

They are

There's a sail on the horizon.

Not really a sail. More like a blanket on a stick.

And today is suddenly going off-script. The complication of others intrudes. And I'm to be their savior.

*

They're all sleeping now, for the second night; and for the first time in these strange few days, I have time to sit and reflect. But not on what I came up here, specially, specifically, to reflect on.

But, still, it's nice that the bach is full again, up to summer capacity. All the bunks are being used. Even the sleepout.

Only these are all strangers, not the usual teens – my teens – and their raucous friends from that last, cut-short summer. (Not that I think they'll come back here for a while – they're still unsettled by the whole thing).

And these strangers in the house now are all a shade of bus driver brown – as those same crass teens would have said. When they still would have laughed.

So here I sit, alone, nursing a late-night merlot, in a house full of the snoring of strangers. And it's better, I believe, than drinking alone.

I'm alone, yet elevated. Something has come to jolt me, something from the place most unexpected, from far outside my own obsessions, something complete with moral examination. And with angles upon angles. It's probably what's needed in this, my first trip back here since that day.

So I get up, to fetch another drink. I nibble distractedly at a biscuit too, then flop down again in the armchair he loved. I sink into the shape he left in the tired old cushions. And try to put things in order. Where to start?

*

I remember driving up here from Auckland three days ago, leaving the office after work, encountering the great northerly in the dark just beyond Whangarei, and braying out loud: How would you describe this storm?

I answered myself in a weatherman voice: *It's big-time climate change stuff, people, a cauldron of Pacific on slow boil. It's the heat up there that drives this storm. It's the tropics coming visiting.*

I couldn't hear the radio because of the storm. The voices of others, for once, drowned out. But I could hear my own voice – and it was kinda refreshing to get it out of my head, where it had been wandering about in self-referential pity for so long. There are only so many sad echoes you can live with.

But to raise my voice above the buffeting of the storm, the rattling of sodden flax leaves, the

thrashing on manuka, the frantic slapping of the wipers at full tilt – I suddenly had to talk, no shout, out loud to myself. Hence my manic weatherman schtick.

And for a minute, I thought I was funny. Tragic. And then I thought, *No this is good value, good for me, talk out loud. Thanks to the storm. Keep it up, Kate, keep it up.*

I could do with a new world that's different, I thought, in a cave of silence deep inside me, well hidden from the weather. I could do with something different, yes.

But I kept on driving to that same old bach. The beach cottage became my beacon on that wild night.

*

There's a sail between me and the headland. Only it's not a sail, it's more like a tarp on a stick.

*

It was the first time I'd come back to the house since the accident. I felt I had to face it. And besides, there was maintenance to do. And I suppose I'd have to do it all now.

The hardest part was seeing the still-there-but-faint marks on the lawn from the helicopter skids.

I stood, frozen in the embrace of a half-opened car door, as those marks caught my eye, their contours exaggerated by the low beam of the headlights. The rain shafted in, wetting the car seat. We always arrived at this time, about ten-ish at the bach after driving up after work; only now it felt much later, much darker. But the car lights still picked out those dents in the soft front lawn.

Suddenly I recall the added weight of the body in the helicopter, the others clambering in after me, the tight fit for us all, the dispassionate commands of the pilot, the urgent clattering of the rotors as we heaved off and whirled around for the hospital – all too late, all too numb.

And I thought of the white faces looking upwards, wide eyed, as I looked back down from the lift-off of that futile flight. Averting eyes, we all were, yet I was still clinging to one cold hand.

The others had hurriedly locked up, and driven home in a ragged convoy. And never come back. That's what a husband and father's heart attack on Christmas Eve does. It rattles even teenagers, and their robust friends.

And they never came back.

Till me. Till now.

*

It's hardly a sail, it's hardly a mast. But it's all they have left to push them to the shore. The motor is dead. The boat is grubby. The people are disheveled. They also look exhausted. They have come so far.

Toothpaste. That was my first thought. *They need toothpaste.*

Funny how the mind works, running away faster than itself. I correct myself with a more rational thought. *Food. They must need food and water. There's plenty at the bach.*

But first I must tow them in.

Then I saw the baby. And if it wasn't for knots to tie, practical stuff to intervene, my heart would have collapsed, too. Like his.

*

The storm blew through in the night; and in the morning, I found I had arrived to silence, of the human kind.

At first I tiptoed – literally. Then I spent as much time as I could outdoors. Although the rain had cleared, the entire earth seemed ragged and wrung. But the sky and the sea were bright, glossy, hopeful. There were two parts to the world.

And then the usual late summer sonata slowly reasserted itself, playing around the old place – oystercatchers on the beach, the distant rhythmic shirrurp of surf, the clawing flight of a tui, feathers rasping as if losing their grip on the air in the same way I have.

And the sound clouds would make as they slide past our lives. And the sighing of an unoccupied house, seeing people again – well just me for now.

The soundtrack continued : mood music from my own sad movie, was my wry thought. I had stopped talking aloud. My voice was retreating inside my skull again.

So here I was, haunting the rooms along with memory.

After a few days, I was moving freely – except to that room, our room. I did go in once, briefly and briskly, to rip the curtains open. The double bed, an immensity of loneliness, was too big for me. I knocked my shin on the base of it as I slid hurriedly past. I would sleep in another room.

So I fired up the old lawnmower, and bravely bumped over those marks on the front lawn. Kept moving, mowed that grass cruelly low, even took grim pleasure in the way the blades hacked off the tops of the little sod ridges that defined those marks. Removing them, at right angles, I thought We'll find a surface again. This will be my new existence.

*

I find myself acutely observing the tiniest details: the excess nose hair of the paramedic (an overlay to his moustache), his gaudy red and yellow overalls, the balance of the bank logo – nice graphic design, I observe professionally – on one side of his chest, his surname on the other.

He has strong, square hands, just like those I know so well. Like the cold hand that falls from my grip. The convulsing of my shoulders, of my entire being, is in time with the gross whumping of the helicopter blades.

*

I'll phone someone immediately, I thought, when we make the land. There must be ways of handling this.

But you know that blankness of sound when you pick up? – no dial tone – as if

There it was, a blankness of sound, and a surfeit of things to do.

First, a big meal.

So I was going to try phoning later. And then I didn't. It didn't seem to be as easy as saying it, as things evolved.

Besides, that next day flew by.

The breakfast. I'm surprised at the continuing popularity of the Watties baked beans on toast, and the disdain – or is it ignorance? – of the Very Berry Nice breakfast cereal from the nice Mr Hubbard.

The washing. The handing of clothes through half-opened doors. The remembered idiosyncrasies of the old washing machine. In the meantime, finding clothes to fit, from the sliding drawers under the beds. We manage.

The incomplete explanations. The shrugs. The shy smiles. The toothpaste.

There was extra shopping to do. And the extra miles to go. Here's the tree, the culprit for the blankness of sound. Lines down, about a mile from the bach. I'll have to break a few topmost branches to get around.

In the end I use the car to crunch them, but score a few squealing scratches down the sides of the doors. I drive on, half elated by this breach of propriety.

I went way beyond the local dairy, to the Four Square superette by the main road crossing.

They wouldn't know there, that I had arrived at the bach alone, and wouldn't draw conclusions from all that food, those eight toothbrushes.

It would mean less to explain, and more time to figure out what to do, beyond the immediately obvious. But for now, I suppose I was enjoying the provisioning, the taking charge.

*

In the shed, his tinnie.

I usually hated fishing. Usually let him manhandle that cold aluminium boat out of the shed, fighting with the rusty bi-fold doors, ripping down rampant jasmine, let him do the cursing, the endless tugs on the outboard starter cord, just to test it. Drag stuff down the jetty. Myriad trips, forgetting this, forgetting that. Hand him a sammie, and a thermos. Let him go out alone. Watch for him coming back. I'd wave from the porch, my good book on my lap, empty tea cup on the deck beside me. I'd let him gut the fish. Let him put the boat away. Only hug him after he'd showered.

At the bach, I prefer walking to fishing. Sometimes I'd watch him from the hilltop, the little grey dinghy sometime almost indistinguishable from the sea. He'd sit so still in the boat. I preferred the moving, the exercise, the unequivocal support of the land.

But I enjoyed eating the fish.

But something (maybe the yearning memory of the blue two-stroke fragrance he so often joked about – said it motivated him to dominate nature – *Secret men's business*, he said), something

made me get that boat out, manhandle like he always did, and head out, away from the solid edge of the land.

And the outboard motor started on only the third pull. A positive omen to hang upon.

*

It's the kind of day that would sparkle, if it could. But there is no breeze to liberate those shards of light from the surface of the sea. It's as if someone's left the grater behind.

So the sea stays as its famous muted turquoise, and smooth, the colour of the new airline uniforms. To punctuate this fact, a distant jet arcs overhead, northwards, on its way to the islands.

So here I was, bobbing. No, more like heaving. As if on top of the slow breathing chest of a well-remembered man. A still-alive man.

With no bites. But then I did have no bait in the water when I checked.

So I moved, around the headland. Me and this motor, we're getting on. We could be friends. And baited up again.

*

There was this sail. Only it wasn't really a sail. More like a blanket on a stick.

*

I find myself acutely observing the tiniest details. The encrusting of salt in their ears. Their toes grasping the gunwale. The sag in their clothes, under lean armpits. Their eyes searching for mine, but never locking with them. The one man who turns away to shift something. A weeping sore on an elbow. The planks that have paint, those that don't. The matt black of soot on an exhaust pipe rising above the coachroof. The fishing lines, the bucket of dried fish guts.

Who is on the boat?

Four women – two middle aged (like me), one older (I'd say a grandmother) and one around eighteen.

One baby - I'd say about sixteen months.

Two men and a ten-year-old boy.

The boat is so small, and they are so curious (but quietly so), and so desperate for land (again in a subdued way), that I see all of them almost immediately. My roll call is complete. There's no-one hiding in the cabin, of that I'm sure.

They are hesitant in their every gesture.

It's obvious the engine is not working. Hasn't been for a while. And equally obvious is their visceral desire for the land. They stare at it hungrily. (Here I am trying to write this, and knowing I have not the experience of this in the words of my comfortable life. How can I ever hope to describe their emotions at this point of first contact?)

I pass them a rope, one of the men attaches it to a post on the bow. I pass up my only liquid, a litre bottle of weak barley juice. It's passed around reverentially. Then I heroically rev up, heading for the shore. The rope snaps taught.

But towing doesn't work. I remember him telling me something about a light boat trying to tow a much heavier one. And here I was doing it. Or trying to.

We yawed (now I know what the word means – now I've actually experienced it). My little tinnie yawed on the end of the string, in a hopeless arc. The engine screamed. We went nowhere.

Something else Rod once said, and I must have retained it somehow, came back to me.

So we lashed the tinnie to the side of the boat. I was surprised how low in the water the bigger boat was, our gunwales almost touching.

And with the small outboard put at three-quarter revs (another thing I remembered), we slowly gained some speed, the rudder in the boat began working again, and side-by-side we limped back in.

Still, it's more than a mile to the landing.

And then, a surreptitious gesture, one I'm sure I'm not supposed to see. An old gun – a rifle thing – I'm not hot on these details, but I know it's not an AK47 – is dropped over the far side of the boat. I catch the man's eye as he does his checking glance – he averts, quickly, guiltily. I notice he has the top joint of a finger missing. And doesn't come near me again for hours.

The little boy is different: he clambers down into the tinnie, and sits on the hard bench facing me, knees alternately pressed together then wide apart, giving me a long and direct stare, grinning broadly.

Wordlessly, immediately, we decide we're going to like each other. I smile back, briefly. He responds, generously.

I pass him the packet of Tim Tams, and he leaps up, gives them to one of the women on the boat. She lets him have one. They all eat slowly, some with eyes closed. The boy crunches his biscuit through a smile. He loses a few crumbs, picks them up by pressing his fingertip on them. The melting chocolate makes miniature smears on the boat's seats.

Apart from his knees, he doesn't fidget. His hair has fish slime in it, and sticks out in all directions. He wears dirty Billabong boardies, no undies, and a man-size T shirt that once was yellow, with word on it in a cursive script I can't recognize.

But I can't hold his eye for long. So I take turns to look at his boat. What I notice mostly is that it's devoid of the bright plastic clutter I know our friends' yachts and launches are filled with. The stuff I'd seen on my infrequent trips with Rod to the yacht chandlers (he called them robbers) down at Westhaven Marina. The boat has a little cabin, with scruffy curtains covering tiny slits that could be windows. The boat stinks of old fish and tired dirty bodies and vomit.

The boy softly pokes my lifejacket. It's obvious he can't figure it out. I give him the spare that I've been sitting on, (it's warm from my bum) and he proudly puts it on. I hope it keeps him warm, too.

The shore edges closer. The sun sets. The headland folds back to reveal the river mouth. It smiles like the boy.

Because the river is running deep, and the bar has been scoured by the storm, the entrance to the lagoon is surprisingly easy. The big waves simply subside as we enter the channel, though still heaving against the rocks out on the point. (Again, I find myself assessing the world in the way Rod would. Have I soaked up his thoughts, his instincts?)

With the tree fringe close by, our speed seems increased. Soon I must throttle back, and our ungainly catamaran comes to an abrupt stop short of our jetty. My little boat's on the outside. I gun the motor again, this time our momentum is right, and I must have gauged the gap to the jetty OK, as the men drop down to the planks, and tie us up.

The others sit still in the boat, the boy in mine. There's a silence that's part fear, part expectation, mostly exhaustion. They all look at me. My move.

So I clamber across. I stand on our jetty. I point to the bach. I make a two-handed gesture, fingers curling to my chest: *Come*.

And so they do. Two of the women bring old bags of indeterminate colour, with stuff in. The rest follow with some hesitation, but not looking back into the gathering dusk. The walk unsteadily. One of the men supports the older woman.

Mostly, I walk backwards, to see that they're following. The little boy never loses his smile.

Welcome to our place, I say awkwardly. It doesn't sound sincere.

Haere mai, haere mai, haere mai ki Aotearoa, I try again. And my bumbling Maori sounds worse.

*

We sit on the porch. I light candles - still no power. On the gas cooktop, I make toast. I heat up a great tub of baked beans. We eat with great grins around our chops, like kids in the ice cream ads. The women drink endless cups of tea. The men and the boy prefer the barley juice I offer them. I keep the booze hidden.

I bustle. I find sleeping bags. I point at beds. I show them the bathroom, how the taps work. I press big beach towels on them. I find old clothes that will fit. For the women I raid my own bags (the number of duplicated garments I have almost embarrasses me, but here and now it's a useful thing). I point at their clothes, and make a washing movement with my hands, rubbing palms, fingers rolled together. They get it. Apart from the boy, they are too wary to smile.

They dissolve into their allocated bedrooms, and the sleepout. I have billeted myself back in the double bedroom. Why? Dunno.

At last I am sitting in the lounge, just sitting.

Just as I think I'm alone, a surprise. The girl re-appears, with her hand around the shoulder of the boy, now scrubbed clean (I already miss his spiky hair).

She is tall and slim, and has one wandering eye. I don't know which side of her squint to try to focus on. Instead, the wafted scent of my soap on her skin connects us.

She says *Thank you miss*. Her eyes cast down. He smiles more.

I say *I didn't think –*

She says *Only a little.*

I say *Let's talk in the morning. We'll practice our English then. Go to sleep now.*

And I make a silly gesture with my hands, prayer-like, under my head tilted. Sleep. We all need it.

*

The next day, their boat is sunk. *Did they do it?* The must have. Only the tinnie is tied up to the jetty, very neatly.

They are all on the porch again, sitting quietly, up before me.

They look a little sheepish in the strange clothes. There is still a muted fear in their eyes.

Midway through the day, the phone makes a soft beep, as if to say *I'm back.*

Electricity starts humming, and the stereo restarts itself. It's playing Liszt's Hungarian Rhapsodies.

*

Do they know where they are? I'm sure they expect Australia. So I dig out an old school atlas – it takes some rummaging, but I remember it's somewhere there in the eclectic bookshelf – and point at the big continent. They seem to recognize it, and nod, beaming.

My finger slides across the Tasman, comes to rest where we really are. I tap the page for emphasis, for confirmation. They look perplexed. The shorter man slaps the other's shoulder with the back of his hand, and snorts a quick laugh. The other giggles. The gran shushes them with a stern bent finger. One of the women picks up the boy, and squeezes him in a tight hug. He squirms, and escapes.

The short man points to an elongated island, that's changed its name twice since this atlas was printed. His finger outlines a ragged drift, off course. He stops, as if dreaming. The finger on the map page taps four times. The embarrassed navigator shrugs at me.

The girl says, *We became lost, perhaps?*

I say, *Well at least I found you.*

She translates; and the group all burst out laughing. I join in, hesitantly, after a while.

There follows much poring over the atlas, with fingers tracing possible routes.

The girl explains: *The wind. The wind it was hard. The...* She gestures to the ceiling, with an undulating hand, palm down.

The navigator carries a strange look. I'm thinking, Does his sly smile mean he meant to come this way? Maybe he knows their chances are better here?

The women and I spend most of the middle of the day washing and cleaning and making cups of tea. They drink theirs with lashings of sugar, but no milk. And cutting hair, except for the gran.

Slowly, more smiles are uncovered. They flap through old magazines. The girl breastfeeds the baby. The boy finds a bicycle in the shed, is ecstatic when I nod *It's OK*, and roams the yard. He doesn't venture up the road.

The girl's vocabulary, I find, is about fifty words. And she's used most of them already. But with eyes, and waving hands, most messages land somewhere near their mark.

She introduces everyone to me by name. I write the names down, so as not to forget, spelling phonetically. We laugh some more at my pronunciation. They get my Kate pretty easily. The little boy says *KateKateKateKate* so many times he sounds like the helicopter, but I don't mind.

I send the men fishing. I push the new rods into their hands, show them the bait – point to the headland, making a walking gesture with my fingers. And I'm hardly surprised when they re-appear in the dusk with four decent-sized snapper, two undersize, and a couple of kahawai. They look pleased, though still wary. The fish are cleaned, I note approvingly.

But would they want them for dinner, I wonder, if they've been on the ocean so long?

So dinner becomes pan-fried fish and baked beans, and stir-fried vegetables (all equally popular). It amazes me to see how much salt they put on their food; how much sugar goes in the tea.

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And now they're all sleeping. I'm sitting slumped in his chair in the lounge. The washing machine murmurs. I've treated myself to a secret drink. The merlot, I suppose it murmurs too: it says, *We'll done Kate. We'll sort tomorrow out, tomorrow.*

And I must admit, I am a bit proud of my seamanship of the day before. And my organisation of today. And happy that the house is full again. That I have a new - if complicated - family to tend to. But then I have to sleep in that room again.

And I still haven't phoned anybody.

*

The wine finished.

The big question prevails. It sits alongside me. At least I have a question for company now. And them.

The question. Unanswered.

What do I do next?

4,168 words