
The Advent Stories
The Gift
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FOUR TEEN
No Ghosts This Year
Matthew Pullar

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The Gift | Pageant | No Ghosts This Year

Foreword

When I was about seven years old, I was invited to my friend C.'s house. It was an elaborate and opulent house. I had never seen anything quite like it. I was a new kid at the school and had slowly been figuring out who I should and should not be friends with. C. had been mean to me earlier in the term but now he seemed very nice. And he was being particularly nice this weekend because he wanted me to be his tent buddy on the upcoming Grade Three camp, and he was willing to offer me one of his toys to help seal the deal.

The problem was, my other new best friend G. wanted me to share a tent with him too. We needed to have three boys to a tent, and, while in theory that should solve the problem, my two friends didn't like each other, and that was that. It was either C. or G. I couldn't have both. But here was C. offering me one of his toys to help persuade me. This was quite a powerful ploy on his part…

C. had a large collection of troll dolls. I didn't have a troll doll, which made me substantially less cool than my peers. Yet, in truth, I didn't particularly *want* a troll. What I was more interested in was C.'s book collection. Okay, said C., you can have one of my books.

Fair enough, but on closer inspection, I found that C.'s parents had far more interesting books than C. himself did. There was a Charles Dickens book of Christmas tales that particularly appealed to me. I knew the story of *A Christmas Carol*, but here was a whole world of *other* Christmas books I could read. Perhaps, I suggested, I could take that book instead of one of C.'s books?

I drove a hard bargain, but C. was keen to sign off on this tent arrangement, so he said yes. Only, there was one small problem. His parents had to say yes too. So he asked. "Can Matthew take this book?" Well yes, his mother replied, Matthew could *borrow* it. My

heart sank a little, but only a little. The world of Christmas stories was still *open* to me; I just wouldn't own it.

I was willing to accept this arrangement. No-one ever really *owned* stories anyway; I was yet to learn this fact in any way I could fully articulate, though I grasped it in some small way that day. I went home with the book, a treasure of far greater value than any troll doll, and agreed to the deal. C. and I would share a tent on the Grade Three camp. And thus began my love for Charles Dickens – and so also, in a way, began this book.

The Gift

A Bed-Time Story for Grown-Ups

First Candle

Alana cannot sleep. At least, not properly. Occasionally her mind drops into sleep, but it is only like she is skimming the surface of sleep, sometimes dropping a little below, but always somehow being pulled back up into dry wakefulness.

It is not the first time this has happened; it used to happen often, but not for some time now, and tonight there seems to be no reason for her sleeplessness. As a child, she would be sleepless with apprehension the night before her birthday or on Christmas Eve. Christmas is soon enough, but she is too old to lose sleep over Christmas now, most of all when there's still four weeks to go until it arrives.

There were other reasons, of course, why she sometimes lost sleep. Sometimes, when she was in her early twenties, she would lie awake thinking, consciously worrying, about whatever it was that was playing on her mind: fears for her future; fears of failing, of being left behind, forgotten, alone. But that is not the case tonight. She has no conscious worries, nothing racing around anxiously in her mind to keep her from sleep. And yet she cannot sleep, simple as that, as though her mind has just forgotten how to.

They had a television, she remembers, when she was a child, which was a particularly temperamental machine. Once, the off-switch stopped working. They would press it in, the screen would go blank for a brief moment, the image shrinking rapidly into the dark vacuum of the screen, and then it would come back on again, like a jack-in-the-box with an overactive spring. She remembers being strangely tormented by that image, as though the television would never properly turn off again and they would be doomed to watch it forever - how strange that a childhood ideal, perpetual television, could when made reality become a source of torment. Well, tonight her brain feels like that television, occasionally playing with the idea of sleep, only to resurrect itself suddenly, laughing macabrely as it does so.

She opens her eyes in a tired act of surrender to wakefulness and looks in the bed beside her. Peter seems, as far as she can tell, to be fast asleep. He doesn't snore, thank goodness, but when he is asleep his breathing always becomes deeper and slower and at times he makes low mumbling noises which, she fancies, only she knows about. She considers waking him up but decides not to; he looks too peaceful to do that to him. But it's no good lying in bed trying to sleep when she can't; she has tried for too long tonight without any luck. And so she reaches for her bedside lamp and her book: a philosophical detective story she had picked up second-hand during the week, from a series that has been recommended to her. She has enjoyed what she has read so far, but something about reading the book tonight only frustrates her. What earlier in the night had seemed light and whimsical now seems affected and ponderous. She can only read a handful of pages before finding herself wrestling with an almost uncontrollable urge to hurl the book at the wall. But she refrains. It would only wake Peter.

Soon she hears his voice beside her.

"Can't sleep?" he mumbles. The light must have woken him anyway. She could have thrown the book against the wall after all.

"No," she says. "Did I wake you?"

"You were making a lot of noises," he says. "Huffing sort of noises."

"Really?"

"Yep. Disapproving noises."

"Disapproving?" she asks. "Like what?"

"You know, the kind of noises you make when you don't like something. Like a tut and a groan combined."

"Really? I make those sorts of noises?"

"Sometimes," says Peter. "Didn't you know?"

"No," she says, then goes silent. The mixture of insomnia and her husband telling her something she had never known about herself is a dangerous combination and she has the potential to become quite annoyed by him, except that he reaches out and puts his arm around her waist and then says, "I'll get you a cup of tea."

For a moment she feels appeased, but calls out, "Make sure it's chamomile," as he climbs from the bed.

Most of her potential frustration is pacified by the time Peter returns to the bed with two cups of chamomile tea; most, but not all, because, while he has been gone, she has read more of her detective book and has only become more resentful both of its style and of its heroine.

"This book," she says, "is really annoying. Seriously, the main character is so self-important. Men should never try to write female protagonists; they never get them right."

"Is that why you were tutting and huffing before?" asks Peter, handing her the tea.

"Maybe," she says, "but I still don't believe I do that."

"Only sometimes," he says, then changes the topic. "I'll tell you a story," he says.

Alana's face lights up.

"Really?"

It's been some time since they have told each other stories. When they were first married, it was an almost nightly occurrence. At first they read to each other, then Peter started to mess around with the details of the story, until the stories he told were almost nothing like, and generally much more amusing than, the stories they had begun with. Before long, Alana found she preferred Peter's stories to the ones they read, and soon she was even telling stories of her own. The thought of Peter telling her a story tonight after such a long time sparkles and fizzles inside her like she is, momentarily, a child again.

"Yes," says Peter. "Just give me a moment..."

"Don't take too long," says Alana, "or I'll have to go back to reading my book again..."

"Okay, okay," says Peter, "just a second. The story is called..."

"No stalling," says Alana.

"It's called...the story of..."

"Of what? The story of what?"

"Of the goblin," he says. "The goblin who...poisoned the Christmas pudding."

"He poisoned the Christmas pudding?" says Alana, indignant. "That's not nice."

"Well no," says Peter, "but do you expect goblins to be nice?"

Alana pauses. "No," she says, "but why would he do that?"

"I'll tell you," says Peter. "Just listen."

"Alright," says Alana, slowly. "But does it have a happy ending?"

"Eventually," says Peter, "but you'll have to let me get there."

"What if I fall asleep when the story is still unhappy?"

"Then you've fallen asleep, and that's good, isn't it?"

"Not if I have nightmares."

"Well, if you have nightmares, I'll wake you up and tell you the happy ending."

A pause.

"Alright," says Alana,

"Can I begin then?"

"Yes you may."

"Very well then. Here it is."

*

The Story of the Goblin Who Poisoned the Christmas Pudding

Once upon a time, there was a goblin.

("You don't know what the story is about," says Alana. "You're stalling." "Just listen," says Peter. "Okay..." says Alana.)

Once upon a time, there was a goblin, and he...

No, once upon a time, there was a *family.*

("Make up your mind," says Alana. "I have," says Peter. "I meant to say it's about a family." "Alright," says Alana, "tell me about the family.")

Well then, there was a family, and the family had two boys and two girls. The boys and the girls were all grown up and had moved away from home, but because it was Christmas they were coming back to their parents' home.

("Where did they live?" asks Alana.)

The oldest boy lived...in a shoe-box, perched on top of a hill. It was a giant shoe-box, left there one day by a giant who bought a pair of shoes and then ran away, causing an earthquake and destroying three towns in his wake. The earthquake caused a housing crisis, and so the oldest boy couldn't get a house anywhere, but then one day he found the shoe-box and it was just the right size for him to live in, so he grabbed all his belongings and stored them inside the shoe box and lived there at night, working very hard all through the week in the hope that one day he could buy himself a better house, or, failing that, a giant packing case somewhere.

The oldest daughter, who was next in age after the oldest boy...

("What was her name?" asks Alana.)

The oldest daughter, Tiffany, who was next in age after the oldest boy, Frank, lived on the next hill in a giant doll's house, where she lived with her husband Bill. Frank wasn't married yet; he had a lot of girls who came to visit him in his shoe box, but none of them ever stayed. So he often spent time with Tiffany and Bill, and when Tiffany had a child, a little girl called Suzy, Uncle Frank often came over, sometimes to see Suzy, sometimes just to get out of his shoe box. Tiffany would tease Frank about his life in the shoe box, but she loved her brother very much and had always been close to him.

The youngest girl, Sasha, lived several hills away from Tiffany and Frank. She lived there with her husband...Hector.

("Hector?" asks Alana, giggling. "Why Hector?" "Because his parents liked the name, of course," says Peter. "Now stop interrupting." Alana stops.)

She lived with her husband Hector...inside a car. The car was all that they could afford for now, but they hoped that one day they might own a shoe box, or a packing case, or even a house. But Sasha was happy not living too close to Tiffany or Frank. She saw them at Christmas and that was enough for her.

The fourth child, Sam, lived further away still. He and his wife Wendy were about to have a baby and so they had bought a house...

("A house?")

They had bought a house, because Sam had made a lot of money selling giant packing cases as a form of low-cost housing. As a result, they owned a two bedroom house at the foot of a hill and were very happy there.

And so: it was Christmas, and the whole family were returning to their parents' house to celebrate together. It was the only time when the whole family saw each other these days, what with Sasha and Sam living so far away. They were not such a close family any

more, but they always united at Christmas, particularly because they all loved their mother's Christmas pudding.

There was something magical about that pudding. The saddest person in the world could eat it and they would feel happy. If you had the 'flu, you could eat that pudding and you would feel better. If you were in the middle of an argument with someone, one bite of the pudding would make you the best of friends. And so, even though the children were not close during the year...

("Except for Tiffany and Frank... ")

...except for Tiffany and Frank, they would always come together over that pudding. Whatever differences or disagreements they had, the pudding would always appease them.

("It sounds like an amazing pudding, ")

It was a truly amazing pudding.

But...inside the hill, near where the parents lived, there was a goblin. Being a goblin, he was wicked, and, being wicked, he delighted in nothing more than to see other creatures be miserable. The goblin had heard the reputation of the mother's Christmas pudding which was spreading far and wide, and he hated what he heard, because the pudding did the exact opposite of what he liked most to do. Where he tried to bring misery and discord, the pudding brought happiness and unity. The goblin hated the pudding.

And so he formed a plan. He knew that other families on nearby hills were also wanting to get themselves some of the pudding. They made their request and the mother agreed: she would make extra puddings this year and give them to other families on neighbouring hills. This meant that the happiness would spread further than the family our story is concerned with; BUT the goblin worked out that if he could somehow poison the pudding, with a poison that would take away all its happiness and replace it

instead with misery, then the goblin could succeed in not only making our main family miserable but also all the families living on nearby hills. The plan was perfect. The goblin only needed to know how to poison the pudding.

The goblin knew that at the foot of one of the hills lived a very bitter family. Life had been hard for that family and, with every misfortune, they had planted bitter fruit in their garden - gourds and eggplant and bitter melon and the bitterest of grapefruit that you could find. There was not a plant in their garden that was not bitter, and with each new misfortune they planted more and more, until their garden was bitter even just to walk in. The goblin's plan was that he would visit that family's garden one night and, when they were sleeping and dreaming their bitter dreams he would take one of each of the fruit in the garden until he had the bitterest array of ingredients he could find. Then he would blend all the bitter fruit together to make a juice, and then he would take some of the juice and mix it with the Christmas pudding mixture before it was cooked and distributed to the neighbouring families on neighbouring hills. Whatever magic the pudding contained would be destroyed by the bitterness of the bitter juice he would add.

Every day and every night as Christmas approached, the goblin watched the mother through the kitchen window so that he was ready when the moment came for her to make the puddings. He did not stir from his place perched by the windowsill until the day finally came when the mother entered the kitchen and began to take out boxes of dried fruit, jars of flour, cartons of milk and eggs...He watched and watched as she mixed the ingredients together, hoping upon hope that he could see what the ingredient was that made the pudding so magical. If he could see what that ingredient was, then perhaps he could steal it and prevent its ever being used again...As he watched, he began to grow anxious, fearful that his plan would not work, fearful that he could not be able to poison the puddings without the mother noticing...His palms began to sweat, and, as they sweated, he began to lose his grip by the window...His hands slipped, and slipped, until he fell to the ground beneath the windowsill.

Now, you may never have heard a goblin fall.

("I have.")

Well then, you would know that when a goblin falls, it tends to make a large sound, because there is so much evil machination at work inside the goblin that it clangs like a sack of metal pots being dropped on a hard floor. The ground where the goblin fell was not hard, but it still made quite an impressive sound when he fell - so impressive that the mother looked out the window to see what had made that noise. She could not see anything from the window, but she called her husband to look too, and soon they had both come outside to look for the source of that mysterious noise.

Now, goblins are loud when they fall but, being subterranean creatures, they are used to having to get up again quickly.

("That doesn't make sense," says Alana. "Yes it does; they fall down all the time, on hard rock ground and need to get up again. Now just let me tell the story.")

No sooner had the mother gone to get the father to help her than the goblin had picked himself up and snuck behind the doorway nearest to the kitchen, waiting for an opportunity to strike. It came; the mother and the father ran out the door, looking eagerly everywhere but behind the now opened door; lithely, the goblin crept out from behind the door, his bitter juice in hand. He snuck into the kitchen, spied the giant mixing bowl on the bench and, pulling himself up onto a stool by the bench (because, being a goblin, he was also quite short), he tipped a thimbleful of the bitter juice into the middle of the mixture, then another thimbleful to the left side, another to the right, and three more at random spots on either side. Too much and the mother might have noticed; too little and it might not have spread throughout the whole mixture. This, he hoped, would be just enough. Then, fearful of being caught, the goblin jumped down from the stool, clanging a little as he did so, and crept out the still-open door.

When the mother and father came back inside, their search yielding no results, the mother got back to the task of making the pudding. She looked at the mixture; it was all ready, except for one more ingredient. There was a small bottle in the pantry that had no

label on it. The bottle was only ever used once a year, to make the Christmas pudding. Did she have enough left to make all the puddings this year? She hoped she would; a very small amount was usually enough, but this year she would need more than usual. Even if she had enough for this year, the bottle would run out soon enough and the liquid in the bottle was very hard to get...This, she feared, might be the last year she could make the pudding, and if she could not make it again next year perhaps her children would not come to visit...

She took the bottle and tipped in an amount the depth of a little fingernail; almost half of what remained in the bottle. Would it be enough? She did not know; but she was too afraid to use any more.

When Christmas came, she distributed the puddings to the neighbouring families on neighbouring hills. They all gave her presents to thank her, but none of the presents would be enough to buy her another bottle of that secret liquid. Though her heart was heavy with that knowledge, it gave her happiness to see that her puddings were soon to be shared.

And soon enough her whole family had converged on the old family home - Frank from his shoe box on the hill; Tiffany from the doll's house with her husband Bill and their little girl Suzy; Sam and Wendy, with their child on the way; and Sasha and Hector, from their home inside the car.

("Why did you leave them until last?" asks Alana. "Because they are the most important," says Peter. A pause. "Are you sleepy yet?" he asks. "A little," says Alana. "How much is there left in the story?" "A bit," says Peter. "It has to get better before it's over, and it has to get worse before it gets better." Silence. He keeps going.)

The mother was happy to see all her children together, and so was the father, but he showed it by telling his oldest son that he needed to get out of that shoe box and she showed it by telling Sasha that that old car would be no good when they had children.

Secretly, they accepted their children just as they found them, but they could never let it show.

("Peter," says Alana. "Yes?" he replies, then waits because she is silent again. "Nothing," she says, after a time. "Keep telling the story.")

By the time the food was ready to be served, the children had already found their old places at the table, and their old places in the family too. Frank had told Sam that his house was a bad investment; Sam had told Frank that he knew nothing about investments; Tiffany had told Wendy all that she knew about pregnancy and Sasha had begun to roll her eyes at Tiffany; all the while, the poisoned pudding sat in the kitchen, waiting to be eaten, waiting to take the family gathering further and further along the path it was already starting to tread. And lurking somewhere outside, from a spot in the garden where he could see it all, crouched the goblin, licking his metallic lips with excitement.

The mother watched patiently as the children, now grown-ups, slipped back into their old roles and the partners watched too, sometimes calmly, sometimes with frustration, sometimes weighing in. The mother was less distressed, because she knew that the lunch could never grow so hostile that the pudding could not fix it. Only, the pudding always had to come last; the lunch always had to be endured before the pudding could emerge and right all wrongs.

Finally the time for pudding arrived; the mother snuck away from the table to fetch the pudding and, as she returned, the pudding glazed in brandy and a secret extra drop of the magic liquid, the whole room fell into a hush, struck with awe, almost meditative. Whatever feuds had made them forget the prospect of the pudding were now put aside; they became as children again, united by that domed gastronomic spectacle that was slowly bouncing towards them on a plate in the mother's hand. The pudding on the table, Frank lit a match and the pudding erupted in a delicate fiery glow. The glow subsided, the pudding was cut and each took a piece, silent as the ceremony demanded.

There was no difference at first in the pudding's taste, for the brandy and the extra drop of the magic liquid had kept the flavour much the same as it always was. Only, the after-taste was different; there was something vaguely bitter, almost metallic, about the taste it left at the back of your mouth. And they noticed, for just a moment, that they did not want to stop arguing. It was only a very brief moment, like that point when you realise you *could* avoid that extra piece of cake but choose nevertheless to keep eating. The pudding was only a comma in whatever terse sentence they had already begun. They chewed, swallowed and resumed their sentences.

"Honestly, Frank," said Sam, "you talk to me like I'm a child. I've sold thousands of packing cases and you only live in a shoe box. What can you possibly tell me about investment?"

And Tiffany said, "Well, Wendy, if you don't want to hear what I have to say..."

And Suzy said, "Uncle Frank, you're the worst uncle I've ever had..."

Only the mother and Sasha noticed what was happening, having left their helpings to last. They looked at each other, and looked at the pudding, and looked at each other again. What was going wrong? the mother asked herself. Did they need to eat more pudding? Perhaps there had not been enough of the liquid; perhaps she should add some more...

She was just about to go to the kitchen to get the bottle when there was a knock on the door. Opening the door, she found three of the neighbouring families standing outside, half-eaten puddings in hand, fury plastered over their faces.

"This pudding," said one of the neighbours, his face a fiery red, "does not work. It hasn't made us happier; it's only made things worse."

"We knew you were trouble," said another neighbour, "the first time we saw you. Look what you've done to our family, you and your infernal pudding."

The mother stood at the door, her eyes starting to sting.

"I don't know what's happened," she said. "I just don't know."

The neighbours were all ready to hurl their puddings and their dishes right in the mother's face, only they were interrupted by a small, unobtrusive family who appeared in amongst the crowd and started to speak, quietly at first but with a quality in their voices that made everyone else stop and listen. It was the bitter family from down the hill, only, they looked unlike they had ever looked before. They stood together, shoulders lowered, features softened, arms placed gently around one another in a quiet, almost sheepish manner.

"We ate the pudding," said the mother of the family. "We didn't even ask for one. It was just on our doorstep when we got up this morning. At first we said we wouldn't eat it, because nothing good had ever happened to us so why would strange food randomly placed on our doorstep be any different? But then we ate it; and soon our mouths started to taste something, not sweet, but calm, and soon the shack we lived in started to look beautiful, and soon we looked beautiful too. The pudding tasted soft, gentle, not a strong flavour...It tasted somehow like...like it tastes to accept things. For the first time in years we ate a meal that didn't hiss like metal on our tongues."

All the neighbours were amazed. Of all the families who had eaten the pudding, only this one family, the bitterest family in all of these hills, had tasted what the pudding was meant to taste like. What no-one knew was this - that the bitter family, who had drunk the fruit of bitterness for so long that it no longer affected them, were transformed by the faintest taste of the magic liquid the mother had put in to the pudding. The goblin's poison had no power over them.

But what, you might be asking, was in that magic liquid? Well, to explain that, I would have to tell you a story from long, long ago, before those hills even existed, and I *would* tell you the story, but not tonight, because

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Peter looks over at Alana, now sleeping beside him. Leaning over to switch off the bedside lamp, he pauses to kiss her forehead.

Alana stirs.

"Did I fall asleep?" she asks.

"Yes," he says. "The story is over. Did you hear the happy ending?"

Alana says something he does not catch. He asks her what she said.

"It's not true," she says slowly, dreamily.

"Not true?" says Peter. "What do you mean?"

"The story. It wasn't true."

"Of course it wasn't," says Peter, with a laugh. "Goblins aren't real and there's no such thing as a magic Christmas pudding and..."

"No," says Alana. "I mean what you said in the story. They don't accept me."

"I don't know what you..."

"My parents," says Alana. "They don't accept me. The story isn't true."

Second Candle

Peter and Alana have spent the day shopping for Christmas presents. The task is always a challenging one. Peter's family is small and easily pleased but Alana's is another matter. She has two brothers and one sister, and they have their respective partners and families to shop for. This year her oldest brother Simon, the only unmarried one in the family, is bringing a girl - not an unusual thing for him to do. This girl, Stacey, has never been to a family gathering before and will probably not come to another one, but Alana needs to treat her as if she is already a part of the family. And so Alana has spent hours searching for an appropriate gift to buy a girl she has never met, finally settling on a bag that looks stylish enough for most girls but neutral enough not to offend against the vagaries of personal preference - quite an accomplishment really, but the process has drained her so that, by the time she starts looking for a present for her niece, she finds she has no energy left to give much thought to it and, in the end, can only stare at aisles and aisles of toys and books with a vacant gaze that sees everything and takes nothing in. It takes Peter's intervention to actually choose something, finding a Christmas storybook which catches his eye at the right moment. Something about the book appeals briefly to a shared sentimentality and Alana agrees that the present seems perfect. But the moment of success is a deflated one and it takes a coffee, consumed in almost complete silence at one of the more quiet shops on the perimeter of the shopping mall, to regenerate them both enough to head home.

By the evening, they are both exhausted, eating dinner in relative silence. From time to time they try to make conversation but most attempts end in one of them snapping at the other or misunderstanding what was said. Silence seems preferable. It isn't long before Alana takes herself off to their bedroom. Peter, unsure, stays in the living room for a while longer, flicking through channels on the TV, processing nothing that he sees, until he can find the motivation to get up and go to bed.

When he goes to their room, Alana is sitting in bed in her nightie, the lamp on, flicking through the pages of a book.

"What are you reading?" Peter asks her.

She absently tilts the cover over so he can see it: her old children's Bible, a book that has sat on their shelf for some years untouched.

"What story are you reading?" he asks.

"Hannah," says Alana. "Samuel's mother."

Peter tries to remember the story; something, he recalls, about a woman praying desperately at the temple and the priest telling her to "stop making a drunken show of herself". He remembers that phrase well from the Good News Bible of his childhood; the rest of the story is vague.

"Do you want to read the story to me?" he asks.

Alana closes the book and puts it on his lap.

"I'm tired," she says. "I think I'll just go to sleep."

She turns off the lamp and rolls onto her side.

Peter sits in bed for a time, unable to lie down and sleep, tired yet made alert by Alana's aloof responses to him. It has been a long day for them both, he knows, and the glimpse he caught of a packet of tampons in their shopping bags this afternoon has confirmed what he, by instinct, already suspected; he knows to tread carefully on days like this. And yet the the ordeal of the afternoon's shopping has left him tired and impatient. His mind as he sits there is continually drawn to Alana's repeated rejection of most of his attempts to help her that day and he thinks, not for the first time, that, if he must be brought

along to help her shop, he should at least be allowed to have some input, otherwise he is nothing more than a glorified mule there only to help carry the bags. They would still be there in the children's section of the store staring blankly if he hadn't stepped in and chosen the Christmas storybook that caught his eye at just the right moment.

Absently, he turns on his bedside lamp. Thoughts of the storybook they bought Eliza have reminded him of the children's Bible on his lap - had Alana put it there for him to read, or was she just too tired to put it away herself? - and so he begins to flick through it, not through any great interest in what it contains but because he would rather do something than sit in bed and stew on his thoughts. His eyes brush over the dedication page - *To our dear daughter Alana, on her fifth birthday* - and moves over Adam and Eve, Noah, Abraham and Moses, arriving at the page where Hannah's story is told. He glances at Alana; briefly softened by the sight of her sleeping, he decides to go into the living room to read and not disturb her. Switching off his lamp, he tiptoes out of the room, the children's Bible in hand, sits on the couch and begins to read.

Slowly the story returns to him. Hannah was the second wife of Elkanah, and unable to have children when Elkanah's other wife, Peninnah, had already given him several children. Elkanah loved Hannah more than Peninnah, however, and whenever they went to the temple to offer their sacrifices he gave Hannah an extra helping of the food he had offered. And yet this was not consolation enough; Hannah still longed for children, and one day in the temple made such a show of despair while she prayed for a child that the priest Eli saw her and thought she was drunk. Hearing Hannah's assurance that she was not drunk, merely in deep distress, Eli hoped that God would grant her her request. Hannah, promising to give to God any child she conceived, went away more hopeful than before. And soon enough she conceived a child and gave birth to a boy, Samuel, who, once weaned, went to serve with Eli at the temple and became one of the greatest prophets of Israel.

How strange, Peter thinks, in this day and age to read a story of a woman whose only wish is to *produce* a child, not to raise him herself. It hardly seems a story a child of the late twentieth century would have understood; and yet there it is in Alana's children's

Bible. What, he wonders, did it mean to her when she first read it? Was it simply a fantastical tale to fill her with wonder?

Closing the book, he wanders the room, gazing aimlessly at the objects that scatter the living room - shared memorabilia; wedding photographs; their Leunig calendar with those circles around the 19th to 24th of December, an indication not of the prospect of Christmas but of their increased regimentation in something that used to be spontaneous. His eyes settle on the calendar - the circles, the handwritten notes about family gatherings, the swirly and whimsical cartoon on the page above - and he stands staring at it in a mixture of interest and coldness until he feels Alana's arms around his waist and her head rested against his shoulders.

"I couldn't sleep," she says.

"I didn't try," he replies.

She pulls her arms away slowly and walks to his side.

"I'm sorry," she says. "You know how these things get to me."

She slowly walks over to the couch where the children's Bible still sits. Peter follows.

"Read me the story," says Alana.

Peter picks up the book, still open at the appropriate page, and then looks at Alana.

"Do you want to hear the actual story?" he asks. "Or my version?"

Alana looks at him tiredly. "You decide," she replies.

He tries for a moment to interpret the look on her face: is it a cue for him to entertain her, to distract her with his silly voices and far-fetched embellishments, or a sign that

she is too tired for that sort of thing? He cannot tell. He only has guesswork and a track record of past successes to go on tonight.

"Well then," says Peter, "my version it is." And he begins.

*

The Story of Hannah and Samuel

There was once a man named Elkanah who had two wives. Their names were Hannah and Peninnah. Elkanah loved Hannah more than Penninah, because she was a kinder person and her conversation was more engaging than Peninnah's who, as her name implies, was a bit of a ditz.

("How does her name imply that?" asks Alana flatly. "It just sounds ditzy," says Peter. No response. He keeps going with the story.)

And so Elkanah favoured Hannah, and always chose to spend more time with her than he did with Peninnah. On days when Peninnah went into town, Elkanah and Hannah would go for long walks together, enjoying the opportunity to be alone, to talk properly, without Peninnah's incessant complaining and self-centred rambling.

The only issue was that, while Peninnah had given Elkanah several children, Hannah had not yet had any children of her own, and so not only did Peninnah demand large amounts of Elkanah's time in taking the children to school, making their lunches, watching them play sport and the like, she also would use her many children as a way to taunt Hannah, whom she knew Elkanah loved more than her.

(Peter pauses in his telling of the story. He looks down at the page to the picture of Hannah crying by herself. It isn't a very comforting picture for a children's book, he thinks. Nor does the story lend itself to the wild embellishments he had hoped for. For a story about a miracle, this one

seems remarkably sedate, remarkably like real life. He glances at Alana. He cannot tell from looking at her how the story makes her feel. Not knowing what else to do, he continues.)

Elkanah always did his best to console Hannah. Whatever time he was not required to spend with Peninnah he spent with Hannah; and yet Hannah could see, for all the frustrations they caused, the joy that Elkanah drew from his children, and longed to be able to give him that same joy herself.

When she felt sad, Elkanah would try to comfort her by asking, "Aren't I worth more to you than seven sons?" and Hannah did not know what to say.

It depended, I suppose, on what you thought of the pros and cons of having seven sons. Peninnah had five, which was close enough, and on days when they had been running around outside and came in tired and filthy Hannah did not feel at all jealous; neither did she envy Peninnah when the boys ran through the house and broke Peninnah's precious ornaments. At times like that, she rather fancied the score was even.

But then she would watch Elkanah helping the boys with their homework or drawing pictures with them or sitting and talking to them or chasing after them outside and, yes, at those times her old friend Envy was very nearby. And when she saw the girls - three of them now, though Peninnah was pregnant again and hopeful of another girl - with their wildly imaginative games, almost always involving the toy horse they had in the backyard (games the boys could sometimes join but only if they kept strictly to the terms and conditions set by their sisters), she would start to feel her scalp tickle and burn with that heated sensation she had when she was nervous or afraid and her future would flash before her eyes, a future where Elkanah was surrounded by grandchildren all looking like Peninnah and she, Hannah, was sitting in a rocking chair in the corner, all but forgotten, all bit invisible, valued only for the booties she knitted –

*

Peter stops. Alana is silent but is looking away from him, away from the book and its illustrations of the story he tells. Closing the book, he moves closer and puts his arm around her shoulders. She shrugs, as if to shake off his hand.

"What is it?" he asks. "I thought you wanted to hear..."

"Not like that," she says. "You're rubbing my face in it. I wanted to hear the ending, not that part."

She gets up and leaves the room, back to their bedroom. Her back tells Peter not to follow.

*

Staying behind in the living room, Peter's eyes skim the pages of the children's Bible but in his head he is replaying every second of the conversation, his mind freezing over key moments, pausing, replaying, examining the scene from every angle he can find. At several points he thinks to get up and check on Alana but something continually tells him not to go. He would not know what to say; he would only make it worse. No, it's better by far to stay and leave things be, rather than intervene and send everything further and further away from the realms of resolution...

Only, as he sits there, his mind begins to replay other times like these, times when Alana has left and he has not followed, times when, seeking to salvage things, he has done nothing, and those times all end the same way: with the very thing he has tried to avoid rearing its head in spite of all his good intentions.

And so, after what may have been minutes, maybe hours, of staring at the same page of the book, he picks himself up and walks into the room. Alana is in bed, lying on her side facing the wall, but her lamp is still on. He cannot see if she is sleeping or awake, and so he slips silently into the bed beside her and rests his arms around her waist. She does

not move them away, but shifts slightly in response, as if to show that she is awake or has just woken.

"I'm sorry," he says, after a time.

"You should have known," she replies.

"You're right," he says. "I was an idiot."

Alana turns over to face him and, in the half-light of the bedside lamp, he can see the vague gloss of tears on her cheeks. For a time they lie there, neither making any noise, until Alana's body begins to shake and he holds her, everything in him wanting to silence the quivering in her body but seemingly powerless to do so. He finds himself saying, "Ssshhhh," as if to make her still, but the shaking continues and so he continues to wait, saying nothing, until finally her body slows down its shaking and is still.

For a long, long time he does not move but also does not sleep. His head remains full of words he would like to say to her and with anticipation of her responses to him; though she is now still in her body, in his mind she is constantly moving, throwing off his best attempts, pushing away every answer, every word he would say to her, and his mind rotates in anxious, aborted solutions and mute, circular arguments.

Sometimes he fancies he is asleep, and sometimes perhaps he is, for after a time he finds he is telling her the story again of Hannah and Elkanah, only this time he is telling her the story's conclusion: the story of Hannah in the temple, praying frantically, and Eli the priest watching her lips move and her body gyrate while no words come out; and Alana is laughing at the comedy of the story and at Eli's insistence that Hannah stop making such a drunken show of herself. *I'd get drunk if I was Hannah*, she says. *But you are Hannah*, he says. And she smiles and says, *Really?* as though this were the nicest thing he has ever said. And he smiles back and says to her, *It will happen*, and then again, because she did not seem to hear it, "It will happen."

Alana mumbles her response - something he does not hear. She rolls over again onto her side and returns to sleep, but he is now awake again, awkwardly aware that the conversation has gone the way of all dreams and never actually occurred.

*

Alana is dreaming.

It is daytime - noon, it seems, for the sun is high in the sky and blazing brightly - and she has walked outside of their house and is wandering in a strange wilderness outside which, though she cannot recall ever seeing it before, seems not altogether foreign to her. The ground has about it the arid brown of a desert but at times it seems damp like a swamp, and scattered across the vast expanse of land are pools of dank water which at first she walks around until she finds they are too large and she has no choice but to walk through.

Reaching the largest of the pools she stops and looks behind her; Peter is there, following at a tentative distance.

We have to walk through, she says.

Go on then, he says. *I'll follow.*

And so she walks in, hitching up the hem of the nightie she is still wearing and steps out into the murky water. At first the water reaches only her knees, then her thighs, then her waist, and then it rises rapidly until it is almost at her chin and, though she can still feel the ground beneath her, it too has become more and more damp until it is scarcely ground. Unable to walk, she tries to move in a sequence of leaps, buoying herself up on branches and other bits of flotsam and jetsam scattered throughout the ever-increasing sea. With each bound she twists her head backwards to see Peter, only he is still standing at the edge, watching. She opens her mouth to call out to him, mouths the words and jerks her throat to make the noise, to cough out his name into the air between

them, but the dankness of the swamp swallows them, and soon each attempt to call sends her beneath the water - if it can even be called water - and she can only move in upward leaps of always decreasing magnitude until she is static, head just above the water, feet nowhere and Peter, on the edge, watching and not for one moment understanding what it would mean to enter the water and follow her there.

*

Once, at Christmas, Alana had been playing with her niece, some elaborate game involving little plastic animals, dolls and a train track, when Simon's girl for the year - Grace, or something like that - had come in and watched the two of them playing and Alana assuming voices for each of their characters. After a few minutes she had laughed and said, *You're great with kids, Alana. I bet you can't wait to have your own.* Peter had walked into the room at that point and Alana had briefly, awkwardly, looked at him.

Sorry, Grace had said. *Did I just put my foot in it?* And they had both just laughed it off and Alana had tried her best to resurrect the game with Annabelle, neither she nor Peter knowing for the life of them if Grace had said something wrong but both feeling a dryness about them that neither had felt moments before.

*

Peter is telling her another story, and the story he tells her comes with pictures, three dimensional pictures which they walk through as though wandering through an ever-unfolding garden. In the story there is a small tree, a sapling only just planted, and at the tree stand a husband and a wife, each wearing the attire of peasant farmers from a forgotten Europe contained now only in the mists of folklore. The husband is kneeling at the tree's roots, plucking, it seems, a tiny stem which grows there. And as he plucks the stem he lifts it up to his wife to show her, and from that stem grows a flower, microscopic at first then the size of a rose, then a sunflower, and then it explodes with a puff of sunshine and its delicate debris floats in the air until the wife leaps to collect some in her hands; and taking them she finds that the debris has become a liquid, thick

and glutinous like a heavy syrup, and she takes her hands to her lips and drinks. Then she looks at her husband and smiles; and together they walk, holding hands, back to the cottage where they live.

And then it seems that time has passed and they are now wandering in their garden with a child at their side playing with them, planting seeds and pruning trees, and Peter looks at the husband and wife and sees that the wife has become Alana and he is no longer watching but has become the husband too. And as the child plants small trees in the soil around their cottage they see a man approaching, a tall man in a cloak walking up behind the boy, and as he approaches he looks at them and says that it is time, and the child stands up and looks at them too, unafraid, and walks away from his gardening with the man at his side; and Alana, now crying, looks at him and asks where he has gone, and Peter replies, *We knew this would happen, it was always the condition,* and Alana leaves Peter in the garden and he stands by the tree that their child has just planted and watches it grow and shrivel and grow.

*

One day he had come into the living room to find Alana crying. She had been on the phone to her mother and something had been said to shake her equilibrium, words said perhaps with the best of intentions but with the worst of consequences. At first Peter had tried, as he so often did, to fix what he saw as misaligned, only remembering too late that this was never the best way to handle things.

When they had quietened down and were no longer shouting, no longer defending their own positions, he had looked at Alana and said something he remembered once her asking him to say when she was upset.

"It will be okay," he said, not quite knowing what he meant by that.

She had paused for a moment and then said, "Will we?"

At first Peter was shocked by the change from talking about *it* to *us.* There was a vague churning inside his stomach.

"What do you mean?" he had asked, his voice choking slightly.

"You know what I mean," Alana had replied, with a strange coyness that he did not quite understand. "We're...okay, aren't we?"

"Of course," he said, then hesitated for a moment. It was hard, this tiptoeing around the topic, naming things with *it* and *we*, always in the shadows, never in the open. Then he looked at her and said, "It takes time."

For a moment Alana had not responded, looking at him uncertainly, as if he had changed the topic or else surprised her by locating precisely what she had meant. He could not tell from her eyes which it was. Then her eyes had become fixed again, their two trains of conversation realigned, and she had said, "Does it?", adding, "It doesn't for everyone. It didn't for Sarah and Greg. And we've been trying. I just don't want to think..."

He had paused. "Just give it time," he had said once again. And then their eyes had met and he had lightly smoothed over her fringe with his hand. "Okay?"

And she had nodded slowly, saying, "Yeah, it's okay."

But it had not been okay. The next morning she had woken with an emptiness in her stomach and had lain in bed looking at Peter, not knowing what to think or to feel.

The feeling had passed, as it often did. They had had a better day, and not long after that she had spoken to her mother and the hurt of the conversation had, for that time, dissipated. But it had a habit, that feeling, of coming back, and when it did Alana felt that she was washed out to sea, without a compass, without a map.

*

When they get up, they eat breakfast in the back garden and talk about the heat that is in the air and how they need to water the garden to keep it from wilting too much. After breakfast Alana sits in the living room reading the children's Bible. He cannot read the look on her face. He does not join her but stands for a while watching as she keeps reading, unaware of his presence.

*

Later that morning, when he is watering the plants, she comes out to him and stands with him for a time, asking about the garden and the state of the trees. Then she asks, "Do you feel like going to church tonight?"

"Maybe," he says slowly. "What made you think of that?" It has been some time since they have been to church.

"I don't know," she said. "I guess it's just Advent and I've been reading my old children's Bible. It seemed like it might be a good thing to do."

"We can go," he says. "We can go tonight."

"Good," she says, "I'd like that."

He continues to water the plants while she pulls out some weeds. Later, she goes inside and puts away the toiletries she had bought the day before. She picks up the packet of tampons, taken out yesterday and now sitting unopened in the bathroom, and puts them away in the cupboard, pausing for a moment and staring vacantly at the mirror.

Third Candle

"Lift up your hearts."

"We lift them to the Lord."

"Let us give thanks to the Lord our God."

"It is right to give our thanks and praise."

Standing, they face the front of the church where three Advent candles flicker in their wreath beside the two still unlit ones. The voices rise around them. Peter puts his hands in his pockets. Alana's voice sounds louder than usual.

"All glory and honour be yours always and everywhere, mighty Creator, everliving God..."

Peter's mind processes the words at the same time as he takes in the surrounding room. It is, on the face of it, a traditional church building: lead-light windows containing pictures of saints and Bible stories, carved wooden pulpit and (unused) choir stalls; in almost every way like the small-town Anglican churches where he spent his childhood and which they would visit sporadically throughout their first few years of marriage. The church where they were married looked like this. The church where Alana's niece was baptised looked like it too. But there are differences: the data projector replacing prayer books; the lower age of the congregation; the casual dress of the minister; the confident tone with which the liturgy is proclaimed...

"We give you thanks and praise for our Saviour Jesus Christ, who by the power of your Spirit was born of Mary and lived as one of us..."

He looks at Alana; she turns her face slightly towards him, catching him in the corner of her eye and smiling briefly.

"By his death on the cross and rising to new life, he offered the one true sacrifice for sin and obtained an eternal deliverance for his people..."

Thankyou, she had said, after they had come home last week from the evening church service. *I'm really glad we went. I think it was good for us to go.*

He hadn't known what to say, and so he had said, *Yes, it was good to go.*

I feel a lot more hopeful, she had said. *I prayed about it, and I think it's going to be okay.*

Of course it is, he had said, and kissed her. *It's going to be fine.*

"Therefore with angels and archangels, and with all the company of heaven, we proclaim your great and glorious name, for ever praising you and saying..."

I read the story of Hannah again, she had said. *God can answer our prayers. He knows how much we want this.*

Yes, he had said, *yes, he does.*

"Holy, holy, holy Lord, God of power and might, heaven and earth are full of your glory. Hosanna in the highest. Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord. Hosanna in the highest."

The floorboards are wooden, Peter notices, and there is no carpet. He gazes at the floorboards and breathes.

*

Sing aloud, O daughter Zion;
shout, O Israel!
Rejoice and exult with all your heart,
O daughter Jerusalem!
The LORD has taken away the judgments against you,
he has turned away your enemies.

Who, Alana wonders, are her enemies? She can often see them clearly in her mind's eye: those whose faces and voices she recirculates in her head, mouths sneering, hearts laughing, words condemning who she is and what she has achieved.

The king of Israel, the LORD, is in your midst;
you shall fear disaster no more.
On that day it shall be said to Jerusalem:
Do not fear, O Zion;
do not let your hands grow weak.

She looks, almost instinctively, down at her hands, at the chewed ends of her nails, then looks back up at the girl who stands at the front, reading the Bible to the congregation. The girl's enunciation is perfect, her voice strong and growing stronger. Alana wonders if she too could speak strongly like that.

The LORD, your God, is in your midst,
a warrior who gives victory;
he will rejoice over you with gladness,
he will renew you in his love;
he will exult over you with loud singing
as on a day of festival.

A festival, she thinks, a real festival - when people rejoice instead of arguing. When they rejoice *together*. What, she wonders, would it look like for God to rejoice over her with

gladness? She cannot quite picture it, but the thought of it makes her warm for a moment.

There are other thoughts, too, playing in her mind: the vague sense of hope that has started to build up in her this week; the feeling that perhaps her prayers are being answered; the faint indicators in her body that make her hope more; the fear that it may not be true; the fear that she should not, cannot, tell Peter, at least not now...

The warmth of the moment before has turned faintly, imperceptibly, to a kind of clamminess. She sits and does her best to listen, not think.

I will remove disaster from you,
so that you will not bear reproach for it.
I will deal with all your oppressors
at that time.

Briefly, Alana's mind flits to an image of her sister and her mother. She pushes it out the instant she recognises it, but there it was, quick but undeniable. She glances down again at her hands.

And I will save the lame
and gather the outcast,
and I will change their shame into praise
and renown in all the earth.

Once, at Christmas, she was playing with her niece. They were playing Connect Four and Annabelle, as always, was winning the game in the most complex of ways, bamboozling Alana with rules that she was quite confident never existed. When, finally, Alana managed to win a game, Annabelle had started to display one of her more impressive sulking fits, so Alana started tickling her to distract her from the sulk. And at first it had worked; Annabelle, despite calling out for her to stop, laughed gleefully and writhed around on the ground beside the coffee table until, with one particularly swift

jerk of her head, her forehead collided with the table leg and, within moments, her laughter had been replaced by tears and the slow seeping of blood down her brow. As Sarah had wiped her daughter's face and held an icepack to her forehead, she had looked at Alana and said, "Honestly, Lani, I thought I could leave her with you for at least a few minutes." And then she had looked back at Annabelle and said, "Does it still hurt, darling?" And Alana had left the room and sat alone until Peter had found her and tried his best to say that Sarah had not meant it the way it had sounded. When Alana had finally found the courage to go back, her mother had found her and said, "Sarah's really upset, Lani. You need to talk to her." And somehow it had all just kept spiralling and spiralling, seemingly beyond all remedy. She can scarcely remember now how it had ever been resolved, and feels sick now at the thought of it. She tries not to think about it, turning her eyes again to the Bible reading girl.

At that time I will bring you home,
at the time when I gather you;
for I will make you renowned and praised
among all the peoples of the earth,
when I restore your fortunes
before your eyes, says the LORD.

As the reading finishes, Alana notices that the warmth and the clamminess have both dissipated, but somehow the words cling to, a little awkwardly but inescapably. The Bible reader takes her seat; Alana's eyes remain locked in middle distance, focused seemingly on something that she cannot see.

*

The service closes with an offer of prayer for anyone who has been "challenged by anything in tonight's service". There will be people available at the side of the church, they say, for anyone interested. Alana looks at Peter, asking with her eyes if they should go forward. Peter hesitates, but Alana nods reassuringly and takes his hand, and soon they are walking to the side, where a small group of people are already gathering, sitting

in pairs or groups of three, heads bowed, mouths whispering. Peter looks around him. There are two people, the girl who read the Bible and a man about the same age as her, sitting to the side. They smile at Peter and Alana as they approach.

The room feels warm to Peter. It is a muggy night and he is sweating. The building does not appear to have any fans and the open windows do not seem to make much difference. His skin prickles a little. They sit down.

"How can we pray for you?" asks the girl.

Peter looks at Alana. What can they say, he wonders? They have never met these people before. Why would he tell these strangers what he has not even told his closest friends? What even is there to tell?

"Well," says Alana, eyes looking into his, then away. "We've been married for six years, and we're trying..."

Peter swallows. His head feels dense and thick, as though enclosed. Alana's mouth keeps moving, her lips somehow opening and closing without sound - at least, not enough sound to push through the wall, a strange, dull membrane pressing over his ears, over his skull, his forehead, his eyes. The girl and boy both smile at them; eyes smile above mouths, and mouths continue to pray, hands assisting the motion of wind around them; and always the membrane presses down, thick with silence, heavy with sweat. *Lord, we ask...*Snatches of words, of sentences escape, through the membrane, into ears, like a frog absorbing water, and then out they push, in the circularity of the room. *Lord we ask...lift up to you...ask in your name...hear our prayer...*Alana looks up and smiles. Somewhere, on a face nearby, Peter smiles too, lips mutely, squarely following commands that his brain somehow knows, in spite of himself, to give.

And then they go home, Peter only vaguely aware of the steps they take out of the church and into the car, mind only half conscious of the road he is driving on,

processing only the sensations of headlights sliding through the night sky around them and the hum of the car engine and the pregnant silence of Alana beside him.

*

"Can I tell you a story?" asks Alana, when they are in bed.

He is lying down and Alana, seated upright, is looking down at him as she often does on the occasions that he is sick and she is caring for him. But tonight Alana's expression is different; it looks more silent, more pensive, like she has run ahead in a race and is now waiting for him to catch up. Only he is sinking into the bed, no energy to run, no consciousness of the race.

"What's the story?" he asks, slowly.

"I read it yesterday," she says. "It's from the gospel of Luke - the story of Elizabeth. John the Baptist's mother."

Peter pauses. "Why do you want to tell me that story?" he asks.

Alana shrugs. "It was a nice story. I thought it might encourage us."

"I'm a bit tired, Lani," he says. "I might just go to bed."

She frowns. "Okay..."

"Don't be upset," he says. "I just...I'm not in the mood for stories tonight."

She looks away.

"Lani," he says.

"Just go to sleep," she says.

For a while they lie in bed, neither sleeping nor saying anything, until Alana feels that the silence is about to explode and finally breaks it.

"I know you don't understand it," she says.

"Understand?" he asks. "Understand what?"

"Going to church. And reading the Bible. You think it's stupid."

"I didn't say that," he begins.

"You didn't need to," she says. "I just...need some hope. You want me to sit back and believe that it'll be okay. Why should I believe that? What can I trust in to tell me it's okay? Us? You?"

"Lani..."

She has sat up and turned on the lamp. Peter sits up too.

"No," she says. "I hate it when you say my name like that - like it's a complaint. Not when we're fighting. Not like that. Don't patronise me. And don't apologise," she adds, when she sees Peter go to speak. "I want you to hear me before you apologise."

"Okay," he says. "I'm listening."

Alana is silent.

"What is it?" he asks. "I'm listening."

Alana shakes her head. "No, you're not," she says.

She turns off the lamp and lies down on her side, her back to Peter.

After a time of not sleeping, he gets up and goes into the living room. When he wakes up, having fallen asleep to the TV, he returns slowly to bed. Alana mumbles; he tells her to sleep. They do not speak again until morning.

*

In the morning they fight again. Peter is running late for work and is shorter with her than usual, and her tolerance, worn down by the tension of yesterday, is even thinner now. He leaves with the fight unresolved, and when she gets to work she feels sick from the conflict. It is only by the time of her morning break that she wonders if the sick feeling is more than frustration at their argument. When the smell of her colleagues' coffee sends her running to the toilet, she catches herself thinking, half hopeful, of what this might mean.

Nothing comes, but the nausea she continues to feel is bad enough to send her home. Her boss agrees that she looks pale, and so she drives home, getting back just before lunchtime. Not feeling very hungry, she makes herself a cup of soup and toast, and then wonders what to do with her afternoon.

The thought to ring her sister comes to her a little unexpectedly. She seldom rings her siblings, except for birthdays or other special events, and they ring her still more rarely. But, once she has thought it, the thought clings, until she finds herself dialling Sarah's number and waiting for her to answer.

When Sarah answers and Alana starts speaking, she can hear, in the silence between replies, that Sarah does not understand why she has called, and inside each pause Alana wrestles with the conflicting urges on one hand to hang up and cry and on the other to tell Sarah what is really on her mind - that which she has only partially begun to admit to herself.

"Who is it?" asks a child's voice in the background.

"It's Aunty Lani," says Sarah. "Do you want to say hello?"

"Yes," says the girl. There is a rustling as the phone is handed over. "Hi Aunty Lani," says the girl.

"Hello Annabelle!" says Alana. "How are *you*?"

"Good."

A pause. "That's good. Have you done anything special today?"

"Um...yes."

"And what was that?"

"Um...well, we looked at...Mummy and I opened the Advent calendar."

"And what did you get today?"

"Um...there was a chocolate and...um...a picture of a fairy."

She still can't quite pronounce her r's. She says the word, *fair-we*. Alana smiles.

"Was there? That sounds lovely, Annabelle."

"Yes."

A pause.

"I'm looking forward to seeing you at Christmas," says Alana.

"Yes," says Annabelle. "Did you know I'm getting a bike for Christmas?"

"No, I didn't. How exciting."

"Yes."

Another pause.

"Annabelle," says Sarah's voice in the background, "we need to go soon, sweetie."

"I've got to go now, Aunty Lani," says Annabelle.

"Okay Annabelle. Can I talk..."

"Bye Alana," Sarah calls from the background.

The phone clicks.

Alana stares at the kitchen clock as it flickers and flashes in silence.

*

"I came home early today," says Alana, when Peter gets home. "I felt...sick."

"What kind of sick?" Peter asks.

"Like I was going to vomit," she says. "I had cramps in my stomach all morning. But then I didn't vomit. It just passed."

"So nothing serious?"

"Maybe not," she replies. Then a pause. "But I'm late."

"Late?" It takes a moment to process. "But I thought...last weekend..."

"I know," she says. "I thought so too. I felt so moody all weekend, and I was due to get it. But then I didn't. It just...passed. I'm nearly a week late now. I'm never usually late."

Peter is quiet.

"I don't want to jump the gun," she says, "but...do you think I should see a doctor?"

"Maybe," he says. "Maybe give it it a few more days. It might be best."

Alana nods. "I guess," she says. "But I've heard that it can be worth having the test after three or four days."

He shrugs. "Then make an appointment," he says. "It couldn't hurt, I suppose."

"It's worth doing," she says, studying his eyes as she speaks. "I'd like to know."

"Of course," he says, walking closer to her. "Of course." He takes her hand and kisses her cheek. "Of course you would want to know."

She smiles. "Good," she says. "I'll call tomorrow."

They kiss; she smiles at Peter, calmer than she has been in days. Peter can hear his heart pounding.

"Are you happy?" she asks.

"Yes," he says. "I'm happy."

He makes dinner for them both and Alana rests. She goes to bed early. Peter watches television until his eyes are tired. Alana does not wake when he goes to bed.

*

When he gets home the next day, Alana is in the bathroom crying. There is a discarded tampon wrapper on the floor. He sits beside her while she cries. They say nothing. In the morning, he calls the doctor's surgery to cancel her appointment. She phones in sick and sleeps through the morning.

Fourth Candle

The days of the week pass quietly, uneventfully. The disappointment of Tuesday gone, they seem somehow calmer, less angry but also less active, as though they are only limping through the day, unable to fight, unable to run. When the dates circled on the calendar arrive, although no longer carrying the meaning they had done a week ago, they go to bed together with efficiency: disciplined, not passionate, but with a kind of quiet affection that makes it a little more than a routine. And then they sleep, and in the morning they go to work and into their days. Alana's stomach cramps pass, anticlimactically, and she settles into the quiet stoicism of the week.

When Sunday arrives they go to church as if by reflex, without discussion or agreement. The fourth candle is lit, the Bible read; and because it is Christmas in two days, they sing only carols. The boy and girl who prayed for them last week smile when they see them; at the greeting of peace, the girl, introducing herself as Emma, speaks to Alana and says she is praying for them. Alana thanks her; they swap phone numbers. They will catch up, they agree, for a coffee after Christmas. And then briefly they exchange Christmas holiday itineraries, with a mutual interest that might be more than just polite: Emma is going to Sydney to see her family; Peter and Alana will travel to Albury tomorrow, for Christmas Eve. Alana's siblings will arrive on Tuesday morning. Then the greeting of peace ends and they return to their seats.

When it is time for the sermon, they feel strangely tired, as though it would take energy to sit and listen tonight. The topic - "Mary's Song", it is called on the screen - means little to them, and describes a state that they cannot quite understand. They have sung carols tonight, yes, and there was something comforting in an act so like childhood that they had been for a moment transported out of their pervasive dryness, but now there seems little to sing about. The walls of the church seem flat and dull.

Alana's attention is caught first when she hears Hannah's name mentioned. Ears pricking up, she turns to Peter. It seems somehow a sore topic to hear tonight; Peter frowns, and Alana shifts in her seat. When Mary heard the news that she was pregnant, the minister says, she broke into song. And her song mirrored another song earlier in the Bible - the song of Hannah. Perhaps Mary was inspired by Hannah, or perhaps she simply felt moved to say the same things. But they should look, he says, at Hannah's song, and Hannah's story, to help them understand what Mary is expressing. And so he begins to tell the story, and Peter and Alana sit awkwardly listening to the story they have never finished and now doubt that they want to hear.

*

The Story of Hannah's Song

Elkanah had two wives. The first wife, Peninnah, had given him several children, but the second of his wives, Hannah, was barren. Elkanah, however, loved Hannah more than he loved Peninnah. Knowing that this was so, Peninnah would often taunt Hannah, gloating about her children, relishing the power this gave her over Hannah. Elkanah would try to comfort Hannah; "Aren't I worth as much as seven sons to you?" he would ask. And Hannah would not reply. Much as she loved her husband, nothing in their relationship could make up for the daily pain of Peninnah flaunting her many children in front of her.

Sometimes Hannah's mind would drift back to the stories of her ancestors - stories of Sarah, Abraham's wife, who had a child well into her old age, and stories of Hagar, the servant girl, who had taunted the barren Sarah with her son Ishmael; of Leah, the unloved sister with weak eyes, and Rachel, the loved one who was barren for much of her life as a punishment, it seemed, for being more loved. At times the stories comforted her; at times they did not. Which of these women, she would wonder, was she most like - Rachel or Sarah, Leah or Hagar? Was she beloved or oppressed, blessed or rejected? She had her husband's love; but her womb was a dry, unyielding field. She cried out to heaven, but her cries fell flat. There was no reply, just a taunting vacuum.

When the time came for the family to offer their sacrifices at the temple, and eat a meal together, as the tradition went, Elkanah made his sacrifice and then served portions to all of his family - to Peninnah and her children, and then to Hannah; and, as usual, he gave Hannah an extra portion as a sign of his love for her. Peninnah no doubt saw it and scowled; perhaps she turned to Hannah and snapped at her, as she often did - some failure, perhaps, on Hannah's part to prepare properly for the meal; some reason (there were many) why Hannah could do nothing right.

Perhaps it was this she had in mind - the taunts of Peninnah, the unloved wife - and took with her into the temple when she prayed, rocking back and forth, arms held up in desperation, lips moving wildly but voice silent. Inwardly she cried: *Lord, have mercy; Lord, show kindness; Lord, take away my crushing shame.* But outwardly, nothing - just the mad movements of one on the brink, the edge of what can or cannot be handled. And as she prayed, she wrestled and writhed and bargained in her mind. *Lord, if you hear my prayer then I swear I will give him to you. The child shall be yours.* And on and on she prayed, shaking and bribing, whispering and crying.

To Eli, the priest who stood by and watched, she was clearly drunk, or out of her mind. Sometimes it happened; some celebrated too wildly, too extravagantly. Looking at Hannah, he made up his mind that she was such a one.

Will you stop, woman? he said to her. *Stop making such a display of yourself. Go home and sleep; sober yourself. This is no place for drunken displays.*

Please, she said to him, her voice begging him. *I am not drunk; I'm just desperate. I've been praying and praying; can't you see that?*

Eli relented, his heart drawn to her. Her cheeks, he saw, were stained with tears. Her eyes were shot through with lines of red.

Go, my child, he said to her. *May the Lord grant your request.*

Hannah stopped crying, not quite appeased but no longer frantic. She left the temple and went home with her family, and though Peninnah said to her, *What was all your fuss about?* and *How nice of you to leave all the work to me*, she did not react. It was as if her ears were immune to the sound of her words.

And that night Elkanah and Hannah went to bed together, and soon Hannah began to feel that something was different. Before long it was clear - her prayer had been answered. And though she knew in her heart that she would have to keep her bargain, she rejoiced to know that her shame would be gone.

Hannah kept the child with her - a boy called Samuel, whose name declared that she had been heard by God - until she had weaned him. And when the time came for her to give him up she went to the temple with her son, and with flour and wine and a bull to sacrifice, and there she killed the bull and gave her son to the priest Eli to raise him.

Did Hannah cry when she gave up her son? No doubt, she did, though we are not told. What she saw, in her mind, that day in the temple, is all that we know - the song that she sang. For somewhere inside her spirit there now was music, and the words to a song that took her through time: to the felling of empires, the reversal of pride, kings brought down low, paupers raised up, grace to the scrap-heap of human refuse. And there, on the scrap-heap, she saw now herself, glowing bright, shining - the end of her shame.

*

The words hit Alana with unexpected impact; they sound to her like a song, rhythmic and fluid, yet they cut deep like swords. She does not remember when she starts to cry, but when Peter looks at her, her eyes are red and flowing, and he does not know what to say.

They stay back longer after church this time, Alana seemingly wanting to linger and talk. Peter gets himself a coffee while a man about his age starts a casual conversation with

him. Out of the corner of his eye he sees Alana talking with Emma. They are seated towards the front of the church. Alana is saying, "But what about Peninnah? I never thought about *her*..." It looks as if she has tears in her eyes still but it is hard to tell from this distance. Peter watches her, forgetting that there is someone talking to him, waiting for a reply. Then, returning, he says, "Sorry - what was that?"

"What are *you* doing for Christmas?" the young man asks.

Peter pauses and glances again at Alana. "Um...I'll spend it with my wife's family," he replies, Alana still in the corner of his eye, her voice sounding somewhere faintly in the noise around him.

*

In the morning, they hurriedly finish packing for the trip and then set off, the sun already beating down its heat. As they drive, Alana is quiet, but seems alert. Peter, however, has not slept well, his mind recycling snatches of prayers and Bible verses and moments of obscure liturgy in an unsettling way. The calm that Alana seemed to take home with her confused him, as it does now.

He drives the first leg of the way, more out of stubbornness than anything else. Early as it is, the roads are still slow, and the cars exiting the city seem trapped in a morning haze. There is roadwork on the Ring Road, as there always seems to be, and they slow down to a point almost of stasis when the road shrinks to a single lane and they sit, blinkers flickering, waiting to merge.

They stop at a service station for coffee and a muffin. The restaurant is playing "Winter Wonderland", a song more inappropriate than ever on this already hot day. The break wakes him up partially, but there is a muteness to their conversation which could perhaps be dismissed as a symptom of tiredness if they did not know each other better. Alana drives the next leg and he sleeps; at times, he wakes up to hear her singing to herself. He keeps his eyes closed and pretends to sleep.

As her song fades out, he can see himself walking, through a place that seems an amalgamation of memories - streets he has walked down, buildings he knows well - and the people who walk beside him and around him are also a collection of people from key moments in his life, people who never knew each other and who occupied his life at different times but now united by his fluid subconscious. And as he walks through this place, he is plagued by a familiar night-time sensation - a feeling of tightness as he tries to talk, and a sense of urgency, even of danger, that, strangely, cannot translate itself into action, as though there is within him an engine that consumes all its fuel solely in order to stay still. Here the signal of danger is found in a rustling of leaves in the trees that line the street, and above the trees he can see a whitish kind of light with no obvious source and of a very different quality to the light of the sun. And, as he stares at the light, for a length of time that you would never normally stare at the sun, he becomes aware of a voice, perhaps coming from the trees, perhaps from the light source. And the voice says to him, *Peter*, then, *Peter - wake up.*

*

When he wakes, they are in Seymour - too early for lunch. They get out to walk and stretch their legs, but then continue on their way. It looks like they'll be in Albury by noon.

Back in the car, Alana keeps driving, Peter feeling more alert yet strangely willing to let himself sit while she drives. The sun, now high, blazes through the window. The temperature's set to hit nearly 40. In Peter's head he sings, "In the meadow we can build a snowman..." Alana turns up the air-conditioning while Peter stares out the window at the open, dry fields.

*

Arriving in Albury just after noon, Alana says, "Let's have lunch first." Something makes her want to delay going to her parents' house just yet. The afternoon stretches out before

them, and they are not expected until later in the day. There is always the chance, of course, that they run into her parents in town, but she is willing to take the risk. And so they park in town and walk down the street to a coffee shop they both like. This one is playing more appropriate carols - less snow, and less schmaltz - and the room is cool; it is a peaceful place to stop and rest in an otherwise busy town. After lunch they walk to the river and rest for a time in the shade of some trees, but soon it is too hot to be outside and so, with a kind of quiet resignation, they return to their car and drive to Alana's parents' house.

Her parents live out of town, in a new house they built there a few years ago. When they arrive, her father is in the garden pruning some trees that have grown dramatically since they were last here.

"Hi Dad," says Alana, giving him a hug in the driveway. "The garden looks great."

And for a moment they stand in the driveway, shielding their eyes from the sun, while her father tells her what he has done with the garden, which trees are flourishing, which ones are struggling with the heat. And then her mother appears in the doorway and Alana turns to approach her. The Christmas holiday has begun.

*

Alana has a memory of being six years old, or thereabouts, and her mother reading a story to her in the living room of their old house. Alana was learning to read herself by then and from time to time she would look over her mother's shoulder at the words, but she still preferred to have the words read to her, on the rare occasions that that happened. It was comforting to just look at the pictures and trust her mother's ability to turn those small, mysterious shapes into words to entertain and amuse her. And her mother was a dramatic and expressive reader, far more dramatic than she herself could be just yet.

The story, she remembers, was about some animals - a little tiger and a little bear - and they were best friends, until one of the animals - was it the tiger or the bear? - met a little pig who replaced the other in his affections. And the two of them would spend the whole day lazily in bed, eating "sloppy, gooey uncooked cake" as their staple meal. Alana would always squirm at the thought of eating uncooked cake, although she herself liked to lick the spoon or the beaters when her mother was baking. Somehow eating a whole bowl of cake mixture did not seem the same as licking the spoon, and so Alana would protest at how disgusting the pig and the tiger (or bear) were being, though secretly she loved to be disgusted by them; the disgust was half the appeal.

Only, this time her sister Sarah had walked into the room moments before her mother had reached the part about the cake and had said, *Mum, you need to drive me to my dance lesson now*, and her mother had said, *Oh yes, that's right, sorry Sarah*, and had slammed the book shut. When Alana had asked, *But what about the story?*, her mother had said, *Later. I need to go now.* And Sarah had said, *Can't you read it yourself?* And Alana had known somewhere in herself that Sarah was right, that she could read for herself, yet all she felt at the time was the injustice of her mother being taken away from her. *But Mum never reads to me*, she had complained, and her mother had said, *Oh, don't be ridiculous, Alana*, and had grabbed the car keys and gone out the door.

Her mother had not finished reading the story that night. In fact, Alana could not remember her reading another story to her. There was always something to do - dancing lessons for Sarah, soccer practice for Simon...And when she herself was old enough to have her own places to go to, her mother drove her there just as she had driven her siblings. But it was never the same as sitting inside her arms while she read. Nothing was ever quite like that. And when she complained about what she was missing, it always sounded like ungrateful whinging and was always dismissed as such, until she started herself to think that she was whinging and there was nothing wrong, only her inability to make things right, her inability to accept the fact that she had grown up and that there were some things she could not expect any more.

*

It is memories like these, of past Christmases, past family gatherings, that circle through Alana's mind that night as she approaches bed. Her mind is buzzing, like it always used to do on Christmas Eve. Only, this time she knows that it is not excitement over presents and the magic of Christmas morning that keeps her from sleeping. This time she is replaying every argument, every confrontation, every terse, unloving look, ever pregnant silence; and in the story they tell, pasted as they are together in her mind, she can see tomorrow unfolding just as every year has done before.

Looking towards Peter's faint outline in the light of the nearly full moon, she thinks, as she so often has done before, of waking him. She listens for his breath; it is soft, shallow almost. Perhaps he is still awake.

"Peter," she says.

A pause.

"Yes?" he replies, a vaguely startled sound to his voice, as though just awoken.

"I can't sleep," she says.

He moves in towards her. "No?" he replies slowly, still not quite awake.

"Can you...do you think you could pray for me?"

Another pause.

"Sure," he says, a hint of uncertainty still in his voice. She cannot remember when they last prayed together. She knows it is a strange request; yet somehow she feels that nothing else will help tonight. Their stories have worn out their welcome; she knows she would not be convinced by them tonight.

"What do you want me to pray for?" asks Peter.

"That I can sleep," she replies, simply.

"Okay," says Peter. "I can try."

And so, his eyes still half-closed from sleeping, he prays - a quiet, hesitant and simple prayer. The words have little power in themselves, and for a moment Alana wonders if it was absurd to have done this. They are silent, lying there a little awkwardly, wondering what to do next. And yet, something within her begins to feel a little more still, a little more at peace, and so she thanks Peter and once again they lie silently, Peter soon asleep again, Alana not yet sleeping but not as fearful as before.

And slowly, as her mind begins again to play over the thoughts from before, she shifts from the memories of past Christmases, and she finds she is in a room, seated beside the Christmas tree, neither a woman nor a child but somehow both at once, and she knows that this is not a Christmas that has ever happened before. She knows, however, that she is in the living room of her childhood home, and the tree is much like other trees they have had before, decorated just as she and her sister and brothers had always decorated the tree.

Turning her face from the tree she sees a man sitting beside the tree, a little like her older brother, a little like her father, a little like neither of them, and he is holding a basket, like a Christmas hamper but made, seemingly, of hay or dried reeds.

And the man looks at her and says, *I brought you your present.*

And, feeling inside herself that same surging excitement that always used to keep her awake on Christmas Eve, she takes the basket and peers into it, seeing, at first to her confusion, then to her joy, a baby, sleeping quietly, clearly a new-born. But then her heart sinks, because she knows, in that way of knowing we have sometimes in dreams,

that this child is not hers, and she looks back at the man with disappointment, as if to ask him why he has given her this child that is not her own.

Look again, he says.

And so she looks again, only this time the child has changed - still the same baby, yet now covered in blood, as if only just born; and the baby turns a little in its sleep, as though distressed by a dream, and as it turns Alana can see the baby's face, and she shrinks back in disgust, for the baby's face is the most distorted, disfigured face she has ever seen. Unable to look any more at the face, she looks up again at the man beside the tree and asks, this time aloud, *Who did this?*

The man looks into her eyes and says slowly, *You did.*

And Alana begins to cry, at the sight of the baby and the thought of what she has done, for she sees in an instant not the moments of pain she had seen before, but sights of herself, her insides, and she knows that what the man said is true. As she cries, she looks back at him, though she is sure he will only look at her crossly, just as she feels sure she deserves, but looking at him now she finds that he too is bleeding and disfigured like the baby. And yet - he is smiling, not cruelly, as she feels would surely fit the blood and disfigurement, but peacefully, even triumphantly.

Look again, he says. She can tell from his voice that it hurts him to speak.

And though she cannot bear to look at the baby again, neither can she bear to look at his face, and so she looks down again and sees that the baby's face has become new again, clean as though just washed, and she fancies that the baby's face is the same as the face of the man beside her, in the way that dreams can unite two objects that are distinct from each other as if they were one. And she cries; though the baby is now clean, she cries with a pain that she cannot understand but can feel pulsing out of her like a primal energy.

Tears continue to pour and pour down her cheeks, until she fancies that the air around her has become damp with her tears, only then she sees that she is now outside and the dampness in the air is rain - torrential rain. And she finds she is standing waist-deep in a river full of reeds, with the man still standing beside her, and the baby's basket in her hands is now floating off in the current, but she does not cry now to see it happen. Standing for a moment in the water, she becomes aware that Peter is there too, standing on the river bank, separated from her by the stretch of water; and seeing this she begins to cry again, for it is just like the dream she had only a few weeks earlier. Only this time she does not cry to be separated from him but instead cries at the thought that he does not know or understand what she has seen.

Do not cry, says the man, resting his hand for a moment on her shoulder. *I will go to him*, he says.

And so Alana stands, watching as the man walks out into the water, walking, waking, until the water seems almost to cover his head, then rising from the water, taking its vastness in his stride, until he is nearly at the riverbank, Peter standing silently, watching blankly, almost as if he cannot see; and though the man does not turn back to face her, she can hear him as though he is still at her side saying once again, *I will go to him.* And though she sees him there, walking ever closer to Peter, she cannot stop crying; and so she cries and cries, for decades and hours, and stands with the river rushing all about her, with centuries of life washing off around her, and there she stands watching, watching, until night-time comes and she finds herself washed onto the bank to sleep, tears turning to peace, peace turning to sleep. And somehow as she sleeps she knows she is cradled, the sands of the bank comforting her with their warmth.

*

In the morning, Alana wakes, Peter beside her, the early morning sun now shining. Vivid impressions of her dream linger with her: the child in the basket; the young, old man comforting her, stretching between her and Peter and the water's vast expanse.

Lying there, circling over memories of the dream, she has no answers, no perfect solutions, but a sense of understanding, of being understood, appeased.

"Merry Christmas," she whispers to Peter while he sleeps.

He does not stir. She lies in bed waiting for him to wake, the gift of her dream still with her as she waits.

Fifth Candle

Alana is reading Annabelle a story. Annabelle loves to hear stories, and likes Alana's stories best. In the morning, when the rest of the family arrived at the house and they had exchanged presents, Annabelle had asked Alana instantly to read to her the Christmas storybook that she and Peter had bought her. But Alana had said, *Later, after everyone has opened their presents*. And so she has waited patiently; now it is almost time for lunch and the rest of the family are scattered throughout the house playing their part in the preparations, and so Annabelle can finally get her story. She sits in Alana's lap, almost too big now to do so, her head nestled inside Alana's arms, thumb in her mouth (a habit she has retained despite her mother' best efforts to stop her), giggling at the voices that Alana does for the characters in the story, some actually contained in the story, some Alana's own invention.

"And so the donkey said, *You can't sleep here. This is my bed.* And the pig said, *This is my sty. I'm not sharing it with anybody*. And the cows said, *Moo moo, go away.* So where could they sleep that night? And where would the baby sleep when it was born?"

Annabelle is growing quieter. "They're not very nice animals, Aunty Lani," she says, her voice faint but nevertheless cross at the injustice of the situation.

"Well," says Alana, "how would you feel about having your bedroom room taken over by strangers? Would you like that?"

"But it's Jesus," says Annabelle. "Don't they know that they have to let him sleep there at Christmas?"

"But it isn't Christmas yet, Belle," says Alana. "Christmas hasn't happened yet. It isn't Christmas until Jesus is born."

"I know *that*," says Annabelle, insulted. "But they should know that it's Christmas *Eve*."

Alana smiles. "Maybe they should, honey," she says. "Do you want me to keep reading?"

Annabelle nods. Alana can't see her nodding but feels her niece's head moving back and forth in the crook of her arm. She starts reading again. But, as often happens, she grows bored with what she is reading, and soon the details of the story have grown wildly embellished, until the donkey and the cows have set up a fortress around their sleeping areas to keep Mary and Joseph out, and the horse is bringing over his hay to help pad out the fortress to make it more comfortable, and Mary and Joseph are standing by watching, wondering what to do; they've travelled for days, they are tired and sore, Mary especially, and now even the animals they are forced to share with are trying to keep them out. And Alana is flicking ahead in her mind to how the story ends, wondering how she will draw the action together to fit the actual ending when Sarah comes in and says, "Belle, it's time for lunch."

"But Aunty Lani's telling me a story," says Annabelle.

"She can finish the story later," says Sarah. "Come on - let's eat."

For a moment Alana finds herself only a little bigger than Annabelle, sitting on the floor while Sarah ends another story for her. She looks down at Annabelle, who has tilted her head back to look at her, pleading with her eyes for Alana to overrule her mother.

Somewhere, a voice comes out of Alana, hesitant, shy, but audible. "Can we just have a moment to finish the story?" she asks.

Sarah pauses.

"Lunch is ready, Alana," she says, her voice unmoving.

"Just a minute," says Alana, voice stronger. "We'll be quick."

Sarah says nothing. She stands looking at them, as if waiting. Alana's mind races over the story, finding her place in it so far, doing her best to decide, in that instant, how to bring it to a close. Briefly, she sees a flash from her dream of the night before, of the baby floating in the basket away from her down the river. And, in that moment, the story seems to find its continuation and its ending in her mind.

"And so the animals did their best, just like everyone else, to keep Mary and Joseph. But they found a corner of the stable where none of the animals wanted to sleep; and they they found a feeding trough where the animals would eat and drink during the day. The animals didn't need it because it was night-time and they didn't eat at night."

"Alana," says Sarah.

"Nearly finished," she says. "I promise."

And she continues with the story, her voice speeding up but determined to finish this story, or to let it have its own ending. "So Mary and Joseph," she says, "put some hay which the horse had left behind inside the feeding trough and when the baby was born they let him sleep in the trough while the other animals fell asleep and snored in their fortress in the stable." She pauses and looks at Annabelle, who is completely still in her arms. Her voice slows down. "But even their fortress didn't stop Jesus from being born," she says, "because our fortresses have never stopped God before."

And she closes the book. Annabelle pauses, still lying Alana's arms. Then she says, "What's a fortress, Aunty Lani?"

Sarah walks over to where they sit and reaches out for Annabelle's hand.

"Come on Belle," she says. "Time for lunch. We can tell you what a fortress is later."

Reluctant, Annabelle slips out of Alana's lap and walks off into the dining room, holding her mother's hand. Alana remains in her chair, watching mother and daughter's backs as they walk; and for a moment Alana fancies she can see a heaviness about Sarah's shoulders, like something weighing her down. Then it is gone.

"Alana," says Sarah, looking back. "Are you coming to lunch?"

Alana pauses. There is a look in Sarah's eyes not unlike her childhood face, a face she has not seen or remembered for some time. In her mind she hears, *Sarah is also a child.* She stops.

"Alana?"

Sarah is not smiling; face and eyes are impatient, her mouth set. And yet, a smile wells up somewhere inside Alana, unexpected, unexplained. She stands up. And slowly she walks towards the dining room, just pausing for a moment to glance back at the Christmas tree, where for a moment she sees a man standing, with the face of a wounded but beautiful child, smiling, in his hands a gift that she knows he is holding for her.

"Yes," she says. "I'm coming."

And she walks through the door.

Pageant

A Tale of Families and Small Towns

In the years to come, opinions would vary wildly as to how it came about that Braydon broke his arm, Tayla ended up buried beneath several sheep and Kassie came to be sitting in the corner of the stage crying. Kim and Craig, both backstage until the last moment, observing it all, had their own ideas, but the cast and the audience — some hundred or so parents, grandparents, siblings and assorted other local well-wishers — also represented a wide spectrum of alternative views on the subject. Some — in particular Kassie — argued that it had been a mistake to ever let Braydon play the part of the star, while Braydon's mother on the other hand insisted that it was in no way her son's fault, a position made increasingly hard for her to maintain because her daughter and her recently reconciled husband took the opposing view. While she initially doted on her injured son as though he were a kind of wounded hero, the father took the more straightforward approach of saying, "Braydon, you were a dickhead," a view which, in the end, even Braydon found himself compelled to accept.

There were, of course, those — you know the sort — who blamed every other circumstance or person possible and took what was, relative to the rest of the universe, only a small occurrence as an opportunity to cast allegations against everyone with whom they had experienced any degree of animosity. They could be heard, in the post-office or in the aisles of the IGA, saying, "Are you incinerating that I..." or, "Well, who was it then who put the frogs out? You tell me that?" And those with good sense tended to give such discussions a suitably wide berth, lest they too be drawn into decades of exponentially exaggerated local grievances.

On the whole, most people agreed that the pageant had brought the town together that year more than it had ever done before, and, once the differences of opinion about Braydon's complicity had become, if not resolved, at least somewhat domesticated, his parents' reconciliation stood as a living reminder to the town of the good which the pageant had done. Yet there were still those who insisted that the father's return to town in mid-December had been the beginning of all the problems that had followed, and,

though small, they were a vocal group vocal enough that it seems worthwhile now to tell the story again from the beginning.

It is always hard to know where to begin such a story, intertwined as it is with so many generational disputes, shifting boundaries, properties changing hands, cattle grazing in the wrong paddock and general communal ambiguities blowing about in the municipal wind. Yet, since the accusation stands that it was Braydon's father's fault and that he should have left his whacko ideas in the city where he'd taken them all those years ago, it seems best to begin with the sound of his car driving down the main street, for the first time since 2008, Christmas carols blasting through the driver's window, and a general sense of no-good-likely-to-come-from-this on every street corner that he passed.

*

Though some would no doubt leave this detail out of their versions of the story, Grant did in fact tell Sue that he would be coming to town that Christmas. Braydon and Kassie both had parts in the Christmas pageant and he wanted to be there. It was all arranged quite politely, if a little awkwardly, with the kids buzzing about expectantly and nervously, in the days beforehand.

Yet for most of the town the first sign that Grant was back was the sight of his car coming down the main street.

Come, they told me, pa-rum-pa-pum-pum...sang his stereo, and everyone nearby turned and looked.

“It can't be,” said Trish.

“He's got a nerve,” said Ethel.

“Who does he think he is?” asked May.

“I know a few people who wouldn't mind putting a few dents in that car,” said Bernie.

“He still owes me a hundred bucks,” said Rob.

Grant must have known that tongues would wag, but he did not seem to mind. *A new-born king to see, pa-rum-pa-pum-pum,* his stereo continued, unabashed through the open window.

“Thinks he owns the place,” said Kev.

It wasn't exactly true. He owned half the house which he was driving to, and owned the car he was driving in, and had an equal share in the children he had come to see. That was as far as his perceptions of ownership stretched. But his window was open, which was a sure sign if ever there was one that he didn't care at all about the townspeople who cared equally little about him.

“Do you reckon Sue knows?” asked Trish.

“Probably not,” said Rob.

“Typical,” said Ethel.

“Who does he think he is?” repeated May.

Her question was so pointed that none of them felt they could respond.

Our finest gifts to bring, pa-rum-pa-pum-pum, the stereo persevered. Kev bent down to pick up a weed. The car moved out of view and they all went back inside.

In the afternoon, the town was buzzing with the news. Newcomers, which meant anyone who had moved to the town since the second world war, who knew nothing of Grant or the reasons he had left town in 2008, had to have the whole thing explained to them,

much to the delight of the Ethels and Mays of the community. The Kevs and the Bruces, meanwhile, served a clarifying role, correcting everything their wives had said and generally making the whole story more confusing than it had been at the start.

“No, you've got it wrong. He moved to Ballarat first.”

“No, it was Bendigo.”

“I heard he lived in a caravan.”

“In Warrnambool, wasn't it?”

“No, that was after he moved into that hippy commune in Benalla.”

“Benalla? I heard it was Shepparton.”

“It definitely wasn't a caravan. It was a bus.”

And so on.

The details, however, on which the community agreed were as follows:

- That Grant, husband of Sue, father of Braydon and Kassandrah, had walked out on his family one day in early 2008;
- That before leaving he had begun to go, to use the technical term, crazy, and had taken his craziness to various parts of Victoria before settling in Melbourne as a place where his craziness could pass unnoticed;
- That the children had grown up with little or no contact with him;
- That no-one had heard from him since.

That was the simplest form of the story. In more elaborate versions, Grant had started a cult; some said it was based around reading people's energy through Thai massage,

others that he predicted life events based on how people spoke while running. In other stories, Grant had had a vision of the Virgin Mary and had gone to live in the desert in obedience to her but had been stopped in Portland because his car wasn't roadworthy. One recurring theme was that Grant's mania had been of a religious kind. Most people also agreed that he was a loser.

Most, that is, except for Braydon and Kassie.

Braydon felt conflicted about his father. Over the years, he had taken something of a bullet defending a man whom the whole town hated. But his stories of his father's superpowers had done nothing to aid the cause. When he had told his friends that his dad was coming to town that Christmas, they had said, "Yeah, like he was going to come every other year," and Braydon's insistence had only made them remind him of all the things he had alleged his father could do, which had in turn made Braydon go red and hot, punch the bag rack, then run away. Having not seen his father since he was four, and insisting to this day that his father could communicate with aliens, had x-ray vision and could, when the occasion called for it, fly short distances, he wanted to finally see the man again. But he also hated him, both for leaving and for causing him so much trouble in his absence. Perhaps, he had begun to wonder, it wasn't worth defending his father's honour any more. But he didn't know what alternative that left him with.

Kassie having been only two years old when her father had left, felt less of the attachment to him that Braydon did. Nor did she share her brother's faith in their father's superpowers. She had seen Braydon break his wrist, arm and leg in the confidence that he too could fly short distances, and repeatedly saw him in the schoolyard defending the existence of those same powers in their father. It never seemed to lead anywhere good. All the same, she wanted to see her father, no idea what it would be like or where it would lead yet feeling somehow that it was something that should happen.

The day that their father was expected to visit, Kassie waited for Braydon at the usual spot in the car-park. When he didn't appear and the school was slowly emptying of

children and parents, Kassie went looking for him, finding him hiding behind the bag rack outside his classroom, arms around his knees and some distinct smudges on his face. Knowing that her brother hated anything related to tears, most of all in himself, she just said, "Let's go home," and he slowly stood up and walked with her. They didn't speak for some time, until they were only five or so minutes from home, when Kassie, unable to be quiet any more, said, "What do you think he'll be like?"

"Who?" said Braydon.

"You know who," said Kassie.

"Dunno," said Braydon.

For a moment there was silence again, then Kassie said, "He won't have super-powers."

Braydon stopped walking.

"You know it's true," said Kassie.

Braydon said nothing.

"We can still love him even if he doesn't have super-powers," she continued.

"Shut up, Kass," he said.

Kassie looked at him slowly. "You can't tell me to shut up," she said.

"Just wait," he said, voice trembling. "Wait and see. When Dad's here, he'll show you who's right."

Kassie was tired. It had been a long day and it was hot now. She left Braydon standing on the street corner and walked home by herself.

Meanwhile, the street still buzzed with news of Grant's arrival in town, and the sight of his daughter walking home drew neighbours to their curtains and, with vague excuses of pulling out weeds and getting things out of cars, some ventured out of their houses, said things like, "Afternoon, Kassie," and, "Where's your brother?" Kassie mumbled, "Afternoon," and, "Having a sook somewhere," and kept going, but behind curtains the rumours and speculation continued.

"She's got no idea."

"Yes she does. She's a chatty little thing most of the time."

"Maybe she knows."

"I reckon she knows."

"How would you feel? Meeting your dad for the first time since you were a baby?"

"He wouldn't mean anything to her."

"Yes he would. He's her dad."

"Some dad."

"Dickhead of the century."

"Watch your language. The kids might hear."

Those at their curtains or lingering in their gardens then saw Braydon walking slowly, kicking a rock around in the middle of the road. Some spoke; most said nothing. The tell-tale signs of crying on his face made them more tactful than usual, at least to his face. Behind curtains, the commentary continued.

“Poor kid.”

“No wonder he stuffs around.”

“Worships his dad.”

“Wouldn’t if he knew.”

All the while, the man of the hour sat in the living room of his old house, awkwardly drinking tea out of a cup that said, “McKenna Electrical,” and wondering where the last five years had gone.

Grant looked at the mug, then up at Sue.

“Thanks for the tea,” he said.

“No worries,” she replied.

“When do the kids get home?”

“Soon.”

“How are they going?”

“Not bad.” Then, “Braydon fights too much.”

“Does he?”

“Yep.”

“I’ll have to have a word with him then.”

"You can try."

A pause. The tea was milky. Milkier than he liked it. Sue always made it that way, he remembered. There was a chip on the other side of the cup. It was an old, old cup. He wondered how long it had been since Sue had done the books for the company. Five years, maybe.

"Where are you staying?" she asked.

"The Colonial. On High Street."

"Of course. Have you checked in yet?"

"I checked in before I got here. It looks okay. Big room."

"Good."

A fly buzzed around their heads. Someone had left the fly-wire open. Maybe the kids. Grant looked at the window for inspiration.

"Have you had rain lately?"

"A bit."

"That's good. It's been raining in Melbourne."

"It always rains in Melbourne."

"True. But it's rained a lot."

"I haven't been there for a while."

“You should.”

“Haven’t had any reason to.”

“I guess not.”

Buzz.

Then a sound at the door. Kassie.

*

The day had taken its toll on Kassie. Even before she encountered her tear-stained and sulky older brother at the bag racks, she had spent the day over-heated and frustrated a combination of teachers demanding her to know what sounds “j” made, classmates bickering and her best friend Katie telling her all about her AMAZING holiday plans. Coming home to find a man sitting in her living room who was supposedly her father was more than she could manage.

“G’day Kassie,” said the man.

She sniffed and ran off to her room.

“She’ll come around,” said Sue. “Just give her time.”

Braydon, on the other hand, needed more time than was available to him. The streets he walked along were neither long enough nor private enough for everything that was going on within him. Nor were there enough rocks for him to kick. When he arrived at his home far earlier than he had hoped or expected, he paused at the door, staring at it, almost willing it to be inaccessible to him. Then, slowly, with a mammoth exercising of

will, he opened it and looked through the door. He could just make out the edge of a man's arm from within the couch.

"Braydon?" His mother's voice.

He took a step inside.

"Your dad's here," she said. "Come and say hi."

Braydon took another step until he could see the man sitting on the couch. He was cleanly shaven and wore a checked shirt. He had glasses. Braydon had never imagined his father wearing glasses.

He paused.

"I took so much shit for you this week," said Braydon.

"Don't swear, Braydon," said his mother.

"Come here," said his father.

Slowly, Braydon approached a man who was simultaneously a stranger and altogether familiar. His eyes, without their glasses, were almost identical to his, and his mouth sat the same unsteady way on his face. He didn't exactly look like a man who could fly, but then neither did Clark Kent. There would be a time, Braydon thought, when he could demand a demonstration, but perhaps not today.

"G'day," said his father.

"Hi," said Braydon.

"Do you want a drink?"

"Sure."

"Coke?"

Braydon looked at his mother, as though for permission. Before she could respond, Kassie was in the doorway.

"Don't give him Coke," she said. "You'll regret it."

*

While Braydon and Kassie debated the merits of his drinking Coke, Braydon's teacher was in a debate of her own. The town grapevine was more efficient than any telecommunications network could manage and the news had already reached her that Braydon's father was in town. Kim was relatively new to the town. Moving to Victoria as a teenager, she had gone to high school an hour away and then, as many like her did, had moved to Melbourne for University. Her first school had been in the city but the country had drawn her back, in the form of Craig, a primary teacher who helped her find a job at his school and also helped her find friends, accommodation and, with time, an engagement ring. It was he that Kim was now debating. The topic of the debate, however, had less to do with the arrival of Braydon's father and more to do with the Christmas pageant that the two of them were organising.

In the past, the town Christmas pageant had been a humble, if somewhat awkward, affair. The school CRE teacher typically pulled out a song for the primary school to sing which had been stored somewhere in a cave where songs went to die, grabbed and salvaged barely moments before it breathed its last, only for a group of indifferent pre-teens to ensure that it well and truly died, never to be seen or heard again. This year, when she had suggested to the teachers that the children might like to sing "Christmas Is a Birthday Party", Kim, whose church upbringing had introduced her to that song in its 1980s heyday, quickly interjected, "Or perhaps we could do a *play* this year." Craig,

who promptly kicked her under the table, did not do so in time to prevent the inevitable; now he and Kim were simultaneously writing and directing the first town Christmas play, a task which had repeatedly threatened the security of the ring on Kim's finger.

The topic under discussion now was what to do with Braydon, the eager student who was equally capable of delivering brilliance or an all-in brawl, depending on how he felt on the night.

"His father's come to town," said Kim. "We can't take the part off him now."

"He'll kill us all," said Craig.

"That's an exaggeration."

"Only slightly. You saw what happened last week. Are you seriously saying there won't be any problems on the night?"

It was true. Joseph's black eye was taking longer than expected to go down after the First Shepherd had punched him, and Mary was still too scared to appear on the stage without holding her mother's hand.

"We could always find a part for Tayla's mother to play," she suggested. "Then she could go on the stage with her."

Craig looked at her. "We're not writing another part just for Tayla's mother."

Kim paused. He had a point. The script had already taken long enough to write alongside reports and emails to parents. But there had to be another option.

"He needs to be on stage," she persisted. "His father's here. He has to have a part to play."

Then a picture came into Craig's mind. There was the tree. It was at the centre of the stage, just as it would have been of course in the original manger. Everyone gathered around it. No-one could miss it. And, if harnessed to the top of the tree and smothered in a sufficiently constricting costume which prevented him from speaking or moving perhaps, just perhaps, Braydon could be contained.

"Honey," said Craig, "have you thought of making him the star?"

Kim stared at him. "I don't get you," she said. "First you tell me to take him out of the play altogether, now you're saying to make him…what…Jesus?"

"No," said Craig. "Not the star of the show. I mean on the tree. *The star on the Christmas tree*."

Kim stopped. That certainly was an idea.

*

"He has Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder," Kassie recited. "Sugar's bad for him."

"It's a special occasion, Kass," said Sue, before the debate could continue. "Just one," she added to Braydon.

Grant returned from the kitchen with two cans. "Want one, Kass?" he asked. Kassie reached out and took the can without saying anything, glaring at Braydon as she did so.

"They've got practice tonight for the pageant," said Sue. "Want to take them?"

"I'm the angel," said Kassie.

"Which one?" asked Grant.

“Gabriel.”

“I thought Gabriel was a boy angel.”

“That’s what I said,” Braydon shouted. “But Miss Swan said that angels are…andro….andro…something.”

“Androgynous?” suggested Grant.

“That’s it.”

“I don’t know what that means,” said Kassie.

“It means you could be a boy or a girl.”

Kassie frowned. “But I *am* a girl.”

“You’re a sook,” said Braydon.

“Well I’m not the one that was crying before.”

A pillow flew at Kassie’s head.

It was some minutes before the fight was more or less settled, Kassie in her room crying into the pillow that Braydon had thrown but no longer screaming, and Braydon out in the back garden kicking rocks against the fence.

“Well handled,” said Sue.

“What?” said Grant. “That was hardly my fault.”

“You had to go and explain androgynous to them.”

"Well, it was the teacher's fault for telling them the word then not explaining it."

"Of course. Blame the teacher. Just like you did all through school."

Grant stood up.

"I can't do this, Sue," he said. "Not after I've just been here five minutes."

Sue was moments from saying, *Then leave. You've done it before*. Only the look on Grant's face told her not to. His eyes were glistening. They never used to glisten like that.

"I'm sorry," she said.

His lips frowned. "No," he said. "I'm sorry. I just…you need to know that I'll stuff it up sometimes."

Sue said nothing. Her eyes were on him.

"Give me some space to stuff it up."

"Okay," she said.

He grabbed her hand briefly. "I'll go get Braydon."

"Okay," she repeated.

Grant opened the sliding door and walked outside. In a moment Sue looked over and saw him kicking rocks beside their son.

*

Perhaps a word needs to be said here to clarify the past. Difficult though it always is to untangle the truth from everything that everyone else has said, it needs to be recorded that, though Grant had seemed to all intents and purposes to become what is commonly called a nut, he and Sue had never divorced. This may seem strange, given their five-year separation, but that is how it stood. Is it enough simply to say that they were Catholic at least, Sue was and that divorce never crossed either of their minds? Perhaps. Or perhaps there are deeper reasons which we cannot see or understand. Perhaps Sue simply never knew what his address was and so could never send divorce papers to him. Perhaps she did not want to disrupt the children more than the separation had already done. Perhaps she believed that one day he might become "normal" again. As always, it is difficult to say. The town had a variety of explanations, ranging from Sue being in denial to her having secretly pursued Grant into the desert and murdered him. Most, however, simply did not know, and the absence of knowledge drove them mad.

What, however, had happened to Grant? The town insisted he had become a religious nut, but many of them said that of the local priest or of anyone whose religious beliefs extended beyond Christmas and Easter. Grant's religious convictions, moreover, were more fringe than the term "religious nut" might suggest. If he communicated with deities, they were usually ones with unpronounceable names that rhymed with Chakra. Most of his beliefs could be summarised by collating all the works in the "New Age" section of a bookstore and then throwing them into a blender and seeing what came out the other side.

All this, however, made little sense when set against the man who now kicked rocks out the back with his son and listened to Christmas carols in his car. The townspeople saw the difference through their curtains and it annoyed them. Sue saw the difference through the back window and it made her wonder.

*

The decision to make Braydon the star on the Christmas tree was met with approval by everyone except for Kassie who quietly insisted that, even when bound up in a costume

that was as close to a straightjacket as could be legally placed upon a student, her brother could still cause trouble. But Braydon was happy enough with the decision, couched as it was by Craig in such flattering language that even he believed it was an honour rather than a punishment. And so it was agreed that Patrick, who had previously been playing the somewhat redundant part of an angel sitting on a haystack, would take the place of the First Shepherd and Braydon would become the star on the tree. Everyone was happy except Kassie.

"He'll be stupid on the night," she forewarned. "Just wait."

History, of course, would prove Kassie right, but in the meantime expediency made everyone else deaf to her warnings. As far as Kim and Craig were concerned, Braydon had been contained. His role would have sufficient attention drawn to it for the father's visit to be justified, but the scope for trouble seemed to them to be dramatically reduced.

An unexpected problem, however, came when parents arrived to pick up their children at the end of the night. When Grant had dropped off Kassie and Braydon at the start of the night, he had been early and no other parents were around. At the end of the night it was different.

At first, most parents simply nodded at him or said, "Grant. Haven't seen you in a while." Some were vaguely polite. But when Tayla's mother, who had been holding her daughter's hand through the rehearsal, came out of the hall toilets to see Grant leaving the hall with his children, she called out to him, "I hope you can control your son better now."

Grant turned around. "I'm sorry?" he said.

"You know he punched Jordan?" She indicated Joseph, whose black eye was still slightly visible beneath the red-and-white-checked tea-towel.

Grant looked at Braydon. "Is that true?"

Braydon stared at the ground. “Only because he was wanker.”

“Braydon,” said Grant. “Don’t swear. It’s not necessary.”

“Well, it wasn’t necessary for him to call you a useless shithead.”

Joseph shuffled his feet.

“Come on, Jordan,” said his mother. “I think it’s time to go.”

Tayla’s mother didn’t move.

“He just said what everyone else was thinking,” she said.

Grant paused, then said, “I see.”

“Come on, Jordan,” said his mother.

Jordan seemed stuck to the floor.

“We’ve sorted out what happened, Mr McKenna,” said Kim, hurriedly. “Your…Braydon’s mother has…already been spoken to. And Braydon understands what he did wrong, don’t you, Braydon?”

Braydon was also stuck to the floor.

“Braydon?” said Grant.

“Yep,” said Braydon.

A pause.

"Well," said Tayla's mother. "I bloody hope so."

She took Tayla's hand. Tayla looked tentatively for Kassie who, at least before tonight, had been her best friend. But Kassie had run to hide behind the stage.

*

"They drive me up the wall," said Kim, when they were back at her house.

"Tell me about it," said Craig. "They're worse than the kids."

This was not the first time that town friction had almost ruined something Kim had tried to do. The Book Week parade earlier in the year had very nearly turned into a civil war when two girls turned up to school dressed as Katniss Everdeen and their mothers had instantly remembered the exact same thing happening when they themselves had both come dressed as Princess Jasmine. Mother #1, convinced that Mother #2 had stolen the costume idea just as she had done twenty years earlier, had felt no compunction about proclaiming this accusation to much of the school community, only to have Girl #2's teacher say diplomatically (if a little untruthfully) that *she* had given Girl #2 the idea of coming as Katniss. It had been a near miss, and Kim would be forever grateful to her colleague for stepping in at that key moment.

But the fractured dynamics of the town had worn Kim down progressively. Each time she attempted to do something to shake up the town in a positive way it fought back, as though determined to remain set in its grumpy and bickering ways.

Craig, too, had very nearly had enough. Having grown up with it, he was more immune to it than Kim. But even he had his limits. Most of the fights he dealt with the schoolyard these days had more to do with the kids' parents than the kids themselves.

It was Kim's idea to rewrite the script that night. At first Craig complained that he was tired and just wanted to go home. He also reminded Kim that she was the one who only earlier that night had wanted to do anything to avoid having to rework the script. Kim, however, reminded him that they still hadn't set a date for the wedding and that he shouldn't be so sure it would happen at all, and thus managed in the end to get the two of them sitting at the dining table, computer in front of them, and with a new script rapidly emerging.

It all began with a crowd bickering. The crowd could be easily cast. They had already done away with one angel sitting on a haystack. They could probably do away with them all and reinstate all fired haystack angels as bickering crowd members.

"There goes Mary," said Villager #1, as Kim typed his words. "Looks like she's going to pop any day now."

"Who does she think she's kidding?" said Villager #2. "Virgin birth? You've got to be joking."

*

Many in the town did not sleep well that night.

Jordan slept badly for fear that the full extent of his words to First Shepherd might come to light.

Tayla slept badly for fear that she would lose her best friend.

Sue slept badly, her mind playing over conversations with Grant both five years ago and that day, with fears of the past resurfacing and with uncertainty over just how much had changed.

Kassie slept badly over fear of what Braydon might do. Braydon seldom slept anyway, so that night was no different to usual.

It was Grant, however, who slept the least. He spent most of the night on his knees.

*

There were two more rehearsals before the day of the pageant. The children whose parts had been changed and who had new lines to learn were willing to go along with the secrecy demanded of them by Kim because they felt sufficiently special now that they had been promoted from entirely superfluous extras to speaking roles. Few of the children knew the full impact of the lines they were learning and few, therefore, felt any need to tell their parents. Kim and Craig's plan to challenge town gossip one final time was allowed to flourish unnoticed.

Braydon, on the other hand, was slowly tiring of his part as the star. Central though it was to the set, and much though the audience's eyes would be drawn to him, there was little to maintain their interest or his once the initial novelty had worn off. At first the sensation of being elevated by the improvised harness gave him the feeling that he imagined his father must feel on the occasions that he flew. Yet the sensation soon left him as, dangling static above the tree, he found that he could do very little apart from simply stay there.

Slowly, however, he began to experiment with the potential of his position. If, he reasoned, he actually *could* fly, then he could simultaneously make his father proud of him and prove to all and sundry that not only his father but in fact all the men in the family were capable of flight. Granted, his previous attempts at flight had been unsuccessful, but surely that was because his father had not been there to give him the courage or inspiration he needed. Now, finding himself able to swing a little within his position above the tree, he slowly and surreptitiously tried to stretch further. If he could find something, for instance, against which to push his feet, which, although positioned awkwardly behind him, were still free, then perhaps he could give himself a good "run-

up" for taking flight. And so, while everyone else slowly rehearsed their lines ("Virgin birth? So typical of that family. Always making excuses…"), Braydon experimented with ways of swinging slowly backwards, stretching out his feet, finding just how far they could go without drawing attention to himself.

You see, the star costume worked like this. The harness went around Braydon's chest. It held him up while his arms were stretched out in the upper points of the star. He hovered above the tree, held up by the harness, but his knees were also positioned on a platform behind the tree. His feet were resting behind him. The wall was a little less than a metre behind. It was possible, courtesy of the harness, for Braydon to remain positioned above the tree while moving his feet slightly. His legs, however, were not long. The men of the family were only medium in height, and Braydon was a late bloomer. Free though his legs were, it was a difficult process to move them backwards while keeping the star — a kind of awkwardly constricting shield — remaining above the tree.

Braydon, however, did not tend to take these kinds of factors too much to heart. He rarely thought of most factors beyond the most immediately apparent. Besides, he only needed to stay in place above the tree while he figured out how to swing. Then, once the dimensions of the space around him had been mentally calculated, it would be the perfect opportunity to fly. Anyway, the harness would keep him safe. Relative to other choices Braydon had made in his short life thus far, this was one of the more carefully managed and safe. What risk assessment Braydon conducted, limited though it was, far exceeded any he had ever done before this moment.

And, by the night of the performance, he was fairly sure he had it all figured out.

Excited though everyone was about the pageant — the first that would *not* consist of a mawkishly sentimental song which they would all have to pretend to enjoy — the real feature on which everyone's anticipation was focused was the fact that Grant and Sue would be there together.

“I bet she thinks he’s changed.”

“Not likely.”

“She’s dreaming.”

“A leopard doesn’t change its stripes.”

“Spots.”

“What?”

“It doesn’t change its spots. Zebras have stripes.”

“Don’t bloody tell me about zebras. What have they got to do with it?”

And on it went, as cars drove to the hall and children on back-seats flinched and squirmed in their awkward and overheated costumes. And on it went, in muffled whispers and behind darting eyes, as families stepped from their cars and walked into the hall. And it carried on as they took children back-stage, and on into the stalls and into the rows of seats, punctuated by, “Excuse me,” and, “Which number are you?” and, “That’s my seat. Get out.”

It only stopped when the curtain stirred and on the stage stood a boy with a white robe and rat-tail whose parents had, until this moment, been convinced was playing an angel not a…what was he?

“Good evening, ladies, gentlemen, boys and girls.”

A pause. Had he forgotten his lines? His little sister squirmed empathetically. His dad turned to his mother and said, “I didn’t know he had lines.”

“Good evening, ladies, gentlemen, boys and girls,” he repeated. “Welcome to the Christmas play. The title of tonight’s play is, ‘A Scandalous Baby’.”

His mother applauded. His sister turned to the mother and said, “What’s scandalous?” Her father said, “Shut up and listen.”

“Our story starts in…”

A whisper from backstage. “Bethlehem.”

Another pause.

Another whisper: “Bethlehem.”

Then a nod of recognition.

“Our story stars in Bethlehem…where…an unexpectedly virgin is giving a baby…”

Another whisper: “Where a virgin is unexpectedly giving birth…”

A nod. “Yep. That.” Another pause.

“Come with us…”

Another nod. “Come with us to…a stable where a baby is being born.”

The curtain rose. Behind the curtain was a scene familiar to everyone who had ever been to a Christmas pageant before: a mock-agricultural setting more reminiscent of the Manchester section of a department store than the Middle East in the first century, with boys and girls in tea-towels, sheets and bathrobes, and an appropriate number dressed in cotton-wool and brown blankets with face paint suggesting the animals they were

representing. In the middle of the stage, gloriously tall, was a tree, with a star on top, moving suspiciously like there was a boy behind it.

"Braydon," whispered Grant.

Some of the boys and girls on the stage started whispering. They hesitated at times, as though their lines had only recently been learnt, but there was something unmistakeable about those lines, a quality seen all too often behind curtains, on lawns and in supermarket aisles. To Grant and Sue, the room stank of town gossip.

"I'm sorry," said a boy, dressed slightly differently to the others, with a large, messily-written name-tag that seemed to say, "Inn-kePPer". "We don't have room here for your sort," he added, disdainfully.

And so a boy and girl carrying a baby doll and with two children dressed as a donkey beside them moved clumsily around the stage, the donkey trying to avoid bumping into actors and props on the way, with little space available to differentiate between unwelcoming inn and the stable in which they finally settled.

Meanwhile, Braydon was beginning to feel quietly triumphant. He had worked out that there was a way that he could move his right leg out first, leaving his left leg securely on the platform for stability. Then, once his right leg was carefully placed against the wall, he could use that and the harness to hold himself in place while he lifted his left leg. He had already done it once without anyone noticing. Was now the time to fly? It was difficult to tell, paying as he was no attention whatsoever to the rest of the action. He replaced his knees on the platform. They were becoming a little sore.

On the stage, Joseph and Mary had successfully found a manger in which to give birth (Mary also having mustered up the courage to no longer need her mother with her), and so it was time for the shepherds to emerge. Patrick, previously First Haystack Angel, emerged as First Shepherd, with Ben and Lachlan in tow as his sheep, to the joyful applause of family.

“Go Patty!” called out his father.

The First Shepherd squinted in the direction of his father. It was difficult to see if he was happy or angry. He momentarily forgot to walk forward. Second and Third Shepherd stalled for that moment behind him. Their sheep bumped into one another.

Hearing the action pause beneath him, Braydon wondered if now was the time to fly, while on the left-hand side of the stage Kassie too was preparing for her moment. Kassie, unlike Braydon, being a little unwilling to fly, though her part seemed to call for it, Kim and Craig had had to settle for an arrangement of clouds which would appear at Stage Left and above which Kassie would slowly rise from a seated position to say Gabriel’s lines. What with the delay, however, with the sheep, the stage-hand who was supposed to help Kassie get set up behind the cloud hovered to the side, unaware that his assistance was needed. Kassie paused. Should she come out anyway, cloud or no cloud? What would happen if Gabriel *didn’t* herald the arrival of Jesus? What if her father never saw her say her lines?

“Jack,” whispered Craig.

Jack the stage-hand looked over at his teacher.

“Kassie’s cloud,” said Craig.

“Oh,” said Jack, running over to collect it.

The silence on stage continued. Braydon fancied it invited him to fly.

“You ready, Kassie?” said Craig.

Kassie nodded.

Braydon shifted.

Jack carried the cloud over to Kassie. Kassie hid behind it. Slowly the cloud moved forward and Kassie with it. Braydon stretched out his right leg.

The First Shepherd moved towards the cloud.

The Second and Third Shepherds began to move, but the sheep were tangled up in the tree. The tree shook.

Braydon positioned his right leg on the tree.

"Okay, Kass," said Craig.

Kassie breathed. What was her line again?

Held in place by his right leg, Braydon began to lift his other leg towards the wall.

Second Shepherd tugged at his sheep. The base of the tree rotated a little to the right.

"Do not be afraid," said Kassie.

Sue's heart stirred.

The top of the tree stirred.

"I bring tidings of great joy."

That's my girl, thought Grant.

It's time, thought Braydon.

He stretched out his left leg.

Third Shepherd pulled at his sheep. The sheep would not move. The manger shook slightly. Tayla, holding onto the manger, moved slightly with it.

"Today in the town of…David…a saviour…"

Go, thought Braydon.

"Come on," muttered Third Shepherd to his sheep. "What are you doing, Danny?"

"…has been born to you. He is Christ the Lord."

What a lot of lines Kassie had to learn, thought Sue. Braydon at least was behaving himself.

Then Tayla screamed.

*

The best that Kim and Craig could work out was that Braydon had somehow come detached from the tree, which had fallen on top of Second and Third Sheep, which in turn had fallen onto Tayla. Kassie, unharmed physically but having experienced too many traumas with her brother that week, vindicated in her warnings yet feeling no victory, had retreated into the corner in tears, her angelic prophecy left hanging, much like Braydon, who was swinging wildly from the harness, his right arm the worse for wear.

When he finally became coherent at the hospital, Braydon mentioned that, as he had fallen from the tree, his right arm, positioned as it was in the star shield, had bent awkwardly in response to the fall, and that he had heard something like a snap, having around that moment then lost consciousness.

“It wasn’t your fault,” said Sue.

“Yes it was,” said Grant. “You were a dickhead.”

Braydon mumbled, “I thought you told me not to swear.”

“It was necessary,” said Grant.

He held Braydon’s left hand while the doctor prepared the cast.

Much of the town was still gathered at the hall as Sue, Grant, Braydon and a slightly less teary Kassie drove back from the hospital. Parking at the hall, Grant stepped outside for a moment to say, “It’s okay. He’s broken his arm, but he’s okay.” Most just stared awkwardly at Grant, but he looked unabashed back at them. “Is something wrong?” he added. “Is my second head showing?” No-one said anything, and Grant returned to the car and drove home. He slept that night at his old house, in his old bed.

In the morning, tongues temporarily paralysed by Grant’s unexpected confidence were wagging once more. Some said the usual things:

“Can you believe his nerve?”

“Who did he think he was, talking to us like that?”

“Thinks *he’s* the normal one, does he?”

But others were rehearsing new lines.

“Maybe,” said Ethel, “the play was telling us something.”

“What?” asked May.

“I’m not sure,” said Ethel. “But I felt like it was…speaking to us.”

May said nothing, but felt somehow that Ethel was right.

Kev too felt different, and, when Rob started on his usual tirade against Grant, said, “Maybe we need to give him a chance.”

Rob, however, thought nothing of the sort, and was in the middle of covering all the reasons, from the cult in Warrnambool to the unroadworthy incident on the road to Mt Gambier when Grant himself walked into the store to buy milk.

“My ears are burning,” he said.

“Oh,” said Rob.

“Keep going,” he said. “I’m enjoying the story.”

“Nah,” said Rob. “It’s okay.”

“It’s a bit boring, though,” said Grant. “I mean, the truth was way more interesting. The bit about the Virgin Mary was way off. It was a vision of a Native American deity. I was high at the time.”

Someone shuffled their feet. Another said, “Hmph.”

“But the truth’s always weirder than the fiction. That’s what I learnt.”

The cash register stopped.

“I mean, can you imagine what I found?”

No-one imagined. No-one said anything.

“There was actually a group of people who thought something way stranger than anything I’d heard before.”

A child dropped an apple. Their mother picked the apple up and told them to shush.

“They believed that God came to earth and walked around as a human, then died, then rose again.”

The child crunched on the apple. The mother said, “Shush,” again.

“Can you believe that? It puts our town gossip to shame. I had to get in on that one.”

No-one could believe it. No-one replied.

“Got no response?” said Grant.

Nope. No response handy.

“I might just get some milk,” said Grant. Everyone stayed still. “Excuse me, Rob,” said Grant.

“Hmm?”

“The milk’s behind you, mate.”

“Oh,” said Rob.

Grant took the milk, paid and left. For a moment, the silence in the store looked set to last longer than any the town had heard before. It was broken only by Braydon appearing in the doorway, arm in a sling, calling out, “He can fly, you know.”

*

You'll still hear differing accounts, of course. Those who still have it in for Grant will tell the story in such a way that he is entirely to blame. Those who hate Tayla's mother there's a few of them will suggest it was Tayla's fault all along. Jordan still looks sheepish about it all, as does Third Sheep. But this conclusion, when all's said, is the closest the town has come to unanimity about the events: that Braydon thought he could fly, that the sheep got stuck, and that Tayla, annoying though her mother is, was not really to blame for any of it.

And the sight of Grant driving around town, once again in his McKenna Electrical van, causes less stir than it did once. Most people let him into their homes to do work for them, and the word is that Sue is once again doing the books for the company. He has fewer visions of supernatural deities preventing him from concluding jobs. In fact, he has none. But he has one strange idiosyncrasy, which is that, out of respect for his son, he never helps install Christmas lights. His son, it seems, has an incurable fear of Christmas trees, at least of anything balancing on top of them, and Grant says he doesn't want to upset his son more than he has done already.

Though relatively pleased with the success of their first experiment with theatre, Kim and Craig say that they are happy not to do a Christmas play again next year. They have another event to organise, and have heard that there is a wonderful song that the children can sing together, called "Christmas is a Birthday Party". Kim hopes that, as with all songs that the primary school kids have sung in the past, it will die quietly after they sing it and never be heard again.

No Ghosts This Year

When holidays came, it would be okay. But for now Philip just had the long waiting days. The sun deceives us, he thought, into believing it's holidays before it is. Last weekend he had made the mistake of sitting out on the verandah with his book, like he used to do with his sister in that first glorious week of holidays at home, and nice as it had been for those hours of warmth loosening his tautened face, once over it only made more agonising that gap between now and the time when holidays properly began. Now he was stuck in that odd limbo period in which teachers pretended that the work they were doing now still mattered but when things like reports and awards had not yet arrived to make the year's struggle seem somehow worthwhile. They were too old for colouring-in (and he probably would have found it babyish to do now, though he remembered with a certain fondness the focus that shading carefully within the lines had brought him), yet they were too young for work experience or introductions to VCE, too young for anything that was truly important.

What was this now? An odd form of torture designed to keep parents from having to pay for extra childcare before Christmas? The days were flusteringly hot and the rooms not air-conditioned. Today he had come in from lunchtime sweaty and irritable. His hair, he knew for a fact, was sticking up all over the place because of the ridiculous hats they had to wear in the summer months. And now he was seated at a large square of tables at the centre of the music room where everyone could see everyone else and there was no hiding while he tried to flatten his hair with his hand so he didn't look like some strange antennaed alien while they did their listening journal for the afternoon this one a recording of a highly inappropriate carol, "In the Bleak Midwinter". If only it was the bleak widwinter, he thought. My hair wouldn't stick up like this in winter.

Wha-at can I bri-ing him, poor as I aaaam?

"The singer," he wrote, "sounds like a strangled cat, and the words are about as appropriate for Australia as the American national anthem."

He was quite proud of that. He hoped his teacher would find it funny.

Across the table, Laura was looking over at him. He smiled at her, and pressed his hair down in case it was standing up again. Laura seemed to be laughing. Perhaps she found the song funny too. He could share with her what he'd written after class. It might make her laugh more. But Laura wasn't looking at him now. She was writing in her listening diary.

I-if I were a she-epherd, I would bring a laaamb...

His feet felt fidgety and his pants were sweaty. The room stank a bit, and he was starting to have that feeling he sometimes did, that dislocated feeling, like he was watching himself, not participating in his own body. He had asked his dad once if he had ever felt like he didn't really exist. Dad had said, "Yes," and he'd felt that instant rush of relief that comes from being understood, only then Dad had continued by saying, "That was how we used to talk in the 70s," and Philip had suddenly fallen from a state of being known to one of total disconnection. His father's words had fallen flat on him. Was he talking about nothing more than what was trendy back when everyone was on LSD? He'd read about those days in a book once. He was fairly sure his dad had never taken LSD but the words had no other meaning to him than that. No, there was no understanding after all.

I-if I were a wi-ise ma-an, I would do my paaart...

He held his hair down some more. Laura looked at him again and smiled.

Inspired by the smile, he wrote, "The writer has no idea how to rhyme. He's obviously only just learnt how to write poetry in primary school. My little brother could write better poetry than that."

Why had he written that? He didn't have a little brother. Still, it was effective writing. He kept it in.

But what I ca-an I gi-ive hi-im...

Behind him some boys were laughing. Mark's voice he recognised, Mark who had taken a specky on his back at the gym last week and feigned repentance and concern for him while the teachers were around only to mock him for his distress when the boys were alone in the change rooms at lunch.

"That's gay," someone said probably Mark. It was the kind of thing he said.

"It's talking about Jesus," Laura called back.

Miss Brown said sshh and the lesson regained some barely-maintained control. Philip didn't write anything more about the song. He didn't want to sound like Mark. He gave the song three stars, closed his exercise book, and rested his head on his hand to press down his hair more. He hoped no-one could see.

As class finished and they left the room, he slowed down so that he walked through the door at the same time as Laura.

"Did you have fun playing with your hair?" she asked.

He said nothing. His hands felt clammy.

"Good song, hey, Savage?" said Mark behind him. "You loved it, didn't you?"

Philip slowed and slowed until he sank into the exiting mass coming through the door. The holidays could not come a moment too soon. More and more outside of himself, he watched as a small and insignificant child hid inside a mind that no-one could penetrate if they tried. The day, at least, was over.

*

The walk home was generally a relief. Mark caught the bus home, so he wasn't around to be a nuisance. And mostly Philip had the time to himself, to think and daydream. Sometimes he would take a book with him and try to read as he walked, but that was a hard thing to do. He knew the walk well and hardly needed to look where he was going to take the correct left and right turns, but he hated having to interrupt his book every time there was a red traffic light ("You would have been happier in this town when there were no traffic lights," his grandfather had once said to him, "then you could read without stopping"), and once in a while there was a dog that had left a little treat for him on the ground, waiting for careless feet to tread in. No, it was generally best to look where he was going. It was difficult to do that and read at the same time.

You could get quite far in a daydream, of course, even if you couldn't read: far away from Mark, and far away from PE and Maths homework. You could get to a place where it didn't matter so much if your hair was messy or you stank, where no-one was likely to take a specky on your back. Only, there were obstacles still to daydreams: the realities of classmates that saw you while you were walking, for instance. Where they were likely just to ignore you at lunchtime, you seemed to become much more interesting when they saw you outside of school. If they saw you while they were standing by the milk-bar, they might call out, "Hey Savage!" as though that were a particularly original (and biting) thing to say. If they were doing something forbidden for kids to do in school uniform smoking, for instance they might append an offer to the "Hey Savage", like, "Wanna smoke?", knowing, of course, that the answer would be no. That was the point of it: to provoke him into saying no. Had he ever said, "Sure!" and gone over to smoke with them, the appeal might have worn off quickly. Or he might have opened up something altogether new in his relationships with his peers, an entirely unknown and dangerous dimension: unknown and dangerous to all involved.

He preferred the unknown dimensions of his daydreams. At least then he had some control over what happened within each dimension. Recently, for instance, he had discovered that, in his mind, he had mastered the power of time travel, and found that it was remarkably similar to an H.G. Wells book, just without the bad special effects and

furry monsters of the old film version your father showed you. In that world he could smoke without getting lung cancer or being grounded, because that was what happened in H.G. Wells books. Indeed, you could do basically everything that would be misinterpreted or misconstrued in a world that simply did not understand imagination or the desire to be somewhere or someone else. So long as he could be in his imagination without anyone seeing that he was "playing imaginary games" (something that, he had learnt a few months ago, he and his peers were all now too old to do), he was fine; he could do whatever had struck him as interesting or worth doing, without fear of it being twisted against him. Hadn't it been Mark who, back in Grade Three, had seen him and his friend Tim, no longer at the school, playing a game themed around the French aristocracy being guillotined, and had said by way of explaining away their game, "They're homosexual"? Now it struck him that this had only revealed a lack of imagination or historical knowledge on Mark's part, not anything negative about himself or Tim, but he could hardly have said that at the time — or even now, for that matter. People like Mark didn't care about being unimaginative or historically ignorant. It was almost a badge of pride. No, it was best to keep his many worlds inside his head. That was best for everyone.

He was all set to explore one of these worlds on his five minute walk home (ample time for a time traveller to use gainfully) when from behind him came a voice that he didn't recognise. It wasn't Mark — that much was impossible, since he would be on his way home on the bus by now. But neither was it anyone from his year level. It was an adult's voice. He paused, unwilling to look behind him, the stranger-danger talk firmly in his mind.

"Sorry to bother you, mate," said the man. "I just need some directions."

Philip remained where he was but tilted his head a little towards the man. He didn't recognise him, but something about the man made him seem harmless enough. He looked like someone his parents would invite over for dinner — though that was hardly a guarantee of safety. "Even if someone you know well makes you uncomfortable…" his teachers had said — at which Mark had called out, "Ben makes me uncomfortable!" and

the lesson had changed from being about stranger-danger to Mark's stupidity. Not unusual, he reflected. Though it had made the moral of the lesson a little hard to recall at this moment.

"Can you tell me where Burden Street is?" the man continued. "I…" A pause. "I got the train here and thought I could walk there from the station. But I'm lost."

Philip lifted his arm to point in the direction of Burden Street, before realising that this meant the man was going in the same direction as he was, a thought that made his head spin a little. This could be difficult, if they found themselves walking close to each other. How was he to avoid stranger danger in that case? Perhaps he should just tell the stranger which way to go and then wait until he was gone before walking further himself.

"It's up that way," he said, still pointing. "Turn right, then left, then right again."

He'd given the directions without really thinking about them. But were they correct, he wondered? Suddenly he doubted himself, but didn't want the conversation to go on any longer. It made little difference if he sent the man off the wrong way. He'd never see him again. So he said nothing more.

"Right, left, right," repeated the man, still from behind.

"Yes," said Philip, looking straight ahead once more.

The man smiled as he walked past Philip to go up the hill. "Thanks, mate," he said, and kept walking. He didn't look back. Philip stood still and watched him go up the hill. He'd wait until the man was out of sight before continuing on his own way home.

*

There wasn't much time for Philip to regain focus on his time travelling. At first, he found himself altogether unable to return to the adventure on which he had been

embarking only a minute ago; somehow, his brush with possible, real-world danger had taken his focus off time travelling and smoking without health risks to wondering if he would ever see that man again and if, indeed, seeing him again would be a safe or perilous thing. Yet there was no time even for reflecting on that, because he was startled again by the sound of a car horn behind him. Looking back with a jolt (and no small fear that his decision to give directions might already be having treacherous repercussions) he saw his sister, who was surprising him not only by honking her horn but also by being alone behind the wheel of a car.

"Get in!" she called, pulling up beside him and leaning over towards the passenger window.

"What are you doing here?" he called back, too surprised for that moment to have the presence of mind to get in.

"Driving!" she called back, an answer that was, for that moment, sufficient reason for him to get in beside her.

They were halfway up the hill that the stranger had only just surmounted when Sarah said, by way of explanation, "I got my license!"

"But why aren't you in Melbourne?" asked Philip, still confused and reluctant to accept the facts set out before him.

"I came for my license test," she said. "Surprise." Then a pause. "Aren't you going to say, 'Congratulations', or something normal like that?"

"Oh, yeah," said Philip. "Congratulations."

They sat quietly for a moment, Sarah too focused on changing gears at the top of the hill, Philip too thrown by all these unexpected encounters to know what to say. Then he

remembered the question that had most been on his mind since getting in the car, and asked, “Were you driving to get me?”

Sarah laughed. “Nah, I just wanted to go for a drive. I only finished my test an hour ago. But I saw you there and you looked so forlorn. I thought I’d give you a lift.”

“Thanks,” said Philip, not liking the description *forlorn*, but, in truth, too forlorn to think too much about it.

After a moment, Sarah said, “Were you talking to that guy before?”

Philip sat up. “Which guy?”

Sarah pointed ahead of them. They had caught up with the stranger, who had taken the first right and was heading towards the next turn.

Philip swallowed and, for some reason, said, “No.”

Sarah paused, and said, “It looked like you were.”

“No,” said Philip. “I wasn’t.”

And that was that: a pointless lie, a conversation that went nowhere. They turned the corner and Philip avoided the man seeing him as they drove past. That, as far as Philip was concerned, was that. Yet his heart pounded particularly hard as he entered the house when they arrived home.

*

Dinner had passed with congratulations all round for his sister’s success at her license test and corrections from his grandfather over his reports of the ridiculous song that had been inflicted on Philip in music class that afternoon.

"That was 'In the Bleak Midwinter'!" Pa had said. "Christina Rossetti and Gustav Holst. The greatest English poet of her century, and one of the greatest English composers too. Strangled cat indeed. Ppphhhh!"

He never quite knew how Pa managed to make that sound, really just a blowing of air through pursed lips, into something so affectionate and admonitory at the same time, but it had had its desired effect. Philip already contemplated changing his listening diary in the morning to reflect a growing understanding of the song's value. But then dinner had ended, he had been asked if he had any homework, to which he had replied in the negative, and the conclusion had been that he was therefore in the perfect position to do the washing up. Unable to suddenly acquire homework without raising suspicions, Philip had slunk off to the kitchen in reluctant obedience and had begun the laborious task, finding as he got underway that the act of splashing dish suds around in the sink was quite restful and restorative. Only, when he had finished and his shirt was covered in water, Sarah said, "Did you wet yourself, Phil?" and his dad found several plates that still had food-scraps left on them, and the job, when he returned to complete it, seemed much less pleasurable the second time around.

So, when Philip was finally released from the responsibility, he retreated quickly to his room, where the book he had borrowed that morning from the library was waiting for him. It was entitled *Tales of Mystery and Imagination* and had a particularly gruesome picture of a man skulking around a four-poster bed with a bloodied heart in his hands. He felt fairly sure that his parents wouldn't want him reading it, which was why he had placed the book under his pillow as soon as he'd come home, and why he decided to read it now with the added precaution of hiding under the covers. The caption on the back cover told him that the cover painting was called "The Tell-Tale Heart", and, finding a story in the book by that name and finding that it was relatively short he started the book there.

True! – nervous – very, very dreadfully nervous I had been and am; but why will you say that I am mad? The disease had sharpened my senses – not destroyed – not dulled them.

He was compelled from the start. The phrases — short, sharp, almost staccato — and the odd, frantic punctuation arrested him somehow, as though he himself were in the mind of the narrator. He had no idea what he was reading, yet he had to continue.

Above all was the sense of hearing acute. I heard all things in the heaven and in the earth…

A knock on the door. The door began to open. He hurriedly poked his head out from under the covers. It was Sarah.

"What are you doing?" she asked, looking a little oddly at him.

"Nothing," he mumbled. "Just reading."

"Under the covers?"

"Yeah, why not?"

"No reason."

A pause. He slipped the book under his pillow, hoping Sarah didn't see the action, then slid the covers off and stood up, with a face that said, *Nothing to see here.*

"Do you want me to pick you up from school tomorrow?"

"Sure," he said. It felt strangely grown-up having your sister pick you up from school. He wondered if Mark's sister could drive. He didn't know if Mark had a sister.

"Okay," said Sarah. She stood in the doorway for a moment. "Are you alright?"

And, though he felt quite sure that he was, for some reason his voice squeaked a little when he said, "Yeah." Was his voice breaking? He was a bit young for that, wasn't he?

"You sure?" Sarah insisted.

"Yes, I am sure," he said, thinking that a more formal reply might be more convincing. And Sarah, recognising at least that no other answer would be forthcoming, gave him a peck on the cheek and went out, closing the door behind her.

He paused before picking up the book again, but soon he was so immersed in that strange, staccato world that he forgot the conversation. So immersed in the odd and frantic world of the character's brain – a brain that feared an eye, and the pounding of a dead man's heart. Immersed, he must admit, in a mind that had resorted to murder. Nothing else could enter his brain until he reached the final words – *Tear up the planks! here, here! – It is the beating of his hideous heart!* – and had found in that phrase something that grabbed him and clung to him like an oddly caustic limpet.

He had carried it with him, wordlessly, as he said good night to his family, turned off the light for the night and crawled under the sheets, with Edgar Allan Poe still at his head, beneath the pillow. And as he lay there he found the limpet still present, though it seemed to be becoming larger, stronger, almost in the atmosphere around him. And he found that all conversations and all things that he had read, seen and known that day were replaced with the face of the man in the street – why was *he* there? – somehow changed, turned not so much sinister as *knowing*, and replaced too by the pounding thought, prompted by nothing but his own pulsating mind, that he, Philip Savage, was the real danger, and that a pounding, murderous heart, uninvited yet thoroughly expected, was beating all about him. *Quick*, the air seemed to say, *listen to his hideous heart!* And sleep, he knew, was unlikely to come that night.

The day after, he always felt like a wounded soldier. And, while there was a certain manly glory in the feeling, it was hard for others to see or understand it; and what good, really, was there in having survived a battle that no-one else

knew you had fought?

As a younger child, he had tried at times to get his parents or Sarah to understand. Sometimes they seemed to, yet only sometimes. It was easiest for them to understand when there was something tangible to explain the battle: a sickness, for instance; something that could be observed and diagnosed. Fear of sickness did not seem to amount to the same thing. Being convinced he had asbestosis because Pa had brought out a piece of asbestos at the dinner table one night and had shown it to them: that had not been legitimate. The night that the left half of his face felt paralysed, that night they had understood, for a time; until it had been revealed that there was nothing really wrong with him, only fear.
So, on days like today, he learnt to simply endure it. School would go on, the battle would go on. Perhaps, he reflected, he shouldn't have read that book before bed. Perhaps he should have drunk his before-bed glass of milk. There were no explanations, only guilt. So he took it on his own shoulders, and went to school.

Sarah, although offering to drive him *from* school, had no intention of driving him there. "I'm on holidays," she'd said, when he'd gone to her room to say goodnight. "I'm not getting up that early." And so it was with some level of fear that he set off walking to school, passing Burden Street as he did, not sure if he was afraid of the stranger he had met or of the strangeness of his thoughts on going to bed. He could reflect now, in the relatively calm light of day, that there had been no reason to think that he had feared what was it? What even *had* he feared? The content of the book? The face of the stranger? His own heart? Having no idea what, he could only try to shrug off the odd sensation that clung still about him.

It was another sunny day, likely to make him clammy and grumpy by the end. He hated the sensation of summer about his face and limbs. Only when he could be still and at rest in the sun did he not mind. When he had a fan and a book, or a beach to dip into, then the sun did not trouble him. But when his uniform clung about him and the sun beat down with the pulsating urgency of timetables and the scrutiny of familiar schoolyard faces: then sun was only torture.

So he did his best to walk in the shade, and shade there was if he crossed the road. The shade took him also away from the milk bar where some of his classmates met in the mornings to walk to school together. Crossing over, he averted his eyes from the milk bar and focused on the shade.

"Hey," called a voice from the other side of the road.

Reluctantly he looked over. It was Laura. She was crossing to meet him. But what was she doing here? She didn't normally walk this way to school.
"I slept over at Stacy's," she said, as if she knew that an explanation was needed. "Are you walking to school?"

For some reason, he paused before saying, "Yeah."

"Want to walk together?"

He looked over to where Stacy, a girl from his class whom he didn't think much of, stood with some of the other kids from their class. They looked like they were waiting for a few more to join them.

"Aren't you going with Stacy?" he asked.

Laura shrugged. "They're waiting for the others," she said. "I don't mind walking ahead."

It should have been an easy enough question to answer. Sometimes, since they had moved closer to school instead of coming from the next town away, he had wondered if he would bump into Laura while walking. It had never happened, though he had sometimes seen her in passing, when she had others with her or when he was with his family, and it had only ever been awkward. But now — now she was offering to walk to school *with him* — and he couldn't answer her. He looked over at Stacy and the others,

imagining what they would be thinking. It was always best to imagine what others thought, in case they thought something that might hurt you.

"It's okay," he said. "You go with them."

And he kept walking.

"Bye then," called Laura.

And, in an action that would confuse even him and circle around in his head in the days and weeks to come, he simply lifted his hand up in a kind of absent wave, not looking back, not even letting her see the side of his face as he walked.

*

That lunchtime, before Drama class, Philip had nearly lost a prop that he'd brought from home for the performance they were doing, and had spent so much time running around looking for it – opening up and emptying the contents of his bag *and* locker, checking his home room, everywhere he could think of – that when he had arrived in class, he had been more flustered than usual for an afternoon class. And, to top it all off, when he'd finally come to class with his prop in hand and sat down, the boy next to him, a new boy to the school called Simon, had said, "I thought I smelt something." It had taken a few minutes to realise that this was Simon's latest joke – he was using it on most people in the class that afternoon – but even then the joke had stuck on him like his sweaty shirt did. The whole lesson after that, he'd had that same feeling about him as though he were no longer inside him but watching. As he had lain on the floor pretending to be a paintbrush, talking about what a hard master Van Gogh was, with the coloured wool he had brought to school gathered around his head, he had felt as though that very well might have been true. Better to be a paintbrush than what he was.

And so, by the time Sarah had come to fetch him, Philip had nothing to say. There had been plenty of material for conversation throughout the morning: all the ridiculous and

frustrating things his teachers had made him do, as though they mattered at all by this time of year. Yet the afternoon's Drama class had overshadowed all of that, and done so in a way that words could not convey. The mute position he'd taken on the Drama room floor seemed somehow the most fitting way of expressing what had been and gone through the day. Sarah tried to make conversation a few times but, failing altogether, had settled into silence herself, though almost certainly a very different silence to the one that Philip inhabited.

Sarah would not, for instance, have been ruing Philip's awkwardness with Laura that morning when passing the milk-bar had made him think of her offer to walk to school together. Nor would Sarah have felt that odd mixture of fear and shame that assaulted him when they approached Burden Street. Yet she would certainly have shared his surprise at seeing the police barricade outside Number 12, yellow-and-blue police tape marking out a temporary fence across the front lawn and white-and-blue cars in the street. And, in that moment of shared surprise, Sarah's silence turned to now expressing Philip's thoughts when she said, "What happened here?" But before she could speak Philip's thoughts had turned to white noise in his ears.

*

No answer was forthcoming simply from passing the crime scene. Nor did his family know anything about it when they came home. It had to wait until the six o'clock news for anything official, though Pa had a friend visit his caravan out the back with word of what had happened. The story was that the police had arrived around midday after a tip-off that someone had died at number 12. No-one could remember who lived there now. The old family had moved a few years ago and there had been a stream of tenants since then. Pa's sources had no information about the current tenant or who it was that had died. Had it been suspicious? Suspicious enough for the police to be there. Had anyone heard anything? Had anyone odd been seen around the house? Many questions were asked, many theories shared. Philip had ears only for the ones in his head.

As far as he could see, it all made sense, and it was all traced back to him. The lines were so clear that, when the police officer on the news was heard asking for all who knew anything to come forward, Philip's face was sweaty with the urgency of the moment. Yet nothing came out, not even a confession to his parents, not even a mumbled question about what the police might be after. Although he rehearsed many such questions in his head, and at a speed that defied the movement of light, only silence seemed a clear enough response to what he had heard. While the rest of his family had nothing else to talk about but the death at Number 12, Philip had no desire to talk at all. After the news, and after dinner, he took himself to his room, where he sat on his bed and tied knots inside his mind.

*

Pa found him on his bed, the light still on, around 9 o'clock that night when he came to say goodnight. He didn't, of course, see the knots, but he did see Philip staring blankly into the wall as though seeking to see through it. He paused in the doorway and asked, "Is everything okay, mate?"

Pa was the only one who called him that, "mate". Philip looked over at him. He had a book in his hand. Philip looked at the title. *An Advent and Christmas Treasury*, it was called.

Philip didn't reply. Pa stepped in closer to him, close enough to pass him the book, but he held it briefly suspended between them, letting Philip's hand touch it but not quite giving it to him.
"I brought you this," he said. "I knew I had it somewhere. I remembered it when you talked about 'In the Bleak Midwinter' the other day." He moved in now to sit beside Philip and, taking the book back, he opened it. "Look," he said. "It's got some other Rossetti poems in here that I thought you might like more. There's one…" His hand hovered over the pages, as though trying to summon up the exact page from memory. "'The end of all things is at hand'," he said, then chuckled. "It's a grim name. But it's a beautiful poem. I think " He turned to a page near the centre of the book and, finding

the poem, looked over the words to remind himself of them. "Yes, I think you'll see her skill more if you read this one."

Only then did he look up at Philip, whose eyes were directed towards the book but focused on nothing.

"Phil?" He paused. "Is there anything…?"

The question hung incomplete, slightly inflected, with Pa's eyes asking the rest.

"Pa," said Philip. "If…"

"Yes?" prompted Pa.

Philip paused, rearranging imagined words somewhere above his head.

"Is it…can someone be arrested for helping…for making a crime possible?"

Pa's eyes turned more intently toward Philip's.

"Do you mean…being an *accessory*?"

"Maybe…" said Philip. "I mean, if…"

Pa closed the book. Philip saw the picture on the front cover. He recognised the scene: Ebenezer Scrooge and the Ghost of Christmas Present. He stared at it while he spoke, though the image slowed his words, almost blocking them somewhere in between brain and mouth.

"If…what happened at Burden Street…if someone had done something…not meaning to…something that helped…"

"Phil," said Pa, moving closer, "have *you* done something?"

Philip's eyes settled on Scrooge's face. He tried to see into them, but couldn't. The Ghost of Christmas Present, large, jolly, full of yuletide cheer — what did his glowing cheeks seem to say to Philip that night?

There was nothing else he could tell Pa now.

Nothing else, because words could not convey the kind of knowledge he now held. It was knowledge of an utterly certain though intangible kind, yet it carried with it also the equally palpable certainty that none would believe it. He could not tell you how he knew, yet he did know: that the man he had directed to Burden Street had been the killer, that he was in some unavoidable way to blame for the death that had taken place there, and that his life was now forfeit because of what he had done. Indeed, he had already known this in some way prior to this moment; known, that is, that his life was forfeit because of something unspeakable within him. Was that not the reason his classmates mocked him, why they called him "Savage", why that name always seemed so apt for him, why Laura kept her distance, or why he knew he had to keep *his* distance from *her?* It all made sense. It always *had* made sense. Yet, like Cassandra before the fall of Troy, what he knew was never to be believed, however disastrous the consequences.

And so silently he took the book from Pa, said, "Don't worry, it's nothing," and made to get ready for bed. If Pa was unconvinced, he said nothing, only paused briefly in the doorway to add, "You know where I am if you want to chat." It was one of his common lines — whenever he could see hints of unhappiness in Philip's face — and Philip would reply, "In the backyard". Only, not tonight. He said, "Yes," and looked at the cover of the book.

He had read *A Christmas Carol* some years ago, and images from it were still burnt into his mind, most powerfully the Ghost of Christmas Future, that figure who was all the more terrifying for being silent and invisible. Yet he was haunted too by the image of Marley, the ghost whose face first appeared in the door knocker and who Philip

somehow expected to see each time he went to his own front door. He had been haunted too by the ghosts that had hovered in the night air after Marley's appearance to Scrooge, those souls tormented by unresolved wrongdoing, doomed to linger in that tortured half-life of theirs, a life that, for months after, Philip had believed himself condemned to.

No-one else knew why. At school, he was without fault. Yet that faultlessness was a trial to maintain, especially when it was nothing like the world within. And now, he felt sure, the world within had caught up with events outside of him. The murderer inside him had crept out and taken hold of circumstances, even against his conscious will, to take another life, just as he had done so many times in his own head, when mocked, when ridiculed, when set up for failure again and again. Each time he had wished death upon another: each of those times had culminated in this moment when a murderer had seen him in the street and, knowing at first sight the murderous kinship they held, had asked him for direction. There was no doubt in Philip's mind: there would be ghosts for him tonight, and ghosts more brutal than any that Scrooge had seen.

*

The court was in session. The witnesses, ghoulish but familiar all of them, were summoned one by one. First, the swimming instructor Philip had wished dead when he was nine. Second, the emergency teacher who always found reason to tell him off when he was in Grade Six. Third, a convoy of his peers. Fourth, Laura. She could not even speak. All she could do was point at him. And then, fifth, the Burden Street Stranger. And sixth, the dead man at Number 12 who, though Philip had never seen, was emblazoned in his mind. He had no face, only eyes, and the eyes stared into Philip's.

Seated at the head of the court was the judge. He too was faceless yet saw everything. And when the witnesses had all spoken he raised his gavel and beat Philip's resounding judgment into the table, into the earth below. There was nothing Philip could do. Panicked, he ran from his bed. Only water could save him, if even that would do.

Hurriedly, he entered the bathroom and slammed the door, stripping his pyjamas from his body, now drenched in condemning sweat. The sweat knew. The bathroom mirror knew. He did not wait for the water to heat before standing under it. He did not close his eyes. He simply stared through the shower screen at the sight of his face in the basin mirror. The water gathered around his face. The shower screen began to mist. Still Philip stared. Still the face and the mirror knew.

He barely heard Sarah knock. He barely had the presence of mind to cover himself as she came in. He barely registered what she said; was it, "It's nothing I haven't seen before"? Perhaps. At least he gave up covering himself then, and let her enter the water to take him out.

And then, "Mum, Dad." Yes, she called, "Mum, Dad."

And where were they? Did they come straight away? Draped in towels, he felt himself be taken. He felt the couch beneath him. He heard his mother say, "Dad…" She must have meant Pa. His father was somewhere else. He could not see where. "Dad," she said, "can you keep an eye on him while…"

And then the phone. It was a noisy phone. The numbers always beeped when you touched them. He heard her speak but not her words. "Easy there, mate," said Pa, as he sat. And Pa's soft arms enveloped him.

*

When the police officer visited him in his hospital room and showed him a photo that he did not recognise seemingly of the man the police suspected she said, "I didn't think he was your man." And then she had spoken to his parents, who stood at the foot of the bed. "He's already confessed," she said. "And there's not a chance that he was the man your son saw."

And, while the explanation helped — that the man at 12 Burden Street had been killed by his ex-wife's new boyfriend, who knew the house well and had no need of directions from a thirteen-year-old in the street — and while the panic had subsided and the ghost-court had gone into recess, it had all only been replaced by a new flurry of unfamiliar action: group therapy sessions, individual therapy sessions, silent and unsteady walks around the hospital grounds, rooms filled with pamphlets and booklets with names like, *Understanding OCD* and *The Way Out of Obsessions and Compulsions*. Sometimes, when his parents thought he was asleep, he saw them reading the material together, stony-faced, whispering concerns to one another. But when he was awake they would tauten out their voices, as though stretching tired muscles, and say unnatural things like, "How are you going, big fella?" or, "Can we get you anything, honey?", calling him names they never normally called him and adopting faces that said, *Everything's okay*, which they had never felt the need to say before for never having feared that it wasn't.

And then there had been Laura's visit, with a bunch of flowers and a card from his class, her dad awkwardly in tow behind her. She had perched next to him at the end of the couch in his room and together they had tried to find words to say and found none, finding only a silence that was, for that moment, the most comforting thing anyone had said. And then she had leant over to hug him and he had felt her breath in his ear and smelt her shampoo and when she left his heart could not stop pounding and he had no idea where to begin thinking.

And Pa, too, always Pa, with books that he had "found somewhere" (the endless supply of books that man had! how did they all fit in his caravan, or in the handful of boxes in the attic?). Pa, with old jokes and hand-me-down stories. Pa, with, "Well, you've got your two front teeth, so what else do you want for Christmas this year?" And his dad saying, "You'll be home by Christmas, the doctors reckon." And his mum saying, "Greg, they're not sure." And Pa saying, "Well, we'll just have to throw a party for you wherever you are."

And then silence, a breather in the afternoon when they left him alone, no flurry of action, no therapists, no doctors. And then he would take out the treasury of stories that

Pa had given him that night, and he would look again, again, at the strange, bewitching words of the Christina Rossetti poem Pa had found for him to read:

The end of all things is at hand. We all
Stand in the balance trembling as we stand;
Or if not trembling, tottering to a fall.
The end of all things is at hand.

O hearts of men, covet the unending land!
O hearts of men, covet the musical,
Sweet, never-ending waters of that strand!

While Earth shows poor, a slippery rolling ball,
And Hell looms vast, a gulf unplumbed, unspanned,
And Heaven flings wide its gates to great and small,
The end of all things is at hand.

The end of *all* things? he would wonder. Or only the end of the ghosts, of the fear, of hospital rooms and this newly-named, old familiar thing they called OCD? *Hell looms vast*, he read. He knew that well. But *Heaven flings wide its gates to great and small*. Great and small. Which was he? The vacuum was great, and he was small.

The silence always passed before he could complete the thought. Soon there was a parent, or a concerned aunt, or cousin, or a therapist or nurse coming to check something or give some reassuring thought, and the poem would have to wait, expectant somewhere hovering around his bed. He knew he would return to it soon, as soon as he had the chance, and that it promised an answer if only he could listen, and promised something more comforting than sleep, if only he could grasp it beneath the sheets and hold it to him as he lay.

"What do you want for Christmas?" the nurses always asked. Everyone asked that, as though Christmas presents alone could remedy all ills. Every year before this one he had

had a wish-list that he'd subtly present to his parents, mostly books. This year, he had no thoughts, except one; and silently each time he would say that same thought, deep in his mind, where only something truly silent and reverberating could be heard. "No ghosts," he would say, half-statement, half-request. "No more ghosts, please, this year."