New Gold

An inflatable boat is heading along the isolated, north arm of the lake. This is sheep station country: loose, bare, with few fences and is a long way from the lake's other tree-smattered, southern arm, which ends where the faint fuzz of Weka Village basks in late summer sun. She massages her aching right knee – arthritis – and, from her position part-way up the steep-sided mountain range, observes the boat's progress. It has overtaken three kayaks she can't remember seeing earlier. She wasn't expecting anyone else to be about. She wants to do this, more accurately, feels compelled to do this, but doesn't relish discussion with strangers.

"Chi-ca-go, chi-ca-go." There's a pair of Californian quails immediately in front of her and one is calling.

"Chi-ca-go." Earnie was good at imitating them but oh, he could be irritating. She is reminded of his observation that not all imported game species damaged flora and fauna, using quail as an example. Earnie, the great environmentalist. Earnie, the great herpetologist. Huh! Earnie, the great inconsistent. Of course his encyclopaedic knowledge was admirable. Yes, he knew lots about lizards and geckos and skinks. It was his conviction that he was always right

about them that got to her. So infuriating. She swivels back to look at the lake. The three kayakers are moving along smartly. There are two people in the boat.

The two are talking.

"Do they lose their tails?" asks the man wearing a red beanie and steering the boat.

"Sometimes. But best they don't," says the other.

"Bazza in Aus reckons the tails are good to eat if you cook 'em the right way," says Red Beanie. He has eased off the throttle. "But Aussies barbecue everything."

"Even lizards?"

"You called them geckos."

"Whatever."

"You said 'orange-spotted gecko'."

"Whatever. Also called mokopirirakau."

"Mokopirirakau," repeats Red Beanie. "Be as good as winning Lotto if we find some."

"Finding them's not even third division," says the other. "You want to win Lotto we've got to get them to Auckland and through security. Alive.' He considers his words while assessing the shore line, then snorts before continuing. "Bastards. They've been watching me ever since I got caught with that Kraut's order for an Awakopaka skink. Still reckon someone shopped me."

There is a silence. The job is certainly not without risk.

"Right, this'll do, I reckon." Red Beanie revs the motor and aims the inflatable at a slight indentation where a creek meets the lake. As the boat surges forward, he turns off the motor and raises it, so that they are in shallow water when it comes to a stop. Red Beanie throws a grapple attached to a rope up and behind a driftwood log and he and the Poacher step into the lake. "That should keep her safe. Let's go."

There are a few poplar trees nearby, remnants perhaps of an early gold fossicker's occupation and a likely camping spot, but she sees Red Beanie and his companion ignore them and head away from lake and trek towards the mountain-side from where she is observing them. They pass through the same stunted manuka trees and clumps of prickly matagouri and briar she has recently fielded, it's almost as if they are following her footsteps. She can't see if they are wearing puttees, but she glances down and blesses the dark green ones covering her ankles, purchased on her own initiative for this expedition. She releases, then tightens the brace on her

right knee. Earnie ordered it on-line: it doesn't seem to improve things. She will, reluctantly, concede the alpine walking sticks are helpful and uses one to push herself up from the rock she has been perched on. She resisted the idea when Earnie first insisted on them. But then Earnie was always persistent when it came to her welfare. He knew what was best for her.

Anyway, the two Tramadol she swallowed this morning will keep her under her pain threshold today, and hopefully not make her dopey. Earnie would say any sixty-five-year-old woman wandering around the southern mountains on her own is a disaster waiting to happen. But she is not wandering, she has a destination. She is about to slip on her day pack to head upwards when she notices the three kayaks are beaching on the shingly lakeshore, not far from where the secured inflatable nudges the land. She watches them come to a stop.

Damn. Even more people.

The kayakers step out and drag their canoes from the water, stowing paddles and life jackets in the cockpits.

"If there's other people up there, will that frighten them away?" The male speaker is looking at the nearby boat.

'They might not be going where we're going." the second speaker is mother of the third in the group, a twelve or thirteen years-old child.

"Just don't want a wasted trip, is all," says the man. By the time they get up there, pancake about and come down, the day will be almost over. And then there's the return trip …

"They could be tramping, rock-climbing, abseiling ..." from the mother.

"Meditating, photographing, botanising ..." from the child.

Smart little prick. It's hot, the climb will be hard, the task is not of his choosing. He's there to prove his willingness to include her son in their relationship; this kid she thinks is gifted for gawd's sake. A better description would be obsessive/compulsive.

"All I'm saying is that if they are going where we're going, won't them blundering around scare away any geckos."

"Ok, duh, Einstein, I got that. But since we can't know, why worry?" The man and woman glare at each other. He has been afraid this might happen.

"They might be looking for them." The child speaks.

"What?" From both adults.

"Mokopirirakau. If we came here because we're looking for mokopirirakau, they might be too."

The man looks at the child: for all his weirdness, he's sometimes surprisingly shrewd.

They set off. The boy trails slightly. They are an hour behind Red Beanie and the Poacher.

She is climbing again. The vegetation thins, giving way to tussock and taramea mired amongst boulders. Higher still these will give way to scree beds and then, when she gets to a flatter, almost terraced area, she will reach her objective. It's a hard slog but she is in no rush and wants only to keep a steady pace. A kea circles and rides an uplift towards the ridge line, and then there is the shrill cry from what may be its mate. She takes another breather, confirms her GPS on her phone: it is difficult terrain and her knee is becoming more painful. Kea form long term pair bonds, so what do they do when the bond is broken?

She will not be a person who remembers only the good times and forgets – ignores – the bits that weren't so good. It is more respectful to remember with accuracy rather than gloss over inconvenient aspects of his character; that would be sterilising him into pleasant conventionality. The truth is that despite all his achievements, he failed to get any evidence proving the existence of a colony of mokopiriratau on the site above.

Ensuring he will rest there for the rest of eternity should keep the score even.

Sunlight hits sheaves of dry tussock and warm boulders; fractured rock lies underfoot, easily dislodged by her steps. She continues upwards.

"Surely time for smoko," says Red Beanie and the two drop their packs to sit, passing salami and a pocketknife back and forward, drinking from water bottles. The Poacher checks the GPS on his phone. They look at the terrain above and become aware of a lone figure threading through the flakes of schist. They look down at the long, narrow lake far below and see the three beached kayaks, look harder – and see three figures starting an ascent below them.

"What's the odds of that, do you reckon?" asks Red Beanie. "Above and below."

"It'll just be people tramping, maybe rock climbing. A coincidence is all. No worries. Won't be interested in what we're doing."

"Might wonder why we stop when we do. Might notice if we moving round catching lizards." Red Beanie wonders why the Poacher hadn't suggested they wear camouflage: cameras or something to look like photographers, or some ropes and a helmet like climbers carry. He doesn't know much about the Poacher, an accidental meeting in a pub two nights ago,

the man's interest when he heard Red Beanie had a boat, a conversation which must have been steered because Red Beanie found himself talking about his time in the outback and trying to catch blue-tongue lizards. Then the proposition: it appealed, was something a bit different, the Poacher seemed to know what he was doing – and real money at the end of it.

"Well the fellow above us is not gonna be looking down to see what we do."

"True."

"And ones behind us could head in any direction."

"How do you know, anyway, they, the little darlings, aren't everywhere all over this whole bloody mountainside?" asks Red Beanie.

"There's just the one area, and it's unconfirmed but I've got the GPS coordinates. It's on a terrace over that ridge, above right."

"That's where he's headed too."

"Looks like it." The Poacher shaded his eyes and squinted. "Bugger."

The two men begin moving again.

She grinds higher, goes over the ridge, and a plateau stretches before her, with a small tarn in a depression at its centre. There seems to be a little vegetation and it is not as barren as the terrain she has just come through: stellaria is flowering, there are a lot of button daisies around with pads of lichen attracting small insects. It's a lovely spot, a perfect final resting place. She angles around rocks to get to a long slab close to the little pool of water and sits on it gingerly, turning her face to the sun. She made the right decision: this is the right place. It is time for the next, the final, step.

From what she's read, ashes are a mixture of heavy grit and light dust so it's not possible to actually scatter them. She will slew the container around so that the contents spill out in an arc. A clumsy scattering would be disrespectful. It's important that she is respectful.

There's another thing to consider: the legality. It might be against the law to scatter cremains on conservation land, so it's probably best to scatter – or slew – without witnesses. Earnie is no longer here to hurry her, she will take her time, wait till that couple coming up have overtaken her and moved on. No rush. In a way her struggle to reach the plateau seems a fitting tribute to a difficult man. Like paired with like. And it's also true the other occupants in this little micro-climate resemble his complexity, though in a different way – their strange nocturnal habits in apparent contradiction to their sun-bathing habit. His professed care tainted with constant correction.

She lies back on the rock. She has plenty of time. She closes her eyes. She dozes.

A small creature, just under ten centimetres long, approaches a warm outcrop not far away and stops. It is mostly a greyish – almost a greenish – brown colour blotching into a pinkish brown. There are irregular, dark charcoal strips across its body and sprinkled over the stripes are patches of orange. Its tail is as long as its body and when it flicks out an orange tongue, the inside of the mouth is the same shade of orange. The flicking tongue seizes a tiny jumping spider beside some lichen and the gecko ingests it but doesn't move. It remains on its stoney outcrop, absorbing the sun's warmth in its only habitat, the vertiginous mountains of Central Otago.

Nobody sees it.

Red Beanie and the Poacher arrive at the edge of the plateau.

"This is the place? Here?" asks Red Beanie.

"Yep."

There's an immobile figure lying on a rock near the tarn.

"Do we go over and say g'day?"

"Yeah, and go over say something like 'lovely day, have you, by any chance, spotted any mokopirirakau while you've been lying there? And if so, can you show me where so we can catch it'?"

"We could just sit for a bit and see what happens. Who knows, one of them little blighters might come out asking to be grabbed while we're sitting." The Poacher starts rummaging through his pack, bringing out a plastic take-away tub, it's lid and half a cutting mat. "You put the tub over them and slide the mat under. Then sneak the lid on. Not hard."

"OK."

They are sitting hopefully when the three arrive. Red Beanie nudges the Poacher and both watch in silence in silence as the party approaches. When they are almost within hailing distance the child suddenly freezes, then cautiously approaches a wedge of schist. He stops and stands very still. His mother notices he has stopped. She nudges the man and both stop.

For a few moments it's an immobile tableau. Then the child stealthily removes a phone from his pocket and seems to be taking a photo. Then he seems to be filming, slowly stretching as far forward as he can without moving his feet. He turns towards his mother and makes a gesture with his fist, one his mother has seen football players make.

The abrupt movement on the schist is so rapid no one is sure they have seen it. They look at where the invertebrate had been. They look at each other. They look at the clutter of rocks and plants and boulders around them.

The mother hurries to her son. They can hear her calling. "Darling how wonderful! Let me see!"

Red Beanie and the Poacher watch the threesome take turns to examine the phone, confer, then begin walking towards them.

"Pretend we know nothing about lizards," mutters the Poacher.

"Well I don't," Red Beanie answers in his normal voice.

"Hello," the approaching male speaks heartily. He gives his and the women's first names. Red Beanie and the Poacher give false ones.

"We thought Tim here" the male indicates the child, "just took a photo of a mokopirirakau, a rare gecko – which is like a lizard. But he didn't. Phone's not working properly or something." He turns to the boy. "Good try though, lad."

"Lizard? There's lizards here?" Red Beanie looks guileless.

"Who'd have thought? A lizard! In this wilderness," says Red Beanie.

From the other side of the tarn she watches the two groups interact and wonders what could have led them to congregate in an area of no great significance. She'll wait till they leave. There's plenty of time.