WILLIAM DIREEN

Utopia Rag
(Nusquama)

ENGLISH VERSION

Legal Deposit: January, 2016
ISBN 978-0-473-34859-5

Download address:
http://alpha.books.online.fr/Utopia

In digital format

Fiction

Wormwood. Paper edition *SPORT 18, 1997*
Utopia Rag. Paper edition *Nusquama* Alpha Books, 2002
Onaevia, fable. Paper edition Alpha Books, 2002
Jules. Paper edition Alpha Books, 2003
Coma. 3 Stories in the First Person. Paper. Titus Books 2005
Nusquama. (German tr. A. Loeffler). Paper Titus Books, 2005.
Brakeman—End of the Present. Paper:Titus Books, 2006
Enclosures. Paper edition Titus Books, 2010
Hyperbaton. Paper edition *brief48*, Writers Group, 2013
L. in *A Foreign Country, New Zealand Speculative Fiction,* edited by Anna Caro and Juliet Buchanan. Random Static, Wellington, 2010.
Stadium. Novella. Digital format, 2016.

Other

Versions Translations. Poetry. Paper edition Kilmog 2014
Tourtagebuch. Tour Diary (tr. A. Loeffler), 2012

DOWNLOADS
To read the download of any of the above titles type http://alpha.books.online.fr/[first word of title above]

To download all titles as PDF in one bundle click here.

This page has been intentionally left blank

Gunshot

But this scrap of crumbling calcium ran into his fingers and up his arms, inhabiting his own face with the antipathy of a brother, of his own Abel. It set in first of all behind his eyes, then it was as if the tendons of Glenn's face were tightening right down to his jaw and the nerves of his trembling lips. Glenn was spreading through Perry's sapient body, to remain within him long after he had thrown the hollow bone among the still and filthy fleeces.

This page has been intentionally left blank

Hamish McLeod fiddled his birth-date and pushed off for Western Europe where they were running out of men to die. They called them men though they had the faces of boys, of lying boys who had got themselves into a jam. He drove ammunition limbers through the mud, between the dump and the battle lines, at night mostly, praying that the random shells wouldn't strike him or light him and his underfed nags into a silhouette target on the twice retaken plains. He never carted a dead man before he enlisted—his father had done the funerals—but his cargo soon became corpses. He would never forget their eyes still and staring, the human blood that painted the planks of the cart, that caked the sides of the same box, lowering different bodies into the same grave.

When he again tasted the Otago air, air icy fresh and free of the stench that rises where bodies have been blown apart, it was a shallow inhalation given the state of his lungs. He made it through a maul of embracing, weeping couples to be greeted by his mother and sisters in mourning. So he left McLeod Carts, 1877 to his brothers,

seized on a government offer for returned soldiers and took seventeen-year-old Aileen Frazer to farm Lincoln-Merinos on three hundred acres of arid land half-way up the South Island.

Aileen had not wanted Hamish. She had not been waiting, as her friend Esther Vogel had been waiting, for one particular boy to return. But when she married Hamish the waiting began. She waited for him at night, for his death-familiar hands to bring their knowledge to her body. A dark head appeared, an easy birth, small—and spinetwisted. They waited beside the scarcely human form, scarcely breathing themselves or breathing through their eyes, not weeping nor holding back tears but drawing the consecutive seconds with each breath of the wrapped, immobile child; the breathing stopped, and they became aware that they were continuing, themselves, to see, to breathe. No return. Hamish walked from the room, from the bloody face and from the silent mother who had not wanted him then and who did not want comfort now. Thereafter, if they brought their bodies together in that union which state and God had sanctioned, it was passionless and heavy with accountability.

Another war came. Aileen was grateful she had not raised a boy to be trained to kill. And yet she listened to the losses being read out on the radio, with the middle names, too, if they had them, making the boys sounded gallant and noble. The United States entered the combat. She and Hamish felt pride in alliance, enemy-hatred, and

shared in the growing conviction that this, at least, was a just war.

Glenn McLeod was born spine-worthy inheritor of a farm he would name Utopia, when his mother was forty-three. He had Hamish's features and as he grew up Aileen would leave the two of them together on the farm while she made more and more visits south. Down Lumsden way there were Frazers to talk to, and her girlfriends Marth, Biddie and Esther. Esther Vogel had raised seven girls and four sons during Aileen's barren years, children so scrubbed and pressed people said they came out of a bandbox.

The papers called it a slump, but for many there had been no prosperity. Esther's husband worked on labour schemes throughout the thirties. During World War II he organised delivery of the Otago Daily and Southland Times, or announcements on the War Effort. And the youngest of those tough years was Tammy.

By the armistice, Hamish McLeod could hardly draw breath to cheer. He took on demobilised men ostensibly for patriotic reasons, but he really needed help. The exhaust fumes of the generator, the smoke from a burn-off had him coughing blood. Soon mere specks of dust on the wind were enough, then Aileen buried him.

Aileen and Esther Vogel had worked it all out years before. Glen and Tammy would marry, and so they did.

While the teenage couple were on their honey-moon

the new local cop Matt Downes passed by to make himself known and found Aileen. She had strapped a hose to the exhaust of the generator, put her head in a pre-war double-stitched flour sack, and breathed until breathing lapsed.

The heat rose so quickly that Ilya wondered if he too might be coming down with one of those diseases, not tropical but European, which had found their ideal conditions on the South American continent. They had travelled from Cherbourg to Salvador, appearing from Rio to Temuco, like smoke, in many ways, that settles on a village for days and then is gone leaving the cold reek of spentness.

The trombonist succumbed. They buried him in Concepción, where some local wind-men provided a dazzling, discordant impromptu. The troupe, glum, hound-like, trekked back to a makeshift settlement where they passed alcohol between them till, one by one, they passed out. Next day the ablest followed a mulatto newsreel advertising scout. One of the films featured a circus very like their own. If this gave them hope, Ilya understood that with the coca and mesa and tequila, eighteen lives could easily fade away in Capricorn dream-time. Eighteen months after the armistice, there were people in Chile who thought some war was still being fought in Europe. Although word of the Zlodo highwire act had reached La Paz and

Lima, he struck a deal with a steamship agent.

During the first days, the sea breezes were so slight as not to ventilate at all. They intensified the heat-wave. Ilya perspired in a deck chair, dispatching novels with joyless voracity.

The morning of the storm, as if affected by the atmospheric tension, he overwound his pocket watch. Opening the back where his own name and 'Warszawa, 1895' were inscribed in barely legible letters, he took out his tie-pin and, placing the tip in a purpose-built pit, released the jaw that held the jammed cogs in place. The mechanism unlocked itself with an unwatchlike cry. The capstan swung into motion. Its tiny see-saw rotation, the fine loose golden coil tightening and loosening, made him feel unusually powerful, but he would soon be feeling like the devil's plaything.

He was reading in English when the light failed two hours ahead of time. Looking up, a charcoal sky, riled and billowing, was looming over their vessel. Within a few minutes the swell was higher than the ship. Hemmed on each side by walls of water, wave and moment seemed poised to infold. Steam on all boilers, the sea beginning to swipe at them, the captain steered steadily along and up the liquid drape.

Still the clouds did not break, they fattened, as if coagulating, mucilating. They were not entering the prototypic force of the storm, they were present at its birth.

A bolt of lightning struck out of the epicentre. The ship shuddered as if its engines had jammed. Some prayed that they be spared, that they might remain in the world of smell, of taste, of shallow sharp inhalations, of rivering sweat, of vomit. Some cursed.

They went below in twos and threes, helping each other hand over wrist on the narrow over-painted stairways. If they made it to their cabins unbruised, in the coming hours few would not be freely turned and thrown against riveted walls or bunk-ladders. Once, in his unwindowed poorly ventilated cabin, Ilya felt the screw lift out of the water, and he imagined the boat performing like one of his acrobats in space.

There were smoother passages of time when the troupe lay unmolested by the forces yet sentient of the storm's rapacity. Presently they became aware that the engines, though still cranking on full power, were climbing the slopes and riding the ridges more easily.

When the wind dropped, the ship skied the last of the swells, carving careful grooves north by northwest towards clearer skies, undulating seas, and to romance. Having passed some ring atolls and wound towards Tongatapu Island, the steamer berthed beside a pier built for far smaller vessels. Ilya stepped ashore, feeling that sailor's insecurity on solid land which, until then, had been no more than a literary phrase. The image he had of the Polynesian islands was also literary. Even in its censored form, *The Beach of Falesá* by Robert Louis Stevenson described a paradise ru-

ined by unscrupulous traders, brigands and missionaries. But the Friendly Islands couldn't have been better named; these new-century guests and their hosts had something in common. They were soon comparing juggling techniques. The Tongans were amazed at the European technique, albeit that they regarded crossing balls in mid-air as something of an obscenity. Ilya met the young Queen Salote Tupou whose reign would last another forty five years, and he was introduced to the beautiful Lesieli.

When, after some weeks, there was no news of the cargo ship bearing the circus hardware and animals, Ilya made the decision to voyage south. New Zealand was the southernmost of the 'new' islands but whereas he had some notion of Britain, Ireland, South Wales and the Hebrides, all of which had their "New" counterparts, he had no mental picture of Zealand, or Sjaeland as the Danes knew it.

He was fifty-three, Lesieli twenty-seven. They were officially tied by the public registrar in Lyttelton. Though she could juggle seven in a circle she would never perform publicly. A wire reached them at the British Hotel: Debris of cargo ship washed up at Rarotonga. No known human survivors. The hardware lost, the animals drowned in their cages, Zlodo's Circus was finished.

The publican gave them work, levying a small surcharge on his customers. He wanted to draw the crowds from Christchurch to watch the clowns tumbling on makeshift equipment on the wharves. Ilya resisted. He

didn't want to become an object of ridicule, freaks exiled from their circus tent, so he forged promises from reliable entrepreneurs further afield, and the troupe split up in the New Year, fanning out to Sydney, Port Moresby and Johannesburg. Only he and Lesieli remained.

It was a prosperous time for a child to be born. Ilya secured two loans from The Bank of New Zealand to tide him over and the family wanted for little. He took his initialled suitcase on perfectly executed 'sorties', as he called them, journeys by train to rendezvous with the inheritors of estates wanting rid of cumbersome libraries. He spent three years eliciting a cheque out of his Dutch insurance company for the lost cargo and set up the bookshop which his son Pita and grandson Dylan would manage. Since Ilya figured his own East European name of Zlodogursko wouldn't encourage trade with the Christchurch Angles, he ordered a signboard that read simply:

GREENS (est. 1924).

One crisp winter's morning in 1947, a man in his early twenties entered Greens. His eyes, Ilya thought, resembled those of his son Pita. Perhaps he was one who had avoided conscription because of illness or by some deception or other. He was offering Ilya a Bible.

'It's the only one of its kind.'

The man repeated what the vendor had told him. 'The

only one in this neck of the woods… in German, see… hand coloured plates, see? Should be in a museum, I reckon!'

Ilya continued to regard the face of this man. It carried no suggestion of literacy, neither that arid air of almost racial superiority of some academics of the period, nor the rugged self-tutored intelligence that marked many of his customers.

'May I ask how you came by it?'

'I told you. War widow. Job lot. Looks like I hit the jackpot, eh? It must be worth twenty quid. Give me half of that!'

'Yes, yes.' Ilya was nodding.

'I can leave it here and come back this afternoon. What do you reckon?'

'Yes. You do that.'

'It's not stolen, you know, Mr Green. I have the bill of sale. Give me a note of receipt and I'll be back later.'

'Like the last time. You said you would be back.'

The man looked worried. He tried to remember another occasion when he might have left Ilya a book. 'OK. We can forget the paperwork. I'll be back around three.'

Ilya watched him go out, took his hat and left the shop in the opposite direction. He walked down Tuam Street, skirted the hospital and sat in the band rotunda by the Avon. He muddied his shoes walking through the Botanic Gardens under denuded European trees. During this time his thoughts went from this illuminated manuscript to the

fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil, from human endeavour to ambition, to Faust and the tendency of history to repeat itself. Checking his pocket watch, still functioning after all these years, he passed the stone buildings of the university and entered DIC. Wrist watches from £5. Vacuum cleaners, twenty two pounds ten. Congoleum, a new type of lino, on sale. He admired the finish on a mantlepiece chiming clock — Lesieli wanted to buy one.

When the stranger returned at three Lesieli was ready for him.

'I'm sorry, Mr Green has not looked at the book.'

'I'm only in town for one day.'

'I'm sorry, I know nothing about the antiquarian side of things but I don't think we can help you. It will be better if you take the book back. You could try Winter's Antiques on the corner of Cashel Street—'

'Thanks. Tell him, tell him I'll be back. He's on my list.'

'I'll do that. You are Mister—?'

The man, who would gladly have placed his name on a bill of holding, took exception now to being asked who he was. He seemed about to shout at Lesieli, but he restrained himself and replied, 'Faithfull. Two l's. Tell him Faithfull, Nick Faithfull.'

After he had gone Lesieli called to Ilya and he descended the back staircase.

'You see, Ilya? Just a wheeler and dealer, that's all.'

'Yes, yes! Of course. It could never happen here.'

Six years later Lesieli, though barely sixty, fell victim to influenza, and without her Ilya was quite lost. Pita had taken over the running of the shop and it was there he met Hilary North, ten years his junior. She was everything that Pita was not, enthusiastic, spontaneous, daring. Ilya was grateful for her cheerful presence in the house, though their marriage was doubly eclipsed by the visit of the British Queen, and a viaduct train-crash that killed 151.

Greens had sold out of albums depicting royalty of any country in any century and Pita closed early. That evening he and Hilary prepared hot drinks in the kitchen. Ilya was in the library. He had the wireless on but he was not listening to it. Pita put a half-cup of chocolate before him.

When Ilya did not move Pita switched off the radio and was about to remove his glasses when Ilya mumbled dreamily.

'He said he would be back.'

'Who's that, dad?'

'The man about the Bible.'

'What man, dad?'

'If he doesn't get his price.'

Ilya was laid to rest beside Lesieli. Pita and Hilary continued to live in that sizable Lyttelton house. Dylan Green was born to parents who no longer loved each other on the seventh anniversary of their marriage, December 20th, 1960.

Not long after his mother left for Sydney. No one spoke of divorce. She was on business overseas. Pita took the education of Dylan on board. Nothing would be too good for him. Private lessons in music and the arts. Medical notes excusing him from having to play rugby at school. As Dylan neared his twenties, Pita divided the large Lyttelton house into two, so Dylan could lead an independent life, as Pita never had.

Some of the single women received letters from particular boys. Una had no letters. She had a photograph of a soldier called Mort Macfarlane. Perry was born just before the atom bombs dropped, and as far as he was concerned the hero in that framed photograph was his father. He understood his mother's hardness, and was a quiet, hard type himself. He was not interested in school but if it was the turn of Tammy Vogel to stand up and recite scraps of verses, he paid special attention.

Some boys had an "HQ", its floor soft with flattened rat droppings, walls decorated with lichenmould beading. On those walls were helmets, gas masks and accessory belts from one World War or the other. Perry passed through its roughbolted door into that damp must of unsweptness to sell the gang tobacco. When he told them his father had been a soldier killed in Suva, they invited him to witness a prearranged encounter with two brothers from Pahiwi. It was a fair fight, two against two. When the brothers lost they were tied to a stump near a wasp nest, which was then riled.

The tobacco Perry sold came from Dan, a casual farm labourer who slept on one side of Una's bed, always the same side. He earned the money he squandered with that labour that no one buys, a shout of the earth and the sun. Sterling was a currency for celebrating, for night after night of brain-rollicking bravado and wrong-muscled dancing. When Perry opened the first of those bursting plastic packets Prison, source of the coarse leaves, entered his senses. Whenever Dan spoke of Prison, Perry imagined it dark golden, busy with sorting, packing hands, heavy with that aroma so like molasses. In spite of this attraction, Perry would never spend a single night in any local cell. He was not going to die 'inside'. He smoked his last cigarette in the same room where Dan taught him to smoke his first.

Drinking, fighting, prison tobacco, that was Dan. He brought Una chocolates and glass diamonds, sweeping away all doubt and misgiving. He was big-boned and apple-muscled, yet he made love to her quietly, and if they were noisy in the night these were the rhythms and exhalations which, Perry knew, did not come from pain. As the pitch of lovemaking passed like a rainstorm, he did not feel the least jealousy, knowing that this does good, that his mother would not be downhearted for days. Dan might go in a truck to Southland or Central Otago and be shearing for weeks, but he would always return limb-weary, the skin of his hands wool-oil-cracked, his body

eager for scrubbing.

One night Perry listened till their flailing so like wrestling had ceased. When he was sure they were sleeping he took a crowbar to the town park bordered to the south by bush. Though there was some cloud and little moon he passed easily along the path into the trees past the wasp nest and down to the club hut. The door gave easily. He surveyed their paraphernalia — knives, sheathes, gloves, cuttings and paperbacks detailing war crimes. He passed a match before their toys recalling what he had seen, their acts of petty transgression. He laid an unlit lamp on its side so the kerosene spilled out and ran a way before seeping into cracks in the floor boards. He tore down a photograph of an execution. He struck and held its roaring yellowness against the torn photograph until it too burst and bubbled into a flare. This he laid with all delicacy against the oildamp boards. A pale blue aura was spreading as the oil itself had done as he crossed to the door. The quivering menace reached some newspapers in a corner and in an instant all was glowing. The fire was claiming his oxygen, he was suffocating before his own handiwork. Into the conflagration he threw a grenade and he ran.

The following day the wood stove had been blown meters away. Half a dozen trees had lost their foliage. Lucky, people said, the forest was too wet to burn, folk might have been roasted in their beds. Those bloody kids in their smoking hut!

One day, one week, one year—how long did it take for him to know Dan was not coming back? The nights were silent, a silence more miserable than snivelling or the sounds of sickness. But even then, in the dark and Una's silence, he had no quarrel with Dan. He knew that if he could have he would have returned and remained, but his best mate had served his time and they had scores to settle, and he was probably inside or heading for it, or dead.

At fifteen, Perry did as Dan had done and began seasonal work. It was 1959 and the new Labour government was losing popularity. Dan entered those bars peopled by childless women with rasping voices and men dealing in contraband. He learned quickly about alcohol, about semi-precious stones, and about rifles.

He never left Una without saying when he would be back. When the work lasted into autumn he found a way, even if it meant stealing a car, to share those dark, quiet hours with her. He didn't know how she could sleep so silently, unless, like him, she was not sleeping.

And if she asked him if he had a sweetheart he would say 'You know who that is, ma,' meaning herself, but she was sure that there was one and not many. She wondered if it might be the youngest of the Vogel girls because he went to visit someone on Sunday afternoons and he and Tammy Vogel were always friendly.

The class had been small but varied. Perry had been aware

of all of them, feline, freckled, sistered and brothered, legitimately fathered. But when he was close to her, even in a crowd or within earshot of her milling family, he felt alone before her, like a tiger in the sun.

At school she repeated the set phrases with no effort of learning and no understanding of their sense. When prompted she would re-present the unreified syllables as if they were a simple enough task, like one carried out by a mason ignorant of the scope of the wall he is working on. And as easily as she forgot those phrases, she assigned her intimacy with Perry to her childhood. He was, she said, like a brother, and later, when she reached marrying age, she never suspected his Sunday visits were more than social.

She didn't invite him to any of their populous parties, but she told him all about her brother playing Rock Around the Clock and about her uncles dancing on the table tops. Once she had met Glenn a few times and the marriage had been all arranged she thought nothing of telling Perry about that as well. She was getting hitched to "some farmer up north"—so what? She laughed strangely that day as if she was trying to sing, or cry. She did not say that she did not want to go, but she never said that she loved him, this Glenn McLeod. So Perry took a chance. He asked casually if he might do seasonal work for them. The scent of his work, the sight of his hands, the sound of those soft words, surprisingly soft and true, told a part of her that he was asking for more

than that, but her conscious self would not believe it. She promised she would come back to visit the town, and she told him that Yes, in time, he could come and work on the farm. Because she did not know better she gave him hope, then she went to marry Glenn McLeod.

Perry went back to earning and spending, and he did what he was good at by now, he waited. The first news that came was of Aileen Frazer's sudden passing, and then of the birth, in 1961, of a daughter, 'Fay'.

*

He had been a winner in a ballot.

Perry took a gun registered that year, 1964, and his unregistered sniper's rifle. He had dismantled and reassembled it, tightened the holding screw, scrubbed and oiled the bore, shot and pulled the bolt, till he could whisper to himself, 'Should shoot good.'

Government certificate on the seat beside him, he drove half the morning till he reached the designated afforestation area. He left the track, crossing the blazing of another hunter, and, through his telescopic sight, lined up a stag. From side on, with his Magnum, he usually aimed at one shoulder, so the bullet would go through both shoulders, then he could get in closer to finish it off. He was about to fire when he heard the whistling that betokens mustering. The deer's head turned, he had a perfect view. He aimed for the brain. The recoil bit at his shoulder.

Glenn was cooling himself in the shade of the canopy. He removed his hat and was leaning over the pommel looking down the scoop of the valley. A flock of mutton was pulsating like indecisive plasma, sheepdogs were orbiting like electrons in popular representations of the atom. When Glenn dropped from his horse the other shepherds galloped to his help. As Glenn's blood filled the cracks of the burnt earth one of them rode along the edge of the canopy flapping and waving his hat and screaming insanely at the forest 'Hey! Hey! Hey!' The other two shepherds stayed beside Glenn. One whispered to himself, 'Jesus!'

*

The tenth winter after the freak shooting accident had been a mild one and the ewes had mothered early. By late August there were puny pelts of following hunger everywhere. Perry just knew the cold snap was coming. He drawled up the island in a head-blown Zephyr, stopping regularly to top up the water. Tam was not puzzled by his arrival, he never showed without reason. It was due to him that her flock sizes had increased over the past ten years.

Doing what he could to keep losses to a minimum he shepherded the expectant ewes into sheltered areas with feed for eight days. He sequestered the very stud rams that he had bid for at the stockyards. He rounded up as many

new mothers and lambs as he could find and fenced them nearer the farm house where they could be reached if the storm lasted.

The southerly carried the stab of promised snow. He paid off the hired hands, dropped his shovel on the far side of the bushy halfacre known as Hifield cemetery, and hit the Cry.

Some regulars were mourning the passing of a Prime Minister, Norm Kirk, buried that week in Waimate under an ominous mist. Some were secretly pleased. Perry lost some money to Matt Downes, who quit while he was ahead, drank to his own success and left before midnight. Perry was the last to leave the bar some time after one.

He worked methodically under the gathering clouds, segmenting the earth with controlled lunges, amputating intrusive tree roots. Worms thrashed and squirmed in the occasional moonlight as he neared the body. His spade discovered the chest, snapping a few ribs as if they were rusks. He knelt and searched till his fingers had defined the immensity of Glenn's skull.

As he drove back to the farm it began to fall, a harmless-looking flour-dusting of snow. By mid-morning most of lower Canterbury was under two centimetres, the high country was under five. It kept falling for thirty six hours and some late squalls gave the drifts a topping of ice.

On the third morning he cleared tracks between his markers and searched the cloudy slopes for the

enclaves that stranded sheep instinctively create. He found many surviving through the heat of their own assembly. These he led down to cover, splitting twins, identifying orphans and fostering out, returning later to gather the carcasses of the frail and the newly born that had died, to pile them up in mounds. Finally, he dug the pit—four paces by five. That took him the better part of the second clear day.

On the third fine day, the pit half full, he removed the human skull from its flour sack and held it like a bowling ball. The bullet had entered on the right side, there was nothing for a bullet-hole save a clean crescent where it had enlarged the temple. He withdrew his fingers from the eye sockets. It hardly differed from the sheep's craniums that littered high country paddocks, each with its dark patches where eyes had once lain, patches great, soiled and brainless. But this scrap of crumbling calcium ran into his fingers and up his arms, inhabiting his own face with the antipathy of a brother, of his own Abel. It set in first of all behind his eyes, then it was as if the tendons of Glenn's face were tightening right down to his jaw and the nerves of his trembling lips. Glenn was spreading through Perry's sapient body, to remain within him long after he had thrown the hollow bone among the still and filthy fleeces.

The valley was echoing with the futile bleating of a wet dry ewe. Perry filled the pit with the last of the

stiffened, branch-legged lambs and rode back towards the generator drone of the farmhouse as the light failed on the evening of September 7th, 1974.

This page has been intentionally left blank

So You Wanna Be a Rock 'n Roll Star?

Mike, former guitarist of the Hates, half-hearing, half-dreaming the shots, wakes abruptly in his bedroom at Utopia, Hifield. It is 1987. In the doorway is Myrlena, band mechanic, holding a .44 Magnum rifle. On the verandah is Perry, tied and gagged.

This page has been intentionally left blank

Mike was raised on the West Coast of the South Island by his grandfather Eamonn Doyle, a collector of empty half-Gs and a hoarder of books.

In the summer of 1982 the driving rhythm of The Clean's 'Point That Thing Somewhere Else' could be heard competing with the cicadas. It wasn't the music itself he objected to, it was the repeat arm on Mike's stereo that drove Eamonn down Nine Mile Creek to the Wishing Well, the only pub within cooey. Perhaps he spent more time at the pub than a man of his age should, whatever the reason, Eamonn didn't see out the next winter, but he would have voted for the party that won the 1984 election. After a decade in the opposition watching a sly economist mixing up the roles of leader and treasurer, the new Labour Prime Minister announced naïvely he didn't have a clue about money matters — he would leave all that to his Minister of Finance.

Mike had lost his parents when their house collapsed during the '68 earthquake, and now the man who'd been a second father to him was gone. He was alone, all of eight-

een, owner of a tilting house on a mountain called Saint Patrick, and learning to play a battered, toffeeapple-red Mustang electric guitar.

To raise money for an amplifier he sold some of Eamonn's books over the hill — that's to say the Southern Alps, not a hill at all, but a bloodthirsty formation of shifting, tectonic fists. Eamonn had often mentioned Greens Bookshop, and Mike was expecting to find a sickly bibliophile behind the counter. He found Dylan Green, a handsome, dark-haired music freak who played a '68 Rickenbacker bass and talked about bands Mike had never heard of.

'I saw The Gordons last night, you know?'

'From Australia?'

'Woolston!'

'Oh yeah. I thought you said—'

'They were sensational! Of course they're not Sonic Youth—'

'Sonic who?'

Dylan took the bootload of rare hardbacks and promised Mike an amplifier in return. He threw in a few of his favourite bootlegs and jotted down the number of some friends where Mike could kip the night. Dylan talked to Fay who invited Mike to play at a party that very weekend.

Fay was four years Mike's senior, and she had tough-looking best mates. They looked as if they'd flatten Mike if

he sang a politically incorrect lyric. Fay told him to just "be himself" as she popped the cork on a wicker-covered flask of Chianti. The set was too short so he started on the first song again and when Dylan and Fay whistled and yayed around one o'clock Mike's first gig was over. Fay's friends unfolded their arms and went for their bomber jackets, Dylan left with the daughter of the Chancellor of the University. The party took a turn for the worse.

People danced so hard that the needle jittered and the old gramophone broke a pulley. A stoned astral traveller filled the vacuum climbing on the cabinet and playing Jimi Hendrix licks on his viola, looking all the while as though he was going to eat the neck. He finally did, or rather he plucked the strings with his teeth, piercing his tongue when one of them snapped. Mike drained the last drops from another bottle of Chianti and fell like a wardrobe against the stereo, telling Fay to give his money to the hippie with God in his fingers. Fay applied kisses and entreaties, and the violist saved Mike's Mustang from a gangbang. His name was Joe Ranui, and they would form a band.

Right now, though, Fay and Mike had another kind of formation in mind. They headed for the bedroom where the feminists were having a difference of opinion with a Fullbright Scholar flaunting a foetus badge. They slipped out into the crisp night as a gadget-regaled Goth homed in on the party and the house poet could be heard reciting 'Hit me with your rhythm stick!'

They climbed over spear-pointed iron spikes into the Botanic Gardens finding a comfortable canoodling pad under some giant sub-tropical rhubarb fronds. And the frogs in the Oriental Pond were soon croaking their approval.

After the debut Fay persuaded Lil, the student activities officer, to hire Mike at the university and the frolics in the gardens became regular events. Lil didn't like it, but who was she to stand in the way of hope and inevitable disaster. She gave up trying to reduce Mike to a pile of spacedust and when she urgently needed a guitarist for a Women's Festival she asked him to stand in, as long as he shaved closely, wore an ankle length dress to cover his hairy legs, and lurked in the shadows. Fay dressed as Quentin Crisp and the frogs' chorus had added excitement.

The role of rhythm guitarist gave Mike huge satisfaction, and it wouldn't be the last time he played in drag. But if he and Fay made a show of flouting convention, when she fell pregnant in the spring of '85, they took refuge in the most conventional of institutions.

The wedding dress had golden triangles under a wide-sleeved oriental jacket. Tam arrived the morning of the ceremony with baby clothes spilling from her arms. She and the JP waited in a damp corner of the Botanic Gardens as the wedding party — a grinning violist, the couple and a small contingent of masked and dancing anarchists

— streamed over the Zen Bridge towards them. Fay was in the morning suit. Mike was in the oriental jacket. Izzie was on the way.

Tam paid for the honeymoon and they chose Kaikoura. The manager of the motel eyed them suspiciously.

'Doyle! Not French are ya? Got some ID?'

Mike couldn't find his Driver's License.

'She's right! If you were foreign agents you'd have some phony ID, I reckon.'

The sea was flickering with little candlelights, the effect of the setting sun on the ruffled waters. They bought a crayfish from a fisherman who told them to drop it in boiling water. Fay wouldn't do it, cold-blooded, stalk-eyed scavenger or not!

'It is inhumane!'

Mike didn't think the cray cared one way or the other and it even tried to solve the dilemma by crawling off the bench and dashing itself on the cement floor. Then he recalled that salt-water fish drown in fresh water.

'It's true, my grandpa Eamonn told me.'

'It's better than being boiled?'

'Better! Drowning is the coolest way to go.'

'How would anyone know?'

'The ones who come back!'

This appealed to Fay, who believed in life on other planets and alternative space-time co-ordinates. She filled the sink and Mike held it under till its feelers were waving dreamily.

That night a bird bashed against the sliding glass panel of their cabin. They opened the door to the patio where it was lying dazed. Finding a box meant softening up the manager,

'It gave us a bit of a shock, eh! We were afraid it might have been a French agent!

A Watties cardboard box materialised.

'No trouble in this town since we whipped up our own vigilantes.

Mike asked him what kind of bird it was.

'Sooty! Mutton bird! They nest up there. He pointed to the roof of his office. There! And he waved up at the jagged silhouette of the mountains. His hand glided down to where they stood as if following a guyrope from the crowns of the coastal range to the sea. Then he clutched at the air as if he were gripping a clump of grass. 'It's not the first cloudrunner smacked into one of my windows. God knows what makes 'em do it. Blown off course, I reckon. It's dog eat dog up there! A hundred miles an hour!'

Fay and Mike looked up at the still, cloudless sky, where countless stars were blinking tranquilly.

'Perhaps it was confused by the lights of the town, and it mistook the glass panel for the surface of the sea,' Fay offered.

The manager was on his way back to the office. 'There! The lady's onto it! She's got a brain! Bigger than those birds' anyways. Sweet dreams!'

In the morning they took it down to the sea. When

they set it free it paddled a few metres then dived under. They never saw it resurface.

'Perhaps it was a bird, but it became a fish when it touched the water.'

As they returned, she saw a man approach and pass. Out of the corner of her eye she felt there was something familiar about him, but when she turned around to observe him there was no one there. The sea was on one side and a fish-gutting operation twenty metres away on the other. Mike asked a fisherman if he had seen or heard anything. He smiled knowingly, thinking Fay was expecting, and offered to take the honeymooners out on the Pacific in his trawler.

'Then you'll see something top-dog! There's some real friendly Sperms out there!' he broadcast without so much as a grin.

But Fay had had enough of surfacings and submergings. They booked out.

A few days later Mike bought an overworked trade van for the band, last owner a one-armed mechanic with a hole where his right cheekbone should have been. The Registration Papers looked genuine, but it came with a smudged repair manual and an extensive toolkit — always a bad sign, Jim of Moana would tell him later.

Lil was one of Jim of Moana's girls. He called his daughters 'girls' even when they were fully grown and in Lil's case lesbian. She was crazy about Fay. She would have

done anything for her. She was president of a women's rights club and wasn't the only one that wanted to recruit Fay.

At three months the doctor told Fay to rest more. When she told him she wanted a home birth half way up a distant mountain, he recommended a psychiatrist. She changed her professional. The new one gave her the same news. No fun. More rest. Hospital birth.

Joe and Mike had hatched the band idea and the first practice was to be in Mike's tilting house. The van broke down between Christchurch and the West Coast but a hitch-hiker they'd taken on board, name of Myrlena, her arms strong as a wrestler's and busy with tattoos, carried out repairs in between showers. Their windshield wipers, lights and brakes were soon operational. She said it had bad compression but with new rings and a rebore the van would be a good workhorse. Mylena would become indispensable to the band.

They were relieved at last to reach that heap of coal outside the old house, all the dust washed away by rain and the pieces hard and shiny like record vinyl. Myrlena rolled a smoke and went outside to meet the wekas. Mike took his guitar and let loose a few riffs. Something thumped against the outside wall. It was Larry, staggering up the path with his drum cases. Now, his drum kit had wide ebony and ivory swirls, and Larry too had parallel rings under his eyes. If he looked a bit vacant it was because most of the time he was completing complicated

percussive manoeuvres in his head. Sometimes he would play them out with his fingertips.

Sam, the singer, was anorexic. She wore a shiny leather jacket, a gift from her mother. She had slashed it with a one-sided razor to make it more street credible. She wanted to be a star and later on she made it as a bald backing singer for Nina Hagen. She had experimented with every known mindenhancing drug and treated the rest of humanity as if their minds were accordingly unenhanced. She assiduously learnt the words of the songs, enunciating them with exaggerated grimaces. She had no voice training but had an inborn facility with the microphone. Her voice was dusky, or she could scream psychotically as required, which usually destroyed the former quality. The sultry songs therefore had to come before the raucous ones.

Dylan, bass, puffed his cheeks out when he played, and stared seriously into a void. He had style but was not extravagant.

Sam strapped on her credibly chipped white Vox teardrop guitar. She turned on the amp and plugged in the guitar lead, a procedure that she always performed in the wrong order causing a mind-altering buzz.

Larry trod on his kick pedal and cursed. It was adjusted as tight as it could go but was still slack. So there was a delay between the intention and the arrival of the sound. The skin of the bass drum was loose so it made a dull thud

when he'd have preferred a hard clap. He reacted to both problems by treading harder on the pedal. This would give him a recurring injury in his right leg and turn him into a stand-up percussionist.

Dylan switched his amp from standby to run. A deep note hummed into the room and everyone stopped what they were doing for a second to admire its fullness, its thickness and its unerring length. Dylan deftly placed his first finger flat over the A-string. Pure silence. A dog barked. Minutes later the humans heard Joe Ranui arriving on his scooter.

Joe's smile burned round the room. He had wild dreaded black locks, Doc Marten boots, a red feather earring and a racing green Edwardian frock coat. He unfastened a small case, ingrained with all kinds of motifs, Egyptian, Polynesian, Furry-Freak. He lifted out his viola, pointing out its new pickup, and everyone cooed in admiration.

Dylan lit a cigar. Joe lit a joint of weed. Mike launched a riff. Larry burst into motion. Dylan stretched his fingers and held on to wide-spaced chords that would be the home finders in many a loss of direction. Sam sank into an ululation, Larry slapped the kick pedal harder and Joe went into raptures, climbing up on the furniture, as if such an accumulation of good vibrations demanded physical elevation. Afterwards they listened back to the cassette tape of what they had done.

The practice week was coming to an end and Fay brought out a record by Mammal with a poem called 'Beware the Man' by Sam Hunt, advising you to watch out for any guy who tries to fit you out in his idea of a hat. It might be he's fitting you out 'for more than that.' The band would be The Hats.

Usually they were sardined in the ill-lit trade van, but conditions eased if Dylan brought his mirror-hubcapped Studebaker. He only did so if he had a girlfriend with him, in which case the band still travelled in the van, but at least there was some elbow room.

They played fourteen gigs in all, anywhere and everywhere: at the inauguration of a pine-only cabinet making project, in pubs where they were paid with free beer, or at communes where they were paid in vegetarian meals and grass. In a cavernous hall at Runanga they played on a stage surrounded by portraits of past politicians. The Labour Party had its first meeting in that hall seventy years earlier.

But a new type of activist undreamed of by the first socialists, a masochistic anarchistic speed poet called Mettler, strapped in black leather with piercing in all kinds of places, jumped up on stage, grabbed the microphone and slobbered a jabber of half-sense during their set. Mettler's speciality was 'subversion', he called it. Parties, concerts, weddings, funerals, no job too small!

Eighty-four
feed the poor
no slug speedier
than the media

eighty-five
barely alive
beat the blues
freedom to lose

eighty-six
get the fix
ball and shackle
the spec-tackle

eighty-seven
shootin' heaven
doin' harm
up in arms

eighty-eight
kill the state
eat the cake
spit the fake
hate!

The band let him have his say till he ran out of puff and spit. Later, Mettler, fascinated by the roomy Stude-

baker, asked Dylan if he could jump in as far as Reefton Junction but Dylan refused. Dylan was doing his best to impress the Japanese abstract artist he had invited, and didn't want anyone ruining his romance. Mettler would not forget.

It rained a lot. They had to drive ever further for work, and they soon learned that the keyword for this industry was not variety but repetition.

The Earth Lovers Alternative Lifestyles Outdoor Festival in Christchurch seemed to hold no danger. The Hats would be third on a bill of twenty. Fay still hoped that having a child wouldn't make any difference to their dream but the disparities were already clear. The non-breeders would sleep in tents behind the stage; Fay and Mike were booked into a motel with hot running water.

The band before them, MOLI NOHO (Mother's Little No Hoper) was made up of a guitarist, a keyboard player, and a drum machine. The sound system had a buzz in it, so the engineer removed the 'earth' from one of the essential circuits, reducing the buzz but endangering lives. MOLI NOHO was hoping this would be their breakthrough concert. Their idol Schism was at the festival and they were hoping he would take an interest in them. In their efforts to impress him, they over-ran their time slot putting The Hats under pressure before they had even started. There was rain forecast and an insensitive stage crew were hurrying the opening bands through as if that would hold back the weather.

On this occasion The Hats played well. A good performance was usually due to something unexpected happening, or to someone playing in a way that they could never have rehearsed. This drew them out of their nervousness and fear and Joe was soon playing in a frenzied distorted way that inspired the rest of them to respond with the chaotic capacity of their instruments. The noise that resulted was wickedly good. Joe climbed on top of the stack of loudspeakers, Dylan hit the bass grooves and they found themselves being carried along on a current in which they were amazed to recognise the riff of their first song. The result, of common understanding out of such disorder, pleased the hippies in the park as well as the Indies and punks and they all began bouncing about destroying the council grass. The only ones not satisfied were the fidgety lines waiting for the portable toilet doors to open and exhale their dark odour of treated ordure, and a small gang of racist bikies with steel-capped boots who were drinking, smoking their chemicals and doing a good job of transforming their own craniums into toilet bowls.

Tapes of the group's concerts were guarded by the separate members long after, each of them believing they had the essential performances, but this was the one everyone most wanted a copy of. The Hats performance was a winner, Fay's management skill had been proven and her faith in the band rewarded. Joe was being offered joints of grass by the hippies and quarts of beer by the punks. Everyone was grinning, but the skies were greying and Fay was feel-

ing the strain. She and Mike went back to the motel as the first shower hit.

The rain was intermittent, heavy. They watched television and listened to radio reports about the Festival. The organisers were facing a loss, a singer had been electrocuted and Schism refused to play because of 'the earthing problem'. The planned fireworks were cancelled and it had already been dubbed the Mud Festival. Early on Sunday morning Mike and Fay were woken by Dylan. Joe's teeth had been kicked in. They had to find a dentist. The one they found performed the extraction of Joe's broken off roots as if it was still Good Friday and he was carrying out an ancient form of Roman torture.

That afternoon Fay went into labour.

After a painfully long wait at the hospital, during which the contractions increased to seven minutes, a doctor arrived carrying a golf bag. He was succeeded by an anaesthetist with a pink Easter bunny in his pocket. Some hours later, measurable by Fay's screams and the imprecations of an enthusiastic nurse, Izzie was born. Izzie did not cry out even when they slapped her backside and pricked a needle into her heel. She lay for a few minutes on Fay's breast, then a nurse wrapped her up and handed her to Mike. He was directed up three floors to an incubator room flooded with phosphorescent light, where Izzie would lie for four days with cotton wool swabs over her eyes to protect them from the same light.

Fay had undergone agony, pethidine and a paralys-

ing injection. For what? For her baby to be taken away. Her first slumber was broken by fearful awakenings. Each time she dozed she recalled a fragment of a wider dream. It was to do with a beach. A girl was skipping over stones and twigs. There were faces under the water, like stone faces, and Fay ... was an island bleeding into the water. A ship with billowing sails passed through a channel. The little girl was waving at her, but the ocean was rising up around her. When Fay woke the last time she was calling out, afraid she was drowning, that her baby was drowning. She wanted to know why they had taken her away. And where was her husband? What if the baby were swapped for another one?

A nurse, trying to be helpful, told her that 'baby' was in an incubator.

'INCUBATOR!' She hated the nurse, and the white room with its glaring light and the doctors with their golf clubs and bunny rabbits and the hospital with its corridors and injections but most of all its INCUBATORS!

'HELP! HELP! THEY'VE STOLEN MY BABY! Help! Help! That nurse wants to steal my baby! And that doctor with his golf clubs, what has he done with her, where is she, what right do they have to take my baby away like that, and the drugs, I didn't want any drugs, so why did they give them to me, did my husband say to do it? No! Why did they do it? They're not human! They're aliens! That's what they are, aliens! What right do people have?'

The hospital staff held Fay down while a silent doctor in a starched white coat jabbed her with a tranquilliser syringe. A nurse told her as she slipped into a trance that 'it is best for baby' to remain under ultra violet lights and 'it is best for baby' to be bottle fed for a few days and 'baby' is all right now, Fay will be all right after a little sleep, and baby will be all right after a sleep, and everything will be all, all right.

A bursting buxom charge sister that could have walked out of one of Joe's Robert Crumb comics bumped Mike awake. A visitor, Joe, was in the waiting room, looking as if he'd walked out of one of Larry's war comics. His face was swollen from the anaesthetics and his lips were like hacked melanomas. They shared a cigarette. They sneaked up to the incubators and ogled at Izzie. They crept like burglars through the wards of incubated babies and tranquillised mothers, astounded at the low security. How easy it would be for aliens to switch one baby for another. Back in the Waiting Room, Joe put his arms around Mike and squeezed him tight, emitting a vapour of mouthwash and marijuana. The two of them were gasping this breathy, warm, brother-hobo, antiseptic laugh-wail not about blood and violence, but about new life and new hope when the charge sister asked if they wouldn't like to enjoy the weather outside.

Ultra violet beams of sunlight reached through the cumulus. Joe shook his head at the 'northwest arch', a mighty

curvature of purple rimmed cloud, exclaiming 'A wonder sky! A great day to be born! It was the music! That's what brought it on! The baby's a jiver! She was grooving in Fay's belly!'

They bounded joyfully through the hospital marigold plots onto Manchester Street before Joe made a detour to a house in a dead-end street where he emptied his pockets of syringes he had found 'just lying there' in the hospital. He left Mike in an open area with a tourniqueted junkie who had streams of blood running over his dry brown skin where he had failed to find a vein. He held the syringe out to Mike who shrugged, he didn't know how to do that. The junkie shrugged and tried again. Another stream soon appeared when Joe appeared dazed but satisfied surrounded by a cloud of smoke. He injected the junkie, with surgical expertise, then the two friends made for the Barbadoes St cemetery.

The sun descended below the arch and illuminated the underside of cloud making everything a warm orange glow. Joe went into raptures over the light and took his painkillers, or vice versa. The wind was warm, like the first blast from an oven when you open the door. Joe was wondering what it would be like to bite a biscuit with false teeth. Mike shook his locks and told Joe again about the helpless baby, so light, and the way she had seemed to stare at him, with the wisdom of all ages, how everything about her, her skin, her long eyelashes, her fingers peeping from the tight wrapping, her dark, fibre-

thin hair, everything about her seemed wise, older than age, truthful, and trusting.

After a silence in which Joe's thoughts again arrived at biscuits, it was Mike's turn to throw his arms around Joe. After picking up some Chocolate Macaroons they headed back to baby base.

Over the next few days feminist and musician friends visited the new baby. Their appearance frightened some of the new mothers. Joe was caught stealing needles. Sam ignored Fay completely, and said that the baby was the dead spit of Dylan, which didn't win her any bonus points. Larry held the baby so tenderly he nearly dropped her. So the staff shared in Fay's relief when the golfing doctor said she, they, everybody, could leave.

Changing nappies, trying out different teats and getting the temperature of the bottle right didn't stretch the intellect, but Izzie had a glowing Mediterranean complexion, hair that was thickening up by the day, and 'ten fingers and toes' as Fay's mother put it. She danced her fists about to Fascist Tango in the Street but it was a floppy 7-inch vinyl disc of whale voices salvaged from a National Geographic that turned her into — another of Tam's phrases — 'a good sleeper'. When Izzie was awake there was little time to think, and in the silence as she slept the new parents were content to be grateful blobs, lying in an open-eyed coma listening to the calls of birds outside.

An article in Rip It Up praised The Hats, except that

the journalist misspelled their name as The Hates. Joe was about to become a legend. The journalist lauded the improvisational skills of 'Ranui Joe', calling him 'the Edmund Hillary of Pop.' He assured his readers they would grow to love The Hates.

With exposure like that they had no choice in the matter: The Hats were now The Hates, and Fay got busy on the phone. By the end of the day, backed by gargled inducements from her mother's latest gift, an Italian coffee machine, she had some one-off shows arranged. The band would be lodged, fed and paid, and that was going to be a lot better than being unplugged or paid in dope. The wagon-wheel sun globed down over the aubergine sea. Not only brine, not only the fertile odour of decomposition, not only Joe's herbs, but fortune was on the breeze. A weka, the house pet, pecked at some slices of bread below the kitchen window. There would be enough for everybody. Mike and Fay laid a blanket on the ground. Soon only the moon and stars could see them, and a frog on the edge of the water tank, slowly, sceptically, blinking.

They had the greatest time of all in inauspiciously-named Gore. A cowboy in rawhide jeans stalked from the Nashville Milk Bar as they drove down the main street. Mike was afraid the audience might turn out to be white supremacists with a set of sexual attitudes that would make Fay's feminist friends hot under the bodice. But the little group of welcomers that emerged from the pub was of

another cast altogether.

When Joe opened the passenger's door and the clothes and blankets that had been stopping the draughts fell out, the organiser of the event seemed not to resent the apparent disorder. He was a tall bronze masterpiece called Shake, six feet two, a statistic he put down to the virtues of kiwi lamb. His father, five feet and a few, came to New Zealand as an approved Halal killer of lambs whose meat was destined for the Gulf States — the method had something to do with the way the throat was slit and the direction the slaughterman was facing, Mecca. Shake's talent was recognised early; he won tuition scholarships and became a prizewinner. He had been accepted for the woodwind section of the Symphony Orchestra and would take up his position in Wellington in a couple of months. Though Shake did not take anything stronger than spirulina for kicks, he and Joe were comrades from the start.

After the sound check everyone sat round a circular bar and listened to tapes Shake had made the previous summer in New York. There were ambient pieces, a live concert by John Zorn, liquid percussion by a guy called Trimpin, and the eerie accents of two German hobo sound explorer drop-outs called AusGang making music with found objects in a 42nd Street subway station.

The band ate vegetarian, Izzie was passed from kindly arms to kindly arms and soothed to sleep, and the doors opened around eight. When only a few more people arrived than had turned out to welcome them, they played

their set without dramatics, and at the end Shake joined in for an unrehearsed jam. Everyone slept on mattresses in different houses, and most of the audience turned up next day to help pack out. He gave a recording of the evening to Joe and invited the guys to visit him when he set up shop in Busineyland, as he called Wellington.

Not all of the venues were as baby-friendly as Gore had been. Some of the people they stayed with behaved as if they had never seen a baby in their lives. On the money front, Fay was extracting a bit more each time from the promoters, but it seemed that the higher the fee, the greater the hidden expenses. A road accident didn't help matters.

Mike was driving way too fast. He tried to fling an apple core out the window but it smashed against the steel rim of the window frame, the van deviated, Sam screamed, Mike over-corrected, and they were out of control. The van swept across the highway in front of an oncoming Landrover and they dived into a sea of wild dry grass. A wire fence softened the van's arrest, giving like a bass string before busting.

The van was drivable after it had been disentangled from the fencing wire; the Landrover towed them back onto the road. But the repairs used up all the profit from the tour and Sam vowed that one day she would belong to a group that flew from place to place in a private jet. There was a taboo on throwing anything out of the window from

then on — all cores were to be shish kebabed onto Mike's jungle knife — and the next tour Fay stayed at home.

*

The flimsy panes were rattling. Izzie had a runny nose and they were out of kindling. Fay cleaned the grate, and tried to set the fire with torn up cartons, but the coals fell through the grey wafers of corrugated card.

The updraught was reversing down the chimney. The cold wedged itself into Fay's cardigan. They looked at a book about dolphins. Izzie put her fingers in her mouth and snuffled, clutching her fluffy grey and pink elephant. When finally she went to sleep Fay peered into the bush from behind the curtains. Yes, there was someone there, a face in the forest, hers. She, Fay, was hiding out there, unable to come in.

She drank herbal teas and tried not to smoke. She listened to Leonard Cohen, 'It's time that we began to laugh'. She thought about her friends in Lyttelton. She hadn't heard from them for months. All she got in the mail were trendy political booklets asking for money. She wanted to know why people cut themselves off from you after you start a family. Do you stop being human, or what? Yes, she had stopped being human.

She wanted to visit Lil. She needed to laugh and sing and dance again. She wanted to have enough money to be comfortable, she wanted to believe the finance minister

when he said, talking about GST, 'Everyone will be better off.'

Then she felt it. The eye of her double had entered the house. The eye that belonged to the person she had not become.

She glanced at a booklet about a nuclear-free New Zealand but the bomb was in her head. While he was asleep Izzie was passed out from the mammoth mountain over the bush by a cruel robed mist-figure with callused hands. Syllables, fragments of syllables of her name, of her friends' names, were popping like Rice Bubbles, and a bright traffic light coloured insect like a bulls-eye aphid was descending towards her on a thread.

Tam suggested taking Izzie for a few days to give Fay a break, and that seemed like a good idea. Mike left Fay alone by the coal pile waving feebly at Izzie, who was strapped tight into her kiddie seat, eyes dilated, fingers lodged in her mouth. At Hifield Tam read stories, cooked up treats and collected magazines for Izzie to cut up for her Hifield scrapbooks. Fay thought she would be all right all alone for the duration of The Hates next tour, but she soon realised her mistake.

She woke to a fizzing sound coming from the smoking light plug and there was an explosion in the fuse box. She replaced the fuse and it blew again. She wrapped herself in a blanket wondering if it was she who had stopped existing. She had been lying on a blanket spread over the soft

floor of the Botanic Gardens when she experienced the sensation she always interpreted as the beginning of her daughter's life. She now asked herself if that moment had not signalled the end of hers.

The storm did not let up. She was longing for a house with no windows, at least not these thin-paned rattling things. She wanted to live somewhere there was a school nearby, where there were no trees swishing, no branches snapping, no rain pelting, and definitely no musicians. She couldn't see the valley for the mist and rain.

The minutes she waited were like hours, the hours like days. She took to modelling clay. Instead of scattered toys, the living room became littered with tortured figurines. She wanted to be like the giant weta, a fierce Jurassic insect that can freeze within ice in the winter but resurrects like Jesus in the spring thaw.

The tour came to a calamitous conclusion. On the very night when a record promoter came to see them play in Queenstown, Joe climbed up on to the P.A.speakers, which then toppled into the audience.

Joe disappeared that night and wouldn't be seen until Mike's visit to Wellington, not long after the bust-up.

Mike and Fay split up the year Izzie started at school. In the same year, the new Minister of State-Owned Enterprises closed 432 Post Offices, leaving 560 people without jobs. Thousands of stamp shops were soon appearing in corner dairies; dozens of restaurants and bars were soon opening in abandoned historic Post Offices.

The band, reduced to Mike, Larry and Dylan, changed their name to Wreck the Mike and played in one empty Post Office or Railway Station or church hall after another ... in Nelson, in Blenheim, in Lyttelton, in Oamaru. Fay found them a show in an ex-church renowned for its acoustics. It would be their last gig.

The exhaust pipe blew a hole and the trio had to put their heads out the windows to breathe. They arrived in Havelock intoxicated by the fumes. On the walls were photographs of the history of the region — a clock tower with curved kauri beams, a meeting house with carved totara poles, a collection of ribbed washboards, and a wet-cooper

from a neighbouring valley standing beside a wine cask. There were prints of ships with wondrous names, the *Astrolabe* and Cook's *Endeavour*. The organisers had wanted a conventional evening of folk-rock. When they saw Mike's ambiguous dress sense they dimmed the stage lights. Dylan rose to the occasion and gave his finest performance ever. Feeling his way in the half-light his sound was full, he discovered new tones, his tuning, timing and feeling were an aural miracle under the curved beams! Everyone was appreciating Dylan's finest moment when Mettler sneaked in by the fire exit. High on pills and paint fumes, he climbed up among the rafters like a spider, found a niche in one of the alcoves of the stained windows, and lambasted the congregation, his fingers spreading out into the air as if spinning the words in front of him,

I clears out sleepin' out
back to the black water
death-boat flat-iron
waitin' for the climb-out

Crunchin' munchin' engine
whack me whack you
screamin' in the head
one last bizz-buzz—

Gone! Gone! Zero!
Live or dead!

Hear me, hear you
chew chew, cud bitch drown the punk!
AGRO!!

He hunched up holding his stomach as if he was in pain. A long low mean snuffle escaped like steam from his compressed form crouched like a beaten cat refusing to surrender to fear, to pain, to the imagined enemy. He began wheezing phrases of idiotic descant till one long ho-ho-hee-hee gained pitch and bubbled to a high cackling pitch. Mouth open wide, his tongue vibrating a demonic ululation, his eyes turned in their sockets as he cried,

One half
three four
five eighth

Here some of the audience looked interested, thinking he was talking about rugby.

Two fours.
In your gate.
Gettin' small.
Cut the blood.
Gettin' big.
Kick the necks
in the tex, tic pox!
hen sex!

The spectators looked from him to the stage and back again. One of them was smiling knowingly and winking at Mike, not only because he was wearing a dress, but because he believed this was all part of their performance! Mike was terrified. Mettler was drawing spirals in the air.

Round up down
pee stick, master kick!
ping time, Mister Munn!

The faces of the faithful were cloudy. Certainly there was some meaning in what he was saying but, well ... what was it exactly? And who was he anyway? Was he with those fairies on the stage or not? In this moment of perplexity Mettler shinnied down a kauri puncheon and grabbed the fire hose. Grinning like a gargoyle, he turned the nozzle crying, 'Casanova over!' which was some kind of twisted reference to Dylan's romantic weekend with the abstract artist at the Labour Party party. The local vigilantes got him this time and had him arrested, but not before Dylan and his baby, the Italian cello, had been well and truly doused.

Later, Mike opened a bottle of Tequila and promised better concerts. Larry took three slugs and fell asleep with his head on a tom-tom. Dylan stroked the blouse of a local girl saying, 'You know, that ring around the moon, it just like those golden rings in the centres of your eyes.

In the morning Mike found a note from Larry saying he was going to find Myrlena. Dylan and Mike visited a poet at Korere on the Motupiko River, who put on a record by Marie and the Atom and, music over, read an elegy for the end of the decade:

Abandon
all you once dreamed.
You are burning
out of the shadow of that tree.

You have climbed
with your habits
and your hands
and your thoroughness
and come where there is no prophet.
Listen,
everything is still
out of earshot of the river.

Put everything behind you
though you would do it all again.
You have followed the line
of the ravine,
you have passed
the spring way below,
and now the rushing water
the rustling of leaves
they are the same to you.

The tree is near,
its roots reach through rock
to the spring.
Abandon all you once dreamed.
Enter its shadow.

Dylan took a keen interest in the poem. What did the tree signify? Was it the tree of life or of religion? The poet looked confused and read the poem again, while Mike stared patiently at a family of shining laughing-Buddhas on her mantelpiece. Before long, Dylan and the poet were gleaming at each other, and Mike went outside to keep company with a goat that was chewing and bleating. Its cry seemed to be part of its own clever plan — eat, cry for help, drop little pellets of shit, eat again, cry again.

The next day, astronautically positioned in the passenger's seat, Dylan announced he was going to throw a sale to 'generate cash flow'.

'And I'll cut the rental space Greens occupies, give it a facelift, change the name. What do you think? I'll open a record shop in the other half. It's that or sell it to the highest bidder.'

'You can advertise our shows there.'

'Your shows! I'm going back to the real business. It doesn't make sense, Mike! The band, music ... it's gonna cause me more and more expense. It's gonna break all that Pita and Illya worked for!'

They turned at Sphinx and followed the Maruia River through Shenandoah. Mike dropped Dylan at Springs Junction to catch the bus to Christchurch. They shook hands, something they didn't usually do, and it was goodbye to Wreck the Mike.

It was goodbye to more than that. When Mike arrived at his house there was no smoke and no Fay. There was nothing but another foreboding note, 'Gone to Tam's'. Fay had had enough of the house, enough of Mount St Patrick, enough of Nine Mile Creek, the van, the band, the three-piece, and, he would come to realise, enough of him. She had left Izzie with her mother and was driving the Beetle towards Christchurch.

She had just wanted to get away, to get somewhere, anywhere, to get quickly through the threatening small towns with their big dirty automobiles, to break free of parenthood, of marriage, of the mountains. She passed Matt Downes, the Hifield sergeant and one-time shoot-

ing buddy of Glenn McLeod, who screwed up his eyes as he stepped from the Criterion and waved at the car, thinking it was Tam who was driving. Many's the long half-hour he spent in the Cry.

A gigantic shadow, part mountain, part night, was creeping up on Fay. At least, she thought, as it overtook her, she had escaped that draughty tomb waiting for husband or friends or mother to call, stuck plumb inside one of those Lows on the weather map. When she got to Lil's she would feel better, lighter. They would drink and smoke and reminisce and laugh together.

The shadow raced ahead. Everything about her turned grey, gluey grey. She slowed down, projecting a bleak pool on the road ahead. The Port Hills, separating Christchurch from Lyttelton, were still illuminated, golden. They reminded her of the topaz lamplight in her old student flat, the one Mike stood outside guitar in one hand and a bottle of Riesling in the other. He made her laugh. He was young, a kid really. Was that all? Was desire enough for her to give up her studies and shift to a derelict shack, to start a family, to manage a band of R.S.I. candidates?

A cattle truck packed with jittery mutton passed her on a long stretch of road. Another car at the end of the straight flicked its lights up and down in warning. The driver of the truck hit back with a hunting spotlight forcing the approaching car to pull over. The stink of diesel exhaust and condemned sheep forced Fay to stop. She felt nauseous. She switched on a cassette, the Hate's old demo tape. She

loved Mike. She still liked his music. She switched it off. She never liked his music. She threw the cassette out the window. She wanted to escape, to avoid making the same mistakes again and again. She stared at the patch of lights on the road feeling like one of those blinkered horses at the Hifield racecourse pacing, pacing around and around.

Later, a little later, she arrived at Lil's. Lil was no stranger to emotional difficulties. In her first year, she had been courted by two men, one a Trotskyist and the other editor of the Law Society rag. It went on for two semesters. One day she woke up and ditched them both — another happy lesbian. In going to stay with her, Fay never really gave Mike much of a chance.

'Oh, come on, Fay! He's emotionally stunted! Anyone who plays an electric guitar must be, it's so easy to make a big noise. He was probably beaten as a kid when he played with his penis.'

'Sometimes, Lil, this is terrible, but sometimes I wish I hadn't had Izzie! You know? The world changed one way and I changed another way. Now there's no getting back into the swing of things. You don't make the same jokes after you've had a child. They stitch you up all wrong and it's just not possible to do anything the way you used to. Why oh why did we get married? What a mistake!'

'Look on the bright side — later, perhaps you could have an affair with him, when you are no longer married.'

'No longer married.' The words had a mighty pleasant ring to them. She had never thought she was leaving him.

She just wanted a holiday, and a shoulder to cry on. But perhaps she had done it. Perhaps she had left him.

Lil delved into her entertainment address book and managed to find Mike some work on the other island. Making a sound track for a film would mean crossing the Strait to Wellington — as soon as possible.

Fay called Tam to say the Beetle needed repairs. It would take a few days.

Now Tam had raised Fay alone, but she couldn't have kept the farm going after Glenn's death without Perry's help. He arrived at the appropriate seasons, took care of the lambing, the docking, the crutching and the shearing, and was gone as silently as he had arrived, leaving polkadots of spat gum and a few empties in the shearing pit. He used to give little Faybell the biggest swings in the world.

'Izzie's staying here for a few days.'

'Poor kid.'

'Why do you say that, Perry. She's happy as can be.'

'With a queer like that for a father?'

'He only wears dresses when he's on stage.'

'That's what he tells you.'

'So what? What do I care? It's a free country!'

'*Either shall a man put on a woman's garment*.' Remember? We had to rememberise it, at school.'

He had moved closer to her. How did he manage to do that at times like these, so his rough voice became physical, intimate, and that odour of wool oil and horse's flank

and tobacco reminded her that he loved her? She steeled herself, 'Skip it, will you, Perry. I've got enough to think about!'

He lifted his weathered face and aimed a thin jet of smoke at the oyster-flesh nimbus clouds.

The next day Tam watched him ride into the high country, his work-built thighs astride a thick leather saddle that moulded perfectly the muscle-curved loin of his mare. He knew horses, not to control them, but to ride them till they became a part of his body. He bet on them, too. He could pick a winner at a glance. He knew pain. He worked till it hurt. Sweat and fatigue were his friends.

Izzie was at Tam's side, appearing without warning as she had the knack of doing. She slipped her little hand into Tam's.

'Wotcha lookin' at, grammah?'

'At Annabel Lee, piglet. Wouldn't you like to ride her one day?'

The old herb garden had been neglected for years. Some of the herbs had survived snow and drought and sown themselves afresh each year. The cement lines of the border could still be seen here and there so they drew a plan making use of the lines, with a new low wall to close in their 'serenity plot'. Then they drove to Scuggs Garden Supplies.

Sergeant Downes emerged from the Cry shaking his

trouser leg to disperse a rogue dribble. Tam introduced Izzie.

'My word, you are the spit of your grand-daddy, young lady.'

This sent Izzie into a giddy swirl as Tam explained, 'Sergeant Downes and grandpa used to go fishing together, Izzie. In the 1960's.'

To Izzie that sounded like another century.

'I bet you'd like a ride in the Cherry Wagon, eh, young lady?'

He winked and lead Izzie round the back of the station to a highly polished deep red and black 1959 Holden station wagon. Its family-friendly curves and two-toning had been passionately preserved by Matt's little brother Stan, a vintage car enthusiast who doubled as the local coroner.

'Is it for puttin' crim'nals in?'

'Only the good people, honey. The mayor of Methven sat right there last race day. And it's the Cherry Wagon leads the local farmers in the A & P parade. Jump in, we'll go for a spin round the race track!'

But Izzie was squeezing Tam's hand tight and they opted for a walk round Scuggs. They bought Russian tarragon for fish, mint for lamb sauce, dill for headaches, and valerian, for restless nights.

Beset by sudden showers and too late to make the last ferry to Wellington, Mike pulled in to a hotel in Kaikoura where one shark cleaned him up at pool, another cleaned him out at poker. He slept in the back of the van and was woken next morning by men in plastic macs and seafarer hats, though the skies had now cleared. Two of them were holding improvised truncheons, a third was hitting the back window with his fist, yelling, 'He's not Wanted, I reckon. Just a jitney tourist.'

Mike cleared sleep from his eyes and gaped from one to the other.

'No worries young fella! Just checkin'you're OK! You OK? What way you headin'?'

'Picton!'

His interrogator pointed with his truncheon, 'First turn past the bowser. Don't turn off.'

Mike filled up the tank and drew out some cash. At least the rain had passed. He shoved the notes into his jeans pocket and climbed back into the van. He turned up the music, the mystery of the Chills' song Pink Frost.

Back on Highway One he felt the knife against his neck. A voice that he knew told him 'No sudden movements', and did he have any cigarettes? As a Camel waited in the hijacker's mouth for a shaky light Mike made out some slashes, probably self-inflicted, on a drooping lip creamy with pus. Mettler took a long slow toke, the better to display a spider's web tattoo on the back of his dragging hand.

'Don't make a big thing of it,' Mettler muttered and slunk back into the shadows without waiting for a reply. Not that Mike wanted a conversation. He had plenty to say, but none of it was polite.

They drove like that for an hour or two, without looking at each. Mike routinely lit Mettler's cigarettes. He figured that Mettler was not high enough or desperate enough to do anything violent.

'Any preference?'

'You're the driver!'

The Axemen were followed by Iggy Pop, 'La-la-la-la, I drive and I drive!'

Mike drove and Mettler smoked his Camels. As they descended the last hill towards Picton township he tapped Mike on the shoulder.

'You mad?'

'You might have asked!'

'Don't go septic. No one picks me up! You gotta be creative! Hide me in your van while we roll on and I'll help you find Joe. Deal?'

'Do I get my jungle knife back?'

The surface of the Sounds was smooth and a titanium third quarter moon hung high above the Pacific as the ferry rounded the first bend. The wharves of Picton blinked off behind the great rump of a denuded hillock. The stealthy licorice-like figure of Mettler tapped the suspended liferafts with a secret knock. Anxious faces peered out from under the tarpaulin, but not Joe's — he wasn't on board. Word was he was hiding out in Wellington.

The ferry passed island crowns of bald turf, mounds like dormant crustaceans above the windless glaze of the water. The Arapawa Gates opened onto the troubled waters of Cook Strait; a latitude forties westerly was sweeping through the channel. Soon the loosely laid settlements around Wellington glided by and the call came for owners of vehicles to go below, the ferry shoved up against the wharf and the off-ramp was fastened. Trucks, trains and delivery vans stirred to life, jammed cars blared their horns. An officer and three tattooed seamen directed the vehicles out of the holding hull. The van clattered off.

Mike followed Mettler's directions to various houses. They inquired at a transients' cottage, and a so-called Refugee Room, but there was no Joe. Mike was about to go on to his lodging at Shake's when Mettler asked him if he couldn't see his way to advance him a hundred bucks.

'In advance of what?'

'Whaddya think—The Golden Kiwi?'

So that was it! No Joe without a party donation. Minutes later they were in a peeling house in Marion St that had the hopeless mustiness of heroin about it. A big-boned Polynesian transvestite showed them a room in a state of holy untidiness. Mettler went to buy cigarettes with his capital and never returned but Joe turned up an hour later. They crossed the Mount Victoria basin to Shake's warehouse.

'What's it to be?'

Joe called for Ornette Coleman.

Shake had mattresses already laid out for even more musical guests he was expecting, so the three laid back and heard out a live recording of an extended 'Sadness'. They ate nut loaf with mushrooms and went to sleep early. In the morning, his guests, German composers from the group Ausgang, arrived and Shake cycled off to a rehearsal of a Tchaikovski piece while Mike and Joe headed for the sound studio. Joe proved to have a natural bent for studio recording.

One evening Shake turned up with a viola that had been in the Orchestra storeroom for years, owner unknown. Joe wasn't as enthusiastic as expected.

'Aw! You know. I'm through with that. Give it someone who can play.'

'Come on, Joe, you can play real good. What are you on?'

'Not any more. I'm not into it. I'm a sax-man now.'

Was he kidding? To play sax you needed teeth. Strong

original front teeth. Shake looked out a window at a nearby construction site.

'You see that hut over there with the demolition order on it? That's you if you don't wake up, pal.'

Shake's warehouse was one of those monstrosities that were hastily erected in the waste land left by the destruction of Wellington's Chinatown. He'd tried to imbue it with a sense of history by sticking large black and white photographs to the concrete walls. A cluster of warships with American flags anchored in Wellington harbour. Disappointed faces at the Labour Party defeat of 1990. His German guests were interested in New Zealand's history. Even Shake did not know the answers to some of their questions.

'No wars? You have not had a war in the twentieth century?'

'Only other people's, and, ah, union busting.'

'What is that?'

The next day they walked around the harbour and Mike gave them a brief history of Waterfront strikes, in particular the one in 1951 when Prime Minister Holland said that the country was at war and called in the army. It was one of those Wellington days when a sea breeze and passing clouds rob the sun of its value. The Europeans made recordings for their 'sound banks': the clanks and screech of containers being scraped, the shrieking of gulls,

marine slapping and sloshing. They stopped into the cutting studio and listened to the backing track sync'ed up to the footage. The chase ended with a smash:

The wheel hits a rain culvert. The left wheels climb onto a footpath as the right wheels groove themselves into a long scooped culvert. Uncontrollable speed, the ground passing like rushing water.

The driver hits the brakes. The automobile smacks into the pole.

[Slow motion.]

The hood caves in. The driver's head is thrown forward, his forehead pierces the windscreen, shards lodge in his face, his fore-head comes to rest over the edges of jagged glass.

[Normal speed.]

The driver withdraws his face from the crazed web. He pushes the buckled door open. He steps out onto the street.

Live wires are dangling from the pole, sparking. He staggers to the front of the wreckage, he is staring from the honeycomb of the windscreen.

He calls out, a name, perhaps. Or a cry. He climbs over the smoking mangled bonnet. He punches a bigger hole in the glass

from outside and pushes his head through the windscreen. Now he is climbing back in, reaching his arms through the hole towards a still shape, a child.

Heinz was shocked, 'The film is very violent.'

'Yeah, you get used to it.'

'Are many people killed on the road here?'

'I think so. What about you?'

'Very many. There is no limit of speed in Germany. You can go as fast as you like. The road is a symbol of freedom for us, and of death.'

'Yeah. Oil and blood.'

The lights had come up and Joe had vanished to spill some of his own. It was late that evening when they returned to the warehouse. Joe had climbed up the fire escape and was inside, pupils bulls-eyed like the pin-pricks of a horror-film ghoul, incommunicable. Shake and Heinz talked about racism in Europe and New Zealand into the early hours.

The situation to the south did not give more cause for optimism. When Fay returned to Hifield with Tam's Volkswagen there was another car behind her. She grabbed Izzie from the house and dashed to the other car, whose driver had the motor idling. Then she and Izzie were chauffeured back to Lyttelton, by Lil.

As the ferry drew out of Wellington Shake took a shot of the group, waving hands a blur, arms and legs held out

sideways like skeletons, cheeks sucked in close to their bones, Heinz's arm around Joe under the shade of a sombrero.

AusGang went above to spot dolphins, Joe and Mettler went below to the Rail Deck, Mike found a seat near the children's play area. The boat shuddered across Cook Strait without any of those other people's children throwing up over him. They clattered off the ferry onto the South Island; they threaded Marlborough and the Hunder Lee hills; they turned at the Waikuku bypass for Hifield ... The musicians had been on the move for ten hours and not only Joe was strung out. They began the gradual ascent over the plains towards Tam's farm.

'Like a sea of jasper shon!' Mike whispered into the fogging windshield. Something opened out like a roll of flypaper. It was the road. He was becoming detached from the act of driving, from the present, from their lateness, becoming more and more dissociated from his hands upon the wheel. He focussed on the thought of seeing Izzie again. Details of her birth replayed. Helpless and useless, he was at the scene of Fay's agony again: here comes the golfing doctor, and a nurse is yelling at Fay to push and push as if she is dumping 'a great big poo'. Fluorescent light is glaring out of the cubicle where they have wrapped up Izzie like an Egyptian mummy and a nurse is explaining that they have tranquillised Fay because she called the doctor an alien. Mike saw it all now, the birth, the marriage, the mountain. He was writing a new plot.

They would start again. They would have another baby. They would shift to a better place. His foot was flat to the floor with hope and expectation. They were warping along the highway, the van shaking with the stress. Heinz and Gretsch were staring from Mike to the streaking saffron light before them, where frogs found themselves stunned in the spotlight for the final glue-up. The mountains loomed. The van arrowed through the galactic moon shadows. Moths and mozzies became strafing space junk. He will sell the van, buy a family wagon. They will make a home, a theme park for children, with toys and games, swings and slides, and Fay will never feel left out again. Mystic drop-outs will always be dropping in where dykes and queerdos schmooze and children blow kazoos.

The farmhouse hall light, segmented into diamonds by lead framing, threw dagger-like beams over the courtyard. The front door opened. Tam yelled at the barking dogs to shut up and crossed the courtyard. She jumped in next to Heinz, who shuffled on to the hot engine seat. She pulled a fifth of whisky, snapped the screw cap and took a swig herself. She leaned across and passed it straight to Mike who took a long slug. Heinz shifted uneasily. The spirit fumes rose. She told him, 'She's not coming back.' Then she added, though she had no reason to, 'Not just yet.'

Inside, a good fire was roaring. AusGang liked the house. They asked if it had a cellar, since it reminded them of the film Psycho. Mike wanted a description of the car that had taken Fay and Izzie away from him, but Tam wouldn't have known a Valiant from a charger and she could only say that it was an old jalopy like the one her dad had driven. He settled for an image of Fay's lesbian friend, Lil, driving a family saloon. They stared into the gleefully raging logs.

Heinz and Gretsch mooned over the quality of the

whisky in modal tones appropriate to the occasion. It was a tender community — the sexy grandmother, the sympathetic foreigners, the diarrhoeic drug addict, and morose Mike. Around 3am, the generator grunted and coughed, causing the lights to dim, and you could hear water bubbling through the wetback till the motor caught again. The fire discovered a cache of gum and spat gentian flame like a gentle hint to go to bed. Tam promised everyone a good breakfast, and invited her guests to go bathing the next day in the tepid pool up the mountain. Mike showed AusGang to the bunkhouse. Halfway across the courtyard, Heinz stared at the bright stars,

'Where are the Bears?'

'The who?'

'Ursa Major and Minor.'

'Not there.'

'They must be!'

'Don't think so.'

'Where are your fixed stars, then?'

'Ah yeah! I know what you mean…. There aren't any!'

'But… the navigators.'

'Weren't any.'

'So how did they get here, then?'

'Spin the bottle. You know? You spin the bottle and kiss the person it is pointing to when it stops!'

Mike steered the visitors into their bunk room and shared a parting glass with Tam before finding his usual room.

Heinz was woken by a rat that disappeared like a bubble of mercury behind a bedside cabinet. Budging it aside he uncovered a nest not far from a hole in the floor. He decided to drop the babies through the hole and the mother could find them all a new apartment. He jiggled out a loose board and placed the entire nest onto dry dirt beneath. He replaced the boards, plugged the hole with the tongue of his boot, shot the bolt on the inside of his door, killed the light, stumbled towards the bunk, and not surprisingly when you consider how much whisky he'd put away, was unconscious before his head hit the bedroll.

Tam was unused to so many strangers in the house and was half awake when Heinz cried out. She pulled back the curtain to see a nervous, scent-deranged pigdog stop in the centre of the courtyard. The dog hared off, bushbound. The light in Heinz's cell went out. Two possums were courting on the roof of the bunkhouse. A figure came into view. It was Joe, moonlighting, closely examining the plants in her garden.

A cloudless dawn. Tam started on the pancakes. The smell of sizzling butter soon drew Mike down, and he roused the guests in the shearing shed. They enjoyed breakfast so much, a sumptuous arrangement of yoghurt, alpine muesli and wholemeal bread — the guests wondered if Tam might have some German blood. She was delighted and told them about her supposed ancestor, entrepreneur premier Julius Vogel. Heinz told them all about being woken in the night and how he put the tongue of

his boot in the hole to keep the rats out, and that when he looked under the floorboard the next morning the babies were gone from the nest on the dry ground underneath, and — !

Everyone stopped chewing to hear the next part of the story. — and in the light winding in around the piles he could see, lying there among an open cemetery of broken bottles ... a rifle, a sniper's rifle he knew to be a Mauser.

This startled Tam. She made as if she hadn't heard right. 'A mouse? You should have killed that too!'

'No, no. A real gun.'

Heinz fetched it to show everyone. It had a forged sci-fi quality to it, like a relic from a planetary war, an effect heightened by its precision telescopic sight with blades for 100, 200 and 300 meter settings. Its full-length stock was endowed with a rich walnut grain. Mike dabbed a portion of the end of the bore with his sleeve. The metal seemed in good condition. They examined it as one might a poisonous spider that might only be playing dead, a good idea as this was no film prop, there were still four live slugs in it's five shot box. Mike clicked on the safety catch. Tam took it out of his hands and told Heinz not to worry, she would hand it in at the next amnesty.

She showed AusGang the new herb garden, giving them a bit of aroma therapy, then led the way through a thin mist clawed with golden tracks up the mountain path to a secret place where the warm water rose out of the livid earth.

Sun brightened the snowy peaks above and lit up the drought-burnt turf on the near side. A moist breeze fell from the podocarps on the shady, bushy side of the valley. Tam slid in on the other side of Mike so their toes were almost touching. The Berliners revealed their gender, Heinz was indeed male, Gretsch had been female all along. The naked bodies stretched out under the surface of the sulfidic waters. Tam's little toes pulsed at Mike, Mike raised his big toe up just high enough to nod back, and that was how it began between them, toe-puppetry. Joe was the only one who saw it, but it cheered him up as he sat on the edge. He looked at the human heads ranged like so many trophies, at the flirting toes, at the naked bodies splayed under the soapy surface, and he said, 'Nature, eh Mike!' a smile brightening his face and, inevitably, everybody else's.

The visitors raided the deep freeze and found a frozen cache of salmon that was served lightly grilled beside new potatoes coated in butter with a sprig of mountain mint. Tam showed everyone the place on the map where the fish had been caught, and pointed out some other sites worth visiting. Heinz asked whether the farm had a name.

'Glenn, that's my husband—'

Heinz looked surprised.

'Yes. He's ... he died. He called it Utopia. He wanted to paint a sign and everything but—'

Heinz was moved. He drew some letters in his sketchpad, 'Mrs McLeod, if you please… what do you think of

something like this?'

No one had called her Mrs McLeod for a long time. It had the effect of bestowing a special status on her, even if it reminded her that she was a widow. She watched the letters taking shape, an art decorative 'U' with tendrils and vine leaves followed by Roman 'topia'.

'I can make them all gothic if you prefer.'

'Heinz, they look perfectly wonderful.'

'You will see, Mrs McLeod—'

'Tam.'

'Thank you, yes, you will see.'

Joe went outside to search for earth lights, sudden magical shoots of light coming out of the ground. He wandered around the moonlit forest for a time without success but on returning he began to feel dizzy. He climbed inside the Beetle, shaking like a winter-born calf. Every pore was goose pimpled and the perspiration was raining off him. They found him more dead than alive.

They gave him all the pain killers on hand and propped him up on the window seat. They encouraged him to take a few gulps of tea when he could. When his temperature dropped and his shaking became less violent AusGang rolled the Beetle out into the courtyard, attaching wires to it, lining up all the possibilities for sound, the latches, the ventilation system, and even a tarpaulin cover exuding a smell of weather-proofing oil. They were intent as monks at meditation, hoping Joe would heal, that he might soon

join in with his new sarangi, but when the composition finished the window seat was bare. They looked in the garage. They called towards the forest. They checked the hot pool in case he had gone for a midnight dip. In the end they stared into the fire feeling rejected. Mike put on the whale tape more out of nostalgia than for any desired effect. The avant-garde composers fell victim to its suggestive power and were soon asleep in their armchairs. Mike heard some distant shots. Pig hunters. Or kids using the speed limit signs for target practice.

'That rifle, Tam, is it safe and sound?'

'Safe as houses, Mike.'

A mist settled in dissolving the fir trees. You could hardly see the bunkhouse on the other side of the courtyard. Mike felt its wet fingers dabbing his face, and that tremor passing through him was a part of it too. He and Tam had become shades in a billowy emptiness, their skin blue-green as glacial ice.

They drew their chairs up side by side before the fire, each of them unsure of what was passing. Her skin reflected the glow of the fire but her flesh still seemed to have that icy foundation. Mike was reminded of the same character in Fay's skin at certain times. At which times? He put his arm around her, expecting her to be cold. She was hot. He could feel the heat coming out at him from beneath her blouse. It went straight to his seed sack. She leaned towards him and touched his lips, a feather-touch, and he pressed back, in complicity.

He was roused by the feeling that someone had been in the room. He slipped nervously out of Tam's bed. A light went off in the bunkhouse. He made sure the outside doors were locked and went to his usual room.

The next day Tam was moody. She announced that Izzie would be coming to the farm in a few weeks and everybody would be welcome back then. Mike checked the brakes for a trip to Mount St Patrick while Heinz finished the signboard. They drank 'stone fences' — brandy and ginger beer —for the road, and Heinz had just presented the signboard to Tam —'Utopia, Neu Zealand' — when the phone stung. It was Matt Downes. He had caught Joe stealing poppies from his brother Stan's prize-winning garden.

'This rabbit's sick! And Doc Parsons pig-hunting! Come and get him or he's gotta go down to Christchurch Central!'

Everyone chipped in to pay the fine and reparation.

Part of AusGang's plan was to tour the South Island at some stage so when they dropped in on Jim of Moana and Jim was selling an old school bus, Heinz bought it on trust. It was a cloud grey that had once been off white with a dusting of fawn that would soon deepen into a necrosphere of rust. It had registration papers but no reverse gear. They managed to engage enough forward

gears to get it onto the main road but they would never have made it back to Mount St Patrick had Mike not picked up a certain hitch-hiker. As the van and the bus slowed to a halt to pick her up, Myrlena wolf-whistled and Larry emerged from hiding behind some toi toi, his buck teeth blaring.

They had been in Waimate for Mettler's funeral — 'He O.D.'d on homebake, and his face had a horrible skin disease. You wouldn't have recognized him'. Now homebake used to be an unpredictable DIY concoction of clandestine narcotics, so Mettler's relatives hadn't made his only friends, Myrlena and Larry, very welcome.

'They sort of blamed us.'

Back at the house they knocked down a fence and parked beside the coal pile. AusGang strapped the bus down with high tension wires. Each evening metallic twangs and the eco-acoustics of the forest interpenetrated.

Fay's new home was a century-old worker's cottage with a gothic finial poking up from a false gable. The back yard was a shout from Lil's villa, so friendly feminists or self-styled mystics were often dropping by.

She persuaded a local carrier to bring some rough quarry cuts to the back yard and roll them over to the door of the shed. Soon she was chipping away here and there with a cold chisel and hammer, just to see what would happen. It fell away in unwanted chips and out of what was left, forms grew. The shed became her workshop.

Fay put Izzie on the train to Hifield more and more frequently where Mike would drive alone or in the company of musicians to be with Izzie. His relationship with Tam became warmer and warmer, Lil came to realise a long-held ambition where Fay was concerned, Perry came and went from the farm according to timetable happy just to see Tam again, to be in her company, and a year or two passed in relative stability.

Now, in Lyttelton, Izzie used to go to school twenty minutes before the bell, that's what it was called, a bell, though it was really a buzzer. It rang five minutes before nine and then longer exactly on the hour when they would all line up for karakia like convicts. The children all knew that a hold-up man had been hanged in the old jail over the road, they were sort of proud of that, so when they lined up he was, in a way, there with them though there was the uncanny feeling they had done something wrong.

Izzie used to go early to 'tell' things to her friends, like new words she'd heard, what adults said to each other and stuff like that.

After the line-up everyone went to one of two rooms, one for the littlies and one for the pre-schoolers. After Mrs Watts had talked about things she'd heard on the radio, anyone else could stand up and say if they thought it was 'newsworthy', but it had to be that big word. Sometimes kids would say things that were kind of interesting. One day Angela Badland said 'Our house is right where

the first telegraph line started and they're gonna put up a plaque beside the gatepost!' This day, Izzie had something 'newsworthy'.

She arrived early but kept her lip buttoned not saying one word to the others. The first bell rang and then the second, they lined up and went into Room Number One. Mrs Watts said Rodney Parkes had been found in the railway tunnel and he was alive but he wouldn't be back at school for a few days. She had a dark look on her face though the children thought it was good news that he'd been found. Then she brightened up and said that she'd heard about a herd of whales getting beached in the Coromandel and she smiled as if that was a good thing though everyone thought that must surely be bad. Izzie raised her hand and told Mrs Watts and everyone in the room, 'My mum's going to have a baby' and there was a hush in the room you could hear.

Mrs Watts said 'Thank you Izzie, does anyone else have any other News?' and that was it.

Her best friend said it would be better because she'd have someone else to play with at home but Janice Macauley didn't come to their spot before the bell any more. She became a real tomboy and gave Izzie withering looks whenever she saw her.

Fay says it was Bailey's Irish Cream that was to blame. She felt it almost straight away as if something had grabbed

hold of her inner lining. She took the morning after pill three mornings after and nothing happened except that she got very sick.

Dylan tried, but his enthusiasm was unconvincing. He made plans for extensions to the house, thought up names for his 'son', and talked about the bookshop being handed down through the generations. Then he grew anxious. He had no personal assets outside the Studebaker. As for the shop, antique books were on the way out, he feared. Two bookshops in Dunedin had gone under. He scoured the antiquarian journals. Some dealers in Australia had placed discrete advertisements. So he made contact with a collector in Sydney, the city that his mother Hilary had adopted. He would fly there with a dozen treasures packed in among his underwear and pocket the profits tax-free 'for the kid'.

As the weeks passed by, no matter how much Fay urged herself to be strong, no matter how often she told herself there might not be another chance, no matter how much she tried to convince herself of the inevitability of a new existence, that a process had begun whose only resolution could be childbirth, maternal instinct was no match for rational argument.

She would have consulted Dylan, but when she woke him he rolled away, grumbling, 'Tomorrow. In the morning.'

He was going to Sydney in a few days to meet Hilary, their first meeting since Pita's death. Fay would have the abortion while he was away.

Fay was offered the foetus by the clinic and on her request all wore black. This was to fool any random devils seeking live souls into thinking that the mourners were already dead. Lil gave Fay a tiki for extra protection and placed candles around the corpse that lay in a wicker basket on a bed of fresh ginkgo and karaka leaves.

Tam knew that Fay had lost the baby though she didn't know it was voluntary. She was to pick up Izzie as soon as possible and Mike would drop in to the farm on his way back from a solo gig in the south. When she arrived the first thing she heard was an ululating keen, '*Ahlalala! We are th'lost ones! Oh you have sent death among us! Vegale, Hamicata. Defend in thy name the taken one whom I hold, Umsa, Terata, Yeh, Dahlalala—beyond the gates of the shadows of death*!'

A muslin mandala-stamped cloth was wafted over the body as a priestess slurred, '*Per omnia, omnia, himesere.*'

Tam could hardly believe 'her own flesh and blood' had come to this. The waxen expressions of the witchy women was enough, but that J.P. in sharp black parish garb, who showed no signs of being discomforted by their ritual, that really put a knot in her duodenum.

She too felt distressed and mournful. She too had suffered a loss. She retracted to the sofa. At that moment Doctor Delore couldn't suppress the ex-priest in him any longer. He pulled up his sleeves, spread his beefy freckled

forearms to take in the company, and sang the dust to dust prayer with the added conviction that his Latin was correct,

'*Memento homi, quia pulvis es, et in pulverem reverteris*.'

The group carried the candle-lit bread basket to the back yard and the corpse was incinerated over a pyre of dried harakeke seed-stems.

That was, as the saying about the camel goes, the straw. Tam carried Izzie to the Volkswagen. She left a note for Fay, and departed without so much as a farewell toot. Izzie asked why all the people had been in the house, and what they were singing. Tam said it was a dress rehearsal for a theatre performance, and promised Izzie they would have a dressing up party with daddy. Izzie asked grandma if she ever had a real dad.

'Of course, Izzie, everybody has a real dad.'

All the way back to the farm Tam was thinking about how the farm had been a good place for Fay to grow up and it would be a good place for Izzie too. If her daughter couldn't give Izzie what she needed, then she and Mike would. She sat Izzie down on a bench outside the Hifield milkbar and told her she wasn't going to have a little brother or sister any more. Matt Downes left the Cry and crossed the street. Tam felt the blood rush. She nabbed him on the footpath.

'Your brother, Stan! He never answered my letter.'

'Tam, you okay?'

'The bullet that killed Glenn. What was it?'

Matt picked a strand of beef from his teeth with his little fingernail, 'All that went down to Christchurch!'

'Think, Matt! Can't you?'

Matt's eyes narrowed. 'A… a spitzer! Sure it was. A spitzer with a boat-tail base.'

'Was it from a certain make of rifle?'

'No telling. Nothing special. Bolt action. What do you want to know for?'

'Nostalgia. I'm writing my memoirs.'

Mountains kill without warning. A man goes the wrong way on a climb. He grips frozen blades of grass and icicles and falls, bouncing over jutting ice and rock. How many are lying up there? The sea throws back its victims, but when someone is missing in the mountains there is only searching the silence. The bustle in the cities and towns goes on as usual as the searchers seek, hoping to find a message, a corpse, or nothing, to search long enough to have tried.

Mike's operation as a solo musician had turned into an electronic nightmare. He'd put the fax on the phone line, he was saying 'Hi!' to beep tones and callers were being grated by unexpected electronic squawks. He had at least managed to arrange a solo show for a drag night at the same bar in Queenstown where The Hates had toppled the P.A. speakers. Wearing a Dunedin schoolgirl kilt for the first set and a satin evening dress for the second,

he did his best to entertain the audience. They drank and laughed at him and some threw 'harmless' homophobic abuse. There was a lot of guffawing and Mike had the run of the top shelf.

A few hours later, convinced that not only the band was over, but his solo career as well, he carried his equipment out to the van, filled with that listlessness that comes from poor diet, ill-advised alcoholic consumption and incipient psychotic depression. He filled the flask with coffee and set out for Hifield in a pre-dawn fog, tunnelling the length of the Kawarau.

It's ten o'clock in the afternoon
You'd better come round here soon
Or I'll go out
Of my mind!

The van seemed like a tank in a weird war. But what was the objective, and who was the enemy?

He bought a pot of Manuka honey off a woman in the Tea Rooms at Crippletown. She was chuckling to herself about something. Of course, he had forgotten to change out of his evening wear or wash the accents from his eyelines. Back on the road, guitars twined, the singer cried 'Spic and span!' but he was feeling decidedly sleazy.

He cured his stomach cramps with mountain water, but all the other cars on the road were breathing down his neck or overtaking him. All those metallic bronze reds

and shimmer-satin greys whizzing past him had a wearing effect on his morale, so he was pleased to be able to pass a hippie bus daubed with multi-coloured swirls and dizzying spirals.

Dawn was approaching and he was somewhere between Fairlie and Geraldine when he dropped off to sleep for a micro-second. His neck muscles relaxed, his head dropped like a ball from the top of a water spout and he woke to the crunch of his left wheel in the gravel. He had been lucky. The van had diverted only slightly, so he pulled in south of a roadside stall and lay across the front seat, relieved in a way many long distance drivers know too well, thankful to be alive.

*

He was woken by a noise like a drummer soundchecking. Mike had never met Perry, but the lanky unshaven man in his mid-forties tapping a coin on the driver's window knew Mike's van and Mike's face, and he was soon going to smell his fear.

'Any chance of a ride, matey?'

He spread his lips without actually smiling and managed to stare Mike in the face without making eye contact. Mike couldn't very well refuse him a ride, but he didn't want any small talk, any big talk, and certainly not any smart talk. He was about to get all three.

'Been a helluva drought.'

This seemed harmless enough. Perry stared at the road

ahead, making a big effort not to look at Mike's dress. Mike grimaced in agreement and made a clicking sound with the back of his teeth as if to say Helluva-drought-right-there-matey.

'Should be crutching time.'

'Crutching?'

'You cut the wool away from the lambs' arses, y'know? Stops flystrike.' He scratched the crotch of his jeans. 'There's no feed for winter, see? Can't give 'em away. Have to dump 'em in pits. Drives the dogs crazy. Makes me puke.'

So farmers were being forced to kill off their lambs. Mike had noticed a whiff of something unsavoury in the air. A few kilometres went by and the passenger's focus never diverted from the road.

'You know a baby's head is ten times bigger than an ape's?'

His voice was nasal, adenoidal, everything he said fell within two or three semi-tones; and he was exhaling huge quantities of smoke. Mike was on a contact low.

'That kid's gonna be a bright spark.'

Was he talking about some kid in particular?

'What kid?'

'*Let the dam go, take the young to thee*.'

'Is that out of the Bible?'

'Guys that do a runner should be sterilised, matey, sterilised! ... sticking their howitzers wherever there's a hole... They're cancer.'

Mike wasn't in the mood for moralising from someone who looked as if he'd been blown backwards out of an elephant's arsehole.

'You been on the razz?'

'You? Been on a bender, eh matey?'

Mike let his knees spread as if he was dressed in manly trousers. He lit a cigarette himself and soon the cabin was full of smoke. Mike's accelerator foot was nearly flat to the boards when, just ahead of them, a Kingswood slanted out of nowhere into their trajectory. He braked late and hard and skidded to the shingle on the other side of the road, surfing to within centi-metres of a ditch. If there was a moment to hold your tongue, that was it.

'Nearly dead meat, eh mate?'

Mike stared into the thinning dust cloud. A sign on the other side of the ditch said 'BEAUTIFUL VALLEY LIGHT NO FIRES'.

'I know what death smells like. When you cut open a rabbit's guts, you know?'

'Look, sorry mate. I need to be alone. Ride's over, okay?'

Perry turned and sneered the kind of sneer that disturbs sleep patterns. Mike eyed the jungle knife. He must have reached for it a hundred times with non-violent intentions, but could he snatch it now to defend himself? The passenger's door opened and slammed. Perry screwed up his face, leaned down through the open window and stared Mike straight in the eye,

'Who do you think you are?'

Mike started the engine. Perry stepped back. A wasp flew into the cab. Mike rolled away, still unaware who his passenger had actually been.

They travelled together for a time, Mike and the wasp and Lee Heazelwood singing 'Some velvet morning when I'm straight!' You could even say he and the wasp established a good rapport until it discovered the leaking honey jar. Mike practised snatching for the jungle knife as he drove along, perfecting his technique.

Evening begins early in the shade of the mountains and near Cavendish he pulled in to a rest stop. A wasp can't keep a secret, and a squadron of them soon left the local rubbish bin to share in the strike. He tried flicking them out, he left cigarettes smoking in the ash tray, but it only made the striped-arses more determined and dangerous. He took a walk up a bush track, coming to a waterfall where the air was cool with spray, though redolent of insecticide and window cleaner.

On the other side of the falls a rubber-faced camper in loose white underpants and sleeveless singlet was cursing at mosquitoes, striking at them, then settling back into his seat and gulping more beer. He was watching a small television under a tarpaulin that extended from the edge of his caravan. A possum jumped from a tree down onto the top of the caravan. The camper scooped up his hunting rifle into his hands and fired in the same movement. Then he reached onto the top of the tarpaulin,

flicked the limp furry body to the ground, cursed at the dying animal and drove the butt of his rifle into its head saying something like 'Got ya, ya buzzard!'

Mike hurried back towards the rest area, deciding to take his chances with the wasps.

A short way from the clearing he heard the sound of the motor starting. He bounded through the bush, ripping his dress at the shin, but the van was already lurching onto the main road. The passenger's door bashed against a safety post. The van clattered over a one-way bridge and burned up the other side of the hill.

He sat on the burning earth blaming, cursing, wishing for supernatural powers.

Not supernatural, but a psychedelic-painted rolling hippie bus sputtered in to the rest stop and out spilled a handful of happy nature lovers dancing to percussive and stringy sounds that were strangely familiar. There were friends behind the painted faces. Heinz, Gretsch, Joe, Larry and Myrlena had recorded rock, avant-garde and sarangi tracks with anthemic slogans such as 'Make peace, not pieces!' and a chorus Mike didn't know the meaning of: 'You and me and UTP.'

Well, he was glad to see them, though there was an oniony odour about them. They all danced round in the Rest Area till they dropped like children at the end of a party rhyme.

Mike asked them if they were on drugs but even Joe was clean. This was a natural high created by the ideal health pill. A chemist at Pukaki had invented a legal compound that combined the properties of coffee, spirulina, ginseng, chocolate, ginger, kava-kava, and garlic. Hence the aroma! It was better than any drug, Joe claimed melodiously, it made everything better, sightseeing became a pilgrimage, music a spiritual experience, and they were seeing colours he hadn't known existed.

'We bought all he had! You want to try some, Mike? It's from the source!'

Mike didn't want to arrive at Tam's smelling like a sausage roll. 'It's not a good time. I'll sit this one out. What's it called?'

'We've called it after Mrs McLeod, you know, Utopia and all that. UTP for short.'

Mike wasn't sure that Tam would take it as a compliment, but he had other things on his mind, his van and that hitch-hiker for starters. And he was famished, 'Got any real food?'

Roadside fruit became their first objective. The booth was wasp-free, due either to the absence of food or to the reek. At the first stall the Utopians lingered over the produce, extemporizing over its potential juices, imagining the smooth perfumed lips of fruit gliding down their gullets. They did not buy kilos, preferring one of this or of that. Mike leaned on the counter chatting with the vendor about the wonder of the natural tourist experience and the

whacky performances you have to do to earn a living as a musician these days.

'Hey! You rabbits aren't on drugs, are ya?'

Mike put on his best hoon voice, 'No way, pal! Now there's a death trap! Whaddya take us for?'

He rounded up the team and they rolled onto the rubber band road that would lead to Utopia.

Heinz kept the bus on the road through the dexterity of his little finger. Though they weren't travelling much faster than five or ten kilometres an hour he did well to keep the bus out of the irrigation ditches, but when he began to peel a mandarin with both hands while steering with his knees Mike protested and there was a compulsory Eats Stop.

Each of the Utopians had his own personal item of fruit. Mike have never seen anyone eat rock melon, pears or oranges so slowly. By the time he had eaten his fill the others were still experiencing the sensations and bouquets of their first nibbles. They preserved the skins and cores as if they were sacred relics. Time stood still. Each became preoccupied with some tiny thing inside the van, and their comments, even when one of them found a worm, were like galactic pulses of joy in the universal vacuum.

'This insect has hardly changed in 200 Million years.'

The UTPians were wandering around finding mother nature (and losing her and finding her again) in the bush. It took an hour to round everyone up, last aboard was Joe, mostly naked except for his boots. He whispered

in Mike's ear, 'Nature, eh Mike?!' so forcefully that Mike nearly passed out from the garlic fumes. Mike insisted on doing the driving, and they were soon moving forward again, slowly — if he gathered speed one or other of them pleaded with him to slow down, and they would freewheel to a crawl again.

There were only a couple of turns on minor roads to make, but the eco-navigators were convinced they had entered Middle Earth, every meter they discovered a twining jungle of real or imaginary life forms. They were impressed, ecstatic that Mike knew his way through the ancient passages. Well, thought Mike, it was a natural high. Two hundred metres from the gate he saw his own van parked on the side of the road. Damage was slight. The passenger's door had a wallop in it and, strangely, nothing had been pilfered. Mike changed into jeans and a tee shirt as Joe, feeling the cold, pounced on Mike's torn dress. Clothed and contented, they rolled past the Utopia signboard to Tam's.

Annabel Lee was tied to a hitching post outside the bunkhouse and the lights in the shearing shed were blazing. Mike opened the main door and entered. The others followed, admiring the dirt layers, textures and grains of the rough-hewn wood. Mike felt a lot better with them on his tail than that hitch-hiker if he was in the neighbourhood. They stalked the narrow hall towards the shearing pit.

Why were the lights 'wasting effort', as Tam often said, as if the generator held the ghost of her dead husband in it, as if every light in the ranch spoke of his deed in dragging that generator up there all those years ago?

The smell of petrol caught in his nostrils, he stepped out the back of the shearing room to where the generator was grumbling. He checked the caps on the drums of fuel, everything was okay, and why shouldn't it be? Why ever since the first time he had come to the farm had he imagined that something would not be okay, that he might have found the caps off the fuel tins, or one of the fuel tins missing, a dowsed shed, a fugitive firebug darting into the night? There was nothing, no physical event to pin it to, this fear, and although Mike had never thought that Fay was genuinely crazy, he thought right now with the petrol tins lined up like bomb casings and the nagging whine of the generator, that she was not even crazy in the way he was. This place had taught her to run long before she stepped inside his doorbattered deathtrap of a bandcart.

Mike turned towards the interior to find some of his friends staring at the idle stunning machine. Some betting slips were scattered on the sawdust floor, primary yellow and emerald green. Heinz spoke for them all, 'Bad karma, Mike.'

He tried to reassure them. 'Don't worry. That's all normal farm machinery.'

But nobody could get out of there fast enough. They scampered across the courtyard quicker than monks on

a vandal alert. The porch light was flickering with night-flying insects. His eyes met Tam's. She said the word more as a confirmation than as a greeting, 'Mike.'

'Why are the horses saddled?'

'The shepherds have to do a muster. It's an emergency. In the morning they'll be gone.'

'Where are they all?'

'At the Cry.'

'And Izzie?'

'Upstairs. She's been waiting to dress up with you. Your van broke down?'

'Stolen! But it's ... it's OK now. That's no French perfume!'

'It's the pits on Vince's farm. We have to dump stock as well. You'll get used to it.'

The painted health freaks stared at her, big-eyed, like hungry cattle.

'Come on in, all of you.'

Izzie was standing on the stairs. Mike was struck at how like a woman she seemed, the dimensions of her body were taking on those of Fay. Stillness too, gave her a false maturity. But her childlike manner returned as she registered the coloured faces and she realised that the dressing up party was going to happen after all. Heinz was the princess, Gretsch was the nurse, Tam the newly crowned queen, Larry the baker, Myrlena the constable, Mike the pirate, Izzie the ship's mate and Joe was Mike, since he was wearing Mike's ripped evening dress.

Midnight struck and, well-satisfied with the excitement, Izzie went to bed of her own accord. Joe and the others searched for earth lights in the forest while Tam and Mike shared a nightcap. The Mauser was lying on the table.

'You planning on using that?'

'I'm planning to hand it in at the amnesty.'

'Is the safety catch on?'

'The safety catch is on.'

'That shepherd of yours—'

'I'm tired, Mike. There's plenty of hot water if you want a bath.'

She kissed him on the forehead and went upstairs. He went over to the rifle and nestled it into his shoulder. He zoomed down the barrel checking the sights. There were still four shots in its chamber box. He stretched out his right hand to take the barrel and spooned the finger of the left around the trigger. He had always taken rifles like that, left-handed, it just felt natural to him though everything else about him was right handed. There was a gurgling and a spitting outside — the hot water cylinder spurting steam through the pressure valve. When he entered his room, to look at the bed was to lie on it, and to lie down was, like Izzie, to fall asleep in costume.

Blood is running over Tam's breasts and down her thighs. It seeps into a lake that is unaffected by it, remaining blue.

Now his mother is smiling for a camera, she is posing beside his blank-staring father. They are smiling for everyone who will see the photograph, as if they know it will be the only thing left of them after the quake. The mountains rumble. The earth is shaking. A shelf of rock is shoved up and a river alters course. Lava is flowing over a plain. Mike can't find his parents. Houses are being broken like wafers. An arm is visible from the rubble.

Rusting rail-trolley lines twist out of the disused entrances of abandoned mines. Mike hears the voice-like texture of Joe Ranui's viola playing. He says, 'It's good!' Joe has a kiwi-feather cloak around his shoulders. ' You like it, Mike? It's called Utopia Rag.' Joe's eyebrows are wrought into his particular laughing eternal wanting-to-believe disbelief, his mouth is gaping dark where his front teeth are missing. He closes his fist around a handful of nails. A peacock-blue fluid weeps out

of his hand but when it splashes near his boots the marmalade colour of the earth remains unchanged.

They go into one of the mine shafts. On the walls of the mine are lists, like the names of recent servicemen or ancient warriors. As they go deeper the lists change into a network of branches linking all names.
Now they are being read out, the names of men and women and of objects, places and times. Mike is not at the beginning of time but at the end, the voice is not Joe's nor of the land, not the voice of an adult, not an accent Southland, nor German, nor Maori, not his voice, but the voice of a child saying 'Daddy, daddy.' He hears gunshots and cries. Izzie is shaking him and pointing to the hall.

There was Myrlena holding Perry's .44 Magnum rifle. There was Perry, bound and gagged.

Matt Downes took both Perry and Myrlena down to the Hifield lock-up to hear both sides of the story. Myrlena was saying that if she hadn't jumped him they might all be dead. Perry claimed he had been shooting at wild dogs, and How was he to know there were freaks on the loose in the forest?

Doc Parsons patched up a wound in Joe's arm with all the tenderness of a Love Festival dentist. In the good doctor's view if those deviants and that poppy thief had been wandering round the forest in women's clothing at

all hours they got what was coming to them. And Perry and the shepherds had work to do. Who was going to close over those stinking pits?

The good sergeant was of the same mind as the good doctor.

'Bleedin' pits!' he growled, as if the stench from the pits was to blame for all this. He unclipped Perry's cuffs.

It was the last day of the arms amnesty. Tam drove to Hifield with the loaded Mauser., safety catch off She had been doing some thinking as well. She entered the front door of the police station as Perry was crossing the reception area on his way to freedom. The rifle she was holding exploded repeatedly, leaving a shattered window and three golfball sized holes in a hardboard panel wall.

This page has been intentionally left blank

Izzie's Story

We walked down the easy ledges of a stream, he picked up some soft granite and it crumbled in his hand. The clouds shifting behind a mountain made it seem its peak was bending over us, over me. I was alone. I would surely die. The mountain fell. Somehow I was still alive.

This page has been intentionally left blank

I don't actually remember me and Fay living with Mike. I know mum and I stayed in Dylan's house for a while, because I've got a picture of us on the porch and the back yard full of sculptures. But to my mind the only person we ever really lived with, was Lil.

You know, people used to laugh at Fay because she thought some ghost was following her around, but I saw a man that nobody else did. It was when there were all those witches in the house, singing, and what grandma told me was a dress rehearsal, that was really a cremation for my sister. He was outside on the verandah. I saw him looking in through the French doors. Nobody saw him but me. You have to watch out because he can steal you away without you even knowing, and you might think you are still there but when you wake up and get out of bed you are really somebody else. He can switch you just like that.

That was the night grandma took me away from Lyttelton. At the farm there were little bugs on the bay shrub

grandma we had planted. They were like limpets and they were sucking the juice out of the stems of the leaves. If grandma hadn't been arrested she would have bought something from Scuggs to kill them, but as it was the shrub dried up and died.

At first I was afraid they were going to hang grandma. They hanged a man in Lyttelton right over the road from my school. But Fay told me she was going to be all right, it would just take a bit of time to prove she was innocent. So why was Fay acting so weird? I heard that the police were wanting to exhume the body of my grandpa, Glenn McLeod, to do a test on the hole in his head. Maybe that had something to do with it.

Lil had finished at university and wasn't student activities officer any more. She was writing letters and going for interviews for jobs, something in the business line, since she had an Accountancy Degree and all that experience hiring and firing musicians like my dad. So she couldn't babysit me any more and mum had no choice but to let me see more of Mike.

After grandma fired the rifle that nearly killed Perry, Fay adjusted her set where Mike was concerned. She said he was more mature these days, and encouraged me to see more of him. On top of that, Mike was a whole lot easier to be with. He'd tweaked his knobs too. When I talked to

him he listened in a way he didn't use to. He still had spells when he wasn't really there, but it didn't matter so much. Fay said all adults are like that. It's because the longer you live the more you have to remember. We went for walks in the Botanic Gardens and that paved the way so that later I went to stay with him in Wellington in his caretaker's room.

His beard had three colours in it. Ginger like bracken pubes, black as coal, and brown like split pine. He let it grow and he cut it without order or timetable. There wasn't any length of beard that suited him. Truth to tell I think he'd have preferred no beard at all, like a woman. He would have tried out being a woman if that was possible, and even then he wouldn't have been able to make up his mind what he preferred.

About the time Fay made up her mind she was lesbian, and took to wearing a man's three piece suit. She looked terrifying in it. Lil too, in hers. Lil put her job for the Cashel Street redevelopment project down to her pinstripe and Calvin Klein shirt with insignia. Lil liked men's clothes but she was glad she didn't have a face like an orangoutang.

In fact, both Fay's and Lil's bodies were a lot more hairy than they used to be. First it was their armpit hair, then Fay stopped shaving her legs, then Lil let a fine moustache

grow on her upper lip and Fay allowed shoots to sprout from a mole on her chin. They were proud of all that. I was figuring out all these body-hair developments when I went to visit grandma. Her hair was a sorry sight, result of the prison hairdos. I was on the lookout for a bit of body hair myself. A couple of bumps were appearing across the line where my heart was.

Now Grandma's lawyer, Marg Haywood, had something hoity about her. Her office was like a hearse. Its wood shone, not as if people used it, but as if no one ever touched it. I wandered around Atlantis Market while they talked about a Guilty plea. I bought a piece of moonstone because the guy selling it said it matched my eyes. He was nice, I thought, I would go to the movies with him if he asked me. But I didn't trust that lawyer.
Round that time I went to stay with Jim at Moana for a weekend. He was Lil's father, and Mike knew him by a different connection. It was Jim who sold that old school bus to Heinz.

Jim had eleven vehicles on his property. There was a walnut tree at the far end of it, and a climbable eucalyptus in the corner that backed onto a contract drainage outfit that serviced the district. Under the eucalyptus and the walnut were two buses, the camper van he was putting the motor in, and an old house-truck he would never find a motor to put in. It looked as if your uncle had done it up in his

spare time, it had real wood panelling and a handpump water supply. There was a miners' bus with a curved window in the back you could look out of through a straggly bottlebrush into the long grass of the place next to Jim's. The neighbour watched TV all winter and had a fishing hut somewhere in summer.

Jim had seventeen grandchildren and I reckon about half of them were conceived in his buses and caravans. There were smaller vehicles, two going station wagons and one for parts, and one that looked as if it had done its run in parts and was just a home for the cats and a romp for visiting dogs. There was a small flat deck truck, a converted Rover 90, and a long trailer that he used for carting boats and car wrecks and anything else too big for the flatdeck. And there were spaces for visitors.

There were always caravans coming and going. He had relatives and friends all over the country, and his children had in-laws and friends and his grandchildren too when they were old enough. My family was small, but at least it was bigger than Janice McCauley's. She lived alone with her mother who wouldn't let her dad inside the house. People used to visit Jim for ideas because he was an inventor. He had coils of pipes going up the side of the house on the northern side filling up tanks long before anyone thought of solar heating. This tap was for the months of January to March, this one for the winter and so on. It

wasn't fancy but it worked.

So Jim looked okay to me, but Lil disowned him not long after this story that I have to tell, because a hypnotherapist told her he had molested her when she was baby. He swore he never touched her, but she got a payout for it though there wasn't anything tangible, nothing but those shrinks that is. Mike said it was Autosuggestion. I hoped Jim wasn't guilty and I was afraid that he was. Any case, Lil and Jim ended up on different planets, and people said it sent him to an early grave. He ended up most of the day leaning on the gatepost waiting for the post van because people had heard about the scandal and didn't visit him any longer.

Talking of psychologists, the date of the trial had been put back because the prosecution couldn't find enough money to pay them. The psychs were refusing to work for the standard fee.

That was when we visited Jim. Before the first trial. He was replacing some boards of decking on the front porch of his house when we arrived. He dropped his crowbars and his hammers and shook Mike like he was trying to empty spuds out of him. We drank tea till he'd caught up on the latest, then his nephew Tony and his sister Kay came in and we went to play around in the sheds.

Now Jim had a shed full of iron and mechanical things and at the end were two stacks, one for treated building wood, and one for wood with a good enough finish to use indoors. He had a shed full of old bed wires that he used to cover his vegetables to stop the cats from using his garden as a toilet. He had a shed full of windows. Leadlight, sash, hinged and plain. Stained glass, two of them. His fishing shed had all the gear, different hooks for the fish you want to catch, sinkers and spinners, and 8-shaped things called swivels that stopped your line from twisting up. He had a license since before the ark which would last till Judgement Day. He said it would be okay for us to fish on the lake but we just wanted to go out on the kayaks that the Zornfields were renting out. So we left Mike and Jim groaning and grunting and swearing at a motor and we glided out over the still sepia giant's gumboot-print through the watergrasses towards some stark trees deadrooted in mudflats.

The next day I played with Rachel Zornfield. She was born on the West Coast though her parents were Germans. A few days passed when Tony was practising opening and closing a Zippo lighter. That clicking was distracting so I investigated under the porch where missing planks had rotted out. I found a piece of glass that looked as if it had once been a bottle. It was hard as metal, and opaque, but glass all the same, molten as if it had been in an atomic blast, and the penny. It hardly looked like a penny. I

thought it was a bottle cap, it was covered over in dust and when I took it in my hand and rubbed gently the dust came away as a fine green sand. That penny was just dissolving by lying there.

Back at Lyttelton, I was late home one night and Fay gave us the daily report on the trial. The prosecution still had to table its agenda, Stan Downes had lost some ballistics report, and Fay's lawyer was opposing exhumation. I said I knew who had stolen the documents.

—You do?

—Didn't I tell you about the Lightning Man?

—Oh, Izzie. We're talking about reality, not fantasy!

But I was beginning to learn that reality can lead people a pretty dance and fantasy can have a lot of truth in it. I wanted to know more about what they called reality. Was that what Mike admitted to himself when he looked at his hands bleeding, at the fact that he couldn't finish a job before nightfall or perhaps never finish the job in the way that he would have liked? Was it reality when Lil said Angela Badland was better off without her dad? Reality was like a big tight apple with a rotten centre. It was that flavour of bruise in your mouth before you see what caused it.

So Fay and Lil were going round in circles and they were seeing the same lawyer about kind of getting married and co-owning the house they lived in when Angela Badland and I did a project at school about the meaning of names. Angela talked about the name Angela though everybody thought she was going to talk about the name Badland. I talked about Isis. She was the goddess of medicine.

Fay chose the name before I was born, so it must have been a relief to her I was a girl. It was the name of an Egyptian goddess. The other big gods were Osiris, Seth and Nephthys. The family album was a mess of disembodied genitals. Osiris made his brother Seth jealous. Seth attacked him and threw his dismembered body in the Nile. Isis, who was cleverer than all the gods, put him back together again, and fluttered her wings to give him the breath of life. He came back to life just enough to make love, and that brought about Horus. When Horus grew up he tore off Seth's testicles, so he would not poison anyone any more. Semen were sometimes thought to be poisonous. The Egyptian word *metut* means both semen and poison. And Gretsch told me that in the Greek language the same word means gift as well as poison, and ... the German word for poison is *Gift*!

All that about sperm and presents and poison set me thinking about how people might give you something for the wrong reason, they might give you poison, and

you might accept because you are afraid of offending with a refusal. I was double wary about any presents from anybody.

It is possible they found some McLeod or Frazer down in Southland who gave them the sayso, but next thing I know they are about to dig up grandad's bones and make that report on the hole in his skull. Grandma was saying they can't do that, and Fay said it was sacrilege, but they dug him up anyway. Mike and Fay kept the facts of the exhumation from grandma as long as they could. There wasn't any evidence. There wasn't any hole. There wasn't any hole because there wasn't any head.

There were a lot of flies about. The nights were cold so you left the doors open in the morning to let in the sun but the flies rose with the evaporating dew and you had to close the doors again. It was autumn. A year had gone by and the prosecution didn't know any more now than they had a week after the shooting. Marg Haywood asked everyone to look presentable, no fancy dress. There were two teams in the courtroom, the Utopians, and The Rest of the World.

Sally Downes looked as if she belonged to The Rest of the World but she was there to support grandma. She had been telling people at Scuggs or in supermarkets, people she hardly knew at all, about how there wasn't a nicer per-

son than Tam and there was no way that she tried to shoot Perry the slaughterman.

Tam and Sally had passed a polite howdy more than once when Sally asked Tam if she would exhibit some of her antiques in a museum Sally was wanting to create. So Tam made a list for her and we took it down to her house, it must have been autumn because her wisteria was turning that sick yellow colour and she was in her garden planting bulbs.

—It's so nice to have the spring flowers isn't it? What are you putting in?

Grandma hadn't had time to think about it because it was crutching time and she had to feed the hired hands and pay them off. Sally gave me two Dutch Iris bulbs and told me how to prepare a little patch where they'd come up every year. So Sally looked all right to me, and Tam must have thought so too because she was going to lend Sally *A History of the Maori Campaigns and the Pioneering Period* and a kauri chest of drawers with five generations of paint on it.

It gave us confidence to have the wife of the Hifield cop on our side. The judge wasn't like a judge at all. He didn't have a wig and he didn't talk pompous. He had a wandering eye. He didn't seem to be phased by Tam's support-

ers looking as if they had put on each other's clothes, I guess he had been prewarned. The lawyers spouted, Matt Downes described what had happened, statements were read, witnesses were questioned and grandma was called.

The judge sounded like he wanted to get home in time for lunch. He asked grandma point blank whether she had wanted to kill Perry Macfarlane when she went to the police station with that gun, or was she going there just to hand in the gun. Grandma said she couldn't rightly say. The judge asked whether she aimed it in his direction thinking to shoot him, regardless of whether it was loaded or not. Same reply. She didn't remember anything. Just the noise of the gun. Marg Hayward had wanted grandma to lie. But all she would say in her defence was that she was worn out, hadn't slept for days and other details such as I had been sick and she had driven to Christchurch and back with me, and all that. She never said she wanted to kill him. She never said she didn't.

Perry had been to the barber that morning. You could almost smell the hair oil. Grandma never looked at him. The prosecution lawyer was a cop. He didn't like the smell of this case. He didn't like Perry and he didn't like grandma and he didn't like the Utopians. He wanted to hang Perry and he wanted to hang grandma, and he had been doing his homework.

—Mr Macfarlane. Were you ever in the Erewhon afforestation area in 1964?

—Yes.

—What were you doing there?

—I won a culling ballot.

—He is referring to government authority to shoot in a region for a set period of time, your honour.

—Were you in that forest on the morning of 15 May of that year?

—Huh?

—The day Glenn McLeod was shot, Mr Macfarlane!

—Where was I?

—Yes. Where were you in the forest?

—I wasn't in the forest, sir.

—Not in the forest?

—Not in May, sir.

—Where were you, then?

—I was at home with my mother. She'll remember that. She writes everything in her diary.

—Mr Macfarlane! Could you explain how you came to wound Joseph Ranui on the night of 23rd March, 1992?

—Who?

—Joseph Ranui, also known as Joe.

—Wild dogs.

—Are you aware that Mr Ranui was dressed in a woman's dress when you shot at him?

I was sweating and short of breath. I must have been red as a tomato. Marg Hayward objected, What did a woman's dress have to do with it? The judge asked the lawyer what he was getting at. The lawyer lowered his voice and explained.

—Your honour, that item of clothing belonged to the son-in-law of the accused, Mr Michael Doyle. In such a dim light, your honour, Mr Ranui might have been mistaken for Mr Doyle.

That lawyer had a screw loose. He wasn't saying that Perry tried to kill Joe because he was a racist, or because he had a grudge against Joe. He wasn't saying that he tried to kill Joe because he hated faggots or because he hated men who put on dresses. He was saying that Perry was really trying to kill my dad. I was scared. I gripped onto Fay's arm. It felt cold, not like a human arm at all, the hairs were sticking up out of goosepimples and Fay was green as curdled milk. She didn't like that lawyer's insinuations any more than I did. The judge took the hint. He asked Perry directly,

—Mr Macfarlane. Didn't you hear any voices in the forest before you fired that rifle?

—Voices?

—Yes or no, please.

—No.

—And you didn't think Mr Ranui or Mr Doyle were in the forest when you fired those shots?

—Who?

—Mr Doyle. The musician. Mike Doyle.

—Nothin'. I couldn't see nothin'. Shadows, that's all. I thought they were dogs.

Perry was allowed to step down but the damage had been done. Damage to the whole shop. They called Mike, who lied. He swore on the Bible that he put those slugs in the rifle and forgot to take them out, and since his prints were on one of the cartridges and on the gun as well, that seemed reasonable to everyone except the judge, who had had enough. Whether Perry killed my grandad on purpose or by accident, whether Perry killed my grandad at all, , whether Perry had been wanting to kill my dad when he shot at Joe Ranui, none of that mattered to the judge. He convicted Tam of attempted murder on the life of Perry Macfarlane.

We had expected her to go free. None of us thought she had really intended to kill Perry. And even if I had known then what I know now about grandma and Mike I wouldn't have believed she was capable of murder. But the judge did. He just got out in time.

Larry started to whirl like a disturbed daddy longlegs till he was insulting the prosecution lawyer and the defence lawyer and pointing at the judge's podium like he was casting a spell on it. Myrlena was shrieking like a blackbird on a wing-swoop that there was no justice. Joe was

standing on the defence lawyers desk saying it was a conspiracy. Heinz was on his feet announcing a miscarriage and history will prove him right and Mike and I were sitting down still among all the turmoil as if we had been convicted as well.

When I added it all up I thought she was going to be in Christchurch Women's Prison till she was an old lady, but I didn't know what 'concurrent' meant.

Mike returned to Wellington and the Germans went to his house, the one with the leaking skylights on Mount St Patrick. In time they turned it into the AusGang Composition Laboratory and released records with hand-made covers. I liked the word 'released'. I imagined the music had been locked up and they busted it out of prison. It was about that time I began to learn the drums.

While Mike was in Wellington Heinz had a few difficulties with Immigration. One day I asked mum where Lil was and she said she'd gone to marry Heinz.

I was feeling like a loose electron but the trip to Wellington made me feel more independent. Fay and Lil saw me into the hands of a stewardess with a flat Spanish hat who ogled and gave me sweets and escorted me into the Wellington terminal. I thought the plane had been hijacked to a terrorist hideout, the terminal was so grotty,

but there was Mike at the end of the off ramp, half his face a three-coloured beard, the other half shaved like a balloon. He told me a nomadic tribe in Libya used to do that two thousand years ago. I didn't see why that made it a good thing but I soon discovered he knew a lot of arty types with equally outlandish haircuts. I met a theatre director there who was dying. An operation had cut off a part of his tongue. Shake told me later he was once tied to a tree by feminists and labelled a rapist. At the party he was sitting in a corner trying to eat a hamburger. He had to chew on one side of his mouth to lessen the pain. I was the only person who would talk to him.

Mike's flat was a ten minute walk from Shake's. It was on the second floor of a disused department store in an area where rents were low, and the lowlife usually high. The guys on the top floor ran Midnite Expresso, a coffee shop on Cuba Street, and on the first floor was an African poet-cum-DJ called Adonis. A band practised some afternoons, and one night the entire building shook with the vibrations of a sound system. Nobody could sleep so we joined the party.

In the evening the sky used to turn electric violet and the drapes there were a bright velveteen, like glowing dust. The flat had running water and a gas stove. It had been the caretaker's room. Mike had plans to add a mezzanine, and some timber did appear during my first visit as if he was going to do something, but every time I went to

Wellington the wood was still propped up in the corner.

A lot of the people we visited had ghost stories to tell. Either there were a lot of haunted houses in Wellington, or they thought ghosts would interest young teenagers like me. A theatre in Tonks Lane was haunted. The accountant for the film Mike was working on remembered when a hotel in Wellington was pelted with pennies by a poltergeist, smashing all the windows. I turned the penny in my pocket for luck, the one I had found at Jim's.

There were normal people too, who usually didn't believe in ghosts. Like Shake. He taught me how to blow a bassoon. Now, my fingers were already toughened up from learning the guitar, but my lips had a long way to go. He said they were tense. I still hadn't kissed a guy and I wondered if it would make a difference to me if I did. Not that I was looking about for a candidate. When I got my first note out of that bassoon it felt good, like I imagined my first kiss would. But I should tell you that when I got my first kiss, it wasn't anything like that, I didn't feel electric at all. And his breath stank like carpet.

One evening Mike and Shake were in a bar overlooking the construction site of Te Papa when Mike saw a guy pass down Oriental Parade towards town. He ran over to him and they talked together a bit. When he came back he looked happier than he'd been all day. Mettler was alive,

even though Larry had kissed his corpse.

Shake was a good cook and we often went there to eat. One evening, after the meal, he had to finish a letter. He said it was the hardest he had ever written.

—My father wants me to marry a woman I've never seen. She is the daughter of a man who lived in the same village as him in Iran. In my father's culture if I marry her that marriage will be forever. It is the law.

—You going to do it?

—I can't do it.

—Because you don't love her?

—I could grow to love her, that's the idea. And it usually works. Western marriages start hot and go cold, but the other way works too. But it wouldn't be fair to her. I'm gay. I thought it was exciting. I was glad I knew a gay guy to balance Fay and Lil. I wondered if my dad was gay too, but Mike never knew anything about himself. He didn't want to know. But Shake was the real thing, and he knew it! He was OUT.

When Joe started sending letters with a return address at the top of the page it took everyone by surprise, be-

cause Joe had never had a place of his own. He hadn't been seen even in Wellington for months, not even to collect Lucky Kiwis his aunties sent him or to throw out the summonses, not even to enjoy the underworld and his old drugs buddies. Mike figured that there was a woman behind it all, one in particular, and for once he was right. It was the last summer before grandma got out and Mike had come back to take over the farm from Sally Downes when he received an envelope with red letters over the top, 'Insufficiently Paid for transmission by Fast Post'.

They called it trouble once. After the war people used to say that a guy had got a girl into trouble. I heard it called other things as well like 'A bun in the oven' or 'Up the duff', which didn't sound very nice to me, I hoped I was never called a bun or whatever 'the duff' represented, but when Mike read the letter with Joe's address at the top of the page the worried look went off his face and we went down to Hifield.

The jump suit he bought at the grocer section of Scuggs was bright lemon green with yellow stripes along every seam. It would fit a baby up until it was three months old.

It was a boy. And they called him Hohepa.

After he finished the film job Mike set his sights on the shearers' quarters. He was filled with a mission. His hands

were torn to pieces most of the time. He was banging nails, hiring contractors and refitting and rewiring. It didn't look like much more than a barn to me but he said it had architectural qualities and the historic places people were going to stick a plaque on it. Jim came over to help him some weekends, and before the summer he had fitted it out like a Youth Hostel. It was hard to think of complete strangers flirting in the tepid pools, but it was the times, Mike said, more and more tourists were coming in to the country, not rich types but backpackers, students and holidaymakers like you and me.

—You'll meet heaps of new people.

Perhaps because of the influx of tourists, Immigration was getting more and more picky. There were a lot of weddings. Doc Delore, the Lyttelton JP who married my mum and dad, got a lot of work in that line. But there was one family who didn't have that option. The Zornbergs bought a store then they started the kayak hire company. They had three children who were born in New Zealand so that made the children New Zealand citizens didn't it? One of the girls was Rachel that I had played with already. She had thick blonde hair that I would have given my silk pyjamas for.

Mike was filled with his old insane energy as if he was living in a film or in another time. He believed we could save them from deportation, that's what he called it. He

thought we could persuade some MP to change his mind. He believed that if we drove enough miles and talked to enough people we could save their necks. We went from Mount St Patrick to Moana and talked to Jim. We listened to the Zornbergs tell their story. We drove down to Greymouth to talk to the MP for West Coast-Tasman and we called Fay to get her lawyer onto the case. But within a few weeks Rachel and her sister and brother and her mother and father were shipped out, and you know, that's just what happened to the Jews in the second world war. I heard a man say it, a Coaster too. He said 'Ha! that'll teach those Germans, give them a taste of their own medicine!' Their kayak business had to be sold, and their shop and café and petrol and diesel station, all that they had made happen like in a dream.

So I guess we failed, Mike and me. I knew what that felt like now, to fail. After they were made to leave, Mike and Heinz went to Moana to supervise the sale of the business. We bumped along the undeveloped road that crossed the unpopulated undrained marshes and passed through once-were towns past once-were settlements where only chimneys stood unleaning marvels of mortar and hand-made brick. Heinz and I stood at the edge of the wide silver water, its half-tamed unpopulated shore. I wondered how Rachel was feeling right now. I imagined her sardined in some overpopulated supersonic bus. I didn't know when authorities should practise clemency.

I didn't know what anyone could have done to save them. I didn't know much.

The business barely broke the reserve price. A real estate agent hired some contractors to go through their house. Everything was sold or cleaned for the next people. I felt so ashamed. There was a telethon but it didn't mean anything to me.

School was breaking up and I was glad. I was sick of it. I was tired of travelling through the tunnel, tired of talking about careers and tired of gutless two-faced patriot-types. I said I wanted to go and stay with Mike on the farm for all of the summer holidays. Fay wasn't pleased about that. But there was stress in the house. Lil had got herself sacked from the Cashel Street board.

—You know what they wanted to call Cashel St? Cashfields! And the chairman said 'Yeah well even the Irish are getting wise to economics, Lil. There's no room for principles in commerce' so I said 'There's no room for me, then, matey!'

She never touched her mashed potato pie with grated cheese and onions grilled on top that I had cooked. It turned out she had clocked the stuffed shirt so he had to wear dark glasses for weeks. Fay installed a fly-screen as if that might help. I was sorry for Lil, but I needed a break.

I didn't like that feeling of failure. It was everywhere. Mike believed he could achieve the impossible, save the Zornbergs, fix cars, catch ferries, do a job without asking for help. It was a flaw in his character. We'd learned about them in English, Macbeth. He would put all his effort into turning that pipe, the success of the whole job depended on it. His face would contort so you would think this was the last effort anybody could make and you could see his back straining so you just knew he wouldn't sleep well for months on account of it. Then the vise grips would give, or the thread would shear off, and he would appear about to cry like a baby, about to give up, but then he would inhale and be strong like the man he so much wanted to be, and he would try one more thing, and that would fail too. So he would stop, not to give up, but to try again tomorrow, saying, 'God! I was stupid to think I could fix that in one day.'

I just wished he would get in a repairman. It was taking up his time for me again. I felt I might as well be back in Lyttelton being ignored by Fay and Lil.

It was my twelfth birthday and I wanted to skip a few. I was getting sick of being the kid around the place. Mike twigged and arranged a party. He invited Jim who brought Tony. Vince Chatwin the neighbouring farmer brought his son who talked as if he had a plum in his mouth.

Heinz and Gretsch came down from Mount St Patrick for the event. They had some books with them.

—Your great-grandfather was a book warm.

—You mean 'worm', Heinzie!

The one he was reading had a story about some Greeks condemned to death, but the imprisoned men exchanged clothes with their wives and escaped into the night disguised as women. When Heinz told me about that I wondered if Mike's transvestite phase had something to do with dying. Heinz looked surprised, then spat that unjolly laugh of his and said it had more to do with escaping! Another of the books, which he gave to me to read, was A Tangled Tale by Lewis Carrol, full of puzzles. That helped the time pass.

Myrlena had a good game, you had to dismantle and rearrange the letters of words. It helped to have a theme, and Heinz chose Utopia. So there was 'utopia' itself, 'shangri-la', 'nirgendwo' (from the German for nowhere), 'nowhere' itself — that was pretty much Erewhon backwards — and 'nulle part' which Gretsch told us was French for nowhere. She spoke French really well, mainly because she grew up in Switzerland. German was her first language but Switzerland has four languages and she could speak three of them. Backwards 'nulle part' made 'trapellun', and that

sounded like a race-horse to me.

'La shagrin', 'now der gin' and 'aipotu' followed and we jumbled all the letters up to try to make a sentence. When we trailed off to bed we left GIRL HORSE PIT WOOL GRIN LUNA TUNA PANDA and one more word, apart from the others, EREWHEN.

Like my still-to-be first kiss, I thought, yeah, never. Gretsch was reading the Diamond Sutra, another of Mr Doyle's books:

> *There should be nowhere to live*
> *And in the nowhere*
> *Thought should be born.*

She was into meditation and contemplation, but I wanted action. We played the game again with time as the theme. We reversed Yesterday and Gretsch suggested it now meant tomorrow. So Tomorrow became Yadretsay and Yesterday became Worromot. But it didn't last. Nothing lasted. People stopped saying it and reverted to the proper word and no one wanted to play the game any more.

Gretsch and I were on the porch one day, when she put a miro-leaf bookmark in her page and said, 'Novalis believes there is one person that people of all times have tried in vain to find. You know who that is? Yourself.'

But, you know, that kind of stuff didn't mean anything to me any more. The way I saw things, everyone else had let me down. It was them who were having identity problems, not me! Dark clouds hung about without it raining. There was still a couple of hours to go before sunset, but the birds started singing as if it was already dusk — it sounded beautiful but at the same time I knew that they'd been duped. I wanted out.

Mike put a rug in the middle of the room, a white rug, rectangular, but a water pipe burst somewhere and that white rug just got dirtier and dirtier. He trampled over it in muddy boots until it was like a piece of paddock that someone had laid in the middle of the common room and I thought, 'An idiot, my father's an idiot!'

Heinz knelt on a prickly blackthorn branch that Mike had pruned and he was walking wih a limp. He washed it too late and said if he could just sleep on it but the next day it was swollen up, he couldn't bend the leg and he had to go down to see Doc Parsons. Nobody went to see Doc Parsons unless they had to. Doc Parsons said the prickle had gone right in under his kneecap and he would have to operate. So he gave Heinz an anaesthetic and drained off some fluid and poked about a bit, slapped a poultice over it and Heinz was laid up for a week at the farm, looking really worried. Mike hung a saw above his bed.

I thought none of that should have happened in the first place. Everybody seemed to be doing stupid things. And saying them. I was practising drums in the shearers' quarters that were half hostel, and one day I heard Mike saying my drum practices were punishment for his sins. That was when I decided to break out.

It was my job to go down to Hifield on Wednesday afternoons to return books or borrow them and that's how I planned to get away. Matt Downes drove back from Arthur's Pass on Wednesdays. He picked me up on the way through. I went into the library as usual with the books, looked around a bit then crossed over to the railway station and caught the train.

When I got off the train at Christchurch Fay was there. Matt Downes had seen me getting on and tipped her off. She tore strips off me, but I could see that she was pleased. She was pleased because she thought I had wanted to come back to her. The fact is, I wasn't going to go back to her, I had another plan. I was fed up with her and Mike and everybody.

Next Saturday I said I wanted to go in to town just by myself. I made it to Greens, or where Greens used to be, around ten o'clock. It was two shops now, a bookshop called Red That, and a record shop, Herd That. Dylan was

just opening up and he already had a couple of customers. My fingers strolled through the categories, Classical, Country, Punk, Reggae. Bigger teenagers were flicking though quickly as if they knew each title at a glance.

Herd That was booming, and Red That wasn't doing bad either. Dylan was climbing out of debt. He still played cello, often with visiting bands whose members he met in his shop. I mooched about a bit, waiting for my chance, while Dylan dealt with customers who looked as if they had read this and heard that and were in every way where it's at. When he was free I nabbed him,

— I'm running away. Will you help me?

—Where you heading?

—Don't care.

—Done something wrong?

—Mad with my parents.

He served a customer, giving a special reduction for cash. He was thinking about something. Then he went over behind the plastic bags where there was an old turntable. He put on a 45, saying it was older than me and it was still good. It was made before the days of Flying Nun and the

band couldn't find a label. They made just a hundred copies.

—Yeah. So? What is it?

—Schism in '79.

Dylan was his biggest fan after Schism's mum.

—You haven't heard of him?

—Rings a bell.

—You've got to see him on stage. He always dreams up something unexpected!

—Like what?

—Once he got somebody out of the audience to shave his head.

—So what?

—Yeah, but … there's something well, psychotic about him! Hasn't Mike ever talked about him?

—Rings a bell, that's all. Is he friend of Mike's?

Dylan lied, —Big friend.

—He's old?

—Old but he knows what he's doing, Izzie. A real taonga, like John Lennon.

—Oh, yeah.

—He's playing on the Coast next weekend. Do you want to go to his concert?

—Isn't he dead?

—Not John Lennon. Schism! You've got to see him once in your life… and he won't be around forever. Want to?

—With you?

—With me.

—Yeah, I reckon!

I went to Atlantis Market and bought two rings, one with a fake-looking lapis lazuli and one with a real-looking fake emerald. I told mum I was meeting some friends in the big smoke next Saturday and spent the week worrying about what to wear. I took some flared jeans that I had

patched myself, a purple tight, and a tie-dyed top. I plaited a Polynesian ribbon into my hair and wore a couple of badges.

We took the Lewis pass and he pointed out sights like an overhanging rock that resembled a frog. I'd seen it before. He put on some tapes of live bands. I suppose it was good he had saved them for posterity. We stopped by a lake and some katydids were chirping.

—You know it's only the males that make that sound.

—Yeah? What are the females doing?

—Digging it.

I felt him close. That distance that adults keep by their voices and their cold gestures, the way they hand you things, that distance that you do not go beyond, was evaporating. He put his arm around me as we looked at the programme for the concert — we'd missed half of the acts but Schism was next up — and I knew he was going to have me.

There was a boom and Schism started up an instrument that sounded like an lawnmower. I covered my head, or my ears, and Dylan slipped his arm around me again as if that would deaden the noise. Schism was humping about like a

hippo. We were a long way from the stage but it looked to me like he was doing something indecent up there. I recognised a song from the radio. People were laughing hysterically the way I did one Christmas for no real reason. Now he was brushing his teeth and singing and gargling a song. Now he was pouring beer over his head and drinking it too. Now he was pissing into the same glass and it looked to me as if someone from the audience was about to drink it. Dylan found me back at the car.

We stopped into a bar and had a microwave pie. Greasy men were playing cards; money was changing hands. Dylan said we could go straight back to Christchurch or take the long way. I knew what that meant and I didn't care. When I said 'the long way' he grinned and reached over the back for a beer and a bottle of Drambuie. He pierced the tins carefully so as not to spill any drops on his seats. The forest passed by as in a film. Of course there was a soundtrack.

He stopped the car. He walked. I followed. The plants were perking up in a fresh burst of solar heat. Gingery hairs erupted out of darker follicles, the moist soil. We walked down the easy ledges of a stream, he picked up some soft granite and it crumbled in his hand. The clouds shifting behind a mountain made it seem its peak was bending over us, over me. I was alone. I would surely die. The mountain fell. Somehow I was still alive. It was sharp

like rock then firm and dark and soft and the mountain breathing harder till some pleasure I could not know stole him from me.

A mist came down, a half burnt mist, you could smell the coal on it, as if specks of soot were clinging to the droplets. I could feel his bristles in my skin, as if his needles had lodged into me. And that smell of carpet. He went to piss. I found a stream with water cress growing in a side pool where I washed. I thought, And if he drives off? I felt tied to him, I imagined being hooked by a rope and dragged along behind him. The sky was still low. The clouds seemed to point to the mountains, how was that? as if the mountains were drawing us inland. A seagull shrieked in their peaks. Giant tank-green cicadas were broadcasting coarsely. I detached a skeleton from the bark of a tree. It shone like gold as if it had been cast out of the gum of the trees. I smashed it with my hand. The car coughed and cut. It wouldn't start. Moisture in the fuel line or electrics, he said. The sun was moving quickly now, you could see it descending. It would soon be night. We did a crash start, gathering some speed on the slope and throwing it into gear. It was scarier than him kissing me. We lurched towards the edge of the road as the engine caught.

He stopped at the last garage before turning inland. I was missing Fay and Lil and Mike and I wanted to cry. A passage of rain was over, sandflies and mosquitoes were rising.

Plagues of waxeyes were spreading through the trees and cats were crawling out from under motel cabins to stalk the birds or each other. Moisture drifted like dandelion seeds without there being a shower. I was alone in all that ruthless air.

The mechanic and Dylan were under the bonnet. A work light illuminated their crooked figures. I went down to the water. It was grey and mean looking, lapping, snapping. Sparks from a driftwood fire were stronger than the sky's fading streaks of orange and red. Some lights appeared out on the water, there were people out there, in the water, carrying lights, seeking flounder, calling to each other.

—You doing all right, Midge?

—I swallowed my gum, dad.

I wanted to know what was my right. I whose blood had been spilt. And I wondered, there in the darkness made blacker by the lanterns of the family in the water, Are colours burning in Brazil for me now, are birds in Malaysia singing for me now? Are the gods making love to excess, in subterranean or equatorial dens, to celebrate my arrival, because of me, as I am, now?

I was tearful because I had lost him, first his body had gone then that which he had given me. It had not been as

I had imagined it was going to be in that moment when he leaned over me. It was my fault. I wouldn't ever blame him for it.

Back at the garage I called Fay and left a message on her machine, *See you soon*.

The mechanic gave us a lot of wily looks and served up stewed tea. Dylan was itching to get moving. He didn't spare the tar or the tyres. He'd had enough of my moods.

I told everybody I and some friends had taken off on a whim for the youth hostel in Arthur's Pass. If they asked I said it had been cold but we'd had a nice time. Fay wanted to know more so I told her I had thought about things up there in the mountains and now I felt better. Even when she looked unconvinced I didn't tell her what had happened. I said that I felt okay about Fay and Lil getting married now, or whatever they wanted to do, and about them being my official parents, as long as they were equals with Mike. I told her I had needed to come to that my own way because I hadn't had any real choice in my life. She knew it wasn't the full story, but she swallowed it. So everyone was happy except me.

*

After I ran away people treated me in a different way. Myrlena taught me to drive. Now Dylan used to shove his right shoulder back into his inner-sprung upholstery and straighten out his arm and cruise, but Myrlena always had two hands on the wheel. She wasn't very patient with Mike or Larry but she had loads of patience with me. I wanted to go fast, but she said, 'You learn what slow means, and you learn how to do it, and you've learned a whole lot.' Once she had to take the wheel from me when I forgot about Slow. She's a strong woman. Funny couple really, little rakish Larry and beefy Myrlena. Another time I forgot about Slow she said, 'You'll be dead for a long time!' And the last lesson was psychological. It was practising to put yourself into the position of the other driver.

Not long after Mike and I went on a horse trek. I was putting myself into other people's positions more and more. I asked him if he had a girlfriend.

—Na. Through with that.

Vince Chatwin owned a race horse called Unlucky in Love and so I asked Mike if it was because of that, that he thought he was unlucky where women are concerned. He said it was that he didn't have time with his backpackers project.

—But you don't decide to fall in love, do you? It just hap-

pens doesn't it?

—Yeah, it happens.

To get out of the hot seat he asked me if I had a boyfriend. There was a boy at school, he was an idiot sometimes but other times I couldn't help myself, I just had to laugh. So I told Mike I liked him and Mike said he might turn out to be that extra special faithful idiot.

—A "faithful idiot"?

—Sure. Why not?

Mike had weird friends but he was such a hypocrite sometimes. I wanted to break his nose so I asked him if Fay had ever been unfaithful to him and he was visibly shocked by that. He said no, of course not. But I couldn't know if that was true or not, he wouldn't have admitted it to himself, because for Mike if a man sleeps around that makes him more of a man, but if a woman sleeps around that makes her the whore of Babylon. And he wasn't going to let my mum turn into that.

—Don't you hate mum?

—No, I still ... like her. You know?

I knew. I wished they were together again. We trekked on to the rhythm of the horses' steps. Mike leaned both hands on the pommel.

So can I ask you a question now?

—Fine!

He asked me who I had run away with, was it this guy at school that I fancied?

—Promise not to tell?

—Scout's honour.

So I told him.

I regretted it straight away. Mike would never understand. If I was Dylan I might have done the same thing under the beech trees. Maybe I was too beautiful for him and he lost control. Mike would never think of that. He would never see it that way. How could he? We never talked about it again. Not once. Not one word. But Mike, with a little help from Mettler, would have their revenge.

So that's more or less the way things stood when the appeal was heard. It became the story of the week. A journalist argued her case: she had panicked when the gun went off

the first time and accidentally pulled the trigger again, and again. Fay renewed her subscription to The Press. Marg Hayward had been busy. She'd had an independent analysis of the rifle commissioned. A ballistics expert reckoned the trigger was overly sensitive. Suddenly grandma was free. Insufficient evidence. The Court of Appeal said she was guilty of Dangerous Misuse or something, and she had to serve exactly the amount of time she had already done. It was so neat and tidy we all felt that we had been swindled. No one cared any more about the hunting accident that killed Grandad McLeod. No one cared about all of that, but grandma was coming home.

Heinz and Gretsch arrived early. They had a Japanese composer with them who was helping them with their water and tube work. The farm was connected to national grid power now and there was going to be a festival in the courtyard under theatre lights.

It was a real reunion. Dylan arrived for the homecoming in his Studebaker with his cello in the back seat. Mike tracked down the rest of the Hates, inviting Mother's Little No Hoper who were now Heck Orchestra. Shake threw a sickie from the N.Z. Symphony Orchestra. He brought his own one-stringed 'Zither-thing'. Sam was in Brazil with Nina Hagen. Larry arrived, on crutches. Lil wore Nicaraguan army surplus. Mike wondered if Lil and Fay would like to do some ritual but they had left the coven

and were finished with ceremonies. Lil was interested in Natural Births now that she was disillusioned with economics. She suggested some natural remedies to Larry and promised him he would again be able to play drums sitting down. The farm brought back memories of UTP that they had cooked up, and some of the party patrons dressed up. Heinz was the last person on record to wear the Japanese jacket and wedding dress my parents were married in.

An eight cylinder Falcon cruised up the drive. Joe was planning on a big family. Hohepa didn't smile until I held him. Joe didn't smile a lot either. He had a weight of unpaid fines. He had thought that starting a family carried with it some immunity, but not from the debt collectors. He had been nailed through that permanent address.

There was a forced cheer like that explosion when the cold tap's got air in the pipe and Mike reversed grandma up the drive of the farm in the Cherry Wagon. He was followed by the new Hifield patrol car, two tone siren and lights strobing. When the hooters and streamers fell still, some eerie sounds came from the hills, bubble-happy reflection sounds. Heinz and Gretsch and the Japanese had begun a slow-moving acoustic performance called Life Sauce using their water-and-tube instruments. Other musicians and spectators, including grandma, traipsed up towards the melodies and joined in or listened to the wa-

ter music. Autosuggestion caused a deep track to be worn to the new hostel latrine. Dylan felt the urge to join in and went to get his cello from out of his Studebaker. The cello wasn't there, neither was the Studebaker. He grabbed Matt Downes and they raced off in pursuit of the thieves. I joined in with some Tibetan hand cymbals. It was my first public performance!

After the party grandma got herself hooked up to the internet. But cyber-genealogy had a nasty shock in store for her. She thought she was descended from pioneering gold-mining premier Julius Vogel, but some expert she corresponded with by email said that it was impossible.

Mike had a go, too. He got behind the mouse now, to find out more about his family. He didn't have much to go on except some dead Doyles in Millerton who came to New Zealand in the 1870's, and he got a shock as well. There were three Doyles buried in Argentina who had exactly the same dates and places of birth as his ancestors. One of the two families were not who they said they were. Mike was more upset about that than grandma had been about not being related to Julius Vogel. He had to accept that there was a fifty-fifty chance he was descended from refugees from a war he didn't have a clue about or a bunch of criminals who had swindled the Bank of Arabia. I thought that sounded exciting, but he was thrown. Grandma announced you had to believe what you want to, the Internet

wasn't God.

—They could say I'm not even a Vogel! grandma sniffed.

—Yeah! They could make up all kinds of stuff. They could say Mike isn't my dad and get away with it, eh grandma. (I'd been having fantasies about being adopted.)

—Izzie!

—They could say anything.

For a moment grandma wasn't there. It was scary. I snapped her out of it.

—But couldn't they, grandma?!

—What? Oh, yes. But… they'd reap the whirlwind, Izzie. And she sniffed again.

It had started, her sniffing. I couldn't smell anything, but maybe she had been too long inside where they disinfect twice a day. She would walk into the sitting room or the bedroom and sniff and go, whew! and think a bit and go out again. I never knew what was getting on her wick, Mike hadn't had any big parties there or nothing, like there wasn't any stink of beer or boots or anything. Maybe there wasn't even any smell.

The acacia in the back yard had shot up to thirty metres. That tree was gaining before your eyes. Mike cut it down to size during the weeks when he was lost of ancestry but grandma instructed him to leave a certain horizontal branch. That gave some shelter from the sun, which was beginning to feel like a blowflame that summer. I thought it would make a good tree for a swing but one morning, grandma draped a rug from the front hall over that branch and she started beating it. He beat it too, Mike did. And they both felt better, I could tell. After that they were beating a rug nearly every day as if they couldn't stand something about woven wool. They freed a lot of the dust and fleas eggs. Grandma sprayed on some chemical and upped the pressure on the hose till the water that ran off was clear. The house smelt like a dentist shop for months.

Dylan's Studebaker turned up, abandoned on a road leading to a disused river wharf, engine burned out. The thieves had emptied the oil out of the motor and run it till it was red-hot. The seats had been taken to the riverbank for a bonfire. The mirror hubcaps were missing. No cello.

Another Easter and another birthday passed and I found the cutting about Perry dying "suddenly". "No flowers." The mustard and blue lupins would soon be ploughed out before the new crops went in. It was turning wintry cold as soon as the sun disappeared behind the mountains

when Tam upped the pressure on whoever was holding the animal-stock money. By the time she got it, it was spring.

Grandma used to talk about how the fruit and even seeds that came out of our land tasted really good, so good that you didn't need to do any cuisine to tart them up, and she had plans to bottle and sell them, all over the show, as Granny's Own. She wasn't a scientist but she had a hunch there was something in that worn land and something in the rain that would work through the yield and make good. And that was when the Silber Fruit started growing.

I had never tasted anything like them, not the fruit on the plains, not at the greengrocers in Wellington. But their flavour was something you knew, if you only knew from where. Their skin was purple as passion fruit but it was hard to tell if it was a fruit or a vegetable. The flesh was usually light, orangey peach with veins of wine-red fibres running through it. But that could change too. And they were bitter and sweet at the same time, like a pinch of salt in porridge with brown sugar on it. Funny thing is that the earth when they fruited there was a smell of rotting, a sweet smell of rotting. But when you broke the skin of the fruit they tasted so good, not like the smell at all. They surely had all sorts of vitamins and qualities inside of them that would make UTP look like aspirin. If you ate one of those every day, you would live forever. They were

all mine. No one else knew about them. I left them alone for the first year and they sowed themselves next season around the first plants.

Then came the day Heinz and Gretsch came down from Mount St Patrick and Heinz told me the facts, no mucking around, like I was an adult. Perry had done it with a shotgun, muzzle in the mouth. His mum had found him.

Because of that, because he had told me straight, Heinz was the first person I told about them, those fruit. I made him close his eyes and imagine. He said, 'Silber Fruit!'. Just like that!

Soon I had a field of them. I reckon they loved eroded soil as much as turnips do and soon they were growing everywhere, wherever I was.

*

It was after Shake came back from Japan. I was sleeping at Shake's warehouse in Wellington, Mike and I had gone there for dinner and Mike drank too much as usual. He and Shake shared Shake's enormous bed, but they weren't, like, lovers. The sun was shining but I hadn't quite woken. In my palm there was a mirror that was rippling like a pool of silver blood and in the other hand was that penny, the one I found under the porch at Jim's, being worn away

as I looked at it, and it was soon nothing but dust. I was afraid that the creeping desiccation would take over my hand my arm my body. I threw the coin from my hand but the sprinkle became hundreds of new coins and a voice, the voice of a newsreader, was saying 'The Silber Fruit has failed!'

I was kind of sobbing, breathless without tears. I told Mike and Shake at breakfast and Mike said not to worry, dreams go by opposites. He said that as if he didn't care, not one bit. But Shake had a look in his eyes.

—Mmm, could be.

His eyes were closed. He was scouring the symphony of his night's sleep. Then his face lit up.

—Mmm–mmm! Yep!

—You sure?

—Dead certain!

—What are you guys on?

I forgave Mike. It wasn't his fault he didn't know what we were talking about. See, Shake and me had a special thing going. It had come back to him and it came back

to me too thanks to him. It's here and now and it's when you close your eyes and it's the night and all our befores. It's a flavour and it's a love-song. It's being beautiful, y'know?

This page has been intentionally left blank

Digitalised for
Percutio
PUBLICATIONS
January 2016