

Growing

They're shouting at each other – again.

Her mother's accusations spew in furious Dutch, but Anneke understands enough. Mammie is calling Pappie *stom* for making them migrate to this even stupider country, where people think outside toilets are normal and everything is expensive yet nobody considers eating horsemeat. Didn't he care this heat-afflicted land might give their children polio? How long must they endure this house that's no better than a shack while he breaks his back growing vegetables for that Home over there, those poor souls who have half-lives themselves–

I'll remind you, Pappie interrupts, speaking loud English that slices like a cold knife and troubles Anneke more than Mammie's rage, that you detested my shift work and we were both grateful for the free voyage and thirty pounds landing money, let alone endless orange trees and opportunities this country promised anyone with two hands and legs and willingness to work.

Work? Oh yes, good at that, aren't we? Ignorant labourers they regard us–

Anneke yanks chickweed shooting between broccoli plants and tries blocking Mammie's answer. Complaints and accusations rise and fall, spreading in ripples until they form a wave, crashing, then the argument sucks back to start all over.

Do Mammie and Pappie think she can't hear every word, or have they forgotten it's Saturday, when she and Gerrit weed garden beds all morning? Her brother hates chores and has disappeared, taking advantage of their parents' conflict and lured by the river's tree-swing, but Anneke would rather feel soil sifting through her fingers than endure the alternative – sweeping floors, dusting, wiping crockery – and spring sunshine is soothing and calming.

Just not today.

Everything has been wrong for a long time.

The worst day arrived a month ago – the two-word overseas telegram, Pappie clenching a pencil and writing each letter recited by the telephone operator until Tante Agatha's message formed: *Mother dead*. Colour had drained from Mammie's face and she'd released a scream and hurled her best vase, fresh flowers and all, across the kitchen. Her knees hit the floor as she howled *Moeder* over and over and pummelled the floor like Gerrit used to do when he was a little boy.

Anneke's beloved Oma, small and smiling and cinnamon-scented, had left Holland and entered heaven.

That was the beginning of the shouting. And silences.

Ever since that worst day, Mammie, whose magic silver needles can unfurl pictures on embroidery cloth, mends and sews without enthusiasm, lips puckered as if she is holding back lemon-sour thoughts. Even her knitting needles clack like they're arguing.

Inside the house a door slams, cutting off Mammie's outraged shriek. Pappie strolls out and stacks manure bags, his movement calm and measured, a cigarette drooping from a corner of his mouth like a white worm.

Anneke is old enough to remember his railway master uniform: black-brimmed red hat and shoes black and shiny like the buttons speckling his navy-blue coat. Vegetables don't care what I'm wearing, he told her when they moved into the shack, trying out a new joke. Plus, no lettuce or pumpkin would ever give him as much bother as passengers buying the incorrect ticket and lecturing him on the rising cost of train travel.

Pappie straightens, stretching his long arms. Anneke, he says indistinctly, cigarette jiggling, check the *zilverbiet* next. He calls silverbeet, and all other vegetables, by their Dutch names. They're the only mother-tongue words he uses – other than occasional swearing that slips out when Mammie isn't in earshot.

Pappie is an onion, held together by many layers, humble and ordinary yet relied upon to flavour everything. Anneke enjoys secretly comparing people to the produce she helps nurture. Pesky little brother Gerrit is easy – a brussels sprout (nobody's favourite, must be endured). Anneke's teacher Miss Brooks reminds her of a fennel flower: bright, dainty, pretty. Defining Mammie's likeness, however, is difficult. Sometimes she's bitter and hard to take as pickled cabbage, but other times she's sweet, like a freshly-pulled carrot.

Pappie pushes his wheelbarrow, bulging manure bags stacked high, towards the cauliflower crop. There's no better feeling, Anneke, Pappie says when he passes her, than digging the earth and watching things grow. People who tend their gardens don't notice their neighbour's weeds.

Anneke is a bright girl – Miss Brooks and others before have mentioned that – and she knows Pappie's advice has two meanings, yet the response that flicks through her mind, like the white moth fluttering between broccoli heads, doesn't belong to her. She only knows the words sound clever and disrespectful.

You and Mammie should stop looking at each other's weeds and be quiet for a change.

Pappie drops the wheelbarrow handles and its legs stab the earth. *Anneke!* His rebuke cracks and its whiplash burns her chest as she runs away, her knees pumping, fleeing the crisp order of Pappie's vegetable plots.

Loose gravel skitters under her feet, but she could sprint down this path blindfolded. It veers away from their shack-house, lining a boxwood hedge hiding the Home's nurses' quarters, tapers off at a triangular garden dotted with azaleas. The next part is less familiar, but she knows the path borders a manicured hedgerow and loops around the Home towards the driveway entrance and a big sign introducing *Holbrook Home for the Disabled*.

Nestled between azalea bushes, her own special hideaway, she waits for Mr Park to appear, staring up at the first floor, although she knows he doesn't have a window room.

The Home, three stories of sprawling turreted grandeur, is forbidden territory, but she loves crouching here, hidden and cocooned in its pristine garden like a caterpillar waiting for butterfly wings. Sometimes she wishes Pappie didn't grow dreary vegetables for the patients but tended roses, mowed rolling lawn or pruned hedges into perfect English-style corners.

The Home's gardens have been that way for nearly a hundred years, Pappie told her when they arrived, ever since the mansion was built by a man who was once a convict. Convicts? People sent to this land without a choice, unlike we did. Many convicts made lives for themselves here. Know what that proves, Anneke? You can achieve anything when you set your mind to it. Anything.

There's a face framed in a second-floor window – one of the Home's many poor souls crippled in mind or body (Mammie's description), and impulsively she waves at the poor soul, but the white oval doesn't move and then she sees a frilled cap as a nurse steers the patient away and the only thing in the window is the sky's reflection.

The sky was a milky blue version of that colour and winter air nipped their faces when she, Gerrit, Mammie and Pappie boarded the migrant ship in Amsterdam. The lock had raised their ship high and they looked down at Oma and Tante Agatha, standing on the wharf like small versions of themselves, almost hidden by a giant spiderweb of yellow, green, blue and red paper streamers. Oma waved a plump arm and raised the streamer Anneke had flung over the railing. Anneke had tugged her mother's coat, thrilled. Mammie, Oma's caught my ribbon!

Mammie hadn't heard over the crowd's noise and the ship's farewell horn-blast and Gerrit's bawling. He'd thrown his streamer too hard and dropped it. Mammie gave him hers and leaned down to point at Tante Agatha, who had caught the other end, but Gerrit insisted Oma hold his ribbon. Tante Agatha and Oma swapped, Gerrit's tears dried, and a lump rose in Anneke's throat as she realised that when the ship moved and streamers broke it wouldn't be Oma clutching the other half of her blue ribbon.

A thornbill's high-pitched tweets – *sit, sit, sit, twirl* – interrupts Anneke's drifting memories of the life her family left behind. She can remember warming herself by the potbelly stove in Pappie's railway station office, her pet pigeon bobbing along roof gutters as it followed her to school, feeling wrapped up like a parcel in coat and scarf and mittens while dotting the chest of winter's first snowman with coal-lump buttons.

Tasmanian winters are chilly, but it will never snow here.

She wonders what's keeping Mr Park. It's been – she counts the days on her fingers – six days since she'd seen him last. She expects to hear gravel crunching under his wheelchair tyres anytime now. A penny for your thoughts, he'll say, and she will respond: they're worth a lot more. Hello, Mr Park.

G'day, lass, he'll say back.

They're friends; it's their special greeting.

She's considered him a friend ever since Mammie's first meltdown when Anneke had sought refuge inside the forbidden ground, making herself small beside two azalea plants blooming pink. Mr Park had rolled past, grasping the hand-rims until his wheelchair stopped, and he said, sounding astonished, blimey – have ya ever seen an azalea with a golden head and two feet?

I'm not a flower, she'd announced, crawling out. It's just me – Anneke.

You're the gardener's daughter, aren't ya? Joe's little lass.

Pappie's name isn't Joe, she informed him. That's only what people call him here, because nobody can pronounce Jochem without sounding like they are coughing up spit.

Mr Park had laughed until he wiped his eyes when she'd said that, and he asked: where's your family from, then?

She had hesitated. She'd overheard Mammie saying once, her mother's voice bitter as vinegar, that their Dutch home had been the village of *Weduwenenwezen*. Anneke knew that wasn't right, because although her Holland memories were hazy, she was sure there was no such place as *Widowsandorphans*, but she felt too afraid of Mammie and her own ignorance to question it.

She kept her answer simple. Holland, hey? Mr Park had mused. Got close to there myself, in the war. Lost me legs in Germany, I did.

Anneke saw a blanket tucked around the stumps where his thighs ended. She knew about the war because it's what took Pappie's brothers and both Anneke's grandfathers and made Pappie scared of small spaces and big noises.

Ruddy war, Mr Park said. Been over for six years and it's still claiming victims.

Anneke had nothing else to say about the war, so she told Mr Park about other memories, including her last gift from Oma, new red court shoes, and how she'd stood at the railing during a choppy day and lost one off the migrant ship's side, with everyone else too sick to notice. She hadn't added that by the time a sullen Mammie repacked their suitcases when

the ship docked in Melbourne, she told Anneke the voyage had cost them more than pretty shoes.

Mr Park had memories, too. He pulled out a photograph revealing a smiling young woman, a man wearing a distant expression and a girl wedged between them, peering up through a heavy fringe. That's me daughter, he explained, with her little gal. Charlotte would be near your age now. They live along the north coast. A beautiful place, right on the ocean. Ah, it's grand having the seaside at your doorstep, but it's far away and, all things considered, that's why they don't visit.

Anneke hadn't asked why Mr Park didn't have a newer picture, seeing as his granddaughter looked younger than Gerrit, which meant the photograph must be some years old, and it was dog-eared and crumpled as if Mr Park had shown it to many people.

Sit, sit, sit, twirl! The thornbill's scolding is louder, now, and insistent. Never mind pennies or our thoughts, Mr Park would say, if he was here. She's worried. See that birch tree? She's got a nest up there, and a mother-bird protecting babies is fiercer than a lioness. Mr Park's conversation is as solid and comforting as a buttered potato, and he never flinches when she says things that would shock her parents.

I wish I could *really* run away, she said fiercely, the last time she'd fled here.

Oh, lass. I know about wanting to escape, even with no legs to take me anywhere. There are worse things than missing limbs. Being broken up here. Mr Park tapped his temple, then his heart. In here. He'd talked about survivor's guilt. Mind-scars. Migrant regret. Until her stomach coiled tight as a fist. He spoke a language she didn't understand and she felt left-out and invisible again.

His eyes had flicked to the Home and it was like he'd forgotten she was there when he said, it's a beautiful prison, isn't it? His eyes glistened, then he'd blinked. Ah, these drops the nurses put in me eyes cause more trouble than they're worth.

Daringly, considering the blank window rows watching them and the ever-present nursing staff, she had pushed his wheelchair along the hedgerow to give his arms a rest and said goodbye at the corner, where he clasped her hand and patted it. Mind your father, lass. He has a wise head on his shoulders. And sure enough, don't you know there's always wisdom to be found in a garden? No, sadly, I won't see you tomorrow, lass. Some other time.

Someovertime, someovertime, someovertime. Sit, sit, sit, twirl.

Anneke makes a song from the words that accompany the thornbill's melody as she waits, her heels tapping the earth impatiently. She wonders why lovely spring weather would chase Mr Park inside the Home.

Someone is walking from the nurses' quarters; she sees a blue skirt's hem, white stockings and brown lace-ups. Anneke finds her courage and crawls out. Excuse me, nurse?

The young woman steps back. Bless me, she says, one hand grabbing her chest. What are you doing, hiding down there – do you intend scaring me half to death? The woman's severity matches her uniform and nerves thicken Anneke's words. She hears a tinge of Mammie's accent when she asks: do you know where Mr Park is?

The nurse sighs and mumbles under her breath, asking herself how she could explain something like seaside to an innocent child, and Anneke thinks it strange that a grownup would mind talking about such a thing.

Oh, Mr Park longed for the seaside, she says. That's where his family lives, along the north coast with the ocean at their doorstep.

The nurse's face is blank; then she makes a noise that passes for a wistful laugh. Shakes her head. That's right, the seaside's taken him away. But you shouldn't be here, child. You'd better go before Matron catches you and skelps us both.

Anneke watches her leave, gravel crunching under the nurse's shoes, and she's sad for herself but glad that Mr Park is away, finally making memories and taking new photographs with his daughter and granddaughter.

She's right, Mr Park's right. I shouldn't be here, Anneke thinks. I should be helping Pappie weeding, hoeing and planting gardens full of plain old vegetables that will become beautiful and useful and wholesome.

And as she runs down the path towards home, she hears Pappie's voice ringing in her head: there's no better balm, Anneke, for life's troubles, than to dig, dig, dig and watch things grow, grow, grow.