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Eyes and Ias:

The case for pronominal diversity in fiction

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Abstract

Although the contemporary pronoun debate in English can at times be heartfelt and vehement, the discursive structure of the debate itself has served to constrain pronoun discourse, reduce the potential for meaning, limit opportunities for the expression of alternative identities, and thereby to maintain a white androcentric norm. That is, despite the efforts of activists and commentators to challenge existing power structures, popular debate has continued to unfold in a self-limiting fashion that reaffirms the ideological status quo. This limitation of discussion is engendered in three ways that are covert and significant:

- English personal pronouns – *I/me/you* – and proforms – *he/him/she/her* – have been defined as closed-class function words, thereby placing severe restrictions on the acceptability of new usages.
- The English third person proforms are gendered, which has limited discussion to gender identity at the expense of other identities such as ethnicity, age, religious affiliation, etc.
- The gender distinction in English pertains only to the third person proforms, so that little attention has been paid to the more salient first and second person pronouns.

I propose that the ideologically informed limitations placed on pronominal diversity can be effectively challenged from within the field of creative fiction where poetic license is more readily granted and where innovation is more readily accepted.

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I dedicate this to my mum and dad.

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Critical Component:

The Case for Pronominal Diversity in Fiction

Kaupapa Statement

My decision to demonstrate the openness/meaningfulness of pronouns by using Māori ones in New Zealand English results from my particular lived experience. My mother is of Ngā Puhī descent, my father is Pākehā, and I spent the first eighteen years of my life living in the rural community of Ongaonga where Dad was a shearer, Mum worked at the freezing works, and my childhood dream was to win the Ranfurly Shield playing number eight for Hawkes Bay. My critical thesis, however, is not limited to Māori pronouns and Kiwi identities, nor to any particular time or place. I humbly submit that pronouns, as content words, can be employed in the service of all identities.

Introduction

“The smart way to keep people passive and obedient is to strictly limit the spectrum of acceptable opinion, but allow very lively debate within that spectrum – even encourage the more critical and dissident views. That gives people the sense that there’s free thinking going on, while all the time the presuppositions of the system are being reinforced by the limits put on the range of the debate” (Chomsky, 1998, 43).

Ideology is often covert. As Kress (10) states, “Discourses conceal ideology by ‘making what is social seem natural’” (qtd. in Hart 5), while Fairclough notes that, “Language use reflects social structures but at the same time it (re)enforces social structures (qtd. in Hart 3). It is not safe for us to assume, therefore, that as participants in discourse we are necessarily conscious of the ideological framework to which we inadvertently subscribe whenever we write, nor either that the habitual terms by which we express ourselves be benign. Moreover, given the vast range of lexical items and the virtually infinite syntactical combinations at our disposal, a complacent attitude can lead us to believe that we are entirely agentive choosers of our utterances; that our ability to formulate our attitudes be governed by none other than ourselves through the seemingly unlimited choices we can make. The nature and availability of those choices, their restrictiveness – what we

supposedly can and can't do – as a result, can easily go unexamined. Vigilance is required should we wish not to be the mere unreflecting agents of the prevailing discourse.

In this thesis, I would like to expose the self-restricting nature of contemporary pronoun discourse. I will do so by discussing in greater detail the three aforementioned bullet points: the conventional classification of pronouns as closed class function words; the gendered nature of English third person proforms; the fact that the pronoun debate has been limited almost exclusively to the third person. As per Bhat's formulation (1), I will utilise a distinction between *personal pronouns* on the one hand and *proforms* on the other. *Pronouns* will be the overarching term that encompasses both. *Personal pronouns* will be restricted to the first and second person *I/me, we/us* and *you*, which are distinctive for being deictic expressions, the function of which being to, "indicate the two principal speech roles, namely that of 'being the speaker' and 'being the addressee' respectively" and which, according to Bhat, "do not provide any basis for identifying the actual individuals who perform those speech roles" (Bhat 6). The term *proform*, by contrast, includes all the other sets of words that are also included in English under the banner of pronouns: the so-called third person pronouns; demonstratives; interrogatives, indefinites, etc. Of these, my discussion will relate to what are commonly referred to as the third person pronouns *he/him, she/her, it* and *they/them*. It is worthwhile establishing this distinction so as to foreground the fundamental difference between the deictic expressions that refer to

speech participants whose very presence constitutes the communicative act, and the third person proforms that (rather like demonstrative expressions, i.e. “that woman” or “this man”) refer to individuals outside of the communicative act and its constitutive roles. Popular discourse tends to formulate first, second and third person pronouns as representing three points along the same scale, however first and second person personal pronouns are distinct from proforms, which has ramifications for my discussion as it is developed below.

I include brief discussion of my chosen method of challenging pronominal homogeneity – the use of reo Māori origin pronouns and possessives in English language creative fiction – in particular addressing the subject of cultural appropriation. I also discuss the additive, meaning-making nature of my project.

I include an original novella entitled *Eyes and Ias*, in which I hope to demonstrate only a small fraction of what I believe to be the vast potential of this new understanding of pronouns. I use reo Māori origin pronouns and possessives alongside English language ones, modulating between them in ways that, I believe, add extra layers of meaning to the characters’ relationships to one another.

Closed-Class Function Words:

Pronouns have been defined as closed-class function words, which places severe restrictions on the acceptability of new usages.

“Quite apart from the suppression of definitely heretical words, reduction of vocabulary was regarded as an end in itself, and no word that could be dispensed with was allowed to survive. Newspeak was designed not to extend but to diminish the range of thought, and this purpose was indirectly assisted by cutting the choice of words down to a minimum” (Nineteen Eighty-Four – Orwell 313).

“This above all: to thine own self be true” (Hamlet – William Shakespeare, Act I, Scene III).

It is conventionally understood that pronouns belong to the closed class of words and are severely limited in meaning. Münte et al. explain that the closed class of function words, “...comprise determiners, pronouns, conjunctions, prepositions and a number of particles that serve the purpose of syntactically structuring a sentence. This class of words tends to be conserved over time, which led to the term closed class” (91). More recently, McCarthy (77) in *English Grammar: the basics* has defined pronouns as being a closed system, while Krauthamer states that, “Most grammarians and linguists consider pronouns to be function or structure words” (9). It is well-established then that

pronouns be function words that belong to a closed class, unlike open class words such as verbs and nouns for which new items are continuously being accepted into the lexicon. It is simply taken for granted that, “it is very hard to invent new pronouns” (Krauthamer 10) because, “...language doesn’t work that way” (Garner 34) and such efforts are, “...bound to fail” (Baron 80).

However, the accepted wisdom that pronouns belong to the closed class is belied by the fact that usage continues to evolve (i.e. the persistent presence of *youse* and the increasing usage of *y’all* and singular *they*) and that other languages can (and do) accept more expansive pronominal systems than English currently does. For example, in te reo Māori the second person can mark both duality (‘you two’ as opposed to ‘you and three or more others’) andclusivity (‘me and you’ as opposed to ‘me and someone else who is not you’); Japanese has both a masculine first person singular (*boku*) and a feminine one (*atashi*) (McGloin 31); and although traditional Western conceptions of gender posit a masculine/feminine binary distinction, the Bugi language of Indonesia has five gender categories (Krauthamer 38). Moreover, as will be discussed in greater detail below in relation to *you* and *thou* (and the related forms *thee*, *thy* and *thine*), the English language has itself historically included a greater number of pronouns that have been allowed to diminish over time. All of which demonstrates that the English pronominal system has the potential to be far more flexible and receptive to neopronouns than is currently acceptable.

Crucially, “Language is ideological when it is used to promote one perspective over another. Grammars as system engender ideology through the, often inhibited, choices they allow ‘for representing “the same” material situation in different ways’ (Haynes 119)” (quoted in Hart 2). Notably, and in direct contradiction to the motivating intention to avoid reinscribing a Manichean binary that subordinates the feminine to the masculine, “There is a well-documented male bias in language comprehension where supposedly gender-neutral words automatically and unconsciously are associated with men and/or masculinity” (Hellinger; Stahlberg et al., quoted in Lindqvist et al. 109) – “which is one of several examples of how men constitute the norm for humanity” (Lindqvist et al. 109). Indeed, “Singular they has in some studies been shown to contain a male bias” (Bailey and LaFrance, quoted in Lindqvist 111), while research by Ettner (cited in Lindqvist 110) reveals that the non-gendered third person singular *tā* in Mandarin, “most often activates associations of men.” Such findings suggest that the move from two, gendered proforms (*he/she*) to a single non-gendered one (singular *they*) in English subsumes feminine identity within a dominant androcentric norm. From a broader perspective, we can also see that the received wisdom that the pronominal system be closed to new items in fact serves to maintain the dominant identity by subsuming alternative identities within limited, generic constraints. Indeed, the falling into disuse of *ye*, *thee* and *thou* which took place between the 16th and 17th centuries coincides with the collapse of traditional hierarchies represented by the rise of the English middle-

class and the emergence of globalisation. As Swyers reports, “thee and thou were abandoned at least in part due to ‘a popular reaction against the radicalism of Quakers’, who rejected the use of the hierarchy-reinforcing *you*” (Brown and Gilman, quoted in Swyers and Thomas 273). For the sake of democracy, homogeneity and submission to a standard type – so the prevailing ideology goes – the fewer the pronouns, the better.

In addition, the effect of attaching the qualifier *closed* to the noun *class* with regards pronouns is to generate a false dichotomy. It does not follow logically, after all, that the exclusivity of one class from another renders either closed to new members: the pronominal system is closed-off from the verbal, nominal and adjectival systems, but *not* to other pronouns. The potential for alternative approaches has been circumscribed by overlaying a non-gradable framework onto a gradable taxonomy, i.e. by positing that word classes must be either open or closed, thereby allowing for no degrees of differentiation. Rather than applying a rigid open/closed dichotomy, it is more preferable that we conceptualise a spectrum within which some systems can be more resistant to expansion (such as the prepositional system) and some less so (such as the nominal system). Münte et al corroborate this approach when stating that, “Some authors ... have therefore advanced the view that the differentiation into open and closed class words is not clear-cut but rather that the two word classes represent a continuum” (Münte 92).

It is worth noting however that even though Münte et al recognise the non-gradable framework constituted by the open/closed distinction, their own research continues to assign pronouns to the closed class alongside determiners, conjunctions and prepositions (91), as does the research carried out by Diaz and McCarthy (47, see appendix 1; note the relative lack of pronouns in the given list). Such a gesture conflates pronouns with those other more rigidly non-semantic classes, so that the characteristics of prepositions, conjunctions and articles are incorrectly attributed to pronouns. All function words – despite their respective differences; despite occupying different positions on the spectrum of semantic status – are simply lumped together into a closed class, being defined as mere polar opposites to the open class. For example, the claim that function words, “have few inherent associations to other words when presented outside of a sentence” (Diaz 39) is flawed on two counts: firstly, it invokes circular reasoning given that the semantic field of any personal pronoun is small precisely *because* the number of items in that field is kept to a minimum. Were the pronominal system to undergo expansion, the falseness of that proposition would be brought to bear. Secondly, the claim also ignores the strength of association between items in a semantic field: *he*, for example, has very clear and direct associations with *him, his, hers, she, her, it, they, I, you, we* and *us*.

Diaz also notes that function words carry limited semantic properties and imageability, which clearly does not apply to the deictic expressions *I* and *you*, given their immediacy in constituting speech

participants whose very subjectivity is being invoked. As Yamamoto notes, “It is natural that the speaker invests the strongest animacy/empathy in himself/herself, and the second strongest animacy/empathy in someone whom he/she is addressing” (3) – suggesting that *I* and *you* in fact might be considered the *most* semantically loaded words given their immediacy. Additionally, the human presence is eminently imageable in its bodily form.

Yet another spurious notion inhibiting the acceptance of pronominal diversity relates to the conventionality of language. It is right to argue, after all, that the proliferation of neopronouns would make comprehension difficult. There have certainly been many attempts to introduce an array of neopronouns throughout the history of the English language (see Denis Baron). For a word to enter the lexicon it needs to be recognised, understood and finally accepted by a discourse community: “... phrases and entire grammatical structures gain strength or fall out of favour based on processes of popular acceptance or rejection (Swyers 273). However, this process applies to all grammatical classes of words, whether they be pronouns, nouns, or verbs. The number of proposed neologisms that have failed to make it into the official lexicon has gone unrecorded because of the very fact that those newly coined words have not been accepted (dictionaries don’t list the words they don’t have). However, the fact that many new *nouns* have been coined and then forgotten is not seized upon as reasonable proof that nouns belong to a closed class of words.

Likewise, since there is no ideological bias against *verbs*, it is not common practice to yolk the failure of newly coined verbs to an existing anti-verb bias so as to justify that failure on a pseudo-scientific, grammatical basis. Of course an abundance of neopronouns will be proposed, and of course the majority of them will not be accepted. This is the case with most neologisms and is not the exclusive preserve of the pronominal system.

But perhaps most telling is the persistent belief that, as function words – i.e. grammatical items that merely structure sentences – pronouns carry little meaning. Function words are defined in opposition to content words, such as nouns and verbs, which by contrast (it is accepted) do carry meaning. However, the very fact that gendered pronouns do encode gender, that the proforms *he* and *she* clearly carry a semantic load that has been the primary point of contention within the gendered pronoun debate from the eighteenth century onwards, that the gendered meaning of English proforms does generate vehement discussion in public discourse, ought to be evidence enough that pronouns function more than merely grammatically. Ideology, however, operates covertly to put limits “...on the range of the debate” (Chomsky, quoted above) and to “...diminish the range of thought” (Orwell, quoted above). With the complete disuse of *thou*, with the popular preference to use generic *you* in place of the indefinite pronoun *one* – “... if *one* is used too much, it can make the speaker sound too formal...” (Cambridge.dictionary.org) – and with the ongoing pressure to suppress *he/she*, the received wisdom, the covert

dictum, that pronouns *ought* to be function words has effectively brought itself to bear. Ideology has already succeeded in contracting the boundaries of conceivability, which explains the general reluctance to accept new pronouns.

We can put the issue into much sharper relief with regards to the recently proposed bilingual road signage (McClure) and the reaction of the right-wing opposition (Lau) who reject such lexical expansion with regards to the acceptance of Māori verbs and nouns in New Zealand English. The anti-Māori sentiment encoded in the attitude that reo Māori verbs and nouns ought to be excluded from the Kiwi lexicon is self-evident, and yet, were we to apply that very same overtly racist formula to pronouns, the homogenising white androcentric project would maintain its cover within the Trojan Horse of acceptable grammar: Māori pronouns in English could be rejected on the basis that they are pronouns, thus concealing the more unsavoury ideological motives at play. The critical point to be made here is that, from a decolonial perspective, there are many languages and many pronouns extant within indigenous communities worldwide. These pronouns already have conventional, comprehensible meanings within those communities and would generate greater meaning if used in counterpoint to the existing pronouns of the target language – in the process rendering those target language pronouns more visible, more meaningful, in contrast. To deny the right of expression of those pronouns/identities within the local variety of English (or other dominant language) – to knowingly or otherwise subscribe to the

demonstrably false claim that *English be a closed class of words* – is not a grammatical argument, it is an unacknowledged ideological restriction.

The purportedly sacrosanct nature of the pronominal system does not inhere in the system itself but is merely an ideological norm that serves to maintain white androcentrism. The supposed closedness of the pronominal system is in fact a discursive mechanism that obviates diversity. A change in the perception of the pronominal system to being flexible and dynamic would allow for greater diversity of expression that better reflects the diversity to be found in human identity and experience. Contrary to received wisdom, the pronominal system is a fertile resource which can be employed to that end.

Gendered third person proforms:

The English third person proforms are gendered, which has limited discussion to gender identity at the expense of other identities such as ethnicity, age and religious affiliation

It is a characteristic of Modern English that third person singular proforms encode gender and that as a result the popular pronoun debate has focussed almost entirely upon the effects of that gendered binary distinction. Such discourse can be traced from 1745, when the, “...English grammarian named Anne Fisher posited that the masculine singular pronoun includes the feminine” (Garner 33). In 1888 Anna Johnson then made the case for women’s right to vote on the basis that, “...usage sanctions the employment of ‘he,’ ‘him’ and ‘his’ as of common gender. Therefore under ‘he’ women can certainly register” (Baron 49-50). Later, the first- and second-wave feminist movements rejected generic *he* (Martyna, quoted in Krauthamer 11). And now the early 21st century has seen, “The transgender tipping point” (Steinmetz, quoted in Swyers and Thomas 272) and the current debate that concerns preferred pronouns, disruption to the non-gradable binary gender framework, and the showing of “respect for the autonomy of individuals whose gender identity may not conform to the way they are perceived by others” (Pook 6). This near-exclusive focus on (non)gender expression has contributed to the silencing of other possibilities, which in turn has served to maintain the assumption that the pronominal system be closed.

Historically, however, another means of expressing one's identity in relation to an interlocuter has been available in English by invoking the T/V distinction, that is, sub- and superordinate positions were once encodable through the use of, and the distinction between, *thou* and *you*. Interlocutors were able to express intimacy or deference towards each other, modulating between levels of formality and social status. This distinction is demonstrated in the oft-quoted lines from Shakespeare's "The Merchant of Venice" (134):

GOBBO. I cannot think you are my son.

LANCELOT. I know not what I shall think of that, but I am Lancelot, the Jew's man, and I am sure Margery your wife is my mother.

GOBBO. Her name is Margery indeed! I'll be sworn if thou be Lancelot, thou art mine own flesh and blood [my underlining].

Gobbo verbally manifests his changing relationship to Lancelot by referring to him as *you* in the first line (where he rejects the inference that they be related), and as *thou* in the last (where additional information suggests their familial bond). It is therefore demonstrably the case that (binary) gender has not be the only identity/positionality factor at play with the English pronominal system.

Moreover, it is testament to the near complete monopoly that gender has had on the pronoun debate that there exists – *currently in use* – another long-standing third person singular proform that continues to go relatively unheeded. That is, the distinction can be made in the third person singular between personhood (using either *he*

or *she*) and non-personhood (*it*). It may have been the case in the past that non-personhood could have been disregarded out of hand, and by definition, as being a meaningful identity marker since non-personhood could once have equated to non-identity. However, with the advent of artificial intelligence and entities such as Siri, Alexa, ChapGPT, the granting of legal personhood to non-human entities such as the Whanganui River (New Zealand Parliament), the ongoing debate about animal rights, and the heated contemporary arguments with regards abortion, the right to life/choice and the personhood of embryos and foetuses, the dividing line between *entity* and *identity* is not so clear. Thus, all things being equal, the *he/she* versus *it* distinction should share significant prominence within the pronoun debate. This, however, is clearly not the case, the reason being that the difference between the gender distinction and the personhood distinction is not grammatical, but discursive; the ideological tendency is towards pronominal reduction and not towards the acknowledgement of more numerous potential distinctions. But if pronouns can encode such ultimately arbitrary categories as formality, personhood and gender, so too could they encode sexual orientation, child/adult status, ethnicity, nationality, religious adherence, etc.

Because the compulsion to mark gender in the English only occurs in third person singular – because there are no equivalent distinctions to be made using *I* and *you* – debate has been overwhelmingly limited to the ways in which that compulsion could be avoided. While some question the need to reduce individuals to a

masculine or feminine binary status, for others, “the question is not just of how to refer to a generic human, but how to refer to a specific person who identifies as non-binary” (Swyers and Thomas 275). This is an approach that reduces meaning to yet another binary (i.e. gender expression versus lack of gender expression), which merely reasserts the cultural primacy of gender identity and silences discussion of others.

The disappearance of the T/V distinction in English represents a reduction in the potential for meaning making within the pronominal system, to the extent that the distinction between singular and plural *you* is no longer encoded in the second person pronoun in isolation (tags like *you two* or *y'all* can be added to mark plurality). Interestingly, this mirrors the process whereby *they* – which has predominantly, but not exclusively, marked plurality – is being applied more and more in the singular in contemporary usage. Krauthamer even speculates that, “once people start using *they/them/their* without thinking, most likely *they* will take over all third person pronoun use, singular and plural, specific and nonspecific. Completely. Possibly even making *he/she/his/hers/him/her* as archaic as *thee/thou/thy/thine*” (46). Thus, even a cursory analysis of historical uses of English and the pronominal systems of other languages (the T/V distinction still exists in other languages) provides sufficient evidence that other opportunities for meaning making are indeed possible. However, the focus on avoiding the compulsion to mark gender in English has taken place at the

expense of a more productive approach that would look to generate *additional* meanings rather than to efface them.

The predilection in discourse to reduce meaning-making by neutralising the gender binary (like the binary T/V distinction before it) has had the unintended result of limiting popular discourse to a process of constraining diversity of expression and consolidating a dominant androcentric norm. This process goes unnoticed because it is, contradictorily, generated by efforts to challenge androcentrism. Thus, while those in favour of the movement toward non-gendered pronouns are motivated to promote that movement, those against stand ultimately to profit from its success. *He/she* is overtly gendered but the male bias of singular *they* goes largely unnoticed. The existing movement towards non-gendered pronouns is ultimately reductive, covert and counterproductive to its intended aims since the underlying tendency is towards androcentrism. The countermeasure I propose – to treat pronouns as meaningful, open class words – is productive and overt.

Any number of identities may be mapped out according to age, ethnicity, sexuality, membership to a local cheese-makers' guild, etc (indeed, it seems rather obvious that a local medieval re-enactment society might mark in-group membership discursively by referring to each other as *thee* and *thou*). Sywers and Thomas (273) paraphrase Woolard when they explain that, “groups can use dialects and distinct language patterns to create ‘authentic’ identities.” Such agency to freely encode in-group identity is destabilising to dominant power structures and hegemonic identity since it allows small communities to exert

power over their own identities and to exclude out-group members (who lack the knowledge relevant to that specific to that group and its identities/pronouns). This represents a shift in power from the centre to the margins where diversity and marked identities can operate freely. Thus, any given non-generic *I* would exist and derive its meaning in contradistinction to generic *I*. The cheesemakers' guild might, after all, deploy one first person singular pronoun to identify a master cheesemaker, another first person pronoun to mark out an apprentice cheesemaker, and the dominant generic *I* to mark outgroup identification, all three being available to the same individual at different times and in different contexts.

One obvious, conventional objection to this would be that it is not the function of pronouns to operate in such ways. However, we know such objections to be untrue when we draw attention to the fact that gendered pronouns are fundamentally the ingroup/outgroup markers of a historically patriarchal society, and that the T/V distinction of old was also employed to mark broad ingroup/outgroup socioeconomic difference and degrees of interpersonal distance/intimacy. Ingroup/outgroup membership is fundamentally a dynamic of power – of one person's status in relation to others. Thus can we glimpse the potential pronominal expansion has for generating a diversity of meanings, acknowledging and/or subverting power relations, and challenging the homogenising effects of dominant power.

First and Second Person Pronouns:

The gender distinction in English pertains only to the third person proforms so that little attention has been paid to the more salient first and second person pronouns

There is no clearer illustration of the covert discursive limitations affecting the popular pronoun debate than the issue of *preferred pronouns*. As stated above, because third person proforms are gendered, popular debate has focussed on challenging that gender distinction, and because the gender distinction is only available in the third person, it is to the third person that the debate has been further restricted. As Pook states (6), “A preferred gender pronoun or PGP is the gender pronoun, or set of gender pronouns, *an individual uses to represent themselves* and which they would like others to use when they represent them” (my italics). For people in academic circles, “it has become commonplace to see conference tags that include space for a person’s pronouns. E-mail signatures signal by which pronouns the sender should be addressed” (Swyers 272). It has become accepted by many that, using a person’s correct pronouns (Balmer) “fosters inclusion, makes people feel respected and valued, and affirms their gender identity” (Hosking). Moreover, using “correct pronouns is one of the supportive behaviours that has been linked to better mental health outcomes for TGD [transgender and gender diverse] children and youth” (Brown 72). By the same token, there are many people who reject the notion of preferred pronouns due to pragmatic considerations:

“I meet hundreds of people in a day. Individualized pronouns would be unworkable” (Garner 34). And numerous works of fiction (see Livia) have tried to address the issue of preferred third person gender proforms without a general consensus having emerged. Under the present conditions, none ever will. The reason for this is the simple fact that the third person singular has been the sole ground of contestation. Were the debate to shift to the first person singular – i.e. the pronoun an individual uses to *directly* represent themselves – the covert discursive/ideological restraints would be overcome and the discussion could take a more productive turn.

The self-limiting nature of preferred third person proforms is brought into sharp focus when viewed alongside the first person: the third person entails reference to others, not to oneself. All attempts to express one’s own identity by compelling other’s to adhere to one’s own preferred pronouns are subject to the same inherent constraint – that self-expression is, by definition, *self*-expression. In a practical sense, it is easy to understand the difficulties in trying to assert one’s own identity via the utterances of others: those others would need to have foreknowledge of one’s identity and they would need to be willing to express that identity. In the first case, this is impractical since so many of our social interactions involve people with whom we have limited familiarity. All the people one meets throughout any given day cannot know one’s preferred gender identity and it is impractical to expect otherwise. In the latter case, it is also excessive to assume that everybody should subscribe to the same gender (or other) ideology as

oneself. Many people, after all, are content with the idea that humanity be divisible into masculine and feminine halves that are corequisite with male and female bodies, which correspond to *he* and *she* (indeed, for the concept of preferred pronouns to be taken in good faith, allowance must be made for different preferences, lest they cease being preferences and become compulsions – an important consideration when we remember that the motivation behind much non-binary pronoun discourse is to *avoid the compulsion* to mark gender). However, that essentialist, masculine/feminine distinction conflates biological sex with gender, i.e. gender pronouns are generally assigned according to the perception of whether a person be male or female (Brown 71), while a person's gender refers to their subjective experience which is not necessarily apparent in their physical features. As Swyers notes, there is “a growing acceptance of the idea that one's biological sex does not ‘naturally’ induce particular gendered behaviours” (278). Thus, vicarious self-expression through third person proforms is severely restricted by the rather prosaic fact that you simply don't know or wouldn't agree with, nor should you be forced to express, any given person's gender (or non-gender) identity/ideology.

It should also be noted that when a speaker uses third person proforms they are to a significant extent expressing their own identity/ideological viewpoint. This point runs counter to the received wisdom (which often informs the motivation behind preferred pronoun use) that to apply a third person proform such as *he* or *she* is to label someone else, to define and assert the referent's identity. However,

one's word choice, pronominal or otherwise, fundamentally reveals more about oneself and one's orientation towards society than it does about the person to whom is being referred (if Mary, for instance, were to refer to Steve using the N-word, most readers would, I am confident, impute far more to Mary's sense of in-group membership and the relationship between the two characters themselves, as well as within the larger community, than merely ascribing the epithet to Steve in isolation). Thus, the concept of preferred pronouns is predicated on a compulsion to self-subordination on the part of the speaker and is an act of symbolic violence on behalf of dominant androcentrism, using non-binary discourse as a proxy. That is, the concept of preferred pronouns as popularly understood is a self-defeating mechanism. As an example, let us assume that Jean prefers to identify as non-binary *they* and John as traditional, masculine *he*. If it is right that John should, out of respect, be socially obligated to refer to Jean as *they*, Jean should be equally obliged to refer to John as *he*. Yet, in both cases, each individual is being compelled by societal pressure into suppressing their own identities in favour of the other, which they will both most likely reject. In either case, such a state of affairs is not feasible if one hopes to live in a society that valorises freedom of expression. By contrast, if John were to refer to Jean as *she*, and Jean to refer to John as *they*, each individual would be expressing their own identity and neither would be under compulsion to act on the other's behalf: they would both be achieving what they had set out to do – to express themselves. In effect, and contrary to the conventional formulation, pronoun preference can

only be accomplished by favouring one's own pronouns. Agency is effected by the agent; preference is enacted by the speaker; to use a pronoun is to subscribe to its usage. You don't need to respect my pronouns – *I* do.

Indirect third person self-expression is therefore possible, although a much more direct means is available via the first person. However, as discussed above, because English does not have gendered (nor any other) first person alternatives to *I/me*¹, discussion has been limited to gendered third person proforms, and because pronouns have been categorised as closed class words, the possibility of coining new first person pronouns has remained, in popular discourse, virtually unthinkable. The existence of a sole, generic *I* has been taken for granted as natural and immutable to the extent that, even those commentators who have advocated stridently for singular *they* or other non-binary pronouns have been blinded by the dominant ideology to the much more effective possibilities available in the first person.

As noted earlier (Sywers and Thomas), different groups can establish, “distinct language patterns to create ‘authentic’ identities.” One means by which those identities have been expressed is with different varieties of English around the world having adopted lexical items of local provenance, a case in point being the large number of Māori origin words existing in NZE. These words can function as

¹ The *I/me* distinction, unlike the semantic distinction between *he* and *she*, being a matter of grammatical case.

ingroup markers to identify fellow group members, such as when a New Zealander might call out, “Kia ora,” when spotting somebody wearing a Thames Valley Swamp Foxes rugby jersey on the streets of London. Different groups express differing group identities in a variety of ways and coining, borrowing, rejecting and accepting new words into a lexicon is a natural process in the evolution of languages. The barriers that have heretofore been applied to new personal pronouns have served not to maintain a grammatical standard but rather to close the lexicon off to what are deemed to be non-standard identities.

Furthermore, since creative fiction can provide conditions that are suitable for linguistic innovation, it is within the field of creative fiction that such innovation can be demonstrated. For example, should an author wish to construct a French character in a novel, one of the many characterisation devices available to that author (explicit reference to the character’s country of origin; untranslated speech; conspicuous use of cognates; non-standard syntactical constructions; cultural references or quirks considered particular to that language-speaking group; etc.) would be to have the speaker using pronouns from their mother tongue. In the following example, taken from Agatha Christie’s *Murder on the Orient Express* (79), which already includes some of the aforementioned devices, I have taken the liberty of swapping some of the original English and/or French nouns, pronouns and possessives with French and/or English equivalents.

“What happened exactly?”

“Je knocked at the door, but il called out and said il had made a mistake.”

“In English or in French?”

“In French.”

“What were his words exactly?”

“*Ce n'est rien. Je me suis trompé.*”

“Quite right,” said Smith. “That is what I heard. And then vous went away?”

“Yes, Monsieur.”

“Did vous go back to votre seat?”

“No, Monsieur, je went first to answer another bell that had just rung.”

“Now, Michel, I am going to ask vous an important question. Where were vous at a quarter-past one?”

“Moi, Monsieur? Je was at mon little seat at the end – facing up the corridor.”

“You are sure?”

“*Mais oui* – at least – ”

The effect of the changes, I contend, is to realise the character of Michel more fully as being French. He refers to himself as either *je* or *moi* (*I* or *me*), and by referring to the absent, unnamed person about whom the pair are talking as *il* (*he*), Michel also, in line with the arguments I make above concerning indirect third person self-expression, reiterates his own French identity, his own Frenchness. By contrast, by changing the

name of the other character from *Poirot* to *Smith*, and by retaining that character's use of English first person pronouns, I contend that the characterisation of both Michel and Smith changes markedly in contradistinction to each other (to the extent that Smith's – actually Poirot's – use of the phrase, "Quite right," makes Smith sound decidedly English, whereas the original text does not, as it is not intended to, create the same Englishness effect for Poirot). From a broader ideological perspective, I also contend that in this particular case the distinction between *je* and *I* also disrupts the white, androcentric generic *I* by introducing nuance into the conventional conception of what it means to be white/European. European is divided into distinct Anglo and Franco components (such a distinction also gestures towards the idea that European can be further divided up into yet more ethnicities/nationalities/language speakers. This is just a small demonstration of how pronouns are meaningful and may be exploited by writers according to their particular intentions.

Additionally, as noted earlier, the first and second person pronouns are deictic expressions, identifying the roles of *speaker* and *addressee*. Unlike the third person proforms, these two personal pronouns encode a strong sense of immediacy because, "the deictic nature of first and second person referring expressions entails direct reference to the speech participants. Direct reference encodes the perception of intentionality and sentience very strongly, and hence there is strongly inferred animacy" (Yamamoto 26). Unlike a third person, the speaker and addressee are inherently present. This

immediacy gives the personal pronouns even greater potential for meaning since one can be a French-speaker (see above), an intimate-friend-speaker (compare *thee* to *you*), or a Māori-mutually-inclusive-speaker (*tāua* meaning *you and I*). Contrary to the ideological strictures stating that pronouns be meaningless function words, it is in fact the case that the opposite is true – pronouns are fraught with meaning.

Indeed, of the three grammatical person categories – first person, second person, third person – it is the second person that possesses the most potential for meaning because it is the most overtly relational of the singular references. Both the first and second person are deictic, referring to the constitutive participants of the communicative act. The first person, however, is primarily self-referential and self-defining, so that any primary conflict would be internal, between the speaker and themselves. The third person, on the other hand, is non-deictic, making it less immediate (the referent, after all, may often not even be present in the conversation). The second person, though, is unique in that it makes direct reference to the addressee in their presence, thereby exposing the speaker's attitude in relation to them. As noted earlier, encoding such relationality is the primary function of the T/V distinction, expressed in English via *thou/you* or in French through *tu/vous*. Indeed, the fraughtfulness of the T/V distinction is well understood by most English speakers who have attempted learning French because when deploying it the speaker must make assumptions about their relationship to the addressee and their respective relative status. To err in such a situation is to risk causing offence. After all, the

sense of discomfort one faces when having to choose either a masculine or feminine third person singular when referring to someone of non-apparent biological sex (normally prompting recourse to singular *they*) is a common enough experience that a comedy film exploiting the subject has been made (Bernstein): one can imagine therefore the potential for social awkwardness if English were to possess masculine and feminine versions of *you* and no non-gendered one.

Being fundamentally relational, were the second person singular to take more than one form – as has been available in English in the past – each of those forms would be exceptionally meaningful. An example of such can be found in the above excerpt, where Smith expresses empathy and shared identity with Michel by choosing to refer to him as *vous*. In contrast, by switching to, “You are sure?” when questioning Michel’s version of events, Smith’s orientation to Michel immediately becomes less sympathetic; there is suddenly a social distance between the two that, although it concerns a matter of trust, is projected through their respective nationalities. One’s pronouns are vehicles for meaning.

Notes on Reo Māori Pronouns in *Eyes and Ias*

Cultural Appropriation

I would like to preface this section with a brief discussion on the notion of *cultural appropriation*, so as to pre-empt any potential objections to this thesis on such grounds. Cultural appropriation fails as an analogy and thus as a polemical device because it evokes the action of removal that does not occur in the linguistic sphere. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines appropriation as, “The making of a thing private property, whether another's or (as now commonly) one's own; taking as one's own or to one's own use; *concrete* the thing so appropriated or taken possession of.” However, when the word *kūmara* is used in English, that word is not being taken away from te reo Māori for exclusive use in English. Rather, a different word is being produced in a different language – a word that has origins in another language but nonetheless is itself an instantiation of something new. As opposed to *appropriation*, the word *translation* expresses the idea that a lexical item has its own linguistic and cultural context-dependent meanings, whilst also acknowledging that the item takes its provenance from elsewhere. *Translation* gestures simultaneously towards an approximate correspondence with the language of origin and the fundamental situational difference of the target language, which more accurately describes the process in question.

Therefore, I would like to suggest that *cultural translation* and *cultural counterfeiting* be more useful terms than *cultural appropriation* because they suggest varying degrees of acknowledgement of provenance. Moreover, the term *cultural appropriation* (and its usefulness as a criticism) contains the seeds of its own repudiation since while cultural *artefacts* may be taken away, *performances* of culture – such as language use – cannot, which is a point of order that gives the wilful counterfeiter the rhetorical means to dismiss outright any claims of wrongdoing, i.e. “I haven’t taken anything from anyone, which means the accusation of cultural appropriation is false, and therefore no wrongs have been committed.” Such a rhetorical strategy opens the door for exploitation and disrespect to be committed under the aegis of the so-called tongue-in-cheek. Rather, where offence is caused, the issue is a matter of production, not appropriation, counterfeiting, not theft.

To provide an example, a sentence such as, “pass me those kumaras” might be regarded as a cultural counterfeit while, “pass me those kūmara” can be recognised a cultural translation since there are varying degrees to which each version makes conspicuous the existence of an originating precedent. Because of their presence within a string of New Zealand English (NZE) discourse, both usages are instances of NZE and neither are instances of reo Māori: it is no more a matter of code-switching than is the use of the words *kindergarten* (German) or *café* (French) in NZE. The first (“kumaras”) lies somewhere nearer the counterfeit end of the spectrum because little is

being done to acknowledge its reo Māori origins (indeed, its complete grammatical integration into NZE works to conceal its origins). The second (“kūmara”) lies nearer to the translation end because the refusal to fully integrate the term into the grammatical and phonetic structures of the target language stands as an acknowledgement of its provenance elsewhere (such as is more clearly the case with the pronunciation of reo Māori and Māori-origin words, perhaps most especially place names, within NZE discourse, which of course is outside the scope of this thesis but worth mentioning as a sociolinguistic analogue). Respecting portions of the morphological/grammatical integrity of the language of origin is not a negligible symbolic gesture. Conversely, to conflate cultural counterfeiting and cultural translation under the single term *cultural appropriation* is to facilitate the disregard under which exploitation and insult have previously been committed.

Far from representing Pākehā cultural appropriation, I consider my thesis to represent part of a larger reo Māori resurgence geared towards harmony and mutual recognition. My stance is that to use Māori-origin pronouns and proforms in NZE is to put NZE to work for Māori purposes, and by doing so, to also enrich NZE.

Addition versus Substitution

Readers of *Eyes and Ias* will notice *he* and *she* being used in conjunction with *ia*. This is a deliberate strategy that aligns with my contention that pronoun discourse has heretofore exhibited a reductive tendency that ought to be resisted. Simply substituting *he/she* with *ia* would lead to *ia* taking on the role of the generic third person singular, just as generic *I* subsumes other identities beneath the dominant white androcentric identity in the first person. My aim is to demonstrate that pronouns are meaningful and that such meaning is relational: *ia* can be meaningful when applied in contradistinction to *he/she* because *he/she* represent what *ia* is not, i.e. gendered, Pākehā, dominant, generic, etc. *Ia* would have greatly diminished meaning were it to be used merely as a substitute for *he/she* since it would be fulfilling the role of representing everyone, i.e. it would have been reduced to the generic.

A useful precedent which demonstrates the importance of contradistinction can be found in the 25th anniversary edition of Ursula Le Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1994). In this particular edition, Le Guin has provided (as appendices) different versions of some of the novel's chapters, each enacting different pronominal strategies. Within the novel's fictional universe, the indigenous inhabitants of the planet Gethen experience "*somer*, their ungendered 'normal' state," and "*kemmer*, their sexual period" (288). In Appendix A, Le Guin applies

non-gendered third person neopronouns (or neoproforms) to a character in somer:

E is one of the most powerful people in the country; I am not sure of the proper historical equivalent of es position, vizier or prime minister or councillor; the Karhidish word for it means the Sovereign's Ear. E is the heir of a Domain and a Peer of the Realm, a mover of great events. Es name is Therem Harth rem ir Estraven (299).

What this extract demonstrates is that without recourse to other third person proforms, the neoproform *E* lacks salience because we as readers cannot know which identities it excludes. Thus, superficially, *E* succeeds only in its reductive function as a non-gender marking personal pronoun. However, as noted above, by replacing the gendered personal pronouns, *E* also performs the function of generic third person singular, thus covertly encoding a bias towards the dominant, white masculine identity. I contend that most readers would conceptualise Estraven as masculine, despite the lack of masculine reference.

In Appendix C, by contrast, Le Guin takes a more relative – and as a result additive – approach, “Using neuter pronouns for people in somer and gendered pronouns for people in kemmer” (333). The significance of the proforms to the characters’ developing sexual relationship is strikingly effective:

This one was a stranger, young as ensel. They looked at each other. Each of them was comely, strong of frame and fine of feature, straight and dark. Estraven saw that the fire of kemmer was in the face of the other.

E said, "I am Arek of Estre."

She said, "I am Thorem of Stok."

Then Estraven laughed, for e was still weak, and said, "Did you warm me back to life in order to kill me, Stokven?"

She said, "No."

She put out her hand and touched Estraven's hand, as if she were making certain that the frost was driven out. At the touch, though Estraven was a day or two from his kemmer, he felt the fire waken in himself. So for a while both held still, their hands touching (335).

Here we see that the change from referring to Estraven as *E* to *he* signifies both the initiation of a change in his physical form from *somer* to *kemmer* as well as the changing dynamic of the pair's relationship. Furthermore, because of the heterosexual, male/female relationship being effectuated in the scene, the plural third person *their* in the final sentence encapsulates Estraven's *he* and Stokven's *she*, thereby accentuating the already activated (hetero)sexual potential of the relationship. Were the two characters instead embodying the non-gendered *E* state of *somer*, *their* would suggest a more Platonic relationship. The relational meaning of pronouns can be highly salient.

Conclusion

I hope that my thesis might inspire a reassessment of pronouns and their value as meaningful words. In conjunction with the creative text that follows, the aim of this thesis is to make the reader more fully aware of the power of pronouns – *my* aim is to make *you* more fully aware of the power of pronouns – by drawing attention to our culturally conditioned resistance to them as being meaningful words. I believe that in the process of reading *Eyes and Ias*, the open minded reader might, after some initial reluctance, come to understand that the barrier to accepting pronouns as content words lies not in the nature of pronouns themselves but in the reader's culturally conditioned attitude towards them. My hope is that – in a world that is being increasingly digitised, where information must be granulated so as to be incorporated into computer programmes and algorithms, in a world where data is increasingly being privileged over knowledge, where real world human relationships are progressively being undermined in favour of the virtual, where identities are being increasingly codified – the irreducible complexity of our interpersonal relationships can be reasserted if we choose, collectively, to acknowledge and then to resist the dehumanising process of pronominal reduction to which we have to this point unwittingly subscribed.

Creative Component:

Eyes and Ias

Chapter One

A couple of human limbs – one of each, apparently – had washed-up on the beach further up the coast, but Jerry hadn't known about that when stepping out from under the bridge to find a cop car waiting right there.

Ia had been hitching up State Highway One; had suddenly got a crook guts. That happened sometimes when on the road, living on fish and chips and Maccas and whatnot. The bush tucker wouldn't have helped. Had all, just like that, dropped to the bottom of ōna guts and ia had to go, right there and then.

Ia'd been waiting outside the town for almost an hour without even getting a hint of a ride. People off to work, mostly going the wrong way back into town. The hiss of traffic was like the whoosh and whisper of breaking waves. Mostly top-heavy old vans and rusty utes bobbing along or else a cheap little sedan with no passengers and a radio station that needed changing just as it was going past. In the distance, the tar-bound river stone bore more vehicles down from the hills where the backs of the paddocks that dominated the landscape were scored by a thin crisscross of fence lines.

Ia scuffled along, almost in a crouch, making small, rushed steps with ōna guts clutched, past a rotten old house that still stood half burnt-out on a rise maybe a kay in from the road; driveway had long since been absorbed by the paddocks. Thought about cutting across and shitting there in the wreck of that old home, hoping to make it over that open ground in time; thought better of it.

The spasms were coming on hard. One moment felt as though ia would no longer be able to hold it in, would burst, would have to crouch down where ia was and suffer the humiliation and public retribution. Someone would call the cops.

Thought back to that time when rātou had been staying at the beach and ia had made a mess in the public toilets there. Must've been five or six. Somewhere up the Coast. Had done a tūtae in ōna undies and gotten some on ōna fingers. The concrete floor had already been wet with that pissy damp of public toilets. Beach bogs. Had waited for ages not knowing what to do until a kind parent had, noticing the smell, asked if ia was alright, had gone and gotten ōna parents.

Ia shuffled forward in a panic as another stab drove itself into ōna guts and a car approached and appeared to slow down. Ia straightened, forced a hostile glare onto tōna face, since the last thing ia wanted now was that a car might stop. The four-wheel drive, an iridescent burnt orange colour, a townie car, was perceptibly losing speed and ia searched for the eyes of the driver and glared hard as it neared, tried to look angry, psychopathic, undesirable, and finally

made eye contact. Could see the young driver recoil and think better of stopping before accelerating back up to speed.

Ia had glanced further ahead to where the land sunk down with the river, snuck down out of sight under those thick slabs of concrete where the sun's heat would never penetrate, and did a shit on the moondust under the bridge. On the way down the path (trodden no doubt by kids on the way to ō rātou favourite swimming hole, scampering back up again dripping wet to try to do an even bigger bomb) ia had thought ahead and grabbed a handful of grass to wipe tōna arse with, but fuck, it ended up being a mess alright. Had been happy, in a way, to have been out on the road away from everyone else. Public toilets were grotty enough as it was without having to make eye contact with anyone about it. Here ia was alone.

The day seemed brighter looking out from the shade under the bridge as if from a cave. A weeping willow dreamily trailed ō rātou fingers across the smooth surface of the water. Little birds quarrelled in the harakeke. Somewhere not far off a pūkeko opened and closed a squeaky door. Was warm out there too, with a whole new brood of cicadas straining the sound from the sunlight and the river trickling away there in the background while every now and then a *whoosh* would reverberate through the dull concrete frame overhead. There was a clinging dewiness to the morning that warned of a heavy summer to come, a summer of thunder and sandflies, bloated carcasses and the foulness of overripe meat. The plants were being fattened up by the last of what the spring rains had brought.

Seen a massive dragonfly too. There was something cartoony about that stick zigzagging there in the air, casting spells, drawing neat constellations and conducting the cicadas that reminded Jerry of being a kid.

Fly had landed on tōna crack and ia had to jiggle tōna arse like a bee giving directions just to get the fucking thing to move, but each time it landed back again until at last ia took a couple of swipes at it with the handful of grass and it finally took off for good.

Had got into town pretty late one night a few days earlier, having been dropped-off by some soul-patched business one in a suit who hadn't said much but must've been a good cunt for picking ia up in the first place. Jerry had hopped-in to this flash BMW and introduced tōna self when the one had laughed and gone, "Jerry? What? That short for Gerald or Geraldine?" Got lame comments like that every now and then. Wasn't funny any of the other times, either, but ia just laughed politely because of the ride and the fulla didn't say a lot after that. Neither of rāua were very talkative, apparently, so rāua just drove on in silence.

Jerry eventually got out in the middle of the main street and told the fulla that ia was gonna check-in to the pub for the week and try to find some work if ia knew of anybody. Went to the cash machine and checked tōna balance: a hundred and seventeen bucks. Then off to the fish and chip shop and then wandered down where the sign pointed, towards the school, which was usually the best bet when one needed to save a few pingas and find a quick place to sleep, usually just in a

nook somewhere close-up against one of the classrooms, although this time ia'd been able to pull a bit of cardboard from the recycling bin to use as a mattress. Settled-in at a spot underneath where the red fire alarm box was attached to the wall. The weather had been heating up day after day, plus there had been a bit of cloud cover come in during the afternoon to keep the heat in. Fell asleep satisfied with a full puku.

Got woken up in the middle of the night by something thumping into ia. Must've been around two o'clock in the morning. Just felt the thud followed by something large squirming alongside, then it seemed to scissor open, the two parts coming together before bending in unison and then something long seemed to grow out of the ground in the darkness. Suddenly it loomed over ia.

There was laughter and Jerry realised that there were three of rātou.

“Your turn, bro!”

One of rātou handed a bottle to another and then, stepping back to get a run-up, came hooning towards Jerry before leaping sideways and slamming full-length into ia on the ground.

The other two went, “oh!” as if rāua had just seen a massive hit in the rugby.

Jerry was too stunned to formulate anything to say.

“Your turn, Steve,” the second one laughed, taking tāna beer bottle back from the first one. “Fucking body-slam, bro!”

The night was darker because of the overcast sky. Jerry could just make out the silhouette of ō rātou bodies bristling like bulls,

could sense the disbelief rātou felt at having stumbled across such a lucky find just when the fun had seemed to be over for the night. Jerry made out the third one's approach but failed to see the foot that hit ia hard in the chest.

“Ah, fuck, you cunt!” Jerry yelled, rising up into a foetal position, ōna knees to the ground. “Fuck off, you arseholes!”

There was a split-second pause before rātou broke once more into laughter.

“D'youse hear that, boys?” one of them goes.

Another swallowed the dregs of tāna bottle and then smashed it on the ground so that the shards burst into Jerry.

“Fuck off, you cunts!” Jerry goes, much louder.

“*You* fuck off!” the third one raged with sudden, unexpected ferocity, “I'll fucking scalp you. I'll fuck you twice, cunt! Don't fucking tell us what to do in our own fucking town! Who the fuck are you? *Who the fuck are you?*” Ia inched forward with every word to loom further over Jerry's body.

Jerry quickly stood up, shedding tōna sleeping bag and drawing tōna arm back as if to strike at the fulla before seeming to stumble backwards into the wall and then dropping the arm. The three fullas flinched together as if being struck by the first jolt of an earthquake. Two of them threw ā rāua beers to the ground and all three sprinted off in the same direction into the darkness. Jerry gathered up āna stuff, quickly shaking the glass off tōna sleeping bag before stuffing it into tōna backpack and running back out of the school grounds at the point

at which ia had climbed the fence to get in. Ia ran down the street in the opposite direction to the main drag, tāna presence setting dogs off barking one after another as ia made tāna way down the street exposed beneath the bright streetlights before finding the darkness of a wide public park. Crossed the open grass. When ia stepped onto the river stone and heard the calm rustle of the water, turned right, staying on the bank and after pressing through the undergrowth for a couple of minutes settled-in at a gap between some toetoe, hidden from view, but out of reach of the cutty-grass, while back at the school the fire alarm still shrieked away, waking up the town.

The next morning ia changed ōna plans and went bush for a few days. Thought it'd be easier to get away from all the shitheads of the world. Crossed at a hanging walkway by the park and wandered up the river a bit more until ia was well away from town before setting-up a couple of nylon lines. After that, stumbled across some freshies in a stream that cut in further up, catching the little fuckers by pressing down on each one with the end of a long stick and then picking them up by hand, boiling them alive until they changed colour in tāna pocked little aluminium pot. Little square thing with the handle broken off. Been a while since ia'd done that, was surprised at ending-up being so well fed, especially on top of the baked beans ia already had in tōna pack and the eels ia ended-up catching – skinned and gutted with tāna army knife bought out of a *Combat and Survival* mag when ia was a kid and was still going strong. Well, sort of. The cap had come off the bottom of the handle, which was hollow, but it

wasn't as if ia wanted to store toothpicks or nail files or any of that gimmicky shit. Just wanted to be able to cut-up meat. Was a bit top-heavy, so ia had grouted the handle with the dregs of a rusty paint tin and then loaded it to set with four-inch nails that just poked out, giving the whole thing a better length and balance. Tied a bit of cord round the nail heads. A bit of yarn, a bit of kōrero, ia goes. Kept a stone in a leather sheath that belonged to a butcher's knife but did the job alright with this one.

Hadn't brought a book. Ended up just re-living some instead. All that old school stuff that ia could definitely see past but enjoyed anyway in a more enlightened sense. After all, ia reckoned, who could cook tucker in the bush without being Crumpy or Hemingway? And it wasn't just those old school fullas who could be self-sufficient, so one could lift those stories out of their context and use them however one wanted, like that time on that construction site ia'd MacGyvered-up that clear bit of hose as a spirit level. The fullas on site shat ō rātou pants when ia came up with that one. Must've thought ia was dumb before that, just some no-hoper drifting through. Rātou were the ones who were dumb, sitting there doing nothing, waiting for someone else to drop-off another laser before rātou would get on with the job. Too bloody stuck in ā rātou ways to give anything new a go.

Had wandered back into town, cut through without stopping, hooked back up with the main drag on the other side and then put tōna thumb out. It was then that ia'd felt the twinge in ōna guts.

Had gotten a shock stepping back out to find that familiar white and blue shape where there had just been road and scrub before, with the window down and the policeone looking up, startled or something.

“Where’d koe come from?”

Jerry froze. The white noise of the cicadas and the ever-distant traffic seemed to crumple and hiss together inside tōna head. A muss of white clouds billowed low along the western horizon, making it look to Jerry as though the land itself were shifting, as if ia were being spun on a carousel.

Ia hesitated, tried to size the cop up, but couldn’t make out much from where ia was standing back from the road. Didn’t know what ia was meant to say or do, having been caught almost with ōna pants down. Had been stepping up from the bank, wading knee-deep through the flow of the shade and the wet grass, weighed down by tōna backpack, readjusting tōna belt, when ia’d looked up to see that dark pair of eyes looking back with surprise and curiosity and suspicion, was in a compromising position for which the proof lay there probably already covered in flies.

Was it illegal to take a dump under a bridge out of town? Had no idea. Could go either way. Surely, if one had to go, one had to go? Was beside the river out of town not a part of nature where all animals including humans were free to go? Thought back to the mess left there in that lifeless patch of dust beneath concrete slabs and the persistent hiss of traffic and wondered if that could really be classed as natural.

“From under the bridge,” ia finally answered.

The policeone just sat there, expressionless, before muttering something into tōna chest that Jerry couldn't quite make out. Jerry stepped forward mumbling “sorry?” Stopped at the bottom of the ditch.

The policeone's voice seemed to echo in from elsewhere, until Jerry realised that it was another voice, a different voice, that ia had for a second turned tāna attention away from Jerry and was speaking into the police radio.

Then something like a slap whacked Jerry on the cheek, blasted ōna hair across tōna head, screamed into ōna ears, and then the blue-grey stench of diesel fumes washed over ia as the stock truck thundered through.

The policeone's head tilted back to an angle with the rear-view mirror and Jerry sensed ia calculating whether or not to chase the truck down and pull it over and rark the driver up for going too fast, before concluding that it wouldn't be worth the bother because the truck wasn't actually going *that* fast. The truckie was just being a smart arse, not slowing down enough, going “go on then, pull me over. What have you got on me?”

So the policeone leaned towards Jerry instead, resting one hand on the dashboard and one hand on the passenger seat casually like a dubious stranger soliciting directions.

“What were koe up to down there?”

Jerry gave the policeone an annoyed what-do-you-think look and clipped together the chest buckle on tōna backpack. One of the straps was almost frayed through completely and was about to go. A plump blowfly slammed into tōna neck just below the ear, about as graceful as a kererū catching itself a tree.

“Just taking a leak.”

The policeone sat still, unimpressed, as if ia wasn't going to do anything, but then the dark screen of the car window closed-up and ia pushed through tāna driver's side door and out onto the road. Kept close to the vehicle before sliding out in front, then onto the grass verge and out of traffic's harm's way. Was stocky and unhurried and must've been a decent front-rower or something, Jerry could tell, because of the uncannily shapeless cauliflower ears and wide, heel-heavy gait.

Ia goes, “How long have koe been living under there?”

Jerry groaned silently, looked off to the side, going, “do I look like a troll?”

Jerry had never had much luck with the cops, not because ia ever played-up, but because ia *never* played-up. Whenever the cops had a go at Jerry, ia was always innocent, so it was always unfair, so ia couldn't help but hate rātou. Especially that arrogant cunt at New Year's in Raglan that time who broke tōna nose just for being part of the crowd. Just smirked and walked away knowing Jerry wouldn't be able to do a thing about it. Fuck that had made ia wild. And when ia had put tōna hand to tōna nose, it was crooked, and ia had freaked out,

had snuck off behind the portaloos and mashed it back into place while it pissed blood everywhere. Could feel the cartilage crunching away, but had got it done alright.

Now this policeone was reaching into tōna chest pocket. Pulled out a notepad. Looked back up at Jerry.

“Where do koe live?”

Where did ia live? Couldn't answer that question in a way that would make the cop happy. Ia never really lived anywhere properly. Just *stayed* or *rested*, didn't *live*. Just followed the seasons and the work around the country, had done a hundred different jobs in heaps of different places. Knew tōna own country better than most of those other cunts ever would. All the nooks and crannies.

“Not under there.”

Another car hissed past, blasting its wake over rāua.

The policeone sighed and glanced for a second off into the distance to where the sun had crossed behind a cloud. A shadow stroked the karst-backed line of hills. Ia gently replaced the notepad and looked at Jerry again. Tōna demeanour had softened. Ia goes:

“Nō hea koe, e hoa?”

And then, for whatever reason, something in Jerry shifted and suddenly ia was *really* pissed off: who does this cunt think they are? One minute th'are all suspicious and accusing me, the next they think we're fucking mates?

Jerry ceremoniously hoicked up some snot and then spat it on the ground and goes, “All over.”

The cicadas were fizzing louder as the rusty old mechanism of the sun seemed to skip a notch and jolt heavily forward a degree, leaving the landscape fully exposed and sunlit, releasing the summer's first latent puff of dust.

“Oh, is that right?” the policeone goes, unable to conceal tāna annoyance, tāna affront at having been rebuffed. “Well, koe wanna come with au to the station so koe can come up with some better answers?”

Rāua locked eyes again and Jerry goes, “if you don't like my answers, why do you want to keep asking me questions?”

Crrrrsht.

A hiss of static escaped from the policeone's radio.

“How long have koe been living down there?” ia persisted.

Then Jerry, fucked off at having to deal with yet another false accusation, goes, “I *haven't* been,” while the policeone reached into tōna pocket, not moving ōna eyes away from Jerry.

Cla-clunk.

The car made a locking noise.

The policeone strode through the ditch and past Jerry, up the other side, approaching the spot where Jerry had stepped out from under the bridge. Ia looked at the pathway Jerry had cut through the dewy grass. The cicada buzz now seemed to sound like a warning.

“So,” ia looked back, “if au go down and find proof that koe *have* been living down there, au will have to take koe in.”

Jerry was flabbergasted.

“*What!* What for? It’s not against the law to sleep outside,” ia objected. The whole situation was starting to get out of hand.

“Yeah, that’s right,” the policeone goes, “but if au *do* find something, au’ll know that koe’ve been lying, eh?”

Jerry said nothing. Wasn’t sure if there was a bluff to be called. Rāua just stood there while the sound of the cicadas shifted again, seemed to now have become the sound of the river cutting its way, slowing sinking, slowly melting into the earth.

The policeone took out the notepad again and drew the pencil from its sheath.

“Ingoa?”

Then a loud noise went off in Jerry’s head, like a foghorn or a siren, followed by the groaning whirr of an approaching/decelerating vehicle.

A Falcon ute, pit-bull white, with a head half-poking out of the window, was pulling up on the far side of the road adjacent to the police car. The man behind the wheel seemed to be berating Jerry. The handbrake creaked into full strain as the Falcon bounced to a halt.

Another car hissed past at full speed, violently cutting rātou off for half a second.

An unfamiliar voice shouted, “There you fuckin’ are. You were supposed to wait for me in town, not fuck off out here.”

Jerry turned back to the policeone and then back to the ute. The policeone didn’t look back at Jerry, but stayed, with crossed arms, facing the newcomer.

The stranger was weather-beaten, unshaven, had a supercilious grin, grey eyes glinting from beneath tōna brow. Ia wore a dark green, close-knit woollen jersey with a brass zipper at the neck. Had thick, greasy wrinkles cutting into tōna face. Rested a reddened arm on the window, where wiry black hairs mingled with the glow of sun-bleached down as if tōna skin were being grazed by the fur of two distinct animals.

To Jerry's bemusement, ia goes, "This one's with me, *Cuntstable*," grinning, switching tāna look towards the policeone and back to Jerry, then dragging on a tailey.

Jerry turned again to the policeone, who seemed less taken aback, more watchful. Ia wracked tōna brain but the stranger didn't spark any memories. Didn't have a clue what to say.

"Don't worry, Cowrie," the new one went on, reaching up to readjust the rear-view mirror before looking directly at Jerry, "Get in the truck, you queer cunt." Then, glancing down the road as if suddenly coming to a realisation, ia broke into a laugh, adding, "Next time, you can bring your own fucking car."

Jerry wondered how this stranger had heard of tōna last name. The only person who knew tōna name around here was the Business One, but Jerry was sure of only having given tōna *first* name.

Then Jerry turned towards the policeone once more and, in that instant, seeing that suspicion there again, wincing again at the memory of tōna cartilage grinding back into place, pissed off at the thought of another false accusation being thrown at ia for nothing,

insulted at the arsehole's attempt at trying to be matey with ia after all that, ia glanced down the length of the road. Off in one direction, the first few houses of the town stood small in faded, rectangular multicolours like roadside bee hives, while in the other direction the green hills rolled away, smooth and undulating. Since there were no cars coming, ia jogged heavily across to the other side of the road, backpack swaying side-to-side, and tried the handle of the passenger side door.

It was locked.

“Nah,” the new one goes, turning to Jerry standing helplessly there on the other side of the locked door, “get in the back.”

Jerry stepped across and tried the door. It opened. Ia pushed tōna backpack in and followed along behind.

“What are koe up to, Con?” The policeone called out, standing calm and motionless with po-faced officiousness there on the side of the road. Ia now had the unconcerned demeanour of someone who had seen this kind of thing before, of someone not expecting less.

“Sorry mate,” Con smiled, “you’ll have to say it in English. I don’t speak *mowrie*.”

Jerry looked through the window, recognised the wince that slashed across the policeone’s face, and had a second thought.

“What are *you* up to, *Conrad*?” goes the cop.

Con chucked tāna tailey on the road and spat at it and grinned. A tiny wisp of smoke curled up off the chip seal.

“I wish I was as good with names as you are, *Cuntstable*,” ia winked, “Just picking up my employee.” Ia shifted the truck into drive. “Keep up the good work, eh.”

And then, with Con’s elbow resting casually on the open window, rāua drove off in the ute leaving the policeone standing there following with ōna eyes as rāua disappeared around a bend up State Highway One.

*

“Thanks for that.”

Con didn’t respond.

Rāua carried on for another three kays, were travelling at around a-hundred-and-twenty and Jerry could feel the slight losses and gains of gravity as rāua dolphined through the dips and rises, feel the lateral nudges as rāua swerved around the long easy bends, tōna head rolling into each turn like a slow metronome. Looked out as batten after martyred batten, stapled to the twelve-gauge, flickered in an endless reel, power poles whizzed past reviving that old daydream of wielding a long chainsaw, immense wind turbines spun ā rātou taiaha against the wavering skyline, and a little tribe of cabbage trees trudged knee-deep through the blood-green paddocks.

This was still sheep country. Too hilly for dairy. Lambs kicked out while their mums patiently grazed.

Jerry goes, “That must’ve been your mate that dropped me off in town?”

Con carried on as if nothing had been said.

Jerry didn’t try again. Thought maybe Con was a bit hard of hearing. Tāna window was open, after all. Thought ia was probably a good cunt since ia had rescued Jerry from that cop, and tāna mate, the Business One, must’ve passed on to Con that Jerry was looking for work. Must be decent fullas. Quiet, but decent. Jerry had known plenty of fullas like that. Gruff, salt-of-the-Earth types. Seemed like arseholes to those who didn’t know better. But it was hard to work them out, tell them apart, cos there actually were some real bastards out there too.

Then Jerry’s body pressed into the seatbelt and tōna head tilted forward as the brake came on. Tōna left arm, which had been dangling from the handle over the door, tightened against the strain.

On the other side of the road stood a blistered old sign for a caravan park where ia could hardly make out the hand-painted word *closed*.

“Ever work in the sheds?”

Jerry had.

It was then that Jerry remembered that time ia’d been rouseying in the sheds around Pōrangahau, had heard the stories about this shearer called *Con*. Jerry had been thinning apples just out of Waipawa when someone’d said ia was gonna go do some rouseying with a shearing contractor who was tāna mate’s dad. Said Jerry should

come along because the money on the orchards was shit, which was true. Jerry couldn't strip the trees like some of those other fullas, or rather ia wouldn't have gotten away with it like those other fullas seemed to. Jerry would always get sent back down the row to do a better job. The fast ones who did a shitty job would just be left to go at it. Jerry would've made more money getting paid by the hour instead of on contract, but rātou couldn't put them all on a wage. If rātou did that, all the fast ones would slow back down and rip the system that way. It was people like Jerry who missed out.

So when the offer came ia jumped in the back of a shitty old Hillman Hunter and went out to the beach. Got put up in the camping ground with half a dozen other shed hands. The Hillman Hunter never made it back. Got driven down to the river one day and never started again. Rusty skeleton's probably still there, threatening kids with tetanus.

Anyway, Jerry didn't ever come across that Con character. Just heard about ia, as one hears about lots of people. Was just another set of stories. But apparently, so rātou reckoned, one wouldn't want to be the sheepo who didn't fill this fulla Con's pen fast enough, nor be the rousie too slow to grab the raddle, or else the ewe staggering around the board with its spine cracked like a broken sawhorse would haunt tōu conscience even if koe didn't normally give two shits about sheep. Anyone who's worked in the sheds knows that sheep are cunts. Stupidest animals one will ever come across. But still, hard not to feel bad for a creature that's just discovered hope by losing all of it.

“Um, yep,” Jerry replied from the back seat, at a forty-five degree angle to the back of Con’s head, “I’ve done a bit of rouseying and pressing.” Ia looked across at Con looking up at ia through the rear-view mirror. “Can’t shear, though.”

“Bet you can’t,” Con muttered, dragging a half-circle over the steering wheel from right to left, guiding rāua down the driveway.

The whole complex had been laid with shingle. Seeing it there reminded Jerry of the very first time ia had heard the word *greywacke* at school. It had sounded like a joke and none of the kids had believed the teacher at first.

The first building rāua passed must’ve been the old reception office, which had a newer, unpainted corrugated iron section added to it – what Jerry worked out must’ve been the kitchen and canteen area for the workers. The harsh reflection off the bald steel seemed to shift its glare to wherever rāua moved.

The rest of the compound was made up of one- and two-bedroom weatherboard huts. The place looked as though it must’ve had its heyday in the fifties because all of the colours on the walls were different shades of pale former somethings. There were off-white versions of the whole spectrum – faint pinks had been reds and light creams had been yellows. The paint on roofs had started to curl up, letting rust-freckles stain the underlying grey where gaunt old nails stooped hatless.

The gravel seemed to groan as the ute passed over.

To the right, in an open space between the huts and what Jerry could tell was the communal bathrooms, stood a pile of unsplit wood. The shower block must've been one of those old jobbies that ran on a wood burner.

Con looked in the mirror and saw Jerry looking at the pile and goes, "That's dry, that lot."

Then the truck came to rest outside the smallest of the huts. A shack, pretty much. Furthest away from the road.

Con stepped out of the truck and goes, "That's your room."

Jerry pulled tāna backpack after ia and hopped out as well, walking over to the hut and pushing open the door. It was a single room with a little kitchenette and no toilet. Ia would have to trudge up to the shower block each time, ia thought, chucking the backpack on the bare, stained mattress.

Ia'd stayed in worse places.

Heaps worse.

At least there was a little fridge and a microwave and stove. Jerry would rather have this place to tōna self than have to share with some rowdy cunts in a bigger hut.

Ia glanced out the little aluminium-framed window that was embedded high in the back wall. At the top of a hill, maybe five-hundred metres above the compound, standing tall and white and lonely like a lighthouse from which the seas had long since receded, stood an incomplete turbine. The third blade was missing and it stood there with arms held out to the world in a V. Ia could hear the

crackling sound as Con crossed the gravel outside, followed by the thudding as āna footsteps hit the floor of the lean-to, and then the door flew open with a kick and Con stepped into the doorway with the axe held in both hands.

Jerry froze there beside the kitchen bench, steadying tōna self by placing a hand on the edge, shifting the weight evenly into the balls of ōna feet. There was nowhere to escape further into the room and there was no getting past Con in the doorway. The buzzing of the cicadas suddenly seemed to fill the air again, crowding out the oxygen and tightening ōna nerves to suffocation.

“You’ve got two weeks,” Con mumbled, “and then main shear kicks off.” Ia threw the axe onto the bed beside Jerry’s pack. “If you don’t get it done, I’ll find someone else.”

Leaving the door wide open, Con turned towards the ute and strode off again without saying another word. Ia got into the truck and drove off back up the driveway and out onto the road.

Jerry grabbed the axe and took it off the bed. Leaned it in a corner.

Then another thought occurred to ia about that time back in the sheds in the Bay. There had also been a rumour that, much further back, somewhere else in the country, a young shearer had once formed a, let’s say, strong attachment to Con. It was one of those rumours one would normally write-off as a load of bullshit. Just some stirrer going too far.

But anyway, so the story went, this young shearer had gotten a crush on Con or some fucking thing before being found one morning on a stay-out hanging black-eyed and blue-tongued from the rafters of the woolshed. Skin on tōna neck had split open below the noose, so rātou reckon. And all Con does is goes and props tōna jilted lover up on the killing shed floor for the local constable, a three-hour drive away, to collect, and makes the gang work through.

Then Jerry stopped to think, to calculate from the size of that wood pile whether it would be possible to even get it done in two weeks or not.

Wasn't sure.

Grabbed the axe and went out and started.

Went to lock the door on the way out, but there were only four empty screw holes and a powdery rust stain where the lock used to be.

Chapter Two

Ia had been the happy and only child of a doting whaea and gruff father, each of rāua at turns kind and stern to ō rāua varying, respective degrees.

While, in tōna experience, the earliest childhood recollections of others seemed centred almost universally on merely vague, impressionistic images – turreted sand buckets; sepia-toned litters of kittens; bath-times bathed in that ever-streaming, mote-filled light of distant memory – tōna earliest, as far as ia could tell, seemed much later in onset than those of ōna peers, being sharp as glass. Indeed, if pressed to describe the essential characteristic of the memory, tāna unequivocal response would be *clarity*.

Behind that foremost recollection fluttered an acoustic backdrop of crate bottle clinks, Billy T-chuckles and the exaggerated puckering of kisses. At those times when ia was being baby-sat, ia always knew that if ia stayed awake long enough ia could expect that indulgent perfume-and-wine goodnight kiss from tōna whaea that ia seemed to somehow have had – for it was no doubt a false memory – the wisdom at that age to already forever miss.

And yet, seemingly preceding those recollections in tōna timeline of experience was that much sharper, singular remembrance, one that in all likelihood had not preceded the others at all, but had superseded them purely by force of lucidity. It haunted ia. It was from within that memory that ia derived the cry which ia kept vouchsafed

inside tōna self for that final encounter with the void, an echo of the abyss that ia would one day spit back in its hollow face.

Prior to that moment, ia had only had the blessed child's limited perspective, the view from which no end can be seen or even be postulated, an upward trajectory defined by monthly visits to the kitchen door jamb where, amidst tickles and giggles and unsophisticated glee, tōna height was measured and recorded with ruler and pencil.

But who could have foreseen that such a merry routine would also be that from whence tōna greatest pain was born? It was true, as ia had come to understand in later life, that despite the illusion of boundless potential inherent in subjectivity as experienced, it was an undeniable fact that the human body was but a finite instrument and that every sensation, be it the stresses of anger or the torments of burning skin, had a limit. One could only be so happy, one could only be so cold, and in that defining instance of enlightenment ia had come face to face, as a child, with tōna absolute limit of sadness.

Wasn't it exciting though? One day ia would be a metre tall. And then two metres. Then three! It just went on and on! One day ia would be taller than the roof of the house. One day ia would be a giant who could wade through the ocean to battle armadas. And then ia would start stretching out into space and would hit tōna head on the moon!

Ia straightened the alignment of a smurf that had been knocked askew by a curtain. The mirror the smurf had held was now broken off at the handle.

Wasn't it odd, then, that Queenie and Koro and Grandma and Grandad weren't already that tall, since rātou were so much older? Wouldn't Whaea and Dad be too tall to fit in the house soon? In fact, now that ia thought about it, it seemed unlikely that Whaea and Dad could keep growing up like that, since wouldn't the world be already full of giants who could reach up to the moon?

Ia turned a lonely figurine between damp fingertips.

Where were all the giants?

Chapter Three

That scraping of the window wipers was gonna get on ōna nerves, ia could tell straightaway. Especially since the radio didn't work. Piece a shit.

Who did that pig think ia was, anyway? Jesus that sort of crap pissed Jerry off – others trying to make one whoever rātou thought one ought to be. Made one angry only so rātou could tell one to calm down again. Didn't care about koe personally.

Pulled into one of the diagonal car parks. Main street had a steep camber and ia had to wrench the handbrake all the way back to stop the car from rolling into the kerb. Last owner must've been a young fulla who thinks pulling on the handbrake is a test of strength.

Pushed the door open with tōna foot, climbed out, didn't bother about locking it and ducked down under the shop awnings out of the rain, which had started easing off a bit, which wasn't good. Ia'd been going at that pile of wood for a few days now. Had put a good dent in it too. Con had wandered in late the day before and not said much other than grumbling, "Give us your bank account details," and said ia could use that old dunga under the carport there – an old red Honda Prelude with a white bonnet. Didn't seem too fussed about how Jerry was getting on, which Jerry took as a sign that ia was getting on alright.

Had snuck-in a couple of hours this morning and had gotten saturated. Had given it a go, though, which ia reckoned was excuse

enough to take a break and wander into town to get a few things done. But didn't want the sun to break out again, otherwise Con might be a cunt about it.

It was pretty busy cos it was a Saturday. Seemed to be more vehicles than people. Still warm too, even though the sky was the same colour as the road. Grey lino. Dingy as an old hospital. Wet weather was bringing out the smells of things like the swollen pollen and the musty scent of hay bales and the sheepdogs that were whining and circling tensely, tied to the decks of trucks. Thought ia had heard the flutter of a pigeon taking-off but it was just one of those mutts shaking off the rain. Stopped outside the chemist for a second to watch some man who had stopped to watch some woman parallel parking, then overtook someone's kuia making tāna way along the pavement with tāna walking stick, and then got overtaken tōna self by some teen slunk low on a BMX who was pumping music onto the street like carbon monoxide.

Then Jerry got to the cash machine and pushed in tāna card. Ought to have been around a hundred bucks now, which would get enough tucker to survive until payday. Instant noodles and spaghetti would have done alright – might have even gone to the bakery – but then looked at the balance and did a double-take.

Had to wait for a campervan to tour past before ia could shoot across the road and go down to the library, squinting into the incoming squall that spluttered and fizzed off the road. Behind the squall the sky was blue and, glancing back, the sunlight refracting off

one car's plashing roof gave it for an instant, drifting past, a rainbow crown.

The external walls of the library were mostly glass, unlike the rest of the Council building to which it was attached. Maybe it had been a tax return, ia was thinking, while crossing the dripping façade of the older building and awkwardly slipping through the library's sliding doors as an elderly pair were coming back the other way. Rāua kept looking up at the sky and then down at ā rāua brollies and then fumbling.

Jerry had to pay for internet at the counter. Sat down, logged-in to the bank and clicked through to look at tāna account activity where it showed that two-hundred and sixty-odd dollars had been deposited by C.L. Shearing Ltd.

Con had paid Jerry's first week's wages in advance.

After that, Jerry decided that the working day was pretty much done. This was in spite of the new blue sky and the thin heat mist that was now slowly beginning to rise off the street. Ia stepped back onto the main drag and into sunlight that nagged tōna skin. Ia had done a few hours in the rain today. Would do a full day tomorrow, which was a Sunday. Had checked the forecast while ia was online. If Con went to have a look now ia should be able to see that Jerry had done some work in the rain this morning. Couldn't fault Jerry for coming into town, then. Just tell Con that ia had run out of food, although in fairness the supermarket shopping could be done after work since it stayed open until later.

It'd be alright.

Could do with a glass of wine.

Formulated a plan in the supermarket. Would drive back out of town, past where one'd expect the cops to have tā rātou breath-checkpoint, turn right up that side road there with the macrocarpas, and park-up a little way up, out of sight. Walk back into town, have a few sneaky drinks at the pub, wander back, grab the car and drive back to base. Was much cheaper just to buy wine at the supermarket but ia wasn't actually that big a drinker and just wanted to be around people for a bit, just on the off chance... Just had one other thing ia wanted to do first.

There was already a conversation going on when Jerry wandered in. The owner's name, apparently, was Sonya, since that was what the customer already there had called ia. It sounded like rāua were having a pretty lively kōrero and neither paid any attention as Jerry walked in.

The shop looked pretty basic with rows of second-hand books aligned spine-out on the shelves that lined the walls of a blandly done-up room. Torn and bubbled wallpaper, still off-white where the watermarks were yet to colonise. Carpet rubbed smooth like a dog's puku, pocked black and grey. In the middle of the open space where Jerry crossed between the door and the counter stood a waterfall display of fading picture story books, while ia could see at the back there wobbled a rickety spinner stoically bearing many a season's yellowing Mills and Boons. Hazy beams of sunlight reached through

the glass at the storefront and fumbled lazily about the carpet. The whole place seemed infused with the autumnal potpourri of stale paper and, crossing the threshold, a small bell had clanged, and entering the room Jerry felt as though ia were inhaling a sweetened cup of stagnant tea.

Jerry picked out the location of the classics section pretty easily and walked past the man – this orator – who was leaning on the counter. Jerry was hoping to find, was sort-of in the mood for, a modernist classic in the Southern Gothic style, or else something by Truman Capote, or one of the later, supposedly lesser works of Aldous Huxley, although ia had thought *After Many a Summer* was much better than *Time Must Have a Stop* or *Antic Hay* or even *Eyeless in Gaza*.

“... Ever since they fucked me over, they’ve been drowning in it,” the fulla at the counter lamented, “Good fucking job, too.”

The loudness of the Orator’s rant had seemed to be escalating steadily in the short time that Jerry had crossed the floor. Ia, a man in āna forties or fifties, tapped a finger on the counter to back-up each of ōna judgements. The shade of tōna umbrage darkened with each remark whilst Sonya seemed to be maintaining the persevering façade of a house that wouldn’t sell. The Orator was holding forth on what Jerry worked-out was the supposedly bullshit state of affairs at some workplace where, during some sort of regional get-together with the bigwigs, another staff-member had been roped into sorting out a round of tea for everybody. By the sounds of it, the Orator had also

been there and had been offered a cuppa, to which ia had responded with, “cheers, Big Ears,” by way of thanks.

Apparently, however, it came out later that the other staff member had supposedly been suffering from this ear-size anxiety, “or some fucking thing,” at the time. The Orator was accused of workplace bullying and then, “they fuckin’ sacked me.”

Jerry noticed a splinter in tōna hand for the first time as, in spite of the Orator’s loudness, ia ran fingertips over the gilt-edged pages of cloth-over-board and faux leather hardbacks. All those same old colours: dull vermillion; dusty navy; Lincoln green; while the Popular Penguins illustrated every phase in the life-cycle of orange. A couple of startled dust mites honed it out across the top of a closed bible, taking refuge in the shadow of the hard cover, whilst one by one ia took down raggedy volumes, rustling through the parched leaves, compiling and consolidating tōna mental inventory.

The Orator by now had gotten even more worked-up by what ia must’ve thought was the sympathy Sonya was dishing out and had started going-on about what sounded like some recent murder that had happened. Tōna global sense of hurt was genuine and palpable. Apparently, ia would have solved the case by now. Sonya, for tāna part, appeared now to have become a more attentive listener, carrying-on busying tōna self with various unseen tasks behind the counter but looking up every now and then to give an incredulous, “but how will they unlock the money?”

However, for a brief moment, Sonya glanced in Jerry's direction, seemingly only in that instant becoming aware of tōna presence. Yet within that fleeting exchange of eye-contact was enveloped, Jerry felt, after that first flicker of basic mutual awareness, a little wink of recognition, as if rāua were silently cahooting in plain sight.

The Orator had not, Jerry now noticed, taken a book up to the counter.

Then Jerry shied away. Didn't want to overcharge that brief rapport with too much meaning. Broke eye contact. Looked back at the shelves randomly at some book that must've been out of place since it was obviously a lot newer than the rest of the books it was sitting in amongst there. Lifting the copy off the shelf, the weight of the thing stood out even more than its appearance had, since by tōna reckoning it had to have been at least twice as heavy as each of the dozen or so other paperbacks ia had been handling. Privately published, then. Not something ia would usually look twice at, knowing as ia did that that kind of book would likely garner about as much classic status, contain about as much literary value, would accrue about as much financial or social capital as a lotto ticket.

Meanwhile, the tirade at the counter had come to the boil. This fulla was relentless. Had shifted from talking about the murder back to talking about tōna self again, about how hard done by ia was. The one-would-think naturally calm atmosphere of the store seemed under threat of permanent scarring and a sudden urgency entered Jerry's

mind as the strain of politeness under the weight of diatribe started to show-up on Sonya's face.

Someone's gotta knock this bullshit on the head.

Ia would look back on this moment and wonder to what degree others might consider āna actions – or really tāna *lack* of action, since the main thing was tōna failure to give the book back – fateful, but whatever people might think, Jerry anticipated that in hindsight ia would still be able to look back on tāna behaviour and see that all ia was trying to do was the right thing, and so in a way that justified everything that ia did afterwards.

“Aroha mai, but have koe read this book?”

This gambit, which ia had assumed would at least make the Orator pause for a second, actually achieved nothing. The Orator would not stop. The guy didn't even glance in Jerry's direction, but just carried on as if rāua, Sonya and ia, were the only ones there. Ia was basically just talking *to* tōna self *at* Sonya.

Sonya shifted tāna weight towards Jerry while at first not appearing to be able to shift tōna attention away from the Orator. But ia slowly broke through the surface of the Orator's viscosity and turned towards Jerry, starting slightly before reassuming tāna role.

Ia goes, “Just that one today?” with a smile.

“...the level of wokeism that's infecting everything is just insane...” continued the Orator.

“I was just wondering if koe had read it?”

Jerry reached around the bulky frame of the Orator – whose eyes now flicked towards ia and back again without even the slightest sign of acknowledgement – to pass the book across the counter. It was as if the Orator had looked straight through Jerry, who then recognised the dashed hope in Sonya’s eyes at the realisation that ia had not read the book and so didn’t have a proper excuse for shifting the conversation entirely in Jerry’s direction.

“No, I haven’t, sorry, though it’s very good by all accounts.”

“In that case, I don’t think...”

“...I mean, I was the one Breeze Power dealt with, so I’m the only one who knows what’s been going on...”

Sonya quickly stared back in tāna direction, suddenly intrigued:

“What have they got to do with anything?”

A grin of satisfaction spread across the Orator’s mouth as if to say, “gotcha,” and ia finally turned to Jerry, inviting ia to bask in tōna reflected glory.

“You don’t think that windfarm has anything to do with it?” ia asked, speaking to Sonya but looking at Jerry, “of course they fucking do. Fuckin’ mowries get in the way of big business, what do you think’s gonna happen?”

“Oh, of course,” goes Sonya, “because wind power companies are well known as being evil, murdering bastards. What was I thinking?” Ia leaned back and grinned patronising at the Orator. “I think you’ve been reading one too many conspiracy theories, mate.”

Then it dawned on Jerry that, from Sonya's perspective, ia hadn't the means of penetrating the conversation. Each shitty attempt ia made at breaking through the Orator's monologue would just bounce-off and ia couldn't hide the reddening cheeks and drying eyes induced by the obvious fact that ia was floundering, being ignored, spoken-over and dominated, that tāna attempt at coming to the rescue had so far pretty much been a dead loss. Ia had the humiliating idea that tōna shining armour was actually just something cardboard that tōna mother had cobbled together for a fancy-dress party long ago that ia'd been wearing ever since. Shame was something Jerry avoided. Ia was sensitive to its presence. Felt stink about things that other people probably hadn't even noticed. But it was hard to ignore because it turned-up in plain view on tōna face where – unless disguised as fury – it couldn't be concealed, which fuelled its own fire. Tōna face got redder.

“Oh, is that right?” the Orator goes at Sonya, “Well, don't you think it's a bit strange that the one person who has single-handedly been stopping that extension from going ahead suddenly ends up chopped into little pieces and chucked in the river?”

Sonya rolled ōna eyes over to Jerry and seemed to pause – almost flinch – after seeing Jerry's face.

“Um, sorry about that,” ia carried on, glancing inside the cover to where the price had been written faintly in pencil in the top corner before looking back up intently, “Five dollars for that one, thanks.”

Despite not actually wanting to read the book, Jerry instinctively pulled tāna card out of tōna back pocket while the Orator, to the side, seemed to be looking ia up and down.

The presence of a milder sense of shame at not being able to extricate tōna self from buying the book, something closer to self-deprecation than humiliation, eased tōna feelings of helplessness, allowing Jerry to draw consolation from this, tāna charitable contribution to the situation. That minor act of translating tōna impotence into benevolence, tōna obvious passivity into false agency, affected the functioning of tōna mind and allowed the rest of tōna thinking to follow a more subservient mode. Ōna feelings were reined-in by the familiar procedure of buying a book. After all, who was ia to think that ia should be someone's saviour anyway? Or even that Sonya needed saving at all? A sense of calm descended on Jerry and ia congratulated tōna self for having the smarts to notice and resist the self-defeating ideological tendencies governing ōna impulses. This fulla and I aren't equals, ia told tōna self. Ia could work the fucker into the ground seven days a week and twice on Sundays.

“Honestly, those mowries need to learn to help themselves. They could've made a mint off that deal.”

The Orator now seemed to be prodding Sonya as ia tore the docket from the eftpos machine with apparent annoyance.

"Need tāu receipt?"

“No, thanks.”

The draw of the cash register slid along its rollers and then Sonya banged it shut.

“Well,” ia replied, crumpling the receipt in one hand and under-arming it into the bin under the counter, “if you had fifteen-million bucks in crypto just sitting there, would you sell off your family land?”

Jerry grabbed tōna book.

“Why wouldn’t I?” the Orator answered. “They don’t do anything with it anyway. Might as well take *all* the money. Could get yourself a couple of houses: one in Queenstown *and* the Coromandel. I’d get a yacht. Fuck, you’d be away laughing. Why would you wanna hang around this dump?”

Jerry could see that the composure on Sonya’s face had almost reached breaking point as rāua shared another brief glance before ia goes, turning to face the Orator, “Well, I think it’s iwi land so they want to hold onto it.”

“Fuck, who cares? Everybody these days is so caught up in their fucking identities that they can’t even do what’s best for them! You know, the world would be a much happier place if everybody stopped trying to tell you who they are on the fucking inside.”

“Well, actually,” Jerry interrupted, now seizing the Orator’s rather stunned attention, as if ia had suddenly emerged from within the book that ia had just retrieved, “the world would be a much happier place if *you* stopped telling everyone who *they* are on the fucking inside.”

Time snagged for an instant on tāna interjection.

Then ia said, “ngā mihi nui.”

And then the bell clanged.

Jerry went straight back to the car and sat down feeling chuffed. Did well there. Had shut that fulla up. Seen the glow on Sonya’s face, too. Be nice to actually catch up with ia and have a kōrero and a laugh. Seemed really nice.

Went to put the book in the plastic bag with the shopping that was already on the passenger seat, but then stopped and took a closer look at it. Weighed it in tōna hand again. Had a glossier texture than most other paperbacks, too. Opened it up to have a quick squizz, still buzzing from tāna victory over the Orator. Might be worthwhile giving a chapter or two a go. Never know, there could be some element of local colour that could rope ia in. After all, why should mātou leave it up to the bigwigs in the publishing industry to tell us what tātou like? Why should four-syllabled *lit-er-a-ture* be better than three? Wouldn’t it be dumb of tātou katoa to give away all of the power by taking for granted the infallibility of the custodians of knowledge? How would the gatekeepers know the world outside the castle walls if tā rātou only view, the one through the keyhole, were being obstructed by the key itself?

And ia had already paid for the bloody thing.

Now, to this day, ia’s still unable to fully describe the experience of looking inside that book – a reverse-reification of self, maybe, as if it had been a pop-up book from whence tōna own countenance had

burst. It was all ia could do but to sit there for who-knows-how-long just waiting for some sort of meaning to jump out, as would usually be the case when confronted by a lack of resolution, giving one at least space enough to project a narrative, to draw whole constellations of signification if need be. But the two points represented there – between ia and this other person – persisted stubbornly in occupying the same space there in that moment, refusing even the slightest opening-up and giving no leeway into which significance could bleed. Tōna very own name seemed to cast doubt on all āna memories, on all ia understood to have been tāna life up to that point, on the validity of that there very moment. Felt as if perched on the edge of a realisation, on a bridge to nowhere that did not, in fact, exist. Had somehow blundered into negative epiphany where light shone black. Had opened the cover only to find the words, ‘For Jerry’, hand-written in black ink there on the title page, as if ia were being singled-out by a universe that had suddenly collapsed, cone-shaped, and was now funnelling its emphasis uniquely upon tōna self.

Ia instinctively put the car into reverse, somehow jerking it back with greater speed than ia would normally have anticipated. A pedestrian sounded the sharp groan of alarm that pinched tōna nape and snapped tōna foot from the pedal. The screech of engine brakes signalled a dense, looming momentum, like the shadow of a colossal weight falling. Tins of spaghetti lurched back and then rolled forward onto the passenger-side floor. A horn trumpeted a stampede. Ia had

stalled the car dead there in the path of whatever approached and had braced tōna self for impact.

The truck roared its awful onset.

And then hissed a benign departure, swerving back into its own lane.

How was it possible? What did it mean? Ia had never seen the book before, nor heard of its author, nor had ia ever set foot in that bookshop.

Had it somehow been a message from Sonya? Ia wondered, scrolling tōna mind back to the store and thinking again about that loaded glance of mutual comprehension. But rāua had never met before and ia shouldn't have known tōna name. Had ia even had the chance to scribble something in the book?

Had it been a message?

Tōna mind was in a daze as ia headed back to base. It had finally settled into being a cool and bright blue day grazed by flocks of meandering cloud, though now the light was taking-on a honeyed, late-afternoon hue, and the greenness of the countryside had begun to deepen as the low-lying sun drew out the landscape's shady undulations from whence the chill was beginning to seep and then to pool. This was a place where people tussled with the land, where ideas as rigid as the cardinal directions were instead gauged by the elements: south blew-in on the southerly; the east spilled down from the sun like syrup onto a pancake. Likewise, the preoccupations of Jerry's mind had begun to mellow and that initial panic was starting to

gel into a more straightforward set of ideas until, out of the corner of tōna eye, and only two kays or so from base, something flashed in tāna rear-view mirror.

“Fuck! I forgot about going to the pub.”

It was only after looking in the mirror and seeing the police car that ia noticed the sound of the siren.

Chapter Four

Like all beasts of burden, ia knew how best to utilise fury, for nothing could equal rage in sustaining the intensity of brutal, self-lacerating toil. Ia had taken-up the axe and had attacked the wood pile with a ferocious resentment that, were it extractable and examinable, placed on a cool bench and dissected, would be labelled carcinogenic. Each swing of the axe was sanctioned by a righteous animosity. Ia took aim motivated by a desire to punish. Indeed, at the times when by necessity ia was forced to stop and seize yet another tree-ringed wheel of timber, separating it from the great stack of discs, the vehemence of tāna wrath was only increased by the indignity of there being a practical barrier constraining tāna access to violence. Ia scuttled irascibly back and forth like a beetle grappling with a hoard of ponderous coins. Ia wanted only to bring the axe down again and again and again, without pause, without cessation. Ia raised it high, almost releasing it to the heavens, but at the final moment taking hold of its extremity with one arm fully outstretched, and in throwing it down threw the other hand down behind it, plunging it there with lightning impact and cleaving the pine in two. Each throw was like the toss of a two-headed coin, upon which tumbled the faces of that other one and tōna self. Accountability for tāna shame oscillated back and forth, within and without, was as inescapable as the centre-ness a parent projects upon a new-born, for whoever be responsible ia was struggling as yet to confirm. Splintering timber flew. Scabs of bark

formed rubble about ōna feet. Tōna chest heaved at the great exertion and sweat wept from tōna brow. Ia drove tōna thumb behind the tongue of a boot and wrenched out a shard of debris.

Ultimately, was ia not the prime mover of tōna own life? Was ia not culpable simply by the fact of being?

Ia had taken leave of the shop, had taken the tickets from that constable, had taken to the pile with a vengeance, but ia was also relinquishing the notion of justice. Blame, ia understood, was real, but the sense of fair play that ia had witnessed tōna whole life being incessantly yoked to that reality was, ia could see, just a lie that had made ia a snare out of tōna self.

Chapter Five

The fines for driving without a license, warrant and registration added up to eight-hundred bucks. Ia had just blown seventy at the supermarket.

It had been the very same policeone, of course. Probably the only cop in town. Had taken tāna time getting out of the police car. Jerry could see in tāna rear-view mirror ia just sitting there, staring down at tōna lap by the looks of it, almost looked asleep. Had waited so long that Jerry had started to wonder if ia had even been pulled over at all until the police car door finally opened and the cop had stepped out. Every car that had slowed down as it went past had had a gawking driver's face swivel in the window like one of those mechanical clowns one gets at the show.

“You again, eh?”

“We not mates anymore, *Constable?*”

The policeone paused and then grinned.

“Can au see your license, please?”

Jerry pushed tōna pelvis up off the seat and reached into tōna back pocket to pull out the thin card holder. The plastic was starting to crack where it hinged. Ia slid out tāna license. The photo had half rubbed off and some of the details were illegible, making it look counterfeit. Didn't look at the cop as ia handed it over. Didn't see the look on tōna face.

“Is that your name, is it?”

“Yup.”

“Jerry Kauri?”

Jerry looked up.

“Who else’s would it be?”

The policeone hesitated and then seemed to wilfully force a change in demeanour, a more hardened attitude.

Glared down at Jerry.

“You looking for trouble, are you?”

Jerry sighed theatrically and goes, “Yeah, nah, not really.” Here it was again. Same old same old.

“Yeah, nah,” repeated the policeone, holding the blank look on tōna face, “this expired last year.”

“Aw, did it? Jerry goes. “Hadn’t noticed. I’ll go and get a new one on Monday, first thing.”

“Not without a license, you won’t.”

Jerry put tōna right hand on the steering wheel and seemed to jerk tōna head as if in a bridle.

“Well, it’s Catch-22 then, isn’t it? I have to drive in to get the license, but I can’t go in without one.”

“You can ring up.”

“Not without a phone, I can’t.”

“What’s wrong with your phone?”

“Haven’t got one.”

The policeone looked unconvinced.

“Haven’t got a phone?”

“Nup.”

The policeone paused. Sighed. Almost seemed to concede that Jerry would have to be allowed this dispensation just to bring the matter to a close. Ia stepped forward and craned tōna neck back at the top corner of the windscreen.

“Haven’t got a warrant or rego either.”

“Aw, what!” Jerry goes with what the cop could now sense was genuine surprise and annoyance, “well, that’s not my fault. It’s not my car.”

“Where’d you pick it up from?”

“Eh? Where’d I pick it up from?” ia scoffed, “what, do you think I stole it?”

The policeone just looked at ia blankly.

“*Jesus. Con lent* it to me.”

“Are you sure about that?”

“Yes. I’m gonna be working in his shearing gang. I’m staying at the base there.”

“If it’s Con’s then how come au’ve never seen it?”

“How should I know?”

“How should au know it’s Con’s?”

“Because I fucking said so.”

The policeone’s posture became more hostile.

“You think you can speak to me like that, do you?”

“No, I’m just saying that it’s not my car.”

“You gonna calm down?”

“It’s not my car.”

Ia held another pause. Stared vacantly for what to Jerry seemed an unnaturally long time.

“But you’re driving it.

“Yeah, but it’s not mine.”

“If it’s not registered, it’s not anyone’s, but you’re driving it.

What’s that then, Catch 23?”

Jerry put both hands on the wheel and dropped tōna head. A fine for not having a license, one for no rego, one for no warrant, and ia would have to pay for the new license first as well, *and* ia had already been paid a week in advance which actually left ia a week owing. Was gonna takes ages just to get back out of the hole. Had to stay here no matter what now.

“Can’t koe just fine Con and let me get my license? I haven’t got enough money for all that.”

By now the policeone had tāna notebook out and was writing.

“The vehicle isn’t registered and you’re the one driving it so au couldn’t give the ticket to someone else if au wanted to which, thanks to your attitude, au don’t.”

“But,” Jerry goes, faintly, “I won’t have any money.”

“A few weeks in the sheds’ll see you right. Just get your mate Con to take it out of your wages,” ia said, before adding with a wry grin, “Ia’ll look after koe.”

*

Chopped wood that night till eight o'clock. No sign of Con. To get the work in the sheds to be able to pay the fines, had to get the wood done by the end of that coming week. Had so far only done about a third. Had to get a new licence. Had to tell Con about tōna shitty fucking car. Had to eat, had to sleep, had to piss, had to shit. Couldn't do a runner cos the fines would just get bigger and bigger and then catch-up with ia somewhere down the track.

Stopped chopping when the pointlessness took over.

Who does overtime up-front?

Trudged up to have a shower. Gaspd, shocked by the cold blast. Put tōna head under till it almost seemed warm. Thought ia had heard something outside. Switched off the water. Trembled for a couple of minutes in the silence, the limpid pebbles dripping down ōna gooseflesh in searching fits and starts. Nothing. Switched it back on. Couldn't reacclimatise.

Outside, the heat had evaporated and the wind was picking up. Was dark when ia walked back down barefooted, cupping ōna feet over the jagged shingle, wrapped in a towel and shivering.

Back in the shack ia put on some toast. Opened a small can of spaghetti, tipped it into a small pot and put that on the stove. Grated a clove of garlic and some cheese onto a plate before stirring that into the spaghetti and letting it melt in. Put the toast on a plate, poured the thickened spaghetti over the toast, and proudly crowned the whole

thing with a sprig of store-bought parsley, “like a proper fucking tosser.”

Ate in silence, fully clothed, sitting-up in bed beneath an old tartan blanket, propping tōna self against a pillow that was propped against the wall. Sliced each piece of toast into nine even squares and then heaped each square with as much spaghetti as it could carry.

After that, opened the book.

Didn't get to sleep till four a.m.

And even then, at four in the morning, ia pulled the covers ecstatic. There were moments when ia had wanted to chuck the book across the room. There were moments of climax that seemed drawn straight from tōna very own life, conflicts that had many-a-time played-out, and insights that in hindsight ia felt anticipated realisations upon which ia would have expected inevitably in future to have stumbled, as if the book had – it was embarrassing to even say it that way – read *ia* already, and had sketched an outline gesturing towards capacities that were for the time-being beyond the very imagination through which they might some day be expressed. Like the first time ia'd taped tōna self, it spoke in a voice that was both false and familiar. Ia found tōna self lost down paths that were tangential to the narrative at hand but seemed somehow to trace an invisible superstructure, describing some irreducible pattern posited from unknown depths. The text was drawing ia outward, coaxing ia to press tōna temple against the glass so that ia might catch a glimpse of something unforeseeable, yet recognisable, that fluttered outside, just

beyond the field of vision permitted by the window but leaving for now against tōna cold cheek only a false memory of dampness.

But it *must* have been a message. Books don't write in ā rātou selves. It can't be just a coincidence. There would have to be a point at which the odds against the coincidence of any two given events were so astronomically vast as to prohibit any attribution to coincidence; a secular argument from design that simply identified a statistical tipping-point of probability beyond which intention must be assumed the prime mover. After all, maybe one might be able to unearth from the depths of one's character the humility to concede that a watch, hypothetically, by unlikelihood upon unlikelihood to the power of a million, *could* fall fully formed into place, but then to claim that the watch regularly wound itself up was a bit fucking stupid. To find a book dedicated to oneself might seem pretty unlikely, but for that same book to then actually talk to koe, to seem to know koe personally, to dredge the depths of tōu soul and return with a yield of sparkling echoes was an exponential leap beyond mere chance and hollow quantitative formulation. This had to be significant, didn't it? Significant not in a metaphysical sense, but in a personal one.

Someone was responsible.

Ia travelled back again in tōna mind to that moment of connection in the bookstore. *Of course*. Of course ia had recognised the 'save-me-from-my-life' longing on Sonya's face, the sadness hidden underneath the everyday persona. Everybody had

unexplainable sadnesses tucked away somewhere. Lord only knew what traumas were banging on the interior walls of people's eyes. Honestly, ia could count on two hands the number of times ia had glimpsed the tip of that seemingly ever-present iceberg – of what tātou used to call *cot-death* – floating unbidden to the surface of some other's conversation for a brief second only to roll monumentally out of sight once more. Just a slip-of-the-tongue. But it was always still there. It was impossible not to accumulate regrets, impossible not to berate oneself, impossible to not be hurt by the hopelessness of hope. What was grief, after all, but complete impotence in the face of one simple wish?

In any case, ia was sure, Sonya *had* wanted saving, and there was nothing wrong with recognising it if it were true. Nobody said there were no such thing as *princesses* in shining armour. Jerry wasn't some *type*. Just wanted to be *particular*. Didn't want to always play the lynchpin, and in doing so be bound inextricably to the wheel of history. What value did membership to the fellowship of humankind bequeath to ia except duty as a human shield to its more powerful adherents? What glory the unseen slab bearing the weight of a pyramid? Ia was a worker and worked hard. Āna instincts didn't need justification. Jerry had felt the bond between rāua, so ia could go, not as a man or a woman or any other category, but just as an equal, to Sonya, so that rāua might save each other.

*

On the few occasions that ia got to sleep-in, Jerry would usually wake up feeling much more tired and sluggish than when ia had gone to bed. Not this time, though, because it was Sunday and ia needed to get to the bookstore before it closed.

It was now ten-thirty in the morning and the sun had finally begun to emerge from beyond the sandstone hills through which the river was languidly carving. Ia was in a hurry because ia knew Sonya would close, as it said on the shop door, at midday, and ia was keen to give tōna self enough time to explore the shelves for any books by that same author. Tāna sense of urgency was tinged with mild irritation since ia knew that the books weren't laid-out in alphabetical order and that searching would take a lot longer that it needed to. Sonya, ia would have thought, ought to have known better. But Jerry forgave ia, assuming that there were probably good reasons that weren't apparent to people like Jerry who weren't in the know. Jerry was keen too, ia had to admit, to re-establish contact and to not be left, until who-knows-when, suspended from tenterhooks.

Once on the footpath, however, a real optimism took over and compelled ia forward. For the time being, Jerry would leave āna fears with the car. Ia wouldn't get another fine for the same thing, and ia had promised to get a new license on Monday. Jerry might get rarked-up by the cop but ia wouldn't get a fine. No big deal. Nope – ia had better things to worry about and, book in hand, strode onward. Ia would go to Sonya and explain about the book and she – being a lover

of literature too – would be blown away by the whole thing, or even better would have a similar experience of tāna own to share, could hopefully shed some light on exactly how Jerry’s name had made it on to the title page of that book. Maybe Sonya had heard about Jerry through the grapevine, this was small town New Zealand after all, and had noticed some invisible clue that had made ia think that Jerry was tōna kind? Another lost soul. One’d always get romantics who would describe this kind of thing as ‘love at first sight’ or ‘an arrow through the heart’, and Jerry didn’t usually go in for that cheesy, Hollywood shit, but there might be something in it sometimes. To judge by that glance alone would be immature, ia knew, but taking into account the larger context: the love of literature; the nature of a small, isolated towns; the constant bullying of wankers like that Orator cunt. Of course Jerry wasn’t infatuated – it was too early for that sort of thing – but ia was buoyed by the promise of infatuation, by the possibility that there might be, after all, somebody waiting for ia, just like in the movies.

It was eleven o’clock by the town clock. There was plenty of time to talk and to browse. A grin pressed itself against ōna lips because it was silly, really, wasn’t it, staying up into the early hours of the morning grappling with some random book that seemed to have been half-written about one’s own life? Wasn’t it just a good book and that was it? People were often blown away by good books – that was the whole point of them. And it wasn’t really surprising that a privately published work of fiction should speak to ia because ia was

different, a bit marginal in the non-pejorative sense, so of course it would take a really random book to strike a chord.

And then there was this thing about tōna name being written in the book, which, well, let's be honest, must have been a message from Sonya. Ia'd practically winked at Jerry.

Of course! Jerry's name was on tāna eftpos card!

There was a giddy silliness to the whole thing that made Jerry smile at tōna self in the window of the shop door, but as it closed behind and the bell gently clanged, the Orator – who had been scribbling something in a notebook – looked up from behind the counter.

*

Jerry hesitated before carrying on into the store, taking the path towards where ia had first encountered that book, and straightaway started reproaching tōna self for having been so dumb. Was suddenly gutted by the idea of having to carry on with tōna stink life. The tipsy promise of something so long-yearned-for had only lasted that short, humiliating instant. Would've been better if it had never happened at all.

The Orator spoke at ia with a loud, “Oh look, here comes our rotten egg now!”

Upon seeing the Orator standing there behind the counter, Jerry had realised straightaway that ia and Sonya must be a couple. Had totally misread the situation. Tried to swallow tōna embarrassment.

“Au beg your pardon?”

The Orator smirked, raising ōna hands palm-out in a theatrical appeal for understanding.

“Rotten egg. You know, white on the outside, brown on the inside.”

Jerry’s mind was all over the place and a bemused, “is that right?” was all ia could offer. Was trying to stop that red burn from glowing off tōna face. Moved quickly with a forced casualness to the back of the store, out of the way of that man, that arrogant prick. Didn’t want other eyes making ia conscious of tōna own shitty presence in the world. Couldn’t let on how gutted ia was. It was ridiculous, Jerry knew, but ia was crushed and wanted to weep.

There was nobody else in the store and ia took-up a position in Classics, listlessly picking-up and putting-down books without taking notice of what they were, whilst berating tōna self at the ridiculous idea that ia could possibly now be interested in reading.

The Orator appeared to have accepted that the conversation had come to an end and had continued with whatever scribblings ia had been in the process of carrying out, whilst every now and then seeming to look up expectantly in Jerry’s direction, almost leering in smug anticipation. The upshot of that was that Jerry remained painfully aware of tōna presence too. It was as if by tacit agreement

rāua were locked in an adversarial dance for which condescension to the other would indicate submission and therefore defeat.

How did these sexist, racist cunts always end up with people like Sonya while people like Jerry...

“You finished that other book already?” the Orator asked, suddenly shifting into Jerry’s space and placing a thick stack of *Reader’s Digest* at the end of the Classics shelf not a metre from where Jerry was standing.

There were people, Jerry knew, who could not hide, or at least struggled to conceal, and even had the strength of character, when it was needed, to express *ō rātou* feelings properly. Ia was not one of those people. At times like this when ia was in intense pain, ia would strive only to maintain an outward appearance. Didn’t want anyone’s sympathy. Ran away from conflict. Had learnt from previous efforts that vulnerability was simply considered unacceptable coming from someone like ia. Had become so good at putting on a brave face that that’s what ia saw when ia looked in the mirror.

“Yeah, actually...” ia held up the book, accepting the prompt to move the conversation into more mundane territory, “au was wondering if the author had any more books?”

Ia felt dishonest, as if being polite to the guy was a kind of betrayal. It occurred to ia that a truce was being called, not because the Orator was a nice person but because rāua were stepping safely into the retail situation where the roles were predetermined.

“Let’s have a look,” the Orator answered, taking the book in hand. “Nope,” ia announced breezily, “not unless you know how to glue people back together.”

Jerry hesitated in a moment of incomprehension.

“Jesus. Don’t you watch the fuckin’ news?”

Jerry responded in the negative as the Orator’s meaning slowly unfurled.

Then the Orator pointed towards the section where an unevenly scissor-cut label of *New Zealand Fiction* was sellotaped to the face of a ledge.

“You might find something similar over there, mate. I wouldn’t hold your breath, though.”

But Jerry was struggling to absorb the information. Seemed to be caught in a glitch. Yearned to be more confrontational or something, to make it clear that ia was upset, to assert tōna self and to be acknowledged in some more decent manner, to have it recognised by someone, anyone, the unfairness of it all, that the two most prominent potential connections in tōna recent life had, in the space of a couple of shitty minutes, here in this shitty second-hand fucking dump, had just like that been made laughable self-deceptions: the woman ia sought was unavailable and the author ia sought was dead.

Not for Jerry. Just a dumb fucking coincidence.

“So what exactly happened? Au don’t get to see the news very often.”

“Don’t you?” goes the Orator, looking at Jerry inquisitively, in a way that made Jerry uncomfortable, as if ia were trying to work something else out, “well, you must’ve been living under a fucking rock or something, mate, because everyone’s heard about this. That author’s the one who got cut up and dumped in the river here. Got fifteen-million bucks worth of crypto currency sitting there but no password. Now every man and his dog thinks he’s fucking Sherlock Holmes trying to work out what it is. Haven’t you got a phone?”

“No. Can’t afford one.”

“Jesus,” ia muttered. “Can’t afford a phone? What’s wrong with you? Afraid of work?”

Jerry couldn’t in that instant tell the difference between decency and cowardice, had even started to think that any difference between the two might be a load of shit, since tōna urge to bash the Orator’s skull was sluiced through with the much slipperier need to maintain a socially acceptable charade.

“Au can work, alright. Don’t you worry about that.”

The Orator paused.

Jerry had accidentally asserted tōna self.

“Bullshit,” the Orator goes, conversationally, now more curious, “Where do you work then?”

“C.L. Shearing. Au’m a presser.”

“Is that right?” ia goes again, leaning tōna left hand on the top of the book shelve there, “I did a couple of seasons with Con and that back before I went off to Whanganui. Pressing, as well.”

“Au can leave a note for Sonya.”

“Eh?”

Now it was the Orator’s turn to look as if ia had been caught giving tōna self away.

“Au can leave a note for Sonya in case *ia* knows of any books that au might like,” Jerry explained, as if to a child. Could see the Orator now suspecting ia of being wilful, could see the Orator suddenly regretting the unnecessary effort that ia had spared for Jerry’s sake, could see from tōna arrogant fucking perspective that to be charitable was in a lot of ways to take a position of superiority, to put oneself up in a higher role and look down kindly, patronisingly. But the Orator now looked as though ia might have miscalculated, might have given to Jerry more than someone of tōna lowly status did actually merit in relation to the pittance extracted in the price of a second-hand book. Jerry could see the disgust rising on tōna face.

“How did you know her name?”

Jerry narrowed tōna eyes and goes, “Cos that’s the name you called ia.”

The Orator wasn’t buying it.

“You a stalker or something?”

“Au just want to leave a note to see if ia has any good recommendations.”

The Orator turned and went back to behind the counter.

“Good idea,” ia goes, taking a notebook and pen from underneath and throwing them onto the countertop. “There you go,” nodding towards the notebook, “name and number.”

Jerry approached the counter and picked up the pen. Had the disconcerting insight as ia was writing that rāua would be as relieved as one another once this final hurdle had been overcome and rāua could part ways.

Then ia just as carelessly tossed the pen back onto the counter.

The Orator picked up the notebook once more and, glancing at what was written there – just a name – gave up all pretence to civility. Ōna eyes jolted upward with venomous scorn. Ia then closed the notebook and stood up straight, tōna face taking-on that expressionless demeanour assumed by bouncers when wanting to put up a wall of unruffled aggression. Ia crossed ōna arms without saying a word, simply stood there looking blankly at Jerry, who simply stood there looking back, utterly perplexed, ōna hopes that some explication might follow intensifying with every new second that passed, until finally the Orator scowled, “Get out my fucking shop.”

Jerry was dumbstruck. The Orator’s face was no longer blank. The intensity of tōna disgust was manifest.

“What for?”

A malevolent grin crossed the Orator’s face and ia stared at Jerry, unblinking. Calmly, with an eerie softness of voice, ia goes, “Believe me: I’m not afraid to slap you.”

There was nothing Jerry could do to stop the bell from clanging cheerily as ia walked out.

*

Ia was almost back at base when the Falcon loomed into tāna rear-view mirror, descending like a Space Invader. It was travelling at well-over the limit before swerving aggressively into the opposite lane. Jerry glimpsed Con beckoning with an index finger as ia flashed past and then swerved back into the left-hand lane in front of the Prelude.

Jerry accelerated but was struggling to keep up. A stock truck blasted past as ia swung around a narrow curve that had been sunk into the limestone hill, tāna wing mirror seemingly only millimetres from impact. A harrier rose up from in front of Con's path and roadkill flashed by underneath. By the time Jerry had arrived at that same spot, the Falcon had already disappeared around the next bend that swerved up and out of the gully as another car descended coming back the other way.

Coming over the crest of the hill, Jerry looked down to see the white form of the Falcon having already taken a right down a metalled side road much further up where the land valleyed out at the river proper. Taking the turn, ia had lost sight of Con, following instead the tornado of dust that churned its way alongside the river. Rāua carried on for a good five minutes, seeing neither house nor

woolshed nor any kind of evidence of habitation. Just stop-bank on one side and thistle farm on the other until eventually an ad hoc path crossed over the bank and out onto the riverbed where Con had already pulled-up and was lifting something off the deck of the Falcon.

Jerry hesitated to pull-up alongside until Con waved ia forward irascibly and pointed to an open flat where ia meant for Jerry to park. Jerry slowly crawled the Prelude past Con and onto the designated spot, searching in all directions and feigning a casual interest when instead dread was expanding like a bubble in tōna chest.

How had ia allowed tōna self to be lured out here?

The driver's-side door suddenly flew open. Jerry jerked tōna leg away, thinking Con was making a grab for tōna foot, but instead Con yanked upwards. In a panic, Jerry fumbled with tāna seatbelt, finally releasing it and pushing tōna body away from Con with ōna legs. A dull clunk sounded behind ia.

Con now appeared to be unscrewing something on the ground just outside the car door.

“Get out,” ia growled without looking up.

Jerry scrambled over the passenger seat, knocking tōna knee on the handbrake, opened the passenger door and escaped out onto the far side of the car, glancing back to see Con pouring something in after ia.

Jerry stumbled backwards and tripped on some river stone, falling over. Con walked around to the back of the Prelude and tipped

more fluid into the open boot. Then ia took a rag from tōna back pocket and threw it over the end of a stick that was there on the ground. Tipped the last of the liquid over it. Walked over to the Falcon and threw the empty plastic drum in the back. Then went back to the rag, pulled out a lighter and lit it, picked-up the free end of the stick and flung the rag into the boot of the Prelude.

The hollow *woof* sounded like a rottweiler.

Con climbed back into the Falcon and switched on the ignition.

Jerry hesitated again. Ia had expected flames to start roaring out of the Prelude and had, much to tōna own confusion, felt the need to warn Con that the fire had gone out and would have to be relit. Everything was quiet and still except for the hum of the Falcon and the rustle of the river. Jerry then noticed the air inside the car beginning to shimmer and warp like a mirage and all of ōna nerves seemed to scream at once as Con's horn sounded.

“Well, come on. Get in the fucking car.”

For half a second, Jerry wasn't sure as to which car Con was referring.

Rāua drove back to base in silence after Con had mumbled, “you won't be getting any more tickets now, will you?”

Chapter Six

It's awesome sleeping outside, ia mused. Can strap the planet to one's back and bellyflop the sky and it wobbles set behind like jelly.

Then blink and it's morning.

Already had ōna shorts and jersey on. Cody wouldn't muck around. Ia bounced off the tramp, grabbed a mug of milo and some butter and marmite toast and was off, gumboots on, across the dew-blackened shingle driveway. The russet-cruled ute clattered into life, fuming purple, and ia slapped the flat deck of the truck two-handedly and side-hurdled on.

“Lucky, Copper-Knickers,” Cody goes. Ia'd been about to drive off.

Jerry straightened up, swung tōna bag around so it lay between ōna guts and the truck, grabbed a cross bar and kneeled on the hay bale.

The truck shunted and rattled off like a corrugated iron rhino, and once rāua were moving steadily Jerry pulled ōna sleeves down over ōna hands so ia could keep holding onto the bar cos it and the wind were cold-as. A greasy old wool-and-piss-smelling fadge flapped against the deck and ia whacked a fly off tōna leg, and whacked it again, and piss off!

Aww, nah. Just baling twine.

Cody shouted back over tōna lazy elbow, “those fullas still letting koe play?”

“That’s right, Sonnyhuckle. Should au play for youse instead?”

Cody hoicked a gob of spit past.

“If koe wanna get fuckin’ smashed. Your choice.”

Cody’s window wound up with a chalky, circular screech, while
the paddocks flowed past.

“Nawww. Au reckon *you’re* choice, too.”

There were already a few trucks lined-up beside the paddock when rāua clanked up. Jerry saw there were some young fullas picking cow shit off the field and discus-chucking it off to one side, although most of it wasn’t getting as far as the sideline, crumbling instead into smaller bits inside the five-metre mark. All the flash trucks belonged to the cockies and stock agents. Rātou always got there first and just stood around in ō rātou oilskins, with ō rātou collars up, looking at the ground like private investigators inspecting a
chalk outline.

Or wet-weather toddlers sizing up a puddle.

Jerry’s coach was one of them.

The ground was just a paddock up the old Dump Road. Jerry liked it because it looked impressive in the middle of winter when there was snow along the ranges, but now it was getting into spring the ranges looked more like a hazy, dark blue and huge wave caught
sneaking up.

It was a good ground though. The fastest ia’d ever run was on that ground, when the nor’wester started shoving one in the back. And it was never too hard at the start of the season, the ground. Some

paddocks were like cheese graters at the start of the season. They were better in rep season.

Look at these two, Sam thought. One's smoking; the other one's a little shit. Neither of them were going to turn into workers. The old man had been working for him for years, was fencing up the back paddock right now. The whole lot of them had been living in the old shearers' quarters since before the younger one was even born. You would've thought growing up on the farm would've turned them into workers, but nah. They're alright as far as docking goes, but you can't trust them on a bike or a tractor. Not after Cody'd rolled that other bike. Didn't even give a shit, either.

Got no go in them, those kids. Couple of bloody no-hopers.

Cars kept rocking up and Cody had a couple of mates from the prems hanging around by the ute. The Johnsons and the Ihakas turned up. Kelly, the captain of Jerry's team, biked up. The ref was there in ōna gears. A few people Jerry had seen around but didn't know were there. A couple of white minivans pulled in and spilled out people he didn't recognize – the other teams.

Jerry's team had started meeting up in front of the changing shed, which was just a mushroomy concrete piss swamp where the lights and hot water didn't work and the cold floor was algal, fungal moist. Most people were like Jerry and just got changed when rātou got home. Had to provide one's own shorts and socks – rātou looked after the jerseys – but got to take the tracksuit home, so one could just wear that. There wasn't enough room for both teams to get changed in

there at the same time anyway, and if one did try to get changed in there, all the slimy water on one's feet got all over one's grunts and pants when one tried to put them on, so one ended up smelling and feeling like soggy old leaf gunk in spouting.

One'd think rātou'd do it up.

People kept arriving: Manny and ōna parents; Jordan; Alex; Ata and Tui; Shannon Millar and Sandy Booth both turned up even though rāua were injured. Old Mel was there in tōna holey black singlet, like ia always was, rain, hail or shine. Some stragglers from the other team had turned up in ō rātou cars by the look of it. Even J.J. had turned up, even though ia hated playing prop. And Lee was there with ōna folks, Erin and Sam – the Sam who was also tō rātou coach, who looked at

Jerry with that grin that Jerry didn't like.

Look at ia, Jerry thought, with tōna flash car and big farm and stuck-up kids who went on ā rātou big overseas holidays all the time. Whenever Jerry was rouseying in tōna shed, Sam would always growl at Jerry for not separating the seconds properly, even though Jerry was doing the exact same thing as everybody else. And the shearers were

always angry.

Except Matua.

And the head rousie was mean, too.

Unless it was Mum.

And rouseying was boring.

The only bit Jerry liked was being sheepo, but that was the presser's job.

Ia wanted to be a presser.

“Gonna have another big game today, Jerry?” Sam asked.

“Dunno,” Jerry replied.

For some reason, all the cockies were suddenly listening and grinning like rātou were waiting for something.

“You gonna watch the big game afterwards?”

The All Blacks were on.

“Nah, au’ll probably go straight home.”

Sam’s eyes glinted like a watch catching the sun.

“Aren’t you gonna stop and have a sav or two after the match?”

Then all the cockies burst out laughing. Ia didn’t know what it was rātou were laughing at, but it made Jerry wild, those rich cunts all laughing at Jerry like ia was dumb or something. None of the kids were laughing. Ia didn’t know what was meant to be so funny, but ia knew ia was it.

Shit it had been a hard case – Sam still thought it was funny. A while ago, at an after-match function, the team had done their usual thing; had the speeches, let the other team eat first, tucked-in as well, stood around talking, rah-dee-rah, and then Sam had asked a couple of his mates if they wanted to go and grab a sav down at The Tavern in town.

Then this dumb kid goes, “but there are still heaps of cheerios here.”

Dopey fuck.

But Jerry reckoned Sam was the thick fuck.

Ia hated that guy. Had had a gut's-full of grown-ups. Rātou didn't know anything. Must see the world upside-down or inside-out or something. Rātou don't walk on the top of the Earth like mātou. Rātou walk upside-down, against the inside, and the whole universe sits there, at the core, just above ō rātou heads, but rātou never see it, cos the harder rātou look, the littler it gets.

“Right, get your gears on, you jokers,” Sam bellowed. Jerry dug the boots out of ōna bag, which were still muddy and wet-leather stink from the previous weekend, and chucked ōna gumboots in the bag. When ia tighten up the laces, the old water seeped cardboard-coloured out of them and into ōna socks. They were the old-style boots with square toes and collars that came over the ankles. Nobody had that sort of boots anymore.

Other fullas' liniment stung Jerry's eyes like onion cuts. Then they all jogged off to the pine trees on the far side of the paddock to do ā rātou stretches.

“These fullas beat Coast?”

“Nah, they got a hiding.”

Choice.

Jerry leaned against a pine tree and stretched the backs of ōna legs. Liked finding globs of pine sap that were rubbery on the outside and soft in the middle and rolling them between ōna fingers.

Some cones had already been laid out.

“Alright, you jokers. Pass to your left and running straight through.”

None of this had changed since Sam had been a kid. They'd go for a jog to warm up and then do their stretches, then a few drills, starting off with a few basic ones and then maybe doing one or two more complicated ones. Jeez, some of these kids, though. Never seemed to learn how to catch and pass.

Didn't have plastic cones and drink bottles in my day, either.

Even oranges are on the way out now.

He knew it was his job to be tough, but he enjoyed coaching the kids. There was something satisfying about passing on the traditions, getting the kids to do the same things that he and his mates had done back in the day. Even though he might not get along with all of these kids, at least they had this thing in common, he supposed. Bit like a scrum: there're some players behind you and some beside you.

And some who just need a good boot up the arse.

And there were some good little players in there, too.

That Jerry was shit hot.

Shame it'd come to nothing.

“Right, break up into forwards and backs.”

Then rātou came back together and did a practice kick-off, then mauled it and spun it out to the backs and crashed it up, then mauled it, then spun it and did scissors, then mauled it, then another crash ball and a quick ruck, then spun it wide with a skip pass, and then did it again a few more times. Then rātou brought it into a huddle, jogging on the spot, and Sam said heaps of things about keeping up each other's arses and doubling 'round, going low and getting ā rātou

binding right, about how rātou needed to give a hundred percent, that it was the top two inches, that these fullas were well-drilled and that, “they can’t come to our party and put on their music.”

Then rātou lined up on halfway and lost the toss. Ran onto the field and did three cheers for the opposition and the opposition did three cheers for rātou. Then the whistle went and Jesse raised a toast and drop-kicked it off.

And rātou were off.

It only took two scrums till Jerry got tāna first tighthead. Rātou were inside the opposition twenty-two. Tried to run it blind but got taken into touch. Ref saw it come off a defender’s hand, though, so Jerry got the throw in. Wasn’t able to do it overarm like everyone else did. Always chucked it in underarm. Still worked alright. The call was forty-two, fifty-six, thirty-one, twelve. One odd number. Threw it to the front. Prop threw it straight back and Jerry scored in the corner.

Cody yelled out, “lucky, Knickerless,” from the sideline, which got a few laughs from the other prems, who were watching while rātou waited for tā rātou game. One could tell the prems because rātou all wore ō rātou number ones and stood around looking like rātou thought rātou were hot shit or something.

The twins were both playing well and had both scored tries. Rātou were up to thirty points after twenty minutes. Five tries, all converted.

Rātou were picking the beetroot out of them.

There was a bit of a scrap, not really a punch-up, in the forwards, and Jerry heard some fulla from the opposition prems – holding an umbrella and wearing white gumboots – yell out, “don’t retaliate! Be the bigger nigger!” which got a massive laugh from everyone on the sideline, although the ref – ia was also a teacher at the college – told the fulla to settle down.

“Sorry, ref, cuz.”

Another laugh.

Play had started again. The ball had been knocked-on by them but the ref played the advantage and Jerry took off down the blind and dummied inside to Lee and a roar went up as ia sprinted twenty metres and scored in the corner again.

“Whoa! Sold the dummy there!”

Au don’t sell dummies. Au give ‘em away for free.

Cody yelled out, “let Knickerless Copper-Knickers take the kick,” and Jerry heard the prems and the other team’s supporters all cracking up about that.

“Yeah, don’t get a big head, mate,” Sam added.

Jerry jogged back into position with tōna head down, getting ready for the restart.

“It’s a team game, Knickerless,” Cody goes.

The opposition fullback was climbing over the fence because, even though the conversion had missed by a mile, the ball had bounced over into the paddock next-door.

Jerry pulled ōna socks up. The tape had started to unravel on one of them so ia yanked the loose piece off and threw it on the grass. The remaining end of the tape shrivelled back into place.

It felt like the entire sideline were watching Jerry and no-one else.

“Just remember,” Sam goes, so that everyone could hear, “there’s a good reason why you’ll never be All Black material.” The laughter from the crowd was slightly more subdued, as if it were just polite or even embarrassed.

As the ball flew over the fence and was relayed back to the halfway mark, Jerry turned towards the sideline and mumbled something about a jersey.

“What was that?” Sam demanded. “Did that little shit just back-chat me?”

Nobody on the sideline had been able to make out what Jerry’d said.

The opposition first-five waved for āna forwards to move back a bit and then readied tōna self for the drop kick.

“What did that little shit fucking say to me?”

Then one of the opposition forwards who was standing on the halfway waiting for the kick looked across with apparent annoyance and answered Sam’s question:

“She said only the jersey’s made of all black material, Dumb-Arse.”

The crowd erupted in laughter as the ball spun end-over-end into the air, seeming to hover for a moment as it reached its peak and then began to descend. Jerry got underneath as it bobbed downwards.

“Nāku!”

Chapter Seven

The Tavern was one of those big old two-storey country pubs that had yet to burn down, the sort that would shudder the same in a gust or a quake, and in the slight dimness of the early evening, at least in Jerry's munted state of mind, the glow of the facade was stark and angular.

The top floor had the accommodation and a massive sense of relief had washed over Jerry when the manager had said that a room was available for fifty bucks. The other shit would have to wait. Chucked tōna backpack on the bed, locked the door behind ia, and went downstairs again.

Ia walked through the middle of the public bar where there stood an old wool press that must've been salvaged without being done-up from a nearby sheep station, since the square tabletop was the only part that didn't reek with that smell of lanolin. Crinkle-cut tufts of wool could still be seen wherever they'd snagged while the press was in use. The rest of that end of the pub was made-up of booths aligned along the outer walls and half-a-dozen rectangular bar tables spaced evenly around the floorspace. The manager, a wiry lady of around fifty or sixty or seventy, tended the bar, behind which was arrayed the usual stained glass pipe organ of spirits and wines and cigarette packets, all of which were set in front of a large mirror. Lower down were chillers packed with the usual brands of bottled

beers and ciders and ready-to-drinks, as well as shelves of empty glasses, handles and jugs.

Jerry made tāna way through the door that separated the public bar from the restaurant – what would have been the ladies' bar back in the day. Didn't want to run into anybody and there wasn't anyone in this half of the pub. Rather than carrying on through to a table, ia took up a seat at the bar. The counter continued from the public bar through the wall to where ia was now sitting and then continued around ninety degrees before terminating at the back wall next to the swing door that led past the kitchen to the loos. Jerry could have leaned over the counter and looked across into the public bar, could hear snippets of conversation between the manager and the punters next door, could even see movement reflected in the mirror behind the bottles, but couldn't see rātou or be seen by anybody from that end. The last thing ia wanted was to run into Con.

Filthy cunt.

Rāua'd gone straight back to base after having left the riverside. Hadn't spoken the whole trip back. Con'd parked-up outside Jerry's room and told ia to get inside, had led the way in.

“Sit.”

Jerry had carried-on into the shack and sat down on the only available seat, which was on the edge of the bed, and straightaway started hoping that Con wouldn't decide to sit down as well. The late afternoon sun was still bright enough that Con didn't need to turn the light on. Ia stood in the space between the kitchenette and the bed,

blocking off access to the door. The bowl, cheese grater, knife and fork were all sitting on the rack next to the sink where they'd dried. Being off the road and up from the river, the sounds of neither made their way to the shack. The room felt filled with still water.

“Doing some research, are you?”

Jerry looked up from the floor to Con and then down to the corner of the bed to where Con gestured.

“Au just picked that up from the second-hand bookstore the other day. Didn't know it was that person who went missing. Only found out later.”

Con moved closer and picked it up. Flicked through the pages.

“You know this fucking asshole cost me a packet, eh?”

Jerry stayed staring at the wall, ōna hands resting flat under ōna thighs. Glanced back at Con.

“No. What do you mean?”

Con looked at the back cover.

“Dumb fuckin' mowries wouldn't sign-up to that wind farm extension. Would've gone on their land and mine. Why do you think there's a half-built fucking wind turbine up on this hill here? Money for nothing and the dumb cunts said no.”

“Aw, is that right?” Jerry goes, trying to look casual as ia stood up and stepped past Con into the kitchenette. Grabbed the tea towel and started theatrically drying and putting away the dishes.

“So why wouldn't they just take the money?”

Con was still handling the book.

“Primitive fucking animals, that’s why.”

Jerry’d spent tōna whole life failing to confront racism and now had that familiar sensation of being sliced cleanly in two – of tōna back half sliding smoothly to the floor whilst tōna front just hung there, lip-shrugging inanely.

“Yeah, well, you never know. Rātou might be holding out for more money in the future. People reckon land’s the only thing that’ll never go down in value.”

The sun must’ve passed behind a cloud for a second because the light suddenly dropped a notch or two. Jerry looked out through the open door and saw a lone magpie, its white feathers mottled with light shades of grey, listening attentively to something that only a magpie could interpret.

“I thought you said you bought this yourself?”

Jerry’d been drying the same knife and fork for a whole minute. All ia’d really done had been to wipe off a cloudy watermark from the base of the knife’s blade where a droplet must’ve dried. Paused and looked up at Con’s broad back. Was drawn for a second to a moth-hole the shape of Lake Taupō in the shoulder blade of Con’s faded blue polo shirt.

“Yeah,” Jerry replied, as conversationally as possible, “at that bookshop in town there. It’s actually not too bad a book.”

Con half cocked tōna head back towards Jerry, scowling down at the floor to tāna right.

“Who gave it to you?”

Jerry was now rubbing the knife and fork together nervously inside the tea towel, making a faint clinking. Stared confused at the side of Con's face. Con chucked the book on the floor at the foot of the bed and moved further into the room. Stopped in front of the high window that looked out towards the plaintive turbine on the hill.

"Sorry?" Jerry goes, slowly pulling open the cutlery draw. "Au don't know what koe mean. Au bought it from the shop."

Con didn't look back.

"Fucking *kway* me again and I'll feed you to the dogs."

The patrons were starting to pile-in to the pub while Jerry reflected on what had happened. Didn't need to see *rātou* to know what *rātou* were like, filtering-in, in ones and twos, from trucks and utes, in Swanndris and Aertex, giving little nods and moving *ā rātou* jugs to join *ā rātou* mates at *ā rātou* tables, while Jerry sat at the restaurant bar alone. There was now a family at one of the tables. A woman and a man and a boy and a girl looking at *ā rātou* menus. Jerry had almost finished *tāna* handle, taking refuge in anonymity while the violent fantasies unfurled in *tōna* mind again and again, re-lived each time with increased brutality. Ia refined and perfected *tāna* vengeance. Would break Con's skull. Would scalp Con's face. Would sink a canine into Con's diddle and tear it off, leaving the stump spurting red piss. Would dowse Con's hair in diesel and set it on fire.

"Don't fucking lie to me," Con had said, "If you bought it, why the fuck has it got 'for Jerry' fucking written on the inside?"

Jerry tried to work out the nature of the accusation that was apparently being made, but the more ia thought about it, the more ia floundered, and the longer the silence grew.

“It’s just a coincidence,” ia blurted out, taking anchorage in the truth, however tenuous it might seem.

Con turned to face ia.

“Just a coincidence that you’re on a first name basis with the person who got murdered when you turned up?”

Jerry dropped the fork into the draw.

Then tōna attention was drawn back to ōna surroundings in the pub. A couple of people had taken up the seats on the opposite side of the partition. Rāua were effectively sitting at the bar beside Jerry, but out of view.

“Look,” the male voice said, “I’ll tell you something I’ve never told anyone before, okay?”

“Off you go,” goes the female.

The closeness of the pair and the volume of tā rāua conversation made it almost impossible for Jerry to ignore. Ia turned tōna back to the partition and tried to look oblivious as to what was being said.

“Right, well years ago, just after I’d left school, actually, I had to get from New Plymouth down to Wellington and, being a young fulla, I thought I’d may as well hitch-hike. Seemed like a cool thing to do at the time, and this was back when the world wasn’t as fucked-up and weird as it is now...” There was a pause, followed by the sound of a handle clunking back onto the counter.

“And you had that awful hairdo.”

“... and I had that awful hairdo,” he concurred. “Anyway, don’t ask me how, but I ended up getting dropped-off in Whangamomona of all bloody places. Miles out of my way. Some fucking dumbass farmer reckoned it’d be faster, since he was going that way, to drop me off there. Plus I was young and stupid and didn’t really cotton on.”

“Jeez, he must’ve driven you a long way to get out that far?”

“Yeah, well, he seemed like a decent fulla and we were having a good yarn, so I didn’t really think about it. He didn’t say we were going *all* the way to the fucking Republic. He just said he’d take me in that direction and then just kept on driving and driving.”

“Dumbass.”

“Who? Me or him?”

“Both of you dumbasses.”

“Yeah, well, anyway, the dirty cunt ended up propositioning me.”

A smaller sounding glass hit the counter.

“Oh my god! What did you do?”

“What do you think I did? I told the cunt to let me out, and then I hitched up to Whangamomona and ended up having to stay the night in the pub there cos by that time it was too late to keep going.”

“Yeah, it’s a nice pub, that pub.”

“Yeah, well, anyway, the point of the story is that when it happened, I was obviously pretty pissed off. At the time I thought I should’ve smacked his head in. But then while I was having a quiet

one in the pub, I started feeling sorry for the cunt. I mean, the dopey fucker must've gone his whole life hiding who he really was from the rest of the world. He probably got married and had kids... somehow. He probably spent his whole life calling people poofs and faggots and whatnot, when the entire time he was talking about himself."

"Yeah," she added, "it's pretty sad."

"So instead of being angry with him, I felt sorry for him. That moment was probably one of the only times in his life where he had tried to actually be himself, and all he got was being told to fuck off."

"Oh, that's good of you. So did you go back and suck him off?"

Then Jerry recognised the Orator's boisterous laugh.

"Smartass," he laughed, "last time I confide in you."

"I wish."

"But I'm not as much of a bogan as you think I am, though, eh?"

"Nah," Sonya goes, "you're still a bogan alright. You're just good at lying to yourself, that's all."

"Eh? What's that supposed to mean?"

"Don't you remember when we were in living in London? You gave every Kiwi you met some five-minute long handshake and called them all *bro*. You took off your shirt and did a haka any chance you got. And when anybody ever asked you where you were from, you'd say *Tuddanucky*, but as soon as we landed back in New Zealand you went instantly back to being from *Tarranacky*. You're your own forgery."

The anger in Jerry welled up even more.

Con had asked, “You trying to get your hands on that money, are you?”

Jerry had frowned.

“What money?”

“The crypto.”

Then Jerry screwed-up tōna face.

“All au did was read a second-hand book.”

“That’s two days in a row now you haven’t chopped any wood.”

Jerry put the knife in the draw, grabbed the bowl and the grater and put them in their places on the shelf.

“Yeah, well au worked yesterday morning in the rain but au knocked off after it got too wet. And au *was* gonna work today but au had to go into town and get some stuff done. But au’m gonna go out and do some more right now.”

“Was a ticket all you got?” Con demanded.

Jerry didn’t understand the reference.

“Eh?”

“When you got pulled over yesterday. Was a ticket all you got? Did that fucking cop say anything else to you?”

“About what?”

“About you being a dodgy cunt.”

Jerry hesitated, not knowing at first how to reply.

“No.”

“So I pay you up-front and the first thing you do is skive-off work and go get pulled over by the cops?”

“Au wasn’t skiving-off. Au just had to get some stuff done in town.”

“Are you gonna get that wood done?”

“Yes.”

“What are you gonna do if you don’t?”

“Au don’t know.”

“You know the only reason you haven’t been arrested is because I took you under my wing.”

Jerry didn’t know what to say.

“I could go to the cops right now and tell them you’re some dodgy cunt who just turned up out of the blue.”

Jerry stared down at the kitchen counter.

“And that book connects you to the murder.”

Jerry could feel the room closing in.

“So what are you doing to do about it?”

A dull discomfort was circling Jerry’s eyes, drying them out. Ia tried to squint through it. Could see the cold determination in Con’s eyes.

“I’m asking you a question dumb cunt. You owe me. You fucking owe me big time. Now come here and tell me what you’re going to do about it.”

Come here and tell me?

Jerry couldn’t help blinking. All the moisture seemed to have drained from ōna eyes and ia was struggling to decipher the meaning of what was unfolding.

“Come here,” Con hissed, pointing at the floor at ōna feet.

“Come here and pick up this book.”

At the bar, Jerry finished tāna handle and gestured moodily to the manager for another.

“Well, who else could it have been?”

“Anybody, I suppose.”

The manager placed the handle on the counter and brought the nearest eftpos machine across. Jerry swiped and entered tāna pin.

“Receipt?”

“No, thanks,” ia responded with little more than a whisper.

“Nah, Babe, it can’t have been just anybody. It had to have been someone who lives around here or was living around here at the time. You don’t just drive off into the wop-wops, slice someone up, chuck ‘em in the river and then wander back home as if nothing happened. It has to be someone from around here.”

“I don’t see why you think it was ia, though. Ia’s just a geek, not a bloody murderer.”

“Jeez, have you ever seen the news? Most of those mass shootings in America are done by pathetic little losers. Even that Christchurch shooter. Did you ever see that Beyond the Darklands programme? Man, you start feeling sorry for some of those cunts. Never stood a chance.” Short pause. “It’s those angry, damaged ones who do all the killing in real life, not those evil criminal masterminds you get in bloody movi... oh,” ia suddenly bawled condescendingly

as Jerry heard tōna weight shifting in tāna seat, “speaking of sorry fucking arseholes...”

Jerry froze.

“*No, David!*”

The manager looked up towards the entryway. Twisting in tāna seat, Jerry peered over the bottles and into the mirror and made out the unmistakable colours of a police uniform approaching the bar while what must’ve been the Orator’s frothy handle rose up into the air in haughty salute.

“Well, if it isn’t Cunstable Cowrie the trustable mowrie,” the Orator cried. “Cheers, Big Ears!”

Jerry pictured the policeone pausing in āna tracks, recalled the uncanniness of those cauliflower ears.

“Be quiet, David, for fuck’s sake!” Sonya hissed.

Jerry could imagine the unimpressed face of the officer, could sense by the change in background noise that the attention of the entire bar had been drawn towards the bust up that was now unfolding.

“Come on, Dave. Let’s not overdo it,” goes the manager.

The policeone had approached the pair.

“Kia ora, e hoa. This fulla behaving?”

“Tēnā koe,” Sonya answered shyly. “Kao.”

“Hei aha,” the policeone sighed before shifting to a more officious tone. “Au actually needed to speak to kōrua about a run-in David had with one of Con’s staff-members this morning.”

The Orator's seat creaked as ia shifted forward angrily.

“Oh, are you fucking serious? Did that little asshole run off to the fucking cops? Jesus.”

Jerry shrank even further against the partition.

“Keep tōu voice down, David, please,” the policeone replied. “It's not really about that.”

“Aha!” The Orator guffawed, leaping out of tāna seat quickly and raising ōna arms as if in victory so that ōna fists appeared in the mirror. Then the counter was slapped and ia jeered at Sonya. “I told you it was that fucker!”

Sonya chuckled uncomfortably whilst – Jerry imagined – motioning ia to sit back down.

“Jesus, settle down, David.”

The Orator wouldn't be placated.

“Ha! We were just talking about that weirdo before you walked in, Cuntstable. I knew the fucker was a murderer!”

Jerry could only squirm in tāna corner.

“David!” Sonya snapped.

The policeone said nothing for a prolonged instant.

“Having been a constable, au thought koe might have known better than to speak to au like that,” the policeone noted drily.

“Thanks for the mansplanation. Now go fuck yourself.”

“*David!*”

The manager interjected:

“Hey, mate. We can’t have you talking to the police like that in here, eh.”

The policeone paused again before moving the conversation along.

“The timeline of tāna arrival in town corresponds with the murder. Con gave us a payslip showing that ia was floating around at least a week before the body washed-up.”

“Is that right?” Sonya goes.

“Yep. And now tōna car’s been discovered burnt-out down by Davidson’s Bridge,” the policeone said. “Matches the description of a vehicle that was seen at the deceased’s property a few days ago. Looks like ia’s done a runner. Might a gone bush.”

A deep fear expanded through Jerry’s lungs.

“Why the fuck are you hassling me, then?” the Orator moaned. “It’s got nothing to do with me. Why don’t you talk to Con? He’s the only one who’d know anything about whoever-the-fuck.”

“Already have. Con reckons ia owes Con money and was trying to take off without paying.”

A bolt of indignation plunged down Jerry’s spine.

“So what? You a debt collector on the side now, are you?”

The policeone withdrew the notebook from tōna top pocket.

“Au’ve also been told that kōrua had a bust-up earlier and au wanted to know what that was about.”

At this the Orator’s voice flashed red with rage.

“Oh, ha-fucking-ha. You know exactly what that was about.”

Bafflement emerged in the policeone's voice.

"Do au?" ia asked.

"You're mates with that fuckin' psychopath."

The officer paused, evidently bemused.

"What makes koe think that?" ia asked.

"Oh, come on. I know you two are mates. Playing your woke fucking games. Maybe I should complain about my feelings getting hurt and get *you* fucking fired? See how you like it. Maybe we should organise a big fucking hug session and cry it all out like a bunch of airy-fairy, no-hoper fucking arseholes?"

Jerry heard a wave of sniggers reverberating across the pub.

"David! You can't talk to Jerry like that. Pull your friggin' head in," Sonya goes in exasperation.

"You're doing a good job of the crying bit," the policeone retorted.

"Go fuck yourself."

"Sonya's right, David," ia added, composing tōna self, "koe need to be careful about how koe speak to au."

Jerry could imagine the Orator glaring at the policeone.

"You think I don't know that already?"

Again, there was a pause, a momentary stand-off, the policeone silent, the Orator brooding, Sonya in all likelihood cringing with a combination of frustration and embarrassment. All Jerry could do was to lie low, hanging from tenterhooks, anticipating.

"What makes koe think māua are mates, David?"

The Orator took a long loud gulp from tāna handle, finished it off and bashed it down on the table, before replying with a rueful grin:

“I know you two are in cahoots because that smartarse cunt gave me your fucking name.”

*

Jerry rushed off to the toilets in case the policeone decided to do a quick scan of the restaurant. Just as ia was entering the passageway somebody in a suit passed by going the other way. Jerry had been too busy listening to the conversation across the bar to have noticed tōna arrival, but as rāua passed each other Jerry held tōna nerve – didn’t make eye contact; didn’t dare glance towards that incongruous soul-patch – as the Business One strode by, seemingly unaware.

Fucking small town New Zealand.

Wondered what to do next as ia took a leak. Couldn’t leave the pub until ia was sure the cop had gone. Seemed to be safe enough from running into Sonya and the Orator because the public bar had its own toilets down the other end. But if the Business One had come in to get a meal and was now hanging out in the restaurant area, ia might... what? Jerry had told Con to go get fucked, grabbed āna gear and had walked away from the base and all the way into town. Con hadn’t come after ia. Sounds like Con had rung the cops though, so if the Business One knew that then ia would just call across to the cop and dob Jerry in right there and then. But there was a good chance

that ia didn't even know anything about it yet. The bigger risk, Jerry reckoned, was probably the bar manager putting two and two together and realising that Jerry was the suspect that those fullas had been talking about.

Slowly made tāna way down the passageway and had a quick squizz around the corner. The family had finished ā rātou meals and had buggered off already. There was no-one else in the restaurant.

Ia went back to tāna seat and listened. Sculled half of tāna handle. Sounded like Sonya and the Orator were still there, having a yarn with the manager, but the policeone had gone. Took another swig. Just needed to wait until Sonya and the Orator went to the toilet or... A massive dizziness clouded tōna mind. The room started to carousel and ia suddenly felt as if ia'd sculled an entire bottle of Jim Beam. The last thing Jerry remembered was almost falling backwards before being cradled within a big, heavy pair of arms, and then being guided forward onto the counter where ia lost consciousness.

Chapter Eight

Why do we have to be poor? Jerry thought, trudging, disconsolate, behind tōna father. It's just so humiliating. The Leaders and Qianya will be leaving for the airport tomorrow morning – the very day the borders reopen – and we're here hunter-gathering like Neanderthals. Why can't it be a practical joke? Why can't Conrad suddenly emerge from the bush and take me?

Lumbering through the grey pebbles, Jerry was almost in tears just thinking about how embarrassing it would be when ōna friends had returned from the trip with so many amazing stories to tell of all the places rāua'd seen and all the adventures rāua'd had, maybe even the beautiful foreign guys rāua had met – that Ivoire had met – while ia could only stand there listening, growing red in the face, trying not to cry and being bombarded with all the things ia had missed out on because ōna parents were stupid.

“Come on, Fancypants,” goes Cody.

“Don't call me that!”

Cody was less fit than ia would have liked to admit. Rāua'd parked the truck down by the new camping ground and had walked along the beach up to where the river mouth now was. The gear was heavy on tōna back and now traversing the river stones in ōna heavy waders seemed like harder work than it had been in previous years, was like stumbling fruitlessly through ancient ruins where everything

good had already been taken and each step revealed nothing more
than the same empty, monotonous clunk.

We're just dirt, Jerry concluded in despair as rāua made tā rāua
way inland along the river's edge.

Most painfully of all, Mr Leader – Conrad – would be kind
about it, like ia always was. Ia'd play it down, make out that the trip
was mostly a big hassle and not much fun, and that Jerry hadn't
missed out on anything at all. And when the other girls weren't
around ia'd lean in, tōna body solid like a stallion's, and whisper
gently, "you didn't miss out on anything, Daffodil," and Jerry's entire
chest, ōna heart and lungs, would swell up almost to bursting. Just
knowing that Conrad cared for ia and thought of ia was just too much
to bear.

Why is love so impossible?

"Can't we just stop here?" Ia grumbled out loud.

"No," came the angry reply. "Stop asking."

Cody was fed-up already. It had been a stupid idea to bring Jerry
out here, but it was too late now. Anyway, ia thought, it's time Jerry
learnt that life isn't all VR and AI. Don't want her ending up like
those stupid people in that terror attack who got their devices out and
starting filming instead of fucking running. They'd all lost their
instincts, were more focussed on being seen than watching, had
filmed themselves getting shot.

No wonder society's fucked: dumb cunts think th'are
uploadable.

“Well, where’s that spot you said?”

“Just fucking wait!” ia growled.

Fucking kids these days, man; got no patience, first impulse is either to whinge or lecture their elders, as if they could possibly know more about the world than me. *Get a vaccination, Dad. It’s not about you – it’s about us.* Honestly, as if this were Cody’s first pandemic.

Got into a bad habit of folding an idea down the middle and hiding the one half behind the other.

But the worst part was that Jerry resented Cody for all this.

“But my friends are going!” Jerry’d said.

“Well, maybe all your snooty mates should do a real day’s work before they go swanning off like a bunch of fucking princesses.”

This trip was supposed to be something deeper than that other superficial shit. This was the sort of thing one couldn’t buy with money: spending time with tōu old man; getting back to nature; catching food with ōu bare hands. What would those spoilt brats know about that sort of thing? Ia’d teach rātou a lesson or two, especially that stuck-up Ivoire bitch...

It’d been a few lean years now. Nobody’d caught anything since the late thirties. That’s why ia thought it might be a good idea to bring Jerry along. At any other time Jerry’d probably have been too young, but tōna presence might bring a bit of good luck this time. That’s what ia’d thought. And that’s why ia was looking for that old lucky spot, if it hadn’t already been swallowed-up.

I wonder what th'are doing now? Jerry thought. Ivoire had been strangely coy when Jerry'd told ia that rāua were going camping down the river. Ivoire'd probably felt stink for ia, or was more likely just embarrassed to even be associated with ia. Camping? Where? At a trailer park? Jerry'd tried tāna best to make out like ia was happy to go, that ia loved communing with nature, that the bliss of solitude was sublime, but of course Ivoire wouldn't understand. Ia'd always had it easy. Was stuck-up and superficial – even insisted on calling everyone *tu* or *vous*. Ia would never have the profound feelings that Jerry had. Such grand ideas were ineffable and people like Ivoire and Qianya would never get it like Jerry got it.

But Conrad knew.

River stinks, too. All sorts of strange gooey shit flowing in and growing in it nowadays. No wonder there's hardly anything left. Cody'd had to leave Trigger at home this year too, after what had happened to Duke last year further up the coast.

Poor mutt.

Rāua clunked around a bend in the river and the bridge out of town came into view.

That's a real Kiwi image, thought Cody. Shingle river, bridge, ranges in the background. Just needs a hawk to fly over.

Jerry was instantly horrified at the thought that ōna friends might drive past and see rāua there on the river. How could they not with Dad wearing that heinous hi-vis vest of his? Why does he have to wear that everywhere? Why not just walk around town with a

stop/go sign flung over your shoulder so the whole world knows

you're a meat-eater?

“Let's stop here, Dad.”

“No.”

“Yes!” ia almost screamed. “I'm not going any further! This is
far enough!”

Cody was thrown.

“What the fuck? What are you talking about? You've got no idea
where the best spots are.”

An old petrol ute like tō rāua hissed its way across the bridge.

“Honestly, who do you think you are?”

“I'm your daughter!” ia cried, two plump tears of fury and
desperation welling-up in ōna eyes. “I'm tired! I wanted to go with
my friends, but I'm stuck here with you and I hate it, now stop!”

Jesus, where did that come from? That fucking Conrad cunt, I
bet. Turning my own daughter against me.

Jerry had sat down on a stranded tree trunk.

Ia'd done it before, too. Wasn't just this trip. It was everything.
And just because you've got money, why do you need to live in an
oversized house with moving walls and a living fucking roof? What's
next? A toilet that licks your arsehole?

I can't even begin to describe how wild that rich-prick arrogance
makes me.

Why is he so mean?

Cody glared at Jerry's back. Ia wouldn't stand for tōna own daughter back chatting like that. It'd all kicked off when Jerry'd started hanging out with that Ivoire and ōna mates, too; being exposed to the Leaders and tā rātou pretentious, ooh-la-la fucking bullshit.

Fuck that cunt.

It's like Jerry'd rather be his daughter than mine.

Ia tore the gear from tōna back and dropped it onto the stones.

“Okay, here then! Fucking here then!” Ia seemed to yell at no-one. Ōna teeth were bone white against the hot glow of tōna face as ia rifled through the gear, unpacking things that didn't want unpacking, untying and retying things, needing merely an action to give expression to tōna anger, without which ia would be left idle and embarrassed, because tōna anger had been evolving into sadness for some time. Humiliation had been spreading over tōna life like the slow expansion of dark in the evening. Ia'd put faith in hard work and loyalty, honesty and decency, while all along everyone else had been concentrating on money. It was like ia'd been dribbling the ball tōna whole life, only to look up, late in the game, to find that every one else had picked up a ball and run off. It was only through Jerry's eyes that Cody had finally seen tōna self, and there was nowhere to run now that could change it.

Tāna lucky spot must have been taken by the sea.

A few metres away, a sparrow dusted itself, dipping its head against a patch of dry sand. Cody unpacked the lunches from the top of the backpack, carefully separating ōna sandwiches from Jerry's and

stashing them off to the side. Ia wasn't supposed to, but ia'd snuck some Nutella into the house and made Jerry's favourite as a surprise.

Ia unstrapped the net, then withdrew the shotgun carefully, laid it against a sun-bleached branch and removed the cartridges from their waterproof pocket.

Oh my god.

Oh my god!

Jerry leapt up from the log. Tōna very soul seemed to collapse at the great betrayal.

It's them! Th'are on the bridge. Th'ave come to laugh at me:

Ivoire and Qianya, Mrs Leader... and Conrad. All of them!

The Leader family's ever-spotless silver Souffle Trois-Mille – first one in the country – was parked on the bridge with a trailer. The two girls were jumping up and down as Mrs Leader stood there calmly waving out. Jerry heard the distant cry of tōna name flowing gently down the river. To the right of the others, ia could barely make out Conrad attending to something on the trailer. With a flash of tōna arm the top of the trailer seemed to switch in an instant from blue to yellow.

Cody stood up, too. Ia'd heard a faint, familiar noise from the river – like a once lost scent, like a recollection trapped in amber – that ia couldn't quite locate. Ōna senses were suddenly electrified, tapped-in to the current and its rippling surface, in search more of a memory than an instance, for a long dormant sensation. Ia stepped lightly towards the river's edge, alert like a hunter or prey, mindful,

without seeing, of the heavy river stones shifting either side of āna
footfalls.

Conrad could be seen folding the tarp into the back of the truck.

And then, right before Cody's eyes, like magic, there were three
– no, four, five even! – ducklings almost marching through the water,
conducted watchfully by their mother. Six! Seven! It'd been so long
that ia could hardly believe it. Ten years, at least. It was like
stumbling across a pack of moa.

It's a miracle!

Cody had been checking the flight schedule every day, just on
the off chance, had rechecked it again this morning, was keeping a
constant eye on availability. To get tāna daughter on that plane with
ōna mates, all Cody needed was the money. Ia'd even kept the
itinerary that Conrad and Caitlyn had sent through, the wankers. It
was still doable. It was always still doable.

Never turn your back on the underdog!

The tears were already streaming down Jerry's cheeks when
rātou began pouring what looked like a bright yellow waterfall over
the edge of the bridge...

A thousand bucks a pop nowadays, these fucking birds.

... and they seemed to fall like flowers...

Here's your ticket, Sweetheart!

... He's sending me a message! He does love me...

Who's the super dad now?

Then Jerry's entire body flinched and ia cowered into a crouch, the reflex folding ia in two. Horrified, ōna eyes cut across to where, out of the river, white cascades reared maniacally up like deranged horses as the boom of each blast thundered upstream to the group on the bridge who gasped in terror.

Shotgun already cast aside, Cody was now ploughing through the water, net raised, striving frantically to get to the slow channel across the river where the bodies would now be strewn.

The money some people would pay!

Ia tripped and stumbled, ōna waders taking in a heavy draught of river water just beneath the armpit.

Might be the last ducks on Earth!

Jerry gaped at ia in terrified disbelief. Those on the bridge stood silent and still, ō rātou hands cupping ō rātou mouths.

Cody thrashed tāna way onward, desperate to get to the ducklings before the current drew them away from the pool. Ia stumbled again, the current stinging coldly against tōna neck. The dead ducklings were drifting slowly into the current, the mother's appalling caw now spiralling down like a siren.

Sheets of water flashed through the air as Cody lost tāna footing against the irregular river bottom, the pebbles themselves seemingly having taken on a liquid consistency. Ia thrashed again, instinctively throwing out tāna net like a hook, grappling with the water and trying to pull tōna self forward, yet gaining no purchase against the current's fluid insistence.

It didn't seem unusual, it didn't seem to register as uncanny in Cody's mind, when the first yellow plastic duck floated down from the bridge. Indeed, deep down, it seemed almost natural. They only started to impose on tōna consciousness, only began to impinge on tōna world, when they commenced to number quickly in the dozens, swarming around the dead ducklings as they gathered speed along the current. Ia ran. Ia ran and stumbled and thrashed. Took in and spat out
great mouthfuls of water.

The strange migration overwhelmed the little bodies, subsuming
them beneath a tide of daffodil-coloured plastic.

Jerry could only crouch there watching tōna father thrashing in
the water like a drowning bird, like a landed fish.

Were those tears?

Is he crying?

Ia'd didn't dare look back upstream.

Couldn't run away.

Chapter Nine

It seemed to Jerry, in the slowly dissipating stupor of waking, as though a blanket of light had been draped across tōna face, such was the softness of the morning's glow. Ōna shuttered lids glowed peachy pink in the morning sun, and ia felt wrapped in warm gold. Squinted into air that seemed to carry a great, weightless migration of bioluminescence, and for the briefest of moments re-lived a childish, unreflecting enthusiasm to leap into the day, for there were plots to be hatched and traps to be set.

That gossamer fabric of slumber, however, was slowly drawn aside, and the thin film of ōna delusions evaporated like condensation. Tōna tongue was dry as. The haziness of tōna mind wasn't a result of just sleep...

Ia stirred, feeling hungover and dehydrated. Through the small kitchenette window ia could see the tall figure of the turbine stretching bone-white into the morning sky – entreating with arms outstretched. Jerry rose and shuffled towards the sink, taking a faded plastic cup and sculling three full mouthfuls from its calloused rim.

Ia must've drunken too much – it was slowly coming back – and had finally collapsed in front of the bar. Had only a vague recollection of having been gathered up and heaped into a car before being returned to base and back to the room from which ia had only a few hours earlier escaped.

Had to get out.

But ia hadn't drunk too much. Had only had that one, or was it two handles? It was Sonya who had driven. That's right: it was the Orator who had lifted Jerry into bed. The Orator had even said sorry about something: "... got my spelling mixed-up."

So rāua must be all good then if the Orator had helped look after ia?

But it hadn't been the Orator who had caught Jerry at the bar. It had been the Business One.

Ia looked outside, up the drive, keeping an eye out for Con whilst trying to remember what had happened. The Orator had put ia in the car. Jerry's drink must have been spiked. Sonya had been behind the wheel. Rāua must have saved ia from the Business One without knowing that rāua were also saving ia from Con, which is why ia had been brought back here.

That's right: in the bar Sonya had said, "we'll get ia home – leave it to us," and then the Business One had just disappeared. Nobody'd had a bust-up.

Jerry'd been lucky.

For once.

Ia packed-up āna gear into tāna backpack and set out across the paddock, kept looking back to where Con's truck would appear up the driveway. Rāua: Con and the Business One. Fucking predators.

But Jerry couldn't work out why Con would be trying to frame ia for the murder: just so ia and tōna filthy mate could trap Jerry into tā rāua filthy, rapist games?

In every book, in all those hardboiled classics ia'd read, it always came down to money. James M. Cain. Dashiell Hammett. Follow the money. Ia looked back towards the driveway and then, hesitating only briefly, turned towards the turbine.

The ascent was brief, being just three thistle-ridden paddocks up an undemanding hillside. The incline was populated sparsely by a raggedy-looking mob that paid little attention to Jerry's presence, only glancing up from their chewing every now and then. There was an empty pragmatism and desolation to the scene, the sheep, the fences, even the shortness of the grass, as if a great, soulless instrumentalisation were at play, as if all were subject to the same helplessness that had been affecting ia tōna whole life, the only difference being ō rātou respective degrees of awareness, tō rātou sense of urgency, tō rātou sense of agency, tō rātou sense of authority.

Brittle cairns of sheep shit slowly crumbled in the dew-weary grass.

All shed hands developed a hatred for sheep. Rātou katoa resented their stupidity that served only to make ā rātou tasks more awkward than they needed to be. Sheep, Jerry had learnt, were cunts, and there was nothing to be done for them because they couldn't save themselves. The natural empathy that as a child ia had brought to the sheds had soon been erased with regards to those creatures, to the point where the only time tōna empathy had ever come close to being rekindled was when ia had seen some shearer, back in the day, bashing the head of some stubborn ewe – one unfortunate enough to

have escaped the shearer's grip – against the corner of the press until its eyeball hung loose down its cheek. It had already been shorn so that shearer, to show off tāna strength, tōna brutality, had raised the ewe off the ground and driven it taiaha-like down the chute to be forgotten, along with its torment, amongst its terrified and oblivious own.

The sheer size of the turbine, up until that moment, had escaped Jerry. Yet, now standing at its base, the immensity of that tower rising into the vast blue emptiness was elongating ōna perceptions of depth and height, drawing tāna perspective back like a bow and further confounding ōna feelings of disorientation. It was as if by looking upwards into the sky-blue depth ia had lost tōna equilibrium and was now being submerged into the ground.

Glancing at the base of the tower to regain tōna balance, ia remonstrated tōna self for tōna naivety in having imagined that there would be a ladder or climbing frame attached to the outer wall of the tower. Of course there wasn't. There would be a door at ground level.

Somewhere in the wash of background noise, amidst the distant swish of traffic and the cicada-like buzz of the day's burgeoning heat, ia perceived a more distinct, isolated sound. Staying close to the wall of the tower, ia peered around the edge and saw the white Ford Falcon moving slowly through the first of the farm gates that led up the track.

It was like touching an electric fence. Ia flinched as if stung all-through at once. The new-found motivation that had hitherto been informing āna actions had now been overtaken by an urgent fear. Ia

almost laughed ruefully at the ease with which self-determination had been cast aside by self-preservation.

The farm track, ia knew, wound its way up to the summit in such a meandering fashion, and the ground between the tower and the bottom of the hill was so open that it was simply dumb to expect that ia could make tāna escape without being seen. And while, in any other context, it might have been sensible just to evade capture, Jerry knew, in this particular case, that simply being seen was the great danger, because in the tray of tōna ute, in a box under cover, Con kept tāna hunting rifle, and Jerry suspected, in that panicked instant, that the opportunity might be another temptation upon which the savage bastard would be keen to indulge.

Predators like prey to run.

Ia followed the overgrown gravel that encircled the tower and located the door. Presumably, had the turbine ever been fully commissioned, the electronic lock that was embedded in the wall would no doubt have been engaged. However, what Jerry found instead were two steel elbow plates that had been welded to the door and wall respectively. Holes had been drilled into the protruding ends, which sat flush against each other, and which were now linked together by a solid brass padlock.

Ia took hold of the steel handle and pulled, setting tōna foot against the wall in the hope that ia might find sufficient weakness in the weld to separate the makeshift mechanism, but the metal held fast. Ia glanced around for any implement that might aid āna efforts,

hoping against hope that ia might see, although of course ia knew ia would not, a set of bolt-cutters or a rusty sledgehammer waiting miraculously amid the stalky grass, but the vision never materialised. An anger began to emerge from beneath the surface of ōna fears, ignited by sheer frustration. Ia kicked and kicked the door again, almost masking the sounds of the car revving and idling and revving again as Con negotiated the second-to-last gate.

Jerry spied a brace of adze-shaped rocks embedded in the gravel like middens and, taking one in each hand, attempted to strike each side of the padlock simultaneously. Ia was too early with tōna dominant hand and the padlock simply clanked and settled back into position. Ia tried again with less power and more precision, still failing to make a clean strike. Ia heard the jangling of the final gate being unlatched and the creak of it being swung open. There was a dull wallop as the gate made contact with the fence line, sending a twang down the wires. The hollow concussion of the car door clapping shut forced a thick gout of alarm up through Jerry's gullet.

Ia paused and held the twin stones together, end to end, ōna palms facing upward as though handcuffed, as if beseeching the tower to release ōna shackles. Ia took a deep breath and clanked the sides of the lock again, exhaling as the body fell away from the shackle. Ia withdrew the padlock from the lock and threw it to the ground, dragging the door back and sliding in before pulling the darkness closed behind.

In the brief glimpse that Jerry had before closing the door, the interior was larger than expected. There were lockers – or maybe they were banks of encased circuitry – to one side of the squared-off space. Ia had noticed the location of the ladder off to the left before setting forth in that direction and taking hold of the side railing. Ia moved ōna feet with rapid caution, anxious to put as much distance between tōna self and that beast as possible, if indeed it were Con's intention to enter the tower at all. Jerry prayed silently otherwise. Ia could only hope that Con had some other business in that particular paddock, perhaps to check on the stock or a fence, or even to get a view of some other location from that higher elevation.

Scraps of light leaked in at the edges of the door and the darkness intensified as the distance between Jerry and the entrance grew. Ia could sense the walls around seeming to slide downward as tāna ascent progressed. Every sound receded in opposing directions as if ia were quivering upon a vertical tightrope or crawling toward dense focus on a black beam of light. It was uncanny to be climbing upward into darkness and Jerry was struck by the sudden horror that perhaps a premonition were being divulged.

Ia plunged up into a black pond. Somehow, the darkness had deepened further and āna bearings were lost. The light had vanished completely between one step and the next.

Then a piercing shriek of light screamed past like a train.

Below, someone had opened the door.

Glancing down, Jerry was perplexed to see a mere halo of light encompassing ōna knees, and at first ia felt trapped in a black plastic tube. Then ia apprehended shuffling movements below and realised that ia had in fact passed through the hatchway of an intermediate platform. Ia kicked out with one leg and knocked a shin against the side of a solid floor. A new, more intense light burst into the space from below just as Jerry pulled ōna legs up and placed them as noiselessly as possible onto the platform before pushing tōna upper body away from the ladder. The light from below shone up into that newly vacated space and ia shrank fearfully into the darkness.

The light searched the hatchway from different positions, but to no avail. The limited angles available from that distance could only illuminate the area immediately surrounding the hatchway and Jerry, only a few steps back, was hidden, for the time being, entirely from view.

Just as suddenly, the light from below stopped scanning and held motionless on the hatchway, betraying only the slight wobble of Con's hand as ia tried to hold tāna cell phone steady. Jerry seemed not to breathe as Con protracted the silence. Rāua were hunter and prey, alive to each other's awareness. Jerry withheld, restrained and placed each breath as if it were the final piece in a precarious house of cards. It took profound effort for Jerry to release tāna exhalation slowly whilst tōna heartbeat spasmed inside tōna chest. Ia could have sworn ia had heard the synchronous pulsing of ōna and Con's veins, as if

rāua were connected by one heart, but the weight of the silence, in that instant, was absolute.

It was then that ia became conscious of the stink of human shit rising up through the darkness, a stench that was almost overwhelming, but had until that point, in tōna heightened state of alarm, gone unnoticed.

In the faded light that was leaking through the hatchway, Jerry noticed a couple of objects – one seemingly bundled – on the floor to tāna right. Ia stepped back into something tall and solid standing there in the darkness behind. Turning warily on ōna heels, ia felt around in the shadows, fumbling with what at first seemed an arrangement of steel pipes. Braced tōna self against the sides of this second ladder and pedalled a foot in the air until it rested safely upon the first rung. Adjusting to the light, ia glanced back at the bundle. Con's heavy footfalls juddered up the first ladder. Jerry felt the vibrations through tōna grounded foot and was seized by increased urgency. Looked up into the continued blackness and found another, and then another rung, placing each hand and each foot with a lightness disciplined by terror. Taking one final glance back down at the items on the floor, ia made out a laptop lying open, and what looked like the familiar form of a CPR doll, what was affectionately known in first aid courses as Rescue Annie, wrapped in a loincloth.

Jerry's dread was replaced by a rising, more horrifying sense of terror as ia blindly placed ōna feet upon each new rung. Ia scaled the ladder apace, timing āna footfalls so that ia made two soft steps for

each of Con's heavy one, screening āna movements behind the rhythm.

For a brief instant, despite the panic, Jerry somehow managed to reason that ia must attain the next platform before Con attained the last, and that doing so might prove tōna salvation, since it seemed that Con might not be there for ia after all, because the doll's wide eyes were locked on Jerry.

Tears of horror, delayed by the shock, began finally to seep onto Jerry's cheeks as ia rose further into the darkness and the next platform knocked against tōna thigh.

Blindly aware of Jerry's and Con's movements taking place around ia, the limbless body of the missing author let out a nasal bleat while flexing helplessly like a maggot on a woolshed floor.

*

Jerry was looking down through the hatchway of the upper platform. Con had put tōna head through the lower hatchway, had scanned around the lower platform with the light from tāna phone, which shone on the author's body, squirming there on the floor, now level with Con's grotesque, shadowed face. The stumps where the author's limbs had been taken off were scarred and bloodied, as if rough hewn and charred with nothing more than Kiwi ingenuity. In the fluctuating darkness, the mangled remains of tōna tongue looked like a cauterised heart pulsing inside tōna mouth.

“What the fuck have you done?”

Jerry didn't dare speak nor move. Con looked up to where ia was hidden in the blackness above, then flashed the light at that upper hatchway. Jerry lurched back into the darkness, reached a hand back to find the wall. The sun was warming the turbine from the outside.

“Jesus fucking Christ. What the fuck have you done?”

Con was looking up towards Jerry and tōna voice carried clearly through the hatchway, yet Jerry dared not move. Just stood there in the blackness clinging to the delusional hope that Con was not, as Jerry had prayed, aware of tōna presence.

“Well, come on, you cunt! Speak up!” Con yelled, “I know you're fucking there because you undid that padlock.”

Hidden in the gloom away from the platform, Jerry was no longer looking down onto Con and the author. In between Con's outraged search for answers Jerry could hear the muffled shuffling and tongueless bleating of that mutilated body there on the floor.

Jerry spoke up without moving into the light: “What do you mean ‘what have I done?’ Au've only been in this shitty town a few days. This horrific fucking shit has nothing to do with au.”

Con didn't respond, and in the ensuing silence it occurred to Jerry to then make it clear: “This is *your* fucking land. *Your* fucking turbine. *You* did this! Not au, *koe!*”

“No fucking way, mate,” Con answered at a lower volume, as if to tōna self, “no fucking way.” Ia paused, then goes, “Just my land. Not my turbine. Still waiting for those cunts to get rid of it.” Then ia

paused for another moment, gathering ōna thoughts, and climbed up fully through the lower hatchway and stepped out onto the platform and goes, “How come you had the key to the padlock, then?”

Jerry moved back into a position to see what was going on down below and responded:

“Au didn’t. Just pinged it with a couple of rocks.”

No movement.

Then Con stood right over the author’s body and glared down.

“Can you hear me?” Con demanded.

There was no discernible change in the body’s movements.

“Oi!” Con yelled. “Can you hear me!”

The squirming ceased, as if the author were hesitating, as if ia had made out some distant sound that ia couldn’t quite confirm.

“Yep,” Con muttered.

But not very well, Jerry thought, looking down through the rungs in the ladder.

Con stepped forward and, with the toe of tōna boot, nudged the keypad on the laptop that was sitting there open on the ground. The screen suddenly lit-up to a web page that Jerry couldn’t make out. Con squinted and leaned-in closer to see.

“You fucking cunt,” ia goes.

Then turned and looked up to the hatchway, casting the light in that direction. The rest of the interior went black except for the computer screen that seemed to hang there like a square planet in

space. Jerry's first instinct was to withdraw into the darkness again, before realising that now it was no use.

“What?” Jerry goes, “what is it?”

Having visually confirmed Jerry's presence, Con looked back at the author lying there, stood still in contemplation, then let the arm holding the phone fall to tāna side as ia looked off into the thickened darkness in a moment of deep thought, tōna heavy beer gut hanging over the front edge of tāna belt. Jerry could almost sense the dots being mentally connected in Con's mind, a constellation forming in the darkness.

“It's that fucking twin of yours.”

Jerry didn't understand.

“What?”

Con gave the author a light tap on the chest with tōna foot, which set the body off into desperate spasms, lying on tāna side, nodding tōna head backwards and forwards, crab-clawing open and closed. It was Jerry's instinct to go down there and offer the author some sort of tactile reassurance, offer any sort of remedy to the awful hopelessness of the situation, but Con just stood there, staring.

“It was the cop, eh!” Con yelled down aggressively at the author.

The body froze and then flexed again once more, then slowly began to emit the hushed murmur of weeping.

“Those two were rooting each other until it turned sour with the wind farm,” Con goes. “Ol' Cunstable Cowrie had a bit of skin in the

game, by the sounds of it. Was almost as fucked off as I was. Or,” ia corrected tōna self, “was even *more* fucked off, by the looks of this.”

Jerry couldn't believe it and yelled down at Con through the hatchway:

“Why did you try to frame au for the murder then, you filthy cunt?”

Con let out a short laugh, a fake laugh, and that was all. Stepped over to the ladder at the lower hatch and looked down into the empty space. A mist appeared above tōna head, as if somebody standing below had released some red spray paint into the air. Con let go of tōna cell phone and it fell light-up onto the ground, gently illuminating the entire level: the dried blood that was smeared against the walls; the rags and buckets and rope that were hidden in the furthest recesses; the scuzzy mattress that was now slumped against its own shadow. The shock of the boom that reverberated through the entire turbine seemed to have had a delayed effect on Jerry's mind. Con's body folded downwards onto the floor of the platform, rebounded slightly and then half straightened out flat beside the hatchway, tōna head falling sideways with a hard bang. A thick gout of what in the weak light looked like motor oil trickled about ten-mill away from where tōna temple made contact with the platform. The back of tōna head looked mussed and wet. Then Jerry recognised the faint nerve contraction that gives confirmation of death. Con had been shot through the skull.

The adrenaline pumped so rapidly through Jerry's body that ia felt lava rising up through tōna throat, felt as if the platform had suddenly become electrified and ia was a rat caught on its surface, felt stuck full rev with the clutch down. Heard a rattling noise that clinked up from the base and all the way through the ladder, creating a polyphonic effect, as if the sound were emanating not from the bottom but from along the ladder's entire length, before being joined by the dull thud of footsteps rising.

“Kia ora, e hoa!” echoed the familiar voice from down below, “bloody health and safety nightmare, this place!”

Jerry'd done a bit of harness training in tāna time, some tricky work at heights, and recognised the sound of carabiners being released and attached, rung by rung, and felt the vibrations rising up through the turbine and onto the upper platform.

“Can't have any injuries,” the policeone goes chirpily, popping tōna head through the lower hatchway, “no-one likes having to do an incident report sheet.” Ia climbed through and onto the platform, unfastening each of the two carabiners and letting the ends of the harness fall almost to the floor. Scanned the entire breadth of the platform before resting tāna gaze momentarily on Con's body lying there, “Or having to log a near-miss.”

Ia reached down with one hand and dragged Con's body around by the collar of tōna jersey so that the head was nearest the hatchway. Then, after looking around once more, ia quickly holstered the gun and, straddling the body, took hold of it by the belt with two hands

and dragged it towards the opening. First the head, then the torso, slid awkwardly into the hole until the balance of the weight took over and the feet shot up into the air as if diving into a pool. After a brief silence echoed-up the heavy sack-like thud.

Jerry had shrunk back once more into the darkness, but it was no use. The policeone had heard rāua talking. Had to have. Āna final moments were something that ia had imagined many times before, but ia couldn't be any more accepting, wasn't any more prepared. Tōna body was rejecting the possibility outright. Jerry knew that ia could carry-on up onto the next platform, which'd probably be the last, only to be followed and murdered all the same. Could try to hide from the policeone and surprise ia at the hatchway. Rip away the gun. But this wasn't a movie. In fact, the policeone could shoot up through the platform.

“Come down here please.”

Jerry looked at the glow rising up from the hatchway. To step into that space felt like certain death. Moving as slowly and gently as possible, Jerry slipped off ōna shoes and then began padding silently around the upper platform.

“Leave me alone!” was all Jerry could think to say. “Please, just leave me alone!”

Could hear the infantile pleading, the weakness, the desperation, in tōna own voice.

“Look,” the policeone said calmly, “Au won't hurt koe, okay. Con was a scumbag. Ia and ōna rapist mates should all be shot as far

as au'm concerned. Alright? But koe're innocent. Koe shouldn't even be here. Koe could wander off into the sunset and no-one would ever need know. Au promise," ia continued, "if au wanted to kill koe, au'd just go ahead and do it right now."

Jerry wanted to believe it but knew it wasn't true. Shooting ia on the ladder would be so much easier than climbing up and risking getting hit on the head or wasting bullets shooting up through the platform. A simple conversation to try to coax Jerry down was always going to be the first option.

Still Jerry dared not stay still, dared not give away tāna location, could feel tōna self clinging like a child to hope, as if there were a tiny chance, maybe, that the policeone could be telling the truth.

"Au don't want to get koe into any trouble," Jerry yelled toward the hatchway. "Au fucking hate that cunt. He tried to rape au." Ia paused. "Au'm glad koe shot him. If au'd had a gun, au'd have shot him too."

"Au know," goes the policeone. "That's why au'm gonna let koe go."

Jerry stared at the hatchway but couldn't move.

"And as far as au know, it was Con who cut that fulla up and kept ia in here." Jerry was lying to survive. "Au caught Con in the act molesting tāna hostage and koe came and saved au. So if anyone ever found out, au'll tell them koe're a hero."

"Exactly," agreed the policeone, "that's exactly right."

Jerry couldn't step into that light.

“Can koe just go, please? Just go and leave au here and au’ll escape into the bush and au swear koe will never see au again. Koe will never hear from au again. Just leave the turbine and give au a chance to get away. Then koe can honestly say that koe never saw au escape. Can say whatever koe want. Just leave here first and let au escape in peace.”

There was a long silence, but Jerry could sense the calculations being flicked through like pages, then heard the sound of footsteps as the policeone starting to pace around the lower platform, the carabinieri dangling from tōna back and bouncing off the backs of ōna heels with each step. Jerry leaned-in closer to the hatchway, trying to make out what page was open on the computer screen.

“Alright,” goes the policeone finally. “Just come and stand in the light where I can see koe for a second, just so au know that it’s actually koe and not someone else au’m talking to. Au haven’t seen koe. Au’ve only heard a voice. Koe could be anyone.”

It was then that Jerry knew for certain that the policeone was going to shoot.

On the screen Jerry could just make out the header and logo for that crypto-currency firm, *seplucre.com*.

“Come on,” goes the policeone, āna footsteps coming to a halt directly beneath where Jerry was standing. “Just poke your head through the hole there so au know it’s koe.”

Jerry increased the speed of tāna circling.

“Koe don’t want to kill au, eh?”

“Of course not,” ia answered.

“No, seriously,” Jerry asserted, continuing to circle around above the policeone, “koe don’t want to kill au.”

The policeone hesitated, not comprehending Jerry’s meaning.

“And why’s that?” ia asked.

Jerry stepped recklessly over to the ladder and, giving neither the policeone nor tōna self any time to think, started climbing down:

“Cos au know the password to unlock the crypto.”

Chapter Ten

Cody's guts shrank – collapsed bowl-shaped like a squashed ball – when Jerry turned up in the kitchen. Ia'd just settled the kids at the table and the mince was good to go. Con looked up and one could see the fucked-offedness on tōna face as well.

“Hi, Mrs Bibby.”

Why didn't this bloody kid ever knock? How many times was ia going to come around without picking up on the fact that ia was unwelcome? Every single time Cody had made it clear – or at least to a normal person it would be clear – maybe not out loud, but definitely through tōna attitude, that the kid's presence was a pain in the arse.

“What are koe doing here, Jerry?”

Con mashed margarine into the white-bread and dealt it out to the three kids who were chop sticking their legs under the table, unable to reach the floor.

But Cody'd done it again. Ia'd been too nice again. Couldn't ask without softening the question, tagging Jerry's name on the end. Not that kids like this could pick up on subtle cues. One had to be harder on rātou, but it wasn't in Cody's nature.

Even Con took a hard-arsed attitude, talked-up a good game behind closed doors, but ia couldn't be any harder on the poor kid either. And it didn't help that the kids didn't mind having Jerry there.

Jerry was pretty harmless for now. Had that look about ia. The way tōna hair always shielded tōna face. Tāna presence always made

Cody uneasy. Jerry was a grenade chucked into the world: one always had to stop what one was doing and make sure the pin was still in.

Au have to keep checking.

“Can someone play, Miss?”

Dim as midnight, this kid. Stone cold fucking stupid.

“Sit down, Cynree!”

The kids had tried to leave the table.

“Now’s not the time to play.”

At least Con was straight with *ō rāua* own ones.

Jesus, who fucking drinks when they’re pregnant, anyway? The loop in Cody’s mind had been reactivated. Cody’d told *rātou*, too. *Ia*’d said haven’t *koe* had enough? Shouldn’t *koe* leave it at that? But nah.

Rātou didn’t need to hear that rich people shit. *Advocados* and *yoga*. My mum drunk with me and I turned out alright. One can’t beat that – the ultimate comeback – can’t say no, can’t say are *koe* sure? Can’t change someone’s mind by insulting *ia*, by calling *ia* an outcome.

“Why aren’t *koe* at home, Jerry?” Con said. Even *ia* had to soften it by adding the kid’s name to the end of the question. Couldn’t

just ask, “Why aren’t *koe* at home?”

That would be too gruff.

Too unfair.

This was the bit that hurt Cody the most. Cody’d watch Jerry frown as *ia* tried to formulate an answer. Jerry looked like *ia* hurt just being in the world, always looked like *ia* was about to stumble forward, seemed to have pain without knowing where to attach it.

“Au’ll go then.”

Jesus. Stupid fucking damaged fucking kid.

“No, come and have some kai, Jerry. There’s heaps there.”

Or was Jerry clever? Ia always seemed to win. Or Cody always
seemed to give in, at least.

“Don’t they feed koe at tōu place, Jerry?” Con probed, not
unkindly, but battering another piece of bread until ia’d pushed a hole
through.

Rāua changed ā rāua tunes so easily around this kid.

Jerry rendered the question rhetorical.

“Save mātou some!” Cynree cried, as Whitz began pouring a
second large dollop of tomato sauce onto tāna mince.

“Don’t waste that, Whitz. Māua’ve told koe that before.”

Cynree took the tin Whitz proffered and patted more sauce
through before pouring, then did the same for little Charlane, who
dipped tōna finger directly into the sauce, eating it straight.

“Sauce is for adding to stuff, Charlane. Don’t eat it by itself,”

Whitz railed.

“Give some to Jerry, please.”

Cynree tried to hand the bottle to Jerry, who had reluctantly
taken the spare seat, but Jerry pushed it away with the back of tōna
hand.

Was that aggression? Was it hostility? Cody suddenly hardened
again.

“Jerry, if koe don’t want any sauce say ‘no, thank koe, please, or
koe can go home.”

“Yeah, mātou use manners in this house, mate,” Con added.

Jerry sat still, except for one foot tapping on a dark gap in the
lino. There was that furrowed brow again, and the tilting forward.

Without making eye contact with anyone, ia stood up.

“Fuck yuz, then.”

By the time Cody began yelling, Jerry already had tōna back to
ia, which made it easier.

And then Jerry was gone.

Unbelievable!

“Little shit,” Con added.

The kids shrank into ā rātou seats and ate with quiet
deliberation.

After all Cody’d done for that bloody kid! Fed ia. Looked after
ia. Put up with ia coming in at all sorts of hours with that hollow look
in ōna eyes. Cody’d stuck up for ia when those shoes had gone
missing from Jason’s bag that time. And then Jerry’d left some
flowers on tō rātou doorstep. Mrs Solomon’s flowers - and ia’d called
the fucking cops, the old arsehole. Just unbelievable.

And now, how dare Jerry...

There was a crash followed by a volley of voices from out on
the street, and then a car sped away.

The ball in Cody’s guts squirmed like a knot of eels.

Con beat Cody outside. There were no cars on the road, just a
black body under a streetlight.

Jerry kneeled over ia.

Long triangles of yellow light emerged along the street where
curtains were being held open; figures appeared in doorways, each
face lit off and on by an orange ember. The sky though was still light
with shades of blue, pink and grey. Cody noticed the road bike lying
on a neighbour's lawn like a kid's discarded BMX.

The face on the body was pale.

“What happened?” Con's confusion – like Cody's –
overpowered tōna sense of alarm.

“What happened, Jerry?”

“Hit by a car.”

Sonya, tā rātou neighbour from across the road, seemed to
emerge from the evening like a wraith wrapped in a faded pink robe:

“It was a flash car, too – the bloody bastards.” Sonya's lips
withdrew pensively around ōna gums. “Just took off.”

Over Jerry's shoulder Cody made out panicked features, the
eyes peeled like hard-boiled eggs.

“Koe okay, Miss?”

No, ia's obviously not okay, poor, stupid child.

“Tāua have to call an ambulance.”

“Au left tāku phone inside,” said Con, turning and running. Ia
was heard yelling, “get back inside and stay there, e tamariki mā.”

The front door slammed.

The alarm began to reassert itself in Cody's mind, consigning another idea to the darkness before the front door slammed again and

Con reappeared with tāna phone to tōna ear.

“Ambulance...”

Jerry could be heard speaking softly to the motorcyclist whose heavy, leather-clad body and thick boots belied the fragile face

staring, astonished, at the slowly fading sky.

“... by a car...”

Cody edged closer, trying to make out the state of the

motorcyclist...

“... conscious...”

... and what Jerry was saying.

Con was peering over Jerry's shoulder.

“Hello? Can koe hear au?”

“Get out of the way, Jerry!” Cody goes, exasperated. “Māua

need to see how ia is.”

Con, steadily conveying information, circled around to the far

side of the body.

“Who took tōna helmet off?”

At the top end of the street the traffic rustled ceaselessly past.

“Au'm just talking to the kid who saw the accident – Jerry, how

did tōna helmet come off?”

The sky's colour contours flattened into black and a new sense

of fear slithered into Cody's guts.

Sonya told them it was Jerry.

Cody almost spat.

“Jesus, Jerry! Get away! Get out of the way so Con can hel...”

Jerry’s voice carried up the street. Tōna frustration came out as a wild tirade directed solely at Cody. Cody was appalled that such a domestic scene should be imposing itself on so drastic a situation, appalled at being made the villain in this shitty, unnecessary sideshow, appalled that someone’s else’s life could be dripping into the gutter while here rātou were squabbling and throwing tantrums for an audition nobody’d called. There in the street-lit twilight tōna life felt suddenly like a petty barrier other lives could only hope to pass through.

Then a soft voice rose from the chip seal and a sobbing Jerry leaned in to hear.

*

In the end Con had to give the phone to Cody and carry Jerry away, and then the ambulance came and attended to the body and carried it away, then Jerry went and sat on the kerb while Con and Sonya spoke to the police. A truck came and took the battered road bike. And then the police went. And then Sonya.

The rest was left for the rain.

Cody sat on the kerb next to Jerry, while Con stood back.

“Koe okay, bubs?”

“Yep.”

Cody couldn't bring tōna self to put a hand on Jerry's shoulder.

Cody'd been there in the delivery room when Jerry had been born. Jerry's mum had to be taken away and fixed up. Nothing major, but it meant Cody'd done that first skin-on-skin.

And Jerry's tirade had been vicious.

"What did ia say to koe, Jerry?" It came out like an accusation.

"Yeah, Jerry. Au was wondering that," Con chimed in, trying to soften the evident hostility in Cody's voice. "What did that lady whisper to koe?"

"Don't yell at your mum."

Con could only look away as Cody put ōna arms around Jerry. The kids watched like ruru from the window, peering over the back of the couch, nestled side by side. Jerry's arms stayed limp in tōna lap, but Cody could feel Jerry leaning into the cuddle, trying awkwardly to nuzzle tōna neck. Yet the harder Cody squeezed, the higher it raised tōna gorge, and ia came to understand that ia would never be able to disentangle the resentment and sympathy that ia felt for the sake of this other human one.

Chapter Eleven

The muscles in Jerry's neck had tightened almost to snapping because ia had been expecting, with each step down the ladder, a bullet to shatter the base of tōna skull. At the same time, the adrenaline, the dissonant recklessness and pragmatism of the bluff, the fact of having nothing to lose was giving ia enough hopeless confidence to keep moving. Stepped down onto the lower platform and turned around to face the policeone who stood in front of the lower hatchway, blocking off any hint of escape, any last-ditch leap of faith. Jerry's heart almost blurted toad-like from tōna own mouth when ia saw the dark mouth of the barrel calling towards ia. Tōna body screamed; fought the instinct to reel. The presence of the policeone – whose face was lit-up from underneath by the glow of Con's cell phone – seemed for an instant almost incidental in comparison to the fact of the gun.

“Oh,” the policeone goes, “*do koe now?*” Ia stared warily at Jerry. “As koe might've noticed,” ia smiled, gesturing behind to where the author lay, now still, “ia and I had gotten to the point where I'd kinda given up on getting the password. Ia's a very stubborn person.”

Jerry was perplexed by the policeone's perverted logic, but the madness of āna actions gestured towards an emotional logic that Jerry, distressingly, recognised. Like tōna self, tōna namesake viewed the world through that dumb, working-class moral lens where things were good or bad, fair or unfair, where loyalty and betrayal made sense –

whereas rich people used the law. The actual law, not that informal one that's churned out in novels and movies. Jerry could see that rāua were in fact trapped within the same resentments, the same self-limiting mindset. The differences between rāua were, demoralisingly, only matters of degree.

In the end, everybody wants the money.

“So,” the policeone goes, holding the handgun pointing steadily at Jerry’s chest, “what’s the password, then?”

Jerry felt a warped grin wringing itself across tōna mouth, as if the strain of the blood surging through tōna body and the excessive discomfort of tōna pulsating heart had granted ia a death wish.

“If au tell you, you’ll shoot.”

“If koe don’t tell me, I’ll shoot.”

The turbine’s external framework shuddered and buckled under the soft beat of the sun’s hammer and the arid air inside began to circle and rise invisibly. Jerry glared unblinkingly at the policeone’s shadowed face and in doing so imagined tōna own face likewise puddled by darkness. The policeone’s eyes were held steady as if by a mirror.

“A minute ago you were going to let au go.”

“A minute ago,” ia sighed, “koe didn’t have fifteen-million dollars of mine, did koe?” Ia dropped tōna arm, pointing the gun at the floor. “Anyway, the chances that koe are telling the truth are slim to fat, so the only way koe can prove that koe aren’t lying is by telling me the password. So just tell me or I’ll shoot you.”

“Au’ m not lying.”

“Neither am I.”

Tōna adrenaline was spent and Jerry felt a kind of calm. Ia contemplated the policeone as a problem to be solved.

“Give au the gun. Au’ m not a killer. Au would only shoot you in self-defence. Not even if you were running away: it’ d be easier for au just to call the cops and let rātou deal with you. So if you give au the gun, au won’ t get shot, and au could give you the password. That’ s a fair deal: au get the gun, you get the password; au get to live, you get the money.”

“Or koe could just run off safely with the gun and dob me in. Koe would still have the password. Koe could access the money at any time.”

“But au only know the password, not the account details, not the signing-in...”

The policeone swung the gun and pulled the trigger. Jerry flinched with the flash of the muzzle and the deafening boom that reverberated up through the turbine. Ia snapped one foot off the floor, wrenching tōna body sideways, which served only to prevent the bullet from smashing through tōna shinbone. Instead, tāna twisting motion had exposed tōna calf muscle to the bullet and a large chunk of the meat there disintegrated in a puff of vapour. The bullet continued through the platform and shattered against the turbine wall. Jerry cried out in disbelief and crashed to the floor in agony.

“You gonna give me the password now?”

Jerry had gone down in the foetal position and could hear the blood pattering in a puddle on the floor as it trickled from tōna leg. The excruciating pain was only surpassed by the fear at being damaged, the gross shock at having something so taken-for-granted as tōna body suddenly made contingent and precarious.

Of all the things to think about in that instant, Jerry was suddenly drawn back to the times as a child when ia had watched puddles growing, seen them spread and join up with larger puddles and drain away to larger puddles still, or down the drain, and now, instead of water, it was tōna own lifeblood that was rolling at the edges across the floor.

“Well,” the policeone goes, “are you gonna tell me or do I have to shoot your other leg?”

At the intrusion of the policeone’s voice an element of clarity, an element of anger, a kind of reckless competitiveness, emerged in Jerry’s mind. Ia sat up, enraged, resting the heel of the wounded leg against the floor and, trembling uncontrollably, pushed tōna thumb into the back of the sock of the other foot, slid it down, pulled it off and, in spite of the pain, began tying the sock above the knee of the injured leg while tōna blood trickled down onto the floor.

Closer to the ground, in the corner of tōna eye, ia noticed through the haze of tōna tortured state the white face of the author glowing dully like porcelain in the dark light on the floor behind the policeone, seeming to swivel on its side like a head on a spit before suddenly disappearing into the shadows. Then it flickered back into

existence, coming to rest once more. Jerry focussed on the tourniquet, for fear of drawing the policeone's attention toward that luminescent presence. In the darkness where the light of the phone was failing to seep, the author was rolling nearer.

Jerry looked defiantly up at the policeone.

“You've already been given the password.”

Then Jerry pulled the tourniquet tight and winced. The trickle of blood continued along tōna Achilles tendon, down tōna heel and onto the platform. Tried to straighten tōna leg but couldn't, so took tōna foot in one hand and the back of the knee in the other and, leaning forward, slowly laid tōna leg out onto the platform while the pain overwhelmed. Tōna body was screaming to stop; tōna mind objected and carried on.

“What are you talking about?”

Jerry tried to harness the pain:

“Didn't you read the fucking book?”

The policeone hesitated, confused.

“What are koe talking about? What book?”

“The one ia wrote and gave to you. The one that had ‘For Jerry’ written in it. The book that was for *you* and no-one else.”

The policeone put the gun down and furrowed tōna brow.

“How did koe know about that?”

Tears of pain filled ōna eyes as Jerry worked on a second knot. Ia didn't look up:

“Why didn't you fucking read it?”

The policeone raised the gun again.

“Why the fuck is that any of your business?”

Jerry glared up at ia with the boldness of one who has nothing to lose.

“Because ia *gave you* the fucking password. Because none of tātou would be in this fucking mess if you’d just *read the fucking book*. Because au want to know why you’re so fucking stupid. That’s why.”

The policeone paused, stunned, turning tōna mind back over and reinterpreting past events. Ia looked down at the floor in disbelief, while Jerry saw that the spread of the puddle beneath tōna leg had begun to slow.

“That fucking cunt.”

Jerry strained to temper the agony that was threatening to overwhelm tōna face. Here, at what was probably the end of tōna life, like a marathon, ia wasn’t afraid to sprint, had held tōna self back for the entire race but now, with nothing to lose, agency was coming easy and victimhood had lost its value. Could bluff and push buttons, could scratch and claw, could justifiably do just about anything to make tāna way out of this. For the first time in tōna life ia felt the invisible hand letting go.

“It never occurred to koe that the password might be hidden in the book?”

“No, it fucking didn’t!” ia hissed. “I spent years sucking up to that asshole. Years. Years learning your shit fucking language.

Bought a couple of houses that are now worth fucking nothing because the windfarm didn't go ahead. And what did I get from any of it? A fucking book to read?" Ia raised the gun. "Give me the fucking password or I'll blow your fucking guts out."

"Au'm not telling you. If you had any fucking decency you'd have already known."

The policeone glared at Jerry for a moment and then kneeled down. Placed the gun on the floor between ōna knees and leaned sideways, reaching out to grab the laptop. Ia placed it on the floor in front and hit the space bar. The screen lit-up and the face of the author, behind, bathed in greenish light, re-emerged like the moon from an eclipse. The policeone picked-up the gun, aimed it at Jerry's uninjured leg, and fired.

Jerry lurched away, rolling to the side, screaming in agony. The pain scorched through tōna leg like flames pulsating up through ōna bones. Turned onto tōna stomach, then tōna side, looking across at the gun, the one leg biting through ōna nerves, the other leg resting unharmed underneath as a support. The bullet had missed.

"Give me the fucking password!"

The pain in tōna leg was overwhelming and tōna head rocked back and forth in agony. Blood had begun to seep up the back of tōna thigh. The wetness seeped into tōna crotch. Shouted at the policeone through gritted teeth:

"For Jerry!" Ia cried. *"For Jerry! For fucking Jerry, you dumb cunt! It was for koe and you couldn't even see it! A whole book of*

stories with different versions of who you could have been. Ia gifted it all to *koe* and look at what *you* did!”

The policeone stared, dumbstruck. The warming air had begun to swirl up the turbine and the soft sound of it flowed upwards. Ia drew the laptop nearer, raising it up so that the closest edge rested against the top of *ōna* knees. The tapping of the keys was so slow, so deliberate, that Jerry could almost feel the shadows of sweat being left behind beneath the pads of the policeone’s fingers, as if it were ia who were doing the typing. Could feel each letter, even noted the distinct sound of the space bar marking out the gap between the two words; waited and waited, hanging in suspense, for the *enter* key to be pressed. Instead, the policeone seemed to hold down another key and then release it. Had pressed delete.

A light breeze must have picked-up outside the turbine because the two blades suddenly began to creak. That metallic buckling sound clanged down through the turbine. Through the almost paralysing pain Jerry thought of a wind chime, wryly conscious that that may have been one of *ōna* last ever thoughts. The wind brushed around the outer wall of the tower and the carabiners hanging from the policeone’s back jangled lightly on the floor as ia shifted *tōna* weight, resettled the laptop at *ōna* knees, and nervously tried again.

Tap-tap-tap.

Tap.

Tap-tap-tap-tap-tap.

Ōna eyes rolled up at Jerry like that of a great white, then back down at the screen. Tōna head didn't move.

Enter.

The author's face appeared to snarl at the air behind the policeone like a shark on the floor of a fishing boat snapping desperately at nothing.

The policeone's eyes widened. Fury melted down tōna face. Ōna lips retracted, exposing the white's of ōna teeth. Ia looked up at Jerry with unmitigated hatred. The wind had momentarily subsided and the only noise was the sound of a carabiner being dragged slowly across the floor. The policeone cast the laptop to one side and grabbed the gun from between ōna legs. Ia shifted tōna weight to one side, unfolding a leg out from underneath, swinging it around and placing the foot against the floor, the barrel pointed at Jerry throughout the entire motion. Tried to stand-up but was held back by the end of the harness that was being held tight between the author's gnashed teeth. In a half-crouch the policeone stumbled backwards.

The author's body spun around like a crocodile in a death roll. The slack of the harness wrapped around tōna face. Ia rolled into the hatchway. The policeone was dragged backwards, tōna torso collapsing into the opening. Locked in a starfish shape, arms and legs splayed out desperately against the sides of the hatchway, tōna body convulsed with a sickening noise as the harness snapped tight beneath. The next moment, the strain released. Ia clawed at the platform floor, ōna arms thrown sideways. The gun fell loose beside

tōna straining hands. Pushing the back of tōna head against the hatchway edge, ia began regaining control and pulling tōna self back out while the awful sound of impact echoed up from underneath.

Screaming in torment, Jerry twisted tōna body side-on to the hatchway and rolled towards the policeone. Tōna blood-soaked leg bashed with each turn against the platform, forcing a flood of pain to surge up tōna body. The agony seemed to pulse in time with tōna heartbeat. Twisted until tōna shoulder smacked against one of the policeone's feet. Looked up to see ia pushing tōna weight down on ōna elbows.

Jerry kicked out – driving tōna foot into the policeone's shin again and again, over-riding the pain, driven on frantically by fear – but the policeone's foot was anchored fast. Jerry saw ia reaching for the gun. Lashed out with tōna foot. Hit the policeone's hand just as it was making contact with the gun and it went spinning across the platform and into the shadows.

The policeone again shifted tōna weight into ōna elbows, again drove tōna head back down onto the hatchway edge, pushed up with ōna legs until tōna torso emerged from within the hole. Growled with the effort.

Jerry spun around ninety degrees, pointing ōna feet towards the policeone and then, with a scream of pain and exertion, raised tōna uninjured leg high into the air and brought tōna heel down hard into the policeone's crotch. It was like pushing a release button as the tension instantly left the policeone's muscles and ia collapsed

inwards, doubled over, and disappeared like a spider being sucked down a plughole.

*

Jerry had managed to get through to 111 on Con's phone.

Sat still in the darkness, waiting.

The pain in tōna leg swelled and contracted, heaved and bloated, dragging a grimace down tōna face with each expansion. The rhythmic ebbing and throbbing rendered every throe torturous since each new glimpse of respite contained the seeds of further torment.

Painting the floor with a broad, dark stroke, ia had dragged tōna bloodied self around so that tōna back was leaning against one of the thin sides of the ladder, the steel pressing harshly into tōna skin, so that ia could look down into the hatchway and confirm that the danger had passed, could sense any movement, could allay the possibility of further nightmares. Had lit-up the grotesque image below with a swift wave of the phone. All lay motionless and silent except for the groans of the turbine as it reckoned with the wind and the sun, the tower's every minor adjustment reverberating through the platform and into Jerry's pulsing leg. The air was becoming stifling and ia couldn't tell whether the sweat dripping down ōna temples were due to the heat or the shock.

The battery icon on Con's phone said it was a quarter full. Jerry leaned over, hit the spacebar on the laptop and saw that its battery was

close to dead. The notification in the middle of the screen said that there was one attempt remaining.

Chapter Twelve

On the day mātou said haere rā to tōku whaea, the moon had turned black. None of mātou had even noticed until someone had seen the news on tāna phone and, looking up, cried out. It was a pristine black disc on autumn morning blue and mātou stood in the driveway as the hearse drove up, looking skyward like a troupe of meerkats.

This was years before what happened in the turbine.

Tōku whānau had never been a religious family, nor – at that point – a particularly Māori one either, and following the wishes of tōku father the service was held at a funeral home. Au admired the stoicism of ōku whāea kēkē as rātou had gone about dressing tōku māmā for the very last time.

Someone said that ia suited purple.

At one point, au was taken aside by Dad. Tōku old bedroom was by that time nothing more than a seldom-visited storage room where the floor was decorated with woodworm hieroglyphs and dust mote-lit light hung in the air as if trapped in warm honey.

“Your mum left you some petrol money.”

The dry notes folded smoothly into tōku palm and a ‘thank you’ rolled out of tōku throat and across the floor.

Tōku heart crumpled like a yellow leaf.

That evening, alone with one half of the world, au followed the trajectory of the moon while, in spite of tōku self, making juvenile bargains for just another chance — the only clue to the moon’s

presence being the brief eclipse of each star as it trickled down the
face of the night.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Function words cited by Diaz

Appendix A. (continued)					
Word	Length	Frequency	Word	Length	Frequency
Function words					
Ago	3	246	Nowadays	8	12
Alas	4	10	Nowhere	7	29
Alone	5	195	Oft	3	1
Already	7	273	Oneself	7	5
Amid	4	14	Onto	4	60
Amongst	7	4	Ours	4	27
Anew	4	6	Overall	7	12
Anyone	6	140	Prior	5	47
Aside	5	67	Qua	3	2
Astray	6	3	Quite	5	281
Awhile	6	4	Sans	4	2
Aye	3	1	Sic	3	4
Barring	7	3	Soon	4	199
Beside	6	78	Supra	5	3
Circa	5	1	Thee	4	17
Duly	4	10	Theirs	6	21
Else	4	176	Thence	6	6
Ere	3	1	Thereby	7	33
Etc	3	58	Thine	5	1
Fore	4	7	Thou	4	14
Forever	7	39	Thy	3	12
Forth	5	71	Till	4	50
Gratis	6	1	Unduly	6	6
Hence	5	58	Unless	6	101
Hereby	6	8	Unto	4	16
Hers	4	16	Versus	6	9
Hither	6	2	Whence	6	3
Lest	4	17	Whereas	7	41
Likewise	8	18	Whoa	4	1
Maybe	5	134	Whom	4	146
Mine	4	59	Whose	5	252
Nay	3	2	Yea	3	3
Near	4	198	Yes	3	144
Neither	7	141	Yon	3	1
Nobody	6	74			

Appendix 2: Original text taken from *Murder on the Orient Express*:

“What happened exactly?”

“I knocked at the door, but he called out and said he had made a mistake.”

“In English or in French?”

“In French.”

“What were his words exactly?”

“*Ce n'est rien. Je me suis trompé.*”

“Quite right,” said Poirot. “That is what I heard. And then you went away?”

“Yes, Monsieur.”

“Did you go back to your seat?”

“No, Monsieur, I went first to answer another bell that had just rung.”

“Now, Michel, I am going to ask you an important question.

Where were you at a Quarter-past one?”

“I, Monsieur? I was at my little seat at the end -- facing up the

corridor.”

“You are sure?”

“*Mais oui* -- at least -- ”

Appendix 3: Māori Pronouns

Singular:

au	=	I/me
koe	=	you
ia	=	he/she, him/her

Dual:

tāua	=	you and I
māua	=	ia and I
kōrua	=	you two
rāua	=	those two

Plural:

tātou	=	we three or more, including you
mātou	=	we three or more, excluding you
koutou	=	you three or more
rātou	=	those three or more

Possession of one item:

tāku/tōku	=	my (e.g., <i>tāku pukapuka = my book</i>)
tāu/tōu	=	your
tāna/tōna	=	his or her
tā/tō tāua	=	our (yours and mine)

tā/tō māua	=	our (his/hers and mine)
tā/tō kōrua	=	your (yours and his/hers)
tā/tō rāua	=	their (belonging to those two)
tā/tō tātou	=	our (yours, mine and others')
tā/tō mātou	=	our (theirs and mine, not yours)
tā/tō koutou	=	your (yours and theirs, not mine)
tā/tō rātou	=	their (belonging to those three or more)

Possession of several items:

āku/ōku	=	my (e.g., <i>āku pukapuka</i> = <i>my books</i>)
āu/ōu	=	your
āna/ōna	=	his or her
ā/ō tāua	=	our (yours and mine)
ā/ō māua	=	our (his/hers and mine)
ā/ō kōrua	=	your (yours and his/hers)
ā/ō rāua	=	their (belonging to those two)
ā/ō tātou	=	our (yours, mine and others')
ā/ō mātou	=	our (theirs and mine, not yours)
ā/ō koutou	=	your (yours and theirs, not mine)
ā/ō rātou	=	their (belonging to those three or more)