THE SHELL-KEEPERS of KING ISLAND
A Magically Real Tale

An exegesis/project submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for
the degree Master of Arts

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The Cataraqui (also called the Cataraque) was a British barque sailing ship which sunk off the south-west coast of King Island in Bass Strait on 4 August 1845. The sinking was Australia's worst maritime civil disaster incident, claiming the lives of 400 people.

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*The Shell-keepers of King Island* is a fiction and only suggestive of King Island, Tasmania.
The Shell-Keeper of King Island

A Magically Real Tale

ROSEMARY RAINER

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One curious thing about growing up is that you don't only move forward in time; you move backwards as well, as pieces of your parents' and grandparents' lives come to you.

*Philip Pullman*

I believe that superstitions, or what are commonly called thus, correspond to natural forces which rational thinking has rejected.

*Gabriel García Márquez*
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PART ONE : MATT
1. The Shell

It knows I’m here. It’s been waiting for me.

I can smell the seaweed – not the rotten egg smell that comes off pod-weed – a salty, sweet green smell. I stand on the rock ledge and calculate the depth of the water. Sometimes it can be deeper than it looks. I lower myself in. Cool water swells over my knees. I stand, peering into the greenness, waiting for the surface to be still again. And gently, I push the weed aside. I can see the shell clearly now. I breathe in sharply and lift it lightly with both hands.

Back on shore, I hold it up to the sunlight unable to take my eyes off its luminous pinks and papery thinness: like a nautilus but not a nautilus. It’s now about midday, the sun hot and blinding. I want to shade my eyes but I need both hands to hold it. I feel dizzy with the heat. It’s not just heat either but excitement. I whisper, ‘finders-keepers’. It’s all up to me, I think. I’m responsible for this now. Even away from the direct sunlight, it’s pearly. Magic.

I know shells but this one is different. In the Currie maritime museum there’s a nautilus but it’s as rare as can be. You can’t find shells like that anymore. Dad says that’s because of over-fishing but at school we learnt how it’s due to cities warming everything up, sending toxins into the atmosphere and screwing up the weather, warming the seas. This shell is like nothing I’ve ever seen before. I feel a tightening in my
stomach and the smile spreads across my face. I try to walk slowly, for fear of tripping, but my feet keep breaking into a run.

Back home, Dad appears at the back door and pushes the wire open for me.

“What’s that you’ve got there, Matt?”

He takes it from me and twists it about and I don’t hold a lot of hope for it surviving his rough fisherman’s hands.

“Careful! You’ll break it!”

I look on in despair longing to have it back into my care.

“Where’d this come from?”

All at once I feel cautious; I don’t want to share the shell with anyone else. Besides there are laws on King about finding and keeping stuff from the beaches. So I lie.

“I found it down on the Kelp Road. Must have dropped out off a kelper’s load.”

I’ve never lied to Dad before but all at once the lie seems necessary. I don’t know if he’ll let me keep something as good as this.

“Kelp Road? You’re kidding me?”

“I told you. Dropped out off a kelper’s load. It’s just a shell.”

“What were you doing way over there?”

I lie again.

“Just watching the kelpers loading.”

“Jeez Matt, I don’t want you anywhere near those kelp racks! They weigh tons and they’re mostly old and rusty. If one collapses, you’re dead. Understand?”

“I know, you’ve told me before.”

“Yep, well I hope you’re listening. Doesn’t seem like it to me.”

He rolls the shell over in his hands and lifts it to his ear. He drifts deep into thought and for a moment he seems to have forgotten I’m here.

“Dad, give it back will-ya!”
Inside I’m tight, worrying that he’ll make one of his adult takeovers, the ones I never win against. He looks at me seriously,

“It’s no ordinary shell, Matt. Be worth a bit. And, well you know the rules about keeping stuff as well as I do.”

I feel a shadow cross my face. The shell is becoming dull and colourless in Dad’s hands, even if it still looks big and unusual. I look down staring hard at the floor, all my earlier pleasure draining away. I should have left it where I found it. I wipe at my nose with the back of my hand. I feel Dad’s tap on my shoulder. I look up and he hands it back. “Rules are made to be broken. I reckon finders-keepers, don’t you? Too many rules and regulations these days, no wonder everyone is struggling to make a dollar. No need to go blabbing what I say, to your mother either.”

I’m sitting in my room, with the shell on my bed, all pearly and fluorescent again. I’m thinking about how it lost all its shimmering colours in Dad’s hands. Has it really chosen me as its keeper? I sit looking at it for a long time. The afternoon sun sends shadows through the bedroom window. They fall across the bedspread making a rainbow, just where the shell is lying, stars dancing off its surface. I guess it is too special not to share.
2. A Talisman

I rest the shell on Mum’s lap. She opens her eyes and smiles her weak smile, but, seeing the shell, a look of wonderment comes on her face. She touches it gently and then lifts it to her ear. She looks almost as bright as the shell, her skin pearly and glowing. She’s listening as though there’s so much to hear from that shell. I’m listening hard too. I can hear waves as if they are crashing into the room. But of course there aren’t any waves. Mum puts the shell back on her lap, looking right through me as though the shell has carried her to another place a long, long way away.

“Mum!”

She drifts back to me,

“Oh love, isn’t she beautiful! The colours are exquisite, don’t you agree?”

“I heard waves crashing all around us just like they were here in the room, did you?”

She looks at me curiously, cautiously,

“You could hear waves?”

She gives me the same strange look again and I have the feeling the shell has filled the space between us so that I can’t quite reach her anymore.

“You can always hear the sea in a shell like this, Matt. Didn’t you know?”

“I’ve never seen a shell like this before!”

I see that Mum’s eyes are still distant as if part of her is somewhere else. I see the shell is getting brighter, not like it was in Dad’s hands, opaque and chalky. Mum whispers,

“Like coming home. “

Her words are so soft I can only just catch them. She smiles,
“Once, Matt, you could find magnificent shells of all kinds on any of King’s beaches, just as easy as finding drift wood or rock limpets, but not anymore. Shells like this have gone. Most people, nowadays, would never have heard the sea in a shell. Wouldn’t even know to hold it to their ear.”

I shrug watching to see how she reacts, “Dad says it’s worth a bit.”

Secretly, I’m thinking how we could make money from the shell and get cable, the Internet, lots of stuff. She drops her head back and lets it rest deep into the pillows. Her eyelids come down over her aquamarine eyes. The sea breeze blows in through the window and, with it, a thousand tiny silvery things. The room fills with their tinsel glow. She opens her eyes waving her free hand through them. The silvery mist moves with her, swimming around her, in sparkling arches. She sighs, “So pretty. Shut the window now, love.”

“Shut it?”

“Please, too many memories tonight.”

I stare at her wondering if a closed window can really hold memories back. She senses my curiosity and quickly shuts me out. She picks up the shell and looks at it again: “Why do people put a price tag on everything, Matt?”

“But Mum, if it can make money for us?”

“Do you really think she’s ours to sell? She belongs to the sea, Matt. Isn’t that where you stole her from?”

Mum almost never gets annoyed, but she props herself up on the pillows and her brow knits hard. She’s going to make me put it back. You just can’t find a shell like this and keep it for yourself. Finders-losers, I reckon. Now I’m annoyed, “I didn’t steal it! I found it and that’s different… isn’t it… It is!”

I’d been, filling my head with buying all that stuff – stuff I really wanted – but, now, suddenly, I’m back on the beach lifting the most spectacular shell in the whole world out of the water.
“I wasn’t trying to discipline you, Matt. I just wanted you to think about putting a price on something so naturally beautiful.”

I squirm, hating the way she knows what I’m thinking.
“Watch cable? Get broadband?”

“But I …”

Mum smiles and frowns at the same time,
“You know love, I’d put it somewhere secret and safe. Have it as your talisman and, one day, you can put it back in the sea, when you’ve used up all it has to offer.”

“Talisman?”

“You know, a sort of good luck charm.”

Her frown is gone and she smiles. I grin back,
“I’ll keep it for the time being then, will I?”

She rests her hand gently on the shell, closes her eyes for a moment and lets me take it. Its extraordinary colours change from gold to salmon, from mossy green to ochre to pearly white, reminding me of the blue gums through all their seasons. She looks serious, staring straight into my eyes,

“One important thing to remember, Matt, and I hope you will try hard to remember this: everything that comes from nature has a way of eventually returning to it. And that isn’t such a bad thing. It’s the nature’s way.”

Her words float in the air. There is something particular about those words. I collect them in my hand and hold them tightly, so they can’t escape. She closes her eyes. I go to my room and hunt out the box made from mother of pearl she had given me long ago. I
open it and push her words inside, closing the lid quickly and carefully, turning the key so none can escape. I sit it on the bedside table next to the shell.
3. Sea Legends

I start on my homework, all the time turning to the shell as if it has some magnetic pull. I’ve got an assignment to hand in by the end of the holidays. So far, I have exactly two words: Matt O’Leary — underlined in the right hand top corner of the page. It looks scraggly and awkward, even in my neatest handwriting. I’ve spent most of my time so far, riding my bike into Currie, where I can get free access at the library to the Internet. Mrs Meehan, my teacher, comes in one day and she’s so surprised to find me there.

“Oh, Matt, I should have realised your situation. Of course, you wouldn’t have the Internet.”

In my situation, oh yeah, of course and we don’t even have T.V, but I say nothing. She must have seen clear through the screen I’d thrown up to show she wasn’t getting to me, because a red patch creeps all the way up her neck and she’s smiling all apologetic and sheepish. I guess she knows how mean spirited and downright rude she’s been. I smile too, but I screw the knife in by adding how really difficult it is for me, with the library making you pay twenty five cents a page for printing and how I can’t afford it, so I’ve been making notes by hand, and is that ok?

“I mean I’m trying to write real neat and everything.”

“Really neatly.”

“What?”

She shrugs, like some things are just too difficult.
“That’s fine Matt. I’ll look forward to reading it.”
Mrs Meehan is wearing a bright red dress with a big skirt that goes all the way down to her matching sandals. She smiles again but her smile looks like it’s painted on. She scurries away crimson, but, I admit I’m red myself, and it’s not because of the old red T-shirt I’m wearing. It’s just plain embarrassing being poor.

Our place is a shack — and I mean it, exactly that a shack. Dad’s great grandfather built it and O’Learys have lived in it ever since. I never knew my grandparents because they were dead some time before I was born. All the O’Leary’s have been fishermen. Great-Granddad hunted sea elephant and seal and Granddad fished for shark. The sea elephants are gone forever on account of Great-Grandad. Sometimes I think that’s why we’ve got a hazy reputation in the town. Whenever I ask Mum or Dad about it, they get all windy, and adult. — *Don’t worry yourself about what people say — People don’t like what they don’t understand.* What’s to understand that’s what I want to know! — *Dunno son.* Guess it’s just we keep to ourselves living way out of town in this shack — Lot’s of shacks way out of town like us, Dad! — *Yep, well, people got their own ideas.* Once I asked straight: Is it because of Mum? Dad looks at me like looks could kill. — *You got something to say about your mother, son?* — Kids at school say stuff, Dad. I could see him softening. — *We’re all right aren’t we son, you, me and Mum?*

In the end I didn’t really care. People can say what they like. Maybe they’re the ones with the problem. I’m thinking of Ian Wolf’s Dad. *Old Werewolf,* the Currie town kids called him; he was covered all over in hair like a rug. You could see it coming out over his shirt collar and the top of his socks. One day he took a rifle and went up to Cape Wickham lighthouse and shot himself. Kids can say hurtful stuff. Some of the kids
round here don’t use their brains much. Dad says the trouble with living on King is that even brains get washed out to sea or just clear blown away.

Anyway I don’t see that we’re really so badly off. Our place looks just fine to my eyes, paint is peeling off and the roof is rusty, leans a fair bit too. It sits tucked in behind the dunes, that way it doesn’t get blown out to sea when the wind is up, which is most of the time, because King is about the windiest place in the world.

The shack is built on four great pieces of flat rock, lying directly onto the sand at each corner. I always wondered how Great-Granddad moved those rocks there. Dad says men were tougher back then. —Lifted them rocks into place? — *Maybe son, or maybe they had means we know nothing about, or something of the sort. So long ago, so who knows?*

There are winds that whistle, and winds that roar, and winds that just about take the hair off your head on King, so over the years the sand has shifted from under the house making a huge hollow deep enough for me to stand up in. There’s heaps of junk kept under there: all Dad’s fishing tackle, an old boat that he says he’ll get around to fixing some day and piles of driftwood neatly stacked that was used in the kitchen stove and for the boiler. But most of the stuff is history. Even the shack is history, made from huge pieces of wood that washed in from Bass Strait. Great-Grandad must have salvaged it all from the beach. Sometimes I look at those big beams exposed inside the house and wonder about the wrecks they’ve come from.

I could wish things were different but they’re not so what’s the point? I like it here anyway and we’re not the only ones living in the dark ages. Gary Meadow lives on a rotten old boat with his Dad who’s on a war pension most of which, Dad says, goes down Mr Meadow’s throat. Gary and I were friends for a while; neither of us quite ‘the fit’ at
school, but Gary turned out to be too much like his Dad. If Gary knew about the shell I just found, he’d find a way to pinch it and sell it, and then say it wasn’t him who’d done it, even if it was as clear as day he had. Dad and Mum didn’t even have to warn me off Gary, I could smell how bad he was.

Then there’s Larry Pratt. Larry’s Mum runs the fish and chip shop in Currie. You’d think Larry would be the most popular kid in town on account of it, but I guess he’s got a bit mixed up over his Dad. Larry Pratt comes to the library some days when he thinks no one is looking. Larry Pratt is not much better than Gary Meadow. He doesn’t smell bad like Gary but he’s stranger than strange and doesn’t talk to anyone. Larry’s Dad was into salvaging from shipwrecks. Shipwrecks are one thing we can lay claim to on King. One day, Mr Pratt’s boat just turned up without Mr Pratt. No one really knew how, or why.

You might think I’m being too psychological about Larry but this is how it is: I see him come out of the library all sneaky and I guess he’s been coming to the library to research his assignment. The thing is, I’m finding it really hard to think up a topic for myself so I start reading Larry’s bookmarks. I look up in his searches and find about twenty sites on sea legends that Larry is surfing. There is heaps of stuff about the Bermuda Triangle where sailors just disappeared off the map, stuff about ghost ships, pages on sea monsters and some stuff about the Bass Strait Triangle. I guess he’s wondering all the time about how his Dad disappeared. I guess you would. I can’t think what I’d do if my Dad disappeared like that. Anyway, that’s how I know he’s picked Sea Legends for his assignment.
I go home and add two more words to my own page: Sea Legends. Mrs. Meehan might say it’s plagiarism, which is just a fancy word for copying, but I call it ingenuity or just basic necessity.
4. Claire

I thought about what Mum said. I really liked the idea of the shell being a talisman. I thought about the dugout and how I could keep it safe there. The dugout is up in the dunes off British Admiral Bay. I made it myself by tunnelling out a hole in the side of one of the sand dunes. No one knows about it, so no one is going to find the shell if I put it there – not in a thousand years. I made the dugout a long time ago when I was only eight or nine. It’s a tight fit for me now, I have to crawl in on my backside, like crawling inside a sardine can.

I take my bike and ride through Currie and along the Kelp Road all the way to British Admiral. I’ve ridden the track so many times I could ride it in the dark with my hands tied behind my back. I crab-crawl into the dugout and place the shell on a shelf I made just a few weeks back. I had no reason for a shelf. I just made it because I could and now I’m wondering if it wasn’t a bit extrasensory, you know, a bit psychic. Maybe I was preparing it all along for this shell; it fits on the shelf perfectly. I sit back wondering how much I believe in fate and that kind of thing. There’s not too much that happens, I reckon, that I get to control. Most things control me. Maybe even the shell because I can’t stop my eyes from admiring it. And, I wonder, if I hadn’t found it, would someone else have, or was I destined to find it, or did it find me? I remember the strange sensation when I first saw it lying there under the seaweed, as if it had been waiting for me.

I lift it down and hold it to my ear. I close my eyes and open them again, close and open, like I’m one of those wooden venetian blinds they’ve just installed at the Currie Hotel. But it has nothing to do with Currie, or some fancy new blinds installed ready for
the summer tourists. Something very strange is happening. I hold the shell to my ear and tiny stars float before my eyes and my ears tingle to the tune of a million water drops. And build. Build to the hammer of rain pounding on a corrugated iron roof. And building, and building; building to the metallic crescendo of a brass band. Building, until I’m wrapped in the curve of a thunderous wave, my body filling with the roar of a trillion mega litres of water. *All that comes from nature must return*; Mum’s words falling through the water like tiny silvery fish, me tumbling and swirling in the rolling wave. Am I being returned to nature? Every particle, every atom, every molecule, each bit of my being shaping into a new mix, blended, restructured as if the wave is giving birth to me. As if I am being born new, Matt, son of a wave. It is believable, but of course, not believable. Startled, I pull out of the wave, pull back and almost break my neck on the cold, hard sand of the dugout walls.

“Bugger!”

I put the shell back in its special place. I’m not scared. Stranger things have happened, stranger than just me being the keeper of this shell. I crawl out of the dugout and stand on the dunes looking out at the sea.

“Let it be known! I’m the Keeper of the Shell.”

I yell it into the wind like a madman. I look around but I’m alone. I know I mustn’t swim here. It’s dangerous because of the rip, but sometimes I take the risk. It’s calm today. I climb down to the beach and take off my T-shirt and daks. I dive in. I dive deep on a single breath. A shoal of tiny, silvery fish, dart between my legs. I swipe at them. Can never catch them. I twist and roll underwater. About twenty metres out from shore the floor of the sea drops away. Suddenly a chilly current passes across me. I think of
the rip and how many times I’ve been told not to swim here. I feel blindly for the surface, clawing my way up. Surely I hadn’t swum this deep. I struggle on. Still the surface is out of sight. My chest aches. I peer ahead and I see something: dark shadows caught in the swirling waters above. I can’t really make them out, not in the murky, disturbed water. I should swim to them, help them; if I don’t they are going to drown.

My lungs are tight with holding my breath and my head throbbing like my skin is stretched out to burst. I push with my arms and legs and I reach a small helpless shape, a child, but I can’t see the face and I can’t stay under any longer. I reach out and my hand grabs a corner of clothing and it releases a phosphorescent glow into the water. Terrified I shoot up towards the surface but below me I can hear whispering, singing, gently comforting the drowning. I break through the surface and open my mouth desperate for air. I look down but there is nothing now but fading shadows. I hear their faint whispers from the ocean floor a long way below but around me the sea is smooth and calm.

I wade out onto the beach and stop short. I hadn’t seen her as I swam in but now I recognise her, scrambling down over the sand dunes. It’s Claire Campbell. She’s in my class at school. She sees me too and stops in her tracks. She seems a little panicked and my heart is still thumping. I guess I’m a little panicked too.

“Hello Matt.”

She calls as she comes towards me. She makes a shade over her eyes with her hand and looks out across the flat, still water. She calls smiling:

“You look like you’ve seen a ghost.”
I nod and think, *perhaps I have*. In fact it’s very likely I have, how else can I explain the shapes I saw and heard?

“That your hidey-hole?”

I don’t like that. Firstly, it isn’t a hidey-hole, as such. It’s just a place to go, to be.

Secondly, what if she has found the shell? My surprise turns to anger. It creeps over me like the shadows from the clouds that now creep over the dunes, as the two of us look uneasily at each other.

“Did you follow me here?”

“No.”

“But I’ve never seen you here before.”

I think how sulky I must sound but I’ve never shared this stretch of beach with anyone before and I have the shell to worry about now. I feel the need to defend *its* territory.

She babbles on oblivious to my discomfort:

‘Actually, Esther would kill me if she knew I was here. I’m supposed to be helping prepare dinner. There are guests arriving tonight.’

She says it like her presence is doing me a favour.

Claire lives up the road from us. Her parents run holiday cabins for tourists. Once the place had been a mess of tin sheds and old beach bungalows but now it’s fancy. Dad says tourism is the heart of everything on King these days. Rex Air flies tourists in on old DC4s on weekends. They have a fish lunch, whip around the island on a tour bus for a couple of days and then head home with a hamper of King Island beef and tubs of island cheese. The story goes that on one of these tours, the group was half way back on their flight home to Launceston, when a funny smell began to bother some of the passengers. The flight attendants checked the fridges, the toilets and did a routine check
of the overhead lockers, but nothing turned up. The smell got worse and soon people were covering their noses with handkerchiefs, jackets, screwed-up newspaper, anything to keep back the stench. Suddenly there was a scream and another, and another, and then some passengers began unfastening their seat belts and leaping into the aisle. The flight attendants hurried forward and what they discovered was a couple of rather sickly, dehydrated fairy penguins regurgitating partly digested fish. Turned out some kid had tried to smuggle them home in his pockets. Dad said tourists are fools with too much money and a desire to make every inch of the world their playground. I don’t quite know what he means by that, but on account of the penguin story, I’m with him on them being fools. I stare hard at Claire,

“So why’d you come down here then?”

And my voice sounds very unfriendly.

‘Had a row with Esther and I wanted to get out of there. I saw you ride past. You didn’t even see me. I was just up there, on the dunes.”

I sit down beside her and it is my turn to shade my eyes and look out over the still aquamarine water. It is a perfect sea. I ask suspiciously,

“How’d you find the dug-out?”

“I told you. I saw you arrive and I watched you going in and coming out.”

“And you thought it would be OK to go inside someone else’s place, uninvited?”

“I didn’t know it was someone else’s place. I wondered what you were doing. I wanted to see.”

“So now you’ve seen.”
“It’s very good. Clever. It must have taken forever to build.”

“You better not have touched anything!”

“I...I...”

“What? Go on.”

I’m thinking again how no-one has ever intruded on my space before, not in all the years I’d been coming down to the dugout. “I picked up the shell. It’s a beauty. Where’d you find it?”

Suddenly I’m remembering the dull, opaque white of the shell in Dad’s hands. I tell her the truth. “Here. Over there, in one of the rock pools.”

“It’s valuable you know.”

I stand up and stare down at her. I almost hate her. ‘Intruder’, I think. She doesn’t stop, “It’s like a nautilus but so much bigger and prettier.”

I flop down again beside her, somehow defeated by her. She rubs the sand making a smooth arc with the flat of her foot. “Some shell though!”

I’m filled with pride as though the beauty of the shell is my doing. Even so, I’m feeling really unsure. Is it going to be absolutely impossible to keep the shell just for me? Claire isn’t somebody I really know. And the truth is I’m not good with people, distrustful, awkward, make a fool of myself, making friends and all that stuff, it’s not me. “What’s your angle, Claire?”

“What do you mean, angle? Look Matt, I’m not telling anyone, if that’s it. Really! Not about the dugout. Not about the shell. Only you need to be more careful that no one else sees you coming out of there, or they’ll find it too. You’re breaking the law keeping it you know.”

I leap to my feet. “I’M Keeper of the Shell. You think I’m not up to it?”
She gives me a really strange look and I can hear my words ringing loudly out of tune in her ears. Suddenly she seems so much older, so in control and I sound childish and stupid.

“I found it and that makes me its Keeper.”

A red flush creeps up my neck. She looks me over again and then making a quick step forward she puts her hand on my shoulder and with all the kindness of an overflowing cup she smiles a sweet honey smile,

“Sure you are. You’re the Keeper of the Shell, and I’m… I’m here in case something happens to you… a lieutenant… OK? Let’s make it our secret? Together we’ll be the Keepers of the Shell!”

I meet her look and we exchange glances like one ship coming into harbour and another going out. I’m not angry any longer. She’s up and searching the beach for something. A minute, and she’s back with a piece of broken sea snail shell. A second later, she’s cut her finger with it. A blob of blood forms. She hands me the shell,

“Your turn. Blood brothers, sisters, well friends – OK?”

There are lots of kids at school like Claire, kids whose parents have come over from the mainland to settle, to make a new life. Some end up back on the mainland at boarding schools. I guess if you’re not into fishing or football there’s not a lot to their way of thinking happening here. But, like I say, making friends is not something I feel easy about and all at once, I know I really want to be friends with Claire. I take the shell and jab the sharp point into the end of my forefinger and as the blood runs she pushes her bleeding finger against mine:

“Oh God! Can you believe us doing this? Anyway, it seems the right thing to do, don’t you agree?”

“I’m glad there is no one around to see it.”
“I don’t care what anyone else thinks! If I did I wouldn’t be here would I?”

I study her face really hard. She’s a strange one that’s for sure. A bit like me after all. I say,
“Let’s see then if you can find it back to the dugout on your own from here.”

She surveys the sand dunes and tries mentally tracing her footprints. She looks across the vast coast of saltbush and sand. She is so keen about it, so genuine. It occurs to me, as a change of wind makes you realise the weather is about to change, she wants us to be friends as much as I do. Claire is lonely too. She looks up at the sand dunes as if willing the path to the dug-out to materialise.
“It’s hopeless. I’ve no idea.”

“Good! That’s how I want it.”

We find our way back to the track and to our bikes. We ride home together. My house is past hers. I pause as she stops at her driveway. She looks thoughtfully at me. I ask firmly,
“And you’ll keep your promise?”

“Promise. I mean, I really promise. Cross my heart!”

I smile and ride on. I have to be satisfied with that.
5. Larry

I’m in the library again because I still have only four words written for my assignment, or our assignment – Larry’s and mine now. I know Larry’s been in, because there’s heaps more references bookmarked. The last ten are on shipwrecks. I’m reading about how in 1845, the Cataraqui was shipwrecked off the northern coastline of King and how 406 emigrants died. It says, ‘This remains Australia’s greatest national civil disaster’. 1845 rings bells inside my head but I don’t have time to think about its significance because I hear Mrs. Greenwood talking with Larry. I close down the Internet fast, and disappear down one of the aisles between ‘Children’s Books’ and ‘Australian Literature’. I grab one of those big B3 size children’s books, and bury my face in it. For a moment I’m lost in the illustrations until I get a peculiar feeling, a comforting feeling, a coming home feeling, a hot chocolate at the kitchen table on a cold night feeling. You know, a getting selected for the school footy team feeling—that kind of feeling. The book is full of pictures where unusual sea creatures hide under beautifully coloured coral or against giant seashells. Suddenly, I hear Larry from the other side of the bookshelves, talking with Mrs Greenwood. I hide behind my B3 and head to the front desk, drop it there and sprint through the doors and run full bore into Claire.

“Watch it! What’s the hurry?”

“Larry Pratt. Don’t want him to see me.”

“Yeah, well that I can understand. He’s creepy but he’s seen you now.”

I turn around and Larry is standing at the library windows just staring blankly out at us. He’s holding up the B3 book. He has it pressed up against the glass, open at a picture
with shells and sea creatures. At first I’m too shocked to focus but the feeling of familiarity overwhelms me. Not because I’ve seen the picture minutes before but because I recognise the pearly, soft pinkness and a remarkable fluorescence.

“Can you see! Can you see, Claire! “

“What? No. Well, it looks like the shell. Your shell — our shell!”

The likeness is unbelievable but somehow I know it isn’t unbelievable at all. Larry’s eyes leer over the top of the pages, those eyes making me feel cold like Larry I’m the Iceman. I’m shivering, visibly shivering.

Once, when I was a really little kid, Dad and I were out in the bush looking for feral turkey. You can still find them all over the island. Dad says the early settlers released them and without any foxes to prey on them, they have run free-range all over the place for a long time. Anyhow, I came face to face with one. It was the biggest turkey and it came up over my head. Who’d be scared of a bird I told myself. But then I start remembering stuff I’d heard about how strong and dangerous these feral birds are. Suddenly, I’m feeling really nervous and weak at the knees. I’m shaking and shivering, the turkey staring down at me. I just stand frozen like a roo waiting for the bullet. The turkey sizes me up, grunts and runs off with big gangly strides, ugly, ungainly. To see it run like that, you’d never guess the power in each of those clawed feet. Dad says people are like animals: you’ve got to look carefully to know if they’re friendly or not. Claire pulls at my arm,

“Come away! He’s nuts! Let’s go down to British Admiral and check out the shell. We’ll have to be back by three, Dad’s got two more families coming in this afternoon and wants me on hand.”
As soon as we’re out of Currie, I forget about Larry but in my mind I’m certain, Larry’s no friendly turkey. When we get to British Admiral, Claire tries to find the dug-out but fails. So I show her how to find it. It’s mostly sand and tussock grass all the way along the beach but there are a few hidden landmarks. About half way along as you come off the bike track, there’s a dead teatree stump and you can only see it by waiting for the breeze to blow the tussock down. It doesn’t take much to make it out and there’s always wind, and most days a gale, blowing off Bass Strait. You walk along the beach and then head back up onto the dunes until you’re even with the stump. You have to count ten paces and then you come to a bit of old wire fencing half submerged in sand. Turn right, and the dug-out is in a depression, about ten paces back towards the beach.

First try Claire doesn’t take enough paces and misses the wire fencing and I workout she is that much shorter than me, so we make it fifteen paces, and this time she finds the dug-out. She crawls in and brings out the shell.

“You better carry it - you’re the Keeper. Let’s take it down on the beach.”

I hold it out in front of me like I’m carrying a trophy and Claire marches behind, ceremoniously chanting: Keeper of the Shell, Keeper of the Shell. It’s a bit ‘girlie’ and it should feel silly but it doesn’t, not coming from Claire. We climb down off the dunes and I sit on the sand with the shell next to me. Claire kneels at my feet and bows, a low bow, close to the ground.

“What’s that for?”

“You’re the Keeper, so make the shell grant me my wish.”

“You can make a wish if you like but I can’t speak for the shell, and I can’t promise your wish will come true either.”

She looks out across the water, thinking.
“I wish that I didn’t have to work in the kitchen tonight. I hate being used as home help. It’s not like I wanted to come to King and run a tourist joint, is it?”

“Then I wish the shell could make your wish come true!”

She smiles her sweet, honey smile,
“Seriously, Matt, what would you wish for?”

“I don’t know. A digital camera. No homework, ever! Demise of Larry Pratt.”

“You can’t. You can’t wish someone dead!”

“Why not?”

“Because it’s wrong to hate that much. Why do you dislike Larry Pratt so much, anyway? I mean, everyone dislikes Larry, but why do you?”

“He follows me around. He’s a creep and I think he knows about the shell. And, it was the shell in that book. How weird is that? How could that be?”

“Coincidence probably. Don’t read too much into it.”

I pick up the shell and pass it to Claire.
“Listen, you can hear the sea? Hold it to your ear.”

She holds it to her ear, a little uncertain,
“No, nothing, a bit of a whirring and shooshing, that’s all.”

I lift it to my ear,
“I can hear waves crashing.”

Claire laughs. I look down towards the sea. The water is calm today. Still. I quiz Claire, curious,
“You can’t hear anything? No kidding?”

“No. I told you.”
“Funny, I wonder why you can’t hear it?”

“But you can.”

Both me and Mum but perhaps not Dad, and not you — but I keep this to myself. Claire says seriously, ‘Maybe you’ve got special powers. After all, you’re the Keeper.”

I sit thinking for a bit; it chose me. — I chose you, I chose you, I chose you — whispers the sea inside the shell. I put the shell down and turn towards the sea. Claire persists, “Perhaps it’s a magic shell.”

“Na.”

“Don’t you believe in magic?”

“I can do some magic tricks, with a pack of cards.”

“Matt?...Do you believe in God?”

“No. Not that I know. I’ve never been to church.”

“What, not even once?”

“No, never.”

“What about a wedding or a funeral or Christmas Eve for carols?”

It’s the first time ever I’ve wondered why we have never done any of these things. “Nope to all of those.”

Now I’m remembering the day years back when I came home from school and climbed in under my bed and hung in under there forever. Later, Dad dragged me out.

“For God’s sake son, what’s the matter with you. Something happened? Listen, whatever it is, it doesn’t matter to me, or your Mum. What matters is you feeling you
can talk to us. You can tell us anything son, even if it’s the worst thing possible. We
won’t get mad.”

I know Dad meant those words too, but I had a few bad memories of a near thumping for
things I’d confessed up to. Like the time I pinched a football from the school sport’s
cupboard so I could practise at home. I really wanted to get on the team but I needed to
practise and I didn’t have my own football. First thing Dad says is: ‘Where’d that come
from?’ — ‘A kid lent it me’— ‘Yeah? Like which kid would that be?’ — ‘Brian Burke’,
‘Yeah? How come its got King Island Secondary College stamped down the side then?’
—I hadn’t noticed that— ‘I borrowed it from school.’
But that didn’t wash and when he’d got the truth out of me, he walked me up to the
school and made me apologise to Mr Porter, the footy coach. Two days later, Mr. Porter
arrives at our place with a new football. ‘That’s really considerate’ says Dad, ‘but
actually I have one here for him. Got it today.’ He had too. The truth is, Dad was
embarrassed because I should have gotten one years ago. What kid doesn’t get a footy?
Dad isn’t good at that kind of thing. Things just don’t occur to him; he has a life in some
other place inside his head and he just wonders around in there as the world outside
passes him by.

Anyway, that episode, with Dad catching me hiding under the bed, had a similar kind
of beginning, I mean with Dad forgetting basic parenting: There’d been this discussion
in our English class at school about the Bible and Mrs Meehan has asked me to tell the
class a Bible story. I was stumped; didn’t even know what the Bible was. So there was
just a great silence until a few kids started to giggle. —“We’re waiting Mathew. Surely
you can think of at least one Bible story? What about the birth of Christ?” —That’s
when I got it really wrong. — “I don’t think I know about him. Can’t be a fisherman or a
kelper or I would have heard of him.” Everyone breaks up laughing, even Mrs Meehan.
Seems everyone knows about this bloke except me. I don’t know why it bothered me so,
but it did. Riding home after school, some of the boys chucked stones, calling, ‘Weirdo O’Leary!’ Like I’ve said already, kids round here can be rotten to the core.

So when Dad drags me out from under the bed and I told him, he looks stumped too.

“Well son, can’t say I could tell a Bible story myself.”

Next day he calls me into the front room where all the O’Leary history is piled up on shelves and old furniture. Nothing has ever been thrown out in there. Dad’s got an old book in his hands. A big book with a gold edge. On the front there’s a cross.

“This, Matt, is a Bible and you’re welcome to it — if you can make any sense out of the thing. Always thought it was a lot of mumbo jumbo but maybe it will mean something to you. Have a try anyway.”

I tried, but it was heavy going, especially as the print was small and there weren’t any real sentences. Claire nudges me back into now,

“Matt! You’re not listening!”

“No. Sorry.”

“I was just saying, Dad says religion and believing are different matters.”

“How’s that work?”

“Well, not everyone goes to church but everyone has to believe in something, don’t they? I mean, how are we here and what’s the purpose of us?

Talking to Claire is different. I’ve never talked with anyone like this. It’s like touching without actually touching. I feel I must answer carefully. I want my answer to equal her question. I want what I think to touch her. I want to touch her. I feel uncomfortable all over, like ants are climbing on me, like I’ve overheard something I
wasn’t supposed to hear; like I’m swimming at British Admiral when I know I’m not allowed to swim there. I think for a long time while Claire sifts sand through her fingers. I think about the shell, I think about how I love it down here on the beach, I think about some of the strange things that have been happening to me since I found the shell. Finally, I say,

“I don’t think I believe in God but I do believe in the shell. I mean, that it is important. Significant in some way.”

“Significant, yes! But, in what way?”

“I don’t know, I can’t explain. I found a rare and wonderful shell; and somehow Larry knows about it; and it’s pictured in an old children’s book. Dunno. Maybe it’s something to do with the forces of nature?”

“Forces of nature? Like magical forces, like I said before?”

“No! The shell has nothing to do with magic. Natural forces. Nature!”

“I’m not so sure I understand… Anyway, it’s three and I’ll be in trouble if I don’t get back.”

‘I chose you, I chose, I chose you’. The sea in the shell seems to whisper.
6. 1845

I’m lying in bed and I’m wide-awake. It’s a hot summer’s night. The wind is still, the sea is still, and even the humming in my ears from the shell is still. I get up and look out through the window and up at the sky: looks like someone’s turned on all the lights in all the other worlds. There’s got to be life up there looking down on us and surely it’s wondering if there’s life down here wondering if we’re looking up at them.

Just about half the books in the school library are about other worlds. Dad says that’s nothing new. People have always been writing about other worlds, even when he was at school. Kids disappearing through wardrobes, flying off on winged horses or down rabbit holes into another universe. ‘That Wrinkly Time book will be in the library or the Hobbit one.’

So I find those books in the library, and Dad’s right, people have been writing books on other worlds for ever. The way I look at it is this: just about anything that anyone’s taken the time to dream up, or discover, or invent, has eventuated, eventually. So I look at the sky and I think it might be tonight-while I’m watching the stars- that something from those other worlds finds its way to earth. Right now while I’m looking. And suddenly a light goes on inside my head burning out my eye sockets and I’m grabbing the torch and then I’m outside. I’ve just remembered about 1845!

I climb in under the house, past the piles of driftwood, the old boat, and heaps of junk that seems to build up under there, every year. I shuffle in as far as I can, and I see it
above my head. It’s there on a huge round beam. It runs the full width of the house. God knows how Great-Grandad got it up from the beach without a front-end loader, or a winch. Scratched deep in ruts— that not even time, sea or sand could remove— I read, 1845.

I look all the way along the beam hoping for something more but that’s it, 1845, etched in the beam. I sit back on my heels and shine the torch onto it again. In seconds, I hear the sea and I see those waves crashing over that beam. Only, it’s not a beam, it’s the mast of a ship. The wind is howling and the sails are ripped and carried away across the face of the storm. I hear screaming, yelling, commands, whispers. Now I’m under the water and I can see dark shadows everywhere and I want to swim to them, to help them, because if I don’t, they’re going to drown. My lungs are tight with holding my breath and my head is throbbing like my skin is stretched out to burst. I push with my arms and legs and I reach a child but I can’t see its face and I can’t stay under much longer. I reach out and my hand grabs the corner of its clothing but before I can make my move the water is glowing phosphorescent. Terrified I shoot up towards the surface but below me I can hear them whispering, singing, gently comforting the drowning.

“Matt! What are you doing down here, boy. Matt what’s up with you! You’re burning up, son.”

I look into Dad’s face. My pj’s are clinging to me and I’m wet through. It takes a minute before I realise where I am.

“Came down to look at that.”

And I point at the grooved out numbers: 1845.

“You know what this beam is Dad! Do you know?”
“Steady son. I think you’ve come down with a fever or something.”

Dad puts a hand to my forehead,
“It’s a beam from the Cataraqui Dad. Here! Making up part of our place. She went down in 1845. Has to be from her.”

Dad, kneeling awkwardly in the cramped space, runs his hand over the numbers.
“Well I’ll be damned. You’re probably right. Come inside now and get back to bed. You scared the living daylights out of me acting strange like that.”

We go inside and Dad puts on the burner to make hot milk. Dad says the best thing for insomnia is to get up, have a pee, and make a cup of hot milk.

“It is Dad! It has to be. It’s a piece of the Cataraqui.”

Dad comes over all serious.
“Listen son. A priceless shell is one thing, but shut your mouth about that ruddy beam, or we’ll have every ruddy historical preservation busy-body swarming the place wanting to take it off to the national museum or the likes. Where’d we be without that beam hey? Not sitting here with the kitchen floor under our feet, we’d be standing with our ankles in sand!”

We look at each other seriously, because it’s a serious matter, and then I think of Dad standing making hot milk with his ankles in the sand and I can’t stop from laughing.

“Better? Now drink your milk and go to sleep!”

I’m back in bed and I still can’t sleep. I’m thinking about the Cataraqui going down and those shadows. I get up and go to the window to check out the stars again, but I don’t get a chance, because I see Larry Pratt over the road sitting on his bike, just staring at our house. I close the window and push the catch on the sash. I pull down the blind and block out the sight of Larry and the thought of him out there being creepy; weird.
“You’re something other, Pratt!”
7. Gossip

It’s the next day and I wake to find Mum and Dad not at home. Nothing to worry
about: Dad regularly takes Mum to the beach if the weather is good. I’m riding over to
Claire’s. It is a windless day and warm. At Claire’s, I park my bike and walk down the
long drive passing the holiday cabins. I can smell burnt toast coming from one, and fried
bacon from another, and I am suddenly hungry. Some kids are on the verandah of the
last bungalow fighting over some gizmo. City nerds, I say aloud, but they don’t hear me.
At the end of the drive I see Claire cleaning leaves from the swimming pool with a large
net on a pole. Beach lounges circle the pool. At one end a couple are sunbaking. I eye
the woman’s long, sun-browned legs. She looks a lot younger than her partner who is
grey and has a big gut.

Claire puts the net thing down and draws me to the far end of the pool, away from the
guests. She lowers her voice in a conspiratorial way. Her expression changes and she
gives me a confiding kind of look that makes me stare down at my feet feeling
unprepared for what she might be about to say. She whispers,

“That’s the couple that came in last night. They’re supposed to be honeymooners.
She’s half his age and Esther reckons she’s his secretary! A bit of the pot calling the
kettle black I’d say!”

“Who is this Esther person?”

“You’re kidding of course!”

My look shows I’m not kidding. She throws up her hands,
“I thought everyone knew. Esther’s my stepmother.”

I blush. I had never known someone with a stepmother: “And... what happened... you know... to your Mum?”

“Do you walk around with your head buried in the sand? Don’t you listen to the town gossip? I’ve got a Mum but she lives in Queensland. When Dad hitched up with Esther, Mum shot threw with Terry O’Brian, from the Currie garage but he split after a few months.”

I don’t like the sound of Claire’s parents. I know Dad and Mum would walk to the end of the earth for each other. “I don’t think my Mum and Dad would ever leave each other like that.”

It comes out sounding very ugly and judgmental and for a moment Claire looks sulky. “They say your mum can’t walk.”

It had to come, I knew it, but I wasn’t about to give anything away even though I could feel my cheeks burning. I turn and stare across the pool to where the couple are sunbathing. Secretary Woman’ is rubbing sun tan oil on her legs and Fat Gut is watching her over the top of his sunglasses. I turn back to Claire and push my fingers through my hair. My finger hurts where we became blood brother and sister. I notice Claire has a Bandaid on hers. I hold her eyes steadily to mine:

“So that’s what they say, is it?”

“No. Not quite... I want to tell you... because we’re friends, but its silly...I mean what they say is silly.”

I don’t give her any help. “They say, they say... they say she’s...”

“Go on. What?”
She starts doing that thing she does with her foot, sliding it backwards and forwards.

“Well. Ok…if you’re sure?”

She looks uncertainly into my eyes.

“They say she’s not your real mother and that your Dad just turned up here with her one day and said she was…said she was your…natural mother.”

I don’t flinch, not even a hint. But I can feel the tension building between us; people don’t want to hear what they don’t understand. I more or less change the subject,

“My mum’s a really great swimmer…like me. I can hold my breath underwater for ten minutes or more. You try and do it! Kids at school used to call me Fish Lungs.

Pricks.”

She laughs but I shuffle over my swearing like I’ve farted badly.

“Matt Fish Lungs.” Claire jibes and makes fishy lips at me.

“Listen, you want to come up to the museum with me?” I say getting away from the subject.

“Why there?”

“To see the nautilus, stupid.”

Claire looks across kind of hopefully at the house.

“Let me finish cleaning up in the kitchen. I’ll only be five seconds. Wait for me won’t you. I’ll be as quick as I can.”

I think about Claire while I’m waiting. Never really noticed her before these holidays and yet I feel I’ve always known her. I like her. She’s direct and direct is what you can trust. She appears before her five seconds is up.

“Quickly.” She drags me away by the sleeve, “I’m sneaking out. I’m supposed to be doing study otherwise I’d be peeling vegetables.”
“Won’t you get into big trouble?”

“Kind of, but they can’t yell at me with the place full of tourists can they?”

We reach the museum but we’re too early, it’s closed. We sit on the museum steps and Claire lifts the pack off her back. I wonder why she has it with her and then I notice how carefully she is lifting it and I think I can see the outline of the shell under its soft fabric. I tense suddenly doubting her, doubting my own judgment of her. Has she taken the shell from the dug-out? Why would she do that? Why hasn’t she said she has it? I leap to my feet.

“What’s in the pack Claire? Is there something you’re not telling me?”

Claire smiles. Her eyes smile too. Bright green with golden sparkles. She opens the backpack.

I brought us some breakfast.”

She produces two bacon and egg sandwiches and cokes. I feel like I’ve failed the first test of our friendship, doubting her. I take the sandwich feeling too sorry to speak.

It’s an hour later. Old Mr Rickards arrives to unlock the museum. A few tourists arrive too and are waiting on the steps along side Claire and me. Everyone who visits King gets used to King time. Mr Rickards unlocks the doors and turns on the lights and the fan. A musty smell rushes out and almost chokes us. We follow him in and wait as he unlocks the office door, shuffles inside and pushes back a glass window that slides across the top of the counter. ‘With you all in a tick’, he rasps and then coughs from the effort.

He moves about slowly inside and then settles himself at the window. He eyes Claire and me and beckons us over ahead of the others. We’re locals after all. Loyalty on the
island is fierce even if tongues are fiercer. Smiling we head into the main room of the
museum. We walk straight to the polished wooden cabinet where the nautilus is
displayed. It’s very small compared to my shell and it’s just white but it’s beautiful. Old
man Rickards shuffles up from behind:

“So are you interested in the shell then?”

“They’re said to be very valuable.”

“Valuable? Valuable is only what people want and can’t have.”

“You mean, rare?”

“Rare, unusual, forbidden, dangerous, all of those things.”

I raise my eyebrows. Poor old Mr Rickards is a bit odd.

“What makes it valuable then?”

We both notice the red of the electronic security device on the corner of the cabinet.

“Like I say, rare, unusual, forbidden, dangerous, all of those things.”

“Dangerous?”

“They say if you put one of these to your ear you can hear the voices of the dead.”

I start and take a step back. Claire smiles uncomfortably. We laugh but I shift onto
one leg and back onto the other and a chill climbs under my skin.

“Oh, I’m not joking. You find one then you leave it behind where you find it. That’s
my advice to you. Leave it where you find it. That electronic eye has nothing to do
with value. It’s there for safety.”

There’s a twinkle in his eyes as bright as the night star.

“So you two are shell hunting then?”
I can’t stop myself looking nervously across at Claire.

“Oh, don’t look so crestfallen. Every kid that ever lived on King goes shell hunting at sometime. Rites of passage and all that.”

“Who found this then?”

“No one finds one. It finds you — so it’s said and, if it does, better to be safe than sorry!”

We want to ask more but the honeymoon couple from Claire’s pool turn up and Rickards is quick to remind them a donation in the box is most appreciated. We look around the museum a bit longer and then leave. On our way out old man Rickards calls us over to his window.

“You asked me who found the shell? The thing is you see, no one knows because the finder never lives to tell the tale.”

With that he stares at us hard and waves a finger.

“Just in case one finds you!”

“Don’t worry Mr Rickards, we’ve gone right off shell hunting. Haven’t we Matt?”

I nod and I’m grinning thinking Claire is clever, even if she has two mothers. Inside a dull ache has started up in my stomach — ‘No one finds one — It finds you.’ Claire skips through the doors and into the sunshine.

“Old man’s off his tree!”
8. Sharing a Dream

I wake in the night and know something unusual is happening. It is like I am awake but asleep at the same time but sleeping someone else’s sleep. For a moment I come over queasy as if it’s too much to stomach being inside someone else’s head. Because I am inside someone else’s head: sharing Mum’s dream:

“Come on in! It’s lovely. Come on! She calls to me.”

I can see her dream as clearly as if it’s my own. She’s watching me as I kneel in the sand dunes with Claire beside me. She’s in the water with Dad. They’re having their morning swim. They had never included me in this early morning ritual. As I grew older, I became more curious, until I just had to follow them and watch hidden from sight in the dunes as I was now with Claire. I have agreed to bring Claire but I feel badly about it. Mum calls, ‘Come on in! It’s lovely. Come on!’ She reaches up an arm and waves. I shove Claire down. Jeez, I feel bad. This is wrong. This is private. I might as well have set up a sign and sold tickets. I look along the beach for Dad. Mum is still waving and calling. Dad is now nowhere in sight. I see her wave again and feel hot with worry because perhaps she’s not waving; perhaps she’s calling for help. I struggle between wanting to go to her and not wanting to be discovered spying. Then I hear her voice clearly.

“Come on in, Matt!”

I feel myself dying from guilt. I push Claire in the ribs as if she’s to blame, as if nothing will ever be the same again and it is all Claire’s fault.

Mum calls in a voice so strong, so much bolder than I’ve ever heard from her before. I slip off my daks and run down to the water’s edge. She smiles and continues to beckon
me in. I’m abreast of her and returning her smile when she dives under. I wait but she
doesn’t reappear so I dive after her, concerned again for her welfare. I feel excited and
strange. Under water I can see her legs, long and sun browned legs. She is using her
arms to take her straight down into the deeper water. I follow. The water becomes dark
and cold. I wish I’d taken a bigger breath. Mum turns and smiles through the emerald
water. She seems so at home underwater; so mobile and strong. She beckons me again
to follow her. She dives even deeper. Never swum with her before. Never swum so
deep. I follow. Maybe from fear, and maybe from responsibility but I don’t want to lose
sight of her. I swim hard to keep up with her. We swim along the edge of what appears
to be an underwater mountain of rock. Then I’ve lost sight of her. My lungs ache. My
head aches too with the strain of this extraordinary turn of events. Then I see her again.
The water clears and is warmer and greener than before. She is swimming with
thousands of fish. Can’t tell what kind but they are beautiful, coloured like silver tinsel.
Thousands and thousands of silver tinsel fish playing underwater with her. She dives and
rolls and they dive and roll and follow her every turn. I tread water, too amazed now to
care about my aching lungs, throbbing head. She smiles and beckons. I begin to swim
with her, and the fish. She swims out in front and we dive and twist in and out of the
rock shelves that edge the underwater mountain; so graceful. We could have wings we
are flying so effortlessly through this underwater world. I am long past breathing or
needing to breathe. She smiles. Never imagined I’d be doing this. Why hadn’t she
swum with me before? I breathe but there’s nothing but water to take in. She points
upwards and disappears.
In less than a moment, together we burst through the surface. Sun shines down on us. I take in great gulps of air. Mum treads water next to me laughing and giggling like she does. But part of me is annoyed with her. Why’d she never swum with me like this before? But I can’t say what I think.

Mum lifts a shell from beneath the water. Same as my shell! Dad is wading heavily through the water to Mum. I hear Claire’s voice beside me:

“Matt! What’s the matter with you?”

I’m there, where I’d been, with Claire, in the dunes looking out over the sea. “Come on, let’s go. I don’t like this Claire, spying on my Mum.”

And it was true, I felt sick about it. In the morning I kiss Mum sheepishly. She smiles her usual smile and cuts her toast in half brushing the crumbs away. They fall like sand onto the bedspread and float to the polished boards. It was only a dream I tell myself.
9. Conflict

I get my bike and ride down to the dug-out. I crawl in and wait for my eyes to adjust to the lack of light, and my nostrils to take in the dank, sandy smell. The shell sits proudly on its shelf. I feel a bit better being there with the shell, until I see the water. A small pool has gathered on the surface of the rough wood of the shelf and surrounds the shell. Odd. It is always damp in the dug-out but never wet. It didn’t make sense. I sit up and hit my head trying to figure out why the water is there. The only explanation is the one I don’t want to think about: Mum had held up a shell just like mine.

I crawl out and that’s when I see the footprints. Footprints don’t usually stay in the soft sand around the dug-out but these are wet and as clear as if the feet that made them have only just gone. Someone has come up from the beach. You can’t just stumble on the dug-out. Apart from myself, Claire is the only other person to know how to find it. A dull, clammy feeling grabs me. I don’t want to doubt her, not again. She would never come here without me, without telling me. I follow the imprints but they fade out almost immediately. I walk up over the dunes to the beach. Someone is walking naked along the shoreline. It isn’t Claire. It’s Larry.

I watch as he walks a distance to where his clothes are. He pulls on his jeans and a T-shirt. He’s too far away for me to see his face but he stands up straight and looks my way. Just stands there for a couple of minutes and then he salutes me and runs off.

“Creep,” I scream, “you go near the shell again and I’ll have you!” The wind is blowing the wrong way for him to hear and the words blow back in my face.
Next morning I ride into Currie to the library. I have it in mind to delete all Larry’s files. I bump right into him coming out as I’m going in.

“You go near my dug-out again Pratt and you’ll regret it. Got that!”

“What are you on about? What dug-out? You have a dug-out? Where?”

“You touch the shell again, I’ll smash your face.”

“What shell?”

“You’re not listening! I’ll smash your head in!”

“Yeah? I’m not scared am I because my Mum’s no freak, hey, freak-kid!”

I make a fist and I whack him straight and hard right in the centre of the face and walk off. Almost break my finger. By the time I get home, there’s a police car out the front of the shack.

“God! Damn! Bugger!”

I dump my bike and climb into the house through my bedroom window. I can hear Dad talking to Sergeant Reilly. Maybe it’s about something else, but I know it isn’t. Come to think of it, I probably broke Pratt’s nose. I begin to feel badly. Jeez, Dad’s going to crucify me. I hear the wire door bang closed.

“Matt? A word.”

*Oh, God.* I walk into the kitchen and Dad grabs my right hand. I wince immediately. Maybe I did break my finger. Dad fills a saucepan with cold water and makes me sit with my hand in it.

“Takes out the swelling.”
I mumble thanks, dreading what’s coming.
“So why’d you smash Larry Pratt’s face son?”

“Dunno.”

“Dunno is a pretty crap reason, son.”

Dad stands up like he’s going to drag me up by the shoulders but he puts the kettle on instead.

“Tea?”

“Ahhuh.”

We sit waiting for the kettle to boil. Dad’s looking ready to deliver a sermon on me. I’m not going to tell Dad what Larry said. He can yell as much as he likes but I’m not saying. He pours tea into two mugs and pushes the sugar over to me. We’re silent for a long while except for the sound of the tea being slurped up and the mugs put down on the laminex table.

“Listen son, whatever happened today, the best thing for you to do is apologise.”

I stiffen like my blood is turned to wood. My face is burning up, the flames about to ignite the whole kitchen. Dad pushes his chair back as if he can see it too.

“I’m not apologising, Dad. You can do what you like about it but I’m not.”

He stares hard. I stare back so hard I can see the back of his sockets. He drops his eyes first. I’ve never spoken to Dad like this before. Never challenged his authority. He flops back in his chair and he looks old. It makes me feel really sad. I wish I hadn’t been quite so determined.

“Dad, you’ve got to trust me. Larry Pratt’s got a foul mouth.”

“Heeere’s a man who does what a man has to do, I know. Just be sure you’ve nothing to regret and we’ll make that the end of this business. OK?”

He gets up and walks round to my side of the table and lays his hand on my shoulder and then he leaves and a minute later I hear him and Mum talking, softly. I pick up the mugs from the table, wash them and hang them back on their hooks. It is as good as saying I’m sorry.
10. Phantoms

I’m hanging around outside the library waiting for Larry to finish up. I know he’s in there because I’ve seen him go in and I know he’s seen me because he stopped for just a second and stared right at me through the library window and if looks could kill, I’d be dead. He’s wearing a band-aid across his nose. I wish he’d hurry up and come out because this time I’m definitely deleting his files. I’ll remove his bookmarks at any rate and I’m hoping he’ll have to start all over on his assignment.

Larry comes out the library door. I’m flat against a tree and he doesn’t see me, or he’s ignoring me; he puts his head down walking off in the other direction. I fly inside and I’m into his bookmarks. It’s been interesting following Larry’s crazy line of thought. I hesitate before removing them, after all this has become my assignment too. I open some sites and begin reading more about King shipwrecks. You can follow the shipwreck trail all around the island. I’m reading and taking it all in because I know the beaches well. I’m absorbed and just thinking about changing my topic to Shipwrecks when out of the corner of my eye I see there’s a square of paper stuck to the side of the computer.

It might be from the librarian, something Mrs. G has stuck there, but I know even before I take it that it’s not. I read what it says slowly, almost sounding out the words, as if I can’t read properly: ‘For – Matt – O’Leary.’ I open it out. It’s been downloaded from Google Earth and it’s King with a large section of the surrounding sea and in the middle of the sea a cross is marked in red pen. Underneath written in the same pen is X Marks the Spot. I sigh with relief. I don’t know what I thought it was going to be but this is just stupid: I’m really scared Larry! What’s your problem anyway?
I turn back to the screen suddenly realising this means Larry knows I’ve been tracking his bookmarks. I decide not to remove them. I’ll keep on using them to spite him. If he wants to follow me then two can play that game. I shove Larry’s note in my pocket and head up Grassy Road to Claire’s house. It seems really quiet at Seaheaven. I knock on the back door hoping Esther doesn’t answer. Claire opens it.

“They’re out. Do you want to come in?”

I step inside. It’s a big house, all two storeys of it. Claire’s room is upstairs and you can just see the ocean over the dunes.

“Nice.”

Downstairs there’s a big dining and sitting room set up for the guests. I can’t quite figure sharing my house with strangers because to me it makes it a house but not a home. But off the kitchen there is another room with couches, a coffee table covered in magazines and CDs, a flat screen TV — the size of a movie screen, two computers and a laptop lying on the floor. Claire rescues it and flings it onto a desk. It’s like another world.

“I live in here mostly.”

“I can tell.”

The kitchen is immense with two fridges and a stove with ten burners. There’s a walk in pantry stocked like a home supermarket. Claire smiles as if she knows what I’m thinking.

“It’s a commercial kitchen.”

She helps herself to two cokes and passes one to me.

“I’m sorry I repeated that stupid gossip about your Mum, Matt. Some things are private, aren’t they and, well, I was being nosey.”

“Yeah, you were, but it doesn’t matter. There’s been a development.”

“Yeah? Like…?”
“I think I’ve broken Larry Pratt’s nose.”

She folds her arms across her stomach and leans forward laughing hard.
“How?”

I told her my version: that he’d tried to nick the shell.
“Where’s the shell now?”

Suddenly I’m aware of how stupid I’ve been.

“I left it there!”
“Matt!”
Claire rides out in front and takes the lead all the way to the dug-out. She crawls in and retrieves it.

“It’s here! Thank God! Protected by its shell magic.”

I groan:
“How many times do I have to tell you, there is no magic.”

We hike across the dunes, Claire carrying the shell,
“You can be Keeper if you like.”
“No way, you’re Keeper of the Shell.”
She hands it over to me.
“Sorry again, I shouldn’t have presumed to carry it.”

“You’re not serious?”

“Very serious. The shell is important. Being Keeper is important. Don’t let Larry Pratt spoil it for you, or us.”

On the beach, Claire begins collecting tiny, white money-shells. She’s told me to collect pink seaweed but I only find green and common old black stuff. She arranges the shells in a circle and makes a bed with the seaweed and sits the shell in the centre.

“Come on. Sit here with me. What will we wish for?”
She holds her hands on the shell. She shouts, mend Larry’s nose!

“What Matt? Don’t look at me like that!”

“I don’t want his nose mended!”

“Why’d you hit him anyway?”

“He said stuff about Mum. I guess you got the gossip right!

Claire blushes. It’s the first time I’ve seen her redden. I feel maybe I am giving away more feeling than I mean to. She looks me straight in the eye as if she’s reading everything there. It works both ways. Immediately I realise I can trust Claire, can truly trust her. Impulsively, she jumps up, pulls off her jeans and undresses to her knickers and bra.

“Come on in Matt Fish Lungs.”

I watch as she runs into the water. I strip to my undies and follow her in. We stand, water up to our necks. She raises her hand to shade her eyes, in the way she has a habit of doing:

“I’d like to meet your Mum. I bet she’s really nice.”

Claire dives into the water. She’s a good swimmer. She swims out a long way. She’s under a good while before she surfaces. I follow and dive too. We chase each other under the water. It’s a beautiful temperature, the sun shining through the water making split rainbows across the surface.

All at once, I lose sight of Claire and I’m following Mum again, chasing schools of fish glistening in the split rays of sunlight that dance off their silvery bodies. That’s when I see them again, against the light: dark shadows struggling in the water, women, children: faces of terror. A mother struggles to push her child back towards the surface. I pull my arms against the water desperate to reach her and do what I can but no matter how hard I swim there seems always to be the same distance between us. I feel exhausted and I rest,
treading water. Masses of bubbles form in front of me and Claire takes my arm and pulls me upwards.

We come into the air and the sunshine.

“What happened?”

I really want to say, I can see ghosts, to share the horror of those underwater nightmares but some truths require more than just trust. Instead I tell her:

“I got the cramp.”
11. Flight

Two ideas are coming together and colliding.

“Claire, are you up for anything?”

“Like what?”

“Trust me.”

She looks uncertain, but smiles,

“Sure.”

We ride into Currie. I have the shell in my backpack. It needs a new, safer hiding place. Keeping it at home would be too obvious. I need a place where Larry would never think to look.

We pass a handful of ancient graves, lumps of stone, some leaning, waiting to fall, others fallen and covered in lichen and moss. Some of them are so old you can’t even read the names on them. I lean forward and whisper to Claire,

“Forgotten people.”

“Ghosts of the dead.”

Suddenly her hand flies to her mouth holding in a cry. I look to where her eyes are fixed. An old grave stone. In worn gold lettering it reads, “Mary. Died at sea.” No dates. Claire heaves a sigh,

“How sad is that!”

“Yeah, like I said, forgotten people.”

The Anglican church in Currie is small, wooden, plain and simple. The doors, unremarkable except for a large black circular wrought iron latch, are closed. I turn the
handle and push gently. Inside its cold, cold enough to send goose bumps up my legs and arms. There’s a strange smell, a mixture of mould and shaving cream.

“What’s that smell?”
“It’s a church smell.”
“It is so much bigger on the inside.”
I feel a strange kind of wonderment. I creep forward, my shoes echoing loudly on the tiles and I stop stock-still. Suddenly I feel afraid.
“Do you think there’s anyone in here?”
No. Just ghosts.
The windows at one end stretch to the roof-line, a great coloured wall of glass. The light shines through and throws rays of purple and red across the floor. Beneath this, the altar and a giant cross with a tortured male figure hanging from it. His hands are nailed to the cross and blood pours from them. I wipe my hands and feel the stickiness of the blood.

“Who’s that? Why is he…like that?”

“It would take too long to explain.”

I wish I’d tried a bit harder with the Bible Dad had given me. I want to understand this place. There was something here seeping in through my skin and passing over my lips with a thousand questions. I take in the pews, the aisle, the vaulted ceiling, the organ, looking everywhere for a place to hide the shell. I admit, I thought a church would be full of hiding places, not as it is, stark and cold. I stand gazing again at the altar, covered to the ground in a white and gold fitted cloth. I walk up the aisle and drop onto my knees in front of the altar. I hear Claire, close behind me, take in a short, sharp breath. Then I lift the cloth.

“I thought you were going to pray or something!”

“Look, it’s just a great empty space under there. It’s perfect.”
I shove the shell safe in the back-pack into the space but Claire pulls at my T-shirt.

“You can’t leave the shell there! Someone will find it.”

“They won’t.”
“I think you’re making a mistake and anyway what makes you think the shell would be happy stuck in under there in the dark and the cold and surrounded by ghosts!”

I check the shell, tidy the cloth and stand up just as the whole church fills with a harsh, sharp, scraping sound that tears into my teeth and runs down my spine. The half-light suddenly turns to a cold white glow and fades again as suddenly. Claire pushes me down.

“Someone’s coming.”

Seconds later and we hear the swish of cloth and rubber shoes grazing the stone tiles.

“Get down!”

We drop and crawl in under the altar joining the shell. Someone is humming and we hear the tinker of glass and the swish of liquid. Then whispering.

“Someone’s praying. Let’s go! Now!”

We crawl out from the other side of the altar, the great stained glass windows watching us with curiosity. We are stopped in our tracks as the praying person, a man dressed in long robes, rises. We dive back behind the altar for cover and watch as he disappears out a side door. We are moving like moths, half way up the aisle now, silent, invisible and then we see shadows at the doorway ahead and Claire pulls me down into a seat beside her and begins whispering with her hands held together in front of her.

First Mrs Parker walks down the aisle, passes us without even a look. Everyone says she is loopy; she is followed by Mrs Thomas who served in the pub until she was eighty and was always in trouble for stealing from the till; close on her heels is Arthur Treble, but kids call him ‘Tremble’ because he has cerebral-palsy; and last, Mrs Whitebread who
uses a walking frame and is almost blind. Eventually they manoeuvre themselves into seats. A mighty groaning starts up and gradually sounds like a tune.

Eventually it is quiet again. The Reverend Grimshaw appears from a side door dressed in a white flowing robe, like a great apron, and makes his way to the front of the altar, hands folded across his front, head bent.

“Let us pray.”

We sit through a series of prayers, at the end of which, along with the congregation, Claire says, Amen. Rev. Grimshaw climbs some stairs to a wooden cradle.

“What’s he going upstairs for?”

“That’s the pulpit. He’s going to deliver his sermon.”

“Today we will consider life’s long journey. We are all sinners, we have all trespassed but it is not for us to judge and it is never too late to repent. Repent and the doors of heaven will open before you…”

I shrink into the seat feeling nothing but embarrassment for poor Rev. Grimshaw.

“Why’s he shouting like that? The church is next to empty.”

“It’s a sermon.”

He builds up to a crescendo, spreading his arms wide and reaching to the vaulted ceiling,

“…Yea, thou I walk through the valley of death…”

Suddenly he begins to rise, his white apron blowing out around him, his eyes raised upwards. Some stage effect! But Claire has slipped off the edge of her seat, eyes wide. Rev. Grimshaw rises high enough for us to see the soles of his feet and his trousers peeping from underneath his apron. Old man Treble calls: S-t-o-p! Like Rev. Grimshaw is making off with the church plate. Mrs Whitebread raises herself onto her frame waving at him unbalancing herself. Rev. Grimshaw rises, she falls. My head is trying to
take in this performance, when Rev. Grimshaw gives out a horrible death rattling kind of noise and disappears into the ether. Just vanishes above a soft green glow that has spread out from under the altar.

A shocking silence follows. You can almost hear it inside their heads. All I can hear is the ocean roaring, waves thundering, the voice of an angry sea.

Mr Treble pulls himself up and wobbles from the church. Mrs Parker follows. Mrs Thomas looks to Mrs Whitebread half sprawled over the pew as if about to offer assistance, but she too hurries out. Only Claire and I are left. I move out from our pew and down the aisle. We help Mrs Whitebread up but she hits us both, pushing us away.

“Let me go! Let me go!”
We move back and she stumbles her way up the aisle. I circle the pulpit and climb the stairs. Claire joins me as I climb up.
“What happened to him?”

“Dunno.”
I climb down under the altar and retrieve the back-pack and check inside. The shell is in one piece.
“Don’t leave it here, Matt. It’s not safe here.”

“Too right I’m not leaving it here.”
A chill crosses my chest. I turn and look down the aisle and I’m almost sure I see the back of Pratt following Mrs W. out the door.

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Next day the whole town is in an uproar. The police interview the four oldies about Rev. Grimshaw’s disappearance. I sneak about outside the milk bar trying to pick up news of what is being said. There’s absolutely no mention of Claire or me. So I start
joining in the discussion with everyone else, trying to piece together what happened. By midday a helicopter has arrived from Hobart with a news crew. They interview Mrs Parker and Mrs Thomas, but Mrs Whitebread is in the hospital, suspected cracked hip — serious. Mr Treble refuses to speak with them. Next day, there’s a quarter page story on the second page of the Hobart Mercury. Down at Currie harbour boats have been gathering since yesterday and crews have been trooping up to the church to look at the pulpit. About three in the afternoon, police arrive from Hobart and cordon off the church. A crowd gathers. Claire’s Dad brings down a group of tourists. Mrs. Duffy, from the general store, comes down in the tray-truck, selling sandwiches and cold drinks. A real circus develops with blokes in white plastic coveralls moving in and out of the church, the local police marching about asking everyone to ‘stand back and let the Hobart boys do their job’, the press from the mainland multiplies by the minute, and bored kids climb all over the graves, howling like ghosts.

By evening, two officials have arrived from the head office of the Anglican Church, and begin by blessing the pulpit. They announce a special service of purification to be held the following day, which just happens to be the 26th of January, Australia Day. Every year, Australia Day is marked by a re-enactment of the naming of King Island by Captain Campbell. No relation to Claire. Today, a public meeting is called to discuss what to do given the extraordinary circumstances. In the end, seeing that all the preparations have been made, its decided to go ahead as usual, after the special service has been held. The next day, the Hobart Mercury, runs a front-page story on Rev. Grimshaw, declaring he should be made a saint. By ten, more helicopters have arrived,
one carrying the Anglican Archdeacon. With such a venerable guest on the island, it is
decided he should be invited to participate in the Australia Day festivities.

The 'extraordinary purification' service is held by the Archdeacon, at 11 am. The
church is full; Claire and I have to stand outside. Mike Todd has set up a sound system
so we can all hear the service. It doesn’t amount to much, just lots of prayers and talk
about heaven and earth and Rev. Grimshaw’s salvation. The organ causes the outdoor
speakers to ring and crackle so badly that in the end they are taken away. The
Archdeacon leads a procession out of the church and down to the beach for the arrival of
Captain Campbell. We save on the need for a tall ship by having Campbell arrive in a
rowing boat, rowed in from around the headland. It takes forever for it to arrive, first it is
just a speck and everyone calls out, ‘There she is’, and, over the next hour, we watch as
the boat comes increasingly bigger and more in view. Meanwhile, kids set up a cricket
game on the beach and the Archdeacon watches from a deck chair under a beach
umbrella.

When the boat finally draws into shore, the town band strikes up with the national
anthem and there’s an attempt by everyone to sing a rendition if only for Rev.
Grimshaw’s and the Archdeacon’s sakes. It’s usually a rowdy moment as the crew on the
boat cheer and whistle Captain Campbell on shore. However, today, there is no cheering,
no whistle. Care half discarded, faces are drawn and white.

What’s happened goes round faster than a chinese whisper. Soon we all know. They
have Rev. Grimshaw’s clothes. They have found them on a strip of beach just the other
side of the headland. The police call in a forensic team but, in the end, conclusions are
drawn, death by drowning declared.
Helicopters carry all the visiting officials away, including the Archdeacon and all his attendants. There is never any further mention of making Rev. Grimshaw a saint and the Hobart Mercury runs a one liner: ‘King island pastor found drowned’. Mrs W. told everyone that the Rev. G had always been full of hot air and that he’d blown up and been carried out to sea and drowned. It made perfect sense.

That afternoon, Claire and I ride out to British Admiral Bay and make a new dug-out for the shell, with new markers that Larry could never find. I feel better knowing it is back there, near where I’d taken it from the sea, closer to natural forces and away from the circus of civilised life.

“Matt.”

“What?”

“Do you think it was the shell?”


“Magic.”

“No!”

“Then what? How…?”

“Natural forces.”
12. Debris

The grin has been fixed across Dad’s face all morning no matter how hard I try to act indifferent just sweeping and putting things right. I turn all the cushions on the couch over to cover the marks that have gathered over the years. I whip a cloth round all the surfaces to shift the dust and throw open the windows to let out any O’Leary smells. I make my bed and tidy my desk and arrange the books into piles. I stuff my cricket gear and a box full of rocks, shells, and other stuff, into the bottom of the wardrobe. I’ve already collected up all the dirty clothes and stuck them in the shed out back that Dad calls the laundry: an old copper and a concrete trough. I don’t need to worry about the kitchen because Dad keeps that spotless under mum’s direction. They made Anzacs together this morning, Mum sitting up at the kitchen table measuring and mixing, Dad doing all the legwork. Anzacs are the best biscuits in the world.

Mum looking neat and pretty is propped up on big pillows with the best pillowslips, hand-stitched by Granddma. That’s how Mum starts the conversation with Claire, running her hand over the stitching and asking Claire to examine more closely. Claire says how beautiful it is. All the time she’s watching Mum closely: Mum sipping tea and eating Anzacs. Best Anzacs, says Claire.

“Would you like me to show you how to make them some time?”

You can see Claire’s wondering how Mum gets about to make biscuits and then you can see how embarrassed she is when Mum says, “I don’t need legs to cook!”

Not nastily, just to break the tension. Mum’s got a melodic laugh she always follows with a giggle that kind of puts everything right. Claire laughs at herself and we begin to
relax and chat with Mum about school, Seaheaven, and the changes on the island in general. Dad sticks his head around the door and says he’s got something to show Claire but I know this means he thinks Mum’s getting tired. I give her a kiss and a wink because I’m thinking it’s all gone rather well. Claire gives a little wave,

“Pleased to have met you Mrs O’Leary.”

“Not so scary is she?” I whisper as we join Dad in the kitchen. Dad has an old family album open. Claire is served an hour’s history on Great-Grandad, the elephant seal hunter, how he traded oil and hunted until there was none left to kill. About how Grandad (only three photos all yellow and cracked and Grandad dressed like he’s in a straight jacket) built up a fishing business taking lobsters to the mainland and how he was rich as Croesus but chose to live here in this shack of a house like he hadn’t a penny to his name and how in the end he didn’t have a penny to his name because his partner cheated him and ran off with every last cent. (There’s an old newspaper cutting about him but its been attacked by damp and you can only make out half his name and a handful of words). At that point I stand up and push my chair in. Claire takes my cue.

“Thanks Mr. O’Leary, it’s been really interesting.”

We nick outside and I suddenly have this longing to share the Cataraqui beam with her.

Under the house, Claire throws glances at all the old stuff piled up.

“For a rainy day. Dad never throws anything away.”

I point up to the great beam above our heads.

“That is from the Cataraqui. Do you know anything about it?”

She squats so she can look up at it properly.

“1845. How do you know its from the Cataraqui?”

“Has to be. 1845.”

“I guess so.”

“Shipwrecks don’t interest you?”

“Yes, kind of. Dad says they put King on the map, that’s what all the tourist blurbs say. I’ve been on one of Dad’s tours to all the shipwreck sights: ‘The Cataraqui is the
largest loss of life in an Australian civil disaster to this day’. Hey, Dad can bring his

tours here!”

“No! You mustn’t tell anyone, seriously. Dad’s really wants it kept a secret. Imagine
this place swarming with people. No way!”

“It was a joke, Matt.”

All at once I feel angry, regretting I’d brought Claire down here. Regretting I’d let her
into my home. She was laughing at us. She was polite and smiles but inside she was
laughing at us. She crawled out from under the house.

“Come on, let’s go down to the dug-out.”
I had wanted to tell Claire about the ghostly shadows, and the truth about the shell, but
I was beginning to suspect we were very different, she and I: anything that’s not real is
just a game to Claire. Maybe you have to be born and bred on King to see how the past
lingers.
13. The Fall

We’re heading for the dugout.
“Come on!”

Claire heads off across the dunes in the direction of the shell. She makes out the new markers, pushes aside some tussock grass and disappears from sight. I’m right behind. I know inside there will be a minute when she’s blinded by the darkness but not for long. It will smell of cold, damp, musty sand. I wait as she feels for the shelf, and then the shell. She climbs out gingerly.

“It’s not there!”

I look at her and see she’s not kidding. She looks afraid. I push past. Inside the dugout, my eyes adjust to the dimness. *No shell.* The hum starts up in my ears getting louder and louder. I scramble out. Claire looks at me, her brow all wrinkled, wringing her hands.

“Matt, where is it?”

“As if you really care?”

“What’s that supposed to mean? Of course I care, just the same as you!”

“You don’t. Everything’s a game for you. You’re not true King. You don’t understand anything. You think you’re better than us but you’re not. Having stuff doesn’t make you better you know. It makes you worse.”

“Matt! Stop! Stop it! You’re being horrible. I don’t understand.”

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Just then, we both hear a loud cracking, like glass breaking. Seconds later, a plume of smoke makes a black line against the sky. An idea comes. I run across the dunes and crouch, watching. Then I beckon, secretly and quietly, to Claire.

Looking out from our position, below on the beach, there’s a bonfire burning. The flames spark and jump, made brighter and more sinister by the falling dusk. Someone is down there, dancing round the fire, wearing a mask.

“Who is that?”

I know already but I stay still, watching. The mask is made from feathers with slits for the eyes but otherwise there is no human face visible. The body is bare-chested. It’s a boy, Claire whispers. His chest is marked in white geometric lines. The boy gives out a whooping cry like the peculiar cry of an osprey. Over and over it whoops and hoots every few minutes. We watch in silence as the dance and the yelling becomes more intense, more passionate. The boy takes a burning stick from the fire and begins to wave it ferociously at the sea. He seems to be calling the sea but as friend or enemy it is impossible to say. He waves his stick wildly and jumps about yelling his osprey call.

Claire is silent and then she touches my hand,

“It’s Larry Pratt! What the hell does he think he’s doing? Matt, look!”

She points to a pile of rocks near the edge of the fire, an altar of sorts, topped with wide flat stone. Resting there, sacrificially, is the shell.

“How did he find the new dug-out?”

“He’s stalking me day and night, that’s how!”

I race down the face of the sand dune to the beach.

“You’re stark raving mad Larry Pratt. Stark raving mad!”

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I scream at him, my throat hurting with the rage that is pouring out. Claire is running behind me, calling, screaming, against the crackling of the fire and Larry’s wild bird-calls. As I get closer, I feel a curious force enter my body. I feel the tightness of my clenched fists and I feel them ripping through Larry’s skull and his skin tearing away under my nails.

“Stop! Stop!” — But Claire’s plea is lost in the wake of my fury. Larry has his stick ready to bring it down on the shell. He has seconds to act. Claire is right behind me. Larry hesitates and I fling myself at him and bring him to the ground. I feel his knee in my stomach and I feel my shoulder sting as it collides with Larry’s bony body. Then I hear a shocking scream. At first I think it’s Larry and I smile because I’ve got him scared and hurting badly. It isn’t Larry. Larry’s eyes are looking past me and I realise the scream is coming from behind somewhere. Not a scream to ignore. I pull myself off Larry. Claire is half standing, half falling. Her face is intense, her eyes wild. She has one hand on her arm. I can see her pain. Then she just twists awkwardly and falls over onto the sand. She’s fainted. Her arm is twisted back onto itself held only by a dirty piece of stick. I see the stick, sharpened to a point at the end, bloodied. It’s this point that has penetrated her arm making a gaping hole through it. Blood pours out of the wound.

“She’s fallen onto this. Did you make this spear? You’re a bloody idiot Larry Pratt.

I should have killed you!”

Larry is running back along the beach and I think what a coward he is until he turns back and I see he’s carrying his shirt. He rips it and douses the pieces with salt water.

“We have to pull the stick out and wrap this around and stop the bleeding.”

Larry announces this so calmly and it’s me, not him, that’s snivelling.

“She is unconscious.”

Larry ties the shirt cleverly around the gaping hole and pulls it tightly trying to stop the bleeding.

“Can we carry her?”

“We need help, that’s what! She’s unconscious. We shouldn’t move her. Do you have your bike?”

“Yeah.”

“Then get some help!”
Larry disappears behind the dunes. I sit with Claire’s head in my lap. Gradually I begin to think straight. I think how weird its all going to look when the adults arrive. I get up and I throw sand over the fire and kill it as best I can. I retrieve the shell and kick Larry’s altar to pieces. I don’t know what to do with the shell. I can’t leave Claire to take it back to the dug-out. I take off my shirt and wrap it in that. I take off my socks and wet them in the sea. I dab Claire’s forehead with the wet socks. After a while she moves and opens her eyes.

“The shell?”

“It’s Ok. You’ve got a bloody great cut in your arm. Help is on its way.”

I decide not to say anything about Larry. She squeezes my hand and then she faints again.
14. Respite

I try to sleep but if I shut my eyes I see Claire propped on the hospital pillows, her face ashen and her arm bandaged and in a sling. In her other arm there is a saline drip. For the shock they say and tell me to come back in the morning. I look at my watch. It is one a.m. I roll off the bed and get dressed. I go to the kitchen and cut some bread and butter, drenching it in honey. I want to go to Claire. I walk round and round the kitchen until the honey runs down my fingers and drips onto the kitchen floor. I make a decision. I un-snib the back door quietly, and ride into Currie in the darkness. The honey on my fingers sticks to the handlebars. The sky is alive with stars. A few hours back I was ready to kill Larry. Would I have killed him? Jeez, I felt like I would. I think what that would have meant. The mess we would have been in. Thinking about it that way, I’m almost glad Claire hurt her arm and put a stop to things.

I reach Currie and it’s closed up and deserted like all the people have been shot off into space or something, and it’s only me left. The streetlights are eerie in the stillness; the hospital lights shine out eye-like from the building, into the darkness. Close up, I can see it’s really just the one light shining from the reception area behind the front doors, making it look like the hospital is still awake. I try the doors and they’re locked. Then I notice a sign FOR AFTER HOURS PUSH RED BUTTON TO RIGHT OF DOORS. I stare at the button and imagine an alarm or something going off if I dare to push it. I push it. As the button compresses under the pressure of my fingers, I’m preparing my excuses. No alarms. No voices. The automatic doors swing open. The lobby is clinical and empty. I
try some doors to the side but they are locked. I’m half way back out the automatic doors when I hear footsteps.

“Can I help? It’s a young nurse. She looks kind.”

Nothing dared nothing gained I think,
“ I came to see Claire Campbell.”

“Visiting hours are 6 to 8pm.”

As if I don’t know. It’s written all over the doors and the reception desk.
“Don’t want to visit her, I want to be with her through the night. She might be scared or something.”

I stare down at my feet because my throat has gone tight as if my swallowed words need a glass of water to wash them down.
“What’s your name?”

I tell her my name.
“Wait here.”

Clearly I’m not going anywhere but I stay where I am all the same. She disappears through the double doors to the right. I think to follow her but the doors have self-locked. So I wait like she says to. A few minutes later she comes back and I’m already thinking of the ride home because I know it’s useless, hospital rules.

“Just happens she’s awake and she is pleased for you to sit with her. If you want to help her though, let her get back to sleep. OK?”

Claire is propped up on pillows just as she was when I left her earlier. She’s still ashen and the drip that measures out the saline is burping and belching every thirty seconds. I sit down on the only chair in the room.

“What’s the damage?”
‘You’ve got about twenty stitches in your arm.’

“Not me, are you in trouble? What happened with Larry is he..?”

“You think I killed him? Can’t kill him now. He saved your arm, at least that’s what the doctor said.”

“Yeah, I guess. What about the parents?”

“Nothing. They haven’t said anything.”

I’d been wondering all night about that. Sergeant Reilly dropped me off at home but not a word from Dad.

“Your Dad was here earlier but you were still asleep.”

“Any problem there?”

“Don’t think so. He thanked me, and Larry, for getting you back here.”

“How strange. You’d think he’d be screaming mad.”

“Don’t know. Who knows how they think.”

The nurse returned with tea and some sandwiches and squelched off again. It was funny eating sandwiches at that early hour.

“She’s old Mr Rickard’s granddaughter. She’s nice. Kind.”

We drink the tea and I eat the sandwiches, tomato, ham and cheese just a little tainted with the honey still on my fingers.

“You better go to sleep.”
I go over to the basin and wash my sticky fingers and fill time by opening the wardrobe doors, nothing in there. I try the drawers but they’re empty. Claire’s already asleep. I make myself comfortable in the green vinyl chair.

“Go home now. We’ve got a routine to get going here. Like washing and feeding. You know.”

From a long way off, it’s the nurse speaking. I shiver and stretch and realise I’ve been asleep.

“OK I’ll be back later. Thanks. She’s OK isn’t she?”

“She’s fine. Up and about later today probably.”

“Thanks. Thanks again.”

I realise I’m overdoing it so I hurry off and ride home.
15. Repair

    I visit again in the afternoon and they say Claire has to stay another night. She can move her arm but the wound is looking a bit infected they say. I ride all the way home again but I don’t want to hang around the house all day because at some point I’m going to be interrogated by Dad and Mum. So I ride out to the dugout but it feels juvenile sitting in there. I climb out and sit on the sand. My ears fill with the noise from the shell. Don’t know why it’s so upset. I go home feeling really disappointed with the day. It’s like that sometimes. Things just go sour and you can’t think when it went like that: nothing in particular, just a mood. After dinner, I lie on the bed and start a Garth Nix book and wish I could disappear into another world, with Claire. The shell is on the table by the bed. It is quiet but glowing more fluorescent than I’ve seen it before. It sends a rainbow of colour onto the ceiling, so bright I can’t read. I put it in the wardrobe. The light soon creeps out from the edge of the doors, and then the joins, and then from every crack until you’d think there was a strobe or something in there. I lift it out and put it under the bed pulling the covers down but its glow still warms the room.

    Dad comes into my room and sits on the end of the bed. So it is going to happen now, I think and brace myself.

    “You’re not talking to your mother then? You haven’t been into your mother since the other night.”

    I reply as if I’m guilty of something even though Dad hasn’t said a word about anything.
“It was an accident Dad. Claire fell. We weren’t doing anything we shouldn’t have. We just road out there and it got dark quicker than we realised. Larry was there and he helped.”

‘Things happen. That’s life son. Doesn’t explain why you’ve been avoiding your Mum.’

I was waiting to be dressed-down and Dad was on at me about Mum. Mum never dressed me down. If I’d been avoiding anyone it was Dad.

“Anyway son, I’d like you to have tea with your Mum tonight just like usual. OK?

Mum’s a bit tired so I thought we’d eat early so she gets something before she nods off. Pretty hard to get her to eat at the best of times but no good at all if she’s sleepy.”

I carry the tray into her room and rest it on the bed. I help her with her meal. It’s tomato soup from a tin and sardines on toast; her favourite but not mine. I go to open the window and let out the fishy smell. Strange that it should be closed on such a mild evening. Odd, her window is almost always open to allow in the sea breeze and the silvery things she loved that blew in with it.

‘Why’s your window shut?’

“I was feeling the cold more than usual.”

She was feeling cold again and now I was beginning to really worry but I tell myself it happens when she’s upset. I feel guilty because sometimes things have a way of pilling over and flooding over when all you want is to damn it up and keep it to yourself. Mum speaks before I can,

“I’m sorry about Claire. It’s nice though that you’ve had someone to hang about with these holidays. Is her arm very bad? What were you doing with Larry? You might have been better to keep away from him, don’t you think?”
So I know then that they know all about it. I’m thinking what to tell her about Larry but
when I look up she’s asleep. I take the tray out to the kitchen and Dad washes the dishes
and I dry.
  “You and Larry made it up?”
  “Hell no. Larry’s a creep!”

I can tell he wants to ask me more questions so I say I better get off and finish my
assignment. Dad shrugs.
  “Don’t stay up too late son. And no midnight rides tonight please.”

I walk off making out I didn’t hear.
16. The Eye of the Whale

The seagulls follow me up Green Road screaming overhead, my own personal fan club. Dad says you can find the best fish any day by following the flight paths of the gulls. They overtake me and fly off towards the coast.

I come up over the rise and see Claire on her bike waiting for me in the distance. I’m pleased she’s there like we’d arranged. The gulls catch my eye again, circling and swinging back in a screaming attack on each other like a pack of dogs in a scrap.

I’m looking up watching, wondering what’s got them so worked up and I begin feeling strange, light-headed. Before I know it, I’m sprawled across the road holding my hands over my ears, an unearthly humming sizzling my head. A strange, green haze rises up over the dunes where the gulls are still squabbling. I can’t take my eyes off it. It seems to cram the sky with its luminous green. There are pinks in it too, pearly pinks, silky like in the shell.

The first thought I have is that it’s the shell, definitely the shell. Second thought is that I can’t fight it anymore. And the third is that I can feel myself morphing into it, or might be that it’s morphing into me. The noise becomes a soft hum, and as I sit up, I can see Claire pedalling towards me. I see the concern on her face, her concern for me. Then she fades and I drift, float inside my head, inside the shell; and this is no game. The humming has gone but I feel constrained and breathless. My nostrils fill with the dank salty smell of the beach. My eyes are open but I can only see a confronting dimness. My
skin feels moist, clammy. I feel squeezed, suffocated, like I’m inside the dug-out, but tighter still. So tight, I can feel the build up of pressure behind my eyes threatening to pop them from their sockets. I struggle and twist but movement is not possible. I’m confined inside a shell. I reach out and my fingertips come up against a solid, slippery wall. Gripped by the horror of it I push hard determined to break free. I can’t move, can’t hit out, can’t kick, so I twist and push with my back. Breathing is difficult and my head is dizzy, light, claustrophobic. I’m fainting.

But I don’t faint.

The space fills with a glowing white light, an intense whiteness, like midday sun far out on a still ocean. As I stare blindly into it, unable to raise my hands to my eyes, I see a strong image of a stranding. It lasts for one blink. I blink. I’m released. The neck of my T-shirt drips with perspiration and I wipe my forehead to clear my head, hot and sticky. For seconds, I struggle with what has just happened. I fainted, I dreamt. No, it was real enough. A sticky phosphorescent slime clings to the back of my hands. I wipe it away on my clothes and I’m on my feet and I’ve got my bike up and my foot on the stirrup, leg over. I’m pedalling, with the cool wind racing into my face, to where the gulls are, as fast as I can, racing over a rock-strewn track, a short cut to British Admiral Bay. How shocking, a stranding!

“Matt! Wait’!

Claire is following but I can’t stop to look out for her. I just hope like hell she can negotiate the track without hurting her stitched arm. I scream back,

“Take your time!”
I’m well ahead of her and I don’t know if she hears me. It takes about ten minutes to cover the distance to British Admiral Bay. The gulls above are still disturbed. I throw down my bike and run to the top of the nearest dune. Claire comes up beside me puffing and holding her arm. Annoyed, she checks under the bandaging to see that the stitches are OK.

‘Why’d you race off like that? It’s lucky I didn’t break these! Why’d you want to ride so fast over all those rocks? God! What’s that green stuff all over your daks?’”

I can’t speak and then she sees too.

‘Oh God! A stranding!”

She falls to her knees, the hand of her good arm stretched out in front like a weapon against the carnage. Her face is contorted, her body begins to shake as she sobs, gently at first, and then uncontrollably. Her tears spill across the beach out into shallow waves, where they float, precious jewels, washing over the whales. I reach across and touch her hand. I’d thought of doing it so often, thought it would be impossible, unbearable even, like touching electricity. Instead, she nestles her fingers neatly into my palm so I’m not so much as holding her hand but cupping it in mine, taking her pain into the palm of my hand, letting it pass to me.

“It’s us who’s done this, Matt. Do you know what I’m saying?”

I can feel her meaning, can feel the hysteria rising in her throat but I don’t have the words that can help her

“I mean, it’s people Matt, like we have the right to do what we want, without a thought for them. Everything is too finely interwoven. Too tightly connected so no one can untangle it; just gets worse and worse. Even here on King.”
“Yes, even here on King, we’ve got the whole world sitting on top of us but Claire, for now, we have to think what we’ve got to do. There’s work. First we’ve got to get help right? Can you ride back, Claire?”

I drop my hand from hers and instantly feel the loss.

“I’ll have to.”

A second later, she’s gone.

There must be fifty, maybe more, lined up and beached like a fleet of fishing trawlers at the end of a season. You might mistake them for that if you were looking onshore from the sea. They’re whining and calling but not deafening like before, inside my head, inside the shell. I walk along the line. I know, however much I want to, I won’t be strong enough to roll the ones that need it off their sides and onto their stomachs. I know, left like this, on their sides, water will flood their spouts and they’ll drown. I walk along the line inspecting. I’m already worried at the chances of one or two who seem close to death. I find a strong piece of wood that’s washed onto the shore from a packing case or something, maybe off a container ship. I use it to dig around the fins of one of the biggest. That way water can pool and keep it cool but stay clear of the spout.

“You got to do the tail as well. I’ll do it.’

*It’s Larry.* I feel an explosion inside my chest but I keep it in control. I’m not about to ask him what he’s doing here. I can guess he’s been following me again. At the moment the space between us seems insignificant. I have nothing to say to him anyway. I just keep on digging. It takes forever to dig a hole big enough and when I’ve finished I move onto the next whale.

“We could roll this one!”
Larry talks as if there is nothing between us. He starts giving out orders and I don’t think about us, him or me; I just do what he says because it sounds sensible. Larry goes round to the head and squats whispering really sweetly to the whale. He keeps it up until it’s got used to us, then we place our backs against its side and heave, using our spines and leg muscles like we’re rolling out carpet, and push till we ache. We hold her in position but she doesn’t move. We hold but take a break from pushing. Sweat is running into my eyes and I’m panting like an old dog. Larry gasps.

“You got to let it roll back and forth to get the momentum.”

So we get it into a rocking motion and each time it feels a little further towards rolling, and finally she goes. There’s a haunting whine as her belly hits the sand. We share a look of triumph that lasts a split second before I start in with my stick working to make a space for her wedged left fin. Larry moves to clear the tail.

The whale has been looking at me all the time with one eye. I try to ignore this staring, feeling guilty as if I’m somehow responsible for the mess it is in. It just keeps on staring, its eye challenging me to look harder into it. And what I see is shocking. Painful. I stare into that pain like staring can make it go away. Its eye widens taking in my horror. Looking harder, I see men moving. For a second, I think Claire has arrived with help and what I’m seeing is their reflection. I glance over my shoulder, no one, just flat blue water. I look again into the eye of my whale and I realise I’m seeing right into her mind’s eye.

There are men, maybe twenty or more. They don’t look like any men I’ve ever known: a dirty, wild bunch, tough, muscular. Unshaven men, bare to the waist exposing their strong, weathered bodies, bodies stained ruddy with the blood of their victims. Callous men tearing at the skins of dead elephant seals, peeling them back while some seals twitch and strain still dying as they are skinned. In the water, two rows of men span out into a victory ‘V’ formation, a human trap. The elephant seals —there are hundreds and calves too— are panicked but keen to make it to the shore, keen to keep with the pack, keen to obey the instincts that have driven them over the centuries to this beach to breed
and bathe in the surf and sun. The men brandish their clubs, left, right, hitting their
targets wherever their clubs fall and right between the eyes. And further out, men in
boats brandishing rifles, wait in hope of sharks drawn by the smell of blood. All are
indifferent to my horror. The killing continues until there is just one creature standing. It
pulls itself up out of the water, bleeding, maimed and roars: noble and dignified, before
plunging into the sea. I can’t see where it goes or if it is dead but everywhere is red with
the slaughter. Someone screams, screeches like the desperate call of gulls, the harsh
rasping cry of cockies, *Stop the Killing! Stop the Killing!* Just stop please. Who is
yelling? Me, the whale, Larry? I can’t tell. Like pictures they say flash through your
mind when you’re dying, I see all this in the whale’s eye; a collective history; a silent
witness. I’m full of loathing.

Liquid gold. That’s what they were after. They came in hundreds and slaughtered the
elephant seals for oil, lousy lamp oil. They set up distilleries and extracted the oil. It was
sold all over the world, America, China. So greedy for it that in five years there were no
seals left to kill. It didn’t matter, there was a new gold by then and the hunters exchanged
their clubs for shovels and tin pans and hiked in-land in search of it. The elephant seals
weren’t given that choice.

The whale blinks. I think *there is more forgiveness in that eye than in the whole damn
world.* A single tear runs over its thick, leathery skin onto the sand. Then it cries tears of
blood and forgiveness. My hands are red with its blood. The whale closes its eye. My
face is wet and I wipe the tears off with the back of my hand. I turn quickly hoping Larry
hasn’t noticed, but I don’t see him anymore.
I stand back and look down the line of whales, listening to their whimpering and calling. I’m hoping Claire has explained how many there are. Done as much as I can, but it amounts to nothing much, there are so many. The stench is starting to get to me. It’s the smell of their exposed skin in the hot afternoon sun but I know it’s also the smell of fear forewarning death. I remember reading something about it. It’s too hot for them! I say aloud. We need buckets. But I’m talking to myself. In the distance there’s the hint of an engine noise. I look towards the dunes but it’s coming from the sea. It’s the coastguard and a flotilla of other boats, every shape and size. The whole of Currie is mobilised. I shout, start jumping and waving my arms. I run down the beach to meet the first boat ashore. In minutes there’s a helicopter, hundreds of people with spades and buckets; four-wheel drives flow off the dunes and onto the beach. Some bloke from the coastguard inspects what we’ve been doing and smiles approval. Then he starts giving orders and getting people into teams. I sit out for a minute just recovering from it. I see Claire shading her eyes and wave her over.

“What happened to your face?” She asks all concerns.

I shrug. I don’t know anything has happened to it but I’m thinking maybe all that pain has done something to it,

“You tell me?”

“It’s covered in blood.”

I shrug again and look away.

“That guy over there says you’re a hero, done exactly right for the whales, digging holes for their fins, keeping them cool.”

Larry too, I almost say but I stop short because I’m not sure about Larry. I can’t see him anywhere. Was he here I wonder?
Everyone is at it for hours bucketing water and wishing the sun would set. When it does the horizon is on fire and spreads a glow across the sea turning it crimson. People start pitching tents and setting beach fires ready for a long night.
17. Strandings

Dad is waiting in the kitchen when I come in. It’s late.

“Take a seat son. You want a chocolate drink?”

I see Dad has hot chocolate ready to make. I nod but I hope he won’t say too much. I feel pretty wrecked. We wait silently while the milk boils. We drink the hot chocolate. Dad cleans up and rattles the saucepan cleaning it away into the cupboard. He rinses the mugs and puts them on the bench for the morning. I feel cold and long for a hot shower.

“You and Claire did a great thing today, Matt. Acted real sensible.”

I stand up and push the chair in like Dad always tells me to do but I never do.

“You OK then?”

I shrug but don’t speak. I feel like I’ve been playing footy for three weeks straight and missed a goal on the final kick of the game.

“It just happens son. No one knows why.”

I cut in, voice cracking,

“We almost had them away Dad!”

“Yes, I know you did. What an effort. We sure know how to pull together on King, hey?”

“Not good enough though.”

“You’re mother wants a word before you hit the sack.”

Mum’s waiting, leaning back against the pillows, velvet smile. I sit on the end of the bed and wind the edge of the bedspread over and over in my fingers.

“Feeling helpless?”
She begins but I don’t reply. I wind the edge of the bedspread over and over in my fingers.

“You look as if you’ve grown a foot taller this summer. Better get Dad to take you over to Dobson’s to get some new clothes before school goes back.”

“Yeah? OK, that’d be good.”

I’ve never thought about clothes but lately I’ve noticed my jeans are half way up my legs. At least Claire noticed. Once, — just once — You setting a trend or escaping one — she asked. Mum pushes herself up on her pillows,

“Whales are such magic creatures. I wish I could have been on the beach with you today. Once, a long time ago, your father and I saw a huge pod. They swam about fifty metres from the boat. They rolled over and over again and again making up their minds about us. I caught the eye of one and I felt so ignorant, so insignificant, as if the world really belonged to them, not people. It was a moment of truth for me. I cried just with the wonder of it.”

“Yes. They’re magic or majestic all right. Not sure which.”

“A bit of both I suspect.”

I keep turning the bedspread over and over until its just about coming off the bed.

“They had their own agenda, Matt. People wanting to ‘save the whales’…might be they are really wanting to save themselves.”

I keep on twisting but I’m listening.

“Whatever, they came onshore for a reason. Their own reason. Don’t make the mistake of thinking for them.”

“What would you know? You weren’t there. You didn’t see the stuff I saw!”
I start up from the bed, angry and throw the bedspread across it.

“They’re gunna shoot them if they can’t get them off shore at next tide!”

My voice is high-pitch, unusual as if it’s someone else speaking.

“It’s Ok to be angry, but not with me. That is just too much.”

The room fills with words, sparks flashing off them. I shuffle, as if to leave, but I’m not moving. I whisper,

“Sorry. You’re right. They could have just been confused I guess. I’ve read whales often beach because of earthquake tremors interfering with their sonars.

“An earthquake?”

“That’s what I’ve read.”

“What nonsense. People always want to rationalise everything. How does knowing if it’s earthquakes, or climate change or saline levels help the whales? How does knowing change that! Maybe it’s just the natural balance. No explanations…just are what they are. It is entirely in the hands of Mother Nature. Humans can believe what they will but that’s the truth of it. Mother nature. If they want something to sing songs about and build churches for then let it be for her.”

I can’t say anything to this. I’ve never heard Mum say so much. She looks worn out with it, lips pale, skin blue. For a moment I feel like she’s somewhere else, like she sees herself as different…like she’s a different species or something. Like she belongs more to the whales than to us…to me. I don’t like feeling like this. I think perhaps I should go and get Dad. And suddenly I wish like anything I could undo mentioning
earthquakes. She interrupts my thinking, sitting up suddenly as if she’s been struck by the lightening of her own thoughts,

“Where’s the talisman, Matt?”

What does she mean? Then I realise she’s talking about the shell.

“It’s hidden, just like you said.”

She’s a bit more like herself now, softer, a hint of the velvet smile returning.

“You’re its Keeper, Matt. Maybe now is a time to draw on its natural powers. First thing tomorrow, take the shell to the whales and call on it for help. If there’s help to be had, it will know the way.”

She says it like the she knows all about the shell just like the way she knows just about everything I’m thinking, most of the time. She lies back, closing her eyes and I go to tiptoe out.

“Before you go Matt, one more thing. Be careful son…with the choices you make. Everything comes with a cost. Believe me on this one…everything comes with a cost. Sometimes you have to decide how much you’re willing to pay and sometimes the cost can be…well just too much.”

Back in my room, I take the mother of pearl box from the table next to my bed, and open it carefully. There, resting on the bottom, are the tiny silvery things, and Mum’s words. As the air reaches inside the box, they begin to move and dance. I shut the lid on them— tightly.

In bed, I lie awake for a long time, thinking about Mum. How’d she know I was the Keeper? I think long and hard on it, but I’m certain I’ve never told her anything about me being the Keeper. Have she and Dad been spying on me. And all that stuff about the shell. She must know it communicates with me. Can she hear it, too. A watery cold
shiver convulses me and the shiver seems to say, _Go to sleep. You have a lot to do tomorrow._

Next morning I’m chucking stones on Claire’s window at dawn. She comes down dressed for the cold morning holding two pieces of apple pie, one in each hand.

“Thanks. These are good. I say with my mouth full.”

“So what’s up?”

“Going to take the shell down to the whales.”

“Yeah, what for?”

“Dunno. But I know I have to. Mum told me to.”

Claire looks as if to say something but she just pulls her bike out of the shed and gets on ready to ride. We get to the dugout and I climb in and get the shell. It looks ok and still in one piece. Don’t know why I thought it wouldn’t be except for all the energy it must have used up yesterday. At British Admiral Bay, Claire follows me to the top of the dunes and we look out onto the whales, beached again. Only once, the previous night, did we get them off, but they’d cut back. We gave up in the end. There was talk of moving them to another beach where we might get them away. Experts were swarming all over the matter but in the end it was decided the best thing was to put them out of their misery. Today, the sea is flat and the dawn spills across its surface like gold dust. It’s hard not to enjoy it even today with the whales lined up along the shore. Claire whispers, “Look how beautiful the sea is Matt. I love dawn!”

There were lots of people still huddling around fires that had kept them warm through a clear, cold summer night. The smell of coffee and bacon drift across the beach.

“Bit awful don’t you reckon? Whales must be starving and all that pig fat wafting about!”

I search out my whale, the whale with the knowing eye, and we sit near it holding the shell. Claire sits next to me but says nothing. I stare at the whale and it stares back, all that kindness circling around as if I’m the one stranded and dying.

“Matt, what happened yesterday?”

“So much happened yesterday.”
“How’d you know the whales were here?”

“I didn’t.”

“But you rode off as if you knew something. Remember?”

“I saw the seagulls carrying on and I followed before they got out of sight.”

“You fell off your bike! It looked like you’d fainted.”

“I think maybe I did a bit. It was really hot riding back from Currie.”

“And that’s all?”

“What else?”

“Just thought something happened. You were covered all over in green slime for one thing.”

“I just fell off my bike.”

It wasn’t that I didn’t want to tell her about what had happened, but what could I tell her? I didn’t know myself.

Years ago, maybe I was eight or nine, I was down near the dugout. I came over a dune and there was an aboriginal woman squatting over a circle of stones. She was different to the women I’d seen before but the same as well. She was making a fire. She had a big pile of periwinkles in a tin of water. She spoke but I couldn’t understand her but I knew what she was saying. She was making a fire to cook the periwinkles. She waved with her hand for me to sit and join her. I wasn’t so sure I wanted to eat periwinkles but I wanted to stay. I sat next to her and she began chattering in her own language, waving towards the sea, once shaking her head as if to say how unbelievable some things are,
once chuckling and laughing so I knew she was telling me a funny story. After a while, she had the fire going and in minutes the water was boiling and the periwinkles were dancing around cooking. She fished some out with a metal spoon she had. They had split open in the boiling water and inside was a grey slimy pea. I couldn’t say no. So, I sucked the flesh out, like she did, and swallowed it whole and as quickly as I could. It didn’t taste bad but it didn’t taste good either. She offered another but I shook my head. One was enough. She grinned so her smile reached back to her ears and took a handful and sucked them down. I sat with her while she finished them off. She kicked sand over the fire and made sure it was out, put her spoon in a pouch that hung from a string around her waist – apart from the string she was completely naked – picked up the tin and a wooden spear she’d had stuck in the sand nearby and held it up over her shoulder so for an instant I thought she was going to throw it at me. Instead she looked at me long and hard, kind of sad, almost mournful, then she walked over to me and tousled my hair, patted my shoulder and walked off down the beach. I raced home and told Dad all about it. He looked at me strangely, like he was trying to figure out if I was being fair dinkum.

“True Dad. We ate periwinkles together.”

“What did they taste like?”

“Horrible!”

“Well, that’s right. Pretty ordinary.”

“Pretty ordinary.”

“Thing is son, you know as well as I do, the last Aborigine to live on King was about a hundred years ago.”

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I went back to the beach and the stones were still there, still warm alongside the periwinkle shells. Footprints in the sand too. And more. There was a circle of light dancing around those footprints. You know the kind of thing, like the circle of light that comes off your watch sometimes when the sun catches it and it reflects onto the wall. Like that. And I could still hear her free flowing laughter. Decided not to tell Dad that though. Claire calls me back from my daydreaming,

“Matt? What are you thinking about?”

“Thinking about what Mum said.”
“What exactly did your Mum say?”
“She just said, why don’t I call in a bit of luck for the whales from the shell.”
“You’re Mum is…well she’s nice but she’s different.”

We sit in silence looking out over the sea as the sky changes from ochre to a misty blue-grey.

“OK. So you’re the Keeper. Call in some luck.”

I sit for a while longer. I’m thinking about how to do just that. I know the shell and it knows me. I get up. It’s really chilly but I take off my jacket and shoes. “I’m going into the water with the shell, Claire. I just know that’s what I’ve got to do.”

“Jeez you’ll freeze like a brass monkey!”

“Whatever it takes.”

I take off my shirt and daks and pick up the shell and walk into the sea. I walk until it’s deep enough to swim and holding the shell under one arm, I paddle out. When I can feel there’s no bottom beneath me, I stick my head under and it’s black as a moonless night down there. I dive as deep as I can. I hold the shell out in front of me and it’s just a silhouette through the ebony water. I begin to think to it.
‘You chose me remember! Called to me! Summoned me more like— to help the whales. You can’t say I haven’t done my best. I got help. Not that it’s done any good.’

‘You interfere, you take from the earth and never put back.’
‘That’s unfair. We do what we can’.
‘But you do it for all the wrong reasons. You only do it for yourselves.’
‘We’re greener here than on the mainland. We care on King.’
‘Green is a colour not a solution. Colour won’t save the whales.’
‘Shell, listen to me! There’s nothing left but to shoot them and put them out of their misery’.
‘You can see how it is, can’t you? Because of your people, your past footprints... You owe them especially...
‘They just thought differently, Great-Granddad and that. It’s not like those early-settlers were bad.’

I reason with the shell but the strongest memories of those images that came to me, through the eye of the whale, fill my head once more. I don’t know how long I’ve been underwater but I still have air enough. Just enough to reason one last time with the shell:

‘Listen to me. I am doing something. I’ve come here, into your space, to beg you to help me... and all of us on King... find a way. You could make the sea rise and wash them out. You could speak to them yourself. Look, I can’t be responsible for what my ancestors did but my head is in the right place. Surely you can see it. Don’t let them be shot. How could you? Is nature really that cruel?’

I’ve been under water seven minutes or more. I come to my senses and am pushing up to get to the surface. I swim with the shell tucked under my arm carrying it up to the surface as if it is nothing but an ordinary shell: just any old shell I found one time on the beach. Damn you shell! I break through and look to the shore. Claire is standing, hand over her eyes against the morning sun; and the whales are still beached. I pull myself out. My teeth chatter and my fingers are so numb I can hardly pull on my clothes.

“You were down there a hell of a long time. I was worried.”

“I’m freezing. Guess I’m going nuts!”
“You see ghosts down there or something ‘cause you’re white as one.”

I eventually pull my clothes on over my wet body and it feels like I’m sharing them with a heap of slimy slugs. It sends shivers all over. We make our way back to the dug-out. I put the shell safely back in its place and we find our bikes and begin the ride home.

Out of the blue, there’s an ear-splitting crack. Claire screams. We stop for a minute wondering what it is. Then again. We see lightening strike the ground about a hundred metres ahead. The sky darkens.

“It’s going to pour down like billeo!”

We hop on our bikes and peddle home as fast as we can. We almost make it too. We come over the hill and the Seaheaven sign –The Best Place for Sea and Heaven– illuminates the surrounding darkness. Then thunder-claps strike straight over head. Lightening flashes brighter than the neon sign and rain drives down on us. We drop the bikes and run for it.

“Where have you two been? Claire, get what’s-his-name into the shower and you use our bathroom. Go on. Now, before you catch your death. Both of you!”

It’s nice under the shower. I let the warm water wash over me. I forget about the three-minute-rule and turn the hot tap up. I’m red all over and only just warming up. I’m feeling numb, not in my body, but inside. Guess I’d believed the shell could help, in some way. Was that just superstition, like touching wood for good luck? What power could the shell have anyway? But it does have power. Nature is power. Yeah, right, sure thing, nuts.

“Matt! Matt! Matt!”
Claire is outside and I’m not too keen on her catching me without any clothes. I turn off the taps and grab a towel.

“Matt, Hurry up!”

Dragging on the clothes Claire found for me from her Dad’s wardrobe, way too big. When I get down stairs everyone is running around like antechinus.

“You got to come in the car with us. You want to get your Dad too?”

“What’s going on?”

We drive up to my place and I run in and change my clothes. Dad grabs his fishing jacket and disappears to tell mum what’s happening. We head off. As we drive up Green Road to British Admiral Bay I realise this is the first time I’ve ever been with Dad and other people. It feels strange but good. Friendly. Dad is asking Mr Campbell,

“So who rang you?”

“Coastguard rang.”

We are driving blind because the rain is stronger than the wipers on the Landcruiser can manage. I notice how luxurious the car is, with leather seats, GPS — although it doesn’t work on King, and heaps of dials and lights. We hit pot-holes and Mr. Campbell swears. I look to see how Dad reacts to that. I haven’t ever heard a single swear word out of him. Dad doesn’t use bad language, anyway, not like Claire’s Dad is using. I guess he’s not about to tell Mr Campbell off but I can sense his disapproval. We bump and jostle and roll inside the car but eventually we climb out and push against the rain and wind onto the dunes above the beach. Plenty of others are braving the wet and the cold too.
The storm is raising the height of the waves so they are falling right up and over the beach. Not a stretch of sand is in sight. It must be ten feet deep because it’s that high up the side of the dunes. The whales are swimming free, calling to each other, getting organised. We wait an hour wondering what they’re doing. Wondering why they don’t swim out on the high water. I have my eye open for my whale but I can’t tell one whale from another. They sway with the waves and circle backwards and forwards across the surf. A trawler has been sent out to try and drive them out but instead they circle the boat until it has to cut its engines and drift. I hear a humming but I’m busy watching, thinking, hoping. The humming gets louder and then it’s not humming anymore but screeching in my ears. I look across the dunes to where I know the dugout is and I see a soft green glow. Claire’s face is all concern.

“You OK Matt?”

I don’t reply because at that moment the whales begin to turn out to sea. One of the whales lifts itself right out of the water. It has to be my whale. It turns and heads out to sea against the crashing waves. The whole pod follows. We watch until they are far, far away.

“It’s stopped raining!”

Dad’s shout is too loud in the sudden quiet. The wind has stopped howling and the sea is subsiding, leaving the sand washed smooth; not a single bit of evidence of the activity of the last forty-eight hours. Then a wave washes in and brings with it tents and buckets, all kinds of stuff washing in onto the beach. Don’t know why, but every one cheers, like ruined camping gear is a good thing, or something.

'Thank you', I whisper.
18. Vengeance

I’m sitting at my desk looking at the near empty page. School is back on Monday and it will be the first time I haven’t got homework in. I sit looking at the page wishing I could use the library but loathing the thought of bumping into Larry. Then it occurs to me that Larry’s not the last minute type and he’s been working at the library all holiday so he will be all written up. Even so, I give the library the full check over before I descend on the computer.

“You seen Larry, Mrs. Greenwood?”

“No dear, he hasn’t been in for a few days now.”

“Yeah, he’s been too busy stalking people.”

“What’s that, I’ve got my aid turned down?”

“I said he’s probably busy.”

“Yes, well perhaps, but he’s an unusual boy and he doesn’t seem to help his mother with the shop as much as he might.”

“I could tell even Mrs. Greenwood found Larry creepy.”

“How’s young Claire Campbell?”

I should have realised it would be all over town by now.

“Bit better, I think.”

I scoot down one of the aisles before she can ask me any more questions. I settle into the bookmarks and find all the stuff on the Bermuda triangle. Claire lent me some money
so I could use Word and print off my assignment. It’s a bit slow but easy downloading chunks of stuff and changing it around so it sounds like I’ve written it. I have it printed off within the hour. I manage five pages, which is a lot more than I could have got out by hand. I’m sorting the pages when my eye catches a paper in the waste paper basket. No reason for it. I just fix on it and then I’m lifting it out feeling so curious. What I see shocks me. It’s a page torn from the B3 children’s book that I’d used to hide from Pratt and that he’d held up to me in the library window just a couple of weeks back. It’s not the same page with the shell but it’s a similar scene with a mermaid combing out her golden tresses. I blush so hard the redness pushes down through my whole body, and my hands are clammy and burning red too. My mouth is so dry I can’t swallow. The thing I know for sure is it has to be Larry who has torn it out and left it here for me to find. I fold the page small as I can and stuff it deep into the pocket of my jeans.

I scoot around the shelves and there it is, the same book, in its place on the shelf in the children’s section. I find where the page has been pulled from and turning back a page to where there is the picture of the shell. Strangely it doesn’t look so much like my shell anymore, similar, but not exactly the same.

I ride home and stop off at Claire’s but I don’t get to see Claire because Esther says she has to stay in and rest. So I lie on my bed and read my Garth Nix book because I just can’t get into finishing my assignment. Soon the book is hanging off my hand like it does when you’re drifting to sleep reading. Next thing Dad storms into the room like the devil is in pursuit. He swears like I haven’t heard ever before. Not bad like Mr Campbell but bad for Dad. I sit up sharp and watch Dad collapse on the bed next to me. He sits
with his legs wide and his head in his hands. Then he flares up again and shoves this piece of paper in my face.

“Explain the meaning of this!”

“It’s a photocopy of the mermaid picture only someone has put a cross through it and written ‘X marks the spot’. ”

“This is sick. Bloody sick. Not a word to your mother. Not a word!”

He is calmer now.

“You know who sent this?”

I should tell him it’s Larry but I can’t because the shell is ringing decibels in my ears. Seems the whole world is fiery tonight.

“It’s Pratt, isn’t it? What’s his problem son?”

“He’s nuts, Dad. I don’t know. He’s been following Claire and me all over the place. He’s just creepy.”

“Yeah, well his mother needs to know about this.”

He leaves the room but I’m burning up. I fumble in the pocket of my jeans and pull out two pieces of paper. One is a map of the seas surrounding King with ‘X marks the spot’ and the other is the page from the library wastepaper bin. I climb out the window, take my bike, and ride away without being heard. I’m so angry I fall off the bike twice before I get into Currie. The fish and chip shop is still open but Mrs Pratt is getting ready to close.

“Where’s Larry?”

I know how rude I sound. I can’t remember ever speaking to Mrs. Pratt before but I can tell she knows who I am.

“Don’t know luv. He’s sure as hell not here helping me!”
The town is already closed up, just the fish and chip shop and the neon light of the petrol station stand out. ‘Goodnight!’ — Mrs. Pratt calls as she turns off the shop lights and disappears out the back where she and Larry live. I’m glad I don’t live in a shop. God, the smell of fish and chips would put me off for life. I wander down to the harbour but nothing much is happening there, just one of the big trawlers is docking with no catch on board. I’m still spitting over Larry. I ride back towards home and then decide to see if Claire is about. Everything is dark at Claire’s, except for the blue security light under the eaves. I decide to call it quits and head home. I climb back through my bedroom window and look back out into the night. I know poor sick Larry is out there somewhere but I’m deathly tired now and I lie down on the bed without getting undressed and pull the covers over me and I’m asleep.

The next morning I’m awake before daylight and I’m on my bike riding like hell’s fire.

Thing is, the shell is gone!

My head is screaming with the sound of the sea like there’s a cyclone coming. I reach Currie. There are no more people about than there was the night before. I go round the back of the fish and chip shop and it’s dark, sleeping. I go to knock on the back door but then I see a window open that I can climb in through. Surprise Larry, I’m thinking. This time, I’ll kill him. Inside, I creep around looking for Larry’s room. Not that there’s a lot of looking to do; there’s just a kitchen with two rooms off it. Mrs Pratt is alone in a double bed snoring her head off and in the other room the bed is empty, not slept in.

I leave by the back door and head out to Claire’s. Can’t think what else to do. Seaheaven is beginning to wake up. I can hear someone doing laps in the pool and the lights are on in the kitchen. I go in through the back door bracing myself for Esther refusing me at that hour but it’s Mr Campbell, in his pyjama pants, making a cup of coffee. I give him such a fright the cup slides across the saucer and steam pours over his fingers.

‘Bloody hell! Where’d you come from?’

I was beginning to quite like Mr Campbell. He was a cup half full person, like Claire.

‘Sorry Mr Campbell but I need to see Claire urgently. I’ve lost something real valuable and I need Claire to help me find it.’

‘What’s happened?’
It’s Claire in her nightie. You can see right through it.
“Shell’s gone.”

I’ll get dressed straight away. Claire holds up her arm.
“Not much use to you anyway but I’ll be back in a tick!”

“Want a coffee, son?”

As I say, Mr Campbell is a good bloke.
We ride slowly back to Currie with Claire sitting on my handlebars. I peddle and, when I can, I explain to Claire about the shell and how Larry’s taken it, but I leave out about how he sent Dad the picture.

We wake Mrs Pratt demanding she tell us where Larry is.
“How dare you speak to me like this!”

Then she bursts into tears. Seems she hasn’t seen Larry since the business with Claire. Claire makes her a cup of tea and we explain that we think Larry has taken something precious that belongs to us.
“Larry’s a little…well…different but he isn’t a thief! Never!”

I don’t want to argue the point but Larry is a thief because he’s taken the shell.
“Is there anywhere Larry might go Mrs Pratt?”

I know then Claire is an angel because of the way she’s coaxing Mrs Pratt and staying really calm.
“There’s the sabot. He might have gone out in that. I didn’t think of it ‘till now.”

“Where would he go? Is there somewhere he particularly likes to sail to?”

Claire is brilliant. Mrs. Pratt looks uncomfortable. Claire puts her good arm around Mrs. Pratt’s shoulders then pours her another cup of tea.
“Larry’s always looking to find where his Dad was salvaging the day he disappeared.

He had some idea Hubert had found the Cataraqui. He wanted me to send divers but the expense and…well Hubert would have wanted to be buried at sea anyway. Let
the dead rest in peace. They say if you dive deep enough, about a kilometre off
Cataraqui beach, you can see the wreck a long way down."

Mrs Pratt looks like she can see it.
We’re at the harbour within minutes and its obvious Larry has taken his sabot. I’ve
never stolen anything in my life; I never had a need to steal anything. I’ve always had
everything I wanted. Right now though, I need a boat and none of the boats tied up here
in the harbour belong to me. Claire sees what I’m thinking.

“Dad’s got boats at Grassy for the tourists to use.”

“Grassy! That’s ages away! We’ve got to take one of these or we’ll never catch him.”

I’m not even going to think about what Larry might be going to do. I untie the smallest
dinghy I can find. Claire looks uncertain then she sees I’m determined and she climbs in
as I push the dinghy out into the water and jump in. I take the oars and settle them in the
rowlocks and head out past the moored trawlers. I’m going to have to row it myself
because of Claire’s arm.

When I catch up to Pratt, I’m going to do more than break his nose. This time I’ll kill
him.
PART TWO : CLAIRE
1. Memories

Not a soul has appeared from a single trawler to question the wisdom of what we are doing. After all, why would they: the sea is flat, the wind is just a cool, gentle breeze and kids on King are always mucking around in boats. Still it would have been reassuring, less confronting, sensible, if someone had waved or watched as we make our way through the harbour. Matt pulls on the oars and takes the dinghy out beyond the moorings. His bleached hair falls tangled over his forehead. He needs a haircut. Half moons of purple sit like bruises under his eyes. His face is drawn yet determined, and somehow sad. Still, his rowing is frantic and his eyes don’t leave the oars except to check our progress against the shoreline. He has no idea how closely I am watching him.

As we row round the point, the great statues of the windmills loom at us from the shore. Even as far out as we are, we can hear the whoosh of their sails.

“Aren’t they magnificent!”

“Sure.”

Matt looks thoughtful.

“They’re pumping pretty fast. Wind must be getting up.”

Water splashes off the oars and makes froth like soapsuds along the seat. Matt doesn’t notice. I watch as they run into each other and drip over into the bottom of the boat. But my eyes drift back to the windmills. The thing about the windmills is that you never get sick of looking at them. It’s one of the best things about King…making our electricity
from the wind. When had I begun loving King? It’s kind of crept up on me. I remember Matt that first day, white as a ghost, coming out from a swim. I think he hated me then, hated I knew about the shell. It’s just a shell I thought, then. Just a shell, but I promised I’d keep it secret. I think it made the difference, my promise. And no matter how moody Matt is, how weird he is acting right now, I trust him like I’ve never trusted anyone in my life. Oh Matt, please tell me what is going on. He’s pulling so hard on the oars I don’t reckon he can keep it up for much longer. There is no sign of Larry, not a glint, not a shadow.

“No sight of Larry, Matt?”

“Matt throws a glance over his shoulder.”

“Do we have a plan, Matt? Do we know where we’re headed?”

For a moment I see the storm in his eyes and wish I’d kept my mouth shut. He keeps rowing and the drip from the oars occasionally falls on my bandaged arm. I shift in the boat because I know it has to be kept dry. Matt follows my movement but he is still hard faced, set on rowing as fast as he can. It’s easy to see he isn’t really rowing anywhere. He’s just rowing because he’s angry and maybe scared. Gulls scream overhead and I listen to their echo fading like distant thoughts.

I think about feeling scared. About running away in Hobart. It wasn’t just the cold and the discomfort that was scary. It wasn’t even the junkies who came up and lent over me or tried to get money out of me. The scary bit was early in the morning after about one or two, when everything closes down, the lights, the walkers, the dogs, even the junkies; everything except the noises. In daytime you can hear twittering birds, rustling leaves, breeze in the grass, insects, clouds. They rustle and creak but they don’t creep.
In the early hours everything creeps. Everything creeps up on you like some creature eating out your brain. Creeps in to steal your bag, creeps in to throw you in a van and take you away, creeps up to cut your throat. If you find the courage to stand up and confront it, there’s no one, just the noise. It keeps on and on, an everlasting time. Dad says it’s always darkest just before they turn on the lights. Dawn. The sky lightens, rest comes with the dawn; the creeping sleeps when the light wakes.

“Matt, there was this time when I was so scared I thought I’d die. But of course I didn’t. No one ever does because mostly they just move on. Being scared is like being at a cross road and not knowing which way to go but once you make a decision you almost laugh at yourself for all the worry you’ve had over it.”

I had wanted to tell him for a long time about how I ran away, about the creeping feeling, and Mum turning me out. He rests the oars and we begin to bob about drifting slowly out to sea in the slight off shore breeze. He finally looks me in the eye, his voice slow and tired,

“I’m not scared. At least not for myself. I’m scared what Larry is going to do with the shell and what might happen if he does something…bad. Most of all, I’m angry because I can’t think what to do, except hope to catch up to him.”

The little boat drifts, the waves popping like corn against the bow. The sun is high now and bright off the water. I can see even Matt is softening in its warmth, its dreamy peacefulness; too nice to be angry or afraid. Matt stows the oars and pulls off his T-shirt.

“It’s deep here. I’m going in. I’m hot.”

He looks guiltily at my arm.
“Do you mind?”

But he doesn’t wait for my consent.

“Turn you’re head ’cause I’m going in naked.”

I hear the splash. If it weren’t for my arm I might have stripped off too. Matt disappears underwater. The boat is drifting. He resurfaces and has to swim to catch up. He dives again. I shift nervously looking from side to side trying to guess on which side of the boat he will reappear.

A seagull lands on the bow. It cocks its head this way and that. For a moment I relax glad of its company. We drift like this for sometime just me and the bird. All at once, it’s airborne again, high over the dinghy where it hovers in a holding position, wings flapping ferociously. Time seems to stand still. Next, it dives. Then a terrible thought, what if there’s a shark. Matt has been down the longest time, too long. I look at my watch.

The seagull emerges from the surface and returns to its place on the side of the dinghy. It has a fish in its beak, silvery and fat. It drops it into the bottom of the boat. A gift? Wildly the fish’s tail flaps against the wooden slats. I feel sorry for it and reach to fling it back into the sea but suddenly it rests quietly. The seagull nods with approval as if the fish has followed orders. He flies off, circling the boat. I raise my hand to my eyes against the sun to watch.

I watch the early morning sun as it splits threads of light into a myriad of yellow rays and weaves them into a quilt of gold across the sea. So pretty. My feelings drift with the sound of the gentle wash of water against the oars and the sweet, salty smell of the dinghy. Something is welling up from deep within. I feel at last I belong: sea, sky, sun,
King and me. Looking back I see Currie already small and distant. I hug myself with happiness and yet this is the saddest day. Matt will kill Larry if we find him. Other sadder days drift past me in the morning sun.

Mum heading North. Dad announcing we were leaving Hobart. Me running away. I was on the streets for two nights until the police found me sleeping in a park and dragged me home. I was scared as hell and I’d spent most of the fifty dollars I’d taken from Dad’s wallet. Truth be known, I was so relieved when they picked me up. I’d made my point I thought: Nothing, and no one, was going to take me out of Hobart. But Dad played his trump card. He found me a boarding school. That was the choice I had. But there was no way I was going to let Esther win. So I got bold or stupid, same thing, and nicked the money for the ferry to Melbourne and a bus to Queensland. I can’t believe how easy it was to buy those tickets.

“I’m going to Queensland to have a holiday with my Mum. Been looking forward to it for months.”

I managed to look dead innocent, unloved innocent. You could see the empathy grow all over the ticket lady’s face. I even heard her say as I walked away,

“Fancy a kid that age having to get herself to Queensland. You can guess what kind of Father and Mother, eh?”

Yep, she was so right. It was the worst trip. I threw up on the ferry. Not that it drew anyone’s attention. Almost everyone on board was sick, disgusting. To make it even worse, maybe better, there was this immense vacuum cleaner that hoovered up the vomit. The bus wasn’t much better. Through the hours of endless highway and toilet stops, I thought how it’d be between Mum and me from now on, like sisters. Then when I got
myself to her front door tired and smelling of sick—I hadn’t thought to bring a change of
clothes, it occurred to me that she might not be so keen to see me. I was right. She fed
me—sort of, shopped me until I dropped—buying peace with her conscience—and sent
me back to Hobart.

On the way back to Melbourne I figured it all out. She had moved far away so I
couldn’t visit, not without Dad, and certainly not on my own. Well I had. Anyway, how
exactly, was it my fault that Dad had run off with Esther? It was really scary thinking like
this because Dad had Esther, and Mum had Queensland. What did I have? To them, I
was just a pesky insect bite; something you’d rather not have, like a boil, something you
wished you could vanish with an antiseptic cream. I asked myself over and over how it
was possible for a mother to disown her own flesh and blood like that.

I made up my mind to stay in Melbourne and get a job. That scared me. I’d never had
a job, not even a pocket money job. How do you go about getting a job? Then I needed
somewhere to live and money to keep me going. I had about twenty dollars in my pocket
and the stuff Mum had just bought me. By the time I got off at the coach station in
Melbourne, I’d dug myself deep into a black hole of misery. When my feet hit the
pavement, and the six o’clock winter dimness closed around, I felt nothing but panic.
People were pushing and shoving and collecting their bags, throwing their arms round
relatives and friends, or chasing up taxis, buying hot dogs. A greasy airlessness crammed
the place. I just stood on the spot thinking, Hell what do I do now?

Then I saw Dad. He was not more than a metre away and he was looking at me as if I
was pavlova. He scooped me up and I just about suffocated in the musty wool of his
coat. When I got to see his face, his cheeks were wet like he’d been standing in the rain.
He didn’t say anything, just chanted my name over and over. Then Esther steps up and says she knows she can’t be a mother to me but she would like to be given a chance. They’d come all the way from Hobart to be there to meet me and to take me back home. I tried for Dad’s sake but I hated King and I tried even harder but I hated Esther; like for all the trying I could never like cabbage.

The seagull leaves off circling and dives suddenly, dart-like into the water. Seconds later, Matt comes thrashing through the surface gasping, and ghostly and grey.

“Matt!”

He struggles, dog paddling, exhausted and grasps onto the edge of the dinghy with his white-water-washed hands and pulls himself up. Awkwardly, he hooks one foot over the side and hauls himself in. I throw him his T-shirt and he rubs himself dry and without a word drags his daks on. I turn and look away although I know he is not in the least self-conscious. It just seems the descent thing to do. A thousand questions sit on the tip of my tongue. Then a whoosh from the water and I turn to see the surface break and the seagull pull himself up into the air, water dripping off his tomato sauce legs. He circles as if checking on us before squawking a farewell and flying high into the horizon.

I can hear Matt wheezing and look back to find his hands on the oars, his face stony and his silence hurtful. I don’t say anything but I notice a little patch of blood coming through onto his shirt at his right shoulder. A shudder crosses over me as though the secrets of the deep have laid their cold hand on my shoulders.

“What’s happened to you?”
Matt looks at me as if he’s seeing me, really seeing me, for the first time since we rowed out.

“It’s nothing. Don’t worry about it.”

I look back towards the shore and see we’ve drifted a long way out. I know it’s much further than I could swim. We are just a dot in this great inky liquid and I realise how stupid it is to be out so far without food, or water, or safety gear.

“I want to go back to Currie. Take me back.”

“Claire?”

At once his eyes are warm and kind again, and full of concern.

“I’ve been waiting for you to start talking to me again, to tell me what’s going on but if you’re not going to, if you don’t want to, then I might as well go back. Esther will have set up a right squealing by now. I’ll be in big trouble. I didn’t say I was going out.”

“You can’t. We’ve got to find Larry and the shell.”

“Oh, so that’s why you’ve been swimming for the past half hour is it, almost drowning and scaring me half to death! Anyway I need the loo.”

I add this as if it is suddenly the most important thing on my mind, more important than him dying. He looks overcome with regret as if he should have thought more, thought more about the little things.

“Well, we could row into Miller’s Harbour. They’ve got public toilets and there’s a public phone too. You can ring Esther and say you’re at a friend’s doing homework.”
Begrudgingly, I nod but don’t smile. Of course, I don’t for a moment intend not to stay with him. I just don’t want him to know that.

“But first you have to tell me what happened down there. Every day you’ve been getting…I don’t know how to describe it but it’s like you’re haunted. You’ve had that look all summer. I haven’t said a word until now because you haven’t volunteered anything but if I’m rowing half way to China with you, because of Larry and the shell, I need to know what’s going on. Has it got something to do with the shell, or with Larry, or both?”

Matt stows the oars and hangs his head in his hands while the plopping of the sea on the hull grows more determined as if it too wants to know what has been going on. But it takes my breath away to see him broken like that. He runs his hands through his hair pulling at the knots.

“Sometimes…it’s hard to explain…I can see things…I dunno. They’re like shadows. Don’t really know what they are ’cause I can’t quite see ‘em. I just catch a glance. Just a glimpse out of the corner of my eye but I can hear them.”

He rubs at his ears as if to wipe away the sounds. I know he’s not having me on. The reality is there in his face. He looks into the distance towards where the sky meets the sea.

“It’s kids drowning, mostly.”

I gasp and just manage to hold in my horror, disbelieving and believing at the same time.
“Whispering, calling to me, wanting me to save ’em. It’s adults too. Their arms spread like oars, long floating dresses, bodies floating up passed me until I see the bottoms of their feet rising, rising, up, up until I’ve left it too late to help them.”

“Rev. Grimshaw looked just like that.” I swallow a laugh.

But Matt is lost to his mind’s eye:

“The kids are the worst. But I can’t save any of them, women or children, because they’re only shadows.”

“Do you mean ghosts?”

“Or memories.”

“Memories?”

“Yeah. I dunno. Ghosts is something different. There aren’t any ghosts except in stories. It’s just like a remembrance or a footprint from the past.”

“And it’s only been happening since you found the shell?”

“Maybe. It’s much clearer since I found the shell. Before it was vague, just a sense of something lingering.”

I think about seeing shadows, about hearing the dead calling. I can’t imagine it. It’s the worst thing I’ve ever heard. How can Matt keep the knowledge of something so haunting to himself. I look at the black circles under his eyes. The Keeper of the shell. I haven’t really believed in the shell, not really, I’ve just gone along with it because it was different and so much fun and because Matt is different. I think about what great company he’s been. I wish I could take back being so sulky.
“What happened to your shoulder down there?”

“The seagull.”

“My seagull?”

“Yours?”

“He brought me that fish.”

Matt looks at the fish resting on the bottom of the dinghy.

“Really? How strange. I wonder why?”

“Matt, what happened down there?”

He looks away into the blue.

“I dived too deep and I was fading, passing out. The seagull must have dived and stabbed me… with its beak… I guess to wake me out of it. It probably saved my life.”

“But that’s…is it possible?’

“How can I answer? It happened.”

Matt takes up the oars again and rows more casually, slowly, both of us deep in our own thoughts. He seems more like himself now, so I ask,

“Matt, do you remember the day I came to your place. Well, I keep thinking that I did something or said something that upset you but I don’t know what it was.”
Matt pauses from his rowing and I see him blush all the way up his neck and I’ve never seen him do that before. He looks beyond me as if it would be too difficult to look me in the eye.

“I thought you were laughing at us, me and Dad and Mum. But maybe I was wrong.”

“You were wrong. I was so excited meeting your Mum and Dad. And I was blown away by you as a …as a family. You’re close. I mean there’s not … stuff and the debris in the way.”

“It was the debris I thought you were laughing at.”

We row slowly each thinking over what the other has said.

“Matt. If we head into Miller’s Harbour won’t someone recognise the dinghy?”

“They won’t. Look at it! No one’s used it in years. Anyway the wharf’s so high there at Miller. If we’re lucky we will be in and out with the dinghy unseen.”

“How far?”

“It’s about a kilometre past the point.’

I look back to shore and along it’s length into the far distance.

“You better start rowing then.”
“Can you hold the cleat with your good arm?”

“The only thing to hold onto, I can see, is a large rusty metal ring, one of a row, fixed to the stonewall of the wharf.”

“This?”

I move gingerly favouring my stitched arm but I have my hand tightly round the rough, wet ring and can just hold the dinghy steady against the wharf wall while Matt ties the frayed old length of rope through another cleat to secure her. Even so we bob and bump in the swell of the sea trapped against the barrier of the wharf.

“How do we get up there?”

The wharf towers above the sea giving the effect that the sea is draining away from under us. I begin to panic. Matt points to some metal rails fixed to the wall that make up a narrow staircase to the top. There are no side rails and the rungs are a long distance apart. I glare at him but before I get my question out he has given me his hand. There is so much strength in that hand it takes me by surprise; I’m in safe hands I think as he helps me across to the rails, the dinghy rising perilously on one side and sinking away on the other against our weight.

“How do we get up there?”

I screw up my nose doubting myself.
“Get your hand up onto that second run and you’re foot onto the first one and you’ll be fine. Just don’t look down and remember it’s wet and slippery. Be sure of your footing before you take the next run. OK?”

I take hold of the second rung and then wedge my foot up onto the first so I’m dangling like a barrel of monkeys. I feel Matt’s hands on my backside as he pushes me up and a rush of colour burns my cheeks. I respond by pulling hard with my good arm and holding my balance with the stitched one. And, it is as he says, I’m OK, almost to the top in no time. At the top I scramble onto the pier and peep over the edge to watch as Matt skirts up the ladder like a bandicoot. He joins me and we laugh.

A harsh crackle has us spinning round to our right. An old, grey man leans against a light post, a fishing rod standing wedged into a broad plank of jetty. He is pixie-like, his winter weight beanie pulled down over his ears and although it is boiling hot, he is rugged up in a great, dark blue overcoat.

“You’re O’Leary’s boy ain’t you?”

Too late for us to get away, Matt nods.

“Nice day for a row.”

He winks in a way I don’t like, as if he carries trouble in his pockets. I pull at Matt to move on.

“Haven’t seen ya Dad in months. Still in the business is he then?”

We are trapped into chatting.

“Sure. He’s gone over to Grassy today. Sardines I think.”
“Y’ shud be up there helpin’ ’im if you’ve time on y’ ‘ands, boy. That’s how y’ learn the trade. Made me lad go out with me every mornin’. Late to school every day but I say you learn ten times more at sea than the buggers can teach-y’ in school. Never taught me nothin’.”

“Yep. That’s pretty true.”

“Anyway better get along with-y’ girlie friend.”

He winks again and Matt gives a kind of salute and we escape.

“Nosey old bugger!”

“Well it doesn’t matter does it? Why shouldn’t we be out rowing, I’d like to know? It’s a nice day and it’s still holidays. We can do what we like. That old coot is just a waste of space.”

Matt gives me a funny smile as if I am behaving peculiarly or something.

“What Matt?”

“Nothing. Well, it’s just for a tick you sounded just like Esther.”

He runs ahead looking back with a grin cut right across his face. I screw up my nose and try to look hurt but for some reason, I don’t feel that way at all. I almost like Matt teasing but there’s no way I’m going to let on to him. I take my time catching up to him.

“Thought you were bursting!”

The public toilets are one of those big old concrete blocks that winds inwards like a maze and open to the sky. I disappear inside to join the flies buzzing over the bowls. I hold my breath to block out the smell of stale urine and work on a strategy to pee without
sending the flies into a swarm. But in the end I give up and go round the back of the block and pee on the grass.

Over the road, the public telephone hangs off the side of a tired kiosk where a weathered Coca Cola sign glints in the sun. Problem is, we don’t have any money and realising this reminds me how hungry I am. The kiosk is closed anyway, shut up, empty, disused. Matt becomes gloomy again. Then he spies a plastic bottle, empty lying in the grass. He begins rinsing it under the dribbling tap at the side of the toilet block. I cross back to the kiosk and pick up the receiver of the phone but the receiver comes away in my hand, the cable cut through. Matt joins me. He has filled the bottle and hands it to me.

“I’m not drinking that water and not from some dirty old bottle!”

Matt shrugs, drinks it down, crosses back to refill it and drinks again. I’m so thirsty just watching. I shrug and start back to the dinghy running my tongue across dry lips. It is just too bad. I relent and take my turn. Matt screws back the top and we take it with us. I remember another boating essential: make sure you carry plenty of fresh water.

“I can’t believe I came without my pack and supplies but then I didn’t know what you had in mind, did I? Any plan yet Matt?”

“Well, I’ve been thinking the best thing is just to head up to Catarataqui Bay. Mrs Pratt seemed pretty sure Larry was heading that way. Best I can come up with.”

“Let’s go home. We haven’t caught as much as a glimpse of Larry and you don’t really know if it was him who took the shell. Maybe it was your Dad?”
“My Dad! I’m not going back. Here you take the water and walk it home along the beach track.”

I turn my face away in frustration. Bobbing about in a rowing boat in acres of ocean on the off chance we would find another little boat bobbing around didn’t seem much of a plan to me. On the other hand, I don’t want to be sulky and make things harder for Matt. But, I feel sulky, and hungry, and tired and I am really not sure any of this is sensible.

“I’m not walking anywhere!”

I storm off ahead. When we are half way down the jetty the old geezer is waiting for us and there is no way of avoiding him.

“You that girlie that got bashed by the Pratt kid?”

I feel my cheeks burn and the rudeness bursts from me:

“I didn’t get bashed, I tripped and Larry Pratt rescued me. You should get your facts right. All people do round here is gossip when they should mind their own business!”

“Woah, hehehe…steady there! I thought it must be this boy youse was holding a torch for but clear as day it’s young Pratt. Got a rival there sonny boy!”

He winks at Matt and chuckles until a watery gurgling sound chokes him. He spits over the edge into the sea. Matt helps me onto the ladder showing me silently with little hand movements what to do. I climb down slowly and almost turn the dinghy over landing in it. Matt says something to the old guy and then slips quickly down and lightly onto the bench. He chucks a Mars Bar onto my lap.
“Says he’s sorry if he upset you. Gave you this.’

I pretend not to care although I know it’s not right to go around sounding off at people, even old geezers.

“He smelt.”

“Yeah, he stunk.”

We row for a long, long time and take it in turns to nibble on the Mars Bar as if its got to last us our lifetime. The sun is hot and we both should be wearing hats. Another must in boats. No hats, no safety gear, no sunscreen. At least now we have water, and a dead fish. Another Mars Bar would have been good.

“Matt, keep as close to shore as you can. It’s unsafe anytime but without life jackets…”

“Claire! We stole the boat. It didn’t come neatly equipped. Although…”

He stows the oars.

“…what about in that locker behind you?’

Behind me, at the bow, where I’m sitting on the cross seat, there’s a small door built into the decking. I pull it out and for a moment it’s just a black hole and then it becomes apparent that there is something in there. I drag it out. A pile of mouldy, stinky canvas drops onto the floor of the dinghy.

“Lifejackets! Three.”

I screw up my face.
“I can’t wear this!”

Matt shrugs. But my eye has caught sight of a red plastic bucket at the back of the hold. I lift it out and fill it with salt water and drop the seagull’s gift of the fish into it. Pity to waste it! I scuffle about with my hand in the darkness of the locker and find a rusty knife coated in green, salty corrosion. There’s some rope too and an anchor.

“Treasure trove! Can you believe it.”

It cheers me up a little. Matt resumes rowing and I go over and over, in my mind, what we now have, making an inventory and calculating how long before I was going to make Matt turn back.

“Is it far? I can row with my left arm if it would help.”

“I’m OK, for now. Probably only another half hour of rowing to Cataraqui.”

I can see Matt is chewing something over in his mind.

“We’re in this together, Matt, so you’ve got to trust me and tell me what you’re thinking?”

“It’s nothing. It’s just I’ve been thinking about what the old geezer said and how you replied.”

“What are you talking about?”

“So you actually like Larry?”

I cup my hand and scoop some water out of the bucket and flick it over him.

“Idiot! I just wanted to turn that geezer over! I knew Pratt was a geek the first day I met him.”
“Yeah, he’s a geek all right but something is driving him. He’s got something on me. I mean he’s got it in for me for a reason. Why’d he take the shell and that ceremony on the beach, what was that all about?”

It’s funny how things can happen and you accept them without question. When I’d fallen and ended up in hospital all that concerned me was that I’d be in trouble from Dad and Esther. Funnier still, how you lie to yourself. True I didn’t want a lecture from Esther or Dad but, actually, the real thing that concerned me, that pleased me, that made having a great scar down my arm for the rest of my life bearable, was how much I cared about Matt. I guess I have been full focus on Matt and haven’t given an iota of thought to Larry. Come to think of it now, why was Larry stalking Matt?

The sun disappears behind a cloud and the offshore breeze springs up making it harder for Matt to keep us close in to the shore. I look doubtfully at the lifejackets. He rows on but he’s not happy, chewing his lip and sighing every few minutes. Waves are forming, whipped up by the breeze, which is getting stronger by the minute. I shiver as the day’s warmth drains away. I can see we’re getting pushed further and further out.
3. Snow

It’s getting cold and I’ve had enough of bobbing about in boats. Out towards the horizon great black clouds are gathering at a terrific speed. The shore is a long way off and I feel uneasy. The smell of a storm is on the air.

“The weather looks lousy, Matt. Row closer to the shore, will you. We’re way too far out.”

My mouth is twisted into a pout. I’m a breath away from tears.

“I don’t like this! Let’s go back.”

And echoing my mood, the wind rises and the water criss-crosses over itself making glossy rippling hills and dales. A shudder plays on my bones. The dinghy plays its own tune, clunk-clunk, clunk-clunk, clunk-clunk, clunk-clunk, clunk, clunk, clunk, up and down the sea as it rises and falls. Again, again, again, we seesaw on the waves. The dinghy rocks from side to side through the rough water. Resignedly, I swallow my repulsion about the smelly, mouldy lifejackets, pulling the stiff, smelly thing over my head.

It’s a relic of a thing, made of canvas stretched over polystyrene squares with a cloth belt that pulls through a metal buckle. I drag the cloth cords around me and tie them, the buckle too rusted to use. They pull into a tight, closed knot, probably undoable. Matt is struggling to hold the bow into the shore but he is no more than rowing on the spot. I crawl on my knees to the centre bench and he makes room for me, no longer arguing the toss about my arm.
“Try not to drop the oar in too deep. Just cut across the water surface, a bit like skimming the top layer off custard.”

I hate custard and the oar seems to know it. It jerks out of my hand and buries itself in water, jamming against the side of the boat. I try to lever it back up but by some annoying phenomenon of physics it’s stuck fast, and is only prevented from disappearing into the drink by the rowlocks. Matt leans across and with some effort pulls the oar back into the boat.

“That’s called a crab. Try again but don’t let the oar drop into the water. Hold it above the water. Better to scoop air than lose the oar in the water.”

This time I scoop just air like he says, once, twice, three times. He nods approval.

“Now see if you can do the same but just skim the surface with the bottom of the paddle, like you’re buttering toast.”

“Cut out the celebrity chef stuff, OK? Give me time!”

Great wallops of sea slap into the boat making a fast growing pond at our feet. I focus all my attention on the oar: I still can’t quite get the hang of it. Matt grinds his teeth into his bottom lip. All the time, he’s adjusting his rowing to mine, otherwise the little boat swings drunkenly into a turn and each time only a frenzied effort gets it back on line to the shore. I stare into the distance concentrating as hard as I can on the rhythm of the oar. Back towards Currie the sun is a hazy afternoon glow, whereas, where we are, all the way to the horizon, the sky is getting blacker by the moment. Matt looks over his shoulder, his eyes as black as the sky.
“We still don’t seem to be making any distance.”

His face is lines and the purple circles under his eyes are like moons.

“The off shore wind is too strong, we just can’t make any inroads.”

“My arm is killing me.”

Soon as it’s said, I want to bite it back. He’s been rowing all morning. His knuckles are white, tight with rowing. A wave rises and rolls carrying the dinghy high on in the air and then dumps us. I’m thrown off the seat and into the space between it and the bow. I protect my stitched arm by throwing my weight to one side, landing on my back with the wind blown out of me. I can’t help the tears that flow. Matt rests his oar and rescues mine before helping me up onto the seat in the bow.

“You OK?”

He drags a handkerchief from his pocket.

“Please don’t cry.”

But I can’t stop. I’ve whacked my hand heavily on the side of the boat and already it’s throbbing more than I can bear.

‘I’m sorry Matt but I don’t think I can row anymore.’

I speak through showers of tears, gulping, hic-cupping. A tortured sympathy hangs in his face. He is looking at me and not looking at me. He is looking through me.

“Matt?”
His eyes look piercingly into mine. Then I hear it too. The wind has stopped and its silence echoes all around us in the wake of the gale.

I rub at my eyes with Matt’s hanky. It smells stale. He remains motionless, still, staring, looking right through me in that peculiar way, into the distance. I pass my hand across his eyes. Now the wind has stopped it is very cold. Little clouds of white air drift from our mouths and nostrils. The cold bites into me with razor sharp teeth. I nudge Matt but he is transfixed. We shiver so much I can hear our teeth chattering. I shove Matt hard and he turns his face towards me. A dull, regular padding sound encircles us. At first, I think it is our hearts beating. Then quietly, almost secretly, out of the stillness, breathless confetti begins falling, neat squares of white flakes, landing and vanishing against the black sky.

Matt puts out his hand and a layer of white powder gathers on his palm. It’s too thick to melt as it lands; the edge of the boat has a neat band of white all the way around. The bow, the seats, the deck, the flooring – everywhere is snow. The water too is a floating sheet of white. Matt is distant, dreamy as though the slow falling flakes have commandeered his thoughts and then suddenly he can’t stop talking:

It’s fascinating, mesmerising. Watch! See the swirl and drift. It’s like we’re on the outside of a Christmas window, seeing the magic but not being a part of it. Like it knows you’re wondering about it. You know what I mean, wondering what it is to be snow.

Then I see the idea come into his head. A shadowy eclipse across his face. For a moment our minds are one:

“Matt, is it the shell? Is this something to do with the shell?”
I rub my hands and gasp in the cold air. The dinghy moves with the weight of my feeling crunching against the white crusted sea. Matt shifts his eyes and stares into mine but he is silent.

“What’s the matter? Matt!”

The snow is so thick there is hardly anything to see but whiteness. The glare hurts my eyes. Infuriated I shake Matt.

“Stop it! It’s not funny. It’s like you’re turning into snow!”

I don’t understand what is happening. Snow in summer. Well they talk about it, about global warming and the freezing impact of changing currents. I think about the shell. How can this have anything to do with the shell, it’s just a shell for god’s sake. So much of me cannot comprehend any of this. What were we thinking coming out here anyway. We don’t even know if it was Larry who took the shell. And Matt seems possessed by the shell. Perhaps what people say about the O’Leary’s is right, a bit odd. I pinch myself but my fingers are so numb I don’t feel a thing. The snow is burning my bare arms and legs. My scar is deep purple.

“Matt. We’re freezing, I mean literally freezing.”

I look at Matt and suddenly I know that everything I have ever believed, all the understanding I have ever had about the world, about nature, I mean, about how it is that we are what we are and do what we do, about being, has altered forever. This is a new understanding where things are not what they seem or seem what they’re not, or does that amount to the same thing? Here, in this new world, Matt is disappearing. His edges are
blurred into whiteness and I cannot see where he begins, and ends. He is becoming snow.

“Matt! I can barely see you!”

He is shaped only by his clothes and the bulky lifejacket. Where his face and hands should be, there is only whiteness except for the two round black holes of his eyes making it impossible to make out the feeling behind them. The tears freeze on my cheeks as they fall. This has to be something to do with the shell. A terrible memory of the beach, the stone shrine and Larry with his arms raised, ready to crush the defenceless shell to pieces. Crush our shell of happiness. Perhaps Larry has finalised his ceremony, smashing the shell, achieving what? What is he hoping will happen? That Matt will fade away? I accept this. It is part of my new reasoning. A new urgency grabs me, something must be done, my responsibility.

Matt must fight back. If hurting the shell hurts him, then he must fight against it, reverse the process. We must find the shell and, whatever Larry’s done to it, we must undo it.

“Don’t leave me Matt. Please don’t leave me. Not on my own in this strange new world. I’m frightened.”

Using Matt’s soaking hanky I rub at my melting tears. Melting! It has stopped snowing. The sky is still black but it’s lighter, less gloomy, hopeful and not so cold. Maybe I can row us to shore. Perhaps the adults will come looking soon. We’ve been gone for hours. Surely Mrs Pratt knows where we’re headed, although she’s not too bright. I search for some recognition in those black holes in Matt’s ghostly face.
“We can do this, Matt.”

The snow melts rapidly, and before I have really thought what I’m to do, rain falls in heavy, cold globules. The rain falls into Matt’s mop of hair and runs down over his face. He seems unable to respond but his eyes are set. He’s fighting back. Some colour returns to his faded face so he is less pale and less vanished.

“That’s good Matt. Fight, fight!”

His mind is not with me, yet his eyes are open and he is breathing. I push him off the centre bench onto the flooring and try to make him comfortable by pulling the lifejacket up behind his neck to cushion his head. Thunder breaks overhead and the rain pelts down. My eye catches the red plastic bucket and the rusty knife floating in the growing ocean of water sloshing up through the floorboards but the gift of fish from our seagull is gone. I look back to the shore but it’s just a suggestion in the black light of the storm.
4. Anything is Possible

The wind is up again and it is a sea of valleys and mountains. The dinghy washes up one side and down the other. I take my position in the centre of the bench and recover my oar and Matt’s. I lift both awkwardly and thrust them into the water ready to pull against the sea. I am half way up the crescent of a valley when the swell rips the left oar out of my hand and it comes close to snapping off at the rowlock. The other flies back inwards and across my body. The dinghy is half way to turning over on itself and I look up to see Matt suspended in the air, hanging as if held by some invisible hand which releases him and throws him down with menacing force. There is the sound of something heavy and resistant hitting wood. Blood runs down his forehead.

The dinghy rights itself again, but is filling with water faster than a bath. My bandage is drenched and beginning to unravel. My oar is crabbed and the other swings threateningly across the boat. In desperation, I lean out and reach for the wild oar and pin it under the seat at the bow. The bucket and the rusty knife float alongside Matt in the bottom of the boat. I half stand, half sit to keep my balance and try to pull him back into place against the centre bench. I roll on my feet with each lurch of the boat, breathing in the metallic odour of the sea and the rain. I feel a nail tear as my fingers pull at the lifejacket. I must get Matt back up against the bench. In that bilge he’s hardly human and I can’t bear to watch it. I drag him onto his front and drape him over the seat. He lies limp, like he is stuffed with wool, his head on his right arm, blissfully asleep. I can’t
raise him. I dab at his head with his stinky hanky. There’s a cut about four centimetres long. I pull the bandage from my arm, drench it in salt water and tie it round his forehead against the bleeding.

“Keep fighting Matt.”

I’m fighting too. No more tears. Calculations are computing inside my head like wasps swarming: the depth of the deluge in the bottom of the dinghy, the severity of the rain, the fall and rise of the waves and the degree of drift from the wind, not to mention the strength in my arms and the courage in my heart. The swill is half way up the sides of the dinghy and lapping against my legs, covering Matt to the waste. The cold makes my nose run so fantastically it threatens to tip the balance by utterly swamping the little boat sending it to the bottom of the ocean like a saucepan of cold porridge. The thought slaps me in the face: I’m just about out of chances and the bucket is my only hope. This will be my last chance. ‘Our last chance’, I whisper encouragingly to the red plastic.

‘We have to do this!’ I lift it gently and I cradle it in my lap. I pull at the tie around my lifejacket and loosen it enough to knot it through the handle of the bucket and secure it against the force of the waves. Now we are one, neither tool nor human: a third thing, a new creation. Whatever otherness we have become, we set to work as one.

It is hard on us both because I must stay centred on the middle cross seat but sit bent over all the time to fill the bucket and scoop water overboard. It takes all my concentration: Bucket, scoop, throw - Bucket, scoop, throw. I build up a momentum knowing that I must empty the swirling water faster than it can refill. For every bucket, the sea throws back two. The rain drums on my back and I work against it composing my own rhythm. I hum softly: faster and harder, faster and harder. The tune becomes
an orchestration, deafening, crashing, crushing and with me the conductor, my baton a bucket, until my arm falls with the finale. The music stops. I stop. The rain is relentless.

“You can’t beat us!”

But we are beaten by both sea and rain. I scream into the storm. Defeated by the sea, cruel sea, so more determined than us. Chattering teeth draw blood on my lips. My hands are so cold I cannot release my grip on the bucket and I have no idea where my feet have gone. I can feel only the icy water lapping at my knees and sobs of exhaustion shaking my body. I look skyward to the great puppeteer, to Nature, God, Mum, Dad, Esther. Who will help me when I can no longer help myself? And finally, a weak plea to Matt,

“Matt I’m afraid. If you...if you love me... help me, Matt.”

A lifetime of forbidden hopes, longings, locked away in some unknown part of my anatomy, a secret place, a hidden organ full of unspoken feelings, making my heart race. Do I love Matt O’Leary? Matt O’Leary whose head is fallen forward and rests on the front of a mouldy lifejacket. Matt O’Leary whiter than snow except for a washed out purple at the edge of his lips. Matt O’Leary with his hands, whiter than white but faintly purple at the tips. This new world is full of strangeness and surprises.

Another smack of thunder overhead sends the sea into a rage. The dinghy rises on the arc of a wave and drops through the air into its underbelly. I fall across Matt and perhaps it is the force of this that saves us both as the dinghy slaps back into the water. The wave crushes over us, subsides, and we emerge on the surface; impossible we are still afloat for we are more water than dinghy. I pull myself off Matt and sit on the bench with the

I’m sliding down a great black hole like I’m Alice falling into Wonderland. Clear against the dark sky I see a circle of shimmering light. Like waking to oncoming headlights on a night drive. Where am I? I look back along the endless tunnel to a swathe of illumination; soft glow, gentle radiance, calling. A welcoming warmth wraps around me. I try to focus. I’m so very tired, I have just run the longest race and lost. I have to fight to keep my eyelids from closing and through their half openness I see a figure, I see a man, a man sitting on the bench in front of me. Water laps at his knees as it does mine. He can’t be real for although he is wearing a black raincoat, there are slits across the shoulder seams through which two immense white wings protrude. His face is a pattern of deeply scored lines, his hair grey and he wears a beard as white as his wings. But his breath is sweet like chocolate, and warming. Yet, the most amazing sight of all is his eyes: two royal blue crystals sparkling better than diamonds into my gloomy waterlogged universe.

“Is Matt..is he dead?”

The Angel smiles.

“Ah, you think I’m the Angel of Death come for the boy? No, it is the boy who has called me, to save you.’

“The boat is sinking and I can’t bail fast enough!”

“True but you’re a sensible girl, strong and brave. You must try again and keep going until the job is done.”
“Bailing you mean? But isn’t there another way?”

“To be honest, I can’t think of any other way to prevent the tub from going down other than bailing her out. Can you?”

“Can I? Can I? What are you talking about! The dinghy’s bloody sinking and I can’t bail anymore! We’ll drown! We need a miracle.”

The Angel stares at me as though mildly amused at my outrage. Then he folds his wings neatly behind him and stares me firmly in the eye:

“You, my child, are the miracle.”

“What? Me, a miracle? Now I know you’re just an apparition, a delusion, a mirage. Me, a miracle? I don’t think so.”

“But you are indeed! You are strong and determined and your love for this boy will see you through. Love, loving, is the greatest gift of all. I don’t need to tell you any of this: you know it for yourself.”

“No. You’re wrong. I know nothing of the sort. I know nothing of love or of being loved. Well…a little.”

The warm, woolly smell of Dad’s overcoat, on that cold wintry evening at the Melbourne bus station, wells inside me. I wish he were here with me now. Dad would know what to do. Dad would not let anything happen to me. I sniff loudly and wipe at my nose with my wet hand. The Angel winks.
“A very old and wise man once said, there are three methods by which we can learn wisdom, first by reflection which is noblest; second by imitation, which is easiest; and third by experience which is the bitterest.”

“That’s too much for me to take in now. I don’t need a lesson. Anyway I’m a lousy learner. No…I like learning; I just don’t like being taught. Oh, look, now you’ve got me wasting time and we have to save ourselves.”

“Precisely. And no one’s teaching you anything Claire. That’s my point entirely. You have everything you need to save yourself and Matt. Take a moment longer to think on it. But not too long. I fear nature might out manoeuvre us any minute.”

The water in the dinghy seems precariously deep. It is a wonder we have not already sunk.

“Well I’ve been thinking how Dad would get us out of this. The first thing he’d do is take stock; second he wouldn’t let a bit of rain get the better of him; third he’d give it everything he had left in him.”

“Now you understand! Anything and everything, if you want it enough, is possible when it is driven by love. I’ll tell you what, let’s strike a deal. I’ll make it a little easier for you by holding off this rain and the wind for a while. Mind, I can’t do it for long so waste no time. And, as an act of good faith, I’ll let you have my raincoat. Come! Time is running out and, as you so eloquently articulate, the dinghy is about to sink.”
He peels the great coat off and flings it across my shoulders. There is a momentary but blinding flash and a wonderful silence.

“See! I have held back the rain and the wind. Quickly, get going. Do it for young Matt.”

The stormy sky is darker after the spell of glowing light, and the Angel vanished. It has stopped raining. The wind has dropped. Resigned, I sit back on the seat; I take up the bucket and bail. I bail more successfully with practise, filling the bucket slowly and emptying it carefully so all its contents go overboard. This time I can see I’m making some progress and the water sits over my ankles, not at my knees. I bail more until at last it is no longer possible to immerse the bucket fully and it scrapes against the floorboards. All the time, I am struggling to remember one really important thing the Angel had said, for whatever it was, it had given me hope. I search inside my mind and it comes to me fragment at a time, ‘No, it is he.’ Who? And then I remember, ‘He who has called me to save you.’ Matt! Matt summoned the Angel.

I look back to shore. It seems an impossibly long way but then anything is possible if you put your mind to it, if you love enough. I sit up and try to think clearly. I take the oars and begin to row but the cracked oar threatens to break. How can I row with one oar? Rowing is hard work against the drag and sway of the heavy sea. I keep up the momentum, one row, two row, three row…until the water changes colour, it is getting shallower. When I can glimpse the wavy ridges of sand magnified under light green, clear water, I jump overboard. It’s deeper than I think and I sink up to my armpits but I’m able to pull us towards the shore. No sooner than I feel the beach under my feet, than the sky darkens and rain clobbers down on us again.
5. Rescue

I scramble to pull Matt from the boat. It’s like lifting a sack of wet fish. I wince as the stitches in my arm tear under the pressure. Blood trickles down and is washed away by the sea only to reappear. I can’t be worrying about it. I lay Matt on the sand. His face is white, ghostly, and his quivering lips are the shade of blueberries. The dark circles under his eyes are rimmed with yellow. His eyes flutter behind closed lids. The cut to his forehead has swollen into a lumpy bruise and stands out like a great abnormality. His hair is matted with blood, salt and sand. His chest rises and falls so I know he is alive. I have succeeded just as the Angel promised. I remember what else he said too, ‘you can get through this Claire. You know you can!’ I take off the raincoat and wrap it around Matt. I remove my sodden lifejacket and put it under his head. A gloomy darkness surrounds us but it can’t be later than three o’clock. I’m frozen to the bone but the rain continues beating down in stinging, cold pellets. I look about for somewhere to shelter.

We are on a long stretch of coast bound by the southern point of Miller’s Bay. The point usually rises like a great, upraised arm but the light is so dim in the storm, there is only a wall of blackness. Behind us are low-lying sand dunes covered in couch grass and scrubby saltbush torn by the wind. A long black hump of seaweed and kelp hugs the beach close to the water’s edge. Every now and then huge bundles of the smaller stuff, like hideous, black spiders, blow out from it and are carried away by the wind. It gives me an idea. The bank of weed is drenched, a putrid, stale salty stench, but, turning it over and digging deep into it with my hands, I find dry stuff. At first I consider dragging Matt up the beach and covering him in the weed but then I get a better idea. I wade in to the
forgotten dinghy thrown backwards and forwards against the shore by the crashing waves, the undertow threatening to carry her out to sea any moment. I find the bit of mooring rope tied to the bow and drag her to the beach. She moves little by little with each tug, the breaking waves helping to bring her into the shore. Once she has hit the sand I can’t move her. I retrieve the anchor from the bottom of the boat and do my best to attach the anchor and dig it into the sand. I will have to think of another way.

I go back to working on the seaweed stacks. I collect armfuls of the dry seaweed that hides under the smelly, wet stuff on top. The coat wrapped around Matt flaps in the wind and threatens to blow away. I snatch at it and run with it back to the seaweed stacks. I lay it out flat securing it with sand and begin piling it high with the weed. I drag it back across the sand to Matt and unload it. I work with the speed of the wind going back for more, again and again. Even so I can’t gather as much as I want because of the bucketing rain. All the while, I’ve been trying to think how I can move the boat.

My best plan is to use the boat as a shelter by tipping her upside down. But I have to get her up on to the beach first. Suddenly I know what to do. I wade in and once again I drag her to shore and I turn her so she’s the wrong way round, bow seaward. With the stern onto the sand it’s easier to drag her out of the water. I get her far enough to swivel her round again so she’s sideways and then I lift and push until she’s out of the water, letting her go as the weight gets too much. She drops onto the beach as I hoped she would. I almost laugh aloud with the pleasure of my success. The seagull’s gift has fallen out of her, such a small fish but our treasure. I rescue it along with our bits and pieces: the bucket, the rusty knife, the water bottle, still full of water from the Miller’s Bay toilets. I stack them in a neat little pile not far from Matt. I retrieve the lifejackets
and place one under the dinghy at each end as substitute rollers; and then I pull and push like that dinghy is the most stubborn mule in all the world. I get her a metre up the beach near to where I’ve piled the seaweed next to Matt.

The wind and rain never give up, not for one moment. I shove the seaweed under the dinghy. When this is done, using both hands, I lift the boat. It’s heavy but I only need enough to crab-crawl underneath. Under there, it’s pitch black. I can touch the sides by stretching out my arms; same with my legs, but lying longways there is plenty of foot room. I start about making a bed from the seaweed. When this is done to my satisfaction, I push the side up and roll out from under the boat. Next, I use the coat to drag Matt close and with one hand lifting the side and the other involved in a combination of pulling and pushing, I get him under. I crawl under too. I rearrange the seaweed under him. He’s out of the wind and the rain and the seaweed is dry, even if it smells like sushi. I’m so tired I ache from head to toe but I’m soothed by the thrill of success.

Under there, the height between the sand and the seats is only just enough for me to manoeuvre awkwardly. I begin by removing Matt’s wet clothes. It would have been easier to do it outside but not in the wind and rain. It takes forever but I get him undressed: his shirt, his jeans, undies, socks and sandshoes. I cover him in seaweed, rolling him over to tuck the raincoat underneath to reduce the cold coming up from the sand. Then I remove my own wet clothes and lie closely beside him. My body is cold, but his is icy. I rub his hands and then his feet but it is awkward to do in the confined space. The rain on the hull sounds like hail and could be hail; and the wind whistles through the tiniest spaces but in minutes I am warmer. As my eyes adjust to the
darkness I can see Matt’s face next to mine. I can hear his breathing slowly and deeply and am reassured he’s alive. I look across at his face and I could swear a smile touches the corners of his mouth. I feel sleepy. As I drift away I am sure I can feel the wings of the Angel enveloping us ever so gently and as soft and warm as goose down.
6. Confrontation

I wake and find the dinghy upright next to me. The sun sparkles cheerfully off the sea in a celebration of the passing storm. Up the beach a way, I can see Matt gathering driftwood and pieces of saltbush. He’s dressed. Nearby, my clothes are hooked over a couple of sticks fluttering in the breeze coming off the sea. I struggle up but my arms are stiff and I feel heavy and lifeless as if I haven’t slept at all. I pull on my jeans even though they’re still damp and my shirt, just dry enough. Matt spots me and I wave. He is walking slowly but he seems fine. As he comes closer, I notice the purple lump on his forehead.

“You OK?”

“You?”

He drops the wood and begins to scoop out a hollow in the sand. Then he takes a handful of seaweed and makes a ball of it in the hole. He layers the pieces of stick and driftwood into a kind of pyramid and then he reaches in his pockets and pulls out two stones. He holds them close to the seaweed and rubs them together. I smile. So this is life. One minute you are I surviving the worst day of your life, next you’re playing at scouts He winks,

“I learnt it from an aboriginal woman, a long time ago.”

He tries again and again to get the stones to fire. And again. I smile. This time I swear there’s a spark. For the next ten minutes he works at it once almost keeping the stones sparking for more than a second. He sits back as though he’s giving up and then
changes his mind and gives it one last try. The seaweed begins to smoulder and I watch enchanted as he blows it softly into flames. Matt lets out a hoot and I clap my hands. He gets it burning properly and instructs me how to keep feeding it with sticks before he heads off with the bucket. I soon see what it is he’s up to. He has our gift, our fish and is washing the sand off. When he returns he places the rusty knife into the fire and leaves it there a long time waiting for the corrosion to burn away. Then he places the blade on a lump of wood and begins scraping at it with one of the stones. When he’s satisfied with the outcome, he uses the knife to gut the fish. He uses the lump of wood like a pan and arranges the fish over the fire; already the smell is tantalising. My stomach groans.

“Is it cooked?”

“A bit longer.”

We have this exchange over and over until eventually Matt uses two sticks to lift it off. I have already found a flat piece of sea worn plastic—could be the lid off an old ice cream container, and we use it as a plate taking it in turns to pull away the sweet heavenly flesh of the fish. When it’s nothing but a skeleton—for Matt has eaten the whole head, which I never could, would never do even if I was starving to death—he throws it out to sea where it floats airily for just a moment before a solitary gull sweeps down from nowhere and carries it like a flag in its beak, higher and higher away into the aquamarine sky.

“I think the fish really was a gift, Matt. It’s almost as if the gull knew we would need it. The coat was a sort of gift too.”

“Coat?”
“From the angel. It came to me out there when I thought you were dead and I was going to die too. It gave me the coat.”

I felt under the seaweed and dragged out the plastic raincoat that had saved us from dying of cold.

“What did it look like, this angel?”

“Like a man. A very old man with a grey beard and enormous wings. Not at all like you’d expect an angel to look.”

“Did he speak?”

“Of course. He told me to stop crying and get on with bailing and he stopped the rain for a while so I could make a bit of headway on the bailing.”

Matt piled more sticks on the fire even though the sun was quite warm now and we had nothing else we could cook.

“It’s getting impossible to tell what’s real and what isn’t.”

“So you think it really was an angel?”

“Could have been, or it could have been that the coat was in the locker all the time; it’s black and you might not have noticed it before. It could have floated out of the locker when the boat filled up with water.”

“So you don’t think it was an angel?”

“Didn’t say that. Stranger things have happened. Old Rev. Grimshaw was closest thing I’ve ever seen to an angel. Or you… and what you did yesterday. That was the work of an angel, a miracle.”
I gaze out to sea thinking of how I had rowed the dinghy, got Matt to shore, how I’d thought to use the boat as a shelter, gathered the seaweed, and got us safe and warm under the dinghy. How we were alive and yet somehow not quite the same two people we were before it all happened.

“What’s that? Something is flashing about half way between the horizon and the shore.”

The way the sun is shining into our faces, it is impossible to see beyond the flash of light. Matt has his hand shading his eyes.

“Maybe it’s a search party. We’ve been gone all night and half Currie must be out looking for us and if they aren’t already, they will be soon.”

“No! It’s Larry. It’s gonna be Larry for sure.”

“How can you tell? I can’t see anything but a glint of light.”

“Claire, think about it!”

I see Matt is fired up and he has that aura about him, a kind of submerged excitement that he only gets when he’s with the shell.

“You can sense the shell?”

“Let’s go!”

He heaves at the dinghy. I had done it alone and now Matt is hardly able to move it at all. I push from behind and it starts to run across the sand more easily. We jump in and Matt is rowing once more.
I wish we could have stayed on shore. If we’d waited it would not have been long before someone would have turned up looking for us. We could have gone home to a hot shower and bacon and eggs. We row for sometime, I turn from time to time to look over my shoulder. I make out the little sailing boat before Matt: Larry is seated at the stern holding the tiller; the mast is broken and the torn sail is hanging off it. The sun must be shining off his watch because every couple of seconds it glints and sparkles.

“Must have been out here all night in the storm. Whatever he had planned for the shell, the storm must have interrupted him.”

“So if Larry had destroyed the shell well…you know…well you might still be snow now!”
7. The Maelstrom

Matt’s eyes are blacker than the deepest ocean. He’s biting his lip the way he does when he is angry. We are about five metres from Larry now. He shouts to us across the water like a madman.

“You’re too late Matt! It’s gone. I chucked it overboard.”

I scream back sounding just like Mum as she walked out on us,

“Liar! You might have tried to do something to our shell Larry Pratt but we know you failed! We’re the keepers of that shell”

Larry puff’s up like a tropical fish.

“Oh Yeah, so where’s the shell then? I don’t see it, do you!”

I wish Larry knew better than to bait Matt. My stomach cramps. I double over and groan. I’m right to worry. In seconds we are close enough for Matt to pull up his oar, lift it from the rowlock and swing it at Larry with the strength of Neptune. I’m in no doubt: he intends to kill him.

“Matt. NO!”

My words are as useless as Dad’s to Mum, ‘Sorry luv, please luv, I’m truly sorry luv’. The dinghy wobbles single-mindedly and the oar misses and drops into the sea but Matt is across into Larry’s boat in a flash. He throws himself at Larry mindless of any danger and they fall onto the flooring washing half Bass Strait into the boat with the impact.
Matt is throwing punches while Larry gives out squeals of terror. I grab the wild oar before it disappears altogether. I yank it back to safety but just in time. I can’t believe I’m worrying about the oar when Matt and Larry are together in a death lock. But the danger we would be in without it, the thought of having no way to get back to shore sparks a fire of passion inside my head. With the oar safe, I throw the anchor across to Larry’s boat so we don’t drift apart, then I scramble aboard. There’s hardly room for the three of us. Neither of them takes the slightest notice of me. Blood streams from Larry’s nose. Time is running out, if I don’t do something Larry is dead. Suddenly I remember the red bucket. As they thrash beside me, I hook it out of the dinghy. I remember how Dad once put an end to a dogfight. I fill the bucket and throw seawater over them. The shock brings both up and I throw another before they can start back fighting.

“God Claire!”

Larry takes advantage and pulls himself out from under Matt and hops clumsily across into the dinghy. At least it puts an artificial distance between them. I yell at the top of my voice:

“Stop it! You’re both crazy. It’s only a bloody shell!”

Matt draws in his breath at this blasphemy. He looks really pale, looks like he is done-in but you can tell he has not finished with Larry yet. I have a feeling something dreadful is about to take place. Matt flares at Larry:

“Where is it Larry? Did you break it? You better not have done something stupid with the shell Pratt. You hear me Pratt, you are this far from being zilch, nothing, air.”
Matt holds up his fingers as if to shove them in Larry’s face and even though his voice is calm and authoritative, his body trembles with anger and violence. We are standing in the sabot staring across at Larry. Larry drops his head in his hands. His whole body shakes. Every few seconds, he wipes his face with the back of his hand. He seems completely broken. All at once, I feel miserable for him. The look in Matt’s eyes frightens me. Poor creepy Pratt, only it’s Matt that’s being creepy now. He looks like the devil.

Suddenly, I can feel the sabot shift under our feet. Matt’s face of anger changes to surprise. We both sit down grasping the sides of the boat to steady ourselves. I look over at Larry and am amazed to see the dinghy turning in a slow circle, around and around.

“Hey, stop it! How are you doing that. Stop it will you O’Leary!”

In moments the sabot is spinning alongside the dinghy, both drawn into the whirlpool. I move nervously next to Matt and he wraps his arm around me and it is like a spark of electricity.

“Get down onto the floor, quickly!”

We huddle in each other’s arms on the floor of Larry’s sabot, the torn sail swinging against the swirling movement. Around and around we go, faster and faster, with all the speed of the whirly-gig in the Currie community park, the Big Dipper at Hobart Luna Park, the sails on the windmills. And faster still. Spilling down the walls of a great centrifugal force of water. The sides glowing glossy, spun to a fine silky mixture like beaten eggwhite. We are spinning and sliding inside a giant eddy. I look up but the sky is now a small circle. It’s like looking up through a giant cone. My hair is flying wildly,
my eyes wet from the wind whipped up in the spin. I have my face buried in the musty cotton of Matt’s T-shirt so I cannot see his face, my head tight against his shoulder, his mine. I raise my head and I can see back to Larry. My heart goes out to him, alone and no one to share the fear. I try to call to him against the hum of the whirlpool:

“Larry! Hold on! Larry it’s OK.”

He raises his face, not blubbering, no sign of the fear that runs freely through my body. He looks like he has been given a free ticket on a circus ride, a smile runs across his face, his hair sweeps back in the torrent of wind, he clings to the sides of the dinghy; he’s enjoying himself. His words float back to me,

“It’s the Bass Strait Triangle. It’s wonderful.”

His words are delayed by the spin but we hear them. Matt pulls away and stares long and hard across to where Larry, hair swept back in the gale, appears to be drinking in the ride. Matt’s face is strained, terror working its way into his eyes. He whispers so I can hardly make out what he says,

“The Bass Strait Triangle is just a myth.”

And as if his words have offended, the speed of centrifugal force intensifies, terribly, pressing on every organ in my body, suffocating, squeezing, constricting. My tongue is swelling and I am unable to make any saliva. To die choking on my own tongue. I glimpse at Matt’s bulging eyes. This can’t be the end. It can’t end like this. It hasn’t even begun. I’m too young to die. Matt reads it in my eyes and drops his forehead gently against mine as if in apology. When we pull apart to make our silent goodbyes the whole scene has changed.
The walls of the giant whirlpool spin but at a greater distance apart. The whirlpool has become a giant ellipse the size of a football oval. And we are beaching under the sea on a great expanse of bright orange sand. Above, water hangs translucently splendid, perhaps held there by the current of the whirlpool complete with sea creatures circling, drifting, swimming. Great red coloured seaweed writhes and falls. Schools of fish move across our path of vision; giant squid puff blue ink as they move in and out of the kelps. 

Larry steps from his boat and runs ecstatically across the waves of sand like he has landed on a sea of gold, like he is running to kick a goal.

“Matt, what is happening? What is the Brass Strait Triangle?”

“It’s a myth like I said, a underwater legendary force.”

“Yeah? Well if it’s a myth explain how I’ve just been spun like a screwdriver into the core of the ocean, beneath the bloody sea. Or is this a dream? Are we sharing a dream, a group hallucination?”

“Claire, I don’t know anymore than you. Strange things have been happening ever since I found the shell.”

“So you said, I think you called them forgotten footprints from the past like the people buried in the graves at Currie. Isn’t that what you said they were, forgotten people. You said you were seeing… memories. So is this a memory?”

“I don’t know. You remember when the whales were stranded? Well, well…oh it’s just too difficult to explain.”

“Try.”
“Well, when I fell off my bike. I didn’t exactly fall off. Actually I did fall but not because I had an accident. I kind of passed-out. And…”

“Matt! For God’s sake, what?”

“It is so difficult...promise not to laugh at me.”

“Matt, I’m not laughing. I’m a thousand leagues under the sea, I may drown any moment if that...aquarium cracks. Just tell me!”

“I became the shell. I mean for a moment, it must only have been such a tick in time, I was inside the shell, I was the shell. Remember you asked me about the green slime on my clothes?”

I must have been right; we must be sharing a dream, a group hallucination. Sometimes dreams are like that, you dream you are having a dream and you dream you can’t wake up. I pull at my hair and feel it stretch through my fingers, I slap the back of my hand hard and wince, I cough in Matt’s face and watch as he steps back from it.

“You’re telling me that green stuff was from the inside of the shell?”

“I’m telling you I was inside the shell. Remember when I took the shell into the water?”

“Yeah, I thought you were stressed or something. People go a bit strange in a crisis.”

“The shell communicated with me.”
I wondered if it would be like this all my life. If every time something good seemed about to begin it would end before anything got started. Blow up in smoke before my eyes. Just like Mum, one minute she is there helping me with homework, the next magically gone. I might have grown up with a scientific view on the world and its machinations but too much that comes my way is beyond explanation, beyond understanding, beyond being acceptable. Inside, all at once, I feel selfish and cynical:

“So do you think Matt the angel or something else magically real will come and get us out of this? The angel said you called him to rescue me. Was that true?”

My face must be ugly; it feels ugly with a sneer all the way across it.

“I remember I was inside me looking out. I couldn’t speak. I couldn’t move. I couldn’t see. But I could hear you crying, trying to beat the storm. I begged that you be saved. I prayed.”

Without explanation, Larry suddenly turns, running back from his tour of the Promised Land, arms flailing widely:

“X marks the spot O’Leary!”

He is standing about two metres from us. I don’t know what he’s talking about and I look in the sand for this ‘X’. It means nothing to me. Matt groans and doubles over so I think he is in pain. He makes a slight recovery and I see him fishing in his pocket. He brings out a tiny square of paper. He holds it out for me to take. I unfold it but it’s damp and comes away in two pieces but I can read it well enough. Matt begins so softly I have to strain to hear:
“‘X’ is the spot where Larry thinks his Dad disappeared.”

“No! Not disappeared! Was taken and by you know who O’Leary!”

Matt selects words like he is walking up stairs really slowly:

“Larry thinks… in Larry’s imagination…he has this geek idea… he thinks that his Dad was… seduced…taken by a siren.”

“He was. Come clean! And who was the siren? TELL HER! You know who it was!”

Larry is in such a fit of rage his words echo through the cone and I imagine a fissure in the ceiling of water above.

“Calm down Larry! Matt? What’s he on about?”

“Larry, you see, found a whole website on sea legends. Legends are only stories right? The stories were about sailors who came to King on discovery ships whose ships sank, dragged into what was named the Brass Strait Triangle. It was said the sailors couldn’t keep their eye on the compass and the weather dazed by the beauty of sea sirens. Once seduced, the sailors were lifted from their sunken ships and carried away and held underwater in dens of debauchery. Larry is sick with desire thinking about those naked sirens and their colourful dens!”

“Everyone in Currie knows what your mum is! I’ve seen…”

I hardly have time to hear all Larry’s words before I’m hot with embarrassment.

“Larry, shut up. You have no right to being saying that stuff. I’ve met Matt’s Mum and she’s the loveliest person and what’s more, Larry, she’s an invalid and
you shouldn’t speak about her like that, in that tone…and say those disgusting things. What has she got to do with this anyway? You’re raving!”

“I’m not! She’s a siren and we all know what that means!”

“What are you talking about, Larry? His Mum? You’re not making any sense? Why’d you start all this, Larry? I’m sorry your Dad is dead I’m sorry for you but making up stupid, filthy stories won’t bring him back. There aren’t any sirens, or siren’s dens. Anyway even if there were, Matt’s mum isn’t one and if she were, what would she want with your Dad? She’s loved by Matt’s dad, and Matt. Don’t you get it!”

It must be the lack of oxygen but suddenly I’m too tired to argue. Larry leers:

“If there aren’t any siren’s dens then what is this place?”

Larry pauses as if realising the magnitude of what he is saying. If there is a vortex, a Bass Strait Triangle, a maelstrom then it might explain why so many ships went down off King. More ships disappeared here, unexplained, than anywhere else in the world. But if this is the place where the ships were taken, driven down into this underworld, we should be surrounded by shipwreck and debris. I climb back into the dinghy feeling the need for comfort, for home, somewhere safe. I rest my hands on my chin, too tired to think anymore, a breath away from sleep, or exhaustion, or both. If this is a scientifically real event, a place in the ocean where the currents draw vessels down into the deep; if it is possible to be drawn beneath the ocean, then there must be a scientific way to be drawn out of it and back to the surface. Was it possible for the whirlpool to reverse its cycle? But who has ever heard of a ship miraculously reappearing. It would take more than science, it would take a miracle. ‘You are the miracle’ the angel had told me.
A single ray of sunshine gleams down through the centrifugal cone and shines off something metallic on Larry’s boat: a shackle, the main stay, whatever. By instinct I seem to know what it is, know why the sun has fallen on that particular spot. Larry is taking handfuls of sand and throwing them our way. I ignore him and casually I climb back out of the dinghy and cross to the sabot. I follow the ray like a pointing finger and there it is, half hidden by a bit of cloth, gleaming with all its luminosity: the shell. I stand, peering into its greenness. And gently, I pick it up. I breathe in sharply and lift it, lightly, with both hands.

“Matt! It’s the shell!”

Matt follows my stare and is beside me. Instantly he’s got it in his hands but gently as anything like he is retrieving a fledgling from a bird’s nest.

“You bastard Pratt!”

“Matt, we’ve got it back.”

Larry is sneering at us with a sinister grin. Matt glares back; if looks could kill. His eyes flare red and the sun glints off their redness. He is like the devil itself, standing there. Larry looks ugly too:

“So you got the shell but it doesn’t stop the truth about what your mum is Matt O’Leary. Everyone in Currie knows what your mum is!”

“Stop it! What does this shell have to do with any of this?”
“The legend, so it goes, is that once the birth shell of a siren is broken, the siren dies and the sailor gets back his life.”

I climb back onto my bench in the dinghy. I’m so tired I don’t know what to think anymore. All these weeks we’ve laughed at Larry. Pratt the loser, Creepy Pratt, Larry the Pratt! But secretly I’m beginning to wonder about Matt. Perhaps I was right not to take the shell too seriously. Perhaps that was the really crazy thing. The Keeper of the Shell game ended in thirty stitches up my arm! I glance down at the welts and redness. The stitches are a mess. I realise I am in for big trouble at home. Home. Hell. We’ve drifted a long way from home and the thought makes me scared. I’m not in my world now, not in any other I know either. I’m caught in a vortex between magic and reality. Like when it gets dark before you get home and you have to walk it alone with the evening shadows and you feel like any minute you might just vanish, be beamed up into another universe or something. Now I am somewhere and nowhere all at once. In my daze, I don’t see Larry pick up the oar but I get wise in time to see him swinging it wildly at Matt trying to dislodge the shell from his hands.

“I said I’d break the shell O’Leary, and now you’ll have to watch me do it!”

Larry lurches as he swings the oar. Next thing he has lost his balance and has fallen flat on his face against the dinghy. I shudder remembering that horrible crunch of head hitting wood. Larry’s head hits the edge of the boat, me watching uselessly as he falls, white as a ghost, colouring the sand with his blood. Matt appears to fall with him and the shell flies from his hands, cracking against the edge of the boat. It breaks into two pieces.
8. Footprints from the Past

A blizzard, like a snowstorm, rains sand down on us. An immense groaning, like the ocean moaning, fills the vortex. Together, we manage to lift Larry into the dinghy. The seafloor quivers and trembles beneath us and we huddle in the boat, waiting, wondering. Water begins to break from the aquarium above flooding down the sides of the vortex. With it comes all the sea life: creatures, weed, crustaceans, the flotsam and gypsum of the underworld. They overflow down the walls of the giant whirlpool and in minutes the dinghy is afloat spinning upwards in a reverse centrifugal current. As the water rises within the cone and we spin up towards the light, the walls glisten like great mirrors reflecting Matt and I clinging to each other. Our faces white as snow. White with fear. Around and around and around like Black Sambo’s tigers. I almost giggle at the thought but other reflections are appearing, other things, massive things, not to be laughed at: great wooden pieces broken from ships, sails hanging off great masts, wooden staircases complete with balustrade. And small things: barrels, chests, bottles. And dreadful faces: dark shadows caught in the swirling waters, faces pleading, begging, calling to be saved. Their whispers are deafening, the noise of breaking timbers deafening, the roar of the sea and the wind deafening. The wall spins and for a moment I think I see Reverend Grimshaw without a stitch of clothing! Sounds echo from the gyrating walls: choral singing, high pitched as the call of dolphins but beautiful, alluring. The visions of creatures: half human half fish. I hold my breath. These creatures have faces that look
human, and arms and hands and rounded breasts. Their skin is milky and their eyes like two diamonds. They swim using their giant fish tails. Beautiful creatures, striking, graceful. Magnificent creatures. I am entranced. Matt stiffens beside me. Then the face of a boy, floats across our vision. Floats aimlessly like a piece of jellyfish, washed this way and then that. A woman too— is she his mother? — She tries to grab him but his clothing breaks away like sponge filling the water with a green slimy glow. Matt shudders and trembles. I turn my eyes away and bury my face in Matt’s shoulder. Through the noise of the rising water, the spinning wash of the walls, the screams, the cries from behind the looking glass, I hear him whisper, ‘forgotten footprints from the past’. Forgotten? No, not forgotten, I could never forget that child’s face so close to my heart as if it were my own.
9. Natural Forces

We spin at lightening speed and break through the surface and the dinghy rocks in the rough water. Matt recovers more quickly than me and grabs the oar, mercifully fallen into the boat. He rows until we are clear of the waves. Larry lifts himself from the bottom of the boat. He has a blood nose. I smile with relief. Matt is pale. Pale as a ghost. Tears well up but I wipe my hand over my face with cold sea water so he can’t see.

“Matt, you’re fading again!”

“I’ve got to go back for the shell.”

“The shell! My God, didn’t it come with us?”

“It will be here, near, somewhere. It must have been brought up on the surge like we were.”

“But you’re fading. What if…”

“I have to find the shell.”

“But it broke. I saw. Into two pieces.”

“I’ll find them.”

He throws off his shirt and climbs out of his daks and dives overboard. I hesitate before I remove my jeans and drop over the side after him. Underwater I can see Matt swimming downwards, a single line of bubbles trailing behind. I follow pulling hard with my arms to catch up. In seconds the water has changed, become thicker, colder and
I ease-up trying to hold down my panic as I lose sight of Matt. There’s a sudden eddy of water and I almost lose hold on my breath at the fright it gives me. I don’t want to be dragged down into that vortex again. My lungs are tight like pod-weed. I look up and the light is a long way off. The eddy pulls me down with it. Terror swims beside me. The water is murky and grey and I can hardly see my hands stretched out in front of me. I know I need to break from the whirlpool but I can’t. Some funny movement at the back of my throat demands I breathe. I kick with my legs and stretch upwards with my arms. Matt is there! In front of me and he’s holding one half of the shell. He thrusts it into my hands and throwing an arm around me pulls me with him to the surface. We break through and take huge mouthfuls of air. The relief is glorious. Matt looks less pale but when he speaks it is merely a whisper,

“I have to go back.”

He fills his lungs with new air and dives. Larry reaches out a hand and taking the broken piece of shell, helps me into the dinghy.

“What’s he think he’s doing? It’s broken and I’ve won!”

Won what, more unhappiness! I hate you Larry Pratt. Give me that back!”

I climb over into the dinghy and wrap the fractured shell in Matt’s shirt as if that might have some healing power. I am shaking from the dive and from rage. Once I had told Matt that it was wrong to hate Larry but now I could see Larry was out of control. Larry was twisted with hate. Me too. What was he on about! Memories of our journey back from the underworld spin before me. What magical or spiritual force was at work here? What did Matt call it, forgotten footprints from the past. Sometimes the truth was harder to believe than fiction.
Larry drops down onto the cross seat with his hands to his face and I can see the gentle rise of his shoulders. Poor Larry, he’s still just a kid. A kid without a Dad. I think of Mum untouchable up there in Queensland. We’re not so different Larry and me.

For a minute I rest and get my lungs back to normal. I’m thinking about Matt down there looking for the other half of the shell and I’m remembering how quickly he faded only the day before when the shell was in trouble. What was likely to happen now there was only one half? If he passes out down there! I leap up and am hesitant for the shortest moment knowing how hopeless I was down under myself, knowing I’m the last person to try and carry out a rescue.

“Larry, you have to come too! We can’t leave him down there alone.”

“Get stuffed.”

“No Larry, really. There is something about the shell. I don’t understand it but I know Matt is in real danger down there by himself.”

Larry looks at me as if I have said the first meaningful thing he has ever heard. He stands up and throws off his shirt.

“Stay close to me Larry. We don’t want us all drowning.”
10. The Heart of the Whale

We jump in and find each other under the water. I motion for us to dive down and we go together. In no time at all we can see Matt a long way down twisting in and out of a huge bed of floating kelp. I’m much calmer this time and I motion to Larry to stay where we are so we can watch but keep out of Matt’s way. I’m having second thoughts about having brought Larry down. Matt would not approve. Matt dives, in and out of the kelp, determined the broken shell is in there. The kelp is immense, each strand almost as thick as Matt’s whole body. Shoals of fish swim in and out just like Matt is doing. Matt dives in again pushing his way through the great fronds of weed deeper and deeper into its centre. A glint, a tiny glimmer. I almost open my mouth to shout to Larry, he’s got it! Then there he is with the shell held out in front of him and just his feet to propel him upwards. He hasn’t seen us and then he has. First me, and then Larry. Anger ripples the water for a metre around him and urges him to take Larry on. He holds up a fist and waves it at Larry. It only takes a fraction of time for him to drop the half piece of shell. He swerves and dives but it falls fast into the deepest, darkest water and is out of sight.

Matt’s skin is so pearly and luminous it glows in the deepness. I’m now unable to stay down any longer, the pulse in my head and the pain in my ears telling me I have barely enough time to surface. I look over and see Larry is already on his way up. I look back to Matt. He is drifting below me. If I go up for air I can come straight down again and bring him up like he had me but I need to surface immediately. I kick off but at the same time, I see the great mound of seaweed lift and another great mound moving beneath it. A flash of silver, a familiar eye and I know it is him. Perhaps he was somewhere in there.
all the time. He moves deliberately towards Matt. I swallow stale air back into my lungs. The whale, Matt’s whale, circles as if by way of, recognition, introduction, and then swims up under Matt and lifts him gently with his dorsal fin. Energy floods back into Matt’s pale face. I catch a glimpse of Matt’s eyes, two royal blue crystals sparkling better than diamonds in that murky water. He takes a firm hold on the fin and the whale carries him down, down, down.

I break through the surface and Larry is already sitting comfortably back in the dinghy.
11. Redemption

The sun is warm. It is a beautiful day. The sea is calm and everywhere is silent except for the gentle lapping of water against the boat and the distant cry of a lone seagull circling high above. I have heard stories about men and whales but I have thought of them only as stories. The reality is stranger. I think, *No one will ever believe this.* Then Larry bumps into my thoughts.

“Shouldn’t we go down again and look for him?”

But Larry doesn’t know about the whale. I couldn’t bring myself to tell him. Before I can make an answer the gull –my gull, for it must be my gull- sweeps down low over the water and circles. My heart skips. Memories. Memory.

“Matt is there! See! Where the gull is!”

A minute later and the water breaks as Matt bursts through. He has the piece of shell and he holds it high above his head like a victory salute. When he is near enough I take the piece and lay it carefully next to the other. Matt scrambles aboard but I am taken aback by something in the way he moves and when I look closely at him I can see that his whole person is outlined by a green shimmering glow like the screen on a mobile phone. I look across at Larry and I know he sees it too. He sits holding tightly onto his seat. Next Matt explodes, his eyes burning with vitriol.

“See this Larry! You know what it is Larry! Take a good look!”
He flings something from his free hand, something metallic across to Larry and he only just catches it. It’s a watch. Larry’s whole body trembles and he holds the watch close to his chest. He looks up at Matt. I know the look he holds in his eyes. That look that says I want and I don’t want to believe this.

“Matt! Enough! Don’t say another word. He’s just a kid, really he is.”

I don’t think Matt hears me.

“I saw him down there, Pratt, not that there was much of him left but it was your Dad all right. I brought back that little souvenir to prove it. He was inside the Cataraqui. Drowned to death…Like…like all those other poor bastards that went down, women, children. I’ve seen them down there too…they’re all there just wanting to go home, wishing they’d never left…wishing… And I don’t think my mum had twot to do with it.”

His face is radiant: a recent memory, a child drowning, the face of a boy. I’d seen that face sitting at Matt’s kitchen table as his Dad took me through the family album. Matt’s face. I pull him down next to me. It’s hard to say which one of us is shaking the most. Matt’s hands are trembling so badly I can’t hold them steady. I lay my head on his shoulder and we sit quietly until I realise we are both staring at the two pieces of shell. Softly I get up and take them in my hands and put them back together so the shell is one.

“Look Matt, they fit together perfectly!”

“You think it’s that easy?”
I glance across at Larry rocking himself backwards and forwards clutching his father’s watch to himself. I think too, of how much it has meant to me to have Matt’s friendship and how much it has meant to us both to be Keepers of the Shell.

“I do! I do, Matt. I think anything and everything is possible if you want it enough.”

A brass band fanfare meets my words: the buzzing of engines. Half of Currie is speeding towards us. The old geezer from Miller’s wharf leans over the side grinning from ear to ear. So he told on us after all and just as well. You can see Mrs. Pratt mopping her eyes with a handkerchief, Dad bellowing out orders and Matt’s Dad supporting his Mum in his arms.

It will be good to get home.
EPILOGUE

But--a stirring thrills the air
Like to sounds of joyance there,
That the rages
Of the ages
Shall be cancelled, and deliverance offered from the darts that were,
Consciousness the Will informing, till it fashion all things fair.

*Thomas Hardy*

That night Matt takes the two pieces of shell and fits them together and, by some unknown force, they mend. The shell glows phosphorescent and pink once more. He places it on the table by his bed. He knows what he must do. In the morning he will go with Claire and they will return it to its place under the pod-weed at Admiral.

Matt reflects on his mother’s words, ‘everything that comes from nature must return to nature’. He smiles to himself happy in the knowledge that the shell is going home and that his mother *is* home. Dad, mum and me, we’re not so badly off. We’re a family and the rest is history.