

REDUX NOW by Carmel Lillis

At the stench of rotting food regurgitating through the communal rubbish chute, the girl hurrying by wrinkles her nose and pinches it between her thumb and forefinger.

“So that’s it, Rosie? The flats not good enough for ya no more?” the skinny woman at her elbow shrills.

A blast of wind lashes them to the concrete floor of the exposed balcony. Smothers Rosie’s “Mum, don’t. Please.”

Rosie regains her stride first, leaving the woman clinging to a ledge and yelling at her backpack. “Where’s ya respect? Stand still when I’m talkin’ to ya. Stubborn as your old man was.” Swamped by the wind, her voice is a reedy whisper too shallow to slow her daughter.

At the lift, her mother finds Rosie already pressing the *down* button.

Scrunching up the sleeve of her thin hoodie, she thrusts her arm beneath the child’s face. “How can ya leave me?” she demands. But Rosie has already turned away.

The rip of a bandage compels her to look – at a puss-seeping sore on an arm pocked with puncture marks.

Quick gasps from the child push the woman to a plaintive, “Who’s gonna help with the kids, Rosie? You’re me right hand Darling.” She points to *Rosie* tattooed in swirls of flowers above the colourful *Sunshine* and *Skye Blue*. “Me first, Rosie. Always with me.”

Tears scald Rosie’s eyes. Again she says, “Mum, please don’t,” as she represses the button. Hesitant now.

“Lift’s out of action, Rosie. An omen. Tellin’ you not to leave.” Her face brightens. “Go, and I’ll have that bloody interfering grandma of yours arrested for kidnapping. You know I’ll do it.”

The child’s mouth hardens. “Nan could get all us kids taken away.” To the click of her fingers, she adds, “Just like that – now you’ve moved Uncle Tommy in.” The finger resumes its frenzied pressing.

“Don’t you threaten me.” But the woman’s shoulders slump, even as she kicks a discarded carton against the lift door.

With a hitch of her sagging backpack, Rosie declares, “I’ll walk down. I’ll run.”

Weeping, “Rosie, my Rosie,” the woman prostrates herself on the ground. Between splayed fingers, she watches the child heave the fire-exit door open and slip through. But she does not see the shudder that rips through her girl’s body when it crashes shut. Nor does she see her lean her head, sagging like a drooping flower atop too slender a stem, against the wall.

Perhaps a minute passes before a sting draws Rosie back. So vigorously has she chewed at her finger that she has ripped the quick away.

Beads of blood steady her. To have steeled her heart to travel this far, only to limp back to Uncle Tommy’s taunt of: “I know a standover stiff when I see one, and your kid’s the coots at it.” No! She could go. She would go.

On the top step, she teeters. Almost totters beneath the combined weight of the wailing she has fled, and her pack laden with clothes and school books. Deeply, consciously she breathes; places one sneakered foot onto the first step.

Graffiti leers from impossible-to-climb-to places. A grotesque face menaces at every turn, spewing out *Redux Now*. *Redux Now* emblazons cavities where syringes

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tangle in discarded clothing. Even on the banisters, *Redux Now* screams at Rosie, berates her, accuses her. A squint will blur the words, but no squint can dissolve her mother's echo, amplified by the crude acoustic of the concrete walls.

Loudspeaker announcements at the railway terminus pulse like jarring music – just the assault her ears crave to quell her mother's pleas. From her pocket she retrieves an envelope. Checks the ticket in it against the computerised screen; squirrels through the bustle of commuters to Platform Four. Armed with a bag of Warheads and bubble-gum, she settles into a train seat. Nan has written, 'Sit next to an old lady. They're usually safe.' Rosie rolls her eyes and grins. There just don't seem to be any old ladies travelling this morning. Anyway the tickets are numbered.

Rosie presses her nose against the window. Her breath fogs up the view. An artist's canvas. With her fingernail she traces stick figures of the 'uncles' who have staggered through her twelve years. Drunks and druggies, dropouts and dropkicks. A smiley face marks the arrival of Skye Blue with her dancing Asian eyes, so unlike Rosie's green. Another for Sunshine with her coffee coloured skin, (which freckled Rosie tries not to envy,) and her crystal eyes sparkling with mischief, when she begs Rosie to carry her. Just the thought of them rocks Rosie like a shaking from a furious uncle. With the edge of her hoodie, she wipes out the weeping blur her picture has become.

She sucks on a Warhead and admires her tongue changing colours in the little mirror of her wallet. The train churns through suburbs. "I'm going to live in the country with my nana," she longs to call to passengers huddled in overcoats, waiting for suburban plodders. "She cooks me veges and she changes my sheets every week."

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To the inner-city commuters she pokes out a ghostly green tongue; at a station where the backdrop of houses morph to modern it's a fiery red; and to the frozen statues of the last suburban stop she flaunts a ghastly black.

Not again! Shrieking from the giddiest height on a disused building. *Redux Now*. Is it a command, or some warning? For who climbs under bridges, who dangles dangerously near power lines to write something unimportant? Why had she seen it so many times on this very day?

Mum believes in omens: like that Uncle Nathan with his mismatched eyes would bring them luck. And he did... for a while. In his year they got the plasma – and they got Sunshine. Yet Rosie had always reckoned Mum's omen stuff was just another crazy rant. Until now.

What would Nan say? *When you can't sort something, write it down.*

Rosie flips past her poems in the note-book she pulls from her backpack, to a blank page. From lessons on Latin roots, she recalls that *Re* means *again*. *Dux?* Easy. *Top of the class*. Like me, she thinks, although she never would have said it aloud. How useless! As if the gang that swaggers around the flats at night with spray cans, would be encouraging other kids to be the smartest in class – several times over.

Cattle, pensive as old men, stare from frost sprinkled paddocks. The train slows for the tile-roofs of a township. Again the words *Redux Now* flash by, dribbled in red on a billboard for takeaway food.

A list of *Re* words might throw up some overlooked pattern. *Receipt* – she writes in red, then clicks her pen to black: *paper record you get to prove you paid*. Mum had kept her home to accompany her to the financial counsellor. “With all me troubles, I've lost me receipts. And isn't it just like me lousy luck to deal with Dodgy Brothers? Scum bags. Me poor little darlings – their fresh stuff all turned to sludge.”

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Rosie had studied a row of ants scurrying across a corner of the desk, each bearing a crumb double its size. Until Mum pinched her leg, and she delivered her rehearsed line, “I saw Mum counting out the money to the man.” But she felt her face blush; she could not look up. Anyway the counsellor got them another fridge, so at least their milk didn’t go off anymore.

So much to remember. Another *re* word. *Remember* she writes – *recalling what has happened*. Rosie slaps her notebook shut. Remember nothing, nothing. “Go forward,” she whispers. Like this train, charging onwards to her new life.

When she steps onto the platform at the end of the line, the wind whacks her with the force of one of her mother’s mood changes. A recorded message hails times of arrival and departure, people kiss, tussle and laugh over luggage.

Oh, there. Yes, there’s Nana. Into her arms catapults the shaken Rosie.

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Over a steaming bowl of pumpkin soup, Rosie asks, ‘What does redux mean?’

“Never heard of it, Rosie,” Nan shrugs, “but then...so many new words around.”

From a shelf that she climbs to on a folding step ladder, Nana brings down a dictionary. Flushes as she wipes dust from the cover with a sponge and says, “Your dad’s.”

Rosie bites her lip. Flicks through the pages to the *re* headword. “No,” she says after a minute, “*Redux* isn’t here.”

“It’s the dictionary – getting old, like me. Was the one we got too heavy to bring?”

“It’s gone, gone.” Rosie erupts like a volcano that has simmered too long beneath the earth. “How could you leave me with him?” Her grandmother grasps her

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hand, as Rosie spills her story. “*Risky recidivist*, Uncle Tommy reckons the committal magistrate called him that. He asked me to look up the meaning for him. He made me.”

Her grandmother wipes Rosie’s tears with a tissue. “Recidivist,” Rosie repeats on a great sigh. She swallows hard. “The magistrate put Uncle Tommy on bail. He said, Uncle Tommy said, he didn’t know. What recidivist meant. Then...when I ... he yelled *I’ll burn this fuckin’ dictionary.*”

Rosie turns from Nan’s quivering lips. She must finish. “Mum threw water on it. But it was already ashes and crumbles. Stuffed, my dictionary was. So was the carpet.”

Nan’s voice sounds far away, as if from inside a bubble. “Tell me about Uncle Tommy.”

“He...” Rosie begins. Perhaps she has already said too much. She hears again her mother’s wailing when she left, imagines its pitiful volume trebled as the little sisters are wrenched from their mother because of what she is about to say. Rosie clamps her teeth. No. No way will she tell any more.

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So clean. So Nana. Rosie snuggles into the spare-room bed. She falls asleep clutching the velvety rope of the chenille bedspread.

But in the night she half wakes. “Sunshine,” she murmurs, “I’ll change...” Another moment alerts her fully. It is she, Rosie, who has wet the bed. How she shivers then, suffused with shame. She peels off the nightie Nan has lent her with a promise to *shop for warm pj’s tomorrow*. When she plunges her hand into her backpack, she finds Nana has already unpacked. Stifling an unaccountable urge to

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jumble her few clothes lying shop-folded on scented liners in dressing table drawers, she pulls on her spare t-shirt.

Roll back the bedspread, pull off the blankets, strip away the shee... A shadow darkens the doorway. Nana!

In Nana's bed, she coils like a watchful cat while her grandmother questions: "How efficient you are, Rosie, at changing the sheets." Baited compliment – she must not swallow it.

"I've watched Mum," Rosie replies, then rolls over and lies, stiff as the cardboard cut-out in PE class. But she is seized by the torment of Sunshine's night terrors, silenced only with reassurances and dry clothes. In Nana's gentle snores she remembers the tranquillised sleeping of her mother – mercifully peaceful. In the hiss of air-brakes on the highway, in the roar as the trucks throttle into commotion to round the corner, she hears Uncle Tommy exploding at Sunshine's wet bed. What if he hangs the stinky sheets around Sunshine's neck like he did when Rosie went on a sleepover?

At a parrot's rustling in the bush below the window, Nana pulls on a dressing gown and brings back steaming mugs of tea and yoghurts. Bedside lamps throw distorted shadows against the walls as Nan asks, "Mum hasn't had any more nights away?"

Through pursed lips, Rosie says, "No." Sharp looks and silence, her grandmother's familiar weapons.

Thus they sit, sipping tea, thinking.

Until Nan interrupts in a voice like Rosie's principal at assembly: "You don't leave your children."

"Dad left me," Rosie shoots back.

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Nan's hand flies to her mouth. She corrects herself. "Mothers don't leave their children."

Stay calm as this camomile tea to reply, "Mum does go away, but she always comes back. Even when she had to take her stereo to the pawn shop, and she said she was through with life, she returned with so much take-away we lived off it for days." She stops herself from adding, "Even when her skin goes all scratchy and makes her mad, and she has to go to the doctor, she comes back."

Sleep, Rosie commands herself. *Curl up. Tuck legs beneath chin, press fingers into ears.* Her *Earthquake* assignment is due today. All that research. Her teacher would never know how much she understood now. How some schism in the earth could make the tectonic plates collide and the earth's crust swell and shatter. How its force could toss mountains skywards as if they were game dice. Crush so many. How it could set a sleepy volcano seething. Magma would rise, lava spew up and spill, and petrify the powerless people below, forever distorted in some valley of despair. One move, so much suffering for so many.

The pale sun illuminating this room will be seeping through the ripped roller blinds at the flat. Well, Mum would just have to wheel Sunshine to child-care, and plait Skye Blue's hair and take her to Breakfast Club. Yes, Mum would just have to get out of bed with Uncle Tommy.

Uncle Tommy! Yoghurt curdles in Rosie's gut. She pulls away from Nan's arms. For when Uncle Tommy gets banged up, as he surely will, who will hold Mum when she smashes her head on the wall and screams, "Oh! I'm a magnet for bad men." Who will say, "Let's us four be a family. We can do it, Mum. We don't need these creeps messing with our minds."

"Nan, if a word is just made up, with no meaning, can someone have it?"

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“I suppose so. Words have to grow from somewhere.”

“But what if it does have a meaning?” Rosie persists.

“Welcome to a big family of words with multiple meanings. But why do you need a new word?”

“I can’t say. But I think I might need a word – for something I really must do.”

A sound like an abandoned dog’s whimper rises from Nan’s throat. Rosie burrows into Nan’s dressing gown.

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At the station, Rosie clings to her grandmother; pulls away only as the automatic doors begin to shut.

When she opens her backpack, she smiles at her grandmother’s surprise. The tang of the mango peeled and sliced into a plastic container. Lavender on her laundered clothes. She will remember these things always.

And there, nestled beneath the fluffy flannelette pyjamas: Nan’s old dictionary. Once again her eye roves down the pages of *re* words. And just above *re-echo* at the top of the page, Rosie prints with fineliner in her tiniest writing *Redux: to return, when you are needed.*

She props the dictionary against the window, and buries her face in its musty pages. In this position, she journeys back to her mother.

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