

Uncorrected Bound Proof

REMEMBER ME

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REMEMBER
ME

Charity Norman


ALLEN & UNWIN

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For Pauline Perry

Remember me, remember me, but ah! forget my fate.

—Henry Purcell, *Dido and Aeneas*

17 June 1994

‘I envy you,’ she says.

She doesn’t. Why would she envy me? She’s Dr Leah Parata, five years older and infinitely, effortlessly superior. Everything about the woman screams energy and competence, even the way she’s twirling that turquoise beanie around her index finger. She’s tall, light on her feet, all geared up for back-country hiking in a black jacket—or maybe navy blue, as I’ll later tell the police. Waterproof trousers, walking boots with red laces. Hair in a heavy plait, though a few dark tendrils have escaped.

‘I really do,’ she insists. ‘You’ve bought your ticket to Ecuador. What an adventure.’

‘Hope so.’

‘I know so.’ She grabs a bar of Cadbury’s from the display and holds it up to show me. ‘Got a craving.’

‘I didn’t know you were a chocoholic.’

‘Just when it’s cold. This should keep me going all the way to Biddulph’s.’

I’ve only once managed to haul myself up to Biddulph’s

bivvy, a ramshackle hut on the bush line, built about a hundred years ago for professional rabbiters. They must have been hardy people. As I count her change, I peer out at the weather: standing water on the petrol station forecourt, raindrops bouncing high off the mustard-coloured paintwork of her car. The ranges are smothered in charcoal cloud, as though some monstrous creature is breathing out giant plumes of smoke.

‘Seriously?’ I ask. ‘You’re heading up there? Today?’

She takes a casual glance at the cloud cover. It seems to delight her.

‘Lucky me, eh? Perfect weather for finding Marchant’s snails. The first wet days after a dry spell bring ’em out. I’ve got a happy weekend ahead of me, crawling around in the leaf litter.’

I can’t imagine why anyone would choose to tramp through those rain-soaked forests and uplands, but then I’ve never been a mountain woman. Leah is, of course. She took her very first steps in the Ruahine Range. To her, that wilderness is home. She’s going on and on about her snails while I smile and nod.

‘They’re *this* big!’—holding up her fingers to demonstrate. ‘Carnivorous.’ She catches me blanching at the image of a giant, flesh-eating snail. ‘Okay, maybe not the sexiest of our native creatures. But their shells are works of art, they’ve been around for millions of years, and now they’re in trouble because everything preys on them. Possums, rats, pigs.’

Blah blah blah, I think, because I’m twenty-one, and empty-headed, and I’ve been jealous of Leah for as long as I can remember. Her teeth are a bit crooked. She has a high forehead, a small mole on her left cheekbone and a permanent concentration crease, a vertical line between her eyebrows. Yet somehow, these imperfections add to the hypnotic effect. I can see why my brother Eddie’s had a crush since he first clapped eyes on her, swimming her horse in the Arapito stream. They were both eleven then, and he was a scrawny kid from Leeds, but he still hasn’t given up hope.

Just as she's opening the door to leave the shop, she drops her chocolate—*oops*—and swiftly stoops to pick it up again, flashing a wide, warm smile at me.

'Ecuador! Good for you, Emily.'

'I'll see you before I go,' I call after her.

I'm not sure she's heard me. She's striding across the flooded forecourt, pulling her beanie onto her head. The turquoise looks vivid even through rain-streaming glass. She checks her watch before getting into the car. I bet she's already forgotten our conversation. She'll be thinking about her snails, about what she's got to achieve over the weekend.

Her brake lights flicker at the exit. Now she's accelerating away, water rising in sheets as her wheels bounce through the flooded hollows.

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They never found Leah Parata. Not a boot, not a backpack, not a turquoise beanie. After she left me that day, she vanished off the face of the earth.



ONE

February 2019

The sign I painted thirty years ago still hung beside the road gate: *Arapito*. The name means ‘End of the path’, which seemed eerily apt right now. I’d illustrated it with a pair of fantails in flight, though time and rust had obliterated all but their wings. Leaning out of the driver’s window, I opened the creaking metal mouth of the mailbox. Mainly junk. A bank statement.

The landscape was a bleached desert, acres of desiccated grassland even up here in the foothills. Dust billowed in a beige cloud as I nosed my car up the drive. A small flock of sheep sprinted ahead, tightly bunched together, docked tails bouncing. Familiar things: the school bus shelter at the gate, the derelict woolshed, the backdrop of mountains. At the end of the drive a long, single-storey villa, surrounded by trees, clad in white weatherboards with heat haze dancing off its tin roof. *Arapito*. My home.

Dad was standing on the back porch, wearing canvas trousers and a polo shirt. Upright, tidy, self-contained. I waved as I rounded the house. I waved again, smiling, once I’d cut my engine. He simply watched me, shielding his eyes with one hand.

Silence. For one final breath, I hadn't quite arrived. I was still on my journey, still free. I had a desperate impulse to turn the key, reverse and speed away—back to the airport, back to my own life.

Why was I here? What possessed me?

I was here because of that phone call. Just a month ago, a wake-up call. I'd worked in my studio all day, gone out on the town to celebrate a friend's promotion, fallen into bed long after midnight. Four hours later, the blaring of my phone dragged me from the paralysis of dream.

Still dark, silly o'clock. Must be Nathan, calling from . . . Malaysia? No, he'd moved on. Jakarta. My son never worried too much about what time it was in London, especially when he'd run out of money and wanted a payout from the Bank of Mum.

'Nath? Whassup?' My tongue was still numbed by sleep.

Not Nathan. My caller was a woman.

'Oh, Emily, I'm so sorry! Have I woken you?'

I lay with my eyes shut, trying to place the voice. A New Zealander, for sure. I wasn't in touch with many people in Tawanui, and these deep, placid tones certainly didn't belong to my sister. Carmen always sounds as though she's about to slap someone's face.

'I forgot the time difference,' the woman said.

Ah! Now I had it. Raewyn Parata. Our neighbour, our school bus driver. Leah's mother, the woman whose name was synonymous with tragedy. Raewyn had ample reason to be angry with the world and yet she always sounded pretty much as she did now: interested, gently determined.

Something must be wrong with Dad. I couldn't remember when I last lifted the phone to call him. Damn it, I meant to! Maybe I ought to fly back for the funeral? Be easier to talk to him when he's dead.

I didn't say any of that. You don't. You observe the social niceties, even when you know bad news is coming.

'Raewyn! How are you?'

'Good. I'm good.'

I was pulling a jersey over my head, feeling guilty, thinking about funerals.

'What's happened? Something up with Dad?'

'Well . . .' A hesitation. 'You heard about his accident?'

'Accident?'

'Nobody's told you. Uh-huh. Thought not. About a week ago, he and his car somehow ended up in a ditch next to Arapito Road. He wasn't hurt—just bruises—but they kept him in Hastings hospital overnight in case he was concussed. Ira dragged his car out of the ditch and took it to the panelbeater. Anyway, it's not just that . . . um, where do I start? For quite a while now I've been bringing him meals, shopping, doing a bit of cleaning.'

'He can afford a cleaner, Raewyn.'

'That's not the point.'

'You shouldn't be cleaning for him.'

It's tricky to pull on your jeans with a phone tucked under your chin. I managed it somehow before blundering into the kitchen. *Tea. Milk.* I pictured Raewyn in her own kitchen, on the other side of the planet. She stayed on after her son Ira moved out—stayed on alone, despite the shadows gathered there. A wooden house with peeling paint and rotting boards; fruit trees in the garden, generations of sheep grazing up to the fence.

'The hospital were worried,' she was saying. 'He kept asking how he'd got there. He was trying to examine other patients, checking their charts! We've known for ages, haven't we?'

'Have we?'

'But—oh, Felix!—he's refusing to take any medication. He says he's not going to prolong the inevitable.'

'He was fine when I was last home.'

‘Are you sure about that?’ I heard the small silence of her disapproval. ‘That was . . .’

‘Getting on for three years ago, now.’

‘Long time. He was already hiding it then. Battling on. That’s why he resigned from everything, that’s why he’s become such a recluse. Manu did the same: quietly gave things up when he knew he couldn’t manage.’

The fridge door closed with a gentle click. It was covered in photos, mainly of Nathan at every stage from babyhood to twenty-two. Nathan, the cleverest little knock-kneed toddler on the planet. Ten-year-old Nathan whizzing down the slide in our local playground. My favourite was quite a recent one of the two of us, skating on the Somerset House ice rink with our arms linked.

And there was Nathan with his grandfather on the porch at Arapito. Dad looked handsome in his gardening hat, neatly shaved, Mediterranean-blue eyes in a face that somehow seemed both delicate and heavy. Nathan was a nineteen-year-old beanpole with copper hair, freckles and glasses. My father and my son both stood very straight, wearing their photo smiles, awkward grins they stuck on whenever a camera was pointed at them.

I held my forefinger to my lips, pressing the kiss onto the beloved boy in the picture. I took this photo as we were setting out for the airport, the last time I saw Dad. He looked perfectly normal. I didn’t remember anything . . . oh. Yes I did, come to think of it. Little eccentricities, just a few wacky moments. He tried to serve us frozen green beans instead of ice cream. And there was that day he nipped into town to get milk but came back hours later with no shopping at all. He seemed angry, said he’d been collared by an old patient who talked so much that Dad had completely forgotten what he’d come for. Nathan called him an absent-minded professor. Now that I thought back, perhaps he wasn’t angry. Perhaps he was frightened.

‘They did tests at the hospital,’ Raewyn said. ‘They got him to see a consultant.’

‘And?’

‘I’m afraid they think it’s Alzheimer’s.’

Alzheimer’s. Among people my age—the sandwich generation, squashed between parents and children, never quite coping with either and feeling constantly inadequate—the word had friends recoiling with grimaces and sympathetic tuts. *Oh no! I’m so sorry, that’s a cruel thing.* We’re all afraid it’s coming for us too. We’re all terrified when we forget someone’s name.

Raewyn was talking about the diagnosis, about what it meant for Dad.

‘They’ve told him he has to stop driving,’ she said. ‘He’s given me his car keys in case he forgets.’

‘No! How’s he meant to manage? You guys live miles out of town.’

‘The thing is, Emily, this isn’t new. He forgets to pay his bills. His electricity got cut off. I’ve even found him gardening in his pyjamas at midday.’

This, somehow, was more upsetting than his driving into a ditch. I couldn’t imagine my father in any state other than that of immaculate dignity. He always—*always*—wore a jacket and tie to work, his shirt collars literally starched, a Panama hat for gardening.

‘Today was the final straw for me,’ Raewyn said. ‘I went round with his shopping. I’d only just walked in when a frying pan burst into flames. These wooden houses can turn into infernos within minutes.’

‘Do Carmen and Eddie know about this diagnosis?’ My siblings.

‘They do now. I don’t think they were surprised.’

‘So what’s the plan?’

‘They both lead such busy lives. They think he needs to go into a care home, probably St Patrick’s, but he won’t hear of it.’

That's why I'm phoning you, Emily. You're the one person I could think of who might be able and willing to help.'

I indulged in a moment of smugness at being the *one* person—but I could see exactly where all of this was leading, and I didn't want to go there.

'I think you should come home for a while,' she said.

There it was.

'I don't live in the next town,' I reminded her.

'I know that.'

'I don't even live in the same hemisphere.' I sounded like a petulant teenager. I *felt* like one. 'I'll phone him today, I promise. But I can't simply drop everything, and there's the cost.'

'Imagine if you never got to say goodbye.'

Raewyn knew all about saying goodbye; she knew about never having the chance to say it. Manu. Leah.

'My useless siblings are both twelve thousand miles closer,' I moaned.

The kitchen door was inching open. A chubby-faced tabby squeezed through the gap and made a beeline for his bowl of biscuits. Max, my lodger's cat. My good friend, who spent his mornings curled up on a cushion in my cramped little studio. He was the model for Admiral Flufflebum, a wise, kind cat who lived in Buckingham Palace in a series of books I illustrated, whose success helped to pay the mortgage on this flat.

Raewyn aimed another shot.

'Come and see him while he still knows you, Emily. Don't just come for his funeral.'

'We're not very close.'

'You love him, though.'

After we'd hung up, I sat at the table and tried to kid myself that my father wasn't my responsibility. A bus came gliding past, early-morning commuters on the upper deck gazing straight into my world, and I into theirs. Nathan was gone, and the nest felt

empty. Christmas was a tinsel-strewn memory. The truly dark days of winter were just beginning: January, February. Rain and greyness and political division.

But it was summer in New Zealand. Temperatures in the thirties, endless blue skies, evening dips in the Arapito stream—our deliciously clear little river, with its pools and cliffs and pockets of native bush.

You love him, though.

I was ten, charging around the house, looking for my gym bag, screaming at Eddie that he'd messed with my effing stuff—and he was screaming back that he hadn't touched my effing stuff, he wouldn't touch it with an effing barge pole, and Mum was slumped on the porch in her housecoat, smoking bitterly, and Carmen was cleaning her muddy riding boots among the cereal bowls on the kitchen table, and it was always like this—always, *always*, every morning. Dad was dressed for work after his run, looking about ten years younger than his wife, who was creased around all her edges. He behaved as though his family were characters on the telly, and he wasn't even watching the show. He wasn't abusive; he was simply absent. He didn't seem to care.

You love him, though.

But maybe he didn't love me. Or any individual, for that matter. My father loved his Fellow Man, whoever the hell that was.

Max jumped onto my lap and began kneading. He had it good: his bed, his bowl and a Burmese playmate who lived two doors down.

'Lucky sod, Max,' I whispered, as he rubbed his cheek against mine. 'Nobody expects you to drop everything for your old man.'

And then I opened my laptop. *Flights. Heathrow–Auckland.*

Not that I was planning on actually . . . I mean, *obviously* not. I was wondering what a flight cost nowadays, that's all. Just out of interest.

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I opened the car door. Heat surged into my air-conditioned sanctuary, along with the scents of childhood: pasture, sheep dung, resinous eucalypts and macrocarpas in the shelter belt. The dry hissing of cicadas reverberated, as though I were inside a tolling bell.

Dad was still standing on the porch. I inherited my colouring from him, blue eyes and mid-brown hair, though his had turned cotton-wool white in recent years. It was a bit out of control right now, frothing around his head like Einstein's. That wasn't normal for him.

'Whew—made it!' I cried, walking around to the boot to drag out my bags.

It was odd that he hadn't greeted me. He wasn't the kind of father you dash up to and fling your arms around, and hug, and kiss noisily, doing a little dance together. He wasn't that kind of father; I wasn't that kind of daughter. He didn't *do* touching, never had. But this silence was strange.

Thank goodness for his dogs, who made a fuss of me—pouring down the steps to say hello, tails waving. First was Gloria, the boss, an elderly labrador with a coat the colour of shortbread. The smaller one, Gyp, was given to Dad by one of his many grateful patients. He had some spaniel in him, and some foxie, and a truckload of charm—chocolate and white, with bed hair and a lolling tongue.

'Good to see you guys,' I muttered, crouching to ruffle their ears. 'Gyp, you're all grown up!'

'Morning,' Dad said politely. 'Can I help?'

His smile was too sweet, too empty, too anxious. 'Sweet', 'empty' and 'anxious' were not words I'd ever have used to describe this man. There was an imposter in my father's body.

'Hey, Dad!' I was laughing to cover the awfulness. 'It's me. Emily.'

I counted to three before he turned into himself again. The lights came on, and there he was.

‘Emily! Of course it is! Sorry . . . the sun in my eyes, couldn’t quite see . . . didn’t recognise your car. Hired, is it? No need for that, you can use mine. Well, marvellous, you’re here.’

We both pretended it hadn’t happened. We both acted out a charade in order to cover up the horrifying fact that a father had failed to recognise his daughter. I climbed the steps to give the token half-hug and air kiss.

‘Good journey?’ he asked.

‘Seems to get longer every time.’

Wariness froze his features again. I don’t think he had a clue where I lived.

‘I flew from London,’ I explained, helping him out, ‘into Auckland. Then another flight to Hawke’s Bay airport in Napier, and then I drove for an hour down to here.’

‘Sounds exhausting.’ He gestured towards the house. ‘Tea? Coffee? Let me carry your case.’

As he led the way inside, he twice glanced back over his shoulder as though checking I was still there. Perhaps he thought I might be imaginary.

‘Good journey?’ he asked again.

I blinked. ‘Um, yes. Long.’

He tried to make tea, but after he’d opened the same cupboard three times I took over. He stepped aside and let me do it.

‘Of course, the mugs are there!’ he murmured. ‘Stupid of me. Thank you. How was your journey?’

‘Fine, Dad. Just a bit long.’

The kitchen hadn’t changed in decades: old joinery, high ceiling, blissfully shaded after the glare of the road. A quick trip to the bathroom proved that hadn’t changed either. Yellow tiles and a mouldy shower curtain.

Something was filling the air with cooking smells—wine and mushrooms. I lifted the lid of an electric crockpot to reveal a gently bubbling stew.

‘You’re a chef!’ I exclaimed.

‘Raewyn brought that round, I think. Biscuits, too—here, have one. They’re those special biscuits, you know . . . Tip of my tongue. Named after the troops.’

‘Anzac?’

‘Anzac!’

I was rummaging in the cutlery drawer, looking for a teaspoon. I’d just found one when something caught my eye: a post-it note, taped to the handle of the tin opener:

CAN OPENER

1. *Open the metal arms.*
2. *Put cutting edge onto edge of can.*
3. *Press down HARD!*
4. *Turn handle.*

Dad’s handwriting used to be controlled and even, marching along straight lines. Much like the man himself, in fact. This was certainly his writing, but it looked as though he’d used his left hand, with quavering wobbles on every letter. Looking around me, I spotted more notes with spidery instructions: on the microwave, the dishwasher, the rice cooker. I slammed the drawer shut. This was terrifying.

‘So,’ I began, with fake brightness. ‘How’ve you been?’

‘Fine fettle.’

‘I hear you had a bit of a mishap in your car?’

He looked both guarded and offended, shaking his head with pursed lips.

‘Just a small one?’ I persisted. ‘An argument with a ditch. Didn’t you have a night in hospital?’

‘A night in . . . ? Ha!’ he scoffed. ‘Wherever did you hear that rubbish? No, no. An hour. They were fussing about concussion. Do they think I wouldn’t recognise concussion in myself?’

‘Best to be thorough.’

‘Can’t have been much of an accident. The car hasn’t a scratch on it.’

I decided not to mention the panelbeater. Fetching milk, I found the fridge festooned with notes, all in that wobbly handwriting. One bore Raewyn’s phone number, with directions to her house. She and Dad had been neighbours for forty years, she lived just down the track—less than half a mile away, as the crow flies. He could have walked to her place blindfolded.

The other notes were equally disturbing.

*DO NOT TALK to man who phones about my COMPUTER
FEED DOGS! FOOD IN BAG UNDER SHELF IN
STOREROOM*

Felix, have you had a shower today?

BRUSH TEETH

CHECK is the OVEN OFF? THE GAS?

One was in red felt tip, with giant letters:

EMILY ARRIVING ABOUT 12 PM MONDAY.

HER ROOM IS READY.

RAEWYN WILL BRING STEW IN CROCKPOT.

A trapdoor was opening under my feet. This wasn’t right. What you have to understand is that my father, Felix Kirkland, was the most precise, orderly individual that ever walked this earth. Can you imagine what it’s like, to be the child of a perfect human being? Now he needed reminders to brush his teeth, to feed his dogs, to greet his daughter when she flew across the world to see him.

We sat in the shade of the broad porch roof, in the low-slung wooden chairs that had been there forever, our tray on the coffee table Eddie made at school: solid, with an inlaid chessboard on its surface. The porch ran right along the back of the house with

the boot room at one end. From here we looked over the garden, across steeply undulating farmland to the ranges beyond. I noticed a supply of split logs stacked against the wall, ready for autumn.

The dogs stretched themselves at Dad's feet while we humans made conversation about the dry weather, the state of the garden—'Needs a bit of attention,' Dad mumbled, shaking his head at the overgrown bushes, clumps of parched grass on the drive. None of this neglect would have mattered at all, but it wasn't him.

Stilted and impersonal conversation, on the other hand, *was* him. It always had been. This was why I only made the journey every few years. The twins had both settled in Auckland, while I'd run even further.

After a long silence, Dad put down his teacup.

'I want to get my house in order,' he announced. 'I mean literally. *This* house. Papers and rubbish all over my study. I can't seem to get rid of anything.'

This I could believe. His only vice was to be a hoarder of documents.

'You don't have to get rid of anything, Dad.'

'I do!' He slammed his hands onto his thighs. 'But I can't seem to make any progress. It's so irritating.'

'It doesn't matter.'

'I can't leave all this mess for other people to deal with.'

'Nobody will mind.'

'I *must* get my house in order.' He was looking at me hopefully, half-smiling. 'You'll help me, Emily? You'll help me?'

My throat had closed. Maybe it was jetlag and sleep deprivation, maybe the treacherous weepiness of perimenopause, maybe just the fact of being home after three years and knowing that this visit really might be the last.

But I think it was because it was the first time in my life—the very first time, so far as I could remember—that my father had asked for my help.

TWO

After lunch, Dad retreated to his study. He claimed to have letters to write but his eyelids were drooping. I suspected he'd be writing in his dreams, slumped in his armchair.

I wandered around the dark rooms of Arapito homestead, reacquainting myself with its slumbering stillness. The house smelled exactly as it always had: of dust, of history, of slow disintegration, all overlaid with some kind of polish—which was odd, since I'd never seen anyone actually polish anything. The glass in the sash windows was warped, their frames excavated by wood-boring insects. The grandmother clock kept a steady heartbeat, chiming the quarter-hours as it had throughout my childhood. It lived in the snug, a comfortable little room connected to the kitchen by an archway. I sat on the sofa for a time, watching the pendulum.

I'd talked to my brother and sister before booking my flights. They presented a united front. Par for the course.

'We're trying to persuade Dad to set up an EPOA,' said Carmen, who had just been down to see him.

'A what?'

‘An enduring power of attorney. We need to safeguard his finances.’

‘Against what?’

‘Anyone who might take advantage of him.’

‘Yeah?’ Something in her tone had me bristling. ‘Like who?’

‘Just whoever. And we need to be able to make decisions about his care going forward. It’s really difficult to know what to do. We’re thinking about St Patrick’s.’

Tawanui’s rest home. Bahamas-heated, urine-scented. Dad used to be on the management board, and GP to most of the residents. He founded a gardening club and a choir; he often took the latest of his succession of labradors with him on visits. I saw blank faces brighten, arthritic fingers reaching to stroke soft fur. Dad knew all about St Pat’s.

As the clock chimed, I slid in and out of sleep. Two am in England. Ringing in my ears, gravel behind my eyelids. *Must stay awake*. If I succumbed now, I’d be making cups of tea half the night.

Moments later I was heading across the paddocks towards Raewyn’s house, my sandals scuffing on bone-dry grass. Gyp and Gloria trotted beside me, stopping to drink from troughs on the way. At one stage I spotted Ira Parata in the far distance, a white-helmeted figure on a quad bike. I jumped about and waved, but he passed out of sight without seeing me.

Ira and I lived in one another’s pockets when we were small, chanting and giggling on the back seat of the school bus while our older siblings pretended not to know us—*Leah and Eddie sitting in a tree, K-I-S-S-I-N-G! First comes love, then comes marriage, then comes a baby in a—*

Dear Lord, poor Eddie. He used to turn crimson, right to the tips of his ears. Leah just smiled and shook her head.

Kids were dropped home in ones and twos as Raewyn fought the massive steering wheel, navigating slippery tracks and steep

hills. By the time she turned up Arapito Road, only the five of us were left: two Paratas, three Kirklands. Ira and Leah often got off at our place, leaving Raewyn to drive on alone and face the grimness of Manu's illness. Leah and the twins did their homework together. They were all swots. Eddie's only ambition—apart from getting Leah to go out with him—was to be a doctor like Dad, but he didn't get the grades.

I heard a yell of greeting as I opened Raewyn's gate, and the wonderfully familiar figure came pelting to envelop me in her arms. Relief took my breath away. Someone normal, someone whose mind wasn't sliding away into the ether. She smelled of soap and butter. For the second time that day, my throat felt as though it had a knot tied in it.

'Oh dear.' She peered into my face. 'Was he in a state?'

'He didn't know who I was.'

She tutted, holding my hands in both of hers.

'He was so polite.' I laughed miserably, trying to shift the ache in my throat. 'He said, *Can I help you?*'

'I should have been there.'

'You tried to warn me.'

The dogs lay panting in the shade of an apple tree. Raewyn took my arm and guided me towards the house, her head on a level with my shoulder. She was barefoot, wearing a man's checked shirt and baggy khaki shorts, silver-grey hair hanging halfway to her waist.

'He was sharp as a tack this morning,' she said. 'I left him in the study, sorting through the newsletters from St Patrick's.' She bent down to pick a shiny strawberry and passed it to me. 'Imagine if he fetches up in their dementia unit, among all those other lost souls.'

'D'you think he knows what's happening to him?'

'Sometimes. Two or three years ago, he told me he was losing the battle. He was going to become a blank sheet in the end. Tears

pouring down his cheeks. *God help me. God help me, Raewyn, I'll be erased.* But now he seems to have accepted it.'

I had only ever once seen my father cry. Once, in all the years.

'He's only seventy-five,' I protested. 'He was still hiking in the ranges last time I was over. He never loses a game of chess, he's been on the board of half the non-profits in the district. I thought you could avoid dementia if you kept your mind and body in shape.'

'Maybe he's bought himself more time by keeping so active? C'mon out of this heat.'

She straightened, holding a handful of strawberries in the palm of her hand, and I followed her up the wooden ramp to her back door. The ramp was installed decades earlier for Manu's wheelchair, along with widened doorways and a special shower.

Stepping into Raewyn's kitchen felt like another homecoming: the sense of order, the faded linoleum on the floor, that lingering smell of tomato plants and baking. While she poured cold drinks, I looked at the photos lined up along her dresser. I knew them well. A triptych of Leah: a teenager in white judo gear, a mountain climber on a peak. The third was taken during her PhD graduation ceremony. She was regal in a magnificent korowai—a Māori cloak—with a mortarboard balanced on her mass of corkscrew curls; that intense gaze, the vertical crease on her brow. She had her whole life ahead of her.

There were photos of her dad, too. Nice man. One showed him in his prime, lean and muscled, stooping to shear a sheep on the boards of a woolshed and looking startlingly like Ira. The image was faded, too small for its brass frame. I had a dim recollection of Manu in those earliest days: a cheerful farmer in a sunhat and shorts and big boots, chatting across the fence to whichever of my parents was in our garden. Sometimes he'd take Ira and me across the farm, bouncing around on the flatbed of his truck.

The other photo of Manu was upsetting. I would never have believed it could be the same person if I hadn't witnessed his decline myself. A wasted doll, propped in a high-backed armchair in the Paratas' front room. Someone had put a yellow paper crown on his head. I'm sure it was meant to look festive, but it seemed like mockery as it slid down his emaciated skull. His hair was shorn, because his constant movement left it matted. His body seemed twisted, his mouth wide open, head tilted backwards so that he stared up at the ceiling.

I spoke to him—in that chair, on that day, wearing that yellow crown. His last Christmas. He couldn't form words, but I think he tried to smile at me. The writhing that had tortured him for years was less now, though he still flung his limbs about—even, Raewyn told me, when he was sleeping. She'd lined his bed with sheepskin so that he wasn't bruised at night. He was struggling to swallow, and there was talk of his need for specialist care, but there were so few beds and nowhere close by. While they were waiting, his heart began to fail. Dad arranged palliative care. Manu died in March 1992, with his family around him.

Raewyn was in the photo too: perched on an arm of the chair, clutching Manu's thin hand. Her trademark flame-red mane was turning grey. Leah sat on the other side, pressing her cheek to her father's, gazing straight at the camera. Such a contrast: her vitality, his vacancy. Ira stood scowling behind them all. He hated having his photo taken. Brother and sister would have been nineteen and twenty-four at the time, but living very different lives. He'd stayed at home to run the farm and look after his dad. She was a high-flyer, a doctoral student with a scholarship, following her dreams. Nobody suggested *she* should sacrifice her future. Didn't seem fair to me. Though as things turned out, she didn't have a future.

'How's Ira?' I asked now. 'I caught a glimpse of him when I was walking over.'

‘Good. He’s . . . yes, I think he’s good.’

That was the stock response around here. It meant nothing. Everyone was always ‘good’, until they weren’t.

Raewyn picked up the picture, dusted it against her shirt.

‘He’s forty-six years old, he lives alone in the single man’s quarters, he works from dawn till dusk every day of the week—except when he gets drunk as a skunk at the Tawanui pub. Most of his friends are fathers now, some even granddads.’ She glanced out of the window, in the direction of Ira’s place. ‘I know he won’t have children in case he passes on the Huntington’s gene. Breaks my heart a bit. But surely there are women out there who’d settle down with him, love him for himself?’

I was sure there were plenty. The odd girlfriend had come and gone from Ira’s life, but he’d never let one get close.

‘Can’t *you* save him, Emily?’ asked Raewyn. ‘You were always partners in crime.’

I chuckled. ‘Blind leading the blind.’

Ten-year-old me had blithely assumed that Ira and I would get married one day. I’d thought he was so handsome, with his dark curls, his shining eyes and that confident lift to his chin. I used to daydream about our house, our puppies, the pet lambs we’d feed. None of it came true. My best mate and I never even dated, never kissed, never so much as held hands except to haul one another up onto the roof of Manu’s woolshed.

‘Whenever he can spare a day from the farm, he heads up into the ranges. He says he’s hunting, and he’ll come home with venison, but I know he’s looking for his sister.’

‘Still looking? It’s been . . .’

‘Twenty-five years this coming June. There won’t be anything left of her to find.’

Raewyn’s gaze was drawn towards a narrow saddle between two peaks, easily identifiable by the livid scar of a slip. I knew Biddulph’s bivvy lay close to that point, just below the bush line.

At this distance, the uplands might have been bare rock, shimmering in mirror-bright blue.

I'd been up there. The Ruahine Range is a biodiversity hotspot, one of the last refuges for all kinds of native plants and creatures, including Leah's giant snail. Our school used to take us on summer camps, yahooing our way up easy, well-marked trails through the rainforest, stopping to snack on bags of scroggin and making so much racket that we barely heard the trickling of the streams or the strange calls of the birds. We'd sleep in a modern hut with gas, foam mattresses and glass in the windows. Our teachers would nag us about not wandering off—*they'll never find you*—and not dropping litter. We used torches when we crept out to the long-drop toilet at night, so we never even saw the exploding majesty of the stars.

I'd only once been more adventurous. When I was thirteen, I asked Dad to take me with him on one of his hikes. I was inspired by Ira's memories of camping with Manu and Leah, and imagined long conversations as we strolled through the bush, perhaps lighting a fire in a cosy hut.

We made a day trip to Biddulph's, which Dad said was a 'manageable walk for someone not very fit'. I was so excited. I got ready the night before, and we left early. Well, what a nightmare! All I remember is screaming limbs and lungs as I scrambled up that hellishly steep trail. Dad seemed to dance from rock to rock across a gushing stream, but I fell and was soaked. When we finally reached it, the hut was grim: no fireplace, no water, just a couple of rotting canvas bunks and a packing case for a table. Rat droppings everywhere. I almost cried. I longed to get home to flat ground, a hot shower and a sofa. On the way back down, Dad apologised. *I overestimated your fitness*, he said. *My mistake. I'm sorry.*

I felt such a hopeless failure. I hadn't been good enough; I would *never* be good enough. Not like Leah.

Raewyn turned from the window.

‘How long can you stay?’

‘Three weeks.’

She folded her arms, lowering her chin so that it tripled. I knew that look.

‘Leave me alone, Raewyn,’ I protested. ‘You can’t expect me to hang about until . . . I mean, he could outlive me. How about some home help for him? I’ll look into it.’

‘You’ve got a Kiwi passport, right? I bet you can work from here.’

‘Theoretically, for a while. But it’s—’

She was clapping her hands. ‘Hooray!’

‘No, *not* hooray. I don’t work in a vacuum; it’s a collaborative process. I need to have face-to-face conversations, I need to provide original work, I need—’

She wasn’t interested in my excuses. She pointed out that we had the internet nowadays, and all kinds of snazzy equipment. She often video-chatted with her great-nieces and nephews.

‘Felix has given his whole life to others,’ she declared. ‘Will nobody give anything back now?’

When I mentioned Eddie and Carmen, she flapped a dismissive hand.

‘We both know they’re not going to turn their lives upside down for him. Even if they wanted to offer him a home, I can’t see Richard or Rhonda being very happy. And anyway, poor Felix! Imagine being bossed about by Carmen all day.’

There was a desperate edge to my laughter. Richard and Rhonda were my brother- and sister-in-law. My siblings had both, inexplicably, persuaded good people to share their lives. It was the old story: I was the portable spinster whose role was to come home and be a sodding nursemaid.

I was too tired to argue. I’d fight my corner tomorrow.

‘Let’s see how we go,’ I said.

THREE

Dad knocked on my door that evening, long after we'd said goodnight.

Sometime in the past twenty-five years, he'd slapped magnolia paint over the top of my bedroom wallpaper, covering the patches I'd ruined by sellotaping posters everywhere. Apart from that the room was pretty much unchanged from my childhood. Cobwebs still clung to the mellow rimu boards of the ceiling; here was my three-quarter-sized bed with the flowery quilt, my sheepskin rug, my bookcase—*All Creatures Great and Small*, *What Katy Did*, *The Hobbit*. Even my lava lamp.

Raewyn, bless her, had made the bed. I was sitting cross-legged on it, a towel around my wet hair, sending a message to Nathan. He was always a far better student than his mother. He graduated in psychology, and promptly set off to teach English in far-flung places. I missed him, but I couldn't complain. He had the travel bug, same as I did at his age. The downside? His girlfriend had tagged along. The dreaded Ella.

His reply was cheerful: *Hey Mum, good to know you got there in one piece! We're on a bus to the old port. Sleep well, love to Grandpa X*

The knock on my door was confident and brisk. Dad's voice was confident and brisk to match.

'Emily? You still awake?'

He stood in the corridor with a manila envelope in his hand. No confusion, no blankness. He looked a lot fitter than I felt. His eyes were still clear, his jawline firm, his complexion had the same fresh bloom as ever.

'Got everything you need?' he asked, glancing into the room behind me.

'Everything's great. Raewyn even put flowers by my bed.'

'Oh, good.' He held up the envelope. 'Something for you to look after.'

'What's this?'

'Keep it for me, will you? Please, please, don't open it until the event mentioned on the front. Until then, I'd rather you didn't let anyone know of its existence. I will undoubtedly forget I've given it to you. I'm afraid I'm going doolally.'

'No, Dad!'

'Oh, of course I am.' He waved away my denial. 'Don't be ridiculous. That's why you're here, isn't it? It's a bastard of a thing.'

'It might not be what they think.'

He placed the envelope in my hands.

'It *is* what they think. I know you mean to comfort me, but I'd rather not lie to myself. You'll keep this to yourself, and unopened? The contents could do a great deal of harm if they emerge too soon.'

'Sure, Dad. I promise. I'll guard it with my life.'

There's a child in all of us, and mine was flattered. My father was confiding in me! That was a first.

'A *great* deal of harm,' he repeated.

'Why don't you just burn it?'

'Because truth matters. History matters. Not alternative facts,

not lies.’ He nodded at the envelope. ‘You’ll know what to do with it, when the time comes.’

‘What’s in here?’

But the conversation was over. He thanked me and wished me a good night’s sleep. I watched him stride off down the panelled corridor towards his own bedroom—hands in pockets, head high, as though he was back in his heyday.

I closed my door and examined the envelope in my hand. Its flap was stuck down with masking tape. On the front, Dad had written in blue-black ink—fountain pen, not a biro:

NOT TO BE OPENED UNTIL AFTER MY DEATH

After that, it’s open season.

F.K.

Probably his will. Maybe he was leaving everything to his beloved Kauri hospice. Perhaps he’d bequeathed the Arapito land to Ira? That would make sense. Our hundred or so acres had been leased to the Parata family forever, and Ira did more for Dad than any of his own children. It would be hilarious to see the twins’ faces when they found out.

An incorrigible devil on my shoulder suggested peeling back the masking tape and steaming open the envelope. Go on! I was a dab hand at letter-steaming; I routinely held Carmen’s mail over the kettle when she was a teenager. Her love letters were hilarious. One outstanding effort, from a jug-eared lad called Zach, quoted Shakespeare. *Shall I compare thee to a summer’s day?* When Carmen caught Ira and me in hysterics over it, she burst into tears and burned it in the fireplace in her room. I must have been such an annoying younger sister.

But I wasn’t ten years old anymore. I slid Dad’s envelope into my suitcase and climbed into bed. As I turned off the lamp, I made a mental note to thank Raewyn for making my room so welcoming. I owed her.

I'd forgotten the extreme remoteness of my old home. A plover screeched in the enormous darkness; a sheep coughed, hacking like the pack-a-day smoker I used to be. The house creaked as its wooden structure cooled down.

I was six when we left Leeds. I bade a snotty, tearful goodbye to my very, very best friend ever . . . what was her name? Poppy? Penny? Nope, it's gone . . . and we flew all the way across the world to this strange settlement, huddled under the mountains, where the shops shut all weekend, where children went to school barefoot and dogs were workers, not pets. Back then, the bright lights of Tawanui consisted of the milk bar and fish-and-chip shop.

At first we lived in a damp rental house in town, arranged by the Health Board, but my parents soon bought Arapito. Back in the late 1970s, both house and land seemed amazingly affordable.

'Space to breathe,' exulted Dad, the first time we all walked across the paddocks to the river, clutching our towels.

'Too much space,' said Mum. 'There's nothing here.'

'Can I have a horse?' asked Carmen.

'Hey, Emily,' said Eddie one night. 'D'you know the story of Arapito homestead?'

We were sitting beside the wood-burning stove in the snug. Mum was collecting Carmen from pony club. Dad, of course, was out at work. He was always at work. House calls, meetings, emergencies at the hospice.

'What story?' I asked, because I hadn't yet worked out that my brother was an idiot.

'Mr Izzard.'

'Who's Mr Izzard?'

Eddie shone a torch up from under his chin as he spun his tale. The eleven-year-old boy became a ghoul, with a glowing face and empty-skull eyes.

'Hilary Izzard,' he said, 'lived in this house years ago. His wife died of a fever on the passage over from England. In those days they used to throw the dead bodies overboard.'

I was open-mouthed. 'Why?'

'Because they didn't have fridges and things. They chucked Mrs Izzard into the sea and the sharks got her. Mr Izzard saw the water turn red, like tomato ketchup. He was really upset, but he came and lived here and farmed this land. And then his only son was killed in the First World War, and finally all his sheep died.'

'Why did they die?'

'A disease took them out. The whole flock. He was the unluckiest man in Tawanui. He went to town and paid all his bills. Then he came home and hanged himself in this very room. See that nail in the beam, right above your head? That's where he tied the rope. It was a week before they found him, and he was mostly maggots by then. They cut what was left of him down and took him away to be buried in the town cemetery. His grave's by the gate. Hilary Izzard.'

'I don't believe you,' I whimpered, wriggling away from underneath the nail in the beam.

Eddie dropped his voice to a guttural rasp. 'He never left this house. People hear his footsteps. People hear the rope, still swinging. That's how come we bought it so cheap.'

For years I lived in terror of that restless spirit. I'd seen Hilary Izzard's grave in the cemetery, and our old house never stopped breathing and shifting as it cooled and warmed. I used to hide under my flowery quilt, listening for footsteps in the corridor or the rhythmic creak of a rope as a decomposing body turned in the wind.

Eddie had made it all up, of course. Years later I did a school project on local history, interviewing men and women who were born in the nineteenth century. No Izzard had ever lived in our house. The Hilary Izzard in Tawanui cemetery was a grandmother-of-many, who died peacefully at the age of ninety.

As sleep began to swallow me, I heard Dad making his way to the bathroom. Steady, calm footsteps, not the ghost of a grieving

farmer. It was a profoundly comforting sound. He was still my dad, after all.

•

Four in the bloody morning. Wide awake under a sheet, sweating, maddened by the whine of predatory mosquitoes. I'd forgotten how those little vampires could make a summer night a misery. My feet wouldn't keep still, my mind turned whooping somersaults.

The next moment I'd thrown off the sheet and was feeling my way down the porch steps, hobbling across the drought-stricken lawn, my toes curling upwards as prickly weed jabbed my soles. I could dimly make out Mum's croquet set on the porch, the white posts where we used to tie the tennis net, those spiky-headed cabbage trees in the paddock. I knew every shadow, every glint of the moonlight.

As a child I used to lie flat on my back on the trampoline on this lawn, blinking up at the blaze of the Milky Way with its dark holes and hazy patches of stardust. I clearly remember looking for God up there. One night, Dad came home late from a call-out to the hospice. He must have spotted me in his headlights as he drove up. I expected him to head straight inside, but he didn't. I heard the car door shut, his steady footfall approaching the trampoline.

'Stargazing?' he asked.

To my astonishment and delight, he swung easily up beside me and lay on his back, just as I was doing. As always, he kept a good foot or two of space between us. I've no memory of him ever properly hugging me, or any of his children—or his wife, come to think of it. The best he could manage was a fleeting arm around the shoulders. I've no memory of sitting on his knee, or holding his hand. He didn't do those things. He rarely touched people at all, unless they were his patients. But this night, he lay near me on the trampoline, both of us staring at the sky.

‘Have you ever wondered what the name of our mountains means?’ he asked. ‘The Ruahine Range. *Rua-hine*. Wise woman. And they do seem wise somehow, don’t they?’

‘I feel as though they’re watching me,’ I said, and he said yes, he felt that too. My dad understood me! I was euphoric.

He knew all about the night sky. He knew about so many things. His memory was astonishing. If he read something once, he remembered it. He pointed out the constellations and named the planets. He explained that in Māori legend, Orion’s belt was a perch upon which birds would alight in order to eat the brilliant star, Rigel—though they called it Puanga—which, he told me, was as bright as forty thousand suns. ‘See there? See how it could be a perch for a bird?’

Ever since then, I’ve thought of Dad when I look up at Orion’s belt.

‘And Betelgeuse,’ he added, pointing. ‘That’s a red supergiant. It’s used up all the hydrogen and it’s burning stuff like carbon and helium now.’

I couldn’t see which one he meant, but I pretended I could. I wanted this to go on forever, my father treating me like a proper person, showing me these things with exotic names. It was one of the very happiest moments of my life. It still is.

I desperately wanted to say something clever and worthy.

‘And what’s that one?’ I asked, pointing. ‘It’s moving.’

‘Um, that’s a plane.’

I felt so stupid.

I wanted to tell him that looking at the universe made me feel like a feeble, flickering match that could be snuffed out at any moment. I wanted to tell him that I felt lonely and frightened when I lay here, and that was exactly why I did it. I wanted to ask him if it had the same effect on him, whether he ever felt lonely. But I was afraid he’d think me even more stupid, so I didn’t say another word. Soon he got up, remarking that it was past my bedtime.

We never stargazed together again. But I took that moment, wrapped it in tissue paper and stored it away. I kept a few treasures like that: moments when I'd felt almost close to my father. From time to time over the years I would get them out and look at them.

The trampoline was long gone now. It had a good innings which finally ended when Nathan and his cousins—Carmen's kids—put their clod-hopping little feet right through the mat. Instead, I stretched out on the dry grass where it used to be, and watched Orion stalking across the sky.

In three weeks' time, this night would be just another memory. I'd be on my way back to London. Even if I saw Dad again, he wouldn't know me. And I would never have known him.