Cait Kneller – Open Division, 2nd Place

Teal

Willie threw the door open so hard it made that stubborn little spring on the wall go *bungg.* I was lying on my bedroom floor, copying out my letter to Teal. Willie held up an empty cassette case, pinched at one corner so it swung from its hinge. *Age Ain't Nothing but a Number*. Aaliyah eyed me with suspicion from the cover.

I glanced up at Willie and blinked, then I went back to my letter. She thrust again, slamming the doorknob against the wall. 'Taupiri!'

My Jonathan Taylor Thomas poster shed its Blu Tack and fluttered to the ground.

'I don't have it,' I said. 'Get out.'

Willie stared at me with a finger in her mouth, working her teeth under a slip of hangnail. Her jumper was wet where she'd sucked on the cuff. She looked as though she could pluck out my eyes.

She charged in, sweeping the room. I followed her hands as they picked through the air. We both turned to my tape deck on the bedside cabinet. I'd inherited it from her: pale violet, with stars painted on it in Twink. Willie lunged for the eject button. The chamber was empty.

'Told you.'

She opened my top drawer and gave it a rattle.

'I – haven't – *got* – *it.*'

She wasn't finished. Her hand considered every item within her reach. When she reached for my basket of tapes, I sat up.

'Don't. They're organised.'

She knew which one would hurt the most. She's my sister, after all. Clenched in her palm was a homemade cassette with orange gel pen on the label.

'I'll keep this until you find it,' Willie said.

I swiped at her legs, but they were slippery in three-stripe tearaways. She slid across the hall, into the womblike dark of her room.

I didn't want to think about it. Teal's tape in Willie's room. The ribbon, translucent-dark like a cockroach, vulnerable between Willie's vengeful fingers. I leaned my ear on her door, quick. I listened for the sound of her drawing out its insides.

Mokomoko dragged herself down the hall on her belly to help. She pressed her nose under the door; twitched the wet curl of her nostrils. Her brindle coat was rippling and cool against my leg. We both felt my sister on the other side.

Since Eli was born, Willie stayed in her room almost all day. She shuffled back and forth on the other side of the door, surviving on biscuits Mum left on a plate in the hall.

I'd been at Nanny's when the baby arrived. When I got home, I spied on Willie through a sliver of open door. The blinds were closed. A warm vinegar smell leaked into the hall, and clothes puddled around her on the bed. Eyes gleamed through the dark – blue-white and wet like a clutch of eggs – and tears crusted around her mouth. It made me feel scared, and kind of sick. I never went in there again.

My parents were young themselves when Willie came along. Dad was seventeen, Mum two years older. She told him a baby girl was on her way, and they curled up together on the bonnet of Dad's Holden.

Eli spilled out of my sister faster than she could know him. At night, from my bed, I heard the whisper of Willie pacing the house.

Mum was folding washing on the floor of the lounge. On the couch behind her, Eli slept under a polar fleece blanket. Tia watched *Ricki Lake* with the volume low. *MINDY WENT NUTS WHEN SHE FOUND OUT ABOUT BELINDA*. Chips kept falling out of Tia's mouth.

Mum caught the neck of a onesie under her chin. 'What are you sulking about, bubba?'

She caught the waistband of my pants and pulled me close.

'I'm not.' I twisted and thunked myself down on the floor. Under the coffee table, Mum's hairbrush was sleeping face down on pale bristles. The back of its wide head lime green and lacquered. I touched my finger to its spine and saw Mum gather her hair in one fist.

'I'm cutting it off,' she said.

I wasn't falling for it.

'It's gotten *too* heavy,' she said.

Theatrical eyeroll.

She shrugged like it was a done deal. This was our game. I'd always stop pouting to save her hair. I crawled into her lap and bandaged a lock around each of my hands. Holding her face so our noses almost touched, I whispered, 'I won't let you.'

Eli rolled over, his blanket wrapped around his thumb. The way his head arced down to meet his neck made my eyes sting. I kissed his shoulder and lay my cheek on his chest.

'He's my baby,' I said.

Mum leaned her cheek against the arm of the couch. Her eyes were wet, reflecting the TV.

'You were Willie's baby,' she said. 'Always cried when you cried.'

Tia rolled her eyes and reached for the remote. 'Tangiweto,' she hissed. I kicked at her but she dodged.

Mokomoko was asleep on her back beside us, the edge of her mouth serrated in black, quivering lumps. I touched them lightly, which made her sneeze. She would bite me if I misbehaved, but only as a last resort. She'd prefer to bite someone else.

Moko's teeth bared, and a bellowing sound unspooled from her throat. I heard scuffing on the driveway. Gravel crunched under someone's feet.

'Who's that?' Mum looked at Tia, confused, and lifted me off her lap.

I saw the silhouette before I heard the knock. The shape of a child, just a little taller than me. It couldn't be Teal. No. I wondered if she had somehow walked all the way from Panguru. She knew how to walk a long way. Her feet spat out stones, thorns, broken glass, prickles. I moved down the hall like a spirit rushing north.

Stella, the girl from next door, stood on our porch hugging an overstuffed bin-liner. Mud seeped over my tongue. Mum stood behind me, craning to see who it was, and I stepped aside without a word.

We pulled the bulging rubbish bag up the front steps. Mum moved her clean folding into the laundry basket and tipped a hoard of Pumpkin Patch hand-me-downs onto the floor. Our lounge looked like the back room of the Salvation Army. Stella's mum had made her come down here. It was obvious.

'Do we have to give her some of our clothes?' I asked.

Mum laughed through her nose. 'I don't think so.'

I untangled leggings printed with blackberries, and plaid pinafore dresses. I wouldn't have worn this stuff even if Nanny begged me. I put on a crushed straw hat with a daisy hot-glued to the brim and performed an impression of Stella's mother for Mum and Tia. I imitated the way she said *Hi, girls!* without actually looking at us, looking anywhere but our direction, as if she were blind. Tia wouldn't laugh, to spite me. Mum sighed but I saw her smirk.

Next, I pulled a pinafore over my t-shirt and blinked super-fast like Stella. The world started to strobe. Mum said that one wasn't funny.

We stared at the heap of clothes. Mum had a lot more folding to do now.

'Not your style, huh,' she whispered.

I flared my nostrils.

'It's okay. I know some mums who would like these.' She was thinking about Panguru.

I'd been up there to stay with my nanny that summer, so I wouldn't be a hōhā when the baby was born. There wasn't room for me in the house anymore. Willie used to be my ally against Tia. Now everything I did upset her.

Dad drove me up north in the Commodore. We wound the windows down so I wouldn't feel sick. My sisters would have complained, but it was just the two of us. I folded my elbow under my chin and leaned out the window. They were sending me away.

It was night when the road turned to metal. The house leaned out from the side of a hill, watching our ascent. It was my job to open the gate. I remembered that gate from when I was small, the way the latch curled in my hand like a fat slug. Everything seemed strange and bristling in the night. The mountains had turned away.

Nanny stood under the porch light, waiting. She pulled me close, and I was enveloped in cold skin and familiar perfume. She gripped my shoulders with tremulous hands, knuckles rolling through her skin like marbles in a stocking.

'You got tall.' Her glasses were so thick the lenses rippled. 'You –,' she poked my dad in the ribs, 'you got skinny.'

Tia told me they had pulled out Nanny's teeth for her twenty-first birthday and given her a brand-new set. She spoke like every word was a surprise to her mouth.

I handed her a parcel from Mum: ginger crunch, some jumpers I'd outgrown, two pairs of shoes that were rubbing my toes. Nanny would take them down to the school later. My arms felt heavy and I tripped over the threshold.

'Let's get this one to bed, eh?' said Nanny.

She led me down to Mum's old room. It was narrow and tall, with twin beds and walls pasted with orange flowers. The bed frame creaked in greeting as I threw my bag down and dug for my pyjamas. They were pressed thin from lying folded in my backpack. They fit tighter under the arms than they did at home.

Nanny's bathroom was at the other end of the hallway. It was the coldest room in the house, with a pale-green light washing over everything. There were two toothbrushes in a glass on the vanity, one peach and one emerald. Still, after all these years.

She tucked the blankets up to my chin. In the hall, I heard her say to Dad, 'Not long now.'

I woke up feeling like I'd cried in the night. I lay in silence, watching oily spots swim at the edge of my vision and wondering if I should get up, or wait till Nanny came and got me. She was probably eating her bran flakes, or Weet-Bix soaked to mush. I slid into my slippers and crept down the hallway.

In the front room, a kid was sitting at Nanny's table. He looked about four, with Marmite smeared on his cheek in the shape of Korea. He told me his name was Ariki.

'My friend's son,' Nanny called from the kitchen.

Over toast, Nanny explained Ariki's favourite game. Shops. Whenever Nanny finished a box of cereal or a pot of Olay cream, she cleaned it and saved it for Shops. Ariki had one of her old leather wallets, with a Far North library card, $1.65 in silver coins and some fading Daily Kenos. I had to sell him the items and put them into a kete, then refund him, take everything out, and do it again until he got bored.

At lunchtime, we ate thick cheese-and-butter sandwiches on stiff brown bread. Nanny grated the cheese, making an airy layer in the middle of the yellow grease. We tried to do it at home but it wasn't the same. After lunch, she walked Ariki home and I snuck into her room. She never said we weren't allowed in there, but she'd never invited us inside either.

It smelled like camphor. Nanny had a carved wooden chest at the end of her bed, just like Mum. My reflection wobbled in the glass of water on her bedside table; a doily underneath, with the knots worn flat. Next to her dressing table, Koro surveyed the room from a huge gold frame. The air was colder in there. He smiled like he was going to tell on me later.

We ate cold chicken for dinner on a card table outside. Nanny picked it apart with her little white teeth. I helped dry the dishes, polishing off dirt that Nanny couldn't see, then I read a book from home until she said, 'Lights out'. We did the same thing every day until Teal came.

One day, Nanny went to the post office and came home with a girl. From the top of the front steps, I watched them come into focus, ambling up the hill together. The girl had reddish hair and her fringe hung in her eyes. Skinnier than me, and a little bit taller. There was a small blue stud in each of her ears. Her name was Teal-Marie Francis.

I didn't want a stranger looking at my stuff, but Nanny made me show her my room. Teal stroked the rainbow blanket my nanny had crocheted just for me. On the wall, right above my pillow, Mum and Aunty Yasmin had hidden their names amongst the coiled orange-blossom print. Teal ran her fingers over the indentations and smiled. There was a gap in her teeth the width of a one-dollar coin.

I told her about my other nana who was buried in the urupā at Taupiri Mountain. She'd never been there, but she did have an ancestress with famous violet eyes. We played with the heavy jade lighter Nanny used to light her long, skinny smokes that smelled like cinnamon, and I showed Teal the picture of Aunty Yasmin from when she used to host a segment on *Koha*. Crystal clip-ons cascading to her collarbones. Yasmin had been to Yum Cha with Temuera Morrison. Their knees touched under the tablecloth.

Teal had knucklebones in her pocket, and I had my own in my bag. Hers were made of real bone from a dead sheep. Mine were coloured resin, full of glitter, each with a carved little face and ugly on purpose. I offered a trade. She picked the green one who was obviously the father of the set and replaced him with a lump of shining bone. We played until we couldn't see without the porch light. Teal didn't stay for dinner, but Nanny gave her a parcel wrapped in a tea towel to eat on the way home.

She came the next day, and every day after that. We inspected everything in the house together. Dark, secretive bottles in the back of the medicine cabinet – ipecacuanha wine, syrup of squills, and kūmarahou. Teal knew the recipe for a flying elixir, which Nanny thought might also work for measles. The black potion puddled on my tongue, and I choked it down, shaking my head as I swallowed and laughed away the burn. Teal swore her feet were a few millimetres off the floor. I got on my hands and knees to check but it was hard to tell.

In Nanny's roll-top desk, we found pictures of my uncle in the navy; his hair like a crinkle-cut chip. Teal's warm fingertips left prints on them all.

The tangelo tree was brimming, bubbling ripe fruit onto the grass. Teal showed me how we could hook our fingers through the branches, pulling ourselves closer to the best fruit. Ariki ran to scoop up the falling bounty, and we juiced them in Nanny's giant citrus press.

Teal sat next to me on the steps, shucking tangelos and slurping them back. We picked at little juice sacs stuck in our teeth. She had freckles kissing down the left side of her face. I'd never been so happy as I was then, sitting next to a heap of tangelo peels with juice running down my chin.

Teal was allowed to sleep over, as long as she checked with her mum. I watched her in the hall, spooling the cord of the telephone around her ring finger. She didn't ask her mother a single question. All she said was, 'Yup. Yup. Okay.'

Teal returned and announced she wanted to play Scrabble. She'd never played before. She lay the box on Nanny's embroidered tablecloth and opened the board like a holy book. We were eating a Moro Nanny had cut into slivers, and the tiles cupped in Teal's hand looked edible, too.

We played for two hours. My best word was *pīhau* for eleven points, but Teal turned it into *pīhauhau* and got the double word score. Nanny laughed so hard she actually farted.

After Scrabble, we put on our pyjamas. Nanny lent Teal one of her t-shirts.

Nanny turned down both beds but we crawled into the same one, top and tail. Tired light from the porch stretched across the wall and settled in Teal's hair. She had a chickenpox scar on her forehead, like an eye gouged out of a potato. I wanted to fill her head with thoughts about me. I wanted our brains to be the same brain.

'My sister is having a baby,' I told her.

‘Did she tell her husband?’

My cheeks glowed. ‘She doesn’t have a husband. She’s not old enough.’

Under the blanket, Teal’s hand found mine and we laced our pinky fingers together. I held my other hand in the moonlight cast across the blankets and showed her how my left pinky doesn’t fully straighten.

‘Can I come to your wedding?’ she whispered. I thought she was going to cry. My face burned and I told her I didn’t want to spend the rest of my entire life with a boy.

‘You can be my bride,’ she said. ‘I’ll love you to death.'

She slept with her mouth open, slightly, and her breath sounded like confetti raining outside a church. I tried to stay still all night.

When it was time for Teal to go, Nanny was out on a visit. I decided I could walk her home on my own. I’d been wondering what Teal’s house was like, and if she had any dolls. Tia had a friend whose room was full of silent, scheming dolls. Tia was scared to sleep over, but I liked porcelain dolls. I liked their little shoes made of white leather.

Teal took me a long way off the main road until I didn't know where we were. The gravel was hot and unsteady underfoot and the weeds made my ankles itch. A blister burst on my heel and the crater filled with grey dust. Teal was walking barefoot. I stopped to lean on a stile.

‘I thought you lived in Panguru,’ I said.

She bent down to pull the head off a dandelion. ‘Mum’s at her friend’s house.’ My stomach shivered. The sun was starting to set. I was too far from Nanny’s to get back before dark.

Teal spotted the house. She went quiet as we cut across the paddocks and stopped at a tree on the fence line with an old swing. Men were sitting in front of the house in a car with its doors thrown open. Beyond the house, people sat around a table in white plastic chairs. I wanted Teal to ask her mum to take me home. Instead, I watched her climb onto the seat of the swing.

I heard a bottle skitter across concrete; the laughter of people I didn’t know. The house was far from the road and the road was far from Nanny’s.

Teal looked at me and bit her bottom lip. ‘I’ll just go and talk to my mum,’ she said.

Teal walked up to a Pākehā lady with Ribena-coloured hair. It seemed like Teal was in trouble, so I stayed by the swing, clinging to the trunk of the tree. It was covered in dry moss like

a mint-green jumper. Teal was wearing t-shirt and shorts. I'd worn the cardi Nanny knitted me last birthday, and long wide jeans that were grey and frayed from trailing in the dust. I'd tied the cardigan around my waist at the stile, but I pulled it back on and buttoned it to my chin. It was a feathery orange yarn with buttons shaped like rabbits. I had matching orange hair clips on each side of my head.

I needed to call Nanny. I tried to tell her where I was with only my thoughts.

Teal came back and took my hand, leading me across the lawn and up four stone steps. The TV was on inside, playing *RTR Countdown* in a freezing lounge. Teal started dancing next to the speakers and I tried to dance with her, but a man shivered out of the dark and danced dirty, sliding up against Teal's back. His tongue pulsed inside his gurning, toothless mouth.

I was thirsty. We walked down a hallway, trailing our fingers on the wall. On the kitchen bench, we found a bowl of tomato sauce, thick with pastry flakes, and an open tub of margarine. Some kid had dissected the last sausage roll. Teal peeled away the pastry and we halved the sausage.

We walked the dim hallways of the house, sifting through drawers and moving the trinkets. When night came properly, the house was silent. Any second, I knew Teal's mum would pull up the car and take us home. My ears throbbed, listening for the sound of tyres on gravel. I was up to a good part of *The Face on the Milk Carton*, and I was going to ask Nanny to leave a hot water bottle in my bed. Teal looked so tired. I wondered where she slept.

'Cold, tonight,' I said. Teal swallowed her spit and scanned the room. In the corner, there was a card table covered in grimy blue fabric. Teal bundled the tablecloth in her arms and carried it onto the deck. Held at two corners, it filled like a sail, and a spectre of ash flew over the handrail. We curled together under the table, and Teal spread the cloth over me like a blanket. It stunk of grease, like Ariki's buttery hands in my face. I wanted someone to pick me up. Nanny, my mum, Willie. Even Tia. Nanny wouldn't know where I was. It made me feel sick.

Pairs of unfamiliar legs moved around me in the dark all night. I clung close to Teal and watched the sky turn from black to indigo. When the morning arrived, a grown-up foot nudged Teal awake.

'Come on.' It was a woman's voice.

My shoulder ached from the rough weave of the carpet. We climbed into a white Corolla, Teal in front and me behind the driver. She pulled off before I found my seatbelt. Head against

the window, I listened as two coins bounced in the ashtray, like silver-plated tuatara writhing in a nest.

We pulled around the last corner and Teal pointed out our driveway.

'This you?' her mum said. I climbed out, and Teal didn't say goodbye.

It was a long walk up the driveway. Nanny was going to tell me off. When I heard her footsteps in the hall, I started to cry. Fat tears slid through the weave of my sandals. Nanny wrapped me in her cardigan and held onto me.

In the last week of the holidays the air turned stale like the mist at the end of the Log Flume. Grey even when it didn't rain. Teal didn't come over much.

The last time we ever played together, she told me she once had a koro of her own.

She lived in his house until she was five. He took six pills every morning and swallowed them all at once. His voice sounded like a door creaking open. He smelled like cigarettes underneath peppermint.

When Teal left to live with her mum, her koro made her a tape. He recorded stories and sang her songs, and she took the tape with her to every new house, listening until the screws came loose and her mum chucked it in the bin.

Teal made a tape for me. She didn't say what was on it, just pressed it into my hands. I imagined her voice echoing out of my tape deck, talking to me even when we're far apart. The same words, forever and ever and me saying nothing back. I was relieved I couldn't play it until I was home.

I went to school in Panguru for two weeks of Standard Three, while Mum and Willie got settled with the baby. The classrooms seemed to crouch in the paddock, ready to pack up and leave any day now.

Teal was in a higher class, but I knew she'd find me at lunchtime. I sat on the deck of the prefab with two boys from my class and a girl named Harmony, who had promised to show me her hernia.

My thirsty eyes searched the playground until she appeared, grinning as she walked across the basketball court. Harmony snapped her arm across me like a seatbelt.

'*Don't look*. She'll scab your lunch.'

The boys joined in with a hiss.

Teal. Her eyes didn't stop smiling, even when her face did. She just stood there, looking up at me, almost squinting, as though she couldn't hear them because the sun was in her eyes. I thought of our night under the table. She probably didn't have any lunch. Her silence made them bolder.

'Go find some fucking friends, Teal!'

She let them batter her with insults. My Teal, who knew a recipe to make us fly. Who could walk for hours with no shoes on. Whose mother nudged her awake with her foot. She was a monstress at school and she didn't tell me.

I sunk my shaking thumb under the skin of my tangelo. The juice ran into the place where my nail was bitten down to blood. The sting made me wince. I tore off a piece of peel and chucked it at Teal's face.

She looked me in the eyes, and there was a droplet of juice clinging – just below her mouth – quivering on that place where it really tickles. She didn't move to wipe it off. The juice formed a teardrop and slid under her jawbone. I wanted to lick it away.

The boys thought I was a genius. They grabbed their own peels and stretched their hands out to Teal, calling *here, girl*! like she was a farm dog. They threw crusts and apple cores over her head for her to fetch. They hovered biscuits in her face like amateur hypnotists. Teal bent to pick up the tangelo peel and walked away.

Before we left for Auckland, Dad asked me what I wanted to listen to. I remembered Teal's tape, stuffed it in the bottom of my bag, and said I didn't care. I hugged Nanny goodbye. She handed me a crocheted blanket and a red Warwick notebook with an oriori written in wobbling cursive.

'For Willie,' she said.

Back home, I smelled my sisters everywhere. Mum did washing all day, every day. I came to learn the scent of Eli and his fronds of black hair.

I never listened to Teal's tape. I don't know if it was a song or a message. Sometimes I slotted it into my tape deck and closed the chamber, or squeezed my finger into one of the white-toothed holes until it bit me back. I wrote her a letter, after many attempts. When I called Nanny to get her address, she hadn't seen Teal in a while.

We shovelled the clothes into their black plastic sack, and Mum took them out to the garage for our next trip up North. Maybe something of Stella's would find its way to Teal. Suddenly, I was desperate to talk to my friend. I wanted to hear her voice crackle off the ribbon of that tape.

'Tia. Where's Willie's Aaliyah tape?'

She was still on the couch, scraping crumbs from the bottom of the chip bag. She looked at me with her tongue in a molar.

'Uh?'

'Where is it? Did you take it to school?'

Her school bag was lumped next to the front door. The zips peeled back like two tongues, and I pulled out her grubby, silvering pencil case, her yellow *Spell-Write*, a fistful of old notices that smelled like mouldy bread. I groped in the hollow mouth of the bag. Only crumbs.

'Get out, dick!' yelled Tia.

She threw the remote at me, half-assed. It cracked open on the floor and spewed batteries. The sound gave Eli a fright. His face gathered in the middle and he wailed.

Willie emerged sleepily from the hallway and slid past the couch.

'Why's he grizzling, now?'

He reached out and caught her t-shirt in his little jelly hand. When she snatched herself free, I felt like I had soap in my eyes.

I saw those orange gel-pen letters on the tape Willie had hidden in her room. My tape. *Don't Forget Me, Taupiri* – with a love heart over one i. I grabbed the remote and hurled it at Willie's back. It spun off the wall behind her and clattered sheepishly to the floor. Then I ran for it, ran to the front door with Willie's eyes carving into my back. Her feet made thunder down the hall; she hadn't moved so fast in more than a year. I rattled the doorknob, removed the deadbolt, slid out the chain.

I almost ran straight through her. Stella. Back with another bag, standing barefoot on the concrete of our front step. Her elbows and eyelashes vibrated under the glow of the porch light. She had a beauty mark just below her left eye.

I froze, pulling the door close so only my face was peeping through, leaving Willie safe to pant and swear behind me in the hall. Eli was screaming, and Mum was murmuring to comfort him. I kicked AAA batteries out from under my feet. Stella pointed her pink nose at me through a veil of mosquitoes and lowered the bag to the ground.

‘Get off our step,’ I said.

She studied me for a whole second, while my family sobbed and thrashed in the hall behind me, then she turned and picked her way across the sharp stones.