

They hugged and he pulled away, taking his bags straight to his room, while she put on the kettle and buttered the warm pear and cinnamon muffins. His eyes were glowering.

‘How’s Emily?’

‘She’s great. Pretty pissed off at Dad though. I know why I left, why I didn’t come back. Bit much having to remember, having to listen to her. She doesn’t stop talking you know. Great to walk over the farm though. Went out most days with Jack to help with the sheep and fences. Loved the physical stuff.’

He stalked the living room.

‘Our two parents – so different, both crazy and self-obsessed. It’s a wonder we turned out as well as we did.’

He started ripping the paper, screwing it tight, till his hands were black with ink and shaking as he stuffed the firebox. His lips were quivering, his mouth tight.

‘I had to choose between you and him. I chose him, because the girls chose you. Someone had to live with him. He was my father.’ Tears were close. There was a long pause. She waited. ‘And yeah, Dad was always going on about you, and as a kid you can’t stop that stuff from sinking in. I stopped even getting annoyed by it. I’m sorry Mum, that it worked out that way.’ His arms spread out as he stood up, face softening, shining through the tears of his admission. That’s why I didn’t come back. I didn’t want to face this shit.’

Sticks broke over his knee – a sharp cracking and splitting.

‘It wasn’t the same for Emily and Charlotte. They had you. I missed you so much and then I didn’t. I missed Orere. It’s good to be back.’

‘Te Puia Lodge.’

‘Right. We didn’t know a storm was coming. It was sunny when we set out and when snowflakes started falling we thought they were magical. You lit a candle in the fireplace and shaped a small stack of twigs over it. I passed some shavings to make a wall further out, for drying, and then axed some larger chunks for even further out. You fed tiny twigs, followed by dead beech leaves, into the flame.’

‘I set up the stove to make you some tea. I didn’t believe you’d get a fire going. I wanted to believe you could, but I’d been disappointed in you too many times. You turned to me with a red and purple smile, eyes pink and puffy with smoke. Your head had been in the belly of the stove, gently blowing, ever so gently, persistently. “Thanks, dear. I’d love a hot drink,” you said. In

that moment something changed. I swallowed a lump in my throat. You were completely happy.

‘I pressurised the bottle and dribbled white spirits into the bowl, the way you taught me. Then I lit the spirits, to heat the element so it would vaporise the gas when I let it through. I loved that WhisperLite. I crossed to the fire and squatted behind you, arm on your shoulder, and peered into the little flame, slowing growing, then collapsing, billowing smoke, catching again, held, it seemed, by your will.’

‘I asked if you wanted honey in your tea. You stopped blowing, looked up and smiled. “Thanks. Now that’s a treat – tea with honey.” I thought that was funny. That’s the end of the story.’

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Mummy had a tiger’s chair – black-flecked skin, wooden arms rolling into claws hidden inside the ends – and a new baby. She was untouchable. I was a fly. Shoo fly, shoo fly, shoo. Like the cows in the paddock by my tree, she’d whisk me away with her tail, if I came too close. Daddy stayed away from her as well. He said I would set off a nervous breakdown. No one ever explained just what that was, but it sounded very bad, like too much electricity, arms and legs falling off, endless screaming and no sense in the words. I didn’t want her to go mad and have to tell my friends she was in the looney bin. How would Daddy cope? We’d become orphans.

She screamed that she was always climbing up the wall but I never saw it happen, and if she did climb up, like the flies do, maybe then she would be free, maybe it wouldn’t be such a bad thing to be a fly. She and Cornelius weren’t all that different – too much electricity, arms and legs coming off, prone to screaming, musical.

I kept my distance, while she mended and knitted in front of TV, watching *Lost in Space*, our favourite programme. She never stopped working – she couldn’t stop, because housework was never-ending. Sometimes Ginger got into her wool bag. She’d scream for us to unravel the wool quickly, or she’d wring its neck. She hated our cat. I watched Daddy’s old sock grow a new layer over where his toe had poked through.

Mummy stretched it over a darning mushroom for its operation. The shining needle poked back and forth carrying a grey thread. Stitches, like I had in my thumb once when Daddy’s fishing hook got stuck there. Mummy’s fingers were always moving, really fast when she was knitting, chasing wool around a needle, one little stitch at a time. I always wondered how one little stitch at a time could grow a whole new jersey for Daddy.