Walter Clift

After a while, Walter had seen too much death. The Robinsons had left for Oamaru, as God had said plainly there was a cloud coming for men. Or, really, for boys. For those on the cusp. They'd told only the Chisholm-McLennans who, being progressive types down from the city, had known better than to take this odd prophecy for truth but, being tolerant of quaint beliefs, made warm sounds and had nodded quite gravely before offering another round of tea and asking about soccer teams for the boys down in Oamaru. But, as unlikely as it had sounded, the cloud had come.

Close to a death a year had come, for some years now. Despite his old-sounding name (a product of his not-from-here mum), Walter was young and kept his shirt buttoned up against the cloud, though he'd had some protection anyway, with a mother not from anywhere speaking English, which sociologists would later confirm as protective but which even then we'd suspected.

Though he himself would make it through, still each death had rent something, both within him and without, weakening the pull that held the tomatoes in time, and that kept baby kokopu wanting both the sea and return. Even the deaths of boys he'd been scared of, popular boys whose humour had thrived on slivers of viciousness, had left him unsure how to move through the day. But some had plain ripped him in two. He still missed Hamish Evans, though they'd never been friends in earnest. They'd learned to juggle by the back-school chestnut tree in that final week of the year when people's guards were down on account of the long summer break almost being here. Having played soccer due to his not-from-here mum, he'd never known that rugby boys could be so gentle. That week, he and Hamish had worked up to keeping four batons in the air all at once and had coordinated a little accompanying dance. A double left step, a right, and a bow.

And now, though he wasn't any longer at school, it was still going on, and with he and Ruthie planning kids of their own, it was hard to know what to do.

When he was younger, back before the deaths and deaths, he'd found grey-and-fawn-coloured creatures inside him with not enough hair to call fur, little beings somehow always quite clammy, damp even in the cold and the dry. He'd pulled them out, one by one, them seeming like something to pluck rather than keep. He hadn't minded so much at the time that less feeling came through from where he'd made the extractions. Alongside the

slight numbing, he found himself longing for anything sweet and became known for his baking and roundness and people said no-one would love him on account of it but Ruthie had, fiercely.

Somehow now, all these years later, thinking of the babies he and Ruthie hoped to have took him down to the creek and, somehow, those creatures still waited, shining clammy through the sparseness of their hair but somehow more handsome for their time in the mud. He'd checked and no-one was looking and, at an urge, he'd kissed each one full on the lips and there in the mud of the creek they'd each flashed golden before passing into his chest, which grew so reassuringly warm he didn't care who might have seen. And he'd laughed.

And he remembered Ruthie talking about the uses of watercress and that he'd wanted to add some to a pie, so he gathered a sap green bundle and one sprig of cherry blossom for his buttonhole and another for Ruthie's blouse. The pink of the blossom caught the late afternoon light and he'd cried a little and hadn't known why, but when he moved his spine was fluid like the short-tailed cats he and Ruthie had seen on TV just last week, and the heel-toe, heel-toe of his feet on the earth lit a private smile that glowed down through his belly to his knees and into the soil.

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