

EMMA L WATERS

*Something for a rainy day*

Janine lived alone in a cottage of darkness, squeaking wood, occasional leaks and global concerns. Her black wireless a constant companion, spouted news without rest. It hung from the kitchen wall in the mornings and evenings. It sat on a rock in the garden as she weeded. It sat on her bedside table and told her stories until she fell asleep. But when she walked around the bay and into town, it stayed home. Then she listened to the breeze. The length of sound as the air cooled and brevity as it heated. If she let her footfalls slow, the words of the news rolled off and away into the bay. If she took her eyes off the yellow gravel path. If she let herself pause to look at a pelican on a thermal current high above, or some kids on the jetty dropping lines, or a far off puttering dinghy, the words of the news fell away and she didn't even think about Brian.

Just before Christmas a series of quakes in South America caught her attention. Then a series of three on the Solomon Islands. On the day of the third quake she bought a world map from the newsagency with a great sense of purpose. Janine took care not to tear it as she unfolded each snug crease of paper. She adjusted her glasses, taking in the lines of longitude and latitude spreading out across the kitchen table. A world weary atlas lay open to a page on fault lines. Her eyes ran up the side of New Zealand and across to south east asia where the edge of the Indo-Australian plate lay. Then down to her little Island at the bottom of Australia. Tucked away out of harms way.

She scribed a definite circle to mark site of the earthquake. Inside the circle she wrote 6.6, (which was the magnitude) and then neatly wrote Solomon Islands, January 3, 2010. Satisfied, she used the same formula for the other two. Soon there was a congestion of seismic citation.

It arced through South East Asia.

Then crumbled the west coastline of the Americas into a rumbling sea.

New Zealand's South Island shattered like a broken biscuit.

Janine sharpened the pencil and waited.

Sitting at the town library computer, Janine considered what to ask google next. Beside her, a man of bitter tobacco smoke and damp wool snorted and coughed as she typed in her next question. Her eyes watered under the harsh light of the flickering screen.

500,000 earthquakes a year. One fifth of those felt.

Apparently this year was nothing new at all. But she felt sure something significant was happening. There'd even been tremors in Australia. The snorting man produced something of consequence and spat it into his handkerchief. Janine bit her lip and left.

The quiet bayside town of St Helens swelled to twice its size with the summer swelter. Shoulders brushed in supermarket aisles. Sausages sold out. Queues formed at the reticently blinking ATM. Bins bloomed with fish and chip paper. The streets peeled with bronzed and burnt children.

A devastating earthquake hit Haiti. It was a strike-slip fault, where two fault-lines met and moved horizontally instead of buckling upwards. Two pieces of the world moving in opposite directions. Side by side. Like huge steel boats passing too close. The radio's netted belly burst with news.

Listless with consuming information all day, she lay back in bed, listening as a subdued man reported from Haiti. The round rose in the middle of the ceiling blurred as her glasses drifted away into the pillow.

"The gang situation has been exacerbated by the lack of order here in Haiti. Street gangs armed with machetes are robbing citizens. Looting has become commonplace. Even, quite shockingly, a person was spotted looting a mortuary. A corpse was removed from a casket, the

looter driving away with the wooden box.”

That night her bayside town split, the two pieces of the horseshoe lurching in opposite directions. People woke to new neighbours. It upended the caravan park, turning trailers around. In one half, the land crackled and perished while the other rained a hot brown rain. People wrinkled with dryness on one side and wrinkled with wet on the other.

Janine opened her eyes. Wide awake. Looking out to the sunny day, she half expected to have a new neighbour. Putting her glasses on, she saw that the green concrete frog by the post box had gone. A sense of indignation propelled her out of bed to investigate.

A dull impression in the ground where the frog had sat. A sullen patch of sickly yellow growth surrounded by green. She patrolled the street. The Greens’ post box was on a new lean. The dummy dressed as Santa Claus up the Todd’s tree now hung upside down like a sloth. And there was the frog. Nose down in a ditch a few doors along. Half fell away as she tried to pick him up. A split down his centre. The indignation rose in her throat, but it would not defeat her. She carried the cleft frog back home, one piece at a time and glued him back together at the kitchen table over a cup of tea. Once he’d set, she positioned him exactly as he’d been. Pulled a few weeds for good measure. A grunt of satisfaction.

Summer crested and then rolled away on the back of melancholic caravans. No one interfered with her frog again. The IGA had too many sausages and ran a red spot special on them. A pile of garden gnomes was discovered in the bush behind the caravan park. The streets emptied. Quiet as a Sunday afternoon nap.

Janine marked off more earthquakes. Pencil on standby for aftershocks. They worked in cycles. And clusters and swarms. She’d always had an excellent mind for patterns and a great memory for names and numbers. At the fish and chip shop she’d prided herself on knowing

everyone's name and order. But she was never one for gossip. Brian was the chatty one. Her sons weren't big talkers either. In all the years at the shop, the only insight she'd had into people's lives was by what and when they had ordered. She felt embarrassed by the things people told Brian. But they confirmed what she'd already worked out. When the Butt's went through a divorce, their order split as well. When Maude went on a health kick her battered flake and chips became grilled flake and salad. When Jed got made redundant and became depressed he fattened up with dim sims and extra potato cakes on the side of his lunchtime burger.

Even with Brian, she didn't pry. Still couldn't bring herself to open up his shoebox. It sat in the cupboard, corners worn as soft as felt, knotted with string, just as it had been when she'd found it sorting through his belongings.

Janine crossed the bridge to the town centre and pier.

The sky was indistinct. Bright. Light grey. The air was still. Not even the gentle slosh of water wearing against the concrete facade. So calm it seemed impossible this spinning world could rupture and break apart.

Greg gave her a wave from his boat moored at the pier. He bundled up purple and green netting on deck. She gave a quick wave back and picked up her pace.

It didn't feel like Thursday without a saying hello to Greg. When she and Brian had owned the fishmongers they'd bought direct from the boats. Now, with the shop gone, it was a social visit. Their old shop, now sleek, repainted and renamed, sat smugly on the edge of the bay. The Chipper Fish and Chipper had become Tides. They'd put in a tank of expensive tropical fish which looked all very nice, but you couldn't eat them and it probably made an order a few dollars more than it should be. The soul they'd put into the shop had been gutted and washed away.

On a wintry evening she'd turned the open for business sign around for last time, fingertips leaving mist halos on the glass. The cancer had swallowed Brian up from inside with a cruel ferocity. They chopped great chunks of it out of him, but it was no use. The treatment was far

away in the Launceston, where she'd grown up. The big smoke. Too fast-paced for her. She held Brian's hand for the last time in that white room at the Queen Victoria. Everything was white. Even outside the fog lay so heavy she could look directly at the sun through the window.

She'd let his ashes fly away at the heads where he liked to walk and beachcomb. Always a collector. Always looking for something new. Two solid bodied sons stood either side of her. Their arms around her crumpling shoulders. Close for a while, they soon drifted apart again. With the changing of the wind.

She knew Brian had done some business cash in hand, but she couldn't have imagined. She asked the bank clerk once more if they were sure of the numbers.

I'm sorry love, I wish I could tell you different, but it's 80 cents and 80 cents only. Her silver bangle clonked on the counter resolutely as she handed her the statement.

If only she'd poked her nose into the banking. Just once. If only they'd set it up as a joint account. All her meticulous daily accounts and carefully labelled envelopes of banking for this.

I'll take it, Nino. More secure this way.

Alright, big feller.

She stood for one more humiliated moment before closing the account and paying the final banking fees.

She could not rest that night, her mind turning pages of the useless accounts book, hoping for something more. It seemed in the end there'd been plenty she hadn't known about Brian. As she'd packed up the house where they'd lived in town, a man she barely knew walked up the driveway. He didn't skip a beat after offering condolences. Apparently Brian owed him a chainsaw from a while back.

The greyhounds, you see. He ran out of cash that night and said, take my chainsaw instead. Just before he went into hospital, it was.

His fat brown hands reached out.

She handed it over and sent him on his way, harbouring thoughts of pulling the starter cord and chasing him with it, snarling at his heels. She continued stacking the empty flower pots, counting the ways she cursed her dearly departed.

Janine sold the shop. She couldn't do it any more. The smell of oil became loathesome. The steel equipment laboursome to lift.

She sold the house too. It smelled of their life together. Every click of the door, every creek of the floorboards sounded like Brian coming home. If he did, she'd have a few questions to ask now.

Her feet landed heavily on the planks of the pier. Two boys with straggly bleached mops sat on its edge with a bucket of oysters collected from the bay between them, slipping the gelatinous bodies onto hooks to drop in. Through the rot of sea meeting land she could smell a change in the weather. Rain coming.

What's going on in the rest of the world, Janine? Greg asked, coming up to the port side. The other few on crew were busy hauling up crates of fish.

He rolled a spilling ended cigarette from his pouch of Drum. He'd caught a bit of the coverage on Haiti. When Janine first told Greg about the earthquakes, she saw a little part of him latch on, blue eyes alight in a face beaten red by sea winds.

There's something in these earthquakes. I'm sure there's been more lately, she said.

Could be linked to the greenhouse effect somehow. He said, finishing off his cigarette to grab a plastic bag from the bench behind the cabin.

They call it climate change these days, Greg.

Oh, I see. Here's a couple of flathead for your tea.

A weighted white plastic bag swung in his hand.

Greg still looked out for her. And he listened. Not like those distant and dull headed sons of hers.

Wind picked up over the bay and threw down a hard rain. Janine put a bucket in the living room, lining it up under the tea-coloured stain on the ceiling. The leak was bound to come on in this weather. The first night sleeping in her cottage, she'd felt like a frightened child. The trees squeaked against each other, casting ghostly shadows through the window. The truck changing gears down the hill had been unfamiliar and sinister sounding. Now they were as familiar as the late night train horns she'd grown up with on the outskirts of the big smoke.

Janine rolled up the volume on the wireless.

An Irish woman spoke sombrely.

This child says, she still can't find her parents. It's been hours now and they are still missing. She's telling me, I have to look after my little brothers, but I have nothing to look after them with. Please help us. The earthquake hit in the middle of the night, leaving many families like this one vulnerable as they slept.

Janine picked up the red and black striped pencil and waited, poised over the map.

Reporting from Concepcion, Chile, said the reporter.

Janine drew a careful circle on the map over the location.

Geoff had sent some more pictures of Rupert. He was getting more like his father all the time. Her eyes had heated up with tears holding her grandson for the first time. But all her advice seemed dated. Made redundant by a bookshelf of exuberantly coloured self-help parenting books. She was told off when she held a strawberry to his lips. Her daughter-in-law careening forward to snatch it away. No one could eat anything anymore it seemed. She sipped many cups of tea those few weeks. Out of place in their home. Displaced at the other end of the country. Bound to the house by the necessity for air-conditioning in the hyperbolous heat of a WA summer.

A little gust of sadness buffeted against her as she sat at the kitchen table with the pictures of her grandson. The ache of distance. But she could never live there. There was sadness

everywhere. But the sadness of her hometown was familiar.

The root of the milk thistle broke off in Janine's hand. The root firmly wedged deep in the ground like a nail. Just a sprinkle of rain and they were all back again.

She'd read that earthquakes could be caused by drilling and mining, like the one in Newcastle years back. A city built on an unstable foundation of displaced rocks.

Janine studied the map every day, looking for answers. Sure that something of consequence was happening. Just as she stared out into the bay each night after her evening meal with a cup of tea. She chipped away at the broken-off root.

Her son's thick shadow fell on the soil.

Hello Mum.

Hello Will.

His face was sun-ripened, laughter lines white from squinting outdoors all day, just like Greg's. He held bag of metallic smelling oysters fresh from the farm for her.

They're good. Starting to sweeten up now its getting cooler.

She gave him a quick hug, the rot of seawater in his clothes.

They sat together over a cup of tea. Stomachs full of Thai fish cake sandwiches made with striped trumpeter. A plate of chocolate wheat biscuits waited patiently in front of them.

You're still charting these earthquakes then? He looked at the map, hastily pushed aside for lunch.

You may mock, but there's something going on.

He put his cup down, gone in two milky mouthfuls.

You're not going to tell me the world's ending again are you?

Janine took a sip of tea, eyes gleaming above the cup, grasped tightly close to her lips.

He never listened. She'd never said the world was going to end.



You do love a conspiracy theory, Mum.

This is all fact. She gave the map a little shake.

Earthquakes are hardly new though, are they.

Are you going to have a biscuit or should I put these away. She pushed the plate towards him. He rolled his eyes and took one. She held her breath for a moment and then went on.

I'm sure these seismology sites are downplaying it. Paid off by the government probably. You know mining can trigger earthquakes. All these poor countries are easy to exploit and then they get ruined. Just like that bloody damn in China.

Will chewed on his bottom lip, turning the empty cup around on the table.

Janine hoped he wouldn't suggest volunteering at the op-shop again today. He had that look on his face.

Do you want me to fix that leak for you? He asked, nodding at the quarter filled bucket in the living room.

Janine sharpened the pencil, crunching the delicate shavings in her hand. The Solomon Islands had another major hit in April. The same day Spain felt a shock of 6.3. In China, villages disappeared under mud as the earth moved. The world was restless. Changing shape. She dropped the shavings into the compost bin.

That night Janine dreamed of ice in Antarctica cracking open. Like a million rifles firing icy bullets upwards through its white crust to form cold blue cravasses.

It was Thursday and Greg's boat should be back, but the sea was choppy and there was no sign of him. There'd been days like this when boats couldn't cross the barway. Instead, mooring in a bay just to the north until the sea calmed. If the weather didn't improve Greg might miss his window to get his catch in before the weekend.

On the corner ahead, people gathered around the burnt out shell of Tony's Pizza Den. Dark flame-licks shadowed the letters of the awning. A smoked pizza hovered mid-air above his blackened cartoon face, burnt up to the neck. The window was smithereened and inside lay a pit of charcoal. A fracture ran up the brickwork. Theories of deliberate arson and insurance claims murmured through the crowd.

As she returned home, wind raged through the trees around the bay and deepened the load of the shopping. Seagulls cawed above, wind shunting them about on the wing. White horses reared on the waves. The sky that had glared white this morning darkened. Rain was blowing in. The barway was messy. The junk down the bottom from ships who'd sunk there over the years meant its hazards constantly changed shape and took skill to cross. It was about to bucket down and the bag handles were cutting into her hands. There was still no sign of Greg's boat and there was no way he'd be getting through the barway now.

In the night Janine felt the earth shaking. Round cups jumped on their saucers like fat children on trampelines. The kitchen table edged across the floor. The wireless bucked and fell from the bedside table. The umbrella stand toppled. Her bed slid, the blankets falling out of her grasp. The whole house was slipping away, lurching over the edge of the embankment into the bay. She clawed desperately at the bedclothes to protect her. But the room tipped up, the bed crashing against the other wall. A great grunt of house grinding against the ground. And over. Into the water. Frigid water. The wireless floated away. She paddled desperately after it.

Pulling at night clothes.

It was dark and cold. She snorted, gasping for air and fully awake, thinking she was coughing up water. Pulled the bedsheets back up. She was soaked. Her head swam. She flicked the lamp on. How could it possibly only be 1 am? A truck rumbled around a corner down the road. A drip of water hit her nose. She put her glasses on. A new leak had formed around the ceiling rose. The radio crackled from the bedside table.

King tides expected. And we repeat, there is a tsunami warning for the east coast of

Tasmania. There's no indication that people living on the beachfront will need to evacuate, but we advise people to delay any planned sailing trips and stay away from the shoreline. Remain on standby and keep listening for updates.

Janine changed into a clean nightie and dressing gown. Pulling a blanket around herself, she took the wireless into the kitchen. If a tsunami was coming the leak could wait. Looking at the map, she surmised there must be something around the Alpine fault running through New Zealand's South Island. Although a Chilean earthquake had triggered a tsunami that had effected tide levels on Maria Island along the south east.

Wind shook the corrugated iron roof. She pictured Greg trying to roll a cigarette on his wrestless boat. At every news break the warning remained the same.

A man with a megaphone called out from the back of a ute,

King tides! King tides! As though he were selling potatoes off the trailer.

She ran down the road after him in her pajamas.

Tell me more! I want to know more! But he couldn't hear. Then the road split in two, opening up like a the skin of dry heals in summer.

Janine lifted her head from the kitchen table to rough reception on the radio. There was no man with a megaphone. The bulletin was still the same. Early morning light leeches into the kitchen. She had slept in her glasses. Her feet were dead with the cold. Inflexible as frozen chops.

Pulling steaming water through her hair, she lathered life into her neck and thighs. Her feet were crazed with pins and needles under the hot water.

With a tea in her system she took a walk down the beach, wireless hanging from her shoulder. Kelp was strewn on the shore. But it was nothing unusual. She looked out across the bay. The barway wasn't quite visible, but she could walk around to see the pier. Still no boats.

By the time she had enough of a rumble in her belly to head back, the wind had subsided. The bay was a millpond again. The sun peaked over a sill of cloud briefly.

The radio prattled away at her side telling her the tsunami warning was over.

Even the tide line was nothing particularly out of the ordinary.

Janine felt that her chance had passed and flicked off the radio, feeling like tossing it and its senseless information into the water. Will was probably right. Just another crackpot theory that the end of the world was coming.

Grey still water. A barking dog echoed from the other side of the bay. She thought it the loneliest sound in the world.

A hum ran across the water. Janine made out the stern of Greg's boat emerging around a point in the bay. They were on deck, busy getting ship shape for land.

She hurried up to the house. Full of purpose, she made a thermos of coffee and fried as many eggs as would fit in the pan, flipping them and splatting them between bread with chutney and hastily wrapped them in foil.

She turned the key in the Datsun for the first time in a long time. It was a wheezy start, but she was soon pattering away down to the pier. Practically clucking up the grey boards to meet Greg and his crew, thermos under one arm, foil package under the other.

Janine! Greg was a little taken aback. They steadied the boat and knotted it to the pier.

I thought you could probably do with a nice hot breakfast after last night.

Greg gave the boys a wink and beckoned them up to the pier.

You're a gem Janine.

Over egg sandwiches and coffee they talked about the tsunami warning, standing around the opened foil package of warm egg sandwiches. The sea had been rough, but not the worst he'd seen. A net had torn. He'd spilled a can of coke down the inside of his waders. They'd had to abandon fishing and call it quits early. But even then, they missed the window to get back in time and moored at Binalong Bay overnight.

Janine piled up old magazines and clothes for the school op-shop, feeling determined to clear clutter from her life. Her eyes passed over the shoe box on the top shelf of the wardrobe. Its

soft corners worn from the times Brian must've opened and closed it, examining its contents.

She folded the map in half, leaving its blank back to face the world. The house was silent, though the aural impression left by the radio still played through her head.

The teacups began tinkling in their saucers on the shelves. She felt a little unsteady on her feet. Perhaps she was unwell after being out in the cold yesterday. The radio jiggled silently from where it hung on the wall. Janine reached for a chair. It vibrated in her hand. She let it go and stumbled back to the door frame, struggling to balance. Her gardening shoes turned on their heels by the kitchen door. Something fell in the bedroom with a dull thud.

And then the feeling went away.

In the bedroom, the piles of magazines and clothes had toppled.

On the floor beneath the wardrobe lay the shoebox, bound with string. A cavity on the shelf above from where it had fallen.

She picked it up and took it to the kitchen table.

Butterflies raced in her stomach as she put a knifeblade to the string. It sprung back. A little too willingly. She lifted the lid, imagining secret letters, trophies from murder victims, photos of a Vietnamese lover from the war.

Janine dropped the lid.

There was a note on top in Brian's handwriting, that read, Something for a rainy day.

The box was full of money. Piles and piles of money. Biting her lip, she pushed through the notes, expecting there to be a heavy paperback novel underneath. But there was more money.

You old devil, she breathed.

Like sediment, it lay in a history of saving. Unsorted. Placed as it had accrued. She dug through the top layer of coloured plastic money to the crinkly paper underneath. Douglas Mawson looked up at her from a one hundred dollar note. Mawson may as well have winked, channeling the ghost of Brian.

Janine made a cup of tea and opened up the map, fingertips tingling.

She'd never travelled overseas before, constrained by the business. Never seeing the point, when her own bayside town in Tasmania was so beautiful. But this was something else. In Thailand the clouds seemed to pile up into columns in the sky. Incandescent. The air fragrant and warm. The birds like strange raucas chimes.

Geoff and Will had known about their father's gambling and his rainy day box.

I just assumed you knew about it, they both said. Probably got money for a sneaky paddle-pop or a bag of lollies out of it as kids while Mum wasn't looking. Money for a cheeky six-pack as teenagers off to a party. That would be just like Brian, revelling in secret boy's business. And just like her not to pry.

The sea was bright. Awash with light. Her toes wrinkled delightedly in the pale sand as she flipped the switch on her wireless and rolled the dial through waves of pop music, hiss and hum until she found a news station in English.

Janine leaned back into the deckchair, enjoying the squeaking of the hinges taking her weight. Cleansing warmth in her bones. She'd bought a map of Thailand at the airport. It lay open on her knees, lines of longitude and latitude stretching out, full of possibility.