



The Mud

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Mick Stone

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MICK STONE

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DEDICATION

To Sue and my family.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

‘The Mud’ is a sequel to the novel ‘The Last Newspaper in the World’. Some characters from that story appear here. This story is fictional and is not based on any person, living or dead. I would like to acknowledge the many people throughout my life who have told me formally or informally of their stories of pain. All of us who know but do nothing have blood on our hands.

THE LIFE IN THE MUD

Water lapping on the mud of a tide out estuary like a dead grey upside-down field. Look closer and the mud has a life of its own, popping and crawling, slowly expanding or shrinking as the tide pushed its way into land and pulled away out to sea. Like a monster of the deep stuck in the shallows. The sound the water made on the side of the boat was soothing. The squab I lay on was comfortable but at an increasingly awkward angle due to the boat settling into a lean in the mud of Ohiwa Harbour as the tide went out.

My baby had seemed to like the sensation of floating inside me as I drifted along in the boat and listened to the sea water sucking in and letting go. Sleep had come to me for a while after I had been washed back and forth by the tide, taking my baby along for a ride. I talked to him – I hoped it was a ‘him’ as I did not want a ‘her’ to live in my world. The rocking of the boat in the middle of the night must have let me go to sleep. I dreamt of going shopping with my best friend. We agreed on everything as we walked through a never-ending mall. I paused in front of a baby shop that wasn’t selling clothes. A man came out – he looked like Mr Christopher, my teacher from old school days – ‘What can I get you Emily?’

‘What do you sell here Mr Christopher?’

‘My name’s not Christopher. You must be mistaking me for somebody else.’

‘Sure I am. So, what...?’ I raised a hand while my best friend pulled on my other one. ‘I sell futures Emily, dear.’

‘Huh, whose future?’ I asked, resisting the tugging and reached out to the man.

‘What future do you want me to sell?’ I called.

I turned to look and my best friend was walking somewhere else in the mall. Another voice came from behind me.

‘Emily, Emily Lewis – hello, wake up. You must get off the boat. It’s not yours.’

I knew that voice and felt happy. I smiled but kept my eyes closed and could see Bill Brown. The coolest kid in school he had been, not only older than me but also the most distant from me. I smiled, because I knew he would’ve hated to have to walk out through the mud to me. Surfing at Ohope was his thing, so he loved the free flow of the water. That is what I used to think when I sat on the sand dune opposite our cottage and watched him twist and turn down a wave. I would sit with my knees up and, if it was cold, pull my big old coat around me. The coat came from the Vinnies charity shop in town and was a bit old lady, although I didn’t care as it kept my baby and me warm. My father’s voice came drifting across the road and up the dune, calling me. B.B., as we called Bill, paddled into another wave and I wished it was he who was calling me – and now he was.

I didn’t hate the mud because it was part of my favourite place, the sea. In some ways, the mud was more sensuous than the surf, which sometimes had as much energy as an electric shock. I felt quite happy laying there on the awkward squab, listening to Bill Brown’s voice.

'Watch where you're walking, Bill Brown, I wouldn't want you falling all over me.' I looked at him first with one eye, peering through my mass of scraggly red hair that looked like the curls were fighting against gravity.

I was a couple of years younger than him but I could have been older. I uncurled from the squab, my long dress folded around my skinny body, bulging sufficiently to indicate I was pregnant, again.

"It looks like somebody did fall on you already. Or did they fall for you?' Bill said

'That's not a very nice thing to say.' I wasn't too insulted, because I knew what he meant.

'No, you are right, sorry, but why did you call me?

Did you want some publicity about something?'

'I heard those two old guys mumbling about calling the cops, so I thought I'd call you just in case. You know, you're quite famous in Whakatane after that business with the mayor's death.'

Being famous in Whakatane wasn't hard, it was such a dump despite attempts to ramp up its seaside resort potential. Bill was involved in a series of articles somehow involving a group of investors and low life interests in the death of our mayor. Nothing came of it and nobody was arrested but rumours, denied, suggested the mayor had committed suicide.

'Don't believe everything you read. So, what are you doing in here, Emily? I didn't know you were a sailor.'

'You don't know much about me. Then again, there's a lot you might like to know but I'm not telling you.'

I knew he wouldn't be able to help himself; he was that kind of loving person. As he reached over to help me sit up, he quietly asked who the father was. 'Nobody you would know,' I said, but I could see he doubted that.

'Hey, Bill, are you setting up camp in there?' I heard Timi Tatua call out, and two old guys laughed.

I held Bill's arm as I pulled myself up off the squab, leaning unsteadily against his shoulder.

'I just wanted to get away for a while. Saw this boat moored out here; launched the old dinghy and rowed out. Pulling the anchor up was quite hard but, once it was up, I had a lovely night just floating around the place.'

'But you've got a boat of your own, haven't you?'

I gave him what he probably thought was a hard look as we ducked through the cabin door.

'That old wreck. Yeah, it was my father's boat. I wish he'd finished it.'

We had reached the stern of the boat and Timi Tatua was preparing to lift me over the edge. Just before I climbed into his arms, I said to Bill: 'You could help me finish it and then we could float off together.'

'I don't think so Emily. I'm not much of a builder.' 'He's a bit hopeless really,' Timi said. Timi was Bill's oldest friend from school. I guessed that Bill had called his police constable friend to head off any cops who might want to come out here mob-handed to find and arrest the big boat thief.

In spite of my growing bulk, I felt quite tiny in Timi's arms as Bill handed me down to him. I pulled my hair back as we started off through the mud and Timi looked over his shoulder at Bill.

'I'll see if I know anybody who can help, Emily.'

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Some people think autumn can be a beautiful time of the year. All those coloured leaves and mild, misty days. Dad used to burn piles of leaves in his backyard. Smouldering leaves surrounded the bright little fire and smoke carried away ashes. I was thinking about this as Timi slurped his way back through the mud. A girl stood like a beacon on the shore. Dressed in what looked like a neatly pressed all-white outfit. I recognised her as one of Bill's colleagues from the Whakatane News. I smiled and looked over Timi's shoulder back to Bill, who was dragging his way through the mud holding up his shorts with one hand.

'Hey Bill, your girlfriend is waiting for you. Gonna give her a big hug?'

He looked up from his task and blinked a couple of times, then smiled but didn't say anything.

'Tell you what, I'll do it for you,' I called out to him just as he was taking a quick pic of Timi and me.

'Hey, I haven't even got my lippy on,' I said, and gave him the finger. 'I'm going to give your girlfriend a big hug when my hero gets me to shore.'

'Calm down girl,' said Timi, 'you're in enough trouble as it is without stirring it up even more.'

'You're not going to arrest me, are you? I was just having a bit of fun.'

'Stealing a boat, drifting around the harbour at night, a hazard to other vessels?'

I started to wriggle then and we almost both fell in the mud, but Timi held me firmly and we steadied. My baby gave me a little nudge to remind me to be a bit more careful.

'So, what's your girlfriend's name anyway?' I called back to Bill.

'Diana, and she's not my girlfriend, just somebody I work with.'

'Oh, of course, that Angelique from Gordon's Café is your number one friend. Not really your type, is she? I think you'd be better off with Diana really.'

Bill didn't answer but just concentrated on the mud, which was thinning into the sand as we neared the shore. I really thought I would be a better friend for Bill than Angelique or his smartly-dressed colleague waiting on the sand, away from the mud. After all, I lived at the beach, swimming most days, surfing when it felt safe with my baby, fishing off the wharf over the estuary or into the waves on the seaward side. I never saw Angelique doing any of those things. Bill and she rarely walked along the beach, and when they did, Angelique wore boots. Like, she really hated the sand. How was that right?

'God, you stink,' Diana said as we reached the shoreline. She had her phone out. But she wasn't taking a pic of Timi and me, but was taking one of Bill in his shorts and mud-covered legs. He walked passed us and stepped toward Diana to give her a hug. We laughed but Diana didn't see any fun in the gesture. Bill stepped back, suddenly

serious. Diana clearly despised such sudden displays, viewing them as grasping rather than affection.

'Yeuw! Go away and get cleaned up. You're not coming anywhere near the car with that all over you.'

She waved at Bill like he was some lower form of life.

Timi rested a large hand on his shoulder, nodded at Diana, and addressed Bill sternly.

'Hey, you're not going to do anything about Emily, are you?'

'Shouldn't I be asking you that?'

Timi shrugged, putting his head to one side.

'Probably just a caution, I think. We could do stealing a boat and so on but....'

'Yeah, "but" – it's Emily right.'

Timi just shrugged. I wondered what he meant. 'Sergeant Stead might have something to say about

that, Timi,' I said.

Again, with a shrug.

'He's got better things to worry about.'

Timi turned away before Bill could ask what better things Stead was worried about. The sergeant had a local reputation as one of the 'tough but fair' cops, although as far as some of us were concerned, that should have been 'rough but unfair'.

I walked over to stand next to Diana, itching to cuddle up to her, but Timi came and stood beside with a hand on my wrist. Bill told Diana he was going to walk over to Bernard's place and get cleaned up. Why didn't she go down to the café and get a coffee? He'd be along soon. Guys like him had no idea – Bernie was Angelique's substitute parent and she worked at Gordon's Café. Surprisingly, because I knew Diana would have hated him for telling her what to do, she nodded.

I watched as he slapped his way along the path with mud caking his legs right up to his shorts. At weekends, this area was popular with visitors, walkers and people going for a fish in the estuary. Luckily it was a Monday morning when nothing much stirred out on the sandspit, so the audience comprised a couple of grey haired girlfriends and a fox terrier that sniffed avidly at Bill as we walked past them.

Timi was chatting with Diana like I wasn't there. Suddenly, I needed a pee. Love you babe but why do you always make me pee? I didn't say anything but gave Timi's shirt sleeve a tug and nodded towards the car. Diana smiled and turned towards the Whakatane News car. When Timi didn't move straight away I gave him a gentle kick in the shins. He could take it.

'I could have you for assaulting a police officer.' I knew he wasn't serious and told him we should get going if he didn't want me to pee on his foot. We went over to the car and he opened the passenger's side front door, carefully placing a hand on the top of my head as I got in. He needn't have. The car was big. The two old guys who had found me were standing next to the car, asking Timi what he was going to do with me. He fobbed them off with something; whatever it was they looked at me and rolled their eyes.

Timi drove us down the beach road to my folks' house. We laughed when we saw Bill washing himself down with a hose. Bernie was just turning into his driveway, and Timi gave the siren a short burst.

‘What is the story with those guys?’ I asked Timi. He didn’t say anything. ‘You know, Angelique and Bill, and Bernie and them?’

‘I don’t know but I am more interested in what it is going on with you.’

I didn’t like where this was going and was quite relieved to see the boat coming into view on our front lawn. The boat sat in a sling out the front like it was part of the scenery. He let me out with a warning. I

made off towards the front door but I had no intention of going into that place. I went around to the back of the garage, where we had a sleepout with a toilet and hand basin. As huts go, it was grotty but I couldn’t face going into the house straight away. I cleaned myself up slowly, washing and scraping off the mud until I felt less dirty – not clean, just less dirty.

Afterwards, I sat on the front porch steps and waited for Bill, because I knew he’d be walking down on the way to the café. A few minutes later, I could see him walking towards our place. He wasn’t looking ahead but out to sea, even though the surf wasn’t up to much.

‘Hey Bill,’ I called and waved out to him, one hand on my hip, the other waving over my head. He was wearing new clothes, having had a change available at Bernie’s place. I hadn’t been inside yet, so was still wearing the same outfit I’d had on earlier. I imagined I looked more windswept than hippy. Our house was a bit run down compared to some of the newer places built in the latest boom. The house was a similar vintage to Bernie’s, and had probably been put up by the same builder. I realised how shabby our place might’ve looked. Only a few shells remained scattered about over the driveway. The garden along the front of the house looked fried. Always a mission in the salt air, it was no longer a garden but a wasteland of lost flowers.

Bill waved back and gestured for him to come over to me, so I could tell he didn’t want to come into

our place. He looked along the road where he could see the café on the corner. Angelique would be in there, serving coffee, chatting openly with customers but more obliquely with Diana. It was a wonder Diana wasn’t here already. I called out and Bill turned so he could see me gesturing, urgently. I lowered my head and closed my eyes as he walked hurriedly down the driveway, red hair fell about my face. I only glanced up at him as through a glimmer of barbed wire, one hand on my belly. I didn’t say anything, just turned and walked inside. Bill followed. We went in through the front door. A light wind, a morning sea breeze, had scattered sand on the carpet in the entrance. Our bare feet sparked a scraping sound as we walked over to the kitchen. The lounge was a mess like a big boys’ night out gone wrong, although only mum and I lived there and here she was now – sitting at the kitchen table facing us, just as I had left her.

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‘Hi Emily’s mum,’ Bill said. The old lady sat with her eyes closed at the end of the table and didn’t answer. She wasn’t big but she looked like strong, like an off- shore wind on a heavy surf day. I started to think maybe she really was asleep despite what I knew already. You could say I hoped she was asleep but that would be wrong. I went around

to the other side of the table and stood beside her. I felt like a little kid again, standing next to mummy even though she was sitting down. As I put a hand on her shoulder, gently touching the denim of her cut-off jacket, she slumped forward.

Bill stepped back and stood unsteadily for a moment. Seeing somebody with a filleting knife sticking out of her back would do that to you. I just put a hand on my belly and looked ahead at Bill.

'You see, Bill,' I said, quietly, 'you had to come and help me; help my baby and me. I didn't want to lose this one.'

Bill went over and stood beside me and held my hand. Did you do this? he asked me. I just lowered my head further, so the barbed wire hair completely covered my face. I was starting to feel like my face was being scratched.

'Emily, I have to call the police now. You understand, don't you, that they'll want to know what happened?'

Just a quiet sigh from me, my belly slightly moving. Bill leaned over to pick up a phone off the table.

'Emily, I'm dialling 111. I have to call the police.'

A hard hand reached and gripped Bill's wrist. He dropped the phone but I could hear the receptionist.

'No you don't,' mum said through gritted teeth. Bill looked like he wanted to talk but was frozen. The hand's grip hardened on his wrist, but that may have only been my shock.

'Call the ambulance,' mum said, taking a deep breath then adding. 'I've had an accident.'

Bill did nothing but stare. I stepped back and looked horrified at my mother. I started to cry.

'Call the bloody ambulance or else I will die.'

My head went back and I felt the red hair fall away. Tears ran backwards off her face and I heard myself scream. As Bill asked the operator for an ambulance, I said in a quiet hiss – 'you bitch, why could you just not die?'

The ambos took what seemed a long time to arrive. Bill also called Timi rather than emergency, but I knew he'd come with friends. I walked away from the table and leaned with two hands on the bench, my head lowered. I started shaking but stood up straight and put the kettle on as though it was just another day.

Bill came over and stood next to me, so close I could still smell the mud despite him having cleaned up. We looked at my mother. I left Bill standing there and went over, bending close to her.

'I'm sorry; you know I had to do this.'

She didn't say anything, just squeezed her face up and gritted her teeth. She nodded once when I asked her if she wanted me to get the knife out. I moved around behind her and reached out to grab the knife handle.

'Don't do that. You'll get your fingerprints all over it.'

Bill grasped my fingers as I was about to wrap them around handle. We stood for a moment, him holding my hand and me staring at him. I thought he had quite a soft hand, must be all that time in the water.

'Bill, do you think it matters now?'

I always liked Bill's face but he often looked like he was somewhere else, out the back on a surfboard or maybe dreaming of Angelique. She had tidied him up quite a bit. His usual shanks of salt-sticky hair had been washed out and brushed back. The long face was suddenly alive and close to mine.

'Here, let me do it.'

'Yeah, you not her, just do it,' mum wheezed.

Bill looked at me and nodded. Wrapping his fingers around the handle, he braced to pull the knife out. A knock at the front door froze the moment.

'Emergency services,' Bill said and stepped back. He walked over and opened the door to an angry Diana.

'I gave up waiting for you at the café and went down to Bernie's. He thought you might be here.'

He held up a hand as she started to demand an explanation. In the distance, sirens from emergency services sounded like the cries of wounded birds. He ushered her in. I stood beside mum as she slumped over the table, the knife still firmly lodged in her back. Diana stopped and asked in a quiet voice 'What happened here? Is that what I think it is?'

I went to the bench pouring the tea into three cups. I got out a fourth.

'Do you take milk?' I asked Diana, who replied 'We need to do something to stem the bleeding.'

Bill walked over a set of draws below the sink where he pulled out a tea towel and wrapped it around the area where the knife was stuck like an arrow in mum's back.

In the distance, sirens from emergency services sounded like the cries of wounded birds. The back door opened, slowly at first as though there was a listener on the other side.

'Come in, Timi, it's okay,' Bill said.

I got another cup and saucer down and rattled them on to the table.

'Yeah, come in and have a nice cuppa.'

Timi's head poked around the door, looking around the kitchen. The sirens halted outside the house, first the ambulance then the police. I know the sound of an ambulance siren well. It sings whereas the police siren squeals. I remembered the sound of the ambulance sirens from the time I lost my first baby. Well, I guess you could say I didn't lose the baby; dad killed it with the final kick. I fell off a ladder trying to clean the kitchen and hit the edge of the oven on my way down. Very unwise activity when pregnant, the doctor said. Mr Stead from the police wasn't convinced either, but I was considered an adult by then, so he left me alone, eventually.

'Get out,' Timi said, striding across to mum, 'now.' Diana headed straight for the door but halted when Bill remained standing beside me. She raised her eyebrows and tilted her head towards the noise coming down the path. Diana walked over to stand beside Bill. The front door burst open and uniforms started to pour in through the lounge.

I wanted to say 'hey, guys, slow down. This is not a biggie. I just stabbed my mum. You know, no worries eh'. Instead, I felt swept by the wave of blue. I turned and looked at Bill. I think he nodded to me. I noticed his hair seemed to be standing on end but it wasn't the usual sea salty look he had after a surf.

'I touched the knife handle,' Bill said. 'Great, why?' Timi asked, shaking his head. 'I was going to pull out the knife.'

'I stabbed her,' I said, quietly. They both looked at each other but by that time we were swamped by police and ambulance guys. We were taken outside while they attended to her.

MEETING ROSIE

'Baby, did you see that? Isn't it beautiful?' 'Yes mummy, what is it?'

'A flying fish. They swim then fly above the sea.'

Look, there's more now.'

'Am I a flying fish mummy?'

I rolled over on the narrow bed. The police cells were quiet now in the dim of the night. Lying on my back, my hands on my tummy, baby swimming with me.

'You are my baby, darling. You don't have to go rushing about, leaping out of the water until you are ready. Baby, you are safe with me.'

Even in a police cell. I didn't think they would keep me here long. They only thought I killed my mother, the waters being muddied by my friend Bill Brown. He grabbed the knife to pull it out of her back just before the emergency services arrived at home. Told the cops too. My father wasn't saying anything, couldn't probably, and I just shrugged. I knew I would have to talk to them some time, because they were holding me on suspicion.

I heard a noise, thought the cops were looking at me again. Opened my eyes and thought about floating on that nice boat with my baby. Bill was right. You know, maybe I could fix up our old boat and sail away. Me and my baby, and Bill. I wonder if he would like to come.

A woman cop leaned over me and shook my arm. 'Hey, I think there's something wrong with her,' she said, and another face appeared. I should have known, Sergeant Stead, big and strong with huge hands.

'Hello Mr Stead, I was waiting for you to come and see me,' I said, and blinked.

'She's away with the fairies,' he said. 'Hey Emily, get up. You can go.'

'You had us worried there for a moment,' said Rosemary Price, the woman cop. I didn't know her but you get to know these people in our sort of business.

'No worries Rosie. I was just floating away on my boat, my baby and me.'

'Constable Price it is. You can float out of here for now.'

'Why are you letting me go, Rosie? Didn't I kill my mum?'

'Your mum's not dead. She's in the hospital. They pulled the knife out and patched her up.'

'Oh, shame that.' 'Sorry?'

'So, where's she now?'

'She's going to be in the hospital for a few days but she says you didn't do it, so why look so worried?'

I paused in the doorway, the news that mum was alive caused me to feel like I wanted to stay where I was right now.

'Come on, we're going to bail you and you out of here.'

'On what charge? What do you mean?'

'Something to do with stealing a boat – that'll do you for now won't it?'

I lay there for a moment looking at Rosie's auburn hair glinting in the yellow nightlight of police cells. I shrugged and slowly slid my legs over the side of the bed. Rosie ushered me into the custody offer's section where I was charged. They said I was being released on bail and took me out front where Bill and Angelique met me. That annoyed me at first, because I couldn't think why she had to get in on this thing involving me, Bill and my mother and father. Bill put an arm around my shoulders,

and he said I had been bailed to the address where Angelique lived with Bernie. I didn't know Bernie but I knew he had some level of authority.

'I thought about you possibly staying with me at Harry's but the old man wasn't too keen, given the newspaper's reputation,' Bill said but even he had to smile at that last bit. Before he could say anymore, Angelique added in what I would have to admit was a sweet voice "But we thought it best you stayed with me so you could be close to home.'

A little shiver went through my body at this complex thought. "Can't I just stay here?" I asked Rosie.

'Sure, we're a hotel of the highest quality. Special meal orders accepted for our highly-valued guests.'

I felt a bit silly then. I seriously didn't want to go out there and find out whatever had happened. Okay, I lied, I could wait to get out but just didn't want to do what I would have to do.

'Do you finish your shift soon Rosie? Maybe my baby and I can go home with you.'

She waved some papers at Bill and, while they were going through them, I slipped out the front door. The night was a bit chilly for autumn. No lingering warmth left, just the possibility of colder days ahead. My baby was restless, but I walked on.

'I can't go there, baby. They want us to live near that house, them, him. We don't want to stay there do we baby?'

I thought I'd walked all the way to The Strand Hotel but when Angelique took my hand, I realised I'd only just made it to the curb outside the police station.

'Come with us; let us look out for you and your baby.'

Angelique had an open, round face with serious eyebrows over sensitive eyes. 'You and Bill and them, you don't know anything.' 'What don't I know, Emily?'

'I can't stay here or I'll go back to him like I always do.'

But Angelique quietly held my hand and we looked up as Bill came down the stairs and walked over with Rosie.

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The drive back over to Ohope that night seemed to take forever. It got dark very quickly as we left behind Whakatane to wind our way through the hill suburbs. An old couple I knew lived in a house up there somewhere in Brandville. She was quite blind and he a bit deaf. They knew me through my mum's church and sometimes looked after me when mum had to go away. When I was a little kid, before.

We started driving down the hill. Angelique was saying what a beautiful night it was but how she did have to get up early to work at Gordon's Café. Did Bill want to stay over rather than driving back to town? I thought he would have wanted to, but he said no, he had better not. I really wasn't listening. By this time, I was quite nervy and, without realising it, had started to kick the back of Angelique's seat gently until we had passed our house. The place was fully in the dark, although a cop car was parked outside.

After Bill had dropped us off, Angelique and I walked down the crunching shell drive to Bernie's little house. She showed me to a spare room, and I heard her going in to talk with Bernie. I sat for a while and then went and had a shower. The water was warm and, while more of a trickle than a rush, washed the stink of my day off me. Back in the room, I climbed into bed and lay with the light out. Angelique looked in but I seemed to be asleep. All I could hear was doors closing, and then nothing except the

sound of some fir trees moving and one wave after another clapping on the beach, then silence.

The bedroom window jammed at first when I tried to open it. Maybe it jammed but maybe I didn't really want it to open. I took a breath and the old wooden window sash moved easily and quietly. The air was just a bit chilly, like when you first open the fridge, so I took a blanket off the bed and dropped carefully outside. I tried not to rest my belly on the sill as I lowered myself out the window onto the ground. It was dark at first, but I closed my eyes as I wrapped myself in the blanket and when I opened them it was like somebody had filtered a little light on the scene. The glittering shell driveway provided a pathway in the night light. A cloud passed over the moon and everything went dull again. The grass was wet. Trying not to walk on the shells, I lifted the blanket to stop the bottom edge from getting wet. My feet were cold by the time I reached the footpath. I quickly turned and walked down towards our house.

Dad wasn't in the house and mum was still in the hospital. The cops had gone. I still tried to walk as quietly as possible down the centre of the drive to avoid making any noise. Cop tape stretched across the front doorway and nobody seemed to be about. It had been a long day for everybody.

It is easy enough to get into a house when you know how. Before long I was in our bed, well mum and dad's bed. I hugged my baby. My belly and I were together alone, he wasn't there. A shadow ran across the bedroom wall and I thought it was mum with the knife still in her back. The car roared along the road, headlights shining on a lamp post. Curling into a ball, I put my head under the bedclothes and smelt us. But I could somehow still smell him, so reached over to grab a pillow.

'What are you doing in here?' asked my father, as he looked down at me. I didn't feel afraid and a kind of warmth ran through me. He reached over and slapped my face. Not too hard, thanks, but hard enough for the warmth to turn away.

'I'm sorry, I'm sorry,' he said as he pulled me towards him and pushed his head into my chest. I went to hold him but he pushed me away.

'Get out of here you little bitch. I don't want to see you and your bastard ever again.'

No blows came but I held my arms out to protect my baby. Again, he held me too close.

'You know you bloody near killed your mother.

What were you thinking?'

I rolled over and felt a hand on my shoulder. 'Emily, are you all right?'

Angelique's head was down next to mine. The closed bedroom window stared blankly at me. Had it ever been open? I blinked. Angelique touched me on the shoulder. She was going to work at Gordon's Café, she said. A short while later I heard her talking to Bernard, but softly, so I turned over and went back to sleep.

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Bernie was still shuffling about in his pj's and dressing gown when I got up. He sat at the kitchen table eating toast and poached eggs, while looking at a screen propped against a packet of cereal. He glanced up briefly and nodded, gestured towards the fridge and the bench, then went back to his screen. I poured water into a glass and topped it up with some hot water from the kettle. Knowing I had to eat, even though I

didn't feel up to it, I put some bread in a toaster. I wanted cereal but didn't want to bother Bernie.

'Hey Bernie, how're you going this morning?

What're you looking at there?'

He gave a little shake of his head as though he was pulled out of a trance.

'Just doing a bit of market tracking – you know shares, currencies – that sort of thing.'

'Oh, that's exciting.'

I went behind his back and peered at the screen. It was dark with multiple coloured graphs with moving lines.

'Why aren't you tracking gold?' I asked.

'That's another whole screen. Here, look at this page. It's fascinating what's happening to gold at the moment.'

My toast popped up and I walked over to flip it out onto the board. Looking for spreads, I had my back to Bernie.

'I read you are involved in another kind of tracking.'

Bernie didn't say anything, but I heard him closing down the screen and putting it aside.

'Want a cup of coffee?' he asked and stood up. 'Are you avoiding my question, Bernie?'

'Not really but I am avoiding the answer?'

I turned to face him. He was about as tall as me, and I'm quite tall. Of course, he was much heavier than me but that would not be hard. We both had little bellies though, as his pyjamas pressed through the belt around the dressing gown.

'I'd better put some clothes on. Then I'm going for a swim. Want to come?'

I shrugged and turned back to prepare my toast. 'Sure, sure, so you don't want to talk to me. You're

into tracking down paedophile rings internationally but here I am, just down the road, and you can't help me. Must be pretty embarrassing.'

Bernie's work came out during an investigation

into the mayor's death. Not much was given away but enough was now known that Bernie wasn't some weirdo playing international markets. I took a bite out of my toast and looked down at my belly. Baby was starting to stretch and move. Bernie stopped at the kitchen doorway and turned.

'This is different. You're a young woman now.' 'I wasn't always, Bernie.'

The phone went and he looked down before going to answer it.

'That was Bill. He says you've got to be in court at 9.30.'

'Sure. So, Bernie, how do you identify a paedo?'

He didn't look up from the computer screen, so I gave him a nudge with my foot.

'Hey, that hurt. Maybe you identify the victims first. I don't know, perhaps you should ask your counsellor. You have got one, haven't you?'

'Should I have?'

'With the sort of crime you are said to have committed, you should be referred for a psychological assessment.'

'Bernie, there is no 'allegedly' about any of this. I did stab her in the back. What about you? Can't you help me?'

He looked at me. I was trying to sound as nice as I could and, putting on a smile, I hoped was pretty, although I was never going to be cute. He looked annoyed for a start, then softened.

'It's not really my job to get involved but...'

'But you are involved aren't you. Here I am. So enough of the bullshit.'

'Yes, here you are, but there's no need to swear, thank you all the same.'

'Okay, alright I'm going to calm down.'

He pushed his chair back and stood up, walking over to the kitchen. Turning on the cold water, he picked up a kettle and filled it up, plugged it in and turned the power on in silence. I stayed where I was waiting for him to come back but he didn't, so a gap between the two rooms separated us. Maybe he felt more comfortable that way. I didn't, so I strode over and into the kitchen.

Bernie's story had partially emerged elsewhere but he explained how he had been employed by the government during various south east Asian difficulties. In Vietnam, an embassy contact introduced him to Angelique's mother, who was working for a guy in a similar way as I did at The Captain's Table, our little town's brothel. Young as she was, she had recently had a baby and this was a problem. The baby's father, being a French embassy official, wanted nothing to do with the baby and was quickly moved on. Bernie worked the system to get Angelique out as a refugee and brought her home where she grew up as his ward.

'What happened to her mother?' I said. This was for some reason a critical point to me now.

'I don't know,' Bernie said. 'Okay, I think she died but I never found out.'

I looked down, thinking of Angelique's mother. Baby gave me a nudge and I held her tightly. Bernie reached over and placed patted me on a shoulder.

'Everything will be okay but do look after yourself.'

I couldn't look up at him at first but took a deep breath and raised my head. Bernie's hand dropped away.

'Bernie, I have to do what I am doing. I can't stop.'

'Whatever you are doing, just make sure it doesn't kill you,' he said and turned back to the screen.

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The only thing the cops were charging me with was borrowing that boat, so I was remanded on bail. A note about 'other charges pending' was recorded in the file. The courthouse was pretty quiet. I'd seen it busier. The judge, Brenda Evans, I had used when she was just a lawyer starting out in her own practice. She was useless then as the judge gave me two years. Apparently, the law takes a dim view of theft as a servant. I was sorry about taking the shop's money but the owner really was too crap, with all that touching going on of his younger employees. For some reason, he never came near me. My lawyer this time was John McVicar, a little guy, to me anyway, who rode cases hard on behalf of his long line of seasoned criminal clients. His pay cheque for my case was coming from my friend James. To say I helped him run The Captain's Table was probably a bit too much, but I helped him out when he couldn't be around to look after the girls. The judge, almost as an aside, ordered me to undergo a psychiatric assessment. I didn't overthink it at the time but McVicar said outside the court that I had to take the process seriously.

Bill and I talked about the assessment as we drove over the hill from Whakatane.

'Do they want to find out if I'm mad or something?'

'Well, you have been acting a bit crazy?' Bill said.

He looked over at me and smiled.

I gave him a tap on the arm.

'Ouch, that hurts,' he said, smiling. 'Look, it won't do any harm to show you are willing to participate. It might help your case.'

I wasn't convinced but asked him in a distracted way how that might work. I really didn't want to go to prison, although there are worse placed in the world.

'How about writing down notes about your experiences. Maybe that will give them something to work with when assessing you.'

'That's easy for you to say, Bill. Not everybody's like you.'

'You might be surprised what you can do if you try. Look in the glove box. There might be a note pad in there you can use to write things into.'

The glove box door snapped open and I found a memory book.

'Interesting cover,' I said, looking at the cover picture of sunflowers in a yellow vase. The flowers looked to be past their best but I could see the sun's reflection in the vase.

'Yes, they're Vincent van Gogh. Angelique gave me that to see if I could work through my own stuff.'

'What stuff do you have Bill?'

'Exactly what I said but, hey, this isn't about me.'

Take it and use it if you wish.'

'Van Gogh – Dutch artist. Born 1853 and died 1890. A bit mad, wasn't he?'

'You scare me sometimes, Emily, where do you get this stuff?'

'I must've been listening to Mr Christopher in art class after all.'

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Bill let me off at the beach while he went over to see Angelique and have a coffee. The surf was loud and I couldn't hear anything else except the waves banging down and exploding. The tide had left a large branch of a tree had been left near the high-water mark. I sat on it and wrapped my black skirt around my knees.

'This is the best place to come, baby' 'Why is that mummy? It's very noisy'. 'That's the waves.'

'Are they very scary?'

'The waves are the best thing in the world. We can sit here and they just keep coming in no matter what we've done and what has been done to us. The waves won't judge us.'

I climbed down from the log.

'Where are we going mummy? I can hear more waves now.'

'We're at the water's edge, where it's all broken up but perfect at the same time.'

'Like you mummy.' I laughed to myself. 'Yeah, like me baby.'

'Don't go in too deep mummy.'

'Can you feel us float in the water? I am standing on a sandbank. We can go out further to where the water is calmer.'

'I'm not sure about this. Is it safe?'

'Feel the smoothness as the water covers us. Baby, this is your friend, no questions, no answers, just accepting us.'

Floating near the sand, I looked up and could see a wave rolling overhead, lifting me up as it passed and

set me down again. The water was clear and had the blue-green quality you sometimes see in people's eyes. My head jerked up as my hair was pulled hard. Bill didn't say anything when we broke the surface but he hauled me onto his surfboard and held us steady as another wave passed through. We were awkward, so he struggled at first but then reached the sandbank and guided us through the shore break foam to the beach.

'What were you thinking? No, don't tell me, I don't want to know.' Bill put his arm around my shoulder and we walked up the beach. He walked but I just struggled along. I suddenly felt hefty, and it wasn't just the weight of the wet dress pulling me down. We made our way through the dunes to where his car was parked and I lay down on the soft grass, shivering.

'Come on Emily, we've got to dry you off,' he said, trying to lift me up. As he held an arm to lift me, I threw the other hand up and slapped his face. I don't know why I did it, after all Bill had just dragged my baby and me up from out of the surf. Maybe I just didn't want another man taking control of me, even if he had just saved me.

Bill pulled back as I reached out to touch his face. He opened the car door and reached in for a large towel, throwing it at me. Taking off my dress, I quickly wrapped the towel around as much of me as could be pulled around my belly.

'Hey,' he said. I shrugged then walked over to the toilet block and changing room and dried myself down.

Looking in the smeared, partially cracked mirror, I was still for a moment. Who was this person I was

looking at and where was I? I heard a car pulling up outside. I knew from the engine noise it was my friend James from The Captain's Table.

When I went out, Bill was resting against his car. He looked relaxed but I sensed he was tense. I reached into the back of James's and grabbed a blanket he keeps in there, just in case. Pulling it around me, I gave the towel over to Bill. He looked like he was going to say something, but I cut him off, too loud probably.

'Good to see ya, Bill. Nice swim, eh.'

Bill told me to wait and reached into his car. He gave me the memory book. I turned and quickly walked over and jumped in beside James. He didn't look at me, just stared ahead down the road even. Not that it mattered anyway. His face was always a sketch of nothingness. I gave him a kiss on the cheek and smelled lead or something metallic.

'What're you doing swimming in your clothes? In your condition. That's dumb, even for you.'

'Just love the water; can't keep out of it. Does this mean you give a shit?'

'Can't keep away from that Bill guy you mean.'

Looking in the side mirror, I could see Bill still standing, watching. I laughed. A little high-pitched probably. Looking out, I could see the surf standing up straighter now.

I could already tell what was coming from James, so I just slapped him on his bottom lip. James smacked me then. He was kind enough to keep his hand open and not hit me with a closed fist. I knew my face would be red but it wouldn't be blue. Glancing, I could see Bill taking a step forward.

The car picked up speed as it went around the corner past old Gordon's café and headed over the hill. James hit me again, with the back of his hand. A little surprised by that second shot, I curled away from him and leaned against the big car door. Without meaning to, I put out my belly. Sorry to use you like that baby.

James threw a smoke over to me. 'Light me up.'

ON THE STRAND

We met in the bar at The Strand Hotel. I know, I should not have been there in my condition – out on bail and pregnant or should that be pregnant and out on bail. However, James did not want to take me back to The Captain's Table. Sometimes he should just chill but his decision was understandable really, given the heavy red welt on my cheek. I could have gone upstairs to his office, but all you could see from there are seagulls and rooftops. Wharves and the harbour headlands and bar had been visible until Bill's old man moved the Whakatane News to a new office and sold the old building. A new "four-star" hotel was being built in place of the newspaper offices and printing works. I had tried to lighten up the place by putting a beach umbrella up over the picnic table I'd added. I didn't want to stay up in the room, locked away like some mad woman, and James didn't want me to go back to Bernie's place at Ohope. There were always spare girls' things washing around at The Captain's Table, although not much in the way of pregnancy outfits, I found some stuff and changed. I walked over to The Strand, with James saying for me to behave or he would know about it. He would too. Whakatane was that kind of place.

The Strand was the kind of pub that had been through several hands and the latest owners had tried to make it something it might be but probably was not.

I stood at the door blinking to adjust to the brightness of the lighting, such a contrast to the dimness I was seeking. The owners, a group of investors, had gone for the beach theme look; potted palms; smart new surfboards dangling around the place and wall screens showing endless surfing videos and girls watching guys doing man things. Electronic music usually twisted into the patrons' heads. This morning, before lunchtime, the bar was quiet. The wider options for food meant sometimes a different crew came in for a midday meal and catch-up drink or coffee.

I was surprised to see George Smart. It wasn't his sort of bar any longer but I guess he had still to find a new place for a de facto office. Maybe that's how James could keep watch on me, George being into the kind of thing that would tie in with The Captain's Table business.

'Hi ya George, how it going?' I stood at the table, but he just shook his head and looked back at the door.

A couple of the girls sat in the window looking out onto the street, but I didn't feel like joining them. They were kind of sisters who sometimes seemed to speak their own language. Now their heads were down and they murmured between playing with their phones and sipping handles of beer, so I went over to the bar where Liz, the barmaid, was cleaning the espresso machine. I badly wanted an orange juice to flush out the taste of salt water, even though I knew it would make me heave. Standing at the bar, I stared at my reflection looking back in the mirror opposite.

'Try smiling,' she said. Her back was turned to me, but she too was looking in the mirror.

I was suddenly conscious the memory book was sitting on the bar in front of me. Funny how things quickly become a part of me.

'Got a pen there Liz?' She rolled her eyes and continued cleaning the machine, stopped and dug into a drawer before throwing me a pen. It looked like it had been chewed at some stage by an angry person but I could just make out the words 'The Captain's Table' scrolling along towards the nib. I had a scribble on the inside of the cover and the blue ink ran out as though flowing from a spring.

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Baby gave me a good kick and I gripped my midriff, thinking I might fall I reached out to grab the bar. I felt an arm around me holding me up. I looked up and saw my hero was a tall guy, well-built with an enormous red beard and equally alarming curly hair. His eyes were kindly, though, and he had a friendly smile. His dress sense was off, as the checked suit he wore looked like it came from the market or the local op shop. I didn't know his name but I called him 'Rusty'.

'Leave me alone,' I said, shrugging off his supportive arm. Mistake right there, because my hair fell back from around my face. I felt him pull right back with his big hands up, fingers outstretched. I unclenched my fists and swept my hair around my face again.

'Sorry. Can I get you anything?' 'No, just let me alone.'

I turned back to the bar to order a drink but I noticed he hadn't moved. I wasn't irritated for some reason but he wouldn't have known that.

He paid for my soda when it came, along with his vodka and orange. I didn't mind that. I suddenly had an urge to write something in the book.

'Listen, I'm going to sit in that booth over there.

Don't come and join me as it might get messy.' 'For you or for me?'

I was feeling weary so I ignored him and made my way to a booth along the far wall, facing George but as far away from him as possible. The book seemed to open itself on the table in front of me. The page had light blue lines like the rims of waves running down the page. The nib was a bit wobbly. 'Hello baby. I'm writing your story.' 'Lovely mummy, what are you writing?' 'This is just the start.'

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Rusty is such a large guy I heard him before he came and sat at a table next to my booth, looking out on to the street, and pulled a copy of the Whakatane out of the side pocket of his jacket.

'Hey Rusty, what'cha doing?'

My head was down and I was studying the contents of a book of matches I had picked up at the bar. The palm of my hand started to itch as I flicked the cover open.

'The crossword,' he murmured.

I dropped the matches and opened the book, taking up the well-used pen.

'Russell what?' I poised, pen floating over the page.

'Russell Boulton, but who wants to know?'

'I am just writing something about my life. Somebody seems to think it might be a good thing to do. What do you say?'

'As long as it is about anybody but me.'

'Well you're insisting on coming into my space, my life, so what makes you so special, Rusty?'

The name is Russell not Rusty,

I snorted with laughter and some of my drink spilled onto the table. Rusty, I couldn't call him Russell, jumped up and came over, making a big fuss over me.

'Leave her alone.' It was George. 'She doesn't want to be bothered, do you?'

Rusty kept leaning over me as he slowly patted down the table and my dress.

'I think you should go now,' I murmured. George took another step forward and when Rusty stood up to face George, he was the larger of the two.

'Actually, I wanted to buy and I hear you're the right man.'

I tucked the cover closed on the book, picked up the matches and left.

A NEW LOVE

I fell in love with him, of course. Looking back, this shouldn't have been a surprise, because of my tendency to fall in love with nearly anybody who was kind to me. And I didn't often fall in love. Even James, although he was hard on me, he gave me the attention I craved. That was a sort of kindness, I suppose. Other people who were kind to me, I usually hurt them. They did not know my hurt was like a test of their love. My father's baby, not the one inside me but the one I had earlier, who was lucky to be away from where she too would have been hurt. This baby I have now would not be hurt. I told myself that I had reconciled myself to my life. It is easier to lie to yourself than to other people. When I walked out of The Strand, leaving Rusty Bolt to his discussion with George, I felt he was somebody I could love.

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Standing outside in fresh sunlight, I looked up and down the main street of our seaside town. I felt angry as I watched cars vie for parking places and people stroll along the road, looking in shop windows. I had the urge to do something wrong, like go and kick in the panels of that tidy family car over there. Why couldn't I meet people I fell in love with on equal terms?

'You didn't get very far,' Rusty said, holding on to my right elbow. I shrugged his hand away.

'How did ya get on in there, Rusty?'

'Russell, actually, and friend George has been most helpful.'

'That'd be a first, Rusty. Did you get what you want?'

'Nah. That smoke thing was just a put on.' 'A what?'

'You know, just a way to start a conversation.'

'I don't know whether George goes in much for conversation, Rusty.'

'Russell, and as it turns out your friend George is most helpful.'

'First of all, he's not my friend and ...'

'Yes, I told him I'm Russell Boulton from the Whakatane Gazette and I'd been told he's the kind of guy who could help me.'

'Help you do what?'

'Well, like I told George, it is a bit of a mystery really.'

I made some ooh, ooh noises, like a Halloween freak. Rusty just laughed and shook a big hand in front of me.

'Nooo, no, no, not that kind of mystery. It's this young woman, you see, her mother ends up with a knife in her back and she's the only one picked up. But she isn't arrested for trying to kill the dear old girl. Spends the night in the cells and is let out on bail for something trivial.'

'And if George was helpful, does that mean he pointed you in my direction?'

'I wouldn't call it pointing, more a stare. He didn't have to. I already knew it was you.'

I really wanted to hit him but I turned away and started back to The Captain's Table. As I walked by, I glanced into The Strand and could see George had gone back to his

table. Then I stopped and turned around and gave Rusty a good slap. He held my arm as his face turned red.

'You're better than this; you know you are,' he said.

My baby kicked out then and I reached out with my other hand to brace myself against him.

'Why'd ya say that?' my voice husky now, 'Tell me, ya seem to know everything.'

'That young guy, Bill Brown, he tells me you're okay.'

Bill couldn't help himself. I was wondering what I'd do or say the next time I saw him when Rusty broke into my thoughts.

'Don't blame Bill. His old man took him off the story and ...'

I was feeling a bit shaky, so I didn't argue with Rusty or tell him that Harry, the newspaper's owner and editor, was really Bill's grandfather. Everybody knew that but not Rusty.

'I think this is yours,' he said, handing my book to me. I must have left it on the table and thought how I must take more care. I had only written a couple of lines but I felt ownership and it was a nice feeling. Without much urging, I crossed the road with him. We walked over to a seat on the bank overlooking the harbour. Behind us was the main building of the Whakatane Council. We were sheltered from the road noise and caught a little extra warmth from the sun. I yawned. It had been a long day already and I wanted to nap, so let my head fall against Rusty's arm.

DRIVING RUSTY

'Baby, let's leave this fool here and go for a walk. There's something I want to show you.'

'Why do you call him a fool, mummy? He seems quite pleasant.'

'That there is a good reason for calling him a fool. Sorry, baby, I shouldn't say these things to you. He seems all right. Hang on now.'

'Where are we going? It's a bit steep and bumpy.' 'Don't be scared. We are just going down the bank to the waterside.'

'Are we going for another swim today, mummy?' 'No, baby, I want to show you some of the rocks.'

Here we are. Just let me get my balance as I climb over these rocks to this pool.'

'The water seems very clear. Very peaceful too. Why are you lifting that rock? Don't hurt us, mummy.'

'I wouldn't do that darling. Look, look there. It's a crab. Let me lift it up.'

'Be careful. Why is it all hard? It looks awful and ugly.'

'I guess that's the idea baby. It means only the toughest fish can hurt the crab, but it is soft inside and nice to eat.'

'But I am all soft on the outside – like you, mummy – so won't we get eaten when we go in the sea?'

'Well, you are soft now baby. I hope you stay that way but I have to be a crab so I can look after you.'

'Don't be a crab, mummy, all hard and tough, even if it is just on the outside.'

'Don't be upset, baby, I will always be soft with you. Come on, let's go for a swim and I will show you how crabs swim.'

'No more mummy, no mummy, no more mummy.'

Rusty's big hand was shaking my shoulder gently. 'Hey Emily, wake up, are you okay?'

'Leave me alone will ya. I was having a nice dream with my baby.'

He pulled his hand back and put it up in the air. 'Sorry, didn't mean to frighten you. It didn't sound

very nice whatever was happening.'

I didn't want to know but couldn't help myself. 'How do you mean?'

'You were calling out something about 'no more mummy' repeatedly. I just thought it best to wake you.'

I held out a hand and put it in his. The skin of his fingers was coarse for a man with such a soft job. I said so, and opened the book to make notes.

'Come on, this is kind of interesting. How come you ended up in Whakatane with your rough hands?'

It turned out Rusty was one of those big guys who liked to talk about themselves. He had worked in a big city media environment but had needed to find himself.

'Alone?' I nodded at the wedding ring.

'To start with but Pam and the boys joined me. We lived in an art commune on the Coromandel. I was able to do some stories online for sponsors and Pam had some work she was able to do counselling.'

I stopped writing and looked up, but didn't say anything. His big, gnarly hands were in full flight as he described what he called their idyllic life. I wrote 'sickening' in brackets.

'Your hands look hard. It can't have been all flowers and sweet vibes?'

'Living off the grid does harden you up, and I did some pottery to help with the funds.'

'So how did you end up here in Whakatane?'

'This is off the record. Life on a commune is great, don't get me wrong, but we needed more for the boys. Their money was getting tight.'

I just kept writing, as I didn't know what he meant.

He reached over and held my hand.

'If you are going to record what people say, you have to know off the record means you cannot record what they say.'

I closed the book.

'I haven't finished. There's more,' Rusty said. I had seen guys like Rusty plenty of time in The Captain's Table, wanting to keep going when you had run out of interest.

'Take me home now, Rusty.'

'Where? Where do you call home?'

'You know where I have to live at the moment don't you? Not that new, are you?'

That was kind of insulting, because there was nothing new about Rusty. We walked up the The Strand to the media company's car. Rusty climbed into the car and opened the passenger-side door. It fell against the curb, causing me to jump a little and turn away. He climbed out of the car, and came around so he could lift the bottom edge of the door off the footpath while I climbed in. Both doors shut and with our seat belts clicked in place, we were clearly out of proportion with the small, logo covered car. Rusty's height and bulk were accentuated by frizzy red hair and flaming beard. His hair would have looked good but it was coarse, like it lacked some ingredient.

He drove me back over the hill to Ohope. I could hear a tune in my head that was like a lullaby. Baby stretched, and I reached around the seat belt and hugged myself. As we turned into the beach road past the café store, I asked Rusty if he wanted a coffee. He looked at me knowing I was delaying the inevitable, and we drove down towards Bernie's place. As we approached my folks' place, and I saw the boat at the front of the section. Putting my hand on his shoulder, I told Rusty to pull over.

'This isn't Bernie's, is it? He's further down the beach, right?'

He did pull over. Not saying anything, I got out and slammed the door shut. It was such a tiny car; the noise hardly rose above the sound of the surf from down on the beach. Without waiting for Rusty, I walked to the top of the shell-littered driveway. He came over and stood beside me.

'Should you be here? You know, with everything that's happened, the court, charges and so on?'

'Don't worry. I'm not going in there,' I said, nodding towards the house.

I walked over to dad's partially finished boat and put my hand on the underside of the bow.

'Hey Rusty, ya know anything about boats?' 'Maybe if you called me Russell, I might tell you.'

He walked over to put a hand gently on mine. I wanted to scream right there but, instead, turned my hand over and grasped his fingers in mine, hard. Through his large fingers, I dug my nails into the top of his hand and tore down on his knuckles.

I laughed when he pulled back and held his hand, firmly against the front of the boat.

'Bow,' he said. 'Wow,' I replied.

PLAYING WITH KNIVES

We stood beside the boat looking at each other. Not quite eye-to-eye, but I seemed to have grown taller and he appeared to have come down to my level. Far from diminishing me, baby added to my heft.

'Go on, tell him mummy. Make him understand.' 'He's a man, baby. He can't understand.'

'You can do it mummy. You can make him. I think he will.'

I looked Rusty in the eyes. They were direct and strong but the whites were streaky, weathered.

'Go on, ask me.' 'Ask you what?'

'What you really want from me. You want to know how, or if, or why I knifed my old lady in the back, right?'

He didn't say anything but nodded, so I turned my back on him and walked over to the front door, stepping over the police tape that had fallen and was draped down the steps. I heard him coming up the steps behind me. Although the door was locked, I knew how to open it without a key.

I went into the main bedroom and stood and faced the chest of drawers. The mirror on top seemed to make it loom over me like a protector. I felt safe and in control. Rusty came in too and stood behind me. Now he seemed bigger than me. I didn't look straight at him, however, because I was staring deeply into my own eyes.

'Get undressed and get into the bed.'

He didn't move and stood behind me. I met his gaze then.

'Do you want to know or don't you want to know?'

Now.'

He started to get undressed. I left him to this task and went into the bathroom. The shower was cold as the hot water had been turned off but I felt so filthy the harsh stream was stimulating and cleansing at the same time. I had taken one of my mother's satin gowns with me, and she was smaller than me now, so it was ill-fitting in the way men liked. I looked in the mirror and smiled. I was screaming inside.

Later, he lay back with that dead fish look. His left cheek was starting to swell up. I just wanted him to get out of there.

'Go into the kitchen and put the kettle on. I need a drink.'

'But I want to have a shower.'

'No, we haven't got time,' I said, and hauled myself out and went to the bathroom. When I came out, he was pouring boiling water into two mugs of instant coffee.

'Sorry, it has to be black, but there is sugar.'

I shrugged and sat the end of the table, where dad usually unloaded himself. Rusty brought both mugs over and went to sit down at the other end of the table.

'Don't do that. Go to that second drawer down over there and get out a sharp knife. Yeah, that's the one sweetheart. Now bring it over here.'

He didn't but I jerked my head up and over, and he came over.

Then he starts on at me: how this is too weird and it's wrong and, yes, he got it. He hadn't really, how could he or anyone else for that matter.

'Do you want to know what happened or not,' I said, turning my head to look at him. Standing there in his shorts, he didn't look that big. Rusty nodded and I told him 'go and stand behind me'. He complied.

'Put the tip of the knife on my back.' 'Where?'

'Anywhere really.'

'I meant, really, on your back?' 'Do it.'

When I felt the pinprick of the tip pressing against my skin, I pressed back against it. Not hard or quick enough, because Rusty dropped the knife to the floor. He reached down and held me as I shook. I wiped his face and kissed his cheek.

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I reached over to my book where I had left it on the table. Opening it, I asked Rusty why he followed me into the house. He held my hand and asked me if I really wanted to know the answer. Probably not, I said, but I found asking the question quite powerful. 'Because I want to get to know you better,' Rusty said. 'You're an interesting person.' 'Even with a knife in my hand?' 'Well technically, the knife was in my hand.' 'Yes, but it was me who put it there.'

SIRENS AND SIGNS

We sat in silence sipping the coffee. Maybe Rusty said something but I wasn't listening. He might've been thinking, but I didn't know. He was scratching his chin through the curls of his beard. As he got up to head to the bathroom, a shaft of sunlight down the hallway caught his head and his hair looked like it was on fire. I put my mug down and opened a cupboard under the sink to pick up a bottle of methylated spirits. The meths was used to light our barbeque, but this was such a rare occurrence the bottle was quite full. Matches lay on the window beside some incense sticks mum had lit before she left. They remained at odd angles in a jar, burnt out.

Rusty was still in the bathroom as I walked pass and out the front door. I blinked quickly to adjust to the light and stepped over some flimsy police tape on the porch. The boat looked like it was going to float away in the sunlight.

As I stood on our wrecked front lawn, all tangled kikuyu grass and patches of sand, I felt dad's boat look at me.

'Mummy, why is the boat so sad?'

'Oh baby, it's his and it knows I want to destroy it.'

'Don't do that mummy. Don't take your anger about daddy out on the boat.'

'He's my father but please don't call him your daddy. You know how that hurts me.'

'Yes mummy, and so about this boat?'

I took the lid off the bottle and poured meths over my hands and over the bow. Behind me, I could hear Russell coming out of the front door, walk down the front steps, pause, then call out my name. Quickly, I pulled out the book of matches I had picked up from The Strand, ripped one off and struck it. My hands quickly caught alight with the blue flame flicking up fingers and I held them out to light up the bow. Rusty pulled off his shirt and put out the liquid fire before it caught my skin. He slapped down the flames just taking on the bow. Throwing the shirt on the ground, he turned to me. I held him. My hands gripped his shoulders and my face pressed into the heat of his chest.

'Why would you do that? Sure, burn the old man's boat down, but why hurt yourself?'

I didn't say anything but gripped him tighter and shook him until he grabbed me tightly. I could hear a siren coming down the hill to the beach road. I became calmer as the siren grew louder. We stepped back from each other. Standing this close to him, I realised just what a big guy Rusty was, and how his beard was all different colours of red I put my hands

on his chest and gently scrunched light, curly hair in my fingers. Stepping away from him, I now felt disgusted with myself. He reached out a hand and put it on my shoulder. I could feel the heat, but I shrugged it off and walked slowly over to the shell-strewn driveway. Lights from the cop car flickered as it came towards us. Some gulls on the road flew up. Rusty laid a hand on my upper arm, his fingers just about wrapping right around. I twitched and tried to pull away.

'I will help you float it,' he said in a low voice that sounded like he had swallowed some shells.'

The cop car was pulling up. I stopped and turned to him.

'You? What do you know about boats?' 'A bit, but I bet you know even more.'

A feeling of pressure on the back of my neck released. Then baby gave me a good reminder, so I took the opportunity to lean close into Rusty.

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I stood behind the wheel of the boat. My hair was light and streamed out behind me in a flurry of sparking red. The boat bumped a little as we approached the bar, and I could see the ocean stretching out ahead of us. I looked down to see if my children were okay. Baby lay in a Moses basket on the floor of the cabin. She seemed to be looking up at me, intently. Her sister crouched beside her, bracing herself while cooing and comforting baby. Feeling warm and happy, I looked around and saw, seated at the stern of the boat, my father. We looked at each other for what seemed a long time. A hand was on

my shoulder rocking me, gently at first and then more vigorously.

'Molly, Molly, wake up. You're scaring the other prisoners.' It was Rosie, my favourite cop, leaning over me as I lay on a bunk in the cells.

'Ok, ok, I was sleeping, sorry. Things get a little out of hand sometimes,' I said, distractedly.

'Why do you keep going back to that place if it's so bad for you?'

'Where?'

'Your home; you know, your folks' place.'

I lay back down with a little bit of a thump, there being two of us. My eyes fluttered like small waves and I felt the sand under my back. I called out for help. Rosie shook me again, gently.

'I do keep going back there, don't I?' 'Yes, but why?'

She had a beautiful face made a bit sharp by time and experience; her auburn hair was close cropped and her body a little too well-developed in that cop kind of way.

'I don't know. I start off going somewhere else but always end up back home.'

Rosie looked up and didn't say anything for a moment, then smiled.

'I have a great-great-grandmother like that. She and her sister came here by mistake. They were walking down a road during one of the Irish famines and met a guy riding a horse. They could only speak Gaelic and he must have been English. After all, he had a horse to ride rather than to eat.'

Rosie put up a hand as I went to ask what was Gaelic. 'It's what the people in Ireland spoke, before they got run over by England.'

'Oh, so sort of like Maori here?'

'Yeah, anyway the guy told them they should get out of Ireland and go to New York like everybody else. A ship was leaving port soon. It was raining, of course, their bellies were empty and their families were dwindling daily. They got on the boat to New York, somehow.'

'So, your people come from New York; how glamorous.' I looked up at her and thought how wonderful it must be to have relatives from America.

'No, rather than getting on a boat to New York, they boarded one to New Zealand. Happened quite a bit, apparently. The rain was still falling as the ship sailed into Bluff at the bottom of the South Island.'

'Ew, gruesome.'

Rosie laughed and stood up.

‘Yes, you can see it now can’t you? The cliffs, dull, the dreary heaving sea and that bloody rain. You see, Molly, it doesn’t matter where they went, the weather followed them.’

‘You think that’s what it’s like for me? That’s why I don’t go anywhere else but home.’

‘Or what stands for home, yes, maybe it is.’

I hesitated. Was this a trap to make me admit I knew I wanted to kill my mother to let me leave my father? Silence rose around me.

‘Maybe you did,’ Rosie said, answering the question in my mind.

I turned over and she put a hand on my shoulder, went to the doorway, where she too loudly told me to go sleep and keep it down.

‘What happened?’ I asked before she could shut the door.

‘What was that? I didn’t quite hear,’ Rosie said, stepping back into the cell.

‘What happened to the sisters after they landed?’ ‘Oh, you see, one was my mother’s gran and had a big family. The other sister? We don’t know what happened to her. She went to Nightcaps to work in the hotel there.’

‘Nightcaps? Are you sure that’s even a place?’ ‘Yeah, I’ve been there. Sure, not much of a place

and it still rains lots. Couldn’t find a grave, of course.’ ‘Okay, it rains in Ireland, it rains in Bluff and I bet

it rains in this Nightcaps place too. What’s the point?’ ‘The point?’ Rosie suddenly looked more the tough cop.

‘You know, the point of going anywhere when it still rains there. Ireland, here or wherever. It’s all the same.’

‘If you say so, Emily,’ she said.

“Do you want to borrow my book? Maybe you could write her story, or is that your story?”

Rosie shrugged and closed the cell door. I heard the lock fall into place and lay with my eyes open, thinking about those two Irish girls. I suppose at least they didn’t starve at home in the famine. Rosie’s here, now, so I guess their life continues, living on. People like Rosie didn’t get it – or maybe she did – but that’s why I must stay in Whakatane and not take off to the city. Nothing would change. Of course, shoving a knife in my mother’s back does make a difference and I will probably have to go away for a while, but not away, away.

HARRY STEPS UP

Bill signed me out the next morning, after I had been given a final warning. They gave me my book back, somewhat formally I thought. I didn't know what had happened to Rusty, so I asked Bill once we were outside and had started walking to The Whakatane.

'Oh, Rusty? He's back at work. Harry gave him a hard time but he's brushed it off.'

We walked on down the Strand a bit, then Bill stopped and held my arm.

'You know Russell, he's married, right.'

'Of course, I know that,' I said. 'So where is Mrs Rusty?'

I don't know why I asked. Maybe I just wanted to know if Rusty's version of the truth was close to Bill's. I knew which one I trusted. As far as Bill knew Pam was on a farmlet up on the Coromandel Peninsula while her devoted husband earned some money to keep their bush-clad lifestyle afloat.

'Are there any little Rusties?'

Bill didn't say anything but we were getting closer to the offices, so I repeated the question.

'Mmm, a couple I believe. Look, don't go off here, okay.'

'Boys or girls?'

'Boys, but does it matter?'

It didn't matter, of course, but somehow it made Rusty's uselessness in my life seem worth even less than it really appeared. Rusty wasn't going to float my boat. Even if he wanted to do so, I couldn't trust him. Why did that matter? I thought. Could I trust anybody anyway? I looked at Bill and he just shrugged.

Through the sliding glass door, I could see the office lay out in its new setting. The old building had burnt down and the newspaper was now in a new office, with printing somewhere in the light industrial area.

'How does your old man feel about the new set up?' I asked, putting a hand on Bill's arm. It was only then that I noticed the quality of his clothing had improved from the roughed-up beach clothes he had lived in for as long as I could remember. I felt grubby beside him. Even though he was distant, I had previously felt something like closeness to Bill due to what I knew of his life. His estrangement from his parents and the reliance on those around him for his self-perception echoed somewhere in me.

Bill held open the door. I wanted to go in but I didn't. Those people and their useful and exciting work, with their dwindling lives in a shrinking world. What would I do in there, apart from sitting in Bill's extra chair and be watched like a foreign object you might find on the beach. I was about to turn and wander off up the Strand but Bill reached out and grasped one of my hands.

'No, you don't, I think you should stick with me for now. Don't look at me like that, Em, come on in, you'll be fine.'

The way he held my hand deflated me and prevented me from shaking him off.

'I don't belong in there.'

'Where do you belong? With your boyfriend, that James around at The Captain's Table?'

'Oh, James is all right. He lets me manage the place sometimes, reckons I'm better at managing some of those clients than he is it seems.' I made the mistake of touching my cheek near where I had the remnants of a bruise from where James smacked me.

I walked through the doorway ahead of Bill and the only person who noticed me was Diana. She gave us the kind of look she might give a naughty child bringing a mucky

puppy into her spotless house. Bill walked over to what seemed a small desk, although it probably only seemed tiny just because I felt so giant right now. He pointed to an office chair and then went to see Harry, who now had the only office in the new open layout. The chair wasn't very comfortable, so I wandered around until I found a small bathroom. I was just looking through my bag for some body freshener when I spotted the remains of a joint among my things. How didn't the cops pick that up? What a laugh. Locking the door, I sat on the covered toilet seat and prepared to light up. The door rattled and I quickly put the smoke away. Heaving myself up, I unlocked the door. Bill jerked his head for me to follow him. I told him to wait a minute and tried to tidy myself up a bit.

'Harry says you can sit with him for the rest of the day.'

'You are joking, right?'

It made some sense. If I wandered off again, I would probably lose my bail, so sticking it out here for a few hours was better than going back to Rosie and her friends.

'We can't make you stay here,' said Harry, as he stood when I entered his office. 'Not as much space this one and no view.'

'I know that. What happens if I want to get some air?'

'That's over to you really. Make yourself comfortable.' He nodded to a couple of armless chairs pushed together against the wall opposite him. I curled up on them as best I could and closed my eyes.

'How's your mother?' Harry asked. Being the kind of guy he was, Harry hadn't hesitated to ask me the question nobody else seemed keen to know about.

'I am sorry for what happened,' he said.

What was the old guy on about? I was uncomfortable, so sat up and stretched. My dress was unruly but it didn't matter as it was only my wild child hippy black number. I did like the pleat around the square-cut collar, and started to pull a piece closer so I could once more enjoy the stitching. I opened my book and found the scruffy pen in my hand.

'Why should you be sorry? What's happening to me has nothing to do with you. It's about my mum and me and my dad, isn't it?'

The piece of the collar I could see seemed to shiver like a field of grass caught by a breeze. When I

glanced up, Harry was looking directly at me. His eyes were the deepest of blues and he had that worried look, not unlike Bill. Thinking about it now, I wondered whom my eyes looked like. My mother; the one in whose back I had neatly parked a knife? He looked at me and the pen on the open page.

'I hate it when people like you say they are sorry to me.' I stood up, a little unsteady at first. 'When you do that, all you do is take ownership of a part of my life you know nothing about. Let's be clear, there is nothing you or anyone else can do about me.'

Oh, I shouldn't have gotten angry. It wasn't safe for baby. I wanted to leave right there but Harry came around the desk and stood in front of me.

'You see Emily, I am your father.' 'No, you're not.'

'It's time we faced this.'

How could you be? How could you leave me with that bastard and let him do what's he's done to me; and to my mother. You're just another old creep who wants to get his hands on me.' But I rescued my anger and stopped.

'I know this is hard, Emily, but you have to understand this was a very long time ago when your mother never wanted me to know you were my child.' Not saying anything, I looked at him but sat down again and started writing. He retreated behind his desk and into his chair.

'I am writing this down now.'

'I know. Bill gave you the book. He told me.' 'But don't you mind?'

'I might have some time ago but now it is time. I want to help you. So, ask me your questions now.'

'You didn't know I was your daughter? I asked. 'I would have thought it would be quite easy to add up wouldn't it? What, you didn't see her again in this little town of ours?'

'Our lives were different then, okay. I was married to Bill's mother then and your mum was, well, pretty transient.'

'Transient, how do you mean?'

'Well she moved around quite a lot, so she disappeared for a while then came back with a baby, you. It was easy for me to ignore you.'

'Ah, you didn't think? It didn't click?' I started to say things I now regret but Harry reached out and held my hands. I wanted to pull away but didn't.

'I knew but what could I do? I couldn't have two families. I had to decide, make a choice. Now, I think I made the wrong one, so I am sorry.'

I poised. I wanted to write this but I was almost too scared.

'Can we just go back on?' I didn't wait. 'I always thought Bill was your boy. How come?'

Harry didn't say anything, just scratched his chin and looked beyond my gaze. Silence is sometimes an excellent question mark.

'His parents were difficult. Not difficult but lived on the edge. So, you could say I rescued him from Auckland.'

'Did this cause the problems between you and Bill's grandmother?'

'It might have but I am not going to blame any of what happened between your mother and me on to her. We both agreed what was best for the boy, for Bill. We did eventually adopt him, so he is legally our son.'

'That's a bit weird.'

'No, not weird. These are things you have to do, or need to do, in life.'

I thought about that for a while, putting my pen down and moving about to get my baby and me more comfortable.

Harry's phone rang and he answered it but had only a brief, quiet conversation. His office door opened and I saw the reflection of Diana's blond hair shimmer in the window but she quickly withdrew when he waved her away.

Knowing I might be losing him for now, I asked "So what was my mother to you?'

'In the end, she was someone I loved but.' But what? I thought.

'You loved her, so why didn't you want her?'

'Like I said before, she was aimless and seemed to me to be lost, so grasped on to the man you know as your father to keep her on an even keel.'

'An even keel? You cannot be saying what happened to us was in anyway even.'

'Okay, what we had just wasn't enough for me to go any further.'

'What about the night she came to see you asking for you help?'

'How do you know about that?'

'I didn't but thank you for telling me, dad. So what happened?'

'You really are my daughter, aren't you?'

'Come on,' I said, badly wanting to go the bathroom.

'We went over to the beach at Ohope. It was a lovely, cold clear winter night that I will never forget, although for all the wrong reasons. When it was over, she walked out into the water. I watched but she kept

on going until I ran in and pulled out as the surf fell on her like shards of glass. I held her and, you know Emily, I felt for her but I couldn't be that person she wanted me to be.'

Harry didn't say any more. He again turned his head like he was looking for an enemy in the distance and not finding him. It occurred to me that the enemy may have been himself.

I closed my book but, like all good stories, I knew there was more to come. I looked directly at Harry and knew he was a man I wanted to know but would never really know.

'And what about you, Emily?' 'What about me?'

'I am here now. Do you want to be here now with us?'

When I shrugged, he asked: 'You might think you have to be angry but you don't. You don't have to go to those places you are driven to visit.'

'Harry, I thought that at least you would know that you haven't lived until you have been invited into dangerous places by desperate people.'

He didn't say anything, just tilting his head to one side, so I added: 'Like the place you went with my mother.'

A FRESH WIND

Bernie was in the kitchen when Harry dropped me back to the cottage by the beach. Harry helped me out of the car on to the shell driveway, but went back and just sat in the driver's seat. I stood for a moment, then looked in through the passenger side window and whirled my hand. The fingers twisted like the branches of a tree caught in a late afternoon sea breeze wind. The electrics hummed as the glass was lowered.

'Does Bill know?'

Harry didn't say anything but I didn't give up.

'We haven't talked but, yes, I think his mother told him some time ago.'

'What do you mean you two haven't talked? Haven't talked about me, your daughter, his sister or whatever? What about my child, my children?'

Harry looked at me with those penetrating eyes of his – I looked straight back at him, but I was getting

uncomfortable bending over my stomach looking through the window. He didn't say anything, or anything I could hear. I swayed unsteadily down the driveway, driving my feet hard into the shells as if in the desire to hurt something. Baby kicked right then. Great timing, as usual. I leaned against the doorway before going inside. I must have looked quite dodgy, because Bernie came towards me, but before he could help me I felt myself being supported from behind.

'You're right, Bernie, I've got her.' 'Sure, you have. Coffee, Harry?'

Bernie didn't wait for a reply and walked over to put a pot on the stove. I suddenly felt the need to run away. I walked through the kitchen, into the front room, where I paused to open the front door. A fresh wind topped my skin as I stood in the doorway. I looked back through the lounge, down the hallway to the kitchen, where I could see Harry and Bernie sitting at the table with their mugs. They seemed to be engaged in a reluctant conversation. I couldn't quite tell from the distance, so I tried to make up the words from the shape of their mouths, their postures and gestures. That wasn't much help but their conversation was intense and it must have been about me, because they sometimes talked under their breath as they looked sideways at me.

I turned away from the old men and quietly walked out to the driveway. Harry had left the keys in his car in his hurry to prop me up. I quietly opened the door and sat in the driver's seat. Where would I go? What would I do that would be so different to what I did now? Instead of crying, as you might, I got out of the car without closing the door behind me.

On reaching what I would have called our place

but didn't know what to call it now, I walked over to the boat. A short ladder lay on the ground under the stern, so I picked it up and propped it against the side. I leaned against it for a moment before climbing like I was levitating above the clouds, every step taking me nearer to a lustrous world. Boarding was awkward, but I managed to manoeuvre over and onto the boat. I could see out beyond the dunes and clearly hear the energy of the sea even on this tranquil day.

'Mummy, are we going to go sailing again?' 'No darling, not today.'

'Then what are we doing here? It is a bit weird.' 'Baby, you're not even born yet. How do you

know what's weird?'

'Well, what say we lay down mummy. I think we are tired now.'

I was about to go into the cabin when I saw Harry and Bernie hurrying down the path towards the boat. They stood looking up at me, neither of them saying anything. I worked my way around and onto the ladder, climbing down into their waiting, gently accepting hands.

SCHOOL REPORT

Mr Christopher was an intense man. He spoke and at length when he got going. I remembered that from classes at school. His nickname was 'Shaddup' because, well, you couldn't. His square face would bob up and down, brown eyes lit up and his grey, tight curly hair seeming to float above him like a troubled raincloud. The school day had ended as I approached Whakatane College but I knew he would be in his office. The wooden, weatherboard covered classes on a single level had grown to include a new technology section along with a gym. It all looked very healthy compared to the frumpy country school it had seemed to me only a short few years ago. And there he was, sitting opposite me across his desk.

'How can I help you, Emily?' he asked, leaning forward looking like he was going to explode into joy. He didn't giggle but he came close. I was almost too scared to say anything but I was on a mission – to find out who I was and why I was here now.

'How can you help me?' I asked him back, opening my book and drawing the pen out of my bra. It was the chewed up one from the bar, which now I think about it was bit gruesome.

'Good. Take notes. Listen, one good thing you didn't do that I thought you might've done by now is that you didn't burn the school down.'

The pen paused on the page. 'Did I have it that much?'

'No, you didn't have school or this place, but you definitely hated something. I am sad and I want to apologise to you that we, as an institution, did not have the mechanisms with which to manage your hate, your anger.'

'It wasn't your fault, really it wasn't.'

'Maybe but I also know that as a government institution, and educators, we could have intervened more at a time when we should have helped make a considerable difference in the outcomes of your life. In what you became.'

'Tell me about it.'

Emily, you were damaged when you came to us after your early school years. That much is clear now. However, you could disguise your troubles, your distress, through your cleverness. Thinking back now, we didn't picture well enough who you were, because we didn't see you first hand but solely as a product of your parents.'

I nodded my head and looked up, poised over my book. Mr Christopher contemplated me, then shook his head, as though he had seen somebody else. He looked away.

'By the time we had a better insight into who you were, it was too late.'

'Who I was or who I am, Mr Christopher?' 'Ted, Emily.'

'Sorry?'

'Ted, that's my name. You can call me that now if you wish.'

My hair fell in flames around my face, hiding my blush as I wrote.

'Even then, there were times when it was possible to see who you really were, or are, through the clouds of life's experience. You had one good year towards the end of your schooling. It seemed you were right on track.'

Mr Christopher leaned forward and typed into his computer. I went to say something but he held up a hand.

'Won't be a minute.' He stood and walked out of the room. He didn't take long but it seemed forever. I stood up and was about to walk out when he returned. He looked at me like he like he was going to say something. I beat him to it.

‘What’s that? Is it a record or something?’

‘This, Emily, is your official school record, or at least the parts that are of interest to you today. It’s all online now.’ I leaned forward but he raised a hand. ‘Access is, of course, restricted.’

‘That’s not very helpful. C’mon Ted.’

‘Don’t Ted me, Emily,’ he said, eyes blinking with light accompanied by a chuckle. ‘I tell you what I can do, because it is you and I owe you this at least. I can read some out to you?’

I nodded carefully like a grateful puppy. He paused like he was dipping into a murky well and hauling up dark secrets. I won’t detail all the bad behaviour, but two years at the end of my schooling have interesting remarks. Ted read them out.

‘This is a comment on your second-to-last year at school, as follows: “Emily has markedly improved in both her attitude and her application to her work this year. The result has seen her examination results among the highest quantile of her peer group.”’

He paused and I reflected on that year. Dad had been away – as in away, away. It had been just mum and me. We had a spell where there were no batterings for her and no uncalled visits for me. I felt right, like I was on a bike that had come over the brow of a steep hill and was floating all the way down and out into my life, letting me easily take the bend. I recalled how that year flattened out and I drifted into the start of the next. Even though he was back, my father that is, I felt my momentum was such that I believed I could continue to perform well. The first time he came home drunk and raped me and bashed mum, I still believed I could go on. Little-by-little my determination leaked out of me like I had been stabbed by a fork. He scoffed at my ambitions and went out of his way to put obstacles in my way. Every time I did well, I was rewarded in the most evil way possible.

‘Emily, do you want me to go on?’ ‘Yes, please Ted.’

‘Somewhere along the way you seemed to have become distracted. You were by this time 17 or so but your behaviour worsened and you seemed much more immature. We tried to help but you became more and more withdrawn. I even visited you at home to talk to your parents.’

I recalled the event and how I cringed as I listened to their positive affirmation as to how I was so well-behaved and such a good girl. How they were so very troubled by reports of my behaviour at school. One remark my father made stands out – ‘Maybe she has had enough of school.’

Ted closed the report. I thought he was going to cry but he just brushed a hand through his bushy eyebrows. I noticed how delicate his fingers were as he drew them down, folded the file and put it in his drawer.

ENDLESSNESS

I stand in the doorway looking out of Endlessness, the shop where I work. The sea flows out across from me but my feet are dry. Bright little wavelets lick the footpath. I can hear them laughing. A light breeze runs through my tangled red hair and ruffles the full length sheer dress I am wearing. I took it from the Endlessness collection created by my boss, Love Zorich. The wavelets climb closer. I turn my head slightly to look back into the shop, where I see her to the back in among the array of slim, hanging garments. I steady myself, placing my hands on either side of the doorway. Love's hands, her fingertips, slide around my waist and her body presses against my back. I turn to embrace her to bring her into me and nobody is there, just the dated shop with its beautiful, lonely dresses hanging on their stands. I

walk to the back of the shop, to a corner of a storage cupboard where I have hidden the green dress for the past week. Aroha hasn't noticed the dress missing, so now is the time for it to come with me. Why do I love it so much? I had only worn it once, that time when Love left early and I walked out to the shop doorway. I wanted to walk down the street and show my beauty off to the world. People would see my green beauty and know that this was me. But waves of fear came like little sharks across to me and I stopped. I hold the dress in front of me and feel the soft material ran softly through my fingers in the cupboard's darkness. I feel hands around my waist but, rather than being gentle and loving, they are hard and firm. I turn and see a cop with cuffs. Love is standing to one side. She looks sad but angry.

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Endlessness remained in the middle of The Stand's line up of local and national shops. Most were open but one or two had closed. It was a typical provincial shopping street of our time. The proximity to the beach probably attracted more people to the shops than they deserved. The lights were on in Endlessness. I was struck how outstanding it looked on The Strand, like a sleek but colourful bird among the ordinariness of the flock. The window was lit up strongly with a display of the couture ranges Love specialised in stock. I walked along the other side of the road three times and almost crossed over and went inside.

'Go on, you can do it.'

I jumped and turned. Bill was standing right behind me and had to stand back to avoid the instinctive slap I almost gave him. Luckily, he raised a hand, because I had my book in my hand and it would have clipped him.

'Bill, don't do that. This is hard enough without you creeping up on me. What are you: my minder of something?'

'No, your brother. Do you want me to come over with you?'

'Would you?'

He shrugged, adding: 'You aren't alone now Emily. We love you and want to help you. Just stop trying to take aim at me.'

I pulled myself up to my full height and patted him gently on the shoulder. 'Thanks. I think, no, I know I will be alright.' I stepped out from the footpath. 'Well, I'll wait for you here,' Bill called.

I turned and waved to him. A car screeched to a halt and the horn sounded. I turned and saw the driver, a retiree in the small hatchback gesturing at me. My hand lifted to make a sign back to him, but I turned and waved to Bill. He smiled and waved back.

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Love was serving a middle-aged woman when I entered Endlessness. She was smiling as though she meant it. She looked over at me and the smile didn't move.

'I'm sure your husband will love this, Mrs Hedges,' she said, folding the garment and slipping it into a branded brown paper bag. She was quite tall, although not as tall as me, and had once had luminous hair. The sheen had gone some time ago and she kept it wrapped tightly. Her lips were thin, which made her face seem more pointed than it was probably. She was somebody's mother but I couldn't remember who.

'I don't care if he doesn't,' Mrs Hedges said. She turned and looked me up and down, before looked back and nodded to Love.

As she walked out of the shop, Love followed her. Closing the door behind her customer, she turned the card in the window to 'Back in Five'.

'Do I need to call the police?' she asked, walking back towards me. 'No, no, no. I'm here to say sorry,'

'You could've done that in restorative justice. Why didn't you attend?' 'I'm sorry, I should've but I wasn't able to then.' Her face was beautiful even when she was angry,

but her eyes were deep and dark. 'What's with the book?'

'I'm getting some help but I need to make sense of why I did what I have done. Don't be afraid of me, Love, I am not that person.'

'That, Emily, is easy for you to say. What you did to me was horrible, but not entirely unexpected.'

I opened my book and started writing.

'I knew about you from your father.'

Of course, how else would somebody like me find a position in a shop like Endlessness? Love met my father through The Captain's Table, where she worked until she came to an arrangement with James to use some of his cash as an under-the-table investment. She had paid the debt for the shop off some time ago but when James asked her to do a favour for my father, Love felt bound to comply.

'How else do you think you got a job here? Sure, I helped tidy you up. Gave you some gear to help you look the part. You are damaged, Emily, but you are intelligent enough to make opportunities work for you.'

'I stole from you. I'm sorry, you didn't deserve it.' 'You were good, even very good, for a while. One

of the best little, or not so little, sellers I've had through here,' she said, looking me up and down. 'I don't know. What went wrong? It's like somebody through a switch and one day you changed into this creature, this predator who damaged the person and the place nurturing you.'

I might have cried had I not been writing. As it was, I stopped for a moment. I looked up at Love.

'You don't know? You must know, a woman like you.'

Love put her head down and her long black hair fell over her shoulders like a waterfall of sadness. She put a hand up and I held it and drew her into me. We hugged each other and cried endlessly.

Bill was standing outside when Aroha turned the notice over to 'Open' and let me out. We didn't talk much as we drove to the Ohope. The waves were small. From high up, they looked like wavelets. A light rain fell and the sunlight shining through the drops reflect sporadically on the tips of the tiny waves looked like little fairy lights.

NO RETURN

James didn't believe me when I said I was doing a report on my experience. We were seated in what passed as his office at the top of drab, painted stairs above the rooms of The Captain's Table. I sometimes wondered why James didn't allow himself the luxury of a sharper office reflecting the fake lushness of the brothel below. Down in The Captain's Table, guests were treated to a kind of erotic sports fishing club complete with a backdrop mural of men in tight clothing fishing with phallic rods for mermaids. The mural was in the foyer, where guests were welcomed. I wasn't available for duty now and James had had to make do with another of the girls.

I had the easy recorder function on my phone set to go as I sat awkwardly in a sun chair in the clear

spring sun, or what remained of it, coming through the gloom.

"You're doing this for your therapist, right?" I shrugged.

'Okay,' he said, 'I know it's for the court. Some kind of reverse victim impact statement. That's it. Emily, I always knew you were a hard head but trying to knock off your mum and blame the whole thing on your dad, that's even a bitch of a thing for you to do.'

I didn't answer but hugged my baby close to me. 'One day soon mummy, we will be together all the time.'

'Yes, sure baby, I can't wait to be with you. Just not now, okay.'

James leapt up and went over to the windows, wiping one to clear away a film of dirt.

'I know – why don't you ask him, or better still, ask your mother why you knifed her in the back?'

He didn't mean it. James was always funny, but I don't mean like he was a laugh.

'No, not now,' I said and stood up slowly, holding out my phone. 'How did we end up here? When you first saw me, why did you take me on?'

'Put that bloody thing away,' he said. He already had hold of my wrist, twisting it so I dropped the phone as he jerked me to my feet.

'No reports, no writing and definitely no recording. As far as this thing is concerned, I don't exist.'

I wasn't surprised. As he let me go, my wrist freed from his white-hot grip. I wondered what it would be

like to stab James in the back. I hoped this stabbing thing wasn't like an infection otherwise somebody would die. That would be really it for baby and me. She was silent at this point. James and I had a nice talk after that about how the brothel was going. He even asked me for some input on new ideas he had to keep attracting new talent. He was like any other man who came through the front door of The Captain's Table wanting his girl to listen as he went on about the life he dragged in behind him. Even though I tried to appear helpful, I had reached the point where I wanted him to hit me again. No, not hit me so much as punish me. Someone had to for what I had done, but

nobody seemed to care enough. Sure, I might have to go away for a while but would it make any difference?

'I think you should get out of here,' said James. He was standing away from me but close enough to put a hand on my shoulder. 'Don't come around here again.'

'But what will I do?'

'You've got people to look after you and,' he looked at my midriff, 'it, haven't you?'

He did hurt me but not quite in the way I had hoped he would. I wanted to hit him to get the response I wanted, I needed. Sensing this, James put up his hands with outspread fingers, then pointed to the door. We didn't say anything more, and I went slowly down the stairs. There was nothing left for me at The Captain's Table.

Out on The Strand, the town was busy now.

A COAT

I was frightened. Most people might think that's funny or strange. They would wonder how I could be scared to leave the life I lived with James and the girls at The Captain's Table. I got hit occasionally and had to deal with some unpleasant people, but how different was that to Ms Suburb who lived a pretend life with Mr Suburb and his boy's dreams? The girls and I were tight, and I looked after them if they got into trouble. James looked after me when I needed it. Whakatane was someone else's paradise, and I did not fit in. Now I had neither the Captain's Table nor the paradise of my hometown.

My 'brother' was sitting on the hood of his car outside like he was waiting for me. He slid off and quietly held me by the hand like was going to shake it. My baby gave me a nudge then and I stepped back.

'You okay?' Bill asked.

'Baby just reminding me to be a good girl.'

We got in the car, and Bill took me to the police station so I could check in. I saw Rosie when I was about to leave. When she asked about how I was going, and I said I wanted to see my mother, she said it wasn't possible now. Maybe later, after my case was dealt with and they had decided what they wanted to do with me.

As we drove away, I asked Bill to take me to Whakatane Hospital. He asked me why and I said I thought I was going to have a baby.

'I know you are going to have a baby, but right now?'

'You think I'm not sure if I'm going to have my baby or not?'

Bill didn't say anything but also didn't drive me to the hospital either. I guess he is my brother after all. Besides, what could I do when I got there?

They left me alone after that. Not forever but at least for a while. I almost loved old Bernie's cottage and sometimes felt at home. I knew my old house was like my old life, down the road. The police tape was gone now like the bedraggled wrapping discarded until the next Christmas. The police had wrapped up the crime scene when they arrived, and now the case had been unravelled. Was I the gift that nobody wanted?

Bill tried to encourage me to write my story but when I wrote in capitals, I could tell he was disappointed. I didn't have to write in capitals but I wanted to scream and this seemed to be the best alternative.

We went to sit in the sand dunes, my baby and me, where I would write about the things I saw. Sometimes I would walk down to the beach and walk along the shore to emerge opposite the house where my family lived. When that happened, I would sit amid the dunes, sheltered by some grass from the autumn winds as they grew stronger, colder, and write in capitals.

It was a good place to sit, but it was becoming colder, so I borrowed one of Bernie's old coats that mostly fitted right around baby and me. One day, when the wind was brutal, I sneaked a blanket out of the house and wound it around us. I must have looked something but no one came to worry me. Maybe I just looked like another piece of scrubby dune sitting there with my hair screaming out and across my face. I was also waiting for someone. I should tell the truth – I was waiting for my father to come home, so I could do to him what I did to my mother but make it stick this time. Nobody knew what I was doing or at least that is what I told myself. As I wrote my book, I kept on being drawn into the boat sitting outside the house. The memories I had of what

was then our family enjoying the boat sometimes overwhelmed me. I wanted to burn it but I wanted to live the dream again.

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She came home eventually, my mother, in a cop car looking massively out of place, crumpled in the back seat. When she got out, she turned briefly to look over the car's roof at the dunes. She couldn't see me, I told myself, as she scanned along the line. A cop, I could see it was Rosie, held her arm and made to walk her into the house. My heart leapt in anticipation. 'This is going to fun, baby.' I grasped my stomach. Mum, tiny as she was, tried to shrug off Rosie's hand. When she couldn't, she held her other arm above the car roof point straight at me. How could she see me? I thought I was hidden but she pounded the roof a couple of times then turned and, held or propped up by Rosie, walked into the house.

MOTHER

Melissa was just sitting at the end of the table right where I had last met her, if the encounter can be called a meeting. Okay, right where I stabbed her. Now, she was leaning forward with a cup in her hand. Her long frizzy hair made her face look thinner than it was, falling over her face like a veil. I stood beside her in silence.

'Your father wasn't a bad man, you know.' 'Who? Harry?'

Her lips tightened even further, almost to the point of disappearing. She turned towards me but not quite enough to look straight at me.

'Why did you let him do it?' 'Who?'

'The man you called my father.'

She didn't say anything but bowed her head to sip from the cup held like a delicate flower in her hand.

I walked out through to the front doorway and stood on the porch. My arms wound around my waist just wanting to speak to baby, or my brother. Melissa came out and stood behind my right shoulder.

'How do you know I'm not going to stab you, you little bitch,' she said. That too was funny, since I was taller than her but I guess she still thought of me as the small one she could harm at will. 'Anyway, what are you doing standing out here for looking at the sand dunes? They're kind of scrubby, not even nice looking. Shame we can't see the ocean from here. Trust your dad not even to get us a sea view.'

I didn't say anything immediately but held out a hand to sweep it across the view in front of us.

'That's the difference between us, Melissa.' 'Not Melissa. I'm still your mother, you know.'

'I am looking at the sea. It's a sea you cannot see yet it is real to me. It goes way out in front of me and is around me. I swim in it with baby. We can feel the sun on us when it is out and the rain when it is falling. Sometimes, I think I might drown in the sea. Just fall, down, down to the bottom; then come up, up, up. That wouldn't be so awful, would it? I nearly did, you know, the other day but my brother pulled me back, my baby and me. You see the dunes, sure they are there, but I can see the sand, the waves and the sea stretching out. I don't have to have it right in front of me. I am living in it.'

'You really are crazy. You need some help?'

'Oh, you really don't know anything. At least Bill cares about what happens to me.' 'Bill? So, I care.'

'Do you? You know what I want to do now?'

'No, I don't and I am not sure I want to hear either.'

'I want to float that boat,' I said pointing at the old boat on our front lawn. The bow was slightly blackened where I had tried to light the fire.

'That? That boat's rubbish.'

'I always thought he loved the boat but gave up going out in it because you didn't want to come with us.'

We were both quiet then. 'You know the truth then?'

'What? That he's not my father? Harry is?'

'Yes, that and the fact he only wanted you on the boat and not me.'

I walked over and stood next to the bow with one hand on its side, resting. She came over to me.

'Well, you go ahead and help yourself. He's not coming back, so you can have it. Just don't expect me to help you.'

CLIENT X

Rosie took me to the court-ordered psychologist. She said she had to take me. It was her job to look after me. I knew it was not her job but it was true I would not have gone probably without her presence in my life. They wanted to find out what was going on inside my head that might have influenced my decision to stab my mother. Bill or somebody could've taken me, but I did not argue with Rosie. I did say she just wanted to make sure I went as it was more trouble for her if I did not. Rosie did not disagree.

'I think you will like her,' she said as I got into her car. I could tell it was an off-duty job for her as we were in a sports car, trim, and red. Some people would feel flattered. I just screamed out to stop myself from scratching something. We drove along the beach road. I folded my arms around my middle and told baby where I was going and how beautiful the glimpses of the sea looked. She had been unsettled but asked me if we could go for another swim.

'Not now, baby, maybe later,' I said over the buzz of the car.

'What was that?' Rosie asked. I reached over, pulled one of her hands off the steering wheel and put it on my middle. The car swerved, but Rosie kept her hand in place.

'Just talking to my baby. Hey, do you want to say something to her?'

She glanced over with a dubious look on her face, the auburn hair streaming behind her.

'Say hi to Rosie, baby, she's a cop, so we have to do what she tells us to do.'

'Yes, baby, I hope you are going to be as obedient as your mother,' Rosie put her head back and laughed. We turned and went out of the main business centres of town.

Rosie took me to a house on the outskirts of Kopeopeo.

'She's new here. Her practice is at the front on the right-hand side. Ring the bell and wait. Be good, Emily.' She leaned over and kissed me then, and held me a little too long. I didn't mind. I was used to people doing that to me.

The house was old and set back in the section, so visitors had to walk down a long concrete path to the wide veranda running along the front. A plaque on a door to one side announced this was the entrance to the practice of psychologist Janice Bolt. I held a hand over my stomach - 'This is going to be interesting, baby' - and wondered whether to press the business-like doorbell - very un-Rusty - or knock on the moulded door. Nice wood, it that was what you were into. I pressed the bell. Mrs Rusty. I could not stop myself thinking of her this way at first, quickly came to the door. Dressed in what I thought was op-shop clothing but what turned out to be fashionably downmarket, she had an immediate calmness that flowed out over the doorstep. We introduced ourselves and I followed her in into a comfortable room decorated in what I suppose were meant to be moderating colours. A waft of incense lingered throughout but I could not discover its source. She sat like she was caressing the chair, and I fell into mine. She told me she had not been in town long and had come down from the Coromandel to join up with her husband, Russell Boulton.

'You know him, don't you?'

I just shrugged, 'how do you mean?'

'I wasn't too happy with this move, but Rusty said it was a good place with good people. How do you find Whakatane?'

And so, we were into it. It was that easy. I resisted, of course, and tried to ask more questions, but she was penetrating but kind, like the weed one of the boys had given me at The Captain's Table. I didn't want to tell her much of anything but I wanted to leave the session knowing that I had told her enough.

She must have known she was sitting opposite a woman who had used her partner to express whatever feelings came from within this twisted spirit. Yes, she was professional. She was going to talk to me so that the courts, everyone else, would know what to do with me.

The room was meant to be restful, but I hated it for trying to calm me down. Janice waited for me to talk and, of course, I did. Not straight away and never as much as she wanted me to, at least not until later. All the time I was honestly and openly disclosing the terror of my life, I thought it would be interesting to address her life with Rusty. The tentacles of our links with her husband had stretched to grasp me by the leg. I could have cut it off, hacked it away, not entirely bloodlessly but without feeling. Instead, I talked about my life: Like how I was disgusted by my father's love for me. How I came to his touch. How, at the same time, I hated my mother's love for him and craved her approval.

'Your parents are very narcissistic,' she said, but that just made me feel duller in spite of the clarity. She was good, for what she wanted. She drained my life out of me without giving anything back. I just wanted her to replace it with a new life, but her sponsors would be happy. When we finished, and I felt much like I had been raped of my feeling, except I wanted more. Of course, I wanted more. Janice was happy enough to let me go. I had to sign an agreement. As I signed the form, I could not help myself. 'You know I screwed him, don't you?' 'Who?'

'Rusty? Your husband.'

'Did you? Why would you do that?' 'You don't mind then?'

'Emily, that is not what I said? I am sure you are quite capable of doing anything you want. The answer I seek is the why.'

'Why Rusty? Your husband? Why would you say that? The question you should be asking is why would any man, your Rusty included, make love to me.'

'Love,' she hesitated, 'love, did he make love to you? Is that how you imagine it?'

We were standing by the door. I was trying to figure out whether this was part of the formal session

– "Client X imagines making love when she is only having sex to assuage some dark psychotic need from her past" – file closed.

She held my hand and led me through the doorway, adding, 'sweetheart, you have to go now.'

I drew back.

'Do you think touching me like that is all right?'

You're just another user.'

'Emily, we need to make another appointment, goodbye,' she said and closed the door.

I leaned against the door frame for a minute, turned and walked down the path. Rosie had gone, having done her duty by getting me to the appointment. Looking back

is always a risky business. Who knew what you might see? The pull was irresistible, and through the old window I could see

Janice with two energetic boys. They jumped around her to show her pictures they had drawn while waiting for their mother to finish with me. Their curly red hair leapt as they grabbed at her. They seemed to float in slow motion for a moment. I looked too long. Janice glanced up and saw me, giving me a friendly wave as if I was just another loving mum.

Now I was on my own. Not entirely, however. 'Why are you so upset mummy? That lady is very confusing, isn't she? Please take me for a walk. Can we go to the sea again? That is lovely.'

'Oh baby, how I love you so much. Yes, of course, we can go to the sea.'

Looking across the road, the tennis courts on the edge of town sports grounds lay asleep until spring. The fields recovered from teeming players. The town centre hummed in the distance. I saw none of this, only the beach in front of me and the sea as it stretched out its body to the horizon. I took off my shoes and tread across sand made warm by the bright sun hanging like a last hope in the autumn sky. The water was cool but the waves were small, so the surge was minimal as I waded deeper and deeper. Soon, I was afloat. I started to sink, which was nice but I remembered my baby and started to panic, a mistake.

Rosie was shaking my shoulder. We were in the middle of the playing field.

A LIGHT SMUDGE

I stood at the bottom of the narrow staircase leading up to James's room at The Captain's Table. Night time noises came from the rooms, but business seemed quiet for a weekday evening. I wished he would paint the stairs. They were worn, black and sufficiently faded to make me want to avoid treading the steps many other girls had walked. Even the floor to ceiling side window was dirtier than it had been. The light from The Strand Hotel on the opposite corner smudged through the window. The beach umbrella normally spread over his table against the window was now folded, leaving the room without any colour.

'You must do something about this lousy décor, honey,' I said. James said nothing but gestured with a nod of his head to a chair on the opposite side of the table. When I sat down, his eyes looked away from me, and he nodded. I followed his eyes and saw my father come from behind a line of shelving. I made to stand up, but James already had one of his paws on my wrist. The table was set rocking as he reached across to restrain me.

'You bastard. You low life. You scum. You know you are not my father, and yet you are here, now.'

I looked at him and turned to James. His grip remained firm.

'What is going on here?'

'Sit down,' James said, twisting my arm sufficiently to make me obey his command.

'That's a good girl. Now let's listen to what daddy has to say.'

He came and stood over me. My fingers itched. I wished I had a knife. 'Stop kicking me, baby.'

He looked terrible. That was a shock as I had always thought he looked lovely. What girl could not love my daddy? I felt like crying inside but the heat of my despair burned my face. A chill wind ran through my body. My baby was crying inside of me.

'Emily, you know I love you and wouldn't intentionally hurt you. What we have had is greater than anybody else. You must know that too.'

I turned to James.

'What is going on here? I am already in therapy and facing a charge because of this ...' I nodded at my father.

'He asked me to look after you. I owed him a big one because he brought you up nicely for me. You are tough and have been good with the girls. Thanks, but now you are a problem or at least your baby is a problem. Too many questions, Emily, too close for comfort for both your old man and me.'

James slapped me easily and pulled me closer, but

he seemed to let me struggle out of his grip. I made it across the room and was about to hurry down the stairs when I heard smelled my father's cigarette breath behind me. His fingers were like claws on my back. I made to pull forward to get away but then I realised he was not trying to grab me. I floated for the briefest moment.

'I love you.' I hit the stairs, bounced down and heard my baby scream. Glancing upwards before smashing through the window and down to the street, I saw James with a heavy hand on my father's shoulder. It was dark then, very dark.

MY ROOM

The room where I live breathes lightly in and out like the tide. I can feel it with me all the time. I am always reminded of that period after baby's death as much as I can pretend it didn't happen. I know, if only in my heart, that she was murdered. My room has looked after me in the time since. I feel this small area is my best friend, but closer than that – a confessor who has listened and felt my fears and my imaginings. Not like a brother, because brothers are like rivers, always flowing out and only vaguely connected. More like a sister, like the ocean, my room is always there for me. Sometimes calm but other times throwing me waves of emotion and care. I imagine my sisters and me sitting around the table at home, talking and laughing. Mum goes out and leaves us alone. Our father looks up from his breakfast and wonders how he is going to start the day or who with. I need not worry because he only has an interest in one of us: Me.

Voices outside now. Not raised voices, as it is not that sort of place. There's Alex, the transsexual, who gave herself time and again for the love she could not find; Pauline who crawled through broken glass to escape her rapist and has the scars to show it; Duane, who lived inside a bottle from which there was no escape; and others who came and went. Most, like me, had some involvement with the court system, either being referred for help or being here as the end part of a sentence. They were either in it, just out of it, or near it.

Bronnie, who manages the place, is smaller than me but seems a lot bigger. A black-haired Irish woman, she has told me I have the clearance to go home. I am staying with my brother Bill and Angelique at Bernie's place over on the coast. Without them, I would be here for a much longer time. Bronnie comes into my room to say it is time. I stand up, so much taller than her and say goodbye to my friend. Bronnie and I hug then we go out to the reception area. Alex is there to say goodbye. We hug and she won't let go. I am so much taller than Bronnie but she leads me by the arm like a child to Bill. I wonder how it would be to lead your child, anywhere. I always miss my baby and suddenly wonder where I led her. Bill puts an arm around my shoulder.

'Emily, are you okay?' asks Bronnie. I nod but even the drugs and the tools she has given me cannot stop me from crying quietly. I don't say anything just in case she changes her mind.

'Got everything, Emily?' asks Bill. I nod yes and lift the large shopping bag with my things in it. Bronnie looks up at me, then gives me a hug. I can feel her fingers pressing on my bones. Angelique, her hair now cut short accentuating her round face, holds one of my hands and we go out and down the stairs to the car. Bill puts my gear in the back, turns and takes my breath away when he says, 'Come on sister, it's time to go home.'

We drive out of town and over to the coast. I sometimes wondered if I would ever make this drive to Ohope ever again. Goodbye life, hello life. I only become emotional when I see the sea. If the car window had been open, I feel I would fly out to be with it. I look out the window at the sand dunes as we drive along the beach road and know what is beyond them. Angelique leans forward from the back seat to put a hand on my

shoulder. We pass the house where I grew up, where my mother lives and where the man I called my father raped me. I looked for the boat but it wasn't on the front of the section. I didn't say anything until we came up to Bernard's and we kept on driving. 'Where are we going? Have you guys moved?'

I may have sounded upset, although my meds didn't allow me to become too carried away.

'It's okay. Just wait for a minute. We've got something to show you first,' Angelique said. She is very clipped in her speech when she is like this, almost bossy. I look at Bill and he just smiles.

He turns across the road and goes down the driveway leading to the wharf. When we get out of the car, he waves towards the boat anchored out in the Ohiwa Harbour. I walk out along the wharf and hang onto a pole as I look across the water. In the crisp light of the bay morning, the boat seems to float above the reflected landscape. Bill walks up beside me, with Angelique standing back. I look up at him and think how nice it is to have a brother.

Bill leans over and holds my hand while shielding his eyes with his other hand. 'A beautiful little thing, isn't she?' I could only agree.

'Come on,' Bill said. 'The tide will be out soon and we don't want to get stuck.'

We climb down into a dinghy tied to the wharf and he rows out. I look back at Angelique walking towards the shore. Across the road an apartment building rises above the Norfolk pines, seeming to float along like a concrete cloud. We reach the boat and Bill climbs on board, tying the dingy to the stern. I don't have any trouble flipping my legs over and standing up. A reflection in the cabin window shows a smile across my face as I steady myself.

'Get the anchor will you,' Bill said, as he checks out the engine and primes it to go. I climb forward and open the hatch. As I grasp the chain, he starts the engine and idles it for a while. The anchor tugs up off the bottom. I start to slowly pull it up, dropping the chain down through the hatch. Once it is stowed and I am back on deck with him, Bill slowly turns the boat around and we head out. The boat was never fast. It wasn't built like that. It takes a while but we reach the harbour entrance. Bill points inside the cabin and asks me to get out a couple of life jackets. He turns the boat into the stream far enough away from the bar to be calm. How many times I had been out without one on and why would I put one on now? I am happy to be here and follow Bill's lead.

He leans down and picks up what looked like a big jar. Handing it to me, he tells me to take to the side. I know before I open it what was inside. I hold the urn away from me. Bill holds me firmly but gently by the shoulder as though to steady me. 'It's my baby, isn't it?'

'I'm sorry. The hospital authorities wanted to know what to do with the body and we had to decide for you. Are you okay?'

I don't say anything but tell Bill to run the boat into the wind. Holding the urn close to me, I think of all the things I did with baby and how it would have been nice to do different things now. Bill holds the boat steady. I take the lid off and look down at the delicate ashes before bending over the side and letting them flutter out to the sea. A seagull skims by on its way out over the bar. The water looks muddy then quickly clears.

THE MUD

You wouldn't know me now. I met someone who knew someone is the best way I can put it. The reality is that my real father, and Bill's dad, Harry, helped find me some work in the media. After working for him on The Whakatane, and doing an online course, he fixed me up with an acquaintance on a failing newspaper in a city away from the coast. I enjoyed the work sometimes but it wasn't for me.

Bored, I started a blog for children who were loved too much by their parents. It was meant to be just a side-line to my work, but it grew. More and more people were attracted to my story and to the discussions I provoked. Most were young girls who initially contacted me using other names than those their mums and dads had given them. Some were older women who were sufficiently powerful to sponsor me so I could concentrate on my work. When I started writing, it was as if the words flowed from my blood. Now, the stories I write are offered with love in the same way that gardeners love their flowers. The stories are not very long but I hope they show people in pain how they can love again. When I am finished writing a story, I put it into a little basket of reality and push it gently out into the stream, much like some mothers did with their babies when they tried to protect them. Somewhere out there, someone may find something to bring them closer to love.

I gave talks and went to conferences and live events celebrating the spirit of young survival. Most were young girls, but sometimes boys or even men contacted me. One told me how he was loved so much by his mother and despised by his father that he had tried to commit suicide to escape. When that didn't work, he made stupid decisions. We became quite close friends and still message each other, something I am still reluctant to do with men.

Whakatane will always be a part of my life, even if only in my mind. The newspaper is no longer there and Harry died some time ago. I went to his funeral but it was too soon for me to go back. I was still not right, because I got drunk and let some guy have me afterwards. I do not do that sort of thing now. Bill and Angelique are still on the coast. They opened a French café below the apartment building overlooking the harbour. Bill still writes stories and he has started an online news service about the coast. He's called it 'The Mud'.

WORRIED?

If you are in a place where you feel need help, talk to a friend or family member. If you feel unable to talk to anybody you know, go to your doctor. They will listen to you in confidence. If you cannot make it to the doctors, the Mental Health Foundation has an excellent list of alternative agencies who can assist: Need to talk? Free call or text 1737 any time for support from a trained counsellor

[Lifeline](#) – 0800 543 354 or (09) 5222 999 within Auckland

[Suicide Crisis Helpline](#) – 0508 828 865 (0508 TAUTOKO)

[Healthline](#) – 0800 611 116

[Samaritans](#) – 0800 726 666

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Mick Stone is a pseudonym for Michael Smith. In his role as a reporter, he met many people and listened to their stories. His fiction is based only on his own experience and the experiences of those he has met. Today, he lives in an inland city where he works helping others tell their stories through writing, editing and publishing.

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