

Hill Slide

“Go on. You can have a go if you want to,” Stephen says kindly. Robert just scowls. I shake my head staring up at the hill, golden grass, crisply toasted by the summer sun and already polished by the dirty old sacks the boys have been sliding on. The hill slide looks fun but it’s a long way down and very steep. I’m a bit scared and Margaret’s sticky hand glued to mine tells me she’s more afraid than I am.

Stephen, Robert and Margaret come from the farm next door. We always play together in the holidays but we aren’t always friends, especially Margaret. She drives me crazy telling tales and whining all the time. Robert’s her cousin and he’s come to stay for a while. I adore Stephen because he’s the kindest as well as the oldest. Stephen’s my hero and I wish he was my big brother. It’s not fair because Margaret doesn’t even like him.

Anyway, here we are standing at the bottom of this steep hill, the boys with their old fertilizer sacks and us girls just looking on. “They aren’t allowed to play here,” Robert reminds Stephen. “They’ve got to keep their clothes clean. Your dad said he’d belt us if we let them play in the dirt.” Stephen thinks about this. “That’s because of the day you played rugby and Robin fell into the silage.” I don’t feel good about remembering that but I shut up because Stephen said it. He’s three years older than me and just like that big brother I used to beg for in my letters to Santa before I found out that Santa wasn’t real. At the same time I found out about where babies come from. Boy, was I embarrassed. Fancy asking Santa for a big brother!

“Dare you.” I feel my chin lift and my tummy tighten. I have to do it, so seizing the smelly sack in my free hand and dragging the clinging Margaret, unwilling and whimpering to the bottom of the hill, I begin to climb. Margaret pulls back. “Let go!” I hiss. “You can have a turn later.” “But I don’t want to,” blubbers Margaret. “Anyway I’ll tell if you do it!” You wouldn’t think she was only a few months younger than me but her threat makes me hesitate. I don’t want to get in trouble again. However I do want to slide down that hill bouncing and yelling just like the boys. I glance at Stephen who is watching with interest. Robert tries to take charge and pulls Margaret. She bawls. Baby! I try to shake her hand off. “Let me go. You don’t have to come!” Robert yanks at her hand again and she falls over with a bump and a howl.

Taking a firmer grip on the heavy sack I start to scramble up the hill, nine-year-old legs struggling to stretch the steeper bits. It gets harder as I climb further. My sandals slip on the dry grass. I try to grab hold of it but the sack gets in the way. As I lose my grip on the grass and begin to slide backwards, I drop the sack and it tangles round my ankles tripping me up. The crash onto my tummy hurts but I snatch frantically at a baby manuka bush and save myself but not the sack. It’s gone, sliding out of reach and I feel cross and stupid. I’ve ripped my dress and my knees. Mum’s going to be wild. And I haven’t even climbed up the hill yet. “She’s too little,” I hear Robert sneer. “Then, why don’t you help her?” replies Stephen. I don’t hear what Robert’s answer is but next thing Stephen clambers up, scoops up the sack and hauls me upright. He pushes me towards the top and I scramble, half sobbing and gasping. I’m climbing Everest without oxygen. My skinned knees sting and ooze blood, but at last I’m there. So is the sack. Stephen slaps it on the grass beside me. “Ready?” he asks, grinning. I’m not but I sit down anyway. He shows me how to hold on to the front corners. “You can’t steer. Just hang on tight and keep your feet up.” He put his hands on my back to push. “No!” I yell making him jump. “Go away!” I don’t know why I say that. He shrugs and bounces back down to the bottom. I lay back hearing the rasp of cicadas and the distant purr of tractors working in the hay paddock. I look at the endlessly blue summer sky enjoying being alone and putting off my next move. I wriggle, scratching my back on the grass stalks that poke through the sack. Being up here feels good, as if I’m part of the hill like an ancient rock, older even than my Gran. Rocks don’t have

false teeth like Gran has. When she puts them in a glass of water on her bedside table at night, they look huge and they give me nightmares. I love it when my Gran visits, even if her teeth are scary at night. She always comes at Christmas to help when mum and dad are haymaking. I love her soft white hair and her chewy hokey pokey biscuits and that she doesn't ask me to do chores. That's why I'm here on this hill. No chores.

"Scaredy cat, scaredy cat, sitting on the butcher's mat!" I sit up blinking in the hard white light and look down. The hill is really steep. I pretend that it's Mount Everest with lots of lumpy rocks and glaciers. There's that bank where I fell on the climb to the top. It's the Hillary Step and I've got to slide down it on my toboggan. I'm scared. I want Sherpa Tenzing to ride with me. Then I notice the three faces looking up. I've got to do it by myself. The Sherpas are waiting at the bottom of the mountain. I swallow hard, pretend to be brave and grab the thick corners of the sack, gripping with fearful fingers. Then using my heels to drag myself to the edge of the polished slope and with my heart thudding louder than our new water pump I jerk over the edge and begin to descend.

The top of the slope isn't as smooth as I thought. Just as the sack and I begin to gather speed, we hit the first bump. My foot catches in a clump of grass. I lurch to the left and start slewing around. I hear myself scream and then remember to lift up my feet. That makes me fall backwards just as I jolt over the next the bump. Ouch! I grind my teeth together to stop from biting my tongue. The next bump isn't so bad and I'm almost back in control. The bank rushes towards me. I try to slow down but I don't know how so I screw my eyes tight shut. Suddenly there's only air. The sack and I are flying. I scream again before we meet the hill with a jarring crunch that hurts more than falling off my skates. Going faster than ever we hurtle past a bush that snatches at me and whirls me right round. Something rips: my dress or my sack. Now I'm travelling backwards, headfirst. I try to roll over but just get a mouthful of sack. Yuck! I'm too scared now to let go. I hear Robert and Stephen whooping and cheering but I'm too busy spitting out dirt and bits of grass to notice that we're slowing down, that sack and I.

Then suddenly the hill isn't rushing past any more. Everything has stopped. Silence. No screaming, no cheering. Slowly, painfully, I sit up and untangle my fear frozen fingers. Opening my eyes, I expect to look up into the blue, blue sky. Instead I see Dad's furious face.

Robin Mills

It always took such a long time to get to Granny's house. There was always a sense of arrival when we got there. It would always be dark. Her driveway and garage would be lit by the moon, and its reflection shone up from her tiled roof. I always thought it was quite magical the way the road and garage were up above the house, and that we had to walk on travel-weary and wobbly legs down a hundred stairs to get to her front door. Wellington was so hilly. It was unlike anything else that I knew. After such a long journey down the main trunk line from Turangi, Wellington's twisty twining streets were like entering some kind of magical place, and the prize at the end of the journey was Gran. She'd wait with stooped shoulders in a pool of light on the porch as we raced as fast as our fear of falling would allow us to greet her, her crone hand patting seven heads as they passed and her warm welcome twinkling in clouded eyes.

Gran's house had been one of the first built on Mount Victoria. My Granddad had built it himself. I remember seeing an old black and white photo of a younger looking Gran pushing a baby in an old-fashioned pram. Evidently that scrawny white thing was my Mum, though I never really could accept that it could be her. There were few houses on Mount Vic then, and a lot of native bushy scrub. Gran had to push the pram down the hill to the corner dairy to get supplies. I remember thinking how impossibly hard it must have been for Gran to push the pram around the hills, after all it always took a terrible straining for Dad to convince our car, laden with seven people and their luggage, up the hill on Alexandra Road. I got a sense of horror and foreboding when I stared at that photo and thought how terrible it would have been for Gran if she had let go the pram, watching it careen down the hill with her baby and hard-earned groceries in it. There was something desolate about the isolation captured in the photograph. Everyone said how clever Granddad had been to build the house all on his own there, but no one commented on how hard it must have been for Gran to raise a family there, all on her own.

Gran's house was special because it was just across the road from the lookout. If you crossed the road and scaled the grassy bank you could see Wellington harbour over the other side. It was the most amazing thing at night. I always felt like the King of the Giants looking down on Wellington Central's tall concrete buildings dwarfed into miniature scale, and the night lights, glowing like fairy lamps on the harbour water. The silent cargo bays and deserted train tracks made the wharf look like some alien wasteland. The wind would always whip at you trying to warn you that gravity's hold was tenuous. There was something elemental about the wind, it had a life force of its own and would sing songs in a strange tongue that would add to the otherworldliness of the lookout at night. The stars were thick in the black sky and even though you were on top of the world, they diminished your sense of self and made you feel so small; miniature scale in the cosmos.

When you look out Gran's window on the other side of her house you can see down south. The airport is down there, on the other side of the Mountain. Sometimes, when we were eating breakfast, a plane might come in for a landing. It would lumber past Gran's window and you could read the name of the country it came from on the side of it as it went past. Gaze at eyelevel at the many windows along its side. It always seemed so positively absurd to me. To think, that the passengers from some foreign land that I had no knowledge of, could look out their plane window and see me eating vegemite toast in my pyjamas!

In Gran's Wellington everything was topsy-turvy. Like Escher's staircase with stairways going nowhere, or changing perspective at each junction, the varying vantage points of Wellington's cityscapes were simultaneously sitting above or below the places you could expect them to normally be. Gran's Wellington had platforms of worlds that felt magical and otherworldly because of their juxtaposition to other places or sites. But somehow, this improbable situating of things in relation to other things was normal here. It was the ludicrous placement of these platforms of worlds in relation

to each other that was the appeal of the trips to my Grandmothers. It was this improbable placement and warping of perception that shaped the way that I looked at things when we returned home. I do believe that this helped shape my acceptance of different worldviews. My belief that there was more than one way of looking at the World, and that something could be real and have a validity from more than one perspective. It could be something different depending on where you looked at it from. I could be something different, depending on where I was and what angle I was looking at the world from. That's the legacy I gained from my childhood trips to the magical world of my Grandmothers. Nothing and nobody is one single thing viewed or experienced from one static point.

Philippa Grace

Living on the Edge

Living on the edge of town had its advantages. It meant as a town kid I still got to go to the movies, go shopping, or catch up with friends, without it being too much of a drama. If it was okay with Mum and Dad I could get on my bike and take myself there, with their permission of course, but it was being the country kid that I really enjoyed.

Over the stop-bank was the Whakatane River. When the heavy rains came the river would flood and cover all the farmland between the stop-banks. The flood waters swirling and raging down toward the river mouth carried washed away trees, rocks, soil and animals that had been cornered, captured and dragged away by its torrent.

When the rains ceased and the clouds dispersed the sun reappeared. The waters would recede leaving a swamp lying on the farmland between the stop-bank by my house and the river. This swamp was like the jewel in the crown. I would sacrifice my freedom for a moment of “my time” down there. A couple of hours down there just listening to the sounds, smelling the smells, seeing the colours and hunting.

If I was caught down at the swamp on my own my parents would go bananas. I would be grounded for a week. Mum and Dad always said it was far too dangerous down there on my own. I used to always wonder what was dangerous about this place; to me it was a visual and aural feast of sights and sounds.

I would stand still. I would listen to the croaking of the frogs, the buzzing of the mosquitoes, the clicking of the crickets, the chirping of the birds and the gurgling, swishing sounds of the water lapping on the edges of the banks. The smells all around me of; clean crisp air, sheep in the paddock, and the mud on the edges of the swamp. The feeling of the sun warm on my bare skin. The water cool around my feet and up my legs. All this made me feel alive and connected.

I especially loved the sounds common to this large wet muddy over-sized puddle and here I planned my attack. Armed with a couple of Mum’s large AG preserving jars and a small net Dad and I had made last white-baiting season, I would stalk my prey.

I would hunt through the duck weed to see what living treasures skittered among the weed. There was always a myriad of frogs’ eggs, tadpoles with and without legs and tails. Frogs in a variety of sizes and colours. Today I was after bigger prey. I wondered if that old bullfrog was going to let himself be caught today.

Last night I had heard him taunting my cat Smokey. While I lay in snuggled up in my bed Bullfrog had made his way from the swamp up onto the road by our house. He had attracted all the neighbourhood cats with his oversized bloated puffed up body and raucous croaking. Smokey could not play “cat and mouse” with this guy.

In bed somewhere between waking and sleeping I could see Smokey, claws extended, left hooking Bullfrog. I would hear him squeal and in response see the hair stand up on Smokey’s arched back as she hissed threateningly at him. In one great leap Bullfrog would hop back into the long grass. Now camouflaged, he would retreat back to the safety of the swamp.

Today I could now hear him calling me, taunting me. Creeping, creeping, picking my way through the weed I stalked him. Then silence, he hears me, he is listening. I freeze, who will make the first move, the right move—the wrong move? Will he retain their freedom today? Will I go home empty-handed, alone, imprisoned?

Therese Cargo