



# Alfie

BRADLEY PEARCE

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### **Dedicated to:**

Munif

### **Acknowledgement to:**

Waitai

Wars never hurt anyone except the people who die.

Salvador Dali



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No fish in the sea today.  
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About Bradley Pearce

# Charlie

On an old wooden pallet down a forgotten alleyway between two run-down Villas, sheltered by a hoarding, lays a large cardboard carton stained with dust and grime.

Inside the cardboard hull, insulated by the inclement weather outside, an old man stirs from his sleep. His regimented body clock had woken him. Thankful to be have been woken from a troublesome dream, letting it pass from his mind. Morning light leaks through the flaps of the opening. Sounds of commuter traffic penetrate the inner sanctum.

He surfaces into the light of day gasping for a breath of the cold early morning air as if surfacing from beneath the ocean.

And assesses the day in the city of wind.

“Hmm!” He grunts at the foul weather blowing about him.

To live in Wellington, you had to love to the wind. You got to love the wind.

Crawling from the carton, stands and supports himself against the hoarding gathering his thoughts. Grateful for another day, another breath, another pain. Pain that murmured from a long forgotten war.

Pain that meant he was still alive.

A large brown rat scurries along a wall. Stopping momentarily to look at the human before scurrying away behind a dumpster in search of a morsel of food.

“Charlie.” The old man greets his neighbor.

The old man had found the tendency on Marion by accident. The former tenant having abandoned it for one reason or another. The vacancy was a step up from the seedy red light district on Vivian around the corner that was noisy and besieged by mongrels of the human kind.

Upon the discovery the old man relocated his meager possessions to the splendor of the quieter surroundings. Undisturbed and unnoticed, for now. Times would change, they always do. Nothing stays the same forever. For now it was home. Sanctuary from the elements. Sanctuary from those that wanted to confine him.

Wanting no trouble the old man kept to himself, he distanced himself from people. Blending in with the pavement, and buildings. Withdrawing from the world that had wrenched him from sanity of life, and thrust him to the insanity of war.

Lacerated wounds would heal, but there are some wounds that are too deep for sutures to reach.

Straightening himself, he feels the creaks of his joints.

Inhaling deeply, cold damp morning air and diesel fumes fill his lungs. Taking a comb from a tired brown briefcase runs it through thinning grey hair. Scissors trim a shabby white beard as he looks at himself in the reflection of a window of a villa that was once an abandoned paint store.

Now long abandoned as he was.

Unfolding the faded overcoat he had used as a pillow pushes weary arms down its sleeves. Retying a narrow black tie with a Windsor knot he straightens it in the reflection. Adjusting a brass Return Service badge on his lapel, gives it a rub to polish it. Reminding himself to stand tall as if a Warrant Officer was about to inspect him. Patting down trousers, secures a tweed cheese cutter firmly down on his head.

And runs his fingers along the edge. Giving the briefcase a rub with a sleeve to polish the fading leather. Firm fingers clutch about the heavy twisted knob of a weather stained length of drift wood. Balancing himself, relieving the pressure from a troublesome leg.

To look at him, no one would ever know the old man as being homeless.

And in many ways he was not. He had an abode he could call his own. Albeit a large carton. Appearing like an elderly gentleman going out for a daily walk. The cap, walking stick and brief case adding to his guise of respectability. His mind was as sharp as the day they had shipped him off to war. To a war no one wanted. No one talked about. He was damned if he went and damned if he stayed. And when it was over, he would be discarded and left to fend for himself. But that was a long time ago.

But the dead, we will remember them.

Checking a gold watch, 8:00AM, he had slept in.

Happy for the extra half hour. Giving the watch a wind before tapping the face as though to remind the second hand to keep moving much like

himself. Looking to the sky to a sun shrouded by the thick rolling clouds threatening to piss on him as any moment.

Pulling a retractable umbrella from the brief case, a rare find on the street. Like a magpie his eyes on the lookout for objects that others overlook and walk by. One man's misfortune is another man's luck. Opening the umbrella in time to catch the first spits from the heavens above. Securing the buttons of the tired overcoat about his neck, begins his daily round.

"What day is it? ..." He asks himself, "...Monday? No that was yesterday... Tuesday... Must be Tuesday." He confirms with himself.

Perhaps he would treat himself with a cup of hot tea and bacon and eggs. And he knew just the place wondering if Samantha would be working today. He was in no rush, he had all day. His diary was clear, as were most days.

"*Ahh!*" The old man moans as he feels his spine clicking into place as he straightened himself.

Masking the limp, he casually strolls from the alleyway to the footpath to decide the best way to head.

How the street had changed over the past fifty years before the world had gone mad with economic growth. Multileveled car parks stood where once a row of commodity stores had loitered. Pushed aside by progress and money. Supplanted by designer stores and high rise office buildings. Sandwiching themselves between the grey tarmac and the grey clouds above, much had the city that day.

Encouraged by the ever increasing number of parking buildings sprouting up like mushrooms over the city a steady pulse of commuter traffic bleed slowly along arterial routes onto Vivian. The daily congestion coagulating and clotting. Only to bleed again and shuffled themselves like cards to be dealt into alternate lanes.

Trolley buses with puppeteer poles pushed their way through the minnow of smaller metal vehicles that scrambled to get out of their way. In the jostling madness, drivers cursed in one breath and forgave in the next.

They were all in the same predicament, addicts in desperate need of their morning fix. Caffeine.

The old man deferred Vivian for another day, and headed to the other end of Marion hoping that was quieter.

Leaning heavily on the walking stick to ease the discomfort of an old wound. His leg a barometer to the weather. He stops at the corner musical store to rest the leg and inspect the colorful display of instruments in the window. And admires a beautiful grand piano. Looking polished and pristine. He entertained the thought that perhaps he should learn. Why not? Grinning at the thought. He had all the time in the world.

The grin turned to a frown as dark thoughts of being confined in a room overcame him.

“Perhaps not.” He said dismissing the careless wishful notion.

The café was about as cooped up as he ever wanted to be. The large windows with views onto the street outside made the confinement bearable. It should be open by now he reckoned. Hoping no one had taken his table.

Like the Mad Hatter, he checks his watch.

He was running late to meet the Alice. Samantha, and he smiled at the thought of her. And at that moment, he materialized to those around him. But gradually the smile faded, and so did he. A cold gust of wind slapped his back side causing the umbrella to blow inside out.

And reminding him to keep moving.

“Bugger.” He cursed, turning about to invert the anomaly.

Sheltering close to buildings made his way to the next intersection. Stopping to observe the coming and goings of morning commuters. Appearing invisible to them, unaware of the old man’s presence.

He was but a chameleon on the sidewalk of life.

The chilling wind yelped at his ankles. He resisted its nudging, preferring to go at his own pace. And the limp lessened as he found his stride. Only to ache again to remind him it was still with him.

The café laid just ahead, sheltered from the howling southerly on Courtney Place.

Cowering beneath the umbrella. Seeing people rushing to escape the scattered showers of rain like machine gun bullets. Rain drops sounding like artillery shells exploding on the umbrella. Dark thoughts detonate in his mind. Then shells fall silent, and the ghost of a wind pushes at him, almost causing him to lose his balance.



An unseen hand catches him from falling.

Looking every part a businessman on his way to the office he stops at the entrance of the café and closes the umbrella.

Giving the brolley several sharp shakes to loosen it of rain that had attached itself to its black nylon skin. Pushing the door open a buzzer sounds his arrival. Disappointedly he sees his table has a reserve sign on it.

About to take another table a voice calls out to him from the counter.

“Morning Alfie!” A waitress calls out from behind the counter.

“Morning Sam.” Alfie replies looking about for another suitable table near the window.

“I saved you your table.” Indicating the sign was for him.

“Oh... Thanks. I thought it might be for someone else.”

“Can’t have my favorite customer miss out on his favorite table... The usual?” She smiles at him.

“Thanks Sam... Cup of tea would be nice. A bit nippy outside.”

“Coming right up... Make yourself comfortable.”

“Mind if I use the rest room?”

“You don’t have to ask, of course you can... You know where it is.”

He relieves himself and washes up, taking the opportunity to enjoy the hot water. Splashing water on his face looked at himself in the mirror. A handsome looking seventy seven year old stared back at him. Behind the reflecting mask, a mind that had not aged a day. What had happened to the youthful face that had been there before?

*Time*, he conceded. It passes gradually, then catches up on you all of a sudden. No one was immune to it. The youth may think they are impervious. Until the next generation pushes them aside in their hurry to be somewhere they did not need to be.

Alfie smiles, reappearing in the mirror, sees himself smiling back at himself.

“What are you smiling at?” He asks himself.

Then the smile drops, and Alfie disappears and an old man gawks back at him.

“That’s more like it soldier....” He tells himself, taking a more regimented tone.

“Papers on the table Alfie.” Samantha calls out.

“Thanks Sam.”

“Busy day today?” She asks.

“Maybe... Lets’ see how the stocks have done shall we?” Alfie lied.

Flicking through the pages hoping a head line would catch his attention. Same news, on a different day. Only the places and names have changed. Opening the center of the paper for the outbreak of World War Three. Not today, maybe tomorrow. The President was acting like a bull in a china shop.

And it never ends well for the bull.

Was New Zealand any better he wondered? Having not voted in thirty years he had no reason to criticize or complain. Conceding that half a dozen Plunket nurses and a couple of smart asses from the University could run the country better than the barnacles that clung to bowels of the Beehive.

“There you go Alfie...” Said Samantha placing a large white plate before him. “...I gave you an extra ration of bacon.”

“You’re alright Sam... Thanks.” Taking in the feast.

“Don’t tell Kaye.” She winks, about to walk away.

“What’s your dream Sam?” Asked Alfie by surprise.

“Sorry?” Catching her off guard.

“Your dream? ... You must have a dream to get out of here... No offense, but this can’t be what you want from life?” He asked curiously.

“I know... It’s a struggle to get ahead... Money comes and money goes...”

“But if you could?” Alfie probed, seeing a faraway look in her eyes.

“Well...” She hesitates, “...I’ve always wanted to study law.” She confessed her deepest secret.

“Law? ...” Taking him by surprise, “... Really?”

“Yeah, I’m saving, but I never seem to have enough... Then there’s Sarah.”

“How is she? ... How old is she now?”

“She’s adorable... Coming up five... Daycare takes much of this...” She sighs, surrendering to her predicament. “... She takes priority.”

“I understand... Don’t give up... No one ever got anywhere by giving up... You’ll get there.” He offers his advice.

“Yeah I know... *One day.*” Sighing at the elusive dream.

Seeing Alfie distracted by the passersby outside she leaves him to finish his breakfast. Watching an umbrella take flight. It's owner desperately in pursuit.

She had never asked him what Alfie had done for a living.

Accepting what others saw in him. An old man with a brief case. An overcoat and tie. Going about his day. A gentleman. A retiree going about his day. There was something about him that roused her curiosity.

She had a feeling there was something more to Alfie than met the eye...

## Lovers Lane

Sheltering on a weathered concrete seawall step to watch the ocean boil for a while, Doug's own mind bubbled with troublesome marital thoughts.

Incessantly bubbling white foam and turbulent water, churning steaming mist into the howling southerly. Watching seagulls dart about in the wind. It was a bleak day. Grey clouds had washed the color from the hills on the far side of the harbor.

The stone laden foreshore laden with regurgitated drift wood and seaweed heaved up overnight. In some way the inclement day mirrored his stormy marriage. Hoping the blustery breeze would blow his troubles away, pulling up the collar of his overcoat at the thought. Looking over his shoulder down a lane to where he had left his wife breaking plates. Taking his son with him for his own safety.

A small boy runs about trying to throw stones into the water ever hopeful one would skim over the choppy surface.

"Not too close... Don't want you to fall in... What would mommy say?" The concerned father tells his son.

The boy halts momentarily to look back at his father watching on. Then taking a step away from the crashing surf looks about for a suitable stone to throw next. The boy runs about without a care. Invigorated by the rushing wind and raging surf. Finding an ideal pebble throws it into the waves only to see it splash and sink. The boy stares a gasp at the disappointment, then spontaneously runs off in search of another stone.

Seagulls suspend themselves in the air above him, suspicious of the dangerous urchin running madly about below them.

"Careful!" Doug calls out again in hope that the boy heard him.

The boy carries on unaware of the warning, now lost upon the howling wind.

His marriage in tatters and on its last legs, it was only be a matter of time before it would implode completely.

Not one for verbal abuse, Doug had escaped the house and left his wife to continue her ranting and complaining to herself. Hoping she would have

calmed down by the time they returned. Divorce had never entered his mind.

Until today.

The writing that had been on the walls for the past few years was coming into focus. There was no way he would allow her take his son away from him. He knew the law all too well. And he knew lawyers all too well. If it was a fight she wanted. This was a fight he was prepared for.

Or was he?

“For better or worse...” He reminded himself of the vow.

He had been a faithful husband. Despite the house, the car, the life style, she never seemed to be happy. Her drinking had gotten out of control, only to fuel another fight. For a moment he thought he could hear a plate crashing and wondered what the neighbors would be thinking. Not that they had not heard it countless times before today.

Then looks back to the small boy on the stone burdened beach and smiles to himself to have been blessed.

“Not too close I said!” He calls out again to the boy.

Threatening rain clouds had gathered above the hills behind him. Knowing the temperament of the City’s weather. It was not in the mood for raining so early. Squawking seagulls darted about wailing air currents in attempt to stay aloft. The boy watched on in delight. Squealing and chasing those that had landed, only to have them take flight again.

Eastbourne laid on the eastern outpost of the Wellington’s harbor.

Nestled beside a roughed stony beach thrown up by the swelling surf and hills that jutted up behind. An enclave of some four thousand souls. Standing watch beside a treacherous channel that had seen its share of tragedies. Undeterred, an Inter-Islander ferry pushes its steely white bow into the chop and wind. Slowly nudging its daily passage into the wild seas Cook Strait.

Two Islands face off against each other. The North Island and the Mainland. In eons to come they would become one. But until the day arrived they stood defiant of each other. One a tropical paradise of volcanos and cows and sheep and immigrants. The other a sparse wilderness of roughed alpine beauty, glaciers lakes and red wines and Colonial settlers.

Dismissing the encroaching land mass. Doug looks over the harbor back to the city and makes out familiar buildings and port. Seeing a train hug the coastline as it made its daily commute into the city. Commuter traffic kept pace with the train, their lights blinking white and red. Effervesced mist begins to obscure the view.

Wellington was the center of Doug's universe.

His Auckland breed wife was held a different view.

"Almost time." Doug calls out to his son.

The boy pushes himself into the wind and spreads his arms out as though he could fly and Doug smiles at his attempt. Mimicking the boy, flaps his arms to encourage him to take flight. The boy giggles and falls into his father's arms to seek warmth and protection. Embracing him, holds him close. Looking into his eyes to see his own looking back at him. What happened to all the years since he was a boy that age? Had time flown *that* fast?

Sucking in a deep breath he sighs to release the aberrant thought.

"You ready to go?" He asks the lad.

The boy nods keenly and takes his father's hand to be lead back to the car.

"Is mommy okay?" The boy asks, catching his father by surprise.

"Mommy is *mommy*... She just needs some time by herself." His father tries to explain.

"*Oh.*" Said the boy, unsure what it all meant.

Climbing the steps of the seawall back to the road behind. Doug catches sight a neighbor with his sketch pad that had sort shelter from the wind inside his car.

"Colin!" He calls out to get his attention.

"Hey... Mister McCrae... How you doing?" Colin looks up from his pad.

"Not too bad... How's the painting coming along?"

"Good... Just sketching today." Looking out to the foul weather.

"Don't blame you... Must be off... Due in court today."

"What are you up for?" Colin jokes.

"Car theft." Doug replies despondently.

"Hope you get off."



“Between you and me... I don’t.” Replies Doug indifferent of the verdict.

“Really?” Asked Colin confused.

“Yeah... Best be off before the Judge comes looking for me... Catch you later.”

“You too Mister McCrae.”

“Say hi to Kath for me.”

“Will do.” Replies Colin seeing the father and son disappear down a lovers’ lane back to their home.

Lowndes Lane provided a sheltered walkway back to the main road.

The house stood diagonally opposite. Still in one piece despite the internal hurricane that had raged earlier that morning. Hoping his wife had left to her mother’s. Or lawyers. Both would be preferable. Other than the whistling wind through the overhead trees, there was silence. Her car was gone. A good sign he thought. The boy held his father’s hand. Unaware of the adult games being played and rushed inside expecting to find his mother.

“Where’s mommy?” He asked innocently.

“Oh... She’s probably popped out to see Nanna...” Doug half lied. “... You can see her later when you get back from Kindie... Okay?” Doug said in a chirpy voice. “... *That would be nice... wouldn’t it?*”

“Yay\_!” Calls out the boy excitably.

“Yay\_!” Mimicked Doug with restrained enthusiasm.

A lunch box sat on the kitchen table and Doug checked its contents. Empty.

“Hmm!” Doug dismisses the abandonment and reconciles himself to preparing the boy’s snacks for the day.

“What would like in your sandwiches?”

“Dunno.” Came the reply.

“Okay let’s see what we have in the fridge shall we?” Opening the refrigerator door and examines its contents. “...How about some of this... This and.... That?”

A small head nods up and down happy with the selections as his father goes about preparing the sandwiches.

“Cut the crusts off... Like mommy does.”

“Crusts makes your hair curly.” The father reminds his son.

“Don’t want curly hair.” The defendant argued.

“Fair enough... Grab a juice box and a piece for fruit okay?” He orders the attentive urchin watching on.

Satisfied his boy would be feed for the day he goes in search of the boy’s pack.

“Where’s mommy hide you pack?”

The boy who rushes off to collect it from his room.

“You got everything you need? ...” Cross examining the boy.

A small head nods up and down excited about heading out again.

“Okay... In the car young man!” He sentences the urchin.

Closing the heavy door of the silver Jaguar behind him feels the insulated warmth and comfort.

Shutting out the howling wind and cocooning the pair in silence. Turns the key and the engine starts first time and he listens to the purring engine. A radio comes to life and begins voicing current affairs. Listening momentarily to unfolding national events. Same news on a different day with the names changed. A newspaper rested on a polished black leather briefcase beside him.

He was due in court that morning.

Checking his watch, gauges he has ample time to drop his son off. His mind drifts to his wife and her possible where about. She could be anywhere. Her parents, her friends. Or simply out. Would she return? He would know that evening. Perhaps it was time to have *that* talk. Perhaps it should be him talking to a lawyer.

Letting the oppressive thought fade and turns his attention on his son.

In the rear view mirror sees his son engrossed in a picture story book. Stirring memories of the day his own father had left. Though Doug was much older than his son at the time, the separation still lingered in his mind. There was always a father son bond, no matter what the sin. He had forgiven his father for leaving all those years ago.

Would his son would forgive him?

His mind drifts to the court case.

It was time to face the music. He could not afford another conviction. Three strikes would be was hard to come back from.

“All good back there champ?” He asks looking back at his son.

“Good!” Parrots the boy looking up from the picture book.

“Ready for Kindie?”

“Kindie! Kindie!” The voice chants back.

“Okay let’s go... Your girlfriend Rosie O’Donnell might be there?”

“Yuk! ... Girls!” The boy protests in disgust.

“Yeah... Who needs them eh? ... Give it a few years you might think differently.” His father suggests a change of heart.

“Never! ... Yuk!” The urchin refuses to budge...

# Don't forget to breathe

Evans Bay provided little shelter from the southerly siphoning between the hills either side of the airport.

At its southern end, the churning currents of the notorious Cook Straight. At the northern end, the more sedate inner harbor. Any sunshine that offered any warmth was soon swallowed by the cribbing shadow of the Hataitai hillside.

A young man sat unperturbed to the wind nudging him to go home where it was warmer. Ill-prepared for the conditions, wearing jeans and flannel shirt. His adolescent hide imperious to the squalling breeze's bite that sent other's scurrying for shelter. A faded Dodgers baseball cap pulled down on his head.

The young man watches aircraft make their precarious approach from the north.

Turbines screamed as they struggled to make progress against resisting forces holding them back. Incensed by the ferocity of the weather, he almost willed the plane's wanton destruction. Expecting a wing to be torn away. And the plane to dive helplessly into the harbor. Only to watch it stubbornly thrust itself forward toward the runway. Maybe tomorrow.

Fishing boats bobbed up and down like corks on the harbor's choppy swells. Reluctant to leave their berths. Life could be seen about the decks. Boat hands preparing for another outing. Sorting nets and equipment and he wonders what it would be like to work on one. The thought of the adventure and danger appealed a whole lot more than sitting around watching his life slip away.

High School had spat him out onto the streets.

Preparing him for nothing other than to sit on a bench. It was only a matter of time before he found trouble. Or trouble found him. The lad looks over his shoulder. As though he was expecting it to appear at any time.

Seagulls darted about hoping for offal scraps. Squawking loudly to protest another bird's trespass. Watching the birds being pushed about like

the plane. Their wings spread wide, suspended on the current air. Amused as to how they did not collide into each other.

In the distance he sees a blue and white fishing trawler drawing closer to the wharf. An empty berth awaits the boat. Leslie sits up keen to see it approaching. Fighting the current and chop of the water. Unhurriedly it nudged closer. Diesel engines chugged rhythmically. Belching thick black smoke into the air. Captivated, he watched as the trawler gracefully maneuvered beside the wharf. The harbor haven a paradise to the open seas from which it had return.

It's belly full of fish.

Voices called out for ropes to be secured as activity began on the deck. Powerful engines to groan as hydraulics lift crates of fish packed in ice were hoisted from the boat's hull onto the wharf to be loaded into an awaiting lorry. It had been a good trip for the trawler. Or so he thought. A ginger bearded man called out the tally in an Irish accent to the skipper who tallied the catch on a clipboard.

"Take it away Emmet!" The Skipper calls out.

"Aye, aye Skipper!" Emmet calls back signaling the lorry to leave.

"Hose down and get home." The Skipper informs the men.

"Aye, aye Skipper." They call back again in unison.

Looking like Jonah, as if thrown up from the sea, a stocky old man appears on deck. A bushy white beard frothing on his chin. As rough and as tough as the ocean itself. Jonah looks over to see the lad sitting on the bench and dismisses the lad's attention of him. Weary legs take Jonah back to a car that had been parked since his departure several days before. Turning back to look at the lad again, his mind percolating a thought. Perhaps he would have a word with him.

Unnoticed by the lad, now spellbound by the sturdy blue and white vessel baring scars of rust. Its name in thick heavy painted letters on its bow.

"San Jen-nif-fer ..." The lad struggles to pronounce the name, "... San J-Jen-nif-fer."

Just then his thoughts are distracted by an unwelcome visitor, along with two other barnicales.

"Shit!" He curses seeing the last person he wanted to see heading his way.

Trouble had found him.

“Hey Leslie... You girl!” The troublesome voice calls out.

Leslie pretends to ignore him and fixes his gaze on the trawler swaying with the ocean swells. The smell of fish and salt air fresh in his lungs. He was about to drift off to a day dream adventure on the high seas when he is suddenly struck on the back of his head. Sending his cap flying.

Catching it in time before it was lost to the water.

“F-f-fuck off T-T-Toby!” Leslie threatens his delinquent mate.

“What you going to do about it bro?” Toby challenges.

Leslie looks at him with threatening eyes.

“Hee hee hee.” Only have Toby snigger and sit beside him.

“W-what do you w-want?” Asked Leslie, the peace of his day now shattered.

“Why you hang out here? ... It’s boring bro... Nothing but boats and shitty seagulls... Hang with us’ man.” Suggests Toby.

“I l-like it... Something a-bout t-the b-boats.” Leslie stutters out.

“Got some smokes?” Looking Leslie over.

“Y-you know I d-d-don’t s-smoke... Now f-f-fuck off!”

“F-f-fuck off.” Parroting Leslie’s stutter.

Leslie ignores Toby’s cruel mimicking.

“How about some money? ... You got money on ya? ... I know you got some money.”

“I g-got no m-m-money... N-now l-leave m-me a-a-lone!” Warns Leslie.

“Come with us man... We’re heading to town... Maybe get some pussy eh.” Toby boosts.

“I very m-much d-d-doubt that.” Lesley contends watching the trawler strain at its moorings.

“Fuck you! We’re outta here... Loser!” Toby grabs Leslie’s cap and throws it into the water and runs off before Leslie had a chance to grab him.

“Hey! ...” Leslie watches the cap about to sink, “...You b-b-bastard T-Toby... I’ll g-g-get you for t-that!”

“B-b-bastard! ...” Toby mimics running away. “...C-c-come with us retard!”

“F-f-fuck you T-Toby!” Leslie responds annoyed.

“P-p-pussy!” Calls out Toby heading towards a bus stop.



Thoughts of diving in and saving the cap passed through Leslie's mind. But the swell of the water and chop soon dampened any hope of salvage. Surrendering the cap to the Davey Jones' locker.

Above him seagulls stuttered squawks at him as if to carry on where Toby had left off.

"D-don't you f-f-fucken s-s-start! ..." Leslie pleads them to leave him alone. Taking a deep lungful of air calls out, "...Fuck off!"

Catching himself unaware of a stutter that never came.

Watching the boats bobbing up and down, almost like a hypnotic trance, soothing his frail nerves. The blustering breeze suddenly falls away and for a moment a beam of sunlight shone upon him bathing him in a warmth and a peace.

The Man watched on in wonder at the strength and frailty of the human soul. Leslie looks over his shoulder, sensing someone was watching him. Thinking he saw someone but lost sight of them.

"Hmm." Leslie dismisses the aberration.

The day was dimming and he knew he would have to be heading back to an empty home. His father would be drinking at a bar and his mother at the casino. His parents having wasted their lives away, he wanted something more. But what?

The San Jennifer lurched up violently on a giant swell and battered its side abruptly against the wooden wharf. Sending a heavy vibration through to Leslie's bench. As though it had heard his thoughts. He stares at the boat confused by the message it was trying to send him. A seagull squawks breaking his attention from the boat and he looks up to an approaching aircraft battling against the wind.

Rain clouds had begun to gather about the Hataitai hills. Deciding he should get going before they pissed on him. He pulls up the collars and secures the top button. Rain spits on his face and he looks up to the heavens knowing that Toby and his gang would be caught in it coming back that evening.

"Retards." Chuckles Leslie.

He is about to leave, when he hears a voice calling out.

"Hey kid!" An angelic voice calls out.

Leslie turns about again sees a man standing on the wharf with a grappling pole in one hand and a blue Dodgers cap in the other.

*'Where'd he come from?'* Thought Leslie, thinking everyone had left.

"This yours?" Asked the man knowingly.

"Yeah... How'd you do that? ..."

 Unsure what to make of the turn of events.

The Man hands Leslie his cap and smiles at the lad.

"Thanks mister." Lesley examines the cap. Now with a hole in side pierced by the hook. A battle scar. A small price to have his cap back.

"You take care son..." Said the man walking back along the wharf. "... And don't forget to breathe."

Leslie begins to walk away securing the seemingly dry cap on his head and looks back only to find the man had mysteriously disappeared.

Looking about as to where he could have gone so quickly. The trawler showed no sign of life and there was no one on the walkway.

"Hey... Where'd you go?" Feeling an eerie feeling about the man.

*'What did he mean? ... Don't forget to breathe?'* He thought to himself.

As if though by instinct, took a deep breath, the fresh air full the extremity of his lungs.

*'Hmm.'* Feeling the weird new sensation.

"Retards!" Leslie calls out to Toby and his gang long since departed on the bus.

Taking one last look at the trawler rocking gently in the swell of the ocean.

"I'll be back..." He tells the boat, "...I'll be back."

Securing the still damp cap on his head. Pulling it down to shield his face from the ever increasing spits of rain. He heads home.

Content to have his favorite cap back where it belonged...

## Piss off

Alfie finishes up breakfast by wiping the last of the sloppy yellow yoke with a piece of brown toast bread and shoveled it into his mouth.

“You must be hungry...” Samantha arrives to take away his plate. “... Big day in the office?” She asks.

“Those days have long since passed Sam... Thought I’d hit the old book shops, find one to read.”

“Get yourself home where it’s warm okay... Not having my best customer catch chill.” Samantha mothered him.

“Will do.” He lied pushing some money on the table towards.

Only to have it pushed back.

“Your money is no good here Alfie... You know that.” Warned Samantha, “...That one was on me.”

“You’re alright Sam, thanks.” Accepting the meal gracefully swallowing the last of the tea.

Samantha looks out the window to see umbrellas blowing inside out.

“Another cuppa? ... It’s looks nasty out there.”

The howling wind shoving people and vehicles about. Funneling itself along Courtney and the parallel streets before spilling into the harbor. To stir up a swelling sea of white top waves that crashed back onto the shore and rocks.

Another day in windy Wellington.

“Maybe one more.” He reflects deferring the inevitable.

Hoping the wind would drop. But knowing it was likely to get stronger as the day grew longer.

“Stay right their young man...” Samantha tells him, “...I’ll be right back.”

Alfie consoled himself with the incarceration of the four walls about him. His one true sanctuary from the outside world. That and the humble villa on Marion. The weather could continue for another week. Or it could be gone tomorrow. The sun could burst through the clouds at any moment. Such was the enchanting love affair of the temperamental city.

Like a gigolo, residents never knew what they would wake up to the next day.

A gust of wind rattled the large window pane as if to remind him not to linger too long.

Becoming anxious with the walls closing in on him. A mind wrestles with conflicting thoughts. Should he stay or should he go? Hearing Samantha rattling cups behind the counter. Overwhelmed with an urge to leave he stands and gathers his overcoat and umbrella. Without looking back quietly makes his way out the door just as a customer enters.

Samantha looks up to catch him leaving, looking flustered and anxious. "Alfie? ..." She tries to call out, but too late to catch his attention. "... Oh."

Wondering what had riled him to leave so suddenly. Hoping he would have stayed longer. Perhaps he was running late for something. A bus perhaps.

And she berates herself for detaining him.

The café released the old man onto the street and immediately put his mind at ease.

An assailing wind pushed him in the direction he wanted to head. A secondhand book store some distance along the street. Spacious enough to accommodate his fears for much of the day. Warm enough to counter the chill of the lazy wind passing through him. Providing shelter from the elements that were stalking those ill-prepared for the day.

Women gathered skirts about their knees fearful of being exposed. While hopelessly holding onto hats and umbrellas. And being shunted in directions they did not wish to go. Some clinging to lamp posts to avoid being blown away. Never to be seen again.

Appearing almost human. Beggars squatted in doorways sheltering from the foul lashing of the wind's tongue. Holding out receptacles of paper cups and bowls. Soliciting passersby for spare change. Only Alfie sees them. He was one of them. Invisible to the office workers that walk by indifferent to their plight. Unaware of the fine line that separated them from the apparent ragged cup holders.

Other than a shower and a shave and fresh change of clothes.

Alfie reaches into his pocket and fumbles for a coin and drops it in the empty paper cup. Giving because he knows what it felt like to want.

"Thank you Mister... Have a nice day." The beggar recites the blessing of the street.

“You too brother.” Alfie engages the man with a smile.

Looking less respectable than himself, Alfie would not judge the man.

“Judge not, lest be judged.” He reminds himself, resisting the wind pushing him along.

His frail body swayed with the jostling turbulence, the overcoat flapped about his legs.

Perhaps he was better to have stayed in bed and waited the tempest out. But Alfie was not one for lounging about. Though the pain in his leg was telling him otherwise. A regimented discipline told him to keep moving, lest he too would become motionless and end up on the side walk with an empty cup in his hand.

Pain was good, it meant he was alive.

Standing outside the second hand book store he peers through the window to see people milling between the shelves. Bright lighting throws a seductive warm glow onto the pavement. And like a moth attracted by the appealing radiance, he enters. High ceilings brought a comforting thought.

He wanders about in search of no particular book. Hoping one would catch his attention. A gem among the graveyard of forsaken books. Never one for reading while in the army, books now opened a new world to him without having to leave the comfort of an arm chair.

“Can I help you sir?” A store assistant asks politely taking him as a gentleman of means.

“I’m fine...” Smiles Alfie in a tone reciprocating his appearance, “... Thank you.”

The assistant leaves him to peruse the shelves. The hushed silence of the store complimented by soft music and quietly spoken voices of store assistants serving customers. Eyes scan ordered spines and by chance comes across a book he had not read in years. Discreetly pulls the decaying tooth from the shelf.

Creating a cavity among those left behind. Bleeding dust from its removal.

Reading the title embossed on the dull hard back cover. It’s jagged edged pages bringing back fond memories of the haunting tale. In some way he identified with the wandering physician and the dark tales of death and his love for animals. Lifting the book to his nose. Sniffs the open

pages as though a familiar fragrance. There was a smell about an old book that roused his senses.

Giving it an essence and soul.

Suddenly a sharp pain agitates within his chest. As if the smelling salt of the pages had triggered it. He steadies himself against the shelving and rubs his chest. Putting it down to indigestion from the greasy breakfast. In his peripheral vision he sees a man watching him.

“Piss off.” Alfie warns quietly without looking at him.

Causing a person nearby overhearing the remark to back away wondering what had disturbed the old man. Catching his breath, gathers his composure. Feeling whatever it was had passed, takes the book to a large red leather reading sofa beside the window.

And made himself comfortable.

Flicking through the pages to find familiar stories of the author’s transgressions and escapades across Europe. As if he were reading his own obituary. Identifying with the self-inflicted torment, and that we was not alone.

Lost in time and space, Alfie cocooned from the outside world. And passed the day as he had most days. Tomorrow would be another book store. Another library. Another museum. The harsh winter months held him captive in buildings. His bones longed for the warmth of spring. Summers were too long and too hot. And he pondered what had become of God’s Zone. The climate had changed from his time. Something was amiss.

Perhaps it was just him. Perhaps he was getting old.

The day brightened with the afternoon sun shining through a fractured clouds.

Sending a rare ray of brilliance upon those below. Rain clouds had caught themselves on the hills of Khandallah. Shoved by a southerly that stalked the streets below in search of umbrellas and unaware pedestrians. Indiscriminant to age or ethnicity or gender. Jumping out at people and startling them. Lifting skirts and removing hats to intimidate the city’s inhabitants.

Leaving the literary cemetery, Alfie pulls the cheese cutter down firmly. Holding the brim for good measure to complete the predetermined



circuit for the day before heading back to his humble abode. But he had one more stop to make on his rounds.

Hoping there would be shelter and friend waiting for him.

The weather eased, and people dared to venture onto the streets again, wary of its return.

Making his way along Courtney Place, he comes to a halt at an intersection and waits for the lights to change before crossing. Standing invisible among others who see only brief case and a walking stick.

Dismissing their inattention, Alfie is happy to wait. Time is all he had, and then some. A buzzing sound from above and the little red man turns green. And people shuffle and scurry about him. Last out of the gates, he follows the pack of eloping people across the road. Seconds count down before traffic would once again flood the intersection.

Taking any stragglers along with them.

Making the other side with seconds to spare. Looking about for the others who had long since disappeared along side streets and into the heart of the city. Willis Street onto Lambton Quay. What was with the hurry of people these days? Watching people rushing about. Always in a hurry to go someplace they wanted to be.

But did not need to be.

“Left right, left right.” He pushes himself along, trying to suppress the dull ache of his leg.

*‘Fight off it...’* He told himself, *‘...Almost there.’*

He continued his meticulous march. Another block and he would be. Buildings provided some shelter from the blustery gusts that would catch him napping.

“You have to do better than that!” He talks to the unseen forces set on toppling him.

Entering a convenience store and the owner looks up to see who had entered.

“Mister Alfie my friend! It’s good to see you... What are you doing out on a day like today?”

“Afternoon Munif... Got to keep moving, I save on funeral costs.” Alfie tells him.

“You’re a wise man Mister Alfie... How can help today?”

“Just a loaf of bread... White will do.”

“Behind you there Alfie...” Munif points out Alfie’s oversight.

“Oh... Right... Sorry.” Selecting the first loaf without checking the expiry date and pays in coins. “Thanks Munif... Best be off. Catch you soon!”

“You too Mister Alfie.” The storekeeper watches him leave, the plastic bag of bread swinging beside his briefcase.

And Alfie heads deeper in the Cuba pedestrian mall of colorful shops...

# All rise

“All rise!” A Courtroom Bailiff calls out.

Doug stands and waits impatiently for the Judge to enter the courtroom to take his seat and look down upon counsel and the defendant. Sitting anxiously, fidgeting as though he were guilty. Sounds of shuffling papers and suppressed coughing. The judge coughs himself, and a hushed silence fills the air as attendants await with baited breath for the Judge to speak.

Only to hear a continual silence.

The Judge surveyed his dominion. A few reporters had taken up tenancy in the gallery. Hopeful for a headline to fill their gossip rags they called newspapers, tabloids by any other name. Doug looks about the faces of the motley reporters. Half asleep and apathetic to his predicament.

Dimly lit, the high dome ceiling of the court room cast an eerie shadow of authority over those below. Timeworn portraits of timeworn judges hung on the walls bordered with dark heavy wooden frames, adding to the seriousness of the proceedings.

The Judge looks down from high and scrutinizes the defendant carefully.

Looking at Doug with some mistrust and then turned to the Jury. Hoping they had seen sense and thrown the book at the defendant.

“Has the jury reached a verdict?” The Judge asked looking over his glasses to a jury of four men and eight women.

A foreman stands, holding a piece of paper in his hand.

“We have your honor.” The foreman responded loudly for all to hear.

“How do you find the defendant?” The Judge asks looking back to the defendant in hope of catching some satisfaction of the man’s conviction. He had been the vain of the court system for years and today he would go down.

Three strikes and he would be off to jail.

“Not guilty!” The Foreperson sounded out precisely so as not to cause any confusion.

Stunned, the Judge looks back to the Foreman as though there may have been a mistake.

“Are you sure?” The Judge inquired.

“Unanimously Your Honor.” The Foreman answers, hesitant as to what the Judge wanted to hear.

“Hmm...” Grumbled the Judge quietly shaking his head as he looks down upon Doug wondering how he had pulled one out of the bag.

The Judge addresses the defendant. Looking down upon him as though God himself were in Judgment over him.

“Mister Smith... You have been found not guilty by a jury of your peers... Against my better judgement you are free to go... But not without caution... I do not wish to see your face again in my court room ever again... Understood?”

“Yes Your Honor... Thank you your Honor.” Smith bows his head to acknowledge his temporal reprieve in a cunning cockney accent. Faking a smile to add to the fabricated sincerity.

The Judge slams down the heavy gavel sending a sharp abrupt echo about the court. Waking two reporters and anyone else who may have fallen asleep during the short proceedings.

“Counsel dismissed.” Barks the Judge, his glare fixed on Doug.

“Thank you Mister McCrae... *They* said knew you were the best.” Said Smith as if *they* were a fraternity of thieves.

“Keep your nose clean John... You were lucky this time... You can’t afford another arrest.” Warned Doug.

“I promise Mister McCrae.” Smith lied.

“I very much doubt that... You heard the Judge... I would have convicted you myself if I were the Jury. I don’t know how did it and I don’t want to know.” He warned looking back to the Jury retiring. Thinking he saw one of them wink at Smith as they were leaving.

“Thanks again Mister McCrae.” Smith gathered his overcoat.

“Thank me by paying my bill... Some of us have to make an honest living to get by.” Suggests Doug getting ready to leave.

“Of course Mister McCrae.” And with those lying words Smith scurries out of the Courtroom like a rat being set free from a trap.

The Bailiff approaches Doug and has a quiet word in his ear.

“Nice one Counsel...” The Bailiff congratulated Doug on his first win in weeks. Then added with caution, “...Watson wants a word with you in his Chambers.” His face telling more than the words expressed.

“I’ll be right along... Give me a moment to tidy up here.” Doug shuffled papers into neat stacks and filed them away in no hurry to face

the Judge.

“Righto Mister McCrae.” Said the Bailiff stepping back from the esteemed counsel.

Moments later Doug taps on the heavy wooden door of the Judges Chamber and waits.

“Come in!” Howls a deep from inside.

Doug enters the darkened chambers. Stained with the smell of old books and whiskey. Shrouded sunlight filtering through the venetian blinds.

“Drink?” Offers Watson pouring a large helping for himself.

“It’s a bit early for me.” Trying to graciously decline.

“Oh? I would have thought you’d want to celebrate after your recent run of bad luck.” Watson places a glass in front of him.

“I’ll take the win, if it helps the feed the family.”

“Ah... How are things at, home?” Watson hesitates as though he was overstepping his authority, “... Heard you’re going through a rough patch.”

“News travel’s fast at the Club...” Wondering who had leaked his troubles to. “...Charlie.” He mutters to himself.

“We’ve all been through it at some time...” Watson tries to identify with Doug’s situation. Having been married three times and now living with number four, the Judge was an expert on martial separations, “...If you need a good lawyer I can highly recommend Thomas... *Thomas Pritchard*... Very good... Knows all the loop holes... I fear for the man on the street.” Watson reflects his own divorces and the costs inflicted upon him.

Doug swirls the ice about in the whiskey as the light refracts through the crystal tumbler. It would not hurt to speak to someone in the know. Taking a swallow. Savors the taste and contemplates where his marriage was heading. His wife had made it clear where she was heading. But how much could she take with her? And then there was his son. Doug had drawn a line when it came to his son. Downing the remainder of the drink he stands to leave.

“Thomas Pritchard you say?”

“One of the best... You can’t go past him.” Watson endorses, “... Another?” Holding up his glass.

“Not for me thanks Dave... This has done the job... I have to prepare for another case... But thanks anyway.”

“Well done on the Smith case I was sure it would be three in a row for you.”

“Yeah so did I... Maybe my luck’s changed.”

“You don’t need luck Doug, you’re one of the best.” Declared Watson thanking a liking to him.

“Thanks... I’ll see myself out...” Stopping by the door, “...*Pritchard* you say?”

“He’s your man.” Watson holds up his glass watching Doug leave.

Noon and with the morning court proceedings Doug decided he would stretch his legs.

There was a particular café along Courtney Place had become familiar with. It was out of the way there were a couple of reasons for wanting to visit.

The café’s buzzer announced the arrival of a customer and Samantha looks up to see a man dressed in a sharp pinstripe suit enter.

She examines the man and surmises his occupation. Fantasizing briefly of a liaison with him before the man catches her looking at him. Embarrassed she resumes her activity behind the counter.

Alfie sits at his side table. His briefcase beside him and momentarily looks up at Doug with a smile. As though he knew the man. Then diverted his attention to the passersby on the street outside over the top of his newspaper.

A woman in the kitchen sees Doug entering and catches his attention.

“Doug!” See calls out wiping her hands on an apron and coming to the counter.

“Kaye...” He stammers, caught looking shyly at Samantha.

“What brings you in today? ... You’re a long way from your fancy café’s on Lambton.” She asks sensing an awkwardness about him.

“Ah... The coffee is better here.” He lies.

“Really? ...” Kaye questions, “...If you say so.”

Samantha goes to check on Alfie. Leaving Doug to watch one of the reasons for his visit.

“Just a sandwich and pie would be fine... And the coffee.” He adds at the last moment.

“Take a seat and I’ll bring it over to you.”

“Can I have it to go? ... I have a busy afternoon.” He lies.

“Course you can... Wait right there.” Kaye disappears and moments later returns with the coffee and a brown bag containing the sandwiches.

Depositing the bags inside briefcase. The takes a sip of the bitter sweet coffee and makes a face as though he were delighted.

“Hmm-mm.” He smiles.

Leaving Kaye to return to the kitchen and Samantha to the counter to serve another customer. About to leave, Doug quietly slides money towards Alfie, who pockets the money before anyone sees it. Samantha looks up to see the pin striped man standing beside Alfie. Discreetly watching on from behind the glass cabinet as the men talk. After a brief inaudible discussion, the pin striped man leaves.

“Hmm.” Samantha said to herself, curious and unsure what to make of the liaison.

Curious to know more, she takes a pot of tea over to Alfie’s table as though to top up his cup.

“An old friend?” Asked Samantha pouring fresh tea into his cup.

“Something like that.” Responds Alfie as though not wishing to discuss the matter.

“Oh.” She replied getting the hint.

Leaving Alfie to himself.

A fresh cup of tea will hold him inside a while longer as the weather deteriorated outside on the streets. Today the walls were kind to him. She returns to the kitchen hoping Kaye would know more about Alfie’s relationship with the pin striped man.

“What’s with that guy and Alfie?” She asked curiously.

“Doug? ... I have no idea... They just talk from what I see... No harm in that is there?” Kaye suggested.

“I suppose not.” Samantha asks.

Looking back out to Alfie’s table to discover he had silently disappeared back onto the streets again. Nullifying the door buzzer.

“I don’t know how he does that... It’s as if he’s invisible.” She said growing more confused than ever...

# Freddie of Cuba Mall

Half way down Cuba Mall Alfie stops at a bench.

Wiping away the patches of water, he takes the weight off his ailing leg. Leaning the walking stick beside the briefcase. Relieved to have come to a rest and catch his breath. There was a time when he could have run to the top of Mount Victoria and not broken a sweat.

But those days were well in the past now.

Rubbing his chest of a niggling discomfort. Looks about for the suspicious looking people. Those that did not belong to this realm. Thinking he saw his a woman reassembling his wife standing among the passersby looking at him. He looks again, only to find her gone. Unsure what to make of it, and allows the aberration fade and opened the bag of bread.

Pigeons begin to gather about his feet when they see the bread. The old man had come to pay them a visit. Scanning the docile flock of grey and white birds in search of one in particular, Freddie. A red speckled pigeon with a limp. Like himself. A wound from some misadventure. Freddie was a battler. Holding her ground among the other pigeons. Breaking the bread into small pieces he scatters it on the ground.

Amused by the tussling and shoving among the birds.

“There’s plenty to go around...” He warned the birds, “...No need to fight!” Watching the contesting birds compete for the pieces.

Birds were no different to people he thought. Living vessels with fragile souls. With the spark of God was within. A warmth came over him as though the thought pleased him. Behind him he hears a flapping of wings and a soft cooing.

“Freddie... What took you? ... You almost missed out... Come here.” Alfie encourages his feathered friend.

Breaking a piece of bread the Freddie pecks at it from his hand.

“Good girl.” He soothes the bird, stroking it gently.

Unsure if it was a boy or girl. Freddie seemed an appropriate name either way. Throwing out down more bread to distract the other birds of his one true friend.

Ensuring she would get her fair share.



“I’ll look after you Freddie... Don’t worry about *them*.” Alfie glares at the scavenging feathered mongrels at his feet.

Scattering the last remains of the bread. Saves the second to last piece for Freddie.

“There you go...” Feeding Freddie, “...It’ll be dark soon... Best get yourself off home... Where ever that is...” Sheltering where she could if it was not occupied by another bird.

Something they had in common he thought.

Pigeons milled around Alfie’s feet, strutting and cooing as though to serenade him.

Hoping there would be more. Only to take flight to other feeding grounds once they realized there was no more. Freddie waited for the others to leave. A veteran like himself. She was in no mood to rush off. Content to carry on her courtship with Alfie. There was a kindness that radiated from him.

A warmth that bonded their kinship.

The two lovers sat quietly. And watched as colored buckets filled with water. Then fall like dominos upon the other. Splashing and banging as they fell open. Keeping passersby guessing as to which might topple over next. Children squealed with delight. Adults watched on transfixed by the haphazard waterfall. Causing some pigeons to scatter and take flight.

Sporadic trees added a touch of greenery to an otherwise grey day. Looking across the lane Alfie spies a familiar café and levers himself upright from the bench. Brushing the crumbs from his overcoat tidies himself and marches over to the store.

“What’s it to be today Alfie?” The proprietor asks seeing him appear.

“Tea and one of those sandwiches there thanks Hamish.” Said Alfie smiling pointing to sandwich behind a glass screen.

“Coming right up... Take a seat I’ll bring it over.”

“Thanks... I just be by the front.” Said Alfie picking up a paper.

“I’ll find you Alfie.”

Taking a table sheltered from the wind.

The day had passed as it did most days. He would return to Marion before it got dark. Tomorrow would be another day. Perhaps a trolley bus ride to Evan’s Bay? Having not been for a while. It would make a nice

change from the inner city. Hoping the sheltered bay would offer a sunnier disposition to that of the city's funneled wind.

Opening a paper, resumes where he had left off at the café that morning. The freedom that he and every other soldier had fought and died for in the past hundred years was being systematically dismantled. A tweetstorm was forecast and he looks up to the sky unsure what to expect.

Perhaps the horoscope would be a better read.

A crazed poet had taken to standing precariously on an unsteady three legged stool. Attempting to deliver a sermon of unrequited love to the pedestrians that gathered about him, suspicious of his appearance and fidgeting movements. Hands and fingers flicked out without warning.

Causing children to squeal and giggle hysterically.

Appearing like a human wind sock, arms flailed as he tried to balance himself. Not helped by deft Fred Astaire dance steps on the stool top. A black and white sheep dog laid at his feet staring up at his master. Children followed the bogeyman's every move. Thinking he would topple at any moment. But the bard held his turangawaewae, his ground.

Nothing would shake him from this pedestal.

"I have been to the mountain!" He exclaims loudly to the faithful watching on.

Pointing towards the distant Mount Victoria.

As if in transfiguration. The sun shone directly behind him. People gasped in awe at the sight. It was the second coming, again. Crying out in prophetic tongue. Ears hung to his every word. Lest they miss the message the redeemer was about to deliver.

"I have been to the mountain!" The poet repeats.

"What did you see?" Asked a small boy curiously.

"I saw... I saw..." The poet stared into space, followed by a long paralyzing silence. As if the words could not be spoken.

The gathered apostles looked to the heavens hoping to see what the man could see. Disenchanted people began to wonder away. Leaving the man wobbling on a stool, staring to the heavens, staring back at him.

"This is why you shouldn't do drugs... You hear?" A mother tells her son pulling him away and covering the boy's eyes from seeing more.

Alfie listens on intently the man.

Finding solace in the words that resonated to his soul. He had known love and loss and sorrow and grief. Somethings cannot be expressed in mere words. Comrades who had died in his arms. A wife as she lay dying of cancer. A tear comes to an eye and he wipes it away in time before someone noticed.

Across the street a woman stands watching him. Her mind connecting to his. Soothing his troubled thoughts. Alfie senses someone is watching him and looks about, but sees no one.

Taking a sip of the tea to ease his mind. Noticing the heavy shadow of the western hills rolling over the sleepy hollow of the inner city.

It was time to return home.

“Thanks Hamish... See you tomorrow.” Calls out Alfie about to leave gathering the brief case and walking stick.

“Take care out there Alfie, it’s going to be a cold one tonight.”

“You too... Mind if I take the paper?”

“Sure... Its old news now.”

“Thanks mate.” Alfie smiles before disappearing from view.

Folding the paper and quietly slips inside the briefcase. And heads further along Cuba Mall. Stops to take in an aging busker singing boisterously to an out of tune guitar.

And found himself tapping his foot to the catchy folk song.

“Alfie!” The busker interrupts his song to acknowledge him.

“*Fish* you old sea dog.” Alfie responds smiling, encouraging him to continue.

The guitar case littered with gold coins. It had been a good day. More than enough for a few of beers for which he serenaded the passersby.

The Australian ballad was a crowd favorite.

“*Waltzing Matilda... Waltzing Matilda... You’ll come a waltzing Matilda with me!*” Sang Fish in a rasping smoker’s voice.

Standing back Alfie listens on. Waiting for Fish to finish before making his way back to his Marion abode. Hoping his residence was still standing.

Less so occupied by another.

Darkness had blanketed the city by the time he had returned to the alleyway.

Overhead street lamps lit the sidewalk. Walking quietly into the alleyway to find the large paint sign still leaning against the building. The thick cardboard intact and undisturbed. Other homeless comrades would understand the tenant's claim. There was an unspoken code.

Charlie watches from behind a grating. Sensing the old man's return. Twitching its nose and whiskers, recognizes the human and scurries out along the wall.

"Evening Charlie..." He greets the beloved rodent. Throwing it the last piece of bread, "...Something for the family."

Stopping momentarily to gather the slice and acknowledge the human's presence before scurrying on.

"Sweet dreams my friend." Watching the rat disappear back beneath the wall.

In a far corner of the alley Alfie unzips and relieves his bladder.

Returning to the cardboard box to examine his sleeping arrangements. Folding the overcoat over and over again to make a pillow. Placing his cap beside it. Unties the tie and loosens his shirt collar. Taking the newspaper from the brief case separates the pages and slides them down his trouser legs for insulation. Satisfied it was adequate.

He crawls inside the box and closes the flaps securely behind him.

A darkness engulfs the interior of the box. Muffling the city's groan of perpetual commerce in motion. Trucks and cars and street cleaners. Listening to the sound of his own breathing. His mind drifts to thoughts of his wife Renna. Wishing she was still alive. She would know what to do. Annoyed by her death, wishing it had been him. And not her. But it is never our choice.

A vision of the man in black appears in his head.

"Piss off!" Alfie mutters, perturbed by the intrusive thought.

Nestling his head into the folded overcoat to find a comfortable position.

Alfie sighs and smells the familiar soothing scent of the overcoat. The sounds of the street outside, music to his ears.

And drifts to sleep thankful for another day...

# Mister Teddy

In the middle of the night the head board of the bed bangs rhythmically against the wall.

“*Shh!*” Samantha warns her lover from waking her child asleep in the next room.

The advice going unheeded and the man continues his thrusts an aroused desire of his own. Hands clutch a pillow tightly as eyes roll in her head as a flood of convulsion rushed through her body.

“Ahh... Fuck you! Ahh!” She suffocates the erupting sexual gratitude into the pillow just as she feels the man flood his own appreciation.

“Ahh\_ Fuck. Fuck. Fuck!” The man calls out.

“You better be wearing condom!” She warns him trying to escape his grasp.

“Nah... You know I don’t like them.”

“Oh Jesus Rob... I can’t afford to get pregnant again... One kid is enough on my plate without another... *Men!*” Pulling herself from the bed she staggers to the bathroom to wash the offensive intrusion from her loins.

“I thought you were on the pill?” He calls out to her.

“You know I don’t take that shit... Must be one of your other girlfriends.” She informs him.

“Oh yeah...” He speaks before thinking.

“Sometimes Rob I think you have shit for brains... You know that?” She calls back from the bathroom.

Rob heard nothing, he had collapsed on the bed satisfied with his manly efforts and within moments had fallen asleep snoring. Outside the small Island Bay cottage waves crashed over rocks. A howling wind also snored relentlessly, rattling window and doors in their frames. Samantha goes to check on Sarah, and found her fast asleep clutching Mister Teddy.

Pulling a blanket up over her shoulders, whispers in her ear.

“Sweet dreams sweetie.” She kisses her cheek.

Sarah grins as if to say she knew her mother was there. Returning to the bed room discovers Rob asleep and taking up much of the bed.

“Men! ...” She told herself, “... Why do I bother?” Climbing into bed, pushing arms and limbs away to make room for herself.

Nestling her head on the pillow next to his and tries to fathom what goes through his mind.

If anything at all.

Unemployed and only showing up when no one else will have him. A commitment of some kind would be nice, she was not going to hold her breath. He had a kind heart. And she was a sucker for a caring man. She also had an itch that needed scratching.

Thoughts of the pinstriped man enter her head.

*‘Doug was it?’* Is that what Kaye had said she thought quietly biting her bottom lip.

Wondering what he did for a living. Businessman of some kind. Not that it mattered. It could not be any worse than Rob. Snoring beside her. Pushing on his shoulder as if to get him to turn over. Momentarily disturbed, he snorts like a pig and rolls away from her to resume his snoring on the far side of the bed.

Rolling away herself, a fantasy enters her thoughts. Imagining a world different to the one lying beside her. Hands roam her body as though they were Doug’s. Willing his hands to touch her in a way Rob’s could never.

*‘Are all men the same?’* She wondered, looking over Rob bathed in dim hallway light leaking into the room.

Doug looked different. He sounded different. He sounded hurt. The ring on his finger said he was married. There was something about him she wanted and that could only be satisfied by pressing the right buttons. Her breath quickens and she arches her back as spasms of desire surge over her. Stifling the groans from listening ears. Sending a warm glow through her body. Robs continues to snore beside her.

Some things never change.

Morning breaks and eyes open in time to catch Rob getting dress and about to leave.

Light beginning to creep from behind the heavy drapes. There was a cold chill in the air.

“You got a job yet?” She asked regaining her senses.

“Yeah-nah, not yet eh... My mate have something next week.”

“Always next week... Why not today?”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Sorry Rob... I know it’s tough out there... What you doing today?” She quickly diverted the argument.

“Hang out at the TAB with the boys...” Said Rob, “...Wait for a job to come a long I suppose.” He also had a tip on a horse that could not lose.

“Good luck with that.” Said Samantha.

“Thanks Sam...” Responds Rob, “...I’ll catch you later.”

“Yeah... Give us a call first though eh... I have Sarah to think of.”

“Yeah sorry about that... I was just passing and I thought...”

“I know, I know.” Knowing the sleep over was nothing more than a booty-call.

Without a kiss or a cuddle or further ado, Rob scurries anxiously out the door like a rat without looking back at Samantha sitting on the bed covered by a bed sheet. Moments later Sarah pushes the door open and jumps up onto the bed with Mister Teddy in her arms.

“Morning sweetie.” Said her mother.

“Morning mommy... Is *he* gone?” Sarah asks looking about for the man.

“Yeah, *he’s* gone...” She sighs, rolling over and cuddles her daughter before tickling her, “...Why don’t you wait here while I have a quick shower before I fix you breakfast okay?”

“Kay.” Sarah giggles and grins.

A knock sounds at the front door.

Samantha goes to answer it to find the Landlord waiting impatiently. Shuffling feet, hands buried deep into pockets, looking as if he were part of the bleak and miserable day that had arrived on the doorstep.

“Mister Fletcher... Just one moment... I just go get it.” Walking away to get her purse to pay the rent.

“Take your time Samantha.” Watching Samantha disappear into a bedroom.

Returning with her purse she opens with a shock look on her face. She was sure it was all there last night.

“You bastard Rob!” She curses aloud discovering fifty dollars missing from the amount.

“I’m sorry?” Responds Fletcher wondering.

“Sorry Mister Fletcher... I’ll fix you up for the rest next week... If that’s okay with you?”

“You’re already a week behind as it is... I can’t carry you forever... You’ll have to sort it out or you’ll have to leave... I have other tenants wanting this place.” He begins to lecture her.

“I understand Mister Fletcher... The money was all there last night I swear.”

“Either change your boyfriend or change flats Samantha... This can’t go on like this... Understand... You’re a good tenant. I’d hate to see you have to leave...” Continuing the ultimatum.

Just then Sarah appears clutching Mister Teddy. And stands behind her mother as though to hide from the man at the door. Halting Fletcher’s sermon on the doorstep.

“Hello Sarah... How are you today?” Fletcher broke into a kindly voice.

“Good\_.” Relies Sarah looking up to the two adults.

“I best be off... This evening I’ll be back for the balance.” Fletcher left his demand there and smiled back down at Sarah as though it would encourage her to come up with the money.

“Thank you Mister Fletcher... This evening... I promise.” Samantha spoke without knowing how she would come up with the money. “... I’m so sorry about all this.”

“This evening!” Barked Fletcher walking away.

Closing the door behind her she looked again in her purse hoping it had been a mistake. The purse remained empty. Cleared out by someone.

Someone that had left in a hurry that morning.

“You bastard Rob! ...” Samantha grits her teeth cursing vengeance upon him. “...If he ever shows his face around here again I’ll... I’ll...”

Seeing Sarah standing there trying to comprehend what was going happen. Samantha stifles the threat in time what would have seen the removal of his crown jewels and perhaps the royal scepter.

“Sorry sweetie... Everything will be okay... I promise... How’d you like to see Aunty Kaye today?”

“I thought you were going to the zoo today?” Sarah asks.

“Not today... Maybe tomorrow if the weather clears up okay... I just have to ask Aunty Kaye for a favor first... Okay.” She ponders Kaye’s response.



“Kay.” Sarah surrenders the zoo outing.

“Put on your coat sweetie, it’s going to be a blustery day again... We need to rush if want to catch the next bus okay.”

“Can Mister Teddy come with us?” Sarah asks.

“I suppose... If he promises to behave himself.”

“Kay mommy.” Said Sarah running off cuddling Mister Teddy to her room.

Mother and child sheltered inside the weather worn bus stop, opaque perplex windows scratched by vandals.

Offering little protection from the wind that came off the sea. The time table was long since faded and illegible. Buses continued to run on a regular basis none the less. Sarah huddled close to her mother.

Samantha’s mind played out what she would say to Kaye. Having managed up until now. Rob’s antics that morning had been the last straw. Swallowing her pride, she would ask for help. Eyes looked out across the bubbling Cook Strait to the South Island looming closer. Wondering when fortune would favor her and she could look back on these lean days. Looking down at Sarah she smiled.

Thankful for one blessing in her life.

A one night stand. A father long since vanished. Leaving behind the only true love in her life with strawberry red hair and freckles. And kisses the top of the child’s head. She would do this for her.

Outside the bus stop stands a man seemly impervious to the blustery assault about him. His cap held fast despite the attempt by the wind to remove it. The man smiles at Sarah.

An angelic smile.

“Who’s that man mommy?” Sarah asks looking up to her mother.

Only to look up and see no one.

“What man sweetie?” Her mother asked looking about for him.

“He’s gone.” Declared Sarah unsure where that man had gone.

“Perhaps he caught another bus.” She plays along with her daughter’s imaginary friend.

“Perhaps.” Said the child, playing along with her mother.

A rare burst of sunlight radiated on the bus shelter from a tear in a cloud.

Giving Samantha a feeling of hope on an otherwise dreary day. A feeling of warmth and hope. Wishing it that it would stay like it forever,

and that the bus would never come. But somethings are beyond our control and the tear in the clouds close. Staining everything grey. A cold southerly hand slaps her face. Bringing her back to planet earth just as a dull red trolley bus pulls gently to the curb.

Doors open unwillingly. Squeaking on their hinges. Reluctant to let the foul weather onboard. Overhead cables swayed as two umbilical rods clung on in desperation. Threatening to detach at any moment without warning.

Samantha searches for coins in her purse to pay their fare. Finding a seat as the doors close behind them. Sarah looks to the seat behind to the mysterious man from the bus stop looking at her.

“Shh.” He whispers to her raising his finger to his lips.

There was something about him that made her feel safe. She smiles at him.

“Everything is going to be okay.” The man tells her.

“Everything will be okay mommy.” She tells her mother.

“I know sweetie... I know.” Kissing Sarah’s head.

Sarah looks back only to discover the man had disappeared again. And looks about the other seats and faces. But the man had vanished again. Sitting close to her mother, cradling Mister Teddy in her arms.

The dull red carcass rattled and creaked its way along dull grey dreary nameless streets towards the city center.

Time and time again the trolley’s poles detached causing power loss and delays and frustrations among the passengers.

None more so than the driver who had to reattach them in the howling foul weather assaulting him. After countless ventilated stops the bus creaked to a stop on Courtney Place outside the Café. Relieved passengers clambered onto the exposed street and rushed for shelter from the riling wind and peppering rain.

Sarah takes a last look back at the bus. Sensing someone was watching her. A man sits at the window looking down at her and smiles at her. And she watched as the bus whined into the distance to continue on its daily route.

“Come on sweetie... Let’s visit Auntie Kaye.” Said Samantha taking Sarah by the hand...

# Love you Darl

Valentines' door opens and a gust of air rushes in from the cold.

Kaye looks up to see Samantha with Sarah in tow.

"Hey Sarah! How are you? ..." Kaye calls out wiping her hands on the apron. "... Come here. Let me look at you... You're so\_ cute!" Teasing her like a puppy dog and kissed her cheek.

Call it a woman's intuition, but the look on Samantha's face told Kaye something had happened.

"You can't miss the place that much to get you in a day like today." Kaye broke the unease.

"I know... Sorry but I need to ask a favor... A big favor." Samantha spat out the reason for their visit.

"Take a seat... I'll get 'us a cup of tea... And something for you!" Kaye entices Sarah with a cheeky grin.

"Darl!?" Kaye calls out the back.

"What's up darl?" A voice hollers from out the back.

"Two cups of tea and cream donut for Sarah... Thanks darl!"

"Coming right up darl!" George echoes back.

"Now what's up? ... What's happen?" Kaye asks hesitantly seeing an anxious look on Samantha's face.

"Seems I'm a little short on the rent this week..." She said hesitantly.

"I thought I just paid you yesterday... Where did the money go?"

"You did... It's just that... Rob..." Samantha began to say. But she had already said enough.

"Rob... I don't know why you bother with him... You can do better than that fool!" Kaye gives her sixpence worth.

"I know, I know... I'm in a real bind... The Landlord is threaten to kick us out if I don't come up with the money by tonight... I don't want to ask you. But I don't know what else to do? ... Barely enough change to get here..." Samantha stammers out.

"How were you expecting to get back home?" Asked Kaye curiously.

"Dunno... Walk if I have to." She said defiantly.

"And Sarah?"

"I'd carry her if I have to." Eyes beginning to well with tears.

Kaye looked at Samantha looking at her wits end. Just then George arrives with a tray of tea and donut on a plate.

Sarah's eyes light up with the sweet treat.

"There you go sweetie... enjoy." Said George.

"*Men!* ..." Cusses Kaye, "...Can't live with them, and can't live without them."

"What did I do?" Asked George entering the conversation at the wrong moment.

"You're okay darl... *Sometimes.*" Chuckling to herself. They had had their moments in the past, but what relationship did not. It only made them stronger as a couple. Forgiveness was the key. And she had done a lot of forgiving with George.

Taking a deep sigh, watches Sarah demolish the donut with sticky fingers. Jam covering her lips and pretend feeding Mister Teddy that sat quietly on the stool next to her.

"I'll understand if you can't..." Samantha accepts her fate.

"Don't be ridiculous... Of cos I'll help... We can't have this wee thing on the street can we? ..." Kaye smiles at Sarah smiling back, "...Its only money Samantha... How much do you need?"

"Thanks Kaye, I'll make up the time... I work weekends..." She began.

"No you won't... You need to be with Sarah, not stuck in here... We'll call it a loan and you can repay a bit each week off your wages... How's that sound?" Kaye offered a solution.

"Thanks Kaye... I didn't want to ask but..."

"I'd be disappointed if you hadn't... We've all been there at some stage in our lives... Now finish up here and get yourself home where it's a lot warmer... I'll go get you the money... Don't worry Samantha okay... It will be alright." Kaye consoles her.

"Thanks Kaye." The burden lifted from her mind.

"Told you everything would be fine mommy." Said Sarah.

"You did didn't you... Aren't you clever? ... How'd you know?"

"The man on the bus told me." Sarah smiles.

"The same man you saw at the bus stop?" Samantha asks curiously.

Incapable of speak, her mouth stuffed with bread and cream and jam, Sarah nods her head up and down. A smile forming on her swollen cheeks.

"I see." Samantha responds unsure what to make of her daughter's invisible friend.

Kaye returns with an envelope of cash and hands it to Samantha.

“That’s far too much!” Remarks Samantha reluctant to hand it back.

“Pay your rent and then some... Keep that creepy landlord Fletcher away from your door... And Rob too if you’re smart enough... He’s nothing but trouble if you ask me...” Warns Kaye, “...*Men!*” She calls out loud enough for George to hear.

George looks up to catch the comment aimed at him and fired one back of his own.

“Love you darl!”

“Love you too darl.” Kaye echoes the affection.

“Rob ain’t coming anywhere near me... Not after this.” Warned Samantha blacklisting his genitals.

“Why don’t you keep your money in the bank and pay by automatic payment like most people?”

“Mister Fletcher likes the rent in cash.”

“Does he now? That’s interesting.” Kaye begins to speculate why.

“What is?” Asked Samantha.

“Nothing... It’s just not really *done* these days...”

“It isn’t?”

“Why don’t you suggest it next time? Ask for a bank account number to pay it into?” She informs her.

“Okay.” Said Samantha.

“Look at you! Oh my goodness!” Looking at the Sarah appearing more like a clown.

Taking a cloth from her apron proceeds to wipe the mascara of jam from the child’s chops.

“There you are... I wondered where you got to.” Transforming her into a princess again.

The buzzer sounds and Sarah looks up to see Alfie walking in looking battered by the elements. Kaye looks to the clock on the wall and confirms he was on time.

“Morning Alfie!” Kaye calls out.

“Morning Kaye...” Alfie calls back taking his table and getting comfortable. “... Sam? What brings you to town?” He asks.

“Just passing through... There’s someone here I want you to meet.” Advises Samantha taking Sarah’s hand.

“I’ll go fix Alfie’s breakfast... Why don’t you two keep an eye on *him* till I get back?”

“Thanks for this!” She acknowledges the gesture.

“No worries Sam... Let me know if you need more.” Kaye give her a wink to check on Alfie.

“How’d you like to meet *uncle* Alfie?” Samantha asked her daughter.

“Who’s uncle Alfie?” Sarah asks curiously.

“See that man at the front table?” Her mother points him out.

Sarah’s eyes light up at the sight of the friendly old man.

Holding her mother’s hand she walks hesitantly towards the table clutching Mister Teddy in front of her. Appearing beside Alfie as though to surprise him.

“Alfie... How are you?” Asked Samantha catching his attention.

“I’m as well as can be I suppose... And who might you be?” He asked looking to Sarah.

“Sar\_ah.” The child responds shyly taking in the strange but friendly face.

“I’ve heard so much about you and who is this?” Looking to her cuddly toy.

“Mister Teddy.” Sarah replies.

Alfie smiles and reflects a time when he once had a family. Being a father. Having a child. But severs the memory before it could take hold. Taking in the innocence of youth.

“We’ve just popped in to see Kaye before heading back home.” Remarked Samantha.

Sarah looks at the old man and Alfie looks at Sarah.

It was as though they could read the other’s thoughts. The other’s secrets. Sarah could see the loneliness in his eyes and the unspoken pain behind the invisible smile. She looks to the chair opposite as though someone was sitting there watching them.

“Ssh.” Alfie raises a finger to his lips.

Kaye arrives to break the impasse and places Alfie’s breakfast on the table.

“We best be off... And thanks again for the... *Tea*...” Said Samantha tapping her purse and about to leave, “... I’ll see you Monday.”

“You’re welcome, I’ll see you Monday Sam... Take care now okay.”  
Said Kaye watching them leave and Sarah waving goodbye.

The door opens and a gust of wind pushes pass them to get inside.  
Upsetting Alfie’s newspaper.

“Sorry!” Calls out Samantha closing the door behind her before  
another gust could enter.

The café door closes. Shutting out the turbulent bedlam of the street  
outside.

Fleeing newspapers had taken flight and corpses of dead umbrellas  
protruded from rubbish bins. Wind funneled down streets and alleyways,  
whistling like a giant flute. It was another grey bleak day in the city of  
wind. A day that only fools and Wellingtonians would dare venture into.

Waiting at the bus stop for the next bus back that may, or may not  
arrive along at any moment. Thankful for Kaye coming through. Relieved  
to have a roof over her head again and vowing never to see Rob again. Her  
track record with men was dreadful. Attracting the wrong type. Generally  
rough and ready for a quick one. And generally unemployed or married.  
For now she would take matters into her own hands. And take Kaye’s  
advice to keep her money in the bank than lying around for prying fingers.

Her dream of Law School no closer than it was a year before. Or the  
year before that. Or the year she fell pregnant. One step forward, two steps  
back. One step sideways and never getting ahead. It felt the universe was  
holding her back. Looking down at Sarah. Somehow she would make it, if  
not today. Then tomorrow.

If not then, then the next day.

She was not going to give up she told herself. A charge of energy  
surged through her with the thought and then faded as it always did. She  
sighed, allowing the momentary enthusiasm to die and burying it with all  
her other hopes and dreams.

“Everything will be okay mommy.” Said Sarah as an opportune time,  
as though reading her mother’s thoughts.

“I know sweetie, I know it will...” Placing an arm around her to pull  
her close. “...Hey, how about some marsh mellows and a video to make up  
for the zoo?”

“Shrek?” Sarah asked excitably.

“My favorite!” She lied and smiled.

“Liar, liar pants on fire!” Catching her mother out...



# That's not my problem

Toby and his motley crew of two took their seats at the back of the bus.

Staring down passengers that watched their progress along the aisle. Hoping they would sit some place other than near them. Rain lashed the windows as the bus shook in a pestering wind.

“Shit day Toby.” Informs Mutts now wondering if it was a good day to be heading to the city.

“Yeah-nah.” He concedes looking out at the grey skies and passing streets.

Now having second thoughts.

“Where we headed?” Mutts asked curiously.

“Town... Score some pies and some smokes eh.”

“Cool\_!” Said Mutts, enthused by the prospect.

“Yeah... Real cool eh.” Toby grins to himself.

The Hataitai tunnel swallowed the bus whole.

Blackening windows as it passed along an elongated colon to emerge on the other side in brilliant sunlight. Blinding those caught unaware. Negotiating tight turns and narrow suburban roads, the boardwalks littered with new-age cafes and derelict theatres.

Such enchantments went unnoticed by the three unlettered juveniles seated at the back of the bus. Toby rocked back and forth in time to the beat of heavy metal screaming through ear plugs. Drowning out any ability to think. Mutts and his brother Runt, lost in the cyber space streaming meaningless dribble to momentarily fill vacant minds.

The dull red bus stuttered to a stop outside a café. Jerking the young men back to harsh reality about them. The driver pulls on a lever to open the rear door and watches their departure. Relieved to have seen the last of them, for now.

Hoping some other driver would inherit their return journey.

“You hungry?” Asked Toby to the others.

“Yeah.” Said two blank faces, unsure what he had in mind.

“Follow me...” Toby grins, “...I have a plan.”

Valentines' buzzer sounds and Kaye looks up from the kitchen to see three youths walking in.

Taking her time, wipes her hands and approaches the counter. Two of the youths were inspecting the pie cabinet while another had diverted her attention in another direction.

"Pack of smokes? ... " Asked Toby, "...Those ones there..." Pointing to a shelf behind her, before adding at the last moment, "... *Please\_*"

Kaye looks at Toby with suspicion. Gauging his age and turns about for the cigarettes.

"Nah not those one's... The one's next to them... Yeah-nah, not them... Yeah, yeah them." He stalls her further.

"That's twenty-eight fifty." She tells the lad.

Toby reaches for his wallet and discovers it all but empty.

"Ah shit... Sorry... I need to get to an ATM..." Giving an imminent excuse to leave, "... I'll be right back."

"I'll be waiting." Warned Kaye with her hand grasping the pack of cigarettes as though the young man was about to snatch them and run off.

But his eyes betrayed his intentions and he backed away.

"I'll be back." Warned Toby.

"I'll be waiting." She repeated watching his every move.

From nowhere, George appeared from the kitchen unaware of the standoff between Kay and Toby. But sensed something was awry.

Watching the young men leave the store.

"What was that all about?" He asked.

"Just some punks looking to pinch some smokes... Don't worry... They won't be back."

"If you say so Darl." Said George kissing her head.

Watching the lads disappear out the door giggling.

"You get them?" Asked Toby keenly.

"Yeah... Fuck they're hot!" Said Mutts pulling a couple of pies from his deep trouser pockets.

"Only two?" Asked Toby questionably.

"I didn't have enough time for another."

"Oh well... You two will have to share." Taking a pie shoves it in his mouth before thinking, "...Fuck! ... They're hot!" He exclaims burning his tongue.

“Told you!” Laughed Mutts.

Toby swings a hand and slaps the top of Mutt’s head sending his cap flying from his head. Then recalls Leslie’s cap flying into the water, “... What a retard! He doesn’t know what he’s missing.”

“I’m not a retard!” Protests Mutts.

“Not you... You retard... Leslie!” Explains Toby.

“Oh yeah. What a retard!” Parrots Mutts.

“Let’s head down Cuba... I knows someone down there.” Suggested Toby.

“Sweet! ...” Runt squeals watching Toby and Mutts consume their pies. “...Hey? What about my share?”

Mutts spits into the remaining half of the pie and offers it to Runt.

“Fuck you... You can have it!” Runt screws up his face.

The other two laugh hysterically at him being outwitted by them.

“Next time okay.” Toby lied.

“Okay.” Concedes Runt ever hopeful.

Clouds had regrouped on the hills about Wellington for a final assault on the city.

Taunting pedestrians with heavy machine gun spitting rain and heavy artillery thunder. The ill-prepared trio pressed forward into the shallow of the city. Impervious to what was being thrown at them. Making their way along Courtney Place.

Crossing over streets in front of traffic and cussing drivers that glared at them.

“Fuck you! ...” Toby cusses a little old lady staring at him in disgust. “...What you looking at bitch?!”

Flipping the old lady the finger. Only to have one flipped back at him with foul look. Driving off before he could reciprocate another warning.

“Bitch!” He calls out.

Just then a silent trolley bus narrowly misses him and loudly sounds its horn. Startling him and sending him falling onto his backside. Mutes and Runt laugh hysterically at his misfortune. Only to fall suddenly quiet when their eyes meet with Toby’s.

“Fuck you two! ...” He warns them. “... Piss off!”

“Oh\_ ! What about the smokes?” Grunted Runt.

“Fuck your smokes... And Fuck you... Now piss off.” He warns them again.

“How we’re supposed to get home?”

“Same way you got here?” Informs Toby.

“I don’t have any money.”

“That’s not my problem... You should have thought of that before you came, eh!”

“Come on Runt... I’ve some money.” Said Mutts pulling Runt away.

Runt was out of his league with Toby. Several years younger and green about the gills.

Mutt’s had his back.

“Yeah... Fuck off retards!” Toby calls out getting to his feet, “... I don’t need you two... Retards!” Calling out again.

Hoping they heard him the second time.

Brushing himself off, looked about the traffic, now wary of the ever present silent trolley buses.

The streets were a ghost town. Sensible people were at home keeping warm. A place Toby would prefer not to be. A drunken father who would beat him for looking at him the wrong way. A mother growing into an arm chair watching television twenty four hours a day.

Preferring the streets. Unrestrained by four walls. Away from his father’s belt or fist. Relying on *friends* that could supply him with what he needed...

# The Palace

Heading down Cuba Mall the wind had dropped away, sheltered by trees and over hanging awnings.

The evening was darkening and rain fell more steadily. His tee shirt becoming wet and soon saturated. Finding shelter beneath an awning outside a café where an old man was about to leave. But not before flashing his wallet for Toby to see. Without his minions, he was no his own. The coward in him discouraged him from confronting the old man alone. Maybe he should follow him.

A man watched on unseen from within the shadows.

Alfie pulls up the collars of his overcoat and throws the remainder of a sandwich onto the ground for the pigeons to finish. He watches one in particular. Ensuring it had its fair share of the bread. The kindness being missed by the lad watching from the shadows some distance away. The man now standing directly behind him. Unseen.

With a hand buried into his overcoat, the other holding a briefcase, Alfie shuffles down the arcade looking up to the heavens for a hopeful break in the weather.

Toby follows some distance back and watches the old man cross over a street. Reaching the curb Toby is stopped in his tracks. Halted by a mysterious flow of traffic that had suddenly appeared. Making it impossible to cross. The bumper to bumper the traffic stalls and a large red trolley bus blocks Toby's view.

"Shit!" Curses Toby looking to get around the obstacle.

He rushes to the end of the bus hoping to catch sight of the old man only to discover he had disappeared from sight.

"Where you go old man? ..." He asked himself looking about the streets. "...Fuck it!"

Alfie watched from the shadow of an alleyway hoping the lad would give up and go home. Toby scanned the streets for possible routes but in the end figured the old man could have gone a dozen directions.

"Fuck! Fuck! Fuck!" He curses. Passersby by look at him anxiously.

"What you looking at?" Toby threatens, staring at a woman as she passed.

Sighing heavily, Toby decides to try his luck at a strip joint on Vivian. The old man can wait for another day.

Alfie's eyes follows the young man as he heads onto Vivian. A man watches on from across the street. Rain passing through him. Eyes intently focused on Alfie. A pain stirs in Alfie's chest.

And he rubs it off.

"You okay mister?" A passerby asked seeing the old man in discomfort.

"Yeah, yeah. Thanks... Indigestion." Alfie lies watching them walk away.

Taking several deep breaths he clams himself. And steadies himself against a wall.

"Piss off..." He utters a prayer to the unseen, "...I ain't ready!" Alfie warns the unseen.

The man grins to himself and vanishes from sight...

Toby looks up at the threatening dark sky that were about to unleash themselves upon him.

In the distance he could make out the colorful flashing neon lights of *The Palace*. Looking more like an amusement parlor from the outside. Inside it was another world. A large bouncer stood at the entrance. A thick black overcoat insulating him from the chill of the growing evening air. Presenting an intimidating presence.

Watchful of intoxicated young bulls, intent on wandering inside.

"Speak of the devil." The man said to him watching the saturated juvenile approaching. Expecting to walk straight in. Only to have a heavy arm thrust in front of him.

And hand held up that said, '*halt!*'

"Where do you think you're going?" A deep voice asked, reluctant to let the distressed lad from entering.

"Come to see Mister Fletcher eh." Toby responds.

A menacing look eyes Toby from head to toe. Unsure what to make of the wiry wet individual. He had seen the youth before and wondered what purpose his boss had with him.

"What your name?" The man asked.

"Toby." He replies. Shuffling his feet. Burying hands into shallow jean pockets to keep warm. Eyes shift and down the street. Hoping to get inside

before he froze to death outside.

“Wait here.” He delays the lad further.

Disappearing inside, leaving Toby alone on the street.

Cars slowed as if to take in the incongruent creature that had stagnated outside the strip club. The evening chill beginning to penetrate his impervious hide and his youthful bones. Goosebumps erupted over arms and he rubs them off to keep warm.

Alfie watched the young man standing awkwardly on the street. Colored lights accentuating the lad’s presence more than before.

*‘Two can play at this game.’* He thought to himself.

Overhead the sound of artillery rumbles and Alfie looks up to the darkening sky. It was going to be a torrid evening. Best he be heading home before he got caught in the down pour and totally drenched.

The bouncer finally reappears and instructs Toby to go up the stairs to the office. Then resumes his position beside the doorway. The colored flashing lights a playful contrast to the descending grey evening. Looking up and down the street for anyone that did not belong.

Only see a familiar old man making his way into Marion.

Like a fish out of water Toby enters the dimly lit interior and edges his way past the ticket booth.

A scantily clad young woman sits at a glass booth chewing gum. Eyeing him suspiciously. Toby looks to the stage hoping to catch a stripper’s routine. Pulsating music and spotlights lit a tall polished silver pole on center stage that was bare. Making out voyeur heads through the haze of smoke. The door closes. Removing the titillation from view.

Hurriedly, he heads up the narrow stairway unsure what to expect when he got there. The door is ajar and he knocks and waits.

Music and voices drifting from below.

“Come in... Come in.” Calls out the devil reclining in a chair smoking a fat cigar.

The air thick with the smoke and Toby restrained from coughing on the pungent fumes.

“Toby, Toby my boy... What brings you here? Raining outside?” Fletcher asks seeing the wet underling appear before him.

“Yeah, was just passing...” Said Toby nervously, looking out at the stage through a window of the office.

“Were you now... That’s fortunate, I was just thinking about you.” He entices Toby with hope.

“Oh.” Taken by the sudden interest in him.

“Have a seat... Would you like a drink?”

“Wouldn’t say no, thank you.” Said Toby finding some manners.

Fletcher poured a strong whiskey into a short glass and handed it to the lad.

“This will take the hairs off your chest...” Said Fletcher handing him the glass. “...Cigarette?”

“Wouldn’t say no...” Taking in the offer.

Shelves laden with folders and an assortment of certificates lined the walls. All beyond his shallow comprehension. Sniffing the drink he takes a mouthful and swallows it. Feeling it burn down to his stomach. And gasps for a breath to quell the burn. Glad now he had made the trip into town and had left the other losers behind.

Fletcher threw Toby a packet of cigarettes and told him to keep them.

“Ghee thanks Mister Fletcher.”

“*Fletch* will be fine Toby... You work for me now okay?”

“If you say so Mister... Ah *Fletch*.” Toby catches himself, “...What you want me to do?”

Pulling a cigarette from the pack and lights it like a seasoned smoker. Drawing on the virginal taste. Lungs cough and protest the intrusion.

Fletcher watches entertained by the young man suffering the effects of the cigarette.

“You can start off collecting some rents for me? ... I need someone I can trust... Can I trust you Toby?”

“Of course Mister... *Fletch*.”

“Good, good... Later you can help with some...” Fletcher searched for the right word, “... *Courier* work... You like that?”

“Of course.” Toby reclined back in the chair. The whiskey having the desired effect Fletcher hope it would have. Drawing heavily on the cigarette Toby succumb to temptations.

The devil sat opposite admiring his new disciple.

“Thank you... *Fletch*...” Said Toby. Eyes drifted to the window. “... When do I start?”

“You just did... I’ll be in touch.”



Toby nods unsure what to make of the job offer. But if it meant money and smokes, how bad could it be? Looking about the warm interior of the office. He could get use to *this*. Music drifted up the stairway and on the stage, through a two way mirror, a young beauty appeared and aroused Toby's attention. Like a possum caught in approaching headlights, is captivated by the erotic dance.

"That's Abigail..." Advises Fletcher savoring her sensual moves, "... Fresh off the boat from France."

"Oh." Said Toby taking in the naked beauty curling herself around the silver pole.

His mind numb with whiskey. The warmth of the office seeping into his impervious hide.

The warmth of Abigail seeping into a bone...

# Time hath no meaning

Lightning lit up the Marion Street alleyway, loud thunder applauded soon after.

Alfie could smell rain in the air and crawled into the carton just as the first drops fell.

Heavy drops sounded against the billboard like drum beats.

*'Thump-thump-thump-thump-thump-thump-thump.'* Like the helicopter blades of a Huey.

Charlie had retired for the evening. Safe in his nest beneath the neighboring building.

"Sweet dreams Charlie." Calls out Alfie closing the opening. Encasing him in darkness.

The evening would be a cold and wet. Hoping the wind would not blow the billboard over and expose the carton to the rain. A pallet underneath would keep him from the surface water. Lightning flashes leak through the gap of the opening. Momentarily revealing the interior of the box.

He made himself comfortable. Just another winter he thought. He had experienced worse. Wellington's rain was no more than a sun-shower compared to Nam. With that thought he pulled up the collars of the overcoat and closed his eyes. And surrendered to darkness. The pitter patter of rain drops sounding above him.

Drifting to a deep sleep that would take him to a darker place...

... Brilliant flashes of light cackled, lighting up the forest floor and silhouetting glistening tall green palms. Instantly transforming night to day.

Alfie raises a fist to halt the platoon of fatigued men behind him. Relieved the march was over. The air thick and humid. The rain adding little comfort. Dropping their packs where they stood and surveyed the lay of the land for shelter. It was pretty shitty whichever way they looked.

"Make camp..." He instructs the men following him, "...Whitcliff!"

"Sir?" A young man steps forward.

"Have eyes." Directed him to keep watch through the scope.

“Sir.” Accepts Whitcliff lugging a heavy Remington over his shoulder. Just a kid of seventeen, with the sharpest eyes in the army. Disappearing into the undergrowth to take position.

Alfie radios the platoon’s position and awaits further instructions. Deep in enemy’s territory on reconnaissance. Three days march from their next base camp.

They were a long way from home.

“Keep your weapons dry...” Warns Alfie, “... Watts, Anderson first watch... Two hours shifts.”

“Sir.” Said Watts.

“Others of you... Grub up and sleep with one eye open, understood?”

“Sir.” A quiet unison of voices reply.

Dismissing the men to make camp. Finding himself shelter beside large fallen log. Using the trunk as a back rest. Tents would have been a luxury. The jungle had become an extension of him. Stripping off the shirt, raises outstretched arms and allowed the heavy warm rain drops to wash the sweat from his body.

The other men watched the Lieutenant enjoy the moment. To have him as their commanding officer they knew were in experienced hands. Many just wanted to finish their tour and to go home. The war had dragged out and become stagnant.

Many wondered when, or if it would ever end.

Dark plastic sheets provided some shelter and men tried their best to sleep. Helmets shielded faces from pelting of rain drops.

Charlie was out there somewhere waiting to spring a trap when they were least expecting. Tiredness overcame the men and somewhere in the periods of silence they succumb to sleep. Brilliant flashes and thunder claps sounded about them. Eyes jolt open as sounds erupt from within the undergrowth. Startled and disoriented reach for rifles as if they were under attack.

Unsure if it were Charlie, or their own imaginations.

A heavy hand falls on Alfie’s shoulder. Unsurprised he acknowledges the man to take his turn on watch. Damp, stiff and weary, he sits upright. Eyes adjusting to the glistening darkness of the rain soaked terrain about him. Moonlight flooded the jungle interior. Keen eyes scan for movement. Hoping that Charlie was sleeping.

But Charlie never slept.

Inhaling a thick lungful of the jungle air. Longing for a cigarette, he resisted the urge. Knowing it would give away their position. Straining eyes to stay open. Picking out static points of reference.

A charcoal black sky now peppered billions upon billions of pin holes of brilliant light shining through. Alfie contemplates other civilizations and other wars beyond his own. Other soldiers like himself that had given their lives to their army. Giving him a job where others would not. Now it was payback time. He had no complaints. No gripes.

It was what he had signed up for.

The sun would rise soon, and they would need to be on their way again. Crossing at times into Laos. A forbidden trial but a necessary one. It was like looking for a ghost. Tunnels were everywhere. They could well be camped on one.

Sniffing the air and thought he smelt a cigarette, a faint trace lingered in the air.

A shitty smell of shitty tobacco. Tobacco that Charlie smoked. There it was again. A faint trace drifting on the still evening air. Gauging the direction watches the distant tree line. Sinking low, threw a stick at one of the sleeping men to waken them. Startled to see Alfie holding a finger to his lips to stay silent. The man slinks about the other men silently waking them to be ready.

Pointing the direction. Silently directs two men to out flank the distant enemy posse either side. Now it was a waiting game. Who would blink first? Hoping his men would be in position should it go down. Other men take their positions behind fallen logs. Eyes peeled for movement.

Time hath no meaning when one faces death.

Heartbeats pounded in chests and ears listened for the breaking of twigs underfoot. Making out a moving head. Then another. Then another. Hand signals passed the information to the other men of the number and positions.

Suddenly Charlie fires a flare into the black evening sky.

Setting the sky alight with a brilliant glow. And staining the ground red beneath. Soon followed by white tracers. Alfie restrained his men from being drawn into the firefight. Hoping he could fool Charlie into thinking they had made a mistake. AK-47's cackled obscenities that whistled over the platoon's heads without a response.

As anticipated, Charlie stood up and exposed himself one by one without retribution. Unsure what to make of the anomaly. Waiting for the enemy to get within range. And counted backwards from three. Fingers indicating the countdown to his men. Then all hell was unleashed from the front and sides.

The exposed enemy troupe had little to no chance.

Weapons stuttered their intent to kill. Spitting white hot tracers in both directions. AK47's resonated bass and M16's sang soprano in an Opera that could only end in death. Cutting down the enemy where they stood. It was all over before it had begun. Alfie clenches a fist for firing to halt and waited. Smoke drifted like mist over the punctured vegetation.

"Pattison, Burns, Sullivan..." Alfie instructs the men to check on the fallen enemy.

They knew what to do if they were still alive. There would be no prisoners. Their mission was to reconnaissance and Intel. Charlie never talked and wounded prisoners would only slow them down. In the distant Alfie heard the cracks of a single shots. Those that were dead would stay dead. The three men returned having stripped the enemy of valuable maps and satchels.

Nature would take care of their burials.

"Radio it in Collins..." Alfie instructs, "...Request Evac LZ Bravo 0600 hours."

"Sir..." A voice echoes back, "...That doesn't give us much time to get there."

"It doesn't give Charlie much time either... They'll be over us before we know it... Leave what you don't need... We move now!"

"Sir." A unison of voices reply.

Alfie looks back at the killing field. It could well have been him out there. His men had been blooded in their first firefight and held their ground and won.

Next time they may not be so lucky.

Retracing tracks to a landing zone some five clicks from the battlefield.

An open field exposed on all sides. One of the few places an Iroquois could land. In the distance the thumping blades hammered the air. Sending out a signal of the helicopters' presence and imminent arrival. If they

could hear it. So could Charlie. An orange flare bellowed smoke across the LZ.

Two Hueys circled the LZ like vultures. Heavy fifty-Cal machine guns at the ready to contest enemy fire that could erupt from the vegetation below at any time. A Huey circled above, covering the other that had landed.

*'Thump-thump-thump-thump-thump-thump-thump.'* Blades made a deafening drone as men scrambled to board the crafts.

Alfie waited until the last man was on board and signaled for the pilot to lift off. Eyes scan the perimeter. Charlie were there somewhere. Alfie would be back to pick up where he had left off. Intel was what he did best. Becoming one with the land. To see something, where others saw nothing. And what he saw was that the war was far from over.

Living by his wits which had kept him alive up until now. His platoon a nomadic band of Kiwis. Knowing he could trust them to watch his back and get the job done. That's what Kiwi's did. There would be no friendly fire on his watch.

Blades stuttered a harmonic hum. Music to Alfie's ears. Others would keep watch from the sides as the lush green idyllic countryside of South Vietnam passed underneath. Rice paddies carved out of the rainforest. Oxen drawn ploughs trudge muddy fields. Pulling with them dominative villages.

Looking up to see an uninvited presence in their skies.

If the invaders wanted to help, they should provide food and medicines. Not bombs and bullets. Returning to their ploughs. Unperturbed, it would only be a matter of time before the uninvited would succumb to the mighty red army that sprawled beneath the undergrowth and hidden tunnels.

The sun was breaking the horizon. A spirit freed from the matter of the earth.

Tilting a helmet to cover blinded eyes, he resumed the broken sleep he had been pulled from before his watch. The thumping of the blades pulling him under. Leaving behind the sodden killing fields. And the billion upon billion pin pricked stars of distant galactic wars.

It was all but a dream...

... A sudden thunder bolt startled Alfie awake.

The warm moist air of the jungle replaced by the cold damp air of the carton. The killing fields by the alleyway on Marion Street. Needing to relieve himself pulls himself from the encapsulated warmth of the carton. His mind still connecting with the dream. Reluctant to venture outside he knew he must.

The rain fell steadily. Large puddles had gathered beneath the pallet. He crawls out carefully from beneath the heavy hoarding. Pisses against the wall of the building, letting the rain to wash it away.

Looking up at the dark sky. Slowly being stained with the light. Stripping off completely throws his clothes into carton. With outstretched arms, allows the rain to wash over him.

The war was never over for Alfie...

# Where's mommy?

Doug pulls the silver Jaguar gently into the driveway, so as not to wake the sleeping urchin in the back of the car.

The lights of the house were off. No one was at home, or so it seemed. Pressing a button on a remote, garage's doors begin to open slowly. And Doug eases the car gently inside. Killing the engine he sits and waits momentarily, hoping someone was home. Or not. Unsure what to expect if there was. Another confrontation. Damned if his wife was home. And damned if she was not.

Gently he lifts the boy onto his shoulder and cradles him with soothing words that they were home. Only to stir him from his dreams.

"We're home sweetie." He whispers to his son.

"Hmm." Whimpered a soft reply.

His eyes opening to familiar surroundings. Smelling the stale cold air of the garage begins to fidget to be put down and he rushes inside in search of his mother.

Only to return moments later.

"Where's mommy?" He asked curiously.

Doug looks to the interior hallway hoping his wife would appear. But is only greeted by silence.

"She must be still at Nanna's place... Why don't we give her a call? .... Okay?" Doug encourages the boy.

"Kay." Said the boy rubbing sleepy eyes.

"What would you like for dinner? ... Fish-fingers? They're your favorite." Asked Doug.

"Kay." Rushing inside the house down a hallway.

Doug's mind ran through out the possible places his wife could be. Accepting she was either at her mother's. Or one of her countless socialite girlfriends. Letting his wife's absence slip from his thoughts. He had a pint size priority to attend to. Needing to be bathed and feed and put to bed. Hoping the child would soon forget about his mother's absence.

Adult games beyond the child's comprehension.



Small strong jaws chewed on the crispy over cooked fish-fingers and limp microwaved vegetables.

Doug picked over his plate for something palatable. Or at least digestible. Looking to the wall clock and then to his watch to confirm the time. It was getting late, thinking his wife would have returned by now. If he had known she was going to be away he could have treated himself to something more edible. Like takeaways.

“Where’s mommy?” The boy asks, his cheeks bulging.

“She should be home soon... Let me call Nanna later and find out shall I?”

“Kay.”

“Need to get you to bed... Oh look at the time... It’s late!” Doug lied.

“Read me a story?”

“Okay... But just the one... Daddy has to go to bed too... Daddy had a big day at work... How was Kindie?”

“Good\_.” The boy recollects pinching eye brows together.

“That’s good...” His father replied contently, “...You finished there?”

“Hm-mm.” The boy nods his head. Jaws still chewing up and down.

“Well done... How brush your teeth and into bed. I be there shortly... After I call mommy.”

“Okay.” Climbing down off the chair and runs off down the hallway to his bedroom.

Doug gathers the plates and scrapes the remains of his dinner into the waste disposal.

“You in bed?” Doug calls out to his son’s room.

“Yes!” A small tired voice echoes back.

“I’ll be there shortly for your story... Don’t go to sleep okay?” He lied.

“Okay.” The tired voice responds.

Taking a deep breath, prepares himself to make the call he really did not want to make.

His tenure with his in-laws was on as much shaky ground as with his wife. Sitting at the kitchen table pulls out his mobile and dials the number. Listens intently to the ringing tone. Hoping in some way it would not be answered.

Then hears the click of the receiver being lifter.

‘*Shit!*’ He thinks to himself.

“Hello?” A gentle old woman’s voice answers.

“Kathleen... It’s Doug.” Trying to sound chirpy and pleased to be calling.

“Doug\_... How are you?” His mother-in-law politely asked.

“I’m good, I’m good... How are you?” He reciprocates the courtesy.

“Good\_.” Kathleen replied.

Followed by an awkward silence.

Avoiding what he needed to ask from a woman who had little time for him. So he just said it.

“I was wondering... If Helena was there?” He asks hesitantly.

“Oh... She’s not *there*?” Kathleen asked, as if Doug had misplaced his own wife.

“Apparently not... I thought she might be with you... It’s getting late and I just thought...”

“Oh I see... No... I’ve not seen her since the weekend... Sunday afternoon I recall. She popped in to say hello...” The old woman searched her old memory for details.

“Oh... I see...”

Another awkward pause on the line as he thought of alternate places his wife could be.

“She’s probably be at one of her friends... She has so many... Ha.” Faking a laugh.

“Have you tried her mobile?” Kathleen asked.

“I thought I’d try you first.”

“I see... How is my favorite grandson?” She asked checking on the boy’s welfare.

“Feed, bathed and in bed... And hopefully asleep.”

“That’s good... Try her mobile... I’m sure she won’t be not far away.” His mother-in-law suggests.

“You’re right Kathleen... Sorry to trouble you at this hour...” Looking to the clock showing only eight o’clock.

“That’s okay... Call me anytime.” She lied.

“Have a lovely evening... Bye.” Hanging up quickly.

Checking on his son before making the next call.

Quietly creeps to his son’s room and finds him asleep cuddling a soft toy. A picture book open beside him. Taking the book away, pulls the duvet

up over the boy's shoulders. Kissing his head turns off the bed side lamp. Returning the doorway to leave it partially open. Illuminating the bed room with a dim soft light.

Returning to the kitchen dials his wife's mobile number and waits. Hearing it ring and ring and ring. And ring and ring and ring. And then some. The dial tone sang a ballad he was all too familiar with. The longer it sang, the longer it would go unanswered. He waited and waited and waited, then heard it click over to voice mail. A familiar voice answers. And informs the caller to leave a message after the tone.

Unsure if he should, decides to kill the call.

He was not *someone* trying to reach her. He was her *husband*. Her multiplicity of socialite girlfriends made it to know where she was. Thoughts of her being with another man an impossibility in his mind. No doubt pickled on Chardonnay at a swanky night club.

If his mother-in-law had found it amusing that he had misplaced his wife. Her girlfriends would spread the gossip like wild fire. Somethings are best settled between husband and wife.

Looking to his son's bed room. Wonders where it would all end.

"Pritchard..." He recalls the name Watson had given him.

Perhaps he would call him for a chat. Professional, lawyer to lawyer. Just to get an understanding of course. To know where he stood. And what would be involved should he head down that path. His son was not a chattel to be divided. Nor a pawn to be sacrificed in a game of chess. If it came down to a contest, he would fight tooth and nail to keep his son. The in-laws had money to make things difficult for him. But then so did he.

Perhaps he would give Pritchard a call.

In the meantime, he would give her a period of grace. The pendulum of doubt swung to and fro. Perhaps he had been harsh on her. Perhaps it was him. Perhaps he did work too hard and did not give her enough attention.

Dismissing Pritchard to the dark corridors of his mind.

Ever hopeful the door would open and she would walk in. Like the old days when they first got married. What happened to those days?

The pendulum swung back again.

Ten thirty, and he kills the television and the room goes dark.

Peering through windows, thinks he sees head lights of a taxi. An Uber perhaps? Or a friend dropping his wife off. Only to be the passing traffic

on the road outside. Checking the mobile for missed calls. Nothing.

Sighing heavily, pulls himself from the arm chair and takes himself to bed.

A thousand unanswered questions churned over in his mind. Making it impossible for him to sleep. Exhaustion lead to tiredness. Sinking beneath the ruffled ocean of blankets, rain patted on the roof like soft drum beats.

*'Thump-thump-thump-thump-thump-thump.'* Like distant faint helicopter blades.

Wind whistled across window panes that sounded like flutes, soothing his troubled mind.

In the middle of the night, Doug awakens, thinking he heard a car door closing.

Voices, and a car departing. Listening for the front door to open and close. Waited the prescribed time it to reach the bed room. The bed room door to squeaks slowly open. Hallway light shines into room. Casting its violent intrusion over him. Laying with eyes closed. His mind imagining her undressing. Feeling the bed move as she slipped quietly beneath the blankets beside him.

She spoons her body against his. Soft warm breasts pressing against his back and the warmth of her breath stained with wine. Cigarettes. Traces of perfume. Warm eager hands roams over his body.

*"Sorry."* She whispered gently kissing his ear.

Feeling a wet warm tongue slide up and down his neck. With blood rushing from his brain, he almost had time to forgive her. Allowing the hands to wonder freely to find what she desired most. Slinking beneath the covers begins to stroke him. What had not been aroused already, was about to be. Hands reach for her head. Rocking rhythmically up and down. Moaning her own satisfaction in time with his.

Straddling him and allowed the length of his manhood to penetrate her. Doug moans, caught in a fantasy of his own. The dimly lit room offering only a titillating silhouette of her flirtatious body. Canterng strokes. She rides him as if he were a stallion.

Grinding herself onto him, and with each gyration taking him to the brink.

And as though as if it were a dream within a dream. He imagines Samantha. With that unfaithful thought suddenly awakens from the lucid dream. To find the bed still rocking.

And his son jumping up and down on the bed to waken his father.

The room illuminated by the morning light streaming through the partly drawn curtains. Feeling for the space beside him. Still vacant. Still cold. Still alone.

Struggling to reconcile the inexplicable dream now fading...

# Thomas Pritchard

“Where’s mommy?” Asked a little boy.

“She stayed with Nanna.” Doug lied.

“When she coming home?” The boy continued to question his father.

“Soon... Let’s get you ready for Kindie shall?” Diverting the boy’s attention.

“Can we go to the beach first?” The boy asked eagerly.

“I think we have time... Why not?” He conceded wishing for a breath of fresh air himself.

Pulling himself upright from the bed headed to the bathroom. Hoping a cold shower would invigorate him awake. Pondering the bizarre dream of Samantha. Shaving and dressing himself as though on auto-pilot.

Totally unaware he was doing so.

Arriving at the beach to discover freshly deposited logs and seaweed that had been belched onto the shore overnight.

Colin sat on the steps of the wave wall to sketch a view of the distant western Khandallah hills. Brilliantly alit by the rising eastern morning sun. Doug watches over Colin’s shoulder as he outlines the ridges and crevices.

“Mister McCrae... Didn’t expect to see you today.” Said Colin seeing a shadow appear beside him.

“Just passing before the office...” Said Doug watching his son chasing seagulls, “... Didn’t expect to see you here at this hour.”

“The sun is perfect on the hills.” Colin looks towards the hills drenched with the glorious light.

“Oh yeah... Never noticed before....” Taking in the beauty as though it were the first time, “... Strange how one can stare at something all their life and never see the obvious... Hmm!”

The majestic view soothed his troubled thoughts.

A man walks pass unseen, causing Doug to sense a presence behind him.

“The boy.” Whispered the man, as though it were a thought in Doug's head.

Doug looks down at the shoreline to see his son venturing a little too close to the water's edge. Waves began crashed higher onto the stony shore. He calls out frantically for the boy to halt and come to him. The warnings go unheard over the blustering wind and squawking seagulls. Rushing over the stones he reaches out and grabs his son's arm just as a freak wave crashes over them both. Pulling the pair into the surf.

Churning them over and over and over again.

Violent swirling water overwhelmed them. Bubbling effervescently. Agitated by waves, one way, and then the other. He held on to his son's arm, and was not letting go. Breaking to the surface, gasps for breath hoping his son had held his breath. Colin rushes into the surf and reaches out to grab Doug's belt. Pulling them from the water coughing and spluttering.

Just before another swell could crash upon them and drag them all out to sea.

"You okay Mister McCrae?" Asked Colin anxiously.

"Yeah... Thanks... You?" Spitting sea water, panting, catching his breath.

"Yeah. I'm good."

Unsure what had just happened, the boy stared at his father with a sense of fright.

"That was fun wasn't?" He smiles to his son to ease his fears.

The boy squeals looking back to the turbulent surf as if it were a water slide. Doug looks to the wave wall in search of the man that had warned him. But the man had seemed to have mysteriously disappeared.

"Where did he go?" He asked his eyes scanning the board walk along the seawall.

"Where did *who* go?" Asked Colin.

"You didn't see *him*?"

"See who?" Looking up to the wave wall.

"There was a man... Told me to look at my son... He was... Just there..." Eyes still searching the walkway now deserted.

Confused by the apparent aberration that had now vanished. Convinced more than ever a man had been there.

"Thanks Colin... Don't know what would have happened without you..." Gazing out to sea at what could have been.

“Just glad you’re all okay... You better get back and change out of those wet clothes.”

“Yeah, yeah.” Holding his son’s hand firmly.

The troubled thoughts of his marriage now displaced by another.

The glorious sunrise that had lit the distant hills now hidden by grey clouds that smothered the city like a dirty dish cloth.

Doug pulls the Jaguar into the reserved parking space and kills the engine. And sits staring blanking at the concrete block wall in front of him. How close he had come to losing his son? The thought terrified him.

As though it were a symbolic message. His wife the freak wave, trying to take the boy from him. He refused to let go. Goosebumps ran over his skin at the thought of losing him.

“Pull it together Doug.” He told himself.

Shaking himself from the dark thoughts. Levers himself from the vehicle, heads to the elevator that would take him to his office overlooking the harbor and city.

“Morning Alice.” Passing his secretary’s desk.

“Morning Mister McCrae.” Said Alice not looking up.

“What’s my morning looking like?” He asked out of routine.

“You have an eleven o’clock with a Mister *Rahul*... Said you came recommended by a Mister *Smith*.” Alice relies the appointment.

“Ah did he now? ...” Doug recalls Smith’s tampered juror, “... Thank you Alice, I have a few calls to make, I don’t want to be disturbed before then.”

“As you wish Mister McCrae.” Confirms Alice.

Situated twenty two stories above Lambton Quay the office offered panoramic views of the harbor.

Today it only mirrored his mood. His senses still feeling the turbulent wash of the ocean. Visions of the underwater world flashed in his mind.

Collapsing into the leather chair and gauges the files on the desk. Neat tidy stacks of colored case files. Swiveling the chair about, looks across the harbor back to Eastbourne. From whence he had come that morning. Somewhere along the foreshore, among the mist and haze was his son. The most precious thing in the world to him.



Swiveling the chair back to the desk. Focuses his thoughts on another concern. Searching the register of lawyers on the computer. Looking for a particular name. He could ask Alice for the number. But that would arouse a curiosity he would rather keep secret.

“Pritchard... Pritchard...” He recites the names vetting the dozen *Pritchard’s* that were listed.

Stopping at a name that qualified his search criteria...

‘Thomas Pritchard... Divorce Lawyer’

Doug stared at the screen.

Eyes transfixed on the name and title. Divorce was such a dirty word. The wheels of the law turned slowly. And court cases were generally slow drawn out affairs. Was he prepared to put himself and his son through that?

Thoughts attach themselves to his wife’s prolong absences. Absences she could not, or would not explain. Shutting him out of her life. Unsure if they were living together, but separated. Or if they were separated, but living together. Having accepted the unrequited relationship for the semblance of being a family.

Time stood still, only to be resume again when Alice appeared with his morning coffee.

Killing the screen in time, as though he had been caught surfing porn. Not going unnoticed by Alice seeing the screen switch off hurriedly.

“Is everything all right Mister McCrae ... You seem... Not yourself today.” She enquires kindly like a doting mother.

“I’m fine Alice... Just a little tired. Thanks for the coffee... You are a God send.” He said hiding behind a smile.

“Call out if you need anything.” She informed him.

“Thank you Alice.” Watching her leave.

Waiting for the door to close before turning the screen back on. Still on the same page where he had left it.

A benign number displayed to the side of the name, waiting for him to make it malignant.

Without thought he reaches for the mobile taps the digits on the screen. Taking a deep breath leans back in his chair and swivels to look out at the miserable day now spitting at him on the window.

The dial tone rings several times before being answered by a woman's voice not too dissimilar to Alice's.

"Pritchard and Stone, how may I help you?" The polite voice asked.

"Hello... I was wondering if Thomas Pritchard was available." He asked tentatively.

"He is just on another call at the moment... Can I get him to call you?"

"That would be fine... My name is Doug McCrae... Barrister." Hoping that would expedite matters. Providing a number and the hours he himself would be available.

"Thank you Mister McCrae... Mister Pritchard will be in contact soon." The woman confirms the message

"I appreciate that... Thank you for your time." Killing the connection.

10:37AM and Doug fidgeted in his chair.

Pulling out case files in an attempt to occupy his mind. A mind filling itself with questions. His son. The family trust. The house. Even the law practice itself. How much could Helena get her hands on?

His mobile rang and vibrated loudly on the surface of the wooden desk. The number displayed was not *her's*. Recognizing it as Pritchard's the unsaved number. This was his last chance to bail. Slowly taking a deep breath picks up the mobile and answers it.

"McCrae speaking." Knowing too well the caller on the other end.

"Mister McCrae, Thomas Pritchard here returning your call...From one lawyer to another, how can I help you?"

"Please call me *Doug*."

"*Thomas*." Reciprocates Pritchard.

"Hmm... I'm not sure where to begin..." His mind blank as to what to say. Perhaps he was being silly. Paranoid.

"It never is..." Consoles Pritchard. "...How about we make a time to meet?"

"That sounds fine... I prefer not to meet in chambers... If you know what I mean." Asked Doug.

"I understand completely... We could do lunch, make it seem professional... If you know what I mean."

"Yes, yes... That would be good... Today too soon?" Doug enquired.

"Today would be perfect... Some place out of the way... Do you know *Vultures* on Vulcan Lane, off Willis?" Asked Pritchard.

“Who doesn’t? ... Best craft beers in town... Say One O’clock?”

“Excellent... I’ll see you soon.” Confirmed Pritchard making a note in his diary.

“Thanks Thomas... Bye.” Doug hangs up and contemplates the impending meeting.

He was very familiar with the bar. It would offer seclusion from prying eyes. And could be seen as a business lunch between lawyers. There is a knock at his door and Alice appears to announce Mister Rahul had arrived for his eleven o’clock appointment.

Though referrals were always beneficial, this was one he would have preferred to pass onto another. Perhaps he would hear the man out first. If only to gather the preliminary facts. It would pass the time until his meeting with Pritchard.

“Send him in Alice... Perhaps another coffee if that’s possible?” Asked Doug composing himself and organizing the colorful files on his desk.

A man appears at the door holding a file of his own. Looking lost and confused and sees Doug standing to greet him.

*‘Legal aid.’* Immediately thought Doug seeing a man enter casually dressed, and of insufficient means.

Perhaps he would take it on.

“Mister Rahul... Please come in... Take a seat.” Said Doug offering his hand to welcome him.

“Mister McCrae... Sir... Thank you for seeing me.”

“It’s my pleasure Mister Rahul... How can I be of service?” Eyeing the police report in his hand.

“Oh yes... Sorry...” Passing the file to him, “...Mister Smith said you are one of the best.”

“That is very kind of Mister Smith.” Doug lied.

Silence fell like a cone of silence over Rahul, as Doug read the police report.

“Well, well... You have been a naughty boy.” Doug grins, “...I see you have priors for the same thing.”

“I have to make a living Mister McCrae.” Confessed Rahul ignorantly.

“As do I Mister Rahul... That is why you will get the best possible defense the taxpayer can buy... You will be wanting legal aid in assuming?” Looking over his reading glasses.

“Of course Mister McCrae... I couldn't afford you without it... *They* said you were the best... *Can you help?*” Asked Rahul anxiously, being incarcerated within a lawyer’s office. Looking about the walls with shelves upon shelves of thick gilded books. Certificates embossed red seals stamped on them.

“And you shall get the best...” Informed Doug, “...Is this report accurate?” Seeing a procedural irregularity.

“Dunno... I reckons it is.” Trying to peer into the file from the far side of the desk.

“Really... Hmm...” Doug surmises the verdict, “... I think you have a very good chance Mister Rahul... Why don’t we schedule another appointment to go over your case before you head to court?”

“Thank you McCrae... Thank you very much.” Relieved, beaming a smile.

“How is Mister Smith may I ask?”

“He got nabbed up in Auckland... Judge threw the book at him.”

“Oh really... That didn’t take long...” Grinning with satisfaction, “... I’m sorry to hear that... Give him my regards should you speak with him.”

“Will do Mister McCrae Sir.” Replied Rahul standing to leave.

“I’ll be in touch shortly with a time to meet... Stop by reception on the way out to fill out the necessary legal aid forms.” Doug suggested.

And watches a guilty man walk from his office. The police had cocked up, sufficiently enough for the charges to be dropped. He could milk the case to the hilt and perhaps even pay for Pritchard’s fees.

Alice appears at the door with a fresh cup of coffee.

“Ah... Thank you Alice...” Taking a sip of the steaming black elixir. “...Just what I needed.”

Swiveling about on the chair looks over the city.

Somewhere among the tangled muddled concrete rainforest of towering buildings. Laid a small boutique bar. The clouds had parted to allow a brief interlude of sunshine to rain on the illustrious capital city.

In the distance he sees Courtney Place. Contemplating the fragments of the bizarre dream he had had of Samantha. As if to interject his thoughts the mobile vibrates and sees Helena’s number. Letting it ring and ring and ring and ring and ring and go to voice mail.

Two can play at that game...

# San Jennifer

Alfie watches the dull red trolley bus drive away, leaving him alone at the Evens Bay bus stop.

Aging cottages and villas clung to the hillside. Above him, he hears the engines of a whining passenger jet battling its approach to the airport. Cars and Lorries roll continuously along a busy coastal road.

In the distance, spies masts of the moored boats. A rush of sea breeze invigorates his nostrils, reminding him to keep moving. The skies had parted and a rare treat of warm sunlight radiated upon the earth.

Feeling the dull ache in his leg flitches at memory. Flashes of a violence erupts in his mind. Stopping in his tracks. Leans heavily on the knotted handle walking stick. And waits for the thought to pass.

Seagulls squawk and squabble over a scrap of food thrown by a human sitting on a nearby bench. Pulling the Alfie from caged thoughts. He looks behind, thinking he saw someone familiar following him.

“Piss off!” Hissing the warning under his breath.

A passerby momentarily looks at the old man talking to himself, before continuing on their way. Making his way along the board walk to a wharf. Boats rocked in the gentle swells that had creeped in from the notorious Cook Straight to find shelter in the inner harbor. Looking for one boat in particular. A fishing trawler belonging to a friend of his.

Seeing the large blue and white vessel brought a grin to the Alfie’s face.

“*San Jennifer...* There you are.” As though he were speaking to a lost love.

Searching the vessel for life only to see none.

Seagulls sat on the towering mast staring back at him ever hopeful the human would feed them. Not today. They would go unrewarded. Approaching a bench already occupied by a young man wearing a blue cap covering eyes transfixed on the same boat.

“Nice boat.” Said Alfie as he sits at the other end of the bench.

Leslie turns to see who the old man was talking to.

“Yeah-nah.” Replies Leslie.

The two sat in silence watching the boat heave up and down on the ocean surges.

“I use to work on it once.” Recalls Alfie.

“Y-you?” He asked, intrigued by the distant relationship.

“After the... War... When I was younger...” Confessing a former life.

“W-war? ... W-what w-war?” The lad asked curiously.

“Nam.” Said Alfie as though it was yesterday.

“Vietnam? ... Y-you w-were there?” Becoming more inquisitive.

“Yeah.” Said Alfie smiling at the thought.

Eyes fixed on the trawler as though to stop his mind wandering. Perhaps he had already said too much.

“W-what was it l-like? ... D-d-did you...” He asked becoming anxious.

“Did I kill anyone?” Alfie completed his question.

“Y-yeah.” Confirmed Leslie.

“Don’t know...” Alfie lied. “... It was mess... Nothing like what you see in the movies.”

“Oh.” Responded Leslie disappointed, falling silent.

Alfie recalled the dead bodies of the innocent villagers. The women. The children. Collateral damage they called it. Alfie saw nothing collateral about it.

“We were supposed to be helping them and we *shat* all over them... I don’t blame them for hating us...” He said shaking his head recollecting the chaos, “... Jungle warfare... Charlie was out there somewhere... Yanks that thought if they could fire enough bullets and drop enough bombs Charlie would give up and go home... And in the end it was us who went home.” Said Alfie disappointedly.

“W-who’s Ch-Charlie?” Asked Leslie.

“The Viet-Cong... VC... *Victor Charlie* we use to call *them*.”

“Oh...” Intrigued by the mysterious name. “... D-did you w-win?” The lad asking ignorantly.

“Don’t they teach anything in school these days?” Asked Alfie without thinking.

“Nah... D-don’t go t-to school any m-more.” Beginning to lose interest in the old man.

“I guess they wouldn’t teach it anymore... It’s a forgotten war son... It’s a war no one wanted...” He tells the young man beside him, “... No, we didn’t *win*... No one wins anymore.”

Returning his attention to the fishing boat, to occupy his single thought his mind could hold at that moment.

The two men sat in silence again. As though at a funeral, not knowing what to say in case they said the wrong thing.

“Breathe.” Said Alfie from nowhere.

“S-sorry?” Asked Leslie.

“Your stutter...” He begins to point out, “...I use to stutter once.”

“Y-you d-did? ... How’d y-you l-l-lose it?”

“You just have to breathe properly... Deeper... Try it.”

Taking a deep breath Leslie feels lungs fill with a cold air to the extremities.

“Think of your lungs like they are balloons... They need pressure to work properly.” He informed the lad.

Leslie recalls the advice from the man who had retrieved his baseball cap. Then looks at Alfie as if there were some connection.

“Thanks.” Taking a deep breath before he spoke.

“That’s feels better doesn’t it? ...” Asked Alfie.

“Yeah.” Grinning to himself.

“Had it long? ... The stutter?” Alfie asked wondering what had brought it on.

“S-since I w-was a k-id... S-s-sorry.” Said Leslie forgetting to breath.

“Don’t need to apologize to me son... Try that again... Deep breathe now.”

Taking a long slow deep breath filling his lungs to their extremities.

“Since I was a kid.” Said Leslie with a satisfied grin.

Alfie grinned with the lad. Happy to have parted wisdom onto the boy.

“Me too... I bet you a million dollars you never stutter when you sing?”

“Yeah-nah.” Respond Leslie having been unaware.

“Called a lot of names I bet.”

“Yeah.” He chuckles.

“Me too... What your name son?” Alfie asked extending his hand to the lad.

“Leslie.” He says proudly, sucking in a lungful.

“I’m Alfie.” Shaking the lad’s hand firmly.

A peace came over Leslie, as though he had found someone who cared about him.

Finding a friend in the most unlikely of people, an old man. Two men at different ends of a spectrum. One whose life was just beginning. The other whose life was all but done. One had the world at his feet.

The other had yet to take his first step into it. Pulling down on the Dodgers cap and feels its snug fit. Sun shone down on the bay. On the boats. And on the two men staring at the majestic fishing boat. The silence was broken by the approaching thunder of Toby.

Mutts and Runt following in his wake.

“Leslie you p-p-pussy!” Toby calls out to him, cowering under a grey hoodie trying to like a gangster.

“Who’s the idiot?” Asked Alfie recognizing the delinquent from the previous evening.

“That’s Toby... He’s taking the piss.” Taking a deep breath.

“I realize that...” Alfie grins taking a firm hold of the walking stick. And waits for idiot to arrive, “...Breathe.” Alfie reminds the lad.

Alfie ignores the juvenile standing in front of Leslie. As though he too did not exist and continues to stared blankly at the boats.

“What you hanging out here for all the time? Come with us... Who the old man?” Toby asked curiously sensing he recognized him from somewhere.

Toby waited for Leslie to stutter a reply.

“Don’t know.” Lied Leslie calmly.

“Hang with us bro... I got me a job now with Fletch.”

“Fletcher?”

“Yeah bro... Got some cigarettes too... Sees.” Pulling out a pack.

“Nah, thanks... Don’t s-smoke.” Leslie catches himself.

“Pussy... You coming with us?” He asked a final time.

“Yeah-nah, Think I’ll hang out here...” Taking another breath, “... Watch the boats eh.”

“We’re heading to town... Last chance!” Toby kicks at the walking stick hoping to dislodge it and upset the old man.

Alfie holds on firmly. The two men make eye contact. Something in the old man’s eye told Toby he recognized him.

“I know you.” Said Toby, recalling the old man on Cuba Street.

“And I know you.” Replied Alfie unafraid.



“Leave him alone Toby... He’s with me.” Defends Leslie.

“Thought you said you didn’t know him retard?”

“I do now.” Warned Leslie about to stand up.

“It’s okay Leslie.” Said Alfie wanting to defuse the situation.

Toby looks suspiciously at Alfie unsure what to make of him.

“You will keep old man.” Warns Toby.

“You know where to find me son.” Alfie informs the delinquent as though to accept the offer.

“Yeah.” Said Toby.

“Piss off T-Toby.” Stutters Leslie becoming agitated.

“Hey? ... Isn’t that the cap? ... How’d you get that?” Looking to the water.

“Magic.” Said Leslie, if only to annoy Toby further.

“Is he coming or not? ... Bus is almost here.” Asked Mutts anxious to get going.

“Nah... P-p-pussy here w-w-wants to h-h-hang out with the o-o-old m-m-man.” Stutters Toby walking away.

“Hey Toby.” Calls out Leslie at the last moment.

“What you want?”

“Don’t forget to breathe!”

“Ah\_ fuck you p-p-pussy!” Toby calls back walking away.

“Nice one.” Offered Alfie.

“Who’s this *Fletcher*?” Asked Alfie curiously.

“Runs a strip club on Vivian... And some other *stuff*... I-i-f you know w-what m-mean.” Said Leslie running out of breath.

“Think I know the place... I live nearby.” Recalling Toby entering the place, “... You hang out here all the time?”

“Yeah I like it here...” Taking a breath, “...The boats... The water...” He inhales again, “... Got no other place to go.”

“I’m heading to the museum soon... If you want to come along?”

“M-museum? ...” Catching himself, “...Old stuff?”

“Yeah, old stuff, like me...” Chuckles Alfie, “... You like art?”

“Suppose... Ain’t no good with w-words...” Pausing to breathe, “... I get them mixed up... If you know what I mean.”

“Yeah I do... Dyslexia right?”

“Yeah... That’s what the teachers called it.”

Alfie was beginning to understand the lad's troubled past. No wonder the world had abandoned him and spat him out. He was seeing a lot of himself in the boy.

"I like drawing... At school it w-was the only thing I was g-g-good at."  
Said Leslie becoming anxious again.

"Makes sense." Comforted Alfie.

"It does?" Taking Leslie by surprise.

"Yeah..." Said Alfie grinning, "...Come on, we can catch the next bus." ...

# Vultures on Vulcan Lane

By the time Doug had arrived, Vultures had crowded with lunchtime office workers.

Looking about for Pritchard sees no one obvious and heads for the bar and waits to be served. The man beside him looked out of place. As though he had lost directions to the crack house. Hinging himself to the bar the man rocked back gently to the tune in his head. Staring blankly at the opposite wall that was staring blankly back at him. A plaid shirt covered a black tee glorifying Guns and Roses. A thick silver wallet chain garlanded at his side. A dark backward facing baseball cap completed the heavy-metal guise.

Tattoos adorned most of his visible flesh and Doug could only imagine what laid beneath the shirt and faded jeans. Tattoos that screamed *'keep the fuck away from me if you know what's good for you.'* In front of him sat an empty shot glass, an empty whiskey glass with melted ice cubes remaining, and half a bottle of beer.

"Bad day at the office?" Doug asked trying to lighten the mood.

There was a pause below the man spoke. Like a needle before a vinyl record played.

"Any day I kill any one is a bad day." Replies the man still staring at the wall.

"Oh I see... Here's my card if you ever need a lawyer." Pulling a card from his pocket and sliding it on the bar.

Sniffing, nostrils twitch at an irritation, fingers fumble to pick up the card to inspect it. Looking Doug over. Matches him to the card. Doug grimaces as the man slowly he reaches beneath the shirt as though he were about to pull out a gun.

"Here's mine." Said the man unobtrusively opening his wallet to reveal a detective badge.

"Oh I'm sorry... I just thought..." Surprised by the camouflaged officer.

"Yeah... I get that a lot... *You have a nice day now.*" The man replies in a slow New York drawl, encouraging Doug to be on his way.

Inspecting the card again, the man pockets it.

“I take referrals.” Adds Doug throwing a sales pitch.

“Doug! Doug!” A voice calls out from a distant table.

A man in dark pin striped suit raised a glass of chardonnay. Doug waves back and makes his way to the table through swaying intoxicated patrons.

Half standing Pritchard extends his hand to him who shakes it before sitting down.

“I’ve taken the liberty.” Said Pritchard indicating another glass of chardonnay on the table.

“Cheers.” Examining the glass, hoping that it would sooth his nerves.

Looking back to the detective. Only one man had nerve to stand close to the man. Perhaps his partner. Looking more like a crazed poet. They could have been brothers. Were it not for the tattoos.

But their worlds could not be further apart.

“I want my pork ribs like I’ve just delivered a baby.” The detective explains to the bard listening on intently.

Conjuring images of fingers bloodied with grease and barbecue sauce in the poet’s mind. Rousing an appetite, reaches for the menu. A black and white sheep dog curled up at his feet. Its nose sniffing the air filled with odors of food and humans alike. Its eyes tether with Doug’s and a feeling of Deja vu passed between them. Where had they seen the other before? A life time ago.

The dog whimpers as he recalls the little boy in the passing car.

“I understand not wanting to meet in chambers...” Pritchard interjects Doug’s distant thoughts.

Scanning the bar for other similarly dressed professionals masquerading as lawyers,

“...Can’t be too careful... Word spreads quickly in our fraternity.”

“Indeed.” Agrees Doug surveying tables about them.

“So... Can I help Doug?” He asked.

“I am not sure actually... It’s my *first* time at *this*.” Searched for the right words.

“First time is always the hardest...”

“I suppose it is.” Recalling Watson’s multiple divorces.

“You seeing another woman?” Pritchard asked plainly.

“Ha... I wish... Dave suggested I should speak to you.”

“How is Dave?” Asked Pritchard.

“Good, good I think... Same as ever... Still wife number four I think.”

“Give him my regards next time you see him.” Asked Pritchard.

“I will do that.”

“So your wife is seeing another woman?” Punned Pritchard.

“Woman?” Asked Doug thrown by the suggestion.

“One never knows these days Doug.”

“Yeah, yeah I suppose... No, no I don’t think so.” Caught in the twilight zone of the thought.

“How long have you been having *troubles*?” Pritchard sort details.

“Three years I suppose.”

“*Three years?*” Pritchard chokes on the wine.

“Is that bad?” Inquired Doug.

“That’s longer than most people would tolerate... You’ve done well to hold out that long.”

“Thanks... I think.” Taking a sip of the wine.

Doug informed Pritchard of his wife’s absences and their separate lives.

It was an all too familiar ballad his clients sung. Pritchard sat nodding his head. And making notes in a black note book. Doug looks around hoping no one was overhearing him divulge his private life falling apart.

“Hotels and credit cards... I see...” Repeated Pritchard piecing the puzzle together. Closing the book, stares blankly at Doug. Who stared blankly back at him. And gave his opinion. There was kind way to say it, “... She’s having an affair Doug.”

“No... No. She’s out with her girlfriends.” Denying Pritchard’s ridiculous claim.

“Doug... Wake up... Smell the coffee... If this woman was anymore noxious weed or nocturnal pest we’ll need an environmental Lawyer... Craig.”

“Craig?” Asked Doug curiously.

“Once he successfully defended a position quoting three cases verbatim... Producing two witnesses... And without any evidence.”

“That’s impressive.” Said Doug appreciating the legal achievement.

“It would have been if it’d been in a court of law... No, this was down at the club...” Qualified Pritchard, “... Best we stay well clear of Craig for now. But God help us if your wife uses him.”

“Oh?” Doug sat quiet and stunned.

“Look Doug... I can tell you love your wife and family dearly, but... She’s having an affair... It’s written all over the bank statements.”

“No not possible... There’s a perfect explanation for the spending.” He counters with a naïve look on his face.

“Why are you *here* then Doug?” He asked, bringing Doug back to earth.

Doug fell silent. The wheel had come full circle and he found himself facing the real possibility that his marriage was over.

With or without an affair. With or without another women being involved.

“Where do I stand? ... With my son?” Asked Doug getting to the crux of the matter.

“Ah... Now I understand... I went through it myself with my son... I empathize with you Doug.”

“I don’t really care about the money or the house... But I can’t let her take my son away.”

“She won’t get your son if I can help it.” Advised Pritchard taking a swallow to calm his own nerves, “... Though the Courts lend towards the mothers for custody, the pendulum has begun to swing back to fathers.”

“I see... What can I do?” Said Doug.

“First things first... We need to find out more about your wife’s nocturnal activities... I suggest you make inquiries into the hotel payments.”

“I can do that?”

“Why not... It’s your card.”

“How?”

“Call them... Ask about an item you think you left behind when you stayed there with your wife.”

“But I didn’t.”

“They don’t know that...”

“I see.” Beginning to understand the twisted ploy.

“Or simply question them about the billing... Have them provide a receipt... Anything to prove she wasn’t alone... I know someone who can help if you need someone.”

“A private investigator?” Doug speculates.

“Why not? ... They know all the tricks... They could follow her... Get photographs.”

“Oh...” Taken back by the surveillance. “...You can do that?”

“All part of the service...” Pritchard watches Doug’s reaction, “...If we can catch her in the act... Together with her abandonment of your son. It shouldn’t be too hard to convince a judge she is unworthy of keeping the child.” Summed up Pritchard.

Refusing to accept the facts. His mind filling again with unanswered questions. The thought his wife was having an affair was absurd. What if she found out he was spying on her? Would it make matters worse? What if she took the boy?

The pendulum of his conscience swung one way. Then the other. Then it settled.

“Okay.” Committed Doug.

“Okay what?” Asked Pritchard.

“The Private Investigator.” Enlightened Doug.

“A wise decision Doug. You won’t regret it... I know just the man. He’s one of the best in the business. Here’s his number... Call him and arrange a time to meet.” Pritchard scribbles a name and number on a napkin and pushes it towards Doug.

Doug examines the scribbles.

“Ray Finch.” Reading the name aloud.

“The best Doug... He’ll get to root of the matter better than Mueller ever did... And you’ll get full disclosure...” Pritchard humored.

Folding the napkin carefully slides it into his pocket.

“Thanks Thomas... You’ve been very *enlightening*.” Sitting back to take a sip of the wine.

“Let Ray do his job and I’ll do mine... Worse case she is with her girlfriends as you say... Best case is you get to keep your son.” Suggests Pritchard. Waving down the waitress for another glass.

“Not for me thanks Thomas... Some of us have to work for a living.” Doug humored standing leave.

“I’ll be in touch.” Informed Pritchard raising his glass to farewell Doug.

“Thanks for the wine and advice.”

“No, thank you... I’ll be adding it to your bill.” Grinned Pritchard.

Causing Doug to grin with him. There was no such thing as a free lunch. Making his way onto Vulcan Lane. He felt the chill in the air flowing along the narrow lane. Relieved to have escaped the stuffiness of the bar.

Relieved he could put his wife's nocturnal absences to rest.

Back at the office.

Closes the door behind him and collapses into the comfort of his leather chair. Pulling the napkin from a pocket. Examines the name and number. How far down the rabbit hole did he want to go? Without thinking he dials the number and waits for it to be answered.

Within moments a man's voice answers.

"Ray Finch speaking... How can I help?" Answered the authoritative voice...



# Federation Motorcycle Club

Toby knocks loudly on the door clutching a small red note book in his other hand.

And waits anxiously for it to be answered. Knocking again to get the occupant's attention. Shuffling feet on the door step. Exposed to the elements battering him. With no response, he bangs on the door with a fist. Causing the door to rattle on its hinges.

"Hold your horses! ... I'm coming!" A grumpy old voice calls out from inside impatiently.

"Hurry up I don't have all day!" Toby barks back.

The door opens and an old man squints into the bright light of day having been disturbed from a snooze.

"What do you want?" An old man asks eyeing the lad up and down. Unsure what to make of the troublesome young man standing before him.

"I'm here to collect the rent for Mister Fletcher." Informed Toby.

"He said nothing about sending someone else... He usually picks it up himself..." Said the old man.

"Well I work for him now and he's asked me to collect for him." Warns Toby, wearing whatever patience he had thin.

"Hmm..." The old man grumbles recognizing the little red note book, "...Wait here while I'll get it."

"Hurry up old man!" Calls out Toby.

The old man ignores the lad's tone and shuffles into the darkness of the hall. Returning holding a tin jar stuffed with money. Pulling out the amount and hands the notes to Toby.

"Do I get a receipt?" Asked the old man.

"Nah..." Informed Toby shoving the money into his pocket and marking the address off in the note book, "...I'll be back next week."

"Whatever." Said the man happy to see the back of the troublesome individual.

Closing the door to return to his afternoon snooze. Leaving Toby standing on the door step checking the note book for his next property.

"Island Bay... Fuck me! ... How am I supposed to get out there?" He asked himself.

And looks about for the nearest bus stop. The day had clouded over and the wind picked up again. Rain was on its way and the last thing he wanted was to be caught in it. The sooner he made it to the last house the sooner he could head back and drop the money off.

With pockets bulging with cash, illicit thoughts of running off crossed his mind. Only to be stifled by the thought of being beaten senseless by one of Fletcher's thugs. Even his limited intelligence told him it was not worth the risk.

A bus arrived, the display stated it was heading in the direction he wanted to go.

"Island Bay." Toby requests a ticket.

Hoping Fletcher would understand, he pulls a fifty from a pocket to pay for the ticket. The bus driver immediately complains at the size of the denomination.

"Oh come on mate... Ain't you got anything smaller?" Asked the bus driver looking awkwardly at the note.

"Funny eh, cos my girlfriend saids the same thing eh..." Joked Toby, "...He-he-he."

"Wise guy eh... I should make you walk." Warned the driver reaching for change.

"Nah\_ man... It's going to rain eh." Toby protests, looking outside.

"Yeah, yeah, take a seat." Pushing the change and ticket back at him. Closing the door behind him.

Just then a burst of rain stuck the windscreen. Wiry insufficient wiper blades scrape back and forth desperately trying to wipe away the heavy tears. A sudden gust of wind buffered the dull red bus. Any other bus driver in any other country would have checked outside for the end of the world. But this was just another windy day in windy Wellington.

And proceeded to make its way along long narrow streets towards Island Bay.

Wiping the misting window with a sleeve, Toby watches as squat working class houses pass by.

Reminding him of his own home. A place he did not want to be. It was a roof over his head until he got a place of his own. Hoping that working for Fletcher would afford him a crib of his own. Thinking maybe Leslie could join him. He was like a brother he never had. The thought appealed

to him and he grinned. Sitting behind him, a man grinned with him. There was goodness in everyone.

All it took was a single thought to find it, even if it is not our own.

A passenger pulls on a cord and the bus crawls back to the curb. Watching passengers scramble off the old bus and run for shelter. Toby chuckled at them getting caught in the rain. The bus moves off and after countless more stops finally reaches the end of the line. Island Bay.

Any further and it would end up in the sea.

Much as it had started raining it suddenly stopped and clouds tore open and rained sunshine through the tear.

“Good timing kid.” Called out the bus driver.

“Yeah.” Toby acknowledges.

And watches the bus drive away, leaving him alone on the sidewalk.

On the other side of the narrow road a row of identical small white cottages sitting side by side by side. Looking like crustaceans, shells clinging to the base of the hillside. Opposite them, waves crashed onto large roughed rocks. Kicking up sea foam into a fine mist. Fishing boats crawled across the boiling ocean. Snowcapped peaks of the Mainland in the distance beyond them.

Opening the red note book for an address. The last on his list of a dozen houses Fletcher owned. And looks about for the right address. A metal gate squeaked on its hinges giving Toby’s presence arrival. Samantha looks up momentarily thinking she heard a sound. Soon followed by a knock at the door.

“Wait here sweetie.” She tells her daughter.

“Kay mommy.” Playing with cuddly toys.

Samantha opens the door expecting to see Fletcher. But discovers a lanky youth standing on her doorstep in his place.

“Can I help?” Samantha asked cagily, uncertain what to make of the young man’s presence.

The only assurance of being the red note book in his hand. The same type that Fletcher carried with him.

“Mister Fletcher sent me to collect the rent.” Toby said for what seemed like the hundredth time.

“Oh I see... Let me get it, stay here.” Samantha disappears closing the door to keep out the chill of the day.

Toby waits on the doorstep.

Hearing the door reopen, Samantha appears with cash in her hand. Pocketing the money and marks the amount off in the note book. About leave, Samantha remembers what Kaye had told her.

“Hey... Just a moment, what’s your name?” She asked the stranger on her doorstep.

“Toby... What’s it to you?” Challenged Toby taken back by the inquiry.

“Just wanted to know should Mister Fletcher came calling for his rent... Next time you see him ask him for bank account number... Tell him I want to pay the rent by automatic payment ... Could you tell him that?” Asked Samantha seeing the lad confused.

“Yeah... I’ll tell him.” Said Toby.

Sarah appears behind her mother and listens on. Across the road she sees a man sitting on the bench. His back to her. Recognizing him as the same man from the bus stops. The man smiled at her thought. Sarah watches him blow away with the wind.

And she smiles with him.

“You might want to make a note in your note book.” She instructed him.

“I’ll remember...” Said Toby walking away, “...I’ll tell him okay.”

“Okay... Thanks.” Said Samantha closing the door behind her.

“Who was that mommy?” She asked curiously.

“No one honey... Just a friend of Mister Fletcher come for the rent.”

“Everything will be okay mommy.”

“I know sweetie, I know... Come here...” Picking her up and hugging her close. Smothering her daughter with kisses. “... You been talking to your friend again?”

“Hm-mm.” Confirmed Sarah hugging her mother back.

“You’re short?” Barked Fletcher counting out the takings.

“I needed bus money to get out to Island Bay.” Toby pleaded the unexpected expenditure.

“I see... I’ll take it out of your wages.” Warned Fletcher.

“When do you think I’d get paid Fletch?” He asked keenly.

“Soon... soon...” Fletcher grinned looking over to the muscle filling the door way grinning back at him. “... I need you to run a little errand for me... Then I’ll fix you up... How’d you like that?”

“Yeah sure.” Toby said eagerly.

Fletcher pulls a twenty from the folds of cash and hands it to Toby.

“Train fare... Here’s the address you need to go to... Take this and give it the person there... They give you a package in exchange...” Instructs Fletcher pushing a brown envelope towards him, “...Think you can do that?”

“Sure.” Toby picks up the envelope and feels the weight before shoving it in his jacket pocket.

“Don’t come back without the parcel... *Understood?* ...” Threatening as though there would be *consequences*, “...I would get Morris here to drive you but I need him here.” Fletcher lied.

“Yes Mister Fletcher... Fletch... You can count on me.” Toby responds obediently.

“Good, good... I knew I could trust you... Off you go.” Returning to his whiskey and cigar.

“Oh yeah...” Said Toby before he forgot, “...The lady at Island Bay said he wanted...”

“Wanted what?” Interrupted Fletcher before Toby could finished.

“... Wanted your bank account number... Something about paying her rent to it... Automatic payment, or something.”

“Did she now? ... Hmm...” Fletcher contemplates the request, “... Leave that with me Toby... I’ll sort that bitch out.” Eye brow knit together and looks to Morris for a possible solution.

Fletcher turns to look at the two way mirror, ignoring Toby’s presence. Suggesting he should be on his way. Toby passes beneath the shadow of the towering muscled man standing aside at the door. Making him feel insignificant.

Toby checks the address scrawled on the piece of paper.

“Fuck me... Hutt Valley?” Then recalls the twenty Fletcher had given him.

It would be a long haul to get there and back before it got dark.

The train shakes rattles and rolls along the foreshore towards the Petone.

Before deviating up the valley. Rocking Toby in his seat, loud music pulsed through ear phones before filling the void of his skull. At an uninhabited platform the train grinds to a halt. And he looks about for the direction to head.

Watching a man with a newspaper get off with him and walk the other way. Thinking nothing of it feels for the parcel in his pocket curious as to what it might contain. Speculating by its weight contained money. Lots of money. The thoughts of running off entered his mind only to be overshadowed by the beating he would receive from Morris.

The address was still a two blocks away. An easy walk for him. Taking unfamiliar streets he felt a dreariness about the place. Uninviting squat houses sat on sterile sections void of color as if the grey skies had bleached them of their will to live. Turning the corner onto the street of his destination discovers a walled compound. Rimmed with razor wire.

Halting him in his tracks.

Black motor cycles and muscle cars lined the street outside the entrance. Patched menacing gang members look up and see a lanky individual standing on the corner looking at them. As though he was scared to come closer.

Their black leather jackets emblazoned with the club's name and insignia...

## FEDERATION MOTORCYCLE CLUB

Toby re-checks the address.

*'Yeah this was the place alright...'* He thinks to himself. *'...Shit.'*

His heart quickens before contemplating taking another step. Feeling for the parcel he was about to deliver. Fearing he would be beaten and fleeced of the cash. This was the place Fletcher wanted him to be. Taking a deep breath focuses on the entrance and gingerly steps forward.

Intimidating faces watch him approach.

"What you want punk?" An aggressive voice asks, causing other members to chuckle.

"*Mister Fletcher* sent me." Responds Toby anxiously looks about the faces staring down on him.

A large black pit-bull dog barks and snarls at him. Snapping jaws and drooling saliva. Pulling at a heavy chain holding him back.

Canines eager to bite flesh.

"Did he now?" Asked the gate keeper eyeing Toby over unsure what to make of the mule.

Standing over Toby, close enough for him to smell the booze and cigarette and body odor and testosterone seeping from the man's pores. Feeling paltry Toby tries to step back. Only to bump into another man standing closely behind him. Forcing him to raise his arms as a gang member searches him. Patting him down roughly and grabbing his crouch because he could. Toby flinched at the intrusion but remained defiantly silent.

Pushing Toby forward to say he was done with him.

"He clean." The man informs the gate keeper.

"This way." The gate keeper tells Toby to follow him.

Ignoring the errand boy, men continue their illicit conversations. Entering a fortress of high corrugated walls topped with spiraling barbed wire. Dismantled bikes laid sprawled across work benches. Metallic music blared over large speakers. Drowning out whistling blow torches and hammers that slammed metal on metal. Illicit odors lace with acetylene and ozone.

Vicious dogs barked and pulled on chains sensing a stranger among them.

There was an eerie silence as he passed rooms and corridors lined with flags and patches. A sweet pungent smell hung in the air. Unable to resist, inhaled what he could. Chains hung from the walls. Tattooed bodies and skin heads stood menacingly by and watched him pass.

Women eye him up and down.

"Want some pussy little boy? ..." One calls out to tease him, "... Fresh meat." She licks her lips. Toby smiles perhaps to take her up on the offer.

Only to have the women begin to laugh at him.

"Wait here." The man grunts at him placing a heavy hand on his shoulder.

Glaring at him to stay put. Leaving him encircled by other members. Incapable of escape. Sandwiched between the merciless warriors.

"This way." The man returns and leads him to a room with a table and tells him to sit down.

A second door opens. A man enters and sits opposite Toby. Two members stand watch at a doors.

The room flickering in and out of darkness as an overhead fluorescent light clung to life.

“You got something for me?” The man asked coarsely.

Toby stares at the man as though he had forgotten about the package he was carrying.

“Oh... Yeah.” Reaching into a pocket and pulls out the plain brown parcel and pushes it towards him.

A man behind Toby steps forward and takes the packages. Tearing it open and examines the contents. Quickly determining the count, nods to the man behind the desk that everything was in order. The man behind the desk nods to gang member at the door who produces another plain wrapped parcel. Somewhat larger than the first. And somewhat heavier.

A kilo heavier, and places it before Toby.

“Take that back to your boss....” Said the man behind the desk. “... Don’t lose it.”

Gang members chuckle at the thought. The man behind the desk stands and leaves as quietly as he had arrived leaving Toby with the two heavy set members watching his every move.

“This way.” A gang member grunts at Toby to follow.

Retracing steps makes his way back to the entrance. The man ejaculates Toby back onto the street again. And disowning him. And carried on dishonest conversations of criminal deeds and illicit women.

The brown package in Toby’s hand giving away the purpose of his visit.

Some distance down the street, a surveillance van snaps images of a lad leaving with a parcel.

Looking like a fish out of water.

*‘Click-click-click.’* A camera captures the mule.

“We getting this?” Asked a detective.

“Yeah, yeah. Who’s the new guy?” Another asked.

“Dunno... Same guy that left The Palace.” Acknowledged another detective.

“Follow him.” Orders the senior detective.

“Copy that.” Radios an operative on the street, folding a tired newspaper.

Toby makes his way back to the station platform, burdened with heavy parcel. His mind trying to determine its contents. Cocaine, heroin, marijuana?



“Shit.” He said to himself. Fearful of being caught with it on him. All a little too late to take it back now. He had to get it back as soon as he could.

Looking about the platform for suspicious people. Only to see innocuous looking gentleman reading a newspaper. Shoving the parcel inside his jacket to hide it from sight. The train seem to take forever to arrive. And he found himself a remote corner seat at the back of the train. Everyone seemed to be looking at him. The train seemed to take forever to arrive back at the old Wellington station.

Toby boarded a dull red trolley bus outside the station. The detective with the newspaper followed unseen some distance behind. Flagging down a taxi to follow a trolley bus that was heading towards Vivian. Toby cursed the stoppages from fallen terminal poles.

“Stay with the bus.” The detective instructed the taxi driver.

Showing his badge in the rear vision mirror.

Toby appeared in Fletcher’s doorway panting, unable to get up the stairs fast enough.

Clutching his belly as though he were about to give birth. Allowing the mass to slide out from beneath his hoodie. Holding the parcel out to Fletcher as though a new born baby. Not one to handle drugs himself, Fletcher instructs Morris to examine the contents of the package.

Morris tears away the brown paper wrapping to reveal a brick of powder wrapped in cellophane. Skillfully puncturing the package with a pointed blade takes a sample on his tongue. Nostrils twitch as he savors the familiar numbing sensation. Then nods his head to confirm it was good.

Fletcher signals him to take the package away.

“You did well Toby...” Fletcher asked curiously, “... Here, have this as your wages.”

Fletcher peels off two hundred dollar notes and places them on the table.

“Ghee thanks Fletch.” His eyes lighting up wide.

“No... Thank you Toby... I know I can trust you.” He lied. “...Drink?”

“Wouldn’t say no.” Eager for a taste of liquor.

Fletcher generously pours a glass of whiskey and a small one for himself.

And watches the underling take his first steps into the world of crime. Their attention now diverted by Abigail appearing on the stage. Peeling

away a scanty red costume as she danced erotically to the pulsating music. Her seductive young body swayed side to side. Swinging gracefully about the silver pole. Part ballerina. Part stripper. The wanton erotic dance spellbinding. Hypnotic.

Incorrigible intoxicated young bulls watch on eagerly. Impotent of any rational thought. Slipping money under her garter belt.

Emptying wallets and credit cards of their own freewill...

# Operation Timbuktu

“Ray Finch speaking.” Answered the authoritative voice.

“Mister Finch... Doug, Doug McCrae.” He replied trying not to sound anxious.

“Mister McCrae, how can I be of service?” Finch asked curiously.

“Thomas Pritchard suggested I give you a call.”

“Did he now... Hmm.”

“Said you handled ah\_...” Trying to find the right words but could not say them.

“I fully understand Mister McCrae... Say no more... These *things* are never easy.”

“Yes... No... I suppose they’re not...” He accepts graciously.

“We should arrange a time to meet... My office... Unless you prefer someplace else?” Finch asked.

“You’re office would be fine. Fine. What time suits you?” Relieved to have avoided his office or another bar.

“How about this Thursday? ... Say\_ at two?” Inquired Finch, “... I have a pressing case that needs typing up... We should take an hour tops.”

“Let me check my diary...” Informed Doug, scrolling through a calendar of appointments.

Seeing a conflict he weighs the meeting with a client with his own immediate concerns and decides to reschedule the client, “... Perfect.”

“Very good then... I’ll email you my address.”

“But you don’t know my email address?”

“Doug... I’m a private investigator... I’ve found you while we’ve been talking... Check your email and confirm back to me...”

Doug open’s his email and discovers an email from Ray Finch awaiting confirmation.

“I have it... Thanks... You are good!”

“I’ll see you Thursday at two Doug...” Confirming the appointment.  
“... We can discuss *things* then.”

“Thursday at two... Bye.” Confirms Doug.

Hanging up he stares at the innocuous email sitting in the email inbox. Doubling clicking on it, finds Finch’s address was on the Terrace. Just the

next street over. An easy walk from his office. Looking to the door hoping Alice would not appear. A link on the email took him to a website detailing Finch's services. But not an image of him, guessing it was not something a private investigator would want to publicize.

"Reschedule my two o'clock appointment on Thursday would you Alice... Something *urgent* had cropped up." Informed Doug.

"Certainly Mister McCrae." Responded Alice automatically.

"Thank you." Doug takes a satisfying sip of his coffee.

Alfie shuffled up the steps to the art museum like an old man.

Leslie loitered behind him, wondering what was taking Alfie so long and where he was leading him. A large grey stone building stood invisible. Unnoticed by Leslie in all the short years of his life. A large glass-wooden door rotated slowly smoothly on a heavy axle without a sound.

Mute from a century of service.

Entering a world of silence. Polished black and white tiled floors greeted the odd couple. Artificial light illuminated the massive hallway. Sterile of life, other than themselves. Alfie waddled along a corridor as if he had been there a thousand times. His walking stick making a sharp clicking sound as it struck the marble floor.

Standing at the base of a stair case led to an upper floor.

"This way." He tells Leslie to follow.

Through large double doors they enter a large hall with high ceiling and green painted walls. Hung with large paintings of majestic landscapes. In the middle of the great hall a series of long wooden padded pews, providing visitors a place to sit and view the art work.

Like a child visiting Santa's grotto for the first time Leslie's eyes open wide. His artistic mind absorbing what a linguistic mind could not. Staring at a picture awash with colors and contours. Symmetries and perspectives fell into place.

Taking a central pew, the pair sat in silence. Sensing the lad's appetite had been whetted, let Leslie be to discover the beauty for himself.

"Amazing..." Leslie finally speaks, "...I n-never knew this p-place was here." Looking about the large walls adorned with treasures.

"There is more upstairs... More contemporary." Advised Alfie.

"Contemporary?" Asked Leslie.

"Modern."

“Ohh.” Feeling embarrassed.

“You might even like it... You can take the stairs... I’ll take the lift.” Said Alfie heading for the elevator, “...I’ll race you to the top... No running.”

“You’re on old man.” Accepting the challenge.

Alfie was never in a rush. There was no *I* in rush.

Time had stood still since his wife had died. Since... The thought stood still as he waited for the lift to arrive. Doors opened slowly and he enters to watch the doors unhurriedly close again behind him. The lift groaned as it ascended to the next floor only to open and find Leslie already engrossed with the art on display.

Bright vibrant colors danced in contrast to the dull landscapes of the floor below. Tantalizing his visual taste buds further and challenging his mind.

“What do you think?” Asked Alfie engaging the lad’s thoughts.

“Dun-no...” Responded Leslie unable to comprehend the abstract shapes and colors being thrown at him. “...I could do this stuff.”

“*Stuff?* ...” Exclaimed Alfie, “...Some of this *stuff* is worth hundreds of thousands of dollars.”

“No way... This?” He takes a closer look at the bizarre array of images.

A curator passes and eyes Leslie up and down as if he did not belong.

“He’s with me...” Said Alfie with a smile, to alleviate the curator’s concern, “...My grandson.” He lied.

“Oh... Enjoy.” Said the curator walking on by. Unable to see a similarity.

“Grandson?” Leslie whispers.

“Ah fuck him.” Deflects Alfie, dismissing the curator.

Wandering about the room Leslie takes in the unusual pieces. A mind trying to interpret the artist’s brush strokes. A mind formulating his own meaning of the lines and shapes. Alfie could see the boy lost in a world of his own.

Then he came to one of a boat. Blue and white and thoughts of the trawler came to mind.

“Hey, this one is like that b-boat.” Becoming anxious and excited.

“Yeah it is... One of my favorites.” Said Alfie taking a seat to rest his leg beginning to throb with a dull ache.

“You okay?” Seeing the old flicht as he sat down.

“Just an old war wound...” Alfie lies.

“You were shot?” Asked Leslie curiously.

“Yeah... Just a scratch really.”

“Did it hurt?” Then realizing it was a dumb question.

“No... Not really.” Said Alfie taking Leslie by surprise.

“Eh?”

“It all happened so quickly...” Reflects Alfie. His mind fighting the thought.

Taking a seat beside him, Leslie watches the old man staring blankly into space, as if he were being drawn to a deep... dark... place...

... Incarcerated inside a bamboo cage, a naked body huddled shaking.

Powerless to escape the hell of heat and perpetual stench. Thankful for rain that leaked through an opening in the roof that rehydrated him and washed away muck and filth. Guards threw scraps of food at him as though he were a caged animal. Mosquitos feed on his bones. Ravaging him with diarrhea and vomiting and agonizing cramps, that only amused his captives.

Having lost the track of time. It could have been weeks. It could have been months since his capture. Charlie had out witted him. Mowing down his men in ambush he should have seen coming. Surviving because he was an officer. Alfie refused to talk. Death knocked at his door with each beating.

He would not break.

Guards poked at him between the bars with the barrels of their rifles. Tormenting him. Keeping him awake. Keeping him alive. In the middle of the night they would drag his naked body from the cage. Bind him to a wooden chair then hold a rifle to his head they make suggestive motions of shooting.

“Fuck you...” Spits Alfie pressing his head against the barrel to dare them, “...Do it... Get it over with!”

Charlie laughs at him. This one was a fighter.

A rifle butt strikes him across the face knocking him semi-conscious. Relishing in the pain Alfie laughs back at them. Spitting blood and mucus

onto the dirt floor.

Pulling him upright the Charlie continue their interrogation.

“Where?!” A guard asks in Vietcong poking at a map.

Alfie had no idea what the man was asking. But he was obviously wanting something.

“Operation Timbuktu...” Alfie lies, “... Twenty thousand men... Maybe more... Soon... East...” He embellished the lie. Sending them off to chase ghosts.

“Tim-buk-too... Twen-ty thou\_sand ... East!” The inquisitor parrots the recognized words.

Alfie slumps exhausted feeding the devil what he wanted to hear. Hoping the devil would leave him alone. A guard throws a bucket of dirty water over him. Resurrecting a spirit from malnourished soul. Another guard rewards him with a half-eaten piece of chicken. Throwing it at him on the ground. Reaching for the morsel. Hurriedly wipes the dirt from it and shoves it into his mouth.

The first real food he had had in days.

Charlie hands him a mug of filthy water and Alfie gulps it down. Feeling it wash down his throat to his stomach. Life returned behind the sunken eyes. Feeding them false information at opportune moments. Enough to buy him food and water to survive another week.

Outside, somewhere in the distance. The distinctive chatter AK-47s and M-16s arguing. Too many clicks away to be of any hope. Fighter jets and Hueys flew overhead unaware of his captivity. To them he was as good as dead. To himself, he was as good as dead. Probably the only card he had left to play.

Charlie dragged him back to the bamboo cage. Pushing him inside the cramped prison cell. Chaining the door behind him. A radio fires up in the back ground and over hears crackling voices as a guard relays the information back to HQ.

Alfie grins to himself. Then thinks he sees someone standing in the darkened corner of the room. This was no Vietcong, no Charlie he had ever seen before. Rubbing his eyes and sees a man dressed in black. Out of place with the filthy surroundings.

The man watches Alfie cling to life as though it were previous. Forbidden to intervene. He would be there to catch him when he fell. He was always there. Watching. Waiting.

Thinking he is hallucinating Alfie allows the man to drift in and out of his feverish consciousness.

Shivering and shaking, the confinement becoming claustrophobic.

“Piss off...” Said Alfie, “...I’m not ready.” Warning the unsolicited visitor.

“I know.” Said the man fading back into the shadows.

Charlie looks over to the prisoner. Wondering who was talking to. Dismissing the delusional chatter, resumed smoking foul smelling cigarettes. Exhausted Alfie succumbs to sleep. Outside the sound of the night was strangely quiet.

Almost too quiet.

Suddenly Alfie is awoken by the Charlie’s shouting and panicking.

Reaching for rifles as all hell begins to break loose outside. Sporadic flashes flicker as automatic weapons exchanged blows. The shack is suddenly peppered with holes. Bullets whistled all about the guards. Narrowly missing Alfie as he struggles to free himself shoving at the wooden bars.

The gun fire getting closer. More bullets rip through the walls. Riddling holes and filling the small room with deafening percussions. Shredding the bamboo door and killing the guard standing behind it. Another guard returns fire through the opening of the window only to be met with return fire. Appearing to be dancing like a string puppet, his body being riddled with bullets, before falling to the ground. Dead.

Outnumbered and sensing no escape, the remaining guard turned and without hesitation guard unleashes a burst of fire at the cage. It all happen too fast for Alfie to be afraid. His eyes were fixed on the man watching on unperturbed by the bullets sailing about him. Strobe lights lit the small shack as a muzzle spat bullets into Alfie’s fragile body. Scattering the cage to splinters. His body a punching bag taking one violent blow after the other. Time slowed down as adrenaline coursed through his punctured body.

Gasping for breath. Eyes rolling in their sockets. Lungs filling with blood.

The executioner’s rifle jams. Then a single shot sang out from outside striking the man’s head. Knocking it sideways. Brain tissue and blood to



spray out the other side. Collapsing to the ground before the man realized he was dead. An eerie silence fell over the small shack.

The flashes of ceased. The noise ceased. Silence.

Dying eyes open and close. Men rush in and discover the dead guards. And the strewn cage. Inside laid a crippled emaciated body. Inert. Naked. And bloody. A limp arm fell from the between splinted bars. Fingers unfurl as though reaching for something.

Or someone.

“Medic!” A soldier yells out rushing to Alfie’s assistance.

The man watched as Alfie drifted between this realm and next.

Medics frantically trying to plug his wounds. Sealing the best they could. Wondering how he had survived. Wondering if he would.

“You’re one lucky son of a bitch Lieutenant... We intercepted a radio signal...” A man shouts at him over the sound of the roar of the turbines, “...You’ve someone looking over you.”

Alfie looks to the man staring directly at him and grins.

*‘Yeah.’* He thinks to himself fighting to cling to this world.

Thumping chopper blades sound out a beat as he fades in and out of consciousness. Morphine numbed the excruciating pain.

God and the Devil vied for his soul.

“Piss off.” He mutters to them both beneath the oxygen mask before passing out...

# Can I help you?

The clock on the wall shouted one thirty, catching Doug's attention.

Then checks his watch as if to confirm the time. Or delay the imminent appointment. But accepts it was time to leave, and get it over with.

"Block the rest of my day out Alice." Doug instructs his secretary.

"Right-o Mister McCrae... Is everything okay?" She inquired.

"Everything is fine thanks Alice... Just have a personal matter to attend to... I shalt be too long, I hope."

"If you say so Mister McCrae."

"I'll see you soon." Gathering his coat and about to leave.

Standing in front of a building he had passed a thousand times before, and never noticing it until now.

An historical narrow building that had been wedged between two modern day sky scrapers. Confirming the address, makes his way to the entrance. A simple directory board displayed a listing of tenants. Seeing Finch's firm situated on the fifth floor, presses a button and waits for the lift.

Checking the time again. He was early. Sweaty hands clutch a folder of statements and phone records. Unsure what to expect, or say to the man who would hopefully put his wife's apparent infidelity to bed. Apparent to Pritchard, but Doug was still unconvinced.

The lift doors open and Doug steps out and enters a foreign world of private investigators. Conjuring visions of venetian blinds and cigarette smoke fogged rooms in his mind. Of large frosted windows and oversized grey filing cabinets leaching case files.

*'Nah, that was only ever in the movies.'* He thought to himself.

Spying a large frosted window and an inconsequential sign attached to the door means he was in the right place...

RAY FINCH  
LICENSED PRIVATE INVESTIGATOR

Staring at the sign, wondering if he should enter.

But it was all a little too late to back out now. Words had been spoken. A commitment made.

*'Perhaps another day.'* The pendulum of his conscience swung to and fro.

Just then the door opens and a man steps out in a hurry. Without making eye contact the man quickly scurries along the hallway as though he was leaving a nudie bar not wanting to be seen. And watches the man disappear into the lift.

Pushing the door open, Doug steps inside a dimly lit reception. A casually dressed young lady sits behind a desk chewing gum, swiping a mobile.

To the right. Then to the left. The left again.

"Ah-hmm." Doug coughs to catch her attention.

"Can I help you?" She asked as though he were an intruder and interrupted her day. The chewing slows and she looks suspiciously at him.

"I have a two o'clock with Mister Finch." He reminds the lass.

Flicking the pages of a register in time with the chewing. Runs a finger down the page and looks at Doug.

"McCrae?" She asked bluntly. Holding gum between her front teeth. Pushing a bubble gum tongue into it and blew a small bubble. Popping unexpectedly. Demanding an answer from him.

"Doug McCrae... That's right." He confirmed.

"Take a seat... Dad will be with you shortly." She looks over to a wooden bench reserved for clients.

An old recycled church pew sat against the wall. Reminding Doug of the last time he had attended church. His wedding.

*'How appropriate.'* He thought to himself.

"Dad\_! ... Your two o'clock is here!" The young woman bellows out taking Doug by surprise.

Waiting for Finch to appear was like waiting for a dentist to appear. He wished the moment would never to arrive. The young lady returned to her swiping. Grinning and chewing faster at the ones she fancied. Frowning and slower at the ones she was unsure about.

The office door opens and out stepped a tall middle aged man.

Not too unlike the authoritative voice he had heard on the phone.

“Doug? ... Ray Finch... It’s good to meet you... Come on into my office... Hold all calls thanks Alice.” Extending his hand to Doug.

Doug turns and looks to the young woman amused that her name was Alice.

“My daughter.” Finch elaborates the relationship.

“Ah-ha.” Summing up the young lady’s qualifications.

“Take a seat... Drink?” Asked Finch looking for a glass.

“I’m good thanks.” Declined Doug watching Ray pour himself one.

The office was everything Doug had imagined. Overflowing grey filing cabinets. Frosted windows and overhead fan. Venetian blinds hindered the sun from reaching inside. Ray collapses in his chair and swivels about to face Doug.

“Did you bring the statements?” Seeing the folder in Doug’s hands.

“Yeah, sorry... Right here.” Handing over the folder.

“Good... So tell more about your wife Doug... Don’t leave anything out because I’ll find out eventually.” Briefly opening the file to confirm the contents.

“I understand... Where do I start?”

“The beginning is always the best place...” Suggests Finch, “...You sure you don’t want one... It might help you recall.” Holding out his glass.

“I’m good... I’m driving after this.”

“Sensible man Doug.”

Doug informs Finch details of his relationship.

From the time they first met at university. How she had suddenly fallen pregnant and how they married her. And the birth of their one and only child. A son.

“I see...” Taking in the background information, “... And what makes you think she is having an affair?”

“I don’t... But Thomas seems to think there might me one.”

“What makes him think that?”

“Extended absences... Unexplained spending... Hotels and restaurants...” Doug looks to the folder laying on the desk in front of Finch.

Opening the file again and examines the highlighted transactions. A photo of Helena falls out Finch grins and pushes the photo back.

“She’s a good looking woman Doug, you’re a lucky man...” Then got to the purpose of his visit, “... How long has *this* been going on for?” He asks looking over his reading glasses.

“A few years.” Doug confesses calmly.

Finch chokes on the mouthful of whiskey trying hard to compose his embarrassment.

“I understand... Thomas had the same reaction.” Conceded Doug. “...I always thought... Hoped... It wasn’t true.”

“Understandable Doug... You’ve done well to hold out that long... I’ve had worse... And some men never find out until it’s too late.” Finch consoles him.

“Thanks... I think.”

“You’re in good hands with Thomas... He’s the best in the *game*... For now, just go about your day like any other... And leave it with us, okay?” Instructed Finch eyeing the contents of the folder.

“Very good. And your *expenses*?” Asked Doug.

“I’ll be charging Thomas... You can settle him up when the time comes.”

“Very good... Is there anything else you need you have my details.”

“Leave it to me Doug... I should know within a couple of weeks... I’ll make some *enquires*.”

“*Enquires*?” He asked wondering if it would implicate him.

“Don’t worry... She’ll *never* know.” Advised Finch grinning.

“If you say so... If that’s all then I guess I better be off leave you to do what you do best... Thanks Ray.” Said Doug standing and extending a hand.

“I’ll be in touch.” Walking him to the door.

Walking past reception, Finch’s daughter was glued to the screen of the mobile. Unnoticed, Doug made his way back to the lift and onto Terrace outside. Looking back up to the building, imagined Finch at his desk going over the file of statements. His life laid bare before him. His wife no doubt laid bare somewhere in the city.

Wheels had been set in motion. Unsure if he wanted to stop them. His son caught in no-man’s land.

Unwilling to return to the office, Doug walks aimlessly and finds himself outside Valentines Café.

At a loss as to how or why he had gotten there. As though he had been guided. Pushing the door of the café open. A buzzer announces his sudden arrival. Looking like an abandoned child he stands filling the doorway.

“Come on in if you’re coming in!” Called out Kaye wishing to keep out the cold breeze.

“Sorry.” Apologizes Doug about to turn around and leave.

Hesitating just as he sees Samantha behind the counter. Closes the door to the relief of the other patrons looking at the bearer of cold air.

“Sorry... So sorry.” He continues to apologize to the people watching him pass.

“What brings you this way?” Asked Samantha eyeing Doug up and down, mentally undressing him, “...Doug... Is it?” She lies.

“That’s right... Samantha?” He lies.

“You remembered... What would it be Doug?”

‘*You.*’ He thinks to himself, hoping his mouth would not engage and make their encounter more awkward than it already was.

“A coffee thanks... And I’ll have a custard square.” Feeling peckish.

Samantha smiles while still mentally undressing him and stores the memory for later. Finding him a dashing Colin Firth, but younger. Softly biting her lip. Tried to push the image from her mind only to have it ignite a sensual flame.

She gasps for breath and blushes.

“You okay?” Doug asked seeing her in some discomfort.

“Yeah, heart burn I think... Shouldn’t have had that second custard square.” She lied.

“I make a note.”

“To have here or to go?” She asked him wishfully.

“I’ll think I have it here... Slow day in the office.” He lies.

Samantha places the custard square on a plate and hands it to him.

“I’ll bring the coffee over shortly.” She tells him.

“Right-o-then.” Looking about for a spare table sees a table by the front door. And wonders where the old man was.

Deciding to sit at another table. Choosing one by the rest room door. A radio plays soft pop music over the rattling of cups and saucers and cutlery. Looking about the quaint café. Remarkably unchanged since he was a child and his father had brought him here. Many, many years ago.

The memory of his father rouses feelings of his own torments. Something he could not allow to happen with his son. Imagining how Finch would go about spying on his wife. What if he was found out? Only to make the situation worse.

Samantha arrives looking like a million dollars in his eyes.

“Thanks.” Said Doug smiling.

“Anything else?” She asked as if suggestively.

Lurid thoughts crossed his mind but this was not the time to be so forward. There was an awkward silence as he became tongue tied and confused.

“Hmm?” She prompts him again, still fantasizing.

“I’m g-good.” Stuttering a reply.

Grinning as he watched her walk away. Mentally undressing her, the dream still fresh in his mind. Smelling her presence long after she had left. Wondering if all women were the same. Hoping she was different. Day dreaming as she moved about behind the counter.

Samantha looks through the glass cabinet to catch him looking at her. Only to glance away.

Like frustrated lovers teasing themselves with tacit glances. Neither of them brave enough to cross the dance floor and ask for the other’s hand.

Unseen and unheard by Doug, Alfie had arrived and taken his seat near the window. Leaning heavily on his walking stick. The leg playing up with the weather. Giving it a good rub to improve the circulation, Samantha looks up to see Alfie sitting patiently at his table.

“How does he do that? I never heard him come in? ...” She asked confused by his sudden appearance, “... Alfie!” She calls out catching his attention and welcoming him.

And begins to prepare Alfie’s lunch.

Samantha catches Doug looking at her before shyly looking away.

Unsure what to make of his glances dismissing them as curiosity. Him, a fancy lawyer of some kind. A married man and out of her league. And her, a common waitress working for minimum wage.

Frustrated by a desire for the man she could never have...

## And it was colored orange

In the middle of the night a head board of a bed bangs rhythmically against the wall.

A man continues slamming into the woman. Aroused with a desire of his own. Hands clutch tightly into a pillow as the woman is overcome to the brink of climax.

“Fuck me!” The woman demands.

“Fuck you! ... Fuck you!” Exasperates the man sweating and panting and thrusting heavily behind her.

Each lengthy impalement building to a sexual frenzy. The head board banging loudly against the wall like a drum. The lovers indifferent as to who might be listening to the raucous commotion.

“Not yet! ... Not yet!” She pleaded hoping to defer the man’s heated release.

“Oh-oh-oh! Fuck! Fuck!” The man suddenly shatters into her.

“Ah\_... Fuck you! Ah\_!” Suffocating the erogenous gratitude into the pillow just.

The pillow stifling the moans. Eyes roll in the woman’s head as a flood of convulsions rushed through her body. Two sweaty bodies collapse on the oversized bed panting in unison. Feeling content they had consummated their relation. Again.

“Fuck me Helena... I don’t know where you find the energy.” Said her personal trainer.

“You... It’s all those workouts!” She responded gasping for breath.

The man stares at the ceiling as though it were a blank canvas, trying to make sense of her adultery.

Unmarried, marital vows did not apply to him. He could barely forsake himself, little alone anyone else. And wondered how her husband fitted in all of it.

Helena peeled herself from the bed and headed naked to the bath room. The man watched as her near perfect ass walk away. Open curtains provided anyone watching a full view of the infidelity.



She had lost track of how many lovers she had bedded. More so their names. In a week or so she would lose interest in the personal trainer. Whatever his name was. Already having an eye on a younger man.

*Accidentally* bumping herself into him one day.

'*Jack.*' She tried to recall his name. Bulging with muscles. A bushy beard and an ethnic tan that melted her.

The thought igniting a new fire within her.

Steaming water cascaded over her soiled body as her hands ran between her legs. Imagines of Jack standing behind stirred in her mind. Strong hands cupping and squeezing her breasts. A heated stiffness pressing between her legs. Her hand reaches for the imaginary phallic rod. Fingers substituting what her imagination was lacking. Fingers stimulate already tender flesh and she rocks gently with the invisible lover.

Glass walls fog with mist and the strokes become faster and faster until finally she could stand no more.

"Ah-ah-ah\_!" She tries to stifle the orgasm unleashing itself. Over and over and over again.

Turning the water to cold hoping to cool her over heated libido. Washing away the soon to be forgotten personal trainer. Returning to the bedroom only to find the man asleep and snoring.

"*Men.*" She dismisses the passing lover and heads to the minibar for a drink.

'*Click-click-click.*' Sounds a camera shutter capturing the moment. And then some.

Finch had seen it all before. Nothing surprised him anymore. It was human nature to fuck around. If not physically, then most certainly mentally. Wondering how a man like Doug had ended up with a woman like Helena. They were worlds apart. Chalk and cheese.

Helena was irritated by a persistent itch that needed scratching. Why have one man to do the occasional scratching when you have the world at your feet. With the aid of Doug's credit cards.

Having seen enough. Tomorrow he would return and quiz the receptionist he knew. The hotel had a reputation for being used as rendezvous by the unfaithful. Adultery was an industry. Hotels would greet them at one end, lawyers would impeach them at the other. Each would clip the ticket for the ride.

Divorce had become an industry.

Through binoculars Finch looks towards the hotel to see Helena entwined with the man again. Wondering where she found the energy. Entwined like twisted pretzels. Sweaty bodies continue their fornication on the balcony. In plain view of anyone watching on. Helena looks directly at the car park opposite. Thinking she saw someone but loses sight of the darkened aberration.

Perhaps a voyeur who liked to watch.

“Fuck me harder!” She instructs the man grunting heavily behind her. Her eyes fixed on the car park opposite.

Imagining the man in the darkness getting himself off on her. The thought igniting a fuse in her that could not be extinguished. Eyes roll in her head as she is overcome with spasms tingling from head to toe. Beads of sweat dripping from naked torsos in the chill of the night air. Finch’s gaze is fixed on Helena’s. Thinking she was getting off being watched.

And feels his own arousal slowly growing in his crotch.

“Don’t go soft on me now.” He warns himself.

Stepping back slowly he climbs into the van and continues to watch from the rear vision mirror. Waiting until the lovers returned inside before leaving. Lest the vehicle’s lights gave him away. He would return to the office to write up the report while Helena’s naked body was still fresh in his memory.

Toby sits in at a table, a stiff drink on the table before him.

Flush with hard earned cash slowly being fleeced, by attractive young women plying their trade of seduction. Relieving him of the money as though taking candy from a baby. Scantly clad women gyrated on his lap. Grinding themselves into him. Pressing soft warm breasts into his face. Kissing his cheek as though they were dear friends come to visit.

It felt like love. But it wasn’t.

Feeling like a king. Peeling away note after note after note after note. Until it was all gone. And when the king had become a pauper the seductresses abandoned him. To move onto the next king. Leaving Toby wanting more but unable to pay for it. Two hundred dollars spent in but a couple of hours. No money to get home would mean a long walk, or sleep on the street.

It would be a hard lesson to stomach.

*'Money comes, money goes.'* He summed up his lot. Working for Fletcher would ensure more of it in time.

The whiskey was growing on him and he gulps down the last swallow. Feeling its effect on his stomach and mind. Rejected and bored with the strippers he tries to stand.

“Whoa!” He exclaims feeling woozy and losing his balance.

Tilting his head back, his mind begins to spin. Feeling nauseous looks about for the restrooms and calculates the distance. And the impending retch. Forcing himself to stand. Legs were not his own and like a sailor on a ship rocking to and fro staggers swaying across the floor. Pushing his way past men blocking his passage.

“Hey, watch it kid!” One man says spilling his drink and ready to thump the offender.

Incapable of preventing a retch into his mouth. Tries to swallow the vile puke. Only to have it gag him and involuntary vomit disgustingly over the floor. To the amusement of those watching on from a distance.

And a repulsion of those standing too close.

“Oh fuck man!” A man complains unable to stand back in time.

Another retch and Toby throws up most of the drinks he had paid for over the carpet. A woman screams drawing the attention of the bouncer who quickly determines the cause of the mayhem. Seeing the intoxicated lad leaning on a chair bent over and about to retch again. The strong man had no stomach for the smell and his own stomach begins to reflex. Looking up to see Fletcher indicating it was time for the lad to be escorted from the premises.

Quickly and quietly.

A heavy hand grabbed Toby by the collar. Holding him out at arm's length as though to distance himself from the offender. In no state to resist, Toby's legs were barely able to keep up with the bouncer's giant strides. Both men welcomed the fresh air of the street outside. The bouncer discharged the drunken lad from his care onto the pavement.

Flickering colored lights capturing a delirious mind. Causing him to grin to himself.

Then hic-cup.

“Go home.” Warns the bouncer seeing the lad swaying like a drunken sailor.

Confused by the sudden harsh treatment. Stares blankly at the bouncer now blocking the door way with arms folded and a menacing defiant look.

“Mister Fletcher will hear about this!” Warns Toby ignorantly.

Tripping backwards he tumbles onto his backside.

“Go home! ... Last chance.” The bouncer warns clenching a large fist of white knuckles.

Clinging to a power pole, pulls himself up and turns his back on the wonderland of enchanting flicking lights. He would walk home he decided. It was not far. Or so he thought. Time and distance were immeasurable constructs in Toby’s intoxicated mind. Each step felt like a giant leap. Amused by how the ground moved beneath him. Passersby veered well away to keep their distance.

Leaning to one side, gravitational forces pull him around the corner like an asteroid onto Marion Street. He stops and peers into an alleyway between two derelict villas.

Feet stop walking but his upper body continues swaying like a spring.

“Hmm!” He says looking about wondering if he should simply sleep down there.

A passing car slows down to look at the drunken youth before driving off.

“Fuck off!” Toby slurs incoherently.

He was about to step into the alleyway when a rat appears to greet him. It would have barked if it had been a dog. Looking up at Toby.

Its sniffs the air for the source of the offensive odor.

“You can f-fuck off too! (*Hic-cup!*)” Warns Toby about to dry retch again.

Incapable of stopping. A stomach wanting to ejaculate the substance that was poisoning it. Supporting himself against a power pole throws up more yellow puke. The stench riling his nostrils to spew again. Staring back to the rat staring back at him. Thoughts of being nibbled on while he sleep deterring any thoughts of staying.

If there was one rat, there were probably be others.

Charlie watched the munted human stagger away. Then scurries over to the puddle of puke on the ground. Sniffing the vile meal the rat begins to lap up the untimely supper. Looking up to see the human disappear into the darkness of the night.

Swaying side to side.

Alfie stirs inside the confined box thinking he heard someone on the street.

Instinctively he waits and listens. Instinctively clenching his fist for his men to halt behind him. Charlie was out there. Reaching for his walking stick feels for a trigger. Voices and footsteps fade into the undergrowth of the street.

Content that the trouble had passed the Alfie drifts back to sleep...

... Copter blades thump the air and send a deafening noise into the compartment of the Huey.

Above, a beautiful blue sky. A sun suspended by the hand of God. Below, the endless green fields of Vietnam. Muddy brown rivers and creeks glisten and meander like snakes. Eyes peeled for Charlie. Hiding somewhere among the lush killing fields. A heavy carpet of the lush green vegetation made it almost impossible to know what laid beneath. But the Yanks had devised a solution and it was colored orange. And like many of their solutions, embraced collateral damage.

Nothing would be spared.

Suddenly the craft takes fire from below. Ricocheting bullets spark within the compartment. The heavy fifty-Cal machine gun retorts and retches tracers and bullets sporadically back at the source. Alfie cocks his rifle and scans the terrain for movement. But sees nothing. Firing stops and the Huey continues on its way.

Voices crackled over the headsets relaying the incident to HQ.

Taking their fight to someone else's back yard, two superpowers had spread their malignant tentacles over Vietnam peddling their ideology among the people of the land.

But politics was the last thing on Alfie's mind as he flew surreptitiously over the glistening rice fields. Villagers looked up to see them passing overhead. It was not their war.

Slowly, metal arms gradually extended either side of the Huey like giant dragon flies. And began to release an insidious mist over the jungle. Stripping away God's creation to reveal Charlie's hiding place.

And leaving a foul taste in Alfie's mouth...

# Operation Hawk

*'Click-click-click.'* Whirs the shutter of a telephoto camera.

The lens directed towards a scantily dressed woman. Leaving little to the imagination as she suggestively presses her body against a patched gang member. Attaching herself as though lichen to a tree trunk. A tattooed branch grabs her ass to claim her as his. Handing her an innocuous looking cigarette. She takes a long drag.

Holding it in before slowly exhaling the pungent smoke.

*'Click-click-click.'* The camera captures the romantic Kodak moment.

Another man listens intently with large headphones clamped to a balding head. A smoldering cigarette hung from to the corner of his mouth.

"I wish you would not smoke in here." The camera man protested the smell within the enclosed van.

"Call the police." The man challenged back.

"Okay you two, cut I out... Put that damn thing out Barnard... We got everything we need?" Asked a man front the front seat of the van.

It had been a long day. The men were tired and on edge. Tinted windows conceal the occupants inside. An interior littered with coffee cups and fast food wrappers.

Irritated by their confinement and smoke it was time to head back.

"Pack up... We're out of here." Ordered the senior detective.

A heavy shadow had cast itself over the city as the van pulls into a subterranean basement of a towering building on Molesworth.

Disappearing into the bowels of the Headquarters and from sight of the man on the street. Jerking as it came to a stop. Shaking the occupants and informing them that they had arrived. From a sliding door four plain clothed officers climb out and took in the dry stale air of the parking lot. Relieved they were back.

Faulkner leans against a squad car waiting for the others to gather about. The door slams shut signaling the end of the day's surveillance.

"Get the tapes written up... I want the transcript on my desk by tomorrow morning."

“Yes sir.” A man acknowledges the command.

“Have the tech boys scan the photos... Find out who the new punk is and his connection to Fletcher.”

“Yes sir.” Another man confirms.

“Get some rest... Meet up my office zero eight hundred tomorrow.”

“Sir.” A unison of voices sing back.

Suddenly a squad car rushes past and blasts its siren startling the detectives.

“Wankers!” Calls out to the uniform officer grinning back at them from a passing squad car now accelerating away.

“Fuck you cowboy!” A detective calls back raising a finger at the squad car.

“Forget them! ... Focus on Fletcher... He’s moving a lot of product onto the streets.” Instructs the senior detective Faulkner.

“Sir.” The other detectives grumbled back tiredly.

A cold draft circulates the parking lot and Faulkner pulls up the collars of his overcoat. A tired elevator sounds its arrival and the men squeeze into its small interior that would return them to a cramped office of cluttered desks.

Returning to a more spacious office. Faulkner slumps into his chair and swivels about to look out over the dimming city and Molesworth below. In the distance he could make out the glowing lights of Vivian. The attention causing him to open an ever thickening folder on his desk.

Written on the spine in large black letters...

## OPERATION HAWK

Smelling the months of surveillance oozing from between the pages.

A pin-board peppered with photographs as though a mafia crime family. Associates, suppliers and mules. String linked faces with other faces. The young man’s face would soon be added to the puzzle wall. A large map of Aotearoa speckled with colored pins showed the extent of the drug ring’s operations.

Faulkner shook his head at the size of it. Taking down Fletcher would be a start. Knowing the void created would soon be filled by another eager opportunist. He would deal with that when that arose. Until then Fletcher was his only concern.

Business was all about supply and demand, and drugs was no different. It was one thing to take down Fletcher. Another to take down his entire supply and distribution network.

A large white board occupied the adjacent wall. Scrawled with names and places and times. Drawn boxes and circles connected by arrows pointing in all directions. He follows the flow, confirming his suspicions about the man under investigation. Despite all the colorful circles and arrows and pins and post-it notes, Fletcher had so far avoided being caught with his fingers in the register.

An elderly detective appears at the door with two cups of coffee.

“Don’t you ever go home Bob?” Sanders asked seeing Falkner was settling in to pull a night shift.

“One day Bernie... Thanks.” He muses accepting the coffee.

“How’d you go today? ... The Super is looking for a result on this one.” Sanders sits opposite and tries to read Faulkner’s thoughts.

“Don’t remind me... He’ll get one.”

A silence hangs over the veteran detectives. Getting results took time. Without a solid case Fletcher could walk away scot free. Only to carry on his illicit way.

Faulkner begins to rock in his chair as though having autistic thoughts.

“What are you thinking Bob... You got that look in your eye.” Sanders asked curiously.

Faulkner contemplates the scheme that had been brewing for weeks. Reluctant to involve anyone from outside. Then vomits the thought hoping Sanders would be honest with him.

“That new guy... What’s his name? ... From Seattle? ... Grimm? Robert Grimm?” Asked Faulkner.

“Yeah, that’s him... What of him?”

“What’s he doing down here?”

“Seems there was an *incident* in Seattle apparently... Arrived the other week ago on an exchange program... They thought he might need some R&R down here... Out of the way.”

“*Incident?*” Faulkner asked curiously.

“Don’t ask, you don’t want to know... Let’s just say it didn’t end well for those on the receiving end... He’s still pretty messed up... If you know what I mean?”

“I don’t, but I’m getting the picture.”



“What’s the interest?”

“Specializes in undercover right?”

“That’s right... Just remember he’s bruised fruit... What you have in mind?” Inquired Sanders pressing his interest.

Faulkner plays out scenes in his head. If it worked it would bring down Fletcher’s house of cards.

“If we could get Fletcher to talk... We’d have him on tape.”

“You never get Fletcher to talk... He’s not that stupid... Is he?”

“Greed will make any man talk Bernie...” Faulkner said with a smile forming. “...That and a women.”

“True... But why would he talk to Grimm?” He curiously.

“His American connections for one... And no one here knows him for another...” Advocates Faulkner.

Sanders begins to see where Faulkner was going.

“He can play the part alright... I’ve seen him... Looks like a junkie... It just might work... But how?”

Faulkner takes a deep breath and slowly exhales the demons of the day. Satisfied he had been dealt another card to play.

“Let me sleep on it.” Suggests Faulkner swiveling to look out at a darkened sky line.

Mesmerized by flickering lights of vehicles and street lamps.

*‘Magical.’* He thought.

In the distance a sole beckon shone from the Mount Victoria outlook. Had he had binoculars he would have seen a crazed poet ranting and raving to the star lit heavens. A black and white dog howling by his side in unison.

“Who is this *Grimm* working under?” Asked Faulkner.

“Kearns I think... Has him scuffling papers... The guy looks burnt out if you ask me.”

“Really?”

“Have you seen him?”

“Not yet... Why?” Faulkner asked curiously.

“You understand when you do... A picture is worth a thousand words... There’s a good reason he’s uncover... I’ll let you figure it out.” Advised Sanders.

“Kearns eh? ... He owes me a favor... Time I called it in.”

“Go home Bob... Fletcher can wait until tomorrow morning.” Pleads Sanders. “...No one ever wished they had spent more time in the office... But you are proving exception to the rule... How’s Grace? ... Your wife.”

“I’m fully aware who she is Bernie... She’s good, I think...” Catching himself feeling guilty, perhaps he should go home, “... I hate to admit it, but I think you’re right, as usual... I’ll have a word with this Detective *Grimm* tomorrow.”

Faulkner gups down the last swallow of coffee that would keep him awake long enough to get home.

“Catch you tomorrow mate.” Farewells Sanders.

“You too Bernie.” Now closing the file on Operation Hawk.

# Monique

*'Click-click-click.'* A telephoto camera captures Toby's arrival.

Approaching the compound less intimidated than he had the first time. Though still as frigid. An envelope of cash shoved deep into his jacket pocket. Having brought a shopping bag with him to carry the merchandise back to The Palace. Heavy metal music, if it was music, cascaded over the razor wired walls. Dogs barked sensing his arrival. Heads turned to see the return of the mule standing there.

"What do you want?" Asked a gang member abruptly, playing Toby along.

"Fletcher sent me." Said Toby.

"Hmm..." The man grunts, "... Stay here."

Sensing someone standing behind him heavy hands pat him down and grabs his crotch for fun.

"Like that did you?" The man questions, as other men about him laugh.

Familiar foul smells of the compound assaulted his senses. Body odor and urine and weed. Satanic sounds crackle from a workshop. Hammers slamming onto metal. Vicious dogs barking. Straining at chains holding the beasts back from devouring him. Imagining himself being torn apart, red and bloody limbs in their mouth.

The thought makes him cringe.

"This way." A member grunts at him. Pulling his thoughts from the dogs devouring him.

Threatening eyes challenged his presence. Eyes observe his passing. Watching his every move. Wondering if he were a narc. One could never tell these days. They all looked the same. Fletcher's word was good enough.

Still, one never took chances.

"What your name kid?" The gang member leading him asked curiously.

"T-Toby." He stutters nervously.

"Hmm." The man inspected the scrawny individual before him.

"Only one rule you need to know T-Toby... What you *sees* in here *stays* in here... You understand?" The man glared at Toby coldly with the presence of death in his words.

“Yeah.” Toby answers timidly.

“I didn’t hear T-Toby.” Asked the man making it personal and getting into his face. Smelling the strong body odor and cigarette breath.

“Yeah!” Toby responds louder.

“Good... Cos we know where you live and we’ll fuck you and your family over if you mess with us... Understood?” The man threatened.

“Yeah.” Replying timidly again, the man standing over him as though he was about to thump him.

“Yeah what?” The man asked again wanting respect.

“Yeah... Sir.”

“That’s right... You look after us and we’ll won’t fuck with you... Wait here!” Ordered the man entering a room with the flickering light.

Along the collider a young woman leans against a doorway, dressed in nothing but a smile.

Cut away hot-pants and an oversized tee-shirt that sired erect nipples. Eyeing Toby over, the young woman says nothing. Toby feels something stirring in his pants. And tries to hide the stiffening intrusion by shoving his hands into pockets. The girl smiles and giggles and shuffles her body to tease him. As though to taunt him further, she quickly lifts the tee-shirt to flash her breasts. Voices could be heard approaching and she disappears from the doorway.

Leaving Toby wanting more.

“Cock tease!” He mutters to himself frustrated.

A man in a black leather jacket strolls into the hallway to find Toby just standing there.

“You Toby?” The man asks coldly.

“Yeah.” He responds despondently looking at the empty doorway.

“This way.” Instructs the man unsure what had riled the lad.

Toby follows awkwardly behind. Hands still shoved deep into his pockets. Feeling for the cash. The room was bare but for a central glass top table and a crib against the wall. A crate of beer with bottles missing sat on the floor beside it.

The fluorescent bulb still clinging to life, flickering its last breaths.

“Sit... Stay!” The man orders as though he were a dog.

The young woman had followed him and poked her head into the room from the door way. Toby catches her watching him.

“Hey.” She said teasing him.

“Hey.” Replies Toby grinning, rousing his interest again.

“What’s your name?” She asked.

“Toby... You?”

“Monique.”

Eyes exchange secret burning desires and he feels a growing discomfort.

“Gotta go.” She teases him.

“Shit!” Toby curses.

A door opens on the other side of the room and a weasel looking man enters.

Appearing like a malnourished accountant with whiskers that constituted a thin moustache that was struggling to take root on his upper lip. Nostrils twitched and rubs the back of a hand under it to alleviate the irritation. Followed by a sharp loud sniff.

In the other hand he carried a cellophane package of pressed white powder.

“You got the money?” The weasel looking man asked keenly eager to make the exchange.

“Yeah... Yeah.” Toby reaches for the envelope and places it on the table.

The man looks at him as though the envelope would not get to him by itself and Toby pushes it again further towards him. Anxiously the man opens it and pulls out a stack of cash. All hundreds.

Quickly he assesses the count and shoves the cash back into the envelope.

“Good.” Accepted the man pushing the cellophane package towards Toby.

“Thanks.” Responded Toby.

“Aren’t you going to check the product? (*Sniff!*)” The man asked looking at him.

“Nah, I’m good.” Said Toby unsure what to make of the request.

“Could be baby powder for all you know... Your boss would think you cheated him... You wouldn’t want that would you?” The man pressured him.

“Yeah-nah... I suppose not.” Said Toby not sure what to do next.

“Give it here... (*Sniff!*) ... I’ll cut you a line... Watch...” Instructed the weasel man.

Skillfully the diminutive man flicked a concealed switch blade and pierced the bag to create a small opening. Dipping a finger places it into the opening allowing the powder to stick before rubbing it on his tongue.

Savoring the taste he nods his head.

“Good stuff... You try.” Weasel directed.

Pushing the package towards Toby. Not one to back down, he mimicked the weasel man. Screwing his face up as if it were his first time. Unsure what he should be tasting. Because there was nothing to taste. His tongue had gone numb.

And looks back at the man to confirm his suspicions.

“Good?”

“Good shit.” Parrots Toby. It could have been baby powder for he knew. A giggle could be heard from the hallway outside.

He looks about and sees Monique at the door way.

“Why not try a line ... It won’t hurt you... Fletcher won’t mine.” The devil entices him, taking a silver tube from his pocket.

A plastic card slices and dices two small neat lines on the glass table top and the man snorts one through the tube into his nostril.

“Now you try.” Offering Toby the tube.

“Do it.” A female voice whispers from the hallway, daring him.

Seeing it a thousand times in the movies. His eyes meet the man’s as though to challenge him to a game of chicken. Leaning to the table awkwardly positions the tube and snorts the line quickly to get it over with. His face contorts violently as though he has snorted a chili powder. Overwhelmed, his mind exploded with the flashes of euphoria.

Inhaling deeply to regain his senses.

“Whoa! ...” Toby exclaims, his mind sparking. “...Fuck me.”

“You’re really not my type thanks....” Responded the weasel man, seriously, “...I’ll leave that to Monique to help you with that... I’ll leave you two to it.” Encourages the man standing and leaving the room as Monique entered.

Doors closed behind the both of them. Toby now alone in the room with her. A kilo of cocaine on the table. Soon followed by Monique’s tee-shirt. Straddling him she presses her warm soft breasts into his face and begins to grind her hips onto him. Hands roamed over her body. Cupping

and suckling budding pink nipples. Tearing away his shirt and jeans. His mind not his own. Two naked bodies fall onto the crib and engage in lustful sex. Taken to new heights by the narcotic coursing through veins.

Toby fell further down the rabbit hole.

*'Click-click-click,'* Cameras recorded the sexual escapade. Video cameras brought the static images to life.

Drugs was not the only business the gang was into.

Toby awoke to find himself naked and alone in the strange room.

His head hungover and numb. His crotch burning and sore. Feeling woozy, reminding him of the time at The Palace. Without the want to puke. Sniffing involuntarily as though he had an irritation. Causing him to rub his nose. Then sniffed again.

On the table Monique's black tee covered the coke. But no sign of Monique.

Lifting it to see the package still on the table and checks the time.

“Shit... Shit, shit, shit!” He was late thinking Fletcher would not be pleased.

Rushing to dress himself and shoves the cocaine into the shopping bag together with Monique's Tee. But not before smelling the fragrance of her on it. Unescorted, finds his way back to the gate.

Only to be greeted by gang members whose frowns had turned to smiles after the initiation of their newest member.

*'Click-click-click.'* A camera captures Toby about to leave.

Threatening grey rain clouds had begun to gather up the valley and were looking to piss on him at any moment. Burying hands into pockets for warmth. Without looking back hurried back to the station just as the first heavy rain drops were falling. A shopping bag hung heavily on his arm. A man stands at the end of the platform appearing to be reading a week old newspaper.

Toby's mind was in two places. The ecstasy of the cocaine. Monique's heated exchange. The synergy of the two going beyond his wildest dreams. Much to his relief the train finally arrives and he boards oblivious to the newspaper man following him.

“Victor Charlie is on the train... Following.” The newspaper man talks into his collar.

“Copy that... Keep your distance... We have people at The Palace.”

“Copy that.” Responded the newspaper man taking a distant seat behind Toby, appearing as just another commuter on his way home.

A bouncer glares down at Toby as he passes unchecked, the puking episode still ungiven and still in his nostrils.

The weight of the bag on his shoulder suggested this was not the time to detain the lad. Warily Toby climbed the stairs to Fletcher’s office. The sexual excursion and cocaine having depleted his youthful energetic reserves.

“You’re late? ... Where have you been?” Questioned Fletcher, scolding his underling with its tone.

“I got held up at the... place.” Answered Toby looking like a drowned rat from the pelting rain.

“Held up?”

“There was this girl...” Toby sputtered out innocently.

“Oh\_ I see...” Accepted Fletcher, “...Don’t make a habit of it... Okay.” Looking over to Morris with a grin growing on his face.

“Yes sir.”

“You got it?” Asked Fletcher looking to the shopping bag.

“Yeah, yeah... It’s all there... It’s good...” Not catching himself in time.

“What do you mean it’s good?”

“The man there... Looks like a weasel.” Toby defended himself.

“Weasel? ... You met with *Weasel*?” Fletcher asked curiously.

“Don’t know his name... Just that... Well any ways, he tried some and said it was good *shit*.”

Fletcher could almost forgive the incision in the brick, evident that it had been sampled.

“Hmm.” Fletcher grumbles. Toby was but an insignificant pawn in an expendable game. Reaching into the bag and pulls out the black tee, “... This yours?” Examining the undersized black top.

“Ah... Yeah.” Toby lies hesitantly.

Fletcher throws the tee back into the bag and hangs it back to Toby. Morris stands at the doorway blocking any one getting pass.

“If Weasel says it’s good... Don’t you go upsetting the man understand.” Fletcher warns Toby.

“No Fletch.” Responds Toby.



“You done good kid... And here... Take this.” Reaching to his pocket.

Fletcher peels off several hundred dollar notes. Then at the last moment Fletcher has second thoughts and peels off another note and hands it to him.

“A bonus.” Fletcher rewards his disciple.

“Ghee thanks Fletch.” Smiles Toby.

“Take yourself home... No boozing tonight... Still trying to get the stain out of the carpet.” He frowns. Then smiles a smirk at the thought. He would get the money back. If not tonight, then the next.

Morris stands aside and lets Toby pass. Scurrying down the stairs and out the door and onto the cold street. Flush with cash. Abigail looked up to see Toby hurry from the premises unable to stop him in time to help alleviate him of his pay.

*‘He’ll be back... They always come back.’* She thinks to herself watching him leave.

Heading along Marion Toby passes the alleyway, recalls the rat, and shudders at the thought.

Peering into the alley sees nothing but an old cardboard box and a large hoarding lending over it. The rat was nowhere to be seen. The patch of vomit had long since been washed away with rain. Thoughts of the vulgar night and the long wet walk home surface in his mind. How he had forced his legs to keep moving was a miracle. Tonight he could take a bus back home and a warm feed on the way and he knew just the place to get a decent pie.

A door buzzer sounds as a patron enters the café. Kaye looks up from behind the pie cabinet.

“Not you again? ...” She calls out to him, “...Git! ... Get out before I call the police! ... Git!” She told him as if shoeing away like a mongrel dog.

“I ain’t done nothing!” Toby calls back defensively unable to recall what had riled her.

Looking menacing and puffed up George steps from the kitchen and stands beside Kay at the counter. His eyes focused on the insignificant individual that had filled the door way.

“Ah fuck you!” Toby calls back from the door frustrated having to leave...

# You wanted to see me?

“Hey pussy!” Toby calls out from afar.

A grey hoodie covers his head from the cold breeze. Dark sun glasses cover sensitive eyes from the bright light of the dull overcast day.

“Oh no.” Responds Leslie, looking over his shoulder seeing him approaching.

“What you doing loser?” Toby questions seeing Leslie closing a sketch pad.

“Nothing.”

“Where’s your boyfriend? ... The old man?” Toby looks about expecting him appear at any moment.

Trying to ignore him, Leslie gazes at the boats rocking on the water.

“Dunno... W-why? You f-fancy him?” He pushes Toby’s buttons.

“Nah man... Got my own pussy on tap now... Don’t need no old man like you... He-he-he-he\_.” Laughing like a battery going flat, “...Got paid eh... Come to town with me bro... Get out of this shit hole.”

“Yeah-nah man, I’m good here... Anyways, w-when you ever get p-pussy?”

“The other day man... I was at this gang place up the Hutt way for Fletch... She was a real dirty bitch if you know what I mean eh.”

“Gang place?”

“Yeah man... *Federation*... Man there’s some heavy shit out there.” Recalling the demonic compound. Then wondered if he had said too much. the man’s warning still ringing in his ears.

“W-what the f-fuck you doing w-way out there? ...” Asked Leslie. “... They’re nothing b-but trouble man! ... Shit man\_!”

“Collecting... *Rent* for Fletch.” Responded Toby.

“Rent?” He asked inquisitively.

“Yeah... I goes round and collects his rents you sees eh.” Legitimizing his employment.

“Oh... Nice gig.” Said Leslie accepting the lie.

“What you drawing? ... Give ‘us a look...” Pulling the pad from Leslie’s pack and opens it.

Remaining silent, Leslie allows Toby to flick through the pages of sketches of the boats. Looking up to identify the scenes.

“Shit man ... You really can draw... Fuck me.” Toby acclaims Leslie’s efforts.

“Nah m-mate... You’re not my type, I like old m-men re-m-member.” He reminds Toby.

“Yeah, yeah...” Toby teases him back.

“Nothing wrong with the old m-man.” Challenged Leslie.

“Don’t go soft on me bro\_.” Toby begins to wonder.

But the words faded away on the wind as Leslie admired the majestic boats. Gracefully bobbing up and down. Seagulls flew overhead impervious to the turbulent air currents bustling them about.

From a van parked some distance away a camera apprehends images of the two young men hanging out.

Unaware of being watched. Under surveillance.

*‘Click-click-click.’* A shutter stutters successive shots.

A man sits on a bench within ear shot of their conversation reading a tired newspaper.

“You getting this?” The man talks quietly into his collar.

“Yeah... Two punks taking shit... Stick with them... See where they go.”

“Sir.” The newspaper man responds flicking the paper.

No matter how many times he read the same newspaper, the Warriors never ended up winning a match. The news was becoming stale.

It was time to buy a new one.

Boats danced spastically at their berths.

The San Jennifer was out at sea somewhere and Leslie pined for its return like a lost lover. It’s berth taken by another boat unloading its catch. Red and ugly. Dumpy and fat. It did not have the graceful lines the San Jennifer had. Had he cheated on his lost love by sketching a nude of the red vixen?

Suddenly a seagull squawks loudly drawing Leslie’s attention back to the noise of Toby’s voice as he raved on about his knew love Monique.

“Monique? ... W-who the fuck is M-Monique?” Asked Leslie missing the entire story.

“Oh bro... I just been telling you... Weren’t you listening?” He asked.

“Yeah... Nah man, of course...” Leslie lied.

“You ever heard of someone called *Weasel*?”

“Weasel? No... Why? Who’s he?” Asked Leslie curiously.

“Nah... Someone Fletch knows... Important person I think... I met him.” Gloated Toby proudly.

“You getting this?” The newspaper man asked intently listening in.

“Yeah, yeah... If *Weasel* is involved with Fletcher we have bigger problems than we think... I’ll inform Faulkner... Stay with these two... Good work.”

Killing the connection the detective makes his way to Faulkner’s office hoping he would be there. The door is partly ajar and he knocks lightly before sticking his head into the room.

Not wanting to disturb his superior more than he had to.

“Burgess come in!” Faulkner calls out looking up from his desk.

“What’s up?” Sensing an urgency in his voice.

“*Weasel*.” Burgess spat out the lethal words.

“Weasel? ... You sure?” Faulkner asked hesitantly, “...Shit!”

“Think so... Just over heard *Victor Charlie* talking to an *associate* about having meet him.”

“Shit... If Weasel is involved with Fletcher he’s going global... Shit!” Wondering who else might be involved, “... I’ll get hold of inter-pol... I thinks it time I had a chat with our friend from Seattle... Thanks.” Faulkner dismisses Burgess.

Toby scratches his crotch vigorously only to agitate it more.

Catching Leslie’s attention.

“What’s wrong with you?” Asked Leslie glaring at him suspiciously keen to keep his distance from whatever was irritating him.

“Dunno eh... But it fucken burns bro...” Confesses Toby scratching himself again. “...Ahh.”

“Better see the doctor m-man... M-maybe you got something off that M-Monique chic? ... That dirty b-bitch.” Leslie reminds him.

“Nah man... She was sweet... Nothing wrong with her... Must have got something off a toilet seat eh.”

“Yeah, yeah... T-that m-must be it... Any-w-ways think you should s-see a doc eh...He-he-he.”

“Yeah, good idea bro... We can stop off at the hospital on the way... A&E is free bro.”

There is a knock at the door, and Faulkner looks up to see a feral looking gentleman sticking his head inquisitively into the doorway.

“Processing is two doors down the hall on...” Faulkner begins to say only to have the feral individual finish what he was about to say.

“... On the left I know... I've been shuffling forms there for the past three weeks... I'm Grimm... Detective Grimm... You wanted to see me?” Holding out a Seattle badge.

“Oh sorry, I just thought...” Coming to grips with the tattooed anomaly standing in the doorway.

“Yeah, I seem get that a lot around here.” He admits looking about the office and the boards on the wall.

“Come in, come in... Have a seat... Drink?”

“It's a little early for me, but sure why not.” He lied, looking about for the liquor cabinet.

“No... What I meant was would you like a coffee... Or tea perhaps?”

“Tea? ...” The thought repulsed Grimm and he pulls a grimaced face. “... Coffee be fine... Black no sugar thanks.”

Faulkner lifts the handset and requests for two coffees to be delivered to his office.

“You're a long way from home... What brings you to the land of the long white cloud?” Asked Faulkner discovering Grimm's jacket did not go into the cause of the transfer.

“Superiors seemed to think I needed a change... Time out... If you know what I mean (*sniff*).” Leaving out the explicit reason for the transfer.

“You have an extraordinary record detective... Major drug busts in Seattle and Canada I see.”

“So they say... (*sniff*)... You got a case you need a hand with?” Asked Grimm hoping to kill the small talk and to getting straight to the point.

“Yeah... We might have something we could use your *expertise* on.” Assessing the man seated before him.

It was hard to believe he was an officer of the law. Looking like he belonged on the other side of the judiciary. The side that distributed and took drugs. Every inch of his tattooed persona wreaked of drug use. Possibly a former heroin addict. He had had a hard life and somewhere in

that hardship had decided to side with the good guys. The two detectives could not have been more different. One in suit and tie. The other tee-shirt and jeans. Polished black shoes and scuffed crocodile boots.

“Ahh-Hmm!” Grimm interrupts Faulkner’s drifting thoughts.

“Sorry... Right then... I better fill you in...” Began Faulkner just as the coffee arrived, “...Very good Irene... Just down there will be fine.” Waiting for the secretary to leave before he continued.

“Have you heard of Operation Hawk?” Asked Faulkner.

“One hears things around the office...” Leaving it there.

“For the past year we’ve been investigating a drug syndicate headed by a night club owner... A one Charles James Fletcher... Owns *The Palace* on Vivian.” Looking over to a board of photos. Fletcher’s mug shot at the top of the pyramid of glossy black and white images.

“Yeah, I know the place.” Grimm openly admits.

“That’s good... It won’t look like you’ve appeared out of the blue.”

“How do I fit into all this?”

“We need to get Charles Fletcher on tape... He’s an evasive creature... Keeping his distance while others handle the product.”

Grimm nods his head imagining his role in the operation.

“Something unexpected has put a fly in our ointment.” Faulkner watches Grimm’s reaction, but the man was unmoved.

“And what’s that?” Grimm asked getting his attention.

“Have you heard of *Weasel*?”

“Weasel?” Grimm echoes.

“That’s right, Weasel.”

“What the fuck is he doing in town? ... This is below his pay grade compared to his operations in the States and Asia.” Unable to reconcile the man’s presence.

“We think he’s expanding his distribution network to here and Aussie... Looks like Fletcher is taking over New Zealand operations... He’s stepping up to the big time... Using a *Federation* motor cycle gang’s headquarters to store the product... Without a warrant it’s like Fort Knox out there... And even then they could flush it by the time we bulldozed the walls.”

“Hmm...” Grimm contemplated the outcomes that were not looking hopeful, “...If Weasel manages to establish a network here he’ll corner the market and flood it with Opioids and Coke.”

“Exactly... All the more reason we need *you*... If we can get you inside, see the merchandise... You up to it?” Asked Faulkner waiting to be turned down.

“When do I start?” Grinned Grimm.

“You just did... I’ve had you reassigned to my department as of now... I’ve made a copy of the case file for you to get you head around it. The movers and shakers... Oh yeah... Fletcher has just recruited a new mule... *Victor Charlie* for now until we come up with a name and address... A nobody, no priors, no rap sheet.”

“No yet he hasn’t... He’s the least of our worries...” Said Grimm looking out the window towards Vivian.

Rain began to lash the darkening window. Reminding him of Seattle. You have to love the rain. Wellington was no different. Thoughts of a bar on First Avenue surfaced in his mind and he checks his watch for the time difference. Wishing he was there hanging off the bar, keeping to himself and not some seven thousand miles away from home. Tomo getting him his drinks for free as they both watched Frank slowly get stoned on bourbon.

The reminiscing had made him feel forlorn and homesick.

“I think it’s time for that drink.” He said standing to remove the badge from his wallet.

Pushing it towards Faulkner for safe keeping until he needed it.

Waiting at Accident and Emergency, the smell of disinfectant and sterile air made the place feel like an alien world.

Leslie tries to read a magazine, but the words muddled themselves. Making it almost impossible to understand. And he began to flick through the pages looking at the pictures.

Toby fidgeted like he had the clap. Scratching and rubbing his groin. People around him moved away to distance themselves. Breaking out in a mild sweat as his system battled the illicit viral intrusion. Burning seconds ticked over to agonizing minutes that turned to excruciating hours.

Then a welcome voice called out a name.

“*Tobias Hurunui?* .... Tobias Hurunui?” The male nurse repeats in case all the other people had not heard it.

Toby raises his hand as though he were in school.

“He-he-he-he... *Tobias*... He-he-he-he.” Lesley chuckles at the name.

“Don’t you start.” Flinches Toby trying to stand.

“This way please.” The nurse walks off towards a corridor of curtained cubicles.

Rubber soled shoes squeaked on the polished linoleum floor.

“Wait in here please and a Doctor will be with you in a moment.” Instructs the nurse closing the thin floral vinyl curtain as he left. Quarantining the pair within.

Hearing voices of other patients explain their ailments amused the two lads. Suddenly the curtain is thrown open and a large woman enters to confront the two young men.

“Where’s the doctor?” Asked Toby, unsure what to make of the bulky manifestation at the curtain.

“Good morning boys, I’m Doctor Harrison... What seems to be the problem?” An unsympathetic voice asked.

Leslie tints his head to suggest Toby was the one with problem. Soon followed by Toby scratching himself again.

“Oh I see... Off with your pants and lay on the bed please...” Instructed the doctor closing the curtain and pulling on rubber gloves. “... Hurry up... We haven’t got all day... There are others waiting!”

Unable to protest Toby drops his trousers. Retaining boxers he lays down on the bed staring blankly at the ceiling. Feeling the probable woman pull down his trunks to reveal his junk.

“Jesus!” Exclaims Leslie under his breath, taken back by the inflammation.

“Who’s been a naughty boy then? ...” The Doctor asked taking a closer look at the be-speckled beast, “...No need to operate.”

“No? .... That’s good.” Said Toby relieved about the seriousness of the infection.

“No, not at all... Two or three week your *pecker* drop off all by itself.”

“Very funny... Can you fix it?”

“It’s not an automobile young man... Look at it! ...,” Amused by the inflammation, “...*Nasty!*”

But Toby would rather not look at it and Leslie was looking the other way trying not to laugh.

“We’re going to have to run some tests of course, but you’ll live... This may hurt a bit.” Said the Doctor filling a large syringe with antibiotics.



“Ahhh! ...” Screams Toby as the needle penetrates his penis. “...I don’t like needles!”

“Don’t be such a baby... It was only a little prick... Okay, pull your pants up and fill this with urine and give it to reception... I’ll write you out a prescription... You on any other drugs?” She asked with interest.

“Nah, don’t do drugs...” Toby lied, then added, “...I smoke though.” As if he were proud of the fact.

“Well I’d stop if I were you... There’s no anti-biotic for cancer son.” Warning him, the advice going over his head.

Discharging them from the cubical and watched the lads head towards the toilets hoping the young man would return with the urine sample.

“Fuck it hurts to pee man...” Toby agonizes as he passes it into the small bottle. “...The bottle’s not big enough.”

“I think they only w-wanted a s-sample bro, not a-all of it... You s-sure it w-wasn’t that n-n-nasty g-girl f-friend of yours... *M-Monique* who g-gave you t-that? Who else you been f-f-fucking?”

“Dunno...” Declared Toby. There had been several in the past month. Random sex with random girls. Their ovaries ticking faster than atomic clocks. He could barely remember their faces less so their names, “...No body.”

“You g-gotta start using c-c-condoms m-man!” Leslie told him.

“Nah man not me... I don’t like those things... They don’t make them big enough eh.” Toby protested the size of his endowment.

“By the s-size of your d-dick now I c-can understand... Anyways... L-like the D-Doc says... T-two three w-weeks your p-p-pecker drop off b-b-by itself eh! ... He-he-he-he-he.”

Toby tried to laugh, but it hurt...

## Vikki with two k's

Looking more like James Dean than a detective, Grimm stood shoulders hunched, shuffling feet and hands buried deep in a trench coat, a cigarette hanging from his lips.

Insulating himself from the biting cold breeze that was funneling itself unimpeded along Vivian. Twitching and shaking as though he needed a hit. A bouncer stands to one side of the entry and looks down at the creature that had stopped to inspect the flashing neon lights. Pulsating music leaked onto the street. Attracted like a moth, transfixed by the enchanting music. Wondering what lay within. Feeling the need to go inside.

Lighting a cigarette Grimm begins to swagger inside only to be greeted by a heavy hand to stop him from going any further. The bouncer points to a sign a small no smoking sign and Grimm squints as if to focus his eyes on the sign.

“Fuck.” He curses throwing the unspent cigarette on the ground and rubbing his boot over it.

Then looks back to the bouncer for permission to pass. The bouncer momentarily assesses his intoxication and attire. Unsure what to make of the tattoos on his hands and neck. Appearing reasonably sober and being a cold night. What money the stranger did not spend on drink, the girls would help alleviate him of.

The bouncer tilts his head for him to get inside and stop wasting his time.

With unhurried steps Grimm strolls into the darkened reception as if he were a regular. To be greeted by a scantily clad young woman wearing nothing but what appeared to be her underwear.

“Twenty dollar please.” She asks for entry fee.

Grimm reaches for a wallet and opens it exposing a wad of notes and peeling out a fifty and hands it to the girl.

“Take a seat, I’ll bring you your change... Would you like a drink?”

“Whiskey... On the rocks, keep the change sweetie.” He informed her as if he had known her forever.

“I’ll be right back... I’ll find you.” The young woman smiles.

“I’m sure you will.” Grimm talks quietly to himself and pushes open a tinted glass door to a world of moving laser lights.

A glistening silver pole stands at the center of the stage on a mirrored dance floor. A naked young lass swings about it gracefully. Not that anyone noticed her performance. Her youthful firm body passing in and out of sight as lights accentuated your sensual allure. Gentlemen sit in the shadows. Many of whom accompanied by young ladies that plied them with drinks. Enticing them with private dances. Those that wanted to take it to the next level would be invited upstairs.

Grimm takes in the room. And re-familiarizes himself with its dimensions. Just then the young woman returns with a whiskey in her hand, the change tucked into her garter belt.

“Thanks sweetie.”

*‘Tea? Really?’* Recalling Faulkner’s offer, the colonials had gone soft.

“Anything else I can *do* for you mister, just ask for me... *Vikki...*” The runs her hands over his shoulder in a suggestive manner, “...With two *k’s.*”

“I’ll do that... Thanks again.” Grimm responds to suggest he was familiar with how things operated.

Taking a swallow savors it and allows it to warm him. Stripping away the anxiety of what he was getting into. Tonight would just be the first of many visits. Making himself known to the girls and the bouncers.

Flash enough money and doors will open.

*‘New Zealand tax dollars being well spent.’* He thought settling into the chair.

Girls walked by and smiled and he would slide a note into their meager costumes. Dancers came and went on stage to applause of ever intoxicated voyeurs. Strobe laser lights cut tracking beams through the haze of artificial smoke creating an alien landscape. Mirrors walls adding to the illusion.

Half naked women wondered about like a scene from ancient Greek orgy.

Time passed with each successive short glass. Inhaling the fragrance of sex and candy sweating from those in the room. Twitching his nose he made sure those watching from above saw him. Rubbing a hand beneath it to relieve the apparent irritation he began to fidget.

Taking the final swallow prepares himself to leave. Just then a young lad sits beside him. A bottle of ginger beer in his hand. Grimm wonders how the lad had gotten past the bouncer. Then notices him scratch his groin region. Unsure what to make of it, the lad does it again. Either the young cock was aroused, or he had stuck his cock into something he should not have.

Either way, Grimm was not sticking around to find out.

“You off so soon? ... You only just got here sugar.” Vikki flashes dark eye lashes.

A fake pout on her face.

“Gotta see a man about a dog... (*Sniff!*)” Said Grimm appearing anxious to leave.

His nose twitching and sniffing as though something was riling him.

“I’ll be back.” He said tipping her as he left.

“Don’t be too long sugar.” She watches the John walking away.

Pushing a path through testosterone fueled young men, Grimm made his way onto the street. Pulls a cigarette from a pack and tore away the filter and lit the cowboy killer. Then offered one to the bouncer.

“Cheers bro...” Appreciated the bouncer looking tired from standing motionless for hours. His feet were killing him. “...It’s going to be a cold one tonight... There’s a storm brewing.”

“Yeah you’ve got that right...” Said Grimm pulling up the thick collars of the trench coat, burying hands deep into the pockets and swaggering away, “...You got that right.” Grinning.

“Bob? Got a minute?” A detective asked entering Faulkner’s office.

“No... What’s up?” He calls back for the man to enter.

“We got a name back on our Victor Charlie... A one Tobias Hurunui... High school dropout.” The detective hands Faulkner a piece of paper confirming the details.

“That was fast... Has he got priors?” Faulkner asked wondering how they got the name so quickly.

“No, but he’s got the clap... Barnard followed him to the Hospital. Didn’t take much after that... Nothing on his associate.”

“Good work, keep an eye on him...” Faulkner returned to the thick file open on the desk, “... Oh, FYI... Detective Grimm is officially undercover as of this moment... He’ll liaise only with myself... Understand?”

“Right-o Bob.”

“He should be at The Palace as we speak... It’s a tough assignment, but someone has to do it... Lucky bastard.” Shaking his head.

“I’ll tell the boys to back off...”

“To the contrary... Bust his balls... He has to appear as any only junkie... He gets no favors else Fletcher will smell a rat.”

“Copy that Bob.” Confirming the order...

## **Ka mate, ka mate!**

“Morning Charlie.” Alfie pushes the flaps of the carton open to see Charlie waiting for him.

Paws wiping whiskers in anticipating of a scrap of food. Reaching to a pocket pulls out a piece of bread he had saved for his neighbor.

“Here you go Charlie... Go feed the kids.” Throwing a crust towards the opening in the wall and the rat scurries to retrieve it before disappearing beneath the building.

A fine blue sky greeted him as he stretched his limbs. Feeling joints click back into sockets. The sun had yet to rise completely and cast a long shadow over the alleyway. Frost covered the ground and breathe fogged in the air before him. He had seen out many a winters and this was no different. Pulling newspaper from beneath clothing he folds it carefully and places it inside the carton. Then closes the flaps again.

Tidying himself. Runs the combs over his hair before running it through a grey beard. Wondering if he should trim it. Perhaps at the café if there were not too many people. Straightening the overcoat and tie gathers the brief case and walking stick and walks assuredly from the alleyway. The early morning commuter traffic was but nonexistent. Alfie wonders what day it was. Sure it was a Friday and then surmised it must be a public holiday of some kind.

Then remembers.

“Happy Birthday Queenie.” Offers his felicitations.

Perhaps he would celebrate with some cake today. A rare treat on such a special occasion. As a soldier in her army, it was the decent thing to do. Pulling down the cheese cutter to feel the snug fit. The briefcase in one hand, the heavy knotted stick in the other. The pains of his wounds abated with each passing step. Like a cold blooded animal the sun penetrated his hide to the bone. Feeling the warmth surge through his veins, animating him to move.

The city felt like an abandoned ghost town.

Trolley buses rolled like tumble weeds down deserted streets. Turning the corner on to Courtney sees a man standing atop a bench stammering

dirges. Arms flayed about as though speaking to someone. Alfie looks about in search for them. But sees no one.

The dog whimpered and laid patiently at his master's feet. Lifting his head in time to see the old man about to pass by. Eyes follow him. A nose sniffing the air for a scent that would mark the human.

A scent that was tired and stained with pain. There was something about this human that separated him from the others. Another human follows nearby. Unaware by the first. This human had no scent.

Alfie takes a wide berth from the man on the bench. Wondering how much he had had to drink. An empty bottle of beer at his feet. The dog follows human's movement into the café.

"Alfie! ..." Calls out Samantha, "... Where have you been? Haven't seen you for a while."

"Out and about." He lied smiling and reappearing to those around him.

"Tea and toast?" She asked knowing the answer.

"That'd be lovely..." Taking a seat at his table, "...Didn't think you'd be open today."

"Have to pay the bills somehow." She calls out.

"It's like a ghost town out there... If you don't count the clown on the bench outside."

"Yeah... He's been at it for over an hour now... Something's upset him..." She peers out the window to see the man had vanished. "...He's gone." Looking up and down the street, but he was nowhere to be seen.

Only a cloud of swirling dust above the seat raised up by the wind before blowing away.

"Must be a *woman*... It's always a woman that will *do it* to a man." Advised Alfie.

"You talking from experience there Alfie?" She asked curiously.

"I suppose..." He reflects.

Old wounds were being opened and he wondered if he should be going there.

"I don't want to pry Alfie but... Were you ever married? A good looking man like yourself must have had the women lining up for a dance." She encourages him.

"Only ever one woman for me Samantha... And she went and died on me... Cancer." He said, as though she had gone to the shops and never

returned.

Almost making it sound it acceptable.

“Oh Alfie... I’m so sorry, I shouldn’t have asked.” Samantha bites her lip regretting she had asked.

“That’s okay Sam... I was lucky to have had her at all... She was the most beautiful woman in the world... She could have had any man she wanted... And she chose an old fool like me.” Alfie stares into space recalling Renna’s face, thinking he saw her sitting opposite him smiling.

He smiles back.

“Well... She chose the best one Alfie... A woman knows.”

“They certainly do Sam... They certainly do.” He conceded.

“I’ll get you those eggs, sunny side up.”

“Thanks Sam.” Alfie grins.

Opening the paper hoping the world events would occupy his mind. The aberration of Renna fades replaced by images of death and destruction on the pages before him. The paper forecast another tweetstorm had passed over night.

And he looks out the window only to see blue skies.

“Hmm!” He grunts to himself unsure what to make of the political phenomenon.

Then flicks to the horoscopes hoping to lift his spirits. Reading the poignant words wondering if they applied to the Queen.

“To the Queen... God save the Queen!” Alfie lifts his cup of tea and toasts the air before him.

“To the Queen!” Parrots Samantha arriving with the plate of bacon and eggs.

“Lovely-dovely...” Alfie savors the greasy plate of food.

The rhythm of his heart was beating like a drum, the bacon and eggs were rolling off his tongue.

Leaning back in the chair to allow the breakfast to settle, the café door opens and a rush of cold air rushes over him. Fusing itself with visions of the dirt hill Nui Dat in the distance, the sound of chopper blades above his head...

... Base camp for Diggers, Aussies and Kiwis alike.

Home for the next twelve months. Turbines screamed and whined loudly, forcing sticky humid air over the anxious FNGs. Overwhelmed by



the shuddering and noise, breathing a cocktail fear and aviation exhaust fumes. Alfie could make out the approaching base camp below. A shanty town of tents, pitched on scoured terrain strung together with rope and wires. Laundry fluttered in a maelstrom of rubble kicked up by the blades.

Half naked sweaty men stopped kicking a ball about and watched on as the Huey of green horns came into land. Stirring up a blinding cloud of dust and dirt. Shielding faces, they held their ground eager to see the new arrivals.

Their brothers in arms.

The whine of the engine lessened from a scream, then to a purr, before falling silent.

The camp fell silent. A chill ran down Alfie's spine and through the settling yellow haze of dust a lone soldier appears. A native of Aotearoa.

Others break from games to join him.

Pacing back and forth as though he was troubled by something. Trembling hands summoning ancient spirits. He stops and tilts his head to one side and stares at the new men. Protruding his tongue at them straining every muscle of his face with a fearsome look. Howling in native tongue for the others to stand with him.

Slapping hands against naked chests. Boots stomped heavily on the earth. Raising a layer of dust about their feet. And resonating an earthly thud. Arms raised as though threatening to throw a spear. An intimidating sight intended to challenge an enemy watching on.

Khaki clad warriors began to chant the ancient words...

*Ka mate, ka mate! ka ora! ka ora!*

*Ka mate! ka mate! ka ora! ka ora!*

*Tēnei te tangata pūhuruhuru!*

Feet stomped earth and hands slapped sweaty bodies, enlarged white eyes orbit in sockets.

Faces with terrifying contortions. Deep warrior-like voices cried out a welcoming challenge befitting the Kiwi soldiers. Fathomable only to them. The mana not lost on those watching. Poms, Yanks and Aussies watched on in awe as the war dance continued...

*Nāna nei i tiki mai whakawhiti te rā!  
Ā, upane! ka upane!  
Ā, upane, ka upane, whiti te ra!*

Reverent voices cried out rousing goosebumps, and the Maori Haka fell silent.

Followed by a loud cheer, officially welcoming the neophytes to the camp. To their first day of their tour of duty. It could well be their last.

The man who had lead the Haka steps forward and salutes Alfie.

“Welcome to Whiskey Three Company Sir!” The man announces.

“Sounds like my sort for company.” Not returning the salute.

“This way Sir, I’ll show you to your tent.” A Private steps forward to assist him.

“Don’t get too comfy men... We bug out 0700 hours.” He orders his men to be ready.

“Sir!” The troop respond in accord throwing kit bags over shoulders.

Rock music blared out over speakers, singing songs about a Southland, where the skies were so blue.

Somewhere in the far distance the sound of thundering artillery pounding enemy positions. Passing a tent with a New Zealand flag draped over a window. Outside sits the Maori warrior that had lead the formidable Haka. Leaning back on a sturdy wooden chair watching him pass. Strumming an old guitar that had seen more action than those who had played it. The Maori warrior gives a nod to his countryman. He was not alone in this unwanted war.

Looking up to hear another approaching Huey about to arrive.

“Bloody Aussies.” Cusses the man to the poor cousins from across the ditch.

Arriving at a large tent reserved for officers, on opening the door the Private steps aside fearful of stepping on the hallowed ground.

“Anything you need Sir, just say the word.”

“What’s your name? Where you from son?” Alfie asks detecting a foreign accent.

“Michael, Sir... Jacksonville Florida. Sir!” The Private said proudly.

“Drafted?” Alfie asked inquisitively.

“Yes Sir... I ain't no Senator son, Sir!” Michael responds dejectedly.

“Good for you... Got long to go?”

“Done three of twelve, Sir! ... Just have to survive until then, Sir!”

“Keep your head down... The war will be over by Christmas.” Alfie lied.

“Hope so... I got family back home.”

“Don't we all son... I'll be fine from here. Dismissed.”

“Sir!” The young Private salutes and Alfie waves him off to rejoin a group of men kicking a ball about.

Looking about the tent spies an empty bed suggesting where he would be sleeping. And he throws a duffel bag onto the bed to stake the claim. It seemed two other officers had taken up residency. Speculating their ranks. He would discover after his briefing with the Colonel.

Checking his watch sees he would be cutting it fine.

“Shit!” He cusses and rushes out the door.

The briefing over, Alfie tracks down his men playing a friendly game of rugby against a team of Aussie Diggers.

With trans-Tasman rivalry on the line the term *friendly* took on a whole new meaning between Anzacs. Dirt bruised men wrestled over a ball, as Americans watched on curiously. A ruck had formed with the ball at the bottom. Buried beneath a kiwi body being raked vigorously by an Aussie.

“Get off him!” Orders Alfie, and the Aussie backs away.

The ball tumbles out on the Kiwi side and picked up by Pattison who passes it to Burns. Burns is tackled and brought to ground heavily.

But not before flicking the ball onto Sullivan.

“Go you bastard! That's an *order!*” Cried out Alfie to the amusement of the others watching.

Sullivan charges down the side line like a man possessed. When his commanding officer tells him to run. He runs.

Diving to the corner just as an Aussie tackled his legs from beneath him.

“You beauty!” Alfie clapped and hollowed.

A mess bell rang time and the end of the game. Men shook hands and brushed themselves off and headed to the mess tent.

“Grub's up!” A soldier calls out.

The sun's soul lingered on the western horizon. Casting long shadows across the playing pitch. Stars had begun to appear to the south. And the more he looked the more certain he thought he saw something familiar. The Crux to anybody else. He smiled at the glittering constellation of stars gradually lighting in the darkening heavens.

Guiding the way home, The Southern Cross...

... Alfie's hands shook in time with the ancient Maori still chanting in his head. A foot stomping softly on the linoleum floor. Dazed and staring to the seat opposite, to a beautiful woman smiling back.

"You okay their Alfie... You want me to call you a doctor?" Asked Samantha thinking the he was having a seizure.

Bringing Alfie back to the café.

The vision faded, as did the beautiful woman.

Disappointed to have lost the connection. An empty plate before him stained with yellow egg yolk and toast crumbs.

The smell having long since dried.

"I'm good thanks Sam..." Wondering what to say, "... Reminiscing old times."

"If you say Alfie... More tea?" She asks.

"Oh that would be lovely... One for the road." Suggested Alfie looking out at the clear blue skies and the street now coming to life with people...

## So what's the bad news?

3:27AM Doug is awoken by sounds of a marital intruder coming from the kitchen.

Eyes strain to an alarm clock, its digits glowing back at him defiantly. If it was a burglar they were making themselves obtrusively at home.

But he knew this burglar too well.

Glasses rattled and a fridge door opens and closed. A dim light from below crept up the stair way and into the bedroom. Hearing the sound of a cork popping wondered if he should confront his wife.

Or do as he had always done and go back to sleep. Cowardly, he rolls over to resume a fantasy of Samantha, who had crept into his dreams that evening. The dream dissolved as a silhouette of a woman filled the doorway holding a wine bottle in one hand. And the door frame in the other to support herself from falling over.

How she had made it up the stairs was a miracle.

“Dougie, Dougie, Dougie.” A very drunk voice announced.

“Go to bed Helena.” Groans Doug from the pillow.

Too sleepy to be drawn into an argument at that of the morning.

“Oh poor diddum’s... Did I wake you? ... (*Hic-cup!*)” She began to tease him.

“You’re drunk Helena... Go to bed!” He repeats, hoping not to wake his son.

Collapsing in an arm chair Helena takes a mouthful from the bottle. Through blurry vision and the faint light of the room sees her husband laying beneath the blankets.

Urges begin to tingle and surface.

“Why not?” She convinces herself, he was legally her husband.

Taking another swig on the bottle, she pulls herself upright and sways gently on the rocking floor boards.

Allowing the bottle to fall the floor and spill over the plush carpet. Staining it blood red. Frustratingly she pulls off the blouse and throws it over the hemorrhaging bottle. Fingers fumble with the zipper on the skirt. Incapable of functioning properly as though they were not her own.

Eventually the skirt falls to around her feet.

Down to lace bra and panties, looking not too unlike a candy girl at a gentleman's club. She begins to run hands over her body and primes the erotic engines. What was another lap to her? Swaying with each step. Wobbles her way to the bed, pulling back the covers and slides beside Doug, now asleep.

Her body now super charged and heated with desires beyond her wildest imaginations. Thoughts of Jack surface again. Fanning the flames that were growing ever higher with every moment of anticipation.

Hands reach for an already stiff phallic.

“Who’s being a naughty boy them?” She whispers.

His mind captured by a fantasy of its own. Unperturbed, he continues to sleep. Unable to distinguish between reality and dream that was drawing him under.

“Not yet... Jack.” She dared to say softly, almost hoping Doug would hear the adulterous words.

Pulling aside her scant panties she mounts him. Releasing breasts from their captivity she presses them softly against his face. A mouth opens and suckles on the aching swollen nipple. She feels a wet hot tongue begin to suckle it.

Working herself up and down, somehow more excited. Who was this man beneath her? Perhaps she should stay away longer next time. Breaths quickening, keeping pace with the other.

Doug fantasizes Samantha presses her breasts against his face. Soft and warm and inviting. The smell of her body like a sweet perfume. His hands about her waist.

Helena fantasizes Jack’s muscular body beneath her. Strong arms holding hers. It was all becoming too much for both of them.

“Ahh\_” Doug cries out softly unaware it was not a dream.

Doug’s eyes open at the moment and sees his wife on top of him. Intoxicated eyes roll in their sockets unaware of him looking up at her. Closing his eyes again hoping to capture Samantha again. But she had gone. Fading away as though he had cheated on her with his wife.

Laying inert, limp. Numb to the vixen that had used him.

Rolling off beside him Helena lays panting. The orgy of imaginary bedfellows over. Retreating to neutral corners before the next round of blows. Doug lay staring at the far wall. Fathoming what had just

happened? His visit to Finch tomorrow would dispel his worse fears. The glow of the alarm clock beamed 4:07AM.

Unable to fight the sleep that was over coming him, he surrenders to the sandman in search of Samantha.

Pulling up the collar of his overcoat Doug reaches for an umbrella from the large vase.

“I’m just popping out for a bit... Do you mind keeping an eye on my son... I shalt be long.” Doug asked his secretary.

“Of cos Mister McCray... Is everything alright?” Alice asked inquisitively.

“Fine, fine... I just have to see a man about a dog.” Doug lied.

“A dog?” The little boy squeals with delight.

“Maybe...” Doug lied again. “... If any clients come in, have my son see to them...”

“Of course Mister McCrae.” Said Alice as though she meant it. Then smiles.

His mind in two places. The events of that morning still troubling him.

“*Women.*” Said Doug to himself

“What was that Mister McCray?” Asked Alice missing the comment.

“Nothing Alice, just taking to myself.”

“Very well them Mister McCrae... See you when you get back then... Come along you... Let’s find you some paper shall we.” Enticing the urchin to follow her.

“Puppy dog!” Squeals the boy.

“Yes a puppy dog... Aren’t you lucky?!” Alice encourages him.

Doug shakes his head wondering how he was going to get out of it.

Much like his marriage, the day had turned turbulent.

The howling southerly and heavy scattered showers pelted the city from all sides. No one would escape the onslaught. Daring to open the umbrella. He risks it and immediately regrets the decision as it blew inside out.

To the amusement of others watching.

Hurrying into the foyer of the building before the next wave of wet pellets bombarded him. Looking drenched and feeling sorry for himself removes the overcoat. And shakes what water he could from it as he waited for the lift to arrive.

Finch's daughter was still in search of love. Swiping left and right. And left again. The man of her dreams was there somewhere. The trouble was there were just too many for her to choose between. Standing quietly in front of her, he waited for her to notice his presence. Her eyes glued to the small screen of flashing faces. Ear plugs blared music into a skull. Dampening her perceptiveness of him standing there unnoticed.

The swiping stops and for a moment he hoped she had found love.

"Ah-hm." Doug coughs to catch her attention.

Looking up as though annoyed to have her day interrupted. Seeing a tall drenched gentleman standing before her in a dark pin striped suit.

"Dad! ..." She calls out to an open doorway. "...*That* man is here again!"

*That man* had a name, or so Doug thought. Looking to Finch's door hoping he would appear.

"Tell him I'll be right out!" Finch calls back.

Doug turns his head back to the daughter hoping she had good news.

"He said, *he'll be right out...* Have a seat if you like." She relays the message looking over the church pew.

"Thank you... I prefer to stand for now."

"Whatever." The girl replies pushing an ear plug leaking the loud music back into her head.

Then began frantically swiping left and right and up and down in search for love of her life. Which would inevitably end up being a mistake. As it had the last time. And the time before that. And the time before that. She kept swiping.

Her Uber prince was out there somewhere.

"Doug, Doug... I'm so sorry to keep you waiting..." Finch humbly apologizes. "...Why didn't you tell me it was Mister McCrae?" He reprimands his daughter.

"I did!" The girl retorts pulling a pout and glaring down her father.

Returning to the mobile as though the topic had been dropped and she had forgiven him.

"*Women.*" Said Finch.

"Yeah." Agreed Doug following Finch into his office.

"Drink?" Asked Finch pouring a couple of crystal tumblers.

"It's a little early for me thanks Ray, but you knock yourself out."



Finch nonetheless pours Doug a glass and places it on the desk before him.

“Trust me... You’re going to need it.” And returns to his own chair inhaling the aroma of his before taking a swallow.

Unsure what to make of the gesture Doug lets his own glass sit.

“How’d you get on?” Asked Doug keenly.

“I have some good news and I have some bad news...” Ray began unsure how to broach the infidelity to him looking rather soaked to the skin. “...Wet outside?”

“And the inside...” Admits Doug, “... So what’s the good news?”

Finch had chosen his words carefully and there was no nice way of breaking it to him. Before him on his desk a large brown envelope. Evidence of his investigations. A damning Mueller report. Making no recommendation, he would leave it to Doug to impeach the woman.

“She’s not sleeping with a man... Or woman for that matter.” Finch grinned before delivering the bad news.

“That is good news...” Doug grinned, “...I knew it...” Sure now that he was just being paranoid, “...So what’s the bad news?” He looks strangely at Finch perplexed why there would be any.

Finch sighs deeply and takes a gulp of the whiskey to calm his own nerves. Sighs again as if the first time was not enough.

“She’s sleeping with *a lot* of men...” Finch trails off and watches Doug go visibly silent as he took in the fake news. It had to be fake. “...At least you’re not still sleeping with her...” Then realized he had spoken too soon, “... Ah shit... Sorry Doug... I didn’t...”

Doug sat quiet. Reaching for the whiskey takes a mouthful and swallows it. Then another. And another. Draining the contents of the glass places it ever so gently back on the desk. His mind incapable of accepting the discovery.

He spies the large envelope and looks to Finch for confirmation.

“You don’t want to see those Doug... Take my word...” Warns Finch handing him the envelope.

Calmly, Doug reaches out to take the damning evidence from Finch’s hand. Slowly opening the file pulls out large black and white photographs. With disbelieving eyes he identifies Helena. The men complete strangers to him. One after the other after the other he flicks through the photos and the men.

“You weren’t kidding were you?” Said Doug beginning to see the funny side to Finch’s humor.

“Sorry to be the bearer of bad news... Just doing my job.”

Doug tilts his head at a photo wondering if the position that the lovers were entwined in was possible.

“She’s certainly pliable your wife.” Said Finch recognizing the photo Doug was looking at.

“I never suspected once...” Doug sighs, as Finch goes to pour him another stiff drink. The first beginning to have its effect, “...What’s next?” He asks.

“I can pass these onto Thomas if you like and he’ll take it from there... I’ve done about as much as I can... These photos will be damning enough.”

“I see... No chance of a second opinion?” Joked Doug.

“I’m sure I can get you more photo’s if you want... I think your wife has a certain *medical condition* if you know what I mean?”

“I’m sorry?” Asked Doug naively.

“Doug... She’s a raving *nymphomaniac!*”

“Is there a cure for that?”

“*Divorce* usually works...” Recommends Finch, “...The balls are your court Doug... Excuse the pun.”

“I’ll get in touch with Thomas... But I’ll need to sleep on it first.”

“Of course, I understand... I’ve seen it a hundred times before Doug... They never change their ways. My advice is to get out before she cleans you out.”

Nodding gently Doug takes in the advice being dispensed. His delusion shattered. His hope shattered. His life shattered. Thoughts turn to his boy. Finch watches him go inward with dark thoughts. He had also seen that look before. Where men do silly things.

Taking matters into their own hands.

“You okay Doug?” Finch trod the dark corridors of Doug’s mind.

“Yeah.” He responds very slowly. Drawing out the reply as though planning a retribution.

“Leave it to the lawyers Doug... You of all people should know that... Get that down you and go home...” Finch issued a personal prescription, “...If pain persists... Give me call okay.”

Gulping down the whiskey as though it were water. Feeling it burn to his stomach. The afterglow beginning to have the desired effect of numbing his senses.

The scales of justice were beginning to level themselves in his distraught mind.

“Thanks Ray.” Going to stand feeling woozy.

“You can keep those if you like... I have the negatives.” Informed Finch.

“I’m good, I have the original...” Managing a grin, “...I’ll see myself out.”

Walking pass the young lady at reception searching for love in all the wrong places.

“*Women.*” Doug mutters to himself.

Standing on the Terrace, his world falling apart around him.

Rain began to fall again and he felt the world wanted to piss on him. But the wild weather was nothing compared to the tempest brewing in his mind. Visions of his naked wife being taken by other men. Perhaps Finch was right. Perhaps she was sick. He would leave the doctoring to others. For now he had to protect his most precious possession. His boy.

Perhaps he *would* see a man about a dog.

Then as if the universe had sent him a sign. Spies a black and white dog cowering and shivering under a bush sheltering from the rain.

“Hey... What you doing under there fella?” Doug approaches the dog slowly hoping not to frighten it.

Looking familiar as if he had seen it somewhere before. The dog approaches the friendly voice wagging its tail. Sniffing and licking Doug’s hand.

“Good boy! Good boy! ...” Speaking the dog’s language while checking the collar for the owner, “Dexter... That your name? Dexter? ... Good boy Dexter! Come on!”

Dexter followed the human obediently. The mind can only hold one thought at a time and Dexter occupied Doug’s. A man followed a short distance behind. Rain drops passing through him as though he was not there. Dexter looks back to see him. Uncertain what to make of the human with no scent.

A pin stripped lawyer with a sheep dog by his side.

The odd couple turned heads as Doug made his way back to the office. Appearing at doorway with the dog his son squealed with delight only to have his hopes crushed immediately.

“I found him... We can’t keep him one okay?” Informed his father.

“Why not?” His son asked confused.

“He belongs to someone else... We need to find them and give him back... You’d want your dog back if you lost him wouldn’t you?” Doug asked.

The boy nodded his head.

“We can get a puppy tomorrow... How does that sound?” Suggests Doug eager to raise the boy’s hopes, “...In the meantime we can look after this one... Okay?”

“What about mommy? ... She said I can’t have a dog.”

“Don’t worry mommy... I’ll have a word with her.” Said his father sternly.

Alice detected a tone in Doug’s voice that suggested all was not well on the marital front.

“How about you play with him while I call his owner... His name is *Dexter*.”

“Dexter!” The boy squeals aloud excited by the name.

The dog rushes over and begins to lick the little boy’s face causing him to giggle hysterically. Doug dials the number he had seen on the collar but there was no answer.

Leaving a message after a familiar gravelly drawl and the beep for the owner to contact him...

# Rent money... Please

Cook Strait boiled, white tops and heaving peaks for as far as the eye could see.

Seagulls squawked and darted about as turbulent waves crashing over rocks. Sheltered fishing boats refused to budge from their berths. Ropes strained as they clung tightly their moorings. Only the Inter-Islander was brave enough to challenge the tempest being thrown at it this day.

Sarah peered out the window. Her nose pressed against the glass. Her breath misting the pane and she drew a smiley face. Causing her to smile. Samantha kneels beside her and draws her own smiley face. Insulated from the assailing elements mother and daughter enjoy a hot chocolate in the sunroom. Amused by a man standing on a bench ranting and raving to the bubbling seas. Rabid seagulls dived at him as though protesting his presence.

Sarah giggles as the man ducks to avoid being peaked on the head.

A bus slows down and stops and Samantha watches as a familiar looking young man gets off. Looking lost and disoriented. Then looks directly at her house and begins walking towards it.

“Stay here sweetie, I won’t be long okay.” Sarah tells her daughter.

“Kay mommy.” Said Sarah watching the stranger approaching.

Moments later there is a heavy knock at the door as Toby pounds on it loud enough to raise the dead and get the occupants attention. No response and he pounds again only to have the attempt stifled by the door opening.

“Easy on the door... You can pay for the damage.” Samantha warns the dazed delinquent looking individual.

“Rent money.” Toby belches out as if a gangster seeking protection money.

“A *please* would be nice don’t you think?” Informed Samantha taking in the young man’s appearance.

It was as though he had slept in his clothes and was suffering a hangover of some kind. Sniffing loudly, wipes his nose with the back of his hand. Dark glasses cover sensitive eyes and a throbbing headache. Scratching his crotch involuntarily.

He sniffs again.

“Rent money... *Please*...” Toby recites reluctantly, “... (*Sniff!*)”

Samantha stands back unwilling to catch the bug that young man had.

“Wait right here, I’ll go get it.” She said about to close the door in Toby’s face.

Toby sticks a boot into the doorway preventing it from closing.

“Hey, get your foot out!” She warns him.

“What you going to do about it bitch?” Toby threatens her.

“Really? ... I’ll show you what I’ll do about it...” She looks back into the hallway and calls out a name, “...Rob!”

Moments later Rob appears standing beside Samantha. Towering over the Toby looking inadequate to defend himself. Reminding him of the menacing patched gang members. Taking a step back.

Begins to regret his words.

“What’s up Sam?” Asked Rob staring down Toby.

“Young fella here has a trouble with his foot in my doorway... I was wondering if you could help him remove it.”

“Does he now... What you want punk?”

“Rent money... *Please*.” Toby asked nervously as Rob step forward.

“Tell Fletcher he’ll get his rent money when we get his bank account details otherwise we’ll call to the *IRD*... You hear me? ... *Punk?!*” Threatens Rob, “...I don’t want to see your face around here again understand? ... Now fuck off before I slap you!” Clenching a fist to expose white knuckles itching for a fight.

“I’ll tell Fletcher...” Said Toby walking away. Safe behind the gate calls out his own warning,

“... You ain’t heard the last of this!”

Rob steps forward to pursue Toby, only to have Samantha hold him back.

“Thanks Rob... I don’t know what I’d done without you here.” Samantha hugs the bulk of the man.

Despite her best intentions and Kaye’s advice. She had an itch that needed scratching. And Rob had just the right rubbing post against which to scratch it. She had almost forgiven him for taking the money. The horse that couldn’t lose had won.

The scent of another woman’s perfume on his plaid shirt was another matter.

“*Men.*” She said to herself.

Alfie sits on the bench basking himself in a rare burst of sun shine that had opened up from the heavens.

Feeling its warmth over him. A fleeting thought of Charlie the rat sunning himself in the alleyway crossed his mind.

“Hmm!” Alfie muses at the imaginary.

Watching the San Jennifer bobbed up and down as swells rolled in from the straight. Fish was no-where to be seen. Probably at home with the wife. The thought had the opposite effect to the sun and sent a chill down over his body. Letting it go and blow away in the breeze.

He was never one for holding onto memories.

“*Really?*” Said the man sitting beside him unseen soaking up the divine light.

Thinking the breakfast of that morning had not settled Alfie rubs his lower chest and the pain momentarily fades. A seagull guides down and lands at his feet. Anticipating a morsel of food. Reaching into a pocket. He always had a crust or two for a friend in need and throws the stale crust at the bird who catches it mid-flight. Other seagulls on seeing this swarm down and join their *friend*.

Making it impossible for him to distinguish one bird form the other.

“Fuck off! ... Shoo! ...” Alfie begins to shout. Kicking out a foot and waving his stick about to scare the birds away, “... Piss off!”

Birds scatter only to immediately return as though the strange man meant no harm. A dominant bird crowed loudly to keep their distance. Strutting among the others to back away.

This was his human.

Alfie reaches for his stick and goes to stand quickly as though to surprise the birds. But the exertion was all too much and he finds himself becoming dizzy.

The pain of the breakfast in his stomach had shifted to a pain in his chest and arm. Clutching the arm tries to steadies himself from falling. Only to have legs give way beneath him. Turning about to see the man sitting on the bench watching quietly on.

“You?” Said Alfie unsure what to make of his sudden appearance, before collapsing to the ground.

Seagulls scattered in all directions. Squealing and squawking loudly drawing the attention of a passersby. Dialing one-one-one, a young man

rushes over to investigate. Finding Alfie sprawled on the ground like a chalked body at a murder scene.

Removing his hoodie folds it and places it under his head.

“Alfie! Alfie!” A familiar voice calls talks to him frantically.

Opening and closing, Alfie’s eyes lids flicker to life. Caught between life and death, the silhouette of Leslie’s head and bright light behind it. Casting a strong shadow over the face and its features.

“Alfie... Stay with me.” Leslie beseeched the old man.

“I’m not going anywhere...” Said Alfie coming about again looking again at the face coming into focus. “...Leslie? ... What are you doing here?”

“Dunno... I just had a *f-feeling* to c-come down t-t-today... J-just as w-well eh?”

“Yeah...” Said Alfie looking about for the man who had vanished. Oddly, the bright light had disappeared as well.

“Ambulance is on its way.” Advised Leslie looking up for it.

“Don’t need not ambulance... I’m fine. Just got dizzy... Damn birds! ...” Standing up gingerly to wave his stick at the birds that had gather again, “... Piss off!” He warned becoming overly excited again. The pain in his chest return and a shortness of breath chokes further warnings to the birds.

“Have a seat Alfie... The ambulance w-will be hear s-shortly.” Helping him back to the bench.

“Thanks Leslie... You’re a good kid.” Said Alfie before passing out again.

In the distance sirens wailed and grew louder as they drew closer. Silencing just as they arrived at the scene. Rear doors break open and a Medic rushes over to the bench to find an old man slumped on a lad’s shoulder.

“You coming?” The medic calls out to the lad standing back.

“M-me?” Asked Leslie looking about as if the man was talking to someone else.

“Yes you... Hurry up!” The medic called out about to close the doors.

Alfie laid strapped down on the gurney being shaking side to side by the jostling rushing ambulance.



Wired for sound and vitals. Leslie sat opposite shaken by the sudden turn of events. Overwhelmed by the shaking claustrophobic enclosure. Next to him sat a Medic monitoring the old man's vital signs.

A man sat unseen between to the two holding Alfie's hand.

"Almost there Alfie." Says Leslie seeing the hospital up ahead looming into view.

Alfie squeezes the hand and Michel smiles.

"Family?" The Medic asked Leslie.

"Yeah-nah... J-j-just a... *f-f-friend*."

"You called us just in time... Otherwise he'd be a goner for sure."

The man looks to Leslie as though he had been cheated. There was a reason for everything. Freewill must be played out.

Suddenly there is a brilliant white light and the occupants look about as to the cause.

"What was that?" The Medic asked the driver.

"Dunno... Reflected sunlight probably... Get ready we're here!" The driver calls back and the Ambulance screeches to a halt outside A&E.

The rear doors of the ambulance burst open and another bright light sanitizes the compartment. Wheels drop from beneath the gurney and hurried voices call out his vitals.

"Male. Seventy seven. Possible heart failure... BP one-sixty over seventy and dropping."

"Bag him. Run blood. Echo and an ECG... ASAP..." An overseeing doctor instructs nurses gathering around Alfie like seagulls squabbling over a hot chip. Then sees Leslie standing suspiciously nearby, "...Who are you?"

"The lad found him, he's a friend." The Medic answers for Leslie.

"Yeah." Confirms Lesley looking at the nurse's work on Alfie.

"Take a seat over there. We'll let you know when you can see him, okay?" Instructs the doctor.

"K-kay." Said Lesley.

Nurses open Alfie's jacket, unbuttoning a shirt to discover a horrific sight.

At first, unsure what to make of the purple pitted scars and lacerations. A nurse hands the doctor a wallet and pulls out his only means of identification. A dull metal dog tag from a forgotten war impressed with name, rank and serial number.

“Run this through the database... Found out what you can about *Lieutenant Alfred Douglas McCrae*... ASAP.”

“Yes Doctor.” A nurse rushes away with the precious tag in hand. Warm from Alfie’s body. Carried with him for over fifty years.

“We’ve got ourselves a Veteran here... Let’s take *extra* good care of him.” The doctor examines the scars and old wounds. Looking like he had gone to hell and back to get them.

“Look at this...” A nurse attracts the doctor’s attention, “...What do you make of it?”

The nurse pulls up the Alfie’s trouser leg to reveal a newspaper shoved into the socks.

“Hmm...” The doctor dismisses the discovery and resumes his assessment. The doctor knew immediately the meaning but said nothing. Somethings are best left unsaid. The old man needed respect, not pity, “... Finish up here and get him to the ward. Scrub and feed him. He’s tough as old boots... He’ll live to fight another day.”

Alfie comes about, eyes open to the stark clinical ward.

A flickering fluorescent light above him. The smelling of disinfectant. The elevated bed enclosed by a green floral nylon curtain. An intravenous drip feed vital nutrients into an arm. Covered by a flimsy surgical gown, feeling as though he were naked. On the side table his wallet. Inside the cabinet discovers his clothes washed and folded neatly. Checking the wallet, finds it all there and places it under the pillow.

An opening appears in the curtain and Leslie peers his head through to see if he as awake.

“Hey... What was you doing here?” Asked Alfie curiously.

“They m-made m-me c-come.” Said Leslie feeling anxious.

“No one can make you do anything Leslie... And what did I tell you about breathing.”

“Yeah-nah s-sorry.” Stuttered Leslie confused by the mixed message.

“Good to see you Leslie...” Welcoming the visitor, “...Have a seat.”

“You okay?”

“Yeah-nah.” Responds Alfie causing the lad to smile.

“Thanks Leslie... They told me how close I came. If it wasn’t for you...”

“Hey...” Leslie takes a deep breath and begins again, “... I know you would do the same for me.”

“Told you... Now you keep doing that... Take a breath and talk slowly okay? ... No rush... You have a life to say what you want to say... Okay?”

“Okay.”

“Can’t wait to get out of here.” Said Alfie looking about for an escape route.

“Eh? You get f-free food... And warm bed... And n-nice nurses.” Leslie takes in the comforts.

“I’m not one for being closed in Lesley... The sooner I’m outta here the better.” Looking to the window and the blue sky outside.

The curtain opens again and the same doctor that had examined him on his admission stands at the end of the bed to inspect a clip board scrawled with medical notes.

“How we feeling today Mister... *McCrae*?” There was a tone in his voice that said he knew a secret that Alfie would prefer if he keep to himself.

“*Alfie* would be sufficient... I’m just dandy thank you... Will I be in for much longer? I have business to attend to.” Alfie played along the game of cat and mice.

“And what business would that be Alfie?” The Doctor enquires curiously.

“...Property.” Hesitating before answering. Fearing the Marion abode would be taken by another. Such was the under supply and over demand on the Wellington property market.

“A few more days at best... Your blood sugars are all over the place and your ECG results have yet to come back.” The doctor lied.

“Hmm...” Alfie grumbled. “...We’ll see.” He mutters to himself.

Leslie giggles happy to see Alfie back to his old self again.

“Eat well Mister *McCrae*... *Alfie*... I’ll be back again tomorrow to check on you.” Pulling the curtain closed behind him moving onto the next bed.

“*Dick head*.” Said Alfie watching the doctor leave.

Seeing Leslie looking at him as though the Doctor could have heard him.

“What? They’re going to kick me out? ... I’d like to see them try.”

“Yeah-nah.” Said Leslie smiling back...

## She said what?

“She said what!?” Fletcher interrogated Toby.

Standing in front of his desk looking like he was about to be court-martialed.

“She said she’d call the police or IR something or other...” Toby tried to recall. Still shaken by being threaten by the woman’s hefty boyfriend and by Fletcher’s intimidating cross examination.

“The IRD? ... Did she now?”

“Yeah, yeah, the IRD...” Confirms Toby, “...Who are they?”

Fletcher ignores the question. His mind busily thinking.

“Who was the guy?” He asked with curiosity.

“Dunno... Her boyfriend or something I suppose... Told me to fuck off else he’d slap me.”

“Hmm... Tough guy eh? ... Maybe we should send a couple of Federation boys out and see how really tough he is... That might help her change her mind.” Leaning back in the chair swivels around to look at the stage.

Abigail was on early. A treat for tired eyes. Taking in her sensuous curves. Rocking her body in time with the music. Grinding herself against the silver pole as though it were her lover.

“I need you do another run. Tonight... Think you can handle that?”

“Yeah of course Fletch, anything you say boss.” Said Toby eager to please.

“That’s my boy... Two tonight.”

“Two?” Asked Morris looking at his boss concerned he may be pushing his luck.

“Two keys...” Confirms Fletcher looking back at Morris as to why he would question him now. “... You can handle that can’t you Toby?”

“Of Course Mister Fletcher... Fletch.” Gently rubbing his crotch catching Fletchers concern.

“See Morris... No worries for Toby... Told you he was our man for the job.” Fletcher lied.

A mule was a mule. You worked them until they dropped dead. Then you got another. Morris smiled, reading between the lines.

Handing Toby two brown envelopes and tired looking shopping bag.

“Pick ‘us up some tea while you’re at it... We’re running low.” Asked Morris pulling five dollar note from his wallet.

“Yeah sure.” Pocketing the money.

“Don’t lose that. Your life depends on it, understand?”

“Yes Fletch.”

“Give my regards to *Weasel*.”

“Sure.”

“Good... Off you go... Don’t come back without the Coke... Or the money for that matter... Make sure you’re not followed...” Warned Fletcher.

“Okay... Will do Fletch.” Scurrying from the room. Side stepping Morris still blocking the door way.

“Two keys?” Asked Morris again curious as to bosses intention.

“Market has picked up dear Morris... It’s all about supply and demand... Speaking of which... Who the new guy down there? Fidgets worse than Toby scratches his crotch.”

Fletcher looks into the pit to see a tattooed gentleman flashing money like water.

Peeling off notes like candy to the girls. Every so often rubbing his nose as though in need of relief.

“Just an American passing through...” Advised Morris, “...Likes to party hard, if you know what I mean... Has connections back in *Seattle* apparently.” Relaying what Grimm had feed the girls.

“Seattle? Really? I’ve heard of the place... Perhaps we could *help* him.”

“We’ve got enough on our plate boss without another... Especially one we know nothing about... He could be a Narc.” Morris questions Fletcher’s interest.

“Doesn’t look like much of Narc... Look at him, he’s a complete fucken loser... Jesus Christ... If he’s a cop then he’s snorted more than he’s apprehended... Nah, he’s a loser like the rest of losers that use the shit... Have him checked him out just in case.” Fletcher squints eyes down at the tattooed man.

“Yes boss...” Morris grumbles, “...I need a cupper tea... You want one?”

“Yeah if you’re making one.”

“Oh while I remember, check out the moves on our boy... I sent you the link.”

“He didn't stick his cock into Monique did he?”

“Yeap!”

“But she's got the clap?”

“Yeap!” Said Morris shaking his head in disbelief.

“Jesus... Poor Bastard...” Sympathizes Fletch.

“Why do you think lover boy helps rubbing his crotch?”

“I thought he just fancied you.” Suggested Fletcher chuckling.

“Ha ha... Very funny Boss.” Rattling cups from a small kitchen off the office.

Lights dimmed as Abigail finished her routine.

Stirring an arousing applause from men in appreciation of the carnal dance. Young intoxicated bulls roared wildly eager to stick their cocks in to anything that moved. Married middle aged men in denial of growing old clapped enthusiastically. Wishing they could stick their cocks into anything that moved, but knowing better. And the more elderly discerning gents. Their cocks having long since lost interest of being stuck into anything. Having accepted their fait accompli watched on quietly in awe. Unfazed by the young fillies by their side, young enough to be their granddaughters.

To Grimm women were an enigma. An unfathomable species that defied logic. Yet there were times when he took some comfort there. Finding solace when the urge arose or necessitated itself. Undercover, all in the call of duty of course. It was a shit of a job, but someone had to do it. Abigail was beginning to prove the exception and he felt his interest being roused.

It was time to visit the restroom.

Grimm relieved himself in the urinal. Rocking gently in time with muffled music. Hearing the door open behind him and listened carefully to the number of men entering. Leather soled shoes echoing off the tiled floor. Making no effort to approach towards him. Senses them standing there waiting behind him.

Hearing the latch on the door lock was the final sign.

Grinning to himself. Giggles away the last of the drops and tucks the snake back into the pit and zips up.

*'It was time to go to work.'* Grimm thinks to himself.

Taking a deep breath that could well be his last. Turning about to see what he had expected. Two brawly gentlemen covering the door way.

“What do you want?” Playing dumb and confused.

Morris and the bouncer remained silent. Standing over him. Trying to appear intimidating.

“Come on guys, I ain't done nothing... *(Sniff!)*” He pleads. Trying to step around Morris to leave the restroom.

Only to have the bouncer grab him from behind and hold him in a full nelson. Powerful arms immobilizing him from moving. Lifting him from the floor. Legs kicking in the air.

“Steady down petal... We only want to talk.” Warns Morris facing Grimm with suspicious eyes.

“*(Sniff!)*... What do you want? ... *(Sniff!)*” Trying to wiggle his way out of the hold.

“Hands against the wall!” Morris tells him. As the bouncer releases his tight hold and forcing Grimm's hands against the cold tiled wall.

Heavy hands run over his body. Violating pockets and crevices. Under collars and shoes. Nothing was left to chance.

“What's this?” Asked the bouncer eyeing a suspicious stick.

“Protection... Can't be too careful these days... *(Sniff!)*.” Informed Grimm.

The bouncer presses a silver switch and a menacing pointed blade ejects itself from the wooden stick.

“I'll be keeping this... No weapons on the premises.” Pocketing the souvenir and hands Morris Grimm's wallet and old mobile.

Finding nothing of interest in the wallet other than cash.

That would soon become the property of the club once the girls got their hooks into him. Receipts from a hostel. A Seattle driver's license and a business card. Inspecting the card closer reveals a lawyers name.

“Who's this? ... McCrae?” Asked Morris wishing to know the connection to the lawyer.

“No one... *(Sniff!)* Just my lawyer.” Grimm lied on the spot.

“What you done?”

“Was drunk one night (*sniff!*)... And the cops here pulled me in for disorderly conduct (*sniff!*)... And found a blade on me... (*Sniff!*)” Grimm embellishes the lie.

“You never learn do you?” Asked the bouncer holding up the blade to Grimm’s face.

“(*Sniff!*)... Like I saids, protection. (*Sniff!*)”

“This ain’t Seattle Mister... *Charles Makowski?* ... What sort of *fucked up* Polack name is that?” Morris asked inspecting the license.

“My father was Polish, my mother American... They meet at a dance...” He began. Only to be cut short.

“I don’t want to know how your *fuck’n* parents meet asshole... What are *you* doing *here?* You’re a long way from home.” Morris glares down on him.

“Holiday you know (*sniff*)... Get away from you know (*sniff*)...”

“Supposing I don’t know... Why don’t you tell me?” Morris presses the inquiry.

“A few drinks, the girls... Maybe score some... (*Sniff!*)” His eyes convincingly glazed by the eye drops he applied before he arrived.

“Score some what?” Morris asks pushing a large finger into his chest.

“You know... (*Sniff!*)...some (*sniff!*)...” Grimm rubs his nose, “...One of the girls said (*sniff!*)...”

“Which one of the girls?” Eye brows pinched together his face but inches from Grimm’s.

“Vikki... (*Sniff!*)... With two *K*’s.” Cringed Grimm trying to back away only to be cornered by the bouncer and the wall.

“Did she now... I’ll be keeping this...” Holding up the mobile, “...You can get it back when I’m ready.” And throws the wallet and contents into a urinal before the bouncer flushes it with water. “Be seeing you around... *Makowski!*”

Unlocking the door they leave as a queue of men are about enter.

“Have a nice day.” Said Grimm in a slow New York drawl grinning to himself.

*‘Stage two out of the way.’* He thought.

The fish had taken the bait. It was time to start reeling them in. Retrieving the wallet from the urinal. Shakes the water from it. Thankful for the plastic money.



“Come on bro... There’s a party up the Hutt... You coming?” Toby pressured Leslie to tag along.

“Really? W-who’s p-place?” Leslie asked suspiciously.

“Just someone I knows... Free piss eh... Maybe some pussy for you.”

“Yeah-nah, nothing’s free man eh... L-let me think about it... I’m p-pretty skint at the m-moment eh.”

“Ain’t nothing to think about man, I’ll buy ya’ the ticket out there... Anyways, where you been... Ain’t seen you at the boats.”

“Yeah-nah... Been at the h-hospital eh... Visiting the old m-man eh.” Said Leslie annoyed he was stuttering again.

“That old man? ... I think he wants your arse bro! You better be careful man, I’ve heard about his *kind*.”

“Nah man... He’s really c-cool... Been to w-war... A real w-war... Even been s-shot eh.”

“Nah\_! He’s a bull shitter bro... Else he’d be dead eh.”

“You think?” Asked Leslie confused.

“Yeah I knows eh... You coming or not pussy?”

“I suppose...” Said Leslie easily led, “...Let me grab m-my hoodie... What’s w-with the b-bag?”

“I have to do some shopping eh... Get some tea.” Said Toby, confusing Leslie further.

‘*Click-click-click.*’ A camera captured the moment, tape machines the lad’s voices.

“Follow them.” A voice orders from the front of the van parked some distance away.

“Copy that boss.” Confirms another folding an aging newspaper and walking away.

Staring out the window of the train as the lights of the harbor flashed pass.

Rocking Leslie gently in the seat. Thoughts of Alfie in the hospital bed. Like a grandfather he never had. An unspoken bond between them. Looking over to Toby rocking his head in time to the blaring music through ear plugs. So loud he could hear it from the other side of the carriage.

Free piss did not sound too bad to lad that did not have two pennies to rub together.

“Good night Charlie.” Said Alfie closing the flaps of his humble cardboard abode, having discharged himself from hospital earlier that day.

The hospital was nice, but it was not home. Feeling for the small bottle of tablets in his pocket. Rattling it to confirm what he thought it was. Not one for medicines. Frustrated time was catching up with him.

“Piss off!” He whispers to the unseen man standing outside the carton.

“Good night Alfie.” Said the man...

# How'd you get in?

The train pulled into the desolate windswept Hutt Station.

Hissing a sigh of relief as it came to a stop to let off the three passengers. Dimly lit by lamps light the platform. Shrouding their identities in shadows. Folding the tired newspaper the man heads in the other end of the platform. And disappears from sight to join his team cowering in a parked van.

Leaving Toby and Leslie alone on the platform.

“Which way?” Asked Leslie, wishing now he'd brought a heavier jacket.

“This way bro... Not far eh.” Informs Toby.

Leslie followed obediently, eager to get his hands on a beer and having good time. To break the boredom of doing nothing all day.

“How you knows these p-people?” He asked curiously.

“Just friends... Just don't upset them eh.”

“What's that s-supposed to m-mean? ...” He asked looking into the shadows of the night.

Houses glowed from behind closed curtains. Watching them pass. In the distance he could heard music playing.

“M-must be one hell of a p-party m-man?”

The night sky glowing brighter the closer they came to the source of the loud music.

“Yeah man... Monique might be there.” Said Toby about to round the corner.

The gang's compound lit up with spot lights. Loud rowdy motor cycle's roared their exhausts pipes at each other in competition. Heavy set tattooed men in black leather vests and patches signified that they and arrived at *the party*.

“Oh shit m-man... I c-can't go in there... W-why didn't you t-tell me?” Protested Leslie looking to turn back.

“Don't be such a fuck'n wuss bro... It's okay, you're with me!” Said Toby offering his protection.

“Fuck you man... I'm outta here.” Protested Leslie not wanting to take another step.

“Nah bro... Next train’s not for another couple of hours eh bro... You want to freeze your balls off out here that’s up to you... Or you can come with me... Don’t worry bro... You’re safe with me.”

“Fuck you T-toby! ...” Weighing the options. Shivering in a tee shirt beneath the hoodie and jeans, “...Okay, but I’m outta here on the f-first train!”

“That’s my boy... Knew you weren’t a p-pussy.” Toby catches himself stuttering, “...Shit its cold out here.”

Walking into the light of the gateway. Men revved the engines of the motorcycles louder to intimidate the two youths that had wondered too far. Then recognized Toby and began to laugh amongst themselves.

“What you want punk? ...” The gatekeeper asked, “...Who’s your girlfriend?” Looking Leslie up and down.

Men gathered about the two lads making it impossible to escape. Overcome with anxiety. Leslie could do nothing but stuttered a prayer it would be a quick death.

“Only messing with ya’ Toby! ...” The gatekeeper laughs at Toby causing the others to back away and return to their bikes. “... You know where to go.”

“Yeah.” Confirms Toby.

“Where we going?” Asked Leslie, beginning to think the Party was another one of Toby’s lies.

“Nah all good bro, follow me... Party’s this way.”

*‘Click-click-click.’* Stutters the shutter of the telephoto camera.

“They’re going in.” A voices calls out from behind the lens.

“Copy that... Wait for them to come out with the package.” Said Faulkner watching the live feedback at the station from the comfort of his office.

“Roger... Over and out.” A voice echoes back.

Toby follows the familiar hallways and passes half open doors.

Strange music and pungent smells ruminates from within. Eyes look back at those peering in and doors close in their faces. Unfazed Toby proceeds further down the hallways. Leslie stayed close in fear of being separated.

“Fuck me man... I don’t like this place...” Said Leslie anxiously looking behind him. “... You been here before?”

“Yeah-nah... No worries bro... Stay close eh.”

“A squeal erupts from a door way...” Followed by what sounded like grunts of a wild boar, then moans of a wild whore, “... He-he-he.” Toby chuckles. Thoughts of Monique still fresh on his mind. His cock had all but healed over and was ready for some action, “... This is the room... We wait here.”

Taking in the vacant room. Leslie looks about to see a table and chairs. A crib to one side and holes in the walls and ceiling. Making him feel like he was being watched. A fluorescent light flickering above.

“Wait here for who?” He asked.

“Weasel bro... Weasel.” Sitting at the table. Following suit Leslie sits beside him.

The flickering bulb unwilling to die was beginning to annoy the shit out of Leslie. Without warning, he stands on the chair and gives the end of the bulb a light tap. The flickering stopped.

Leslie took his seat as though it was nothing.

“Oh bro... They’re going to be so\_ pissed at you for doing that.”

“What? ...” Leslie was in no mood for games.

Stuck in a rabbit warren. Surrounded by menacing patched bikies. And about to meet someone called Weasel. And probably about to die.

“F-fuck the l-lightbulb... And F-fuck you m-man... I’m outta here!” He goes to stand.

“Good luck finding you way back.” Toby jests with him.

Suddenly a door opens and a weasel of a man scurries into the room. His nose twitching like a rat that could smell money. Then looks to Toby and the strange young man beside him. Maybe looking a bit too long for Leslie’s liking.

Leslie looks away before the man could consummate their relationship.

“Toby... How are you? ... Who’s you’re *friend*?” Weasel asked licking his lips.

“My bro.” Cementing Leslie’s kinship.

Weasel could not see the resemblance. But who was he to question their parentage.

“You have something for me?” He asked eagerly.

“Yeah, yeah.” Reaching inside his deep pockets to pull out two envelopes.

Weasel checks the contents briefly. He had a feel for these things. Flicked the notes to smell the aroma. Noticing something unusual, Weasel went very still. Looks suspiciously at Toby as though he had been cheated. A worried look came over Toby's face and he looks to Leslie. Weasel looks to Leslie for confirmation.

Then looks up at the bulb.

"Thank fuck'n God for that... Was that you?" He asked Leslie.

"Yeah." Leslie gingerly answered.

"Hmm." Grunted Weasel pulling a note from the envelope and pushing it towards him.

"What's that for?" Leslie asked examining the note.

"For showing initiative...." Then turns back to Toby as if disappointed in him, "...So Fletcher wants two keys does he?"

"I suppose... He said to give his *regards*." Shrugging his shoulders as if he did not know.

"Did he now?" Sighed Weasel suspiciously.

Snapping fingers Weasel summons a man nearby and whispers inaudibly to him.

The man nods to confirm the instruction and leaves the room. Returning moments later with two cellophane wrapped bundles and places them before Toby. Weasel looks to Toby as though to suggest he should check the merchandise.

Toby pulls out a pocket knife opening the blade. Piercing the cellophane and tasting a small amount. Rubbing it onto teeth before running a tongue over them. Leslie watches Toby become another person.

Something said he had done this before.

Repeating the procedure with the second package. Pursing his lips with approval and nodding back to Weasel.

"Do you mind?" Asked Toby wishing to draw a line.

Taking a cut off straw from a pocket cuts himself a line across the glass table top and snorts the line like a hardened addict. Eyes widen and a face contorts with the explosion of neurons dying in his brain.

"Whoa! ... Good shit man..." He looks to Leslie for approval, "...You want some?"

"Yeah-nah, I'm g-good m-man... You knock yourself out."

“Wise man Leslie.” Weasel could see one of the lads had the sense to stay away from it.

“You?” Toby asked Weasel thinking he was sure to want some.

“I’m good thanks Toby... Could kill for a cup of tea though.” Exclaimed Weasel looking about to his servant to provide the addictive elixir.

“Oh shit... That reminds me...Morris.” Toby splutters out confusing those listening on.

“Whatever...” Weasel dispels Toby’s personal issues, “...You have what you came for. I have business to attend to... You know your way out?”

Packing the keys to the shopping bag stands and is about to leave. Weasel disappears through the same door he came through. And leaves them alone in the room.

Monique mysteriously appears at the other door wearing nothing but a smile. Lace panties and bra.

Her eyes firmly fixed on Leslie.

“Monique! ...” Toby is surprised to see her, “...Hey what are you doing here?”

Monique ignored Toby’s voice as though he were invisible. Walking around him and taking Leslie’s hand leading him to the crib.

Feeling like a third wheel on a bicycle Toby decided it was time to leave.

“I’ll see you back home bro.” Backing out of room.

“Yeah-nah what-ever m-man...” Stuttered Leslie, “... Kill the lights on your w-way out m-man.”

“I like them on.” Said Monique with a fake pout biting her bottom lip. Who was Leslie to argue? Having lost the ability to think.

Toby closed the door behind leaving the lovers alone. Sniggering with the knowledge of the painful aftermath.

“Got any condoms?” Asked Leslie. Not stupid enough to put his cock into broken glass without protection.

“Of course sweetie...” Monique lied taking Leslie by the hand and undressed him seductively. His manhood standing before him. “...Oh! ...” She exclaimed with delight, “...What have we here? Let me help you with that.” Going to her knees.

Cameras clicked and videos whirred. Taking in the young lovers somewhat less brutal than with Toby.

It was as if they were making love.

“Tobias is coming out carrying a bag... Looks heavy... Want us to pick him up? Asks a detective.

“Follow him back to The Palace... We can’t afford to bust the ring too early.” Warns Faulkner.

“Copy that.” The newspaper man waiting at the station, shuffling feet to keep warm. Checking a watch for the next train.

“No sign of Mule Two... Want us to stay with him?”

“Yeah, just in case he’s carrying... Stay with both of them... Copy.”

“Roger that...” Confirms the detective. “...You heard the boss... We’re staying.”

A groan erupts from the back of the van protesting the extended hours. Mule two would show up somewhere.

Albeit an internet porn site.

Taking the back entrance to the station Grimm appears at Faulkner’s door.

Knocking just loud enough to wake the sleeping dead behind the desk.

“Anyone home?” He asked seeing Faulkner behind his large desk covered with files.

“Yeah, yeah, of cos... How’d you get in?”

“Back way.”

“Didn’t know we had one... Hmm... How’d you get on?” Asked Faulkner anxiously.

“Yeah good... I think they fell for it... Those numbers on the mobile legit?”

“Yeah, other undercover dealers... I doubt they’ll have any questions after that... I’ve cleared you with McCrae should they come knocking.”

“What happens now?”

“Carry on what you’re doing. Try not to spend too much of our hard earned tax dollars... Once you’re accepted into the fold we’ll wire you up.”

“Paper work signed off for that?”

“Done and dusted... Got a friendly JP on the books... If you know what I mean?”

“Nice.”

“Fancy a drink?” Asked Faulkner.



“Stronger than tea?” Asked Grimm cautiously.

“Of course.” Opening his bottom drawer pulling out a bottle keep for emergencies.

“Won’t say no... How’s the surveillance going?”

“Good, they just checked in...” Handing Grimm a short glass half fill, “...Hurunui is on his way back with a heavy load, unsure where the second mule is...” Faulkner stares out into the distance of the Hutt Valley.

“Another mule?” He asked taking a swallow of the single malt whiskey.

“Yeah... Apparently he has a friend, about the same age... Poor bastard.” Faulkner contemplates their fate. Both men stare up the valley.

The night was clear and stars sparkled above, as street and car lights sparkled below...

## Bow-wow eyes

The front door closes and a man pulls on a length of baling twine attached to a black and white dog whimpering, reluctant to leave the warm comforts the human's home.

If there was dog heaven, this was it. Plush woolen carpet, soft leather couches and canned food. A refrigerator with a light inside. A far cry from the cold Vauxhall and dog biscuits.

"Bye Dexter!" Whimpers the small boy waving to the dog leaving.

"Come on Dexter! ..." Pleads the man straining on the other end of the lead, "...Don't give me those bow-wow eyes! ... Come on you!"

Dexter resisted every step. He was not going without a fight. Watching the little boy disappear from view. His scent lingering on the air. Jumping into an old grey Vauxhall takes his seat and the familiar smells of the old car came back to him. Rekindling memories of his benevolent master. Closing the car door and turns the key and it coughs and splutters before resurrecting the metallic corpus to life and drives into the darkness of the night.

"I told him he can get a dog." Doug informs his wife sitting at the dinner table looking hung over and worse for wear.

"And I say he can't!" Helena counters.

"I don't care what you say, we're getting one."

"Over my dead body you will."

"Really? ..." Doug briefly contemplates the suggestion, "...Where were you the other night?" Changing the topic.

"My mother's!" Helena lied.

"I called her and she said you weren't there." Doug informed her.

"I went out..." Fumbling for an alibi. "... With Sally if you want to know... You can ask her if you're so inquisitive!"

"I will!" Doug lied.

"Fuck you Doug!"

"Helena! Not in front of the boy!"

Small eyes darted between the two adults yelling at each other. Cowering and grimacing with each shouted exclamation mark. Adult eyes

shift to the small boy looking frightened. Doug goes over to him and picks him up.

“It’s okay sweetie.” Comforting the child. Kissing his cheek and giggles him on his hip as though it were just a game.

Helena pours herself tall glass of wine. Her third for the morning. Her second in the past half hour.

“Helena please, not before eight thirty... You won’t be in any state to drive.” Warned Doug hoping she would take the child to Kindie that morning.

He was already running late for an important case. Albeit Mister Rahul’s.

“I’ll be fine... I’ll take *the kid*.” Helena slurred her speech.

“The boy has a name, I wish you’d use it occasion.”

“What was it again?” She asked to infuriate Doug, raising her glass and laughing in Doug’s face.

He really wanted to say ‘*I wanted a divorce*’. But the words could not come. Not with the boy on his hip. Biting his tongue told his son to wait in the car.

“I’ll take him...” Said Doug softly in submission if only to have a cease fire, “...Will you be *home* tonight by any chance?”

Helena screwed her face up and concentrated on an answer that would not come.

“I’ll be at my mother’s.” She lied.

“I very much doubt that.” Challenged Doug leaving her stunned.

Her social calendar was full that day, beginning with drinks with girlfriends at the lady’s club.

Lunch with the girls in town at a new swanky café that had just opened. Then gym class which entailed being boned senseless by her personal trainer. Followed by dinner with her girlfriends at an uptown restaurant where a hulky new waiter named Mathias that had just started. An Italian stallion with a reputation of batting for both teams and said to be hung like a Columbian drug mule. And finally to cap the day off she had snarled Jack to join her at the Hotel that evening. A socialite’s life was never dull.

But Doug’s credit cards made it bearable.

“Don’t you trust me Dougy-Wougy? ... You didn’t object the other night big boy!” She teased him, “...Who’s Sam? ...” She asked catching

Doug by surprise. "...Your boyfriend?"

"Don't know what you mean." He lied.

"You keep saying his name in your sleep... Who's been a naughty boy then?" She teased him.

"You're talking nonsense Helena... I wish you would stop drinking.... I have to go. I'll see you when I see you... This can't go on like this much longer! I'm warning you Helena!"

"Don't threaten me Doug McCrae! ... I'll take you to the cleaners... I'll take your precious son away from you... You have to pay me millions to see him... Ha-ha-ha! ... I've got a vagina! ... You can't win! ... Ha-ha-ha!" Raising her glass to salute her evitable victory.

"We'll see about that." Warned Doug walking away.

Emptying the rest of the bottle into the glass she gulped a mouthful in the hope it would annul the growing irritation between her legs. The argument had aroused her and thoughts of being ravaged by Doug on the table only made it worse. Wondering if he was up to it? Or perhaps Sam was. Who was Sam? Her mind began to fantasize Doug's masculine lover.

She never heard the door close or the car drive off. Oblivious to their departure, her imagination entangled with lovers as convulsions overcame her.

"Shall we get a puppy after Kindie?" Asked Doug distracting the boy's attention from his parent's fight.

"Yay\_!" The boy squealed with delight.

"What type of dog you'd like?"

"Like Dexter!" The boy squealed again excitedly without hesitation.

"We'll see if they have one okay... After Kindie Okay?!"

"But mommy said..."

"Don't worry about mommy... What daddy says goes okay?" He tells the boy, seeing the Kindie building getting closer and closer.

"We're here! Give me kiss! Off you go... See you later!"

"Bye daddy!" The boy rushes into the small compound and a wire grill gate closes behind him.

"Mister McCrae." A woman waves out taking the boy's hand.

"Hold all calls this morning Alice. I have one call to make myself first." Said Doug walking hurriedly past the reception desk.

"Right-o Mister McCrae... Is everything okay at home?"

“Fine Alice... Why do you ask?”

“Call it woman’s intuition.” Said Alice not wanting to pry.

“Fine thanks Alice... Just a blip on the radar... Nothing that won’t pass with time... Now hold those calls... And a coffee.”

“Yes Mister McCrae.” Quietly disappearing to the kitchen.

Doug collapses in his chair and swivels about to take in the portrait of the city painted on the window pane.

Every day was a new image. Summer, vibrant colors of pastels and oils. Winter, lifeless water-colored greys. No two days were never the same. Somehow today, he could smell spring in the air and the skies stained a hue of blue.

The harbor tie-dyed green and colorful villas had begun to bud on side of Mount Victoria.

Taking a heavy sigh lifts the hand set and dials a number he should have dialed years ago. It rang as though the receiver of the call knew who was calling and did not wish to answer it.

“Doug! ...” A cheerful voice echoed back at him, “...I thought you’d never call!” Responded Pritchard.

“Thomas... I thought you’d never answer.”

“Spoke with Ray the other day and he filled me on his ah\_... Investigations... Told me you’ve ah\_ already spoken about the ah\_ ...” Pritchard gingerly stepped around the sensitive words, “...The photographs? ...” Getting to the point, “...I assume you have seen them?”

“Well of course. Confidentially of course... Ray has done a thorough job as you can see from the ah\_...”

“Photographs.” Mentioning the offending word.

“Seems an open and closed case of infidelity. Or should that be infidelities...” Pritchard ponders the legal semantics, “...Hmm... Either way she’s fucked! Excuse the pun.”

“Thanks for the insight... What’s next?”

“I’ll draw up the papers... You want to serve them or should I?” Asked Pritchard keen to see Helena McCrae in the flesh.

“I’ll serve them. It’s probably best they come from me... I started all *this* by proposing to be married. It would only be fair if I proposed a divorce.”

“How very romantic of you Doug...” Said Pritchard feeling dejected, “... Suggest you cut back the credit cards or cut them in half before she max’s them out... Same with any bank accounts.”

“What about the boy? She could just take him...” Doug asked concerned for the boy’s wellbeing, “... She’s a heavy drinker and I wouldn’t want to see him in a car with her.”

“Ray told me. She must be part fish your wife... Not much we can do about that. But we can use it against her in court as an *unfit mother*.” Advised Pritchard throwing the first of the body blows.

“I see.” Said Doug, unsure if he did.

“She can take him... But the courts will rule against her keeping him... Often children are used as pawns in these *games*... Best we try to minimize the exposure to the child.”

“I understand... When can you have the papers completed?”

“Today, tomorrow... I’ll give you call and I’ll bring them over to your chambers.”

“No, no... Probably best I pick them up... Vultures like before?” Not wanting Alice to open them my mistake and read them.

“Sure. Sounds great... How about noon tomorrow?” Asked Pritchard checking his own calendar.

Doug checks his calendar and confirms the rendezvous.

“Don’t forget to get onto the banks Doug... The moment she gets a sniff of what is about to go down, *Hell hath no fury as a woman scorned*... I should know.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.”

“It’s going to get a whole lot darker after tomorrow Doug... Are you ready?”

Taking a deep sigh Doug accepts his fate and the path of no return. Any doubts faded as black and images of his wife appear in his mind. One in particular. A close up of her looking directly into the lens.

As though she were looking at him.

“Do it.” He said committing to the decision.

“Leave it to me Doug... I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Thanks Thomas, bye.” The phone goes dead and Alice walks in with the coffee.

“Thanks Alice.”

“Mister Rahul is here.”

“Very good... Send him in.” Smile Doug swiveling about to see clouds had gathered and scattered showers falling over the City.

The portrait had changed. He had changed.

Alfie sits quietly on the Mall bench feeling the warmth of a pigeon nestled on his shoulder cooing softly in his ear.

“Good girl Freddie, good girl.” Cooing back to her as she peaked crumbs from his palm.

The morning sun shone and he could feel spring in the air. He could smell it. The Mall buzzed with activity of people coming and going. Fish strummed old ballads and Alfie tapped a foot in time.

Singing the words he knew and making up the ones he did not.

A fracas began to erupt at north end of the Mall and seemed to be getting closer. Birds scattered causing Freddie to take flight startling Alfie in the process. Through the shoppers and onlookers a group of juveniles strutted into view. Recognizing one as Leslie’s *friend* Toby. Undaunted Alfie leaned back and basked in the warmth of the sun. Soaking up the rays as though he were a solar panel to charge his soul. The evening would be chilly and every ounce of sunshine counted before it sank below the western hills.

“Well, well, well... Look who do we have here?” Toby seeing Alfie reclining on the bench indifferent to his presence. The old bull ignored the young bull’s challenge.

Toby kicks the old man’s walking stick away. Gaining the old bull’s attention.

“Piss off runt!” He challenges the young bull.

Shop keepers come out of surrounding stores to see what has caused the commotion.

“You heard him runt, piss off!” Fish stepped forward puffing up like a blow fish.

Sensing he was being out numbered Toby side stepped around the old man and swaggered pass. And carried on his way to Palace in search of fun. Mutts and Runt followed behind like minders. Every now and again startling passersby.

Toby laughed as though his mind was not his own.

Alfie watched the delinquents disappear as Fish collected the walking stick.

“Mate! This thing is a lethal weapon! You got a permit for this?”  
Handing the stick to him.

“I could have taken them.” Warned Alfie watching the punks disappear into the crowd.

“I know you have... It just wouldn’t have been a fair fight.” Fish chuckles.

“Yeah...” Alfie chuckles, “...Have a seat.”

“Don’t mind if I do.” Taking the weight of his feet for a while.

“Going to rain soon.” Alfie looks to the heavens. Grey clouds beginning to gather.

“Yeah looks like it... What’s up?” Fish asked suspiciously.

“What do you mean?”

“Mate I’ve know you a long time and you aren’t one for talking about bloody rain (*ha*).” Chuckled Fish.

“You know me too well Fish... (*Ha ha ha*)... Can’t pull one over you.” Concedes Alfie.

“So what’s up?” He asked again.

“You looking for hands for your boat?” Alfie asked inquisitively.

“Of course, but you’re a bit old aren’t you...” Pulling his leg, “...Who you have in mind?”

“I know a kid, a good kid... Hangs out with the wrong sort of people if you know what I mean.” Looking down the Mall.

“I think I know who you mean... Hangs out by the boats.”

“Yeah that’s the kid... Name’s Leslie.”

“See what I can do.” Offers Fish with a subtle plan of his own.

“It would mean a lot to me.” Said Alfie gratefully.

“Anything for you Alf’.”

“Cheers mate.”

Just then spits of rain peppered the ground, marking dark spots on the dry grey concrete.

Drops that became heavier and steadier and soon people ran for shelter. Alfie remained seated. Undeterred, his arms out stretched across the back of bench. Feeling the fresh raindrops over his face and beard. Closing eyes the sounds of the jungle surrounded him in lush green vegetation. He knew a passing sun shower when he saw one.

Others looked on at him as though he had lost his mind.



“Alfie! Get out of the rain you mad prick!” Fish called out.

The advice going unheeded as he just leaned back and smiled. He was home. The man sat beside him unseen. His arms out stretched.

Raindrops passing through him. He was home too...

# Prince Albert

A puppy yapped excitedly, eager to escape the captivity of the cage.

A little boy eager to play with the new sibling. The smell of new puppy permeated from the blue plastic cage.

“Let’s put it down here shall we.” Said his father gently placing the cage on to the floor and lifting the lid.

Small hands reach inside and lift out a black and white puppy that immediately wanted to lick the little boys face. Causing the boy to giggle hysterically.

“Put him down and let him get to know his new home.” His father instructed.

The puppy rushes off to explore the room. Only to sniff a spot on the plush pile carpet and urinate.

“Oh boy!” Doug restrained himself from cursing in front of the child.

Thinking his wife would be furious. Then dismissed the concern. Somehow the stain would be trivial compared to the reaction his wife would have to being served divorced papers.

The little boy looks up as though he was in trouble.

“Don’t worry... I’ll clean it up before mommy sees it...” Doubling he would see her at all that evening. “... So what you want to call him?”

“*Dexter!*” The boy squeals his eyes as big as saucers.

“There’s already a Dexter... What about something else?”

“*Batman!*” The boy squeals again.

Doug thinks long and hard...

“You know what? ... There can never be enough Dexters in this world.”

“*Yay\_\_!!* ...” The boy jumps up and down. “... Come on Dexter! ... I’ll show you my room!” Disappearing up the stairs with the puppy chasing behind yappy at his heels. Leaping the gigantic steps in single bounds.

Doug grinned, knowing someone in the household was happy. Knowing at any moment his world could implode. Taking his son with him. Having cancelled his wife’s credit cards that afternoon. Helena would be financial rations until further notice.

Then contemplated her where about...

...Jack grunted and Helena moaned.

And not from sexual gratification, but disillusionment. Calling time, she fakes an organism and pushing Jack off her to collapse exhausted beside her after the three minute workout. She had boiled eggs longer. Not even his Prince Albert could compensate for his steroid stunted performance.

Escaping the bed she heads to the shower to finish what Jack could not. With Mathias still fresh in her wank-bank she begins to make an immediate withdrawal. Swiping and inserting the imaginary phallic card into the slot. Pushing innumerable buttons with closed eyes. In search of a pin number that would release an orgasm beyond her wildest dreams.

“Oh fuck me!” She groans to herself.

Only to feel Jack’s hands cup her breasts to kill the moment.

“Oh\_ not again.” She moans. The imaginary phallic card being ejected from the slot.

“Can’t get enough of me eh?”

“You can say that again.” Pulling herself away from his grasp.

“Where you going?” Asked Jack confused.

“I have to see a man about a dog.”

“A dog?”

“Yeah... My son wants a dog for his birthday.” Thinking of a timely convenient lie.

“Oh ... I thought were staying the night?” Sounding dejected.

“You can... I have to go sweetie... I’ll see you at the gym tomorrow...” She lied again, “...Help yourself to the mini-bar.” Closing the shower door on him.

Watching Jack disappear from her life as shower glass slowly fogged over. Desperate to escape the second biggest mistake of her life.

Dressing hurriedly and makes her way to reception to check out.

“I won’t be staying...” She began, “...But my *husband* will be.”

“Oh course madam.” The Receptionist replied tapping screen and swiping the Helena’s credit card.

A worried look came over the Receptionist’s face and accompanied by more hurried taps the screen. Re-punching numbers she thought may have entered incorrectly.

“Is there a problem?” Asked Helena in a hurry.

“It says *declined*.” The Receptionist announces hesitantly.

“Declined? Not possible... My husband is a *Lawyer*. There is definitely money in the account I assure you.”

“I am sorry Madam... But I have tried several times and each time the same response... *Declined*.”

The word becoming dirtier each time it was said. Helena’s mind echoing the discussion earlier that day with her husband. She may despise bad sex and small cocks.

But what she detested most was a cancelled credit card.

“The *bastard!*” She mutters to herself.

“Excuse me Madam?” Inquired the Receptionist.

“Nothing... There must be a mistake somewhere... The Gentleman in the room will pay.”

“Don’t you mean your *husband?*”

“Ah\_ yes of course... My husband.”

“Very well Madam... Have a nice evening.” Offers the receptionist.

“You too.” Said Helena leaving in a hurry without looking back.

“Bastard Doug!” She cursed loudly leaving the polished marbled foyer. The echo carrying back to reception off the polished floors and walls.

The Receptionist nods her head and confirms the word she thought she heard earlier. And looks up to the ceiling and with X-Ray eyes imagines the husband being abandoned by his wife.

“*Men...*” The Receptionist said to herself, “...*Bastards.*”

## Filthy Mongrels

Grimm reclined in the chair and savored the perky breasted young women plied their virtuous wares, swaying to suggestive music.

Soliciting young bulls to part with money in exchange for a titillating lap dance. Or if they felt brave enough, full penetration upstairs in more private luxurious surroundings.

Though onto his third or fifth bourdon Grimm could feel eyes burning down upon him from above. Fletcher and Morris looked down at the tattooed alcohol soaked individual. Sniffing and fidgeting in his seat.

“Did Makowski check out?” Asked Fletcher suspiciously.

“Yeah, he’s clean... But I still don’t like him.” Said Morris juggling with Grimm’s antiquated mobile.

“I’m not asking you to fuck him Morris.” Said Fletcher.

“Ghee thanks boss.”

“Get him up here... We need to talk.” Instructed Fletcher.

Morris had a bad feeling in his gut and it was not the dodgy chicken vindaloo he had earlier.

“Aye, aye boss.” Grumbled Morris.

Fletcher watches as Morris appears below him and tap Makowski on the shoulder. Pulling Grimm’s attention from the stage. Looking up to the mirrored window. Morris stands back and allows Grimm passage. Following him up the narrow stair well.

Stopping him at the door pats him down only to find another switch blade.

“I thought I told you?” Warned Morris.

“*Protection.*” Responds Grimm.

Morris shakes his head in disbelief and hands him back his mobile.

“*Mister Makowski...* Come on it, come on it... Have a seat... Drink?” Welcomed Fletcher as though he were an old friend come to visit.

Morris stood back blocking the door way.

“Sure, whatever you’re having... *Cheers mate.*” Accepted Grimm taking the short glass.

“What are you after Mister Makowski?” Asked Fletcher taking reclining back in his chair.

“*Charlie*, please... The only person to call me *Makowski* was my parole officer.” Grimm joked.

They joke not going down well with Morris. Makowski had too many loose ends for his liking. And loose ends only ended in trouble knots. Grimm takes a swallow of whiskey and contemplates what to say next.

“Looking to source some Keys... You the man to speak to? Asked Grimm as though he wanted to source a bag of flour.

“*Keys?* ... Fuck me, you don’t think small do you Mister... *Charlie.*” Fletcher’s eyes lit up at the request.

In his peripheral vision he could see Morris shaking his head.

“Can you handle it... Or should I go elsewhere?”

“Where else would you go?” Grinned Fletcher knowing he was the King Pin of New Zealand.

“Aussie.” Replied Grimm.

Fletcher leaned back in the chair and looked over to Morris whose face was telling more than his mind revealed.

“When?” Asked Fletcher keen for specifics.

“You tell me... I’ll work around you... Sooner than later.” Taking a heavy swallow of the drink having little effect on him.

“Let me think about.”

“Sure... I’m in town for a few months... You know where to find me... Thanks for the drink.” Grimm takes the final swallow and places the glass on the table. “...Excuse me gentleman... I have a lap dance booked with Vikki... With two k’s... I’ll see myself out.”

“Knock yourself out *Charlie.*” Said Fletcher watching him leave.

Morris’s eyes followed Grimm like a shadow down the darken stairwell.

“I don’t like it boss... We aren’t ready for this scale.” Warned Morris.

“Don’t worry about it Morris... I’ve got a small job for you tonight... Fancy a drive?” Asked Fletcher grinning...

...Hearing a knock at the door Samantha thought that Rob had forgotten his keys again.

Outside the wind batted the small cottage’s windows and door frames. And she hurries to let him in. As she turns the handle the door is shoved forcefully open by the person on the other side. Knocking her backwards.

Morris had come to pay her a late night visit.

“Get outta here before I call the cops!” Samantha yells at the menacing looking thug approaching her.

Sarah hears the commotion and comes out to see a brawly man standing over her mother. She screams. And cowers behind a door.

“Go back inside sweetie... Close the door... Everything will be okay.” She tells her daughter.

Sarah backs away and closes the door behind her, “... You touch her and I’ll swing for... So help me God!” Samantha warns him pulling herself to her feet.

“Fuck you bitch! ...” Morris threatens as a heavy fist comes across her face knocking her to the ground again. “...Pay your fuck’n rent bitch! ... Or the kid gets it next.” Looking to the closed bedroom door.

Samantha feels for the swelling lip bleeding into her hand.

Wind rushes in from outside causing the light to swing from side to side on its cord. Projecting moving shadows to dance about the hallway. Outside motorcycle’s rumbled and Morris grinned. Hearing heavy boots entering on the wooden floor.

Thinking Fletcher had sent for Federation gang members as back up and sort the boyfriend out.

“Fuck you! ...” Samantha curses him grinning, pulling herself up on the side table, “...And fuck your rent!”

“Tough talk bitch. She’s all yours’ boys... It’s *party time!*” Calling out for the men behind him.

Suddenly a heavy hand slams down on Morris’ shoulder turning him about in time to see Rob’s white knuckled brown fist slam into his face. Breaking his nose and reeling him backwards. Another man punches Morris with sharp successive body blows sending him to the floor. Rob lays into him with his boot.

Again and again and again until Samantha pleads for him to stop before he killed him.

“You okay? ...” Rob asked examining Samantha’s face and pulling her close, “... Where’s Sarah?”

“She’s okay... She’s in the bed room.” She said shaking.

Rob cradles Samantha’s head on his heaving chest.

Laying broken and buckled on the floor the other man drags Morris to the doorway and dumps him unceremoniously onto the concrete path with a thud.

“I don’t want to see you again... Now fuck off before I regret the decision... Tell Fletcher *we* know where he lives!” Rob closes the door firmly behind him and kills the outside light.

Leaving Morris is complete darkness.

Pelted by wind and rain Morris staggered limping back to the car.

Clutching a bloody broken nose and bruised ribs. He had been on the rare receiving end of a hiding, and was not waiting around for another.

Next time, Fletcher can do his own dirty work.

“What the fuck happened to you? ...” Asked Fletcher seeing Morris sulk into the room, “...Did the bitch that to you? ... Ha! ... Maybe I underestimated her.” He chuckled to himself.

“Very funny boss... It was her fuck’n boyfriend and another... You didn’t tell me he was patched to the *Filthy Mongrels!*”

“Hmm! ... Neither did I? ... Seems she’s out smarted *us* Morris...” Fletcher collapses in the leather chair, “...I didn’t want to do this.”

Slowly opening a bottom drawer reaches in and pulls out a note pad and scribbles down his bank details.

“The bitch!” He curses as he folds it carefully and places inside an envelope.

Out trumped by another gang. The last thing Fletcher wanted was a turf war and the cops to come knocking.

“Get Toby to drop it off tomorrow.” Instructed Fletcher seeing Morris feeling sorry for himself.

Morris groaned with every shallow breath. An arm in a sling. A bruised and batted face swelling beneath the bandages.

“I could go a cupper tea if you’re making one.” Suggested Fletcher dropping the hint.

“Make it yourself... I’m going home.” Said Morris in no mood for any more of Fletcher’s chores...



# Kill anyone today?

Keen to get it over and done Doug arrived earlier than planned at Vultures.

Looking about for table to wait for Pritchard. Seeing the Detective hinged on the bar. Rocking gently to an unheard tune in his head. Sipping on a half empty bottle of beer.

“Small world.” Doug attempts to engage the anomaly in social intercourse.

“Thanks for the card... It came in handy.” Grimm responds continuing to stare at the wall staring back at him. Talking to his apparent lawyer would lean credibility if Fletcher’s people were watching.

“You’re welcome... Kill anyone today?” Doug joked.

“Still working on that... (*Sniff!*)” Said Grimm not joking.

“Okay\_ then...” Said Doug unsure what to say next.

“Faulkner talk to you?”

“Yeah... I’m apparently representing you on a possession of a lethal weapon charge if anyone comes knocking... Will someone come knocking?”

“Probably not...” He lied, “...You have a nice day.” Advised Grimm captured by the thought of Doug leaving.

“You too.” Doug backed away and ordered two beers.

“Over here Doug!” A voice calls out from amongst the tables.

Looking about for the source of the voice, sees Thomas at a far corner table, a chardonnay in hand.

“Better just make that one...” Instructing the delightful young Korean barmaid with rainbow colored hair. “...What’s your name?” He asked curiously.

“Sujin.” She tells him smiling at him, flashing her eyes.

“*Sujin.*” He repeats the name, to remember next time.

“Doug!” Pritchard caught Doug’s attention again.

“Sorry! ...” Squeezing his way through the thickening bodies. “...Busy place!” Taking a seat opposite Pritchard.

An ominous large white envelope lay before Pritchard as though it was meant for someone. Doug stares at the envelope and then to Pritchard.

Eyes saying what words could not.

“Once you go down this path... It’s game on...” Pritchard warns him, “... You ready for this?”

“Don’t know... I wasn’t exactly ready for the photographs...” Said Doug anxiously. Taking a deep breath and exhales a loud sigh, “... Let’s do it.”

“Read it when you get back to the office. This is not the place...” Handing the envelope to him, “... When?”

“Tonight... If she ever decides to come *home*... Credit cards have been cut, so I’d be expecting fireworks at any moment.”

“Good. The sooner the better... These things are best done like bandages Doug... Rip them off! ... Don’t pull away at it slowly...” Advises Pritchard. “...She’ll probably want you to move out. But with the property in your name... She can’t do much but move out to her parents until this all blows over... I’ll prepare the brief, photographs proof of the infidelity... The case is open and close... Drink up Doug! ...” Pritchard salutes Doug’s impending victory, then remembers someone, “... Unless she gets *Gardiner*...” A puzzled look comes over his face as he played out the possibilities.

“Who’s *Gardiner*? ...” A puzzled look comes over his face, “... I thought you were the best?”

“I am, I am... But the women *love* Gardiner... Darryl Gardiner... Blind bald headed prick that he is... But he comes a price and your wife won’t be able to afford him...” Pritchard chuckles and shakes his head, “... Never going to happen in a million years. He’s out for her league... (*Ha-ha-ha!*)” Grinning back at Doug looking as though he had had a close escape.

“Cheers!” Doug raises his glass and take a mouthful of cold beer.

The Detective had unhinged himself from the bar and left unnoticed. In his place stood the wiry poet and Dexter curled at his feet. Dexter’s eyes fixed on Doug. A remnant scent of the fond human still on the dog’s nostrils. Freedom was so close. Yet so far away. Tethered, nay chained with a length of baling twine tied to his master’s belt, now reciting infatuated love to Sujin. Titillated by her foreign allure.

The unrequited love going unrewarded.

Grimm strolled into The Palace as though he had become a regular and claimed his chair.

Becoming a fixture, eyes watched his every move. He would let them come to him. A game he knew too well. Setting the scene. Staging the props. Never over acting.

Imperfection was the key.

Successive bourbons slid down without touching the sides. Numbing the required senses. Reminding him of Frank at Jefferson's back home in Seattle. His stool now cold at this hour. No doubt at home with Julie.

"Lucky bastard..." Smiling as he recalls her face, then wondered what ever had happened with Marilyn, "... Lucky bastard."

Frank had all the luck.

Vikki stops at his table. Scantly clad in bra and panties. The black light accentuating the white lace and the contours of her fine young body. And slides a twenty into her garter belt and gently kisses her cheek as though they were old friends. She rubs her firm warm breasts against his cheek as though she was a dirty little stripper and giggles.

"I'm up soon honey... I hope you'll be around to watch." She teases him.

"I'll be here, I wouldn't miss it." He replies watching her fine ass disappear into the darkness.

Allowing the bourbon to soak to his bones and mind, eyes in the back of his heading looking to the ceiling and the darkened window.

Preparations had been made behind the scenes to move the moment they had Fletcher on tape. Cash sat in an innocuous looking brief case in Faulkner's office waiting for the call to an *associate*. An associate with no name.

Names connect people, like a bad Facebook profile.

There are only so many degrees of separation between the moral and the immoral. Grimm could number them on one finger. Sniffing. Ran a finger under his nose.

Watching Vikki come to the stage and swing her petite figure around the silver pole. Feeling the cold steel in her hands. Gripping it as though it pleased her. Caught in the spot light and allow it to undress her.

Her eyes fixated on Grimm. His fixated on her.

The foreplay was obvious to both of them. Pulling away her bra and throwing it at him. Wolf whistles and whoops holler out from the cheap drunk seats. Morris goes to investigate the source and moments later an

intoxicated young bull is dragged by his collar through the darkness and escorted from the premises.

Swaying in time with the music. Gyration rubbing the pole as eyes roll in her head. Biting a lip as if to say sorry, slowly, and deliberately she removes her panties. The spot light moves away to hide the illicit act and the audience groans only to have the spot light capture her again. Wearing nothing but a smile she swings about the pole.

Her eyes looking at Grimm. Teasing him.

Taking a swallow of bourbon. Holds it before swallowing. Licking his lips at the enticing vixen.

Wondering what she saw in an old prick like him.

“Ah\_ what the fuck.” And he gives her a nod to come over and finish the dance privately. It would taxpayers money well spent.

Arriving home to a house with the lights blaring from every window, Helena’s car parked in the driveway blocking access to the garage.

Doug parks on the grass not wishing to inhibit her from leaving. But first he had the small matter of informing her of the divorce. Having been taken for a fool until now, reality had caught up with him. His marriage was a sham. A façade. A convenience for one person and one person only.

Hearing plates breaking inside, he fears for his son and rushes from the car to the front door only to find his keys did not work.

“What the fuck?” He tries again with another key.

Confused he looks about as if to check he had the right house. Then sees clothing spewed across the lawn. A discarded suit case laying open. Shirts and expensive suits unceremoniously tossed from the bedroom window above.

His world beginning to implode.

“The bitch!” He mutters to himself.

Gathering the damp clothing, he throws them hastily into the suitcase. Unconcerned if the neighbors were watching. Returning to the front door.

Knocks loudly. But to no response.

Pushing open the mail slot spies a view to the kitchen down a long hallway. Seeing a woman slouched over a table. A bottle of wine beside her. Again he knocks and still no response. Deciding to go to the back of the house taps heavily on the glass French doors. Stirring the woman from an alcohol induced slumber. Looking up to see a man imprisoned outside.

Her eyesight coming into focus.

“You bastard! ... Fuck you Doug fuck’n McCrae!” Helena cusses back at him from inside.

“Calm down Helena... Let’s talk about this like two adults... Open the door!” Asked Doug looking about as for neighbors were listing.

Heads appeared at windows at the raucous erupting from their neighbor’s back yard. Doug fakes a smile back to the faces that disappear from view.

“I want a divorce! All *this* is *mine*!” Helena screams the pre-prepared speech.

“Helena... Listen, please... Let me in!” Doug slams his fist on the glass, only to break it and cut his hand badly, “... Ah fuck!” He cries out clutching the lacerated wound now bleeding profusely.

Reaching in through the broken pane, unlatches the lock and pushes the door open.

“I’m calling the police! ...” She threatened him. “...You keep away from me!” Taking a heavy swig from the near empty bottle.

“Go ahead, it’s my house... *Technically, you’re* the intruder.” Warned Doug looking about for his son. “...Where’s the boy?” He asked anxiously.

“The boy? ... He has a name you know... He’s at my mother’s! ... Now get out! Get out! I’m calling the police... I’ll tell them you tried to rape me! Ah!” Helena proclaimed brilliantly.

“And I’ll show them the photographs that it wasn’t by me... Now calm down Helena, put the bottle down.”

“What photographs? ... Have you been spying on me? ... You bastard! Get out!” She throws the bottle narrowly missing him as he ducks. It smashes against a wall and the bloody red contents run down the wall.

“Helena! Helena!” He pleaded.

Reaching for paper towels to control the bleeding. Seeing no sense arguing with a drunk woman. Pulls the envelope from his pocket.

Stained with blood. His.

“If it’s a divorce you want... It’s a divorce you’ll get... You’ve been *served*.” Pushing the envelope towards her.

“What’s this? ...” Helena picking up the envelope and examining it. Groping at it hopeful it contained fresh credit cards. The anticipation dissolves when she reads the title. “...You bastard Doug McCrae... After all I have done for you!”

“Helena please... It’s for the best... You can get help...” He began.

“Help for what? ... This? Ha!” She raises a freshly opened bottle and taking a heavy swig.

Doug could not find the words to explain what he could not understand himself.

“I’ll see you in court.” Said Doug backing away.

“The kid’s mine! ... I make you pay child support! You’ll never see him again! ... You bastard!” Yelling at him for all the neighbors to hear.

“I’ll see you court.” Doug informs her calmly.

Foregoing the house for the time being he left the same way he came. A change was as good as a holiday. His son with grandparents, and despite them being the enemy, knew his was safe.

First his hand needed attention, A&E.

Presenting himself at the counter Doug conflicted with the sterile surroundings.

Told to take a seat he waited his turn. The bleeding now seeping through a wrapped handkerchief. Sitting nearby two young lads. One holding his crotch as though he was in pain.

A sweat across his forehead.

“*He-he-he...*” Chuckles Toby knowing what his mate was going through, “...Hey... maybe in a week or two *little pecker* will drop off all by itself... *He-he-he.*”

“It’s not f-funny m-man... It hurts!” Groans Leslie feeling sorry for himself. Wishing he had used the condom. But somehow Monique got ahead of him.

In more ways than one.

‘*Monique.*’ Swelling thoughts of her naked body. Only to make him groan with pain.

“Leslie Walters.” A nurse calls out his name.

“*Tobias... He-he-he*”, Retorts Leslie having the last laugh, “...Ah it burns man!”

“Pussy.” Informs Toby...

# Box of birds

Dazed and disoriented Doug awoke to a pain throbbing in his hand.

Vague twisted memories of the previous evening flashed in his mind. A small silver flask on the passenger seat, empty. Examining the neat dressing. Wiggled fingers for feeling. Unshaven and unclean, he elevated the driver's seat to an upright position. It had been years since he had ever had to sleep in his car. And that was as a student. His joints protested the reminder.

The sun was rising over the eastern hills bringing with it a new dawn. A new beginning for him. He had hit rock bottom, and now the only way was up.

But first a coffee and he knew just the place.

A door buzzer sounds and Doug stands silhouetted in the doorway like a wounded trouper returning home from the front.

Alfie sits at his table occupied reading the morning paper to notice, bemused by the passing tweet-storms that had grown more frequent and fierce.

Samantha looks up from behind the counter to see Doug standing there looking misplaced.

"Coffee." Doug calls out and takes a seat in front of Alfie.

Alfie stares at the man before him looking tired, beaten, and cut.

He knew before his son spoke.

"You look like shit... You okay?"

"Yeah." Doug sighs.

"Women eh?" Alfie shook his head.

"Yeah, women." Confirms Doug quietly.

"Speaking of beautiful women." Said Alfie seeing Samantha arrives with the coffee.

"You okay?" She asked, unsure who was worse for wear.

"I'm fine thanks, just a late night at the office." He lied.

"Paper cut?" She spies the dressing.

"Something like that..." He relents grinning, "... You?"

"Door."

“Oh.” Letting the inquiry go and watching her return to the counter.

“I think she like’s you.” Remarks Alfie seeing something in her eyes.

“I’m barely rid of one and you’re trying to stitch me up with another.”

Frets Doug watching the women of his dreams walk away.

“Not all women were created equal Doug... Your mother, she was one off...” Alfie reflects and grins.

“How you doing?” Doug asked ever concerned for his father.

“Box of birds... Doctor said I could live till I’m a hundred.”

Though Doug had his doubts, his old man was as tough as an old army boot.

And probably would.

“You’ll be fine son...” Said Alfie. “...You’re exactly where you’re supposed to be.”

“What does that mean?”

“It will all work out in the end son.” Trying to console him.

Finishing the coffee Doug stands and opens his wallet pulling out several notes and pushes the money towards Alfie. Only to have them pushed back.

Only to leave the money on the table.

“Pay the young lady for the coffee old man.” He tells his father.

“She has a name you know.” Alfie remarks.

“Samantha, I know...” Said Doug caught out. Waving briefly to the counter with Samantha racking a cabinet with pies, “... Be seeing ya.”

“Yeah you too... Take care okay.” She reminds him.

“You too.”

“Ms\_ McCrae here to see you Mister Gardiner.” The secretary informed her employer.

“Send her in Judith. Send her in... Coffee if you don’t mind.” Gardiner looks over rims of thick glasses.

Light reflected off a polished bald dome head.

“Certainty Mister Gardiner.” The secretary disappears from the doorway and moments later Helena appears to fill it.

Dressed flirtatiously and capturing Gardiner’s immediate attention. The short skirt accentuating long legs and open neck blouse her abundant cleavage. Dark glasses covered hungover eyes.



“Ms McCrae please come on in... Take a seat... Coffee perhaps?” He asks watching her sit and fold her legs.

“*Helena* please... Anything stronger?” She asked pursing her lips.

He had come highly recommended by girl friends who had impeached their previous husbands for misinterpreting their adulterous affairs as infidelity.

Helena removes her sun glasses to reveal tired tear stained eyes, still grieving the passing of her credit cards. Gardiner looks to the clock on the wall. It was after 10:00AM, and generally he would have waited until noon. But one needs to adapt and overcome as the situation arises. There were always exceptions to the rule. The woman looked in need of consoling and opens the panel doors of a drinks cabinet of amber colored bottles.

Just then Judith walks in with a silver tray with two porcelain cups of coffee and places them on a meeting table.

“Thank you Judith... That will be all... You can close the door behind you.” He instructed the secretary, “... I don’t wished to be *disturbed*.”

Maintaining a plain expression Judith had assessed Helena the moment she had walked in the door. A socialite on the prowl. A common client of her boss who would take advantage of her circumstances. Fleecing them of their husband’s hard earned money.

And the wives of their virtues.

“Thank you *Mister Gardiner*.” Helena reaches for the glass eager to settle her frayed nerves.

“*Darryl* please... Helena.” Graciously offers Gardiner.

Hands touch a moment longer than one would expect. The intimate lingering touch sending a mutual message of sensual familiarity. Taking an arm chair opposite and makes himself comfortable. To await a story he had heard a hundred times. All had the same sad ending. Helena sat lost for words, unsure how to begin.

This was only the *first* time she was being divorce.

“How can I *help* you Helena?” Gardiner begs the question.

His eyes having already undressed Helena now sitting naked in the large chair opposite and was already imagining taking her on his desk.

“My husband has served me with divorce papers... The bastard.” She curses, “...I’m sorry.”

“That’s okay Helena... It’s perfectly understandable...” All men were *bastards* in Darryl’s mind. The bigger the better. The bigger the payday. He continued to probe her dedicatedly, “... Another woman perhaps?”

“There may have been a one or two in the past...” Struggling to recall the few times, “... But I’m sure Doug doesn’t know about them.” Helena naively confesses.

“*Oh* I see.” Gardiner makes a mental note, grinning back at her.

She hands him the papers her husband had served and he examines the contents.

“Hmm-mm, hmm-mm... Hum-mm... All rather straight forward. Nothing I can’t handle.” Said Gardiner refolding the papers, “...Pritchard, the *prick!*” Muttering under his breath.

“I’m sorry?” Asked Helena, “...Is there a problem?”

“No, no... Pritchard’s a push over.” Gardiner lied.

“We have a child he wants custody of... *He* can’t have *him!* ...” She begins to demand, “...I want the *house*... I want what *belongs to me!*”

“What’s the boy’s name?” Gardiner inquires curiously.

“It’s there in the papers somewhere.” Helena points her finger at it as though to pin point the name’s exact location.

“Ah yes, there it is... *Hmm*... It says here that the house is in your husband’s name and his wealth tied up in a family trust.”

“You must be able to do something... I’ll do *anything*.” Pleads Helena swallowing the last of the whiskey from the crystal tumbler and placing on the side table.

“There, there Helena... Not to fret... Now about my fee.” Gardiner goes in for the kill.

“My husband has all my money... I’m not sure how I could *possibly* pay you?”

Faking a tearful pout, she uncrosses her legs and spreads them apart, all he fantasied about was true.

Standing to console her, places a hand on her shoulder, fondly caresses it. With the money locked up in her husband’s account, there was only one other account remaining he had access to.

Feeling fingers caress her arm, a hand brushes her breast.

“Oh Darryl, you are a naughty man!” She gasps playfully.

“I am here to help you Helena... Let’s not worry about the money for now. I’m sure we can work out a *pro-bono*... If you know what I mean?” Suggested Gardiner reaching her thighs.

“I like the sound of that Mister Gardner.. *Darryl*.” Helena remarks suggestively.

“I’d take down your brief... But it appears you’re not wearing any... Perhaps some dictation is would suffice for now.” He suggested.

Helena runs fingers over his chrome dome and removed the bulky glasses rendering Gardiner legally blind.

He would have to grope the rest of the way.

“Why Mister Gardiner be gentle... It’s been such a long... Long... Long time...” She lied, “...Ah! ...” Gasping at the sudden intrusion of her virtue, “... *Oh Darryl* you’re so, so... *Big*.” She lied again.

Gardiner was everything she desired for in a man, wealthy.

Pushing aside files makes his first deposit.

A deposit followed by a withdrawal. Followed by another deposit and another withdrawal. The teller moaned with each transaction before Gardiner collapsed panting and exhausted into a chair. Leaving Helena laying starfish naked over his desk.

He wondered why her husband was wanting a divorce.

“Is there a Mrs Gardiner?” Helena asked panting.

“Not yet, but I’m working on it.” His cock answered.

His mind incapable of thinking until the blood returned to it.

“Another happy client.” Said Judith grinning to herself hearing sounds moaning from her employer’s office, quietly completing a LA101 requesting Legal Aid.

Taxpayer’s money being well spent.

The sky was vivid blue, the kind you see in a photo-shopped holiday brochure.

Leslie reclined on the bench. His crotch still sore but recovering. Battling thoughts of returning to the gang headquarters to the insatiable Monique.

“*Women*.” He curses.

The wanton hussy that had taken his virginity and left him with the clap.

Pulling a sketch pad out begins to sketch the San Jennifer from a different angle. Distracting his mind momentarily from Monique. Facebook notifications had surfaced about someone looking like him had appeared on a porn site.

He was sure it was not him and he dismissed the rumors.

The old man with a bushy white beard wanders past the boy on the bench. Paying little attention to him, and climbs aboard the boat. Soon followed by crew carrying hefty duffle bags for a long haul at sea.

Leslie watches on.

The man with the frizzy red beard belched orders to the other crew. Pulling on ropes lowering empty baskets into the hull before latching a heavy hatch closed.

Leslie sees the old man within the cabin tape a piece of paper to the window. A notice of some kind. The words appeared muddled and jumbled. Straining to read them Leslie dismisses the notice. And carries on sketching.

Fish notices Leslie's disinterest in his advert for a hired hand.

"Perhaps when we get back." Said Fish to himself seeing him lost in his sketch pad.

Engines rumbled to life and seagulls flew away troubled by the noise and black diesel fumes bellowing into the air about them.

"Cast away Emmet!" Fish called out from the cabin window and ropes loosened from their moorings.

"Aye-aye Captain." Responds Emmet.

Guided by a steady hand, the trawler eased gracefully from the berth.

There was something familiar about the captain thought Leslie. Thinking that he resembled Alfie in some ways. The white beard and cheeky grin. Watching the trawler chugged from view rounding the point of land and into the harbor channel. In its wake a faint tell-tale trail of diesel fumes. Adding the final touches to the sketch. A line here. Shading there.

Feeling quite pleased with himself and the world.

"Not bad." Said a man watching on over his shoulder unseen.

Heaven and earth shattered when he heard Toby's voice calling him from a far.

"Shit." Cursed Leslie looking to see him striding towards him.

“Come on then...” Toby called out, “...We don’t have much time.”

“Time for w-what?”

“Got to pick up a package from Federation bro... Com’on *we’ll* be late.” Toby presses him to hurry.

“I ain’t going b-back there m-man... I g-got the clap l-last time... Re-m-member?”

“*He-he-he*... That was funny bro... You’re famous... You’re on the internet... I downloaded you... Look!” Toby pulls out his mobile and searches for the video clip.

“Yeah-nah man... That ain’t me... That’s s-someone else... I didn’t s-see no c-cameras.”

“*Hidden* bro...” Lesley smile, “...*He-he-he*... Hurry up... Bus be here soon.”

“Nah\_ not t-today m-man... It still h-hurts to m-move... Next t-time eh?” Leslie lied.

“Pussy... I’ll give Monique one for you eh bro...” Toby swaggers off with the shopping bag under his arm.

“W-whatever.” Responds Leslie returning to his sketch pad, glad to see the bck of Toby.

‘*Click-click-click.*’ A camera clicks.

“You getting this?”

“Copy that... Hurunui is on the move. Repeat... Hurunui is on the move... Follow him!”

From a far bench a man stands and folds the aging newspaper. Smudged with grease stains and ink. Following some distance behind Toby.

“What about *Walters*?” A detective asked, his details recently gleamed from the national health database.

“Nah... He ain’t going nowhere today, poor bastard... Stay with Hurunui.”

“Copy that.”

‘*Click-click-click.*’ A camera clicks repetitively, capturing Leslie unawares.

Again...

# Garden of Eden

Fletcher looked down upon his creation, much like God, watching Adam and Eve play in his Garden of Eden. The Palace.

At its heart the tree of life, a tall silver pole. Abigail glided about the stage, scantily clad with lace fig leaves, tempting Adam that sat infatuated with her at tables. Young men fell into temptation and Abigail took a bite of their credit cards. Blood rushing from brains and money from wallets into Fletcher's bank account.

"That's my girl..." He said to himself proving herself again and again, "... She a good little earner our Gail."

"That right Boss? ... Which one is that?" Asked Morris nasally, his nose still broken and swollen.

"Abigail." Fletcher repeats affectionately.

"Yeah, yeah... The men like her alright..." He agrees returning from the kitchen with two cups of tea. One in each hand. "...There you go Boss."

"Forgiven me yet?" Fletcher asked.

"Maybe." Morris tried to smile, but it hurt. The swelling and color about his eyes and nose yet to subside.

"That's my Morris... What doesn't kill only makes you stronger!" Fletcher offers his wisdom.

"If you say so Boss." Feeling his rib cage.

The pain had all but disappeared. So long as he did not have to breathe.

"Think it's time we had a chat with your friend Mister *Makowski* down there... Why don't you bring him up before Vikki *ties* him up again for the evening?" Fletcher tilts his head for Morris to get going.

"Yes Boss." Reluctantly leaving a hot cup of tea on the desk.

Fletcher watches from above, seeing Makowski slumped in a chair slowly getting stoned on bourbon and whiskey.

Swearing the man had the constitution of a fish. Then to one side of the room sees Vikki like a lioness stalking her prey from among the tables making a bee line for him. She had picked up the scent of money. And was

hungry to make the kill. Limping lumbering wounded wildebeest from the other side, sees Morris approaching Makowski.

Who would win the race?

Morris raises a hand to halt Vikki in her tracks. The lioness veered at the last moment to snare a weak male separated from the herd. Sinking her carnal claws into him, surrenders his fate to be dragged away into a private booth to be devoured of his money. His wife would thank her later. A heavy curtain closed behind them. His spent carcass and wallet would be cast out of Eden and onto the cold damp street. Drunk and broke.

A heavy hand taps Grimm on the shoulder lightly.

“Boss wants to see you.” Morris informs him.

“What about?” Grimm plays along.

“Wants to talk.”

Grimm grins and swallows the last of the stiff drink. Pulling himself out of the chair to stand. Feeling for legs that had fallen asleep under him. Men parted ways to left the odd couple through unsure which of the two men they feared most. Following Morris as though he was being escorted from the premises before deviating up the narrow stair way to Fletcher’s office. Morris pats him down before entering. Finding nothing but a wallet of cash. An old mobile and the flick knife. And a pouch of tobacco, bulky with a lighter within.

“How many times do I have to tell you *Makowski*?”

“How many times do I need to tell *you*? ... *Protection*.” Responds Grimm shrugging his shoulders.

“What’s with the shit phone?” Morris examines the aging Nokia.

“Hey don’t knock it. It’s a classic... Give it here!” Protesting the insult.

“You’ll get them back when you leave.” Advises Morris placing the impounded items on the table.

Fletcher sips on a cup of tea peering out the two way window overlooking the stage.

“Best seats in the house...” Boasts Fletcher returning to his chair behind the desk. “...Tea?” He asks indicating Morris’ cup.

“I’ll pass... Anything stronger?” Asked Grimm looking towards the liquor cabinet.

Fletcher indicates for Morris to fix Makowski a drink. Grimm reaches for the pouch and begins to roll himself a smoke.

“Do you mind?” Asked Grim about to roll himself a reefer.

“Knock yourself out... Got to die of something... May as well be something you enjoy.”

Grimm lights the joint and inhales deeply, sending a large plume into the air.

The sweet pungent odor hung heavily before dissolving from sight. Morris returns with the short glass filled to the brim and places it awkwardly next to the mobile spilling some onto it.

“Hey watch it!” Warns Grimm picking it and wiping off the whiskey.

“Sorry... Eh.” Morris lies before standing back. His bulk now blocking the door frame.

“Now, now boys... We can all be friends here... Especially if we’re going to do business together.” Fletcher initiates the proceedings.

“Boss?” Morris questions the haste at which he is moving getting involved with Makowski.

Fletcher dismisses the concern and eyes Makowski over. First impressions were important and he was confident with what he saw. A low life, surviving off the grid. Now again surfacing to pay taxes if only to launder illegitimate takings. Giving the semblance of being an honest citizen.

What was one less cash rent payment? If it kept the taxman off his back.

Pleased with the thought he grins as though he had just passed wind.

“Charlie? Was it?” Asked Fletcher confirming their last meeting.

“That’s right... *Fletcher*? Right?” Grimm plays along.

“That’s right... You’ve meet my associate Mister Morris... A little worse for wear I’m afraid.”

The two men look over to Morris’ and take in his misfortune. Grimm tried to restrain himself from riling him and ruffling his feathers unnecessarily.

But did anyway.

“Walk into a door did you?” Incapable of thinking there was anyone larger than Morris.

“A women actually.” He responded reluctantly.

“Jesus!” Grimm’s mind went into overtime imagining the size of the woman. Or perhaps Morris liked to play rough?



“Fuck you Makowski!” Morris threatens him, his feathers well and truly ruffled.

“Now, now boys... Play nice.” Said Fletcher grinning at the two adversaries.

Silence fell over the room as Morris sulked and Grimm chuckled. Fletcher took another sip of tea to collect his thoughts.

“What can I do for you Charlie?” Fletcher got to the purpose of the meeting.

“It’s what I can do for you... Mister Fletcher.” Counters Grimm.

“I prefer *Fletch*... Less *formal* don’t you think?”

Grimm purses his lips and nods quietly, “*Fletch*.”

“How so?” Fletcher makes the next move.

“Word on the street has it you’re supplying...” Grimm slaps Fletcher in the face with the information.

“How’d you know that?” Fletcher asked suspiciously. Then glares at Morris. Perhaps he was right. Makowski was a narc. Then glares back to Makowski.

“I’ve got connections here... You’re not the only one moving product...” Grimm looks about the office as though others were listening on. Leans forward over the mobile and quietly speaks to Fletcher. Looking momentarily to Morris as though he could not trust him. “... I could go through *Weasel*... Or I could go through you.” Leaning back having baited the hook.

“Why me?” Fletcher asked suspiciously.

“We’re looking to expand and you’re looking to expand... Question is... Can my people in Seattle trust *you*? We’re not going to have any *issues* are we?” Grimm challenged him, upstaging his and cartel’s position.

“No, no, of course not...” Fletcher leans back in the chair taking a sip of the tea to calm the growing anxiety.

“Is the product top shelf?” Asked Makowski pressing his fingers together to form a steeple. Like cross hairs had Fletcher in the sights.

“Columbian product, direct out of LA... As much as you like. Whenever you like. Delivered to where-ever you like.” Fletcher finished the sales pitch.

Grimm takes a hefty draw on the joint. Filling lungs to their extremities. Holding it in as long as he could before exhaling. And offers

Fletcher a hit who waves his hand at it as though it was an annoying fly.

“Morris?” Asked Grimm looking back.

Unsure what to make of the gesture. Took a hit and the allowed the narcotic to course through his veins and soothed the pain of his ribs had returned.

“Thanks.” Offers Morris now warming to the tattooed Makowski.

Fletcher picks up the phone and dials a short number. And uttered inaudible words into it. Suspiciously looking at Makowski while he spoke. Then replaces the handset to its cradle to sleep. Unsure what that was all about Grimm eyes the switch blade on the desk and calculates its effectiveness. Watching Fletcher’s every move as he reaches into a bottom drawer.

Slowly pulls out a note pad and scribbles down his private number.

“You can reach me on this... It’s a private line. Untraceable.” Handling the folded page to Makowski.

Without looking at the number Grimm pockets the paper and takes another long slow draw and sinks further into the chair.

Finding himself falling further down a dark hole of colored lights.

Fletcher looks up to see someone standing at the door, wearing nothing but a smile. And what could have been band aids covering erogenous zones.

A cherry red fedora hat on her head.

“A little *gift* for you Charlie... In *appreciation* so to say... I look forward to doing business with you.” Offered Fletcher.

“Why thank you very much.” Said Grimm seeing Vikki approach and sit on his lap.

Stroking his face and pressing her warm perky breasts into his face. Taking a long slow draw on the illicit weed. Allowing it to seep into her system before taking him by the hand about to lead him from the room.

About to leave, feels a heavy hand tap him on the shoulder to halt him in his tracks.

“Don’t forget these.” Morris hands back the confiscated items.

Vikki leads Grimm upstairs to a private room and begins to peel away the band aids.

“You can leave your hat on.” Instructed Grimm peeling away his clothes.

Faulkner steps from the back of the surveillance van after having ease dropped in on the meeting with a hidden microphone in the old Nokia.

Breathing in the cold dark air, refreshing after the van's stuffy confinement, and stares up up at the Milky-Way, pondered his insignificance. Months of surveillance cumulating in a perfectly baited confession. Now comes the dangerous part.

Catching Fletcher with product in his hands, on his premises.

"*Hurunui* is back with the package." A voice calls out to Faulkner too tired to listen.

Thinking he heard a noise coming from an alleyway. Shines a torch down it only to see a rat scurrying away through a hole in the wall.

"*Christ*, that's a big rat!" He exclaims.

Beneath a hoarding leaning against a building, thinks he sees carton move.

A gust rushes out from the alleyway.

"Must be the wind." Faulkner speculates, leaving Alfie sleeping within undisturbed.

He was not venturing down there without back up.

He had bigger rats to catch, but not by much...

## No fish in the sea today

Exhausted from all its huffing and puffing, the Windy City had relented its onslaught.

The occupants proving too stubborn to be budged from their hillside perches. Spring had sprung and the wind had retreated to the outer boroughs. Leaving the central city streets soaking in brilliant sunshine. With Freddie nestled on a shoulder cooing gently in his ear, Alfie lounged on a bench relishing the rejuvenating solar rays.

Pigeons peaked seeds and crumbs about his feet.

In the distance. Delinquent eyes watched on like pack of angry ugly hyenas. Appearing as though from nowhere, Toby, Mutts and Runt rushed out and startled the docile pigeons. Immediately inciting a commotion of frantically flapping wings and squealing squawks and flying feathers. Alfie's restrains Freddie from flying away. Coxing her with gentle strokes if to say it was safe with him. Watching the misfits walk on by laughing and giggling to themselves.

Alfie looks about for Leslie not with them.

*'Just as well.'* He thought soothing Freddie's anxiety.

Taking uncertain strides, Toby's eyes glazed over, his mind not his own.

*"Old man!"* Toby calls out slurring the words as though he were drunk.

*"Punk."* Alfie calls back accepting the challenge.

Oblivious to the comment, Toby laughed hysterically and continued on his way along the Mall to startle shoppers. He had seen it all before in Nam. Men consumed with heroin and cocaine. Anything to annul the reality of being there. Succumbing to cheap narcotic remedies on offer. Suzi Wongs and penicillin shots on every other corner. Homesick kids that partied hard. Their next patrol could be their last.

Life was short enough. Even on the longest days.

Passersby took photos of the old man on the bench with the pigeon on his shoulder. A zephyr breeze blew over the love birds. Thoughts of endless summer days entered his head. Drifting off off as Freddie coos in his ear, watching over the old man. The man joined him in the divine light. A dove nestled on his shoulder.

He also recalled a summer's day so long, long, long ago...

...Wearing black togs and a Batman cape a small boy comes rushes at his father.

"Dad! Dad!" The boy calls out hysterically.

"What's up Doug?" Lifting the boy and throwing him into the air and catching him.

"Mail! ..." The boy squeals as his father tickles him, "... *He-he-he-he-he!*"

"Let's have a look shall we?" Taking the brown envelope from the boy.

The opaque wax window displayed his name boldly. And he examines the envelope carefully. A coat of arms in one corner, no stamp in the other. This came from within the camp. He looks about the other Linton houses and spies a man in uniform pushing envelopes into mail boxes.

Whatever it was, it was important.

Suspecting his worst fears about to be confirmed. The army had been his life since he had left school. They had taken him when others would not. Kicked his ass, and straighten him out and made a man out of him.

Fearing the day would come for him to serve. Fear not from death, but from being away from his wife and kid. The news would devastate his wife Renna and he thought of ways to down play the situation. But the gossip vine had arrived before the mail.

She had already heard the deployment day before.

"You get your order's Alfie?" An officer calls out from a window of a car slowing down.

"Yeah, you?"

"Yeah... When you think we'll ship out?" The officer asked keenly.

"Doesn't stay. When they're ready I suppose." He said looking to the sky for clouds and relent from the sun.

Sunshine drenched the manawatu Plains in glorious sunshine.

Feeling the warmth on his face. Another endless summer unfolding. Stretching out his arms as though to embrace what the Good Lord was throwing at him. Suddenly he is surprised by a sudden jet of water from a hose Doug was aiming at him.

"You little bugger! ..." Exclaimed his father, "...I'll catch you! ... Come here."

If he could not catch his son, how could he be expected to catch the enemy? Doug ran off squealing around the house on the large section. Looking over his shoulder expecting his father to be behind him.

Only to bump into him coming the other way.

“Gotch ya!” Cheered his father.

Turning Doug upside down. Carrying him by the ankles still squealing and thrashing about. Holding him out to hose him down thoroughly, and himself along with it.

Both laughing and giggling.

“Can we go to the beach today?” Asked Doug upside down.

The idea appealed to Alfie. It would give him time to talk to Renna about the call up. But the expression on her face as she stood at the doorway said she already knew.

Perhaps there were more important things to talk about.

“Sure why not... It’s going to be a scorcher!... We can stop off at old man Grey’s dairy on the way and get an ice cream... You like that?”

“Yay\_!” Doug squeals rushing inside to grab a towel.

No words were spoken with the boy in the car.

The grey Vauxhall came with kiwi air conditioning, windows wind down to the max. The cool breeze rushed through the car over the occupants. Like a dog Doug stuck his head out the like and was immediately stuck by a fly. Or the fly was stuck by Doug. Suffice to say, the fly came of second best with Doug swallowing the evidence and retreated inside the car rubbing his mouth and tongue.

“How fast we going dad!?” Squealed Doug looking over his father’s shoulder at the speedometer.

“Eighty-Eight miles per hour!” Called back Alfie over the sound of the rushing air.

“Slow down.” Whispered the man to Renna’s thoughts.

“Slow down Alfie, not so fast!” She pleads clinging to her seat belt anxiously.

And Alfie eases back on the pedal and the Vauxhall slows down.

“Oh dad! We nearly made ninety!” Complains Doug slumping back.

“Maybe on the way home... We’ll have a trail breeze!” Curtailing the boy's frown.

“Yay\_!” Doug exclaimed grinning from ear to ear.

Slowing down in time to avoid a cop that had pulled over a canary yellow Datsun Bluebird on the side of the road. A young man protested his innocence from the side window. A black and white puppy poked its head out the back window sniffing the tantalizing rural air of the Foxton Straights. Seeing the Vauxhall and young boy go speeding by.

Eyes tethered to the other's until the last possible moment before they disappear from view.

"I have to get to Wellington!" A crazed poet declared to the officer writing out the speeding ticket.

"And what so important down there to have you to speed?" The officer asked curiously as to the cause of the emergency.

"My old familiar... My only true love..." The wiry poet confessed.

"Love? Eh?" Asked the officer unsure what to make of the explanation.

"Love is like a blossom... That's blooms..." The poet begins to break into verse, fingers stabbing out at the officer, taken back in fright.

"Yeah, yeah... Tell it to someone who cares..." Stopping him mid-verse. Tearing the ticket from the pad and handing it to him, "...Have a nice day." Going back to the patrol car.

"But officer... I can explain everything..."

"I very much doubt that." The officer calls back.

Twenty minutes later the Vauxhall pulled to the curb outside a corner store.

The last pit stop before the final leg to the beach itself. Doug scampered out excitedly and rushed into the small store standing before the counter. Eyes alight by the colorful sweets through the glass cabinet.

"No fish in the sea today!" Old man Grey informed the boy handing him an ice cream.

With the remains of the ice cream melting over his fingers and chin, the car arrived at the beach.

Pulling the Vauxhall into a space among the countless other vehicles that had arrived for the beach gala. Thousands, maybe hundreds of children ran about the hot sand like blue bottomed flies. Ruby red bodies lay prostrate on their large beach towels. Sacrificial lobsters coating themselves in coconut oil, blistering with third degree burns.

Excited by the sight of the crashing surf and crazed children running about, Doug gallops from the car and heads to the sand and surf.

Leaving his mother and father alone in the car.

“It will be okay Alfie.” She consoles him watching their boy disappear among the other children..

“Will *you* be okay?” He asked looking into her eyes.

They had never been apart their entire married life.

“I’ll be fine... You look after the men... I’ll look after the boy.”

“He’s got a name you know?”

“Yeah... Your middle name if I recall.” She reminds him.

“Yeah.” He chuckles with satisfaction.

Renna slides over on the bench seat and rests her head on her husband’s shoulder.

And for a moment Alfie thought he heard her coo. Nestling his head onto hers, he took in the majestic view of the rugged west coast surf beach. To the north, the faint outline of Mount Taranaki. To the south, Kapiti Island jutting off the coast. And beyond that, Wellington.

And on a good day one could see the Mainland.

Cars lined the beach like regimented tin soldiers. Some made their run up a ramp to avoid being stuck in the sand. Their wheels spinning only to dig themselves a deeper grave. Sending sand into the air behind them, over sweating young men that pushed and shoved earnest to set the metal carcasses free. Children gather about the stranded metal whales.

The blue green ocean boiled as wave after wave rolled in.

Crashing one upon the other. Boogie boards darted skillfully among the bathers. Among them Alfie could see Doug splashing and jumping up with the incoming waves. The sun shone brilliantly in a cloudless blue sky.

Closing his eyes for but a moment to enjoy the blissful moment.

“The boy.” The man leans forward from the back seat whispering a thought to Alfie.

Startle, Alfie gasps. Eyes search the rolling surf.

No sign of the boy.

“What’s up Alfie?” Asked Renna seeing him in a state of panic.

Rushing from the car Alfie runs frantically to the shoreline and into the crashing surf. Suddenly he sees a small hand raised in the air and then go under. Tearing away his shirt and shoes dives into the oncoming waves. People watch on confused as to what was happening.



Making out an arm of a boy waving in the air being pulled out to sea by a rip.

Exhausted arms and legs battled against the surf. Reaching the boy as he was about to go under again. Grabbing the boy's arm before a massive wave tumbles them over and over and over again.

Alfie refused to let go.

Above them, through the surface of the water a bright light shone. Suddenly the light was eclipsed by the silhouette of an inflatable patrol boat. A powerful arm reaches into the water and grabs him. Pulling the pair into the inflatable. An outboard motor screamed as they headed back to shore. Cradling his son safe in his arms Doug begins to shake with fear.

Alfie pulls the boy close seeing him distressed.

"That was fun wasn't it?" He asked his son playfully.

"No!" Said Doug grinning back at his father.

Renna waited on the shore as the pair staggered to her coughing sea water.

"Come here!" She puts her arms around them.

"Thanks Basil." Alfie extends his hand to the volunteer surf lifesaver.

"No worries Alfie... I thought you'd be the last person who'd need saving."

"Yeah... So did I." Looking to his son.

Alfie glances up at the car park and sees a man in black standing beside the Vauxhall.

"Who wears black on a day like today?" He asks himself.

"What's that Alfie?" Renna asked looking towards the carpark.

"Nothing, I thought I saw someone."

Suddenly, like an ecstatic blue bottomed fly, and the attention span of a lightning bolt, Doug runs off to join other children in a big dig that was about to begin. The traumatic event now forgotten.

Taking her husband's hand, Renna walks him along the beach. Exchanging promises to keep his head down and come home safe. Walking hand in hand, ever watchful eye on their only son.

Now blissfully unaware of how close he came to drowning.

"You've got someone looking over you Alfie McCrae... I can feel it." Said Renna.

Anyone watching would have seen three people walking along the beach.

Anyone noticing would have seen two sets of footprints behind them...

... “Mister Alfie! ... Mister Alfie!” A voice calls out, pulling him from a tunnel of summer dreams, “... Mister Alfie!” The voice calls out again.

Eyes open to a day shrouded and dimming. He must have nodded off, to the amusement of passersby. Regaining his orientation, discovers Freddie had taken flight with the other pigeons. Having more sense than him as to when to go home. Stores were closing and the final rays of the sun beginning to shadow the western hills.

Pulling himself to his feet tries to straighten the back stiffened day’s slumber.

“You okay Mister Alfie? ...” The store keeper asked handing him a cellophane wrapped sandwich, “...I thought for a moment that Allah Himself had come for you.”

“I’d be so lucky... Nice day for a snooze.” He responds pocketing the sandwich.

“You take care of yourself Mister Alfie.” Watching him shuffle down the Mall.

“You too Munif... Thanks for the sandwich.” Walking away raising it in the air to wave goodbye...

# I'm no Saint

Gardiner had made himself very familiar with Helena's case.

Probing and penetrating every part of her, but her mind. A place no man should ever venture.

Grey clouds had snared themselves on jagged peak of the lookout.

Reluctant to rise any higher, the sun peered its head over the eastern hills. Sending sharp a blade of light into the penthouse apartment and over a naked body laying like a starfish on the bed. Gardiner stood proudly naked with hands on hips, before the large tinted window overlooking the city. Inhaling deeply, the strain of the previous evening's exertions slowly taking their toll.

The woman had an appetite of a piranha on heat.

"What time is it?" Helena groans from the oversized bed.

"Nearly seven."

"In the morning? ... Come back to bed *my love*... I want you again."

'*Again? Christ!*' Darryl exclaimed, barely getting any sleep as it was.

"We have to be in court by ten... Your divorce, if you can recall."

"Is that today? ... Can't you go and I'll stay here." Helena rolls over and spoons a large soft pillow. Fending off the intruding sunlight reaching for her. Its warm fingers massaging her body back to sleep.

"The court system doesn't work that way, *my love*... You have to be present or you husband gets the lot... The court won't look too kindly on you snubbing them... Bad enough we have David Watson as the Judge. .. If anyone knows about being divorced... It's him."

A groan resonates from beneath a pillow. Or it could have been a snore. Gardiner looks at the morsel of insatiable flesh laying like a starfish over the bed. Legs spread as though inviting him to return. An appetizing new portal had opened up and he momentarily speculates the accessibility of penetrating this new avenue of inquiry.

Checking his watch, he still had time. Perhaps one more thrust into the valley of the shadow of lust might help ease his troubled mind about the woman.

Any doubts soon faded as blood rush from his brain. Mounting the filly abruptly to stir her from her slumber.

“You bastard! ...” She groaned protesting the antipode intrusion. Looking to a large wall mirror to watch the erotic performance. “...Stop! ... Please don’t! ... Please don’t stop!” She cries out.

Gardiner shuts and collapses on top of her. Exhausted, staggers to the bathroom to run a cold shower. Water runs off the waxed polished dome head like water off a duck’s back. His thoughts becoming his own again.

Exhausted from broken sleep, Doug looked into Pritchard’s eyes.

Pritchard puffed quietly on a cigarette and looked into Doug eyes. Neither able to read the other’s mind. The sun crept through an opening and Doug feels warm fingers stroke his skin.

Both men dressed in pin stripes as if it were the only fashion.

“You can’t smoke in here. Outside if you want to do that.” A waitress catches Pritchard out.

“I thought this was a garden bar?” Protested Pritchard looking about for a sign to validate his claim. The protest went unanswered. Notice had been served.

Pritchard stubs out the cigarette on the concrete floor but not before getting in a final puff.

“We all set?” Asked Doug feeling anxious.

“Nothing to worry about... Word on the street is that Gardiner is losing his touch... Got involved with some hussy... Hasn’t been at the office all week apparently.”

“Who’s the judge?” Asked Doug.

“Watson... Didn’t think he handled Family Law... Heard of him?”

“Really? Dave Watson? ... Yeah.” Doug grinned to himself sipping contently on a coffee.

“Plenty of time, we’re not due until ten... Let’s go over our case again.”

“Okay, one more time...”

“She’s got nothing on you has she?”

“I’m no Saint... But no... Not that I’m aware of...” Responded Doug. A creeping doubt lingered to mind, “...No...” He hesitates, “... No nothing at all.” The doubting thought washed about his mind, over and over and over again.

“If you say so Doug... I don't want to find out I court you had a floozy on the side... Bad enough your wife has a list a mile long... Sorry, I shouldn't have said that.”

“That's okay. Anyways, it's probably two miles long by now if we'd kept Ray on the job... How is he?”

“He's good... It's a shitty job but someone has to do it.” Jokes Pritchard...

# Death had stepped among them

The Mall was dead and zombies roamed up and down.

Casting lifeless shadows and empty wallets into the colorful stores and cafes. Only the second hand book store buzzed with a hive of activity. Searching the dusty aisles, in the hope of a book would find them, before the zombies outside did. Grey and white speckled pigeons lay huddled together.

Seeking warmth from the others about them.

One stood out from the rest. A red speckled bird sitting alone. As though waiting for a friend to return. Older, wiser. It had strategically placed itself aloft from the others to catch the morning's first light.

Suddenly unawares from no-where, Toby and two barnacles leaped upon the birds with such stealth and virtuosity. Laughing hysterically and waving arms about. Causing a commotion of flapping wings, startling some and stunning others. Their only escape vertically. Toby rushed at the birds grabbing at those he could.

Freddie, its legs too weak to stand quickly is suddenly grabbed. Panicking it flaps its wings and struggles within Toby's grasp. Squealing and screeching unimaginable sounds. Shopkeepers come out and tell the young men to bugger off.

Only to be told to fuck off in response.

All the birds had scattered and taken higher positions overlooking the Mall. Leaving Freddie to fend for herself. Calming the bird, Toby spoke softly to it. Coaxing it with lies and promises of no calm. Crazy eyes betrayed the deceitful tongue. A narcotic rendering the delinquent impotent of a caring thought. Mutts and Runt watch on anxiously.

Keen to flee should the police arrive.

"Com-on man... Let's get outta here... Before they call the cops!" Pleaded Mutts walking slowly away from the crime scene. Outlined with scattered feathers on the pavement.

Whatever thoughts Toby was thinking was of the old man. It was payback time. No one calls him *punk* and gets away with it. A look comes over his face and Freddie felt the human's grip tighten and squeeze her. Unable to breathe she struggles violently to escape the suffocating death.

Then as though to have second thoughts Toby softens the threatening grip.

Freddie senses a reprieve and coos panting in his hands. Then without feeling or remorse or warning. Toby breaks the bird's neck. A distinct crack echoed about the Mall. Causing watchers on to gasp in horror. Following a deafening silence.

Death had stepped among them.

The man stood behind Toby. Freddie on his shoulder, cooing.

Shop keepers stepped out with brooms and sticks towards Toby. Mutts and Runt had vanished from the scene. Seeing himself out numbered Toby throws the bird to the ground in disgust.

"Fuck you! Fuck you!" He laughs raising a finger at the storeowners as he ran away.

Munif walks over to the bird laying lifeless on the ground. Uttering a silent prayer for the bird's soul. Gently lifts the bird and carries it back to the store. Wondering how he would break the news to Alfie.

Tears run down his cheeks...

# McCrae vs McCrae

“All rise.... This court is now in session... The Right Honorable Judge Watson presiding.” The Bailiff calls out for all those present to hear.

An old man sits in the gallery. A detour from the Mall for the day. Looking among the people attending, recognizes no-one. Other than Doug. A giggle erupts from the main doors below him as Helena and Gardiner arrive five minutes late.

Straightening their clothing.

“What is the meaning of this Counsel?” Watson asked sternly looking over his glasses. A strong smell of whiskey on his breath.

“Sorry Your Honor... We were ah... *Detained* by traffic.” Gardiner offers a palatable defense.

Tipsy with wine. Helena giggles hysterically under her breath.

“We will speak later in chambers Counsel.” Watson slams down the gavel down hard. Sending a loud sharp shock wave around the court.

Alfie’s eyes suddenly open, startled by the sound.

*‘What have I missed, was it all over? Who won?’* Looking about before realizing the case had yet to begin. Pulling the sandwich from his pocket and takes a sneak bite from it.

Chewing slowly so as not to catch the Bailiff’s eye.

“Your Honor... Today’s case is McCrae verses McCrae.” The Bailiff states loudly for all to hear.

“Are the Counsels *ready* to begin trial? ...” Watson asked looking sternly at Gardiner. Observing Ms McCrae had taken a fondness to Gardiner and was sitting unusually close by. Her hands from view. “... *Ah hmm!*” Directing a grunt towards Gardiner.

“We are your Honor.” Barristers sang out like neutered choir boys.

“Very well... Let’s get this over with!” Said Watson, as though he was about to have a tooth pulled.

“If it may please the Court...” Pritchard begins, “... My client wishes to claim full rights to the marital home and investments in his name...” Then was nudged by Doug who points out the third and vital claim, “... And full custody of the child... A boy I believe.”



“And what is the boy’s name?” Judge Watson asked inquisitively looking over his glasses hoping to gleam the evasive fact.

“It’s ah, it’s ah...” Pritchard stammers, and looks to Doug for the answer, who points to the document before him. “...It’s stated in the third paragraph from the top Your Honor.”

“Hmm! Well I be damned, so it is... Proceed Counsel.”

“If it pleases your Honor... The Applicant Douglas McCrae seeks a divorce from his wife Helena McCrae on the grounds of infidelity and being an unfit mother.”

“Hmm!” Grunts Judge Watson looking back to Helena, staring back at him smiling as though she was fantasizing something that involved *him*.

Looking to Gardiner. Seeing a man in need of sleep. Eye lids at half-mast. The only thing missing was a bugle playing the last post.

It would have been a trombone but it had had long since retracted.

“Counselor Gardener, what have you to say? ... *Counselor!?*” Watson speaks louder to awaken both Gardiner and the old man in the gallery from drifting off.

“If it pleases Your Honor...” Gardiner begins but is cut short.

“I very much doubt that... But humor me nonetheless, proceed.” Watson looks impatiently over his bifocals.

“These claims are entirely false and it is Mister McCrae who is the unfit parent. My client has been a caring and loving mother.”

“Spare me your sentiments Counselor...” Watson looks back to Pritchard and then to the gallery and an old man who had perched himself on high. Chewing slowly on something. A homeless person no doubt that had wandered off the street. Thinking he resembled someone. “... You may begin Counselor.”

Pritchard hands two files to the Bailiff who passes them firstly to the Judge for inspection. Shaking his head aversely. Passes a file back to the Bailiff to pass onto Gardiner. On opening the file finds numerous black and white photographs of Helena in comprising positions with various men.

“I can explain.” Helena whispers in Gardiner’s ear.

Her hand reaching between his legs unseen beneath the table.

“I very much doubt that.” Gardiner whispers, his mind beginning to lose circulation again.

Doug refused to look at the photos of his promiscuous wife. If picture spoke a thousand words, then the no more needed to be said. The case was open and closed. Helena looked at the pictures with keen interest.

Trying desperately to put names to faces rekindling old flames.

“Can I keep these?” She asked Gardiner, aroused by other thoughts developing beneath the table.

“Anything to say Counselor? ....” Asked Watson peering judgmentally over his glasses, “...Counselor? ... Have you anything to say regarding your client’s behavior?” Asked Watson growing tired and was about to raise the gavel and award everything, including the boy, to Doug.

“He’s a bad father!” Gardiner spat out cutting to the chase.

“I sorry Counsellor... I’m going to need a little more than that... Explain yourself before you such a claim!” Watson grew impatient.

The pictures themselves enough to convict. What could possibly annul the woman’s treacherous adultery?

Alfie leaned forward and listen keener than before. To call his son a bad father was nonsense. He had only ever known him to be caring and loving.

“The boy almost drowned! ...” Gardiner pulled an ace from his sleeve, “... *Parental neglect* Your Honor! ... If it weren’t for a passerby... The boy would have drowned!” Gardiner hammed up the theatrics.

“Is this true Counselor?” The Judge looks back to Pritchard.

“I\_ do not know... You will need to ask my client, Your Honor.” Responded Pritchard being caught out.

All eyes shift to Doug who was desperately trying to remember the memory of that morning, which he had desperately been trying to forget.

“Yes...” Spoke Doug honestly, “...It is true the boy could have drowned... But...”

Silence fell over the courtroom. Baited by what Doug would say next. His eyes welling with tears.

Having to relive the haunting memory churning itself over and over again in his mind,

“... He didn’t. Thank God... It was an accident... And accidents happen... Fortunately, for the best this time...” Spoke Doug searching for the right words.

“He admits neglect!” Interjects Gardiner, causing Helena to giggle.

Watson cast a frown upon Gardiner before slamming the heavy gavel onto the bench. Silencing Gardiner completely.

“Go on Doug.” Watson breaks protocol. Causing Gardiner to sense there was more to their relationship than Judge and counsellor.

“It wasn’t a passerby that save *us* from the surf that day... It was a *voice*.”

“A voice?” Asked Watson curiously.

“It told me to watch the boy... That is when I saw he was in trouble. I dived in to save him...”

“You almost lost your own life trying to save your boy’s?”

“Any father would do the same for their child.”

Alfie sits back on the bench seat hearing the words for the first time. Reflecting thoughts of a similar day, a lifetime ago.

“If it wasn’t for Colin... I don’t know if we’d be here today.”

“Colin?”

“A neighbor who was with us that morning.”

“Not a passerby?” Asked Watson looking at Gardiner suspiciously.

“No.” Said Doug calmly.

Conceding he may have lost the case and the boy through his neglect.

“And the voice? Who was it?” Watson asked curiously.

“That’s thing... I don’t know... It just came in my head.”

“It was *your* voice Doug.” Said Watson.

Watson leans back on the throne and eyes Gardiner and Ms McCrae suspiciously.

Closing the file of photos from view. He had seen and heard enough.

“Counselor have you anything more to say?” Watson glared at Gardiner as though to suggest the answer was no.

“Ah\_...” Then as if having a thought that was not his own declared, “... No Your Honor.”

“Counselor... Have you anything more to say?” Watson looked passively to Pritchard.

“No Your Honor.” Replied Pritchard standing bowing his head respectfully.

“Very well then I will retire to my Chambers to consider the verdict.” Watson slams the heavy gavel onto a slab of wood.

Sending a sharp loud echo about the courtroom.

Waking Alfie from a momentary snooze pulling him from the killing fields of Vietnam back to the warmth of the courtroom. Looking down at Doug and counselors packing up. Wondering what he had missed. A half-eaten sandwich beside him. Taking another bite.

Thinking he would save the rest for Freddie.

The Bailiff announces the Court is adjourned for the day.

Before closing the door behind him Watson has a quiet word with the Bailiff.

“Judge wants to have a word with you in his Chambers... Not you Counselor.” Said the Bailiff waving off Pritchard.

“Who’s been a naughty boy then?” Jokes Pritchard.

Sensing the case had gone well for them.

Doug stands and finds himself alone in the courtroom.

Almost alone.

Looking up to the gallery sees his father sitting proud as Punch grinning back at him. Looking like an old man that had wandered off the street. Seeking shelter and comfort of the courtroom. The two had an understanding that stretched back to Foxtan Beach.

“Thanks Dad.” Said Doug softly for saving him.

Alfie grins and touches his hat to say, it was what any father would have done for a child. A strong beam of light beams through a window and momentarily blinds Doug. The sun burst passes, as a cloud covers the beaming light.

Doug’s vision returns only to find his father had gone.

Doug knocks at the heavy door and waits.

His head bowed, unsure what to expect.

“Come in! Come in!” A deep voice commands for him to enter.

“You wanted to see me?” He asked seeing Watson sitting behind a large desk. Perusing an open file of photographs.

“Drink? ...” Asked Watson, “...I’ve taken the liberty.” Indicating a glass on the other side of the desk.

“Thanks. I think.” Said Doug falling into the buttoned leather chair.

The whiskey would do the rest.

Watson turns a photo sideways and wonders if the position was possible.

“Your wife reminds me of my second wife... Or was it my third? ...” Watson deliberates the conundrum, but is unable to decide, “... Anyways, yours seems more\_ ah\_... *Flexible* shall we say.”

“You haven’t gotten me in here to talk about my wife’s dexterity.”

“Of course not... No, no, no... Ha ha...” Hesitates taking one last look at the photo before closing the file and placing it in his brief case. “... Looks open and close to me Doug.”

“What? ... My wife, or the case?”

“Ha ha... Very good.” Watson sees the pun. “...The case, the case...” Watson gets back to the point of Doug’s visit, “...Obviously it has to be fifty-fifty on the house and money... Pretty hard to get out of that I’m afraid... Best to split it and move on with your lives.”

“And the boy?” Doug asked anxiously.

“The boy yes, the boy... What’s his name?” Pulling out the paperwork, “Ah, there it is... Good name.” Qualifies Watson, “... Had an Uncle with the same name.”

“And?” Doug reaches out for the sole possession.

“I can’t see you...” Watson began, “...Not having him... The woman is unfit... I could smell the wine on her breath from the bench. Good God man...” Watson takes a hefty swallow of whiskey, “...I’m surprised you were as married as long as you have... I will be ordering full custody to you Doug.”

“Thanks Dave... She can have the money and the house. .. But I don’t know what I’d survive without the little fella.”

“I hold your sentiments Doug... She seems to know the mechanics well enough to have more... Somehow I don’t think we’ve seen the last of her... Gardiner will be sitting where you were if he pursues that vixen... No offense Doug.”

“None taken... Cheers Dave... How’s your wife if you don’t mind me asking?” Reclining in the chair. His mind at ease. Money was money. It came and went with the breeze.

Children were a different matter.

“Ah\_ there’s the problem. She’s gone back to the Philippines... Or wherever it is she came from.”

“Really, I never saw that happening.” Said Doug trying to act surprised.

“Liar! ...” Roared Watson raising his glass and offering a toast, “... *Women!*”

Watson's mobile vibrates with an incoming alert.

Swiping left, then right. Then right again. Then left before stopping at a screen that pleased him.

"Hmm\_" Eyes light up with delight at the recent citations.

Momentarily losing consciousness he was no longer in control of the horizontal.

"*Well hello!*" Introducing himself to an image of a woman young enough to be his daughter. And then some...

## Have to see a man about a dog

“When?” Asked Grimm collapsing into a chair opposite Faulkner.

“The moment he exchanges product for cash... We’ve got him.”

“Can’t we bust his balls now?” Unsure why the delay.

“Legal say we have to complete the transaction... We have to show intent to supply.”

Things were done a lot differently in Seattle. Less formal. Less paperwork. More brutal. Expediently effective. Usually ending in a shoot out to avoid arrest.

Grimm nodded at the path less taken.

“Once we have him on tape we throw the switch on the nationwide raid and his fifty known associates... *Simultaneously.*”

“Shit! You got the men for that?”

“Oh\_ yeah, they’ve been primed for months just waiting for the call... It’s all up to you Detective Grimm... No pressure.”

“Back up?”

“Only what’s outside the door.”

“Shit...” Grimm was finding himself cornered and out gunned. “...Oh well, it is what it is.” He lied.

“Stall him a week before you take the money in... Don’t want to appear too keen... If he asks... Just say it’s clearing your accountant...” Taking a sip from the porcelain cup, “...You sure you don’t want one?”

“I’m good thanks Bob... You knock yourself out, I better head off.” Standing about to leave.

Outside the windows the hills sparkled with lights. The heavens aglow with stars. Red tail lights moved like snakes on a dark tapestry below.

Morning breaks and Alfie pushes open the carton.

A large brown rat pokes a head out of a hole having heard the human stir and waited patiently hoping for a morning morsel.

“Here you go Charlie! ...” Pulling the remainder of a half-eaten sandwich from a pocket. Breaking a piece away he throws it towards Charlie, “... Go feed the kids! *He-he-he.*” Chuckling to himself.

Pocketing the remainder of the sandwich for the birds Alfie looks to the clear blue sky and pieces together an itinerary for the day. First the café for some breakfast and maybe the boats. Wondering if Leslie had taken the bait of the job Fish had on offer.

Feeling a twinge in a leg as he began to walk, had second thoughts about the boats.

“Maybe tomorrow, no rush.” He said to himself.

Perhaps he would soak up some rays at the Mall. Listen to the crashing water from the water bucket fountain. Spend some time with Freddie. The plan appealed to him.

And marches like a soldier from the alleyway.

“Left, right, left, right! ...” He calls out. Imagining his platoon behind him, “... Keep up! Don’t dilly-dally!” Marching with a spring in his step.

Strangely the twinge in his leg faded as did the thought of ever feeling it. With grace and agility Alfie twirled the thick rod of drift wood as if it were a pipe band mace. In a world of his own marched to the beat of his own drum. Those seeing him pass chuckled with amusement.

Arriving at the café door slams a foot on the ground and comes to a halt.

“At ease men! ... Stand easy.” He dismisses the fallen comrades.

The door buzzer sounds and Samantha looks up to see Alfie appearing bright eyed at the door.

“Alfie! ... You’re right on time... You’re a box of birds today!” Observes Samantha.

“Another day in paradise Sam!” He said smiling having woken up on the right side of the carton.

“If you say so...” Biting her swollen lip, “... Paper is on your table, I’ll fix you a plate.”

“Lovely-dovely...” Said Alfie shaking the paper open.

“Here you go... An extra ration of bacon nice and crispy just as you like it. And a nice cup of tea to go with it.”

“Don’t know what I’d do without you Samantha...” Cutting into a runny yoke of an egg, “...Lovely-jovely.” Anticipating the taste.

The early morning spring sunlight bleed swiftly through the arterials of the city.



Human corpuscles came to life and began to spill onto the streets from sleeping dens and night clubs. Alfie and Grimm pass each other on the street. Taking in the other's appearance and moving on. Alfie eager to get a seat on the bench before someone else.

His strides becoming quicker.

Relieved it was untaken spreads his arms across the back rest, and stakes his claim.

And awaits for his feathered friends to arrive. One by one the pigeons swoop down and coo agitatedly at him. Strutting about frantically. Telling him in their own way the events of the day before.

Alfie looked about for Freddie.

*'Perhaps she'd slept in...'* He thought to himself.

Deciding not to feed the others until Freddie got there,

"... Freddie comes first okay."

Reclining back to take in the morning rays. Feeling the heavy breakfast in the pit of his stomach. The warmth of the sun penetrated his body. About to fall into a day dream he feels a cold shadow cast over him as if the day had become night again and the chill of the breeze biting on exposed skin.

Opening eyes to see Munif standing before him blocking the sun. Holding out the shoebox box. Words need not have been spoken. A procession of store keepers appeared at doors. As though it were a funeral, solemn looks on their faces. Each willing to step forward to give witness, testimony of the wanton act.

The sunny blue sky no longer offered any joy to the day.

Munif hands Alfie the box. The weight said it all. Hesitantly lifting the lid to the cardboard coffin he peers inside.

Freddie lay sleeping.

"Good girl... Good girl." He cooed to her softly. Eyes fighting back the tears.

Stroking the bird, feeling the cold feathers empty of a soul. Taking a gentle breath, blew it over her.

"Sleep... And when you wake you will be a dove... Spread your wings my friend and fly..." He spoke softly closing the box. Darkness fell within. Visualizing his own carton.

That they had on common.

Then added in a loud voice in Maori for all to hear, "... Ka oati ahau ki te utu i to mate! (*I vow to avenge your death.*)"

The words lost on Munif and those listening. But not their tone nor intent.

"Who?" Alfie asked bluntly. But knowing the answer, seeking only confirmation.

"That kid... Toby... The lout that comes down here..." Not sure how else to describe the delinquent.

"I know him." Alfie grumbles assertively.

There could be no *why*, no excuse.

Alfie stared into space. His mind harboring a dark thoughts. This was personal. Pulling the small tablet bottle from a pocket, rattles it. Opening to find two remaining.

Throwing them in his mouth and swallows them whole.

"You okay Mister Alfie?" Feeling concerned for him.

He had never seen him like this before.

"I will be..." His stare fixed on the box, "...I will be."

"Hold on to this for me will you Munif?" Handing him his brief case.

"Of course... Where you going Mister Alfie?"

"To see a man about a dog." He lied.

"A dog?" Asked Munif confused.

"I'll be back." Standing like a man on a mission.

Walking away cradling the shoe box as though it were his sole possession.

Thumping the heavy walking stick with each determined step...

## Is he dead?

Alfie gazes out the window of the bus as it traveled unhurriedly along the tangled streets.

Stopping at knots momentarily before moving on. Unconcerned as to where he was. Determined on where he was going. The day suddenly turns to night and large stars flash by the window as if the trolley bus had engaged warp drive before hemorrhaging through a portal on the far side of the galaxy, into daylight again. Eyes adjust to the bright light and survey the constellation of Evens Bay in search of a specific individual.

On his lap Alfie cradles a box.

“Good girl.” He assured the bird stroking the box gently.

A man sits behind, stroking a dove on his lap, “Good girl.”

Silently the dull red trolley bus pulls to the curb and comes to a gentle halt as if not to disturb the dead.

“There you are Alfie... Have a nice day.” Said the bus driver watching him climb down the steps cradling a shoe box.

The salutation goes unanswered.

Alfie looks about the walkway. The San Jennifer was out at sea and Alfie hoped Leslie had the sense to be on it. Taking a seat on the bench, Alfie waited. He would wait eternity if he had to. The shoe box would not leave his lap. The man sits beside him, and waits too. Both men stare at the vacant berth.

The void stared back at them.

Minutes turned to hours and Alfie sat perfectly still as memories of Nam flooded his mind.

Channeling the anger of war to face down his foe. Horrors incapable of being forgotten. Horrors that should not be forgotten. Lest he forgot. He would remember them. Remember his men. Every mission relived and replayed again and again and again.

And again.

Morning became noon became the afternoon and the midday sun passes overhead unnoticed.

Quietly he sat staring at the empty berth. The man beside him was growing impatient. The boy was late. Then in the distance, as if by preordained destiny, laughter could be heard approaching. The man looks up.

But Alfie's eyes remain fixed on the empty berth.

Leslie and Toby and Mutts and Runt approach the bench to see Alfie sitting quietly. Leslie sees a box on his lap.

"Hey Leslie, it's your boyfriend... *He-he-he-he*." Pushing Leslie closer to the old man, "... What the fuck you doing here old man!?" Toby challenges him.

"Looking for someone." Said Alfie sternly, leaning on the heavy walking stick to stand.

"Who?" Asked Toby guilelessly.

"You punk!" Responded Alfie.

"Well you found me old man... Now what you going to do eh? ... *He-he he*." Toby laughed to himself, Mutts and Runt sniggered behind him.

Leslie stepped between Toby and Alfie.

"Leave him alone Toby! I f-fucken m-mean it!" Leslie confronts Toby, clenching his fists.

Without warning Toby punches Leslie in the guts and buckles him over, causing him to fall to the ground groaning.

"Leave the boy alone punk." Alfie warns.

Holding his hand up to stop Toby from stepping forward. Without speaking, Alfie removes the lid of the box and holds it out before him. Letting Toby see what lay within.

Alfie's eyes fixed on Toby to witness his response.

"It's a fucken bird! What of it?" Toby said indifferently and wondered what it had to do with him.

"It had a name... It had a life. .. It had soul." Alfie reminded the boy.

"What do you want from me old man? ... I ain't done nothing... It wasn't me." Toby lied looking over his shoulder to Mutts and Runt giggling back at him.

"I want you to apologize to Freddie... Ask her for forgiveness." Alfie glared at the lad for an ounce of remorse.

"*Freddie?* ... What sort of fucked name is that? ..." Leslie laughed, "...Fuck you. And fuck the fuck'n bird!"

"You don't scare me punk." Leaning on it heavily on the walking stick.

“What you going to do about it old man?” Taking a wide stance and clenching fists. Looking down his nose at Alfie.

Alfie turns about and places the box gently on the bench. Stretching his limbs, feeling each one click into place. Toby watches on amused unsure what the old man was doing. Slowly Alfie begins to remove the overcoat. Folding it. Places beside the box.

“Hey Leslie... I think he’s going to fuck you bro... *He-he-he.*”

Leslie pulls himself from the ground clutching his stomach.

Removing his jacket, Alfie slowly and deliberately removes a white shirt, stained with time. His back turned to Toby. Only the man sees the pain etched upon his body.

Alfie rises his arms out, as though he were about to be crucified.

“What you doing old man?” Toby asked curiously.

A small crowd had begun to gather at the unusual sight of the old man undressing himself. An emaciated body pitted with dark scars. Unsure where one began and another ended.

With arms outstretched Alfie turns to face Toby.

“What the fuck? ...” Asked Toby unsure what to make of the wounds.

“War son. War...” Responds Alfie, “... Something your lot will never have to know, thanks to men that died for you.”

He steps back and falls silent. Taking a deep breath preparing himself for what was to come. Hands begin to shake and tremble.

“Ko koe te whaea whara! (*You dumbass motherfucker!*)” Alfie cries out.

“You okay Alfie? ...” Asked Leslie, “... You want me to call an ambulance?”

Alfie ignored him and cried out again. One arm raised in the air. A fist clasp the knotted handle.

‘*Thud! Thud! Thud!*’ Stomping the heavy walking stick onto the ground

“Ka whiua e ahau tenei mate!” (*I will avenge this death!*)” Wailed Alfie.

The words meant nothing to Toby taken back by the sudden outcry in his native tongue.

“Fuck you!” Toby steps forward only to have Alfie tilting his head to mimic an agonized decapitated head, his tongue protruded and eyes widen.

“Pokokōhua! (*I curse you!*)” He hollers out for all about to hear.

Causing those that knew the word to stand back lest they be stained by it.

“Pane kohua! Pane kohua! Pane kohua! (*Boiled head! Boiled head! Boiled head!*)” He cries out loudly. The head was Tapu. To boil it was been the ultimate insult.

Slapping a hands heavily on his boney chest. The sharp sound painful as it was loud. Stomping feet upon the gravel path raising dust from the damp soil. The sound of helicopter blades thump above his head. His men behind him stomping in unison. Slapping sweaty bodies, wailing insults at the naïve fool standing before them.

Toby laughed and looked over to Mutts and Runt taking in the spectacle. Slowly, unnoticed, Alfie creeped up on the smirking lad. Smelling the fear on his breath. Twirling the walking stick majestically. Toby looks around to find Alfie standing in front of him rolling eyes in their sockets. Tilting his head, runs a thumb across his throat as though to imitate a knife.

“What the fuck?” Toby exclaimed being caught unaware.

Alfie steps back and suddenly swung the heavy knotted club swiftly into Toby’s groin with solid thud.

*‘THUD!’*

*‘Aaaah\_!’* Sounding a gut wrenching groan, followed by unimaginable pain.

Buckling the Toby to his knees. Eyes begin to well with tears.

“Get him!” Toby groans to the other.

But to no response. Mutts and Runts stood back fearful of what the old man would inflict on them with the knotted walking stick. Alfie stared them down with a look that said, *stay where you are*.

“I’ll get you for this!” Toby warns Alfie about to walk away.

Wishing the lad had not spoken. Alfie stops in his tracks on hearing the threat. And sighs. Turning about to face the buckled fool on his knees clutching his crotch and gasping with painful breath.

“I’ve killed a men in my time that did not deserve to die... But nothing would give me more pleasure than to remove you from the gene pool punk.”

Raising the club intent on striking the fatal blow.

“Alfie don’t! ... He’s not worth it.” Pleads Leslie holding Alfie’s arm from striking Toby.

Alfie hesitates. Disgruntled. Lowers the club and backs away.

“Fuck you old man... I’ll find you.” Toby threatens again without thinking.

“You won’t need to punk... I’ll be coming for you.” He warns stepping back.

Only to turn about suddenly to swing the knob of the stick across Toby’s face.

‘*Whack!*’ Sounded the violent contact.

“Ahh\_! My nose!” Toby cries out in pain clutching his face. Blood streaming through his fingers.

Falling to the ground in pain. Lifeless.

An applause erupts from the crowd. The man momentarily smiles. The battle between good and evil was never ending.

Today was a good day.

“Is he dead?” Asked Leslie.

“He’d be so lucky...” Said Alfie smiling. Walking back to dress himself.

“Anyone else care for a taste of pain? ... No? ... I didn’t think so.” Asked Alfie looking to Mutts and Runt.

The two minions stood back unsure what to do. Toby was out for the count.

“We’re going to call the cops old man!” Mutts threatens him pointing his finger at him.

“Who do you think they would believe? ... A bunch of hoods like you lot... Or a frail old man? ... Now *fuck off* before I deal with you too... And take that piece of shit with you!” Warned Alfie.

The minions try to pull Toby to his feet, only to be pushed away by the embarrassment.

Wiping his face on a bloody sleeve. Spitting blood, gave Alfie a glare.

Alfie glared back at him unmoved.

“You coming Leslie?” Toby asked anxiously.

“Yeah-nah... Think I’ll stick around here a while.” Choosing sides.

“Be seeing ya then.” Called out Mutts.

“Nah\_... I don’t think so...” Turning his back on the thugs. “...You okay?” Asked Leslie.

“Never felt better... You?” Said Alfie, “...Think I needed to get that out of my system.”

“I’m okay... Sorry about the bird, ah F-Freddie... I didn’t know until n-now.”

“You’re the one person who shouldn’t be Leslie.”

“W-weren’t you afraid?”

“Afraid? Of them? ... Nah\_ they’re just a bunch of load mouth punks... Anyways, I been hurt worse than whatever they could do.” Dressing himself covering the dark unsightly wounds.

“Those scars... They from the w-war aren’t they?”

“Maybe...” Alfie fell silent to the torture unfolding in his mind. Catching himself before the final scene. Whitcliff’s shoot was timely. And true. A moment later it and...

“Hey thanks.” Alfie quickly changing the topic.

“For w-what?”

“Few people would take a blow for another... I’m proud of you son.”

“T-that was awesome Alfie. You really s-showed it to them...” Began Leslie only to be cut short.

“Nothing ever come from fighting. Just more pain... And having to watch your back... The best thing to do is to walk away. Otherwise...”

“Otherwise what?”

“Take down the leader. And keep him down... A good chance the others are cowards and will run.”

“And if they don’t?”

“Then you run... Run like the wind!” He chuckles grinning with Leslie laughing with him.

“Yeah, I’ll t-try to re-m-member that.” Reconciling the wisdom.

“That Toby boy... He’s in a lot of pain.”

“I saw that.”

“Nah... In his head... He’s got issues. Someone should have slapped out of him years ago... The world’s gone soft these day if you ask me... In my day, it was the rod until they straighten you out.”

“W-world’s c-changed Alfie... All P-PC n-now.”

“Pathetic... What did you see in *them*?” Alfie asked.

“Dunno... Just m-mates to hang out with I s-suppose.” Wondering himself.



Alfie dressed himself and the crowd dispersed and went on their way. The pair took a seat with the man on the bench. And stared at the blank berth before reminding him of an earlier thought. The shoe box cradled on Alfie's lap.

"I thought you'd be on the boat?" Alfie probed.

"W-what b-boat?" Leslie asked.

Alfie looks at the empty berth at the wharf and then back to Leslie.

"W-why w-would I be on the b-boat?"

"Nothing... Just a wishful thought I suppose... Could pay for Art School if you ever decided to go... But hey what does a foolish old man know eh?" Alfie planted the seed.

"Yeah-nah." Responded Leslie confused by the enticing new thought.

'*Art school?*' His mind spinning as the seed took root.

Eyes darted left and right agitated by the enticing prospect.

"I must be off... I have to make arrangements." Alfie taps the box.

"You be okay?" Leslie asked with concern for him.

"Don't worry about me Leslie... Worry about the other guy." Smiled Alfie with a wink.

'*Thud!*' Stomping the walking stick onto the ground. Now stained with Toby's blood.

Then as though he was talking to an invisible friend on the bench called out to the man on the bench. The man reluctant to move from the divine rays of sunlight.

"You coming?" Tapping the box.

Leslie looks about as to who he was talking to and wonders if Alfie had lost his marbles.

"*You* be okay?" Alfie asked the lad.

"Yeah think so... Think I'll hang out here for a while... Maybe the boat might come back."

"Be seeing ya then." Said Alfie.

"Yeah... You too." Said Leslie turning his thoughts to the possibilities of art school.

A bus had conveniently arrived out of schedule.

Not that the man had anything to do with it.

"Good timing." Said Alfie to the bus driver smiling at the good fortune.

“Welcome aboard Alfie.” Said the driver a little confused how he had gotten there so soon. Not recalling any the stops after leaving the depot. Or why he had no passengers on board.

“Slow day in the office?” Looking about for passengers.

“Yeah looks like it... Is everything okay Alfie?” Seeing the blood stained walking stick.

“Things could not be better Ravi...” Smiled Alfie taking a seat opens the box he strokes the bird’s feathers and feels a warmth. “...Good girl.”

Her death avenged. Her spirit free. There was peace in the world.

The man smiled at the temporal thought.

“Good girl.” Stroking a pure white dove on his lap.

For a moment Alfie thought he heard a cooing behind him...

## Trust me, it's good

“Come on bro... You coming or not?” Asked Toby reluctant to go to the gang headquarters alone with a nose broken and swollen eyes.

“Yeah-nah, not today man.” Responded Leslie. Reluctant to forgive Toby so quickly.

“Come on pussy, just this once... I'll give ya a hundy.” Toby entices him.

“You ain't got a hundred?” Challenged Leslie.

Toby pulls a wallet out. Thick with notes.

“W-where'd you pitch that from?”

“Nah\_ bro... Fletch looks after me eh.” He pushes a note into Leslie's hand. Hesitantly he takes it but he did anyway.

Money was money. And he needed art supplies.

“Okay... But just this once.” Looking over his shoulder for Alfie.

“Cool\_ bro... Monique might be there.”

“I hope not... My cock hasn't been the same since the l-last time.”

“Don't worry about your cock man... My balls haven't been the same after what the old man did to 'em... Why you wanna hang out with that old man for?”

“Hey! ...” Leslie pulled the reins in on Toby, “... Easy what you say about him... You want me to come or not?”

“Yeah, sorry bro...” Toby backed off fearing Leslie would change his mind, “...Come on the bus be here soon”

Wondering why it was running late. Looking to the tunnel hoping it would materialize at any moment. Road works had mysteriously sprung up and traffic re-routed causing the pair to mysteriously miss the train out to the Hutt.

“Oh\_ fuck bro... We have to wait another hour 'til the next one... Fuck me bro.”

“You're not my type m-man... *He-he-he.*” Leslie sniggers to himself.

“Funny bro... he-he-he... (*Sniff!*)” Sniffing violently. Wiped a finger across his nose and regretted it, “...Ah\_! It hurts!”

“*He-he-he.*” Chuckled Leslie at the sight of Toby in pain.

A man reading a month old newspaper sat against the wall.

Searching for something he had yet to read. There was only so many times he could read the obituaries and horoscopes. The Warriors were on another losing streak.

Speaking into a sleeve of the overcoat, presses a finger on an ear piece.

“Stay with them... It’s going down tonight.” Faulkner tells the man.

“Copy that.” The detective responds.

A train pulls into the grand old Wellington station. Doors open and commuters spew over the platform.

Toby pushes his way through the oncoming tide of people.

“Fuck off! Fuck off! ...” Toby yells insults at them to part ways, “... You coming?” He asks Leslie standing back, waiting for the platform to clear.

“Yeah-nah... I’m c-coming, I’m c-coming.”

“Tell that to Monique stud.”

“Keep that b-bitch away from m-me m-man... I don’t w-want w-what she’s g-got again.” Cringing at the thought.

“Yeah-nah bro... Me neither eh?” Feeling for his genitals.

Swollen by a more recent affliction.

The harbor moved swiftly outside the window.

The setting sun was losing the fight to dominate the heavens. Lights were beginning to appear along the foreshore of the harbor. Titillating Leslie’s playful imagination. Watching the last rays light up the eastern hills. The surface of the water glistening changing hues.

Matiu Island a stubby thumb protruding through the palette’s hole.

In the distance the agitated waters of Cook Straight. Squinting he makes out a trawler coming back to port. His heart skips a beat, seeing the tell-tale blue and white markings that gave it away as the San Jennifer.

Tomorrow he would pay it a visit. Eyes lit up with excitement.

“You’re thinking of Monique aren’t you bro? ... I can sees it eh.” Said Leslie grinning to himself and wishing he had not. The arousal causing more pain than good.

“Yeah-nah... Don’t think so m-man.” Leslie denies. Watching the trawler slip from view as the trained turned to go up the Hutt valley.

A valley not too unlike Hataitai. Hills that shrouded the sun’s presence. The train grinds to a halt at their station. Only three passengers get off.

The detective man checks his watch and like the Mad Hatter strides off in the other end of the platform to a van waiting for him.

The lads head the other way to the gang's compound.

Rounding the corner they discover road works had sprung up down the street.

Bulldozers and diggers with powerful arms ploughed shallow freshly dig graves. Pot holes cutting off one end of the road. Workmen leaned on shovels as machines did all the work. Shifting soil from one pot hole to another, and back again. Gang members watched on curiously.

Wary of the sudden appearance earlier that day.

"What the fuck happened to you? ..." Asked a gang member sees Leslie approaching. A bandage over his nose and swollen dark eyes, "... You ain't been fighting with Morris's misses have you?" The gate keeper chuckled at him, causing others to laugh with him.

"Yeah-nah, it was an old man." Speaking before thinking.

"An old man? Fuck me..." The gate keeper shakes his head in disbelief. "...Get inside before a senior citizen shows up! ... Hey stud." The man welcomes Leslie raising an eye brows as though he knew something Leslie did not.

Making their way through the warren of hallways of strange sounds and smells. Swearing they could hear Monique's playful moan's resonating from one of the bed rooms. They kept walking. Menacing looking patched members watched their every move. Suspicious of the two outsiders.

One beastly member blocked a hallway and prevented them from going any further. Another equally as beastly member blocked the other end. Trapping the lads between them.

"Hands against the wall." A man saids pushing the lads up against the wall.

Frisking them thoroughly. Toby squeals with pain as a hand reaches for his crotch and squeezes his swollen balls.

"What you got down there then?" A man jokes with him.

"Monique." Said Toby with unusually perfect timing.

The man now wishing he had not touched him.

"They clean... Well he is..." Indicating Leslie, "...Can't speak for his infected prick." Looking at Toby.

"It was the old man." Toby corrects them.

“Hey... Whatever gets your rocks off man...” Advises the brawly man, “... You know where to go, now fuck off!”

The two men disappear laughing to each other amused to have riled the lads.

“This way.” Said Toby wanting Leslie to follow him.

A pungent smell hung in the air, making it difficult to breathe without inhaling.

Toby inhaled deeply. Enjoying every lungful, if only to ease his pains. Entering the room, the zombie bulb that had returned from the dead, flickering and twitching, jerking its light about the room.

Beneath it sat Weasel.

Waiting with a stone cold look on his face. Nervously the lads take their seat. The door closes behind them and two heavy set men block any thoughts of leaving in a hurry.

Something was up.

“What the fuck happened to you? Jesus! ... What is the world coming to?” Weasel asked staring at Toby’s battered face.

“Well, ah\_, it was, ah\_...” Toby is cut short before he could explain.

“I don’t give a fuck it who it was... What’s this hear about Fletcher talking to a buyer?” Weasel got to the point.

Eyeing the two frightened lads for answers.

“I know nothing about that... I just pick up and drop off.”

“*I just pick up and drop off...*” Weasel parrots Toby, “... Don’t give me that shit! ... You know something...Tell me! ... I’ll make it worth your while.” He baits him.

Flashing a fist full of notes.

Without thinking, Toby spills the beans on Makowski from what he had heard from Abigail.

“*Makowski?* Who’s the fuck Makowski?” Looking over his shoulder to the man behind him.

“Dunno boss. Never heard of him.” The man shrugs his shoulders.

“Seattle you say... Find out more... And there’s more where this came from.” Waving the money before Toby’s swollen eyes.

“Thanks Weasel.” Said Toby hastily.

The room suddenly goes cold as though Toby had stepped into a chiller.

An evil glare came over Weasel's face. No one ever called him *Weasel* to his face. It was an insult. Only his rivals called him by that name. He could almost forgive the lad for being green.

Almost.

"What the fuck did you just call me?" He asked, wiry dark whisker brows pinching together. A face drawn and narrow. Lips pursed, making him appear more like a weasel than before.

"Sorry... I didn't know." Toby apologizes for the second time in his life in as many hours.

"Don't ever call me that again or I'll have you concreted into wall... Understood?"

"Yes Sir." Toby fell silent.

"The name is Smith... John Smith if anyone asks... Understood?" With a look that said he meant it.

"Yes *Mister Smith*." Lowering his head sinking lower in the chair.

"You bring the money?" Warming to the thought of possessing it sooner than later.

Toby reaches deep inside a pocket and fumbles for an envelope. Thinking he had misplaced it. A worried look came over his face as one grew on Weasel's.

"Found it! Shit... Thought I'd dropped it somewhere?" Said Toby anxiously.

*'Fletcher sends a boy to do a man's job.'* Weasel shakes his head disbelievingly and looks back at the man behind him.

Giving the man a nod to fetch the package. Returning with a cellophane package and places it in front of Toby. Taking the money in exchange quietly checks the contents and nods back to Weasel.

"All good." The man responds.

"Okay then. We're done here. Off you go now! ... Oh Toby... Here's something for your troubles." Pushing several notes his way.

"Shouldn't I check the product Mister Smith?"

"Trust me, it's good... I tested it myself earlier." Indicating a small hole in the package.

"If you say so Mister Smith." Accepted Toby eager to leave before he became part of a wall.

The two lads leave the compound a shopping bag weighted down on Toby's shoulder.

A detective follows some distance behind in the shadows. A workman on an RT informs Faulkner waiting in a van on Marion.

"Copy that... Stay with them..." Faulkner informs the detective, "...Be ready to go on my word."

"Copy that Sir." The man responded nodding to his men to be ready for the signal.

The evening darkened and the workmen continued to work under strong spot lights blinding those watching them from the gate.

Deasil engines whined loudly, drowning out radio chatter. Bulldozers pushed and shoved earth back and forth. A truck appears at the site. Crouching inside the deep tray two dozen armed defenders and drug enforcement officers.

Their weapons locked and loaded.

Outside on the road workmen in Hi-Viv vests still leaning on the same shovels. Still unmoved from an hour before. Watching diggers push earth from one hole to another. Then back again. Apart from the weapons beneath their vests they looked like any other council worker from any other city.

Except maybe Brazil...



## Testing one two three

Faulkner hands Grimm bland black brief case who feels it weight for the contents within.

Opening the case he inspects the bundled notes.

“This stuff is legit? I don’t want to be caught holding counterfeits.”

“One hundred percent... From another case months ago... Everything’s in place... There’s a built in microphone and camera...” Indicating the hidden devices, “...Once Fletcher hands you the product we’ll send in the cavalry... Stand back and raise your hands in the air... We’ll process you like everyone else and make it look as you were caught up in the raid.”

“Let’s hope so... And back up?” Grimm looks for assurance Faulkner had his back if things went south.

“We’ll be right outside the door... There’ll be half a dozen men who drew the short straws to be on the floor.”

“Poor bastards.” Grinned Grimm.

“Yeah... They’ll be armed so you don’t need to be.”

“Copy that.” Grimm lied.

Faulkner stares at the colored pins on the map. The culmination of tens of thousands of man hours and sleepless nights.

Relieved it would soon be over.

“And you had this just sitting in your office the whole time?” Grimm asked curiously.

“Whoever breaks into a Police Station?” Faulkner laughed off the prospect.

“Yeah... It’s the last place I’d expect a criminal to be... I better be off. Think I’ll walk. Don’t want to appear too keen.”

“Walk? You have a twenty thousand cash on you... You think it’s safe? We can drop you off down the street.” Asked Faulkner worried.

“I’m good. There’s probably more crims in here than there are on the streets...” Gathering his overcoat and the black case. “... Testing one two three.” Grimm speaks to the case looking to a technician listening through a headset.

“Copy that.” Responds the technician giving him the thumbs up.

“Good luck Detective.” Faulkner extends his hand, hoping he would see him on the other side of the raid.

“I bring my own luck...” Without saying anymore, “...I’ll be off.” Taking the last swallow of whiskey from the glass.

Strolling casually from the office exists the building into a dark damp alleyway that lead onto a back street. Looking feral, the only think out of place was the brief case. Eyeing the street for suspicious vehicles. Spies the white van standing out like a sore toe and a hot tin roof.

“Christ... Amateurs.” He curses to himself hoping the microphone had not picked up the words.

Strolling casually into The Palace, the bouncer notices the briefcase and lets Makowski past without caution.

Eyes peeled for untoward vehicles and spies a large white van with dark windows. And resumes his watch undaunted. Whoever it was would need to get past him first.

And entertained the violent thought.

Grimm took in the foyer. It felt different. It always did went something was about to go down. On edge, took his seat and ordered a bourbon. Vikki appeared and began to stroke him. Caressing what the bourbon could not.

“Later.” Grimm lied.

“I’ll be waiting for you Charlie.” Vikki strutted away.

Her firm ass followed by Grimm’s watchful eyes.

“Enjoy the show boys.” Said Grimm holding the case securely in position.

“What’s he doing?” Asked a detective over the headset.

“Blending in.” Said Faulkner admirably watching live pictures of naked women on the stage being streamed from the strategically placed briefcase.

Drinks came. And empty glasses of melted ice cubes went.

Dances came scantily clad. And naked young women left. Taking with them the money tucked into garter belts. And whatever other crevices men could find.

Time came and went.

Dragging on until it seemed as though Fletcher was no longer interested.

Grimm calls his bluff.

“What the fuck is he doing no? Leaving? He can’t leave! ... We can’t call it off now.” A detective begins to panic seeing months of work being flushed away.

“Relax... He knows what he’s doing... *Watch.*” Said Faulkner amused by the improvised ploy.

About to exit, Grimm feels a heavy hand on his shoulder.

“Makowski? ... You leaving so soon? Asked Morris towering menacingly over him.

“If you guys aren’t interested... (*Sniff.*)” Holding a poker face.

“Let’s not be too hasty... Fletch wants to see you upstairs... If you don’t mind.” Suggesting no alternative.

“I suppose... (*Sniff.*)” Being led away.

Closely followed by Morris breathing heavily down his neck. At the door reaches into a pocket and pulled out the switch blade and Nokia and offered them to Morris.

“Nah, you’re good.” And indicating he should go in.

Fletcher looked up and saw Makowski with the brief case and grinned. Distracting him from Abigail’s performance of Swam Lake. Minus the swans. Minus the lake.

And now minus the tutu.

“Come in Mister Makowski... Come in.” And indicates for him to take a seat. “... Morris would you be kind to make Charlie here a drink.”

Laying the briefcase on the desk. A fisheye lens captures the room and the occupants.

“We getting this?” Asked Faulkner to his team recording it all.

“In living color... Keep it coming.” A technician replies keenly.

Eager to calm the growing anxiety that was building Grimm pulls out the plastic tobacco pouch and begins roll a joint. Lights up and takes a hit before handing the doobie to Morris.

“Cheers man.” Taking a long satisfying draw.

“I see you two have kissed and made up... Is that for me?”

“Depends? (*Sniff.*)”

“On what?” Catching Fletcher by surprise.

“You got something for me? (*Sniff.*)”

“Forgive me Charlie I’m getting ahead of myself... Of course. You show me yours I’ll show you mine.” And nods to Morris to fetch the product and returns with a brown paper bag.

“Do you mind?” Asked Grimm seeking to check the substance and pulls the switch blade from a pocket and flicks the switch.

A sharp blade springs out suddenly and takes Faulkner by surprise.

“Where did he get that from?” Faulkner asked looking to his men for answers. Only to be replied with shrugging shoulders and silence.

Poking a small hole in the wrapping, leaked a small amount of white powder onto Grimm’s fingertip.

Rubbing it over his teeth before a tongue licked it away.

“Whoa! Shit!” Grimm’s eyes suddenly opened wide as the buzz blew him away.

Then opens the case and shows Fletcher the neatly bundled cash.

“Never touch the stuff myself.” Looking Morris to check it.

Checking the contents without counting, the smell was strong enough to say the correct amount was there.

“We got a deal then?” Taking a long slow draw on the reefer. Exhaling the smoke filled the room.

“Sold.” Said Fletcher reclining back the chair.

“Shit he’s good... Doesn’t even break a sweat...” Remarked Faulkner watching on.

“Sticking around?” Asked Fletcher.

“Long enough to finish this... I wouldn’t want to be roofied and find it missing... What would my associates think?”

“Charlie, Charlie, Charlie... Is there no trust? ... You have quality product... Why would I kill the golden goose?”

“Strong choice of words. But I hear ya... It’s good doing business with you Fletch.” Grimm raises a glass to salute their partnership. “...There more where that came from. I’ll be in touch.”

“You’re too kind Charlie...” Gesturing back his glass taking puff on a large cigar, sending smoke rings into the air to stain with the peculiar scent of the reefer.

Just then Toby and Leslie appear at the door.

“Who’s your friend Toby?” Fletcher eyes Leslie suspiciously, looking innocent and naïve.

Another mule.

“Oh sorry Fletch... This is my mate Leslie... We hang out together.” Responds Toby awkwardly.

“Don’t bring anyone up here unless they’re invited. Understood?” Fletcher warns him.

“Yes Fletch... Sorry Fletch.” Cowered Toby shrinking inside his hoodie.

“Shit! What are they doing there? Fuck! ...” Faulkner cursed, momentarily deciding to continue, “...They’re there now...Proceed as planned.”

“Copy that.” An undercover officer confirms.

# I went for back up

Grimm almost fidgeted, if it was not for the soothing joint between his fingers, wondering what was taking Faulkner so long.

Perhaps the two lads had stalled the raid. Collateral damage never looked good on police reports. Paperwork.

And Grimm hated paperwork.

A phone rings. A red phone. A private line. Catching everyone's attention as it rang again and again and again. And again. Catching Fletcher's attention.

"You want me to get that boss?" Asked Morris approaching the desk.

Fletcher raises a hand to halt him in his tracks. And lifted the handset. Without speaking Fletcher listens. Grimm struggled to hear what was being said. Making out muffled voices. Fletcher's voice was all but nonexistent.

His body language however spoke volumes.

"I see... Thank you." Replacing the handset ever so gently.

Eyes shift to Morris and back to Makowski relaying troubled thoughts.

Toby and Leslie were caught in a Mexican standoff of eyes. Their eyes looking to each other and back to Fletcher. Who was the strange tattooed man in the chair and why there package of cocaine on the table?

Toby steps forward to break the impasse.

"Mister Smith gave me this."

"*Mister Smith* now is it?" Suspicious eyes now shifting from Makowski to Toby.

Questioning lad's allegiance.

Fletcher weighed the lives in the room and reached to bottom draw of his desk. A move not unnoticed by Grimm making his own subtle unnoticed move. Holding a Smith and Western revolver he pointed it at Toby. Startling him to raise his hands in panic. Immediately followed by Leslie standing in the doorway looking frightened and surprised by the sudden developments.

Wondering if he should make a run for it.

"Mister Fletcher?" Exclaimed Toby about to piss his pants.

“Go! Go! Go!” Barked Faulkner ordering the raids to begin across the country. He had what he needed on tape.

“What about Grimm?” A detective asks.

“Grimm has the situation under control.” He lied.

“He does?”

“Makowski? ... Anything to say?” Fletcher pointed the gun at him.

It was not the first time Grimm had had a gun pulled on him, if Fletcher was going to shoot he would have by now.

Appearing indifferent to his predicament slouches deeper into the chair. If only to conceal his own weapon pointed under the desk at Fletcher’s groin. If he was going down, it would not be without a fight.

Taking a swallow of whiskey before his next move.

The look on Fletcher’s face said that he had been betrayed and his empire was about to fall around him. Whoever was on the line had informed him of something. Or someone.

And that only someone was him.

Outside the sound of wailing sirens approaching.

“Nice doing business with you gentlemen...” Declared Grimm giving away his hand, “... Games up.”

“You fucken Narc!” Called out Morris stepping forward to grab him.

Fletcher pulls himself from his chair to take aim, only to have Grimm push the desk knocking him back into his seat.

Causing the gun to go off accidentally.

*‘Boom!’* A loud percussion engulfs the room.

Shattering the two way mirror sending glass over those below creating a mayhem of screams. Half-naked women and men rush from private booths against the onslaught of the raiding police.

Swiftly Grimm brings the heavy barrel of his concealed gun up under Morris’ chin. Slamming it across an already broken nose. Buckling Morris over in pain. Fletcher takes aim trying to not to hit Morris.

*‘Boom!’* Fletcher fires a shot only to miss the man and the bullet flies towards the doorway.

*‘Boom! Boom! Boom!’* Grimm responds with three shots in quick succession.

Striking Fletcher in the chest.

Stunned, Fletcher looks down at the blood bleeding through his fingers. Slumping back into the chair. Eyes blink in disbelief and his head wobbles incapable of supporting itself.

Looking to someone or something in the corner of the room.

“Who? ...” Eyes close for a final time and his head droops to his chest. Dead.

Grimm stood firm with his aim on Fletcher ready for another should he move.

“Where the fuck did he get a gun from?” Faulkner exclaimed frantically hearing the shooting unfold through an ear piece.

Toby crouched in a corner ducking the flying bullets. Morris lay on the floor holding his face. Leslie stood in the doorway. Stunned. As if he had been shoot. Eyes blink in disbelief. His head wobbles as though incapable of supporting itself. He sees a man in black in a corner. The man from the boats. Confused.

What was he doing there?

Unmoved by the mayhem that had unfolded. The man smiles at Leslie and a bright light engulfed the room.

“Leslie!” Cried out Toby watching him about to topple over and collapse to the ground.

Armed police rush into the room. Laser sights pierce the smoke haze room, aimed at the one holding the gun. Grimm. Now raising hands and a badge to differentiate himself from the bad guys.

Police redirected their weapons at Morris, on his knees, and hands above his head.

“Grimm... What the fuck happened?” Faulkner asked storming into the room. Fletcher dead in a chair. Bodies over the floor.

“It went south... He went for a gun...” Claimed Grimm calmly, “...I went for back up.”

“Back up? ...” Questioned Faulkner, “... Fuck me... You know the amount of paper work that is involved?”

“I’d prefer that over my death certificate...” Countered Grimm holstering his weapon. It was just another day in the office and he wondered what all the fuss was about.

“Hang in there bro\_.” Pleads Toby. Cradling Leslie’s head in his lap.

“Medic\_! ...” Calls out Grimm frantically putting pressure on the wound. “...Don’t worry kid... You’ll be fine.” Grimm lied, “...Medic\_!”



Calling out with urgency in his voice.

Police cast a coordinated drag net across the country, raiding compounds and offices and houses of Fletcher's known associates.

Road works outside the Federation Headquarters ceased. Spotlights redirected on the fortified compound. Blinding the gatekeepers as Armed Defenders rushed from concealed vehicles. Threads of red lasers pierced fumes and dust raised by machines. Diggers wrenched aside muscles cars. Pulling away flimsy corrugated iron walls rimmed with razor wire.

"Fuck you pigs!" Gang members fired insults at the police.

Shotgun pellets ricocheted from dozer's blades. Automatic fire spat back their invitation. The compound had been set ablaze. Engulfing it in fire and destroying evidence. Sending the toxic narcotic fumes into the night sky.

Gang members now more concerned with saving their bikes than themselves. Weasel had long since escaped. His investigations had been thorough. He also had connections in Seattle. Tipping Fletcher off to the undercover Narc.

Charles Makowski was a ghost.

Operation Hawk was over and now the paperwork begins, crossing t's and dotting i's.

Faulkner wondering how he would explain the unregistered weapon and the dead body.

"Damn Americans!" Cursed Faulkner looking about for Grimm for explanations, who had somehow mysteriously fled from the crime scene.

As had Vikki, with two k's...

# Speak of the Devil

Monitors beat out the rhythm of Leslie's life.

A plastic bag hangs on tall silver pole, dripping nutrients into a tube that bleed into his arm. Alfie and Toby sit quietly either side of the bed. Watching him come about. Sleepy eyes flicker like the zombie fluorescent light. On seeing Alfie sitting there.

Leslie smiles, matching Alfie's grin.

"Hey... Welcome back." Said Alfie smiling, seeing the lad awake.

"Hey Leslie." Said Toby catching Leslie's attention.

"Hey." A dry croaky voice responds.

"Here... Have a drink of this." Toby offers a glass of water. A straw extends from the top.

"Thanks..." Looking about the ward, "...How l-long have I b-been here?"

"Not long." Alfie lies. The bullet narrowly missing an artery.

Any closer and Leslie would be laying someplace else.

"I thought you said it didn't h-hurt?" Said Leslie. Watching Toby chewing on the green grapes.

"Yeah-nah..." Alfie grinned, "... First one always hurts... After that..." Catching himself drifting to a dark thought, "...Anyways it just a scratch."

"Does f-feel like a scratch?"

"Pussy." Added Toby.

"As for you..." Alfie gave Toby a menacing glare to remain silent.

Tapping the walking stick on the hard floor. Toby sunk back into his chair.

A glum look came over Leslie's face.

"What's up?" Asked Alfie seeing the lad despondent.

"Gotta go to court... M-maybe jail..." The thought was too much, "...I can't afford a lawyer... I done n-nothing."

"Don't you worry about a lawyer ... I someone who knows someone, if you know what I mean."

"No." Responded Leslie becoming confused,

"Ah\_ speak of the devil..." Seeing Doug walking into the room.

A father raises a hand to catch his son's attention.

“Doug... These are the lads I told you about.” Alfie introduced him.

Doug assesses the juvenile laying in the bed and the other sitting beside it.

“How you feeling?” He asked before he got down to business.

“Kay.” Leslie wrestles with the numbed pain.

“Doug, Doug McCrae... Here my card.” Handing one to Leslie and to Toby who examined the embossed cardboard curiously, “... You must be Leslie, Leslie Walters...” He turned to look to Toby, “... And you must be his partner in crime, “Tobias Hurunui?”

“Tobias... he-he-he.” Leslie chuckled, “...Ah\_”

“I’m glad you see it is funny but unfortunately you are both up on some very serious charges... Though this is your first offence...” He looks to Toby with suspicion and confirmation. Only have a blank look stare back at him, “... You chances are not good... You were caught in possession of a kilo of cocaine... Let’s hope we get a lenient judge... You could be facing time.”

“Jail time?” Asked Leslie.

“You’re over eighteen. Juvenile jail is out of the question I’m afraid... But I’ll do my best... We should be able to get it reduced to community service if we’re lucky.”

“We can’t afford you Mister McCrae... McCrae?” The name caught on a memory in Leslie’s mind wondering where he had heard it before.

Looking inquisitively at Alfie holding a poker face.

“Don’t you worry about that ... I have a debt to repay someone...” Placing a hand on his father’s shoulder, “...You just get well and I’ll see you boys in court okay.”

“Yes M-Mister M-McCrae.” Responded Leslie anxiously.

Doug looked to Toby for confirmation.

“Yes Mister M-McCrae.” Stuttered Toby.

“Don’t get into trouble again before then okay.” And with that advice gave his father a wink and strolled out as though on an afternoon stroll.

“Catch you tomorrow bro\_... You too Mister Alfie.” Said Toby with respect.

Then remembered something. Reaching into a shopping bag.

“I almost forgot bro\_...” Handing him his baseball cap.

“Oh thanks man... W-wicked as! ...W-where’d you f-find it?” Putting the cap on his head.

“Funny thing eh... This guy gave it to me... Said to give to you eh... I looked about for him after like, but he was gone eh... Like a ghost eh... Oh\_ creepy bro\_.” Cringed Toby.

Behind him a man smiled.

“Thanks man... See you tomorrow eh?” Responded Leslie.

“What this man look like?” Asked Alfie inquisitively before Toby could leave.

“That’s the thing... I can't remember.” Toby struggles to recall.

The harder he tried the more the visions faded in his mind.

“Yeah, that sounds like him.” Confirms Alfie.

“Who?” Asked Leslie.

“Just someone...” Confirms Alfie, “...Doc said you’d be outta here soon... You should see Fish about a job? ... Maybe take Toby with you.”

“Who’s Fish?” Asked Leslie curiously.

“The skipper of the San Jennifer... He’s looking for a couple of strong young men... Know anyone.”

“Maybe.” Responded Leslie eyeing Alfie suspiciously.

“Hard work, but good money... Keep you two off the streets, money for your studies... Thought anymore about that?”

“P-pretty hard if I’m g-going to g-go to j-jail Alfie.”

“Don’t worry about that for now. Doug is the best... Focus on the future, not the past... Okay.”

“If you say so Alfie.”

“Now if you don’t mind... I’m going to that empty bed over there for a snooze... Don’t tell anyone okay?” Winking at Leslie and drawing the floral nylon curtain behind him.

Feeling unusually tired, Alfie laid down on the bed and let the afternoon sun blanket him.

Thoughts of death occupied his mind that day. Freddie laying buried on Mount Victoria overlooking the grand old capital city. The smell of disinfectant and sound of squeaking floors brought back memories of a hospice.

Watching quietly on, the man recalled the day he came to collect...

...Renna lay on a bed, the sun blanketing her with celestial warmth.

Alfie on one side holding her hand. The man holding the other. Cancer ravaging her frail body as morphine deadened the pain. Drifting in and out

of consciousness. Suddenly she awakens and sits upright as though the sedative had no effect on her. And she speaks as clear day.

Looking to the man beside her.

“Look after him.” She tells him.

“I will.” Alfie responds automatically, promising to care for Doug.

“I love you Alfie McCrae... Thanks for coming home.” She looks to him one last time.

“I love you Renna Hill... Now rest.” He whispered back to her.

Succumbing to the morphine she becomes dozy. Her eyes shift to the end of the bed as though visitors were standing there. Looking along those who had come to take her home. A grin grows on her face. Lips move as if she was talking to someone unseen.

Falling to a deep sleep.

No more gasping.

No more struggling.

A peace comes over her.

Alfie watched helplessly, holding her hand. Never letting go.

Her grip loosening as her soul loosened itself from her body.

Untethered, it was free to fly away.

He had seen death before.

More violent. More bloody. In the end, dying was always the same.

Peaceful.

Tears welling in his eyes as he stared at the earthly body feeling her lifeless hand in his.

He looks to the end of the bed as though he knew the man was standing there.

“You look after her...” Alfie told Him, “...Or there’ll be hell to pay... You hear?”

The man nods and an unseen brilliance engulfed the hospice.

There would be another star in the heavens that evening...

# Alfalfa and Buckweed

“All rise.... This court is now in session... The Right Honorable Judge Watson presiding.” A Bailiff calls out for all those present to hear.

Alfie sits in the gallery a keen spectator today. Journalist lined the prime benches. The two lads sat anxiously shuffling and tapping feet. Leslie with his arm in a sling and Toby sitting nervously beside him. The downy pubes shaved from his chin and upper lip. Dressed in their Sunday best. Exchanging jeans and hoods for their father’s oversized suits and ironed white shirts.

Knotted ties strangled the two lads. Leslie runs a finger under the collar hoping to loosen the hangman’s noose.

Their hair oiled and combed, looking more like Alfalfa and Buckweed than two drug mules.

Fidgeting as they took in the strange world around them. Ominous portraits of ominous judiciary cast ominous eyes upon the defenseless pair. Unsure who they feared most. Their parents sitting behind them. Or the judge at the bench.

Toby would take his chances with the Judge any day.

“Oh dear oh dear.” Doug muttered to himself, shaking his head. Things did not look good, not good at all.

Drawing the pair’s attention away from the prosecuting portraits. Leslie watched Doug anxiously sort and stack and re-sort files. Lab and Police reports detailing the illicit facts.

One of particular interest. The indictment.

“Hmm\_” Doug groans shaking his head again.

The heads of prosecution counsel hung low, as if on a chopping block. They had charged the lads and due process must be served. It was time for the two young men to be tried, judged and sentence. Watson glared down from the bench like God. The smell of whiskey on his breath. Demons to his left. Angels to his right.

Wondering how Doug had pulled the short straw again.

Slamming a gavel down hard Watson brings the court to order.

Sending a loud shock wave about the court and into the collider outside. Alfie's eyes suddenly open startled by the noise.

Pulling a sandwich from a pocket takes a sneak bite.

"Your Honor... Today's case is The Crown verses Leslie Walters and Tobias Hurunui..." The Bailiff states loudly for all to hear, "... Trafficking and Possession of Cocaine."

"He-he-he..." Leslie giggles quietly, "...Tobias... He-he-he." Chuckling under his breath to Toby. Only to receive a stern look from the bench.

Restraining himself falls silent.

"Are the Counsels ready to begin?" Watson asked austerely.

"We are your Honor." The two Counsels sang out like neutered choir boys.

"Leslie Walters... Tobias Hurunui..." The Judge begins, "...You are *charged* with possession and trafficking Cocaine... A Class A drug... How do you plead?" Thunders the voice of God from the bench.

"Guilty." Respond the two boys in false falsetto.

Their sudden plead causing Doug to choke on a mouthful of water he was about to swallow. Frantically raising an arm to interject his clients before Watson slammed his gavel down prematurely to convict the pair in the spot.

"If it pleases the Court .... The defendants will enter a plea of *Not Guilty*." Doug splutters, hoping to stall their haste to jail.

"You know best Counsel I suppose... Proceed." Watson growls disappointedly.

"But we did it Mister McCrae..." Whispers Leslie. "...The Police said the Judge will go easy on us if we plead guilty."

"Did they now? ..." Doug looks dubiously at the detectives seated behind prosecution counsel. Fidgeting as though agitated by the change of plea. "...We'll see about that Leslie..." Shuffling through papers before him, "... Ah\_ here it is."

Doug grins towards the prosecution table looking pleased with himself.

Watson notices his mobile vibrate on the bench before him. Glancing momentarily down to an incoming alert. Brows raise on a wrinkled forehead. Then recalls where he was and looks down at the Prosecution table.

Begging a question.

“What was the street value?” Watson asked keen to know the magnitude of the bust.

Reluctantly. Almost embarrassedly. A man stands. If the wig on his head was not silly enough. To admit they had blundered was more so.

Doug listened with interest, watching the prosecution counsel squirm.

“Hmm... It’s difficult to gauge at this stage... It could be two or three...”

“Million? ... Oh my God!” The Judge exclaims cutting them short. As if delighted by the prospect. This would be a personal best for him.

Looking harshly at the two lads. Now sweating profusely about the collars. Fidgeting as to which of them would be the bitch in jail.

Watson looks to Doug and shakes his head.

“Ah well, actually Your Honor... Just *dollars*.” Prosecution Counsel stammered quietly hoping the press gallery had not heard. Nor had the stenographer who looked up unsure if he heard correctly.

Watson looks up from his mobile.

“Hmm... I’m sorry Counsellor... Louder for the court to hear.” Asked Watson hoping to catch the value.

“Two or three dollars!” Calls out Counsel for the prosecution.

Reporters started scribbling frantically at their pads at the embarrassing news.

“But it was Cocaine man...” Watson beseeched the Prosecution bench. Forty years on the bench and he has never been so humiliated. “...You did get toxicity came back from the lab I hope? ...How potent was it?”

“Of course you Honor...” Searching for a piece of paper to substantiate the findings, “... It’s ah, ah\_ ...”

“Well then? Speak man!” Watson bellows keen to convict and return to his mobile.

“Ah\_ well\_ ...” Reluctant to speak. Reluctant to make eye contact with Doug looking at them, “...One hundred percent pure...” Pausing momentarily, then confessed the sin, “... *Baby Powder*.”

“Baby Powder?” Watson looks to Doug and back to the prosecution.

And back to Doug.

“If it pleases the court...” Doug interjects the humiliation, drawing the Judges attention.

Allowing the Prosecution Counsel to sit and shrink into his chair.



The courtroom a buzz with Journalists chatter. Watson slams the gavel down and the chatter falls silent. Waking Alfie from a dream.

Thinking it was artillery was about to dive under the gallery bench seat.

“I hope something will.” Said Watson knowing he would be the laughing stock of The Club that evening.

“CCTV have the dependents leaving the Federation gang headquarters with a shopping bag... Exhibit A...”

All eyes shift to offending item.

Journalists scribble frantically at the insidious facts.

“Hmm...” Speculates Watson wondering where he was being lead. Perhaps Doug would do a better job impeaching the two felons than the prosecution, “... Proceed Counsel.”

“The same shopping bag found at The Palace containing The Package... *Exhibit B.*”

All eyes shift to the cellophane wrapped baby powder. The stenographer recording every last word.

“Where is this leading Counsel?” Asked Watson confused.

“If it pleases Your Honor... To best of my knowledge there is nothing in the Statutes that prohibit the *trafficking* of Baby Powder... I ask that all charges be dropped immediately and the case dismissed.” Doug pleaded to Watson’s intoxicated goodwill.

Leslie and Toby sat up surprised by the findings.

Their fate turning three sixty degrees in as many seconds. Looking to the judge who was pre-occupied with something on his mobile. And back to Doug shuffling papers into a briefcase as if he was in a rush to be somewhere.

A feverish hush fell over the court room as Watson deliberated his mobile. Feeling a dismissal was in order. He swipes the screen to the left. Sighing heavily.

Reluctant to see two drug mules walk free.

“You are free to go... But don’t let me see you in my court room again! ...” Warns Watson standing to leave. “...Case dismissed!”

Slamming the gavel down narrowly missing the mobile. Shaking his head at Doug pulling another win from the bag.

Whispering in bailiff's ear to have Doug to come to his chambers afterwards.

“Okay you two... Get out of here before the judge changes his mind...”  
He tells the boys, “... *Baby Powder!*... *Ha!*”

“Thanks Mister McCrae.” Said Leslie looking up to the gallery to find Alfie had nodded off again in the afternoon sun.

“Watson wants to see you.” The bailiff informs Doug.

“Tell him thanks... But I have to see about a girl... He’ll understand.”

“If you say so counsellor.” Worried the news would upset the Judge.

Knocking on the door, a voice growls for the knock to enter.

“Mister McCrae apologizes but he has to see about a *girl*... Said you would understand?”

“Oh... Does he now?” Watson is disappointed, yet pleased for Counsel after his wife's recent extra marital affairs.

“Come in Barry... Take the weight of your feet.” Watson offers a glass to the bailiff surprised the judge knew his name.

“A girl you say? ... Hmm.” Watson begins to speculate.

Swiping the mobile again. Left, then right.

And right again...

# Always the gentleman

Alfie lay back on the Mall bench, at his feet pigeons cooed and pecked at crumbs.

One was missing in body. But not in spirit.

“Good girl.” Stroking his shoulder.

Spring had been good to the city. Blessing it with glorious warmth and sunshine. The nights were warming and the wind had lost its bite. Only the morning’s breakfast was having trouble to settle.

Or so he thought.

Feeling a growing pain in his chest he reaches for the bottle of tablets only to discover it empty. The man stood behind him casting his presence over him.

Gasping for breath Alfie clutches his chest. And looks about the Mall for help. Catching Munif’s eye raises a hand for help.

“Water?” Gasps Alfie hoping it was only indigestion.

Munif rushes inside and returns with a bottle of water. Only to find Alfie slumped on the bench as though he had fallen asleep. A crowd begins to gather around him. Wondering what had happening. Pulling out a mobile Munif dials one-one-one.

High above, a red speckled hawk circles.

Samantha arrives at the hospital asking for an ‘*Alfie*’, that was all she knew of his name.

The nurses knew him well and pointed her in the direction of the ward. After countless corridors and endless wards of beds filled with countless patients. She came to room with four beds. Each patient staring back at her hoping she had come to visit them and she dismisses their hopeful glances with a smile. Scanning the room for the one person she had come to visit.

Seeing him lying on a bed. Almost unrecognizable in pajamas. Connected with tubes and wires. Intravenous dips and monitors beeping out an aging heart beat like a broken record. A doctor stands at the end of the examining a medical chart scribbling notes with a ball point pen.

“What’s with all the tubes? ...” Samantha asks curiously concerned at the extent of Alfie’s injuries. “... I thought he just bumped his head?”

“He’s got a heart condition... That’s probably how he collapsed... It’s common among these people.”

“*These* people? I don’t understand...” She asked growing more confused.

“Don’t you know?” The doctor asks looking up from the clip board.

“Know what?” She asked, unsure if she wanted to know.

“He’s homeless... Lives on the streets... We see ole Alfie time and again.”

“Homeless? ... I don’t understand... He always so well dressed, so... Tidy...” Samantha struggled to reconcile the discovery.

“Ah... That Alfie for you. Always the gentleman... Old school... Pride his in appearance... If only the youth of today had half of Alfie’s measure.” Suggested the doctor.

“Why is he homeless? ... Surely there has a place that would take him?”

“I am sure there is... You best ask him... He’ll be fine. We’ll discharge him a day or two once he’s had a good rest... Now if you excuse me, I have patients to attend to.” Returning the clipboard to the end of bed.

“Thank you doctor.”

Samantha watches the doctor leave to the next bed drawing the curtain behind him as though it were was a cone of silence. Then turns her attention to Alfie lying motionless on the bed. Monitors beeped a quiet rhythm suggesting life still resided behind his closed eyes. Examining the man she thought she knew.

Alfie the gentleman. Now Alfie the homeless man.

She thought she knew everything about him. Only to realize now she knew very little. Other than his name. He had not lied to her. It was her that had assumed. He had but harbored a secret. For what is a secret, if it is shared.

And a gentleman never burdens others with their troubles.

Taking a chair beside the bed watches him sleep.

Grey hair combed in place. Indistinguishable from a man of wealth. Her mind begins to question how he had come to be in this position. How do any of us? Who was she to judge, when her own life was really little better. How close had she been to being on the street?

Alfie's eyes begin to flicker, as though he detected someone in the room. Looking about he sees Samantha sitting there quietly smiling back at him.

"Hey you... How you feeling?" Samantha asks breaking the eerie silence of the ward.

"Fine... I think... What are you doing here?" Alfie looks about to see the curtains closed.

"Thought I'd come and check in on you... Say hello... Got you these." Passing Alfie a small bunch of colorful flowers wrapped in brown paper.

"Never had flowers before." He muses unsure what to do with them.

"The nurses can put them in some water later... Why didn't you tell me?" Samantha asked.

"Tell you what?" Questioned a reply.

"You know what... I could have helped... I thought we were friends?" Samantha began.

"Hmm\_..." He looks at Samantha with annoyed that she knew, "...I keep to myself... Don't want to trouble anyone..." He wondered who had been talking to her. "...The Doc tell you?"

"Yeah... Sorry I didn't mean to pry."

"You're okay Sam..." Feeling a familiarity when she was around.

"You don't have to tell me... What happened?" She asked hesitantly.

"Happened?" He asks as though to confirm the question.

"How did you end up...?"

"... On the street?" Asked Alfie.

"Yeah." Samantha reluctantly confirmed.

Alfie falls silent, recalling fragments of precious time that drifted like smoke over the battle fields.

Vivid images flood his mind. Screams and explosions. Stuttering machines guns. Death all around him. Like an endless looping movie of scenes playing over and over and over in his mind.

Without thinking he speaks.

"War..." He hisses as though it were a release valve, his eyes staring into space.

Samantha sees his face change from that of a placid old man in a hospital bed, to that of a soldier facing the horrors of war. It was beginning to make sense to her. He was from a generation where men toughened up.

Took the blows that life dealt them, and remained silent. Grateful for his lot.

For fifty years he had harbored the traumatic scars. Suppressing it the only way he knew. Living on the streets. In the trenches.

“I understand.” Samantha accepts.

“Do you? ...” He questions her, “... No one can ever understand war unless you’ve been there... See your mates die...” He falls silent, seized by a hallowing memory.

“No... Of course not...”

Alfie looks down at her from the bed.

Why was he talking to her? Perhaps he had already said too much. There was something about her that made him feel they were... Family. He examines her face. Only to see a friend who cared for him.

“You could stay with me when you get out...” She proposes, “... You can’t live on the street... There are agencies that could help you...” Samantha reaches out, hoping not to strike a stubborn nerve.

“Thank you Sam... But I can’t live in a house... *Little boxes on the hillside, little boxes made of ticky-tacky.*” He muses to himself. “...I tried once and...”

His mind envisioning the enclosure of the walls. A ceiling where there should be stars. Everything so neat and precise. Sleeping with one eye open fearing the enemy would crept in. His back to the wall. Nowhere to escape.

To live in a house would be to pretend the war never happened.

“I’ve lived out there for thirty years and I’ll be there ‘til the day I die.” Alfie told her.

“What if you get sick?” She asked.

“I get over it.” Barked back Alfie stubbornly.

“You could die?”

“I’d be so lucky... The only people who fear death are those who want to live forever... The Good Lord can take me any time He wants to!” Alfie lays down the challenge.

The man stands quietly at the end of the bed unseen. And smiles to Himself.

“Stay with me a few days, until you get your strength back... okay?”

“I’ll think about it.” Grumps Alfie reluctantly...

# It's time Alfie

In a glass conservatory Alfie sits in a wicker chair, bathing in the last rays of the spring sun.

It seemed warmer than before. Or perhaps his old bones had gotten soft with his new abode. Looking out the large window to the roughed coast line of Island Bay.

Seagulls darted about in the gusting swirling breeze. The ocean bubbled and boiled. Waves crashed over large roughed rocks. Sending up sea spray. A rare moment of beauty. And in that rare moment, the memory of war left him fleetingly. Wishing the scene would last forever. The city offered some shelter from the elements. Perhaps he could venture to this wilderness in winter, he thought to himself.

Watching a fishing boat in the distance making its way through the choppy surf. Recognizing it as the San Jennifer. With keen sharp eyes, thought he could make out two young lads on the deck.

“Nah can't be...” He said to himself and shakes his head with disbelief, wondering what had happen to the young men.

Feeling a sharp pain in his chest he gasps and regains his breath. Closing his eyes momentarily. Feels it pass and exhales quietly as though to soothed him.

“Hmm...” He groans rubbing his chest to dismiss the passing nuisance.

Dunking a ginger nut into the tea. Allows it to soak and soften before biting into it to savor the sweet ginger tang. Looking to chaos of the world outside. Beating itself against the panes of glass. In the corner of his eye he sees a man dressed in black standing quietly.

His hands folded before him. As though he was waiting.

“You...” Alfie responds recognizing the man.

But this man, if it was man, had not aged a day from the first day the Alfie had seen him.

“I thought I told you to *piss off*.” Alfie reminds the man.

To one side, looking at peace he sees his wife standing quietly. A soft glow shone around her.

“Renna?” He asks as if for assurance it was her.

“It’s time Alfie...” She tells him holding out her hand to come with her.

“What if I don’t want to go?” Alfie protests knowing what was being asked of him.

“You already have...” Informs the man.

Renna smiles, her smile always made Alfie feel he was safe.

And in that moment between heartbeats. In the shadow of death. Finds himself looking back at an old man sitting in the wicker armchair. Appearing to have nodded off. A cup of tea on his lap. The ginger nut biscuit untouched as if he were about to dunk it. Feeling a peace came over him. There was no hunger in his belly.

Nor pain in his bones.

“Where now?” Accepting his fate.

“Home Alfie...” Mused the man reading Alfie’s thoughts, “...Home.”

“Alfie... I’ve brought you a fresh pot of tea.” Said Samantha returning to the conservatory to find him napping.

There was a stillness about him that told her something amiss.

“Alfie? ...” She asked timidly, followed by an uncomfortable silence.

Crouching beside the chair. Touches his arm hoping to stir him. Knowing this was not a slumber that could be awoken from. Lest by her. Taking the cup and biscuit from his lap and places them on the side table.

He looked at peace as though he had had a visitor.

Outside a gust of wind rattled the window frame.

A flock of seagulls took flight squawking. Waves beat against rocks. Fishing boats waltzed upon the ocean.

Insulated from the chaos of the outside world. Samantha sat with Alfie and held his hand. There would be time later to call the authorities. For now she would allow him his place in the sun. A sun that had shone on him a life time. As a child and through a war and his time on the street.

It would shine on him one last time...



# No one likes funerals

No one likes funerals, especially the dead.

But some undertakings in life we are socially obligated to attend and Samantha dressed in her Sunday best to see Alfie off in style. Birds chirped as though to celebrate new life that was erupting about them with the new spring. The sun suspended in a vivid blue sky. The day could not be more perfect.

There was the scent of Déjà vu in the air.

At the quaint Anglican chapel Samantha arrived to discover a small group of elderly gentlemen.

Dressed in the smart dark suits and polished black shoes they reminded her of Alfie. Recalling tales of war. Brethren Alfie had lost touch with. And for a moment she thought she saw him standing amongst them listening in on their conversation.

The old men turn to sees Samantha approaching.

“Family?” One elderly gentleman asked.

“No... Just an old friend.” She replied sincerely.

“Ah... We were just saying how we had not seen ole Alf for while... Do you know what happen to him?”

“I only know him from the café where I work... But I believed he lived in Wellington his entire life... Always the gentleman.” Samantha responded.

“Aye\_ he was always a gentleman ole Alf...” Another elderly man acknowledges. “...A real dapper.”

“He was hero... Saved my life on more than one occasion... Got more medals than all of us combined...” An old man interjects.

“Mine too... If it wasn’t for Alf, I wouldn’t be standing here...”

“Aye...” Agrees another.

“Then one day the Charlie got him... He was never the same after that... Got himself invalided home... Lucky bastard... Leaving us to fend for ourselves!”

The men begin to laugh among themselves.

“If anyone deserved to be sent home it was Alfie...” Words trail off as the man recalls the forgotten days.

And the forgotten war that no one talks about.

Soft music leaked through the doors of the chapel, a signal that the service was about to begin.

The chapel smelled like a chapel. Of polished wooden floors and cold hard wooden pews that stood like regimented soldiers. At the altar laid a simple pine coffin layered with white and pink roses. A single red rose lay at the center next to an old tweed cheese cutter cap. At the foot of the coffin, a display case of a dozen medals. Laid out on a plum red velvet backing.

Polished as though they were about to be presented.

Doug sat seated at the front and beside him a small boy. Samantha wondered what Doug was doing there. And who was the boy? Perplexed, she took a solitary pew midway down the aisle and waited for the service to begin. The organ music came to an end.

A resplendently dressed Anglican Vicar appeared beside the coffin.

Speaking reverently, asking the Lord to take Alfie’s soul to whence it had come. One by one, old soldiers came forward and gave their testimony and gratitude to a fallen comrade. Tales of daring feats that brought chuckles from the few gathered. There was more to Alfie than Samantha had realized. A life beyond the café. Of comradeship. Of courage on a battlefield upon distant shores.

Samantha noticed the small boy sit up and listened keenly to the adventurous deeds of his grandfather. Doug wiped tears from his eyes. Then taking her by surprise. He got up to speak.

What could Doug possibly have to say about Alfie?

Standing behind the pulpit takes a folded piece of paper from his jacket pocket. And looks out to the small congregation looking back at him. This was summation like no other he had had to give.

Not before a Judge, but to the Almighty himself.

Seeing Samantha sitting all alone. Her yellow dress in contrast to the dark suits of the men. Offering a brightness to the otherwise solemn group.

He smiles at her, as if to thanks for coming.

“What can a son say of a father? ...” He begun, “... Other than you were my hero...” Doug spoke to his father as if he was standing before

him.

Words he never spoke while he was alive but wish he had.

Recalling childhood memories and adventures his father would take the family on.

Dwelling on the good times and kindness he showed for others.

“How little do we know about ourselves? ... Of life and the world around us? ...” Doug eluded his father’s life on the streets, but added, “... If my father taught me one thing... It was that where there is a human being, there can be kindness... Rest in peace Dad... I love you.”

Tears welled in Samantha’s eyes. Realizing now that Doug was Alfie’s son. Tears now running down her cheeks. The time together at the café was more than just idle banter. The pieces of the puzzle that was Alfie were coming together. He had a family. A wife. A son. A grandson. Friends. He was rich beyond any money could buy.

Doug’s final words summing up Alfie perfectly. He was always there for others with a words of wisdom.

An organ began to play softly as able pallbearers, soldiers from Charlie Company, lifted the coffin upon able shoulders and carried the fallen comrade to the waiting hearse outside. Followed by the Vicar chanted sacraments in Latin to send him on his way.

Munif uttered his own prayer to ensure Alfie was covered. Allah would understand.

Doug walked behind holding his son’s hand. A puppy pulled at him on a lead. Stopping to sniff at every pew leg.

Causing the Vicar some anxiety until the puppy was outside.

Samantha returned home with mixed feelings.

And transformed from her Sunday best to that of a waitress. Half the day was gone and she was late for her shift at the cafe. But somehow today it did not matter.

There were more important things in life than being late for work.

“You okay?” Asked Kaye seeing Samantha arrive looking dejected.

“Sorry I’m late...” Samantha apologizes, “...I’ll make up the time.”

“Don’t be sorry... And no you won’t make up the time... It was Alfie’s funeral... Should have closed the shop and gone with you... How was it?” Responded Kaye taking Samantha by surprise.

“It was... *Nice*... Some old boys gave him a sendoff to be proud of... Did you know he was a war hero?”

“Really, I’d never have picked him as a fighter... It’s always the quiet ones you least expect I suppose.”

“His son gave an amazing eulogy for him.”

“His *son*? ... I didn’t know he had a son...”

“Doug.”

“*Our* Doug?” Kaye exclaims in astonishment.

“Yeah... It seems this was the only place they could meet and chat.”

“After all these years, I never knew...” Kaye is astonished.

Just then the buzzer sounds and a customer enters seeing the two ladies chatting.

“Back to work Sam... I’ll finish up out back, almost done here... You’ll be okay for the afternoon?”

“I’ll be fine, you head off.” Dismissing her boss for the day...

## About bloody time

Days passed and routine returned to Valentines, and life returned to Samantha.

Nothing could fill the emptiness left by Alfie. She expected to see him at any moment appear at the door. Only to be disappointed by another customer.

The door buzzer sounds and she peers up from behind the pie cabinet to see a puppy tugging on a lead. Pulling along with it a small boy wearing black Batman cap. The boy looked familiar as though she had seen him below somewhere. A cheeky grin smiled back at her with big bright eyes. A man in a pinstriped suit holding the boy's hand.

In his other hand a polished black brief case.

"Doug! ... What a surprise." She catches her breath. "... What are you doing here?"

"Coffee perhaps..." He asks, "...You do still sell it?"

"Yes of course, sorry... I didn't expect to see you here since..."

"Actually... I've come to see you."

"Oh... Really? ... Me?" Confused by his sudden appearance.

"Can we sit down perhaps?" Looking about for a table.

"Sure... Kaye! ... Can you hold the fort for five minutes?" Samantha called out hoping Kaye had heard.

Looking up from the back Kaye sees Doug with Samantha.

"No worries sweetie... Take your time." She replies.

"This will do." Said Doug sitting at a vacant table. Pulling out a stool for the boy.

"I'll get you that coffee... And how about you young man?" She asks the urchin grinning up at her.

The boy's eyes scan the shelves and open wide on spying a jam cream donut.

"Oh I see..." Said Samantha getting the hint.

Opening the briefcase Doug placed a file in front of him. And waited for Samantha to return.

"Poppa came here you know..." He told his son whose eyes lit up wider than before. "...He use to sit just over there at that table." Pointing to the

corner table.

The boy looked to the table and imagines his grandfather sitting at a table having a cup of tea.

Samantha returns with a coffee and a plate with a cream donut on it, neatly cut into bite sized quarters.

Little fingers reached eagerly for the sweet morsel. Shoving what he could into his mouth. Jaws chumped up and down eager for the next bite.

“Yours?” She asked.

“Apparently...” Said Doug examining the frost covered face beside him.

“What’s this all about then?” She asked taking a seat opposite.

“This is for you... My father wanted you to have it...” Pushing a plain white envelope towards her.

Her name written boldly in ink on the front.

She picks it up hesitantly unsure of it.

Then looks back at Doug, sitting with a poker face not giving anything away. Opening the back she pulls out a letter and attached to it a cheque. Made out to her for the sum thirty thousand dollars. Her eyes bulge at the number. She looks back up to Doug showing no signs of remorse for what he was putting her through.

The small boy chewed contently on the bun, licking the jam with a pointed tongue with surgical precision.

“I don’t understand...” Gasps Samantha shocked by the amount. “...I can’t accept this... Its Alfie’s... You should have it. You’re his son.” Pushing the cheque back to him.

“He wanted you to have it... Between you and me... He was *loaded*...” Pushing the cheque back to Samantha. “...Read the letter.” Advised Doug.

Samantha lifts the cheque to one side and beneath it a short hand written letter. Etched by a hand of fine penmanship of a gentleman.

“This is dated months ago?” Samantha notices curiously.

“Yeah... That was about when the angina started... I guess he wanted to cover his bases just in case... Something happened to him.” Responded Doug.

She looks down to the letter and begins to read...

My dearest Samantha,

If you are reading this, then I guess the Good Lord has caught up with me and decided to take me after all. Don't waste your life like I have holding onto the past. Take this money and follow your dreams. You are young and you are beautiful. You have the world at your feet. Spread your wings and fly. Until we meet again.

Alfie

X

PS: I've seen the way you and Doug look at each other. I'm no fool. He may know his way about the law. But he has two left feet when it comes to women. Be gentle with him.

"Have you read this?" Samantha enquires curiously looking up to Doug.

"No, he sealed it after he wrote it... Told me to hold onto it for you... What's it say?" He asked curiously.

"Nothing... Just... *Stuff*... But I don't understand, if he had all this money why did he live like he did?" She asked.

"It was what he wanted... After coming back from the war to mother and me... He was a changed man... Restless... As though he didn't belong... Cooped up in a house... It lasted until mom died and that was the last straw... His world fell apart... Without mom he couldn't carry on... I think he saw a bit of mom in you that made him feel... *Normal*..." Recollecting the day as though it were only yesterday, "...Then one day he didn't return... No one knew where he was... It wasn't until he had a fall and ended up in hospital... They traced his records back to me."

"He seems to have a habit of doing that."

"Yeah..." Doug chuckles. "... Tough as old boots."

"What did he do after he returned from the war?"

"They discharged him on full pension... It was before they knew about post-traumatic stress... He bounced between odd jobs... Working fishing boats and painting jobs... He could never assimilate back into... *Society*... He'd gone too far down a dark hole to ever come back to... *This*."

Doug looks out the window of the café to the colorful sunlit drenched street. To people oblivious to the man that had walked among them.

Invisible but to the few who knew him.

"Strange thing... A few days before he left he told me to stay away from the army... To stay away from *war*..." Doug remembers his father's

words verbatim, "...*Nothing ever good comes of war.*" Reciting the words.

Looking at his son sees a resemblance and grins.

The small boy giggles and screws up his face.

"So I studied the next best thing... Law. And became a barrister... I've been handling dad's affairs while he's been out... Wandering. His army pension has been accumulating ever since. Hardly ever touched... I tried giving him some... But he was too proud."

"Yeah that sounds like him... That explains the visits... I didn't know."

"Dad kept pretty much kept to himself... You were one of the lucky ones he opened up to."

"We had our *moments*..." Samantha grins reflecting, "...Weren't you worried for him?"

"He was old-school... Stubborn... Spit and polish through and through... I would have been more worried about anyone who crossed him." Doug grins at the thought.

"I can image..." She smiles, "... And he lived on the streets?" Asked Samantha.

"It was his decision... He wanted... To be free."

"You met him here though?"

"It was the one place he felt truly safe... The one place he could call home... You were here watching his back I suppose... He trusted you Samantha." Said Doug piecing the puzzle together in his mind.

"I only did what anyone would have done."

"But they didn't... Only you did."

The little boy watches on oblivious to adult silly games, step toeing around the other's feelings.

Pushing the last bite of donut into his mouth with sticky little fingers. The puppy licks the jam covered fingers.

Causing him to giggle hysterically.

"Dad said you were interested in studying law but couldn't see yourself out of here..."

"Yeah... One step forwards, two steps back as they say... This will go some way towards my studies." She contemplates a future.

"I wouldn't bother if I were you... Save the money for a holiday or something."

"Excuse me?" Asked Samantha taken back by the cold remark.



“Sorry... I didn't mean it like that.”

“How did you mean it?” She asked becoming defensive of her goal.

“There is another reason I am here...” Said Doug.

“Oh ... Not more cheques I hope?”

“You'd be so lucky...” Doug grinned, “...What I was trying to say was that I have an internship starting up at my law firm... It's paid so you can work and study... And I was wondering... If you'd be interested? ...” Doug looks about the grandeur of the café, “...You'd have to give up all... *This.*”

“When's it start?” She asked stunned by the offer.

“Monday if you like.”

“Ghee... Let me think about it for moment... Kaye?!” She calls out to the back.

“Yeah what's up?” Raising her head from behind the counter.

“I quit!” She calls out without hesitation.

“About bloody time... I'd thought you'd never leave! ... Tea?” Kaye asks kindly.

“That'd be lovely thanks.”

“Good... That settled.” Remarked Kaye rattling the cups and saucers...

## And what's your name?

The café door opens and Kaye looks up to see Leslie entering carrying a large brown paper bag under his arm.

Toby followed behind, his head lowered and avoiding Kaye's notice.

"Oi! ... I thought I told you... You were banned from here? ... Git-out before I call the cops!" She calls out to the lad holding his ground, "... Now git!"

"I know... I just wanted to give you some money for the pies the other's took..." Said Toby pushing cash onto the counter toward Kaye.

Kaye looks at the cash and looks back to Toby with suspicion.

"Where'd you pinch that from then?" She asked with a suspicious look in her eyes.

"Nah\_, I didn't, honest... Been working eh." Defended Toby the accusation showing his calloused hands. "... Just wanted to say sorry about the trouble we caused eh." His voice resonated sincerity.

"Where you working then?" She asks Leslie to confirm Toby's alibi.

"On a fishing boat, the San Jennifer... Fish owes it... We just got back this m-morning... Got a couple of days off before we go back out again."

"That explains the smell..."

"Sorry." Unaware of the smell that had grown on him.

"You're alright, it was only pies..." Kaye relents seeing another side to the boy, "...Got plenty more where they came from... Here, take these... You need to eat well if you're going to work the boats." Shoveling a couple of meat pies into a paper bag for them.

Leslie reaches for his wallet only to have a hand push the money away.

"These are on me... Now get washed up or I will call the police!" She grins.

"You sure?" Asked Leslie.

"Yeah... Save your money for a car, or whatever young men do with it these days."

"Ghee thanks."

Then Leslie remembers the reason he had come in.

"I came to show Alfie this..." Leslie pulls a picture from the paper bag.

“Poppa! Poppa!” The small boy squeals recognizing his grandfather.

“Where is he?” Leslie asked looking over to the vacant table, thinking he would be about.

Sensing something was amiss, the mournful silence and solemn faces told him what he did not want to hear.

It took a moment for Alfie’s death to register.

“When?” Leslie asked looking to the faces for an answer that seem never to come.

“About a week ago...” Said Kaye watching the expression change on Leslie’s face. Sensing their relationship ran deep.

Leslie’s eyes begin to well with tears and he wipes them with his sleeve. Kaye hands him a tissue and he takes it unashamedly.

“How?”

“His heart... He was an old man...” She consoles him, “...You draw this?” Examining the picture.

“Yeah... It was Alfie that g-got me into drawing... Seeing how I had t-trouble w-with w-words.” Running out of breath.

“Well, well Leslie Walters, still waters run deep... I’d have never pick you as an artist... This is good.”

“Really? You think?”

“I really do... Would you mind if I had it framed and hung it over Alfie’s table?”

“You’d do that?”

“It would be my honor... You should keep drawing.”

“I’m thinking of going to art classes... Once I save enough m-money working for F-Fish... He’s encouraging me too... Said I m-might be onto s-something.”

“Leslie? ...” Interrupts Doug, attracting his attention. “... Just the one I want to see.”

“Oh\_, I ain’t done nothing M-Mister M-McCrae... Honest.” Said Leslie defensively.

“I know... It’s about something else...” Doug takes an envelope and Alfie’s old gold watch from the brief case and hands them onto him, “... He wanted you to have these.”

Taking the watch felt a connection with Alfie as though he was in the room. But he was unsure what to make of the envelope.

Afraid to look inside.

“Go on, open it... It won't open itself.” Kaye nudges him inquisitive to know herself.

Hesitantly he tears it opens the back to reveal a cheque made out for ten thousand dollars. He stared mesmerized by the amount and his name on it.

“Serious? ... That's more than I ever had in my whole life! ... But I can't...”

“Put it in the bank and put it towards your art classes like Kaye said.” Doug suggests.

“Thanks M-Mister McCrae... Can I ask where he's buried so I can v-visit him? ... To say thanks?” Leslie asks.

“Ah\_ there's the thing Leslie, he's not... He wanted to be cremated and his ashes thrown to the wind from Mount Victoria... He didn't want to be shut up in a box... He's all over Wellington now... Free to roam where the wind takes him.”

Leslie grinned at the thought of Alfie drifting on the breeze.

“That's sounds like Alfie alright...” Leslie folded the cheque to the envelope and pocketed it, “... Better be off. Get washed up... Thanks again M-Mister McCrae. You too Kaye.”

“You're welcome sweetie... You come back soon okay?” She calls out watching the boys leave.

A gust of cold air rushes in as the door opens. Rattling Alfie's table before rushing out the back of the store to be free again.

The little boy giggled as though he had been tickled.

Doug had thought hard for a long time about what he wanted to ask Samantha.

He had gotten into the minds of some of the most devious felons the courts could throw at him. He now faced the greatest challenge of them all. Women. Taking a deep breath to steady his nerves, unsure if he would sink or swim closes his eyes and plunged into uncharted waters.

“Would you like to go out for dinner s-sometime?” Doug stuttered nervously.

“What about your wife?” Asked Samantha suspiciously.

“Ah\_ Well... She left me another man I'm afraid...” Holding up his bare wedding finger, “... Leaving me with this young fella.” Looking

down at a giggling jammed cheeked urchin.

The puppy licking the boy's sticky little fingers.

"Oh that's terrible..." She empathizes.

"Truth be known it was *several* actually..." Recalling the black and white images.

"Oh\_ dear." Becoming lost for words.

"It was for the best I suppose." Said Doug covering the lie with a smile.

"I suppose." She comforts him.

"And dinner?" He asks again.

"I'd love to..." Rob would understand, as would his other girlfriends.

"We could talk about the job." He added feeling a little awkward.

"Or we could just talk." She corrected him recalling Alfie's advice.

"We could do that too." Grinning.

Small eyes darted between the two adults unaware of cupid's arrows being flung to and fro, before settling on Samantha.

"And what's your name young man?" She asked curiously.

There was a long phase as everyone anticipated to know the little boy's name...

"*Alfie!*" Answered the boy with a cheeky grin.

"Of course it is... What else would it be?"

"*Batman!*" The boy squealed.

"I think like *Alfie* better, don't you?" Said Samantha smiling back at him.

## **About the Author**

Born a long time ago in the small township of Foxton New Zealand, Bradley's first book was a Self-Help book E is for Effort. That led to his debut novel The Ring. And so began the "End of Days" trilogy. One book lead to another, and as they say the rest is history. His books reflects his keen interest in comparative religion, spirituality, adventure and romance. When not writing he enjoys innovating new products, hearty workouts and hanging out with his three amazingly intelligent and beautiful children Harry, Emily and Rebecca. Then again, he could be found at his local enjoying a craft beer with good friends.

## **Other books by this author**

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