**Big Brother Little Sister**

Witi Ihimaera

Hema was half-way down the street and running fast, when he heard his little sister yelling after him.

‘Hema! Wait for me!’

He turned and saw her appearing out of the dark street, and her shadow grew long and extended toward him as she passed under the solitary street light. She had put a jersey and old jeans over her pyjamas, but the edges still showed underneath. In her hands, she was carrying her sandals.

‘What do you want?’ he growled. He turned his face away from her so she couldn't see he was crying.

‘I'm coming too,’ Janey said. ‘Hang on.’ She bent down and began putting her sandals on.

‘But you can't come with me,’ Hema told her. ‘You'll be a nuisance. You're too young.’

‘I am not!’ Janey flared, and she stood as tall as her seven years would allow her. ‘And I'm coming, so there! You might need me.’ She clutched his hand tightly, but he pushed her away and began to run, down the long dark street toward Newtown. Behind him, he heard Janey's short legs drumming after.

‘You just wait for me, Hema!’ she screamed. ‘Don't leave me behind, I'll tell on you!’

He turned. ‘You just go back home, Janey,’ he yelled. ‘Stop following me!’

‘No!’

‘You're too small to come with me. I'll give you a hiding! Look …’ He picked up a stone and pretended to throw it. Janey ducked behind a lamp post. Then her face looked out, and she was crying.

‘Now go home!’ Hema yelled.

He turned down the street again. Behind him, he heard Janey scream. He looked back and she stopped, smiling at him. But when he turned round, she screamed again. He sighed.

‘All right, you cunning thing,’ he said. ‘You can come!’

Janey ran up to him and grinned cheekily at him.

‘I knew you wouldn't leave me behind,’ she said as she put her hand in his.

Janey and Hema had been in bed for a long time, but the sound of the crash had awoken them. They slept in the same bed because the flat was too small.

‘Hema …’ Janey had whispered, sacred.

‘It's all right,’ Hema answered. He'd strained his ears and heard more sounds. Then a crack of light had appeared under the closed door. Mum and Dad were back from the party. They were quarrelling again.

‘Don't you answer me back, Wiki!’ Dad was saying. ‘Don't you tell me what I can't do.’

‘You don't own me,’ Mum screamed, and her voice was shrill with anger. ‘Go on, go back to that black bitch, you and her are made for each other, fat and ugly.’

‘You want me to go? I'll be bloody glad to go!’

‘Yeah, go,’ Mum had yelled. ‘I'll even pack your clothes for you. And don't come back either! The quicker you get out the better.’

A door had slammed, and Hema had heard Mum sobbing on the other side of the thin wall.

‘The bastard, the bastard … I'll show him …”

‘I'm scared, Hema,’ Janey had whispered.

But he'd hushed her, and heard Mum dialling a number on the telephone.

‘Taxis? Could I have a taxi please?’

‘Can't wait to get rid of me, can you!’ Dad had yelled.

‘You're bloody right!’ Mum had answered. Then she'd dialled another number.

‘Is that you Pera?’

And at the sound of that name, the fighting had begun.

‘Who's that you're ringing, Wiki … I heard who you were ringing …’

‘You're hurting me, you're hurting me …’

‘You been playing around behind my back, ay Wiki? AY?’

‘As if you care, as if you care a damn what I do, about your kids, about me. You don't care! You're always too busy at the Tramways, or your parties, to care!’

‘Has he been coming here then, ay Wiki?’

‘Stop, you're hurting …’

And Janey had clutched Hema tightly and begun to cry. In the other room, they'd heard Mum whimpering and the heavy, menacing sounds of Dad. Then, the terrifying, harsh sounds of Mum whispering.

‘You're … choking … me … Go on … then … See if I … care …’

‘NO!’ Hema had yelled. He'd run into the other room and grabbed at his father.

‘Dad! Dad!’

And Janey had come and pulled at Dad too.

‘You just leave Mum alone! You just leave her alone!’

And somehow, they'd loosened their father's grip from Mum's throat. He'd stood up, had been silent for a while, then lurched out of the room, out of the flat. He'd never returned.

Then Uncle Pera had come to stay. That was when Hema had decided to run away.

‘I want a mimi,’ Janey said.

Hema sighed. ‘I knew you'd be a nuisance.’

Janey lowered her head. ‘I can't help it,’ she sniffed, as she squirmed and fidgeted.

‘Come on then,’ Hema said. ‘We'll find you a ladies' lav.’

They'd gotten as far as the Wellington Hospital. Newtown had been busy because it was Friday night. It was still early, not yet half past seven, and they had plenty of time. As usual, Mum and Uncle Pera had gone to the pub, and afterward, they'd be going to a party. So there was still a long time before Hema and Janey would be missed. But they wouldn't be missed … Mum would probably be glad that they'd gone. She didn't love them any more.

Hema pressed his lips close together. He had to be brave, and boys weren't supposed to cry.

‘I can't hold it, Hema,’ Janey whispered.

‘Hang on,’ he answered. He looked around, desperately. ‘You can't have a mimi here, people will see.’ He grabbed her hand and pulled her quickly after him, along the road and round the corner into John Street. He'd decided to go this way, because if they kept to the main road, they'd have to go past the Tramways, and they might just bump into Mum coming out of the pub.

‘Hema …’ Janey wailed.

‘Almost there,’ he answered. ‘See? There are some trees at the corner. You go in there and have your mimi.’

They crossed the road. Hema looked round, to make sure that no cars or people were coming.

‘All right, it's safe now.’

Janey disappeared. Hema kept a look out. Every now and then, Janey would whisper from the bushes. ‘Hema, are you still there?’

‘I'm still here,’ he would answer. ‘Hurry up!’

And finally, Janey returned, hitching up her pants. Some of her mimi had dripped on them.

“Eeee!’ Hema grinned, pointing to the stains. He helped her tuck her clothes in, and brushed her down.

‘I couldn't help it,’ Janey said. ‘You told me to hurry!’

But Hema just grinned again, and took her hand. Quickly, they walked along the road. Every now and then, a car would rush past, going into Wellington. One car stopped just in front of them and some people got out, climbed some steps, and disappeared into a lighted house. All along the street, the lights from the houses shone down upon them.

‘Where we going?’ Janey asked after a while.

Hema shrugged his shoulders helplessly. He'd previously thought of going to the railway station and getting a ticket for Taumarunui. That was where Mum came from, where his Nanny George lived. He'd had enough money for the train saved up, but now that Janey was with him, he knew that the money wouldn't stretch to buying two tickets. Maybe, he could put Janey on the train. Somehow, he would follow after her. Maybe … He made up his mind. Yes, he'd still head for the railway station. There was nowhere else to go.

‘Where we going!’ Janey asked again, persistently. He told her, and she gasped. ‘Are we going to walk all the way? All the way, Hema?’

He nodded.

‘It's not that far,’ he told his sister. ‘If you get tired, I'll give you a piggy-back. We'll manage. It's only to the railway station.’

‘I won't be tired,’ Janey told him.

Hema smiled at her. Janey smiled back. Their happiness made their feet light as they walked past the lighted windows, the rows of singing windows, toward the city.

Hema hadn't known why or when he had begun to dislike Uncle Pera. Most times, Uncle Pera took no notice of him and Janey; and Mum used to hurry up and get them their tea before he got home. If she was running late, Hema would have to dress Janey for bed himself, and he couldn't help feeling that Mum was pushing them further and further away from her. He'd hoped, at first, that Dad would come back. He'd missed his father, and Janey had been confused about the strange man who had come to live with them. For a time she used to ask Mum when Dad was coming back. As time went by, she stopped asking, not because she had forgotten him, but because she began to understand that Mum didn't want to be reminded of him.

If Uncle Pera had been older, maybe Hema would have grown to like him. But he was much younger than Dad had been, and even younger than Mum. Somehow, Hema had the feeling that this was wrong. He couldn't trust this man, and he felt that some day, he would leave Mum too. Yet, he made Mum happy and that was all that mattered. Better not to think of a day when Uncle Pera might leave. As long as Mum was happy, he would be happy for her sake.

But Hema knew that even Mum was afraid that one day Uncle Pera might leave her. He saw it in her eyes and the little nervous things she did. He laughter, when Uncle Pera was home, seemed twice as loud as it should have been; her attempts at being casual, remained simply, attempts. Uncle Pera could twist their mother around his young finger if he wanted to, and he knew it. His was a silent kind of arrogance, making no demands, confident in the knowledge that these had already been anticipated by his woman, their mother.

His first frown when Janey had wanted to be held by her mother, set the pattern for her later attitude toward them. When Janey went to her mother the second time, Mum pushed her away. And Janey learned when Uncle Pera was around, that she was not wanted, that she should make no demands on her mother.

Uncle Pera's silence at the dinner table one night, also changed a routine they'd been accustomed to. They began to have dinner before he came home, and would be watching television when he had dinner. Afterward, when he and Mum came to watch, Hema would only be aware of their mother's anxious glances in their direction. Sometimes, they'd be allowed to stay. Other times, Hema would understand his mother's pleading silence. Then he would take Janey by the hand and they would go to bed.

The happiest times for the two children were in the mornings after Uncle Pera had gone to work and Mum was getting them ready for school. In the mornings, their mother always kissed them.

If she had been a stronger woman, she would have been able to make Uncle Pera understand that her children also meant much to her. But she was not a strong woman, nor was she independent. Her life began to revolve more around this new man, circling away from Hema and Janey. Uncle Pera seemed not to remember that this woman had children; he would tell her to come out with him and she would go.

‘Look after your sister,’ she would tell Hema.

They were often left alone at night. Uncle Pera liked to go out. Although Hema was often hurt, he would think of his mother and see her looking at him, pleading with him to understand.

Even when their father had been home, Hema had known that he must look after Janey. When Uncle Pera came to stay, things were no different except that looking after his sister became less of a duty and more something to cling to and never let go. Mum had Uncle Pera. They only had each other. And they grew to understand this on those long, dark nights when they were left alone together; that lighted windows were not for them.

‘Can I have a rest now?’ Janey looked up at her brother. ‘My feet are sore, Hema.’

They had come down Taranaki Street and were almost at Manners Street, where the pigeon park was.

‘Okay,’ Hema answered. ‘We'll just go across the road and sit on one of those chairs over there, ay?’

Janey nodded. Together, they walked to the pedestrian crossing and waited at the lights. A lot of other people were waiting there too. The road was busy with traffic.

‘Don't you let go of my hand,’ Hema said. Janey held it tighter. The lights changed, and the “Cross Now” signal buzzed. Hema waited just a second, letting the other people cross before them, then said, ‘Come on!’

They ran across the road.

‘Let me have a look at your feet,’ Hema said when they were sitting on a bench.

Janey put them on the bench, and Hema took her sandals off. In one of them, he found a small sharp stone, and saw that it had bruised his sister's heel. He rubbed it.

‘All better now,’ he said.

‘Yes, all better,’ Janey repeated. She put her sandals on again.

For a while, they were silent and just watched the people walking past and the traffic zooming through the streets. Further along from them, on another seat, an old man sat, his head hunched between his legs. The ground was stained with his vomit and the broken glass of a beer flagon. A group of girls walked past him and giggled behind their hands. They giggled again, when they passed Hema and Janey.

‘I like your maxi coat,’ one of the girls said. The others laughed.

Hema flushed. But he didn't care; his coat was a good one and kept him warm.

And then he saw a policeman coming.

‘We better go now,’ he told Janey. Hurriedly, they stood up and began moving away. But the policeman didn't seem to worry about them. He went straight to the drunken man and began shaking him.

Hema slowed his steps and his heart stopped beating so fast. He and Janey reached the bus stop outside the Royal Oak. Janey pulled at his sleeve and pointed to a bus, but he shook his head.

‘We haven't got enough money,’ he said.

‘I've got some!’ Janey answered.

‘You have?’ Hema said, astonished.

Janey nodded vigorously. She reached into a pocket and showed him. ‘I'm not dumb!’

Nine cents … nine brown cents, were in her palm.

‘No, you're not dumb,’ Hema whispered to his sister. ‘But you better keep them for later, just in case, ay? It's not far to the railway station from here. Okay?’

Janey smiled, a brilliant, proud smile. She put the coins back in her pocket.

‘I'll bet you're glad now that I came along with you, ay Hema!’ she said.

He nodded. ‘Now take my hand again,’ he said. ‘There's lots of people around, and I don't want you to get lost. If you lose my hand, you just stop where you are and don't move. I'll find you.”

‘Okay,’ Janey answered simply.

‘Come on, then,’ Hema said.

Hema walked in front of his sister. Although he was quite tall, many of the people couldn't see him and buffeted against him. But he didn't mind; as long as he felt his sister's hand in his, everything was all right.

‘Hand on!’ he said, as they joined the stream of people crossing the intersection at Cuba Street. And he pushed through the people dragging his sister behind him. Janey clung tightly to him, and her fingernails dug into his arm.

Along Manners Street they went, and it was much easier there and in Willis Street. But then they came to another intersection, and a thick crowd was waiting to cross.

‘Hold tight,’ Hema whispered again.

Janey looked up at him and nodded. She was a little frightened. Couldn't these people see her down here?

Then the lights changed, and the tide of people began to move. From the four corners of the crossing they came, merging in the middle, jostling, shoving, pushing their ways across the road.

And the heavy weight of a man crossing Hema's path slammed him to one side, wrenching Janey's hand away from his.

‘Janey!’ he yelled.

He looked back and glimpsed her face in the rushing crowd. He tried to get back to her, yelling ‘Janey!’, but the crowd pushed and shoved him to the pavement. Frantically, he clawed his way through the melee.

‘Let me through! Let me through!’

And he saw the stragglers dashing across the road, the lights changing, the cars beginning to move.

And Janey, she was standing there, alone, in the middle of the road.

‘JANEY!’

She heard him calling and looked at him, her eyes full of trust. And he rushed out from the pavement, and put his arms tightly round her. He heard horns blaring and honking, and the shouted oaths of a driver, but he didn't care. He picked Janey up in his arms and carried her to the pavement.

‘Janey …’

He heard a man saying that kids shouldn't be out at this time of night, and he felt the eyes of curious onlookers boring into him. Then the stream of people began to move again.

Yet Hema still clutched his little sister tightly. And Janey looked up at him.

‘You told me to stay right where I was if I lost your hand,’ she said. ‘So I did.’

Hema looked down at her.

‘You did right,’ he said. ‘But next time you get lost, I'm going to give you a good hiding!’

It wouldn't have been so bad if Mum had made her children understand that there were some things they could do or couldn't do, now that Uncle Pera had come to stay. But she didn't, and as the days passed, they were often confused, watching for any telltale sign, a frown, the flicker of a smile, which would signify to them whether a certain impulse or gesture would be accepted or not, whether it would be rejected or condoned. Sometimes, they would make the wrong appraisal and be repulsed by their mother. Other times, things would be all right, and Uncle Pera in a happy mood, and he would beckon Janey to come and sit in his lap. Then their mother would also be happy, although her anxiety would now and then flash darkly in her eyes.

Hema remembered that they did have happy times together; their mother, themselves and Uncle Pera. They were like sudden shafts of laughter, chasing away an anxious silence, like the time that Uncle Pera took them all to Eastbourne to the beach. But there were not many of those happy times.

What hurt most, was that Mum began to change, in small ways at first, but finally so much, that her children could never understand her moods. At one moment she would kiss them, the next moment, lash out at them with a harsh word or hand.

Once, Hema had returned home late from school and his mother had asked him to find Janey and told him that she'd been naughty and Mum had hit her. Hema had known instantly where Janey would be. He'd gone into their bedroom and sure enough, he had heard her crying beneath the bed. Whenever she felt sad or wanted to have a little cry, Janey always crawled under the bed, so no-one would hear.

‘Come out, Janey,’ he said. ‘I know you're under there.’

‘I'm not,’ his sister had replied. ‘Go away!’

‘If you won't come out, I'm coming to join you,’ he'd replied. And he'd crawled under the bed and put his arms round her.

His sister resisted him at first, telling him to go away, but finally she turned into his arms and her hot tears brushed his cheeks.

‘What's wrong, ay?’ he asked gently.

‘She hit me … Mummy … ‘

‘Were you a bad girl then?’

‘No, I didn't do anything. Mummy, she hit me for nothing.’

And Janey had wept very hard.

‘She doesn't love us any more, does she Hema … ‘

‘Course she does. You're just being stupid.’

‘No she doesn't, Janey had whispered. ‘No she doesn't … ‘

And they stayed under the bed for a long time, holding each other very tightly.

But in spite of their mother's moods, the children still loved her. They kept clear of her when she was angry and when she didn't want them around; they tried to anticipate her needs, to make her happy. As long as their mother was happy, they were too.

Whenever Uncle Pera brought his mates to the house for a party, the children would clear up the debris when it had finished. They would sweep the floor, wash the glasses, stack all the flagons neatly in the kitchen and set the chairs in their places again. Sometimes, they would find their mother flaked out on a chair, her face haggard with beer.

‘Mum, come to bed, Mum,’ Hema would whisper. ‘Come on.’ And he would shake her gently. Her eyelids would flicker and then shut again.

Sometimes, Hema and Janey would be able to get her to bed. Other times, she'd be too blind drunk to move, so they would get some blankets and tuck them in around her.

And once their mother had looked at them and her face had screwed up with pain and she had said, perhaps to herself: ‘You kids are so good; I'm a funny mother to you fullas, ay … ‘

‘No you're not,’ her children had answered. ‘You're good, you're a good Mum.’

Their mother had said that they could go to the afternoon pictures the next Saturday because she'd been so funny to them. They had tried to look happy, but they'd known that in the morning. Mum would have forgotten her promise. They were used to it.

‘How much further, Hema?’

‘Not far to go,’ Hema said. ‘See? Almost there.’ He pointed ahead, to where the lights of the railway station were blazing.

‘Okay,’ Janey said. ‘You can let me down now.’

‘Are you sure?’ Hema asked. He had given her a piggy-back along Featherston Street because she'd been tired.

‘Yes,’ Janey answered. She slipped from his back and began to walk beside him. The railway station grew larger and taller. A taxi swept past them and stopped at the entrance. Some people got out, and the children followed them through the entrance.

The station was very crowded and noisy. It was half past eight and people were running or waiting to catch railway units back to their homes in the Hutt. Every now and then, the loudspeaker would crackle above the clamour announcing departure times, platform numbers, welcomes and farewells to passengers.

Hema found a seat for his sister.

‘You wait here,’ he told her.

‘Where you going?’ Janey asked.

‘Just over there,’ he answered, and he waved toward the ticket office. He told her he wouldn't be long, and joined one of the queues. Every now and then, he looked back to see that Janey was all right, and she smiled and waved to him. He hoped she wouldn't cry too much when he put her on the train. He'd decided that would be the best thing to do; somehow he'd find a way to follow after her. Would she know when to get off? It was a long way to Taumarunui. Never mind: he would find a nice lady who was travelling on the same train and ask her to look after Janey.

‘Yes?’ The voice boomed at Hema from over the counter, and a bored face looked down at him. Hema stood on his toes and put his money on the counter.

‘Please, can I have a ticket please, to Taumarunui.’

‘For where?’ the clerk asked him.

‘Please, Taumarunui.’

‘When for?’

‘Tonight, please.’

‘The train's already gone,’ the clerk said. Hema heard the words and all his plans, his hopes died as he sank back on his heels.

‘Oh … ‘

‘Next train's tomorrow,’ the clerk said. He pushed the money back to Hema. ‘Anyway, you haven't got enough money here. Better tell your mother to come and get the ticket.’ He turned away from Hema. The queue moved forward.

Hema shuffled back to Janey. He'd never thought to find out when the train left Wellington.

‘What happened, Hema?’ Janey asked.

‘The train's already gone,’ he answered.

‘What do we do now, then?’

Hema shrugged his shoulders slightly. ‘There's plenty of time; I'll think of something,’ he said.

They sat together without speaking while the rush of people ebbed and flowed around them. Then Hema said:

‘Are you hungry?’

Janey gave him a guarded look. ‘How much money we got?’

‘Enough.’

‘Are you hungry too?’ Janey asked. ‘I'm not if you're not.’

‘Yes, I'm a little hungry.’

Janey thought for a while. ‘Well, we'll get a pie, and you can have half and I can have half, because I'm not very hungry either,’ she said. ‘I only got a small stomach anyway.’

They went into the station cafeteria and bought a pie. Then they found an empty seat out on the platform, and Hema divided the pie as best he could. They ate silently. When they had finished, Hema asked his sister if she'd like the mince which had fallen into the paper bag. She said she didn't, but he made her have it.

Afterward, the two children watched the units arriving and departing, arriving and departing, and the people rushing to and from the platforms.

And there was one brief incandescent moment, when Janey reached up and whispered in her brother's ear.

‘I wouldn't have gone without you, anyway,’ she said.

Mum had changed, withdrawing herself from Hema and Janey, and they grew closer to each other. Hema's friends became Janey's friends too, for she was always following him round. At school, he would be playing with his mates, and all of a sudden, Janey would be there. If she was alone, she would come and sit, watching him. Even if she was playing with her own friends, she would suddenly look up, alarmed, and search for him. If she could see him, she wasn't afraid. As long as he was somewhere, as long as he was there, that's all that mattered.

Sometimes, Hema used to get angry with her, especially at night when they were alone and Mum and Uncle Pera had gone out. Janey would follow him from room to room, silent and watchful.

‘You're always following me!’ he would yell. ‘Stop it!’

And once, he'd hidden from her, and she'd looked everywhere, screaming out his name: ‘Hema! HEMA!’

She'd started to cry, and he'd gone to her and said: ‘Don't cry. I'm here.’

They were often left to themselves. Uncle Pera would whisper to Mum, and she would say it was still light outside so why didn't they go and play, or that Hema must have some homework to do so he should do it and take Janey with him into the bedroom, or she'd give them some money and tell them to go to the shop and buy something.

Those were the moments, when their mother's motives were so transparent, that the children gew especially close because they were almost outcasts together.

Hema would say, ‘Come on, Janey. You want an ice cream?’ And even if she didn't, she'd say ‘Yes’ because that's what Mum wanted. So they would leave the house and wander dismally down to the shop, and lick half-heartedly at their ice creams. On such walks, they would often look up at the other houses along the street and watch through lighted windows. But that only made them yearn for something they were almost afraid to name … But they knew what it was all the same, and it was Uncle Pera who had taken it away.

Uncle Pera … He was the one to blame so Hema thought; and his thoughts grew, and finally, unleashed themselves.

They'd been sitting in the kitchen, Hema, Janey and Mum. Uncle Pera was not yet home. Mum had wanted them to hurry up with their kai, because she and Uncle Pera were going out that night. Then Uncle Pera had arrived, and he'd been angry that Mum wasn't ready.

‘Why don't you go out yourself!’ Hema had yelled. ‘Why don't you go and don't come back.’

‘Hema!’ Mum had yelled.

‘She doesn't want you,’ he continued. ‘We don't want you either, Janey and me. Go away.’

But Mum had not understood. She hadn't seen her son's rage, his tears; only this other man.

‘Get out!’ she'd screamed at Hema. ‘Go and sulk in your own room.’

‘No!’

‘Do as your mother says,’ Uncle Pera had said.

And Hema had faced this man and answered:

‘I don't take orders from you. You're not my father. And you,’ he'd said, looking at his mother, ‘you're not my mother either.’

Uncle Pera had grabbed him and pulled him along the corridor to his room. He'd shut the door, grabbed a belt.

Afterwards, Hema wept. And Mum had come in and whispered to him.

‘Don't interfere, son. You only get hurt.’

She'd reached out to caress him, but he'd turned away from her. After they'd gone, Janey had come and crawled beside him.

‘Don't you cry, Hema,’ she'd whispered. ‘Hema, don't you cry.’

Hema sighed, and the wind carried his sigh across the deserted platform. His movement disturbed Janey as she was sleeping, buttoned up in his long coat.

‘What's the time, Hema?’ she asked.

‘It's very late,’ he answered. He hushed her and told her to go back to sleep, but she roused herself.

‘I'm cold,’ she whispered.

He smiled at her, and cuddled her against his warmth. They sat like this for a long time; watched the flood of people become a trickle as the night had waned. Now, they were almost alone. Only a few others remained on the platform: a young girl and her boyfriend, an old man, and themselves, all derelict in the night.

A cold wind was blowing, and Janey shivered and moved closer into the warmth of her brother, hiding her eyes beneath the coat, away from the glare of the platform lights.

By now, Hema thought, Mum and Uncle Pera would be home. He wondered if he and Janey would be missed yet. Maybe Mum had gone straight to bed. It had been a long time since she had looked in to see them after returning home. But then, maybe, just this one time, she might look … might open the door upon an empty bed, not slept in. What would she do? Would she worry about them, or would she just simply shut the door again.

And what was he to do now? That was a big question which weighed heavily upon his small shoulders. If he'd been alone, he wouldn't have minded sleeping out. But he had Janey to look after, now and always. Always he would look after her. Always. He was her big brother, she was his little sister.

Janey stirred again. She rubbed her eyes and looked up at her brother.

‘We'll have to go back, won't we … ‘ she whispered.

Hema nodded. There seemed nothing else to do, but just go back. To Mum. To Uncle Pera.

‘We'll get a hiding, ay.’ his sister continued.

Hema smiled. ‘I suppose we will.’

‘I don't care, anyway,’ Janey sniffed. ‘We go now?’

‘No, not yet,’ he told his sister. ‘We just stay here for a little while longer.’ If they did, then maybe their mother would find them here and understand. If she looked for them, she'd find them. They'd be waiting.

And Janey snuggled close again, into him.

‘Wake me when she comes,’ she said.

‘I will,’ he promised.

‘And if she doesn't,’ his sister continued, ‘you won't leave me here, will you … You won't leave me, ay.’

‘No, I'll never leave you,’ Hema said.