

## 2nd Place (2022): Anissa Ljanta, The Shimmer Lines

Old Rewa from next door found a head-sized hole in a shimmer line when she was looking for mushrooms one hungry day a few months in. She'd heard voices. Not one of ours. There were twenty-seven souls in our part of the world; we knew everyone's voice and every footfall.

I thought Rewa was on the homebrew, hearing birds talking again. She had snorted and said, "Pfft, girl, only people would talk about missing the pub."

We set up a watch after that. On the fifth day John spotted someone through the gap in the line that slashed through the hillside orchard. There was a shouted conversation and that's how we first knew about the patches. That ours wasn't the only one and there were still other humans out there. The back-and-forth of John's gravelly voice with the woman's sing-song on the other side was the beginning of the relay of information. It was dangerous - some of us lost limbs or lives to the shifting of the lines while distracted by our thirst for contact with people other than our patch mates, desperate for news of loved ones.

We tested throwing letters tied around rocks but the lines didn't like that - my letter to Ana ricocheted back and broke John's nose. Nothing got through except voices and the creatures. There were strange ones since the Happening.

I lost a finger to something with teeth when I was eeling with the old girls. I didn't see it, but Gran said it looked like one of those deep-sea fish in Pop's *National Geographic* magazines.

"Good thing it was your little finger," Rewa said as she bound it tight with her handkerchief before the blood attracted more unwanted attention. No one spoke but we were all thinking of little Bill's screams.

We made screens for the windows after that. And shutters. Doors were kept locked and we only went out in twos. And after I lost my finger Rewa moved in with us permanently.

We had been paying her to be Gran's companion since long before the Happening, when Gran had been found in the hills. Lucky Rewa had spotted the smoke. Gran had left apples stewing and wandered off. She'd been scaring the kids outside the little school with all her talk of tohu and taniwha - and death too. Whether she liked it or not, Gran could no longer live alone. Monday to Friday the old girls hung out. Weekends were whānau time.

The morning we woke to the shimmer lines was my first weekend of Gran duty without Ana. We'd had a big fight about it. Ana loved coming home to Gran but there was a netball game she didn't want to miss that weekend. She'd just had her sixteenth birthday so I supposed it was fair enough. I had succumbed and given her scoundrel dad strict instructions to keep an eye.

I had first brought Ana back home when she was six weeks old. A surprise visit, but when I let myself in with the key Gran kept in an old paint tin in the shed I found my favourite biscuits in the baking tin and a note welcoming me home.

Gran thumped in with tuna fresh from the river traps not long after, eyes shining to see her moko. I made her wash her hands from the eel guts before she held baby Ana. That didn't go down well.

"Bloody city life has ruined you, girl," she complained over the noise of the water discordant from the kitchen tap.

"Never mind that, Gran," I laughed. "How did you know I was coming? Did Mum call? Don't tell me a fantail told you."

"Rewa told me," she said, a sly grin spreading.

My mind had spun, trying to find a connection that made sense. “What, Mum called Rewa?”

“No, a little birdy told her.” She paused for effect. “The old ruru that calls from the tōtara.” Gran had wicked-laughed then, eyes disappearing into the earthy richness of her lined face.

The morning of the Happening my first thought was of Ana. I couldn’t get enough oxygen, grabbing for my mobile phone, then trying the landline, internet, radio. Nothing. Once the backup generators ran out of diesel there were no lights, fridge or oven either.

Rewa had come over to see if our landline was working. Standing in the doorway watching me pace, panic painting taut lines of my body, she shrugged and said, “Tē taea te aha.”

I wanted to smack her.

I had thought it was an earthquake. That was the closest language I had to describe the shuddering. The wrongness. The snapping of the air. The wrenching feeling in my gut.

Gran had walked across the hall, taken one look at me, limbs folded oddly under the desk, and said, “Get out of there, Hera. This is no earthquake.”

The first we knew of the lines was when Mary Williams was killed trying to get to the city. A shimmering in the air marked her demise, the new boundaries of our world and the sinking of my last hope of getting to Ana.

One shimmer line sliced right across the river, cutting us off from the old swimming hole. Gran had taken it all in her stride up until then but cursed like a sailor when she realised her prize eel-trapping spot was lost.

The lines are not static; we reckon there’s a five-metre creep. They usually shift at night, but not always. We are trapped, and being picked off.

Rewa set up the old Singer treadle sewing machine on the porch. The pair of them spent hours sewing while reliving the old days, cackling into the nights. I was banned after I complained about the noise.

“Killjoy,” Rewa sneered.

“Party pooper,” Gran grinned, eyes disappearing into her mirth.

A crew of us had been harvesting late apples the day Gran got shimmed. Bloody thing must’ve caught her when it moved.

It turned out Rewa and Gran had been sewing a shroud. They had known. I didn’t ask how.

## About Anissa



Anissa Ljanta is a writer, mama, coach, equity advocate and systems change geek with an extraordinary life story. A change agent on a good day. She lives in a little house on a hill looking out over bush, sea and sky on Te Kawerau a Maki land. Proudly ADHD, autistic and queer, she claimed the word outlier when she was eight. Writing is her first love and how she makes sense of the world.