MY NEW ZEALAND STORY

QUARANTINE

Philippa Werry

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FOREWORD

I can remember very clearly where the initial idea for this book came from. It was a story that my father-in-law, Peter Werry, used to tell about how he and his family once went to stay on a farm in Waikononi, in Peel Forest. It was the middle of a polio epidemic and his parents thought the isolated farm was the safest place to keep him and his brother safe. Back then, no one knew what caused polio, or how to avoid catching it. There was no cure and parents were terrified that their children would end up sick, paralysed or at worst dead.

When I was writing this book in 2008, it felt as if those events had happened a long time ago. Our lives then were so different! But then Covid-19 arrived, and suddenly I saw the book in a new light. Schools and movie theatres closed, children not allowed to gather at playgrounds or visit each other's houses, parents worrying about how best to protect their children – all these things began to seem eerily familiar.

Many people have shared with me their own stories of polio as it affected them, or members of their family or community. These stories are still out there among people who grew up before the polio vaccine was developed and first given out in the early 1960s. It's an important part of New Zealand's history that we shouldn't ever forget.

Philippa Werry, December 2021

School was drawing to a close and a summer of golden promise stretched before us. We all had our dreams – whether running an Olympic gold, flying aeroplanes, becoming a film star … Inspired by our heroes, we felt dreaming was just a breath away from achieving.

Sadly, the summer of '37 had other plans for us. The heroes of the 'world out there' were being replaced by more sinister forces, ones which fed nightmares, not dreams.

CHAPTER
ONE

"THIS IS IT!" Charlie crowed. "This is the perfect spot. We are going to get them for sure. They won't even know what hit them!"

We were hiding behind clumps of tussock up in the dunes, overlooking Lyall Bay. It was a Saturday morning at the start of summer, the sea glittering, the day still brand new. Charlie had come whistling for me and I'd sneaked out of my bedroom window without waking Johnny up. That wasn't very hard, because Johnny always slept like a log; and he made so much noise wheezing and snorting that you couldn't even hear the sash going up.

"Ammunition!" Charlie said gleefully. He picked up two or three of the balls we'd been making out of water and hard-packed sand, and started hurling them down the beach.

"Sutherland Road Gang forever!" he yelled.

One of the sand balls landed squarely on the back of a man out walking his dog. We heard the heavy, wet thud of it above the sound of the waves breaking. The man looked around, shouted, and shook his fist.

"What a shot!" Charlie said in admiration.

"That's Billy Thompson's dad," I said. "Better get out of here, quick."

"You sure?" Charlie looked longingly at our pile of sand-ball grenades.

"Absolutely sure," I said. Billy Thompson lived in Freyberg Street. His family were all as big and beefy as he was, and now his dad had turned around and was coming back towards us. "I don't wanna get mashed. Come on – run!"

We ran. Luckily Billy Thompson's dad was as unfit as Billy, and we soon left him way behind, puffing and red in the face, and shouting about how we'd be for it, once he'd spoken to our dads.

"Think he recognised us?"

"Nuh," Charlie said carelessly. "Or he'd know my dad's not around to speak to." We looked back one more time. Billy Thompson's dad had found our cache of ammunition, and was stamping on it and kicking it to pieces.

"We're still going to get Billy Thompson, though," Charlie said. "*Pow! Kaboom!*" He ducked and dived from one side of the pavement to the other, throwing

pretend sand balls at a tram that was going down the middle of the road.

"Watch out," I said. "You'll get Paddy instead, and he hasn't done anything."

A little ginger-and-brown face was peering out the door of the tram: Paddy the Wanderer, the little dog who lived down on the wharves and knew his way all over town. He was always hopping on and off buses and trams, and sometimes even into taxis.

"Sorry, Paddy!" Charlie yelled, and Paddy wagged his tail and barked as though he understood, while the tram headed slowly down the street.

"But we'll get Billy though," he added.

"And the others," I said. "All those Boyles. We'll get them too."

"We'll get all the Freyberg Street Gang," Charlie said. "We need more driftwood. Stacks of driftwood, for hand-to-hand fighting."

We walked slowly back home, talking about when we'd get the Freyberg Street lot. It was already the 12th of December and school was due to finish in another week. Then it would be the long summer holidays; acres of time for messing around in. We took our time. It was just an ordinary Saturday; there wasn't any rush.

Lily and Flo were in the kitchen when I sidled in the back door. Lily had heated up the water on the stove to wash the breakfast dishes, and she was bent over the sink with her sleeves rolled up, scrubbing

away at the sticky porridge pot. Flo opened her mouth to say something loudly, but Lily dug her in the ribs and handed me a bowl of porridge.

"Thanks, Lil," I said, and I slid into a seat at the table to eat it. Johnny was still sitting there, too, struggling to finish his bowl. He hates porridge.

"Where've you been, Tom?" Mum asked sharply.

"Nowhere," I said quickly.

Mum looked up with a frown, but then she turned her attention back to getting the baby dressed. Jessie was three now, and Mum said we shouldn't call her a baby any more. But we still did, because it was funny to see her get cross. "Jessie not a baby!" she would say, stamping her little foot at us.

"Well, hurry up and finish your breakfast," Mum said. "The fireplace needs cleaning out. Johnny, you hurry up, too. Stop playing with your porridge and eat it."

I was suddenly starving after our early-morning trip down to the beach. I sneaked some extra sugar to sprinkle over the top of my porridge. Nobody noticed, except for Johnny, but I glared at him so fiercely he didn't say anything, just went back to looking hopelessly at the last few lumps of cold porridge congealing in front of him. Lily came over and whisked his plate away. Mum didn't notice that either. She was too busy tugging at the knots in Jessie's hair.

When I'd finished, I knelt down on the hearth and

got to work. Dad cleaned out the fireplace during the week, but it was my job in the weekends.

Dad was reading the paper. On Saturday mornings, he always spent half an hour reading the paper in his favourite chair before going out to dig in the veg-etable garden. I checked to see if he was wearing his watch. He wasn't. He didn't usually bother to wear his watch in the weekends, especially if he was going to work in the garden.

"Move! You're in the way," I said to Johnny. He was lying on the floor, now, lining up marbles to play with. He kept bumping into me, and every time that happened, I spilt some of the ashes.

"There's nowhere else to go," he said, in his usual whiney voice.

"You can always come in here," Lily grumbled. "Come back, Flo! You're supposed to be drying these."

But Florence was hanging over Dad's shoulder with the dishcloth in her hand. Dad didn't like to be interrupted over his paper, but Flo could always get away with things like that.

"Where's the bit with the movies?"

"Don't listen to Lil," I told Johnny. He annoyed me most of the time, but we boys still had to stick together. "Don't go in there. Washing up is girls' work."

"That's right, Tom," Dad said, turning a page. "You can both come outside in a minute and help me with some hoeing."

"Aw, Dad," I complained. Next, he'd be wanting me to help cut the grass and chop some wood. There were too many other things I wanted to be doing on a sunny Saturday morning. "I'm supposed to be doing something with Charlie."

"School finishes next week," Dad said. "Plenty of time in the summer holidays for you to be out and about with your mates."

I crouched down by the fireplace and hoped he'd forget. Dad didn't understand: there was never enough time for all the things Charlie and I wanted to do.

Maybe Flo would take his mind off it. "Look!" she squealed right in his ear. "Ginger Rogers is on at the De Luxe in *Twenty Million Sweethearts*. Please can we go and see it, Mum? I *adore* Ginger Rogers. *Please* can we go to the matinée today?"

"I thought you adored Shirley Temple," I said, looking up from setting the wood and newspaper logs for that night's fire.

"*And* Ginger Rogers," said Flo, tossing her head. In her imagination I knew she was tossing blonde curls like Shirley's back from blue eyes like Shirley's, but in real life she was stuck with boring, straight brown hair and brown eyes, like me. Flo and Jessie and I all take after Dad: round-faced, short and stocky. Lily and Johnny are more like Mum: taller and thinner, with sharp noses and pointy chins. But nobody in our family has film-star looks.

Jessie was watching Flo. She tossed her head as well, which only made it harder for Mum to pull the cotton frock over her head.

"We'll see," Mum said absentmindedly, with her back to Flo. "We're not made of money, you know."

Flo made a face that Mum couldn't see, and her lips moved silently. "We're not made of money, you know," she mimed. Jessie giggled.

Flo would have gone to the movies every week if she could. Sometimes we went to the Kilbirnie Kinema, but that wasn't good enough for Flo. She always wanted the extra excitement of going into town, even if that meant the price of the tram fare as well.

Mum was obviously thinking about something else, or she would have snapped at Jessie for wriggling. Now she glanced across at Dad's *Dominion*. "Is there anything in the paper about That Woman?"

When she said "That Woman", she pursed her lips up as though she'd just tasted a glass of homemade lemonade and found it too sour. Lily was onto her at once.

"Mum," she said, from the kitchen sink, "she does have a name. She's Mrs Wallis Simpson."

Suddenly the room bristled with tension as Mum and Lily scowled at each other. I never read the papers much – the print was too small, and it all looked dull and boring – but even I knew that over in England King Edward wanted to marry someone called

Mrs Simpson, and if he did he would have to give up the throne – abdicate – because she had already been married and was divorced.

"Exactly. *Mrs!*" Mum hissed. "She's a scandal and a disgrace. Coming across from America and—"

"There's nothing wrong with America," Lily said hotly. "I'd love to go to America."

Trust Lily not to leave it alone. Now that she's nearly fourteen, she thinks she's almost grown up. She's only two years older than me, but you'd never think so from the airs she gives herself.

I was trying to keep quiet so Dad would forget about asking me to help in the garden, but I couldn't resist it. "You just want to go to America," I said, "because you think you'll bump into Clark Gable on the streets of Hollywood, and he'll turn you into a movie star."

"Tom!" Mum said automatically, but she wasn't really listening. "He's the King," she went on. "He ought to put his country first, and he knows it, and That Woman isn't fit to be Queen."

"But he's in *love*," Lily argued. She stopped scrubbing at the porridge pot and gazed dreamily at the wall in front of her. "How can he rule properly without the woman he loves by his side?"

Mum got one of Jessie's arms through her cardigan. It was an old pink one that she'd knitted years ago for Lily, and mended for Flo, and now Jessie was

growing out of it too. "Ow! Hurts!" Jessie protested, but Mum ignored her. "You've been listening to too many popular songs, my girl," she said to Lily, "and watching too many romantic pictures."

"So?" Lily said.

"Real life's not like that."

"Why not?" Lily demanded. "Why shouldn't it be? It needn't be one big round of washing-up."

The newspaper rustled as Dad turned another page. This Edward-and-Mrs-Simpson argument had raged between Mum and Lily many times before, and Dad had learned to ignore it. I wished I could.

And I didn't see why Lily had to make such a big fuss about the washing-up. That was women's work. It's what women did.

I had other plans, of course. Charlie and I always had lots of plans. Starting with the battle of the century: the mighty, unbeatable Sutherland Road Gang versus the Freyberg Street Weaklings.

"Well?" Mum asked again, buttoning up Jessie's cardigan instead of answering Lily. "*Is* there any more news about the abdication?"

But this time Dad didn't answer. He was reading something else. He looked up and his eyes met Mum's.

"What is it?" Mum said quickly. "What's happened?"

"Nothing," Dad said. But Flo had darted back

again and was looking at the headline on the page he was reading.

"*Concern at Dunedin*," she read out. "*Outbreak of infant-ile para ... para ... Five cases reported.* What's infantile para – par-aly-sis?"

Neither Mum nor Dad replied. Mum stood up and straightened her apron.

"Isn't it that—" Lily started.

"Lily!" Mum said sharply. "We'll talk about it later." Not-in-front-of-the-children, she meant.

Well, I was blowed if they were going to tell Lily and not me, even if she was nearly fourteen. I'd find out somehow. Maybe Charlie would know what it was. I had a vague idea that it was one of those diseases – like diphtheria or tuberculosis – that grown-ups talked about in hushed voices.

But it could wait. It wasn't anything urgent, and Dunedin was a long way away from Wellington. And if it was *infantile*, that must mean infants – babies – so what did it matter? Johnny was five now, and Jessie three. They might act like babies sometimes, but we didn't have real babies in our family any more.

Mum had gone over to read the paper as well, shooing Florence away. Nobody was watching me. I picked up the parcel of cold ashes and slipped out the back door before anyone even had time to notice I was gone. Then I doubled back around to Mum and Dad's bedroom, nipped in through the window and took

Dad's watch off the table by his side of the bed. Very carefully, I put it in my pocket, and climbed back out the window.

It was Saturday morning and the whole day was waiting. Who cared about Ginger Rogers? Charlie and I would find something much more exciting to do. We had to plan the battle of the street gangs, for a start. I dumped the parcel of ashes in the rubbish bin and set off down the road to Charlie's place.

CHAPTER
TWO

CHARLIE LIVED a few houses down the road from us. His mother was pale and thin and always looked tired, and she never minded what we did, so long as we took his little sister Emmeline with us. Emmy was a bit younger than Flo, and she was used to tagging along. She knew she had to do what we said, or we'd send her back home again.

Charlie's dad wasn't home very often. He didn't have a steady job like our dad. Instead, he was away for weeks or months at a time on relief work, digging ditches or building roads, and when he was home he shouted a lot. You could hear him from out on the street. You could even hear him from our house, sometimes. Charlie never said, but I think his dad drank a lot, too. Maybe it was better when he was away.

"Coming down the beach again, then?" I said, after

we'd wrestled each other around their garden a bit, while Emmy watched without saying anything. It was a scrubby little garden, not like Dad's with its neat rows of potatoes and cabbages and silver beet, and tomatoes on poles, and parsley for Mum.

"Yeah, let's go get some driftwood," Charlie said.

We were always on the lookout for wood to add to our woodpiles. Sometimes we went all the way up to the Town Belt, on top of Mount Victoria, where the young pine trees were growing, and collected pinecones. We built forts up there, too. It was another good place for gang fights. But today was warm and sunny, so we decided to head back down to Lyall Bay.

"And I've got Dad's watch," I said, quietly, so Emmy wouldn't hear.

Charlie groaned. "Not again!"

"It's important," I said. "If I win a gold medal at the Olympics, I'll let you touch it."

"Let me keep it, don't you mean?" Charlie said. "It'll be all thanks to me. Mum!" he yelled. "We're going down the beach!"

Charlie's mother gave us jam sandwiches and a bottle of homemade ginger beer for our lunch. She came out to the doorstep and watched us go. She didn't wave or anything, just stood there with arms folded over her apron, watching. Behind her, their house was dim and gloomy inside.

"Race you!"

"Not fair!" Charlie yelled. "You always win!"

We charged off down towards the sea, leaving Emmy far behind. I soon outstripped Charlie as well. At the corner I stopped and waited for them both. By now the sun was glittering so brightly on the waves that you had to shield your eyes from the silvery glare of it. I drew in deep breaths of fresh salt air. Summer was coming. We practically lived down at Lyall Bay over the summer. I couldn't wait.

"Think you're blimmin' Jack Lovelock or something," Charlie grumbled, catching up at last.

I remembered back to the month before. At the exhibition race at the Basin Reserve to honour his Olympic gold, Lovelock had looked so ordinary at first: a small, slight figure with fair, curly hair. But how he ran, making it all look so smooth and easy. I remembered the crowd singing 'For he's a jolly good fellow', once he'd finished. And I remembered … but I wasn't going to tell Charlie that. I wasn't going to tell anyone. It was my secret.

"You should have raced him," Emmy said. "You'd beat him for sure."

"Oh, for sure," I said. "He's only the fastest man in the world, that's all."

"Yeah," Charlie said cheerfully, "but you're on your home turf, see? We'd be supporting you. That always makes a difference."

In between collecting bits of driftwood, we left our

shirts with Emmy, who was building sandcastles, and went swimming in our shorts. I wrapped Dad's watch up in my shirt, and told Emmy to watch over it carefully.

Lyall Bay was cold, but it was still a better place to swim than Oriental Bay, where it was often smelly and dirty. There were other kids swimming, too, some of them from school. We yelled and shouted as the waves crashed over us. Charlie, who was all skinny arms and legs, looked like a stick of driftwood himself, being tumbled around in the surf.

"Nearly the holidays," I said into my sandy jam sandwich, as we lay soaking up the sun and warming up after our swim. "Soon we'll be able to do this all the time."

"Terrific," murmured Charlie. He was nearly asleep. I opened my mouth to ask if he'd heard anything about an outbreak of infantile paralysis, but then I shut it again. Why spoil a perfectly good day? I lay back and closed my eyes too. Charlie was never that interested in the news, anyway. When I'd told him about Edward and Mrs Simpson, all he'd said was "Can kids abdicate from school?"

"Getting late," I said at last, when the sandwiches and ginger beer were all finished. "We'd better head back soon. Come on, I've got to do my training."

Charlie groaned again, but he sat up and took the watch that I handed him.

"Be careful," I warned him. "Dad'll kill me if anything happens to it."

"He'll probably kill you if he knows you've got it," Charlie said.

"Maybe," I said, "but I need it. Jack Lovelock says you've got to learn how to pace yourself, see. He can pace himself over a quarter-mile lap so he knows exactly how fast he's going."

There weren't any quarter-mile laps on Lyall Bay, but it was a long beach and I did the best I could. A few weeks before, I'd paced out what I thought was about 220 yards, and lined it up with landmarks up on the road, like street signs and lamp-posts. Charlie sat at the beginning, holding the watch. I stood slightly crouched over, hands on one bent knee, like the photos I'd seen of Jack Lovelock starting his races. When Charlie yelled "Go!" I set off, racing down the beach, 220 yards, then back again – 440 yards altogether.

I reckoned it didn't matter if the distance wasn't absolutely exact. I was just trying to get a feel for how fast I was going.

Jack Lovelock said he didn't run on beaches, because it made your heels sink into the sand, and you couldn't run on your toes, but I figured if I ran down on the hard sand, near the water's edge, it would be all right.

Sometimes I had to swerve around people coming

in or out of the water, and once I stepped into a hole that some kid had dug and fell flat on my face, while Charlie laughed his head off.

But I had to do it.

I don't know if I can explain it, about running. It was just something I had to do. When I ran, everything else fell away. Nothing else mattered, except how fast I was moving and the ground under my feet. On days when I couldn't run, I felt hemmed in and irritable. But on a good day, running made everything feel all right.

When Jack Lovelock ran his races, they said that he looked like he was floating on air. Gliding along, as though his feet were hardly touching the ground. As though it was no effort at all. Until nearly the end, when he gathered himself together and exploded in a mighty sprint finish. In the 1500-metre final at the Berlin Olympics, he'd sprinted from 300 metres out, and the fastest runners in the world couldn't catch him.

That was how I wanted to run.

"What'd you get?" Charlie asked, as I stood on my invisible finishing line, panting.

"About sixty-five?"

"Nuh," Charlie said. "You're way out."

"Again," I said. "I'll try again. Just let me get my breath back first."

We had a few more goes, until Charlie pointed out that Emmy, huddled up watching, was looking blue in

the face and starting to shiver from the breeze off the water.

"Sorry, Emmy!" I apologised.

"That's all right," Emmy said. She hesitated a moment, and looked at me shyly. "If you win a gold medal at the Olympics, will you let me touch it, too?"

"Absolutely," I said.

I put Dad's watch back in my pocket. We gathered up our piles of driftwood, making Emmy carry some too, and wandered back down the road towards home, dropping bits along the way. The pavement was warm and gritty under our feet. My shoulders felt a bit burnt, and I was itchy all over with sand and dried salt-water, but I felt good after the run.

"You keep most of it, if you like," I said, as we reached Charlie's gate.

"Why?" Charlie said.

"I dunno, because—" I didn't want to say that they probably needed the firewood more than we did. We're not rich or anything, but at least Dad always pays the rent on time and Mum always cooks a proper dinner. I didn't go inside Charlie's house any more. The walls were bare; there wasn't much furniture, not much food on the shelves, and, the last time I barged in on them, all they were having for their tea was bread and dripping, and Charlie was really embarrassed about it. He even told me that they'd had to do a midnight bunk a few times, because they'd got so behind with the rent.

Charlie glared at me. "We both got it. We go halves, OK?"

"Yeah, OK," I said. "Sure. See you tomorrow."

It was early evening by the time I got home. Everyone else was already sitting up at the dinner table. I sneaked back in through Mum and Dad's bedroom window, carefully replaced Dad's watch, and climbed back out again. Then I strolled in through the back door.

I held my breath for the first few minutes. I thought Dad might have noticed that his watch had gone missing. He might be mad at me for sneaking off instead of helping in the vege garden. Mum might complain about all the sand in my hair, even though the following night – Sunday – was bath night. But it didn't matter. Mum frowned at me and said "You're late," but nobody even asked what Charlie and I had been up to.

Lily, Flo and Johnny had been to the Ginger Rogers matinée, and the girls were both trying to tell the story over the top of each other while Mum dished out stew and mashed potatoes and carrots and cabbage. The Edward-and-Mrs-Simpson argument seemed to have been forgotten. Flo got up and danced a few steps around the table until Mum told her to sit down again. Jessie was making her knife chase her fork around her plate – I would have been told off for doing that – and Johnny was carefully separating the cabbage, which he hates, from the potato.

"You'll have to eat it in the end, you know," I whispered, sliding into my seat. He didn't say anything, just looked at me with big, unhappy eyes.

"Don't be mean to him," Flo hissed across the table.

"I'm not being mean," I hissed back. "He needs to toughen up. And Dad will make him eat it, anyway." Dad always insisted we finish everything on our plates. Because of the Depression and all the men like Charlie's dad who didn't have proper jobs. Grown-ups were always fussing about not wasting anything.

I'd cleaned up my plate before Johnny was even halfway through his. It was all that fresh air and sunshine. The summer was going to be wonderful, if all the days were like this one.

Mum and Dad weren't worried about where I'd been all day, but they were worried about the infantile paralysis outbreak. I'd almost forgotten about it. But I heard them talking about it after we went to bed.

Johnny was already fast asleep under the blankets, mouth open, snoring softly. I was used to his snoring, because we top-and-tailed. I always end up with his cold feet in my stomach, but at least his snores were at the other end of the bed. Our room was tiny, just a glassed-in porch off the dining-room, really, and Mum and Dad hadn't worked out that I could hear them talking when they thought I was asleep. The girls all shared a bedroom: Lily in a single bed, and Flo and

Jessie in a double one. Lily had her eye on our room for herself, but there was no way I was going to share the big bedroom with Johnny *and* two girls.

That night I was still trying to read my *Comic Cuts* in the last of the daylight. Dad's cigarette smoke drifted in through the window from out in the garden.

It was quiet outside. Far away, you could just hear the waves breaking. A song from someone's wireless floated through the night air. We didn't have a wireless yet, or a gramophone. "One day," Dad said. "One day, when I win the Art Union lottery."

I heard the bang of the back door as Dad came in again, and a thump as he settled into his favourite chair. And I could hear the regular squeak-scrape of Mum's rocking chair, and the rapid *clicketty-clack* of her knitting needles. Mum was always knitting something. Watching her used to fascinate me, because she could knit so fast and without even looking. But it was a bit scary, too, the way her needles stabbed the air so viciously.

Dad cleared his throat.

"About Edie …" he said.

Mum sighed, and her needles paused for a moment. *Clicketty … clack*, they said in the silence.

A tram clanged past on its way down to the terminus, and then all was quiet again. It was too dark to read now. I tucked the comic under my pillow ready for the morning, snuggled down and tugged some of the blankets off Johnny.

Edie is Dad's younger sister, Aunt Edith. She lives in Dunedin, married to Uncle Frank, and they've got one daughter, our cousin Meg. Meg is ten, in between Flo and me. Once I overheard Mum starting to tell Ellen Boyle's mother about how Aunt Edie couldn't have any more children, but then she spotted me listening and shooed me away. So I know Meg can't help being an only child, but she doesn't have to be such a brat. Flo is all right most of the time, but Meg would never dream of climbing a tree, or running along the sand, or scrambling over rocks down at the beach. She probably wouldn't be allowed to. Flo sometimes gets her hand-me-downs, and they're always several sizes too big, because Meg is quite plump. They're also very frilly, very clean – and never torn.

I didn't know why Dad was suddenly talking about Aunt Edie, but then I remembered the newspaper story. The infantile paralysis outbreak was in Dunedin. But it was *infantile*. Meg might act as babyish as Jessie most of the time, but she was ten years old, so what were they worried about?

And Dad was worried. "Edie's always been delicate," I heard him say.

I snorted into my pillow. If sitting around drinking cups of tea all day and complaining about her nerves was being delicate, then Aunt Edie definitely was.

Mum made a noise that sounded suspiciously like a snort too.

"Edie? She's got the constitution of an ox. She'll outlive us all, you wait and see."

"And little Meg's such a wisp of a thing," Dad continued. "A breeze would blow her away."

I nearly laughed out loud at that. If only it were true! We might be able to get rid of her for good in a Wellington southerly. As it was, a hurricane wouldn't blow Meg away. That didn't stop Dad from having a soft spot for her. She knew how to act all shy, and smile prettily, and make people fuss over her. Grown-ups never seemed to realise how infuriating she could be.

"If you're thinking of asking them up *here*, mind," Mum said, knitting busily again, "then the answer's no."

"But … but …" Dad stuttered. "I can't just leave them down there, if there's going to be another big outbreak."

"Frank can look after them," Mum said. "He's a lawyer, he's rich enough. They can rent a holiday house somewhere for the summer."

"But they're family," Dad said. "Don't you …" he hesitated. "Don't you remember—"

"Of course I remember," Mum said sharply.

Remember what? I didn't know what they were talking about.

"That's why I don't want Edie and Meg coming anywhere near us," Mum went on. "This is your family

now, Gerald. We can't run the risk of exposing the children to infection."

I was starting to feel drowsy, and Mum and Dad's words came and went in waves as I sank towards sleep.

"But if they leave Dunedin at once," Dad urged, "before they've been quarantined. What if they impose travel restrictions like last time?"

"We don't know yet," Mum said. "Why rush around making a crisis of something that might never happen?"

"Just for Christmas," Dad pleaded.

The last noise I heard before I fell asleep was the sound of the back door slamming again. But that was nothing unusual: Mum had a fierce Welsh temper on her, and Dad was as obstinate as she was.

Nothing unusual at all. Saturday, 12 December 1936, like it said at the top of Dad's newspaper. Just an ordinary day.

Just an ordinary, boring old Saturday that was going to change our lives for ever.