We arrived at Corrie's place a few minutes before dawn. The sky was just starting to lighten. It had been a horrible ride. At every tree I promised myself that we were nearly at the turnoff, but I doubt if we were even half way there when I started promising that. I had pain in every part of me, first in the legs, but then in the chest, then the back, the arms, the throat, the mouth. I burned, I felt sick, I ached. My head got lower and lower, until I was following the back wheel of whoever was in front of me, Corrie I think. My mind was singing a tired chorus of a meaningless song:
'I look at your picture and what do I see?
The face of an angel looking back at me ...'
I must have sung that a thousand times. It went round and round in my head like the wheels of the bicycle until I could have screamed in frustration, but nothing would make it go away. I didn't want to think about what had happened at Mrs Alexander's, or the fate of the three soldiers who had chased us, or what might have happened to Lee and Robyn, so it seemed I had no choice but to sing to myself:
'The face of an angel, come from Heaven above,
You're my sweet angel, the one that I love.'
I tried to remember more of it than just the chorus, but I couldn't. At one point someone said to me, 'What did you say Ellie?' and I realised I must be singing out loud, but I was too tired to answer whoever was asking the question – I don't even know who it was. Maybe I imagined it anyway. I don't recall anyone else speaking. Even the decision to go to Corrie's seemed to have been taken by osmosis.

We were half way down her driveway before I let myself believe that we'd arrived, that we'd made it. I guess everyone was in the same state. I stopped in front of the Mackenzies' porch and stood there, trying to find the energy to lift my foot and get off the bike. I stood there a long time. I knew eventually I'd have to raise that leg but I didn't know when I'd be able to do it. Finally Homer said kindly, 'Come on Ellie', and I was ashamed of my weakness and managed to stumble off the bike and even wheel it into a shed.

Inside the house Flip was bounding around Kevin like she was a puppy in love, Corrie was making coffee on the camp stove, Fi was sitting at the kitchen table with her head in her hands, and Homer was getting out plates and cutlery. I couldn't believe what a difference it made not having Lee and Robyn; it was like the kitchen was almost empty. 'What do you
want me to do? I said, kind of stupidly, no longer able to think for myself.
'Just sit down and eat,' Homer said. He'd found cereal and sugar and more long-life milk. I nearly choked on the first few mouthfuls, but after a while I got into the habit of eating again, and the food started to stay down.

Gradually we got talking, and then we couldn't stop. As well as being tired we were so wound up that the conversation became a battle of babbling voices, no one listening to each other, till we were all shouting. Finally Homer stood up, grabbed an empty coffee mug and threw it hard at the back of the fireplace, where it smashed into large white pieces. 'Greek custom,' he explained to our astonished faces, and sat down again. 'Now,' he said, 'let's take it in turns. Ellie, you go first. What happened with you guys?' I took a deep breath, and fuelled by the mixture of muesli and Rice Bubbles that I'd just eaten, launched into a description of what we'd seen at the Showground. Kevin and Corrie chimed in occasionally when I forgot a detail, but it was only when I got to the part in Mrs Alexander's back garden that I began to have trouble. I couldn't look at anyone, just down at the table, at the piece of muesli box that I was screwing up and twisting and spinning around in my fingers.

It was hard for me to believe that I, plain old Ellie, nothing special about me, middle of the road in every way, had probably just killed three people. It was too big a thing for me to get my mind around. When I thought of it baldly like that: killed three people, I was so filled with horror. I felt that my life was permanently damaged, that I could never be normal again, that the rest of my life would just be a shell. Ellie might walk and talk and eat and drink but the inside Ellie, her feelings, was condemned to wither and die. I didn't think much about the three soldiers as people: I couldn't, because I had no real sense of them. I hadn't even seen their faces properly. I didn't know their names or ages or families or backgrounds, the way they thought about life. I still didn't know what country they were from. Because I didn't know any of the things you need to know before you truly know a person, the soldiers hardly existed for me as real people. So I tried to describe it all as though I were an outsider, a spectator, someone reading it from a book. A history book about other people, not about me. I felt guilty and ashamed about what had happened.

Another thing I was afraid of was almost the opposite: that if I told the story of the mower with any drama at all, the others, especially the boys,
would get all macho about it, and start acting like it was a big heroic thing. I didn't want to be Rambo, just me: just Ellie.

Their reactions weren't what I expected though. Half way through, Homer put one of his big brown hands over mine, which made it harder to shred the muesli box, and Corrie moved up closer and put an arm around me. Fi listened with her eyes fixed on my face and her mouth open, like she couldn't believe what she was hearing. Kevin sat there grim-faced. I don't know what he was thinking but he sure wasn't doing war cries or carving notches on his belt, like I'd half-feared he might.

There was a silence after I finished, then Homer said, 'You guys did well. Don't feel so bad. This is war now, and normal rules don't apply. These people have invaded our land, locked up our families. They caused your dogs to die, Ellie, and they tried to kill you three. The Greek side of me understands these things. The moment they left their country to come here they knew what they were doing. They're the ones who tore up the rule book, not us.'
"Thanks Homer," I said. He really had helped me.
'So what happened to you two?' Kevin asked.
'Well,' Homer began. 'We had a good run at first, along Honey Street. But the further into town we got, the more careful we had to be, and the slower we went. There wasn't any excitement till the corner of Maldon and West. There'd been some kind of action there. Must have been a bit of a battle I think – there were two police cars, both on their sides, and a truck just down the road that had crashed into a tree. And there were spent cartridges everywhere, hundreds of them. But no bodies or anything.'
'But blood,' said Fi. 'A lot of blood.'
'Yes, well we think it was blood. A lot of dark stains. But there was oil and stuff everywhere – it was just a big mess. So we went through that pretty carefully, then cut through Jubilee Park. Our idea was to go down Barker Street, but honestly, it was a disaster area. Looked like those American riots on TV. Every shop's had its windows smashed, and there's stuff all over the road and footpaths. I'd say these guys have had themselves a big party.'
'They must think it's Christmas.'
'I don't know if they're heavily into Christmas. We had to laugh though: straight opposite us was a big sign in Tozers' window, saying "Shoplifters will be prosecuted". Well, they've had themselves some shoplifters. The whole shop's been lifted.
'Anyway, we decided to go down that little lane beside Tozers'. It was all dark and shadowy, which suited us. Funny how quickly you adapt to being a night creature. So we moseyed along there, across the carpark, and into Glover Street. Then Fi, who's got hearing like a bat, thought she heard voices, so we ducked into the public dunnies. Into the men's of course: I wasn't going to risk being caught in a ladies' toilet. Actually it wasn't that smart a move. You guys seem to have got into the right kind of thinking pretty quickly, but we've still got to retrain our minds. If anyone had seen us going in there, or if they'd caught us inside it, we'd have been dead meat – the place was a perfect trap. And there was someone coming – I could hear the voices by then too. I'd been thinking of taking a leak, but when you're scared – well, I don't know what it's like for girls but a guy can stand there for half an hour, and not a drip ...

'Come on Homer, get on with it. I want to go to bed soon.'

'OK, OK. Well, we waited and waited. Whoever they were, they were sure taking their time.'

'Homer kept himself busy graffiting the walls,' Fi interrupted.

'Yes, that's true,' Homer admitted shamelessly. 'I figured it was one time in my life when I could get away with it. When this is all over they'll have more important things to worry about than my messages on the lavatory walls. And they were patriotic messages that I wrote.'

'I don't see what's patriotic about “Wogs Rule”,' Fi interrupted again.

'But I wrote other things too.'

'You're an idiot Homer,' Kevin grumbled. 'You never take anything seriously.'

But I remembered Homer's hand on mine when I talked about the screams of the three soldiers who'd been hit by my home-made shrapnel. And I remembered what he'd said to comfort me. I smiled at him, and winked. I knew what he was trying to do.

'Anyway, these guys kept getting closer. And when I say guys, I mean a mixture. Like your patrol, there were men and women. About six or seven altogether, we thought. Our biggest worry was that they would decide to use the toilets. I wanted to go into a cubicle and lock the door, so the “Occupied” sign was showing, and I'm sure they would have respected that. But Fi wasn't so keen, so we got in the cleaner's cubicle instead, by wriggling under the door. That was one place they still hadn't looted. There was no room in there and the smell was terrible, but we felt more secure, although really, like I said before, we were crazy. The whole place was a deathtrap. And sure enough, two minutes later these boots came crunching in: three guys, we thought. Two of them used the urinal and the other one headed for the throne. So it was lucky we did hide, because I
wouldn't have liked Fi to be seeing things like that. The guy in the cubicle was right next to us, and geez, if the smell had been bad before, it was shocking now. I think they were trying to save ammunition by gassing us to death. And as for the sound effects ...

Homer gave an imitation. The little dog, Flip, sitting on Kevin's lap, pricked up her ears and barked. Even Fi laughed.

'Lucky we didn't have Flip with us,' Homer commented. He continued his story. 'We didn't learn much, except that they eat a lot of eggs and cheese. They talked a lot, but no language that I recognised. Not that that means much. All I can say is that they weren't Greek. But Fi's the language student – she does about six, don't you Fi? – and she couldn't tell who they were.' I reflected that the night they'd spent together had given Homer more confidence with Fi. He'd found the style, the tone, to use with her. And she seemed to enjoy it. She laughed at his jokes and there was more life and colour in her face when she looked at him. She was losing the coolness she'd had before.

'Well,' Homer continued. 'At last they finished whatever it was they were doing, and we heard them shuffle off. We gave them five minutes and then slithered back out under the cleaner's door. We could see the soldiers though, from the door, as they disappeared down Glover Street. They were a funny looking bunch. There were eight altogether, and I think three were women. But of the men, two looked pretty old, and two looked quite young, about our age or even younger. And they were dressed in rough old uniforms.'

'I guess,' said Corrie, 'that to invade a country this size they would have had to call up everyone with four limbs.'

'We didn't have any ride-on mowers lying around,' Homer went on, 'so we tiptoed off in the opposite direction. Nothing much else happened till we got to Fi's ...'

'Yes it did,' Fi cut in. 'Remember the shadows?'

'Oh yes,' Homer said. 'You tell them. I didn't see them.'

'About two blocks from my place,' Fi began, 'there's a milk bar, with a little park behind it. The milk bar had been looted, like all the other shops. We were sneaking across the park when I thought I saw a couple of shadows coming out of the milk bar. Shadows of people, I mean. I don't mean shadows either; that's just what I called them, because it was so dark it's what they looked like. At first I thought they would be soldiers, and I grabbed Homer and we hid behind a tree. When I looked out they were disappearing towards Sherlock Road, but I could see they weren't soldiers, just from the way they were acting. I called out to them, and they
stopped and looked around, then they talked to each other for a minute, then they ran off. That's all.'
'I never saw them,' Homer explained. 'I nearly died when Fi started yelling out. I thought she must have inhaled too much Dettol in the cleaner's cupboard. But when you think about it, it's logical that there'd still be people running around loose. They can't have caught everyone in the district in this short a time.

'Anyway, we kept plugging up the hill. We got to Fi's place. It was locked but Fi knew where there was a spare key. And now I know too, which could be handy one day. Fi sent me inside with my orders: to open the curtains and pull up the blinds. The main windows are about a hundred metres from the front door, across this enormous hall, so Fi sat on the steps outside while I crept through this pitch-black room. I tell you, it was pretty spooky. You know how psychic I am, and I could feel a presence in there, a being. I knew I was not alone. I got about half way across and suddenly there was this unearthly scream from above, and the next thing, I was being attacked. Devilish claws were tearing at me and a ghostly voice was howling in my ear. And that's how we found that Fi's cat was alive and well and living in the rafters. Fi's folks have been having the ceiling renovated.'

'God you're hopeless Homer.' Kevin yawned. 'Get on with it.'
'Well, I won't go into the depressing details, like we told you back at Robyn's there was no one home. But everything was in good nick. I'm sure they're OK, that everyone's folks are going to be OK. It sounds like they're all bailed up at the Showground, and once these people have got themselves organised they might start letting them out again. Plenty of food there, anyway. They've got my mum's decorated cake for a start, and that was a prize-winner if ever I saw one.'

There was a bit of a pause, then Corrie asked, 'Did you have any trouble on the trip back to Robyn's?'
Homer became serious, and his voice softened 'Do you know the Andersens?'
'Is that Mr Andersen who coaches the footy team?'
'Yes. You know their house? Well, we came back a different way, to avoid the shopping centre, and we passed the Andersens' place. Or what's left of it. My mum always says my room looks like a bomb hit it. I know what she means now. I think a bomb did hit the Andersens' place. And two more houses between there and the railway. There's been a bit of damage done round that part of town.' He sat gazing at the table, as though he could still see the wrecked houses.
Then he lifted his head and shoulders and kept talking. 'That's about it really. We got back to Robyn's about a quarter to three. We'd been hoping we might see Lee and Robyn on the way, but there was no sign of them. That wait at Robyn's sure seemed a long time. We were terrified that none of you would turn up, that you'd all been caught. Then we heard the shots from the Showground. Scared the buttons off my shirt. Then more shooting, and finally this explosion, in Racecourse Road. My God, it was like fire and brimstone shooting up in the sky. Would have cracked a five on the Richter scale. It was dramatic. You guys sure know how to put on a fireworks show. But of course, standing there and watching it, but not knowing, that wasn't so good. I wouldn't like to do that again.'

He yawned too. 'I think we should have a sleep. It's no use sitting here trying to guess what's happened to Lee and Robyn. We'll only depress the hell out of ourselves. And we can work out our tactics later. What we need is to keep our energy levels high. If we take it in turns to be on watch, we should be OK here for today. I don't think these people would have the manpower to search the whole district in a day.'

'That's fair enough,' I said. 'But we should have an escape route, in case they do come. What you realised when you and Fi were in the cleaner's cupboard applies here too.'

'Those little yellow balls,' Fi said, wrinkling her nose. 'There must have been a thousand of them in there. Why do boys' toilets always have those little yellow balls?'

'How do you know what boys' toilets always have?' Homer asked. Corrie said, 'Suppose we sleep in the shearers' quarters? Whoever's keeping watch can sit up in the treehouse. If we have a vehicle behind the shearers' quarters we could be away and across the paddock into the bush before anyone gets too close.'

'Would they see or hear the vehicle?' Homer asked. Corrie considered. 'They might. They shouldn't, if the sentry picks them up early enough, and if everyone moves fast.'

'Well let's take the bikes up there too, so we've got the silent option if we need it. And let's clean up this kitchen, so there's no sign that we've been here.'

Homer was becoming more surprising with every passing hour. It was getting hard to remember that this fast-thinking guy, who'd just spent fifteen minutes getting us laughing and talking and feeling good again, wasn't even trusted to hand out the books at school.