

THE YELLOW HOUSE

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It is a sunny day. The sky is painted a clear blue, obscured only by a few brushstrokes of wispy clouds. There is no wind to hurry them on their way, so they stay perfectly still. Candy floss sculptures suspended in an ornamental sky.

Eden smiles from where she lies nestled in the bows of the mighty tōtara tree behind her house. Her dark hair is scraped back into twin pigtails that threaten to tangle with the sprays of tōtara scales. Here and there, a few tendrils have escaped. Further down, Eden's faded dungarees are crusted with remnants of this morning's toast and jam. She is on top of the world, one hundred meters high, legs swinging like pendulums in the sky, while the tōtara tree reaches towards the candy floss with outstretched bark-encased fingers and the neighbourhood stretches out like an unfolded map below. Children's laughter tinkles down the street, accompanied by the warble of the tūī and the beating of kererū wings. A suburban symphony orchestra.

Eden turns her head further to the left, shifting a leafy arm to reveal the horizontal stripes of the yellow house. The yellow house stands out from the other houses on Eden's street, a stain on the crisp, white tablecloth of suburbia. Its faded yellow paintwork peels away from the wooden weatherboards like flakes of dead skin. Several slates are amiss on the tile roof, the gutter overflowing with mushy, dead leaves leftover from autumn and dripping leftover tears. There is no garden in the yard, no flower bed. Only a field of tall, yellow grass. The kind of grass that crunches under bare feet like burnt toast.

From her perch in the tōtara tree, Eden sees everything that happens in the yellow house. Now, Eden makes out a figure through the cobwebs smothering the kitchen window, a woman with long dark hair. The woman doesn't see Eden. She never does. She leans over the kitchen sink, drowning bowl after bowl in soapy water, taking a break every minute or so to wipe her hands on the tea towel and scrutinize the oven. Macarons, Eden thinks. The woman has made macarons before. As always, a pile of failed attempts lies in a heap next to the jumble of jam jars and marmalades.

A man enters the kitchen. As he draws closer, his mouth starts opening and closing but Eden is too far away to hear what he is saying. Then his hands are on the woman's shoulders. He lowers her head into the soapy sink water just as quickly. A stupid place to wash someone's hair, Eden thinks as the man's fingernails massage the woman's scalp and neck. She cannot see whether the woman is smiling or not because her face is still underwater. She is a soapy sink scuba diver. From the tōtara tree, Eden's laughter rings out as the woman's deep-sea adventure comes to an end. 'See that,' she says to the tūī and the kererū. 'She's laughing so hard she's almost choking.'

The woman shakes off her hair, droplets of water cascading through the air. She must get to the oven. The macarons – they're almost done. But once again, the man stands in the way. Eden is sure the woman is shaking. It must be cold inside. She tries to push the man away but instead he embraces her, enveloping her the way clouds do the moon. He presses his lips to hers, doesn't care that she is flailing like a dying animal. After he's gotten what he wants, the man lets her go. He retrieves a glass bottle from the cupboard and takes several gulps before sauntering out of sight.

Alone again, the woman opens the oven door with a tea towel. Smoke snakes out, swirling around the kitchen like a demon as she pulls out the tray of macarons. All that remains is a charred heap of ash. She scrapes it off into the pile where her other failures are. The woman raises a trembling hand to her neck and Eden notices a smudge of red has stuck to her finger. She must get jam on herself just like Eden does when she eats toast.

Sighing, Eden turns away from the yellow house, allows the branch to fall back in place. The tūī and kererū are still close by but soon they'll go home to their perches to sleep just like the children across the street. Their parents are calling them in now. It's dinner time. Yawning, Eden closes her eyes and leans back against the tōtara tree's trunk, letting the dappled late afternoon sunshine wash over her. The afternoon melts into a dream.

When Eden awakes, the tūī and kererū are as long gone as the setting sun. Night has closed in like a pack of wolves, and the stars have appeared behind their dark blue curtain; blinking yellow eyes that scan the streets for prey. The rain falling from the dark blue curtain burns Eden's skin like acid. Trembling, Eden puts foot to craggy foothold, foot to craggy foothold. Her matchstick arms ache as she struggles to hold her weight. She can't see. The darkness has

come on too quickly. It has blinded her. And she can hear things in the night. Moving. Whispering. A howling call other than that of the wind as it whips through the branches of the tōtara tree and that rises above the rhythmic thump-thump of her own pulse.

She ignores the scratches that sting at her cheeks and her arms and her legs and races across her yard, the yellow grass crunching under her bare feet. She has to get there, has to get home, away from the rain and the wind and whatever else would prey on a child in the dark. By the time Eden makes it to the back door, her hair is slicked back, tendrils sticking to her face like tentacles. As she pulls down on the door handle, her heart rate begins to slow. She is safe now. The back door of the yellow house creaks open like a feral cat yowling. She is home.

Eden closes the door carefully behind her and slips down the hall, breathing in the acrid smell of burning. She can hear them. If she closes her eyes and pretends the cracking in her throat isn't coming from her sobs but from the other room, then she can make herself believe that it's only the radio. Only the radio. Only the radio.