

# Sado

Mikaela Nyman

Victoria University of Wellington Press

# 1

The morning after, when the silence threatens to become oppressive, Cathryn drags her body across the hallway and begins to crank up the cyclone shutter. Outside there's still a whole world waiting, bruised and muted. Crinkled iron sheets and criss-crossing wooden beams block her line of sight. She puts her weight against the sliding door in an attempt to pry it open but it won't budge until she leans into it with hip and shoulder. Unexpectedly the door gives and she's spat out. A sharp stab in her hip whips tears into her eyes.

With robotic movements she navigates the obstacle course that is her patio, her breakfast spot in a previous life. Her mind is scrambled with white noise. Sleep is what she craves: to sleep and forget. It's as though she's been submerged in a water tank, passed out from exhaustion, until the moment her brain decided to switch on and reconnect with her body. An imperfect connection to say the least. Placing both hands on her temples she rakes her fingers through her hair, accidentally yanking a few flaxen strands as she scans the braille of lumps and bites on her scalp. No sores, no mysterious swellings. She rolls the silky strands between her fingertips, noting how wrinkled they are – as if she's spent the past hours in a bath – and drops a neat hairball on the ground before turning around and slipping back inside.

Tarn is snoring in the hallway to the bathroom, their safe haven for the night. The urge to confirm that her son is all right wins over the thought of leaving him to enjoy his dream hunt.

‘Hey, wake up.’ She tugs at the tangle of sheets, struggling to free him from the damp cocoon of bedding as he curls up and turns over. ‘Come on, Tarn, get up!’

Together they wobble out through the sliding door into what Pam has left behind, gasping for fresh air, their bodies and brains as bruised as their surroundings. The rain is but a whisper: silvery strands patting the battered earth. Cathryn blinks away the raindrops, relishing the tickling sensation of them sliding behind her ears and down her neck, the cool air in her lungs. They’re both here, no bones broken. If only Pedro were here with them too.

Pedro. Five letters with as many hooks and possibilities that all lead to nowhere for the moment. She checks her phone and finds the last email update from the Auckland office before all communications lapsed. Resisting the urge to hurl the phone over the cliff, she lets the words and figures race towards her. It can’t be right. Even if it’s the United Nations, the claim that 44 people died last night on the island of Pentecost must be a mistake. She’s tried Pedro’s number several times, but the line to Pentecost went dead shortly after nightfall.

She must have made a noise because Tarn is suddenly watching her with a mix of curiosity and concern. She shakes her head and studies the chipped nail polish on her toes. Party blue. Only last weekend, too.

Turning over the facts in daylight doesn’t render them any more believable, yet she can’t imagine the UN would report it unless it was true. It’s like a sandfly bite – the more you scratch the more it itches. Before the fear has managed to slice through her skin, she changes tack, reassuring herself that Pedro knows what to do. He’s weathered storms before. But that’s hope and wishful thinking, not fact, she corrects herself, reeling at the thought of what he might have faced over the

past twelve hours. If only . . . If it weren't for their latest row over money he might have stayed in Port Vila.

'If-only is What-if's prettier sister,' her mother used to scold her when she was a child. 'She's the mean one, who laughs at your poor decisions and foolish desires. Don't entertain her.' Yet here she is, asking If-only to take back what shouldn't have been uttered in the first place.

The sky is hanging dense and low over the islands, the clouds whipped into molecules and atoms that do nothing but hold on to other molecules and atoms before they can start shaping themselves into proper clouds again. She sends a silent prayer into cyberspace, into the cosmos, to a god she doesn't know if she believes in anymore. Please let Pedro come back to us, she pleads, please keep him safe. As if God, if she or he exists, wouldn't see through this tissue-thin excuse for a prayer.

Carefully, Cathryn and Tarn shuffle towards the edge of the cliff where the fence used to be, but there's no trace of either poles or mesh – only a colourful salad of croton leaves at the bottom of the scarp, along with a few cubic metres of dirt and coral rubble. Every tree within sight has been stripped of its leaves. The rolling hills on the other side of the lagoon are shorn from shore to horizon, revealing roads and houses, wrecked concrete walls and rusty vehicle carcasses previously hidden under a dense canopy. The village below splayed out and dissected in the unflinching light. A giant house of cards, collapsed. Scattered pillows, clothes, pots and utensils, toys and schoolbooks the only evidence of human life. A village devoid of its usual soundtrack: no roosters crowing, no dogs barking, no children laughing.

There's a sharp puff in her ear as Tarn lets go of his breath. She glances at him sideways. He's so pale, his body pitched

forward as if he wants to make sure his eyes are capturing the shapes and broken lines. Are there tears in his eyes?

‘Where’s everyone gone?’ The shaky vowels give him away, all the teenage cockiness drained out of him. Gently she places an arm around her son’s shoulders and gives him a squeeze before trusting her vocal cords not to betray her.

‘Somewhere safe, I hope.’

Neither of them is willing to voice their dread. Whatever the worst is, in this moment it’s in their power to name it. It’s like the way the UN’s words and figures, stamped with officialdom, become the truth, she thinks, wondering what version of truth is served for breakfast in New Zealand. Somehow she needs to find a way to let her mum know they’re fine.

Below them the road to Pango is lined with bent and uprooted power poles pointing in all directions, a tangle of power lines lassoed around organic and human-made debris, sealing off the road.

‘It’s so quiet. No cars, no quad bikes, no boats . . . and look, you can see through Erakor island,’ Tarn says.

He’s right. The trees anchored on the belly of yellow sand that only yesterday was an attractive wedding venue now look like stick figures ready to leg it across the water. Even the iridescent eye of the lagoon is muddied.

‘Maybe people are waiting until it’s safe to come out.’

‘Well, is it?’

‘What? Safe?’ She wonders if he appreciates what a burden he places on her by asking for this reassurance. When he was little she wouldn’t have hesitated to comfort him, whatever the price. Now she knows that kind of reassurance is not hers to give. But he’s only fifteen; it’s not fair to refuse. Taking a deep breath, she says, ‘Yes, I’d say it probably is. It’s over now, Pam is gone.’

Tarn twitches and doesn't seem convinced. Just as she's about to ask him what the matter is he beats her to it. 'Do you think Reimon is all right? We should've asked her to come and stay with us.'

'I did ask her, but she wanted to stay in the village with her family. She said they were too many, that they'd be fine.' Even as she's speaking she realises it doesn't explain why Reimon left a bag with them for safekeeping. Maybe she should have insisted on taking them all in. But would they have been any safer here? 'They're not by the lagoon, they should've been more sheltered.' Despite the logic she can hear how lame it sounds.

'Bananas are down, too.'

It's too much, she thinks, stumbling over her unformed thoughts as she takes in the garden: the slain banana stalks, the savagely lopped lychee, the bulbs of unripe avocados on broken branches, thick as a man's thigh, among the uprooted frangipani trees. If this is our garden, if this is what's left of the village – what does the rest of the country look like?

She wishes she could speak to Faia or James. With their web of local connections they're bound to know more.

'Right, we'll need to save the bananas,' she says with more confidence than she possesses for the sake of having some concrete action to hold on to. 'I'd say it will be some time before the market is back to normal.'

From where they stand, the neighbour's house appears to be on its knees, the roof and upper part of the boundary wall partly caved in.

'Is she all right?' Tarn looks at Cathryn as if she could conjure up a ladder or a functioning phone line.

'How would I know?' she snaps back, and instantly regrets her tone as her son's face takes on the guarded look that she knows only too well. That's the problem with reassurance: they

keep coming back for more. ‘Why don’t you yell out to her? You know she doesn’t want to have anything to do with us, or anyone else, for that matter. At least she ignores everyone equally, I suppose.’

‘She’s not that bad, just ancient.’

‘You go, then. I haven’t seen her since we had that fight over the rubbish she kept throwing over our fence. She seems to think she’s still running a business empire. I’m sure her sons will check on her as soon as they can get through.’

It’s when Tarn turns his back on the crumbling boundary wall that he comes to face their house. His head tilts back as he focuses on something above her head.

‘Mum . . .’

Cathryn already knows: the look in his eyes says it all. Up until that moment they have combed through their surroundings, circling their own house, consciously or unconsciously postponing the inevitable. She folds her arms across her chest and turns, bracing for the truth.

If the neighbour’s house is a plane with two broken wings, their house is flying on one wing. Half the lounge roof is ripped off, and the remainder of the roof questionable at best. Twisted iron beams and timber frames protrude like broken bones from the body of the house and garden, a curious array of metal shards firmly embedded in a couple of cyclone shutters.

This time it’s Tarn who takes her by the shoulders and leads her towards the house. Gingerly they tread their way through the debris on jandalled feet.

‘I guess we should have opted for sturdy shoes,’ is all she can say as a red flower blooms on her big toe. The intensity of the colour amazes her; the sting hits like an afterthought. Her eyes drift from toe to hip, where a coin-sized dark spot

has leaked through her shorts. Clearly the neurotransmitters are still not up to scratch. She wonders if there will be some lasting damage.

Because she hasn't told Tarn the scariest part yet. It wasn't the sheer effort it took to open her eyes this morning. It was when she realised that her eyes were already wide open and had been trailing, for some time, the shafts of grey light shooting through the roof and shifting across the water puddles on the cream tiles. A map of water and light. For how long she'd been in this semi-awake state she couldn't tell. She couldn't recall being knocked out by falling debris. Swivelling her head left and right, three times, four times, she felt no pain, just thirst. Thirst, and the memory of sounds she'd rather forget.

Bush knife in hand, Tarn runs along the fallen tree trunk spearing the fence and disappears towards their neighbour's warped gate. Planting her feet in the river of leaves and tree limbs that used to be their street, Cathryn inspects the damage to the fence. It will have to be a priority. In the distance she spots a group of men slashing their way through the greenery. Men and desperation and opportunity. She retreats back into her own yard, wondering if it would be possible to fashion a palisade out of crumpled wire and dead wood. A palisade sounds too grand for what she has in mind. A screen, then, a cover-up.

'She's upset but she's okay,' Tarn reports when he returns twenty minutes later. 'At least she can now get through the front door.'

'Sounds like she's her usual self. Did she even thank you?'

Cathryn's mind travels back to the moment when the primordial instinct to flee kicked in: skin and heat as inseparable as sound and mind, one leaking into the other; the



roof creaking like a ship coming apart in rough seas. Anywhere else seemed safer. They had already abandoned their bedrooms by then, for fear of the rattling windows caving in, and sought refuge in the lounge. Not anticipating that it would be the more perilous choice. When she flung the front door wide open, she found herself leaning into a wall of darkness, the driveway transformed into a tearing river at her feet. She still might have opted to leave, had it not been for the inexplicable crash-bangs, the flapping of gigantic wings.

‘Death by a million knives,’ Tarn mutters as he struggles to dislodge a foot-long spear of corrugated iron jammed into a crack in a bedroom shutter.

The way he says it makes her shift her weight from foot to foot, but that does nothing to dispel her unease.

‘Can only hope no one had to spend the night outside.’

Tarn doesn’t even bother to reply.

Inside, the house is airless and dank, the walls still weeping. They remove the plywood boards barricading the kitchen windows, struggling under the soaked weight of them, and crank up the cyclone shutters in the lounge to knee height. It’s a relief to feel the breeze sweeping away the stale remnants of fear.

‘Let’s leave the rest of the shutters for now.’

One of the last email alerts she received before the network went down warned of another newly formed cyclone swirling nearby, following in Pam’s wake. This one’s named Nathan and still deciding where to go, whether to greedily gain mass and embark on a rampage, or fizzle out. Surely one is enough? Cathryn wipes her face on the front of her T-shirt as she inspects the lounge in the unforgiving daylight. Sweat beads already re-forming on her forehead, a slick second skin

wrapping her limbs. At first she can't comprehend what's happened in here. The walls and floors are plastered with white pulp. Roof plaster, perhaps, or some kind of filling washed out of the ceiling.

'Oh, no, my magazines, my books!'

She wipes a handful of paper mush off the coffee table and flops down on the couch, its soaked sponge sucking in the weight of her bones and flesh. Goopy and soft, perfect consistency for papier mâché, better than anything she's ever managed to produce in the art workshops. Why on earth didn't she pack away the books in plastic bags?

'Oh, wow.' Tarn slides towards her, graceful as an ice skater, his mobile phone extending from his hand like an artificial limb. Miscalculating the treacherousness of pulp and rain on ceramic tiles, he ends up on a precarious backwards lean, his arms flailing through the air, before his free hand clamps on to the edge of the coffee table and he manages to steady himself.

'Ew.' He flicks his hand. White specks land in Cathryn's hair.

'I should've cleared them away, bagged them up. How stupid of me.'

'You couldn't know.'

Her face scrunches up and she manages a crooked smile, yet her voice is a traitor. In the bookshelf the crimped pages of *The Luminaries* open up in a mocking peacock tail next to a swollen paper concertina that once was *IQ84*.

'I had borrowed those, can't get them here.'

Resistance in every step as she moves through the kitchen and the three bedrooms, inspecting the material disaster that is their home, her hands clenching and unclenching a ball of paper porridge, the rain still dribbling through the lounge roof. As the volume of the patter on tin increases, the water

starts gushing through, forcing them to scramble for mops and erect cordons of sodden couch cushions to prevent the water from flooding the rest of the house. In that moment the cruel reality of natural disasters hits her: it's not over yet. What was she thinking? The thirst returns with fearsome strength.

'The cyclone, Tarn, they thought it was heading towards Tanna last night. That's where Eslyn sent her children. To safety, she thought.' They look at each other, horrified.

The mop clatters to the floor as Tarn disappears into the kitchen. She can hear him dropping one mobile phone after another on the kitchen bench, checking the landline again, fiddling with the radio in an attempt to connect with the outside world. *There's nothing we can do*, she wants to tell him, but doesn't have the strength to name their powerlessness.

'We can only pray and hope,' she mumbles, surprised at the earnestness of her words – since when has prayer entered her personal life? – while the radio scrapes and blips through the white noise until it bursts into glorious pop music transmitted from a station in faraway New Zealand.