Precarious Girls: Gender, Class, and the New Zealand Short Story

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Abstract

This thesis seeks to explore experiences of precarity in New Zealand fiction through an analysis of short fiction by Tracey Slaughter and Alice Tawhai, and my own collection of short stories. The critical component of this thesis explores intersections of identity such as gender and culture that influence and at times compound experiences of precarity. Results of these intersections in the fiction of Slaughter and Tawhai are the decrease in hope and feelings of self worth for characters and subsequent acceptance of unequal and at times abusive relationships for women in the precariat, including a lowered perception of rights for these characters. Slaughter and Tawhai also portray the differing levels of power characters wield in differing settings, showing that differing intersections of identity can fluctuate in power depending on the social environment.

My own fiction also explores experiences of precarity. Some of these stories explore in particular the experience of community within the precariat as an enabling and comforting device, and experiences of precarity for rural women, in particular the gender roles expected for financial stability. Other stories explore the experience of precarity for those who are trying to escape this part of society, and the prevalence of mental illness in the precariat and ways characters use to cope with it or to feel safe. The last stories in this collection address family and community within the precariat, and the strong bonds created within the precariat to increase feelings of comfort and hope.

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Precarious Communities

When I first read Dorothy Allison's *Trash* and *Bastard out of Carolina* this was the first time I understood the themes and characters in a piece of fiction completely. Those were *my* friends and family, living and dying and presenting their defensive faces to the world. Allison achieved in her fiction what I struggled with in my own, which was explore nuances of precarity without appearing dramatic, sentimental, or unrealistic. I originally wanted to focus on the work of Allison in the critical section of this thesis, in homage to her writing about something I recognised, in the abrupt tone that I associate with the precariat. However, there were challenges to this initial decision. Allison's fiction is set in the deep south of the USA, with its own tensions of ethnicity and gender. Despite the similarities I had noticed in her fiction with my own, my fiction focused on class and gender as it appeared in New Zealand. The differences between our settings and nuances of precarity were not an insurmountable challenge, but one that would have to be acknowledged.

I had not considered looking at New Zealand fiction as a way to bridge this gap in setting and detail until my supervisor introduced me to the works of New Zealand authors Tracey Slaughter and Alice Tawhai. These female authors also write about precarity, with the added advantage of their fiction being set in New Zealand. All three authors, Allison, Slaughter, and Tawhai, write about what precarity does in fictional worlds to limit hope, to increase shame, and to influence relationships, particularly for women. After reading the fiction of Slaughter and Tawhai I realised that we had always had permission to write about precarity in New Zealand; and that precarious women had been doing it *all along*.

In writing the critical section of this thesis, my goal was to explore the common themes of precarity as I had originally recognised them in Allison's work: these being shame, impact of setting on characters, hopelessness, and unequal relationships. With the decision to focus instead on the fiction of Tawhai and Slaughter, I could analyse the impact of setting on characters within each story with more confidence. Not only did I want to know where we saw our own communities on the page, but I wanted to know what led to those communities? Did gender play a part? How about culture? Where did we fit? What could we expect and how did we feel because of it? How could we cope? This addition of a sense of "we" to the analysis was another valuable facet of analysis that would have been more difficult to access through Allison's fiction alone.

This thesis seeks to answer some of the above questions about nuances of precarity by exploring in a collection of short stories and a critical essay the effects intersecting parts of identity have on characters, their actions, and their perceptions of themselves and of society. Through my analysis I found that gender, class, and culture all merge to create different identities, communities, and lived experiences for the characters in Slaughter's, Tawhai's, and my own fiction. I saw further that intersections of class, gender and culture in Slaughter and Tawhai's stories provide evidence of inequality in New Zealand, and furthermore show how intersections of identity compound to further increase this inequality. Consequent effects of compounded inequality in these stories include a decrease in self worth for characters and an increase in feelings of hopelessness, which influences the characters' sense of agency in the texts. In Slaughter's "50 ways to meet your lover", the narrator accepts an unequal relationship throughout the majority of the story as a result of her low self worth and hope. Similarly, the

narrator in Tawhai's "Pale Flower" chooses between two unequal relationships, with her circumstances and heightened sense of hopelessness making her unable to see any further options. ".22" by Slaughter shows how a lack of hope can be compounded not only by inequality stemming from intersections of class, gender, and culture, but also the perceptions held by others in higher classes which serve to limit those in the precariats' access to rights. Tawhai's "Roses are Red" explores how power based on intersections of identity rises and falls in differing settings, and that violence in one setting can create power, but not in a structured society such as prison — which is reflective of power imbalances between higher and lower classes.

Other results of precarity that I had hoped to find in Slaughter and Tawhai's fiction were a sense of community, of humour, of strong bonds in families or friendships. I did not see these other results very often, and this served to remind me that humour and strong bonds are luxuries not afforded to everyone in the precariat. In writing my own stories, I wanted to include these other by-products of precarity by bringing in community in ways that could portray comfort in the face of hopelessness.

In an approach that was similar to my consideration of the fiction of Slaughter and Tawhai, I wrote my short stories in *Winter Fires* to try and find answers about the precariat and identity. Each of my characters has intersecting parts of their identities that come to the fore to influence their actions and feelings in the precariat. Differing settings bring out specific parts of these identities. "Tessa Ann", "Hoofman" and "Marigolds" ask, how is a sense of community different when you're in an environment that is used to violence? The stories "Girls" and "At the Pub" consider gender roles when the setting is far from town. "Greece", "Lucky" and

“Missing” explore what role drugs and alcohol can play when faced with the deadening sensation of life in the precariat. “Tessa Ann”, “Tulips” and “Missing” ask, Where do the people with mental illnesses go in the precariat, and what does safety and security look like for these people? Finally, in every one of my stories is the ongoing question: how powerful can family and community be against such inequality in such environments?

My experience in the precariat lends itself to some details included to make the reader part of the community, but the stories are fiction intended to consider the precariat from more than one angle, to try and understand its implications better. In my fiction I explore the options of precarious girls to demonstrate some of the experiences of unique intersections of identity in differing settings and what they may say about the nuances of inequality in New Zealand.

I begin the collection with “Marigolds”, a story about a family in the precariat, told from the perspective of a young adult male. The tone of this story is intentionally flat in a playful look at how communities come together in far more accepting ways within the precariat, and how it may be more blissful to be unaware of the implications of inequality. The normalised violence, drinking, and family structure show the higher levels of acceptance in the precariat, and the tone of the narrator suggest the idea that ignorance may just be bliss.

“At the Pub” is written as an experiment in voice, where the story belongs not to the active male characters in the rural setting, but to the women watching them. This story is included early on to bring the reader quickly into the tone and the world of the collection.

The third story is “Hoofman”, a story about a female character who struggles to find her place between the classes of her friends. This story includes more characters and events than the first two so the voice is as clear and honest as possible, even in the narrator’s shortcomings.

I seek where possible in this collection to avoid sentimentality, because in my experience of the precariat there is always someone worse off, who is making light of their situation. Of course, many situations in the precariat are not to be made light of, and it is the delicate understandings between characters in these stories that show that, contrary to the language involved in the stories, these issues are not being made light of at all. The narrator in "Hoofman" is brutally honest with herself when she comes to understand her ignorance of class differences, and she also reflects wider society when she begins to question whether she can just ignore the inequality she has realised. The character of Crystal with her harsh language and aggressively defensive actions reflect a facet of the precariat where sadness is dealt with in abrupt and at times unhealthy ways to keep the characters safe from their vulnerabilities which, in their violent part of the precariat, could make them weak.

"Greece" is a short story that addresses a question I had about the precariat which was: what does life in the precariat look like for an older character, with many of the opportunities to leave the precariat behind her? In my mind Anna would have an acceptance of her place in society, little hope, and perhaps try in some small way to escape the deadening sensations of her life in the precariat. The tone of the story is also deadened, with the main character having minimal reactions to comments and actions by other characters, having given up on trying to change her circumstances. Her long life within the precariat allows her to navigate the community with ease, and to simultaneously keep her isolated from it if she wishes.

"Lucky" is a look at the precariat from a narrator who avoids the realities and inequalities of it, this time with alcoholism and participation only in a community that is as firmly entrenched as she is. Like "Marigolds", the community of this story is far more accepting

of drinking and seemingly brutal thoughts and actions. Never do these characters have to come up against their situations in comparison to groups outside of the precariat, and so they only judge their situations from within their communities. The tone in this story is hectic and dismissive, with the narrator believing only in luck and alcohol, rather than considering the inequalities of society that contribute to some of this "bad luck".

As a juxtaposition to the above stories where characters and narrators are unaware of or unwilling to deal with their places in the precariat, I wrote "Summer" to explore what happens when someone in the precariat is only too keenly aware of their status, and as a result becomes trapped, ashamed, and angry. The narrator in "Summer" is a father seeking to escape the precariat by obsessively controlling his own family. The result of this anxiety and shame is anger, which I portray in the tight language and actions of the narrator. However, as is so often the case, the anger of the narrator is expressed as violence, which serves only to make him appear to belong even more to the precariat — a bitter cycle.

"Roses" continues the idea of seeking to escape the precariat through the perspective of a young male who wants to pretend he was never in the precariat, and what lengths he might go to in regards to his family to do so. In this story I wished to explore the shame the narrator felt, not only in avoiding his past, but his treatment of his mother in doing so. The idea of trying to eliminate one's past (and in doing so, any memory of their family) in order to escape the shame of the precariat is one which I would like to examine further in future stories, to identify how shame and class mobility can at times shatter the close bonds that were originally developed within the precariat for survival.

In “Girls” I explore the emotions of a character who is unsure of the traditional way she raised her daughter and concerned that this upbringing limited opportunities for her daughter’s happiness. I tried to portray through this character’s language and actions the hardness required for survival in their original rural setting, and how this hardness ended up being a barrier to connecting with her daughter. I could not bear but to give this story a happy ending, in contrast to the real life experiences of a precariat that often makes focus on survival so urgent as to take the affection out of families.

In “Tulips” the narrator also lives rurally, but alone. The setting of the narrator’s home in the country seems to alleviate her anxiety by giving her space to grow flowers, but the isolation in its comfort ultimately exacerbates her anxiety when she has to leave it each day to work, to the point of a literal shattering of her setting.

“Tessa Ann”, like “Tulips” has a main character with anxiety, shown through erratic language and actions throughout the story. Her condition is rooted in family and revolves around fear of violence, and we see that, perhaps counterintuitively to our own experiences of fear, Tessa Ann finds comfort not in the system designed for mental health but in the violence of a rural setting. Her chosen community provides a form of safety and security, as many in the precariat might turn to strength and violence for comfort when faced with uncertainty and fear, having little faith in the appropriate systems to protect them. “Tessa Ann” is to me a cornerstone of this collection, as it includes nearly all of my key themes: precarity, gender inequality, safety, a rural setting, and the importance of family and community in the face of the compounded effects of identity that limit hope.

"Missing" again addresses mental illness in families, and ways of coping that increase a numbness of sensation to a world that does not seem fair and oftentimes just seems plain sad. The voice of the main character, Karen, is intentionally flat to represent the numbness some people in the precariat feel in the face of tragedy or loss of hope. Karen has the same depression as her missing brother, but does not fully accept that his depression may have led to his suicide, believing instead that the bonds of family would have kept him alive but "missing". The tragedy of the precariat in this story is that family or community is not always enough to keep its residents safe, or to alleviate the loss of hope within it.

The last two stories, "Sisters" and "Winter Fires", seek to reintroduce hope into the precariat. In these stories, I focus on the community and strong bonds built in the face of the precariat, often helped along by gallows humour. The brutal humour of the girls in "Sisters" serves to keep their bond strong, and keep them safe from vulnerabilities. The acceptance of Elizabeth by Karen in "Winter Fires" alleviates the rejection Karen feels from the world outside a precarious and rural setting. I chose to end the collection on this story because to me it implies hope in connection and community against a seemingly cold society outside of it.

The collection moves from stories such as "Marigolds" and "Lucky" where characters do not fully understand their place in the precariat, into stories such as "Summer and "Roses" in which characters recognise and resist their place in the precariat. From here I turn to stories that consider the agency of women in the precariat, particularly in rural settings such as in the story "Girls". The natural progression from these themes of avoiding, resisting, or treading water in the precariat transitions into stories that explore the impacts of the precariat on its inhabitants. These stories, "Tulips", Tessa Ann", and "Missing" suggest that precarity and

intersections of identity that increase inequality can at times exacerbate mental illness and that safety may come from strength based communities for some of these characters. The last two stories of the collection “Sisters” and “Winter Fires” seek to inject hope back into the precariat through strong bonds of family, community, and humour, providing unique solace to those in the precariat, created by those *within* the precariat, to alleviate inequality and shame.

Through these stories and this critical study I intend to consider the precariat from many different angles, to see how the differing intersections of class, gender and culture compound to influence life for the characters within it. The fiction of Slaughter, Tawhai, and myself portrays some of the ways precarity is compounded by gender and class to decrease hope, create unequal relationships, and limit self-worth and agency. Through this study I found evidence of inequality in New Zealand fiction and some of the ways in which it can limit hope and decrease the perception of rights for the inhabitants. This finding suggests that further research and attention is necessary to give voice to the many different facets and effects of inequality in New Zealand, in an attempt to bring them to public consciousness.

I learned through writing this thesis that I too struggle with feelings of self-doubt which may serve to keep those in the precariat out of higher academic study. I realised that I am a writer who notices the sadder parts of life for those on the fringes of society, and that I feel compelled to document it. I also realised, perhaps most surprisingly, that I have a large amount of trust and hope in community and family as being the main support for those in unequal situations, and there is nothing sadder to me than evidence of a lack of this support. I wrote family and community into most of these stories because I could hardly bear not to, despite my knowledge that not everyone in unequal situations have these luxuries. The intersections of

class, gender, and culture need to be examined more fully in all areas of New Zealand based research and include far more voices to get a clear picture of inequality in New Zealand. The addition of more nuanced voices would serve to connect the details of lived experiences in New Zealand to more readers who may recognise themselves or their communities within them. In this way we can create a stronger community within New Zealand, particularly for those who currently exist without one.

Winter Fires

Marigolds

This is a story about how my mum and my sister Anna and my girlfriend Billy and I all live together, even though Mum is an alcoholic and Billy wears baggy clothes and hates all men except me, and Anna is sad to know any of us. I work as a builder while Anna works in a shop full of nice clothes, and Billy works as a motel cleaner. Mum doesn't work, but she used to, cleaning offices with a big vacuum cleaner on her back. Billy, Anna and I went to school together, but I didn't see Billy there because she was younger than me and kept her hair short. I got kicked out because they said I was taking too long to get my qualifications (which made Mum call up my teacher and call her a uppity bitch which meant I couldn't even get in the dumb class the next year), and Anna got kicked out for fighting with a girl.

When Anna came home that day, with dark scratches down her face, Mum got real angry.

"How many times have I told you?"

"Headbutt backwards, mash her teeth," Anna repeated.

It was too late because she and the other girl had been kicked out and besides, that would have been Anna's name known in town. We don't have any other family to back us up. It's just us. I had a dad who came to visit sometimes but he didn't meet me until I was eight and so we were just sort of friends who hung out at McDonald's every so often until I got too old for it. Anna's never met her dad.

When they asked my mum at the hospital after she'd given birth to me what my name was going to be she said she wanted to think about it. But they wouldn't let her leave without

filling out a birth certificate. So she called me James, after my father, even though she left the father part of the certificate blank. “Never put anything in writing that you might regret later”, she always tells us.

James is an easy name at least, not like my girlfriend Billy who could be either a girl or a boy’s name and it doesn’t help she has her hair curly and flopped on top of her head and wears a grey sweater most of the time; from behind she really could be a skinny boy.

“Look at my wrists,” Mum always says, when she’s had a couple wines. “They never changed size, not when I was pregnant, not even when my ankles puffed up.” She’s proud of being thin but I don’t know why, because she’s in a wheelchair and her skin is grey. I can’t remember if it was grey before her accident, if it’s the smoking, or something medical to do with her having a catheter and a bag she has to empty. It’s like her body has died and is waiting for her to catch up, but she’s got us to look after as she always says, so she doesn’t.

Mum’s in a wheelchair because she got in a motorbike accident with her last boyfriend and he died. After she got out of hospital, we went to his grave with me bouncing her wheelchair over the ruts, and she and some of her friends drank out of a cask, and Mum said “that’s the last one” and never got another boyfriend and never had any more kids. A lot of people are afraid of my mum and don’t want to come over, but there’s a part of the world that she fits into and the people who do come over fit into it with her. Those sorts of people drank out of the cask with her at her last boyfriend’s grave.

Billy’s not afraid of mum. Not because Billy’s intimidating or anything but because I don’t think it much occurs to Billy to be afraid of things. She wears baggy clothes and never smiles and

when men smile at her on the street she doesn't even pretend to get along with them, she just stares back. She's an artist. Mum thinks Billy's paintings are stupid because when they're finished you can't see what was in them. You feel like there might have been something there, before she started pouring thick paint over it, but that it's been ruined.

Mum's never told Billy that, only me. She doesn't get snappy with Billy, even though Mum often gets mad over little things, like when checkout girls shove her groceries in the bags too hard. I get embarrassed on those days because I like checkout girls, they're nice and they try hard with their makeup and you can tell she's making them nervous. Mum tells me I'm going to be a sucker, that at least Billy knows how to look after herself. I think she's glad that Billy makes people uncomfortable. She always looks pointedly at Anna when Billy gets up and moves away from men, like she's saying, "learn something".

Billy's not even a little bit embarrassed about being a motel cleaner and doesn't try to dress nicely like Anna does. Anna only buys her clothes from the expensive shop she works at. Sometimes I drive past Billy's motel in my truck and look for her up in the balconies of those fancy rooms, with her apron straining against the wind. She's tall but she's strong, she clatters around with a broom and holds big bags of laundry to her chest with her long arms like she's wrestling giants. She's told me about the sticky semen up the shower walls that she has to punch off with a rag, and the little flies painted on the urinals for men to aim at. I think I'd actually kill anyone who made Billy upset.

I don't know what Billy's like at work, if she talks much, but they seem to like her. They all wave out to her if I pick her up, and they laugh and throw the rubbish sacks on the back of

my truck and make me drive the hundred metres to the rubbish cubby, so they don't have to all walk it down there in a line of girls with brown sacks.

Mum's friends came over to visit at lunchtime today and they brought her some wine like everyone does when they come here, even though there's a sign on the door asking people not to bring alcohol into the house. Anna was out with her friends.

"Why's James getting so fat?" Mum's friends asked when I let them in, and she smiled with her teeth because she's the one who cooks for me. Anna was out with her friends. Mum's friends sat around drinking wine from the box and I did wheelies on her wheelchair while Mum lay on the couch and closed her eyes and ignored all of us. Her catheter bag stuck out the bottom of her shirt and she didn't try to cover it.

Her friends left early because Mum wasn't talking much, and then she and I watched TV.

Eventually she looked up at the clock. "Go and find your sister," she said.

Because I'm the boy it's always lift this, carry that, open this, close that, go find your sister. It gets me so riled up sometimes and I ask Billy if we should move out but she always says no, that Mum and Anna need me. Billy likes Mum. She says she wished she had a mum that strong, who protected her children like ours does.

I went to pick Anna up in my truck. When I found her she was wandering on the cliffs above the lake, holding a bottle of wine by the neck with her fingertips. When I pulled up next to her she said, "what if I jumped?".

The lake was thick and black like oil.

"Yeah, but Anna," I said. "I've just gone and got this whole bucket of KFC."

"Give it to Mum", she said. Then she looked nervous. We both knew Mum would poke at the chicken, say it was slimy and why did we talk her into it. Then she'd eat some of the skin. I'd eat most of the rest and Anna would take some to work tomorrow in a sandwich, for her hangover. Thinking about work made Anna stop having fun anyway and she got in the car.

When we got home Mum looked at us suspiciously while Anna tried to take her shoes off at the door, leaning too far over and bumping up against the wall. Mum rolled her eyes. "May as well have a glass of wine then," she said. She was grumpy because the chicken was cold and it took too long to find Anna, to get her in the car and not over the side into the lake, plopping like a little stone.

Anna refused the glass of wine mum poured. I could tell she was having one of her *wanting to be better than us* moments, even though she was also glassy eyed. They both sat in their chairs and glared at the TV, Anna ignoring the glass in front of her and Mum drinking twice as fast to make up for it.

"Just going to waste it?" Mum asked, watching Anna delicately scissor meat from one drumstick with her knife, mix it in with coleslaw. The bucket with the rest of the chicken sat on the bench, sweating. I jumped up and grabbed another piece.

"Not that hungry", said Anna.

"We can drop you at the hospital then. Put you on a drip with the other skinny girls." My mouth fell open. Sometimes Mum still shocked me, even though I knew her real audience was the awareness Anna brought into our house, the feeling she conjured of someone else watching us, appalled.

I knew better than to get involved. Every time there was an argument I noticed mum watched *me*, as if *I* was going to do something. She's said she doesn't care what any girl says to me I am not to touch them, ever. As if I ever would.

It'd be like mashing a bug.

So I went to bed. Drunk arguments always sound stupid from the outside. Billy was already asleep when I got there and there was one of Mum's rings on the bedside table. Mum must have given it to her, which meant Mum was drunker than she was letting on. This happened sometimes. Billy always left them out for me and I always put them back in Mum's jewelry box. Anna would be mortified if she knew.

I could still hear Mum's voice, loud and nonsensical. Anna's must have been filling in the silences. Eventually a car pulled up outside.

All ok? I texted Anna.

Yeah, she replied. *Jared's picking me up. I'm going to move out.* Anna's boyfriend. She'd been talking about moving in with him for a few weeks now. His house wasn't even that far away, like five streets.

When I woke up, the house was quiet. Billy was at work and Mum was in the lounge having a cigarette. "Thought I'd go see if Anna needed a hand with moving anything," I said.

"Well, she can come home for dinner, if she wants." said Mum.

I took my truck to Jared's house. Anna was in the driveway when I got there, with one gardening glove off and one on. She was crying and I wondered if she might have a cask of wine on the go under the sink like Mum sometimes did. Jared was at work.

"He told me if I didn't like it, I should do something to make it better, or leave", she said.

I could imagine it. Anna arriving late at night to a house that looked almost exactly the same as the one she'd left. She'd have been up early, pulling up bedspreads before Jared could even finish his morning coffee. Then she would have been out ripping weeds from the front of his house in great armfuls with people walking past to school and work, before giving up and curling into a horrified ball on the couch, staring at the grease-stiffened curtains. I knew because she did the same at our house.

"I thought if I just made it look nice," she said. She was still crying. She couldn't decide what we should fill the truck with, the plant rubbish or her stuff to move back to Mum's.

"I always liked those orange flowers." I said. Anna had had flower boxes outside her old room which she would not allow anywhere else but directly outside her window.

"Marigolds. Slugs eat them and they go all shitty." She wiped her nose. "But I could get some ground cover. Morning Glory." She eyed me sharply and then smiled herself. "It's a weed, but. Purple flowers." She put her other glove back on and lifted an armful of hairy dandelion plants. A long-legged spider scampered out of the flowers and across her shoulder. She turned her face towards it, blew it away.

I stayed most of the morning and we took a couple loads of stuff to the dump and then I went to pick Billy up from work. I invited Anna along for dinner at Mum's, but she wanted to stay there and make a go of it, cook dinner for Jared, show him she wasn't crazy.

So it was just Billy and I who walked up to the front door of Mum's house. It was bucketing rain by then and Billy had stopped on the edge of the road. Mum was watching us turn up through

the window. Billy was crouching next to a dead cat in the rain, and I was standing behind her and Mum was watching us from inside from her twitched apart curtains. Billy's grey sweater was getting wet and Mum's face looked screwed up from the window, looked afraid and angry at Billy's floppy hair plastering down in the rain and me standing there, doing nothing, letting them both be. I kept hearing wheels squishing through the mud and thinking maybe someone was going to stop, but it was just cars passing by.

At the Pub

At the pub they say, "*his new missus has him whipped*". Or,

"*how is she, you know, with the dishes?*" Or,

"*they're either hot and can't cook or they can cook but they're crazy*".

Their women are sometimes there, sitting on their phones, texting their mums or the friends that they left. Or they're chatting to each other about kids. Or, they're just at home, unwilling to make small talk. They'll be watching TV. Doing dishes.

Sometimes one of the women at home will call, looking for her husband. She'll call his phone, the phones of his friends. The men put their phones on the tables to watch them light up and buzz. If she's a well-known sort of woman, she'll call the pub itself. By then the one who is hiding begins to look pale.

Not often, but occasionally, one of the women will go to a different pub to the one her partner is at. She'll laugh with her girlfriends if she has any, or whoever she's scraped up from around the area to join her. She'll order the country pub versions of the colourful town drinks she used to have. But everyone in the area knows each other and it doesn't end well. "Sorry mate," the boys say. "She was too pretty to be trusted."

The men talk about dogs. Dead ones, usually. One shepherd tells how his best bitch held mobs of sheep for minutes at a time, only a stare. How she knew what "shake it" meant, could kill a ram like *that*, but would let the farmer's own chubby daughter pull her tail, poke fingers in

her eyes. But if he'd said "shake it" while his daughter was clambering through the bitch's fur, *well*.

They talk about tractors, dirtbikes, fertiliser and grass seed and who is ordering too much and who isn't ordering enough. The girls who are there sit in silence, with nothing to offer. They wonder what would happen if they interrupted. If they said, *Hey, guess what, I had to fix a mistake at the cafe and send back some coffee today.* Or, *what did you all you think of the Prime Minister's speech to the United Nations?* But those things are not happening here.

The men talk about bosses. Who is disorganised. How they, lowest on the chain, suffer for it. How they would have organised it instead. Who loves money. Who loves to stop for breaks. Who keeps them working long after the sun has set, with head-torches. They talk about managers who are kind to their dogs. Those who don't feed their dogs enough. Those who ruin a dog with beating so that when they call to him after the day is done he lopes away against the fence line, tongue out, eyes rolling. When they finally coax him in they shoot him and in not very long he becomes another story about a dog.

They talk about other people in the pub. The townies - that is, anyone wearing dress shoes, anyone with skinny arms, anyone with glasses, anyone wearing a colourful woollen hat. The skiers. Anyone talking to foreign girls - who they call the honeys but never talk to. The town is small enough that the tourists and the farmers cross over in the same places, but they don't sit at the same tables. The farmers hunch their red shoulders and mutter about the soft townie boys who can go over and talk with the honeys with long legs.

Sometimes the foreign girls aren't wearing bras. The boys stare. They comment. They point for their friends. The foreign girls go to the bathroom and come out with jackets on, heads down and cheeks flaming.

The men talk about jobs that need to be done. Jobs that will never get done. Fights they've had. They tell the same stories word for word because the others will pick up on inconsistencies. No one wants to be known as a young fella. Everyone knows young fellas tell yarns. They stick to the truth. The time one of them got locked out of the pub by the staff because if he had gotten in there, he would have gone *nuclear*. The time one of them got arrested. The time two of the boys at the table fought each other. They tell that one gently, with humour. Don't trust sluts, the two boys say. They touch bottles.

They tell the more recent story of one of the older block managers getting knocked out, in this very bar, right over there. One of the bar staff had knocked him to the ground, and then some of the boys had jumped in and kicked him. He'd been annoying people, drunk. The boy who knocked him down was a young fella, showing off. The ones who kicked him had just been upset with all the loud noise. They tell the story with toughness, with confusion. The women listening wonder, why didn't you help him? Wasn't he your friend?

The boys are invited more than once to have some of the food someone has ordered for the table. "Dig in", is not enough. After "get into it boys", someone takes the first chip. The girls order their own food, impatient with the etiquette. One of the boys is having a lean week. He is careful that he does not eat the food, does not drink from any of the jugs on the table. He goes up quietly and buys his own pints.

Sometimes the girlfriends really get along. They drink wine, talk to each other. They've been lonely this week. Most of the time though they're just tired. They have jobs talking to people all day, in hospitality, in teaching, at the liquor store, the only options available. They come to the pub and just listen. To be out of the house is sometimes necessary. To be quiet is a relief.

One of the wives is at home. She is looking at the box of linen that has not been unpacked since they moved in. She is wondering whether she should go out and sleep with someone else, a vagrant, a traveler. Her children are turning over in their sleep. The dishes are not done. The dog whines at the door, wanting his proper owner to come home. The wife pulls the door open, throws the dog out with a kick that does not land and the dog runs quickly away, low to the ground, tail scooped in under his body. She throws the dirty pots and pans one after the other out into the rain. If her young husband walks past them when he gets home she will leave him and go to the city. If he brings them inside and puts them back on the bench she will leave him and go to the city.

Early in the morning the wife gets up and the fire is lit. He is already off shearing, has made his thermos of tea and left in the dark. As she pulls onto the long driveway the bulls are standing at the fence, jets of heat steaming from their nostrils. The first light is spilling over the mountains, frost glittering on the wires. She must remember to defrost some briskets for the dogs; which have already started howling.

Hoofman

Karen eased the car around the bends. Tania sat next to her in the front and Melissa in the back. They were all silent, looking out windows.

Melissa stirred. “Who do you think will bring him to the church?”

“I’d guess his younger brothers. I don’t know which car they’d fit the coffin in though- they’ve got a truck-”

“Maybe no one is bringing him? He might already be there.”

“Did anyone take him home?” Asked Tania. Karen was Pākehā, but she had been to tangi before and knew what Tania meant. The dead were taken home or from place to place, never alone until they were farewelled. It was difficult to know with Ben. Some of his relatives were Māori, some weren’t. Some Pākehā adopted the tradition, some didn’t. Of the ones that didn’t, Karen knew that sometimes Māori would go and sit with the body in the morgue alone. To watch over their friend.

Karen wanted to break the sad feeling that settled over them. “A lady I cleaned with, she was telling me how her parents had the only van in the family. So they would always end up transporting the”, she paused. “Bodies. When they travelled around. She said the kids hated it, refused to sit in the back. A big painter’s van.”

Tania laughed. “That was us too! The kids would have to lie down under the shelves on each side, holding the casket so it didn’t slide around. All I could think was, ‘what if one of my Pākehā friends sees this?’”

They laughed.

"We never had that," said Melissa. "It's just... there's music at the funeral home and the coffin is there. You don't really touch it. But those have all been grandparents. Not… You know. Someone young." She trailed off.

Karen imagined the coffin sitting overnight in the dark funeral parlour waiting for them to arrive, for someone to turn the lights on.

The death of a brother. It was the worst funeral yet.

"Surely someone would have taken him..?" Tania started. But Crystal's family were hard and secretive, pulled stiff shells over themselves. It was difficult to say what they would have done, what the girls would be walking into. Karen had always avoided going to Crystal's house when they were children, preferring to have her over at her own. There had always been men outside and an electric feeling in the air, a faint smell of something plastic burned. Tania and Melissa hadn't even been allowed over there. Would Crystal's family have taken Ben home? Who did he belong to most?

"Where did your parents go to school?" Tania's parents asked Karen when she had picked Tania up. She could see behind them the solid rimu dining table the four girls had danced on to celebrate their graduation from their own high school. It was possible that the girls' parents had gone to school together as well. Karen's heart beat quickly. Her parents were cleaners and welders. They hadn't stopped to tell Karen about their childhoods. Why? They would have asked her, laughing at the thought.

Karen pictured them to try and guess what school they might have gone to, sifting through the sinew and politeness they had always presented. Was she showing something about herself by not knowing?

“I think mum went to Hilltop”, Karen said.

“I didn’t see her there and it was tiny!”

“Oh, well, maybe Tauhara. Definitely Tauhara. I remember now.” A lie. She’d have to ask her mum later. Awkward now, she started picking up bags. That was the thing about class. You didn’t know what you didn’t know.

Karen cruised around the corners. It was one winding road up the mountain and down the other side through native forest, set aside in the middle of farmland. The trees and moss towered overhead, dark and tangled. Up and up the girls went. They all seemed lost in thought. Karen knew Tania and Melissa hadn’t seen much of Crystal since school, but both of them had kept the line open for any hopeful updates from Karen, and they were there to travel to Crystal’s brother’s funeral with her. Karen was grateful.

“So”, said Tania eventually. “We’re not going to mention the- you know.” Melissa nodded quickly, eyes wide. Karen knew what they were talking about. Crystal had a habit. She lied. There had been less of them since school, but they still popped up occasionally. When the girls talked about careers Crystal always interrupted with something loud, like how she’d had a seizure in the admissions office for university all those years ago and they wouldn’t let her enrol. But the girls knew better. Crystal had given up after school. She wouldn’t have even gone

to the office. The audacity of those responses were intentional. A *fuck you* to all of them for leaving her to her own path.

Or there were older stories, more elaborate. Crystal couldn't give Tania's pair of pants back because they'd been burned in a house fire. Or she didn't come around and help them with their group project because she'd fallen in the lake. Or she couldn't bring in the money they'd made while fundraising for camp, standing outside Pak'n'Save with sausages and stickers. Her parents had used it to reconnect the phone again, because when her dad was going after her mum he ripped all the phone cords out of the walls.

Karen wondered how Crystal would say Ben died. What he'd been like for the last few years. Better to let Crystal tell whatever lies she wanted today.

Karen suddenly thought of what stretch of road they were on.

"Have you heard of Hoofman?" The teacher aide had asked her in the staff room. He was there to take the worst students for a walk when they drew fake guns and pulled the triggers at their teachers.

"You drive through his territory. He sticks out his hoof for a ride and if you don't pick him up something bad will happen. Ask your husband about him".

The other staff members joined in. The stories came quickly.

"He doesn't speak. He carries you safely through where you were gonna have an accident."

"Not all the time. Sometimes he's just there for a tangi, turns up in your car on the way."

"He was born to an old kuia -"

"No, he was born to someone else and they dropped him off at the kuia's house"

"But who had sex with the goat then?"

"He's half man half goat."

"He stamps on the side of the door when he's ready to get out"

"Always popping up around death."

"Never seen him? You might."

Karen peered into the moss and sodden branches ending in darkness on the sides of the road, but she could see nothing.

They had to park around the corner when they arrived at the funeral parlour. There were cars and motorbikes everywhere, engines curdling. The men skulked around the entrance in patches and smoked cigarettes. The girls walked past them all.

Crystal came up the aisle to meet them. The girls registered shock. *But,* thought Karen, *she's always been skinny.* An older lady planted herself in Crystal's way and gripped her hands hard. Crystal stared down at her face. The stare was from a great height, as if Crystal wasn't really attending at all.

Karen knew that stare. She'd seen it the last time she'd been at Crystal's house. She had taken her boyfriend Dave there for a visit. She went into the memory, sifting, trying to avoid the reality of Crystal walking toward them without her brother Ben.

There had been animals and woolen blankets everywhere. Karen and Dave had arrived before Crystal had gotten home and they sat in the lounge with an older guy who was waiting

for Ben, Crystal's brother. Kittens had been mewling, pulling each other face over feet. They had gummy eyes. The older guy was talking in the background.

The kittens plopped onto the floor and cartwheeled closer to Karen's glass of wine.

The door slammed open, really whacked into the wall, and Crystal struggled in. "Look at all this stuff I got" she said. In her long arms were clothes. She'd been at the dump. The kittens struggled over and crawled through the clothes.

"You want this one?" She held up a purple and tan woolen jersey. Karen nodded and put it on. Crystal had a foot heater blasting day and night with pegged power and smelling of burned plastic but it did next to nothing.

"Wine?" Crystal took a drink, acting crazier than she was.

It was freezing but no one seemed to notice. Air whistled through the floor and if anyone knelt and looked through the slats they could see the dirt under the house.

"I'm out of here," Crystal was saying. "I'm getting a house in town".

The dogs started barking. The door flew open and a girl came in.

"Where is he?" she shouted. Karen and Crystal's eyes met. Crystal started to laugh. The girl came into the lounge, suddenly embarrassed and blustering. Karen felt for her. The girl went to the older guy and pulled at his clothes, wailing, and they both went outside. Crystal smiled at Karen and Dave while the voices outside rose and fell.

The fireplace wall suddenly shuddered. Karen and Crystal moved to the window and looked down. The older guy had the girl pressed against the side of the house by her face. Karen looked at Crystal to see what they should do but Crystal just stared down at them as if she had gone away, with no expression at all. The girl went limp and the guy let her go.

"I can't think with you shouting at me", he said. "You can't come in here shouting and screaming", he said. The girl cried quietly. She went back to her car and backed down the driveway.

He came back inside with no explanation. Karen went back to the couch. The sun lit up the backs of the clouds behind Crystal's head. They swelled outward, rent with light. It looked like something terrible was trying to get through, some monster made of a killing brightness. Why hadn't Crystal done anything? Why hadn't *Karen* done anything? But Crystal just kept staring outwards, far away from all of them. Karen's heart beat fast. She felt like a voyeur. She felt the danger of pretending to be like Crystal. There was a scuffling and a thump, a crash of glass. The boys jumped to their feet. Crystal paused with her lighter and her cigarette. But it was just the kittens, fallen off the table and taken Karen's wine glass with them.

Karen and Dave hadn't gone back to visit Crystal since. It wasn't that they were suddenly too good- just that- Well. That was it, wasn't it? No other way to say it. Karen pushed the thought down.

Crystal reached the girls at the back of the funeral parlour before Karen could figure out what to say to her. Crystal stopped and looked hard over their shoulders and out the back door. Some of the men from the street started filing in, standing around the back. None of them took any of the seats. A guffaw of laughter leapt in through the doors from outside and just as suddenly stopped, leaving organ music.

Karen's boyfriend Dave arrived; having driven over separately from work. He walked quickly over to them, holding four bottles of water for the girls. They had condensation swelling over bright blue labels.

"Take those outside," hissed Karen.

"I'll put them in the car," said Dave, shocked and miserable. He left, and the coffin began its journey into the church, carried by strangers in heavy boots. Crystal stared at it. The service began. Karen knew Dave would be too polite to risk coming in late. He'd wait outside for hours.

Dave had slept with someone else a month ago but he'd been trying *so hard* to make it right. Karen had told Crystal, too embarrassed to tell Tania and Melissa that she hadn't left him. Crystal had commiserated, then suddenly grown sick of her. "Get over it," she'd said. "Or find another one."

Karen had gotten the message. Choose where you belong. Don't show me these pitiful mouthfuls of air.

Crystal didn't sit with any of her family so Melissa and Tania took over, sitting on each side and holding a hand each as the service began. Crystal glared at Ben's casket, back ramrod straight. They sat that way through the eulogy, the speeches - which were few, no one at the back got up to say anything. They sat through the minister saying, "unfortunately Ben's father could not be here", even though the girls had passed him on the way in, skulking with the others. He must've been let out on a day release. Crystal had scoffed and two people in the seat in front turned around to have a look at her.

There was a powerpoint display of photos. Ben's mum and younger siblings must have made it. The photos dissolved to sad music through from baby to childhood and Karen smiled and felt her first tears form. Ben playing with water pistols in a small paddling pool. Wearing floaties at the lake. Crystal holding his hand on the beach.

None of his later photos made it into the powerpoint. As far as the women in the funeral parlour were concerned, Ben's life stopped as a teenager trying not to smile, one arm awkwardly loped over his body. There were no photos of his new friends, the male members of his family, of parties. *We've taken him back now*, the powerpoint said. A hard consolation.

The service ended. Crystal didn't wait for the casket to go. She left the church with the girls trailing behind her and she strode to her car with her keys already out.

"You guys coming?" She asked.

Karen couldn't bring herself to say an excuse out loud. She didn't want to go with her. But she couldn't let Crystal go home alone. Melissa and Tania stood with arms around each other, secure and solid. Karen gave them her keys to take the car to the hotel and they promised to meet back up later. They roundly ignored the burnouts screeching up and down the street from the men, their only offerings to Ben. All four of the girls looked at each other, pretending they'd had choices to get them where they were. Karen remembered her awkwardness at Tania's house. *Who did she belong with?* She got in Crystal's car.

"Assholes", Crystal said, as they pulled away from the kerb.

Karen had completely forgotten to tell Dave where she was going. She suddenly felt like an idiot. What was she doing? No wonder he avoided her. She turned around to look for him

but she couldn't see his truck. She looked at the glovebox, so close to her knees. She couldn't bring herself to ask Crystal to take her back.

"Do you know where your parents went to school?" She asked, absurdly.

Crystal turned her head, fully away from the road, and stared at her.

"What?"

Up until then Karen had been proud that she'd never been on the end of the stare, that they'd always understood each other, even when occasionally Tania and Melissa didn't understand them. She'd thought that they might laugh off knowing the ins and outs of one's parents, call it bourgeoise.

But there the stare came, from miles up. In that height, far above ground, Karen saw a young Crystal holding hands with Ben. She saw them running across paddocks still wet from the morning, phone cords and plaster littering the floor of the shuddering house behind them, while their father raged. She saw the narrow loop of Ben and Crystal's lives, with one of them lined in satin, right where it was a surprise to no one. She was a fool. She hadn't understood anything. She wished she'd found Dave.

So what if Crystal went home alone? Any story would be better than this one, which had been fixed for Crystal since birth. She focused on the glovebox. She kneaded her knees. She turned around one last time at the last corner, looking for anybody - and there was Dave, right behind them. His black truck vibrated as it sped up toward the back window. In his back seat she saw goat's horns. From Crystal's face she could tell she'd seen them too. Wherever they were going, at least some of them were going together.

Greece

Anna never had the guts to go back to the doctor, but that was okay because she'd lived in town for over 35 years and still knew the faces she had gone to school with. She knew the women who had had postnatal, knew those of her old classmates with work injuries, who'd attempted suicide, even one who was hit with a car on purpose in the main street. She knew the pretty girls from school who had seemed fine but then one day stood in the middle of the street with a robe flapping open.

They were people she had gone to school with, had sat up at the end of the room in maths and drew fighting stick figures in each other's books, back when Anna had thought she might travel to Rome, where colossal women traded filthy curses with tanned men, laughing loudly and sunning their vast bodies on the beach in bikinis.

Some of the people Anna looked up were even boys she had made out with at high school parties, when they were wasted and she was not really that drunk, when all the prettier girls were leaning over the back fence and spewing, the boys would lean back slightly and shrug their shoulders at her and she'd always nod and step forward for as long as it would last. Before they'd all found their partners and had children. She went to visit them all (not the men without their women at home, small town revenge went hard) for cups of tea. She mentioned feeling down, feeding it into some patter about having a sore back.

"They don't do anything", said one woman, one of the postnatal ones, dropping valiums from a snaplock bag into her palm. "I take two or three at a time with vodka and you don't get any sort of high. You can have them".

A man who fell off his motorbike and then had to drag it off the road with a ruined leg gave her a box of oxycontin. “Too addictive,” he said, shaking his head. “Missus won’t let me take them”.

“I took these out of my son’s room”, said the closest friend Anna had, an alcoholic who Anna drove home often, her phone light glowing suddenly in the early hours. She put coloured pills in Anna’s hand. “They’re probably just some sort of shitty speed”.

“I can pay you”, said Anna.

“No”, said her old school friend. “Take them. He shouldn’t leave them lying around.” She laughed. “Hopefully you get a kick out of them”.

But Anna only wanted them for things like getting up, going to work.

At work Anna’s boss called her aside.

“Mereana said you’re too slow”. Anna did not argue. “You’ve been here six months. If you can’t keep up we’ll have to put you in for more training days”

Anna went back to the sandwich line. Training days. Unpaid work. Behind the customers’ line of vision, over by the chiller, she could see Mereana watching her, a stopwatch in her hand.

Eventually the day staff left and Anna was left with her favourite coworker, Caitlin. “Fuck this place”, Caitlin whispered at midnight as she passed Anna with the garbage sacks. Someone had dumped a full drink in the rubbish. Coke dribbled out all over the floor as Caitlin dragged the bags over the tiles.

“Really? That much lettuce?” asked a customer at quarter to one. “I can still see the bread underneath. Can I have like, a whole handful of olives?”

"I'll have to charge you more", said Anna.

"Leave her alone", said one of the drunk boys. "She's just working here".

"If I'd known girls like you were here, I wouldn't have even bothered going to the clubs", said another one, looking at Caitlin.

The first boy looked at his friend. "No tummy with mine, please", he whispered. Anna looked down and her tummy was indeed resting on the sandwich bench. She shuffled back a step.

When Anna cleaned the toilets later she saw someone had taken a knife to the female toilet seat, gouging thick lines out of the plastic. It could have been the girl who wasn't happy with her sandwich. It could have been Caitlin, who hated working there as much as Anna but was still young and energetic enough to resist in some small way.

At 1am they finished the final mop, set the alarm. They stood outside on the cobblestones, under the glowing sign. *Bread baked fresh.*

"I'm going clubbing," said Caitlin. She was still in her uniform. "Bye".

Anna was left standing there. She imagined herself with some lippy, texting a husband to tell him she'd be home late. As soon as Caitlin disappeared into the alleyway that led to the clubs Anna started walking home.

She ended up throwing out the cheap little teenage pills. They'd been a long shot. She tried the oxycontin and the valium, one night for each with a notepad next to her, like a science experiment. She started an ongoing arrangement with the postnatal mother. At work the customers' complaints washed over her, lapping at her skin. She did her free training days,

three of them. She even got invited to Caitlin's 18th birthday with Caitlin's friends at Caitlin's grandma's house. Anna smiled at the grandma and helped her in the kitchen as older women do, but the grandma did not say much to Anna and Anna knew she was wondering why Anna was there. Where Anna's life was. Anna went with Caitlin and her friends to a bar, but it was very loud. She got Caitlin a glass of water and some paper towels as Caitlin threw up butter chicken and birthday cake in the bar toilet and then Anna, sober, drove herself home. But she was glad she had gone. She was proud of Caitlin's vigour.

Anna took her valium each night and every morning, watching TV. She grew older and more alone but she felt calm, and who could blame her? People with deliberate lives who could look at pictures of Greece with their husbands and then book the ticket, giggling and thinking *oh, I am so naughty. Naughty me*. Who will storm into her house and stop her when she is not hurting anyone else?

Lucky

"Got a present for you", said the officer when Marie opened the door. Between them was Daniel. His head was hanging down between his ribs and there was thin gruelly vomit down the front of his shirt.

"Oh for fuck's sake."

"Where do you want him?"

Marie sighed. She turned and went back into the house. The officers followed her, lifting Daniel over the door frame. Daniel gurgled. They bumped him down the hall and into the bathroom, where Marie held back the shower curtain.

"Put him in there".

The policemen dropped Daniel into the tub and followed Marie back to the front door.

"Where are you going?" She asked. "Back to town? Can I have a ride?"

"Stay home", said one of the officers, pleasantly. "Look after your husband."

Marie didn't stay home. She left a towel and a bucket for Daniel and drove into town. He wouldn't remember if she'd been there or not anyway.

She met up with Shirley at the pub and they had a great time, the two of them, drinking house wine and dancing, throwing their heads back. At the end of the night Marie stabbed her keys into her car and drove them both home, dropping Shirley at her small unit. Shirley said she was welcome to stay but Marie said no, she liked to drive out to her house in the country. The stars were always best at this hour. Marie continued home, smiling at what a great time she'd

had. In the morning she'd pick Shirley back up and take her to her car in town, because Shirley didn't like to drive after a night out.

Daniel was still in the tub when Marie got home. That was fine with Marie. His snores filled the house, and the cats looked at her in worry while she poured herself one last glass of wine before bed and played her favourite songs on repeat, swaying on the breakfast stool.

In the morning Daniel was in bed with her and he smelled of vomit. He rolled and muttered when Marie got up and she resolved to not look after him, not today. When she got to Shirley's, Shirley was out on the step having a coffee. Shirley had given up smoking because she'd had a cancer scare herself a while back and then her mum had died of it. Bad luck, thought Marie. Marie's family were all wizened but they just went on and on with their bad breath and bony hands. Marie lit her own smoke. She breathed deep.

"How's the head?" she asked.

"Bad".

"Not like you, going out all night"

"Cancer's back", said Shirley. Shirley had rotten luck. Marie was sad for her, but she didn't ask if there was any hope. You didn't ask, you just waited to be told.

"Shirley." A quiet voice from the back of the house. The voice was soft, wasting. Shirley's husband. Shirley's face dropped.

"I haven't told him", she whispered. Marie nodded, unable to breathe. She almost ran to her car and got inside it. Shirley eventually came back out and Marie opened her door from the inside, a dent had made it stick. Marie had slid into a culvert a few weeks ago but she

hadn't been hurt. After Marie dropped Shirley at her car in town, she went back home and made herself a coffee. As she sipped, Marie began to calm down. She poured a little spiced rum in her coffee. That much bad luck couldn't be for nothing. She couldn't help but think a little positive thinking could go a long way for Shirley. Marie was a great fan.

In the lounge Daniel was playing the Xbox in his underwear. They ordered pizza. At lunchtime Marie and Daniel started drinking properly again. In the afternoon, they goaded each other into a fight. Daniel lost heart first, winding down from loud shouting to red-eyed whingeing and pouring Jack Daniels into his mouth like it would make Marie fall all over herself to stop him. Instead Marie went to the pantry and pulled out all the Tim Tams and chips while Daniel muttered into his chest. On second thought, Marie opened the freezer and took the frozen sausage rolls as well. Daniel would just eat them in a drunken stupor and not remember it, and she'd come home to crumbs and nothing nice for herself. Marie put the food in her car and drove to Shirley's house.

"Come on! Let's go out for dinner! My treat!" Shirley was hesitant but she never got to go out for dinner because her husband had a broken back from a logging accident and he lay in bed all day in silence.

Marie took Shirley to an Indian restaurant and drank a bottle of wine stabbing her naan bread at some of her curry while Shirley ate hers and looked all around them. Their bill came quickly.

"Indians are so *fast",* Marie said. Shirley looked at her plate. "Not being *racist*, you know, but they just *are.*"

"Should I drive?" asked Shirley.

Marie drove. Halfway home the gas light came on and she swerved into a station, causing Shirley to spill half the stuff out of her purse, which she'd been digging in for panadol for whatever ache and pain she had now. Marie got out and filled the car, turning around with her finger already on the pump and spilling petrol all down one side. She didn't care about the argument anymore and now she just wanted to get home and see Daniel. She hurriedly dropped Shirley back off and headed home under the stars.

At the intersection there was a dark heap in the middle of the road. Marie swerved, fear jolting into her mouth. As she pulled up she saw it was Daniels' heavy Ford, facing her. Its lights were out. There was no sound. She thought of Shirley's husband asking for her so quietly. *Shirley*. She went right up to the driver's side. Daniel was in the seat, hands in his lap and mouth open. He had passed out.

Marie looked around. Usually he made it to somewhere along the driveway. She tried to get Daniel to move but he was too useless and confused so she just took the keys out of the ignition and put them on the passenger seat. Barely anyone used that intersection anyway. Marie and Daniel were positive thinkers. People liked them, even the police joked with them sometimes.

Summer

When Chris's son Sam's tree house burned down and Sam was rushed to hospital with shiny burns down the back of both his legs, he also had a big bruise on his back that he told no one about and no one asked to see. Chris, his father, sat in the waiting room in a hot bath of red sweat. His wife, Sarah, sat one full chair away from him. When Sam had hit the ground Chris rushed outside not to help but to kick his son in the back as he lay on the grass, before Sam woke up and started screaming. All Chris had seen was the treehouse on fire.

By now the neighbour's kid would have told his parents all about it. They would have seen Chris lift Sam into the car, speed off to hospital. They would have heard how Chris had kicked Sam. They would have heard earlier in the week when Chris was shouting at Sarah. Because of these things they would not open the door if Chris went to ask for the neighbour's boy to admit what he had done to the treehouse and to Sam. They would not believe Chris, a 42-year old man, over their 10-year old son with his curly fringe.

When Sam came out of the ward, he did not mention the kick and only wanted to show them his puffy white padded legs. Sarah rushed to Sam and held him and Chris stood and sat back down. He said nothing. The nurses would have seen the bruise. They would have registered it.

It was muggy outside. Chris worked in a big concrete garage with the aluminium door flung open, the sun hitting his equipment and burning his neck. Hot bits of metal from his welding gun drifted onto his clothes and burned holes to the flesh, leaving pinprick burns on his arms and legs.

When customers or his boss came to stand behind him and talk, all the heat that Chris had been holding in his core flushed to the surface and burst out on his skin. His armpits would instantly begin to stink. Down in his jeans his underwear would be sodden. So he spoke gruff, short words, so no one could smell his discomfort.

When they got home from the hospital Chris did the dishes. He could not stand dishes on the sink. His own mother had left coffee cups all over the front stoop, sitting in her dressing gown with a muddy coffee and stubbing her cigarette butts into the old mugs while her children tried to hug her or play with her and got their ragged baby nails tangled in her greasy hair. Anyone could see them from the road, and the world always watched through the curled netting.

The dishes would pile high on the bench while his parents walked past them. Other adults gave his father hunks of venison and he threw them straight into the fridge without a plate or a cover, straight onto the shelves to bleed. The meat would go green and then it would harden. The children carved lumps off it and cooked them in the microwave, the steaks bubbling grey.

Sarah watched Chris from the doorway, Sam's hand in her own. She couldn't seem to let his hand go. Chris would not berate Sarah about the dishes. Not today. He knew he could not stay at home all day with the children, not with his strict rules. The sun was not shining but he was unbearably hot, the steam rose from the water and sweat trickled down his back. He wished for an open window, anything. Mosquitoes bit at his feet, sticking agonising probes into his skin. He did not stop them. Sarah asked if he was okay and he could not answer without shouting.

It wasn't her fault. It was the heat. He nodded, shook his head, dumbly, anything to get her away from him, fuck *off*, and she finally, finally left, taking Sam upstairs even though Sam was saying he wasn't tired. Sam wanted to go next door and show the neighbour his padded legs. Chris clattered the cutlery louder and louder until he couldn't hear his wife and his son anymore. One of the cups broke against his palm and he nearly picked it up in his fist and stove it through the window but he carefully, carefully, wrapped it in newspaper and put it in the bin, which was nearly overflowing.

Where could he go where they might be safe from him?

Sarah came back downstairs and went straight to the lounge while Chris mopped. She flicked on the TV. She was not a lazy bitch but sometimes she looked it. Chris could not stop the thought from flashing in. He wondered if she might leave him for this. He had felt her leaving in their marriage at times before. She would begin to prepare, to clear out old clothes from her stuffed closet and to pick up property pamphlets in other towns, but in the end routine and habit always took over and she always stayed without even telling him she had been thinking of leaving.

And Chris had been trying. He'd taken her to his boss's house for dinner, to meet his wife so they could unwrap salads together and murmur and the men could tip a craft beer back and watch them, knowing they were doing a good thing for their wives who sat at home alone most of the time. His boss had a tennis court and a pool. Sarah had worn a brown dress. He'd worn leather shoes, to take off in their foyer. They'd even thrown swimsuits in the car, just in case they all had a night time dip — *Who knew?* But it had all gone wrong. When they arrived with their bottle of wine and his wife flushed and excited, Chris's boss and wife were in jeans.

The boss's wife was wearing *slippers for god's sake*, and they'd all sat on the white couch and watched TV. They'd ordered Chinese. The pool had lapped softly outside.

When they got home Sarah had wanted to talk about the movie they'd watched on the couch but the kids had gotten into the pantry with their teenage babysitter and there was sauce spilt all over the element. They were sitting at the table, frozen, their forks tangled in half cooked pasta.

Chris had walked stiffly upstairs. He knew his abrupt departures from them cut him apart from them irreparably.

After Chris finished the dishes he went to the lounge and stood behind Sarah. Her neck was tense. He did not touch it. He went upstairs. On his way to bed he went to check on the children, looking in at them from the door. They slept in the same position, arms thrown up above them, lips sweating. He remembered being handed them as newborns, red bundles radiating heat, their damp fragile heads.

Roses

Shane watched the TV in horror. His granddad was on the news. He looked old, and wiry, and still dangerous despite the pooched flesh around his chin. Shane felt shame and wished not for the first time that he'd been born far away from them both, his mother and his grandfather. He pulled his laptop from where it lived between the armchairs, the other chair empty, two for symmetry. The laptop weighed barely anything and the screen turned on instantly. He searched his childhood name, Shane Davis. Nothing. He searched his current name, Shane Donald. Nothing, except his lawyer practise. And the award at the real estate gala, special mention for getting young couples into new homes.

Shane's mother, Mikayla, had a sex video online. He could type a couple words and she would be there on the screen. When he was a child, older boys had made thrusting sex movements at him when he got on the bus and they sat next to him and told him all about it. But Shane knew he would never watch it, so he didn't have to believe any of it.

Everyone knew who Mikayla was, who his grandfather had been. Men would watch him out of the corners of their eyes, men who knew his grandfather for good reasons or bad, from parties, from altercations in the street, from bags delivered from his house to theirs. Mothers at the gate would single him out with their eyes and look around for Mikayla, so they could tell each other they'd seen that *whore* picking him up from school, with her big rose tattoos. They sidled close and asked him questions like, "is this the Richmond bus?" even though everyone knew the Richmond bus was the only one that stopped at the back gate. Shane just

concentrated on his school work and not offending anybody and the principal called him into his office to say he was keeping an eye on his progress and that he was pleased.

Shane had grown up with his mum and his granddad. His granddad used to be a criminal but he was old then, even when Shane was a kid. His arms were orange and had faded green blotchy tattoos on them. His fingers had noughts and crosses on the knuckles. There was a red heart with a knife through it on his arm but time had turned it a soft magenta. The only thing that still intimidated about him was his beard, which was long and grey and rested on his chest. The beard said, “no hugs boy”.

When Shane got home from school on the day the principal spoke to him he put his books on the counter and went to the pantry for a biscuit. “Bring me one of those while you’re at it”, said his granddad from his green leather chair in the lounge. Shane brought them both two biscuits each, and a beer for his granddad. Granddad didn’t start drinking until Shane got home from school. “Got homework?” he asked. Shane nodded and lay his books out on the floor. He didn’t really have much to do but he liked laying on the floor working before his mum got home. Some of his homework was about Matariki. He had to learn some words like constellation, and Ranginui, and Papatūānuku.

Mikayla came home. She gave Shane a hug and a kiss, held him with her tattooed hands with big roses blooming on them. She heated up some fish fingers and peas and the three of them ate in front of the tv. Granddad started to curse at the news, face going red. Shane was allowed to stay up and watch a cooking show because Mikayla liked them and part of a movie afterwards. After he went to bed, some time after the movie had finished, he heard Granddad

shouting something about Rangi and Papa. Granddad didn't like anyone who wasn't white or burned red like him. Shane turned over and went to sleep.

Years later Shane watched them make a fool out of his grandfather on the TV screen and wondered if there was anything any of them could have done about it.

"It's a lack of — of respect," he said. The news lady nodded. She looked at his green faded blobs of tattoos and then at the camera, keeping her eyebrows very still.

Granddad was in the image with his huge grey beard looking soiled under the lights, next to the news reporter, young and shiny. He was in some sort of opinion piece about gangs in New Zealand. Shane could not bear to listen to whatever his Granddad was saying about morals. He turned the volume down, couldn't quite turn it off. He watched the reporter bite back a smile, dance around his Granddad's spitty responses.

"That is not what I said." Granddad's voice cut suddenly over the banter. Shane stiffened and watched the TV, alert now. Well-spoken or not, Granddad had that sixth sense of all wiry violent men of when he was being made fun of. But the sound cut out, the segment was over, and the last flash of the scene was of his grandfather's bright blue eyes baling into the woman. He looked a fool. He was doing it to look like he'd grown, like he'd gotten wisdom in his old age, instead of just a dirtier beard.

Granddad had gone to prison one more time while he was living with Shane and Mikayla. The police had come in at 7pm with the sun just set, after they'd waited out in the

driveway for 45 minutes. Granddad had watched them the whole time, through the window next to the tv. When they'd started checking their radios and exiting their cars he'd gone to meet them out in the car port. They'd all shaken hands and chatted awhile. Then they'd all come into the house, Granddad saying "I live with my daughter and my grandson, there's nothing here." But they came in anyway. Mikayla stayed at the sink doing dishes, where she had placed herself when Granddad had gone outside. Shane stayed on the couch, even when one of the officers turned off the tv and searched inside the back of it. The man who did it turned it back on again afterwards. "Sorry kiddo", he said. They were all polite to Mikayla and Shane, even to Granddad, even when they told him he was under arrest and he went and sat in the car. Shane wondered how he could still find the police so nice, even though they did that. Granddad's friends all called the police pigs, pigshit, chickenshit. But Shane had thought they were good, to turn the tv back on and to be kind to his mother when many people weren't.

When Granddad got out, he came by once to visit. He didn't come inside, just hung around the gate. Shane was 12 then and had thought his Granddad would say something like sorry, or missed you boy, but instead he had just looked at Shane with something that looked a little like disgust and walked past him to Mikayla, shaking his head. "You've ruined him," he said.

"He can hear you," she said.

People got through anything. Shane worked as a property lawyer. He changed his last name to Donald and stopped going to anything that included Davises. His seat was empty at weddings and funerals. He helped young couples buy homes, talked them through the

paperwork. When people searched for his business nothing about Mikayla came up, thanks to a legal name change he'd organised for her, showing her where to sign. He'd erased her.

Shane poured another glass of wine. He felt like calling the news channel, asking them if they knew that Peter Davis had had a daughter who had a sex video. How they'd laugh. They'd probably get his Granddad in for a weekly segment. Then he thought of his mother's hands, big roses blooming on their backs, handing out plates of fish and peas. He felt guilty. He decided to visit her the next morning, take her some groceries.

Mikayla had her own little flat on the other side of town that Shane had bought her, but she was confused easily and kept thinking she needed to pay rent. She paid her power bills bit by bit, wrote all the expenses down in her notebook with withered roses on her hands. Granddad seemed so full of vitality on the TV, compared to his daughter.

She'd been an addict most of her life. When she was young Granddad had threatened her under pain of death about it, but he didn't stop business. His associates got younger as he got older until one day they were the right age for Mikayla to date. *Who else could she have dated?* Thought Shane, bitterly. The sex video had been common enough, with a boyfriend, but when it went online it rippled outward and everyone knew those tattoos, knew whose daughter she was. Granddad had hunted down the boyfriend and scared him off violently, putting himself in jail in the first instance, but that just gave Mikayla over to all her father's young friends so willing to step in and look after her and keep her fed with her pretty roses. By then Mikayla had no chance of ever getting a husband who cared about her, leaving her and

Shane to the worst parts of town with the men who lived there. Shane was careful never to blame Mikayla.

Mikayla came into the kitchen and rifled in the cupboards, pulled out her pocketbook and a pen. She started to add up the groceries he'd brought in as if she had ordered them and he was an anonymous delivery boy, hiding her hands from him as she delved into the teapot for money.

"I got it, mum", Shane said. Almost in tears. She looked up at him, shrugging. One day Mikayla would die and then Shane would have no links to his history.

"You don't have to come all this way love", Mikayla said, patting Shane on the arm. He flushed.

Granddad's Harley pulled up in front of Mikayla's house. Granddad popped by every weekend, more than Shane. He, too, had groceries piled high. He sat on the bike, engine idling, next to Shane's car, leaning back with his arms folded. He was not ashamed. Shane left Mikayla in the kitchen with the kettle boiling and he escaped out the back door to stand in the backyard, facing the back fence, hands weak. One day it would be over and Shane would be a property lawyer called Shane Donald and only one of them would go to Mikayla's funeral.

Girls

Edith looked around Megan's living room. Megan had grown up and become custodian of the family history. She kept mismatched furniture from family members who had died or left, unable to let go of any of it. The room was crowded with chairs and couches.

They'd gotten into Taupo at night, the lake looking like a deep hole in the dark, no lights to define it. That's what her granddaughter, Rebecca, called it. A hole.

Edith and her late husband Bill had raised their family on an acre not far from the lake, before eventually moving out to the coast. Bill had built the house and it was often icy. The sun disappeared at 4 o'clock each day behind a hill and the boys, three of them, chopped kindling after school in the growing dark. At the time it hadn't seemed so bad. There was always warmth to be found by getting up quickly, stamping feet into shoes, blowing into coals and boiling water. There were mutton sandwiches for school. It had been a good beginning. For everyone except Megan, perhaps.

When Megan had been born, last and impossibly tiny, Bill had given her straight over to Edith. A girl. The only girl.

In Megan's living room on a large antique cabinet there were photos of Megan's three brothers; one of them in sunglasses haggling in Egypt, spending money. There was a framed photo of Megan's wedding to Kevin, body hidden in a creased wedding dress, standing in a field of green. A postcard from Rebecca, from Portugal.

One day Edith would have to move in here for good, into Rebecca's old room, and that would be the beginning of the end. Another piece of family history to add to the old cabinets

and chairs. The washing machine beeped. Megan bolted up to collect the towels to hang on the clothesline. She washed her family's towels every day. Edith had raised Megan to take this role. But even Edith hadn't washed the towels every day. She wondered, not for the first time, if she had disarmed Megan in some way, raising her out in the country with only men to look after.

Edith looked out into Megan's yard. Under a magnolia tree was a large rock, with "Holly" engraved into it. Edith hadn't been able to pass on to Megan the hardness about animals required for growing up on a farm. In everything else she had taught her about sacrifice, Edith supposed she should not be surprised. How to teach a child to do everything she had to but to keep most of herself for herself, privately hidden? She didn't know. Edith's own cats had been buried with a shovel in the sand, no markers and left for the wind.

When Megan was young she had kept tadpoles in an old washing machine in the backyard, near the killing shed. Bill had dragged it outside, left it in the rain until he could fix it or find a use for it. Edith could see in her memory the machine out in the rain with the boys stood around it, while the sun streamed into Megan's living room.

Nearly every afternoon in summer Bill would drop Edith and the children at the lakeside and head off to the community hall to drink with the rest of the working men. Edith would watch the boys in the water while Megan stumped down to the marshes, pushing aside dragonflies to scoop tadpoles into a bucket. She would return with her tadpoles as the air cooled. Mother and daughter would watch the shadows grow over the small bumps in the sand, watch them turn yellow then orange then pink as the sun dipped. In those moments on the beach Edith felt they had a nice time, the two of them.

But it wasn't a *hugging* family. They didn't discuss their days or their opinions or how things could be made better. Only people in town with extra rooms in their houses specifically for company did that. Edith had not been a wife who received many visitors. How could Megan have learned to be easy in large groups?

Edith watched Megan's head bobbing around outside as she lifted towels onto the line, and thought about the time the three boys had caught an eel in the creek behind the house. There had been no question between them about where they were going to put it. Edith had become aware of the silence all at once, and looked up from the sink to see the boys so still, looking down into the old washing machine. She ran out in her dress and gumboots and chased them away with a wooden spoon, but they could barely hide their smiles. She almost smiled herself, they had gotten so big.

No one except Megan cared about the tadpoles, and Bill dealt with the three boys in quick succession down in the wood shed at the back of their quarter acre for that. They all walked gingerly out of the shed again after the sun was gone and the air was syrupy with dark. They filed into the kitchen in a line and patted their little sister on the back. Megan offered up the plate of lamingtons that Edith had helped her bake and the boys forgave her. That's what girls did, Edith realised. She had taught Megan that. Offered food, asked for forgiveness for the punishments that their softness prompted boys into.

Edith knew that moments like their time in the wood shed only increased the boys' bond with their father, while they made them to her and Megan more like strangers.

When they moved into town the boys were teenagers, polite and strong. They tipped the washing machine over and the eel, tripled in size, slithered out and oozed across the grass.

It slimed its way back into the creek while Megan and Edith watched from the house. Megan barely went outside by then, no jobs for her out there, no interest in the outdoors. The eel had sucked up her only other interest and so she stuck close to her mother's side, learning.

Bill was buried years ago now, his hard builder's fingers were all gone, and Edith sat in Megan's living room. If she was at home, at the coast, she would have been in her sunroom. The yellow light from the setting sun would be crossing over the two green felt chairs and the brown glass coffee table.

Bill had built her that sunroom. She remembered him near the end of his life walking down the beach each evening, slower by a minute each time, winding down like a warm metal watch. They didn't talk often, even at the end, but in the sunroom Edith could see his care in the warmth of the coffee table, the softness of the rounded cuts of wood.

Megan's daughter Rebecca had taken up the space that Megan sacrificed from the very beginning. When Megan was pregnant she had come to stay with Edith and Bill at the beach. Edith, with her long life, had never seen morning sickness like her daughter's. Megan was hospitalised twice, put on a drip to keep her and the unplanned baby alive. Edith made plain toast for weeks on end while Megan stared out to sea, pale and thin. Then it was time and Megan went back home to her partner Kevin who was waiting to get married. When she was born, Rebecca squalled and screamed with the same energy as the sea at a storm.

Rebecca had grown in vitality, each visit, as Bill had dwindled. He became an old, frail man and Rebecca did not give him attention. Her interest in seeing just how much Megan would do for her had already begun.

At dinner one visit as a seven year-old, when Bill barely spoke anymore and sat at the table more as a gesture, Rebecca had asked, “Grandpa? Did you hit mum’s knuckles with a ruler when she was little?” A funny image, Bill ever treating Megan like one of their boys.

There could have been a chance there to joke with her daughter, Edith reflected. She could have said, “only your uncles, who were naughty. Your mother was always a good girl.”

Rebecca would have laughed. Megan could have used the compliment to bring a little blood and warmth to her pale face. Maybe it would have shown Megan that she was allowed to joke with her mother. That she hadn’t meant for her to be *so* meek. But it had been over too quickly. Megan carried on, pale and bloodless, and Edith missed an opportunity to try and reverse the things she had taught her.

The phone rang, interrupting Edith’s thoughts. She was brought abruptly back to Megan’s crowded living room. Megan answered the phone.

“Hello, Megan sp-”

A voice spattered quick words on the other end. Edith could hear it was Rebecca.

“He did what? All of it? What did you have with you?”

The voice rapidly pattering.

“Why didn’t you have it in a safe? Why would you take-” Megan turned her body away from Edith and held the phone closer to her ear. She whispered.

Tears now on the other end and Rebecca’s voice growing louder, becoming angry with her mother.

"Okay. Okay. Tell him you're getting off at the next sto- what? Who saw? Okay. Well we'll pay for the next flight home. Let me know when you're getting in."

Quiet words on the other end.

"You too. Grandma Edith sends her love. We'll see you soon."

Megan hung up and turned to Edith.

"Ben and Rebecca have had a fight. She's coming home."

Edith looked at her.

"They've been kicked off the ship. He ah, threw her jewellery over the side. The whole ah. Jewelry box."

Ben was Rebecca's fiancé. When Rebecca was a teenager, she had stolen money and jewellery off her mother, and Megan had pretended she had misplaced it. Now that Rebecca was a fiancé she took from her mother in other ways. She ridiculed Megan in front of Ben about her coupons and her kindness, and then called in tears when Ben's own kindness ran dry.

"Well. She's safe" Edith said, because she knew Megan needed her to say it. *Who takes their entire jewelry box on holiday?* She thought. Rebecca would, who tried so hard to look rich and important and not at all like she came from a small mother with her hair in a ponytail. Seeing Megan through Rebecca's eyes made Edith bristle. Megan adored her family, and Rebecca despised her for it. Edith thought of how their pet lambs, raised to be gentle, would run to Bill when he sidled into the yard with an axe. Too late.

Edith napped while Megan rattled and bustled. As she napped, she saw the jewelry spinning and flashing into the water, the purple velvet box going in after it, the small sound as it

bounced off the side of the ship. She thought of the coast of Ireland as it disappeared from her and Bill, lessening from sharp cliffs, growing softer and greener over the stern until it faded.

The phone rang back an hour later and woke Edith up. Megan snatched for it.

"Yes, hello?"

Megan tensed.

"He's taking you where? How long? No, no, it's a holiday. You may not get to see it again. We'll figure out the rest later."

She hung up the phone.

"They're going to Santorini." She didn't meet Edith's eyes. She knew what Edith thought of Rebecca. How quickly that fight between Rebecca and Ben would have been smoothed over.

Kevin, Megan's husband, arrived home while they were sitting at the kitchen bench having a cup of tea and waiting for it to be time to bring the towels in. Edith gave him a nod and went into the lounge to avoid their undoubtedly dull exchange. *How was your day? Good. What's for tea? Sausages.*

Megan had turned out exactly how she'd raised her. She watched Kevin's back retreat into the end of the house. She wondered if they ever fought, ever made up, ever laughed. She cast her eye over their wedding photo, with Megan squinting at the camera and Kevin standing beside her. He had waited in Taupo for his pregnant girlfriend to come home and marry him. At the reception and at every family gathering since he had stood next to Megan, holding his one beer in his hand until it went warm, while Megan's brothers teased him in their rough voices. He had driven all the way up the coast by himself to shake Bill's hand at the very last.

Edith allowed herself a small breath. Perhaps Megan had found something good for herself, after all.

A week later Edith and Megan drove the four hours together up to the airport. Rebecca hurried out of the gate, tall and smiling in white shorts. “Grandma Edith!” She swooped and bestowed a hug. Ben followed closely behind. On Rebecca’s hand was a new pear shaped diamond, to replace the one he’d thrown to sea. The stone glittered cool white. Megan returned the hugs from both of them, looking short and pink.

“Shall we go for lunch?” Megan asked. “Your Grandma and I saw a deal at a Tandoori place.” Ben flicked his eyes slightly upward and Edith stared at him with the hard look of a back shed at the end of a quarter acre.

“Hold on a minute mum!” said Rebecca. She went to the airport shop with Ben’s card and bought herself a drink in a bright green can. Megan eyed the drink, not mentioning how much cheaper it would have been outside the airport.

Edith reached across and clutched Megan’s hand hard. She had set up Megan’s life, she couldn’t undo it.

“Let’s not get in their way”, Edith said. “We’ll drop them off and go to dinner tonight. Us two girls”. Before she even knew what she was doing, her lips touched Megan’s cheek.

Tulips

Ahead of Claire on the road were two boys dragging —dogs? —no, *goats* —across the asphalt. She recognised them. They were her students, missing from the last class of the day. They must have wagged to be down this far before her. They both had their arms wrapped around the goats' chests, holding them upright and pulling them backwards. The goats' back legs dragged along the road. They were brothers, Jeremy and Max. Jeremy's goat rolled its eyes and bleated. Jeremy's jaw was clamped down as he waited on the centre line for a gap in traffic. His brother Max was already on the other side, holding his goat more gently. As Claire drove past he stared at Claire and she smiled, even though she knew they probably both hated her.

Claire travelled up the hill. It was supposed to be a quaint area, that's what the website said, but they didn't mention the lack of light in the main street, the saggy houses behind the railway line. There was a job advertised to manage the station. The salary was huge. Every week it was re-advertised while the sign out front lost paint in flakes.

Claire slowly drove up the bends, thinking about school. The sun cut in and out, blocked off by native trees. One of them had called her stupid today. It was more often bitch, which she liked better, because on the days you were a bitch you weren't quite prey. But she'd read Nigel Latta's book on teenagers, she was a loving rock for them to break against. She looked down and realised she'd only been travelling 80. Guiltily, she pressed down on the accelerator and lifted a hand to the ute right behind her. Sorry. But the ute, already behind this slow car too long, powered past her on a blind corner and up into the hills, dogs on the back barking.

At home, to avoid her panic attack, Claire planted the flowers that were dying outside in pots. She dug a little hole with her trowel and lifted each plant by the thickest part, just above the roots. She pulled each straggled flower out of its pot as gently as a child, supporting its small stalk and dry leaves. She crumbled the sides of the roots so they could grow. She planted them, pressed the dirt down, hands certain.

Claire lived alone. It wasn't ideal and she always had to choose the cheapest houses on the back of farms to pay the whole rent, where farmers learned quickly about her soft nature and dropped off mis-mothered lambs by the handful for her to rear. It was sad to live up a gravel driveway so far away from anything but Claire was also grateful she wouldn't be left by a man she loved, not so late, not after so much sacrifice, not like her mother who was left standing in the driveway of the home she made, nothing but dirty hands and saggy blouses and "can garden" on her résumé. So instead Claire paid her cheap rent and went to school and hoped people there would like her enough to keep her from being lonely.

Another day. Claire ate her porridge gazing out over the farm, the lights of the quadbikes criss-crossing as the shepherds moved the first mobs of sheep in the dark. She got in her car and drove back to work, an hour over the hill. As Claire drove her mind churned over the day ahead, the day behind. There was a spot on her chin that she must not touch. Her hand kept straying to it. It was raining. A car turned its lights off as it went past. Had it just turned its lights off? Or had it flashed its lights? Was there something on the road ahead? Something wrong with her car? She slowed down, saw a car behind her, didn't want to seem too slow, sped back up again.

At school, one of the teachers in the staffroom mentioned her name. She looked up, ready to smile, and then realised the teacher was talking to the principal. “Well those students outside yesterday, they were Claire’s. And I told them to be quiet, I had a test going on. And they didn’t.” Claire went to the bathroom. The principal met her eye as she slid past.

Claire walked down the yellow hallway hunched deep into her ski jacket. The students ignored her, streaming around her and pushing their earphones in deeper when she tried to talk to them. One rolled a smoke as he walked. “What are you doing?” she asked.

“Fuck off.”

There was a message on her phone after first period. A parent. Angry. Her son was not progressing. He needed to get NCEA so he could move out and get a job. What was Claire going to do about it?

Third period. Globalisation. The students were arguing with her. “Why do we have to learn this? What has this got to do with anything?” Claire began to patiently explain. But they were already sick of her. They began to concentrate on each other.

“Sieg,” one called out.

“Fuckin’ heil,” shouted another.

The older ones sat on their phones, waited for the day to be over. A boy made fake lines of cocaine on his desk out of a paracetamol and snuffed them up his nose. “Why do you dress like that?” a student asked.

The end of lunch. Claire waited for her last class of the day. She pottered around with her folders, trying not to look vulnerable as they came in. When she looked up she saw fists swinging. The obvious loser pushed his face down into the first boy’s chest, to bring them close

and limit the punches only to the back of his head. Claire shouted, “go and get someone!” to the students, knowing they wouldn’t, knowing they would stay and watch the fight. She went for the door, wondering what she was going to do when she got there.

But it was already over. A large senior who barely spoke but nodded politely at Claire when she tried to get him his literacy credits had pulled them apart. He held them, one in each hand. The senior shrugged his shoulders at Claire. What would she like him to do with them?

At home the lambs baaed incessantly until they were fed. It was raining so hard that Claire sobbed as she fed them, so cold, so uncomfortable, so angry that she would never let them just starve, as much as she wanted to. That she’d never just tell them to *fuck off.*

Saturday morning. The tulips weren’t coming up where Claire had planted them. The shoots grew in haphazard clumps, as if they’d wormed toward each other under the soil, in secret. She couldn’t control anything. Claire lay down on her stomach and counted them, raking the dirt softly with her fingertips. The shoots were sturdy. Thick and sleek they had shoved the last of the dirt aside overnight, leaving cracks in the surface. They were strong.

She heard the crunch of gravel and jumped up, heart pounding. She was lying on the *grass*, for goodness’ sake. But it was just one of the rams on the driveway, who had also gotten a fright and was now staring at her with his chin raised. Claire went inside and sat on the couch, got up, stoked the fire, picked up cups, closed the curtains against the hundreds of green sheep eyes.

She spent some time in the dark looking at luxury hotels. The hotel rooms were bright and airy. They had clean white linen and slick tiles where thoughts just slid right off. The chair

in the corner was impersonal. The desk was the same in every room. She imagined how calm, how confident she would be in one of them. Sometimes the view from the hotel looked out onto the street, onto lights and people and a whole world going on, one step removed from the carefully bare room. She looked around her own living room where her thoughts had been wearing down all the corners, wearing down the furniture, the corners, the walls, the door. She began to breathe faster. She put the jug on.

As a reward for not having her panic attack, Claire thought she might buy a cyclamen for the laundry. She looked at them online. So pink. She would place hers on the shelf above the washing machine. But the water from the tub beside the washing machine had been splashing back with each load, running down the side into the crack between the whiteware. She had been thinking about this on the back burner for awhile, how it would need to be pulled out and wiped so mould wouldn't grow. Then she remembered there were some spots of damp mould on the ceiling of the bathroom and she had to change the sheets in the spare room. She felt like crying. But, easier than crying, was getting a sponge and wiping one thing at a time.

Claire had a dream. In it she was rummaging through the dirt with her hands, looking for her tulip bulbs. She pulled them up, held them, secure in their weight. She re-planted them, pressing them down. Then she frantically scrabbled back through the dirt with her nails and pulled them back up, checking they were still there.

School again. Claire looked at the posters on the back wall as she talked about apostrophes. Two of the posters had fallen halfway down. There was a rumble, a truck going by. The students stopped their chatting to listen. Ignore it, Claire was about to say. Do your work. But the rumble got louder. The desks began to hum. An earthquake, then. Claire waited to see what it would do. Most passed. She didn't want to begin the battle of getting them under their desks, to convince them to look uncool for something that may be only a minor tremble.

The students looked at her. She looked at them. The rumble increased and the desks began to jitter. No… Hold… She thought to herself. The books tumbled off the bookshelf. The floor began to roll. The students watched her. Was she going to say anything? The rumble became a roar. *Is there even enough room under my desk?* Claire thought. The floor bucked. Time to get under the desks. There was a deep groan and everyone looked up. All thoughts slipped off the deeply-grooved tracks. She could just stop worrying now. She clicked her throat to speak her first entirely natural word, and the first cracks sprinted across the ceiling.

Tessa Ann

Tessa Ann grew up in a house with guinea pigs living under the floor. At night the children lay in their beds and listened to them scuttering. Someone, maybe one of her mother's sisters, or even one of her grandmother's sisters, had owned a pair, and they had gotten out. Instead of dying in the frost, they multiplied. When Tessa Ann's mother had her morning coffee and cigarette on the front steps, kids clambering onto and off of her lap, it was not unusual to see a fat sleek body trundle out from under the front porch and across the lawn. The fur was long and glossy. It reached to the grass.

Marlene was her mother's name. Marlene's mother before her had been psychic and they all had dreams about her where she smiled at them reassuringly. When they had nightmares about men in the house their grandmother would appear and open a back door that hadn't existed before and they could lie still with the guinea pigs, hiding from the cats and the horrors come to kill them.

The children went crazy in cycles. Tessa Ann's hairdresser told her that hair had a seven-year cycle. Your hair could be curly for seven years, then straight. Blonde, then brown. The crazy of Tessa Ann's siblings was like that. They would relax and get into routines to put the anxiety into manageable boxes. But when the routines got too serious, too rigid, it would mean they were about to blow wide open. Tessa Ann had no choice from the beginning so she had to make do with who she was and where. So she made do.

When Tessa Ann grew older and felt like stopping showering, stopping eating, crawling under the house with the guinea pigs, she thought of her psychic grandmother's bedroom at

the back of the house where they'd grown up. It had been cream and green and from it you could hear the whole house as if underwater. While Marlene corralled her siblings in the front rooms Tessa Ann lifted her grandmother's perfume. She touched the sea shells.

They had a calm father. That was lucky. Most of Tessa Ann's siblings when they grew up could keep jobs. Some of them even paid their bills. Tessa Ann remembered the chaos when they were young, the children all running around underfoot and screaming every morning. *What if I can't find my homework? What if there's an earthquake? What if our parents die and we all have to live alone? What if a man stands in the front yard we have to choose who dies, beaten to death in front of the rest of us?*

Their calm father pinned something white with yellow highlighter to the hallway wall. It had a title. The children stopped running and screaming. The title said, "The Getting Ready Chart". On it were pictures drawn in ballpoint pen, for all the younger children who could not yet read. A picture of a hairbrush, pulling through long, flowing hair. A picture of shoes, with laces tied. A picture of a toothbrush, with impossibly large teeth. "Brush your teeth" it said. "Brush your hair" it said. "Get your shoes ready", it said.

All of a sudden, everything made sense. They crowded around it. Where were they on the chart? What next? The screaming and running stopped. The chart stopped Tessa Ann and her siblings from starting every day in a full panic, their individual horrors climbing and spilling over each other in a rushing torrent.

Tessa Ann still thought of the chart when she was grown. All her siblings did. On those days when you could hear the guinea pigs scratching and the cats getting under the house to kill them and they woke up crazy in spite of themselves, they still counted their hours of sleep,

set alarms, woke up and brushed their hair, they brushed their teeth, they found their clothes and they put them on and they did not kill themselves, they stuck to the chart. They got out the door and went to school and when they grew up they went to work.

When the children left home Marlene had gifts for all of them. This one is rose quartz. For your heart. This one is moonstone. To protect you from demons. This is a knife. Put it in your in your boot. Don't sit in rooms with men without one there to protect you. This is a dream catcher. It lets the bad ones fall through. This is my phone number. For if anyone has come to get you.

Their father's temperance rose and fell in them, turning some of them calmer than others. Some of her siblings did not receive enough of his blood, and they were wild and made no sense, never went to bed. There were many brothers and sisters. Whenever Tessa Ann thought of her mother when she wasn't with her she thought of her as she'd never been, in a glossy red car with no roof, two Great Danes next to her. She was wearing sunglasses and a headscarf.

When they were teenagers they came home less often. Tessa Ann's friends were nice and they drove down the Napier Taupo hill at 170 kilometres per hour. Sometimes Tessa Ann rode in the boot. There was some sort of rev booster in there. It had a blue light and it whirred. She could hear the gears changing up and up and then – when they were fast enough - silence. One night they parked at the Taupo bungy and she exploded out of the back where she'd been rolling around with the bottles. She ran into the trees and realised she was standing on a bush growing out from the edge of the cliff. Her feet were sinking through. Her piss was draining through the branches and splashing into the river. She laughed and pulled her skirt down. That

was not one of her fears. That night when they finished their drinks they threw their glasses against the wall.

Tessa Ann got a nice boyfriend who looked out for her for many years. He was kind to her. He fell in love easily and he slept with other people, but he was always sorry and came home and told her everything he liked about her because he was so romantic. Eventually her routines and undulating panic got too much for him and he left her. Tessa Ann was sad, but she had jobs to do. He didn't like to touch the rubbish, so Tessa Ann did it. He was afraid of the whipping blades on the lawn mower, so Tessa Ann did it. He had panic attacks about things like never making enough money and disappointing his parents. Tessa Ann was not like that.

Marlene had always impressed on them the importance of trying to find rich men. Tessa Ann thought that with a rich man she wouldn't have to mow lawns or climb on the roof and pull the muck out of the gutters, so she found one. This man drank nice wines and had a nice kitchen that was cleaned by a cleaner once a week. He took her to dinner. He took her to meet his family.

Tessa Ann was careful not to speak because she knew her voice came out as a question, that she laughed at the wrong sort of meanness. The pretty women asked her to come and sit with them, but Tessa Ann could smell danger and went to sit with the men in the pool room. You won't believe this, but the mayor was there. Tessa Ann met the mayor. He had brought his own rum. He drank it all and started being sexist with a red face. He did not bother to edit himself in front of Tessa Ann. She was watching but he didn't care because she was probably stupid or not even real.

Tessa Ann realised she didn't fit, and she never would and she went home and never went back to rich men, even when they asked her. They were their worst selves in front of her, and besides they could not protect her. She wondered if Marlene would have impressed on them the importance of rich men if she had known that.

The first time Tessa Ann visited her last boyfriend who became her husband she drove herself up his gravel driveway into the heart of a farm. She passed a tractor. The bowl of the tractor was full of pink guts and red soup. From the slaughterhouse she heard shuffling. He mowed his own lawns and he didn't wear any sunblock - which even Tessa Ann thought was a bit careless.

"Look at this," her husband would say, in the beginning. "They're chopping off his arms with a machete". He would thrust his phone at her. "Look at this one, they're burning him alive".

"Stop", she would say, tears running down her cheeks. "I can't deal with it. I have no boundaries. I'm crazy."

She could not stop imagining the end of the world. She told him about how it would go, the lack of resources, the violence, always ending in the men coming into the house. How he wouldn't be able to protect her. He stopped showing her the videos. Late that night she woke up and he was on the phone. "I won't use it," he said. "I just need it. To bury somewhere. Out in the bush. Just in case". He was getting them a gun. Rich men wouldn't do that, men who trusted in the order of things and thought Tessa Ann and all her family were crazy for worrying so much.

You also need to protect yourself, her husband said to her. The first time she was hit, hard, she relaxed totally. It was nowhere near as bad as she had imagined. It was bearable. She signed up for more and more classes. She was not a graceful athlete. Her stride jolted up and down, not quick or smooth at all. The teacher made fun of her, bouncing on his feet and springing out his elbows, protruding his teeth like an idiot. Like she was poor and inelegant. That was what she looked like, he said.

The ridicule was another terrible thing that, after all, was bearable. Five times a week she was ridiculed and hit, hard. The flimsy armour she wore did nothing to deaden the deep silence in her ears after a strike to the top of the head. The arm guards slapped against her arms when they were hit and left grey bruises in lines. Her fingers blistered, peeled, blistered harder. When the men struck her *doh,* her shiny plastic chest cover, her breast flattened.

She never won a single match, but she felt better anyway. She biked home at night, with her sticks across her back.

Tessa Ann's husband could leap a fence and grab a ewe by the scruff, his other hand tumbling a tangled lamb out of the sheep and onto the ground, for it to stand up, gasping. He could hold a ram with his legs and lift its chin, cut its throat and let the blood gout out over his knuckles. He was so casually involved with life and with death. Tessa Ann learned from him that men fighting were generally unfit. They grew tired before they could really hurt each other. Fists on faces really only caused lumps and thick lips, not much more. She learned that two glasses of wine made the fights bearable to see.

One of her husband's friends pissed off a man called Sal. Tessa Ann did not know what Sal was short for, but her mind always corrected it to *Sally.* He was old, that age group she had always feared most. She did not know how to deal with aggressive old men, and she felt instinctively they were the ones Marlene had wanted her to never be alone with.

Sal wore track pants. He rode a motorbike and had a stiff old leg from an accident. Even an imagined name like Sally only seemed to make him more frightening in its strangeness. He walked into Tessa Ann's property at one of their barbeques and knocked one of her husband's friends down. He put his foot on the younger man's throat. The boy was squirming with his shirt tangled and riding up his belly, like a wriggling white whale. Sal stomped on his face a couple of times, sometimes missing as the guy squirmed, sometimes mashing his boot into the guy's lips, getting dirt in his mouth. The guy kept trying to talk, his voice muffled against Sal's boot.

Here was the man coming into the house. Here he was ruining all her nice friends and soon he would ruin everything. She did not know what to do except watch. She imagined herself standing there with the gun, shooting Sal in his stomach, watching the guts come out. But the gun was out in the bush, in their secret meeting place for the end of the world.

Eventually the proper routine took over. The old man got tired. The boy pulled himself up on the side of a truck and pushed the old man over, pummelled his face a bit. Then they both got up, wheezing and leaning on things to catch their breath. The old man got on his motorbike and rode away. "Don't take it personally", said someone, clapping the young man on the shoulder. "He's having a bit of trouble with his wife", carried on the other man, in explanation. Tessa Ann let out her breath.

Afterwards, a couple weeks afterwards, after another bout of crazy where she stuck to her routines so hard that she muttered vicious words to herself in the mornings when the clean dishes touched the dirty ones and the side bench was smeared with crumbs and blood and she even once threw her wedding ring on the floor, Tessa Ann's husband came home after he'd been out drinking beer and he picked her up, laughing. He swung her around and lifted her legs, and all Tessa Ann's crazy dead relatives crowded around to watch as he stamped her feet up and down on the dog. The dog was barking and nipping her legs with his wide open mouth, swallowing up her bare feet. "Watch out for the Sally stomp! Sally stomp!" her husband shouted, while Tessa Ann laughed.

Missing

When Shane came to visit for a scheduled family dinner and found his fourteen year old sister Katherine face down on the lawn after eating everything in the medicine cupboard, he draped her over the back fence to puke it out. If you do that again you may as well take the rest of us with you, he said. They went to the doctor together. Ask for these, he said. They're tranquilisers. The doctor wrote the prescription. She'd be alright by the time she got to his age, he said. They went back to the routine family dinners, Shane driving over with dessert.

Then Shane went missing. It was uncommon, but not impossible. People drank too much and tried to swim the river. Some moved away without telling anyone. Usually everyone found out what happened, but with Shane no one had been with him. No one had seen him.

Katherine was sixteen. She'd been babysitting at a hotel on the waterfront. When the parents got home and handed her a fistful of coins, they were drunk enough not to notice that she only pretended to call a taxi. Katherine walked home by the water, following the curve of the lake, which sucked the light out of the air. Shane had been missing for nine months already by then. As long as a baby took to finish growing lungs, fingers. If he was alive he'd be 28.

Katherine was glad she hadn't called a taxi. She liked the quiet, wasn't ready to go home yet. The lake was pawing at the shore, cold black water. She counted the coins in her pocket and added it to her babysitting money. A car went past, boys in it shouting and laughing. She stared after it. The car pulled into the lookout ahead of her and spun in a slow circle, headlights

picking out road, dark water, sand. It came back and pulled over on the opposite side of the road, all the windows down.

"Hey, girl!"

"Girl, come here!" She walked over the sand, back onto the pavement, and up to the car windows.

"Girl, get in. You wanna ride? We'll take you home. You can't walk at night. Truck drivers, girl. Truck drivers are rapists." She looked into the car. It was full of twenty-somethings, the same age as Shane. They looked like him. Smelled like him.

"Do you know Shane Green?" she asked. The boys looked at each other.

"I did. Why?"

"He's my brother", she said, refusing to use the past tense as they did.

Five minutes after that she was home. They'd been friends with Shane. They'd gone searching when he'd gone missing, door knocking, poking sticks into the river. The conversation faltered. One of the boys shut the door behind her and the car pulled away. She looked up at her family home. The safety light was on out the front, and nightlights were glowing in the kids' rooms.

A year passed. Katherine worked at the pet store and came home to sleep and wash her clothes, sometimes to eat dinner with a family that looked different to what she remembered. She had younger siblings, a boy and girl, four and six. She was as kind as she could be to them.

When they waved at her from the table where the youngest was strapped in, she forced herself to sit with them, to lean over and cut up their fish fingers.

Her mother spoke. “Katherine, Richard and I were thinking that it might be nice if you had room to park your car in the garage, so you don’t need to unfreeze your windscreen in the mornings.”

Shane’s stuff was in the garage. After the police had let everything sit at his single unit for a month, they had let her mum and stepdad in to pick it all up. There wasn’t a lot, a dirt bike he’d kept in the lounge, a small stack of books by the toilet, clothes and some soap. The soap had a hair on it. It had all been in the garage ever since.

“Well, yeah,” Katherine said. “You should’ve gotten rid of it all ages ago.”

Her mother’s eyes welled with tears. Katherine had seen visible rising hope in her face that Katherine might argue for Shane’s return, argue that he was alive somewhere and just taking his time to come back. The look on her mum’s face was naked and infuriating to Katherine. Katherine’s own hope was selfish. She did not want to share it.

“He obviously doesn’t fucking want it, Mum.” She made the ‘Mum’ sound like a rapier, slid it deftly in between the lungs.

“Hey, well, hey now…” started her stepfather. It was the ridiculousness of his interjection that made her stop. That and his small children sitting in their seats, chins level with the table, big buggy eyes staring at her. Shane, if he was a ghost, stared at her too. Katherine, the older sister.

She saved them all the awkwardness and packed up her own stuff and moved into a single flat on the other side of town, with a view of the grey water. She couldn't be anywhere near the decisions that would have to happen. What to keep, what to sell. Couldn't watch some young local kid from the window while he passed over money and loaded her brother's dirt bike onto his father's truck.

Katherine's new flat was close enough that she could walk to work. Sometimes she saw the car that had taken her home after babysitting, full of Shane's friends. Every time she saw it she thought of Shane in his car, which they'd found still neatly parked in his driveway, empty. She thought of him as a twenty-something pulling up next to her, Katherine shuffling in her uniform with her friends, bending the planks of her sandals under her toes with each step for something to do. *Get in shithead, I'll give you a ride home from school.*

Another year. It would be his 30th birthday. To celebrate Katherine drank too much on top of her pills at a co-worker's party and fell all the way from the top outside stair to the bottom. As she lay there she imagined Shane at parties, hitting on girls. He should have been good at it. He had been kind to his baby sister. She lay and thought about ditches. Concrete in peoples' backyards with other people under them. Anywhere that he could be.

A couple of white, white legs walked into view. Katherine could see right up the girl's skirt.

"What are you doing?"

"Resting", Katherine said.

The girl squatted down, skirt hanging open. She didn't seem to care, didn't realise the moonlight picked out her skin like crystal.

Katherine sat up. The girl held out a joint.

They ended up at the lakefront, sitting on the edge of the lookout. The girl's name was Melissa.

"Your brother's gone."

Melissa wasn't telling her this, she was just checking she had the right person. Katherine didn't know what to say. The girl hadn't said dead, or missing, just gone. He wasn't anything definable, he was just not there anymore.

Melissa didn't seem in a hurry to go anywhere. They sat looking out at the lake. Small crests of water jostled in the lights from town, stirred up by something underneath. Melissa kicked her legs softly. Katherine looked at her. She had a round face, white and balloonish. She had short black hair. Her skin was very pale, and her arms and legs were puffed, somehow dainty. Katherine thought of Snow White, but fatter. When Katherine spoke to her Melissa looked down and nodded often, as if agreeing with herself. She seemed centred, hard to unbalance. She wore a skirt. Sensible shoes. Red lipstick.

The water pulled back from the shore and came in again. Katherine felt sober and tired. "I have to go", she said.

"Hold on" Melissa stood up, surveyed Katherine. "Here." She pulled a cheap deodorising spray from her handbag and sprayed Katherine from top to toe with it. Strangely, Katherine felt better.

A month later, Katherine watched as Melissa, sweating and grunting, hauled her opponent under her. Clamped her with her thighs. Put an arm over the back of her neck. The referee stopped them, and Melissa rolled off, panting. She competed in wrestling and Katherine often came along to watch her bend people. It could have looked comical, but Melissa was in earnest, as she was about everything. Katherine was grateful for Melissa's strangeness. It soothed her. Shane could even be alive in a world so strange.

They spent weekends together, usually stopping by parties of people they hardly knew. Melissa was striking in her unnatural dumpiness. People looked when they entered a room together. Katherine scanned every face for her brother. When Melissa got her learner's licence she drove Katherine to Rotorua the very same day, crunching through the gears. From then they went somewhere new whenever they could. Katherine spent the time looking out the window.

Shane's friends still went past from time to time in their car. They were the same age as her brother would have been, could be. The two tenses were habit now whenever Katherine thought of Shane. Would have been, could still be. Two Shanes. One dead, one alive. Years of two Shanes made Katherine feel tired. She stopped throwing herself downstairs and in with strangers. She found a boyfriend through Melissa's wrestling club, and she watched them both

at tournaments, rising through the ranks each year. Her boyfriend was calm and strong and his conversations rested easy on her. Katherine began to stay in. Melissa went on longer and longer drives without Katherine and then eventually she just didn't come back. Katherine knew she was fine. Nothing could uncentre that gnome.

Katherine and her boyfriend moved to Wellington and lived there for six years, nearly long enough to expect to get married. But they'd run out of easy things to say and he had been the one to end it. "We need to break up", he'd said. Not "we need a break", or, "we need to talk", just… we need to break up.

There was nowhere to go from there. He'd gone back to Taupo. Katherine, so used to feeling the least in their relationship, felt this. But she had a prescription that never ran out.

Months later, at a bar, a woman detached herself from a loud group of people and followed Katherine into the bathroom.

At the sink Katherine watched the woman come in and approach her own reflection, while water coursed down her hands. The woman whispered something at herself in the mirror. She had thick black eyelashes weighing down the top lids. Katherine watched her.

Her reflection smiled, small teeth everywhere. "You shouldn't wear jeans without heels unless you want to look stumpy, Katherine" she said. She stared at her in the mirror. Then with the grab of a purse and a rush of perfumed air she was gone. Katherine followed the woman out onto the street.

Of course it was Melissa. Katherine hadn't recognised her at first, not used to seeing her in a pencil skirt. Her muscles ballooned up under it. They had dinner. Melissa said she'd looked for Shane. She'd followed a group in Tokoroa who had claimed to kill a guy but he'd turned out to be someone different. She'd even let herself into one of the halfway houses in Wellington, peered at the people sleeping on the dirt. She seemed to want to prove she'd always looked for Shane — that she, like Katherine, believed he was missing. Katherine noted that.

When they did find him it was 2017. Melissa and Katherine had a small unit in Wellington with soft white furniture and cross stitch on the walls. Melissa hadn't broached the subject of a relationship with Katherine yet, but Katherine knew it was coming. She would likely say yes. Melissa was still a wrestler. Absurd. Hard to lose.

The police had been looking for a teenage couple who had gone missing near the Acacia Bay cliffs and they'd sent divers into the lake. No one had thought to go into the water for Shane before because it would have been such a long walk for him to make from his house alone.

They'd found the teenagers hiding in a garage at one of their friend's houses. Katherine fantasised about making a swap, putting the teenagers in the lake to find Shane alive in a garage with a girlfriend. How nice if he'd had a girlfriend, instead of driving around by himself, visiting his family so regularly, knowing which medication to ask for. Her feelings were hurt with the proof of it. *If you do that again you may as well take the rest of us with you.* The phone rang. It was Katherine's own baby sister. Yes, she would come home for the funeral. Yes, she'd

bring Melissa. She thought about Shane on his walk, bundled up against the cold. After she hung up Katherine checked Shane's old address, took a tranquiliser, packed a warm scarf for the lake air. It would be windy.

Sisters

"They leech the calcium from your bones, you know," said Meg, edging the car into the slow vehicle lane. A silver ute slid past. Tilly, in the front seat, nodded.

The three sisters were on their way to Wellington for Tilly's abortion. Matt, Tilly's fiance, had wanted to come with them, but the girls had said no. He'd been on and off the fence about the whole thing. Wishy washy. Tilly told them he'd accepted that she'd never wanted kids, that she'd been on birth control. He'd told her it was okay. On the other hand, he got drunk with the boys after work on Fridays and sent her 9pm messages like *would been cool though. A mini-us running around.* After Tilly told Meg about the messages, Meg had called Ainsley. They'd both organised the time off work.

When they picked Tilly up Matt didn't come to the front door.

So what? Thought Meg. But she knew she felt defensive. Had they been too quick to whip Tilly off into the car? It was no secret their family could be a little… exclusionary. But of the three, Tilly was probably the most tolerant of children, the only one who had liked babysitting, who kept her friends after they'd had babies, made the effort to go and see them or invite them around, kids and all.

"I'm pregnant", Tilly had said to Meg. She'd laughed a little after she said it, like *oh fuck I know right*, but her eyes were full of tears. Meg had chosen her next words as carefully as footsteps through virgin snow.

"Ah. Shit. What do you...?"

"I don't know yet."

"Have you told Matt?"

"Yeah. He's happy but also knows I might not..."

"How long have you got to decide?"

"Not long. A month or so."

Meg thought of her ex fiancé. His parents had had beautiful cats, Siamese. She thought of how he'd told her he wanted kids, all of a sudden. How he'd threatened to leave without them. She'd called their mother, not dead yet, asked her all the questions she could think of.

Meg had drawn up a contract of sorts. *I will have kids if I can have two weeks off a year. If I can take them to my mum's anytime I like. If I can still work. If I am allowed to make jokes about them. If I am allowed to have kid-free days. If I don't have to take them grocery shopping. If you never call me a bad mother.*

She'd written it, in a letter. It had taken her a week. She'd meant it. Given it to him. Remembering that, Meg felt guilty for only reacting to Tilly with shock instead of excitement. She had been so close herself to trying out a normal life.

He'd read it and replied, in a letter of his own.

You know, you want all these things. To settle down. Get married. Have kids. I want to travel.

"What a shithead!" Tilly had crowed, laughing, when Meg turned up on her doorstep. "He was just looking for a reason to leave you!"

After he'd left her the girls had spent their first Christmas in ages together without having to tone it down for anyone. They didn't need anyone else. They drank wine and toasted their parents and laughed loudly at the mean things that had happened in the world and their

ugly cats zipping across the lawn. Three little girls sitting in front of the fire with long hair drying down their backs waiting for their parents to brush it now sat in lawn chairs without their parents and tied back their hair into knotty ponytails and did not need to let anyone else in.

Their mother had always been off to the SPCA to choose the ugliest and oldest cats. She'd give them a nice home for a few years then put them down. The girls grew up to do the same. They had ugly cats buried all over their yards. There was satisfaction in a clear end in a calm place with clean walls and kind people. "Our family just loves putting down animals", Meg had said to her ex once, laughing.

"Your family is all fucked in the head", he'd said.

His family had had formal Christmases, the siblings all polite to each other over chokingly thick trifle, harriedly making plates to try and cajole into their kids' mouths and making sweet suggestions to their own parents, who were getting on in age. All pretending Christmas was a special time once a year, that the world wouldn't swallow them all up. That they could count on each other no matter what.

Tilly had decided not to keep it. It was the only decision really, but it was hardest for her. She'd really thought about it. She'd brought down from the attic boxes of baby clothes their mother had left them, touched the wool with her fingers. She'd read articles. Talked to current mothers, who struggled in laden with baby carriers and gripping the arms of toddlers. Meg, living in Tilly's spare room *(what right do I have to discuss this, the sour bitch in the back room?)* had heard a lot of the conversations.

"You won't regret it," they said.

"It's different when it's your own." they said.

Meanwhile the babies screamed. The older children ran in and out, touching things.

"You think you do, but you don't really know love until you've seen your own child," one said.

Meg tore that one apart so much after the mother left that even she recognised she was offended, overdoing it, nearly in tears. *Don't know love.*

In the end the extra research, the touching of soft wool, made Tilly cry so much in the doctor's offices that they signed her off immediately. The crying convinced Matt too, for the most part. Even with his careful support for her decision Tilly still threatened to leave him often, sometimes screaming, in the weeks leading up to the appointment. In the end he surrendered her up to her sisters.

They'd split the trip into two sections, Taupo to Taihape, Taihape to Wellington. When they got out of the car in Taihape, Meg saw the beginnings of a swell in Tilly's T-shirt.

Give me a pizza, she thought. *I'll have the same.*

The hotel was calming. Tilly and Meg had both been hotel cleaners, although when they were at the same hotel they were hardly ever allowed to work together because they used to throw pillows at each other and make themselves cups of milo in the rooms.

These bedspreads were pink and orange. The girls pulled towels from the bathroom to lie down on top of the spreads. They knew how rarely they were washed. Ainsley put the kettle on and started calling out the names of the teas.

"Fuck it," said Tilly, getting up. "I'm having a drink." She clattered the car keys off the table and into her hand. She stared at her sisters. Meg went with Tilly. Ainsley stayed behind to

have a bath. They stopped at a Thai restaurant and got Ainsley, a vegan, a tofu dish. Then they went to McDonald's and picked up a family pack for the two of them, laughing at the four cokes, and went to the liquor store. Tilly was going to get a cask but Meg worked full time so she bought them three bottles of a nicer wine instead, a bottle each.

"It's just cells," said Ainsley, when they got back. The three of them sat around the small round glass table in their red upholstered hotel chairs. Ainsley didn't usually drink. But she poured one for herself. They didn't clink glasses, but they all finished their first mouthful together.

When Tilly started crying it wasn't even about the baby. She'd been scrolling on Facebook while they ate and caught a video on veal calves, birthed into nets so they didn't spoil their jelly texture by taking a first step.

Ainsley, who had seen the videos all before, gave Tilly a hair tie. Tilly sat on the lid of the toilet and cried.

"I ate McDonald's," she said. Meg hid a smile.

"Spew if you need to," Ainsley said.

Meg wondered if she should tell Tilly that she could back out. They wouldn't say anything. They'd be kind to the kid.

"You know what I'd love to do?" said Ainsley, breathlessly. "You know those anti-abortion people? The ones who stand outside?" Tilly looked up. "I'd love to throw some abortions at them."

Tilly slid off the toilet seat. They fell about laughing. Meg imagined how hard, how horrible they would look to anyone else.

The next morning they woke up early.

“Do you feel okay?” Meg asked, mindful now of not being *too h*ard.

“Yeah. I do. I feel a bit bad about that wine-”

“Oh my god I’ve seen people drink more than that and they know they’re keeping them,” said Ainsley.

“And all the ones who try to kill it *with* alcohol,” said Meg, thinking of a young girl she’d met at a bonfire, who’d told her she’d drink until it died. Meg saw her around sometimes, kids in tow.

“At least you’re doing it properly,” she finished.

“Yeah,” said Tilly. “And it wasn’t even a whole bottle.”

They were silent. Tilly looked as if she was about to say something else, but didn’t.

When they got to the clinic the process got them in and out quickly. The nurses were all cheerful. One of them wore a black surgical cap with bright red chillies on it. They pattered while they pierced, touched Tilly’s arms, her back, walked with her down the hallway. Meg and Ainsley waited. Meg kept thinking of Ainsley’s horrible joke about throwing abortions and smiling, that painful ghoul smile that you cannot stop.

Forty-five minutes later they were in the car.

“What was it like?” Ainsley asked.

“It was okay,” said Tilly. “Better than I thought.”

“Did anyone say anything mean?” Asked Meg.

“Nah. They had to ask if I was sure. But that was it.”

“Is it you know, really sore?” Asked Ainsley.

"Kind-of. They gave me a giant pad." Tilly laughed.

Meg nodded. What could a child do, alone, without siblings or parents to watch over them? They would not risk finding out.

"I did ask the nurse though, where they put them," said Tilly, needing to say it. "I asked if you know, they go in the rubbish bin."

"Do they?"

"Nah. She said they cremate them. They're treated with respect. You know."

"That's good." Said Meg.

Ainsley was driving now. She whipped around corners, passed other cars at 140. She went faster and faster. Her sisters let her. It was just how she drove.

They stopped at the same hotel, drank a shitload. They all felt lighter. Tilly didn't cry.

Tilly felt a lot better the next day, and she drove them to Taupo. She drove as if the road was inconsequential. She didn't once speed or slow down. They stopped at another McDonald's and parked up at the lake, where the boy racers used to sit idling. Tilly parked like shit, as usual. She wound her window part way down, stretched back on her seat with her sunglasses covering most of her face, held fries out the gap in the window. Sparrows flew up and took them from her fingers.

"Would you guys have ever considered it?" Asked Tilly. "Keeping it?"

"Nah." Said Ainsley.

"Nah." Said Tilly.

Meg wondered if Matt would stay with Tilly, or would keep looking at her empty belly.

Ah well. It was done now. The three sisters wound up their windows, drove away.

Winter Fires

The bartender, better dressed than Elizabeth, looked at her expectantly while she ordered. The bar itself had green walls - plants growing from little pockets all the way up to the ceiling. Elizabeth felt pastel, dowdy. Business after five. The tables were full of men and women in suits. Their neck ties were already loosened and the women sat on the stools with their heels hanging half off their feet, tanned calf muscles pulsing. Elizabeth found Harry at one of those tables, his face already pink. She was pleased he had invited her. The girl next to Harry moved her stool so Elizabeth could perch next to him.

"I've left the car at the office again. You don't mind..?"

Of course she didn't. Elizabeth sat back on her stool and nursed her gin and tonic.

The topics of their conversations had nothing to do with her. The women were uncouth, they swore and looked beautiful and racy doing it. They oozed the power they expected to come into.

"Better get off," Harry said to the table presently. He rolled his eyes over at Elizabeth, a skittish horse.

Elizabeth didn't think that was fair, but she *was* hungry. She always felt uncomfortable ordering food at these gatherings, where the young businesswomen threw back their pints of beer in their ivory blouses with tight belts and ignored any food on the table.

Harry waited in the car while Elizabeth did groceries. She hesitated at the fresh produce section and then, on a whim, bought strawberries. She hummed as she bought chocolate drops.

"Look," Harry said, as soon as she'd finished her last mouthful of chicken breast and broad beans. "I've been thinking about what you said - about the trip." Elizabeth had been bored, researching trips to Greece, to Europe. She had gotten excited, imagining them sitting at an Opera in Venice. Her heart leapt.

"Look. it's just not going to fit."

I know, it's okay, thought Elizabeth. *Stop there.*

"Because I want you to go. You should go. I think we should put things on hold."

Elizabeth began to cry. She wished she had never mentioned Greece.

"Look. I think you should go to your mother's for a couple days."

Again with the *look*. He was treating her like a hard sell.

"What about your car?" she said at the door, hoping.

"What? Oh, I'll get an uber," he said. He wasn't even looking at her anymore.

When Elizabeth got in her car she realised the chocolate strawberries were cooling in the fridge. He would open it later and find them. She drove through swimming lights.

She couldn't go to her mother's. "Your sister is doing *so* well", she'd said, multiple times, to Katrina.

Elizabeth headed out on the highway.

Katrina lived up a 30 minute gravel driveway. Elizabeth had to stop twice and tuck her long skirt into her underwear to give her both hands to lift the latches on the stock gates. Mud coated her soft ballet slipper shoes. When she walked into Katrina's house it smelled like a den. Katrina wasn't home, she never locked her house. Elizabeth tried to light the fire but it sputtered and

died. She rooted through Katrina's drawers for some fleece, pulling it on over her work clothes (how long ago that seemed now), and looked in the freezer in the shed. Mutton. She hauled out a leg and put it in the oven. She sat on the couch. One of the dogs snuffled at the door and then nosed his way inside. An old work dog. They stunk. Ordinarily Elizabeth would have ordered him out, but now she just bumped herself from the couch onto the floor and held out her arms.

"Yuck", said Katrina, from the doorway. Her quad had roared up to the house, dogs on the back jumping on and off and yipping in excitement, for the ride, for red meat, for the lights being on in the house. The dog inside stiffened and rolled onto his back, hoping to be allowed to stay. Katrina stared at him with her lip raised. She did not mention Elizabeth's arrival.

Katrina went out the back to feed and kennel her dogs, leaving the mutt inside for Elizabeth. She came back in carrying a plastic milk bottle.

"Tried to light the fire huh?"

Elizabeth smiled. When they were children their firewood was always damp, always cheap or chopped too late in the season. The only way to get it to start was to melt something over the wood, something toxic like rags, towels, jandals, milk bottles. They knew how to get warm. Katrina laid the fire and set about the task of melting the milk bottle over top. The smell of plastic filled the lounge and the kindling, coated in thick bubbles, began to catch.

By the time they'd cooked the potatoes and pulled the roast steaming from the oven the house was sweltering. They ate until their bellies swelled over their fleece pants.

In the morning the frost had set in and cold water ran down the insides of the walls. To save sitting around cold all day, Elizabeth dressed and joined Katrina feeding the dogs. As Elizabeth lifted the sack of feed a rat leapt out of the top and ran down her arm, its fat body

heaving. Katrina laughed and laughed. Then she kicked one of the dogs, which had nosed too close.

They went grocery shopping. Elizabeth did not have money. Her job did not pay well, and she spent most of what she earned. They cruised the aisles, buying eggs, bread, margarine, cheese, milk. At the last moment Elizabeth threw in a bag of carrots, in an attempt to be healthy. Shopping like this was going back to easier times. No having to decide what to cook each night, keeping it fresh and interesting, considering how to keep nutritionally balanced. The girls ate eggs on toast or cheese toasties during the day and mutton, potatoes, and carrots at night. They drank instant coffee. At night Elizabeth sat and looked forward to her first coffee of the next day.

They watched television. Movies played end on end. During the work week Elizabeth straddled the back of the quad with the dogs leaning up against her, Katrina roaring through wet grass straight at cows who stood and watched her come. Elizabeth closed her eyes, but the cows always moved, suddenly kicking their back legs out at the quad and dancing away.

Sometimes Katrina leaned over the top of the quad and slapped them. “Move it move it for god’s sake! The gate is right there, you idiots!” The cows would run a few metres, stop, look back at them. The dogs squealed to be let off. But no dogs among the cows, who were pregnant and only wanted to watch the two curious skinny girls leaning out and waving their arms and shouting horrific curses at them, both sides enjoying the waving and the swearing as a break from their routines of quietude.

How could life have gotten so difficult? Elizabeth wondered.

She woke up to a scratching on the fifth night. *Scritch scritch*, next to her chest of drawers. The sound of first nails, then teeth, against wood. The rats were starting to eat their way up through the floors. She considered pretending she did not recognise this phenomenon, then went to the kitchen, got an aluminium tray, laid it over the hole. Katrina nodded at it as she walked past. “I’ll get some bait from the shed”, she said.

Harry called on the 6th day. He just wanted to know where to drop her stuff.

One of Katrina’s dogs had a seizure and died. She brought it home wrapped in a blanket. They took the ute up the highest part of the farm, looking out over the paddocks, the sheds, the pine, the lake. The sun shone cleanly, the air up on the hill was cold. Elizabeth and Katrina dug a hole, warming up quickly, stopping to drink beer between shovelfuls of dirt. Elizabeth told Katrina how the businesswomen drank pints of beer, holding them in their smooth hands with pink nails. Katrina shook her head in disbelief. The girls were dirty and sweating in baggy T-shirts, swallowing from their bottles for thirst and heat and pain, dropping tears onto the blanket where the dog’s feet and the tip of his nose hung out.

The sun dropped and they sat with the mutt, underground and packaged up now in dirt, the girls wrapped up in his old blanket, drinking. Stars came out before the sun was completely done and then just kept coming, an overwhelming number of pinpricks pressing down on them. The stags started to roar, closer and closer, their guttural howls working up the girls’ spines, women squatting before great fires, feeding the flames against the noises in the dark.

Gender, Class, and the New Zealand Short Story

New Zealand's literary criticism is lagging behind its fiction in its attention to contemporary representations of New Zealand class-based societal structure. There is evidence of class and implications of class in New Zealand fiction, but less attention is paid to these factors in analysis of this fiction. Terry Eagleton in *Why Marx was Right* posits that the declining attention to class in social criticism is not due to the fact that the problem is disappearing, but rather that those concerned about it are admitting defeat. Despite the evidence of a growing wealth gap where "inequalities of wealth have dramatically deepened", Eagleton suggests that criticism of class is declining as a result of the "growing conviction that the regime [is] simply too hard to crack" (5). The decrease in attention to class in New Zealand literary criticism is perhaps a symptom of a general felt consensus that, in accordance with Eagleton's suggestion, class is simply a lost cause. In "Revisiting 'Fiction and the Social Pattern' in the Era of Social Death: Materialising Recent New Zealand History", Jennifer Lawn suggests that an analysis of New Zealand fiction needs to consider many factors to gain the best insights, including a discussion of how "claims of culture, society and economy may be rebalanced in the reading of contemporary New Zealand literature" (98). She asks, "What insights might be gained by injecting a revised understanding of class consciousness and social alienation – or its felt absence in some important literary texts – into the terms of literary analysis?" (98). Lawn is suggesting that criticism needs to account for social patterns of class and power in analysis of New Zealand fiction, explaining that while a "vein of New Zealand literature itself is demanding attention to

the spheres of labour, money [etc]", the "everyday life of our current times… seems curiously under-observed in New Zealand's hyperopic critical lens" (112, 113).

In the fiction of Alice Tawhai and Tracey Slaughter attention is drawn to intersecting facets of identity through specific detail and form to explore the apparent hopelessness of precarity in New Zealand. Intersections of gender, culture and class limit the options and hope of the characters in the short stories "50 ways to meet your lover" and ".22" by Tracey Slaughter, and "Pale Flower" and "Roses are Red" by Alice Tawhai. Analysis of the ways Slaughter and Tawhai craft setting, character relationships, and voice, demonstrate that the compounding of class by gender and culture can influence characters' self worth, perception, and actions. The female narrators in "50 ways to meet your lover" and "Pale Flower" accept unequal treatment in romantic relationships due to intersecting parts of their identity that serve to diminish their sense of self-worth and to limit their perception of options that are available to them. In ".22" and "Roses are Red", intersections of identity serve to show how female characters may not seek assistance for abuse, including hints that those characters are likely not to receive support in these settings, increasing their sense of hopelessness in the precariat. Slaughter and Tawhai's fiction also portray how the limited power of some characters has them seek to assert power over others, and how perception of others influences power, by having it grow or diminish depending on the settings used.

In her thesis "Growing Upwards: Parenting styles, class and class mobility" Louise Holland explains that class is a "very general - and at the same time complex - concept, which encompasses a broad range of resources, and behaviours which are linked to these resources, in the context of groups within society" (4). She references Blau and Duncan who state that

"class differences come to rest primarily on occupational positions and the economic advantages and powers associated with them" (24). One's occupation and access to resources is a determiner of economic power, which in turn can open up avenues of social power. Having the better access to resources (be these physical or in the form of opportunities and connections) means being in a more dominant group of society with the power to oppress others through resource availability. Other factors relevant to class include the connections, group status, and various social and political opportunities that economic power brings, creating a self-perpetuating loop of resources and power.

Groot et al in *Precarity* define the lower class as the precariat, (a term I will be using interchangeably with the lower or working class), a three-dimensional construct:

> First, its members have insecure employment; that is, they are in and out of jobs often, failing to secure long term contracts. They are, as a result, habituated to a life of unstable labour and unstable living. Second, its members rely on money from wages that are flexible, rather than from wealth or enterprise-based incomes. They thus experience chronic income insecurity on top of their employment insecurity. Third, its members have fewer civil, cultural, social, political and economic rights, which translates into limited access to rights-based state benefits… This combination tends to induce a sense of relative deprivation and a consciousness of loss. (29)

The above description of the uncertain financial conditions of this class explains why the term precariat is used, in that the work, quality of life, and rights within it are all unstable. Groot et al go on to state that the precariat in New Zealand is "overrepresented by females, younger age groups, those with low or no qualifications, and those with low incomes". They warn that "with

few material resources and little opportunity for upward mobility, for many young New Zealanders the stage has been set for a lifetime of precarity" (35). This is echoed by Robert Wade, in Melissa Kennedy's "Maori Economic Inequality: Reading Outside Our Comfort Zone", who states, "the success of some is at the expense of others, and access to education and work is to a large extent predetermined by social class and background" (qtd in Kennedy 1019). Thus, many of those born in the precariat can expect to remain in the precariat, a situation which has a profound effect on hope.

Intersectionality posits that different facets of one's biology and situation compose not only one's identity but the amount of power one may wield in interpersonal relationships. It is an intersection of culture, class, gender, among other factors, that determines and demonstrates both one's identity and the groups one fits into (and, perhaps more tellingly, does *not* fit into) in society (Holvino 249). Intersectionality implies that one can be in some dominant groups but simultaneously subordinate in others. In "Simultaneity of Race, Gender and Class" Evangelina Holvino describes intersectionality as a "a kind of belonging and not belonging, a 'both/and' orientation". Her description in this passage is intended to convey the unique position of women of colour in the field of feminism (249). In different contexts, different parts of one's intersecting identity can become more salient; thus one's environment can determine their power in certain relationships, and consequently their sense of self-worth in differing environments. Holvino explains, "race, gender and class produce and reproduce particular identities that define how individuals come to see themselves and how others see them" (262).

Intersectionality has drawn criticism as a concept according to Sara Salem in "Intersectionality and its discontents: Intersectionality as traveling theory", due to its lack of a "precise definition" (403); and to concerns that it has changed from its roots in Black Feminism. In its travel to Britain and Europe, the term has come to "speak of 'diversity'... instead of power relations or domination" (406). The risk of this transformation is that intersectionality may shed some of its original aim of identifying power relationships. Instead, it has been used at times to discuss complex identities without acknowledging the power relations and conflicts of each facet of these identities. Being Pākehā and using intersectionality as a theory also runs the risk of considering the cultural imbalance of power within New Zealand *from* a position of power, when this consideration would be most relevant and beneficial coming from a Māori critic. Erel et al outline this risk, stating "where the concept of intersectionality is used and race is included as an intersection, the understanding of race can often be Eurocentric and thus exclusionary" (qtd in Salem 407). Despite the potential pitfalls of intersectionality as a concept, Salem finds solid theoretical value in the term: "intersectionality can be an extremely useful concept if it addresses relationships of power" (415). Some analyses of intersectionality go further to posit class as "co-constitutive of race, gender and other social categories so that none of those can be spoken about as a completely separate category" (408). While acknowledging the risks of intersectionality as a concept, I intend to use intersectionality as a tool to determine where the impact of class is compounded by the impacts or inequalities of other identity based groups such as gender and culture. I believe the theory will enable me to point out the relationships of power and inequality within the texts if used according to its original aims. Salem states this perhaps most simply: "which women are affected in which ways?" (410).

New Zealand is a bicultural country and yet one culture wields considerably more power than another. Colonisation and unfair, inaccurate interpretations of the Treaty of Waitangi have served to strip power from Māori, and as a result, Ella Henry and Hone Pene explain in "*Kaupapa Maori*: Locating Indigenous Ontology, Epistemology and Methodology in the Academy", Māori are now forced to try and contend in a society that is not based on their values, is inherently racist, and is unwilling to change structurally to enable Māori success (Henry & Pene 235). Robert and Joanna Consedine write, "the true value of the overwhelming transfer of wealth from Māori to settler society over the past 165 years is impossible to calculate" (5). It is little wonder in the face of these factors that Māori are "disproportionately affected by poverty, precarity and social indicators including unemployment, educational achievement, health and morbidity" (Kennedy 1011). If intersectionality was originally intended to show the unequal power relationships in society, then focusing on Māori culture as a facet of identity shows that culture can indeed co-constitute class. This is due to the difference in availability of opportunities or fair playing field available to non-dominant cultures and the impact this has on economic advantages.

Kennedy further shows concern that talking about Māori literature as purely a cultural facet of identity does not adequately address the frequent detail of poverty and inequality that goes into Māori fiction. She states, "in order to 'close the gap', literary critique must resist retreating into claims of Māori cultural specificity and instead name all poverty and inequality as injustice" (1014). This echoes Salem's statement that intersectionality must be used to address issues of power imbalance. Addressing such fiction as only cultural ignores an opportunity to pay attention to issues of class and the prevalence of low opportunities and low

resources within Māori literature. Kennedy further considers the prevalence of "various markers of poverty...hunger, lack of clothing, shoes, food and school materials, substandard accommodation, broken families and children left alone" in New Zealand Māori fiction that "significantly shifts the question of 'what is Māori writing' away from a question of a writer's connection with Māori culture and the Māori life-world he or she creates, to one of a set of unfavourable economic factors" (1015). Intersectionality can be used as a tool to see where culture has been compounded by class to "approach the glaring evidence in Māori fiction of inequality and poverty" (1024). I believe an analysis of New Zealand fiction that pays attention to culture, class and gender as intersecting and at times compounding facets of identity is necessary to begin to bring recognition to "the injustice of social and economic exclusion which continues to feed the marginalization, discrimination, and racism in New Zealand" (1024). In analysing fiction by Alice Tawhai, a Māori author, and referencing Māori culture as an intersection with class that can be identified in fiction, it is important for a Pakeha researcher to address the fiction and culture in a way that doesn't appropriate or assume complete knowledge about kaupapa Māori, avoiding the pitfall of using Māori culture in such ways as to "disempower, objectify, and further alienate Māori from...aspirations for self determination" (240). Instead I intend to use the research to highlight the implications of inequality and draw attention to the effects that intersections of culture and class have on the power of characters in New Zealand fiction.

Intersections of class, gender and culture are all identifiable in the fiction of Alice Tawhai and Tracey Slaughter and show the impacts intersecting parts of identity have on power in relationships within and outside of differing groups, which in turn influence the characters'

options and hope within their settings. These broad impacts on options and hope break down further in these works into a lack of self-worth for characters, acceptance of unequal relationships, at times acceptance of emotional and physical abuse, and an inability to believe in help or hope for escaping one's circumstances.

A focusing point for identifying power in the texts of Tawhai and Slaughter is found in Lawn's set of key questions:

> What is the cast of characters in this set of novels; what is the social scale; how do objects, affects and people circulate; who and what are the typical subjects and objects of actions; how does a sense of a collective coalesce or deform in this work; how are political figures and events represented; what are the channels and obstacles of social energy…? (115)

Lawn's questions when applied to the stories of Slaughter and Tawhai bring the characters' intersecting parts of identity into focus to show that the power imbalance associated with social class in these stories is often heightened by gender and/or culture. Sometimes this inequality is accepted by the characters in the text, sometimes it is resisted. In each story there is a dissatisfaction of the narrator or characters with their own situations, a recognition of the power of others as compared to their own as a result of an intersection of class, gender and culture, and a feeling of hopelessness for escaping the situation. This hopelessness portrayed in each story calls to mind Eagleton and Groot's theories about the precariat: economic inequality has a profoundly negative effect on hope, either in ability to change the system, or being able to escape the precariat as it stands.

"50 ways to meet your lover" by Tracey Slaughter is a narrative composed of 22 scenes with numbers skipped between them. 28 of the 50 "ways to meet your lover" are missing, implying the full story has not been rendered on the page. The 22 scenes which *do* comprise the story come together to form a narrative that explores the balance of power between a female motel cleaner who becomes a mistress to a male manager of a higher class. The language, actions, perception and shame of the narrator highlight how the intersection of her gender and class compound each other to lessen her power and diminish her self-perception. The story follows the female narrator in second person voice, as she recounts how "you" feel and act when "you" are shown attention by a male character of a higher class. This unnamed protagonist participates in an affair with the married male character and struggles with her sense of self-worth throughout. She is aware of the imbalance of power in the relationship, of being used and treated unequally, but nonetheless accepts the relationship on these terms. Her shame at this imbalance prompts the narrator to select details from her life, focusing on class signifiers, which explain this imbalance of power in self degrading and self-blaming ways. The narrator's language, relationship, self perception, and shame are all used to show her class and the perceptions of her class by others and herself.

The language of the narrator in Slaughter's "50 ways to meet your lover" is brutally casual and emotionless, and this style suggests that one in her situation does not have the luxury of being emotional, of holding others to account for their feelings. She speaks in second person voice, in an attempt perhaps to distance herself from her actions and role within the story, of which she is ashamed. The narrator is not prone to flights of fancy or explaining away her actions; instead she deals with the painful facts in short sentences: "He has to knock,

although he has a key. You have to say no, you've changed your mind...Then open the door to him after all" (133-134). The way the narrator speaks about her actions shows a self-recognition of her role in the affair and no attempt to hide it, although this brutality also serves as defensiveness. If she judges herself with her harsh language, no one else will have to. The narrator also understands that her language and her treatment of her actions show her class. When she is feeling rejected or vulnerable she states, "so you chug vodka" (139), showing firstly a lack of regard for her own health, and the use of "chug" implies a sort of desperation to dull feelings, to beat the recognition of her situation. The narrator's attempt to dull the feeling of her situation rather than change it relates to Eagleton and Groot's points about class, firstly that it is a system that is impossible to change, and secondly that she can likely expect to stay in her class. The use of vodka to dull feelings implies a lack of support from other areas of the narrator's life, and the prevalence of drugs and alcohol referenced by Kennedy can be used as evidence of poverty and inequality in fiction.

Throughout the story it is implied that other characters perceive that the narrator possesses less power than them due to an intersection of her class and gender; and they act differently toward her as a result. The narrator is sensitive to this possible perception from other characters, as their perception of her is in keeping with her perception of herself. She references her appearance throughout the text in a way that implies she knows that she looks like she belongs to the precariat. Slaughter writes, "you'll bung your hair in a ponytail, where it will wobble around, unwashed" (137). The narrator knows she looks like she has given up on her appearance. She suggests that if the relationship with the higher class manager were more equal, she may look better: "you try not to look at the still life of your face. If he had chosen

you, you would have had a different one" (137). Being chosen in this instance is about being chosen as an equal and able to share in the benefits of joining the higher class through a relationship, not the participant of an affair where she is kept secret and, as a result, kept locked in the precariat.

In keeping with the narrator's sensitivity to the perceptions of other characters on her class and gender, she is defensive about her job as a motel cleaner and the perceptions of other characters as a result of her job. Slaughter writes, "someone's complained they lost their wallet - bitch at the office eyeballs you like you're suspect. What the fuck *ever*" (140). Her noting of the reactions of others implies this narrator is aware of what she looks like and how people perceive her differently - as being casual, as being untrustworthy, and as being likely to submit to their will. At the same time, she attempts to resist these perceptions, perhaps while simultaneously recognising how hopeless it is to do so. Part of this hopelessness likely comes from the narrator's negative perceptions of herself, which trap her into believing other characters must be thinking the same.

In "50 ways to meet your lover", the narrator's belief in her visible lack of power is captured in her actions and defensiveness at a store, where she runs into the male character she already loves, and with whom she ends up having the affair. When the narrator attempts to make a complaint at a store, the sales clerk does not take her seriously. The narrator says, "the guy behind the counter can tell your training is just about to kick in. It's in his face as he goes through the warranty clauses: he's banking on you giving up" (131). The narrator believes her tendency to back down to others is somehow visible in her appearance, as she perceives another character is responding to this visible lack of power. The narrator perceives she is not

the power holder in the situation in the store, and she attempts to resist the imbalance between her and the sales clerk. Slaughter writes, “and that’s what makes you smack both wrists on the bench… No way, mate. You are not going to stand for it. You want to see the manager” (131). In this gesture of slamming her wrists on the table, the narrator appears to be mimicking what she believes someone in a higher class might do in the same situation to assert their power over the clerk. The manager, when he arrives, turns out to be the man the narrator half-loves, half-resents for his power over her. Her shock at seeing him, “the air in the room is out of order” (131) tells us that the narrator already knows this character, and coupled with an earlier, unexplained line from the first scene of the story, “it’s him. It’s not. It can’t be. Only it is” (127) — we learn this character is someone the narrator attempts to avoid. In this scene in the store where the male character finally takes shape on the page, he touches the narrator’s hair in the midst of her anger. This touch is a clear display of his power: they are in a professional setting and she is a customer making a complaint. This act implies that the manager feels secure in his role of power, and does not expect this narrator to say or do anything to resist the power balance he establishes in his gesture. The narrator’s recognition of the manager and earlier unexplained attempts to avoid him suggest furthermore that this is a *re-assertion* of his power over her. Slaughter writes that the narrator’s “scalp goes neon with love”, a stark comparison to the “*I mean business* spread” that she described herself with a few lines earlier. Slaughter ends the scene with the simple sentence, “lifetime guarantee”, a play on the situation where she wanted to return a product and wasn’t able to, as well as her simultaneous recognition that she will likely never get rid of the man’s power over her because

she reacts to him with love and acceptance despite her recognition that the power balance between them is unequal.

"50 Ways to Meet Your Lover" also portrays class, gender and power as belonging to a "subject/object" relationship. When searching for power in a text Lawn advises us to ask , "who and what are the typical subjects and objects of actions[?]" (115). In this story the male character is established as subject and the narrator as object. This relationship is portrayed through the narrator's imagining of herself and her own value in the eyes of her mother and the male character. The mother calls the daughter to tell her she'd seen the manager and that he'd looked "*mean"* and that "he told her [the mother] he'd never stopped loving her daughter...My daughter… He'd loved my daughter all these years" (128). The mother does not mention the male character's wife in the phone call, or the possible implications of his 'mean' look, only her pride that the male character said he loved the narrator.

The narrator knows her mother is seeing her in a new light for being asked after by the manager, implying that his social standing must be above their own. His attention, in turn, increases the narrator's value in her mother's eyes. "It must have made you seem worthwhile," thinks the narrator, about herself, in her mother's eyes. She continues, "tears in his mean eyes made you [the narrator] worth calling. She might even spread it, might even hiss it, later, round the ladies' night" (128). As an object of affection from a character with higher social standing, the narrator is attributed more value by her mother. The spreading of this information by the mother also serves to show the mother's consciousness of value in class mobility. This is a portrayal by the story of the social value that can be gained by being the object of attention of someone with higher social standing. The apparent hope of the mother is that her daughter

may be able to jump classes, to join the male character in his class. In spite of the mother's class aspirations for her daughter, the narrator is still positioned as an object. The idea of being able to improve one's class through a relationship and supposedly enjoy all the privileges that brings, brings the intersection of gender and class into an interesting light. It implies that by becoming a more willing object, a female may improve her class by attracting or accepting the attention of a male with higher social standing, despite any obvious power imbalances or indignities within the relationship. While this is an option available to women in the precariat, in this text it requires the narrator's debasement and dehumanisation.

When the manager in "50 ways to meet your lover" does begin an affair with the narrator, the experience is narrated in language that contains an acknowledgement of the dramatic and inevitable unequal power balance in the relationship. The language the narrator uses shows no mercy for herself, only an acknowledgement that she is a willing participant in the subject/object exchange: "You'll be pitiful"; "You'll try to kiss him" (141). The word "try" implies that the kiss is not reciprocal, and that for the manager this is more about sex than affection. The narrator understands her role as the mistress to be one of sexual service, but she still catches herself asking for affection in a momentary slip of the role. Her attempt to kiss the manager serves to test the waters to see if he could potentially see her as an equal, and his refusal to reciprocate re-affirms that he will not. The narrator's inclusion of these details in the narrative serve to show the she is determined to be honest about her perceived humiliation in this role, perhaps as an attempt to shame herself into giving up the role of mistress. The harsh language used to describe the affair and the narrator's abasement of herself is portrayed particularly in relation to the motel room in which they have the affair. Slaughter writes, "It has

to be this cheap...Because you're a joke. You have to be the cheap joke, don't you? Everything here has been pointing to it" (133-134). This awareness of the cheap hotel room and her feelings of cheapness as a result serve to show the narrator's recognition and acceptance of her lack of dignity or power in this situation. Her gender and her class compel her to take on the feelings of cheapness, despite doing something that she has agreed to.

In *Skin,* Dorothy Allison talks about the shame and resentment that come with being in a lower class. Allison speaks of having "burning resentment" (loc 262) for the more privileged and the temptation of seeing "middle and upper classes as the villains" (loc 293). Allison and the narrator of "50 ways" both show that it is possible to feel resentment and anger simultaneously with shame when dealing with issues of class. When the narrator is sent to a hotel room as part of her job as cleaner to search for a client's wallet, she reveals her class-based anger. Even though the situation with the manager appears hopeless, it is still possible for the narrator to feel anger and frustration at her apparent hopelessness. The narrator understands (or thinks she does) the use of these hotel rooms, likely because of her own experience of being the mistress in the cheap hotel room: "The only couples that book in now are up to nothing good … base-rate rooms used only for a fuck" (140). She assumes the male who has lost his wallet has also been cheating on his wife in this room. When she finds the wallet the narrator looks through the photos. Slaughter writes, "...him and his kids … birthdays … travel, his wife with her middle-class strings of fob chain dangled from the shoulder she's got tensed with the fucking Taj-Mahal in the background" (140). Here the narrator's disgust in the cheating male character is apparent, but there is also an undercurrent of class-grounded anger directed at the wife, who has the opportunities the narrator feels she cannot expect. Allison describes class-based anger

as being born of shame and jealousy. She states that “entitlement...is a matter of feeling like we rather than they. You think you have a right to things, a place in the world” (loc131). The narrator’s own affair with its unequal power balance has certain characteristics: it is secretive, played out in cheap hotel rooms, and will not end in marriage. In this relationship she does not have a “right to things” (loc131).

In looking at the pictures of the wife in the wallet in the hotel room, the narrator is shameful and jealous, which, according to Allison, breeds class-based anger. The narrator’s attention to the looks of the wife in the picture as being “middle-class” (140) reminds us the narrator is not middle class. Her swearing in the description “fucking Taj Mahal” implies jealousy for the trip and for the wife status in the relationship. As a juxtaposition it appears impossible that she would ever be taken to the Taj Mahal with the manager which whom she is having the affair. These passages demonstrate the narrator’s simultaneous shame and anger in being the lower-class mistress in the “cheap” hotel room (133) and not the wife who goes to the Taj Mahal. The narrator is angry at the manager and at herself, but also at the middle-class wife who she knows she will never be.

The language and use of second person narration in “50 ways” is a distancing technique that demonstrates the narrator’s feelings of being removed from the feelings and events involved, an object at the mercy of others and her circumstances. The sense of hopelessness Eagleton and Groot describe in the precariat is apparent in the language of this story. The narrator uses harsh language toward herself to stamp out any hope of escaping the precariat, in order to preserve herself from having her hopes ruined. When she visits the beach she states, “you always thought you’d marry here. Oh well” (135). She states this again in another way,

"you should be careful what you hanker for" (135). In these statements, the narrator is expressing the warning that members of her class should be careful not to aim too high in terms of equal relationships with people of a higher class, or they will end up hurt. The story ends with the narrator slipping from second person into first person voice, which may hint at the narrator's attempt to resist once again the power balance. Slaughter writes in first person, "he changed his mind and kicked me out the room like the easy lay I was" (141). This ruthless sentence is again displaying the narrator's harsh perception of herself. The cruelty of the sentence shows the narrator's anger at her continued playing of this role despite the power it strips from her.

Up until this point the narrator has, despite her anger and shame, outlined her role as the mistress as if it has been inevitable: "the essence of lower class position is the belief that one is at the mercy of forces and people beyond one's control, often, beyond one's understanding" (Kohn qtd in Holland 9). The abrupt shift to first person in the last scene is a demonstration of hope in the story. In becoming the subject in first person, the narrator begins to take responsibility for events and to increase her agency going forward. The last line of the text is, "pray he never gets closer than the page" (141). This line suggests that the narrator knows that the power is skewed as a result of class differences, and as a result the relationship will only ever be cheap or toxic. If she is to escape her feelings of inferiority, hopelessness, shame and anger, she must pray (in first person, as the subject) that the male character never gets closer than the fictional page of the text.

"Pale Flower" by Alice Tawhai explores two romantic relationships in a way that suggests that the narrator's gender, culture and class all intersect to limit her romantic options

to either staying in the precariat with little hope, or accepting inequality outside of it. The apparent lack of control by the narrator in both her relationships in the story serve to show not only the sense of hopelessness of the precariat, but the narrator's lack of agency within it. "Pale Flower" is written from the perspective of a Māori female narrator living in Ngaruawahia who decides between a relationship with an abusive Māori male character (also from Ngaruawahia) with whom she is familiar, and a relationship with a Pākehā male character in Auckland where she is not physically abused, but instead feels unfamiliar and unequal.

At the beginning of "Pale Flower", the narrator tells us that she "grew up in Ngaruawahia, population five thousand, according to the signs at the edges of town" (123). This setting hints at reduced economic development and Tawhai's subsequent detail reinforces the implicit poverty of the rural location: "someone stole both signs eventually, of course, but for years and years I waited for our town to get bigger, looking to see if the signs would change" (123). The narrator is not surprised at the theft of the signs, making the theft appear a natural part of life in the setting. She is more disheartened by the lack of change. She describes the setting further:

> I remember...all the cigarette butts on the ground where we sat, more often than not dipping our hot chips into snowfreeze ice creams, not bothering to go home for dinner. Radio Tainui blasted on the car radios. I remember the Waipa and the Delta Taverns, and smoking joints outside. We were a small town, with two second-hand furniture shops that did good business on benefit day. (124)

While Tawhai's setting in "Pale Flower" implies a lack of familial structure for the narrator as a child, it also suggests a sense of community. The line, "other people drove through our town

without noticing anything" (124) further suggests there is a difference in worldview between those who have grown up in Ngaruawahia, and those who drive through. The setting described above also includes "glaring evidence...of inequality and poverty" (1024) in its inclusion of drugs, alcohol, busy second hand furniture shops, 'benefit day' and "children left alone" (1015), which as Kennedy reminds us, are markers of injustice for Māori. Such references to poverty by a Māori author in a setting that is home for a Māori narrator is another example of inequality for Māori in fiction and a symptom of systemised racism in New Zealand.

The narrator continues her description of her hometown with other indicators of inequality and poverty. Tawhai writes:

> When I was young, we used to sit in the rotunda in the evenings. We shared flagons of beer in brown paper bags; dark, malty liquid like the night. Some kids breathed from plastic bags, like transparent lungs filled with glue which got daubed around the outside of their lips, so that they looked like stoned clowns. We waited for the pub to close, which was when lots of people's parents came out. I grew out of sitting there. I grew up to be old enough to drink inside. (124)

This paragraph establishes the apparent inevitability of the narrator's turn to drinking, in a sad contrast to the hopeful child who "waited for our town to get bigger, looking to see if the signs would change" (123). The short sentences and the absence of sentimental language or consideration of any alternatives point out the narrator's matter-of-fact sense of helplessness in avoiding following in the footsteps of her parents. The lack of agency in the narrator's consideration of her turn to drinking also relates to Kohn's quote about class and conformity. There is a feeling of a lack of agency apparent in the precariat and those in the precariat often

act and feel as if they have no control over their standing in society. If the members of the precariat have no options, and no sense of agency, most will follow their parents' examples.

Like "50 ways", the narrator's gender intersects with her class in "Pale Flower" in ways that limit her options and hope; although in "Pale Flower" culture furthermore becomes a factor, showing how class, gender and culture can compound to increase inequality and decrease hope or agency. Tawhai writes, "me and Sal were on again, off again. Sometimes he'd hit me really bad, and then I'd go back and live with my mother and my little sisters, and my daughter Atarau. My mother took care of her because I was young when I had her" (124-5). The narrator does not dwell on either the violence in her relationship with Sal or the fact that she had her daughter young, suggesting that they are both accepted features of the community to which she belongs. The lack of emotion in the narration, shown similarly to "50 Ways" by short sentences and statement of brutal facts without further consideration or any sense of agency, captures the hopelessness in the language of the story. The reader may be surprised and angered at the domestic violence within the story, and this feeling on behalf of the reader is, in turn, juxtaposed with the lack of feeling that the female narrator employs in her description. This contrast draws our attention to the deadening effects of life in the precariat.

Class intersects not only with gender but with culture in "Pale Flower", and the intersections reveal a hierarchy of power composed of culture, class, and gender. Sal is not free from this hierarchy, and, despite his power over the narrator, he is also not near the top of the power structure. The narrator states that Sal "wanted to be called Herewini, like they called him in class. It was his birth-certificate name, before the teachers started to call him Selwyn, because Herewini was too hard for them to say" (125). The implication is that those who

changed his name were Pākehā who used their power to change Herewini's name for their convenience. Even though Sal dominates the narrator in this story, the inclusion of this detail about his name shows that Sal is treated unequally by Pākehā teachers and has his power taken from him as a result of his Māori ethnicity. Sal's power in the story is also weakened by his class. The narrator's father implies that Sal's class places him lower on the social hierarchy than himself, despite the fact that the father is also Māori. The father refers to Sal's lack of a job as a reason why Sal does not have power within the Māori community, stating, "'...before you can get like a kaumātua and start sounding off about things, first you've got to earn the right to be called a man. Sal should get off his arse and get a real job instead of just sitting around with the bottle'" (125). Occupation is a strong determiner of class and can be used as an indicator of class in fiction. In "Pale Flower" we learn Sal is unemployed and likely an alcoholic, and as a result he is positioned lower on the social hierarchy than a character of the same culture and gender. The positioning of Sal's power over the narrator at home while retaining little power in a Pākehā environment or a middle class Māori community demonstrates how the unique intersections of culture, gender, and class determine how a character views themselves and are viewed by others.

While culture and class are intersections that affect power in different environments, they are also factors in determining romantic partnerships in "Pale Flower". The narrator, while separated from Sal, meets a Pākehā character and begins a relationship with him, calling him "Pale Flower". Pale Flower has two jobs, one as a DJ and one at Woolworths (127). Even though these jobs are still seen as part of the precariat they suggest Pale Flower is more reliable than Sal in terms of income. His behaviour also suggests he has more ambition or less hopeless

feelings than Sal, as we learn that Pale Flower "didn't drink" (127). The narrator struggles with the complex intersection of culture and class at the centre of her romantic relationship. Tawhai writes, "Sometimes I'd tell myself that he wasn't my type. I never went out with men with soft skin like newly risen dough" (127). Tawhai's description of Pale Flower as having "soft skin" suggests that Pale Flower lives an easier life than the men the narrator is accustomed to. Additionally, the nickname "Pale Flower" implies not only skin colour but the association of delicacy attributed to flowers. Both of these details imply that the Pale Flower is closer to middle class, or is likely to reach middle class with relative ease, having the increased mobility that comes with his ethnicity. When Sal finds out about Pale Flower, he appears angriest about his ethnicity. "'Te Pakeha!' shouted Sal, when he found out. 'You can't get with him! A fucking Pakeha! He doesn't know anything about us!'" (128). This implies that it is his ethnicity as well as his class that causes the narrator's lack of certainty about her new partner. Indeed, after Sal's outburst, the narrator states, "I gave Sal one more go. He'd convinced me" (128). The narrator's brief return to Sal in this instance suggests that she is anxious about what her role will be with a Pākehā and feels safest sticking to the safety of the community of Ngaruawahia that she is familiar with. We learn that Sal very quickly returns to drinking and physically abusing the narrator, so she leaves him again soon after to try again with Pale Flower.

The complex power differences between Pale Flower's position of being male, Pākehā, and closer to middle class creates anxiety for the narrator when she meets Pale Flower's parents. This encounter also suggests the narrator is likely to struggle in this world if she is to become a part of it. Tawhai writes, "Pale Flower took me to meet his parents. 'Your son's brought a Māori girl home for dinner,' his mother told his father. 'I don't know that we'll be

eating what you like,' [Pale Flower's mother] said anxiously to me. 'Do you eat pork?'" (130). The somewhat comical question by Pale Flower's mother implies that she understands little about the narrator or the narrator's way of life. This ignorance is a luxury associated with the power of generally not having to consider other groups, and this type of power is usually reserved for those who belong to the dominant culture and class.

Pale Flower suggests that he and the narrator move to Auckland for better opportunities. We never learn if the narrator takes him up on this offer, as she spends the remainder of the story considering her relationship to each male character in an attempt to make her decision. In this consideration of each relationship by the narrator we see that her gender, class and culture are all factors in deciding who she will stay with. We learn that the narrator's sense of community and familiarity in her relationship with Sal in Ngaruawahia are important to her. Tawhai writes, "ever after, some of my heart stayed in my hometown with Sal, limbs breaking, bruises flowering, spirit crushed. Remembering our good times, watching him wrap himself up in the flag of tino rangatiratanga and drink from brown bottles" (131). This statement not only captures the narrator's powerlessness and endurance of abuse in her relationship with Sal, but also, complicatedly, her empathy with and understanding for him. She recognises and shares his seemingly helpless position in society, his sadness for the loss of his culture, and his coping through alcohol. The mention of the narrator's hometown in her consideration of their relationship suggests that in spite of its restrictions, it remains the place she feels she belongs. Groot et al argue that those in the precariat often see their life in the precariat as a lifelong sentence (35), while Eagleton implies that change seems hopeless for

many in this position. These factors may be part of why the narrator is reluctant to try and leave her home town.

The narrator then considers the prospect of life with Pale Flower. Tawhai writes, “some of my heart went to Auckland with Pale Flower, while he watched the way other girls danced, and bought me earrings with real diamonds in them” (131). In spite of the fact that this partner is more financially secure and generous than Sal, the narrator lacks equality in her relationship with him. Pale Flower still takes the right to show interest in other women as potential partners and this interest suggests the narrator’s lower standing compared to Pale Flower in the relationship. Similarly to Slaughter’s “50 ways to meet your lover” in which the narrator accepts that her relationship with a manager in a higher class negates the need for equality or mutual respect, the narrator in Pale Flower also accepts substandard treatment, suggesting that enjoying the luxuries of a relationship with someone who appears to be reaching middle class may be worth debasement. However, like Slaughter’s “50 ways to meet your lover”, the narrator in “Pale Flower” also recognises this debasement. Her wavering between Sal and Pale Flower suggests that the tension and inequality of the intersecting parts of her identity not matching the power implicit in Pale Flower’s identity may be worse for her than returning to an abusive relationship in a familiar community.

The narrator in “Pale Flower” exhibits some agency over her situation in choosing between the two men at the end of the narrative, but there is still a sense of inevitability and lack of agency that runs through the story, as we never learn which partner she chooses, and we are left with the feeling that, no matter which one it was, the narrator is not much better off. To end the narrative Tawhai writes, “As to which one I chose to spend my life with, well, it’s

a done deal now. You can talk about it, you can think about it, but in the end, you've got to decide with your heart" (132). The story, after exploring romantic options with male characters of differing intersections of culture and class, ends with a sense of resignation and hopelessness in change for the narrator, suggesting that in this story world, once one is born of a certain gender, ethnicity, and class, there is little hope for opportunity or equality to be found, even through relationships.

Two further stories by Slaughter and Tawhai deal with incidents of violence against female characters in the precariat and in doing so highlight the limitations of their class and gender as outlined by Groot et al when they suggest that those in the precariat have fewer rights (29). Although New Zealand has a rights system based on equality, it appears at times that the groups one belongs to in terms of culture, gender and class can influence how these rights are dealt with by authorities, or how the members of those groups expect be treated by authorities and the dominant groups in society when their rights are threatened.

".22" by Tracey Slaughter suggests that it is the judgement that female characters in the precariat expect from the higher classes that may contribute to their paralysis within their class and their relationships, even when their rights are threatened. ".22" is a first person narrative told from the perspective of a middle class and male gun control officer. The class of the narrator can be surmised as middle class by the characteristics of his occupation: he has a stable, government-issued job as gun control officer, and he is in a position of authority to make decisions on behalf of an agency. Throughout the story the narrator describes a female character's appearance and house in such a way to show the reader that not only does he assume she is in the precariat, but that he is evaluating her for this status instead of evaluating

her safety. He asks her questions about her husband to consider his viability for a gun license and misses cues in her responses and demeanour that imply to the reader that this is not a safe environment. The narrator's judgement of the wife and her home situation blinds him to the danger of granting a gun license to the husband. This turns out to have tragic consequences as it is alluded throughout the narrative that something terrible happened in the house once a firearm was introduced into it. Slaughter writes the story in the past tense, with the narrator confessing his judgements and going over the meeting on the page, to review how much he is to blame for the later events.

The narrator's superior power and class are embedded in his judgements of the female main character when he visits her house from the opening line. Slaughter writes:

> Her hair was wet but she hadn't tried too hard. Green eyes, yes, but with nothing special done to them, and damp hair. Bland and lank, uncombed. You wouldn't have called it any colour much. The pictures you see now were taken earlier: the woman I met didn't seem like a blond, and it wasn't a model body to me, just tired, and needed meat on it. (183)

The narrator's selection of these details display that he is convinced the female character is of a lower class to him because she appears drab and as if she has not "tried too hard" (183). His notice of her weight and fatigue also show her position as firmly entrenched in the precariat. She looks tired and thin, implying overwork and stress. The narrator states after his description, "at the time I just thought she could have taken a bit more pride" (183). This statement shows the narrator's profound ignorance of the woman's situation, and his assumption that her appearance was an effect of low motivation, not an effect of her class. This resonates with

Allison's observation "the vast majority of people believe that poverty is a voluntary condition" (loc 144), that those with more social power often see it is a personal shortcoming of those in the lower classes not to pull themselves up by the bootstraps, rather than considering their own privilege in relation to the at times inescapable environment of the precariat.

The narrator's judgement continues in such a way that he completely misses the danger inherent in the family situation, choosing only to judge, rather than properly see. When he asks, "'and how would you describe your marriage?'" (184), the wife jumps so hard that she bumps the table and spills the narrator's tea on his folder. He focuses on the folder rather than her fright. He states, "I was fussy about my folder, because it was a gift from my wife, real leather and a gift" (184). In this moment we see that he has missed the cue regarding the obvious danger in the marriage; instead, he is preoccupied with an object that reinforces his own class status.

The narrator of ".22" judges the female character according to both class signifiers and gender roles. After his description of the woman's appearance the narrator notes, "most women have tidied their houses, too" (183), demonstrating his gender-based expectation that the wife should have tidied in readiness for a visitor. When he uses the bathroom the narrator further states that he was "less than impressed" (188). He is missing the signs that this female character is exhausted, resourceless, and afraid. He does not consider how her situation may prevent her from having time or financial resources to clean, or how her partner may be controlling her actions in the house. The narrator assumes that this female character is being supported, as he would expect to support his own middle/upper class partner at home. Based on the description of the environment however, finances are clearly part of the entrapment of

the woman in the house. Holvino states that “working class women’s demands for equality, on the other hand, are tempered by their greater fear of family instability and potential poverty in divorce” (254). The narrator is missing that in the precariat or in an abusive home situation, the wife does not enjoy the same privileges that his own wife might. The narrator’s judgement of the quality of the house in “.22” serves as an accusation that the female character is lazy, and that living better is an option available to everyone if they work hard enough.

The narrator in “.22” remains unaware that his judgements may be influencing his decisions throughout most of the story. The focus by the narrator on the house and the looks of the female character causes him to completely neglect his duty, which is to determine whether the male resident is an eligible candidate for a gun license. Slaughter writes, “we were chuckling when his ute pulled in. I like to keep a proper tone, so I was more wary of cutting my own smile back than watching when hers quit” (186). In his preoccupation with his own actions and the appropriate behaviour for his social standing, the narrator utterly misses the fact that the female resident is nervous about her partner’s arrival. The narrator continues the interview and signs off the gun license: “we signed him off, tick by tick” (186). When he asks his final question, he is aware the male partner can hear him, but lets it slide. He asks, “‘do you consider him safe around firearms?’” He adds, “I could hear him lighting up on the back steps...By rights, he shouldn’t have been in hearing range. But I let it stand. We were so close to done” (186). When the narrator asks this question he is preoccupied with himself and wants to finish the interview, and the male partner is listening outside. In this moment the female character is trapped between two men, her fear of her husband, and the feeling that the narrator wants the interview over and doesn’t really care. This sense of entrapment for the woman in the house

foreshadows for the reader that the final question about the husband being safe around firearms should not have been asked in his earshot. The gun control officer, through his judgements, incorrect focus, and skipping of protocol, has shown the reader how his actions discouraged the female character from any attempt she may have made to ask for help.

".22" ends with the narrator alluding that something terrible happened in the house as a result of his allowing the husband to have a gun license. He says, "like I told you, I drove past the place the other day. When you look back you know everything is evidence" (188). This statement implies that he realises he made a mistake, and that the mistake could have been avoided if he had paid attention to the evidence in front of him of a clearly unequal, precarious, and dangerous home life situation. In light of the ending, the story becomes more of an implied confession, or an examination of a situation. The narrator further states, "people don't ask for help. That's the lesson. They don't believe it's there to be asked for" (188). In this statement the gun control officer reflects on how the social hierarchy of the characters prevented the wife from believing she had access to equal rights or help, and how his part in making class-based judgements only increased the wife's reluctance. Not only was the wife judged by the narrator, she also recognised his judgement of her and as a result, did not expect the same rights or protection to be accessible to her from him. ".22" portrays how judgement based in gender and class can prevent people in more dominant groups from feeling empathy or even seeing the truth of situations which increases the entrapment of those underfoot, leading at times to tragic results.

In "Roses are Red", Alice Tawhai explores the barrier between classes as a factor in the perception of accessibility of rights for female characters when they are faced with abuse,

comparing this to the perception of rights of female characters in power positions outside the precariat. The culture or ethnicity of any of the characters is not stated throughout the story, but differing intersections of gender and class between two female characters are compared in their treatment of and treatment by Caesar, an incarcerated male character, who narrates the story. Caesar is by his own admission an abusive character who exerts power over his partner, Rose, even while he is in prison. Throughout the text Caesar shows no remorse for his abuse of Rose or for the actions that have landed him in prison, focusing instead on his troubles, his comfort, his anxieties, and his attempts to exert control over others.

"Roses are Red" offers a view of precarity from a male character who has more power than his partner, in spite of his incarceration. It becomes apparent that while both Rose and Caesar belong to the precariat, Caesar views Rose as someone lower on the social hierarchy than him. Tawhai writes, "He [Caesar] could thank Rose for the TV too. But she was his missus, and that was her job, to get Caesar what he wanted" (17). Despite the physical distance between them, Caesar sees Rose as under his control. He is so confident of his position of superiority that he even admits his abuse of her: "He wondered if Rose preferred him to be in prison. She knew where he was, and she wasn't getting hit" (18). Caesar does not reflect on the implications of this statement or show any remorse for this abuse on the page, rather his callousness and acceptance of his treatment of Rose shows how accustomed he has grown to the power and privilege he enjoys, even from prison.

Rose continues to serve Caesar as a faithful subject while he is in prison. This loyalty indicates the apparent hopelessness of her situation and her inability to consider escape, even when Caesar is not physically present. There could be many reasons for Rose staying with

Caesar, including love, but the text does not cover them explicitly other than in hints at low income and fear. Caesar mentions she has a baby, “sometimes, Rose brought their baby to visit him” (19), and that she is dependent on government support, “he didn’t care if she was changing Baby, or...going to a WINZ appointment” (21). Not only do the above details show Caesar’s expectations of control over Rose, they also show evidence of class inequality in New Zealand fiction, a broken home with reliance on government assistance to raise a child where finances may play a part in an abusive relationship. Caesar mentions having people watch Rose to keep her under his control, stating “some of the brothers on the outside kept a listening ear, to see if anyone was servicing her” (21). This combination of lack of finances, evidence of fear, and normalisation of abuse in the environment are all common reasons cited by domestic abuse organisations for staying in abusive relationships. The prevalence of abuse and evidence of low income both suggest that it is Rose’s position in the precariat that adds to her lack of options or hope in her unequal relationship.

In “Roses are Red”, Caesar is occupied with the power he possesses or does not possess in prison. Among the inmates, violence determines pecking order, but even with physical strength, survival is never guaranteed. Caesar’s violence has served to keep him alive in prison thus far, but he is aware that even his power cannot save him from all the violence in his environment, due to the other men being “varying degrees of psycho” (14). Caesar’s inability to fully control the other inmates is a source of anxiety to him. Tawhai writes, “people lashed out at you, and they said it was because you looked at them funny, but really they just wanted to dominate someone else and be farther from the bottom, and closer to the top” (15). In contrast

to his relationship with Rose, Caesar is in an environment where asserting dominance through violence does not always work, and it makes him anxious.

When Caesar cannot assert dominance over Rose due to his physical distance he reacts with rage and insecurity. Tawhai writes, “he felt angry and upset when she wasn’t home, and started slamming things around; his fist into walls, into other peoples’ heads, into walls, into his own head. Yelling words so low and hoarse with threat...Words of not caring anymore, because he had no control over anything” (19). Rose’s lack of availability reminds Caesar of his own lack of power because there is no one to dominate, no one to pass the lack of power onto, no one to keep him “farther from the bottom” (15). This attempt to dominate others to make up for a lack of power in one’s own life demonstrates that violence can be an ugly symptom of precarity and inequality.

Class, gender and power are also portrayed in “Roses are Red” in the juxtaposition between Caesar’s treatment of Rose and a female prison guard. Caesar calls the guard “Miss” (18), a signifier that she has more authority than him. However, he attempts to assert control over her nonetheless. Tawhai writes, “sometimes, the red-haired Miss looked sideways at him, and he knew she wanted his cock… Caesar was going to get that red-haired Miss”(19-20). When he gets the chance, he touches the guard inappropriately and she does not react (23). Caesar interprets this as a sign of his power: “Caesar knew that she secretly liked it” (23).

Despite his attempts to assert power over the female prison guard, we learn that Caesar’s class and his position as a prisoner intersect to limit his power. In Caesar’s description of the prison, we are shown that not only is Caesar unable to control the other inmates, he is also unable to assert dominance over the prison staff, despite his physical strength and their

gender. This is unsurprising to the reader, but appears as a surprise to Caesar. He complains about his rights in prison, and the lack of respect shown to him. About prison life, he says, "here...it was assumed that your mental age was three, and all decisions were made for you. And there was no such thing as fairness or justice, because you were three years old, and not entitled to any rights" (13). In prison Caesar is treated only as a criminal. He is afforded no respect by the staff for being male, for being physically strong, or for being violent. His self-perception is still stuck in his old environment, where violence and gender were all that mattered. Caesar is allergic to his blanket but, "nobody cared, because nobody gave a shit if he lay awake and itched all night" (14). In prison, he is also known as "Johns" rather than "Caesar", his preferred name. Similar to Sal in "Pale Flower", a group with more power changes Caesar's name for their convenience.

When Caesar's rash from the wool blankets gets worse, the nurse orders him acrylic blankets. In a move that shows the difference between Caesar's perception of his power and the prison's perception of his power, the female prison guard that Caesar touched inappropriately sends the blankets back:

"'Who sent them back?' he said.

'I did', said the red-haired Miss. He wanted to press all of the air out of her windpipe…'Is that going to be a problem for you, Johns?' she asked.

'No, Miss,' said Caesar" (24).

The above exchange makes the authority of the guard irrefutable, in spite of her gender. Caesar has learned in this exchange that gender and violence is less important in this prison environment than institutional power, and it is his role in the prison society to be below even

the female guards. This hierarchy reflects wider society, in that those who are viewed negatively by society due to their ethnicity, criminal record, and/or class are structurally pushed to the bottom, despite their strength or their gender. It is a rude awakening for Caesar. In his life outside prison, he can hide from his lack of power in society by dominating the people around him. In prison, Caesar's name becomes ironic. The story ends with Caesar backing down and demonstrating that for all his power over Rose, he is powerless to actually change his situation both as a prisoner and as a man in the precariat.

In the fiction of Alice Tawhai and Tracey Slaughter attention is drawn to intersecting facets of identity through specific detail and form to explore the apparent hopelessness of precarity in New Zealand. Intersections of gender, culture and class limit the options and hope of the characters in the short stories "50 ways to meet your lover" and ".22" by Tracey Slaughter and "Pale Flower" and "Roses are Red" by Alice Tawhai. Analysis of the ways Slaughter and Tawhai craft setting, character relationships and voice, demonstrate that the compounding of class by gender and culture can influence characters' self-worth, perception, and actions.

In "50 ways to meet your lover", the narrator outlines her affair with a higher class manager in casually brutal, self-blaming language. However, by the end of the story, she has decided to avoid the unequal relationship and the potential opportunities it may bring, to focus on becoming the object of the story instead of a subject to a higher class character. In "Pale Flower", the narrator struggles to decide between romantic relationships with two men of differing intersections of culture and class. Through the narrator we feel the sense of community she feels in a familiar relationship where she suffers abuse, and the sense of

inequality she feels in a relationship with a middle class Pakeha character. Despite these two relationships, the reader is left with little hope for the narrator as it is suggested she will not be completely happy or mobile in either relationship, implying that the intersecting parts of her identity have compounded each other to limit her options irreparably in the story world.

In ".22", a female character is discouraged from asking for help in an abusive home situation. The narrator, a middle-class gun control officer, is more preoccupied with judgement of the female character's class than his role to determine the safety of the house. The female character's rights, while covered by the laws in the story, are inaccessible to her due to the lack of appropriate focus by the narrator, and her own diminished belief in these rights as a result of the narrator's judgements and actions. In "Roses are Red", an incarcerated male narrator comes to terms with his lack of power in a prison setting, after being accustomed to dominating the people around him in the precariat through violence and gender power imbalances, particularly his partner Rose, whom he abuses on the outside. The differing aspects of his identity show that only in the precariat does the narrator have any real power, as he is structurally pushed to the bottom of the hierarchy of power both in prison and in society. Slaughter and Tawhai's fiction explore different experiences of the precariat using a myriad of characters with different facets of identity, to show how parts of identity can intersect with and be compounded by class, and the deadening effects these intersections have on hope for characters.

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