

A heartbreaking yet humorous story
about surviving loss—and finding
a way back



EDDY EDDY

Kate De Goldi

Eddy, Eddy

*Eddy,
Eddy*

KATE DE GOLDI



CANDLEWICK PRESS

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are either products of the author's imagination or, if real, are used fictitiously.

Copyright © 2022 by Kate De Goldi

Excerpts (pp. 41, 44, 46, 56–57, 130–131) from *Murder in the Cathedral* by T. S. Eliot. Copyright 1935 by Harcourt Brace & Company. Copyright renewed 1963 by T. S. Eliot. Used by permission of HarperCollins Publishers.

Lyrics (p. 188) from “Careless Love.” Words by John Maybury. Music by Angelo Badalamenti. Copyright © 2008 ANLON-MUSIC CO. All Rights Administered by UNIVERSAL MUSIC CORP. All Rights Reserved. Used by Permission. Reprinted by Permission of Hal Leonard LLC.

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced, transmitted, or stored in an information retrieval system in any form or by any means, graphic, electronic, or mechanical, including photocopying, taping, and recording, without prior written permission from the publisher.

First US edition 2024

First published by Allen & Unwin (New Zealand) 2022

Library of Congress Catalog Card Number 2023944036

ISBN 978-1-5362-3282-0

SHD 29 28 27 26 25 24

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Printed in Chelsea, MI, USA

This book was typeset in Centaur MT.

Candlewick Press

99 Dover Street

Somerville, Massachusetts 02144

www.candlewick.com



*For Sally Zwartz
and in memory of Jenny and Fra,
who gave us the books and the songs*

Marley was dead: to begin with. There was no doubt whatever about that. The register of his burial was signed by the clergyman, the clerk, the undertaker, and the chief mourner. Scrooge signed it: and Scrooge's name was good upon 'Change, for anything he chose to put his hand to. Old Marley was as dead as a door-nail.

—Charles Dickens, *A Christmas Carol*

SEP
TEM
BER

“Marley was dead: to begin with. There was no doubt whatsoever about that.”

Eddy’s uncle got to the immortal words first. It was a quotation begging to be said that day. One of them had to say it, Eddy supposed. Brain grabbed the moment.

Funny, really, since Brain was a slow thinker and mover most of the time. But he spoke the second they settled into the car. Then he shut the passenger door softly—a full stop. Brain did most things carefully, even delicately. This sometimes made Eddy itch.

Maybe he’d been waiting years to say it. Maybe, all that time ago, he’d named Marley just so he could say the line when Marley died. Only now he said it wrong.

“*No doubt whatever,*” said Eddy. Really, for a research librarian, Brain could be surprisingly imprecise. He often fluffed song lyrics and quotes. “No ‘so.’”

“Are you sure?”

“Positive.”

Brain looked at Eddy: his baffled-animal look, the raccoon eyebrows bending inward. He seemed to be staring at Eddy’s forehead as if trying to make out the words etched there or something, proof.

“*Marley was dead.*” Eddy paused.

“Colon,” said Brain, with a wan smile.

“*Marley was dead colon: to begin with. There was no doubt whatever about that.*”

There really wasn’t any doubt. Marley was in the back seat, head resting on her old pillow with its stains and holes and sprouting kapok.

She was wrapped in the Kaiapoi Pure Wool blanket. The blanket was Eddy's sole inheritance from his unknown maternal grandmother. He'd donated it to Marley when she was a pup, and it had been her bed rug for as long as anyone could remember. It was all felted from years of washing, spattered with ragged holes from Marley's unclipped claws. She liked to rough up the rug before she slept; she pawed at it, bunched it into little hillocks, then thumped down onto it, exhaling noisily, her long nose between front paws.

"Memories of snow," Brain told Eddy all those years ago. "The reptilian brain remembering Labrador—you know, all the snow, how they paw into the snow for warmth.

"Labrador. Where Labs come from," said Brain unnecessarily. Every moment a teaching moment. Labrador habits. Dreamtime lore. The Jesuits' misdeeds in China. Lines of poetry—misquoted probably, now that Eddy thought about it. The arguments for and against veganism. The meaning of thanatology . . . It had been all right when he was young, Eddy supposed. He couldn't stand it these days.

Marley's old rug would go with her now, into the ground beneath the wattle tree in the backyard, where she had lain in the shade all the hot afternoons of Eddy's life.

He'd already prepared the hole, spent half the morning marking out the plot and digging, manufacturing a decent sweat. It was sweltering by 11 a.m., a breathless, pressing heat, though it was only September. Eddy had derived a grim enjoyment from the liquid gathering under his cap, leaking unpleasantly down his neck and back. He imagined it glistening in the sun, a moist and manly rebuke to Brain. One of them was practical, the sweat said. *One* of them had borrowed the spade from next door and prepared the grave.

Not that Brain had been watching. He was inside with Marley, contemplating the animal soul. Saying a prayer, no doubt.

In the car now, Brain still stared, dwelling on the quotation, listening to it in his head. Everything in Brain's head happened at adagio.

"*Marley was dead: to begin with,*" he said again. "*There was no doubt whatever about that.*"

Eddy had been there at the death. Brain, too, but only Eddy watched. Brain laid a big white hand on Marley's flank but stared fixedly at the poster on the otherwise bare clinic wall: an image of a gadfly petrel, aslant against a blue sky.

Eddy held Marley's shabby left forepaw. It had troubled her for years; she couldn't manage a run longer than 3 km without developing a limp—a Marley limp, graceful and apologetic. He massaged the furless patch on the side of the paw with his thumb. He watched Marley's face, the grizzled muzzle all slack now, her lovely eyes gummy with sickness.

At the same time, from the corner of his eye, he watched the vet expertly filling the syringe.

"It's very quick," the vet said. "And completely painless." Eddy doubted the vet knew this for sure, not being a dog. It was Fat Vet. He was in practice with his brother Thin Vet: Fat Bob and Thin Tim.

Yeah, but shut up, Fat Vet, Eddy thought. Don't talk.

He liked Fat Vet well enough. He liked him much better than Thin Vet, who was terse and kind of bitter. But Eddy didn't want Fat Vet talking, not while Marley was getting the needle. He wanted it just to be Marley's sounds, her little snuffles and wheezy exhalations, the occasional tail *thwomp*, pathetically tired. He wanted to hear her breathing right to the end.

Fat Vet obliged. He said nothing more. He felt around with his competent sausage fingers for the soft gap in Marley's neck and slid the needle neatly into the cavity, and Marley was as dead as a doornail. In less than a minute. No doubt whatever.

"Except," said Eddy now, "it isn't 'to begin with.' It's the end. The end of an era. The Marley Era. Marley was dead. Full stop. The End."

He started the car and pulled out into the road, pitted and hummocky like so many of the roads in the area; even at normal speed, the going was bumpy. Today the traffic ambled, befuddled by the heat. The air was hazy, filled with spores. This city is comatose, thought Eddy. He imagined flooring it, frightening all the dozy motorists, driving somewhere at great speed. He pictured the long straight roads north of town, the magical vanishing point. But really, you couldn't floor a Suzuki Alto with any conviction.

"Marley was dead to end with," said Brain, trying it out.

Eddy felt the familiar spike of irritation with his duffer uncle, with Brain's over-deliberate enunciation, his ponderous—as he called them—*cerebrations*. He felt the evil little urge that visited him sometimes to pinch Brain someplace painful.

"To begin with is better," said Brain, oblivious. "God closes a door, opens a window."

If he closed his eyes, thought Eddy, they might end up in the river, sink into the silted-up bottom, let the water close over the Suzuki Alto, their banana-colored coffin, Amen, Amen.

"*Lift up your heads, oh ye gates!*" sang Brain through the windscreen, into the suburban middle distance.

2

The month of Marley's death was the two-year anniversary of the first earthquake. Which meant it was exactly two years since the death of Brain's mother. She had probably died during the long shaking, though no one could say for sure. Bad heart. They had found Doris in her narrow bed when they went around to check on her, an hour after the quake. Could have gone at any time, the doctor said. It might have been the quake.

"Frightened to death," said Brain mournfully, but Eddy doubted it. Doris was quite the termagant. Mostly, people were frightened of her. He had frequently witnessed her admonishing tradies and shop assistants, hapless passersby. In church she recited the prayers at an uncomfortable volume, in competition with the rest of the congregation. Once, she had barked out her disagreement during the sermon. Heads had turned, but the priest plowed serenely on, used to Doris, no doubt. Eddy, ten years old at the time, had gone hot and horrified. He refused to accompany his grandmother to Mass ever again.

This weekend, Brain had arranged for the Modern Priest to say an anniversary Mass for the repose of Doris's seized-up little soul. In their living room, on a Saturday evening. The Modern Priest loved a house Mass; he grieved for the 1970s when everyone and their aunt apparently took up homestyle worship.

"Count me out," said Eddy, even as he automatically helped Brain push the couch across the room to make space for the temporary altar trestle. Eddy had not been to a church since the quakes, and before

that he'd gone solely to sing in the Cathedral choir. The choir loft was sufficiently far away from the priest and the progress of the Mass to make it feel like you were uninvolved, practically elsewhere, which suited Eddy fine.

He'd finally let his friend Thomas More talk him into the choir. Toss More was an inconsistent theist, but he had unshakable faith in music of all kinds and the glory of voices raised in chorus. Eddy had resisted joining because Brain was the deputy choirmaster, but Toss More worked on him, wore him down like a faltering surface under a power drill.

In fact, Eddy loved singing just as much as Toss. He loved singing *with* Toss. They'd been in every school choir together since primary school, had formed countless short-lived bands, all with satisfyingly abstruse names. Their last band (Steal Away) had been barely a band: just the two of them, harmonizing Toss More's increasingly strange secular spirituals—Toss liked a paradox.

"Ginge will be here," said Brain. He smoothed the woven runner carefully across the tabletop.

Eddy was very fond of cousin Ginge, a bachelor like Brain, with a houseful of cats (last count, six) instead of a nephew. Cat-love on Ginge's scale was possibly pathological, but Eddy approved of it: if not for Ginge's interventions, the moggies were destined for the prick in the paw. Ginge was a union organizer and sometimes as dufferish as Brain, but he was a committed communist and very droll. Also an atheist, though (more paradox) he went often to Mass, in his ancient army coat and Doc Martens—for old times' sake, he said. If you considered Brain and Ginge with a cool eye, you could not fail to conclude that the Smallbone genetic makeup was peculiar. And coming to an end. Any reproductive glory was up to Eddy.

“Bridgie’s coming too,” said Brain. He placed the pottery candlesticks at either end of the trestle. Next, he would get the oval Temuka pottery bowl for a makeshift chalice. Eddy just knew Brain was imagining himself as an early Christian preparing for the Eucharist in a Roman atrium.

Well, Bridgie. Bridgie was wild. She was Eddy’s godmother, though she believed in neither God nor mothering. She taught piano and viola and played in the symphony orchestra, had in fact played in two of his and Toss More’s five-minute bands. Bridgie dressed extravagantly and pursued a dangerous line in conversation. She sometimes inquired after Ginge’s and Brain’s peckers: Had they shriveled and fallen off yet, due to long-term lack of use?

The quartet’s friendship was a mystery to Eddy, but they went way back. Back through the mists of time to Our Lady of Perpetual Succour, their hallowed primary school, where fragrant and beautiful nuns had cast an unfathomable spell, and when the Modern Priest (chief altar boy) had answered to the name Christopher Mangan. They had all regularly played at Masses in Chris Mangan’s bedroom and, in Eddy’s view, they were playing still.

“When I was a child, I spake as a child,” said Eddy, watching Brain fold the lily-white table napkin he kept especially as a purificator to wash out the pottery chalice. Brain was pretending he hadn’t heard.

“But when I became a man, I put away childish things.”

“King James?” said Brain.

Eddy pretended he hadn’t heard. They sometimes did this. It was 1:50 p.m. He had a pickup in forty minutes.

“I’m off,” he said.

3

He walked to Paparoa Street, a zigzag route that dodged the worst of St. Albans's chewed-up footpaths. He had a bike, but lately a disturbing thing happened whenever he swung his leg over. Slowly, terribly, he felt himself turning into Brain. He felt his arse spread and his fingers plump up. His scalp itched as his hairline seemed to recede. The pedals moved as if through porridge. He could have cycled naked, but still it would have felt like he was wearing a navy blazer, wheat-colored corduroys, and polished brogues.

This sort of horror had happened at intervals throughout his adolescence, especially once his voice had broken and settled in the same baritone range as Brain's. Eddy had been violently alarmed by the first of these episodes, bursting from Toss More's sleekly appointed sleep-out into a cold June night. He'd leaned against the roughcast exterior wall, his breaths short and his scalp prickling on the inside.

Wtf? said Toss More by way of his eyebrow when Eddy finally came back inside. Had he sounded like Brain? asked Eddy.

Toss thought about it. "No more than usual," he concluded. Eddy was appalled. "It's the vocabulary," said Toss. "How many fourteen-year-olds say *concatenation*? And, you know, the *sound*—same timbre as Brain's." Thanks for nothing, thought Eddy. And btw, how many fourteen-year-olds said *timbre*?

He'd tried to keep watch on vocabulary after that, suppressing Brain-type words. Interstices. Adumbrate. Desuetude. He would lead a two-syllable life. He tried to speak in less well-formed sentences, too,

use a more bass voice. It was hopeless, of course. He'd been a sitting duck; fourteen years with Brain was a full-scale colonization. He would never escape his uncle's words, his grammar and tone, his *ceribrations*. Occasionally Brain's voice even narrated passages inside his head while he was reading. Did this happen to everyone at some stage—their parents or caregivers taking up passive-aggressive occupation inside them, a desperate stakeout just before their offspring left forever?

Not that Eddy was leaving anytime soon. The quakes had seen to that. The city's housing stock was gutted. Rentals were thin on the ground or beyond his pocket. But also, in his many interior fantasies of Moving Day, there appeared always a reduced and stoical Brain helping him lug furniture, pressing household linen and appliances on him, waving a brave farewell from the front porch. Eddy couldn't do it to him. He might just have done it while Marley was still alive—he could have trusted Brain to Marley's care. But that ship had sailed.

As it was, on most days they were both engaged in elaborate delaying tactics, re: arrival home from their respective jobs. It was the silence that came down the path to greet you, the lack of hustle and operatic whimpering. And being alone in the house. Nothing, nowhere, felt as it should. No dribbling dog-love when Eddy slumped on the couch. No slavish companion padding alongside him down the hallway or curled like a conch beside his bed. He didn't like going to the fridge or the pantry, the dog-roll and the half-full bag of Eukanuba staring back at him, all sad and unemployed. He meant to take them next door for Pluto the Maltese but somehow never got round to it.

Brain, for his part, had suddenly organized extra choir rehearsals. He'd dreamed up new parish good works: taking Communion to the elderly, writing material for the parish bulletin, visiting lonely

parishioners. Dusting the bishop's miter, for all Eddy knew. They were in a figurative slow bike race: seeing who could be last to the home finish line and claim victory. He couldn't leave Brain to the Ghost of Marley and the accusing dog-roll. It was infuriating.

Which was why he made his way now to Paparoa Street, where a new entry in his portfolio of pet-minding jobs awaited him. So far he had four dogs (walking), two cats (feeding while owners away), and a shifting miscellany of tropical fish, guinea pigs, and budgies, also Rhode Island Red hens, who were prodigious layers. The best way to continue living with Brain, Eddy had concluded, was to live with him as little as possible. Evening and weekend employment was essential.

He'd moved through a number of jobs since leaving school two months before the first quake. In the dizzying days after his abrupt departure, he'd signed on as a builder's laborer. His grandmother had been infinitely sardonic.

"From cloth cap to cloth cap in four generations," said Doris. She seemed almost pleased, as if Eddy had proved some private thesis. But his grandmother had always been grudging about him—ungrateful, Eddy thought: he was her only grandchild, after all. It was because he'd been born out of wedlock, an antique notion to which Doris still subscribed. Sometimes, Eddy thought he could see the word *bastard* shimmering above his grandmother's head, a malign aura, emanating toxins. It was hardly his fault. If anything, it was *her* fault. She was the one who'd reared a feckless son.

Eddy's great-grandfather had been a railway laborer and his grandfather a doctor, a socially upward leap in Doris's eyes. Brain's job—librarian—was something of a comedown. Jobbing builder's boy was beneath contempt. Except Eddy'd had the last laugh, hadn't he? Because

now there were building sites all over the city with every man and his dog wanting a job on them. It was the new gold rush.

Except, really, he hadn't had the last laugh because he'd broken his foot six months after the February quake, and the delicate bud that was his building career had withered and died. A shame, because hefting two-by-fours, sawhorses, and bags of tools—really, his building career was just lifting, carting, and digging—had provoked some embryonic upper-body muscles.

On the other hand, though the sudden release from uniforms, timetables, earnest teachers, and the need to memorize myriad facts had been initially thrilling, by the time the June quake rolled around, ha, Eddy had begun to feel that builder's laboring was not for him. It was interesting only up to a point. He wasn't really *making* anything. This had been his pitch to Brain—the pleasure of seeing something solid, something *material*, come into being, he'd said. What had he been thinking? He hadn't, of course. He'd become allergic to thinking. Thinking made him *sick*, he told Brain, he was sick of reading, writing, researching, and regurgitating. He was sick of being inside his head, being a swot and a nerd.

No, he wasn't making anything, or rather *he* wasn't making anything. Cullen & Kelleher Homes was doing the making—and pretty ordinary it was, too. If anything, he was unmaking, Eddy thought. Digging holes, for instance, that was an absence of something, a pit, an abyss. He wound himself into a bitter little state every so often dwelling on this. Clearly laboring didn't completely obviate thinking. Plus, it was tiring—no, exhausting. He was mostly too whacked to go out at night, and when he did, he regretted it the next morning, rising in the dark at 5 a.m. He loathed the alarm.

It was exhaustion that made him break his foot—exhaustion and Toss More’s effete boots. He’d worn them home after a night in the sleep-out composing an anti-disaster-capitalist rant, “Eat My Aggregates,” which Toss was planning to perform outside the earthquake recovery authority offices, if he could ever make it out of bed. The boots were too narrow for Eddy’s feet, which meant that when he climbed the gate at Snorebins Park’s east exit and dropped as carefully as possible to the ground, the left boot rolled disastrously and somehow this had broken two metatarsals. He was laid up for a week with a monstrously swollen foot, the pain throbbing throughout his body, and only a pile of Brain’s Inspector Wexford novels to divert him. He read them helplessly, one after another, and was brought very low by this further evidence of Brain-creep.

Thereafter he’d hobbled about with crutches, then crutchless but jobless, then finally with just an imperceptible favoring of his left foot. Occasionally a twinge still surprised him if he encountered a treacherous footpath eruption.

Doris would have cared little for his broken foot—she had been a famously heartless nurse, heedless of anyone’s sore stomachs or headaches. “Go to the toilet,” she said in answer to every complaint.

“She was forged in different times,” said Brain.

And actually out of iron, thought Eddy. He learned to shut up.

“Doris was born crabby,” Bridgie told him once. “And then there was Vincent.”

Well, Eddy conceded, a dead drug-addict son was a bummer for sure.

4

Paparoa Street had done okay in the quakes, Eddy thought. He assessed all parts of the city in this way: Avonhead, scot-free; Papanui, surface wounds; St. Albans, broken limbs; Dallington, six feet under.

Paparoa Street was bungalowed, big-sectioned, abundantly gardened, deciduously treed; high-sided trampolines and swing sets were ubiquitous. Number 62 was two stories, the wood exterior pristine white. The job was for a Josie Mulholland. They had two dogs, she'd emailed, a spoodle (of course, the dog du jour) and a golden retriever. Thank God. A retriever offered some gravitas amidst his doodle-dominated charges: thus far, two spoodles, a cavoodle, and a completely insane chipoo with overactive tear glands. He had turned down a peekapoo, ostensibly because its owners lived outside the parameters he'd determined—no more than 5 km in each direction from home—but really, it was one ridiculous cross-breed too many. He was hanging out for something noble: a border collie, a boxer, a standard poodle. Even a German shepherd. No Labs though. Or not yet. Eddy felt a terrible ache around the heart each time he saw one, which was often; since Marley's death, the suburbs seemed riddled with Labradors.

He couldn't imagine having another dog himself. A replacement companion. Some people acquired new pets with impunity—his old friend Ollie, for instance. That family's pooches were always getting run over, or poisoned, or falling prey to bizarre medical conditions. But Ollie and his brothers shed their dog attachments with ease. They found new puppies speedily, like necessary household items, a kettle or

toilet seat, and life went on as usual. Until the new dog met its inevitable end, providing more compost for their vegetable garden and the chance for a bit of a ceremony. Eddy had attended at least three dog funerals in Ollie's backyard.

These pet-care jobs—when did a cluster of jobs become an actual business?—they filled an emotional hole. He was dog-adjacent but not fully involved. Hands-on but no strings. Was this how early childhood caregivers felt? Or teachers? He could certainly do with the kind of variety a nursery of children provided. At the moment it felt like he was in charge of a dispersed multiple birth—all skittish and hairy. Bring on the retriever.

It was 2:30 p.m. Eddy pressed Josie Mulholland's doorbell.

The Mulhollands' house was large. Its décor would be the opulent sort he knew from his ex-girlfriend Hazel's and her friends' houses on the west side of town. Marble benches, leather sofas that sucked at your skin, vast beds with oppressive numbers of pillows and cushions, everything conspicuously clean, tucked up, and tidy.

The boy who answered the door was conspicuously unclean. He wore ancient jeans and a manky, spattered hoodie. Sparse hair sprouted hopefully from his chin. He was barefoot and sizable and said nothing. A wave of fruity sweat met Eddy.

"Eddy," he said, stepping back. "To see Josie about the dogs."

"She's out." The boy looked past Eddy, his face expressionless. Eddy turned to see what was behind him. Nothing.

"You can just take them," the boy said. He turned and lumbered down the hallway. A *big* lad, as Ginge would say. Eddy followed, feeling slight and tubercular, as he always did around substantial people.

“In there,” said the boy, pointing to a door. He pushed through another door and was gone.

In there was a kind of conservatory, Eddy supposed, sun-filled and awash with shiny-leaved plants. A girl dressed in white sat in a rocker, a dog in her lap, another by the side of the chair. He was suddenly in a Tennessee Williams play. But then the dogs rushed him (undisciplined!), and it was the inevitable first-meeting *mêlée*. He gave them the love, of course. Oh, the old doggo slavering, it never disappointed; even if you didn’t know the dogs, out went your hands involuntarily and back came their paws and tongues, the snuffling, the trembling bodies. It was another language, and he was fluent. You stayed patient and attentive, and their frenzy eventually settled, the sniff test sorted on both sides.

“I’ve been trying to train them,” said the girl. “But it’s not working. We went to a class, but Dad hated it.” She was young—nine, ten? He could never tell kids’ ages. Was she wearing an enormous nightie? Stick arms and legs poked from it like a scarecrow’s. Her hair was like straw.

“Don’t you mind?” she said, watching the maul.

“Love it,” said Eddy.

The spoodle was mental, wanting full lip kisses already. “Hey, you! Not on the first date.”

She giggled. “Rizzo’s needy.”

“What’s this one called?” The retriever sat now, earnest and aquiver. Eddy gave him an approving pat.

“Waffle.”

“Because?”

She sighed. “He’s kind of *toasted* like waffles. I was only four when

we got him. I'd probably call him something different now. Like Henry or Toby. A proper dog's name. My dad had a German shepherd once called Norman."

Clearly the talker of the family.

"We got Waffle from the pound. He had a terrible life. But Rizzo was from a dog breeder. Two thousand dollars Dad'll never see again. That's what he said. She was my present for sleeping in my own bed for a month."

And where did they get you? wondered Eddy.

"I'm Delphine," she said.

"Eddy." He held Rizzo firmly away from his face, waiting for her to slacken.

"I know. Eddy *Smallbone*. And you're a dog walker."

"Amazing no one's made that joke before."

"That was my brother who answered the door. He hates doing it, but I'm not allowed. In case of kidnapping. I'm not making that up. Dad says it could happen to anyone."

Pity the kidnapper, thought Eddy. She was like a brat-sprite, precocious and invasive, all angles and ghostly skin and a high, insistent voice.

He gave in to Rizzo then, tired of disciplining. He knelt properly and her nose went straight into his crotch. Delphine looked at him askew.

"In case you're wondering," she said, "I have a wandering eye."

"All good."

She rocked a little in the chair, looking at his ear. "Sometimes I have double vision. I could see two of you."

"Twice as much fun," said Eddy.

“Our last walker was a failure. He lost Rizzo; he was a student. We had to make signs and put them on lampposts. It was three days before we got her back.”

Eddy stood, looking for the leashes.

“Is dog walking your actual *job*?” said Delphine, pitching forward, holding the rocking chair in place with her bare feet.

“Mum said you walk lots of dogs. She found out about you from her friend Erica. She’s got a spoodle, too, but she calls it a cockapoo? She used to have a Maltipoo. Two *poo*s.” She laughed maniacally. “Did you know there’s a designer dog called a whoodle?”

In fact, Eddy did know this, having been driven to doodle sites on learning there was a breed as risible as a chipoo. But he’d had enough of Delphine. He took the leashes from the arm of an overstuffed chair.

“Well, *is* dog walking your job?” She rocked herself up and out of the chair.

“It’s one of them,” said Eddy.

“What are the others?”

“Grave digging and dentistry.”

She stared at him, the eye roaming. “Can you tell me about the grave digging?”

“No,” said Eddy, clipping a leash to Rizzo’s collar. Waffle stood at attention. Good boy. Sorry about the name.

“Mum says they need a long one and there are poo bags in the kitchen drawer. They’re compostable.” She trailed Eddy from the room.

“I wish I could come. I used to go with Dad, but he’s moved out now. But I’m having a nightie day because I didn’t go to school. Do you have those? Or a pajama day?”

“No,” said Eddy. He never wore pajamas. Brain wore pajamas. Pale

blue striped ones from Ballantynes, bought every three years since the Bronze Age.

“Mum’s at the gym. And Jasper never goes out if he can help it. Except sometimes at night. Like a bat.”

“What about school?” He opened the front door.

“Correspondence,” she said, looking up at his face, more or less.

“I’ll be about an hour,” said Eddy.

“Mum said she’d be back.”

He felt her eyes as he went down the path, drilling a hole in his spine, or thereabouts.

“Careful,” he called. “Kidnappers!”

The door slammed and the dogs pulled him through the front gate.

5

“There are two really good things about dog walking,” Eddy had once told Toss More.

“Let me guess,” said Toss. He languished pale and wasted on his bed, like *The Death of Chatterton*, only without the lilac trousers. “There’s the dog. And? Oh yes, of course, the *walking*.” Illness had greatly increased his satirical tendency.

“It’s much more nuanced than that,” said Eddy.

“Do tell.”

But, really, he couldn’t adequately express the deep pleasure and comfort of dogs plus walking, except that it had something to do with the rhythm of footsteps and his wandering mind, the great green stretches of parks, the scents on the air, whatever was coming through his earphones, and the eternal entertainment of pooches and their mysterious distractions—a sensory world, an intelligence, to which he had no entry. Toss could never understand anyway; he’d renounced pets since catching salmonella from his two red-eared terrapins. He’d lost a third of his body weight and was still recovering months later, tired all the time.

Eddy missed the turtles. He’d spent much time lying in front of their tank, staring at their Yoda-ish necks and old eyes while Toss went on and on. Sickness did not dim his monologues, scurrilous and interminable.

It took just minutes to discern the personalities of new dogs. By the time they’d walked the back streets of Papanui and Merivale and

explored a couple of parks, Eddy knew that Waffle was keen to please and Rizzo wanted medicating. Neediness plus attention deficit plus no sense of consequence. A potential topic of conversation with Brain next time he was home for dinner.

Brain liked to hear about Eddy's various charges. There had always been cats and fish and birds in Eddy's young life, and Brain had fed him a steady supply of animal books. For his sixth birthday, Eddy had asked for a blue-tongued skink and a frilled lizard, both in a book of Australian animals. Brain had explained in his tirelessly instructional way that these were not animals for houses or cities. Their fullest and happiest life could only occur in their natural habitat.

Despite Eddy's current irritations, creatures remained a point of connection between him and Brain. In the fortnight following Marley's death, they had by unspoken agreement rewatched every episode of *The Life of Mammals*, Eddy's fiftieth birthday present to Brain. Sunk in the couch with him, Eddy had been both consoled and tormented by their mutual need. It was spring in their wrecked city and he was nineteen, but it was also every Friday night of his life for as long as he could remember: cheese and chutney toasties, ice cream sandwiches, a wildlife documentary, and his wheezy, softhearted uncle at hand.

6

Delphine waved madly from the bay window of the front room as Eddy ushered the dogs back through the gate. Rizzo immediately lay down on the warm path.

“Vanquished,” said Eddy. He jerked the leash gently, but she wasn’t having it, so he gathered her up and carried her to the front door, Waffle in lockstep beside him.

Josie Mulholland answered the door. She was still in her gym gear, her face pink, hair piled on top of her head. The child was on tiptoes clinging to her mother’s back.

“Eddy, I presume.” She held out her hand. “Don’t crowd me, *please*, Delphine.”

“I told you he had a man bun,” said Delphine. “And a tattoo.”

“It’s a low bun,” said Eddy repressively. He shook Josie Mulholland’s damp hand.

“Seventy minutes,” he told her. “They’re good and tired, especially this one. And wanting water.”

“Mum says you’re too young to be a dentist!”

“Enough, Delphine,” said Josie. She took the child by the shoulders and steered her toward the plant room. “Let me talk to Eddy.”

“Did your tattoo *hurt*?”

“Delphine.”

The child lolled against the door, gargoyling at her mother.

“Just ignore her,” said Josie, taking Rizzo from Eddy. “You have time for a coffee?” She nuzzled the dog’s neck. “A big walk, eh? We like

a tired Rizzo. And please take off my nightie,” she called to the child, though not with much conviction.

“I have another job at five thirty,” said Eddy. “But coffee’s good.”

“Some grave digging probably,” shouted Delphine after them. “For *coffins*.”

“Sorry about that,” said Josie in the kitchen. Glass-fronted cupboards, a half wall of wine bottles, high stools, and acres of bench. She filled the gleaming espresso machine with water. The dogs drank furiously from grand aluminium bowls.

“They go okay?”

“All good,” said Eddy. “Rizzo needs a tight leash, but the big boy’s a sweetie.” No outright criticism of your charges’ behavior, he’d learned. Owners never failed to take it personally.

“Milk?”

“Thanks.” Eddy sat on a high stool, watching Josie Mulholland. He studied mothers habitually, auditioning them for a role in his past. There was a show reel in his head: his friends’ mothers, teachers, the pet owners, retailers, strangers—all alien and a little alluring.

Josie Mulholland was one of the quietly efficient ones: coffee brewed, cups filled, bench wiped, biscuits from a tin, all smoothly done. Not a chatterer.

“Bought, I’m afraid,” she said, holding out the plate of biscuits. “I used to bake, but what good does that do?” Eddy took a biscuit.

“Bran,” she said. It looked unnervingly like Marley’s dinner biscuits.

“I wanted to ask, I know you’re in demand, but could you possibly manage every weekday? If I begged hard enough?” She blew on her coffee. “Things are tight right now. My husband was the dog walker, but we’ve recently separated.” She paused, as if this information surprised

her. "I'm hoping he'll take Waffle eventually, but right now he's in a no-pets town house so I can't push it."

Eddy scrolled his mental timetable. Did he want to interface with Rizzo five days a week? On the other hand, he could do some decent training. And Waffle was a lovely soul.

"I could do four days," he said, hating the bran biscuit. It was like eating hay. "An hour. I'd play fetch with Waffle, too." He'd read up on retriever muscle health last night. "You have a Frisbee?"

"Hardly. Not an outdoor household. And I'm—what's the phrase? Time poor."

Eddy was unsurprised. But why did these people have dogs? It maddened him. On the other hand, feckless dog owning was proving lucrative. Against the grain of the times, his work life was gathering steam.

"I should get one, anyway," he said. "A tool of the trade."

"You really couldn't stretch to five days?" said Josie Mulholland. Mascara flaked in the soft wrinkles under her eyes. "I'm happy to pay more. Do I sound winning?"

"Sorry, can't at the moment." He was a bit sorry. She seemed nice and kind of harried. "Are afternoons good with you? Do I need a key?" He was used to all the details now, knew what to ask for. People gave him their key box codes or spares. He had a little collection on his Our Lady of Guadalupe key ring, a present from Hazel.

"You know I can only use this ironically," Eddy had told her.

"Our Lady believes in you, even if you don't believe in her," Hazel whispered into his neck with hot little accompanying kisses. They'd broken up soon after that, but Eddy was attached to Our Lady anyway, to her sorrowful face and the holy rays springing from her sides like anteatr spines.

“Jasper’s here every day,” said Josie. “But he collects Delphine in the afternoons, so a key might be good.” She took one from a drawer and handed it to him. “You’ll keep me in mind, if you get a space? I don’t suppose you cook or clean?”

Well, yes, actually, he did both very competently thanks to his uncle’s training over the years and the job before last at Wilbur and Orville’s Café. But no thanks. For sure they’d be gluten free or dairy free or egg allergic. Or grain intolerant. Needing three different meals. He’d cooked for a family very briefly in the winter, businesspeople on and off planes all week. One kid ate only chicken nuggets, the other no meat at all, but the parents did the full nutritional range. A nightmare. He’d deleted cooking from his résumé.

“Full book, sorry,” said Eddy. He waved his phone vaguely.

Delphine was at the front door as he left, still in the nightie.

“Upstairs now, please,” said her mother. “No arguing. Take that off.”

“Are you coming back?” said Delphine. She took backward steps toward the stairs, not looking at her mother. He wasn’t sure where she was looking.

“Monday,” said Eddy. He felt sorry for her, her wacko vision and irritating personality. That spindly little frame.

“Happy grave digging,” she said, continuing in reverse up the stairs.

“That was a joke,” said Eddy. “My other job’s at New World supermarket.”

“Fah-la-la-la-lab,” bellowed Delphine, turning away, waving upside down behind her back.

It was a forty-minute walk to the supermarket. He was thrashing his sneakers these days, what with pooch walking and this new bike phobia. He tried not to drive the Suzuki in daylight. The car had been Doris's, left to Brain with the rest of her modest estate, but Brain had never had a license, never learned to drive. He'd been riding his bicycle—he always called it a *bicycle*—for almost fifty years, and now, in this globally warmed, earthquake-ridden universe, the incurably uncool, rule-abiding Brain had become both an eco-conscious exemplar and a wily gamer of the traffic queues endured by their city.

“Think of the car as yours,” said Brain generously, once Doris's estate was settled. But was a yellow car really a generous gift? Briefly, Eddy contemplated a paint job. But it would still be a Suzuki, a flimsy toy car. Toss More occasionally refused to get in it.

“It compromises my masculinity.”

“What masculinity?”

“True,” said Toss. “But still.”

They'd been preparing for a clothes-shopping expedition. Following the salmonella curse, all garments hung limp and baggy on Toss's reduced frame. Naked, he resembled St. Sebastian, minus the arrows. His mother had given him her credit card to reclothe himself, instructing him to go only to decent shops. But his mother's definition of decent was irretrievably bougie, Toss said. Instead, they headed for the thrift shops, dispersed now around the suburbs.

“Also, I want more bang for my buck,” said Toss.

“In fact, your mother’s buck,” said Eddy.

Toss had never had jobs, part-time or otherwise. His parents believed he should rest during the school holidays, rest before university, rest after the salmonella. They rewarded this resting with regular deposits in his bank account. Toss squirreled away the money, enjoying it piling up.

“What for?” Eddy inquired, wanting a new keyboard for *Steal Away*.

“Rainy days, rainy days,” said Toss. Eddy had argued more than once that receiving what amounted to a stipend from rampant capitalists (the Mores had a large property portfolio) was inconsistent with Toss’s alleged anti-capitalism. Toss had various florid counter-arguments to this charge, but the truth was he didn’t give a rat’s arse about consistency. His relationship with capitalism was as incontinent as his relationship with God.

In relation to *New World*, Toss was an anarcho-activist. Or a thief, depending on how you viewed these things. He regularly stole fruit, sweets, and craft beer. It was anarcho-activism, apparently, because supermarkets were virtual monopolies that exploited producers, paid their labor force crap, and held consumers wretchedly captive to price and supply. And by the way, their increasingly cunning surveillance systems not only raised privacy issues, but they also would soon be putting hardworking shoplifters out of business.

Yes, yes, thought Eddy as he walked westward, listening to Alynda Segarra, enjoying the soft wind on his bare arms. It was all true, or most of it—could kleptomaniacs really be styled as hardworking? Maybe. In their own way. But he had developed an instant and profound affection for *New World* and all who worked there. He had

banned Toss More from this corner of food retail under sentence of severed friendship. In exchange, he weathered regular denunciations of the place and its people.

He'd avoided derision from that terminal employment snob Doris, at least. By the time Eddy's foot had mended and he'd scored the job, his grandmother had been six feet under for some months. Although even Doris might have conceded that the combined effects of the quakes and the recession made the securing of any job, however cloth cap, a small triumph. But it was really an old-school tie, he supposed. Dirty luck. Hazel's parents owned the supermarket.

In principle, Eddy maintained a mealy mouth toward the west side of town—it had largely escaped crippled houses, fissured roads, mud baths, unreliable sewage, fused schools, no-go parks, bulldozed shops, insurance bastards. But he'd needed the job. And Hazel's mother—Judith—felt sorry for him because he was an orphan saddled with a duffer uncle who was a librarian. Probably Hazel did, too. Hazel was a law student now and had acquired a new law-student boyfriend named Anzac who wore suit jackets with jeans and was, by Toss More's pungent reckoning, an immense twat. Eddy agreed. He and Hazel didn't have much to say to each other these days. She was, it turned out, uncomfortable with an ex-boyfriend at the checkout.

And Toss was fully wrong about the supermarket: it wasn't a terrible place—it was *marvelous*, a great clockwork universe with dozens of moving parts, a glorious, edifying cooperative, a . . . new world! It was an alternative family at least, encompassing multitudes, unlike his own extended family, which now comprised just an uncle, a first cousin once removed, and a second cousin who lived in Timaru. They were an etiolated clan barely worthy of the name.

His supermarket family, though—it was full and fabulous, thrillingly ordinary *and* lunatic. Brad the butchery apprentice, for instance, who could rap lyrically on lamb and beef cuts, mincing methods, and the underappreciated beauty of offal. And Bernardine, tiny and wrinkled, who moved like a windup mouse; she worked every possible shelf-filling shift to get away from her husband and could provide in-the-moment coded commentary on high-maintenance customers. Alefosio, the bakery manager; whenever they saw Eddy, they enveloped him in a lengthy hug and begged him to join the New World touch rugby team. Marcus, the liquor manager, of indeterminate age, shy and prone to stuttering, who had blurted to him one day last December that he was flying to Wellington to hear the *Messiah*. Eddy had been astonished on so many counts. And Shamura in the deli, beautiful as the day. Sometimes Eddy bought ham slices or Scotch eggs just to watch her wielding the tongs, weighing and wrapping, handing over packages with a gloved hand and spectacular smile.

Plus the trolley boys. He watched them on his coffee breaks. They were fierce and determined and wrenchingly humorless. Each had his own collecting system and strange navigational path around the car park. They were almost balletic with their trolley trains. And long-suffering with the ruder clientele, who roared across their paths in high-up cars. Not a flicker crossed the trolley boys' faces. They'd been schooled—they all had—never to show the slightest exasperation, even to the most imperious of matrons, of which there were plenty, btw, on the west side of the ragged city.

As for Eddy's own in-store duties, these were unexpectedly diverting. Take shelf filling. It was *interesting* to learn about new lines of

products—artisan cracker biscuits, say, or yet another paleo-muesli brand. Or to wonder about the price differentials in caper or prune or coconut milk brands.

After he was shifted to checkout—a promotion!—Eddy perfected the art of packing a shopping bag, the proper weight distribution and layering of goods. He was curious about what people bought, too. He liked to watch the unfolding contents of a trolley and imagine the various snacks and meals they might turn into, the people who ate them. The west side of town, he noted with a newly alert sociological eye, ate fully and well. A lot of vegetables and protein. Moderate sugar and fat intake. Much alcohol. He was forever raising his hand for one of the managers to okay a wine purchase, a practice he never failed to find humiliating.

Generally, interactions with a manager had a humiliating edge. They were all women and perfectly pleasant—it was their overt motherliness that made him bristle. They patted him or gave his back proprietary rubs. Maureen, not even old enough to be anyone’s mother, had once squeezed his cheek in a hearty and presumptuous way. Judith had doubtless been sharing his history. She was the worst: caring eyes and a certain tone and her glance straying regretfully to the quotation tattooed the length of his right arm.

Eddy looked at his arm now. It always pleased him to see the words, the way they seemed to rear and rebuke. He’d had to cover up once he was on checkout.

“But it’s biblical,” he’d argued, just for the sake of it.

“Possibly offensive to customers,” said Judith, and the warped truth of this was perversely satisfying. But he dutifully wore the long sleeves,

he tied his hair back in a bun, he joked with the customers. And sometimes when he saw Judith on her rounds, he imagined stopping suddenly in front of her and intoning a different though equally scolding quotation: “*for ye pay tithe of mint and anise and cumin, and have omitted the weightier matters . . .*” That was the great thing about the Bible. It had as many apposite quotes as *Friends*.

Eddy caught a ride home on the back of Reuben from accounts' motorcycle; Reuben carried a spare helmet for potential passengers, which said something about him. He lived in Sydenham, so Eddy's was out of his way, but nothing was a bother. Eddy put a pilsner in his saddlebag as thanks—accounting gave you a powerful thirst, Reuben said. Eddy had marveled at this thirst during last year's Christmas party when Reuben and Sylvester from inventory had put away three dozen beers between them. His own capacity for beer was extremely limited. "Pitiful is the word," said Toss More when three beers had once laid Eddy out. "If you must do it at all, do it properly."

This made no sense to Eddy, but he hadn't been in any condition to argue. Toss himself drank only sometimes and only purloined beer. He was always mortifying the flesh in one way or another—fasting, praying naked on frosty mornings, swearing off stimulants, having ice-cold baths—even in his semi-atheist phases. "A young man of troubling extremes," the Modern Priest had pronounced one evening after five glasses of wine: Eddy had counted. These days he believed scarcely a word that fell from the Modern Priest's mendacious lips. Even *and* and *the* were suspect, as the saying went. But he had parked that comment.

Annoyingly, when he arrived home, there was the Modern Priest ensconced in the reordered living room. Eddy had been looking forward to the trace of snuffed candles, a melancholy comfort. Instead, the pervasive aroma was chili beans. Ginge and Bridgie had dug in for the evening as well. There were three empty bottles of wine and

another half-full amidst the dinner dishes on the coffee table. Dinner. He hadn't eaten since Josie Mulholland's horrible bran biscuit.

"Hail, Eddy!" said Ginge, picking up the bottle. He, too, had a prodigious thirst and was helplessly convivial, loving nothing more than to pour large glasses for everyone else. The Smallbone family tree was weighty with drinkers.

"A glass of red, Ed? You deserve it, working for the man from dawn to dusk."

Well, it was half-true. And he had been up at 6 a.m. to feed the cats, in Edgware and Richmond, respectively, and then to take Bunny the chipoo to the vet. More drops for the lachrymose eyes.

"Sure," said Eddy, checking the state of the bean dish. Plenty. Brain always provided for an army; before library training, he'd cooked for a youth remand facility. Eddy filled a bowl, drowned it in cheese and sour cream, and thumped down on the couch between Ginge and Bridgie.

"How are you, George?" said Bridgie. "How are you, *really*?"

This was a joke between them, the *really* both serious and not. Bridgie had also been calling him George for years, for no reason Eddy could determine.

"Not so bad." Sweet Jesus, the ultimate Brain phrase, communicating nothing. The chili was excellent, though. Fire in the digestive tract. Nice wine, too. A Chilean grape no doubt. Or Argentinian. Ginge had been on a South American jag since the quakes, reading up on anarcho-syndicalism. He read and drank in quantity, and only red wine, the proper Marxist libation, he said.

"In your eye," said Eddy, holding up his glass, not looking at the Modern Priest, though he knew the Modern Priest was looking at him, at his tattoo Eddy hoped, uncovered now, out and proud.

“*Alla vostra*,” said the Modern Priest. He’d spent years at the Vatican; he dropped Italian phrases like dog doo.

“*Cent’anni!*” said Bridgie, leaning into Eddy, giving him a smacker on his cheek. She was well-liquored, smelled comfortingly of her smoky perfume. Brain looked sleepy, though he generally nursed a single glass through an evening.

“Edmundo! I have another customer for you,” said the Modern Priest.

He detested the Modern Priest calling him Edmundo. But it was an uncomfortable fact that the foundations of his pet business (surely eight clients constituted a business?) had come through the well-oiled connections of Father Chris Mangan, onetime Cathedral administrator, now disgraced. The Cathedral lay in ruins, the parish was scattered, the choirmaster had lost a leg, and the Modern Priest had been removed from his position. Yet he carried on regardless, glad-handing, spreading god-dust, shepherding an invisible flock.

“Much obliged,” Eddy said, and shoveled a forkful of chili, keeping his eyes on the bowl. Expunging the Modern Priest from his emotional universe, though, without making it too obvious, sometimes drove him to act and speak like a lowly character from Dickens.

“In Phillipstown,” said the Modern Priest. “The owner’s in Vietnam for three months. His frog needs feeding. Live flies—”

“True?” said Brain. “It’s getting heavy, Ed.”

Eddy granted his uncle a smile and a nod. This was, for some reason, always easier when the Modern Priest was around. Context was everything.

“You should be keeping a journal,” said Bridgie. “Rhode Island hens, guinea pigs, frogs and flies . . . It’s *My Family and Other Animals*.” A

quotation slid across Eddy's brain: *smooth blue muscles of wave*. Brain had read him that book when he was nine years old and then, night after night, he'd listened to a library CD of the story, too, understanding only half of it but gathering that crazy family around him like a giant blanket.

"To frogs and flies—and cockapoos—*of cabbages and kings*," said Ginge, raising his glass, too swiftly this time. A wavelet of wine broke over the edge and splashed his nose. The other three laughed immoderately.

The moon was shining sulkily, thought Eddy. Brain had regularly recited "The Walrus and the Carpenter" too. For a long time, Eddy had squinted at full moons, trying to make out their aggrieved faces.

"You'd better stay, Ginge," said Brain. He always said this, but Ginge would not leave his cats alone overnight. Sometimes Eddy drove him home, sometimes Bridgie, though she was certainly over the limit right now. If only he could stop reflexively monitoring their intoxication levels.

"I can take Ginge," said the Modern Priest, somehow reading Eddy's mind. Most unpleasant. "I'll leave the Phillipstown details."

"Right you are," said Eddy, standing, picking up the empty bottles from the table. "Mercy Buttercup. Kia ora, homies."

"Right *you* are, Eddy," said Ginge, thrusting his glass up again. "Workers of the World Unite!" Indulgent chuckles all round.

Jesus wept. They were like a bad '80s sitcom. Eddy felt a scream might suddenly burst from him.

Instead, he took refuge in his long-serving rage repellent: he began to whistle as he mooched from the room. It was the patter song from *The Pirates of Penzance*, a great favorite of the Modern Priest's. He had once played the Modern Major-General to Brain's Frederick in a school

production. They were surely the last two Gilbert & Sullivan devotees on earth. Sometimes after several glasses of wine, the Modern Priest got down on Brain's old vinyl, and it was all "Take a Pair of Sparkling Eyes" and "Poor Wandering One." Against his will, Eddy had, over the years, become familiar enough with the loathsome G & S repertoire, just as he was conversant with an entire antediluvian alternative culture unknown to his peers: the Father Brown stories, great tracts of T. S. Eliot, Vaughan Williams's choral music, and the spiritual songs of the Medical Mission nuns. He was somehow simultaneously an Edwardian and a child of the 1960s, though he'd been born in 1993.

"What do you expect?" said Toss More. "Your adoptive uncle-father was a born great-granddad." Well, quite.

The patter song parody had been Eddy's idea. He and Toss had written the lyrics in an afternoon, gleefully rehearsing until they had it all by heart. Of course, its full glory would only ever be performed to themselves, but Eddy had whistled the tune many times in the Modern Priest's company, softly or with rude heartiness. It was a disguised insult, a dagger to the heart under cover of camaraderie—though perhaps he had once or twice seen unease flit across the Modern Priest's handsome face . . .

He rinsed the wine bottles and put them in the recycling box, whistling adagio. The song should be up-tempo, but he liked to hit the notes in their true tuneful middle, hear the lyrics clearly in his head: a perfectly camp caricature and a bitter lament.

*I am the very model of a modern man of Gob-bob-bod
I catechize, I weaponize the armies of the Catholic squad
I'm liturgically forward, I have earned the name of Father Mod
I baptize, I sermonize, I steer my peeps from birth to sod . . .*

OC
TO
BER

9

Eddy had walked nearly the length of Barbadoes Street toward Phillipstown. It was a sorrowful pilgrimage and he took it regularly, needing somehow to give witness to the rubble piles and empty lots, the boarded-up windows, the toppled and broken headstones of the old cemetery, and, finally, the great open wound of the Cathedral, domeless and gutted, a still life of vomited stone. He stopped now and considered its misshapen countenance against the pale spring sky. *Here let us stand, close by the cathedral. Here let us wait.*

In the weeks after the February quake, Toss More had plotted a secret assault on the Cathedral ruins. They would sing sacred songs in the debris-strewn nave, he declared, howl at the stars for the lost dome. They would intone a chorus from *Murder in the Cathedral* after all. They would tenderly collect glass shards from the Trustrum window, genuflect before the Summers' Stations. Also, they must film everything.

Eddy knew this would only ever be a theoretical sortie, since Toss was enfeebled by the salmonella, and the army patrolled the red-zone boundaries, and there were sizable fines for trespassing miscreants. But part of him wished they *could* observe some grand obsequies for the sad old place. His eyes had swum, hot and furtive, when he'd first seen it after the quake, the sun blazing carelessly, and the Cathedral cowed like an injured animal.

Eddy had written a list of the hymns they would sing; he loved a list after all. Thank you, Brain. He texted various mates with video cameras. He and Toss argued chorus excerpts. But then a southerly

storm arrived and Toss suffered a prostrating spasm of nausea, and thus they were delivered from the burden of action. They stayed in the sleep-out and wrote a song about the statue of the Virgin that had once presided over their rehearsals in the choir loft.

The next day Eddy had texted his tennis friend, Harry, whose property boasted a rare court with undamaged turf. A blinding tennis workout and half an hour of purposeless chat with Harry was sometimes necessary after a sleep-out session with Toss, and this urge caused Eddy to dwell yet again on the peculiar place T. B. More occupied in his life: Toss was his best and oldest friend, but one kept almost entirely separate from his other mates. Eddy sometimes felt bad about this, though he doubted Toss gave a rat's arse. The truth was, Toss was monumentally disinterested in most people and the ordinary things they did—hanging out, chewing the fat, playing sports, living in the everyday beat of popular culture. Their bands had all been short-lived because Toss was a tyrant who made no effort to win hearts and minds. On the rare occasions he did cross paths with Eddy's other friends, he uttered only enigmatic non sequiturs or stayed thunderously silent. Toss was altogether best kept private. "Like wanking," said Toss when Eddy confessed this. They could say anything to each other. That was the point.

It was his fourth visit to the Phillipstown frog. In fact, Arbuckle—a solid name in Eddy’s estimation—required feeding only once every three days, but Eddy fretted about him, alone in his tank, no one to talk to him or admire him through the glass. He was a lovely specimen, a slim and shiny golden bell, but Eddy detected a lingering wistfulness.

Since Arbuckle’s house was between Bunny the chipoo and a new prospect—a cockatoo, plus some chores for the owner who was temporarily discommoded (Brain word)—Eddy had decided to call on Arbuckle every other day. The frog’s owner, Justin, had left him a friendly note with instructions on Arbuckle’s little ways, plus an open invitation to snack, play the grand piano, borrow any books he fancied.

It was odd at first, roving freely in a stranger’s house. Eddy had moved tentatively from room to room. He noted the books and paintings and the few personal photos, peered into each of the bedrooms; to frankly investigate seemed impolite. Before leaving, he sat at the piano, lifted the lid carefully, and stared for some time at the creamy keys. Then he closed the lid, said goodbye to Arbuckle, and left.

But today he had lost all reserve. Scanning Justin’s bookcase, he had found a copy of *Murder in the Cathedral*. The same edition as the one from Year 13 drama. This was eerie and unnerving. He stared at it for a minute, then stuffed it back between two other slim volumes, but a second later he took it out again. He went to the kitchen and made green tea in the Japanese teapot, assembled a plate of crackers and cheese, and sat in Justin’s reading chair in a pool of sunlight, one eye

on Arbuckle. He'd been right about the frog: company suited him. He became a little frisky; he jumped in and out of his small pool—*plop*, *thud*—as if to entertain his new friend. It reminded Eddy of something, though he couldn't think what.

The reading chair was extremely comfortable, chrome and padded leather and just the right amount of concavity for his back. There was a matching footstool that he judged unmanly, but in a minute his feet were planted there anyway and something close to contentment came over him.

How very good it was to sit in a plush chair in an empty house with only a princely frog and a book for company. He felt about forty-five years old and fully sagacious. It was the sitting that did it; at home he lay down to read, on his bed or the couch, or along the window seat, or in front of the wood burner—like a child. And even if Brain was out (choir, SPCA, te reo class, book group, and other improving activities), he was still somehow there—in the very weave of the hearthrug and the Anaglypta wallpaper and the view from the window seat: a great linden tree that Brain liked to contemplate through all seasons.

What shall we do in the heat of summer . . . The words of the play still had the old, familiar charge, though Eddy never could shake the idea that *Murder in the Cathedral* represented his last sorry schoolboy testament, thrill and repugnance in one.

If he closed his eyes, he could summon those heady readings that final term in drama class, the Modern Priest, austere and mesmerizing, briefly seducing them all with his delivery of the Archbishop's ghastly sermon.

But Eddy had declined the role of the Archbishop and the knights'

roles, all of the solo speaking parts. He wanted only to be one of the chorus.

“A Woman of Canterbury!” he said, itching to provoke the Modern Priest.

“What do you mean?” said the Modern Priest, quite unable to compute this.

“Part of the collective,” said Eddy. “The *ladies’* collective.”

“Don’t be crass,” said the Modern Priest. “This isn’t pantomime.”

But Eddy had dug in, and in a while the rest of the guys, naturally seditious, stood with him. A storm of feelings showed on the Modern Priest’s face: disgust, petulance, anxiety. Eddy watched him straining for patience. But they had all suddenly become deaf to his cherished persuasive powers.

“This play,” said the Modern Priest, not quite shouting, “is not the platform for a statement about contemporary gender politics.”

“Why not?” called Roberta O’Brien from the back of the room. They’d all turned to look at her. She was perched on a stack of bench seats, legs swinging.

“Why can’t we comment on the play as well as perform it? Make a point about women and power. I’m up for the sainted Becket. Who wants to be a knight?”

Every girl raised a hand. The Modern Priest had lost them. Now the girls demanded all the solo parts, and the guys were delighted to agree. When the Modern Priest stonewalled, a very testy debate about clerical misogyny and the ordination of women broke out, students and priest locked in dislike. Cold and furious—and thoroughly bested—the Modern Priest had walked out.

“What danger can be for us, the poor, the poor people of Canterbury,” Toss chanted ironically in the days after the second quake. The two of them had laughed bleakly in the sumptuous sleep-out. It all seemed so long ago now, and the words of the play, the Modern Priest’s incarnation of Thomas Becket, and Eddy’s awful exit interview with The Venerable all collided and merged, a sour music in his head. Sometimes—as a kind of penance, he supposed—he opened The Venerable’s office door just a crack and replayed that last meeting in his head.

“You are a tabula rasa, Smallbone,” The Venerable had said. He persisted in calling male students by their surnames. “A blank slate waiting to be written upon. *Your* choices, *your* actions determine the writing.”

Eddy only half listened, distracted as usual by the titles on The Venerable’s bookcase. They were an odd mix: theology and ancient history, both predictable, he supposed, for a Brother and a classics teacher. But there was everything from poetry to crime, too, and, confoundingly, *How to Win Friends and Influence People* by Dale Carnegie. A self-help book—the foundational self-help book—seemed to Eddy a dead peculiar read for a religious Brother. But surely The Venerable hadn’t actually read it—or, if he had, he’d never taken the slightest notice of it. Eddy had checked out the book at the library, and the first thing he’d read under the heading “How to Win People to Your Way of Thinking” was avoid arguments. Let the other person do the talking. Or something like that.

“You really are a weasel and an idiot, Smallbone,” The Venerable had said with great weariness. “I’d like to personally eviscerate you.”

“Sorry about that, Brother.”

“Like hell you are.”

He’d wanted a cigarette, Eddy could tell. The Venerable was an ardent smoker, fifty-plus a day. Perhaps the last great smoker in the world, outside Serbia. The only place he didn’t light up was in church,

but he must have decided an exit interview should be smoke-free, too. He rubbed his eyes lengthily instead.

“What are you going to do?”

Eddy heard the wet suck, suck of his eyelids.

“Get a job, Brother.”

“Good. Boys like you shouldn’t be idle.”

“Boys like me, Brother?”

“Thinkers, Smallbone.” He looked at Eddy again, the skin around his eyes munched up like one of Toss’s terrapins.

“I’m more of a doer, Brother.”

“You only *think* that!” He gave his smoker’s laugh, all grumble and phlegm.

“Yes, Brother.”

“And you can stop that pseudo-respectful crap right now. For God’s sake!”

Now he was opening the top drawer of his desk and getting out the makings anyway, Zig-Zag and a packet of Champion Blue. Their encounter was plainly impossible without the assistance of tobacco.

Eddy had seen The Venerable roll his own many times. He was famous throughout the school, if not the diocese, for his one-handed agility. Eddy watched it now, already nostalgic. It was probably the last time: a small conjuring wonder.

The Venerable stared sourly at him as he rolled. He jammed the cigarette between his teeth and struck a match, fierce and fervent, hungry for the business. It was nearly lunchtime and the ashtray in the middle of his desk was almost full.

“I don’t know,” said The Venerable, his head in his hands suddenly, his exhalations billowing around him. “Where did we go wrong?”

“Not your fault, Brother.”

“Easy for you to say.”

He raked his hands through his hair. It was gray, streaked with black; there was a swatch of yellow brown in the front where wandering smoke had done its work over the last fifty years. Like all people in religious orders, he seemed of indeterminate age, not young but not quite old, either. Eddy figured mid-sixties, which meant he'd probably been in the Order for forty-odd years. He tried to picture him as a twenty-year-old: Brother Bede O'Brien. Black-haired and full of energy. Full of faith, too, and idealism. Rangy and striking, like a bird of prey.

“I suppose—” Eddy had the oddest urge to throw him a bone. A small bone (ha). He suddenly wanted to give a crumb of comfort to the guy. Or to that fire-eating young man who hadn't yet become The Venerable, crusty old relic, the last remaining religious principal.

“Don't insult us both by trying to explain, for Chr—” The Venerable bit off the word and glared at Eddy. He drilled his cigarette into the ashtray. There was a long silence.

“You've driven me to blasphemy, Smallbone.”

“Sorry about that, Brother.”

The glare slackened minutely.

Eddy counted the butts in the ashtray. Seven. One for every year he'd been at Champagnat College.

“Is this all part of some adolescent Oedipal melodrama?”

“Oedipal, Brother?”

“You know perfectly well what I mean; you're doing bloody scholarship classics. *Were* doing it,” he amended.

“I don't want to kill my father, Brother. He's already dead.”

“Your father substitute, you smart arse. Oh, bugger off, before my language heads irretrievably for the gutter.”

Eddy tried to think of something to say, by way of goodbye. It bothered him how wound up The Venerable was. “I’m—”

But The Venerable cut across him. “It is a terrible thing to waste God-given talent.”

His voice was stark, his eyes a little shiny. “Sinful. But you probably don’t believe in sin.”

Eddy couldn’t keep looking at him. He looked down instead at the famous beach stones on the desk. They were graywacke, flat and unpolished, scored with fine white lines. The Venerable’s version of an executive toy: he fiddled with the stones, rearranged them constantly, made little cairns while he smoked or took notes or talked on the phone. You knew it was a bad interview if he left them alone. Today the stones remained unbothered, silent in their three small columns. Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, thought Eddy, with all due wryness.

“Where are those stones from, Brother?”

“What do you care?”

“Just curious.”

Eddy took a quick look. The eyes were back to normal.

“Blaketown Beach,” said The Venerable. “Where I grew up.”

“Nice,” said Eddy, absurdly.

They were silent again.

The bell rang for lunch. In a moment a great rough chorus would break out: six hundred chairs thrust back, doors bursting open, six hundred girls and boys shouting and shouldering their way out into the fresh afternoon.

“You’d better go,” said The Venerable at last. He stood, his face wintry. Then he held his hand out over the desk.

Eddy was so surprised, the heat rushed to his cheeks. But his own hand went obediently for The Venerable’s and they shook, almost shyly.

“Good luck.”

“Same to you, Brother.”

He headed for the door, trying to outpace a surge of shame.

“God bless you, Eddy,” called The Venerable as Eddy closed the door behind him.

12

The morning sun had crept across Eddy's cheeks, singeing him along with the memory. *Tabula rasa*, eh? Was he still a blank slate, though? He felt pretty heavily written upon these days. The weight of experience, ho, ho, blah.

Plop, went Arbuckle. *Look at me!* His eyes bulged hopefully toward his audience of one, and Eddy knew immediately who the frog was like. That crazy Delphine. His new best friend.

She was in his face from the moment she clocked him, watching breathlessly at the bay window whenever he arrived back with the dogs, spattering him with questions, bursting to communicate some marvelous thought or thing. Occasionally she was oppressively silent, staring wonkily until he was properly unnerved and driven to say something, though this only encouraged her. Yesterday it had been one of her interminable stories he must read. He sat down in the plant room—Delphine's preferred stage set—and tried in vain to decipher the words. Her handwriting was bonkers.

"How about you read it to me? It's good to hear your own work aloud."

She was delighted. "Jasper hates me reading out. And Mum gets distracted."

It was a kidnap story: victim Delphine and a bizarre collection of goofball abductors who mismanaged everything and were outwitted by the heroine. Eddy sank into the cushions as the child declaimed this