

MARCEL'S LAST WAVE

You have to understand, first off, that I hated, *hated*, my hair. So when I went to stay with our Auntie Noreen, who was a hairdresser, I had big plans. A whole week away from my Mum. Mum was curly herself and pointed proudly at mine as if she'd personally sculpted it out of marble. Auntie had gells and potions and lotions that did things to hair. Made it orange or blue or short. But most important of all, made it *straight*.

I liked going to Noreen's. Even if Uncle Graham was afraid of children and spent my stays hiding in his workshop, where he flattened tin cans in a little machine and planned a new way to have the garden that involved a lot of concrete and a statue of a Greek lady.

That was OK. Uncle Graham didn't bother me that much. He only came in for meals and told me, through his big moustache, that too much salt would harden my arteries and vinegar was the elixir of the Devil.

The house was great. It was big and it didn't have a falling down porch and a big water stain next to the kitchen table where the spouting had leaked, because Dad had left and there was no one to fix it. It had big rooms and little rooms and Auntie's room and Uncle Graham's room where he slept because Noreen said he snored. She had the good room, tastefully decorated in blue, that looked out over the road. Uncle Graham was relegated to the back, with the sewing machine and a box full of buttons.

My room was little, but I didn't care because it was all mine. Back home, I had to share with my sister Cara, who took over and stayed up late and woke me with the light. At Noreen's, there were boxes of winter clothes and cartons of stuff. The bunk bed was wedged sideways in, under the window. At night, I pretended I was on a ship and that everything outside was water.

The plan was that I was going to convince Noreen to fix my hair. I hated it, so much that I scraped it back hard, so it did scary things to my cheekbones and made my head hurt.

Noreen drove an old Morris, painted bottle green, with little signalling things that popped out when she turned a corner. At home, we didn't have a car. Mum had tried to learn, but she nearly killed the instructor by getting her foot jammed on the accelerator when she was having her forty-second lesson. Cara said driving was beneath her and got men to pick her up in their cars, the best of which was an old ex-horse with a petrified lily petal stuck to the paint.

Cara was eighteen and beautiful and had straight hair and men always did what she wanted. They rang up and made Mum go and get her when she was in the bath or scraping her legs with the razor or plucking her eyebrows. And Mum would go.

I was thirteen and ugly and had a moon face and curly hair and I wasn't going home until Noreen had fixed it.

At home we always had toast for breakfast, in a toaster that had flappy little doors worked by bolshie black levers that thought being used on a Monday was an offence against nature. At Noreen's, you got things like porridge. Or eggs. Noreen always approached me like she was going to have to force food down my throat. But it was OK. I learnt fast. On the third day, she smiled as she brought my boiled egg under a little knitted cover.

'Mrs Thewlis made that, Natalie' she said encouragingly as she set it down like a junior hand grenade.

She said Mrs Thewlis like I should have heard of her. Aunt Sylvia, who knew everyone, and lived with us, might have known Mrs Thewlis. I didn't.

Slicing off the top of the egg and hoping I didn't get the gloopy, transparent bit, I said 'Mrs Thewlis?'

'We're going to see her today. I'm going to do her hair. She's getting a Marcel wave.' Auntie said, decapitating her own egg with a neat gesture.

She looked smart today. Freshly pressed blouse, trousers, flat shoes, hair carefully waved. This made me worry a bit about Noreen at first. She had straight hair but she got her daughter, my big cousin Sally, to come over every fortnight and stick rollers and gunk in her hair and make it curly.

'Right.' I didn't know who Marcel was and why Mrs Thewlis was getting a wave from him. I dipped toast, neatly sliced into soldiers, into the golden star burst of the yolk. It ran drippingly down the shell and dried like paint on sunstruck concrete.

Mrs Thewlis lived a bit away, at the base of one of Auckland's mountains. Auckland had a lot of mountains. None of them were about to explode.

Still, I wasn't that keen. I knew what would happen. She'd be older than God and we'd spend seventeen hours drinking tea and get cakes that were worse than the ones Cara made in Cooking at school one year.

My teeth were still getting over those. Mum said they were delicious, even if she had to get a new plate for her false teeth afterwards.

I hoped Mrs Thewlis didn't have false teeth. They gave me the creeps. Mum only wore half of hers. The bottom half she carried in her bag, ready to shove in at the last moment. One year, she lost them at the beach and had to eat baby food for six weeks.

Anyway, I was going. I had Auntie's good books to get into.

Mrs Thewlis lived in one of those big Kauri houses you got a lot of in Auckland, with a veranda right round and a corrugated iron roof painted bright red. The garden looked like something out of a park, with roses blooming and hydrangeas as big as meteorites, bobbing in the wind.

At home, Mum had put down scoria and called it the pebble garden. It looked like a bit of field from the far side of the moon.

We parked the Morris on the drive. Noreen got her bag of hair stuff and looked at me in that way she had, as if she was afraid I might bolt or swear or start gnawing on the hydrangeas. I smiled back. I could see my reflection in the green paintwork.

'Mrs Thewlis is – well, she's a bit deaf, Natalie. And she's very old.'

'OK.' I scuffed my sneakers on the concrete. 'Right.'

Another look from Noreen, then we climbed the stairs to the front door. The day was already getting better. I had a thing about stairs. There was a place in Auckland called the Building Centre, and even though Mum never did any building, we used to go there and wander around. They had bits of staircases there, only three or four steps, going nowhere, and I'd go up and down them with this sappy grin on my face.

When I grew up and had straight hair, I was going to have a house with real stairs in it.

Mrs Thewlis had the sort of bell you had to turn, like an egg timer. Standing there, we heard it thrumming through the house. A seagull flew over our heads, screeching like mad before putting a deposit on Auntie's clean paintwork. The next door man came out, gave us a cheery wave and got into his blue Ford Anglia. Everyone in New Zealand had old cars. They'd been brought

out on boats, Auntie Sylvia said, because no-one knew how to build them here, so everyone had to drive them until they fell to bits.

After several years had passed, I heard halting, shuffling steps, then metallic unboltings and rattlings. The door swung slowly back on its hinges. Behind it, the tiniest, most wizened old lady I'd ever seen waited for us.

'This must be Natalie!' Rheumy eyes, filmed with wet, narrowed and disappeared into a face pleated out of crumpled elephant hide.

'Morning, Mrs Thewlis.' Auntie shouted. I didn't know she could talk that loud. 'Yes, this is Natalie.'

She urged me forward with the corner of her bag. 'Say hello to Mrs Thewlis, Natalie.'

I said 'Hello'.

We didn't get started right away. Instead we went to sit in the lounge. Mrs Thewlis had a lot of old furniture, all jumbled into the room like a junk shop. You had to move sideways to get around. The walls were covered with faded blobs of wallpaper, sepia pansies dotted with photos and pictures of people with high collars and weird hair cuts.

Giving me a hard stare that meant stay put and don't fiddle, Auntie Noreen went to help Mrs Thewlis make the tea. I was glad, because it meant I didn't have to look at Mrs Thewlis' head. It was pink and shiny, trapped in a wriggly cocoon of white hair, like a bird's nest that'd got caught in a concrete mixer.

'Here we are!' Mrs Thewlis sat in one of the armchairs. She was so little that her feet, in green and white checked slippers, didn't touch the ground. She was beaming at me, as if I was something she quite liked the look of.

'Such lovely hair.' Mrs Thewlis said. 'So lucky to have it curly.' She patted her own pink and white sculpture and beamed even harder.

I wanted to growl but I had Auntie's good books to get into, so I glared into my cup of tea. There were little bits of black stuff and white blobs floating on the surface.

'She *is*, isn't she?' Auntie said, beaming back.

'So lucky.' Mrs Thewlis said again. 'You won't have to spend all your time having a Marcel wave put in, like me.' She said it in a sort of delighted way, as if I had the secret of eternal life stuck to my head.

I couldn't contain myself. I said 'You *want* it curly?'

'Ah!' Little patches of red appeared on her cheeks, making them look like the roof. 'That was my late husband.' She patted the glowing spots with spindly hands. 'The men do like the girls with curls.' Clapping her hands, she was pleased with that. So pleased, she had to say it again, in a sing-song kind of voice. '*The-men-do-like-the girls-with-curls.*'

I thought I was going to be sick. Auntie was nodding her head. It was then I knew she'd never agree to stick gunk on my head and put me out of my misery. Mrs Thewlis and Marcel and his wave and Auntie and the world were all against me.

'This is my Edgar.' She'd gotten up and found a photo and when I looked up there was one of the high-necked brown and white people being stuck in my face. 'He was one for the ladies, you know.' She was doing something with one eye that I realised was meant to be a wink. 'Very handsome. But he loved my hair. Used to twine it round one finger. All the other girls had straight hair.' She said it, in her cracked old voice, as if having straight hair was some kind of odd religion.

Something had swum down into my brain. I hooked it and dragged it out.

'You mean, men *like* curly hair?'

I couldn't believe it.

'Oh yes.' Mrs Thewlis put down her photo, after giving it one more approving look. 'Much more feminine, I think.' She stuck her face closer to mine and lowered her voice as if someone might be hiding behind one of the ten armchairs. 'I never told Edgar my hair was really straight. I just got a Marcel wave put in and he was none the wiser.'

Cackling like a hen about to lay a really big egg, she winked again.

Auntie got out the things for the Marcel wave. They looked a bit like the things I'd seen in my history book. Medieval instruments of torture. Shiny bits of metal. Clamps with big screws.

I didn't like looking at them.

I had one of Mrs Thewlis' big leather photo albums to look at while Auntie was doing her thing. Soon her head was covered in bits of metal. Strands of white hair tugged at her scalp. It looked painful.

The old photos were much more cheerful.

The-men-do-like-the-girls-with-curls.

I loosened my hair band a little bit and turned a page.

Mum said 'Noreen told me to tell you that Mrs Thewlis died. Two weeks ago.'

It can't have been long after she'd had her last Marcel wave.

I felt happy, because now her Edgar need never know.