

The Darkness Before Sunset



Alan Greenhead

THE DARKNESS
BEFORE SUNSET

Alan Greenhead

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I don't like the men or the lady. They are bad people, mean and ugly and they hurt us.

I've been working here for ages now. They make me grow plants. I don't know what they are for. I've never seen anyone eat one. It makes my hands sore but they yell at me if I complain. Sometimes they even hit me and I cry.

I want to go home. We can't go outside the fences and they lock us in our room at night.

I miss my Mummy and Daddy. One of the men keeps saying they will be back for me but I have to finish my work first. But they never come. Why do they never come? Have they forgotten about me?

At night I cry. It is dark and I am scared. The other kids are all older than me but they cry sometimes too. We all sleep together in a room. It is dark and smelly and everyone is hungry. Some are nice to me, but most don't say much. I think they are scared too. They look sad.

I want to go home. If I get the chance I am going to run away...

The Farm in the Hills

THE DOMINION POST: July 28, 2047. Last polar bear dies in zoo: Snowy the polar bear, one of the star attractions of the San Diego Zoo, died at the weekend after a long illness. He had been the last of his species following the death of his mate five years ago. Polar bears died out in the wild over a decade ago with the complete disappearance of the Arctic ice sheet in the 2030s. “This is a great loss to the world,” said the zoo’s Information Officer Paul Wilscott. “The collapse of the biosphere this century means polar bears are just one of many species that have gone, but I think the extinction of this special animal is particularly heart-breaking...”

“Come on you devil, move!” shouted Grandad as the cow struggled to stay upright in the sticky mud of the swamp. Despite the harsh words David could see concern and worry on his grandfather’s face. The cow gave a desperate bellow, sliding up to its belly in the sodden muck with a ghastly sucking sound. Sweat glistened on its flanks as it drew in lungfuls of air and its muscles twitched with exhaustion. David and his grandfather had both tried to get out to the distressed animal but risked getting stuck themselves.

Grandad stopped, removed his battered hat and

swept a muddy cloth across his brow. He was breathing heavily himself. His face was deeply furrowed and lined but a mischievous energy gleamed from his eyes. A scruffy grey beard, cropped short, covered his chin.

“It’s no use David. I think I’m going to have to shoot the poor old thing.”

David screwed up his face in frustration, sweat mingling with the mud and grime already there. Having spent all his fifteen years in the valley he was no stranger to the harshness of farm life. Death was a part of every day here; it lay rotting in the bodies of the lambs that had not survived the spring storms and written across the decaying boards of the farmhouse, eaten away by mould and lichen. But he felt a particular sadness at the idea of losing a cow in this way. He hated to see any animal suffer, and he could not bear the thought of giving up on it. Each cow in their small herd was known to him individually, and each had its own personality. To have this cow die would be to lose something very special to him. Perhaps if there were other people his own age to play with things would be different but the local school had closed down two years earlier and now his mother and grandfather taught him at home. The only time he saw other boys or girls was when they took the long trek to visit his cousins once a year. These cows and other farm animals were his friends and playmates. He sighed deeply and pulled his fingers through his straggly, brown hair.

The cow rolled onto its side and the fear flashing in its eyes seemed to show it knew the end was close. The mud pulled greedily at its sides, dark and thick

like porridge.

“It’s the kindest thing my boy,” explained Grandad in a quiet voice. “It’s only going to die slowly of exhaustion. I know you don’t like it so perhaps you should go back to the farmhouse and I’ll take care of things here.”

David knew his grandfather was right, and although he felt a small core of resentment inside, he tried to tell himself Grandad had been doing this for a long time and knew best. He understood that he could be too sensitive but did not know how to ignore the fears that filled his mind, and Grandad did not always take these worries and concerns seriously. He looked down at his thin, wiry body. Fifteen years of harsh farm life did not seem to have produced much, but when putting food on the table was a daily struggle he supposed he was never going to be big or muscular.

“Okay, Grandad, I’ll go back,” he said. He trudged solemnly to the farmhouse and waited on the porch while his grandfather went inside and came out again with his rifle. David tried to concentrate on the view over the farm rather than the sight of Grandad walking with head bowed towards the swamp. He turned and discreetly watched his mother through the window as she washed dishes in the sink. Her movements were slow and automatic, her expression blank and unfocused, as if she was an automaton going through some scripted routine. She looked lost and vulnerable, and it made him sad to see her that way.

A thin veil of mist clung to the tops of the steep, furrowed hills that enclosed the valley. Bush smothered the slopes – a thick, shaggy cloak at the ridge-tops but thinner and scruffier closer to the

bottom. The occasional large rimu or rata tree reared its head above the canopy, softened into pale shapes by the mist. The valley floor was choked with growth: lush grasses, clumps of wiry tussock, and the gnarled, skeletal forms of macrocarpa trees. The rainfall in the valley was very high, and the hills were often shrouded in rain and mist, the valley floor saturated and sodden. The swamp seemed to be growing each year, stretching greedy fingers into the paddocks and gullies.

Suddenly there was a loud crack from nearby and David knew Grandad had shot the cow, ending its torment. He felt his throat tighten and wished he could be less affected by such things. Sometimes life seemed harsh and cruel, a daily struggle just to survive. He wondered if things were this tough for everyone. Perhaps there still existed places where calmness and order could be found. Since the Regression in the early part of the Twenty-first Century, when social and environmental collapse set society back a hundred years or more, life had become limited and difficult for most people, and communities were mostly isolated and suspicious of outsiders. David had never known it to be any other way, but Grandad loved to tell stories of the old days, if David's mother let him. She worried that the stories would depress David, but he liked nothing more than to sit before the fire on a cool winter's evening listening to tales of when you could fly in huge aircraft to the other side of the world, or buy a small disc that held the complete symphonies of Beethoven or the entire works of Shakespeare, etched onto its plastic surface.

Grandad reappeared, his face stormy beneath the brow of his hat. “Sorry about that my lad. Had to do it I’m afraid.”

David said nothing but hoped a faint smile showed he understood what Grandad had done.

“Once I could have filled that swamp in with the tractor,” his grandfather muttered. There had been no petrol or diesel available for vehicles for years, and now you could only get them on the black market. Internal combustion engines were outlawed – one of the chief culprits in the global warming that had blighted the world with catastrophic climate change in the first half of the century. Most vehicles ran on electricity, but they were a luxury item or used for public transport in the cities. Their own tractor lay rusting and overgrown in a paddock somewhere like the carcass of some gigantic beast, and though he might play on it regularly and dream of it moving, it had long since corroded beyond repair.

“Farming sure was a lot easier when we had machinery and farm bikes,” said Grandad. “Come on lad, we’ll go for a quick walk up the hill. I want to show you something.” He passed David a thick raincoat and led him across the farm, their boots making satisfying squelching noises in the pools of water collected from recent downpours. A curtain of drizzly rain moved down the valley and drew itself across their path. It kissed their faces, cool and refreshing. The trees faded into ghostly forms on the slopes ahead, then finally dissolved into nothingness as heavier rain moved in.

They climbed a trail fringed by thistles and tall grasses, and found a small group of sheep sheltering

beneath a large totara tree.

David looked down into the valley through a widening window in the drizzle, feeling a comforting pride at the small green wedge that formed his world. The rain was clearing and the shapes of hills and trees were reappearing from the murk. Soon he could see the opposite hillside as a jagged silhouette. He often climbed high up the slopes, at least as far as the bush-line, but had rarely been beyond the hills. Even the line of trees marking where the dense rainforest began hid a place of mystery. Beneath the leafy crowns was a potent darkness that seemed to ebb and flow around the tree trunks. Nonetheless he loved the bush – the hushed stillness of it and the almost violent sense of life frozen into the tangled forms of vine, wood and leaf. Grandad too had spent a lot of time in the forest in his younger days, and could tell you the name of this plant or that tree. He had taught David to recognize the heavy whoosh of a wood pigeon’s passing, or the difference between the flute-like calls of tui and bellbird.

“There you go David,” shouted Grandad proudly, sweeping his arms in a wide arc across the valley. “One day all this will be yours.”

David wondered why his grandfather had brought him up here just to show him a view he had seen many times before. It seemed an odd comment, and he wondered what Grandad meant by it. He did not think much about the future. Just coping with the challenges of the farm kept him busy enough most days. Other times he would lose himself in lengthy dreams and fantasies, but they were always of the past and the old days. He could not really imagine what the future

would be like. He supposed things would always stay the way they were, though when Grandad listened to their little solar-powered radio he usually muttered darkly about everything getting worse and the world becoming crazier by the day.

David looked across to the range opposite – its broad face dropped sharply down forested ridges to the strip of brighter green below. The silvery sheen of swamp and stream flashed from the valley floor.

“I wish I could see what was on the other side of those hills,” said David.

Grandad stroked a face almost as convoluted with age and hard work as the land around him. “Well, it’s a lot more peaks and valleys before you get to the flatter areas, and then of course you come eventually to the sea.”

“I’d love to be able to view the horizon. All I ever see are endless hills. It’s like being stuck inside and never going out.”

Grandad chuckled. “I know what you mean. The thing I miss the most in this valley is the sunset. The whole sky would light up like it was on fire, with every colour under the sun, if you’ll excuse the pun.”

“Wow, that must have been something,” sighed David, as if to himself. He wished he could see a real sunset just once. He had seen pictures in books and sometimes the sky above the hills in the evening or morning would blush with colour, but the hills crowding over them and the almost constant rain and drizzle made the viewing of a full sunset impossible. What a glorious thing it must be. Here on the western coast of New Zealand the climatic changes of the last fifty years meant rainfall had increased. Higher

temperatures led to greater evaporation from land and sea and therefore increased precipitation, adding to the general gloom. It was uncommon to have clear skies or breaks in the cloud cover, and when the sun did shine it only made its way into the narrow valley for a few hours a day. David felt like everything was perpetually wet and soggy. Sometimes the moisture dripping in crystalline drops from the foliage and the gentle gurgling of the many streams was beautiful but as often as not he grew tired of the constant wetness and the suffocating humidity.

“Yep,” breathed Grandad in a hushed voice, “those sunsets sure were special when I lived on the coast. Don’t think I’ve seen one since I’ve been here though.” He sounded suddenly regretful, as if he was slipping into another of his reminiscences of the old days. They could be warm and happy or gloomy and dark depending on his mood. But at heart Grandad was a pragmatist, and usually it did not take long for him to come around.

“Wish I was a few years younger,” he grunted. “I’d leave this valley and go to see one last sunset. As it is I think I’ll be ending my days in this place.”

“Not for a while yet though, aye Grandad?” laughed David.

An unreadable expression crossed Grandad’s face, before he shook himself, grinned and said, “Of course not.” David was not expecting the pause, and wondered if he had missed something important.

“Come on lad – Mum will be waiting,” said his grandfather. He surged forward down the trail and David had to run to catch up.

As he walked Grandad looked out over the valley,

now filling with shadow below.

“Sure would like to see another sunset,” he sighed under his breath.

Today was the worst day yet. I was so hungry I stole a tiny potato – just one. My tummy is sore all the time. They found out and they hit me with a stick. It hurt a lot.

Mummy and Daddy still haven't come. Why are they taking so long? Perhaps they aren't coming at all. The nasty man said they will be here soon. Then he told me to shut up about it. I'm too scared to ask him again.

Last night I found a piece of wall in the bedroom that is loose. I pulled it and it came out. I put it back and I don't think anybody else noticed. Every night they lock us in, but now I know how to get out. I think I can just fit through. And Danny showed me where there is a hole dug under one of the fences. They don't know it's there, but he was too scared to go under.

Tonight I am going to run away. Not when it's dark. That would be too scary. In the morning, before the others get up. I'll run away – that will show them. Then I will go to find Mummy and Daddy...

2

In the Saddle

Stratford District Community Newsletter: May 14, 2037. Police Reminder: All motor vehicles must comply with regulations regarding the prohibition of petrol and diesel engines. Those found driving unauthorized vehicles face fines of up to \$200,000 and/or imprisonment for up to 5 years...

www.offdaedge.com (underground website): April 4, 2056. ...50 litre drum of petrol, ideal for all owners of early 21st Century recreational vehicles. One of the last in the country. Hurry – will go fast! Offers over \$15,000...

The rain made a soothing drumming noise as it beat steadily on the window. Beads of water slid down the glass and formed a small waterfall at the bottom. David looked outside glumly and wondered when he would be able to leave the house. It had been raining for the last two days and he was beginning to feel like a caged animal pacing the length of its small world.

It was quite common to have rain for days on end. The sky was dull and overcast – filled with thick, grey clouds that light barely forced its way through. At one stage the clouds broke apart briefly to reveal patches of blue sky as if some marvellous world lay beyond.

In the early part of the Twenty-first Century New Zealand had enjoyed an enviable climate with mild winters and long summers, before global warming drastically altered the world starting in the 2020s. The polar icecaps melted and sea levels rose, flooding coastal cities and forcing people inland; epidemics killed thousands of people with new diseases from tropical regions and crop failures, floods and droughts meant large numbers of people died of malnutrition and starvation.

David went to his grandfather's bookcase and pulled out his favourite book – a collection of scenic photographs that showed the way things used to be. The book was old, dating back to the 10s, and many of the pictures were of landscapes with clear blue skies above. The sun's light seemed to fill everything with a warmth and brightness that he wished he could experience.

David looked at the pictures and tried to imagine he was in those magical places. The landscapes were breathtaking – high, snow-capped mountains and deep alpine lakes – but he knew he would never get to see them. To cut down pollution the government had banned all petrol-driven vehicles in the 30s and although electric cars were available the average person could not afford one. Now most people got around on foot or bicycle. As in times past people were confined to their own small communities, and poverty meant most could not even afford the few public transport shuttles running between the larger cities. David would probably grow old and die without venturing more than a few dozen kilometres from his small farm.

He was filled with a sudden sadness at what had been lost, and a desire to talk to his grandfather. Grandad had come to live with them soon after David's father died of some disease usually confined to the tropics. It was the first case of the disease so far south, and would not be the last. Although a cure was probably available the family had no way of paying for it and with so many people sick there was no choice but to hope vainly for the illness to pass. His father sickened and grew weaker before their eyes, withering away until he was unable to talk. They had felt so helpless, and angry that their attempts to get doctors to come and look at him were ignored. The authorities said people were dying everywhere and it was not possible to treat everybody. With that they had been dismissed and forgotten, left to care for a dying man over a harsh winter. On a grey and icy morning David's father finally died and the rest of the winter was filled with emptiness and a seemingly endless pain. Grandad had lost his wife to skin cancer a few years earlier and moved in to help on the farm. It was a great comfort having him around – he had that deep wisdom found only in old people – and David loved to listen to his stories of the past, when people had lots of money and could go wherever they pleased. There were things called television sets and movies, and phones that meant you could talk to people on the other side of the world instantly. Such things mostly disappeared after the New Zealand economy collapsed and people began to struggle just to feed themselves. Perhaps other places still had them, but communication with overseas countries was limited and he supposed they were facing their own

problems. David's nation had truly become a few islands, isolated and alone at the bottom of the Pacific Ocean. He often wondered what was happening in those great and powerful countries he read about in books – China, America and Australia.

David found his grandfather sitting by the window staring at the rain as if mesmerized by it. His mother sat sewing by the light of a small lamp powered from a portable solar-charged battery, and looked quiet and lost in her own thoughts. She shrugged her patched shawl closer to her thin shoulders and brushed aside some blonde strands of hair that dangled into her eyes. Her face had become increasingly lined in the past few years. At times she seemed to become so self-absorbed and still David worried she might never surface from the dark thoughts which, for a moment, claimed her. It made him sad to see her like that, but he was filled with the same helplessness he had felt during his father's sickness. He supposed it was after Dad's death that she had seemed to sicken herself, but it was a sickness of the spirit. The strong, independent woman he knew became weary and frail, turning increasingly to her own company and leaving more and more of the running of the farm to David and his grandfather. Like many people she seemed to have given up – to not really care anymore about trying to improve things or put them back the way they were. "Perhaps it's the way things were that was the problem," his grandfather had said when David mentioned this to him. "Who wants to repeat the mistakes of the past? Maybe things needed to change."

Now his grandfather had a faraway look that meant

he was remembering his youth.

“What was it like in the old days?” David asked.

“Ah, why do you want to talk about that again?” replied Grandad, stirring suddenly as if emerging from a dream. “What’s gone is gone. We can’t get it back even if we should want the world to be as it was.”

“But it doesn’t hurt to talk about it. I think it sounds like it was a wonderful time,” said David quietly.

Grandad looked thoughtful and his face brightened. “Yes, there were many wonderful things, perhaps so many they distracted people from what was really important. But let’s not dwell on the past.” A shadow seemed to cross his face and he started to rise from his chair. “A tea anyone?” he asked.

“Just tell me about the sunsets again. They look like they must have been the best thing of all.” David remembered one particular picture he had seen where the whole sky seemed to be aflame with colour.

Grandad chuckled and sat down again. “Yes, I suppose they were when I stop and think about it. A beautiful sunset made you feel like the world was a fine, good place to be, and it might only last a few minutes so you had to be quick and grab it while you could. And the colours – reds and yellows, pink and orange – they would change as you watched and no two sunsets would be the same.” He gazed ahead with a broad smile as if watching a sunset on the far wall.

“I wish I could see one,” said David sadly.

“Well, you haven’t much chance of that around here,” continued his grandfather, “but down at the coast it often gets clear enough. The sea breezes can blow some of the clouds away and then you’d really see something.”

“Jim, stop talking about things he’ll never be able to see,” said David’s mother angrily. She rose to adjust her sewing, her tall, slender form stooping to pick at some threads.

“It doesn’t do any harm to talk about it,” defended Grandad. He stopped and looked thoughtful. “I sure would like to get a peek at a sunset just once more,” he said as if to himself. He wore the same enigmatic look David had seen on the hillside a few days before.

“Can we go Grandad? Can we go to find a sunset?” David felt a sudden keen excitement.

“There you go Jim, putting ideas in his head,” chided his mother. “You know it’s a long way and it’s not safe out in the wild.” She always called the land between the towns “the wild”, and indeed since the collapse of economic and social order it could be an unsafe and lawless place. She imagined it to be filled with gangs of bandits roaming around and packs of wild, starving dogs that would attack a person who was not careful. “Besides, there’s too much work to do here on the farm.” She looked tired and almost as old as her father-in-law. David did not think he had ever seen her look so weary and pale, and felt suddenly worried. Life was even harder for her since the death of his father, and David thought sometimes she had forgotten how to be happy and see the goodness in the things around her. Perhaps it was worse for those who had once known how things used to be.

“It sure would be a sight though,” dreamed Grandad, lost in thoughts of the past, “and the drowned city is really something – skyscrapers like you’ve seen in books sticking up from the water ...”

“That’s enough Jim – please don’t give David ideas about things he’ll never get to do. The wild is no place for a boy and an old man.” She gave Grandad such a fierce look that he was immediately quiet, but he gave David a quick wink before turning back to the window, as if to say no one could take their precious dreams away.

Later, when David had crawled into bed, his mother came in to say goodnight.

“Sleep well David,” she said.

“Thanks Mum.” He paused, as if his next question might be an opening to things better left undisturbed. “Did you ever see any nice sunsets?”

She looked surprised and a little annoyed. “What? Oh, I suppose so love. But it was so long ago I really can’t remember. Grandad shouldn’t be talking about things like that. It doesn’t help.”

“But how could you forget something so wonderful? It must have been amazing with all the colours, and every one so different.”

“I really don’t recall.” She sighed heavily. “Listen love, we have to focus on what’s going on now. It doesn’t help to get caught up in dreams of the past.”

“But things can be that way again can’t they? People will rebuild and the land will heal.”

“I don’t know if we would want to go back even if we could. Grandad talks about many incredible things but there was a lot of unhappiness and turmoil too. It was very hard for a long time.”

“But it’s hard now too.”

“Which is precisely why we need to do our best to stay on top of things. We need to keep the farm alive and not get distracted by Grandad’s crazy ideas.” Her

face softened and she put a hand on David's head, stroking his hair. "I know it's been tough since Dad died, but he would be proud of how you've kept going and would want you to work hard and keep your mind in the present. He loved this farm so much and wanted it to be yours one day. It doesn't help to dwell on the past too much."

David could see the resignation in his mother's eyes. As far as she was concerned this was their life now.

"Okay Mum. I'll try to stay focused."

"Good lad." She kissed him on the cheek. "Goodnight then."

"'Night."

She left the room, pausing at the door for a final smile. David lay awake for a long time. Should the past really be forgotten completely? Surely remembering the mistakes helped you to avoid repeating them. It can't all have been bad either. Grandad seemed to recall many great times from his younger days. People looked happy and content in the pictures in his books – clean and fat and shiny, as if life could not have been better.

*

The next day the rain cleared and the sky brightened. David did not see much of Grandad. The old man seemed to have tapped into some new, limitless reserve of energy. He could be found hurriedly putting out feed for the animals, clearing out the pig pens or mending some gate he had been meaning to do for a long time. David tried to ask him what the rush was but Grandad would only wink secretively and scamper

away with a grin to some new task. He disappeared in the afternoon for a couple of hours and returned looking smug and happy.

“Oh-ho, it’s all coming together,” David heard him mutter before quickly looking away as if some great secret had almost been revealed.

At the end of the day David settled into bed, turned off his lamp and sank into sleep. A dream of a golden sunset came to him and it was glorious to stand on a sandy beach with the sun burning as a fiery orb before him, stroking his face with its light. He felt a tug on his arm, but he was too comfortable and warm to heed it. The tug came again, harder this time and more insistent. David woke and blinked in the harsh light of a portable lamp held before his eyes.

“David, it’s me,” whispered a voice. His grandad held the lamp up so it illuminated the deep ravines lining his face. “I’ve got it all organized my boy. If it’s not raining tomorrow we’re setting out for the coast. I’ve got two packs and a few days’ food and we can take the bikes. You’re going to see a sight you won’t soon forget. We’ll make camp by the beach and we won’t move until we’ve seen ourselves a sunset!”

“But Grandad, what about Mum?” said David, his head swimming with confusion.

“Don’t worry about her. I’ll leave a note saying we’re just off for a few days and not to worry.”

“But is it safe?”

“Of course – you’ll have your old Grandad to look after you.”

“She’ll be worried. I don’t think I can do it Grandad.”

“She’ll be fine for a few days. I’ve worked extra

hard to make sure everything's up to date on the farm, and she's stronger than you think." He paused as if trying to understand David's concerns. "John from the next farm over is going to drop in and help her out. I cycled over yesterday to see him. She would want you to do this. Course she might not know that herself just yet."

"But she won't know where we are."

"I've left a note explaining everything. I promise it will be fine David. Leave the worrying to me."

"I don't know Grandad – can't we think about it?"

"No time to think," said Grandad with an excited quiver in his voice. "You'll just come up with an excuse not to go. Every kid should see a sunset at least once in their life – what else are we on this Earth for? Now get some sleep – we're off first thing before your mother is up. No arguments!"

And with that he was gone, leaving David alone with a flurry of different emotions – fear, excitement, nervousness and worry about his mother. But to see a sunset – surely there could be no question they had to at least try. He rolled over and closed his eyes. An image of a sky bright with colour filled his mind.

David did not get much sleep after that. He worried about his mother being left on her own. She seemed so lost these days as if all hope or desire to go on had faded from her. He could not remember the last time he had heard her laugh, and sometimes caught her quietly crying to herself. Sometime in the early hours of the morning he must have drifted off, but he was woken by his grandfather gently shaking him. He rubbed his eyes and looked around. The darkness had lessened slightly and he could see Grandad standing

by the bed looking more animated than ever before, dressed in a long, tatty coat and wide-brimmed hat. He had two packs at his feet.

“David, it’s time,” he whispered, barely holding back his excitement. “But be quiet – we don’t want to wake your mother.”

“Shouldn’t we tell her ...?”

“No, no. She won’t understand. You know how she worries.”

David felt he still had not made any decision about whether to go or not, but there did not seem to be any time to think as Grandad led him quickly out of the house and onto the lawn. It was not raining and David felt a sudden disappointment that a chance to delay things was gone, but also a growing sense of the adventure ahead.

“I’ve put some feed out for the animals, and I’m sure your mum will be all right for a few days. John next door can pop over to check on her and we’ll be back before you know it.” Grandad stopped and saw the uncertainty on David’s face. “I know you’re worried about her – I am too – but we have to do this, *I* have to do this. David, there’s got to be some beauty and life left in this world, and if there is I need to see it one more time before I meet my maker. I’d like you to come with me, but if you stay I’m still going.”

David could see that his grandfather meant to go through with it, and he did not know who needed him more – his mother or Grandad. He was suddenly worried about the old man being out there on his own. His grandfather was certainly stubborn enough to go off alone and rarely changed his mind once he had set it upon something, no matter how hare-brained an

idea it was, but sometimes David had a suspicion his grandfather was not as strong as he thought. It was a surprise to realize Grandad needed him.

“I’ll come then, if you really think it will be okay.”

“I can’t guarantee it won’t be dangerous David, but for the chance to see the glory of the sun lighting up the sky ... I’d cross a lake of fire to get there. All I can say is if I don’t make it back it will have been worth it just to see a sunset once more – to see what I used to take so much for granted. But of course we’ll make it back. I’ll make sure we do.” He looked sad and regretful. “If I could go back I’d watch every single one – all those sunsets I missed because I was stuck inside in front of the t.v. set. I’ll understand if you want to stay.”

Grandad’s words touched off some deep longing inside David and he felt the choice was no longer his. He too had to see the sun setting over the ocean, just once. He had to believe there was still one place untouched by all the sadness and emptiness he saw – one piece of beauty and goodness safely enduring the chaos around it. He supposed his grandfather was right and his mother would be fine. John could help out and Grandad was correct to think that if they told her of their plans they would never be allowed to go.

He smiled and looked at his grandad who was almost dancing with excitement like a young child.

“Okay. Let’s do it. Lead the way.”

“Good lad,” grinned Grandad. He disappeared into the barn and came out with an old, battered bike. “Here’s your steed cowboy – let’s ride off into the setting sun.” He went back in and came out on his own bicycle.

David put on his backpack and shrugged it into place. It was heavy and bulky and would take time to get used to. He mounted the bike, changed into a comfortable gear and began riding after Grandad down the farm track to the main road, fighting to stay on the saddle as they ploughed through the mud. It was a still, quiet morning, and only the cows and sheep seemed to be awake. A gleaming layer of moisture coated the land and wisps of mist clung like silk to the hillsides.

They followed the road as it wound its way between towering trees from where magpies called as they passed. Huge perching plants crouched on tree limbs and mosses, lichens and ferns coated every available space, or hung from the branches like hair. It seemed a wild and untamed place. Grandad was whistling and chuckling to himself with happiness, although at times he would stop and go quiet or even grimace as if in sudden pain. David felt a twinge of disquiet, as if there was something his grandad was hiding from him, but whenever he asked what was wrong the old man would grin and say it was just a bit of indigestion.

The road was easier going than the farm track had been, but in places the potholes and cracks made for a bumpy ride. Since the decline in use of the roads there was no need, desire or money to upkeep them and they were being left to go to ruin. They rode all morning past steep, bush-clad hills, stopping for sandwiches and cheese beside a creek. It grew very hot and humid and the sweat began to pour from them both. The landscape became less rugged and more pastoral, solid forest giving way to trees standing

alone or in clusters in the pastures. They passed a few farmhouses, occasionally stopping to talk with people and learn of the happenings in the wider world. Since they were still fairly close to their farm Grandad knew some of the farmers, and they were happy to chat. The news was not positive, and it seemed the army was trying to take over the government. There were riots in the city of Auckland as people tried to loot food from shops or fought over food rations and the Prime Minister was appealing for calm. At other times the people they met were unwilling to talk, merely nodding their heads or staring suspiciously. One woman did sell them some strips of bacon for their dinner, passing it over with grimy hands wrinkled from many years of labour.

Most of the farms were struggling to survive against the encroaching bush and wetlands. Often they cycled past large areas of swamp eating gradually into the forests and farms as the land became more and more saturated with water. At one point the road itself was flooded and they pushed their bikes through a wooded area ankle-deep in water, alongside a herd of cattle being moved to higher ground. The farmer driving them nodded in greeting as they passed but did not stop to chat. Later they skirted around the edge of a muddy bog that sucked at their shoes, carrying their bikes awkwardly. Sometimes they could see what was left where a forest had been gradually drowned. Dead trunks and branches protruded from the murky waters like gnarled fingers. Elsewhere lakes and ponds had formed in fields and valleys. Often trees fringed the ponds and stroked the surface of the water with their leaves, and David thought they looked very beautiful.

“You used to hear frogs croaking from places like these,” reminisced Grandad. A duck kept its distance and watched them warily from among the lily pads and bulrushes. David smiled, thinking he would love to have seen or heard a frog.

“Shame they became extinct,” sighed Grandad to himself. “Actually we lost a lot of precious stuff – kiwis, dolphins. Of course we still have damn cockroaches! They say they’ll out-live us all. Fancy that – roaches ruling the world!”

“I would like to have seen a kiwi or a dolphin, just once.”

“Yes, they used to call *us* kiwis.”

“Us?”

“Yes us – New Zealanders. But not since they all died out. Now we’re just plain ‘New Zealanders’.”

“Why did they die?”

“Everything’s finely balanced in nature, like a house of cards,” explained Grandad. “Take away an important enough card and the whole thing collapses. They all depend on the others. I guess we just took away too many cards.”

“People can be so stupid.”

“Well, it’s easy to judge after the fact, but most people couldn’t see much further than their own noses. Not until the weather changed that is.”

“So it got much wetter?”

“Some places did, like here. Others had terrible droughts like in Aussie, or over on the East Coast. The only common thread was more extreme weather – more floods, more droughts, more cyclones. Some places even got colder, not warmer – like England. The Gulf Stream that kept their climate mild was all

messed up. ”

“Did the floods cause the sea to go up?”

“No,” chuckled Grandad. “That would be one helluva flood. The ice caps at the poles melted and the higher temperatures caused the seawater to expand. It was a lot greater than everyone expected. If you lived on the coast you were toast.” He grinned at his rhyming.

It all seemed too incredible to believe – that people could be so short-sighted. A wave of sadness at what had been lost washed over David. It was much worse for Grandad, who had seen first-hand what was now gone, and had known the world of plenty before the house of cards came tumbling down.

I did it. I got away from the horrible men and the lady. I waited until the morning and pulled the board away and squeezed through. I almost got stuck but it was just big enough. Then I went under the fence and ran as fast as I could. I didn't know where I was going and a dog began to bark. That made the woman come out and she started to yell and chased me. But I ran into some trees and she couldn't find me. I could hear her shouting bad words.

I ran until I was really tired. I found an old barn and went inside. There was a big pile of hay so I climbed on top.

I feel really sleepy. I will just sleep for a while, until I think of what to do next...

3

Ghost Town

THE NEW ZEALAND HERALD: September 29, 2046. Tonga abandoned to the sea: The evacuation of Tonga was completed this week as the last villagers were boarded onto boats for New Zealand. Rising sea levels claimed the low-lying islands in the group several years ago, but some Tongans had remained on E'ua and Vava'u. Although these islands remain habitable, a series of devastating cyclones and the relocation of the Tongan Government to New Zealand have forced all remaining Tongans to be removed for their own safety...

N.Z. CAR MONTHLY: March 3, 2038. ...the new Volt-Wagon from Volkswagen, the world's most powerful electric car! Charged from your solar charger or mains power (where available), with GPS navigation and CAAR (Computerized Accident Avoidance and Recovery)...

They passed through a few small towns. In the first one the people in the street stared blankly at them, although Grandad was fairly well-known there. This was where he came once or twice a month with the cart to stock up on supplies. Grandad was not a regular visitor to the next town and the reception was

much colder. Suspicion and fear showed on the faces of the people, and no words were spoken. Each pair of eyes seemed to burn, as if accusing them of trespassing on some hallowed ground. As they cycled through they cast their own nervous glances around them.

Later they came to an abandoned ghost town. As they approached the first ramshackle houses they were aware of entering a strange, eerie stillness, as if the heavy air was suffocating all life and sound. David pulled his jacket closer around his thin shoulders to ward off a sudden chill. The buildings stood like a grim parade of dissolution and decay, rotting timbers sprouting patches of dank moss and lichen like cancerous growths. Windows and doors were broken and hung with jagged, glassy teeth, opening beyond into dim rooms that seemed to suck at the light. Walls and roofs crumbled from neglect, and branches poked from the gaps and holes seeking escape from the darkness within. The gardens were no better – fences and gates had been swallowed by a green, chaotic tide of weeds and scruffy grasses that rose up the sides of the houses as if fighting to get in. One building was a burned-out skeleton with just a frame of charred timbers and no roof. Another had a top floor that was completely open on one side.

Grandad reached into the weeds at his feet and pulled out something, hooting with pleasure. “Look, potatoes!” he bragged. “Must have been an old vegie patch.”

David smiled, but felt as empty as the streets. They looked through the shops, forcing their way into a grocery store through a broken window-frame. The

name of the shop was written across a board dangling above the doorway, but the letters had faded and peeled as if all memory of the life and activity that once dwelled within was slowly being erased. They rummaged around among the rubbish, looking for food that had not spoiled. A choking shroud of dust wrapped itself around them, and the pools of darkness seemed to move and pulsate like living things. Grandad lifted some broken furniture and pieces of wood aside, and dug among the splinters and paper below. He found two cans of baked beans and a pack of cards; a small smile of triumph played across his face. David felt uneasy, as if some malevolent presence did not want them there. He found himself looking around nervously and watching the shadows, alert for any noise or movement.

A dark shape darted towards him and he froze, his ears ringing as his senses responded. A rat ran across his feet and disappeared into a crevice. He released his breath and tried to relax as his heart continued to pound.

“I don’t like it in here Grandad,” he said.

“What? Oh, yeah, I guess you’re right,” said Grandad, suddenly mindful of his grandson’s discomfort. “We’ll press on in a mo – just let me look through a couple more rooms.” He brushed aside the spider webs guarding a doorway and went inside. David could hear Grandad’s boots shuffling through the dust and debris, grinding glass and litter underfoot. His grandfather emerged clasping another couple of cans. Their labels had worn off long ago.

“These will be a lucky dip I’m afraid,” he smiled.

They retreated outside, glad to be wrapped once

more in light and warmth. David felt particularly relieved, as if he had intruded into some forbidden place where time was frozen. Grandad seemed to read his thoughts and a sympathetic smile lit up his face.

“Bit creepy in there wasn’t it. I’m happy to be out in the open again,” and he pretended to shiver as if some spirit had just passed by.

David grinned, and looked around the quiet streets. The dusty road was pockmarked with holes and furrows and choked here and there with weeds encroaching from the verges. He suddenly thought it was sad rather than scary. These had once been homes and gardens, filled with laughing children and voices and music drifting across the streets. What happened to all those people? Where did they go? Had they left for the cities and communal farms, or died in some epidemic or natural disaster?

Suddenly a loud crash sliced into the silence. It came from a nearby house and Grandad and David both stared at each other, scarcely daring to breathe.

“What was that?” asked David nervously.

“Don’t know, but it certainly wasn’t a rat.”

“It might be a person. Perhaps there’s somebody hiding here.”

“Probably just some rubbish shifting. It could be anything.”

“Maybe someone is hurt,” offered David.

Grandad looked doubtful. “If it is a person, it would be best not to disturb them.”

“But they could be injured. They may need our help. If they meant us harm surely they would have shown themselves by now.”

“You might be right I suppose,” said Grandad. He

seemed to be won over by David's logic. He eyed the doorway nervously and began to edge slowly towards it. "Stay behind me though." His voice seemed thin and quiet, as if it had crept out of his mouth without his knowing.

David moved to stand behind his grandfather, trying to make no sound. As they stepped towards the door he leaned forwards and put one hand lightly on the small of Grandad's back.

Grandad jumped and whirled around with a gasp, before composing himself again. "Just stay a bit farther back my boy," he whispered hoarsely.

David stepped back with a look of apology. They inched their way through the doorway and peered into the darkness within, waiting for their eyes to adjust. All was silent.

David found himself tugging on Grandad's sleeve again, much to the old man's annoyance.

"I think there's no one in here," he said.

From behind a pile of jagged wood and scattered books came another sound. Part of the pile slipped and a book fell to the floor with a thump.

They froze and looked at each other, their faces ghastly and pale.

"Grandad?" gasped David.

"It's all right, probably just the wind."

"What wind?"

There was a second, much louder report that made them jump, and the whole pile of debris collapsed in a cloud of dust. David couldn't help letting out a thin, desperate shriek, and his fingers tightened on his grandfather's sleeve so that the old man groaned and pulled at David's fingers.

“Just settle down – you’ll give me a heart attack,” he grumbled.

The dust began to part and a small black and white form materialized. David took a deep breath at last and smiled. It was a dog – a border collie, thin and bony with ribs like the timbers of an old shipwreck showing beneath a matted coat.

“I think it’s a stray,” said David.

“You’re probably right. Perhaps it was left behind when people deserted this place.”

“Can he come with us?”

“Don’t be daft! We’ve barely got enough to feed ourselves. Anyway, it’s a stray – they follow their own rules. He wouldn’t come just because you called him.”

Still there was something in the glassy sadness of its eyes and its pathetic posture that tugged at David. It looked frightened and hungry. From its bowed head to its tail curled like a tattered hairbrush between its legs the dog looked a picture of neglect.

“Can’t it come with us? Please?”

“No David. I told you, it won’t stay with us. There’s nothing we can do for it. If it is still alive it must be getting food somehow. Now let’s come away,” said Grandad gruffly.

David knew his grandfather was right, but still felt leaving the dog there was some terrible act of abandonment. They returned outside, shouldered their packs and climbed onto their bikes.

A small, furry face, smeared with saliva and dust, appeared at the door. “Just ignore,” said Grandad. “We can’t help it lad.”

Glumly David lifted himself from his seat and put

his weight onto the pedals, and his bike began to move with a chorus of creaks and groans. He followed as his grandfather rode juddering in his seat, down the cratered road. It was slow going with the surface in such poor condition, and it became so hot and humid their clothes grew heavy with sweat. Flies began to pester their faces, seeking the perspiration that glistened there, and David's muscles set up a persistent protest.

The day grew hotter as they continued, the sun beating at them in an unforgiving crescendo of heat. It sucked moisture from the sodden ground to clothe the hillsides in mist. Cattle and sheep sought shade beneath the scattered clumps of trees dotting the fields. Beyond, hills reared their hulking backs to the sky, sometimes darkly forested but other times naked and green or scarred by erosion. The hills were becoming smaller and more rounded, lacking the height and steepness of their own valley.

They saw few other people on the road – some cyclists who waved but said nothing and an electric car that shot past in a cloud of dust. It seemed to pass deliberately close and Grandad almost lost control of his bike. He muttered silent curses after it. Later they passed a man riding a horse-drawn cart laden with goods to sell in the towns they had come through. Grandad stopped to say hello and the man gave them an apple each from his cart.

As they cycled on David happened to glance back and noticed a shaggy form following some distance behind. Occasionally it left the road to disappear into the roadside bushes. The dog must have followed them all the way from the town.

“It’s been on our tail for some time,” remarked Grandad. “Seems to have taken a liking to us.”

“I’m glad it’s not there all by itself anymore,” said David. “I hope it stays with us.”

“Well, I don’t know how long it will stick around. Until it loses interest in us I guess. It’s keeping its distance at the moment – just making sure where we are.”

“I’m going to call him Toby.”

“Good lad. Toby it is,” laughed Grandad.

Toby continued to follow behind, although later he disappeared into a clump of trees and did not emerge. After an hour they saw him again a short distance behind. He was intent on investigating the various smells to be found along the roadside, but would look up every now and then as if to check on them. Grandad stopped and threw some meat on the ground behind him. Toby wolfed it down hungrily, and David knew his grandfather had been won over.

“Poor old thing,” Grandad muttered.

From then on Toby seemed to be a regular presence, sometimes gone following the dictates of some secret urge of his own, sometimes running just behind and once even appearing ahead, having discovered some alternative course. David found the sight of the dog comforting and looked forward to each reappearance. As the day progressed Toby grew bolder, until by late afternoon he was quite happy to lope along beside them in long strides, tongue flapping from the side of his mouth. They began to have confidence that when he disappeared he would rejoin them farther down the road when he was ready.

That evening Grandad decided it was best to camp

well off the road, and they crossed some fields to set up beside a gurgling stream, at the edge of the bush. David collected wood for a fire from the forest. The last two days were dry and hot, and enough wood had dried to get a small blaze started with some matches. Grandad showed David how to set the fire – finer material at the bottom and heavier on top, placed within a circle of stones from the stream. David hung a billycan of water from a stick over the flames while Grandad put up a tent large enough for them both.

Toby approached, cautiously at first but with growing boldness, and lay down about ten metres away from the fire. He looked at them as if to check he had not crossed some forbidden boundary, and when no protests were forthcoming edged closer inch by inch as the evening went on. Each time he would look up to see what the response was before placing his head back onto his outstretched paws.

Grandad tossed him some scraps of food, which were greedily swallowed. The dog looked up, eyes pleading for more and David laughed, throwing across a slice of his own preserved meat.

“He sure does have an appetite,” he said.

Grandad disappeared into the bush and came back with an armful of leaves, some broad and tough with a furry, white underside.

“If nature calls you’ll have to go in the bush,” he warned. “This is rangiora leaf – what they used to call ‘Bushman’s Friend’. Very useful for cleaning up when you’ve finished, if you know what I mean. These others are ngaio. Rub them on your skin and they’ll keep the mozzies away. The manuka we’ll stick in with our tea.”

David was amazed that every need could be met by something in the bush. Grandad knew so much about how to survive out here and was clearly relishing passing it on to someone else.

It was a cool, still evening and David began to think that perhaps he did not need to go all the way to the sea to find some beauty in the world. His grandfather put a line down in the stream and began to cook some potatoes and fry bacon for the main course. "If we're lucky we might have some eel to go with this," he said.

There was no eel but the potatoes and bacon were filling enough, followed by some tea and biscuits. David lay on his blanket feeling full and satisfied, but tired from the day's cycling. The soothing trill of crickets came from the bushes and a more pork called from a tall rimu tree nearby. The gentle hiss of light rain in the forest canopy made them move to the tent, and they huddled inside as it drifted down, looking out at a sparkling curtain of droplets. Toby moved off to find shelter. After a short while it stopped and Grandad revived the fire. The biggest challenge was finding more dry wood, but he seemed to have a knack.

Toby came back to reclaim his spot, perilously close to the fire. Now and then embers would pounce from the flames to lie glowing and pulsating in stark orange and red near him. He would eye them suspiciously but did not move.

There was a timeless quality to the evening and a feeling of gratitude and peace filled David. Even the presence of Toby seemed essential. He wished he could save the moment and bottle it to put on a shelf for some future day. He looked across at his

grandfather's face which was lit by the flickering light of the fire, and he too seemed relaxed and happy. David knew his grandfather had often camped out as a young man and this must have been like a trip into the past for him.

As if reading his thoughts Grandad said, "I haven't done this for a long time – too long." He sighed and prodded the fire with a stick, causing sparks to dance and crackle among the glowing embers. "Perhaps there are too many things we've let be forgotten. Every now and then you need to get into the wild places of the world or else you go mad."

He looked suddenly pensive and seemed to be mesmerized by the flames for a while, or perhaps he was just lost in his thoughts. "Your dad used to love it in the bush too, especially when he was a young tacker. I'd take him in there all the time, and your grandma wouldn't sleep a wink for worry till we came back." He grinned, his smile softened by the warmth of the memory. "He could name every bird from its call, build a bivvy that would stay dry at the bottom of the sea, and cook up some mean bush tucker. He would have loved it here – would have loved sharing it with you." He grew quiet and stared into the flames, idly stirring them with the stick.

From his coat Grandad pulled a harmonica and began to play a catchy but mournful melody that seemed to suit the evening and was broken only by the occasional angry swipe at a sandfly.

"What's that?" asked David.

"It's by one of my favourite groups," said Grandad. Once you started him talking he could be hard to stop, and a bright quality lifted his voice, making it shine

above the crackling of the fire. “The Beatles!”

“Beetles?” laughed David.

“Oh bands had all sorts of funny names: The Porridge Freaks, The Flexible Pockets – even some your young ears are still too delicate to hear. But it was ‘Beatles’ with an ‘a’. They were a bit before my time, back in the Twentieth Century, but still very popular when I was a young man. I don’t think they were ever surpassed. In a way they came from a more innocent time. People called them ‘the Fab Four’ because there were four of them – John, Paul, George and Ringo.”

“The Fab Four,” said David, as if trying out the name. “I like it.”

“Yep, me too. The Fab Four and Bach, they are my favourites. Musical geniuses.”

“Bach? Was that another group?”

“No, Johann Sebastian Bach – the composer. You’ve heard his music on the radio. *The Brandenburg Concertos*, ‘Jesu Joy of Man’s Desiring’.”

“Oh, yeah.” said David. His grandad often called him over to listen to music on the radio and he could not specifically recall who was who – Mozart, Bach or Beethoven – but he had come to share his grandfather’s love of classical music. It was as Grandad had said – it seemed to speak from a simpler, less complicated era, with a beauty that transcended time.

“Grandad, why didn’t people try to stop the world warming up?” he asked.

His grandfather stopped playing and looked surprised, as if the question had broken a spell and let the real world back in. He settled into place to start

one of his long monologues. “Well I guess some people had been warning for a long time about what was happening but there seemed to be a collective desire among most to ignore it all and believe it might go away, or perhaps hope it would be delayed enough that it became someone else’s problem. But eventually there were lots more floods and droughts and epidemics of diseases, and the disaster that was happening couldn’t be ignored any longer. By then it was too late. Governments all over the world banned cars running on petrol engines or introduced non-polluting engines that had been around for some time but ignored. Industries looked at alternative fuels and cleaner practices. But the damage had already been done. The climate change that was set in motion had too much momentum and when pollution levels finally dropped there were still decades of warming left from what had already been pumped into the atmosphere. If only we’d listened earlier, but I think the damage came from centuries of pollution. It had been a long time in the making.”

“That’s sad.” said David, wondering how people could be so blind to what was going on. “Maybe they felt it was a problem bigger than them and it was up to bigger people to fix, and so everybody just did nothing.”

“Maybe so,” said his grandfather quietly. “The stresses on society were too great and things collapsed pretty quickly. Not overnight of course, but fast enough that you could see what was happening and feel powerless to stop it. Economies failed when families could no longer afford basic things, oil ran out and countries couldn’t trade any more. People

began to fight over limited resources like land and water. That's always a recipe for war."

"There was a war?"

"Not a big one like before, but lots of little ones, especially where refugees were fleeing from some area ravaged by drought or floods into another. The folk already there are hardly going to welcome them with open arms."

"Even here in New Zealand?"

"We were spared the worst of it thankfully. People here have always been pretty accepting of each other but they were sorely tested. Plenty of riots and clamp-downs by the government, curfews and mass arrests. Africa was the worst hit. It was really awful there. And now – well I haven't heard news from Africa for a long time." Grandad gazed sadly at the fire.

He began to play the harmonica again and the music seemed to have even more regret and longing than before. David lay down to listen and eventually fell asleep on his blanket under the open sky as his grandfather played late into the night.

*...so tired, I feel like I could sleep forever...
...it's cosy here. I like it ... the smell of hay, the sound
of the wind...
...and something else ... voices, coming closer...
...I hope it isn't them. Please don't let it be them...*

4

Sophie

*THE NEW ZEALAND HERALD: August 2, 2032.
Cincinnati falls to the South: As the Second American Civil War continues to spiral out of control, the SCC (Southern Christian Coalition) has claimed to have secured the city of Cincinnati from its US (United States) rival...*

*TARANAKI DAILY NEWS: December 20, 2053.
(classifieds) ...Johnson's Solar Converter and Wind Turbine – 2 energy sources in 1! Roof mounted! Easy to install. Free organic farming kit when you order before August 1...*

They knew the town was a bad place as soon as they saw its first grubby houses brooding on the low hills. There was a tangible malady infecting the air, eating at the withered boards of the homes and written across the faces of the young men who scampered away as they approached. Farther along the deserted main street they became aware of a noise in the distance. They slowed on their bikes, sensing some disturbance ahead, but unwilling to turn from the main road into the wild, disordered growth that lay wrapped around the town. David could feel his muscles tensing as

anxiety took hold. Around the next corner they sighted a group of a dozen or so people in the middle of the road, heaving and thrashing around like a single organism. There seemed to be some sort of commotion; voices were raised in an angry chorus and they were gathered around something or someone. With growing fear David realized a person on the ground was being attacked with fists and feet. Other men and women were running in to join the group, apparently to add voice and body to the crowd's savage dance.

Grandad stopped his bike and put a foot to the ground. "Hold here David," he cautioned. "We don't want to get involved in this." David could hear the fear in his grandfather's voice.

But it was too late. Two large forms darted towards them from the sides of the street and suddenly a man had his hands clasped firmly on David's handlebars, so he was forced to stop.

A craggy, unshaven face was thrust towards him – the man looked crazed, overtaken by some dark fury. Spittle mingled with the dirt smudged across his cheeks as he wrestled with the bike until David was thrown to the ground. He looked up to see the man poised over him as if ready to strike; Grandad had also been knocked off his bike and lay exposed on the ground. Two shouting figures closed on the old man, and David thought he had never seen Grandad look so scared. Feet lashed out, then fists and he heard a desperate yelp.

David's own attacker was still frozen as if filled with a wild energy that had temporarily paralysed him. The man's fists were clenched, his limbs trembled and

shook and a horrible menace burned in his eyes.

“Don’t try and run, you’re not going anywhere,” the man growled from between his teeth.

David had abandoned himself to a keener fear than he had ever felt before; he was frozen, immobilized by it, even as he saw his grandfather disappear beneath the blows of the growing band of attackers. There seemed to be people all around now, and more running in all the time, swirling around him in some mad, confused mass, each figure seeming to blur and melt into the next. He tried to fix his gaze on one face, catching a quick glimpse of an angry snarl or stabbing eyes and then it would be wrenched away to be replaced by another. Furious voices shouted at him but he could no longer make out what they were saying. He did not know what had set off the crowd or whether the people saw him and his grandfather as a genuine threat. Perhaps they had just been unlucky enough to get caught up in the mob’s violence. He had never been so scared, and looked around frantically for Grandad.

David could not see him, but he had to worry more immediately about his own survival. A sudden sharp pain in his chest was followed by a jarring blow to his leg – he was being beaten and he could not even see who it was by. He put his arms up to protect his head and just in time – other blows landed on his arms but glanced off. Some landed harmlessly on the pack. He crawled into a ball as further fists and feet pelted his body. He was terrified, for himself and his grandfather. He imagined what Grandad would say to do in order to stay safe – *just cover up, ride it out, don’t fight back*. It surprised him that amid such mayhem he

could create a small core of clarity and focus. *Stay low, protect the head. Wait for your opportunity.*

Then he found it. The people around him were momentarily distracted by some other target, and a window seemed to open in the circle of tangled arms and bodies. David forced himself painfully to his feet and dove for the gap, finding himself forgotten for the moment as the people focused their intent upon those still on the ground. One of those being attacked was his grandfather. He could see Grandad's arms thrown up in a desperate attempt to ward off the blows. The tattered raincoat was drawn across his body like a protective cloak and his pack gave him some protection, but David knew Grandad must be suffering and was in grave danger.

He felt a moment of helplessness – of terror that froze him in place. He was at the mercy of the crowd, tugged here and there by currents of frantic motion. Eventually he was brought within reach of Grandad.

He looked down. His grandfather was right before him, covering his face between blows and groaning with each that landed on his head. His wispy hair was flung across his forehead and blood was smeared over his cheeks. The old man looked up, a frightened, helpless look on his face. For a moment David saw fear glistening in Grandad's eyes as if he thought his grandson was also about to beat him. It made David ache with sadness that this could be done to someone he loved. Then Grandad's face hardened into a fierce look of determination as he realized who was there beside him. It seemed to spur him into action.

“Help me up boy!” he shouted and David offered his arm. His grandfather lurched to his feet, seemingly

unconcerned now by the blows being thrown upon him by the crowd. The people seemed newly maddened as if angry they might get away, and David felt one or two elbows and arms digging into his side. The mob's voice rose to a piercing shriek. With a huge effort Grandad dragged them both forwards and staggered away from the crowd. An arm flashed towards them and connected with the side of David's head – his ears rang and his vision blurred and for a moment he thought he might fall. They ran as fast as bruised limbs would allow – another couple of punches dug harshly into his shoulder. But thankfully they were away; the crowd seemed to have turned back to those still lying on the ground and lost interest in them. The bikes had disappeared.

David supported his grandfather while they walked quickly away from the main area of violence where the crowd still surged back and forth in brutal synchrony. Other people stood on the periphery, some looking scared or horrified, while others watched with greedy pleasure. Grandad flashed them a furious look as he passed. They hobbled down the street, the harsh sounds of the mob falling away behind them. The town was small and soon they passed the last of the homes and were safe enough to rest on a fallen log beside the road.

Grandad looked menacingly back towards the centre of town. "Animals!" he growled. "These people have no dignity anymore!" He took a deep breath and composed himself, grimacing at the pain of his bruises. "Are you all right David?"

"Yes I'm fine Grandad."

"Hurt?"

“Just a few bruises. I’ll be fine. How about you?”

“Well I can’t say I enjoyed it but yeah I’ll survive.” David lifted up his grandfather’s shirt and gasped at the angry bruises he saw underneath. He tried to examine them further.

“It’s worse than it looks. Don’t fuss now,” Grandad reprimanded. David reached into his pack and brought out the first aid kit, using antiseptic to clean the wound on Grandad’s head and covering it with a plaster. He himself was not hurt too badly physically, but inside he felt a raw pain at how helpless and afraid he had been. If Grandad had not helped him he could have been killed. For the moment he could not look his grandfather in the eye.

“Should we go back to look for the bikes Grandad?”

“Too dangerous. No we’ll have to give them up as lost. Probably carted away by some scoundrel. I’m lucky to still have my hat. Now let’s have a look at you.” Grandad gestured at David’s shirt. David lifted it up to show a couple of bruises. His left temple had also swollen into a sizeable bump.

Grandad’s face fell and he sighed. “I’m so sorry lad,” he breathed softly. “This wouldn’t have happened if I hadn’t brought you out here.”

David had never seen his grandfather look so frail and vulnerable. “Really I’m fine Grandad,” he reassured. “Just a few bruises. They will heal in time.”

“If your mother could see us now she’d give me a right old tongue-lashing.”

David looked at his forlorn grandfather, afraid to ask the question he knew he must.

“We’re not going back, are we?” he said after a pause.

There was an even longer delay before Grandad spoke. For a while he just gazed into the distance, then his eyes swung towards David. “I can’t put you in any more danger. I shouldn’t have brought you out this far.”

“But we’ll be okay. It was just bad luck.” The prospect of abandoning the journey seemed almost as bad as that of another attack, and David felt he was fighting for the survival of the trip. The fear and shame of before was forgotten. “Please Grandad.”

“I don’t know – it’s not safe out here. We should have stayed on the farm.”

“But it’s just as unsafe to go back as forwards. And don’t you want to see the sunset? You said everyone should see it – that you wanted to see one more ...”

“Yeah, but not at the risk of a beating. Look, I know you’ve got your heart set on it now, but perhaps it was just a bad idea. Maybe when things settle down or you’re a bit older we could try again.”

“But I might never get to go if we leave it, or you might not be around to take me ...”

Grandad looked up sharply as if David had said something he shouldn’t have. “Course I will. I’ll make sure you get to see one.”

His voice seemed to lack conviction and David wondered if he was wavering.

“It was just that one town. It was bad luck,” David continued. “We could be more careful and listen out for trouble – avoid towns if they look unsafe and go around through the fields.”

“We don’t have the bikes anymore David.”

“I don’t mind walking.”

“It’ll take an age.”

“But we’ve come so far.”

Grandad looked at his feet. He sighed and mopped his brow, fingers stroking the cut on his forehead gently. “I just don’t know. We’ve come so far it would be quite a haul back anyway. I suppose it might make more sense to carry on. I’ve got a friend not so far away who might be able to give us a couple of bikes or even horses. Actually she’s the widow of one of my oldest mates and it’s about time I called on her. We’ll need the bikes really to get back. Her name is Jan and she has a farm called Greenacres. A good lady.”

David could tell Grandad was desperately trying to justify continuing. The main battle was won – his grandfather wanted to go on.

“And once we have those new bikes we might not even be that much longer. I suppose it is the wisest option. But by crikey your mother will thrash me over her knee when she finds out. I’d rather face that mob again.”

“The bruises will be gone by then,” said David with a smile, “and if not we’ll say we fell down a bank.”

“What, both of us?” laughed Grandad.

“Yeah.”

“Okay, you’ve convinced me. Let’s hope I don’t live to regret it. It’s going to be tougher for a while until we get those bikes. I reckon we won’t get there till tomorrow.”

“It’s okay. I’m happy to walk.”

“Well then, let’s get away from this damn town and rest properly farther up the road.”

“Good idea.”

David looked back at where they had been. It was

quiet now, almost peaceful, with no sign of the sickness at its heart. He turned and followed his grandfather down the road, walking gingerly as he tested sore limbs and made aching muscles move.

“Sure did give me a fright though,” Grandad muttered. He turned to David with a grin. “And by the way thanks. I might have been toast if you hadn’t got me out of there.”

David smiled but his grandfather’s words did not take away the sense he had somehow failed. His fear had made him powerless. Grandad seemed proud of him anyway.

“My hero!” the old man squealed in a girlish falsetto. He burst out laughing and the sudden effort took the strength out of his legs. He collapsed to the ground and rolled around there, laughing even harder in surprise. David threw himself on top of his grandfather and they both hugged and rolled around in a fit of hysterics. After a long time the laughter subsided and they sat in the middle of the road, their bodies shaking with the occasional persistent giggle. They felt drained but happy.

“Hah,” chuckled Grandad. “Ages since I’ve had such a good laugh.” It had been mostly due to a sense of relief rather than the clowning around. The release of tension seemed to have soothed aching muscles and revitalized spirits. David knew they had made the right decision to carry on. He spied Toby trotting up the road towards them.

“Look who’s turned up now the coast is clear,” complained Grandad.

*

Being forced to walk would make the journey to the coast a more challenging prospect. After walking for a while Grandad stopped to rest on an old stump and dragged his hat from his head. He scratched his chin with grubby fingers and sighed.

“It will be longer now, maybe a few more days,” he said. “Your mum’ll worry a bit, but after coming this far I’m loath to go back. Call me a stubborn old goat. Do you still think we made the right choice?”

David certainly did not want his mother to worry, but he knew he was unlikely to get this far again and this might be his only chance to get to the coast. Somehow seeing the beauty of a sunset seemed worth causing his mother a day or two of concern.

“I think so. I really don’t want to go back either.”

“Good lad. I know you worry about Mum, but she’s a tough old girl – don’t be fooled. John’ll help out, and she knows you have me to look out for you. She will just think we’ve decided to stay on a day or two longer.”

“I agree Grandad. This is too important. I want to make it to the coast more than anything and I might never get this chance again. Already I’ve seen and learned so much – the farm seems like such a small part of the world. Let’s go on.”

“It’s agreed then. How’re those bruises?”

“What bruises?”

“Ha, good on you lad.”

Another hour of journeying brought them to a valley. They could see the road disappearing into a silvery sheet of water that stretched across it, swallowing the pine forest filling the valley floor. The trees rose

straight and tall from the water. There was a figure sitting by the road alongside a couple of wooden rowboats. A horse grazed nearby next to a cart. As they approached they realized there would be no getting across this flooded section on foot. Toby stopped and sniffed the rowboats.

“Hi there,” said the man, getting to his feet. “This section of road is flooded but you can hire a boat to get across. Only fifty dollars.”

Grandad cringed at the price. “Is there no other way over?”

“The water should drop in a couple of days but until then this is the only way across mate.”

“Very well then. Good to see the entrepreneurial spirit is still alive, I suppose. What do we do with the boat?”

“My son will collect it on the other side.”

“Fine. Here then.”

“We would have been stuck with the bikes here anyway, Grandad,” said David.

“Small comfort.”

“Thanks,” said the boat-keeper. “You’re my first customers of the day. Perhaps the only ones too, and I need the money. My family can eat tonight now.”

“Glad we could help then.” Grandad seemed to mean it too.

They pushed the boat into the water and put in the packs before climbing aboard.

“Come on Toby,” called Grandad. Toby looked unsure but eventually jumped in as if reluctant to be left behind. He sat at the bow with his tongue hanging out. The man pushed them off and they rowed underneath the pines into a dimly lit and silent world.

David thought it looked quite magical with the water lying still and dark around the tree trunks and columns of light shining through the branches to touch the surface. Grandad rowed where he imagined the road to be but it was not always clear and David wondered if they were lost.

“I know where I’m going,” said Grandad, sensing his concern. “I’m keeping the sun in the same position so I stay on the right track.”

“I’m learning so much on this trip.”

“That’s the idea.”

“Toby’s loving it!”

It was a pleasant trip with the gentle lapping of the water and rich pine scent, but soon they appeared out the other side of the flooded forest and into a swamp. They rowed past clumps of reeds and lily pads to where the road resumed. A teenage boy collected the boat and drew it up alongside another.

“Cheers mate,” said Grandad.

“No worries.”

They continued on past more farms carved from the bush, but the hungry forest was reclaiming what it had lost piece by piece. In one broad field they found a decrepit old barn, the rotted timbers barely holding up the roof, and decided to rest awhile inside as some light rain approached.

It was still and dark within the barn. Shafts of light slipped through holes in the corrugated iron roof and shimmered in dust-speckled bands before them. The dirt floor was fairly dry, and rusty implements leaned against the walls or lay scattered on the ground. Cobwebs draped across the corners like wreaths, beaded with drops of gleaming moisture. On one side

of the barn a bank of hay climbed the wall.

They found a spot near the door and pressed their backs against the timbers. Grandad took out some apples and bread, and cut off a slice. He spread it thickly with butter and passed it over to David.

“Here you go. We’ll use up the butter before it goes off.”

“Thanks.”

As they began to eat David became aware of a sound. At first he could not place it but he grew convinced it came from the pile of hay on the far side of the barn.

“Grandad, do you hear that?”

“What?”

“That noise. It’s coming from over in the hay.”

“I can’t hear anything.”

“There, it sounds like a moaning. I’m not imagining it.”

“My old ears aren’t as good as yours. Are you sure?”

“Yes, there it is again.” David strained his ears and heard it once more – a soft repetitive sound like a chicken perhaps. No, more like a person, like a child – a child who was sobbing. Yes, that was it – the sound of a young child in tears.

“Someone’s crying,” he said. “A kid!”

“Yes, I hear it now and you’re right – it’s over in the hay.”

They got up and approached the sound, hearing it more clearly as they climbed through the tangled pile. On the top lay a small girl with her head buried into the sleeves of a grubby coat. She shook with the force of her sobs.

“My God, it *is* a kid,” breathed Grandad.

“Why is she crying – is she hurt?”

“Dunno.”

The girl raised a grubby face to look at them. Tears traced their way down her smooth, rounded cheeks. She was perhaps 5 or 6 and of Asian descent, her glossy black hair tangled and entwined with strands of hay.

“It’s okay – we won’t hurt you,” said David, surprised at himself for taking the lead while Grandad seemed momentarily stunned. “What’s your name?”

“Sophie,” said the girl in a frail, thin voice. She appeared frightened and unsure of them, and David wondered how a young child had come to be there alone. Did she live nearby or had she been abandoned or become lost? Perhaps her parents had been killed. She looked like she had been living rough for a while.

“Come down from there and we’ll give you some food,” said Grandad, taking charge once more. “There’s nothing to be afraid of.”

Sophie’s initial fear seemed to have been replaced by relief and gratitude at finding helpful strangers and she climbed down from the hay and followed them over to the packs. She sat disconsolately in the corner, and though the crying had stopped she still looked miserable.

“Here you go,” said David, offering some bread and cold meat. Sophie took the food and began to chew on it slowly, eyes nervously searching their faces.

“How did you come to be here?” asked Grandad in a gentle voice. “Where are your parents?”

“I ran away,” she said. “There were bad people.”

“Where are Mum and Dad?” persisted Grandad.

Sophie shrugged her thin shoulders and her face screwed up in misery. “I don’t know.”

“Do you live around here?” asked David.

Sophie shook her head.

“Where do you live? Where do Mum and Dad come from?” he coaxed.

“Wanganui.”

“Wanganui!” exclaimed Grandad. “That’s miles away. You’re a long way from home. What’s your address?”

Another shrug.

“How did you get here?” David asked.

“A man and a woman grabbed me when I was lost at the shops. They put me in a car and took me to a farm. They made me work all day growing things.”

An expression of horror passed over Grandad and the colour began to drain from his face.

“Were there any other kids there?”

“Yes. But I didn’t know any of them. They didn’t talk to me much.”

“How long ago was this?”

Sophie shrugged again. “I can’t remember.”

Grandad turned to David, a solemn expression on his face. “I think she’s been kidnapped. I’ve heard about this happening before. They snatch kids and put them to work on farms – lock them up and sometimes charge ransoms. Probably growing drugs. It’s been on the radio.”

“Why don’t they run away?”

“Well this one just did. But these farms are pretty well hidden in the bush. The kids have nowhere to go. No wonder the cops haven’t been able to find many.”

“What do we do?”

“Let’s take her with us for now. Can’t leave her here.”

“Should we go back to the farm then?” David felt a sudden fear this might be the end of the trip to the coast but he cursed himself for putting his own needs before the welfare of a lost child.

“No, we’ll go on. We’ll take her to the city and drop her off at the nearest police station. That’s the smartest thing to do. I don’t fancy taking her to any of the farmhouses round here. We don’t know who is safe and who isn’t. Perhaps some of these people are in on what’s going on. No, she’s safest with us.”

He turned to Sophie and lowered himself to her level, softening his voice. His face relaxed into a warm smile. “Is that okay? If you come with us we will take you somewhere safe. You might need to spend a night or two camping out in the bush but we’ll get you to the police and they will take good care of you.”

Sophie nodded and her face seemed to brighten a little. “Will Mummy and Daddy be there?”

“I’m sure the police will be able to track them down,” said Grandad.

Toby had appeared at the door and came over to sniff Sophie’s hand.

“He likes you,” smiled David. “He wants you to come too.” Sophie laughed and stroked Toby’s matted coat. It was amazing how quickly the mood of a young child could change.

“That’s settled then,” said Grandad. He started getting some more food from the packs. “Let’s have a decent feed and a rest and then start on our way.” Toby came and lay down near them as they ate, looking up hopefully every now and then for a scrap of food.

Sophie seemed much happier now, the tears of

before forgotten. New hope and a shaggy playmate had distracted her from the unpleasant events of the past. David looked at her, concern and compassion mixing in him with a fear for how this new development would affect their trip. For now, though, he was pleased to have the extra company. It would almost be like having a little sister, and although she was too young to provide much in the way of conversation, it was good to have someone else along. How they were going to cope with having a young child to look after only time would tell.

5

“It’s the Bad People”

THE DOMINION POST: November 14, 2041. Australian exodus continues: Figures released by the Department of Immigration today show that Australians continue to leave for New Zealand in their thousands, following years of crippling droughts that have devastated the economy. Immigration Minister Jordan Patel said New Zealand cannot support such numbers of new arrivals and will have to place much greater limits on how many immigrants it accepts...

“Right,” said Grandad, standing up as if impatient to get on. “Shake a leg David, Sophie, Toby. Hey – we’re the Fab Four!” He laughed as he began to shoulder his pack.

They left the barn and walked for an hour, setting a slow pace with frequent rests for Sophie. It was a lot to ask of a six year old and she began to complain bitterly of tiredness and sore legs.

“We can’t go on like this Grandad. She’s too little and we’ll never get there,” said David, casting a sympathetic look at a miserable Sophie trailing several metres behind.

“I know, but what else can we do? We’ve got to get her to the police and it’s got to be on foot until we get to Jan’s unfortunately. I haven’t seen a car for ages. If

one comes along we can thumb a lift I suppose, but then it may well be the people she ran away from looking for her. I don't really know what else to do."

"Perhaps we could wait for a lift at the next town or get some horses or bikes."

"Well bikes won't be much use with Sophie but horses could be good, and there's bound to be a few folk around with vehicles. Where are all the damn trucks? There must be a few round picking up stock and milk to take to town. What's going on in the city?"

"When was *our* last pickup?"

"A few weeks ago." Back on the farm they sold their cattle, sheep and wool, but it was getting harder and harder to make much money from it as the years passed. Every now and then one of the cattle trucks running on a mix of electricity and biofuel would call to pick up stock, but they were becoming fewer as the roads worsened.

"Look, you're right," continued Grandad. "We'll see what we can do at the next town. It's not far ahead."

Sure enough they soon came to a small collection of buildings. A dusty, pot-holed main street led between scruffy wooden houses and a short strip of shops, most boarded up. A few lethargic-looking people shuffled around or stood talking on the pavement – few seemed inclined to smile or make eye contact with strangers. A grimy figure lay sprawled in a doorway beside a collection of empty bottles, snoring loudly.

"Grumpy lot! What's wrong with people?" moaned Grandad.

"They look sad," observed Sophie.

“Life must be tough for them,” said David. “Everything looks so run-down and old. The shops are half-empty too. How do people survive here?”

“A lot of them just go through the motions my boy,” Grandad sighed. “There can’t be much work here.”

There were a few battered vehicles parked at the kerbs.

“Wait here and I’ll ask around to see where people are going,” said Grandad. He trotted off to talk to a couple who were just climbing from their car. The man did not look pleased to have Grandad approach him although the woman offered a warm smile. David could not hear what they said but it did not look hopeful. Grandad tried another two vehicles before he returned with a stormy face.

“Selfish lot!” he shouted. “What’s the world coming to? People just care about themselves these days.”

“Everyone looks scared,” said Sophie.

“They look suspicious of each other, like nobody trusts anyone else anymore,” David added.

“Yes, well it’s no excuse,” grumbled Grandad. “Let’s try in the dairy. We need to buy a few things anyway. They may have some ideas. You wait out here Toby. Good boy.”

Toby lay down and put his head on his paws. They left their packs outside and walked into a small grocery store. The dusty aisles were largely empty and though there were canned and packaged goods, there seemed to be a real shortage of fresh fruit and vegetables. They were more likely to find dead blowflies than anything worthwhile on the shelves.

Grandad cast his eyes around the lines of boxes and cans, muttering under his breath.

“Grandad,” said David. “Sophie’s upset about something.” She was tugging insistently at his sleeve and spluttering with tears. A terrified expression was on her face.

“What is it Sophie?” asked Grandad.

“It’s the bad people,” she quailed.

“Where?”

She pointed nervously towards the counter where a man and woman were talking to the bored-looking shopkeeper.

“Quick – in here,” hissed Grandad and they drew back into one of the aisles out of sight. “That’s them?”

She nodded.

“Are you sure?”

“Yes.”

“I’ve a good mind to go and give them a good ticking off.”

“Grandad, they might be dangerous. Is that a good idea?”

“I suppose you’re right. They may have weapons, you never know. This is a matter for the police. Let me listen.”

Grandad moved a little closer and strained to hear. He came back looking fierce and tense. “They’re asking if the shopkeeper has seen their daughter. I think they’ve got a picture. It’s them all right.” He lowered his voice. “Don’t worry Sophie – we’ll just slip out quietly. Ready?”

Another nod.

“Good girl. You go in front so I’m blocking you. David, you follow. Here, take my hand Sophie.”

Grandad led them out onto the street.

Sophie began sobbing uncontrollably, and David

knelt down to give comfort. Toby jumped up to offer his own support, wagging his tail wildly.

“No time for that,” warned Grandad. “Let’s get off the road fast.”

But it was too late. They heard a shout and turned to see the couple exiting the shop. The man was tall, lanky and mean-looking. His fierce eyes burned angrily from a gaunt face. A similarly thin, skeletal woman emerged behind him. The man pointed a scrawny arm at them and bellowed.

“There she is!”

“Run!” screamed Grandad.

They had about fifty metres head-start on the pair but although Sophie was running as if her life depended on it she could not hope to outrun the pursuers. David glanced over his shoulder and saw the man sprinting after them, his face screwed up like a fist. He was gaining fast.

The rest happened in a blur. David grabbed Sophie and pulled her off the road and down a bank. They slid through the shrubs and grass to the bottom and rolled behind some bushes, panting heavily.

“Are you all right?” whispered David between breaths.

“Yes,” she replied weakly.

“Good girl. Where’s Grandad?”

Desperately he looked around. Although he was glad he could not see the kidnappers, neither could he see Grandad. Toby was nowhere to be seen either. It all happened so fast. He had concentrated on Sophie but lost track of Grandad. Where was he? The man had looked like he would not think twice about dealing out bodily harm if you got in his way. Even now Grandad

might be fighting for his life. The man could have a knife or gun; even with no weapons he hated to think of Grandad up there defenceless and alone. David looked around the bushes, and towards the edge of the forest that began at the bottom of the bank – still no sign of his grandfather. He tried to listen for the sound of movement in the scrub but the blood rushing in his ears was all he could hear.

There was a noise from above and he looked up to the top of the bank. The man stood hunched there like a spindly vulture, peering down and examining the scrub. With growing horror David saw the man take something from a belt around his waist – something that flashed wickedly in the sunlight. A knife!

“Where are you?” he screamed. “There’ll be hell to pay when I get my hands on you girl!”

Sophie began to sob again. “You’ll have to stop crying – they’ll hear you,” whispered David. Sophie gasped and struggled to control herself but it was a losing battle.

“You have to try. I know it’s hard.”

There was a shout from above. “There she is! He’s got her!”

They had been spotted! David rose to run, drawing a shaking Sophie to her feet but he knew now they were found he could not possibly hope to outrun the man with a small child in tow.

Then with a start he realized he was mistaken. The man was pointing farther along the bank and had not seen them. David followed the man’s jagged finger and saw Grandad running through the scrub towards the edge of the forest. He was about forty metres away but the man was quickly covering the ground in

between, waving the gleaming blade before him. In his arms Grandad held a large bundle, wrapped up in his coat. Quite what it was or where he had got it from David did not know, but obviously the man thought it was Sophie. *Clever Grandad!* he thought.

Grandad plunged into the bush and disappeared. Seconds later the man followed, cursing loudly. Then all they could hear was the snapping of branches that faded into silence.

David lay in the grass with Sophie beside him, waiting for his pounding heart to slow down. Sophie's tears had stopped for the moment but she looked petrified. He felt helpless and confused. Should he go after Grandad? He could not leave Sophie here alone, but then what was happening to his grandfather? The man must surely catch up, especially as Grandad struggled with the bundle. Hopefully he'd have the sense to drop it once in the bush and run, but then the man might find the bundle, realize he'd been tricked and come back here. With luck the bush was thick enough for Grandad to hide easily and make his escape, and he had the advantage of being at home in the forest.

And so David made a decision. He did not know if it was the right one but with all the thoughts crowding through his mind it was the best he could come up with. He must get Sophie away to safety first. Grandad would have to fend for himself, and would expect David to make Sophie his priority, but there was still the woman unaccounted for. Was she waiting up on the road? It was hopeless. He felt completely unprepared for this. He was aware of how much he relied on Grandad's wisdom. Now he would have to

act for himself.

He rose to his feet. Just as he did so the woman leaped from the top of the bank and began pushing her way through the thick scrub towards the bottom!

He quickly crouched down again. The woman disappeared into the bush after her partner and could be heard crashing noisily through the dense undergrowth. *That takes care of one problem*, David thought. He climbed to his feet again and took Sophie's hand.

"Come on – I think we're safe now. She didn't see us."

"What about your granddaddy? The man will get him."

"He'll be okay. No one knows the bush like Grandad. Those baddies haven't got a hope of finding him in there. Look – you can't see more than a few metres, it's so thick." He wished he could feel as confident as he sounded.

Sophie got up and followed him, looking resigned but still fearful.

"You've been really brave," said David. "Just a bit farther. Well done Sophie!"

They climbed back up to the street. A few people were watching nervously to see what was going on; others clearly did not want to get involved. Even now most were turning back to their own affairs.

"I hope he's okay," said Sophie.

"Me too."

Now David was faced with a dilemma. What should he do – find somewhere safe to wait or move on down the road with Sophie to get her away from the town? The kidnappers might return at any moment and start

searching again. Maybe he could get some people to help him go into the bush and look for Grandad? The townsfolk did not look particularly helpful and the bush was so dense they might search endlessly and perhaps get lost themselves. He decided against that option. Grandad had to cope alone. Sophie needed to be made safe first and Grandad would expect no less of him.

Once he had made the decision he felt a renewal of strength but was still racked with doubts. Grandad would have known what to do. *If only he was here*, thought David, consumed with worry. He tried not to let it show for Sophie's sake.

He took Sophie back to the grocery store. The packs remained there, beside a motorbike. Although the store owner seemed hesitant to offer help he had some sympathy and agreed to let them stay there to wait for Grandad. David was sure his grandfather would return to the shop to look for them once he had shaken off his pursuers. The shopkeeper led them behind the counter and into his home, and helped shift the packs inside. It was small, cluttered and dingy, but it was safe. He did not say much and did not particularly want to know anything about why they were being chased, but he got them glasses of water and sat them down on a couch to wait, before returning to the shop.

An hour passed and David grew increasingly agitated. Sophie was exhausted and fell into a deep sleep but David could only fidget nervously and pace around the room. With no sign of Grandad he began to grow more and more fearful. The anxiety ate away at him, screwing up his insides until he felt sick and making his muscles twitch and tremble with tension.

Where was Grandad? What if he lay dying deep in the bush where he would never be found? The man had a knife and looked happy to use it. David knew he must make a decision about what to do.

It was early evening when the shopkeeper came in.

“Look, I’d like to help you but I can’t afford any trouble in my shop. This is my business and it’s hard enough making ends meet as it is without people being too scared to come in for fear of trouble. I’m just closing up now and you’ll have to be on your way. I’ve put the packs out front for you.”

“But I have nowhere to go,” protested David.

“That’s not my problem. You could ask some of the others in town here to put you up for the night but we’re a careful lot these days. It’s just the way things are I’m afraid.”

“What about Sophie – she’s only six?”

“You don’t know anyone in these parts?”

“Grandad did mention a friend of his, Jan, on a farm called Greenacres. I think that’s where we were going.”

“Ah, Jan Wilson. Yes. I know the farm you’re talking about. I suggest you head there. That’s probably where your grandfather will make for too. Here, I’ll draw you a map. You’ll be hard pressed to get there by nightfall but if you start now you shouldn’t be too late, even with the little girl.” The man got a piece of paper and began to draw a crude map. The farm seemed fairly close but it might take a few hours. Sophie would be stretched to her limits, but he could not see what else to do. The man’s suggestion to go to Jan’s place seemed to make sense. He felt sure Grandad would head there himself. They

must hope they did not come across the kidnappers on the road. It would be a fearful journey but they could get off the road and hide if anyone approached and the coming twilight should work in their favour.

“Well thank you for your help anyway. We didn’t mean to be a bother. We’ll be on our way and hope Grandad catches up with us.”

“Good. All the best to you then. I hope your grandad finds you all right. If he drops in here I’ll tell him you’re making for Greenacres and to meet you there. I suggest you sit tight until he arrives.”

That’s if he is still alive, thought David, but he had to banish such thoughts and bury them somewhere deep inside for the moment. He must be strong for Sophie, and though he was scared and worried for Grandad he knew that getting to Jan’s was the best course and hoped his grandfather would find them there. If Grandad came back to town the shopkeeper could direct him on to Jan’s. David had to trust he was doing the right thing, but it was hard to fight off his doubts. He thanked the man again and left the shop, pausing in the doorway to search the street for the kidnappers first. The shopkeeper came out to say goodbye and found David looking down at the packs.

“Grandad won’t have his pack until he gets to Jan’s. How am I going to carry it? I don’t think I can manage two packs.”

The shopkeeper looked sympathetic. “Why don’t you take my old shopping trolley – I don’t get enough customers anymore to make it useful? One wheel is a bit dodgy but it should get you there.”

“Thanks.”

The shopkeeper went into the shop and returned with

the trolley. The pack was placed inside.

“How about you Sophie – would you like a ride?” asked David.

“Yeah!”

“Hop in then!”

Sophie climbed in and David began pushing her down the road after a final goodbye to the shopkeeper, keeping close to the sides so they could dive into the bushes at the verge if needed. The rough state of the road made the going difficult – now and then a wheel would catch in a hole and almost tip the trolley – but it was better than nothing.

Once out of the town they relaxed somewhat, but David was aware his eyes were constantly darting around looking for danger. Sophie was quiet and solemn and David could tell she was suppressing her tiredness in order to get to safety. He was so proud of her, and her courage inspired him to push himself harder.

They had gone a short distance when they came upon a narrow dirt driveway leading off to one side of the road. Next to a half-demolished letterbox was propped a grimy board with a name carved onto it in bold letters. An arrow pointed down the driveway to a small wooden hovel.

“The Fab Four Bach”, it read.

David stopped and pointed at the board excitedly.

“What does it say?” asked Sophie.

“The top bit says ‘The Fab Four’ – that’s what Grandad called us remember? And the other word is pronounced ‘batch’ – that’s a small house, but it could also be ‘bark’ like Grandad’s favourite composer. It’s a sign from Grandad – I’m sure of it. I think it’s

telling us to go down there. Only we would know what it meant. Anyone else would just think it was the name of the place.”

He was convinced of it, but there was only one way to be sure. They would have to go down the path to the house and find out. They walked between tall hedges to the tiny cottage. Its windows were smashed and the wooden planks were rotten and mouldy. David was suddenly unsure – perhaps he was wrong. Maybe they should have stayed in the town and this was all a mistake. Would Grandad really be there? Perhaps it was all a trick – the kidnappers had caught Grandad and forced him to write the board as a trap. Even now they could be waiting inside.

David cursed himself – these thoughts weren’t helpful. Sometimes they filled his head and threatened to shut down normal thinking altogether. He had to find out. Raising his fist he rapped on the door.

There was a nervous wait before he heard heavy footsteps approaching. He tensed as the door handle rattled noisily in its socket and the door swung open.

Grandad stood there beaming proudly. “What took you so long?” he said cheekily.

“Grandad!” David hugged him gratefully and Sophie attached herself to a leg and laughed. Toby appeared from behind Grandad and pounced at them, barking excitedly.

“See who I picked up along the road. He looked lost without us. You got my message then?”

“Yes, but what if I hadn’t understood?”

“Course you would. You’re a bright boy. All right Sophie? Hope you didn’t get too much of a fright. Nasty characters those. I can see why you ran away.”

“I was scared,” she said sadly.

“So was I, I don’t mind telling you. You did very well. And so did you my boy.” He reached out and squeezed David’s shoulder, his eyes shining with pride and perhaps the beginning of tears.

“Thanks Grandad. I didn’t really know what to do. I was pretty scared too.”

“Well you did good, lad. Really good.”

“So what happened? How did you get away?”

“Bah, those idiots don’t know one end of a tree from another. It wasn’t hard to lose them in the bush, even carrying that bag of rubbish. Clever aye? They thought it was you Sophie!” He laughed and Sophie giggled. “In fact I wouldn’t be surprised if they are still in there, horribly lost.”

“What now Grandad? We were going to make for Jan’s place. The shopkeeper drew us a map.”

“Smart boy. I went and had a quick look around the town for you. The shopkeeper wasn’t there when I stopped in. Perhaps he was out the back with you. Bad timing that. I saw the packs were gone and guessed you were lying low. I hoped you’d end up scouting down this way and see my sign. Yes, I think we should push on to Jan’s and assess our options once there. I think the main objective has to be to get Sophie to the cops as soon as possible, and that means getting to the city. These small towns only have community constables who visit once a week or so. It’s shocking! I don’t know what the world’s come to. Meanwhile these places become more and more lawless. It’s like they don’t care anymore and they’ve just given up on the provinces. These towns are being left to rot.”

David could sense one of Grandad's rants beginning and cut him off. "What if those two find us on the road?"

"It may be they give up now they know Sophie is with someone who means to look out for her. Then again I might have really hacked them off. I don't know how they're travelling – perhaps by car or bicycle, maybe on scooters. We'll just have to take a chance."

"We can look out for people and get off the road if we hear anyone coming."

"Yes, I don't want to go back to that town and risk seeing them there. They looked like particularly mean sorts, those two. Did you see he had a knife?"

"Yes."

"Not someone to be messed with. I get the impression he'd cut your throat just for the sport of it. Sorry Sophie."

Sophie had blanched at the words and David stroked her back. "It's okay. We're safe now."

"We're on foot I'm afraid," continued Grandad. "I don't fancy flagging anyone down when it might be them, not that we've seen much traffic anyway. But it should pick up as we get closer to the city. We'll have to be on our guards. Let's go down the road a short way and find somewhere to spend the night. It will get dark soon. This place has no floor."

They could see the entire floor of the one room cottage had collapsed into the foundations. Thick grass and dark, muddy pools of water filled the space below. Whole sections of the roof were also missing, leaving gaping holes.

"Okay Grandad."

“You brought my pack! Good lad. And I see you’ve picked up a trolley from the dairy. That will help us pick up the pace a bit. Well done!”

As Grandad lifted Sophie into the trolley she squealed with delight. “There you go. You can push first David. Just watch out for the pot-holes. Some could swallow you whole.”

They continued down the road, David and his grandfather taking turns to push Sophie, and Toby running alongside. The trolley juddered and bumped over the uneven road but Sophie quite enjoyed the thrill of it. The twilight began to drain the land of colour and darkness soaked slowly across the fields. Around a bend they came upon a broken, moss-covered gate, almost hidden by a suffocating veil of blackberry and bracken. Grandad guessed the overgrown path beyond might lead to a place to stay the night. They lifted Sophie from the trolley and pushed it behind a bush, then followed the path and soon found a dilapidated farmhouse in a field that was being steadily reclaimed by the bush. A sea of gorse and bracken advanced upon it, and the walls were falling into ruin as they rotted and crumbled. Moss and fungus ate at the wooden planks like a disease, and the door hung awkwardly by a single hinge. A few stubborn flakes of paint clung to its frame. The roof had gaping holes from which foliage sprouted and the windows were shattered and grimy. Near the entrance was the rusting skeleton of a car almost engulfed by vegetation and decay. A small tree grew through the roof and mosquitoes danced around the water collected within it. Nearby a swimming pool had turned into a swampy pond complete with reeds

and ducks.

Inside the house someone had covered the walls with obscene graffiti and the floor was blackened from a past campfire. In the kitchen Grandad opened a filthy fridge and cringed as dozens of cockroaches scattered. He scrounged among the dusty rubbish and broken furniture and came up with some grimy pillows to sit on and a few old cans of food. The dust he disturbed hung in the air like smoke, and everything reeked of mould and decay. They were careful not to put their feet into the dark holes that years of rot had left in the floor. He went down a hallway where peeling wallpaper hung off the walls in long strips, and looked into a room crowded with foliage from saplings growing up through the floor.

“There’s a whole jungle in there,” he joked. In a nearby bathroom a hole in the roof had allowed a bathtub to fill with brown water.

“I don’t think we’ll be having a bath. Won’t be drinking that either. Just as well I have a bottle left.”

He continued along the hallway opening doors. One revealed steps leading down to a flooded basement. Lastly he went through a pockmarked door from beyond which a particularly strong and unpleasant stench came. He emerged looking shaken and pale and closed the door.

“Don’t go in there David,” he said softly. “We’ll just stay in the living room.” David sensed he should not ask his grandfather to explain any further.

That night Grandad got David to light a fire in the middle of the room inside an old barbecue to show what he had learned, and they heated the canned food in the billy. Lazy tendrils of smoke curled into the air

and escaped through a large hole in the ceiling. It had not been too hard to find dry wood among the shattered furniture of the house, and an old television cabinet was broken up and thrown on the fire.

Despite their encouragement Toby would not enter the house but lay down near the steps to sleep. Grandad made sure he was provided for with leftover meat.

Following dinner David picked up a sleepy Sophie and carried her carefully to lie on a mattress they had set aside for her in one corner of the room. He tucked a blanket around her small shoulders and gazed down at her with concern. He looked up to see Grandad smiling at him and felt embarrassed.

“She’s rather fond of you I think,” said Grandad. Though David protested with a dismissive shrug he felt a keen pride at the thought.

Grandad looked through a shelf of dusty books to see if there was anything worth reading. “Just the *Edmonds Cookery Book* and some boy called Harry Potter,” he sighed. He settled himself into position before the fire and began to tell stories of the old days, but after a while he seemed to grow tired and quiet and crawled into his sleeping bag to rest, leaving David to sit by the campfire alone. Grandad seemed to become suddenly frail at times, and it had been happening more and more over the past year. David stared at the flames that crackled and spat before him and felt concern begin to gnaw at his mind. It clung there and refused to budge – a sense that something was not right and he should be doing more, but he was afraid and weak. If it wasn’t for his grandfather he would be completely lost and at the mercy of the

darkness outside.

Later Grandad emerged from his sleeping bag and seemed much perkier. They sang for a while at the fireside and then went outside to sit on the disintegrating porch of the house. Toby was fast asleep, his legs twitching as he chased some imaginary animal. The evening was so still it seemed to be holding its breath, and only the sound of crickets and the buzz of mosquitoes disturbed it. Amid such peace David could almost believe that the deep wounds of the world were starting to heal. The sky was clear and glittered with a dense sprinkling of stars. The Milky Way spread across it as a glorious veil of light. It gave him a feeling of immensity that was slightly frightening. Grandad pointed out the Southern Cross and how to use it to find south, and also two small smudges of light.

“See those,” he said. “Those are the Large and Small Magellanic Clouds. They are whole other galaxies.”

“You mean like the Milky Way?”

“Yes that’s our galaxy. All the stars you can see are part of the Milky Way, and even that bright smudge all the way across the sky is formed of so many stars they just blend into one smear of light. There are over two hundred thousand million of them, some many times the size of our own sun.”

“Wow,” breathed David. He loved these moments when Grandad would become carried away in describing some incredible fact. His grandfather knew so much, most of it from books he had read.

“But that’s not the half of it. Those clouds I showed you are other galaxies altogether, so far away they are just faint blotches, and there are maybe one hundred

thousand million others just in the Universe we know about, most too faint to see. But some are much bigger than our own galaxy.”

“That’s amazing.”

Grandad went on, excitement shining from his voice. “Light is the fastest thing we know of and it takes about eight minutes to get here from the sun, but it takes over four years to get here from the next nearest star and one hundred thousand years to cross the whole galaxy.”

“It makes me feel so small. Do you think some of those stars have planets with life on them? Perhaps even people like us?”

“Who knows? I think that’s the greatest mystery of all.”

“If there is I hope they don’t do to their planet what we did to ours.”

“Me too. It’s hard to understand how you could ruin a whole planet.”

A brief line of light shot across the sky.

Grandad pointed to where it had been. “Shooting star. Make a wish.”

David was silent.

“I bet you wished for a sunset,” said Grandad.

“You’re not meant to ask!”

Grandad laughed. They sat in silence for a while looking at the stars, then Grandad began to talk of the old days in the bush, when you could still hear kiwis calling at night and before most of the tramping trails had become overgrown. A possum screeched nearby and they could see its eyes gleaming in a treetop.

“Grandad, what was Dad like as a boy?”

Grandad looked surprised by the question and took a

moment to answer, as if his response was carefully considered. “Well funnily enough he was a lot like you. Good and loyal and constantly surprising me. And he asked a lot of questions.”

“Did he ever get scared? About the world I mean.”

“All the time. Only person scarer than him was me.”

David paused awhile. “I find I forget more and more about him all the time. Sometimes I forget what his voice sounded like. That scares me more than anything. What if I wake up one morning and can’t remember anything about him at all?”

Grandad looked solemn and then smiled. “Well I can’t see that happening. We’re talking about him now and that keeps him alive, doesn’t it? Maybe we will forget some things, but not the important things like knowing he was a good man and that he loved us.” He looked off into the darkness. “And besides, like I said I see a lot of your dad in you. So whenever I need to remember what he was like, how he sounded, I just look at you.”

“But who’ll remind me?”

“He’s there, talking in your mind – you’ve just got to be still and listen. It’s because of him and your mother that you are who you are. He taught you well, and so he will always be a part of you.”

“I worry about Mum too.”

“Crikey you worry a lot!” Grandad’s voice softened. “I hate to see her like that too. But she’ll be okay. She loves you and she’ll never leave you or let you down. She just needs some time and she’ll pull through. Till then we’ll have to be strong for her and help her the best we can.”

“Okay, I just feel so helpless sometimes. It makes me sad to see her so unhappy.”

“Me too. But don’t think she doesn’t love you or that she wouldn’t cross the Earth to keep you safe.”

“I know.”

“We’ll just have to look after her until she comes right, and she will. She’s stronger than she might appear, that one. Always has been. Only woman I’ve ever been scared of, your mother.”

“No!”

“I mean it.”

“Grandad!”

“Yep,” he chuckled.

David went silent for a while. “Will the world ever cool down again?” he asked.

Grandad smiled and after a pause said, “I think things will improve. The Earth has an amazing ability to heal itself, just as your body does, and I’m sure it has begun to mend. Perhaps all this madness needed to happen. Sometimes it takes a big shake-up to wake people up and set things on the right path again.”

“I hope so,” said David. “I’d like to think that one day I’ll be able to sit on a porch every evening and see a sunset.”

“I do too. I’ve got a lot of missed sunsets to make up for. Now get some sleep. We’ll be at the sea by the end of tomorrow.”

The sea. The very word conjured up magical pictures in David’s mind. He had only seen it in books but knew it was something that inspired great love and awe in people. He felt so eager to see it that he took a long time to get to sleep and his grandfather’s snoring did not help.

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“Let’s go then,” said Grandad cheerfully. “Rise and shine you two. Today’s a beauty!”

David rose and scrubbed his eyes clean. It was a clear morning and there was an invigorating chill. The air was full of bird-song – the blackbirds, tuis and bellbirds seeming to be trying to out-do each other. They had a leisurely breakfast – Grandad showed David how to rekindle the fire, then set the billy to boil and cooked some bacon in a small fry-pan. Afterwards they washed their faces and the dishes in a nearby creek before readying their packs. They each scouted out their own areas in the bush to go to the toilet as the house toilet was smashed and useless. David led Sophie to a suitable spot and left her to return to camp when finished, passing over some rangiora leaves.

The sun was well clear of the horizon by the time they began but the day still had that early morning briskness to it. The road glistened after a brief overnight shower and the air smelled fresh and clean. Perhaps the world really could recover from the centuries of pollution that had caused the climate to change. It was hard to believe sickness and disintegration lay behind such a glorious scene.

6

Into the Bush

APOCALYPSE NO (the magazine for the eco-soldier of today): August, 2027. Indonesian forests disappearing fast: The environmental organization Greenpeace has warned that Indonesia could lose most of its remaining rainforest within years if burning and clear-felling are allowed to continue. “Deforestation has continued at a horrifying rate, much of it illegal, and is threatening the last stand of lowland forest on Java,” warned spokeswoman Janice Hood. “The forests are cleared to grow palms for palm oil, a component of biofuels. Forests are the lungs of the Earth. Biofuels may seem like a good idea but they are not the answer ...”

Grandad stood looking down at a huge hole where the road should have been. They had been passing through a gorge where the farms ended and dense forest held sway, pouring down the hillsides in a profuse mass of dark green. At the bottom of the gorge a river gurgled and hissed on its way to the coast, choked with debris. The road followed the river but in front of them a bridge had crumbled away into a stream below, perhaps in the recent heavy rains, leaving support pylons standing like tree trunks. Toby peered bravely over the edge at the muddy, brown

soup below.

“Dammit – I think we might be stuck,” grunted Grandad, putting his hands on his hips. “I can’t see us getting across there.”

David searched carefully but looking above and below he could see the terrain was steep. The vegetation formed a tangled wall of vine and leaf – there would be no way through. “I think you’re right Grandad. I don’t like the look of it.”

“This probably happened recently. There’s still quite a bit of water coming down. I would be willing to try crossing the stream if it was a bit smaller. But we certainly can’t take Sophie across.” He sat on the roadside to catch his breath. “Wait, let me think a moment.”

Yet another obstacle had been put before them, but once again it merely served to remind David how desperately he wanted to go on. There had to be some way around it. He sat down beside his grandfather. Toby disappeared into the bush as if to search for a way ahead.

“What about taking one of the roads we’ve passed?” asked David.

“Wrong direction completely. They head east.”

After a period of silence Grandad turned to David with a tired smile that told him there was hope. “There was a track through the bush a way back that we could take. It meets up with the road after crossing a couple of ridges. I don’t know what condition the track is in. It may have been unused for a while and could be a bit rough. It will be straight up for a while too, but I’m keen to give it a go if you are.”

“Have you done it before?”

“No, but it used to be a fairly well-known tramping track. I don’t see why it shouldn’t still get a few travellers.”

“What about coming back?”

“We certainly won’t be getting across the slip with bikes or horses but Jan may know of another way round. We will have dropped Sophie off by then too.”

David had a moment of hesitation, as usual feeling anxious at the idea of the unknown, but he had come too far to give in to his fears now.

“Sure, let’s do it.” He loved the bush, and getting off the road would be a welcome change. It might be safer in the forest too, away from people.

“Good on you. We’ll go back then.” Grandad stood and readied himself. “I think I remember where it starts. There was a gravel road off to the side that ends at the beginning of the track. Are you happy to do that Sophie?”

Sophie looked unsure but David took her hand and smiled down comfortingly. “It will be fine. I will look after you.”

“Okay,” she said.

“You’ll like the bush. Have you ever camped out in it before? The day’s getting on and we may have to spend the night in there. Is that all right?”

Sophie nodded in an unconvincing manner.

“You’ll like it,” reassured David. “It’s fun sleeping out in the bush.” He had slept in the woods around the farm a few times, but did not add that the forest could be a scary place at night, even with his grandad sleeping a metre or two away.

They lifted Sophie into the trolley again and backtracked through the gorge to where the steep

hillsides drew apart and flattened. A hawk cruised slowly above the treetops. It was hot and humid, and a ceiling of high cloud sucked the colour from everything. Despite this the sun was strong and Grandad pulled off his wide-brimmed hat and sat it on Sophie's head. It was possible to get badly burned on sunny days even back when Grandad was young, but more so today when the atmosphere had taken so much damage.

"We need to keep that sun off you Sophie. Don't want you to burn. My old mug is not so important so you have this from now on."

It was too big for her and slipped over her eyes. Grandad laughed. "Here, you can adjust it with a strap."

He fiddled with it until the hat sat snugly on Sophie's head and shaded her face.

"Looks a bit odd but it does the job."

They came to an unsealed road in poor condition and reluctantly abandoned the trolley which would be useless on the gravel. They helped along a complaining Sophie for a kilometre to the road end. Toby reappeared and trotted along beside them. Sophie went across from time to time to massage his coat and chase after him.

A mangled signpost showed the start of the track but the writing was illegible with age. David peered into the dark throat of the forest path. It formed an opening into the solid wall of vegetation in front of them. He was fascinated with the lush New Zealand rainforest, but it frightened him too with its primeval wildness. Here was a place that kept to age-old laws – a different world where people had to adapt and meet

the forest on its own terms. There was little to be afraid of – no fierce animals or poisonous creatures – but its rugged disorder held other dangers. If you became lost inside you might wander for days or weeks until you succumbed to hunger or exposure. It was not a place to enter unprepared, but Grandad seemed at home in it. David felt anxiety growing within him. He hoped the trail was not too overgrown. Even the darkness felt like something to be feared, waiting to swallow them. He knew such doubts were not helpful but they weren't things he could turn on and off at will. He was not able to share his concerns because Grandad would tell him not to worry so much. He just had to do his best to trust his grandfather.

Grandad seemed to read the hesitation on David's face. "Ready mate?" he asked.

David took a second to gather his strength, forced a smile to his lips and said, "Ready."

It must have convinced Grandad because he shouldered his pack and disappeared into the gloom ahead. With more confidence than he felt David took Sophie's hand and plunged in after him.

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Inside was a place of wild beauty, where the luxuriant growth contrasted with a heavy silence. The track was mostly in good condition and easy to spot, apart from the odd tree that had fallen across, and only a couple of times did they have to backtrack or search for the way ahead. Roots snaked across the dirt track like deformed fingers, and carpets of moss and kidney ferns smothered the sides of the trail. They seemed

almost luminous where light made it to the forest floor. Tangled vines twisted around trunks and dangled from the canopy like rope. The occasional small bird flitted past, calling shrilly – farther off the harsh, rising shriek of a long-tailed cuckoo could be heard. Toby overtook them and ran on ahead, keen to be first. He stopped to investigate the occasional smell before surging onwards when the others threatened to take away his lead.

“I love it in here,” said Grandad, stopping to fill his bottle at a small waterfall. “It’s so peaceful.” He gazed off into the depths. The darkness was broken by silvery shafts of light slipping their way through gaps in the canopy. They created small pools of brightness on the forest floor.

“Where do we sleep?” asked David.

“There are old tramping and hunting huts in here, or at least there used to be. Otherwise we will just pitch the tent.”

David sucked in a breath of air. It held the pungent, earthy smell of the forest – dampness, decay and rotten wood. He loved it – it was at once otherworldly and alien, but also comfortingly familiar. Even Sophie looked happy and at ease as long as David or Grandad did not stray too far away. Toby was in constant motion, plunging into the undergrowth one moment before reappearing another to make sure they had not left him. Sometimes he would be gone for several minutes.

“Why doesn’t he get lost?” asked Sophie.

“Dogs have a really good sense of smell,” said David, “and hearing too.”

“I like Toby.”

“And I think he likes you too.”

After an initial hour of climbing, the track reached the ridge-top. Through gaps in the trees they could see down to the gorge below with its thin ribbon of brown water. They descended on the other side, David holding Sophie’s hand for the difficult bits, and reached the coolness of the valley floor. Tree ferns and nikau palms filled the spaces beneath the trees. As David walked hookgrass seeds snagged on the hairs of his legs and pulled at them painfully.

Grandad laughed when he saw David cringing. “Just be glad your legs aren’t as hairy as mine yet,” he said, pointing down at the collection of seeds clinging to his own calves.

After another hour of walking, with occasional stops for Sophie to rest, Grandad paused and turned to David.

“Smell that? I can smell smoke.”

David sniffed and caught the scent of smoke himself. The sight of Sophie screwing up her nose told him she smelled it too.

“Wait here a second while I go on a bit,” said Grandad. “I’ll check it out, but no reason just yet to think they’re not friendly.”

Grandad went ahead and David sat down beside Sophie. She laid her head on his shoulder to rest, and Toby came up to sniff them both, making Sophie giggle. As the minutes passed David began to grow concerned. Where was Grandad? Had something happened to him? The thought was terrifying – David did not know if he could find his way without Grandad, especially with a young child. Why was it taking so long? He stood up, too nervous to stay

sitting. Should he go ahead to see what the holdup was?

Just as he began to contemplate searching he heard the soft tread of someone approaching. He froze in place. If it was a stranger he could hardly make a run for it and leave Sophie there.

To his relief he saw Grandad appear around the corner, a beaming smile upon his face.

“There’s a marae just up ahead in a clearing,” he said.

“A marae?”

“Yeah, fancy that here in the middle of the bush.”

“What’s a rye?” asked Sophie.

“A marae,” said David. “A place where Maori people live.”

“I’ve heard some people have been going bush to live according to the old ways,” explained Grandad. “Not just Maori either – farmers, neo-hippies, eco-types. All sorts.”

“And was anyone there?”

“Oh yes, heaps of people. They’re friendly too. Invited us for a feed.” He turned to Sophie. “Fancy some kai? That’s food in Maori.”

Sophie’s face brightened and she nodded vigorously. “Yes please!”

“Come on then,” laughed Grandad, and he led them on down the trail.

They emerged from the bush into bright light. In a broad, grassy clearing and beside a chuckling stream they saw a large wharenuī – the meeting house – its steep front roof panels and doorposts decorated with ornate carvings painted in red. Smaller buildings, sheds and animal pens were dotted around the area. People sat on the porch of the meeting house, or could

be seen around the clearing cleaning pots, feeding animals and performing other chores. Some were Maori but it was a diverse group. A few of the women had traditional flax skirts below t-shirts, but most wore casual shirts and shorts. There was a vibrant energy evident as people attended to their tasks. David thought the happy faces were a welcome change from the sour, austere-looking farming folk they had encountered so far. Dogs wandered around alongside the chickens and pigs.

A large woman approached, smiling broadly. The tightly coiled spirals of a moko were tattooed on her chin and a bone carving hung around her neck. “Kia ora,” she called. “Welcome to Parihaka.”

She placed her hands on Grandad’s elbows and reached up to press her nose against his in traditional greeting.

“Kia ora, I’m James,” said Grandad, “and this is my grandson David and a fellow traveller by the name of Sophie. There’s a dog round somewhere too but he comes and goes as he pleases.”

The woman leaned across to hongi David. “Kia ora David.”

She crouched down to Sophie’s level and gave her a big kiss on the cheek. “Hello darling, you can call me Hine.” David took an instant liking to her.

Other people began to drift across and they formed a group before the wharenuī, all smiling warmly. Hine called out in Maori, using a piercing sing-song voice. An old man stepped forward and spoke briefly in Maori. His face was densely patterned with tattoos. Then the group started a waiata – a delicate and bright song that hung in the air and instilled a feeling of

warmth and peace as David listened. Someone had appeared with a guitar to accompany the singers.

When they stopped there was an expectant hush.

“Help,” whispered Grandad, “now it’s our turn, but I can’t think of a song.”

“What about something by The Beatles?” offered David.

“Right you are. Can you remember ‘All You Need Is Love’?”

“I think so.”

“Okay let’s go.”

Grandad began to sing in a gravelly voice and David joined in where he remembered the words. They had sung it round the campfire the night before but David struggled to recall the verses. Although it seemed clumsy and rough around the edges compared to the loveliness of the waiata the audience laughed in appreciation and began to clap. This had the effect of spurring Grandad on – he even sang out the instrumental counter-melody in the chorus, and Sophie twirled and danced along. The crowd cheered and hooted with delight at the end.

“Ka pai!” they called. A line was formed and David and Grandad went along it to hongi each person. “Kia ora,” they said, adding their names.

The beaming hosts led them to the wharenuī. They removed their shoes and entered. The interior was cool and hushed – if the forest had seemed a quiet, almost sacred place, this was an even more special enclave within it. David gasped at the rich carvings of figures adorning the walls and posts. Shiny paua shells gleamed down from the huge eye sockets, and colourful woven tukutuku patterns bordered them.

Sophie looked unsure of the strange faces of the ancestors depicted on the walls, but David put a reassuring arm around her shoulder.

“Beautiful aren’t they?” said Hine. “They tell our whakapapa – the story of our ancestors – but because we come from so many different backgrounds here it is a general story of where we have come from as a people. Simi over there is from Tonga.” A large man in the corner waved at them. “His home was covered by the sea and he came to New Zealand. Robert’s family is originally from China and Shamita’s from India.” The people named smiled from their positions seated around the room. Others continued with their tasks, sewing or sweeping the polished wooden floor.

Hine turned back to the carvings. “Here we have Kupe, our legendary Maori explorer, but this one is a settler from Europe – see his hat? And that is a sheep.” She pointed to another figure. “This voyager is from the islands, while this one comes from Asia. All are people of Aotearoa. Everyone is welcome here. Our marae is named after an older one here in Taranaki that was also a symbol of peace and togetherness.”

She led them to another panel. Rather than being carved this was painted in a more contemporary style. They could see a forest scene, with birds and other animals lying dead on the forest floor. Dark clouds gathered overhead. “This one shows the sickness and destruction of the land, caused of course by people’s carelessness. We use this to learn from the mistakes of the past and it reminds us of what we are fighting against as we try to heal the land.” There was a sadness in Hine’s eyes as she looked upon the

painting, and as David examined it more closely he too felt a shame and regret at what was lost. The world had held so many riches, so many wonders – it seemed inexplicable that people allowed such waste and destruction to occur. Why was the beauty and variety of the natural environment not cherished and protected as a precious thing?

“Anyway, there’s plenty of time for you to have a proper look round the wharenuī. Would you like to come for some kai?” asked Hine.

“Yes please,” said David and Sophie together.

They were led into a smaller dining hall beside the wharenuī where a few tables had been set with bowls and trays of food, some steaming with heat. Other people came in and seated themselves around the tables and began to fill their plates.

David sat next to Sophie and helped her to choose her food. There were carrots and potatoes, green beans and a variety of other vegetables. Ham had been cut into slices in the middle and a pot of scrambled eggs stood beside it.

Grandad had already started to tuck greedily into his own plate. “This is delicious,” he said, his voice muffled by the contents of his mouth. David dug his elbow into Grandad’s side as a man at the end of the table began a solemn karakia. “Oops,” said Grandad, putting down his fork hurriedly. Once the prayer was finished he resumed his meal.

“We grow just about everything here of course – beans, carrots, kumara – and keep the usual pigs, chooks and ducks,” explained Hine. “But we trade a little with town folk and farmers for what we can’t grow. Someone goes once a week to town and we get

the occasional trader coming through.”

“Well it’s damn good,” said Grandad.

“Thank you.”

Grandad buried his face once more into his food.

After eating Sophie went off to play with the youngest children; they could be heard giggling and chanting as they played with skipping ropes, hoops and on a makeshift playground. Ropes hung from a rotating washing line, and a wooden bunk-bed formed a climbing frame. A plank over an oil drum served as a see-saw, and there were also swings, a flying fox and a drainage pipe tunnel to crawl through. A small child sat on an old quad bike, making spluttering noises as he pretended to drive it.

Meanwhile Simi took David and Grandad on a tour of the marae. Inside the wharenui he showed them the schoolroom where the children were taught by teachers and kaumatua – the elders, and an area for relaxation. An old fridge was being used as a bookshelf.

“We have used a lot of old stuff here,” said Simi. “We find a use for most things.”

“How did you get a fridge in here?” asked Grandad.

“It was already here. There was a hut on this site originally and it had a generator and fridge, no doubt airlifted in at some time in the past.” He pointed at an antique television that had its screen removed. It was being used as a container for growing ferns. “Neat aye?”

Grandad laughed. “Now that’s something worth watching.”

Simi led them outside and showed them the vegetable plot. “Everything is grown naturally – no

chemicals or sprays. By the way I should have told you where the toilets are. The two sheds over there are the dunnies – one for ladies, one for the blokes. We have special stuff – some sort of bacteria we add that turns the waste into odourless compost. We don't need to add any more once it's in because it keeps growing. We clean it out now and then and stick it on the vegie garden with our other compost." He laughed as David screwed up his face. "Adds to the flavour. It's all part of the cycle. Use and re-use. All our food scraps are composted too." He pointed at an old washing machine being used as a compost bin.

Next he took them to the animal pens and chook house. "They have free run of the place – see, no gates, but they don't fancy going into the bush and stay pretty close. At night they like to cosy up inside. Actually many of us are vegetarians, but some need their meat."

They went down to the sandy edge of the stream where the water gurgled noisily as it tumbled over rounded stones. There was an old car wheel with a handle in its middle attached to a pole. A wire line wound around its edge and led off to another wheel beside the dining hall. Grandad was intrigued.

"We attach buckets of water to the line and wind the wheel to send it up to the kitchen. It saves a lot of back-breaking carrying," said Simi.

"Ingenious."

"Most of our food is fresh so we don't need to refrigerate. A few things we bag up and hang in the stream to keep cool." He pointed to a canvas bag sitting in a small pool formed beside the main river. "All our drinking water comes from the stream. We

bathe in it and wash our clothes with special biodegradable soaps. Everything we do is planned to have a minimum impact on our environment here and we don't use more of anything than we have to. This is our home and we want to take care of it. We don't want to repeat the mistakes of the past."

"Good on you," said Grandad, admiration shining from his voice. "If only there were more people like you."

"Well, places like this are springing up all over the place – on farms, in the bush. I'm not saying we have all the answers, but we realize we need to do things differently to before. Perhaps this is a fresh start."

David looked around and felt that here a tiny seed had been planted and was bearing fruit. Maybe there was hope for the future after all, but as Simi said it required breaking the patterns of the past.

"But you do have light in the meeting house. Where does the electricity come from?" asked Grandad.

"Have a look up there," said Simi proudly. He pointed to a box affixed to the roof of the wharenui. "It's a Johnson's Solar Converter and Wind Turbine. Really efficient. There's a waterwheel attached to a turbine in the stream too. Meets all our needs – cooking, lighting; we have a radio and a hot water shower for those who want it. "

"Well I am impressed." Grandad looked around the clearing, smiling with approval.

"Thanks, we try to make as little impact as possible, but that doesn't mean we don't know how to have fun, as you'll find out tonight."

*

And find out they did. A bonfire was built in front of the wharenui – Hine explained that they tended to avoid burning wood but the arrival of visitors would warrant an exception. Guitars and drums appeared and songs were sung. Some were traditional waiata, others were folk and pop tunes from a variety of different times. David even recognized one by Grandad’s beloved Beatles, and as guests they were given the opportunity to choose a few of their own. At times the songs were slow and solemn, and tinged with a melancholy beauty. Others were boisterous and loud, even a little coarse in their humour, prompting the gathering to sing or laugh along with raucous cheers and claps. Some people got up to dance. In between the songs the crowd grew hushed for the telling of stories. Again they were varied, cheeky humour mixing with elaborate tale-telling. Grandad was coaxed into telling of their journey.

David took a moment to study the faces lit by the flickering flames, each smiling and laughing or listening intently to the speakers. He thought they looked as happy and content as people could possibly hope to be. Here they seemed to have created something powerful and effective in its simplicity, at once basic and yet open to so much richness. Again he had a sense that perhaps there was a way forward from the darkness after all.

Someone passed him a stick, on the end of which was a fat marshmallow to toast over the fire.

“I told you we don’t grow everything here,” chuckled Simi nearby.

A group of young people got up to perform. The

boys did a stirring haka, thumping their chests vigorously and poking out their tongues. The girls, dressed in flax skirts, twirled poi and rolled their eyes as they sang.

David felt a deep contentment. He watched Grandad slapping his sides to the music and thought how happy he looked. Sophie was fast asleep, her head resting on David's arm. He was being careful not to disturb her. With surprise he looked up to see a shaggy form lying down at the boundary between firelight and darkness. Toby had come to join the gathering, but was keeping a safe distance from the other dogs.

"He's decided he'd rather have company after all," said Grandad.

David glanced round to see that his grandfather had stopped listening to the song, and joined him in a moment of quiet reflection.

"My God, this is a great place David," Grandad said quietly, observing the rest of the group. "We could learn so much from these folk."

"We can do some of these things ourselves. It's given me lots of ideas."

"Right you are."

Sophie shifted in her sleep next to David, and he saw his grandfather looking fondly down at her.

"It seems our little friend has become quite attached to you," Grandad whispered. "What's it like having a little sister for a while?"

David felt suddenly embarrassed, but nodded and said, "Good."

"I'm sorry you haven't had any kids your own age around. It must be hard for you – I forget that sometimes. You've had to grow up pretty fast."

“I don’t mind,” said David, but it was mostly to placate his grandfather. It had been difficult and he missed playing with people his own age. The holidays with his cousins once or twice a year seemed to pass far too quickly. Life on the farm certainly was tough, although at other times it could be filled with awful tedium. But these people had found a balance between work and having fun and David realized how much he missed from having such a limited social circle. He loved his mum and Grandad dearly, but there was so much to be gained from the presence of the many varied people here.

David felt something soft and moist nudge his hand and looked down to see that Toby had come over and pressed a wet nose into his palm.

“Hello boy. You’ve decided to join us then?”

Toby lay down next to Sophie. She stirred and drew her arm across the dog’s back, burying her face into his coat.

Grandad smiled, but looked suddenly tired. The firelight lit the furrows of his face and David saw a deep weariness there.

“You know, I might turn in,” Grandad said. “You stay up if you want to.”

“Are you all right?”

Grandad forced a smile onto his face. “Yeah I’m fine mate. It’s just been a long day. Do you need help carrying Sophie to bed?”

“No thanks.”

“Good lad.”

“I’ll go to bed too.”

“Righto.”

David carried Sophie carefully into the wharenui.

She was heavy and he had to shift her into a more comfortable position. She moved but did not wake. He looked down at her. It was indeed a bit like having a younger sister and he liked the feeling. He would miss her when they got to the city and passed her over to the police.

In the wharenuī mattresses had been dragged from the sides earlier and laid on the floor. Most of the people slept together in there but the couples and families had their own private huts. David placed Sophie carefully on a mattress and covered her with a blanket. He paused a moment as she settled then went to his own mattress and lay down. He looked across at the next one. Grandad had pulled his blanket across his shoulders and was perhaps already asleep. He seemed very tired and pale, and David felt concern for his grandfather growing inside. He wondered if there was something he was not being told. The transformation had been so sudden – one moment Grandad was energetically clapping along and then so quiet.

But it had been a long day and perhaps it was just fatigue after all. David rolled over and waited for sleep, but it took a long time coming.

*

In the night David woke. The wharenuī was still and quiet apart from a few snores and grumbling stomachs. Dark shapes hung across the walls, broken by silvery bands where the moonlight shone in, turning the carvings into grotesque forms. He noticed Grandad's mattress was empty. Getting up he looked around the

room. Where was he? Quietly David crept to the porch of the whareniui and there he found his grandfather sitting alone.

“Gudday David,” he whispered. “Couldn’t sleep either?”

“No.”

They sat in silence, looking out across the clearing, its details etched in ethereal clarity by the light of an almost-full moon hanging just above the treetops. The edge of the forest formed a dark wall around them.

“Peaceful isn’t it?” said Grandad.

“Yeah, I like it here.”

“Me too.”

In the bush a morepork called mournfully and a cricket trilled from beneath the porch. Other noises filled the night – shuffling animals and the soothing rush of the stream.

“It’s almost a shame we have to push on tomorrow,” sighed Grandad.

The treetops stirred as a breeze brushed them into action.

“There’s a wind getting up. Someone I was talking with said the weather’s going to turn nasty. I’d like to get out of the bush before then. Feel how the wind is coming from the north, down from the tropics? It’s going to get hot and the air will be laden with moisture. We will get wet.”

They sat in silence again as the breeze washed around them and cooled their faces, enjoying their last moments on the marae. This was perhaps the way the world used to be – people giving and taking only as needed and living with a keen sense of how they related to their surroundings. It was a life lived in the

moment according to easy, dependable rules – concerned with meeting simple needs but also serving some higher cause. These people seemed to have wealth despite their few possessions. David hoped there would be many more places like this setting up alongside nature and not in its place.

“Right, I think I’m ready to turn in again. How ’bout you?” said Grandad.

“Yes, I’m ready.”

Grandad began to rise, his old joints protesting noisily.

“Grandad?”

“Yes my boy?”

“Thanks for bringing me on this trip.”

There was a pause while Grandad smiled gently down at his grandson.

“You’re most welcome mate ... most welcome.”

7

Storm

WAIKATO TIMES: November 14, 2044. Beijing chokes under toxic cloud: Citizens of Beijing had to don their gas masks for a fourth straight day yesterday as the Chinese capital continued to deal with crippling smog. The pollution crisis comes on the heels of the Xining Nuclear Power Plant disaster and the recent fatal poisoning of swimmers in the Yangtze River...

OTAGO DAILY TIMES: September 12, 2055. Sahara records highest temperature ever: A record temperature of 64 degrees Celsius was recorded in the Saharan region of south-eastern Libya last month. Two years of particularly severe conditions have seen the Sahara Desert expand in area by almost five percent, threatening the livelihood of millions of people. Eyewitnesses report birds “falling down dead from the sky”...

In the morning the wind was stronger and dark clouds were building in the northern sky, looming menacingly above the trees. Grandad pointed at them and said, “See those, David. They are cumulonimbus clouds. Bad weather is on its way.”

Simi led them to a breakfast of eggs and toast. The

bread was baked on the marae using flour that had been bought. Hine explained how they traded for foodstuffs that could not be grown there with things they made.

“We weave, carve and make flutes and other instruments to sell. Some of us have become expert at building generators. Others go to work on nearby farms for short periods and bring the money back. We even have whanau – family members – working in the cities. They are always welcome to come here for a break.”

“How do you communicate with them?” asked David.

“Ah, come and see.”

Hine took them out to the side of the hen house, where they found a large box at chest height. She unlatched a door and opened it. Inside were five grey pigeons, looking surprised at the intrusion. They bobbed their heads as if in protest.

“Pigeon post,” she explained. “These know their way to members of the whanau in the city, and they can be sent back too. We attach messages, notes, even money to little satchels on their backs. Gets there much faster than anyone on foot or horseback. We can have a reply in a day, easy.”

“Well, will you look at that,” breathed Grandad, “I haven’t heard of these being used since the World Wars.”

“Sometimes the old ways are the best.”

“No arguments there.”

Later, after they had sat around the tables for a final talk, Grandad leaned back and sighed.

“Well, we really feel we could stay here forever but

we must be on our way. I've got to get the boy home before his mother worries and Sophie needs to get to her family too."

"It's been great having you here and you can come by anytime. You're part of the whanau now."

"We just might take you up on that. What do you think David?"

"Yeah, I'd love to come back."

"We could bring your mum too. She needs a break."

"You are always welcome here too Sophie," said Hine. "Once you are back with your family you can bring them here whenever you like."

"Thank you," said Sophie and she looked genuinely pleased.

"Thank you so much," continued Grandad. "You've looked after us so well, and I don't know how we can repay your kindness."

"Just make sure you come back and visit."

"We are really impressed by what you are doing here. I hope people leave you alone to just get on with it."

"We have some protective measures in place," said Hine, but she did not elaborate.

After saying goodbye and accepting some items of food they collected their things and said final farewells out in front of the wharenuī. There were many warm smiles, hugs, handshakes and hongis. Sophie giggled as one or two of the old kaumatua bent down to press their noses against hers. "You take care now Sophie," they said.

Toby had appeared at their side after a night sleeping beside the embers of the bonfire and a morning spent exploring in the bush. He had been fed meat alongside the other dogs and looked reluctant to leave himself.

“Goodbye then. We’ve had a great time. Thank you for everything,” said Grandad, smiling. He looked like his old self again.

“Thank you – I really like your place here,” added David shyly.

“You’re welcome David. Look after your grandfather.”

“I will.”

“Cheeky monkey,” laughed Grandad. He turned to David and whispered.

“It’s usual to give a koha – a gift – to say thanks. Have you got those goodies?”

David handed over a bundle of home-made chocolate, biscuits and cured beef from their own farm, which was taken with many calls of “Kia ora” and “Thank you”.

Then they were on their way, Sophie holding David’s hand and Toby trotting alongside. As they left the clearing to enter the bush they looked back at the waving figures and raised their own hands in farewell. Turning, they continued into the trees. While they walked they could hear the people singing a final cheerful waiata that drifted after them, dying away gently until the silence of the forest swallowed all sound.

*

They tramped for an hour or two through dank bush, stopping for occasional rests. A strong wind buffeted the treetops and it began to rain quite heavily, hissing noisily in the forest canopy. The thick leaf cover spared them a drenching but it was still a miserable

journey. In places the trail was deep with mud sucking at their boots. Elsewhere they waded through ankle-deep channels of water and descended steep stairways that were small waterfalls.

After a while Sophie began to slow. "I'm tired," she complained.

Grandad stopped and looked sympathetically at her. "I know it's a long way my darling, but we have to get you back to your family. You're being such a brave girl. Can you go just a bit farther and we'll have a good rest?"

"Okay," she said morosely.

"You are doing so well," encouraged David. "It must be hard to keep up with us. We're like storks compared to you." He pretended to be a gangly stork, flapping his arms and prancing on his toes. It brought a smile to her face, but she had stopped, her face lowered, and she did not look like she would be moving anytime soon.

David looked at her with pity. He shifted his pack to his front. "Come on then. Climb aboard," he said, crouching down.

It spurred her into action and with a laugh she scrambled onto his back. David continued down the track with his piggyback passenger. She soon grew heavy but he struggled on as long as he could to give her a decent rest. Finally he had to let her down and give his burning muscles a break.

"Aw," whined Sophie.

"Walk for a while and when I'm ready you can climb on again."

"Yay!"

David became aware of an uneasy feeling. He kept

imagining he could see shadows moving at the edge of his vision. It made him think they were being followed.

“I feel like we’re being watched?” he said.

“Huh? No, you’re imagining things. The bush can be a spooky place.” His grandfather did not seem concerned, but David could not shake the feeling and continued to eye the dark undergrowth warily.

The wind increased until the canopy was thrashing dementedly, the gale so strong it drove the rain before it almost horizontally across the treetops. There was an occasional bright flash and peal of thunder. The lightning etched stark images of the tree trunks before them. They missed the worst of it down below; in fact the dense bush created a safe cocoon of relative peace and shelter. The wind roared and bellowed like a banshee, so that Sophie huddled closely to David in fear.

“It’s all right – mostly just noise,” he said.

“I don’t like it. When will it stop?”

“Hopefully it will blow itself out soon,” said Grandad.

He looked fondly at them both. “She’s quite taken with you David. You’re the big brother she never had.” He chuckled, and again David felt a sense of warm pride.

They continued along the track, over bony roots threaded through the soil and under arching branches draped with ferns and mosses that hung down in stringy curtains.

“You can see why they used to call this sort of forest ‘goblin forest’,” observed Grandad. Often whole trees and boulders were invisible beneath a spongy layer of

moss and lichen. It did indeed look like an ancient place where magic and enchantment might thrive. He pointed up at the large clumps of lilies that grew on tree branches high above, dripping moisture down upon them.

“Watch out for those in this wind. The old bushmen called them ‘widow makers’. You wouldn’t want one falling down on your head!”

Now and then they would pass the trunk of a massive rimu rising straight and thick like some enormous Greek column, or a rata that had suffocated another tree beneath its contorted coils. The forest was eerie but beautiful, and the storm infused it with a mad energy.

The trail snaked its way down into a gully. At the bottom a swollen stream rushed and bubbled over large boulders rubbed smooth and round. Large tree ferns and branches arched over it forming a tunnel that disappeared off into darkness.

Grandad stopped and surveyed the scene sombrely. “It’s a cardinal rule not to cross a stream in flood, but we have no way on. I think we’ll be okay if we take it slow. It’s not too big.”

“Are you sure Grandad? Remember Sophie – how will she get over? And Toby?”

“I’ll carry them both across. If it gets too difficult I’ll turn back. And I can help you across too.”

“I don’t know.” David stared nervously from the edge at the tumbling water. Toby slunk over, his body low to the ground. He did not like the wind and noise either.

Grandad was not to be dissuaded. “It will be fine. I’ve crossed many streams and rivers, some much

worse than this. Just trust me.”

“Of course I trust you.”

“Come on then. I’ll take Toby first to test it out.” He picked up Toby and the dog relaxed in his arms as if aware this was the only way ahead. Grandad stepped from boulder to boulder until he was halfway across the stream and then it became necessary to wade. The water swirled around his legs and he staggered before planting them firmly apart and walking forwards slowly.

“Not too bad,” he called. A few more metres of wading brought him to the far bank. He dropped Toby there and the dog looked back as Grandad returned, wondering perhaps why he was being abandoned. Next Grandad took the packs over one by one, then walked over to Sophie and picked her up in his arms.

“Your turn. Don’t be afraid.”

Sophie watched the stream with a look of apprehension. “I’ll be right behind you,” called David. “I’ll hold onto your coat Grandad.”

“Sure. Just stick close.” They moved across the smooth tops of the nearest boulders to the point where they had to wade. David entered the water holding onto Grandad for support. Sophie looked down at the water rushing past her feet but then decided it was better to hide her face in Grandad’s coat.

“That’s it. Not much farther.”

The water was cold and powerful against David’s legs, tugging insistently to try to pull him off balance. He needed all his strength to stay on his feet, positioning his legs as far apart as possible. The hardest bit was when he needed to lift one to move it. All his weight went onto the other leg and he had to

shift his balance carefully and move with great caution. The water level climbed to his thighs.

Suddenly Grandad lost his footing with a yelp and fell chest-deep into the water. Sophie was torn from his arms and shrieked as she plunged into the stream. David lost his balance and fell in as well. The water wrapped him in coldness and he felt like he had been punched in the chest. He had fallen against Sophie and grabbed hold of her coat. As he was swept down the stream his head went under and he felt like he was being buffeted mercilessly inside a tumble dryer. He no longer knew which way was up and he fought to hold his breath, his nostrils burning as water crept into them. All the while he kept his fist tightened firmly around Sophie's coat, unsure of whether she was still inside it or not. A boulder slammed painfully into his side, then another, almost making him take a gulp of water in shock. His head spun – now above the water, now below.

As he broke through the surface again he saw a branch that hung into the water rushing towards him. It would be within reach but he had to time it carefully. If he missed he might not get another chance and he could feel his fingers losing their grip on Sophie's coat. *Ready, one ... two ...*

He threw his arm around the branch, letting himself become entangled in the foliage. For a moment he thought it might give way but it held and he hauled with all his strength on the coat, unsure if Sophie would emerge inside. It felt incredibly heavy, but eventually a small form appeared from the water. It was Sophie. She looked at David with eyes that bulged with fear and her mouth opened to gulp in air

or perhaps to call for help. For a second that seemed to stretch to an eternity she hung there without speaking, before the strength of the torrent wrenched her from his hands and she was gone.

David stared at the swirling, brown water in shock. One moment she was there and the next she was not! He had failed her. He waded across to the side of the stream and got to his feet. It was shallower here, and the current was less powerful. He was safe, but what had become of Sophie and Grandad? Were they even now spinning out of control downstream?

David looked back and saw Grandad standing dripping at the side of the stream, a look of horror on his face.

“Are you all right David? It happened so quick!”

“I’m good. But Sophie ...”

“Where is she?”

“She’s gone. I couldn’t hold her. I tried ...” His throat tightened and he could say nothing more.

Grandad came over and placed a comforting hand on David’s shoulder, but he looked pale and shaken. “You did your best. Don’t blame yourself. Let’s get down the bank and start searching. She may have grabbed hold of something.”

It seemed unlikely but to be doing something would be better than standing there feeling powerless. David nodded weakly.

“Good lad.” Grandad began picking his way as quickly as he could downstream, breaking branches and foliage that got in his way. Toby bounded ahead, his nose to the ground, as if understanding what they needed to do.

It’s hopeless, thought David. The bank was a tangle

of vines and overhanging branches, with whole tree trunks sloping into the raging stream. The water surged angrily past them, tearing chunks of mud from the sides. How could a small, frail body survive in such a boiling mess? He feared they might never see Sophie again, and it would be his fault. He could not get the image of her eyes pleading with him for help out of his head.

They had made their way about two hundred metres downstream, when Toby began barking and stood anxiously over a spot on the bank. Grandad rushed forwards to see what he had found. David dared to hope – had the dog found Sophie alive and well, or a lifeless body? As he drew nearer he could see neither was the case. There was nothing on the stream bank, and yet Toby was excited about something. Grandad too had a beaming smile on his face.

“Look David.” Grandad pointed at the mud where Toby was waiting with tail wagging vigorously. David saw marks in the mud – tracks. He recognized a couple of tiny footprints, the size a small child would make. Sophie had crawled out of the water here! He could not help grinning uncontrollably himself.

“She made it!”

“Yes, she dragged herself onto the bank and stood up. But she’s not here. The tracks head off into the bush. We’ll have to follow them. It’s a good sign though – she’s alive and well enough to move.” He knelt down beside Toby. “Come on boy – find her!”

Toby seemed to know exactly what Grandad had asked and bounded off quickly. Away from the stream the bush was not quite so thick, and although they had to crouch at times moving became less difficult. The

rain stopped, but numerous puddles and areas of clinging mud remained. After a short distance they rejoined the path they had been on, and Toby surged ahead. The occasional footprint showed they were on the right track.

Soon Toby stopped and began sniffing the ground. Grandad came to his side and crouched to examine the trail. He looked at David solemnly.

“New footprints – big ones. These belong to an adult. Someone else has found her before us.” He searched the nearby area. “They headed this way. Those are Sophie’s footprints. There’s the other person. She’s gone with him. Whether it was willingly or not I can’t say.”

“Do you think it was ...?” David found he could not give voice to the awful possibility.

“There’s no reason to think that yet. Could have been anyone. Let’s follow the tracks, but it might pay to just keep quiet for a bit.”

Grandad and Toby began jogging down the path and David followed with mounting concern. Someone had Sophie. Was it one of the kidnappers? It seemed a cruel twist to learn she had survived the flood only to be snatched again.

After a short while Toby left the main path and started down a side-trail. They stayed right behind him. The path was narrower and more overgrown but broken branches and disturbed mud showed that indeed someone had come this way. David had no idea what they would find. Were they even prepared if they found someone dangerous?

Toby stopped and looked back at them, letting out a quiet whine. Grandad came to a halt also and

motioned sharply for David to stop and not make a sound. David stood still and listened. Yes, he could hear something ahead – voices. Two men. They crept slowly and carefully to a point where the trail began to descend suddenly, and huddled behind some bushes. Peering through the foliage they could see that the trail dropped down into a depression cleared of most vegetation. Some tarpaulin and corrugated iron sheets formed a crude shelter, with logs for chairs and a fire-pit. Two men sat on the logs, and nearby crouched a tiny, miserable figure with her arms around her knees. *Sophie!*

Grandad put a finger to his lips and in his eyes David saw fear and concern. Looking at the two men he understood why. It was the male kidnapper – the thin, nasty man – and another person that David did not recognize. Both were dressed scruffily in tattered shirts and tramping boots. Toby fidgeted nervously and David held him to keep him quiet.

“What do we do?” he whispered.

“*Sssh!* Let’s just listen for a second. Keep Toby still.”

They sat as motionless as possible and listened as the men talked.

“I told you if she was in here I’d find ’er, didn’t I?” said the unfamiliar man.

“Yes, yes. Well done mate. I knew I could count on you.”

“Mind you it’s a big area to cover and it’s been hard going. I’m not sure if the fee we discussed is gonna cover it Rob.”

“Don’t be greedy now,” warned the kidnapper. His face had a bulbous nose like an unwanted growth and

piercing eyes. "I'm paying you more than enough to keep your scrawny hide alive for a few more months. And don't make out it's been such a hard road. Once you knew they were at the camp any idiot could have set himself up farther down the trail and waited – could have done it meself. And then the little fool goes and walks right into your arms all by herself. Couldn't have been easier."

The first man seemed suddenly contrite. "No offence Rob – just doing what you asked that's all. And I admit I was pretty lucky there."

"Don't think I don't appreciate it Josh. I've been trying to get her back for a few days now. You've done me a great service. You'll be rewarded, don't you worry."

"Thanks mate. Where's the missus?"

"Waiting down at the road with the gear. She thought us blokes were more than capable of taking care of things here."

"What are you gonna do with 'er?"

"Take her home where she belongs. Not that it's any of your business."

"Course. No offence Rob. Just happy to help out."

Rob got up and walked over to Sophie. The girl huddled in a ball and was shivering violently, whether from cold or fear they could not tell.

"Caused us a lot of bother haven't you Sophie?" Rob growled, standing menacingly over the girl.

"Grandad!" Toby was growing agitated and David was struggling to keep hold of him. Before they could stop him the dog let out a loud yelp.

"Quiet," whispered Grandad, but it was too late. Rob swung around to look at the bushes where they were

hidden and he glared fiercely as if barely able to control his rage.

“Come out!” he barked. “I know you’re there.”

David and Grandad looked helplessly at each other.

“What do we do?” mouthed David, but his grandfather’s expression seemed to say he had no answer. They both crouched down further behind the bushes, but it was hopeless – they were discovered!

Rob pulled his long knife from his belt. “Come on out or I finish the girl. It’s your decision.”

Grandad’s shoulders dropped and he had a terrible look of defeat on his face. “It’s no use David,” he said. “He’s got us in a corner. We have to go out. There’s no choice.”

David hated to admit it but there was no other option. Slowly they stood and walked down into the bowl, holding out their hands to show they carried no weapons. David had never felt so scared in his life, but he feared most of all for Sophie. What would this monster do to her?

“Well, well,” croaked Rob with an ugly chuckle. “An old man and a kid. Some rescue party you turned out to be. Thought you got the better of me did you Grandpa? Lost me in the bush. Well you’ve just learned I don’t give up that easy. Specially when someone has somethin’ that belongs to me.”

“She doesn’t belong to you,” shouted David, surprised at his own courage.

Grandad placed a hand on David’s shoulder and the simple gesture calmed him. “Easy now lad.”

“Listen to your granny, boy,” said Rob sourly. “You might just live a little longer.”

Grandad stepped forwards, and as David watched the

old man seemed to become taller and more self-assured. When he spoke there was authority in his voice. “The girl does not belong with you. We are taking her home.”

David had never felt prouder of his grandfather. His words carried such certainty one felt sure it could not be otherwise.

Rob laughed – a nasty sound that cut the air. His next movement was so quick it caught them by surprise. A fist lashed out and caught Grandad on the side of the head with a dull thud. His head twisted horribly and he dropped to the ground, lying still.

“No!” screamed David and he started forwards, but suddenly two strong hands grabbed him from behind and held his arms firmly to his side. It was Josh. David struggled but could not get free. He willed his grandfather to move but though the old man shifted a little he did not get up, merely groaning in pain. Rob rolled him onto his back with a shove from a boot. Grandad looked dazed, no longer the strong, powerful man of a moment before.

“Time to say goodbye Grandpop,” taunted Rob through gritted teeth. “Just like I said – I always win in the end.” As he spoke spittle caught on the rough stubble of his chin. He raised the knife and angled it at the still form of Grandad. The blade flashed in the weak light filtering through the trees. Grandad did not move – just lay there as if resigned to his fate. Everything seemed to have slowed impossibly.

The next few events happened in a blur, as if time had suddenly been released and hurried to catch up. A new figure burst into the clearing – a wooden spear swung and struck Rob on the neck with a smack. He

spilled to the ground. The man, a stocky Polynesian, kicked the knife away and stood over Rob, who now lay on his side.

David recognized the newcomer and his spirits soared. "Simi!" he cried.

"Hey little bro'. Looks like I was just in time." He twirled the spear – a Maori taiaha – and brought its intricately carved head to a stop inches from the throat of Rob, who glared at him savagely. Meanwhile Josh had started backing away slowly.

"Don't want no trouble," he said nervously, then turned and sprinted into the undergrowth. For a moment Simi looked like he would give chase, but he relaxed and motioned to Rob to crawl over to the bivvy. Pursing his lips, he let out a shrill whistle.

"Just stay there and don't move mate," he warned. He put the knife beside him and then crouched down to attend to Grandad.

"How are you James? Hurt?"

Grandad raised himself onto his elbows and motioned Simi away. "I'm fine. Check on Sophie."

David rushed over to the girl and she reached for him as if for a favourite toy.

"It's all right Soph. Are you injured?"

Sophie shook her head and seemed to be feeling better now he was there. "I swallowed some water but I'm okay now."

"Good girl. No cuts? Bruises?"

The girl pulled back a sleeve to show a dark smudge on her arm. Then she showed another bruise on her leg and a grazed knee.

"Poor thing. Don't worry – we'll patch you up." This seemed to satisfy her for the moment.

Then there was a whirlwind of commotion again. While they were helping Sophie Rob climbed to his feet and, with uncanny speed, launched himself onto the back of Simi. He had a grotesque look of pleasure on his face as his large hands locked themselves around Simi's throat and squeezed. Again David could only watch stunned as Simi began to choke and his face turned a dark red. The muscles around his neck pulled taut as he strained against the fingers digging into them. It seemed impossible that a man as thin as Rob could possess such strength – the sight of him wrapped around the much larger Tongan would have been comical if the situation was not one of life and death. Simi flailed his arms, trying to dislodge his attacker. Although he caught Rob a few glancing blows the smaller man clung on like a limpet.

David felt consumed by a sense of helplessness. With shock he realized he was not able to move and could only stand passively as if watching from a distance. Now, when Grandad and Simi needed him most, he was completely incapacitated by his fear. His face burned with shame and hot tears of frustration welled in his eyes. Why could he not move? He should do something but still he stood rooted to the spot. Grandad was still dazed and could not help.

Rob's fury was frightening to see. His face was a hideous mask of anger and he seemed to be barely in control of himself, as if some primal force was spilling out from within him. All the while Simi was growing weaker. He had dropped to his knees and surely could not last much longer.

Suddenly there was a thrashing in the nearby bushes and raised voices calling. Figures could be seen

approaching at speed. Who they were David did not know. Were they friends of Rob? How he wished he was stronger.

Rob looked up and scowled. Clearly these newcomers were not on his side. He threw Simi to the ground and got to his feet. As he turned to leave he thrust a bony finger in Grandad's direction.

"This isn't over old man," he spat. Then he was away, disappearing into the bush. Seconds later a group of men and women ran into the clearing. David recognized some from the marae, and like Simi they carried a collection of clubs and sticks. Two people went straight to Simi and helped him into a sitting position. He was coughing and weak but seemed to be otherwise unhurt.

David felt released from his paralysis and rushed to Grandad's side.

"Are you wounded?"

Grandad stirred and smiled feebly. "No, I'll live. Don't fuss. The punch glanced off. Sure am sore though." One side of his forehead was dark and swollen. "I've got bruises on my bruises," he chuckled. "Sophie needs you more than me." Then he saw Simi and blanched. "My God, I'm so sorry!"

Simi smiled to show he was not badly injured. When he spoke his voice was thin and raspy. "Good job I've got such a thick neck. Once I've had a rest I'll be as good as gold."

"Thank God for that. And the girl?"

"She'll be fine."

"We owe you our lives. Sophie especially."

"Perfect timing aye? There's not much that goes on in this forest without our knowledge. We have our

spies out and about and weren't far away from you at any time. Still, it was a little too close for my liking. I'll be having words with the guys. Sorry about that."

"No worries. You came through when we needed you."

Simi got to his feet, despite the protests of his carers. "You've got to get that girl to the cops as quick as you can. Some of our fellas will show you to the road and from there you shouldn't be too far from your friend's place."

"Yes," said Grandad. "Jan will help us get to the city."

"Good."

"What about that man, Rob?" asked David.

"Don't you worry," reassured Simi. "Our scouts are on his trail now. They'll catch him up no problem and we'll take him to the police ourselves. You just get the girl to safety."

"Be careful. He's a nasty brute."

"They'll be okay. They know this bush like the back of their hands. They won't be seen if they don't want to. And we've relieved him of this." Simi held up the long knife.

"Good. Once again we have a lot to thank you for my friend," said Grandad.

"Anytime mate." Simi turned to the others. "Tahi. Christine. Matt. Show them to the edge of the bush. They'll have a clear run down to the road from there."

Grandad nodded and shook Simi's hand. They pressed noses again in farewell. Then he turned to leave.

"Sophie, David. Let's go."

They followed their guides through the forest.

Sophie was quiet and still weak from her ordeal, but seemed to be gaining her strength back slowly. One of the guides carried her most of the way. They hurried through the forest without talking, Toby at the rear. At times David could not even see the trail they were following, but the folk from the marae seemed to know exactly where they were going. The storm was abating, making their travel easier.

They continued on, coming to another stream but crossing carefully on a large fallen log that formed a bridge over it. The forest thinned and gorse and manuka replaced the undergrowth of ferns and mosses. The storm continued to die down and their spirits lifted. They could see down the hillside to where the farmland resumed in a jumble of fields and pockets of bush.

Grandad turned with a cheeky grin on his face. "I told you the storm wouldn't last long," he said.

8

Toby's Sacrifice

www.queenslanddiving.com: May, 2031. ...come with us to experience the last of the world's pristine coral reefs. The area of the Great Barrier Reef around the Whitsunday Islands in Queensland is one of the few reef systems that has escaped the ravages of coral bleaching. Come aboard The Pacific Dream and see the splendours of a coral reef and its prolific fish life as nature intended, before it's too late...

IZB Talkback Radio: June 25, 2028. (anonymous caller) "...and now I heard they put cockroach genes into a chicken so they could get six drumsticks. What's next – pigs that fly?..."

Christine stepped forward and pointed to the road at the bottom of the long, scrub-filled slope. "There's your way on. We'll leave you here and go back to help the others."

"Cheers, and thanks very much."

"You're welcome anytime at the marae. Safe travelling."

"Thanks."

They all pressed noses and then the guides were gone, disappearing once more into the bush.

Grandad sighed and looked weary. "Let's check you

out Sophie. You've had quite a shock." He went over to inspect her more closely, looking for bruises. She seemed to have come through without serious injury. David had a couple of bruises but was otherwise unhurt, but he burned with anger at Grandad for risking their lives on the stream crossing. He felt a sudden outpouring of fear and frustration, and had not realized how much tension he was holding in. It came out in a flood.

"I told you it wasn't safe crossing the stream!" he shouted. "Why didn't you listen to me?"

Grandad looked shocked at David's outburst. "I'm sorry. I really thought it was okay. I just slipped there in the middle."

"Why did you ever bring us on this trip? It's been one dangerous thing after another! We've been chased and attacked – dragged through all sorts of horrible places! That man almost killed us! And what for, Grandad? Some silly sunset!"

Grandad was stricken with remorse. "I'm sorry David. I really thought that you ..."

"You didn't think – just of yourself getting to this sunset and to hell with everyone else! What about the danger you put Sophie in?"

Grandad's face fell with shame. Sophie began to cry and it shocked David into silence. He felt ashamed himself.

"You're right of course," said Grandad softly. "I never should have brought you on this fool's trip. I had no right to put you in any sort of danger. I never would knowingly take you anywhere unsafe. I've been very stupid, getting caught up in my own ideas and forgetting about what you wanted or whether it

was sensible. It's all right Sophie – don't cry now."

David wished he had not spoken without thinking. He had felt so shocked and scared that the words tumbled out before he could stop them. Now he regretted it. The truth was he did want to go to the sunset and he was willing to pass through dangers to do it. Some things were worth risking everything for, and Grandad had never thought of anything but keeping Sophie safe and getting her back to her parents. There was an awkward silence.

"Sorry," he said calmly, looking Grandad in the eye. "I do want to see a sunset Grandad, and it is worth it. I want to go on. All the way to the sunset."

"I don't know David. We can't go back, that's for sure. We have to get to Jan's but I think then we should call it quits – organize transport somehow back to the farm, once Sophie is safe of course."

Now, when the trip seemed at greatest risk of being ended, David wanted it more than ever, but he knew its survival was hanging by a thread.

"No, please, we can't go back as failures. You were right Grandad. Some things have to be done and if you don't put yourself at risk you don't get them. We have to go on – to the end."

Grandad looked doubtful.

"Please," begged David. "We should go to the city anyway to make sure Sophie is safe, so we might as well stay for the sunset."

This seemed to convince Grandad. "I suppose it makes sense. Perhaps it's more important than ever to see that sunset."

"Sorry I yelled. I didn't mean ..."

"Not another word."

“And I don’t think you’ve deliberately put Sophie in danger.”

“I know. But you are right. She is our main priority now. We have to be as safe as possible. I promise I won’t take any more unnecessary risks. Agreed?”

“Agreed.”

“Good lad. How ’bout you Sophie? Can you keep going? We’ll be at my friend’s house soon.”

“Yes, I’m feeling better now. I just got some water in my throat.”

“Good girl. Let’s have a decent rest and dry off.”

“Is it safe?” asked David.

“Yes, I’m sure that bloke will be picked up by our friends. He won’t trouble us any more. We still need to get Sophie to the cops quickly though, but let’s just draw our breaths. We’ll be all the stronger for it.”

They found a level spot and took off their top layers of clothing, tying them to branches to dry. While they waited they sat on cushions of moss to rest. Toby found a sunny spot and curled up to sleep. The strong wind helped in drying and though the clothes were still damp and clammy after half an hour, it kept them cool on the rest of the trip.

There were a few trees down across the trail to the road, and many broken branches. Along with the prickly gorse crowding the path it made their travel slow and laborious. They stopped to shelter awhile beneath the roots of a huge rimu that had been blown down, perhaps in some past and even greater storm. The roots were splayed out like a giant hand and covered with toadstools. Grandad had become suddenly tired and needed a rest.

He napped for almost an hour. Sophie slept too but

David was wide awake and sat lost in thought. He felt a now familiar concern growing in his mind. How badly had Grandad been injured? He said he was unhurt but he always said that. Was he just tired from all the walking? After all he was an old man. Or was it something else? David couldn't help thinking there was some greater malady affecting Grandad.

After a snack they continued. Grandad walked more slowly and spoke little. He seemed to be heavy with fatigue. The last of the trees gave way to scrub and bracken, but soon that too was replaced by pasture. The sloping farmland was rugged and lumpy, marred by crater-like depressions filled with swampy reeds or cabbage trees. The forest rose behind them like a fence.

"It's like another world in there isn't it?" observed David.

"It sure is." Grandad seemed to brighten at the thought of his beloved bush. "Though I love the forest I respect it too. It's an alien place that you have to tread softly in – to become part of without fighting it."

"I like it in there," said Sophie. "It's really pretty with all the moss on the branches – like a fairyland."

Grandad laughed. "You said it so much better than my flowery words. Now let's get down this hillside!"

*

They reached the level and walked on through the silent farmland. The hills bordering it were coated with scruffy manuka and tree ferns that rose as ghostly figures from the mist. In places the road was blocked by fallen trees or washed out by floods and

they had to step carefully across, David holding Sophie's hand and Toby bounding ahead once he had made sure everyone else was safe. In one area the road dipped while crossing a broad valley. A flat sheet of water stretched right across from one side to the other, submerging the road. The asphalt disappeared beneath the flood for a distance of about two hundred metres. A cluster of trees rose from the water on either side of where the road would be.

"Not again! Hang on," said Grandad. He had regained his energy and stepped forward as if relishing the challenge. "Let me go first to see how deep it is." He began to wade carefully into the muddy water. It swirled around his boots, climbing to his knees, then his waist. By this time he was halfway across and it began to deepen suddenly. He returned and shook his head.

"It gets deep." He stood looking across the dark expanse before them, hands on hips. Toby walked forward to sniff at the water.

"What about making a raft of some sort?" said David hopefully.

Grandad scratched his chin and looked around. Beside the road was an old hay-shed, open at the front. A few wild sheep were sheltering inside and ran away as Grandad came over. He searched through the assortment of rubbish, wood and metal drums pushed into one corner. He examined an old gate.

"That might float, I suppose."

Meanwhile David had pulled aside some planks to reveal a battered aluminium bathtub that had been used as a drinking trough. "How about this?"

Grandad looked it over. "Is the plug in? Yes, perfect.

Well done. Let's see how heavy it is."

They tested its weight. Between them they could lift it comfortably.

They carried it across to where the water was deep enough for it to float and gave it a trial. A little water seeped through the plughole but it was quite stable.

"I think we're good," said Grandad. "You hold it here and I'll go back for Sophie."

He waded back, picked up Sophie and carried her to the tub, placing her inside. She squealed as her dress got wet in the growing pool of water around the plughole. He returned for the packs and added them to the tub.

"Sorry love – can't be helped. Look after those packs for us. We'll have to swim I'm afraid David. Put whatever clothing you don't need in the tub."

"What about Toby?" David asked.

"I'm sorry but he'll have to look after himself. There's no more room. He can't stay with us forever."

As it happened Toby waded out himself and then began to swim after them.

"Good boy," they all encouraged. No one liked the idea of him being left behind. He had become an indispensable part of the group. David and Grandad pushed the tub on either side while Sophie looked nervously over the edge. When the water got too deep for them to touch the bottom they kicked and paddled, steering the tub between them over where they imagined the road to be. Sophie seemed to be enjoying herself and Toby was swimming along beside them.

In the distance they heard the rasp of an approaching motor vehicle.

“I think someone’s coming,” warned David.

“I hear it. Let’s get out of sight until we can see who it is.”

Grandad directed them into a stand of flooded trees. Some branches were dead and stuck out from the water like jagged signposts. They headed towards a group of willows, pushing a curtain of foliage aside and sheltering by a trunk under a leafy dome. The branches hung down to the water farther out from the trunk, creating a private space but a few gaps made them worry about being seen. Pushing on they came to a clearing within the circle of trees. Inside was a cottage, the bottom submerged in the water. A sliding glass door had shattered leaving one side open.

“Toby, get over here!” growled Grandad, as loud as he dared. Toby obediently swam towards them.

“Where are they Grandad?”

“They’ve stopped at the edge of the water.”

“I think they can still see us.”

“You might be right. Let’s go inside this house to be sure.”

They pushed the tub in through the gaping hole, holding onto the top of the door frame to steady themselves, and into the largest room. Inside it was cool and dim. The only sound was the water slapping gently against the walls. They could touch the roof with their hands and had to dodge a few pieces of floating furniture. Grandad grabbed hold of a window and pulled them over. Through a gap in the trees they could just see the vehicle at the water’s edge. It was a streamlined motorbike with a sidecar – the one they had seen outside the dairy – and beside it stood two familiar figures.

“It’s them!” gasped David.

“Yes, we did the right thing getting into hiding.”

“But I thought the marae people would catch him.”

“Me too. He must have given them the slip. He’s a slippery snake that one.”

“Don’t worry Soph – we’re safe in here.” David reached into the tub and patted her shoulder.

They watched as Rob pushed the bike into the water.

“Surely they’re not riding through,” said Grandad.

The man appeared to pull a lever and two short wings extended from the side of the motorbike. At the same time the wheels retracted. The bike seemed to be floating on the water. The woman waded out and climbed into the sidecar and with a roar it took off, gliding over the water and shooting a plume of water out the back. They soon passed out of sight and the engine noise receded.

“Well I never ...”

“They aren’t giving up Grandad.”

“No, but in a way it will be good to have them in front and they’ll be travelling faster than us. At least we know where they are. We’ll give it half an hour and then keep going.”

“So we are still heading for Jan’s?”

“Yes.”

Once they were sure it was safe they swam back out with the tub and made for dry land where the road resumed.

Soon they could feel the asphalt beneath their feet and before long the tub scraped its bottom on solid ground. They carried Sophie across to the road. Her dress was wet at the bottom.

“You’ll soon dry off. We, on the other hand, will

take a bit longer,” Grandad said, gesturing to David and looking down at his own dripping trousers. Toby came and shook himself dry vigorously so that his hair stood up on end.

Sophie laughed and pointed at him. “He looks like a toothbrush!”

David grinned and gave Toby a pat. “I’m glad you decided to come too.”

He and Grandad got their shirts from the tub and put them on. Their boots were saturated, and squelched loudly as they walked.

They continued on, their clothes slowly drying in the warmth of the day. It grew very hot and the heat beat down upon them like a hammer. Toby ran off to explore and they lost sight of him in the trees.

“I wish we still had that trolley,” said Sophie.

“Maybe we should have put some wheels on that bathtub. We could have pushed you to Jan’s,” grinned David.

They passed through a wooded area of radiata pine from which wraith-like clouds of steam rose as the sun’s warmth heated up the sodden vegetation. David heard the hoarse barking of dogs coming from somewhere in the trees.

“Where’s Toby?” asked Grandad.

“I haven’t seen him for about half an hour. Do you think he’s all right?”

“Yes, he’ll be fine. But just be on the lookout. Some of these dogs are pretty wild. They’re half starved and get into packs. Best to steer clear of ...”

Before he could finish two dark, muscular forms exploded from the forest undergrowth and shot towards them. A huge Labrador came straight for

David with its teeth bared in a savage grimace. It leaped on top of him and grabbed the pack on his back, shaking it furiously from side to side like a shark tearing at its prey. David was knocked off his feet, and dragged across the tarseal. He could see Grandad lifting Sophie desperately above the snapping jaws of another dog. Grandad kicked furiously at it. "Get away you mongrel!" he yelled.

The air was slashed by the din of barking and growling, but David had no time to worry about Grandad and Sophie as he fought to stay away from his own attacker. It seemed to have incredible strength and its hot breath washed over his neck. Fear gripped him, but once again time had slowed and within it he felt a small core of calmness that could be clung to. He had been here before. He had known fear and danger and got through it to be stronger and wiser. He somehow knew he would survive again.

"Drop the bag!" yelled Grandad. "For God's sake! It can smell the meat!"

Suddenly the tugging on his bag relaxed and David thought it was all over. A sharp pain jolted his arm. The dog had given up on the bag and clamped its jaws onto his wrist, soaking it with drool. It felt as if fire had shot up to his shoulder and he yelled uncontrollably. The dog began to shake him again and he could feel skin and tissue close to tearing beneath his clothing. The calmness of before was swallowed by terror and he knew this had become much more serious. Grandad was powerless to help him and fought to keep Sophie just out of reach of the other dog.

Suddenly another smaller shape barrelled into the

Labrador, causing it to release David and turn to face the new threat. With a gasp of surprise he realized his rescuer was Toby. Their dog had fixed himself to the neck of the Labrador and was pulling it away.

Quickly David rolled to his feet. The Labrador and Toby were a blur of mad energy and snapping jaws. It was hard to tell one from the other. Toby was like a demented beast, but he was dwarfed by the other dog and it could only be a matter of time before he was seriously wounded. The Labrador drew back, bared its fangs in an ugly snarl and leaped at Toby's throat, bowling him over.

Again David felt powerless and torn between separate demands, but he knew Grandad and Sophie came first. Grandad was still desperately fending off his dog. It had hold of his shirt and was growling insanely.

David ran quickly to the roadside and grabbed a large, solid branch. He ran to the dog hanging off Grandad's shirt and belted it hard on the flank. It yelped with surprise and looked around at him, but turned back to snap at Grandad again. David swung the branch a second time, hearing it crack on the dog's head. It squealed loudly, let go of the shirt and ran off into the undergrowth.

Next David turned to the Labrador. It had Toby in its jaws and was shaking him like a rag doll. David hit it across the nose with all his strength. The dog's head snapped back and David knew he had really hurt it. He was shocked by how satisfying that felt. The dog seemed to glare at him for a moment before turning and loping quickly after its mate, back into the forest.

David looked down at the still, bloody form of Toby

lying sprawled on the road. The dog's throat was ripped open and red fluid seeped profusely into a growing pool – it was clear he was dead. Elsewhere his coat was sticky with a mix of saliva and blood from other wounds. It had been a savage fight.

Grandad and Sophie came to stand in shocked silence beside him, disbelief on their faces.

“Toby,” moaned Sophie, and she buried her head into Grandad's side. He stroked her hair and looked teary himself. “There, there. He gave his life to save us. What a brave dog.”

A hard lump settled in David's throat and refused to budge. Anger, sadness and gratitude all fought for prominence inside him, but mostly he felt a profound emptiness as he realized Toby was gone. The dog had often seemed to follow his own rules, coming and going as he pleased but had come to be like part of the family.

“Come on – let's bury him and move on before she gets too upset,” said Grandad. “First let me see to your arm.”

He peeled back David's sleeve to expose a dark bruise but the skin was not broken. “Will we need to amputate?”

David smiled and flexed his arm. “It's sore, but I think it can be saved.”

“Good. Again you have surprised me with your courage. That was some scrape we were in. Well done.”

Once more Grandad's few words had a potent, almost intoxicating, effect. David felt giddy with power. Adrenaline still coursed through his body but a proud satisfaction flowed there too.

They carried Toby's warm, lifeless body a short way into the forest. It was easy to dig in the soft soil and leaf litter. David and Grandad took turns to console a howling Sophie while the other dug. Soon they had a small grave. They laid Toby inside and covered him over, and Grandad said a few words. Sophie had grown quiet, realizing tears would not bring Toby back, and stood morosely at the graveside.

"You were a faithful companion, protector and friend. We will miss you Toby. God bless you. Here Sophie – sprinkle some earth on."

David helped her spread a handful of soil over the grave and it seemed to make her feel part of the solemn ceremony.

"He was a brave dog and my friend," she sobbed.

"Mine too," said Grandad. "We were very lucky to have him along for a brief time."

"Goodbye Toby," said David, throwing his own palmful of dirt onto the small mound. "We'll miss you."

Sophie started to splutter again so Grandad began to coax her into motion. "Come on. Let's get going. We're almost at Jan's."

They moved off, David taking a last lingering look at the small grave beneath the pines.

The Treasure Room

THE NEW ZEALAND HERALD: January 14, 2046. Divers rescue Venetian treasures: Work has resumed on salvaging priceless art treasures from the waters covering Venice, once one of the world's most popular tourist attractions but now only accessible to diving operators. Salvage had halted for the past two weeks due to stormy weather. Most art was removed during the city's initial evacuation but many precious statues and craftworks remain...

WAIKATO TIMES: May 15, 2039. Scavenger killed at city landfill: A man was fatally wounded by a bulldozer at the City Landfill yesterday. Manager Brian Tupare said the increasing number of people trespassing to scavenge and the spread of illegal dumping sites may force the closure of the landfill. "We have reached crisis point with the amount of rubbish we produce. People may need to start burying their waste in their own gardens..."

"Here it is – the Wilson farm," said Grandad, gesturing to the farm ahead. Through a rickety gate a short dirt track led to a large two-storey farmhouse in fairly good condition. Beyond were paddocks coloured a lush, healthy green receding towards a

series of low hills covered with shaggy manuka. The jaunty warble of a magpie carried across the fields from a tall stand of macrocarpa trees.

“Good – I’m tired,” moaned Sophie.

“I know, and you’ve done really well,” encouraged David.

“We’ll be able to have a good rest-up here,” said Grandad. “Jan is an old friend of mine. She was married to my best mate, but I haven’t seen her for a good few years – not since before Caitlyn, your grandma, died. It’s great to finally have an excuse to drop in and see her.”

“I hope she’s home,” said David.

“She’s by herself these days. I don’t see why she wouldn’t be in. If not we’ll just push on and leave a note – perhaps catch her on the way back.”

They approached the door to the house and Grandad hammered loudly on it. He was brimming with excitement. Soon the door swung open and a large, grey-haired woman appeared. After a brief pause her face lit up and she came forward to hug Grandad warmly.

“Well this is a surprise. If it isn’t James O’Brien. How are you? Good to see you.”

“And you Jan. Sorry to just drop in on you like this but we were passing by on the way to the city and thought we’d stop in.”

“I would have been furious if you hadn’t. Well, it’s been a while hasn’t it? Anyway, come on in. Excuse the mess.”

“Thank you Jan. Yes, it’s been far too long.”

They entered the house and sat around a table while Jan put on a kettle. The kitchen was sparsely furnished

and basic, but nonetheless cosy and bright.

“This is my grandson, David. Last time you saw him he was just a little nipper.”

“Hello.”

“My goodness. David, how are you?” said Jan. “Nice to see you again. How old are you now?”

“Fifteen.”

“Gosh.”

“And this is the delightful Sophie who we picked up on the way. She’s temporarily separated from her parents but we’re making sure she gets safely to the nearest police station, aren’t we Sophie?” continued Grandad.

“Hello,” said Sophie quietly, looking to David for reassurance. He smiled to show that this big new stranger was okay. Jan exuded a natural warmth so David already felt safe and comfortable around her.

“Hello Sophie. Make yourself at home. Hang on – I’ll just get the drinks. Tea?”

“Yes please, and a cordial for the lass if you have one. You too David?” asked Grandad.

“Tea too thanks.”

“Then you can tell me all about why you’re here. I assume there’s a story to be told. I know your grandfather well.” Jan directed this last bit to David with a wink.

“There sure is,” said David.

Grandad told the story of their journey so far to Jan with help occasionally from David and Sophie. Jan listened earnestly as Grandad recounted each part. She shook her head and muttered darkly as Sophie’s story was described and laughed loudly at the description of them singing “All You Need Is Love” in front of the

wharenui. She was saddened to hear about Toby and amazed at their lucky escape in the flood.

“I always said you have nine lives James,” she chuckled. She turned to Sophie. “I’m sorry to hear about Toby. It sounds like he was quite a special dog.”

Sophie looked sad. “He was my friend. He saved us when the big dogs attacked. Well, him and David and Grandad.”

David saw a smile appear on his grandfather’s face at being called Grandad by Sophie.

“Actually it was pretty much all Toby,” the old man said.

After a while David and Sophie went outside to explore while Grandad and Jan talked on. Sophie found some cows to pat by a fence and pigs to scratch.

An hour passed before Jan came out. “Your grandad’s just having a lie down for a while. Would you like to come and help me dig up some spuds and feed the chooks? You’ll be staying for dinner and spending the night here. I’ve made up a room for each of you.”

“Is Grandad all right?”

“Yes he’s fine. He’s just a bit tired out that’s all. Not as fit as you young fellas.”

David worried again about his grandfather. The old man had always seemed so strong and dependable that to see him tired and frail was quite a surprise, but then David had never seen Grandad pushed to such extremes. Certainly they did all need a good break from the rigours of travelling and to sleep in a cosy bed would be wonderful.

They crossed to a nearby vegetable garden and Jan began to dig in the thick, moist soil for their dinner.

“I hear your grandad’s taking you to see a sunset on the coast. You’ve really never seen one before?”

“Not properly. Sometimes we see a bit of colour in the sky. But really the hills block out the sky mostly and it rains a lot of the time anyway.”

“You’re in for a treat then. Everyone should see a sunset – it’s one of the most spectacular sights in nature. You might even see one here tonight although it’s looking a bit gloomy.”

“You get sunsets here?”

“Sure, just over the hills there. We’ve had some lovely ones.”

“I like sunsets,” said Sophie.

“Me too. But your grandad is right to take you to the city for your first one David. The best ones are at the coast and you can’t beat the sight of the sun going down into the sea. Glorious. I just hope the weather is kind to you.”

David began to feel excitement building in him. It really did seem close now. With any luck, by this time tomorrow he would be getting ready for the sunset. He could hardly wait.

After collecting the vegetables Jan took them around to feed the animals, giving Sophie handfuls of grain to spread for the chickens and a bucket of scraps to give the pigs.

Back inside they found a bleary-eyed Grandad sitting at the table.

“We’ve been out digging up vegies and feeding the animals,” explained David. “Did you have a good sleep?”

“Yes thanks – I feel much better for it. I was just thinking about the last time I was here Jan. You still

had an old t.v. and we watched some show about dancing rugby players. It was hilarious!”

Jan laughed. “Yes, I remember that. Pity the t.v. doesn’t work anymore.” She turned to David and Sophie with a bright twinkle in her eye. “Say, would you like to see something interesting?”

“Yes,” chorused David and Sophie, intrigued.

“Come on then. You too James.”

Jan took them down a flight of worn steps to the basement door and turned to face them with a wide grin spreading across her face. She looked like a naughty child caught in the act of some delicious mischief.

“This is what I call my ‘treasure room’,” she breathed in a voice hushed with gleeful secrecy. “Inside are things most people haven’t been able to get for years, or threw away ages ago. But I don’t throw anything away – it’s all in here.” She looked suddenly apologetic. “Of course, most of it doesn’t work anymore.”

David got the distinct impression Jan was deliberately heightening the suspense by turning the key slowly and pretending to wrestle with the lock.

“Haven’t been down here in a while,” she offered as explanation. David felt a growing sense of excitement at what might be beyond. What could be so special you would call it a treasure room? He imagined it must contain something valuable or rare or perhaps even illegal.

Finally the door swung open and Jan reached for the solar-powered light switch. A small room was revealed, cluttered with an odd assortment of objects and appliances. A thin layer of dust coated everything

but was stirred into motion as they entered. David realized with a gasp that he had been holding his breath. He longed to know what each and every fabulous thing was for.

“This is incredible,” said Grandad softly, as if the room was some sort of sacred space that would be profaned by raised voices. “I didn’t know you had all this down here.”

“Look, a t.v.,” said David excitedly, pointing to a thin panel leaning on the wall in one corner. He had read about televisions and been told by Grandad about them, but had never seen one. “Does it work?”

“Ah, no. As I said most of this stuff stopped working years ago. That’s what you call ‘planned obsolescence’ I’m afraid. Nothing’s built to last. But there’s not much to see on t.v. these days anyway. There’s only one station broadcasting for a few hours a day in the old 2D format and it’s all political stuff from the government.”

“I must admit I do miss the telly,” sighed Grandad. “It was like a holy ritual, sitting down each night to watch the box. You knew you were sharing it with billions of other people all around the world.”

“What sorts of things did you see?” asked Sophie.

“There was everything – news, documentaries, dramas and movies, funny comedies and soaps. You name it and it was on the box, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week,” grinned Grandad proudly, as if he was remembering some great achievement of his own.

“Soap,” giggled Sophie and she hit Grandad playfully on the leg.

“Yes, well, not the sort you’re used to my girl.” He tousled her hair with his wrinkled fingers. David felt

once again a sense that Grandad came from a different world, one where people watched movies and “soaps” at all hours of the day and night and marvellous things were taken for granted. He wished he could have seen such a world, and wondered how much Grandad missed his former life before the Regression. Did he wish he could return to those golden times? Even now he had a wistful look as if he was once more becoming lost in thoughts of the past.

“What’s this one?” asked David, hoping to break the spell before Grandad became too gloomy.

“A computer,” explained Jan.

“I’ve heard of those.”

“Of course you have,” went on Jan, “but these days you have to be rich or in business to afford one. Once upon a time everyone had one, and you could communicate with anyone in the world instantly and find out about anything at any time. They controlled everything in your house from your alarm call in the morning to flicking on the lights for you and they could drive your car much better than you could – even give you counselling if you needed it.”

“How could a computer put on the lights?” laughed Sophie.

“You just asked it.”

“Could it talk?” Sophie screwed up her face in confusion.

“Yep, and you could even decide whether you wanted it to speak like an old man or a young lady. Of course Cameron, my late husband, always chose a young lady,” grinned Jan with a sideways look at Grandad.

“And this?” queried David, pointing at a slim black

box.

“Ah, a Playstation 6 console. My dear husband wasted a lot of time on that blasted box.”

“What was it for?”

“Playing games.”

“Like chess?”

“Well, no”, continued Jan. “It was more like being in a story, where you were playing one of the characters. You put on some goggles and a special suit and you could see, hear and feel what they did as if you were really there. You even got some tastes and smells.”

“Wow,” sighed David and Sophie in unison. David wondered why Grandad had not spoken of such a wondrous thing before. He wished with all his being to be able to experience something like that for just one moment. Perhaps he could put on those goggles and see what the world of Grandad’s youth looked like. He would see all the fantastic things his grandfather spoke of – television and birthday parties and rugby matches. It would be a dream come true, but there was also something a little frightening about the idea.

Jan looked suddenly cross. “Yes, well it’s not that amazing. The damn thing almost cost us our marriage.” Grandad chuckled along with her.

“This was the worst thing of all,” she said, picking up a small device. “It’s a mobile phone and it completely controlled every aspect of your life. I’m sure some people asked it for permission before going to the bathroom!” Everyone laughed.

“Anyway,” said Jan, looking suddenly a little embarrassed as if she had shown them something forbidden, “it’s all just collecting dust now.

Everybody upstairs and we'll start getting dinner on."

David and Sophie protested but there was no changing Jan's mind and she ushered them upstairs to begin making the evening meal.

They had a production line going and David enjoyed the sense of camaraderie and shared labour. He peeled potatoes in the sink and prepared the vegetables, Grandad made a sauce to go with it and Jan cooked a delicious omelette using eggs collected from the farm that morning. Even Sophie was occupied setting the table with plates and cutlery. She was bathed in the evening light spilling in from the doorway, but clouds were rolling in to obscure the sun.

They sat down to eat and for a while they were quiet as everyone ate while it was hot, but soon the conversation turned again to the past.

"Hey, we didn't tell them about t.v. dinners," said Jan to Grandad with a wink.

"T.v. dinners?" exclaimed David.

"No we didn't eat television sets back then," laughed Jan. "It was a pre-made meal you just heated up to eat in front of the telly, usually of doubtful nutritional value."

"Why did people eat them then?"

"So they didn't lose a single precious moment in front of their beloved boxes," trumpeted Grandad with a laugh.

The light dimmed and shadows crept from the corners of the room as they finished their meal.

The plates were tidied away and everyone sat out on the porch, enjoying the cool of the evening and the gentle sounds emanating from the farm around them – a soothing chorus of crickets, birds and shuffling

animals. A gentle breeze tickled their faces and called forth long, deep sighs from the treetops. The lonely screech of a pukeko came like some ghostly warning from the darkness beyond. They sat in a small island of light and warmth, sipping mugs of hot chocolate. David wondered if this was the sort of thing people watched on television. Could they sometimes sit down to enjoy replays of gentle evenings like this? Did they watch shows of night-time noises and the quiet unravelling at the end of the day? Television must have been a wonderful thing indeed.

*

The next day they had a late breakfast – everyone seemed to need the lie-in – then began to prepare to continue the journey. Grandad stuffed clothing and food into his pack impatiently as if he could not wait to be away. Jan gave them meat, bread and dried foods to top up their dwindling stocks, and they all felt the trip was drawing close to its goal.

“We’ll be in the city soon,” grinned Grandad. “How are you holding up Sophie?”

“Good.”

“Sure?”

“Yes.”

“Don’t push her too hard James,” warned Jan. “I know what you’re like when you get a sniff of the end of a journey.”

“Don’t you worry. She’s a strong wee thing aren’t you Sophie? And David has been just fantastic with her – really looks after the lass.”

“Great to hear.”

David felt a glowing pride at his grandfather's words. There was a small squeeze on his palm and he looked down to see that Sophie had taken his hand in her own.

"You'll look after me, won't you David?" she said.

"Of course I will." He looked at her fondly. He was suddenly aware that by the end of the day she might be gone. He was going to really miss her, but to have her back with her family would be a wonderful thing.

Suddenly there was a knock at the door, loud and insistent.

"Expecting anyone Jan?" asked Grandad.

"No." A look of concern crossed her face. She went to the window and pulled aside a curtain, then sprang back with a gasp.

"A man and a woman. Ugly lookin' bloke – just like you said. I think it's them! Go and hide quick."

"I don't want to leave you here alone ..."

"I'll be fine. They have no way of knowing you're here. Get her somewhere safe."

"Okay. Just take care. He might have another knife."

"Will do."

Grandad hurried David and Sophie into a room and closed the door, but left it slightly ajar so he could listen. David's heart was thumping madly and Sophie looked petrified. A small whimper escaped from her mouth. He squeezed her hand gently.

"Don't worry. I promised to look after you didn't I? You're safe with me."

Sophie nodded her head but still looked scared. David tried to appear braver than he felt for her sake.

"What's happening?" he asked.

"*Sssh*, keep your voice down," hissed Grandad. He listened intently at the door. David could make out a

raised voice in the kitchen. Jan sounded angry.

“No you can’t come in. I told you there’s no one here. I live by myself. Now if you don’t mind ...”

“Should we go out there Grandad?”

“I’m tempted to go and give them a piece of my mind, but she’s a tough old thing. No, I think we should just sit tight. Jan has things under control. He could have a knife and if he finds out we’re here for sure he might use it. She’s safest if we stay hidden and he doesn’t know we are here.”

The voices continued from outside but Jan stood firm at the door. “I told you I’m here by myself. I don’t care what you think ...”

“They know we’re here Grandad. How did they find out?”

“I don’t know. How could they? He must be bluffing.”

“Maybe we should help Jan? What if they force their way in?” David was surprised at his own courage.

“No, just wait. Jan will take care of it.”

“I’m scared,” whimpered Sophie.

“I know you are love, but David’s here to look after you. No one is going to hurt you. We won’t let them.” Again David felt proud his grandfather placed such trust in him. It made him feel stronger, braver. He believed he really would do anything to protect Sophie from harm. It amazed him that he could feel so strongly about her when she had been in their lives for such a short time, but the past days were so full of events they seemed to stretch back an eternity.

“You’re not coming in mate,” growled Jan, “and you can get your hand off my door. If you don’t leave I’ll set the dogs on you.”

“Jan doesn’t have dogs,” said David.

“I know. I told you – she’s clever. Still I might go out there and give her a hand.”

“But they know you.”

Jan’s voice rose loud and clear from the kitchen.

“Come here Dover. Come here Satan!”

“Satan!” chuckled Grandad. “Oh, that’s rich. Good on you Jan.”

There was a sharp bang from the kitchen then quiet. Grandad strained to listen at the door.

“What happened?” gasped David.

“Don’t know – just hold on. I’m going out.”

Sophie squeezed David’s hand hard. “Don’t worry Soph. They won’t come near you.” He wished he could be as certain of that as he sounded.

They could hear footsteps approaching the door. He was terrified and could feel Sophie trembling beside him. Grandad too looked pale and stiff, as if preparing for the worst. He opened the door.

Jan stood there with a wide grin on her face. “All clear,” she said. Everybody relaxed and sighed with relief.

“What was the bang?”

“Me slamming the door in their faces!”

“Good on you!” laughed Grandad. “You all right David?”

“Yes,” he said weakly.

“Sophie?”

“Yes.”

Jan still looked grave. “You should get to the city as quickly as you can and get Sophie to the police. They looked like pretty unpleasant characters.”

“You’re not wrong there. Those two are really

starting to tick me off,” agreed Grandad.

“Give it an hour for the coast to clear then get going.”

“What if they’re watching the place? They seemed quite certain we were here. How did they know?”

“I’m not sure. Perhaps that shopkeeper said something. I wouldn’t go by the main road to town. I’ll take you out the back and across the paddock to another road into the city. I think you’ll be safe.”

“Thanks very much. You’re a true friend Jan. We don’t know how to thank you.”

“Yeah, thanks Jan,” added David.

“Thank you,” said Sophie.

“Don’t mention it. Those two have really got my blood boiling.” Jan looked furious. “Anything I can do to help, you just ask. In fact you can have two of my horses. They’re good girls and they’ll get you there safely.”

She led them cautiously out the back door, down a dirt farm track and into the stables. In a dark corner heavy with the smell of dung and hay they found the horses. Jan tied the packs to their sides.

“This is Bessie,” she said, stroking the glossy, black flank of the closest horse. “She’s a nice, quiet girl. Might be best for you David.”

“Okay, she’s beautiful,” said David. “What do you think Sophie?”

Sophie came and reached up to stroke Bessie’s nose. The horse dropped its head helpfully and snorted in appreciation.

“I like her. Can I ride with you David?”

David looked questioningly at Grandad.

“Sure. Put her in front of you with your arms on

either side and you'll be right."

Sophie grinned happily.

"And this is Shian, for you old man," joked Jan, handing the reins of a chestnut mare to Grandad.

Grandad mounted his horse and it shifted beneath him as if impatient to go. David mounted Bessie and positioned himself comfortably in the saddle. He had ridden plenty of times on the farm and was a confident horseman. Jan lifted up Sophie and placed her in front of David.

"Grab hold of the mane Sophie – you won't hurt her. That's it. You hold on tight. Don't worry – David will look after you. You won't fall off."

Sophie looked nervous but also thrilled to be on horseback. She grabbed a handful of mane with one hand and stroked Bessie's neck with the other. "Hello Bessie," she said. "You are so beautiful."

Grandad looked seriously at his friend. "Well Jan, we can't thank you enough for looking after us. Sorry to cause you trouble."

"Now stop that – we're friends. You just make sure you get to that sunset of yours and show David what it is you've been droning on about all this time. And get Sophie to the cops. She's a sweet little thing and I'd hate to think of those creeps getting hold of her."

"No chance of that. But I'm concerned about you here by yourself. What if they come back?"

"Don't you worry. I can see them coming and I've got plenty of hiding places and ways of protecting the place. When you live alone you have to come up with ways of looking after yourself."

"If you're sure then?"

"Yes. They aren't the first rough types I've had at

my door and they won't be the last."

"Okay then. Thanks again Jan. We'll be back with the horses tomorrow – probably by lunchtime."

"Now you just take them back to the farm with you. Get back to that daughter-in-law of yours and save her worrying any more than she has already. But drop in on your way to let me know you're all right and get directions. I will make some inquiries about what roads are clear. I'll come over to your place in a few weeks and bring the horses back. They'll enjoy the holiday and it's about time I came over for a visit."

"Right you are," said Grandad. "Cheers then Jan – see you soon." He nudged his horse's flank gently and began to move off towards the paddock.

Jan turned to Sophie and David. "It was very nice meeting you Sophie. Take care of these two now."

Sophie giggled. "Thank you. I love your place. I'll take good care of Bessie."

"Why thank you." She turned to David. "See you soon David. You've been very brave – perhaps braver than someone your age should have to be. But these are bad times. You'll pull through."

"Thanks Jan. You've been so kind to us, and it would be great if you came to visit sometime. I'd like to show you around our farm."

"I'd like that." She paused to see that Grandad had pulled out of earshot and looked suddenly serious. "And take care of the old bloke. He's not as strong as he thinks."

"I will."

"Goodbye then." Jan patted Bessie's rump and the horse started moving off after Shian. They crossed the paddock until Jan was a distant figure waving them on

their way. David felt the burden of the day ahead weigh heavily upon him. Again the responsibility to look after another person had been placed upon his shoulders. He did not know if he was up to the challenge. It seemed too much for someone who had only fifteen years of life experience behind him. But he could not let either Sophie or his grandfather down. They both needed him.

Fighting in the Streets

AUCKLAND TOURIST TIMES: May 6, 2052. Ferry trips to the Sky Tower: Daily boat trips to the Sky Tower and site of the old Casino (now demolished) from the New Downtown Transport Terminus. Each half hour from 9 a.m to 6 p.m.

Radio New Zealand broadcast: April 12, 2054. "...as bush fires continue to rage out of control across much of Hawkes Bay and Bay of Plenty, Police and the Fire Service are warning people to keep well clear of affected areas and not to return to properties or attempt to rescue stock. The fires could be the last straw for many farmers struggling to scrape a living from land bordering the rapidly advancing Eastern Desert..."

As they approached the outskirts of the city the condition of the road improved and traffic increased. People passed on foot, bicycle or horseback, but the occasional electric car also glided past with a gentle hum, the mirrored windows showing nothing of the passengers inside. Larger intercity buses and trucks trundled past more noisily. Most of these ran on a mix of biofuels and electric batteries. The people were still unsmiling and aloof, isolated in their own small

bubbles of concern.

“Now there’s plenty of traffic once we don’t need it,” grumbled Grandad.

“I don’t mind. It’s much better travelling this way,” said David. “You see so much more.”

“You’re not wrong there.”

“And I like horses. Bessie is beautiful,” added Sophie.

“She sure is.”

The land was flatter and more orderly, the dwellings they passed more prosperous. There was not the appearance of decay and despair that had been evident deeper into the countryside, but David knew there was still a lot of sickness and desperation even here. The land and its people bore deep wounds wherever you went, despite how they might look on the outside. The Regression had been tough on citizens and country folk alike and you could see it as a palpable hopelessness seared onto the faces of the people.

They passed a ruined petrol station and the rusted hulks of abandoned vehicles, including a huge truck that lay on its side like some wounded beast. In the distance, across a broad plain, rose a high mountain and its attendant ranges, the tops lost in a crown of cloud. Patches of blue sky peeped through here and there and Grandad began to chuckle happily to himself in anticipation of the sunset to come.

“It’s looking good for tonight. With luck we’ll be seeing a great show.”

“I can’t wait,” said David. “I feel like I’m going to explode. This is going to be fantastic!” He meant every word and was fidgeting restlessly in the saddle in his excitement.

“Can I come and see the sunset too?” asked Sophie.

“Sorry love, but we need to get you back to Mum and Dad,” said Grandad. “I’m sure there will be plenty of sunsets for them to show you.”

She brightened at the thought of seeing her parents again. “I miss them. I can’t wait to see Mummy and Daddy and you can’t wait to see the sunset.”

“That’s right,” laughed David.

The sun beat down on them. “It’s getting hot. Put that sunhat on Sophie will you lad?”

“Sure Grandad.” David took out the broad-brimmed hat he had been keeping in his pack and placed it on her head. She smiled and thanked him. He wished he had brought his own along.

They crossed a river on a makeshift bridge of planks laid over empty oil drums. Alongside were the remains of an older bridge, now in ruins. The surface of the old road angled into the water. Twisted steel rods stuck out from the tops of the crumbling pylons, and murky brown water curled around the bases. The horses crossed the shaky bridge gingerly and were clearly glad to get to the other side.

Another hour of riding brought them into the city and they joined the flow of traffic towards the centre. There were more cars here, and small scooters were common, many of them with sidecars. A few horse-drawn buggies passed by as well, and the faster vehicles were constantly having to navigate their way through the slower ones. David sensed an energy and excitement among the growing hubbub of voices and vehicle noise.

“I forgot it’s your first time in the big smoke,” said Grandad to David.

“The big smoke?” Sophie giggled.

“That means the big city. Exciting isn’t it?”

“It’s amazing,” said David. “I’ve never seen so many houses or people. What do they all do I wonder?”

“This is nothing compared to Auckland or Wellington. Sometimes you can’t move for people. But they can be rough, dangerous places too. You have to watch your back. I wouldn’t take a young fella like you downtown in Auckland, that’s for sure.”

“That’s sad. Why do people put up with it and live like that? Don’t they want to be safe and happy?”

“I don’t know. You have places overseas that dwarf even Auckland,” Grandad went on. “I haven’t been, but there are cities like London and New York with bigger populations than the whole of New Zealand.”

“Wow,” breathed David and Sophie together. They both jumped as a Volt-Wagon swerved past, tooting loudly.

A cooling breeze sprang up and it was not hard to believe the sky might clear at any time. David could feel his anticipation growing.

“Do you know the way Grandad?” he asked.

“Yes, I grew up in this area. I know it well. Just wait till you see that sunset. You will be able to smell the sea soon.”

The city grew shabbier and more derelict as they neared the centre. Some buildings had collapsed into piles of rubble or been gutted by fire to leave skeletal frameworks of twisted steel and charred timber. Skinny people in torn, grubby clothes could be seen searching through the debris for anything of value, alongside stray dogs. David thought their movements were so slow and listless they were more like robots

than people. He felt a sudden pity for them.

They passed through an area where there seemed to be some sort of commotion. Angry-looking figures were milling about in the middle of the street; there were shouts and people running. Others stood and watched, looking variously concerned, excited or bored.

“Let’s move through quickly,” cautioned Grandad. “Remember the trouble in that other town. We don’t want to be involved.” They hurried on through.

They came to a stretch of shops and market stalls where an assortment of people strolled and mingled. Some were dressed in the strangest clothes David had ever seen – bright and colourful, with hair sculpted into bizarre shapes and weird designs painted onto their faces. David wondered how some could be said to be wearing clothes at all judging by a few of the outfits. One young woman carried a portable stereo from which came loud, discordant music, and some of the cars that cruised slowly past had songs with pulsing, insistent beats blaring through open windows. Some of the crowd still seemed agitated and there was a disturbing tension in the air. David had the feeling something was going on – something they were unaware of, as if the city was coiled up tight like a spring ready to explode at any time.

“I don’t like the music. It’s too loud and jarring,” he said.

“Me neither. Give me The Fab Four and Bach any day. Let’s stop and have a bite to eat and we can ask the way to the police station.”

They dismounted and tied Bessie and Shian to a public stand for watering horses, alongside a number

of others. An attendant strolled past with a bucket and shovel, scooping up dung. “That’ll be twenty dollars,” he said in a bored voice.

“What? Oh. Here you go,” grumbled Grandad, handing over a note. “Daylight robbery,” he muttered under his breath.

They entered a cafe and sat around a table. It was busy and customers clustered around the displays of baking, cold meats and fruit.

“I’ve never seen so much food,” said David.

“I’m hungry.”

“Okay Sophie, let’s get something to eat,” said Grandad. “You wait here and I’ll go order. What do you fancy?”

She looked across at the cabinet of food. “One of those please,” she said, pointing.

“Bacon sandwich? Okay. And I’ll get you a fruit drink too. David?”

“Mince pie and chips please. And a milkshake.”

“Sure. Won’t be long.”

Grandad left and began to place their food onto plates before heading to the counter to pay.

As they ate and talked David became aware this was the last time they would spend with Sophie and it gained a precious quality because of it. They talked of how wonderful the sunset was going to be, what Sophie should do with her parents first and about how the police would lock up the bad people and rescue the children from the farm. He wished it did not have to come to an end.

They finished their meal and went outside.

“Hang on,” said Grandad, “I forgot to ask where the police station is. I won’t be long.” He went back

inside the cafe.

Suddenly David felt a sharp pressure in his back and a hot breath on his neck. A voice hissed in his ear.

“Don’t do anything silly – that’s a knife you can feel in your back and it could slice you open before you can blink. There’s another one my lovely wife is sticking in the girl’s back and while I love my wife dearly she has a bit of a temper. You don’t want to get her mad, believe me. Let’s just stay calm. Don’t make a fuss and get into the sidecar over there.”

David looked carefully around and saw the tall, thin woman holding Sophie tightly by the arm. She had a ghastly look of triumph on her face, her eyes gleaming with spiteful glee. Another hand pressed into Sophie’s back but was hidden by her body. Sophie looked pale and petrified, stunned into silence.

“Nice and slow now. In you hop and no one gets hurt.”

David climbed into the sidecar of the motorbike parked nearby and Sophie was placed in front of him. He put a reassuring hand on her shoulder and whispered, “We’ll be okay. Just keep calm.” But he felt far from calm himself – almost dizzy with terror. Where was Grandad? It was awful to have come so far, to be in sight of their goal and within reach of a police station ... Why had they not gone straight to the cops? And why were these people so intent on getting Sophie back? It didn’t make sense.

The gangly man hoisted his grubby jeans over his hips and climbed onto the motorbike. His wife got on behind him. The bike and sidecar surged forth with a spluttering noise and a burst of exhaust. This was a petrol-driven bike, David realized. They were illegal

and horrendously expensive to run, but in reality police rarely prosecuted people for driving them. Usually they were owned by the rich, famous or those involved in crime, for whom it became a status symbol. How could these people afford one?

“Well done Mary my love,” said Rob as they sped round a corner and down an alleyway. “A bit of persistence pays off.”

They pulled up outside a doorway with a smashed window and broken lock, and Rob sat on the bike as it idled. The alleyway went to a dead-end ahead of them. Rubbish overflowed from bins there, and two scooters with sidecars were parked outside other doorways, those clean and newly painted. Graffiti covered the walls.

“Hop in there love and see if it’s clear. Most of these old places are abandoned. We have a little job to do before the journey ahead and we need a bit of privacy.”

“Okay Rob.”

Mary pushed open the door and went in cautiously, returning after a short while with an ugly grin scarring her face.

“All clear.”

“Lovely. Right – in you get and no funny business.”

He pulled Sophie roughly from the sidecar, then David, and stuck the knife in his back again. Mary took Sophie. There was no need to hide her knife here with no one else around, and she held it boastfully at Sophie’s throat. “This would slice through your little neck no problem!” she spat.

“You first Mary.”

“Yep. In you go girlie.”

They were shoved through the doorway, but as they went David dropped something on the ground. It was Sophie's sunhat which he had removed from her head while they were sitting in the sidecar. With a secretive flick of the wrist from near his waist he let it fall in the doorway behind them, praying Rob would not see. The man was too intent on getting them inside and did not notice.

Inside it was dark and dingy. Wallpaper peeled off the walls in untidy strips and a rank odour rose from the carpets. Most of the furniture had been removed and broken crockery and rubbish lay scattered among the dust. Through doorways in the hall they could see bedrooms with mouldy mattresses and blankets lying strewn across the floors.

They entered what had once been a kitchen. An old stove blackened with rust and a pockmarked table were all that was left. Filthy windows barely let any light in through a coating of grease and dirt, and tattered curtains were drawn to the side. The light that did come in coloured the room a sickly brown.

"Sit down here while I make you comfortable," smirked Mary. Her voice was harsh and cold and the words were spat out like nails. She pulled some rope from a small pack and used it to bind David's hands in front of him. The binding cut into his wrists.

"You led us a bit of a dance, didn't you Sophie," said Rob. He was trying to soften his voice to make it appeal to a child, but he could not disguise the ugly menace behind it. Nor did he want to. It was apparent he was enjoying the fear that had hold of Sophie. He relished the power over her and from the loathsome smile on Mary's face David could tell she was taking

pleasure in it too. David was sickened by them – they were despicable, evil. His body was shaking with fear but it was slowly succumbing to another emotion. Anger – hot, acrid rage boiling up from some deep centre within him. Grandad was not here and he felt fully responsible for Sophie. She needed him but he had been rendered useless. He struggled hopelessly against the rope.

“We had quite a job tracking you down my darling,” continued Rob in his poisonous, sugary voice. He scratched at the stubble covering his chin, making it hiss like sandpaper, and turned to address David. “Even with the bike and you on foot it was a challenge – we got delayed by the odd missing bridge or slip. Took us a while to find other routes and they held us up but we were never far behind. And you were damn lucky to get away from me in the bush that time. That really got me wild. In a way you had the advantage being on foot – you could go where we can’t.” He seemed to be enjoying boasting about his cleverness. “But we caught up with you again just inside the city boundary. Of course we couldn’t do much with all those people around and that old man looking after you.” He ran a finger lovingly along the blade of his knife. “But we bided our time, watching you from a distance until we got our chance. My biggest regret is I won’t get to split open that interfering old man. I’ve taken a great dislike to him.”

“Why don’t you let her go? She’s just a kid. What has she done to hurt you?” pleaded David.

“Oh no, she’ll be coming back to the farm with us, won’t you Sophie?”

“But why – why is one person so important? Why go

to all this bother?”

Rob looked round sharply and his eyes drilled into David with a savage intensity. The rage and anger there fought with David’s own. “We can’t have our workers running off into the big, wide world. No, we have to protect our home and keep our little family close. You’ll be much safer with us, where we can keep an eye on you Sophie. You almost ruined everything – put the safety of your friends at risk. You wouldn’t want them to get hurt would you?”

Sophie sat quiet and expressionless, paralysed by fear.

“Besides, we missed you,” crooned Mary, following it with a hideous laugh.

“Why are you doing this? Why do you need to steal kids to work?”

“Well let’s just say our business isn’t entirely legit. But it makes us a lot of money, and that’s only the half of it. We get ransoms for some of the kids too. Adds nicely to the earnings. Make them work for a while then send them home again, for a price. Of course it’s a bit more complicated in your case Sophie. Unfortunately there was a little accident when we were borrowing you from your parents and they didn’t quite make it. They found us just as we were getting ready to take you to your new home and weren’t quite willing to let you go without a fight.”

David gasped in shock. These people were monsters, inhuman. He realized he was dealing with cruel, cold-hearted killers. Thankfully Sophie had not fully understood the words and continued to sit in silence. *Poor girl, he thought, to have everything taken away and replaced with such misery...* It made him sick

with anger.

“You won’t get away with this. Eventually the police will find out!”

Rob hooted with laughter. The mottled skin around his eyes screwed up into a mass of wrinkles. “Oh that’s funny. When you have as much money as us boy you don’t need to worry about the police. Let’s just say we have friends in high places.”

“So why go to so much trouble for one kid? Why not let her go?”

Rob grew suddenly silent as if unsure whether he was saying too much. With a sickly smile he seemed to have decided to tell more. “Sadly Sophie’s parents were important people and engaged in a somewhat similar line of business to our own, though on a rather larger scale. Keeping her with us gives us a certain ... power over her family. What’s left of them anyway,” he laughed. “And of course we still hope to get a rather large ransom from them – it’s all tainted money anyway. So you see we’re really rather fond of our Sophie and would like her back in the flock.”

“What about me?” asked David.

“Oh, well I’m very sorry but you won’t be coming with us,” said Rob with mock concern. “No, you’re a bit old for our place mate. We like our workers young and stupid – they’re easier to control that way. You’re just a bit too big, which is a shame for you.” He stroked the knife suggestively and ran a slug-like tongue over his teeth. “No, you’ll be staying behind I’m afraid. The rope isn’t really necessary but makes the job a little easier. Wouldn’t want you thrashing about too much.”

A cold horror filled David. He knew he was in the

gravest danger.

“You can’t let me go?”

“No, we don’t really want to be looking over our shoulders for you all the way back. Sorry to disappoint you. Besides, I’ve just blurted out a whole lot of stuff I wouldn’t want spread around.”

David knew he could not have abandoned Sophie anyway.

“We’ve just stopped in here to do this little job and then we’ll be on our way. I promise to make it quick boy. I’m not a monster.” Rob held the knife firmly by its handle and began to stand.

David realized the end was near and yet his thoughts were only for those he cared about – Grandad and poor, frightened Sophie. He squeezed his eyes shut and his muscles tightened into knots ...

Suddenly there was an almighty *Whoosh!* from outside the front door. It shook the walls and sent dust drifting down from the lampshade.

“What the hell was that?” roared Rob. He looked sternly at Mary. “You stay here and watch them. I’ll have a quick look.” He darted outside and left his wife eyeing the captives nervously.

Then without warning a shape appeared behind Mary and threw a blanket over her, wrapping it around her head and arms so she couldn’t move. She dropped her knife and tried to scream but was muffled by the blanket.

It was Grandad. “Quick lad!” he called. “Out the back!”

“Grandad, where did you come from?”

“I created a little diversion outside, crept in here and waited till it went off, but no time for that! Let’s go

before he comes back.”

“But my hands are tied.”

Grandad struggled to keep hold of the woman. Surely Rob would hear the commotion and come storming back in.

“Undo the rope Sophie!” shouted Grandad.

“She’s only a kid – she can’t do her own shoelaces!”

“Right. Sophie, get that knife darling and cut the rope.”

Sophie picked up the blade Mary had dropped and held it before David. He slipped the rope over the tip and pulled it against the blade. It was a tight fit.

“Hurry up! I can’t hold her much longer,” Grandad bellowed. “Cut the rope!”

“She’s not strong enough Grandad!”

“Hurry!”

Were those footsteps he could hear in the hallway or the beating of his own heart thumping dizzily in his ears? They had only seconds to act. He pulled the rope sharply towards himself, using his own strength and bracing the knife against his stomach. Sawing back and forth vigorously he saw a few strands of the rope part, but not enough for it to break.

“Don’t cut yourself!” gasped Grandad.

“That’s the least of my worries,” said David through gritted teeth. He was afraid to look around. Even now Rob might be poised to plunge a knife deep into his back. *Come on!* Why wouldn’t the rope break?

“I’m losing my grip on her! Hurry!”

David threw all caution aside and, risking injury, pulled hard against the knife. The rope split some more, enough to loosen it so he could wriggle his hands out. He was free.

“Well done Sophie!” he yelled, tossing the knife out of sight.

“Now let’s go.” Grandad gave the writhing form beneath the blanket a last mighty shove, sending Mary sprawling onto the floor. They sprinted out a doorway onto a lawn.

A lean, spindly figure leaped lightning-quick onto Grandad’s back and pulled him to the ground. It was Rob, and he looked insane with rage. Spittle flew from his mouth as he cursed and rained heavy blows down upon Grandad’s head using the fist clasped around the knife. He burned with a vicious anger and it was all directed at the body lying helpless underneath him. Already ugly bruises and cuts were appearing across Grandad’s face. Then Rob turned the knife around in his hand and raised his arm ready to plunge it downwards.

“No cavalry this time old man,” he gloated.

David knew the time had come to put aside the terror swirling like a storm inside him. He must save Grandad and he realized the danger involved. His life was being offered as something worth giving up for those he cared about. Strangely it instilled in him a sudden calm. He knew death was something preferable to the horror and despair that awaited Sophie. The thought gave him strength. He needed to be focused for her. The dangers of the past days had been trials, practices, leading to this moment. It was up to him and him alone.

Without further thought he threw himself onto Rob’s back and wrapped his hands around the scrawny neck. The knife tumbled from Rob’s hand and fell to the grass. He growled loudly and lashed out, connecting

solidly with David's forehead.

Light flashed before David's eyes. He was lost in a confused jumble of pain and sound, and was thrown to the ground, lying there stunned. He tried to lift himself but somehow his muscles refused to respond. He could hear Sophie screaming hysterically and Mary urging her husband on.

"Kill 'im Rob!"

Why could he not move? Now, when Grandad needed him most and was fighting for his life? He felt a great fatigue fill his body. If only he could rest – why not just roll over and stop for a moment? Would that be so bad? No, he must help Grandad! He cursed his weakness – his legs had to move, they simply had to! The fear was dying away to be replaced by a sense of anger and a desire to survive; it was almost a calmness that came upon him as he realized what he needed to do.

He forced himself to his feet and took in the situation – Sophie frozen and terrified watching it all happen, Mary gloating as her husband pummelled Grandad mercilessly, the horrifying sight of his grandfather's blood-smeared face ...

... and a large, heavy piece of wood lying propped against the side of the house. Seemingly in slow motion David picked it up and stood over Rob. Again his mind took in the scene in crystal-clear detail – the look of shock on Mary's face as she realized what was about to happen and that she was too late to stop it; the glazed look in Grandad's eyes and the sight of Rob picking up the knife and lifting it once more. As he did so he caught sight of David and paused, surprised at the inevitability of what was to come.

Crack! David brought the wood down hard on Rob's head. The impact travelled through the wood and into his arm. Rob yelped and released Grandad, rolling into a ball and clutching his head. He lay there whimpering, clearly dazed and in great pain.

"Rob!" shouted Mary. She looked at David standing fierce and proud with the wood held tightly in his hand, and she suddenly looked frightened and alone. He felt powerful and full of a hot fury. He wanted to hit the pathetic figure before him again, and again ...

But then he happened to look at his grandfather's frail form and his rage melted beneath a wave of tenderness. How could this have been done to his grandfather – to a passionate, caring man who loved the bush and nature and beautiful music? There had been enough violence and suffering. Now he must get those he loved to safety.

Mary had seen the indecision burning in his eyes and quickly grabbed her husband under his arms. With all her strength she pulled him back into the house. His eyes were closed and blood poured from a gash on his temple but he was alive.

"Please don't hit him again," she pleaded, before disappearing from sight.

David ran over to his grandfather and knelt next to him. "Grandad can you hear me?"

His grandfather's eyes flickered open and looked weakly at David. A feeble smile came to his lips and he lifted his hand onto David's shoulder.

"Are you all right Grandad?" repeated David, fighting back tears.

"Yes I think I'm okay my boy. I'll have a killer headache though," he whispered, grimacing with pain.

How could his grandfather joke at a time like this? David cradled Grandad's head in his arms. It was a mass of bruises and oozing blood. A tearful Sophie came over to join them.

"Can you walk Grandad – we need to get away from here?"

"I think so. Give me a hand to get up."

David helped Grandad stagger painfully to his feet and supported him as he walked. Sophie followed along looking worried but David tried to reassure her with a smile.

"How 'bout you Sophie? Are you injured?"

She shook her head.

"How did you find us Grandad?"

"I came out of the cafe just as you lot took off. They didn't realize I'd seen them. I watched as they turned into that alleyway."

"What a stroke of luck!"

"Yes, about time we had some of that. But the next bit wasn't luck. I didn't know which door to go in, but saw my hat lying outside one of them. So it was you that helped me there."

"I hoped you'd see it."

"Good thinking."

"What about the diversion?"

"I noticed the bike was a petrol one, so I just opened the petrol cap, stuck a rag part way in and lit the damn thing with my matches. It was almost empty and I hoped the fumes would ignite. I crept inside and waited for the fireworks. Made quite a bang didn't it?"

"Clever Grandad!"

"Thanks."

David helped his grandfather out onto a street and

along the short distance to where the horses were tied up. His grandfather climbed onto Shian's back with difficulty and leaned forwards across her neck.

David asked a passing pedestrian where he could find the nearest medical centre and was given directions. He adjusted the packs and put Sophie on Bessie before climbing up behind her. He moved out into the street and Shian followed behind, Grandad sprawled upon her back.

"We're getting you to a hospital," he called to Grandad.

"Don't mind me," a faint voice responded. "I'll just rest back here."

They entered another part of the city where crowds of young people were standing around, some shouting and looking nervous or angry. He saw a group of young men trading blows and chasing down rivals; there was a growing cacophony of shouts and smashing glass. A car had been overturned and set alight, and was billowing forth clouds of black smoke. Everywhere shattered concrete, rubbish and broken glass were piled into untidy heaps and pungent smells filled their nostrils. The air seemed to crackle with electricity as if some force was being barely contained. Screams and laughter rang out from every direction.

"Something's going on," said David.

A group of riot police appeared, waving shields and batons and protected by helmets. One fired a tear gas canister into the crowd, causing it to break up. Behind them came an armoured vehicle with a water cannon mounted on top. A few brave rioters began to pelt it with rocks.

Grandad lifted his head and looked around. He

appeared frail and tired.

“It’s becoming dangerous,” he said. “We must get to that hospital and hole up for a while.”

David had never known his grandfather to be like this. It was a shock to see him so vulnerable and helpless, as if everything that defined him had been taken away. Concern and anxiety twisted David’s stomach into an uncomfortable knot. He knew it was imperative his grandfather get treatment.

The Darkest Hour

THE NEW ZEALAND HERALD: June 21, 2042. Peace talks resume amid chaos: A fresh round of negotiations began in Nairobi today as 24 leaders of African nations met to pursue an end to the decade-long conflict that has swallowed much of the African continent. As they met the price of water reached a new high of \$300 a barrel. Egyptian President Hasni Talal, who is chairing the meeting, said that, "The United Nations has abandoned Africa to its fate, and the African War is entering a dangerous new phase..."

They found a hospital and helped Grandad into the reception. He had wiped his face clean and was looking better apart from the bruises across his forehead. Although he could walk without aid they put their arms around his waist.

David explained what had happened but the receptionist was unimpressed. She peered through her glasses and looked reluctant to attend to them, shuffling anxiously through a pile of paperwork in front of her.

"We are far too busy to help at the moment. We're taking emergencies only."

“But this *is* an emergency,” complained David angrily. “He’s been severely beaten.”

“He doesn’t look too bad to me. Don’t you know there’s rioting in the streets. We’ve got people coming in all the time in a lot worse condition than he is. We’re short-staffed as it is.”

“Aren’t you meant to take care of sick people?”

“Now don’t be smart with me! The reality is hospitals today just don’t have the staff or money to take anything less than an emergency. Now, I suggest you get your grandfather some painkillers and put him to bed for a decent rest. That’s all I can offer.”

“But it’s not fair!”

“Look, I’ll be completely honest with you. We have a lot of young people coming in here. They are our first priority. Your grandfather is near the end of his life. It *is* fair.”

“But ...”

Grandad interrupted. “No, she’s right David. I’m an old man and it’s not good that I take away care from the young folk. It wouldn’t feel right. No, I’ll be fine. I’m feeling much better now.”

David looked unconvinced. “Are you sure Grandad?”

“Yes, yes. It’s just a few bruises – nothing serious. I was a bit stupefied for a while but I’ve come right now.”

“Well if you’re sure ...”

“Yes, and don’t you worry Sophie. It’s not that bad.”

“Good – I was really scared.”

“I don’t like it at all Grandad,” said David.

“I know, but there’s nothing more we can do.”

They went outside and remounted the horses.

“We’ll take you to the police station now Sophie,” said Grandad.

“No we can’t. It’s not safe,” said David.

“What do you mean?”

“That man, he said the police were in on what they were doing – that they’d paid people off or something. He has friends high up in the police.”

Grandad looked stunned and was quiet for a while. “That changes things,” he said seriously. “We can’t take her there then. She’ll just end up back on that farm. We can’t trust anyone. Bah, these are dark times. Things are getting worse by the day. Everything is just going to hell. No, she has to stay with us. Maybe we could look for her parents ourselves. We’ll take her back to Jan’s and decide what to do from there. Is that okay Sophie? Do you fancy staying with us a bit longer?”

Sophie looked delighted, a brief flash of happiness in a dark day. “Yes, I want to stay with you and David.”

They rested awhile in a half-demolished church, then continued towards the edge of the city. Some of the shops, factories and schools they passed were empty, and David felt a keen sadness. Worst of all was the supermarket he climbed into through a broken window while scrounging for canned food – the vast, echoing space inside was overwhelming in its emptiness.

Later they stopped in an overgrown park for a rest. It had once been a sports field – rusted rugby posts and an old playground had almost disappeared beneath the vegetation. While Sophie was busy exploring the tunnels and climbing frames of the playground David told Grandad what he had heard Rob say.

“Her parents are dead. I think he killed them. Sophie doesn’t know it yet.” He whispered so Sophie would not hear.

“My God,” Grandad said quietly.

“It sounds like all her family are involved in the same sort of business too.”

“It just gets worse. I was going to say we should get her to other relatives but maybe they’re *all* bad apples. I’m beginning to think she’s safest with us. I need to think about this. Let’s get to Jan’s and decide what to do then.”

“Sure.”

Grandad looked with pity at Sophie as she played. He had forgotten his own pain for the moment. “Poor little mite. So much sadness for one so young.”

They continued on their way and Grandad began to worsen. After a long and torturous journey they reached the outskirts of the city. They were passing a wooded area when David noticed Grandad slouching weakly in the saddle.

“Grandad, you look awful.”

“I feel awful,” his grandfather muttered. “I don’t think I can make it back to Jan’s. I need a rest. Let’s camp in the woods here and head for Jan’s first thing in the morning. I don’t like the city and I feel safest in the bush, where I can see people coming. Help me down.”

“Righto Grandad.” David’s mind was a jumble of fear and confusion, and he was so tired he really just wanted to be home. He began to be afraid Grandad was worse than he was letting on.

*

They set up camp in the bush, well away from the road and near a stream. The late afternoon sun lit up the grasses and silver ferns along the bank, and there was a warm breeze.

Grandad had grown even weaker, and was wincing with pain. They were too tired to put up the tent, but it was going to be a warm, dry night. The breeze would hopefully keep mosquitoes away. Soon the camp was set up and a fire lit, but there was no harmonica playing or stories and Grandad sat quietly watching the flames licking at the firewood. After a while he crawled into his sleeping bag, his back lit by the dancing firelight.

“I just need a rest for a while if that’s all right.”

“Yes, no problem Grandad.”

“I’m sorry but I won’t be able to cook tonight.”

“Don’t worry. I’ll take care of it.”

“Good lad. We’ll head to Jan’s in the morning. Wake me up when dinner’s ready.”

“I will. Grandad, are you really okay?”

“What? Yes, yes. Don’t you worry about me.” He rolled over and looked at David, speaking in a suddenly serious voice. “But listen now.”

“Yes, Grandad.”

“Jan will know what to do. That’s where we’re headed. And you really will get to see a sunset.”

“I know Grandad. Sophie first. The sunset will wait.”

“Good.” He looked for a moment as if he might say more but then turned over and was soon asleep.

David felt worry flooding his mind. Why had Grandad wanted to make it so clear what the plan was, as if he was not expecting to be around to carry it out?

He sounded like he did not think he would make it to the morning.

Sophie sat and watched glumly while David made dinner and stoked the fire. Staying busy helped to keep the thoughts of Grandad out of his head, but they were there at the periphery, jabbing incessantly at his mind. Would his grandfather make it through the night? Was he strong enough to carry on without Grandad? Would he let Sophie down when she needed him most?

Later David woke his grandfather. The old man sat up and took a little food but looked pale and exhausted like some ghost desperately clinging to life. They sat bathed in the shimmering light of the fire, saying little but enjoying the precious time together. Sophie grew tired and David put her to sleep on a mat made out of ferns and moss. He wrapped a blanket around her and stroked her head tenderly.

“Goodnight Soph.”

“Goodnight.” She paused to look up at him. “Will I be seeing Mummy and Daddy again soon?” she said. In her voice he sensed she had come to suspect the awful truth. He could not lie to her.

“I don’t know. I really don’t Sophie. I’m sorry.”

“Will you look after me if I can’t get back to them?”

He was amazed and suddenly a little shamed by her courage. She was so brave, calling on enormous strength to go through what she had in the last few days. He knew he would do anything for her, and the realization caused him to smile.

“Yes, I will,” was all he said.

He stayed with her for a while as they gazed up at the stars glimmering through windows in the clouds.

David pointed out the Southern Cross.

“There are so many stars in the Universe you could never count them all, not in a million years. Grandad knows the exact figures, but I bet there are more stars than there are grains of sand on all the beaches in the world.”

“Wow.”

“If you see a shooting star you can make a wish.”

“You know what I would wish for?”

“No.”

“I would wish for Grandad to get better.”

David was surprised. He assumed Sophie would wish to see her parents again. Perhaps she really had accepted she was not going to be returning to them.

“So would I,” he said.

On the other side of the camp Grandad got back into his sleeping bag and called David over.

“David,” he said in a weak voice. His face was drawn and ghastly, his eyes small dark points among the pale flesh. “I don’t know if I’m going to make it through the night.”

David felt a shockwave of fear run through him. “Don’t talk like that. You’re going to be fine.”

“I don’t mean to frighten you David. I’ve been sick for some time now – even your mother hasn’t known about it. I’ve expected the end for a while, and I think this might just finish me off. I feel suddenly very tired. I think this is why I wanted to come on this trip so badly – to see one more sunset before I died.”

David found he could not speak. He somehow knew Grandad was at the end of his life, but could not imagine going on without him. “We’ve got to get you back to the farm,” he said in a quavering voice.

“Brave lad,” sighed Grandad. He spoke slowly and softly and his skin glistened with sweat. “I shouldn’t have put you through the last few days but I’m so proud of what you have done. You’ve been braver than I could ever be, and I know your mum is going to be getting back a different man to the one who left.”

“Grandad ...”

“No, listen. I’m old and I’ve lived a good life. Going out like this in the bush, with you – it’s the way I want to go. And I know you’re ready to take on the challenges of the farm yourself. Not just the farm but the whole damn mess this world’s getting into. Just always remember what you’ve learned and don’t let the world drag you down with it.”

“But Grandad I don’t want you to go. I can’t do it without you.” David felt hot tears springing into his eyes. Why was his grandfather talking this way?

“You can and you will – if not for me then for that little girl. She respects you and I want you to look out for her now. And for your mum too.”

“Of course. Yes, always. But I’m not tough Grandad.”

“I don’t want you to be tough. It was tough, heartless people that got us into this mess. It was your compassion that stopped you from beating that man to death. That’s your greatest strength.” He leaned closer as if what he was about to say was especially important. “The world needs people like you David – people who would rather heal than destroy. No, don’t be tough. But be strong.”

Grandad seemed to grow a little more relaxed as if a sudden thought had brought him a moment of peace. “You know, your father would have been so proud of

you – don't ever doubt that. He thought the world of you, and you have more than lived up to his hopes and dreams."

"I guess."

"I see a lot of him in you."

David took his grandfather's hand in his own. "I love you Grandad."

"And I love you. Perhaps I never said it enough but I'm a crusty old dog. Tell your mum I love her too and I'm sorry for all the bother I've caused. Get Sophie to Jan's and then promise me one thing."

"Anything, of course."

"Once it's safe make sure you get to see a sunset. See it for me."

"I don't know Grandad ..."

"Yes, otherwise it will all have been for nothing," Grandad said in a voice that was growing weaker. "You've got to go on and see it for me. Promise me you'll see it." He started to rise and seemed to be getting so agitated that David had to say yes to calm him down.

"I will. I promise."

"Good. I sure do wish I could have seen a sunset one last time."

"You will Grandad. You will."

But Grandad fell silent and looked as though he was not strong enough to say any more.

"I'll just sleep now if that's okay."

"Sure Grandad. You have a rest and I'll see you in the morning."

"Righto. Bring your sleeping bag over and sleep beside me if you like."

"I'd like that." David brought it over and got inside.

He looked at the figure sleeping beside him, chest rising and falling slowly. He put his arm across his grandfather and tried to go to sleep. An hour later he was still awake and lay looking up at the night sky. He watched for a shooting star but none came.

*

In the morning David woke to find his grandfather was dead. The body lay still and cool beside him. The talk of the previous evening had prepared him partially for it. After a period of crying and sitting in shocked silence he got up and composed himself, breathing deeply. There was an aching emptiness inside him and he felt numb. It seemed impossible to go on alone; the awareness that Grandad would not be there to guide him and protect him was more frightening than anything else he had ever faced. He felt as though any moment he could turn around to see his grandfather leap from behind a bush with a cheeky grin, and it would all turn out to have been some awful mistake, but a deeper part of him knew this moment of pain would have a terrible permanence.

He zipped up the sleeping bag to hide the sight from Sophie, then woke her and explained that Grandad was dead. She burst into tears and seeing her so upset helped him to control his own grief. He had to be strong for her.

“Is he really gone?” she asked.

“I’m afraid so.”

“You won’t leave me will you?”

He fixed her with a look that let her know he would never contemplate such a thing. “Of course I won’t.”

She gave him a hug.

After a quick breakfast he tied Grandad's body onto the back of Shian and they began the trek back to Jan's farm, Bessie leading the way. The time passed in a haze; he remembered little of the journey until they found themselves turning into the driveway at Greenacres.

Jan had seen them coming and stood in the doorway. She saw Grandad's body tied across Shian's back and guessed what had happened.

"I'm so sorry," she said, coming over to give them both a hug. "I know he hadn't been well but this must be terrible for you both."

She took them inside for tea and warm food, and the familiarity of the surroundings and her gentle bustling around the kitchen was somehow soothing. They talked for what seemed like hours about Grandad's life and the times Jan and Cameron shared with him. There was much David had not known before. Why did he have to wait until Grandad died to learn about the details of his life? He was suddenly aware of the huge gaps he had in his knowledge of his grandfather. That it was too late to fill them was one of the saddest things of all. They also spoke about the events of the last day. Sophie went for a nap while Jan and David continued to talk.

"Don't worry David," said Jan. "We'll take him back on Shian to the farm and break the news to your mother. But first I'll go into the city with Sophie and speak to the police myself. Those criminals aren't the only ones with contacts. I have a few friends in high places of my own who will be very interested to hear what you've told me. I'll go once Sophie has had a

decent rest. I don't like the idea of keeping her here, just in case they come back. I'll drop Sophie off at the home of the local Member of Parliament. She's a friend of mine and Sophie will be safer there for the moment. You go on to the sea. He would have wanted you to finish what you started. You should see the sunset for him, and watching it over the ocean at the coast is the very best way to do it."

"Is it safe?"

"Yes, I've been listening to the radio and the troubles are over. They flare up from time to time but it's always in the same areas. I'll show you on a map the best place to go for your sunset and a safe way to get there, through the quiet neighbourhoods. You'll be fine. Besides I don't like the idea of you hanging round here by yourself either."

"And the kidnappers?"

"We'll change your clothes. Keep your hood up and head down and keep to the quiet areas. As I said I'll give you a map. Any problems, give Bessie a nudge and she'll take off quick smart. Your grandad really wanted this for you and he was very proud of how you've proved yourself on this trip. After the sunset meet me and Sophie at my friend's house. I've marked the address on the map. It's easy to get to and in a safe part of town. As long as you leave the foreshore before it's completely dark you'll have no trouble."

"Will you be safe?"

"Yes, I have a hunting rifle and I'll wave it about if they come poking around here again. Once we're on Shian they won't have a hope of keeping up with us, even on a motorbike. She can really move if she has to

and these rough roads suit a horse better than any bike.”

“Thanks Jan. I really wish Grandad could be there to see the sunset.”

“He would have loved to share it with you too. But he saw that you are strong enough to take care of yourself. I see a lot of him in you actually.”

The thought filled David with pride. He felt like such a different person to the anxious, quiet boy who had left the farm, so full of self-doubt. Had it really been just a few days ago? A new strength and purpose flowed through him. He had lost Grandad but had gained Sophie and Jan, and he would do all he could to keep them safe.

“Have a bite to eat before you set off, but you should go soon if you want to make the sunset. I’ll leave once Sophie is awake.”

“Thanks Jan, for everything.”

“You’re welcome. Come back here anytime. This is your home now too.”

Greenacres, Parihaka, Sophie, Jan. His world had grown so much larger in the space of just a few days. He knew he would never feel trapped and small inside the walls of his small valley again.

The Drowned City

ST ANDREW'S PARISH NEWSLETTER: October 5, 2057. Join us this Wednesday for an evening of prayer and comfort as we approach the end times. Father Brian Jensen will speak on what the Bible has to say about the trials ahead and songs and prayers will be offered for the deliverance of you and your family...

David made his way back to the suburban outskirts, riding Bessie. Using Jan's map he kept to the quieter areas, and the rest of the afternoon passed without incident. As he neared the flooded foreshore of the city the streets grew more crowded with pedestrians, cyclists and the occasional electric car. David felt he wanted his own space and avoided them. Somehow his journey seemed intensely personal and he did not feel like sharing it with other people. Soon he could smell a sharp tang in the air and as he rose over the crest of a hill he saw the flat expanse of the sea spreading away to the cloudy horizon. It stretched across his field of view, speckled with flashes where the light glinted from its surface and seeming to pull his eyes onward into some unimaginable distance. He felt as if he might topple forward and had to steady himself. He gasped in wonder and it was even more

magnificent than he had hoped. The ocean seemed to have no end and he suddenly realized what a vast place the Earth was. The tiny world of his farm became safe and comfortable in comparison.

A little way offshore tall buildings of glass and metal rose from the water like rocky pinnacles, and the sea was still and calm, broken only by gentle wrinkles. Farther to the west a tall power station chimney stood in the water like some medieval tower. Alongside it was a group of rocky islands and the wreck of a grounded tanker. Houses along the cliff tops nearby were slowly crumbling as the ground was eroded from beneath them.

It was late afternoon and David spent some time sitting quietly, lost in his thoughts. He went over the events of the past few days and his grandfather's death. He still felt numb from the realization of what he had lost. So many people had faced death in the world, and yet the aching inside seemed so personal and vivid – surely no one else ever felt that way before. He wondered if he could ever be happy again. Strange fears crowded his head – perhaps he might forget his grandad. *How did his voice sound? What did he look like?* First he had lost Dad and now his grandfather, and as the memories faded it would be like losing them both all over again. David tried to etch the memories into his mind so they could never be lost. The tears had dried up and now there was just a dull ache that would not go away.

He relived in his mind the last precious days. What a rich, exciting, frightening, bewildering time it had been. He thought of his mother too, and wondered how she had coped alone. What was she thinking and

how worried was she? Suddenly he missed her with an intensity he had never felt before. He wished he could speak to her and share his grief, or see her face just for a moment.

Before he knew it considerable time had passed and it was getting late. The light was turning to the warm, golden tones that signalled the day was drawing to a close. He led Bessie down to the shore where a number of small, wooden buildings stood. Outside one particularly decrepit hut a board advertised boats for hire. A man was snoring in a chair beside it, a hat across his face.

David shook the wrinkled old man, who awoke with a splutter.

“Yes, sorry ’bout that mate. How can I help you?”

David explained that he wanted a boat to row out and watch the sunset. The man scratched his head and looked puzzled.

“Well that’s a new one,” he said. “Most folks just want to do a bit of fishin’ or go out to look through the high-rises. Sometimes you can still find the odd thing of value but they’ve been pretty well cleared out by now. Divers are starting on the underwater buildings. Just last week someone found a stash of jewellery that had been missed. Anyway, I suppose that island out there would be a nice place to watch the sun go down. You could even climb one of the buildings for a grand view. Don’t worry – I’ll watch out for you. I don’t think anybody else will go out at this time of day. The island is a safe place to spend the night. Probably not safe for a lad your age to bed down outside in the city.”

“Oh, I’ll be back before it’s dark.”

“Well you have a little bit of time yet. You can stable your horse here with mine. If you want to stay the night on the island I’ll make sure you have the place to yourself.”

“Thanks, but I probably won’t be too long.”

David paid for a boat with a few crumpled notes. It was a small, wooden rowboat. He had used one before on the pond at the farm. With growing panic as the sky began to darken he pulled it across to the water’s edge, where the pavement disappeared beneath the small waves. It had cost all his money, but David wanted the best possible view of the setting sun. He began to row past the tops of traffic lights and down the middle of an old shopping street. It was now flooded almost up to the tops of the doors, so that windows and balconies opened onto water. In one store he could see the top halves of mannequins facing him like frozen swimmers. Farther out he could see large buildings rising as shiny columns from the calm sea. They stood in two rows facing each other like a colonnade of giant pillars, marking where the main street of the city had been, before the sea swallowed it. Although some windows were smashed and birds nested on the rooftops, they still glistened like the pictures he had seen in books, and he could almost imagine people still living and working in them. Instead they had been cleaned out and left to the sea as it rose over many years to devour them. Some had been demolished or dismantled and the intent was to build farther inland, but somehow the will or money to build a new city had petered out. These silent towers protruding from the water were now merely a tourist attraction to those few travellers who came this

way. Broken windows glared at him like rows of suspicious eyes, while on one or two buildings whole sections of wall had crumbled away to reveal the rooms behind, which were picked clean by looters. The odd desk, chair or cabinet showed these had once been places of work and industry. Now a heavy stillness settled over the place, seeping slowly inwards to infect stone and metal. A piece of paper fluttered down from some high window like a scavenging bird. He rowed down the middle, and the towers on either side seemed to lean towards him as if their massive weights would drag them forwards on top of him. As the water deepened he could make out the tops of smaller buildings just below the surface, emerging as hazy protrusions from the murk. They were coated with marine growths and seaweed clinging to the rooftops. Fish swam in and out of the fronds that surged back and forth with the tide. David imagined for a moment how thrilling it must be for divers to explore the world of sunken ruins below, but the dark corridors and silent, empty rooms would also be somewhat frightening. They were best left to the fish.

There was an open view to the sea, and with a building sense of excitement he noticed a brisk wind had begun and was tearing the clouds above to shreds. It grew brighter and he could see the sun's light shining through the clouds near the horizon in colossal shafts. As he watched and rowed patches of blue sky gradually appeared and the sun broke through, shining so strongly he had to turn away. But it was magnificent and he felt a joy unlike any he had ever experienced before. He put the oars down for a moment, raised his arms and whooped with happiness.

The sun seemed to be a thing of such power and beauty that anything else was insignificant beside it. The world and its problems felt suddenly small and of no consequence and anything was possible for that brief moment before the clouds drew a curtain across the sun again. All the while it crept closer to the sea and the sunset grew nearer. He rowed faster, wanting to reach one of the buildings before the sun was doused by the sea. Then he would row to the island for the final show, but he was racing time to get there before it was too late. Already the clouds around the sun were beginning to glow with a pale tinge of red. David could hardly breathe, and it seemed he had been waiting for this moment as long as he could remember.

He rowed to the side of a building where a collapsed section of wall allowed entry to the dim interior. Tying the boat to a twisted piece of window frame, he climbed onto the dusty floor and entered the building. Inside it was dark and silent. Beyond a doorway was an empty elevator shaft that disappeared into blackness above. From below the sound of lapping waves came. Next to it was a flight of stairs, also leading up, or down into surging water. David began to climb upwards.

Some of the steps were cracked or missing entirely and everything was coated with corrosion and decay, dissolving beneath the touch of the salt air. His feet sank into the dust, bird droppings and flakes of paint covering the steps. One piece of railing crumbled beneath his hand and he fought to keep from toppling down over the side. He could see the dark pool of water at the bottom of the stairwell rising and falling

gently as the sea breathed and sighed below. Carefully David continued on, jumping across one area of stairway where the steps had fallen away.

He walked down a dark hallway and arrived in a room on the top floor. It was well lit from the large gaps where floor to ceiling windows had once been. One side faced the sun and much of the wall had disintegrated in some past storm to leave a gaping hole. David stood at the edge, feeling uneasy at the dizzying drop to the water far below. He could see that the three floors underneath him were also completely open to the elements.

He explored the rest of the level. Graffiti competed with mould and mildew to paint the walls in garish shades, and he had to clamber over the broken furniture and office supplies which lay tangled in twisted heaps across the wide floor space. A blackened area of floor showed where someone had lit a fire in the past, and David supposed the person was lucky not to set the whole building alight. He had already passed one that had been reduced by fire to a burned-out metal husk. In another corner the floor had collapsed to leave a large, dark hole ringed with a jagged edge of crumbling concrete. Part of a wall had also fallen in to form a ramp descending into the darkness below. David stepped nervously to the edge. In the gloom of the next level down he could make out untidy mounds of rubble piled across the floor.

He turned and walked slowly and with growing anticipation to where the burning sky lay framed before him. A smudge of fierce red and orange was forming near the horizon, swallowing the western sky. David could hardly move with the excitement of the

moment. Time seemed to stop and wrap him in a breathless silence. It all felt somehow sacred, as if he was witnessing an event of sublime beauty and importance. The world paused and held its breath, shifting under some heavy cosmic weight.

The sunset had begun and the clouds were luminous with rich shades of orange and apricot. All the western sky seemed to be on fire and changing colour as he watched, shining like burnished copper. Ribbons of silky red melted into brighter pools of pink and gold, shifting and transforming before him. The timing had been crucial and he knew this display would be as brief as it was unique.

After a while David realized the temperature was dropping and the light was lessening; he felt as if he was waking from a dream or trance, his awareness returning from some faraway place beyond conscious thought. The memory of where his mind had been was already fading.

Reluctantly he stirred his body into action, returning to the stairwell where the shadows were already flowing down the walls to engulf the way ahead.

At the bottom of the stairs he became aware of a pungent, unpleasant stench he had not noticed before in his eagerness to get to the top. He walked across the room, and as he approached an untidy heap of debris in one corner he noticed a large form lying still next to it. He struggled to see clearly in the poor light. A crumpled, black coat covered something from which the odour seemed to be coming. David decided his curiosity was taking him somewhere he did not really want to go. His heart began to pound – a frenetic staccato in his ears – and he felt faint. He could not

tell if the smell was somehow poisoning him or if it was his own stale fear. Wiry strands of hair poked from beneath one end of the coat. Turning away, David decided he had seen enough. Some things were best left alone and the day had suddenly taken on a darker, more menacing hue. He was reminded he was in a world of danger and despair, where shadows and nightmares had a living, breathing presence.

He reached the boat and climbed in, beginning to row with increasing urgency for the island. He wanted to reach it before dark. He passed between two buildings that rose like smooth, glassy cliffs on either side. The sun's light gleamed from the glass in glossy yellow shades as it sank lower, and it began to colour the sea golden. Around the boat the water shimmered and danced like molten metal, lapping at the sides of the rowboat. In one place an aerial walkway between two buildings formed an arch beneath which he rowed; the glass sides were shattered and twisted. Elsewhere the stone spire of a church projected above the water like a signpost to the island ahead.

When he reached the small island David tied the boat to a shrub and climbed the grassy hill to sit beneath a statue at its top. The figure was headless and scarred, an obvious target for vandals. He sat and wrapped his arms around his knees, letting the cool stillness of the evening settle over him. He felt a profound peacefulness seeping into his bones and suffusing his whole being, and wished this moment could be somehow preserved forever. A flock of starlings wheeled overhead searching for a roosting place and a few strident noises drifted across from the city. Otherwise all was silent. The chimney and islands to

the west were now stark, black silhouettes, as were the mountains farther inland. A scattering of electric lights from private generators shone from the city, trembling on the water. Jagged lines of smoke climbed to the sky from a few places, but whether it was from cooking fires or further troubles he did not know. Behind him the horizon seemed to disappear into infinity.

The noise of shifting water made David look back in the direction of the shore, and he saw another boat rowing out towards him. Inside the boat he could see two hunched figures, one small and one tall and thin but wrapped in a dark cloak. Apprehension stole over him; the old man had said no one else would be coming out to the island. He also said the city was not a safe place to be outside alone at night. Fear gripped him once more; it seemed to be becoming a familiar feeling in the last few days. The boat drew nearer and David struggled to make out the occupants in the last precious scraps of light. With a start he recognized the child as Sophie, but who was the taller person? It was far too thin to be Jan. With sudden horror he realized it must be one of the kidnappers. The person had snatched Sophie again and was now coming for David! An icy panic clutched at him – he felt his muscles tighten ready to run, but he was bound to the spot, unable to move. He had nowhere to go anyway. All the while the boat slid closer and closer while he stood there like a statue, fear and terror carved on his face.

Run! he willed to himself, but his legs were unable to respond.

Run!

As the figure looked over its shoulder to the island,

David finally broke open the straitjacket that fear had thrown around him and crouched quickly behind a nearby bush. His heart pounded and sweat ran into his eyes, blurring his vision.

The boat came nearer, and drew itself into the muddy shore with a soft, sucking sound. The tall figure rose from the bottom of the boat, and took Sophie by the hand, stepping onto the grass.

Monster, thought David, pure evil!

Again he seemed rooted to the spot as the pair came closer, straight towards where he crouched, shaking and frozen like a rabbit caught in torchlight. They obviously had seen him and knew exactly where he was. Why couldn't he move? He must get away, must run, but how could he leave Sophie with such a devil?

Then suddenly, as his eyes cleared, he found something familiar in the gait of the larger figure. He peered beneath the hood of the cloak, trying to make out the features beneath. With a gasp he recognized who it was.

His mother.

Sunset

TARANAKI DAILY NEWS: February 16, 2058. Police arrest couple on kidnapping charges: Police have discovered a farm in rural Taranaki where children as young as 6 were forced to work growing narcotics in squalid conditions. "It was awful," said local MP Sharon Hodson, who has taken a particular interest in the case. "These children had been stolen or bought from their parents and made to work long hours for meagre amounts of food and water."

Police acted on information provided by a member of the public and apprehended the couple while one was receiving treatment for a head wound at Base Hospital. They were well-known to police and their farm, whose location is still being kept secret, is now a crime scene. Sergeant Alex Henare explained that when police questioned the man and woman they realized both were wanted in connection with missing children over the last two years. "They are facing charges of kidnapping, slave labour and growing narcotics for supply," he confirmed.

An anonymous source has told the Daily News that police have begun an internal investigation into why files relating to the couple over recent years have been misplaced or ignored...

"Mum!" David called. He had never been more pleased to see her.

As she came to stand before him she smiled and her

eyes glistened and shone with tears. The last light of the sun tinged her face with warm tones so her skin seemed to glow from within. It made her look younger and filled with a healthy vitality that had not been evident for a long time. She placed her hands on either side of his face.

“Are you okay? Are you hurt in any way?”

“No Mum, I’m fine. Just a few bruises.” The loss of Grandad had hurt him much more. It was a wound he would always carry.

“Are you sure? There’s nothing you need?”

“Yes Mum. I’m sure.”

His mother relaxed and turned to face the burning horizon. “That really is something,” she said, putting her arm around him as the sunset began to dissolve in a pale blush across the western sky. It outlined the tall buildings looming over the island as black shapes.

She looked sternly at his face. “It took me a long time to find you. I left straight after you on my bicycle and must have been close behind but it was hard work keeping up. I had a few adventures of my own.”

“How did you find us?”

“I made for Jan’s place knowing Grandad would stop there. She was just about to leave for the city and you had already left. She told me everything and we went to the police together with Sophie.” She looked around at the dying sunset. “I know Grandad loved this place. The boat seller told me you’d be out here. He said he was watching out for you.”

David looked at Sophie, a warm smile splitting his face. “Hello you,” he said.

She ran over and wrapped her arms around him, burrowing her face into his stomach. “I missed you,

and I'm not going to let you go," she giggled.

His mother grinned and said, "She seems to have quite a bond with you. Jan told me about what happened to Sophie's parents and she is still at the police station telling them what you told her. I wouldn't like to get on the wrong side of her. Some of those grown men looked genuinely frightened. It may have been a lie about Sophie's parents, but if not she could come and live with us. It sounds like the rest of her family are not really the sorts to be bringing up a child. We'll find out as soon as we can." Sophie looked at her, mouth open in surprise.

David's mother touched her gently on the cheek. "If she wants to that is."

Sophie was speechless but the joy on her face seemed to be answer enough.

"That's settled then – if it's all right with you David?"

David too was suddenly lost for words but a happiness within him expanded and filled his whole being. *A sister*, he thought – someone to join his solitary rambles on the farm, to teach and play games with and even boss around when the occasion demanded it. He felt a sense of pride and gratitude wash over him.

A little sister.

"Yeah," was all he could say, but it was all that was needed.

"Good lad," his mother said quietly, and these two words also seemed to suffice.

"I thought you were one of the kidnappers," said David, conscious of how nervous and afraid he had been.

“I’m so sorry you went through all that,” his mother said seriously. “I feel awful I wasn’t there for you. Jan explained it all to me. But they are gone now – the police arrested them today. I wouldn’t have brought Sophie with me unless it was absolutely safe. In fact she insisted on coming.”

She looked down at Sophie and her face, so often lined with worry, softened for a moment. “I don’t think she was going to be left behind if she had anything to do with it.” Sophie giggled in agreement.

“You’ve both been so very brave,” said his mother and she looked for a moment as if she would cry, before gaining control over her face with some effort.

“Somehow seeing this I can’t feel mad at your grandfather for dragging you off. Perhaps I’ve shut myself away too much from the good things and missed what’s in front of me. I’m sorry I’ve been so distant. Maybe it’s taken losing you and seeing this to remind me there is still plenty of beauty left in the world for those who look for it – plenty of good things like sons who try hard to put up with mothers who have given up.” She looked at him as she said this, smiling. “These things will always endure – not just in sunsets but in people like you.”

“I know it’s been hard Mum,” said David.

“Yes, but the time for dwelling on the past is over. I have to move on. Perhaps we need to make trips to this sunset of yours a regular thing, just to remind us of what’s important – what’s worth fighting for.”

“Mum, Grandad ...” began David, but suddenly his throat hardened and he could not speak.

“I know all about Grandad,” said his mother softly, putting a hand on David’s shoulder. “I saw him at

Jan's. She told me what happened and will help us take his body home. He'd been sick for some time and I think would have died sooner or later whatever happened. He thought I didn't know, but it wasn't too hard to tell he was not well. He would have loved to see this, but he wanted you to see it even more, and we will just have to enjoy it for him." She hugged him gently.

"Dad would have liked it too," said David.

"He sure would have. And he'd have been so proud of you. Probably would have murdered your grandfather, but been so jealous and proud too. Seeing this reminds me of so much I'd forgotten – sunsets we shared, trips away, before things changed. It's beautiful."

The shades on the horizon deepened to a rich crimson. The sun appeared from beneath clouds briefly and sparkled on the water in a shining path from the island to the horizon as it dipped into the sea. David imagined if he could walk along that path for long enough he might arrive at a place where there was no hardship or uncertainty. Perhaps his grandfather would be there. The bleeding sky began to fade and the clouds dimmed. It felt like a shade was being drawn across some glorious, heavenly show, over for another day.

"It's getting dark," said his mother. "Let's camp the night and maybe we'll see a sunrise in the morning. I told Jan we would stay out here, and your boatman is keeping an eye on us." She grabbed a pack from the boat and began to pull out a tent and sleeping bags. Suddenly she looked up with an excited gleam in her eyes. "Perhaps we could look for a place along the

coast and move in. There are plenty of abandoned houses that just need a bit of doing up.”

“Then we’d have sunsets every day!” shouted David joyfully, and he thought he had not seen his mother so lively in a long time. Sophie whooped in agreement.

“Exactly,” said his mother, “and we’ll bury Grandad there. Then he’ll have all the sunsets he could want.”

“What about the farm?”

“I think it belongs to the bush now. We can’t keep it going with just the two of us adults. You and Sophie will need to be in school anyway. It’s been too long since you were around people your own age. And I’ll get a job in the city. John can have all of the stock – we won’t abandon them. He’s looking after the place at the moment.”

David smiled. For the first time in many months he felt a hope for the future. While the sun continued to shine light would not disappear from the world, but perhaps the light you made for yourself was just as important.

The lonely call of a gull carried across the water as they crawled into their sleeping bags. The sun seemed to be setting on one period of their lives and who knew what the morning would bring.

Author's note

THE NEW ZEALAND HERALD: December 18, 2006. Orangutan faces fiery extinction: At least 1000 orangutans have been killed in fierce forest fires in Indonesia, hastening the species' headlong rush to extinction within the next decade. Conservationists believe many of the fires...were deliberately lit to make room for plantations to grow palm oil – much of it, ironically, to meet the world's growing demand for environmentally friendly fuel. In the past 20 years, 80 per cent of their habitat has been destroyed – and only about 2 per cent of what remains is legally protected in reserves. The apes – whose name means "man of the forest" – are one of our closest relatives, sharing about 97 per cent of our DNA... (Geoffrey Lean, INDEPENDENT)

Climate Change brought about by global warming has become a topic of prime concern in the minds of many people both young and old in recent years. There is now a high degree of agreement among scientists from countries all over the world that average global temperatures are climbing, and that this is due to human activity such as the burning of fossil fuels. Such increases in temperature are enough to upset the delicate balance of factors governing the world's weather systems, causing climatic changes in our lifetimes that would normally take thousands of years

to occur.

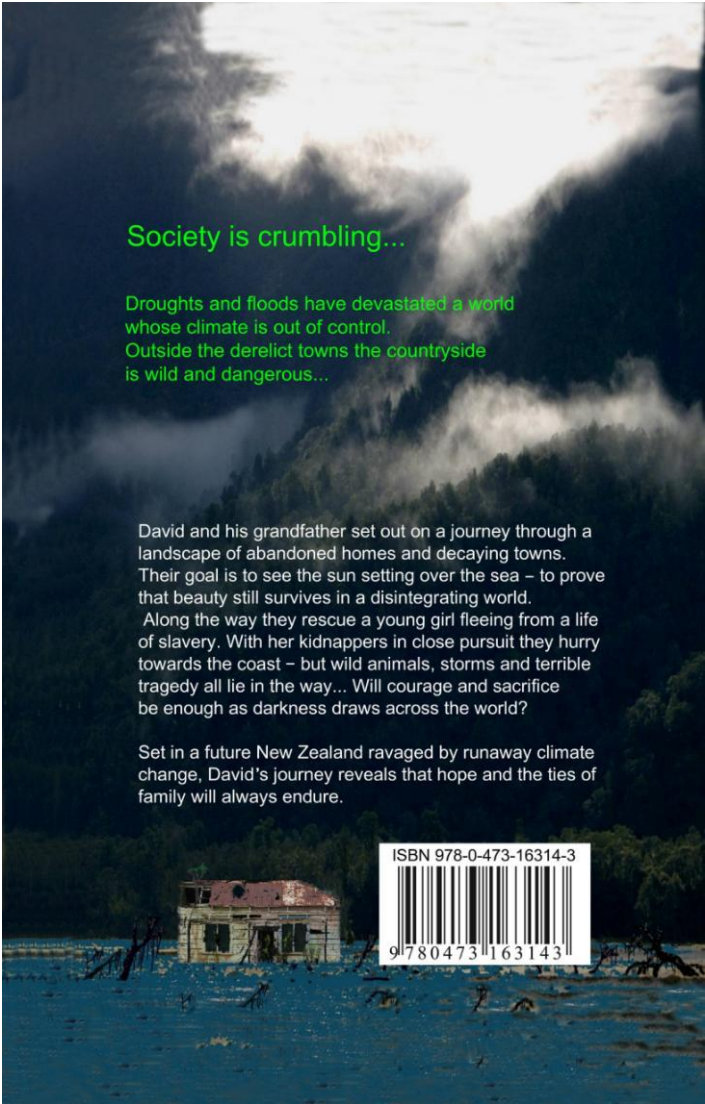
Although the effects of climate change on a future New Zealand presented here are exaggerated and extreme for the purposes of telling a story, all are based on actual consequences of rising atmospheric and sea temperatures. In its 2007 report the UN Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change predicted average global temperature increases somewhere in a range of 1.1 to 6.4 degrees Celsius over the next century. This story supposes that such changes have occurred at the top end of the scale or to a greater degree than expected. Certainly the eventual effects involve a lot of uncertainty. We are already seeing an increase in extreme weather conditions such as floods, droughts and storms. Polar ice caps are melting and will, along with the expansion of seawater as it warms, cause sea levels to rise. This will result in coastal erosion and flooding, perhaps even the inundation of some low-lying islands in places like the South Pacific. Diseases and agricultural pests are spreading to areas that never had them before, coral reefs are undergoing destructive “bleaching”, and deserts are expanding. The oceans will become increasingly acidic, threatening all marine life. As ecosystems face such stresses we could see a large number of animal and plant species become extinct. Some scientists warn of mass extinctions on a scale not seen since the time of the dinosaurs.

Alongside these changes in the natural world will necessarily be changes in human society. Trade and transport will be affected, agriculture will face new challenges, economies may suffer. Increased competition for scarce resources (water may become

the new oil) and the effects of drought may lead to whole populations being displaced, creating millions of refugees. The resulting conflict and social unrest will need to be carefully managed.

But all is not bleak. There has been a slow awakening of awareness about the problems ahead and across the world a new consciousness is emerging. As in times past it will be the young people of the world who will lead the way. There is every reason to believe human will and ingenuity can solve the challenges ahead. Alongside the need to find new energy sources (especially as oil stocks may be used up in this century) and halt the destruction of the world's forests, ordinary people can make small but significant changes in their own activities – cutting down energy use and packaging, walking instead of driving when possible, recycling and buying goods that have been produced with the least amount of environmental impact. This is where the individual can have the power to change things for the better.

There is no doubt the world of fifty years time will be very different to the one we know now, but collectively we can ensure it is a better and more peaceful one, where the natural environment is treasured and preserved for all.



Society is crumbling...

Droughts and floods have devastated a world whose climate is out of control. Outside the derelict towns the countryside is wild and dangerous...

David and his grandfather set out on a journey through a landscape of abandoned homes and decaying towns. Their goal is to see the sun setting over the sea – to prove that beauty still survives in a disintegrating world.

Along the way they rescue a young girl fleeing from a life of slavery. With her kidnappers in close pursuit they hurry towards the coast – but wild animals, storms and terrible tragedy all lie in the way... Will courage and sacrifice be enough as darkness draws across the world?

Set in a future New Zealand ravaged by runaway climate change, David's journey reveals that hope and the ties of family will always endure.

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