

This is the house on Beach Street
by Mary Francis

It's a two-bedroom house just over the dunes from Himatangi beach. Grandma and Grandad bought it, looking down the road to retirement, ready to relax and maybe even move out here one day (they didn't). Mum and Dad drove up from Wellington with you in the car seat, your brother on one side and your sister on the other, gripping an icecream carton to puke in.

It was all sandy footprints across the living room carpet, ham sandwiches and the car parked on the grass out front because Grandad never got round to putting in a driveway, and once he was dead Dad took over never getting round to it. Fights over the biscuits, the couch, the books, no tv, Mum and Dad with a box of wine yelling that they'd find you something to do. Noisy and naughty; a normal family holiday. Until your sister was a teenager and the naughtiness got too much, and your brother was caught with weed but only got a slap on the wrist and it wasn't fair and your sister was pregnant and gone before the end of seventh form and never came back. Dad was gone by then too, into his own apartment downtown, too small to have you kids to visit, sorry.

You came up for a weekend with some friends at the end of high school. But it rained – more than it ever had when you were a kid. The sandy footprints were mainly mud. The southerly came shrieking up under the floorboards and lifted the rugs. Your best friend wouldn't stop complaining about the bathroom with its concertina door someone could peep through, and at midnight she shrieked and claimed your maybe-maybe-not-boyfriend had been doing just that. She made such a fuss, and he sulked, and none of you were friends after that.

Then a few years later there was a Christmas when your brother brought his kids and Mum came as well, and even Dad, though he turned tail after a couple of hours. Your

boyfriend couldn't handle being around your family even though his parents were divorced too and his mum didn't like you and by New Year you were kissing someone else at midnight.

Mum talked about living there. She tried it for a few weeks when her second marriage ended, said she liked the commute to work in Palmerston North, but then she found a place in town instead. A few years later she tried to fix up the house on Beach Street and made you come and help, along with your brother's youngest who needed to be got out of the city and away from his so-called friends. A weekend's work and it still looked shabby, not chic. Mum called it "retro" in the listing.

There must be someone desperate enough to live there. She was sure there was someone with a work ethic who would like it. Refugees have had it much worse, she said, this would be like a palace to them. They never appeared, though. The house stood empty and eventually the listing changed from "rental" to "sale".

The neighbours kept parking on the lawn and Mum said they'd move in and cook meth and then it'd never sell and she couldn't do any more in her state of health and why wouldn't anyone else take responsibility?

The weeds had claimed what the sand hadn't swallowed in the garden and dirt-bikes chipped away at the dunes so now you could glimpse the sea from the kitchen window.

Storms blew plastic bags of dog shit from the beach up to the back door. Beer bottles peeped out from the gorse bushes tangled up in the remains of the dunes. Still worried the neighbours were selling drugs and the roof had blown off in the latest gale, Mum nagged you into going to check.

What's left of the front lawn Grandad sowed is dead and crunchy underfoot. The paint on the house has worn away, exposing the zombie-grey wood beneath. The roof is still there,

held on more by rust than bolts. You wander through the rooms. They're smaller and darker than you remember. Spiders have colonised the windows. The foam mattresses and low, slumped sofa and curtains are all draped in a veil of grey mould that you think is dust until you touch it with a cautious finger. You don't set foot in the bathroom.

In the back garden a deep puddle spreads like a grim private lake under the grey sky. There's a channel worn into the ground from the puddle to where high tide will creep, licking right up to where the dunes used to be.

It's going to rain again; more storms chewing on the coastline. Rain picking away at the ground, revealing the foundations of the house like a reluctant old stripper.

Mum will leave it to you and your brother, and you would sell it, except nobody in their right mind would buy it, subsiding on a coast eroding by the hour as the sea levels rise and the weather bears down, and your sister will reappear with a lawyer to contest Mum's will, which she was written out of years ago. Reuniting in a solicitor's office will feel cold and angry, even though it was Mum she fought with really, not you, but you will have inherited the fight as well.

You'll consider trying to sell the house cash-in-hand to the neighbours, or demolishing it, or even burning it down, but in the end you'll do nothing. You'll ignore it, try to forget it, in the hope that the weather and the sea will keep eating away at it until it's finally gone.

That was the house on Beach Street.