

When my aunt asked if I'd come to stay with her at the beach, it seemed like perfect timing. She had just moved in with myself and my mother in the little cottage off Great North Road. It was very noisy at night with the traffic streaming past, the buses and the souped-up cars, and my aunt said she couldn't think. Neither could I. I'd just moved back in with my mother after breaking up with Robert. The little cottage was really only good for one person.

My aunt, Bea, had recently burned her house down. It was an accident, she kept telling us. Her mobility scooter, which had been parked in the garage, had somehow ignited and set the place alight. Bea had walked away with nothing but the flannelette nightie she'd been wearing. It was lucky, said my mother drily, that she hadn't been wearing something more flammable.

Bea is older than my mother, and has always liked to think of herself as eccentric.

Her old buddy Max at the RSA had a house by the beach which he said Bea could live in while the insurance people looked at the claim. My aunt didn't drive (except for combustible mobility scooters), so she wanted me to come too. The house, we discovered, was at a remote beach on private property up north. Max had had it for years; it had been passed down through his family. He hardly ever used it, he said. She'd be doing him a favour.

The morning of our departure, my mother loaded up my car with all the things she thought Bea and I could use in what she imagined was a dilapidated shack on the edge of a marsh (my mother didn't have a high opinion of Bea's friends down at the RSA).

There was a box of canned goods; sheets and towels; suncream, mosquito repellent, cockroach powder. There were three second-hand, but perfectly good dresses my mother didn't want any more for Bea to wear. There was an old plastic kettle and a

sharp knife. There was a jar of kitchen utensils.

The car rattled with all these things as I drove north on the motorway.

Bea's friend had drawn us a map with various directions in spidery writing: two hours past such-and-such town. Take eastern highway until you reach such-and-such turn-off. Drive until end of road, go through two gates. Take track on left. Three miles. Blue house.

I've left out the useful details, as I don't want anybody else finding this beach. It was a perfect, pristine beach, so unreal it seemed to have been magically created just for the two of us, for our mutual recuperation. It would have disappointed my mother to know there was no marsh, and apart from a nest of starlings under the eaves, the house was intact.

We climbed out of the car in a swirl of dust, and stood on the patch of buffalo grass, looking at the blue-glazed ocean and the smooth curve of pink sand.

'Well,' said Bea.

I didn't know what to say, either. 'We'd better unload the car.'

'All right, dear,' said Bea, digging around in her oversize handbag to find the key. 'I'll just have a little lie-down while you do that.'

Last week I turned 28. I've got long skinny legs, like a model, but too many freckles to be called photogenic. Also, my hair is ginger, which lots of people don't seem to like; it's not very fashionable at the moment to be ginger. It also doesn't help that I work at the museum, where everything is ordered, classified, and even the lighting is regulated.

When I tell people at parties what I do their eyes glaze over. None of this, however, seemed to matter to Robert.

It all began because of the sleep apnoea.

My job at the museum was a public relations role. The job came with a uniform

and a nifty hat. All I had to do was stroll around the museum, making myself available to lost or bewildered visitors. There were quite a few of them. Even with large arrows painted on the floor showing you where to go, the museum had many rooms and hallways. You could end up in Chinese ceramics when you really wanted to find the interactive science display. It took me a week to find my way around.

I had a chair, as well, where I could sit and rest my feet. It was against the wall opposite the prehistoric skull case. It was quiet there, mainly because kids weren't interested in prehistoric skulls, and the lights were dim to create the right atmosphere. I'd sit in my chair and the next thing I'd know it was an hour later. This happened every afternoon. Then one day a young man holding a sketchbook was standing in front of me.

'You were asleep,' he said. 'Are you supposed to sleep on the job?'

I couldn't tell if he was being rude or funny. He had hair which fell over his forehead, and large lips. His skin looked very smooth, as if he used moisturiser.

'Can I help you with something, sir?' I asked, standing up and straightening my hat.

His name was Robert and even though he was 31, he was still at varsity, studying anthropology. He followed me around for the rest of the afternoon, as I helpfully pointed various lost people in the right direction. His thesis project concerned a gentle, tree-dwelling people from the Solomon Islands. They had had quite pale skin and worshipped the trees as well as living in them.

'What happened to them?' I asked.

'Oh, they got slaughtered by a sea-faring tribe who cut down all their trees to build ground dwellings.'

He said it in such a matter-of-fact way that I felt dizzy for a moment, and leaned against the glass case that displayed Maori greenstone. He took my elbow, as if I might faint. We were close together in the dim museum light, his eyes the same deep jade as the pieces on display, when the closing bell went. We both looked up, startled.

'Would you like to go for a drink?' he asked.

'All right,' I said.

Later, when we were saying goodnight, he said I ought to see a doctor.

Our days at the beach settled into a rhythm. Bea had set up two chairs out the front of the house, and every evening around five we would sit in these chairs and sip the heady vodka concoctions which Bea mixed in her cocktail shaker. They tasted like fruit drinks, but that was entirely deceptive. The chillybin, where Bea kept the vodka and various other bottles, sat between the chairs. I didn't like to enquire too much into the contents of

the bottles. If I didn't know what I was drinking, then I could keep pretending they were fruit drinks.

We watched the sea lapping at the pearly sand. Once, a dolphin leapt out of the water. It happened so quickly I thought I'd imagined it. Bea was smiling in that dazed, beatific way she gets after several of her cocktails. I don't know if she even saw it.

Eventually, I'd stagger into the house and fetch crackers and cheese. It was all we could manage for supper. The real cooking I did during the day when it wasn't so easy to drop things or burn myself.

'It's a funny old life,' said Bea. Her hands were folded on her lap; she was wearing one of the dresses my mother had discarded. It was pastel blue, with straps and a handkerchief hemline. Her bare legs were crossed, and all the veins and creases were visible.

'Yes?' I said.

The sea was pouting tonight, like a sulky teenager. Perhaps it was going to rain soon. An odd calm had fallen over the waves, and the surface of the water looked oily.

'There's you,' said Bea, 'up and leaving your young man -'

'I don't want to talk about Robert,' I said quickly.

But she carried on as if I hadn't spoken. 'And there's your mother ...' She started humming then; perhaps she'd drift off to sleep soon and I wouldn't have to hear any more of her misguided attempts at family analysis. 'There's me too, of course, must include myself.' I wondered if there would be a point coming soon. She gave me a knowledgeable glance. 'It's a line, don't you see? Like an inheritance. Like heart disease.'

She sighed then, looking out to sea. I, too, studied the sea, looking for clues.

'You don't have to accept your inheritance,' she murmured softly.

I moved in with Robert on the day Edmund Hillary died. It was a Friday.

There was a sudden hailstorm as we were carrying my things, my boxes and suitcases inside. I stood on the veranda, arms folded across my ribs, thinking about omens, while the hail whitened the lawn. Robert was grinning, pleased with the hail. He put his arm around my waist and said, 'How about that!' I tried to compose my face: I couldn't tell him about the deep foreboding which had arrived with the hail. Although, in hindsight, perhaps it was really the news about Hillary that had done it.

We went inside, and had cups of tea at the small table in the kitchen and ate slices of toast with Marmite on top. I had never lived with a man before. There had been guys, sure, and one or two of them had wanted to live with me, but somehow I'd always put them off. Eventually something would happen and these guys would drop off, as if silently slipping over the edge of a cliff. I wouldn't ever see them again; not even waiting

for a bus, or waiting in line at the supermarket.

But Robert was different. He wouldn't take no for an answer. He'd put his arm around my waist and ask me what I liked to eat for breakfast, and did I prefer to wash my whites separately from my colours, and would I like to grow some vegetables? Often, we'd lie on his bed in the dark (this was before I moved in), the only light in the house the orange streetlight outside, and he would tell me anthropology stories. How the Hmong hill tribe used to support themselves by growing opium poppies, but now they sold needlework; and how the Karen people of Burma lived in bamboo houses raised up on stilts with the pigs and cows living underneath.

The stories soothed me somehow. I liked to think of all those peoples out there in the world, getting on with their lives. And I thought if I lived with Robert, it would be like that all the time: stories lulling me to sleep, like being rocked in a dinghy on a gentle sea and his murmuring voice the last thing I heard each night.

But Robert had his thesis to write, and liked to work on it late into the night. And then, I was so tired from walking around the museum all day, that I'd be asleep by nine, without even trying. The doctor had given me sleeping tablets; Robert thought it was sleep apnoea.

'There are times in the night,' he told me, 'when you stop breathing. Then you sort of gasp, and start breathing again.'

That frightened me so badly I wanted to stay awake – I didn't want to succumb to sleep. But it always got me in the end, like a drug I didn't know I'd taken. 'You must shake me,' I told Robert, 'if it happens again.'

'Okay,' he said in his usual cheerful way.

The next night I was dreaming of being trapped underground, like those miners in Australia, and then Robert was shaking me. '*What?*' I cried. '*What is it?*'

'You did it again,' he said, rolling back over to sleep. 'You asked me to shake you,' he muttered.

I lay awake, staring at the orangey tongue-and-groove ceiling, remembering the hail. I just couldn't carry on like this. I didn't like being shaken awake, after all, and I missed the Robert I'd known when we were simply going out together.

That weekend I moved back out. Robert stood on the veranda, arms by his sides, looking hurt. I'll call, I said through the open car window. But mentally I was seeing Robert sliding off the edge of an abyss.

Lying face-down on the beach, I could see that the sand was comprised of tiny pink shells. Minute, miniscule, pearly-pink. So that's why it was the colour it was, this sand. I sat up and crossed my legs, pleased I'd resolved that one. Waves chugged relentlessly in

and out. The sun moved behind a cloud and shadows raced across the surface of the sea.

Bea was up to her knees in the water, her skirt bobbing in the swell, working her toes into the sand. She held a plastic bucket in her hand, but it looked like she was doing the twist. Every now and then she'd turn round and cry out, 'Found another one!' Then she'd stick her arm into the water, up to the shoulder, and pull out a tuatua, holding it aloft for me to see. We were going to make fritters before we started drinking.

My sleeping was much improved since coming to this beach. The drinking seemed to help. I had had a polysomnogram and the doctor had booked me in for an operation, so that I wouldn't keep dying and reviving during the night. Really, things were looking okay.

Except there was a little Robert-shaped stone inside me. Sometimes I'd take out my cellphone and look at it, just like I could take out the Robert-shaped stone and look at that. But no matter how much I turned the stone, or the phone, the answer was always the same.

'Found another one!' Bea cried triumphantly.

I wiped the tears off my face, gave a brave smile, and waved.

'What I *meant* to say,' Bea said into the mutual silence, as if continuing a conversation we'd been having all along, 'is that your mother got hurt, so she hid herself away. Completely natural response, of course. Your father, bless him, gambled all his money on the pokies. Sent them both broke.' Bea took a meditative sip of her cocktail. It was an orange concoction this evening, to match the sunset. 'But it doesn't mean that *you* have to follow suit, too.'

A pressing feeling came into my chest, like somebody holding the palm of their hand against my breastbone. 'It's got nothing to do with my mum, or dad,' I said.

'No no, I'm sure it hasn't, said Bea. 'Nonetheless. There is such a thing as breaking free.'

The orangeade sea was jaunty tonight; the sun had gone down behind the sheep hills which stood beyond the house. The sky went on into hazy infinity. It ought to have been a beautiful sight, but I wasn't in the mood. I left my glass on the ground, and went inside the house. Lying on the lumpy old mattress, I listened to the sussuration of the sea. The house was growing dark, and my breathing filled my head. Eventually, I heard Bea's apologetic footsteps coming across the kitchen floor and pausing in my doorway. I hadn't actually shut the door, so maybe I wanted her comfort after all.

'Never mind me, love,' she muttered, 'I'm just an old woman.'

I squeezed shut my eyes, then wanted to protest, *No you're not!* But the doorway was empty.

My dad wasn't that bad, really. He just loved the thrill of winning. But you had to keep playing, and playing, and playing, to keep getting that thrill. And when it got hold of him, he became another person; he became a person who couldn't walk away, even when he was losing money and the winning had become a myth that happened to somebody else. He became overwhelmed by a force much bigger than himself.

This was how Mum tried to explain it to me as we walked through Eden Gardens to plant the hebe and the brass plaque she'd had made for him. She stumbled once, over a tree root, like an old person, and I had to grab her elbow so she wouldn't fall. Her eyes, turning to me, were grateful, though I don't think she'd even noticed the stumble.

'I met him at a party, you know,' she was saying, as I held her elbow and we carried on along the path beneath dusty rhododendrons, 'and as soon as I met him, I knew, this was the one for me.' A little, indulgent laugh. 'Isn't that silly?' I steered her clear of another tree root. 'I mean, how silly is that ...' Tears were leaking now, down her cheeks, but I don't think she noticed.

We planted the hebe in the spot they'd shown us; in front of a bench, in a bed which overlooked another, lower part of the garden. Groundcover plants grew in that lower garden, and a lovely scent, like incense, rose up from them. Then I stuck the plaque in the ground next to the hebe, and we stood there for a long time just looking at it.

Finally, my mother shook her head, as if dismissing all that as a bad lot – my dad, her marriage, all the lost money – and we went off to the garden cafe and had a cup of tea.

I walked along the lacy edge of the waves, my bare feet crushing tiny pink shells underfoot, and switched on my cellphone. The sound of the waves was loud in my ears;

or it could have been the sound of my heart. I'd have the operation. I'd talk to Robert. Perhaps I'd get a new job, a job where I didn't get lost among antiques, where I didn't have to dig myself out. I would've told all of these things to Robert right then, except there was no reception for my phone.

The sea tipped a wave across my feet. I looked up to see a dolphin break the smooth surface of the water, then it splashed back down again as if nothing at all had happened.