to fall apart.

On Christmas morning Jordan and I get up early. With three families to visit we are always in a hurry on Christmas. Once showered and dressed we drag the kids out of bed and wake up Mum and Andy. The kids shake off their sleepiness and shift into excitement at the giant piles of presents for them. Again Mum and Andy are at opposite ends of the group. As we open our presents Jordan slips away to make waffles, aware that time is slipping

away. Mum manages to get in a few insincere compliments to Andy, dripping in sarcasm that go over the kids' heads. I don't blame her though. He fucked up.

"I wish you didn't have to go," Mum squeezes my hand when Jordan starts packing up the car.

"I know. Sorry Ma," I squeeze back.

"It's okay, I understand."

"Are you going to be okay?"

She looks behind her at the back and shrugs, "I guess."

"I love you, call me okay?"

"Love you too, Bun."

The kids come out to say goodbye. We hug and thank each other for the presents and the time, wish each other a happy new year and then we're off. I turn in my seat and watch Mum as she stands at the gate waving. I lean over Jordan and toot the horn. I turn back to face the front and stare ahead.

"It's okay honey. She'll be okay." Jordan squeezes my thigh.

At Dad's we're presented with stony faces.

"You're late." Robyn bustles past us with an empty chilly bin.

"You guys said it was a late lunch. I took that to mean 2pm onward," I say.

“So did we.” Dad raises his eyebrows at us.

“It would have been nice if you guys were there. Your father really wanted you there, Stevie.” Robyn refuses to look me in the eye.

I grit my teeth. I don’t need this shit on top of the guilt I already feel for leaving Mum. The guilt we get made to feel every fucking year, on this stupid fucking day. Every year it’s the same conversations “What have you been up to?” “How’s Jordan going?” “Are you still at school?” It’s all just pointless small talk. If we were important to one another we would seek each other throughout the year, instead of waiting for the one day we happen to be in the same room.

“It was just really disappointing,” Robyn turns up her nose and walks away.

I slam my drink down on the bench and storm out, slamming the door behind me. In the sleep out I pace back and forth cursing under my breath. I start to cry. I hate crying.

“You okay boo?” Jordan sidles into the sleep-out.

“Yeah,” I say. But I’m not. “It’s just so fucking hard, every fucking year, everyone wants me to spend the whole bloody day with them, and I can’t.”

“They don’t expect you to...”

“But they do. I know they just love me and want to spend time with them, but I can’t do it. It’s hard enough looking at everyone’s disappointed faces when we leave.”

“Come here.” He hugs me.

“Seriously though, the look on Robyn’s face.”

“She doesn’t get it.”

“They said it was going to run late! How was I supposed to know it was going to be done by two?”

“I think they’re just disappointed you didn’t make it.”

“Why does it matter though? I just wanted to hang with Dad, Rob, Mike and Simone. Chill out, eat some food, and maybe get a little drunk. Why can’t we just do that now?”

“I know.”

“They’re mad at me for not being there, I’m fucking here now, maybe stop sulking and enjoy my fucking company...”

“Stevie.” Dad’s voice calls from the house.

“What?”

“We’re heading to Mike’s, you wanna come?”

“Okay,” then to Jordan “We didn’t come here to hang out with ourselves did we?”

Jordan shakes his head and I get up and start reapplying makeup to my blotchy face.

It was so much easier when I was a kid. My parents would decide who would get me and when, who would drop me off or pick me up, and what we were doing for the day. Now it’s on me. Now I have to try and cram Mum’s Christmas, Dad’s Christmas and Jordan’s family’s Christmas into my

Christmas. Now I find myself constantly apologising. "Sorry we're late."

"Sorry we have to go." "Sorry I left your present at Mum's." Sorry.

The next year we stayed in Welly. We cooked beautiful food, caught up with friends and drank mimosas on the beach. It was relaxing and calm, but it wasn't Christmas. I thought I could avoid the guilt of not being everywhere at once, but the guilt still managed to find me. I think it has become ingrained into my way of being - the separation, the guilt, and the constant back and forth. I have become the in between. Like the sand caught in the rolling surf of Waipātiki. Not part of the shore, but not part of the sea either. I keep moving. Rolling in and out with the tide.



## **Until the Final Swing**





### *Early Mornings*

I can't remember much of Grandad before Dad and I moved back to New Zealand. I know he visited, but I only know this from photos of him holding a fat-brown-baby whose puku popped out from her t-shirt in front of both Australian and New Zealand settings. The fat brown baby became gangly and she eventually grew some hair after time coaxed it out of her. Her resemblance to smiling Buddha statues faded and instead she became a gap-toothed tomboy.

When we moved back to New Zealand we stayed with Johnny. Dad would go to work before the sun had woken up, so Grandad would make me breakfast and walk me to the bus stop. After school he'd be waiting at the bus stop for me, leaning against the fence and smoking a cigarette. It was a place I knew I was safe.

Things didn't change much when we moved out. Dad still had to work early so he dropped me off to Grandad's every morning. Grandad kept walking me to the bus stop, even when I was old enough to do it myself and he was always waiting for me when I got off the bus. We didn't have profound conversations, just the usual comforting chitchat you have with someone you see everyday. The day-to-day changes and happenings as opposed to the drastic leap of months and years.

Like thunder Dad's voice booms down the hallway.

“Get up.”

I lie in darkness staring up at the glow-in-the-dark-stars that twinkle at me from my ceiling. A snuggly warmth creeps up from my toes and I feel sleep weaving itself around me. A knock on the door snaps me out of it.

“Come on.”

I groan in drowsy dispute but roll from my duvet anyway. I know the drill. I stumble down the hallway into the bathroom where I rub at my eyes in the mirror and half-heartedly brush my teeth. Back in my room I pull on the closest pair of track-pants that have become one with the carpet and rummage through my draws for a long sleeve tee. I make my way to the kitchen where Dad is sipping a giant mug of tea.

“Morning Dad.”

“Morning.”

I plonk myself down on the couch and sleepily stare at the ground. The carpet is a mosaic of browns and oranges arranged in a floral, diamond shaped design. Dad places his mug in the sink and picks up my schoolbag off the bench and drops it in my lap.

“Better be off then.”

I yawn slinging the bag over my back. Outside on the way to the ute the Hawke’s Bay frost chills my skin and I shiver, wrapping my arms around myself. Dad shrugs out of his coat and places it over my shoulders, schoolbag and all. It’s heavy and I pull it close around me, struck by the familiar gritty, metallic tang that reminds me of home. Dad unlocks his side

and hops in, he leans over to unlock and open my door from the inside. I slide in and close the door behind me with a bang. The sound is out of place in the silence of the morning, with the sun still asleep the birds are yet to sing and the roads and pathways are empty. Dad starts the engine and it roars like a boar on heat.

The lamplights that line the road are sporadic in the darkness. I find my sleepy eyes following the white line at the centre of the road as our headlights illuminate it along the way. The drive is short. Six minutes and twenty-seven seconds to be exact, I timed it once. We turn off the main road and cruise down Grandad's road for almost four minutes. Just past the rugby club we turn into Grandad's gravel drive. The tires crunch as we pull in.

"Alright, have a good day, Rang."

"You too."

"Love you."

"Love you Dad." I lean over and kiss his prickly cheek.

"Ew, have a shave you hairy bitch."

I punch his arm in response laughing, slip out of his coat and jump out of the ute. I run up the rest of the driveway and he toots the horn as he pulls away. At the back door I kick off my sneakers and drop my schoolbag in the back porch.

In the dining room Grandad is in his seat by the window watching as Dad's ute makes its way to work.

“Hey Grandad.”

“Morning.” He puckers his lips slightly and leans toward me so I can kiss his cheek before taking the seat across from him. He pushes a cup of tea he has ready for me across the round wooden table and we watch as the morning stretches across the nearby rugby fields toward us.

“Time for breakfast,” Grandad pushes back his chair and gets up. He opens up the pantry and hands me a loaf of bread and the butter dish. I pull out the soft white slices and butter them while Grandad pops some eggs in the microwave stirring them occasionally. When they’re ready I put two slices of bread on my plate and gently lay some of the eggs across them. I fold the bread in half and take a bite, warm butter runs down my chin and I lick my fingers.

When it’s time to go, Grandad and I unlatch the back gate that opens onto the rugby fields. I take Grandad’s hand in mine and chat happily about the day ahead. We pass the Eskview Rugby Club and the Brownies and Girl Guides Hall. As we pass by the playground I let my grip slip from Grandad and run to the monkey bars.

I climb up the ladder and reach out toward the first bar. I let myself hang on the first bar. The bars are gritty and thick, almost too thick for me to hold on to. I swing my legs and propel myself toward the next bar and then the next. Grandad catches up and waits for me on the ground. He checks his watch and jerks his head toward the bus stop. I drop from the middle bar. When I land, ground shock, like shards, fires up my legs from

my ankles. I shake out my legs scattering the bits of bark that cover the ground of the playground.

I take his hand again and we walk over the grass, still soft from the morning dew. At the bus stop, cars pull up to drop off their kids and other kids cross the main road from the houses that line the street. I smile at the ones I kind of know, but stick with Grandad. He leans on his side on the fence and pulls a smoke from his pocket and lights it. I climb up on the wooden step, put there so people can get over the fence and sit on top of it.

“Have a good day.”

“You too Grandad, what are you going to do today?”

“Got some deliveries to do, but I’ll be here when you’re done for the day, okay?”

“Okay.”

His smoke hangs out the side of his mouth and he manages to puff and talk without removing it. I lean back over and give him a kiss on the cheek before jumping over the other side of the fence. The bus pulls up and I wave at Grandad before climbing in.

### *Every Day*

I know I took him for granted. I didn't realise at the time how much he was helping Dad out, didn't realise how he reorganised his life to make sure he was there when I needed him. Even when I was a teenager he was there, always there. I was a bit of a sickly kid. Always catching what was going around, plagued by ear infections and eczema and reacting badly to injections and medicine.

At school we got shots for meningococcal B, and as usual I was the only one in my class who reacted badly to it every time. There were three shots and that was three times when the only person I knew could come and get me was Grandad. Dad was at work and hard to get a hold of, Mum was running her own business and had a baby to look after, but Grandad was always there.

Every time I called him - I still remember his phone number off by heart - Aunty Kath would answer the phone in her gentle voice before going and getting him from outside where he worked chopping wood. He always came to get me when I needed him. Then at his house I'd wrap myself up in a blanket in front of the telly and he'd bring me biscuits and tea.

I still saw him almost every day once we moved further out into the country. We had extra paddocks so Grandad used one for stacking all his wood. If he wasn't out collecting the wood he was in the paddock chopping

away. Then at 5.40pm he'd make his way to the house and while he unlaced his boots Dad would pull up the drive. I'd make cups of tea for them both and we'd sit and shoot the shit.



### *One More Cup*

His hands grip the wooden handle of the axe as he lifts it above his head. The checks on his shirt stretch across his back as he brings it down on a piece of wood bending slightly as he does. He rearranges the wood on the block and repeats the action. The thud of his axe echoes around me in a melancholic melody.

I sit on a nearby fence watching. I kick my bare legs and feet dangling over the edge in time with each thud. I push myself up and walk the thick flaking wood like a tightrope.

“Hey Grandad, you want a plum?” I call.

He wipes his brow with the back of his hand and shakes his head no before turning back to his work under the shade of the walnut tree. Thud, thud, thud.

I drop down onto the grass on the opposite side and skirt around the gravel drive ducking under trees and slipping through bushes. At the plum tree I climb up onto the fence. My heavy, maroon, school skirt gets in the way and I hold onto branches on my tiptoes reaching for deepest, purple plums hanging just out of reach. I load my skirt pocket with plums and slip one into the pocket on my white school blouse. I pick another and take a bite. The sun’s sweet warmth drips down my chin, onto my blouse. *Shit.* I rub at the growing red stains on my shirt before giving up and continuing to eat. I grab another plum before dropping back onto the grass and sprint

back to Grandad.

When the fence is in view I speed up and vault myself over using my hands to propel my body in the air. I land awkwardly and end up on my back in the long grass. I look up through the branches of the old walnut tree trying to catch my breath. Grandad comes over and looks at me his eyebrow raised.

“Alright?”

“Yup,” I slip my hand into my pocket and offer him a plum.

He takes it and rubs it on the thigh of his beige trousers. He takes a bite, the red juice runs through his grey bristles and drips off his chin. I laugh and point to the red splotches on my blouse as I push myself up. I lean against the walnut tree and watch as he continues to split the wood.

The rumble and crunch of Dad’s jeep fills the air and he waves as he passes the paddock we’re in.

“Alright, time for a cuppa?”

“Race you there!” I’m over the fence before he can answer. I slide open the glass door as I wipe my bare feet on the doormat. I make my way into the kitchen and top up the water in the jug before flipping it on. I pull out three mugs of varying sizes and colours. Dad’s mug is the largest, Mine is the smallest and Grandad’s is in the middle. I place one teabag and two teaspoons of sugar in each mug and line them up.

Grandad and Dad both sit outside unlacing their boots as Jessie and Kelly our old, fat dogs greet them excitedly. They both sit at the breakfast

bar and chat as the water boils.

“How you doing Johnny?”

“Fine, fine. Yourself?”

“Can’t complain.”

When the jug boils I pour the water over the bags and stir occasionally, persuading the flavour to steep faster. Once the water is dark enough I add a splash of milk and give them one last stir before removing the teabags and dumping them into the sink. I slide the mugs over to Dad and Grandad.

“Thank you kindly,” Grandad gives me a grin.

“Good boy,” Dad responds. “How was school?”

“Okay, I guess.” I shrug my shoulders and sip my scalding, sweet tea. Okay is accurate. I’m doing okay, the teachers constantly complain about my not meeting my potential, but I get okay grades.

Robyn pulls up shortly after and I offer her a cup of tea too and flip the jug back on. She busies herself getting dinner ready. I put one teabag and one teaspoon of sugar in a mug and wait for the jug to boil. Dad skulls the rest of his tea and slides the mug back over to me.

“One more Rang.”

Irritation flickers through me as I ready his mug too, the second of many cups I’ll make him tonight. When dinner is ready, it’s some variation of meat and three veg, we spread out. Grandad takes a seat at the dining table, Dad and Robyn park up at the breakfast bar and I sit across from

Grandad. We are still together though, still connected, the distance doesn't hinder our conversation and the silences that come while we eat are comfortable.

After dinner Dad and Grandad smoke cigarettes by an open window. It's dark outside, properly dark. There are no streetlights shining down on us, just the neighbour's porch light on in the distance. The television is on in the lounge and I migrate to the corner of the couch. I tuck my legs up into my skirt and zone out.

"Alright, I'll be off now." Grandad stands up and slides open the glass door.

"See ya Johnny." Dad replies.

"Bye Grandad, see you tomorrow," I call from the couch.

Sometimes I'm consumed with guilt. Guilt for not making the most of each moment. I can remember times when Grandad would come over and I would grumble internally about having to make him yet another cup of tea, or I would barely notice he was there.

We talked about school and he taught me things. After years of Dad trying it was with Grandad that I managed to ride a bike without training wheels. I cut wood and climbed trees under his supervision and he was an avid reader which was something we did together.

I realise of course this guilt is misplaced. I was just a kid. I had a great love for Grandad and I know he loved me. Dad and Robyn always did say I

was his favourite. I wonder if I was, or if I still would be if he could see me now.

# **Undercurrent**



## *Tough Girl*

My parents broke up. I don't remember it, I just remember the already regular fights became even more so. Then they became ships in the night. I was either with one or the other, never both. Eventually they asked me what I wanted to do, who I wanted to live with, and whether I wanted to stay in Australia or go to New Zealand.

Dad and I moved back to New Zealand the summer of 96/97 and I had to start a new school and make new friends. With my strong Australian accent and my Sydney city clothes I was quickly nicknamed "Posh." I hated that nickname. These kids didn't know I spent my weekends running through the bush and riding on the back of a motorcycle. It was the clothes I guess. *Clueless* the film had come out a couple of years before, inspiring Mum to adorn me in matching skirt/jacket combos with Mary-Jane shoes and knee high socks.

Coming from a school that wore a strict uniform, it was the first time I had had the freedom to wear anything. Some of the girls were nice and complimented my outfits, but I quickly learnt that to fit in I was better off wearing my hunting clothes. Most of the kids wore trackies, skivvies and sneakers. This makes sense; we were kids after all.

In Sydney Mum had kept my hair in a straight bob with a fringe, which Dad let grow out. Actually I don't think it ever crossed his mind that I would need a haircut. I had hair on my head, I brushed it occasionally and



that was enough for him.

Dad bought a boat. It was more of a dinghy, small and tinny with a handheld motor. The weekends were not a time for sleeping in. Dad would carry me from his ute draped in a Swannndri and place me in on a mattress tucked into the bow of the boat. It would be dark when we left the harbour but by the time we anchored the sun would reach its rays across the Pacific Ocean and gently wake me from my dreams. The waves lapped against the dinghy and we swayed gently in the sea breeze. Sometimes we caught a lot of fish, sometimes we didn't.

When winter came it was a huge shock to my system. In Sydney I maintained a golden tan all year round, but in Napier as the days shortened my tan began to fade. When we needed supplies we'd make a trip to "town" which is what we called central Napier. We'd roll up to the "Ware Whare" and stock up on thermals, sneakers and socks. Bit by bit my clothing changed, and with that change I fit in a little bit more.

I still got teased though, not excessively, just every now and then. When I told Dad this the first time he clenched his jaw and patted his cheek.

"Go on, hit me."

I hesitated. "I don't want to hurt you Dad."

He laughed. "Rang, you couldn't hurt me if you tried."

He pet his jaw and leaned down toward me. "Go on."

I scrunched up my fist and threw it at his face.

He laughed again. "Have another go."

I tried again, this time throwing my whole body into it.

"Better, you'll have to work on that. You need to know how to defend yourself. Come on hit me in the puku." He pets his tummy and tenses up. I hit him a few times. His stomach hard on my hand. "Rock solid aye Rang." He put up his hands and motioned me to hit them like a boxer. I punched and ducked. He'd occasionally hit back, laughing. "Come on boy, you hit like a girl." I threw everything into the next punches until my fists were red and I was puffing. "Alright, alright. That's enough." Dad scruffed up my hair before walking away. I was full of adrenaline. Pumped. I liked punching. I wanted to keep going, wanted to take it further, wanted to inflict pain.

The next time a boy at school said something to my best friend Pip, I didn't hesitate, I punched him straight in the nose. Fists for words. I can remember the boy's pale, blotchy face screwed up in pain but I can't remember his name. I didn't get in trouble. I don't know if he told on me. At the time I didn't care.

When that same friend I defended and I had an argument later in the year I pushed her over. She fell to the floor, clutching her stomach. I walked out. I was angry, I was anxious, I had no idea what I was really. When she came back to class she was still crying and she pointed at me and told on me in front of the class. The teacher sat me down and asked me why I had done it. I shook my head and shrugged my shoulders. I realised then that being able to defend myself didn't work. In future confrontations I would

walk away, maybe, well mostly.

After a year Mum came back to New Zealand. She came back with bags of presents, arms open and smiling. She wanted me to live with her and I agreed quickly. I was excited to have my mum back. She was glamorous, she was bright and shiny, and she was different. She found herself a home by the sea.

In the summer we would lie out on the shingle beach, the stones hot in the Hawke's Bay sun. We swam too, even though we shouldn't because of the undertow. Mum in that same black one-piece swimsuit, now heavily pregnant with my little sister, picked her way down the stone stairs to the beach and into the water. We would swim out past the breaking waves and just float peacefully. The sea would swirl past my ears as I stared into the sky. That is, until Mum got bored and pretended to be a sea monster, dragging me under.

### *Lessons on Cool*

The first time I smoked a cigarette I was ten years old. Ten. Maybe it was because adults were always surprised by how mature and eloquent a ten-year-old I was that I took it one step further, maybe it's just in my nature to rebel.

Dad had just moved in with his new girlfriend, Robyn, who he would eventually marry, and the big Y2K scare was looming over us all. I had inherited two stepsisters; one was fourteen and the other eighteen. I was taller than both of them and perhaps that's why they took me in as one of their own. I wore a simple, black, thin strapped dress and black sandals. They did me up with heavy black eyeliner and shiny lip-gloss. I felt so grown up, but in reality I was a baby giraffe, all arms and legs, learning to walk for the first time.

I had my first drink that night. When Dad and Robyn left to meet up with their friends at the local pub, one of my brand new stepsisters handed me a drink. It was one of those premixed colourful drinks that tastes like the big packs of fizzy Dad gets at Christmas time to put in the chilly bin for the kids when we spend the day by the river. I took a sip and again marveled at how very grown up I was. People started arriving—some of them were family friends, some of them were strangers. I continued to drink and at one point in the night someone offered me a smoke. I accepted, swept up in this completely different way of being. I coughed my

way through that first cigarette and grew very dizzy and a little sick but I was happy. Deliriously so.

I laughed with strangers and my usually reserved nature was replaced by someone who laughed easily and chatted in a familiar way. At one point a boy who was about two years older than me, and had come with his older cousin, took an interest. I noticed him looking at me. He smoked his cigarettes easily and leaned back in his seat, relaxed. Meanwhile I was trying to keep my long limbs in check and not cough. I learnt quickly that coughing was not cool. The boy's stare scared and exhilarated me all at once. The boys at school who I had developed crushes on up until that point had always shown a preference for the girls with blue eyes and blonde hair.

As the night wore on the boy started appearing near me. At one point I sat on the couch watching my sisters and their friends play drinking games and he sat down next to me. He asked me if I'd like to kiss him. I said no, got up and walked away. He approached again and as I got drunker, he became more insistent. I found my older stepsister and told her. She laughed and told me he was harmless.

We counted down to midnight by the pool. One of my stepsisters was dancing on the roof of a pagoda and as we cried "Happy New Year" a mass pool dive ensued. Drunken teenagers danced and splashed to the music and I was one of them. When I pulled myself from the pool and made my way to the bathroom to dry off the boy reappeared. He told me I had flirted

with him and that it wasn't fair. I responded by stepping into the bathroom and locking the door. He knocked once and then left.

I wiped off the eyeliner and dried myself as well as I could without getting undressed. I didn't want to take off what little clothes I had on. In the bathroom, with the excitement wearing off, I realised I felt awful. I thought I might vomit so drank some water from the tap and sat on the edge of the bath. I wanted to go to bed. I wanted everyone to go home, I wanted Dad and Robyn to come home and I wanted to put on my PJs and watch a movie. Instead I stumbled out to the lounge and told one of my stepsisters I wasn't feeling well. She put me to bed with a bucket. She also told the boy to fuck off when he came down the hall to see where I was and I assume she kept him away for the rest of the night.

When I woke up the next morning piles of teenagers slept on our living room floor and even outside. Four girls were spooning in Dad and Rob's bed when I peeped in to find them. I went to the kitchen and poured myself a glass of water. From the kitchen window I saw two figures huddled up in sleeping bags out on the trampoline. I ran outside in my polka dot printed pyjamas and bounced on the tramp laughing while Dad and Robyn groaned.

It baffles me now that I was in that situation when I was ten years old. Up until that point I had been a level-headed child who liked to read books, hike and eat copious amount of chocolate, something you could still say about me today. Dad had no reason to suspect I'd smoke or drink or do

anything, they just wanted my stepsisters and I to get along and because I had been so painfully shy, progress had been slow going.

My Dad thought that my stepsisters would look after me but at the age of fourteen and eighteen my stepsisters were more interested in being the cool older sibling, something that I would take on for my stepbrother and his friends in a few years time. A right of passage. I was so young, too young, but I felt so very grown up and would continue to go on to do things that I was much too young to be doing.

The following year I started intermediate school. I was so nervous about leaving primary school, wearing a uniform and meeting new people. On the first day I met my two best friends outside the main hall and we clung to each other in our crisp new uniforms before heading inside and finding a seat on the mat. We were to be sorted and unlike Harry Potter where there is a cool talking hat to put on your head; there was an old man with salt and pepper hair standing at a podium waiting for everyone to be seated.

Once we were all inside and had quietened down he lowered his head and began to read off a list of names. Both of my best friends were on this list, which meant they were in Rata house, which meant that they would have all their classes together and be able to sit with each other on their morning tea breaks. I was in Rimu house. I was alone. Until I stepped outside for morning tea and my cousin who was one year older than I waved at me excitedly.

Jackpot. My cousin, Stacey, was in the cool group, which meant that by association I was in the cool group. The girls eyed me cautiously as I approached, appraising my appearance. Once satisfied, they smiled and I was in. I was obviously not very threatening with my boyish short hair, lack of make up and skirt that hadn't been hemmed as short as theirs, yet. I started hanging out with my cousin more. She had a rebellious streak like me, probably more than me.

When I had first moved back to New Zealand, we played at the playground near Grandad's and she was always plotting some way to kiss the cute boys. I was eight and she was nine and she begged me to dare her to kiss one of the local boys. I was so nervous. She suggested we play truth or dare and told me I could start. So I turned to the boy and dared him to kiss Stacey. Before they could kiss, I jumped from the playground and sprinted all the way back to Grandad's, where I found him working. I helped him pile up the wood until Stacey slinked back through the gate with a sheepish smile on her face.

Hanging out with her at Intermediate was a bit the same. She'd tell me to go with her behind the school's whare. There she'd pull out a cigarette and light up. I'd freak out and she'd laugh at me before handing it to me. "Go on, have some." I thought she wanted me to fit in, to be cool like her but now I look back and realise it was also a good way to ensure I wouldn't tell on her.

Part of me desperately wanted to be like her. To have the confidence



she exuded, to be as grown up as her. So I started modeling myself on her. I flirted with boys, I stole cigarettes from my dad, I kept her secrets and she kept mine.

I think it was Stacey's idea to get drunk, although I can't remember. I just remember that she was always the one with the ideas and I was her willing accomplice. My friend Bonnie offered to steal the booze and cigarettes and from there the three of us hatched a plan.

The following weekend we made up a hamper and walked to the Eskdale River. The three of us drank raro tinged vodka, smoked cigarettes and sunbathed. Stacey taught me how to inhale properly because I was "bum puffing." When Bonnie started to feel ill, we panicked. We fed her sandwiches and water and let her lie down in the shade. I think that sobered us up, or maybe we didn't even drink enough to get drunk. When we went home, Bonnie called her mum to pick her up and Stacey and I hung out in my room. When Stacey's ride came she told me to hold onto the stuff and to bring it to school on Monday.

On Monday morning I poured the vodka, coloured pink by the raspberry raro into a pump bottle and stashed it in my bag with the cigarettes. I walked down the gravel driveway and waited for the school bus. When Stacey got on she came straight to me.

"Have you got it?"

"You know it," I patted my bag.

"You know what cuz, I'm feeling a little thirsty. Can I have a drink?"

Stacey asked.

I handed her the bottle and we giggled as she took a sip. She handed it back and I took a sip as well. It tasted terrible. The pink colour did nothing to detract from the terrible watery vodka. It's hard to say how I felt in that moment, but I think it was a sense of belonging as well a sense of adventure. I was doing something that I felt no one else would have the guts to do. Looking back it's more that no one else was stupid enough to do. I stashed the vodka back in my bag and Stacey slipped the smokes in her pocket.

We met again at morning tea. Stacey had enlisted some friends and we huddled in a corner passing the bottle around. I took a sip and passed it on to the next girl. We giggled and shhhd, and when the school bell rung we took off to our next class. It was P.E.

I strutted in my baggy P.E. gear like I was hot shit. I really thought I was too. We started doing drills and this was when I started to struggle. I attempted to run and bounce the ball. The ball was bouncing above my head, my arms flailed and my feet scuffed as I ran. About halfway down the court I was overcome with how funny it all was. Couldn't they see how high the ball was bouncing? Wasn't it hilarious? I cracked up laughing until I was in a foetal position, giggling on the floor.

Mrs Thompson came over to me and looked down at me through narrowed eyes.

"Stevie," she said. "What's going on with you? Are you okay?"

"I'm fine, Miss." I tried keeping my face straight but was struck with how funny her face looked looming over me, her glasses resembling an owl. She searched my bag and I was sent to the school principal.

Mr Shadbolt, or Mr Shaggyballs as the students had dubbed him, peered down at me in disdain and began asking questions. I held out for a while but eventually admitted that my cousin and I had been in on it together. She then swiftly dobbed in Bonnie as the source. Our punishments were as follows: I was suspended for 5 days, Stacey was suspended for 3 days and Bonnie's parents were informed of the situation.

Mum picked me up from school and the whole ride home she screamed at me and I may have screamed back.

"Your father is going to be here soon. What do you think he's going to say, Stevie?"

"I don't care, Mum."

"You're going to care. You know you're grounded right? Yeah. I'm not even going to put a time limit on it. You're going to have to earn back my trust, Kid. What were you thinking?"

"I don't know."

"It's Stacey isn't it? You shouldn't hang out with her. She's trouble. Always has been."

"It wasn't her."

"I can't see Bonnie coming up with it."

"Mum, just shut up!"

“Don’t you tell me to shut up. You’re in the shit now kid.”

Dad pulled up Mum’s drive and honked his horn. Mum proceeded to frog march me down the path and went to Dad’s window.

“Don’t you think we should talk about this, Terry?”

“Talk then, Charlotte.”

“Well, what are we going to do?”

“Obviously stop it from happening again.”

“And how exactly do you think that’s going to work, huh?”

“You deal with your end, and I’ll deal with mine.”

“She’s not to hang out with that Stacey, this is all her fault.”

“No it’s not. Come on Stevie, get in the car.”

“Yes it is, Terry. She’s your niece, you need to sort her out.”

I got in and he wound up his window, cutting Mum off mid sentence. We drove in silence. The sky was starting to get dark and I kept glancing at Dad’s profile waiting for some type of reaction. When he turned to look at me I broke down crying.

“I’m sorry, Dad.”

“Are you going to do it again?”

I shook my head and sobbed.

“Good.”

I lied, but I didn’t do it again for a while at least.

It may be obvious, but my parents hated each other. They had a tumultuous

relationship, a nasty split and nothing nice to say of one another. It was confusing growing up. It was hard hearing Mum say bad things about Dad. It made me uncomfortable and it messed with how I felt about Mum more than it did Dad. I thought Dad was a great Dad and if Mum said anything bad about him it said more to me about her.

Dad on the other hand didn't say much, he didn't have to. The inflection in his voice when he said "Your mother," was enough. The way he squared his shoulders and locked his jaw in her presence spoke volumes to me.

I think I may have translated wrong though. Mum is more communicative than Dad and either way I was a kid who liked both of my parents, but couldn't understand why they didn't like each other.

I stopped going to the river as much, opting to stay with friends instead. I begged my mum to buy me a fancy bikini so that I'd fit in. Dad just wouldn't get it. Brands were important, and a \$120 bikini apparently meant I was cool. During the summer holidays I worked with Bonnie in the grapevines snipping grapes and at the end of it I had over \$200. I was rich! With my riches I purchased some Sugar baggy flared jeans, a Converse hoodie and Sketchers sneakers. They needed to be branded, they needed to be relevant and so did I.

## *Life Lessons*

While I was at intermediate Dad attempted to give me my first driving lesson. I was eleven. We were at the Rodeo - Dad and his friends usually met there as they had a pig hunting competition and there was usually someone who had a good enough pig to enter. Us kids would roam the paddocks fuelled by fizzy and lollies. When it got dark we'd make our way to where our parents were getting pissed on cans of Tui. It was around this time Dad thought it'd be a good idea to teach me how to drive.

"Hop in Rang."

"Are you sure Dad?" I climbed up into the seat of his 4WD jeep; it felt so high. My feet couldn't reach the pedals, so I pulled the lever and shimmied forward.

"Yup, go on. Just turn the key."

I turned the key and the jeep jumped backwards. There was a thump and the jeep stalled. I heard someone scream and everyone outside began making a fuss. I sat staring straight ahead, my hands on the steering wheel unable to move or speak.

"Fuck!" Dad jumped out of the jeep. He reappeared by my door and yanked it open. "You ran over Rob. Get out of the car." He leaned over and pulled the keys from the ignition. I tried to move my hands, tried to think, tried to move, but I couldn't. *What if she's dead?* kept rattling around my mind.

I managed to shake my head at him and pulled the door closed. Dad went back to check on Robyn and I sat in the jeep crying, still stuck to the steering wheel.

After what felt like hours, but was probably more like ten minutes, Dad slid back into the passenger's seat next to me.

"You okay?"

I shook my head and turned my face away so he wouldn't see my tears. "Is Robyn okay?"

"She's fine, a bit battered and bruised, but she'll be fine. Come on, come out." He wrapped his arm around my head and crushed me to him. He tussled my hair before jumping out.

I took deep breaths and wiped my face before sliding down from my seat onto the uneven grass outside. Everyone surrounded me then.

"Come on girl," they patted my back and hair, laughing. "No need to be upset."

It became a bit of a family joke after that. Dad and Robyn hadn't been together very long before that, so they joked I had been trying to kill her off. I used to think it was my fault, that I had made some terrible mistake. I now realise that it wasn't my fault. That I wasn't the one who was supposed to be responsible. That was on Dad.

The next year I headed off to high school, a different one from my friends due to zoning restrictions and me living out in the country. I drifted

apart from most of my friends, except for Bonnie, who I caught the bus home with most days.

I was a terrible student. My mum recently sent me some of my old school reports and they are awful. Every single one a reiteration of "has potential."

I was a terrible friend too. I seemed to move from group to group at high school not really finding a place I belonged. One day at lunch I turned to a girl in the first group I fell into, and after having enough of her and the group dynamics, I told her that I didn't want to deal with her shit anymore. I got up and walked away. I walked up to another group that I had been friendlyish with and asked if I could sit down, they said yes, so I sat down. It was in that group I made a new best friend, Nicole.

It's funny because Nicole and I didn't have a hell of a lot in common. She was into her competitive dancing, she tried really hard in classes and she had never been in trouble before. Maybe that's why she was drawn to me. At that age I oozed confidence when it came to anything naughty. Boys were easy, alcohol was fun and I had been smoking for like two years, no biggie.

I think this was the thing that made me interesting to other people back then. In terms of the TV show *Sex and the City*, which I watched religiously with my mother, I was a Samantha. I was proud of it too. After I lost my virginity I became a fountain of wisdom for all the girls who were considering losing theirs too, or who were just curious.



This was when I solidified my reputation as a slut. When we went out to parties or just to the park to meet up with boys, I would pull on my knee-high-fuck-me-boots, a skirt that barely covered my butt and a top that was probably two sizes too small. This was liberation to me. Why should I hide my body? I'm fucking fabulous.

I was the friend that taught my other friends how to do their make up and hair. I went with them to buy their first thong. I helped them discover what their "style" was. I was also usually there when they got wasted for the first time.

So with Nicole I helped her figure out how to use makeup to hide the eczema she got around her nose, introduced her to push up bras and overall I think I brought out her confidence. I also tested her a lot. "I'm not going into town with you if you wear that," was a common phrase of hers. Funnily enough, it wasn't the revealing clothes she objected to but the "weird" clothes I'd find in the retro section of the op shop.

I still cringe when I think of the clothes I wore then, not the retro duds, but the scandalous ones. I was trying to express myself. I was trying to be different. I wanted attention. In other words I was a confused teenage girl who thought that in order to be liked, which I really wanted to be, I had to fulfil the role, be the Samantha. I collected and lost friends and lovers along the way and thankfully the fuck-me-boots didn't stay in my wardrobe too long.

*Home is Where the Heartless*

I always considered Dad and Rob's house out in Eskdale home, but the truth was I didn't really have one. It was the more homely of my houses, but I lived out of a suitcase. I was always lugging around bags of clothes with me wherever I went. One week at Dad's, the weekend at my boyfriend's and Mum's the week after. Then depending on who Mum was dating at the time, I'd be lugging my bag off to their house as well. While Grandad was alive, his house was always the home I could rely on. But after he died, even with Aunty Kath there, the house was only a sad echo of what it had once been.

It's like I lived in two different worlds. At Dad's I was a tomboy again, a Rangi and at Mum's I was fashion and beauty obsessed. I lied to them both. While they thought I was at a friend's house, I was usually riding in cars with boys looking for scenic spots to smoke pot.

I chose between Mum and Dad's houses, depending on who was more useful to me. I was a bit of an asshole really. If Mum and I had an argument I would pull on my fuck-me-boots and march off to Dad's.

"Stevie, where's my eyeliner?"

"I don't know, Mum."

"Yes you do. Where is it?"

"I might've used it. I dunno."

"Why do you always take my shit!"

"I don't!"

"Well where the fuck is it then?"

"I don't fucking know."

"Fucking look, then."

"Fuck you!"

"Fuck you!"

"I'm going to Dad's"

"You're not fucking going anywhere."

"Yes I fucking am."

Dad and I didn't fight often, but when we did it was usually pretty loud and involved a lot of slamming doors.

"Get out here, now."

"No."

"Stevie."

"Dad."

"I mean it."

"So do I."

"Stevie."

"Fuck off."

"Don't you fucking swear at me."

"I'll say what I fucking like."

"Oh really, you're so fucking obnoxious."

"Whatever."

"You shouldn't have spoken to Robyn like that."

"I told her not to clean my fucking room."

"Then you should clean it yourself."

"It's my fucking room. I shut the fucking door. I told her not to go in there. Not hard."

"Don't be a bitch."

"Or what."

"You're just like your fucking mother."

"Oh yeah and what?"

"You should learn to shut the fuck up."

"You should fuck off."

"Don't you fucking talk to me like that."

"What are you going to do Dad? Hit me?"

"You'd deserve it if I did."

"Go on, hit me! I'll call CYFS."

"I'll dial the fucking number!"

Easy to see why I have a bit of a potty mouth.

### *Boys and Girls Look Good Together*

When I was fourteen I dated a seventeen year old who ended up going to juvie. I loved it. I loved reading the letters out to my friends and I loved the drama. We hadn't been dating very long before it happened but I found it all so romantic. "Will you wait for me," he wrote as though he was going away to war and I sighed. At school when a teacher tried physically taking a letter off me I ran out of the class and blocked the door with my foot so she couldn't follow. I got in a lot of trouble for "locking a teacher in her classroom." Sorry, Mrs Gopal. I didn't write back to him as much as he wrote to me and when he got out, I broke up with him. The idea of him was so much more romantic than the reality of him.

When I was fifteen, the same age my mum was when she found out she was pregnant with me, I started seeing my first long-term boyfriend. We liked to party. We'd go to beaches and rivers, smoke pot and hang out with friends, we'd party all weekend taking party pills and raving all night long. I thought I was happy, but I gradually realised I was treading water, not moving forward, stuck. Towards the end of our relationship it became apparent to me that if I stayed with him I wouldn't be the me I wanted to be. I'd forever be the cool girl, the girl that was down to chill with the boys, smoking pot and playing video games, the girl who'd get pregnant and be stuck in Napier forever. That's not what I wanted. I wanted more, but I didn't know what more was, didn't know how to be more, just knew I

wouldn't find it where I was.

I broke up with him after 3 years and moved back in with Dad for a while. Mum had bought a house in the city at this point and became more convenient for me to stay with her while I worked. School had finished and most of my friends took off to university. My afterschool job working at Burger King became my full-time job and I made new friends there as I had lost most of my social circle when I left my boyfriend.

There were other boys, and a girl once, but as a whole they don't really matter. I liked them and they liked me, at least for a while.

It was at Burger King I met my now partner, Jordan. We were friends first. Flirty friends, but he was dating another girl that worked there and I was dating another boy.

It wasn't always easy. I was insecure and constantly pushed him away because I didn't want him to leave me. We did long distance twice. We broke up and got back together a few times. Eventually I got over it and after a couple of years we got engaged and moved to Wellington together in 2010. We've been here ever since.

It was with Jordan that I stopped playing parts and began figuring out who I am. I didn't have to be a Samantha. I didn't have to be a country girl or a city girl. I didn't have to be intelligent or play dumb. I didn't have to be only one thing. My years as a Samantha have left me quite comfortable with the topic of sex but I no longer feel like my body is my only asset. I still love

escaping into the bush or to the sea, but I also love strolling down streets of cities too big to leave an imprint on. I guess it's all part of growing up.

## **When They're Gone**





## *Tap Water*

Walking down the white corridors the walls ooze sadness and sterility. The despair leaks into the air and I breath it in. It tastes of bleach. I clench Jordan's hand as we near the waiting room.

"Are you okay?" I ask. He nods, his face blank but his jaw tight. We turn into the waiting room and Sue, Jordan's mother, is there waiting.

"Hi loves," she greets us with open arms and we hug.

"Have you been here long?" Jordan asks.

"Oh fifteen minutes, they don't always let you in on time. Go ring the buzzer they might let you in now."

Jordan presses the button and a voice replies.

"Yes?"

"Hi, can we see Kevin Boyle?"

"Two at a time." The woman's voice is clipped and efficient. The door buzzes and we push through. We walk past open doors, with closed blue curtains. The receptionist points us in the right direction.

There he is. Dressed in a printed blue hospital gown and covered in white blankets. His chest rises and falls unnaturally in small weird bursts as a machine breathes for him, a multitude of tubes go into his nose and mouth and a blood filled tube peeks out from the top of his gown.

This is not what we were expecting. I reach out to Jordan and grip his shoulder. A tall, bald, man approaches us and begins to tell us what's

happened, what all the cords are and what we can expect.

Kevin was poisoned by his tap water. He contracted campylobacter after flooding in the Hawke's Bay tainted the water supply in June 2016. Kevin's intestines were so inflamed the doctors decided to operate to remove infected sections. His intestines then were too swollen to close the surgical cut so his stomach was left open and bandaged up. The swelling caused too much pressure on his kidneys so they stopped working. He was being fed from a tube, a machine was breathing for him, he was on dialysis and he was in an induced coma, where they kept him on the brink of waking up.

We put on plastic gowns, gloves and masks before we can go anywhere near him. The nurse tells us not to be afraid, they're to protect Kevin not us. I stand on Kevin's right hand side and rest my hand on his arm. His arm is so small. Kevin looks small, so different from the man I had met ten years earlier.

"Hey Grandad," Jordan reaches out and pats his other arm and I have to pull my lips together so they don't tremble. He looks at me, unsure of himself. "I don't know what to say." I nod and try to smile encouragingly, I know that if I try to say anything my voice will shake and the tears that seesaw in my eyes will spill over. After a few deep breaths I manage to pull myself together.

"It's okay honey, you don't have to talk." I turn away to look at one of the many machines that beep gently in the background attempting to

control my face and my breathing. Attempting to be strong.

Jordan nods but carries on, he tells Kevin about the trip we've only just gotten back from, talks about Cam, Jordan's brother who lives in Amsterdam, he just talks. I try to chime in, try to keep it light, but for the most part I am a useless emotional blob who only manages to appear strong in silence.

Jordan pulls out the little windmill we bought Kevin on our travels and looks about the room before putting it back in his pocket.

"I'll hold onto this for you Grandad."

Kevin's eyes flutter and he begins to move. Machines start beeping loudly and we step back as the nurse rushes in. He hits some buttons and grabs Kevin's hands before they reach the tube that goes down his throat. Before he falls back asleep Kevin looks at me, his eyes unseeing, completely panicked.

As we leave the hospital the awful walls taunt us again. Jordan and I glance at each other, trying to gage the other's feelings. He's always so stoic, so I try to be stoic too. I fail. Before we get to the car, I'm sobbing.

We went back to visit Kevin when we could, some visits were planned, most weren't. Most were a result of panicked phone calls that echoed of, "This is it," or "It'll be your last chance." I'm so familiar with the Rimutakas now. I've seen those mountains during the day and night. I've seen them in beautiful sunshine, mist covered and blearily through torrential rain.

Mostly we played throwback music, easy music to sing along to and forget why we were driving back up to Napier.

Different white walls, but white walls all the same, surround us as we make our way up to his room. We don't know what to expect when we get there but the day before we had had a call. Kevin had told Sue he was going to die and needed to change something in his will, told her that he needed Jordan, that he wanted to say goodbye.

We pump the blue sanitiser into our palms and rub as we round the corner to his room. He's sitting in his dark blue, lazy boy styled chair, staring out the window at the sunshine. He looks healthy.

"Hey Grandad." Jordan and I say in unison.

"You're here," his voice barely above a whisper. He had had his vocal cords damaged on his last trip to the I.C.U. when he had a tracheal tube put in to help him breathe. He has a rosy flush in his cheeks that fills me with hope.

"You look so good." I gush. I lean in and give him a kiss on the cheek.

"Were you making up stories to get us up here?" Jordan nudges Kevin playfully. Kevin laughs but between the pneumonia and the damaged throat it is more of a cough.

He taps the side of his jaw, which is his way of asking Jordan to shave his face. Kevin has always been meticulous with his grooming and months at the hospital have meant that he has had to let this slip a little. Jordan

pulls out Kevin's electric razor and shaves him.

I follow up with a cool, wet cloth and dab it on Kevin's forehead. The tubes and pneumonia have meant that Kevin isn't allowed to drink fluids. He's always hot and thirsty. I wipe away the white build up around his mouth from being so dry and hand him a moistened sponge lollypop that he can rub around his gums.

This has become our standard welcome. Try and make him as comfortable as possible. We help him brush his teeth and Jordan combs his hair the way he likes it.

Conversation is hard for him. He is breathless and croaky so he conserves his words for when they are needed. Jordan and I attempt to entertain him. We talk for long stretches at a time and he seems to enjoy our stories.

His neighbours arrive who visit him every day but leave quickly when they see us there. They say they'll come back later. Jordan's mum gets there and the talk turns legal. They organise times for the next day where they can sign the forms.

"You're lucky to have a room to yourself Grandad," Jordan says.

Kevin shrugs, "I guess, but it's boring."

"Can you get a TV or anything?"

"I don't think so. I've got that but it only gets one bloody channel." He points to his radio.

"Wait here a sec." Jordan then goes to enquire about a TV and within

an hour we've ordered one and it'll be set up later that day.

When the woman comes to install it Kevin is so grateful, I am struck by how happy something so simple can make him. I'm struck with guilt that we're not here to visit him as much as we should. I feel bad that so much of the responsibility of caring for him has fallen on Sue, who visits him daily, while working a fulltime job.

Leading up to Christmas Jordan had the idea to source one of Kevin's old cricket team's photos and have it framed. Kevin was originally from the Wellington region so the National Library is a great source for a lot of his youthful sporting endeavours. He's not hard to spot. He had the same goofy smile and a similar figure to Jordan's now. Jordan had to source the names of everyone in the team from one of Kevin's best friends as they weren't available and set it up like an old school photo with the names left to right from each row.

We drove straight to the Hastings hospital from Wellington. Our luggage still stacked in the boot along with all of our Christmas gifts for the rest of our family. We head to the I.C.U. and buzz. People there inform us they had been waiting over an hour. We hesitantly sit and wait along with them. After an hour and eight other people coming and going from the waiting room we buzz again. No answer.

"They could at least tell us how long we're going to be stuck out

here!" I exclaim in frustration. The older ladies nod and tsk while tapping their feet. We wait for another fifteen minutes before giving up and going, we'll be back tomorrow.

We arrive back to the hospital the next day.

"They better let us in today. I can't believe those women sat there for over two and a half hours yesterday."

We pull out the frame, which I wrapped, in brown paper printed with white stag heads and tied it up with twine. We also grab the little windmill, which was now wrapped in plain brown paper to be part of his present.

We had joked that the windmill was cursed. We had bought it in Amsterdam the day we flew out and when we had our first stopover in Taipei, Sue had called us to say Kevin was really ill. We had brought it up for him multiple times but it was always when he was in I.C.U. so we were never able to give it to him. We joked that if we actually managed to give him the windmill it might cure him or kill him.

In the waiting room for the I.C.U. people are dressed up, people have presents and flowers and treats. It's Christmas Eve, so I guess for a lot of people this is their Christmas celebration with their loved one. It is ours after all. Sue, Jordan, Cam and Morgan, Jordan's siblings, and I make our way into Kevin's curtained off area.

He has a large window in his room and a spare bed that Morgan, Cam and I perch on while Sue and Jordan take separate chairs. We chat about our lives for the last few weeks, before we open the presents. I think he



likes his presents from us. He stares at the photo with a reminiscent smile. Jordan finds an article online about Kevin's cricket team and reads it out to him; he smirks satisfactorily at his statistics. When it's time to go Kevin slumps in his seat, his head hangs. We promise to visit him on Boxing Day before we head up north.

We're up early, we shower and pack while Dad cooks us a hearty breakfast. I'm still so full from Christmas day, yet I surprise myself with how much eggs and bacon I manage. We give Dad and Robyn lots of hugs and kisses before we head back to Hastings to see Kevin.

We are buzzed through quickly today but are greeted at the reception area by a concerned looking woman.

"He's been put in isolation." She tells us. "You need to wash your hands, put on gloves, gowns and masks. Do not touch him." We nod and glance at each other. I can see he's worried. The muscles in his jaw twitch and his brows draw down, I'm worried too. As I tie the plastic around my waist I can feel my heartbeat speed up, my breaths hitch and my eyes prickle. *Get it together Stevie.* I let Jordan go ahead of me to give myself crucial seconds to breathe. It's okay, I tell myself, he's going to be okay.

The room is a glass box. The lighting is dim, there is constant beeping and it's cold in here. We say hi and move toward Kevin.

"Take a photo of me," he says. "I want them to see what they've done to me."

My breath hitches again but Jordan just nods and pulls out his phone to take a photo. The mood in this room is so different from the mood only two days earlier.

“Are you cold?” I ask. He shrugs his shoulders.

“I can’t sleep in this room. It’s awful. The air. The beeping. Awful.”

Jordan and I empathise with him, but try to be positive as well. That’s one of the things we’ve intentionally tried to do since he’s been in hospital. Be positive, encourage him, all in hopes that he’ll want to get better, that he’ll try. People say that’s important with recovery. Up until now it seems to have worked. Instead of nodding profusely and saying he can get through it, like usual, he slumps in his chair looking dejected.

We attempt to distract him by telling him about our trip, about what we’re planning on doing. This only seems to make things worse as we are going to stay with his estranged son.

“Tell him I love him.”

There is something about his eyes. It’s hard to describe. His usually bright blue eyes seem grey. There is no animation shaping them, no glimmer, none of his personality. His eyes just hang in his face.

We tell him we love him. That we’ll be back in a week and that he better be feeling healthier next time we see him. In the side room we take off our gloves, masks and gowns, we sanitise and exit. I hold my breath as we walk past Kevin, we stop and wave and I blow him a kiss. He tries a smile, but it doesn’t reach his eyes. As we turn the corner I let out my

breath and with it comes tears.

That was the last time we saw Kevin. He died while we were up north enjoying beaches and sunshine. It was weird at the time. Knowing he had died but still staying up there. It happened over the New Year so the funeral wouldn't be for another week or so, so there was no need to rush back.

The funeral was what I would call your typical New Zealand, vaguely religious affair. It was held at a funeral home. There were readings and songs. There was a photomontage. There was cakes and tea. The readings seemed to ask for an emotional response, it's felt manipulative in a way, like they wanted me to cry. The photographs echoed his blue eyes and the songs praised a god that seemed to increase in importance towards the end.

Afterwards we went back to Kevin's house and had drinks and nibbles. Kevin's old friends all told stories about Kevin and we drank to his memory. I poured myself a glass of water from the tap and hesitated. I looked at the glass in my hand, innocuous. Its contents, clear. My hand shook and ripples formed on the surface. All of this from fucking tap water. I shook my head and sculled it down.

This was my first experience of bereavement as an adult and I learnt some things about myself. I am not a bad ass. I am not the woman who can

hold her head high and organise people and activities. I am the woman who is there when you need her, the one who holds your hand and asks if you are okay even though you obviously aren't. I give out hugs instead of advice and if anything, try to make myself scarce. I lurk in the background. I am an emotional vulture, in that if I see you cry I have to cry too. I'm sorry. I also apologise a lot for crying.

When I was younger I picked up on some of the issues that go on behind the scenes when a family member dies. I felt the tension, I heard the frustration and I witnessed some of the ugliness caused by money. Now that I am an adult, not the adultiest adult involved but one nonetheless, I witnessed it all first hand.

I saw the effect of one person putting their bereavement above everyone else's. I saw claws come out when the will was read. I saw what happens when the will is contested as the family scrambles to maintain some kind of normalcy. I saw that if someone came at my fiancé with unfounded accusations my usual conflict avoidance was surpassed by my protectiveness. Don't fuck with the people I love.

When I had met Kevin I had already lost both of my grandads, so he became my adopted grandad. I called him Grandad and ended up having a much closer relationship with him than with my mother's father. When I lost him, I felt my previous losses as well. It's like loss accumulates. I felt the loss of Nana, Grandad Johnny and Grandad Graham. I felt the loss of Uncle Eddie. I even felt the loss of pets that had been important to me.

Is that the way loss works? Does every loss build up inside of you? Do we have enough room inside of us for that? Or is it that like smells, emotions have nostalgia attached to them? Do we just feel it all in that moment like a memory imprinted in an emotion. I don't know. But this experience takes me back in time. Swimming upstream to the year 2003, two days after my dad's 35<sup>th</sup> birthday. The day we lost Grandad.

*In the Wind*

"Hello?" I hold my phone to my ear.

"He's gone." Dad croaks. My heart plummets into my stomach and I catch my breath. A choking noise escapes my throat and I work my mouth open and closed trying to form words.

"Really?"

"Yeah, I'm sorry."

"Are you okay Dad?"

"Yeah," he whispers.

"Where are you?"

"I'm here, at Grandad's."

"Okay, I'll get Mum to drop me off."

"No, no, you've got a wedding to go to. I just thought you should know."

"I love you Dad."

"Love you."

I pull the phone away from my ear and stare at it. Then down at my dress. It's black and figure hugging with a straight across neckline and little red roses evenly spaced out on the straps. What the hell am I supposed to do now? I have a wedding to go to. Mum pops her head in my bedroom door.

"You look great babe." I look at her, frozen, and she frowns at what

she sees on my face. "What's up?"

"Grandad." I stop unable to say it. My throat is thick and heavy as though someone has me in a choke hold.

"Is he?" She asks. I feel my face folding up in on itself. I lose control of my breath. Still unable to form words I nod in response. Her arms are around me and I sob into her shoulder. She smells floral and heady, mixed with the chemical tang of fake tan. "It's okay honey."

Each breath is fire in my chest. I struggle to slow them down, to take in less air, to be less desperate, less gasping. The breaths slow, and as they do my body goes limp in my mother's arms, shuddering with every raking breath. My cousin Alexis' voice floats down the hallway, something about buttons, and she appears in the doorway.

"What's going on?" her eyebrows arch quizzically at me. I draw in a deep breath, trying to summon the words, but Mum answers for me.

"Stevie's grandad died."

"Oh, Stevie." Alexis joins the embrace and we just stand there holding each other. I pull away. Action. I need to do something, I need to respond and I need to do it now.

"Mum, can you drop me off? Or I can walk?"

"Of course I can, I'll pick you up when we're on the way. Go wash your face with a cold flannel, you're all red and puffy."

In the bathroom I run the tap and stare at myself in the mirror. This was supposed to be a happy day. My lips are red and puffy and my eyes

almost swollen shut. I'm not a pretty crier. I splash my face. The water slaps me out of my daze. Action. I run my wet hands through my hair and take two deep breaths through my mouth. My cheeks swell and my lips shudder.

I stalk into the kitchen, my heels clacking on the wooden floor.

"I'm ready." I look around and see Mum on the porch watching the waves and puffing on a cigarette. She jumps up and drops her cigarette into a paua shell.

"Shit, sorry honey. Didn't think you'd be ready so quick." She pulls her dressing gown around her and ties the waist. "Let's go then."

"I'm coming." Alexis takes my hand. I look at her, my face softening and nod.

"Give them my condolences. I'll come in when I pick you up, okay?" She grimaces down at her dressing gown. We wave goodbye and stagger up the shingle driveway in our new high heels. There are people sitting on the front porch craning their necks to see who we are. I recognise a few and wave.

"Stevie," Aunty Kath calls from the porch, standing up. "I thought you couldn't come." We hold each other and she squints at Alexis. "Oh, little Alexis. Well you're not so little anymore."

"Is Dad here?"

"Inside dear." I nod and make my way to the door of the porch.



In the living area I can hear Dad's voice, loud and angry. I freeze and grab Alexis' hand.

"Why the fuck is she taking over? That fucking vulture. Seventy people? Does she think there'll only be seventy people there? This is like Mum's funeral all over again. It wasn't enough." He spits out each word as though they taste bad.

"He hasn't left much money, Terry." My uncle Daryl's voice is quiet.

"I've got money, you've got money and if she lets him, he's got money too."

"I know."

"But she wants to cater tea and cake for seventy people. There are fuck loads of people coming from all over the fucking place and that's it, that's all she wants to do."

"She doesn't see the point."

"Fuck her."

I sidle into the kitchen and Alexis follows.

"Hey Dad."

He looks at me, bleary eyed, rage etched into his features.

"Kiddo? What are you doing here? I told you not to bother."

"Dad." I say it in a way that says, "Shut up you big doofus, of course I came," and reach out to him. He hugs me, crushing me into him. He gives me a kiss on the cheek.

"Go have a shave you hairy bitch."

I laugh and punch him on the shoulder. He reaches out to Alexis and squeezes her shoulder.

“Hey Lexi.”

“Hey Terry.”

“Hey Uncle Daryl.”

“Hey,” he replies. He’s sitting at the table looking out the window. I go over and kiss him on the cheek.

“This sucks.” I slump into the seat next to him.

“Yeah,” Dad follows my cue and takes a seat at the table.

A few hours later Mum walks into the cottage smiling a politician’s smile. She kisses cheeks, hugs and chitchats easily with the family that was once hers. Now it’s just mine, mine and Dad’s. Dressed for Aunty Shirley’s wedding she makes the cottage look smaller. She hugs me and I am swept along with her and Alexis back to the car. She passes her makeup bag to the back seat where I’m sitting and pulls the car out of the gravel drive, spitting stones in her wake.

“Don’t put on too much, you’re young and beautiful and you don’t need it.” I open the bag and pull out the glass foundation bottle. I use it as concealer dabbing it on my under-eyes and on my blotchy red nose and around my mouth. I pat my fingers on my skin blending the foundation. I pull out a black case that opens with a mirror on one side and a deep brown bronzer on the other. I use the mirror to see what I’m doing and dab

a brush in the bronzer sweeping it along my cheeks. I line my eyes heavily with black and put on red lipstick to match the roses on my dress. I'm ready to pretend now, ready to play the part.

"Are you going to be okay?" Mum asks. I shrug and look out the window as we pull up to the church I go to with my school.

"Wait, she's getting married at a church?" I query.

"Yup, hubby-to-be is a Christian something or other. You girls better hurry in to do your ushering. I'll see you soon."

"Save us a seat?" Mum nods and I slam the door behind me.

"You sure you're okay?" Alexis asks.

"I have to be." We link arms and walk into the church.

I tug at the skirt of my dress, the same one I wore to the wedding as I walk out to Dad's 4WD. I have a thick black fitted jumper and black boots on with it; Mum said this makes it more appropriate. I hop in the back and Rob turns to me. She smiles at me warmly and reaches out to take my hand.

"Oh Stevie, you look lovely." I nod and try to smile back.

"You get on okay today? Everything sorted?" I ask.

"Yup, she can have her tea and cake. We're having the after party."

Dad replies.

"Good," I say.

We watch from a room that's designed to be nondescript, unmemorable. It's all white walls, wooden benches and lots of light. The

room is too small. At the front is Grandad's coffin. People are swarming over the benches like black bees and pressing in the doors, spilling out onto the plain, concrete entryway. I sit and watch as we go through the motions. Say the things we're supposed to say. Offer up a just-in-case prayer and sing songs that don't say anything about Grandad.

In the adjoining room tea and cake is set up. I reach for a piece of cake, chocolate of course.

"No." Dad's voice causes my hand to freeze. "Don't eat anything. There's not enough here for everyone. We don't need it." He moves away and starts saying his goodbyes. As we edge our way to the door Dad turns to the room and raises his voice. "For those of you who don't know, we're holding an after party at the rugby club next to Dad's. Everyone is welcome."

Dad pulls up the gravelly driveway of the Eskview Rugby club and parks near the other cars already there.

"Come on, we've got work to do." Dad hops out and we follow. Robyn rolls up her sleeves the second we get inside and starts to help their friends, who have been working while we were at the funeral. I grab a peeler and start peeling potatoes. Dad takes off and I don't see him for a few hours. Other people come in and out of the club, dropping off cakes, whole animal carcasses and cases of beer.

The work merges into a party as more people turn up to help and

start drinking while they work. I become superfluous and float from room to room. I find Dad lording over roasting trays of meats, the rich, savoury scent making my mouth water. He hands me his Tui.

“Have a sip girl, today’s a special day.” I take a sip and he laughs. “You finished it, now go get me another one.”

The clubroom is crowded. We quieten down for speeches. Real speeches this time. We laugh, cry and heckle the speakers. I eat and drink until I’m full and sleepy. Feeling content I watch as the adults raise their voices in a song. The song is so full of joy and merriment, I feel my heart fill up too.

As the night wears on I slump into my mug of stolen beer and fall asleep on my barstool. The party carries on around me like a lullaby.

Months later, we stand on the edge of the cliff overlooking the organs. The organs are a natural formation in the rock that has been whittled down to look like the pipes of an organ. Below the pipes, the Mōhaka River rushes by, almost black from this height. The sky is a battle between the clouds and the sun, unable to make up its mind. I pull my coat closer to my body and watch as Dad walks to the edge, the wind tugging at his hunting coat.

Being here, the loss hits me once again. It’s heavy and threatens to drown me. I miss making him cups of tea, miss the melodic thud of his axe on wood, miss his smile that crinkled up to one side of his face and how he’d pretend to wind up his glass eye when it had turned around.

I try to remember the last time I saw him. He is in shades of grey. Sitting on his couch with an oxygen mask on, still convinced he might get better. I believed it of him. Believed he could get better, believed it so much because I didn't want to think of what it would mean if he didn't, if he couldn't. I hate to think of him like that.

Instead I'll think of him under the walnut tree. His hands gripping his axe. Worn, hardened hands on wood, weathered wood to metal. The melodic thud that filled my afternoons. Dad, proud of strength and hard work making Grandad show me his guns. Grandad, rolling up his shirtsleeves and flexing. His skinny, white arms bulging with a shocking amount of muscle. The countless cups of tea.

I've lost my grandad. A good man. People throw those words around all the time when describing the deceased, but he really was the best kind of man.

The sky opens up and the sun shines down on us and it feels right being here. This is the right way to say goodbye. With the open sky above us and the river below, this is where he would want to end up.

"So I guess I'm just going to do this." Dad calls out. He removes the lid and holds the silver container above his head. An icy wind cuts through the sun's warmth and I feel a smattering of rain dance across my face. It's spitting through the sunshine. I stifle a laugh and Dad looks at me, a smile on his face.

"He always did say, one fine day when it's raining." He turns his face

to the container in his hand. "Well here you go Dad. It finally is one fine day when it's raining." He tosses the ashes into the air and we watch as the wind picks up the grey, picks up Grandad and whirls him towards the river below.

**Standing Here**





## *Whānau*

History is not something I am able to hold onto. I get close and reach out. I manage to hold on for a single second, but it slips through my fingers. When I find it again, it is changed, like me. I am a rock in a river, new information rushes past me like water. The past changes with every current, constantly forming and fluctuating. Sometimes I hold onto it, refusing to let go. I become stuck. Sometimes it's only for a day, but sometimes it's for years. If I let the water rush over me, take in the information, I am changed, forever changing, forever searching for the elusive truth.

Whakapapa is used to place oneself within a wider context. It's meant to link an individual to the people who came before them, to land, to rivers and sea. My iwi are Ngāti Whātua Te Uri-o-Hau, Ngāpuhi and Ngāti kahungunu. My land is a place I do not know, full of people I do not know. Do I want to visit these places and their people? Absolutely. But I struggle to call a place so far removed from my everyday life, my whenua. My land. Instead I've created my own links and ties. My whānau is ever changing, ebbing and flowing with the tides of life and so does my place in this world.

My Dad and I still have a strong bond. I'm still a daddy's girl through and through. He still calls me Rangi. We still go out fishing and hunting when I'm back in the Bay. It's easy, we'll call each other out when we're being dicks but for the most part our relationship is relaxed, full of jokes

and banter.

My relationship with my mum has probably evolved the most over the years. We've both grown up. We've grown to respect one another. We can talk about anything, and I mean anything. It's probably not your typical mother/daughter relationship, but we've figured it out and it works for us.

The land that I'm linked to now has changed. Memories of the Mōhaka still fill me with wistfulness but I barely see it anymore. It's been over a year since I last went for a walk with Dad along the riverside in search of deer. Ten years ago, Waipātiki was nothing more than a nice beach I liked to go to occasionally. Now, it's a place I yearn for.

I don't know when Napier stopped being home and Wellington took over. I used to bus back for holidays and as the bus would crawl along the Marine Parade, I would relax. It was a homecoming. I still love going back to see my family, I love curling up in their homes and eating their food and listening to their familiar voices prattle on. But it's different now.

The relief comes when I get back to Wellington. When I open the door to my house, place my suitcase down, pick up my cat and squish her. That's when I can take a breath, take a moment and be truly at home.

Dad recently asked, "When are you guys coming home?"

I laughed and said, "We're not. Why would we?"

"Oh, it's like that is it?"

It hadn't occurred to me that they were waiting for us to come back. A few years ago Mum turned to me on one of her visits to Welly and said,

“You’re not coming back are you?” I shook my head and she nodded. I love this city. I love being in a place where I don’t know everyone, where they don’t know me and I can be who I am becoming.

In Napier I feel as though I’m fifteen again. To the people there who knew me way back when, I will always be that same girl. Maybe it’s my fault for typecasting myself when I was younger, playing the roles that were required of me, being so many different girls. The tomboy and the girly girl, the cool girl and the bookworm, the wild child and the homebody. Then there were the different worlds I lived in. Mum and Dad, the city and the country, the Māori and the Pākehā.

But now, in Wellington, I’ve found a place where I’m not limited by who I was. I just am. Looking into my whakapapa I found that I actually have a lot of whānau from the Wellington region. When my European ancestors came to New Zealand from England and Scotland, Wellington was the place that they made their home. It was from Wellington and the Wairarapa that they spread out, finding their place in New Zealand. That’s what I’m doing, finding my place. I can’t say that I’ll be here forever. I often feel the call of far off places that need to be seen and experienced. But for now, I’m claiming this place, this land and its inhabitants as my own.

*Racing the storm*

“Time to pull in the lines, there’s a storm coming.”

I look at the horizon, storm clouds seethe in the distance. I’m not worried. The horizon is forever away. We pack away the lines and pull the anchor.

The swell around us starts to form into sharp peaks with white foamy points.

“Let’s get the hell out of here,” Dad calls over the loud motor of his boat. He turns the nose toward Napier and lets the engine roar.

The swell begins to take us up, up, up then crashes us down on the other side. Dad changes tack and started driving into it diagonally. That way we fall more gently down the other side, the nose dipping into the next swell to come along.

The sky darkens quickly as the horizon falls heavy on us. That, combined with the sea spray, makes it difficult to see a thing.

The swell grows bigger and bigger and I can see Dad looking at me out of the corner of his eye.

“You better go get the life jackets.”

I nod and get up. I stumble down into the galley, grabbing onto the oven to steady myself. I pull one on and grab one for Dad. I get up and throw it at him before taking a seat and tightening the buckles. Dad tucks his behind himself craning his neck to see better.

"Roll me a smoke," Dad throws his pack at me.

I catch it and begin to roll. A little rusty, I take my time placing the tobacco in the paper and rolling it into a smooth cylindrical shape. I lean over in my seat, smoke in hand, outstretched.

Dad lights up and begins puffing. I can see his shoulders relax a little as he exhales.

"Remember that time on the Hawkesbury?"

I nod my head.

"*Life is a breeze,*" Dad sings in a deep baritone. One hand on the steering wheel, his smoke hanging from the corner of his lips. I join in on the next line.

"*We do it for fun. No apologies to anyone. We live on the seas. We do as we please.*"

### *One Fine Day*

I tried swimming against the current, crafting the story I wanted to tell, instead I've told the story that wanted to be told. When I stopped struggling the river showed me the way. Sometimes it was a little rough with me. I struggled to get to the surface, struggled to breathe. But at other times I was at peace, floating with the sun on my face and the river taking me where it will.

There is an ocean of human experience out there and mine is only one drop in the vast expanse of possibilities. As my river approaches the ocean it slows down. I lazily swim to the bank and pull myself out. On the edge I watch the water drift by and as it merges with the sea I see resistance. The fresh water mixing with the salt, the tide being pushed aside for the current.

I wipe the water from my eyes and ring out my hair. I get up to walk away. I make my way towards the sea hoping to get a better view, a better understanding. The sun is warm on my back and soil turns to sand beneath my feet. As I crest the rise before the sand goes down into the sea the sky creaks and the sun turns grey.

The rain falls then. At first it is barely more than a mist hovering around me, I breathe it in. Then come the rumbling and the crackling of thunder and lightning. I am not afraid. This isn't the first storm I've been caught in, and besides, I'm already wet. The rain falls heavy now. The sea

rises to meet the clouds and the river surges, gushing into the sea and all I  
can do is stand here and watch.





## Part Two: Exegesis

# **What are You?**

The Formation of Identity through Autobiographical Stories



## Introduction

After meeting a new person in a social setting where we chat about life, there inevitably comes a pause, a hesitation, before the person glances up at me, looks away and asks me the question. *What are you?* The question has been worded differently of course. *Sooo is your family from New Zealand? You're so pretty, what's your ethnicity? Your last name is Greeks, does that make you Greek?* An interesting conclusion to come to. I have been asked that last question multiple times to which I respond (with a smile of course). *Yes, because people have their country of origin as their surname.* They blush, laugh and then it's my responsibility to make them more comfortable by placing myself, labelling myself, so they know how to "deal" with me from then on.

This sounds cynical I know, and of course this is not always the case, but I'm attempting to express why I've sat by while people are, for the want of a better word, blatantly racist. *Oh but you're not like the rest of THEM, you're different. You're such an Oreos.* Insert stereotype here. I am only as "different" as any one person is to any other person. When they say I'm different they think they're complimenting me, including me, drawing me to their side. Really they are only highlighting their own inability to understand people they deem to be 'different' beyond stereotyping. They are saying, "this is what people from your ethnic group do, say and think, but don't worry, I think you're different. I'm not

placing you in with *them*, you're special," and with those sentiments, I disagree.

My thesis isn't about racism, though. It could have been. I don't think I know any one person who hasn't experienced it, witnessed it or even inflicted it. This thesis is about the question and why that question is important to me. *What are you?* I've been asked this question so often but I still don't have an answer I'm comfortable with. Do I tell you my ethnic identity, do I break it down into percentages, do I put them in order, highest to lowest? Pākehā 68.75%, Māori 25%, and Chinese 6.25%, or should I be offended that you asked? Probably, but what's more troubling is the amount of weight people put on these numbers. I myself have been guilty of this. I have used the lower percentages as an excuse for my self-perceived lack of prowess at cultural proficiency. When instead of focusing on numbers, we should focus on the experience of being multi-ethnic and not the amounts that add up to that fact.

*What are you?* I can't help but question what the motivation behind this question is. I know white people aren't asked this question unless of course they have an obvious accent, but even then the question is phrased differently. *Where are you from?* My French colleague likes to make a game of it, she'll make them guess. But to me, the question is *What are you?* Almost as though I am not human, not a who, but a what. I know this is likely to stem from the fact that I am obviously Kiwi. I have a Kiwi accent, I use colloquial language, and I manage to blend in for the most part. This is

why they can't ask *where are you from*, because to this I will say simply, *I'm from the Bay!*

This exegesis is the critical accompaniment to my collection of autobiographical stories, "So Let it Fall." "So Let it Fall" is an attempt at answering that question, *What are you?* Without me fully realising it at the time, this question informed so much of what I wrote. The purpose of this exegesis is to discuss the ideas and research that went into creating "So Let it Fall" and to explore how my creative component works within the context of New Zealand nonfiction writing, with a particular focus on identity. I will observe the journey of my creative processes, following key points and directional changes that went into "So Let it Fall." Here I discuss why I chose the form of autobiography, what informed this decision, and how this has developed over time. I cover how research and advice formed and informed my creative work. I also situate my own approach to the formation and representation of identity in nonfiction writing within the context of a selection of recent works of contemporary New Zealand nonfiction. This selection consists of examples from Witi Ihimaera, Manying Ip, Alice Te Punga-Somerville, Tina Makereti, Tze Ming Mok, Ashleigh Young and Tracey Slaughter. These authors offer different approaches to the formation of identity through nonfiction writing and were a varied sounding board in which to place my own work. This exegesis is about the journey that was "So Let it Fall" and key factors that

influenced my work. It's about why the question, *what are you?* is important, but also why *who* I am and who you are, is more so.

### **Empowering Autobiography**

There are many options when considering how best to tell the story of our real lives. There are of course writers who have written about their own lives and labelled it fiction, and then there are those who take a nonfiction approach to the topic and label it autobiography or memoir. Either way the protagonist or the "self," represented in the text is exactly that, a representation (Anderson 70). This was something I had to come to terms with during the process of writing "So Let it Fall" as there is not only one "self." As Anderson states the "autobiographical subject can never authenticate his (or her) reality but only go on adding indefinitely to his many spectral forms of identity" (70). So in writing I had to decide what "So Let it Fall" was about and what parts of myself tell that story.

There is an inherent issue with self-representation in autobiography. The act of writing events, drafting, editing and rewriting, recreates the self over and over until the final version is ready. Does that imply that the final version is less true than the initial draft? Due to the representation of the "self" in autobiography and other nonfiction approaches being a construction of identity and not identity itself, we might assert that that they are both "true." Anderson states that this process of drafting and rewriting "confounds the notion that there is one definitive self or fixed

version” (9). This is useful for both the writing and reading of autobiography, as it emphasises the multiple truths that exist and multiple selves one could choose to voice and represent.

Early on in the project, I aimed to combine fiction and nonfiction writing in a way that could be read as either. I felt that fiction would allow me to explore real life experiences and my personal identity with the freedom to change and enhance what happened. After a semester focussed solely on fiction, however, I felt that combining fiction and nonfiction in the way I intended could be seen as deceptive. I was concerned that changing and manipulating my own personal experiences and feelings, and attempting to blur the line between fact and fiction, would cause my story to be less impactful. This propelled me to then focus on telling a story that presents itself as the truth and aims to achieve a version of that.

In the Concise Oxford English Dictionary, Autobiography is defined as “an account of a person’s life written by that person” (88). There have been many different distinctions and definitions since the inception of the genre. In *On Autobiography* Philippe Lejeune defines autobiography as, “Retrospective prose narrative written by a real person concerning his own existence, where the focus is his individual life, in particular the story of his personality” (4). Autobiography as a genre has evolved over time and we can see there is a certain malleability when attempting to define it.



I am not an established person of interest, revealing the intricacies of my childhood. Instead, in "So Let it Fall" I am attempting to show value in an individual experience. Anderson writes that autobiography has sometimes "been viewed as aiding the diversification of culture and subjects" (Anderson 5). This was important to me as a multi-ethnic woman who wants to see more diversity in the voices represented in New Zealand writing. My work isn't only the telling of an individual identity, but of a time, a place, and an experience. I wanted my own work to speak beyond itself. Swindells speaks of the potential value of autobiography for people to write themselves into a history that may be missing their perspective:

Autobiography now has the potential to be the text of the oppressed and culturally displaced, forging a right to speak both for and beyond the individual. People in a position of powerlessness – women, black people, working class people – have more than begun to insert themselves into the culture via autobiography, via the assertion of a 'personal' voice, which speaks beyond itself. (qtd. in Anderson 104)

In Anderson's *Autobiography* there is a back and forth on whether autobiography is empowering and allows people to write their perspective into mainstream culture (11) or whether an individual claiming to speak for the groups they represent is questionable (104). For me, the writing of these autobiographical stories is not an attempt at representing a group or speaking for them, but of presenting a new story of identity and experience.

## Being Māori Chinese

It was important to me to find examples of New Zealand writing on childhood and cultural identity early on in the process, as I was attempting to define exactly what it was I was writing and how that fit within the context of New Zealand writing. I intended to include cultural identities that related to my own ethnicities in my reading, and so began with *Māori Boy: A Memoir of Childhood* written by Witi Ihimaera. Ihimaera, the first Māori to publish a novel and a short story collection, has published many novels since. I then turned to Manying Ip's *Being Māori-Chinese* and *The Dragon and the Taniwhā* to try and understand my Chinese ancestry and how to write about that aspect of my identity.

*Māori Boy: A Memoir of Childhood* is a memoir of the first fifteen years of Ihimaera's life. It is not only a personal memoir, but also a memoir of his whānau, his whakapapa and the changing society he grew up in. Ihimaera's memoir speaks directly of his cultural identity. This is evident from the title, the subject matter and even in the way he has structured the memoir. I found Ihimaera's approach to paralleling cultural identities refreshing, as he wasn't afraid to question his own actions and the actions of those around him. When I first encountered Ihimaera's work it led me to start describing my developing project as a "memoir that explores the disconnect that I feel with my multicultural identity."

Ihimaera's cultural identity has an explicit presence throughout his memoir, constantly driving his portrayal of himself as a "Māori Boy." He approaches the divide within himself and the society in which he lives in a straightforward manner, moving from one perspective to another. For example he states directly:

Like all people born in Aotearoa New Zealand, my life has been negotiated primarily through one frame or another, Māori or Pākehā. The outcome of these constant negotiations fashioned a particular New Zealand childhood. (100)

This negotiation spoke to my own experience, however it gradually became evident to me that my relationship with culture differed from Ihimaera's. Ihimaera tells the story alongside the "tika." In one instance he tells a story four different times, retelling how the story had been told to him from different people. He then tells the tika, the truth. Tika or tikanga has many meanings in Te Reo Māori, but Ihimaera makes this the basis for his factual accounts or alternatively his opinion on what has been recounted:

Now the tika. Let's face it, there are always questions you can ask about my mother's narrative. Some aspects of the First Telling puzzled me, especially when compared to later versions. There appeared to be a wilful attempt to obscure and confound some of its truths. (94)

Through using this narrative motif Ihimaera draws attention to the frailty of memory and the issues that surround telling the truth and representation when writing autobiography and memoir.

This was something that troubled me in the early stages of writing when my father told me that some of the facts in one of my stories were wrong. What was I supposed to do? I considered changing my story to tell his instead and I considered ignoring his story completely. In the end I wove his story in with mine in hopes of getting closer to the tika. As the story in question was from a very early memory for me, I was willing to accept holes and false memories I had created. In earlier versions of "So Let it Fall" I attempted to explain this unease. I brought up false memories and how concerned I was about not telling the truth, until I realised that this is a natural aspect of autobiographical writing. That autobiographical writing is a representation of the self and not the whole self released me from these concerns. I nevertheless endeavoured to keep my stories as true as possible while still applying craft and narrative techniques, hence changing the work in some ways.

When I was younger I felt no need to analyse my ethnicity, I was what I was. I wanted this lack of analysis or awareness reflected in my writing, as opposed to foregrounding the questioning of my identity that came later in life. Ihimaera's work however, takes the opposite approach. When writing from his childhood he constantly questions himself and compares

himself to his family when he is younger, creating identity through these comparisons, these similarities and differences. At one point he writes:

Buddy gave me a hiding. That might seem harsh to you, but it was my cousin's ritual, I suppose, and because I fought back I must have gained their admiration; I may have been a townie, but I wasn't a coward. (131)

In this example it is apparent that the narrator positions himself and finds identity in his actions and the actions of those around him. He establishes his mental strength while demonstrating his lack of physical prowess. Throughout *Māori Boy* Ihimaera uses examples of his lack of physical strength and his intelligence as ways of differentiating himself from his family, with a special focus on the men in his family. He identifies more strongly with the women in his life, especially Teria his grandmother, and this is made more apparent by this constant drawing of comparison.

Moving forward I began writing what I considered important scenes that shaped aspects of the identity I intended to portray. It was through writing comparable formative moments with my own cultural identity in mind that I gradually recognised the need to approach my story in a different way. The difficulty for me was that Ihimaera's *Māori Boy*, while a powerful example of memoir written from a Māori point of view, was approaching memoir from a dissimilar place than mine. Not only was Ihimaera's experience of culture different to mine, he also approached it in a different manner. While he has had over 70 years of experiences to

develop his opinions on his cultural background, at 27 I was only just beginning to question and come to some type of understanding. Instead of modelling my approach to autobiographical writing and developing cultural identity on Ihimaera's, I took what I had learnt from analysing his memoir and attempted to keep relevant aspects of his work in mind when pursuing my own approach.

In particular, I found his approach to structure helpful. The structure in *Māori Boy* differs from that of a traditional autobiography. Although this has to an extent been more diverse in recent decades, conventionally one can expect that "nine times out of ten autobiographies inevitably begin at the moment of birth and will follow what is called a 'chronological order'" (Lejeune 70). While Lejeune argues that no order in autobiographical writing should be considered natural as any order is a representation, this order is sometimes referred to as a "natural narrative" (Lejeune 70). In *Māori Boy*, however, Ihimaera uses the idea of whakapapa as the structure of his narrative. He introduces the importance of whakapapa in telling his story early on:

And so, if you want to know about me, first you have to meet my ancestors. They belong to a time Māori call 'I ngā wā o mua', the days that have gone before us. The phrase alludes to a particular way of looking at the past as something that doesn't lie behind us but is in front of us; that goes for the ancestors, too, not comfortably dealt

with and consigned to past tense but watching over us and still waiting to be accounted to. (15-16)

The importance placed on those who came before influenced my own writing, in that I too found it necessary to place myself contextually by highlighting those who came before me. Ihimaera continually links his own story to that of his mother and his grandmother as well as Māori myths. He locates himself within a group, a “we,” yet at the same time works to show his individuality within that space. Ihimaera approaches each chapter with “the story” and then “the tika,” whereas I found that when writing events I had not witnessed myself, I incorporated reimagining to fill in the gaps, creating a separate story within my own and combining the real with the imagined.

Ihimaera also uses the concept of the spiral to describe how he shaped his memoir:

I like to think of the spiral as being an appropriate symbol for the way that Māori tell stories. We progress our narratives by way of their circularities and, when one spiral touches another, it has the power to take us back as well as propel us forward. (41)

This explanation sets up how his memoir is written, with each story having its own digression or backstory. Ihimaera continually moves backwards and forwards through time and space throughout his autobiography. This style allows Ihimaera to tell the story of his childhood not through his individuality, but through his relationships with others, while including

their individual stories as well, thus creating a spiral, an inclusive way of telling his own story while staying true to his whakapapa. For example, “Chapter Six: A Literary Whakapapa” is separated into three distinct sections. The first section highlights why he is breaking chronological order at this point, and explains why the reader should continue to expect digressions throughout the memoir. The second section is written in scene to illustrate this point and showcases developments in his relationships. The scene shows Ihimaera interacting with his parents prior to his first book launch. It demonstrates his expectations of his family and then the reality, while at the same time revealing why whakapapa is important to him. The third section of this chapter is the tika. In this section Ihimaera reflects on that moment and why it is important to the overall development of his story. Ihimaera uses this structure throughout his memoir, giving himself space to reflect as well as being true to the type of story he is telling, a Māori one.

Examining Ihimaera’s work illuminated possibilities I hadn’t previously considered in regard to structure. It also emphasised the importance of shape and the need for a purpose behind it. Ihimaera’s non-chronological approach was deeply embedded in the mindset of the author and as a reader this structure feels completely organic and specific to the author and the story he is telling. The significance of whakapapa to the writer has impacted the narrative in a structural manner that is unique to Ihimaera’s personal style. This has resulted in what Ihimaera refers to as



the “spiral” structure of story telling that allows him to tell stories in a way that seems to come naturally to him. While it does not follow what is known as “natural narrative” (Lejeune 70), it still reads naturally. This may be due to the overarching narrative which does generally move from beginning to end, while at the same time taking into account those who came before the individual who is telling his story.

Moving on from the structural approach of *Māori Boy*, I also found that even though my understanding of bicultural identity developed differently from Ihimaera’s, the content of the memoir did have an effect on how I wrote about my own identity. Ihimaera writes, “There is nothing worse than not having a tribe to belong to or lacking mana. Without a tribe or mana you were an orphan in the world” (17). This idea stayed with me as I wrote scenes from my own life. I wondered about my own tribe, my mana. Am I an orphan in this world? There was part of me that wanted to say yes, I am obviously searching for something through the writing of my own life. I just hadn’t figured out what that was at this point. There was also a stubborn side of me that said no, I have a place, I have people and I have history. It was with these two conflicting sides of myself I continued to write.

I then turned to Manying Ip’s *Being Māori-Chinese* and *The Dragon and the Taniwhā* to try and understand my Chinese ancestry and how to write about that aspect of my identity. *Being Māori-Chinese* is a sociological

exploration of seven Māori-Chinese families' experiences researched and presented through interviews and oral history. The book is prefaced with why Ip chose the subject and the families she did to work with. She was sent a letter by someone on the East Coast iwi trust board who objected strongly to Asian immigration but who then later stated that his own aunty was half-Chinese. This is what sparked questions for Ip regarding the "new political dynamics" (viii) between the Chinese and Māori communities and propelled her to think about how individuals in these communities may be affected. Ip chose seven different families who had hugely varying experiences as Māori-Chinese to interview.

Ip introduces the book by setting the time, place and tone of the period when most of these multicultural families originated. The earlier families originated around 1920-1930. After reading the introduction it became apparent to me that at the time my great-grandparents got married, Māori-Chinese weddings were relatively common. Ip describes this as a time when both Māori and Chinese were "much despised and ignored by 'mainstream New Zealand'"(1). This led me to wonder whether being Māori-Chinese is a result of racism. Mutually beneficial relationships seemed to sprout out of necessity and neglect by mainstream New Zealand. At this time Māori and Chinese were marginalised and ignored by New Zealand's "White Nation" (2). As a result, they were pushed into the same geological locations, intertwining families from both cultures.

While both cultures were considered lower in status than the European New Zealanders who were in power, they were viewed differently from one another. Māori were seen as undesirable, but they were still British subjects that were being taught how to be more appropriate citizens, whereas Chinese were unwanted as they were seen to have served their purpose (3). Many Chinese settlers came at a time when labourers were required for gold mining around the 1860s, but the mines dried up by 1900 so they then were seen as superfluous. This is the social context in which my great-grandparents married, made a life together, and had children who according to the parliament of the time were a “mongrel race” (3), that is, Māori-Chinese. My grandmother was born into this social environment. This helped me to understand many of her attitudes toward her Māori and Chinese heritage. She brought her children up not speaking either language with an emphasis on assimilation.

In the stories of the families that Ip details, one of the interviewee’s mothers was known to say, “There’s no good Māori” (29). This attitude, this inner conflict, when she herself is Māori is, I think, a tragedy. I am also aware this internal negativity is intrinsic to how a lot of my own family members view their cultural heritage. I myself internalised this conflict as well, my own dilemma came from struggling to fit in. My nana’s parents and my nana had these same societal pressures and changes to deal with. “They wanted them to be successful in the Pākehā world”(34). Am I the result of this want, I asked myself? A history of stripping away what it

means to be Māori or Chinese until I'm unable to identify what it means to me? This book was a valuable resource for me as it placed my own family story in the wider context of New Zealand history and the changing social circumstances. *Being Māori Chinese* does not answer the question of what it means to be Māori Chinese but instead offers differing experiences of *being* Māori Chinese.

Through reading Ihimaera's experiences of being Māori and Ip's exploration of the Māori-Chinese identity I realised that my own experience of being multi-ethnic is subtler. While my cultural identity is an important aspect of my life and my creative writing, I wanted to focus on what I had instead of what I was missing. With this in mind I made writing about my own whakapapa part of "So Let it Fall," drawing from the importance Ihimaera established for this, as well as the context and sociological factors I discovered in Ip's work. The section "Whakapapa" in "So Let it Fall" was my way of answering the question. *What are you?* It felt necessary to the project. Whether it was for my own understanding or that of the reader, didn't matter to me. It had a place; by adding "Whakapapa" to my work I created a context for the rest of my story, the *who are you?* After establishing *what* exactly I was ethnically and placing myself within time and place, I changed direction. I shifted from a memoir that addressed cultural identity directly and instead worked to imbue my memoir with subtler layering of the experience of being multi-ethnic.

## **Finding Reflection**

Initially, I was most comfortable writing in scene and this seemed to garner more positive responses from readers. This involved choosing relevant moments of my life that adhered to the themes that I had begun to explore through my initial expositional writing. The water theme was a clear choice, but the scenes needed to speak beyond themselves and work at character development. This is where a lot of the hunting and fishing scenes came from. I chose moments that show my father as a caring, gentle dad as well as a young man with a wild side. The scenes written for “So Let it Fall” were predominantly in present tense from whichever age perspective the narrator was at the time of the occurrences. This was my attempt at enabling the reader to immerse in my experiences. By writing in scene through an occasionally childlike narrator I was aiming to let my story tell itself.

It was still apparent however that there was a need to find some room for direct reflection within my work. While I had incorporated some techniques of Ihimaera’s memoir such as *whakapapa*, I hadn’t developed my style enough to include sophisticated reflection. The concerns I had with incorporating more reflection throughout my work related to directness versus indirectness. I was hesitant to approach the topic of my identity in a direct manner as I felt this gives the writer an all-knowing appearance, when in reality I was searching. Instead I attempted to convey

my own confusion and show how through the writing I was finding the answer, moving toward an identity.

I was initially drawn to essays that addressed cultural identity in an explicit way, in particular to Alice Te Punga-Somerville's, "Māori Writing in place: Writing in Māori Place" and Tina Makereti's "By Your Place in this World, I Will Know Who You Are" both from *Extraordinary Anywhere: Essays on Place from Aotearoa New Zealand*, as well as Tze Ming Mok's "Race you There," which won the Landfall essay competition in 2004. Te Punga-Somerville and Makereti offer both a more contemporary and a more female approach to Māori identity in creative nonfiction than Ihimaera. Ip's contributions had been more sociological study than autobiographical, whereas Mok's explicitly states the New Zealand-Chinese identity she identifies as. I also wanted to include nonfiction works from a Pākehā perspective as well, as this is one of the lenses through which I view my own identity. With a Pākehā mother and half of my father's heritage being Pākehā it was important to me to see how writers from this perspective navigated their individual identity. I read through the *Tell You What: Great New Zealand Nonfiction* collections 2015-2017, which offered a variety of different voices and perspectives, before focusing on Ashleigh Young and Tracey Slaughter as indicative of a Pākehā perspective.

Te Punga-Somerville's "Māori Writing in Place: Writing in Māori Place" explores the concept of Māori place being displaced and replaced by the use of Pākehā names for places and by doing so, displacing the people

and the history of the land. It also touches on Māori writers' value within New Zealand and why their place within the industry is underrepresented. Te Punga-Somerville's voice is direct - she ties her personal experience with her political points in a way that is grounded and known to the writer. An example of this:

Often the people connected to Te Aro Pā (and Pipitea, Kumutoto, Waiwhetū and all the rest) are invisible. Likewise all of the iwi and hapu who were here before us. No, they're (we're) not invisible. They're (we're) *made* invisible. (102)

I admired her approach to what can be seen as a difficult topic but knew I wouldn't be able to approach my own cultural identity in a similar way. However, there were questions her work raised for me, in particular the importance of places and what they mean. This raised questions about my childhood in Sydney, Australia, moving back to Napier New Zealand, and about home and belonging. The essay is sourced from a collection with a focus on place, and the essay spoke to what I was trying to illustrate with my own places in "So Let it Fall."

Makereti's "By Your Place in this World, I Will Know Who You Are" was closer to what I was trying to do through the writing of my autobiographical stories. There is an exploration of her relationship with places that are both familiar and unfamiliar to her. She investigates her feelings on belonging to these places and them belonging to her. This aligned with my own exploration of place and belonging to an extent. There

is a question that provokes her exploration “Where are you from?” (166), which seems to have a similar effect on her as my own question, *What are you*, has on me. As a mobile person, Makereti’s final line “But no matter how much you and your whakapapa wander, the homeplace calls” (173), resonated with me in writing “So Let it Fall.” The search, the questioning and the self-reflexive voice Makereti uses in this essay gave me examples on how I could incorporate more reflection into my own work. An example of this is, “I have used the essay as a site to make ancestral journeys, and these explorations have only complicated my understandings of where I come from, rather than simplified them” (172). This illustrates the journey and the search that Makereti explores in her work.

“Race You There” by Tze Ming Mok is an example of a more directly political voice. In her call to arms, a plea to stop racism, Mok speaks directly to the reader. She gives examples of race relations and issues and includes her own personal experiences to emphasise her point. I found her approach straightforward and well informed. She writes:

We need to realise that if Māori are expendable we are all expendable, and that the only lasting alliances will not be engineered by political parties, but by the people; not unions of convenience, but of love. (26)

Again, though, it came back to the inherent knowledge that comes through when writing in a direct manner that I knew I wouldn’t be able to incorporate this style in my own work. This is due to the differences in



content, where Mok seeks to speak directly to the reader my own approach is more immersion based. I did however appreciate the methods Mok utilises throughout to develop her cultural identity and where she is speaking from. She establishes a “we” and goes on to define what she means by “we”:

I’m taking a breather from trying to convince white people of anything. I’ve been talking to white people all my life—they’re everywhere. Every piece of discourse seems directed towards the Pākehā majority. (19)

The language here is strong and direct and Mok includes ideas that could be seen as controversial. However, she manages to do this in a way that doesn’t feel exclusionary and maintains directness in message and language throughout the essay.

Many essays in Ashleigh Young’s essay collection *Can you Tolerate This?* build an individual identity within the context of her New Zealand childhood and later years from a Pākehā perspective. “The Te Kūiti Underground,” an essay that is heavily based in place and featured in *Can You Tolerate This?, Extraordinary Anywhere* and online at *NZ Festival* proved to be particularly poignant to me. Young uses the backdrop of Te Kūiti to move from being a girl trapped in a small town, to a woman returning to the place where she grew up. The combination of her small town New Zealand life interwoven with rock bands and singers creates a

sharp contrast and lends the writing an air of surrealism. An example of this:

I had a limited sense of the ridiculous but a strong sense of the melodramatic, and I gathered the landscape into my mood as if gathering up a luxurious fabric, pulling it round me and breathing it in. (26)

There was a subtlety to her self-reflexive voice, which shows her unique viewpoint that I found a useful example of a less direct approach to identity. I found her work to be particularly effective at creating living, breathing characters and illustrating the space they occupied. This seemed to happen through the contrasts available to her, finding beauty and placing it alongside something sad or ugly in order to create that *this has happened to me* feeling. Writing of her father, she says, “He also had a forensic knowledge of Te Kūiti, and this made him even more difficult for me to understand. Why would you bother learning about this place? There was nothing here” (30). This provides a simple description of a complex relationship dynamic, that of a young woman and a father she struggles to connect with. By comparing a place that would be considered her home with nothing, can be jarring to the reader in its honesty and this is what creates that feeling.

I wanted my work to be subtle too. It was this subtlety in contrasts and defamiliarisation that I kept in mind as I continued to write. This became a reappearing theme throughout “So Let it Fall”; contrasts in

environment as well as internal ones. This is especially evident in the “Day and Night” section. I choose the same place and my parents are both there but at different times. My mother is day and my father is night.

Tracey Slaughter’s “Ashdown Place,” featured in the 2016 *Tell You What*, offered a different approach at identity building through autobiographical writing than the other examples. In “Ashdown Place” Slaughter immerses the reader in scenes of a 1970s childhood. With a focus on detailed images this piece explores the effects of the swinging-seventies spouse swapping, and on what would once have been considered normal family units, that is, suburban nuclear families. “We don’t know we know” (182) resonates through the piece until bit by bit the reader knows too. It’s an indirect approach to a taboo topic. I was drawn to Slaughter’s essay as an example that doesn’t offer much in the way of direct reflection, except at the very end, but manages to offer descriptions in a way that allows the reader to reflect. Slaughter writes heavily in scene, in fact the majority of “Ashdown Place” is pure scene and she mainly uses a collective pronoun “we” to tell her story. It was good for me to have an example that differed stylistically from the other essays to create a wider area for me to write into.

Again I found I was not only drawn to the style and approach in Slaughter’s essay, but the content also made me rethink scenes I had

written. Near the end of the piece, recounting a conversation with her mother, Slaughter writes:

My parents didn't know it *could* filter to the child world. They didn't notice. They never suspected we knew. And I tell her, in some ways that is true. Because we don't *know*. You could not call it knowing. But we are so porous. The feeling seeps in but can't be ordered or spoken or held in shape. The seeing, the sensing happens – in angles, unclarity, ripples, depths, hollows, unclarity flashes – but we can't analyse it. We don't have the tools, we lack the means. It just lives in our bodies. (185-186)

While this is an example of Slaughter's reflection, it is also the sentiment that Slaughter has instilled throughout the essay and shaped it around. This caused me to look at my own scenes and see how they were working on multiple levels. While I wanted my scenes to have simplicity, I also wanted them to tell a deeper story and be more than just a selection of scenes. This encouraged me to look at the key themes and ideas throughout my stories and tighten these so that, like Slaughter's work, the reflection isn't just at the end of the essay but is an undercurrent throughout the whole piece.

Reflection is partly in the language choice. There are lots of details in Slaughter's writing, but not a lot of explanation. Instead Slaughter infuses a simple description with the weight of reflection. As a reader I read it as it

was in the moment, but then later reflected on the piece and the authorial choices made by Slaughter:

And all that summer we want guns to our heads, the grown-up  
killshot of getting our ears pierced, the butterflydazzle of the single  
diamante stud bobbing in the shocked lobe's swell, a teardrop of thick  
infected pink. We want to be branded pretty. (177)

In this moment they are just kids who want to be grown up, who want to be pretty, who want to belong. Slaughter's use of "guns to our head" could be metaphorical of the threat that looms over the family unit. "Killshot" causes the reader to compare adulthood with death or the loss of innocence that comes with growing up. The language she uses with "branded pretty" touches on image issues and beauty standards. She demonstrates the consequences of their actions too, an infected pink ooze. Perhaps this is an omen of the cost of the adults' behaviours that are explored later in the piece. It is examples like this throughout "Ashdown Place" that build upon the internal reflection of Slaughter's scenes.

Throughout the reading process I saw the value in well-crafted scenes and the need for reflection. This was especially true when writing from a child's point of view; I did not want my reader to tire of a younger voice. The insertion of reflection amongst the scene-based writing in my own work created a more dynamic and multidimensional finished product.

Consequently the combination of Māori, Chinese and Pākehā creative nonfiction about identity has provided a rich context for “So Let it Fall.”

### **“So Let it Fall” in Context**

Throughout the writing of the creative component of my thesis the driving force, the why, evolved constantly. I began in a place where my ethnic identity was the central idea. I felt that this topic leant itself to being more critically evaluated in terms of the weight placed on indigenous peoples’ writing and the representation of a group. While the driving force for this thesis still contains some of that intent, it has shifted. Instead my aim is to answer the pressing questions that surround my identity. *What are you? Who are you? Where do you belong?* The reason these questions became important when approaching creative nonfiction writing was to diversify the types of stories that are being told. I aim to do this by contributing to the growing range of voices from different cultural perspectives in New Zealand writing. It is important to have wide and varied experiences represented, in order for new voices joining the discussion to feel less pressure. More voices in this space means less burden on an individual to represent a group and less expectation on the cultural significance of our work. The more voices, the more comprehensive our collective experiences become.

“So Let it Fall” became a collection of autobiographical stories that are linked through theme and narrative to explore questions of identity

within the New Zealand context. The narrator moves between cultural contexts surrounding her multiple character traits. In terms of cultural contexts, Māori, Chinese and Pākehā identities are explored early on in the “Whakapapa” section. There are also explorations of other contrasting identities such as: girly girl – tom boy, city girl – country girl, wild child – home body, cool girl – shy girl. Being caught between mother and father and how the different relationships with each of her parents shaped her are also explored.

The structure of “So Let it Fall” is comprised of five sections. To begin, there is the preface. This felt necessary as an introduction to the narrator in the present and creates the moment of writing, the moment exploration, and the beginning of the search. The preface also sets up the water motif that runs throughout the rest of the piece. Due to the length of “So Let it Fall” and the various characters that appear throughout, this proved a useful tool to introduce the main characters that would continue to appear. The reflective voice seemed necessary to start with in the preface due to so much of “So Let it Fall” being scene-based writing.

The following section “Whakapapa” consists of three different sections. The first “Family facts and fiction” explores the narrator’s familial identity through anecdotal stories and layers these to create a context for the narrator’s character to exist in. The next part “History? It’s me, Stevie,” weaves facts and reimaginings together to create a fuller picture of the narrator’s ancestry and moves through to her birth and move to Australia.

The third section “Snapdragons” is a scene that moves from Australia to New Zealand. This scene has many of the characters mentioned previously and shows some of the family dynamic.

In general when writing this second section I was very aware of what I didn’t know. I was constantly asking questions and often not getting as much information as I wanted. I started looking into my genealogy to build up my family tree and made surprising discoveries. This still wasn’t enough when trying to work through what I “knew” and I found I had to include reimaginings to fill in some blanks. I feel like this was useful as it added some narrative into a section that could otherwise be seen as quite tedious.

The next section “Water Baby” is separated into eight sub-sections. After a short introduction and reflection on memory it moves into a past tense sequence of vignettes surrounding water memories. The use of scene in this section develops the characters further, especially that of the mother and father and elaborates the differences between the two characters and the narrator’s changing loyalties. This section also shifts from predominantly father/water-based memory to mother/water-based memory. This separation between the two characters illustrates the status of the parents’ relationship, and how the narrator sits in relation to it.

The fourth section “Until the Final Swing” focuses on the relationship between the narrator and her grandfather who proves to have an impact on the narrator’s identity through his presence in her childhood. This



section is to provide the later section “When They’re Gone” with backstory that amplifies the emotions expressed in this later section.

The fifth section “Undercurrent” consists of four subsections. “Undercurrent” illustrates the darker side of growing up. The content of “Undercurrent” includes sexuality and gender, drugs and alcohol, and physical violence. The first half of “Undercurrent” is written in past tense. There are scenes woven throughout these sections but most of the writing is retrospective narrative. This choice moves away from the structure of “Water Baby” where the past tense narrative was broken up by present tense scenes. The reasoning behind this is probably due to the subject matter. It is harder to write in a present tense when you potentially have regrets surrounding that moment, which is evident in the narrator’s attitude towards these topics. This is a decision I’m still considering. There are still moments of present tense scene in “Undercurrent” but they do not carry the same weight as they do in “Water Baby.” While the water motif seems to fall away in the section we do see more of the splits coming to light; tough girl, wild child, shy kid, angry kid and shows the reader more of what’s beneath the surface.

“When They’re Gone” is split into two sections. The first is a recent experience of death in the family, which is followed by the death of the Grandad featured in “Until the Final Swing.” This section brings together a lot of the characters that have featured throughout the piece. This also

works at bringing loss and grief from different perspectives to the forefront, working as the climactic point of the story.

The final section “Standing here” is reflective writing that is a return in a way to the initial “Whakapapa” section. In this section, under the subtitle of “Whānau,” the narrator discusses what her current ties are both to land and people and establishes what these mean to her. This section seems to work where it is as it simplifies the current state of the relationships featured in “So Let it Fall” and shows evolution in a more reflective manner than we see in the scene-based writing. “Chasing the Storm” is a scene that continues the water motif that flows throughout the piece. “One Fine Day” delves into the metaphor of writing from memory and rain. It is a more artistic approach of the narrator’s experiences of writing “So Let it Fall.” This section is in a way summing up what the writer has learnt through the process of writing “So Let it Fall” but in no way concludes it.

When considering the complete structure of “So Let it Fall” there were some factors that prompted certain decisions I made throughout the creative process. During workshopping I found that “Water Baby” had the most positive response from people generally, with readers wanting more scene, more narrative and more dialogue from “Whakapapa” and what would eventually become “Undercurrent.” At the time “Undercurrent” was

a stream of remembrances that I used as a map for what “Undercurrent” became.

They did suggest a more emotional chronology, which is how I found the current order of “So Let it Fall.” By emotional chronology I refer to the order of “Water Baby” being split up, separating the two parents. Then “Undercurrent” started at the breakup of her parents, even though the previous section had surpassed this chronologically. I think this order works for my work, as like Ihimaera’s *Māori Boy*, the non-chronological order is there for a reason. In the case of my work it shows a split, a separation that is relevant to the themes of “Water Baby” and the whole of “So Let it Fall.”

While there were some instances that I actioned feedback, there were other times I did not. For example when workshopping “So Let it Fall” there were some questions surrounding the necessity for “Whakapapa” at all. Some other students did not like it, some thought it should be moved to later and others wondered why I needed it at all. I took this feedback into account but in the end decided this was an important part of the story and in some ways an attempt to answer that question, *What are you?* Maybe it’s because I am multi-ethnic that I felt like this was relevant to how I wrote about my identity and how to put myself in context with the world. Or maybe it’s just the Māori in me that wants to introduce a reader to those who came before me, before myself. This section has presented issues with order and structure though, as it is very easy for a reader to start getting

names and titles mixed up when one section contains so many. I have reworked this and changed the order of introduction a number of times and tried to be especially clear with titles.

By finding the emotional cord of each section I sought an order that while not chronological, felt right to tell my story. This emotion based chronology worked well with the water motif that runs through “So Let it Fall” as it allowed me to express various emotions throughout each section.

The water motif was developed early on in this project. While it could be considered cliché, I felt that so much of my life has been tied to water that it needed to be central. I attempted to avoid cliché by making the thematic water scenes specific to me and to places that hold special meaning for me. I think for the most part I avoided familiar water themes, however there was a challenge when discussing water/memory in more abstract terms. Again, I worked to draw parallels to bodies of water that are memorable and specific to my own experiences.

Playing a part or role became an accidental theme throughout. It wasn't until after I had completed the bulk of the writing that I was able to draw comparisons between the different people I was perceived as being. Once this became apparent to me, I endeavoured to draw out these contrasts, and to show them clearly without being too expositional.

The major theme, however, throughout “So Let it Fall” was a result of the underlying question. *What are You?* In order to answer this question I had to consider *who* I am, where I *belong* and what *home* means to me.

Home, belonging, and being caught in the middle, all reoccur throughout “So Let it Fall,” and this is the connection any one section has with another.

As the writer of “So Let it Fall” I can see now, in hindsight, that there are many different directions I could have taken with this autobiographical project. I do feel it works as a whole, and effectively builds up individual identity through the combination of scene and reflection. The question, *What are you?* may have been more of a hindrance than a help when it came to how I approached my whakapapa but I pushed through that and focussed on that second question, the more important question, *who are you?*

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