

Settlement: a novel

1.

The Inferno

On Saturday nights, they always went to Dante's. They met at Ruby's Coffee House in Cuba Street, so they could all go in together. "Safety in numbers", Adam explained. After three cups of Ruby's coffee - served Turkish style in a glass cup, with the bitter grounds nestling at the bottom like sand - Adam or Morag settled the bill. Yentl refused to carry a wallet, saying that it ruined the line of his jeans, and so was usually short of cash. Then they would put on their coats - even in midsummer, Wellington's coastal climate was capricious, and the unprepared could be caught in a biting south-westerly - and head around the corner to the club. Adam would lead the way while Yentl and Morag followed behind. It was a short walk, no more than a minute, but always walked in silence, in solemn anticipation of the night to come.

As time passed and Yentl's social status ascended, he assumed control of organising Saturday nights, in terse, haiku-sized emails.

"We *have* to go," he typed. "We haven't been for ages."

"We were there last week!" Morag replied.

Adam was always the first to approach the black windowless door, blocked by a grim unsmiling bouncer. "Evening, Terry," Adam said. Terry wore the same uniform year round, regardless of the elements - a sleeveless black t-shirt, army fatigues trousers and standard-issue military boots. Through the armholes of his vest, his deltoids and biceps bulged thick as tree trunks, each arm covered from shoulder to wrist with a dense latticework of tattoos.

Terry would seldom speak on duty, even to Adam, but at their approach he would always push open the door, swivelling to one side to let them past. Morag and Yentl would exhale with relief, only then realising that they had been holding their breath. The first hurdle was completed.

"Cheers, mate," Adam said, walking in first. "See you for a drink later, yeah?" Adam knew that Terry's gruff exterior was mostly for show, and would be peeled off with his t-shirt at the end of the night.

“In the old days”, Adam told the others, “there wasn’t even a bouncer – just a slot window in the door. You’d ring the buzzer, and someone on the other side would raise the shutter and look at you. Then you’d wait till you heard the door lock click open.”

“That sounds horrible”, Morag said, closing his eyes as if to block out the possibilities for humiliation. “Did you always get in?”

Adam arched a furry eyebrow at him. “Course I did. The trick was to not blink. Just stare them down till they let you in.”

“I like it,” Yentl said. Adam smiled. Like Yentl, he approved of the Darwinian clarity of the old rites. You either belonged to the gang, or you didn’t; you made the grade and were granted entry, or you were turned away.

The club entrance was at the top of a rickety flight of stairs, dimly lit by naked light bulbs. Halfway up, they could still make out the words “The Inferno”, scratched into the blood red walls with a car key by a long-forgotten wit. The stairwell had the familiar nightclub stench of sweat and cigarettes, mixed with something sharper and more poignant - the hospital stench of urine, overlaid with industrial strength bleach and ghostly trails of cologne.

At the top of the stairs, Adam would wait patiently as Yentl and Morag checked in their coats. Morag folded his ticket and slipped it neatly into his wallet, which he kept in his left hip pocket. Yentl pushed his into whatever open flap he could find, from whence it would invariably disappear – flying out as he dug around in his pockets for change at the bar, or disintegrating into a fabric pill after sweaty gyrations on the dance floor.

After the coat check, they walked down the narrow corridor with mirrors on either side. This was the second hurdle. Yentl would survey himself slowly from a number of angles, untroubled by the jostling of punters trying to pass by. He had brown deep-set eyes, olive skin and a square Sephardic nose that he claimed to hate. To Adam, Yentl looked like an emperor on an antique coin, proud and fearless. Beside him, Morag smiled brightly at his own reflection. He had the milky white skin of a Botticelli angel, and cloudy blue-grey eyes hidden behind thick horn-rimmed spectacles. His gestures were halting and self-conscious, and he had the slight stoop of an extremely tall person raised among pygmies. He wasn’t much taller than Adam, which made his awkwardness strange and endearing. Perhaps he stooped in deference to Yentl, who was the shortest of the group - a gesture that

Yentl should have found infuriating but either didn't notice or chose to ignore. Yentl had his own response to the disparity: working on his upper body at the gym, and wearing discreet lifts in his Prada loafers.

Adam would always stare straight ahead, just as he had in front of the slotted window. He cocked his head to one side, winking at his reflection: "*You talkin' to me?*" He had a broad handsome face, with his father's sanguine complexion and his mother's sad brown Doberman eyes. He was running to fat in his face, though his jawline looked sharper with his new winter beard. His hair grew prolifically: a mop of black curls on his head, only just beginning to thin on top, and spread carpet-like over the rest of his body. In the dark old days of the early 90s, when he'd first gone clubbing, he wore high-necked t-shirts to cover the embarrassment of his chest hair. Now he allowed himself a low-cut v-neck, revealing a dense triangle of fur. He knew he lacked Yentl's metallic brilliance, and he'd never been as fresh-faced as Morag, even when he was the same age. But as they neared the new Millennium, the tide was turning. The hairless waifs of Calvin Klein ads were on the out, and men were slowly able to look like men again.

Adam looked at the three-headed reflection in the glass. Yentl, alert and knife-sharp, Morag, the willowy Victorian aesthete, and Adam, the Bear who would be King. "C'mon, Hot Sluts," he said. "Mustn't keep the punters waiting."

They turned to the right, and emerged into the north end of the dance floor. The air was heavy with dry ice, amyl nitrate and the sickly sweetness of Gaultier: Pour Homme. The crowd of dancing men, punctuated by the occasional woman in a pink cowboy hat, turned and stared at them for a second, then looked away. The third hurdle was completed: the evening had begun.

After an initial round of tackily-named cocktails – "Sex on the Beach" was soupy rather than tropical, and drain-cleaner blue – they would take to the dance floor, losing themselves in the forest of waving hands and swaying bodies, bathed in the silvery rain of the disco ball.

There were no rules imposed on the evening. They were free to stay knotted together or roam the crowds, searching for a new face or an old one that would do for now. On quiet nights, they parked up at the bar, chatting with the barmen and cheering lustily when the midnight drag show came on. On busy nights, Adam would excuse himself from the dance floor and roam quietly through the shadowy recesses of the club. Here were the men who avoided the bright lights of the dance

floor. Here were the old, the ugly, the terminally unfuckable; the men who hovered on the edge of their tribe, here to serve a more primal urge than dancing.

There was one final ritual, if none of them had pulled and they were all around at closing time: a hands-in-the-air techno remix of *Total Eclipse of the Heart*. At 3.01am, the music would stop abruptly and the lights were switched on. Adam and the others would face each other blinking in the harsh florescent glare, the floor sticky with chewing gum under their feet. After the scrum of the corridor, in which Yentl would invariably have a fight with the sour-faced dyke at the coat check, they poured down the staircase and into the street, like rats fleeing a sinking ship.

“They should have a fleet of rickshaws waiting outside,” Yentl would complain, as they waited in the taxi queue. “Like Catherine Deneuve in *Indochine*.”

Morag, who had been to Vietnam on his gap year, disapproved of Yentl’s fantasy, which he said romanticised the exploitative nature of capitalism. “It’s horrible,” he said, frowning his brow with earnest concern. “They work thirteen, fourteen hours a day. It’s terrible on their backs and they get paid barely enough to feed their families.”

Adam stayed silent during these debates. He had never been out of the country, except for a holiday on the Gold Coast with the least jerkish of his mother’s old boyfriends, and a trip to Melbourne last year. He admired the ease with which Yentl and Morag discussed travel, ticking off countries they’d visited like a shopping list. He didn’t tell them that his mother cleaned houses when he was growing up, or that he’d done the same thing himself when times were hard.

Adam would always wait with the others until they got Yentl a taxi. Yentl was a messy drunk, belligerent when offered assistance. “Make sure he’s inside before the driver heads off,” he told Morag, who nodded, an army private receiving instructions for battle. Adam would watch the taxi drive away, and then would walk to the top of Cuba Street and wait for the night bus to Brooklyn. If he wasn’t too tired, he would take a different route, and call into another un-signposted venue, where consolation could usually be found in one of the steam-filled cabins.

Sunday brunch at Felix was strategically timed at 2pm to allow hangovers to be slept off and trade discreetly ejected.

“It’s such a dump,” Yentl sniffed. “Nearly half a million people in this city. One in ten men are gay.”

“That’s if you believe Kinsey,” Morag interjected. “Some people criticised his research methods. He interviewed a lot of male prostitutes.”

“Lucky old Kinsey,” Adam said. He’d heard it all at last week’s brunch, but Yentl arguing his way through a hangover was not unenjoyable.

“Exactly.” Yentl waved a finger in Morag’s direction. “It’s probably much higher now than one in ten. My point is – why do we only have one nightclub?”

“What about sex on site venues?”

“They’re not the same as bars, love,” Adam said, patting Morag on the arm. You can’t take your mother to a sauna. Well, not *your* mother. Mine would probably love them.” He signalled to the waitress, a dreadlocked waif with the final line of *The Great Gatsby* tattooed on her arm. “Another espresso, thanks. Make it a double.”

“One bar, three whorehouses. What a dump.”

Adam sat in silence, pondering Yentl’s verdict. Dante’s was tawdry, cramped and heavy with the weight of lowered expectations. The bar nuts hadn’t been refreshed since the late 80s, and the pink flamingos behind the bar were looking decidedly limp. But for nearly thirty years it had stood, surviving police raids, gay bashings and prurient health and safety inspections. It alone was the constant in their tribe, a stepping-stone between the bathhouse and the suburban dinner party. Though it was often a joke, it was theirs, and was definitely not to be fucked with.

This wisdom was lost on Yentl and Morag, two exotic creatures chafing at being forced to share a cage with the other barnyard animals. They would fly away one day, to Auckland or Sydney or London, and find new disappointments to replace the old ones. Adam knew he would never leave town. When the great earthquake came and most of Wellington’s CBD slid back into the ocean, there would be worse places to die than here.

It was on the night of the general election, as Adam stood at the bar waiting for his change, that he realised he was deeply unhappy.

It had been in all respects an unremarkable evening. Morag had called first.

“Which channel are you watching?”

“TV3,” Adam said. “I can’t stand Paul Holmes.”

“Yeah, he’s a dickhead. But he’s saying there’ll be an announcement later tonight.”

“Nah,” Adam said. “Helen Clark’s already gone to bed. She knows it’s in the bag. Let’s go out. What about Her Highness?”

“He just texted. He’ll be there.”

“OK. See you at Ruby’s.”

On arrival, Yentl and Morag scuttled to the dance floor when the Jakatta remix of the *American Beauty* theme came on. It was one of the few pieces of techno Adam really liked, mostly because it reminded him of Kevin Spacey doing bench presses with his shirt off in the movie. Adam waved the others away, and found a quiet corner at the bar next to Ken.

“How are you, handsome?”

“Not bad, you old lech. How’s tricks?”

“Not bad. Babysitting tonight, I see?” Ken said, gesturing towards the dance floor.

“Fuck off. You can talk. Haven’t the Wellington Club kicked you out yet for smuggling in rent boys?”

Ken had been in Wellington since the dawn of time. He’d accepted the humiliations of middle age with good cheer, dressing in jaunty polka dotted shirts and suspender belts, and brushing what remained of his hair into a halo of blond dandelion fuzz. If he ever died, which seemed unlikely, the regulars of Dante’s would have a bronze likeness erected in his honour, like the statue of Hemingway at that bar in Havana.

Outside, the rain and wind bashed against the blacked out windows, as winter battled the coming of spring. Inside, Yentl and Morag waged their own battle, taking turns to attract the sole newcomer, an athletically built man in a red polo-neck shirt.

“Ten bucks and a hand job says he’s going home with Yentl,” Ken said.

Adam looked at Yentl and sighed. He was beautiful, but he needed to do more than arch his back and point his gym tits at his prey. Morag’s scorched earth approach showed more effort, but was similarly ineffective. The man in the red shirt excused himself, and headed towards the darkroom at the back of the club.

“Well, at least he gets points for trying,” Ken said. “Quite sweet, really.” Morag looked over at Adam, who responded with an empathetic shrug. “I’ll call you!” Morag mouthed theatrically. After a brief word with Yentl, they walked across the dance floor and headed to the exit.

“Why don’t you go and say hello?” Ken said. “Hung like a horse, from the looks of those jeans. You could give him a warmer welcome than the Children.”

Adam looked in the direction of the darkroom. The man was handsome, in a late 1980s Alec Baldwin way. He knew it wouldn’t be difficult to get him into bed. He was probably married, and using an out-of town business trip to find what he couldn’t get at home. He would want a man’s man – someone steady and unfussy, who would buy him a beer, talk about sport and not ask too many personal questions. After the second beer, Adam would invite him home for a coffee. He would enjoy himself, and make sure the man enjoyed himself too. And it might feel good to drop it into conversation with the Children at brunch tomorrow, and remind them how the game was played.

“Nah,” he said. The chase had lost its thrill, and there was something mildly depressing about going after Yentl and Morag’s sloppy seconds. Yentl would be passed out by now, and Morag would be awake, chatting online with his lonely schoolteacher in Wanaka. The man in the red shirt would find whatever willing mouth or hole he could stumble across in the darkroom. It was time to find a new song to sing.

“I know, love,” Ken said. “Gays ruin everything.” They stood in silence for a moment, as *Rhythm of the Night* blasted around them.

“I think I’m off.” Adam leaned in and kissed Ken lightly on the lips; no more than a peck, but sincere and affectionate. “Catch you soon, mister.”

“Anytime, hon,” Ken replied. “Stay gorgeous.” Adam raised his middle finger behind him in Ken’s direction, and wandered out of the bar.

The Visitation

“How long are they here for?”

Morag stirred the foam at the bottom of his coffee glass, and raised a spoonful to his lips, like a chef testing the consistency of a sauce. “Just for the weekend. They come in Friday afternoon and fly back Sunday night. I wanted them to stay longer, but Mum didn’t want me taking any time off work.”

“Probably for the best,” Yentl said. He was in a flat humour, rugged up in an uncustomary sweater, and wearing a pair of outsized aviator sunglasses. His bloodshot eyes were just visible through the alien gleam of the green bug-eye lenses.

“Yeah, I guess.” His follow up review with HR had been scheduled for Tuesday, but had been postponed twice due to Bruce’s near comic unavailability of his manager.

“Is it their first time here?” Adam asked.

“First time since I’ve been here, yeah. I think Dad came once, years ago, when we were kids. Some dairy co-op thing.”

“They’re not staying with you, are they?” Yentl growled.

Morag shook his head. “They’re at the Travelodge in Aro Valley. I told them to book somewhere in the CBD but Dad didn’t want to – well, they said they’d enjoy the work.”

“How rustic,” Yentl smiled.

“Take those things off, you big queen,” Adam said. “There’s no sun outside.”

Yentl readjusted the glasses squarely over his eyes. “Mumma’s not feeling pretty today. I need another coffee. Does your friend still work here?”

“Mary Jane,” Adam said slowly. “Her name is Mary Jane. You’ve been introduced several times.”

“I knew that. Is she still here?”

“No, she quit,” Morag said. “She had an argument with the manager. Something about overtime.”

“Where’s she at now?” Adam asked. “Is she alright?”

“I’m not sure. We haven’t caught up for a while.” He looked out at the Michael Fowler Centre. It was a sombre, unsettled day. The air was thick and heavy, reminiscent of Friday afternoon school sports days that always threatened rain.

Dense banks of grey cloud pressed down over the skyline like cement, obliterating sunlight and colour. His eyes followed the clouds towards the furthest point of the skyline, where they darkened into grainy charcoals and blacks.

The words came to him almost without thinking. “And I beheld when he had opened the sixth seal, and, lo, there was a great earthquake; and the sun became black as sackcloth of hair, and the moon became as blood”.

Yentl took off his sunglasses. “What the hell was that?”

“The Book of Revelation. It was always one of my favourites.”

“Never read it,” Adam said cheerfully. “Guess that means I’ll be going straight to Hell. At least I’ll be behind Yentl in the queue.”

“Jews do guilt – not Hell.”

Adam squeezed Morag’s hand. “Are you sure you’re up for this visit?”

“Of course.” Morag looked down at his Eggs Benedict, trying not to engage with Yentl’s Death Ray stare, but resistance was futile.

“Good on you,” Adam said. “I think it’s good that they’re coming. Maybe if they can see where you live and where your job is, they’ll be a bit more... relaxed about things.”

“Are we going to meet them?”, Yentl said.

There was no point in telling a lie. He was always the first to be seen through – like his stupid pale skin that always burned, even on cloudy days. “I’m not sure. We were going to have dinner on the Friday night, and then on Saturday night they’ll probably want to go to church, so...”

“We could do a lunch, couldn’t we?” Yentl said, lingering on the L, the rest of the word dropping like a guillotine blade.

“Don’t pressure him,” Adam said. “He’s got enough on his plate dealing with his folks in town without having to introduce them to Tamara Shagwell over here.”

“I resent that,” Yentl yelped. “I happen to be excellent with parents. They love me.”

“Yep, you’re a regular Mother Whisperer.” Adam turned back to Morag. “Look, it’s your call. If you want us to meet them, we’ll come over. I’ll talk to your Dad about rugby and Yentl can charm the tits off your mother.”

“Let me think about it.” Adam was right – they probably would like Yentl. He would be polite and deferential, and they would be impressed with his career ambitions and his undivorced doctor parents. Adam was the one he wanted to

introduce them to, but he knew they would immediately suspect him as a high school playground seducer. He felt sick disloyalty and lack of courage, made worse by the fact that Adam knew it, and was still here, sitting across from the table with him, being kind and non-judgmental. I don't deserve my friends, he thought. I should never have mentioned it.

When Morag got home, he immediately undertook the clearance. He started with the bookshelf, pulling out the Edmund Whites and Alan Hollinghursts and all the Tales of the City series in their rainbow-coloured bindings. He leafed through the brick-sized Penguin Book of International Gay Writing that Adam brought him for his birthday, and re-read the inscription scrawled on the inside cover - "*Hope this provides some inspiration. Much love you big poof. From A*" - then put it in a pile with the others. He moved the remaining books on the shelf together, plugging the holes with the seldom-used cookbooks from on top of the fridge.

The Michelangelo's *David* fridge magnets came next. The great man was currently dressed in a pink feather boa, with nothing covering his marbled cock. As Morag pried the beige Mary Jane heels off David's feet, he winced. His parents would be sure to ask about her. His mother would adopt the mournful face she used when talking about children born out of wedlock or neighbouring husbands who gambled away their wages. "Poor girl," she would say, in a tone of genuine concern and deep condescension. Perhaps it would be easier if MJ wasn't included - at least, not this time.

He debated over whether to leave the Matisse print in the living room. It was only a black outline of a human body on a blue background - no genitals or breasts or anything obviously signifying nudity - but he knew they would be sure to make some kind of comment. "That's very modern, Michael", his mother would say, or his father might attempt a joke at how they'd forgotten to draw on the face. It would have to stay up there. The block mount would be too big and heavy to store under his bed and it would be too easily found in a cupboard, plus there was no time to find anything to replace it. They would only be at his apartment for a couple of hours at the most. It wasn't as if everything had to go.

It was already late in the afternoon by the time he finished in the living room. Spindly columns of pale light tracked lazily across the cream-coloured walls. There was no noise from the street. The air was still thick and heavy and had lulled

the city into a drowsy stupor, with no breath of wind to ruffle the maples lining the streets. The city was quiet and sober, pondering with bloodshot eyes the end of its own idleness and the return to the rigours of the working week.

Morag had grown to love the quiet of living alone. At least there was no one to argue with as he worked. Graeme had been furious when he'd attempted a similar parent raid in their Dunedin flat. There hadn't been much in the way of erotica to get rid of, and Graeme himself was bound to have been more offensive than any of his Socialist textbooks. "If that's how you feel, then I might as well move out." Somehow, Morag had pulled off a double diplomatic mission: convincing Graeme to stay and his parents to not to come to the flat, meeting them at a cafe priced cheaply enough for his father not to grumble about the bill. His *modus operandi* had always been to avoid disagreements. It was far, far simpler to engage with others at their level and show them what they wanted to see – even if he felt like a parchment being ripped in two, the edges fraying and ragged, the words separating from their meaning.

Morag stacked the books into a lidded box and slipped it under his bed, pushing it all the way under till it touched the wall. He camouflaged the box with his Kathmandu backpack, and pulled down the bed covers. One day he would meet someone who would understand this, a co-conspirator for whom this would also be a game, and who he could laugh about it with later in bed.

His mother often asked him if he was lonely, away from his family in the big city. He wanted to tell her that she couldn't possibly understand because she had never lived in a city. He wanted to say that living in a small town surrounded by family who don't know your secrets is the loneliest sentence of all. He wanted to remind her of her own loneliness: all the years on the farm before they moved into town; or his sister's loneliness at being the only girl in the family; or his grandmother, lost in the solitude of her dementia, running away from her care home and having to be sedated. There were far worse forms of loneliness than his.

The Happiest Time of the Year

“It’s almost Christmas,” Yentl snapped. “It shouldn’t still be raining.” He felt restless and vaguely territorial, like a greyhound denied its favourite chewing bone. He turned away from the window, rolled himself off the sofa and poured himself another vodka. “Sisters Grim, can I tempt you?” He held up the bottle and brandished it at the others with a smile.

Morag pursed his lips and shook his head silently, clutching his glass of cranberry juice to his chest as if shielding himself from contamination.

“Don’t worry, darling, I’m not going to spike your drink.” Morag’s abstinence was getting very tiring, layered as it was in a tissue of self-righteousness. Only old people in rest homes drank cranberry juice on its own, and even then not willingly. “Adam, fancy another?”

Adam pushed forward his glass. “Don’t mind if I do.” Good old Adam: always reliable. Yentl thrust his glass into the empty space between them. “Cheers, you bitches!” he growled. “Mud in your eye!” Adam responded. Morag leaned forward half-heartedly. The crystalline chime of their shot glasses collapsed into a dull thud when it met the plastic of Morag’s tumbler. Yentl sighed. It was going to be a long night.

They exchanged their presents at Ruby’s, nestled into the corner booth with a view of the front door. In past times, Yentl had sat in this booth for hours, nursing a double espresso and allotting points out of ten to prospective husbands as they passed by. The café was decorated garishly with ropes of tinsel draped at rakish angles. Over each booth, Ruby had pinned up cardboard cut-outs of 1950s American Physique models wearing Santa hats and extremely small briefs. Rat Pack-era Christmas tunes played on the sound system, humming a synthetic air of good cheer.

Yentl sat facing Morag. He was even paler than usual, with dark circles under his eyes, and a pensive, haunted expression. Adam sat between them, stirring sugar into his coffee, humming contentedly along to the jukebox:

*Santa Baby,
Just slip a sable under the tree,*

*For me,
Been an awful good girl, Santa baby,
So hurry down the chimney tonight.*

“You amaze me sometimes. The body of a front row forward and the soul of a drag queen.”

“Why thank you, princess. Now hurry up and open your present before it melts.”

Morag produced a package for each of them, beautifully wrapped with a tapered bow pert as an Easter bonnet. Yentl and Adam accepted them with murmured thanks, unwrapping them carefully as if afraid of detonating bombs. Adam’s book was the new revised version of Michael King’s *Penguin History of New Zealand*.

“Thanks, bro,” Adam said, breaking into a toothy grin. He leaned over and pecked Morag on the lips.

Yentl’s present was *Divine Secrets of the Ya-Ya Sisterhood*, a film they'd both wept through at the movies a few months before. On the front page, he’d written “To a wonderful friend and an even greater year ahead.” It was sweet and thoughtful, typically Morag in its attention to detail. But it felt too studied, and tinged with desperation. Yentl had a sudden desire to throw the book back in his sad slapped-arse face.

Adam went with the safer and sillier option of cheap joke-shop presents. Morag's gift was a Glow In the Dark Virgin Mary, which inflated when placed in the bath. “Now you’ll be extra specially clean,” Adam said with a wink. Yentl got a box labelled “Face Massager”. The cover illustration featured a smiling blonde in a leotard, pressing a large purple vibrator enthusiastically into her cheek.

Yentl ripped the plastic wrapping off the vibrator and slapped it experimentally on the table top. “I love it.”

“Batteries not included.”

After a second round of drinks, Adam asked what everyone was doing for Christmas.

“The beach house with Mum and Dad.” Yentl sighed as if already exhausted by the prospect. “I’ll come back into the city for New Year's.”

“Sounds good. What about you, mister?”

Morag looked down at his hot chocolate. “Home with Mum and Dad. Not sure about New Year.”

Yentl said nothing. A week in the deepest South Island with fifteen thousand Irish Catholic relatives sounded grim. He’d need more than an inflatable nun to survive all the guilt and sponge cake.

He turned to Adam. “What about you, darling?” The vodka shots were coursing through his bloodstream, making everything feel silky smooth. He was in a mood to be generous, especially with Adam. Morag was fine, with his presents and his Ya Yas, but Adam – Adam got it.

Adam grinned and leaned across the table, as if about to share a filthy secret. “I’m off to Vinegar Hill.”

“What’s that?” Morag asked.

“It’s a gay and lesbian camp on the banks of the Rangitikei River. It started with a group of guys who - couldn’t go home to their families for Christmas. So they went camping. Then the next year more people came along, and it just grew from there. You’d love it. Graeme went with me once.”

“It’s vile,” Yentl said, leaning across the table. “Everyone’s about sixty and wearing SwanDris. They all sit around and smoke pot and talk about how great life was in the 60s. Then on New Year’s Eve they have a drag show and crown one of the old poofs Camp Queen.”

“I didn’t realise you’d been, princess,” Adam said.

Yentl folded his arms in front of him. “Last year.”

“Shit, that’s right!” Adam started laughing. It was a full-chested filthy sounding laugh, which always made Yentl more excited.

“They wanted to do something big for the Millennium and get some more young people up there - ”

“Fresh meat for the old queens,” Yentl growled.

“So Princess here went up with all the party boys from Deus and they tried to throw themselves a big gay dance party.”

“It didn’t go quite as planned.”

“What happened?” Morag asked.

“Let’s just say the two different parts of our happy rainbow family didn’t mix that well,” Adam said. “It’s going back to normal next year. We’re building a hangi.”

“You’re having a funeral?”

“That’s tangi,” Morag said crossly, looking back to Adam for moral support. “A hangi is a pit oven with heated stones, where they...”

“Yes, yes,” Yentl sighed. Now wasn’t the time for Morag’s refried liberalism. “Well darling, don’t forget your bone pendant.”

Adam grinned. “I never do.” He reached inside his shirt and pulled out his pounamu, which hung from a knotted cord. Yentl felt a surge of excitement as he saw the tendrils of fur spilling over Adam’s t-shirt.

“It’s beautiful,” Morag said, looking at the pendant. “You’re meant to give them as a gift, aren’t you? Or if you have one, to give them away to someone who’s in great need.”

Yentl looked at his watch. “I’ll be right back.” He stood up and headed to the bathroom, counting each step so as not to sway too visibly. As he passed the counter, he snapped his fingers at the waitress. “We need the bill.”

Inside the cubicle, he placed the first pill on his tongue and swallowed it down with a single gulp. He looked at himself in the hazy complexion of the mirror. The remnants of an old Safe Sex sticker clung to the mirror’s edge, peeling like old skin. Yentl ripped it off savagely, and wiped the rest of the mirror with the back of his hand. There was no point in polite self-deception: it had been a shit evening. It would be good to get some distance from them for a week. Then it would be the New Year, and only two months until Sydney and Mardi Gras. He leaned his head back and dropped the second pill into the back of his mouth. It rolled down his throat without touching his tongue, neat as a hole in one on the 18th round. Keep your eyes on the prize, he told his reflection, and soon you will be free.

We Three Kings

Adam took a long and satisfying drag on the joint, and passed it to the guy next to him. It was almost midnight on Christmas Day. Those who hadn't stumbled off to the tents and campervans were sitting quietly around the campfire, as someone picked out the chords to *Stairway to Heaven* on a guitar. He closed his eyes, leaned back in his deck chair, and took in the sounds of the night: the chirp of the cicadas, the gentle crackling of the embers, muffled laughter from the city of tents. He was pleasantly drunk, slightly stoned, probably sunburnt, hoarse from talking and laughing, and ready for a long dreamless sleep, the reward of the truly contented.

The hangi had taken most of the day to prepare. Adam and some of the burlier guys dug the pit early in the morning, with the help of three muscular singlet-wearing dykes, while the others collected flat stones from the river and placed them on the fire. Rowena, the oldest and bossiest of the kuia, supervised the gutting and dressing of the pig, the peeling of the kumara, and the decorations of countless pavlovas. The children destalked cherries eating more than they picked until their lips were stained red, and were chased away by Rowena with a rolling pin.

When the stones were white hot, the men scooped them up with shovels and placed them, one by one, in the pit. Rowena walked behind them, slapping the rocks with a wet cloth to create steam. The women placed flax ketes of food on the rocks - meat and poultry first, followed by the vegetables. Then Rowena supervised the draping of wet sheets on top of the food, followed by wet sacks. Everyone pitched in and dug up mounds of dirt with their hands, packing it over the sacks until nothing was visible beneath. It looked like a giant's muddy footprint, or an anthill waiting to burst open.

"Your hands are blacker than mine, palangi," Rowena said. Adam laughed and wiped his dirty hands on the grass. "You take the mokopuna for a swim, eh?" She fished a sachet of sunscreen out of her apron pocket and slipped it into his hand. "Put this on. Don't want you boiling like a crayfish."

"Tena rawa atu koe, Rowena."

Rowena flashed a toothy grin at him. "You getting good, boy! Ka pai!"

They sat down at around two, at the trestle tables set up in the shade of the kowhai trees. It was a perfect midsummer afternoon, with a cloudless cornflower blue sky and just the hint of a breeze to soften the heat. Before they ate, Rowena and the other kuia thanked the land for its bounty and acknowledged the whakapapa who stood behind them, from Hawaiiki and the Old World – “and even fucking Auckland”, she said, to rowdy applause. The meat had a hearty smoky texture and warm vivid flavours. Adam chewed each bite slightly and gratefully. Food tasted all the better for being cooked and eaten outside in the open air. Adam thought in a moment of Christmas dinners of long ago: huddled around the TV with his brother watching *The Sound of Music* as his mother shuffled around in the kitchen in her dressing gown, fiddling with the oven thermostat and trying not to cry. He shook his head and chased his thoughts away. Mum would be fine at his cousin’s. They were all better off apart this year.

It was a slow, relaxed afternoon, full of silly jokes and camp asides that would be forgotten tomorrow. Adam felt humbled at the ease and generosity with which he’d been welcomed, and ashamed that his own tribe were unlikely to return the favour. The Vinegar Hill crowd were seldom seen in Settlement – perhaps once or twice a year, at the Newtown School Fair or the Lesbian & Gay Film Festival. Most of them were in couples, some with kids from former marriages, and quite a few younger lesbians with proudly fatherless babies. They weren’t the most sophisticated lot, and Adam was fairly sure some of them funded their lifestyles by running meth labs, but they were decent people, for whom their sexuality was the least remarkable feature of their lives. Adam blushed as he imagined the chilly reception that they would receive if they ever made their way into Dante’s. His tribe could be vicious bitches, especially to their own kind.

After an en masse afternoon nap, punctuated by a bubbling symphony of snoring, Rowena commandeered the washing-up operation. She found a job for everyone, even the little children, who she set on a treasure hunt to find lost spoons and tin cups nestling in the grass.

Then it was down to the river for a swim, the little ones carried high on the grown ups’ shoulders like kings. It’d had been years since Adam had swum in the open air. There was still nothing to prepare the body for the violent jolt of cold river water. He loved its clean salty taste, so different from the chlorinated soup of the

city pools. The lesbians swam away to the other side of the riverbank and hollered back at the men and boys, who slipped out of their clothes as easily as mermen. The young bucks preened and flexed their biceps, while the older ones slapped at their bellies and quivering jelly bottoms, laughing. Adam held his breath and dove underwater, holding his breath for as long as he could as he took in the magnificent tangle of thrashing legs and dangling cocks.

The long grass and sand flies nibbled at their bare legs as they wound their way back to the campsite. Slowly the evening skies brightened into fierce pinks and tangerines. "Another good day tomorrow," Rowena cried, raising her wobbly arms and singing a karakia to the setting sun. One by one, the families and groups fell away, until only a handful were left around the campfire.

"You better watch out, palangi," Rowena hollered, waddling towards Adam with an arthritic gait. "You're gonna boil like a crayfish out here. Better take some of this." She slipped a sachet of sun cream into his hand. "You're still pretty cute, though."

"Tena rawa atu koe, Rowena."

Rowena flashed a toothy grin at him. "You getting good, boy! Ka pai!"

Slowly the afternoon skies blended into vivid tangerine sunsets. Rowena raised her arms and cried a wailing karakia to the setting sun. After a dinner of leftovers, the families and groups fell away slowly, until only a dozen or so were left around the campfire.

Adam reached into his Hawaiian floral shirts and scratched his balls luxuriantly. It felt good to be a feral singlet-wearing stoner again. He giggled to himself remembering Yentl at the Millennium camp: decked out in designer beach wear, objecting to the smell of the latrines and the lack of power plugs, and complaining when he got mud on his Prada loafers. Morag would probably manage better here - growing up on a diary farm must've rubbed off on him somehow. Once separated from Yentl, he might be able to relax a bit and enjoy himself.

Adam decided he was just drunk enough to send a sappy text. He fished his mobile phone out of his pocket and punched clumsily at the buttons: "*Hope u had a gr8 day all good here Merry Xmas u hot sexy bitches Love you A xxx*".

Yentl responded in an instant. "*Thanks darling. You too. Any hot campsite action?*"

"*Nah,*" he texted back. "*Lots of hotties but no Xmas cracker.*"

“Give ‘em hell, girlfriend.” Adam slipped the phone back in his pocket. His cock stirred sleepily in his briefs. Yentl could be a prime bitch and deserved a good slapping, but right now Adam would have him up against the wall of the Portaloo, pants pulled down, a mouthful of spit for lube, whispering filth in his ear as he gave him a good seeing to. But now there was Him.

“Who’s the tall guy with the shoulder tattoo?” he’d asked Rowena earlier that day, as she supervised the dishwashing chain gang. The man was tall and muscular, with long black hair tied back into a loose bun. He had two children in tow: a girl of about seven or eight, and a boy of no more than three who clung to his legs like a crustacean.

“That’s Mack,” Rowena said.

“What’s that smile about?”

“Nothing.” She flicked two giggling girls lightly on the backs of their heads. “Hey, you two – cut it out!”

“Are those his kids?”

“Yeah. The wahine is beautiful, eh? The little boy looks just like his dad.”

“So he’s married.”

Rowena smiled. “Separated. For ages now. Go talk to him. He could do with a few more mates.”

Adam kicked at the grass with the tip of his jandals. “Nah.”

“You pakeha are useless, eh,” Rowena said. “Hey Maaack!” It was extraordinary how much sound came out of such a tiny old woman.

Mack turned around calmly and looked in their direction. Oh fuck, Adam thought. He’s a Baldwin. Adam pulled his shoulders back and tried to suck in his stomach as Mack came closer. The children trotted a few paces behind him like ducklings.

“Hey Mack, this is Adam. He’s over at the Ministry of Justice, eh. Does a lot of good stuff for the iwi.”

“Kia ora, Adam,” Mack said. Up close, Adam was nearly level to him in height. Mack leaned in and grasped Adam’s hand, and they pressed noses together. Adam felt a thrill of excitement as he inhaled Mack’s sweat. His hands were huge with long tapered fingers, and a sandpapery roughness around the joints.

“Adam, these are my kids. Moana and Wiremu.” The girl hid behind Mack, looking up at Adam sullenly with huge unblinking eyes. The little boy waddled towards Adam’s leg and gripped it like a tree trunk, gurgling happily.

“She’s a bit shy. Say Kia ora, Moana.”

Adam scooped Wiremu up in his arms. “This one’s not shy.” The little boy squealed with excitement and put his arms around Adam’s neck, pulling at his beard. Mack smiled at them. He had full curved lips that should have been too big for his face, but only added to his sensuality. Adam imagined what it would be like to bite them.

“Why don’t you jokers take the kids down to the river for a swim?” Rowena said, suddenly straight-faced and solemn. “We’ll send these bastards down when they’re finished.”

“OK,” Mack said. “How about it, Adam?”

“Sure.” He felt tongue-tied and grotesque, like the time his mother had shrunk his swimming shorts in the washing machine and he’d had to wear skin-tight pants into the pool.

“Be good to get another swim in,” Mack said. He looked intently at Adam. His eyes were a warm brown with flecks of green around the iris, framed by dark eyelashes. “You’ll need some sunscreen. You’ve got that fair skin, like Moana. I reckon I’ve got some in my back. Hey Moana, go and get Dad’s kete. Ka pai.”

The little girl glared at Adam, and crossed her hands across her chest, then turned and marched towards the campsite.

“She’s got an attitude, that one,” Mack said, scratching his head. Wiremu slithered out of Adam’s grasp and waddled back towards his father. Mack lifted him and held him up in front of him, until he was silhouetted by the afternoon sun. “Who’s a beautiful boy?” he cooed, bringing Wiremu’s fat cheeks to his face to kiss him.

As he watched the ripple of Mack’s biceps, Adam heard Yentl’s voice whispering coolly in his ear: *Don’t blow it*. He slipped his hand into his pocket and curled his fingers around Rowena’s sachet of sunscreen. He would find a quiet place to throw it away on the walk to the riverbank.

§

Yentl waited until his parents went to bed before texting the boys. It was the family's most strictly observed rule – no phones at the dinner table, unless his father was taking an emergency call at the hospital. “Just once,” his mother would say, “I wish we could get through a Christmas lunch without someone needing a coronary bypass.”

This Christmas had passed pleasantly and without interruption of the cardiac or digestive kind. There'd been a few lean years after they first moved to New Zealand. His mother, unused to not having hired help, struggled with the perky do-it-yourself culture of their adopted country, where everything closed on Sundays and grocery stores didn't make home deliveries. They were saved by his brother Ethan, who made the somewhat controversial decision to go to catering college. Despite his mother's initial objections to one of her children “going into trade”, her complaints soon dried up when Ethan produced succulent joints of pink spring lamb, salmon mousse that melted on the tongue, and towers of cream filled profiteroles. This Christmas, Ethan had help - Natasha, his new girlfriend, the fearless sous chef at the restaurant where they both worked. The wine flowed freely and without moderation. His father stuck to Scotch, while Yentl and his mother enjoyed the new season's Villa Maria Pinot Gris. Ethan, somewhat irritatingly, stuck to water throughout lunch. “The chef never drinks on the job”, he said.

Every year, Yentl's parents encouraged him to bring a friend to dinner, but he continued to turn up alone. Christmas was a family affair, and not to be shared with any old hanger-on. He did feel for Adam, forced to go to sleep in a tent with some scraggy old hippies rather than deal with his miserable drunk mother, and poor Morag, marooned in the Deep South with all those relatives. But they weren't family.

After lunch, his parents had their traditional after-lunch “lie down”, giggling like teenagers as they closed the bedroom door.

“Gross,” Ethan said. “We're going for a walk. Wanna come?”

“No thanks,” Yentl said. “I'll help you with the dishes when you get back.”

Ethan gave Natasha a meaningful look. “Yeah, right.”

“See ya later,” Natasha said. She was a sweet girl, and good for Ethan, and hopefully wide enough in the hips to bring forth the next generation of male children.

Yentl watched as they went out through the sliding doors and followed the winding path down to the beach. He piled the sofa cushions up on one side of the sofa and lay down, imagining that he was reclining on a chaise lounge. The house was quiet, but for the ticking of the carriage clock in the hallway. His parents must have fallen asleep.

He didn't mind his parents having a sex life. They'd approached sex with the same frankness and no-nonsense attitude they'd applied to their medical practice. From an early age, Yentl and Ethan had been taught the proper name for their genitals. The facts of life conversation was delivered by his father, a couple of years too late, but impressively detailed on the finer points of gynaecology. They'd taken his coming out stoically and with a minimum of fuss. His mother cried a little about lost opportunities for grandchildren, while his father nodded, sad and silent in his armchair.

Yentl had found an unexpected support in Aunty Lilah, his mother's maiden aunt, who had moved from South Africa to join them when they emigrated. She descended on the family a week after Yentl broke the news, and took him for a long walk.

"You'll be alright, boychik," she'd said. "You're a good-looking boy, and you've got brains. Just wear a rubber Johnnie."

When he was older, and after Lilah was dead, Yentl asked his mother some discreetly worded questions. She had never married or had children, and worked alongside Yentl's parents in Kenya. She wore a man's hat and kept a Swiss Army knife in her shirt pocket with her rolling tobacco, and argued with Yentl's father about post-Apartheid South Africa. For an apparently unmaternal woman, she was intensely interested in children. At each visit, she would question Yentl and Ethan in the manner of an interview, quizzing them about their opinions on current affairs.

"I don't honestly know, darling," Yentl's mother had said. "She didn't like men much. She didn't have much time for women either. "Bloody useless, most of them", she used to say."

"She has a point," Yentl said.

§

Adam shifted in his seat. It was getting a little colder, so he pulled his chair a little closer to the fire.

“Hey, you want a blanket, bro?” the man next to him asked.

“Yeah, if you’ve got a spare one, that’d be awesome.”

“Hey Mack,” he yelled. “Bring Adam over a blanket, eh?”

Mack appeared out of the darkness. He must have been sitting in the second row of camp chairs just outside the circle around the fire. He walked slowly over to where Adam was sitting, and handed him a blanket.

“Here you go,” he said, not quite making eye contact.

“Thanks.”

“Pull up a pew, bro,” the other man. “Have a tinnie.”

“Nah, I’m good, thanks.” He spoke softly, as if not wanting to wake the campers. “Just put the kids down. Going to get some kip.”

“I might turn in as well,” Adam said. A catcall went up from one of the queens around the fireside, but everyone else was too sleepy or stoned to notice.

“Whereabouts is your tent?” Mack asked. There was nothing in his voice to suggest anything more than matey concern.

“Over by the big bank of trees near the showers.”

“You must’ve got here early.”

“Yeah, I learned last time.” He was trying for cool and casual, but had a feeling it was coming out as stoned wanker.

“I’m not far from there,” Mack said. “Wanna walk back together?”

“Sure,” Adam said. Here goes nothing, he thought.

§

After Yentl’s mother had gone to bed, Yentl and his father sat up watching television. Yentl shifted uncomfortably in his seat. He hadn’t spent much time alone with his father since his coming out, and without his mother as a buffer, they often had little to say. They sat in silence, watching the well-enunciated dullness of the Queen’s Christmas Message, as they polished off the rest of Ethan’s trifle.

His father spoke first. “So, is there... Your mother was wondering if there was anyone. A boy.”

So it was this conversation, again. “You mean a boyfriend?”

“Well, yes, I suppose. Your mother and I were just curious. We don’t want to pry.”

“Not at the moment,” Yentl said, choosing his words carefully. “There was someone – earlier in the year.”

His father peered at him over his reading glasses. “Is that this lawyer chap? Michael.”

“No, he’s just a friend.” It was strange that he hadn’t heard from Morag all day. His text messages usually reached operatic proportions when he was on a home visit.

“So, this other chap?” His father was speaking in the same tone he used with his patients – engaged but neutral, giving the impression of concern without establishing emotional attachment.

“It didn’t work out.”

“I’m sorry to hear that,” his father said. “We didn’t know.”

Yentl shrugged. “It’s ok. I’ve moved on.”

“I wish you’d told us.”

Yentl shifted again in his seat. “I – I told Mum. At the time.” He watched as his father’s face fell, then composed itself again.

“Well, I’m pleased you did, boychik. You can’t go through those things on your own.”

They sat in silence for a moment.

“Do you remember Kenya much?” his father said.

Yentl shook his head. “Not much. How old was I when we left.”

“You were seven. Ethan must’ve been three. Yes, that’s right.”

“I remember Faraja”, Yentl said.

His father smiled. “Oh, wonderful Faraja. How we missed her when we left. We asked her to come with us, you know. We were going to get her a work permit, everything. But she wouldn’t come. She didn’t want to leave her family. Which is how it should be, I suppose. You cried for her every night for a month. You used to stand at the front door in your pyjamas, waiting for her.”

“I don’t remember that,” Yentl said. He could remember little of his life before turning six, and never believed other people when they claimed to have memories from infancy.

His father stood up and walked over to the drinks cabinet, and poured himself a generous Scotch. “Do you want one?”

“Yeah, ok.” Whiskey wasn’t his drink – it was too bitter and leathery tasting, but if he had it with ice and sipped it slowly it wasn’t too bad. His father handed him a glass and then settled back into his armchair.

“It was a hard place, Kenya. We went there with Medicines Sans Frontiers – your mother and me, and Lilah, of course. She was incredible. She worked as hard as any man. Harder, probably.”

“Why Kenya?” Yentl asked.

“We were working in an AIDS ward,” his father said.

Yentl forced himself not to react. He had heard this before from his mother, but he knew better than to interrupt.

“There were thousands of cases. Whole families. Every bed was full. Sometimes we had people lying in stretchers in the corridors.” His father raised his whiskey glass to his lips with shaking hands. “The children were the hardest. We ran out of coffins to put them in.”

“What did you do?”

“It was Lilah’s idea. We’d just had a shipment of tennis shoes from the Red Cross. Tennis shoes. Can you imagine? In a country where most people go barefoot. But we had hundreds of boxes with lids, all lined with waxed paper. So we wrapped the babies in a shroud and put them inside the boxes, and gave them to the families. It was something for them to bury - better than nothing. They were so grateful too, the parents. You’ve never seen anything like it.”

Yentl looked up at his father. He wanted to say something reassuring, something heartfelt and real, but nothing came.

His father went on, barely aware of Yentl’s presence. “So after that, we knew we had to leave. We had to – for your mother, for you. So we applied for our papers, and... here we are.”

“Why did Lilah come?”

“She might have stayed, but she knew we needed her. God, she was a tough old nut. I wanted to punch her half the time. But she was gold.”

Yentl raised his glass in the air. “To Lilah, then?”

“To Lilah,” his father replied.

§

Adam left Mack's tent at about 7 o'clock as quietly as he could. The children were all sleeping together in the makeshift marae tent in the centre of the campsite. Adam's head felt sluggish, each movement of his body as clumsy and lumbering as an elephant. He managed to get dressed without waking Mack up. He leaned in and planted a single kiss on Mack's bicep tattoo, and then crawled out of the tent. He didn't want to think about what had happened last night or what was going to happen today. All he needed was sleep.

He woke just before noon. It was another glorious day, the heat more intense this time without yesterday's mollifying breeze. The breakfast things had already been cleared away and things were quiet. The others must've headed to the river to cool down. Adam found a Thermos of warmish coffee and poured himself a generous shot. He would kill for a flat white from Arabica right now. He pulled out his phone and started to message Mack, until he realised that he didn't have his phone. Fuck, he thought. Who am I kidding?

There were three missed calls from Morag, spaced at different times throughout the night: 10.06am, 11.57am and one at 1.10am. He scrolled through his speed dial list and hit the Call button. He had no idea why they made the phones so small. With his big sausage fingers, he needed something with bigger buttons.

"Season's greetings, sexy," Adam said.

"Hey, Happy Christmas, Adam. How are you?" His voice sounded strained and high pitched.

"Yeah, great thanks. Had a really good day yesterday. How's you?"

"Yeah, I'm ok. Just calling to say hey. How was the hangi?"

"Bloody brilliant. You've have loved it." He winced and kicked himself. It was stupid and thoughtless to remind Morag of how much fun he was having. "So how are you, little buddy? Everything ok at home? Is your Mum stuffing you with lots of food?"

The other end was silent. Adam held his breath, listening for the sound of Morag's breath. "Are you there?"

"Yep, I'm here." The line went silent again.

“What’s going on?”

“Things aren’t great.”

“What happened?”

“Mum and I had a fight yesterday.”

From what Adam knew of Morag’s parents, they seldom raised their voices above a whisper. He imagined a fight at their dinner table would consist of people throwing bread rolls at each other. They wouldn’t have lasted half an hour at Adam’s childhood Christmas dinners when his Dad was on a roll. “What happened?”

“I can’t talk about it right now. I need to get out of here.”

“Where are you planning to go?” Adam asked

“I don’t know. A motel, maybe.”

“That could work. A KFC quarter pack, the *Dr Who Christmas Special*.” He closed his eyes, waiting for what he knew would follow.

“Would it be, like, totally insane if I flew back up and came to Vinegar Hill with you?”

Adam looked back again at the campsite. Mack had emerged from his tent at last, shirtless. He slipped into his singlet, and raised a single hand in Adam’s direction, a Roman centurion’s salute. Adam waved back with his free arm, and pointed to his phone. “Yeah sure. Come on up. The more the merrier.”

“What does that mean?” Morag said.

Adam growled into the mouthpiece. “Let’s just say the bed might be a bit full.”

“For real?” Morag said. “Won’t I be in the way?”

Of course he would be in the way. Of course he would take attention that Adam wanted to give to Mack. He would sit and listen and hold Morag’s hand while he cried, when what he really wanted to do was bugger Mack into the ground, fall asleep together, and then climb a tree and howl at the moon with joy.

“Of course you won’t. Just book a flight, then text me your details. I’ll drive down to Wellington and pick you up. Try and get here for New Year’s, though. It’ll go off.”

“OK,” Morag said. “Thanks Adam. I won’t forget this.”

“No problem,” he said. “Bye now.” Adam put his phone away and covered his face with his hands. It’ll be fine, it’ll be fine, it’ll be fine, he whispered. He needed to find Mack. But first, he needed a piss and another cup of coffee.

For One Night Only

Yentl jabbed at the foam of his coffee with his spoon, and checked his watch again. Morag was nearly half an hour late. Yentl refused on principle to wait for anyone for more than twenty minutes. His own exacting punctuality was both a personal manifesto and a statement of reproach to the tardiness of the modern world.

“Where are you?” he texted. His phone was unresponsive. Yentl frowned, and then relaxed his brow. Tonight he needed to look fresh and relaxed. “Never get angry – it makes you look older,” his mother said, usually after her third glass of Pinot Grigio on Christmas Day.

Yentl fished a discarded copy of *Marie Claire* from the neighbouring table, and leafed through the pages. The cover had a photo of Catherine Zeta-Jones, pouting as she posed in a black corset. Someone had drawn a penis pointing towards her lips with a marker pen.

He gestured to the waitress. “Another flat white, please, to take away.”

“Sure,” the waitress said. “Any sugar with that?”

“No thank you. I’ll just get the bill.”

The waitress flashed a gap-toothed smile. “You just pay at the counter, eh!” She looked not unlike the wretched Mary Jane, though much happier and not averse to wearing lipstick.

Yentl collected his coffee, and marched out of the café. “See ya!” the waitress hollered behind him. Yentl grimaced. Even after a dozen years in New Zealand, he failed to comprehend the lack of deference in the locals. The women especially, were a mystery: loud and affectless, and apparently oblivious to status or rank. Few of the locals seemed to comprehend the pleasures of the dance of domination and submission.

Yentl crossed the road at the Embassy lights and headed down Courtenay Place. It was almost daylight savings, and the smell of spring was in the air. Soon the cherry blossoms would be out, and the cute boys would rollerblade around Oriental Parade with their shirts off. It was time to prepare for Mardi Gras. He’d need to up the PT sessions with Jono to three times a week. If tonight worked out, he could certainly afford it.

An insect buzz from inside his bag. It was Morag.

“Hi darling. How did the appraisal go?”

“Sorry, sorry, sorry, sorry,” Morag hollered. “The head of Human Resources sat in on things.”

“Did you tell them you want more chargeable work?”

“Yeah, we talked about that. They want to do another review in a few months.”

Yentl grimaced. It was worse than he thought, though hardly surprising. Morag’s lack of a coherent strategy was making him a liability. If his billables got any lower, he would be thrown to the wolves, and in the meantime, news of his failure would spread around town. He needed to be taken in hand, before things unravelled any further. Not tonight, though, of course.

“Never mind, darling. You’ll pull through.”

“Do you wanna come over tonight?” Morag asked. “*Out of Africa* starts at nine. We could get KFC. We haven’t had Hag Time in ages.”

“Sorry, darling, not tonight. I’ve got a work thing tonight. Client dinner. Yentl needed to tread carefully. Morag was hard-wired to spot signs of treachery, even in the irregular slant of a vocal intonation. It was best to say as little as possible.

“Oh God, did I make you late?” Morag groaned. “Sorry. Well, text me later. We could go to Dante’s.”

“Sorry, babe. I’ve got Jono first thing in the morning. See you at brunch on Sunday, yeah?”

“OK.” Morag’s voice sounded small and quiet, as if he’d been shrunk. “Have a good night.”

“You too. Enjoy Meryl.”

Yentl rang off first. It felt strange to break their compact – the lie hung in the air above his head, like cigar smoke - but oddly thrilling. He had just enough time to get home, shower, and knock back a quick glass of Chardonnay while he decided what to wear.

Yentl walked into the lobby of the hotel just after eight o’clock.

“Good evening, Sir,” the concierge called out. Yentl kept walking without breaking his stride, and headed for the elevators.

The elevator walls were helpfully lined with mirrors. Yentl checked himself a final time. He was dressed smartly in a collared white shirt with a midnight blue blazer, and had flattened his rooster coif into a more respectable side part. The door pinged for the 11th floor.

Room 1101 was at the end, with a view of the harbour. Yentl ran his thumbnail down his front teeth one last time, and rang the doorbell.

The door opened. "You must be Ryan," a voice said. "I'm Jeff".

"Hello, Jeff," Yentl smiled, making sure to show his teeth. "It's lovely to meet you at last."

"And you. Please come in." The man extended his arm behind him towards the dimly lit room.

The man walked into the bathroom, immediately to the left of the front door. "Just give me a couple of minutes. I'm nearly ready. Pour yourself a glass of champagne. It's on the table."

"Thank you," Yentl said. The room was a suite: a sitting room, with heavy wooden sliding doors leading to the bedroom. The décor was tasteful and expensive, in soothing, non-offensive beige and powder blue. On the west side, the floor to ceiling windows framed the night view of the waterfront. It was a clear night, and the smoky oranges and blues of the city lights danced on the surface of the black water. Yentl poured himself half a glass of champagne - Veuve Clicquot, vintage, expensive - and it sparkled like gold as he raised the glass to his lips.

"Go easy on that. We've got a big night ahead."

Yentl stiffened as he felt a hand on his shoulder. Yentl stepped back and looked properly at the man, whose name might or might not be Jeff. In the light, he looked more or less like his profile photo: tanned and patrician, with dazzlingly white American teeth. His hair was greying around the temples, and his physique, while still robust, was running to fat around his middle. The shirtless swimming pool photos he'd sent were clearly a few years old.

"It's a lovely room," Yentl said.

"Yes, it is." Jeff studied Yentl as if he was something good to eat. "They look after you here. I'm going to look after you tonight too."

"Cheers", Yentl said, raising his glass to Jeff's. The crystal glasses clinked with a satisfyingly crisp top note.

“Now before I forget.” Jeff reached into his blazer pocket and pulled out a white envelope. “This is for you.”

“Thank you.” Yentl bowed his head slightly took the envelope. The paper was the colour of cream, embossed with some kind of watermark.

“Don’t I at least get a kiss?”

Yentl stood on his tiptoes and offered Jeff his mouth. Jeff’s lips were big and fleshy, and his citrus cologne was rather too liberally applied. Yentl had worn no cologne, as instructed, which now didn’t seem fair. Yentl slipped the envelope into his blazer pocket.

“We’ll have a nice time tonight,” Jeff said. “I like to look after my boys. Now then, we’d better go. How far away is this place?”

“About twenty minutes by taxi,” Yentl said.

“What was that?” Jeff growled and dragged his forefinger slowly against Yentl’s cheek.

Yentl closed his eyes, searching for the missed line. “Twenty minutes by taxi, Daddy.”

“That’s a good boy.”

Yentl’s jaw was beginning to ache with the effort of smiling and speaking only when spoken to. It was going to be a long evening.

The restaurant was perfect - comfortable, dimly lit, and far enough away from town to avoid easy discovery. Their wine waiter was friendly without being over-solicitous, and deftly answered Jeff’s endless series of questions about vintages and corkage. Yentl ate sparingly, making sure to use the correct cutlery and to leave something on his plate. It was important to look like he knew how to behave in a restaurant.

During the starters, Jeff talked his recent hip replacement, which he said had given him a new lease of life. By the time the mains were served, he was onto the renovations to his summerhouse in Palm Springs.

“I’ve had the wine cellar completely rebuilt and lined with native stone. The architect didn’t approve, of course, but that’s what happens when you hire a modernist. I have a marvellous 1960 Chateau Latreuse in storage. I bought it to celebrate my 50th birthday.”

Yentl nodded encouragingly. He didn't understand the rationale behind buying wine you weren't going to drink, and could think of more creative uses for a cellar.

"I bet you didn't think I was that old," Jeff said.

"Of course not," Yentl smiled. "You're in great shape."

"Well, thank you, Ryan. I do 50 laps in the pool every day, and play racquet ball three times a week. Does the hotel have one?"

"A racquet ball court?"

"No, a pool."

"I think so," Yentl said. He felt mildly resentful at being expected to remember every aspect of Jeff's itinerary. He was the guest star, not a travel agent.

"Never mind," Jeff said. "I'm sure I'll be getting plenty of exercise with you tonight."

Yentl thought of the envelope nestling in his pocket. He had counted the notes in the bathroom, one by one - they were brand new, the paper crisp and unlined, like freshly ironed shirts.

"I don't feel like dessert, do you?"

Yentl shook his head. It was best to say as little as possible, and cut to the main act.

Jeff started undressing Yentl as soon as the hotel room door clicked shut. He pinned Yentl against the wall, holding him by the shoulders as he kissed his face and neck.

"Undress me, boy".

Yentl obediently undid Jeff's shirt buttons and slipped his hand under the fabric. His pecs, while still firm, were beginning to lose their shape. A layer of belly fat stretched over his abdominal muscles like slabs of melting chocolate. His chest hair, while appealingly thick, was almost completely white.

"You like a hairy Daddy, don't you, boy?" Jeff murmured.

Granddaddy more like, Yentl thought. "Let me have a shower first, Daddy. I'd like to be clean for you."

"That's a good boy. Take your time." Jeff lurched into an armchair, and hunched over awkwardly as he unlaced his shoes. There was something tentative

and prissy in his movements, like a debutante anxious not to get her prom dress creased.

Yentl locked the bathroom door behind him. He turned on the shower to full volume, and stood underneath the blast, closing his eyes so as not to lose his contact lenses. He'd hoped at this moment for a rush of excitement and danger, some sense of a line about to be crossed or a point of no return. But there was nothing: only the final piece of business to be transacted. It's now or never, kiddo, Yentl said to his reflection in the bathroom mirror.

Yentl walked into the bedroom. Jeff was sitting up on the bed, naked except for his socks. Yentl undid his towel, letting it fall to the floor, and walked towards the bed.

The foreplay was over in a matter of minutes. Jeff's tongue felt sluggish in Yentl's mouth, with a furry coating from the nearly two bottles of red wine he'd sucked down at dinner. Yentl decided to play to his strengths and moved to fellatio. After several minutes of dedicated effort, Jeff still couldn't get hard. Yentl kept diligently on, though he was on the point of gagging. He'd never lost a man yet, and wasn't about to dash his reputation with a middle-aged Californian.

"Get on all fours, boy," Jeff growled. He reached over to the night table to grab a condom, which were arranged in fan formation on a saucer. Yentl moved into doggy pose and arched his back. After a few false starts, Jeff slipped inside Yentl easily. Soon Jeff pounding away behind him steadily, his meaty hands gripping his hips.

With Jeff finally out of his face, Yentl's mind was free to wander. The trick of the game, it seemed, was not to have a perfect body or to perform tricks on demand, but to successfully maintain an appearance of interest in the face of the banal. He thought about Morag, alone in his apartment, curled up on the sofa watching *Out of Africa*. It must be almost finished by now. If only Jeff had been more like Robert Redford and less like himself.

Thwack! A hot stinging pain jolted through him as Jeff landed two hard slaps on his buttocks.

"Who's fucking you, boy?" Jeff panted.

"You are, Daddy." Yentl closed his eyes. Surely Jeff the metronome couldn't last forever.

Jeff yelped and pulled out of Yentl. “Sorry boy. Daddy’s got muscle cramp. It’s the other hip.”

Yentl sighed and rolled over onto his back. He watched as Jeff pulled off the condom and started tugging at himself furiously, his face dripping with sweat. After what felt like a week, Jeff blew his load on the bedspread, just clear of Yentl’s face. It was an embarrassingly small puddle, given the Olympian effort taken to produce it. Jeff roared triumphantly and collapsed backwards onto the bed.

Yentl raised himself onto his knees. Jeff’s face was the colour of beetroot and still panting heavily.

“I’m just going to go and clean up.”

In the bathroom, Yentl pulled his first towel off the towel rail, flung it onto the floor, and helped himself to another towel from the pile. He deserved it. He stood under the shower for a luxurious ten minutes, losing his thoughts in the thundering blast of the power shower.

He emerged, wrapped demurely in one of the hotel bathrobes, Jeff was sitting up against the bedstead, flicking through the TV channels with a remote control. “Nice and clean again?” he said. His voice was thick and drowsy, and there was a fresh glass of champagne on the night table.

Yentl nodded. He would say as little as possible from now until the end.

Jeff said. “That was really special.”

“Thank you, Jeff.” Yentl’s mother had taught him always to accept a compliment graciously, though perhaps not with this scenario in mind.

“Would you like to stay a while?” Jeff said. “We could watch a movie.”

Yentl hesitated. It was past midnight. He wanted a sleeping pill and a glass of something hot and sweet to wash away the mediocrity of the evening. But it would be bad form to leave too soon. It never paid to burn bridges, even with someone he hoped he'd never see again.

“Of course.” Jeff extended an arm towards him. His biceps were still toned enough to bulge nicely as he pulled Yentl to his chest.

“What do you want to watch?”

“Do you have Sky Movies?”

“Let me look,” Jeff said, picking up the remote control again and jabbing at the buttons. “Oh. I think I... I might need my glasses to be able to...”

“Allow me.” Yentl sat up and took the remote out of Jeff’s hand. Why was it that even millionaires over the age of 50 were unable to work technology? He scrolled through the channels, stopping when he saw Meryl Streep in close-up. It was the scene when her ugly ex-husband comes to tell her that Robert Redford had been killed in a plane crash. Yentl watched as Meryl sat in silence, her hand trembling slightly as she raised her cigarette to her mouth.

“Come back here, boy,” Jeff growled. He took the remote out of Yentl’s hand and pulled him into a boozy embrace.

Yentl snuggled back into the warmth of Jeff’s body. “Can you turn it up, Daddy? This is one of my favourite scenes.”

The Miracle of the Rose

Adam moved down the stairs slowly, one step at a time, brushing his hands against the curved sides of the walls to steady himself in the darkness. The stairs, uneven and worn in the middle from generations of footsteps, creaked under his feet. The noise was getting louder. He'd woken suddenly and heard it, a low rhythmic rumbling, indistinct but persistent. He'd pulled on Wayne's bathrobe, and tied it loosely at his waist, then crept into the darkness of the hallway. Something in the night air commanded his absolute silence and stealth. He reached the bottom of the stairs, grimacing at the icy kiss of the floor tiles. The sound was coming from the library - voices, laughter, the vague swelling of violins - and light glowed from the gap at the bottom of the door. A bead of sweat trickled down the left side of his forehead. He brushed it away quickly with the back of his hand, and wrapped his fingers around the door handle. He paused for a moment, and threw the door open.

The library was filled with people, sat for a lavish banquet, talking and laughing, happily oblivious to his presence. Two men in dinner suits stood in one corner, straining at violins while a third pumped a harmonium like a blacksmith's bellows. Wayne and Don sat at the top end of the long table. Don was in a dinner jacket with a bow tie, and Wayne was wearing a floral kaftan and a headscarf with an orchid behind one ear.

Wayne smiled at Adam and stood up. "Hey, hon! You're just in time!" He gestured to an empty seat close to the door. The music halted, and everyone was hushed into silence.

Adam looked down at the table, pulling the folds of his robe together to cover his body. "I'm not dressed."

"It's ok, hon," Wayne beamed. "We've been waiting for you!"

A large silver lidded tureen sat on the table, with a carving knife and fork on either side. Don stood up, leaned down the table, and pulled the lid off the tureen. Adam forced himself to look down. Nestling between green leaves was his father's dismembered head. His eyes were open and cast upward, and there was an orange in his mouth. His father spat out the orange and rolled his eyes towards Adam. "Do it, you bastard," he said, flashing his tobacco-stained smile.

The violins struck up a feverish polka. Adam closed his eyes, raised the knife in front of his face, and plunged it downwards. Everyone screamed, and the room was plunged into blackness.

Adam sat up with a jolt, panting for breath. It was morning. The bedroom was flooded with hazy golden sunlight, and a teasing breeze caught the net curtains at the open window, rippling softly. It was all in place - the apple green walls, the four poster, the coiled limply around the curtain rail seemed like an old and welcome friend.

He wiped the sweat off his face, struggled out of bed, and pulled on his jeans. He found the postcard in his pocket, folded into quarters, thick and shiny like a playing card. He let his eyes dance over the words. He'd read it so many times that the words letters lost their shape and blurred into shapes, like after-images on his retina when you stared into the sun. He caught sight of his reflection in the mirror above the fireplace. His face was red and puffy, still full of sleep and fuzzy with stubble. It was his father's face. He remembered the boiled egg pallor of his father's eyes in the study and tried not to retch. The corrugated whirring of Wayne's coffee grinder broke the silence. Adam salivated in anticipation. This morning, he'd need a coffee the size of his head.

Wayne was bustling around in the kitchen with a skillet, frying bacon. His chef's apron read Priscilla: Queen of the Dessert in spangled pink lettering.

"Morning hon. You want some eggs?"

"No thanks." Adam shuffled to the stove and poured himself a coffee from the percolator. I'm ruined for Nescafe Instant for life, he thought.

Wayne disappeared into the kitchen. "So this morning, once you've done your business, we could swing by the farmer's market."

"OK," Adam said. "What's it like?"

"The food stalls are fantastic, though the rest of it is a little - rustic."

"It's a dump!" Adam turned around in his chair. Don was planted in an easy chair in the lounge, bathed in the chilly blue light of the screen. The spaniel rested her head on Don's knee, with an expression of weary contempt.

"Oh, ignore him," Wayne said, swatting his spatula in Don's direction. "It's not New York, but it's kinda fun. Anyway, we've been cooped up here all week. Mumma needs to go and stretch her legs."

“Sure,” Adam mumbled, his mouth full of eggs and toast. “These are great, thanks.”

“Oh hon, that’s the double cream. Not that you need to worry about that. I’ve been feeding you up all week and you’re still leaner than a bar of soap after a hard day’s wash.”

“Backpacking.” It’d been great for his shoulder definition too. Yentl would be wonderfully jealous. “Is Don coming?”

“No hon. It’ll just be you and me. Just like Thelma and Louise, though we won’t be driving off any cliffs.”

“Chance’d be a fine thing,” Don hollered.

“Guess I’d better have a shower. How far away is... Tours?”

“TOO-arr,” Don said. He stood up and walked into the kitchen, the spaniel trailing forlornly behind him. “It’s like two arses. Just not as firm or as tasty.”

“As if you’d know,” Wayne said. The morning Bitch-a-Thon had commenced.

“Thanks for breakfast,” Adam said, and ran back to his room, taking two stairs at a time.

The drive, in Wayne’s enormous black Range Rover, took around twenty minutes.

“It’s overkill, I know,” he said apologetically. I must look like Robocop to the locals.”

Wayne was wearing a floral Hawaiian shirt, fire engine red chinos, green Converse sneakers, a large white fedora and huge bug-eye sunglasses vaguely reminiscent of Yentl.

“Yep, that’s what I was thinking too.”

They passed a grim-looking stone building on the edge of the river. “That’s the local discotheque. You wouldn’t think to look at it, but on Saturday nights that baby is humming.”

“Are there many young people around?”

“Oh it’s for the farmers, not the kids. They hang up their scythes, get all dressed up and go do the tango. Some violins, one of those guys on a harmonium. It’s wild.”

Adam could feel the postcard in his pocket. It seemed to be throbbing, like an organ freshly ripped from the body but still alive and pumping blood.

“You sure you’re ok, hon?”

“Yeah. Just didn’t sleep too well.”

“We can pick up some stuff at the pharmacy. The French will literally sell you anything over the counter as long as you say ‘Je suis malade’ and pout.” Wayne pushed his lips into a moue.

“I’ll be right.”

“Merci beau-coup”, Wayne said approvingly, as the waitress brought their coffees. Adam ordered a café crème, which turned out to be an oily espresso with milk in a separate jug. It smelled strong and pungent, like gasoline.

Wayne scooped the foam off his cappuccino with his spoon. “Hon, you wouldn’t mind if I left y’all alone for a while? Mumma’s got a couple of little jobs that need doin’.”

“Sure. I’ll have a wander around the market.”

“YOU are an absolute angel. Now let me give you the lay of the land. Over there, you’ve got the fresh section. Go to the nougat stall. The boy who sells it is c-u-u-u-te. In that big ol’ marquee, you’ve got your live produce. You name it, the French will kill it, skin it, and sell it. I mean, they eat everything. I bought a pig’s nose in there once and left it on Don’s night table. Never saw it again.”

“OK, cool.”

“Let’s say an hour. Don’t do anything I wouldn’t do!”

Adam smiled. “At least that gives me room for manoeuvre.” Wayne readjusted his sunglasses, crossed the road, and disappeared into the crowd.

The clothes section was lost in a late 1970s timewarp: beige mackintoshes, patchwork leather bags and underwear stalls selling the kind of baggy elasticated Y-fronts his dad used to wear around the house on Saturday. The underwear stall owner had a magnificent walrus moustache and gestured towards a table of furry wind-up toy dogs. The man turned a key in the dog’s back and placed it back on the table. The dog started moving around jerkily, singing in French, its red eyes flashing with a Satanic expression.

“Aaah, les mignons! Pour votre copine, peut-être?” The man said, smiling, showing a row of brown discoloured teeth, like a broken picket fence.

“Ce’est combien?”

“Cinq Euros, monsieur!” the man said, scratching his stubbled chin.

Adam could smell the fish before he saw the covered market. His eyes lit up as he saw the displays of whole trout and carp, their eyes still shiny, and crustaceans still twitching in their shells. Pigs and rabbits were skinned and displayed whole with their innards still showing. There were glass cabinets filled with cheeses and pâté, and the infamous pâté de foie gras, that Wayne told him was made by force-feeding geese grain through a tube down their throats. (“Most things made from torturing animals taste fabulous. Why do you think I’ve stayed with Don for so long?”) The crusty baguettes and fresh honeycomb in jars made him long for Manuka honey on Vogel’s toast, dripping with butter.

The morning shoppers were mostly retirement age, short and squat, built more for utility than design, with broad shoulders, short arms and thick legs. They moved slowly and with total self-possession, stopping to chat and kiss each other gravely on both cheeks – even the men, something Adam had never seen done before except by gays or drag queens. Adam watched as an old woman about his mother’s age prodded at a leg of lamb with fat stubby fingers. He remembered the old women from his after school supermarket job, dressed in moth eaten coats, their eyes grey and watery with cataracts as they lingered over tinned beans, budget tea bags, a single roll of loo paper and yesterday’s bread, shakily counting out the coins from their change purses. Some of the snottier checkout girls ignored them, but Adam always made sure to smile and ask them about their weeks, and carry their groceries out to the bus stop for them if they looked shaky on their feet. His mother hadn’t gone shopping since he was 12. He and Hayden had done the weekly shop, pinching a few things here and there, and booked a weekly shop with Presbyterian Support Services after they’d left home. Even she might have liked shopping here - if she’d ever left the house.

The blood and offal smell was starting to make him retch. He moved outside, taking hungry gulps of fresh air. A friendly looking woman in the stall opposite sold perfumes and scented soaps. Adam picked up a bar of soap and held it to his nose. Rose: his mother’s name and her favourite scent. There was no point taking it home. She would only keep it in her chest of drawers, “For good”, she’d say, until it had lost its scent and colour, and never be thrown out.

Of course she had rushed like an idiot when Dad reappeared: prematurely aged, drunk, blathering, full of cancer but an empty wallet. What was it about doormats like her that made them long to please the men who’d abandoned them?

In the mid-distance, he could see Wayne, talking to a Permatanned boy in a white puffer jacket in the empty space between two stalls. Something was exchanged from hand to hand, that probably wasn't nougat. Wayne sauntered slowly towards the covered market, adjusting his hat and sunglasses. What a wonderfully hopeless spy he would make: Bond – Jane Bond.

“Hi-ii hon,” Wayne said, waving as he approached. A sour-faced woman gave Wayne a frosty stare. Noticing her, Adam moved in and kissed Wayne full on the lips.

“Hey, babe. Fancy another coffee?”

Wayne smiled, blushing a little around his plump cheeks. “We-ell, someone's fresh this morning. Don't mind if I do.”

“It's surprising what you can find even in small towns.”

“You're darn tootin'. So,” he said, clasping his hands together like a kid on Christmas morning. “What did you buy me?”

§

“You ready, hon?” Wayne yelled from the ground floor.

“Just a minute!” Adam called back. He looked around the room, taking one final look to make sure he had everything. He hoisted his backpack onto his shoulders, slipping his arms through the straps. It felt miraculously lighter. Wayne had washed and pressed all his clothes for him the night before, in between tears and a lot of tequila shots. He left his two remaining paperbacks on the desk in the bedroom – *The Vintner's Luck*, and his well-thumbed copy of *Nights In the Gardens of Spain* that always fell open to the sexy bits. He liked the thought of a little taste of Kiwi literature in this strange place.

Don was in the living room, slumped impassively on the sofa, watching television.

“So... see you later, Don. Thanks for everything.”

“No need to say goodbye just yet,” he answered curtly. “I'm driving you to the airport.”

“Really?”

“He sure is!” Wayne hollered. “He’s doing me a big favour today, aren’t you, hon? I’ve got this housewife in the village who’s two fabric swatches away from a nervous breakdown. I’m gonna go over and look at her shitty furniture and tell her what goes with beige. More beige, probably.”

“I see.” Adam wondered how long this had been planned for, and what Don had been promised in exchange for the favour.

Wayne zipped up his shiny puffer jacket. It was slightly too tight around the chest, giving him the appearance of a giant smiling ant.

“I’d better get going.”

“I’m going to miss you too,” Adam said.

“Oh, you just hush. Ten minutes back in Noo Zee-land with your big May-ori boy and you’ll forget all about us.”

“No. I won’t.” He wanted to puncture the airholes in Wayne’s coat and watch him fly around the room like a deflated balloon.

“Well look, hon, it’s been our pleasure. You keep in touch now, y’hear?”

Adam took off his backpack, and moved towards Wayne. He put his hands on his shoulders, and pressed his nose against Wayne’s.

“Bye, hon,” Wayne said, his voice wavering. “Oh good Lord. I’d better run, otherwise it’s racoon time.”

Adam watched as the Robocop reversed waywardly down the driveway, and disappeared in a spectacular cloud of exhaust smoke. The house was silent for a moment. The spaniel looked visibly pleased, and leapt into armchair in the hallway, curling into a pretzel shape.

“That’s the 10 o’clock number over,” Adam heard from behind him. “C’mon, Sugar Tits. Let’s get on the road.”

Don tapped his fingers on the steering wheel as Chet Baker crooned *Let’s Get Lost*.

“Extraordinary, isn’t he?” It was the first time either of them had spoken in nearly half an hour.

Adam chose his words carefully. “The first time I heard him, I couldn’t work out whether he was a man or a woman.”

“I had a similar experience meeting Wayne.”

Adam smiled. He wondered whether this was their foreplay – bickering about each other until they drove the rest away, and then fucking contentedly in private.

He rolled down the window, and took in the smoky smell of the autumn fields. Rows of late-flowering sunflowers, stood to attention in the warm afternoon light, their heads bowed like wounded soldiers.

“Have you ever read Genet?”

Adam turned and looked at Don. “Who?”

“Genet. G-E-N-E-T. The T is silent. The French are too lazy to pronounce all their consonants. Unlike Wayne, who always adds two more.”

“Did he go to prison?”

“Yup. No one reads him much anymore. I can’t imagine French authors are popular in your neck of the woods after they blew up that boat in the South Pacific. What was it called?”

Adam turned and looked at Don. “You heard about the *Rainbow Warrior*?”

“I was with the *Washington Post* in the mid-80s. Huge story. Everyone’s forgotten about it now, of course.”

“How long were you a journalist?”

“Fifteen years or so. It was fun,” Don reached over to turn down the music. “I retired when Clinton came in. It’s never as much fun writing about people who aren’t idiots.”

“So, Genet...”

“He grew up not far from here. Lived in foster homes mostly, then prison. Shoplifting, prostitution: the usual. Managed to get himself kicked out of the French Foreign Legion, which is pretty much impossible.”

“What did he write about?”

“Prison rape, mostly. Most of it’s pretty bad, but the cultural elite loved him. It was very cool in the 60s to hang out with a bugger.”

“Did you ever meet him?”

“I’m not that old,” Don snarled. “I wouldn’t have been his type, anyway. He liked anything with a revolutionary beret and a big black cock.”

“Nice if you can get it.”

“It sure is,” Don said. The car slowed as they approached the toll booth. Don plucked a Euro coin from the dashboard and handed it to Adam. “Stick that in your slot, sunshine.” The machine obligingly belched out a small paper ticket.

“Give me that,” Don said.

“Is he worth reading?”

Don grimaced. “The life is more important than the work. He had these fascinating relationships with his exes. They were always straight and married. They’d fuck Genet but then go back to their wives. Then he’d set them with a house with the royalties from his latest book, and then he’d move from place to place, visiting them.”

“The wives must’ve loved that.”

“God, can you imagine. I think he was trying to recreate a family, but one he was never completely welcome in. A lot of poofs are like that. They’re too fucked up for a relationship, so they latch onto other people’s. You do know what I mean, don’t you?”

“I suppose,” Adam shrugged. He turned the CD player back up. Chet was crooning *You Don’t Know What Love Is*.

Don leaned across the dashboard and jabbed at the Eject button, spitting the CD out. “I detest cheap sentiment. I think there’s some Miles Davis in the glove compartment.”

“I’m ok with it off.”

“Suit yourself,” Don shrugged. The car drove on in silence, as the afternoon sun turned the barley fields to rivers of gold.

As he stood in the check in queue, Adam pulled out his cellphone and turned it on. The phone reception had been crap at the Bates Motel, and he’d turned it off to save the battery. The phone spluttered to life, and croaked a series of insect beeps. There were five new messages: two from a French mobile phone provider welcoming him to France, one from Morag (“*Bonjour? Ça va? Vous retournez à la maison?*”), and one from his mother confirming the details of the funeral: Dunedin First Church, 2pm, Friday; a week from today. Funny to think that his father’s final moments would be spent with a bunch of stiff-collared squares and weeping old women. Better to drive him to the nearest racetrack and leave him in the carpark, propped up in the front seat with a bottle of Scotch. The last message was from Wayne. “*Hope drive with Don was ok. Did he give you the Genet speech? Missing you already.*”

Adam took the postcard out of his pocket and unfolded it. The creases warped like veins through the card, and the corners were starting to fray.

“Hi mister. How’s the big wide world? The kids are good. Wiremu asks when u coming home. I miss you. Let’s try again if u want. Ko koe i roto i toku ngakau ake ake. Mack.”

Adam brought the postcard up to his lips. “You bloody beauty,” he whispered into the postmark. He approached the counter and handed his passport to the Qantas check-in girl. Her name badge read Kylie.

The girl looked back at Adam and beamed a giant toothpaste commercial grin. “Thanks, Mr Sullivan. You’re boarding at Gate 4 in about 50 minutes. Looking forward to going home?”

Adam gave the girl a sultry wink. “Bloody oath.”