

The Direction of Our Fear

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For Ann

“We must travel in the direction of our fear.”
John Berryman: *A point of age*.

Prelude

Farida watches as the people board the train. They do so singly or in pairs, looking down the platform to check for friends or to glance at the indicator board. The weather is calm, sunny. On the bridge, which is just visible beyond the stanchions of the station, she can see a bus, caught in the traffic, windows flashing in the low sun.

They seem to have been sitting here a long time now, and she's getting restless. The young woman next to her must feel the same; she fidgets, knocks Farida's arm, apologises. Farida shifts the bag on her lap, waits.

The doors swish shut. The train jolts, moves off. The station slides past. The carriage enters a tunnel, and suddenly the scene contracts. She flinches as an electrical flash lights up the wall, blanking out the reflections of people in the windows. Through the connecting door, she sees the carriage in front jerk as it crosses the points. The wheels screech.

She looks at the passengers. Most of them look like the sort of commuters that you might see almost anywhere on the morning train. Smartly dressed secretaries, standing stiffly in their own small private space; shop-girls or filing clerks in short skirts and platform soles, their mobile phones clutched to their chests; labourers in overalls, students with ipods in their ears, a gang of jostling children in the uniform of some school one is meant to know. A middle-aged, bald headed man wearing a striped, claret and blue tee-shirt that bears a slogan which she can't quite read: Cryst Pal. A football team, perhaps? Beside the door is a thin youth, sallow-skinned, a back-pack at his feet. Is it her imagination or is he nervous? She cannot see his eyes, but something in the shape of his face, the curve of his body, makes him seem taut and intent.

The train stops and the children pile off, chattering and pushing. Their place is taken by a woman with a buggy bearing a small child. The young man with the back-pack shuffles aside to give her more room. In the buggy, the child kicks with his foot, and his hand snatches at something only he can see. Farida feels that he might almost be waving at her.

More commuters surge on board. Four men in smart suits, neat ties crowd into the space around the buggy. The woman and the boy with the back-pack are lost from sight. As the train pulls away again, Farida watches the group of men. They are all in their early twenties, chummy and brash. She can imagine them heading off to well-paid jobs in a bank or finance company, confident of their place in the world, of their carefree futures. Between sips of take-away coffees, they lean towards each other, laughing, joking, bodies swaying to the rhythm of the train.

Another tunnel. That same sudden inversion of the scene. A train in parallel outside the window. Noise and light thrown back from the tunnel walls. The hubbub of voices is lost. Just one word seems to linger against the roar of the train: "Tomorrow."

In the buggy, the child kicks again, waves.

One of the men by the door looks down.

Then from somewhere beyond them, somewhere she cannot quite identify, she has the sense of disruption, like a sudden wound opening up in the world. She reads it in the movement of the bodies, towards her, away from its epicentre, against the movement of the train. She sees it in the change in the air. Light torn apart.

She hears herself gasp.

Then everything is whiteness, then black.

Chapter One

Monday, May 6th

The sigh of the brakes, a jolt, drew Brendan from his thoughts. The name Paraparaumu flowed past; the train slowed, stopped. He watched idly as the passengers wandered along the platform, got on board.

He had, he realised, been far away, lost somewhere in another time, another place. A pale and tessellated land, stretching ahead of them as far as he could see. A rough stone wall at his back, Lynn at his side, her voice mulling over the words of a new song.

He tried to recapture it, that repeated phrase, but it eluded him.

But the place he knew. The Burren. Home, then.

He wondered what had provoked the memory. Nothing much, he guessed. A chance likeness in the scenery, in the play of light. In either case, nothing unusual. She was never far from his thoughts.

Then the words came back. 'Life leads me on.' Either to or from her lover; he could no longer remember which.

He looked down the platform. It was empty now. The conductor stood by the door at the far end of the carriage. He appeared to be in no hurry. He checked his watch, leaned out and scanned the station, raised a desultory hand towards the driver. With a final leisurely glance down the train, he reached for the button by the door.

Even as he did so, another movement caught Brendan's eye. A flash of red. Someone had emerged from the gap between the station buildings behind him, stepped towards the train. A girl.

She stood there for an instant, legs strangely splayed in a half turn, seemingly frozen in indecision. The doors hissed, and the train seemed to lean against its brakes, eager to go. The girl opened her mouth as if to shout. Then she darted forward, reaching for the closing door.

Momentarily, the future seemed to hang in the balance. Half a dozen consequences, all with equal title. A missed lunge, a hand caught in the door, the girl dragged from her feet. Or left standing on the platform, looking foolish. Should he act?

He hesitated.

Not so Solomon. He was an ageless Maori, who always positioned himself by the door, despite the empty seats. At each station he smiled everyone aboard: share my train, join my story. Now he pushed out a leg. The door juddered, hissed, opened again. The girl stepped on.

As the train at last moved away, she muttered her thanks to Solomon, looked around. She seemed flustered and uncertain. People were staring up at her, adding to her discomfort. She hitched her bag to her shoulder. It tugged at her skirt slightly; she smoothed it out, then started to make her way along the aisle, away from Brendan. In that part of the carriage the seats were arranged in pairs, facing forwards or back. She considered them for a moment, then, finding them inadequate in some way, turned, retraced her steps. Here, where Brendan sat, there were two seats on either side, facing inwards. The pair opposite him was empty. She moved quickly towards it and sat down.

He watched her as she tried to compose herself, arms, legs, bag still all awry. Then she looked up, noticed his gaze, and her face flushed. He gave her a quick, encouraging smile.

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Sally chided herself, feeling the colour in her cheeks: another childish trait. She opened her bag, took out her biology notes, opened the folder, stared at the page. There was no point

reading them really; the curriculum here would be different. But this was what she used to do on her way to her old school – read, revise – and clinging to something familiar felt good. It was a displacement action, too, a way of covering up her embarrassment.

Her mother was to blame, she thought, for insisting she have breakfast. She hadn't wanted any, could manage without, and by then she'd known that she was already running late. Too much time standing in front of her mirror, still only half dressed, wondering what to wear. Trying out this and then that: trousers, no a skirt; a shirt, a pullover. Wanting her clothes to make the statement 'This is me'; wondering what that was.

Not having to wear school uniform, like at Ham, should have made the choice easier. Instead, the freedom simply made it much worse: all those different versions of herself from which she could choose from. Which did she want to be? The new school still had rules, though: skirts of a modest length, no shoestring-tops or bare midriffs. Not that she'd been tempted: too cold by far, and with her figure – or what she thought as a lack of it – neither did her any favours. And in any case her mother would have shot her one of those looks, the unspoken and reprimand: "No daughter of mine –"

At last, she'd gone back to the blue skirt, the cream blouse with which she'd started. With the top two buttons undone she looked alright: a hint of sophistication, yet modest enough. She'd picked up the locket Chris had given her as his parting gift, hesitated before putting it on. Not because it wouldn't count as 'modest' – that word appeared a lot of times in the Year 13 Guidelines it seemed – but because of the weight it carried. A boyfriend, a relationship.

Later, after the breakfast her mother had stipulated she have, then reprimanded her for gobbling – "You'll get indigestion; you don't want to be belching at everyone on your first day" – she'd stood in her room again, touching the locket,

pressing it to her throat, aware of the statement it made. Did she want that? And if not, why? Was she really ready to betray him, discard him, so soon? She fought the notion, yet even so took the locket off, and slipped it into the pocket of her skirt. Better there, she told herself, more private, more personal. Chris was hers, not for public display.

But as she turned to go, she had hesitated again. Something still missing? She snatched up a red scarf, adding a splash of colour.

Back in the kitchen, her mother had been waiting at the door, patient, car-keys dangling from her hand, emphasising a point – don't blame me. By the time they got to the highway, it was clear that she'd miss the train in Waikanae. Her mother made no comment; just swung left into the traffic, and headed for Paraparaumu. Said in full, Sally had no doubt, in her mother's mind – not Paraparam as the locals seemed to call it – for her mother hated contractions, any form of slang.

Even then it had been a close call, made closer she knew by her own indecision. Ducking back to give her mother a kiss: she deserved that. Then running back again to grab her scarf. Making a fool of herself on the train as a result. That was too easily done, she thought: making a fool of herself, the clumsy newcomer barging in. And it wouldn't only be here. There'd be more of the same at school. Girls, teachers, sizing her up, labelling her – friend, foe; straight, weird; scholar, dunce. She, in her turn, trying to fit herself to them.

She raised her eyes, looked around, suddenly defiant. Perhaps she should do the judging instead. Why not? She could start here.

The Maori man by the door who had saved her day, then greeted her with a laughing "Haere mai" as she squeezed on board. He was OK. He saw her gaze now, and gave a small wink of reassurance: don't worry, no harm done. Yes, she liked him.

In the seat to her left, at right angles, a sparky woman, thirty-something. Red hair, cropped close; heavy make-up;

careless clothes, a dissident air. Sally felt a twinge of admiration. Not her strength, she knew, dissidence.

The man opposite her, who had been watching her and made her blush. He was absorbed in a magazine now, holding it half-raised so that he read it through the bottom half of his glasses. Yet he was still watching, she thought. He was in his late fifties, perhaps early sixties; square-faced, solidly built without being overweight. Silvery grey hair, bushy around his ears. A teacher, perhaps; at a co-ed school and in a subject like history or geography, where the kids are interested and don't play up too much, so that you could be friendly and easy-going – so long as you stayed alert.

On the seat at right angles to him, was a younger man, less daunting. He must have boarded at Paraparam, for as she sat down he'd still been arranging himself in his own seat. Now he was hunched against the window, gazing out. There was a book on his lap and she tried to read the title. *Magyar-Angol szótár*. Hungarian-English, she managed to decipher. The other word – dictionary? It could be, for there was something in his face, in the shape of his nose, his jaw, the slightly startled eyes, that seemed to fit. A Hungarian. Another newcomer, she thought with satisfaction; just like her, trying to decipher his new world.

She dropped her eyes back to her book and a sigh escaped her. She smothered it with a yawn. Christ, how she hated biology! Why had she chosen it? Of all the subjects that she might have done – history and economics and Pacific studies, even religion – why did she have to choose this? Though she knew the answer well enough: to please her father. Not that he'd be pleased if she failed.

She turned the pages, her eyes glazing over at the rows of ordered words, the neat diagrams of cells and DNA sequences, energy flows. It all seemed useless now, out of place. Part of a school she'd left, a life that was behind her.

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Idly, Brendan studied the bag that lay on the seat opposite. It was a habit, born of all the years of searching for finds in second-hand shops, of hunting out neglected treasure – a map, an atlas, an explorer’s alidade. Always analysing, working out the provenance.

The bag was brown, leather, with a long shoulder strap; the buckle was tarnished, its surface scuffed and worn. The girl’s name was written on the flap, in purple felt-tip pen: Sally Wainwright. Beneath it the letters: HGC Year XIII. The last two numerals were in black and must have been added later, he deduced, marking the years as she moved up through the school. Her old school, he guessed from the initials: Hamilton or Hastings. She must have come to the area recently, was perhaps on her first day at her new school.

He glanced up at her. Something in her manner seemed to match her name: an air of steadiness and common-sense. He liked that. She was studious as well, for within minutes of finding her seat, she’d got out a textbook, started reading, was absorbed in it still. Biology. A scientist, though to look at her you’d have thought she was the arty type. Not like Jo, the woman who sat in the next seat, and who’d become his friend of sorts – someone, at least, he sometimes chatted with: all bangles and beads and multi-coloured hair. More sophisticated, despite her young years. You could see it in the way she was dressed, the affectation of the red scarf. The blonde hair worn straight and long, in what seemed to be the required fashion of the day. Pretty too, in a lean and unformed way. She had an oval face, hollowed cheeks, that in a year or two men would find attractive, pale skin, blue eyes. But her mouth was small, almost pinched, saved from seeming severe only by a slight extension of the upper lip, a tiny overbite, that gave it a teasing touch, as if she’d had an insight that others did not share and might laugh, or say ‘Oh’ in surprise.

He looked away, aware that he'd been studying her too long. Yet as he did so, he wondered if she'd be a regular now, and if so whether she'd adopt that seat as her own. He rather hoped so, for her presence opposite him in the mornings would be a pleasing addition to the day.

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Tamás leaned against the window, watching the landscape unfold. It was almost familiar now. Life had a pattern.

When they'd parted at the station in Budapest, Katya had held him tight, her head against his shoulder, arms locked around his waist. Her dark hair had smelled of something musky and sensuous, some Roma oil she'd used to moisten it, or some unguent when she'd bathed, or perhaps just the scent of their bodies from making love in the early hours as they'd lain awake, waiting for the day to come.

"I love you," she'd said.

"I love you," he replied.

When the whistle blew, she'd released him reluctantly, as if fearing she'd never see him again. He'd picked up his bags, pushed them on board, stepped onto the train. As the doors closed, she'd stood, staring at him, her eyes wide with misery. "Stay safe," she said, though he only saw the shape of the words, did not hear them. Then the train jolted, and she slid out of sight.

In the first few weeks that followed, that picture of her had haunted him. She seemed so far away, as if lost in some other world. His own, brash and alien, jeered at him every day, confronted him with new surprises, new fears. The work was hard – such a change from the laboratory work he'd been used to with Démász. It sapped his strength. The constant barrage of a new language, the loneliness of evenings in a small bed-sit in Wellington, had done the same to his spirit. The daily mistakes – words misunderstood, money wrongly counted, traffic

coming at him from the wrong side – had made his presence here seem foolish, the whole endeavour a dreadful mistake.

Now, though, things had started to improve. He could already feel the change in himself. Tiredness and tensions draining, a routine taking hold. Familiarity emerging from the confusion, a sense of belonging taking shape.

His encounter with Laszlo and Ferenc in the supermarket had been the turning point. He'd called in on his way home from work and saw them peering at labels on the rows of tins. He recognised them immediately, not by name, but nationality: Hungarian like himself. He saw it in the shape of their shoulders, their leather jackets, dark jeans, by the very act they were engaged in, matching his own.

He went up to them, greeted them in Hungarian: “Szia! Hogy va?”

They'd turned in surprise. “Maga Magyar?
“Természetesen!”

Within minutes they had sealed their friendship. Hands were shaken, names exchanged, origins compared, family connections checked out. Five minutes later, they asked him to join them at home – not to visit or a meal, they explained, as he hesitated, wondering what they meant, but to live. They told him about their house. They lived out at Paraparaumu. There were two others, they said, Marek and Martina. He'd like Martina – everyone did. It was a little Hungarian exclave, where life was good. They had a spare room, the rent was cheap. What more could he want?

What more, indeed. He'd shaken hands again to seal the arrangement. The next weekend he'd moved in.

He allowed himself an inward smile. He had a job, a place to live, friends. Money coming in. He was making progress.

He picked up his dictionary: just the language to master, now.

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As the train slowed, rattled its way across the points, Sally looked again at the map on her mobile, trying to memorise the route from the station to school. She'd checked it at home half a dozen times already, but still did not trust herself. She had no sense of direction, Chris would grumble at her when she went out walking; she couldn't find way out of a paper bag. True enough, she thought. Thank goodness for Google.

Around her, people were getting to their feet, moving to the door. She snapped the phone shut. Hastily, she pulled on her coat, buttoned it up, tucked her scarf into her collar. Then the doors hissed open and she drew in her breath. Time to go. Yet still she sat, imagining what lay ahead, daunted by the prospect. The man opposite folded his paper, stood up. She indicated with her hand for him to proceed and he nodded his thanks.

She followed him onto the platform, across the foyer, into the square. There, for a moment, she paused in the crisp sunshine, looked around. The man ahead of her walked on. But beside her, the statue of Gandhi stood poised, as if caught by the scene. She gazed up at it, and as she did so felt something like confidence return. It seemed to promise some other future; a bright undiscovered world.

Farida: afternoon, Dunedin

"Miss Jadoon," the man says. "Farida Jadoon. Correct?"

"Yes."

"Age twenty. Born in Lahore. Moved to New Zealand at the age of three with her family. Father was a laboratory technician – optics. He works for Specsavers now. Yes?"

"Yes," she says again, thinking – is there anything he doesn't know?

"A brother. Two years older than you. Married, lives in Auckland. But you're unmarried. Studying modern languages.

A good student, I'm told. Though retaking a year. A bit of trouble with exams, it seems."

"Yes." Is that the only word she will need?

"Anything in particular?"

"Personal things," she mutters.

He looks at her, says nothing. Does he know about Hasim?

"I had problems at home," she says. "It can be difficult being a Muslim here – you know, fitting in. My parents felt I was losing my faith."

"Were you?"

"I – I suppose so." She indicates her clothes. She's dressed smartly, discreetly: in black trousers, a white blouse; she wears a patterned hijab. The effect, she knows, is clear. It's western fashion, not the clothes her parents would want her to wear.

"You can see, can't you?"

He studies her, his eyes intent – the first sign of interest he's shown. She has to fight not to look down. He nods. Perhaps it's a small victory.

There are three people across the table from her. A woman and two men. In the panic of those first moments of the interview, she missed the men's names. The one who is doing all the questioning, though, is clearly the senior and the one who matters. The station head or something similar, she thinks was the way he was described. He's tall, fleshless, with a high sloping forehead, a strong jaw. A man whom nature seems to have shaped for his role: intelligence. To his left is a younger man, in his thirties, with ginger hair that lies lank on his head. He has nervous eyes, fingers that fidget. He's said little. The woman is called Mrs Grayling – it was the only name that Farida had caught. She must be in her forties, fifty at the most. She has greying hair, a kindly face. Now and then she gives Farida a small, encouraging smile: don't worry, you're doing alright.

She needs that assurance, for she still feels tense and overawed. And she needs the job. Since the break-up with Hasim,

life has run away from her, left her clinging to its tail. This is her opportunity to catch up. To get enough money to repay her parents, resit the year, finish her degree. She's been lucky, she knows, to get that chance.

When they separated, it almost destroyed her. She felt exactly that – destroyed. A woman left broken by her passion. The one man she loved, could love, lost; herself, worthless to any other man, even if she should find one, and that was beyond imagination.

For a year afterwards, she'd merely existed, no more. Somehow, she completed the mechanics of living. She ate, slept just enough to survive; purely from habit, got up, dressed, went to lectures, did what she was told. Even so, it had cost her. She had failed her exams, been advised to repeat; had been allowed to do so only because, earlier, she'd managed to label herself as a promising student, with good language skills. Perhaps, too, because the year tutor, Dr Schumacher, seemed to have a soft spot for her and had pleaded on her behalf.

But another year studying meant another year of living off her parents, and they could not afford that. So part of the deal had been that she would find a job to get her through. Something that would cover her fees, pay for somewhere to live, feed her. Dr Schumacher had come to her aid again. She had contacts in a translation service, she said, a government thing, a crown entity, linked in some way to the intelligence service. They recruited occasionally. She'd put in a word for her.

It must have worked, for a few weeks later, Farida had been invited to what was called an induction session. It took place in a small building on the edge of campus – in that ambiguous zone that is neither town nor gown. Firth House, almost anonymous, except for a small sign in dulled brass beside the door. There, in an airless basement room, she had joined another dozen or so potential recruits: people she did not know, yet whom she felt she might have recognised; clones in

some way of herself. They were briefed by a woman who introduced herself as Mrs Skelton, head of recruitment. The Translation Support Service, she told them, was part of a chain; one that linked the intelligence gathering services – the GCSB – with the intelligence users – the NZSIS and police. Their role was to help translate the flow of information that was gathered, convert it into an English that captured not just the words but the essence, the real meaning, of what was originally said.

Language, Mrs Skelton told them, was vital, for these days crime was international, and though automatic translation systems had come a long way they still couldn't match humans. And the best translators of all were people like themselves: young, bi-lingual immigrants, who come from native-speaking families, but had been schooled in English.

That revelation had startled Farida, and made her look around: that's why that sense of mutual recognition, of shared purpose. That's why they were all there.

Later, to drive home the point of how important it all was, they'd been shown a series of videos. A film tracing the steps involved in identifying, tracking, cornering a cybercrime gang. Another of a raid on a child-sex ring. Footage of drug mules caught in a sting operation – sad, confused faces, women in tears; men, their private parts pixelated to protect their modesty, stripped ready for internal searches. Most shocking of all, amateur video of the 7th July bomb attack in London, on an underground train. Filmed by a Japanese tourist on a shaky mobile phone. Five minutes of what was meant to be an everyday journey: commuters sitting passively on their way to work, looking out of the window; men joking; a woman with a child in a buggy. Leading up to what hindsight said was inevitable, yet which Farida begged in her mind not to happen. Not again.

Now, the chairman says: "You speak Urdu, I assume."

She nods. "Of course."

"You're fluent?"

“Yes. We speak it at home. I still read it a lot.”

“The Qur’an?”

“Sometimes. But poetry mainly. I like poetry, especially Islamic poets.”

“Dikhaai diye yun ke bekhud kiya, Hamen aap se bhi juda kar chale,” he intones, his pronunciation ugly yet understandable.

“Mir Tariq Mir,” she says.

“Translation?”

“She appeared in such a way that I lost myself, and went by taking away my self with her,” she says, blushing. “But I prefer more modern poets. Nashi Gilani, Samina Raja. Women writers.”

He gives no reaction. Either he does not share her taste, or has passed the meagre limits of his knowledge – or whatever briefings he’d had for the interview.

The interrogation goes on for another ten or fifteen minutes. Perhaps the panel has already made up its mind, for the questions become less challenging, are offered almost as a matter of form. Testing what she knows about politics in New Zealand, checking at the same time that she’s not active in any untoward way. Delving into her personal life. Boy-friend? Yes – though not serious. A Muslim? Yes, but not of an extreme kind. Other friends? A few, mainly on her course. Living alone? Yes – in a small bedsit; she prefers it like that. Questions actually, she feels, to which they already know the answer. But which need ticking off.

At the end, they offer no decision, just tell her they’ll be in touch in due course. But as Mrs Grayling shows her out, she says: “Well done, Farida. You did well I think.”

She walks back across campus, goes into the Muslim Centre, looks for Tariq. He’s not yet there, so she finds a seat in the quiet room, slips on her ipod, settles back in the chair. Music fills her head. A laconic guitar, the squeak of fingers on the frets, then a thin, girlish voice. Yuna. Pop-music, not always

her choice, but Yuna is different – someone like her. A Muslim, yet storming the charts, wowing kids on the Bronx, the smart set in LA or wherever. Farida feels obliged to lend her support.

Not really like her, though. For what she told the interview panel was more-or-less the truth. She's no longer a true Muslim. Not since Hasim.

She's not a complete apostate. She still believes, of course. It's impossible not to, after all the teaching, the conditioning, the threats. But it's on her own terms. She prays when she thinks about it, when her conscience pricks. She says the words, means them. She tries to think pious thoughts. It's just the ritual she struggles with, the hierarchies and rules. For women especially.

In Pakistan, she can believe, God wants all that. Here in New Zealand, he's surely satisfied with something less.

She thinks of Tariq. Will knowing him make her change? Lead her back? It would be nice to think so, to see him as a bridge. Back to her faith, to the woman her parents want her to be.

Tariq would like that too. Her wildness worries him.

She's been lucky to find him, she thinks. She's been honest with him; he knows the woman she is, has been. Yet he's generous enough to forgive. Modern enough to believe that his god will too. Brave enough to take the risk.

Not that even he knows everything. She's told him about Hasim, that they were lovers. But she has spared him the detail. The passion, the intensity of it all.

The next track starts. "Who is this stranger...? Could be danger-ous..."

Chapter Two

Friday, May 24th

Brendan stood by the window, looking out, waiting for André. There'd be no more customers now. It had been quiet all day. Before lunch, he'd told Gilly that she might as well go home, that even he could manage an empty shop. If André hadn't been coming, he'd have closed up an hour ago.

When Gilly had left, he busied himself tidying up, browsing through brochures for upcoming sales, checking the week's takings. Then, as daylight began to fade, he turned on the lights, went across to the globe. It was his favourite piece – a nineteenth century floor globe by Johnston and Co from Edinburgh. He'd found it on one of his trips when he'd accompanied Lynn to a concert in Gisborne. It dated from about 1880, had a mahogany horizon-ring, and an especially fine cartouche showing a red Scottish lion holding a shield and thistle. He'd valued it, for the sake of form, at seventy-five thousand dollars, though there was no price tag to see: not really for sale.

Slowly, he walked his fingers across it, making it rotate, watched as the faded empires and countries came and went. China, Russia, the emptiness of Africa, the expanse of British pink. At its western edge, Ireland.

There he stopped. Back at the start.

They'd met – he and Lynn- as they must have been destined to, given the people they were: in O'Hannery's Bar. He'd returned home, to County Clare, to Lisdoonvarna, after five years away, supposedly making his fortune, finding a wife.

In search of the letter, he'd started in Dublin, the fair city,

where the girls were supposedly pretty, and for a while the song seemed true enough. But then other friendships intruded. He was living with two men, Donegalers, wild and red-blooded. One evening, after too much whiskey, too much rhetoric and debate, the arguments had got out of hand.

Roddy lived in a ramshackle crofter's cottage on the edge of the hills near Drumkeen, a dozen or so miles from the border. They'd not seen each other for ten years, and on that first evening they lounged around in the house, drinking, reminiscing. At school, Roddy had been the anti-establishment radical, finding conspiracy in everything the teachers or prefects did, always ready for the fight. He'd matured, Brendan realised, into something far more dangerous: a man not just with opinions, but the anger to match. While Brendan lamented what was happening across the border, the hatred and death, the latest atrocities, and welcomed the slow progress towards some sort of settlement, Roddy seemed to see everything in reverse. A few deaths were the least of it, he claimed; what mattered was the nationalist cause, settling history's debt – and any agreement with the British would be a betrayal of that.

For a while, they came close to arguing. They were saved from it only by the mellowing effects of the whiskey, and by Brendan's firm buttoning of his lip. Yet when Brendan got to his feet, unsteadily, ready to escape to his bed, Roddy suddenly laughed, grabbed his arm and steered him to a door on the opposite side of the room. Beyond was a small byre or fuel-store, dark save for pale flecks of moonlight that filtered through between the slatted walls. In the centre of the room, Roddy knelt, pulled at the

, and for want of confidence or determination achieving

neither. Another prodigal son. He wasn't the only one in town, for most of the failed returned; only the successful stayed overseas.

Like the others, he'd been welcomed home, and his failures forgiven. The job he'd spurned five years ago – working in the family antiques business – was still open, his father said. And as for a wife, there was always the annual Lisdoonvarna Matchmaking.

Gratefully, Brendan took the job, and one evening in August joined the crowds of other eager young men from the region, and hesitant, middle-aged bachelors and widowers from the hill farms, all determined to take whatever chances they might have. His came early, and unexpectedly. Almost the first girl he approached. A Dubliner he guessed from the sophistication of her clothes, a nurse she told him when they started talking. Her voice and her manner were rueful, demure; she looked up at him from lowered eyes.

She'd been there all week, she said later, as they lay in the meadow together, where he'd led her, cocooned by fescue and foxtail, their bodies scented with the musk of bedstraw and thyme. "Why weren't you here then?"

She was leaving the next day, she told him. Back to the city, back to work.

"The we've no time to waste," he said, and pulled her towards him again.

When at last she drew herself away, he asked: "Can I see you again? I want to."

But she just laughed, leaned back, buttoned up her dress. "That's the trouble with this matchmaking thing," she said. "You all take it too seriously. You expect it to be the real thing."

Later, as he pushed his way down the main street, heading home, he thought he saw her again in the shadows of a doorway, the arms of another man.

Work absorbed him. His father had been wise and made room for Brendan not in the shop but as a roving buyer. It gave

Brendan the excuses he needed: to travel as much as he liked, to find himself again, wipe the slate clean, and one never knew – perhaps even yet to find himself a wife. He quickly found that he enjoyed it. Not just the travelling, but working with his father, and afterwards going back to somewhere that felt like home of an evening. He enjoyed, too, rediscovering his own Irishness, the warm spirit of the place that he seemed not to have tasted for years. And where better to do that than O'Hannery's bar, down the road in Doolin?

He was there that night. It was a Saturday, and he'd taken his bodhrán. It had travelled with him when he was in England, a symbol of where he came from. But English pubs weren't like those at home: music had to be planned, booked, paid for; it wasn't simply made by whoever turned up. The bodhrán had remained unplayed. Now he was back, his neglected talent was in demand again. Niall, the regular drummer was getting old, could not always manage the long walk from his croft on the edge of the Burren – and every band needed a drummer. Brendan was asked to step in.

Slowly, the rhythms were returning. His instinct for the music came back. He found that he was playing in the same way the others did, not with his mind but his heart, so that the tunes simply flowed from him. And as they did so, he had the time to exchange glances and quips with his fellow players, sip at his beer, look for a pretty face amongst the audience; sometimes to win a smile in return.

But that evening it wasn't a face that caught his attention. But a voice. How long she'd been there, he didn't know. He simply became aware that there was of another tone, a meandering trail of notes that flowered and shrank against the sound of the instruments, the background chatter, the sigh of the beer-pumps. Like footprints in snow. When he turned to trace its source, he saw her sitting alone by the window, a half-glass of Guinness on the table in front of her. She wore a red bob-hat over curly brown hair, a loose Aran sweater, jeans. Her

face was hidden, for she was twisted away. But her voice was high-pitched, lilting, and rather soft. Her singing seemed to be a personal thing – not for the public, but an unintended reaction to the music, something that just happened.

He listened as he played, stealing glances at her when he could. Quite what drew his eyes to her, he couldn't have said. Interest more than attraction, for he could not judge her physically, beyond the fact that she was small, sat hunched. She might have been a child or middle-aged, pretty or plain. But her voice was a lure, and he wanted to fix it to a face.

Others soon noticed, and turned. One by one they shuffled aside, or stepped back slightly, as if to give her singing more space. Finn, the fiddler, had noticed too, and with a quick nod, a slight change of tempo, called an end to the piece. He went across, said, "You've a pretty voice, young miss. What's your name?"

"Lynn," she said, her accent light, not Irish.

"Would you be joining us, now?" Finn asked.

"If you like."

Finn arranged a place for her between himself and Brendan, then enquired: "What do you sing?"

"What do you play?"

Finn laughed and named a tune: *Cliffs of Doneen*.

"That's fine," she said.

They played, and she sang, and her voice made a pattern somewhere beyond the music, between the beat of the drum. And she sang many more times afterwards, long into the night.

* * * * *

Sally felt relaxed. Three weeks gone now and school was becoming routine. She'd settled into its rhythms, learned its foibles, worked out what was expected of her, what was not, where she could sail along on what she already knew, what required extra effort. She'd made friends. Lucy was the best of

them.

Lucy had adopted her on the first day, almost as if she'd been expected. There'd been no preamble, no sparring, just the clunk of a chair being set down beside her before the start of second class, then Lucy's voice: "Hey new girl. So what heinous crime have you been sent to this hell-hole for?" Sally had liked her immediately.

There was nothing predatory in Lucy's attention. As Sally soon discovered, she was simply gregarious and lapped up friends. Nor was it some instinct of common vibes – in fact just the opposite. Lucy was everything that Sally knew she was not. Extrovert, coarse-grained, uncomplicated. Quick-witted and street-wise. . Physically, too, they were poles apart. Lucy was no taller than her, though a little heavier, solidly built as if made to last. She had a strong jaw, square face, a flat-footed walk. She'd take nonsense from no-one, girls or teachers alike, yet was generosity itself.

From that first meeting, she had made it her business to induct Sally into the ways of the school. She told her the unwritten social rules, pointed out the girls to trust, the ones to avoid, the ones with boys not to touch nor even eye too openly. She warned her about the teachers and their ways. She drew her, without any chance of refusal, into her group of friends. Lauren and Shelley and Jess, who were all doing biology and psychology with them, Francesca – or Frankie as they all called her against her will – who was studying languages, and had silken, Italian looks. Half a dozen others from other courses, one or two from the year below. When they could, they'd sit together in class, go for a coffee together in break, walk through the streets together, a loose and ever shifting gang, on the way home.

When they were alone, Lucy would quiz her about her life: where she was from, why she'd come to Wellington, what her parents were like, did she have sisters or brothers, a boyfriend? "Sort of," Sally had said in response to the last of these

questions, then corrected herself. “Yes, back in Hamilton.”

“Not much use there, though,” Lucy had observed. “Sex by Skype isn’t really much fun. We’ll just have to get you fixed up with someone here.”

Sally had laughed, dismissing the notion, but that evening, as if tainted in some way by the suggestion, she had phoned Chris, spent a long time talking to him, telling him how much she missed him, how much she thought of him, and how she hoped that soon he’d be able to come down for a weekend. How she wore her locket every day.

Now, the last lesson over, they were all packing up. Sally slid her books back into her bag, slipped her pen into the pencil-case, zipped it up, stood ready to leave.

“You are coming, aren’t you?”

Sally looked across at Lucy. “Coming where?”

“Out on the town. It’s Friday. We always go.”

“No. I didn’t know.”

“Fuck. Didn’t they tell you? I told Frankie to let you know.” She shook her head in exaggerated annoyance. “But you will come?”

“I can’t. I haven’t told my mum.”

“Ring her.”

“And I’ve nothing to wear.”

“You’ll be fine as you are.”

Sally looked down at her school clothes, gave a Cinderella-like sigh. “I can’t go like this!”

“No – I suppose not. But I’ll lend you something, if you don’t mind wearing my rags. And you can grab some food at my place.”

While Lucy waited, Sally called home. They exchanged glances, embarrassment and despair on one side, amusement on the other, as negotiations were engaged. “Please, mum, it’s a chance to meet new friends . . . It’s just a group of us from school going out for a bit of dancing . . . I’ll be home soon after midnight . . . No, I promise I won’t drink . . . Of course I’ll be

good . . . I'll call you from the train." Finally: "Thanks Mum. Love you."

As she put away her phone, Lucy gave a round of mock applause. "You're good at this. You should be at the UN. You'd have the whole Middle East signed up to a peace treaty and tiddlywinks tournament in no time."

* * * * *

Brendan opened his arms wide, and they greeted each other with an embrace, then stood back, assessing.

"Good to see you," André said. His voice was flat, the words clipped as if vowels were costly. André was approaching eighty, Afrikaans, and though he'd left South Africa half a century before, his accent still betrayed the fact. He was also one of the gentlest people Brendan knew. He had been a friend of Lynn's family, and had known her long before she and Brendan met.

André had made his money in wine. He lived in Napier and until recently had travelled widely, but as he'd got older his trips had become less frequent: knees, unlike wine, he complained, don't improve with age. Even so, whenever he was in Wellington he made a point of calling in. They'd exchanged passions when they first met – maps for wine – and he always brought with him a small selection of fine pinotage or merlot, as ready trade. Today, it was three bottles of Kanonkop from vines half a century old. He deposited the gift on the counter, in a crumpled plastic bag. They tasted a glass while André looked round the shop, choosing his side of the deal. He settled on a sketch-map that Brendan had placed on one of the display tables, where he knew André would find it.

"Good choice," Brendan said. "The Waikato estuary, attributed to a group of Maoris, who supposedly drew it for Connell-Smith, one of the early European explorers. They're rare."

"I can believe it," he said. "Yes, it's good. Too good

perhaps?” He meant, compared to the wine.

“It’s yours.”

André laughed. “I’ve told you before: not good salesmanship.” He peered at the map. “Anyway, I can’t believe that it was really done by a Maori hand. More likely some subaltern with the surveying team, with names added to represent what some poor family of locals told him: What’s that place... and that? That’s a rock. That’s another rock. That’s where we shit when the wind’s from the west.” He laughed, suddenly yielding. “On which basis I can’t refuse, can I? Though that means I pay for dinner.”

They toasted their exchange. The wine was dark, mysterious, and worth the trade.

Afterwards, Brendan led him to the restaurant. They went where they always went, to the wine bar in Boulcott Street. While they waited to be served, they talked about the shop. André had been instrumental in Brendan setting it up some twenty-five years ago and had a stake in its fortunes.

Four years after they were married, and still living in Ireland, Lynn’s father telephoned from Wellington. Her mother had been taken into hospital, he said. Though her father had tried to play the incident down, the midnight call, the tone of his voice, made it clear that he was worried, that he couldn’t cope. Lynn decided immediately. She needed to go to back. “We’ll both go,” Brendan had insisted. “It’s time I met them. And probably time they saw how foolish their daughter’s been.”

By the time they arrived in New Zealand the emergency was over. Her mother was home again, recovering; her father was safe. But Lynn was a late child, her parents were in their seventies, and since Lynn had left they seemed to have aged more than years alone merited.

That evening, Brendan and Lynn discussed what to do. “They need me here, don’t they?” Lynn had said.

“Then we should stay,” Brendan had told her.

logic was clear and neither could deny it: they ought to be here, they ought to stay. Yet each balked from the decision not for their sake but for the other's.

“What about your singing?” Brendan asked.

“You can't leave your father,” Lynn said.

A few days after their arrival, André had appeared. He greeted her with a bear-like hug, then held her at arms length, gazed at her affectionately – the look of a lifelong friend. At last, judging her happy, well, after all her years away, he'd hugged her again. “Beautiful as ever,” he'd said.

When she escaped, she'd introduced him to Brendan. They shook hands. “You're a lucky man,” André had told him. “I hope you know that.”

Brendan had assured him that he did, and they'd eyed each other for a moment, assessing also. Both had seemed satisfied.

Then André asked him about his work. What had he done in Ireland, what would he do here? How would he keep Lynn in the style and comfort she deserved?

Brendan had thought of her simple desires, her basic needs, and hid his smile. “I'm not yet sure,” he admitted.

André had scowled: not the right response his face said. Later in the evening he had gone off to a huddle in the kitchen with Lynn's parents. Brendan imagined them discussing how to save their poor daughter from her husband's obvious inadequacies, even unmarry her if they could.

Then the door had opened, and André had returned. “Problem solved,” he'd said. “Lynn's parents have been sitting on a property in Wellington for years, wanting to sell and never

getting round to it. It's yours, to set up an antique shop. And I'll loan you some cash to get you started if it would help."

Brendan tried to argue against it, but his efforts were soon crushed with a question: could he think of anything better? In truth he couldn't. He accepted gratefully. Not just for his sake and theirs, but for his father too. He'd be keeping up the family tradition; he owed him that.

Though not antiques, he'd decided. Something more specialist: antique maps. It had always been his own passion, and had a fitness, for journeying and exploration had brought them to this point.

Now, sipping from his glass of still-water, cautiously as though it was some strange tonic he'd never tasted before, André regarded Brendan. "How's business?" he asked at last.

"Alright."

"Not great though, is it. Most of the stuff there hasn't moved since I was here last. I recognised it."

"Antiques never sell fast," Brendan said. "If they did, I must have the price wrong."

"I seem to remember using that argument myself to the bankruptcy court," André said, drily. "It didn't wash." Again he was silent, his eyes steady. Then: "You should sell up. You know that. It's time. You've nothing but yourself stopping you." He grinned. "You've been trading in maps for years. Isn't it time you used some?"

Brendan looked down, in the pretence of considering the idea, though his answer was already prepared. The money had been her parents'; the shop in a way was Lynn's. He couldn't sell.

"My world's here, now," he said.

The food came, and the wine. When they'd been served, André offered a toast, holding up his glass. "To life," he said. "And to all the journeys it takes us on." Their glasses clinked.

The food was good, the wine not to the standard of what André supplied, perhaps, but a fitting accompaniment. It

softened their thoughts, loosened their tongues, slurred their speech a little. For a while, Brendan asked him about his wife, Isolda. She was new, his fourth, and Brendan hadn't met her yet. From the pattern of the past, he suspected that André might already be regretting the arrangement. He never seemed truly happy with his wives until they'd left him. Instead, André talked about her with fondness, although obliquely, as though he missed her presence yet could not quite bring himself to admit it.

After a while, they became maudlin, retreated into reminiscences.

They talked about Lynn. André told him about her childhood days, long before Brendan had known her. Brendan had heard the stories before, but was content to relive them. He replied with memories of his own. That first evening, when they met, the days that followed.

Later, they talked about school. André's in a small Presbyterian community in the Free State, Brendan's Galway Catholic. They might have been poles apart, but the experiences of each seemed familiar to the other. The oppressive regime, learning by diktat. Forced religion driving out any spiritualism they might have had – a process, Brendan reflected, that had taken far longer than necessary, leaving him with lingering echoes of belief and doubt. The consequence for them both had been stilted views about sex, which they'd later resolved in different ways: André by urgent experimentation, Brendan hesitantly, and with a heavy baggage of guilt.

Presbyterianism makes revolutionaries, they agreed; Catholicism just bred shame.

* * * * *

Sally stood by the bar, taking time out. All evening, she'd kept to her word and drunk nothing but coke or Lemon and Paeroa. Now though, she had a bottle of Smirnoff ice in her hand. It

tasted good.

She was watching Brett. Was he good looking? Did she like him? She wasn't sure. But he was interesting without doubt.

Earlier, as they'd walked to the club, he'd materialised beside her, introduced himself. "Hi, I'm Brett."

"I know," she'd said. "Lucy told me."

"And you're Sally, right?"

He was silent for a moment, his long loping strides slowed to match her pace. She was aware of his eyes on her, kept her own trained ahead.

"I like the dress. It suits you."

"Thanks." A flush of satisfaction, and she'd glanced down. He was right. With some help from Lucy's mother – a tuck here, a pin there – it fitted her well; the waist pulled in, the bodice low cut and tight enough to give her shape.

"It's Lucy's," she said. "She lent it to me."

"Yeah. I thought I recognised it." He grinned, then leaned towards her, spoke quietly, as if sharing a secret: "Bit chilly though, I guess."

He was right about that, too. She was freezing. She wished she could have brought her coat, but fashion trumped comfort any day, especially on an evening like this.

He swept her with another look. "You've got goose-bumps," he said, and strode on ahead.

Now, he was dancing with Frankie. The music was slow, and they were locked together in an embrace. Their faces were squashed against each other as they kissed. It looked both absurd and erotic. Sally felt envious.

Why had Chris never kissed her like that, she wondered, or she him? What would that feel like?

She tried to imagine, tried to think of herself there in Frankie's shoes, failed. She put the bottle to her lips, savoured the sharpness of alcohol in her throat.

* * * * *

Walking from the station, Brendan counted the steps. It was an old habit learned in Ireland, on dark country lanes: measuring his way home. It was a habit, too, made for introspection. Each step leading his mind back.

Back to the past. To Doolin. O'Hannery's. That first night with Lynn.

Fresh in his mind, now, from talking with André, it no longer felt like half a lifetime ago. It was as though he might almost touch it.

When they'd at last finished playing, sometime after midnight, when they had congratulated their unexpected vocalist and patted her on the shoulder and shaken her hand, when Finn as the self-appointed leader of the group had held her a little longer and kissed her on the cheek, they all went outside. It was a cold night. Wind blustered off the Atlantic, sharp with rain and beach-grit, the hint of snow. Brendan had huddled his coat around him as he stood there, a step away from the others, while they said their goodbyes.

He waited for his turn, waited also out of caution. Finn, if he took a mind to it, might try and press his case too far. It had happened before. And something in this girl made it seem possible tonight.

Instead, Finn shook her hand and said: "Forgive me. I have to go, it's a long walk home. Brendan here has a car and will take you to wherever you're staying. Isn't that so?"

"It is," he said, then asked her: "Where's that?"

She'd laughed, nodded towards an old yellow van parked on the patch of grass across the road. "I sleep in that. I live in it at the moment."

As she spoke there was another brief catch of wind, and she'd shivered.

"You can have my spare bedroom, if you like," he said. "It might be warmer."

She looked at him doubtfully, then away towards the van. The wind gusted again. "That would be lovely," she said. "And a

shower too?”

“That can be arranged.”

At home, he'd sat with a glass of whisky, listening to the sound of the water as she showered, imagining her. The picture in his mind was vague. He'd still not managed to absorb her looks. Only the tangle of chocolate hair, the red bob-hat that she'd kept on all the time she sang, and the smallness of her, a head-height shorter than him. Her face, her figure, remained shadows, undefined.

When she reappeared, she was dressed in a simple grey, loose-fitting smock, her legs and feet bare, her hair hanging long. She looked childlike yet ageless, eluding him still. To stop himself staring, he poured her a drink. She accepted it with a smile, sank into the sofa, curled her legs beneath her. She looked as if she belonged.

For a while they sat silent, perhaps neither knowing what to say. Then, he asked her where she was from, and she told him: New Zealand. But her ancestors were Irish, she said, it was in her name – Sullivan. Her grandparents had emigrated from Cavan back in the 1920s. She'd come here to trace them, to find her roots.

She was enthusiastic about what she'd found. She'd seen the cottage her grandfather had been born in, where he and her grandmother had lived; the patch of greener grass that they'd cleared and drained from the bog. She'd touched the stone walls they'd built from the surfeit of boulders and scree. “I felt that I was touching them,” she said. “They seemed so close, so real, as if the land had grown out of them, as if they were part of it – you know, like it was a map of their lives.” She'd laughed, suddenly abashed by her own sense of wonder. Then she was marvelling again, telling him how she'd been to the churchyard and found the graves of her great grandparents, and those for two generations before. Now she was exploring the rest of the country, and learning folk songs as she went. She liked singing – though perhaps he'd guessed – and wanted to

sing professionally one day. That would never happen of course. But she'd take the songs home.

They talked until she slept. Sometime after two o'clock she'd fallen silent, and her head had slumped. He'd watched for a while, feeling strangely at peace. Then reluctantly he got up, roused her, guided her to her room, wished her goodnight. He went downstairs again, and busied himself, giving her time to settle. When he went to his own room, she was there, curled in his bed, eyes closed. He stood, observing her, wondering what to make of it: whether it had been a mistake – she'd returned to the wrong room – or by choice; was an invitation. As he hesitated, she opened an eye, grinned, sealing the matter. He undressed, slid in beside her, slipped an arm across her chest. She gave a small, contented groan.

He lay like that, hand loose upon her, nose nuzzled into her hair, for an hour or more, thinking her asleep again. But then she had turned, and kissed him and drew him into her without a word, and they made love in a lazy, drowsy way, so that if it had been the only time he might have believed that it had never happened, and would have thought it a dream. Yet in the morning she was still there and she stayed, and then the next day and the next, and there were other times. And during those first days and nights together, he discovered the woman he'd found.

Those discoveries filled him with a wonder of his own. She wasn't beautiful in any conventional sense, for her features were small, almost pinched. But her eyes were large and teasing, her unruly hair made her seem wild, and her sudden movements – a quick touch of her hand, a turn of her head, a mocking smile – gave her an impishness that matched her inner self. And in her quieter moments she would be pliant and still. She fitted against him when he held her; she melted into him when they made love. When she stood before him naked, her body seemed perfectly made. His eyes would slip from shoulder to breast to belly and ginger bush, down the curve of

hip and buttock, thigh and calf; and when she moved around the room would follow her like a loyal dog.

It was no wonder that he learned to think of her as some figment from his Irish history, from the stories of his childhood. An elf, a selkie, Etain herself. His own Leanan Sidhe. In moments of passion, he called her that.

Three months after they met, she was there still, and he asked her to marry him. She had regarded him gravely, and he'd felt his heart go to his throat: was she going to refuse? But then she nodded and said: "Yes. That would be better, wouldn't it?" Only later, when the wave of joy and relief had passed, did he realise the meaning of her words. Better for him, because she recognised that somewhere in his conscience there still lay a residue from the Catholic past he thought he'd shed – a sense of mortal sin. Unmarried, she guessed, he would always fear the deadening of his soul, and that because of it he might lose her. For herself, though, it was unnecessary. She loved him, and that was enough; it would last without the help of paperwork, priests or rings.

She allowed him another concession to that part of his life, and took no precautions in their love-making. In truth, though, there were other motives, for they both wanted children.

He imagined a daughter who would blossom from her, and whom he'd watch as she grew to become a woman in her own right; a son, a variation of himself, who had absorbed her goodness and beauty and passions and things he was not. For Lynn the details didn't matter, either gender, and any number, would do. Let the children come, she had said.

Yet after three years, none had. So they'd hatched a different plan. A European holiday, with the same glorious goal. Britain, France, Italy, Spain. Long days on the train. Meals of bread and cheese and beer, eaten on station platforms. Nights in small pensions or ugly hotels in drab towns. Making love in complaining beds. If babies won't come in Ireland, let's have a French or Basque or Tuscan one.

But still no children came.

Brendan stopped, and his thoughts too slowed to a halt. He had reached his door. Unguided, his steps had taken him there, brought him home, just like all those previous times in Ireland.

He looked up at the house. Is that how it felt, he wondered? Like home? It was a place they'd made together, he and Lynn, had planned. They'd worked with architects, chosen designs and materials, bent and carried and hammered beside the builders; in their years together had shaped around themselves. They'd been happy there. Yet home? Was it now? Could it ever be without her? He wasn't sure.

* * * * *

Tamás dropped his tool-bag on the seat, sat down beside it, leaned back. He was tired, his arms and back ached, his fingers were calloused, but he felt satisfied. It was the tiredness of a good day's work, a good week's. He had a wage-slip in his pocket; he hadn't opened it yet, but he knew it would read well. Four thousand dollars? With all the overtime he'd been doing over the last month, something like that. And next week, another step forward. He'd be in charge of his own team. A reliable and friendly pair, whom he'd worked with on one or two jobs before: Spud, young and enthusiastic and a little bit wild, but with a heart of gold; Larry, in his sixties, quiet, methodical, unteachable simply because there was nothing left for him to learn. He couldn't have chosen better.

The train jolted, shuffled off. The last train of the day. The carriage was almost empty: just himself, the young schoolgirl who sat by the door, a group of youths at the far end. Outside, the world slid by. The train seemed in no hurry, feeling its way through the dark, hesitating at every stop.

He glanced at the girl. She was stretched out on her seat, head back lolling, eyes closed, her cheeks puffing and hollowing with each breath. Such a change from her

appearance in the mornings, when she would sit there, prim and neat, her book open on her lap. Now her book, her coat were gone, her school clothes swapped for a flimsy yellow dress. She'd been drinking, he guessed, partying. Drugs too, he wondered? For she looked dazed, vulnerable.

The guard came along, checking tickets. He stood for a moment, wondering whether to wake her, then looked at Tamás, smiled. He put his hands to his head, making a pillow. "It'll take a bomb to wake that one," he said.

Later, when the train slowed for the next station, the youths moved back through the carriage to the door. As they waited for it to open, one of them pointed at the girl and made a gesture with his middle finger. The others laughed. Tamás stiffened, ready to intervene.

The train stopped and they bundled off, but at the last moment one of them reached down and flicked at her skirt. She didn't stir.

At Paraparaumu, he waited for her to wake. She slept on, cheeks puffing slightly with each breath.

He got to his feet, hesitated. Should he wake her? The doors hissed, and she opened her eyes blearily, looked around.

On the platform, he glanced through the window, checking that she was still awake. She had her mobile phone to her ear.

When he arrived home, the house was dark, all the others in bed. He sat by the fire for a while, warming himself. Once, he poked at the embers and watched as the sparks scurried up the chimney, making their escape.

Then hunger gripped him. He'd not eaten since midday. He went into the kitchen, opened a jar of something from the fridge, butter chicken or rogan josh – he didn't bother to read the label – and heated it in a pan. As he waited for it to cook, he thought of the meals he used to prepare at home. Traditional food, with a touch of his own invention. Túrós csusza made earthily sweet with truffles or ceps; tokány piqued with brandy and a touch of ginger; thin beef steaks marinated in peppered

wine then flash-fried for pecsenye.

While he ate, he thought of Katya. She'd have expected him to call hours ago, would assume by now that he'd forgotten or been too busy. He felt suddenly desperate to speak to her, to hear her voice. He found his phone, dialled.

She answered after a single ring.

"I knew it was you," she said, then scolded him for ringing so late – for making her wait, for still being up past midnight, for working too hard. "That is what you've been doing, isn't it?" she joked. "Not out with the girls having a good time."

"Every night," he said. "I can't keep them away." Then he told her about work, about how much overtime he'd done. As they talked, he opened his wage slip and read out the amount. Three thousand six hundred dollars after tax.

She praised him, told him how good he was, but could not help repeating the caution: "Don't work too hard, Tamás. Don't kill yourself."

For a while, they let themselves imagine their life together again, in New Zealand. It would be summer. Janos would play on the beach. Katya would grow vegetables in the garden. At weekends they'd walk in the hills.

He would start his own business. She would get a job, teaching or as a child-minder perhaps. They'd buy a house.

In the silence, he tried to picture her, and said: "Tell me how you look."

"What do you mean?" she asked.

"Now. Right now. What are wearing? How does your hair look?"

She laughed. "Can't you remember? Have you forgotten me already?"

"Tell me," he insisted.

She did so self-consciously. She was wearing her jeans she said, and the blouse he'd bought her in the market on the bridge, on that last weekend before he left. "It's my favourite." She had her hair pinned up, because she'd just got back from

work. She'd painted her toenails, red. She had a bruise on the little one, the pinkie, because she'd stubbed it on a chair. She thought she'd lose the nail.

"Flowery," she told him, when he asked about her panties, her bra. Then she scolded him for being so personal, and for having lewd thoughts.

"I love you," he said.

"I love you, too."

Afterwards, he went into the bedroom. Katya's photograph was on the dressing table. He picked it up, lay down with the picture close to his face, imagining her there beside him.

Farida: late evening, Dunedin

"Farida, a Muslim woman. Spends her time translating nonsense-messages into English. Represents the futility of the modern world."

Farida laughs. "Something like that perhaps."

She's been working at Firth House for almost three weeks now. Mrs Grayling had called her the day after the interview and told her that she'd been accepted. "Congratulations," she said. "I'm so pleased we got you!" Her pleasure seemed real. "When can you start? How about Monday?"

"If you like," Farida agreed, wondering: what's the rush? Is something important happening?

She still didn't know. It certainly didn't feel like it. When she arrived for the evening, she'd been asked to sign some papers. Official Information Act they said at the top, above pages of tiny print. She browsed them quickly, signed.

Then she had been led down the corridor. At the end was a security gate. She was asked to hand over her phone, her bag was searched. She was waved through a scanner. It beeped sulkily as she passed through. She wondered what happened if she tried to carry something in that it didn't like.

On the other side of the gate, Mrs Grayling was waiting. She shook her hand, welcomed her effusively. “Welcome,” she said. “Come with me. I’ll show you where you’ll work, and explain what you’ll do.”

Mrs Grayling led her along more corridors, down a narrow flight of stairs. It was darker, drabber there. They walked past doors that were labelled with inscrutable numbers: A/312, TC&D, LOR-JC. There seemed to be no logic or sequence.

“This is yours.” Mrs Grayling indicated a door. It was labelled T9. “It’s one of our translation rooms,” she said. “I’m afraid they’re not luxurious.”

She opened the door, switched on a light. The room was windowless, small, painted in a dark cream that shone dully beneath the single strip light. Against the opposite wall was a desk, bearing a computer; beside it, two plastic chairs. Mrs Grayling drew one out, indicated for Farida to sit beside her.

“The computer is set up ready for you,” she said, “with your own password and workspace. Each session, you’ll get some documents to translate. You type in your translations, save the files. After you’ve finished, our IT boys will remove everything and send the files on.” Where they went she didn’t say.

For security reasons, Mrs Grayling continued, the computer wasn’t connected to a server or the web. If Farida needed the internet for any reason, she’d have to use the machines in the library. They were under supervision and fully encrypted. Nothing could be taken or sent out of the building. Did she understand?

She nodded, feeling suddenly small and naive.

Mrs Grayling stayed with her for a while, showed her what to do: how to open files, save them, the protocol for naming the translations. Then she went out, fetched a pile of typescripts and put them on the desk. “Over to you now,” she said. “Good luck.”

The typescripts were short. Emails or text messages Farida suspected. Fragments of no real meaning and no obvious

import. She couldn't imagine what security risk they might pose. As she translated, she remembered what they'd been told at the induction – English that captures the essence and meaning, not just the words. That was difficult, she found, when the original was so cryptic, so incomplete.

Her next shift was the same; the following shift, even worse. Technical messages, full of words she couldn't understand in any language. Capacitors and parallax controllers, pulse width modulators, breakout shields. She spent half the evening in the library trying to track down the words on the web, wondering even then what they were. Components for some dastardly device, she mused? A nuclear bomb or an inter-continental missile? She'd laughed when she reached the final message and discovered what seemed to be the answer: a robotic toy. 'Works like a dream,' the message had said. 'I got it to chase our cat yesterday. Scared it shitless.' Or words, when translated, to that effect.

Now, she is at Sue's house. They met after their shift. Soo Yin is her real name, but everyone anglicises it to Sue. She's Korean, another of the new recruits. She's small, plump, with a strangely warped face: a squint or a frown that makes her look angry. It was a surprise, therefore, when she suddenly giggled as they stood together on the step outside Firth House.

"It amazes me every time," Sue had said. "Doesn't it you?"
"What?"

"That there's a real world out here, with real people. In there, it's like being in a fairy tale. You know – like *Alice in Wonderland*. Characters in someone else's dream."

They'd walked together for a while, laughing at the notion – the dreams that they might inhabit. Farida liked her immediately; she seemed full of wit and wisdom and surprise.

"Why don't you come home?" Sue had asked. Then: "You've not got a boyfriend waiting have you?" Another doubt, another frown: "I'm sorry. You do have one, I assume. They are allowed?"

“Yes,” she said. “I have boyfriend, Tariq.” Allowed or not? She still couldn’t say. Maybe she’d know when she introduced him to her parents. “But he’s playing volleyball tonight. He’ll be away.”

Sue’s house was down near the harbour. A rambling place shared with half a dozen other girls, no two of them from the same country, so they’d made themselves an official-looking sign, and stuck it on the door: United Nations.

For a while, they all sat together in the kitchen and chatted. When the others drifted off to bed, they sat alone, talking cautiously, suddenly unsure what topics to choose, how much to say, where any pitfalls might lurk. They talked about home, about their courses. Sue explained that she was doing an economics and business studies degree. She’d applied for the translation for much the same reason as Farida had. Her parents were farmers; it had taken all their savings to get her to New Zealand; now, she had to pay her own way.

Farida asked about boyfriends.

“There’s someone back at home,” Sue said. “We’ve been going out since school. I see him when I go back. What he does when I’m not there, though, I don’t know. I’m not sure any longer that I care much.”

They talked about the work they did in Firth House – given the forms they’d both signed, what felt like the weight of national survival on their shoulders, the most intimate subject of all. Sue worked on financial stuff, she said. International fraud, money-laundering, that sort of thing.

Farida sighed. “Lucky you!” She told her about the robotic toy, if that’s what it was, then parodied some of the other messages she’d dealt with that evening: chatter about girlfriends, sport, a band she’d never heard of, even how to get rid of zits. “It’s all rubbish,” she said. Provoking Sue’s alternative interpretation – that they’ve been unknowingly recruited as minor characters in some long-neglected piece of theatre of the absurd. “Samuel Beckett,” Sue had suggested,

and when Farida looked blank, surprised her even more by quoting: “Nothing happens. Nobody comes, nobody goes. It's awful.” Then, in explanation: “I studied English literature. We all did in our school. It was meant to make us sophisticated.”

Now she says: “Actually, it's probably all in code. Have you thought of that? It'll be about terrorism for sure.” She grins. “A bomb plot or something. Everyone knows that you Muslims are born terrorists.”

Farida laughs. She ought to be offended, but Sue can say things like that without any insult. She's a clown, dressed up in a fierce mask.

“It'll be a plan to blow up Parliament and declare Bin Laden president,” she adds.

“He's dead.”

“According to the Yanks, maybe – but you can't trust them.”

Later, as she walks home, Farida finds that the conversation has given her something like hope. Sue can lighten any subject – that's one of her skills. But it's more than that. Despite the jokes, it suggests that somewhere in it all there might be a meaning; something real. She needs that; she's uncomfortable feeling that she is being toyed with, teased.

All that religion, again, she reflects, as she waits for a gap in the cars, to cross the road. No room for randomness or trivia; everything must have a purpose.

At home, she stands in the doorway, looking through the cramped area that serves as a kitchen, into the only room. The single bed, still unmade from the morning. Chairs, piled with books, clothes. Just the sort of place where a spy would hang out, she thinks.

She remembers her days with Hasim. Living together in the apartment that he'd been loaned by a relation or friend. Modern kitchen. Plasma TV in the lounge. Drinks cabinet under the counter. King-sized bed. Space to romp in. Space to play.

No need for that these days. When Tariq comes – and it

won't be tonight – he sits in one of the chairs, angled round so that the bed is behind him. Its presence – even a single one – seems to disturb him. She sits in the other chair. They talk. Sometimes they listen to music. Not Yuna, not anything quite as decadent as that, though he tolerates western orchestral things, some of them at least. Beethoven, Brahms, Shostakovich. He thinks Mozart is sinful. Wagner imperialist. Opera of any sort is far beyond the pale.

What will they do with their time together when they're married, she thinks? Will it change? Will he?

When, she asks herself? Or should it be if? Just now, it feels more like that.

But he's kind. So kind. Gentle. If he weren't so considerate, he'd have surely asked to marry her already. It's only that he wants her to finish her degree, become educated, be a modern Muslim woman, if such a thing can exist.

And yes, he is good-looking. His body will be worth the wait, won't it? It will bring her the comfort she needs?

Chapter Three

Tuesday, June 11th

Sally was concentrating hard. Her mother let her drive to the station now, but she was still on trial: one mistake and the privilege would be whipped away. She felt every stiffening of her mother's body, every indrawn breath whenever something came into her line of sight, when there was a chance she might err. It was difficult enough at the best of times. But this morning was a real test. Her conversation with her father had unnerved her, cluttered her mind.

He'd arrived home late the previous evening, had eaten, unpacked; soon after, gone to bed. But by six o'clock he'd be in his study, she knew. She'd got up early, taken him a coffee, placed it on the desk. He'd looked up, smiled.

"How's my favourite daughter, this morning?" he asked.

"In case you don't remember, I'm your only one. Anyway I'm good." She kissed him on the forehead.

A flicker of what might have been anxiety, surprise creased his face. He recovered, indicated a chair. "You look it. You look radiant."

She sat down. The chair was old, worn, stood beside his desk – before his, her grandfather's. It was always a nice thought, and the sense of continuity mattered even more to her now, when her own world was changing so much. She coiled herself into the leather, regarded him gravely.

He looked tired, and she felt a wave of sympathy for him, for the life he led. It couldn't be easy, she knew. Since he'd taken up his new post, his work had been split between three centres: Palmerston North, Napier, New Plymouth. He spent a week or

two in each, long hours in operating theatres, with patients, counselling relatives; in between, fitted in his teaching and research at Massey, work on government commissions, the occasional conference overseas.

“I’m sorry about last night,” he said. “I was tired.”

“You work too hard.”

“Yes. That’s what your mother says. But what about you? Settled in now?”

She regarded him for a moment, scolding him with her eyes for changing the subject. “Yes. It’s fine.”

“I’m sorry we had to drag you off like that. The timing just went all wrong.”

He meant about his job, the house. When it was clear they’d have to move in the middle of her last year at school, they’d considered letting her stay in Hamilton, live with friends. She’d refused: she’d rather live at home. And she’d already got her grades for university; changing schools wouldn’t matter.

He asked her about school – the inevitable father’s question – and she told him about music, about joining the quartet, the practising they were doing for the concert. “I hope you can come,” she said. He promised to try: another fatherly response.

“So, what else? How’s biology going?”

She grimaced. “OK. I like the plants, and the human evolution. But the genetics is hard. All those names and codes. I’ll never be a scientist. Sorry!”

“Your mother’s genes, not mine, do you think?”

“No,” she said. “Both are in there somewhere. But I reckon she got more than her share, don’t you?”

“Your mother’s looks,” he said. “I can see that more clearly every week. You’re just like her.”

She pulled a face, and he laughed. “You should be pleased. I had to queue for her – I was lucky! I bet the boys queue for you.”

“They’re in the wrong street, then,” she said.

He enquired about Chris, choosing his words carefully. Did

she miss him? Perhaps he detected an equivocation in her reply, for he asked: “You are still friends, aren’t you?”

“Yes, of course we are.”

He nodded. “Good.” But his eyes stayed on her, and there was a twinkle of amusement in the look. “So – ” he said. “What do you really want to talk about?”

He’d been right, of course. She had an ulterior motive. The party. Better to ask him for permission than her mother. He’d at least think about it, give her a chance to plead.

But pleading hadn’t been needed. He’d agreed straight away. “Of course you can,” he’d said. “You’re grown up now. We can trust you to be sensible, I’m sure.”

“I’m glad one of you does.”

He nodded, regarded her for a moment, then sat back, in what she thought of as his consulting pose. Legs crossed, hands folded on his knee, observing her through lowered eyes, gentle yet serious. “Sally,” he said. “Can we talk a moment? Do you still have time?”

She felt a jolt of concern. “Yes. My train’s not for almost an hour yet.”

What it was about, she couldn’t at first guess. He talked to her conversationally, and seemed to have no particular issue in mind. He told her about his job, apologised for his absences, as he did every time, but explained to her, too, why it was like that and had to be so. Not for his sake or hers, or her mother’s, but because that was the only way that he could use his skills, apply his knowledge, give what he had. “I don’t like it either,” he’d said. “I’d much rather be here and spend more time with you. But if I did, I’d have to do some other job, and I’d be wasting myself. Throwing away something only I can give. Denying those who need it. We don’t have the right to do that.” He’d looked abashed. “Does that sound arrogant?”

“Of course not,” she’d said, thinking: I don’t see him like that, as public property; just as a father, belonging to me.

Then, without any warning or change of tone, he started to

talk about her mother. He said again how lucky he'd been, catching her. "I really did have to chase all the other boys off. I still don't know why she chose me." He told her about their wait for children, until Sally had at last come along.

He made it sound as though she'd been dallying somewhere, having a good time. Partying perhaps.

Then he told her about the miscarriage. "It was while you were young," he said. "Two or three – too young to understand or remember. That's why you're an only child – my only and favourite daughter." He smiled. "After that, we were told it was unsafe to have any more."

He paused and asked: "Do you know this already?"

Sally had shaken her head, too dumbfounded to speak.

It affected her mother badly, her father went on. To his shame, he hadn't seen how much at the time. It had taken her several years to get back to her old self. But they'd been worried that her depression might recur. So since then, he'd found himself watching her, looking for the first indications that something was wrong. "Catherine, too, devised her own way of warding it off," he said. "By being busy, being in control, never shirking. That's why she acts the way she does, why she seems so strict." He looked down at his hands, then back up again, his eyes intent. "Perhaps that's also why she's never talked to you about it, never felt able to tell you. Why she keeps it all to herself. It's her way of protecting you. Her way of protecting herself."

Sally nodded, grateful for the words. As her father had been speaking, she'd felt herself fighting against a rising sense of injustice, betrayal. Why hadn't her mother ever said anything? Didn't she realise that a daughter had a right to know?

"I realise it makes it hard for you sometimes." Her father had continued. "She can seem insensitive, worrisome, stiff. But it's just her way of making up for me not being there, by being protective, the strong firm shield. And to me, that's always a good sign. It means that she's still alright."

They'd been silent for a few moments, until he'd added, as much to himself as her: "Try to see things through her eyes sometimes. It may help."

She moved and sat on the arm of his chair, and put her arm around him and whispered: "Thank you."

He looked up at her, seeming to study her face, as if mapping it into his memory for some future time, a time when she wouldn't be there. "I ask myself sometimes what I want for your life. I expect you do, too. The strange thing is that I don't really know, and maybe that's right. Because the whole point is, it's not mine, is it? It's yours, now. We both need to remember that."

She smiled at him, knowing that her eyes were moist, holding back the tears. Then she leaned against him, tightened her a hug. The feel of him shocked her. Against the unexpected strength of her arms, his body seemed fragile and old. In one short interval, the balance of the world had changed. "I'll remember one thing," she said. "Whatever happens, wherever life takes me, I'll remember where it started, and how lucky I've been." She kissed him gently. "I love you."

Now, she glanced at her mother, seeing her anew. Feeling that same sense of reversal, power and dependency exchanged. Sudden affection.

Her mother saw the look, misread it, said: "Watch the road."

* * * * *

On the second storey of the new hospital block, on Adelaide Road, Tamás reached between the rebar, caught hold of the cable, guided it through the next section. They were on a new contract, an extension to the hospital, an intensive-care wing. Their last job had been completed the previous week. Despite their best endeavours, they'd finished late. That meant no down-time between contracts to plan and prepare; straight from one job to the next.

He'd been called into the office on Friday. Steve, his supervisor, was there, a woman at his side. Steve looked sour, though that wasn't unusual. He seemed to have an inherent distrust of Tamás, perhaps of all Hungarians. Maybe of women too, Tamás thought as he observed him. "Our project manager," Steve had said with a nod to the woman. "She'll be keeping an eye on us on our next job. I'll let her explain."

She introduced herself. "Louise McCall." She held out a hand. "I asked if I could brief you." She was dressed in work overalls, a hard-hat. A strand of light brown hair, almost pewter, tagged behind one ear. She was compact, had an air of brisk efficiency.

She looked him up and down. What she made of him, Tamás wasn't sure, for her face gave nothing away. "It's an important job," she told him. "You need to be aware of that. The building will house a mass of advanced electrical gear – scanners, imaging equipment, sonographs, that sort of thing. It's got to be fool-proof. Lives depend on it."

They were using a pre-installation technique, she went on to explain – fitting the electrical services into the formwork before the concrete was poured. It was designed to save time later in the construction process, and to avoid the need to cut into the finished surfaces to insert the cabling and boxwork. There'd be half a dozen contractors working between each other on different tasks on each floor. All the installation work on each storey had to be completed, tested, verified before the concrete was poured and they could move onto the next. They'd all be under pressure. "It's a tight schedule," she said. "There's no room for slippage."

"There won't be any," he assured her.

"I hope not." She gave a fleeting smile, more in punctuation than humour or friendship: subject closed. "Steve's still your supervisor. So he'll deal with the plans and all your supplies – but I'll be keeping a close eye on everything to make sure it all goes well. Understood?"

She spelled out some of the procedures that she expected everyone to follow. Daily checks on materials to avoid any delays, spare tools for the same reason, proper safety briefings and protective gear.

“Oh, and one other rule,” she added. “No mobile phones on the work-floor. I’ve seen too many accidents like that.”

She needn’t have worried so much. A week in and work was going well; they’d already established a routine. Spud and Larry took care of the cabling; Wayne, newly added to the team, installed the fittings. Tamás did whatever was needed to keep the work flowing, every two hours reviewed progress, matched the work against the plans.

Even so, Louise McCall was true to her word. She never seemed to let him out of her sight. He’d see her watching him from the pile of rebar at the end of the building, or the shadows of the stairwell, from the scaffolding for the next floor. Several times she’d come over and asked: “Is everything going alright?”

Each time, he bit back his irritation, said evenly: “Yes. Fine.” Each time he met her gaze levelly and unyielding. Each meeting became a battle of eyes.

Now, he looked up again. She was standing by the corner, a dozen metres away. She’d taken off her hard-hat, was wiping her brow. Burnished by the sunlight, her hair haloed her head; silhouetted, the raised arm might have been in benediction. In the background, a pair of stooped cranes made wings. He smiled: Louise McCall as guardian angel? Not the image of her that he really had.

But then she shifted slightly, and the picture fell apart.

Later, she came across, stood for a moment watching. “Everything OK?” she asked.

“Yes,” he said. “Fine.”

* * * * *

Mid-morning, and Chews Lane was quiet. Brendan sat at his

usual café, at an outside table, a coffee in his hand. After the fright Gilly had given him, he needed that.

She'd come into his office, stood a metre or so from his desk, hands folded in front of her: the plaintiff's pose. "Can I put you down for a reference?" she'd asked.

His heart had sunk. Why hadn't he seen this coming? He had no choice but to agree.

She waited, and he was forced to ask: "What's it for."

She gave a careless toss of her head. "Oh, there's a PA job for the Director at Willison's. I thought I'd apply."

"I see." She'd get it, of course. She was too good not to, and his reference would only increase that likelihood. Everything he wrote would say how precious and irreplaceable she was.

Then her face cracked, and she had laughed. "No, just joking. It's for a house. I've a chance of something a bit bigger."

He laughed, too, his relief evident. "In that case I'll tell the truth." Then, more seriously: "You had me worried, you know. I really wouldn't know what to do without you."

She'd nodded. "I know. That's the sad thing." She observed him for a moment, as if awaiting a response, then thanked him and turned away. But at the doorway, she paused, looked back. "You need to find someone else," she said. "And I don't just mean for the filing."

Alone now, he reflected on their brief exchange. Gilly was a good sort, one of the best. He was lucky to have her. Luckier still that she stayed. But he wondered: had her joke – her two jokes – been a warning? He took her too much for granted, he knew. Not just for what she did around the shop, but for those more personal, almost sisterly observations, pieces of advice. For the way she seemed to care about him. Was she telling him that he expected too much?

She certainly made that easy. In the shop, she worked quietly, efficiently, without fuss. Outside the shop? He didn't know, for she kept that part of her life to herself. It added to the imbalance in their relationship: the giving and caring was all

one way. On the occasions when he did remember to enquire her about her life, she'd dismiss his interest with a quick shrug, a gentle smile: not his business. The only thing of substance he knew about her was that she had a son, who was at a special school. Why, what the difficulty was, he'd never been told, perhaps had never asked. As for a husband, he'd no idea; one was never mentioned. A single mother, he'd always assumed. Dealing with life as she knew was best: independently, efficiently, without complications.

But even she must have her limits. Was he over-stretching them?

Even now, was she thinking of leaving? The thought disturbed him, and lodged firm. On the way back to the shop he pondered on what he should do, how he could repay her in some way.

* * * * *

They talked about the new site foreman over lunch. Opinions were divided. To Wayne, any woman on a building site was anathema, unnatural. If that was what they were meant for, they'd have been born with big muscles and hard heads. Spud had the opposite view. The more the merrier; especially if they had big tits. He didn't rate Louise McCall highly on that score, he said – not from what he'd seen, but that wasn't much, which kind of proved his point. Larry kept an open mind. "I'd rather look at her than most of the guys on this site, I'll give her that. But let's see if she does her job as well." They'd turned to Tamás: "What about you boss?" He remembered the image of her, framed by the sun. Was she so bad? He shrugged. "She's a bit of a dragon, that's for sure – but you guys need that!"

When they'd finished, he wandered over to the scaffolding and leaned out, looking around. He could see across the town centre to the port, beyond the misted line of the Rimutaka Hills. On the wharves, lorries were being shunted around ready

for loading, in a strange and disjointed ballet. On the water, the midday ferry traced a path southwards, heading into Cook Strait. A train silently tip-toed its way out of the station. At the bottom of Adelaide Road, cars stopped, moved to some hidden rhythm. The town, it seemed, had its own momentum, its own choreography. Up here, he felt divorced from it all, in a world of his own.

He looked downwards. Across the street from the hospital was a school. It was lunch-break, and the children were in the playground. They ran around, all sorts of games criss-crossing each other: football, tag, hop-scotch, mixed into one.

He let himself imagine Janos amongst them, pictured him there, playing wild and free.

He imagined meeting him after school, taking him home. A child and his father, walking through the streets, hand-in-hand, sharing memories of their day.

He imagined Janos growing, almost as they walked, so that from one end of the street to another, he went from child to teenager to young man. And all the time that bond between them, son and father, held firm, growing too. The son becoming wise and strong, ready for a life of his own.

All possible here, he told himself, where freedom and space are every man's due.

Down in the playground, a teacher had emerged and by some means that Tamás couldn't detect captured the attention of the children. They stopped their games, gathered around her, waited until she led them in. He turned, went back to his work.

* * * * *

“Bugger!”

The word escaped from him before he could prevent it. One of the parcels he was carrying, broke free too. It spilled open on the ground, the contents scattering. Books slid across the tiles,

between people's feet.

He'd spent too long chatting to the dealer, supposedly negotiating a better price: Gilly's last command to him before he set out – "Don't let him diddle you, not like last time."

He'd left late, hurrying to catch his train.

"I'm sorry, Mr Lovall. I really am." It was Sally. She stood there flustered, distraught. "I was running for the train and didn't see you."

"Me too."

She knelt beside him, started to pick up the books. "Are you alright?"

"Yes, I'm fine."

She glanced over her shoulder.

Through the archway of the station he could see the platform emptying, the last few passengers striding to the doors. "You go. I'll sort these out."

She hesitated.

"Go on," he said.

"Thanks." Then again: "I'm sorry." She touched his arm in apology, then hitched up her bag, ran off, shoes clattering on the tiles.

He retrieved the books. A trio of atlases, a set of explorers' diaries, bound portfolios of watercolours of birds and landscapes from an expedition in the mid-nineteenth century. It was a good haul. Not in raw value, but interest, promise. Benjie, the dealer – a Samoan, wiry, grey-haired, who'd built up the second-hand store in a makeshift building on the edge of Lower Hutt – had been collecting them for him. They knew each other well, had traded often, enjoyed their moments together. Notwithstanding Gilly's strictures, the bargaining was really just a game.

He stood up, looked round. The train was still at the platform. He started after it.

"Excuse me." A woman's voice, American or Canadian.

"Excuse me," she said again.

He turned.

“Is this yours? I think you dropped it.” She was holding up a book. It had spilled open as it fell, and she was flicking through it, flattening the pages down.

He stood in indecision for a moment. The train or the book?

“Thank you.” He went back.

“I hope it’s not damaged. It must be quite rare.”

She handed it back and he slipped it onto his pile, almost possessively. “They’re nineteenth century,” he said, by way of explanation. “Travel guides, diaries, that sort of thing. Maps as well.” He stopped. It was more information than she needed, more than he had time to give. The enthusiast’s mistake.

“I’m envious.”

He laughed. “You shouldn’t say that to people like me. I’m a dealer – I’ve a shop in town. Do you collect?”

It took her a moment to decipher the phrase. “Not really. But I’m interested in such things. I’m an academic, I study First Nations people – in Canada mainly. I’m here doing a bit of research on your Maori.”

They were silent and he glanced towards the platform. The train had left.

“I’m sorry. Have I made you miss your train?”

“Not really. I’d missed it anyway, when I dropped these.”

“Yes, I saw.” She waved inconsequentially toward the platform. “Was that your daughter?”

“Sally? No. She’s just another passenger.”

Silence again.

He asked: “Can I buy you a coffee?”

She looked at him enquiringly, testing perhaps for a motive. “Why not?”

They went to the coffee bar in the station. It was noisy, crowded, and they had to perch at the end of a table, on two stools. There was no room to show her the books, though that was probably what she wanted and what he’d have liked to do. It would have given their presence here a purpose – and he,

too, was curious to see what he'd bought. He slid the parcel between his feet.

She stirred her coffee, and he risked a glance. She was younger than him, by five, maybe ten, years. She had dark hair that hung loose, a high forehead, flattened face, a wide mouth, giving her a slightly aboriginal look.

She reached over. "My name's Robyn," she said, as he took her hand, shook it. "Robyn Kinnikinnick." She laughed as she saw him frown, and repeated the surname. "It's Ktunaxa – that's my ancestral tribe. It's the name of a plant." She laughed again. "Sorry – meeting me is always complex. It needs a dictionary."

Kinnikinnick was a heath, she told him, commonly called bearberry. Not pretty, but tough and hardy and drought resistant. "It suits me."

"Brendan Lovall. I'm Irish – was."

"Still are, from the accent I'd say."

He asked her about her work, what she was doing here. She worked in UBC, she explained – University of British Columbia. She was a political scientist, and was studying the ways in which the First Nation peoples were being catered for by Canadian law. It was a slow process, especially with the current government: no-one took it very seriously anymore. She had come to see how the Treaty of Waitangi worked, to see if there were lessons to learn. She had just come back from a meeting in Palmerston North, she said; tomorrow, she was heading north – to Waitangi, Kaikohe, Kerikeri.

"If my contacts have done what they promised, I've a month of interviews lined up, plus some time in the library in Auckland. I'm looking forward to the trip."

He asked if she'd been to New Zealand before.

"No, this is my first time. I'm a virgin, as the nice man at the customs desk told me. So I'm making it a holiday as well. I'm biking it."

"Biking?"

“Motor-cycle. I’ve got one booked, as from tomorrow.” Once more she laughed, the same small chuckle in her throat, as though she were clearing it. “Not quite the real thing, not a Harley-Davidson like I’ve got at home. But a BMW. Still not bad.” She glanced at him. “You a biker?”

“No. I’m afraid not.”

She gave a small grimace. “Sad on you; you don’t know what you’re missing.”

For a moment, he wondered what meaning he should attach to her words, and tried to think of a riposte. But before one came, she’d looked at her watch, grimaced again. “I have to go soon, I’m sorry. I’m meeting someone this evening.”

She thanked him for the coffee, and he return he thanked her for saving his book. Then they stood, facing each other, awkward for the loss of further words.

“Well, if you ever need a map, let me know,” he said.

It sounded trite to his own ears, but she smiled, gave a shake of her head. “Not for this trip, I won’t. These bikes have everything, you know. GPS, satnav, the works. I couldn’t get lost if I wanted to.”

“Even so, can I give you this?” He held out his business card.

She took it. “Thanks.” With a cursory glance, she slipped it into her pocket.

He watched her leave, trying to picture her on her motorbike, on the open road, feeling a pang of envy.

Farida: evening, Christchurch

After the meal, she tidies up. Her mother supervises, once or twice moves one of the dishes to its correct place, rearranges the cutlery in the drawer. Just a reminder, perhaps, that she’s been away too long, has forgotten.

She’s tried to be daughterly, to get it right. When she arrived, she kissed them warmly, asked them how they were,

admired the house. As they drank tea together, she sat demurely, knees close together, back straight, and listened with feigned interest to the tales of neighbours, friends, the countless relations here and elsewhere. When they asked about her, she told them what she thought they wanted to hear. Don't worry – her job was going well and didn't interfere with her course; she was getting good marks. No, she wasn't short of money, and yes, she was eating properly; no, she wasn't losing weight. Yes – she'd made friends.

Her father had been the first to break: "So are you seeing anyone, now?"

"I've –" She'd planned to say, 'found a new boyfriend, yes – a Muslim boy.' But something checked her. "I've not met anyone, no. I'm happy as I am."

It created silence. No hope in that direction, then.

Her mother asked the other question, the one that hung like a shadow from the past. "You've not heard any more from that boy. That other one."

Never say his name. Mask it in anonymity. Hasim.

"No, mother. I've told you, that's all over. I don't know what happened to him."

She waits for the next question – the inevitable follow-up. Her cousin, Jamal, still enquires after her. He is interested. Why does she not let them invite him? But to her relief, they do not ask it. Perhaps they have learned, given up. Or perhaps he's found someone else. She hopes so.

When she can, she excuses herself and goes out for a walk alone.

The town surprises her. It seems so changed since she last came home. Work on the earthquake damage has started at last; buildings are being torn down, new ones started. But in a way she cannot quite fix, it depresses her. Rather than a renewal it feels like the final retreat. The old and the familiar scrapped, ugly replacements thrust in their place; things she's

had no say in, were not part of her childhood. It's not the place she remembers, and is becoming less like it every day.

As she walks, her mind goes back to the puzzle that she's left behind. What does it all mean?

Mrs Grayling had been waiting for her in her room when she arrived, the previous week, a smile on her face. One of knowing, not laughter: see, why did you doubt? "I've some new files for you today," she said. "I need to talk to you about them before you start. You'll be working on them for some time, so it's important you understand." She drew up a chair beside her, waited as the computer booted up, reached across to the keyboard and typed in a password. A page opened up, revealing a list of six folders, each with a cryptic name – just a sequence of letters and numbers – a date. "They're under special encryption, so you'll need to ask me or Mr Thorburn to give you access," Mrs Grayling explained. "They've been passed to us from Australia. I can't give you the details; I don't know them all myself. But they're part of a surveillance operation that's been going on for several months now. We've got them because there might be a New Zealand link. A suspected terrorist cell." She seemed to see Farida's reaction, for she went on: "Suspected. Remember that word. Nothing's certain, so don't jump to conclusions. Do you understand?"

Farida had nodded, lips dumb. There ought to be something she should ask, a crucial question, but she couldn't think what it was. Just a sense of excitement: let me get at them.

Mrs Grayling eyed her pensively, chewing at her cheek, seeing her enthusiasm. "You won't be the only one working on this – you realise that don't you? There'll be a mass of stuff, and we'll be analysing it on other shifts." This was news to Farida, though she should have guessed, she thought. She wasn't in this alone; when she was not there, others picked up the work, dealt with material that she never saw; perhaps they checked and corrected what she had done.

When Mrs Grayling had gone, Farida had sat, looking at the

screen, her mind in turmoil. Surveillance? Terrorism? So Sue had been right. She reached for the mouse, moved the cursor to the first folder, hesitated. The next move, she felt, would be irrevocable, would take her into a different world. Could she go there? Did she dare?

The cursor blinked back at her, non-committal.

She clicked on the first folder. It contained a series of audio files. She slipped on her earphones, opened a file. It was about two minutes long, a casual conversation between two men, discussing a third who'd apparently gone overseas. They were debating whether he'd come back, if so when. As she listened, she translated in her head, testing the process out. It was more difficult than working with texts or emails, she realised. The words that were spoken slipped by before she had caught them, and the tone added another layer of meaning that she struggled to grasp, providing more scope for nuance and ambiguity. There were gaps, too, for the recording wasn't always perfect: interference, extraneous noises, masked words; sometimes one of the speakers would move out of range.

She wondered how the recording had been made, how you could intrude on someone like this. The sophistication of it, the deceit that must be involved, had made her shiver. So much happening, unseen.

She tried a few more files, selecting them randomly. What it was all about she could not tell, but the very fact that she was listening to them, to real people, talking in everyday voices, made it seem urgent and close. It was as though she were there at their side.

By the time Mrs Grayling returned, she'd completed three of the files. Mrs Grayling seemed pleased "That's good," she said, as she scanned the translations. But then a warning: "It'll get harder. At present you've no preconceptions so you translate what you hear. If you're making any mistakes, they're probably errors of omission – things you didn't catch. Later, it'll be the opposite. You'll start to think you know things, can join the

dots, tell a story. You think you know how it will end. Watch out. That's when it can all go wrong.”

Standing there now, those words come back to her. Is that what has happened? She's tried to resist, thinks she has. Yet as she worked on the files over the next three sessions, she felt as though she were listening to recordings of a play. With each file the plot develops, the story draws her in.

There are four main characters in the cast. The men are called Zameel, Rishan and Pamiir; the woman Alraaz. Whether they are their real names or pseudonyms, she's not sure. But Zameel is clearly the leader. He doesn't speak as much; when he does, it is not to advance the discussion but terminate it – decision made. Alraaz is the most enigmatic. In Farida's mind, the name suits her, for it means mystery. That's how she sees her – a shadowy force, elusive.

They're young – she can tell that from the voices. Zameel, she thinks, is a native Pakistani, the others like herself, educated overseas: the hint of a western accent, New Zealand or Australian; in the case of Alraaz, maybe English.

They're idealistic, they're believers in a shared cause. It has a name, though it means nothing to her, and she's been unable to find it anywhere on the internet. Islami Wirsaa – Islamic Inheritance. Is it something they have invented themselves, a nascent movement, or some offshoot of one of the many groups that seem to form and sinter in the Middle East – Al Qaeda, Al-shabaab, ISIL?

What it is they believe in, though, she's not sure, for their ideas seem framed in abstractions. In words that shift and shimmer and change shape. Rehayee – redemption, absolution, ransom; kafara – redemption, penance, atonement; tawaan – ransom, penalty, damages; saza – penalty, impalement, punishment.

Words, she suddenly thinks, that now seem to turn back on her as she tries to catch them, confuse her, ensnare her, bind her, so that they might do with her what they will. The thought

makes her feel vulnerable, almost violated. As if, like a computer, a virus has nested itself in her brain, is working in the background while she sleeps, reprogramming her thoughts.

Is that what happened to them? Is that how they themselves were trapped?

Amidst the chatter and polemics, though, issues of fact occasionally leap out. They talk about events she's heard of: the Boston marathon, Madrid, London, Paris. Others she had to look up – Pattani, Narathiwat, Khasavyurt. Sometimes they recite statistics, argue about them: how big the bomb was, how many were injured, how many died. Once, they were joined by another man, whom she'd not encountered before. He told them about time-switches and pressure-sensors and remote controls, and they discussed which were better to use.

It grips her, fills her with dread.

She looks around, at the ruin and disorder that was once the place she lived. Suddenly, the city seems dull, deaf, stupid. Hasn't it learned anything from its catastrophe? Can't it see what lies ahead? Doesn't it care?

People walk down the streets, shoulders bent into the wind. A dog pees against a lamp-post. Cars drive blindly past. A man shambles by, glances at her, gives her a tentative smile.

A scrap of paper tags along the pavement, finds rest for a while in the gutter, then reluctantly moves on.

She turns and walks slowly home.