

Leaving Waipu

As I walk down the streets of Newtown, Wellington, where I live all sorts of weird and wonderful people pass me by. The outfits are often eccentric; bomber hats, dramatic velvet coats, a generously proportioned gal festooned like a pink bunny. They don't seem to care what others think and no-one gives them a second glance. Certainly not me – I love it, celebrating, not judging the people by their appearance is something I learnt to do a long time ago.

Think the hot summer of 1978, Farah Fawcett and floppy hair, Grease, pappy love songs and disco dominating the airwaves. Punk rock was something we'd never heard of, like other darker, sharper world events; terrorist attacks, Jonestown and the Son and Sam murders it belonged over there, not here in our paradise.

Off in our own little 19yr old paradise, my boyfriend (let's call him Joseph) and I were offered a job in our University summer holidays as camp cleaners for the Waipu Cove campsite. The regular cleaners were taking this summer off. How perfect! A few hours of cleaning a day in exchange for a caravan, afternoons spent in the impossibly blue sea, returning white sand dusted to lie under the Northland stars and on each new day taking in the languid summer in big breaths. And so we did. But not for long. Something darker, sharper and smellier was waiting for us.

The campsite was booked each year by regulars from Auckland. Each boxing day they would decamp from their homes in Chilton Downs and set up a replica of their house; TV's, birdcages, mini fridges, shag pile carpets, a replica of their street - the tents and caravans in tidy rows on a Northland beach. All the neighbours together again! These were the days of Muldoon and Thea. Our short, stout arch conservative PM had a reverence for the ordinary bloke and Sheila. Long socks and shorts, twin sets and perms, a cloud menthol cigarettes and spumante keeping out the foreigners and anyone 'suspicious looking.' And anyone 'too brainy'. But unfortunately into their summer haze came me and Joseph, the new cleaners, two strangers in paradise.

Our day started with the rubbish. I'd drive the big old Bedford truck between the tidy rows and Joe would run along behind biffing in bins filled with empty beer cans and meat bones. We would take the truck over dirt roads to the tip out of sight behind the dunes and marvel at the huge seagulls shrieking and fighting over their dinner. Then we would clean the toilets and kitchen areas before taking a break. For a while it was okay. We thought we were doing a good job. Being clean that is; scrubbing, hosing, wiping. We worked hard. For awhile we basked at the beach, basked in the routine, walking hand in hand to the headlands, hitching a ride to the pub for a beer, sometimes smoking that other stuff. We were harmless, young, naive and nice and clean.

But it turns out we weren't clean. We noticed we were being watched. Squinty eyes viewed with derision the swing of my green silk skirt, the cut of Joseph's op shop trousers. Ears were tuned, suspiciously listening to the tapes we played; Mahler's symphony no.5, French love songs, Bob Dylan, Cajun music. Noses smelt our strange cigarettes wafting through that starlit Northern night. Voices gruffly called from the beer tents,

'Turn that shit music off.'

Our perfect days began to get a bit murky. We were unnerved. Still, we continued to clean, continued through the hot days, laughing a bit too much, talking a bit too meaningfully, still happy. We ignored the increasing level of dirt and waste on the toilet and kitchen walls.

Then one day, only half way through our cleaning contract, I drove as usual the Bedford truck. Over the noise of the truck I strained to hear the clunking of the cans falling into the trailer. It was quiet. Then I heard a man bellow,

‘Clean it up yaself, ya dirty bugger.’

Getting out I saw that the rubbish was emptied onto the grass. Men stood hands folded over burnt pot belly stomachs, women in their nighty’s, hands on hips, kids sneering. Joseph stood firm.

‘I’m not cleaning that up.’

But his well enunciated, ‘varsity tones’ didn’t go down well and the circle closed in. Not up for a fight, just too young and lovely, we jumped back into the Bedford and high tailed it to the rubbish dump, taking refuge with the whining seagulls.

Later when we’d plucked up the courage to sneak back to our caravan, there was a knock on the door. The ‘camp leader’ a kindly man in regulation socks and shorts came to tell us we must leave, Slightly apologetic and mildly explaining, he told us it wasn’t safe for us to stay. He would bring us our pay in full in a few days to our flat in inner city Auckland.

And we left. As a light squall closed in, we packed what little we had and what was left of our pride, tucking away the impossibly blue sea for another time. We felt dirty and ashamed but not sure why and when we walked out of the camp, the ordinary people and their children from Chilton Downs jeered and threw rocks and rubbish.

‘Get out!’

‘Get out!’

‘Get out!’

We were hardly back in our flat when we noticed a disgusting smell. Conscious that the camp leader was coming the next day we made sure that the flat was sparkling clean but try as we must; wiping, hosing, scrubbing the smell stayed and sure enough the nice man turned up and gave us our check, never once though letting on that he smelt something foul in our house.

The next day, pulling out a bed in the spare room I noticed a half eaten rat -the source of the smell, our black cat Gladys shyly standing beside it with pride. And all we could do was laugh.

We were always going to be dirty to the people in the little tent town and what mattered was the nights holding hands under the Northern sky, listening to the pathos in the Mahler symphony, loving the sight of the white caps pouring into the luscious bay and ever since I haven’t I’ve tried to not care about what others might think about how I appear. There is so much that is darker and sharper and wonderful going on here.