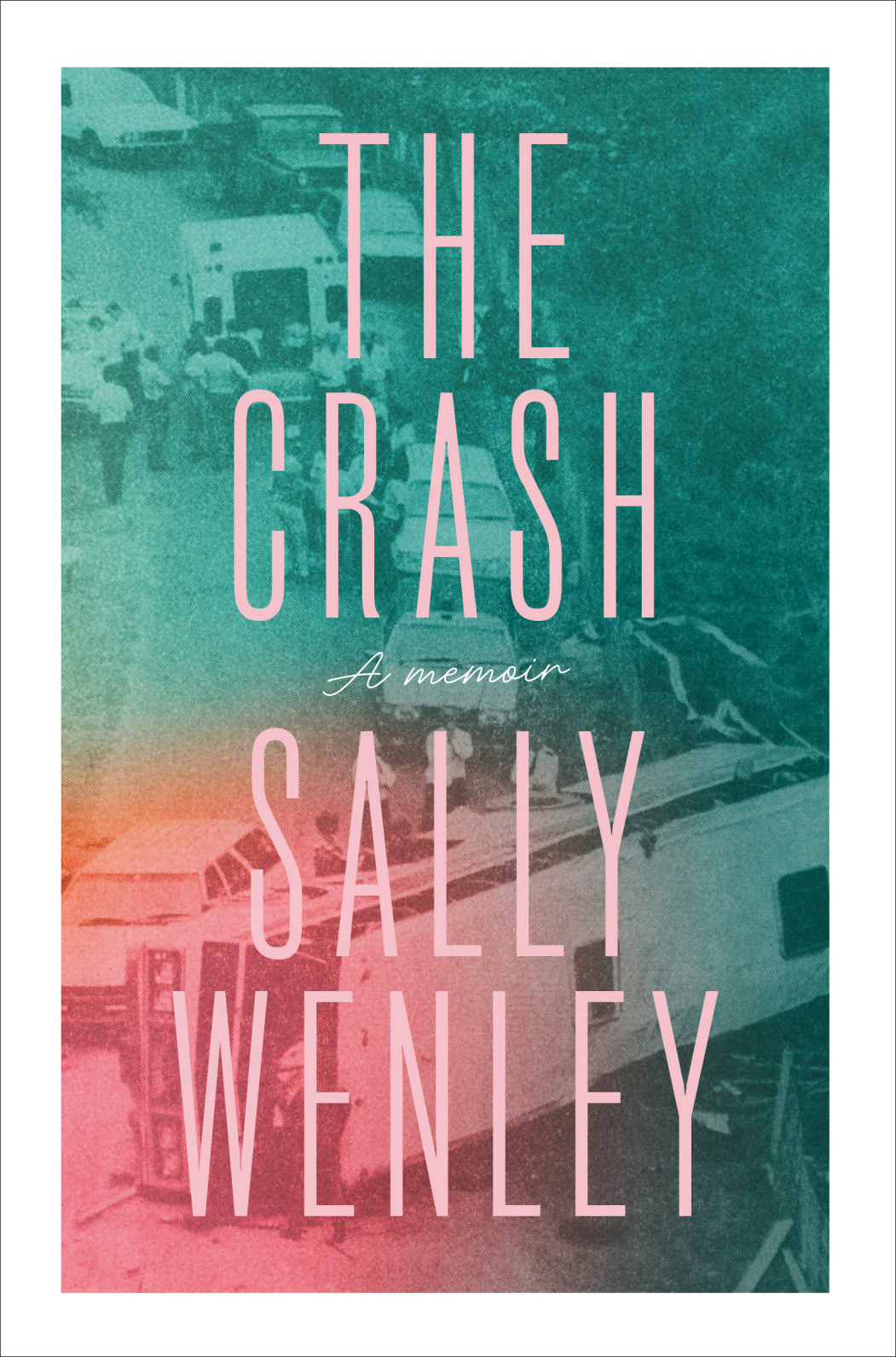




THE CRASH

A memoir

SALLY WENLEY

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WENLEY



MASSEY UNIVERSITY PRESS

I sat with my anger long enough until
she told me her real name was grief.
— C. S. Lewis

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PROLOGUE

A February day, hot and dry. Elaine glanced up from peeling Golden Queen peaches at the kitchen bench. In the distance a police car with its lights flashing was speeding over the one-way bridge. She watched it race past the church and the hall and the little primary school. She followed its path as it sped past the drought-parched paddocks. When the road turned towards the ranges, it disappeared from view.

She wiped her hair from her forehead, the peeler still in her hand. An uncomfortable sensation settled in her stomach. At the kitchen table she cut the peaches into slices and began to drop them into the line of Agee jars. A mob of flies butted against the mesh screens over the windows, drawn to the sweet smell.

Peter and David were feeding out hay to the cattle. They badly needed rain. In a couple of days David would be starting his first year at Lincoln and there was plenty of packing to do. Two weeks earlier, her daughter, Sally, had gone back to boarding school in Havelock North, and Elaine was missing her 16-year-old's energy — all the jumping, running and chatting through the house.

When Elaine heard sirens she stepped onto the front veranda. Three police cars and two fire trucks raced past the paddocks below, lights flashing and sirens shrieking. As

they faded into the distance more sirens drew near: several ambulances were now on the road, heading past the woolshed and speeding west toward the hills.

Elaine took off her apron. The pot of water bubbled on the stove behind her. She felt slightly nauseous. Sally's boarding-school house was on its annual picnic at a farm further up that road. It was now late afternoon. Surely those buses had rumbled back through the school gates by now.

CHAPTER 1

MUD

‘Sally Wenley, I will cut off your head and sew on a button!’

I looked up from the sewing machine and flicked my fringe out of my eyes as the sewing room fell silent. I could hear some girls snigger. ‘You’re in trouble now, Wilbur,’ muttered a classmate.

‘No shit, Sherlock,’ I replied.

‘Get back to work, girls,’ Mrs Ferguson told the class. She glared at me. ‘Sally — for a start you weren’t meant to be using a machine today with your arm in a cast, and second, if the machine is making unusual noises you should STOP. Not put your foot flat on the pedal. And what on earth is that mess under the machine’s foot?’

She stabbed her finger at my project. I could not talk myself out of this one.

‘Umm, I wanted to do something more interesting than just hand-sewing,’ I said, ‘and this machine was free. I found a packet of jubes in my pocket and I thought I could make an edible jube bracelet by sewing over them with just one hand. The first one worked, so I kept going, but the next one was a bit sticky. I thought it would be a bead bracelet but made of jubes . . . you know?’

Mrs Ferguson sighed, ran her fingers through her perm and sent me to sit outside the sewing room. ‘And Sally,’ she called as I skipped out of the room, ‘any repair bill for that machine will be posted to your parents.’

It was a sweltering day, so I sat under a tree and found a stick to poke at the itchy skin under my cast. The bell rang, and as the sewing room emptied out Mrs Ferguson waved me back inside.

‘Sally, you are fourteen, not four,’ she said. ‘Can you please try to behave like a young lady?’

Behind her on the driveway some girls were mimicking her hand movements, waving their arms around. I couldn’t help but grin.

‘This is not funny! And if you do anything so impulsive and silly again, I will have to report you to Mr Richards,’ she snapped.

I was relieved to only have to endure a lecture from her. Being sent to the headmaster’s office wasn’t my favourite activity. The last time I was there I had left clumps of mud on his Persian rug.

I’d been sent ‘straight to Mr Richards’ office’ by a florid-faced house matron after a mud fight in the rain on one of the hockey fields. True to my nickname of Wilbur, or Wilbs, like the pig in *Charlotte’s Web*, I was covered in dirt — it was in my hair, on my face, all over my sports uniform, arms, legs and hockey boots. We had tried to sneak up to the showers, but the matron caught us halfway up the boarding house stairs. For some reason she presumed I was the ringleader and immediately sent me to the office.

Mr Richards — or Dick, as we called him, though obviously not to his face — had put down his pen, lowered his glasses, rearranged his tie and given me a hard look. I held my breath while he lectured me about dirtying the boarding house and



The Woodford House First XI cricket team of 1985. I am standing at the end of the back row on the right.

not respecting my uniform. Then he delivered my sentence: I was to mop the mud off the stairs, tidy myself up and then apologise to the matron. It could have been a lot worse — I could have been gated over the weekend or made to help the kitchen staff dry the dishes after breakfast and set all the tables for lunch.

As I lurched toward the door, he cleared his throat and pointed to the mess on his rug. I offered to find a vacuum cleaner but he waved me on my way. I was sure he was trying not to smile as I grasped the handle of the door and closed it behind me.

CHAPTER 2

HALLEY'S COMET

‘When the comet moves across the night sky next week you will be able to see it with your naked eye,’ our science teacher was telling us. ‘The last time Halley’s Comet passed Earth on its journey through the inner solar system was in 1910.’

I was finding this quite interesting.

‘The comet was named after an English astronomer, Edmond Halley. In the early 1700s he worked out its orbit time . . . about once every seventy-six years. Historical documents and drawings show it has been entering our solar system for thousands of years.’

I rocked back and forth on my stool and pondered. I would turn 16 in a few weeks — the same month the comet would zip across our skies. The last time it was here my parents weren’t even born. Wow! That was a long time ago.

A brainy girl from the front put up her hand and asked what the comet was made of.

‘Good question,’ he said. ‘It’s a combination of ice, dust and other elements such as methane, ammonia and carbon dioxide.’

My mind wandered off again. Where could I see the comet from?

Another hand shot up. 'How do we know it was orbiting so long ago?'

'Ancient Greek and Chinese records describe it as a bright star with a long tail — and it was also documented in England,' he replied. 'One medieval tapestry even had the comet on it. Some people believed the appearance was an omen.'

'Why was that?' I asked, surprising even myself.

'That was apparently confirmed by a battle,' the teacher said, scratching his beard. 'Because soon after the comet made its way across English skies hundreds of years ago, the ruler at the time — Harold — was killed in the battle of Hastings. William the Conqueror claimed the throne and became king.'

I smelled burning plastic and turned around to see two girls at the back bench giggling as they turned off a Bunsen burner and fiddled with a melted pen.

'What's an omen?' another girl asked. The teacher stroked his beard again and told us that it was something perceived as good or bad for the future. 'Of course, that was before scientists started learning more about the solar system. And we still learn new scientific facts about Earth, planets and the solar system nearly every day.' He paused and smiled.

Sort-of-interesting, I thought. The bell rang and we scrambled out of the lab.

'Next time, leave the Bunsen burners alone!' he shouted.

**

Midnight. 'Wake up!' I whispered to my roommate. I darted across to the window. Above the silhouette of the chapel roof stars dotted the sky. Cool! No clouds, so we should get a good view of Halley's Comet! We tiptoed out of our room and woke some of the other girls. Back in our room, I slid up the sash



**The Woodford House First XI hockey
team in 1986, my sixth form year.
I am seated third from left.**

window by my bed. The frame rattled. ‘Shhh!’ someone hissed.

We slipped out and gathered on the asphalt between the boarding house and the chapel. An insect was clicking in the hedge and there was a scent of jasmine. We sneaked along the side of the boarding house to the fire-escape ladder. I went up the rusting rungs first, past the second storey, across the ledge and onto the roof. The others followed.

Someone produced a packet of MallowPuffs and our little group lay back to watch the inky sky. ‘There’s Orion’s Belt!’ one girl called.

‘Shhh!’ we hissed in unison.

‘I think that’s the Southern Cross,’ squeaked another. We scanned the paddock of stars. ‘Where’s the comet then?’ I asked. Then Lucy stood up and pointed. ‘Look! It’s coming across now, I think.’

We jumped to our feet and watched as a tiny star bumbled across the night sky, trailing a long smudge of brightness behind it.

‘It looks like that sperm picture we were shown in class,’ a girl said.

‘Shit, I hope it isn’t an omen,’ another replied. Our snorts of laughter were quickly followed by lots of shushing.

We watched until the comet vanished over the horizon, then made our way back down the ladder and through the window by my bed.

CHAPTER 3

SWEET DREAMS

Butterflies fluttered in my stomach as I waved to my parents while trying to look super mature as the bus left the Hastings bus station. Auckland and the Eurythmics concert, here I come!

Earlier, at home, Mum had given me some advice. ‘Men in Auckland are more sophisticated than down here, Sal. They may offer to buy you a drink and to take you sightseeing around the city, but remember, don’t get into cars with people you don’t know . . . You are only sixteen. And if they get you a drink, check that it isn’t full of booze. You aren’t meant to go into bars.’

I had rolled my eyes and reminded her that I would be 17 in two months. I swung around, flapped my arms up and down and raced to my bedroom with Mum in pursuit. ‘Well, Sal, you know what wine and beer’s like at those woolshed parties. Just don’t overdo it.’

Mum sat on my bed. The sun streamed through the window and made a little halo around her head. ‘What about marijuana, Mum?’ I asked, baiting her. Her eyes twinkled as she advised me to avoid smoking anything at all. Then she said, quietly, that if it was a ‘proper’ cigarette in a packet, it was up to my discretion.

My jaw dropped. ‘Are you saying I’m allowed to smoke fags?’ We both chuckled.

A comfortable silence followed as I packed. 'Have you got a towel? And make sure you pack a toothbrush,' she said. I stuffed more clothes into my backpack. The zip strained, and seemed about to burst, but between us Mum and I finally got my pack closed.

The bus was stuffy in the hot summer sun. It seemed as if the trip to Auckland would take a lifetime. An entire day! I stretched my legs under the seat in front and pushed off my sneakers.

The last time I'd been in Auckland was to play hockey in an interschool tournament. I was in the First XI with girls who were a few years older and I found them intimidating. They were cool girls and knew lots of 'stuff'. But this year I would be captain of the First XI hockey team, as well as the First XI cricket team. The long-jump cup was on the bookcase in my bedroom at home. I was top of the squash ladder, and at the end of the previous term I'd run the road race in the New Zealand secondary schools athletics competition, my first marathon, and just missed finishing in the top 10. I was still grumpy about that. This year I planned to keep up with the leaders from the start and stay there.

I would start training for a triathlon when the school year began. It was a new sort of competition, and I was looking forward to it. Swimming wasn't my forte and I would need to spend more time in the water to improve my style and speed; cycling was fine though, and I could run all day.

I thought about Sir Arthur Lydiard, who had visited our school the year before for a training session with our athletics team. He took us jogging around the Havelock North hills and just kept running and running at the same steady pace — up steep roads, along flat pavements, across gravel paths and down sloping paddocks. The sinews stood out on his muscled



**Competing in the New Zealand
secondary schools road race, 1986.**

legs and his skin was tanned. How lucky was I to be running with him, I thought, as we puffed and sweated behind him like a herd of ponies sucking in air. He kept talking while he ran, telling us that running and chatting was good for training. That was my kind of life — running and talking!

**

The Hawke's Bay coast disappeared as the bus climbed inland along the gut-churning Napier-Taupō Road. 'Sweet Dreams (Are Made of This),' I hummed to myself. After thinking about Annie Lennox for a bit, my mind drifted back to school.

How amazing my life would be in a couple of weeks, when the school term started. I would be the school sports captain and prefect, my dream role ever since my first assembly at Woodford House five years earlier. As a shy, skinny 12-year-old I had gazed in awe at the school sports captain in her maroon blazer with white piping, her lapel laden with badges.

I now had my own 'colours' — one for hockey and one for cricket — and this year I aimed to achieve two more, for squash and athletics. I felt proud of myself, and hummed a bit of Cyndi Lauper's 'True Colors'.

What felt like days rather than hours later, the bus was approaching the city centre, where my school friend B— was to pick me up at the bus station. When the bus hissed to a halt I bounced out of the door, grabbed my bag and off we went — chattering and laughing about pending adventures.

The next morning B— suggested we go to Victoria Park Market. I was enthralled to see hippies smoking pipes, and selling clothes, beads and saris. I couldn't stop staring at a thin older man with long fingernails and an even longer beard who was smoking a bong, and who offered to sell me some

fragrant rollie cigarettes. A couple were strumming guitars and singing 'American Pie'. Our house, Frimley, had sung it at the house music competition last year, and I joined the small group singing along to the chorus. B— pointed to the hat in front of the musicians. I clicked that they were busking and rummaged in my bag for some coins.

We were slurping freshly squeezed orange juice when I noticed a sign advertising clairvoyant and tarot reading. Ooh, how exotic! I climbed up some steep steps and pushed through a bead curtain into a small, dark room filled with the overpowering smell of incense. An orange lump was oozing up and down in a lava lamp and a large purple candle was flickering in the background. A small woman with a ring in her nostril, a scarf around her neck and plastic bangles on her wrists held out a pack of cards and began to shuffle them. She grasped my hands and turned them over so my palms faced upwards.

'Mmm . . . I feel an energetic young woman,' she said. I squirmed as she slowly released my hands and gave me the cards to shuffle. When I fumbled with them the woman gestured for me to hand them back, then spread them out in a fan shape between us.

She asked me to turn some over. After a long silence she told me that I had a positive future and would be successful. I let out my breath. The mystique had worn off a little and I was impatient to get back to the sunshine.

**

The next few days were a dizzying whirl of visiting shops I wasn't really interested in. There were no horse tack or running gear outlets in the central city, but I did my best to be polite and enjoy the experience. It was fun meeting B—'s friends

and going boating with what I thought were extremely trendy Aucklanders, who also waterskied.

One day I was standing on a beach in my new togs with a group of older guys and girls when a voice said, 'Hi, I'm Marcus.' I peered into sky-blue eyes and felt the heat rush to my cheeks. Marcus chatted about going to the Eurythmics concert the following night and how everyone in the group would share cars to get there. He was in his second year at university, and four years older than me. That night at a friend's house we sat beside each other on the couch, his thigh pressed close against mine. It felt deliciously warm. So did my cheeks.

The next night at Western Springs, Marcus stayed close as we joined the surge of fans vying to get close to the stage.

'Hey, if you get on my shoulders you'll see more!' he shouted. I jumped onto his back and climbed onto his shoulders. The waft of his aftershave and cigarette smoke was intoxicating. I could see that Annie Lennox was wearing a little red top. As the heaving crowd sang along with her she came to the edge of the stage and shouted something about loving New Zealand. We clapped, laughed and swayed.

Marcus bent forward and I lumbered awkwardly to the ground. He grabbed my hand and I stumbled beside him through the crowd. When we popped out to the left of the stage he turned to face me, cupping my jaw softly in his hand and drawing me toward him. We kissed, and I closed my eyes as he wrapped his hands behind my neck. The beat of Eurythmics thumped through our bodies and lights strobed from the stage. I felt euphoric.

Before we knew it, Annie Lennox had finished her set. We meandered back to the cars where the others were waiting. I felt very self-conscious and quite smitten. When the guys grinned at us I didn't know where to look. Marcus engineered



**Happy time at a beach after
waterskiing, 1986.**

it so we were in the back seat of a two-door vehicle, our legs and bodies entwined. 'Hey, can you move your foot please!' the driver shouted. My foot had ended up between the front seats, jammed against the gear stick. As I sat up I leaned into Marcus and he put his hand under my shirt. The cassette player was belting out Whitney Houston's 'Saving All My Love for You'. So this was what it was like to be a grown up!

A couple of days later I was back on the bus, heading home to Hawke's Bay. I pressed my cheek against the window and watched hillsides of trees disappear behind me. I felt a sudden disconcerting thumping in my chest. Would Marcus get in touch? I didn't have high expectations: he was a popular university student and I was a farm girl, still at school and in a different part of the country.

'C'mon, Sal,' I thought, 'school is important.' Well, the sports side.

Ha. That's what Mum often said to me: 'C'mon, Sal.'

This year would be exciting. Not much time for daydreaming, I told myself as I hummed 'Sweet Dreams (Are Made of This)' ...

**

'Wilbur! There's a note for you on the board. You need to go to the office,' a girl shouted as we exited the dining hall after a lunch of oily stew, boiled potatoes and wrinkly peas. The waft of overcooked vegetables followed an inelegant rush of several hundred girls making their way along the corridor.

'Don't push!' shouted a prefect. 'It's not a race.'

The school office was closed for lunch. Bugger. I made my way to where my friends were sitting, overlooking the pool. I didn't know why I'd been summoned to the office and I hoped I wasn't in trouble; I couldn't think of anything I had done yet

this year that could be interpreted as naughty. We stretched out our legs and pulled our tunics up to mid-thigh for a bit of sun.

We chatted about the house picnics, which were in three days' time. At the beginning of the year each of the school's four houses went to a local girl's place for the day. My house, Frimley, was going all the way out past my family's farm at Maraekākaho to a station near the inland ranges. The trip would take about an hour each way. Someone suggested taking a boom box and cassettes, and a heated debate ensued about the best albums and favourite bands. Madonna, David Bowie, Billy Idol, Cat Stevens, Whitney Houston and Eurythmics were high on my list.

I sauntered back and presented myself at the now open office. The office woman smiled, asked me who my secret admirer was and passed me a long-stemmed dark red rose sheathed in white tissue paper covered in love hearts. Of course! It was 14 February, Valentine's Day. There was a little white card with a handwritten note: 'From your admirer. Happy Valentine's Day xx'. My face burned redder than the rose. There was only one person it could be from. Marcus.

CHAPTER 4

HOSPITAL

It was dark. My body ached. My eyelids felt as if they were cemented together. Lights blipped on and off somewhere near me. They were too bright and I closed my eyes. There was a scratchy sensation across my face and up my nose. Something annoying was wrapped around my head. Tubes were coming out of my arm. I heard beeping. I felt boiling hot. I felt freezing cold. I heard Mum's voice. I tried to look at her. My brain felt fuzzy. I felt numb. I couldn't move. I could feel Mum's warm hand on mine but my body didn't feel as if it belonged to me.

If I tried to move, everything hurt more. People were doing things to me and speaking in hushed voices. Much later I learned they were monitoring my blood pressure, injecting painkillers, taking blood samples, keeping an intravenous supply of fluid going into a vein, lifting my eyelids to shine a light on my pupils, emptying the 'ooze' from my surgery sites and my urine from a bag. I felt so removed from my body. Was this real or a dream? The fuzziness was joined by different types of pain. My head throbbed and I felt as if a hammer was being thumped against my back, over and over again.

**

Over the weeks I was under sedation, I could, in my lucid moments, remember riding in the bus as we returned from the house picnic. I don't remember when I was told that the bus had crashed, that five people — two students, two teachers and the driver — had died, and that my spinal cord had been severed.

People with an acute spinal injury who live south of Taupō are transported to the spinal unit in Christchurch; those north of Taupō go to Auckland. I learned that I was in the intensive care unit at Christchurch Hospital after spending several nights in Hastings Hospital for head surgery and being stabilised before being flown to Christchurch for spinal surgery.

I didn't understand what that meant. A doctor told me a hole had been drilled into my skull to relieve the pressure of blood against my brain. Another doctor explained that I would soon be having more surgery on my spine. My lower thoracic vertebrae had been crushed and shunted sideways, severing my spinal cord, and there was concern that the biggest blood vessel, the aorta, which runs down beside the spine, could rupture, causing catastrophic internal bleeding.

When he came to see me after the surgery the orthopaedic surgeon demonstrated how the surgical team had moved my spine up and then back to the centre where it should be, aligned with the lower vertebrae. They'd done that, he told me, with a piece of equipment a bit like a car jack. Then they'd taken a bone graft from my hip and fused it across the shattered vertebrae, and finally, they'd wired metal 'Harrington' rods about 20 centimetres long to either side of my spine for extra stability.

It was a long and serious surgery, the surgeon told me, but thankfully I was extremely fit and young and that would help my recovery. 'It could have gone either way,' he said.

Then he told me that I was now a paraplegic. I sank back into the hospital pillow. What the hell was a paraplegic? I was a 16-year-old needing to train for my first triathlon and I wanted to know where my running shoes were. There was a cricket game on Saturday and I would be late for practice.

There were so many people around me and the pain was excruciating. The medication could only do so much. If anyone bumped the bed or tried to sit on it my back shrieked in pain. Every few hours a team of nurses and orderlies rolled me onto my opposite side. One took my feet and knees (which I couldn't feel), one my hip and one my shoulder. A fourth gave instructions and moved pillows to support me. I held my breath every time and squeezed my eyes closed. I had no sensation or movement from just below my waist, and when they shifted me my body felt odd. They also moved all the tubes: one that was up my nose, another that came from my back, one that drained urine and a fourth in my arm that led to the intravenous drip.

After about a week of this I became more stable. The pain from the surgery was beginning to recede but was replaced by new pain that shot down my thighs. I had no actual sensation there and was told that these were 'phantom pains'. They certainly weren't phantom to me. It felt as if I were stuck on an electric fence — tingling, shooting pains and a burning sensation all at once. I would break into a sweat and cry out.

Nurses turned me regularly and washed me with warm flannels and soap. Sometimes when they rolled me onto my side I felt an uncomfortable sensation, and the penny dropped one day when I realised they were 'evacuating my bowels', as they put it, by putting a gloved finger in my rectum with some lubricating jelly. Ughh. I also realised the logistics of a catheter going into my bladder. Gross.

The days and nights were filled with constant activity.

My single room was beside a brightly lit glassed-in nursing station, and further along the corridor were rooms shared by several spinal injury patients. I watched people in wheelchairs rolling past and thought that I would never be like them. How ridiculous to think I wouldn't walk again!

I couldn't remember anything about the bus crash. Maybe it didn't happen and this was all an extremely bad nightmare. I concentrated on trying to wriggle my toes and clench my thigh muscles. Nothing. I tried to push my heels down into the mattress. Nothing. Surely I could bend my knees? Nothing. Clench my buttocks? Nothing. Cross my ankles? Nothing happened.

One afternoon a nurse came to check on me. She fed me a handful of coloured pills and put the straw from a cup of water into my mouth. I asked her if it was true that I would never walk again. Her eyes brimmed with tears, and in a quiet voice she said the doctors would need to answer my questions.

**

Soon I was stable enough to be transferred from the intensive care unit to the Burwood spinal unit. Time blurred into days and weeks. Initially only my family was allowed to visit me, and only for a short length of time. Sometimes Marcus was there. I was confused about why this guy I had met in Auckland was now at my bedside.

Later on, others visited, including the Woodford headmaster, Mr Richards, who had retired to Christchurch the year before. He leaned over, gave me a kiss on the cheek and handed me a book. I found it confusing that people I hardly knew came to see me. I was so very confused about everything. And everything hurt.

Dad went home after a few weeks. The neighbouring farmers and family had been looking after the livestock but now he needed to get back to the farm and get ramps and bathroom access organised for my return. Mum stayed on in Christchurch in someone's spare room for the next five months.

As my routine evolved I found myself beginning to look forward to the daily visits of the cleaner. Around five o'clock, when most of the doctors had left, the ward noise had abated, patients weren't pushing their buzzers and mum had gone for the day, an older woman would appear and quietly start mopping the floor, wiping down the windowsill and the bedside cabinet, filling my water jug and folding any linen. Sometimes she closed the curtains and tidied the bunches of flowers that sat on every available surface.

As I became more lucid she sometimes chatted about what she had been up to that day, the weather, her family and Christchurch news. I found her presence so relaxing and comforting, so 'normal' — she wasn't an anxious face peering at me wanting to know how I was. No one would tell me what had happened and everyone seemed to me to be wearing plastic smiles, but the cleaner, whose name I never learned, didn't try to be cheerful or ask me anything at all.

I was getting tired of being asked a multitude of questions every day by medical staff — even though I knew they needed to — and by visitors who wanted to fill the silences. I can now reflect on how hard it must have been for them, not knowing what to say, and I respect that everyone meant well. I learned to warn new visitors not to sit on or bump my bed. I was also becoming very angry about being in bed, in pain and in hospital but somehow the swishing noise of the cleaner's mop and her everyday conversation was soothing.

The pile of get-well cards got so big that a box was recruited

to house them. Each morning, when the mail arrived, Mum would read the messages on the new cards out to me. I would seethe about the 'get well soon' wishes. In the late afternoon an orderly often came in with more cards. If no one was with me I would open the envelopes, rip the cards into pieces and throw them on the floor. The cleaner would pick them up and put them in her rubbish bag as she worked her way around the room.

**

A month after arriving at the unit I was moved to a larger room where there were three other patients. Each morning the curtains around our beds were swept open by the clinical team, which usually included the unit's lead specialist, a head nurse, a physiotherapist, an occupational therapist, a social worker and several doctors in training. Holding their clipboards, they gave each other updates that made me feel like a specimen under a microscope.

I lay impassively in the bed, fascinated to hear about my injury, the treatment, the plan and the medication. Was this really me? Before long, I heard them say, they would get me to start sitting up and they'd 'mobilise' me into a wheelchair. I still presumed I would soon be running out the school gate in the early morning frost to get my fitness level up to scratch. I was looking forward to catching my pony and riding along the hills behind our house or trotting down to the jumps at the pony club. I was adamant that this hospital stay wouldn't last much longer. When everything had healed my life would return to normal.

One afternoon between visitors and medical interventions I felt an itch near the bony part of my right elbow. I gave it a

scratch and found a scab about the size of a five cent coin. I twisted my arm, got a fingernail under it and ripped off the scab to have a look. Underneath there was a deep hole full of goopy fluid. I picked out what looked like a bit of gravel. It was the only sign of an injury that I had seen. I couldn't see my spine or head wounds and hadn't thought about what they might look like.

I lay there trying to imagine what it would have been like as the bus left the road and rolled down the bank before coming to a halt on its side. Perhaps I had whacked my elbow on the ground when some windows popped out as it flipped over.

I pressed my buzzer, and a nurse cleaned the wound and put a dressing on it.