

*The
Fine Art
of
Kindness*

By
Robert Philip Bolton

Also by Robert Philip Bolton

Six Murders

Underneath The Arclight

To The White Gate

My Marian Year

The Boltons of The Little Boltons

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The Collected Short Stories

For Viktor. The story of Mussorgsky's 'Pictures at an Exhibition'

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Preview file information

This preview file of *The Fine Art of Kindness* contains the prologue and the first six chapters. The complete book comprises thirty chapters and 234 pages. This preview file and the complete text are protected by copyright owned by the author, Robert Philip Bolton.

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The Fine Art of Kindness

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Cover design and production by Stephen Bolton

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ISBN: 978-0-473-42584-5

For Billy

FROM THE AUTHOR

The Fine Art of Kindness is a work of fiction. Apart from references to real places and people which are obviously in the public domain the characters, places and events it depicts are entirely the products of my imagination. However, I did receive help and advice for which I was grateful.

Thanks especially to Lindy Lely, the Starship Volunteer Coordinator at Auckland City Hospital, and Andrea Newland of the Starship Foundation, for their patience and kindness, their time, information and advice.

But while their help was invaluable in the preparation of this small book of fiction, the value of their *real* work, day after day, and the work of all the Starship grandmothers, grandfathers and many other volunteers and donors, working quietly behind the scenes in support of Starship's objectives, as well as the hospital's medical professionals, is impossible to measure.

Similarly, the Women's Refuge movement in New Zealand works constantly and quietly in the interests of women and children and I am indebted to Wendy Valler for her information and advice, helping me understand the movement's work.

Thanks also to my wife, Kath, for her advice and encouragement, to Gail Batten and Max Ross for their help, and to my son Stephen for his cover design.

PROLOGUE

‘ZELNICK,’ ANNOUNCED THE voice on the phone.

‘Mort. How are you?’ answered old Jack Landseer cheerfully. ‘Long time no hear.’

Landseer liked Zelnick. He always had. Despite his flashy suits, heeled boots, gaudy ties, huge gold watch on one wrist, heavy gold bracelet on the other, and heavily-bejewelled fingers – he even suspected Zelnick sometimes wore lipstick – he had always, since he bought the Steele twenty-five years ago, found the strange little man, now in his sixties, to be easy to deal with and utterly honest. And that, to a plain and practical country man with an open mind, was more important than appearances.

‘Well, my friend,’ said Zelnick, ‘I am afraid this is the last time you will hear from Zelnick. At least about this thing of us. Perhaps other things, perhaps not so, I do not know. But about this thing there is no more. It is over you see. Finished. The end. The last. The very final last.’

‘I see,’ said Jack Landseer quietly. Wondering.

‘I keep the very best for last you understand,’ said Zelnick.

‘I see,’ said Jack again. ‘But it’s not really *you* is it, Mort. Deciding I mean.’

He enjoyed teasing the wily old dealer.

‘You insult Zelnick, my friend. It is I who give advices. Good advices. From here, the heart, and here, the brain. Both are important you must understand. And now this.’

‘So, the very best and the very last. What is it this time?’

‘Before I say, my friend, before I tell, I must ask of you.’

‘Ask away,’ said Jack. He knew basically what was coming; he just didn’t know, couldn’t even guess, the number.

‘My vendor – so secret and private as usual – is wanting one hundred and eighty thousand dollars,’ said Zelnick.

Jack pursed his lips and then smiled; almost laughed aloud. He had just finished his breakfast when the phone rang. He was now standing in the kitchen, dressed, ready for the day. And now this.

‘That’s a lot of money, Mort,’ he said.

‘A lot of money he says. I know already, my friend. But what can I say? A lot of money of course.’

Jack could almost hear the dealer shrugging apologetically over the phone. ‘But the seller won’t get it all,’ he said teasingly. ‘There’s your commission, Mort.’

‘But of course, my friend,’ said Zelnick. ‘Vendor understands. For many years we have done business. As you of course know. And business is business, no?’

‘Tell me about it. But you’re rather early for this, Mort. It’s not even eight o’clock on a Friday morning.’

‘I want to get it out of my brains now, off my desk, gone, vamoose, before I open, before the masses of people come and it gets busy. So busy. You’ve got no idea how very very busy is Zelnick. This business. My God.’

Jack smiled; again he almost laughed aloud. He knew business would be slow in Parnell on a hot Friday morning in early January; most people would be on holiday.

‘That’s alright, Mort,’ he said soothingly. ‘So, what are we talking about? A hundred and eighty thousand. What is it? Do you think it’s worth it? What’s your advice?’

‘Is Lindauer, my friend Jack,’ said Zelnick. ‘Gottfried Lindauer. You know? The little Austrian. Or Czech I think. Who cares? Bloody foreigner. Worth it? Are you a crazyman?’

‘And?’

‘Mere Rangipaeroa. Handsome old famous lady with a feather and a cloak and a moko and a tiki and a pipe and every damn Maori thing. So beautiful. Exquisite. She’s not been seen by nobodies for seventy-three years. Imagine it. Except two owners. Just two. Can you believe this what I tell you?’

Jack pursed his lips again, frowned, in surprise, in silent admiration for the collector who had kept something so special so secret for so long.

‘Authentic?’

‘I am a liar now? I am a fraud already? My friend, Jack. Authentic? I am Zelnick. My reputation.’

‘Then it’s probably worth a lot more than that,’ said Jack cautiously.

‘Between you and me and the post gate probably is true,’ said Zelnick. ‘But our vendor friend is not greedy. Not a tiny little bit of it even. As usual just wants a quick sale. No auction. No publicity. No newspapers. No pictures. No interviews. Nothing complicated. We together trust you, my friend Jack. Only you. Always we have trusted. Agree? Quick and easy. No publicity. Just so.’

Jack Landseer thought for a moment but for no more. He didn’t have to. Not for a forgotten Lindauer.

‘Then a quick and easy sale you have, Mort,’ he said. ‘If it’s everything you say.’

‘Everything, my friend. But our secret, eh?’

‘Our secret.’

'Is alright? A hundred and eighty thousand?'

'It's fine. Well, if you say so it's fine,' said Jack although he could imagine what his son Alan would say. But in return he would say to Alan that it was worth a lot more. Indeed, a bargain. A real bargain.

'I will come down tomorrow, my friend Jack,' said Zelnick. 'About eleven o'clock. For the cheque, no?'

'Saturday?'

'But of course,' said Zelnick. 'Is good for me. Closed Saturday.'

'Bring the painting too,' said Jack. 'I want to hang it here. To see it.'

'Of course, my friend, I will bring her. Not so big but so valuable. You must add to your insurance. With all the others. So valuable.'

'I'll take care of it today,' said Jack. 'Now. But they might ring you to confirm.'

'Is good. They ring me. They know me well. No worries,' said Zelnick. 'So, tomorrow I will come, in my own car, not the van, with the security men. Two men. They will cost.'

'That's your problem,' said Jack with a laugh.

'You are a hard man, Jack,' said Mordacai Zelnick. 'This I know. A very very hard man.'

1

OLD BETTY KRILICH could have cried. But she didn't. Instead, she sat in the gutter in her long and somewhat shabby camelhair coat, her faded-denim clad legs apart, her knees high, her little tartan shopping trundler lying broken on the footpath behind her, and wondered what she should do next.

'Bloody hell.'

Thus was her wondering expressed aloud.

Her arms were resting between her raised and spread knees and she had a large egg in each hand, the only two which had survived; the others – a dozen or so – lay broken on the footpath, their golden yolks and gelatinous albumen soaking through the flimsy brown paper bag in which they had been held and so mixing with the fine gravel and pebbles and filth and grime of the pavement. Beside them lay two large cauliflowers – their virginal lumpy whiteness now irreversibly corrupted by the dirty footpath upon which they had landed, bounced and rolled – two tightly wrapped dark green cabbages, each as large or larger than a basketball, which had also bounced and rolled on the pavement and were therefore somewhat darkened and bruised, and an iron-bark pumpkin with

specks of black gravel embedded in its hard but not invulnerable silvery-grey skin. The rest of the produce, fresh from her garden – a large bunch of silverbeet, a plastic bag bulging with heads of broccoli, and long stems of streaky wine-coloured rhubarb tied together with string – had remained contained in the little lidless trundler.

The red and rubber-tyred wheel which had come off the shopping trundler had rolled away and lay on its side a few metres distant. Sitting there on the kerb, her feet in the gutter, her legs apart for comfort and her knees up around her ears, her elbows between her legs, her arms held out in front, a precious egg cradled in each hand, old Betty Krich was only a hundred metres or so from home; but it might as well have been a hundred kilometres.

‘So what the hell am I going to do now?’ she said. To herself.

‘Betty,’ said a voice from behind. It was, she could tell from experience, the voice of an old man. She turned around and looked up at the speaker, an old fellow for sure, but still reasonably handsome, and well-groomed, she could tell, despite being dressed for gardening. He was wearing a working man’s leather boots, leather gloves on his hands in the right one of which he gripped a pair of soft-handled secateurs. His white hair and rimless spectacles made him look professorial.

‘Who are you?’ she asked.

‘This is a fine kettle of fish, isn’t it.’

‘Who are you?’ she asked again.

‘Jack Landseer, Betty,’ said the old man. ‘Remember? I live there.’ He was pointing his closed secateurs over his shoulder to the brick-and-tile house behind him which was set far back from the street at the end of a long front garden which was so perfectly planned and maintained it had the appearance of a public park.

‘Jack Landseer?’ There was a question in Betty’s tone but she quickly decided that the name meant nothing to her.

She stood up, somewhat awkwardly, shuffling, and leaning far forward, her bottom out to maintain her balance given that she was carefully cradling an egg in each closed hand. Once standing she turned around to face the man. She stood, looking at him curiously – she was about his height – now holding her egg-holding hands to the warmth of her belly.

‘How do you know my name?’ she asked. ‘Betty.’

‘That’s your name. I know that. Everybody calls you that,’ said the old man.

‘They call me Old Betty, don’t they,’ she said. ‘It’s derogatory. They think I’m a bit nutty.’

‘No they don’t,’ said Jack.

Betty looked at him curiously, her head to one side, thinking.

‘Yes they do,’ she said at last. ‘But I’m not.’

‘Not what?’

‘Nutty.’

‘I know *that*. Anyway, your wheel’s come off,’ he said. ‘Needs a split pin. No problem.’

‘It’s a problem to me,’ she said.

‘I can fix it, love,’ he said. ‘Piece of cake. I’ll take it home – right here – and fix it.’

‘Don’t call me love.’

‘But first we’ll get you home.’

‘You don’t know where I live,’ she said indignantly.

‘Yes I do. Of course I do. One hundred and seventy-two. Down there.’ The old man pointed with his secateurs down Northumberland Road, the main road from the Karapuke shops south to the State Highway, in the direction of Betty Krilich’s house. ‘Everybody knows that.’

‘Do they?’

‘Of course they do,’ said the old man. ‘You’re famous.’

‘Am I?’ Betty was surprised.

‘Tell me about it,’ said the old man. ‘Now where were you going?’
‘You know the women’s refuge? The safe house?’

‘No,’ said the old man.

‘Good,’ said Betty. ‘Best you don’t.’

‘Is that where you were going?’

‘Never mind that now. I just need to get home,’ said Betty. ‘Get this mess sorted out.’

‘No sooner said than done,’ said the old man. ‘Just wait here. I’ll get my barrow.’

And so Betty waited, her egg-holding hands held close to her body, and watched curiously as the unfamiliar old man, Jack something, who seemed to know her, strode back to his garden, slipping the secateurs into his back pocket as he went, and pulling off his gardening gloves and stuffing them into a side pocket. She saw him walk to a big professional-looking steel wheelbarrow which stood where he had left it at the head of a long row of roses adjacent to the long drive which ran down the length of the garden to a double-garage attached to the side of the house. She continued to watch, puzzled, as he tipped the few rose prunings from the barrow onto the lawn; evidently he hadn’t progressed past the first few plants before he had noticed her sitting in the gutter beside her broken shopping trundler. And she watched as he returned pushing the empty barrow. He stopped when he reached the broken trundler where he set down the wheelbarrow.

‘What are you doing?’ she asked.

The old man didn’t reply; rather he bent, easily, and effortlessly lifted the broken and half-full shopping trundler and gently placed it in the wheelbarrow in such a position and at such an angle that its remaining contents of freshly-harvested produce – those which had not spilled onto the pavement – were safely contained.

Betty was surprised. She looked surprised.

The old man then bent to retrieve the spilled goods lying on the dirty pavement: the pumpkin, the caulis and cabbages; and then, with a booted foot, he nudged the broken eggs and their wet, transparent and shredded paper bag into the gutter. Betty watched; she could see he was untroubled by stiff joints or any other such condition common in men and women his age. Evidently – like her – he was healthy, fit, strong and capable.

Having made the observation she collected herself and her thoughts and stepped forward somewhat annoyed.

‘I can do that,’ she said abruptly, sounding rude and ungrateful when in fact she was neither. ‘Hold these.’

She handed the two warm eggs to the old man and then quickly gathered up the goods in question and placed them carefully in the open top of the trundler.

‘I’ll take them now,’ she said, her hands held forward to accept the eggs.

‘Right-oh,’ said the old man who handed back the two eggs and then picked up the red wheel which had come off the shopping trundler and wedged it between its broken parent and the side of the wheelbarrow’s steel tray.

‘Now,’ he said as he took the loaded wheelbarrow in hand and turned it down Northumberland Road. ‘Let’s get you home safe and sound.’

He looked at her again to make sure she was recovered and ready to walk home with him and his wheelbarrow.



Jack Landseer was used to Betty’s odd appearance; she always wore clothes that were once exceedingly fashionable (and expensive) but were now dated, shabby, and utterly inappropriate. Indeed, some of her clothes would have once looked elegant and refined at a ball, a cocktail party, a symphony concert, the ballet, a gallery opening

or the theatre, while others clearly belonged at an old-fashioned rock festival. But now, in the small rural service town of Karapuke, whatever she wore made her look both strangely eccentric and oddly distinguished. Whether she knew what others thought of her wardrobe was not known but if she did she certainly didn't care. She couldn't afford to: it was the only wardrobe she possessed.

Betty Krich was tall – taller than most women of her or any age – and slim and upright and eminently dignified despite her late years and evident borderline penury. To the old man she was like a human version of her own house: an elegant old mansion whose fading paintwork, dirty windows, sagging verandas, rotten steps, loose roof shingles, broken chimney pots, overgrown front yard and broken concrete drive, couldn't diminish its fine underlying architecture nor the quality of the materials with which it was built.

On this chilly Monday morning in July she was dressed in her camelhair overcoat – which was limp and tired-looking now but was expensively fashionable once – over a pair of widely-flared faded blue jeans; around her neck was a red mohair scarf. She'd always had masses of thick and wavy hair, now perfectly white, which she wore up in a casual fashion held roughly in place by coarse tortoiseshell combs which weren't taming enough to stop a few long and curly strands of whiteness to fall, loose and unruly, to the sides of her thin and remarkably unlined face. She never wore a hat. Her spectacles had radiant-blue frames, dotted with diamantes, which swept up to a point above and beyond her eyebrows; like almost everything she wore they were designed and made at a distant time to follow the dictates of a now-scorned fashion. The only modern item of dress – perhaps her only wardrobe extravagance – were the expensive white sneakers, of a recognizably famous brand, with neon-green laces, which she chose and wore for comfort.

‘I walk everywhere, you know,’ she used to say by way of an unnecessary explanation. ‘I need good and comfortable shoes like this.’

Bright, modern and incongruous, her expensive and comfortable trainers were the only exception to her overall but unconscious projection of an old woman accustomed to quality, with an innate sense of good taste, but compelled by her limited budget to wear clothes from another era.

And so, as Jack Landseer – tall, upright, himself smartly dressed (even for working in the garden) – strode purposefully down Northumberland Road, pushing his wheelbarrow and looking directly ahead, Betty Krilich, comfortable in her expensive walking sneakers, easily kept pace with him while holding a precious egg securely in each hand.

She wanted to talk, to ask him something, but at the same time she didn’t. She didn’t especially want to engage with this man whom she didn’t know – he said his name was what? Jack something – and yet she was curious about him. He seemed to know her. He definitely knew at least her first name. Should she know him somehow? She looked across at him as they moved together down the long flat road but he didn’t return her look. She looked, trying to remember, but she couldn’t. She wanted to ask him to stop and look at her, so she could stare at his face, but she didn’t. He just marched on with his wheelbarrow, looking straight ahead as if she were not there.

Jack Landseer knew Betty’s house well; in fact he’d known it almost all his life although he’d been inside it only once and that was many years earlier. And anyway he had to drive past it often enough, down Northumberland Road, to get to the State Highway which led to the motorway.

‘Here we are, Betty,’ he said as he reached the top of the drive of one-seven-two. ‘Home again, safe and sound, good as gold.’

‘Thank you,’ said a grateful Betty although she couldn’t help wondering how she was going to transfer everything in his wheelbarrow to her kitchen at the back of the house. ‘Thank you very much.’

‘Call me Jack,’ said Jack. ‘Now we’ll get your stuff inside and I’ll take the trundler home and mend the wheel.’

Betty was on the broken concrete drive by then but she stopped, paused, and looked around at the old man with an expression of doubt – apprehension, almost fear – on her face.

Her hesitation didn’t go unnoticed by Jack; and so, when he added: ‘Well at least I’ll get the wheelbarrow to your door,’ he saw at once the relief on her face.

She smiled weakly. ‘That’d be good,’ she said. ‘On the front porch. I can manage after that.’

And so she led Jack as he pushed the wheelbarrow down the drive of broken concrete, across myriad cracks filled with rank weeds, and then at an angle along a narrow and equally-derelict path across the unmown lawn to the front porch. She went ahead of him and up the three shallow wooden steps to the porch where she carefully laid her two eggs on a coir mat and then turned to help Jack lift her produce from the open top of the broken shopping trundler and set them carefully on the floor of the wooden and somewhat rickety porch.

‘Job done,’ said Jack. ‘Right as rain.’

There was an awkward moment of silence then as if neither of the old pair knew what to do next. Betty wanted to ask him in. No she didn’t: she felt *obliged* to ask him in but she didn’t *want* to and so was torn between her innate courtesy (against which she was always struggling) and her privacy (which unfortunately but not accurately manifested itself as a dislike of strangers) of which she was inordinately jealous. It was the sort of internal conflict of conscience she didn’t enjoy and did everything she could to avoid.

Indeed, she even resented any person, situation or event she considered the cause of any discomfiture of conscience. But sometimes – and this was such a time – resentment was unreasonable and avoidance was impossible; the conflict had to be faced. And so she determined to thank her Samaritan as graciously as she could sufficient to make the offer of further hospitality unnecessary.

Although Jack Landseer was a plain and practical working man, rarely if ever subject to the internal emotional conflicts now at work in the emotionally complicated mind of Betty Krilich, he wasn't insensitive to them in others. Thus was Betty enormously but silently grateful when, as if reading her thoughts, the old man went to the back of the wheelbarrow and, after dropping the red wheel into the empty shopping trundler, and ensuring that the trundler itself was secure in the wheelbarrow's belly, he lifted the barrow by the handles and simply said: 'Right-oh, like Gough I'm off.'

'Thank you, Mr—'

'Call me Jack,' said Jack again. 'Jack Landseer. Remember? I'll bring your trundler back in a couple of days. Tomorrow probably.'

'Yes, that'll be fine. Thanks—' said Betty, adding, after a pause: '— Jack.'

Jack merely smiled at that – at Betty calling him Jack – and gave a little farewell salute by flicking his forefinger away from his forehead.

2

TO KEEP BUSY, not without purpose but to be always useful and productive, was Betty Krilich's philosophy; especially to help vulnerable children and their loving mothers. Being always useful, productive and helpful helped her remember what was important in life, now and in the future. And it helped her forget the unimportant past; the regrets; the awful regrets; the wasted years.

Gus knew. Dear Gus she called him. He tried to tell her then but she wouldn't listen. She was enjoying herself too much. It won't last, darling, he used to say. You can't go on like this. I don't mind for myself but I mind for you. And he was right. All those wasted years. Wasted money. So selfish. And self-centred. And self-indulgent. It was shameful and she hated – not too strong a word – hated to think of it.

But those days are gone, she thought. That was a different me. A long-ago me. Not the now me. The real me. Now I keep busy. Busy being productive and useful and helpful. Helping others. Especially children. Mothers and children. That's it. That's what's important. No time to waste. Must never waste a minute. Never again. Never a minute.

So now she was annoyed to be wasting *more* than a minute. She had wasted time and effort in setting off for the refuge with a full trundler only to return, her bounty undelivered, burdened with an obligation to that man Jack. Now she was wasting time, waiting fruitlessly, unproductively, on the front porch, waiting for him, that Jack, to be out of sight so he couldn't see what she was about to do. She watched him impatiently, unreasonably annoyed, as he wheeled his barrow – within the deep steel tray of which lay her little disabled tartan trundler and its red rubber-tyred wheel – across the lawn path, down the short drive of cracked and broken concrete and out to the public footpath. She watched and waited, frustrated, as he, with a cool and thoroughly methodical deliberateness – as if he were purposely trying to annoy her – strode away to the right along Northumberland Road back to his own house. And she watched, relieved at last, as he looked back at her, just before he passed out of sight behind the tall and unruly *pittosporum* hedge which marked the boundary on that side of her property, and nodded what was meant – she assumed – to be a final goodbye.

Despite her impatience, and unable to overcome her innate courtesy, she – reluctantly – gave a little wiggly-finger wave of acknowledgement although she quickly realized that it was probably too little a wave given too late; he probably didn't see it.

'Too bad,' she said. To herself. 'Too bloody bad.'

She was on the front porch, with her produce at her feet, her two eggs safely cushioned on the coir mat at the front door. But the front door was permanently locked and bolted; she never used it, never used the haunted hall which led to it, nor any of many large, dusty, empty and unfurnished rooms which were off the hall, all of which were decorated with– (she shuddered at the arrival of the thought and quickly blocked its progress).

So she had to make three trips from the front porch, down the steps, around the side of the house, down the long, unused and cracked, broken and dangerously uneven drive which led to the

unused garage and the back yard, through the flimsy wire-netting barrier she called a gate but which wasn't a real gate, up the few unnaturally steep wooden steps to the back door, through the warm glassed-in sun-porch she used as her bed sitting room, and into the kitchen. There she laid the two eggs on a damp dish-cloth, on the bench, and the produce – the soiled cauliflowers, the huge bruised cabbages, the pumpkin, the splaying bunch of shiny and crinkly silverbeet leaves, the broccoli, and the bunch of stout, pink, fibrous and juicy rhubarb stems – on the table. She removed her old camelhair coat in the sun-porch and replaced it with an all-purpose plain cotton wraparound housecoat. Then she sat at the table on an old wooden chair, one of only two in the little kitchen.

‘What a bugger,’ she said. To herself. She rested her elbows on the table. ‘A proper bugger.’

She sensed – no, she felt – soft pressure on her left leg.

‘Hello, Norman,’ she said brightly.

And as she leaned back in her chair Norman, a middle-aged spayed male she rescued from the RSPCA, more black than tabby, and somewhat overweight, sprang lightly onto her lap – judging the distance perfectly as cats do – and purringly began nuzzling up to her chin; she could feel his wet nose.

‘You don't love me,’ she said as she knuckled his bony cheek. ‘I know you, you rascal. You just want something to eat.’

Norman was one of Betty's three cats; he was the oldest, biggest, strongest and bossiest while black-and-white Duchess was small and delicate and especially affectionate, and long-haired Mittens, the youngest, was grey and limp and soft and shy. They didn't get on well, the three cats, but managed to tolerate each other as cats do when thrown together by chance. But at night they overcame their antipathy and slept together on Betty's cot: Duchess near her head, Mittens at her waist and big Norman at her feet; he liked to have immediate access to the cat door.

‘Well, come on, young man,’ said Betty as she gently tipped Norman back to the floor. He looked up and meowed in mild protest. ‘Too early for your dinner. But no time to waste for me. I’ve got to do something to save these caulis. Cut off the dirty bits and make a nice creamy cauliflower soup I think. The kiddies will like that. They will. I know. And nourishing too.’

She stood up and moved to the bench taking the two cauliflowers with her. Norman moved too, pressing against her leg around which he curled his tail sinuously. She laid the cauliflowers on the bench and bent to fetch a wooden cutting board; and as she bent she massaged the top of Norman’s head with her fingertips.

‘He’ll bring the trundler back tomorrow I hope,’ she said to Norman but really to herself. ‘I’ll have the soup ready. And I think I’ll pull some carrots. And, of course, I’ll need more eggie-weggies thanks to you-know-who.’

Norman looked up, opened his mouth to show its pinkness, and display his rough tongue and his little white teeth as sharp as needles, and gave a silent meow in reply.



Old Betty Krich had lived in Northumberland Road for more than thirty years. She moved there from Wellington after her mother died and left her the Karapuke house. She had already lived alone in Wellington for seven years after her husband had died so suddenly, so unexpectedly. Well, it was sudden to her, unexpected, although evidently, according to the coroner, based on the post-mortem and the evidence of Gus’s doctor, and of course on his will, he, Gus, would not have been surprised at his own sudden death. Indeed, thinking about it later, remembering many of the things he had said and done, Betty realized he may even have expected it.

‘He more or less told me,’ she said to Margaret, Gus’s old and faithful spinsterish secretary. It was at the funeral. Margaret was weeping and it dawned on Betty then – for the first time, (God, I’m stupid, she thought) – that Margaret, who was more Gus’s age than Betty was, had probably been secretly in love with Gus for years. She felt sorry for Margaret then. ‘More or less told me but I wasn’t listening,’ she said to Margaret. ‘Too absorbed in myself,’ she added sadly.

The weeping Margaret had agreed: ‘Yes, I know,’ she had said.

But what did she know? thought Betty. Which? That Gus knew he was ill? Knew he was going to die? Or that she, Betty, was too absorbed in herself to realize what Gus (and probably Margaret too) knew? Betty had wondered about that then. But now she knew the answer. What a shit I was, she thought. All those wasted years. Such a shit. And how kind, devoted and loyal was poor lonely Margaret.

‘I was a shit, wasn’t I,’ she said to Norman. It wasn’t a question.

Norman followed Betty into the sun-porch, looking up at her eagerly – still hoping for food – but chose to jump onto the end of the cot, which was covered in a rug of multi-coloured knitted peggy squares, when she opened the back door and went out into the chilly yard. Resigned to hunger for a few more hours he curled himself into a furry ball, covered his nose with his right front paw, and was instantly in a state of feline nap.

The hens ran clucking to the door of their long and narrow coop, with stretched necks and long strides, when they heard and then saw the back door being opened. Betty carefully stepped down the steep staircase – there was no handrail – and laughed.

‘You biddies all got fed this morning,’ she called jovially to the noisy hens – brown shavers and white leghorns – numbering a score or more. ‘It’s carrots I’m after now. Carrots for my soup.’

Betty’s house was set well to the front of what was a large section – a genuine old-fashioned New Zealand quarter-acre section –

which meant that the front yard was especially small and devoid of trees or shrubs or garden or anything ornamental, living or not. And the grass and weeds grew rank together as though in the unfavoured field of a lazy farmer.

But while the front yard was small, unkempt and uncared for the long back yard was neatly planned and laid out, intensely planted and highly productive. The hen house was in the north-east corner together with a row of compost heaps, at various stages of decomposition, set against the boundary hedge of mixed *pittosporums*. The drive from the street – of badly-fractured concrete – ended at a dilapidated and unused garage set near the house against the southern boundary behind which was Betty's little glasshouse within which she raised all her vegetables from seed. Behind the glasshouse, running parallel to a tall wooden fence, stood a double row of fruit trees including winter-bearing lemon, orange and grapefruit, feijoa and tamarillos as well as summer apples, pears, plums, peaches and apricots. Meanwhile the old fence supported the rambling dun-coloured hairy and smelly vines of kiwifruit while half-a-dozen bright and shiny passion fruit plants sent their curling tendrils up and across the walls and roof of the derelict garage.

And down and across the rest of the entire spread – a rectangle defined by the back of the house, two boundary hedges and the tall wooden fence – was laid out a vegetable garden divided into regularly-sized manageable plots by neatly-trimmed grassed paths.

It was down one of these paths that Betty now went to pull a handful of long *Egmont Golds* which she had sown directly in the past summer in accordance with her garden calendar. While she was there, on her knees, she pulled a couple of radishes – long magenta-and-white French breakfast, her favourite – which she rubbed clean on her housecoat as she walked across to the current compost where she laid the already limp green-tops of the carrots and radishes before walking back to the house.

It was a large and sprawling bungalow of the nineteen-hundreds, her house, painted a now-powdery cream. Within its sturdy kauri walls, and below its aged shingled roof, was a wide passage leading to the unused and permanently-locked and bolted front door and providing side access to four spacious bedrooms, a large lounge, an equally large dining room as well as a big bathroom, a small one for the bedrooms, two toilets and a study. It was, indeed, the largest house in the neighbourhood; it was also the shabbiest.

Despite its generous proportions, and the large number of its commodious but unfurnished rooms, Betty chose to live only at the back of the house in only four of its rooms: the east-facing sun-porch (glassed in, years ago, by her father) which served as both her bedroom and living room and was only a doorway away from the adjacent kitchen – which also served as her laundry and which also looked east and out to the long back yard – and the cold-water bathroom and separate toilet, two small and gloomy rooms across the hall from the kitchen. As she never used any of the other empty rooms of the house her privacy was as complete in the house as it was in the back yard. Indeed, she was rarely – never – disturbed by her neighbours who considered her a harmless hermit-like recluse; and although they surreptitiously looked out for her – an old and eccentric lady living alone – they had no idea of the layout of her back yard nor how she occupied herself there or within the few back rooms of her always darkened house.

Now, in the utter and treasured privacy of her back yard, she laid the bunch of hard carrots on the steep back steps and sat beside them for the few minutes it took to enjoy the fresh, cool, crisp and peppery white flesh of her two long radishes. And while she was there the usually affectionate Duchess emerged slinkily from the house and leaped directly down to the path where she began chasing a brown and curled leaf which had attracted her attention and was now being patted about by her right front paw curled into a quartet of vicious hooks.

‘Sorry, darling,’ she said to busy Duchess. ‘I’m going to use your lovely gravy beef to help make my soup. You’ll all have to have tins today. Or Whiskas.’

But the little black-and-white Duchess – preoccupied with slaughtering her leaf – took no notice and so Betty laughed, stood up and returned to the kitchen and the cauliflowers which were waiting there to be transformed, with the fresh carrots, and a stock of more than a kilo of gravy beef, into a hot and nourishing soup made with love to be enjoyed by the mothers and children now residing in the safe house of the Karapuke women’s refuge in Church Street.

3

‘DAD?’

‘Alan.’

‘Where the hell were you?’

‘I was in the workshop.’

‘I had to ring three times. I was a getting a bit worried.’

‘I was in the workshop,’ said Jack again. ‘I can hardly hear the phone from there.’

‘That’s why I got you the cell phone. You can use it anywhere. Take it anywhere. In your pocket.’

‘I hate that thing,’ said Jack. ‘I told you. Everything’s too bloody small. My fingers.’

‘So what have you done with it?’

‘In the kitchen drawer I think.’

‘What were you doing in the workshop anyway?’

‘Just fixing something. Nothing really.’

‘Nothing heavy,’ said Alan. ‘You know what the doctor—’

‘He said I’m fine.’

‘But the angina.’

'I'm fine,' insisted Jack. 'The angina's nothing so stop worrying. A wheel came off a shopping trundler. It needs a split pin that's all.'

'What the hell are you doing with a shopping trundler?'

'It's not *my* shopping trundler. Anyway, what do you want?'

'I just wanted to make sure you're okay. All the trucks are out, everyone's at morning tea, Miriam's doing the accounts, the branches are all busy, customers happy, the phones are quiet, the whole place is peaceful and quiet for a change. Like a morgue. Nothing till the bank manager at eleven. Coming down from Auckland for a meeting. So I took the chance. Whose shopping trundler is it anyway?'

'Just a friend's,' said Jack. 'I better get back to it.'

'A lady friend?'

'Yes,' said Jack, somewhat annoyed by the persistent questioning. 'Men don't have shopping trundlers do they?'

'Is she a new friend?'

'What's this all about? She's not really a friend at all. Just a neighbour. Someone I know. I've known her for years.'

'Does she know about the Braithwaites and that? The Steele and the McCahon? And the Lindauer? Christ, dad—'

'She knows *nothing* about me or anything,' said Jack curtly. 'We're just neighbours. I'm doing her a favour and that's it. Okay?'

'Okay, dad,' said Alan. 'I'm sorry, okay. But I can't help worrying about all that stuff in the house and no security and strangers—'

'She's a poor old lady of eighty-eight so she's hardly going to be—'

'Forget it, dad,' said Alan, somewhat embarrassed. 'Forget I mentioned it.'

'Alright then,' said Jack resentfully. He didn't like being bullied by his own son.

'So, are you alright out in the workshop?'

'I told you, I'm putting a split pin in the axle of an old shopping trundler. And that's it.'

‘Nothing heavy. Not too strenuous.’

‘Nothing like that.’

‘Are you warm enough out there? It’s quite cold today.’

‘Look, I’m fine. But I’ve got to go now. How’s Miriam?’

‘She’s fine.’

‘And what about Michael? Any change?’

‘Not really,’ said Alan. ‘He just lies on his side staring at the wall all bloody day. Day after day. Says nothing. Does nothing. If it wasn’t for Miriam.’

‘Poor bugger,’ said Jack.

‘All the drugs don’t help,’ said Alan.

‘They knock him out I suppose.’

‘That’s about it.’

‘What can you do?’

‘Miriam gives him something to eat sometimes. Soup or something like that,’ said Alan. ‘Has to feed him like a baby.’

‘Poor Miriam.’

‘She doesn’t mind,’ said Alan.

‘Tell me about it,’ said Jack. ‘She’s a bloody saint.’

‘Now, are you sure you’re okay?’

‘I’m fine,’ said Jack. ‘Can’t help thinking about Michael though. On my mind. It’s horrible.’

‘I know.’

‘Anyway, I better go. I’ll see you later. Love to Miriam, eh.’

‘Will do, dad.’

‘And Michael too if he wakes up.’

‘Will do. See you Sunday.’

‘Tell him I’ll see him then,’ said Jack. ‘Sunday.’

Jack stood by the phone in the kitchen for a minute or two trying to calm down. For some reason Alan’s phone call annoyed him.

And he was worried – and felt so helpless – about Michael, his younger son.

‘Bloody kids,’ he said. To himself. ‘Sixty years old and he’s still a worry.’

He shook his head sharply in an attempt to shake out the thoughts about sick Michael.

When he felt better he made his way from the kitchen to the attached double garage, past his two cars – standing side-by-side like big brother and little brother: first, his beloved nineteen fifty-five blue Zephyr Six and, against the far wall, a nineteen seventy Rolls-Royce Silver Shadow which was about due for its monthly outing to Landseer Farm on Sunday – and into the workshop which was in fact an extension of the garage. It, the workshop, was built and equipped to his own specifications when he bought the house. That was when he retired, just after Catherine died, twenty-five years ago.

‘You go ahead and retire,’ Alan had said. ‘Everything’ll be fine. Business is booming. You know that. Buy yourself a nice place in town. You’re still young enough to enjoy life. Even on your own.’

‘Sixty’s young to retire,’ said many of his sixty-year-old Combined Club friends who couldn’t afford to retire.

‘Alan’s running the business now,’ he said. ‘And he’s good. He doesn’t need me hanging around the place.’

‘But you’re on your own now,’ they said. ‘Why did you buy a big family-sized house when you’re on your own?’

‘Why on earth did you buy that place?’ asked Alan. ‘In Northumberland Road of all places?’

‘What’s wrong with Northumberland Road?’

‘It’s so busy. All the traffic to and from town and the highway.’

‘It’s not that bad,’ said Jack defensively; indignantly. Alan didn’t know it but he had always planned to live on Northumberland Road. One day.

Annoyed that he had to explain himself – to his son as well as to his friends – and knowing there was at least a little envy behind the questioning of his friends, he nevertheless tried to furnish credible-sounding explanations.

‘I’ve bought that old Zephyr and I’m going to restore it,’ he said. ‘I need a big garage for the cars. And I need my own workshop and tools.’

‘But you never drive the Rolls,’ they said.

‘Yes I do,’ he replied. ‘I maintain her very carefully and drive her regularly. She’s an investment.’

‘But all those rooms,’ they said. ‘Such a big house for one old bloke.’

‘I need wall space,’ he said. ‘I’m investing in art.’

‘Why? You never cared about art before.’

‘Well I do now,’ he replied somewhat resentfully. ‘And I like the garden. I’m going to grow roses. I love roses. And, anyway, I’ve always wanted to live in town; close to the doctor and the Combined and the showgrounds for rugby and that.’

‘But Northumberland Road? It’s so busy.’

‘I really like Northumberland Road. I really do,’ he said.

‘But that old painting?’ said Alan. ‘You never liked art before. Who was Steele anyway?’

‘He was pretty bloody famous actually,’ said Jack.

‘Pretty bloody expensive if you ask me,’ said Alan. ‘Twenty-four grand. That worries the hell out of me, dad.’

‘Alan. Why don’t you leave your father alone?’ asked Miriam. Rhetorically. Frequently.

‘I don’t know what’s got into him,’ said Alan later. ‘He’s never been arty-farty. He’s always been so bloody down-to-earth. So practical.’

Indeed, Jack had always been a practical man, always enjoyed working with his hands. In the early days of the business – when he

left school at fifteen to work for his father – he did most of the mechanical maintenance and repairs on the company’s trucks and vans. Now, seventy years later, despite being a ball of muscle (as he said), fit as a fiddler, (as he said), a box of budgies (as he said), generally healthy, fit and strong, his doctor had mentioned his heart: a bit of angina there, Jack, he had said, almost in passing. Not bad. But best to take it a bit easy at your age. It’s only your age. And keep the pills on you.

It was advice which he heeded with sensible moderation – walking, working in the garden – but which Alan had interpreted as a direct instruction to do nothing.

‘I can’t do *nothing*,’ he had insisted. ‘I’d rather die being busy. Doing something.’

But Alan – conservative and cautious in all things – didn’t have to worry. A man of eighty-five is naturally less able than a man of sixty; it’s a self-regulating process.

Before he re-entered his workshop Jack stopped briefly at the door. He wanted to admire it. He liked its orderly tidiness; the way the woodworking bench ran the length of the wall to the right, with fixed vices and all his woodworking tools mounted on the wall above. He liked the way he had organized the engineering bench which ran the length of the other side, the side to the left, together with all the tools for engineering and metalwork mounted on the wall above. Each bench was lighted from above, along its entire length, by its own strip of fluorescent tubes and a wide window set into each wall to let in natural light. Meanwhile the few heavy power machines – for woodworking and engineering, necessarily bolted to the concrete floor – were fixed in a line down the middle of the workshop’s length, each with its own source of power and its own lighting for close-up work.

Most of the tools, equipment and machinery were now rarely used but he liked to remember that he was once active in the workshop

almost every day and that it and its machinery were always there if he needed them. Even now he was sometimes called upon to make or repair something which, according to Alan, couldn't easily or quickly enough be made or repaired by the men in the firm's own now-extensive workshops. Jack didn't quite believe Alan about that but he accepted the patronage graciously and enjoyed the work.

After no more than a few moments of such melancholy contemplation he moved to Betty's little tartan trundler which was lying on its side on the engineering bench. He used a pair of pliers to finish the job which Alan's phone call had interrupted: to divide the tines of a shiny new split pin and turn them back around the axle. Then, unable to stop there, as a matter of course, a matter of pride, he turned over the trundler and replaced the other old split pin with another new one drawn from his plentiful stock of such miscellany stored in a plastic tray of labelled compartments which he kept under the bench. If one's gone the other's bound to go soon, he thought. A few drops of oil to each end of the axle, to each wheel, and a trial spin of them both, confirmed – he was sure – that Betty's little tartan shopping trundler was good for many more of her walking kilometres.

'Just like a bought one,' he said as he lowered the flimsy and light-weight little vehicle to the floor.

After lunch he set off for Betty's house. He started by pulling the repaired shopping trundler behind him although only a few steps into the short journey he decided it was easier to pick it up and carry it. Once there he again made his way up the broken concrete drive and diagonally across the lawn path to the front porch where the day before he had sensed Betty's discomfort at his presence and then her relief when he said goodbye and left her and her vegetables and eggs together on the porch.

4

‘I’LL BRING BACK your trundler in a couple of days,’ he had said. ‘Tomorrow probably.’

And that was today.

He stepped up and across the narrow porch to the front door which comprised eight panes of dimpled glass held in place by old putty, brittle and crumbling and losing its hold; there was a Yale lock, a tarnished door handle – no more than a grip – and a matching doorbell twist. Swinging the shopping trundler in his left hand he used his other hand to twist the doorbell but it turned freely, without resistance, without ringing, evidently disabled, and so he knocked loudly with his knuckles on one of the loose panes of glass.

He saw, through the dimpled glass, the approach of a vague, indistinct, distorted shape. It stopped, and he heard Betty say, a little nervously he thought: ‘Who is it?’

‘It’s Jack,’ he said loudly. ‘Jack Landseer.’

‘Who?’

‘Jack Landseer.’ He shouted it this time. ‘I’ve brought back your trundler. All tickety-boo and right as ninepence.’

‘Oh dear. I see,’ he heard her say. ‘Take it around the back will you. To the back door. But mind you shut the gate.’

‘Good-oh,’ he said cheerfully. ‘Round the back it is then.’

And so he went down the long side of the big house, along the uneven concrete drive which led to the ramshackle garage. He could see the garage was not used – at least not for housing a car as he knew from experience that it once had – as its wooden doors, rotten at the bottom, hung crookedly on rusty hinges and were fastened by an old and corroded padlock; and anyway the whole double-door opening was draped in a green tangle of jasmine which would, in the summer, he knew, be covered in small, bright and highly-scented flowers. The side of the building, the side facing into the back garden, was covered in a green tangle of something shiny but dormant; he guessed correctly that it was passion fruit.

A fence of lightweight chicken wire was stretched at an angle from the corner of the garage to the adjacent corner of the house to which it was attached by a batten and three large dull brass cup-hooks. Jack assumed that the wire netting was a fence and the batten-and-hooks arrangement constituted the gate which Betty had enjoined him to shut. And as he lifted and lowered the shopping trundler over the fence and unhooked the batten from the house he could see the probable reason for the enclosing fence and why its flimsiness was sufficient for its purpose: a flock of large and healthy-looking hens – variously brown and white – enclosed in a long and narrow run with a hen-house attached, set in the far corner of the section. They clucked alarmingly and flapped their wings uselessly at his appearance. Jack assumed they were protesting his presence in their domain but in fact they associated any human shape with the potential delivery of food. When none was forthcoming they reduced their excited clucking to a soft and sociable croaking and resumed their heads-down bobbing and browsing.

As Jack rehooked the flimsy gate Betty appeared at the top of the steps which led up to the closed door of the glassed-in porch. He was surprised to see that she was wearing a sturdy all-purpose wraparound house coat in plain cotton. He'd never seen her in such an ordinary workaday outfit.

'Your trundler, Betty,' he called as he approached the steps. 'All ship-shape and Bristol fashion again.'

'Thanks,' said Betty. She smiled weakly. 'I do appreciate it you know.'

'My pleasure,' said Jack cheerfully. He lifted the trundler by the handle and proffered it up to her standing at the top of the steps with the porch door half-closed behind her. 'Where do you want it?'

'Just leave it there,' said Betty. 'It'll be fine.'

She turned back to the door.

'But I could—'

'I'll get it later,' said Betty quickly, over her shoulder. She pushed open the door and was gone leaving Jack standing at the bottom of the steps, holding the shopping trolley at his side, looking up dumbly at the closed door.

'Bugger me,' he said as he lowered the trundler and checked that it would stand upright on the crooked and broken concrete apron at the foot of the steps.

He turned then and looked properly down the back yard. The hens had settled and were now scratching in the dry bare dirt of their run, scratching and bobbing and pecking away at whatever things edible they found there, although a few looked up the yard at him from curiosity.

'Bloody chooks,' he said quietly, to himself, as he surveyed the scene, duly impressed – as any gardener would have been – by the planned orderliness of the back yard.

There were twelve rectangles of cultivated garden, four rows of three, all the same size, separated by grass paths, carefully mown and with neatly-trimmed edges. All but one were dedicated to seasonal vegetables, some low-growing, some tall, some staked and some only recently planted. He recognized the patches of silverbeet, cauliflower and cabbage as the sources of those vegetables which had spilled from Betty's trundler, as well as rows of lush-green spinach, unready broccoli of a medium height, thriving broad beans and Brussels sprouts, a corner dedicated to a few large-leafed rhubarbs, and a few other plants that were too young and too small to be quickly or easily identified. Over the only fallow plot stood a mobile but vacant chicken coop, with rubber wheels at one end, the exact width and length of the garden rectangle.

To the right, behind the end of garage, he could see a small glasshouse, its panes glowing with internal condensation and greened with moss at their edges. And beyond the glasshouse, two rows of fruit trees – one row without leaves – running parallel to the boundary fence all the way to the section's end which was roughly defined by a ragged tecoma hedge.

'Bugger me,' said Jack again. To himself. As a gardener of sorts he couldn't help admiring the garden while nevertheless being perplexed by the personal nature of its architect and only operative.

He was about to leave at last when he heard the back door open; he turned to see Betty standing again at the open door.

'Excuse me,' she called tentatively and Jack wondered why she didn't – couldn't bring herself to – use his name.

He waited. Looking up at her looking down at him.

'I made some soup,' said Betty. 'For the refuge.'

'I see,' said Jack who didn't see at all.

'The women's refuge. In Church Street.'

'I see,' said Jack again.

'It's in a sealed pressure cooker.'

'Oh,' said Jack.

'The soup, I mean,' said Betty. 'You see, the thing is—'

'Jack,' said Jack by way of a prompt.

'—Jack,' said Betty somewhat awkwardly. 'The thing is, it's big and heavy and I can't get it there. To the refuge. I could put it in the bottom of the trundler but it's too big see.'

'Oh,' said Jack again.

'So, the thing is, I hate to ask but could you give me a lift in your motor car?'

'I see,' said Jack.

'You have got a car haven't you?'

'Tell me about it,' said Jack.

'Eh?'

'Yes, of course I've got a car.'

'Yes, I thought you would have.'

'When?' asked Jack.

'When what?'

'When do you need a lift? In my car?'

'Oh, the sooner the better,' said Betty.

And so Jack held up the forefinger of his right hand, to signal a decision, and said: 'Right-oh. I'll go and get the car now and be right back. Would that be okay?'

'Oh, that'd be splendid,' said a genuinely pleased Betty with a genuine smile. 'I'll be waiting at the gate.'

'Okey-dokey,' said Jack. 'Back soon.'



'This is a really nice car,' said Betty as she settled herself on the bench seat of Jack's Zephyr, her catering-size sealed pressure cooker of soup at her feet. 'How old is it?'

‘It’s a nineteen fifty-five,’ said Jack.

‘My goodness,’ said Betty. ‘Such nice condition.’

‘Built in Lower Hutt and fully restored by yours truly.’

‘It’s lovely,’ said Betty. ‘It really is.’

‘Tell me about it,’ said Jack. ‘I don’t use it much though. Vintage. It’s like a hobby.’

‘It’s nice,’ said Betty approvingly. ‘A nice English car. A *proper* car. Now, do you know where the refuge is?’

‘No,’ said Jack, as he turned the car around and headed back up Northumberland Road in the direction of town.

‘It’s at the very far end of Church Street,’ said Betty.

‘Okey-dokey,’ said Jack.

‘But the thing is, you’re not supposed to know.’

‘Eh?’

‘It’s not a secret exactly, the safe house, but we don’t advertise it,’ said Betty.

‘No, I suppose not,’ said Jack but he didn’t know what he was talking about. The subject was a mystery to him.

‘For obvious reasons.’

‘Yes. I see.’

‘We know some people – undesirables shall we say – they probably know the address,’ said Betty.

‘Do they?’

‘Probably,’ said Betty. ‘But, you know, we’ve never had any trouble.’

‘That’s good,’ said Jack. He didn’t know what else to say.

‘Anyway, the thing is, don’t tell anyone the address,’ said Betty seriously. ‘Ever. It just looks like an ordinary house. That’s the important thing. Just an ordinary house in an ordinary street.’

‘Right-oh,’ said Jack somewhat naively.

‘Just drop me there and wait while I take in the soup. If you don’t mind I mean.’

‘Of course,’ said Jack cheerfully. ‘And then I’ll take you home again.’

And so he was directed to an address in Church Street; it was, according to Betty, just an ordinary house in an ordinary street although all Jack could see, as he waited in the car for Betty’s return, was a tall wooden fence, stained a reddish-brown, into which was set a matching gate and a letter box, and over the top of which he could see no more than the peak of a concrete-tiled roof.

5

IN THE MIDDLE of the next afternoon – an afternoon as fine and cool as the one it followed – Jack Landseer was again in his front garden attending to his roses. He had almost completed the annual task and was standing at the house end of the long row adjacent to the drive; his wheelbarrow was standing at his side almost full with the viciously barbed woody cuttings from his dormant roses.

When he wasn't bent to his work he stood as straight and tall as usual; the bright whiteness of his thick wavy hair made his face look more flushed than it really was and emphasised the bright blueness of his eyes behind his rimless spectacles. Despite his eighty-five years he looked as he always did, even in the garden: handsome, prosperous and well-groomed.

Such a lovely old chap, was the general opinion of the lady members of the Combined Club – some of whom were as old as he – of which he had been a member since his arrival in the town. Such a gentleman, they all said.

'He's decent old bloke alright,' said his fellow gentlemen members who were generally younger than he.

‘A lot smarter than he lets on,’ said others.

‘Got a bit of dough too, I reckon,’ said one.

‘Plenty,’ said others.

‘But keeps himself to himself,’ was the consensus.

And now, as he straightened from his work, and dropped another thorny stick into his wheelbarrow, the man in question noticed a familiar female figure in the street about to pass by. Her white hair was up, as usual, and on this occasion she was dressed in a bulky ankle-length dress in brown corduroy with a short jacket in orange paisley. He lifted his right arm, secateurs in gloved hand, in what was intended as a wave, and was about to call out, but both wave and call were aborted when he realized that Betty Krilich was either unaware of where in the street she was – perhaps absent-minded and preoccupied and so not connecting her position with his house or the broken shopping trundler event of the previous day – or was consciously avoiding him and any form of intercourse.

I think she’s avoiding me, he decided. Well, too bloody bad, Betty. Plenty of time. Now it’s time for my afternoon tea.

The roses were pruned, compact and naked, and now looked – at least to an enthusiastic and knowledgeable rose-grower which Jack Landseer was – right ready for spring. The pruned wood had been carried away to the back yard to be burned but inevitably a line of debris ran along the lawn on both sides of the roses row spoiling the neat appearance of the smooth green lawn. And that was the excuse Jack needed to spend another hour in the front garden in the darkling of that winter’s day.

Setting the lawnmower high – to gather up, mulch and catch the rose pruning debris rather than actually cut the lawn which didn’t need it – it required only two or three runs up and down each side of the rose row to return the lawn to its unsullied green smoothness. And it was as he was finishing with the mower, having switched it off, and as he was tipping and shaking the contents of

the catcher into the wheelbarrow, he again caught sight of the familiar figure of old Betty Krilich stepping determinedly along the pavement, her brown corduroy maxi-skirt swirling and swishing around over her bright white sneakers, presumably on her return journey.

Undeterred by her dogged determination to ignore his presence only a few metres away, Jack stepped nimbly over the low wall which separated him in his front garden from her on the public pavement, a little ahead of her progress, so that after two or three more steps she was forced to stop and acknowledge him given that the alternative was to detour around him, completely ignoring him, which rudeness he knew she would not, could not, entertain.

‘Betty,’ he said. ‘Jack. Remember?’

The old woman stopped and looked directly at the old man.

‘Course I remember,’ she said curtly. ‘I’m not stupid.’

‘No,’ said Jack. He was somewhat taken aback. ‘I saw you before.’

‘When?’

‘After lunch some time. I can’t remember exactly.’

‘I’ve been at choir practice,’ she said.

‘Where?’

‘At Saint Peter’s,’ said Betty. ‘Every Thursday afternoon if you must know.’

Jack knew the church; the Anglican church in Church Street, just two or three streets closer to town. They would have passed it on the way to the women’s refuge the previous day.

‘Oh. I see,’ said Jack. ‘Well, I wanted to ring you up.’

‘Why?’ she asked with curiosity mixed with suspicion.

‘I couldn’t find your number in the book,’ said Jack.

‘No. You wouldn’t.’

‘Why not?’

‘I haven’t got a phone,’ she said.

‘Oh,’ said Jack. ‘Why not?’

‘Why not what?’

‘Why haven’t you got a phone?’

‘Bloody people ring you up.’

‘Tell me about it.’

‘Why did you want to ring me up anyway?’

‘Well, how are you?’ asked Jack. ‘Are you alright?’

‘Of course I’m alright. Is that why you wanted to ring me up?’

‘Not only that,’ said Jack. ‘How’s your trundler?’

‘Stupid question,’ said Betty. Jack knew it was a stupid question even as he asked it. ‘It’s fine. Thank you. Now is that all? I’m busy. I have to get home. Things to do. Always things to do.’

And so at last Jack managed to ask the question that was the real reason for his interception.

‘Do you want to go out to tea?’ he blurted out.

‘What?’

‘Tomorrow night.’

‘What?’

‘I said do you—’

‘I heard what you said,’ said Betty. ‘I’m not bloody deaf. But what do you mean, tea?’

Jack could see that she was genuinely puzzled although he didn’t know why she should be.

‘Dinner. An evening meal. At night. They cook a beaut steak, egg and chips at the Combined,’ he said, adding: ‘and pav for pudding, good as home-made, with all the cream you want. Caramel sauce too. And hundreds and thousands.’

‘What’s the Combined?’

‘It’s a club. My club. The Combined Club. Like a Cossie club. It’s nice for oldies like us.’

‘No,’ said Betty.

‘What?’

‘I said no,’ said Betty again. ‘Thank you, but no.’

Jack was getting used to her plain speaking but he was still surprised by the bluntness of her reply.

‘But why? Friday nights. They have old-time dancing. Good orchestra. Well, a band really. Pool. Darts. Big meat raffles. A good bar and a great feed. And nice people just like us.’

‘Look at me, Jack,’ she said. She raised her hands pointed them back at herself. He noticed that it was the first time she had spontaneously called him Jack. ‘I’m not a going-out-to-tea person. I’m not a club person. I don’t like crowds. I don’t like mixing with strangers. And I don’t like going out at night.’

‘You weren’t always like that,’ said Jack although he immediately wished he hadn’t.

‘What do you mean?’ snapped Betty with a hint of anger.

‘Well, Catherine, my wife, late wife, she used to read about you,’ said Jack quickly; recovering. ‘In the social pages and that. You were famous in Karapuke. Famous in Wellington too.’ He took a breath and noticed that his audience looked astonished. He suddenly felt foolish. ‘You know what I mean,’ he added lamely.

‘No I don’t,’ said Betty.

‘Look, forget it shall we. The thing is I was asking you out on a date,’ said Jack with a smile.

‘A date!’ Betty Krilich looked disgusted. ‘Don’t make me sick,’ she said.

‘It’s a *joke*, Betty. A joke. You and me. A date.’

‘Why are you even talking to me? No one talks to me. At least not on the street. Not people I don’t know.’

‘Well I know you. And you know *me* don’t you?’

‘No.’

Yes you do, thought Jack. But he ignored her reply.

‘What about a cup of tea then? Or coffee?’ he asked hopefully.

‘Next time you go to town. I’ll walk with you and we can talk.’

‘What about?’

Jack didn’t reply. He just looked at her smilingly. Daring her to respond. Which she did. At last.

‘I’m going to Saint Peter’s again tomorrow morning,’ she said. ‘To do the flowers. There’s a wedding on Saturday and four services on Sunday.’

‘What time?’ he asked although he knew well enough; she passed his house at the same time every Friday morning.

‘I’ll be coming past here – your place – about half past ten,’ she said.

She obviously considered the conversation over and was ready to set off home.

‘Right-oh, Betty,’ said Jack as he stepped aside to let her pass. ‘Half past ten. I’ll be raring to go.’

He noticed that she looked at him quizzically – wonderingly – and he felt foolish again. And so she passed around him without saying goodbye. Without saying anything.

But after just a few steps she stopped, turned half around, and said: ‘You can help me with the flowers if you like. And then we can have a cup of tea and a biscuit with Mr Widdop.’

‘Who’s Mr Widdop?’

‘Reverend Widdop. The vicar,’ said Betty.

And then she was gone. And Jack was left on the pavement watching her walking away, tall and elegant in her long brown dress and short paisley jacket set off by bright white sneakers with neon-green laces.

‘Goodbye, Betty Henderson-Krilich,’ he said. To himself. ‘You *do* know me you know. You really do.’



He was almost back at the house, at the front door, when he heard the phone ring.

‘Bloody phone,’ he said. To himself. ‘Let it ring.’

It stopped ringing but started again as soon he reached the kitchen.

‘Hullo?’

‘Dad, it’s me.’

‘Alan.’

‘Where were you? I rang a minute ago.’

‘I couldn’t get to the phone that quick. Outside. You should let it ring longer.’

‘Sorry. But listen, dad, it’s Michael.’

‘What? Has something happened?’

‘I’m home. Miriam had to call the ambulance. She’s gone with him. It’s bad this time, dad. Real bad. Probably *it* if you know what I mean.’

‘Oh dear,’ said Jack sadly.

‘I’m going up to the hospital now,’ said Alan. ‘Do you want me to pick you up? Do you want to come? To see him? It’s a long trip to Auckland.’

‘Of course. I’ll be ready.’

‘He won’t know we’re there you know.’

‘I know,’ said Jack resignedly. ‘I know that. But I want to go.’

Suddenly he felt sad and old and empty; as empty as his big house. He went to the garage for his jacket and scarf. And then to the workshop to check that it was locked. Checked the back door. He got his wallet from the bedroom, opened the front door, and then sat in his favourite arm-chair in the living room, by the window, where he could see the drive. There, in the company of the two Braithwaites, the Steele, the McCahon, the Lindauer and some of the others, he waited and thought about Michael.

And Alan.

Alan was the steady one. Always had been.

He's such a joy, Catherine used to say.

These days, though, Jack found him impatient and often cross. But he couldn't argue that as a boy Alan was a good child, obedient and cooperative, always wanting to please. A good student. Good at sports. And now, evidently, a kind and considerate husband, father and grandfather if somewhat over-bearing as an adult son.

'Don't worry, dad,' Alan had said when his mother died. 'I'll look after the business now.'

And he did. Took it over and grew it in a way that Jack knew *he* never would have; never *could* have; wouldn't even have wanted to. Now it was bigger and more successful than ever. So many trucks. Vast storage depots and branches all over the country. Meanwhile he was clever enough to marry well: Miriam was a remarkable wife, mother, grandmother and daughter-in-law – poor Catherine had loved her so much, and the twins, David and Dianne – and then to willingly take on nursing her husband's degenerate younger brother.

Miriam was an angel whom Alan didn't deserve; and nor did Michael.

Poor Michael. A young genius. A polymath. Schooled at home by private tutors who were recommended by the university and paid for by Jack somewhat reluctantly but under pressure from Catherine. By then he, Jack, was managing director of the increasingly successful and wealthy Town & Country Carriers Limited.

'Why can't he go to Boys' High like I did? Like Alan did? Like other boys do?' protested Jack each time he was asked to write a cheque to one of Michael's tutors.

'Don't you get it, Jack' said Catherine. 'He's not like other boys.'

'Tell me about it,' said Jack who had no idea how to deal with his younger son; a boy who looked like a child but thought and conversed like an adult. 'It'd be a lot cheaper if he was.'

And then university degrees in subjects that Jack didn't understand. Two masters. And then off to Oxford. A doctorate. A brilliant mathematician, they said, they being the big-wigs of his Oxford college. And a physicist.

'We should go and see him at Oxford,' said Catherine.

'England!' said Jack. 'Bugger that for a joke.'

He didn't go. But Catherine did. She was so proud of the photos she took. He looked up: they were still there, on the mantelpiece. What a dag, he thought.

'How will he ever earn a living,' he said to Catherine when she got back. He didn't know what mathematicians did; or physicists.

But he *did* earn a living; a good living. He was recruited directly from Oxford by British military intelligence.

'Does that mean he's a spy?' Jack used to ask Catherine and Alan. 'Like that James Bond or something?'

But they didn't know.

In fact for the more than twenty-five years that Michael worked for British military intelligence – MI5 first and then, later, MI6 – nobody but his immediate superiors knew exactly what he did. Even Sharon – his wife, who was also an operative although in a different branch – didn't know what he did although she knew enough not to ask. On the other hand Michael didn't know what *she* did.

'How can they live like that?' Jack used to ask. 'That's not a marriage.'

Indeed, for three years – during the late nineteen-nineties – Michael was working for the American CIA in Langley, Virginia; for those three years Sharon didn't even know if he were alive.

But in the end that very clever little boy who became a very clever young man wasn't clever enough. And now, age sixty, with nothing to call his own, childless, disowned by his English wife, and now entirely dependent on the financial support of the family business

(which he had always claimed to despise), his older brother and the tender nursing of his sister-in-law, he lay in a coma, the vital organs of his body corrupted by alcohol, his brain being overwhelmed by a tumour, now evidently only hours away from death.

A car horn sounded; Jack looked up from his reverie, looked out the window, confirmed that it was Alan's big Range Rover in the drive, sighed deeply, stood up, adjusted his scarf and jacket.

Bloody kids, eh, he said. To himself. Bloody kids.

6

JACK WAITED FOR Betty at his front gate; but he didn't have to wait long. So straight and flat was Northumberland Road that he saw her leave her property – at one-seven-two – and set off towards him. He knew it was her from her height, from the way she walked, and from the bright whiteness of the hair on her head and the shoes on her feet.

She can probably see me here waiting, he thought.

It was a pleasant day. Not too cold. There was no wind. And the unwarm sun was sharing the pale sky with thin and milky clouds.

Betty arrived before long. Jack noticed that she was wearing the same widely-flared blue jeans she was wearing on Monday, when he helped her with her broken shopping trundler, with a matching and heavy-duty denim jacket – almost white with age – with metal buttons and pockets elaborately embroidered with what he took to be dragons although it was hard to tell as the once-bright embroidery threads were faded.

'No shopping trundler?'

Betty smiled and Jack was glad. 'Not today,' she said pleasantly enough. 'Not on Fridays.'

She didn't stop walking and so Jack fell into step beside her.

'Do you do the flowers every Friday?' he asked.

'Pretty much,' said Betty. 'Except on Good Friday and days like that. Got to be flexible.'

'How long have you been doing it? The flowers?'

'Ever since I moved back.'

'To Karapuke? Here?'

'Yes.'

'That's thirty-three years ago,' Jack said.

Betty was astonished. She looked at him suspiciously.

'How do you know *that*?' she asked accusingly. 'The years. Exactly?'

'Well, about,' said Jack evasively. 'It's a long time. Doing the same thing every Friday.'

He was trying to change the subject and it worked.

'I've always got something to do,' said Betty. 'Every day. Something different. I can't stand being idle can you? So much to do. Here we are,' she added, turning right into Church Street.

There was very little motor- or foot-traffic on the quiet suburban streets of Karapuke, especially off Northumberland Road, but Jack noticed that each pedestrian who passed, whether male or female, young or old, acknowledged Betty (and him incidentally) with a friendly nod or a 'morning, Betty'; and the drivers of most of the cars which passed them on the street, whether going to or from town, sounded their horn in a manner that was unmistakably friendly.

I never noticed that before, he thought; that a car horn can sound friendly.

And he noticed that Betty wasn't at all surprised by the nods and greetings and friendly car horns but routinely acknowledged every salutation with a little wave, a faint smile or a nod.

They arrived at Saint Peter's which was a pretty little wooden church – typical of its age – painted a bright white with a steep roof of grey-painted corrugated iron, a squat and pathetic-looking steeple housing one small bell, and doors and windows in a pointed Gothic style; the window and door frames were painted dark green as were the doors themselves.

The church was set close to the street with a wide spread of lawn to the right in the centre of which stood a single, old and naked oak tree. In front of the tree, close to the unfenced boundary, stood a large notice board on two sturdy white wooden posts. ST PETER'S ANGLICAN CHURCH, KARAPUKE it announced with the scriptural quote below: *"I am the way the truth and the life"*. The office phone number was painted in small letters together with the website address: www.stpeterskarapuke.org.nz. And across the top of the board was a crawling electric sign announcing the times of four Sunday services (7.45 am, 9.00 am, 10.45 am and 7.00 pm) and one on Wednesdays (11.00 am). Jack saw everything at a glance and once again wondered – as he did so often lately – what the website address business was all about. He knew that Town & Country Carriers Limited had a website but he'd never looked at it – he didn't know how – and he knew that Alan and Miriam and the children and just about everyone he knew, including his friends and acquaintances at the Combined Club, had an email address but he didn't – he didn't even have a computer – and didn't think he ever would. Not now. And he was sure Betty wouldn't have one. He knew she didn't have a telephone and he was pretty sure she didn't even have electricity.

Beside and attached to the church, although set back slightly, was what was obviously an all-purpose hall. What was not obvious was that it was a rather new building, at least compared with the church to which it belonged, and Jack couldn't help admiring the way the unknown architect had cleverly designed it to complement the

church's traditional design and blend naturally into the mature ecclesiastical landscape.

And at the very back of that churchly landscape, at the end of a long and curving Macadam drive, stood the old vicarage wherein no doubt, thought Jack, dwells Mr Widdop and, perhaps, a Mrs Widdop and some little Anglican Widdops.

There was just one wide concrete step up to the church's heavy double doors; Jack followed Betty who pushed open one of them and entered the church porch. The door closed loudly and jarringly behind them, rattling the old door hardware, and Jack noticed that the ambient noise of the outdoors was immediately muffled; the small church, which opened out beyond the porch, lined with wood that was darkened with age, its pale light coloured by a stained-glass window above the alter, was empty and utterly silent.

'Good old Valerie,' said Betty suddenly, her voice echoing around the small building; it seemed loud and irreverent to Jack.

'What?' he whispered.

'You don't have to whisper, Jack,' said Betty. 'There's no one here but us.'

'But what did you say?' He forced himself to ask the question in a normal voice in which respect he was not entirely successful.

'Valerie O'Davies,' said Betty. She was taking off her denim jacket and hanging it on one of a row of antique hooks there for the purpose. Under the coat she was wearing a loose white t-shirt tie-dyed pink and blue and purple; Jack remembered that Catherine often wore one just like it.

'She delivers the flowers early in the morning,' said Betty pointing to a huge pile of white chrysanthemums, with their lacy foliage and over-length stems, lying wetly and heavily across a small table in front of the parish notice board. 'She's a florist and she buys the flowers for the church every week,' said Betty. 'At the market in Auckland. Donates them. Every week,' she said, adding: 'Generous.'

She's a professional florist but she's hopeless at big arrangements. Funny, eh.'

'Has she got that little florist shop in town?' asked Jack. 'Val's Flowers or something like that?'

'Val's Flower Pot,' said Betty.

'I know her husband,' said Jack. 'At the club.'

'Steve. Her husband's name is Steve,' said Betty. 'I've met him once or twice.'

'That's him. He's a builder,' said Jack. 'Big outfit too. O'Davies Brothers Construction. He's a friend of Alan's. I think they went to school together.'

'Nice chap,' said Betty. 'Now, could you bring them Jack? The flowers.'

'Good-oh,' said Jack.

'Right. Let's get on with it then.'

And so for almost an hour a willing and obedient Jack Landseer followed the firm and clear instructions of Betty Krilich, flower arranger.

'Go to the kitchen in the hall, there, and through the kitchen outside to the compost,' she said, 'but don't go into the hall itself.'

'Why not?' asked Jack. Naturally.

'It's ante-natal class this morning,' said Betty.

'Oh,' said Jack who didn't want to know more.

And so he took the old flowers from the church into the kitchen of the adjacent church hall – ensuring that the door into the hall proper was firmly shut – where he emptied the tall and heavy vases of their putrid water and left them rinsing in the sink while he went out the kitchen's side door and around to the back of the hall to dump the wilting old flowers in the compost bin. Back in the kitchen he washed out the vases with hot water and then cold, as instructed by Betty, while she, in the church, was dressing the foliage of the fresh chrysanthemums and trimming their stems to a

suitable length. Finally Jack was asked to make another trip to the compost bin with the unwanted foliage and stems.

Betty was still busy when he returned to the church; she was half-way up a step-ladder, stretching out in the process of making some petty adjustment to her arrangement.

‘Are you safe up there like that?’ he asked.

‘Oh, you’re back,’ she said without turning around or looking down at him, and ignoring his question and his implied concern.

‘Yes. Are you safe?’

‘I’m nearly finished here,’ she said. ‘Go and wait in the kitchen and we’ll have a cup of tea in a minute. Won’t be long.’

She seemed affable now and he was glad. Perhaps she appreciated his company. Perhaps she appreciated his help. Evidently she didn’t appreciate or need his concern. And so, assuming she had been putting herself in danger up the church ladder every Friday for thirty-odd years, Jack decided to leave her to it.

This is the end of the preview file of *The Fine Art of Kindness*. Thank you for your interest and support. For complete buying information go to www.bolton.co.nz.

For any questions, comments or feedback don’t hesitate to email me at robert@bolton.co.nz. Thank you.