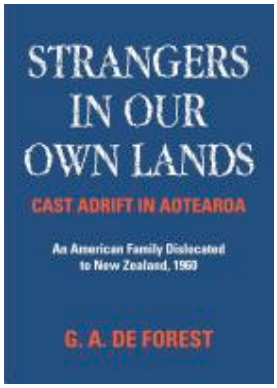
STRANGERS IN OUR OWN LANDS

CAST ADRIFT IN AOTEAROA

An American Family Dislocated to New Zealand, 1960

G. A. DE FOREST



This is a work of "Creative Nonfiction," a deeply personal account as seen through a child's eyes, and reviewed from an adult's viewpoint still often childlike in its frankness. Family events from the writer's early life are observed and related to the unfolding fate of the family caught in an existential, psychological tug-of-war. Quirks of both American and New Zealand outlooks are seen and interpreted with some humor and personal insight.

Strangers In Our Own Lands: Cast Adrift in Aotearoa

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An American Family Dislocated in Time and Space to New Zealand, 1960

A work of creative nonfiction by

G. A. De Forest

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Strangers in Our Own Lands: Cast Adrift in Aotearoa

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Foreword

Life does different things to different people. To deny that is to deny our essence as unique individuals, our very DNA changed by life experiences. To combat this truth the saying in the British Empire, where my family found itself transported, was "Pull your socks up!" — pretending everyone could have the same expectations as long as you conform to private school norms and upper-class aspirations. The modern version is the "Think positive!" catchcry, as if thinking can make something so. In optimising our choices, no one could accuse a De Forest of kneejerk positivity or conformity (though I have tried it every now and again at others' urging in case the laws of the universe had changed). The in-vogue Recovery Model of mental health is as bad, defining a recovering person as one who conforms closer and closer to the lifestyle of his next-door neighbors: a life prescribed, more like a living death, a rat on a treadmill. None of this allowed anything for our family's bohemianism infused with a strong aroma of fatalism.

It is now fifty-five years since I saw the land of my birth, Hawaii, or any part of the United States, my homeland and sentimental favorite in boyhood. Could this be the definition of growing up? — that "My country right or wrong" is no longer the issue. (And I'm straining to think of a single Kiwi I've met in, say, the last thirty years who would prefer to see a fair, losing contest rather than a

victory gained by cheating.) In 1976 and in 1988 my sisters in turn made pilgrimages to their home state, California. One went with her husband in hopes of resettling there, but came back unable to find much of anything that suited. The other, reunited with her first husband after twenty years, went for a catch-up with relatives and look-around. Neither went a second time. None of us is completely at home in either of "our countries".

This is the story of a mother and children uprooted at a crucial stage of development and transplanted in hope of flourishing in haphazard new conditions; often barren soil, under a weak sunlight in a land where children thrived or wilted in the shade. Our lives turned on one event and one decision forced from that event. From leaving America to travel back in place and time to my mother's homeland, New Zealand, an island community (and the most remote one in the world from another landmass) with the pros and cons that entails, our lives seemed to take on a downward cast that we as individuals never fully recovered from.

A pedant wedded to scientific method will object to the whole foundation of this book, shrug and say there is no control group to compare us to through such a longitudinal "study". But of course he has no insight of his own and no intuition for seeing these things, and so must rely on dry figures to tell him what's what. After double-blind research and peer review he still doesn't *know*, in his guts, what he is seeing right before his eyes. Neither am I a journalist bound by an "objective" search for dry facts in

pretence of giving each side equal weight. Readers that disbelieve their own senses in human matters are not my audience.

Looking back, it is no exaggeration to say my mother's long, slow death began with leaving her adopted country and arriving back in her country of birth. The fact that her spirit survived almost whole until near the end is the human miracle bringing this book together. Her children too, divorced from our birthright and introduced to our destiny, fatally denting our spirits, saw confidence withering as we watched ourselves going under.

Preface

Gently rolling slopes top low bluffs on the shore at Point Chevalier. I see this arm of the harbor called Waitemata (Shimmering Water) as one of the truly special suburban settings of the land we settled, five kilometres from Auckland c.b.d. ("Tamaki Makaurau" as the isthmus is called from recreated native memory). The volcano Rangitoto, majestically symmetrical in profile, sits at the harbor mouth, quiet now for a few hundred years, waiting for a sign from active cones further south to set off fifty or sixty more lying dormant across Auckland.

On bright days the playground throngs with family groups from all cultures and club outings of every persuasion. A maze of stone-masoned paths lead down on one side to a popular beach (dredged and sand laid years ago to keep it so) and on the exposed other, rocky tidal pools smoothed by eons of lapping waves. Here my mother's and our generation were taught about marine life by teachers keen on pulsing anemones and moribund gastropods alike.

But it was late on an unseasonally storming evening that I made my way unsurely across the level but pitted park, unrecognisable this night as the welcoming sports and bbq mecca, through driving sheets of rain and swirling winds pummeling my face and body. Descending to those tidal pools, winding steps led onto a ledge made treacherous by slimy marine growth that might send you

into a pratfall whipping your feet out from under and cracking your skull. The rising tide washed over it in sweeps, but I was intent, unmindful of any terminal rogue wave.

Already memorializing my mother the best way I knew how in a book, it was early summer months later that I came to deposit her ashes at her favorite spot in the world, the place where she would best like to “rest”; along with those of her beloved miniature dachshund saved from years before for this, to mingle for eternity. As I opened the first box some portion of Poco's remains settled on the waves while the rest blew back in my face in his always playful way, making seeing a job of concentration. On carefully gapping the second box open there descended a strange stillness, allowing a good handful of ashes to drop on the water. Then, the remainder took off straight away from me, as if carried on a high-speed conveyor, towards the harbor bridge and lit by diffused moonlight so that I could see it shoot along on a course it seemed to know.

I fancied when I thought about it later that her spirit had directed the ashes on their own special beam of light on a straight path to Spirits Bay at the northernmost point of “Te Ika a Maui” (The Fish of Maui = The North Island), where according to Maori legend the spirits of the dead leave this land to return to “Hawaiki”, the mythical Polynesian homeland. I cannot confirm a "spiritual" nature for any phenomena around my mother’s passing. At times, I have heard utterances that might or might not be hers —

in my house, where she once lived. But what better way to say goodbye than to set off on her flight on the wind to her final home?

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1. Finding Roots

The strongest strand that binds people is blood, tugging on the soul and genetic memory like no other. From the time the descendant of "The Mother of Modern Humans" (*Homo sapiens sapiens*) stepped out of Africa a hundred thousand years ago already a hundred thousand years old, it took halfway along that future timeline to reach the "New World" of Australia. Groups evolved by kinship separated from those who looked or behaved slightly differently. We came to define ourselves in narrow geocultural groups, and the centrality of family has been a constant in our daily lives.

Ethnic and cultural conflict fueled by prejudice hundreds and thousands of years old goes on to this day among those who keep to their "own kind" in every country on every continent. They might react in horror to my family made up of Irish, English, French, Australian, Cherokee, Choctaw and Maori strains. Our white forebears coming to America and the South Pacific did not stand separate and "pure" but assimilated into native populations on new continents.

The De Forests early in the 20th Century settled in California, having three centuries before come out of France via the port of La Rochelle, Huguenots fleeing massacres by the Catholic majority. Our Native American connection added along the way was just a rumor for a very long time, a party teaser and a daring half-joke pulled

out of the hat every now and then for entertainment value in racy company. If anyone seriously doubted such a playful suggestion of Native American blood, as my mother did when she first met the family — her new husband hadn't mentioned it — the fact was dismissed with an enigmatic half-smile. In the new liberal Hollywood of the 1960s it was *chic* for celebrities to claim descent from the Cherokee Nation — one of the admired Five Civilized Tribes of the southeast United States — though almost up to that time for many at home and around the world "Injuns" as a whole were still thought untrustworthy within scalping distance, and it was edgy to admit you were part "wild heathen".

America was so casual about roots, believing like Henry Ford the past was disposable, even reinventing themselves custom made for a better life. While America and Australia underwent virulent forms of "ethnic cleansing", *Aotearoa*/New Zealand too went through a century of disowning its indigenous people, the *Maori*. My mother's mother — our Maori grandmother — traced back our line through the traditional generations since arriving in the seven original canoes from the ancestral land of "Hawaiki" according to oral history. This meant little to us at the time, as *maoritanga* had been subdued in her and others of her race by government policy. Beatings for uttering their own language in public were the norm. Customs were removed from everyday life, to rural areas; rarely seen in cities and even special occasions never

imposed on white eyes, reduced to tourist level demonstrations for public occasions. When we arrived *maoritanga* had not long hove into fashion, officially — a native culture uncovered from under civilization's figleaf — though the *Pakeha* as a mass took another two generations to assume a pose of liberalism to actual civil rights, much like the United States.

Our first European link in these islands came in one Mulroy, likely arising in County Mayo or Donegal, Ireland, coming around 1830 via New South Wales colony, Australia — either as a free man or as a freed man from penal servitude at Sydney. He mated with Huhana (Susan), a *wahine* of Te Atiawa tribe and was maybe one of a group driven to Cook Strait from Taranaki by the powerful, all-conquering war leader Te Rauparaha, called "the Napoleon of the South Seas". Taking on whaling as subsistence, they lived at Picton, the first "port" in the South Island: a collection of Maori huts at the end of that decade (and well beyond) when namesake son of English reformer Edward Gibbon Wakefield landed to explore wholesale purchases in "Maoriland", as these islands were known. Here either side of the Strait between the two main islands were sited mixed-culture enterprises engaged in the gruesome business of "shore whaling" — harpooning baby whales to entrap the mother — with Portuguese and Dutch stations opposite each other, employing many Fijians, an American site on Kapiti Island with a sole black man, and an

Aborigine involved where the Mulroys were at Te Awaiti (called "Tar-white" by English speakers). Grandiose schemes saw the so-called Founding Families of Wellington society reproducing Britain-in-the-South-Seas, arriving as a microcosm on The First Ships according to history as rewritten: again, like the myth of North America.

As reported by insightful German ethnographer Ernst Dieffenbach on board with Wakefield, children of mixed race were born under protection of various tribes, including Mere (Mary), to be our matriarch called Granny Fraser from a second marriage. To stave off starvation in a hunting and gathering existence, Mulroy relied on Maori help, and must have thanked God for their mercy rather than being sustenance in the cannibal way; enslaved as a beast of burden and guest of honor as a barbecue-on-the-hoof if needs be, as the custom was. But by the 1860s Europeans dominated, and native ways were very much a social disadvantage till the mid 20th Century.

Granny Fraser was a widowed storekeeper in the Marlborough Sounds' growing town of Blenheim when she sued her son's employer, a prosperous farmer who cheated Arthur, fifteen, out of wages and a horse. I can see her dark face blanching in court when the magistrate ridicules her case, awards a pittance and deducts two thirds of it in costs; an injustice that turned Arthur, our great-grandfather, to juvenile offending. The landed gentry had most rights, and women — "half-caste" women especially — barely any. Votes for women three years later (1893), for which New

Zealand is historically renowned, was no consolation: It was for landowning women only, and Granny's shares in her tribal Maori land didn't count, a technicality for which a negligible, tiny rent was paid for its use by *pakeha* farmers who got wealthy. The story passed down that Granny was cheated out of a commercial plot on the main street of Wellington stands as a family legend. One thing she was cheated out of, towards the end of her life, was ownership of her Auckland house by a rental agent who put her mortgage money on horses instead.

A second-class citizen in her own land, yet she excelled as owner of a commercial arts trust selling her own craft goods. Turning away from the town and to her own people, she upped stakes for the thriving tourist resort of Rotorua — the lakeland of the famous Pink & White Terraces of Mt Tarawera recently buried in a disastrous eruption — and served as a country nurse; then managed a hotel; and later at Auckland's rail terminus, where Maoris gathered bowed low by *pakeha* diseases and social attrition. Numbering just forty thousand scattered cross-country at the turn of the century, they were believed to be a dying race.

Finding herself close to the centre of historic political events in the Grey Lynn melting pot, post World War I Granny Fraser's cousin and confidant Sir Maui Pomare was Minister of Health in New Zealand's government; and in the family by marriage was Sir Peter Buck (Te Rangi Hiroa), the first Maori physician and to be a celebrated

ethnographer on Polynesia teaching at the University of Hawaii: giants of Maoridom who formed a leadership triumvirate (with Sir Apirana Ngata) to foment a peaceful cultural revolution raising the sights of Maori from a doomed people into a pillar of a forward-thinking country.

2. Lonesome Bridges Falling Down

In a family pulled by divergent cultures and the tug of survival economics, Granny Fraser was the glue that held generations together. Granddaughter Phyl lost her mother (of Irish clan Sisk) — gone back to her family to die of cancer in Goulburn, Australia — and was raised by Granny from age ten. Father Arthur was an itinerant stonemason still in the Bay of Plenty region while the family resettled without him around Surrey Crescent, Grey Lynn, the heart of Auckland's working class district at that time and today part of an inner suburbia abounding in bohemians, transients, supported homes, people living rough and eccentrics of all classes.

Just as Mulroy had woven himself into the fabric of Aotearoa, a new immigrant Irishman paired with a modern *wahine* and so ensured the family stayed on the outer. Mick Regan came into Phyl's life. An amiable man of restrained power from County Carlow, he was banned from the Emerald Isle by the new government friendly to Britain, for sabotage: blowing up a local stone bridge aided by his brother in the Civil War (1922). A month before the stock market collapse triggering the Great Depression to last a decade worldwide, Phyl's first born, Katy, was a babe in arms blessed by the family's fading guiding spirit, Granny on her deathbed. Compared to the passing of Katy's great-grandmother the Wall Street Crash passed as nothing.

Granny Fraser embodied family durability and without her it cracked.

Phyl was hardly recognisable as Maori in the way she styled herself. A city dweller and movie-goer — an aspiring socialite — she looked to Hollywood for her fashions and took advantage of her 'exotic' looks in dressing to the nines as a screen star opulent and self-dramatising, in the way of Dolores Del Rio or Lupe Velez of similar coloring and fiery temperament; striving to be taken seriously in one of those silly Betty Boop skull caps, with the warped leading edge draped rakishly over one eye. The contrast could hardly have been greater with sister Rene, two years younger: right into Depression mode and later wartime austerity, a stalwart supporter of the rising Labour Party and a down-to-earth factory manager; a hair-in-a-bun wowser descended from the old "bluestockings", and marrying late, no children.

Pressure mounted on Phyl, who married at the required age and produced kids at two-year intervals. Little Katy seemed fine, but then Paddy was afflicted by eczema and asthma; and Danny blighted at birth by brain tumors requiring radical surgery in infancy — leaving him with one eye and a cruelly altered appearance. Danny would have an eventful life. When he died, having led a full life including several cosmetic surgeries to improve his looks, he was still so visually disagreeable to those who thought themselves perfect specimens that the undertakers would not allow an open casket for viewing (and chatting) in the

Maori way, despite our wishes — having asked us if he'd been in a horrendous accident and obviously nonplussed at his irreparability. Hardship never daunted our mother, who grew into a delightful dreamer recalling eating fried bread and dripping as a highlight. She might have succumbed early if not for devoted surrogate grandparents the Cassidys, of Mick's circle of Auckland Irish.

For some few weeks as Phyl nursed newborn Danny, Katy, not yet five, was cared for at an orphanage built by Irish laborers for the same French Catholic priest who had married Mulroy with Huhana eighty years before at the old Maori settlement far to the south (in their poverty substituting a curtain ring where the gold band should have been to solemnise the occasion). It says something about the upheaval at home that when it came time Katy had to be physically dragged from this institution's relative calm and nurturing ways. She experienced a too-short, teasing taste of what it was to be allowed to act as a child. From now on she would grab the moments where she could, even into old age.

For want of a Catholic school, the young family resettled at the poorer, bottom end of desirable Remuera across town. The nuns commanded seven-year-old Katy to run errands for top-dwellers including Auckland's captains of industry. Mick, a well-built laborer — "a Bull Irishman", she liked to call him — in lieu of fees grubbed out the foundations for and laid the surface of the school's tennis courts when he wasn't on relief work: excavating the

motorway south along the ancient Maori track out of Tamaki Makaurau. As if retelling of visitations to a fairy grotto, Katy and Danny later sharing good times together reminisced in detail on the resplendent home of two eccentric middle-aged sisters sited towards the top of the street, richly furnished in a grand style already antique, featuring wall drapes lined with glittering brocade.

Early September 1939, and the family's first evening in a new home back across town to what were then Auckland's far western suburbs was interrupted by the voice of working class savior Mickey Savage, the prime minister delivering his Band of Brothers speech — "Where Britain goes we go" — cutting into the kids' serials on the radio to declare war on Germany. New Zealand sent its crack forces off to North Africa to defend the Mother Country while anxious Kiwis at the bottom of the South Pacific watched the bombing of Pearl Harbor and then Darwin and the Fall of Singapore with mounting fear. Long after the enemy advance was first stymied at the Battle of the Coral Sea (June 1942), Phyl kept a loaded Luger pistol — a battle trophy from the Afrika Korps passed on by a Kiwi serviceman — in the wardrobe ready to perform her duty by her children, saving a bullet for herself, should the Japanese follow up their reconnaissance flights over Auckland and land an occupying force. The invading swarms showed through a succession of archipelagoes they could take this tidal, unnavigable neck of the harbor easy as an afternoon picnic, and Grandma expected them to

come calling anytime. She pictured Bushido warriors of the Empire of Japan lopping heads off at whim with Samurai swords, playing pin the head on the p.o.w., saving chronically sick children like Paddy and Danny for bayonet practice as they had in Shanghai, the Rape of Nanking and elsewhere — the coveted record being five civilians lined up and disembowelled in one stroke of the blade in casual recreation; Phyl and Katy condemned to be "comfort women". These were no lurid imaginings but a direct extrapolation of what had gone on already for a full decade through Manchuria, China and Southeast Asia and now continued in The Philippines and Indonesia down to New Guinea.

In what would seem to Katy like idyllic interludes, neighbors wandered from the verdant grounds of what was, in the vernacular, "the Avondale Looneybin". In what might have been a scene from *Alice in Wonderland*, one of the regulars would offer her strawberries he thought he carried in his upturned hat. Arousing her imagination, she obliged, sought out the ripest one, took a bite and, appreciating its flavor, thanked the man, who walked on.

Phyl often fled the family home with drinking buddies to her favored pub uptown, or down country on a jaunt for days on end. Arriving GIs, camping around Auckland in their tens of thousands and eager for female company, were another diversion. From ten, her daughter was cornered into a motherly role, watching over brothers and preparing the evening meal: the one meat-and-veg dish she mastered

until Mick, no doubt proud of her efforts thus far, quietly urged her to try something else — anything else. She buried herself in books as her own escape, winning a prize in Shakespeare studies; rousing herself to take Danny to Saturday matinées of cowboys and Indians or cops-and-robbers at the cinema a short walk up the main road at Point Chevalier. She would answer for Paddy and Danny when their mother got back to town. A constant task was to try to keep Danny off the rugby field at school — Kids would race to her and inform on him back playing, knowing that one knock to his head could easily be the end of him. Another time she had to run for help when he stuck fast in the mudflats with the tide incoming. She wasn't able to help Paddy when, craving salt, he overloaded from the "Mr Chips" truck trawling the streets and the ambulance came for him, prompting her brother to train as a junior ambulance volunteer.

The mother dished out beatings to her daughter, as many people told themselves, when needed; actually whenever she got over-anxious and lost her temper. A deliberate scuffing of Katy's shiny new shoes by a girl gang, and Phyl ordered her to get them one by one. It was done, ending in Katy's punishment by the convent authorities but Phyl's exoneration on meeting the fathers and sisters over a calming cup of tea. Both sides manoeuvred to neutral corners after invoking the presence of "Jesus, Mary & Joseph."

A happy recollection of times with her mother was the festive intertribal *waka* (canoe) races on the Waikato River down country hosted by revered Turangawaewae Marae at the small township of Ngaruawahia. Whether Katy was taken away into some other world in retelling the memory of it, I don't know, but — normally unmoved by Maori myths — she told of witnessing a *taniwha* (demon) swimming there. She knew it wasn't an ordinary log because floating upstream, against the current. More often, in unhappy times, Phyl took to her daughter with a hairbrush, once flailing in a flurry that kept up until Mick stepped in. At the same time she took a proprietary attitude to her welfare. At a house party young Katy asked for a drink of water. The party animal who filled the order, passed on second-hand, assumed this was a weak joke and delivered a glass of pure gin. It was passed to Katy, who thirstily drank down enough to start her reeling and then collapsed on the floor. Only a pleading, belly-up apology to Phyl saved the man from more than a verbal thrashing. Party hijinks were a necessity for Phyl — as the brighter-spirited Irish-Maori way is, raising any occasion as an excuse for a well-lubricated hooley with a good singsong. One of her inseparable pals was a demonstrative woman around the same age, whose friendly arm around Phyl's shoulder was welcome until one day a mate whispered in her ear what the expectations were: affection-plus. Disbelieving, Phyl returned to the party to confront the woman and was fast fired to an implacable fury over being

used, driving the would-be seducer from the house and raining blows on her across the front yard.

Taking a summer job at thirteen and a half as a salesgirl in the city, Katy was told by her mother when it was time to return to school that she'd finished her education and could keep adding her few shillings weekly pay — irrelevant to the outcome — to the family income. In what passed for a relationship, mother and daughter might glimpse each other as Phyl frequented the Rio Nightclub downstairs from the shop. That Xmas, Katy ended up under Rene's eagle-eyed supervision at the Klippel Brothers clothing factory. Phyl crossed paths with many interesting characters and had a way of making fast friends of those at loose ends. They included a student called "George" who happened to be crown prince of Tonga, later massively built King Tupou IV — a chip off the old block of imposing but well loved Queen Salote, all six-feet-three of her. Mum made him, halfway through the war, her twenty-four-year-old minister of education, then of health, on a fast track to prime minister of the tiny island nation at thirty. And there was American gadfly George (Clark) Titman, decades later a constant irritant as an ultra-conservative commentator over Auckland's talk-back radio. In the early war years each came home for the traditional Irish open house.

Still, Katy might have been daydreaming of sweet escape to a life of her own when, just short of fifteen and lunching with workmates in the central city's picturesque

garden of Albert Park, she met Bud De Forest — a year in the service and turning nineteen — off navy transport ship USS *Mintaka* out of San Diego. From what she described in naughty old age as "a pickup", in a time when people didn't wait for their lives to happen and in the specially quickened atmosphere of wartime, she dated him that evening, Chinese dinner and a movie. Rene reported her to Phyl for not returning to work, concerned not only about her very young niece but her production line for the war effort. But instead of punishing, now Phyl defended her, felt justified in her own lifestyle, maybe even proud that her overly responsible daughter was finally kicking up her heels — until she found out Katy had taken up with an American sailor. Then Phyl butchered her youthful beauty by hacking Katy's hair to rat-tails, as righteous Irishwomen were shown to do to *Ryan's Daughter* for an affair with a British, enemy officer; and as staunch Parisiennes were about to do on liberation to countrywomen who had fraternized with the Nazis. This was regardless of Phyl herself about to do the dirty on her countrymen and elope to the States with a well-set-up Wisconsin farmer's son, a Sgt Karl Kubont known in family legend, before backing out in fear of the unknown that was the big wide world out there. The second date Katy and Bud had arranged would have to await a fate allowing them ever to meet again after the sailor's ship left port. For now, run down with anaemia and hormones running wild, Katy once again took refuge, in a country home referred by her doctor.

Like many Catholic girls, not only those abused, Katy mused over taking vows to be a nun, reinforced by idealised movies *Song of Bernadette*, *Going My Way*, *The Bells of St Mary's*. In contrast to a proposed sacred marriage to God, she gave the impression of being able to take or leave guys, something of a playful tomboy. In putting them off, she and her workmates' line was, "No thanks, my week for girls" — a highly risqué comeback for what is now mistakenly referred to as a very unsophisticated time. In married life she was unalloyed wholesome to the core, and stayed devoted to her marriage. It was only much later our mother took quiet satisfaction in telling us of one episode when one acceptable suitor had to call himself off from a pash-up on the couch when he became too aroused.

In youth there was no denying her sensuous, romantic nature. She did the unexpected and took up correspondence with the Yank. Stood up on that second date, he'd persisted through the reversals of love and war, and left a gift for her at the Central Post Office, addressed hopefully: Kathleen Regan, Auckland. It had taken three years to find her. Physically blooming and of unspoilt spirit, Katy was never short of male attention but the romance of this connection across the seas struck her. Even after this time — and it would be nearly five years between meetings — Bud left an impression. Lack of knowledge about him was swept away by the self-assurance that Yanks, especially this one, "know how to treat a woman." Phyl forbade it. Mick,

siding with his daughter's searching spirit and probably reasoning that her years of deprivation had to have some payoff, signed permission for her to go to San Diego.

3. Going “Home”

When little Katy was eight, pioneering aviatrix Amelia Earhart disappeared on her flight into Micronesia. At nineteen, one slim decade of technological advance on, grown-up *Kay* boarded a commercial propeller plane for this same region of Oceania, pinpointing and landing on tiny remote Canton Island in the Phoenix group (now Kiribati) to refuel. This was a small hurdle, as she saw it, to romance and a new life. Democrat president Harry Truman, having served almost all of the deceased Roosevelt’s fourth term, was being narrowly elected that month on a platform of more of the New Deal of a living wage and greater equality — but accommodating too of reactionary hawks: those raising an alarm about new enemies everywhere *inside* America. Her mother did her best to continue leveling Kay from across the ocean, getting rid of her daughter’s heirloom jewelry and a painstakingly collected treasure of leather-bound literature — instead of sending it on as a goodwill care package when requested; maybe the one possession Kay could have shown her new family with pride, and to say who she was.

Kay was everything a bridezilla wasn’t: enduring, patient, appreciative of help, “thankful for small mercies” every day. She wanted her special day but already had her sleeves rolled up for all the hard work of marriage the day after; unlike today’s brides held up as role models on tv, who only stir themselves from a life of idle self-

centredness to punch out their loved one. Though susceptible to the sentimental stories depicted in Hollywood schmaltz, she was far from star struck and only ever, under pressure, named one movie star she thought was handsome: Jeff Chandler, a towering Jewish hunk of an actor, prematurely grey, who specialised in Apache chiefs and had the on-screen animal magnetism to match. Arm-twisted to name a second choice — in contrast to her mother, who into old age could come across like a connoisseur of fine horse flesh in enumerating the features of any handsome man or otherwise who caught her eye — she usually picked equally tan, granite-jawed Gregory Peck, Mediterranean type two. But she was happiest in real life with Bud, who in the first years of their marriage looked like babyfaced teen idol Fabian of *American Bandstand*; though he aged fast to resemble more one Humphrey DeForest Bogart. She was sure of this particular Yank early on, shown by Louiseanne being born, arguably, before her time (Kay was always ready with the cover story that Lou was six weeks premature, preempting anyone tempted to do the arithmetic).

So it should have been no big deal stumbling on the second-stringer in his hometown, La Jolla. The young in-law-to-be showing her around bridal shops dug her in the ribs after they exited one.

"Didn't you see who was in there?"

"Who?"

"Standing right next to you!"

"No..."

"Gregory Peck!"

When it came to the crunch, Kay was not only a girl from the sticks, but a girl from the sticks on the dark side of the planet. She might just indulge herself with one little peek at the star of inspirational *Keys to the Kingdom* four years before. She opened the door and peered round . . . There he was, now thirty-two and at his physical and box-office peak, a long streak and as handsome as they come — gazing right back and winking, no doubt charmed by her cute foreign accent. Cue a Kay "beet red" moment, blushing from the neck up.

Daily life brought a crash course in culture shock, but she found her new world — most of all a satisfying personal life for the first time — to be a quantum improvement, and adapted eagerly. Bud had a quirky sense of humor, like her read books for fun — only, his were advanced mathematics. And, carrying on with their mutual fantasy from where they left off in Auckland, he impressed his bride all the more with his courtliness: the opposite of what she pegged the New York type of Yank, brash and full of himself, how she forever saw Bud's older brother, Orrin. But the kid brother couldn't resist poking fun at cherished Kiwi cuisine. Used to good meals aboard the *Mintaka* — "Nothing's too good for our boys!" — he told Kay of foot-slogging GIs on furlough from the front invited to Kiwi homes, looking forward to a home-cooked meal as a break from their battlefront rations — bullybeef

on hardtack, the famous "shit on a brick" — only to be offered more of the same: watery hamburger stew on toast. At a premarital dental check — maybe under typically American precaution of "Buyer beware", checking out the merchandise, not just on a prospective cayuse — Kay had another reality check. The dentist, shocked, called in his colleague from the next surgery to witness this curiosity performed by South Seas professionals. Kay had had teeth extracted for false ones — no exception here as at the end of the Fifties still two thirds of American adults by age thirty-five would require some — but under Kiwi "She'll be right"-ism, for every insertion an abscess infection festered.

Like most veterans of the wholesale slaughter of battle, Bud spoke little to nothing of it. He let slip to Kay the memory of a movie night in the Solomons, but — in the manly mode of the day, no softy — the lasting effect on him was up to her to divine. The crew went over to their sister ship moored alongside for a rousing teetotal reunion (no daily tot of rum in this man's navy unlike the jolly, rosy-cheeked Jack Tars of the Brit marine). Alerted by an air raid siren, no sooner were they back aboard the *Mintaka* than their hosts were blown to bits by a bomb direct down the funnel. I'm betting the aftermath from being showered by pieces of his comrades and having to clean up and swab the deck as if they were refuse garbage never left him: with other untold experiences, depressing enough to warrant electro-shock therapy after the war, given that many tender

souls never recovered from battle and were left gibbering and with convulsing body parts — fit only for observation and control for what was optimistically called the rest of their 'life'. Another veteran they met more willing to tell his personal story had survived a Japanese p.o.w. camp, watching friends killed slowly, underfed, overworked, or otherwise tortured as an example of warrior superiority. One guard commander, to pass the time on slow days, repeatedly ordered this GI dragged from the sick tent over to the "dead pile" about to be buried. Not near enough death to suit, he was left to crawl back again and again to rejoin the barely living. He never succumbed in physical form but, haunted and in a smouldering rage the rest of his life, carried a loaded handgun on him in case he ever ran across this officer come to this land so forgiving of its enemies from World War II.

Immediately after the war, coopted in stages from his original Coast Guard enlistment, Bud went to train in Naval Intelligence; then transferred to the Air Force Reserve, and on outbreak of the Korean War was recalled as a tech sergeant. Kay had Louiseanne, herded by Laddie from crawling out of bounds off the living room rug, and Laurette on the way. They were posted to Springfield, Massachusetts, stoking Maw's entranced reminiscences on New England's changing of seasons in contrast to perpetually sunny southern California, and burnished, warm colors . . . nature's greens in shades to blue, browns, reds, russets; then too quickly to Washington DC, entailing

FBI screening of Bud's relatives and associates. His sensitive duty in the capital was analyzing the speeches of prominent public figures — a patriotic activity seen as overbearing to the point of paranoid even then by civil liberties advocates, though remarkably small-time compared to the free-for-all mass surveillance conducted by governments today around the world on their own citizens. Kay said one of his 'clients' was a prominent cleric and leader of national opinion, given no further information: so, she deduced, either the ultra-popular televangelist Bishop Fulton Sheen, close to a Catholic saint; or, she thought likely — and probably, under a Democrat government — Cardinal Spellman, famous as a highly influential Catholic archconservative pushing McCarthyism, the reactionary radicalism led by Senator "Tailgunner" Joe, J Edgar Hoover, Richard Nixon, Ronald Reagan, and Generals Edwin Walker and Curtis LeMay and others that found a populist following as anti-communist superpatriots and dominated opinion of what a good American was and wasn't. Riding a bus a few years before the Rosa Parks incident, Kay was given a lesson in racial innocence and tolerance both. Laurie was barely toddling but Louiseanne, nearly three, ventured to stand up on the seat to offer at the top of her lungs, "Oh Mommy, look at that man's dirty face!" The black man just smiled, exercising a lifetime of patience, and Kay's skin tone spread that beet red . . .

The South, still stubbornly Rebel Country, began a footstep in any direction out of the nation's capital into Maryland, lying entirely below the Mason-Dixon Line that once defined it as a slave state. To scout out their next assigned base and see the Deep South of the onetime Confederacy, Bud & Kay declined an Air Force flight and drove their big old Hudson (see *Driving Miss Daisy*) the 1,800 miles to Pasadena, Texas, an oil town on Galveston Bay since engulfed by Houston. This was early in the northern spring of 1953, just starting the complacent Eisenhower era, three years before the first interstate freeway and, a little scarily, before racial desegregation was federally enforced. Insular, diehard Southerners, never quite over the Civil War and still championing states' rights in its most virulent form, were guarded against latter day carpetbaggers and know-it-all Bluebellies of all descriptions telling them "how to live". And some were quick on the draw enforcing dominion over their tiny corner of dirt to the death. Lynchings, though down to two or three a year as a national total, were still a cherished calling of the KKK, and were not unknown for (white) transgressors of local taboos.

Negotiating stately Virginia, backwood Kentucky and Tennessee, Alabama and Mississippi without incident, in rural Louisiana they stopped at a backwater diner just after dark. On entering they saw a scattering of patrons seated, and picked a table to settle. Between getting the kids seated and mulling over the menu the waitress walked over

looking acutely embarrassed — at having to refuse them that legendary Southern hospitality: "White folks" ate round the other side of the building. Tired as they were, with hungry infants to face, there was no question of giving in to small-minded parochialism (still ruling most of the world as I write) and they drove to the next community to eat at a drive-in movie where they couldn't be told whom to associate with and who not.

Kay must have known from Phyl, hundred percent Maori from Granny Fraser when the mood took her, of so-called hospitality establishments in the Forties or Fifties where the light of *aroha* — true friendliness —never shone, as close as a two-hour drive from Auckland, bragging of a color bar that poured salt into a gaping wound, on signs at the lintel or above the bar, and rubbed it in reducing the founders of this nation to subhuman: "No Dogs or Maoris!" — and bottom billing at that.

And it was no shock to learn that individuals in "The Great State of Texas" were not above enforcing white rule under their own dimmed lights. It was rammed home with no beg-pardon-ma'am when on a services picnic in a national park outside town, the officer in charge ordered a dignified retreat back to the base: The park rangers objected to the presence of one of the wives, a young Japanese war bride. The entire party got up and left rather than have one of their number excluded.

There was less than nothing holding Bud & Kay here given a choice. Within a few months, after the Korea

ceasefire, when offered options of the frigid Aleutian Islands off Alaska and the Mosquito Coast of the US-administered Panama Canal Zone, the De Forests chose paradise: Hickam AFB, Oahu. Amid the ongoing strange and wonderful turns of a service family's life, came I.

* * *

Kay was never happier than when her growing family lived in Hawaii, though her moral barometer — still operating when she returned to New Zealand — tended to keep the Aloha spirit at arm's length as something of a tourist gimmick. Still petite herself, she marveled at exquisitely formed, delicate and graceful women of mixed Oriental and Island races. The norm in this multicultural setting was sometimes wary interaction between acquisitive American "Mainlanders" (*Haole*), whose big corporations largely owned the islands, and the dispossessed native Hawaiians; and added in, communities of Japanese, Chinese and Portuguese dominating various business sectors/ occupations . . . something like the casual but restricted mixing of Fiji between natives, Indians and lesser minorities, where underneath it all the British were still colonial master.

The tropical weather was not sweltering, but eased by the trade winds. Nor was it nonstop sunshine. Much of the time the sky glowered with dark clouds looking as if it was about to storm any minute. When it did rain, Kay told me, torrents pelted straight down for five or ten minutes, then

stopped dead: the opposite of our ancestral bogs astride the Irish Sea, where out of lowing skies it just drizzles a lot, then drizzles some more. However paradisical, something in the atmosphere of the land of my birth didn't suit me and I contracted infantile bronchial pneumonia, with lasting after-effects. Kay and Bud loved the drive up around the Palé, stopping often to take snapshots for the album. I sensed from the way she told her stories of Hawaii that here in these Islands she felt a part of things. Something a bit memorable was appearing on local television as part of a hula class that amounted to "human interest" in the news.

The three years here in the islands of what amounted to Captain Cook's cremation — his murder, carving and devouring, overcooking down to ashy remains — was the family's longest stay anywhere. It seemed the US Air Force wanted its men to feel wanted, everywhere all at once. A constant state of military readiness was the rule, The States having upped its game as a reaction to the bombing of Pearl Harbor, and now at the height of the Cold War assuming a role as policeman of the world. Bud might have joined the navy to "see the sea" as the song said. The result was that Louiseanne and Laurette, who hadn't bought into the cut-rate travel plan, saw rapid changes of scenery from one side of the continent to the other and now halfway to the next, all in two years. At least one change of address was involved in each posting, shifting on or off base for 'convenience': moving house a dozen times in the first six or seven years of their lives, a habit until we

reached safe haven at Te Atatu and attached ourselves like limpets. Maturing into wanting to form friendships, rents appeared in personal lives taking toll on psyches. Louiseanne would grow standoffish, wary of forging new bonds and resorting to changing them often even when we finally did settle. Laurette wore a happy-go-lucky face as if unaffected, but ever alert to *the one* to latch on to. We left the Islands, left to salve lingering longings via detective series *Hawaiian Eye* reconstructing the Honolulu milieu in the Burbank studios of Warner Bros: only in America . . .

Our new home — Omaha, Nebraska — was at the very centre of the USA, geographically, peripheral in every other way. Biggest city of the Great Plains, it was famous for its small-town reticence and stolid, leveling attitude to outsiders. Prairie people wore a reputation for being wary of strangers and emotionally flat; and this was the capital of comatose, striving to make its citizens as plain and featureless as its landscape. An old saying in show business was about the three barren times seasoned performers faced: "Lent, Xmas week — and Omaha", whose natives sat on their hands rather than encouraged those who showed off on stage or any sphere of life. No wonder Kay, our *Maw* as I came to call her, felt at home here, something eerily familiar about the essence of the people that probably she couldn't quite put her finger on; along with the love affair with intensive livestock farming and its rural water pollution. Omaha and its hinterland (if a hinterland itself can have one) spawned down-to-earth types, hall-of-

fame sportsmen, makeshift president Gerald Ford, his name a byword for spectacularly dumb ordinariness, and the self-styled homespun good ol' boy who happens to be a celebrity billionaire, Warren Buffett. A striking anomaly was in producing three of the greatest screen actors of the mid 20th Century: Henry Fonda, Montgomery Clift, Marlon Brando; more Hollywood luminaries in Fred Astaire, Robert Taylor, Dorothy McGuire, who similarly couldn't wait to leave home for some drama. Strangely but not surprisingly, a city then ninety-nine percent white spawned black revolutionary Malcolm X, also driven to move on to a more receptive audience in his short life. For we three kids, living here should have given us a foretaste and prepared us for our lives. Maw should have recognized it as a warning shot of the dangers of a past revisited.

At Strategic Air Command HQ outside Omaha it must have crossed Kay's mind that of the entire world we were the number one strategic target for a Soviet nuclear attack. At least, that was the fear (turning out to have been a real one seen in the wake of subsequent revelations) causing families across America to dig so-called survival shelters in their backyards. Extremes of weather didn't worry her either, or an unrelenting flat terrain or endless cornfields bringing plagues of locusts crunching underfoot on the streets. Of twisters, she liked to tell of the one that wreaked havoc all across town before tiptoeing harmlessly up the middle, the length, of our street and then continued its reign of terror.

4. Bringing Up Baby Boomers

It was here though that Kay felt her children in most peril. Playing with the Lithuanian sisters next door, all four girls, aged seven and eight, went for a walk to see the new kittens at Uncle Buskus's place, a twenty-mile round trip via narrow railway bridges creating narrow escapes from speeding trains and brushing with untold, unseen hazards. Louiseanne came home with Fluffy, her first cat against whom all later comers were measured. The police greeted them, and Maw, out of her mind with worry, for once in her life let wail with wallops on backsides. It was a quarter-century later that our district, Bellevue, had its own serial murderer preying on children, a serviceman at Bud's base, Offutt. But right then, late January 1958, something unprecedented playing out had families bolting doors for the first time and praying for deliverance: the needless slaughter of eleven defenceless people in a cross-country-murder-spree-by-teen-couple that started less than an hour's drive from our place and headed across Nebraska and beyond — later popularised by the Oliver Stone-Quentin Tarantino flick *Natural Born Killers*.

Maw never hit any of us again. She'd started with "Wait till your father gets home!" She got Bud to bluff, walking like a gunslinger (rather the rolling gait of sea legs) and undoing his belt, but the girls eventually pegged him as a softy. So she picked up a line of end-of-tether threats from gangster flicks at drive-ins: "Make it snappy!"

. . . "I'll knock you into the middle of next week!" . . . "I'll slap you silly!" — a Humphrey Bogart classic, if conjuring an image a little too gruesome in reality. According to Bud's family circle in the Fifties, the worst thing you could say to an American was to refer to him as an inoffensive animal, namely, a "jackass" (reminiscent of strangely prim Germans, whose biggest insult in the one-time genocidal land of Hitler and Himmler is "Schweinhund!": pig-dog). Even "Get lost!" was too harsh for our family. I do remember "Oh, why don't you just dry up and blow away!" recommended by Maw to us to use in place of violence (depicted as pretty strong stuff ascribed to a tough guy of the World War II era in *The Dirty Dozen*.)

Maw might threaten to throw a "conniption fit", safe knowing no one knew what it was but would suspect the worst. Her rebukes refined as we grew to appreciate them and she settled deep into historical novels — to "You source of annoyance!" or, when really browned off, "You sod!" For many years her greatest comebacks to settle any argument were "Fiddlesticks!" and "Piffle!" Only late in life did she resort to mild swearing; never descending to "the f-bomb", "the c-word" or other puerile Americanisms like "bee-atch", all in a quaint code pretending you're not really saying the word. She went from her favorite expression of astonishment, "God strike me pink!" — sounding like it was picked up from not-quite-reverent Irish Catholic usage — to "Bugger me dead!" and failing to

register its literal meaning, too innocent to think what she was saying.

I was apparently cautious of strangers even as an infant, crying in fear when Maw tried to sit me on Santa's lap. Come our last Halloween there, well out of my depth aged two, I chose a bunny suit and was pictured knee deep in snow. But I was old enough to remember the name of my first friend (Skippy of the Safleys next door) and going on three learnt my first pop song from my sisters, *The Witch Doctor* ("Oo ee, oo ah-ah, ting tang, wallah wallah bing-bang"). From the radio I remember "I was a *Big Man* yesterday" and *Blue, Blue Day*. All were top twenty the first week of June '58 at WJJD-Chicago daylight-broadcasting across the Midwest — when we upped stakes again. Two years of severe Great Plains winters aggravated my infantile bronchitis, and the doctor urged sending my sinuses to Arizona, as the nasal decongestant tv ads told it. The Mojave Desert next door would do, San Bernardino County northeast of Los Angeles.

Here at George AFB — decommissioned long ago now, kept just to store row on row of surplus planes — Bud debriefed leading test pilots including Chuck Yeager. And he taught essential maths to other staff needing such lessons. Never mind super-secret Area 51, Nevada: When in 2008 Kiwi Glenn Martin invented a jet platform for personal riding pleasure, Maw remarked matter-of-factly that it was here at George fifty years before she had seen a

man flying over low buildings wearing a more compact jetpack.

Elder brother Orrin De Forest, ambitious and practical by contrast with Buddy, had come out of the war a staff sergeant with the Army Air Corps. In the Intelligence game too, assigned to nearby Edwards AFB, he would serve in the Vietnam War as the CIA's commander of Bien Hoa district, where the Kiwi forces were based. In a place where police rape of female Viet Cong suspects (and anyone else they could drag down into war's vortex) was a routine interrogation device, he used his authority to attempt to revolutionize intelligence gathering by humane, nonviolent methods "winning hearts and minds" (that evidently didn't take judging by Abu Graibh and Guantanamo). Orrin was later a minor celebrity in and beyond California through his expository book *Slow Burn* and lecture tours. The manuscript of another, about him and Bud as kids in the San Joaquin Valley, growing up in the towns Coalinga and Avenal, might have been invaluable in terms of psychosocial insights into that side of the family but seems lost.

Kay rejoiced in good times here on famed Route 66. We lived offbase near Victorville, in Apple Valley, now ever-expanding urban areas but then just desert oases of no more than five thousand souls. Middle-aged superstars, cowboy Roy Rogers & cowgirl Dale Evans, who ruled kids' television across the nation, came to live nearby with Trigger, the model for my palomino rocking horse. In stark

contrast, as far as you could get from the wholesome twosome in pop culture, still teens, were radical leaders of Sixties subculture, Frank Zappa — his father in the aerospace division at Edwards — and his buddy Captain Beefheart. Maw lapped up all the mom-and-apple-pie conservative America could throw at her. We three kids the same, growing up in thrall to Disney's Mickey Mouse Club and Bosco chocolate milk, though fast growing closer in spirit to the youthful rock'n'roll rebellion of Buddy Holly arising at the New Mexico end of the desert (and eventually, Zappa) than to the all-American, apple-cheeked, singing cow-couple .

I vividly remember one day a "devil wind" blowing up, catching Maw and me crossing open ground as a huge plane flew not high enough overhead, whipping sand against our arms and legs, stinging fiercely as we tried to duck for shelter. Louiseanne today tells too of the young hot-doggers carefree of regulations piloting fighters through the sound barrier to create deafening sonic booms. We three explored down a wild ravine among the cactus for horny-toads and other lizards, our eyes peeled for scorpions, tarantulas and the occasional rattlesnake. Maw found a rattler nicely curled up in the cool of the shade (where it might be only 115 degrees F) of the back porch one morning and calmly waited for it to venture on. She did nix a daytrip to Big Bear Lake suggested by Bud when her curiosity confirmed actual bears, walking around free, though the Grizzly had been wiped out there early in the

century. The only real phobia she incurred was of spiders; not the eensy-weensy, hopping rain spiders or spindly daddy-longlegs that she found alibis for, but the bulked-up, hairy-legged ones of horror flicks that rarely appeared in real life.

An irrational distaste common in New Zealand then was one she harbored against males of the Indian subcontinent. It was widely said by her generation that Indian fruiterers sold dreaded speckled bananas, overripe, placed thumbs on scales when weighing them, and on and on. Chinese vendors — all long-settled Cantonese via Hong Kong — were popular and the norm in the Sixties. Anti-Semitism was not a prejudice of hers — the Shylock Jew a secret bogeyman of Kiwi society hung over from the Old World despite the huge contribution to local life made by the small pool of Hallensteins, Paykels, Fishers, Nathans, Goodmans, Myers, Friedlanders, Klippels . . . Kay would strongly favor underdog Israel against the rest of the Middle East aligned against it through the series of wars to come.

The drives Bud & Kay took up into the Sierras were exhilarating, the two-sided coin of natural majesty and the wild danger of unforgiving terrain. The white slats marking the edge of highway clifftops were little help to anyone except at night as a last-ditch warning of heading off into eternity. Once, happening on the aftermath of a serious accident where one out-of-control car careered off a line of others, they glimpsed a detached head come to rest a road's

width from where it should have been. Another time an interstate articulated freighter that lost its brakes rode up onto the car ahead, the hauler exercising the guts to take himself and his piggybacker over rather than collect a whole line of oncoming cars. Lives came and went more philosophically then, daily priorities having been tightly focused by the life-changing Great Depression and World War claiming tens of millions of innocent lives — and people were necessarily more fatalistic. Tragedies like cousin "Spy" Spydel, an oil executive, piloting himself smack into in these same High Sierras, were accepted with grace.

* * *

We were suddenly back in San Diego for the closing weeks of the Fifties. Chronically underrated since his high point of being chosen valedictorian for high school graduation, Bud now suffered a relapse. In good times, Pappy, Orrin and Bud would think nothing of driving up to Northern California for a round of golf. No mean feat in the land of tens of millions of addicted golfers, Bud won an amateur tournament at the celebrated Torrey Pines course. This brought on a burst of confidence in what, technically, might have been a "manic" phase — maybe of the kind that acts as a spur of motivation for gifted people, who go on to success in one field or other, or not. He resigned from the Air Force with a view to turning pro. When told that

was an unrealistic choice at thirty-four — around the age family men see their options irreversibly narrowing — seeing a cherished dream going down the gurgler and backed into a corner, he went to bed and stayed there. Maw knew he had long suffered from pangs of inferiority measuring himself up against his older brother, especially where women were concerned. Insecurity bedrock-deep showed itself in unsettling form: an active distrust of her fidelity. When Kay was out at friends' one evening, he having made an excuse to stay home, she saw his face peering in the window from the dark. At first wanting to interpret this just as normal male jealousy gone overboard, it must ultimately have been very disturbing.

She told of his worst days, in the depths of his own personal hell, musing, "I might as well kill myself," aware he could arrange it in theory, checking a gun off the base for practice at the target range. Gentle persuasion otherwise, then exasperated cajoling, didn't help his state of mind. Inherently insightful as Kay was, she was ill-equipped to deal with — apparently out of the blue — her loved one having such acute problems just living life, adjusting down to one's allotted portion. Unknown to her was his course of electric shock treatment after the war to combat deep depression. After all, to our grandparents' aspiring generation having a psychiatric file even for a harmless condition held every bit as much stigma — and then some — as having a serious dollop of Native American blood, which they evidently also kept close to

their chests until the liberating Sixties. Veterans Administration psychiatrists gave Kay a diagnosis that told her next to nothing. But, parroting the phrase in relay to a nonspecialist she bumped into in the corridor afterwards, she was told in plain language that Bud could never again take on family responsibility. In all probability, he was of a type that shouldn't have in the first place. Yet, in the quirky way nature has, he got to pass on what personal value he could as a genetic legacy.

So often our futures turn on a single moment of perceived clarity, right or not. It strikes us as true in a blinding insight, the one and only truth that excludes all other paths. This lightening sky bursting from the heavens was the intuitive resolution given Kay under pressure of witnessing the disintegration of her marriage. Standing by helpless, she had to decide on the future of the surviving members of her family unit based on a glimmer of rational knowledge.

Bud's breakdown when life went sour hits many, many more than we know — or are willing to admit — who go through the horror of war. It is a tragic old story in history repeating, of obvious scientific facts being ignored by conservative power-mongers. A generation before, just acknowledging "shell shock" was taboo, pooh-poohed by self-aggrandising military commanders as cowardice. But across centuries among civilians, those with the wit and imagination to see — and the media resources to report it — it was an accepted part of life and common to hear that

a sensitive person, a poet or his more talented sister, had died from a "broken heart" brought on by a bereavement or series of life setbacks. The marginalised from all walks of life, one blameless debt or scandal away from prison or prostitution — exile to an opium den or the colonies for the gentry — were subject to early destruction in one form or another. In a period of not much more than a year (2011-12) seven of my friends and acquaintances in the Auckland mental health system, aged from thirty-four to eighty-two, died violently or suddenly, only the youngest by outright suicide; the second youngest by self-destructive, long-term suicide, finally "offed" at another's hands. Haphazard leaps in treating mental illness have worked in gross terms, reducing mortality and other hopeless cases, improving palliative care and prolonging average lifespan, with seemingly little to no effect on prevention or cutting the frequency of incidence. In fact, arguably the opposite in the Western World, where mental illness is shaping as the scourge of the 21st Century: The more stress heaped on people in their daily lives the more people succumb to stress with illness/suicide. Apart from the obvious factor of human nature — unavoidable, so irrelevant to the equation or the argument — this simple arithmetic relationship hasn't occurred to most functionaries in decision-making roles of public policy, is most often smoothly passed over by calloused professionals (frequently at risk themselves) and avoided in the self-serving good intentions of other carers who, if they have a business brain, might well

become admired up-scale service deliverers in the mental health industry and, incidentally, millionaires with enviable tax breaks. The old conundrum of "The operation was a success but the patient died" has been successfully reversed, turned on its head, to where patients can survive indefinitely but no one knows why. The body is kept functioning though the spirit of the original person has long since fled or retreated, often lost in an oblivion of ever fine-tuning drug regimes, self 'medication', psycho-therapies and counselling; clinging on to remnants of lucidity but bullied into an incessantly programmed mantra of "positivity", self-reinforced many times a day — whenever he sees a glimmer of objective truth peeking through the mist of real life perceived dimly, maybe from the dark recesses of what they once had, that might upset the whole system if unearthed. Those who plug in at all plod into old age self-deluding and dithering from one day to the next, edging along a tightrope, feeling along gingerly with their toes, clinging on in hopes of one day ekeing out one more dose of genuine joy from life though an evermore remote possibility. And suicide or death by misadventure is always said to be "unpredictable" and so unpreventable — and so, so, sadly unable to be put down to a particular stressor or life event; maybe until one's own time comes up, and then it is all too clear.

The emotional and economic overflow from Bud's withdrawal from the rat race spelt the end for us as a family in what was pretty much a dog-eat-dog society again as the

politico-economic cycle goes. Faith had been restored in cutthroat capitalism a generation after the Crash. FDR's New Deal was unravelling in indecent haste for those eager to revert to the pre-Depression myth of indefatigable go-getters who tamed the original landscape in the trek west across the North American continent. Now the challenge was in taming the stockmarket gods. Again the havenots truly had not, and hearye all haves: Share not lest ye be a havenot, and the devil take the hindmost.

She had taken shorthand and typing at night classes but Maw had serious doubts about her ability to support three kids in the "Land of Ahpertoonidy", and as far as she could see no US Cavalry was riding over the ridge to rescue this lone family of western settlers — rather, stragglers separated from the wagon train and, after one mishap, fallen behind in the race of life. According to conspicuous social democrat Elizabeth Warren (Sept 9, 2014), senator from Massachusetts, a full-time minimum wage in the Sixties was enough to keep a family of *three*, not five, "out of poverty". It was far too much of a risk for a deeply shocked Kay with her confidence too hard knocked to consider it. The in-laws, she said later, turned Richard Nixon voters in the presidential race versus Kennedy, backing the local boy from east LA against their liberal instincts. Maybe this helped turn her off the idea of staying. Who knows from this distance? Did our family, ranging across Baptist/Christian Science/Episcopalian, fancy the possibility of raising quirky Catholic grandkids

any more than they welcomed a Catholic president from the Boston Irish gang in Kennedy? . . .

America was, in the myth it mostly still tells itself — the home of "The American Dream" of Horatio Alger fiction — Work hard and you'll get your reward — the promised land of the rugged individual. It was time for us to get rugged in a hurry. Kay had taken a gutsy leap in the dark to leave her original country. Better, maybe, to retreat now and return when — if — Bud got better. He wasn't objecting to our leaving, maybe resigned, rather relieved. Laurette and I were looking forward to the vacation in "Mom's country". Louiseanne, not yet eleven but loaded down over the past year with more information on the deteriorating family situation than she needed, knew better. In tears, prompted by a kindly teacher, she wouldn't open up to discuss it. And when it came time at the airport she refused to kiss Bud goodbye.

5. A World Lost

We left our world, everything, behind but what we could carry on our backs, in luggage trunks, and in the baggage of our minds and souls stored in personal repositories to be retained, reinvented or replaced. The Internet and Skype were the best part of half a century off, phone lines dicey and calls too expensive for us. All meaningful communication, all-important shoulder-rubbing interaction, with our father and all the family we knew was cut dead. Chatty letters monthly — equivalent to weather-watching with a casual acquaintance at the beauty parlor — rather than the warming heartfelt kind, were not what we needed though Maw drew solace and hope from them. And these, apart from Bud's communications — even less of a people person at long distance — dwindled fast. Before long we kids struggled to see in them any relevance to our new lives anyway. But any fleeting connection with our father was treasured all the more. In the later Sixties I caught sight of him on tv green-side in the gallery at a golf tournament, and hurried to show Maw and Laurette. It turned into an impromptu family reunion. We'd seen him showing signs of life, surviving in the wild in a society we by now took to be a lot more demanding than we were used to, and were grateful for this shared moment that might have to last us some years.

Receiving no visits from the better-off side of the family there was no way to replenish our stock of customs

and heritage to update and reinforce our American-ness. Memories faded aside from those Maw fed us on. The last up-close view of home was of the Eisenhower Era, and the ways we knew were from an age soon antiquated. All "news" was second-hand and we processed it through rose-colored filters that turned our country into a gilded ideal on a pedestal. Could it have been otherwise? In the latter Sixties and through the rest of the Cold War our attitudes were rudely wrenched into reverse to a point of humiliation given the prevailing political view in our new home about our birthplace. For me, a stable perspective on our story only came with age and a self-therapy reaching for a quietened state of being by stricter selection of associates, avoiding so-called mates and acquaintances of the "toxic" variety.

I have only a few vivid memories of living at the northeastern Pacific Rim, where our roots would stay for better or worse — planted deep in an ever-changing land we knew less and less. Our home in San Diego was on 44th Street in the Balboa Park section east of the zoo, on the edge of town then. Googled up close it seems physically not very much changed, on a corner and near the end of the street, the old school still across the road. But would I feel "at home" there? Whether yes or no, allowing my mind to wander across images of olden days is restorative. From somewhere comes an image of climbing high sand dunes with the girls. Pretending it was the Sahara, I was in the foreign legion and out of water, falling back and rolling

down in anguish, almost expiring until rescued. At the beach I recall feeling immersed in a state of sunwashed wellbeing, in what is called "the perfect climate"; yes, crowded, and enjoying the social occasion as well as the encounter with nature.

There's the earlier infant's memory of lying in a crib, nothing to see but the ceiling, crying for what seemed an eternity and wishing to be somewhere else. Kay was very attentive and assertively maternal. In nursing training in middle age she would be singled out for praise by supervisors for cooing to babies; communicating with kids too young to follow instructions was something not many Kiwi women lowered themselves to. On a calendar she occasionally noted her kids' progress; at eighteen months, "Gary fell on head from crib" but notes no effects, good or bad. And there was a first pony ride and dip in a pool just on two. The girls were confident in the water, Louiseanne diving, Laurette jumping. My early conversation with her was rudimentary and to the point: exchanges of "I wanna drink of wawa!" and "Wanna go potties?" When I was old enough to wield a blunt pocketknife, around three, she encouraged me to sit on the porch and whittle on a stick — a manly, American pastime to develop patience. I went to kindergarten and loved the idea of school — would wait sitting on the curb for the final bell, racing to join other littlies in the sandpit and on the jungle gym.

There is no recollection of Bud here, busy with work and studying for officer's exams; he backed off from

applying. Another case Maw saw as an opportunity missed was not buying Salton Sea sections, then going cheap but at one point before it soured fetching a pretty penny as prime vacation resort spots. It is apparently a De Forest trait to grab the short end of the stick with both hands, maybe to stop it poking us in the eye: as when Grandpappy Ledra came West with his Cherokee wife Maggie Baker and buddied up with a Mr Doheny. He lent money, at zero interest if I'm even a halfway good reader of family character, to this anonymous "Ed" Doheny, soon to be famous as the founding oil tycoon of California — instead of investing with him, what would have made the family's fortune for good or bad.

Kay had sought out a reserved man to marry — not knowing how troubled he was — and laid down the law to him much in the way her mother might have done to her husband. Maw liked to tell the story of how she had kept violence at bay in her marriage. Once in impotent rage Bud had thrown a spaghetti dinner against the kitchen cupboards. Naturally refusing to clean it up, Kay added "Don't you ever raise your hand to me. If you do it will be the last time — You have to go to sleep some time." In a sulk and to save face, my father allowed the splattered dish to congeal before rousing himself. Our whole time in New Zealand she loved him to distraction — at least the memory of him, to the point where most of the time she praised me spontaneously was when I resembled him in manner or expression. As Kay saw me — his spitting

image — the possibility I had any of her genes for mental/physical durability didn't occur. I was kept unaware, ever recast as the eternal juvenile. On odd occasions when Maw did see a glimmer of ability in one area — and just as often mistaken — she couldn't relate to it and announced it to others like some freak knack had emerged totally isolated. Still there was a family's emotional bond no matter what.

Among other random images — the gum tree next to the front porch to climb; roughhousing, Laurie chasing me around a coffee table, tripping onto it leaving a thin scar next to my left eye; we three saddling up on the couch and bouncing our butts in time with the galloping theme to *Bonanza* — was me asking Maw one day if I could bring my "friends" inside. She said yes and I brought in my bucket of snails, wandering all over when I was distracted. She and Laurie decades later took this, in that projecting way women have, as a sign in me of utter sweetness, a hopeless innocent thinking of snails as genuine friends — maybe my only companions in an emotionally undernourished vacuum. But I remember my ambiguous phrasing about friends clearly as a trick on the adult world.

A mother's warmth and physical affection was always close — bathing with her up to age three — until I started to rebel against it instinctively as boys do. I think of my father as indulgent because he let us stay up watching late-night thriller tv, busy with his studies at the dining room table while Kay was at night classes. Louiseanne says he

was affectionate and funny, but my lingering image is of an uncommunicative morning probably not long before we left the States. Bud and I were at the breakfast table. He absent-mindedly sipped at his hot, black coffee, giving out a slurp each time, followed by a resonant "Ahhh!" in habit. He gazed straight ahead, too early for him to be "on". I lined up cubes from the sugar bowl, loaded them one by one on to a teaspoon and catapulted them like Roman artillery hoping to land one missile in his coffee. In modern two-bit psychology this might be seen as a cry for attention. I'm sure at the time I just thought it a great game. Like my father, and mother come to that, I was good at amusing myself. Dumbing down to "appropriate" behavior, to being a "team player" in Corporate Speak suited none of our family; though ideal for lackadaisical New Zealand, where progress by the team — in every context but the adrenaline-fed anxiety-filled rugby field — is all the more valued for being pitched at its mediocre members. A great writer once said serious writers keep a cold sliver of ice deep inside, by which criterion I qualify: in self-expression the unvarnished truth comes above all. I like to think, sometimes sadly, that morning was a case of two cold intellects detached in the world but communing together in our fashion. I have since spent many moments like that — souls gently colliding "in company" with other silent people in cafeterias, waiting rooms, among the homeless, waiting for a bus . . .

Louiseanne cold-shouldered Bud, giving as good as she got, unable to reconcile the whys and wherefores of her situation. Only later, when it had sunk in that we had left Bud because he was ill did she ask herself: Why is it okay to leave behind a family member who gets ill? — instead of, ideally, gathering round even closer to help him; unlike me, who never questioned my mother's decision, I suppose because not having enough of a bond. Even when old enough to know his condition, it never became an issue. Why not, I can't answer. But it occurs to me that Maw obviously didn't see an end of it in sight and she had to plan a new life for us over those last few months. She managed to grow an air of confidence for her kids. Lou, who restrained herself from ever posing the question to Maw out of loyalty to her, regained only enough *joie de vivre* to enjoy the trip for its moments, and craved exciting distractions from everyday life thereafter. The effort grew harder with age; finally, next to impossible for long periods of her life. As our plane banked steeply over San Francisco Bay on a frightening approach both girls were thrilled we were going to "land" on the water, Maw related wryly much, much later. Lou met a good companion shipboard, daughter of another solo mother traveling home to Australia. Declaring in the 1980s that we were "settled" in New Zealand and the USA was no longer our home, it was only in 2012 that Louiseanne realised she had suffered from suppressed anger for the past half-century — that I

could have reminded her about on the occasions it boiled over (before we learned to treat each other as confidants).

On the surface thus far Lou and Laurie were red-blooded American girls, happy in their pedal-pushers (capri pants), saddle shoes, joyful in the music of Buddy Holly; with a healthy store of friends including namesake Ann Holley and the son and daughter of the local deputy sheriff across the street. Crushes were tv's The Rifleman (Lou), and Cheyenne Bodie and Flint McCullough (Laurie). I soaked up *Mule Skinner Blues* and *Wonderful World* from the radio those last few months in San Diego. Get-togethers at our grandparents' or at Aunt (Inez) Nezzie's in Inglewood, LA, resembled barely controlled mayhem with Orrin & Jean, first cousins Cecile & Julie, Uncle Buzz, cousins Sandy and Jan & George Jr, and, formerly, high-flyers Isis & Spy. Stored somewhere at these reunions and rolled out for show was curmudgeonly, well-off bluestocking Aunt Sadie, a.k.a. Isabel Eckerman, rumored to be worth a quarter million smackers when even a fraction of a millionaire meant something. It was a vast sum then, and she had promised never would one cent of hers be passed on to a male in the family, mostly because he who would accept it must be pitiful and unworthy and no specimen of a man anyway. But overlying such skeletons in closets the rule at these reunions was goofy humor and stunts one after the other to keep the fun going, many no doubt as simple-simon as those in *America's Funniest Videos* seen later on tv. Our grandfather, "Pappy"

De Forest, a responsible supervisor in the aircraft industry, was as crazy as anyone in his spare time. Deriving a comedy bit from beaver-toothed roughrider Teddy Roosevelt taking San Juan Hill, in a scene closely reminiscent of the eccentric whimsy of screwballer *You Can't Take It With You* (George S. Kaufman/Moss Hart/Robert Riskin/director Frank Capra, 1938), he would stand paused at the top of the stairs, raise his imaginary sabre for everyone's attention and regale all with a rousing shout of "Egad!" before charging down.

But a seismic shift was about to take over our lives — a cosmic instantaneous continental drift causing a precipitous drop through a wormhole to the bottommost of the world's habitable land masses; a regress back to a Depression-era or wartime parallel existence. The Maori name for our destination was Aotearoa, "Land of the Long White Cloud" — a literal description coined on sight from the first outrigger canoes reaching these shores. There would be often times we could think it metaphoric, interpreting these strange new people as reachable only through a thick fog that precluded any deep *simpatico* in either direction; two peoples observing each other separated by an existential bubble.

7. A Series of "Short Sharp Shocks"

Perceptions, priorities, and aspirations were something else here. In California — it seemed to me as a very young kid looking on from the freeway — every dirtwater dive with a Chevy dealership and Chevron horse dolled itself up in neon like Las Vegas at Christmas time to attract newcomers to get things going and growing. Justly, Kiwis knew the simple life has its attractions, and their country's remoteness and exclusiveness by default became a *cause celebre* for Kiwis of peaceful temperament and restful intentions, turning this destination's very unpopularity into a moral victory. Here we were in Aotearoa's biggest city and the Kiwi was a soil-grubbing bird burrowing itself away and turning its dun-colored plumage to the world, hiding any sensuous impulse under dowager's weeds, hoping to ward off foreigners: non-British persons. (It succeeded. Israel likewise had two million people mid century but, with all its troubles, has attracted six more millions to squeeze into its tiny speck of desert land and made it flourish. In Aotearoa, says a Waikato University demographics professor, in thirty-five years from 1976 just one percent of population growth was from net migration.)

On first sighting on the eve of spring, we knew if this was a Pacific paradise we had lived in a very different one — romantic Hawaii with its dreamlike aura half imagined by a willing frame of mind infused into visiting *Haoulis* by tourist-dependent locals; and we drifted back those few

days to our tantalising glimpse of Tahiti, getting *lei*'d and danced to very attractively. Here there was no sign of the native population, *Te Maori*. No dockside welcome; no concert party at airports but for celebrities chosen for their *mana* (prestige). You had to venture to the hinterland and mountain fastnesses, then be invited specially via rare ritual *powhiri* to witness remnants of authenticity. This was long before the Maori learnt to practise their own form of tokenism in return, by delivering just the bare minimum of facile pleasantries instead of sincere gestures to those idly curious Pakehas who were unappreciative of deeper spiritual significance of customary rituals anyway.

Was there a reason the national treasure (*taonga*) was being kept secret, aside from an implied culture bar: the usual institutional racism on one side and humiliation on the other? But our initial impressions proved typical of the ethnic divide then. For years yet, only every so often would you catch sight of an old *kuia* (female elder) come to mainstreet to research her tribe's land rights; erect bearing, chin *moko* (tattoo) leading, striding on with flaxen handbag and faraway gaze set past the horizon to eternity, like Sitting Bull fronting up in Washington to see The Great White Father: doing the dogged leg work for their peoples living in one last hope.

Early morning fog thickening to drizzle hung over the waterfront and lower Queen Street, hemmed in by grim Victorian-Edwardian facades. Britain had the excuse it was not long over coping with reconstruction from the Blitz.

Aotearoa affected the same drabness as a standard in tasteful restraint; and maybe hoped that *nouveau* Edwardian would come back. This main strip with nitespots, their floor shows and the late-night shopping and strip joints in "K" Road (clipped from Karangahape) uptown was Auckland's display window. Elsewhere, in the suburbs nightlife was scarce apart from picture theatres or community halls for dances; not a single restaurant was licensed to sell liquor. Maw was deeply affected by the seeming lack of spirit and social inertia, and would always miss Xmases with homes done up outside, New Year's, Thanksgiving, and showering kids with Hallowe'en candy. Gala times appeared rationed, erring on the side of caution.

One of few concessions to a child's colorful fantasy life was a huge, vivid effigy of Santa Claus erected in time for our first Xmas, extending four floors up the side of Farmers, the most popular department store, owned by a family firm and sponsors of the big Xmas Parade. The cynics came out of the woodwork to insist Santa's rosy cheeks made him look dissolute and his automated, beckoning finger was so blatantly that of a pedophile harmful to children. The contrast of this, over an animated entertainment figure, with the zero scrutiny given real harm to children from some adults (who were discreet, after all) needs no comment. Luckily the other Kiwi imperative — apathy — kicked in to ensure it was decades before Santa was taken down. In the States this was called "paralysis by analysis"; in Aotearoa, by no means unique in the world, in

many circles of authority forming a committee to stall action is believed to be an end in itself. It does, perversely, often work out better than it otherwise might.

One form of amusement not lacking was music. GIs based here in World War II had left — apart from a few kids who passed as a hundred percent Kiwi — jitterbug and jive music that morphed into rock'n'roll. Wild youth soaked up modern styling and Kiwis our age were up with the play: *Wild One, Stuck On You, Handy Man, Sweet Nothin's* in the top ten sellers, almost matched by good recordings from the UK. Across all ages at the very top loomed a phenomenon, the Howard Morrison Quartet, a Maori showband akin to the Mills Bros in delivery but topical, even satirical on race. There were stand-ins for the Kingston Trio, Everly Bros, Connie Francis . . . and Uncle Danny proudly told me the local Elvis had outsold the original by ten to one on *Hound Dog*. Only much later would I learn of another "equivalent", of Alvin York and Audie Murphy in the States, Douglas Bader in Britain — iconic figures of wartime who were cast to represent the best of their respective nations. Charles Upham was someone special in that he was not only a double Victoria Cross winner for valiant acts on the battlefield in saving the lives of his countrymen but when offered a homecoming gift of his own home, refused it on the basis that the real heroes were dead.

That first morning we gave Grandad priority as our sponsor to the tune of hundreds of pounds he'd saved hard

and now spent on our fares — Bud having engineered a monetary split that slightly favored him over the four of us, maybe anticipating the years he would be out of work (and going on to send us money monthly). He showed us around, putting Grandma's nose out of joint as she and husband Pops lugged our luggage to their home. We mounted Farmers — its six storeys the height of Auckland's skyline — to a play area and tearooms, ascending by "lift", an attendant sliding a protective grill back and forth and announcing what was offering at this floor and that. Aunt Rene drove us over the Harbour Bridge. Her old motor sported running boards, a real plus on this "gangster car" dubbed by Louiseanne and Laurette. And we counted "bugs": VWs, Morris Minors and Fiat Bambinas together making up the mass of the old '51 Chevy yank-tank we were used to.

Hosting us in delicious homemade style, Grandma waited . . . and waited. The morning tea she'd laid on turned into lunch, then afternoon tea. Sandwich crusts curled and fresh whipped cream melted on her prize dinner china. Egos were bruised, Maori protocol stomped into the dirt, Granny Fraser rumbling in her grave. Family was an impossible juggling act from the first, our Maw continually outmanoeuvred onto her back foot. Games irked her, and she would be played for years. Grandma wasn't a bad old stick if she chose your side, a tribute she would appreciate. But if you rubbed her the wrong way, even misinterpreted, a hair-trigger temper turned her into a "holy terror" in her

daughter's words. In repose she was reminiscent of Bette Davis in her way of faux-elegantly plucking tobacco dregs off her tongue with thumb and ring finger. She habitually sought an opening to impose her will, by grinding others down if need be. She reminded me of no one more than comedic, elderly movie superstar of the day, Margaret Rutherford, in her element amid her darkened, comforting-homely English-village sitting-room decor as if fashioned from *Murder Most Foul*. Paddy, a complex character, looked like a trimmer Lou Costello but had crossword-intellectual pretensions. Danny was persnicketty, Festus Haggin of *Gunsmoke*, with firm, childlike loyalties and attachments, choosing Louiseanne to take around on his motorcycle. Maw's half-brother Keith, Laurette's age, a cherub in mischief, taught us a new grace before eating: "Two, four, six, eight — Bog in, don't wait", and afterwards expressing appreciation for the meal in Latin rhythm, "Hic, burp, cha-cha-cha". Paddy and Keith passed on to me a love of the British comedic stylings of Tony Hancock and The Goons.

The Old Lady was intensely *human*, of a type not seen today when people are programmed into correctness at the cost of intuition. She was full of contradictory impulses: perching a resting bumble bee on her hand and stroking it gently on the back with a finger, while bawling a human out at the same time; proud of her ratting black cat Minnie and, without turning a hair, drowning a litter of kittens in the laundry tub. Her father, Arthur — Granny Fraser's son

— had died not long before. She who called female breasts udders, the ultimate anti-romantic utilitarian, clutched those still around in an ambivalent bearhug, not knowing whether to caress or squeeze. Unlike Grandad's thick brogue, Grandma made herself plain by fluent body language and a vocabulary not far from an Irish-Aussie pidgin with Maori add-ons: "Ta", common Kiwi for thank you; "me" for my; all-purpose *mimi* for women's paraphernalia; "fair dinkum", the genuine article; *puku* for belly and "tucker" for food/meal, until she fully connected with her inner Maori, then it was *kai*. "Gone up the *booai*" was "Gone up country" or "Gone bush" or just gone. In a kindly mood, "Wet your whistle" offering a drink; a gentling "Hold your wish" enough to quieten us; "Crikey Dick!" dismayed.

The Old Lady, stewing, pricked by Aunt Rene's peacekeeping efforts, blew up at her daughter, our mother. Here at the picture-perfect foot of the Harbour Bridge our bold adventure was deflating by the minute over stone-cold sausage rolls and dried-out scones topped with jam and cream: prized treats from Home Country recipes but to us curiosities we wouldn't have recognized in their pristine state anyway, far from tempting us. Pikelets were familiar, a fraction the size of pancakes, tasted like but for the ever-present cream and jam where the maple syrup should have been . . . An offer of full-sized pikes would have been welcome.

Attractions were hearing our first chiming clock in the hallway with its whirring movement and admiring its balanced pinecone weights; a homemade upholstered footstool I have saved until today; and Grandma's imported fox stole that hung over the back of the couch and must have been the bee's knees and the cat's pajamas in the Roaring Twenties when Phyl was a gay young flapper: head and tail whole but gutted of its innards, a sad relic from the first but now useless to anyone and for any purpose. Keith showed us around; my first big brother bursting with pride at these rellies from the States and the first meeting with his big sister — whom he would come to treat as a foster mother. We saw where to wash, and how to scrub the soles of our feet with a hunk of volcanic pumice stone, one of many natural remedies we would meet with. Thank goodness the folded layers of peach-colored cottonwool Grandma wore under her pyjamas on her chest on cold days were a privilege of age. A happy discovery was real honeycomb ready to eat from the hive boxed in a frame of wooden slats; any number of farm-fresh foods that Little Red Riding Hood would be proud to put in her basket, packed basic. These were adopted into our new expectations. It was still the original era of healthy, homegrown food in suburbia — long before its rediscovery by new-millennium New Agers. These amounted to some leaf veges in a backyard plot, with Uncle Pat's choco vines transplanted from South America growing up the shed wall. Home remedies were standard and sworn by. We

learnt of new maladies to be coped with in this new environment, told by the Old Lady and either confirmed or dismissed by Maw. Chilblains were one of the most fearsome. You got them if you came in cold from the outside and dunked your feet into a hot bath too quickly. I still wasn't sure what they were or might look like if they ever showed up but the threat of them was bad enough. There were all sorts of bottled elixirs good for what-ails-ya: an often-threatened and desperately needed dose of castor oil guaranteed to kill or cure for bad-tempered kids; syrup of figs to keep a kid regular and thus well tempered; milk of magnesia as an unspecified punishment — treatment — for kids, that had the texture of chalk and pretty much tasted like. Only when I was older and cranky or irritable did Maw tell me I needed "a dose of salts" — the same Epsom salts that old folks used for soaking their feet; "liver salts" as the olden day healers had it, also good as a purgative for kids to rid them of whatever bile (ill humor) was affecting them, and apparently in my case to save me from my liveric temperament. But "bung eye" (stye) there was no escaping if you had to wear one to school. Coughs, the one thing smokers apparently didn't have then, were made glamorous anyway in the new television age by the ad for Buckley's Canadiol Mixture: a mountie mushing on through a snow storm and halting his huskies long enough to take a swig and aver in a deep manly tone, "Powerful stuff, that Buckley's!" Alternatively, there were old standbys Bonnington's Irish

Moss and Lane's Emulsion: all names heightening the mystery, not claiming to be a cure-all but known to get you a little tipsy so you wouldn't worry so much about being sick as a dog. Vicks Vaporub for little chests was an institution for congestion in kids. And there was nothing better for a bee sting than a poultice of blueing laundry bleach. Failing all these, there was old Dr Dudding living a couple of streets away, a legend around the entire North Shore since thirty years before when murders each year could be counted on one hand of a double amputee. He reported to the authorities his suspicions of a wife-poisoner who had done in one of his patients, leading to the miscreant's execution by hanging. Grandma rated him alone above herself in medical matters.

Later with evening coming on we had still more "tea" instead of dinner or supper. We looked at Maw when she named a vegetable with tough green skin and orange flesh of stringy texture that made us gag. Just the shell we knew as useful hollowed out at Hallowe'en time. But a food? — maybe a terrible trick on kids, opposite of the festive, spiced pumpkin pie we were used to with candied yams. And we knew she was kidding saying that other tuber was sweet potato — nothing sweet about it and even the wrong color: *kumara*, a Maori staple in pre-colonial times that had wintered well in storage pits when the only other vegetable year-round was tough fern root, and now a hardy perennial on the nation's dinner plates. We later grew to recognise it as filling, nutritious, and tasty in its own right when not

boiled beyond recognition. I was learning to handle a knife and fork with some of my mother's left-handedness and adapting from both worlds, carving meat with my left and hefting it with my right — not the awkward American way of sawing and then, as it got cold, awkwardly switching fork hands to your right too. I sliced with my left and ate with my right. Appearing backassed to many, I never had the nous to reply when asked if I was left-handed, *No, just feral*. Much more than that, I learnt the importance of taking the shortest distance between two points for anything I wanted in life. And I would, but very, very slowly, learn acute disdain for the old chestnut "Anything that's worth having in life is worth waiting for." And finally receive when you've adapted and don't need anymore? How to reconcile the cold comfort of this, which might entail years of pointless torment and contribute to a wasted life, with the justly evergreen "Justice delayed is justice denied."?

Grandma had done her best by us who invaded her home. But her best didn't cut it according to three spoilt Yank kids. Back home we might be sent to bed without dinner if we played up. This was worse, I thought, and didn't even know what we'd done. The front bedroom was made ready for us: Maw under the window, Louiseanne and Laurette in bunk beds and me stretched out on a couch. We slept our first night of twenty thousand in Aotearoa, and counting.

We slowly came to grips with the tenor of new people we met around us. Kids were great, often despite everything delivered from above. The wavelength impulses coming from many grown-ups were off-key, ranging from offhand to punishing. Grandma's leveling reflex was common, we found, deep down to bedrock cynical in some. A cultural habit since died out, outbreaks of bullying are frowned on today and the approved fashion has gone to the other extreme of gushing flattery, Americanized so that what is ordinary is "awesome". A fatuous positivity of *see no evil, hear no evil, speak no evil* comes from officialdom sheltering the public from "inappropriate" truths, self-serving in collective (un)accountability: how the Kiwi village mentality works, or rather, often doesn't. In the toughness of the time, paying indirect compliments was a sign of weakness; direct praise sissy, or deeply suspect. The Kiwi myth of "A Man Alone" explored in literature and feature films was the male model celebrated in everyday life as well as popular culture. The brutish, wifebeating "Good Keen Man" offered a dismissive "Not bad" out of the side of his mouth for anything he reluctantly approved of — unimpressed at his best. The self-sketches and novels by pig-hunting bushman Barry Crump idealising this level of humanity were held aloft by critics as authentic classics and sold a fast quarter million, well over a million in three decades — what would be seventy million in the States. This hero — coming more than a century after the equivalent Natty

Bumpo/Deerslayer/Hawkeye character from Fenimore Cooper — has morphed into a type iconic to this day: the self-reliant man wedded to do-it-yourself solutions, booze-fed hostility, and the backyard barbecue his update of hunting excursions. He inserts simple answers to eternal questions. In those days, to save the outside world getting big ideas about itself, he would bring out his stories to counter news from overseas. This deflating tactic served for any feat you cared to name and express an honest, humble sense of wonder about: men in space — He made a water-powered rocket stuck together with sticky tape and chewing gum in the backyard, same principle and no throwing money at a problem like the Yanks; the first heart transplants in South Africa — He used a penknife, a lot harder, and try getting at an ingrown toenail when the generator's just blown and you're in pitch dark at the bach (country crib) . . . He knew *you* were the skite (showoff), but got in first because sick of having foreigners shoved down his throat. This new country still with so many hollows shunning daylight, we saw, was a breeding ground for patriotic fantasists — rational around the farm, but unreasonable sizing up people in real life. A lot like those Middle Americans called Rednecks and worse back home. The good, keen man was a good ol' boy.

Closely related but seeing himself in an intellectual glow was the self-defined 'radical' overflowing with an all-embracing 'love' for humanity in the abstract but contemptuous of whole classes of actual people, whether

women versus men, races and nationalities, philosophers/clerics, academics/professionals . . . The self-satisfied hypocrisy, coming from someone as comfortable as a pussy curled up on the hearth rug, was so thick it might take years to peel back layers of obfuscation to something putrid at the core, an idea rotting in its own wilful ignorance as backward as any malevolent notion born in the USA: the opposite of a healthy acquaintance, where the more you learn the more delighted. (Two well-educated men a decade older became friends, only years later revealing some special knowledge they had thought better to keep quiet in public. One had four university degrees, usually putting that off to say as the second line out of his mouth when introducing himself, and was liberal in every *visible* way but a boundless egoist and covert racist to the core; the other a born-again Christian with good impulses but for immigrants — long a Holocaust denier and nurturing an unreasoning schoolgirl crush on his Austrian-born idol, Schickelgruber. And these were only the least objectionable of this species I met. Though from very different backgrounds, both painted themselves as eminently liberal and left-wing but had a big-business orientation, were preoccupied with materialism and took a certain amount of luxury in their daily lives as a given and, socially, reverted to a conservative British default position that came most naturally.) The Kiwi hardman on the other hand related easily to the spirit of Middle America that raised Jesse James to a Robin Hood; in 1962 on the local

scene, serial prison escapee George Wilder — "the wild New Zealand boy" — and very recently German *emigré* and international copyright fugitive Kim Dotcom — attempting to stage a political takeover at the general election ballot box to save himself from extradition to the US or elsewhere: both elevated to folk heroes of story and song. A curious phenomenon is a blend of the two types so warped in character — and fearful of contamination by foreign entities — that he makes it his mission to individually kill or call for the mass extermination of exotic animals, including sparrows, pet cats and wild horses.

Being so far removed from the world — days behind in video coverage of events — Kiwis ruled by gut instinct saw themselves not so much at one with humanity, but survivors pitted against the rest: akin to the Boers of South Africa and not only in sport. Both settler peoples were small in numbers, elites of prime specimens tempered by nature and adversity. Formerly they were led by aviatrix Jean Batten, atom-splitter Lord Rutherford; now Sir Edmund Hillary (assisted by his Tonto, Sherpa Tensing, carrying the bags as a loyal porter) perceived as being on a solo endeavor to fulfil the Kiwi ideal; Brian Barratt-Boyes in heart surgery; Peter Snell; harness racer Cardigan Bay . . . There being few fields contended for as all-comers champ, the drive to cheerlead themselves on is usually played *per capita*. New observers like us had to diplomatically not mention other places then just as small

and often more historically accomplished: Israel, Norway, Ireland, Wales, Jamaica, Lebanon, Singapore . . . If not champ of the whole world, then the Southern Hemisphere, which meant just Aussies and Boers in the restricted view of a white man's world. Hillary and Crump were seen as rough, tough solo acts, outdoorsmen conquering the world, and now Olympic champions Snell and Murray Halberg — who must be an especially hard man because disabled, it was reasoned — were icons too. To their great credit, Hillary and Halberg used the image to do good works, to their ultimate cost.

10. On the Outside Pissing In

At the end of the school year the Father Superior — of good Irish stock judging by his name, Terry — called round and confided in us since we were short on fees we'd probably do just as well at the public school. This was more convenient for everyone too, being half the distance from us, just a quarter-mile walk straight up the main road. He was reassuring in his manner as plausible authority figures are, performing irksome but necessary fiscal responsibilities too, regretfully yet cheerily, in one swoop fulfilling "due diligence" standards. So, we were jettisoned by God's spokesman on earth for fitting the bill too well, being just *too* poor — in the most comforting, christianly way. Revered Pope John XXIII's new-fangled passion for equality of people and in particular of the world's Catholic flock had not filtered through to his Kiwi brethren (but is seeing him fast-tracked to sainthood as I write this). My Uncle Danny told me Northcote's young, energetic replacement priest for the Father years later was compassionate in his own way, ministering love in practical form to lonely wives in his parish missing their husbands away from home for an entire day at a time.

The class photo taken after arriving at the state school shows me looking open-faced and innocent as Bambi, either in a moment of grace or with a lot to learn. The shot betrays too the aspirations of North Shoreites, living in privileged isolation until a slow dilution begun by the

Harbour Bridge a year or so before. There are thirty-four of us, and just one offwhite, my playmate-neighbor Raymond who was half-Dalmatian of Mediterranean complexion. The first photo a year on at our next school across town, a good few deciles down the skids, would show a doubled-up class of forty-three present, eleven of us showing shadings of skin variously browner than the whitish, light-tan urban norm of Auckland. (It wasn't until years later that a new friend arrived from England and I saw just how pale "white" could be under deathly long Midlands winters, ghostly almost to translucence.)

Raymond and I played a tougher form of chicken with cars on the main road driving past our deadend street up the slope from the Bridge, some laboring in olden condition and slowing right down to almost stop between gear changes — throwing stones at these targets just asking to be pelted by two five-year-old hellions on the loose. At least once I scored, and the last time it turned out to be a police car. The cop gave chase on foot, up the grassy bank and over the white rail fence to our street. Raymond ran to his place and I stood there looking innocent, pointing the way, says he: "He went that way, sir." It would be nice to think I was that coolly urbane informant in Ray's memoir. He knows the police knocked on *his* door, confirming the opinion of his world-weary dad from Norfolk Island about little white Yank boys who get away. Though I have no memory of the consequences, I'm sure I must have ratted myself out when questioned. This little outlet for

aggression and budding marksmanship now closed to us, Ray diverted onto ways of getting back at the school ogre — a strapping demon who punished him many times — and yanked out his prize flower garden.

A victim of her perpetually sunny disposition and *naïveté*, Laurette chose as her favorite this same teacher, mentioning at home the unforgettably named Mister Isbister, a travesty of perverse poetry. Much, much later she wondered why he seemed perfectly lucid but was always absent-minded enough to call her by every French name but her own . . . Claudette, Babette, Nicolette. (I once knew a similar Calvinist of the same leveling spirit, loving to call one of his staff Mitchell because her true French surname, Michel, he thought vain and affected; and soon succeeded in making this sturdy young woman weep through some device or another.) Laurie guessed it was endearing bumbling. In something of a self-torment during low moments these days she speculates it was deliberate. Was he just the usual boor? Or a man of subtle sadism, devising elaborate delayed cruelties when his victim sees his little joke? The laugh was on one teacher, a prize idiot berating the girls for addressing her respectfully as "Ma'am", suspecting the same sarcasm that arose from herself. Years later they were denied a ticket by a bus driver for not saying "please", the magic word mandatory for British people everywhere and representing to us that polite words were held more important than genuine actions.

Not having learnt any manners, I was better off: no priority for barefoot little boys a generation on from the farm, as many urban Kiwis were then — and especially mud-caked, restless little boys as most were in the barely settled place of West Auckland we were headed. The refrain in a matriarchal household was "Never hit girls!" — the golden rule my second mother, Kula, raised her sons on too. This was easy to obey; the girls in our house were bigger and one of them hit hard. But I wasn't so backward in graces as to ignore girls outside the family or treat them like a mate. My first girlfriend was a nice, serious-looking, tousled blonde, Elizabeth. But this only lasted until some older but very little boys barracked me on the way home: "Whacko! I know your girlfriend! I know your girlfriend!" This inhibited me with girls for many years. Yet, one of the eternal truths Maw 'knew' about me was I was obsessed with blondes. When visits to Elizabeth's around the corner loomed too big for me to face, from the safety of our living room after school I would watch an older girl, maybe ten or eleven, walk stately past, bobbing and swishing her long silken ponytail, eyes focused straight ahead in perfect poise and, I think, wearing a knowing expression like Estella Havisham that I would meet repeatedly through my post-pubescent years too, as if stamped out in mass production on a high-priced luxury model to fit a new generation of elite North Shoreite females.

Once, leaving home for school, a not-very-old lady approached holding something in each hand, a needle and

thread from a sewing kit she carried. On drawing close she asked me if I could thread her needle. I tried but failed, when she asked me to try again; still no, again and again. She thanked me with a smile and walked on. I felt regret at being a hamfisted boy of no help whatsoever in a crisis; and frustration at not having the wherewithal to express this. And today, a bitter futility to think this woman so lonely wandered the streets till finding someone more adept than I to ease what was more than a problem of eyesight and mechanics. Beyond that, a habit of cautious silence, an ingrained reticence, was settling in me. A natural observer, I didn't *feel* quiet though my mother said I seemed so to Mick, no gabble-guts himself. I was nonverbal, focused on soaking in knowledge about the world. Contented on my own, I gravitated to older companions for company — someone who could tell me something new. Trying on different characters worked for me with family and friends, acting at being the goofball, so that Laurie remarked over the years I should be a comedian. Making friends laugh made me feel good. But I was growing serious, defensive, as resentments grew until I came to share good times solely with those close; bad times with no one at all.

We passed on our attractive royal blue uniforms, next to new, to some lucky kids who might now afford a wad of fees. Compulsory, so way overpriced even for an era when clothes were expensive, Maw had bought our outfits with pride and some hardship. Now until she could fit me out in

classic Kiwi, grey pocketless shorts and cross-striped teeshirt, I only had my blue jeans: a dead giveaway of unrepentant, irredeemable Americana. In Mojave and San Diego I'd chosen Roy Rogers cowboy style without the substance. Leaving my hat and chaps behind was a sacrifice; here, unlike the girls, I found a cayuse to be unnecessary bulk, given they seemed a lot bigger and more unruly in the flesh than on the screen. Downtown Auckland a giant, glitzy Kean's Boss Jeans neon wrangler reared rampant over mainstreet, a popular landmark twirling his lasso: inspiring adult fantasies, and far too good for kids. We were forbidden to wear long pants to school — and here I was performing an act so unthinkable it certified me as a goner, "dead man walking". The permission Maw got for me was just another provocation to some, including school staff. In an incident I don't remember, having winnowed it out subconsciously in that marvelous facility little kids have for psychological survival, a special welcome mat was laid out by a gang of four brothers ranging up bigger than Laurie; she waded in to fend off the heaviest punches and kicks, collected some and got a tooth knocked out. Louiseanne was at intermediate school — otherwise those warrior initiates should have feared something dreadful.

Before we arrived, MGM's *Until They Sail* had played here. From a wartime story by South Seas specialist James Michener about GIs and their effect on insular Kiwi society, director Robert Wise visited first to gauge the

nature of his setting, Christchurch. He reportedly changed his original view from a color movie ideal to depict a Polynesian paradise to a particularly grey-looking monochrome one, simply to portray authentically the mood he found. No hit despite the big studio buildup and all-star cast — Paul Newman, Jean Simmons, Joan Fontaine, Piper Laurie, Sandra Dee — this was the only place it made money. Used to stereotyping Yanks into one rigid box but unused to seeing themselves as others saw them, locals stressed how bad the accents were and missed the theme entirely. Focusing on a family of four girls, it has the unluckiest one beaten to death for consorting with Yanks by her repatriated boyfriend, who gets off next to scot-free allowing he only took a good thing too far and 'accidentally' at that.

The attitude of the war generation hadn't mellowed in fifteen years, maybe ripened, matured with the passing of time and ready to be savored: now using their kids to perpetuate prejudices, wreaking stone cold revenge to restore national pride with honor beatings. Maybe Laurette caught it for showing off, wearing her cutely exotic dress in her school photo with its "Tahiti" logo emblazoned on the front. She says a teacher stood by, waiting till the bullyboys exhausted themselves before calling off the 'fight'; perhaps getting his own back for us having had better lives. When she went to the sick bay she was in trouble again for mentioning her "bloody nose": Everyone knew it was a *blood* nose, so you wouldn't be swearing.

What sort of place is this? we might have been entitled to ask; but didn't, just carried on.

Laurette's spontaneity at all of going-on-ten years old struck Aunt Rene too as less than ladylike one day Xmas shopping in the city. She sat down cross-legged on the floor of a big department store to lay out her change to count: natural to a natural little girl; and just begging for a nice girl in a British colony to be fast trained out of. But Laurie, like all of us, sustained a sense of self at her core, for many years — still a decade later when her English/Scots in-laws urged her time after time to wear a girly dress instead of her hipsters. And to this day, jeans-clad in high summer, I get puzzled looks from Kiwis in shorts, the national costume.

It was 1961. The March census recorded not many foreign-born nationwide and two thirds of these from the UK, so not alien at all among all these British subjects; most of the rest Australians — as close in culture and shared history to Kiwis as it gets without being Siamese twins. This was the year Aotearoa, reacting to miscarriages of justice in the Mother Country and at home, abolished painless euthanasia as inhuman for cold-blooded murderers proven beyond any doubt, but maintained intensely painful punishment for naïve little kids lent no benefit of a doubt of what they deserved. The strap was dealt out to tiny tots, the cane at high school in "six of the best". What lesson this taught I don't know, unless it was brute force rules. We (including girls) were strapped with full heft on the

hand with a broad, doubled-up barber's strop of thick leather — combining the stinging whip of a belt and the weight of a two-by-four, calculated to inflict a blow to the end of a limb shocking a concentrated mass of nerve-endings bringing on an unforgettable throbbing immune from any attempt at relief: maybe an outlet for harsh upbringings for many teachers, the icing on the cake for any salivating sadists standing in as an authority and pretending righteous indignation. Supposing they're sincere in their ignorance that it's a remedy, those who hit kids invariably come to a point, funnily enough when a boy grows bigger and stronger than them, where they say, "He's too old to hit now", meaning all the kid has learnt from years of these lessons is to deal it right back; more often, save it up to be used on someone innocent and weak, as taught; or in an act of exceptional character, exercise a strong will to opt for *negative learning* and reject the whole sorry merry-go-round, a time-honored custom posing as a rationale for violence.

I and a mate got it at five and a half for exploring under a prefab. Here too I threw my inedible meat pie (a factory one filled with fat and gristle lumps swimming in the gravy) to save being punished as a wanton wastrel if someone had seen me stealing up like Sylvester and putting it in the bin. I had got away with improvising disposing of my lunch so, but couldn't escape being a boy and curious about the workings of everyday structures; preparation

provided by evolution in searching out the unseen curious nooks and crannies and dark recesses of grown-up life.

I wasn't used to this where we came from, and pulled my hand away in time on the downstroke. *Good instincts well done*, I must have thought, satisfied . . . But it infuriated the executioner: they all volunteered for this as, at best, dour functionaries, turning out a perk of the job for some. After an enraged warning, he brought his weapon down all the harder for the replay, to get in before I ran out on the game again. Both us kids were novices, advised by some veterans a year older to lay our hands on the cold concrete outside for hope of some relief, more likely a helpful distraction as the numbing turned to acute pain, then finally a dull ache as a little person's system adjusts to the shock of naked, serious assault. Wanton little recidivists — crafty, maybe being nudged onto the path as resourceful apprentice crims in the making — learnt an advanced defensive technique: As the strap was about to connect they rode with it, absorbing some impact and taking the edge off like blocking in cricket (or offering a dead bat to bunt). Big strapping men didn't seem to mind this because at least their victim was playing the game with a straight bat like an English gentleman — though with some slyness to overcome teachers' brute force, without any tricky elaborations of thought and style to circumvent the whole process that foreigners got up to. Such was the self-satisfaction in adhering to the highest traditions meted out at English boarding schools, boys' homes and other

nostalgic institutions, exposed by Dickens for their brutality at the very beginning of the Victorian era but that we in the colonies hoped to emulate more than a century after.

* * *

Chilling autumn evenings brought tense anticipation at the Old Lady's, five adults and four kids cooped up in a two-bedroom semidetached (duplex). We vacated to rent a flat over the road, half of a large, rambling place owned by the family of Julie and Sue, poorer cousins of a local yachting dynasty best-friended by Louiseanne. My new room, I told Maw, was haunted: The wallpaper, laid loose on scrim in the olden style of this 19th Century villa, billowed with the wind and all but came alive. On the eastward slope facing the Bridge, that caught the first rays of the sun each morning, at the bottom of the back yard was a tiny stream tumbling down to a harbor inlet where we went fishing among the mangroves. Led by the cousins, we would launch a dinghy accompanied by a cat with good maritime instincts. If she couldn't make the launch she swam out to us, yowling for whatever sprats and tommy cods were going though not the threshing dogfish we once landed. This was our first taste of seafaring, as natural in an island nation as escaping overseas first chance to see what the real world is like. Floating on that inlet marveling at the marine life was the closest any of us would ever come to being a Kiwi hero; a year on too Louiseanne would come

close again, beginning winning school sports competitions, a prized achievement in Kiwidom but one she took lightly with little pride, passing as almost a nonevent in her personal history when she looks back. If there was one thing Maw fell short on it was praising her kids just for the hell of it. But "skiting" for your own kids, or any kids, was unheard-of then. As she'd been raised, once we reached school age we were just doing our job doing our best: the least that was expected and so not especially praiseworthy. Without being spelt out the idea of duty, though slowly fading as an overarching life plan, was a much stronger motivator than it is today. No swelled heads, even healthy egos enough to get us ahead, survived into adolescence in our family; there was a nagging feeling of falling short and we never made the social connections necessary to conquer the world with our prowess. Maw drove us in her own way but was fighting against Bud's reticence passed on to us as well as her own shyness and humility. With all that, she tended to worry and over-protect, so later I couldn't resist nicknaming her our Jewish mother. Just well-placed demonstrations, lavishing of love as we'd had when we were little, would have come in handy every now and again to counter the stingy, anal-retentive attitudes that were our daily staple from authority figures outside the home. Probably, she worried about us being singled out as sookies if she carried on 'coddling' us in this land with its tough make-do outlook. For the rest of our lives we would underrate our competence and far too often allow others

with big mouths and overconfidence substituting for competence to win others over.

In separating from our Kiwi family, we had what would end up million-dollar views of the Bridge, the city (such as it was), and the pristine harbor with a profile of the double cone and slopes of Rangitoto Island. What we appreciated most was the freedom. It was a liberating window of a few weeks and we had free run of the radio to catch up on new classics from "home", *Spanish Harlem* (Ben E. King), *Mother-in-Law* (Ernie K-Doe), *Raindrops* (Dee Clark), *Walk Right Back* (Everly Bros), *Runnin' Scared* (Roy Orbison), and catchy teen sop like *Runaway* and *I've Told Every Little Star.* We couldn't afford it, so gave in . . . But Maw's peace of mind couldn't afford that.

We were back on trial with the Old Lady. It was unrealistic, so many spirited individuals sparking off each others' flinty surfaces in such a confined space. Tiptoeing around just wasn't in any of us. In the end, no amount of bending either way would do. An exchange was recounted by Grandma surprisingly fondly twenty years later. I reacted to the tension and whether disguising defending my mother and sisters as a joke I can't be sure from this distance. One dinner time I took a tee-shaped potholder from the stove, put it to a red-hot element and then threatened, as my grandmother reminded me in her best Texas Longhorn voice, to brand her like a cow. I suspect I had grown the ability in my armory even then to express ambivalent humor with a veneer of Irish charm; *half*-joking

in the way I took on as a lifelong habit. Poker-faced rage, impotent in silence, would take a few years longer.

When the mood moved her Grandma knew how to be a prime bitch of a type well known in Maori *whanau* but rarely seen by strangers in everyday life. Years later, me a teenager sitting at her table and trying to down a lamington cake without getting its chocolatey grated-coconut coating everywhere, she unleashed her ridicule. "Oh, isn't he dainty?" she remarked sarcastically to my mother. I needed no other cue, and showed her how macho I could be if that's what she wanted. I shoved the rest of the cake full-fisted into my face like an eager workhand come home to the chuck wagon, making complimentary scoffing and smacking noises as it went down with gusto. "Oh, you pig!" she said, genuinely disgusted in ladylike turnabout hypocrisy. Point made — or not, I think — pride was restored.

One evening in the August break, stuck around the house in bad weather, it all came to a pustular head. The Old Lady stalked up behind Louiseanne, doing the dishes, and pinched her hard on the arm, firing rhetorical questions "How does it feel? How do you like it?" Poor infatuated Keith had told a one-eighty-degree whopper that my sister had pinched *him*. Lou, thinking it was Keith again, in reflex raised what was at hand. Painful pinching, holding on scorpion-like, continued and luckily for the Old Lady her daughter rushed in. Only now she must have realised how close she came to anaesthesia by cast-iron frying pan.

The scene, if played through, of a granny going all googly-eyed being laid flat might have been just the thing for us who held Our Gang and Three Stooges slapstick close to our funny-bones; not to someone who took herself so seriously. It just wasn't done in the Kiwi society of that day to resist assault from adults, or answer back at all. In the States, kids were encouraged to speak out on whatever affected them as participants in a democracy, and their right in the ideal passed down from the Founding Fathers. And Louiseanne's way of giving back as good as she got answering put-downs of her country had started sticking in craws before now, and not only at school. Not about to lose face no matter the right and wrong, the Old Lady, who could geld a strong man at ten paces, issued an on-the-spot eviction notice: "Get out! I want you all out!" — and forbade Pops, Paddy or Danny to drive us to wherever that was. Knowing it was useless to object, and not about to betray her daughter by making her apologise to soft-soap an injustice, Maw got on the phone right away to a budding rebel priest who cut corners to do good impromptu works in the community — who that night took us to a Salvation Army homeless shelter in the city.

At Mick's suggestion his daughter went to the US Consul, who there and then lifted the phone to get on to the Member of Parliament for West Auckland, where a state housing project was going up. When Maw told me how simple it was to finally get a house of our own, never was I so glad to hear of a large country muscling a small one. We

were in and out of the emergency house in a week or ten days. Pity the poor people there for months. All I recall of the inner city place is narrow old hallways and, fitting how low we had sunk, playing in the gutter of a hill street with a kind older boy who had homemade marbles, pathetic and colorless, of wax Maw told me, bubbles in them and only roughly spherical — but serviceable and maybe his only toys, his pride. Victim of deprivation and who-knows-what abuse, he spent time with me, let me share them, and I thought they were cool.

Our priestly savior, Father Felix Donnelly, later a media celebrity on talkback radio and authoring books about child abuse and neglect — forever sticking his neck out and jeopardising his own career — made up for the Church ciphers who had disowned us, and pitched in with brand new mattresses and provisions to settle us in to our family home. His genuine kindness kindled from small-town beginnings stood out like a beacon, something Maw never forgot.

14. Little Rascals, New Kinfolks

I first saw Kula's sons Marco and Wayne one morning playing on the jungle gym in my first days at the Old School, then fighting over who would rule a large log nearby — tussling to a standstill in a King-of-the-Hill. They went back and forth as the master of this vessel, and at times both were able to stand on the log and jostle, a tricky balancing act. It was one of those fights that starts off as play but, as each got redder in the face barging and tugging the other, in frustration as much as exertion each took on that urgency brothers get in direct contest, and struggled to smile as if he were still enjoying it. I stood there on a spot a respectful distance away just watching, half wanting to join in the fun and the other half wanting to join in the contest. They noticed me too — I was there long enough, until the bell rang. When I saw them in their front yard just up and across the street this seemed like fate. We got together in the sidelong way boys do and were sidekicks for the rest of the Sixties until circumstances sent us different ways. With Maw at work and two bossy sisters, brothers were good for me and better company, and I jumped at the chance to have two my own age.

I got a kick out of their humor. Both created razor sharp wordplay, quick as lightning in reaction to unintended feeder lines. Wayne was happy-go-lucky, could be earthy and improvised funnier lines than the highest-paid standup comedians; but tasteful in aesthetics, coveting

and collecting pretty stamps like most of us; driven by mercurial emotions just below the surface and a reluctant second-in-command to: Marco, a year older, conventionally handsome, into more sober wordplay and the disconcerting niceties of English: the superficial similarities of friend/fiend and obvious/oblivious against the gulf in their meanings. He hung his WWII model planes from the ceiling one end of their house to the other, a massed sortie of bombers, fighters and transports from four different sides: living out the dream and at the same time unknowingly preparing for his career in aviation engineering. We were all into doing accents from tv, reliving the glamor of international intrigue on *Markham*, *Mr Lucky*, *Danger Man*. The Frasers, on the fair side and none more than Kula, half Scandinavian and red-haired, were qualified by "real Fijians" as "part-Europeans" of implied lesser standing in a set cultural hierarchy. Of broad outlook, they related especially to any number of tv performers of olive coloring and exotic turn: Desi Arnaz, Ross Martin, Rocky Graziano, Barbara Luna, Linda Cristal, Henry Silva, James Shigeta, Keye Luke. . . flamboyant, often menacing but familiar personas more accessible than the stiff, staid actors of British strain — though Marco showed the self-discipline and focus of officer material. And when Toa Fraser came to film their family-settling-in-Aotearoa story, *Naming Number Two*, unsurprisingly veteran US actress-activist Ruby Dee was

chosen to depict the matriarch, Kula's mother-in-law and her own role model.

There was enough ruckus for Kula to be forever calling "Maki!" or "Wehn!" to answer for — in her learnt, imperious manner. Lance, coming up kindergarten age, was the best thing to come out of an attempted reconcilation Kula invested her heart in, having returned specially to her husband beckoning from Fiji. The youngest Fraser grew thoughtful, Marco dubbing him "Lancer" in honor of *Captain Gallant of the Foreign Legion*. Surrounded as I was by females every waking hour, Bobbie seemed like another species, one a kid could relate to. Tomboyish, sporty, she grew into a tantalising oasis of warm femininity in what was often a too-macho world, later the subject of pubescent longings for every boy with eyes and a heartbeat, along with friend Priscilla, a Tongan Mormon girl since reported in legend to have wed a Texas oil millionaire (actually an Arab oil sheik). Years later one weekend when I went round and the boys were out, Bobbie was fourteen, me stuck a couple of years behind, and we sat on her bed. In her filmy negligee, she told me a lewd funny story about a morgue. It didn't take her long to conclude from my nonreaction I was sex-stunned, nonreactive as little "Chip", as she called me after the baby-faced boy in *My Three Sons*.

The Frasers' tv set did our end of the street while Tass's family's did theirs. There was lying-down room, often for Laurie too, and we stayed till Maw came across

the road for us. One *Laramie* night, or just as *Rawhide* (Clint Eastwood) was starting, John doubled me on his bike to a mate's place a mile away on the edge of our territory, the known world for our gang as it coalesced. Crowded in for this winter pilgrimage and given the rarity of sets still, it was no surprise to stumble on the Pirini brothers — whom we hadn't seen inside — coming home too in the dark. One channel meant the shortlist of shows on last night was currency, the gold standard at school for acting out stories; Tass's favorite was "Hi-Man Holliday". Maw, maybe wary of us always imposing on the Frasers, a little later on *rented* a set, while we behaved; didn't if we didn't. Before mogul Peter Jackson and Oscar-winning Weta fx, Aotearoa was as far from the movies as the moon. Kiwi 'stars' were in Britain: Nyree Dawn Porter (*Forsyte Saga)* and Ewen Solon (*Maigret)*.

The Frasers' Uncle Eugene, a newsreader trained by the BBC, raised family pride and never raised an eyebrow as an antipodean subject of the colonies enunciating with a plum in his mouth as if born to the purple: the British broadcasting standard of the day. The necessaries of kids' lives were never lost on Kay or Kula. On weekends after hard playing Kula fueled us with snacks of *roti* (Fiji *crepes*) and imported sugarcane stalks to chomp on for their sap. She had the same attitude to boys underfoot as Maw, keen for us to make our own adventures: "Get out of the house in the sunshine, I don't want to see you again till dark!" If something was misplaced there was the standard

Fiji alarm raised. Lost for a name, the description would do as well: "*Oi Lei! Na cava ya!* — the thingame with the whadyoucall!"

Marco and Wehn's hospitality was tinctured with earthy Fiji humor, handing me a tiny red chili pepper ripening from the windowsill — just bite into the end of it; they left off the *scaredy-cat* taunt we dared each other with in the States, but I inserted it for myself. This scare of inescapable heat recurred many years later when a Fiji-Indian lady set out a chili-laden curry for me and a Fiji lady-mate. Taking it as a challenge, in bravado I finished, and proved my mettle by sustaining internal bleeding. Samoan friends would prove kinder, presenting *palusame*, a dish boiled in taro leaves. Sampling the full aroma, familiar but in a setting diametrically removed from the dinner table, it occurred to me before performing the obligatory, Is this another crude joke played on the *palagi?*

All cherished the place of Kula's home island Taveuni in the family legend, assigning it mythical properties confirmed by other Fijians. Once, after a series of shark attacks, the Governor-General walked stately out to the end of the wharf where the shark had last drawn blood, raised his hand to command its attention, addressed the grievance and banished it from partaking of humans. So far, the predator obeys. I felt like I belonged around the Fraser household, with its open-door embrace of all, and still savor the scent of all-purpose coconut oil.

Ours was a street of growing attractions. Frasers' neighbors included Maureen, a sexy older woman of eleven. Dale was nice but once at school caught me right on the temple with a rock — that lethal spot just behind the eye — and instantly apologised: she was aiming for another guy. Stanley was Wayne's much-needed junior partner in mischief. Long before the reviled Accident Compo system took over, Stan Sr sued a driver for running him down on the motorway as he repaired his old clunker. He was left holding his arms in casts in mid-air, like a scene from *The Mummy Walks*. But soon reward for Stan Sr's pain and suffering, three thousand quid worth of Yank Tank — more expensive than a brand new state-of-the-art E-Type Jag just debuting, or a Kervil *house* — sat parked on the street with its magnificent Batmobile lateral fins taking up half the road; the new family launch took up the front yard. We thought Stan had won the national lottery, first prize three thou (to zoom late '61 to twelve grand. Chickenfeed by today's greedy-as-Croesus standards, not fit to wipe Donald Trump's butt, people wondered then how one person could ever spend this much in one lifetime.) This marvel of every boy was a two-tone blue 1960 Chevrolet Bel Air, 17ft-7, with the cat's-eyes tail-lights, fresh out of *77 Sunset Strip* or *Route 66*, a tribute to the American Dream that in one gesture showed two fingers to the world — the common British insult; the middle finger — "flipping the bird" — was too Yank, and

why offer half an insult when a whole one was just as easy?

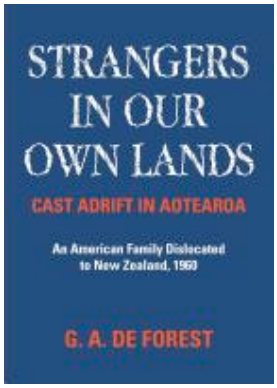
This monument on wheels helped us all escape the humdrum, boosting morale by our sense of guardianship over it. Around the shops we'd see a visiting Plymouth, Dodge, Fairlane, Pontiac, even Impala — all import-taxed to the hilt outclassing the usual luxury car, the pygmy Chrysler Valiant from Australia. But in our street there was nothing else till the Hohepas' compact came from Hawaii, where the dad had worked at the university; something like Bud's '67 Dodge Dart he sent us a photo of. These were the low heights we came to scale — having no car ourselves for eleven years but laying claim to it by showing the photo to friends in hopes of raising vicarious envy at third hand. Dr Pat Hohepa, across and two doors up, was by then feared throughout the land, emboldened by 'funny' ideas from overseas as a serious radical with viable intellectual ideas of Maori nationhood today broadly accepted as valid. I lingered over the Bel Air every time I walked up to Prasads', crossed to the Pirinis', turned to Gail's or Michael's or to go help feed Brandy; and had no idea Marco and Wayne were cadging rides in it . . . Bless their little hearts.

For a year or so Laurette was close to Gail, of a Burmese family living up on the main road in a large house of passageways and spacious wardrobes for a couple to canoodle at Spin the Bottle. I tagged along after my sister to a party and got paired in the game with a nice older

blonde who kindly went through the pretence, me emerging from the closet as innocent as when I went in but feeling somehow taller. Having grown a tough defensive screen that deployed on reflex, at six and seven I was precocious and could be anything from annoying to obnoxious when insecurity was pricked; maybe uncomfortably close to the caricature of Eric Cartman of *South Park* — spoilt, wheedling and cajoling to get my way. Just to show off, I bragged to Gail that "America won the war, and Burma lost." I twisted the story, and the knife, while Laurette apologised for me. I was full of myself and my country, telling Miss Thompson about its exploits in my exercise book. She patiently corrected my grammar and spelling, and passed it back. To my friends I insisted our family was going back in "about two years", put back another two years every time Kay was forced to revise her dream of returning. The longer I bragged some did enquire, now and again, when, exactly, it was, I was going — just out of curiosity.

We had an affinity to others displaced. When Gail's family left town for greener pastures there were exchange visits. Later, the closeness with Laurette cooled, missing Gail's wedding, not being able to afford a bridesmaid outfit. There was still "Bluey" a few doors up, and mostly Lynn the other side of the Long Grass, to be Laurie's bridesmaid at nineteen. Lynn's childhood disrupted by a shift from just ten miles away and still missing her idyllic family setting in a three-generation household, each

confided to the other that she missed her own grandmother most of all. At high school, Laurie — the friendliest, gregarious one of us — gained new classmates but, asked today, none she counts as friends though they count her as memorable, and very fondly.



This is a work of "Creative Nonfiction," a deeply personal account as seen through a child's eyes, and reviewed from an adult's viewpoint still often childlike in its frankness. Family events from the writer's early life are observed and related to the unfolding fate of the family caught in an existential, psychological tug-of-war. Quirks of both American and New Zealand outlooks are seen and interpreted with some humor and personal insight.

Strangers In Our Own Lands: Cast Adrift in Aotearoa