Lorraine Carmody – Open Division, 3rd Place

Alone

The woman is in her late thirties, maybe early forties, with a husband, and children too young to know. Nina is the woman's night nurse. The agency person said Nina would be a good fit; that Nina was exactly who they were looking for. She arrives at the woman's house at ten o'clock each night when it is dark and leaves the next morning as the sun is beginning to rise above the Port Hills. Some days when she drives home there's a pink glow in the sky, otherwise a grey nothingness. The streetlights are still on. The traffic is starting to build. It is winter. June.

The house is a two-storey, off Memorial Ave, with a sign on the letterbox, *No Junk Mail.* In the garden there're trees, exotics, clipped, and bare, and at the entrance electric gates. It's the sort of neighbourhood where appearances matter. Nina parks, as she's been told, up the driveway, out of sight, the gates shutting behind her. *Shush*. Her car has a dent in the driver's door that's been there for months and a yellowing sticker – *Nurses Make Things Better* – on the bumper.

The first few nights she dozes on the couch in the lounge, the door ajar so she can hear, while the woman sleeps upstairs. The woman's husband gives Nina a blanket to cover herself. The room, the house, the part she's in, is warm, with a heat pump in the lounge and another out in the hall. She thinks of her own place with its draughts and single-glazed windows and the roof in need of attention.

Each night, before she settles on the couch, she deliberates about which cushion she'll put under her head. There are cushions of various shapes and sizes and materials, round, rectangular, square, plain, fluffy, silky, all colour coordinated. All featuring birds. Exotic birds. Nothing native. Birds in flight, wading birds, birds standing on one leg. It's the sort of room that could be in *House and Garden* with its wood panelling and big art and everything in its place. Nina's favourite cushion is the flamingo. It is round and soft. She slips off her shoes and sinks back into the couch, the flamingo in her arms.

She sleeps in her uniform. It's navy, to hide stains, with the agency's logo, an anchor, on the front pocket. She pins her nurse's badge, NZRN, on the opposite side. She finds she gets more respect with it on, particularly when she's doing these private jobs. She wonders, as she drifts off, what the electricity bill is here.

The first few nights she doesn't see the woman. She's asleep when Nina arrives and sleeping when Nina leaves in the morning.

It's the drugs, says the husband. Nina nods.

When the husband opens the front door each night, he tells her there's no need to wake his wife. It's been a long day. She needs her rest.

Nina follows him into the lounge. He closes the door behind them.

Have a seat, he says.

Nina puts her bag down and takes off her scarf and unzips her puffer. The husband sits down beside her on the couch. He's a tall man. Good looking. It's been a hard day, he confides. He runs his hands through his hair. It's dark, with a wave. He sighs.

My wife's been in a lot of pain today, he says. And then, to top it off, the au pair called in sick. The children have been difficult, much, much worse than usual. The doctor came, and the district nurse, and then a couple of visitors. Oh, and she's just had her morphine.

The husband will come and get Nina if his wife wakes in the night.

Nina tells him that she feels guilty about getting paid to sleep on the couch.

Don't be, he says. It's just reassuring for me to have you here, believe me.

His name is David. She has permission to call him this rather than Mr Montgomery. Nina would have called him David if he hadn't mentioned it so she's glad he has. But she doesn't tell him this. The au pair isn't allowed to call him by his first name. He and his wife have had to correct Liese about this more than once, he tells Nina.

OK, says Nina.

It's best I keep a distance, particularly with a young girl like her, says David. But you're different, you're a professional, more mature, someone reliable, someone I can trust. He looks across at her badge as he says this. Nina reaches up and touches the badge to make sure it's straight.

Nina wakes with a jump. David is standing over her, touching her shoulder. His hand is light, barely there. It is her fourth night on the job.

Nina, my wife needs you, he says.

Nina looks at her watch. It's not quite 2 am. It'll be the first time she's gone upstairs and into the woman's room, the first time she's met the woman. David leads the way up the stairs. As she follows him, Nina glances at the photographs on the wall. The photographs,

some of David, fill the wall, right from the bottom of the stairs to the top. She's seen this sort of thing in *House and Garden*. There's another heat pump at the top of stairs.

The woman is in bed. It's a king-size bed in a large room with solid furniture and lit by a lamp with a large porcelain base. There're cushions here as well. They're scattered on the bed, on an upholstered chair, some on the floor. These ones have a floral theme – hydrangeas, tulips, roses.

I'm Nina, she says. The nurse.

Can you help me? asks the woman. She is struggling to sit up.

Nina puts her arm around the woman's shoulder and eases her forward into a sitting position. The woman pauses for a moment to catch her breath. Nina holds the woman's arm as she stands. The woman is tall, much taller than Nina, with tight cropped hair. Nina walks beside her to the bathroom on the other side of the room. They walk slowly.

While the woman is in the bathroom Nina smooths the sheets on the bed and puffs up the pillows. She picks up the cushions from the floor.

Nurse, calls the woman.

Nina walks the woman back to bed. She sits on the edge of the bed for a moment. She is short of breath from the exertion. Nina waits.

Shall I? asks Nina. The woman nods. Nina bends down and lifts the woman's legs up onto the bed. She's careful. Then, Nina helps her onto her side. The woman is thin, and frail. She only has days left to live.

How is that? asks Nina. She puts a pillow behind the woman's back for support and another one between her knees to ease the pressure and adjusts the pillows under the woman's head.

Better? asks Nina.

Thank you.

Would you like some water? Or pain relief?

The woman shakes her head. Don't go…can you stay with me for a bit?

Of course I can.

Nina pushes the chair closer to the bed. She moves the cushion on the chair to one side so she can sit down. It has a red rose in full bloom on it.

Can you shut the door first? asks the woman.

Sure.

To Nina's surprise, David is in the hall in the half-dark.

I'll leave you to it, he says. You look like you're managing OK?

Everything's fine, don't worry. Good night.

The woman wants to talk so she doesn't have to think about things. She needs to be distracted from all of this. She waves her hand at the bedside table where there're bottles of pills and medicine and a thermometer, a box of tissues and wet wipes and a jar of Vaseline and a tube of barrier cream.

I understand, says Nina. But, of course, she doesn't.

Before she got sick, the woman continues, too sick to go to work, she'd been in finance. She'd been someone of importance. She'd been good at her job. It had involved quite a bit of travel, but she'd loved it, every minute of it. Up to Wellington most weeks, Auckland, Sydney, Melbourne, you name it, she says, long hours, responsibilities, variety, respect. A big budget to oversee and staff to keep an eye on, a lot of hiring and firing. I demanded perfection. Of myself, and of others.

Nina nods.

We had a live-in nanny then, someone a little bit older, like you, salt of the earth. I couldn't have coped otherwise, with the children, that is. But the nanny left just as I got sick. Just when I needed her. That's when we got the other girl, the au pair, Liese, who's a bit useless, I must say. The one good thing is the children aren't used to me being around. They're used to being looked after by other people.

The woman is tiring now, her words slowing, slurring. She closes her eyes.

Talk to me, Nina, talk to me about anything. Tell me all about yourself.

Well, says Nina, searching her mind for something to say. Well, unlike you, I'm a bit frightened of numbers.

It's the first thing that comes into her head. As soon as the words are out of her mouth, she regrets them. She's not used to sharing things about herself. Particularly negative things.

Really? says the woman, opening her eyes. Why?

I don't know. Nina pauses. She may as well go on, she supposes. It's hard to explain, she continues, but when I see a whole lot of figures on a page, a spreadsheet, rows and rows of numbers to be added up or subtracted or divided or multiplied, or whatever, well, it's scary. I freeze. I try to ignore them. I make mistakes. And if there's percentages, decimal points, fractions, well, that's a whole other level.

But, says the woman, numbers are a fact of life, and sooner or later everyone's got to deal with them, one way or another. You're a nurse, you administer drugs, and that involves calculations, and some arithmetic, surely?

I suppose, says Nina, but that's different. In that situation I can visualise it. You pour the drug into a medicine measure with the numbers on the side, or you draw the drug up into a syringe or whatever. Easy.

The woman laughs.

Her name is Rose.

All my friends call me Rosie, though. She reaches for Nina's hand and holds it. Rosie doesn't want to be alone.

I know, says Nina. I know.

When she's asleep, Nina lets go of Rosie's hand and sits back in the chair with the rose cushion behind her and closes her eyes.

Before she goes home, Nina goes downstairs to make breakfast for Rosie. She wants toast, white, with butter and Vegemite. Not Marmite.

And not too much butter, says Rosie. Or too much Vegemite. Just enough so I can taste it. It might be the only thing I'll eat for the rest of the day. I've completely lost my appetite, but sometimes I just get these cravings for things and then I've got to have them.

I'll be right back with it, says Nina. She stops at the door. Oh, and I'm not a Marmite fan either, we've got that in common.

Rosie laughs. You're a saint.

Nina pauses to look at the photographs on the wall as she walks down the stairs. There's one of Rosie as a schoolgirl, straight-backed, wearing an oversized blazer, her hair blonde, long. Nina recognises the private school uniform. And there's others of Rosie as a netballer, a skier, a horse rider, a member of the drama group, the choir, and the chess club. In most of the photos she's holding trophies or plaques or certificates.

Further down the stairs she spots photos of David, a younger version, in his school blazer, black-striped, pressed. And another of him in a rowing boat. Nina recognises Lake Ruataniwha by the foxgloves. And Mt Hutt. David on skis, his goggles hanging loose around his neck, his nose covered in zinc, the Canterbury Plains behind him.

A girl is in the kitchen.

You must be Liese? says Nina. I've heard a lot about you.

Yeah? says Liese. She's about eighteen or nineteen, with long hair, light brown, loose. She's emptying the dishwasher.

I thought at first you might've been from Sweden or somewhere exotic like that, with your name, says Nina. And being an au pair.

No, says Liese. I'm from Hornby.

Nina can hear children's voices upstairs. And David's voice, deeper now, talking to them.

Whereabouts in Hornby?

Branston Street.

I know.

Nina grew up just around the corner from Branston Street. She lived there with her grandmother and mother, who was on a sickness benefit and in and out of hospital for most of Nina's life.

Liese finishes emptying the dishwasher and picks up her phone and starts texting. Nina finds the bread and puts it in the toaster.

While she waits for the toast to cook, Nina thinks of Hornby with its factories and railway line, a mere few kilometres from this house, with its big trees and electric gate, but a world away.

I'm Nina, the nurse, by the way.

I know, says Liese.

Nina glances at Rosie's bedside clock. It's 3.26. Rosie can't sleep. Nina pulls back the curtain and peers out. The moon is a crescent in the darkness.

It's a new moon, says Nina. I noticed it when I was driving in tonight.

Rosie turns her head to look.

So it is, she says.

Nina's got used to going to work in the dark when everyone else is going to bed. She enjoys it, the peace of it, the half-hour drive, the first part of the journey anyway. After she leaves her house, she follows the road past the estuary. Here, the car's lights catch the tops of the trees where there're several birds' nests. They're startlingly large. The heads of the birds (they're kāruhiruhi or pied shags – she's googled them) are usually visible. They make her smile. As she drives inland the road twists and undulates. She passes Kaiapoi Pa Road, curving away into the distance, and on past the horse paddocks lined with toi toi and harakeke. When she gets to the intersection where she turns left onto the main road to go into the city, it's another story. Here, she must focus on the traffic. Have her wits about her.

Are you married or anything? asks Rosie.

I was married. But not anymore. I decided when it ended, Rosie, that I'd have a change, just do what made me happy. So, I chucked in my job at the hospital, with the shifts and the stress. She pauses. And then I signed on with the agency, and so here I am.

Good for you, says Rosie. You're young. Attractive. You'll find someone else.

Nina laughs. I'm not looking.

How old are you?

Thirty-seven, almost thirty-eight. Getting on a bit, I suppose.

You've got your whole life ahead of you.

Nina closes the curtain.

A while back, says Nina, I bought an old place, not much, a doer-upper out at Waikuku, by the sea. I love it there. It isn't far, half an hour down the motorway, and there I am, away from everything. There're a few other houses, not many, mainly holiday places and a corner dairy.

Rosie closes her eyes. Keep talking. I'm listening.

What I love about it, says Nina, is the sea and the estuary and the mountains. And when you walk along the beach you can see right up and down the coastline, for miles, and the mountains look like you could just reach out and touch them at this time of the year with the snow on them. At night when I'm in bed, I can hear the sea, the waves coming in and going out, and the wind in the macrocarpas. I like the sea, always being able to hear it, like it's a living, breathing thing. It reminds me I'm not alone. Not completely.

After Nina leaves that day, she goes down to the beach at high tide and records the sound of the waves on her phone.

That night she plays it to Rosie.

Beautiful, whispers Rosie.

Nina is washing Rosie. The water is warm in the bowl. She sponges Rosie's back, arms, and legs, and her chest with the scar on the left where her breast was removed. She dries Rosie carefully with a towel. And then she rubs barrier cream on Rosie's heels and her elbows and her sacrum. Nina changes the sheets. She opens the window slightly. And combs Rosie's hair.

Here, have some water, says Nina.

No, whispers Rosie.

Rosie is too weak to get out of bed now. The district nurse has inserted a catheter into Rosie's bladder. Nina empties the catheter bag. There's not much to empty. Nina dabs some perfume, Prada, on Rosie's wrists. And on her own.

When Rosie is asleep, Nina goes back downstairs.

David is sitting beside her on the couch. It's nearly midnight. The blanket is on the edge of the couch as usual.

You look tired, she says.

I am. He leans his head on the back of the couch.

You should try to get some sleep you know, she says. She picks up the flamingo cushion.

Yeah, I should. He turns to look at her. It helps knowing you're here, Nina.

I'm just doing my job, that's all. But thank you.

You smell nice, he says.

Thank you.

She puts the cushion down on the couch between them and stands up. I'd better go up and see if Rosie needs anything, she says.

On her way up the stairs Nina stops to look at a photograph of Rosie on her wedding day. She likes the way the photographer has captured her just as the wind has caught her veil. David, serious looking, is in a black suit. They're on a hill, with tussock everywhere and, above them, a wide, blue sky.

A couple of steps up Nina stops again to glance at the photos of the children, the boy and the girl. They have the same dark hair as David's. She counts the candles on their birthday cakes.

The au pair has a boyfriend, says David.

Yes?

I don't like it. Liese's got a perfectly good room here in the house, but she chooses to spend the night at his place. The boyfriend drops her off at the gate in his car every morning, it's one of those low-slung things with a modified exhaust and loud music.

Nina nods. She's heard the car.

Some of the neighbours have complained about the noise, how it disturbs their peace at that time of the morning, says David. I can't say I blame them. And Liese arrives back here, large as life, without showering, straight from her boyfriend's bed.

Nina wants to ask David how he knows if Liese showers or not. Or even how he knows for certain that she's slept in the boyfriend's bed. Or why it's his business? Liese isn't a child. Nina wants to ask him these things. But she doesn't.

Well, I suppose what's important is that Liese is good with the children, she says.

Yes, says David, the children like her. She can't cook to save herself, though.

Well, neither can I.

David laughs. I don't believe that.

I ignored it, says Rosie, the lump.

Nina is helping Rosie into her nightgown. She lifts Rosie's arm and eases it into the sleeve. It's almost time for Nina to go home.

I thought, Rosie continues, it was nothing, that it'd just disappear. It started off as just a pea-shaped, hard thing in my breast. Nothing much. I was busy, with work, reports, staff, and I'd just been up to Wellington to meet the new shadow finance minister. That was four years ago. I put off going to the doctor, I didn't have the time, I just put it out of my mind. Things like this don't happen to people like me. Or so I thought. Back then I was interested in getting into politics. I was busy networking. Putting out feelers. Joining committees.

Rosie laughs. If things had been different, I could have been the new finance minister right now, telling beneficiaries to get off their bloody backsides.

Really? says Nina.

Rosie leans back, exhausted, on the pillow. Her hair is sticking up on one side.

Yes, really. But now none of that'll be happening.

Nina picks up a hairbrush. Shall I? she asks. Rosie nods.

Nina, if you don't mind me asking, what went wrong with your marriage?

Well, it's a long story.

Go on, I'm all ears.

We just weren't suited, says Nina. Different priorities. I guess I just didn't quite live up to his expectations. She laughs. And he certainly didn't live up to mine.

Nina doesn't tell Rosie that her husband was fond of using his fists. That towards the end she'd been afraid of him. That sometimes just to protect herself she'd had to tell him what he wanted to hear, rather than the truth. She didn't tell Rosie that after he beat her that

time and she had to be admitted to hospital, how everyone she worked with knew exactly what was going on. And that was why she quit.

I see, says Rosie.

Nina puts down the brush. She goes over to the window and peers out through the curtains. It's foggy outside. It'll be a slow drive home. She's got an appointment first thing with a man who's coming to have a look at her roof. She needs to get away on time.

You know what, says Rosie, I've suddenly got a craving for potatoes, plain old mashed spuds.

I could make you some, says Nina, looking at her watch, before I go home. It's great you've got an appetite; that you want to eat something.

Would you? says Rosie. If you don't have time, you could ask Liese to do it?

I'm happy to do it.

You're a star.

Liese isn't back yet. Nina knows this because she hasn't heard her boyfriend's car. She doesn't tell Rosie this. She doesn't want to get Liese into trouble.

In the kitchen Nina peels a couple of potatoes and cuts them up roughly. She puts them in a pot with cold water and some salt. The pot is slow to boil. She turns the element up. Once it starts boiling Nina pokes a knife into the potatoes. Hard, still. She checks her watch again. She doesn't want to miss the man. She sticks the knife in again. Better, but not quite soft yet. They'll have to do.

She takes the pot off the stove and drains the water and adds a dash of milk and presses the masher into the potatoes. There are lumps. She gets a spoon and stirs the potatoes. The lumps are still there. She tips the potatoes from the pot onto a plate. It doesn't look very appetising.

Outside the fog is thickening. She can barely see the trees through the window. She checks her watch again. Then she hears Liese's boyfriend's car and a door slamming and Liese's footsteps outside. Nina opens the back door.

Liese, I've got to run, can you do me a favour and take this up to Rosie for me, please?

That night, when she's back at work, she heads upstairs. She's been here an hour already, on the couch chatting to David downstairs in the lounge.

Rosie is awake when she goes into her room.

I know you didn't make those mashed potatoes, Nina.

Nina had forgotten all about the potatoes.

They were terrible, continues Rosie, full of lumps, so terrible in fact that I know you couldn't have possibly made them. I just know it had to be Liese. I know it wasn't you.

Nina nods in agreement.

There's a low cloud on her way into work tonight. She can't see the birds in their nests at the estuary or the road that curves away to the pā. She thinks of the quote the man has given her for the roof and wonders how on earth she'll ever pay for it.

When she goes inside the house, Nina can see Liese in the kitchen. She is sitting at the table, the kitchen light bright above her. It is unusual to see Liese at this time of night. Liese doesn't turn to look at Nina.

David follows Nina into the lounge. He doesn't sit down.

Rosie wants to see you, he says, right away.

Nina goes up the stairs without pausing to look at the photographs.

The kitchen door is closed when she comes back down the stairs. There's a crack of light under the door and she can hear David's voice, muffled, and then Liese's laugh.

Nina goes into the lounge and lies down on the couch. It is colder in here than usual. There's no blanket left out for her tonight. She covers the upper part of her body with her puffer jacket. Wraps her scarf around the lower part of her legs. She puts the flamingo cushion under her head. But it doesn't feel as soft as it usually does.

She thinks of what Rosie has just said about the potatoes.

It wasn't Liese, was it? It was you. I know it was you, Nina. You lied to me.

Nina closes her eyes. She can feel the heat on her face.

She rummages through her bag for her phone. When she finds it, she holds it close to her ear.

She listens to the waves hitting the beach. Breathe in. Breathe out. She tells herself this.