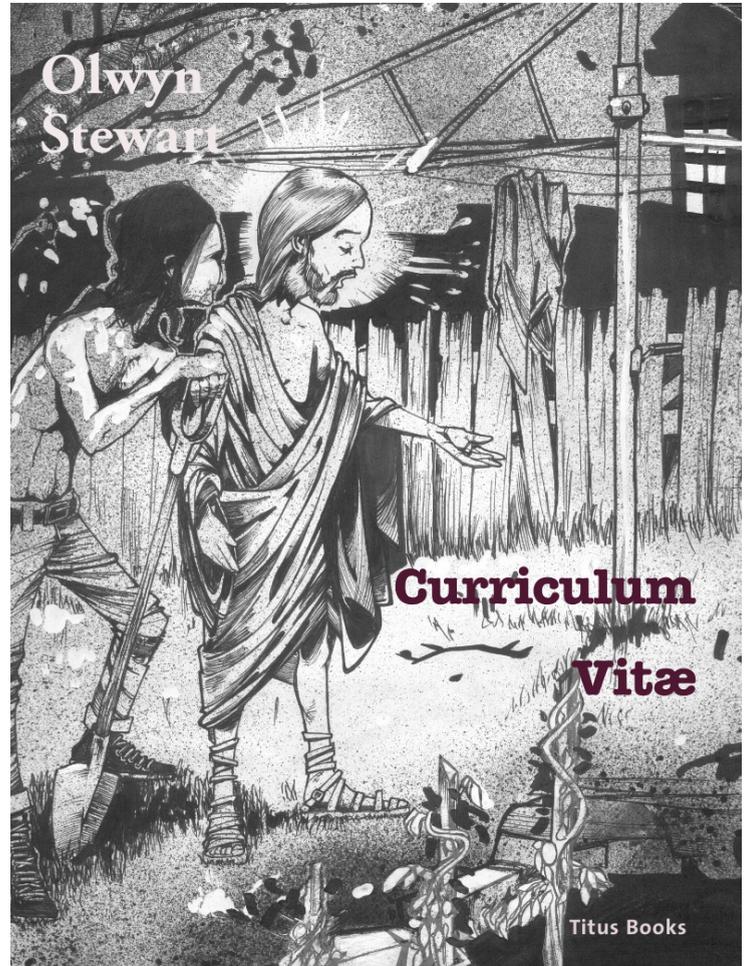


‘There are times when all you can do is stick with the moments. The blue sky. The light breeze. The smell of sponges, fresh from the oven. The damp curl, clinging to the back of that baker’s neck. Right here, right now, nothing terrible is happening.’

EBK 3

A Titus e-Book



There's a maroon plastic folder on a table outside a K Road café. A lady alcoholic, her lipstick awry, mutters 'What's this shit?' shoves it out of her way and takes a swig from a bottle of sweet sherry in a brown paper bag. She flashes a grimace at a toddler in a pushchair, who pulls a face as if about to scream, then changes his mind and sucks on his own bottle.

'Careful! That must belong to someone!' An elderly woman stomps over, sits down, picks up the CV and glances through it as she sips her tea. A decent lad, trying to make a go of things, unlike her own good-for-nothing son, back underfoot at the age of thirty seven. I blame the drugs, she sighs to herself, as she has many times before. She picks up her bag, pays the waitress and crosses the road to the superette.

A couple of girls shamble up, precariously balanced on platform shoes. They slink into chairs, slew their arms over the table and idly flick through the folder. 'Someone's CV,' one notes, 'Look, there's a

photo of him, scrambling down the side of some waterfall with a rope round his waist. You can't really see what he looks like though, apart from his rude eighties haircut.'

The other laughs, taking a finger full of sugar, spilling a few granules onto the folder as she reads, 'He used to be in this band called Overdrive. Must be an old metallor.'

The first girl leans back on her chair and drops her smoke. 'Oh fuck. I've burned a hole in his positive attitude.'

'Who cares? He's a Taurus,' the other declares. 'I can't stand Tauruses.'

A skinny guy with a face full of piercings appears, slips into a chair and runs an eye over the opening page. 'A CV! Shit this could come in handy,' he exclaims.

'For what?' Asks the first girl, shovelling more sugar onto her tongue.

*

Mike has a job. He starts on Monday at Wahlquist's Refrigeration and Appliance Rentals. A proper job with his own desk and extension number. Full time, eight thirty to five, with statutory holidays, sick leave and annual leave. No lifting. No bullshit.

'I should take my dope plants over to Shane's,' he tells his girlfriend Brenda, flopping onto the couch after dinner and a celebratory bottle of Lindauer, 'now I'm not going to be around during the day. I don't want you to feel responsible. I mean you don't even smoke any more. It wouldn't be fair.' He gives her a long, sideways, melting chocolate look, runs his hand down her thigh.

'I wish you would,' Brenda murmurs, removing her hair tie and snuggling into his neck, 'they're a bit of a worry, with the kids and that.'

They drift into the bedroom and make love with such abandon that

Brenda makes a hickey on her own arm, and when she comes, there's a huge splash of fluid all over the duvet. It has never happened before. 'God, I think I've pissed myself,' she says, embarrassed. But Mike can explain it. 'It's female ejaculation. You must have been really turned on,' he grins, pleased with himself, 'You know, like when a guy ejaculates, only it comes from the Skene's glands. Aristotle was the first person to write about it.' Mike's a reader, and knows a lot of stuff about the human body, not to mention tree frogs, Aztec rituals, quantum mechanics and the Great Pyramids. They turn the duvet over and get into bed properly. Brenda snuggles down, curls against Mike's back, plants several kisses on his shoulder and sinks into the soft darkness. Mike wishes he could do the same.

Brenda wrote Mike's CV. A couple of months ago she gathered up his significant bits of paper, made some notes on the back of a Mercury Energy envelope, took them over to her brother's and typed it up on his computer. Then she bought a flash plastic folder at Whitcoull's and put it together. The result was a revelation. With the hangovers, the shambolic friends, the long stoned days, the metal fillings, the

tinea and the threadbare underpants distilled out of the mixture, what remained was the essence of a proper person. So, why is he here, sleeping with a single mother on floral sheets that need to be washed on the delicate cycle so they don't disintegrate?

Fuck, Brenda's nice. He knows she's nice. She's a couple of years older than him, with twins from a previous relationship. Paul and Emma. They've just started school. And he does love her. Well maybe he does. Of course he does.

Mike and Brenda have never officially lived together, because she has a job at the Arcadia Bakery and he's been on the dole since his ACC ran out. Not counting six weeks a couple of years back, just before he met her, when he did some telemarketing for a dodgy outfit called Fourth Dimension International. The address on the CV is his parents', but he stays at Brenda's most nights. He's made a hydroponics set-up in an old wardrobe in her laundry. He looks after the kids while she's at work, cooks when she's tired, does the washing. Cleans up when the place starts looking like shit.

With his new job, he imagines himself striding purposefully down the street during lunch breaks with the other employed people; a man of decision, a proper member of the community. Right now, in the dead of night, this whole scene feels like a sick bed he wants to get out of, a set of crutches he wants to cast aside and walk tall. A cave he's crawled into as a wounded animal.

If only he could stop thinking and go to sleep.

Brenda's breathing turns slow and heavy. Mike slips out from under her arm and pulls on his underpants and a sweater. He goes to the living room, rolls a cigarette and pours the dregs of the wine into a glass. He takes a sip and pulls a face. A joint would be better, but his tin's still in the bedroom.

Down the corridor, a wail erupts, followed by a scream and the scuffle of bare feet. It's Paul, Brenda's five-year-old son. He hurls himself at Mike's chest. 'I've wet my bed,' he sobs, 'a dog was eating my legs.'

‘Careful. Watch out for my drink. Come on. We’ll get you some clean pyjamas.’

Mike grabs a blanket and some sheets from the linen cupboard. He changes the child, strips the wet sheets and puts a folded blanket over the pissed-on bit. He picks up Paul and kisses him good night.

‘Can you leave the light on? I’m scared of the dog.’

‘We’ll turn on the lamp and face it toward the wall, so it won’t wake your sister up. How’s that?’

Mike lowers the boy gently into the bed and tucks him in.

‘Can you stay here?’ Paul whimpers.

‘I’ll be down in the living room. I’m not going anywhere.’

‘Will you stay here all the time?’

‘Yeah, mate. All the time.’

‘OK.’ Paul murmurs, rubbing his eyes and snuggling down, ‘Will the dog come back?’

‘No,’ Mike reassures him, ‘Of course he won’t. Dreams aren’t real, they’re only in your head.’

*

When Mike’s there Brenda gets to sleep in for twenty more minutes. When he’s not she has to wrap the twins in blankets, bundle them into the old Toyota and take them over to her mother’s. Thank God he’s here this morning. At five forty five she tears herself out of bed, gropes about on the floor for her black and white checked cook’s pants, cleans her teeth, and ties back her hair. Then she puts on her pink raincoat and shudders her way through the rain (which she doesn’t remember hearing) to the Arcadia Bakery.

Steak and cheese. Mince and cheese. Steak and mushroom. Chicken and vegetable. Mince. Leek and mushroom quiche. Brenda slaps the pies into the warmer and starts on the filled rolls. She's at work fifteen minutes before she speaks a word to anyone. Not to Jock, who's smoking a cigarette by the back door while his last batch of sausage rolls bake in the oven. Not to Anton, hurrying to the bench with a sweet pastry wrapped round a rolling pin, which he drops, with a flourish, onto the apricot squares. Not even to the boss, who is at the counter telling a sparkie's apprentice how the strawberry tarts are better than sex.

'Three fuckin' dollars! They'd want to be!' the lad exclaims.

'Not that you'd know,' the boss grins.

'Not that you'd remember,' the boy counters.

'Cheeky bugger. I can do alright for myself, don't you worry. Women like a bloke with a bit of experience, eh Brenda?'

Brenda drops a tomato. Blinks. 'Wouldn't have a clue. Don't even have to think about it. I've got a boyfriend.'

Jock wanders in and flings the oven door open. 'Listen to her. Good men all round her, and who does she go for? Some dole bludger from up the Duke. At least we've got jobs.'

'So's Mike now, 'Brenda says proudly. 'In an office. In town.'

'Aha. Task Force Green's finally got him,' Jock laughs.

'What, cleaning it?' the boss inquires.

'Robbing it?' Anton's Austrian accent chimes in.

'Working on a computer. Making decisions. The kind of stuff people do in offices.'

‘So he won’t be doing your washing any more,’ Anton grins.

*

By eight thirty the rain’s pissing down, as is often the case after a deluge of bodily fluids. Mike tries to stuff the duvet cover into the washing machine along with Paul’s bedding. Not a show in hell. He’s going to have to do two loads. And what about Paul’s mattress? He props it up in the corridor and sprays it with fly spray, because he can’t think of anything better. He hurries Paul and Emma into his car and drops them at the primary school gate, their pockets jangling with a reckless donation of coinage, since he can’t be jammed with cutting lunches.

Back at the ranch, the liquid motif continues. Emma has left the hot tap running, which means a lukewarm shower. The washing machine is beginning to overflow, due to a ten-cent piece in the plug-hole, and Mike just manages to get the wires associated with the hydro scheme off the floor in time. Fuck-a-duck. He throws towels down to absorb the water, which will mean another load, goes to the kitchen and

warms up the leftovers from last night's dinner for his breakfast.

It's a pity about that fucking rain, because what he wants to do is clean everything. Wash, polish, dust, sort, tidy, mow, weed, rationalise the trash and generally get the whole place ship-shape. He closes his eyes and sees himself zipping about like a housework ninja; Ki Yeah! Waa Pshht! cutting a swathe of order. He needs some music to get himself going, but what? He flicks past Tool, Faith no More, The Red Hot Chilli Peppers, Jane's Addiction, White Snake, The Cure, The Smiths (both Brenda's), Bad Jelly The Witch (Paul and Emma's), The Black Crows, Stevie Ray Vaughn, Bowie, Van Morrison. No rap, no techno. If there's one thing Mike hates worse than rap, it's techno. Music without a memory. He won't have anything to do with it. The Doors. Nothing wrong with the fucking Doors.

Break on through, break on through, break on through to the other side.

Mike changes the clothes in the machine, boils a big saucepan of

water and starts on the washing up. His burst of industry is interrupted by a spectre at the window, yelling 'Answer your door, you wanker.' It's Shane. He has two pies and a can of Pepsi from the Arcadia Bakery. 'Breakfast,' he announces, parking his arse on the couch. 'Brenda said you've got a job in town. Good shit.'

'Yep. Start Monday,' Mike says, head down at the sink.

'I was gonna offer you a job out here, mate.

'Why aren't you working today?'

'It's raining bro. I'm not going to mow lawns in the rain. Anyway, I've come to invite you to a party. Me and Kirsty are getting engaged.'

'Jesus. What brought that on?'

'What do you mean? Congratulations! That's what you're supposed to say. Congratu-fucken-lations, mate! I'll tell you what happened. Last

week things were pretty slack, so I did a few days down at the sewage plant, giving Carl the drain layer a hand. Anyway, I saw something shiny go into the filter. I hooked it out, and once I got rid of all the shit around it, I could see it was a real classy looking ring. “This one’s mine,” I told Carl, “makes all the wading around in shit seem worthwhile.” Amazing the kind of stuff that comes through those pipes. I took it to the jewellers, got it cleaned up and polished, and had it valued. It was worth a ten spot bro! Ten thousand fucking smacker-oos! A great big diamond, with five little emeralds around it, 18 carats. It’s a beauty. Antique, the jeweller reckoned. Well, I didn’t know what to do. If I tried to sell it, it might have got traced, and then it’d look like I nicked it. So I thought about it for a while, and then it all made sense. It was a sign, bro. A sign from the universe. So I said to Kirsty, “I reckon we ought to get engaged.”

He puts down his pie, goes over to the sink, and raises his right to meet Mike’s in a high-five. ‘Hey what’s that smell? It’s kinda fly spray mixed with piss.’

Mike dries his hands on a tea towel. 'Dunno mate. It wasn't around before you arrived.'

Shane sits down, picks up a sneaker clad foot and sniffs it. 'Bullshit mate. It's certainly not me. I don't mean to be personal or anything, but you and Brenda ought to get this place cleaned up. Me and Kirst, every Saturday morning we get stuck in. Clean the bathroom, vacuum the lounge, wipe out the fridge and that. Then we shout ourselves a big brunch at Kentucky Fried.'

'That's what I'm doing. Trying to anyway,' Mike yells from the porch, where he's piecing the vacuum cleaner together.

'OK, OK. Look, I'm not going to get much done in this weather, you're in your last days of freedom, why don't we have a smoke and grab a couple of vids? What do you reckon?'

'Dunno. I'd like to get the place in order.'

‘No reason we can’t do both. Here, I’ll give you a hand.’

Shane grabs a bath towel, a pair of kid’s sneakers, yesterday’s paper, last week’s Woman’s Day, the Lindauer bottle, Brenda’s pink dressing gown, a fish slice, a tupperware container of crayons, a few children’s drawings, and a legless Barbie, and makes a pile against the far wall. ‘Sweet, mate. Done.’ He sits down at the table, indents his Pepsi can, rams a hole in it with the good carving knife and loads it up with buds.

It’s strong shit. A toke of that on a wet morning and you can kiss the day goodbye. While Shane is out choosing videos, Mike lowers his housework standard to a minimalist level. By the time Shane returns, with a dozen cheap Aussie beers under his arm, he is pegging up the last towel.

‘What the fuck are you doing mate? You don’t hang out washing in the rain. Wanna get yourself a drier. Me and Kirst...’

‘All right, all right,’ Mike flings the plastic basket into the laundry.

Fong Sai Yuk and Once Upon a Time In China. Ki Yaah! Waa Pshht! A couple of beers, a bit more smoke and the afternoon has dissolved. By the time Paul and Emma spill into the hall, followed by Brenda’s solid footsteps, Mike’s pretty much out of it. Shane grabs his remaining beers and heads off. ‘Don’t forget,’ he yells as he strides out the door, ‘Pakuranga Cricket Club. November the twenty fifth. Four kegs.’

Brenda’s dead tired. Mike’s dead wasted. The kids are watching TV. Fuck cooking. Brenda’s brought home six leftover ham rolls, they can have one each tonight and save the other two for the lunches. It could be nice. A slow drift into evening. The News, Shortland Street and Survivor, followed by sweet oblivion. Mike closes his eyes and sinks into the couch. Brenda kicks off her shoes and lies down with her head on his lap. Mike stokes her hair and wanders through the red road maps in his skull, where thoughts lose their way, turn into other thoughts and are infected by vague, nameless yearnings.

Speeches swell up inside him, hover for a moment and break like bubbles before he can grasp them. He needs to prove himself. Seize the day. Be all he can become. All that shit. But what about Brenda? The times they've had together have etched themselves into his heart. Like that night they took the TV to the bedroom, drank mulled red wine from a thermos flask and watched *Clueless* and *My Own Private Idaho*, lying back on a big stack of pillows. And the time he head-butted that bloke at the Duke for trying to feel her up. And her giving him head while he talked to his mother on the phone, and the dust particles sparkled all around them in the sunlight. And seeing the millennium in with her on Hopetoun Bridge, exchanging champagne kisses in the rain, congratulating themselves that the world, at first glance anyway, had neither ended nor reverted instantaneously to the dark ages.

He'll get some new sheets. And a drier. He'll take her out to dinner. To a proper restaurant. Fuck Valentines. Somewhere really excellent, with white tablecloths, a red rose on each table and classical music playing. Wide windows, filled with the dark effulgence of the harbour.

Maybe they could even go on a cruise...

Brenda stirs, rubs her eyes and sits up suddenly. 'Mike,' she says, 'will you make Paul's bed?'

Or a ride in a hot air balloon.

'Mike! I know you can hear me. You could at least drag the mattress back into the bedroom.'

You have to go up in them first thing in the morning, it's got something to do with the outside air having to be cold, so the hot air in the balloon can make it ascend.

'Come on, you've been sitting around watching videos all day while I've been at work. Mike!'

They could watch the sunrise, floating above the city.

‘Alright, don’t help. I’ll do it myself.’

Mike jack-knives up. ‘Don’t you fucking listen to anything I say?’
Brenda is puzzled. ‘You haven’t said anything.’

‘I might as well not have for all you care.’

‘What are you on about?’ Brenda laughs.

‘You just don’t get it, do you? You never get anything, you stupid fat bitch!’ He gets up, fixes Brenda with a baleful eye and limps down the corridor.

‘Don’t you talk to me like that,’ she yells, ‘especially in front of my kids.’

The front door opens, lets in a gust of wet wind, and slams shut.

*

Michael Joseph Lockwood disappears for three days.

Brenda: His hand-made shoes are still here, and his bass, and his CDs, and his plants. He went off in a real shitty mood, I guess he's nervous about starting his new job. I hope he's OK. Mum reckons she saw his car down at Pak 'n Save.

Paul: I shouldn't have wet my bed. Now Mike's gone, and Mum's upset, and I did it.

Emma: He didn't want the leftover filled rolls for dinner. He's only staying away so everyone'll think it's about something important.

Jock: Now he's got his flash job, he's probably got his eye on some new dump.

Anton: Don't let him come back. You're too nice, Brenda. You should only pretend to be nice, and be a little bit bastard.

Brenda's boss, pink wine in one hand, carnations in the other: Just dropped round to see that you're OK. Whatever happens, your job's safe, you know that, don't you?

Shane: Nup. Haven't seen him. If he had a problem he should have said something. You have to talk things through. Me and Kirst...

Kirsty: Has he? Has he really? Oh God. Poor Brenda. Have I shown you my engagement ring yet? It's an antique, an heirloom from Shane's family. His great grandmother brought it over from Germany. Well, that's what I'm going to tell everyone. I'm so happy I could puke. We're getting married next year, but I've got to lose weight first. There's no way I'm going to be a fat bride.

Mrs Lockwood: (to Lorraine, her masseuse) I can't say I'm surprised. I mean I like Brenda, I really do, but... I blame that rotten sod who broke his kneecap. He lost his confidence after that. He's never been the same since.

Mrs Tweedy, Brenda's mother: (ripping into the morning glory, which is blocking up the drains) Good riddance is what I say! That bloke's never done a decent day's work in his life. Dunno what Brenda sees in him. He's neither use nor ornament, if you ask me.

*

Mike's pulls into the Pak 'n Save car park with \$4.25 in his pocket, an almost empty gas tank, and an eftpos card that will cough up his dole around midnight. He's wearing Brenda's grey track pants, a faded blue basketball sweater and the old moccasins he slops about the house in. There is no one he wants to see. Certainly not Shane, and still less his mother. There's his brother of course, and his other mates, but...naah, and he's not going into a bar dressed like this. He could smoke a joint, wait for Brenda to go to sleep and slink home, but there's his dignity to consider.

He peers out into the rain-slicked car park and thinks. Well, not exactly

thinks. Feels? Not really. Not quite. He absently observes the homeys hanging around the supermarket doorway, the Asian couple carefully packing groceries into the boot of a Mitsubishi, and the tousle-haired, track-panted lady lumbering past with her trolley. For \$4.25 he can probably manage a piece of fried chicken and a coke. He gets out of the car and ambles into the supermarket.

He's perusing the chicken pieces, which all have cut price stickers slapped on them, looking for one which isn't burnt or greasy, when a shriek echoes down the aisle, 'Mike!' and a trolley barrels toward him pushed by a girl with a red mouth and a swathe of dark hair. It's Melissa, a girl from the Overdrive days when she was still a kid and he was almost a rock star. Her mother Lorraine used to be their manager. He can't bear to be seen choosing a piece of cut price chicken, and quickly transforms his search into a casual glance, as if he was just checking stuff out on his way to buy razors, or toothpaste, or mandarins.

Seeing Melissa takes him right back to the skinny boy he used to be,

with long hair and fully functional legs, playing bass and singing to a mosh pit of head banging suburban teenagers. He's hot, the adrenaline's pumping, a girl has scrambled onto the stage and is kissing the crucified snake tattooed on his upper arm. Behind him, there's Shane, bashing the shit out of the drums.

The strange thing is, Shane's the only one from the band he's kept in touch with. And Shane has gone from strength to strength while he's sort of marked time. Back then he was the cool one, and Shane was the try-hard. Not that Shane's all that cool now, but he is making money and getting somewhere. Mind you, what happened was really Shane's own fault. He wasn't taking things seriously enough; he wasn't projecting the right kind of image — while Mike worked his arse off, wrote songs, hassled everyone into practising, got them a manager, arranged a recording studio, a tour of the North Island.

'I can't believe it's you! It's been, how many years? Six? Seven? I ran into Kirsty and she told me you're living with some solo mother now,' Melissa babbles, 'I'm staying at mum's, and I know she'd love to see

you. Why don't you come back with me? Mum's not managing the bands any more, she does massage and aromatherapy now.'

Well, Mike thinks, juddering along Reeves Road toward Ennis Ave, Pakuranga, in Melissa's Honda Civic. I'm broke, I look like shit, and I've got this pointless tub of yoghurt I've just bought. I should have got something else, I should have driven my own car — I don't even know what I'm doing or why the fuck I'm doing it. .

*

On the other side of town, in a messy flat in Point Chevalier, the guy with the face piercings, whose name is Jason Matthews, sits at the kitchen table, perusing Mike's CV and thinking about a new alter-ego. He's found a birth certificate, folded into a small square and stuck between the School and Vocational Training Certificates, which is going to make things easier. Mike put it there in case he needed proof of identity or something. Jason's twenty three years old, a willowy fellow with droll blue eyes and a certain fecklessness, reminiscent of an Afghan hound. 'Michael?' he says to himself, 'Mike? Joe? Mo-Jo? I

think I'll be Michael. It sounds more mature' He peers at the photo of Mike, abseiling down the side of Hunua Falls, through a magnifying glass. He probably should dye his hair and get some brown contact lenses, just to be on the safe side.

*

Melissa's mother Lorraine's reading her Tarot cards. The Queen of Wands presides in the centre of a blue silk scarf, laid on the oak dining table as a barrier between the cards and the confusing, corrupting world. She has already put out the past, and just as she gets to the present, depicted by the Page of Swords reversed, in the door limps Mike, which lends great credence to the final three cards, The Lovers, The Nine of Pentacles, and The Star; love, money and transcendence. Things are looking up.

'Mike,' she intones, 'what a surprise.' All gentle. The faded angel in her has released its spoor, superseding the vicious, eternally wronged, legal aid guzzling shrew, the pink smocked healer, and the ageing rock

chick. Mike knows them all, and also the terrified desperado at their heart. He recalls her opaque green eyes looking up at him like broken windows, as he rooted her in the back of her car down in Hastings. He'd been squeamish about kissing her mouth, with those small, yellow teeth nestled behind the lipstick. Oh God. Why the hell did he come here? What was he thinking? She's turned a corner since he last saw her, gone from the old end of young to the young end of old.

She wraps up the cards in the blue scarf, tucks them away in the china cabinet, gets some premixed bottles of rum and coke from the fridge, and then she, Mike and Melissa sit around the dining table, reminiscing about the Overdrive days.

Mike rolls a joint, takes a toke, and passes it on.

'Remember the fat stage diver who came to just about every gig?'

'And what about that night in the Fencible Lounge? When those guys from Drury tried to nick our equipment. Jesus, we really went off that night.'

‘And that crazy chick in Hamilton, who reckoned you were the reincarnation of Jim Morrison?’

With every turn of the world, you get a day, and it’s a modern day. Then it becomes the past. Melissa gets up, a mysterious little smile on her face, and puts a tape on the stereo. It’s Mike, singing a song he wrote in 1991. ‘You’ve gone away, and I look up at the screaming sky, and I want to laugh, but instead I cry, ‘cause you’ve gone away, gone away..’ And the demons are unleashed. The betrayals. The hopes that came to nothing. So he smiles. What else can he do? And he says, reaching out to the mother and daughter, ‘Come on, let’s dance.’

*

The world has never seen a worse asshole than Mike Lockwood. Well, actually it has. Ted Bundy. That guy in the wreck of the Batavia. Hitler. Pol Pot. Still, he’s an asshole. He tosses and turns on Lorraine’s

couch, where he's crashed for the night.

The song was written for a girl called Pamela, an English exchange student, with shoulder length blond hair, porcelain skin and a white, wholesome smile, who'd stayed with a family in Buckland's Beach. He was twenty-one and she was sixteen. No sex, just tender romance. She came to his gigs, but always had to be home by midnight. He'd been her partner at a school ball in a hired tuxedo, made her a satin-lined, heart-shaped wooden box for Valentine's Day, and filled it with Italian chocolates. In seven months, they only kissed five times, the last at the airport, when she boarded the plane back to England. She actually considered saying, 'Mike, you've been a great friend. You really have.' But then she registered the look in his eyes, and changed it to, 'I'll never forget you.' And he went home and wrote...cause you've gone away, gone away...

Hastings, 1993. Overdrive's coming to the end of their North Island tour, everyone's keen to get home, and suddenly they're doing this 21st gig in a marquee, for Lorraine's nephew. She's only just sprung

it on them, and they're all pissed off. Mike and Shane are suffering the after effects of some bad speed that they bought in Levin. The rhythm guitarist's jealous of the attention Mike's been getting and suddenly wants to be the singer, and the lead guitarist, sick of small town yokels, has come to regard himself as alternative and taken to playing strange, unpredictable riffs.

And then there's Lorraine. Before the tour, she was an ordinary, divorced Pakuranga mother. A bit more inclined to say 'cool' than other mothers, but one of the mob at a school working bee. She wouldn't have dreamed, for instance, of travelling in the van with them, and drove her own car. But along the way, something's got into her. The smell of testosterone perhaps. In Hamilton she began to pepper her sentences with fucks. In Tauranga she bought a black leather mini skirt, in Rotorua a stretchy, red lace top. In Wanganui she had a butterfly tattooed on her thigh, and from there on someone always had to go in the car with her, because she was lonely all by herself. And 'someone' meant Mike. If he fobbed her off with one of the others, she'd turn sullen and difficult.

Here in Hastings, among her own kith and kin, she's upped the volume. She's not like the rest of her dull inbred family, no siree. She stomps around the marquee in her new fuck-me boots, yelling, 'Come on guys, let's get this fucking show on the road,' and other tough sounding clichés. 'If it smells like a dog, and barks like a dog, then it's a fucking dog, right.' No one's impressed. Who does she think she is? If Uncle Dougie hadn't lent her that money back in the seventies, she wouldn't even have a roof over her head. And anyway, her band's shit. Just because they're from Auckland, doesn't mean they're any good.

The yard glass ceremony's been and gone, and the band's just played Cause You've Gone Away, which Mike's tried to sing with real feeling, despite the lead guitarist's innovations, when the birthday boy starts a fight. Are these pricks so far up their own arses they think they can play boring fucking songs no one's ever heard of? He staggers toward Shane, hurls a kick at the bass drum and suggests, 'Why don't you fuck off back to Auckland?' Shane gives him a shove, he loses his

balance, and all hell breaks loose.

Before the band started taking up all his spare time, Mike used to do aikido, but generally, he's a man to walk away from a fight. On this occasion he runs. Face. Teeth. He can't do without them. He's the band's image, isn't he? The singer always is. He slips into the back seat of Lorraine's car, curls up and closes his eyes. The fracas outside assaults his ears for a while, but eventually it dies down and he dozes off.

Dirty yellow sunlight. A dream where there's this Chinese girl holding up a board with the number 10 on it, and some old guy trying to talk him into buying a carved wooden parrot. Lorraine's voice. 'You're here. Thank God. I've been looking everywhere.' He squints. She scrambles into the car and crawls on top of him. 'Hey, take it easy,' he grumbles at first, but then his early morning hard on overrides his better judgement.

The van's gone. There's no one left but Mike and Lorraine. They're

stuck with each other, undiluted, and it's a long road home. He didn't kiss her, they kept their clothes on; he's done nothing to give her the wrong impression. But he can sense her loneliness like a concrete wall that's not been properly reinforced, that could crumble if you poked it. Which he's done. He feigns an upset stomach to avoid eating, since who pays for what is going to mean something now. So she buys lemonade and Panadol at a gas station in Taupo, and offers them to him with soft eyes. After an hour or so of driving on in silence, she needs to stop by the side of the road to weep. Allegedly about Melissa, who's fourteen at this stage, who she's left with her ex, a man unfit to look after a cockroach. Mike tries to comfort her, but can't find the right words. He stretches his arm as far as he can so he can put it around her shoulders without having to hold her close.

And he gets to thinking about Shane. It was his fault, that fight. And this morning, he could have fucking woken Mike up. What did he think he was doing, pissing off like that? The more he thinks, the more annoyed he gets, until all it takes is a wistful little observation from Lorraine, 'Look at those two horses nuzzling each other. Isn't it sweet?'

for him to blurt out, 'We should drop Shane from the band. He's just a trouble maker, and he's not a very good drummer anyway.'

'You're right,' she agrees, 'I've thought so for a long time, but I didn't like to say anything.'

Contempt, and someone to pour it on. What a relief. The road slips away under their wheels, and before they know it, the Bombay Hills materialise, under a pink and lavender sky.

When Shane turns up at practise three weeks later, gagging to show off a new snare drum he's bought, he's met by Lorraine with a lawyer in tow. Dropped from the band, he gets very drunk, climbs onto the mezzanine where he stores his drums, and shits on them. He also punches in a window, and then grabs a piece of the broken glass and hacks into his own face and body.

Mike's a staunch mate throughout the ordeal. It's not the band's fault; it's that bitch Lorraine. They'd get rid of her, but she's got all the con-

tacts. He takes Shane to the A and E, and while he's convalescing, drops in with videos, with beers, with really nice buds.

'At least there's one person in the world I can trust,' wails the wounded Shane.

'Jesus, mate, we've known each other since primary school,' says Mike.

*

Is an arsehole less of an arsehole if he knows he's one? Maybe a bit.

It's 10am; Melissa's been at work for a couple of hours, and Lorraine's about to leave. Mike and Lorraine look at each other over their cups of lemon and ginger tea. Both could do with someone to blame for the way things have panned out for them. Doesn't he still owe her almost a grand from before the band broke up, which was not too long after Shane's dumping? Didn't she stalk him and more or less force herself

on him? They could be flinging lawyers at each other if they liked. But why would they? Her cards look promising, and he's into giving the past a decent burial rather than an autopsy. Besides, there's something pleasing about a trace of bitterness, like the coriander in sweet salsa.

'Can I stay for a few days?' he asks, 'I'm not ready to go home just yet.' And he's not. He knows Brenda will be worried, that he should really call her, but his regular life is presently jammed on 'mute.'

'Sure,' she purrs. Mike's mother has an appointment with Lorraine this afternoon. She decides that if his name comes up, she won't say a word.

'I'll do the garden for you while I'm here,' he offers.

Tearing into Lorraine's morning glory, Mike tries to list a few good things about himself, just as Brenda's mother is doing round at her place, only she's listing his faults.

1. He does a lot of nice things for people, like this garden for instance. He's going to do it, and he's going to make a fucking good job of it.
2. He once saved a guy from drowning in a sinkhole.
3. He's been patient with those kids of Brenda's, and has taught them how to do dishes properly, how to write their names and how to ride a bike.
4. He's never hit a woman.
5. He's acquired quite a few skills, and wishes he had his CV on him so he could see them all written down.
6. He doesn't complain about his leg, which often aches, and hasn't been right since this big munter kneecapped him with a tie rod in Glenn Innes, when

he was sent round to repossess a General Electric fridge. That was his last proper job, driving a delivery van with Karklin's Appliances on the side.

7. There's a photograph of him at his mother's house, taken when he was nine. His eyes are clear and luminous, his smile full of promise. There's something good, really good, in that child he was.

About the big munter who broke Mike's kneecap. Mike was delighted at being told to go and repossess the fridge, because he reckoned the guy had it coming. When Mike originally delivered it, he'd sat there on his deck, his fat arse encased in a pair of tight stubbies, sucking on a beer, while Mike struggled up a steep flight of stairs with this great big, two-door, frost-free, ice-maker, top-of-the-range, fridge-freezer. To add insult to injury, the prick yelled, 'Careful mate. Watch out for the doorframes. Make sure you don't scrape the wall. We've just had the kitchen repainted.' So, when he came back to retrieve it a few months later, Mike found it extremely easy to side with this man's pretty, dark-

haired wife, who wept with shock and shame on the front doorstep. 'It's obvious that bastard isn't looking after you,' he sympathised, 'a beautiful woman like you deserves better,' quite unaware that the guy was lying under his car in the driveway, grappling with the ball joints, and listening to his every word.

*

For three days Mike works on Lorraine's property. He trims the edges of the path, tugs out dandelions, thistles, oxalis, and the ancient silver beet, which has seriously gone to seed. He puts tomatoes and capsicums in the vegetable patch; pansies, cornflowers and impatiens along the side of the house. He also repairs an electric fan, since summer's not far away, and re-hangs the fridge door, which bangs against a wall, to open from right to left.

On the second night, Melissa's boyfriend, Lloyd calls in. He works in the computer industry, is two years younger than Mike, and five years older than Melissa. He owns a house in Highland Park, but is letting

it out so he can use the rent to buy another one. Next year, he and Melissa will go to the US, where his computer skills and her background in cell phone sales will seal their fortune. This week, he's been staying at a fishing lodge with an American client, who's offered to hook him up with some good contacts.

Lloyd has a lean, gym-sculptured body, ivory skin and rich, brown, well cut hair. He wears an onyx ring on a tapered, manicured finger. He's as lithe as a cat, and often leaps up to pace while he's talking. He greets Mike with a big relaxed smile, a warm handshake and a question or two about Mike's own life, and how things are going with it. Thank God I've got that job, Mike thinks. Thank God I've got an answer to the 'What do you do?' question.

'I hope you've been keeping up your training while I've been away,' Lloyd inquires of Melissa, his eyes dancing with merriment, to show he's half joking. A sense of humour is always important. 'You haven't have you? I can tell. You can't let it slip like that, love. I don't want you getting fat or anything.'

They look at some photos Melissa has had developed, taken at a work do they both attended. 'See how thin Barry's hair's getting at the back.' 'Janine would be quite attractive you know, if only she'd go to an orthodontist.' 'Leighton used to be really fit when I first met him but he's let himself go. Can you believe those love handles?' Said, not with malice, but compassion. Lloyd and Melissa leave to jog around the Panmure Basin. Lorraine flicks on the TV and relaxes back into her armchair.

'I don't think he'll ever agree to have children,' she sighs, 'he'll be scared they might inherit his jaw, the way it was before he had the plastic surgery. He used to have a great big lantern jaw, you know, like his father.'

Mike thinks about rejoining the work force, and wonders if it has transformed into a beaming, bionic army of people like Lloyd. He sighs, and suddenly misses Brenda.

*

Mike stays with Lorraine and Melissa from Wednesday through to Saturday night. On Thursday and Friday they both work. On Saturday, Melissa goes with Lloyd to a Young National's picnic on Waiheke Island, and Lorraine attends a course on Japanese-style massage, to add to her repertoire of treatments.

During the day, he's alone. He often feels invisible, transparent, as if there's nothing where he's standing, just a void around which other things occur. A blank, cut-out doll in a busy, hungry landscape. He entertains weird thoughts. What if his teeth were to fall out? What if he went out and robbed a bank? What if he actually died in Pak 'n Save, and still hasn't cottoned on? What if this work he's doing in the garden is all part of a suburban myth in the making. He can imagine Lorraine's voice, 'And then we found out he'd been dead, all that time.' Brenda's, 'Everything was fine as far as I could tell, when he stood up and walked out the door like he was being called.' Shane's, 'There was the smell of death in that room on Wednesday. I didn't take

much notice at the time. I thought it was just piss or something.'

Mike isn't dead, he's drinking a mug of instant coffee. He's staked up the tomatoes, even though he's just put them in, because he reckons Lorraine would probably be too slack to do it herself. He's put the gardening tools away, and fixed the loose hinge on the shed while he was at it. His shirt's draped over the clothesline, and he's surveying his handiwork from a small circle of lawn in the middle of the backyard, under oblique rays of late-afternoon sunshine, speared between the loquat tree and the Moreton bay fig, when he sees Jesus.

Jesus appears from round the side of the house, and walks calmly along the concrete path to where Mike is. He's wearing sandals, and the same kind of clothes He wears in Holy Pictures, but doesn't look so European. Instead He has the golden swarthinness you normally see on blond Middle Easterners. Jesus wanders over and stands next to Mike, looking at the garden in a quiet, companionable fashion, the way an ordinary man will, viewing another man's gardening, building or panel beating efforts. Mike tries not to stare at Jesus' Stigmata;

the clean, deep wounds, neither festered nor healed. The nail holes in His flesh. He's embarrassed about the crucified snake tattooed on his own left arm, and tries to keep it hidden, even though he assumes Jesus can probably see straight through him anyway.

'What's happening? Am I dead?' Mike asks.

'No,' says Jesus, quietly, pleasantly, like that's not the point, 'No, Mike, you're not dead. You're definitely alive.'

Mike wants to ask if Jesus means the same thing by the word 'dead' as he would; whether he's going to go on breathing, or has just enough purity in him to qualify for the first stage of redemption. But then his ears fill with the sound of the sea. He can feel something hard, like concrete, crumbling inside his chest. And Mike realises, in a matter-of-fact, non-poetic, non-conceptual way, that life is a rare and wonderful thing. Standing in Lorraine's garden next to Jesus, he knows this as surely as he knows the way from here to Pakuranga Plaza. It has something to do with the way Jesus says his name. Like

it was the name of someone who matters, of someone who's carefully, tenderly, loved. Who can love. Who is fully entitled to exist.

Jesus doesn't say much more after that, just, 'Tomatoes, capsicums. Some sweet basil would be good.' Then He retraces His footsteps round the side of the house, and is gone.

Now, this might not have actually happened. Even Mike has his doubts. Except later sweet basil proliferates in Lorraine's garden, though Mike didn't plant any, and the tomatoes and capsicums are extremely fruitful, lasting well into the next winter. Lorraine gives quite a few away around the neighbourhood, and the people who eat them are more joyous and humble than they were before, kinder and more open to coincidences. Which not everyone appreciates. Lloyd thinks he might be allergic to the tomatoes, they seem to interfere with his focus. He also worries about all the sandwiches Melissa takes to eating, and keeps a nervous eye on her silhouette. And Mike's crucified snake tattoo is intermittently itchy from that day forth, until eventually he gets sick of it and has it surgically removed.

By the time Lorraine gives Mike a lift back to Pak 'n Save that evening, to pick up his car and go home, fat clouds have gathered, and the sky between them is deep indigo. There's a light scattering of rain, but not enough to bother to turn on the windscreen wipers. They pass a joint back and forth between them along Waipuna Drive. Mike wonders if he should be smoking this stuff after meeting Jesus, but it seems like the polite thing to do.

On Monday, he starts work. He has to iron his white shirt and black pants. Clean his leather shoes. Check his oil and fill his gas tank. Explain his long absence to Brenda, which will be the trickiest bit. Why did he have to make things worse by calling her a stupid fat bitch? Well, at least his car hasn't been towed away, that's something. There it is, at the far end of the car park, looking forlorn and forgotten. The good old Bluebird. He's hardly had to lift a spanner to it since he's owned it.

He's saying goodbye to Lorraine when he gets the feeling he should

kiss her. Not lasciviously, but fully, properly, to make up for Hastings. He puts his hand gently on her arm, and leans meaningfully toward her face, but she turns it into a quick peck, and pushes him away. 'Mike, you're still such a sleaze,' she laughs. 'Once upon a time I might have been interested.'

The world's a lumpy place, and imparting the pure intentions of your heart requires a certain amount of skill in the translation.

*

Inny, Winny, Bay and Court, the four horsemen of the unclaimed mail. Sources of those envelopes addressed to previous inhabitants no one's ever heard of, that pile up on mantle pieces, and then get used for shopping lists, telephone messages, scrabble scores and doodles, before falling into the hands of the paper chaser.

Jason Matthews owes \$8,371.43 to Inland Revenue, \$4,209.01 to the Department of Work and Income, \$2,943.92 to Baycorp and \$5,024.00

to the Auckland Courts Department of Fines. But who cares? He's got nearly \$15,000 cash from being paid under the counter as a painter and decorator, failing to pay his rent and selling speed. Anyway, who's Jason Matthews? Never heard of the fucker. He's Michael Joseph Lockwood, he has a passport to prove it, and the world's his oyster. With a nicotine patch on his arm, the Pacific Ocean beneath him and Runaway Bride playing on a screen in front of him, he wriggles his feet to counteract pins and needles. If only his seat on the plane hadn't turned out to be next to a little kid and its mother. If only that little kid would shut-up and sit still.

*

Body, mind, heart and soul. Which one is the lead singer of the thing you call yourself, relegating the rest to be the oolah girls of identity?

On the inside, Mike's in a turmoil. He thinks, so far I've led an unrealised life, wandering aimlessly through days, a passive-aggressive, half-formed lump of protoplasm. And then he thinks, hang on a minute.

I've done stuff. All that stuff that Brenda put in my CV. Of course I've done stuff. I can sing. I can play bass. I can hang a fridge door so the seal fits perfectly. And a lot of other shit. Plus, Jesus wouldn't appear to anyone who was a write-off. Then he remembers Jesus' reputation for actually liking write-offs. And why did he have to have a religious experience to complicate the issue when he's finally on the verge of getting something out of Mammon? Oh fuck, did God overhear him thinking that? And then there's this deep, wordless part of himself that only wants to be fully human; tender, gracious and brave.

His confusion, however, doesn't show on the outside. When he returns to Brenda's place on Saturday night, after his three-day absence, he seems awe inspiringly together. Brenda opens her mouth to say, 'Where the fuck have you been? And don't think I've forgotten what you said to me,' but all she gets out is the 'Where...' He carries himself up the steps with a kind of weary stature, looks at her with a steady gaze and says, 'I'm sorry. I'm sorry for everything.'

Over following three weeks, a strange atmosphere pervades. Mike's

off to work every morning, like Father in a School Journal, and life has a new deliberateness. Any attempt at cursing or whining or bitching fails to find a mark. The kids put away their toys without being asked, and go to bed at seven thirty without demurring. The school lunch boxes contain little tubs of yoghurt and golden kiwi fruit with those special plastic spoons. The parlour palm in the living room takes on a new lease of life from being regularly watered. Even Shane and Kirsty are pulled to heel. When they call in to see how Mike's getting on with his new job, an invisible shield, like the one in the toothpaste ad, prevents them from showing off about how much weight Kirsty's lost, or how much better they are than their present company. Instead, they drink one beer each, slowly, like grown-ups, and are out the door by nine thirty, exchanging bewildered glances as they walk back to the car.

There's a night when Brenda hears Mike playing his guitar and singing the old Guns 'N' Roses number, Patience. Shed a tear 'cause I'm missin' you, I'm still alright to smile... His voice is clear and beautiful, and when she wakes up she's not sure whether it was a dream or not. It

sounded real, and yet she seems to recall his body lying next to hers at the same time as she heard it.

During this period, Mike and Brenda make love just twice. Once, halfway through Mike's first week at work, awkwardly, like strangers, like cover versions of themselves. Again close to the end, with great passion, with the built-in nostalgia of bodies that are already missing each other even as they fuck. And so Brenda understands, even before Mike says, 'I have to go away and sort my head out,' that he's about to leave her.

*

The Rule of Three. Three seconds for a rude taxi driver. Three minutes for a moderately embarrassing revelation at the pub. Three days for hurt feelings. Three years for grief. Weeks, months, and hours; also have their allotments, but the wheel turns in threes. It takes three generations to get from clogs to clogs, presumably with a Gucci moment in the middle.

*

‘Every day’s like Sunday, every day is silent and grey...’ Brenda’s prone on the couch and the Smiths are on the stereo, all day and deep into the night. Paul and Emma draw on the walls and their legs with felt tipped pens, tear up sandwiches, spill juice and throw their duvets over the filthy table to make a hut underneath it. Mike has gone, and the house is like a mouth with a tooth ripped out of it. He has taken his plants to Shane’s, and there’s a poignant line of dust along the laundry wall where his hydroponics wardrobe used to be.

‘What shall I do?’ Brenda wails to Kirsty, over the phone. She’d like to have someone kinder to talk to, but she’s let her circle of girlfriends lapse since Mike came along. And she can’t bear to speak to her mother, who’d find it impossible to conceal her delight. ‘He reckons he wants us to stay friends. He says he needs time on his own, to sort himself out,’ she sobs.

‘The most important thing Brenda, is not to let yourself go. What if I come over and dye your hair? It’ll make you feel better, and take my mind off food as well. I’ve lost four kilos already. Isn’t that brilliant?’

*

Black walls, black makeup, black clothes, thick smoke from a smoke machine.

Jason Matthews tries to replicate the slow motion, heavy-lidded, pelvic thrusting dance style that seems to be in vogue in the Gothic culture of East Berlin.

What he wants to be is a Citizen of the World, at home wherever he is. What he does not want to be mistaken for is a Kiwi on his Big OE. Who thought up that term anyway? It diminishes the whole thrill of waking up in a place where the light, the beer, the bread, the language are different from what you know. It reduces the world to a theme park.

‘What is your name?’ asks a pair of black lips in a chalk-white face.

‘Mo Jo,’ says Jason.

‘So you are on the — what you call it — the OE?’ asks the lips. ‘There’s a Kiwi telemarketer at my work, called Ian. He said he is on his OE. He is from Tie Happy – do you know Tie Happy?’

*

Mike’s moved in with his parents, in his old room on Panorama Drive, and is looking for a flat in town. He wakes up to a table set with a bowl of muesli, two slices of Vogel’s bread waiting in the toaster, and a mug containing a peppermint teabag. Next to them sits an alfalfa sandwich wrapped in glad wrap, and an apple. He likes none of this shit, but has to eat it to avoid upsetting his mother. Except for the lunches, which he hurls into the litterbin outside work.

‘You don’t have to do this for me Mum. Honestly.’

‘It’s alright. I like doing it. A working man needs a good, healthy diet.’

The smiling photo, taken when he was nine, beams down at him from the mantle piece, while he watches TV in the evening with his parents.

Mike’s father hides the remote when he doesn’t want to watch TV. He leaves the house abruptly, without saying goodbye, and returns with neither a hello nor a mention of what he’s been doing. He postpones fixing the loose carpet on the stairs, the faulty light switch or the door that jams when it rains. He corrects his wife’s grammar. ‘I don’t know and I don’t bloody care? I think you’re meant to say ‘bloody well’ when you use ‘bloody’ as an adverb. I don’t know and I don’t bloody well care.’

Mike takes down the dictionary, ‘No Dad, it says here ‘bloody’ can be either adjective or adverb.’

‘Why bother dear,’ the mother hisses, ‘what would the Oxford Dictionary know that your father doesn’t?’

Where did it start? Depends on how far back you want to go. He found her secret holiday fund in the blue jug, hidden behind the sheets in the linen cupboard, and spent it. She lied about paying the insurance and then backed the car into a brand new Saab outside the chemists. He had the cat put down without letting her give homeopathy a try. She persists in buying perfumed soap even though it gives him eczema. Possibly it all began back in 1974, when President Nixon’s expletives were being deleted, fondue sets were fashionable and a band called Paper Lace advised someone called Billy not to be a hero.

Mike was four and his brother Greg eight, when his mother miscarried a baby girl, who would have been her only daughter. He woke up one day from his afternoon sleep to hear a wan call from inside the bathroom. ‘Michael, mummy’s sick. You have to call an adult.’ Mike ran next door to get a neighbour. An ambulance came and took his mother to hospital, while the neighbour stayed on, folded the clean

washing, and made Mike and his brother baked beans on toast for their dinner. At that stage Mike's father was doing a drain-laying job outside Kati Kati. He was unable to be contacted, and found out what had happened later that night, when he arrived home.

While Mike's Mum was in hospital, Uncle Declan dropped by to give his Dad a hand. Uncle Declan. Not Mike's real uncle, his Dad's mate. Mike's Mum considered Declan a hanger-on, even though he was her husband's friend long before she entered the picture. 'Declan doesn't want to grow up,' she'd say, and 'That Declan's never going to face up to reality. He's got no drive. He's like a boat without a rudder.'

Dear landlord, please don't put a price on my soul... Bob Dylan blasted out of the stereo while Declan and Mike's father sat around the kitchen, talking shit and drinking tea, occasionally popping outside for a toke or two. Mike, still in his pyjamas at three o'clock in the afternoon, entertained himself with play dough, crayons or match box cars till his brother got home from school. Occasionally, a wave of guilt would mysteriously wash in, and his father would get up and do

the dishes or sweep the floor, and Declan would say something like, 'Come on Mikey-boy, let's make a rocket ship with your play dough. We'll use this bit for the rocket, and then we'll make a moon for it to land on. A blue moon, with craters and all.'

On the day his Mum returned from hospital, while Uncle Declan was looking after him, Mike chose to stick a red Lego block up his bum. It seemed possible to do, that's all. The block was there, and so was the bum. Then he panicked, but was too ashamed to ask for help. After a failed attempt to lever it out with a pencil, he strained and strained until finally he dislodged the thing, which he guiltily hid down the backyard, as if anyone seeing the block might also see what he'd done with it.

The subsequent stains on Mike's under-pants led to the doctor's surgery, which led in turn to a diagnosis of constipation. Prunes, figs and copious fluids were in order. After which all would have been well, except Mike, saddened and confused by his mother's grief, reverted to bed-wetting. He also did a happy drawing of her to cheer her up

and got so carried away with the face he forgot to put the arms on. At the time there was a theory abroad that children who drew adult characters without arms had been sexually abused. Mike's mother looked back through the drawings she'd saved of Greg's, and they all had arms, even the ones with no body, just limbs protruding from a smiling head. The bed-wetting was further exacerbated by her fixing a panicked eye on him intermittently and imploring, 'If anyone did anything to hurt you, you'd tell Mummy, wouldn't you?'

Eventually, unable to stand her own thoughts, she erupted one night over dinner with a minor bombshell, 'Declan's never setting foot in this house again. Ever.'

'Why?' her husband asked, 'I live here too, and he's my oldest friend.'

'It doesn't matter why. If I ever see him here again, I'm taking the kids and leaving.'

Mike's father should have at least asked further questions, but he didn't. He understood that she was recovering from a miscarriage, and also feared that her outburst may have been informed by stuff he couldn't cope with knowing.

With a baleful glance in her husband's direction, the mother then up and remembered she was a Catholic before she became a hippy, and took the boys to church and sent them to religious instruction on Wednesday nights for seven or so years, getting them through their first communions before re-lapsing. Though if you talked to Mike's brother Greg, you'd think they'd grown up knee-deep in saints, sacrifices, nuns and novenas the way he carries on.

'You've been a wonderful son to me,' says Mike's mother, when he gives her a bunch of yellow roses, before moving into a flat in Eden Terrace, 'I'm going to miss you Michael. I don't know what I'd do without you.'

'Sometimes I find myself plotting to conceal it from your mother when

all I'm doing is returning my library books,' says Mike's father, as he helps him lug his bed into his new room, 'I can't help it. I don't even know why I do it.'

*

Mike gets up from his desk and limps over to the water cooler. Past Margaret the accounts manager, Grace the administration clerk, and Tony the salesman. Past a big window full of thick, grey-white clouds.

'Heavy weekend, eh, mate?' asks Tony.

'Yeah.'

'What did you get up to?'

'Don't ask. I'm trying to forget,' Mike deadpans. He presses four pseudo ephedrine tabs out of their packaging, and

swallows them with a slug of water. He refills his paper cup and drops a Berrocca into it. The office is on a mezzanine, and he wanders over and peers down into the showroom. Fuck, his knee hurts when he's hung over. He sucks air between his teeth, and rubs it.

His job is not all it purported to be. He does, for instance, do quite a bit of lifting, despite the assurances given to him when he was interviewed. And customer service. And repairs and maintenance. But his official title is Inventory Controller. He keeps track of where things are and what needs fixing or replacing. They've lost his CV too, reckoned he took it with him, which is a load of shit. It's got all this stuff in it that's really important to him; proof of the courses he's done, the skills he's acquired, his birth certificate, his IRD number. But the place is a fucking shambles, and he still hopes it might show up eventually. The missing IRD number posed a bit of a problem at first, and they paid him cash-in-hand for three weeks, until he eventually got round to ringing the department to find out exactly what it was.

He swallows the iridescent liquid in a single gulp. The receptionist

glances up, he smiles down, and suddenly this middle-aged guy in a black turtleneck, who's over by the door, talking to the boss, points at him and cries, 'Perfectissimo. That's the type I'm talking about. I'm thinking fifties retro, vaguely Hispanic looking, rough trade with a sentimental streak. That's what I'm getting at. Hey you!', he waves an arm in Mike's direction, 'Come down here. I want a closer look at you.'

What the fuck does he think I am, grumbles Mike to himself, crushing his paper cup and hobbling downstairs, do I look like a fucking fridge? Like I was for sale or something?

'Ever been on TV?' asks the guy. Without waiting for Mike to answer he continues, 'I'd like to think I'm looking at the new face of Wahlquist's Refrigeration and Appliance Rentals. What do you reckon?'

*

Fact is, Mike's new life in Eden Terrace could not be called a box of birds. One of his new flatmates is a DJ and into techno, the other's

a vegetarian in her late twenties. He knows they call him ‘the bogan’ and ‘the munter’ behind his back, because he’s overheard them, and he often interrupts a conversation that is abruptly curtailed, with remnants of suppressed laughter hovering in the air. A minor crisis occurred when he heard the girl complaining of the shower stall being full of his pubic hair, which he would have let pass if she hadn’t taken it further and accused him of wanking into her loofah. He had no choice but to defend himself, not that it did much good. She sat there defiantly while he ranted. Then she marched to the bathroom and returned with her loofah clasped between two fingertips. She stamped her foot on the bin pedal and the lid sprang open. ‘There,’ she said, ‘I’m throwing it out.’

Fuck-a-fucking-duck. How do you deal with a woman like that?

Mike puts on the jug for his after-work coffee when in she traipses. ‘Will you pay the rent tomorrow?’ she asks, ‘There’s a BNZ right near Wahlquist’s. It’d be easy for you.’

‘Nuh,’ he says, ‘I’m not going to work tomorrow.’

‘Aren’t you?’ she asks, with obvious disbelief, ‘Why not?’

‘Because I’m filming,’ he answers, ‘I’m in this ad.’

‘Oh,’ she says, ‘I didn’t know you were an actor.’

‘Well that’s probably because I didn’t tell you,’ says Mike, taking his coffee into his room and shutting the door firmly. He lies on his bed and opens his library book, ‘The Gay Science,’ by Friedrich Nietzsche. ‘Everybody is farthest away — from himself,’ says Friedrich, among other things.

*

The Ad: Exterior, night. Animation painted over real images of Auckland apartments, using low-angle panning. Windows reveal silhouettes of people; partying, working, arguing. Brief still shot of a silhouetted couple kissing.

Musical background: Basin Street Blues played on a muted trumpet.

Scene becomes realistic.

Camera tracks a white Persian cat up a narrow stairwell to an apartment door. We see the cat enter through a cat door, hear a key turn in a lock. Music gets louder. The apartment is in darkness, apart from a circle of light around an open, stainless steel fridge door. V/O of a woman laughing softly. Mike emerges, naked, partly concealed by the fridge door. With a droll half-smile and eyes making love to the camera he says, 'Making love in the refrigerator light.' Music starts up again. Cut to cat, peering into an empty bowl. Back to fridge door.

Voiceover: Wahlquist's Refrigeration and Appliance Rentals, phone 0800 ICEMAN.

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After the ad is made, but before it is screened, Mike finds himself smitten with Grace, the administration clerk, who started work at Wahlquist's just a month before him. She has eyes so pale a brown you could almost call them yellow, and a quiet playfulness about her. In fact, she is something of a player, but Mike has been out of circulation for too long to recognise it.

Basically, she eats his food, takes his drugs and sleeps in his bed, but won't have sex with him. Apparently, there is some mysterious man in her background whom she has never gotten over. She tells him about this, and her battles with alcohol addiction, as well as her child, whom she loves tenderly, who lives with her sister, fixing him with her great, moist golden eyes while sucking greedily on a joint. She's got a brother in London who works in the movie industry, and she'd love to meet some of those film people, the ones who made that ad, if he ever gets invited to one of their parties. Not that he'd want to take her. 'Don't put yourself down. Of course I'd want to take you. Anywhere. You're beautiful,' says Mike, and she snuggles into his shoulder and inhales another big lungful, 'Would you like to come to this party with

me on Friday? It's out east. It's my mate's engagement party.'

A pang of guilt toward Brenda, and an achy-breaky pining for Grace slug it out for control of Mike's heartstrings. Grace wins this round, how can she not? She's both there and unattainable. Oh well, at least his bitch flat-mate has had a chance to see him with a classier women than she'll ever be.

*

Brenda has found a new friend; a fag called Billy, who drops in at the bakery on Fridays for ginger kisses to take to his mother's house on Saturday mornings. He spies Brenda, squatting on her heels and rocking, between the back door of the bakery and the big rubbish bin, sobbing, shaking, and hyperventilating. He hurries over to comfort her, at first stroking her shoulders, and then taking her hands and coaxing her into standing up. He says, 'There are times when all you can do is stick with the moments. The blue sky. The light breeze. The smell of sponges, fresh from the oven. The damp curl, clinging to the

back of that baker's neck. Right here, right now, nothing terrible is happening.'

He works in the Panmure Winz Office, and was once Mike's case worker, providing Brenda with a tenuous, secret link to the love of her life. Between the bursts of angst and plateaus of common sense she has acquired a shimmering, reckless gaiety; that deceptive bi-product of despair, and a dangerous fondness for tequila.

Sometimes she leaves the kids with her mother after work, and she and Billy sit in a corner of the Panmure Tavern, making observations about the other patrons, fancying this one, dissing that one, and screaming with laughter.

Shane and Kirsty are convinced Billy's a bad influence. 'No wonder Mike pissed off,' Shane reflects, overlooking the fact that he appeared after the event.

November 25th, Shane and Kirsty's engagement party, funded by Mike's hydroponically grown plants. Mike doesn't know about it, and Shane is still determining the moral position he should take if or when he tells him. To claim they were stolen, or died because some dick-head opened the cupboard at the wrong time. To insist he thought they were a gift. To argue that since he looked after them they were rightfully his anyway. And they were; now he comes to think of it. He took the risk. He tended to them a bloody sight better than Mike ever did. Fuck Mike Lockwood. Anyway, it's a party isn't it? He can worry about things like that some other time. The Pakuranga Cricket club-rooms are a pressure cooker of loud music, flat beer, cigarette and marijuana smoke, hot, sweaty bodies and a broad olfactory ensemble of perfumes and deodorants. The joint is jumping.

A couple of blocks away, in a tidy living room just off Pakuranga Highway, a group of middle-aged poets are holding a workshop, and their conversation lapses into a momentary lull. One of them, a woman, says, 'A room always falls silent at twenty past the hour.' They all look

up at the clock, and sure enough, it's near enough to twenty past 11. Another, a man, wanders over to peer through the ranch slider, musing to himself, 'There's something very tender about distant laughter.'

At the laughter's epi-centre, Shane is doing a striptease to Ozzy Osbourne's I Just Want You, surrounded by a mob yelling 'Off! Off! Off!' while Kirsty squawks from sidelines 'That's our song. You shouldn't be stripping to our song. I'm going to change the music.' Which she does, and on comes Every Rose has it's Thorn. Someone yells 'What are you doing you silly bitch?' and she yells back, 'Get fucked. It's our engagement party and it's our song, and you can fuck off if you don't like it.' Then someone else pushes her toward Shane, and there's no way in hell Kirsty's going to join in the stripping, and let this pack of arseholes see her tits, but she drapes herself sensuously around him, dirty dancing, and then of course, she wants their song again, so it's back to Ozzy.

On the periphery, Mike and Brenda hover with their dates for the event, trying to avoid looking at each other, but always knowing each

other's precise location. They've spoken of course, a little bit awkwardly, since neither knows what they're supposed to say.

Brenda is with Billy, who has unfortunately been recognised as a WINZ man, and is besieged by a blonde woman who's had her DPB reduced, a beer-bellied geezer with Christine Rankin fantasies to share, and Kirsty's redneck uncle, who has a few policy suggestions, along the lines of 'Throw them all into the army.'

'She's no spring chicken, but old Chrissie's got a great arse on her. I'd screw her,' volunteers the beer-bellied geezer.

Billy peers between their ranks, trying to get a decent look at Mike, whose date seems to be weaving her way elsewhere, to the loo perhaps, and who has aimlessly wandered over to join the Off! Off! Off! chorus. Oh yes, that guy. One he cast in the 'too hard' basket a few years back, and shunted on to the indomitable Alice, who eventually got him into telemarketing or something. Billy has nothing against Mike, in fact he finds him almost fancy-able, in a way. But when a rela-

tionship has ended, and the couple meet separately at social events, someone has to have the winning hand, and Billy feels it should be Brenda. He has a talent for drawing out the gorgeousness in a woman, simply by talking to the gorgeous aspect of her, and can't understand a lot of straight men, who are attracted to swans and then do their darnedest to turn them into ducks.

Billy escapes his small audience, makes two tequila slammers, opens a bottle of Gewürztraminer, and says to Brenda, 'Drink up daughter, we're not here for fun.' They sit down at a picnic table outside, and gradually a salon forms around them; a party within the party. Brenda and Billy are Stockard Channing and Indiana Jones, and everyone who gravitates their way is a star or a character, or a cartoon, or any sort of iconic figure from any era. Emma Peale, Patrick Swazey, Meryl Streep, Vinnie Barbarino, Princess Leah, Betty and Veronica, Cindy Lauper, Homer Simpson, Britney Spears, Johnny Depp. People try and tango to Judas Priest, and pile mad one-liner onto one-liner. Billy finds a yard broom by the side of the building and gets this game going where people have to run the broom from front to back, and

then from right to left, encircling their entire body without letting go of the handle or falling over. They do it in teams; the Body Guards versus the Long Lost Pals.

‘Go Britney. That’s five to the BGs and a tatty old two to the LLPs.’

‘Come on Homer, you can do it, I know you can. No, no. You’re putting your foot through the wrong way’

This isn’t how things were meant to go. Mike was supposed to turn up, urbane and confident, with a glamorous unknown woman on his arm, condescendingly nice to his ex and the envy of his old mates. But it turned out that everyone is getting into it except him, and he hasn’t seen Grace for at least half an hour. From the corner of his eye he observes Brenda doing the broomstick thing for the Long Lost Pals. She is thinner, and also more glowing than he remembers. She is showing more leg and more cleavage than she ever did when she was with him. She’s laughing. She’s done it. Go, girl. It’s three to the LLPs.

While Mike has been wandering around, standing on one foot and then the other, dancing with little enthusiasm, and chatting with random bores, Grace has been out the back of the clubrooms smoking crystal amphetamine from a little glass pipe with the old rhythm guitarist from Overdrive, who has driven up from Thames for the occasion. She is brilliant. She is hilarious. She is bullet proof. She is completely and thoroughly wired.

On her return to the lit-up area she ignores Mike, and proceeds to hold forth on any topic to anyone who will listen, insult people, hit on their partners, and stand around twitching and smouldering between acts. It's a great relief when she disappears again. At first anyway. Later, when people are getting annoyed because one of the toilets is locked for an inordinately long time, and they have to go outside and find themselves a tree, a consensus is reached that someone must have passed out in there. Mike volunteers to climb over the door and help them, and of course who should it be but Grace, legs wrapped around the guitarist from Thames, humping away. So much for the mysterious man she's never gotten over.

It is a mistake to think that when things are bad, they can't get worse. Once she and the guitarist have generously relinquished the toilet to other revellers, Grace's eye falls on Kirsty's engagement ring, which has been the piece de resistance of the night. 'Kirsty that's so beautiful.' 'I hope you've got it insured, it must be worth a fortune.' Kirsty has had a special manicure to render her hands worthy of it, and carries them around as if she'd bought them at Zambezi. She will not even use a corkscrew for fear of chipping a nail.

Grace stumbles into an admiring throng of girls on her way to the keg. The last keg, which needs to be tipped on its side to extract the remaining dregs of beer from it. Shane is doing the honours, glancing over proudly while Kirsty recounts the story of the great grandmother from Germany, whose ring it originally was. Apparently this great grandmother was a countess and a famous beauty, who lived near the Black Forest and played a harpsichord, before marrying a Scotsman and emigrating to Papakura.

Grace takes Kirsty's hand and stares long and hard at the engagement ring. Too long. Too hard. Kirsty does a polite little laugh and tries to discreetly extract her hand. Grace holds on. 'Where did you get this ring?' she asks. Kirsty opens her mouth to re-tell her story for the ninety-ninth time, but Grace continues without waiting for an answer. 'This ring belonged to my dead mother.'

'Bullshit,' cries Kirsty, now trying to wrench her hand away.

'It's my mother's and I can prove it. On the inside, behind the stones, there's an E and a B engraved, for Eileen and Brian. Here, give us it. I'll show you.'

Shane is alarmed. There was a scrawl of some sort inside that ring, so worn down as to be unreadable.

'Get your paws off me,' yells Kirsty.

A problem with crystal amphetamine, also known as P, is that it can

exclude the middle ground between impulse and action. Failing to wrest the ring off the finger, Grace sinks her teeth into Kirsty's beautifully turned out, mother-of-pearl nailed left hand, drawing blood. Kirsty screams. Shane steps in. Four or five of those guys who live for moments where stepping in is required, step in also. In accordance with her drug of choice, Grace has temporarily forgotten her original motivation. All she wants now is to claw the stupid look off that smug bitch's face. She kicks, flails and yells while the stepper-inners drag her away.

'Who brought that woman here? Someone's got to get her home,' says Shane, arm protectively around Kirsty, taking control.

'She's probably given me AIDs, or at least hep C,' wails Kirsty, hand wrapped in a beer-sodden tea towel.

She hasn't. The hand will heal, and nothing much will come of the incident except talk. Talk, talk, talk.

'I saw mum's engagement ring, you remember how she lost it, and we wrote to Dear Fiona and that? I saw this woman in Pakuranga wearing it. I couldn't believe my eyes. I mean, it belonged to Dad's grandma before he gave it to Mum. I thought about saying something, but then I didn't have the heart.'

'Shane McAllister's mean as cat shit. He even bought their engagement ring from cash converters. Yeah, that's a fact. Some woman recognised it.'

'Kirsty and Shane's engagement party? Brilliant. Except I had to step in at one point and stop this fight. Yeah, Kirsty and this chick from town. It was terrible, man, blood everywhere. Worse than a fight between guys.'

Mike waits around with Grace for a taxi. She's jabbering on about sushi; how the sushi you get in shops isn't the real, Japanese-style sushi, how there's a place in King's Cross where they make it properly, with actual sticky rice and wasabi and so on. Which is a relief. If

no one distracts her, she'll hang around till the cab arrives. And then, between the smoked salmon and the avocado, Mike feels something like a tiny ball of light bouncing back and forth between him and Brenda, containing simple but essential information. You might describe it as bat radar, or quantum ping-pong. It is something that only happens between people who have a real connection with each other. He understands at once that she is in a quiet, wound down state, and guesses she might be dressing Kirsty's injured hand. Then his crucified snake tattoo gets itchy, and he thinks, I have to get rid of that bloody thing. It drives me crazy.

When their cab finally turns up, Mike decides not to go. He says, 'Thanks for coming with me Grace. I think I should hang around though and help clean up.' She's been nothing but trouble, but there's no point in holding a grudge. He fishes forty bucks from his pocket to pay her fare, and suddenly the driver's getting out of his cab, laughing delightedly. 'I know you,' he says, 'from the TV. "Making love in the refrigerator light."' That's so funny, man. Me and my wife, we laughed our heads off. Tonight is the first time we saw

it. Very good. Very funny.’ He shakes Mike’s hand and says, ‘Now I will tell my wife I have shaken the fridge man’s hand. She will be very impressed.’

Earlier in the night, while the party was getting started, Mike’s ad made its debut appearance on TV. An ad is just an ad, but this is one of those ads that make people feel good, for no discernable reason. It enters through the eyes to release a little spring of warmth and mirth in the heart. Already, his line is on its way to being a catch phrase. ‘What are you doing out there?’ ‘Making love in the refrigerator light. What did you think I was doing?’ ‘There’s nothing worth seeing at the movies tonight. Let’s just stay home and make love in the refrigerator light.’

All Mike knows of this so far is a bewildering encounter with a taxi driver. He’s arranged to crash on Shane’s couch, it’s 4am, and the party has disintegrated and dissolved. Shane, Kirsty, Billy, Brenda and he have sort of half tidied things up, and are hanging around, holding broken conversations in a suspended end-of-the-party moment, that

will end when Kirsty says, 'Let's lock up, have a sleep and deal with the rest later. We've got till midday.'

Mike and Brenda are gathering bottles and plastic cups that have been dropped outside. Mike thinks about the quantum ping-pong feeling that came upon him when Grace was leaving. He's relieved it's still there, and wonders what the hell he's imagined he's been up to. He thinks about the first time he met Brenda, how she walked up to him and said, 'Excuse me. Can I kiss you?'

That's it. She placed herself in his hands, and so he took her for granted. He thought he was trying to escape Brenda and the kids when the person he was really running away from was himself. Perhaps what he has to do is place himself in her hands. He turns to Brenda.

'Excuse me, can I kiss you?' he asks.

'No,' says Brenda. 'You left me. I didn't leave you. If you want me back you have to win me back.'

'How?' asks Mike, rather stupidly.

'Dunno. Just convince me,' says Brenda, 'but drop in on Christmas day, won't you. Paul and Emma would love to see you.' She smiles, almost coquettishly, 'and come to think of it, I wouldn't mind seeing you myself.'

*

It's nice to sit round a table after dinner, or on a veranda while night is slowly falling, and dream up sweet rides. To win the lotto. To be a salaried cook on a billionaire's yacht, called to duty two or three times a year when the billionaire suddenly remembers he has a yacht, and wants to entertain on it. To buy some old painting at a garage sale, to cover up a hole in the wall, and then find out it's by Van Gogh.

There are people who glance about with resentment in their eye, scanning the horizon for others who look like they're on a sweet ride. The

rich, because they have lots of cool stuff, and can holiday in tropical paradises whenever they like. The poor, because they don't have many responsibilities. The people on the dole, because they don't have to get out of bed in the morning. There are some who even think prison's a sweet ride, if they don't happen to be in prison themselves.

There is not a lot to be said for Mo Jo, aka Jason Matthews, but there is at least one thing. He is devoid of resentment, and begrudges nobody a sweet ride. All he wants is to be on one himself. And as it happens, his luck's in. This Russian guy called Yuri has hooked him up big-time. All he has to do is fly here or there, now and again, with a suitcase full of caviar or some sort of antique or other. He gets \$500US a mission, all expenses paid, and accommodation in a first class hotel while he's on it.

Right now, he's landing in Heathrow Airport with a Faberge egg to take to Sotheby's. It opens out to be a cuckoo clock, with gold hands and diamond numerals. The cuckoo has little gold legs and ruby eyes, and the egg itself is encrusted with emeralds and pearls. Fucking bril-

liant. He'd like to keep it and send it to his old lady for Christmas, but if he did that it would mean the end of the sweet ride. In fact it could mean the end of the ride, period. Besides, he's proud of the progress he's made over the past three or four months. He started out as an honest kiwi accent lending credence to tourist scams, like trading old, worthless currency for US dollars, or acting as a tour guide, wearing a tee shirt with the East German traffic light character on it and guiding tourists toward businesses run by these Sointsevkaya guys. He was so good at it he quickly graduated to being a caviar courier. Fuck it's amazing what people will pay for that shit; if you ask Mo Jo it's sort of like lumpy marmite that's gone off. And now here he is, delivering a Faberge egg. That's how much they trust him. His old lady must be worried about him; he hasn't been in touch with her since he left. He'd better call her from a public phone in the airport. He'll tell her he's ringing from Australia.

'Hi Mum, it's Jase. I'm in Sydney.'

'Yes, I've got this job telemarketing.'

‘No, I haven’t been up to Cairns to see Uncle Charlie. I’ve been too busy.’

‘I’m doing a lot of swimming.’

‘Yes, I’ll be careful about needles on the beach.’

‘And sharks.’

The £5 phone card slowly ticks away.

‘Love you Mum.’

And what do you know, there’s this guy he’s met in Berlin, waiting with a mate of his to use the phone. It’s a small world. What was his name again? Vladimir? Oleg? He’s pretty sure it’s Oleg. ‘Dobroye ytro, Oleg. Kak dela?’ says Mo Jo. He’s down with the Russians. However, the fist that connects with his solar plexus, the head butt that sends shards of pure pain through his body from between his eyes, and the

boot in the back of the head as he lands, suggest that this might not be entirely true. 'That fucking Yuri's set me up,' is Mo Jo's last thought as he loses consciousness.

*

Mike hasn't been at Wahlquist's for long enough to get his full holiday pay over the Christmas break. He just has the statutory holidays, plus a few extra days, and he hasn't been paid for the ad yet either. He could have sold those plants he left at Shane's to tide himself over, except apparently someone nicked them while everybody was at the engagement party. Still, it's great to get away from Grace, and the peculiar little sidestep they now do around each other. Not to mention the customers, who keep saying things like, 'Hey, aren't you the guy off the ad for this place? Well, bugger-me-days, I thought they got real actors in for that kind of thing.'

Blame the silly season, and call it fame by circumstantial evidence. First, there are a handful of complaints to the Broadcasting Association

about a naked man with a lewd line being shown on the TV before eight thirty, for innocent children to see and hear. Followed by a dialogue in letters to the editor:

‘What does this bilge have to do with refrigerators anyway? Some of these ad men like to imagine they’re yet-to-be-discovered Tarantino’s. What we want to know about is the product, not their arty-farty aspirations.’

‘Leave the iceman alone. He’s cool, and besides he’s not naked. All you can see of him is half a torso. There are too many people in this country with no sense of fun.’

‘Performing any activity by the refrigerator light will abbreviate the life of your fridge, especially during the summer months.’

‘The only reason anyone complains about the iceman is, face it, he’s sexy. There are too many people in this country who need to stop writing letters to the editor and go out and get laid.’

Talkback radio picks up the story as well, and follows similar lines, with an added dimension to do with the possibility that an ad like that in prime time could well be giving a green light to paedophiles.

A freelance journalist, looking for stuff to write about while all the employed staff on papers and magazines are eating turkey, exchanging presents and lolling on beaches, does a feature on Mike, which a Sunday paper runs mid January. 'When I called on Mike Lockwood, he was relaxing in his back garden, reading Albert Camus' *The Plague*, with copies of the *New Scientist* and the *Listener* lying on the grass beside him,' her story begins.

Brenda reads it carefully. Everything is true. He does like his books and magazines. His band *Overdrive* is mentioned, his childhood in Mount Wellington, plus the fact that he's more than just a pretty face as far as refrigeration goes. Even their break-up and tentative reconciliation is touched on briefly, though she isn't named, but what is conjured up is not the Mike Lockwood she knows. What is conjured

up is the kind of guy a person who has never left Ashburton might associate with Ponsonby Road. His ordinary interests and skills come across as idiosyncrasies in a character whose raison d'être is its public image.

'Hmmp. Says nothing about him being on the dole all those years,' grumps Shane.

'Doesn't mention that bitch girlfriend of his who bit me either,' critiques Kirsty.

A radio announcer from bFM finds an old tape of Since You've Gone Away among the station's archives, and turns it into something of a motif, treating both the song and its singer with affectionate derision. He even telephones Mike at Wahlquist's, on air, and suggests that he should get the old band back together. 'I don't know about that,' says Mike, 'and anyway, some of us have work to do.' Next thing, to Mike's chagrin, an eighteen-year-old rapper called Out Rage has sampled his song and added it to one of his own.

Goin' down to hook up with my boys in the park
the street lights are on and its getting' kinda dark
Lookin' for my posse, got a pain in my heart
cause I just found out how my bitch is a nark...

asserts Out Rage, with Mike's voice quietly singing and I look up at the screaming sky, between the beats.

The sample is too small for Mike to consider suing, and he couldn't afford to anyway, but what a piss-off, hearing his own personal voice being used to enhance a fucking rap song.

However, there is greater piss-off in store. At 7.30am, on a hot February morning, Mike answers the door, toothbrush in hand, to three detectives. 'Michael Joseph Lockwood?' Mike nods, his mouth full of toothpaste. 'You'd better ring your work,' says Detective A, rather darkly, 'and tell them you won't be in today.'

They wish to talk to him about a dead body found in a shallow grave

in the Yorkshire moors, sans hands, sans teeth, and a partially burnt Adidas bag, containing a passport belonging to a Michael Joseph Lockwood, of 17 Panorama Drive, Mt Wellington, discovered nearby. They would also like to know more about a Faberge egg, auctioned at Sotheby's and later found to be stolen, which arrived from Berlin within the same timeframe as Michael Joseph Lockwood's arrival in London.

'Don't give us any bullshit mate. See this guy here? This is Detective Max McCallum, of Scotland Yard,' warns Detective B, in response to Mike's bewildered facial expression, 'if you think you want to fuck us around, remember you're fucking with the big boys. If I were you, I wouldn't bother.'

Mike's sick of things coming at him, trying to tell him who he is. A star. A sleaze. A joke. Now an international criminal. All he wants is to speak to Brenda, and hear her voice talking to the Mike Lockwood he's accustomed to being. Not that they're back together. He still hasn't convinced her. But at Christmas they did exchange modest gifts; a

green sarong and second hand book of poetry; Blue Footpaths, by Bob Orr. He visited her on Christmas Eve, with some lolly leis for her tree, and a set of fairy wings for Emma and a soccer ball for Paul, to leave under it. They took the kids to midnight mass at Panmure and sang Silent Night, holding little white candles on cardboard trays. On Christmas evening, after they'd been to their families' houses, and the tinsel explosion was effectively over, they hung around with Billy, Shane and Kirsty on her back lawn, listening to Billy's Lee Hazelwood and Nancy Sinatra album. It was then, in a quiet conversation over by the lemon tree, they decided to see more of each other. No strings. No promises. A sort of going back and starting again with simple courtship. Seeing what, if anything, came of it. With Lee crooning in the background, 'One velvet morning when I'm straight...'

The number Mike rings when the detectives allow him to make a personal phone call, is that of the Arcadia Bakery. 'Brenda? I don't know what's going on here, but it looks like I'm going to need a lawyer,' he says.

*

If by any chance you feel a little bit worried about Jason Matthews, stop right now. Certainly he has his problems, but he's not in any way dead. Save your grief for poor Oleg, who found himself next in line for betrayal, and was betrayed rather forcefully because of a score or two from the past, crying out for settlement.

Jason Matthews is effectively stateless and nameless. A non-citizen of the world. He is seeking employment in boats captained by cowboys, drunks and weirdoes, who are able to view his lack of documentation as neither here nor there. What else can he do? He's hardly going to front up at an embassy demanding a new passport to replace one that was fraudulently acquired. The Atlantic Ocean is no place for sissies, whose sea-legs incline toward weakness around knees, and Jason is presently pitching and tossing on the deck of a dirty rust-bucket of a fishing trawler, vomiting pure bile over the side.

'The sea's no good. The fishing's no good. And you're no good,'

observes his fat, whisky-sodden skipper, with stoical restraint.

At Lisbon, he will abandon this ship, and hook up with a mad, mad American couple on an ocean-going ketch called The Shangri-La. On different occasions they will each try to climb into bed with him. On others they will gang up on him. On yet others they will have terrible fights and sulk for long periods, hissing their diagnoses of each other's psychological flaws to Jason in the galley or on the deck.

He will spend a lot of his time cowered in his cabin, reading a book he's found lying around called Who Really Rules the World? by David Icke, and will understand, beyond the shadow of a doubt, that the world is run by lizard-people. He will keep his head down and tough it out all the way to Dakar, via the Canary Islands. By these and similar means he will weave a slow and furtive path homeward, eventually surfacing in an Indonesian fishing boat full of Iraqi refugees, plucked from the sea by the captain of MV Tampa, and deposited on Christmas Island.

The presence of a New Zealand national without papers among this group will be viewed as potentially embarrassing, given the controversy raging around the event and the looming Australian election. For this reason he will be quietly deposited in Auckland by the Australian Special Air Service, and eventually begin to reassemble some form of everyday life around himself.

*

The word 'Sointsevkaya' is becoming commonplace, the way 'dominatrix' did back in the eighties, as the nation argues about whether Mike Lockwood is linked to the Russian Mafia, or has been stitched up. True, the police have so far proved unable to pin anything on him, but a journalist from the New Zealand Herald has unearthed a three week gap between the cessation of Mike's dole and the beginning of his PAYE deductions at Wahlquist's, mysteriously coinciding with the time of his alleged flight to Berlin. And although evidence suggests that he has been around since then, the Faberge egg's arrival in London and Oleg's death occurred during his Christmas holidays. So

what if there's no evidence of his leaving the country again, everyone knows Sointsevkaya members have ways of getting their people to wherever they want them. The reference passport photo at the Justice Department is indeterminate. It could be Mike, but it might not be. There are differences and similarities. I mean, does the mug shot on your driver's licence depict you exactly? There's a woman who works at the office desk, who claims to remember the man who picked up the passport as being both younger and taller than Mike, but what would she know? The human memory for details is notoriously unreliable. And that limp; it's probably an old bullet wound. Not to mention Kirsty's engagement ring. The Sunday News gets a shot of Shane, Kirsty, Mike, Brenda and Billy lunching one Saturday in the Botany Downs Shopping Centre, and an expert's eye zeroes in on Kirsty's ring. 'It was probably made in Belgium toward the end of the nineteenth century. A ring like that would be very rare in New Zealand, and worth a considerable sum nowadays,' he writes to the editor. Faberge eggs. Antique rings. Never mind the fact that Kirsty is Shane's fiancé rather than Mike's, everyone knows they were in a band together years ago, and are still as thick as thieves. It all adds up.

And then there's his mother. She telephones talkback radio to insist that her son is innocent of all allegations, has been in Auckland the whole time, and anyway, she has reason to believe he was sexually abused as an infant, though she was never able to prove it. The old sexual abuse card, cry the listeners. Isn't anyone responsible for their actions any more? And more importantly, if he's so innocent, why make excuses for him? His brother Greg wades in. 'If there's anything wrong with my brother, it probably has more to do with Mum's religious fanaticism than any other form of abuse,' he claims. More excuses.

It shouldn't be too hard for Mike to get off the hook on a basis of mere common sense, but the implications swirling around him capture the national imagination. The police want him to be guilty, because it's the kind of realo-dealo stuff they see too little of. They've had visitors from Scotland Yard, and Interpol as well. A Mr Big of Sointsevkaya, or even a Mr Medium, certainly beats the regular round of bashings, maimings and home-bake factories they normally have to put up with.

The media want him to be guilty because he is providing miles of footage, easily researched on the internet, leaving them plenty of time for long lunches. Sointsevkaya's history and key personalities, Faberge eggs, the need for computerised passport identification, and so on, and so on. Not to mention the whole Mike package. The controversial fridge ad, the old Overdrive song, played these days on all the radio stations, and now links with organised crime and exotic hardware.

The public want him to be guilty, because schadenfreude is a great antidote to quiet desperation, and scandal permits such creative self-expression. The outraged vent their outrage, the forgiving forgive, the gossips gossip, the irreverent make wisecracks and pub bores share their abundant knowledge on a new round of subjects. 'Rah rah Faberge rah rah rah Romanoff rah rah Rasputin...'

Meanwhile, back at the ranch, Mike is sleeping in his old room at his parent's house and mowing lawns for Shane, earning somewhere between \$80 and \$150 a week. Dead famous and dirt poor.

Les Wahlquist, of Wahlquist's Refrigeration and Appliance Rentals, doesn't want anyone official sniffing around his business, and has suspended Mike's employment until his name has been cleared and the dust has settled. The ad too, has been withdrawn from the TV, the printed media, and the backs of buses, although a still of Mike's face, taken from it, sometimes appears on the news. Simon Shankly, Mike's lawyer, who has by now devoured all of his ad money, has advised him against going back on the dole, in case he ends up being charged, and sent to Britain to stand trial. 'Michael Joseph Lockwood, unemployed, of Mt Wellington. It wouldn't sound good in court,' he explains. 'what you want now is a low wage, so you can qualify for legal aid without coming across as a drain on society.'

Despite the ad's withdrawal, 'Making love in the refrigerator light' remains a common catchphrase, with improvisations: 'Making millions, mayhem, monkey business in the refrigerator light.'

*

HBB: Half Baked Bastard.

BTN: Better Than Nothing.

‘I’ve decided to go back with him,’ Brenda tells Billy.

Brenda and Billy have taken it upon themselves to cut down on alcohol, and are drinking lemonade with lime and bitters in Brenda’s living room, where they have just watched *London Kills Me* on the video. It’s March, the evening air is starting to acquire an autumnal chill, and Billy has borrowed the old blue basketball sweater that Mike wore the night he stormed off, before he started work at Wahlquist’s.

‘Why?’ asks Billy. ‘Is that what you really want? I mean, I’m sure he’s perfectly charming, but what’s he got going for him? That combination of being a minor public figure, a suspected criminal and an under-employed gardener looks to me like to a ‘worst of all possible worlds’ scenario. You need a provider Brenda, and whatever his fine qualities are, that doesn’t seem to be one of them.’

‘Stop,’ cries Brenda, ‘you’re beginning to sound like Mum.’

Billy shakes his head. ‘I just don’t get it.’

‘Because if you find someone you really want to be with, and they want to be with you,’ Brenda explains. ‘you might as well stop right there. Look at how most people live. Not counting the ones like Shane and Kirsty, who’ve been together since their teens. All around us there are people in their thirties, forties, dyeing their hair, painting their nails, choosing their winter wardrobe, reading their stars, taking their E, working out at the gym. Dressed up, drugged up and toned up for a groundhog day that goes on and on and on, with a HBB here, and a BTN there to relieve the monotony, along with some dumb-arsed office job to call their career. Stuff that. Mike’s OK. He’s nice to the kids. He’s a good fuck. And anyway, I love him. Well, maybe I love him. Of course I love him.’

‘You’re making me feel all lonesome,’ Billy pulls a wry face, ‘like I took

a wrong turn somewhere in the maze, and missed the Happy-ever-after sign.'

'Who said anything about happy-ever-afters?' asks Brenda, 'and how would we know if we stumbled across one?'

Brenda's place, which is actually owned by her mother, and was once her grandmother's, has quietly been growing more stylish since she's been friends with Billy, almost by osmosis. The pale green art nouveau light shade that has been there since time immemorial has taken to looking art nouveau, instead of just old, and struts its stuff on the ceiling. There are yellow irises in a black vase on the dining room table. Brenda and Billy wander off the love subject to explore the idea of painting the kitchen almond green and a burnt tangerine colour. 'This is getting close to the doorframe and cupboard shade I was trying to describe,' Brenda points to the border of a pamphlet advertising a local Indian take-away, 'What do think?'

By now it is pretty clear to everyone that Mike Lockwood has never left New Zealand and has nothing whatsoever to do with the Russian mafia. However, the ghost of Sointsevkaya hovers, lending him an edgy glamour, rather as Brian Jones' ghost left the Rolling Stones with a 'live hard, die young' patina, which lasted them for years.

'The Australians have Chopper, and we have Mike Lockwood,' the producer of the Wahlquist's fridge ad claims, speaking into his cell phone, 'we should be making use of him.' He's pitching an idea to a television company. They are interested. This could be his big break.

The show is called Smooth Criminals, and involves a trio of personalities exploring cons, dodgy deals and rip-offs. Its territory lies somewhere between the boundaries of Crimewatch and Fair Go, and it flirts dangerously with instructing the public on how to commit the crimes it self-righteously claims to eschew. Mike is one of the personalities. There is also a well-turned-out blonde called Amy; one of those television perennials, who looks as if she may have been a shining new

clothes dryer in a previous life. Plus Robert, a man of about 45, who takes a worthy, authoritative role, who had a brief run as a sports' presenter in the eighties, who thanks the Lord in Heaven that there is sometimes life after death in the fickle world of television. But will Mike take it? Of course he fucking will. No one wants to live at their parents' place forever, on \$100 a week. Who knows how this wave formed, or where it actually came from, but it would be churlish not to attempt to ride it.

It goes like this. With a wink, a nudge and a one-liner hurled in the viewer's direction, Mike breaks into what is purportedly a stranger's house in broad daylight, one he has staked out in a previous episode. Amy then shares pained looks with the viewer while Mike hurls soft toys out of his way, kicks a dog bowl and knocks over a potted palm, leaving compost, terracotta and foliage all over a white carpet. 'It might just look like a computer,' she explains, as Mike lugs a new iMac down the garden path and stows it into the back of a van, 'but it will contain all of Ron and Margaret's business records, little Madeline's unfinished project on whales, and Otto the Jack Russell's pedigree and vet records. At this point Robert will chime in, with advice on

security systems, strategies for keeping safe and so on, with Amy's countenance slowly softening into relief and reassurance that 'something can be done about it.' Car conversion, drug dealing, smash-and-grab robberies, fraud in all its manifestations. Same formula. But no rape. No murder. No kidnapping. Because it is necessary that the audience kind of like Mike, even as they disapprove of him.

*

And what about this meeting Mike had with Jesus in Lorraine's garden? What of it? Was it real? I mean, Mike was in a pretty weird state at the time, to recall things correctly. He reflects on it with decreasing frequency, and over the next couple of years nothing much seems to develop from it.

What happens is, Mike, and then Mike and Brenda together, become small stars in a large galaxy of minor celebrities, bright enough to get away with selling the rights for their wedding photographs to New Zealand Women's Weekly, though not for a very high price. And

didn't it piss Kirsty off, especially since they ended up getting married before her and Shane. Flickery enough to find themselves with some very anxious patches between gigs, including a particularly edgy few months after Smooth Criminal and before Food on the Run, dreamed up by the same producer once he discovered that Brenda worked in a bakery. This producer has so far remained unnamed, but is actually called Sam. We have to know who he is now, because there is something of a frisson going on between him and Billy, so he is almost family. Mike played cupid, and it worked. To paraphrase the Princess of Wales, a marriage with three people in it gets a little crowded.

However, looking forward now, whenever the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune hit; like for instance when Brenda has a stillborn child, their first together; when at the age of twelve Paul gets meningitis and almost dies, and when at forty four and forty six, he and Brenda go through a serious bad patch and almost separate, Mike remembers, and thinks, 'Maybe that's why Jesus appeared to me that day. To fortify me for this.' And the same with his good fortune like his present round of unsought-after fame. On sleepless nights, when

he can't help but toss things over in his mind, he thinks maybe Jesus came to bless him with confidence, so he could seize opportunities. He remembers then how he felt that afternoon in Lorraine's garden and thinks, yes, that must be the answer.

It is only when he is 63 years old, and Brenda dies suddenly, of a heart attack, while taking sheets in off the line, that the seed dropped onto the ground called Mike begins to bear noticeable fruit. It is then that he decides, out of loneliness, to become a voluntary prison visitor, and reveals an inexplicable talent for bringing out the good in seemingly irredeemable people. But that's another story, light years away from this one.

*

It is more than a year since September 11, 2001, and the world teeters on the brink of war. Jason Matthews, in his rented one-room cottage just out of Kaitaia, idly stares at the latest cooking show on a grainy TV screen, while waiting for some rice to boil, to go with his lentil curry. A

swarthy, sleazy looking man and titian haired, serious-faced woman, with one of those sudden but radiant smiles, are happily basting a goat on a spit, with a Vienna loaf and a tomato, green bean and basil salad on a picnic table in the background. Further back is a blue tent, a pohutukawa and a curve of bay. 'What's so cool about eating a poor, innocent four-legged life-form?' Jason asks out loud, and flicks the TV off. Jason has seen the dark side, and these days he believes in karma, wanting only purity, inwardly and outwardly.

Karma works like this. You're walking along, and with every action you take; you're either throwing a pinch of gold or a pinch of shit over your shoulder. And one day, you're going to turn around and face what's behind you, whichever it is composed of.

Unfortunately, getting out of a lake of shit can mean wading through that self-same substance for some time. Jason is compelled to sell drugs and work under-the-counter, this time on a mussel farm, in order to set things right. He is using his dole to pay back his over-payments of dole, his tax free income to redeem himself from the sin

of non-compliance with tax laws, and whatever else he can get his hands on to free himself of fines and other debts. In four years time, he figures, he will finally be a bona fide citizen. He wonders about the karmic connotations of selling his body to rich foreign tourists, and decides that this would probably be alright, providing he gives them their money's worth. At least, living in the country these days, the air he puts into his lungs is pure.

He sits on a pile of banana boxes in the middle of the floor and eats his dinner, from a wooden bowl with chopsticks. The boxes are filled with his worldly possessions, and arrived a week ago from storage in a warehouse in Onehunga. It's about time he opened them. He puts his bowl on the sink bench, and cuts through the packing tape of the first box with a carving knife. He pulls back the cardboard, his eye falls on a maroon plastic folder, and what he sees is one small deed he can do to increase his karmic gold.

*

Paul and Emma have just had their eighth birthday, and one of their school friends has given Paul an Out Rage album, which includes a song that came out as a single a couple of years ago. It's Saturday morning, and they're listening to it while they make a desultory attempt at cleaning up their room.

'Goin' down to hook up with my boys in the park.'

'Please. Turn that shit down,' shouts Mike, 'it's too early in the morning.'

'What's wrong with it?' shouts Paul, 'Out Rage is cool.'

'Anyway you used to be in a band yourself,' adds Emma.

'Last time I looked, people started being teenagers at thirteen, not eight,' says Brenda bluntly, 'turn it down or I'll take it off you. And get on with your room.'

Mike and Brenda are discussing their concerns over a strong pot of coffee. Like what to do when their fifteen minutes of fame is over. As it will be. And getting these kids into separate rooms. They're too old to still be in the same room. They've bought the house from Brenda's Mum at a reasonable price, even though she still has her doubts about Mike. And Mike's parents helped with the deposit, even though Mrs Lockwood thinks her boy could do better than Brenda, especially now he's on the TV. They could turn the laundry into a bedroom, and build out on the other side of the bathroom for a laundry, where the feijoa is, which is probably the cheapest way to go about it. They will definitely be able to increase their mortgage while they're employed on TV, but they'll probably still be paying it when their flash-in-the-pan careers have exhausted themselves. And then what?

'Ooh-ooh, anyone in?' Mrs Lockwood stands in the doorway, flapping an A4 sized brown envelope. It is addressed to Mike at 17 Panorama Drive, his parents' house. It has no sender's address, just Meat is Murder scrawled in upper case on the back, in black marker pen. Mike opens it. The CV Brenda made for him, back in the day, falls out.

At least a hundred years ago. Well, three years ago. The wheel has turned. Mike reads the opening page, which has acquired a new coffee stain since he last saw it. It seems so real. It seems so innocent. He closes the CV, kisses it, hugs it to his chest and kisses it again. 'Well, I'll be buggered,' he says.

If Billy was there, he'd counter with, 'Isn't that my line?' But he isn't. So he doesn't.



EBK 3

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A Titus e-Book

ISBN 978-1-877441-32-5

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‘Making love in the refrigerator light’ comes from a poem by Raewyn Alexander which, in turn, refers to a song by Alice Cooper called Cold Ethyl.

The cover illustration is by Elliot Stewart, ‘Mike talking to Jesus in the garden.’

In 2002, the author was awarded an Arts Board New Work grant from Creative New Zealand which assisted the completion of this work.
