

## THE PLASTIC BABY

Mrs Franklin decided to adopt me the day she first saw me in church. I would have been sitting between my parents, ignoring my baby brother as he fidgeted on my father's knee, my feet dangling in their white socks and tidy T-bar sandals. My mother, who didn't believe in pink, had probably dressed me in a neat corduroy pinafore, something smart but practical, red perhaps, or brown. My hair would have been cut in the pageboy style that was fashionable at the time, a shiny dark negative of my mother's own sleek blonde bob.

It was because I was so beautifully behaved that I caught Mrs Franklin's eye, or so she told my mother later. She'd watched me, staring solemnly out from under my long fringe, apparently absorbed in the sermon, and decided. It was unusual for children of my age to wear glasses then, and the sight of my blunt features behind the heavy frames seemed to awaken tender instincts in a certain kind of woman, the way that a child in callipers might.

The next Sunday Mrs Franklin intercepted my parents after the service, outside on the little church path, the smell of earth and things growing heavy in the warm air. She had come armed with a baby doll, bundled up in a white crocheted shawl. She introduced herself, and told us where she lived, and asked if, as she had no grandchildren of her own to spoil, she could please take me home for lunch.

My mother recovered her composure well, and said that that was very kind, but we had plans already for today. Perhaps another time we could all have morning tea together? Mrs Franklin said lovely, and placed the doll in my arms, and said she looked forward to getting to know me better soon.

"What do you say, Greta?" my mother prompted, and I raised my eyes to say my thank you, as I had been taught.

The doll was hard pink plastic, lighter than you'd expect for its size, with staring blue eyes and puckered pink lips. She was about the same size as a real newborn baby; that is to say, large for me at that age. Her skull was moulded with pink plastic whorls for hair, and made a hollow sound when you rapped it with your knuckles. She wore a white knitted lacy dress and knickers, and a matching jacket that tied with a narrow silvery ribbon, and a little white knitted bonnet that fitted her head as snugly as a scalp. Her hands were like spiky little stars, with tiny creases in her fingers and real little fingernails, which I explored with my teeth and tongue.

I called my new baby Rosy, and tended to her with care. She was different from any other toy I owned. My usual companion, which now that I was growing up I was no longer permitted to take out of the house, was a tasteful rag doll called Joanna. She had auburn woollen hair and clothes that were miniatures of my own, flared cords and flannel smocks in psychedelic florals, made from offcuts of my mother's sewing.

When I lay Rosy down, her arms and legs stuck stiffly up until I flattened them down; she was not pliable and obliging like Joanna. When I held her to me, her unyielding limbs poked themselves into my abdomen. But I knew that real babies were not meant to be easy. I had seen my mother struggling with Carlos, who fought the breast and arched his back when he was meant to be soothed, and whose own angry limbs could be seen flailing above the edges of his cot long after he was supposed to be asleep.

It was a small town, and it was easy enough for my mother to make enquiries. Mr Franklin was a retired cabinetmaker who had served in the NZRAF, and had until

relatively recently been active in the Maudsley Volunteer Fire Brigade. Now he lived quietly with Mrs Franklin and the two of them played lawn bowls and grew prizewinning marrows and pumpkins. Opinion was divided about the age and whereabouts of their children, but the general opinion was that they had one or two, all grown up and moved away. Little else was known.

All this seemed to satisfy my mother, and so after church a couple of weeks later we all walked up the Franklins' rose-lined path, and into the hallway of their old concrete villa. The hall floor was chequered black and white like a chessboard, and the house smelled of camphor and boiling silverside. In the large dark lounge, crowded with furniture and decorative china and framed photographs, my parents drank tea and talked, and I nibbled a date scone around the unwelcome fragments of orange peel.

The following Sunday I said goodbye to my parents at the church gate and walked away from them up the road, holding Mrs Franklin's hand and clutching the plastic baby under my arm; my mother had made an exception today, for Rosy. I was not a nervous child, but a dutiful one, and I was anxious to please. My parents must have asked me if I wanted to go, and I'm sure I said yes; partly, I imagine, because I thought Rosy would be taken back if I didn't. A transaction had taken place, and I understood I needed to keep up my end of the bargain.

In her kitchen, Mrs Franklin sat me on a pile of cushions at one end of the table, with Rosy on another pile, and fed me pikelets and Jungle Juice and chocolate finger biscuits. She told me to call her Nana Frank, because it was easy to say and anyway, Nana Nora was a bit of a mouthful.

After lunch she showed me the china figurines I had seen on my first visit: glossy, attenuated dancers and angels with serene, pinch-featured faces. I was allowed to hold them one at a time in my lap, sitting cross-legged on the carpet. I played with Nana Frank's button box and then I was allowed to cut up paper doilies, which I had never seen before. They were astonishingly intricate and perfect, far too beautiful to spoil. I could only be persuaded to cut them when I realised that there were dozens of them, each one crimped tight to the next, their complex beauty replicated again and again.

Poppa Frank was a big, bony man who frightened me. He almost never spoke directly to me, though on my second visit he startled me to tears with a rebuke for picking a rosebud from the garden. He and Nana Frank were older than my mother's parents, who at that time both still worked. Grizzy and Gramps's house, occasionally visited in Cambridge, was a warm, tactile place full of dark-gold wood panelling and pottery and abstract art, richly coloured rugs and woven wall hangings. Grizzy was brisk and energetic and believed in stimulating rather than spoiling children; on my last visit she had begun teaching me chess. My other grandmother, Grandma Bailey, had been old enough to be Grizzy's mother, and I remembered her only as frail and fretful and vague.

My Sundays at Nana Frank's became a routine, and eventually I started also going two or three afternoons a week, after morning kindergarten. My mother was at her wits' end, she said, dealing with Carlos, and she was grateful for the reprieve. Nana Frank would pick me up and take me home for lunch and then sometimes we would go for walks, popping into the Four Square for milk or eggs, or taking crusts to feed the ducks on the riverbank. If we met anyone she knew, she would introduce me as "Greta, my adopted granddaughter", and ask me stagey questions to demonstrate, with proprietary pride, my neat manners, my quaint vocabulary and early reading ability.

That period of my life seemed to go on for a long time, but in reality we were only in Maudsley for a year. My father got another placement in another town, and we

moved away. Nana Frank wrote to me from time to time, keeping track of our changes of address. At birthdays and Christmases she sent parcels, handknitted cardigans and long frilled dresses, broderie anglaise or candy-pink polyester.

The dresses were often far too big for me, and had a random, accidental quality, as if she had happened to come across them in a cupboard, or was regifting me another girl's unworn things. For years they were consigned to the dressing up box, waiting for me to grow into them. Eventually I wore them as costumes: bride, Christmas angel, Anne of Green Gables, and later, hiked up and belted, Madonna and Slutty Schoolgirl.

When I was seven Nana Frank sent me my first Barbie. She was a slant-eyed ballerina with a golden crown, fixed into a hole on the top of her head with a long golden spike. My mother's carefully neutral expression sealed my satisfaction with this acquisition, which realised one of my long-held ambitions.

By then the plastic baby was consigned to a permanent display role on my toy shelf, neatly dressed in her frothy whites. She had proved herself insufficiently lovable; she couldn't be cuddled or wept into or stuffed surreptitiously into a bag. And I was getting too old for babies, though Joanna still found her way into my bed when I was sad or unable to sleep.

I visited the usual small-girl atrocities on my Barbie, who never had any name but that: washing, and later cutting, her hair, reducing the shining cornsilk first to a dull mass of sticky, uncombable yellow, and eventually to a brief, bristly corona that failed to conceal the grid of implant holes on her scalp.

My stroke of originality was in deciding to pierce her ears, inspired by my mother's wheel of coloured dressmaking pins. I drew them from the plastic disc in matching pairs, pink or red or yellow or turquoise, and plunged them into the soft rubber mouldings that approximated Barbie's earlobes. The trauma was cumulative; the repeated application and extraction of the pins eventually left ragged holes gaping in the sides of her head, as if she had been chewed from the inside out.

Nana Frank enclosed a photograph in one of her letters, and I have it still: a grainy coloured square, rounded at the corners, in the washed-out, slightly chilly colours of the time. Nana and Poppa Frank stand by the birdbath in the crazy-paved front garden at Maudsley, off-centre and squinting at the unknown photographer. My mother told me that Poppa Frank had died soon after that. Nana Frank then spent some time in hospital with burns to her legs after a split hot water bottle, and later with pneumonia. I registered this information only vaguely; Nana Frank had faded to a memory of a memory, or of some distant, mythical benefactor, like the Tooth Fairy. Prompted by my mother, I wrote dutiful thank-you notes, and thought of her only occasionally.

When I was ten, Nana Frank wrote to my mother and invited me to come and stay with her for a week of the school holidays. My mother accepted without recourse to me; the holidays were a stressful time for working parents. By that time Nana Frank had also moved, to Hawke's Bay. I was put on an Intercity coach for the five-hour trip from Hamilton to Hastings. I was independent and methodical, managing myself efficiently through toilet and lunch stops, rationing out my packed snacks at one-hour intervals, remembering to look up from my book every few minutes to avoid motion sickness.

Nana Frank was smaller than I remembered her, but also, without Poppa Frank, she seemed younger, or perhaps it was her new setting. The tiny two-bedroom unit was more modern than the houses I knew, with what Nana Frank called

'ranchsliders' and muddy-coloured print curtains, and a clean white shower stall with its own three-panel sliding door.

Only a few of Nana Frank's china figurines had come with her to Hastings, but there were photos in silver and ceramic frames. One showed a woman with a small girl, unsmiling and out of focus, their pale hair blowing around their faces. There was Poppa Frank, leaning on a spade and showing his prominent, unnaturally even teeth, and a young man, perhaps still a teenager, with the same long bony face as Poppa Frank. This last photo was familiar to me, presumably from Maudsley, when I had been too young to be curious, or really believe people as old as Nana and Poppa Frank had children. I think I was curious now, but something made me hesitate to ask for information that was being conspicuously withheld.

There was an outfit waiting for me in the spare room when I arrived, not pastel or lolly-coloured, but a kind of Alpine peasant costume. It had a full black skirt and little black-velvet waistcoat, worn over a gathered white blouse with a white lace apron. I didn't dislike it; there was something theatrical about it that was quite transformative, and I had always been a fan of Heidi and the Chalet School and *The Sound of Music*. There is a photo of me wearing it at Fantasyland, standing in front of the Sleeping Beauty castle. My eyes are mildly distorted behind my thick lenses, my feet incongruous in red sneakers, the only shoes my mother had packed for me.

In the mornings I would sit quietly in the orangey light, cutting out pictures of Princess Diana and Lorraine Downes from magazines, or finishing off the gaps in Nana Frank's crossword puzzles. When she came out to make a cup of tea in her dressing gown, her grey hair streamed around her shoulders, dramatically unlike Grizzy's brisk dark crop or Grandma Bailey's sparse dandelion-fluff curls. The effect was unnerving, witchy, despite the flowered vinyl slippers, but also slightly indecent, as if I was seeing her in her underwear. In the bathroom at night her teeth grinned at me, grotesquely magnified, from a thick glass mug on the vanity, though I never saw her without them.

For breakfast we ate cornflakes and dry Complian with sweet pink yoghurt, and for lunch, tinned soup and toast fingers with Marmite instead of Vegemite. We saw almost no one else for the duration of my visit, though Nana Frank told me she had a sister living in Napier. She took me to play in the park at the end of the street, where there was a climbing frame shaped like a rocketship, and to Marineland, where dolphins balanced balls and rang bells and shook flippers with their shorts-wearing trainers.

She taught me to knit, and I picked it up quickly. We would sit companionably listening to Dolly Parton and Bonnie Tyler on the radio, while I knitted tiny skirts and jackets for my new Barbie, who fortunately came with her own pearlescent earrings. Nana Frank was knitting me a jersey, a pale lemon yellow in a delicate loopy stitch pattern. I'm not, in fact, sure that I ever wore that jersey; by then I had adopted my mother's preference for denim and brightly striped polo necks.

I was booked on a return coach on the Monday. On Sunday, I was up early and dressed in the Heidi outfit. But Nana Frank emerged from her room at the usual time and there was no mention of church. I wasn't particularly surprised. My parents didn't go very often any more, either.

It was two years before we heard from Nana Frank again. She was living in Whangarei now, and invited me to stay during the school holidays. This time I protested. I had reached the age when I was being allowed increasing freedom

outside school, and spending time with my friends was far preferable to being cooped up with an adult, however generous or attentive. I even offered to look after Carlos instead, which I was sometimes allowed to do for short periods, for my mother's guilty convenience. But my parents were running out of annual leave, and had little money for alternative holiday care arrangements. With one child out of the way they could send Carlos to my mother's parents in Cambridge, and work extra hours to allow them time off in the second week.

As far as I can remember, Nana Frank never properly acknowledged Carlos. He was just a baby when we were in Maudsley, and I suppose she didn't see him after that. Even so, it seemed strange that she didn't speak of him, unless I was telling her some story about our shared escapades. If she had to refer to him, she called him 'Carl', swallowing the last syllable as if she couldn't quite indulge its fanciful foreignness.

Carlos and I were close as siblings, as close at any rate as the four-year age gap and gender difference allowed. I was never in any doubt, though, that whatever the relationship I shared with Nana Frank, it excluded Carlos. In a family where indulgences were doled out with scrupulous fairness, there was something almost illicit about having a whole extra grandmother. Adding to the mild guilty thrill of the regular parcels, and now these invitations, was the sense of having been *chosen*, as if by some secret meritocracy, to receive them.

Nevertheless it was a reluctant child, that year, who was despatched to Whangarei, fetching up in the bleak low-rise city centre on an overcast, windy day. To my astonishment, Nana Frank had two girls with her, similar in age to me. They stood, slouching and sulky, scuffing their feet and looking supremely uninterested.

Nana Frank coaxed us all into introducing ourselves. The girls were Kayla and Marni, and they were staying with Nana Frank too. This was not welcome news. The two girls were dressed in the kind of clothes my mother deemed too 'old' for me: tiny ruffled skirts, despite the chilly weather, midriff t-shirts and coloured plastic jelly shoes. They both had pierced ears and painted fingernails, and the older one, Kayla, was wearing eye makeup.

They called her Nana, too, but to begin with I was uncertain whether they were, in fact, her granddaughters, or if, like me, they had been 'adopted'. Marni later told me, confusingly, that Nana Frank was her real grandmother but that Nana Frank wasn't any relation to her sister Kayla. I eventually pieced together that Kayla and Marni were half-sisters.

Nana Frank's current house was up a steep driveway, set into the side of a sharply sloping section. It was large but shabby, with peeling wallpaper and a mushroomy smell in the bathroom. In the big open-plan living room there was just one couch, which suppurated yellow foam from cracks in the vinyl, and a couple of beanbags on the bare cork tile floor.

In this house there were no ceramics and no photos in frames; the house didn't look like somewhere Nana Frank lived at all. There was little furniture, no knitting basket or piles of Woman's Day by the couch, just stacks of battered cardboard cartons in the corners of the living room and bedroom. On the wall was a calendar, branded with the name of a Hastings garage and annotated in Nana Frank's loopy vertical script.

To my relief, a mattress was placed for me on the floor of Nana Frank's own bedroom, rather than in the room Kayla and Marni were sharing. This gave me a place to retreat with my books and word puzzles and sketch pad.

I had been trained to be sociable, but it was my first experience of trying to make

conversation with people with whom I had nothing in common. Kayla and Marni talked about TV shows and pop stars I knew little about. To be friendly, I feigned interest in the teen magazines they spent hours looking at, full of makeup and hairdos and groups of soft-featured, flicky-haired boys. Their speech was rough and abbreviated, and sometimes hard for me to follow; they used slang I didn't know, 'dweeb' and 'skank' and 'munted', and often swore.

My own friends liked to talk and laugh, about nothing in particular, it was true, but we were all verbal and opinionated. We swapped books and giggled over Wildfire romances. We liked feisty heroines and character-assassinated the drippy ones; we much preferred Sweet Valley High's evil Jessica over her insipid twin Elizabeth.

Kayla and Marni didn't read anything except magazines, and spent a lot of time in front of the television. I was initially pleased at this, as my own TV viewing was strictly limited at home to a list of educationally approved programmes. But they liked *Dynasty* and *The Bold and the Beautiful*, whose conniving, overdressed heroines and convoluted plotlines I found inane. I, on the other hand, liked *I Dream of Jeannie* and *Mork & Mindy*, which Kayla and Marni pronounced 'lame'; probably, I thought, because they didn't get the jokes.

I spent more and more time on my mattress in Nana Frank's room, working my way rather too quickly through the pile of books I had brought with me. I had expected Nana Frank to have some knitting project ready for me, but it seemed she hadn't thought of it. On request, though, she found a narrow tartan bag of knitting needles in one of the bedroom cartons, together with some ball-ends of wool. I amused myself for a while knitting up a baby bootie pattern using fat needles and triple knit, resulting in clownish adult-sized booties, which I planned to take home as presents for my parents. To begin with, I did this in front of the television, but Kayla's incredulous looks soon drove me back to my mattress.

On the third day of my stay Kayla and Marni's father came to visit them. I had established that the girls usually lived with Marni's mother, Linda, but that Linda had recently been admitted to hospital, though not the local one I had seen from the bus. Marni, who was a year younger than me and friendlier than Kayla, told me that Linda was "fucked in the head" and was going to stay in hospital until she'd sorted herself out. I was shocked and sympathetic, but Marni shrugged. "She spent all her time in bed anyway. Crying or pissed."

When their father arrived, neither girl made any move to get off the couch. They greeted him flatly, their eyes drawn immediately back to the TV. He was a short, stocky man with longish hair and a dark moustache, and wore a black and white sports jersey with a kiwi and a silver fern on it, not an All Blacks one. He sat on the arm of the couch and watched the cartoon with us for a few minutes in silence. When the next ad break came he stood up and positioned himself in front of the TV.

"How about we turn that off, eh, and have a bit of a catch up?" The girls muttered reluctantly, but Kayla shoved herself forward and turned off the set.

He looked at me and said hello, but didn't introduce himself, as many adults don't when they meet children. I found out soon enough his name was Shane. (Later I heard him say to Nana Frank, "Who's the other kid?" "That's Greta," she said, without elaboration.)

"So what have you girls been up to?" he persisted. "How's school?"

Nana Frank fussed around, putting out biscuits on a plate and glasses of juice in an effort to entice Kayla and Marni to the table. I could see what was required, polite seated conversation, but I could only hover awkwardly since it clearly

wasn't me it was required of. So I leaned against one end of the table, took a biscuit and thanked Nana Frank, smiling vaguely in Shane's direction.

Eventually Nana Frank told the other girls to come and sit up and talk to their dad, at which point I eased myself gratefully out of the room. I read for a while and then came out to see if Nana Frank needed any help with lunch. The girls were watching TV again but Shane was still there, standing on the deck with the ranchslider open, smoking a cigarette.

I was really shocked by that. I had never known any adult - anyone, that is - of my acquaintance to smoke. I had witnessed people smoking only distantly, through the window of a car, perhaps, or outside the courthouse or rougher bars in Papakura. It marked him out suddenly as morally deficient, somehow, possibly slightly criminal. It occurred to me that perhaps this was the reason his daughters could not live with him.

After he left, Kayla and Marni made no mention of his visit, which surprised me; I think I was expecting the sort of eye-rolling and derogatory characterisation they seemed to apply to everyone else. (They eye-rolled Nana Frank, and called her "silly old biddy" when she was out of earshot, or "bossy cow" if she had reprimanded them. Kayla had once referred to her mother, whom she called Barb, as "that druggy slag".)

Shane came back the next day. He evidently wasn't keen for a repeat of the previous day's awkwardness, because as soon as he arrived he went straight to the TV and turned it off.

"Let's go for a walk, eh?" he said. "Go get an ice cream or something."

Nana Frank looked flustered, and when Kayla and Marni shrugged in a way that might have been assent, she told me quietly to put my shoes on and get ready to go too. I didn't think either the girls or their father were expecting me or Nana Frank to accompany them, but I did as I was told. Nana Frank and I trailed the others, hanging back a bit to allow them privacy, though none of them was talking. We caught up to them at the dairy, where Shane bought us all Trumpets, and then followed them to a small reserve a couple of streets over, which had a pair of swings and a see-saw.

At one point they turned a corner ahead of us that took them out of sight, and Nana Frank grabbed my arm and broke into a shuffling run, not allowing us to slow down until we reached the corner ourselves and could see the others again. In the park Kayla and Marni sat on the see-saw licking their ice creams and Shane swayed on one of the swings, smoking another cigarette, talking nonsense to try and make them laugh. I sat a short distance away at the corner of the picnic table, while Nana Frank walked around pretending to look at the plantings. I had the feeling we were like bodyguards, our presence not welcomed but essential, and part of a conspiracy to pretend we were invisible.

The next day Shane turned up just before lunchtime. This time he sat down in a beanbag, trailing his alien male scent of sweat and cigarettes, and seemed content to watch TV with the girls. Marni actually smiled at him, but Nana Frank seemed agitated, standing indecisively in front of the open fridge.

"We're about to have some lunch, Shane," she said, obviously embarrassed. "But I'm afraid I don't quite have enough bread."

"That's okay," said Shane, looking up amiably. "We're all good here if you need to pop out." I don't think he meant to be rude; I don't think it occurred to him to offer to go himself. But Nana Frank looked stricken. She stood for a moment, still

holding the fridge door. Then she closed it and took a step towards him, lowering her voice, though of course we could all still hear.

“You know I can’t leave you alone with them.”

Shane stared straight ahead for a moment and then closed his eyes. “Jesus, Nora, what am I going to do? They’re my own daughters.”

Nana Frank looked agonised. “I’m sorry, Shane. But the judge said. I signed the papers.”

“It’s all right.” He exhaled heavily and heaved himself up. “I’ll go. Need anything else?” He walked out without looking back, the screen door clashing shut behind him.

He was gone for quite a while and came back with bread and milk and a large iced Sally Lunn in a sticky paper bag. He also had half a dozen cans of beer, linked by a web of plastic rings. He cracked one open and took it back to the bean bag with him. I caught the sour fruity smell of it and struggled not to stare as he sucked the drops from the rim of the can. Drinking beer straight out of a can, and in the middle of the day, was something else I’d never seen in real life.

I thought then of my parents, and what they would make of this house, and Kayla and Marni and Shane and Nana Frank, who had hardly seemed to notice me since I arrived. I sucked sugar and coconut off my fingers and imagined my mother’s moderate, non-judgemental voice, reassuring and unsatisfactory.

It might have been that afternoon, after Shane had gone, that I came out of my room and found Nana Frank at the table, feeding fingers of crustless sandwich to a little girl. She was about six and radiantly pretty, the sides of her dark hair caught up in a tiny pink butterfly clip. Beside her on the table sat a doll, the expensive porcelain-faced type, in an elaborate red velvet and tartan costume with white lace petticoats. She had glossy brown ringlets very like the little girl’s own.

“This is Chelsea,” said Nana Frank. “She lives just up the road, don’t you, darling? We’re giving her mummy a break.”

“And this is Charlotte,” said Chelsea, indicating the doll and beaming at me, showing a gap in her bottom teeth. “She’s my new one.”

That night I lay awake for a long time, listening to the gentle rasp of Nana Frank’s snores. It was the very first time I could ever remember feeling homesick.

On my last day in Whangarei, Shane arrived carrying two large sherbet-coloured teddies. They were Care Bear knock-offs, without the heart-shaped noses and paw markings.

“Last time I’m going to see you for a while, eh, girls,” he said, handing over the bears and hitching up his shorts. “Getting a lift back to Auckland this afternoon.”

Nana Frank packed us a picnic, sandwiches and chips and Fanta, and we all squeezed into her little hatchback, including the bears. She drove us to a park not far from the town centre, with a small children’s play area, a couple of picnic tables and a heavily graffitied concrete skate bowl.

A few teenage boys clattered their skateboards in and out of the bowl, and Kayla

was suddenly more animated than I'd seen her. She made Marni come and sit with her and the teddies on a low wall close to the skate area, where she chatted and giggled and undid and redid her ponytail. She lifted her arms to comb her fingers through her hair while the boys watched her beneath their cap brims.

I sat at the picnic table with Nana Frank and Shane in the pale grubby sunlight, listening to their crushing adult silence, and felt time thicken and stale and slow.

That visit was the last time I saw Nana Frank. It was a long time before I noticed that she had stopped writing. Her contact over the years had often been sporadic, but she usually remembered my birthday. One day I asked my mother if she had heard from Nana Frank. My mother said she hadn't, but gave me the address of the place in Whangarei, our last known contact for her.

I wrote to her on the Holly Hobbie stationery set that she herself had given me years earlier, almost unused in its little cardboard folder. It was a bright, breezy letter, full of teen vernacular and the uneasy mix of self-deprecation and self-aggrandisement typical of adolescents. There would have been trivial news about the three-way dramas that preoccupied me and my two best girlfriends, the boys I liked in my class, the fact I was knitting one of the oversize batwing jerseys that were then fashionable.

There was no reply, and my letter was never returned. We ourselves had stopped moving when I started intermediate school. My parents had decided I needed more stability, now that I was growing up. My father took on a senior role at head office and instead sent other young families moving around the country.

My mother told me gently that it was possible that Nana Frank may have died, and no one would have known to contact us. We were not, after all, family. But years later I was driving through Whangarei when my route took me past a familiar-looking block of neighbourhood shops: a dairy, a hairdresser's, a fish and chip shop.

I was in my beloved, temperamental Volkswagen Beetle, on my way to a weekend at Tutukaka with university friends, travelling alone because I'd had to work the night before. I remember that there was a tiny naked troll doll hanging from the mirror, its mad quiff of leaf-green hair exactly the colour of the car. I'd kept it in a mood of wry sentimentality because its broad pug nose and blank, goofy grin comically resembled a former boyfriend, one who'd gone straight back to his previous girlfriend.

On impulse I took the next corner, into a street whose name I recognised. At the end of the cul-de-sac was a steep concrete drive and a mint-green weatherboard house with a deck on tall piles. I went up the drive on foot, slightly incredulous at myself and the uncharacteristic flight of nostalgia.

The house was, predictably, smaller than I remembered, and to my young urban-sophisticate eyes, startlingly abject. The street had the forlorn, fleabitten air of long-term tenancy underpinned by poverty: blistered paint, weed-seamed concrete, broken baby buggies and split plastic paddling pools leaning in the gaps between the houses.

I knocked gingerly on the side door of the house, and after a moment a man in a white singlet answered.

"Yeah, the lady here before me was called Franklin," he said, scratching his stomach, unsurprised at my query. "Kept getting her mail for a while. But I've

been here two years now. You family?" He looked at me kindly.

"Yes," I said, and then corrected myself. "Family friend. Old family friend."

"She went into a home, I think, she was pretty old. The place was a mess when I moved in. Landlord knocked a couple of weeks' rent off for the hassle." He was sorry he didn't know more.

I thanked him and walked back down the drive. I started the engine burbling but sat for a moment, spreading my hands to unclench them from the steering wheel. I remembered the spiky starfish hands of the doll with which I had first been wooed, the creases in her fat, rigid palms, her fingers roughened by the indentations of my teeth.

It had been a comfortable assumption, Nana Frank's death. My letter unopened, discarded by a stranger. But I had simply been chosen and then unchosen, as I had also been since by a friend and one or two lovers. Love conditional, unbound by blood.

I pulled my sunglasses down over my eyes, craning briefly at my reflection in the rear-vision mirror. The sight of my thin, expressionless mouth repelled me. Abruptly enraged by the little swinging troll, I wrenched at it, leaving a small green tuft attached to the skewed mirror, and dropped it into the passenger footwell.

Crunching the gearshift slightly, I put the car into gear. Then I eased out the tricky clutch, checking my wing mirror first, out of habit, despite the silence of the dead-end street.