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‘Ongoing loss, a wounding dislocation’ Displacement and Trauma in New Zealand Literature

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Abstract

This thesis comprises two sections: a critical section in which the concepts of trauma and displacement are examined and analysed in the ways in which they are depicted in New Zealand literature, and a creative section which consists of a novella entitled *The Strong Ones* written with those same themes in mind. In the critical section, the notion that there are types of displacement, ranging from the large-scale to the small, that cause subsequent forms of trauma to emerge as a consequence is explored, and this notion is given creative expression in the following section.

The critical section utilises three key literary texts with which to further study this link between displacement and trauma in New Zealand literature. Those texts are *Once Were Warriors*, *Auē*, and *The Savage Coloniser Book*. I read each of these texts with the Developmental-Ecological model of Urie Bronfenbrenner in mind, the better to have some manner of gauging specific societal levels of disruption and pathology. I incorporate theorists such as Peter Adey with his work on *The Handbook of Displacement,* Anna Westin's *Embodied Trauma and Healing: Critical conversations on the Concept of Health,* and Susie O'Brien's *What the World Might Look Like: Decolonial stories of resilience and refusal,* among others to help frame the discussion. These theorists concur that trauma tends to go on far beyond the initial causative event. I argue that most if not all trauma in the key texts I have selected eventuates as a result of Bronfenbrenner's macro level of disruption. In other words, that wider, larger contexts for displacement historically and observably tend to trickle down to the small, narrower contexts and the people who live within them.

The creative portion of my thesis consists of the novella entitled *The Strong Ones*. This novella follows the life of one-character nicknamed Hapuka, a twenty something Pasifika who is employed by the local abattoir, and his struggle to regain some semblance of forward momentum following a defining, traumatic event in his past. The themes of displacement and a kind of ongoing, reverberating suffering are fleshed out in various ways, alongside a cast of characters representing different aspects of the New Zealand/South Island working-class.

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Thanks, and acknowledgement must also go to my writing tutor, Joan Fleming, who suggested I embark on a Masters in Creative Writing in the first place. It is thanks to these two wise and talented people that I have attempted, let alone finalised, anything at all with regards to the writing of fiction. I am grateful for their input and oversight.

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Table Of Contents

Abstract ii

Acknowledgements iii

Critical Section – 'Ongoing loss, a wounding dislocation' Displacement and Trauma in New Zealand Literature

Introduction 1

Chapter One – Once Were Warriors 6

Chapter Two – Auē 11

Chapter Three – The Savage Coloniser 16

Conclusion 22

Bibliography 23

Bridging Statement 25

Creative Section – *The Strong Ones*

Part One 27

Part Two 48

Part Three 69

Introduction: 'Ongoing loss, a wounding dislocation' Displacement and Trauma in New Zealand Literature.

The concept of trauma is an evolving phenomenon. It seems to suffuse everything and take a multitude of forms. Displacement, also, is becoming increasingly visible as a present day acknowledged force in the academic and cultural sphere (Adey P, 2020). That these modern phenomena are linked is not a matter much up for scholarly inquiry in today's marketplace of ideas – fields as diverse as sociology, feminism, post-colonial studies, political history, psychiatry – to name but a few, enshrine this substantive link at the centre of their thinking. As anthropologist Sanaullah Khan points out in the *Global History of Trauma,*

> […]from the awareness that the colonial period was a twisted one, where political and psychopathological oppression were structurally knotted together: The truth is that colonization, in its very essence, already appeared to be a great purveyor of psychiatric hospitals. (Khan S, Schwebach E, 2020)

It is the variant of displacement that accompanies the process of settler-colonisation, and the settling of New Zealand specifically, that I will explore in this thesis. The ways in which this displacing, or "deterritorialising" (Veracini, L. 2008) of indigenous populations and others, in selected literary texts, are framed – and how this process then would go on to manifest its' effects through trauma is my area of concern for this thesis. Post-colonial theorist Lorenzo Veracini phrases the displacement-trauma connection as follows;

> A settler society is by definition premised on the traumatic, that is, violent, replacement and/or displacement of Indigenous others[…]More than other political regimes, a settler colonial project, as it dispenses with the labour of colonised others, is predominantly about territory. While it is absolutely crucial, the territorialisation of the settler community is ultimately premised on a parallel and necessary deterritorialisation of Indigenous outsiders. There is no way to avoid a traumatic outcome. (Veracini, L. 2008)

How displacement invariably leads to trauma is a question central to this thesis, in which I explore how this link is reflected in New Zealand literature. New Zealand is of course a settler-colonial nation state, settled primarily by British and Scottish colonialists through the displacing of the Māori inhabitants in the 1800's. All New Zealand literature then, it follows, is necessarily post-colonial literature (Childs, P., & Williams, P. (1997) Furthermore, all New Zealand literature could be argued to be literature of displacement – and so, as I have outlined, literature of trauma as well.

The bedrock of my argument borrows from Veracini's assertion that colonisation necessarily denotes trauma in that 'there is no way to avoid a traumatic outcome' (Veracini, L. 2008). Following this I argue that any literature written in a settler colonial context, including the literature I discuss in this thesis, is by definition a kind of traumatised literature. The socio-political and historical context that underpins New Zealand writers and their writing means that, in addition to whatever else the subject matter may comprise – romance or familial conflict, a struggle for identity or the quest for financial independence; these elements find themselves framed in a conversation always fundamentally, ultimately, about displacement. Displacement, as I will demonstrate in the examinations that follow, is the precursor to many of the traumas that arise in New Zealand life – reflected in key New Zealand literature by Māori and Pasifika authors.

To help demonstrate this finding, I have undertaken close readings of three contemporary or near contemporary New Zealand texts. Alan Duff's seminal *Once Were Warriors (1990)*, Becky Manawatu's *Auē (2019)* and Tusiata Avia's book of poetry *The Savage Coloniser Book (2020).* I read these works with an eye to how trauma is framed in the texts, and how displacement is connected to these traumas. I explore the commonalities between these narratives – the violence and the sense of abiding, multi-level disenfranchisement that could be read in each. Interdisciplinary scholar Peter Adey argues that disenfranchisement is,

> […]about displacement as process as well as event. Displacement is often framed in the guise of spatial exclusions or 'expulsions' from home and living space as part of a wider diagnosis of unstable and disconcerting times. Yet, […] displacement is commonly experienced as an ongoing loss that a language of expulsion risks eliding. (Adey P, 2020)

It is this 'ongoing loss' and displacement as process as well as event that is particularly relevant to the examination sections of this thesis, but doubly so in that this loss finds itself reflected in my own creative portion of the thesis as well. The novella that I present for the creative portion of this thesis is also written in that tradition of displacement trauma. Adey also explains that,

> They can also be multiple rather than singular, and multiple in the sense of persisting over peoples' lives in a slow kind of wounding dislocation or in a manner of a stretched-out duress. […] might call this a kind of 'debility' through displacement, well beyond any kind of severing punctual moment. (Adey P, 2020)

To aid in the consideration of displacement, trauma and how they are framed in the texts I have selected three literary texts to discuss in this thesis – *Once Were Warriors*, *Auē* and *The Savage Coloniser Book* – I also turn to the Developmental-Ecological model of Urie Bronfenbrenner. This

mode of considering the holistic ways in which a human life is impacted by its societal contexts bears particular relevance to my area of focus. I included this sociological model as well as the literary and postcolonial theories covered by this thesis because the Developmental-Ecological model, due to its makeup, serves as an ideal filter through which to examine both trauma and displacement. In lieu of supplying a postcolonial lens through which to consider displacement - or an established psychological theorist with which to engage with the topic of trauma - this sociological and holistic model can be used to address both by its separate metric.

I focus on the following key terms in this thesis (and expand on these in the glossary): displacement, trauma, the Developmental Ecological Model (incorporating human complexity into Macro, Meso and Micro layers) and Tikanga Māori.

Key Terms

Displacement. This term originated with Freud in psychoanalytic discourses but has since been adapted to many other areas (Freud, S. 1913). Displacements most notable usage in recent times has been in the field of postcolonial studies, with special emphasis given to the lived experiences of migrant communities and their often-violent forcible removal from their lands. This thesis, given its chosen topic, will utilise the definition of displacement that bears directly on the experience of the settler-colonial variant of communal dispossession (Robinson D. 2013).

Trauma. This is another term with several applications. In the context of this thesis the word 'trauma' is most usefully defined as a type of psychological wound that can be and often is intergenerational.

> […]since Freud, trauma has been understood as becoming a trauma belatedly, or after its own fact as trauma is made manifest by the traces it leaves after it withdraws, that is, by its aftermath and its effects of repetition and deferral. (Westin, A. 2022)

Bronfenbrenner's **Developmental Ecological Model** is a sociological and psychological metric by which to measure human development across several holistic levels. Bronfenbrenner's grounding theory was based on the observation that life does not happen in isolation or in discrete sections – life itself is holistic, and so it follows that experience and trauma is as well. Bronfenbrenner's model simplified and condensed all human experience into layers of complexity he designated **Macro, Meso** and **Micro**, respectively (Bronfenbrenner, U. 1999).

In this context Macro refers to levels of society and phenomenon of the largest or broadest kind: culture, religion, nation-state. Meso refers to the institutional level: businesses, groups, schools, churches, governmental bodies. Micro refers to the individual level, person to person, families, friendships.

In formulating my argument and recognising the primacy of displacement in New Zealand literature, I have included a theoretical perspective that stems from the lived experiences of the First nations peoples being displaced. The use of Kaupapa Māori – literally 'project Māori' – is a productive ideological perspective within Māori communities that emphasise the importance of Māoritanga, the Māori culture, Te reo Māori, the Māori language, and traditional Māori ways of doing things. However, this project, like many projects, is difficult to define and as an evolving movement has scant literature to use as reference. Of more use to the arguments in this thesis is **Tikanga Māori**, an older and consequently less fluid set of definitions and moral prescription.

Tikanga is a broad Māori term meant to encapsulate, in some dialects, the 'right/correct/just way of doing things' (Fozdar, McGavin 2017). A philosophical worldview that can be translated as follows:

> *Whanaungatanga* – 'the centrality of relationships to Māori life'. *Manaakitanga* – 'nurturing relationships, looking after people, and being very careful how others are treated'. *Mana* – 'the importance of spiritually sanctioned authority and the limits on Māori leadership'. *Tapu* – 'respect for the spiritual character of all things'. *Utu* – 'the principle of balance and reciprocity'. As a whole, these values reflect the importance of recognising and reinforcing the interconnectedness of all living things and maintaining balance within communities. (Fozdar, McGavin 2017)

My intentions for the consideration of Tikanga is to demonstrate, through close readings of the texts, and in the process of pursuing my orienting question, some measure of the contrast between the practised values of the 'displacers' and the espoused values of the deterritorialised (Veracini, L. 2008). The principle of Utu for instance, revolving around reciprocity and balance as it does, is already contrary at its core to the very notion of settlership.

*

These key terms will provide theoretical frameworks and perspectives with which to consider the question; how does displacement lead to trauma in New Zealand literature? The inclusion of Tikanga Māori highlights a disparity between the value systems espoused by coloniser and colonised demographics. Are the implications of such a disparity, an increased cultural sensitivity towards the trauma attached to displacement?

I borrow from Tikanga, with its set of rules or guidelines, along with Bronfenbrenner's Developmental-Ecological model with its frameworks of holistic context, and theorists and scholars concerned with colonisation, trauma and displacement, to form the vital parameters within which to consider examples of New Zealand literature. *Once Were Warriors*, *Auē* and *The Savage Coloniser Book* respectively, show a particular vision of the different authors and poets – sometimes gritty, often confronting and always distinctly New Zealand in character. As the thesis concludes and the close readings come to an end, I see with renewed clarity the fact that this literary New Zealand distinctiveness is a distinctiveness due to cultural displacement. And to what it owes the 'ongoing losses' (Khan S, Schwebach E, 2020) and 'wounding dislocations' (Adey, P 2020) displacement leaves in its wake.

Chapter One – Once Were Warriors

Once Were Warriors is a gritty, social realist novel written by New Zealand author Alan Duff in 1990. The novel revolves around the disintegration of a Māori family, the Hekes, in an urbanised, welfare dependent setting. Beth Heke is depicted as a woman torn between the love she has for her husband Jake - "I love the black, fist-happy bastard" (Duff, 5) - and the sense that the lives they are leading together are incomplete in ways that deepen and evolve as the novel continues. Jake is similarly torn, though his character's internal conflict manifests as a schism, between his feeling aggrieved and harassed by forces beyond his comprehension, and the great palliative afforded him via the mechanisms of physical violence. The character of Jake reflects in one chapter that,

> Just as he woke, almost invariably, with a desire to punch someone, which grew quickly to vivid imaginings of wrongs done him, slights, looks, and so he feeling hurt and then – naturally enough, as he saw it – wanting to right things by the only way he knew how: with his fists. Man, I juss wake up wanting to *punch* somefuckin one. (Duff, 58)

It is between these opposing and symbiotic personalities, and in their dysfunctional shadow, that the children do their best to grow and mature. These children, Nig, Abe, Boogey, Grace, Polly and Huata respectively, have their trajectories traced in the book, each reacting to their circumstances in disparate yet related ways. Nig, the eldest, is drawn to violent gang-life. Abe and Boogey indulge in petty crime and misdemeanours, as well as truancy, the consequences of which come to bear as a major plot point with regards to Boogey. Grace suffers various types of assault, including sexual, and drug dependency which leads to another inflexion point in the narrative, while the remaining two children, too young to have much agency, nonetheless show signs of childhood neglect and trauma. Polly habitually loses control of her bladder while sleeping, and Huata goes nowhere without the protective presence of her doll (Duff, 1990).

The plot of the novel is seen primarily from the two central parental perspectives, those of Jake and Beth, and largely follows the shape of their doomed and tragic love for one another. As Jake's violence towards Beth increases, so too does Beth's disquiet and introspection, which leads her to reconsider matters between them, as it causes her to reconsider her relationship with her Māori identity.

In the *Dynamics of Cultural Trauma* (1968) psychiatrist Frantz Fanon observed that

> "When the Native is confronted with the colonial order of things he finds he is in a state of permanent tension. The settler's world is a hostile world which spurns the native." (Fanon, 52)

Fanon continues by remarking,

> "The settler keeps alive in the Native an anger which he deprives an outlet; the native is trapped in the tight links of the chains of colonialism." (Fanon, 54)

He observed from his clinical work in colonial North Africa that "The colonized man will first manifest this aggressiveness which has been deposited in his bones against his own people." (Salzman, 2001)

While Fanon's terminology is outdated, his observations of colonial displacement trauma endure.

In *Once Were Warriors,* the Hekes are the beneficiaries of a misdirected fury implanted at the historical point of cultural displacement (Veracini, L. 2008). Jake, in this case, is very much the Indigenous person trapped in the tight links of the chains of colonisation.

Fanon argues that, "This stress of the context, then, is manifested within families and communities and thereby transmits trauma across generations through such mechanisms as domestic violence and abuse." (Salzman, 2001)

In *Once Were Warriors* there is a trauma and sense of violence that is represented across the family unit. Bronfenbrenner's Ecological model would have it that the Macrosystem level of trauma – colonisation, cultural disenfranchisement, disruption of traditional economic sources, the stripping of the language from Māori historically – has permeated down through the levels, the rungs, the concentric circles of the new settler-colony society framework and has made its way into the shattered home Duff presents us with (Salzman, 2001).

A sense of shattered homes and exile, displacement and dispossession imbue much of foundational postcolonial scholar Edward Said's writing where he remarks,

> Exile is strangely compelling to think about but terrible to experience. It is the unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place, between the self and its true home: its essential sadness can never be surmounted. And while it is true that literature and history contain heroic, romantic, glorious, even triumphant episodes in an exile's life, these are no more than efforts meant to overcome the crippling sorrow of estrangement. The achievements of exile are permanently undermined by the loss of something left behind forever. (Said, E. 2022)

This cultural trauma, this displacement or exile would not be allowed to have occurred, it could be argued, were traditional Māori values such as Manaakitanga with its especial care and concern as relates the treatment of others been prioritised. The same argument could be made as relates to Utu, the principle of balance and reciprocity in all things; if it had been appropriately and customarily observed (Fozdar, McGavin 2017). This is one of the ironies I find as I read *Once Were Warriors* in particular, that some of the exact remedies of poor societal feeling or crumbling mores that would have protected the modern Māori from those 'chains of colonisation' and their attendant aftereffects, are precisely those values entirely sundered and stripped away as a part of the settler colonial process (Fanon, F. 1968).

The author of *Once Were Warriors*, Alan Duff, approaches these considerations from a disparate angle to me and phrased his own position when interviewed thusly, "They're not there because of a lack of Tikanga – they're there because of bad parenting." (Duff, RNZ 2023) And when pressed to expand, Duff did so; "How many years are we gonna use that excuse? How long are we gonna say postcolonialism made us like this? And when are we gonna start saying 'it's on us to get us out of this'." (Duff, RNZ 2023).

Decolonial scholar Susie O'Brien reflects on this outlook in *What the World Might Look Like* (2024). O'Brien argues that,

> Detaching the mechanism of the state from Indigenous life – including federal, treaty-mandated responsibilites for financial support and social welfare – is coded as a win for Indigenous people; socioeconomic precarity with all responsibility downloaded to individuals reinterpret[ed] … as a new freedom from unnatural interference and enforced dependency. This model of resilience further reinforces settler colonialism by both under and overestimating the nature and extent of Indigenous trauma. (O'Brien, S. 2024)

This is a sentiment that Duff revisits again and again in *Once Were Warriors*. In essence, that while Māori people had been forcibly displaced, taken from their traditional lands and having had their language stripped from them, the ethos of accountability to the self and the possibilities of upward mobility will rescue Māori as a culture. An end not to be achieved by, in Duff's words 'slavish adherence to out-dated ideas':

> '…as I've said to my pakeha detractors or antagonists; you people, you white liberals are advocating that our children go back to learning our traditional stick games etc etc sitting cross legged on the ground, playing in the dust. Whilst you are teaching your children

> computer skills, and how to code – they've got financial literacy, and they know exactly how to go about getting a mortgage'. (Duff, RNZ 2023)

In the text of *Once Were Warriors* itself, we see this ideal laid out bare when Beth thinks joyfully to herself, 'Self-help! She went to sleep at nights with that catchcry exclaiming itself in her increasingly happier mind. Her heart. Like this self-help idea was so beautifully all-embracing it was a wonder they, the Māori people in general, hadn't cottoned onto it before'. (Duff, 201)

In the context of Bronfenbrenner's model, Beth is viewing what is unquestionably a trauma, a 'wounding dislocation' (Adey P, 2020) of an entire family from the Macro level – the level of culture and nation-state – and advocating the solutions to this problem be found at the Micro level. Or, in *Once Were Warrior's* vernacular, the level of self-help and personal accountability, as Duff has framed it in the text. This is an interesting phenomenon in *Once Were Warriors* and is one replicated and reproduced at several points through-out the novel. This sentiment though, espoused by Duff's characters passionately and repeatedly, does seem to fly in the face of scholar Peter Adey's own findings on the matter – who when considering colonisation,

> […]and the study of displacement more broadly, requires us to think of, and respond to, displacement as so much more than simply people being forced to leave their place of residence. Displacement transpires in kaleidoscopic forms, and losses are corporeal, cultural, haunting, and real, just as responses to it are lived as complex, politically charged, and intimately felt in the short and long term. (Adey P, 2020)

Bronfenbrenner was firm on the decided matter of trauma as stemming from a macro level and requiring remedy and address on that same level (Salzman, 2001). O'Brien confirms this view arguing that,

> Healing from trauma begins to be narrated as a prerequisite to self-determination. If the Indigenous don't heal, they may not be able to self-govern; in any case, they would need to heal to be self-sufficient ... This healing would occur while capitalist development might still displace one or require one's land – a little like accepting being bandaged by your armed assailant while he is still ransacking your house. (O'Brien, S. 2024)

In *Once Were Warriors*, the central injustice and pervading wound that reverberates through each aspect of the novel, can be readily identified as displacement. The process of settlership, with its implicit violence and dislocations, hem the characters in this novel in from the macrosystemic level (Salzman, 2001).

Once Were Warriors, I argue is part of a literary tradition with trauma at its foundation. The novel offers its own potential solutions to the problems it underscores, calling to mind some of decolonial writer O'Brien's reminders that,

> It is the singular capacity of creative writers (and other cultural producers) to invite us to inhabit the energetic nexus of metaphor and materiality in a way that allows us to think both critically and creatively about where we are and where we might be going. (O'Brien, S. 2024)

Bronfenbrenner writes explicitly and repeatedly that "trauma reverberating from the macro level cannot be assuaged at the levels of the meso or the micro with any efficacy," (Salzman, 2001) and there are limits to what creativity alone might be asked to appreciably improve or excavate.

This anger, this displacement and cultural homelessness that Jake and his family embody in *Once Were Warriors* prevent, by default, the ordinary, healthy pursuit of an acceptable level of well-being. The Hekes cannot pursue any conception of the good life while Jake remains in Fanon's chains (Fanon, F. 1968). From Bronfenbrenner's cultural-spiritual macrosystem down to the family unit, the interpersonal, the microsystem, the mental health of this family is near irretrievable in its level of trauma. Beth's drinking, Jake's violence – they serve as macrosystem to their own children's micro, who alternatively and respectively, become embroiled in the state system, join a gang, and commit suicide. Colonial displacement is represented as a storm for this family, and all the "cleaning up and planting again" a person can advocate for these characters might seem more than a little optimistic contextually. I read *Once Were Warriors* through the lens of O'Brien's analogy "a little like accepting being bandaged by your armed assailant while he is still ransacking your house (O'Brien, S. 2024)" that Duff has his characters bandaging their arms while the house is still actively being ransacked by those providing solutions to the ransacking.

Chapter Two - Auē

Auē is a lush social realist and crime novel written by Becky Manawatu in 2019. It covers the tangled and complex dissolution of a family in the aftermath of gang violence in rural New Zealand. The story centres around two brothers, Taukiri and Arama. Taukiri, the older teenager leaves his younger preteen brother with their Aunt and Uncle in the opening passages and sets out to make his way in the world and do his best to forget the various traumas that drive him on. Taukiri is beset by internal anxieties and pressures, for teenage psychology to the traumatic recent death of his and Arama's parents. The character of Arama begins the novel, alternatively resenting his brother's perceived abandonment and desirous of Taukiri's return, while grieving in his child-like way, the parental loss. Arama's own trauma is depicted via his habit of placing band-aids on the areas where he feels pain, even if that pain isn't necessarily physical.

> Today, I counted up seventy-four plasters left from the box of a hundred I found, and told Aunty Kat we should always keep more than one box in the house. We lived in the wops after all. It seemed like she didn't hear me so I snuck into her handbag and put 'plasters lots' on her grocery list. (Manawatu, 27)

As befits their disparate ages, Taukiri and his teenage dysfunction and resentment manifest via angry outbursts whereas the young Arama is periodically swept up in a sadness that he is still too young to properly understand. A sadness that manifests as a hurt in *Auē*, the type of internal pain which the child then goes on to apply a band-aid to in the narrative. Other central characters are the aforementioned Aunty Kat, who endures an abusive and demoralising relationship with Uncle Stu. As the novel continues, these different characters find their traumas and their arcs interweaving and coalescing in sometimes dramatic fashion. The spectre of gang life and culture rises before then in the narrative, as does the primacy of the ocean and of nature,

> In a weird way, this car parked beside a broken-down house was home now. The sea was close enough for me to hear the constant hit and pull and drag she made at the shore, but I slept with my car door open this time. I didn't curl up. I extended my legs and let my feet hang out. (Manawatu, 38)

Auē is a complex novel in which several themes interweave and coalesce. The uprootedness and loss of the familiar, whether that familiarity is incarnated in loved ones or geography, being one. Both brothers are united in their sense of loss throughout. Both brothers are in their respective and collective ways displaced.

Using Bronfenbrenner's theory as a lens, I argue that this is displacement trauma at the micro level. Within the family unit, for Taukiri and Arama, there has been both huge loss with respect to the parents and also the dislocation of a familiar locale, and one another's presence (Salzman, 2001). While this level of trauma and upset is significant to the plot of the novel – and the ways in which each character in turn confronts or overcomes this aspect of trauma goes on to speak to the arcs they both are on, I would argue that this is – primarily a depiction of grief. There is a universality to this theme of *Auē* that broadens my posed question for this thesis, of: how does displacement manifest as trauma in New Zealand Literature?

After all, youth who don't happen to belong to colonised ethnicities lose their parents as well and grieve for them. There is a parallel that offers itself up several times over the novel of course – the loss and displacement and uprootedness of the brothers, as depicted, on those occasions serving as possibly being analogous narratively, for the loss and uprootedness of Māori people taken as a whole. Manawatu deftly captures some of the Māori specific embodied uprootedness in the gang scenes:

> 'You mad, baby? Oh, baby. Don't be mad. We been on a run. Three days, no sleep. Farrr. But the gear we got, baby, the gear. We gonna get rich. I'm gonna buy you things. So many things. Farrr.' And she felt terrible that she'd been such a slut, made such a fool of him, while he was working to make their future full of things (Manawatu, 90).

Gang life, and its compromised, watered down role as stand in for more healthy forms of community, makes for a significant series of plot points in *Auē*. Most major characters in the novel are connected in some way to this segment of New Zealand society, and it is here where the themes of misdirected aggression and traditional masculinity without its moorings show themselves more transparently. The character Jade reflects on gang life,

> Hash was nasty. 'Just as nasty as Coon, only secret about it,' she said. But the one-mores were piling up. One more beating, one more toke, one more drink, one more shot. It was something of a dying (Manawatu, 112).

Michael Salzman would think of this degeneracy and steady decline as a predictable aspect of the cultural trauma expected in the wake of colonisation, in which,

> Cultural disintegration and dislocation have been associated with certain patterns of personal and social dysfunction such as substance abuse, hopelessness, and suicide. In order to comprehend and address these expressions of human suffering, it is necessary to consider

> essential psychological functions of culture, predictable consequences of traumatic cultural disruption, and implications for recovery. (Salzman, 2001)

I am reminded also of Adey's 'slow kind of wounding dislocation' (Adey, P 2020) and the way in which Manawatu does a thorough and forensic job in *Auē* of underscoring how 'Displacement transpires in kaleidoscopic forms, and losses are corporeal, cultural, haunting, and real, just as responses to it are lived as complex, politically charged, and intimately felt in the short and long term (Adey, P 2020).

For Bronfenbrenner, the restructuring of traditional Māori tribal societies or Iwi into gangs of violent, amoral men would be the trauma of Fanon's colonial chains and their oppression (Fanon, F. 1968) manifesting on a mesosystemic level. Through a lens of Tikanga, Manawatu demonstrates the grim consequence of a set of lives without *Whanaungatanga* – 'the centrality of relationships to Māori life' (Fozdar, McGavin 2017). In contrast to *Once Were Warriors*, where much of the displacement trauma manifests as a kind of enraged despair, *Auē* shines a light on displacement trauma via the mechanism of longing. Several of the main characters actively yearn – be it for one another, for a change to their circumstances, for a change of any kind. Becky Manawatu explains to an interviewer the connection between her own homesickness and the craving for a return of sorts on the part of the characters in her novel,

> "[…]And I think the homesickness really was a big part of what fed into the story. Because there's all that longing for people; the people within the story have a lot of longing for each other, and I think my homesickness was the seed for that." (newsroom.co.nz, 2020)

Considering Bronfenbrenner, again, he could trace this literary choice back to his Developmental-Ecological Model with relative alacrity. A micro level of yearning finding its way captured in literature, expressing itself in the meso, or institutional sphere as represented by gangs in the text, itself part of the ripple effects of the original macro trauma that was colonisation (Hayes, N., O'Toole et al 2022).

Displacement, in *Auē*, finds itself reflected through the trauma of the brothers and their grief, Aunty Kat and her abusive relationship, the gangs and their degeneracy – and as Manawatu has highlighted: through the prism of longing. I argue that trauma, and the specifically displacement revolving brand of trauma on display in the texts this thesis is designed around, is a recurring or 'ongoing wound' (Adey, P. 2020) and one that causes O'Brien to hopefully posit the idea that "finally we had given birth to a generation that didn't have to spend their adult lives recovering from their childhoods" (O'Brien, S. 2024). An aspiration that the amount of displacement trauma in *Auē* renders extraordinarily ambitious.

Colonial displacement is rarely directly referenced in the text of *Auē*, as compared to a more overt depiction of colonisation in *Once Were Warriors*. What is shown in *Auē*, and captured with evocative, emotive sensitivity in the text, are the follow on, ripple effects of colonisation across New Zealand's lower societal levels. Whether it be in regard to Taukiri and Arama's parents and their trajectory, the troubled bi-cultural relationship of Aunty Kat and Uncle Stu, the grotesquerie of the gang house or the prevalence of substance abuse – the aforementioned "certain patterns of personal and social dysfunction" (Salzman, 2001) are heavily represented in *Auē* .

If mental health is, in fact, 'the psychological precondition of pursuing any version of the good life' (Brydon, D. 2004), then the good life in any of its forms seems particularly distant for many of the characters in *Auē*. If it isn't the harrowing experience of sexual assault that one character, Jade, endures in an early chapter, the loss of the parents of the central brothers, or the repeated instances of domestic abuse suffered by Aunty Kat – then the near omnipresence of the threat of violence would itself serve to make 'the good life' elusive:.

> The worst thing was I didn't think Aunty Kat was a bad person, she was just a ghost of a person, and I knew why. Uncle Stu made people doubt they existed, and when you doubted you existed long enough, you started to disappear. Maybe the day my family stopped existing, I did too. (Manawatu, 138)

In Tikanga, the value of *Whanaungatanga* – 'the centrality of relationships to Māori life' (Fozdar, McGavin 2017) is to my reading the value most emphasised in *Auē*. This is evident in the ways in which the pining for what is lost or missing is captured in the narrative – but also in the way that the text highlights the damage done to New Zealand society when *Whanaungatanga* is absent . As the wider society has gang-life depicted as the unpleasant byproduct of its make-up, so too does the family unit go on to demonstrate the tragic trickle-down effect of a society where gangs are prevalent, as shown in *Auē*,

> The House was Jade's first home. That's where her mum, Felicity, satiated a craving for drugs and non-conformity. Felicity had never held a job for longer than a sniff but had found herself at home in the House. And Jade's dad, Head, was the Pres. (Manawatu, 66)

The precondition for the good life, a state from which people can cope with 'normal stresses of life' from the macro level down to the micro, is drastically compromised in the narrative of *Auē*,

> There was a price for emptying your head. It emptied, euphorically, on the going out, sure, but all the junk flooded back eventually. Only more broken than it was before. I slept in a puddle on the backseat. (Manawatu, 98)

In *Auē*, even as the novel works its way towards its eventual conclusion with its attendant reunions and revelations, this level of coping potential reads as being aspirational. The scars on the psyche of virtually every character are by the novel's ending both deep and varied. A creative and resonant choice by the writer on one level – and a fairly cogent example of Adey's 'slow wounding dislocation' (Adey P, 2020) as a result of displacement on another.

Chapter Three – The Savage Coloniser Book

The Savage Coloniser Book is a collection of poetry written by Tusiata Avia, published in 2020. Avia's poems range from the satirical to the deeply personal, the culturally specific to the universal, demonstrating variety and breadth in *The Savage Coloniser Book* in which one unifying theme remains constant: the theme of life in the wake of colonial displacement. Avia takes on this theme from several different perspectives, from the perspective of the coloniser to that of the colonised. The perspective of the coloniser appears, for example, in the form of the police officers charged with the much-publicised murder of George Floyd, as well as the ghostly apparitions that allowed for the Christchurch Massacre to occur. The colonised also are well represented here, from the knowing 'How to Be in a Room Full of White People' to the ironic 'Jacinda Ardern goes to the Pacific Forum in Tuvalu and my family colonises her house' – in differing styles and a wide selection of voices, the analysis of colonisation and the so called "post"-colonisation (Avia, 13) of New Zealand, Samoa and the wider world is undertaken through poetry.

How to Be in a Room full of White People presents readers with a modern and familiar scenario,

> Listen to white people say: I went to Some-oh-wa on my holiday, I didn't stay in Up-peer, I stayed on Siv-vie-ee, it's traditional, they haven't lost their culture like the Mour-ees, I stayed in the village, everyone was so authentic. (Avia, 88)

This parodying of the coloniser that Avia accomplishes with her poetry sets it apart from the other key texts examined in this thesis. *Once Were Warriors* and *Auē* explore themes of frustration and loss respectively, while *The Savage Coloniser Book* utilises mockery in several places as well. Aside from the clear differences of style and form between the poetic method and those methods utilised by novels, a powerful detail in the writing is the ability and willingness to give voice to the coloniser, as perceived, in the text. This separates *The Savage Coloniser Book* from *Once Were Warriors* and *Auē* and provides the thesis with alternate lenses through which to examine how the effects of displacement and their connections to cultural trauma are depicted in *The Savage Coloniser Book*.

It is useful to refer to Avia's poem entitled '250th anniversary of James Cook's arrival in New Zealand' to examine one instance of the poet exploring this interweaving dynamic:

Hey James,

It's us.

These days

We're driving around

In SUV's

Lookin for ya

Or white men like you

Who might be thieves

Or rapists

Or kidnappers

Or murderers

Yeah, or any of your descendants

Or any of your incarnations

Cos, you know

Ay bitch?

We're gonna FUCK YOU UP (Avia, 11).

I draw from Bronfenbrenner to better isolate the source of the anger and hostility present, in the wording above, as stemming from a macrosystemic source. These are the partly inherited anxieties and racially charged resentments from colonisation, the violent "replacement and/or displacement of Indigenous others" (Veracini, L. 2008) that stood as one of the historically significant cultural traumas of the region. This macro wound, as in *Once Were warriors* and *Auē*, has sent shockwaves down through the mesosystem to the micro. So that Avia's protagonist or representative in the James Cook poem see it as right and proportionate, to be on the one hand on high alert for further impositions by James Cook's descendants, and rhetorically prepared to defend themselves proactively on the other.

This anger, these inherited resentments and measure of 'high alert' perspectives permeate the Savage Coloniser Book. The poem entitled 'White Power' serves as exemplar in lines such as,

> She boards the plane/ seat 2a/ The pilot himself comes out and says: this seat is reserved for the rich white man (Avia, 37).

The speakers in these poems have their ability to 'cope with the normal stresses of life' (WHO, 2024) their precondition for any pursuit of the good life, their wellbeing, compromised and besieged from both within themselves, in the form of the inherited anxieties/resentments alluded to earlier, and from without (Sam W-L, Anna A, 2021). In the depicted instance of this poem shown via the unsettling, matter of fact entitlement of the pilot.

Avia is adept at underscoring Adey's "displacement as process as well as event" and colonisation's "manner of a stretched-out duress. […] might call this a kind of 'debility' through displacement, well beyond any kind of severing punctual moment," (Adey P, 2020). Avia would expand on the construct of her poem, simultaneously remonstrating and reminding the reader,

> Who is not travelling today/ but just in case he does/ and out of respect for him/ you need to go down to the back (Avia, 37).

The concept of 'displacement as process' is worthy of note as a consideration of how ideas are expressed in other modes of writing, such as prose. The novels I have looked at for the purposes of this thesis do contain within them the perspectives and embodied value systems of sometimes racist or violent, prejudicial, or hostile characters – but always within the wider narrative where it is understood that these characters are other. There is always the counterpoint provided to the reader to underscore that these attitudes are not congruent with the writers' own perspectives. In *Once Were Warriors*, for example, Jake's violence is offset by his daughter Grace's compassion. In *Auē* the harshness of Uncle Stu is repulsive to Arama and, the cruelties of the gang members deserving of disgust from the point of view of Jade.

In *The Savage Coloniser Book*, readers are afforded a glimpse of life as the white supremacist alongside the perspectives of his victims, and the emphasis is the pain and injustice of the situations that result, rather than any rhetorical or analytical apportioning of blame or remedy. As Bronfenbrenner insists though, whatever the amorphousness of blame or the practicality of engendering solutions to macro level traumas, (Salzman, 2001) – the shockwaves of these traumas will continue to reverberate. O'Brien touches on this phenomenon in her own writing noting that, "In either passing on the vibration or reacting against it, we let the fear short circuit our own autonomous desires, diverting our goals and loading ever more emotional static into our daily cognitive processing" (O'Brien, S. 2024).

Or put another way, Sanaullah's sociological questioning,

> […] the racism which continues to target them is theirs, a trauma experienced every day, and such as to make us ask […] by what miracle they are not all prey to a “raging paranoia”? (Khan S, Schwebach E, 2020)

Paranoia may or may not be appropriate in modern post-colonial life – but in Avia’s poetry there is evidence of plenty of rage,

White knights in a long line behind me

Shout, *Look into the cameras with pride*

This is the way that we do it

This is your God-given right

Kneel like a prayer full of lynching

Behold the power of God

Crushing the head of the Black man

This is my God-given white (Avia, pg 30).

Anger, I would even argue, is the constant in Avia’s text - perhaps all the more effective as narrative voice for its intentional capturing of a sense of collective impotence or aimlessness. Salzman argues that:

> While the peoples of the Pacific have exhibited strength and resiliency in response to the stress of colonization, the extreme nature of that stress and its predictable consequences are enduring and seem undeniable. (Salzman, 2008)

A vocal and high-profile type of poetic anger by Avia that hasn’t gone untouched by controversy in the broader avenues of international media in fact, relates directly to *The Savage Coloniser Book*. As Avia reminds an interviewer when questioned about negative receptions her work has received:

> "Would you put up statues of other people who stole land and killed with absolutely no good reason?" Avia said. "Why would you do that? It's because our histories have been taught to us through the lenses of white privilege. It's not something that's been done by mistake - it's an agenda." (https://nit.com.au)

While the poetry in *The Savage Coloniser Book* is wide-reaching and subject spanning in its composition, the impression readers are often left with is the cleaning, catharsis of long-contained rage finally expressed through art. This impression most directly addresses my thesis question, of –' How is displacement connected to trauma in this example of New Zealand literature, *The Savage Coloniser Book?*' Anger from the Macro disruption, in Bronfenbrenner's Model, the cultural rape and displacing – reproduced and represented by 'Cook's descendants' in all their guises is targeted in Avia's poetry. Anger at the white colonisers for mis-pronouncing Islander names is given literary voice, anger as well, for looking twice or three times as they pass Avia and her protagonists on the street, to add modern insult to historical injury.

Philosopher Merleau-Ponty covers something similar in his phenomenology of perception. He tells us that 'The world is not what I think but what I live through' (Merleau-Ponty, M. 1965) and Avia's poetry reaffirms this stance throughout *The Savage Coloniser Book*. For *The Savage Coloniser Book*, as far as Tikanga is concerned, *Manaakitanga* – 'nurturing relationships, looking after people, and being very careful how others are treated' is (Fozdar, McGavin 2017) the focus, in part. Avia expresses that indignation which results from seeing *Manaakitanga* ignored in lieu of crass colonial othering (Fozdar, McGavin 2017).

My central question then is perhaps answered most emphatically by Avia and her work; how is trauma shown to be linked to displacement in *The Savage Coloniser Book?* Not only with the particular emphasis depicted in *Once Were Warriors* or the literary choices of *Auē*. Avia opts instead for a sort of all encompassing, holistic anger of the displaced – the type of literary response that calls to mind Adey's earlier summation,

> Displacement transpires in kaleidoscopic forms, and losses are corporeal, cultural, haunting, and real just as responses to it are lived as complex, politically charged, and intimately felt in the short and long term. (Adey P, 2020)

Avia's own thoughts on her identity and its intersection with poetry are revealing:

> Christchurch was quite a violent place to be. I grew up in the seventies and eighties. So, that was the Muldoon era, Dawn raids era. Springbok tour era. So – deeply racist. I think I became really aware then of who I was, as a brown girl. And I decided that brown girls, like me, do not go on to become poets. (Tagata Pasifika, 2021)

Avia's own identity becoming material for her poetry is telling as well in the context of displacement trauma. The displaced sense of self becomes enigmatic to them in the wake of colonisation. An utterance which calls to mind this observation from *Global Histories of Trauma*:

> […] the terrible enigma of the colonized: “Who am I in reality?” In the colony, dehumanization, humiliation and “thingification” generate radical demands on one’s own status. (Khan S, Schwebach E, 2020)

The effects of colonial displacement, for Avia and her poetry, is the restless, angry straining at those colonial chains. A succinctness and distilled clarity of framing perhaps only ultimately available to the poet when it comes to sentiments as richly felt as these,

Hey James,

Yeah, you

In the white wig

In that big *Endeavour*

Sailing the blue, blue water

Like a big arsehole

FUCK YOU, BITCH (Avia, pg 10).

Conclusion

The texts I selected to apply close readings to are disparate from each other in style, genre – area of focus or emphasis but they are unified in their unambiguous answer to the question I pose in this thesis; how does displacement manifest as trauma in New Zealand literature? In *Once Were Warriors* the trauma of the Heke family reverberates down from parents, Jake and Beth, down into the children. This trauma manifested as anger, violence, substance abuse, sexual assault and suicide. In *Auē* the trauma takes the form of family dissolution, displacement, substance abuse and gang violence. In *The Savage Coloniser Book* the trauma manifests as the anger and frustration of the poet, Tusiata Avia and the speakers she gives voice to in her work. What academic Sanaullah called 'the raging paranoia' (Khan S, Schwebach E, 2020) embedded into colonised people across the world. Bronfenbrenner's findings concerning trauma's multi-layered, holistic nature – macro, meso, micro – were helpful in these examinations. I learned that inasmuch as the sociological fallout of displacement is trauma in its various incarnations, I learned that trauma is process as much as diagnosis.

I have learned furthermore that New Zealand literature, of whatever genre or era, is necessarily and by definition a kind of traumatised literature. Even works that don't address the colonising event in the body of its text, like in this thesis the novel *Auē* does not, is as shaped and framed by displacement as those texts that do. Colonisation and the trauma that springs from it manifests 'in kaleidoscopic forms, and losses are corporeal, cultural, haunting, and real, just as responses to it are lived as complex, politically charged, and intimately felt in the short and long term' (Adey P, 2020). Prior to the research involved in this thesis I would think of colonisation as but one of the traumas modern New Zealand has to come to terms with but as these texts have helped to make clear, colonisation is the foundational trauma that underpins so many others. Whether it be *in Once Were Warriors'* tragedy and cultural distance*, Auē's* sense of yearning and familial grief or *The Savage Coloniser Book's* indignant outrage, I have discovered that displacement is very much the central trauma in these examples of New Zealand literature. Perhaps the time is not yet here when O'Brien's optimistic notion "finally we had given birth to a generation that didn't have to spend their adult lives recovering from their childhoods" (O'Brien, S. 2024) can be realised. Certainly, in these texts, it would seem New Zealand is some way off from this achievement.

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Bridging Statement

The novelist Martin Amis said “A writer doesn’t choose his topics. What he does is recognise them,” (Amis, 2015).

When I first conceived the notion of the story that makes up the creative section of this thesis, my key theme was masculinity. It seemed like it already was about masculinity in my plotting and planning stages, ‘here is a young man grappling with the way forward in life and society’. A young man not particularly buttressed by a support system or given much in the way of directions yet doing his best, in these amorphous modern times, all the same.

As the writing went on however, and the story evolved, the novella ‘The Strong Ones’ became unarguably a story about trauma. What has this character been through? How has it shaped the way he looks at the world he lives in, and the future he sees for himself?

The writing of fiction, it is said, is primarily an autobiographical effort. Writers mine their own experiences and perspectives for material, it is alleged, and distil personalities they encounter down into workable portions for their characters. This is certainly the case in my work. In ‘The Strong Ones’ my central character attempts to heal and find his way in the aftermath of his brother’s death by suicide. My own brother, over a decade ago now – younger, not older as in my novella – took his life a few weeks before his seventeenth birthday. This never-entirely-healing-wound in the psyche of my family, and of myself, informed the paths we would and wouldn’t take after my brother’s death, to such a profound extent, that it is very difficult to explain to those who haven’t gone through similar experiences. It had, for one thing, that unnerving effect of tainting familial memories of events before he died, while also bleaching the colour out of events that were yet to be realised. I tried to capture some semblance of what that sensation felt like through the novella, where time is standing still for my character, and leaving him in its wake simultaneously. I do this via repetition of particular scenes, and via the feeling the character has, of being in a kind of stasis.

The scholar Peter Adey, whom I reference in the critical section of this thesis, speaks of ‘a slow kind of wounding dislocation,’ and of this traumatic phenomenon persisting ‘well beyond any kind of severing, punctual moment’ (Adey P, 2020). This phrasing of some aspects of the nature of trauma was apt and found itself reflected in my conception of the plot of The Strong Ones. The protagonist, Hapuka’s, central and defining trauma occurs before the story begins, and the reader has only the already traumatised version of the character to become acquainted with.

The novella is set in a working-class area of Invercargill, in an abattoir, a party and the shared house of four young men – two meat workers, a truck driver and an unemployed man, where video games, conspiracy theories and drugs are a source of bonding and distraction. The depths of Hapuka's emotional hardship, and the wider surroundings of a rough, unsentimental setting doesn't completely rob the character of his optimism. Hapuka identifies this openness to the possibility of things improving as a type of victory and strength in the context of his experience. This was important to my thinking around the messaging of the novella, where the stakes are high should the wrong decision be made at any juncture by the characters – while the possible rewards for making the "right" decision are incremental and miniscule. This felt true, as well, in my considering of the story and went some way to my deciding on the specifics of voice and tone throughout 'The Strong Ones'.

Hapuka is a factory worker while also peripherally Pasifika, regionally specific to Southland New Zealand, and also not someone completely divorced from the imperatives of those performative aspects of young masculinity. Much of the narrative depends on this voice being convincing while not distracting, and with the climax of the plot in mind from the beginning. While much of the story is told in the third person mediated perspective of Hapuka, one chapter breaks away from this. In the penultimate chapter, there is a perspective shift to Rangi in order to provide a close study of a pivotal decision made by this character, which will ultimately devastate Hapuka once again. Once the reader is returned to the voice of Hapuka new elements of pathos have been added to its composition. All of this to better capture what a life authored by trauma might read like. This again, from personal experience as much as creative inspiration. The party scene in 'The Strong Ones' was the sort of party my brother wanted to go to when he grew a little older. The flat the characters live in was the type of flat that my brother's decision not to get any older sent me to. Displaced, personally, but existentially as well. Those sudden, unnatural losses in a young person's life do indeed reverberate well beyond any kind of severing, punctual moment.

The decision to have Hapuka's defining trauma occur 'off-screen' is important to the narrative structure. Before the story begins, he is already wounded and staggering. It makes for good symbolic messaging, as well as a satisfying symmetry of plot then, to have Hapuka's next trauma happen off screen as well. Trauma, after-all, as is covered in both the critical and creative sections of this thesis, is a recurring, unfolding thing. With new chapters being added all the time. The question for Hapuka in the creative, and this as well has some resonance with the personal and the autobiographical for me, has become something like: are the ones who fall by the wayside as weak as they are made out to be? Are those who struggle on, wearing their scars like medals, truly strong? The novella that follows is an attempt at examining these questions in a creative writing setting.

The Strong Ones

Part One

Hapuka had decided, more or less decidedly, to quit his fuckin' job. It was a fine job, fundamentally. As jobs go, you know. Here is a task, here is what we will pay you for it. Get to it, bitch. Chop fucking chop. A job is a job. But he was over this one. He'd only signed up at all cause his brother Luke's unscheduled death had left him all mixed up. But that was years ago. How long to get over a sibling's death? Not as long as a person could keep using it as an excuse for weird behaviour, probably, but things do get old. Jobs do, for sure. Even if brothers failed to. Aha ha. It's true though that all roads, in Southland, lead to the Freezing works. Oh, you hear noise about the Smelter – slurping up all the good, immigrant labour since the Beginning. Or the sullen, fat dairy farms, scattered around, threatening the rest of us with fart cloud tyranny. Some roads, to be fair, *do* lead to liquor stores and fried food dispensaries. The works though. The mighty meat works. If the southern edge of New Zealand has a culture, and it might – then the centre of that culture is a great, grey industrial slab, dominating the horizon. Spewing toxic clouds of animals, repurposed, out of chimney stacks, climbing up to belch at the sky. With lines of miserable, panting trucks, chock full of plaintive livestock, queuing up for entry, disgorgement, and refuelling. And lines, too, of sleep deprived, sometimes showered, motorists – employed to service the great, sprawling death temples. New acolytes of the meat work faith, reciting our mantras of moolah in the overspilling ash trays, and the mud splattered traffic jams that are part of the whole deal.

Hapuka could always tell when he'd been getting high too often once he started thinking about mantras and death temples. It was a sign of his growth and evolution, as a person, that he even acknowledged you could get high too often. The idea would seem like actual madness to express in front of some of his fellow travellers. Rangi was hollering something from the driver's seat.

Rangi, now. Rangi was a relatively fresh addition to Hapuka's circles. It had been maybe a year, maybe two – or three, it was hazy, but a small span of time anyhow, since their becoming acquainted. Rangi was part of Tyler's baggage, or Tyler was a hanger-on of Rangi – they were a package deal however it's put together. They all lived in the same flat now – going halves on boxes of beer and squabbling over the last greenery dot – like a wholesome multiracial family unit of the modern era. Shannon fit in the dynamic too somehow, the wandering surly truck-driving uncle who only shows up for birthdays and then leaves after eating without contributing a word. Shannon's

occasional presence served to round out the quartet and provided crucial pigmentary balance to the team too. Tyler was in danger of becoming very lonely as the flat minority, the one online gambling addicted frenzied pale face devil spawn on his isolated cracker ice-float, before Shannon came along.

The SS Holden Commodore, which somehow Rangi could afford on his meatworker salary, and in spite of his status as sixth generation conquered, subjugated Māori fella, was glistening, black and gas guzzling even while jammed in traffic. Rangi was one of those though who didn't seem to understand the no forward motion equals lower volume on the stereo rule, and so contrary to his usual soft-spoken tendency, he had to holler to be heard.

"I can't hear you."

Rangi pressed a button, and the throb of industrial metal receded. A murmur in place of a howl. Was Hapuka's chest somehow less tight instantly? Had it been tight? Alright, pot needed to leave him alone for a day or so, whatever the truth of it. Shit was getting ridiculous.

"I'm saying it's Friday bro," Rangi grinned from out the corner of his eye "What are the schemes? Are you in the flat this weekend or -?"

The mass of loitering cars, trucks, motorcycles, and the odd pervert van quivered into moving three meters forward then, rolling on and in at some signal Hapuka never saw. This afforded him some time to think and rehearse what to say. The weekend already? Part of the perks of living in the time vortex that is Invercargill is that the sequence of events can get a little slippery. Has it been an hour in this traffic jam? Ten minutes? Who can say. There's been a week of this already? Hapuka took hold of his thoughts with both hands before they lurched down and out, as they tended to. He actually did have a goal this weekend.

"I'm gonna get laid," he stated.

Rangi laughed, as well he might, since the flat they shared hadn't known the pleasure of feminine company since the mortar in the brickwork dried, but it wasn't the derisive laugh of the superior. Nor the bitterness-laced chortles of a Tyler, with his frenzies and social pariah aesthetic. Rangi's laugh spoke, as laughter will sometimes, and it invariably said 'I am on your side haha. I too feel this haha'. Hapuka hoped his own laughter said agreeable things. How could he be sure?

"No, I mean it. She'll be a goth girl, black hair of course –" he continued, Rangi listening, humouring him.

"-With all that lace they like to wear. Or maybe a blonde gym chick who feels like being my white saviour – she'll be white obviously. This is Southland."

The traffic jam had shivered into some semblance of movement and now, the dam being burst, actual progress along the road was happening. Rangi kept his metal low though, presumably to better hear Hapuka's definitely not made-up weekend plans.

"She could teach me about my macros. About my protein windows. Pilates – I don't know. That's the point, she'll be able to teach me! And once she's rolled me up into a pretzel on her yoga mat, but romantic you know, a violin or a piano playing in the background, she'll tell me she loves me as I splay out on her lovely gym fit muscle chest. Maybe stroke my hair. Tell me I'm a good, good boy and that I'm safe. What are you doing this weekend?"

The gate loomed up, and the dystopian, corporate billboard encouraging visitors to enjoy their stay in the meat factory emblazoned in blue on white welcomed them in. A few turns left then one more apprehensive right, angling between two mud covered utes, with working dogs resting on their backs, and they were parked. Rangi scratched his nose pensively.

"I dunno bro. I thought maybe I'd get high and jam some Playstation aye. Probably have a beer or three."

Hapuka took a long swig of the red bull can he had been nursing. That sounded good too, honestly. The duo sighed as one then began to search and grapple for the assorted equipment necessary for the next phase of their daily crusade. Work bag, drink bottle, cell phone. Occasionally, not today, but occasionally a pill or a can of something naughty. They clambered out and began to walk together, for this leg, though the different departments that they owed allegiance to would separate them before too long. Rangi proffered his fist and Hapuka bumped it with his own. Rangi finished the last of his own can of coke and hurled it into the trash in the same movement with which he flipped Hapuka off congenially.

"How many of those are you drinking a day?" Rangi asked, pointing to Hapuka's can of premature heart attack.

"Not enough to make me want to be here," Hapuka muttered.

"Cheer up my brotha. Kia Kaha! The weekend is one shift away," was Rangi's typically cheerful comment. How he managed to be cheerful at the start of a work shift was something Hapuka feared he would never understand. Maori are built different. They proved that when they sailed right past Samoa and the other good islands and hoofed it all the way to this cloudy shit-hole of a country.

"I blame your savage tribes for this," Hapuka called out as Rangi broke out of formation.

"If you had won the war and pushed old whitey back into the sea, I wouldn't need to be here!"

Rangi waved and turned a corner out of sight. Mind you, come to think of it – Hapuka's new weekend lover, with her yoga mat, wouldn't be here either. He sighed and wandered on, dragging his feet like the soon to be executed that he felt like. Kia Kaha, he tells me.

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The department Hapuka was employed to labour for was called, with typical Southland pragmatism, the 'Stockyards'. The yards in which we gather stock. Hapuka enjoyed the setting more than the work per se. It's hard to *enjoy* overseeing the dispatching en masse of thousands of animals a shift – not impossible, but there's a trick to it. The work took place in the open air though; four massive, conjoined sheet metal canopies, held up with corrugated iron pillars, slathered with luscious, waterfalls of rust. No walls – this is likely the beginning and end of it, Hapuka thought to himself as he mentally prepared for the industrialised slaughter and his part in it. The illusion of freedom shines brighter out here, where the breeze lives, than it does in the sterile, refrigerated Boning rooms. The Māori guy with iron grey hair that everyone called Old Mate Timmy but whose real name was Temiti flicked his index finger in the direction of the Stunner as Hapuka ambled past. He only nodded absently, he had already speed read the roster on his way in. His turn to stun. He stomped up the stairs, his steel toed work boots making his casual stride seem quasi militant with the heaviness they brought, and turned a left at the sterilizer before another right brought him to the machine.

The machine, called the 'Stunner', presumably by the same imaginative folks who baptised the departments, was a kind of mechanized claw, held in place by pistons and wiring, and grasping eternally towards the earth. It reminded 'Puka, when viewed from certain angles, of the old arcade game claw which would descend from on high and try to seize the cuddly, stuffed toys piled up in heaps beneath. This claw was controlled and monitored by a set of master panels and levers designated by colour. Hāpuka was colourblind as it happened but one didn't really need to know which colour was which when there was a light flashing or a klaxon blaring. This is what he told himself and there had been no disasters yet.

The Stunner sat, all malevolent and (it seemed to Hapuka's fevered imaginings) starving, at the end of a high powered, rubber conveyor belt – also controlled by the flashing light emblazoned control panel. When the unfortunate sentient animals all the company how-to-manuals encouraged workers to think of as 'product' were ushered up into the belt by Hapuka's coworkers, by virtue of enthusiastic albeit perpetually hungover hollering and rattling of steel implements, the belt would

take the product to it's date with destiny via the Stunner. The Stunner would jerk and rumble into some semblance of cybernetic awareness, the product's mass triggering the laser sensor that served as the machine's green light, though the laser itself was devil red, and the claw would clamp down with eerie precision around the animal's neck. A gush of preparatory water would pour down onto the product and then, with that kind of nightmarish efficiency only the most motivated corporate fat cat, gaping arsehole of a son of a bitch could ever hope to access, 20,000 volts of electricity would careen into and through the nervous system of the soon to be unconscious bobby calf or venison or sheep. The idea being, as it was explained to him during the induction process: We have to kill them in order to export their flesh in exchange for profit but we don't want them to suffer. So we stun them for their benefit, their peace of mind. Also, our biggest market is Saudi Arabia and we need to cut their throats in order for our product to meet cultural requirements over there. Stunning helps achieve this. Also, the adrenaline of a struggling animal at the point of death sours the meat. But mostly, to reiterate – we stun them for *their* benefit.

Some sheep, it was interesting, depending on either angle of contact with the Stunner or maybe it was more to do with the physiology of the individual specimen – whyever it was, some animals would go limp immediately. The electricity snuffing out their lights like the changing of a channel. Others would stiffen, resisting the surging, invasive voltage and thrash, bucking back and forth, sometimes knocking the laser sensor out of position, necessitating a pause in production. Pauses are very much frowned upon from on high. We gotta keep that money machine rolling of course. The worst ones, by far in Hapuka's view, were the shriekers. Irrespective of the particular age of the animal, because of how their vocal chords were arranged, the shrieks of the shriekers would invariably come out in the form of a strangled, desperate "MAAA!," – a last ditch call for help before they too would give out. At that point, it was a simple matter of the claw opening, the successfully 'stunned' product tumbling forward through the translucent curtain separating the Stockyards from their neighbour department – the Slaughterboard. There would ensue ritualistic Islamic prayers, the specially imported and trained butchers being sure to face the sun as they slit the throat with that unusual combination of reverence and casual ease Hapuka had yet to see replicated in any other setting.

He put his water bottle up on a platform at his eye level and stepped back, clasping his hands behind him and adopting the go to posture of a person employed to monitor mass death by automatic machine. The trick was to rest back on one's heels, it had taken him several weeks to learn. The shifts could be long and all going well there wouldn't be that much call for conveyor belt leaping acrobatics. And this was life, apparently. This is a real job that people pay you money for. Being present – not in the new age, mumbo jumbo sense Hapuka had skim read about, but just to basically

call out ‘here’ when they read your name off a list. Be here, keep your eyes on the death claw and press the button that does the thing that’s called for when the lights begin to flash. He had gone to university once upon a time – it seemed like a colossal waste of money and debt but then – at least he knew how to use words like ‘colossal’ in a sentence. Means big, kinda.

Swings and roundabouts.

There came then, over the loudspeaker, the great foghorn-like klaxon that meant start of shift, and the elderly ram flocks on his chain begin sullenly filing in. Their bulk and muscularity meant the conveyor belt would require adjusting to allow them their smooth journey to the knives, Hapuka noted over his shoulder. A few tweaks on the control panel and he could relax back on his heels. The smell is what assaults the newly initiated into the meat works death temples, and that cloying, ammonia tinged reek of overworked adrenal glands and shit, distinctive to the Stockyards was particularly memorable. The sound though. The sound was what got to Hapuka.

Off to his sides, and in the vast industrial space behind him, the new shift clamour swelled up like a tidal wave of iron clanging, men shouting, dogs barking and sheep noise. The herders and truck drivers, with rubber leggings over jeans, waved company approved weaponry with one hand as they manoeuvred their lit cigarettes with the other. Jostling one another, joking, cursing. It was late afternoon and still the shimmering heat snakes slithered up out of the steam given off from stressed and harassed livestock, and into the rusted ceiling overhead. Hapuka was considering putting his headphone tunes on – it made for potentially slightly slower response time if a sheep exploded behind him or one of his coworkers snapped into a murderous rage, and then made a beeline for Hapuka’s unwary back – but as a trade off he’d get to vibe out and not worsen his earache. Life is about decisions, of course – this is one of the worst things about it. Tem’s clapping him on the elbow from down beside the stunner platform rescued him from all the painful choice considering.

The old battler had hollered something.

“Huh?” Hapuka shouted back. Maybe he really was going deaf. He realised he’d put his headphones over his ears without turning them on – so a choice had been made without him realising it. He pulled them off and leaned his torso down towards Temiti all while monitoring the death claw and its victims. A true professional.

“I said, I’m surprised you’re here on a Friday. Don’t all you young fellas take Fridays off and have three day weekends?” Temiti seemed genuinely curious.

It was true. That was one of the customs of freezing work society. Friday or Monday, either one. You knew a person had their shit together - ie no broken condoms demanding food at home or crazy,

outsized gambling debts to pay hanging over them - by how often they would take three day weekends. Hapuka had taken a few himself as part of his adjusting to his environment. When in Rome and all that. The bosses would do nothing, or could do nothing – staff who know one end of a sheep from the other and can, mostly, refrain from beating the product bloody were at a premium. Hapuka sighed with theatrical mournfulness at Temiti by way of answer.

“Meth doesn’t grow on trees, my friend,” he intoned.

Temiti shook his head “Stay away from that shit, boy – what’s wrong with a beer?”

Hapuka gave Temiti the thumbs up as the old fella wandered off.

Temiti or Old Mate, or ‘Timmy’ to the farmhands and shareholders who had never interacted with a real life Mow-ree codger before, and found the odd pronunciation of their names vaguely sinister, was a pretty cool guy really. A bit too fond of the juice, and Hapuka had never gotten a solid notion as to what it is he actually did around the place. A bit of everything. The Departmental trouble shooter. Hapuka had seen him kill a crippled Marino with a stud gun behind the ear once.

Maybe that was his job.

The rams, wool shrouded and thick, kept sliding into the stunner, one by one. The lights would flash their acceptance of the sacrifice, the jaws would grunt as they clasped the horned heads. Down would come the water, and then through would flash the current. Hapuka’s first few weeks here, he had been barely able to watch the process. This was a problem considering watching the process was essentially the job. The shriekers were the worst, but they were all rough. He had kept saying comforting things to himself. ‘I’m only doing my job,’ was a classic. ‘If I weren’t here, someone else would be doing it,’ was another. It never worked – with each leg stiffening execution and plaintive exhale, then the limp collapse through the wall, he had progressively started to feel more and more like a piece of shit. He had even entertained the mad thought that he didn’t need the money this bad. Flipping burgers sounded doable. Sweeping floors. He wasn’t too cool to sweep a floor.

Someone’s gotta do it.

Until one day, and he couldn’t remember which day exactly – at some point in his third week, it had just stopped. Oh, you still felt for the wee blighters, being shuffled off all unknowingly – their kids in front of them and their siblings behind them in the file. All it took was the teensiest dollop of empathy sauce to get it. You could put yourself in their wild-eyed, fear drunk little hooves for a second.

Being harrassed with whistles and dogs off of your farm, corralled into a poorly ventilated truck, with six hundred of your friends and relatives, and whipped away from the only home you ever knew. Crammed into pens in the heat, once the trucks did arrive, then chased by dogs some more through a system of gates and enclosures. Filed up a freakish, unnatural moving belt structure, your entire experience on the planet hadn't prepared you for, passing by some surly brown human wrestling with his headphones in the process. Until finally, the stunner claw, clamping down firmly at the sides of your panicking, helpless head. The water, then, a cloudless sky burst, indoors? No sound of rain either, just synthetic, motorised wrenching, brutalising all other sounds, and the unfamiliar tongues of humans who were even further from their homes than you were from yours. You would strain too, tossing your head this way and that against the stunner claw, trying to get a taste of that sweet, needed water. But it's not there to quench you, it's part of whatever this is. Here to drench you, douse you. Assault you. Then the lightning bolt shock, thrumming through, obliterating the senses. Making the limbs seize up.

Then, nothing.

No, Hapuka wasn't wired in such a way that he could ever really be easy with any of that. It was his fingers on the switches was part of the sting of it for him. One day though, one fine and eerie day – the worst of the slimy, piece of shit guilt feeling just – evaporated. Pretty cool in a fashion. Like those wholesome, motivational posters he would sometimes see around the place.

It is amazing what a person can get used to.

A cry behind him from one of his workmates – Kevin, or maybe Darrell, alerted Hapuka and brought him back to what he was about. The sensor had tripped, allowing two sheep to be stunned at once. Which effectively meant neither of them had been stunned adequately. Hapuka swore and flipped the switch that cuts off the claw, pressed a button that opened the jaws and stamped on the pedal at his feet that reversed the entire belt. The livestock bayed and maa'd but he got things sorted in short order and then re-flipped the switch that set everything back. Only half sarcastic cheers behind him from the cheap seats heralded his victory, and he only half meant the jerk off hand gesture he sent behind his back as well. Two years of this now – three? A lifetime anyway. Ever since the great Death in the family – then the death of that family – interesting how things work out, or don't. Hapuka took a swig from his 'water' bottle, the cunningly concealed bourbon and coke in there already getting room temperature. He grimaced.

It was a depressing arse thing to do for money, whichever way you slice it but it had its perks! And it wasn't as bad as he made it out to be, he just enjoyed a grizzle and bitch-fest. That's Southland

culture, that is – real person or white version of person. Everyone likes a complain session. Hapuka was getting pretty good at it as he got older. The trick of it was to space out all the whining with healthy doses of shit talking and fucking around. It had taken him a while to learn this truth but ever since he had, he had noticed a huge improvement in how people reacted. That way, this spacing out way, people don't get sick of the one song you privately want to be singing. What a song, he thought to himself, laughing a little and looking around.

The melody would be, what – dogs barking and farmers whistling. The bass would be the machine grind. Crash of animals into metal sheep pens could be the beat. Hapuka took another swig, another grimace. If he wasn't careful this shit was gonna affect him in a bit, lightweight as he was and the weather roasting away his composure. The lyrics would be, uh 'I hate my job' – lights flash, jaws clamp, water smashes down. 'What rhymes with job,' the electricity current thrums. Something something, fuck it. Hapuka pulled his headphones back on resignedly. Leave the song singing to the professionals maybe. He wasn't a singer – he was a sheep-sorry, product stunner. One more swig of his godawful firewater and then he put the cap back on the bottle determinedly. Lights flash, jaws clamp, water smashes down. A shrieker, "maaa!", let his feelings be known. His own little complain session bleated out into an uncaring universe. Nah, fuck this place. Maybe KFC was hiring. Hapuka considered himself a lifelong friend to that industry. 'Long-time listener, first time caller,' type vibes. You didn't actively kill the chickens before frying them, right? Food for thought.

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The flat they shared was at the centre of Centre street, off the corner of Lime, across from the Chinese takeaway and just before the pedestrian crossing there. Prime real estate, Hapuka had always felt. Smart people always live close to fish and chips shops, leaving the commutes and gruelling fried food revolving missions to the dumb dumb squads and the mouth breathers. The flat itself was a lopsided, ramshackle type of operation, all rusting corrugated iron roof and feeble, punch-drunk mailbox, clinging to verticality by a fingernail. The lawns were overgrown and frequent pit-stop to several roaming street cats who, in the dead of night, if you squint your ears in the right direction, a person can hear screwing or clawing each other's eyes out or some orgiastic combination of the two. Leaving the work shift behind them, Rangi pulled them into the driveway, where his Holden spent all the time it wasn't ferrying them to and 'fro and thwacked his handbrake down with more gusto than a person needed to summon.

“Holy fuckin’ weekend, Hapuka!”

Hapuka grinned tiredly. Yes, absolutely, weekend. They clambered out of the car and headed on into the house. This process was facilitated by the front door never being locked, and actually, quite often just sat ajar, mute testimony to the warm and welcoming nature of those who dwell within. But also, their forgetfulness, carelessness and the tendency of the residents to be really stoned a good 86% of the time. The ubiquitous purple smoke wafted out in great clouds as the door swung open and the meatworkers shouldered in. The hallway with a swinging lightbulb long out of service, and a poster of a busty beach worker woman – what are they called? – peeling down from one corner. Piles of unopened letters and bills and pamphlets advertising motorcycle rallies and religious propaganda and liquor store discounts all served as a kind of knee high, second carpet that kept the hallway company. The rustling of the displaced mounds of dead trees, slithering like snakes as they shifted and spilled.

As was often the case, they could hear Tyler long before they could see him.

There, as ever, in the living room and on his beanbag throne – gaming headset strapped on to his unemployed skull – the lad was yelling at some noob in Brisbane for not hitting his shots. Or for blocking Tyler’s. Without context it was hard for Hapuka to be sure, but he was rapidly getting the gist of Tyler’s situation when he slumped down onto the couch behind him, kicking his shoes off with relief in the same motion.

“You fuckin’ numpty. You bitch beta oxygen thief – I had it. All you had to do was cover me! Too busy jerkin the gherkin to kangaroo down or whatever your whore mother made you …” and on it went. Rangi, who was leaning against the far wall, checking his phone, looked up and made eye contact with Hapuka who shrugged. Weed is supposed to relax a person. Everyone knows that. Bohemian, hippie dippie ‘let’s all gather ‘round the campfire and play our acoustic guitars after a tiring session of hackey-sack’ type vibes. At least that’s how Hapuka had grown up thinking of it. But Tyler was a passionate man. And violent video games do tend to angry up the blood. Hapuka had typed a few crimes against humanity into online chats himself in his time. He had license though. He was a minority. Of the Pasifika variant and sub-type. Tyler was a mayonnaise person, through and through. Where did all this anger come from, in the heart of one of the inheritors of the Western Empire? Hapuka made a mental note to ask him.

“... Eat my shit. Drink my shit – I want you to take my shit into each of your holes, and then I want you to *shit* my shit, you stupid, brain-dead son of a …”

The living room was the beating heart of the flat Hapuka shared with the two creatures alongside him and the other – the wanderer, the nomad – Shannon the Shining. Two flat screen TVs beside each other for gaming sessions or when there could be no agreement on what to watch. Two pleather armchairs, positioned at opposite angles, complete with swanky foot-rest levers, a broken down, begging to be euthanised couch and Tyler's throne. Standing in as occasional flat council nexus near the middle of the room, was a sometime dinner locale, frequent bong platform and x-rated magazine stand - a long, lacquered coffee table which had seen better days. The heavy black curtains - though they may have been blue at one point - stayed in place, rain hail or sunshine. Glare on the screen is unacceptable. The flat didn't agree on much, but the things they did were set in stone.

Tyler was evidently done with the Brisbane beta. He yanked his headset off and turned towards Hapuka without leaving his seat, making a face as he did so.

"You smell like shit, Hapuka". He flipped Rangi off casually who smiled and gave the Māori chin jerk salute in response. "More than usual I mean."

"I actually did get shat on – twice today. So that makes sense," Hapuka replied. "What's your excuse?"

Tyler grinned.

"Nevermind that – what's on the menu, aye? Friday feast motherfucka!"

Hapuka wrinkled his nose to himself as he aggressively ignored Tyler – he did smell like shit. Now that he was sitting and immobile his nostrils finally had a chance to catch the fumes. Goddamnit. He propped his weary elbows at the back of the couch, readying himself for the mighty upward heave that heading to the bathroom would require, when he heard the tell-tale sounds of the shower starting from down the hall. See, these Māori – they're sneaky and they're quick. How did they lose the war to the Inheritor's of the Western Empire? Tyler was still producing word sounds – the lack of any interest or response from another soul never being a deterrent for him.

"…last week we had pizza, which is dope, cause I love pizza but I feel like today is more of a curry day – it's cold and I was just watching an episode of that old show the Simpsons, remember that shit? Where…"

Hapuka stretched out his aching hamstrings and began idly scanning the takeaway menus he could see on the coffee table from his vantage. Curry didn't sound like the worst thing in the world.

A neon, chirp of an alert notice shimmered onto the TV screen, still showing the end scene of the last game Tyler had played. ‘Friend Request’. This served to interrupt Tyler’s philosophising – he grabbed the controller enthusiastically and accepted the request.

“Hell yeah, that’s my new best friend, Hapuka. Fuck you and the native, let’s get this guy over. Brisbane Beta bitch boy – we went through some shit together just then, you don’t even know!”

Hapuka reached for the other controller, grimacing as he caught another inadvertent whiff of his own potent scent. A mini tornado seemed to thump outside, replete with high pitch hiss-growls, into the veranda. Seems like the cats had started their weekend off too.

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They had decided on Maccas, Rangi was the swing vote – and he had argued with rare passion: “Some days just feel like Maccas days, you know?” Hapuka did know. Some days are fuck your liver days too, and Fridays intersect with these two types of days pretty regularly he had noticed. Freshly showered, and recently burgered, Hapuka then began to drink the teeth rotting bourbon cans Shannon kept the fridge stocked with. He had been drinking bourbon all day albeit in micro amounts so fuck it. Rangi had put some of his industrial doof-doof on through the living room speakers, and then gathered the scraps of the feed up to give to the cats. The cats loved Rangi. Depended on him anyway. He was the only one of the flat the cats even seemed to notice amid their sex-fights.

Tyler had said something, inaudible from the bottom of the swimming pool that separated Hapukas blabber-mouth inner screed and the actual real-life planet, somewhere up there. Hapuka kicked his feet and resurfaced.

“What’s that now?”

“I said ‘loser has to go grab the next one’ – you down?” Tyler waved the controller at him.

“Nah, I can’t be fucked playing man – you’d get it if your work for the government didn’t keep you home all day.” Hapuka heard his rib or maybe a shoulder joint pop as he stood. That’s not good. “But I’ll grab us another one. They’re not as shit as I remember, with the sugar mixed in.”

“Nah they’re all good. Just gotta have like four so your mouth forgets how rank they are,” said Tyler.

Tyler now. Hapuka considered the critter as he grabbed two cans from the otherwise largely empty fridge. A stick of butter on one shelf. An old Chinese food container that he couldn’t remember ever not seeing there on another. A solitary can of fanta. A bottle of chocolate sauce slotted in next to the nearly empty milk carton. Tyler did indeed ‘work for the government’ in that old traditional sense. He bludged the dole or nursed at the teat of the state or whatever the fuck. Shannon would know the

wording – Shannon was all about conversations that included words like ‘deep-state’ and ‘new world order’ and all his other fevered online kinks he seemed to have picked up along the way. Shannon was what some people would call a cooker. A tin-foil hat wearer. A true believer in – something. Disbelief maybe.

Tyler was not a cooker and nor, for that matter, was Hapuka. Or the cat whisperer out there. That was Shannon’s own personal war or ailment. He was a truck driver though so, that kinda makes sense. Driving up and down the coast, 12-hour stints – only your podcasts and your uppers to keep you company. Hapuka felt sure given a week or two of that life he’d be starting to question the moon-landing as well. That flag *had* been waving in those old clips after all – and with what air?

Hapuka tossed Tyler his can, who sent his skull back in the ancient code for ‘cheers’ that all races in New Zealand recognised and respected. Tyler had switched the game console off and put his favourite show, The L Word, on instead. The sound was muted, of course not only since Rangi’s tunes rendered any other noise inferior – Tyler only ever watched the show on mute.

Hapuka cracked his can open and took a swig. Christ. He never felt more in touch with his Island heritage than when he sampled the rot-gut that his mother’s people partied with. On the screen one young woman was sensually dancing for another – in a club from the looks of it. The story was hard to keep track of.

“So, Tyler,” he began “When are you going to leave the house and talk to a real woman?”

Tyler snorted and swigged his own can before he saw Hapuka was serious.

“Oh, you’re serious?”

Hapuka gestured vaguely around them. “I mean, you got the time the rest of us don’t you know. I’m too busy killing sheep –“

“Any of them start looking sexy yet, by the way? They reckon that’s like a whatchamacallit – hazard of your occupation, that”.

“Occupational hazard?”

“Sure, you’re the one telling the story.” Tyler shrugged.

“Rangi’s working in the boning rooms. Shannon’s on the road most of the time …” Hapuka was ticking them off his fingers, one by one. Rangi sauntered back in with his own can in hand and collapsed on one of the armchairs.

“Every whore-house from here to Picton probably knows Shannon’s face,” Tyler speculated.

Hapuka tended to doubt that. You have to let your guard down to get down, as someone maybe had said. He couldn't see Shannon trusting that he wasn't being set up in some Hollywood, conspiratorial plot if a woman made any kind of move on him at all.

"Oh, have you not told Hapuka your theory yet?" Rangi asked, pulling his foot-rest level to set his armchair into the horizontal position as he spoke.

"You'll fall asleep there," Hapuka warned. They'd all done it.

"No faith," Rangi shook his head. "Have a little faith my bro".

Hapuka grinned at him and shook his own head. The music had shifted to some sort of atonal drone shit and he took it upon himself to grab Rangi's phone and flicked the screen. Something heavier with a driving rhythm replaced the atonality. The three flatmates all looked at one another approvingly.

"That's one thing about the white devil, Rangi," Hapuka began.

"Oh, here we go. 'White devil' look – alright. Some of my clan may or may not have slaughtered and or subjugated-" Tyler had recited his spiel so many times he could and did largely only throw out the buzzwords for Hapuka's benefit, in lieu of offering complete sentences. "Different time. Reparations. Stolen Land. Deep regret. Etcetera."

Hapuka and Rangi both laughed. Tyler's depiction of a much put upon and abused representative of entire chunks of history was getting better the more he practised. He would really commit to his bits, would Tyler. Tired facial expressions and over the top gesturing.

"Historic injustices – cultural somethingsomething – can never adequately make up for–"

"No, no hey," Hapuka, still laughing, tried to interrupt. "I'm not blaming you for anything–"

"This time," Rangi chimed in, tipping his head back to finish his own can.

"I'm saying – you people have made some good music, that's all. You know, off the backs and sweat of black and brown people but still –" Hapuka saluted the sound system with his own rapidly emptying can. What was he on now? Three? Not four surely.

"Aha! See? White blame. Fuckin' predictable old Hatin' Hapuka. Hand it over Rangatang. We made a bet you wouldn't be able to have two or three drinks without flying into a racist rant. Hell yeah, easiest dosh I ever made!"

Tyler triumphantly displayed the ten dollar note Rangi had good naturedly crossed the room to relinquish. Hapuka was stunned. Was he that predictable? Racist? No way. That wasn't him. Brownies can't be racist anyway, everyone knows that. They lacked the uh what ya fuckin … special oppressive historical juice that the racist recipe requires. Maybe he needed to have a glass of water.

On the screen, two other actresses on the L word were making out. Probably a culmination of an interesting and well written plot where the characters overcame several obstacles and hurdles to get to this point, but the flat would never know. Hapuka hoped they made it, these plucky kids. They seemed like good eggs. Tyler got up, still crowing about his victory, and pointed at Hapuka and Rangi both, eyebrows raised. Rangi and Hapuka both nodded gravely. Yes. More of the rotgut, teeth death juice, thank you kindly. The music was a mash-up of Saudi Arabic synth jazz and Gregorian chanting now. Hapuka slapped his own face and shook himself.

"Wait, what theory? Since when do you have theories?"

The living room's sole light sources were now the muted TV screen and the flashing that the speakers mounted into the walls gave off. Through and around whatever pauses and breaths happened in Rangi's music, Hapuka could hear sirens and cars backfiring. His head was starting to get that distant, fuzzy, poisoned feel to it and Rangi was being suspiciously quiet over there in the darkness. Hapuka peered at him to evaluate his general level of awareness, but Tyler was back with the drink.

"So, I got it from Shannon, part of it –" Tyler began to monologue. It took Hapuka a second to remember what was being referenced but he caught up quick enough. "You know how he's always on about how we don't need God anymore, since we have the internet? Yeah, it's one of his go to's. I don't wanna talk about his theory, I wanna talk about mine but it's basically – Olden peeps needed something to bind the different villages together and keep from I dunno. The race must continue yadayada so God came along. Whichever God – all of them. Anyway – where did I put my lighter? Ah. Ta, so we don't need that now. The villages are all online. That's why God's on the way out – not cause the people are too smart to believe in him anymore cause – haha – we aren't. But something else is doing his job for him. So, he's outskies. Peace, God."

Hapuka drank some more. "Okay?"

Tyler had sparked up his ever-ready bong, pulling it out from redundant God only knows where. He had a bunch of them. Mind you, Hapuka had one or two himself. As a man of culture. Tyler took a long drag and exhale before continuing.

"So, yeah. Shannon forced me to listen to that spiel – he tells it better – a hundred times but eventually I thought of something. We don't need bitches either. Same reason."

Hapuka felt like maybe he was too tired for this conversation.

“Huh?” he intelligently articulated. “I’m lost.”

Tyler was switching the other TV on and putting the UFC on. Two enormous, muscle swollen behemoths were trying to strangle one another on one screen – all slow-mo, close up, blood spray concussion core – and three girls in bathing suits sitting by a pool on the other. Hapuka found he wasn’t all that keen on watching either. Which was just as well cause his eyes were only half open.

The flashing lights that the screens gave off were getting to him too. The gently drifting clouds of bong smoke that hung in the air were only visible for little fleeting instances but they were there. A miniature rainforest weather system forming at the ceiling of the world, where the forecast’s always over.

“Nah, it’s simple. I figured it out. Like God, see. Women keep the villages together and breeding and whatever. But the internet does that now. There’s too many people anyway. The whole point of trying to get with a chick now, you know for longer than an hour –“

Hapuka tried to blurt out ‘more like two minutes aha ha’ but his lips weren’t as up with the play as his head and Tyler was charging along.

“– Is old fashioned. Babies are old fashioned. Like God. So is tryna ‘meet a real woman’ like you say. It’s all pointless now.”

Hapuka drained the last of his can. What about love though? Love is a real thing – he’d felt it in one of its versions in his life and he was sure Tyler had too. Visions of Hapuka’s brother, all gussied up in a fake leather jacket, posing like a dickhead, threatened to crystallise and harsh his vibe. Hapuka was no rookie at this though and moved on through it – the alcohol and pot smog helping with that. On the screens, a woman was on her knees, sobbing, her make up running and her hands up outstretched in supplication as another woman was storming out of the room they shared, and a fighter was having his own hand raised. Blood trickling down his cheek and a thousand-yard stare trying and failing to snag the camera in its spotlight.

“So… the internet is our God and Girlfriend too? That’s yours and Shannon’s theory?”

Tyler stood and yawned, tossing the remote in Hapuka’s lap as he gathered himself to call it a day.

“Kinda, I dunno. I think it’s more like – for me – why bother, you know? All the little goals we’re supposed to be fuckin’ obsessed with. Jobs. Girls. Fancy cars – why, you know? To fit in or uh – make someone say ‘atta-boy’ or something. It’s all done. It was over before we got here. Noone needs God

anymore. Noone needs to make any more fuckin' crotch goblins. Enjoy women from afar, like me. No fuss no muss. Whatchu think about that, Rangatangi?"

But Rangi, ahead of the curve compared to his flatmates in several respects, was of course already fast asleep.

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Hapuka woke up facedown and fully clothed on his own bed. Shivering. His head was pounding, and his mouth tasted like three separate chickens had had foul smelling miscarriages in there. Why do people drink, he tried to wonder. The shit you're blocking out or getting away from can't be as bad as the hangover waiting around the corner. Short-sighted is what it is. He groped without looking for where a water bottle would be in a sensible person's room but there wasn't any bottle there, or a side table where the bottle could sit in the first place. He sighed. He rolled himself up, and his perceptions rolled with him. He fought the urge to upchuck and grabbed hold of the bedcovers to keep from falling into the ceiling. How much had he drunk last night? Not that much. His Island heritage really did fuck him over when it came to the white devil's fire-water. The stereotypes were true. He swore and after a few deep breaths and hard blinks, he managed to get on his feet. Water. He needed water. He stumbled past the one window his room had, which a neighbour's rugby ball had shattered a month or so ago and he'd yet to get around to fixing. A piece of cardboard had been sellotaped over the majority of the jagged hole but as insulation goes it was a pretty piss poor attempt. Hence all the shivering. His blood alcohol level probably didn't help, but smart money lay all the foul breath mist he could taste, as well as almost see, on the huge hole in his wall. He made it to the bathroom, tripping over the empty bottle of jack and stack of porno mags and scooped mouthful after mouthful of sink water into himself while trying to avoid his own reflection. He'd need some food in him before he could face up to some things. It was probably the combo of the thought of food and the taste of the milky, steel flavoured tap water that made him finally hurl.

He hugged the toilet and felt his innards twist up into a ball inside himself. Plastic, barely digested Mickey Dees dipped in bourbon scented stomach acid came in bursts, between breaths. Face flushed and eyes streaming from the effort, Hapuka staggered up and brushed his teeth ferociously. Goddamnit. This was Tyler's fault somehow. It was only when he'd made it down the envelope carpeted hallway and back to the couch that he noticed that the sun was just then trying to come up. The few gaps in the curtains showing three or four stripling streaks of light, and there was that quiet in the air that only early morning has. How long had he been asleep? An hour? Two? Rangi had evidently vacated the armchair at some stage. He was alone with his suffering. He switched on one of

the TV's – there was one of them animal docos on. Hapuka leaned back and crossed his ankles, turning the volume way down as he shifted. Nah, it wasn't Tyler's fault to be fair. It was Luke's. He could figure it with eerie clarity now that he'd emptied his skull and guts in the grubby bathroom. His brother up and abandoning ship like a wee fuckin' quitter, that's what makes a guy drink and get high and work brutal, pointless jobs when they could – he didn't know. Work in an office somewhere instead. Or be a sparkie or something that was actually useful and made decent coin too. He crabbed his hands around the still-sort-of dark for one of the 498 weed smoking implements that never moved far from the couch, as the polar bear on the screen snagged a mighty great fish out of the water with one paw. They're great, these nature shows. The old British voice doing the talking was saying "... *Food here is plentiful and the Polar Bear knows precisely how and where to hunt* …" Which, Hapuka snapped his fingers and pointed at the screen emphatically, that's it exactly. Old mate voice guy nailed it. He needed to know where and how to go get – whatever he was gonna go get. The freezing works wasn't it. Drinking cheap horse piss all night just to feel like arse and be left alone with your little lad feelings wasn't fucking it either. It was Luke's fault. Hundred per cent. He'd probably be like a lawyer or a casino manager or one of them swanky things if not for being so cut up and side-swiped by his big brother bailing. Not even just the work thing though. Wider than that, he'd – ah! He'd found the bong. He hauled it up carefully, as much for his weakened state as for the urgent need not to spill rank bong water over himself and checked the port. Still half a chunk of pot there, only partially singed. Eureka. There is a God – Shannon is an idiot. He needed a lighter now. His one free hand continued to spider around. On the screen, a bunch of penguins were diving in sequence off of an ice raft into the water. In pairs and singly, but so fast, so close together, it was less like they were individual critters. More like one long single critter. It was pretty and a little hypnotic, but it also reminded him, suddenly, of coughing out his own single long liquid critter into a different kind of water and he had to blink a few times and shake his head from side to side to gather himself. Stupid penguins. Learn how to fly, you literally have wings. Pull yourselves together. He'd found a lighter, but it failed the shake test and refused to spark. He threw it off into a random corner of the house. The search continued.

Luke would laugh if he could see Hapuka now probably. Nah, he'd definitely laugh. His book reading, nerdy baby brother all puke smelling and wanting nothing more than to get high in some dingy, broken-arse flat before the sun had even started to properly shine. Maybe he'd laugh. Hapuka wanted to, a bit. You had to see the funny side of things. Shit was too heavy otherwise. That was probably what took Luke out in the end. Hapuka had thought about it of course. Why do it? The big final dirt nap is coming for everyone eventually - what's the rush? All you're doing by checking out

early is a) taking yourself out of the running of ever winning the Lotto. That's for starters. Ya gotta be in it to win it, as the advertising people remind us. B) you are drastically cutting short the number of female types you might conceivably have persuaded to get groiny with you by carking it. Some of them may even have tried to convince *you* to get groiny with them! Stranger things have happened. That's out. No more sexy groin friends. You would never get to try all the things, the flavours. Experience that buzzy combo of a few strong drinks and a chunk of pot on an empty stomach – watch the world get all techni-coloured and spinny. Those stupid laughs with idiot friends. Seeing your own body change and mutate as you get older. All the shit. Lots of bad shit, okay, sure – but good shit too. Throwing the - what's the saying. You're drowning the baby in the bathwater. Something like that. That's not it - but like that.

A lighter had been under his arse all along. He lit the port, holding the bong to his mouth and inhaling steadily. A genteel, veteran breath. None of this rookie gasping, this was grown folks' business. The smoke wafted up as though anxious to enter its new home and Hapuka puffed out his cheeks to make more room. Then, the hold. The heat of the smoke and the overall hungover strength to him at that present time meant it was an average hold, as these things were judged, but he retained his dignity enough to breathe out through his nostrils. Watching the smoke like dragon's flames from his snout was nearly - nearly - the best part. What had he been thinking about? Oh yeah. Luke. Luke had needed to lighten up. Get high more often instead of just the now and then that he used to. That was probably part of it. Hapuka had picked that up somewhere along the way – the nature show had shifted focus from animals now and was talking about the oceans themselves heating up somehow. Hapuka had picked up, uh … What had he been on about? The thoughts were getting a little fuzzy.

Oh! You had to see the funny. Otherwise, the sad will get on top of you and make it hard to get around. Now, thanks to Luke being a dumbass, or was it his own fault for not being around enough, he fretted about that sometimes, he was gone. Dead now five years. His family had ground right down to a halt - Mum had moved away. No contact for yonks now. Dad had started drinking way more and leaving his house way less. And Hapuka – shit. What was he even up to? In a holding pattern. That's what it felt like he was up to. Just on standby – waiting for a switch to go off that meant he could start moving again, cause the sad will have shifted off of him and he could see the funny again more clearly. That's what it felt like. Hapuka placed the bong back in position and lit up the port holding the pot again. The dirty, seed and stick clogged water in the bulb gurgled with the strength of his inhalation. More homesick, anxious smoke swirled up the chimney and found its place in Hapuka's lungs. Another, slightly more impressive, hold. Another dragon snout exhale. He was

already feeling a bit better. The throbbing in his head had receded and he couldn't taste the bourbon quarter pounder combo anymore. He could only taste the smoke.

Luke had always liked animals too. He probably wouldn't be too thrilled that Hapuka killed some now for a living. That's tough shit of course – you lose your right to have an opinion when you indulge your suicidal instincts too hard. On the screen the seals or sealions or whatever they were could be seen spiralling and pirouetting in the blue drink, chasing fish or swimming away from bigger fish respectively. This reminded Hapuka of his chest burning, razor throated dehydration, all that pre-iced H2O, filled with scaly, gilled friends. He set the bong down and stumbled up to get some relief. In the kitchen – unquestionably and by some margin, the nastiest section of the house, the linoleum floors stuck wherever you stepped. Whether you were wearing shoes or not. And there was a smell, like something rotting out of sight. Tucked away under the fridge maybe. Hapuka did his best to ignore these things and groped around the kitchen bench in the dark for a clean mug. It never occurred to him to flip the light switch. He was still spiritually in bed. None of this was real. This was ambitious, it turned out. There were about sixteen mugs as well as assorted glasses and pitchers, shot glasses, jugs, saucers, Styrofoam cups and plastic beer bong remnants – but a health-conscious person wouldn't consider going near any of them. He gave up, cupping another handful out of the tap and bringing it to his mouth like the Polar Bear with his fish. Not really having hit the spot, Hapuka went to the fridge and grabbed the can of fanta someone had neglected to drink. He snapped it open on his way back to the living-room, swerving in the gloom to avoid the pizza boxes and half full plastic bags of detritus, empty takeaway cartons, old tea towels and BO scented hooded sweatshirts, bundled up in skeevy nests and the perennial, never-ending legions of beer cans that made up a major sector of the flats decor.

"… *As global temperatures continue to rise, our neighbouring species numbers continue to decline. Between deforestation, pollution and the melting of the ice-caps, it is a dire moment for many on planet earth and a way forward is not clear to every expert that* …" Hapuka sat once again, skulling the synthetic-orange garbage, which was cold at least, even as he felt his teeth shrivel in response to all the almost citrus. The light was starting to seep in around the cracks and edges of the house – he could see the mess and overcrowded, haphazard stuff around him more clearly. Tyler's gaming controller, left on its side in the middle of the floor. Hapuka's own bong, still puffing wee micro slivers of smoke out its mouthpiece, making an upward, climbing silver/purple trail in the quiet.

Yeah, he missed his brother though. All said and done. Whyever he had bailed. He reached for the bong and lighter dynamic duo for one more dance. He had been mixed up obviously – dealing with something he hadn't felt he could talk about or take on any other kind of way. Hapuka could

sometimes get to an angry or bitter place with it – the grief. All the how comes and why didn't he moments. But you had to feel bad for Luke and people like him too. It must be a miserable spot to be in – feeling like the only way out is entirely out. The only way for the pain to end was for them to end as well. The gurgling water sent the smoke up to his hungover lungs again. Another hold. Another dragon flame exhale. His bed was calling him back, broken bedroom window notwithstanding. The other souls in the flat would be stirring soon – and if there was any justice having their own toilet hugging adventures as well, but Hapuka wasn't up for company just yet. Maybe today was one of those days Shannon actually made it home come to think of it. Hapuka liked Shannon but he was a lot. He'd need to learn how the world on the TV made it out of the scrape it found itself in some other time. He flicked the screen off and sat in the dark for a second. His thoughts were coming thick and slow, as though through a fog or some skull centred spider webbing. His bed was calling for sure. But just for a bit, just for a minute, Hapuka sat alone in the dark – a rare stillness to be soaked in. And he thought about the brother that left him here, and the version of himself that left this besieged planet earth not long after his brother did. And how he missed them both pretty much equally.

Part Two

Monday shot back around, like it tends to, and Hapuka was once again up to his elbows in sheep shit. Rangi was off in his product packaging department, all box-cutters and hi-vis vests, never even slightly in danger of interacting with an animal. Shannon was back at the flat, returned from one of his cross-country cargo shipment jobs and he'd come back with news. Oh, there was the usual stuff. About how the royal family over there in 'suckingham phallus' were in fact Lizard folk, sent from a different time-line or alternate dimension to eat everyone's babies. Shannon had this from reputable sources – "It's not me saying this but, apparently it's confirmed now."

But this wasn't the news. Nor was the revelation that Big Pharma was putting chemicals in the tap water to make everyone gay – a threat that didn't bother anyone in the flat particularly. Everyone knows Southland New Zealand still subsists on rainwater and alcohol so heterosexual folk were likely to carry on one way or another down here. No, the news was that he, Shannon, had been invited to a house party the coming weekend. Supposed to be a rager, shit-kickers and hard-hitters from all over were coming down for it. A birthday party of an old school friend of both Tyler and Rangi's. Becky something. Tania, maybe. Some chick was aging anyway. Shannon had arranged LSD for the occasion. This was exciting to Hapuka, who wasn't one to turn away a brain-melting substance at the best of times, but it felt appropriate somehow given his new-found quasi decision to 'quit this fuckin' job'. A person who is settled and content doesn't take LSD. It's a kind of pre-escape simulation, before actual escape can happen. All of the chemicals were that, he supposed, fundamentally. LSD moreso though.

He was sharing this perspective with Temiti when the fire alarm went off. The shift had been going more or less to plan. Long rows of condemned animal product were bleating and baa-ing, spirals of steam coming up from their heated, harassed bodies. Flecks of dog spit rinsed the air as the hard-working canines patrolled up and down the walkways that adjoined the sheep pens. Their barking rang out, over and through the surrounding din. Rhythmic and affecting. The truck drivers and yard-hands brought up the rear of the swollen mobs of sheep, cigarette smoke and the dog whistling heralding their passage. It was set to be a cruisy shift too – Tall Boy Keith was up on the Stunner, hands clasped behind his back in readiness which meant Hapuka and Temiti could chew the fat down

in the races. Hapuka valued the old fella's counsel, such as it was. He'd been around several blocks, had Temiti.

Hapuka had been just about to begin his spiel about how LSD was made by the CIA as a truth serum type of thing, pausing mentally to gauge just how far down conspiracy highway he had actually accidentally hitch-hiked without realising it, when over the departmental loudspeakers, and the wider plant as well, a rising, piercing alert sang out. It cut through everything. Plastic lights built into the walls, all veiled by cobwebs and dust, started to swirl and flash. The machinery that plugged into the Stunner claws all deactivated obediently. The tall boy threw up his hands in disgust. Hated an unexpected change of plans did the tall boy. The alarm/siren wailed on as the different Stunner teams all painstakingly reversed the mobs of sheep out of the races, back into the pens. Further back, shepherds and truck-drivers freed up extra pens for space. Departmental policy, under the gentle if insistent pressure from Animal Welfare dictated that no break in production over five minutes can happen without giving all the sheep on death row room to run around. Seemed fair enough to Hapuka. You wouldn't want your last moments on this shit heap being spent all squished up with your neighbours, unable to breathe or move. Empathy, see. More proof that he wasn't supposed to be here.

Temiti saw things differently, kind of.

"Yeah, but what'll ya do with yourself? I support you whole-hearted – get out while you can, this is no racket for a young fulla. But don't tell me you're chucking this in for the dole …" He drawled this out the side of his mouth, the remainder of his jaw being occupied with keeping his lit cigarette going as he worked. Hapuka, beside him, opened another gate and allowed Temiti to shoo another three dozen animals back the way they came.

"I hadn't really thought about it aye. I could work the drive thru at Kfry, is one option. How hard can it be?" The siren cut off mercifully. Loud as fuck those things – and it seemed excessive those times, like this time, when there was no fire to be alarmed about. Just a drill for the local engine crews. This wasn't officially confirmed from head office but the lack of running factory workers or crackling walls of orange hellflame anywhere in sight left Hapuka pretty confident on this account.

"Hello, may I please take your order?"

Temiti, iron grey hair under his incongruous cowboy hat, spat on the grillwork beneath their feet and gestured to Hapuka to get a wriggle on tying up the fence behind them. They walked together for a bit down towards where the plant staff were all gathering in the distance before he spoke up again.

“A job’s a job young fulla. S’like the old American slaves on the doco I watched the other day would say; there’s the house slaves and the field slaves, but ain’t no one more owned than anybody else,” said Temiti. Hapuka nodded. Sure. That makes sense.

“So, what are we – field?” he asked. The gathering staff were being arranged into columns, all orderly and efficient and not a huge amount removed from how the sheep were being corralled down the way a bit. Folks with clipboards were walking down the line, taking attendance. Hapuka filed into one column as directed. Temiti rolled his eyes at his own direction and took his place parallel to Hapuka.

He grinned over at the younger sheep killer. “Well, we’re definitely not fuckin’ house are we boy?”

Hapuka laughed.

“Eh, at least there’s a breeze out in the field. Fuck it,” he returned.

And there was a breeze, but the morning sun was withering down too. Sweat rolling freely from the faces of the workers gathered up. Even the ones in buttoned up shirts, fresh from their air-conditioned offices, were feeling it. Cupping their eyes beneath hands and looking irritably at their wrist watches.

Hapuka nudged Temiti and nodded meaningfully towards the clipboard crew and mouthed, ‘House?’ Temiti laughed without malice. “Oh definitely – a hundred percent House. No shame in it lad, if you get a chance to transfer in there you should. Money’s better. Your back is set to hurt a lot less over time. Just don’t forget where you came from aye. Don’t make that old mistake people have been making for years and years”.

Hapuka affirmed that he was in fact who he was when a clipboard stopped by his column. Present and accounted for. Not on fire, nor being trampled by a mob of rams. An actual danger in this job apparently though he had been spared witnessing anything like that thus far. Hopefully he could be out on the streets or in the drive-thru before he had the chance. The impatient clipboard had rubber stamped Hapuka’s utterance and wandered on before Hapuka could follow up.

“Wait, what mistake?” he asked.

Temiti was holding up his hand like he was swearing an oath in court though, and solemnly reciting his name and occupation to his own sweating interrogator. Hapuka waited. The fulla stamped his rubber down, wiped his brow with the back of his lily-white hand, not that race was a thing Hapuka noticed anymore, and wandered on down the line.

Temiti flicked away his cigarette butt and pulled out a fresh one in the same motion. He lit it and leaned on the fence behind him.

“Eh? Oh, you know – the classic thing people do, when they move from field to house. They start to confuse employment with ‘work’, you know? Look at these jokers for example. The ones from the office. I guarantee you each and every one of them, when they get home – and their missus or other fulla they’re with or whatever – when they ask them how their day was. You know what they’ll all say, I guarantee it.” He puffed his smoke and coughed behind his fist while Hapuka considered what Temiti had said.

Another siren wailed out over the speakers. Just as loud, lights flashing, but only once. The wail sounded long and strident but cut off after one cycle. The ‘all clear’ alarm. The different workers from other departments hopped down off of fences and gates where they were taking a load off and started to head back to their stations. Calling out insults and obscenities to one another as they went. Temiti and Hapuka fell into step, dodging the other twos and threes, and began walking back to where the life-stealing Stunner claw awaited them.

“They’ll say ‘I had the worst day at work today honey – I had to go outside in the sun!’” Temiti stated. “They’ll say ‘state of it ow, did so much hard fuckin yakka today! But see they haven’t. They never have. It’s not the same”. Hapuka kicked a clod of dried dog shit and sent it careening down the yard. Missed his calling lowkey. His Island blood made him a natural at feats of physical prowess. Or so he planned to tell all the girls at the party, before the LSD kicked in anyway.

“Work is when you swing a sledgehammer. Work is when your back aches and you have RSI all up and down ya. Lactic acid never leaves your limbs cause you never stop using them. Work is physical and tough and punishes the fuck outta ya, so you gotta have a drink or a toke at the end of the day. Cause the pharmacies a rip off – and you have to be back tomorrow to do the same shit all over again, see? I know you know this.” Temiti gestured at Tall Boy Keith, who had just come stalking out of the Stunner’s shadows like a ghoul, to head back to his station. The oddity grinned like it was what he had been waiting to hear and hurried up the ramp to his control panel. The old fulla hadn’t finished his rant though. Hapuka was all ears. He did in fact know all this, but it seemed to resonate more when it came from an old head.

“Transfer in to the house from the field if you can young fulla. It’s cooler in there. Your body will thank ya for it – but don’t forget that you know what its like to work, see. Most of them in the house won’t ever know. People in the trenches don’t have much – but they do have those fuckin’ trenches. ‘Had a hard day at work, honey?’ Nah love – I did a good stint of being employed though, aye? See the difference?” Temiti rounds off, scowling resentfully at his cigarette, presumably for already being damn near finished. All the chin wagging had robbed Temiti of the nicotine a tad. Hapuka took this as his sign to grab his flask and take a swig in lieu of accidentally drawing forth more rants. Field slave.

House slave. Employment and work. Well, wherever he was stationed and whatever you wanted to call it, it was time for a change. Hapuka could sense it in his athletic, physical prowess inclined blood.

“Oh, you know how they ended that doco, Hapuka?” Temiti yelled out from down the line. Hapuka raised his eyebrows queryingly, his windpipe too busy navigating the flask’s mouthpiece.

“They finish it up by going ‘ hey, you know the difference, the main buzzy difference – you’ll like this – between wage slavery and actual slavery?” Temiti shouted.

Hapuka replaced the cap on his flask. Trick question?

“We get paid as wage slaves?” he answered. Or was it that you didn’t have to catch or buy wage slaves, we walked onto the block ourselves?

“Nah, I thought that too. Nah, the real difference between us wage slaves and them real slaves was – real slaves could actually escape from time to time. Ha ha. Think about that one when you’re lining up for the drive thru, boy!”

And Hapuka would think about. More than once. Fuckin’ old heads man. Who let them out unsupervised?

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His flatmates were intrigued by Temiti’s world view – after work when Hapuka relayed the gist. None of it new or ground-breaking to them from the generation raised by their TV as much as their parents, but like Hapuka had found, hearing the older folk say certain things seemed to mean more somehow. A kind of snobbery of seniority, baked into the crust of a person. Tyler, the non-employable, was particularly inspired by the overall sentiment. He had looked up the quotes mid Hapuka’s recitation.

“Oh, the American Republican Party said that wage slave thing originally. That’s funny.” And it was. Shannon took exception to the implication that a person required a sledgehammer to qualify as a field hand. “I have to carry these pallets out myself – plus I get pinged if there’s anything missing or damaged – I have to pay outta my own pocket. I think I’m field. I’m definitely not house. How could I be?”

Hapuka could only shrug. What the fuck did he know at the end of the day. Rangi had only nodded thoughtfully at the message, not looking up from his phone. Maybe he was too young to get it, Hapuka reasoned, being several months older than Rangi. Get a few more birthdays in him and he’ll see what we wise, old heads see. Tuesday, when it hit, was a nothing. A non-event. Just another day to mark on the calendar as definitely having had happened. The office had sent around – that was

one thing – the controversial word from on high though. From now on each chain at the yards will process 3,500 animals at a minimum. If they hit 4,000 there'd be a bonus. Some big-brained initiative from some moisturised palm flapping house slave higher up the food chain. This put a fox among the co-worker chickens in the field, no doubt about it. Those simultaneous twin tremors of resentment at the insistence on a minimum kill rate, and greed at the prospect of a bigger fuckin' durry fund added into the pay packet at the end of the week. Hapuka admired the sleazy tactic on display, but it didn't trigger his saliva glands much. He was on the way out, pretty sure. He'd have to think about it a bit more – consult some of the sages around, but he felt he could tell which way the wind was blowing and right then, according to his internal weathervane, the wind was blowing him straight out on to the unemployment line.

Wednesday came all too soon. The sky shat itself before the dream team in their Golden Holden even made it through the gate, which Hapuka took as a bad omen. His Samoan relatives were all about them omens. Bad signs in the aura of a person. Nightmares as premonitions, that sorta shit. His own father had a whole host of superstitions he lived his life by – none of which, Hapuka wasn't tired of his teeth enough to mention, though the thought had crossed his mind once or twice – had forewarned his father about Lukes's suicide or his wife's high-tailing it. But then, how could Hapuka know for sure? His father didn't share everything with him. He resolved to go visit his old man at some stage. It had been a minute since he'd been paternally scolded for his general approach to life. Odd, the shit a person learns to miss. The omens never lie, only people do that. The stockyards were all frenzied that day. The animals were restless and pent up, dragging their feet and straining against the fences that held them. Three major ruptures in the corrugated ceiling, that had been there since the eighties, allowed for differently angled waterfalls, the colour of rust or old blood, down and down. The wind would catch the rust juice and splatter it around in people's faces, in the eyes. A person should get extra to work in conditions like this, Hapuka thought to himself.

"A person should get extra, to work in conditions like this!" he subsequently yelled out to his co-workers in general. There was the usual round of indifference. Probably they hadn't heard him. He could barely hear himself. The standard cacophony of poorly maintained machinery and animal vocalisations was joined by the percussive noise of the downpour from overhead. Hapuka had left his flask of booze at home too – a half-hearted attempt to give his liver some rest before this fuckin' party he was obligated to attend. That had been stupid. If there was ever a day that a person would benefit from a booze blanket, it was this one. Hour grinded away into hour. Hapuka, at one stage, despite the cold and the rain was in danger of breaking into sweat with how recalcitrant the mobs were being. He had dragged four rams in succession, who understandably were moodily digging their

heels in from being doused in roof water, up the ramp himself, and had been eyeing up the fifth dispiritedly when the Stunner broke down. Praise King Santa and all his tooth fairy handmaidens.

He was the only one happy about it, turns out. People had the scent of that 4,000 dead animal bonus in their nostril hairs. Mechanics and departmental sparkies were emerging from different corners of the stockyards. Lights were flashing – always with the melodrama and the lights, these factory people. Hapuka, feeling sensitive to signs and portents from dimensions situated perpendicular to this one, took this breakdown as meaning it was time to take a walk. He hung up his sheep rattle and whistle on a random fence, put his hands in his pockets, and started the 'I'm being paid enough to be here but not enough to stress' minimum wage walk down the way. Others were doing the same, in twos and threes. Some anxiously eyeing up the pens and yards leading up to the Stunner, evaluating whether they'd be held up long enough to start ushering the animals backwards. Having spent the last hour in particular, heaving them in the opposite direction, Hapuka felt morally disinclined to help if it came to that. A matter of principle, not tiredness. This is what he would tell people if pressed, he decided, and rehearsed what he would say.

He had made it to one of the walkway hubs, where different mobs and flocks would splinter off into their respective races and pens, before he was waylaid by Gary. Gary was one of the supervisors of the department overall but he was okay. He had been field before he sold out and became house, so a person could still talk to him without hunching their shoulders over too much.

"Another break down, Hapuka? Why do they call you that anyway?"

Gary had one of his steel-toed work boots propped up on a fence and his elbow laid across his knee. A man not in a hurry to be anywhere else. Hapuka took his cue from this, as well as some comfort. If one of the muckety-mucks thought it was fine to post up and watch time glide by, he wasn't going to argue. Hapuka propped up his own work boot against the same fence alongside and scratched his cheek with one of the few clean fingernails he had available to him.

"Another breakdown, Garry. No fuckin' kill bonus for us today, looks like."

The bonus, from what Hapuka understood, was only about enough coin for a box of chicken wings anyway. Nothing wrong with a box of chicken wings but he wasn't convinced he'd sampled any kind of deep-fried food worth its weight in all the sweat he was in danger of excreting. That'd be one of them questions for the philosophers though. Gary was frowning down the line to where the Stunners sat, all immobile and non-productive.

“If management put as much funding into the equipment as they put into incentive bonuses, maybe they wouldn’t need incentive bonuses,” was Gary’s brainchild and Hapuka made noises that meant agreement. The folk at the pointy end in the yards had mused as much or similar amongst themselves in the break rooms but Hapuka felt a Zen-like distance from it all. He wasn’t here for the money; he was here for something to do while he figured out his life. This makes a difference when the shit storms inevitably hit - a person’s why and how come.

“I live with a Māori fulla – he gave me the name. Reckons I have eyes that bulge like the fish. Fucker,” Hapuka informed Gary absent-mindedly. “At least it's supposed to taste alright - if you’re gonna be compared to a fish it should at least be one of the tasty ones eh.”

Gary laughed at that. Hapuka made a mental note of this. Supervisor Gary laughed at a thing he said – he’d obviously be down to write a glowing reference for him once he was out the door. The KFC people would be chuffed. Hapuka was about to make a show of walking over to where he could now see his co-workers hustling the animals back towards the docking bays, when Lindsay strolled up. Lindsay was not a muckety-muck but he was one of the truck drivers who’d been there since the walls were put up, or so it seemed. Gary saluted him casually and Hapuka nodded respectfully too. Lindsay was good people. All of five foot three of barrel-chested solidity. A down to earth character, as Tyler might say. He brandished his length of rope he carried around himself as animal flail and co-worker whip. Weird habit that, carrying a bit of thick rope around. Maybe one of those coloniser habits Hapuka was too blessed with melanin to understand. Not that he noticed that sort of thing or looked at life through any kind of racial lens. Goddamnit. Lindsay was shaking his head.

“What’s up?” Gary wanted to know.

Turns out, as Lindsay related to mostly Gary but Hapuka was semi-included by virtue of his presence, that one of the young drivers hadn’t shown up for three straight shifts with no explanation or call-in. Lindsay’s own boss had gone around to this young fulla, Andy’s, place to rark him up and give him the come to Jesus talk, only to be informed by a tear stained woman that wee Andy had done himself in. So, Hapuka figured, the come to Jesus talk really woulda been redundant, depending on a person’s belief system. No, but it was sad though.

“Younger than you, Hapuka,” Lindsay shook his head. “Always the young ones isn’t it?”

Hapuka made more noises that meant agreement, but Gary was shaking his head matter of factly.

“Nah, not necessarily. I mean a lot of young ones do it, fuck off that way, but you remember Nigel who had my job before me? He was nearly fifty. Caught his wife stepping out on him or so the

rumour mill reckons. So much for Nigel. Then there was Harry from Rendering. He was just about pension age if memory serves. Tragic, that."

And that was tragic. Young people spiralling off of life's cliffs before they'd really even gotten stuck in to any of the good stuff, that was a certain type of sad, but for the shit-kicking, trench grubbers in the field – the pension is the holy carrot. Bringing them all on, getting them out of bed every morning. Making every 'stick' worth it. Every nightmare shift, every disaster or weird, piss-take move by those on high could be endured and lived with – so long as the average shit-kicker could see the glimmering, shimmering twinkle, of the promise of the pension in the near distance. For someone like this Rendering Harry to be within a pubic hair of that wonderful mecca and still opt out – that wasn't just sad. That was almost offensive.

"Your brother went off that way too, didn't he?" Gary frowned at Hapuka. "A wee while back now."

Hapuka nodded, folded his arms and frowned at his boot on the fence there. Hopefully he could skive off with his work boots when the day came. They spared no expense on the footwear, these factory folk.

"Yep, five years ago or so hey. No idea why – even now. He woulda been, shit. 26 this year? Crazy," he reflected.

"See? These young fullas. What a waste," Lindsay groused, whipping the fence in front of him for emphasis. "New Zealand, we lead the world in fuckin' suicide, so they reckon. If it was Australia, I would understand."

Hapuka grinned. The sly envy towards but also outright disgust at Australia's general existence was one of those generational things a young-field-wage-slave ran into from time to time. He didn't really understand it himself, but that lack of comprehension assured him that he was still youthful and vibrant. He'd know the end was near once he started to understand these kinds of things. He played the devil's advocate card that just sat there in the fabric of the conversation, waiting for him to pick it up.

"Aw what's wrong with aussie? Plenty of lookers over there, from what the TV tells me. Plus, they know what the sun looks like at least." This replete with a meaningful nod at the waterfalls cascading down through the ceiling over yonder. Gary and Lindsay both bristled with older white male indignation. It was Lindsay who was passionate about the topic though. A bee in his bonnet about the great, sun-baked wasteland across the Tasman, evidently.

“They’re a great fuckin’ cultural toilet, Australia! What’s wrong with it? Everything costs too much; a thousand things are trying to kill you while you take a shit. They treat their natives too rough – what are you again, Hapuka? One of those darkie breeds, I forget –“

“One of them,” Hapuka affirmed happily. “One of the friendly ones, I’m pretty sure.”

“Yes, well, fine. Over there, you’d be having a hell of a time. Just walking down the street would be a trial cause they got conquered by rapists and tax-evaders and sub-par rugby players. Be out there on one of them reservations, dancing for a cup of water. And that accent! ‘Fuck me ded!’”.

Gary was laughing with the laughter that meant, ‘Ho ho yes I am amused by how much I agree with this,’ whereas Hapuka’s own mirth had more of that ‘Oh look the older folk are straining their heart meds over foolishness again’ flavour.

Gary regained his composure enough to carry on talking. “It’s true though, I’ve heard that”.

“What’s that? The accent?” Lindsay raised his eyebrows questioningly.

“Yes, I’ve heard the fuckin’ accent – no, I mean the New Zealand ‘leading the world’ in rates of suicide thing. Per head of capita? Wild to think about. There’s only a handful of us all up. But we’re leading the charge apparently.”

Hapuka was familiar with this statistic too. A suicide in the family tree tended to bring a person to hunt out certain facts and figures. He had thought about this before – odds are most people who feel a brush with specific kinds of pain or heartache, they seek out reassurance that they aren’t the only ones. Almost comforting to know that Hapuka’s own case of the tragedy trials wasn’t unique. Almost. Not really to be honest. Hapuka chimed in with some of the other things he happened to know.

“They reckon –“ And it’s always ‘they reckon’ whenever a person is about to relay some information down here in Southland. Under no circumstance should a fulla be seen to be forwarding an opinion of their own. What are we, Australians? “– the rural folk are some of the worst. People like you, Lindsay and your boy Andy there. Arr Eye Pee. The construction sector – they love a bit of suicide now and then. We meatworkers are well represented in the figures. The darker breeds, friendly or not. We like to check out early –“

“Understandable,” Lindsay interrupted with the self-assurance of one who tends to feel that conversations are mostly his, with occasional input from lesser, junior others. “The Māori are sixteen percent of the population of the country, so they reckon. The treaty didn’t do anything apparently. Sixteen of the national population – but fifty-two percent of the prison population! I’d be topping myself too.”

“Look at you,” was Gary’s sardonic comment “You’ve been listening to talk back radio on your days off again!”

But Hapuka was impressed, just quietly. Most mayonnaise folk of a certain age, in his experience, didn’t retain statistics about the caramel critters. You really shouldn’t probably judge a book by its cover. Hapuka was determined not to be the focus of another racial bet anytime soon. He could be open-minded. There was still time. He wasn’t Gary or Lindsay’s age yet. Not quite yet. He had remembered the other noteworthy statistic while Lindsay had steamrolled over his narrative flow.

‘Yes, suicide, we’re good at that – and child abuse. Only Saudi Arabia, world-wide, are better than us at child abuse apparently. I feel like we’ll take the gold one of these days though. Kiwi ingenuity etcetera.”

Lindsay coughed and spat and Gary grimaced. Hapuka clapped his hands decisively. Well, his work was done here. Off to help his co-workers kill some more sentient life for money. The awkward silence behind was only being tentatively broken after he’d walked four or five metres down the walkway. Gary asking Lindsay by way of subject change –

“So, did you see the game then?”

Thursday was another nothing, non-event though the rain had cleared up at least. Hapuka had a soft spot for Thursdays. Close enough to Friday to be basically the weekend and yet somehow as far from Monday as it was possible to be. The Stunners were functional, the animals were docile. Each passing second seemed to slide down the time toilet without undue rigmarole or input required. At this rate, if it keeps up – Hapuka would be on the pension himself in three weeks. Until the last run, a mob of steel grey, horned marino rams, who were from some isolated hill out in the middle of nowhere. They were skittish and leery from the get-go, clumping together in threes and fours against the fence. Pawing at the grillwork and swinging their horns at the legs of any worker who wandered too close. Hapuka knew hard work when he saw it and eyed the department clock resignedly. 4:45. Fifteen whole minutes to be shared with these truculent, bad-tempered bastards. He had stretched in preparation, hands on hips and rotating, like the ads instruct a person to do.

It was sweaty, muscle straining work. Definitely field/trench/shit-kicker stuff. No time for low fat lattes or the moisturising of the palms. The wool on the animals was so dense, so thick, and so clogged with gorse bush bristles and thorns that Hapuka’s palms were cut in several places from grappling with the beasts. Blood was trickling down his forearms. And it was necessary to grapple them – they acted like they’d never seen a human being before. Front legs straight out like iron bars

of resistance, digging into the grilled floor as the yardies pulled and heaved at them, to get them to the Stunner. Back legs curled up ready to kick an unwary Islander lad in the balls. Around them, on the other races and yards, there was shouting of jubilation in the old 'it's nearly home-time' key, but Hapuka wasn't on board emotionally. Fuck these animals and fuck the system that brought him face to face with them. He was at least as incurious about these rams as they evidently were when it came to himself. Ninety-three animals though inexorably, gradually became sixty-four – then twenty-eight. Each one weighed more than Hapuka himself and each one seemed to have a grudge against him personally. Sweat was pouring from Hapuka now. He felt like he'd lost a kg in twelve minutes. The notion that at least there was some justice in the marinos finding the eternal peace of the electric chair didn't bring all that much comfort to Hapuka. All the wild-eyed panic in the animal's eyes meant that it was hard to feel positively about them at the best of times – and the cuts on his palms and the sweat clogging up his own vision were adding irritation to the strain. Finally, he had dragged 92 of them to their date with destiny. Temiti was hollering approbation in his Maori tongue from up on the Stunner but Hapuka could only hear his laboured breathing. Too much takeaways, not enough walking it off. Hapuka stood wearily with his hands on his hips. The last ram stood opposite him in the pen, pawing the ground and brandishing his formidable horns. Lucky last. Two minutes to go before home time.

There is an odd thing a stockyard worker learns a thing or two about after a few years in the job: that groups of sheep are easier to deal with than individuals. One sheep tends to follow another, everyone knows that – there are cliches and stereotypes about it. Sheep on their own though, they tend to get notions above their station. Or the feral, all-consuming panic that seems like the sheep's primary emotion gets swollen and disproportionately frenzied, with no flock friends to share it with. Either way, it wasn't good news for the stockyard worker. An unpredictable beasty is not an optimal dance partner to have. Hapuka feinted left to try and get the animal to make some sort of move, then right – but there was no response. The enormous – it seemed vast now that Hapuka was worn out – behemoth snarled and the windows to its internal panic glistened with animosity. Hapuka feinted right, then moved straight ahead, trying to grab the beast by its horns. A bold move on a good day. Hapuka had done the job for long enough to know better, but he was tired.

The ram reared back at Hapuka's move, back legs smashing into the gate behind it. This seemed to light a fire in the animal's processes, this impact with the artificial, man-smelling boundary that hemmed it in. It swung its horns at Hapuka who jerked back in alarm, then the ram smashed his legs back into the fence again. This time he got purchase, his hill traversing rear legs searching for and finding a foothold, some time-worn divet in the metal maybe. The animal pushed and leaped up and with freakish velocity, straight at Hapuka. A last gasp 'if I'm going to die, I'm taking you with me, you

fuck' kamikaze spiral. Hapuka would enjoy it more in hindsight than he did in the moment. He managed to side-step, barely. Some of that physical prowess in the gene coding coming in clutch. The ram's trajectory had it soaring up and past Hapuka – and it came down with a violent thud, a gate's iron vertical hand-hold puncturing the ram in the rib cage and holding it in place. Hapuka was still reeling from the movement out of the animal's way. He had no frame of reference for what he was seeing. Time had slowed down, while the ram was in motion – the whole wrestling match felt like it had taken minutes instead of seconds – but now that the animal was stuck, impaled, time sped up. Sped up around Hapuka, who felt thunderstruck and poleaxed. He had no frame of reference for this.

People were shouting. Different things, conflicting things. There was too much noise to really hear any of it, but they sounded urgent and time sensitive. Another goddamn alarm was singing, the lights were spinning. Gary was running out of the office – another clipboard was clambering up in the near distance, trying to cover the cameras. Oh yeah, the cameras, Hapuka slowly realised. Animal Welfare will shut us down for this. The dogs were barking – they seemed like there were forty of them and they all had something to say. Hapuka knew there was six at most. He knew that rationally. Poor, dumb fuckin' beasty.

The loudest noise of all was the ram – the usual baa-ing and snorting of a great, wild roaming thing was replaced by a frantic wail. Like a human toddler – the vocal chords were making nightmarishly human sounds of pain and fear. The ugly length of blunt, rounded off iron – thick as a man's wrist - was completely inserted between the rams' ribs, and bright crimson fluid was jetting out from around the gate handle in heart-beat synched squirts. Hapuka was trying to figure out what to do – how to help – should he snap its neck? Could he snap it? The ram was chest height to him, all four legs trying vainly to help it move, head lolling and tongue protruding. Panic fizzing out of the eyes that used to be empty, Hapuka had thought, but he could see them flooding with pain then. He was panicking too. Killing these guys was one thing. Someone had to do it and a job is a job. But this was – this wasn't clean or quick. People were still shouting. The alarms were still squawking. This wasn't quick at all. He hadn't meant for this to happen. Hapuka wiped the blood off of his hands onto his trouser legs, his own blood, and reached to try and get the ram down. He couldn't figure out where to grab that would cause the animal the least amount of pain – and it was still screeching two feet from his face, the distress infecting Hapuka more and more with each passing moment.

"I'm trying!" he had yelled, like it would understand, and he had grabbed the ram from the shoulder blades, thinking if he could muscle it up into some less helpless pose it could – but the ram was stuck. Like the iron gate was a part of it now. It swung its horns as best it could, either unknowing or uncaring what Hapuka thought he was accomplishing. The clanging of its horns against the fence

beneath him made the gate rattle and joined the clamour around Hapuka. Blood was frothing down and out of the ram, a surreal, implausible amount of blood, it seemed to Hapuka. It was dripping from every rung of the gate. It had painted the entire yard pen they were in red. Hapuka was covered in it – he was in danger of slipping over in it. And still the animal was howling. Hapuka stepped back, then again. He took as many steps back as he could away from the stuck creature. Whatever little glimmer of decisiveness or rationality in his head that was there was getting snuffed out by all the noise. All he could smell was blood and it was becoming all he could think too. His entire world, in that moment, became a small hexagon of iron and sheet metal. With him at one end, blank faced and dejected and at the other end there was a stuck, screaming animal that was only hurting at all because of something he'd done. Hapuka was sorry. He might even have said it.

Then Temiti was there. From somewhere. He grabbed the animal's skull with practised detachment, pushed something against the base. There was a dull pop. And the animal seemed to sigh out his last scream, then sag. Hapuka sagged too. The alarms had stopped. Nobody was shouting. Hapuka realised his mouth was full of the ram's blood. He leaned over and spat it out robotically.

Temiti was saying something to him. Grinning, for some fucking reason. Lit cigarette puffing away from the corner of his mouth. Hapuka shook his head.

"What?"

Gary and two of the clipboards had crowded around the dead ram, one of them having wheeled up a low trolley from somewhere. A kind of sheep gurney, from the looks of it. They were saying things Hapuka was only catching every third word of. Something about 'deleting footage' and 'chemical wash before the next shift' but Hapuka was too stunned to focus on the meaning of any of it. Temiti was repeating himself anyway, gesturing Hapuka to climb on out of the pen.

"I'm saying – you dozy fucker, that was number 4,000! Why'd you have to go and do that? You owe everyone a box of beer, Hapuka!"

So much for Thursday. On Friday, he called in sick and went to see his old man.

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The old man still lived in the same place Luke and Hapuka had grown up, off the corner of Conyers there, just down the way from Tramway. Close enough to walk to from the flat. Most places in

Invercargill are. ‘Dad’s place’ for as long as Hapuka could remember, but as an adult he realised it was mostly the state’s place. His dad just paid the rent there. No fence or boundary separated the place from the curb side, making it ideal for teenage sneaking in after hours. Seeing it as an adult hit different though. A house should have a boundary really. The picket, and what the fuck is a picket anyway, but the picket fences don’t need to be white. Still. There should be a fence. Keep the undesirables out. As he approached the letterbox, Hapuka made a note to bring this up to his father at some point. He paused in the driveway and considered the man who spawned him. However things had played out for his father, and a wife leaving you high and dry, or low and drowning in cheap piss, after a son killed themselves wasn’t an ideal chain of events by anyone’s standard. The man had endured and maintained. Maybe this endurance was the optimistic Samoan philosophy of life that his father tended to go on about, but Hapuka didn’t really think so. There wasn’t much evidence either way for Hapuka’s instinct on this, but there had always seemed something oddly Kiwi about the whole stiff upper lip in the face of tragedy thing. Like the pilgrims and settlers, those miserable refugees from the monarchy, he remembered reading about in high school. Floating over here on rickety, influenza crammed invader ships and tainting the air with their perseverance and willpower, as they hacked all the trees down and imposed themselves on the Māori. Some of that pale mentality got into his father somehow. Samoa is sunshine and shrugs in the face of reality. Water off a Pacific Ocean based duck’s back. New Zealand was different: gritting its teeth beneath the storm clouds and getting on with it. Like his father did. Hapuka wasn’t clear on where he himself sat on the spectrum there, but he knew he wasn’t a shrugger or a tooth grinder. Maybe he was a cool, new thing.

He walked up to the door with its flaking paintwork, past the scrupulously mowed lawns and no fence. The door was open for the midday air, but he knocked loudly as he entered anyway. His father was of the old school and had survived weird, concrete jungle eras of the seventies and eighties. Big smoke Auckland and turbulent Dawn Raid infested Wellington. Those had been his father’s stomping grounds, once upon a time. A person didn’t walk into an Islander of that vintage’s home without knocking if that person valued their safety. Hapuka knew his dad still had his grass cutting machete lying around the place somewhere, even as he’d modernised and started mowing the Palagi way. It wasn’t completely out of the question that Hapuka could cop a hefty, blunt blade slam in the face one of these days – as if visiting a parent isn’t painful enough. Not this time though.

His father strolled from the hallway in response to the knock; greying head of hair tilted to the side inquisitively until he had recognised his son standing there in the doorway. The old man laughed then by way of greeting and come forward for a hug.

“Why aren’t you at work? They pay you too much, ah!”

Hapuka grinned and looked around at this place that hadn’t changed in a decade. A book he had never gotten around to reading in his teen years, here. A pile of bills he was pretty sure he’d seen there the last four times he’d visited, over there. The house was the one reliable thing, it sometimes felt like, in a world bizarrely fixated on change. And even this place was starting to feel different, as did the resident’s presence just then. Hapuka figured it was probably him doing the changing though.

“Hey Dad, let’s have a coffee aye? I’m tryna cut back on the hard stuff.”

There was a wind tunnel in the house, created by his father’s tendency to keep both front and back doors open during the heat of the day, and frequently multiple windows open around the place too. So, even in Invercargill where the air is thick and heavy, and time moves slower than it does in other places, the house had billowing curtains and spontaneously slamming interior doors. This was as familiar to Hapuka as his own face, or as his fathers was, but it occurred to him every now and then, when there’d been some time between visits, just how unusual that actually was. What would a head-shrinker make of his father’s need for constantly rushing air? There’s bound to be some theories on the cyber-web. He made another note to someday investigate this. Hapuka sat on a navy-blue couch, also familiar and unchanging, ankles and arms crossed, as his father bustled about, clearing off spaces and removing stacks of newspapers, dirty plates and empty beer bottles from the lounge. His father muttered as he went, sometimes in English, sometimes in Samoan but consistently in that mildly distracted/irritated fashion Hapuka chalked up to age. He would have offered to help with this tidying process had he not also had a lifetime’s experience of being underfoot and in no way of assistance whenever his father was on the move. His father had his set ways, his preferred pace, and a quietly unmoving determination never to properly explain either to anyone. It was just easier to stay out of his way. Hapuka spent the time examining the walls of family portraits as though he’d never seen them for something to do.

Here, a black and white photograph of his father’s uncles and aunts, all stern and in their finery. From back home – the birthplace. Where people are sensible, as his father would often remind him. Where people lived and laughed and thought properly. The photo had a brightly coloured necklace of polished seashells bordering it and was set slightly crooked. There, a certificate of academic merit for the ex-son, the former brother, he who must not be blamed. Still in pride of place above the mantle there. Slightly to the left, the wedding photo of his parents, back in the good old days, before wretched children and various hardships came tumbling on down. He noted the width of his father’s smile. And the brightness of his mother’s eyes. Kinda large, almost Hapuka like, as had been noticed

before. It's her fault then, as so much sometimes seems to be. His terrible handwriting could also be attributed to her apparently.

The tapa cloth beneath the coffee table and the lavalava hanging over the hallway mirror, to keep the spirits from having easy access, made the house's inhabitant's specific ethnicity clear for those in the know. But his father had never been a typical Samoan. If there is such a thing. Some of the stereotypes stuck like glue but others just floated past his father. Maybe it was that way with all stereotypes and all cultures, but Hapuka chose not to believe that. No, it made more sense that his father was odd and unique. It helped validate his own quiet suspicion that he himself was odd and unique. It made for a more comfortable belief system, that, than the dreary conviction that every person is the sum total of the bad things that had happened to them, or how few and far between those childhood safety hugs were. Hapuka's father bustled back in with a coffee, and cold chicken drumstick on a saucer, before wandering back out, muttering. Hapuka seized the chicken leg and took a chomp out of it as he waited. Before another mouthful had been dealt with, his father returned with his own saucer and mug and sat on the armchair alongside him.

"Hey, it's good to see you, son. Are you staying out of trouble? Do you need money?"

"I'm fine, Dad. Just dropping by, checking to see how the other half lives, you know."

The coffee was overly sweet, liberal amounts of sugar having been poured in from a man with clearly no fear of heart failure or diabetes. Hapuka had to chase each swallow of coffee with a bite of chicken – which was an unusual way to go about things but in his time at the flat he had learned comparable dietary weirdness. His father had switched on the television and was scrolling through channels, no doubt looking for some mention of tomorrow's weather. Old dudes love the weather. Hapuka had figured that out a while ago. They sat together in silence, every usual opening for conversation or back and forth rendered moot by the simple fact that they were father and son. He could be still, with his father, in a way that didn't seem possible with other people. What was that about? Familiarity or time served, something like that. A huge amount seemed like it was communicated outside of the need for words at times. Or maybe they just had nothing very much to say to one another, Hapuka supposed. That was possible too.

"How's work, son? Are you the boss yet?"

Hapuka laughed politely. His father used to be a meatworker, field-hand, not house of course, and he knew that world very well. The pension held him in her welcoming bosom lately and he had never been shy about criticising Hapuka's decision to 'waste himself' in the grubby death factory. Parental hypocrisy has no cultural boundaries, Hapuka had noticed. Do what I say not what I do, was still up

and running in his father's house. Just because his father had spent forty years in these shit-heaps, didn't mean his son could get away with the same. Not that he really disagreed that the death factories didn't deserve his infrequently sober presence, mind you. That was what he had come around to discuss in fact.

Still, funny how annoying the parental badgering never fails to be, even if a person plans for it in advance. Accounts for it. Hapuka wondered how old he would be before his father's hectoring would stop at least needling him around the edges there. Probably, realistically, the old man would have to move on to the next place before this transformation could be. Maybe that was like your, whatsit, unavoidable, evolutionary curse type thing. A son can only really hear the father once the father stops being quite as around or something. First comes love, then comes marriage, then comes baby in the baby carriage. He swirled the last dregs of his coffee around in his cup, squinting his eyes to try and judge the caffeine to sugar ratio there. First comes father age, then comes father death – then, what, eventually you start to miss the things that used to give you the shits? He'd have to work on the rhyme scheme. English was his second language, or so he liked to tell the mayonnaise people when they started to get lippy anyway.

"I actually think I'm gonna quit, Dad. I dunno. It's pretty depressing there."

He knew he'd made a mistake as soon as he phrased it like that. He sighed in preparation for the withering 'depressing? What is that? If you were working hard enough and applying yourself, ah, you wouldn't have time to be depressed!' But his father surprised him. He just nodded slowly, not looking away from the television.

"That's good, son. Go get a proper job while you're still young, ah." His father smiled over at him with gentle mockery. "Well, still sort of young aye. When are you going to hurry up and get a woman? I'm going to die before I meet my grandchildren!"

Samoan unpredictability. How did we end up on Grandchildren from career talk? Hapuka needed to have planned better. Or maybe he really was taking a few too many weeks between visits. Younger Hapuka would never have been caught off-guard so easily. It was the drugs' fault. Fuckin' flammable sleeping pills, they had a lot to answer for.

"Hah, ah yeah, maybe Dad. One day. You might need to hang around for a few years yet aye."

His father stood and stalked over to the window, with its curtains whipping the air, and peered out at the street. Hapuka hadn't heard anything, but his father had those concrete jungle ears. Could hear a repo man from a block away, those ears. Hapuka's had been ruined by all that devil worshipping rock music. He also didn't own anything someone could repossess which freed him up anxiety wise.

His father grunted and closed the window. No repo man lurking then.

“No, that’s good. Quit the stupid works. Wait till the off season comes though, so you get the holiday pay, ah.” His father advised, as he returned to his seat.

Hapuka had thought about this as well. Being seasonal, blessedly only half a year of sheep being meaty enough to kill, the works would hand their workers a small sum to see them through the section of the year when there was no work. Holiday pay, so called. Hapuka began to drum imaginary drumkits, using the chicken leg as tasty prop. It would mean he’d have to linger for a bit longer than was really fun to think about but shit, money is money. The idea of leaving a couple grand on the table for his impatience wasn’t an idea that made any kind of sense in the harsh light of day. Plus, Hapuka had reasoned, it would give him some time to plan his next move if he loitered till season’s end.

They sat there for a while longer in silence. Hapuka cleaned the drumstick bone thoroughly. It occurred to him, madly and all of a sudden to bring up the brother. It was this house maybe. Affecting all the decision-making muscles in the head. Or even bringing up, potentially less advisably, the mother. Had we heard from her since, however long it’s been? Is she impatiently waiting for grandchildren too? These questions weren’t for the outside audible spaces though, Hapuka knew. His father wasn’t really in the mode for hearing them, let alone coming up with the answers. He liked to think he could fill in the blanks anyway, for things his father might say. He’d known him for a while and all it took was a little calculating. People don’t need information though, do they, the hard facts, as much as they need to hear those facts from specific sources. It’s the messenger, not the message. It’ll be all okay, type of thing, if our father says it will be.

A door from either the bathroom or one of the bedrooms slammed then. Thwacked into it’s doorframe with a smash and a crash. Both men jumped in their seats but then, recognising the source of the noise, went right on watching television. His father had put a dog show on. One of those where the pooches are super well trained to run obstacle courses and shit. High quality viewing. Hapuka rested his right ankle on his left knee and leaned back to watch the dogs climb see-saws and run through tunnels. No, he knew what his father would say, so why bother him with it? He wasn’t a child anymore, technically.

‘Your brother was stupid, son. Luke could have waited a bit, talked to someone, ah. Flying off the handle, like his mother. Must be the Palagi in the blood, I dunno.’

Which, for whatever it left out or skimmed over, was a hard kind of insight to just dismiss out of hand, Hapuka felt. He had thought similar things. Suicide, and what a dumb sounding word, always

reminded him of soy sauce from the way it sounded when you said it, didn't even really make sense. That was his problem with it. Nevermind that Luke had carved up the ones who got left behind by doing it. Gave his father a drinking thing which sent their mother into a fleeing thing. Made Hapuka all – time frozen and paralysed. That's all good. Whatever. Tomorrow isn't promised to anybody and nor is a good time etcetera. But it's the presumption. How did Luke know, when he'd decided to kill himself, that he wasn't leaving the frying pan for the fire? If all the God-botherers are right about the lake of sulphur, or sodomizing demons waiting for dumb Samoan teens to top themselves, so they can get all strapped up in gimp suits – then shouldn't you just hang around on Earth for a bit longer? Even if sodomizing is your kind of thing, surely you can try it where there isn't burning lakes first. And okay – so maybe Shannon's right and the Internet is Jesus now but you know. There's no guarantee that that's how shit is gonna go once you turn all cold and free of the tax collectors. Seemed like a hell of a gamble. Your classic lose-lose, when you think about it. Hapuka would've raised this with Luke, if he'd gotten the chance. But he'd been the dumb younger brother then. Still was, technically. Who talks to the younger siblings about anything? They have their own learnings to fumble. Hapuka could understand that intellectually even if it bruised his ego a bit.

His father got up and went to the kitchen, returning with beer in hand. The dog show carried on. They continued to sit in silence, but Hapuka could hear his father's probable words roll on in his head. It was definitely being in this house that did it – his father's voice and words were as much a part of the decor as the portraits, or the smell of beer in the air. Or the goddamn wind tunnel. Another door slammed then re-opened in the same movement, as though being thought of had triggered something. His dad swore as his being startled had caused the drink to spill. He rose again to fetch a paper-towel, perrenial mutterings following him out. No, Hapuka's father, were he to be consulted out there in the real world, and not just in his son's skull, would say something like '*Life is for the living, son. Leave the past in the past. That's what the sensible, strong people do, ah. This is why Luke and your mother have to go. They can't see that. Part of their minds got stuck there, in the past. So, they get ripped open on the inside. We keep moving, stay in the present, ah, that's what the strong ones do. Are you listening, boy??*' but Hapuka had heard it all before. Imagined hearing it all before anyway which was just as good. Better really. It was the messenger that counted. He *was* still a boy, in some ways. Maybe in the most important ways, and hearing his father say the thing, or imagining it, mattered more than the thing itself.

His genetic forebear returned to the lounge and folded his arms once he was seated again.

"What will you do when you quit? The dole is no way to live. Don't be like your – what's his name? The palagi boy."

“Tyler. Nah, I’ll need a job aye. I have some time to think about it, Dad.” Hapuka said. “No rush, if I’m going to wait for the off-season anyway.”

His father nodded thoughtfully. Hapuka noticed that the old man seemed more frail than he used to. Nothing alarming or dramatic, just a lightening around the frame. A more ginger way of navigating space, maybe. Hapuka knew in his gut that his dad had never been the same after Luke died, but there was some filter over his vision preventing him from seeing the extent. People get older, and families imploding will have a toll on anyone but it was the fact of his father’s status as parent that Hapuka could never really shake the impression of. He knew intellectually that his father had a name he responded to other than ‘dad’ and that this man, with that other name, was aging. Mortal. Hapuka could see the cracks beginning to show.

A period of time subsisting largely on beer will do that, Hapuka reasoned. As would a wife leaving and a son’s early, senseless death. How many deaths can the average person withstand soul-wise, Hapuka wondered, before that soul was irreversibly changed? Three? One of those things that life will teach a person eventually, he supposed. He rose then, thanking his father for the coffee and the chat, but he really ought to get back to make sure the Palagi’s don’t burn his place down while he’s gone. His father rose too and hugged him again.

“Are you sure you don’t want a beer, son?”

Hapuka demurred though and made his exit, smiling while his father was watching. Once he was around the corner though, out of sight, the smile fell on its own. Hapuka knew he had come through Luke’s death a bit heartier than had his father, which made sense. A brother is one thing but a son is quite another. Or so he’d read in books, and these deaths – they pile up after a while. It figures. They’ll take a toll on a person. All the more reason, he supposed, to make the most of the relative youth he had left to him. And the relatively few numbers of corpses on his conscience. Human corpses anyway. Sheep didn’t count, he was fairly certain. His father, no matter the filter of invincibility and timelessness that Hapuka saw him through, was quite clearly running out of youth. Running out of time all up maybe, and that touched some buried nerve in Hapuka, deep down and beneath some camouflague, that he wasn’t ready to look directly at yet. Maybe he never would be.

Part Three

The next day began as so many tended to – a revolving door sequence in the bathroom then kitchen at staggered intervals. Rangi was up first because the stint at the works had corrupted his sleep schedule beyond the point of saving. 7:30 am, come rain, hail or governmentally sanctioned day of leisure – he would be up and mobile. He smashed an egg toastie and a cold milo and scrolled his phone quietly as the rest of the flat was still collectively clinging on to the night before. Shannon was next upright, nodding to Rangi, as he shuffled through the living room on his way to the shower. No eye contact until the caffeine started moving in the veins as per standard Shannon arrangement. No actual speech forecast until well after the sun was up. Hapuka was next to emerge from his cocoon, rubbing sleep from the eye and yawning. Some left over Chinese food that was probably fine to eat, passed for breakfast, and a black coffee. Nods to Rangi but minimal comms all around. It was going to be a long night. There was a sense of saving energy, conserving it. The raving tinfoil hat podcast Shannon had playing on the TV in the background was quiet but could stand to be quieter in Hapuka's estimation. He could hear the birds chirping and the glugging and protestations of the plumbing in the floor as the system processed Shannon's shower and the flushing of the toilet. Everything is loud in the morning, or parts of the brain want to linger where it's quiet anyway. Tyler, predictably, joined them all last – his rigorous unemployment schedule causing his nights to go the longest and so his days tended to begin later than other people's. He boiled some supermarket ramen and agitatedly muttered into his phone as he paced back and forth in the kitchen. To his mother, would be Hapuka's educated guess. There's a certain harassed, barely civil tone that was so perennial as to almost be a dialect in and of itself. Morning bled into midday. Shannon had begun his grocery mission for the upcoming week and Tyler and Hapuka were jamming violent video games, while Rangi ferried armloads of stuff into the wheelie bins. "I just hate coming home to a mess, you know," by way of explanation. Tyler shrugged at Hapuka's look of incredulity. It really was like living with one's elderly Māori grandmother sometimes. But we love Whaea O te Rangi. It is unlikely anyone else would think to clean. After several losses to Tyler, Hapuka went to collect the lemons and salt from the liquor store across the street. Business was booming as per. They hadn't had the stuff in stock – an ominous fuckin' sign if ever there were one.

The next phase of battle prep ticked over around that point – a person needs to shower and anoint the body with chemicals to bring the female entity in. Or at least chemicals to conceal the rancid

olfactory truth, so as not to actively repel the womenfolk anyway. Tyler brushed his teeth. Hapuka changed his shoes. It was all pointless anyway. Who would want to be twisted up like a pretzel by a muscle mommy with a skull full of LSD? He changed his shoes regardless. Rangi slumped down on the couch next to Hapuka.

“Do you want this?” Rangi asked.

He was brandishing a watch. Silver, chrome and disquietingly clean.

“Why, what’s wrong with it?”

Rangi tossed it over. Hapuka inspected it, holding it this way and that – as if by rearranging the angle of his inspection this would somehow increase his level of understanding.

“Nah nothing’s wrong with it. I just wonder why even have a watch nowadays, you know. Phones and shit,” Rangi waved his hand and shifted in his chair.

“Ho, damn! You sure?” Hapuka strapped it on and flexed, jeering at Tyler, who had just walked in and was watching with open resentment and indignation.

“Yeah man, keep it. Suits you,” Rangi grinned.

Tyler wasn’t having it. He stalked over to his beanbag throne.

“Whoa, whoa – if you’re spring cleaning, it should be me who gets hand me downs. We went to school together. Hapuka is a rich, fat whore. Where is the love, Rangi? This is why your people lost the war! Ingratitude!”

Rangi, it seemed, had foreseen this. He leaned over and pulled out a comic book and handed it to Tyler wordlessly.

“Hulk #181!”

Tyler slumped back in his beanbag chair, mouth a blessedly silent oval shape, and started flipping through the pages.

“Why are you giving this away!? This could get you bank man. I know some sites – I’m not giving it back, unless you change your mind I mean, but holyyy, -“

Rangi was still grinning. He seemed like he was in a good mood overall today.

“Ehh, how often do I even get time to read comics anymore, bro? Not all of us can live day in day out, never leaving the house,” he explained.

“Jealousy,” Tyler murmured, carefully turning the pages and not taking his eyes off She-Hulk punching Wolverine in vivid technicolour. Like a medieval monk with a newly discovered text to pore over.

“It’s true,” Hapuka flicked his eyebrows at Rangi “We are all jealous of you Tyler.”

“Of course you are.” Tyler nodded happily.

“It’s the year round no tan thing,” Rangi offered. “And the not having to wear hi-vis at nighttime.”

“Neither would you guys if you just smiled in the dark. But it’s true. When the next ice age happens, I’m going to blend in with my surroundings.” Tyler beamed.

No sabretooth tigers will get Tyler anytime soon, Hapuka felt. Shannon strode in the door and collapsed unceremoniously among them, limbs akimbo.

“Supermarkets are gay. Everyone is gay. Especially the straight people. Fuckin’ mad house out there.”

Shannon kicked off his shoes and let his head fall back onto the armchairs headrest as he vented about how every fuckwit and their dog was on the road today, and how all of them got their license in a cereal box. This is why Hapuka himself had long ago opted not to own or operate a motor vehicle. This and the prohibitive economic factor. He had limited sympathy for the slave-tribes of the petrol and engine faith.

“Well, I guess it’s that magical time, bitches,” Tyler rubbed his hands together, to Hapuka’s eyes at least, with malevolent glee “Are we ready to get smashed?”

Tyler put Rangi’s comic book to the side and hoisted his bean bag nearer the coffee table. The other three gathered around the table as well. Shannon reached into his pocket and took out the tiny plastic bag that would in a cleaner, more virtuous universe, be used to ferry buttons around for old ladies. Instead, there were four tiny squares of cardboard with yellow smiley faces on each square. Tyler was unimpressed – “old school acid? Where’s the liquid shit at? Liquid, baby. Liquid is sexy,” – but he still took his square between his fingers, gingerly when it was offered. Rangi took his from Shannon with careful appreciation and Hapuka carefully received his as well. Eyeing the little cardboard smile up close. How do they, the acid makers, get these tiny pictures on there? He’d have to ask one at some point. Shannon was holding his, smiley face up, on the pad of his index finger.

“We should synchronize our dropping, so we know for next time who gets fucked up the quickest.” Shannon grinned. “My vote is Hapuka, Tyler not far behind him.”

“That’s not fair though.” Tyler pointed out. “Hapuka’s always basically on acid. He has a head start.”

Hapuka accepted this tidal wave of disrespect serenely. “Alright, so on three?” he suggested. The flat assented and Shannon counted down. Hapuka grimaced once the bitter, chemical flavour started to seep into his tastebuds. He always forgot about the genuinely acidic taste of acid in between drug journeys. Probably the drugs themselves blocking the memory from sticking. A chemical type of propaganda to ensure the future of their species. Were drugs a species? It was too soon into the safari to let his thinking stray like this. He wrenched himself back.

“This tastes like aerosol.” He offered to the room at large. The other three were making faces too.

“That’s how you know it’s good,” Tyler said awkwardly, shaping the words about the square of cardboard on his tongue. “When it tastes like shit that’s how you know you’re away laughing.”

Hapuka knew this was true but why was it true? Surely, if the makers out there – and Allah bless and preserve them for their holy, important work etc – could get smiley faces rendered beautifully on a small surface, they could jack the flavour up a bit. Make that shit taste like chocolate, maybe. Or strawberries.

He sat back on the couch and concentrated on letting the drug-soaked square of cardboard begin the process of dissolving on his tongue. The things we do to scrape a little God dandruff from the universe’s underbelly. Rangi had wandered off presumably to throw more things away or knit a sweater and Tyler had already booted up the video game controls, leaving Hapuka one last solitary period of calm and sobriety. He eyed up his new watch absent-mindedly. Pretty cool really.

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“What street does she live on again?” Shannon yelled over the atonal, Tibetan monk music Rangi had on in his car. Duke Street came the shouted reply, from the three other occupants. Hapuka had been there before, pretty sure. In Invercargill, everyone’s been everywhere before. The question was had the previous visit been a nourishing, edifying time – or had it ended in tears? Probably not tears. But maybe there had been faux pas. Faux pas were an ongoing issue with the whole leaving the house aspect of life. Shannon was still speaking at the loudest volume his Viking descended lungs could manage – one thing about Rangi; he wasn’t afraid of volume.

“Oh, that’s walking distance! Why are we driving!?”

Rangi drove on oblivious.

And Hapuka was fine really. He was, despite himself, monitoring his own bloodstream and nerve endings as they drove though. Observing for the first sizzle, then surge that meant the drug in his system was about to take over. The streets and mailboxes slithered past in the sun as the Holden rocketed on. The more you think about psychedelics when you're on them, the slower they hit and the quicker they pass. All veterans understood this and Hapuka considered himself a veteran. As would law enforcement probably, if those swine ever got a hold of him. Oh, he mustn't think like that either, lest paranoid frenzies descend on the mind. All these rules, with LSD. No wonder he didn't indulge more often. He was in an ambivalent place emotionally about the party itself. So, he could very well spazz out and burn social bridges. When is that ever not true? The fire from those bridges might give off a lovely light, and he had these stimulants weaving in and out of his digestive system that would shield him from being too aware of the heat.

Rangi pulled over and, blessedly, turned down his bizarre chanting beats.

"This is the place, pretty sure," he declared. Shannon confirmed.

They were double parked, Hapuka realised belatedly.

"I need to loop back – I forgot my phone charger and my tunes drained it," Rangi explained as the rest of the car's inhabitants started to unbuckle and grab items and bags and bottles.

They all clambered out, Shannon clapping Rangi on the shoulder as he did.

"You may as well walk back brother. Save yourself the petrol. We have all the shit here now, plus you'll be feeling it soon," Shannon advised.

"Yeah true, I probably will. See you in a bit," Rangi said.

Hapuka leaned his face close to the driver's window menacingly.

"Listen here you little native sonovabitch – if you abandon me here with all these mayonnaise people and go freak out by yourself in your room like some kind of genius, I'll –"

Rangi laughed his easy laugh. "Relax, import. I'll see you soon. Don't do anything I wouldn't do," he was turning his Tibetan zen tunes up again. "See you in a bit Rangatang!" Tyler yelled. Rangi flipped them all off cheerfully and drove off at speed. The three remaining of the crew looked at one another.

"What's the bet the acid kicks in for him when he's home and he forgets all about us," Hapuka mused.

“Or he gets lost on the way here. Ends up gnawing the windowsill off some random’s house?” Shannon grinned.

“We’ll see him on the news tomorrow,” Tyler agreed.

They turned and began walking up to the house. Large, two-storied, white paint – blaring metal music. Cars lined up and around the street, ominously. Hapuka studied them with care as he passed. A fair few boguns at this thing from the looks of it, (here a Ford Falcon, there an HQ Kingswood) which was surprising on one level. Becky or Tania was one of those could-be-a-hairdresser could be a Lycra-sporting-gym-girl types, from what Shannon had told him. Not a black clad petrol person but then, maybe she was being seduced by a bogun. Boguns mean booze and fist-fights, in Hapuka’s experience, as well as the occasional tagging along of the Bogun’s less chill cousins – the Skinheads. None of that was exactly ideal for a brown-ish lad with a head full of vulnerability inducing hallucinogenics – but he was leaning in to his new equanimity, he’d been practising for the past fourteen minutes or so. It helped that he and Tyler had a representative from that sector of the culture with them. Their ambassador. Shannon could speak fluent white boy. Hapuka had always only ever been passable with the cadences. The trick was to substitute ‘mate’ where you’d normally say ‘bro’. He’d figured this out already, and it was important to be mindful of other cultures and their weird fucking ways.

Tyler filed in past the dinky wee waist-high garden gate that everyone on this street seemed to have, and Shannon then Hapuka followed. A group of people gathered around the BBQ in the front yard raised their chins in the silent gesture of welcome as they passed.

“Stick close by us, Pooky-wooky. It’s gonna be sweet. You remember the sign for help?”

“Oh, what was it again?” Hapuka had been partially zoned out for this part of the debrief.

“Wave your arms in the air and scream really loudly ‘Fucking HELP!’” Tyler reminded him laughingly.

“Right yeah of course. Old faithful,” Hapuka said.

They awkwardly wiped their feet on the welcome mat and looked at one another. Hapuka was tense but pretending not to be, Tyler was eager; Shannon looked tired.

“Hey how long do you figure before this stuff kicks in Shan?” Hapuka thought to ask as Tyler knocked on the ornate, stylised door.

“Shit, I reckon we have about forty-five minutes before we’re all fucked up,” Shannon considered.

“Stay hydrated. Think calm thoughts. If you shit yourself, try and clean it up before anyone notices. We have to live beside these people.”

Words to live by frankly, Hapuka thought.

He should write that down.

Tania’s birthday bash, or whatever it was that they were all there to commemorate again, and like most parties in Hapuka’s experience, there was sure to be a good fifteen to twenty percent of attendees who had no real concept of what it was they were celebrating, was already swollen and claustrophobia inducing. Three laughing girls filed past the flatmates, each one of them clutching some high octane pre-mixed brain cell killer in their hands. The music had switched from metal to a kind of pulsing electronica, still playing at near Rangi levels of volume, but somehow very much overshadowed by the din of the yelling and the shrieking. Enough human voices being heard at the same time tends to hit the ear in a single key – all distinctions of tone or sex or diction bled out of the mass by virtue of their coagulation. Hapuka shuddered in a headlight deer reaction to that one, piercing, shapeless voice and turned to take comfort from his safety net but Tyler was already somehow deep in conversation, heads bent close so they could hear one another, with someone who looked like a dread-locked, loose jean wearing sibling or cousin – and Shannon had vanished entirely. This was a disappointing eventuality but not a fully surprising one. Plans tend to fly to shit – it’s kinda cute or optimistic to make them at all really. Hapuka liked the idea of seeming cute when viewed through this light. Hapuka the planner. Hapuka the bright side perceiver. He walked forward, hitching his box of, presumably, beers – Shannon had shoved this into his arms at some point, and manoeuvred his way through the disjointed, randomised gathering.

Here, a grinning gay dude, identified by his elegant mannerisms and carefully arranged hair – laughing behind his hand with a beautiful blonde girl. There, a meathead rugby type, crushing an almost empty can with his forehead and hurling the mangled thing up at the ceiling, as if it was the can’s fault for not being completely drained. Here, a trio of whacked out stoner types leaning against the hallway wall, replete with op shop aesthetic regalia – beanies, beatles era sunglasses being worn inside and large spaced-out grins. There should only be hackey sacks. Hapuka shouldered past the stoners, politely raising his chin at the ones aware enough to note his passing and made his way towards what seemed to be the kitchen. He could only partially see – the lighting was alternatively blue-ish pink through some kind of funky lightbulb setting, then ordinary lighting – then no lighting at all. Only the last remaining shafts of sunlight afforded him any constancy, slicing through the few

windows scattered around that people weren't crowded in front of. An absent-minded reflection, winding its way from Hapuka's unconscious to the front of the brain – where the action is – was shaped more or less like the thought; this lighting is going to be mean as all fuckery once the acid kicks in. Something for future incarnations of Hapuka to circle back to. He made it to the island in the kitchen, and set the box of clinking hops down carefully, alongside all the other boxes, bottles and paraphernalia arrayed there. Used and squeezed lemon rinds. A bowl of already largely eaten peanuts. A stylised shaker of salt, on its side, abandoned, and a teeny statue of the buddha with incense sticks stabbing him in the chest. Shannon re-emerged from the ether into which he'd vanished, and clasped Hapuka around the shoulders with one arm as he peered around.

"Where did you go?" he hollered indignantly.

Hapuka took a beer out of the box mournfully. How does it happen, he wondered. At what crucial juncture had he zigged instead of zagged, gone over when he could have gone under, that he had wound up in this place with these people? A head full of drugs, drugs that were being suspiciously stealthy so far come to think of it – like a panther tracking down an oblivious boar in the sweltering rainforest canopy. Surrounded by descendants of the pale skinned devil breed. Although he no longer noticed race of course. Betrayed and deserted by his treacherous native ally. Lugging a type of beer, he suspected was going to taste like room temperature possum piss. Some people have real problems, he knew, but how many fake, half problems should the average shit-kicker have to deal with?

He handed over the beer to Shannon in lieu of answering his question – and as a half-hearted attempt to put off tasting the stuff himself. He was just pulling out his own when Tyler rejoined them.

"Bro, it's loud as fuck in here," he yelled, just as the music shut off.

Heads turned in their direction. There was that eerie, post social faux pas silence as the herd internally debated whether Tyler needed to be thrown out to the hyenas. Then someone laughed. Someone else started speaking, and then the party continued before the next song started. All over in a second, maybe two at most, but to Hapuka's strained and frantic perceptions they had all been standing in the wake of Tyler's shout for a year.

"What a fucking disaster," Tyler yelled, cautiously, cupping his hand to Hapuka's ear.

"We need to sit down somewhere. My legs are sweating," Shannon yelled in reply.

Hapuka grabbed another beer for himself and Tyler, and they set off as a team. Half looking for familiar faces, half avoiding overly intimate eye contact with the unfamiliar ones. Thumping,

screeching metal blast beats and indecipherable lyrics following them like sonic seagulls overhead as they set out on their confused, awkward, still mostly sober mission.

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“How many people do you suppose are here?” Hapuka eventually managed to ask. He took a swig of his lukewarm throat soother. “And which one of them is Becky?”

They had found a kind of triangular, purple loveseat on an outdoor deck adjoining the backyard. They had, the three of them, set up shop there. Important to do at these things. The box of beer sat at their feet. The bottle of tequila as well. Shannon’s sweatshirt was draped over the back of the chair. Easily viewed signs of territory claiming. Flags and urine scent, type shit. Parties like this – the shit-kicker scene types, fistfights and breaking glass instead of keys in the bowl or whore durves – are moving things. Hapuka had picked this up at some point in his life. There are migrations. There are seasons, at these things. Then, at that point in time, the backyard was sparsely populated. A few groups of twos and threes, milling about smoking vapes or joints – the truly wealthy and extravagant were smoking cigarettes, but this wouldn’t last. It was a hot night, even though, as Shannon would often remind Hapuka without being asked ‘there is no such thing as human caused climate change, it’s a hoax spun out by China to affect tariffs’ and people were eventually going to migrate out here. When the air chilled in a few hours there would be a great throng flooding back in. Smart money had the lounge suite in the living room being prime real estate when the meathead monsoon really hit – as it was there was gonna be an overcrowding issue. Folks were sitting on folks, hemmed in like extremely chatty sardines in an aggressively noisy tin can. This romantic loveseat was their little spot in the frenzy. For the meantime anyway.

“I can’t see her,” Tyler murmured disinterestedly as he fooled about with the pot smoking device they’d brought along. “And you mean Tania I think.” Far more civilised volume out here. Hapuka could even hear the odd snatch of bird song or a distant siren here and there.

Shannon leaned around Tyler to address Hapuka.

“I feel like there’s at least a hundred people here, aye.”

“Jesus, Mary and Joseph,” Hapuka was dismayed.

“She’s early days too,” Shannon added.

“Don’t say that.”

“Well…”

“I know, I know but…”

“We got here weirdly early. Like, way earlier than the plan,” Shannon reminded them before taking a swig of his beer. Rangi’s speeding ways had caused timetables to be readjusted before, Hapuka thought to himself. Māori folk have no respect for speeding limits on the road, probably cause of that time old mate caught the sun with a fishhook or however it went. He considered the LSD in his system again. Sharp and fizzing when a more gradual tongue numbing was what connoisseurs tend to look for. It boded ill for the strength and timbre of the high that was coming – either it was going to be weak sauce and Hapuka and his wayward living space kin had gone to the extreme cost and effort of leaving their home for nothing – or it was going to be of such feral, nondescript composition that it would cause their collective skulls to implode. He wasn’t really sure which scenario was preferable at this stage. He kinda liked his skull as it was but hey, a change is as good as a holiday and all that.

“Are you feeling anything yet?” he asked the loveseat in general. It would be about time. Maybe all the adrenaline and the sweating were causing a delay in transit.

“Not yet, Sione’s wedding,” Tyler grinned as he handed over the bong courteously.

“Soon though, aye Shannon.”

“It’ll be soon. Don’t think about it. Like a watched pot, you know.” Shannon nodded sagely.

Hapuka waved his hand at the electric puha device. He would be monogamous with his chemicals tonight, he had decided. A person should know their limits. Or act like they did for appearances. One of the twos and threes milling groups had made their way over to the loveseat. Probably lured in by the sweet, ubiquitous marijuana scent that acts as a kind of siren song to a certain breed of sailor.

“What’s up boys,” one of them, a beanie wearing white lad offered by way of greeting as his companions, a metal band t-shirt sporting tanned kid and a dark-haired girl with a nose ring raised their hands to wave in unison.

“Sit down team, make of yourselves a home type thing,” Shannon gestured expansively – the beers and heat clearly unbalancing his senses, Hapuka mused, but he and Tyler both made noises of welcome as well. The new additions dragged over some folding chairs that had been leaning against the wall and sat, the metal t shirt wearing dude reaching gratefully for the bong.

“I’m gonna go find the throne room in this house, take mine,” Shannon offered to the beanie wearer as he lurched up out of the loveseat. Tyler and the metal t shirt kid were already exchanging words in that immediately intimate friendliness that all marijuana enjoyers tend to have for one another, but Hapuka paid them and the unfolding events no particular mind. Something had just occurred to him, but he pushed it aside in favour of the more pressing matter.

“Oy, be my little scout – tell me how to find it once you do!” he commanded Shannon while he was still in earshot.

“Nah this will be my toilet – go find your own,” Shannon called back as he went.

“You fucking oxygen thief!” Hapuka yelled. He would need to piss and soon. Maybe a shapely bush will embrace him when the shadows get a little longer. Sweating did that to him, bizarrely. One would think that enough fluid was making it out of his forehead and armpits that the pressure in the bladder would ease. All that plumbing in there was connected, right? He wasn’t an expert in this sort of thing, but some shit just made sense on paper. He turned back to the newly composed group and folded his arms pensively. What had occurred to him previously reoccurred, and he sighed to himself. That tell-tale throb, the first rising vibes of a bloodstream churning event, had begun to sizzle away in the furthest, deeper parts of his awareness. It was too early to tell for sure – even though Shannon was the resident acid expert, Hapuka himself was no newcomer to the pastime – but he didn’t think based on the particular feel of the sizzle, that there was much chance that this was going to be one of those ‘weak sauce’ type of throwdowns. The sun was still up and so was he though.

So far, so good.

“Oy do you suppose Rangi is on his way?” Tyler was asking.

“He could already be here.” Hapuka scanned around meaningfully “How would we know?”

More and more hobbledehoys and miscreants of various stripes and derivations were trickling in. Here a Maori kid with street tough, drug dealer aesthetic, but who was clearly actually a soft-spoken introvert, spending his time on a piano tuning apprenticeship. There a red haired, curvaceous vintage clothing retailer cosplaying as an undercover cop, looking for love. A person can tell these things about strangers, you just needed to concentrate. Actually speaking to them wasn’t necessary. Hapuka looked around himself some more, the lull in parts of the ongoing, segmented conversation that included him allowing him to breathe for a second. Just lung puff, no tongue shape or audio files being called for. The backyard was teeming now. The twos and threes, here and there, had become

six's and sevens – little comingling, cross-pollinating tribes and flocks. The collective babble was constant so as to be unnoticeable – omnipresent, like the fading, purpling light aesthetic in the twilight sky, or the rattling of the windows in their fixtures, from the bass assault pumping out of the speakers. He had become one with the noise, all of a sudden, Hapuka noted then about himself. What was an assault on him, at first, and an assault on Tyler and Shannon – was now an onrushing tide that had the three of them as part of it. They were the assault now, and the crowd, and even the heat. Hapuka observed from his sudden a million-mile distant vantage that he was no longer sweating, he was the sweat. Tyler clapped him on the shoulder, murmuring something indistinct and stood. Hapuka followed wordlessly. They walked from the loveseat stronghold, outside, and braved the journey into the building – an entirely distinct ecosystem from the yard, but all linked, really. All the same thing. Hapuka's thoughts – one year long's store, it felt like, of supple, elastic disassociation found themselves crammed in alongside a type of hyper-driven, frenzied sensory overload – and they tumbled over one another. Somersaulting through his awareness. One instant – calm and serene, not only the one observing but also the process of observing itself, and the matter being observed – the next instant: pure tremulous, chaotic sensitivity. The meat suit he was wearing finding itself aghast at the fit and twitching at the seams accordingly.

Hapuka slapped himself in the face. He had to pull himself together. This wasn't his first rodeo, and he could tell his processes were getting hijacked way quicker than they should be. Maybe this was old age kicking in. Tyler had led Hapuka back to the kitchen. The disarray and scattered evidence of a collective drive towards intoxication and gusto had increased, in both circumference and intensity, since Hapuka had been there last. Broken glass shards were strewn throughout the paraphernalia. There, a half empty bottle of sambuca on its side, still lightly drizzling its expensive, aniseed contents out on to the counter. There, a bulging bag of clearly cheap and low-quality Marley weed, the focal point of the resident tribe, communing with the vapours. Paired knives in the stove were burning, red hot, stabbed in between the elements, and then pressing lumps of the pot between them, causing great mushroom clouds of aromatic, thick smoke to waft up into the waiting communal funnel. Someone, Hapuka noticed with an impressed chin scratch, had hacked a bottle of rum in half and they were using the top portion with the mouth of the former booze container as a gathering cauldron, for all the billowing cannabis magic taking place. The glass shards left to wither in the fluorescence made more sense then. This is the 'Kiwi Ingenuity' all the principals and guidance counsellors had been on about, Hapuka recognised. The kids are all right.

Tyler was busily inserting himself into the informal, hazy queue for some of the smoke inhalation, that he never seemed to get enough of. A person could and should admire the industry with which Tyler hustled about though. In another life he would have made a fine schmoozer – a corporate palm

greaser and winer and diner. As it was, he was one of the foremost social stoners of Hapuka's era. Far more capable and motivated than the rest of them; Shannon was too cooked by conspiracy chefs, Rangi was too shy and Hapuka himself found it took herculean straining, just to get the words from the thought factory, out to the mouth shaped shop floor. Tyler was easy with it – maybe the never leaving the house for the most part meant he had excess chit chat juice stored up. Hapuka would need to ask him at some point.

Around them, the wider party was in full swing. The hollering and yelling was in tongues now – a person could squint and discern them from one another. The anglo-saxon, viking grunts of the petrol smelling, bogun meathead. The machismo smothered, imported street lingo of the Māori and Pasifika kids, laughing behind their fists. The susurrations in the murmuring undertone of the great near silent stoner majority. The ear-splitting A flat majors of the whirling, white girl drunk lady folk. Bizarre scraps of overheard conversation, from each of these disparate local nations, intruded into Hapuka's awareness, stripped of context and magnified by his own chemical filters. Only to slither out of his consciousness too, the membranes in his thrashing, undulating skull meat, currently too slippery to allow events or words to adhere to his ravaged short-term memory.

"… I'm just saying, if my missus suddenly grew a dick –"

"Like overnight? Like a rash?"

"Yeah, yeah exactly. If that happened, I'm so laid-back man. I wouldn't care. That's not gay, see – nothing wrong with being gay, but it's not gay if she didn't have a dick, literally the night before."

"Oh yeah, no, that tracks."

"Literally the only thing that would be a deal-breaker is if it was bigger than mine."

"A hundred percent. That'd just be rude, honestly."

"Bro it would be such a mind fuck!"

Tyler was being handed the rum funnel with no small amount of delicacy. He received it like a conquering sovereign, being officially surrendered to by a grateful rival. *I will be a just and compassionate ruler*.

Other snatches of overheard conversation warbled in, overlaid and undercut by raucous noises of modern socialisation.

"I'm thinking I'm gonna ask Tori to move in with me aye?"

"What happened to Alison?"

“She was three girlfriends ago. My great, great girlfriend.”

Tyler handed the funnel to Hapuka with what was probably intended to be a comradely wink but because it was Tyler, and Tyler, like Hapuka, had a head full of frenzy and disorientation, the wink came over all leer like. I will change his name in my phone to ‘King Leer’, Hapuka decided and grinned to himself. Future Hapuka won’t get it but fuck that guy. He accepted the surrender of the grateful rival. *My first act will be instituting a rule of written laws, no more of these childish customs you have clung to until now*. The thick smoke was warm, and it swirled beautifully in the bottle head in the moment before Hapuka placed the device to his lips and breathed in.

The overheard snatches continued in their ceaseless stream of meaninglessness, churning in the ear as the marijuana mist billowed up and up.

“… Oh yeah, I met you at Sarah’s thing,”

“Yeah, I wanted to come talk to you then, but I wasn’t drunk enough.”

“Come watch me pour you a drink so you can tell I’m not a rapist.”

“What an out of it guy – basically a gentleman!”

“See, that’s what I always told my last bitch, think she saw it that way though?”

The smoke was hot, deceptively hot – a person would think the glass would cool it more than it actually seemed to. Hapuka held it within his lungs, in defiance of the urge to cough. There was no dignity in coughing and when a person loses that, it can be a trial getting it back. He exhaled through his nostrils, the twin streams shooting out, like twin alternative timelines, only waiting for the crux event to cause a rift in the space-time continuum. Something caught Hapuka’s eye in the distance, and upon examination he saw it was a billowing, white curtain in the living room. He thought it was white, the odd lighting situation made guesswork of these sorts of determinations. The curtain swelled up, like a sail on an old-time ship, or like a dove’s single wing. No, not a dove. Like an angel’s wing. Hapuka was vaguely aware of someone taking the glass smoking implement from him and he stepped back on autopilot to make room for the other wretched smoke enthusiasts. An angel’s wing, for sure. The music had dimmed, and his fingertips were tingling. What was it he had read about angels? Not fuzzy do-gooders like the kids’ movies and Hallmark cards made out. Angels were God’s enforcers originally. One eye on Heaven for guidance and one wing dripping with the blood of the unworthy.

There were other things going on though. He was getting distracted and distractable. He could see a thousand campfires from where he was standing. At least a thousand. Like a legion on the night

before invading – some poor unfortunate city-state. But that didn't make sense. Most modern living rooms don't have the requisite square footage to house a legion. They were lighters. Had to be. Or lit cigarettes. Or maybe one cigarette, refracted through his swimming vision. It was possible he'd smoked too much. Different sensations were enfolding him in waves, like being at the centre of an electric heartbeat. There was a pulse happening, either within him or around him. Maybe both, who can say? He wasn't the king of everything. He was pretty sure he wasn't. These are the feelings, he reflected. This is what Luke was missing out on by being dead, like an idiot. There was plenty of time to be dead but how many chances does a person get to stare down a legion? Everything's computer generated these days. It's not the same. He felt the urge to laugh except nothing was funny, really. Just a bubbling, exuberance from somewhere behind his lungs. Hey, shit, maybe that's where laughter hangs out when it's not escaping through our teeth. A person wonders about this sort of stuff. The music either had the volume turned way down or someone had cut it off completely. Hapuka couldn't hear a goddamn thing for the pulsing in his inner ears. His own heartbeat sounded vast and crushing. The wallpaper, barely visible through all the smoke and the legion's campfires seemed to be peeling off like great, curling fingernails. He knew this probably wasn't happening – but how to be sure? Should he walk over and check? What had he been thinking about? Oh, yeah. Papatuanuku and Ranginui. How shitty to be fucked over by your own ungrateful seed. A person just wants to lie with their special love muffin, and then the wriggling crotch fruit start shoving you apart. Just to let the world start. Or however it went. He had learned about this in class, way back when, like the Kronos guy. His kids cracked open his skull on their way out, if he wasn't mixing him up with the other guy. Mythical prophylactic ads from the ancient times. At least Luke hadn't cracked their parents' skulls on the way out. Just their hearts, hey. Ooh shit, he should write that down. It was the dancing girls near the window's fault, and the way they had their arms through the refracting light – they looked like Shiva. That must be how he got here, but where was here? In the present was where. The music had started up again or his own heart had stopped. Either way, it was an exciting feeling. Yes, the present. The past is dead people's baggage, now that Papatuanuku got chumped by his own kidlets. Let the dead people keep carrying it. Like Jesus! The first zombie. He had been about to do something but that impulse to laugh was back, with the tingling fingertips. Oh wait, he knew what this was.

He turned to Tyler, who had been standing beside him for either a minute or an hour.

"You know, I'm starting to think this shit we're on might've kicked in."

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He'd had two more pot mushroom cloud infusions, or were it three? As he listened with no particular intensity to the calls and responses from those around him. Gradually he became aware of two things; he had shifted physically. Either on wings made of sizzling brain fizz, or on a syrup thick rivulet of marijuana. He was sitting and didn't remember giving the knees the order to bend. He was also not alone. The dark-haired girl with the nose ring from earlier was with him. Alesha? Alyssa? The name started with A for sure and certain. She was speaking, and possibly had been for a while.

"… always liked things like this. Different scenes all getting along, hey. No drama. Well. Minimal drama."

Hapuka nodded. Who has time for drama. He stopped nodding once he realised how it made everything shudder and tremble in his perceptions. Ah yes, the drugs. He was on drugs.

"You were telling me about your brother though. Am I talking too much? I'm peaking," she explained.

He was catching up quickly. These time lurches were funnier when he was younger than they were in the present era. He was sure about this too. How does a person continue in confidence, safe in the knowledge that the best moments of his life haven't been sleep-walked through? Or engaged with while on autopilot. He trusted his autopilot, mind, but some things call for a more hands on approach surely.

"No! No, you're fine. I'm sorry, I'm peaking too." And he had been, he realised belatedly. "Or I was just peaking, I dunno. I'm fine – you're fine," he attempted to reassure … whoever this was. The party at large was orbiting around them – a girl tripped over the lip of a rug in front of them and burst out laughing until her friend, also laughing, bent and dragged her up by the elbow. Shannon, barely visible through the pulsing, pink-blue lighting, had his head bent, deep in conversation at the other end of the living room. Probably something about microchips in vaccines or secret backroom deals with the CIA.

"How did he die? Tell me to shut up if you want."

Hapuka wasn't sure he could tell her to shut up even if he wanted to. She was quite beautiful really, Amara – Angela? She was a pale skinned coloniser queen but she seemed alright. What was the question? Oh, the brother.

He died doing what he loved. Asphyxiating on carbon monoxide.

"He topped himself, a few years back," he said instead, the glint of his new watch momentarily dazzling him.

"That's so rank, I'm so sorry," she grabbed his upper arm in commiseration.

“My uncle did the same thing – this was before I was born but – my parents were pretty fucked up about it. I can remember that –“ and she went on. Affording Hapuka the time to take stock.

Now, how exactly had this come about? And perhaps more pressingly, what was he supposed to do next? A woman was speaking to him – an empathetic ‘A’ named woman, he was pretty sure. The drugs were easing their feral clinch on his thought processes, but they were still very much in the mix. In his anxious system. Shannon or Tyler wouldn’t be of any help even if he did somehow miraculously get either of their attention. He was going to have to muddle through this on his own.

“…and you think to yourself, like, yes – shit is hard and tough but so long as you’re carrying on, I dunno. You have a chance to fix things, hey, even just around the edges or …”

Maybe she’d be weirded out if he just started weeping as a diversionary tactic. Fairly sure he’d sweated out all his bodily fluids earlier. Apparently, it had never been even slightly warm – a weirdly specific bit of incidental memory debris, gurgled up to the surface as he thought. Tyler had shown him the temperature on his phone, and also no one else was sweating.

Just then, A-woman’s friends stopped by in front of where were they sitting and made noises about leaving. Hapuka wasn’t sure if he felt relief or resentment. He felt something. He’d figure out what it was later maybe.

Nose ring girl was speaking to him again though – that disconcerting, eye to eye regard. Maybe it’s the drugs she’s on. The drugs tend to hang out in the eye sockets, next door neighbour to the soul. Everybody knows that.

“So, sorry – what was your name again?”

“Daniel,” he told her, slightly disturbing himself with how untrue and foreign his own name sounded to his ears.

“Like from the Bible, of course. The dude thrown to the lions, right, that’s right – you told me,”

What in the actual, oversharing, auto-pilot son of a-

“Yeah,” he managed, smiling through his disorientation. “And you were?”

“Veronica,” she smiled. “Let’s hang out, like we said hey? It was nice meeting you.”

And she was gone. Hapuka had a moment to collect himself. He realised he was clutching yet another possum piss beverage, half full, and distractedly took a pull. Veronica, huh. Well, there was an ‘A’ in there.

Shannon slumped down beside him, reappearing after what had seemed like hours of stealth. Although, Hapuka reminded himself, his brain being what it was that night, there was a very real chance that they had been hanging out the whole time.

The carpets were shifting slightly as Hapuka watched them – the bleary, bloodshot effect of the drug on the capillaries and nerve endings in the optic, letting a person get that classic, stereotypical 'seeing things' experience. Shannon's face in profile elongated and compressed, like a respiring cobra neck. Hapuka shuddered slightly. His thoughts were still sloshing around in his head, like someone hurling buckets of water in his skull against the backs of his eyes.

"You having a good time there, bro?" Shannon turned, his pink and white and blue-lit face a Caucasian zeppelin of inquiry.

"Yeah, I really have," Hapuka saluted his flatmate with his own beer. "I met a girl – I left the planet for a minute there. Most of me is back, I think."

"Oh yeah same," Shannon affirmed, rubbing the back of his head contemplatively. "Most of me is back too, I think. What a time."

Hapuka's stomach rumbled then. Speaking of time. When was the last time he ate anything? Definitely within the last twenty-four hours, but at which end? Maybe he'd rustle up something when he got home. Toast! Buttered toast with marmite sounded like ambrosia right then and there.

"It's good to see man, you've really been getting out there more lately aye. We all have mentioned it before, behind your back like rats! – this next year might be the year of the Hapuka!" Shannon punched him in the leg. It's true. It seemed more obvious now that all the cobwebs felt like they'd been blown out of his mind. Along with part of his mind maybe. Shit, easy come easy go. He had been on the mend around the edges a tad. Slowly but surely, onwards and upwards. You just had to let the past and all its victims be, fundamentally. If he could crystallise and condense his basic world view down to the most basic principle, that'd probably be how it got spelled out. Be where you are. Not where the pain is. The drugs got him out of his head. Life kept on keeping on and it was kinda nice to hear that his flatmates, in their own way, were noticing an improvement. Made it more real and less potentially a delusion somehow.

"Oh, wanna hear something funny?" Shannon continued, unusually chipper now that his natural commitment to brusque masculinity was offset by all the chemicals.

"I am something funny," Hapuka intoned solemnly.

“We’ve been at the wrong party the whole time. Like, the whole time. This is a random house party. I’ve been looking for Tania all night to say happy birthday. No such person here. We’ve just straight crashed some random party, and everyone’s been too fucked up to notice.” He was laughing by the end. Wheezing. Hapuka stared at him. That was pretty funny.

“Okay!” he replied.

And it was okay, but that begged some questions too. Were parties all across Southland just open-door welcome fests, ready to receive any and all comers so long as their vibes weren’t too harsh? Was it like that across New Zealand? That didn’t gel with his understanding of the country at large – but then maybe he was a cynic – too many months playing videogames with wild-eyed conspiracy cookers and unemployed nihilists. He definitely was a cynic; he’d realised at some point tonight. This made his gradual mood shift of recent times more noticeable though, not less relevant. He took another swallow of his beer, mostly froth and dregs now, and he made a face. He was somebody who could hang out with strangers all night now, albeit unknowingly and unintentionally. Somebody who could help others enjoy themselves – someone who could enjoy themselves! When was the last night he had had as good of a wholesome, connected, no drama or down-buzz infected time, spent with other well-meaning souls, as this night? His memory was no reliable guide, moth-eaten patchwork quilt of a thing that it was, even without the drugs. He might have to do this sort of thing more often, frankly. The hard times were over and now it was all about smelling them roses everybody’s always talking about. Once his senses started behaving themselves again anyway.

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Rangi, meanwhile, hadn’t forgotten his cell phone charger. He hadn’t taken the acid tab with the others either, he had pretended to but pocketed it while the other guys were grimacing at the taste. He had figured out that this night had to be the night. No more psyching himself up then chickening out or making excuses. Not this time. There was no way of telling when the next time he’d get the place to himself would be. Fuckin’ Tyler never seemed to leave. After he arrived back at the flat there was a bit more prep to do. Most of his shit, and he hardly owned any shit really, was already taken care of but he wanted his room to be a bit tidier. For whoever was gonna get it after him. He straightened up, wiped surfaces down and that, his eyes stinging a bit from the cleaning chemicals.

He vacuumed; he made his bed. Just procrastinating maybe. Cold feet aye Rangatanga, he tsked at himself. Nah this night was the night. He'd already decided.

He sat on his bed for a bit then, looking at his phone. Going through his contacts. Shit, a fair few on this thing really when you look at it. Not that he talked to anyone on there but. He guessed it meant something to have them on there. He messed around with the idea of calling the boys or messaging them maybe. Maybe his mum. But what would he say? He'd never been one of the talkers. At the end of the day, he figured, it was probably just his nerves tryna get him to change his mind or put it off again, just even considering talking to someone. It's not like someone could say something that would change anything. He looked around the room then, like it was the last time. Drinking in the sights as though they were worth seeing. It's one second hand duchess and closet with the door hanging off one hinge. Some good times here but none of them that good. He had the most company here he'd ever had in one uninterrupted stretch, some out of it jokers to live alongside here but still. That weird, messed up feeling never left Rangi. That's how he knew there was something wrong with him, had been ever since he was a kid. Really lonely type feeling. Even in a crowd. Maybe especially in a crowd. He had tried to shake it a bunch of different ways over the years but a part of him clocked early on that things were probably gonna have ta go this way. He knew it in a way that he didn't know anything else. Like a religious thing. Faith. He had always had faith it was gonna go this way.

He went to the kitchen, the rank never healthy kitchen, and gathered up bits of not finished Chinese and pizza crusts. His wee battler cuzzies on the street circled around, some appearing out of the knee-high lawn like ghosts. Others hopping down from fences or from under his car. Six? Eight? The number always grew and shrank but he'd enjoyed having some furry friends these last years. He tossed a bit here and a bit there from his leftover supplies, and the cats dove in. He laughed and whispered the little names he had given them, without letting on to the other lads. He wiped his hands on his jeans and turned back into the house. Not too long afterwards, he reappeared on the veranda with the vacuum hose in hand and headed over to his car. Jee-sus but he loved this car! Way too pricey to run but he'd made it work. Not having kids or bills of any major kind had helped with that but it was still steep as all fuck, keeping the petrol in there. The engine serviced every now and then. That whole saga. He hooked the hose up to the exhaust and slotted the other end into the front passenger window, before walking around the 'Golden Holden' as Hapuka liked to call it. Giving it a wee what's it, final inspection. He patted the roof and smiled to himself. What a fuckin' chariot. Shit, if he hadn't really done anything right on earth, he at least had a pretty cool car. That's not nothing aye. Depends who you ask maybe.

He climbed in and sat for a bit. Not really thinking of anything much. Just feeling that shitty weight in his chest that always seemed to hang around. Waiting for some sign that he was missing something or forgetting something. Batting the rear-view mirror dice ornament around for jollys. Then he sighed and turned the key in the ignition. The grunty Holden power had the smog pouring in through the window mad quick. Rangi hadn't really considered just how quick this process would be. All the ends nevermind the means kinda thinking. Already he felt like coughing and his eyes were watering. He started to breathe shallower so he could have time to line up his proper last thoughts. It was important to Rangi to have some decent last thought. Go out strong kinda thing. Thick grey-black smog was rushing in. He'd thought about playing a last song on the sounds maybe but which one? Seemed like a shame to go out in the quiet since it was gonna be nothing but quiet from now on, but it was obvious that he wouldn't have had time to get through a whole song anyway. He couldn't see the dashboard through the stinging of his watering eyes. All he could taste was smoke. His head was getting light. His chest was getting tight, not heavy now. He wanted to sleep but he knew he had to stay awake as long as he could. Shit, this was all happening too quick. Try and think something. Something decent. But he'd always been more of a feeler than a thinker. He hugged himself then. Tight. Needing that pressure somehow. Squeezed. His fingers digging into the backs of his arms hard. Everything was becoming fuzzy, and it was hard to think. He had to think, but it was hard. His whole world was dark and confusing. The smoke poured in. The Holden's engine kept rumbling out into the night. The cats had left at the sound of it starting, in twos and threes. Leaving Rangi there alone. The car's motor was the only sound audible down the length of the street, only sirens and the sounds of glass breaking from other blocks cutting in. The exhaust started to leak from within the car and spiral upwards into the black.

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Hapuka had decided to walk home ultimately. The other two were still trying to claw some extra juice out of the evening but Hapuka was more well-read than they were, so the writing on the wall was more fuckin' obvious. He kicked an empty can down the curb ahead of him, making his way by the few, flickering streetlights that were functional this end of town. What a banger of a night. The acid was good, he hadn't made too much of a spectacle of himself. Every Islander's worst nightmare, that. He'd seen God or became one with the cosmos or whatever. Talked to a girl. Which felt like more of an accomplishment honestly. The biggest thing was the corner he'd realised he'd turned on his path.

If he had a path. If anyone did. His bloodstream was still fizzing, and his vision felt sharper than it should, but he knew he was coming down. The tin fences he was walking past weren't undulating in the corner of his eye – too much. He'd maybe been a bit too focused on the work thing, come to think of it. Having reconsidered through the lens of the party just now. Leaving the shitty job would be cool and all, but it was becoming the sort of person who was bothered by the job in the first place – that was the win. And like a lot of the big wins in life, he was learning, it seemed to have happened while he wasn't looking. Funny how much clearer things are once you turn the firehose on in your thinking. The night air was cool, and likely becoming morning air by now, but the acid and booze in his system prevented him from feeling too much of it. He could hear the ubiquitous sirens and sounds of glass breaking in the distance. Some other folks out there, having a good time.

He kicked the can again and it ricocheted off an upturned wheelie bin and flung off into the night. Hapuka paused to set the wheelie bin up in its place before wandering on. He needed to eat something. His stomach was gurgling up at him and reminding him of his obligations. His present-day obligations. He was done with the past. He'd have to hold onto that feeling, that intense combination of euphoria and energising, go forth, sort of sense that acid brings a person. Enough with the dead brother depression and knocked around father down-buzz-ness. So long, racial resentments and being othered since childhood era trauma. At some point you just had to take yourself in hand and get on with things. He turned down the last corner before his own street and quickened his step a tad. Maybe Rangi was still up – that fuckin' abandoner had some explaining to do as well, come to think of it. What had he been on about? Oh, right. Live in the present, leave the past behind you. That always sounded like trite, house slave wank before but he could sort of see his way to the sense in it, in these early hours on a random Sunday. He was passing houses he knew now, their shapes and silhouettes comforting in their familiarity. Home turf. He would fry up some eggs in a minute, like all those anti house fire warning ads he'd grown up watching. He tried to check his new, swanky watch but of course couldn't see shit in the gloom.

Hapuka turned down his own street and began to whistle quietly. He thought it was quiet, he was still very much on drugs, and had some uncertainty about how clear his perceptions and thinking were. He felt stripped raw and vulnerable. A dog barking unexpectedly might send him into a panic attack, so he was holding his thoughts on a leash. Getting closer to home now, he could see Rangi's Golden Holden in the driveway. The lights on, engine running. Was he just getting back from one of his Maccas crusades? Or just now setting out on one? Holy Maccas, he hadn't even thought of that. How much money did he have? Enough for a burger surely. He quickened his steps. You beautiful Māori bastard. He'd have to share his frazzled, semi optimistic perspectives with the Rangatang, after he had yelled at him for leaving him alone with the palefaces. He'd still be on drugs too; he would get

it probably. There was something different about the sight of the Holden as he approached it. No music blasting? Something. Just then, first one, then two and then a third of Rangi's cat friends passed him on the street. Heading in the opposite direction of home base. Weird. Hapuka was pretty convinced the Centre street lawn was these cats' homeland. Maybe they had a Maccas mission of their own to get to. Things were looking up for everyone, seems like. Shit really does get better if you stick with it a while, like Veronica had said. Just a few houses to go. He thought about yelling out, he was close enough now that Rangi would be able to hear but he in that second remembered what ungodly hour it was for everyone not currently coming down from a drunken acid frenzy. He grinned to himself, and bade his time, and begun to rehearse what he was going to say.