



*and the glow worms sing*

FROM THE HARD BED that his father must have slept on, Felix could see across the bushland that circled the edge of the old miner's cottage and spread down to the narrow slash of harbour separating their side of the peninsula from the town. He closed the paperback—marked with his father's name in pencil on the inside cover—and shook the sunlight from his eyes. Josh, he said, and turned away from the window to the other bed. But his little brother wasn't there.

Josh had been anxious for days before their flight. Felix had known their mother couldn't spare the time, so he'd bundled up his brother and taken the tube across London trying to tick off as many of the items on her well-ordered list as was possible to do with an eight-year-old in tow who would not stop tugging at his hair or, if he did stop, would stop completely and abruptly, staring into the middle distance with eyes too big for his face.

The anxiety had returned when the glass doors slid open onto the arrivals hall and their father's father, whom Josh had never met, called their names across the heads of a Samoan family. But in the intervening hours on the flight to Singapore, and then again to Auckland, the eight years between them had vanished. They synched up their screens so that the movies they chose would play simultaneously (and even their choices had synched up). They played noughts and crosses, hangman. They actually talked. The alien creature with flyaway hair—who still maintained to his friends and teachers that he could speak to birds—turned out to be funnier and smarter than Felix would have guessed. When Josh fell asleep, Felix let him curl into his side.

Now he strode towards the hallway, glanced into the darkness of his grandfather's bedroom, passed the empty bathroom, and walked to the front room of the cottage. Josh was kneeling on the couch, pressed against the glass and staring out onto the lawn. Felix walked closer—slowly. He patted his brother's back.

Outside, the brown figure of their grandfather was planting a tall, metal pole deep into the wet earth and uncut grass. He walked down the slope and let a second pole turn in his grip. Felix watched as fine netting unspooled—so fine that when his grandfather planted the second pole, he could barely tell that the net was there. It's a mist net, Josh, he said. Grandpa uses them for catching birds.

Josh didn't look away from their grandfather, who was now crossing to the shed, where another set of poles was waiting.

He asked, Why, why does Grandpa want to catch birds? Does he eat them? Felix felt Josh's ribs vibrating underneath his hand.

No, he said, he bands them. He knelt down next to Josh, making the couch sag, He puts a small ring around their leg, so he and other people can tell how many there are and where they've been.

Why, Josh asked again, and Felix thought to himself that this was a decent question. Why did he need to discover where they'd been? Then Josh said once more, Why, why doesn't he ask me? I can talk to them and find out where they've been, but before Felix could reply, a small, grey bird, rounded like a ball, struck the net, twisted, and shook.

On Friday morning, while Josh brushed his teeth in the slow daze with which he greeted every morning, their grandfather took Felix out onto the little porch and pressed twenty dollars into his hand. I'll pick Josh up from school today, he said, you head into town and have a little fun. He had a creased face from years of working in the sun, thin, white hair that still managed to cover his head and hang down around his ears, and when Felix looked up and met his grandfather's eye, he felt strange and sad inside. Maybe you can spend some time with friends from school, he said, though I guess it's still a little early for friends.

By the time he came to leave the local college, Felix was glad not to be trudging up the rise to where he'd find Josh poking underneath the bushes at the fence-line of his primary

school. But the twenty dollars weighed on him. If he'd thought the two dozen people that made his whole year group here would be easier to find a place amongst than the hundred at his school in London, he knew better now. From listening to Nathan Morehu—who wore an earring and played basketball as a regional rep—he had gathered that most of the class were meeting that evening to hang out by the harbour with fish and chips and beers that Nathan's older sister had bought, just as he knew that he wasn't welcome there.

He was wondering about what kind of books the second-hand shop down by the Thai restaurant might have when he heard somebody call out to him, Hey French, wait. It was Hansen. She was the daughter of their English teacher and, Felix thought, a know-it-all. She jogged to catch up to him. She had a runner's easy stride, and Felix remembered someone saying she was fastest in their year, boy or girl.

I'm glad I have a chance to talk to you alone, she said. She did not look particularly pleased, Felix thought. The space between her thick brows was furrowed, and she had a firm set to her mouth. Want a K-Bar? she added. She handed him a brightly coloured bar of candy.

They walked on towards the town and the waterfront. Felix said nothing, though he felt great pressure from the way that Hansen stared at him, an expectation that he offer something. What was it you wanted to talk about? he asked.

Your father, she said, bluntly. Is it true?

This was the second time that his father had had to go away. The first time, he must have been five—that was before

Josh; before his mother had got the job in London; before it was a matter of crossing the globe to go and stay with his grandfather those times his mother needed space. He wasn't sure how to talk to Josh about it yet. It was something outside of his experience, that kind of conversation. All his brother knew until then was that, sometimes, dad felt really blue. Even now, he can't grasp much more than that, Felix thought.

Their grandpa had touched upon it on the car ride down to the peninsula from Auckland, but the way Josh started at the mention of their dad had warned him off.

Kids at school will have an inkling, his grandfather had told Felix in a hushed voice later, parents talk. Old stories have a way of sticking. Though nobody had come out to say it to him yet, Felix sensed that yes, there had been talk. And the kids had used the nickname, French, that people used for his grandpa too, the name he remembered his father's few friends had used for him as well.

At last, he said to Hansen, Yes, it's true. That's why Mum sent us back here. She's strong, but between her work and trying to make sure Dad is okay—he stopped, embarrassed he had spoken of his mother, and relieved that he had got the story out.

The girl nodded and said, That makes sense. Then she did something unexpected; she reached out her hand and put it on his shoulder. Felix had expected that she'd leave, report her findings to the rest of their class. Instead, she said, It's nothing to be ashamed about. My father's—gone.

They were nearly at the waterfront. Somebody called her name from outside the dairy, and she nodded once to Felix

before jogging off. He watched her easy stride, then turned and walked to the ferry that would take him back across the harbour to their side of the water.

He leant across the rail at the stern and watched the boat's wake. In the distance, he saw Hansen walking with two girls. He thought he could hear them laugh.

Felix woke from a dream in which a figure was hugging him. He didn't recognise the person. All he knew was that it felt like a comfort to him. The pressure against his chest and back lingered for a moment after he woke. He felt angry at Josh as the memory of the pressure faded and looked up at his brother, scowling, What? He was on the brink of telling him to piss off when he saw the tears on his brother's face. The curtains in their room were thin and let the moonlight in. He sighed. It's okay Josh, he said. What's up?

I can't sleep, his brother said.

You know what always helps me? he asked, and Josh shook his head. Wearing this, Felix said, and he opened the suitcase underneath his bed and pulled out a heavy jumper. It looked strange on Josh, hanging too far down his knees and trailing past his hands. Here, he said, and led Josh back to his bed, folding the sheet over him again. Now, do you remember the route we'd walk from our flat to the shops? Josh nodded solemnly. I want you to close your eyes and imagine you are walking up the hill again. He pretended to hand Josh some money, You can buy anything you like.

Felix lay on his side and looked through the gap at the

bottom of the curtains to the line of stars above the treeline. I was dreaming, Josh said, as if talking into his pillow, I dreamt there was someone trapped in Grandpa's nets.

The next Friday, his grandfather didn't ask him if he'd spent the money. He hadn't mentioned it all week. He just pressed a ten dollar bill into his hand.

Felix hung back after his last class. In English, he had got into an argument with Nathan about the short story they were reading. Nathan thought the story was about love, and he said so. Before he knew what he was saying, Felix had said, You're wrong. It is about shame. Something in his tone had riled Nathan, and something in Nathan's tone had riled him, too. But after history class, he called out to Nathan, who waved his friends on and stayed. I'm sorry, man, he said. I shouldn't have spoken to you like that. Nathan stared at him. Felix waited, aware of the silence in the classroom, of Nathan's sharp breathing, of his height.

Then he smiled. Nah, it's cool, Nathan said, I thought about it after. I know what you mean. I'll catch you later.

The second-hand bookshop smelt of stale coffee, Felix thought, and the parched, earthy smell of his grandfather after he'd spent the day at the vegetables. The woman behind the counter wore her hair in a ponytail and brushed her fringe every thirty seconds or so. She hardly looked up from her book.

The fiction section was only partially organised. Felix had just dug out a book of short stories—by the writer his father

had evidently liked—from the wrong letter of the alphabet when he heard someone else come in. It was Hansen. She spoke his name and walked over.

From your passionate performance in class, I thought you must be a serious reader, she said. He thought she was smirking, but he wasn't sure. Then she said, There aren't many of us around here. What are you looking at, she asked. When he showed her the cover, she said, He hated women, didn't he?

I don't know much about him as a person, Felix said, but I like the way he writes, the rhythm, and the clarity.

She shook her head. I don't mean in real life, she said, I mean his characters—always needing to be rescued, or on the verge of going mad.

She stopped talking and looked at him as if she expected him to raise his voice again, the way he had in class. But Felix only said, I hadn't thought of it like that. I like the way he makes people look inside a landscape, he said, after a pause.

Maybe I should give him another go, Hansen said. She smiled properly for the first time.

Felix felt reckless. How about I buy it for you, he said, and in return, we can go for a walk when you're done and talk about the stories.

She folded her arms, then said, I work Saturdays. What about next Sunday, I can meet you by the ferry, you live across the water, don't you? She waited while he paid the woman at the counter, then looked him in the eye. I'll see you, she said.

Felix watched her go, thinking he would browse the shelves a little more. I like the way you put that, said the woman

behind the counter. She did not look up from her book but said, The way people look inside his landscapes.

Thanks, he said, do you have anybody else like that?

She was taller than him, and her skin had the same smell of old coffee as the shop. She found a book of stories by Eudora Welty somewhere at the top. She's not as sentimental as some people think, she said. The old hardback was two dollars more than Felix had left. Don't worry, the woman said, then added, if you're after some part-time work yourself, I have odd-jobs and painting that I need taking care of. She didn't seem to care much whether Felix said yes or not.

That night, the jumper was not enough. Even after he had tucked his brother in again, Felix could hear Josh turning back and forth for what felt like hours. Clouds obscured the stars, but the sky seemed bright like they had caught the moonlight. Felix huffed, picked up his book, and slammed the door behind him. On the couch in the front room, he saw that the brightness was the first light of the sun. He read, pretending that he didn't hear the creaking door or the footsteps down the hall. One sleeve of the jumper dragged behind Josh on the wooden floor. He was holding a book, too.

Felix said nothing but went to the stovetop and began to mix hot chocolate in his grandpa's copper pot. Josh watched him from over the cover of his book. When their grandpa came down, the light was a pale orange out across the bush.

I guess none of us can sleep this morning, he said and walked to the kitchen too. The coffee pot began to boil. Let's

go to Cook's beach, their grandfather said, there are some nests I want you boys to help me look at there.

Josh frowned, We're not going to take anything, are we?

No, their grandpa said, but there might be ice cream in it for you. It looks like that sort of day.

They had to show Josh how to climb a tree. It's not his fault, Felix said to his grandpa, there was just one small wood close to where we lived, and it wasn't really the sort of place to climb.

Their grandfather nodded, then rubbed at his hip.

The most important thing is to keep three points of contact as much as you can, Felix said and showed Josh how you moved one limb at a time.

Once he'd shimmied up the first knotted stretch of the trunk, Josh proved a natural. What are we looking for, Grandpa? he called. Felix followed slowly. Some of the limbs Josh had used bent under his weight, and he didn't want to rush his brother.

We're looking for a shag's nest, their grandfather called, it will be made from pretty sturdy twigs. There might be three eggs, white with caramel spots. They don't normally nest here, but lately, I've seen a pair fishing in this bay.

While they climbed the second likely-looking tree, Josh asked, Why did people want to come here, Grandpa? I can understand why a bird might want to, but why would people want to come to a place like this?

Felix looked down and caught a glance from his grandpa. He shrugged, and the old man said, Your teacher told me

you'd been asking something similar. Well, your grandmother's family came here a long time ago, and she could have told you some of her people's stories if she was still here. It's not my story to tell. But most Europeans came to this place for the gold. That's what drew my grandfather from France with his family, a strange thing in those days.

Josh said nothing. Felix waited for something dismissive or unexpected. But his brother stayed quiet. Josh, he called, you okay?

He could not see more than his brother's toes curled around a branch. Then his brother's head appeared. I've found the nest, he said, softly, I was just listening to the whispers from the eggs.

Felix double-checked the address on the index card before climbing the steps to the weatherboard house. Though he wasn't sure what he'd expected the bookstore owner's house to look like, this was not it. He wondered if the half-storey that sat below the entrance was a basement of sorts. He mouthed the name at the top of the card once more before knocking twice. Bea.

She didn't talk much as she led him to the rooms at the back, which were empty, the floors covered in old sheets. I should have checked that you knew how to paint, she said.

He thought she looked sad, and the thought made him nervous, but he said, I've got a handle on the general principles.

She smiled at that. Just shout if you need anything.

The emptiness unnerved him, too. But the work was

absorbing. Sometimes Hansen's face crossed his mind, her furrowed brows and the quick movements of her mouth. Sometimes he thought of the woman, Bea.

He almost jumped when she knocked on the half-closed door. She looked around and nodded. Coffee, she said, or tea? You've earnt a break.

Don't judge me, she added, as she stirred a spoonful of cream into her coffee, it's a little trashy, I know. Felix just sipped his tea. He'd expected stacks of books, but all that he'd seen was the small shelf in the living room. He didn't recognise many of the names, except Kate Chopin. Someone that his teacher liked. There was a framed photo, too. It took him a minute to recognise the woman in the photograph as Bea. She looked so much younger. Anybody older than eighteen blurred into the category of *older* for Felix, but even he could tell the difference.

Is that New York, he asked and regretted that he'd blurted out the question, but she only smiled.

Yes, she said, I studied there. I always thought that I'd go back, but things have a habit of shifting around you, of getting tangled. Felix felt something drop inside his stomach. He gulped down his tea.

His father's voice sounded foreign. He could not tell if it was the phone line, the months since he'd last heard his father speak, or a change in his father's voice itself. He looked down the corridor, saw that the light in their bedroom was off, and mouthed, *Dad*, to his grandfather, who nodded. He opened

the door and stepped out onto the lawn. Hi, Dad, he said, yes, it's me, Felix. Yes, it's been a while.

He only half-listened to his father. The grass was wet, and he felt it soak into the cuffs of his pyjama pants. His father's voice had changed, he thought, like it was hollowed out. He looked upwards. The stars were so bright that the sky looked inky blue, swirled through with pools of light.

Josh is going okay, Dad, yeah it's a big change for him, but he's okay. He was scared of Grandpa's mist nets for a while. But this afternoon, while Grandpa took a nap, I showed him how to untangle a piwakawaka that had got itself wrapped in the mesh, and you should have seen his smile as he held the little bird trembling in his hand. You're right, Dad; brothers are important.

He heard his father repeat the phrase.

They are important—don't worry, Josh is going fine, we're both good and fine.

Later, he regretted his certainty. He felt Josh more than he heard him, shaking like the fantail had. He shuffled over on his mattress, and his brother lay down next to him.

It's the mines, Josh said, I talked to the others at school about them, and when I asked Grandpa more, he just sounded sad. Do they really run all through the hills, he asked. Felix thought for a long time.

They do, he said. Once Dad took me out to the river where most of the mines were dug. That was when we still lived close to here—before you came along. He turned and tried to focus on Josh's face, to watch for changes, but his

brother just stared. We walked along the river, and Dad took me down into one of the old tunnels. It's not as scary as the kids say—the miners cut holes in the side so you can see out across the valley and down to the water, and even in those places where there is no light, there's still light.

He pulled the curtain aside.

There are glow worms in the tunnels, he said, little lights like stars, only they glow green. They're beautiful, he said, so if you're worried about the mine tunnels in the night, just think of the glow worms.

I can hear them sing, Josh said.

Hansen said, My boss called. He wants me to work the Sunday shift as well. She spoke quickly, and Felix thought he heard her make an impatient noise, although he knew it could just be their poor reception. She's just trying to back out, he thought.

Wait, he said, just as she started to speak again. How about we meet beforehand? He felt tense, and he knew he was pushing his luck. I can pay for your ferry tickets, at least, he said. I still want to hear what you thought. He brushed past his grandfather, who was smirking, and flicked through the bits of paper sticking to the fridge. The first ferry is at seven thirty.

There was another faint mumble of static, and then she spoke, Okay, sure, and he thought she sounded pleased. Just make sure you've got some opinions of your own, okay?

The sun was still rising when Hansen stepped off the little ferry. She wore a stiff, white shirt underneath her cardigan. For work, she said, then asked, so what have you got planned?

Felix pointed up the slope. I thought we could walk out to the point above Shakespeare Cliff, he said, Grandpa told me there are great views through the young kauri they've planted there.

You're lucky I don't mind a climb, she said.

Instead of talking about the book, they spent the walk up the hill discussing her younger sisters and the problems of having your mother as your teacher. She mentioned that you have a brother, she said, as they turned off the road and started up the dirt track that led through the bush towards the point.

Josh, Felix said, yeah. He's a strange one. He glanced at Hansen and said, He's a pain sometimes, but mostly we get along. He was excited to start school, and every morning of the holidays, he would wake me up and ask how much longer he still had to wait. Until the last leaf has fallen from that tree, I said, pointing to a little beech outside on our street. Every time we walked past it after that, he'd pull off a leaf or two to make it hurry up.

She laughed with him, then said, You take care of him, don't you? I like that. Ahead of them, the path split in two. Hansen looked at him.

I don't think it matters which we choose, he said.

Leaning out across the barrier that had been placed at the edge of the point, they could trace the folding coastline and

all the distant promontories—still mere smudges of greenish-grey—in the orange sunlight. But the valleys that dropped down around them were dense with deep greens, khakis, and ochres, young kauri, and the tops of rimus tufting out.

I worried about you, Felix, as I read those stories, Hansen said. I have to stick to my guns on this one. He just doesn't like women. But I had a hunch, and you're bearing it out. You don't think that those men are heroes, that they're better off being alone? Felix shook his head.

I was thinking about it, too, he said, and I think it's like what Gregor said in history. He was saying that some historians think the Europeans who came here were like particles.

Atoms, Hansen said, then said, particles. Go on.

Well, I think that's true, if you look at them from one way, just like if you magnify one atom, it's alone. But most things aren't like that, and if you zoom out, that particle is probably a part of something more. A tree, he said, a hand. It's perspective.

They still had twenty minutes before the ferry that Hansen needed to catch to get back to town for her shift. Let's do a loop of the cemetery, she suggested. Felix showed her the worn clutch of graves with his family name, LeBlanc.

There's a story about these, he said, my grandpa told me once, but I can't remember what it was.

At the ferry, she told him, Forget it. You made it worthwhile. He slipped his wallet back into his pocket. She did not look back until the ferry was halfway across the gap of the harbour, but Felix thought he saw her wink. He was still

thinking about it when he noticed Bea walking through the cemetery.

Felix did not mention it on Wednesday when he went back to paint the final coat. I wasn't sure you'd come, she said.

Why? he asked. You told me you were going to close early today. She cocked her head and looked at him for a long time.

I guess I expected you would get a better offer—she said—that you would head out with some friends. Felix coughed and looked away. I could never quite fit in here either, she said.

After an hour of painting, he decided to say yes to coffee. He'd been thinking about patterns as he painted. Patterns and his father's voice. For a moment, he thought he could feel the hollowness himself. He walked over to the bookshelf while they waited for their cups to cool.

His hand brushed the Chopin, and she said, I must have read that when I was your age. How do you like the Welty?

Felix turned. Bea was standing. I was surprised, he said. Her stories are beautiful, but they felt like photographs. Lots of mood, the sense of standing on the edge of something, but the moment never comes.

He closed the gap between them with a step and wrapped his arms around her. For a moment, she pressed her arms into his back, too, and he felt that pressure, that containment. Then she lifted her arms. He looked up towards her eyes. She was staring out beyond him. Suddenly, he didn't want her to look down again, afraid that if she did, he'd see himself

reflected back. He felt small, scooped out. He knocked the coffee over as he left.

The smallness came to a head on Saturday, when his grandfather shouted at him in the street. Josh reddened too, as their grandpa said, He could have been anywhere, Felix. He's just a kid. I asked you to watch him for ten minutes.

It's not his fault, Grandpa, Josh said, in the quiet that came afterwards. Felix looked at his feet. He felt people staring. I just wanted to investigate, Josh said, and pointed to the rocks that led down to the channel that the ferry crossed. I just wanted to know more.

Felix looked at him. I'm sorry, he said, and he looked at his grandpa and said, I'm sorry, again. His grandfather ran his hand through his white hair. He looked more tired than Felix had ever seen him.

Do you want to stay in town with your brother, he asked Josh, or come back with me, you can help me set the nets. Felix was surprised that Josh nodded and walked off towards the ferry straight away.

Grandpa, Felix started saying, but his grandpa shook his head.

When he saw that Hansen was working, he wished he could turn back and leave the café. But she called out to him, so he ordered a coffee and waited. He expected her to know about Bea; about everything.

She said, Was that your grandfather I heard out there—he could learn some tips from my mum about balling you out.

And she smiled. He felt some of the heat leave his face.

Yeah, I expected worse, he said. Her manager poked his head out from the kitchen and made an impatient noise. She snorted. What customers are you worried about, then, she asked and turned back to Felix. I wish he'd just die, she said, he is such a pain.

When Nathan stepped into the café, Felix felt his legs tense up. Hey, Nathan said, talking more to Hansen than to Felix, just wanted to see if you were coming to the swimming hole in the gorge tomorrow. A gang of us are headed there. Felix looked at Hansen, too.

She hardly paused before saying, Sure, we'll be there, won't we? and she grinned at Felix. Nathan nodded. She called out to him, Just don't expect that I'll wear a bikini. In the kitchen, Felix heard her manager swearing to himself.

Hansen sat beside him on the wide, flat rock that overlooked the swimming hole. It was the same spot he'd come to with his father, he was sure. After this, the path stopped following the trail of the river and went up into the bush. But the walk they'd taken wasn't like the one that he'd described to Josh. There were long stretches in the old mine shafts where you couldn't see the light, and he had forgotten, somehow, the depth of the gorge below, the sound of the river churning over rocks. Just ahead of him, he was sure that he had seen Hansen shiver in the darkness.

Somebody was climbing up the far bank of the pool. It's deeper than Nathan, Hansen said and pointed to the head

that bobbed up and down in the blue beyond them. The churning was less urgent here. The pool was fed from two places, a cave mouth towards the left, three steps of falls to the right. One of the girls in the water called to the figure on the rocks at the far side. They jumped.

Hansen leant closer to Felix. He could see the fine hairs on her shoulder.

Don't tell anyone, she said, but this place unnerves me. I've lived my whole life beside the ocean, and I cannot think of living somewhere where I couldn't hear the sound of water. But this place, the river, it has always made me feel, well—she looked at him—small. She pointed to the cave mouth. You know that was once a mining tunnel too? she asked. Only, they blasted the wrong place.

More people were shouting from the water.

I can see them, washed away, she said, or else I feel them, the long, dark tunnels stretching underneath the earth.

I know, he said. He'd just remembered that one of his great-grandfather's brothers had died in a cave-in. His great-grandfather shot himself over his brother's grave. He stood up. Come with me, he said.

Hansen frowned. But she slipped off her shorts and waded after him. They both huffed, at first. The water wasn't cold around the rocks, but as it reached up past their navels, they both felt the tightness. Felix angled off towards the falls. He climbed through the gentle stream of water, up the first step, and turned back to offer Hansen his hand. Someone called out a long woo. Hansen scowled.

On the second tier, Felix slipped. He landed on his hip, certain it would bruise, but he pulled himself up, turned, and gave Hansen his hand again. They climbed the final bank of falls together. The water came up to their knees, and they waded further up the river, the noise of their classmates fading, until the river bent, and they waded on, to a valley of steep green that rose sharply on either side of the wide and pure water, swallows swooping in wide arcs and dipping down to the surface, leaving ripples that dispersed like echoes, like the wind that carried down into the distant tunnels lacing a net through the hills, stretching down into a pure darkness that was lit in places with the green and starlike light of glow worms, a dim constellation that the wind carried back to the two figures who stood together silently against the empty sky.