

Crawl Space

1.

My father opens the door. I hesitate. He's not who usually answers when I knock. He doesn't step back to let me in and takes forever to say my name. Then he repeats it several times, me nodding along, the way you do with a child struggling to pronounce a difficult word.

Falling, he makes a sound. As if he has food in his mouth that's too hot and he's trying to cool it down without spitting it out. I roll him onto his side and the blood from his nose soaks into his clothes rather than the hotel's carpet. The view opens up without his bulk – he's a big man – and standing beside his body I can see a slab of harbour where the hallway ends and the lounge takes over. Night is beginning to cloak its watery skin.

The paramedics are moving me aside less than ten minutes later. There are two of them. How similar their uniforms are to the Sallies band gathered in the corner of the park at Christmastime. I tell them I knocked on the wrong door. That we were sorting it out when he tanked. Who knows if they believe me. I give them a fake name and phone number just in case.

I call my booker, Sally. She yells, but eventually agrees to find someone else for my 10.30. I go home and collect Red Man. We head to the park. At the playground I find the flying fox grazing on wood-chips and empty water bottles. I drag it up the slope and kick off. My phone rings as I slam the arrestors, the impact pushing me high in the air.

'Don't be alarmed.' My mother's voice is steady. 'I know it's late, but it's your father. He's had a heart attack. The doctors think he's going to be fine but I can't get a flight until morning. I need you to go to the hospital. Sit with him. Answer their questions if you can.'

The paramedics must have found something on him – how else would they have tracked her down so quickly. I whistle Red Man, who is investigating a hedgehog on the soccer field, and we walk home.

2.

The hospital room showcases a different slab of harbour; the port, North Head, Rangitoto proud in the back row. My father is hooked to machines. A doctor arrives about twenty minutes later, what looks like egg and mayonnaise seeping from the corner of her mouth, a re-useable coffee cup the size of a small jug in her hand. She doesn't look old enough. She tells me the tests so far suggest he should recover well. I study my father's hair while she speaks. It's black, thickly painted on, no skull revealing itself yet. It irritates me how he's always seen this as some sort of achievement.

I stay on for about an hour after the doctor leaves, shifting around on a plastic chair, listening to his breathing, watching his hands twitching, waiting for my mother's next call. I can't settle on a response, a way to hold my face hands body should he wake. I feel tired at all the possibilities. I think about cake instead. Sultana, no icing. And gingerbread disguised with butter, cold and flat.

3.

The next time I see my father he is sitting up eating lunch off a tray, urging my mother to arrange for his things to be collected from his hotel. Neither has seen me enter. We're not a particularly demonstrative family, even after Alice, so nothing much is required when they realise I'm there. A brief hug for him – the monitoring equipment helps – and then one for my mother. She always smells good.

The three of us sit, not saying much, my eyes on the woman knight-move opposite. She is knitting, the ball of wool resting by the hand of an old man with closed eyes.

'Heart too.' My mother speaks softly without turning from her texting. 'Worse than your father's. Surgery, later today. Complicated. Low odds.' The woman lifts her head and my mother smiles at her, the genuine one she gifts clients she likes but who nonetheless are not invited to her annual party. 'This is my daughter,' she says to the woman. 'She's left-handed. We never got past garter stitch.'

I've been in hospital twice so far. There's something about being the centre of attention, the white gown, the phlebotomists coming by with their small squares of gauze and *just a tiny scratch* needles. Plucking at the worn sheet stranded at the base of his large belly, my father doesn't look as if he feels the same way.

I don't wonder about the mechanics of sex and fat men anymore. Most prefer from behind, me on my hands and knees. If they're on top, they don't completely fold down.

Like the lid of a lunchbox with a too-big Granny Smith inside. I don't mind if their fat is hard, the skin tight. Tits or marsupial pouches. That's real work.

I have a regular, a barrel with a style all of his own. Lays me face-up then pulls me down the mattress until my feet are flat on the floor, puts a pillow or two under my arse. Standing, he pushes in. 'Take it all, take it all,' he mutters pumping away. It's pretty funny – not that I can actually laugh. His cock's as stunted as he is.

'No need to hang around,' my father announces, abandoning his pleating of the sheet. 'There's more tests, but the consultant said I can have them done at home. Richard's going to step in for my session today. He wrote most of the speech anyway.' Finally he looks at me. 'You've probably got better things to do,' he says. 'Go back to the gallery,' he says.

What had I expected? What did I want? Whatever it is, his expression, his words, don't much satisfy. I turn to my mother. Still texting, she waves her hand across the air in agreement.

'But are you allowed to fly?'

The flash of victory at their distressed faces is so strong, it makes me wonder whether I hate them.

'I hadn't thought of that,' my mother says. 'I remember Dad being stuck in Australia after his heart attack. But that was years ago and he'd had a stroke too. Things must have moved on by now.'

I tell them I'll find out.

4.

If someone had asked me eighteen months ago, I would probably have said nah, my father wouldn't pay for sex. Not his style. Even now I know there's no type, just men, any adjective you like – married single short tall kind crazy careless cruel thin fat high desperate dead-eyed – it's still hard to see.

The consultant lays it out. Minimum two days before it's safe.

The nurse asks where my father's been staying and suggests extending the booking. 'It's a good spot. Close to the hospital if you need to come back in a hurry for any reason.'

‘Why are you staying at that place anyway,’ my mother asks him later, knitting patterns now spooling across her phone. You always stay at the Rose Gardens, I thought you said the staff are practically family.’

‘I was going to entertain some of the punters in the evenings. It was easier to be downtown this time, closer to the venue.’ He produces the lie with an impressive casualness. Perhaps a smattering of truth gives an authenticity to his words. Something an expert might have figured out over the years.

I say goodbye and leave. I walk because it uses up more time.

I’m in the rhythm even before I’m outside the hospital. *Alice jumped off the Harbour Bridge – one/two three four five six/seven eight. And repeat. Alice jumped off the Harbour Bridge – one/two three four five six/seven eight. And repeat, repeat, repeat. And each time I’m eight steps closer to home.*

5.

Alice. Who wasn’t lowered carefully by the air filling her denim dress like a makeshift parachute. That happened to someone I read about online. She wasn’t Elvita Adams either, who jumped from the eighty-sixth floor of the Empire State Building only to have a gust of wind blow her on to a ledge one floor below, force her to live. No-one can tell me what happened to her after that. Not even Wikipedia.

I didn’t see Alice afterwards – to spare me, my mother said – but I can describe her the day she came home with Red Man. She was wearing a green dress the colour of Robin Hood and black boots that laced up her shins, the rest of her skinny legs stranded above, silver bangles crowding her arms.

She’d found him up North tied to a fence, the rope so mean he couldn’t sit, no water or shade, his front paws shredded, one eye shiny with pus. ‘What else could I do,’ her defence. There was nothing to be gained that day from pointing out to her the other possible endings. She’d always been a sucker for rejects.

Red Man, she called him, the colour of dried blood except for three white paws. He swelled with decent food and Alice’s love. His tail talked. His bark filled a field. When she died he came to live with me, his emergency next-of-kin. For months he fretted. It was like watching my own pain. How it could never settle in a comfortable place. Two years ago she did it. Not quite – thirteen days off.

6.

My parents eventually do go home and I get on with my life. I've found it doesn't matter how bad it is, you have to get up. Unless you can lie in piss.

During the day I stand in doorways and alcoves or against the thoroughly painted walls of the Auckland City Art Gallery, watching the visitors. I wear orange lipstick so my mouth stands out and the rote words that fall from it are weightier.

Excuse me, please don't touch the paintings.

Excuse me, please keep your children with you.

Excuse me, please don't use a flash. It can damage the works.

Each evening I walk Red Man. Later still, Tuesdays, Thursdays, and Fridays, I dress up and fuck men for money. There might be one a night, there might be more.

Tonight there's just one. A regular who comes to Auckland most months, more in the winter. Sometimes he just wants a massage and a drink and a semi-naked listener so I've learnt a lot about his business and its rhythms. He's okay. Old school. Clean, except his breath. Smells like yoghurt stranded near the lid of an emptied pot.

He told me quite early on his wife didn't like sex. A lot of them say that. One night, when he'd had a bit to drink, he told me while his daughter was being born the doctors had cut his wife *down there*. 'She caught sight of my face while they were doing it. She never forgave me for that or the pain.' Episiotomy. I looked it up. One blogger described its after-effects as repeatedly rubbing your pussy over barbed wire.

Sometimes he shows me photos on his phone of the baby – all grown now and living far away, whippet-thin with freckles that haven't quite faded along with her childhood. Once, one shot included his wife. He tried to speed it past, as if I might be upset. Actually, I was intrigued. It's always the older men who need to pretend there's a connection not a transaction. The old bang for a buck.

7.

I enter the hotel, the first time I've been back since my father. Seven weeks. Enough time to move the whole thing sideways. Still, it's good to head for a room at the other end of the building and two floors higher up.

There's a cheeseburger waiting for me. I don't mind sharing some things with my regulars: favourite band, junk food, beach, that I want to see a flock of flamingoes before

it's too late. 'Thanks,' I say, checking he's got the relish right, 'but fun first? I'm better with an empty stomach.'

He laughs, walks towards me, and lifts up his shirt. I see four fresh scars, one folded into his belly button, where he also keeps a mole. I touch the largest, just above the high-tide of his boxers. It's hard and angry, shiny with surgical glue. His cock lifts, but I can tell it's unsure. 'Colon cancer,' he says. 'That's why I didn't come up last month. My guts are two feet shorter now.'

I set the cheeseburger back inside its polystyrene igloo and ease him onto his back, unbutton his shirt, put my knees on the bed and slowly, hand by hand, move up towards his chest.

Afterwards he lies propped against the headboard. I eat while he thinks out loud about dodging bullets and working less, walking tours in Italy, and moving to Central Otago. He pauses for more wine and I glance at the harbour. It's the same time, night stepping in. I hadn't thought this through, hadn't thought it would matter. Words fall out my mouth. 'I came here a few weeks ago to meet a client. It didn't go well. I was, he was...' I look up. His face is pressed with irritation. I've broken the basic rule. *Never talk about the others. There are no others.*

I inhale, suck it all back behind a big bite of lettuce and bun, make him laugh, insist he lick the relish off my fingers. He is asleep well before eleven. I lie down. He always pays for the night.

8.

I don't make it to the gallery the next morning. Generally, it's not a problem running two jobs. I'm weightless in my millennial suit. But my body aches for no obvious reason and that professional lapse last night. Seems a better idea to spend the day flattening Red Man's ears against the duvet reading *Alice in Wonderland: Special Edition*. Bridget, my cousin, made the books. One each for my parents, me, and my grandfathers. Photographs and stories of Alice skittering through life. Bridget had wanted Alice's funeral to be more than just a contraction of the universe. It was a futile goal she set herself, even with her books. Alice. Almost twenty-three Alice, jumped off the Harbour Bridge. She left a note about Red Man. One cup twice a day. Don't let him eat chicken bones. His shots are up to date.

9.

The following day turns over and the ones after that too. I'm not leaping about, even so, I'm there. The gallery is overrun. A new show, a tourer, Dutch masterpieces from the Rijksmuseum. The ships, sailing to the colonies to swap their pox for spices and teak, are in one room, the still-lives in another, portraits in the furthest space from the entrance. At the centre of everything, Rembrandt, cloaked and staring out. People queue to shuffle past. It's so hectic. To keep my lines crisp and clear, I drink lots of water and reapply my lipstick.

10.

I talk to my mother. No more no less than after Alice and before my father. It's always the same conversation – Am I eating properly? Am I thinking about another job? Am I seeing anyone? Has Red Man had his shots? – except now there's two new topics, although they're really only one. My father's adherence to the new regime of less and more – less meat less alcohol less work more delegation more exercise more relaxation. And his changes in behaviour. Flowers, flowers! Visiting Lizzie, my mother's aunt, and staying for more than a few minutes. Travel books littering the lounge.

She calls after a particularly busy day at the gallery.

'Your father and I went to the doctor today. Another check-up. The doctor wants to be sure we're doing everything possible to prevent another attack. He's still puzzled about it. No signs, no obvious trigger apart from his size, but even then he said it was unlikely to be just that. He's not fat fat after all. Your father got so testy. He's sick of the fuss, I think. Interrupted. Told the doctor it was just the conference. He was worried about the presentation he was going to give. That was all. To leave off all the psycho-mumble questions. He was so rude. I had him up about it later.' Her voice trails off.

When she picks up, she starts on a different topic. It's a relief, yet odd. She's not one to let things go. Maybe she's just reached some limit herself – one child dead, her husband trying it out. Maybe it's the flowers and shit. Must be quite something so late in the game.

I hang up soon after.

11.

I didn't know shock alone could trigger a heart attack. But if it's true, why didn't his stop when it really mattered, when we got the news about Alice? Why didn't mine?

12.

Alice and I played a game when we were little. We would ride on the swings, her stick legs taking forever to push the air into a rhythm. Flying back and forwards we would ask each other *what are you thinking about*. I never got her thoughts right, nor she mine, but sometimes our mother would join in, sit on the grass on a rug beside us. It was amazing how I could guess her thoughts. Yes! She was wondering why Fraser Wilson had to be helped up the steps and into the headmaster's office, his head and arms jerking all over. Yes! She was thinking about the swimming pool with the yellow slide that wriggled outside the building and back in. That very one we were going to tomorrow.

If only I knew what Alice was thinking when she stepped up to the edge, her hands on the railing.

13.

I dye my hair and cut it off. Some of the regulars drop away. Fantasy girls are always long-haired.

14.

I meet a man. He steps too close to a Hodgkins. 'Sorry,' he says when I ask him to step back. His face is permanently splattered in shiraz. School must have been hell. I see him again in the twentieth-century landscapes, crowding forwards to study a hillside with a signal post pointing in five directions, Anthony, my favourite and the most ancient of the docents, approaching him from the left. I watch them talk, their faces melting into laughter.

Later in the day I take over the post by the entrance. Anthony is on his way out. 'I had to warn the man with the birthmark too,' I say. 'You'd think once would be enough. He didn't seem a deliberate recidivist.'

'No glasses,' Anthony replied. 'Said he was killing time while his optometrist repaired them. Said it shouldn't take blindness to get him through the door. I said, "Some of the works they exhibit here these days, it's probably better to be blind."'

We giggle at his heresy. The artworks don't fall off the walls.

15.

I find myself looking for the shiraz man as the days pass. Of course, he never arrives. Only a worn-out *Woman's Weekly* in some sad waiting room could slot him into a story that included me. Yet maybe they're not complete fiction, because three weeks later I'm standing in the chaos of the children's activity room and he walks in, a girl, eight, nine, pulling him along, wearing his smile. There's glasses on his face this time, thick and black, curved where they rest on his cheeks.

I am inordinately disappointed about the child. After all, he was just a man I asked to move away from a portrait. Turning, I realise there's only two facts. Alice jumped and my father was in that hotel room. The rest, the why, I won't ever have.

My next conscious thought is the shiraz man putting his jacket under my head. It smells of lemongrass. The child is beside him asking why I'm on the ground.

Eventually a colleague leads me away. I want to protest, hear his explanation to the child. I wonder if they will stay on, build a house from the donated boxes and the tools – sticky tape and knives so blunt even a ripe cheese would be safe. I wonder when the child first asked him about his face.

16.

His name is Harry Goodbar, Anthony informs me the following week. We're in the Recently Acquireds, a Fomison with dangerous eyes to the right of my shoulder listening to our conversation.

'Here's his card.' He grins as he holds it out. 'He asked me to pass it on when I saw you next. His niece wants to know if you're all right. She's drawn a picture for you.'

17.

Sally rings. 'You've been turning down too many jobs. I can't keep finding replacements. Are you in or out?'

'In.' The right answer if it gives me time to decide if I mean it.

'Then quit dicking me around. And since I've been covering your arse so much, it's time you covered mine. My sister's got a regular. He wants to bring someone to watch. She can't fit him in. I owe her a favour and you're it. Viaduct Tower, nine pm. Room 8A. He's a good tipper.'

She hangs up before I can tell her I don't much go for audiences. I can't debate the rest though. I can barely call myself a hooker these days.

I had so hoped that fucking strangers would help.

I get ready. Underwear as outerwear. It's fair to say most men lack imagination.

18.

Viaduct Tower is a new hotel by the water. Boats are tied up outside like horses to a hitching post. Stern. Stern. Bow. Stern. Why one way not the other? It's a still night. Rain-washed. This city. So much rain. The lift bank is to the right of reception. I've found you can go a long way just claiming your right to be somewhere. Fake confidence and an elegant overcoat are all you need.

I haven't had a spectator before, but I've been part of a threesome with one of the other girls. Her name was Lily. From down the line. She was fun. I was into it until the guy got sulky, reminded us that *he* was why we were there. Maybe her name was Lily. Most girls have more than one. Sometimes I'm Stella. Sometimes Greta. Or Eva. Bella too. I like the way the *a* hangs off the edge of each name, as if there might be something over the cliff that you should look for.

The lift is lined with pāua shell. It should be ugly, but it's not. Alice collected pāua shells. Stacked them Russian doll-style on the window-ledge in her room, some with the bud of a pearl in their base. Level 8 has real art on the walls and carpet the colour of melted butter. A vase of cornflowers is on a table halfway down the corridor. There's a photograph pinned above my bed. Cousin Bridget's wedding, Alice one of the bridesmaids, a flower snob who couldn't abide mixed bunches. She'd talked Bridget round to cherry-pink cornflowers tied with string.

Room 8A is the furthest from the lifts. The watcher – do they want to or do they have to. The door opens. A man extends an arm, draws me in.

19.

It's Sunday afternoon and Red Man and I are down by the harbour. We're on the breakwater, the cafes and the yacht clubs in our wake. Each time we come here I try and make him sit on the bench so nobody else can share it, but he never stays, even if my initial coaxing pays off. Jumps straight back to lie on the gravel amongst the cigarette butts and bottle tops.

The Harbour Bridge rises up to our left, takes over the entire view unless I keep my head turned towards the high-rises downtown. It's an incredible thing up close, one enormous foot each side of the city, so much concrete heaved across to make its middle.

After Alice jumped, I spent hours sitting here, watching it.

Then for a while I'd come every Sunday afternoon.

I'm not so regular anymore. I decided to keep my visits for when I had good news to tell her. Besides, Red Man isn't thrilled about the route. Too many small people at the start passing backwards and forwards on skateboards and scooters, making him jump, then their parents rushing around as if he were a wolf interested in their darlings' soft flesh.

It's three o'clock. The time we agreed. I can see him approaching. I feel sick. He has sunglasses and a hat that makes him look like he's on day release. But then he smiles and stretches his hand forwards and not just the usual parts of his face are cast in colour.

'Hello Stella,' he says. 'Why so far out? Are you thinking of making me walk the plank?'

I laugh, freeze. Red Man sidles up to him for a scratch, so I plunge in. Get it out of the way. 'It's actually Grace.'

'Grace?'

'Yeah. Stella was a trial. I didn't quite get the hang of her. So I'm back to Grace. My mother's wishful thinking when the midwife handed me to her. I'll show you a photo sometime. You'll understand. Do you want to sit down?'

20.

I can't recall having a real conversation with my father ever again. For the unavoidable family gatherings, Alice's birthday, Alice's anniversary, my mother's birthday, Christmas Day with Aunty Lizzie, we developed a work-around that seemed to hold up. Then I moved across the world and the need to pretend, conceal, fell away. It was an immense relief.

I thought about it though. What had he wanted that night? Did he have my mother, 30 years younger, in mind, and asked Sally to send a replica. Or did he want someone completely different, white, say, but she didn't have anyone available. Did he have a regular somewhere who he bought cheeseburgers and showed pictures of his daughters, one dead, one who worked at an art gallery. Did he tell her his wife wasn't interested in

sex. Mostly, I thought about what stopped his heart. Being caught out by his child or being ashamed of his child.

I never told anyone, not even Harry.

21.

I wanted to call our daughter Alice. Harry wouldn't have it. Felt it too much of a burden whereas nothing else felt right to me. For weeks after her birth she remained Pudding, her inside name – it was all I had wanted to eat as I bellied up. And then we got the call. No resurrection this time. My mother was calm. As if she'd been rehearsing the moment ever since the day she'd sat by his hospital bed explaining to the woman across the way that I couldn't knit.

So we called her Ronnie, after him. And Alice, for the middle. It was a deal I felt I could live with.