

## Only July

Gemma Bennion

*The calls echoed from upstairs to downstairs, bouncing back and forth between each story of the house. "Grab the hats and shoes", "sunscreen my darlings", "drat where is that dozy dog". Into grandma's old basket we loaded lime cordial, crackers, stinky cheese, lemonade, dainty tomatoes with wee little stalks and sandwiches made with the nice crusty bakery bread we buy on Saturdays. Dad had a meeting that morning, but he slipped some ham into the fridge before he left. Days later mum and him would have a "quiet word" about it.*

*"Not my fault what these bloody people charge for it."*

*"Yes John."*

*"Not my bloody fault, same as the juice for the car Mary, same as the car."*

*If my dad wasn't nearly as tall they'd take away the Mazda, but he's big enough to make them shake in their gummies. Squirm in their jackets like hot sausies on a summer barbie.*

*Through the billowing sandstorm of towels and togs we burst out the front door, and we were off. Lily and Maisy wanted to walk, but my bike sat eagerly watching me from the side of the shed. I'll be hounded with many "not too fasts" and "watch out for peoples", but it's worth it for the zooming feeling of two smooth slim wheels, lapping up the concrete beneath you.*

*Dad says never to cycle in jandals in case your feet get stuck in the wheels, and your toes get all mangled like Uncle Tommy's, but I'm careful. Down down down. Down to the beach. Where we live all streets lead to the beach. To the open sea. There weren't many people there today, which was good because it meant we could snort like headless takahe, and blow raspberries at each other, and mumma wouldn't go small and tell us to "quieten down chickadees". Up above, a few valiant clouds stood staunch in their efforts to shade us from the sun, but they were only stretched little cotton buds amidst a crackling blue sky. I wanted to jump off the rock down by the end of the beach, but my cousin Henry broke his arm last time he jumped off there. For two days he got to miss school, and I got to miss a little bit of school too and see him in the hospital. I liked visiting Henry's ward. It had AC.*

*We paddled, we splashed. Soon it got too hot, and I came back to sit under the umbrella. From my pocket I pulled out my magnifying glass. The edges have been dented, with soft nibble marks in them since my dog Mindy had a taste, but it still works just fine. Near the edge of the picnic blanket was an almost-square-but-not-quite piece of driftwood, so I grabbed it and stuck a hand outside the shade of the umbrella, holding the magnifying glass a few inches over wood. It took some adjusting to get a good angle, but soon it began to smoulder. Small pearls of smoke drifted past my ears and escaped up into the stratosphere. You had to be careful not to catch the light on your fingers, or else it'll burn you, but I'd done this rather a lot. I set about carving my name into the chunk of wood. There was a shout from down the beach and I looked up. To my right, Lily knelt on the ground, and next to her, two sets of toes poked out from between the tussock. Normally I'd run over and help Lily bury our little sister's legs and torso under mountains of sand, but I wanted to finish carving my driftwood first. I had reached the second M in Emma when mumma ran over to the limp body in the sand. A gull screeched, the sea coughed and bubbled in its basin. I followed her. Maisy lay eagle-spread facing the sun, her eyes closed. Mumma bent down to pick her up but she was limp as a flax leaf. I grabbed her legs and we carried her under the umbrella, mumma took off her hat and began to fan her cherry cheeks. "Lilly, Emma, grab your things. "Pack everything up but leave the sun umbrella till last, quickly now". Her voice had a wobble to it. The wobble like the one in your chest. The kind when you know you're standing too close to the sea, and no matter how fast you run away from the snaking, foamy waves, you'll have wet your shoes in the end. After Lily and I had tidied away the food and firmly shut the picnic basket, it was time to move Maisy. We tried and tried to carry her, but mumma's arms were old and Lily and mine too young. Eventually we decided to use my bike. Mumma folded up the picnic blanket and laid it on the seat. Then, we lifted Maisy onto the bike where she sat, balancing, her damp forehead resting on mumma's shoulder. "That should do it darlings, well done." We made our way home.*

Marama takes her place, bold in the centre of the sky. The noise in our house boils down to a simmer. Conversation from one room leaks under every doorway and into every closet. I put an ear to the wall and listen to them talking.

“She's resting now.”

“Well thank god it's here and not in some ditch on the beach, why didn't you call an ambulance?”

“Those bloody bush fires up in Karori.”

The house keeps on ticking around me. Mumma says it's because it expands in the heat of the day and shrinks back up at night when it's cooler.

“I thought we could take her to the hospital.”

“Wellington?”

“No, the Hutt.”

“I heard the Hutt's generators overheated when Henry was in there.”

“Well it's closer than taking her to Wellington.

Mumma's footsteps move to the corner of the lounge. I imagine her long plait falling over her face as she bends down to crouch next to my sister.

“Oh my love, my poor sweetness.”

Through the curtains I spy the moon, soaking in its milky pond. Most nights it pierces my thin curtains and makes a hobby of settling a ghostly glow around the periphery of my bookshelf. Through the wall I hear more movements and the lounge door crawls open. Dad carries my sister in his arms wrapped in a blue blanket, with mumma following closely behind, damp cloth in hand. I throw off the covers, my footsteps make soft tappings on the kitchen lino as I follow them. Outside, dad gently loads my sister into the back seat of our car. She murmurs and rolls over, tossing off the cloth which mumma carefully lies back on her forehead. The door shuts with a clunk, and the murmur of my parents' conversation is lost in the expanse of a balmy night sky. Trees hang in the air, the grass fried beneath their roots. “It's only July.” I hear it. Her voice is lowered but it carries on the breeze. *Only July. Only July.* Doors shut. The headlights grow to two blurry spots, then pinpricks, then nothing. Mumma comes and puts an arm around

me. "She'll be alright, heatstroke is nothing major. She'll be alright." I sniff and lean my head against her night shirt, a hand coming up to scratch my nose as a whisper of a breeze tickles its tip. *Nothing major.*

*It's only July.* The legs of my pyjama shorts crease under the grip of nervous hands.

"It's only July." The words come out dry. They're words that don't fit to meaning on their own. Unless the meaning is already in your head. Mumma doesn't turn. She doesn't look down her nose at me. Her nod, the slow, simple tilt of her head takes decades too long.

"I know."