

## FALSE WITNESS

I'm curled up in my father's armchair, reading my book, when the ornaments on the mantelpiece begin to rattle. The Widdicombe Fair jug plays a few notes all by itself – it has half lifted and released the catch on the music box underneath. The light shade starts swaying, and the dog's head ashtray slides off the arm of the chair and crashes to the ground. The chair is trembling beneath me. I stand up, but the floor is moving too.

'Mummy!' I shout, and hear the shaky edge of panic in my voice. I've forgotten to say Mum, even though I've been doing it for weeks now.

My mother appears in the doorway with a towel in her hand, and an expression of complete astonishment. I want to run to her, but the shaking has stopped, so it seems silly. Everything is still again.

'Oh my God!' she says. She must be panicking a bit too, because she said God instead of Gosh. 'That must have been an earthquake! Whatever else does this awful place have in store for us?' My mother is always finding reasons why coming to New Zealand was a bad idea. 'Phoebe, fetch a dustpan while I ring your father.' Out she goes again.

I hear her on the phone while I'm sweeping up the ash. 'Well, we have survived an earthquake now!' she exclaims. She sounds more cross than scared. 'Do you think you should come home?'

When she hangs up, she comes back in and says, 'your father says all the glassware in the laboratory rattled, but it's nothing to worry about! Auckland often gets these tremors, he says. The centre is a long way off in the Pacific Ocean.'

'The next one might not be so far off,' says Jennifer, who has come out of her bedroom, holding the broken pieces of one of her glass ornaments. 'We may have to evacuate, in which case I shall go to Steve's place.' Steve is her boyfriend, who my parents don't approve of, because he's a builder's labourer.

'Don't be absurd, Jennifer,' says my mother, going back into the kitchen.

I open my book again, but then there's shouting coming from the kitchen. And this is when I hear that we're going to Mr. Emery's house. I think my father must have told my mother about it on the telephone.

'I'm not going!' Jennifer is shouting.

'But why?' says my mother. 'It's just for a drink. He has asked us all to go. You'll enjoy yourself when you get there.'

'I'm not going, and you can't make me.'

‘But you’ve always liked to come with us to our friends,’ says my mother.

‘Since when has Mr. Emery been a friend?’

‘Well, you know your father works with him.’

‘That doesn’t make him a friend. Why do you suddenly have to go and have drinks at his house?’

‘Well,’ my mother has lowered her voice so I can hardly hear the next bit, but it’s something like, ‘... a spot of trouble.’

‘Just because Daddy wants to be nice to him, doesn’t mean I have to be.’ Her bedroom door slams.

Perhaps if Jennifer is allowed not to go, my mother will let me stay at home too.

Even though I’m at a thrilling part of my book, (it’s *Jane Eyre*, and Bertha is about to set fire to Mr. Rochester’s house), I can’t concentrate. What if Jennifer is right and there is another, much worse, earthquake? If our house slid down the hill, would we just slide down with it? Would the roof fall in? When the earth cracks apart in those great jagged lines that I’ve seen on television, how deep do the cracks go? Can you climb out again if you fall in?

My mother comes back in and hands me a sandwich on a plate. 'I'm not cooking tonight,' she says, 'as we are going to the Emery's.'

'I don't feel very well,' I say.

'Now don't you start,' says my mother. 'Put your good skirt on, and tidy your hair.'

I've never told anyone about Mr. Emery. I only went out on his boat once; after that, every time my father asked me if I wanted to go again I made excuses, until he stopped asking.

I could sneak out and go and hide in the bush, then my parents might go without me.

I've got as far as the back steps when my mother calls, 'Phoebe! Where are you going? Go and get ready like I told you.'

Mr. Emery's house is dark, and old furniture looms in every corner. There are rugs on top of the carpet, and the rugs are covered with plastic runners that travel like gangplanks from room to room. There are layers of curtains, so that even if you pulled back the top layer, there'd be more net and nylon and frills before you got to the window.

We are led into the lounge, my father laughing and calling Mr. Emery "old chap".

Mr. Emery calls my mother "your beautiful wife," and asks my father where he has

been hiding her away, and my mother tells him not to be silly, and Mr. Emery winks at me.

Mrs. Emery hovers in the doorway, asking about tea. She's wearing a black dress, and her face and hands seem to float by themselves in the darkness like a ghost's.

'Irma has to attend to her mother,' says Mr. Emery, turning his back on her, 'but that won't stop us from having some fun.' He's pouring sherry into big glasses.

'Oh, I'll just have some tea, thank you,' says my mother, but Mr. Emery gives her a sherry anyway.

'And one for your lovely daughter,' he says, giving me a glass too. I think my father is going to object, then Mr. Emery makes a joke and they are both laughing their heads off again. I've never had sherry before, and I feel grown up. I sit back in my chair, and cross my legs, and take a sip. It's delicious.

Mr. Emery plays the piano. He asks me to turn the pages for him, which I'm good at, because I can follow the music. My father sings raucously, and even my mother joins in.

"Ha ha ha! He he he!

Little brown jug don't I love thee!"

Mr. Emery's fingers fly up the keyboard.

‘Come on!’ he says, poking me in the ribs. ‘Sing!’

So I start singing, and the singing and the sherry and the raucous laughter swirl around in me, and it feels like I’m starting to float off the ground. I forget that I hate Mr. Emery. I forget to keep looking at his trousers to see if there is any sign of his dreadful pink thing. I forget the feel of his fingers sliming sunburn cream up the inside of my legs.

In the middle of *After the Ball*, (‘many a heart is aching,’ sings Mr. Emery, rolling his eyes upwards at me), I have an urgent need to do a wee. I stumble along the corridor, trying to find the bathroom, (‘straight down, right, and in you go!’ Mr. Emery calls, laughing uproariously). I turn the key in a door and push, but just as I see that this is definitely not the bathroom, a hand shoots out and fastens on my arm. It’s an old woman in a long pink nightdress and a grey cardigan. She pulls hard. I don’t want to go in, but she’s smiling a horrid smile that shows all her gums, and I can’t be rude to her because I’m a guest.

Her room is even darker than the rest of the house, and smells of wee and cats. She pats the bed, and pushes me down onto it. I feel like Gretel in the witch’s house. She’s groping around in her cupboard, and takes out an enormous china doll. It’s got a long lacy dress on, covered in ribbons and bows, and a velvet hat. She smooths out its skirt and sits it on my knee. She might as well have given me a monkey to hold. It’s a freak, and I’m sure I’ll get a disease just from touching it. It smells of her.

‘Isabel Francis,’ she says, stroking the doll’s hair, and then my arm, and breathing her old lady’s vile breath in my face.

‘Mother, what are you doing?’ It’s Mrs. Emery, her white ghost’s face hovering unhappily by the door. ‘Don’t mind her,’ she says to me, ‘she only wants company!’ But not mine, because Mrs. Emery waves me out. ‘Off you go!’ She points round the corner to where the bathroom is, then she turns the key in the old woman’s door.

In the morning, slivers of a dream drift around me when I wake. There are old wrinkled hands in it, reaching from a crack in the earth to grab my legs.

‘What do you want?’ Jennifer calls, when I knock on her door.

‘To tell you something.’

‘Is it about last night?’

‘Yes.’

‘Alright, but don’t touch anything.’

So I go in. She’s sitting at her desk, writing. I perch at the end of her bed.

‘So what happened?’ she says.

‘They’re keeping an old woman prisoner in a room. I unlocked the door by mistake, and she grabbed me and hauled me inside. She’s completely mad and horrible, and the room stinks of wee.’

Jennifer is staring in amazement. I’m glad I decided to tell her. ‘How ghastly!’ she says. ‘How did you get out?’

‘Mrs. Emery came. She practically chased me out, and locked the door again.’

‘Mrs. Emery!’ Jennifer breathes. ‘What’s she like?’

‘She’s like a ghost, all black and pale, and really unfriendly.’

Jennifer stares. She looks a bit pale herself.

‘It must be against the law to keep someone locked in a room!’ I say.

‘It is!’ says Jennifer. ‘I think you should go to the police.’

‘Really?’ I had not anticipated this. ‘You don’t think I should tell Mummy...Mum?’

‘No. She’ll only say it’s none of your business, or you must have imagined it, or are you sure you’re not just making up a story to get attention?’ Jennifer is mimicking



the way my mother talks, but she's not doing it in a funny way, more as if she's angry.

We stare at each other, in a sort of surprised silence.

Then I say, 'Why didn't you want to go last night?'

She turns back to her writing. 'Because I loath Mr. Emery.'

'You went out fishing with him too, didn't you?'

'Yes,' she says, 'and he caught way more than he could ever eat. He has the blood of innocent fish on his hands. Now I have to finish this letter to Steve.'

She turns her back on me.

Monday morning. I'm stuffing books in my school bag, trying to make them all fit.

Today, I'm not wagging, because there's a maths test, and I want to come first.

My father comes into the dining room wearing his suit and tie.

'Why are you all dressed up?' asks Jennifer.

'I'm going up to London to see the Queen,' says my father.

Jennifer used to think this kind of thing was really funny, but not this morning.

‘What’s the big secret?’ she says.

‘There’s no secret,’ says my father. ‘You just need to learn to mind your own business.’

He stands in the middle of the floor while my mother tries to get all the cat hairs off his jacket with the clothes brush. ‘You look as if you’ve been pulled through a hedge,’ she says. ‘Go and try a damp sponge.’

‘Why won’t he tell me where he’s going?’ Jennifer asks her after he’s gone. ‘It’s as if he’s hiding something.’

‘He’s not hiding anything,’ says my mother, starting to take the breakfast things off the table. ‘If you must know, Jennifer, he has to go to court, and he doesn’t want to talk about it, and I don’t want you to talk about it either.’

‘Court!’ exclaims Jennifer. ‘Why does he have to go to court? What’s he done?’

‘He hasn’t done anything. I’ve already told you about this, Jennifer.’

‘No you haven’t. Nobody’s told me anything about it.’

‘Nor me,’ I put in, heaving my bag up on my back and heading for the door; but they are not listening to me.

‘I told you Mr. Emery was in some trouble. That’s why we went on Friday night, to give him and Mrs. Emery a bit of moral support. He is facing charges, and your father is being a witness.’

I turn back from the door. Jennifer’s mouth is open. When she speaks again, her voice is much smaller than before.

‘But what could Daddy possibly have witnessed?’

‘Not that kind of witness, Jennifer. Your father is being a character witness for Mr. Emery. He is going to tell the court that Mr. Emery is of good character, and wouldn’t have done the things he’s accused of.’

‘What is he accused of?’

But my mother has had enough. ‘I’m not discussing it any further,’ she says, turning the radio and the taps on, and clattering the dishes in the sink. ‘It’s not a subject either of you would understand.’

I want Jennifer to look at me, but her head is bowed, she’s turning her bus ticket over and over in her hand, and seems for once to have nothing to say. I can hear my father starting the car in the driveway, my mother humming to the radio in the kitchen.

Jennifer takes one last look at her bus ticket and walks slowly past me out of the front door. Some words have got as far as my throat and stuck. I can’t tell what they are though, and they subside, bubbling back down into some dark crevice inside me.

‘Phoebe! Have you gone into a trance again?’ my mother calls. ‘For goodness sake, get a move on, or you’ll miss the bus.’

I might never speak again.

I’m sitting on the bus, and my forehead is knocking against the window with every rut and bump in the road. The primary school, and Mr. Ferris’ farm, and the last of the houses before the bush starts, all amble across my sight, but I don’t see them.

The bus starts the long shuddering climb into Tarupiti. I’m hearing Mr. Emery’s uproarious laughter, and feeling his finger poking me, and smelling the fish sliding about in the bottom of the boat. Then I remember Jennifer saying I should go to the police.

I don’t get off at my school stop; I go on into Newtown and ask where the police station is.

*Never be afraid to tell a policeman if you’re in trouble,* my mother has always said.

I’m not sure if this moment would pass her test.

The police station is a square brick building with a blue light outside saying *Police*. I push the door open. Inside, there are a lot of notices on the walls, and a high counter, and a Maori boy sitting on a bench with his head in his hands. I feel like a criminal.

‘What can I do for you?’ says the policeman behind the counter. He’s chewing gum, and has a ballpoint pen stuck behind his ear. If my mother were here, she’d probably ask to speak to his superior.

‘I want to report a crime,’ I say.

‘What’s your name?’ he says, opening a drawer and taking out a form.

‘Jean Bradshaw,’ I say. Jean is my middle name, and Bradshaw is my mother’s maiden name, so I haven’t really lied.

‘And what is it you want to report?’ he says. He hasn’t written my name down.

‘There is an old woman being kept prisoner in a house in Glen Vale,’ I say.

‘Prisoner?’ he says. ‘What do you mean exactly?’

‘She’s locked in a room. Can I give you the name of the man responsible?’

‘Be my guest,’ says the policeman. Is he taking me seriously?

A deep breath. 'Mr. Emery,' I say, and it's out.

'How do you know this Mr. Emery?' he says. He hasn't written a single word on the form yet.

'He's a friend of my father's, and he's in court today facing charges,' I say, thinking that this surely will make him take more notice.

It does. He stops chewing, and leans forward over the counter. 'Charges?' he says.

'What's he charged with?'

I stare at him.

'What has this gentleman been charged with?' repeats the policeman.

'I don't really know,' I say, 'it's alright, I'm probably wrong about the old woman, I'm sure they're feeding her properly.' I'm backing away from the counter.

'What is this Mr. Emery's address?' says the policeman, taking his pen from behind his ear. But I don't know it.

'I'm sorry, it's alright, I'm late for school,' I say, and I'm out of the door, and running.

When my father comes home, I think he might be sick. He is quiet; no hello squeezes, no hilarious laughter at his own jokes, no jokes. He says he can't eat his dinner.

'Was it awful?' my mother asks, handing him a cup of tea.

'My part was fine,' he says, 'but they should never put children in the witness box.'

'Why not?' says Jennifer.

'They are unreliable witnesses,' says my father, 'and they arouse sympathy just for being children.'

Jennifer snorts. 'So everyone believed the children, and not Mr. Emery,' she says.

'You know nothing about it,' he says, stirring his tea so hard it slops into the saucer.

'If you've got something of substance to say, spit it out, otherwise, shut up!'

My mother gasps. Jennifer stands up from the table; she hasn't touched her dinner either. There are tears in her eyes; she looks as if she's going to say something but the words have got stuck, she's just twisting the button on her cardigan. She goes off without asking if she can leave the table, but for once my mother doesn't make her.

Later, I knock on her door, and find her lying on her bed.

‘What do you want?’ she says. I can tell she’s been crying. I want to put my arms around her, but I’m scared it will make her cross.

‘I went to the police today.’

‘What?’ she gasps, sitting up.

‘I went to the police, and told them about Mr. Emery keeping that old woman shut up in a room.’

‘Oh!’ she falls back on the bed again. ‘What did they say?’

‘They are going to investigate it,’ I lie, because I think it might cheer her up.

‘Good for you, Feebs,’ she says, and closes her eyes, so I know she doesn’t want me there any more.

I’m sitting in my father’s armchair, trying to read *Northanger Abbey*, but I can’t make the words stick in my head. I’m imagining another earthquake, a proper one this time, that destroys everything, and my mother with her arms around me, comforting me, and saying all that matters is I am still alive.



I can half hear my parents talking in the dining room, and then I hear Mr. Emery's name.

'Two years!' my father is saying. 'Two years! Someone has even complained about the way they are treating Irma's mother, the police have set social services on them. And I am being tarred with the same brush. No one seems to want to talk to me any more unless they have to.'

'I don't suppose it's possible at all that they might be right about him?' my mother says. 'The judge, the jury, everyone you work with, can they all be wrong?'

'Yes,' says my father. 'He might be a Welshman, but he's a sound chap, and I've said it all along, and if others would rather believe the mischievous lies of a couple of hysterical girls and their gullible parents, I want nothing to do with them anyway.'

'He is lucky to have you for a friend,' says my mother.

There is a long silence, and I think I have stopped breathing. Then my mother's voice again, 'Well, we really have to put the whole thing behind us now. What are you going to do about the situation at work?'

'Look for another job,' says my father. 'A fresh start somewhere else, - it would do us all good.'

The ornaments don't rattle, the light doesn't sway, the Widdicombe Fair jug is silent, but I have fallen into that dark jagged crack anyhow, and I think I'll never be able to crawl out again.

There's a full moon, and the air is thick with honeysuckle. My father is in the garden; I can see him from my bedroom window, sitting alone under the rimu tree with his head in his hands.

I think I can see the old Phoebe, skipping across the grass towards him in the moonlight. She sits next to him, puts her arms around him. I think she says something like, 'Don't worry Daddy, you can have me for a friend.'

And he says, 'Captain, you are the best little friend a Daddy could ever want,' or something of the sort.

But the new Phoebe is standing as still as stone at the window.



