

Elizabeth Morton – Open Division, 2nd Place

Elephant

The cat was called Elephant. The rabbit had no ears. We used to sit at the creek bed, watching the leaves swim giddily by. There were eels, sometimes. Sometimes there were cola bottles and KFC boxes. Mum said *Watch for needles* but we never saw any needles. It was the 1980s, and the world was barefoot. Elephant sat at where the taproot to the cabbage tree had been uncovered. Her body was a treble clef, all loop and quiver. There was this time we found sword leaves from the cabbage tree and we sat on the bank, fishing, and we told all our friends that we caught and gutted the fattest eel in Auckland, but we didn't actually. We did find a dead shag, actually, and we poked a stick down its throat to see if it would come alive. We found dragonflies and cicada husks, and we would carry them in our pockets until they turned to sand.

Mum was sad. They say she had too much daytime television and couldn't take it anymore. Mum was the best but also the smallest ghost you've ever seen. We could hear her up-chuck all her scrambled eggs in the kitchen sink. If a ghost can smell, she smelled of bile and Tiger Balm. She was so pretty, like Rachel Hunter and Karen Carpenter together. She used to sit in a polygon of light that attacked the eiderdown, and pat Elephant and cry and cry. She liked infomercials where *But wait there's more*. She liked daytime replays of David Copperfield and *Rebel Without a Cause*, and she liked dipping gingernuts in her gumboot tea.

On a Tuesday, Micky would visit. Micky was from the nursing bureau, and wore turtle necks and leather jackets with a lanyard and tag. We'd imagined he'd be like Mickey Mouse, all fat shoes and white gloves and jiggly, but Micky was a different kind of animal. We usually went down the garden, when we tired of the wooden marble run and the Lego bricksets and minidolls. We sat at the hillock with Elephant and the rabbit with no ears. *It's like the bloody Wind in the Willows here*, said Micky, grinning at us. Elephant would nod her head.

Micky smoked a pipe, a vestige of some more elegant generation. He'd tamp tobacco in the bowl, and chew the mouthpiece and stem. He blew smoke rings in boring shapes, and sometimes smoke would ooze from his nostrils. We filched from his tobacco pouch, one Tuesday, and poured the contents into the creek to kill the fish – to make them gag and float and hold to sky. But no fish surfaced and Micky was in a stew. *Micky*, we said. *Where's your*

bacco? And Micky just huffed and puffed and patted down his trouser leg. We took the heads off two Lego minidolls and said to him – *That is what we'll do. That's what we'll do to the robbers.* And he winked and said *That's what we'll do.*

Mum didn't know anything about eeling or how to smoke a pipe. Mum smoked rollies, and was always losing her papers and Bic lighter. *Heaven's sake* said Mum when the infomercials were on and she'd left her lighter in the rockery. *Heaven's sake* she'd said when Dad moved in with Penelope from the accountancy firm, or when Child, Youth and Family Services dropped her a line, or when we'd pulled the extension power cord, so that all the party lights came down and landed on the hutch for the rabbit with no ears. When Micky would visit, Mum went to Mrs Grigg's cottage down the road, or she went to the supermarket, or the Plant Barn.

One time Mum went and went and went. I said to Micky *Mum's been a long time* and he winked and said *No shit, Sherlock.* I liked his wink, like I liked raspberry cordial. He was a buccaneer and his lanyard rattled like pirate bling. He was James Dean from Mum's movies or Steve McQueen. Mum said if she were younger and less fat, she would like Micky too. Elephant and I looked Mum up and down and said *Mum, you're the skinniest one in the world,* and Mum said *You don't have to say that.* And Elephant purred and flicked her tail at the same time, like she didn't know whether to be happy or sad.

When Mum was gone, we thought she might be trapped in the escalator stairs or that she might have been jumped by a boogie man from behind a power box, or that she walked into the garden centre and lay down in the potting mix, and would never stand up again. I thought of all the neighbours bringing around casserole dishes, and how the kids in class would all sign a big A3-size joint card, and it would have little hearts and stick figures – just like Mum. I thought that Mrs Griggs would have me stay at her cottage, and maybe I could have Micky there too. We could all have a sleepover and feel sorry for ourselves. And Elephant would come and live on Fancy Feast, and the rabbit with no ears would grow some back, like a miracle, like Jesus or the saints or the false prophets, but more *House and Garden* than *Leprosy and Wine.*

When Mum was gone, we thought we might never watch an infomercial again. We thought that all the infomercial people who sell carrot knives and tea strainers and abdominal

strengtheners might lose their jobs and end up on the weekend kids' show. We thought about how nobody would make us fairy bread and nobody would say *Heaven's sake*, but we also thought that Dad might start growing vegetables again, and listening to Talkback Radio, and how they would have an assembly at school where all the teachers say *Condolences* and *Sorry so sorry* and how that would be quite nice. Micky saw us thinking and said *You're missing your mum*. And I said *Yeah, yeah*.

After a while we played cowboys and Indians. But not the curry Indians; the ones with flappy sleeves and arrows. I liked to be an Indian best because you can go *Wa-wa-wa-wa* with your hand over your mouth, and have a name like Lost Dog or Precocious Child. Mum said not to make the cowboys win all the time, because that's unfair. But Mum was not here and Micky liked to make me play dead and shoot me with his pistol. He said something about how if Indians won all the time we'd all be living in tepees and holding hands in circles. I wouldn't have minded living in a tepee with Micky. I could play dead in seventeen different ways. Shot down or over-dosed or cutting long lines on my forearms. Mum had done it four times. That's the best thing; you get to keel over and then get up again and make the beds and water the garden and pat Elephant.

Micky said dead Indians don't budge, no matter what. Mum was gone the longest time. I didn't budge and I counted all the flower shapes on the couch upholstery. I closed my eyes enough to see his Adam's apple going up and down like a fishing float. Micky said *Okay* and I said *Okay* and we got up and he ran me a bath. When I was in the bath I thought about Dad and the way he never liked the rabbit, and how maybe I don't like the rabbit either. I liked Elephant first and then Micky and then Mum and then my He-Man colouring in book and the rabbit didn't really figure. Then I felt bad because my He-Man colouring in book doesn't have nerves. Nerves were what we wanted and nerves were what got Mum. When Mum isn't saying *Heaven's sake* she's saying *It's my nerves, just my nerves*. I think of nerves like germs and people's sardined heads in stadium photos and Nerds candies. They would be small, and highlighter orange and sick pink, and they would be like the hundreds and thousands on the fairy bread. Mum wouldn't like nerves because they'd have too many calories. *It's my nerves* she'd say over the sink. I felt bad for the rabbit.

Micky was the best. He towelled me down after the bath, and let me get into my Ninja Turtle pyjamas. He said I could have a look at the *TV Guide* and choose anything I wanted. He said

I could go to bed after the Goodnight Kiwi, and that I could eat Two-Minute Noodle flavouring straight from the foil sachet. It was so salty, like a gazillion of Mum's tears. We chose to watch *Old Yeller* about a dog in Texas who dies in the end, like everyone does eventually. But this one was worse because Old Yeller's owner shoots him, even though he loves Old Yeller. I think I wanted to cry because snot came out. It was a bad movie. The snot tasted sad. And they get a new dog called Young Yeller but it's not the same because it can never be the same. Micky said *Do you need a cuddle?* And we changed the channel to the commercial about Ginsu knife sets and the one about the Thighmaster Pro. Elephant fell asleep on the beanbag and then I did. Micky lit up his pipe and phoned the bureau. I could hear him talking in my dreams.

When they found Mum, the sun was still not up. The coppers knocked at the door and Mum was with them. She looked like the nerves had got her again. Her eyes were swollen and her lip was split at the bottom. I sat on the stairs with Elephant. Micky said *Come in and I'll get you a cuppa and a gingernut* and Mum said nothing. Mum walked into the kitchen and passed us by and said *Heaven's sake, you should be in bed* but in a voice that was like it should have been selling toilet paper to people without bowels. Mum liked the word *bowels* but I liked *guts* better. Mum liked words like *diarrhoea* and I liked *the shits*. He-Man and Ninja Turtles and even Skeletor would like it my way best. I don't know what Micky would say; I don't think he has bowels anyway. Mum didn't sound like Mum even on a blue day. She looked like Old Yeller before he was shot, all wild eyes and fever and no idea that things were heading downstairs. I thought if somebody takes Mum and shoots her it should be us because we're her blood. We wouldn't get a Young Mum, but we might get sympathy which would be better than a kick in the teeth. Anyhow, Elephant and I headed to bed because we couldn't be arsed putting anybody out of their misery even if it was our job. Micky and Mum sat at the dining table sucking gingernuts and listening to the Concert Programme and saying words like *hospital* and *pills* and *lost cause* and *little Sam little Sam little Sam*.

At school the teacher says *Never end a story with waking up from a dream* so we're going to end with a dream instead, and never, ever wake up. In the dream there's Micky with a cowboy hat and Mum in a deckchair by the creekbed, and we're catching eels with cabbage-tree leaves. Micky says the best way to catch an eel is with a cage trap, but he says *There are many ways to skin a cat*. We watch the cola bottles and KFC boxes float by and Mum says *Watch for needles* but it's the 1980s and the world is barefoot. In the dream I am Lost Dog

and I have zinc war paint and it's like *The Wind in the Fucking Willows* because there's me and there's Mum and Micky and Elephant and the rabbit has ears. And the sun hits our faces like hundreds and thousands and there are nerves but they're all under the skins of us. And in the dream I turn around and there's a vegetable garden with kale and Brussels sprouts and celery and broad beans and the Talkback is playing something about Muldoon and Rogernomics and Dad is there. Dad is in a cowboy hat and teaching us how to fish.