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Mothership: First person child narrators: unreliable and flawed?

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

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Abstract

This thesis consists of two parts: a creative part titled *Mothership* and a critical component: “First person child narrators: unreliable and flawed?”

Both these components are interested in child narrators and the impact their unreliability has on the text and the reader. The critical component considers what we mean by the unreliable narrator, the tools that the writer may employ when their narrator is unreliable and how these tools enhance the text. Two novels that employ child narrators are examined: *Room* by Emma Donoghue, and *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* by Mark Haddon.

The child narrators from these novels, Jack and Christopher respectively may be said to be unreliable on two levels: because they are children, and because of extreme limitations in environment, in Jack’s case, and ASD in Christopher’s. This unreliability is used to create tension, to undercut melodrama, to foster intimacy, and enhance an emotional connection with the reader, and for other effects. Their unreliable narration helps build tension through the sharing of information in the form of clues, secrets and collaborations between reader, the implied author, other characters and the unreliable narrators themselves. The reader applies these clues and insights to the text as a whole, thus creating a feedback loop (Phelan 91).

The creative work, *Mothership* is part of a novel of 100,000 words, in three parts. Because of the word count restrictions in the MCW, only the first 14 chapters have been submitted. The extract follows Archie’s journey as caregiver for his morbidly obese bedridden mother.

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Mothership

Introduction

The creative work, *Mothership* is part of a novel of 100,000 words, which is divided into three parts. In order to meet the constraints of the word limit of the MCW, an extract from the beginning of the novel is given for this thesis. In the extract we follow eleven year old Archie, and learn he is a caregiver for his morbidly obese bedridden mother. In the creative component of the thesis, the protagonist is an unreliable child narrator. I was influenced by the tools, in *Room* and *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*, used by Donoghue and Haddon in the critical component around unreliable narrators and used this to help develop a bond or relationship with the child narrator Archie and the reader, in this creative component.

The extract finishes with Archie arriving at a summer camp for children who are caregivers. At camp, Archie gains new knowledge and understanding of his situation. This knowledge is tested when his mother's online boyfriend River moves into their home and Archie finds his position as caregiver usurped by River. River moves into the house just before lockdown 2020 and the story follows Archie and River's relationship as his mother becomes increasingly unwell.

Mothership

Part One

Chapter 1

Feb 2019

“Archie, where are you? Hurry up and get up and get me a bedpan.” That’s my usual morning wake up call. Well, every morning that Gibby is late, which is every morning. I was hoping to have a lie in today because I haven’t had enough sleep. A boy my age should have nine to eleven hours and I have only had about seven. I was up late, because she had one of her anxiety attacks. I’m the only person who can comfort Mum when she gets it. If she gets it bad during the daytime, I might have to come home from school too. Last night I did all the usual things that make her feel better, like rubbing lavender cream on her hands, and telling her one of my stories. I just keep on talking while she tries to settle down her breath: in for three, hold for three out for five, like the meditation guru on the TikTok says to do. I keep on talking until her hands stop shaking, and her top lip has no more sweat, and her legs stop being all restless and twitchy.

She yells again, “Come help me. Hurry up. Archie! I need the bloody bedpan.” No more pretending to sleep for me. Some mornings I like to wait until she is yelling out for me really loud, just so that she might remember how much she actually needs me. I get up and run into her room wearing my blue hamburger Christmas present pyjamas. I know 100 percent not to just walk in, like it’s some sort of Sunday stroll, like I don’t have a care in the world. That is something she hates. I know to put on a concerned look on my face, as if to say: I’m taking this whole thing, this looking after you business, very seriously, but inside my head, I would like to be anywhere but here, in this room, with my mother, on deadpan duty. When I run in, I have to take care, because my burger pyjamas are a bit too long, and they hang over my feet, and can make me slip about on the wooden floors. Which can be kind of fun. But that kind of fun is definitely another thing that Mum does not like one little bit. Especially in the morning, and especially when she needs to go.

I know from the yelling and the look on her face Mum is back to herself, in charge and the boss again. This morning she needs me, but not need needs me. When she need needs me, it’s different. Then she never yells, and she always thanks me for being the best son, and says she doesn’t know what she would do without me. She says

how much she loves me, and it always makes me feel bad for thinking bad thoughts about her. I know no one else can do the little things for her that I do. Just like I know I am her number one best scaregiver.

Gibby's meant to come at 7.15am, but he's always late. He usually brings a big bag of Macky Dees, which will have a 'Sausage and Egg McMuffin' combo x 2 in it. That's mum's favourite, and this always puts her in a good mood for the day, and hopefully makes her forget late. One thing about Mum. She. Hates. Late. And Gibby is always late.

"Reporting for deadpan duty, Mam." I say as I salute her. At night, before I go to bed, I always put the deadpan on the little side table dresser beside her bed, so I can grab it fast in the morning. I have this whole go to the toilet in bed thing down to a fine art. It makes Mum happy when I do the job right. I hold the deadpan while she rolls over onto her side, away from me. It takes her a couple of goes before she can grab on tight to the edge of the mattress. Then I put the deadpan on the bed and under where I know her butt will go. And suddenly it's all fat, rolls, and smello. Ugh. I try not to look, but I have to peek to make sure it's in the right place. She rolls back onto it hard with a big whoomph sound. And then there is the sound of her wee. Mum reckons that when she wakes up, she's always busting to go. When she's finished, she rolls to her side again. This morning the deadpan sticks to her butt, even though she's way up on her side. I have to grab the deadpan real quick in case her wee tips out and all over the bed. That's never a good way to start the day.

After Mum has an anxiety attack, we never mention it. She just wants to forget it. She told me once that talking about anxiety makes her get more anxiety. Even though the teachers at school say you should talk about things that worry you, Mum says she has her own way of doing things. When Mum has her anxiety, she's so nice to me and says I'm the best son ever.

Luckily, I don't ever have to do poo patrol though. Gibby, who is Mum's main scaregiver, a proper paid one, says when you stay in bed a lot you get constipated, so she doesn't have to go that often, and so she can wait for him to sort that out. That is good because there are some things boys who are nearly eleven should not have to see. And there's things when you're nearly eleven you have seen, and you can't ever unsee. I am meant to empty the wee from the deadpan in the toilet. But as soon as I get out of her room, and she can't see what I'm up to, I just leave it beside the loo, for Gibby. He says, "That's why I earns me the big bucks." I flush the toilet though, so she thinks I

have done what I'm meant to. Then I go back to her and grab the magic cream to rub it into Mum's heels. I do this for her every morning before breakfast. It's one of the things that makes her happy that isn't food. I have to do it because when you lie in one place all the time you can get a bedsore. Mum once had a little one on her heel, and if you're not careful little ones can suddenly be big ones, and big ones are not good. The massaging is meant to help bring back the blood supply that might have been cut off by lying in one spot and your skin getting flat and squished.

Mum is almost never cross with Gibby (to his face anyway), even if he does something wrong. But when he's gone home, sometimes she moans about him to me, and calls him that skinny-arse lazy shit. But when she's in a good mood, she also says she would be lost without him. I think he's pretty much part of the family now, like a crazy uncle. He's been Mum's scaregiver for nearly three years. Which is good as we're a bit short in the family department. Mum's parents, who would have been my grandparents, are dead. They were fatties too. Heart attacks all round. Too much fish and chips, that's what my uncle Charlie Man says. He's Mum's brother, and he calls himself the responsible adult in my life. I just call him Charlie Man. I've called him that from when I was little because he always calls me Archie Boy. Gibby never calls to say he's going to be late. He reckons, if he's going to be late, just come late, what's the point in being told off twice?

While I'm making my breakfast, Mum's phone rings and it makes my ears prick up. It's early for phone calls. When the phone rings early, or late at night, it gives me a fright. I don't know why but it always makes me think it might be bad news. Like when Mum's mum died. Mum told me that her mum would never tell anyone how old she was. She kept it a secret from everyone, even her husband. When she died, she was at a bus stop, and she turned to the lady sitting next to her and said, "I'm 57," and then dropped dead. Just like that, still sitting in the bus shelter. Mum said when she got the phone call to say her mother had died, she was at home sitting on the side of the bath, shaving her legs to go out to a party. Just like that, the phone can ring, and then nothing will ever be the same again.

Mum yells out to me, "Come and shut my door, Archie." I let out a big sigh (which she can't hear), and jog down the hall to do it. "Sure, no problem Mum," I say. Then I listen outside the door for a bit to see who she's talking to. It will be him, I guess. Mum is big on dating. I blame Gibby for helping her put the App on her phone, so that she can talk to strangers. I guess there are a lot of lonely men out there. I think

it might be a bit funny, though, if the man she was talking to was bedridden too. I watched a show on Netflix, that I wasn't really meant to watch, about internet dating and sometimes the people you think you're talking to are not who they say they are. They are called a catfish. Last week she wanted me to say hello to him. But I wouldn't. I ran out of her room yelling "No, nooo nope." and "You can't make me." Just because I don't choose to talk to him doesn't mean I don't want to know what's going on.

When Mum has her anxiety attacks and they are bad, she starts to think she's going to die. She told me she starts thinking about all that fat around her heart and her lungs and that they are pressing down on her chest, and she can't breathe anymore. She never said, but I think maybe she might worry about what will happen to me too when she is gone. I'm a bit of a worrier also. Once at school I thought there might be an earthquake, and I went under my desk but there wasn't one. I was hoping I might be a psychic, but for some reason my skills have not developed in this area. Charlie Man says that guessing is not being a psychic, and anyone can guess right about 50% of the time. Actually that isn't right. The maths teacher says it's more like 25%. I thought if I was a psychic that would mean I am not a worrier. Charlie Man says I'm more psycho than psychic.

Charlie Man takes me to all my activities like band and soccer, and to school things like parent teacher interviews. Even though he's not my parent. He takes me to things because Mum can't do it anymore. I think he mostly decides to take me to stuff that I don't even want to go to. He says "Archie Boy, it's character-building." I say things like, "Charlie Man, I don't really need to do soccer in real life since I have FIFA 19 on the PlayStation," or "I would like to choose my own character-building experiences." He says, "Archie my boy, there's some things in life you don't get to choose." Which pretty much sums up my whole life. I think this is called irony. I learnt about it at school. Charlie Man must have skipped that day.

I jump when I hear Gibby's key in the door. I hate when I get caught spying. When mum catches me she calls it 'big earsing'. As in, "I know you're out there 'big earsing' Archie." Gibby yells out, "I'm here Martha." Then wags a finger at me, and shakes his head, and heads into the kitchen with the bag of McDonalds. Gibby knocks on Mum's door, and then opens it slowly and drops off her sausage and egg McMuffin. I eat the hashbrown that Gibby has bought me, while he makes himself a cup of tea. Usually, mum likes to eat her breakfast in peace, until she starts to feel more awake. I guess she makes exceptions for this man who likes to call early.

I like that I can sit and talk with Gibby before I go to school. If I have done the shopping and we have bread, and things to put on bread, and Gibby is in the mood he will make my school lunch while we chat. I am old enough to make my own sandwiches, but I love it when he makes my lunch. He always cuts the crusts off and wraps them up in Glad Wrap, like a present. When Gibby was five his mother died of cancer, and his father made him and his two brothers jam or vegemite sandwiches on Sunday nights, and then froze them for the week ahead.

“Archie,” he told me, “There is nothing more sad than food made without love.” When he says things like that, I want to touch his cheek, which is all stubbly because he never shaves in the mornings. I don’t though, because I know that it would be weird to reach out and randomly touch someone’s cheek. Especially if they’re a man and you’re a boy. Gibby always tries to give mum whatever she wants. I think it’s partly because he can’t give his own mum things anymore and also because Mum gets really crazy angry when she doesn’t get what she wants.

I am making myself a milo milk, and Gibby is wiping the benches down, when Mum starts calling out “Gibby, Gibby come on, let’s get on with it.” Mum’s an impatient person. She says it’s one of things she would like to work on. But she hasn’t started yet.

Gibby yells out, “I’ll be right there.”

He says to me, “Time to start the day, Archie. Best get dressed, you’ll be late otherwise.” Gibby says stuff like this to me all the time. But we both know that I don’t need any looking after.

We got Gibby when Mum got out of hospital after her fall. She was bruised up real bad all over her side and back. Massive purple, blue and yellow bruises. She let me take a photo of them, and when I showed one of my friends at school instead of saying how bad the bruises looked, he said, “Is that your Mum? Wow, she’s super fat.” When she fell, she also hurt her knee and hip bad. They said she was too overweight to have surgery on it and she would just have to manage, and then they found out about the diabetes, and a gallbladder thing and some hernias. Some other things too — it’s hard to remember them all. I had to go stay with Charlie Man because he’s my only living relative. I actually do have a dad, and he’s alive. He’s German but he lives in Australia. Mum says my dad, whose name is Norbert Bluth, is a cheating, lying, and probably overstaying bastard, and that’s all I need to know about him. All the caregivers and Mum at my house like the swearing; I try not to swear because once

you start it's hard to stop. That can be bad if you forget and you're at school. Once I tried to make everyone put money in a swear jar, like I had seen on cartoon network, but by the end of the first day it contained an IOU for \$2000 and a KitKat wrapper.

When I was little, I wondered if my dad maybe wrote me secret letters, like they do in books or movies, and maybe mum was destroying them. But when she was in hospital I collected the mail, and there were never any letters addressed to Archie McColl or Archie Bluth. Mum never put my dad on the birth certificate because she was worried he might come and try and take me back to the Black Forest. Mum told me that Bluth means flower head. Which I think is pretty funny. Archie Flower-Head.

Gibby pulls back the sliding door between the kitchen and laundry and goes into the laundry and gets a bunch of towels out of the hot water cupboard. "The hairdresser's coming today," he says. "Your mum wants a spruce up so she can take some nice selfies." This makes me snort-laugh and the milk comes out my nose. Gibby rolls his eyes at me. He's looking around the laundry and does not like what he sees. All my clothes are in a big pile of dirty on the floor. "Wow," he says, "The secret life of boys." He heads off to wash and dress Mum. I have an attack of the guilts, and stuff as many clothes as I can into the washing machine, add extra powder and turn it on to the very dirty cycle. Then I get a bun and some luncheon sausage from the fridge, add tomato sauce and wrap it all in tinfoil. We used to be able to take pot noodles to school until a boy burnt his hand, and just like that no more noodles at school. I liked the pot noodles. All you have to do is grab them from the pantry and go to school. Easy. Why are adults always making life much harder than it needs to be?

Because I didn't do any washing last week, the only shirt now not in the washing machine is on the floor in the bathroom. It has some pen marks on it. I sniff it and it smells a bit musty, but not sweaty so it will probably be fine. Once when I was playing at my cousin Harry's house (he's Charlie Man's son and my only cousin), Harry's mum (Aunty Leigh) came into his room and put all his folded washing on his bed for him to put away. It was just washing, but it smelt so good, like sunshine, and my nose started prickling and my eyes watered like I was going to cry. I thought oh that must be what having a proper mum is like. Harry's Mum was married to Charlie Man before they got the divorce. I used to call her Aunty Charlie Man when I was little, and everyone used to laugh because they thought it was so cute. When they got divorced, I took the name back. I felt the loyalty to Charlie Man.

When I leave for school, mum and Gibby are talking and laughing. Mum is actually giggling. She's showing him her phone. When she sees me looking down the hallway, she gets Gibby to close her door. Gibby told me it's not because she has secrets really, it's because she is punishing me for not talking to the man. When she first got on the Tinder, she let me sit beside her on her bed and we looked to see if anyone had hearted her. She told me it would be nice if she could meet someone because she was lonely, and her life is very small. Even though she's very large. She has me and Gibby, and we're here nearly all the time. It must be a different kind of loneliness. At school we learnt about online safety, and not sharing things about yourself and your photos. I tried to give Mum the talk about how to be safe online, but she said I should mind my own bloody business. I know she doesn't really mean that. I know how to make her the happiest out of anyone. She just gets grumpy from her life not going the way she planned.

"See ya" I yell from the front door. There's no way I'm going down to her room to say goodbye. Her nose will know immediately that this isn't a clean shirt, and then there will be drama. There is no point being drama because there are no clean school shirts for me to magic up, and worse, if she thinks I'm in a dirty shirt she might make me stay home. Lucky for me they don't even answer — probably too busy taking photos. When mum was first on the Tinder, we used to look at photos of men together. There were men on boats, and men with beards, or dogs, or men sitting having beers in pubs, or on tractors, or utes, also with dogs, and sometimes dead pigs they have shot. Sometimes they have pictures of their kids too. Mum never hearts them though. She says she's not interested in more kids to look after. I think it's nice that I'm enough. Charlie Man says I'm too much.

I can't find my bike helmet. I haven't had a good start to this day. As I bike to school, I wonder if Mum finds a husband, will I get a new dad too. If I do, I hope he's the kind of dad that can find stuff and work a washing machine. I'm wearing my school cap instead of a helmet. Sometimes, I just have to make these kind of life and death decisions. Hopefully no police will see me. I am thinking, as I'm biking along, what to say in case I get stopped. I think I will say something about my mother being an invalid, and how I have to organise myself, and this morning I didn't do a good job. It's best not to lie to the police.

Sometimes I can feel embarrassed about what is wrong with Mum, and what I should tell people. When people ask Charlie Man what's the matter with her, he says,

“My sister? That fat cow, she’s too bloody fat to get out of bed, that’s what’s wrong with her!” When the teacher asks me if my mum is coming to teacher interviews, I usually say, “Oh no, Miss, my mother is bedridden.” Or when my friend’s parents ask what my mother does, I say, “It’s very tragic, my mother is absolutely 100 percent bedridden.” Bedridden is like the best word ever! It’s like you ride your bed. You are a cowboy of beds. That makes me laugh when I think of Mum riding her bed and texting and chatting to boyfriends and having snacks. Sometimes people are nosey and want to know more, so I’ll say she has mobility problems. No one ever asks more than that as I always say it with my saddest face. I’m quite lucky in that department – I can do all sorts of emotional faces when I need to. My sad face is one of my best.

At school, we have only been back from Christmas holidays a week and we’re doing tests to see how smart or stupid you are. If you ask me, some kids don’t need to bother with the test to find that out. My teachers are Miss Neal and Mrs Johnson. They’re teacher job sharing. They’re nice, but Mrs Johnson doesn’t like mess on the floor, or backpacks that are not hung up properly. Mine is never hung up right, and always seems to fall off the hook. She can always tell which is my backpack because Charlie Man brought me a bright orange High Viz one to put my schoolbooks in. He said, “You need to be seen, especially as your mother is sending you out all hours of the day and night on that bike for burgers and fried chicken.” He also took the basket off because, “Only girls have baskets on their bikes.” No one ever said anything mean to me about having a girl basket on my bike, but plenty of kids at my school have something smartarse to say about my bright orange backpack, like “Hey Archie they can see you biking from the moon,” and “Know what goes with High Viz Archie? — NOTHING.”

For schoolwork we’re writing about what we did during the holidays. You can write it on your device, or if like me you don’t have one you can wait, and wait, and wait, until it’s your turn and use the school’s laptops. You have to write your draft on paper first anyway. So I may have exaggerated the waiting a bit. And if there is waiting then there is talking. Also you can make the writing less by filling up the page with pictures. We’re going to bind it together and call it CN7 XMAS Holidays 2019. CN7 is the name of my classroom.

Archie McColl Christmas Holiday 2019

We were meant to go to a lovely beach house in Akitio that had three bedrooms and a bunk room to stay in. There is a fish and chip caravan right next door and the beach was across the road. I was meant to go with my uncle Charlie Man and my cousin Harry but unfortunately my uncle had a big fight with his ex-wife and called her some bad names, even though they were true. This meant that my cousin Harry could not come away with us because his ex-wife was being selfish. Charlie Man was in such a bad mood that he cancelled the holiday all together. I had already packed my bags to go, and they were in the hallway by the door with my new boogie board that Mum got me for Christmas. Eventually two weeks later I got round to unpacking everything and put the boogie board in the garage for another time. My mum said it didn't really matter as she needed me at home anyway, and we would play games and I could do baking. She got a bit sick of that after a couple of days, so I played FIFA on the PlayStation, and she played on Tinder. I don't mind staying home that much because my mum is an invalid and needs me.

I added a photo that I snipped from the Airbnb that showed a deck looking out to the sea and the bunk room. I think I would have really liked those bunk beds. I also added one of mum sitting up in bed. It was actually one of the photos for her Tinder. At first she wasn't keen on having her photo "on display," but I said that made no sense since it's on display on Tinder. She emailed it to my school email account, but I had to wear her down first by saying a lot of times how great she looked.

Even though Mum can be very annoying, I have to worry about her a lot, because I know she nearly died after her fall. I think about if I had found her earlier after her fall that she might not have got the hypothermia, or the nearly dead arm. Charlie Man said, "It's not the fall that nearly killed her, mate, it's the fat and that's a fact. The fat facts." Charlie Man is always worried about Mum's weight, and what she eats in his own way. At night I think about if she dies where I would go and live. I'm too scared to ask Charlie Man in case he says something like, "No bloody way — you talk too bloody much to be living with me all the time." And I don't want to ask Mum in case it reminds her that she nearly died, and I don't want her to get sad again about the dying, or worse, mad again because I didn't wake up until morning. I think maybe she thinks I didn't get up on purpose, like the way I do when I stay in bed in the mornings and try to pretend I can't hear her calling me. Mum says the things she's most scared of and that give her the most anxiety are falls, bedsores and dying. I told

Charlie Man about what she was most scared of, and he said she wouldn't need to worry about those things if she ate less, tried harder and did more.

During the holidays, Mum and me played board games together. I obviously prefer playing the FIFA on the PlayStation, but I don't mind playing the old-fashioned games with her, because sometimes she talks about her life when she was growing up, when Charlie was her brother, before he was my uncle. Before she was bedridden. Before she was really fat. Before he hated her. Before she was lonely. Before me. She tells me, "Archie you're my wee man of the house, so you need to be my eyes and ears in the world." And when she's sad and lonely she sometimes wants me to get in beside her and have a cuddle before she goes to sleep. There's really no room for me now that I am growing, and I don't like her salty smell either. Like old fish and chips. It's like when I get home from school, she likes me to tell her about my day. Sometimes I don't feel like talking, but she gets sad because her day is only riding the bed or being on Facebook, texting, Netflix or eating. I know I'm being selfish and ungrateful. I tell her when she says I'm being mean that I'll be a teenager in a few years, and that it's normal for boys to not talk very much. I am practising to be a man, so she must make the most of this time and just enjoy me while I am still talking, but soon I'll only be grunting and raising one eyebrow to her instead of having conversations.

Chapter 2

My favourite part of school is lunchtimes. I like to say the banter is great. The boy banter is of course better than the girl banter. But sometimes I still like to just sit with the girls anyway. They fight and argue way more than boys and like to gossip about each other too: about who likes who, and what teacher they saw out in the supermarket, and who is wearing clothes from the Warehouse. If I just hung out with the boys, I would know nothing that goes on in this school.

Mum really likes me to tell her stories that make her laugh, so I try and always listen out for the funny ones. Charlie Man is the same, and he says his dad (my Grandad) was a storyteller and a bullshitter. Once when I told him one of the stories I had told Mum, he said, “Yep you’re just like your Grandad. We are a sad family that likes to tell funny stories.”

Today is school athletics day, and unlike me, my friend Grace is a super good runner. If you’re not a good runner, or thrower, or jumper you still have to enter one thing, and after that you have to be a good supporter for all those kids who are sporty. I entered the long jump. It’s the easiest event. Grace’s dad is the local MP, and he came to watch her run and then win, I guess. Except when the gun went off Grace took off in the lead, and then left the track and jumped in a bush and wouldn’t come out, until her dad went home. Even though he stood by that bush with Mr Te Marko, and they begged her to come out she just stayed in there. Mum will definitely like this story. I wish I could be as brave as Grace.

After all the athletic day activities finish and everyone has thrown and jumped and run and been sunburnt to a complete peeling crisp, we have a parade, and everyone marches round and around the field and you wear your house colours and cheer and clap. Grace finally comes out of the bush and joins in. If your parents come to watch, you can go home early with them. The rest of us sit in our classroom and watch a movie until 3 o’clock. Because it’s February, by afternoon the classroom is much too hot, and we’re all sweating and smelling from the athletics day. And I still have to bike home. Hopefully I don’t die of heat exhaustion.

When I got home, still alive, Gibby had done what I call a ‘Bruce up’. He’s not meant to do cleaning, because we have a home help lady who comes Wednesdays to

clean properly. But when the house is a real mess, he will do what he calls a spruce up. He has put a basket of washing on my bed. It's not the same as the way Harry's mum does it. It's not folded, but it's all warm and dry and stuck together in a pile, because it has been in the dryer. We never hang our washing outside anymore. I used to forget it was out and then it would stay out for weeks and blow around the place. Gibby has left a list of chores for me to do when the home help lady Jeanne isn't there. Jeanne is really old, I think. Her skin is super wrinkled. Even though she's totally old, she still likes to ride horses, and smoke. These are her hobbies I guess. She says her home help jobs help pay for the stuff her horses need. Once she said she would take me and show me her little house and her bit of land where her horses live. That never happened. It was back when she liked me more. I think now she sees me as just a messy boy. Luckily, I'm not home most of the times she comes. She always tuts and sighs at me, because I am in her way and all the mess outside of Mum's room is made by me.

As soon as I get home, I hang my backpack up, and head down to see Mum, but Gibby yells out, "Leave your mum she's busy." So I go sit at the kitchen table with him. I think I could write a book about my life at this kitchen table. He has put some boiling water on some pot noodles for me earlier and they have cooled off enough for me to eat.

"How was school?"

"It was athletics today."

"Did you win?" Gibby winks at me, because he knows I am terrible at all sports. I don't laugh but just give him the side eye. Usually after school, Mum likes that I go straight to her room and tell her about my day. It's because she is a bit lonely, and a bit bored, so my job is to cheer her up. Of course, I was going to tell her about Grace hiding in the bushes. Mum would like this story: because 1. It's a funny story, and because 2. It has a famous person in it. Grace's dad as well as being our MP is the Minister for Sports and Recreation, which I think makes the story even more funny, even ironic if you think about it. If you went to school that day and learned properly about irony that is.

Once, Grace's dad came and spoke to our school assembly about what it's like being a Member of Parliament, and we were allowed to ask questions at the end. I asked what the Prime minister is like. He said she's very busy and is always thinking of how to help people. Jayden Coutts put up his hand and said his family didn't vote for her, and he said his dad said she's ruining the country. Our teacher Mrs Hawkins

laughed, and then Grace's dad said that is the great thing about living in a democracy, and we can vote for who we like, but sometimes who we vote for doesn't win. Mum for some reason thought this story was hilarious. She also thought the right honourable Member for Napier (which is what he's called when he's not being Grace's dad) is a bit of a plonker.

I try telling the story to Gibby, because he likes my stories too, but he has to get off home, so he says tell me tomorrow at breakfast. Sometimes though when he says that by the next morning the story has disappeared from my mind, and I can't think what it was at all. I think he says that because maybe he doesn't want to hear another one of my stories.

Gibby says as he's leaving, I should leave Mum alone until maybe dinner later on. "We've had words, your mum and I today." I think that can't be good. Mum does not like to have words or arguments, and she also especially doesn't like to lose words or arguments.

"What's the matter with her then?"

"Let's just say, she's giving your inheritance away to losers on the internet."

That seems weird since we don't have any money and so I know that can't be right. "What inheritance?"

"I'm just joking Archie. Look, go play FIFA and have the afternoon off. Your mum's busy, okay?"

"Doing what?"

"Woman stuff."

When Gibby leaves, I stand outside her door for a bit, and I can hear her arguing with someone. I knock for a while, but she doesn't call out to me, and well, I really do want to play PlayStation, so I put my headphones on and play as quiet as I can.

Later when I go in with two heated up meals of shepherd's pie and, try to tell her my story about Grace and the bush, she interrupts me and says she has a lot on her mind and doesn't want to hear a story today.

"Gibby says you are giving our inheritance away?"

"Don't be ridiculous," Mum says. "There is no inheritance.

"That's what I said."

"He's not like that. I just lent him some money, and what I do with my money is my own business." We sit in silence for a while, which I don't like and then she

says, "I also sent him some new photos of me and my new hair style, and he said I look lovely. But no one here wants to talk about that."

Now I feel bad. I haven't even noticed that she has a new hairstyle. She always looks the same to me. Like Mum. "It looks really good," I say. "You look like a new person."

"Archie..."

When she uses my name, it usually means I'm probably about to get told off. I'm trying to think what I have done wrong.

"Archie, when I have my anxiety now, my new friend..."

"The man from Tinder?"

"Yes, well he says I can call him anytime and he will talk to me and help me to calm down. He's had anxiety in the past too."

"Well that sounds completely stupid," I say.

Chapter 3

Fridays during term time, Charlie Man picks me up after school and takes me to the 'How Not to Get Fat Group'. I am not fat, I don't think. In fact, in the group I am the least fat. Although when I look in the mirror.... Charlie Man says it's a hereditary thing: skinny on the top, fat down below. Mum is just fat all over. I like to think mine is almost muscle or maybe fat practising to be muscle for when the testosterone starts. The group is actually called 'Making Healthy Choices Every Day'. Charlie Man says they can call it what they bloody well like. In the beginning, I really didn't want to go. I try and tell as few people as possible that my mother is a big old fat person, let alone being super morbidly obese, which is her correct medical diagnosis. That's why I usually like to say bedridden. It sounds better.

The reason for being in the group (whatever you want to call it) is one or maybe both your parents are in the super fat category. The research says, if your parents are overweight you might end up that way too. My social worker said I should check it out. I got a social worker after Mum's fall. Mum got a physio for the dead arm and the knee because she lay on it with all her weight for so long after the fall in the night, and a dietician, well for you know what, and she also got her own social worker too. They said it's important that my needs are met, which is weird because I have Gibby and Charlie Man for that.

The social worker's name is Jennifer, and sometimes she comes to the house to see me. I can text her number if I need to make a time to see her, if something comes up. Nothing has come up. She loves to talk about feelings, my feelings not hers. She asks me questions about things that I don't really want to talk about, like Mum needing to lose weight so she doesn't die. When she talks to me, I mostly look at the floor, or my shoes, or her shoes. Her shoes are fancy, and they have high heels on them. She's short, so I guess she wants to be taller. I guess everyone wants to be a bit different than they are.

There are six of us in the group now; there were seven but Taines left. His dad died. His dad had the diabetes real bad, and the doctors had already chopped off one of his legs. Taines was pretty much my best friend, even though I only ever saw him once a week, when I went to group. It's lonely now as only the girls are left. The group only

runs during term time, so we're nearly halfway through this term's group. We seem to be doing lots of the same things we did last term. I suppose that is for the new kids to catch up.

Last group, we discussed reasons why we should be healthy (not fat — the fat word is banned). The girls say dumb stuff like they will look better in cut-off shorts. I like to be more dramatic and say, "I don't think I'll look good in a coffin." I try hard to make them laugh. The best part of the group, after my great jokes of course, is the cooking. The worst part is the talking. Today's talking is about how other people have made us feel bad about our bodies.

Charlie Man doesn't say anything about me being fat, but he does say, "Archie Boy, it's in your genes." or "Do you really need that (doughnut, soft drink, biscuit)?" Or if I ask for a second helping, he says, "Whoa, that's how it starts." This is one of his motivational talks. In the group they say that kind of talk is called fat shaming.

Michelle, one of the girls (who is actually quite fat, even though I am not meant to notice), says girls at her school talk about going on diets, and they're not even the least bit fat. She says, "I don't know if they're doing it to make fun of me," (because she's fat), "or that's just the way skinny girls actually talk." Nobody in the group says anything. Finally, Kerry who runs the group says, "That's such a great thing to share, Michelle. Isn't it everyone?". We all nod and say yes. I nod the most because I have the least idea about if this is great or not.

Michelle tells us, "I think it's easier when kids are just out right mean like when they sing the duck song when I walk by you know the one, waddle waddle. I know they're being mean, and I feel mad at them and hate them, those..." (We're not allowed to swear at Group, so she doesn't say the word but it starts with a B), "But when they talk about diets or how they would never eat certain foods, or how fat they are, when they're not fat at all. I feel dumb because I don't know if they're just talking, or if they're making fun of me in a secret way behind my back but to my face kind of way."

This is how the girls usually talk. They need hundreds of more words than boys to tell a simple story. I don't mind though, because then I don't have to say anything. Sometimes I'm not even sure if the stories are sad or funny. I usually wait to see if anyone else laughs first — just in case. Luckily, I didn't laugh at the 'waddle waddle'. I try not to be mean, especially not to people's faces mean. Plus I actually really like Michelle, but sometimes stories can be mean as well as funny. If you laugh at the

wrong place, Kerry stops what is going on and we have to all have a talk about respecting each other.

When the group first started and no one really was talking because we didn't really know each other and there were lots of silences, I did say something. I don't like it when it's quiet for too long. I told them about Mum telling me that if she feels worried or anxious she feels better when she eats. Kerry thought this was a great thought to have shared. When she said that, Taines rolled his eyes at me, as if to say here we go, and I had to dig my fingernails into my hand and make my face long so as to not laugh out loud. Then we all discussed what that might mean, about feelings and eating. What Mum actually said was that sometimes she feels empty in her heart and food helps her feel less sad. I didn't share the way she said it because that was too private.

After the talking is cooking. Today we're making spaghetti Bolognese. We made it last term as well. Of course, we have to make a healthy version. One of the ways we do this is to add grated vegetables, like carrots and courgettes. We measure the dried spaghetti to fit between our forefinger and thumb. That is how you measure the correct portion size. I'm taking my food home today. I do this because Mum likes to share it with me, and because I managed to remember the plastic container.

When we're washing up, in the hall kitchen, Michelle whispers, "This portion size thing is dumb, it's way too much work."

I nod oh yeah, "Yeah, so annoying," I say, even though I actually don't mind it. "When I cook at home I never do it," I tell her. I like to agree with Michelle, she's older than me and I want her to think that I am a little bit cool to hang out with.

She whispers to me, "I have found a new way to eat, and Archie you can eat all you want and never get fat."

"Wow that sounds amazing," I say.

Michelle then tells me that she throws up in the toilets after she eats. The idea is so genius. I can't wait to get home and tell Mum. It will probably be life changing for her.

Charlie Man comes to pick me up after group, he sees me talking to Michelle, and when he drives into the carpark, he toots like crazy as if he has caught me with a girlfriend. Even though she's thirteen and I am nearly eleven. Sometimes he's an idiot. I feel my face going red, but Michelle just laughs. He pulls up right by us and yells out the window, "What you got there, Archie Boy?"

“It’s Spag Bol, but with veges.” I say it like it’s the dumbest idea anyone ever had and roll my eyes to make my point.

Charlie Man looks horrified, “That’s so very wrong.” This makes me and Michelle laugh. I wave goodbye to her and get in the car. We drive in silence for a bit, finally Charlie Man says, “How was fat group?”

He knows that will annoy me, but I’m not taking the bait, and I say nothing. I pretend like I didn’t even hear him. Charlie Man likes to tease me. When I was younger, sometimes it made me cry. I think there can be only a little bit of difference between teasing and being mean. But I can’t say that because I am trying to harden myself up a bit. It’s because I am oversensitive.

“Was that your girlfriend? An older woman eh?”

Because I can’t cope with being quiet for too long, and I want to change the subject, and because I can feel my cheeks burning, I blurt out about Mum being the person with a boyfriend. Charlie Man says nothing, like he hasn’t even heard me. That starts making me nervous. I know I shouldn’t have said anything in the first place. Mum does not like it when I tell Charlie Man things which are none of his business. She always thinks I’m telling on her for some reason, and she thinks everything is none of his business.

Then he says real slowly, “Who the fuck would want to date your mother?” I just shrug my shoulders. “And where the fuck on this earth would she even meet somebody?”

“It’s a dating app I think,” I say to the car mat. Even though I know it’s a dating app.

Charlie Man says he has no words, but then says half a dozen swear words all starting with fuck.

“I don’t think I’m meant to have told you,” I say quickly, “so can you not text her and say mean stuff. Please?”

After Charlie Man drops me off, Mum and I eat the Bolognese together. I have a chair by her bed, and we share the food, one container two forks, on the hospital bed table. Mum thinks it’s sweet to share, and sometimes even wants me to taste things off her fork (I draw the line there). Today we’re really sharing because the dishwasher is broken and full of dirty plates. I was meant to empty them out and wash them by hand in the sink, but I haven’t done it yet, so we’re out of plates. I was hoping if I left it long enough that Jeanne the home help lady would come and do it. She’s not coming until

Wednesday next week, which means sometime this weekend I'll have to wash a dish. Gibby hasn't been happy with the no dishes situation. All the dishes are either in the dishwasher, or in dirty stacks on the bench or in the sink. Luckily since I was in group, I didn't see him after school today, but he has left me a note with a giant question mark in black Vivid on top of the dishes.

“Not bad, Archie, not bad at all.” Mum's a very messy eater. Her food always ends up over her clothes and the sheets. It's a bit gross. We have been talking about my day. She likes to know everything. This is hard because sometimes I feel like not sharing everything, and just having some thoughts and memories that are only mine. I don't know why I have these completely selfish thoughts. I hope Mum can't tell what I'm thinking because I don't want her to feel bad and I especially don't want to be the one who makes her feel bad. Sometimes I think she can read my mind, and maybe even is a psychic because sometimes she knows what I'm thinking, and when I have been up to no good. She told me it's women's intuition and also that mothers just know everything. I asked if men can have intuition and she said it was unlikely.

“Kerry, who runs group told us today that she's actually having a baby. I thought maybe she was getting fat.” Mum laughs at this. Which I like. She does have a great laugh. I tell her about Michelle, and the kids at her school who sing the duck song when she walks by. I sing, “Then she waddled away, waddle waddle, then she waddled away, waddle waddle.” I do the duck actions too. Mum laughs again. She says those kids are not very nice. I want to ask her if kids were mean to her at school, but sometimes those questions can make her cross, or worse, cry. Even though she's super morbidly totally 100 percent obese she doesn't like me to point these things out to her. I wonder if she's shocked that I have noticed she's fat.

Once I said to Charlie Man, “Do you think Mum knows she's fat?” He laughed so hard snot came out his nose. “Archie Boy,” he said, “if that fat cow doesn't know she's fat what on earth does she think she's doing in that bed all bloody day long, eh?”

Mum says when she was about my age, she wasn't even fat — maybe just a bit of puppy fat (that's a word they used to use years ago so fat kids wouldn't feel bad that they were fat). Her dad used to say mean things to her, like her legs were as big as tree trunks, or fence posts, and her mum would lock the kitchen at night, in case she got up and stole the shortbread biscuits or the coconut slice. I don't have to worry about that as we hardly ever have any baking left over. We get Meals on Wheels delivered once a week. Mums are the diet ones. She gets hungry so she eats those and a takeaway too.

“Michelle from group won’t have to worry about people being mean to her soon, because she has a genius way of eating anything she wants, and never getting fat.” When I tell Mum it’s going to the toilet and throwing up all the food she has just eaten, Mum says that this is the most stupidest, fucked-up idea she has ever heard. I decide not to suggest she try it.

Telling Mum about Michelle was today’s story. It hasn’t gone as well as I imagined. I really want to go play FIFA on the PlayStation, but when Mum isn’t happy it’s bad timing to leave. I sit by her bed clicking my thumb and forefinger while trying to think of something better to say. She finally says, “Do you have somewhere better to be?” This is one of those trick mother questions. If I say the wrong thing, she will get sad, or mad, and then I’ll feel bad, but on the other hand I do want to be somewhere else, and I also don’t want to make being here with her sound so good that she then starts some mother and son activity like Battleships or Scrabble. In the end I take too long to answer even though my mind is racing, and she says, “Off you go then. Never mind your mother who’s alone all day long, stuck in this bed.” Sometimes it’s actually best to say nothing.

Our old lounge is her bedroom and so Gibby and Charlie Man made me my own little lounge in her old bedroom. I have a two-seater couch that is purple and a little wooden table and the Sony TV. I have to leave the door open though, and only have my head set over one ear when I’m playing the FIFA, in case she calls me and needs something. Like a snack. Or a wee. Or a foot rub or a life talk. Even though it’s meant to be a lounge, her wardrobes are still there with all her clothes in it. She probably can’t fit any of them now, but she says she doesn’t want to throw them out. I guess she wants to fit back in them, or maybe they’re like happy memories from when she was wearing them. Now Mum just wears those big old nightie dresses. The lady in the clothes repair shop makes them for her. Mum chooses the material online. She likes mostly yellow or blue colours and polka dots or little flowers. She told me she never picks stripes as that would make her look fat. When she says things like that Charlie Man’s face pops into my head, all bug-eyed, with his eyes popping out as if to say, “What the F?” except he would actually say the word. When she says things like this it makes me bite on my bottom lip, so I don’t laugh.

Her shoes, way at the back of the wardrobe, have gone all hard, and they smell sort of old and lonely. She had these black shoes with a little heel that were made of something called suede, and they got covered in mould. When I found them, they were

green all over, and when I took them in to show her she held them and cried. I didn't mention that I had been watching them slowly turn green over a few months, like a sort of science experiment.

The wardrobe has big mirror doors on it, and sometimes I catch myself out of the corner of my eye when I'm playing PlayStation. If you see me once, you will remember me. I'm a redhead. A redhead with freckles. Everyone hates redheads, except for mothers and old ladies. Mum says when I was little people would stop her in the street to say what lovely hair I had. It was long then and curly. People still say things about my hair, but now they say, hey Ginga, Bloodnut, Carrot top, Bluey, or Freckle-face. So these days to avoid unnecessary attention I have my hair cut short. Being a redhead means my skin is either white or sunburnt. I'm meant to wear a hat and sunscreen from September to May, but mostly I forget both. I also bruise easy. It's a fact, redheads bruise more easily, and we feel pain more than people with other hair colours. Not a lot of people know that. When I feel annoyed with myself I pinch my arms or my chest and screw it round until it turns red and in an hour it will be blue or purple. I do this sometimes when she's yelling at me for being selfish and stupid, or sometimes when I don't want to be hugged any more, but don't want to say. No one really sees because it's under my clothes, and I always wear a rash vest when I'm swimming. I also wear it so no one can see my chest. My chest is a little fat looking and I worry in case maybe man boobs are coming. Which obviously is something boys are not meant to get. Mostly I try not to think about them, and I do not talk about them. Ever.

Chapter 4

April 2019

The last Tuesday of the term before the holidays is school report day. In the olden days you used to get given your report on a piece of paper to take home. Charlie Man says he used to lose his on the way. That sounds cool. Now in 2019 there is email.

“We got our reports today, Mum.”

“Yes,” she says, “I’ve seen them on the email.” I roll my eyes when she’s not looking. “It’s a pretty good one this time.”

You get marks for effort, behaviour, self-management and academic progress. One is the best and five is poor and unacceptable. I have never got a four or a five. Mostly I get the number twos.

I see you have some threes this time. A three for effort and a three for behaviour,” Mum sounds angry even though a three is good. I don’t know why her expectations are so high about me. I think that I am a very ordinary student and boy. Though my teacher says I’m quite the philosopher. She says it in a nice way. I looked it up, but actually it was quite hard to understand what being a philosopher means. One of the meanings is that you’re seeking wisdom, but I don’t think that’s the meaning the teacher meant for me.

I say to Mum, “I just don’t gel with the teacher. Yesterday when she was doing the reports, she was already in a bad mood with me, because when I handed in my assignment, she said my handwriting was very bad.” Mum has terrible handwriting too, so I’m hopeful she will let this one go. I try using my most hard-done-by face. My faces seem not to ever fool Mum though.

“Well Archie, I’m not happy to see you have got a three for effort and behaviour. These are things you can control, and I want to see more effort next month and only number ones.” I want to tell her most kids get threes and fours, and that Grace got all fives which she thought was hilarious and that two is actually very good. Kids who get all ones all the time are really those perfect kids. Mum never comes to my school, so I think in her mind, while she lies here all day, she just imagines the type of boy she thinks I am. Charlie Man told me once that all parents want their kids to be

better than they are. This was a quite nice thing for him to say, but then he added, “Which in your mum’s case isn’t going to be too hard.”

“Do you want to hear my story for the day?” I ask Mum, changing the subject. She says yes but to make us a hot chocolate first. We always like to snack during the story. There is a microwave and a little fridge in her bedroom and a table with an electric jug on it. It’s quite handy as you don’t have to make a trip to the kitchen, and you can still chat, so Mum doesn’t get lonely.

“How many chocolate fish?” I ask. She says two. I put four in my cup. I carry hers over first, being careful not to spill it. I’m meant to put it on a saucer first, but they’re all in the dishwasher. I put my hand under the cup, but the handle still burns my finger a bit while I carry it over. It’s okay, I’m quite tough about pain. Charlie Man says when I was about three, Harry accidentally slammed the kitchen door, and I had my little finger in there. When Charlie Man opened the door, my finger was hanging on by the tiniest sliver of skin, and I was just standing there holding it in my hand while the blood poured out all over the floor. He said I wasn’t even crying. Just standing there looking at the blood, and my hand, and then up at him, and finally I said, “Oops I made a mess.” I don’t remember any of this, but I do get shivers sometimes when someone slams a door near me. There is a crooked scar around my little finger, where they sewed it back on, a thin white crooked line, but my finger works fine.

I get my hot chocolate and a teaspoon. I like to drink mine off the spoon. It’s like hot chocolate soup. There’s a step by Mum’s bed for me to climb up on, so I can sit up beside her. Gibby has the bed way up high so he doesn’t hurt his back when he looks after mum. Even though I’m almost eleven, I am not one of those boys who have started to grow taller yet. There is a boy in my class who is eleven and 185cm tall and has underarm hair and a moustache. He said the headmaster sent a note home to his family to say that he has to shave it off. I wonder what my mum would do if I got a note like that sent home. I would love to have a moustache to shave off, that’s for real. I might need to talk to Charlie Man about how to shave. I expect that is something a man, not a mother, should teach you. I have been checking for hair on my face, but there’s nothing really to see unless the sun is shining bright through the bathroom window, and then I can see some blondie hair. I won’t be saying anything to Charlie Man until I’m ready to shave, though — he would probably tease me about bum fluff, and maybe say other embarrassing things. It would be so much easier if I got a note

from the teacher. Then he couldn't tease me. It would just be a fact that I had a moustache and maybe, probably, even a beard too.

Last term, in my report the teacher said that I was a little immature for my age. It really hurt my feelings. She said I sometimes laughed at inappropriate times and played a lot with the younger kids so I could be the boss. I have been trying hard to make her think I am starting to grow up and think for myself more. Charlie Man reckons it's because she doesn't get my sense of humour and because I like to over-explain things. He said, "Just ignore her. What the fuck does she know about your life anyway?"

"Exactly," I had said.

I take a big slurp of my hot chocolate, and Mum raises her eyebrows as if to say, unnecessary sound effect.

"Get on with it." Mum says.

I'm a great storyteller. I don't even make much stuff up. I'm pretty good at listening to people around me and hearing stories and looking at what's going on and seeing stuff that other people don't even see. I hope that's what the teacher meant about me being a philosopher. When something happens, I always think, "Oh that's a good story to tell Mum when I get home."

I sometimes write a reminder on the back of my hand — because even though you think you will remember, sometimes you just can't, and then it's so annoying because just before you go to sleep the story pops up in your mind. I take another slurp. Sometimes it's good to make Mum wait a little bit for the story, especially if it's a quality one.

"Mrs Neal was talking to the PE teacher when we were playing softball today, and she was saying she had gone to Auckland for the weekend with her husband. They had been out for dinner and then were getting an Uber to get the ferry to Waiheke Island..."

"Nice for some," Mum says.

"Yes, but then as they got in the Uber car, and the Uber driver pulled out he hit a man delivering pizza on a motorbike scooter thing, and the man came in right through the windscreen, and there was glass everywhere. Like through their hair, and all over the car, and the scooter man's head was through the windscreen, and he was just sitting and looking at everyone while his head was resting on the dashboard. The

Uber driver is going crazy saying he's going to go to jail, and he doesn't know what to do.

“Oh my god! And then what happened?”

I can tell Mum is liking this story. I take a sip off my spoon. “Well, they just get out and leave because they have to get the ferry to Waiheke. And the man who had his head through the window is fine and he just pulls his head out of the windscreen and climbs down from the bonnet of the car. Mrs Neal says when she gets to the ferry, and looks in her handbag, for the tickets, it's full of glass.”

Mum says, “You're not meant to leave the scene of an accident you know.”

I just shrug. “That's my story, for today. If I had to give it a name, I would call it ... um, Uber Eats Pizza... Driver.” Of course, actually I had thought of that earlier, but I like her to think that I just made it up on the spot.

We sit in silence for a bit. Silence apart from the telly and Mum's phone beeping, chirping and vibrating.

I say, “Is that him?”

“Maybe,” she says.

“Is it a secret?”

“It's not a secret if I have already told you now is it?”

“Does he tell good stories?”

Mum sighs, “Go play FIFA.”

Gibby doesn't work Saturdays, so we get whoever is left over. At least that's what Mum says. We get the scaregivers and home-helps from an agency. Mum does not always get on with the lady in the office. Sometimes I hear her yelling at her on the phone. When the scaregivers come, sometimes they're nice, and sometimes they're grumpy, and sometimes they're just not quite right in the head. They let themselves in with the key from the lockbox outside. I don't like this system at all. What if someone came, and let themselves into our house in the night? It could happen because once while we were sleeping someone opened the door to our garage and stole my bike. Charlie Man had put that bike together for me. It was a road bike crossed with a

mountain bike and had purple tyres. It went really fast, and I did the Weetbix Triathlon on it, and came tenth after the bike ride. Overall, I came about 70th. My swimming isn't too bad, but as Charlie Man says, those legs were not made for running. I had to get another bike, but it's not as good.

The policeman said we had to put a lock on the garage door and put up a security light. The light is over my bedroom window and flicks on and off during the night. When it does that, I always think it might be a burglar. At first, I would get up, and tell Mum that I thought someone was trying to break into the house. Mum has to wear a CPAP mask at night because she has the sleep apnoea. I call it her CRAP mask. After four nights of going in, and saying about the light going on and off, the noises in the driveway, the banging by the garage and the sound of maybe the garage door opening, Mum said unless the house is on fire, or she calls me for a specific reason I am not under any bloody circumstances what so fucking ever to come in her room until after 7am.

She has one of those recliner chairs in her room for when she does get up. It's the very large super-size model and has come out especially from America. America is full of fat people, Charlie Man says. Even though the chair stays at our house it's actually owned by the hospital. I say I could sleep in that, but she says she needs her space, and to go back to bed. Which really means she gets to decide when I can be in there or not. Now, at night when I'm scared, I just lie there awake and click my fingers and shuffle my feet. I guess it is about me being the man of the house that means when she is anxious I go to her, but when I have worries I have to try and be strong.

Sometimes I even wish she might have an anxiety attack so I can sit with her. I know that is not a good thought to have. It means I am thinking only about myself. I have a plan for burglars, which is to roll myself up in my duvet and hide there at the end of the bed as if I'm part of the bedding. I once hid that way when Gibby was looking for me, and he came into my room, called my name, and even looked in my wardrobe but couldn't work out where I was, so I know it's a pretty good hiding place.

As the man of the house, I know if a burglar breaks in I should protect Mum, and not hide because she would not be able to protect herself. I think about a masked man hitting her over the head and then she would be dead. I talked to Charlie Man about someone breaking in, and said I was feeling a bit scared. We were in the car, and he said no one's breaking into our house, because we have nothing to steal. Though we

do have a PlayStation and two TVs. So that is not quite true. But when Charlie Man is talking it's best to just listen. Both him and Mum are from the same short-fuse, listen to what I'm saying or I'll lose my mind type family. Then he said "Your biggest problem, Archie Boy, is not her being hit over the head and dying — it's her having a heart attack or choking on a chip and dying. So there's no bloody point in you lying awake all night, and worrying about burglars when the real problem is inside your house, and it's called coca cola, chips and pizza." Then he says a bit softer, well, softer for Charlie Man, "It's inevitable Archie Boy, your mother is a deathship."

Chapter 5

For the April school holidays Mum says we need to do some spring cleaning. Which really means I can do some spring cleaning. Charlie Man mows our lawns every week, but he has said when I'm eleven I'll be old enough to do this. He said he would give me \$5, for every good mow, but I'll have to do a good job. I asked my friends at school, and no one else is allowed to mow lawns yet. They say their parents think the mower is too dangerous. I do think that the mower is quite scary. Charlie Man has been teaching me how to start it and about safety things like wearing boots, and only mowing forward not backwards over your toes.

He says he started mowing lawns when he was eight. His father was very particular about the lawns, and he had to mow up one way then down the other. This isn't how he does my mum's lawns. Sometimes he goes so fast that he misses bits, and he just leaves them for the next time. I don't know why I'll be expected to do such a good job.

Andrew has turned up today as Mum's Saturday scaregiver. He's old. Probably about 50, I think, with his round glasses, and a big bright sweaty bald patch. I asked Mum once if she minds men washing her. Her eyes narrowed because she doesn't like talking about her care, or her body, or her illness with me unless she has brought it up first. I started to get a bit nervous when I asked her in case she was going to start yelling. Sometimes when I'm nervous I start shrugging my shoulders fast and blinking my eyes. It just happens out of nowhere, and it drives Mum crazy. Sometimes she says, "Stop doing that, you weirdo." But this time she doesn't say anything about it.

"I have no shame left, Archie, I'm trapped in this body here and I just take what help comes through the door. Now stop thinking about all this nonsense, and go make me a cup of tea, and bring me that packet of shortbread to go with it."

I make a pretty good cup of tea. You have to put the hot water in the teapot first then tip it out. Mum likes actual tea leaves — not tea bags. I sometimes have a cup of tea too, but I like mine milky and with two sugars. This is how Gibby has his too. Tea is one of the few things Mum does not have sugar in. I make Andrew one as well. When I take the cups in from the kitchen, on the tray the cups chatter away. It's hard to carry things on a tray and keep my hands from shaking. At least we have clean cups.

The dishwasher broke down again last week. The man who came to fix it said it would continue to break down because the filters were chock full of food, and fat waste, because someone had not been scraping the plates properly. Luckily, he only told me that.

Andrew and Mum are talking when I come in, and I try and listen to what Mum says in case she's talking about me. She isn't. Andrew is telling her about his mother. He's her scaregiver too. That's how he decided to become a scaregiver. On Saturday his mum goes into some care place for the morning for her dementia, and to give him respite care. I say I wonder how you get that. I would like to have some restbite too and show my teeth. They laugh. Andrew tells us, that the old people mostly just sit on chairs, or wander round the garden. Andrew always stays on longer here than his hours are meant to be. Mum has that effect on people. Always getting that little bit extra. You would think he would want to do something different, on his day off from his mother. Mum says Andrew is a gentle soul and one of the good people.

In the evenings, unless there is an emergency, it's just me and Mum at home. We're used to it now. Just the two of us. Against the world Mum might say if she's in a good mood. From 4pm if anything needs doing, I do it. Around 5, most nights we have dinner together. I'll heat up a Meals on Wheels, or sometimes I'll cook something, or if she has a craving I'll go to the takeaway on my bike. But lately our usual routine has been interrupted by the man. He always seems to call dead on 5pm. Mum doesn't seem to know that you can just not answer your phone or ask him to call back. Once I said shall I answer and tell him that we eat our dinner at 5pm? And she said that she can speak for herself and was happy to take his calls anytime. I on the other hand have never been allowed my phone on during dinner time.

It's dark now that daylight saving has finished, so I have to put my light on my bike when I go out. Charlie Man got it for me. It's one of those USB ones, so you have to remember to charge it. You can't leave them on your bike either, because people like to steal them. This means I have to remember to take it off my bike and put it in my pocket before I go into the shop as well as remember to lock my bike up. Charlie Man says there is no more money for another bike. I don't know why he says this. It was not my fault the last one got stolen. I wish you could take your bike through the drive through then I wouldn't have to worry about remembering all the locking up and taking lights off. I tried it once when it was quiet but the lady at the window yelled at me. She said it was dangerous. I felt embarrassed so I didn't go in the front door, I

biked to the other McDonalds miles away on a busy road. Now that really was dangerous.

Once at Bike to School Week you had to chart all the places you biked over the month. The teacher said she's never known anyone my age who biked so much. She said it in a funny way, so I wasn't sure if she thought it was amazing or she thought I had made it all up.

Before Andrew leaves, he tells me to come out to the car. He's got something for us. When I get out there, he opens the boot and says, "It's a bread maker. I never use it now. I thought you could make some homemade bread over the holidays. It will be fun, you'll enjoy it." I don't think it sounds like fun at all. Weird what things adults think you will enjoy.

"Thanks Andrew, it does look like fun," I say, "and we like bread, so it will be handy too." When I say this, for some reason, it makes his eyes a little watery. I pretend not to notice and carry the bread maker inside.

Chapter 6

Gibby is tidying up Mum's bedroom and making a list of stuff mum needs restocked by the hospital, or things for me to buy at the chemist. I am painting Mum's toenails. The weather hasn't been great this holiday, so I have been a bit bored. If you mention being bored in this house, you're bound to get a job. This is what I got. In four days' time I'll be back at school, with nothing to tell about my holiday. Except I did make bread. Actually it's pretty cool. You can put the ingredients in at night and set it for a time in the morning and when you wake up, you can smell fresh bread all through the house. Then you can cut huge hunks off the loaf, which Mum calls doorsteps, and put a load of butter on and eat it.

Mum's toes are like little wee fat sausages on the end of her feet. I do a pretty good job of toenails. Mum likes it and it's one of the things she gives me pocket money for. Mum has chosen Pink Lady for her nails. First I have to remove all the old nail polish. I really don't like the smell of the remover. Last time we did Mermaid, which was swirly bluey green, which for some reason today is quite hard to get off. Sometimes a lady comes and does Mum's fingernails for her and massages her hands. The lady is a volunteer, and when she does Mum's fingernails sometimes, she paints little pictures on her nails. I think I could probably do some little pictures on her toenails too, but when I suggest it, Mum goes "No thank you Archie," in that sharp voice that lets me know that is a completely stupid idea.

While I do her nails, Mum asks me if I'd like to see a picture of him. It's saved on her phone, under favourites, and it has writing over it which says, "To My Love". In the photo the man is really hairy, with a big black beard. No dog, or boat though. I would have liked much less of the beard and more boat and dog, if anyone had bothered asking me. Mum already told me his name is River, but I have still been calling him the man. She says he's 35. Which is five years younger than Mum. I'm not sure exactly what I think of him. It's good I'm doing her toenails, because then she can't see the looks on my face. Sometimes my face does the wrong looks, just by accident. If she sees a wrong look or a bad look this could hurt her feelings. Mum says the man is always asking if she's okay and how she's feeling. He says he would love to

be able to look after her and make her happy. Which is dumb since that is what Gibby and me do. I reckon Charlie Man would say, “Bloody cheek.”

Gibby comes in with some clean sheets on the recliner to make the bed with later, and says, “What do you think of your new dad, Archie?”

Mum says, “Just ignore him. We’re a long way off that.”

Gibby says sarcastically, “Yeah, it’s hard to be more — you know with him having so many problems, in his life at the moment.”

“Don’t be a dick Gibby, you can fuck off home if you’re going to be so negative.”

“I’m not being negative; I’m looking out for you.”

“I won’t be telling you anything anymore.”

They carry on firing off comments and arguing, and this makes Mum’s feet twitch and move so I have to give up the nails for a bit. When they’re like this, they seem to forget I’m even here. This is the best way to find out things.

Gibby starts pulling mum’s pillows out from behind her and putting on fresh pillowcases. He’s whacking the pillows to bounce them all up and make them fluff again, but probably he’s doing it to annoy Mum. It looks pretty funny, but this is not the time to be laughing. I open my mouth to ask mum a question about the man and what kind of problems he has, but then close it again because I am not sure exactly what to ask, and if I do ask something how mad will she get?

Gibby then pushes Mum in the middle of the back, so she bends forward and puts the pillows behind her. Then there is no arguing only silence. Gibby goes about making the bed puffing and tutting, because it’s quite hard work making a bed with someone in it, especially when that someone is a very fat person, and when you’re also in a very bad mood.

Mum says nothing and rolls to the side away from him, and Gibby untucks the bottom sheet and then rolls it up like a sausage until it’s halfway down the middle of the bed, and then puts the clean sheet on, tucks it in and rolls it up next to the dirty sheet. Then Mum rolls over the two sausage rolls of sheet, and Gibby goes round the other side and takes the dirty sheet off and pulls the clean one straight and tucks that in. Mum by now is totally beetroot purple in the face and starts to yell at him, “Am I not entitled to have someone? Someone who will love me?”

Gibby rolls his eyes at me, and says to Mum, “Martha, you’re being very dramatic”.

I don't like it when Mum gets this upset and sad. I start to cry, and I tell her I love her, and I'm always here for her.

"It's not the same, Archie."

I don't know why she says it's not the same. I'm always here every single day and night for Mum. I bet the man couldn't do all the things I do for Mum. He couldn't tell the great stories I do, or make her laugh, or do the special healing hands. And no matter what she thinks I am the only one to calm her down when the anxiety attacks come. Plus I know all her secrets. More than Gibby even. If she had asked me, I would have said I didn't even need a dad. Before I can ask her if she's thought about what will happen to me if the man comes, she starts to yell at Gibby. "Why did you help set up my profile, and help with my pictures if you were going to be like this when I actually met someone I liked?"

I don't like when Gibby and Mum fight. I worry that one day Mum will say something so bad to Gibby, or say he's fired one too many times, and he'll actually never come back.

Gibby says quietly, "Because Martha, I know you're lonely, but I didn't know you were going to be so completely stupid about some loser."

Now there is dead silence. Mum says nothing until Gibby has finished making her bed and she's all comfy. Then she says, "But who am I? I'm just some different kind of loser, the kind that nobody wants."

I say, "I'm going to make everyone a cup of calm the farm tea". When I leave, I can hear them already making up a bit. I wonder why Gibby thinks the man is a loser. I make the tea and slice up some of Andrew's home baked fruit cake and put it all on a tray. When I get back Gibby is fixing up the nail polish mess. Then we all sit slurping our tea and eating cake, saying nothing. This is one of those times I think, like Andrew likes to say, "Least said soonest mended." I got Charlie Man to explain what that exactly means, and he said, "Sometimes it's better to just shut the fuck up, Archie Boy, and not annoy the heck out of people."

Chapter 7

May 2019

I'm going with Charlie Man to buy football boots. The new season starts next week, and not only have I grown out of my boots, but they have split across where my big toes go on the right hand side. I tell Charlie Man it's from all the kicking and he laughs much too loudly for the joke. Once we have the boots, we're going to pick up my cousin Harry from the bus station. He comes down from Taupo sometimes. Charlie Man says when his bitch of a mother lets him. Even though they weren't married that long, it has scarred Charlie Man for life. Charlie Man will definitely never marry again.

At the Mall there is a magic show. I know I'm too old for magic, but I stop and watch anyway. To be honest I'd rather buy a wand and top hat than football boots. The magician is a lady. She has pink hair and plastic flowers on her head and a purple cape. She's also actually quite fat and quite loud. She's asking questions, and the little kids laugh. Not a real laugh but that really loud ha ha haaa that little kids do when they're trying to play the game. She calls a girl up. Girls always get chosen first for stuff when adults need a volunteer. Her mother practically steps on the other kids to get a photo as her kid pulls about 100 scarves from the magician's pocket.

Charlie Man says come on, and we go buy the boots. He tells me off because I didn't bring socks with me to wear when I try the boots on, even though he told me to. He buys me the cheapest pair of plain black boots. I really wanted the orange ones with the black swirl. I say to Charlie Man that I think they would make me play better. Archie Boy, he says, what would make you play better is getting off the bloody couch, stop playing PlayStation, going for a run and practising kicking a ball outside every evening.

When we get to the Inter City Bus Station the bus is running late. Charlie Man gets out to have a vape. His vape sends clouds of steam up around his head. After fat group, when we're outside waiting for our lifts lately Michelle sometimes vapes — even though she's only thirteen. Her vape smells of candy floss, and she told me it doesn't have any nicotine in it. I'm pretty sure Charlie Man buys the kind that does have nicotine in it. He used to smoke cigarettes, and then gave them up about five

years ago. When I asked him about why he started the vaping, he said, “Stress, Archie Boy, stress.” He didn’t say what the stress was, but I hope he doesn’t mean me. While he’s vaping, I get in the backseat. I go over the back of the passenger seat instead of using the doors. Charlie Man knocks on the window and wags his finger at me and lets out a great big puff of steam. I laugh. I move to the backseat, so that when Harry gets here, he can sit in the front with his dad.

Harry never says much. He’s one of those quiet types. Maybe when he’s alone with Charlie Man, or with his friends and not with a cousin he says more, I dunno. Charlie Man tells me to shut up sometimes. He says he’s never heard anyone talk so much. I like to talk. Even if I have nothing to say, I’ll come up with something. At school when we had to write about our best qualities I wrote “talking.” When I gave the assignment to the teacher she smiled in that way grownups do when they think kids are funny.

“Charlie Man?” I yell out the window to him.

“Yes, Archie Boy.” I like the way he says my name. It makes my neck warm for some reason and my shoulders automatically rise up in a nice warm weird shrug. “Can you take a photo of me?”

“What the hell for?”

I yell, “I just don’t really have many photos. Mum never buys the school ones and I was thinking what if I grow up and there are none of me, and what if I get married and I have a little boy and he says Dad do I look like you when you were little? I’ll have nothing to show him. Or what if I die? It will be like I never existed.” The bus pulls in and Charlie Man opens the door, so I don’t have to keep yelling and says he’ll take one when I’m in my football uniform next week.

Harry gets off the bus and he’s like a giant. He’s taller than his dad now and that makes me laugh. He’s really hairy on his face and legs and he has got really skinny. I hope I grow like him. Mum says my little bit of fat is just puppy fat and a boy needs that before he has his growth spurt into being a man. It’s hard to believe everything she says, though. Charlie Man says she just talks a lot of shit. Charlie Man gives Harry a pat on the back and says “Hello son.” Charlie man isn’t a great one for the hugging.

Harry says, “What’s up, Archie?”

“I got new football boots. Your dad....” I was going to say chose them. But then I wish I hadn’t said that. Maybe since he doesn’t live with his dad he won’t like that

Charlie Man bought me boots like a dad would. So I just say, “You got super tall, Harry. You’re miles taller than your dad now. How tall are you?” I think this is a better subject to talk about, I mean who wouldn’t be proud of being tall?

Harry says, “190cm.”

“Wow, that’s really tall, Harry. I hope I’m going to grow soon. All the girls in my class except for two are taller than me now.”

He doesn’t say anything to this. They don’t talk at all the rest of the way home. I’m not sure if it’s because they don’t talk much together, or they don’t talk much with me in the car. It’s hard for me to stay quiet especially when people aren’t talking. Once Mum said to me, “You know, Archie, you don’t have to fill every silence with your jabber. Sometimes silence is nice.” I think she actually was being serious.

They drop me at the letterbox. I wave them goodbye and Charlie Man does a long toot toot toooooooot — even though Mum has asked him not to. She says she could be sleeping. She said this to him in a text. That’s how they communicate. Mum has him on her phone under Brother. Charlie Man has her in his phone under Blimp.

It makes me feel sad that they don’t get on. I feel I’m always caught in the middle of something, though I’m not sure exactly what it is. When I was little Charlie Man and Mum lived in our house together after their parents died. My bedroom used to be Charlie Man’s room. In fact my bed is actually his bed from when he was a kid.

I tell Mum that Harry has got really tall and skinny. Mum likes to know everything, so she always has a lot of questions about stuff that doesn’t even matter. I really want to go play FIFA, but if I annoy her now I might get banned for the night.

“How old is he now?”

“Fourteen, 190 cm, short hair and um, he has some pimples and he’s quite hairy. Oh and skinny. Tall and skinny.” I say this very quickly.

She rolls her eyes at me as if to say, I see what you did there. “Did Charlie seem happy to see him?” I never know where she’s going with her questions, and sometimes I’m not sure what the right answers are.

“I think so. They sat in the front together. But they didn’t really talk.”

“Did he say anything about his mother?”

“Oh, um, yes I forgot I think he said, she said to say hello or hi or oh yes that’s it, she sends her regards.” Mum looks quite pleased when I say this, so I add, “She wants to friend you on Facebook. Yep.” I nod my head a few times, like this actually happened.

Later that afternoon I made yoyos. They’re biscuits that are all yellow with yellow icing, and I like to make extra-large ones. I make hot chocolates for two, even though we’re out of chocolate fish. Mum says she can’t be trusted with chocolate of any kind. She will even eat all the chocolate buttons for the whole of December on the Christmas advent calendar, if you don’t keep it away from her. Charlie Man asked me once what I thought I was doing cooking cakes and biscuits and going out and getting her takeaways she shouldn’t be eating. He said, “You might as well put a gun to her head Archie”. That’s Charlie Man for you, and he thinks Mum is drama! He just doesn’t understand how sad Mum is, and how it’s my job to make her feel happy.

I put Mum’s hot chocolate on the table that is like one of those hospital tables that goes over her bed and put mine on the side table by the recliner. Once I tried to sit in the recliner while holding my hot chocolate and the chair tilted back and it went all over my lap. Even though it was burning me, Mum never asked if I was okay she just yelled about the mess.

It’s only the beginning of May, but the days have already started to get very cold. We’ll be starting football soon and that means playing in the cold and the frosts. It’s not fun playing when the fields are ice. When I moan about the cold Charlie Man says, “You think playing isn’t fun in the cold, you should try standing out there being a spectator, especially when the kid you’re watching is half asleep.”

“Today at the mall there was a magician,” I say to Mum, with a mouth full of yoyo.

“A musician?”

“No a *magician*.” I yell laughing and Mum rolls her eyes at me. “She needed a hand with a trick...”

“Did you put your hand up? You have to be more out there and put yourself forward for those things. Life is all about those unexpected experiences.”

I don't know why she wants me to be the first, best, try-every-experience-out-there-boy. If she really knew me she would know me as the boy who does not volunteer for things, and sits at the back of the class, and makes a good joke every now and then.

“Mum, people always choose the girls. Anyway, this girl in a yellow dress gets up, and stands by the magician and then her mother comes running in from the back of the crowd, and practically tramples a bunch of little kids who are in her way, and there is screaming and yelling, and then the other mothers start getting upset. And of course, Charlie Man is there going, “You go girl.” Then the girl in the yellow starts pulling a huge, long string of scarves out of the magician's pocket. And it's really long and goes on, and on, and the scarves and the string start piling up on the floor, and then finally the last thing on the line is a pair of enormous knickers.” Mum laughs, and because she's in a good mood, and because Yellowstone is on the TV soon, she says I can have PlayStation until 10pm. But of course, I'll have to come in at 10pm and do the deadpan duty, though, before I go to bed. That's my life. All of the days — no matter how good or bad, all end with deadpans.

Chapter 8

June 2019

We had a talk from a fireman once at school about making sure we had a plan to get out of the house if there was a fire. You have to talk about it with your parents, and you should just jump out a window, if that's the nearest exit, and never hide in wardrobes or under beds. The fireman said there's nothing in your house more important than you. But at night sometimes I start to wondering in a fire how Mum would get out. And if she couldn't, would she want me to jump out my window, or would she like me to be with her, holding each other and gasping our last breaths together in the flames and the smoke. Like how a captain goes down with the ship. Mum calls this 'catastrophising' behaviour. She will say, "For fuck's sake, Archie, stop your catastrophising, you're like a little crazy ball of fresh hot worries."

At night to try and stop myself from the hot worries, I try to trick myself into a nice dream. I close my eyes and imagine that Mum and I have gone out for dinner. It's somewhere real fancy. She's happy, and smiling and laughing, and being charming with the waiter. The seats are really big and wide, and they fit her, and she doesn't need to worry about breaking the chair. There's no menu, they just cook whatever you like. That's why it's so fancy. I have a hamburger, but it's a posh kind and comes on a silver plate, and Mum has a big steak with chips and salad. But the best part is that when we eat, we sit and talk, and Mum tells me stories about when she was my age, and they're funny and we make plans for things like a car trip and a holiday. Also the other customers are not staring at us, because we're just a normal family, just like them. I don't know why, since it's my dreaming I always make the seats bigger and not Mum smaller.

Tonight a thought pops into my head about Mum's boyfriend. I don't put him in my dream though. Charlie Man says, knowing Mum, he probably is a serial killer, and then told me to tell Mum not to give him any money, or the house. Charlie Man always says things about the house, because it's legally half his house, even though Mum says it bloody well isn't. I know that their parents left it to both of them, and Mum is meant to pay some rent to him, but sometimes she forgets on purpose. I have

not passed on that message to Mum about the serial killer. I also don't mention to Charlie Man about Mum giving the man money. I will save that for another day.

Even though I'm not meant to, I have watched shows about serial killers on Netflix, but they can give you nightmares. I know from the shows that meeting up with a man from the internet, with a strange name, is for sure a great way to come in contact with a serial killer and end up dead with your body parts spread around the countryside. I wanted to tell Charlie Man that I felt a bit scared about the whole boyfriend situation, but then I would have to say that I had been watching the World's Greatest Serial Killers and I would probably then be in trouble from both Mum and Charlie Man. It doesn't happen often but when they're both mad at you, life is really not fun.

Charlie Man also asked what kind of a stupid made-up name is River. I told him at school we have lots of kids with nature names like Meadow, and we have a Summer and even a Willow. He reckons that those names might be okay these days, but no normal person, back in the day, named their kids after nature or any other bullshit like that.

Chapter 9

Sunday is a funny day in our house. For a start Mum gets up and sits in the recliner chair. And it's the day she gets up to have her weekly poo. When I say she gets up, she actually has people to get her up. They're two volunteers, who I call Mac and Cheese, plus the Sunday scaregiver Shirley. Shirley is Irish. She has lived in NZ for 26 years, but she still supports the Shamrocks. The Shamrocks is the name of the Irish rugby team, but not a lot of people know that. I like the way she talks. Her accent is sort of musical, and she has funny sayings like, "Oh that's for certain sure." If Mum says it's hot today, she always says, "That's for certain sure." I try to say things that I know she will agree with, just to hear her say it. When I'm with Charlie Man sometimes I say it to him too. He thinks it's funny especially if I do it in an Irish accent. Another of her sayings is to be careful about burning your bridges at both ends. I like this one too.

When Shirley comes it always puts Mum in a good mood, even though normally getting up would make her be in a very bad mood. Shirley is one of those skinny, tiny, bony types. She says she isn't even five foot tall. That is the olden-day measurements, and what that means is she's short. Shirley says that we can use metrics for whatever we want, but height should still be in feet and inches, and babies' weights need to be in pounds and ounces — that's for certain sure.

Shirley is also super strong. Even before Mac and Cheese, the strong guys, get here, Shirley has Mum sitting up on the side of the bed with her feet on the floor. It's important to sit up for a while on the side of the bed before you get up, otherwise you might just faint from being lying down quite a lot. It's something to do with the blood not moving round your body properly. It's like when you're lying down it's all spread out nice and evenly, but when you sit up it might all go to your legs, and away from your head.

The two volunteers' real names are Mac and Dave. I don't know how Shirley found them, but they're like super muscle men, and they come and help Mum stand up and shuffle to her chair. Then they go off to the gym and come again on the way home, after their Sunday morning weight session, with their faces all sweaty and shiny, and they have shaved heads, so their bald heads are all sweaty and shiny, too. They're

really wide and take up lots of room in the bedroom, and Shirley has to make sure that everything is out of the way, as they have a habit of knocking things over: things like chairs, vases, CRAP machines and cups of tea.

When Mum is sitting up, I can see her legs, because she can never wear pants, because they would be too hard to get on and off. Her legs look like a stack of pancakes. Once the doctor said she had to wear special stockings so as not to get a blood clot. The stockings were like white, and a bit stretchy, but not super stretchy, and no matter how hard we tried, Shirley and I couldn't get them past Mum's knees. She was yelling at us, saying for fuck's sake just pull them up, but they just wouldn't go up any higher, and that was the biggest size there was. I bet even Mac and Cheese wouldn't have been able to get them on. Mum got so frustrated that she started crying, and then we couldn't get them off because they were stuck. Shirley said "Fuck it Martha, let's just cut the bastards off." Mum was upset because the doctor warned her about how dangerous blood clots could be. Mum is scared of a lot of things, just like me.

Mac and Cheese help put her in the special wheelchair, the one with the toilet seat. It's actually called a commode, which I think sounds like Commodore the car, so of course that's what I named it. Mum's fat bum hangs down through the hole in the middle of it. Shirley and I pretend we don't see it. But it's a weird purple colour. Then Shirley pushes her backwards out of the room, and then pushes her into the toilet as fast as she can. Earlier Shirley gave Mum an enema to help her with her number twos. My job is to rush ahead to make sure the toilet seat is up, and that it's clean and flushed. Then make myself scarce. Mum is so fat now that she's pretty much squished up against the walls of the toilet. Later Shirley will have to go in and wipe her butt. That is a whole thing that I don't even want to think about.

While Mum is sitting in the loo, Shirley changes all the sheets on the bed, and airs out the duvet. I make pikelets. It's my Nana's recipe. She has handwritten a book of family recipes called Mum's Recipes. I think it's the same recipe, though, as the pikelets in the New Zealand Edmond's Cookbook. Mum said when her mum (my nana) got cancer she wrote out recipe books for her, and for Charlie. Sometimes it makes me sad to look at her dead person recipe words. Even if it's just food words. It's sad that she never got to meet me too. I think it would be nice to have a nana doing nice things for you. My friend Sasha's nana took her to Fiji for a holiday, without her parents, and she hung out in the kid's club doing fun activities every day while her

nana drunk cocktails by the pool. She said it was the best holiday ever except for the time her nana felt a bit dizzy and fell over and dislocated her finger.

I put a big knob of butter in the electric frying pan, just like the recipe says. And I laugh to myself because knob is a funny word, even when it's a word written by a Nana. The butter sizzles away and I mix it round with the spatula before adding the batter in big fluffy spoonfuls. The secret is to wait until the bubbles appear on the top of the pikelets before you turn them over. Mum says we only use butter in this house. Apart from it tasting better it's natural. Straight from cows. She also says, "Who the fuck knows what's in margarine."

I wonder what other boys my age do on Sundays. It's hard for me to have really good friends because I can't invite anyone to the house, and because Mum's caregivers usually finish at 4pm, except Sundays where there is only me from 1pm. People just don't like working the Sundays, Mum says. That means I can never have a sleepover at someone's house either.

When I bring in the pikelets, and a big pot of tea, Mum is back in bed with clean sheets, and Mac and Cheese are leaving. I ask them if they want a pikelet. I am just being polite. They always say, "No carbs for us son."

Shirley has a way of making mum look great. Sort of all scrubbed and ready for the week ahead, all wrapped in a clean nightie. Mum's nighties are cut all up the back, so they're easy for her to get on and off. Mum always feels hot so she always has bare arms. When I put the tray down I give her a hand massage. Like always she says, "Archie, you have healing hands." She says it in a way that makes me think I might actually have healing hands. If I really did I would squeeze the fat away. A little bit every day until she was teeny tiny and could leap out of bed, and we would probably go swimming and biking, and take photos of ourselves doing that together and put it on our Facebook pages.

I don't have a Facebook yet, but Mum does — I have seen her putting things on there but it's mostly motivational sayings like, 'Great Things Take Time' or 'If you want to be more - do more'. They have pictures of butterflies or cats, or sometimes clouds with them. Sometimes she takes photos of the food I cook to put up. I try to put my face down by the food when she does that, but she always yells, "Get out of it." I wonder if River has seen a photo of me? Not everyone is partial to redheads. Probably not even serial killers.

When Mum is all shiny and new for the week, it's sort of like she's dressed up ready for something, except there is nothing to be ready for. Just bed, this room and me. I guess that's why she thinks the man is important. When Shirley is here, she makes the house seem light and hopeful. Sometimes I hate when she leaves on Sunday. In my chest I feel a big lump of loneliness. She says her whole family comes for Sunday dinner, and they're all loud and sometimes her boys, who are grown men now, drink too much and break things, and I don't know if that makes her cross, but when she tells the story she just laughs, so maybe it's okay to break things sometimes by accident or if you're a bit drunk.

When Shirley tells me what she's having for dinner that always makes me want to have that same food, too. Mostly it seems on a Sunday they have a roast. Their dinner is at lunch time though. She said one day when Mum is better, she will invite us over. Sometimes when Shirley tells us what is for her lunch, Mum gives me money and I bike down to Countdown and buy meat and roast vegetables. I can cook a roast pretty good, and Shirley showed me how to make crunchy crackling on the pork by rubbing a little oil and a lot of salt in. Mum isn't meant to have too much salt, but on Sundays we ignore that. Last year when I told the kids in my class that I cook Sunday dinner on my own, no one would believe me. Sasha said her mother won't even let her make toast. Everyone laughed when she said that because she's funny, and I laughed too but inside I had a funny feeling because I knew that meant her mother must make all her food.

Once when we were in year three, and we were sitting together at lunchtime, she had this Elsa lunch box from Frozen. It was purple and white, with Elsa smiling on the front, and when she unzipped it, it had a matching Elsa drink bottle, a big size Elsa plastic container, and two smaller ones. When she opened them up, she had little ham and cheese sandwiches, with the crusts cut off. In the other container there was a homemade muffin, and then in another she had grapes and nuts — which actually is a bit naughty as we have two kids who have nut allergies, and you're not meant to bring them. I didn't say anything, though. I sat for a while and watched her eat. I didn't want her to see my luncheon-meat bun wrapped in tinfoil.

When I have done the breakfast dishes, I can have free time including PlayStation. I can even shut the door, but I like to listen to Shirley and Mum talk. Mum calls it her girl talk time. I can hear Mum telling her about the River man. I am trying to listen hard, so I can find out some more things. I guess Mum is showing pictures to Shirley. "Sure Martha isn't your man handsome," and Mum actually giggles and

Shirley says, “Martha McColl! You’re quite giddy.” Which I don’t quite get, but it must be from the standing up, or the big poo she had earlier.

Shirley does like to announce the colour and type of poo, though she calls it a bowel motion. Shirley writes down the bowel motion information every week in a red notebook. It does not make for great reading. Suddenly Mum’s door shuts. How do they always know when I’m listening?

Chapter 10

September 2019

Jennifer my social worker picks me up after group this week, and gives me a lift home. She pretends like she's doing me a favour, but sometimes she likes to do our 'check ins' in the car because she's busy. I think it's busy being a social worker, especially one that looks after kids. Charlie Man says that I should think about what I say before I start talking, and giving away all our family secrets, but it's hard to do that, because she lets me talk about whatever I want, and never interrupts me.

We made Chicken Chow Mein this week and even though the lid is on tight the car fills up with the smell of it, and it makes my tummy growl.

"How's it all going?"

"It's good. Look, Chow Mein."

"Oh yes, you're getting to be a very good cook."

"Yeah, looks that way. I was thinking that the group probably needs some more boys."

"Hmm, it's always hard getting boys to come along. They're either playing sports or on the Xbox."

"I play sports and PlayStation. Maybe I don't need to go either? Maybe this group is more for girls?"

She just laughs. "You're happy enough at group, though?"

I just sigh. Actually no one cares what you think. Unless what you think is the same as what they think. "Is Taines doing okay?"

"Yes, not too bad considering. I can't really tell you any more though, because it's all confidential. Maybe you can find him yourself on Instagram?" I don't say that my phone is the kind of old phone for grandmas and only does texting or calling. I'm hoping for my birthday, next month, I'll get a smartphone.

When we pull up outside my house I go to get out, and she says, "Do you think you might be interested in a camp in the summer holidays?" She hands me some bits of paper. "It's for kids who help with the caregiving of their people in their family. You know kids just like you. There's quite a few out there."

I think that sounds totally dumb, because it doesn't matter how much I would like to go we both know that I won't be going. I let out a big sigh like I have actually thought it over carefully. "I think..., I will have to look after Mum." I say it a bit sarcastic and try to hand the form back.

She totally ignores me. "Well, I could talk to your mum and your uncle — if you like? I think it would be good for you." She says nothing for a while, and I don't know what to say for a change, so I say nothing but look at her shoes. They look new. Actually they're boots. They're emerald green and lace right up to the knees. I think these are the type of things my mum would think is a lot of work, for no real reason. She would probably say, "Who can be fuffed with all that lacing up?"

Jennifer says, "It's only for a week and it's a chance to meet other kids who live like you, but also so you can have a holiday, you know, a break. There's a lake and kayaking, and climbing things, and you go on a tramp and you sleep in a dorm and have camp fires..."

"Okay," I'll ask Mum." I say this in a super duper, bright ridiculous voice, the kind adults love to hear, and then get out of the car as fast as I can because there is only so long I can keep that voice up before it will start to crack. I already know the answer. It will be the same as school camp. I couldn't go because Mum needed me.

I am in a bad mood now. Jennifer has put me in a bad mood. When I get in the door Mum is already yelling for me to come and see her, and hurry about it. "I'm just going to the toilet," I yell back, "I'm busting." When I get in there, I sit on the closed lid, and press the toilet paper over my eyes hard to stop the tears from just falling out. I know that if I let myself go my tears will just go crazy, and I'll get loud and noisy and my breathing will get all short and panting, and I'll feel like I can't breathe or speak, and I don't want Mum to see me like that, because she will feel bad too. I know she needs me and I don't need Jennifer reminding me. I need to get a hold of myself right now. I need to get a good firm grip on myself, and so I pinch that skin under my armpit and give it a good twist until it really hurts. It makes me stop being in my head and being such a stupid cry-baby. I'll wait a bit though. If Mum sees my eyes all red, she will have questions, and be mad that I am probably being an attention seeker. But I can't stay in here too long either as otherwise she will ask if I'm constipated. I don't want to talk to my mother about my poop. When I'm ready, I rip the forms into little pieces and flush them down the toilet.

When I go into Mum, she's on her phone and seems to have forgotten she called me. I stand in the doorway for a bit, "I made Chicken Chow Mein. I'm just going to heat it up."

When I get to the kitchen she yells, "Bring me coke." Good choice, I think. Coke goes good with Chinese food. Sometimes Charlie Man takes me out for a Chinese meal, though he always prefers a beer. A lager beer.

When I get back with the food her programme is starting. I put her tray on her little table. She says the food is good. I don't tell her Michelle made this one. I accidentally put miles too much soy sauce in mine. When I tasted it, when it was done, I nearly started swearing because I knew I would have nothing to share with Mum. When we were leaving Michelle gave me hers. She said no one cares whether they taste hers or not. When I think about no one wanting to eat her food, I feel a bit sad for her.

Mum and I eat the Chow Mein and watch her show. It's called Married at First Sight. It's reality TV. People who don't even know each other get married.

"Would you be on the show Mum?"

"Yes, Archie, they could push me out on this bed — I'd be quite the catch." This is called sarcasm. Mum is quite good at it too. I look at her eyes because I want to laugh. I see her eyes twinkling and know it's okay. It's a joke. A Mum joke.

"Well, I hope the man they match you with will be rich."

"Oh, he would be for sure."

"Maybe he could afford to get you that operation, you know where they staple you up so you get real skinny." I had seen this lady on the TV get this operation, and she had lost like the weight of a whole other person. At the beginning of the programme she was pretty fat and shuffling around, but she was still working and looking after her kids. She wanted to be healthy for them. Mum has the weight of two full other people to carry around. Two fat people.

"Who knows, maybe there will be someone for me who loves me just how I am." I don't know what to say to this. She's probably meaning River. I don't ask though.

1. Because I don't want to encourage her.
2. Because if I don't know anything I can't go spilling the beans to Charlie Man.

We just sit in silence for a minute while I shrug and blink away until she gives my head a whack and says, “Go sort our second dinner.”

I am totally relieved to run off to the kitchen and sort our second dinners. Even though I know second and sometimes third dinners are not healthy choices. Mum says they are her choices to make. We’re having Shepherd’s Pie. It’s one of the good Meals on Wheels dinners. On Sundays Mum puts in our order. She orders two of everything so we can have the same meals. Mum likes it when we have the same food to eat. She says it’s like we cooked it together, like other families do. I put the containers in the microwave and watch them go round. When they’re done, I spoon the food out onto plates. Mum reckons some people eat their Meals on Wheels from the containers. She says, “We’re not those people.” For some reason, it’s okay to eat the food from group out of the container. Mum has lots of strange rules around food.

I take her tray first. I always make sure she gets her food as quick as I can. When she’s hungry she can be grumpy. The dietician lady gave us a list, and it’s on the fridge about what Mum can have with her meal and also what to have as snacks and drinks, and what substitutes you can have. Normal coke is not on that list. On my Meals on Wheels, I also get pudding three times a week. I choose the cold type of puddings like instant pudding, or rice pudding or jelly pudding. This is because you don’t have to heat them up. Otherwise mum can smell them, and then wants them. I share most things but I draw the line at pudding. After I clear our plates I stand in the kitchen and eat the rice pudding and peaches. It tastes good. I think maybe it’s food little kids would have, but I don’t care. Ten meals arrive at once for the week, five each for me and Mum. Her meals have a big D for diet or diabetic on them, so we don’t get mixed up, I guess. The other two nights you’re meant to cook for yourself. That means I cook. Sometimes when the puddings arrive (on a Monday) I stand in front of the fridge and eat all three one after the other.

Today while I’m eating my pudding, I think more about Mum having someone for her that isn’t me. As I finish my pudding I yell out and ask if she wants a story. She yells back, “Stop bloody yelling, Archie, and come in here. I can’t hear what you’re saying.”

I have decided that I am only telling a short story. I want to watch my show on Netflix, so I’m thinking of telling it fast, and from her doorway rather than sitting down on the bed. I am feeling a bit cross what with the soy sauce, the camp. And. My. Life. “Mum, I only have a short story today,” I say at her door.

She looks up from her phone, “And...?”

Now I’m not sure what to do. I should have just started the story, and not announced the story. Now that I have announced the story, I can’t announce that I’m doing it from the doorway. “And nothing, I’m just saying.”

“Okay,” she says.

“Well,” I say as I sit down on the recliner, “two boys in my class wrote swear words on the white board when the teacher was out of the room.”

Mum’s eyes grow wide. “That is totally outrageous.”

“Yes, very outrageous,” I say. “Anyway, one of the boys, let’s call him Alex...”

“Why, what’s his name?”

“His name is actually Alex.” Mum snorts as she thinks that is funny and has got my little joke. I say, “So the boy...,”

And she says, “Alex?”

“Yes, he was with his mother at the doctor’s office, and he must have been feeling very guilty about writing rude words, and so in the middle of the doctor examining his foot, because he has a massive wart right by his middle toes, that he most likely caught from the swimming pool showers.” I add the bit about the dirty changing rooms because our class has been going for lessons to the Aquatic Centre on a Tuesday, and the floors are really filthy. And because I do not like getting changed in front of the other boys. I’m hoping she might say I don’t have to use the changing rooms anymore, now that she knows you can actually pick up a disease from them. She says nothing so I carry on, “The boy, Alex suddenly starts crying. Like really crying and howling and tears are streaming down his face. The doctor sees him all upset and thinks he has hurt him by touching his foot and asks him if it’s very painful and Alex says, ‘No it’s not that, and starts crying and trying to talk at the same time.’” So I put on a voice that sounds like a cry and talking, “and he says, ‘Today I wrote swear words on the white board at school.’ he’s crying so much they can hardly understand him, and when his mother asks what were the words he says the B word and the F word and the C word, but he actually says the words, you know not just the first letters.”

Mum interrupts me and says, “What oh my god the little shit wrote the word cunt on the board?”

“No the C word C-R-A-P.”

“Yeah well,” she says, “actually that’s not even a swear word.”

“The teacher says it is. So. Then the doctor said they could go and he has to paint this stuff on his wart and keep it covered until it drops off. Ew. His mother made him write a note of apology to the teacher. And guess what happened to the other boy, who helped him write the bad words?”

Mum shakes her head.

“Nothing. His mum made him do nothing. I’m calling that story Warts and All. Can I go now?”

“Who told you the story?”

“His twin is in our class, and he was there. It’s totally a true story.”

“Okay. Good story. Remember to come back at 9.30, for the deadpan bedpan.”

I say the word, “Sigh,” and then make a long sigh sound for effect. “You only have to say deadpan. Not deadpan bedpan.” I roll my eyes so she can see.

While I wait for 9.30, I put on my favourite show. It’s called Stranger Things. It’s set in the 1980s. Mum was born in 1982. Probably not near a top-secret government laboratory like the boy in the show, though. I tidy up my little lounge first and text Charlie Man. I am a multi-tasker, even though this is something men are supposed to be not very good at. Charlie Man says not to listen to that shit when women and girls tell you what you can and can’t do. He says it’s a form of reverse sexism. I’m not sure if that’s a rude thing or not. What I do know is that Charlie Man isn’t very woke.

We usually text most nights, though he doesn’t always answer straight away. It’s not because he doesn’t want to answer me, it usually means he can’t find his phone.

yo whats up, I text. It’s okay to not have any punctuation in text. Old people don’t know that, but it’s actually a thing.

Yo Yo Yo Archie my Boy! Stranger Things Time!

I send a thumbs-up and a winking emoji. After a bit he sends me a picture of a tree and then a tent and finally a strong arm. I know he’s talking about the camp.

Which is a bit annoying as I would have not told anyone. He will of course want me to go. Probably because he knows it will annoy Mum.

cant, I text.

He sends me a rolling eye emoji. And texts — We will just see about that! Then four strong-arm emojis and the swearing face one.

We watched the first series of Stranger Things together, and now we're watching Series 2. We have to make sure to start the programme at the same time otherwise you can get out of sync. When something funny happens, we send each other the laughing emoji or a head exploding when something blows our mind. Sometimes I send a confused face as some things go over my head. If one of us goes to the toilet or gets a drink, we pause and wait until the other is back. It's annoying if you get out of sync. Charlie Man will send a laughing emoji and the funny bit hasn't happened yet. Then you know a funny bit's coming or a scary bit and it kind of ruins it. If I want to watch a programme with my friend, we usually watch on our PlayStations and just talk over the headset. I told Charlie Man that we could do this too. He said,

1. He wasn't buying anything as ridiculous as a thing to play games on.
2. The thought of me nattering away in his ear while he's watching the one decent thing on TV would send him completely over the edge.

When the programme finishes, I remember I haven't thanked Charlie Man for my photo. He dropped it off in my letterbox today, and I forgot to send him a message. The photo of me isn't exactly what I was expecting. Meila's mum (who is one of the rich mums) has one of those flash cameras with the big lenses, and she had been taking action shots of my team playing. Meila comes to every game, but she's even more uninterested in football than I am. Once when she was having her turn in goal last year, she made mud balls instead. They actually looked pretty cool. Like cannon balls. Which she stacked up beside the goal — as if that was the real game. The coach was not impressed. She didn't even care if her hands got all muddy. I think it must be hard to get action shots of us. Meila, for some reason, has cut her own hair and she looks terrible at the moment — worse than even a redhead. Meila's photo is of her tying her bootlaces. I guess her mum was making some sort of point. Our team Captain is Jack. His photo is a great shot of him bouncing off a header. He had a real determined look on his face, and you could see the ball in the photo over his head, looking like it was going to go in the goal, and his curly brown hair has flown all out round his head like a

halo. It's a true action shot, even though in real life the ball hit the bar and bounced back out. I don't even try to do headers because they look like they probably hurt. If the ball comes anywhere near my head, I put my hands over my head. Of course, you're not meant to do that in case it hits your hands, and then that's a handball. Which is bad.

I play at the back in defence, and my photo is me standing at the back in defence. You can see it's me. You can see the ball. You can see me looking not at the ball. The look on my face is more like confusion. Charlie Man has stuck it in a frame, and written on the back, The Great Defender! The frame is wooden with little black and white footballs all round it. I showed Mum and she laughed. Even though the photo was meant for me, Mum told me to put it on the shelf by the window in her room. She said when she looks at it, it makes her smile and helps her not feel bad about the things in my life she has missed out on.

Chapter 11

October 2019

It's my birthday today. And it's also football prizegiving. I was born on October 1st. That means I am a Libra. That is the lady with the scales. Librans are meant to be obsessed with things being equal and making people happy. Being finally eleven I think will be amazing. I'm sure that this will be my year and good things will happen. When I tell Mum that, she says, "You said that last year."

Even though it's Saturday, Gibby is coming today, and he's coming early, so I don't have to empty the deadpan. He says, "No kid should have to empty a bedpan, but especially not on their birthday." Though the reason I mostly have to empty her deadpans in the morning is because he's late, in the first place. He's going to make me (and Mum) pancakes for breakfast. He says, when his mum died, his dad never did anything special for him, or his brother's birthdays. Gibby is like the opposite of me, no mum and just a dad. But that's why he gets me. I asked him once if he felt mad at his dad for being a bit useless. He told me that he just tries to love the good bits about him and forgive the other bits. I like it when he says stuff like that. He makes me think about being a better person. I have tried to think about Mum in that way too. It's hard though because lately for some reason I have begun to feel really, really mad at her.

I'm just lying quietly in bed not moving in case Mum forgets and calls me in. I know Gibby has told her that she's not to call out to me for any deadpan bullshit on my birthday. But I am still relieved when I hear Gibby's key in the door. As soon as he's in, he starts singing Happy Birthday as he walks down the corridor. He sticks his head round the door and says, "Wow you look older already." He gives me a Fortnite V card. That means I can buy a new skin. I really want the Trigger Fish one.

"Thanks, Gibby, I yell back."

I wait until I hear the toilet flush and go in and see Mum. I take my present with me. I try and tell her how the card works and how you buy a skin, but she doesn't really get it. I yell out to Gibby who is now in the kitchen cooking, "Thanks Gibby — it's the best present ever." All my friends play Fortnite and I can't wait to get online with my new skin to show them. Even though I like playing the FIFA game, I never

loved it. Charlie Man bought it for me in the hope that it would make me enjoy in-real-life football and understand the rules of the game a bit better.

Mum tells me to open the cupboard under the side table beside her bed. It's a parcel of clothes. Not that clothes are bad. I am growing, so obviously I need clothes. Mum has ordered them online. The Tee shirts say funny things like: *If you can read this, make me a sandwich*, and *I Paused my Game to be Here*. They're pretty funny. I put the sandwich one on, even though it's a bit small. I pretend not to notice. Mum has bought us a card game to play as well, so we play that while we wait for Gibby to bring food. When it comes Gibby has made big stacks of fluffy pancakes just like they have in America. There is bacon and bananas and maple syrup too. There are no eggs. We watched a food programme once and it turned out Americans like pancakes and bacon with maple syrup and *eggs*. Gibby and I both agreed this is just plain wrong.

"Well fam, I have to let you know that I'm going on holiday for a week on the 14th."

"Where are you going?"

"I'm doing a little tour around the South Island and I'm going to catch up with my brother."

Mum and I say nothing. I start shrugging my shoulders. Whenever Gibby goes away for a bit, things have a way of not going okay. Two years ago when he went away, nearly half the days the scaregivers were either late or didn't turn up. I had to stay home from school, and Mum was very stressed, and there was a lot of yelling and crying. Mum isn't meant to keep me home to look after her. Now that I have Jennifer this is okay, because the school will call her if I don't show up. And then I realise when he's going is actually in the school holidays. Gibby is always thinking about us.

Gibby has bought a cake for me for Monday. In my class you can bring a cake to school for your birthday to share. Usually, the mothers pop in with the cake, and they all make a big deal about it: the flavour and how it's decorated and once one of the mothers talked about how many eggs she put in it. Mine is a supermarket cake. But it's double chocolate. When I text Sasha what my cake will be, she says she's over her mother's cooking, and they never have a cake from a shop, so she's happy. Sasha is like the nicest person you will ever meet. If anyone ever says anything mean to her, she just shrugs her shoulders. Like she doesn't even care.

Charlie Man picks me up at 2pm for prizegiving. When I get in the car. I ask him why I have to go, when we all know I won't be getting a prize.

"Because, Archie Boy, if everyone thought that way then no one would go to prizegivings, and then who would celebrate the winners? That attitude is pretty bloody selfish, eh." I nod, but I know it will be boring and I'll get fidgety with all that sitting still, and not getting called up, plus the sore hands for all the clapping for the talented kids.

Afterwards, we played mini golf. Which is another thing to add to the list of things I am terrible at. Then we got fish and chips to eat in the car by the beach. I throw my leftover chips out the window and about 1000 seagulls start screaming, and squawking, and fighting for them. Then one does a big white bird poop on the windscreen. Charlie Man gives me the look and does not talk to me again the whole way home. Which is a long time because he decided to go through the car wash first to get the super deluxe with wax clean.

When Gibby was away, we had five scaregivers in total. Three we have had before, and two new ones. I didn't even bother to learn their names. One only came for two days. Mum says she was very rough, and one of her rings scratched Mum's legs and it bled everywhere. This kind of thing drives Gibby crazy. He always says never turn up to do a half-assed job.

One morning the two new ones came together. I suppose it was so that the one that had been there for three whole days could teach the new one who had been there no days, what to do. I was still in bed, pretending to sleep. They stopped outside my door and were talking in whispers. Loud whispers. The grumpy one with the long face says, "He's in there sleeping, the kid. Don't bother asking him anything though. He either doesn't know or he's stupid." Looks like she didn't bother learning my name either. Then she told the other one that I was quite a surly boy. I had to look that up on

the internet and it means bad-tempered and unfriendly. Aha, I thought, my plan is working.

Because Gibby was away, Mum wants me to stay nearby. Just in case no one turned up to look after her I suppose. It didn't matter too much to me. Most of my friends have gone away for their holidays anyway. I text them, and they tell me they have been on the Luge in Rotorua or are getting the Ferry to the South Island. Sasha has gone to her bach at Waipatiki. I think it would be nice to have a holiday house by the beach for weekends and holidays. I save the thought for my dreams at night before I fall asleep.

Charlie Man had said for these holidays, we could go to Taupo for a night and stay in a motel with a hot pool. If I had the type of phone that did pictures and an Instagram account I would post a selfie of me in a hot pool, saying living the dream. #yolo. We were going to visit Harry as well, but Mum said no to the whole trip. It was because Gibby was away. I was very annoyed. At her. Not Gibby. That's when I decided that I would not be talking to anyone for the rest of the holidays. Well hardly talking. Not the caregivers, not Jennifer and not my mother. I tried to take a vow of silence, but that is actually much harder than you think. So I just kept my answers to yes, no or I don't know. I haven't even done one single story for mum.

Chapter 12

November 2019

The teacher's aid came down to my class to tell me to go home as there was an emergency. She looked at me like there was something wrong with me when I just shrugged my shoulders, and slowly went to get my backpack. Hey lady, I wanted to say, this is not my first emergency okay.

I had been in Options. Which is things like wood making, sewing or baking. This term it was my turn for sewing class. I have been making an apron for Mum. Not that it's going to fit her anyway. You were meant to measure your mother, but as soon as I appeared in the doorway with the tape measure mum told me to "Fuck off with that thing." Before the teacher aid came and told me to go home, I was unpicking the top bit of the apron because I had sewed it on back to front. Which I wouldn't have minded, but I actually sewed it on backwards last week as well. Everyone is nearly finished their aprons, except me and Cory. And he's special needs. So far I have already used two full reels of cotton because I have done so much sewing and unpicking.

I checked my phone before I got on my bike, and there was a message from Mum. Of course the scaregiver hasn't turned up. This morning, before I left, I was just hoping they were going to be late. It would usually be Gibby but he was still away. Mum said there had been a mix-up and now no one is coming. Mum has sent me some money on the phone bank app onto my eftpos card because she fancies some McDonalds. I always feel nervous during school time being out of school. A truancy person might spot me. And I bet they hang out at McDonalds spotting truant boys, but I'm more scared of Mum, so I go and get her some Big Macs and apple pie things, and bike home.

When I get home I can hear her yelling down the phone, at the office lady, about why there is no one there to help her, and when will someone come? And how she's going to report them to the media, and TikTok and her MP. I tip-toe in with the food and leave it for Mum. I then go to the kitchen to get mum a diet coke, before going back to eat my cheeseburger.

When she stops yelling at the lady on the phone and has finished her burgers I go back in and clear up. She wants us to watch some telly together. She doesn't really need me here at all. Mostly I know she's lonely. That's what Gibby says. She knows she isn't meant to take me out of school. I used to be out all the time to look after her. Last year, I didn't go to school for three weeks and then I went back for two days, and then it was the holidays. Some of the kids in my class said that it was lucky not to have to go to school. I usually agree with them, but really I would much rather be at school. I am a bit surprised she has called me home, because the school tells the social worker office when I don't go to school. Mum hates it when Jennifer then turns up here to see what's going on. "She's just a nosey bloody parker in bad shoes," Mum says.

We watch Survivor, and then have a game of last card. Just when I'm getting bored her phone starts whistling and chirping and buzzing, and she tells me to get lost. I don't want to go but she yells, "Go on, get out."

I ask for PlayStation, and she just nods and waves me out.

"And shut the door."

I stand by the door for a bit and can hear Mum saying, "Oh no it's fine. Don't worry about it. I was just being silly". Then there's silence and he must be talking and then she says, "Sometimes my imagination gets carried away." Then something I can't hear and then I think I hear her crying. I think about going in but, I think I hear her say I love you which for some reason makes my tummy feel funny. I try to think about the last time she told me she loved me, but I can't remember. I give the door a kick. Not a big one then race into my lounge and turn the PlayStation up loud. Mum hates the sound of the gaming music. She reckons it makes her heart and mind race. Then I go and make myself a chocolate milk in a very big glass, and carry it to my lounge, and start Fortnite. If I had a proper phone I would take a selfie of me with my milk in one hand and my controller in the other and put it on Instagram for them all to see at school. #norules

Chapter 13

Mum's doctor rang and told her because her blood test was bad, she has to have insulin now and the diabetic nurse from the hospital is coming to teach Gibby and me how to give the injections. Her diet was meant to control her diabetes but obviously that didn't work. Mum says she just can't manage the injections because her hands are too fat.

Shirley says, "I can't do needles and that's for certain sure," and Andrew says he's happy to give it a go. Well, I am not happy about this. I don't get why Shirley can say she doesn't want to do it, and nobody even asks me. As for Andrew and Gibby, they're getting paid, so that is their actual job.

When the diabetic nurse comes, he tells us insulin must be kept in the fridge and shows us that the injection has to be injected into a fatty layer. I try not to laugh when he says that. He brings oranges for us to practise on. He tells us that you have to be very careful with insulin. It can make your blood sugar drop right down. This is called going hypo. You can actually die from this. When the nurse asks if there are any questions, I say nothing. Gibby says, "What's up, why are you being so quiet?" I just shrug. I want to say, I am not allowed to even be somewhere without telling someone and you all think it's a great idea to be injecting an actual person.

Later, when they have all gone home, I ask Mum, "Why do I have to do this? Is it a law that kids actually have to look after their parents?" She gives me a right slap, hard on my ear. She does it so fast I don't even have a chance to dodge her. It doesn't really hurt that much, but it makes me feel so bloody mad and inside my head, behind my eyes it's all swirling red and orange like when you accidentally look into the sun. I start sweating all over my body, and I don't know what to do with myself, so I slam the door hard and run outside, and get on my bike, and bike to Charlie Man's house. But when I get there, his car isn't in the driveway. I bang on his front door even though I can tell he's out. I sit out on the doorstep and think how much I hate my life and cry. And I can't stop. And I don't even care if all the neighbours in the street see me. I think that being dead might be better. I know no one even really loves me and if I died it wouldn't matter anyway, except for her because she would have no one to get her takeaways, or empty deadpans or talk to her.

I remember Charlie Man's key is under the mat, and even though I have never just let myself in before, without him knowing in advance I unlock his front door. His place is a bit dark and smells a bit musty. He's always forgetting to open the curtains when he gets up. Mum says that only mental people leave the curtains shut all day. We always open our curtains as soon as we're awake. It's one of her rules, like eating our Meals on Wheels on plates. But those rules do not make her not mental.

I sit there for a while wondering what to do and then I take one of the glasses off the shelf and just drop it. It crashes everywhere. It sounds amazing. So I pick up another one and another one. Soon there is broken glass all over the floor, and no more glasses. I start to feel bad, because I'm not really mad at Charlie Man, I don't think, and I start to think about being in trouble so I try and pick up all the broken glass, but it's sharp and scary looking so I just leave it. Except for one long shivered piece. I take that with me out into the back garden and sit on the deck and look at it for a while. I feel how it hurts when I wrap my hand around it hard. Then I scratch the deck with it. It's so sharp that it's easy to dig right into the wood. I sit there for a while rubbing my thumb along the sharp bit and then I scratch the word NO on my arm. I scratch it over and over, and deeper and deeper. It feels so good. Now I feel like I am a mental person.

Part Two

Chapter 14

January 2020

Camp Waterfall Ranch DAY 1

On the bus to camp, the kids are singing songs and sharing food. The boy sitting next to me is called Marshall. He has stitches in his head so of course I ask him how he did it, and he says he fell off his bike. “I was riding with no hands and hit the curb, then went over the handlebars.”

“Ouch,” I say.

“In the end it was quite good, because I had to stay in hospital overnight, because they thought I might have a concussion and then the doctors and nurses found out I was looking after my family at home by myself, so that meant I got some help for Dad and Nana.

I nod. I get what he’s talking about. I look at the NO scar on the underside of my arm halfway between my wrist and elbow. I had to have four stitches and some of those butterfly ones too, those are the ones that just stick on. The stitches were on the down part of the NO. Where I cut the deepest. When the doctor was putting them in she asked me if I was trying to kill myself. I shook my head but couldn’t find the words to say what I was trying to do.

I change the subject and say, “I got to fly on a plane to Wellington this morning. The air waitress lady gave me lollies to eat when we were landing.”

Marshall tells me he lives in Wainuiomata, so no plane ride for him today. He only got this bus trip. He says he has never been on a plane before.

“It’s pretty cool,” I say. “I really wanted to see the toilet on the plane. I didn’t even need to go, but I went anyway, and when you flush the toilet, it’s ridiculously loud, and sounds like a huge sucking noise. And the water is blue and does not smell good.” Marshall laughs as I make the sucking noise.

He says, “You wouldn’t want to be sitting on it and then flush, or your guts might all get sucked out your bumhole.”

I think me and Marshall are definitely going to be friends. Anyone that can add the word bumhole in the first minute of your conversation must be friend worthy. Marshall is what Charlie Man would call a big unit. At school they would probably say

fat. He only can just fit into the bus seat and is squashed in on the sides. He has the number one haircut. He says he got it shaved off because when he brushed his hair with the stitches he kept knocking the wound, and making it bleed, so his dad shaved his whole head for him.

When Charlie Man drove me to the airport early this morning, he gave me my Christmas present in the car, which is a smart phone. He said it's second hand, but I didn't care. I can get on Instagram and take pictures and look at the internet. It had been all set up for me, so I texted Charlie Man while we were driving to say thank you with the praying hands emoji, and his phone message alert boings. Boing. Boing. Boing.

"Cut it out," he said. I laughed.

I was feeling excited. Even though I had said I didn't want to go. When I went in to Mum this morning, to do the deadpan, she even looked happy. Which was a bit weird, because she hates me going anywhere because she needs me. I packed my bag the night before and put it by the front door. I had packed really quietly, when she thought I was playing the PlayStation, so she couldn't hear me. Just in case my packing upset her. My new counsellor Tim, who I got after the great NO incident of 2019, said that while it's nice to think of others, I don't always have to, and that my mum is an adult, and though it seems like she needs me she actually has a lot of other options. When he says stuff like that I roll my eyes inside my mind. What options?

I didn't have a proper suitcase or bag to put my clothes in because I don't usually stay away from home that much. Except for the time when Mum went to the hospital, and I had to stay with Charlie Man for a month, and then we just threw some things in two New World shopping bags. This time, I pack my clothes and the sleeping bag, I borrowed from Shirley, in one of those big candy stripe bags. I got the bag from the \$2 shop. Except it actually didn't cost \$2, it was \$5. They need to change the name to 'The \$2 and Sometimes Up to \$5 Shop or else that's false advertising.

Charlie Man rolled his eyes when he sees the bag. "Oh, we really are white trash," he says, as he picks it up and throws it in the boot. I'm not sure how this bag is worse than supermarket bags, except that other people will see this one. Sometimes I wish people would see things for how they are. Like it would be good if Charlie Man could see not an embarrassing white trash bag, but that on my own I biked into Napier city, then locked my bike up outside the \$2 store, and with my own money I bought a bag. Yeah, well done Archie, I say to myself.

“Have you got everything?” Charlie Man says.

“Yes, except for...”

“Except for what?”

“Except for home baking.”

“God’s sake,” says Charlie Man, “Why do they always put home baking on these bloody lists? Who do they think does your home baking?”

I don’t tell him that it doesn’t say anything about home baking. I just wanted some biscuits. Charlie Man stops at the dairy on the corner and gets two packets of gingernuts. He has always got me Ginger nut biscuits from when I was little, on account of my red hair. And when he gets back in the car, he says what he always says, “Gingernuts for a Ginger nut.” Hilarious.

Turns out Marshall is the same age as me, and he tells me his dad has blood cancer, and he lives with his Nana, but the Nana started to get dementia, and for a while, before anyone knew, he had to look after the both of them. He’s waiting for me to tell him what’s wrong with my mum. I don’t know why but I can’t get the words out today, and when I try harder that makes me start doing the stupid blinking, gulping and shrugging thing. So much for being one of the cool kids at camp. I haven’t even lasted the bus trip.

“It doesn’t matter Archie,” Marshall says. “You can tell me later..., or not.”

I think I might cry, so I just nod and look out the window. I don’t know what’s wrong with me.

The bus pulls off the main road just before we get to Levin town, and we all bump up and down on the gravel road. Everyone must be getting excited because the talking noise is getting louder and louder, and then finally we can see the camp. There’s a big wooden sign that says Waterfall Ranch, which sounds really American, which is just how I imagined camp to be. Marshall uses his phone to take a picture of all the bushes and trees. The native bush is so close to the road it’s nearly touching the sides of the bus as we drive in. We go over a little hill, and everyone suddenly gets real quiet, and we can see lots of little triangle-shaped houses (which I find out are called A-framed), and when we get right into the camp we can see a swimming pool, and a huge slide that you have to climb way up high onto that I learn later will send you catapulting off into the lake.

We get our bags and leave them outside the cookhouse door. It’s lunch time, and it’s saveloys and buns with tomato sauce. You can have as many as you like, and

Marshall eats six. I only manage four. The boy sitting opposite of me is a super slow eater, and by the time I eat four hotdog buns he still hasn't finished one. His name is Fred, and he says he's there with his twin Molly. He points her out to me. She's sitting at a table full of girls all with long hair. Her hair is long too. They all look exactly the same. She's much bigger than Fred. Taller and stronger looking. He says, when they were in the womb, she ate all the womb food and squashed him flat, and so when he was born, he weighed less than half of what she did. Fred reckons she was probably trying to kill him. "It's called fratricide," he says, "when a sibling tries to kill you." He says it really loud, and Molly looks over and rolls her eyes at him, and yells over everyone's heads, "You really need to get over it already. It's been eleven years."

I tell Fred that I'm an only child. I think it would be awesome to have a twin. I imagine having a brother or sister to understand the things you can't say to anyone else, and never being lonely. I guess the fratricide thing might be hard to get over though.

Every bunkroom sleeps six, so we all get divided up into groups of six, except us boys because we're only five. They have put boys and girls into different cabins and split us all up by age groups. At lunch they told us that there are 24 of us at camp: ten boys and fourteen girls. It's weird to think that there are other kids like me out there. Kids who take care of their families every day and never get a day off. I wonder how much like me they really are. Do they really have to do everything? Or maybe they just bring their mum or dad cups of tea and do a hand cream once a day?

Our cabin is called Kereru, after the wood pigeons we saw on the way in, I guess. They're pretty to look at, but Jackson (who is one of the camp helpers) says you have to watch them as they like to swoop down near your heads sometimes. Because there are six bunks, and only five boys in our cabin, we all use the spare bottom bunk to put our bags on. Yep, I am the only boy with a candy stripe bag. Nobody even notices though. Fred takes a bottom bunk on account of him being short, and I take the one above him. I have never slept in a bunk bed before, so I'm feeling excited thinking about tonight already.

Jackson said at lunch that we have free time until tea, and once we have made our beds and unpacked, we can swim or explore. You have to stay inside the wire fences though. So it sounds like you're free, but of course there's a boundary you cannot cross. Adults just love boundaries. Which is a bit dumb, because in our real lives our parents have forgotten to have proper boundaries with us, and nobody's parents, or teachers or social workers made a single rule around that. If anyone ever asked me about that, I'd say parents should be parents, and children should be children. It's okay though, no one ever asked, and I know no one will ever ask me that. Sometimes, though, I do like to make up conversations that I would have with people in my mind. Sometimes I even have pretty good in-my-head arguments with people who have annoyed me like Mum or Charlie Man. In my imagination I always have something funny to say and always get to have the last word. Exactly the opposite of my real life.

All the boys in my cabin are going to go and do the waterslide first. Fred has those weird jammer togs that cling to his body. He says he swims for a swim club and races and everything. When I ask him if he's any good he says no, because he's too small. He says that his doctor has told him that when puberty starts, he will catch up, and no one will ever know that he was once small for his age. He tells me that he and Molly go together to swim club, but they only go because the swimming pool is right next door to their house, otherwise it would be too hard, because their mother lost her licence. I tell him my mum doesn't drive either.

Josh (one of the boys in our cabin) says he has already started puberty and shows us his penis and his pubic hair. Everyone starts yelling at him to put it away. This makes me laugh and laugh. And Tem says, "I wish I hadn't eaten all those saveloys for lunch now!" Everyone starts yelling eww and flicking each other with our towels until Fred yells out, "It's all fun and games guys until someone loses an eye."

By the time we're in our togs and at the slide I feel like we have known each other for years, and we're all going to be friends. I have a weird feeling in my chest I can't really explain, but it feels kind of full, but not tight, and I think I'm maybe happy. And for a dumb minute I can feel tears in my actual eyes, like a complete weirdo, who is going to cry because he's happy. I don't want anyone to see me cry, so I charge up the steps to get to the top of the slide before everyone else. I am going so fast that I start overtaking other kids on the steps. When I get to the top, I realise this may have been a mistake. No one can go down the slide before I go down, and there is

practically a kid on every step waiting for their turn. I guess I could go back down, but I would have to push past everyone, and since I pushed in front of everyone to get here first I know I'll look like an idiot. I wonder about the possibility of dying on the slide, and I think about Mum saying goodbye, and telling me to be careful, and not do anything stupid, and I am trying to figure out if I die on the slide how stupid on a scale of the stupid things I have done would that be? I wonder when they talked about how I died, at my funeral, would people laugh?

On the platform at the top, there is one girl in front of me and she's lying on the slide, and I can tell she's feeling nervous too. She's holding on to a metal bar, above her head, and laying on her back looking up at me, and then at the lifeguard. He's very encouraging and saying in a soft, kind voice, "It's okay, you got this."

She yells out, "I'm scared" and screams real loud one of those horrible girl screams that makes your whole body tense up, and then she lets go and screams all the way down and even screams as she flies through the air. Only being quiet when she hits the water.

The lifeguard winks at me. He's a teenager, so I ask him if this is his summer job. When I'm nervous I like to talk, but he clearly thinks I'm holding everyone up, and seems to be forgetting to give me the nice encouragement with the soft kind voice he gave the girl, whose name I learn later is Charlotte, and instead just jerks his neck in the direction of the slide. He looks like he's probably one of the cool kids at school, and I know I'm in danger of becoming one of the not cool kids, and you sometimes only get one chance to make an impression to be a cool kid. So I wave to the kids on the steps, and bow to the lake, and throw myself down the slide, using the bar to swing myself as far down the slide as possible. I am too terrified to scream. But my mouth is open, and in my head there is definitely screaming. Even worse than the slide is the flying through the air. Then there is a massive splash as I hit the water. My whole body starts shaking hot and cold sweats under the water. This makes me feel like crying, and so I stay under way longer than I need to. Plus because my mouth was open it fills up with horrible inky black lake water. When I finally come up for air, kids are yelling, and cheering and when I get back to the ramp, Fred says "Woah you got some major air there Archie!"

Fred doesn't like heights, so he isn't going on the slide. When I get out he does like a special handshake, and we slap hands left and right then grip each other's fingers, and then a fist bump, and then make our fists explode like a bomb. When I

look up, the lifeguard, he gives me a big thumbs up — better than a thousand soft kind girl words. Today, right now, I am king of the world, the boss of Waterfall Ranch, and captain of my own ship as Charlie Man sometimes says. Fred and I wait for all the rest of the boys from our cabin to slide down, but no one else makes air the way I do.

After dinner we play charades. Fred is really good at this game, and he seems to have seen every movie, and read loads of books. It makes me think that maybe everyone is good at something. Fred's body is small, but like elastic and he seems able to bend any which way.

Back in our cabin, we are lying in our beds, I am thinking about everybody new I met today, and I wonder how Fred can be a caregiver when he's so small. Maybe Molly does the heavy work. Even though I don't have to actually lift Mum it still can be hard work helping her. If I have had to do a lot of things for her my back can be quite sore. And I am actually quite strong. At school when the teachers need help lifting things they will usually ask me to do it.

Josh, who is the boy who showed us his penis, says he used to play rugby, but now he has to help out his grandmother, so he had to quit. This is the first time anyone in the cabin has mentioned anything really about having to be a caregiver and looking after someone in their family. Which is a little weird because that is the exact reason we're at camp. For a while no one says anything, probably because we're thinking about the people we look after. I say, "Yeah that sucks." And everyone agrees. It's quiet for a moment because I guess we're all thinking about the things we have missed out on over the years, while we have been busy being someone else's life supporter.

At first, I thought Josh was maybe going to be a bit weird, but I actually like him. Though I don't care to see him naked again. When I was younger Charlie Man warned me about men and older boys, when I was going to be in the pool changing rooms. He said I should use the family room when possible, but the mothers with little kids get real cross when you do that, because it means they have to wait. Even though the reason they like the family rooms is because they don't want to send their boys into the men's changing rooms by themselves. They obviously didn't care about me going

in on my own. That was back when Charlie Man used to take me for swim lessons. He actually hates the water, so he never came in for a play after the lesson finished, like the mums or dads.

Mum has a whole list of things that you have to do to keep yourself safe from the “paedos,” as she calls them. At school we have done some special classes about keeping your body safe, and we learnt that you should always tell somebody you trust if something weird happens to you, and you should always be trusting your instincts around people. In the class we were given bits of paper with a boy person on it, or a girl person and you could choose the one you wanted to be and you had to colour in the bits on your body that you felt okay with people touching in blue and the bits you never wanted to be touched in red. One of the boys in my class, Gregor, just scribbled over the picture of his whole body using the red pen. He does not like to be touched by anyone. Ever. Once I asked Charlie Man what he thought about me joining Scouts, and he said that Scout masters and priests can’t be trusted, and unless I actually wanted to get an achievement badge for getting fucked in the arse I would not be joining the fucking Scouts. That was the end of that conversation. Sometimes Charlie Man’s life lessons can be on the extreme side.

Charlie Man told me when he first became a Scout they were staying in a hut with some other boys and he got a sore throat and was really sick with a high temperature. There were two Scout masters with them, and one took the boys out for a tramp but he had to stay behind with the other one. He told me that he tried to climb into his sleeping bag with him, he said it was because of his high temperature. Charlie Man knew that was bullshit because it’s only when you have a low temperature like hypothermia from the snow that someone gets in your bed with you. He said luckily his sleeping bag had a drawstring on it and he wrapped it tight round his neck and held it on the inside with his hand so the Scout master couldn’t get in. He said the Scout master still lay on the bunk with him, until the others got back. I asked him if he told his mum or dad. He said no one talked about that sort of thing back then and he thought he might get in trouble so when he got home he just refused to ever go back to Scouts again. He said if anything weird ever happens to me, I should talk about it and I will never get into trouble.

Josh is unpacking his bag and putting his clothes into drawers. The rest of us just have our clothes in a big mess on the empty bed. Josh looks at us, and says his grandmother told him to unpack his bags when he got here.

“She reckons if you’re staying anywhere more than three days you should unpack.”

No one says anything for a while and then Fred asks, “What’s wrong with your grandmother?”

“She’s got heart failure from a virus, so she’s on oxygen, and can hardly walk now and gets out of breath.”

“Oh that sounds bad,” Fred says.

“Yeah well, lots of things about our lives are bad right? What about you, who do you look after?”

Fred gives a big sigh, like he doesn’t want to tell his story, but I can see he gets a bit excited when he’s talking about it, so he doesn’t really mind. I think Fred likes to try and shock people. Fred is what my mum would call drama.

He says in a sort of super bright voice, like he said the same things a lot of times before, “Oh our mum is a drug addict, and an alcoholic.”

Then Tem says, “I don’t get it. How do you look after her? Do you have to go buy her drugs?” Tem is a Māori boy, and he has a great smile and is skinny and tall. We all laugh when he says that. I like to be funny, but I have to work at it. Tem is naturally really funny. When he got to the top of the stairs for the waterslide, he raised his arms and flexed his muscles and he actually had muscles and then he did lots of bodybuilding poses. All the boys and most likely all the girls like him already. After tea when we had to help dry the dishes, he organised us all like a leader would. He says things like “great job,” and “good thinking.” Even though he’s definitely one of the cool kids he doesn’t act like one. After tea when we played charades, everyone wanted to be on Tem’s team, but George (who is in charge of the whole camp and the only real adult here apart from the camp mother who is also a nurse and who turns out to be George’s wife), said that the teams for games tonight are the kids in our bunk rooms. This was a pretty good idea because then we could get to know each other better. Oh the cook is a grown-up too.

In the afternoon, we played a game to learn each other’s names, just after our lunch, and before we unpacked. Well, I say learn each other’s names, but I mean we had to tell each other our names, and you had to listen and remember them. George told us all to go outside and stand by the big map of New Zealand that was painted on the concrete. You had to say something that described you, that started with the same letter as your name, and then say your name, and finally where in New Zealand you

lived. George told us that this would be a great way to help remember each other's names. He reckons it works every time.

When it's my turn I say, "My name is Amazing Archie, and I'm from Napier." And I stood on the bit of the map that looked like where I thought Napier would be. Then everyone yells back, "Hi Amazing Archie from Napier."

"My name is Fantastic Fred, and I am from Auckland."

"Hi Fantastic Fred from Auckland," we all say.

"My name is Terrible Tem, and I'm from Paihia."

"Hi Terrible Tem, from Paihia."

And Josh says he's Just Josh from Blenheim, but George says, he can't be just Josh it has to be an adjective or a describing word.

Josh thinks for a while and then says, "I'm Joyful Josh, from boring Blenheim." We all laugh.

George says, "Great work Josh." He doesn't say anything about Josh standing on the west coast of the South Island completely on the wrong side of the island from Blenheim. Before we go back to our bunk rooms to unpack, we have to sign our camp contract form, and Josh told me that he's not too great at reading and writing because he has missed a lot of school because of looking after everyone in his house. I wonder if he might have to put an X for his name, like on the cowboy movies, but when I watch him I see he can write his name just fine.

The camp contract said things like we will have a great time, we will learn new things and skills, and try our best in all activities, and we will be respectful about others, and show kindness, and be positive. And we understand that bullying will not be tolerated. We have a contract at school that is pretty similar. Teachers love this kind of thing. George tells us he used to be a teacher, before he retired.

Eventually we get through all 24 kids' names and where they're from. Kids are from all over New Zealand, but mostly from the North Island, and only three are from the South Island. I guess scaregiving by kids is more popular in the North Island.

First person child narrators: unreliable and flawed?

First person child narrators: unreliable and flawed?

“Remember,” she says on the way to the white car, “we don’t hug strangers. Even nice ones.”

“Why not?”

“We just don’t, we save our hugs for people we love.”

“I love that boy Walker.”

“Jack, you never saw him before in your life.”

(Donoghue 360)

When dealing with first person narrators, questions of reliability often come to the fore, particularly where that narrator is a child. In this thesis, I start by discussing different characterisations of the unreliable narrator and how these characterisations might apply to the child narrator. Developments in literary critiques of the unreliable narrator and in creative use of this type of narrator are considered. Having established the characteristics of the unreliable narrator, I apply some of these characteristics to two child narrators: Christopher in *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* and Jack in *Room*. I show how melodrama is undermined and how realism in action along with the child’s unreliability are used to build tension, by building a relationship, as part of a feedback loop between author, reader and child narrator. In both novels, in some of the quotes I have used, the punctuation seems unusual and is often grammatically incorrect. However, I have quoted as to what the author intended.

One of the reasons authors might choose to tell a story in the first person is that it can add a sense of connection to a character and a text. The first person narrator is telling their own story, and they are able to tell it with the certainty that comes from having first-hand knowledge. This can make the reader feel closer to the story, because it is coming from the person who is experiencing it (Pederson 220). One of the ways a first person narrator shares with the reader is through reflection. This narrator may reflect on their own actions, the actions of other characters and the reflection of events occurring in the novel. This reflection allows the reader to see both what is happening, and how the narrator makes sense of what is happening. This reflection may also help add depth and legitimacy to the narration (Pederson 231).

It would be easy to assume that the unfiltered immediate nature of the first person point of view is necessarily a true and reliable one (Riggan 18). This of course is not always the case. A constraint on the first person narrator is that they only have limited access to information. While they are free to consider, imagine or speculate, their only true knowledge is what they have seen or experienced (Diasamidze 162). They interpret information through their own lived experiences, their own understanding, their own "... biases, values, and beliefs; and degree of awareness and perceptivity" (Diasamidze 162).

These values, biases and beliefs must be considered in order to measure the character's reliability as a narrator (Diasamidze 162). For example, when the narrator is a child or is child-like, a fool, or a rogue, then the first person narrator might be considered unreliable (Riggan 18). Narrators could possibly also be considered unreliable when they show unreliable traits, such as lying, or if they are considered to be uneducated or ignorant (Riggan 18).

Not all unreliable characters are consciously misleading. Unreliable narration may be considered conscious or unconscious. A rogue type character for example maybe choosing to be deceitful (conscious), but a fool might be hampered by their own folly and unconsciously unreliable. Unconscious unreliable narrators are often children, but not always. They may be adults who are impaired in some way. For example, unconscious unreliable narrators may present as being easily fooled, or ignorant. These characters most likely appear to be telling the truth, and they may even seem to have possession of all the facts, but, for example, because of their biases, lived experiences, and degree of awareness their own interpretation of the truth maybe incorrect and unreliable.

Riggan categorised unreliable narrators into four groups: picares (rogues), madmen, clowns and naïves (16). Unreliable child narrators have been categorised, in the past, along with the uneducated and fools as the naïves (Riggan 155). Riggan argues that the child's naivety and gullibility are what make them unreliable. He further argues that their naivety may mean that these narrators are not aware of badness or evil in the world and therefore are not wise to those who would want to take advantage of them. While Riggan's view is helpful, it might provide a somewhat simplistic view of child narrators and unreliable narrators generally.

Booth argues that unreliability is a discord between the character and the norms of the work. In that, the narrator is reliable "...when he speaks or acts for or acts in

accordance with the norms of the work”, and “unreliable when he does not” (Booth 158). The unreliability therefore lies in a disjunction between what the character does or says, and the norms of the work. The norms of the work refers to the norms of the implied author (Booth 158). Therefore, if the reader assesses the character’s actions, words, world view, and values against those of the implied author and those actions, words, and views and these do not accord with the world view of the implied author or of the work this can show unreliability in a narrator.

The discord between the narrator’s norms and those of the work may arise, because these narrators believe what they are told by other characters and are happy to repeat it, or that they are perhaps inexperienced in the ways of life and of the world they live in. This means they may fill in the blanks in their knowledge with things they have overheard, or made up using their imaginations, rather than facts (Riggans 155-56). When unreliable narrators come across a new experience, they may be unequipped to understand the full meanings of these new situations. The naïf brings with their character wonder, surprise and perhaps a sense of astonishment or “incomprehension” or bewilderment of people and the world (Riggans 170). It is this attempt to make sense of their world often through their imagination, memory or unsubstantiated beliefs that make the naïff, and particularly the child naïff, unreliable (Riggans 144-170).

In contemporary literary criticism, from the 1960s onwards, unreliable narrators were thought to be much more nuanced than Riggan’s four categories. Cohn takes Booth’s concept of discrepancy between narrator and implied author and introduces the concept of distance. This distance is said to be at play when the traits and information given about the narrator go against what the implied author has given the reader. This distance is the way the implied author and the narrator help the reader to make judgments about the narrator and how, for example, an unreliable narrator may believe himself to have traits and qualities that the author has not given him (Booth 158-59) (Cohn 34).

For Phelan, reliability of narration is about the relationships between authors, narrators and readers in the whole body of the work, including the consideration of the decreasing moral and emotional distances between characters, narrators and authors (92). Phelan believes it is this sharing of emotions, and the clues offered in the text that makes for a closer understanding and truer relationship between authors and audiences (Phelan 91-95).

This more nuanced interpretation of the unreliable narrator in contemporary literary criticism is also reflected in contemporary novels of the last thirty years, whereby unreliable narration is often used to illustrate social values through popular character traits such as loyalty, infatuation or contemporary changing social values (Thompson 60). Examples of this are the ostracised, socially isolated Kya in Delia Owen's *Where the Crawdads Sing*, and the conflicted and complex Amir learning about selflessness in Khaled Hosseini's *The Kite Runner*.

Whatever the reason for the narrator's unreliability, there must be clues in the text to alert the reader to the narrator's unreliability and to the degree there (Phelan 91). The reader is called on to interpret the clues and to apply this interpretation to the text as a whole — a process that Phelan refers to as a “feedback loop” (91). This feedback loop allows readers to know that “...there is a lot more here than initially appears” (Phelan 91). Phelan's “feedback loops” are essentially clues hidden in the text for the reader to discover more about the reliability of the narrator (91). For example, a clue in the text could be when a narrator talks about another character in a negative light or judges them in some way (Phelan 91). Phelan argues it would be easy to take this judgement of another character, given from the narrator as the truth, but the reader should look at how the narrator judges all the other characters, and consider the reasons why the narrator is trying to guide you in this way. It is in these clues and the ongoing feedback loops, in the text, that the reliability of narrators can be truly established (91).

Realism in action, tension and melodrama are terms I will be using frequently, so I am including the definitions here. Realism in action is when a first person narrator looks as if they are relating to an event as if it is in real life, and as if what they are saying is spontaneous, sincere and honest, and not as if the story is being told or edited by an author, this is realism in action (Booth 57). Realism in action helps to communicate a truth or a sincerity that is beyond the writing (Morris 6), for example, when an unreliable child narrator believes, due to their lack of insight, education, imaginative thoughts or even misunderstood beliefs, that what they are saying is truthful. It is this reality in action, an action that is not filtered through an authorial voice that makes the text seem real and believable (Nunning 11) (Riggin 149).

Tension is the building of suspense in a novel (Magerko and Laird 3). Tension can be built through conflicts or mysteries in the text. Tension can also be developed through the character's journey through the plot, and the dramatic events that take

place on the way (Magerko and Laird 3). Reeve refers to tension as an “...interaction between dialogue, reflection, description and action” (3) as well as the use of conflict and pace (7-9). Tension may be created by the author through narration, characters, plots and subplots and then tension must be a feeling experienced by the reader (Magerko and Laird 3).

Melodrama or over-sentimentality in a novel may be defined when the language, characters, or plots become what Bell calls an “indulgence of emotion” (2). This indulgence of emotion may happen when the work contains themes or subjects that are frightening or cause disturbing emotions, and instead of tension and fear the reader feels pity. If the reader experiences pity, then the story may seem superficial, overly emotional, sentimental or melodramatic (Senelick).

The unreliable narrator, like all narrators, does not release all information at once. Rather, there is a drip feeding of facts, plots, and character traits as filtered through the narrator. This not giving away all the facts (or the plot, or the character traits) at once requires some work by the reader, and whether the truth is purposely concealed, or the narrator is unconsciously concealing facts from the reader, it is a way for the reader to understand the narrator’s frailties and fallibilities (Greene 1), without the reader feeling as if they have been led. In a way, the reader is challenged by the author to ‘discover’ clues about the narrator (Greene 1). This ‘discovering’ can eliminate the need for over-explaining, or melodramatic or over sentimentalised plots, because not everything has been told outright to the reader. When the reader discovers these clues there is a pleasure felt in the found clues, the worked out plots, the understanding of the nuances of the writing, and the characters (Bayrak 155).

Nunning argues that authors often give away only a small amount about a child narrator’s unreliability at a time, and that readers should assume all child narrators are unreliable. Child narrators lack insight, life knowledge and the understanding of relationships (10-11). My particular interest is the child as a first-person narrator, and how authors use the child narrator’s unreliability to help build tension in a text. The child narrator’s lack of insight, or understanding is different from the narrator who sets out to be deceitful, or in some way tries to profit or gain from untruths. That type of unreliability is much more manipulative (Nunning 10-11). Even when the child narrator believes they are telling the truth they might still be considered unreliable. Children cannot have a full understanding of the world they live in (Nunning 11), and this unreliability should always be considered of a child narrator, whose lack of life

experience and insight means that they cannot draw on past experiences that are available to adults (Riggin 149). For example, the child narrator may narrate a story in a descriptive way, while being unreflective about events and characters in the story (Riggin 149).

In examining the unreliable child narrator, I will focus on two books: *Room* by Emma Donoghue, and *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* by Mark Haddon. I will argue that the unreliability of the child narrators (Jack and Christopher respectively) in these novels create tension, and that this tension is built through realism in action, and by the building of an emotional relationship with the reader to create a bond of fear or concern for the child narrator. I will do this by examining the relationship in the text between author, reader and child using the concepts of reality in action and the feedback loop, coined by Phelan (91), where readers are given clues in the text to show the child narrator's unreliability, and then examine how this unreliable narration builds tension and is necessary to help avoid melodrama or over-sentimentality.

In the novel *Room*, five-year-old Jack narrates the story as he and his mother Emma spend their last days as prisoners in a tiny shed, planning their escape from their kidnapper Old Nic. Emma tries her best to create a safe and even normal environment for Jack, despite ongoing sexual and emotional abuse from Old Nic. Jack was born in a shed that he and his mother call Room, with a capital R. Mother and son live in this tiny contained space with terrible deprivation as they struggle for survival both physically and emotionally (Hetu 160-162). Jack is innocent and naive because of his age and circumstances, and his unreliability is compounded by having only his mother, the television and books to learn about the outside world. Emma protects her son Jack, when Old Nick visits, by putting him to bed in a wardrobe. When they finally escape, *Room* tells the story of Jack's awakening to the world, and how he tries to make sense of it all, including the terrible emotional toll this has had on his mother.

Christopher is a 15-year-old adolescent and a first person narrator with Asperger's syndrome, (now reclassified as autism spectrum disorder ASD) in *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*. Christopher is intelligent and high achieving at school but struggles with all the relationships in his life. One morning, he finds his neighbour's dog dead on his lawn, and this sets him off on a compulsive journey to find out who murdered the dog. Christopher lives by his own set of rules and does not always have insight into what is happening to him or around him.

Christopher's unreliability is interesting, because from his perspective he always tells the truth and never lies, (unconscious unreliable narration (Booth 158)), but because of his ASD, he cannot be relied upon to always comprehend a situation or share what he sees accurately (Freibmann 396).

I have chosen to study the characters Jack and Christopher, because both are the main protagonists from novels that have first person child narrators who are unreliable. In addition, Jack and Christopher are doubly unreliable narrators, because as well as being children, Christopher has Autism, and Jack is being held captive, and has a very limited knowledge of the world. Jack and Christopher both use imagination to make sense of the worlds they inhabit, and both characters are not able to comprehend and fully understand situations and events happening in their lives. Both characters invoke sympathy and compassion from readers (Caracciolo 54) because of the difficulties they face and the sometimes frightening circumstances of their lives. Despite their unusual circumstances, and their unreliability both Christopher and Jack tell their stories honestly, and without knowingly being deceptive and are therefore considered unconscious unreliable narrators. There is tension in both novels with the mystery and murder in *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*, and of course the imprisonment and the escape in *Room* (Caracciolo 54-66).

Donoghue uses realism in action to add tension in *Room* through the unreliability of the child narrator Jack. She uses this realism in action through the telling of events as if it is in real life, and as if what Jack is saying is spontaneous, sincere and honest, told through his point of view and not as if the story is being told or edited by her as the author. Adding to tension is Jack's innocence, naivety and his very essence of morality, goodness and virtue (Englund 890). Realism in action is communicated beyond the writing when Jack freely communicates the terrible things he sees, hears, and experiences (Morris 6). The reader's belief in Jack's character is tempered through the perspective of Jack's innocence and virtue, whereby he tells his story truthfully but cannot comprehend and understand all the facts. This realism in action shows the desperateness of the story, and Jack as a character (Wilkinson 125). For example, when Jack goes with the police to rescue his mother. The very sincere and honest narration given by Jack is very powerful, even though the reader knows that what Jack is saying is unreliable. In this quote below, Jack is in a police car, and his mother has been rescued. They have finally escaped their captor (Donoghue 193). Jack's unreliability in the quote adds truth and tension through the use of spontaneity,

another element of realism in action (Ross 175). Jack tells his mother he is tired and wants to go to bed, back in Room.

Ma's talking in my ear, she says we need to go talk to some more police. I snuggle against her, I say, "Want to go to Bed."

"They'll find us somewhere to sleep in a little while."

"No. *Bed.*"

"You mean in Room?" Ma's pulled back, she's staring in my eyes.

"Yeah. I've seen the world and I'm tired now."

"Oh, Jack," she says, "we're never going back."

The car starts moving and I'm crying so much I can't stop. (Donoghue 193). Jack has no understanding of the outside world, or what will happen next for him and his mother, but he knows that the room is his safe space. This feeling of Room as home, reveals to the reader the true horror of the reality experienced by Jack, and the damage done to him. Jack's virtue, nativity and innocence means he believes that Room (a place where he was a prisoner and where his mother was raped), is a safer place than the outside world. It is this unmediated need, rawness of his feelings, and his lack of understanding that juxtaposes the two worlds, and highlights to the reader Jack's belief of Room as a place of safety, and the reader understands Room as a place of danger. This belief by Jack and the way he misinterprets his situation is shown to the reader through the use of realism in action when the author uses Jack's spontaneous, sincere and honest voice to show the terrifying reality of the situation that goes far beyond the writing (Morris 6). By showing Jack's sincere belief and understanding of his predicament while he actually understands very little of his situation, Donoghue thus builds tension in the novel. It is this unreliability in his narration that bridges the gap between reader and child, so that the reader can be challenged to look further to see what the child is really saying (Englund 895). It is in the realism in action used to show this dire situation that the reader feels challenged by Jack: to think about Jack's past, present and future, which is very much seen in the quote about Jack in the car, where he does not know what will happen to him next (Englund 895-6). Direct, spontaneous and honest dialogue, as in the quote above also adds to the tension in *Room*. The reader is helped to become aware of Jack's vulnerability, through the use of a realism in action (because the author uses it to explain Jack's innocence) by showing his misunderstanding because of his natural

virtue in the form of hope in terrible situations which further increase the tension in the novel for the reader.

In *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*, we also see what Booth calls irony at play (Booth 175). In this novel, Hadden allows the reader to understand more than Christopher does since Christopher's understanding is coloured by his age and his ASD (Eliassen 1). The reader and the characters have shared information that the narrator does not know which can show this irony or irony at play. Booth does not differentiate between dramatic irony and irony and says that irony is a type of "...secret communication, collusion and collaboration" (304) between the reader and narrator. This inside information shared together is used to help build tension and suspense (Clifton 76). The more certain Christopher is about himself, the more the reader understands his unreliability (Saliba-Salman 90). There are several ways Hadden uses irony in the way of secrets and bonds made and shared. It is ironic, for example, when Christopher relies on and believes in a set of self-invented rules for occasions when he does not understand a situation, or a person (Friebman 397-98) and the reader understands these rules that are not necessarily norms. Having rules is common amongst children with ASD (Friebman 397-98) (this also adds to the realism in action in the text and Christopher's characterisation), and these rules allow the author to further show Christopher's unreliability. For example, when Christopher tells the reader what he knows about dogs:

You always know what a dog is thinking. It has four moods. Happy, sad, cross and concentrating. Also, dogs are faithful and they do not tell lies because they cannot talk. (Haddon 4)

This is ironic because although Christopher explains his thoughts carefully, he does not understand there is so much more to know about dogs, and that is because he believes that what he knows is all there is to know (Kuppers 193-4).

Irony is used again when Christopher tells us he never lies, while he is actually lying to his father. For example, when Christopher promises his father, he will stop investigating the murder of the dog, even though he has no intention of stopping, and he justifies this lie, because it is only a white lie.

And I said, 'I have been out.' This is called a white lie. A white lie is not a lie at all. It is where you tell the truth but you do not tell all of the truth. (Hadden 62)

There are many times in the text when Christopher is adamant he never lies, and yet the reader begins to understand that Christopher does indeed lie, when a lie will benefit him, or he feels it is justifiable for him to do so. Here we see Christopher's adherence to a strict moral code and the resultant justification of his conduct as truth and realism in action. In a way the irony is shown when the reader sees what the narrator is most certain about are the very things he often misunderstands. Using irony in this way, Hadden develops Christopher's character to realistically portray a boy with ASD who has knowledge of some things, while the reader knows more, and in this way, Christopher can solve the murder with his own ideas and ideals (Freißmann 396-98).

Donoghue uses the child narrator Jack's unreliability to build tension in *Room*. Donoghue does this by helping to build a relationship between the reader and Jack, because the subject matter in *Room* is uncomfortable, challenging and disturbing to narrate in the voice of the mother (Wilkinson 125). Wilkinson says, child narrators can speak or think much more freely and without self-consciousness, or insight, because they are not socialised in the way adults are (125-26). The child narrator's unreliability helps build tension in the text when the account given by a child, for example, could be a chilling or alarming situation, yet the child's narration may seem calm or unconcerned. A child cannot comprehend the full understanding of the situation, or possible danger they are in (Wilkinson 124). In *Room*, Jack's thoughts (from the wardrobe) show the reader in the simple language of a five-year-old and by his childish games the increasing terror and helplessness he feels of hearing his mother being raped (even though he does not understand what rape is) and wishing he could do something about it.

When Old Nick creaks Bed, I listen and count fives on my fingers, tonight it's 217 creaks. I always have to count till he makes that gaspy sound and stops. I don't know what would happen if I didn't count, because I always do
(Donoghue 46)

Jack talks so matter of factly and unemotionally about what he hears from the wardrobe, because he has little understanding of what has taken place. The reader can tell he does not like what he hears, and that he feels scared, scared enough that he needs a way of comforting himself (which he does by counting) (Donoghue 46). Yet the true horror of the rape (understood by the reader) is not felt by Jack. Wilkinson suggests the child narrator can tell, with less judgement, "...themes considered too

large for adult fiction” (123), for example: rape, violence, incest, politics, racism or subjects that would be considered taboo in some cultures (Wilkinson 123).

The themes of violence and rape run through the first part of the novel *Room*. Donoghue avoids graphic scenes, and yet is still able to build tension, fear and suspense about the situation Jack and his mother find themselves in, through the relationship formed between Jack and the reader. The reader understands what is at stake here, even if Jack does not. In quote below, Jack’s mother is trying to pacify, and distract their captor Old Nick, with sex, because he has become angry when she does not want him to engage with Jack.

“Let’s just go to bed.” Ma’s voice is strange.

Old Nick does a kind of laugh. “I know what you need, missy.”

What Ma needs? Is it something on the list?

“Come on,” she says again.

“Didn’t your mother ever teach you manners?”

Lamp goes out.

But Ma doesn’t have a mother.

Bed’s loud, that’s him getting in. (Donoghue 91)

Jack’s thoughts are used to great advantage by the author, to add tension by having the reader understand what Jack cannot. For example, when Jack says, “Ma’s voice is strange” (Donoghue 91), he has no understanding why this is, but the reader knows the mother does not want to be initiating sex with Old Nick, and that she is disgusted with the thought of it but will also do anything to protect Jack. This simple thought by Jack increases the concern for the child narrator because the reader senses that something terrible is imminent (Hover 69). It is this sense of foreboding that the reader feels when it is given unwittingly by the child narrator, from the author that helps to build tension.

In the Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time, Haddon uses Christopher’s ASD, and the deficits in understanding that Christopher has to build tension and further uses this tension to build a relationship with the reader (Blackford 291). Part of Christopher’s ASD means he thinks and speaks in certain defined ways, and that he often has streams of thought, and feels detached from people and his environment. This detachment means he cannot always read or understand what people want from him, or the subtleties of what they are saying to him. This adds to his unreliability as a narrator (Freißmann 396). Christopher should not be judged or seen as a dishonest boy. While at times it is clear to the reader that he is not telling the truth,

part of his ASD means he is telling the truth as he sees it, and that is because, as he says, he does not understand the concept of lying. Christopher is incapable of intentionally framing a lie. Therefore, his unreliability is considered unconscious (Booth 182), because of his ASD. Christopher's understanding, insight and knowledge has limitations compared to those children who are considered neurotypical (Freißmann 396). Early in the novel, we are given a clue to Christopher's unreliability, through his limit of understanding, when he explains that he believes strongly that however many red cars he sees in a row determines how good a day he will have. Three red cars is "quite" a good day, and five is a "super" good day (Haddon 31). The author is showing the reader (by providing clues) that Christopher is still unreliable even though he is not lying, but rather his type of unreliability stems from the fact that what he believes is not always correct, and in this it is not correct because he thinks that his world can be controlled by inanimate objects. Christopher's thinking is not reliable, partly due to his limited understanding and because at times his thinking is overly imaginative and even fantastical. It is this special thinking, of not always understanding or drawing incorrect conclusions that the author uses to build tension. Christopher's stream of thought and detachment when encountering a dangerous situation, for example, can be seen when Christopher jumps down onto the train tracks to try and find his pet rat.

And someone said, 'Get out of there, for fuck's sake,' and I looked up and it was a man who was wearing a green raincoat and he had black shoes and his socks were showing and they were grey with little diamond patterns on them. (Haddon 223)

Christopher cannot comprehend the danger he is in, so Haddon gives the reader a clue with the man yelling at him to get off the tracks. Christopher instead focuses on the man's socks, and not the imminent danger of being run over by a train. Tension can be increased when an author uses "dialogue, reflection, description and action" (Reeve 3), and when danger is shared (Blackford 291). The action of Christopher falling on the tracks while he reflects about what socks the man is wearing, and not on the terrible danger he is in, builds the tension in this scene, not just because of the danger of the train but because Christopher does not understand the danger of the train. The reader understands because Haddon has shared the danger (Blackford 291). The author also uses Christopher's stream of thought (thoughts not relevant to the situation) and detachment from the dangerous situation (not being fully aware of the situation) to

build the tension. Both these ASD characteristics affect Christopher's understanding of what happens around him. Tension is built, when the reader feels concern for Christopher, perhaps even more so when Christopher has no concern for himself in a situation. The reader sees and understands Christopher's vulnerability when he does not understand when he is in danger. This understanding of danger (by the reader) helps the reader build a bond and feel concern for Christopher. It is this forming of an emotional bond between reader and child narrator that builds tension, because the reader is invested in Christopher and his story (Hover 69).

There are many ways authors can give information or clues about reliability or unreliability to the reader: through dialogue, thoughts, structures, and themes (Phelan 91). One of the themes Donoghue uses to elicit an emotional response from the reader, as part of a feedback loop (Phelan 91) in *Room*, is imagination. It is in Jack's imagination, thoughts, and the games he plays that the author gives clues about his reliability (Hétu 161). For example, Jack believes that only he and his mother live in a shed, while the rest of the world lives only in the television. He has imagined this because of his limited understanding of the world (Donoghue 105). When Jack's mother tells him about her home and life before *Room*, Jack asks her, "You actually lived in TV one time?" (Donoghue 105). For Jack, there are only two worlds: his and those who live in the television. When his mother tries to convince him that he has misunderstood, he does not believe her. He thinks, "She wants me to believe so I'm trying to but it hurts my head" (Donoghue 105). This feedback loop is designed by Donoghue to form a bond between reader and Jack, so that the reader may feel concern for Jack, and for the reader to think carefully as there is more here than appears. It is one of the clues given (Phelan 91) so the reader can contemplate how Jack thinks and if he is somehow limited, or unreliable in that thinking. It is not only in that moment where the clues are given that the feedback loop serves its purpose, but clues given at any time are also there to build a picture of Jack throughout the whole novel (Phelan 91). Through these clues the reader senses Jack's unreliability, and how Jack cannot fully comprehend the world. Everything Jack learns is from his mother, the television, or some books, and he chooses at the time who he believes more. Jack does not always believe his mother, in fact, sometimes he only pretends he believes her, "She wants me to believe so I'm trying to..." (Donoghue 105). Jack, aged only five, believes his mother thinks she is right, and wants him to believe what she says. Jack is not sure that she is right. He thinks, in his five-year-old mind, that he is right and wants to make up

his own mind about what he believes, and that belief and stubbornness make him even more unreliable. He also feels unsafe hearing this news. He clings to the old thoughts and by not believing his mother this also makes him unreliable.

The author is setting up the character of Jack for the time when he escapes the shed. When that happens, the way he thinks and understands will be shattered, and this will create further tension in the story. Jack's imagination provides clues that the reader can use to interpret everything he says and does, thus feeding into the feedback loop between the author, reader, and Jack, and shows the reader how Jack uses his imagination to make sense of his world. This also deepens the reader's understanding. When Jack is narrating, he is not aware that his imagination is not an accurate way to see the world or of his own limitations. That means the clues to what is real, in the text, must not be found solely from Jack's narration, but that the reader must find and look for other clues (provided by the author) to build a more truthful picture (Phelan 96). It is this looking for clues from Jack, by the reader given by the author that provides this feedback loop that means the reader is not only invested in Jack, but also actively looking for clues and signs that builds tension for the reader.

Using characteristics of Christopher's autism, Haddon provides a feedback loop about Christopher's unreliability between himself as the author, the reader and the narrator using Christopher's thoughts and dialogue to build tension (Phelan 98). Christopher's life and thoughts are governed by certain rules, which show his unreliability to the reader. Christopher's particular language is very detail oriented. Although, it should be noted the details are only the particular details Christopher is interested in. This is how many children with ASD think, choosing only the details they want or are interested in (Freißmann 400). These details are part of the clues placed by the author, for the reader, to show that even with the facts in front of him, Christopher will still form his own opinion and will only acknowledge those facts and observations that he already agrees with (Freißmann 400). These details let the reader understand more fully the world Christopher inhabits. For example, in this quote, when Christopher tells the reader,

This is another reason why I don't like proper novels, because they are lies about things which didn't happen and they make me feel shaky and scared.

And this is why everything I have written here is true. (Hadden 25)

Christopher tells us, not just that he does not like proper novels, but he does not understand the point and beauty or imagination of fictional works. He sees them as

lies. It would be easy to look here and see what he is saying is proof of his reliability, because he is explaining that he prefers the truth, and that fiction is a lie that makes him feel uneasy (Haddon 25). However, it is quite the opposite. Instead, we are shown clues to Christopher's "literal-mindedness" (an ASD trait) (Freißmann 400), and these hidden clues in the text tell the reader more about his unreliability, because this means Christopher is often tied up in the details, and in himself, and because of his "self-centred-ness" (another ASD trait) (Freißmann 398), he cannot see the fuller picture. Christopher can only see what he wants to see, and he is certain he is always right.

Sometimes, what is left out of the text provides clues more telling than what has been put in the text. For example, because of his ASD, Christopher cannot read facial expressions (Freißmann 400). This is important because when Christopher says, "I did not look at his face. I do not like looking at people's faces, especially if they are strangers" (Hadden 47). The reader is being told not only that Christopher does not see facial expressions, but more importantly that Christopher by not seeing facial expressions will not be able to fully understand what is being said to him. This makes him vulnerable and his narration unreliable. Without understanding facial expressions, Christopher could be unsafe, because he cannot sense an angry face, or a face that is playing a prank on him, or when someone wants to take advantage of him. These situations of misunderstanding are what build the tension for the reader, because it is in the misunderstanding of situations and people that dangerous situations arise for Christopher. Hadden creates these feedback loops (Phelan 98) between himself, Christopher, and the reader by giving clues to Christopher's character traits to both tell the story and give away what Christopher himself understands of the situation (in all his certainty), while simultaneously showing how Christopher has misread the situation and does not understand the situation at all. It is this misreading of situations that helps build tension in the text, because it can place Christopher in danger, and while he does not understand the danger, the reader does and feels concern and worry for what will happen next (Phelan 90).

Jack and Christopher are subjected to events that lend themselves to over sentimentalising or melodrama. But here too, the unreliable child narrator might be employed to undermine melodrama and develop a more nuanced picture of events. To avoid sentimentality, melodrama, and build tension Donoghue often uses wonder, surprise and humour (Hetu 160). The expression of these elements by an unreliable narrator may aid the author to portray difficult emotions without potentially alienating

readers with sentimentality and melodrama. One of the facets of melodramatic writing is characters that readers sympathise with (a child like Jack), and then that child is persecuted with bad luck, and evil deeds with a world so precarious their imminent death is certain at any minute (Smith 15). This sums up Jack's very existence. The risk of over sentimentality and melodrama might be most acute when Jack and his mother are attempting an escape. However even here, this risk is avoided largely due to the use of the unreliable narrator. Rather than focus on the dramatic events, Donoghue focuses on the child narrator's simple strategies of wonder and imaginative play to tell how Jack is feeling. The mother using wonder, surprise and game playing to block Jack from really understanding his situation and thus giving Jack his sense of safety and security in this world, and yet it is this that makes his narration unreliable. Jack often plays with, and is indeed attached to inanimate objects, and through these objects he quietly shares his inner thoughts and fears (Hétu 160-161). When Jack's mother (planning his escape), wraps him up in the rug, and gets him to pretend he is dead (Donoghue 168), this could be a very melodramatic scene, but through Jack's voice the tension in this scene is not overly dramatic, but instead the high stakes are shown simply by Jack's innocent voice and the way he uses his humour to lighten the scariness of the situation.

I jump, I'm supposed to be dead but I can't help it, I want to get out of Rug right now but I'm stuck and I can't even try or he'll see —

Something pressing on me, that must be Ma's hand. She needs me to be Super Prince JackerJack, so I stay extra still. No more moving, I'm Corpse, I'm the Count, no, I'm his friend even deader, I'm all stiff like a broken robot with a power cut. (Donoghue 168)

The humour and imagination shown by Jack while he tries to make sense of this very frightening situation, from his five-year-old consciousness, helps make the situation feel very real to the reader. The reader understands the danger and the threat is contrasted with Jack's imagined life by his sharing of his small thoughts. His role-play at being Prince JackerJack is a slightly comical response to that which is "too terrible to be even uttered" (Hétu 160). Yet this quiet scene, not overly dramatic, is still full of dread and fear. In this way the scene builds tension without the need to resort to a more melodramatic telling through Jack's unreliability, using his wonder and surprise for the world.

In *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* the emotional response to Christopher from the reader heightens tension in the text when the reader experiences a range of troubling affective effects or emotions. These emotions can be felt by when the adult reader has an emotional response to Christopher and through tension in the text avoids the need for melodramatic scenes (Phelan 90). These emotions may include empathy, fear, or anxiety, and can occur when the adult reader senses the child is in danger, because the natural instinct of an adult is to care or worry for a child, especially when they do not comprehend their situation (Phelan 90). In the quote below, Christopher is talking about how he would take care of himself if he was faced with a “stranger danger situation” (Haddon 45).

If a strange man touched me I would hit him, and I can hit people very hard. For example, when I punched Sarah because she had pulled my hair, I knocked her unconscious and she had concussion and they had to take her to the Accident and Emergency Department at the hospital. And also I always have my Swiss Army Knife in my pocket and it has a saw blade which could cut a man’s fingers off (Haddon 45)

The adult reader understands 15-year-old Christopher’s talking about violence being a good thing, is something that makes him vulnerable. The author shows Christopher’s unreliability to let the reader know that Christopher not only believes that resorting to violence will help the situation, but also that he would be the victor. These small giveaways or clues from the author help increase the tension for the reader (Phelan 90). Again, this tension is developed not through melodramatic events, but rather through concern for the narrator’s interpretation of these events and the consequent danger Christopher places himself. Christopher talks about hitting a man if he were attacked, and how he carries a knife. His anger is problematic as in the past he has knocked a child out. How dangerous is Christopher, and how able is he to contain his anger and what could happen to Christopher if his anger is out of control? The reader knows both parents have beaten Christopher, his experiences with violence are real, and he has been damaged emotionally by those experiences (Blackford 300). Thus, Haddon elicits care and concern for Christopher without resorting to explicit, sentimental or melodramatic language about how terrible the situation Christopher is experiencing. If the author had used explicit, sentimental or melodramatic language or over emotional text this could have made Christopher appear indulgent, simplistic or as a caricature of a boy with ASD (Solomon 3-6). Using the reader’s emotions to feel or identify with

Christopher (Phelan 91-95) the author avoids this, and this is what builds the tension when the reader is not concerned with sentiment or melodrama, but instead can feel true fear and anxiety for Christopher (Phelan 90).

I hope to have shown that both Jack and Christopher are unreliable on two levels: because they are children, and because of the extreme limitations in environment, in Jack's case, and ASD in Christopher's. This double unreliability is used to create tension, to undercut melodrama, to foster intimacy, and emotional connection with the reader, and for other effects. Their unreliable narration helps build tension through the sharing of information in the form of clues, secrets and collaborations between the reader, the implied author, other characters and the unreliable narrators themselves. These secrets and collaborations are an important feature in the building of an emotional relationship between the reader and the unreliable narrators. This emotional relationship with Christopher or Jack creates a bond with the reader by encouraging a sense of fear, concern, or a paternal or maternal feeling from the reader for the child narrators. Unreliable narration as expressed through imagination, innocence and detachment by the child narrators helps to foster this fear and concern. Through these clues and insights and the use of realism in action, the reader feels tension build throughout the novels. The reader applies these clues and insights to the text as a whole, thus creating a feedback loop. Therefore, the unreliable child narrators Christopher and Jack do help build tension in the novels, through realism in action, by the building of an emotional relationship with the reader and the tension built and told in the novels is in direct relation to their unreliability.

First person child narrators may indeed be unreliable and flawed, particularly if there are other constraints on their world view, such as experienced by Christopher and Jack. But as I hope to have shown, they provide authors with a range of useful tools.

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