

22 February 2021

Dear Mrs Stanca Komerac,

Greetings from Wellington, across the harbour Whanganui-A-Tara, the Tararua Ranges, the Ruahine Forest, Te Urewera, Raukumara Forest, launching off Wharekahika, swallowed up and tossed by the air born froth of the Pacific Ocean, drying out over Baja, parched by the Sonora Desert, sneaking through the rusty metal slats of Nogales' border wall, zooming through the late summer lighting strikes of New Mexico, wafting in the tall grass prairies and corn tasselled pollen of middle America, drawn up towards the cooling waters of the Great Lakes into The Resurrection Cemetery, ironically, located in a town named Justice. I am your great grand-daughter, Julieanna, born a mere six months after your passing to Barbara, daughter of your daughter, Rosealia. Yes, we've never met. I have never seen you in the flesh or even in an image. I have never visited the family farm in Hinsdale that you were so proud of and worked so hard to flourish. And I have never visited your grave, plot number 200822449, a modest stone, level to the ground, calling out your name, and more so, calling you out as mother, Maika.

Though many members of our extended family have mentioned how much I look, act, live, think, make and emote like you, it is not until now that I have felt the desire to reach out to you. Forgive me if it presumes that this likeness automatically builds a rapport or assumes a deep blood bond. The thing is, that I am in Aotearoa, where family, land and nature, are everything, I am learning what that means only now. It is only until I come to terms with where I come from, who I come from, how that shapes me, that can I even begin to fathom a sense of home and belonging in this place. Lots of learning, re- and un-learning. It is, as some have recently called out, a quest towards becoming a good Pākehā. To be useful in this work of decolonisation, Pākehā need to be clear in our identity — to wear it, own it, not flaunt or wield it. To embrace it, not escape it. No small task. Not a task I can put off any longer.

With borders closed and long-distance travel all but halted, I find myself precariously grounded on an island, as an island, now orphaned, on an island with my daughter Chora and dogs, with no choice, and, at the same time, all choice, to find my feet in soil that, though now familiar, is often not, in soil that is as fraught as I am to my identity, my family, my history, in soil that is simultaneously fertile and fragile, its potential and progressiveness exceedingly hopeful, only anchored by burdens, blames and shames of long- and short-term cultural transgressions that have yet to be mended. And I am not sure they ever will be. Deboarding that cross-Atlantic sail after a six-week journey, what did you experience? Think? Feel? as you stood amongst the bustling streets of 1910 Manhattan grappling to read maps and signs, count money, and find accommodation, clutching all your worldly belongings. Legally aliens, for you, perhaps alien to a land of plenty. For us, alien to paradise.

Living that small percentage of gypsy blood, travellers, nomads, yearning to make home as mobile itinerants, your path led to the cornfields, the soybeans, the livestock and the dirt. It was early 1997 when we disembarked a long-haul flight in Auckland. My husband and two-year old daughter in tow, with no idea how our lives would be changed evermore. Passing through customs, native birdsongs, carved barge boards, and feeling the heat of deep summer weigh on my pale white female American skin, a precursor of events to come. Our three cardboard boxes loaded on a cart, we walked the green line between the international and domestic terminals. Ironically enough, our departure from the USA, like your journey to the USA, was a search for a better life, one that was more sustainable, more progressive for women, Indigenous people, and alternative lifestyles, lots of land to build and grow things, and rugged weather and topography. I dreamt of grocery stores with no packaging, no use of pesticides, no prejudice or racism, a cacophony of languages, living year-round in sandals and shorts, swimming in the sea daily, a backyard of bees, goats, dogs, and chickens, learning to weave flax and fishing. That's how the travel websites described this promised land.

My residency visa failed to come with a device to re-tune my ears and tongue; people were not speaking the same English I knew. They were too polite to tell me that they could not understand my accent while often all I could hear was a melodic series of tones pouring from their mouths that always rose at the end of their sentences. Lifting off. Vowels are the gremlins that wreak havoc for me in this place. We overdosed in the rich butter, cream, ice cream, coffees, shortbread and pies unaware of the caloric consequences. Our tastebuds irrevocably awoken to the sensuality of fresh food, tasting new soil. As an architect, I was puzzled by the city of ugly buildings surrounded by small vintage wooden houses sprawling across the surrounding hills without any respect for sun or wind direction. Walking into our new home, Randell Cottage, was like stepping back in time to an interior world of wallpaper, paisley, chintz and colonial period furniture probably shipped from the motherland. The property manager was horrified to find our toddler sitting on my lap drawing on a piece of paper resting on the

freshly refinished table. Without words, her face grimaced at the realities of a toddler's curiosity where much of the world is explored through mouthing, fondling, and testing the limits of bodily movement. prospect of damage to this historic dwelling. Did the preservationists not remember that the first dwellers, William and Sarah, had ten children?

This house did not match my desire for a new homeland nor my homing desire, a slight paradox between wanting to stabilise, be grounded, to settle. Suffice to say, our stay in this sweet colonial cottage was short-lived. Not home, overly homely, un-settling, unhomely. I longed for fresh air and reprieve from propriety and protocol. This cottage represented the idea of home I had sought to flee- stifling comfort, decorum. I had not migrated all this way to repeat that history. My homing desire met face first with my diasporic journey, where anchors can be lifted like potted plants, as Avtar Brah describes, the boundary between migration and settlement associated with the words 'route' and 'root' put homeland and strangeland in a non-binary relationship. A homing pigeon travels to return. So does a boomerang. So, say some, to karma. Little did I know what this change of landscape would trigger. All strange. All familiar. Out of step. Out of sorts. Out of water. Breathing and breathless.

Ending here, for now. Knowing that, as the world rolls over, pulling the blanket of darkness around me, it is sliding off of you, for now. Thanks for listening. Nice to meet you, if even virtually.

Sincerely,

Julieanna

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