

Testing

By Alex Stone



My father is the prime minister.

So what? Big deal. He's still a jerk.

Ever since the tattoo thing, we don't talk.

Well, he tries. I just ignore him. Who is he, anyway, to tell me about what I put on my body?

At least it was an original artwork – mine – and not one of those pukey-twee little clip art fairies from the tattoo shop catalogue, or some oriental symbol that's supposed to mean something cosmic. My whole entire life I've wanted this. So I did it. He'll just have to learn to respect that.

Anyway, he hasn't seen it. The tattoo, I mean. I won't show him *that* crevice. He demanded he sees it. So I showed him the paper version (still not talking).

He launched into a long schpiel about being disappointed. About me being “volatile” and “impetuous.” Yeah, right, whatever. I glazed over.

Mum sort of whimpered. Mum is a doormat. A fancy French 18th century antique doormat, maybe. But still she's a pathetic figure.

What has she to show for a life's work? Here's her list:

- Fancy antique furniture;
- Oversize vases set against the windows for “dramatic backlighting.” Sigh;
- Always flowers in the house. (We probably spend more on them than a solo mum does on everything);

- Stacks of perfect-bound interior design magazines she won't throw away, so they fill up half a garage;
- A shiny black Mercedes 4X4 she has never driven out of town (she gets a new car every year);
- A reasonable midweek ladies tennis game;
- No career;
- A collection of dweeby CDs. Girly 70's and 80's pop. Horay.

And, a son who uses her for just lifts to where ever he wants to go, and extra pocket money.

A daughter (me) who resents her pathetic-ness. At least I catch the bus. Or used to, before this random special service directive about personal security. Before the native protestors set up their tent village on the grass verge outside our house.

Before we became the "First Family."

Now we got the two halves of this country living on either side of our wall. Who gave them the right to bring their grubbiness into Parnell? (At least they can't afford to send their kids to *my* school.)

If we weren't so rich, my life would suck.

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If dad's such a political wiz (I'm not so sure anyway – most people said he won just because it was his turn, the other lot had done their dash, not through any brilliance of his own) – if he's so flash, how come he gets so much completely wrong?

Like, he has a son. Who has an expensive radio-controlled car kit, unopened at the top of his wardrobe, just waiting for some help, some bloke bonding, to put it together. But then, I think if even both of them did try, they probably still couldn't build it. I've never seen Dad use a hammer – or any tools. There's always some contractor to do it. He's useless. They're both useless. But at least Jared has the excuse of being a 14-year-old nerd. It's tragic when you're nearly fifty, and still the same.

And he has a daughter. Who he only thinks is "volatile." He doesn't understand creativity. He's never looked, really *looked*, at any of my designs.

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The tents have sprouted on the pavement, like a fungus on the fringe of our lives.

No one else in Parnell has this embarrassment. They're just outside *our* house. Thanks dad. And they are on the opposite side of the road, which is the back of Stacey's place, so she doesn't hardly notice them.

This morning, as usual, there are the desultory jeers in te reo, as the black Range Rover heads out, my security fuckwit's weak little chin held firm, his pig-little eyes staring straight ahead.

Doesn't he know how to even say good morning? Not that I am going to ask him. I'm decided never to talk to him again – he might just get ideas. Why's he so young anyway? Did they think he could *empathise* with me? Ha-ha.

This morning I notice a new tent put up, away from the rest, but squeezed in right by our gate intercom, almost under the big bronze street number on the wall.

I've taken to making a census of the protestors, playing a little game with myself defining who's who (family connections, etc) and predicting how long each will last. Dad the Prime Dork once said at dinner – that was a month ago now – “They'll get tired. We'll out last them.

“Punterland is not fussed anyway,” he droned on, “So I'm relaxed about it. But no one from this family must talk to them. Is that clear?” (Mum nods, dumbly)

Well, stuff you. I'll talk to anyone I like. I just haven't found anyone outside the gates who I would *choose* to talk to, just yet. Still, they irritate me. I resolve to have it out with them tomorrow.

Who do they think they are?

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So I walk up to them. I'm out of the gate fast as, as it slides open, as the car's getting ready for the trip to school.

These cheeky campers. (If I was writing an English essay right now, I would say “I brazenly walk up to them”)

A tall guy is coming out of a tent. The lonely tent at the front edge of the encampment. I reach it first. It's right by the gate. He almost bumps into me as he straightens up, from right under our post box.

I was marching his way, I was going to straighten them all out, brazenly (there, said it) tell them to get the fuck off-ova my pavement, but now somehow my speech sort of dried up, like it was a hangover mouth.

I'm angry I know – but am I angry for my mum and dad? Puh-leese. So I don't say anything. Just look. I'm thinking I should have a new speech. My *own* speech. I can get grumpy on my own. And yes I have PMT today.

And he looks back, but only briefly, then keeps his eyes down at his feet. He scratches the back of his head, slowly. His skin glows like a light through honey. His armpit hair is black as mascara. He smells musty, like the old bach dad sold without telling me or Jared.

The protestor, he says quietly, “Who are you?” Still looking down.

And I’m like, “Look at me and you’ll know.” Yes, OK, I’m arrogant. My parents paid good money, big money, for this education I’m supposed to have. And it comes with a certain sense of superiority.

So he looks up again. This time his eyes hold a bit longer. He crosses his arms over his chest, and scratches each elbow, symmetrically. The top button of his jeans is undone. He doesn’t have a shirt. But he has a big black watch, with a dial on it, like divers wear.

He looks like an actor. “Oh, the lady of the house,” he smiles. Straight teeth, one chipped.

His eyes flick up to the third floor (my bedroom window?), to the tennis court, the pool, the guest house, the topiary avenue, the four-car garage, all visible through the sliding gate.

“Go get a life, Camp Mother” is all I can think of to say. And I’m thinking all along he already knows who I am, he’s just having me on.

I feel the hand of the secret service asshole on my arm. So when I spin around, and stomp back to the car, I can at least blame him for my red face.

(Fuck it! ‘Camp Mother’ – what was that supposed to mean?)

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So I was like already majorly pissed with this special service wanker who’s driving me to school these days (“Your Mum’s too busy” he says – yeah, right).

He makes me get in the car, and have the doors locked, before he opens the sliding gate. It’s all about security he says, in his jargon-shit kind of way. He talks like some FBI bit part from a Monday night TV show on free-to-air. He says those Maoris camping on the grass verge outside our house “contain criminal element.”

“It’s a legitimate protest,” I say. “We’ve broken so many promises already, and now my father and his cronies are breaking more. And do you really think one more futile tent embassy will change anything?”

“I know more about this shit than you. That’s what comes from being a political orphan.

“And it’s Māori, without the 's'. Māori – that how you pronounce it.” It’s the most I’ve ever said to him. He looks at me with big eyes. Well, fuck you and your sidearm pistol too.

“They are dangerous people,” he says lamely.

I see asthmatic old fellas, some kuia with hips like shipping containers, grubby kids eating junk, and the occasional spaced-out hunk. I see old cars, painted dull grey, matt black, parked skew. Home-made touch-up jobs. I see their flag hanging limply from a long manuka pole, its black red and white like a flame of anger.

And I've begun to wonder what they're angry about.

And there are others who come and go from the tents on the pavement. Articulate men and women. And when they're on site, there always seem to be cameras in attendance too. They command respect, even I can see that. On the news I watch in my bedroom at night, they seem to talk more sense, more strident angry sense, than any of the mealy-mouthed (I borrowed that word) apologists from my father's party.

I can understand the rightful indignation of the protestors at being so patronized.

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So I've done some reading.

An eager-beaver history teacher at school encourages me. He seems most, most...what's the appropriate old-fashioned word? *Gleeful*, that's it. He seems most *gleeful* to be "helping" me. And so I discover they're only asking for what we agreed on, these people on the pavement. And then we took it away from them.

Sure, it's an old agreement – OK, *treaty* – but that's no need for us to stomp all over it like that. No respect. Reminds me of all the parents I know. Why is equal partnership such a difficult thing to understand? I only need look at my parents to see it in lurid dysfunction. And here he's trying to run a country.

One of the books is called *Ka whaiwhai tonu matou* – struggle without end. Ok so I live in a different world, a very different world, but in a weird kinda way, I know what it feels like. *Ka Whaiwhai tonu matou*. Sounds like my life.

And so I designed a device for my body. That's where the tattoo came from. Well, maybe there is some indigenous blood in me after all. There are parts of our family tree that are hazy.

"Pruned," says mum about the family tree in her simpering way, "to tidy things up a bit."

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The special service team dildos have taken up residence in the one arm of the house that was never used. Yes sure, it was too big for us ever to spread out into the whole thing, but I never expected it to become filled with these Agent Anderson tragedies in bad black suits.

The rules are they can only meet us kids in the driveway area. But they do patrol the perimeter, and make checks through the house. Is there no privacy anymore?

So we are like one big bizarre blended family, only blended with Hallenstein suits with sad haircuts, and these freaky people who talk funny, in an ominous kinda way. It's as if they want their lives to be more dramatic than they really are.

Why can't they live next door, like they did with the old PM? They probably couldn't afford the rent in this suburb anyway, what with dad's big budget cuts for the civil service.

I'm the only one with any individuality of dress in this whole crazy set up. (Apart from Alicia, one of the Filipina maids, when she's not in uniform. I like her. She wears crass 80's flouro colours from op-shops with style and impunity. And her tat's grouse. She showed me.)

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A Chance Encounter. *It's him!* Him from the nearest tent.

We're at ... no, if I tell you, then my father, and his secret special service drongos will find out where I wasn't supposed to be. So, you'll just have to guess.

This time I'm the one who's going to start, so I'm like; "Oh it's my uninvited neighbor. You'll have to tell me your name, so I can give you your mail. That's if you can read."

"El Camino."

"What?"

"El Camino. That's my name. El Camino McLachlan."

"Very Māori name. El Camino. Is that 'cause you were conceived in the back of a ute?"

"No, because my parents always wanted to do a Christian pilgrimage in Spain that's called El Camino de Santiago"

"Oh." This is the first person in my life who can cut me short.

But then he smiles. "But, hey, my auntie did have a ute like that, if it helps..."

And then he says...again, I'm not going to tell you everything.

But what he says holds me. And so do his eyes, this time.

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We can talk. We can talk. We can talk.

And all because he can listen.

What a revelation!

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He teaches me more stuff about our history.

He says we live in states of crafted ignorance of each other.

Most of the craft between us goes into inventing new ways to meet, new places, so nobody will know. And also into breaking down that ignorance.

I always did say I was clever.

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So respectful is he, it takes a long time for his hands to find my breasts.

His huge, gentle hands.

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I hardly notice the mid-year exams. I hang out for him speaking on the news. He's so young, but he's often the spokesman. And it seems, I'm not the only one he can have spluttering for words, such is the clarity of his argument.

And he's only in his master's year at uni. (That makes him only four years older than me – he must have finished school early)

But he's always polite. Just *irrefutable*. I love that word.

God, he's good with words. And in both languages too. He even has the last word with Kim Hill.

She can't speak his language. At all, apparently. We laugh about that.

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He speaks to me of love in his language. It is full of incomparable metaphor; and is lovely.

It works for me.

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I am *irrefutably* in love.

(I think.)

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So now we're on a cheap Jetstar flight across the Tasman.

No one stopped us at the airport. Alicia drove us there in her boyfriend's Impreza. The big exhaust burbled a message of defiance all the way. Fat Freddy's Drop played on the CD. Everything was cool.

No one will stop us the other side, 'cause no one's expecting anything, no one thinks anything, I'm supposed to be at an after-school mock stock exchange thing (*Ha!*). And we will use the rapid self check passport machines, in Australia too.

Yeah, thanks dad, for making this possible. (I can still hear him saying "It doesn't make sense for a businessman flying across the ditch for just a day with just a briefcase, to have to go through full international customs formalities.")

It doesn't make sense for us too. Who needs formalities?

Here's the funny thing. I used to watch the news just to see what he'd say. So I could sneer at it I suppose. I wonder if I will miss that?

Funny how he said he's stopping the drain across the Tasman. Now it's me (*Ha!* again)

We are going to melt into Melbourne. We'll disappear.

Well, the Australians lost an entire prime minister (My history teacher told me).

I'm just the daughter of one. Who doesn't want him. Or his fancy house. And who doesn't want to be found, by him, by *them*. But why am I talking about my dad? He's history.

A strong, square hand comes down gently on my dreaming knee. And points through the little oval window at an endless dusty land coming over the horizon.

I've found him.

So good luck to us.