

## *Dandelions*

The dog's nose twitches. There: a shock of green.

The girl takes a step on the shifting surface. The ground is littered with pointy edges and jagged shards she can feel through the wrappings around her feet. The dog has already climbed out of the pit and is running toward the spears of grass while the girl picks her way out of the canyon of old rubbish. Nana's voice inside her head reminds her: *Never ever hurt your feet.*

The dog is already chewing, eyes half closed, as the girl approaches, fingers outstretched. As he rumbles a low warning, each rib on his body stands out, stark.

The girl watches the dog chew and thinks about the rabbit he shared when she first met him. Frost still slicked the ground, and she had eaten only dried apples and water that day. She had been searching for potatoes when she came upon him, rooting through the rabbit's belly. His muzzle glistened red as he growled. She watched him eat, swallowing her hunger. When he picked up the rabbit head and walked away, the girl understood that he was giving her the carcass.

She has been following him ever since.

The girl closes her eyes, trying to remember the taste she had sucked from the boiled bones. Instead, her favorite story comes to mind.

*Nana, tell me about the time there were too many rabbits*

*I've already told you a thousand times.*

*I want to hear it again!*

*There used to be too many rabbits once. So many that they burrowed everywhere, destroying entire hillsides. So many that they were trapped, poisoned, and thrown away.*

*Why were they thrown away?*

*Because nobody wanted to eat them.*

*But why, Nana, when they taste so good?*

*There was so much to eat then, like crisps, biscuits, jelly, chocolate, yogurt, lollies, beans, pizza. Food that didn't need to be chased or trapped. Food we could eat whenever we wanted, even if we weren't hungry.*

*What did a lolly taste like?*

*I've already told you a thousand times.*

*Tell me again, please!*

The girl would savor the words, repeating them until she could taste their sweetness. These foods from the past had come inside bottles, tins, wraps, jars, tubs, bags, cans, and boxes. Wondrous things once, their crumbling husks now filled the canyon of broken pieces.

The dog looks at the girl, whose eyes are half-closed in reverie. He nudges her. She blinks and grabs the tall clump with a fist.

It takes so long to dig out the grass. Their white roots grasp the earth, refusing to let go. The girl tires easily because it is the start of spring, the hungriest time of the year. The animals—deer, sheep, goats, rabbits, possum—all search for something to eat. The girl rests for a moment. Beside her, the dog's nose twitches as something scuttles out of the rubbish. Even the rats are hungry. The girl knows she must never eat one, because she knows what can happen.

Papa had gotten sick with another stomach ache. But he didn't get better, and bumps like rotten eggs swelled under his neck and armpits. Nana started filling the packs and said it was time for a trip. The girl put on her outside clothes and tried not to cry. *Say goodbye without hugs*, Nana said in a scary voice. *Papa needs his rest.*

After several days of walking the girl asked if they could please go home.

*We are going home. To a new home, in the mountains.*

*But I want to see papa.*

*....he's meeting us there.*

*Is he all better now?*

*Yes, he's in a much better place now.*

Down below, the blue river writhes and sparkles. The rock walls of the gorge are toothed with boulders and tufted with green. The jagged mountains that run north, straight to the sun, loom overhead. The girl and Nana had walked for so many days to reach this place that all the flowers had turned into seeds and berries by the time they finally arrived.

The sun has peaked when the girl reaches the place where she sleeps, beside a buried metal box. *There was a road here once*, Nana said, *before those huge chunks broke off and fell into the river.* They found the rusting truck while gathering elderberries and hawthorne. White sprays of hemlock waved like a warning as Nana kicked the door.

*This truck was on the road during the earthquakes.*

*What's an earthquake, Nana?*

*When the ground becomes angry and throws a tantrum.*

*The ground is alive?*

*I guess so.*

*Even my green rock?*

*What do you think?*

*Green rock feels alive. What about my gumboots?*

*Your gumboots are old and worn out. We have to find you new shoes before winter.*

*Is winter alive?*

*Be careful of winter. She's cold and mean.*

*Winter's a girl?*

*Yeah, winter's a bitch.*

The girl sits on the ground and empties her pack. The clump of wilted grass falls out first, followed by dandelion, miner's lettuce, a potato with crumbles of dirt. Finally, the treasures she found in the pit: an uncracked plastic bottle and a small glass jar with a white lid. Green rock tumbles out last.

The girl eats the leaves first, chewing slowly. She cannot remember if she can eat the grass or the roots, which feel tough against her teeth. She picks up the green rock and caresses its smoothness against her cheek.

"Can I eat this?"

Green rock always remembers, even when the girl can't. But green rock is slow to respond, and the girl grows sleepy waiting for an answer.

The dog stretches, arching scruff to tail. He curls beside the sleeping girl for warmth, the only time he gets so close. He closes his eyes, but his nose stays alert to keep watch.

A slight breeze tickles the dog's snout with an approaching scent.

As the smell starts to thicken, the shapes attached to it grow more distinct. Four-legged, cloven-hooved, matted shags of fur. Their scent is familiar to the dog, who has never been able to catch one. He continues to doze while his nose relishes the musky stench.

The creatures step closer and closer, stopping when the dog blinks awake. They lower their heads, horns whorling, warning the dog to stay still.

The gamey odor awakens the girl, whose senses have been sharpened by solitude. She opens her eyes.

The beasts are staring at her, so close the girl can see herself reflected in their black gaze. Her hand reaches out, and the tips of her fingers brush the dark horns.

The dog leaps up, and the creatures vanish.

“That wasn’t very nice,” the girl says, just as she remembers that she must boil the roots in water until they grow soft. Drink the broth and then chew, chew, chew.

“Thank you, green rock.”

She fills the plastic bottle under a trickle of water that streams down the face of a nearby boulder. A waterfall, Nana had called it. The water looks dusty, so the girl pours it out and fills the bottle again. This time, it looks clear when she holds it up to the sun, which is about to slip under the crest of the mountain. Shadows are stretching toward the river, urging the girl to hurry.

The fire must be started soon.

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That mountain looked familiar, but the woman couldn’t be sure. The last time she came this way she’d been driving in the other direction, towing a trailer.

What she’d give for a car right now. She looked down, to make sure she hadn’t lost the girl, who was entirely the wrong kind of trailer.

The woman paused to wait. Glanced around out of habit. Saw green, bent down, pulled. She was sick of dandelion, but had learned never to pass one by.

“Nana, are those the mountains? Where papa is?”

“We’re getting close. Tell me what plant this is.”

“Dandelion.”

“What do we say about dandelion?”

“Even if you forget everything else, remember the dandelion!”

The woman had first learned about dandelion from her mother, when she was still living at home with her parents. The three of them had been walking to town to see a movie, and mother had

pointed to all the weeds edging the sidewalk. Shepherd's purse, yarrow, comfrey, stinging nettle, lamb's quarters. Afterwards, she named all the plants in the gardens: koromiko, karamu, kowhai, flax. The woman couldn't remember the movie, but she could still hear her mother's voice as she plucked a yellow bloom to show her its hollow stem. *Even if you forget everything else, remember the dandelion.*

On the woman's last day at home, father helped pack the trailer, while mother worked in the garden. As the car pulled out of the driveway, mother had run out, waving an envelope. She'd tossed it in the back before giving her one more hug.

The woman found the envelope a few months later, wedged between the seat cushions. She was at the beach, parked on a section of washed-out road, to watch her boyfriend surf with his mates. The wind was blowing so hard that she'd taken shelter in the car. She'd dropped her cellphone and was looking for it when she found the envelope instead. She knew its contents from the way it rattled, so she didn't bother opening it. That evening, they built a bonfire, with driftwood from houses that used to stand where surf now pounded the shore. Sausages were speared on sticks, fat sizzling on the flames. Someone rolled a joint and passed it around.

"They say that when the rest of the Antarctic ice goes, the waves here are going to reach twenty, thirty metres. Imagine riding that!"

"It'd be the bomb, bro."

Sparks flew up into the starry sky. The ocean roared.

"Probably be the last wave we catch, dude."

"Yeah. But it would be totally epic."

She didn't know what happened to the surfer. They'd broken up before the ice shelf collapsed. As the tidal waves swamped the city, she wondered what happened to him and his mates. Had they honored their pact to die surfing instead of trying to survive what came next?

Her mother reached her while the cellphones were still working. "I knew you were safe. I could feel it in my bones."

"If we hadn't gone camping in the mountains..."

"Why don't you come home? Live with us. Both of you."

"My partner got a job with the army. They're trying to clean up this mess. Maybe in a couple months."

But the ocean could not be cleaned up. Instead, the water seeped further inland, pooling and settling, refusing to leave. Streets full of families one week would be occupied by water the next. While most places drowned, others burned, even as seawater surrounded them. The edges of everything shifted, broke, and blurred. An inch would be lost in a day, a metre in a month.

Life went on, but with less.

By the time the earthquakes struck, her mother had passed away. It took four months for the letter to reach the woman, because the roads had become unpassable. The pace of the world slowed to a crawl, but time seemed to speed up.

One day she was someone's daughter; the next, a grandmother.

The woman and the girl reached a marshy swamp on their fortieth day of walking. Trees, dead and dying, poked out of the water, branches grasping for air. As the girl ran about, the woman stood on the mud, hand shading her eyes. A man on a raft was gliding towards them. He could take them across for a price.

"What about two apples?"

"Have enough apples. Don't need potatoes, either. Got any salt?"

"I wish. What about a can? No rust or swelling. But no label, either."

The man spat. "Probably worthless, but I'll take it."

After telling them where to sit and what to hold onto, the man pushed away from the crumbling bank. The mud sucked the pole like a straw.

"Where you two coming from?"

"Dunedin."

"Not much left there."

The woman nodded.

"Where you headed?"

"Home."

The raft lurched, ending the questions. The man planted his pole in the muck, grunting until they swung free.

Though the woman didn't ask, the man told her anyways. "When the dam broke, the water drowned most of my orchard. Probably wasn't as bad as what happened in the city, though." The man waited, angling for a tale.

The woman inhaled. She was spared from answering by the girl, who was laughing.

"Nana, a white butterfly is following us!" Her fingers fluttered through the air.

The woman saw only the indifferent blue of the sky.

When they reached the other side, the man helped them down. After offering directions to the woman, he gave two dried cherries to the girl.

"Inside every pit's a tiny tree trying to get out. Plant 'em, and you'll see."

On their first night in the gorge they ate potatoes the girl found in a field. The sky was clear and the air warm, so the two of them slept under the stars. The brightness of the moon pierced the woman's sleep, waking her from a dream. Her awareness became unmoored, suspended out of time. She was back in the flat she had lived in as a student, when she first moved to Dunedin. The glare of the streetlight outside her bedroom would shine in her eyes, so she'd covered the window with a poster.

Something soft struck her side. The woman turned to look. The girl's arms were thrown out, hands curled into fists. In the moonlight her face glowed blue-white like an apparition. She was smiling, and in that expression was a beauty so sharply familiar that the woman's heart surged, both terrified and enchanted. Just like her daughter at that age, with the same fey look. Shards of memories, lodged deep, loosened and shifted, baring fangs. *Your daughter's so young, she'll pop that kid out easy. All you have to do is cut the cord.*

The woman covered her face. Her hunched shoulders shook.

Life, but less.

When they found the truck, the sun was high. The light was so bright that it seemed to roar as it bounced off the twisting river and cragged rocks. The woman only saw hemlock at first, before the broken mirror caught her eye. The girl darted toward the flash.

"Careful where you step. You must never ever hurt your feet!"

The truck must have capsized as the road bucked, slipping into the gorge when the ground buckled. A landslide of rocks, gravel and dirt had buried most of the container, but the cab was intact,

free of debris. As the woman climbed up the rocks, she could see what remained of the driver, still belted behind the steering wheel.

“Wait down there a moment. I need to tidy up first.”

“Nana, is that a little house?”

“It’s a truck.”

“What’s that?”

“A very big car. It used to pull that big box buried back there. This truck was on the road during the earthquakes.”

“What’s an earthquake, Nana?”

As she answered the girl’s questions, the woman used a branch to sweep out the bones and their crumbling wraps of rotten clothing. The skull she hid in a crevice, so she could bury it later.

“It’s time, Nana!”

“Time for what?”

“We have to look for shelter when the sun’s on top of my head. You said so.”

“That’s right. And what else do we need to do?”

“Look for water, firewood, food. We already found everything, Nana!”

“We did?”

“Yes! We can sleep inside the truck.”

“Clever girl. We still need to get water from the river, though.”

“That rock over there has lots of water, Nana.”

“Really? Can you show me?”

The girl took the woman’s hand, leading her to a boulder that glistened like a jewel. The woman squinted up to see white froth cascading from a height. The water bubbled along a rock-strewn path before sheeting across the face of the boulder and pooling on a small ledge at its base. From here, the water trickled in a steady stream that wended its way to the river.

The woman put her hands against the boulder. Felt the cool wetness wash over her fingers. Closed her eyes.

“Nana, are you sleepy?”

“A little bit. I’m listening to the waterfall.”

“What’s it saying?”



“I wish I knew.”

The girl’s small hands joined the woman’s under the water. Their hands pushed against the boulder, as if they were bracing the hillside together.

“It’s a secret, Nana,” the girl whispered. “So I can’t tell.”

The woman spent the remaining daylight trying to open the container. As she pounded the rusting door with a rock, the sounds ricocheted out of the gorge, as if they’d started there. Birds shot up into the sky, and animals skittered away.

There was probably nothing useful inside, a shipment of long-spoiled food, perhaps, or a pallet of bricks without mortar. The woman tried not to hope for too much, even as she tallied their needs. New shoes for the girl. Blankets for winter. Knives. She could use anything, really. Anything at all except nothing. The container couldn’t be empty. There had to be something inside.

As rock pounded against metal, the woman allowed her thoughts to drift. The years unwound, the earth uncrumpled, and the seas receded. When there was still a chance the world would right itself, they’d made lists of what they wished for most. Coffee, chocolate, sugar...petrol, medicine, bullets. Her memories were crowded and bright, full of everything she missed.

When the sliver slid through her skin, the woman hardly noticed the sting. As it embedded itself in the meat of her palm, there was only the slightest throb. But she stopped working, suddenly exhausted. Dropped the rock and sighed. She would try again tomorrow.

That night, the woman and the girl ate a dinner of roots boiled with berries. Afterwards, they made a nest inside the cab, where they could sleep, warm and dry. The woman stroked the girl’s hair while telling her favorite story. The girl fell asleep, but the woman stayed awake. As she watched the moon rise, dread welled up, a sudden menacing of the senses.

The woman blamed the skull. She needed to bury it that night. She crept outside on her hands and knees, searching every crevice. With trembling hands, she rolled the skull from its hiding place, recoiling at its coldness.

The woman held the skull far away from her body as she searched for a suitable place. The ground dipped and swerved, and the path she walked meandered between shadow and scrub. Spills of gravel, loosened by her steps, bounced into the night.

As the woman began to claw the earth with her fingers, her pulse throbbed and skipped. She felt the skull staring into her back, so she picked it up and turned it around.

While the woman pulled up handfuls of earth, the skull gazed down at the gorge, glowing silver with moonlight. Below, the river twisted and glinted, waiting for the woman to be done.

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The tracks in the snow are rabbit, but the white-haired woman already knows this. Her nose prickles as it sorts through the drifting scents: crushed thyme, bent pine needles, the musk of fear. She grips the cudgel tight.

Strikes once, and red sprays out. The snared rabbit jerks and goes still.

The white-haired woman kneels. Strokes the fur with tenderness. Feels the creature's last breath dissolve into air.

The wind whispers *leavesscatteringtwigsrattling*

The woman ties the rabbit's body to a stick, leaving a bloody imprint behind in the snow. Red drops scatter like petals, marking the tracks she leaves behind.

The path home goes through a faint break in the bush, under a canopy of branches. But the white-haired woman is not going home just yet. First, she must deliver a gift, the same gift she always gives during the coldest time of the year.

She walks towards the gorge, where a river runs, connecting past to present. As the white-haired woman walks, the ground absorbs the soft blows of her feet. Each subtle tremor penetrates the soil, disturbing countless specks of life. With each step, the woman asks the earth for forgiveness and receives absolution, solid and firm under her feet.

A falcon drifts on a current of air. A rabbit scuttles away.

As she approaches, she can hear the river humming, thrumming through the gorge. Its song is the language of water, sung by rain, stream, lake, and ocean. More sensation than sense is the song, more pattern than sound. The song of water is constant, swelling and drifting between earth and sky.

*eternalweareoneeverypartall*

The white-haired woman sees the river again the same river under the same sky

She makes fire, fills a pot, skins the rabbit.

Adds roots, seeds, dried greens, a lick of salt.

As the water bubbles, scents billow up on plumes of white steam. Hunger and fullness flavor the soup, as do memories of being lost and then found. The soup tastes of everything she has gathered, from every season: winter, spring, summer, fall.

When she is done, the white-haired woman shares broth with the earth, sprinkles some to the winds, and carries the rest to the river.

She kneels, offers, remembers

*I'll be right back*

She touches the green rock she wears around her neck. Wipes her eyes as she watches the river run, blue upon white upon black upon gray. Turns around and walks out of the gorge

past a waterfall whispering secrets

past a canyon swirling with dusty ghosts

past a meadow where a dog rescued a girl

towards a garden full of roots slumbering under blankets of earth

towards trees that burst out of cherry and apple seeds

towards a door she opens

“Nana!”

and closes.