

Sam and Susana

Tim Heath

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School of Communication Studies

Primary Supervisor: John Cranna

‘1968’

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a. Sundry requirements from AUT Postgraduate handbook I

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ABSTRACT

Sam and Susana by Tim Heath (MCW 2009)

My novel, 'Sam and Susana' is set in Auckland in 1968. The story centres on the developing relationship between two students: Sam, a 21 year old from a middle class palagi family, and Susana, a Samoan girl from Otara. When they meet Sam is cynical about university, dedicated to sports and to his drinking companions, but unresolved in almost all other areas of his life. He desperately wants to free himself from the well-to-do St Heliers home where he still lives with his parents, and move out into the world with a more secure set of values and ambitions. He has liberal ideas, bordering at times on Socialist, fuelled by the political events of the day, but not yet translated into any actions. Susana is overflowing with enthusiasm and sees being at University as a privilege. She is very uncertain about academia, but has a strong set of attitudes about everything else, especially the value of family, religion and morality. She is deeply conscious of her extended family's pride and expectations.

Their romance does not progress smoothly.

For both of them, their relationship, together with the radical examination of values and attitudes arising from the political and social upheavals of 1968, demands large, uncomfortable challenges and changes to enter their lives.

Attestation of Authorship:

'I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and that, to the very best of my knowledge and belief it contains no material previously published or written by another person (except where specifically defined in the acknowledgements), nor any material which to a substantial extent has been submitted for the award of any other degree or diploma at a university or institute of higher learning.'

Tim Heath.....

‘1968’

An Exegesis of 4,260 words

by

Tim Heath

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EXEGESIS TOPIC AND TITLE: '1968'

Tim Heath.....MCW 2009

1) INTRODUCTION:

My novel, 'Sam and Susana' is set in Auckland in 1968. The story centres on the developing relationship between two students: Sam, a 21 year old from a middle class palagi family, and Susana, a Samoan girl from Otara. When they meet Sam is cynical about university, dedicated to sports and to his drinking companions, but unresolved in almost all other areas of his life. He desperately wants to free himself from the well-to-do St Heliers home where he still lives with his parents, and move out into the world with a more secure set of values and ambitions. He has liberal ideas, bordering at times on Socialist, fuelled by the political events of the day, but not yet translated into any actions. Susana is overflowing with enthusiasm and sees being at University as a privilege. She is very uncertain about academia, but has a strong set of attitudes about everything else, especially the value of family, religion and morality. She is deeply conscious of her extended family's pride and expectations.

Their romance does not progress smoothly.

For both of them, their relationship, together with the radical examination of values and attitudes arising from the political and social upheavals of 1968, demands large, uncomfortable challenges and changes to enter their lives.

In this paper I will explore the forces that influenced their behaviour and thinking. This exploration will serve to highlight some of the themes I have attempted to weave into the book, namely:

- The 1960s as an historical context;
- The concept of 'counter culture';
- The 'zeitgeist' of New Zealand in 1968 and some of the forces for social change;
- The extent to which characters in the novel were influenced by events and 'social moods' as described above;
- Pacific Island migration to Auckland;
- Conclusions.

It is hoped that discussion of these topics will support my belief that, for the two young students at the centre of the novel counter culture movements, which blossomed in most

major cities in Europe and the United States in the 1960s, were a strong, but not a dominating influence in their lives. Knowledge of the overseas counter cultures changed what they sang, expanded their concepts of what was possible not just on record covers, but in the way one led one's life, caused them to challenge the traditions of both their families but did not cause them to join those who had, in the words of Professor Timothy Leary '*...turned on, tuned in and dropped out.*' (1)

2) THE 1960S AS AN HISTORICAL CONTEXT:

No man is an island, and no year is so bland that its events do not have some influence on those that live through it, but the challenges to the established order that blossomed in 1968 make it one of recent history's watershed years. Perhaps the significance of the Sixties is encapsulated in the titles writers have chosen for their works on this tumultuous decade e.g. Peter Taffe, writing in 'Socialist Alternative' entitled an article "**1968 Year of Revolution**" (2); Mark Kurlansky's comprehensive review of the year is called: "**1968 The Year That Rocked The World**" (3); and Todd Gitlin refers evocatively to "**The Sixties: Years of Hope,**

Days of Rage.” (4) The profoundly influential events they describe had universal consequences. Some of these events were:

- 2.1) The general strike in France, which almost destroyed the economy and made mockery of Charles De Gaulle's grand statement: "I greet 1968 with serenity." (5)
- 2.2) The Tlatelolco massacre in Mexico, in which possibly 1000 protestors were gunned down by the army (6). It has been argued that this massacre was part of a general clean up before the Mexico City Olympic Games. They were the venue for Tommie Smith and John Carlos to famously stand on the victors' podium with gloved hands raised in the Black Power salute, their gesture symbolising the more aggressive demand for civil rights that was deeply discomforting America.
- 2.3) The Vietnam War and reactions to it. In 1967, 9353 Americans had been killed (7). Levels of protest and draft evasion grew to record levels, demonstrating that for many Uncle Sam's call to arms was a matter for debate, not blind patriotic obedience.
- 2.4) The return of disillusioned veterans of both the Vietnam War, and the earlier Korean War, to the United States. Some of these men brought home a cynicism about the

system, and their subsequent treatment, that made it very difficult for them to recover sufficiently, physically and psychologically, to become active members of society.

This is well illustrated in the film '*The Big Lebowski*' which, although set in the 1980s, can be seen as illuminating the Sixties by throwing some light on what happened to those who were the victims of the wars and changes of that decade. (8)

2.5) At the same time, the demand for equality galvanised much of the US Black population and its supporters. Protest became organised and sophisticated. It also experienced the rise of leaders such as Stokely Carmichael impatient with the Church based non-violent protest of Martin Luther King. Violence was seen not just as immediately effective, but also the best way of grabbing the eye of the media.

2.6) The assassinations of Martin Luther King, Robert Kennedy and young civil rights workers shocked and strengthened the protest movements. Ripples of protest became tidal waves that were politically unstoppable.

2.7) The “Prague Spring” saw Czechoslovakia challenge Russian domination: journalists had the delight of a David and Goliath struggle.

2.8) Less heralded, but profoundly influencing millions of lives, were the Cultural Revolution in China; protests in Pakistan and the unfolding horrors of war in Biafra.

3) THE CONCEPT OF COUNTER CULTURE:

Any examination of social change and social attitudes in the Sixties has to look at the growth of ‘counter cultures’. (I have seen this term variously written in the literature as *counter culture*; *counter-culture* and *counterculture*, both with and without capitals. I have chosen, for no reason other than it looks better to me, to write it as two words using lower case letters.) The first use of the term, and its popularisation, have been ascribed to the work of Theodore Roszak in 1968. (9) Of the variety of definitions available in the literature the following from Cohen and Kennedy seems succinct and comprehensive:

A counter culture was seen mainly in the richer countries in the 1960s and 1970s, when those involved in developing a counter culture opposed the dull, unreflective, self-congratulatory uniformity of conventional political values.

They displayed a growing desire for more control over personal development, greater equity and fluidity in social relationships, a heightened respect for nature and promoted the revival of more decentralised, autonomous communities. A turn away from established religion towards eastern philosophies, experimentation with drugs, adventurous popular music and 'way-out' dress codes were also characteristic of the period.' (10)

There is no doubt that many young people in the cities of Europe and the United States embraced, and were embraced by, counter culture movements. Some of this activity centred on famed and publicised areas, such as San Francisco's Haight-Ashbury neighbourhood, but most major cities saw some growth of counter culture groups attempting to live together. In Auckland, James K Baxter's pre-Jerusalem house in Boyle Crescent, was a small such venture, which predictably aroused considerable police attention (11). It needs to be remembered that many of the counter culture communities in the United States of the 1960s were rural and well embedded in a long tradition of radical, but less well publicised, communal living enterprises that had formed on political and religious lines over the previous 150 or so years. (12)

If there were thousands joining the 'hippie' movement, listening to its music, shunning the mores, economic security, political conventions and recreations of their parents for a feeling of involvement of political change, a belief in liberation and the love of flowers, there were also many on the fringes, influenced, but not members. Their association, in many cases, was because of a higher commitment to a more political cause and the seeing of the counter culture groups as a means to an end, a useful if often bemused ally. There were also those whose membership was of a more temporary nature: "...*Undoubtedly, for some young people who participated it was a case of 'revolutionary measles', from which they recovered before they were re-integrated into capitalist society'* (13)

4) NEW ZEALAND IN 1968:

There can be no doubting that Sam and Susana, as students, knew about these events and were influenced by them. At one point in the novel Sam challenges Susana about an incident of domestic violence he witnesses in her home. She responds by comparing the direct face-to-face violence of her society with the anonymous dropping of napalm from B52s causing suffering on a far greater scale. They weep for Martin Luther King and join

protest marches. They have been shown on TV not just how to march, but also the moral necessity of doing so. Protest has been made respectable by figures such as Norman Mailer, Robert Lowell, Noam Chomsky and Benjamin Spock. For Sam's parents, however, street protest is the realm of striking, communist-influenced, wharfies needing to be put into their place by baton wielding farmers on horse -back.

New Zealand was a conservative society in 1968, led by avuncular Prime Minister Keith Holyoake. It was still a place where a magistrate able to say to the prisoner before him: *"For two pins I'd give you three months for using language like this in mixed company and at a school dance, of all places."* (14)

Tricks of memory can make 1968, the year of the novel, seem less distant from NZ today than it really was. The following quotes from the New Zealand Herald of 11 April 1968, may give further insight into the thinking and language of 'the establishment' of the time:

- 4.1) Commenting on the sinking of the 'Wahine' on the previous day, the editor writes: *"There can be consolation that many among the 700 on board the vessel survived the ordeal. That a period of comparative calm in a day of*

storm was vouchsafed at the moment of abandoning ship can be counted as an act of Provenance.” (15)

4.2) The passage above, which sounds more 19th century than 20th to my ear, was followed by an article entitled, in the biggest font on the page: ‘*Students Too Often Turn Liberty Into Licence!*’

4.3) In the Herald of 2nd April 1968, the editor, commenting on US peace initiatives in Vietnam, at a time when Lyndon Johnson needed space for presidential election campaigning, demonstrated a loyalty to the United States, its President and the fear of communism that was to be well and truly dead and buried by the time of the Lange Government of the 1980s and New Zealand’s adoption of a nuclear free stance:

“If the Communists should stall in the hope of further pickings from the American electioneering their protestation will be exposed as hypocrisy. President Johnson has demonstrated in striking fashion how genuine is his wish for peace. The world looks to Hanoi for a compatible response.” (16)

4.4) It is also of interest to note that in the ‘Women’s Section’ there were reports on recent weddings with photographs,

that were typically captioned: *Mr and Mrs J Smith. The bride was formerly Miss M Brown.*'

But there was an increasing number of New Zealanders, young and old, who were freeing themselves from this slightly old world, loyal to Washington thinking. There was protest against the Vietnam War and our participation in it. French nuclear testing at Mururoa was widely condemned. Hone Tuwhare's poem, published in 1964, contains lines that showed a wider vision than those of the editorial writers:

*'Tree let your naked arms fall
nor extend vain entreaties to the radiant ball.
This is no gallant monsoon's flash,
no dashing trade winds blast.
The fading green of your magic
emanations shall not make pure again
these polluted skies...for this
is no ordinary sun.'* (17)

Sam and Susana know this poem. They march, loving the fact that this is a Pacific issue. They do not predict the sinking of the 'Rainbow Warrior' but are overwhelmed by the sinking of the 'Wahine' on the 10th April 1968. This event coincided with Susana's first visit to Sam's home and provided a common focus

that allowed them to get to know each other less awkwardly than they otherwise may have managed. Sam is both agonised and proud when Susana persuades his parents to pray for those being thrown against the Eastbourne coast.

Influential as these political events were, they were far from the sole influences on the young of 1968. The term 'sexual revolution' is overused, but has to be applied to the sixties. The oral contraceptive pill had been licensed by the US Food and Drug Administration in 1960 and its use soon became widespread throughout the developed world. Effective contraception, together with availability of penicillin, made the cry to "Make Love Not War" a safer proposition than it ever had been. 'Free Love' fuelled huge conflicts when a generation of parents found that their warnings against sex were no longer valid or listened to. It has to be noted, however, as some commentators have observed, perhaps wryly, that the sexual revolution was not an instantaneous thing:

"The pill inevitably changed everything, although not, I suspect, quite so universally quickly as legend would have us believe. For those at the heart of things, in the media, the universities, the arts, yes, attitudes somersaulted overnight. But for the average kids, the Terries and Julies down by the station every Friday night, these things took a little longer." (18)

Sam has a bitter encounter in which the father offers a view that can be seen as mix of the moralistic, the vehement and the regretful, when he angrily shouts:

‘...if I couldn’t then why the hell should you?’

Susana is not able to discuss contraception with her family and is enigmatic when Sam questions her about it.

By 1968 the feminist movement was gaining strength. Its influence is elegantly summarised and placed in context by Kurlansky:

‘It would have made little sense for the Miss America pageant to have gone off without a problem. This was, after all, 1968. Television viewers, after watching the Chicago riots, could take time out from the Soviet subjugation of Czechoslovakia, in between reports of burning villages in the Mekong, to see Bert Parks, the make-believe celebrity, explode onto the stage in white tie and tails like a flat footed Fred Astaire, to shoo on the young, white, preferably blond, handpicked last virgins of America’s college campuses, competing for the crown of what was purportedly the ideal of American womanhood.’ (19)

Suffice it to say that there was protest at the pageant. This protest was filmed, seen and discussed the world over. Susana

desperately wants to be loyal to her family and culture, but the messages of feminism become another divisive issue. It is as if her elders, in adapting to living in a new country have come to adhere to Samoan traditions and culture (*fa'asamoa*) more and more rigidly. The more the very education her family members have made sacrifices for her to gain give her new ideas, the more she becomes distanced from them, their traditions and their expectations. This distancing is not so much rejection as the need to be with people with whom she can share her growing array of new interests. This ironic tragedy, which is still being played out in many South Auckland households, recurs in the book, with added dimension of Susana's mother being a successful university graduate who finds that her very success has demanded that she do jobs that take her away from her daughter and homeland.

Issues, both local and international, teemed: abortion; the nil general wage order; the possible imprisonment of The Rolling Stones on drugs charges; growing your own at the back of the section; hanging of 'rebels' in Rhodesia; Bob Dylan using an electric guitar; heart transplants, and whether Jimi Hendrix' version of 'The Star-Spangled Banner' was patriotic or not. At the same time, citizens of Dunedin debated whether James K Baxter, as Burns Fellow at Otago University, should get away with writing:

*“The moral mainstay of the nation
Is careful, private masturbation...” (20).*

It is significant that all these issues were placed, by television, more in front of the public eye than they ever had been. While Minhinnik’s cartoon in NZ Herald of 28 April 1968 bemoaned the lack of information about the Vietnam War, reporting on that war was arguably not just more graphic, but also more comprehensive, than it ever had been. Television was, as the comment from Kurlansky above suggests, the world’s new wild child, less restrained than it tends to be today. General Westmoreland, commander of US forces in Vietnam has been quoted as saying:

“Early in the war he (Lyndon Johnson) should have imposed press censorship, no matter how complex the problems that may have generated’ (21)

The reporting on the United States news channels available in New Zealand today, about the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, would probably be more to the general’s liking.

Protest leaders learned early the power of TV and of its interest in the quick, the violent and the outrageous.

Cameras were everywhere, seeing everything and society could not allow itself the Gaullist delusion of serenity. Perhaps the following incident from the novel will serve summarise the media

influence, and some of the fears, of the time: Susana has to make a quick trip to the University to pick up some books and sees this as a fun outing for some of her young cousins. They, however, are reluctant to go with her, for fear that they might meet students, those creatures in makeshift armour they had seen on screen, night after night, waging war with police, waving banners and lighting fires in the streets of the world's capitals.

5) WERE SAM AND SUSANA MEMBERS OF A COUNTER CULTURE?

Can Sam and Susana, as students at Auckland University in 1968, be seen as members of a counter culture? The answer has to be a definite no. It is interesting, here, to read the following exchange between Mark Kurlansky and NZ Herald writer Graham Reid, in a telephone interview just prior to Kurlansky coming to the fifth Auckland Readers and Writers Festival (2005):

GR: *...there was a rare convergence of idealism, dissent and technology in 1968.*

MK: *Yeah, a combination that will never again come together in quite that way.*

GR: *Because today we are too tribal, we are separate tribes within a city, different countries, and so on?*

MK: *I'm not sure I agree with that. 1968 was the beginning of a shift to the kind of world we live in, a much more global and international world. What we're doing now most likely we not have been doing in 1968. International phone calls? ... it wouldn't have been worth it.*

GR: *And the internet hasn't exactly brought people together, but has allowed smaller voices of opinion to come through but no greater consensus.*

MK: *Yeah, the internet is interesting right now. Like television in the sixties nobody has figured out how to control it and a lot of interesting things go on, although a lot of it is nonsense. The potential for political organisation on the internet is fantastic.*
(22)

I take from this quote a sense of Kurlansky seeing the changes started in 1968 being the basis of much of today's society, but being slow to spread universally. He cites communication difficulties and suggests things would have happened far more quickly with the advent of the internet. It is interesting to note that he, too, comments on the relative freedom of TV, as a new medium and compares it with the powerful, but largely unrestrained growth of the internet.

Sam and Susana, as I visualise them, are still locked into two traditional cultures: Samoan and middle class white New Zealand. They are very conscious of the expectation that they attend university, she as someone representing the pinnacle of her family's dream; he, because as his mother says: *"Getting a BA is the least you can do!"*

The fact that they get together is probably all the revolution they can cope with. They go on protest marches, they discuss issues, they believe that Strawberry Fields are forever, they want family attitudes to change, but they pursue their studies, live at home, and approach sex very tentatively. In their spare time, Susana goes to church and Sam plays cricket. They are not hippies or lefties or commies, but their lives will be for ever changed because they know of people with these labels and even interact with a few of them.

It can be argued that Susana, and her Samoan family, are a sub-culture of New Zealand society, trying to fit in, trying to earn money and trying, above all, to keep their traditional culture intact.

6) PACIFIC ISLAND MIGRATION TO NEW ZEALAND:

The slow trickle of migration from Samoa to New Zealand gained impetus in the 1950s and became something of a flood in

the 1960s. There had been, prior to Samoa becoming an independent state in 1962, relatively free access to New Zealand. The 'Treaty of Friendship' NZ signed with Samoa, at the time of independence, set up a quota system for immigration. By the late sixties, the quota figure was 1,100 adults and their families (23). It would seem that exact population figures were not available, given the informal approaches to Samoan entry in the early sixties and the numbers who stayed beyond the expiry of their Visitors' Permits. It has been stated, that the Samoan population in NZ was around 5,000 in 1961, rising to 15,000 by 1971 (24).

The new immigrants tended to take on low paid manual jobs, clustering around freezing works, Ministry of Works construction projects and industrial centres, like South Auckland. Their official welcome in the country would seem to have had an inter-relationship with NZ's need for labour and accuracy of immigration status did not become an issue until the economic downturn and consequent 'dawn raids' that began in 1973.

It can be assumed that Susana's family had full employment, were expecting to be able to stay forever and were able to focus energy on earning enough money to pay for housing, food, education, donations to the church and the on-going remittance of money to relatives in Samoa.

For the purposes of this novel, the families described have the characteristics of self belief, vitality and optimism that I observed in families I had contact with at the time. For all that Susana's family had difficulties, its story is basically one of success. There were, of course, families for whom the NZ experience was an overwhelming challenge. Their stories are touched on but not examined in any detail in the novel.

7) CONCLUSION:

In writing 'Sam and Susana' I have wanted to reflect some of the turmoil and struggles that characterised 1968 and to show how changes in NZ, and social upheavals overseas, impacted on the characters' lives. I have also wanted to pursue themes relating to cross cultural contact. For a while I wanted to accent this theme by calling the novel "*Paddocks*": this title referring to a comment made by Sam's cousin Michael, who after listening Sam talking of the difficulties of his relationship with Susana, says: "*Life is so much simpler if you stay in your own paddock.*"

I will feel that one of my criteria for the success of this novel will be for people who were alive in 1968, but whose recall of the year may be restricted to memory of the music, read the book and say: 'Yes, it was *like that*'.

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4260 words

Sam and Susana

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‘Sam and Susana’:
Samoan Words

Glossary of

‘aiga:	family
Aukelani	Auckland
fa’alavelave:	anything which interferes with normal life and calls for special activity
fa’amolemole:	please
fa’asamoa	the Samoan way
falema’i:	hospital
fia inu:	thirst
i le taeao:	in the morning
leaga	bad
leaga le timu	the rain is bad
leai	no
malo le onosa’i:	well done for being so patient
molī	light (illumination)
Niu Sela	New Zealand
‘oi	exclamation of surprise
ōiōi	expression of anguish
‘oi Sole	hey Boy
onosa’i	patience
Palagi	European
puleitasi	two piece dress with ankle length skirt
salu	hand-broom made from ribs of coconut
leaves	
sesē	wrong
sesē tele	very wrong
ta’avale	motor car
talofai	expression of sympathy: ‘ you poor dear.’
tifaga	movies
to’ona’i	main Sunday meal
tupe	money
tama valea tele	very idiotic boy
ua mai ‘oe Sole?	How are you boy?
valea	foolish or mad person

SAM AND SUSANA

Chapter One

First Lecture

I sat at the back of the new lecture theatre, near the aisle. The beginning of my third year and I felt I had the place sussed. Social Anthropology, Stage One, Lecture One, Wednesday 6 March 1968. Friends said it was a breeze, just the thing for someone who could waffle on with only a few facts at his command. Friends, talking in the cafeteria, talking socialism, Jack Kerouac, French literature and had the All Blacks ever had a better prop than Kevin Skinner? We fumed about the injustices of the world: Nelson Mandela incarcerated on Robben Island; heroic Joshua Nkomo and Robert Mugabe imprisoned while Ian Smith waved a new flag celebrating his unilateral declaration of independence; the University Council's plan to knock a hole in the historic Albert Barracks stone wall so we could get to lectures faster; the touring Indian cricket team questioning Gary Bartlett's action. And we had a fair idea about who was behind the killing of J. F. K.

I loved this talk and loved taking bits of it home to shake up my parents. I still lived with them and felt a need to compensate for this comfortable compromise by ensuring they made political progress. My cricket mates would take the piss if I ever let them glimpse my beliefs. They would tell me sending troops to Vietnam was an act of patriotism and Lyndon Johnson would save the world as we knew it, but they also read complexity and mystique into Psychology One, Anthropology One and English Three. As Mack, our fast bowler, had said last week, when he asked about my courses: 'You're quite intelligent for a dumb bastard, ain't ya, young Sam?'

I sat, waiting, spotting first years, nodding at people I'd seen last term, feasting my eyes on the women. It was day one of a new first term and there still wasn't a surplus of women at University. They all seemed to be with someone, or, locked behind glasses, remote, walking with slight stoops as they clutched impressive bundles of books to their meagre bosoms. My

gazing became dreamlike, bored, the March summer sounds drifting through the windows, thoughts of the 35 not out I had made on Saturday, on a turning wicket, drifting through my mind. My fingers traced over what seemed like an anatomically impossible sexual instruction scratched into the desktop to my right.

And then Susana Manaiatele came and sat beside me. I had sensed her coming - sensed a radiance, a full smile, a round brown beauty and the gentle fragrance of coconut oil.

'This is the Lower Lecture Theatre? Is this Social Anthropology, Stage One? Can I sit here?'

She smiled again and my life changed forever.

'Sam,' I said, noting her bosom was not meagre, 'I'm Sam - I don't think I've seen you around this place ...around the University?'

'Sam,' she repeated, with another smile. 'I am Susana. This is my first time at a lecture. A lecture at University.'

I'd never thought much about teeth, but the even white sculptured perfection of hers gave me a delicious tremor and made me run my tongue over the rocky, off-white road in my own mouth. There was an excitement about her, a glittering tension shone from her dark eyes. Her hands moved elegantly across her note pad, which she smoothed out over the graffiti on the desktop. She arranged three pens, blue, green, red, together with a pencil, and a small wooden ruler, above the notepad. She interlaced her long fingers and looked towards the still vacant lectern at the front of the lecture theatre. She was ready.

I'd resolved not to take any notes, but to sit back with my chin clasped in right hand. The lecturer would see me as an alert, critical listener, in easy control and not fooled for a moment. I could always get the notes from someone else. Susana's example, however, made me haul an exercise book out of my bag. It was not in good condition. Ever since I was in Standard Two, girls had tidier books than me. They could keep them looking neat and clean for a whole year, but mine, by the end of the first term, were dog-eared and carried a deeply bruised look that comes from sharing a school bag with marmite sandwiches, ageing apples and damp tennis balls. I glanced at Susana's books again. She would have been, by the time she reached

Standard Four, one of those terrifyingly competent girls who made teachers feel their lives were worthwhile.

She saw my look and smiled again.

'This is so exciting,' she said. 'I am so proud to be here.'

'Proud?'

'Yes. My family, not my family back home in the Island, but my Auntie I live with, and her family, they said special prayers this morning because I was coming here today. To Auckland University. It's very good, Sam, very good.'

In her excitement her hand touched mine and I felt the clean smoothness of her skin.

'Yes,' I said, 'it is exciting. It's good to be here, at the University. Yes, I think I'm proud too, yes'

Why was I talking like this? Were any of my friends listening? My eyes closed as I thought of the cricket team: '...it's so exciting to be at the University. It's so exciting, Social Anthropology One. It's so exciting to be young Sam, chatting up the birds at the University. It's so exciting, all this bullshit.'

I wasn't excited by this place. Being here was part of what I had to do. Didn't even think about it much. My mother's words floated around my head. 'Surely, you'll get a BA, Sam. As a very minimum. And then you can at least teach, or something...'

These were not harsh, echoing words, but a background understanding, part of my training, like the expectation I would hold my knife and fork correctly, wash daily and not raise my voice at the end of a sentence. The least I could do and still be deemed to have good manners.

'Is your family excited about you being here at University?'

I recalled sitting in a toilet cubicle on my first day in these hallowed halls and looking at the dispenser that issued those small, shiny, unpleasant sheets of toilet paper, one miserable one at a time. Scratched on its very off white surface were the words: 'B.A.'s – Help Yourself!'

I wanted to somehow weave this into my answer, but the lecturer came in and began speaking before I could assemble the right words. I smiled at her, a big smile, even though I knew I lacked her orthodontic glory. I tuned into the introduction to Raymond Firth and the complexities of being a

Tikopian. Still under the umbrella of Susana's enthusiasm, I let myself become interested, let myself listen to the words, and not look for openings for remarks to take to the cafeteria. I was aware of her, of her busy neat hands that seemed to be taking down every word. I marvelled that she could do this, using each of her three pens and even underlining headings. Her Standard Four projects must have been stupendous, worthy of display in the glass case in the school foyer, below the Roll Of Honour, with the names of those who had given their lives for our freedom written in gold leaf.

The lecture finished and she gathered up her books and walked away, giving me only the smallest of smiles. Had I offended her, given some detectable hint of the desires and fantasies that had beset me for the past hour?

'See you at the next lecture,' I said, to her departing back as she swayed out the door.

The next lecture wasn't for three days. I looked for her, circumnavigating the library, with a serious booklist in my hand, my eyes darting over the bowed heads of the industrious few who had forsaken late summer in Albert Park for their studies. I didn't know any of them. I caught a small waft of coconut oil and I beamed my most magnificent smile at a very dark and surprised Melanesian girl with a scarlet hibiscus in her hair. She returned the smile and brought her hand up to her face as she gave me a small wave. A tiny man, in a tight brown suit had a similar smell, but he didn't acknowledge anything or anyone.

She was nowhere to be found, let alone found by casual accident. I arrived at the lecture theatre early and sat in what I now considered my seat. My eyes wandered again over the graffiti. My buttocks rested on the very front edge of the seat and I leant back as far as I could, my hands clasped behind my head and my eyes almost closed. No Saturday matinee gunman could have had the joint under more casually alert surveillance.

She came in, walked past me without a look and took a seat ten rows from the front. How could she?

She set out her papers and pens in the same neat order and waited, fingers again interlocked. She didn't look around, nor did she talk to anyone.

When the lecture started she bent her head and wrote without looking up, without stopping. I was able to gaze at her more intently than I had before. Not a full view, just the back of her bent head, her shoulders, and her neck with the black collar of her blouse folded upwards, her arms and her industrious hands.

My eyes studied the central parting of her long black hair. It was straight, but for one small deviation to the left, at the point where her head began its graceful scoop to her neck. If I had been allowed to brush it for her I would have run the end of a comb down this line and made it geometrically accurate. I would not have been able to make the plaits so tight and regular. I'd never plaited anyone's hair. My parents had been conscientious in passing on to me the biological details of reproduction, but hadn't said anything about hair plaiting or how to cope with someone not sitting next to me in the Lower Lecture Theatre enjoying the casual conversation I had spent the past three days rehearsing. Nor had they told me about arms. About how the rounded shape of a girl's forearm could be as alluring as any other part. Even in the mundane act of writing down details of the relationship between kinship structure and material culture in Tikopia, her arms, her wrists, and her fingers had a dancing elegance.

My mind filled with thoughts of brushing her hair, letting it cascade over her shoulders, shoulders now as naked as her forearms, her turning towards me, warming me further with a smile of acceptance and gratitude.

'Thank you, Sammy.'

My name coming from her lips would have a lilt that would make it seem new and exotic.

'You are so good to me, Sammy, such a help, in so many ways...'

And her eyes would lower in a coquettish shyness that demanded I put down the hairbrush and lead her further into my sophisticated world.

The intricacies of Tikopian economic activity passed me by until the clang of spring-loaded seating told me the lecture was over. I picked up my unopened exercise book and pen, and positioned myself beside the aisle, waiting for her.

'Susana,' I beamed as she drew close.

Her blouse had a row of shining buttons that looked as if they were made from coconut shell painted over with scarlet nail polish. They gave her demure clothing more showiness than she may have intended. My eyes were drawn to them and to the fullness of the breasts they kept secure. Her breasts...they would be the same colour as her arms, wouldn't they?

She didn't stop. A quick smile, her eyes big as they glanced upward at me and then she hurried away.

I've never managed to be bold with women. I found it almost impossible to ask someone to dance without saying crass words, so unlike those I'd practised:

'I don't suppose you would you like to dance with me?'... (Nar!)

'You don't have to dance with me...' (I know that!)

'Do you mind...but it's OK if you do...' ('Course I mind!)

No, my approach was the quiet chat in the cafeteria, the serious talk after the tutorial, with vague suggestions of having coffee, going to the pictures, or having a game of tennis. So, I was surprised to find myself running after Susana and standing in front of her, demanding attention.

'Susana, I wanted to talk to you, wanted you to sit beside me, ...'

As I blurted on I realised I had laid my hand on the forearm I had been admiring. I snatched it away and looked at her with a rising panic.

'I can't understand the work, Sam, I can't understand. I write it all down and read it and it just sounds like his stupid voice that I didn't understand in the first place and ... you're clever and you don't even have to write anything down, so how could I sit next to you?'

Her eyes filled with tears and they overflowed down her cheeks. I'd read about tears overflowing, but I'd never seen it happen. I'd seen very few tears, I suppose. Young children bawling, all noise and snot; my mother forcing out drops to reinforce anger or underline a need, all small sniffs and ironed handkerchiefs. I think, once, I'd seen my father cry, but only from behind, so I was never really sure of the true meaning of his heaving shoulders. But Susana's tears arrived unheralded and flowed down her cheeks, unrestrained and unexplained. She was sad and so she cried. I had never seen anything like it before, not even in the movies. The closest I could

come was Harry Belafonte singing: *'Ev'y time I think of 'Liza, water come to me eye...'*, his voice caressing its way through my mind.

I promised to help her with her work. I promised her she was clever. As I observed her tears, I felt a surge of happiness

We met the following Monday morning at 9-30. Too early for me really.

I knew I was a fraud. I had little recollection of what happened in the lectures, few notes and, although I had rushed to the second hand bookshop and bought Raymond Firth's book I hadn't read more than the information on the flyleaf. A quick scan of Piddington's 'Introduction to Social Anthropology: Volume One' hadn't given me many quotable quotes beyond a stern encouragement, on page 29, to actually read Firth's book in detail. I was worried. No one had ever called me clever. I didn't, in normal circumstances, like or endorse the term, but I knew I would do everything I could to have Susana continue to think of me in this way.

I bought coffee and chose a small table well away from the aisle. I made sure my back was to the room. Despite these precautions, friends saw me and called out.

'Morning Sam, doing a bit of anthropological research are we?'

'A bit of fieldwork? Getting alongside an informant?'

'Don't let 'work' keep you from the pub, Friday.'

I made frantic hand signals behind my back. These were meant to mean 'bugger off,' but were later translated as 'I'll buy you all a beer if you leave me in peace to weave my web of bullshit around this unsuspecting first year.'

'Are you going to ask your friends to join us, Sam?'

'Susana, you surprise me. We're here to get to grips with Raymond Firth and his Tikopians. Haven't got time for my noisy friends. They're not always serious about their studies...'

She touched the back of my hand. I had never had a relationship in which areas below the elbow had so much significance.

'Is Raymond Firth like that Margaret Mead who came to my Island?'

'Margaret Mead? The American?'

'My mother's auntie, that's my great aunt and she lives in San Francisco now, well, she said when Margaret Mead came to their little village asking silly embarrassing questions, they all told her big stories and lies and laughed to each other. And that Margaret Mead wrote them all down and became a famous important person because of a book full of big stories and lies. And when my mother went to the University in London she had to say she came from Australia because men who'd read her book thought girls from our Island would do anything, just anything, Sam. It made her very ashamed, Sam, to have to say she wasn't promiscuous, only Australian. You'd think they hadn't seen a woman with a flower in her hair before, those Englishmen. So, is your Mr Raymond Firth like that? If he is I'll drop out and change to Biology!'

'No, no. He worked much later, in 1936, when they all knew better. And he was more influenced by Bronislaw Malinowski than Margaret Mead ever was. And she was from America, of course.'

Thank you, Professor Piddington, thank you for your indexes, Chapter titles and long names. Don't look up Malinowski in the Library, or you'll find he wrote Anthropology's only bestseller: *'The Sexual Life of Savages.'* Don't give up on Social Anthropology, Susana. Don't reject Margaret Mead - she had some wonderful stories to tell.

'Don't know about, what did you call him, Brownslaw?' she said, 'But I do know Margaret Mead was bad for Samoan women, very bad.'

'So, you come from Samoa...?'

I hadn't thought to ask before. I knew she came from the Pacific but all the islands seemed a bit the same to me – teach me more, Mr Firth, teach me more, Miss Susana.

'From Western Samoa.'

The frown she wore at the mention of Margaret Mead was washed away by a return of her warm radiance.

'From the village of Safune on the island of Savai'i, to be exact.'

She touched my hand again.

'I would love to tell you all about my village, Sammy, but it would make me too sad and we came here for you to teach me about this hard work.'

I asked her to show me her notes. She had rewritten them. They were clear and multi-coloured. Her handwriting had a small even legibility, inviting concentration, in the same way a soft voiced speaker draws attention. Her note taking was, as far as I could tell, almost verbatim. We talked about summaries and main points. We made lists and I drew arrows joining key words. I learned lots.

Our conversation moved easily along these safe tracks for almost an hour. She would look up from the notes every now and then and let her eyes rest on mine as she listened to me. Listened to me, listened to my words, listened to my attempt to make her realise she could understand and she had been thinking the material was more complex than it had any right to pretend to be. I wanted her to understand, but I also wanted her to need my explanations. It was in my best interests to be obscure but I couldn't, not deliberately. Her eyes, her attentiveness, her trust all demanded I be as straightforward as I could be.

I noticed today her hair was immaculately groomed, a perfection of straight parting and tight plaiting. I was disappointed to notice, now we were sitting so close to each other, how thick, almost wiry, each strand of her hair seemed to be. My dream of silky softness had to take on more springy qualities.

'Thank you, Sammy, you are such a help to me. Thank you, thank you.'

She held my forearm as she spoke, deepening our below the elbow contact.

'I'm going to the library now to rewrite these notes. I don't mind if you sit with me at the next lecture.'

She left quickly.

I didn't go to the Library.

Chapter Two**Speculation**

Speculation is idle, worthless, unsettling and delicious. I speculated about our study session and about her last remark. She '...didn't mind ...' sounded so far from 'I want to...', and even further from 'Yes, Sam, yes, yes, yes...' And who were her friends and how was I to stop them from seeing us 'not minding' sitting beside each other? And where was she now and was her hair straight? And if it didn't feel silky, what would it feel like? A pot scrub? Kikuyu grass? Pubic hair? I was 21 and I had only ever touched my own pubic hair, so what did I know? I was 21 and I still lived with my parents, for God's sake. My romantic life was full of bravado and fantasy. My knowledge was limited to faces, arms and scarlet painted buttons.

The next lecture was scheduled for 4pm the following Friday. A lecture in the middle of the Session, a time held sacred by my drinking group for the past two years! An outrageous, unjust time, hinting at the true savagery that lurked under the surface of the Social Anthropology Department. Missing the Session would mean loss of face, huge penalties, serious mockery and possible exclusion. My mate Laurie had struggled to a Session last winter after his car crash, making a memorable entry, complete with plaster cast and a very attractive nurse. How could I renege on a Session in the face of such legends? Some of the group were cricket mates, most were at University, all of them would know about my serious academic chat with Susana in the cafeteria. We knew about things like that. There was no place to hide, no way of pretending you weren't involved, or trying to be involved, with someone new. Concealment was neither effective nor sought. We were braggers, desperate, exuberant braggers. Those who had enjoyed some success during the week would join the group with silly grins that would provoke calls of 'You dirty bastard, you dirty, lucky, bastard. Buy a jug and tell all.'

I knew I would not be able to help grinning, but there would be nothing to tell, beyond seven and a half seconds of forearm contact. And I didn't want to tell, didn't want to take this delicate, trembling excitement, and lay it on the table with the spilt beer, the ashtrays and the betrayals.

I would miss the Session. I would face the flak. I would go to the lecture.

At five to four it began to rain. Torrential Auckland rain washing up earthy smells from the steaming asphalt. I ran into the lecture theatre, saw Susana already in 'our seat' and performed a deliberate and moderately graceful skid across the wet floor. I ran up the stairs and flung myself into the seat beside her. The rain had changed things, made it easier to talk, not just to her, but to others around us. I filed away 'The Anthropological Function of Weather in Social Interactions and Communication Systems Amongst Peoples of English Background' as a possible essay topic.

'You're silly!' she said.

My grin vanished.

'Only a silly man would slide on the floor and make everyone look at him and then at me! Look at him and me sitting together. Better to break your silly leg next time.'

But she laughed and punched me lightly on the biceps.

The lecture passed quickly, even enjoyably, as the Friday numbers and the steady drum of the rain seemed to draw us all closer as a group, seemed to draw us closer as a couple. I reached over and drew a rose on her notepaper. She smiled and slowly covered it up with a series of strokes of her pen.

When we left the lecture theatre it was raining harder. Cricket would probably be off tomorrow. We were scheduled to play on Victoria Park Number Seven; a grass wicket, but not one of sufficient importance to warrant a cover.

'It's raining, so wet,' she said. 'How will I get home?'

My heart leapt.

'I'll drive you, if you like.'

'Drive...in a car?'

'Yes, my car. Yes, my 1962 850 cc Mini, English Racing Green and a leather steering wheel cover and ...'

'Would you drive me home, Sammy, to Otara? Please, Sammy...'

'I don't mind if I do,' I answered and received another tap on the bicep.

It was harder to talk in the car. I wanted to show her how well I could drive, how I could change into second gear around corners with the skill and nonchalance of Bruce McLaren. I wanted to feel her leaning against me when I cornered and made a series of geographically unnecessary right hand turns for this reason. We were alone and close together and a feeling of risk gripped me. I would find it hard to keep conversation to Anthropology and I didn't know anything about her interests. I didn't want to be silent but I didn't want to blurt out anything that hinted at the dream miles I had travelled since I met her.

'I play cricket, you know. For the Grafton Club. Oldest club in Auckland. At Victoria Park...we'll be on Number Seven tomorrow, grass wicket, but it'll be flooded by now...'

'We play cricket, kilikiti, at home, in my village. It makes me sad to think of cricket in my village and my family...'

I glanced at her but, in the darkening interior of the Mini I couldn't tell if water had come to her eyes again. I wanted to stop, there beside the motorway and take her hands in mine and talk about her sadness.

'They only cover Number One wicket, for the Premier game, not Number Seven. We're not good enough for a cover.'

She didn't answer.

I clicked on the radio. The serious sounds of 1YC filled the car. Please like my music, Susana, please make it perfect. I looked at her. I silently thanked the programme organiser, who had arranged for the Rachmaninov Second Piano Concerto to be played at this moment. The Mini was no concert chamber, but the music surged over its rattles, its straining engine, the clack-rhythm of the wipers and the intimate drum of the rain.

'My mother plays this sort of music when she is by herself. Nobody is allowed to ask her anything, when she listens to music. She tries to make me listen. She yells at her brothers if they talk.' Susana giggled at this thought. 'But turn it off, Sammy, because I don't want to have to be quiet, I wanna be noisy an' loud. I want music that lets me sing!'

Friday night with a noisy girl in the car. Friday night, driving to Auntie's place in Otara. I swung the dial to Radio Hauraki.

'And she makes love just like a woman' grated around the interior of the Mini. I gripped the steering wheel and brrrmed driving noises.

'Tell me about your mother, Susana. She sounds ...interesting.'

'My mother would slap my mouth, if she heard me talk to a Pālagi boy like you about her, 'specially in a car on Friday night. My mother, she would. She's the best person and I miss her, feel a small sickness in my tummy when I can't just go to her. Her name is Sefulu and that's a real important name in our island, a title. She taught me about Beethoven and Rachmaninov and Shakespeare and how to dance. My mother, my wonderful mother.'

Names and titles – I was really getting to grips with social anthropology.

'And she breaks just like a little girl...'

We reached the Otara/Papatoetoe turn-off and she gave me directions.

'You go right at the end of the road, and second left....and, Sam, are you a church boy?'

'A church boy?'

'Do you go to church?'

'Church?'

'Church...I am a church girl, in case you didn't know.'

The thought of mentioning, next time I was in the pub with my mates, if I ever got invited to go again, that I was dating a 'church girl' and had become a 'church boy', didn't bear thinking about.

'No. I don't go to church...I wouldn't call myself a church boy!'

'It'd help you, if you went to church,' she replied, nodding her head as she did so.

'Help me with what?'

'With your faults and weaknesses!'

I reeled. What faults had she been able to see already? Perhaps, sudden conversion would cause them to disappear, thus allowing her to fall into my arms with the delicious abandonment Margaret Mead and I believed to be her true nature.

'Those missionaries have a lot to answer for!' I said, with more fervour than I had intended.

‘They have, and they have answered to their Maker...and you should take the next turn to the left.’

I nearly missed the corner. The conversation was not over, but it stopped, as she guided me through the complexities of the suburb with its streets designed to accommodate the largest possible number of similar looking houses. I had a sense of adventure, as we wove our way around tight corners and the debris of recent urbanisation. I was entering the depths of a suburb I’d read about, and discussed passionately, but never visited.

‘There are children, who have to play on these streets,’ she said. ‘So be careful and stop at number 135, please.’

I stopped and turned to look at her.

‘Thank you, Sam,’ she said, flashing a smile that glowed brighter than the interior light of the Mini. ‘You will now come in and eat with my family.’

She climbed out of the car, clearly seeing her invitation as one of unarguable courtesy and commonsense.

I felt afraid of going into her home. All my thoughts had been about her and me, just the two of us, maybe at University, maybe in my car, even in my room. The prospect of being with her surrounded by her family, in their home, was daunting, terrifying. I didn’t want to meet her mother’s sister or her mother’s sister’s husband, let alone the extended family. I didn’t know how to behave in their household and felt scared about making mistakes. If Raymond Firth had taught me nothing else, he had taught me my standard way of behaving could be very wrong and offensive. As my nervousness grew, so too did my desire to urinate. The whole issue of whether to accept Susana’s invitation started to centre on a growing fear I would not be able to find a way to ask if I could use a toilet.

Susana, now on her home territory, seemed to become almost regal. The flashes of will I had already seen in her strengthened.

‘Hurry! Auntie will go mad if she sees us here talking on the footpath like gang kids, or King Cobras or something. Hurry, before you bring shame on my family!’

I locked the car and followed her to the door. We took off our shoes and I added my pristine Hush Puppies, looking like Cinderella slippers, to the pile of gigantic work boots and large lopsided jandals.

Chapter Three**Dinner in Otara**

We walked into the kitchen. A wall had been knocked out to make it roomier. There was still some lining and finishing work to be done. The stove was crowded with steaming pots bubbling with the evening meal: the room crowded with large steaming women, bubbling with the day's news. Everything stopped, except for the slow turning of eyes towards me and the rattle of a pot lid. A lean boy of about fifteen stood at the bench peeling a large grey looking vegetable, which I assumed was taro. He sent a quick glance in my direction then returned to his task with a deliberate, clumsy concentration.

'This is Sam, Auntie,' said Susana. 'He is in my Social Anthropology Stage One class and he gave me a lift home...through the rain...Sammy, this is my Auntie, my Auntie Valu.'

'Is he the clever one?' asked her aunt, wiping her hands on her apron and advancing towards me, looking large, wide and unsmiling.

'We welcome clever, hard working students in our house. We like Susana to have good friends from the University. We like the education. Welcome, Sammy, to our house'

She shook my hand, awkwardly and with an unexpected softness, and smiled in a way that confirmed she was, indeed, Susana's aunt. The other women started talking again in their own language. I understood nothing of what they said, but sensed the outbursts of laughter were about me. I smiled every time they laughed. I was an intruder, but one of small consequence. My presence wasn't going to disturb the flow of talk any more than it was going to stop the steam rising from the stove. It would be very difficult to ask about the toilet.

'Come to the front room with me,' Susana instructed.

She glided across the kitchen, threading her graceful way around the corpulence of her senior relatives, reminding me of an eel I had seen swimming amongst tree stumps in a flooded paddock. She took me to the front room, sat me down and turned on the TV. Before I could speak, she

raced to the kitchen - the eel joyfully rejoining the laughter and warmth of its home waters.

I expected her to return, but she didn't. I sat alone in the front room for an increasing number of slow minutes. The TV blared a programme I couldn't stand. I wanted to turn it off but felt I might upset someone if I did so. I cursed my inhibitions, the Anthropology course and the recklessness that had brought me here, away from the easy laughter and familiar dimensions of the Session.

The kitchen produced the smells of cooking and the sounds of happy interaction. The only signs of Susana were the times when her voice rose above the others. I didn't know what she was saying, hidden as she was behind the closed doors of the kitchen and her language. However, it seemed she was able to hold the attention of the others with long anecdotes and opinions that produced laughter and approval in generous measure. I no longer flattered myself the stories were about me. The more I came to realise the listeners held her in high regard, the more I felt ill at ease for having blundered into her life. I wanted to go home, I wanted my mates, I wanted to pee.

I stood up and tried to distract myself by looking at the pictures that filled the walls. They were draped with strings of plastic flowers. Some showed groups of relatives, older ones still seeing the camera as a cause for great seriousness; the younger ones as an invitation to adopt practiced poses. Some were of large, stern faced men in sports teams, formidable and united. Many were of Susana: Primary school portraits; basketball teams with players lined up in order of height, short skirts and the hands on the hips of the girl in front; class photos, in chronological order, culminating in a small Upper Sixth Form. There was a gilt edged frame holding a photo entitled 'School Prefects, 1967.' There was a series of certificates documenting her academic success and social excellence. School prizes, Sunday school awards, University Scholarships and results. There were more 'A's' than I felt comfortable with. The whole wall reflected her family's easy celebration of her achievements, so different to my parents who could seldom muster more than a muted 'Well, we didn't expect anything less'.

Two children, perhaps aged three or four, put their heads around the door, laughed and ran away. After doing this ten or so times, they came into the room, even though I'd stopped smiling. Their next game was to run up to me, touch my knee and run away again. They found it equally hilarious if I ignored them or tried to grab them. Clearly, it was an activity that could go on for a long time.

I resolved to leave and to use the toilet before going. I went towards the kitchen, but paused in the empty hallway. There was a phone in a recess on the wall. It was the centre of a galaxy of numbers and messages that radiated across the surrounding wallpaper. I noted the number on the dial and I strode purposefully to the kitchen. It was even more crowded than before. The aunt was talking in a loud, harsh sounding voice to the lean youth. He tightened the piece of floral material around his waist, its flamboyant hibiscus dulled by the scars and slop of cooking, and scurried out the door.

'Susana! I have to go!'

'No, Sam, no Sam, don't go. We have nearly finished preparing the food. Siasia has made us an umu.' She gestured towards the door. 'Soon Uncle Feleti will be home and we will eat.'

She took me back into the front room, shooed the now demure children away, and talked with me as if I was the only person in the house. My resolve to leave melted.

'I hadn't understood how important and successful you are,' I said, gesturing towards the evidence around the walls. She looked at the floor for a few seconds before answering.

'Sometimes,' she said, 'I would like to go and live somewhere like London where nobody knows me. My mother said not knowing anyone, and you not being known, was so free...but sad too. She was in London for years, before I was born. She was a student doing a PhD at the University of London. Can you imagine, Sammy, someone, a woman, from Savai'i, doing a PhD at a famous place like that. Everyone is so proud of her, so proud, the whole Island really. They don't call her 'Doctor', because everyone knows she wrote about the history of the London Missionary Society coming to Samoa and you are only called Doctor if you study medicine. But they call her 'the first PhD' except most of them say 'the first PhT'. And now she works,

sometimes, for the new University of the South Pacific and has been everywhere in the world. You know, Sammy, I looked at her passport once and she has been to so many places, even the communist ones, like Russia and Cuba. She says Cuba could be a model for Samoa's development and...'

She stopped and giggled at her rush of words. I found it easy to smile.

'You must be proud of her, proud to have such a clever mother.'

'Sammy, you know she was so clever, is so clever, they say when she sat her final exam she only wrote one page. Everyone else wrote pages and pages, but she could say it all in just one page. That made her a legend, in our island and at the University too, I think.'

'So, what's it like, having a mother who's a legend, what's that like for you?'

She looked down and her smile evaporated.

'They call me 'the PhT's' daughter and just look at me and wait for some miracle. They think I can say it all in just half a page. And I can't – you know I can't. You know I'm just a dumb Samoan village girl sitting in the lecture theatre, pretending I should be there, pretending I know enough.'

'Susana, just give yourself some time. And you're no village girl – you've been at an Auckland school too long to be a village girl, don't you think? I think your brain is just fine – just look at all these prizes and certificates.'

'Those,' she said, sniffing with disdain. 'Those things. I think they just wanted to find any PI student who made it to Form Seven so they could heap on the prizes and say they were so good themselves at making our people successful. You know, they gave me special prizes for something they called 'Citizenship' and thought I would be pleased, but they didn't understand I wanted the prize for Maths or Physics or Shakespeare. 'Citizenship' – they made me dance on stage at the prize giving and everyone clapped a lot but it was like I was a pet or something - their special prize. And my family, my stupid family, came up and gave tons of money and I know they couldn't afford it. The school got praised for '*... adapting programmes for this new wave of Pacific immigration.*' It also got a dance and a lot of money. I got these prizes and Auntie Valu worked tons of extra shifts at the hospital laundry. No sense, eh, Sam.'

‘But it’s great to hear you talk about it. Great. I mean, you’ll fly through Stage One Anthropology if you keep talking like that. They’ll love it, just love it.’

This conversation gave me the kind of joy I’d felt, from time to time, when I was at rugby practice and believed I could run forever, my feet scarcely touching the ground. I meant the things I was saying, and could have talked forever. Sometimes, when I talked to girls, I could manage a bit of a flirty edge that made things more interesting. It wasn’t like that with Susana. If anything, I kept getting more and more formal, responding to the perfection of her English with a focus on saying every final consonant. And being so polite! I was glad none of my mates were listening. But, despite having to smile at my own formality, I felt elated, at finding we could talk so easily. More than that, and I suppose this might have been the intellectual snob part of me they mocked at the club, but, here in her own territory, away from the terrors of the University, she was showing me she had ideas and political attitudes that felt familiar and exciting. Was it possible I’d met someone whose beautiful face and lithe body were more than enough to keep me fascinated, but was now discovering we had ideas and thoughts to share? Not everything, not the religious crap, but a whole exciting array of windows I felt opening as we talked.

‘Oh, Sammy, do you really think I’ll manage Anthropology?’

‘You’ll manage it with your eyes closed, you’ll be a star, you’ll...’

Her smiles returned when I said this, but, before I could finish, we heard Auntie Valu calling her from the kitchen. She stood up quickly.

‘I will come back soon. You can watch the TV. Don’t let the kids be cheeky. Is there anything you want?’

What did I want? I wanted her to stay. I wanted to ask her about Cuba and the University of London. I wanted to meet her mother, I think, but most of all, I wanted it to be just Susana and me, just the two of us.

She put her hand on my shoulder and looked at me with an intensity I hadn’t seen before. Then she squeezed my upper arm... my upper arm! I opened my mouth to speak, but she had turned away and was heading back to her other world in the kitchen.

Had I been able to find words, I would have told her I felt daunted by her two languages, by her importance, and by her success. I'd have asked her to turn off the TV. I'd have told her the kids made me feel like an idiot. I'd have asked her where the toilet was.

The door opened and a balding, square-shouldered, middle-aged man strode across the room and stood in front of me. The children, who had returned for another round of giggles, disappeared. Dazed by my thoughts and by the noise level of the TV, I was slow to get to my feet to shake his extended hand and was half sitting, half standing when our hands met. I felt disadvantaged because my grasp on his hand was as much for support as it was for greeting. It was a strong hand, full of working muscles and the roughness of use. It did not grip mine with any power, but I felt its potential to cause damage. We stood looking at each other. The man had the smell and sway of recent beer drinking.

'Hello. I'm Sam...Sammy...Sammy.'

'Sam!'

He stood close to me, feet apart and rocking.

'Sam, you are welcome in my house, everyone very welcome. All the time, very welcome. But I seen you sitting on my chair, watching my TV and I think to myself, I never seen this face in my bloody life. And I say to myself...who the hell are you?'

'Susana,' I replied rapidly. He had grasped my hand again. 'Susana...I drove her here in my car...it was raining.'

'Susana. That bloody fing!'

'Yes, Susana, I came with her and ...'

'Susana is the bloody niece, from my wife. Susana at the bloody University. Do you drink the beer, Sam?'

'Do fish swim? Does the Pope have a balcony?' I answered, wanting to be relaxed, to join the uncle as part of the world of men; to show I knew about beer and bars and drinking; to let him know I should be at the Session, not sitting here in his front room.

'Why you talk about bloody fish? And not the Catholics, my family. You want to have a beer with me? I don't know what you fink'

There was an anger about him that made me afraid. I thought of sailing on rough days and needing to watch the waves so carefully, to survive by steering around and along their strength, to avoid suddenly rounding into them.

‘Yes, I want a beer, please. Yes. And what do I call you?’

‘I’s Feleti, the name, but you say Fred.’

He pulled two large bottles from the sports bag he had been carrying used one to snap the cap off the other and handed it to me. He opened the other bottle with his teeth and looked inquiringly in my direction.

‘Cheers and merry laughter!’ I said, raising the bottle.

‘Not bloody Christmas yet! You want to say ‘Manuia!’ We say ‘Manuia!’

‘Manuia!’

I was proud to have negotiated the word without incident. The beer was comfortingly familiar. I felt wary of my drinking companion, but glad my isolation was over, happy the children had gone. The uncle talked at length of the value of education. He told me to work hard, keep out of trouble, leave girls alone, listen to my elders and go to church. Had my father tried to say these things I would have rejected them with scorn and derision, but I made no attempt to challenge this, the most extended burst of advice I had ever received. I nodded at the uncle, who rewarded this agreement by reaching over and slapping me on the arm.

‘You are the good boy, Sam!’ he repeated, each repetition getting louder, each reward getting harder.

I drank and tried to give my full attention to the now unceasing flow of wisdom, but the TV was loud, my restlessness about being here was growing and my bladder was in serious protest.

Susana came in and looked at both of us.

‘I did not think you would drink beer, Sam.’

Her lips took on an unfamiliar thinness.

‘Oh, we drink, don’t we?’

I raised my bottle to the Uncle.

‘Same as the bloody fish,’ he answered.

‘Please come and eat.’

She turned quickly, and led us to the kitchen.

I looked at the table with its array of dishes. This was going to be more than my fish and chips at the end of a Session - excessively more. I was made to sit at the head of the table with the Uncle. He was issuing a series of instructions to the women, who continued to laden the table with little regard for his orders or my notions of sufficiency.

Having filled the table, the women sat down and looked silently towards the Uncle. He turned to me.

'You say the grace for us, my friend,' he said.

'He's not a church boy!' Susana interjected.

'Don't say these fings to me. Why do you say these bloody fings, Susana? He tol' me he the Catholics!'

He turned back to me. I was studying the plastic table cloth, its red and white checks blurred at the edges, overcome by repeated wiping.

'It's your house. I ... I couldn't presume to be the one to say grace in front of you.'

He frowned and tilted his head at forty-five degrees, looking me up and down.

'You the boss here, not me, mate,' I said and slapped his arm to clarify things.

Susana stared heavenward, not for reasons of faith, and filled the silence with a grace that sounded as if it came from her childhood. The other women joined her, the Uncle frowned more deeply and I wriggled in my chair, my sources of discomfort multiplying. I couldn't have said grace, even if I'd had the wit to make something up. I wished, however, I'd been able to find the courage to tell the scowling figure beside me my reasons for not doing so. This was not my finest hour and I wanted to run from it.

Susana was moving around the table with a jug of orange cordial pouring it into each glass. When she reached me, she poured a slow stream of the coloured liquid from a height that made it tinkle in a way I found painful. I knew she was angry with me, but I hadn't expected she would be so perceptive in her choice of punishment.

Siaosi, the lean youth, staggered in with some steaming baskets, which he thumped onto the bench. Some of the food was familiar, and I filled

myself, as much as I dared, with potato salad, chicken and fish. My avoidance of anything new did not seem to be noticed by anyone. In fact, I was largely ignored. Men, arriving from the pub, only nodded in my direction, before sitting and eating hungrily, deflecting the jibes of the women with exaggerated expressions and loud humour. They were the big men I had seen in the sports photographs, their arrival making the expanded kitchen smaller. I knew I was not part of the evening and I began to fear my presence would begin to annoy people. I began to be afraid, to see the big hands that dismembered chickens and scooped up lumps of the large grey looking vegetable, as being unstoppable forces, should they be turned my way. The beer, the heat of the room and the effort of trying to understand, all combined with my now desperate need for a toilet. I became confused and unable to focus. I thought Susana was talking to me but I was uncertain where she was. I smiled in what I thought was her direction and stood up. Eyes turned towards me and I fled from the room, overwhelmed by my desire to get away, to feel safe and relaxed again, to stand somewhere and pee without thought of stopping. If I had a plan, it was to find the toilet, but I ended up outside, shoeless, running down the driveway towards the familiarity of the Mini's British Racing Green.

I drove towards the Town Centre and its promise of a public toilet. My mind bubbled up accounts I had read of beatings and muggings at places like this, and I tried to persuade myself to stop at the roadside and empty my throbbing bladder in relative safety. I ignored these thoughts, parked and raced to the toilets, desperate and determined.

The toilet was a well-lit, concrete block structure, its walls covered with graffiti, sexual and savage. I leant against the harsh concrete, beside the long, bitter smelling urinal and started to relax. At that moment, a figure burst around the door and with rapid strides placed itself beside me, ignoring all the room available to someone wanting privacy. I froze, not daring to look, but aware that the figure was large and edging closer. I thought of the big hands at the dinner table, I imagined my head being slammed into the wall and my body falling into the puddles on the floor. A large arm rested on my shoulders, heavy and dominating. I shuddered at the thought of what this arm could do.

I'd known, as soon as he'd appeared, that fight wasn't possible, but I thought flight might be an option. As he came closer this option faded.

'Had a good evening, Brother?' asked the figure, deep voiced, speaking from somewhere well above my head.

I risked a look and found myself gazing up at a face framed by dark stubble and topped by a rolled back Balaclava. I saw scars, skin blemishes, teeth not treated since Primary School, deep brown eyes glowing with energy and excitement.

'I've had a good evening,' I said, fighting to control my voice. 'A good evening with ...with my girlfriend's family, here, here in Otara. And what about you, Brother, what about you?'

His hand, high in the air, formed a fist.

'We had a Meeting, Brother, a beautiful meeting,' he said, joy and smiles echoing down his voice. 'And at our Meeting three lost souls came back to Jesus!'

'Hallelujah! Praise the Lord!' I yelled, from the bottom of my heart, my relief knowing no bounds.

Chapter Four**Susana Wakes Up**

Early the next morning I lie in bed listening to the quietness of Auntie's house. Soon, everyone will start to wake up and the household will come alive, get up and shake itself like one of the stray dogs that sleeps by the fence. Shake, scratch, turn around a few times, bare its teeth, make noises and trot off to the events of its day. But, for now, in this dark, before-dawn hour, all is quiet, hunched down and gently breathing.

I pull the covers to my chin, stretch my legs to the end of the bed and try to stop my hands from touching the parts the Pastor's wife said should never be touched. My cousins are still, their faces made young by sleep. In the small light the picture of Jesus is only half visible, despite the halo that sits on His head. Grandmother once told me some of the Missionaries, who came to the Island when she was a girl, had looked like Him. They had long beards and eyes that looked hurt. I'd never seen anyone like that until I started University. There are lots of skinny young men there, with hair and beards and sandals. Jesus would've been cleaner, and not had a pipe, but somehow I can't help staring when I see them.

'Ah Sam, Silly Sammy, the run away,' I whisper.

I'd gone outside and called to him last night, after he had rushed away from the table, but he was already in his car, racing off down the road as if he had something important to do. I'd thrown a stone, only a small one, because he'd made me so embarrassed. But he didn't know. He doesn't know anything, just some books and how to walk around the University. When I got back to the kitchen, they all made jokes, like I knew they would, and called him my boyfriend and asked what my mother would say. Words and jokes and big laughs, all because of stupid Sam - I think I hate him. Why couldn't he put up with being the only Pālagi in the room? How many times have I been the only Samoan? Why couldn't he wait till I could talk with him? Why couldn't he listen, just for a while? Have some patience. And why couldn't he say grace? Yes, I do hate him ... no, not hate, just think he's silly and not my friend after all. And when I next see him, at the stupid lecture about the savages in Tikopia, I'll tell him off and sit somewhere else. No, I'll do what my

mother said and put my head higher in the air and be very proud. I'll do that and look down my nose at him, even if he is taller, and say to myself he is like the cockroach who has to run away and hide without saying goodbye to anyone, not even Auntie and Uncle. And not saying thank you for the food and the damn beer.

*'Sam Sam, stupid little man
Run away as fast as you can!'*

These words sing themselves over and over again, inside my head.

But why do I smile when I say these silly words? Why do I put my own arms around myself and smile and think he's nice? And remember he makes me laugh? And remember in his silly little car, in the rain, it felt like we were in our own little home, our own free place, just for a moment. And the music, like my mother's. And the other songs from the man called Bob someone, who sang like he was talking, but his song has made me go around singing *'... she aches just like a woman and she breaks like a little girl...'* Sam and his ideas and his silly music – I'm gonna give him a big hiding and a telling off when I see him, maybe after the lecture on Tuesday. And if I do see him, before then, wandering around the University pretending not to be looking for anyone, I'll just hide again.

I laugh and push my face into the pillow to keep the noise from the house. I don't want anyone to wake up. Just want time with the secret thoughts that come when I'm by myself and everything was quiet. Time when my mind isn't flying like a circus machine whirling out all the chatter, serious talk, prayers, laughter, anger and difficult ideas that fill my small head, in two languages, for most of the day. Often I feel like I'm someone running fast down a steep hill. It's OK, wonderfully OK, so long as I keep running, as long as I keep picking up speed and don't try to change direction or stop. I love the quiet of the early morning – the quiet when I can pull the blankets up, feel warm and only hear the sound of my own breathing.

But, Sam might ring me up or even come back here. Nah, he didn't ask for the number and he'd be too scared, too, no guts to come back here. And I'm not going to give the number to him, that's for sure, and have him ringing me up and making me ashamed in front of my family. Don't think he wants it anyway. Why should he? He was just kind to me because I was too

dumb and scared to understand the stupid lecture. I am so ashamed to think I cried to him about the work. Should've put my nose high in the air and kept walking. He's kind, even if he's not a church boy. Can't say grace! But he looked at me, at my eyes till I had to turn away, and my blouse, even when I caught him. And he kept touching my arms and hands, like stroking them till he got scared I would growl, or something. It was so embarrassing. But nice. Not like that Viliami, back in the Island. Not like that, not like that.

Soon, Uncle will wake up and sing the Morning Hymn. Always he sings the Hymn and his voice is strong. It fills this room even if the door is closed. He is loud and strong, but his voice always sings, sings properly, not like that Bob. We get up when the Hymn starts and we sing too. But, we hurry to boil the water and put the bread on the table and get the little kids dressed because Uncle will go mad at every one if we haven't done those things. It's not so bad in summer, but in winter it's so dark and cold I cry to myself and decide to write to my mother and ask if I can go home, even if I haven't finished my education. But I don't write. I know she will tell me about how hard it was for her in London, with frost and snow and almost no one from Samoa there at all. She said it sometimes got dark in the afternoon about, maybe, three o'clock and all she could do was go to bed with all her clothes on, even her coat. And here I am, in Auckland, staying in the house of family, so is it so bad, really?'

My poor mother!

I wish I could tell my mother's story to Sam. If I did he'd better be interested or I'll get mad with him. But, what would I tell him? Tell him everything, that's what I want to do. It's so strange - I just find myself wanting to tell him everything, everything I'm thinking, even the things I haven't worked out, things I can't understand, but keep going around my mind. Talk and talk and talk and tell him the whole story about everything, most things anyway.

Tell him about how clever she was at primary school, right from the beginning. So clever that the men in the Education Department once brought the School Inspectors from New Zealand all the way to the school, in our village, so they could meet her. They had to travel across the Strait on one of the little boats we call 'va'a kerosene'. (Sometimes my people are so dumb, Sam. They make a mistake, thinking diesel is the same as kerosene, and

that's bad enough, but then they go and put the mistake into our language for all the world to see – just lucky the world isn't looking!)

Anyway, all the students lined up at Assembly, when the Inspectors came. Lined up on the grass outside, because there wasn't a Hall, like New Zealand schools. My mother was called up to the front to read aloud from some very hard books and do some mental arithmetic.

(Are you good at mental arithmetic, Sam? Most Pālagi kids aren't. Most Pālagi kids don't even know their tables. I just can't believe it. One day, you and me are going to have a mental arithmetic competition and I bet I win!)

She was so good at all the tests they gave her and all the kids were so proud, as if they were the ones standing at the front, answering the questions in a clear voice. And the adults from the village, who had lined up behind the students so they could be part of this Special Event, they were very proud too and said our village was being honoured. Some of the chiefs were angry though, because the Inspectors, and the men from the Department of Education, were too busy to take part in a welcoming ceremony. They had other students to see and a boat to catch, back to the main Island. You're like that, aren't you Sam, you people from New Zealand – no manners.

My mother said it was scary, but she liked it when they took her inside and made her do a written test, where she had to choose the meanings of some words on some long sheets of paper. She said the best part was when one of the Inspectors took her for a walk around the grounds and talked with her about plants and insects and education. He rubbed his fingers across her hair, even though he shouldn't have, and told her she was a very special, clever girl and he was going to make sure she *'...received every possible opportunity to make something of herself.'*

When she was in Form One she was given a Scholarship to go to the Intermediate School in the main town, in Apia. This meant leaving home and staying with her father's mother for two years.

Two years of hard work. School work, trying to still be first when the other kids'd been speaking English all their lives and getting special help from their parents who had education and were employed by the Government in offices with fans on the ceilings and everyone wearing white shirts. She had

tons of work at home, where the old lady made her do the washing in the river while she watched and talked. At night she had to massage her ancient legs and back, listening to old stories, learning the old way of speaking our language and getting hit with the salu when she made mistakes. She learnt to do her homework at school and when her grandmother slept. Sometimes, her father came to see her and, at some holidays, she would go home for a few days until a telegram came from the town saying the old legs needed her and there was a lot of washing. It was halfway through her second year before she started coming first again.

The Inspector and the Director of Education, came to see her in November and told they were pleased that she '*...had grasped her opportunity so capably.*' The Inspector said he had arranged a Scholarship to New Zealand for her Secondary Education. He smiled, said he was very, very, in fact, extremely, pleased with her, and, he ran his hand through her hair again.

My mother cried when they told her and she asked to be allowed to stay with her grandmother. They were cross and told her not to be silly and didn't she realise her country needed all the educated people it could get, especially with all this talk of Independence. Her father told her she must go, must take this chance God had sent and make her family even more proud. Her grandmother cried for many days. She threw away her salu and never hit my mother again.

Most of her family, and several chiefs, made the long journey to Apia to be at the Final Assembly and Prize Giving. Every time she got a prize, they jumped up and danced. When her Top Scholarship was announced, they danced right onto the stage and even the Deputy Principal couldn't stop them. (Later, her father said he wasn't ever going to be stopped by someone with a sweaty shirt, skinny legs, short pants and long socks!).

They all came to the wharf when she boarded the 'S.S.Tofua' for the trip to New Zealand. Everyone came to say goodbye, knowing they would not see her for three years. She hung onto her mother and her grandmother, till the three toots of the final call echoed along the wharf. Two of the older students, going on their second trip, peeled her away from her family and made her walk up the gangplank. They also told her she was a disgrace and

asked her who had given permission for her to use the important name she was known by. My mother said arguing about her name, using words and old stories from her father's mother, had made her strong enough to watch her family getting smaller and smaller on the wharf, and then the town getting smaller, and then the Island disappearing as if it had been swallowed by the sea.

Six girls in one cabin, with all their bags in the middle between the bunks, making it hard to rush out when they felt sick. The smells of steam, diesel and old copra filled the whole boat. She didn't want to eat or talk and the cabin was too hot, too stuffy and smelt too much of sick and sweaty girls for her to sleep. She hated the other five, even though they later became her friends and they would talk, for the rest of their lives, about '...that first trip on that damned boat!'

She had read about Taranaki, of course, and knew a lot about the geography and economic activities in all the provinces of New Zealand – dairy farms and co-operative dairy factories. Geography had been her best subject, along with English Grammar, in which she had shown special ability in learning the rules, especially the really difficult ones about changing Direct Speech into Reported Speech.

(I bet you don't know how to do this, Sam. You think you can speak English, but I bet you don't even know what Reported Speech is?)

None of her learning seemed to help her at St Anne's, the Anglican Boarding School for Young Ladies. She didn't know enough about being the only one who wasn't a Pālagi, or about what young ladies did, or about the food or about being cold. Alone, crying most of the night, she couldn't listen in class. She was a long way from coming first and she didn't care.

They nearly had to send her home; nearly decided she wasn't worth the investment. The Inspector came to see her, but she couldn't focus on his words and stopped trying because he became cross. When he ran his hands through her hair, she remembered the places she had been when he had done this before and started crying again. He said she could have one more term '...to pull her socks up...!' This made her think of the Deputy Principal at the Intermediate School.

She was never able to tell me what made it get better. There was no one thing: just small things, like going on weekend leave to a girl's farm; learning how to play hockey; singing hymns in the chapel that were nearly like the ones at home; being able to study without spending hours on washing and massage (although she would have gone straight back to her grandmother if they would have let her.); realising the teachers she could only glance at, but not speak to, really wanted to help her and make her happy.

When she speaks to me about this time, she still cries.

'I couldn't find myself, Susana. Couldn't do or say anything without thinking, without thinking so much that I couldn't decide what to say. One of the boys was sent to Dunedin, where it is even colder all the time. He told me he hadn't got a jersey, so he went around, every day, in just a shirt. All the teachers and the kids thought he was really tough, but the truth was he was too shy to ask for a jersey. So, he spent the first winter being frozen all the time, except when he was in bed. When he got used to the place, and the people, he learnt to ask for things. In the second winter, he asked for two jerseys, and he wore them all the time, as if he was trying to make up for being frozen. It was like that. We knew it was dumb not to ask, but it was too hard to ask. We just suffered, feeling cold or hungry or lonely and the more we practised the words to say, the harder it was to say them.'

I told my mother it was impossible to think of her not being able to talk, because every one said she was the best speaker from our Island. Some people said she was born with too many words to use in one lifetime. She became very serious when I said that and told me her ambition for me was that I would always be able to speak without thinking, even though she had always told me to think before I spoke. I knew it wasn't good to argue with her when she was feeling sad about her childhood, but I wanted to say it was hard to do all this in two languages and maybe if I just had to learn English it would be easier. Two languages, two languages to be spoken perfectly, idiomatically and without thinking!

For her, 'idiomatic' was a very important word, '*... a word of paramount importance in the scheme of things!*' she would say. It gives me a funny feeling, Sam, when she talks like that: I'm so much better at English

than my aunts and uncles so I just expect to be better than all older people but then my mother comes along and uses words I can't understand.

I have found out about this word 'idiomatic' and I don't think she uses it properly. I think she means talking in a posh, English sort of voice when she says it - the voice of the rich Pālagi girls at her school. Girls who would take her home, on some weekends, to their huge houses. One of the mothers always called her 'dear' and told her she spoke beautiful English, so much better than people who had lived here all their lives. She said she reminded her of Marama Martin, on the radio, and wasn't Maori such a beautiful sounding language when it was spoken properly? They would ask if she was enjoying school. (*'It's such a good school and we're so glad we sent Marjorie there.'*) Marjorie told them she was also the best hockey forward and cricketer and sang solo in the choir, but she wasn't so good at horse riding. They all laughed and smiled and said she could come to their house anytime, anytime at all. And Marjorie's father put his head on one side and said she just had to be a princess in her own country and they laughed again.

They were kind and they gave her the chance to learn about horses and about what to do when there are lots of knives and forks. She would slip into their way of talking; find herself imitating their rhythms and sounds. Whenever, in later life, she heard Pālagi people speaking in 'coconut English', she would forgive them more readily than others did, because of this memory. She always called Marjorie's mother Mrs McEldowney and treated her formally, but they became close and wrote to each other, even after the time at the University of London, which was long after Marjorie herself had left their friendship, married a high country sheep farmer and become secretary of the local branch of the National Party. When my mother went to Mrs McEldowney's funeral she was so surprised to find she was the only one who cried.

'She was the one,' she said to me, 'who taught me to listen to music. Didn't lecture me about it - just exposed me to it.'

My mother would give words like 'exposed' special treatment, making it long and revealing all its syllables.

'Mrs McEldowney used to play her records whenever the men had left the house. I woke up one morning and she was playing what I later found out

was the Sibelius Second Symphony. There had been music playing before but I hadn't listened to it, had let it be something heard but far away, like the surf breaking on the reef. On this morning, it reached me, inside me, in the place where tears and dreams come from, and I felt overwhelmed by it. I asked Mrs McEldowney to explain it to me, to tell me about it, to make me understand better.'

'My dear,' she said, 'I could talk to you about pine trees in vast snow filled places and eagles soaring over them. But I won't. I could tell you about violins and the symphonic structure. But I won't. I'll just say it seems you have, for the first time, fallen in love and I am so glad it is with music. I can promise you it will be a fulfilling, lifelong love that will always grow. I hope the other loves, loves that will surely come into your life, will be the same, but I can't promise they will. Tomorrow morning, as soon as the men have filled their bellies and gone to chase their sheep, I will play you Beethoven, perhaps the Choral Symphony or the Emperor Concerto. And the Borodin String Quartet, with the beautiful Nocturne. Yes. I will enjoy thinking about it.'

They hugged each other, for the first time, and began their long friendship. My mother's mission to teach me to love music had its seeds in this friendship. I love Marjorie's mother for all the kindness I have been told about so often, but I don't thank her for the hours I have had to listen to boring music that I can't imagine anyone loving.

I stretch my arms above my head.

You know Sam, you know – and you better still be listening, my mother then went on to University in Wellington. She'd always say 'Victoria' in a big important sort of a way, that made it sound like a palace in a city, but she would say 'Auckland University' as if she was talking about a shop in a small village. My poor mother!

My dreamy story, told to someone who wasn't there, has to finish because Uncle Fred is starting his morning hymn.

'Thank you God for this Day!'

He sings so beautifully, his voice flowing without effort, like the muscles of a race horse. The house echoes with his song and the command it contains.

'Thank you God for Your help to us!'

Thank you for this chance to do Your work.'

The household comes alive and starts to move, throats clearing and voices joining him.

'Thank you, Jesus, for this new day!'

Clothes on, kettle on, bread on the table, the five year old cousin getting his first smack of the day, everyone yelling at Siaosi, who is still asleep because he stayed up to wash the dishes last night.

'Thank you God for all the love You bring to our lives!'

It is Saturday and the family can go a bit slower. The rest of the week is so busy and Sunday is the busiest of all with Church and preparation of the food for the Big Meal.

Will that Sammy be going to Church on Sunday?' I wonder. 'Will Sammy come to our to'ona'i? Will I ever be able to really tell him my mother's story?

I don't think so!

Chapter Five

Matches

Test

I woke, on the morning of Saturday 29th March 1968, knowing I was in love.

I lay in bed, whispering her name, 'Susana, Susana,'
I built wonderful castles around a lecture, a chat and a squeeze on the arm. I almost forgot about cricket.

Saturday's cricket day and I had to put away my Susana dreams. I felt half dead, and slow. Probably wouldn't be able to bowl for shit. Mind you, they say that anyway.

And my whites?

Where were my whites? Mum refused to wash them and I kept forgetting. A man should have someone to look after his whites. Wonder if Susana would wash my whites? Idiot!

Found them, unwashed. Sponged off the worst of the dirt. They smelled of last week's sweat.

I drove to my home ground, Victoria Park, with its ring of plane trees - you get six runs if the ball hits them. Victoria Park, with the legs of the motorway flyover marching like a stone elephant across its western end.

A kids' game was finishing late on our pitch.

'Come on, you lot!' called Mack.

He strode the boundary, kicking divots of grass. The rest of us clapped every hit, every slow act of fielding. The parent umpires signalled the start of yet another over, stoically ignoring the bellowing Mack.

'What's the problem with your mate?' they asked.

'Mack?' said Murray, our captain, 'Bloody good cricketer, our Mack, very keen. Focussed, you might say.'

Murray won the toss and decided we'd bowl.

'Wouldn't ya wanna bat first on this pitch?' snorted Mack.

Murray came over to me. He was forty and he'd played a few games for Auckland B. He put one hand on my shoulder; the other grasped the new ball, untouched in its white paper wrapping.

'Want you to open the bowling, young Sam. Y'can do it, like you looked great at practice. You'll bowl straight for me, wont ya, Sammy? No rubbish, eh. Y'can let a few rip, if y'like, not too wild, though. Got every faith in you but I'll take y'off straightaway if you turn to shit. So, go for it!'

'OK Skip, Give it my best.'

I unwrapped the ball and gave it a rub.

'That's my boy. But Sammy - ya bloody whites, they pong like the feet of one of those bloody drunks sleeping it off on the park benches. Next week, bit of a wash maybe?'

He helped me set a field, waving players into position with easy authority. I wanted to please him, to get wickets. It was like the first time my father had sent me, on my own, to buy his tobacco. A rich soup of pride had bubbled inside me and I'd felt I would risk anything, even the monsters in the trees beside our driveway, in my desire to be worthy of his trust. The same feelings filled me now, as I waited for the batsman to finish the fussy business of taking guard.

'Susana,' I breathed, and ran in, calm, confident, and unleashed my fastest ball. It sang towards the off stump, pitched, jagged away and was in the gloves of Tom the keeper before the batsman could withdraw his dangling bat. Tom clapped, muffled hands raised. The batsman nodded and practised defensive shots. Mack, from the slips, called:

'Jesus, Sammy m'boy, where did ya dredge that bastard up from?'

'Dunno, Mack, dunno at all.'

But I did know, and I smiled. I got the batsman three balls later. Little bit of outswing, little nick, straight to Mack's drain layer's hands. We embraced each other.

'Great nut, mate, great nut!'

'Great hands, mate, great hands!'

The team gathered, congratulatory and keen. I didn't get another wicket, but every batsman played me with caution, not scoring, giving chances.

'Excellent work, young Sam. Y'asked the question of them with ev'ry bloody ball,' said Murray. 'Have a breather. I'll call ya back later.'

I trotted out to the boundary, hiding my smile, hiding the delicious bubbling inside me. Selwyn, our philosopher, stopped me.

‘So, what’s got into you, young Samuel? What’s pepped you up so lively, I find myself wondering?’

His grin told me he would research the matter further, in the clubhouse, at the end of the day, in front of the others.

‘Susana,’ I whispered to myself, her smiling face hopping around the twigs of my mind.

Mack came on to bowl his dangerous and furious medium pacers. Accurate, skilful bowling that should have achieved better results but, whenever the ball was hit in the air, Mack bellowed instructions which seemed to rob competent fielders of the ability to move.

I gazed around the park and thought of the way Susana had looked at me. As I dwelt on these mysteries, the dreaded cry, ‘Catch the bloody thing’ echoed around me. I looked up, and dived to the spot I could’ve so easily reached, had I been concentrating. The ball romped over the boundary.

‘Wake-bloody-up, for chrissake Sam, ya dopey bloody student bastard!’

Mack’s spittle seemed to fly all the way to where I was standing.

The soup turned cold and heavy. I hung my head and wondered why I played this game. Just because my father worshipped cricket didn’t mean I had to subject myself to this humiliation, did it?

My father had been, I believe, one of New Zealand’s greatest cricket devotees. I had my first glimpse of this devotion when I was four. We’d moved to a small town up North, where he worked as an accountant, doing the books for local farmers and some of the Kerikeri orchardists, including Malcolm Steward. The two of them had been at school together. Malcolm was a big man, who looked awkward indoors. The veins and sinews that twined along his brown arms reminded me of the Chinese gooseberry vines he grew in one corner of his orchard.

‘Could be money in those Chinese gooseberries. They’re a bit furry and ugly, not beautiful, like the orange,’ he’d say, ‘But you never know. Never know what they’re going to want, down there in Auckland ... or America even!’

He was pleased to find someone from his old school living in the North. He gave his books to Dad and often needed to discuss them.

‘How are ya, JG?’ he’d say, ‘Long time since we left the old School in ’36 --- hard to believe.’

‘M.K. Good to see you. Nineteen Thirty Six --- you were some bowler back then.’

‘And Mrs J.G? How’re you doing?’

‘I’m well, thank you, Mr Steward.’

He and Dad would touch on the accounts, then chat about Plunket Shield results and test team selections. When Mum brought in afternoon tea he’d thank her three times, half rise from his chair and hold his cup at an improbable angle. We’d all sigh when he put it on the table. Mum would get up and pop it on the coaster.

Later, she’d machine gun words at Dad.

‘J.G.! Why does that man always call you J.G? And ‘Mrs J.G.’ --- for heavens sake! And why can’t he handle a cup properly? Clumsy! It’s a miracle he doesn’t fall off one of his ladders. I’ve got a good mind to give you tea in the garage, next time he comes around to talk about his accounts. Not that we heard much about them, did we? Just about the M.C.C. and Messrs H. and B. Sutcliffe ... endlessly.’

She was not pleased when Dad and Malcolm formed a cricket team.

‘So you’ll be out each Saturday and come home smelling of sweat, leather and beer. God, I suppose you’ll be expecting cucumber sandwiches and sausage rolls!’

‘Don’t know about cucumber sandwiches but one of your bacon an’ egg pies would go down a treat. M.K. - Malcolm - he reckons you make the best bacon an’ egg pie north of the Brynderwyns.’

‘Does he now? And what about his poor wife, can’t she cook? Probably bored witless hearing about cricket and oranges, poor dear.’

‘Be fair, he talks about the weather too.’

‘That he does, that he indeed does. The weather: *‘Well, Mrs J.G. seems like we’re in for a drop of rain, good for the oranges, not so good for your jolly washing, Mrs J.G’* And then he does that odd laugh. I can’t imagine

why I ever agreed to leave Auckland. There'd be nothing worthwhile here, in this desert, if it wasn't for A.R.D Fairburn and the W.E.A., nothing at all!

Dad made one of his silly faces and Mum started laughing, and pushing against him the way she did when her anger wasn't quite over.

'Here's your pie,' she'd say, every Saturday morning. 'Your pie and your whites. Enjoy your game, you and the chaps.'

'Thank you dear. Sorry. Be home early this week, you'll see. Several of them are thinking of giving me their books...'

'Give M.K. my best wishes,' she'd say, and bang the door shut.

We moved back to Auckland in February 1954.

The team held a farewell function at the R.S.A. Mum had a drink and danced with Dad, but she turned her face away when Malcolm tried to kiss her goodbye.

Malcolm's letter came at Christmas:

Dear J.G. and Mrs J.G,

I hope all is well in your Family. We're doing Fine up here. It's been a Good Year for the Oranges. Not too much interest in the Chinese Gooseberries, as yet, but I'm keeping them going.

The Cricket Team plugs away. We miss your Skills and your Knowledge of the game for those Umpiring decisions. Still, we've done quite well, with a couple of new young Quicks. They're quite sharp, but nothing like that Tyson and Latham that are tearing into those Australians right now.

I'm Writing to remind you that we planned to go to the Test Match together. Starts, as you know, on Friday 25 March at Eden Park. Our first Five Day Test Series. Imagine being there, seeing them, the leaders of the Cricket World; T.W. Graveney; P.B.H. May; M.C. Cowdrey and the skipper, Len Hutton and, of course, the terrible Tyson and Statham. Mind you, our boys, specially that young J.R.Reid and Bert Sutcliffe, they mightn't do too badly. They'll be up against it, but they mightn't do too badly.

So, could I take up your kind Invitation? It'd be for six days, the Sunday being a Rest Day. I hope this is not asking too much.

Our best wishes for the Festive Season,

Yours sincerely

M.K.

Mum let the letter flutter to the table.

‘I didn’t know you’d asked that man to stay here for six days. Didn’t know you were planning time off work to watch a game.’

‘Didn’t really know myself. I mean we talked about it, said how wonderful it would be to go to a test ... a five dayer. But no exact plans.’

‘Well, he has some very exact plans.’

Her finger tapped the letter.

‘Yes, well, that’s when it’s on...’

‘And you want to go, don’t you?’

‘Well, yes, to be honest I do. But ... I’ll write and say it’s not a good time...’

‘No ... he’ll know it’s me stopping you.’

Dad picked Malcolm up from the bus. He carried a leather suitcase and a sack of oranges. He and Mum shook hands, her small hand briefly gripping the ends of his fingers.

‘Nice to see you again, Mrs J.G. Hope my coming is not an imposition, but J.G. and me, we couldn’t miss this match.’

He put down the sack and the oranges rolled out onto the kitchen floor.

Dad took him outside. They smoked their pipes, drank a few beers and talked over the rain interrupted first Test in Dunedin. Talked of Sutcliffe’s 74 and the sterling efforts of Cave, Reid and MacGibbon.

‘But that Tyson,’ said Dad, ‘I just don’t know what they can do about him.’

They came home at the end of the first day, flushed and happy.

Dad grabbed Mum and waltzed around the kitchen.

‘Two hundred we made. Two hundred against England! Could’ve been more, if Reid had stayed. Not that his 73 was too bad...’

‘Had a few, did we? A few to celebrate how well ‘we’ are doing.’

The Saturday was cloudy. They were damp and quiet at the end of the day.

‘Not much play today, dear. Came straight home. We got four of the Englishmen for 148. Pretty good, don’t you think?’

‘Don’t know, but I do know your dinner’s ready.’

Malcolm spent most of the meal explaining, in detail, why it wasn’t too bad.

‘Sunday’s a rest day. Three more days after that? Have I got it right?’ she asked.

They left early on Monday 28 March 1955, hats firmly on their heads, pipes lit and shoulders squared. I thought of them as soldiers. They were back before dinner, hats off, shoulders drooping, silent. Malcolm went to his room and packed his bag.

‘Thank you J.G. Thank you Mrs J.G. I’m so sorry about everything ... so very sorry.’

He and Dad shook hands. Malcolm picked up his bag and strode off to the bus stop.

‘What happened? Whatever happened? Did you two have an argument or something?’ said Mum.

There was a look on my father’s face, like the one he had when Grandma was buried.

‘Twenty six,’ he whispered, his voice trembling. ‘We were all out, in less than three hours, for 26 runs. Twenty six ... the lowest score, the lowest score in test history.’

Mum went to him and began stroking his face. He lowered his head until it rested on her shoulder. As I tiptoed out of the kitchen I heard him making sounds I’d never heard him make before.

I smiled and hugged myself, there in the Victoria Park sunshine, as I recalled my parents’ moment of closeness.

My smiling was shattered by a furious bellow:

‘Catch it! Catch the bloody thing!’

Chapter Six Mates

Sam Cops It From His

‘You’re a let down, Sam, a total bloody let down!’

‘Look, I’m sorry I didn’t make it on Friday. I, I...’

‘Nar, ye’re just another bloody piker. Like there’s never a bloody excuse, but what’s yer excuse, anyway?’

There were five of them: Michael; Ken; Bill; Graham and Laurie. They were old friends, school friends, friends I should’ve been drinking with on Friday night. Five of them in a noisy Monday morning group, attracting attention to their end of the Cafeteria. There’d been trouble at the Pub, pushing and shoving with another lot. Police had taken names. The table buzzed with the reliving of the roles each of them had played.

I hadn’t been there.

‘You see, there’s this girl...’

‘The Anthropology one? The dusky maiden? The Margaret Mead one? Eh, Sam the Wuss? That one we saw you making sheep eyes at and being all scholarly with, eh, ya bullshitter?’

‘She is in my Anthropology class and it was pouring with rain and I drove her home and....’

‘There’s only one question ...’

Ken tipped his chair back as he spoke, arms folded, hands pushing his sleeves over his biceps.

‘An’ it’s this. Does she go off? Does she do it like Margaret Mead said she would?’

‘Oh Christ, I’m not goin’ to talk about it, not goin’ to discuss...and that’s not really what Margaret Mead said...’

‘Margaret Mead, James Mitchener, Hugh Heffner...who gives a shit?’ said Laurie.

‘Just like we thought, ya’ didn’t do nothin’. Ya missed the bloody Session, only time we mighta’ needed ya, all because of some bloody coconut sheila and she wouldn’t let ya! Prob’ly bloody too hung up on church and stuff...’

‘Prob’ly bloody drippy didn’t even bloody try, didn’t ask, just drove her home in the rain, all polite and friendly, all socially sensitive, never min’ about his bloody mates, eh Sam, ya bloody drip.’

This was from Michael. Michael who I’d gone to Kindergarten with; Michael, my cousin who still called my parents ‘Aunt and Uncle’.

I looked at him and my fists clenched. My teeth clamped together, making my lower lip protrude.

‘Look at him!’ yelled Bill. ‘The bloody drip is getting mad, lip trembling mad. We’d better watch out...he might hit us with one of his anthropological weapons...a club; a spear; a machete, or, or, a hula skirt...’

They laughed and I stood looking from face to face, wanting to find a way to get off this roller coaster. Once, we’d got stuck into Michael like this, but he’d just said ‘Piss off, arseholes!’ and drummed his thick fingers on the table. Everyone’s words had dried up and Bill’d said, ‘Yea, well, OK then, Mike, mate, she’ll be right this time, I guess.’

I drummed my fingers on the table, but this only seemed to escalate things. There had to be a joke, a clever response I could use to break them away from their attack, but words had become hard to find. I knew I was smiling, a sick little half smile that tried to say I was part of the joke, that I could take it, that I wasn’t battling anger and tears. I also knew that if it had been someone else who had aroused the group’s wrath, I’d have been into it boots and all, climbing over the others in my efforts to make the most cutting comment, to show the pack I could nip and bite with the best of them. I wanted them to know I regretted not being with them and that I hated not being part of their excited post mortem; hated not being able to polish bits, add things and let the story grow.

‘Guys, I’m sorry, I am...’

I looked at them again and saw eyes lit up, animated mouths full of words they’d hurl as soon as there was a gap. It wasn’t going to stop.

‘Oh fuck it, bugged the bloody lot of you. I’m ...I’m going to the bloody library!’

My words checked them for a moment. They paused for most of my sentence, breath drawn, laughter at the ready, some of it bubbling early, like a line of musketeers who hadn’t been able to wait for the order to fire.

I turned and strode through the Cafeteria, knocking chairs over and trying to ignore the turning heads, trying not to hear the laughter and shouts that followed me. I banged into a table full of strangers. They called me an idiot and told me to bugger off.

In the Library, I spread out my books and arranged my pens in the way I'd seen Susana arrange hers. I clasped my fingers together and looked down. Time slowed and I listened to each of my breaths, trying to get them regular, trying to stop the deep ones that seemed to reach to the bottom of my lungs.

There was a ball inside me, like the drop of mercury the dental nurse sometimes gave us at Primary School. It seemed to reach out and unite itself with all the other hurts that came rushing back at me. Older kids beating me at everything, even the games I'd learned first. Going to sleep to the sound of my parents arguing. Waking up in the depths of the night and realising the argument was still alive. Feeling sick at school before morning play, knowing I wouldn't be able to go home for hours. Coming round the corner in the playground and ending up in the middle of a group of big boys, who didn't hurt me much, but became leading players in a series of scary dreams. Sitting in the bath, when I was eight, after falling off my bike on a gravel road, hoping someone would come and tend my bruises and scratches, but having to get out because nobody did come and the water grew cold.

It all seemed so pointless and I felt like turning my back on everything and everyone. If I had any brains, or guts, I'd just pack up a few things and go to India so I could join the Beatles at the feet of the Maharishi Mahesh Yogi.

My head sunk against my chest and my clenched hands pressed against my stomach. Memories from earlier and earlier in my life paraded before my eyes, including my confusion about the song they'd been singing on my first day at kindergarten. I remembered understanding '*Row, row your boat gently down the stream*', and '*Merrily, merrily*' was okay but '*Life's butter dream*' had seemed very strange. This line had stayed with me all my life and I was mouthing, in appropriately hushed library tones, '*...Life's butter dream, butter dream, butter dream...*' when I felt a hand on my shoulder.

It was Michael.

'Heard you bowled shit hot on Saturday.'

He gave my shoulder a small squeeze and moved to a table at the far end of the library.

My eyes followed him. I had to stop myself from calling out, 'Thank you, thank you, Michael!'

I wanted to reject them, to be above them; to devote myself to my studies; to listen to serious music, even Mahler's Second Symphony; to find new friends; to spend all my time with Susana but I couldn't help thinking of a Friday without a group of mates to drink with. I knew I'd miss slipping into a chair, feeling the confidence of belonging, looking forward to the jokes and the smart arse remarks, looking forward to laughing, not because anything was particularly funny but because the beer was taking hold and being with mates was so easy and comforting. Going for a piss and Bill joining me, saying:

'You're a bloody good mate, Sammy, a bloody good mate, even if y' seem a bit too bloody serious about the books...'

I couldn't let them down ever again and be condemned, for the rest of my life, to pissing on my own.

I read, made a few notes but spent most of the time with my chin resting on my hand, my brain throwing around, with dreamlike random, thoughts about my friends, my family, cricket matches and Susana. People around me were getting up and leaving. My watch told me it was lunchtime, but I was reluctant to leave the haven in the library. I didn't want to meet my friends and I didn't want to meet Susana. The furore in the Cafeteria had diverted me from the worry I'd carried since Friday night about having to explain my rushed departure to her. As the memory of the shouting and tumult of my friends lost its raw edge this worry walked in for its time on centre stage. I was no more capable of talking openly to her now than I had been then. With luck I wouldn't run into her. I knew I'd been foolish to let myself travel down little dream paths in which we had all sorts of adventures together. She'd never come down these paths, never dream these dreams, never see me as anything other than someone kind enough to help her with her work and drive her home. A foolish and amusing someone, a Pālagi boy who didn't go to church. It would be best to place her in the file marked 'Me At My Most Ridiculous.' There she could reside, until she was needed, beside the dream of getting hat tricks; the dream of making a ton at Lord's on my test debut; the

dream of driving an Aston Martin to Wellington; the dream of coming home and finding my mother had changed into a big, generous farmhouse woman who dished out laughter, love and bowls of nutritious soup. Dreams I could bring out at idle times: on bus trips; when fielding on the boundary in a slow game; when sitting a three hour exam but only having forty five minutes of knowledge; when I didn't want to read the books in front of me.

I left the library and walked down to High St to buy a pie, which I took back to my favourite Morton Bay Fig in Albert Park. I sat down and lent against one of its thick rounded roots, that spread across the ground like the bridged fingers of a snooker player, and ate the pie, nibbling around its too hot edges and spilling gravy on my shirt. The sun shone with the gentleness that starts to come in late summer. I gazed at the grass, with its entwined couples, enjoying a lunchtime of public passion. I tried to be beyond envy, but had to close my eyes. My brain slowed, took itself away from the horrors of the morning and let me fall into a doze.

'Hello, Sam.'

Susana was standing in front of me. My eyes, in the shock of opening to bright sunlight, could only see her as a silhouette.

'You know, Sam, if this was a coconut tree you were sleeping under, one of the coconuts would have fallen on your head by now.'

I stood up, brushing bits of pie off my clothing.

'Susana! Will you, will you sit down? It's a safe sort of a tree, as far as I know.'

I gestured towards a root large enough to be a couch. She looked up and down the path and at the now empty grass.

'Jus' for a minute Sam. My next lecture, it is at two o'clock.'

She put her bag down, swept her hand under her long skirt and sat, straight backed and graceful, hands loosely together in her lap. I sat beside her, wordless.

'Well, Sammy?'

Her eyebrows lifted and her hands rose and opened in front of me. My wordlessness lived on.

‘Well, Sammy, I was sad and angry when you ran away from my Auntie’s house and ashamed too. I think you didn’t like being with my people in Otara.’

I looked at her, at her clear eyes and the small frown that drew her dark eyebrows closer to each other. She was puzzled, annoyed and hurt. I knew this, because it was all in her face. I’d never experienced this kind of openness and seeing it seemed like a miracle. The story flashed through my mind of the ancient Greek who, when he was out hunting, had stumbled upon the goddess Diana, naked as she bathed in her secret forest pool. He’d been so mesmerised by her beauty that he was unable to flee, even though he knew staying would result in dire punishment. And it did. He was transformed into a deer and ripped to pieces by his own hounds.

Susana was not naked, or bathing, and I suppose she wasn’t Greek goddess beautiful, but I felt a similar awe when I witnessed the total openness of her expression. In front of it I could not lie, or pretend or evade; could not build the screens I’d been trained, all my life, to build. I couldn’t run but knew punishment was a possibility. I didn’t think she had hounds, but remembered the photos of the large uncles and cousins.

I told her the truth.

Most of it.

I told her about wanting to go to the toilet at her house, about the little kids who’d teased me, about the feeling of being in the wrong world. I told her about the encounter with the muscular Christian in the public toilet. And how her name had floated around my mind when I should’ve been concentrating on the cricket match. I told her of my friends’ anger and rejection.

‘Poor Sammy,’ she said, ‘poor Sammy.’

She kept looking at me, her eyes always there whenever I looked up. Eyes that flicked from amusement to annoyance to bewilderment to a gentle soft glow that carried with it all the soothing I’d wanted when I’d sat, all those years ago, bruised and scratched, in a tepid bath. She took my hand and I told her my life had changed since I’d met her. I told her I thought I might be falling in love with her.

‘Poor Sammy, you poor Sammy.’

I wanted to speak more of the words that were pounding around my head, to yell to the top of the Morton Bay Fig not that I thought I might love her, but that I did love her and desired her with all the plunging, confused strength of water spilling down the tailrace of a hydro dam.

But I'd said enough, played too many cards without bluff or coolness. All I could do was wait for whatever punishment she might meet out. Wait for the dogs to rip what was left of my carcass.

She leant over and kissed me. On the lips. A strange, unrelaxed kiss, given with a closed, tense mouth.

But given.

Given to me.

She stood up, still holding my hands.

'It is hard for me Sammy. I cannot, you know, like those people on the grass. My family would be mad at me to see me now, here in the park with you, kissing you!'

She put her hand over her mouth, in shock, as she spoke of her recklessness.

I stood in front of her and smiled, smiled at the same recklessness, smiled because I believed she felt some of the things I felt. The talk of difficulty and family I dismissed. Everything was possible, because she'd not rejected me, not mocked my outburst, not walked away. She'd kissed me, with her funny little kiss.

'My lecture. It has started already!'

She picked up her bag and began to run towards the University. I caught up with her and tried to take her hand.

'No, Sammy. My lecture.'

We paused at the pedestrian crossing, in front of the Clock Tower. Graham and Laurie were driving past on the other side of the road. Laurie wound down the window and hung out his cupped hand, fingers pointing to the ground. The hand slowly turned through 180 degrees so the fingers faced upwards and the cup became a receptacle. A gesture our group used, our Masonic signal, our sign, developed in boyhood and with us forever. We amused ourselves by speculating what the cup might contain.

I grinned, relieved he hadn't called out, delighted by the acceptance the gesture signalled.

'Tomorrow, Susana. Meet me tomorrow at that tree ...lunch time, at that tree.'

'I can't Sammy ... my lecture.'

She ran down the tiled steps, her shoes setting up a clacking that echoed through the building.

Another afternoon in the library with unread books. I packed up at four and went to my locker. Ken was there, with Bill standing at his shoulder.

'Well, Sam!'

Ken reached over and ruffled my hair as he spoke.

'Well, I wanna know if we're gonna see ya this Friday, at the pub, five o'clock, five p.m., five in the afternoon? Wanna know if yer gonna front up, with lotsa dollars for lotsa jugs, eh Sam my boy.'

Bill's hand made the down turned cup.

'Yeah, I'll be there. I'll be there all right. Yeah.'

I reached both my hands towards them, two upturned cups.

'Christ, they're big ones!' said Ken, and we laughed together.

I didn't see Susana for the rest of the week. I went to the Morton Bay Fig, every lunchtime, but there was no sign of her. She wasn't in the Library, nor at the Wednesday lecture.

Sooner or later I would see her, sooner or later she would be ready to see me and when she did it would be with some knowledge of how I felt. I was sure she'd get over the family stuff. I played little scenes in which the family welcomed me, and, much bigger scenes starring the two of us, far from both our families.

Friday came and I still hadn't seen her. I'd already decided not to go to the lecture but to get to the pub early and set things up. I'd be the host, the generous host. It was almost better not to have seen Susana after I'd made my big declaration. I felt I'd made some kind of commitment to her and I would need to make her my first priority. I wanted to do this, but I didn't want to let the boys down again, didn't want to have anything interfere with my

cricket, didn't want to have to consult anyone. But I also wanted to be with her all the time, every moment of the day. To be with her and learn about her.

The pub was almost empty when I arrived. It had a smoky gloom, cool after the heat of the black pavements. The carpet gave off an old beer smell from deep within its crimson and royal blue swirls. There were large oil paintings of landscapes around the walls, all from a brewery sponsored art competition. They wore heavy gilded frames and sweated under strong overhead lights that gave them a starker reality than their creators intended. Dank bush shone and pastoral scenes glittered.

'Six jugs, please,' I said to Kevin the barman, trying to appear nonchalant about this, my biggest pub purchase ever.

'Doan' want you young buggers causing no more bloody trouble again this bloody week, ya'unnerstan?' he said, the roll-your-own bouncing in the corner of his mouth as he spoke. He was filling two jugs simultaneously; chrome taps thrust halfway down each one. A sheriff totting two six shooters, bored, but dangerous.

'Yeah, she'll be right Kevin. Wasn't here myself last week but heard about it. Boys'll be OK this time.'

'Yeah...whatever ... an' that'll be nine dollars fifty.'

'Give ya self a five with the fifty cents, Kev.'

'Yeah, whatever, ta.'

I made three trips to the table with the jugs, donating a few slurps to the ever-thirsty swirls of the carpet.

I sat, surrounded by my jugs, listening to Kev's radio call the afternoon races from Paeroa, drinking slowly and not enjoying it. The taste of the beer, so easy to ignore in the rapid swill with others, took on a furry and sweet quality, like the air that rises from a freshly turned compost heap. It made me burp and want to clean my teeth. Inevitably, the need to piss came back to haunt me, but I didn't dare leave the jugs sitting, apparently abandoned, on the table. It seemed I was condemned to another Friday night of sweaty palms and throbbing bladder.

It was a long hour before anyone came.

'So where've you buggers been, then?'

My inquiry faded under Ken's stern look. They all filled their glasses, drank deeply, and settled in their chairs.

'Bloody piss ya bought tastes bloody horrible, young Sam, but I guess we'll have to bloody drink it.'

Michael reached for one of the jugs as he spoke, sighing as if he was performing a duty.

I smiled.

I was back in.

The evening went on. There weren't any problems, just lots of laughs, lots of shouting and a bit of singing. The mantle of friendship enfolded us all. I leaned back in my chair and looked at them. I was nodding and smiling and deeply unhappy.

I got up and walked out the door.

I went straight to a phone box and rang the number I'd copied from Susana's phone.

'Yes, I say hello to you,' said her uncle's voice.

'Susana, can I speak to Susana?'

'Who's you ringing to my house?'

'I'm from the University ...'

'She go to the choir at the church. You the teacher or you the Sam fella came here on the las' week?'

'I'm from the University...'

'I fink I sniff a mouse, I fink you that bloody Sam...'

I put the phone down and walked off into the night, more or less in the direction of my car, softly singing to myself:

*'Row row your boat
Gently down the stream
Merrily, merrily
Life's butter dream.'*

Chapter Seven**Sam At Home**

I found my car, got in, slid so far forward in the seat my backside nearly slipped onto the floor and made little engine noises, my thumb under my chin and my forefinger strumming on my lower lip. After a few minutes I flicked on the radio and hoped whatever they were playing would suit my mood. Sergeant Pepper and a Lonely Hearts' Club with just one member, one solitary member? If I was at home I would put Miles Davis' *'Kind of Blue'* on the turntable and hope everyone was shopping, or gardening, so I could play it as loudly as I wanted. I'd grown to love its mix of rhythm and melancholy. Most people I played it to pretended they liked it and then started talking instead of listening, which would piss me off. If I protested about this they called me a pretentious musical snob, which may have been true. I'd laughed when Michael had initially responded with:

'This is bullshit, mate, atonal bloody bullshit – give me some Dylan, or even Cliff bloody Richard, for god sake!'

Mind you, the next time he'd been around, he'd said:

'Let's try some of the weird trumpeter guy. He's been in my head since you played it...bloody thing.'

We'd play it often and grin at each other when favourite passages rattled out across the living room's usual hush. These were the best times, knowing someone else was getting off on my special music. And, of course, this thought led me to thoughts about listening to music with Susana. She'd surprised me when she mentioned her mother teaching her about Beethoven and Rachmaninoff, so maybe we would listen together to something more than Bill Sevisi and his Friendly Islanders. I'd heard them play at the Trades Hall and had found it was music that made me smile, but what I wanted now, was to be lying somewhere warm with Susana, listening to music with the majesty and angst of Sibelius, something that would make us both cry and cling to each other.

I shook my head. The Beatles had finished and they had dug up poor old Connie Francis mourning over her souvenirs. I started the car, adding some of my own weary 'Brrm, brrm' noises to the little engine's best efforts

and drove off, through the rain, towards my parents' house in Kohimarama, in the heart of the oh so comfortable Eastern Suburbs.

The sweeping corners of Waterfront Drive suited Connie and me as we sang together:

*'I count them all apart
And as the tear drops start
I find a broken heart
Among my souvenirs.'*

I needed to soak myself in the emotion she gave to each souvenir, even if I had no souvenirs of my thing with Susana – no dead roses, no lockets of hair, no written words, no photographs. I fantasised about singing to Susana and her realising I was a deep, caring, talented person and releasing her wonderful flow of tears and telling me she was sorry.

Sorry?

Well, sorry for not being there when I rang, sorry for it all being so bloody difficult, sorry for getting under my skin more deeply than Miles Davis, sorry for not being here with me now, singing together and grinning as we hit the big notes. Here, surging around these windswept seaside corners on our way home to my bed.

Connie lapsed into sad silence and was replaced by Tammy Wynette advising girls to *'Stand By Your Man'*. Would they be singing that at Susana's choir practice I asked myself, as the Mini eased its way up the scrunchy red chip driveway to my parents' house?

It is a lovely house, truly lovely. I know this because everyone who comes here says so.

They'd then go on about details of the garden (*'...you'd never have a garden like this if you were right beside the sea...'*); or mother's china collection or the imported appliances in the kitchen (*'...oh, so that's what a dishwasher looks like!'*)

My mother would look as if she was enjoying this talk, quietly smiling, not batting away the compliments, just gently turning them behind the wicket, and using her Marks and Spencer secateurs, cut a few of the best roses for

the grateful guests. But after they'd gone, she'd dust her Royal Doulton figurines, yet again, and say over her shoulder, to my father:

'It's lovely to hear them say these things, but I wonder if any of them truly know the effort it has taken to get things to this level. It doesn't just happen, it certainly doesn't just happen...'

The thought made her need to sit, her back held straight, on the lavender and primrose flora of an armchair and wait for him to bring her a cup of tea and one of her pills.

I parked the Mini in the carport beside the garage that housed my father's Humber Supersnipe – a car he kept saying symbolised British quality. I walked to the steps. They swept, with wide, curved, precision, up to the front door. The door, and its sidelights, were glass, expensively etched in an English woodland scene. My mother had covered them with lacy curtains, partly to restrict light and enhance privacy, but mainly to stop people tracing their fingers over the patterns. Had I rung the doorbell, it would have chimed deep within the house in a way that was both as clear and discretely distant as the voice of a butler wearing white gloves.

I opened the door and was again enveloped in the sensations that would forever remind me of this house: the smell of cleanliness and the soft weight of quietness – subtle forces that compelled me to take my shoes off, wash my hands, enunciate all my consonants, and talk softly. The grandfather clock in the hallway, emasculated of its chimes, as it was each evening after dinner, ticked with a defiant loudness, and told me it wasn't quite 11pm. My parents would have retired to their end of the house long ago, reading, listening to music and, as far as I knew, doing precious little else. It was impossible to imagine them having a sex life. I seldom saw them having any physical contact. Any kisses or hugs seemed to involve less touching and energy than the vigorous handshakes my father would bestow on any adult males visiting the house. Michael had come around to pick up some notes from me last week. He'd smiled through the handshake and looked Dad in the eye, but later complained to me:

'Geez, Uncle John kinda uses the handshake as a form of attack, know what I mean? You have to get prepared for it, bit like putting down a scrum: get organised, brace yourself, contact ...nice to see you Uncle John.'

We laughed, but the laughter somehow fell and died in the depths of the white shagpile carpet, so we'd gone outside, probably with a subconscious fear that, if we became too noisy, we would suffer the clock's after dinner fate.

I went to my room, closed the door and gazed at the garden outside the window, the outlines of its orderliness still perceptible in the dark. I knew that at Susana's house there would be people and noise and laughter and no one would have this lonely feeling that simultaneously made me want to cry and shout obscenities at the top of my voice.

The next morning I sat in the alcove in the corner of the kitchen and had breakfast with my parents. Dad read the Herald, as he ate making comments about cricket results and share market movements, neither of which met with his approval. He didn't seem to expect, or welcome replies and left for the office as soon as he had finished his eggs. A quick wipe of the serviette over his lips, then an equally quick wipe of his lips over his wife's cheek, a mumbled 'good luck' for my cricket match and he was gone. I sat, looking over the remains of the poached eggs and toast and the neatly folded Herald.

'Why does he work every Saturday?' I asked. I was bowling better than I ever had, and Murray gave me the new ball at most games, but Dad was never there. Dad, the cricket nut, who'd spent hours on my bowling action from the time I was three, hadn't come to watch me once over the past five years. Not once.

My question opened some floodgate in my mother and she talked, the alcove becoming a private, intimate place, and we had the longest conversation we'd ever had. Not just the longest, but the first conversation in which I felt like an adult.

'Why does he work every Saturday? Heaven knows we don't need the money, but he just seems to...'

She saw my look of astonishment and knew I was thinking of endless times I'd heard her talk of the things she needed and the lack of money to buy them.

'I know,' she said, looking up quickly from the table, then looking down at the small pile of toast crumbs her right hand was sweeping across

the white of the linen tablecloth into her cupped left hand 'I know...I know I've always asked ...demanded ...'

My astonishment grew. Was she about to make some kind of admission? Was she seeing herself as I saw her?

'But it's all for you, you know that, don't you? All so you can have the best, the very best life can offer ...the school and its fees, this house...everything, everything...'

'I never needed the Royal Doulton.'

I said these words without thinking and braced myself for the response.

'The Royal Doulton ...no, I don't suppose you needed it, but don't you like having it, just a bit?'

There was the suggestion of a tear at the corner of her eye. Unlike the angry tears that had been an almost daily part of our lives, this one seemed to have formed of its own free will. I felt tense and uncertain. Susana had given me a new awareness of tears and the glorious honesty they could represent. I'd been brought up believing tears, especially in a man, were diminishing, something you were 'reduced to'. I wanted to change that, to elevate tears to a place of honour. Real tears, that is, real tears, like the one that was trying to escape from my mother's right eye.

She continued to make the brushing movements long after the last of the crumbs had been removed from the tablecloth. I refused to believe I was the snob people sometimes accused me of being, but I have to acknowledge there was a rightness, a comfort about my mother's table cloths. Sometimes when we were out and the table was covered with those woven place mats that have become so popular, or horror of horrors, something plastic in a red gingham pattern, I would see a silent glance, dripping with judgement, pass between my parents. It angered me when I saw them do this – it angered me more deeply to realise I knew exactly what they meant and had to make a conscious effort to stop my initial instinct to feel the same way. It takes constant vigilance to live in the Eastern Suburbs and not betray one's newfound socialism. I remembered noticing the faded tablecloth the night I'd sat down for half a meal at Susana's auntie's house.

'Your father, your father. He used to be cricket mad, like you, when we were up North. Always tearing off to play some wretched game, having friends around for beers, making me laugh when I complained, having that dreadful Malcolm to stay every time there was a test match in Auckland.'

'Malcolm, yes Malcolm,' I said, and gave one of those quiet laughs that didn't involve opening my mouth.

The tear ran free and was followed by others.

'Do you think I've destroyed his spirit?'

'Destroyed his spirit?' No, Mother, I thought, don't try and bowl me with a googly like that one.

'Nah, he's OK, just busy. He never wanted the firm to grow so big...and it might be me refusing to become an accountant. He's never thought English and Anthropology were much chop, has he?'

'Well, no dear, he hoped ...we both hope, that one day you'll ...'

I saw her resolve returning. I wanted her to go back to the tears, not revisit old arguments.

'Anthropology! Heck, without Anthropology I wouldn't have met Susana!'

What possessed me to let that little secret slip?

'Susana? Susana ...a girl? Susana...do we know her?'

'She's just a fellow student; interesting, clever ...you don't know her.'

'Should we? You're trying to be casual, Sam, which probably means this might be serious.'

'Serious? Heavens no, not serious. Just someone I've enjoyed talking with, perhaps helping a bit.'

'Helping? Does she have difficulties, specific difficulties?'

'No, no ...she's very clever, but she's from overseas and...'

'Overseas! You're not doing anything ... ill considered?'

The tears had gone and her hand stopped brushing the table.

'Look, Mum, my game...I need to get my gear and go...'

Yes, I desperately needed to go before I blurted out anything else. I knew I'd been bloody stupid to tell her this much.

'I have to go.'

I stood up and looked down at her. Her Eastern Bays demeanour had deserted her and she had become forlorn again. I put my hand over hers and tried to think of something to say, but we had no history of these sorts of somethings.

‘I’m glad we talked, Mum, glad we had a bit of a chat.’

I grabbed my cricket bag, thanked her for bringing my whites in from the line and headed for the door. When I got there, I felt like I hadn’t done enough, hadn’t said enough so I went back to the kitchen and helped her take the breakfast dishes to the bench.

‘This girl,’ she said. ‘Do bring her to dinner sometime, if you like. Your father and I would be interested in ... would love to meet her.’

The idiot in me took control.

‘Yes,’ I said, ‘yes, of course, yes ...I’ll ask her.’

Chapter Eight

Home

Susana At

I burst into the kitchen after choir practice, laughing and playing with some of the harmonies we'd practised, my fingers fluttering upwards as I tried to get the high notes. Auntie Valu was at the table, cup of tea in front of her, elbows planted and thumbs supporting her chin.

'Sit here Susana. Sit here and we talk.'

Her voice told me I had to clear my mind of everything and let her words become the most important things in the world. My singing died.

'Sefulu, she rang me up on the telephone. She has to come to New Zealand very soon. She rang me up.'

I clapped my hands. It had only been a few months since Sefulu had come to Auckland to attend a conference.

'So, where's her meeting? How long will she be here?'

'No, there's no meetings, no meetings, this time. Sorry. She's sick. She's got this lump and...sorry...she needs tests and things like that.'

'Sefulu? My mother is never sick. She never has tests. Not in my whole life was she ever sick...ever. All the times I have been living here at your house with you, and Uncle Feleti, she was never sick, never. She would ring up because I had the flu, because the stupid teachers made me stand in the rain, but I never had to ring her, never...'

'They think it is the cancer. How do you call it, Susana? The breast cancer?'

She cupped her hands under her breast, as she said this, and lifted it as if she was presenting it to me.

'I talk with the big important doctor when he was walking along the corridor. The nurses and the young doctors, they told me to go away, because they could see my cleaner's uniform and they're always in a hurry, but the big doctor told me to come to his office in the afternoon and he talked to me for nearly ten minutes. He's a good man, that doctor. A church man, I think.'

'What did he say? Will he help? Will he?'

'He said we need the biop...something like that.'

‘Biopsy – that’s when they take a little piece from someone’s flesh so they can test it. Look at it with their microscope to see if they can find bad cells. That’s what they do with ...cancer. Oh, I can’t believe I can say that word!’

‘He said he will tell the doctors in Samoa to do this biops thing and send it to him. He will do some tests and say if Sefulu needs to come to New Zealand for ... for the big operation...we must pray so much for her and get money so we can pay for everything the hospital asks to save my sister’s life.’

I looked at the table and saw the marks left behind when Siaosi had wiped it down too quickly. Greasy marks that made my fingers slide around.

‘Siaosi! Siaosi, come and do your job properly...come now!’

‘That lazy thing,’ said Valu, ‘he’s gone. Sleeping. Or TV or something. No wonder he gets the smacks, no wonder.’

I looked up at Valu, but was unable to speak, unable to tell her about the picture in my mind. If I could have spoken, I would have said I knew Sefulu was going to die. Knew, from the moment Valu had started talking, knew in my heart and my mind, my mother was not going to live. The thought was like the white owl I’d seen in the bush at home, gliding silently to a branch and just sitting there, watching me with its huge eyes. I tried to shoo this new, more scary owl away, but it stayed, just like the one in the bush, watching, watching, knowing it was too strong for me.

‘Will she die? Will my mother die?’

‘No, no. The Big Doctor will save her, we will save her. Jesus will not take her yet. He loves you and won’t take your mother, not for many years. So now we must pray and ask for God’s help for her.’

We said prayers, some soft, some loud, for a long time. I tried not to close my eyes when I prayed, because every time I did, I saw the owl.

It was after midnight when we went to bed. I thought I wouldn’t be able to stop thinking and sobbing, but I must have gone to sleep quickly, because I dreamed dreams full of green cars, the University of London and the steps to the lower lecture theatre. The owl wasn’t always visible in these scenes. He was hidden at the side and I only saw him every now and then. He was watching everything.

In the morning, as everyone started to get up, my talk with Auntie came flooding back.

‘No, no. Oh no. Don’t let it happen. Don’t.’

I started to pray again, but was stopped by big noises from the room where Siaosi had gone to sleep. Uncle Feleti was giving him a hiding for the dirty table.

‘Good job,’ I said and made myself get out of bed.

In the kitchen, Siaosi was moving around quickly, cutting bread for the little ones, heating water and wiping the table whenever he was close to it. He kept his head down, but I could see his top lip was swollen. I knew I couldn’t stay here, not today.

Valu was at the table, with a new cup of tea. My little cousin Tasi, was standing in front of her, trying not to wriggle as her hair was brushed and plaited.

‘Auntie? I have to read some books for my essay and I want to go to the library at the University for the whole day, if that’s OK?’

I didn’t say I hoped to find Sam at the University, so I could tell him about everything, even the white owl with its horrible eyes. That’s if he’s not playing his silly cricket.

‘You are the good girl,’ said Valu and told Feleti he had to drive me to University.

‘Thank you Auntie...and ...’

Last night’s talk was still heavy in the air, a large uninvited guest at the table stopping our laughter..

‘I want her to come now, want her to be here and have the tests and get it all finished, now, right now. I don’t want those dumb doctors just taking their time and us having to wait, Sefulu having to wait, while this thing keeps, keeps growing inside her and...’

Auntie Valu hugged me for a long time and we both found some more tears.

I didn’t tell her about the owl.

I didn’t tell her that I was praying it would rain.

Chapter Nine

Rain

Beach in the

‘Bugger this bloody rain! It’s enough to make a bloody man go round the bloody twist! Shit, shit, and more bloody shit!’ muttered Mack, as he looked again out the window of the clubhouse. He dug his thick thumbnail into the crumbling window frame as he spoke.

‘Christ, Mack!’ said Murray, ‘This bloody outhouse we call clubrooms is going to fall down soon enough, without you hacking bits off it!’

‘Fuck off, will ya Murray and leave me in peace so I can enjoy watching this bloody rain. Jesus, a man slaves his bloody guts out all week in the hot bloody sunshine then as soon as a he wants to play a little bit of bloody cricket, it bloody rains.’

‘Y’know, Mack,’ said Murray, who, like a batsman facing a short rising ball, had jerked back and up onto his toes when Mack’d flung this little tirade at him. ‘Y’know, I was reading in the Herald, the other day, about a young joker who gatecrashed a school dance and let fly with a bit of language. Ended up in court, fined fifty bucks and the Magistrate said ‘... for two pins I’d put you away for three months for using words like that in mixed company, and at a school dance, of all places.’ Shit, if he heard you, he’d put you away for bloody years and years...’

‘Yer,’ replied Mack, ‘ Well, this feels like mixed company playing with you bloody poofers and I might as well go to a fucking school dance as hang around here watching the rain drip through the roof of this stinking dump.’

He was right about the malodorous part. The clubrooms had been one of the first kindergartens in Auckland and still had ‘Logan Campbell Free

Kindergarten', in raised letters, across the front wall. We reckoned we'd heard all the smart remarks possible about this, but they still kept coming, from every visiting team. The background smell was a combination of sweat, beer, old leather, a bit of misplaced urine and a heaviness in the atmosphere that suggested blocked drains, adventurous rodents and windows no one bothered to open.

'Might stop?' I suggested.

'Yeah,' said Mack, adding a bit of spit to the dust on the floor. ' Might stop...and you bloody communist students might stop slagging off that poor old Lyndon Bloody Johnston and his efforts to stem the tide of those bloody Chinese that want to come and turn this cricket field of ours into a bloody market garden.'

Murray looked at me and gave me a small shake of his head. But I already knew this wasn't the moment to have Mack on. He and I'd had a bit of a chat last week, when he'd decided my bowling'd improved enough to make it worth speaking to me. Vietnam came up, and he'd listened to my views without comment, but later in the evening, after he'd had a few more beers, he'd held his fist under my chin and said:

'But what about my bloody mates who were with me in Korea, have you thought about them, Sam, have ya bloody thought about them?'

He emphasized each key word by pushing his fist against the underside of my chin. Not punching, just a bit of a push. I kept looking him in the eye and tried to be casual.

'It's different, Vietnam,' I said, 'totally bloody different...'

'Ya reckon?'

He signed off this last comment with a stronger push and turned away.

'He'd be one of the last of the great political thinkers, don't ya reckon,' I said to Sel, once Mack was safely on the far side of the room, voicing his opinion about the sexual orientation of several members of the current All Black team. 'One of the last truly open-minded, clear-thinking gentlemen of this world.'

I almost managed to keep my voice under control as I spoke. Sel reached over and patted me on the leg.

‘Yep, you’d just about be right there, young Sam, just about spot on.’

The opposing captain conceded that the match would have to be abandoned. The rain looked as if it might stop, but the pitch, and the run ups, were saturated and would take days to dry.

‘Bloody hell,’ he said to Murray, making his voice carry across the room. ‘Bloody hell – the day we play bloody Grafton, the one day we can guarantee a bloody win and a few desperately needed points, it bloody rains and we end up in their shithouse clubrooms with nothing to do apart from drink their bloody beer. That is, if they can get themselves organised enough to open this unhealthy looking thing they call a bar.’

‘Always a pleasure, Bill, havin’ you here, always a pleasure,’ smiled Murray, shaking his hand. ‘Always a pleasure takin’ points off you even if it’s only a miserable one for a draw, not the two we know we can pick up any time you lot get yourselves to wobble yer incompetent way onto the field!’

They laughed.

The bar opened, once Mack had fetched the bolt cutters from his truck, cursing the idiot on the committee who had fitted a padlock to the fridge.

‘I’ll buy ya a jar or two,’ said Sel.

‘Nah,’ I said. ‘Thanks, but nah, not this time. Like I’ve got this big essay to finish...Anthropology...an’ I’d better grab this time...you know?’

‘Oh, yes, I do know, Sammy m’ boy. I do know that most guys who talk of going to the library on a Saturday have an ulterior motive and not a high minded one at that. It’s my guess you’ve hatched a little plan to get into the sweet little knickers of the young lady who caused you to be so bloody unfocussed at last week’s match, and somehow going to the library might aid that sordid little plan, whadda ya reckon?’

‘Na, Sel, I’ve got this essay and...’

I felt myself starting to blush and wondering how he’d guessed I’d let thoughts of Susana float through my mind, from the moment I realised cricket might be off.

‘Na, Sel, I don’t even know if she’ll be there,’ I blurted out and blushed some more.

He put his arm around my shoulders.

‘But she might be, eh Sam, and ‘might be’ is enough to get you dreaming. So you’d better hop to it, doncha think? There’s worse things a man can do with a Saturday that’s too bloody wet for a bit of cricket. So I wish you luck but you have to know I expect a full and detailed report next week...full an’ detailed.’

He slapped me on the back and propelled me towards the door with a laugh that was a mixture of the one he used when he heard a dirty joke and the one he used to help players realise some on field catastrophe wasn’t all that important in the whole scheme of things.

I started the Mini, feeling excited and foolish. I had no reason at all to expect to find Susana at the library and yet I felt sure I would. So sure that I could see us together, smiling, laughing, talking and touching. I so much wanted to run my hands over her skin, to explore the smoothness that had made my fingers tingle and my mind race at the memory of every small touch we had already experienced. It’s funny, but I can remember, in detail, almost every one of the overs I’ve bowled: the great balls; the wicket taking balls; the ones that should’ve taken wickets and the crap that should never have been bowled. It was like that with touching Susana – every contact was a photo in my mind, a movie played over and over again.

Princes St was almost empty, which made parking a luxurious possibility instead of the daily affront that faced those of us who’d come to see taking a car to University as a basic human right.

I jogged through the rain and up the wide front steps beneath the ornate clock tower. The smell of wet raincoats and damp concrete hit me as I crossed the mosaic on the foyer floor, its grand pattern overlaid with smears of mud and undermined by missing tiles. An older student was shaking off his oilskin parka by the row of hooks outside the library.

‘A bloody cowshed,’ he said, more or less to me. ‘A bloody cowshed, that’s what this place feels like ev’ry time it bloody rains.’

He grabbed some philosophy textbooks from his bag and trudged into the library, walking as if he was wearing gumboots. As he went through the turnstile that channelled the progress of every incoming person, I heard him mutter:

‘Bloody cow shed with a bloody cattle race, that’s all it is...’

I was impressed, not just by what he had said but by the fact that he just said it, without the tentativeness that made me finish my most definite statements with ‘...don’t ya reckon?’ or ‘....whaddya think?’ I spread my books out on the dark surface of a battered library table, my mind so full of making loud, unequivocal statements, that I’d started reading before a small coughing noise made me look up. There, facing me, across the other side of the wide table, with her books in an orderly pile, was Susana.

She smiled, as only she could: I smiled my version of the same smile and stared at her. We both stood up without a word, and walked out of the library. When we were through the door and outside, standing on the gap toothed tiling in the foyer, I realised we were holding hands. We looked at each other, then looked away. I didn’t know what to say and she looked as if she didn’t need to say anything.

‘A bloody cow shed!’ I finally blurted out. ‘It’s like a bloody cow shed in here, when it rains, doncha reckon?’

‘Don’t use swear words, Sammy, and I have never been in a cow shed so I don’t know what I ‘reckon’.’

She was growling at me again, but moved closer as she did so. Our hands were no longer joined in the space our arms had made between us but were pressed against her side. Her face was close to mine and I could smell coconut oil in her hair.

‘Susana,’ I said ‘I knew I would find you here today, I just knew, I...’

I found words again and knew I wanted to talk and talk but felt myself at a kind of crossroads. If I went one way I knew I would talk smart, clever joking talk that would keep me safe – acting the clown, in the hope of not making a fool of myself. And we would have fun, if I talked like this, and I wouldn’t scare her away. Or scare myself away. Perhaps we could go to the pictures? Julie Christie was starring in *‘Far From the Madding Crowd’* at the Plaza at two o’clock. It could work well, a bit of stylish, romantic drama, her and me in a darkened theatre sitting beside each other. I’d been in love with Julie Christie since seeing *‘Dr Zhivago’*, so if all else failed, gazing at her for a few hours would be some compensation. The other path involved just telling her the truth, as I’d tried to do under the Morton Bay Fig. I looked back at that outburst with a sense of disbelief – had I really said those things, spoken of

love and not had her laugh at me? I'd got away with it then, but could I risk something like that again? It was like the slide I'd climbed at a park when I was very young. Climbing to the top had been comfortable enough, with a handrail to grasp and my eyes only focussed on the next step but, at the top, I could see how high I was and trembled at the prospect of the out of control downward rush that awaited me. Or would have awaited me, if I hadn't labouriously backed down the steps, to the hooting derision of the kids waiting for their turns.

'Susana,' I said, looking around the foyer. 'Susana, I...'

'Your car,' she said, 'is your funny little green car here?'

'Yes, but it's not funny and the colour is British Racing Green and...'

'Take me for a drive, Sammy, take me somewhere where we can stop and look at the sea. Please, Sammy.'

She pressed close to me and I thought, for a moment, she was going to put her head on my shoulder. Without looking at her, I knew she was crying.

We ran, to my car, as fast as her ankle length skirt would allow. We ran wordless, but hand in hand, without her seeming to care who might see us. I fumbled with the key and it seemed to take forever before we were both sitting in the humid interior of the Mini, breathless and wet. I leaned over and kissed her mouth, a long, unhesitating kiss that found her lips, no longer tense and unyielding, but soft, endlessly soft, as I pressed harder against them. My hand was running over her shoulder and arms, across her breasts and against her stomach. In the depths of the kiss I felt no self consciousness about what I was doing, no sense of needing to think, no fear I was going to upset her or do something wrong. I felt powerful and certain, and in that certainty, I knew I would speak the truth to her, that I would let go and see where this slide took me.

We broke away from each other, not because of any thoughts or words, but because, although I wasn't certain what was going to happen next, it was clearly going to be limited by the anatomical restraints imposed by the interior of the Mini. I flopped back into my seat. She turned and gazed at the window, breathing rapidly, her fingers tracing patterns on the condensation... I grabbed this moment to furtively alter the position of my dick, which was threatening to snap itself in half, inside my jeans.

‘Can you drive to the sea, please, Sam,’ she said, without looking at me. ‘Please.’

Silent, apart from the sloshing of the windscreen wipers, we drove along Customs Street towards Fanshawe Street and the approaches to the Harbour Bridge. As we passed Victoria Park I glanced at the water pooling on the covers of Number One wicket. I noted that the afternoon had become gloomy enough for the lights of the clubhouse, on the far side of the park, to be a soft glowing orange. I knew if Mack had shut up, or gone home, the clubrooms would have become a cosy place, resounding with laughter and conversation – guys in groups, talking loudly over the top of each other, airing views and scoring points; guys in pairs having a quiet chat, commiserating with each other about catastrophes on the field, or at home, or at work. There would be an ebb and flow of support and insult; confidentiality and public accusation; quiet sincerity and raucous bravado, all bound together with an easy acceptance and, despite the name-calling, an absence of judgement. You had to be pretty evil to be chucked out and guys survived, for years, being obnoxious, neglecting their families, making questionable deals, dropping catches and failing to pay their fees. The only unforgivables were cowardice, disloyalty and excessive feelings of superiority.

‘That’s my club, over there, the black building with the lights. My cricket club.’

‘Do you want to be there, Sammy? Do you want to be with your friends? Drinking beer? Because you can take me back to the library....’

‘No, no...I want to be with you.’

If we hadn’t been on the Harbour Bridge approaches I would have stopped the car, so I could have looked at her and made sure she believed this was true. And kissed her again and...

‘Susana, I just want to be with you, OK? Just with you.’

She reached over and let her hand massage my left shoulder. At first, to show her how strong I was, I tensed the muscles, which was hard to do without changing my facial expression. Her fingers, strong and soothing, compelled relaxation and, again, I wondered why I still pretended when I was with this person.

Along the bumpy concrete road that led to Devonport, the Mini's tight suspension gallumped at each joint as if it was on train tracks. Soon we turned down a small cul-de-sac to Cheltenham Beach and parked, under yet another Morton Bay fig. No one else would come on a day like this and I believed we would be undisturbed by the locals, tucked away behind the lacy curtains of their villas. The beach was ours.

I turned to kiss her again, with the same confidence I had felt when we were in Princes St, but she pushed me away.

'No, Sammy, no Sammy.'

She seemed to have become smaller in the seat and was looking up at me, her eyes large and full of inevitable tears. Her beauty overwhelmed me. I sighed and cupped my hand under her chin and stroked her cheek.

'My mother, my mother...', she sobbed, pressing her cheek against my hand. 'My mother...'

'Yes, well everyone's mother says 'don't get into cars with boys, don't let them kiss you, don't let them touch you, don't let them say they think you are beautiful.'

'No, Sammy. She's said all those words, and more, but it's not that. It's that she's...she's...she's...'

She looked at me with desperation and I knew it was serious, just as I had known it was serious when Michael had broken his leg in a rugby match at school. He hadn't said anything, but his eyes were wide and still, and helping him became the most important thing I could do. I wanted to help Susana because I couldn't bear her sadness. I often dreamed of rescuing someone beautiful from a burning house, or sinking ship, or a rampaging animal, and this felt like a version of this dream – a tilted and more complex version.

'Yes,' I said, stroking her hair, 'Tell me, Susana, tell me about your mother...'

'My mother, she is going...she is going to die.'

She howled and shook as she said these words. I moved towards her and held her as close to me as I could. I held her and she sobbed, her head burrowing into my shoulder. I stroked her shuddering back and knew, if I was sufficiently gymnastic, I could reach my hand around and slip it down the front

of her blouse, as I longed to do, and she wouldn't have, couldn't have, stopped me. But I didn't. I just sat there, trying to be strong enough to be the stone she clung to while the river of her grief surged around her, trying to ignore the gear lever that gnawed into my buttock and the cramp that had latched its teeth into my leg.

The rain, and her emotion, started to lose their intensity. A handful of quick, final squalls rocked the Mini. I could feel her take a deep breath, which she held for a long time before launching the last of her sobs. She slumped back in her seat.

'Come on – let's go for a walk,' I said.

We struggled out of the car, kicked off our shoes and, with arms around each other, walked down the stone steps to the thick, soft sand at the beginning of the beach. We laughed at the clumsiness this sand gave us and I made some exaggerated movements, which made her laugh a bit more. The tide was half in and glittered at us as the sun brought back a sparkle to the world. The edge of water had an untidy black fringe of dislodged seaweed, but the sand just above it had a golden firmness that invited running. And we ran, pirouetting around each other with arms spread wide, fingers briefly touching, before falling into long clinging embraces. Everything amazed me, including the way her tears, or the wind from the sea, had given her lips a slight salty taste.

She steered me towards the sea wall. For a long time we sat and watched Rangitoto free itself from the last of the low cloud.

'It's like that,' she said, 'It's like that, my island ...Savai'i. It's a volcano too and it erupted in 1910 and the lava flowed down to the sea and...'

I put my finger on her lips.

'Your mother, tell me about your mother...please.'

A cloud crossed her face and she looked as if she was going to cry again, but she squared her shoulders and talked. She told me of her mother's career and academic honour. She told me about the expectations that had always been there, both for her and her mother. She told me about loving the culture that trapped her. She spoke of hospitals and lumps and biopsies and of knowing that her mother would die because of a white owl that stared into the night.

‘You don’t know it, Sammy, but I’ve told you all this already – I lie in bed and imagine I’m talking to you about my mother and all the important things.’

I grinned and she gave me a laughing push across the sand because she knew what I was thinking.

‘Will I meet her, your mother, when she comes to New Zealand?’ I asked.

Susana dropped the hand she had been holding and leapt to her feet.

‘Meet you! My mother, Sefulu, meet you! Oh no! Don’t you understand, Sam? I am her daughter and I am not to be with boys, especially not Pālagi boys. And not now, not now when she’s so sick, not now...’

Everything crashed.

The closeness, the lust, the chance to be a hero: without warning, just when everything was going so well, they crashed into the sands of Cheltenham Beach and all I was left with was confusion and a pain in the arse from sitting too long on a stone wall.

I wished I’d stayed at the Club.

‘Oh, Jesus, Susana!’

I could feel a little whine in my voice as I said the last syllables of her name.

‘Oh, Jesus.’

Then, she was in my arms again, kissing me and pressing against me so strongly I had to push back with all my strength just to keep standing. I was about to let us sink to the ground when she gently moved away and stood looking at me.

‘I must not be with you, Sam. My mother, my whole family, they would never let me be with you. You must understand this. But I love you and want to be with you because I can talk to you...the only one I can talk to with my real self, the only one I want to do all the love things my family and my pastor tell me not to do – you are the only one, Sam, the only one...’

I said a thousand mixed up words about love and how, in 1968, we had so many examples of people breaking free and expressing their own

truths and what was bad, providing no one was hurt? I told her I loved talking with her and had so many questions. I asked if she wanted to make love.

‘I can’t marry you, Sammy; you know I can’t marry you.’

I laughed. The marriage word wasn’t part of the vocabulary the Friday night Sessions.

Hurt and impatience raced around inside my head. Perhaps I should forget all this love crap and just see if I can make her do it now? Put into practice all the talk I’d heard at the club and in the Cafeteria. Grab my one to chance to have her beautiful body and be done with it.

‘Come, Sammy,’ she said, sliding her arm around my waist and smiling, ‘Come, Sammy, and drive me back to my family in Otara. Please, please, my...my darling man.’

I knew, from the awkward shyness of her words, that she hadn’t ever called anyone her ‘darling man’ before. This, together with my belief that there was more truth in her kiss than in her words, was enough, for now, so I put aside my confusion and drove her home.

Chapter Ten**Back to Otara**

Some journeys are silent.

We drove through the rain, which had returned, but now softened to the point of being background music, the wipers providing a metronomic rhythm section. I tried to think, to make a plan, to find something to say, but my mind was washed out. Susana sat without speaking. Every time I glanced across at her, her face had become a mask, staring ahead and immobile.

‘We could go to the pictures,’ I said, without much conviction. ‘Not too late to get the five o’clock session of *‘Far From the Madding Crowd’*....Julie Christie?’

‘No, Sam. I need to be home. Thank you.’

I wanted to yell at her not to be so bloody polite. Polite and good and running on such a defined set of rails.

‘You seem very controlled,’ I said. I didn’t yell, but I could hear the tension in my voice, just as I’d heard it a thousand times in my father’s.

‘Controlled? Me? How do you mean? Controlled by Uncle, who yells if I’m late? Yes. Controlled by Auntie, who wants to know where I am every moment? Yes. Controlled by my mother who is so good? Yes! Controlled by all the bloody people who want me to be better than every one else? Better at being a Samoan and better at being a Pālagi? Yes, yes, yes – very controlled!’

It was the first time I’d heard her swear and I was as discomforted by its unexpectedness as I had been when I’d seen my father come home drunk, last Christmas, after going to a match at Eden Park with one of his old cricketing mates. He didn’t get drunk and she didn’t swear, so it seemed serious enough to stop the car. I pulled over on the shoulder of the motorway, just before the Otahuhu exit and we sat and talked, with the whoosh and sway of passing cars rocking our secluded and temporary world. We sat there until it was dark, sometimes talking, sometimes holding hands and saying nothing. When she talked she spoke about her life and her family, but kept coming back to her mother’s illness.

‘The owl,’ she whispered, ‘I keep seeing the bloody owl.’

She was getting the hang of the swearing thing, but couldn't quite say 'bloody' without pausing to unwrap it.

I talked about my life and my family, and my need to be with her. And my hurt at knowing I wasn't good enough to meet her mother. Jesus, usually the last thing I wanted to do was to meet a girl's mother, but, with anyone else I'd gone out with, I'd always known I could meet her mother, or her father or her great Aunt Tabatha, if I wanted to. Meet them, know how to handle them, know I would be accepted by them. Know I could play the game of respectable young man. When we were still at school, Michael had said to me: 'Adults are easy- you just have to talk with them and ask a few questions. They're so bloody scared of not being with it that they are pathetically grateful for anything that makes them feel they can talk successfully with *'...a young person.'* A feather in their bonnets, all right, being able to say, *'I had such a lovely chat with young Michael, the other day. Such a lovely young man- they come out with such amazing ideas, these young people, you know, once you win their confidence and get them talking.'*

That was me. Polite and interesting. Respectfully rebellious, well spoken and candid. Charming. Full of bullshit. But not this time. There wouldn't be a chance to use these skills. I wouldn't make it to first base, wouldn't even be asked to bat, wouldn't even make the team. This had never happened to me before, ever.

'Bloody hell, Susana!' I yelled, 'Can't we just run away, or something. Can't we turn our backs on the whole bloody lot of them and give ourselves the chance to love each other, because I'm never going to love anyone else and ...'

I could feel hostility and anger rising in me. I wanted to grab her and shake her. I wanted to say something so loud and forceful that she would forget everything in the world, except me. I wanted to be the most important person in her life. I wanted her to be mine.

'I saw a film,' I told her. 'A film at the Festival called Elvira Madigan and...'

I stopped speaking as the memory of this film, and its use of the emotional Andante from Mozart's Piano Concerto Number 21, surged through

me. I wanted to her to hear this music right now, wanted to be watching the movie with her.

‘The two people in it,’ I continued, ‘had a love, a passion, that wasn’t acceptable at the time. I suppose the fact that she was married had something to do with it.’

‘Married?’

‘And he was a soldier, which didn’t help. But they ran away together. There’s these beautiful shots of them in the snow and in the woods having a picnic...you know black and white photography is so dramatic ...and the music, Mozart, it just gets inside you. When you watch it you know they’re stuffed, doomed, and that society is going to reel them in and punish them, kill them. But they let themselves love each other, let themselves believe they were the only ones in the world, the only ones in the entire world. And they did love each other - physically, emotionally - with all their hearts. And they were right Susana, they were right, even if it cost them everything, they still knew they were not scared of loving, not scared to go where the feelings took them and...’

Did I want her so much I was prepared to die? No, but it felt like it, especially when I let myself relive the film, especially when I tried to talk her out of her sense of obligation.

‘Sam, Sammy, Sam, Sam,’ she said, her voice again a whisper. ‘Come to me Sam.’

She took my head in her hands and pressed my cheek against the breasts I’d spent so much time and energy admiring.

‘Sammy, poor Sammy,’ she intoned, one hand cradling my head, the other stroking my hair. She kept speaking soft words, some in English, some in Samoan. Stroking and speaking and rocking, my head moving with her breathing. She had become older than me, the wise one, soothing and comforting, loving and maternal.

I knew she was trying to comfort me, to heal my anger and calm me down, but she failed, because I found her actions to be the biggest turn on I’d ever experienced. God, a girl tries to comfort me in a way I always wanted my mother to and all I want to do is take off as many of her clothes as I can and drive myself into her. I lifted my head so I could kiss her lips and neck.

There was a sharp tap on the window and a torch shone into the car. We tore ourselves away from each other. I wound down the window, shielding my eyes from the torchlight.

‘Your licence, please, Sir,’ said the policeman.

He shone his torch at the licence and then let it play on Susana’s face for what seemed like several minutes. She held her hands up to shield her eyes and her privacy.

‘Go away!’ she said.

The policeman didn’t reply, but lowered his torch.

‘So why have you parked here? Can’t park on the motorway, y’know. Can’t just stop here, even if you ...’

He flicked the torch in Susana’s direction.

‘Even if you...’

‘No, no,’ I said, telling myself to summon up my best ‘talking to an adult’ manner. ‘No...it’s the distributor. In these Minis, and you’ve probably already seen this before, water splashes up onto the distributor and the whole thing dies, just dies. Nothing to do but wait for the heat of the engine to dry it out. So, we were waiting...and having a bit of a ...a bit of a discussion...while we waited.’

I wondered if I should be calling him ‘Sir’.

‘Might be ready to try but you’ve got to be real careful or you can flood the carburettor. What do you suggest, Officer? Do you want me to try it now?’

‘Might as well. You can’t stay here all night...even if you want to.’

His torch flashed towards Susana again and I could feel her take in a breath. I turned the key and the Mini started with a splutter, which may have given my story a bit of credibility in the constable’s eyes. He wasn’t to know it spluttered on the driest and hottest of days.

‘Thank you,’ I said, ‘Thank you for your help. Can I go now? Don’t want to be a hazard any longer than I have to, do I?’

‘Drive on,’ he said, ‘And keep everything as dry as possible in future, as dry as possible.’

A final look at Susana and he walked away. I let in the clutch and nipped out into the flow of traffic.

'I hate him! And I hate the polite way you talked to him. Why can't we stop beside his stupid motorway? And it's not his anyway. And why did he shine his stupid torch in my face all the time?'

She said more, but I felt too sad to answer. A moment, admittedly an unlikely moment beside a busy motorway, when all the things that held both of us back had evaporated, had come and now had gone. It probably wouldn't happen again, because I knew I had no option now, other than to take her home. Everything she had said when we were at Cheltenham Beach meant there was little point in seeing her again, little point in imagining any kind of future. On the journey to her place I'd let myself ignore the reality of her words and be swept along with the feelings that were so strong when we were together. I believed she loved me, even desired me, but her sense of duty would stop her ever letting herself be alone with me again. There would be no Elvira Madigan journey, there would be no Mozart.

'I don't suppose you would you like to meet my parents, come to dinner at our house next Friday? They want to meet you and I said I'd ask and...'

'That is very kind of them, I would be delighted to accept.'

'No shit ...would you really?'

'Yes ...no shit. I want to, but I'm scared and then there's all the things we talked about, but I will, if I can, but take me home now, please!'

I nodded and guided the Mini around the long curve of the Otara exit.

Chapter Eleven

Uncle Fred

We climbed out of the car and stood on the wet footpath outside the house. The blue flickering of television stuttered across the blinds of every front window, and the penetrating voices of the American actors hurled their versions of reality and fantasy into the homes, and out onto the footpaths, of a suburban South Auckland that didn't suspect that, in a few years, it would be calling those same footpaths 'sidewalks'. From a neighbouring garage came the swell of guitars and singing, together with the fullness of alcohol augmented laughter. From somewhere more distant came a female voice, raised in a shrill cry of ecstasy or despair. The motorway contributed a dull and variable background noise, like the sound of inconsistent surf, punctuated not by the intermittent cries of gulls but by the occasional squeal of brakes. Car horns gave out both bleated small warnings and operatic wails.

We didn't fully register these sounds as we embraced and slid into a long and sad final kiss, mirroring the ecstasy and despair the woman's voice was still howling across the rooftops. It was a kiss that would never have ended had it not been for the sound of a door crashing open and a huge voice yelling.

'What the bloody hell you fink you doing?'

Uncle Fred hurtled across the lawn towards us, waving his fists, closely followed by Auntie Valu, moving more swiftly than I ever thought her bulk would allow. She held a Samoan broom held high above her head

'Run, Sam, run!' Susana instructed, push starting my flight. 'Run!'

I ran.

I ran past overturned shopping trundlers and hurdled brown rubbish bags, their contents disgorged and analysed by local dogs. I ran past groups of young men, leaning on cars, drinking beer from large bottles. I ran, with the sound of Uncle Fred's deep breathing and heavy steps just behind me.

'Go for it, mate,' one of the young men yelled. 'Go for it – he's about to get ya!'

'Nah, ya bloody chickenshit,' yelled another. 'Stop and fight, honky chickenshit, stop an' have a go.'

I ran, at first with fear, then with all the fitness of hours of training making my feet fly over the pavement, leaving Uncle Fred, and the taunts of the young men far behind, their shouts receding. I realised I'd escaped, that I was in the clear, but I didn't slow down. I ran with a sense of jubilation, my legs strong, my lungs enjoying their work. A dog leapt out of a driveway and aimed itself, squat and low, at my ankles. I jumped, kicked out at it and ran backwards for a few paces, watching it retreat into the territory it was guarding. I felt like turning cartwheels or leaping in the air. I had that sense of triumph that comes with scoring tries and making those tight singles where you know you've made the crease a fraction of a second before the wicketkeeper hits the balls.

I could have run forever, but as suddenly as it had come, my sense of triumph evaporated. Why was I running? Wasn't I running away from the girl I loved? Hadn't I left her with the broom-wielding aunt, to suffer whatever violence that aunt thought it was her duty, as a staunch churchgoer, to inflict? And what was I running to? A world without Susana. A world where I would forever know I had run from my one chance of doing something special with my life. My feet slowed and I cursed myself for being a coward and a fool. A coward for leaving Susana. A fool, for still believing there was some future for the two of us, despite the clear message of her words – she had duties, to her family, to her mother, to her education, to her church and to her country and these duties made it impossible for her to waste any more time with me. Sure, she'd kissed me and pressed her body against mine, but she would discipline herself away from these weaknesses. I was walking now, the noises of the night coming back to me, mixed with my own deep breathing.

'Fuck it!' I said, and blew a long breath through my teeth.

I stopped and turned, facing the direction I knew Uncle Fred would come from. I felt calm, completely calm. I'd had this feeling twice before in my life. Once, when I was at school and had been sent by the teacher with the reputation of being the school's most savage sadist, to fetch the cane from the staffroom. I knew I was going to be hurt, but somehow moved outside myself, and my usual fears, and knew I could cope, without flinching. Which I did, just! And was able to look him the eye afterwards and say, as custom demanded, 'Thank you, Sir!'

The other time was when I was very young. I'd climbed a wattle tree in the paddock behind our place and felt a scratching on my arm. I looked down to see an enormous weta, clinging to me, just below my elbow. Its back legs were raised in angry defiance and it seemed ready to saw its strong black spikes across my skin, filling me with the deadly nerve poison my friends had told me every weta possessed. We would hunt them down, with sticks and pocket knives so we could make the world safe from their lethal venom. A geyser of fear had surged upwards through me and I'd thought I was about to fall out of the tree. Not just fall, but jump, because anything would be better than waiting for the slow poison to turn my bones to chalk and my blood to ink, as Jimmy Martin had said it would. Jimmy's father was a doctor, so this was scientifically true. I remember standing like a statue, frozen in my grip on the tree, my eyes not leaving the weta and its deadly readiness. I don't know how long this lasted but, in time, my heart slowed down and I was able to close my eyes and wait. Nothing happened, so I opened them again and started to make a plan. I began to see myself using my forefinger to flick the monster away. If I did this quickly enough, I might survive. I tensed the attack finger against my thumb and slowly approached the weta, the feeling of calmness and concentration replacing the raging fear. It was easy, in the end – a flick, the spiny body flying in an arc away from me, landing the leafy twigs of the next branch where it swayed, almost upside down. A quick glance and a rub let me know my skin intact. I'd told my friends about this adventure at school, told them all the details, except the five minutes I'd spent clinging to the tree crying my eyes out once the weta had gone.

I felt the same calm, now, as I waited on the Otara footpath, for Susana's uncle to pound his vengeful way out of the darkness. Was this me? Was I able to feel this strong, this certain? Sunday school teachings came back to me and I was starting to let myself think my calmness was the result of some kind of divine intervention, when Fred arrived. He was swaying with exhaustion, his head down as he forced himself onwards in a dogged jog. Such was his concentration on keeping moving, he almost went past me.

'I kill you, bloody bastard,' he puffed, raising his fist, his face flushed and his chest heaving.

I laughed. I could have danced around him, run in circles, prodded a few left jabs into his eyes and nose and he couldn't have done much about it.

'Hit me,' I said, offering my cheek to him. 'Hit this one, and then hit the other one if you like, if that's what you have to do. But you have to know that I love Susana and I'm not going to stop loving her and I'm not going to go away and stuff all your bloody Samoan stupid bloody ideas and ...'

I closed my eyes and waited, but like the time with the weta, nothing happened, no crashing punch, no turning out of the lights, nothing. I opened my eyes. Uncle Fred was in front of me, bending forward, his hands on his knees. He seemed to sense I was staring at him and he looked up.

'You turn the cheek ...you turn the another cheek like it says in the Bible. You the good man, the good man, Sammy and you teach me.'

'Thank God for religion,' I said, more to the footpath than to Uncle Fred.

He moved towards me, embraced me and kissed the cheek I'd thought he was going to pulverise. In his embrace I felt the stocky power of his body and trembled in relief at not having had my foolishness tested. Was this divine intervention or just bloody good luck? I didn't know and didn't care. This was the first time I'd been kissed by a man. My father could manage a handshake, but a hug was beyond him and kissing would have been consigned to the dark realms of shirt lifters and poofers and people who didn't stand up for 'God Save The Queen'. But being kissed by Uncle Fred had felt good to me, partly because a kiss has lots of advantages over a bash and partly because all this was part of a world that was not my own, a world that set different rules. And the feel of the stubble of his cheek against mine stayed with me for a long time.

'You come to my house. You welcome, every time, in my house.'

He talked on, partly in English, partly in Samoan. As far as I could tell, he was talking about the need to change to '...the new ideas for the new country.'

'My mate,' he said, 'my mate at the work, the English fella, he tell me we must change, not forget the old way jus' don't be too dumb with the new stuff and the new people. He tell me to find the important things, like the education and the church and nemma mind if it's not the old way.'

‘Yes,’ I said, ‘nemma min’ if it’s not the old way...’

I’m such a chameleon with accents; however hard I try I’m either falling into the rhythms and sounds of what I hear or speaking with a painfully exaggerated version of my own accent. After I’d listened to Bob Marley for the first time I went around, for days, mouthing vowels as if they were small balloons.

‘Nemma min’ if it’s not the old fa’aSamoa way. We fin’ the new way, me an’ you an’ that Susana.’

‘Yes, you and me and Susana...you know that I love her and...’

He laughed, his laughter oddly high pitched for a man of his stocky build.

‘Yes. I know you love that girl. The night you come and sit in front of my TV for the first time, I see you look at her and her look at you and that’s the time I know and I say to myself I better watch this young fella, better watch him, all the bloody time. I know these fings.’

He laughed again then put his arm around my shoulder and we supported each other on the long journey back to the house.

Chapter Twelve**Back at the House**

Susana and Auntie Valu were still standing on the footpath when we got back. Fred made us stop where we were hidden in the shadow cast by the street light. He was smiling. Susana's head was down, bowed by the torrent of words from her aunt. Words that went on and on, rising and falling free from anything that sounded like a question. They had a harsh, strident edge. They would have been audible across a whole village, where they would have advertised, to all and sundry, that at least one person in this family knew the right thing to do. I'd not only never heard so many words from one person, I'd never heard such vehement sounding words. I'd grow up surrounded by furious whispers, muttered asides, meaningful looks and prolonged stony silences – I could not help be impressed, and a little frightened, by the waterfall of Auntie Valu's words.

'What's she saying?' I whispered to Fred.

'She say '...if you fall, then we all fall.'

'Is that all? All those words just to say that?'

Fred looked menacing again.

'It is a big thing...a very big thing to all of us from the Island. When one falls ...if it's the young girl...a big thing ...not forget or I give you the hiding after all...you understand?'

'Sorry...yes. I understand...no one must fall.'

Why was I talking bullshit, again? No, why was I believing this bullshit when he dished it out? How could I talk like this so easily? How could I surrender so easily? Why did I want so much to be in this group, to be accepted, that I gave all the rightness, all the high ground, to them, these immigrants in their shabby house with their piles of kids and their set of religious and social views that were probably old fashioned a hundred years ago? Tell me your ways and I will follow them. Tell me how to behave, show me what to do, and I will pay whatever price I have to for being able to laugh with you, to speak as loudly as you do, to be one of you. Small price for being able to say the right thing, to be correct in your house, at your table, in your family, and in your niece's arms. Small price for entering your world of noise

and full-throated laughter. My parents' home, at this moment, in the glow of the South Auckland streetlight, seemed unimportant. No, worse than that! It was something that held me back, something that wouldn't let me rush at the world with Fred's unambiguous, uncompromising enthusiasm.

Valu paused for a moment, looked around and spotted Fred and me watching her from our comfortable shadow just to the left of the stage where she and Susana were playing out their drama.

'Well, have you killed him yet?' she demanded in English. 'Have you killed the damn Pālagi boy who comes hanging round our niece like a damned village dog? Have you?'

It was Fred's turn to move to centre stage under the streetlight and stand, head bowed, as the tumble of words went on. I knew nothing of the language but heard all her disappointment, anger, frustration and despair at the failure of her efforts to point the family in the direction of truth and righteousness. Then it seemed she was moving away from her fears for Susana and focussing on his shortcomings. I understood this in a shorthand way that depended on the occasional English word she threw at him: words like 'Lion beer'; 'pub'; 'pay packet' and 'races'. He made some attempts to reply, but the ball was firmly in her hands and she was not going to be stopped from running with it.

Susana quietly moved away and came to my side. She softly and secretly took my hand and gave it a small squeeze.

'Are you OK?' she whispered.

Was I OK?

I was in heaven. I was alive, and not just in the sense that I had avoided the fate Valu had wanted Fred to dish out. I felt I had, for the first time, arrived at something I wanted to give my whole life to. I'd had moments of feeling this fully alive before, some of them when facing a fast bowler on a pitch so dodgy that survival of each ball was a trigger for jubilant relief; some of them when I sensed my parents were having one of their rare moments when they allowed something that might have been love, pass between them; some of them when I was with my mates and we began laughing, without restraint, over some ridiculousness that rendered us legless each time it was resurrected. And then there was this beautiful, wonderful girl beside me,

holding my hand discretely behind her back, concerned for my welfare and grateful I hadn't been beaten to a pulp. Any time we had spent together, so far, had depended on time stolen from studies, time made possible by the fact that at University she was free from the monitoring eyes of her family and free to allow herself to fall in with the Pālagi world she had spent all her life studying. Those times had been precious, but they always had a clandestine, careful air to them, that hadn't allowed them to feel completely right. They had felt like the time our team had had a bye and a few of us had gone to play for one of the lower grade teams. We'd been very successful and had had a great time, but there was a nagging feeling we shouldn't have been there and would have had little defence if we'd been discovered.

But it was all different now. I had spoken with Fred. I'd told him how I felt about Susana. I'd defied him and he'd ended up kissing my cheek. I was in, I was accepted, I was official, I'd been sanctioned. I'd been given the Otara version of the good housekeeping seal of approval.

'Am I OK? I'm more than OK – I'm on top of this wonderful world and so happy my heart is going to burst and ...are you OK?'

I moved close to Susana as I said this and tried to slip my arm around her waist. She moved away and hung her head.

'I'm OK, yes, I am OK,' she said.

She steepled her fingers in front of her lips and blew a long sigh through them

'Yes, I'm glad you're not dead or anything but, but...'

She looked at me, then at her aunt and uncle in their noisy circle of light.

'But, but you can't ever understand what makes my life OK...you can't ever...'

She turned again to the others. I could hear the name Sefulu being used, Valu's voice slowing, softening and cracking each time she used it until she became empty of words and full of tears. She went to Fred. They did not embrace, but she leant against his strength, her fist quietly beating against his chest.

'Aueeee!'

This came as a long cry from Susana. She dismissed my hand and rushed to her aunt, embracing her and weeping. I moved towards the three of them, in their tight huddle, but stopped, not knowing what to do. Fred reached out and drew me forward and I felt again, both the roughness of his cheek against mine and the smooth muscularity of Susana's body. I also felt how the three of them had melted against each other in a closeness that I was part of but was held back from fully joining by my need to think about it.

After some minutes our hand and arms dropped and we stood knowing we needed to move, but still caught in the circle of streetlight that had just witnessed and encompassed so many words of rage and grief.

'You!'

Valu pointed her finger at me as she spoke, her voice now soft but still commanding.

'You come into the house and we talk. We talk about your behaviours.'

I followed them into the house, kicking off my shoes at the door, even though they didn't. We went into the kitchen and found Siaosi scurrying to the mountain of extended family dishes that was trying to keep its balance on a nuclear family bench.

'You the lazy fuck bastard again!' Fred hissed, and cracked the boy's ear with the back of his hand. The blow seemed casual and slow, but it sent Siaosi sprawling to the floor in the corner. He pushed with his legs and slid himself upwards, his back pressed against the wall, his arms waving in front of him like a policeman trying to slow down a car. Fred's hand brushed through this flailing screen and there were two more sharp cracks. Siaosi struggled to keep his feet, his head shaking.

'Leai, leai, leai, leai!'

He was speaking in Samoan. I thought he was saying sorry.

His voice was a panting falsetto, his eyes flicking to mine as if I, the new person, might have brought a new salvation. He sidled towards the sink, tensed on the balls of his feet, back bent and eyes darting towards the heavy fists and back to the floor.

Fred made a sharp, growling noise and moved forward with a major blow loaded and ready to be launched from hip level. He swung forward, his

feet moving to maximise balance and strength, but he stopped the punch inches before Siaosi's closed eyes and wincing face.

'Leai Feleti, fa'amolemole.'

The dishcloth was now in his hand.

'Fa'amolemole, fa'amolemole'

His voice rose and extended the last syllable into a whine.

The plug was in the sink, the tap turned on. He sniffed rapid, deep breathing sniffs, glancing backwards and forwards from the deepening water to his assailant, slowly gauging that the immediate danger was passing and the sink could take his concentration.

'Fa'amolemole.'

I was frozen, except for the thumping of my heart. I'd witnessed some violence on the rugby field and had even taken a swing or two at other players. I had memory of a few fights at primary school, trading big words and small blows with a temporary enemy, surrounded by a circle of chanting classmates wanting more action before things were broken up, as they inevitably were, by a duty teacher striding into the circle, grabbing us by our collars and leading us away to be given the good strapping that would teach us not to be violent again. But I'd never been close to violence like this, violence without the legitimacy of the sports field or playground, violence made more stark and dangerous by being in the kitchen, more sickening because there was no equality and no escape, violence without a referee or duty teacher in sight. It hadn't been fair, it could have been fatal and it could have so easily been me.

I looked at Susana and Valu. They seemed unmoved. I knew my eyes were wide, my breath fast and my heart loud enough to fill the small room.

I cleared my throat.

'Can I help him? I mean, so many dishes and I...if you want me to...'

Was I going to say I was disgusted by cruelty I had witnessed, was I going to talk about assault and the law of this land? Was I going to protest, here in this suburban kitchen, away from my own folk with no banners or support people in sight? No ...but I knew I would have to talk Susana about it all when were next together in a quiet corner of the cafeteria.

‘Leave him. It’s his own fault, he knows,’ said Valu. ‘Leave him and we go to the other room now and have a prayer and a meeting about you and Susana.’

I opened my mouth, then shut it and followed them to the front room where, only a few short weeks ago, I’d spent endless hours watching TV and waiting. They prayed, long rambling prayers, in Samoan, that meant nothing to me. I was glad of the time to try to think. The euphoria I’d felt on the footpath had gone. I’d been on top of the world, but had been knocked off by each blow I’d witnessed. This world had been perfect for fifteen minutes but was now askew and my only thought, once again, was to leave so that I could work out what I should have done and said. The family prayed for strength while I berated myself for weakness.

There was a hymn and a few amens, so I assumed prayers had finished, but Valu had begun another of her long monologues, softer than before, but still insistent. I looked at Susana and slightly inclined my head towards her aunt, in what I hoped was a request for information. Susana looked away. I tried to focus on Valu’s words in the hope of decoding something from the occasional name and English word that poked through her speech, like half submerged stepping stones in a swift river.

My concentration increased when I heard my name but then lapsed until the long flow of words ended with ‘...and Sammy can help us.’

‘Me...help. Help with what? How? Tell me.’

I was trying not to get angry. Didn’t they realise how important all this was to me? Didn’t they realise they had invited me in and were now shutting me out? Didn’t they realise they were in a country where we spoke English and that they’d had all sorts of chances to learn English and I’d never had the chance to learn Samoan. And if they came to my house we’d try to make them welcome by speaking the very best of English.

Susana shot me the angry look I’d seen on her face when I ducked out of saying grace.

‘Be patient Sammy, be patient and soon we will talk with you in your language, which we’ve worked so hard to learn. Be patient.’

I nodded, slumped back in the seat and gave up trying to listen. I started working on additional reasons why it was impolite to speak in a

language guests didn't understand. I would add these to the speech I intended to make to Susana about the treatment of Siaosi. We were going to have to spend a long time together to put things right.

Eventually, Auntie Valu turned to me.

'Samuel, we have some instructions to give to you now. Instructions about behaviour for young men and the young womens.'

Stay close to me, Elvira Madigan and Margaret Mead.

Chapter Thirteen**Instructions**

Susana came and sat on the couch beside me, her back straight, hands clasped in her lap and eyes downcast. I knew I wasn't to touch her.

Fred and Auntie Valu sat opposite, equally upright and talking softly to each other. Susana and I waited. The more I waited the more I wanted to be good, the more I wanted to be honest about my feelings.

'Susana,' I said, 'can you tell me where the toilet is, please?'

Her look indicated she didn't realise how much progress asking this question represented.

'The passageway, the second door.'

I thought she might have used the excuse of showing me the way to leave the gaze of her aunt and give me a word, or a small squeeze of the hand or something to keep me going, but she didn't move.

The toilet smelt like a toilet. Its door was heavily dented in two places and didn't have a lock. The bowl was stained. I tried to open the small louvre window a bit wider, but the mechanism was corroded. Two rolls of toilet paper were on the floor, together with a racing magazine and a yellow rubber duck, covered with grey fluff. An out of date calendar, featuring a large, grinning man holding an equally large fish, hung on the wall. The light bulb, shadeless and fly marked, seemed too powerful for such a small room and it lit up the dirt and the fingermarks on the walls with merciless intensity.

The bathroom, next door along the passage, was the smallest bathroom I'd ever been into, except for the one on my father's friend's yacht. The bath took up all one side. It had a shower arrangement over it consisting of detachable rubber hoses running from the taps to a small rose suspended from the ceiling by a modified wire coat-hanger. A shower curtain, the bottom of its skirt grey and stiff with mould, hung from an off-centre frame of rusting chrome pipe. I washed my hands, using the bar of Sunlight soap sitting on the narrow hand-basin and dried them on a thin, fraying towel with 'Property of Westfield Freezing Works' stencilled across it. The floor, with its chipped chequerboard of black and white lino tiles, felt as if it had been wet since last Christmas.

Many things about Susana were a complete mystery to me, not least of which was that she always seemed so clean, fresh and sweet smelling. It seemed impossible for her to achieve this when she had to share this bathroom with at least fifteen other people. Perhaps she didn't wash at all, but just twirled, each morning, like a magical butterfly and emerged clad in a new radiance.

I went back to the others, sat down without looking at Susana, and presented Auntie Valu and Fred with my best listening face. He wriggled in his seat, heaved himself upright, walked to the fireplace, turned and stood foursquare with his hands behind his back.

'Samuel!'

Whenever anyone uses my full name it always takes a second or two to register that they are talking to me. It has been used, occasionally, by teachers and parents wanting to stress the gravity of a situation or an offence, but I was from a group that usually does everything possible to deliver reprimands with sugar and understanding. My worst crimes were discussed but with forced smiles, sticky-sweet diminutives and dutiful affection. (*'We love you Sammy, but we don't love it when you put chewing gum in the hair of visiting children, or, snatch a chocolate éclair from the plate without asking, or, try to punch other boys on the football field'*)

Sel, in the cricket team, calls me Samuel, because it amuses him and the others copy this, especially when I've done something worthwhile. I was used to 'Excellent knock, young Samuel' and 'Jeez, Samuel you beauty, bastard of a nut, that one!' but not 'Samuel' delivered in grave tones, in the middle of a Saturday night, by a man who, only an hour before had wanted to punch my head off.

'Samuel.'

'Fred...Frederick.'

Susana's headshake told me it wasn't for me to talk.

'Samuel – it's a big fmg. We see you kiss Susana, the niece, and it's a very big fmg and we say...'

He stopped and paced across the room. I thought he was going to get angry again.

‘Samuel. My wife, she the one best at the bloody English and she the one to talk about the big fings about Susana and...’

He sat down.

I wanted to pat his shoulder, or shake his hand, to show I felt sorry that I couldn’t cope with his language.

Valu didn’t stand up. Without hesitation she launched into a flow of words, as relentless as the one she had inundated Susana with, under the streetlight.

‘We love our niece and we have the job to protect her from the evils and temptations of this country, this city called Auckland where we have to live for the work and the education. We see the girls here run around and go in the cars, sometimes the pubs even, and this is not the way it was in the Island. In the Island everyone know the right way to behave and we can watch them anyway, all the time and they can’t hide their behaviours from the old people so the old people can correct them and teach them and give them the punishments if they don’t try hard. And everybody goes to the church and the Pastor can tell them the way the Bible says we must behave and can say the names of the kids who just run away together and their whole family is shame ...shame in front of the village and that boy and that girl have a bad life because everyone remember the shame for all the years.’

‘Yes, so shame for the families, so shame,’ said Fred, banging his right fist into his open left hand, and looking at me.

Valu didn’t acknowledge this support.

‘Susana and us,’ she continued, ‘we don’t want to live here, with all the bad things happening and the Maori families having the big parties all the time, with the beer and the guitars and the fights. Everywhere people drink beer. Back in the Island you have to ask the Government for the Points to buy beer and whisky. They look at you and only give the Points if you are the strong person with money and a job and good character, so the poor people can’t buy bottles from the Government store and this protects the foolish people, except the foolish people can go to the clubs or make beer in the bush. Not like that here - no protection and the foolishness happens all the time.’

I wanted to ask more about the Points and the way they were allocated, smiling and nodding as if I agreed with, and understood, everything. It seemed the whole discussion wasn't about me, and the girl I wanted, but about Valu's sadness and longing for home. Was I becoming an anthropologist, after all? It would have been better if I was, because I started to realise that each and every one of Auntie Valu's words spelt doom for any chances I ever had of having any freedom with Susana.

'Susana, she is a good church girl and a student. Our family, my sister and me, we have taught her the old language and ways for a girl to speak and do the right ...how do you say it? Do the right ways...?'

'How to conduct herself, I think that's what we would say ...'

If anyone appreciated my attempt to help, they didn't see fit to mention it.

'How to conduct herself, in the proper way, the good way so we are all proud and she knows she is a good girl who can conduct herself and listen to the words of the Lord and follow in His ways for ever and ever.'

I stopped myself from saying 'Amen'.

'But she tells me she likes you and you help her with the study and make University better for her. This is the good thing but you aren't from our Island and you don't understand our way, the fa'asamoa, and this is bad for us and makes me want to tell you to go away but my husband, he tells me you are a good man who knows the Bible way of behaviour and you turned the another cheek, like Jesus said, so you can come to this house and talk with my niece. And you can come to the church with us on all the Sundays and sometimes to the church picnics at Long Bay. But no going to the tifaga ...the movie pictures... and no just the two of you people by yourself and nothing of the behaviour, the behaviour like the married people because you not married and I don't want you to think like that ever because I get mad and send Fred chasing you if you do. Fred and all his brothers so you better watch out, I can tell you and...'

'Auntie ...Auntie.'

Susana lent forward as she spoke, her words soft, but she voiced each one with a considered clarity, as if she was sitting an elocution exam.

‘Auntie, I have listened to your words and I know where my duty has to be. Forgive me for being a foolish person. Forgive me for the shame I have brought on our family. Forgive me, please Auntie, and please Uncle.’

I looked at her and looked away, shaking my head.

‘Sam.’

A little smile played across her lips. She glanced at her aunt and uncle and took a breath.

‘Samuel ...I like you and want you to be my friend. I want you to come to this house; I want to talk to you at University. I want you to be my helper ... please be my helper. But I cannot have you as a boyfriend, not in the Pālagi way, it just cannot be. You can understand that, can’t you Sam? And can you also understand everything has changed because my mother is sick and she’s coming to New Zealand for treatment and there cannot be any ...any worries about me and my studies and my behaviour. I do not want her to be worried about any problems, any problems at all ...’

I stood up.

‘I won’t be a problem, no, you will not have to worry about me. I’ll just go, just get out of it, just take the ‘problem’ away, just leave.’

I went to Fred and shook his hand.

‘Thank you, thank you Fred, for not killing me and for thinking I was OK.’

I didn’t know if I was doing the right thing and didn’t care. This was my moment and I could run it anyway I liked. I bent down and kissed Auntie Valu on the cheek.

‘Thank you for the... the...instructions.’

I turned to Susana and the tears I had been fighting came suddenly.

‘I’m so sorry it’s like this, so very sorry, because we are...could be...special, very special...but I know when I’m not wanted, know when I have to go, know when I’ve strayed into the wrong paddock ...’

I started to walk out of the room.

‘What you say, that’s the best thing, I think,’ said Auntie Valu, ‘the best thing for everyone and for Susana and her poor mother, but I can see why my husband says you are a good boy and...’

Fred grabbed me, embraced me and kissed my cheek again.

'You very welcome anytime in this house, Samuel, any time, I say, in my house...'

I shook my head and again started to walk away.

'I want to take my friend, Samuel, to his car,' said Susana. 'Please Auntie and Uncle, I want to say goodbye to him.'

They nodded and we walked silently down the corridor and out into the night. I could hear the noise of two, possibly three, parties, distant but echoing across this neighbourhood that I would never visit again.

'Goodbye, Susana.'

I unlocked the car, flopped into the driver's seat and started the engine.

'Goodbye, Susana.'

She opened the door and leaned in, her hair falling over my face. She kissed my lips, her hand behind my neck, pulling me hard against her.

'I love you Sam, and I always will and you must never forget that.'

She slammed the door and ran back to the house.

I drove away.

At the end of the street there was a roundabout. I drove around it six times before I could remember which way I needed to go.

Chapter Fourteen**Chatting with Dad**

‘Heavens above, son, don’t you realise the time? Three o’clock in the afternoon, in the afternoon, three pm for goodness sake!’

My father shook my shoulder, compelling me out of sleep, compelling me back to sad and confused memories of the previous night. He tapped his finger tips on the bedside table, making the cup of tea he’d brought me rattle in its saucer.

‘You’d better drink this, if you’re not so hung over you can’t manage even a good cup of tea.’

‘Tea,’ I mumbled, ‘how was anything ever fixed before tea was invented?’

‘You, you...I don’t know. It’s all very well and fine to go to the cricket club and drink so much you end up sleeping the entire weekend, but it’s not good enough. I mean there are so many things to do. In my day, in my playing days, we’d have a beer or two, sure, we weren’t wowsers, but we wouldn’t wipe ourselves out like this. No, there was far too much to do, far too much and we didn’t have it so easy in those days, I can tell you and, and...here you are, at three in the afternoon, treating this place as if it were some kind of dosshouse and how you can consider that to be fair and respectful towards your mother and me, especially your mother, I just don’t know...’

‘Perhaps, I should go flatting ...seems like I’m not wanted here, either, so I might as well go and find some kind of a flat, somewhere and...’

‘Don’t play the martyr with me, Sam, just don’t. I’m not having it and I’m not having any of your self pity just because you’ve been asked, yet again, to pull your weight. We don’t want much – just want you to pull your weight. Just do what’s fair and reasonable for an able bodied twenty-one year old to do. It’s not too much to ask, for heavens sake is it? Is it?’

As he said these last words his colour rose and I sensed one of his rages was on its way. He was known as a restrained and patient man, but I’d seen glimpses of his fury. It would escape on the road, when he encountered drivers who annoyed him. I remembered him driving me to school one wet morning and being cut off by a little old lady, yes, a genuine little old lady

nervously negotiating the unfamiliar terrors of early morning traffic. He'd had to brake hard to avoid her and this had triggered a fury that caused him to race alongside her, window down, waving a clenched fist and bellowing:

'You idiot, you blithering damned idiot, you shouldn't be allowed on the road if you don't know the damned rules!'

She pulled over to the side of the road and braked to a sudden stop. As we roared past I could see her shoulders hunch and her head go into her hands.

'She shouldn't be allowed on the road, endangering people like that, should she?' he said, wrestling his voice back to something like its usual moderation. 'Well, should she?'

'No,' I said, 'we were all in danger, I could see that. Real danger.'

Another conduit to his fury was people who slept in, particularly people who slept in until three o'clock on Sunday afternoon because they'd drunk too much at the cricket club.

How could I explain it all to him? How could I begin to talk about Fred and Auntie Valu and Susana's final kiss? And the truth? Would that have increased or reduced his anger? What could I say to make him bugger off and leave me in peace?

'Sorry,' I said

I'd heard him say this word so often.

'Yeah, I'll get up now. OK. I'll get up now, if you insist. I mean, how was I to know the time? And yesterday? It was a big day ...a big day ...you just don't know what a big day it was and...'

'Just get up. Just get up and see if you can make some kind of contribution to this household. Garden, lawns...something. Or study ...there's a thought! Study!'

He was returning to quietness again and I knew that soon he'd offer to cook me some food, maybe make some little joke about breakfast tasting odd in the afternoon. He'd share this joke with everyone for a few days, perhaps longer. He'd ask me about my plans, his head leaning on one side and his fixed smile cementing over any residue of anger.

It pissed me off that he'd yelled at me, but I hoped he wouldn't apologise.

I stood in the centre of the bathroom and did several pirouettes with my arms outstretched. My fingers didn't touch the walls. The chill of the white floor tiles was alleviated by standing on the fluffy white mat that held the base of the toilet in its soft and toothless jaws. The spare toilet roll, clad in a frilly-rimmed white top hat, sat on top of the cistern. I stepped into the shower and stood, half awake, half asleep under the endless deluge of warm water. I leaned against the wall, made no attempt to wash and tried not to think. The flow of water soothed my tiredness and lulled me back into semi-consciousness. . After what must have been about twenty minutes there were bangs on the door and more furious shouts. I could only hear some of my father's words, but was able to fill in the gaps from the times I'd heard them before.

'You've been there for twenty minutes, more than twenty minutes, for God sake! If we all did this there'd be no water left, nothing for your mother and me. Have some consideration, can't you?'

I smiled.

'And why the blazes do have to be in there so long? I mean, what on earth are you doing?'

I laughed quietly at this and gave my dick a bit of a tweak, just to prove him right. Should I ask him about how he coped with the bloody thing rearing its head without any apparent provocation? I can't think of anything less erotic than Geography lessons at school, but they seemed to work every time, forcing me to be the last to get up from my desk and leave the room. I didn't dare think of Anthropology lectures, but I did and then it was too late. My father's shouts and the tumbling sound of the water became mixed with a roaring in my ears and the hissing I made as I tried not to pant too loudly.

Should I ask him about the dangers of going blind?

I laughed out loud at the thought, prompting more bangs on the door.

No. I wouldn't ask him anything. When I was fifteen, my parents had, with formality and unsmiling tension, sat me down at the dining room table and told me I was growing older and would soon be a young man. I'd thought this would lead to me being allowed to use the car, but they produced a book of black line drawings which they asked me to look at. I studied 'Cross Section of Female Showing Reproductive Organs' for several minutes, and didn't look

up until I heard my father cough disapprovingly when I turned the diagram sideways. My mother took the book and held it in front of me, as she had when I'd been learning to read. There was something about the way she did this that was simultaneously helpful and demanding. At the end of each page she said, 'You understand all that don't you? I'm sure you understand, but just ask us – ask us now and let's get it all over and done with.'

She turned the pages, her hands as accurate and careful as they had been on the day when she'd thought the missing diamond from her engagement ring might have ended up in the kitchen rubbish bin. She'd tipped its contents onto several layers of newspaper spread on the bench and, using a knife and fork with the precision of a guest in the main dining room at the Grand Hotel, she'd worked her way through the tea leaves, the potato skins, the crusts and the discarded envelopes, excited by some glittering shards of glass, but disappointed with everything else. The diamond was never found and she mourned it like the loss of a best friend.

We reached the end of the book. My father cleared his throat and looked at me over his glasses.

'Any questions, son, any questions at all?'

He reached for the book and placed it on the table in front of him, fingers drumming on the pages.

'Your mother and I will try to answer any questions you might have.'

'Any questions?' I thought. 'Yes...a hundred million questions, but here are six or so for starters: are all penises as big as the one shown on page ten? Is it best to be circumcised or not circumcised? Do girls want to have ... sexual intercourse ... or is it just something we do to them? Is everyone built the same, no matter what country they come from? Can you really go blind?'

'No. No questions, thanks. Pretty well covered most of all that at school, one way or another, I think, as far as I can tell at this point, yes, pretty well covered...thanks.'

I laughed a short, coughing sort of a laugh.

My father closed the book with the same air of finality he used when he put the tools away in the garden shed.

‘Good, then,’ he said, ‘very good, well done everyone and shall I, shall I make a cup of tea? Cup of tea, my dear, after all that, after going through all that.’

They had their cup of tea and we never brought the topic up again.

I turned off the shower and dried myself. When I was dressed I wandered through to the kitchen. My father handed me a fresh cup of coffee and winched his face into a bit of a smile. I knew he was regretting his outburst and would try to find a way to apologise, or, better still, shake hands.

‘Eggs?’ he said. ‘Would you like me to do an egg for your – we can’t call it breakfast, can we? For your afternoon tea? A nice egg for afternoon tea, scrambled, perhaps?’

This thought amused him and his face relaxed. I could see a shadow of the mischief family stories told me was once there.

‘Thanks Dad ...that’d be great.’

I took my coffee and sat at the table on the front deck that overlooked the rose bed with its paths of maroon stone chip, which had been barged from a quarry on one of the islands in the Hauraki Gulf. My mind wandered, briefly, to a study deadline that had come and gone a few days ago and then settled on Susana. I knew I should be asking myself all sorts of questions, but I just let the thought of her settle around me like warm water. This water would drown me, but while I was still floating, it felt gentle and safe.

‘Here you are then. Here’s your ‘breakfast’.’

He put the plate in front of me and sat down.

‘No parsley, I’m afraid. Couldn’t be bothered going down the garden for it, not at this hour.’

He was still amused.

I ate, without enthusiasm, but not wanting to reject his peace offering. He looked at me and I found it easy to smile at him.

‘Son, um, Sam...Samuel,’ he said, hand cupped under his chin, forefinger rubbing his cheek. ‘You remember that bit of a talk you had, you know, with your mother and me, a few years back now, about, well, about things, male – female things?’

I nodded.

‘Well, she’s been saying, your mother’s been saying, that, well, we may have just focussed on the biology of it all, on the plumbing, if you like, and she wondered, we wondered really, whether we should have said more about the, well, the relationship aspect, the emotional side of things, yes, emotion and relationships...that’s it.’

‘Emotion and relationships?’

‘Yes...and marriage.’

He leant forward. His elbows were on the table, hands folded over each other, with his chin resting on them – a universal triangle of apparent relaxation.

‘That’s what we were really talking about, but you would have understood that, wouldn’t you. The whole business of sex, sexual relationships, goes hand in hand with marriage. Marriage and respect and love, yes, I think I have to say that ...love. But people seem to be forgetting that. I look at some of the stuff on television and the films they’re bringing out and I wonder where the respect between men and women has gone. Even that wretched ‘Graduate’ with Dustin Hoffman cavorting about making a fool of himself and thinking looking sad-eyed is somehow funny. Everybody keeps telling me how funny it is, how humorous and clever, but I didn’t laugh at it. Americans just don’t seem to have respect for themselves. Nor the British anymore, I’m afraid to say, if that infernal D. H. Lawrence is anything to go by. ‘John Thomas’ and ‘Lady Jane’ – for God’s sake, the man would make us all into animals...animals.’

He stopped, clasped his hands behind his neck and looked at the sky. He shook his head and blew out a long sighing breath.

‘Animals.’

His voice was almost too soft to hear.

There was a long silence then his voice regained its usual precision and strength.

‘And girls here in Auckland today, well, some of them seem to have a very strange set of values. Your mother told me you were interested in some girl at University, which is natural enough at your age, providing it doesn’t interfere with your studies and your cricket. And providing it is based on respect. If she’s someone you respect, and, well, feel good feelings towards,

love, I suppose, then the last thing you'd want to do is go to bed ...make love... have sexual intercourse with her - unless you were married and you are too young for that. Far too young. You realise that, don't you?

'I'm not thinking of marriage, Dad.'

'Good lad,' he said, and banged his hand against my shoulder, the way he did after I came off the field after a game, if I'd played well.

I kept trying to nod, but I knew my head was shaking.

'Good,' he said, his hand still resting on my shoulder. 'You're a sound lad at heart, a sound lad, and I'm grateful that we're able to talk, talk about these matters. My parents never really talked to me, but things are more open these days, more modern. Marriage is such an important thing and it is for ever. Your mother and I, yes, you're old enough to realise we don't always see eye to eye, that your mother is often a bit disappointed with the way life has worked out, but that doesn't change anything, doesn't change the commitment we made, doesn't change the fact we are going to be together until death parts us.'

I thought he was going to cry and I felt embarrassed. I could cope with his anger and somehow knew that, however mad he became, I was one of the few outlets he had for all his pent up feelings. Me, and little old ladies uncertain of the rules of the road. But tears, from him, would be impossible to handle. Fortunately, he was well practised at controlling them. Why was it that I loved the ease with which Susana cried a river, but fled from the suggestion of a small bitter tear squeezing its reluctant way from the corner of my father's tired eye?

He folded his arms, coughed, sniffed and sat upright.

'Yes,' he continued. 'But there's one last thing I want to say to you, and, yes, these are words my father once said to me – when you do finally make the decision to get married, when you've finished your degree and started to get established in your profession, just make sure that whoever you're bringing home isn't already ...already ...shopsoiled.'

He gathered up the dishes and strode back to the kitchen before I could say anything.

I sat for a long time, listening to him moving around the kitchen. I could often tell his mood by the amount of noise he made with the dishes.

Today, everything was soft and smooth with the occasional muted click. I walked into the kitchen to help him. Something about the rounding of his shoulders, as he stooped over the bench, made me feel a rush of sadness and I wanted to put my arms around him and hug him - hug him as Fred had hugged me, but I didn't.

'Dad. I have to go to University and pick up some books. I think I left some books in the Library on Friday. But let me dry these dishes before I go...'

'No, Sam, you go. You go and do what you need to do. Just go.'

He didn't turn around when he said these words and I didn't try to look at his face.

'Thanks, Dad.'

'Son.'

I drove slowly around the sweeping curves of Waterfront Drive. Random pieces of the last twenty-four hours floated through my mind, but I didn't try make any of them stay.

*'Here's to you, Mrs Robinson,
Jesus loves you more than we can say,
Mrs Robinson ...'*

I knew I hadn't got the words quite right.

'Oh God, when am I going to grow up?' I said through the open window. I realised I couldn't face the Library on a Sunday, so I started driving around the city, flirting with the idea of heading for Otara, but ending up quietly going home.

Chapter Fifteen**Michael**

On Monday morning my books were where I'd left them; open on the Library table, passive and endlessly patient, waiting for someone to extract their message and meaning. That someone wasn't going to be me, not today, not now. I read, again, the essay topic I'd written out and left on the top of the pile: 'Discuss patrilineal descent and its implications for land ownership in Tikopia.' One thousand words. Due 25 March.

'Shit, shit, shit!' I mumbled as I packed up the papers and pens that were going to be party to a thousand brilliant words, before Susana had breezed into the library about thirty-six hours ago. Thirty-six hours in which I'd learnt so much and ended up feeling I knew so little. Thirty-six hours of confusion and elation. Thirty-six hours I wanted to live over and over again. Thirty-six hours that had gone forever.

'Shit, shit, shit!'

'You're sounding more erudite than usual, young Sam,' said Michael, grinning and lightly punching my shoulder.

'Jeez, Michael ...I'm... glad to see you...'

I could hear the tremble in my voice.

He looked at me, head on one side, eyebrow raised, frowning. His mouth formed words, but he held back the familiar jabs and jokes.

'Too early for the pub, I guess,' he said. 'Come for a walk or something ...you look like a man who needs to spill his guts to someone, and who better than a long suffering bugger like me...I mean, do you want to talk about it Sammy, do you want to have a bit of a chat, do you? Tell me to piss off and mind my own business, but...?'

I didn't answer, just gathered my books, knowing I was on the edge of tears. I wiped the back of my hand across my eyes, trying to disguise the gesture by combing fingers through my hair.

'Thanks, Michael ...don't know what to say or do...a walk, maybe...can you? Enough time? Lectures ...?'

His knuckles tapped my arm again.

'In the car, ya dopey sad arsed bastard. In the car. I feel a walk around North Head coming on. A walk and fish'n'chips by the wharf and maybe that'll fill in enough time before hitting the Esplanade pub...move it.'

We drove in silence over the Harbour Bridge, my thoughts cascading back to my recent journey here with Susana. I felt the desire to cry, to let my head slump forward and sob out the confusion, the sadness, to just be a kid and let go and yell as I had when Michael had taken my toys when we were at kindergarten. My head shook from side to side as I wrestled for control and I heard a small moan sneak out through my clamped lips.

'You OK mate?'

Michael's gaze alternated between the busy bridge and my slumped head.

'You OK? Like, what's happening, what's the problem?'

I looked at him, breath drawn in, ready to blurt out whatever truth I could find. I felt childish again and the old confusions and griefs from Kindergarten came rushing back.

'The problem is... the problem is...I think someone's about to steal all my toys...'

'All your toys?' he said, concentrating and serious, emphasizing the word 'toys'.

'All your toys?'

The emphasis changed to 'all'.

'Yes ...all my bloody toys ...everything, the whole fucking lot of them ...my toys...'

'All the toys? Bastards!'

The beginning of a smile was trying to pretend it wasn't twitching the corners of his mouth.

'Yes,' I yelled. 'Bullies and bastards, just like you, you dumb bloody ox when you terrorised the Kindergarten, the bloody worst toy bandit of all time, fucking pirate bastard...'

'Yep, that's me, alright, toy bloody bandit from way back and...fuck it, Sam, you're being fucking ridiculous.'

His laughter filled the car, its rumbling richness enveloping my misery and compelling me to join in. I laughed, tearful aching laughter, laughter that

let itself become fuller after hearing Susana and her family laugh. All the bumpy way to Devonport we kept laughing. Every time it started to flag, one of us would say, 'Toys, someone's gonna steal my toys...' and it would start again.

Michael skidded to a halt at the small, gravel car park above Cheltenham Beach. I looked to see if the footsteps Susana and I had made were still there. I gazed at the sand for a long time, partly seeing the beach, partly seeing Susana's face, her smile and the depth of her dark eyes. There were no footsteps left.

'C'mon, mate, time to walk.'

Michael put his arm around my waist, as if we were about to put down a scrum, and steered me towards the track.

'The high road or the low road, beach or mountain top?' he said.

'High road ...and I want to tell you...'

'Nah, don't talk, Sammy, just shut up for a bit, till we get up there, then you can spill your guts for all you're worth, but now let's just listen to the sea, the gulls and the sound of two unfit bastards puffing their way up a minor mountain. Like, let's keep it peaceful for a bit.'

He trudged ahead of me, his solid, wide body keeping a steady pace. I felt myself relax. Everyone should have a front row prop as a friend – there is something comforting about big, square shaped people. They seem more firmly planted on the ground, more reliable, less likely to be buffeted around, more able to see the common sense side of an issue. Wonderful people, front row props. Sure, some of them are thugs, but most of them are like Michael, reassuring because they are not afraid to say bullshit to anyone, anyone at all. I guess one of the reasons why they have so many fights is the fact that the front row is a place of total, unhesitating honesty, a meeting place of the fearless, surprised to find others of equal frankness. They hit each other on the field, wrestle in their mysterious way, then sit in the club together, drinking endless beer, holding long conversations. They have profound thoughts, but seem to need only a few small words every ten minutes, or so, to sustain these thoughts for hours. Sometimes, these conversations would centre on the great men of the front row. One of them would say a name:

'Ken Gray!'

There would be some silent nodding and private recollection.

‘Jazz Muller!’

Quiet murmers and more nods.

‘Played against that bastard in a friendly game we when toured Taranaki. Jesus, friendly!’

The speaker flexed his shoulders in painful recollection.

‘Kevin Skinner!’

Glasses were raised in silent salute to the ultimate hero.

‘Eden Park, fourth test, 1 September 1956 ... shit-o-dear.’

In the Zen world of props no more needed to be said. Each of them would look down into his beer, remembering the sheer beauty of Skinner’s slipped arm and the short uppercuts that told Springbok props, Walker and Bekker, that their nonsense wasn’t going to be tolerated any longer.

Michael started singing about a surfer girl in the falsetto voice the Beach Boys had made acceptable. I watched his squat form stomping uphill ahead of me and I wanted to tell him I was so glad he was my cousin and my friend, even if he had taken my toys; even if he gave me more of a hard time than the others, when we were on the booze.

We stopped beside one of the huge concrete gun emplacements, dug deep in the hillside, many of them joined by a series of interconnecting tunnels. I peered into a tunnel entrance and I remembered being taken into one of them, by my father, when I was about ten. He’d told me they were the darkest places he knew, places where you would not be able see your hand when you held in front of your face. I hadn’t believed him, but found it to be true. Strangely, this hadn’t been a scary experience, more one of wonder. I’d felt tightly wrapped in the depth of the darkness and this had given me a feeling of peace.

‘Might go into this tunnel, just for the hell of it,’ I said to Michael.

‘Shit no!’ he answered. ‘Shit no - they’re bloody scary places those, darkest places I know – could be anything right beside you and you wouldn’t have a clue, not a bloody clue.’

‘Another time, maybe – quite like them, the darkness, it’s almost peaceful and ...’

Michael had begun to stride on uphill, distancing himself from the tunnel entrance. I smiled and followed him.

When we reached the top we fell back onto a gently sloping bank, cushioned by the deep mattress of kikuyu which, after a bit of wriggling around, gave a sense of floating comfort. We both placed our hands behind our heads and looked across the channel to Rangitoto. A small coastal freighter was making its way into the harbour and we watched, in silence, as it followed the channel, seemingly in the wrong direction. We could see the buoy it was heading for and waited, for what seemed a long time, for it to make the sharp turn to port that would take it around the buoy and let it aim more directly for the wharves. Its wake cut long lines across the glassy stillness, the sound of its engine, and the occasional clang of some on board business, came across the water in a way that seemed disconnected. I knew it was a real ship, there below me, making real noises, but that reality seemed blurred and distant, like looking at a familiar face on a photographic negative.

'These bloody tunnels and gun things,' said Michael, when the ship had gone out of sight, 'they built them about 1905 because they...we... were shit scared the Russians were going to come here after they'd had a bit of a go at Japan. They reckoned the Russians were out to take over the world and we needed to build defences as quick as we could. So they did this lot. Never worked out why they thought the Russians would wait for all this earth moving and concreting to be finished before coming here. I mean, it would have taken bloody years to get all this done and then they'd have to hope the Russians sailed a steady course within the range of the bloody guns. You can imagine blowing that coaster to smithereens easily enough, but a warship? Could wait for high tide and come so close to the shore the bloody guns couldn't point anywhere near them. And then, they went to all sorts of trouble to make them disappear into the ground so they would be all secret and hidden, except any Russian spy worth his vodka and ballet girl would've already come here for a picnic and said to himself 'Yavoll, the old disappearing gun trick, must let the chaps back home know.'

'How come you know all this stuff, Michael? Not like you at all at all.'

'History, mate, kinda gets to me, makes me want to know, find myself kinda wondering what they were thinking back then. Hard to figure how they

could be so fucking stupid. But the bastards I feel sorry for are the poor sods who built it all, with their wheelbarrows and shovels, pick axes maybe, if they were lucky. The bosses would be sayin' 'Come on now Smith, just wheel these sixty four barrow loads of concrete up this bloody hill an' at the end of the day we'll give you two an' bloody sixpence, but you should do it for free 'cos we're protecting you and your family from them bloody Russians, and...'

He shook his head and seemed to working himself up to the slow anger that made him so formidable on the field.

'I'd've sorted them out, if I'd been here at the time, found a more sensible way for them to use all their bloody concrete. But too late now...mind you, if you listen to Kiwi Keithie-Boy Holyoake seems like we're still suppose to be terrified of bloody Russians. And those poor little Vietnamese, for chrissake.

He leaned on his elbow and looked at me.

'Not too late to get you sorted though, I reckon, stop you mooching around the place like some sad arsed prick whose just lost his tickets to a test match. So, shoot ...what's it all about?'

I gazed down at the sea, wanting to wait until the wake from the freighter, which was still cutting a gentle arc across the water, to hit the shore and lap its low sounds.

'And I shall have peace there, for peace comes dropping slow...'

'Nah, Sam, don't fob me off with that sort of bullshit. I'm here for a serious chat, not a display of the clever little lines you know from some pom poet. Talk to me Sam, talk to me or I'll bugger off and leave you here on this hillside, *lonely as a bloody cloud* ...'

'It's her uncle, Michael. He scares the shit out of me and I've seen him be more violent than anyone else in my life, but he likes me, I want him to like me and ...'

'Hang on. Her? Which her are we on about here? The delicious Pacific girl who seems to hang on your every word as if you were some kind of scholar? Can we give her a name before we focus on Attila the Uncle?'

'Susana, she's called Susana, Susana Manaiatele.'

I knew I was making a special effort to say 'Manaiatele'.

‘Yeah, OK, Susana’ll do for now. She’s a gorgeous creature, in a kind of Bambi about to run back into the woods way, gorgeous. But the Uncle – not so gorgeous?’

The words began to flow. I told him about taking her home to Otara, being invited inside and feeling so lost I ran away. I didn’t tell him about not being able to ask to use the toilet.

‘Hell, when I tried to play cricket the other Saturday, all I could do was think about her and I kept dropping catches and letting the ball amble past me on its way to the boundary. Thought Mack was going to whack me, he was getting so pissed off ...’

‘Priorities, Samuel, priorities. We can’t ever let a girl interfere with our loyalty to the Grafton Cricket Club, can we?’

I looked at Michael, but he was gazing down the Channel again and I couldn’t tell if he was serious or not.

My words raced on. I told him about meeting Fred, drinking with him and then being chased through the streets of Otara and ending up not giving a stuff. He murmured approval at this part, but was silent, apart from a few tongue clicks, when I told him about Siasia getting a hiding. And their words – their ceaseless flow of words that I had so desperately wanted to understand.

‘And that’s about it, Michael. It was all over on Saturday night – the world’s shortest romance. I told them I knew it couldn’t happen and walked away, walked away, Michael, like someone in a movie, heart broken, but strong.’

I looked at him and gave one of those small laughs that is more blowing air through the nostrils than really laughing.

‘I know it sounds melodramatic, but it was the hardest thing.’

He reached over and squeezed my shoulder.

‘But she followed me Michael, followed me and kissed me in a way I can only describe as full blooded and not like anything I’ve experienced before and told me she would love me for ever and...I don’t know what the fuck to do next!’

Tears did come now. I wiped them away and stared up the harbour, hoping another ship had come into view, but the sea was empty.

‘Let it go, mate, just let it go. It’s bloody 1968 and we can cry if we want to – it’s OK, it’s OK, it’s OK...’

His voice soothed me and I rolled over and buried my head in the damp sponginess of the kikuyu and let myself sob, let myself think of the lonely boy in the bath, let myself think of never seeing Susana again, let myself think of Siaosi’s face as he waited for the next blow. Everything became a giddy spin of ragged breath and seeing images flash across the blackness of my tightly shut eyes. I saw myself in one of the tunnels somewhere beneath us, hiding in the comforting blackness, alone, alone forever. I sank into my weeping and self-pity and felt them exhaust me. I wanted to stay here forever, released and made secure by Michael’s accepting patience and *so/ed* guardianship. I glanced towards him. All I could see was his thick body, sitting like a large rock beside me. I felt safe, for the first time in days.

Despite wanting this moment to last, despite wanting to lie there in the same way I wanted to keep sitting on the muddy field long after the end of an exhausting game, I started dragging myself back into the world. I heard the sounds of a family climbing towards us, my eyes opened and were confronted with the unfocussed brown, yellow and green blur of kikuyu stalks. I blinked and concentrated on the stalks, as if I was filming a Walt Disney nature film, but no interesting wild life came by – no scorpions, no centipedes, not even an ant. I found myself wondering what I would see if I lay in the grass like this in Samoa. The thought made me smile and I knew I would have to sit up and rejoin the world. I snuggled into the grass for a few final minutes, letting a last sob or two wrench itself upwards, then I pushed myself up on my arms and turned into a sitting position.

Michael was still gazing at the nonexistent boat. His elbows rested on his drawn up knees. His hands cradled his chin, fingers across his mouth. He turned to me, eyebrows raised in question.

‘How are you?’

His voice was muffled by his fingers.

‘Yeah.’

‘Yeah?’

‘Yeah – I’m OK. Feel a bit, a bit stupid, I suppose, a bit of an idiot ...a sook...’

Michael dropped his hands and his eyes flared.

‘You fucking piss me off you people, you really do. Here you are, sad, confused, exhausted and messed around, looking, from the first moment I saw you, like a guy who needed a bloody good howl and you end up apologising and saying you’re an idiot. Jesus, give me strength!’

I’d never heard him talk like this.

‘Can’t you see, Sam? I mean, do you truly think you’ve been an idiot? Are you wanting to cover up in case I tell the other guys, or your anally blocked bloody parents or something? I’ve watched them, my whole family’s watched them, gather together their fortune, their lovely home and all those bloody china figures Aunt Miriam keeps collecting and dusting and rearranging. She loves them, all neat and tidy in their glass cabinets and that’s where she wants you, mate, dusted and safe, perfect gentleman. But it ain’t gonna be like that – you’ve got too many guts for that to happen. I’ve known you too long, played in too many games with you to ever believe you’re glass cabinet material. You’re for the real world Sam, like it or bloody not. You’re going be out there, getting into danger, playing your heart out for whatever team you’re in. You’re destined to drink, to laugh too loudly, to get into fights, to have dopey mates, to only just scrape through university, to get the occasional root, if you’re lucky, and to have a great, wonderful bloody life. But you’re gonna get hurt now and then, like you just have been. And when you get hurt, you’re gonna want to cry, so just do it. Say ‘...*ouch that hurt and I’m sad and I’m going to shed tears about it*’. That’s what I do. That’s what my dad does and my big lugs of brothers. And everyone else I know who isn’t locked into thinking admitting to pain is somehow disloyal to the bloody Empire!’

I felt myself grinning at my wonderful cousin, who’d been my safety net ever since he got the toy ownership thing sorted out.

‘Thanks. You’re pretty bloody rude about my folks, but thanks.’

I could laugh now, without desperation or irony. A soft, easy laugh. My own laugh perhaps?

‘One more thing, Sam, before we go and find those fish’n’chips you promised me - if anyone asks me about you I’m going to say you were so bloody sad you had to come up to the top of a hill and bawl your bloody eyes out. Is that OK? Can you cope with that?’

I thought for a long time.

‘Yeah, it’s OK. I can’t believe it, but it is. Yeah, I can cope.’

I gave his arm a bit of a punch and we came down off the mountain.

Chapter Sixteen**A Prop's Advice**

Michael headed straight to the fish and chip shop instead of the pub.

'Every bugger can tell you a feed of greasies will kill a good thirst, even make you want to drink something poffie like white wine, but I'm famished. All this bloody emotion makes a man hungry.'

I opened my mouth to speak, but he sensed I was going to apologise and he held his hand up like a traffic cop.

The fish and chip shop was dark. There was a blue and white striped tarpaulin stretched over the lower third of the window and the top third was dusty stained glass, with mermaids sitting on shells and seahorses, their long blonde hair draped over their shoulders and breasts. I wanted to offer to give the window a bit of a clean. A fly-browed light bulb gave the shop a sepia glow.

We leaned against the wooden counter, with its tall white scales and pile of newspapers, and waited for someone to serve us. After a few minutes, Michael tapped on the counter with the side of a coin. A short, square woman came out.

'Yes.'

It was neither a question nor a statement, just an announcement that she was there and would do what we asked. She picked up a pencil, her grip on it having the awkwardness of a skill learned long after childhood, and held it poised over a triangle of white paper ripped from the large roll in an ornate brass holder.

'Yes.'

The word carried weariness and that heavy eastern European accent we all called 'Dallie'. Her thick fingers gripped the pencil, waiting for our decision, but we took too long, so she put it down and wiped her hands across her the faded blue cornflowers of her apron and gazed towards the window. The light caught her face, giving it a brief moment of colour, but this did little to change its emptiness. It was a face that could have been made from cold mashed potato, heavy and lumpy, moulded without precision and clean lines, porous and absorbent, taking in the gloom, the fat laden steam and the

drudgery of her work. Had she come to New Zealand as a young girl, full of hope, the shining sap of youth and adventure making her glow with vitality and energy? Or was she already sad enough to have adopted a cloak of drabness to insulate herself from the memory of some pain and horror. Was she just weighed down by the prospect of cleaning, cutting and cooking fish for the rest of her life?

‘Yes.’

This was no louder, and with no greater intonation, than the previous two times.

‘I would like,’ I said, speaking in my best private school voice, ‘I would like two pieces of fish, please, battered, and, say, a scoop of chips, thank you, and my friend will be having...?’

‘Yep. Same as him and half a dozen mussels.’

She didn’t need to write it down. She took a tray of fish fillets from the fridge, grey with stripes of maroon, and picked one up in her fingertips, holding it as if she was holding the tail of a dead mouse, and dipped it into a stainless steel bowl of batter. A couple of shakes and into a deep wire basket. She did this three more times, added two large handfuls of bleached chips and plunged the basket into the trough of hot fat behind her. The fat broke into a minor, bubbling, frothing eruption before closing, like a pool of blue smoking quicksand, over the basket.

‘The mussels, you forgot the mussels. Half a dozen ...six.’

‘Yes.’

Into the fridge again her hands coming out with six already battered and precooked mussels. She let these slid down her fingers into the fat, leaning her body away from the aggressive reception they received.

She wrote \$4.20 on the triangle of white paper and gave it to me.

Michael laughed as I paid.

We waited in silence, some of which I spent studying the faded chart of New Zealand fish on the wall. I wondered, vaguely, if I would ever catch a ling or a leatherjacket or a frostfish. The silence was shattered by the banging of the wire basket against the edge of the trough. Loud, harsh bangs, very different from the tap, tap, tap of the jovial man we went to in St Heliers. She spread out several sheets of newspaper and whacked the golden pile onto

them. I wanted to stop her from putting on too much salt, but by the time I formed the words salt was hailing out of the can. She wrapped up the parcels with quick expertise, tucking the ends under for security and sliding them across the counter towards me.

‘Thank you,’ I said. ‘Thank you – we came here because we heard you make the best fish and chips on the North Shore, the very best!’

‘Yes,’ she said, without looking at me.

Michael and I sat on the sea wall, picking up the hot food in our finger tips, wiping away some of the salt and then having to wipe the grease off our fingers either onto the paper or, in Michael’s case, onto his jeans.

‘Why were you so fucking polite, Sammy, so best bloody manners, so ‘...these are the best fish’n’chips in the whole wide world?’

‘God, I dunno. She seemed so sad, so flat. Thought it might cheer her up, speaking to a nice young man like me. She probably has to take all sorts of shit from the naval ratings from around the corner and I thought...’

‘Well, you’re a bloody expert on the nice wee man stuff, but I don’t think it made a lot of difference. She put on enough salt to kill a couple of bloody elephants.’

. Michael insisted I eat a mussel. I chewed on its flavourless elasticity for several minutes before taking it out of my mouth and throwing it into the sea, much to the delight of a whirling cloud of sprats that materialised from nowhere.

‘You ever caught a leatherjacket?’ I asked.

Michael was wrestling with a mussel, half clamped between his teeth, the other half pulled by his fingers in an attempt to reduce it to a manageable size.

‘Mmmuuh,’ he voiced through clenched teeth. ‘Great fish – gotta dive for them. Spear guns.’

We ate on in silence until I was quick enough to grab the last chip from his package.

‘Greedy bugger,’ he said, screwing the paper into a ball and lobbing it, unsuccessfully towards a bin. He heaved himself off the wall, picked it up, and slam-dunked on top of the other rubbish.

‘Well. How are we going to sort you out?’

I looked at the sea. I’d been lulled by my moment of grief on the mountain and by the easy familiarity of the buying and eating of fish and chips. I didn’t want to return to the rawness of facing up to anything to do with Susana.

‘Sort me out? Don’t know really, but I do feel better than I did thanks to, thanks to our little trip up the mountain and everything. Probably just needed a good feed of fish’n’chips to put me right and ...’

‘Evasive bastards, you backs, aren’t you? Think you can dodge and side step and get around big plodding guys like me, but not this time, my son, not this time. You’re here and I’ve got you cornered and think we need a serious little chat, like a heart to heart, like the whole truth and nothing but...’

I looked down. The tide had just reached the sea wall we were sitting on, bringing with it patches of brown foam and a handful of urban litter – bus tickets, plastic bags, a clothes peg and a piece of yellow string. I focussed on these and on the silence around us.

‘Do y’tthink anything valuable ever gets washed up on a beach like this?’

‘Come on, Sammy, come on mate – we’re not here to be bloody beach combers, so why don’t you tell me about the girl, give me some idea of why you’re so bloody het up?’

‘I think I’m in love with her. No, more than think – I am in love with her –totally...’

I studied the way the yellow string had become wound around a small rock.

‘She’s all I think about, all I want, everything, the whole package, everything ...’

‘So – have you poked her yet?’

I jumped up on the wall and stared down at him, fists clenched.

‘Bugger ya, Michael, stuff your simple minded bloody crudity – it’s not like that, it’s not like your Saturday night back of the car bloody stuff!’

‘So you haven’t, but you desperately want to. Why else would you be dancing along this sea wall like a demented idiot? And don’t bloody kick me,

or even think about it, because I'll throw you in the bloody tide if you do. Sit down and talk – that's what we're here for, isn't it?

I spent several minutes of looking at the flotsam at my feet and then at his face.

I told him everything, even though he knew bits of the story already. He heard, without a murmur, all the details of my visits to her place, my feelings when I touched her, the confusion caused by her last kiss. I told him I wanted to be with her forever. Even as I said this, I thought of the initials we'd seen carved on rocks and park benches: '*L & C 4 Eva!*': how trite, how American they had seemed.

'I want to be with her forever, always. So there, that's the size of it, Michael, that's the whole story. And I don't care if you laugh, it doesn't matter. Just don't try to make it cheap, that's all.'

It was Michael's turn to stare at the water. I wanted to ask if he could see the piece of yellow string.

'You're not twenty two for a couple of months are you?'

'So? Has my age got anything to do with anything?'

I knew I was using the tone I sometimes used when my father questioned me.

'It's just that you're young, bloody young, we're all bloody young, too young for a serious relationship, yet, if you ask me. Let alone the cultural, racial bloody thing...shit!'

'I don't think I'm too young, too young at all.'

Why couldn't I talk about this without sounding like a pop song?

'Well, the thing is,' said Michael, 'the thing is that inevitably, if you'll pardon the expression, sex is going to rear its ugly head, and whadda ya going to do then? Like when I mentioned it you started dancing along the sea wall like a Hottentot on the warpath and threatened to kick shit out of me. Out of me, your cousin, your friend. Jesus!'

I couldn't answer.

'God! Don't get on your high horse, don't go prancing along the bloody wall again, but what you're into with this Susana is too bloody complicated. It'll cost you too much. It'll just happen and then she'll get full of guilt and rush off and tell her pastor and then he'll tell the family and there'll be

hell to pay and you'll end up getting married, or dead, if you're lucky. Shit it'd be worse than being with a catholic girl – at least they can confess with a degree of privacy.'

He paused while his stubby forefinger picked a piece of mussel from between his teeth.

'I mean, I can meet one of the girls from the basketball team on a Saturday night after we've played our games and had a few drinks and it all seems healthy and natural, if you know what I mean? And fun, yes, good friendly fun, but no one's hurt or taking themselves too seriously, or getting pregnant or throwing their lives away because of love and stars in their eyes and having to make big bloody promises. And that's how it should be, Sammy, for a while yet, for a while, until you've sorted out what you're gonna do with your bloody life. And then you might pick one you've got on well with and make it long term, have kids and buy a house – like old Zorba the Greek said, enrol for the '*full catastrophe*'. But with someone who knows what you need to do. Like you've got to have enough time to be an idiot and tear around and do things your folks think are dangerous or stupid, or both, before you risk thinking you're in love.'

'I am in love and I know I'm up somewhere dangerous and too high, but I don't know how to climb down, don't want to climb down, just want her to climb with me ...for ever.'

Michael blew a long breath through his hand.

'Mate,' he said. 'My poor old fucked up mate. You know that if you jump into bed with her, feeling like this, you'll be lost and gone forever. And, shit, the love thing's only half the story, and you know it. She's Samoan. She's not from here. I'm sure they're great people, for all I know, and some of their guys are deadly on the field, that's for sure, but she speaks differently, speaks another language mainly, even when you're around according to what you've told me. And she might be clever and educated, but her family sound like a pack of bloody head-hunters, if you ask me. And then she's bloody religious, for God's sake. It's so much easier if you stay in your own paddock, so much easier.'

He was shaking his head and chuckling.

‘And your folks? Can you imagine introducing her to your folks and them trying to cope? Or introducing them to Uncle Fred – you just couldn’t!’

‘I’ve told them. And they want me to bring her around to dinner one night and I’ve asked her and that’ll all work out, I know it will.’

‘Jesus wept!’

‘Love can conquer all.’

‘Can it? I’m sorry, Sammy, but I don’t think so. You remember when we went to see ‘*Lawrence of Arabia*’ movie a few years ago – Peter O’Toole and all those Arabs and desert sand and burning sun and...?’

‘Course I remember. One of the greatest movies ever.’

‘Exactly, Sam, it grabbed you and you thought it was great and you wanted to go to Arabia with a tea towel around your stupid head and live the whole bloody deal over again.’

‘Shit, be fair Michael, I was only about fifteen at the time. We were all a bit carried away by it, weren’t we?’

‘I guess. I got hold of his book, you know, ‘Seven Pillars of Wisdom’ and it all seemed different. He reckoned it’s dumb to love strangeness because of its strangeness. Is some of that happening here? Is Susana so attractive just because she’s so different, such a contrast to your family? You’re just so much better off, as I see it, to stay in your own bloody paddock and enjoy what’s there.’

I didn’t answer. I realised how little I knew about Michael.

Suddenly, he heaved himself off the sea wall, stood on the footpath and stretched.

‘Better be getting back, I reckon. I don’t think we’ve solved anything, but we’d better have a look at the books before another day drifts by.’

I wondered if he’d become bored or just decided I was a hopeless case and he was wasting his time.

‘Yeah...and thanks, Mike. Don’t know what I’m going to do, but I feel a whole shitload better than I did before you ... before we came over here. A whole shitload.’

He put his arms around me and hugged me.

‘Anytime, anytime. What you should do is come with me down the Windmill Road courts, as soon as the season starts, and see if we can find

you some nubile young thing, in a short gym frock, who'll be attracted to your soulful look and let you find solace in her loving arms, all as rounded and elegant as the limbs of a gum tree and ...'

I punched his arm again.

'You know I won't, but thanks for the thought...'

'Don't reject my basketball girls too hastily, Sammy. Some of them are just so beautiful and, what's probably more to the point, they're probably going to stay that way, more or less. Your Susana, she's gorgeous all right, but what about in a few years? If you look at some of their woman, when they get on a bit, they become a bit...well, a bit hefty, you might say.'

He chuckled at his own description.

'Women of substance, indeed.'

More chuckles.

I didn't answer and tried to keep images of Auntie Valu out of my mind. We were almost back at University when another thought hit me.

'Jes' Michael, we never went to the pub, never bought you a beer. Help, how could that've happened? Sorry. Do you want us to go to the Kiwi or something?'

'She's right, mate. To tell you the truth, I don't specially like drinking, just go along with it to fit in with the rest of you.'

Chapter Seventeen**Heart to Heart with Susana**

Of course I didn't see her on the Tuesday, despite spending the whole day in the Library. I worked on the essay. The belief that if I was to see Susana I would need to stay in the Social Sciences section meant I ended up putting in more effort and research than was my usual practice. By the end of the day I had an essay that gave me a warm glow. I knew I would come to see its faults, probably with the assistance of the lecturer's pencilled comments, crossing outs and loud question marks, but for now I thought it was one of my best. The word 'elegant' kept coming to mind. I had to trust elegance would compensate for lateness.

She was not at the lecture on Wednesday.

I wanted to see her, but I knew I didn't know what to say, or what to do, when I did see her, so her absence was almost a relief. I was able to handle spending time working and mulling over the things Michael had said. I was starting to think he'd been right when he'd talked about the dangers of straying into the paddock of another culture. I knew if Susana had been a Pālagi girl I might have still found things difficult, but I wouldn't have had this feeling of powerlessness. I would have been able to do something – to ring up, to visit, to speak to her mother, or perhaps even write a letter. Susana had told me never to write to her because whoever happened to collect letters from their letterbox opened them and read them, regardless of who they were addressed to. In my family, such an action would have been a moral breach as serious as squeezing the toothpaste tube from the top or leaving the toilet seat up.

I was not happy, but I wasn't feeling the roller coaster of emotion I felt when I was with her. In the dreamy moments that punctuated my essay writing, I began to see myself as someone who'd had a major accident, like losing a leg, but was coming to terms with the trauma and was now focussed on learning to walk as best he could. Words like courage and endurance and adjustment became important to me, in my quiet world of pain, indecision and research into Tikopian land ownership. I didn't see Michael, or any of my friends, although later they claimed they'd tried to speak to me and I'd ignored them.

On the Thursday morning, just as the clock was telling the world it was ten, she appeared, clacking her way across the tiles of the clock tower foyer. She spotted me, leaning against one of the pillars. I kept my leaning as casual as I could, for several seconds and then we both ran across the floor towards each other. People around us seemed to drop off the Earth. To say she threw herself into my arms is probably an exaggeration, but that's what it felt like. We held each other for a long time, wordless and only gradually aware that we were attracting stares and gentle laughter. I drew away from her. Our hands still linked, unable for long minutes, to do anything more than smile.

'I've missed you, Susana.'

'I've missed you, Sammy.'

'Where have you been?'

'Where have you been?'

Slow smiling talk while the tide of university business flowed around us.

'Coffee?'

'Coffee.'

We sat in the corner of the cafeteria, saying little, sipping our coffee, smiling, reaching across the table to touch each other's hands. I knew I had to start talking seriously, but wanted to put this off for as long as possible. It was like the weta on my arm. I'd known I had to get rid of it, but had delayed doing so for as long as I could, because I feared the pain any action might generate. Questions, some of them spawned by Michael, but most of them centred on the last time I'd seen her, had anchored themselves in my mind and I kept giving them form, but not quite asking them. Some, like Auntie Valu's exact weight, I told myself not to ask.

Eventually, I managed to say: 'So, where were you on Monday and Tuesday and Wednesday?'

I pulled a face, and said 'Wednesday' in an exaggerated way, so it would seem I wasn't too desperate.

'Family things.'

She looked down when she said this.

‘Just family things – getting ready for my mother to come here. Family things. We call them ‘*fa’alavelave*’ in our language. It sort of means troubles, things you have to do because you’re in a family – troubles. Troubles that need time and money and work and lots of speeches before they are over.’

She smiled a small smile.

It felt like I was being trusted with secrets and I loved it. I cupped my hand under my chin and looked at her very attentively. I wanted to hear every word, but she stopped speaking.

‘Your mother?’

‘The end of next week. She won’t be able to get here until the end of next week. It’s terrible, Sammy, ...bloody.... terrible and I hate them for not letting her on the plane now, today, because she’s sick and has to get to the hospital and they just play games and don’t understand.’

I looked for the tears. They’d become familiar and I welcomed the way they made me feel close to her.

‘Your mother? Your mother – is she as big as your aunt?’

Shit, shit, shit – why do I say these things?

‘My mother is small, short. She is not a big person. She may not be big enough to fight the diseases in her body.’

The crassness of my question hadn’t registered with her. She cried freely when she talked about her mother and I reached over and took both her hands in mine.

She smiled the tired sad smile I’d seen before when I’d said things she found incomprehensible.

There was a long silence, but it wasn’t the same as the silence Michael and I had enjoyed on North Head. It was a silence I felt I had to change. I wanted her to be smiling, happy, cheeky and flirtatious. I wanted us to dance through the park and then find somewhere quiet, with only the two of us. I wanted to find some sense in last Saturday night. I wanted to know what the hell we were going to do next.

‘What do you want to do?’ I asked.

‘I must do some study, Sam, must try and catch up with the work I’ve missed, go to the Library...’

When she talked like this I knew she would move away into her serious world and be lost to me for many days. I wasn't going to let this happen.

'Tell me about Siao Si. Tell me why your family treats him so badly.'

'Siao Si? Do we treat him badly? You think we treat him badly?'

She was sitting upright, hands clasped in front of her, her lower lip pushed slightly forward.

'Is that what you think, Sam?'

She wasn't going to the library, for a while.

'Yes – yes I do. I'm sorry, but I do. How could I think otherwise when I saw, when we saw, Fred beat the shit out of him the other night? As far as I can see, he's a servant, a slave almost, around your place and your family bashes him whenever they feel like it. And that's terrible, isn't it? Don't you think it's terrible? Or are you used to it and don't think it matters anymore?'

Her face told me she was thinking of storming away from our table. She started to say things and then stopped. She moved her hands, and her long elegant fingers, in the space between us, making circular motions that spoke of confusion and frustration, then she sighed, her hands became still, their palms towards me.

'I can't talk about this here, Sam. Can we go and walk in the park and maybe I can make you understand, maybe I can make you see I hate you talking about us, about my family, in this way. Talking as if you know us.'

I stood up and we headed for the park. This wasn't one of the comfortable, timeless strolls we'd had before, with hands touching, accidentally and deliberately, and gentle smiles bubbling like a pot of soup on a farmhouse stove. This was business and she made us walk quickly.

'Do you understand about Siao Si? Do you understand the gift we have given him?'

'The gift? Punching his mouth is not exactly a gift, is it?'

She glared and I felt a thrill go through me.

'Our gift ...'

She stopped and sat on the grass in a single graceful movement. I flopped down beside her. She didn't speak again until I'd heaved myself into a respectable sitting position.

‘Our gift is making him part of our family, our ‘aiga. Taking him from the village where he was like an orphan with bad people treating him like he was a dog. We are the ones who saved him by bringing him into our family. And then...’

She paused, frowning at the seriousness of what she was about to say.

‘And then we brought him to New Zealand!’

‘To New Zealand. To this cold and sad land. Was it a gift to bring him here or some strange kind of punishment? To take him from a beautiful tropical island and place him in Otara, with its conflicts, its ugly houses, its lack of trees, its streets with dead shopping trundlers lying around with their legs in the air ...’

I felt myself warming to this speech, wanting to say more, but her look stopped me. The emotion I read on it was not the anger, or the sadness, I’d expected. It was something I can only call compassion – the kind of indulgence I’d felt for Michael’s little brother when he tried so hard to kick a football around with us but didn’t have the speed, strength or skill to keep up. We’d let him in for a while and then told him to piss off. He’d been heart broken.

I waited for her next words.

‘You have no idea, do you Sam? You are so clever at Anthropology and your lecturers are even more clever than you are, but none of you have a clue what it’s all about, why we come here to your miserable little country - to your cold and sad land.’

‘Well, seeing I’m so bloody ignorant, you’d better tell me, better lighten my darkness, so to speak.’

She gave me a long look.

‘We come here, Sam, we come here...’

She was speaking very slowly, enunciating every word like a reading teacher.

‘We come here because it’s better, because here we can hope things will get better, maybe not for us, but for the children, for those to come. We don’t have that hope when we’re in the Island. We know we can’t have that

hope because you have taught us that we are small and ... and ... insignificant in this world.'

'Taught you? How?'

'So many ways, Sammy, in so many ways. You have made us look at our lives and know there might be a better way ...an easier way to do things and we have to try, we have to try to have it. I used to laugh with the other girls when we cut the grass with the long knives and think we were having fun together, until, one day, I saw one of your motor mowers going up and down, up and down doing the whole thing so quickly and realised we'd been wasting our time and that's when I hated using the bush knife.'

I was 'Sammy' again and I felt her anger was fading away. Whatever had made me want to challenge her started to evaporate.

'We come here and then go back and tell the others and they don't hear about the hard parts, don't believe us about the hard parts. They don't understand about cold and getting out of bed early and never being home in the sunlight when it's winter. They just see what we've got, what we've been able to bring back. They see we have become fatter and sleeker while we've been away. You know I can tell, everyone can tell, the people who've lived in New Zealand, just by looking at them. At Christmas, when so many come back for their holiday we see them and we know who they are, even the people we've never seen before. Sammy, you know we don't really have a word that means 'holiday', just words for 'a day of rest', which is the best you can hope for back there.'

'But the beauty, the warm trade winds, the laid back lifestyle, the white sand of the beaches and the gentle waters of the lagoon and...'

'People do shit in the lagoon. They build little wharf things over the water, I think you call them jetties, with little houses on the end of them, we call them 'bicycle houses'. And all the village go there and shit. And you know all those beautiful, colourful little tropical fish, the ones you people keep in your special fish tanks and go 'oooh aaah' whenever you look at them? Well, those fish come and eat the shit and it's all disgusting.'

'So you came here for the toilets?'

'The worst thing about you, Sam, apart from the fact that you don't bother to go to church, is that you try to be clever and smart, especially when

you should be listening and understanding that this talk is so sad and painful for me. It's not dumb just to listen. I'm not going to think there's anything the matter with you if you don't talk. All you people, you find it so hard to stop, to stop being clever. You're so clever it just turns you into another dumb Pālagi'

She stood up and stomped off, past the fountain and on her way to the library. I knew better than to follow her.

Chapter Eighteen

More Talk

‘Sam, there’s someone on the telephone for you.’

My mother liked to chat with people who rang me up. If it was Michael, she would say his name and ‘dear’ in every second sentence and become deeply interested in his education. She would laugh and then talk softly, as if to a fellow conspirator, plotting the overthrow of one of my dreams. Michael said their talks were as gentle, clinging and dangerous as quicksand. He avoided ringing. When she said ‘someone is on the phone’ it carried a small hint that proper people gave their names and those who didn’t were not quite the ones who should benefit from the considerable sum of money we paid in telephone rental.

She handed me the phone and began rearranging the immaculate looking flowers on the table just a little further down the hall.

‘This is Susana.’

There was such a hint of laughter about her first words that I knew who it was before she said her name.

‘I thought I was a dumb Pālagi you didn’t want to talk to.’

‘You are a dumb Pālagi, but I do want to talk with you. Was that your mother?’

‘Yes, she’s arranging the flowers.’

‘Oi ...ua mai ‘oe, sole?’

‘I’m a dumb Pālagi, remember. But I want to talk with you, so never mind the flower power ...just talk to me.’

My mother walked to the kitchen. I felt the air move as she went past, just as it does when you’re umpiring and you have pissed off the bowler and feel his anger come at you in waves when he runs in for the next ball.

‘How did you know my number? I never told you this number.’

Laughter.

‘Phone book. I mean, I might be a dumb Samoan, but is there another way?’

Laughter, from both of us. Where were the speeches I’d made up last night? Where were all the telling points she would never be able to answer?

Where was the 'never walk away from me, even if we are having an argument?'

'But can you help me Sammy, please?'

'Help you? With your work?'

Why did I ask? I knew I would do whatever it was.

'Will you drive me to the airport so we can pick up my mother from the plane?'

'No! How could I possibly do that? Your academic mother, the one who wants to keep you one hundred percent traditional Samoan? Terrifying!'

'Did you say 'no' Sam? Did you say you wouldn't take us in your little green car?'

'How can I? You and I aren't supposed to see each other. It's supposed to be over. And you are angry with me anyway, in case you've forgotten.'

'I can be angry with you later, but I want it to be a quiet time when she gets picked up – not all the family. And I don't want them to get off work, because sometimes you can lose the job if you say you are sick and then they find you at the airport, or at some fa'alavelave, some family thing and...'

'When?'

'Her plane comes at five am on Saturday 13 April...in the morning. You need to pick me up at 4.30am ... or you could sleep the night at our house and...'

Whoa!

'I need to ask you now even though it's eight days away and I know you play your cricket on a Saturday and...

'Cricket season'll be finished by then. I'll pick you up – that's if I take you. I can't do it unless, I mean, there's so much to talk about and...you know I asked you to come here for dinner.'

'Ou'oi! Yes. I said I would, but when?'

'Tell her Wednesday the tenth at 6pm,' said my mother from down the hallway, not looking up from the flowers.

'My mother says Wednesday ...'

'Ou'oi...I heard her.'

‘Susana, we have to talk, sort of more privately, just the two of us. This afternoon, I’ll meet you by the Morton Bay Fig- you know, the big tree, the one with the roots growing out of the ground like the legs of a dinosaur, you know...’

‘The one where I kissed your surprised face for the first time, that one?’

‘Yes, that one...at two o’clock.’

I started to tell her she could surprise me again, but she’d hung up.

I wandered into the kitchen, where my mother was still washing whatever contamination she may have picked up from the flowers off her hands.

‘Am I right in saying that was the overseas girl you met at University?’

I let three possible replies die on my lips.

‘Susana, yes, that was Susana. Susana from Samoa, Western Samoa.’

‘It was easy to understand her on the phone. If nothing else, she has an awareness of the need to pronounce the consonants at the ends of words- something you don’t find with so many people who were born here.’

‘G’bye, Mudda. Won’ be in for dinna.’

‘Stop being silly, Sam. I’m pleased she’s agreed to come to dinner. That’s a good sign. I mean some of them never move away from their own people so I don’t understand how they expect to learn, don’t understand at all. I will find it fascinating to meet her. Tell her not to be worried - just let her know we welcome anyone to our house, anyone at all.’

There were no surprises when I met Susana. She smiled and leant against me, but she had taken my hands in hers and held them down against our sides. I was not to develop this into a deeper embrace. There were no tears or outbursts. It felt as if we were work mates meeting to discuss some issue at the office.

‘Let’s not talk, Sammy. Let’s just be together. I’m tired of all the talking we do, tired of feeling like I’m in a court case or something.’

I released my right hand and ran it across her head.

'I know. But, Siaozi. What I saw has become a kind of wall, something I can't climb over.'

She sat down, not cross-legged on the ground, as she usually did, but on the rounded root of the Morton Bay fig. She smoothed her long skirt over her legs. I was reminded of a lecturer trying the informality of teaching outside, but wanting to ensure his status didn't slip.

'I was so angry with you Sam, because you think you can tell me about how we should behave. You think you can be the judge of our lives, the one who knows so much you can tell me we're wrong about Siaozi and the way we look after people. Don't you know that I too would be hit if I was lazy and didn't listen? It's like you can't see that you people are so much more violent than us. Sure, our people get whacked and punched and I don't know how many times I've been hit with a salu, but that's all we do – punch and slap and hit the kids when they're cheeky. But not you and your people. You have planes and guns and big ships and bombs. You don't have to look at anyone – just press the button or pull the lever and suddenly hundreds or thousands of people are injured or dead. Somehow because you don't see the blood or hear the screams you think you're not being violent. Huh! You go on about Siaozi and don't give me a chance to talk about Vietnam. They burn people there, burn off their clothes and their skin and leave them to run down the road. Even little kids ... even little kids.'

I looked down, thought of some words, looked up, drew breath, opened my mouth and then looked down again. Was I learning to be silent, or was it that there was nothing to be said? I had seen the same pictures on TV.

'I couldn't sleep last night Sam. You'd made me mad and I hate it when it feels like you are too far away. And those photos wouldn't go out of my head. I know we punish Siaozi, but we never burn him, or blow his arms or feet off or feed him poisonous air or anything like that. We just don't, even when he makes us all mad with him. Like when I had to explain all these words the doctor said about my mother's illness to the family because the doctor realised I knew more English than Auntie and kept talking to me. It was funny telling the family because I couldn't do it without holding onto my own breast and showing them where they would cut if they had to. And where the radiotherapy might happen. All of them just listened except for Siaozi who

had a silly look on his face as if he'd found me swimming or something. I wanted to hit him, Sam, can you understand that?'

I stared at her, at the breast she had been talking about. I forced myself to treat words as if they were errant hands and sit on them. After what seemed an age of looking at each other and looking away, our fingers joined a warm informality that told me I could relax.

'I'm glad you want me to meet your parents,' she said. 'Glad and so scared.'

Chapter Nineteen**Dinner, Wednesday 10 April 1968**

Susana's outfit seemed longer, whiter and more carefully ironed than her usual university clothes.

'Are you going to church?'

'No, Sam, I'm going to have dinner with your family, in case you'd forgotten. Will they hate these clothes?'

'You look lovely. They'll think you're lovely - just like a princess.'

She looked at me in a way that made me want to start again. I knew how easily I could let myself blunder down a wrong path. Paths I entered without knowing why and then found too slippery to leave. A bad start, but the day had felt weird and wrong from the moment I woke in the dark to the sound of rain hitting the window. Not the snuggle down under the blankets cosy sort of rain, but Genghis Khan and his furiously galloping warriors kind of rain, attacking our house and shaking its solid serenity. Rain that didn't belong in this suburb: rain that made the University even more like a cowshed, with everyone milling around, the weather uniting us by robbing us of usual routines. Rain and wind that let me talk to strangers.

'Sorry, you look great, you'll be great.'

'Take me to coffee or the pictures, Sam. I know it's only lunchtime, but I can't work. The storm. Your parents.'

We ran down the path through the park, our park, made close and laughing by the blown out umbrella and the need to shelter behind the trunk of one of the Morton Bay figs that seemed to give me the reassurance I imagined would come from older brothers.

'It's like Tolkein, this tree, this storm' I said.

'What?'

Tolkein - Lord of the Rings, Hobbit – you know?'

'No I don't know.'

Her head turned away from me, not avoiding the rain.

'Why do you talk about things I don't know about, Sam? Don't you know I already think I will forget how to speak English tonight? Just sit there

with my head down while you and your family talk about The Lord of the Rings and I want to ask if it's a church or a book or a person or...'

Michael's words kept coming back to me and I felt I had do something quickly before the fences between our paddocks became too high.

'The pictures – let's just run and forget the rain. Julie Christie and *'Far From the Madding Crowd'* it's still on and...'

'No, Sam, something easy, please. Something that doesn't make me have to try hard.'

We made it to the two o'clock session of *'For a Few Dollars More'* at the St James. For a couple of hours it felt like it was just the two of us at the pictures, safe from the rain, safe from dinner time: holding hands and drawing in breath as we let the fates of unshaven cowboys become the most important thing in our world. Every time the baddie started the music box tinkle of his pocket-watch to signal he was about to gun someone down, she would reach over, clutch my arm and bury her face into my shoulder.

Outside, on the Queen St footpath I felt rested; felt we were more at peace with each other. The buffeting wind and rain were now a welcome refreshment after the closeness of the theatre. We began to run down the street, Susana yodelling an exaggerated version of the sound track's *did-da-da-aaa*, its coyote loneliness diminished by her giggles.

A small crowd was gathered in front of a shop, listening to a radio set up in the doorway. We stopped, became part of the crowd and gradually came to realise the scratchy words were about the death throes of the inter island ferry, Wahine. She was on her side on the Seatoun coast, pounded by waves, and by the ferocity of the biggest storm in years.

'Oh my God, people will be drowning, right now, drowning, the poor things!' said the woman beside us, clutching her bag to her chest, 'Real people...my God, I'll be late for my bus!'

She hurried away. We listened on in silence, Susana as close to me as she had been at the sound of the pocket watch, taking in this new deathly countdown, real, but more remote than anything we'd heard in the theatre.

'Let's go,' I said, 'we can't do anything.'

We moved through the crowd, but stopped on the edge and listened for a few more minutes. Everyone was silent, transfixed by the news reader's solemn and steady voice. We didn't want to be the only ones talking.

We walked back up the hill. No more running, no yodelling. When we got to the car I turned on the radio and we listened to detail after detail as we drove around Auckland's waterfront. On any other stormy day I would have stopped the car and made Susana stand on the seawall with me, arms outstretched and mouths open in the wind, jumping away from the bigger waves and laughing. But not today, not when others were trying to stay afloat as the same storm took them across Wellington Harbour to the steep, sharp rocks of Eastbourne. Not today.

The quiet red stone chips on our driveway gave me the reassuring whisper that I was home. I switched off the ignition.

'Here we are, then. Are you OK? I know they'll think you are wonderful and I'll try not to talk about Tolkein or be too smart or...'

She put her fingers on my lips.

'It's okay, Sam. I'll manage. Those poor people.'

My parents had dressed up.

'Are you going to church?' I asked.

They, and Susana, looked me long enough to make me feel like the scruffy outsider.

Susana moved up the steps and extended her hand to my father.

'I'm so pleased to meet you, Mr Hereford.'

She reached over with her free hand and squeezed my mother's forearm, 'And you, Mrs Hereford, so pleased.'

She smiled an even bigger smile than ever, her head tipped back, nose high and eyes looking from one to the other. The three of them moved inside, holding hands, talk starting to bubble. I followed feeling even more scruffy.

The sitting room fire was going, chairs drawn up close, candles lit on the mantle piece, casting subtle shadows on the pieces of Royal Doulton currently in favour. Vivaldi's Four Seasons eased its way across the room from the radiogram in the corner, slightly scratchy and just loud enough to fill any gaps in the conversation.

My father stood leaning against the mantelpiece, as he did when he was waiting to be told what drinks to fetch. My mother was sitting upright, her back not quite touching the chair, not letting herself fully explore its potential for comfort. Susana sat, hands clasped in front of her, head still high, upright, but using the entire chair. I flopped down, my arse on the edge of my seat, body slumped backwards, chin on my chest, as relaxed as a cowboy before a gunfight. My father looked at me over his glasses and raised his eyebrows. I sat up.

‘Well, what would everyone like to drink? Could you manage a gin, today, my dear? And Susana? What can we get you?’

‘A cup of Milo, please, if that’s alright, Mr Hereford.’

‘Milo? Well, yes, I think we have some. At the back of the cupboard, perhaps. Yes, no trouble. And Samuel, Sam, we could do justice to a bottle of beer I should think.’

I could see Susana translating English into English as he walked briskly to the kitchen. I should have offered to help but wasn’t going to leave Susana alone. Nobody spoke and the music grew louder.

‘The music,’ Susana said, ‘That’s Vivaldi isn’t it?’

‘Goodness, Susana, that’s very, very...clever of you to know that. Goodness me. Yes, Vivaldi, that’s right. Do you like him?’

‘Well, yes, but I do think of all the baroque composers, apart from Bach of course, I prefer Albinoni, not just his adagio, but almost everything he wrote. He tends to be less...’

She made her fingers dance in front of her like those of a demented pianist, just as the music raced through a burst of harpsichord playing with all the jangle of metallic typewriter.

‘I know exactly what you mean, Susana my dear, exactly.’

Her eyes were so wide with surprise I feared for her make-up.

‘So music, classical music, I didn’t know. Guitars, of course, and all the beautiful singing in the churches, but I hadn’t realised Albinoni...’

I saw Susana draw a deep breath and it was my turn to give her the same raised eyebrow of warning my father had just given me.

The silence was only about ten seconds long, but that was long enough for me to think of, and reject, about ten different remarks. Long enough to give my father time to come back into the room with a tray.

‘Your gin, darling!’ he said, flourishing both the word and the glass. ‘And a milo, with sugar in the bowl there should you be needing it and something for us men.’

He spread a cloth on the coffee table then set down the bottle of beer and the glasses. ‘Couldn’t find the damned opener,’ he muttered, ‘Sam you haven’t..?’

‘The drawer in the sideboard, there should be one there,’ said my mother. ‘But Susana, I’m deeply impressed, you know, deeply. But where did you get all this musical knowledge?’

Susana looked over at my father, still rustling through the sideboard drawers. She picked up the bottle, prised off the top with her perfect molars, and placed it back on the table. She held out the top between two fingers and dropped it in the little bowl intended for the olive stones.

‘From my mother, Mrs Hereford, you have no idea how many things I learned from my mother!’

My mother clapped her hands.

‘I think I’m going to like you, Susana, I think I’m going to like you a lot!’

They talked on about music, laughing and touching hands. My father and I drank our beer and said nothing. I was too astonished to talk and my father too wise.

‘But those poor people in Wellington, in the water,’ Susana said.

My parents had been too busy to listen to the news and hadn’t known of the disaster. Susana and I told them what we knew. It felt like we were a team.

‘It could be,’ said my father, ‘It could be they’ve managed to get something on TV about it. I know they’re trying to do up to the minute broadcasts. ‘Live television’ they call it. Not really ‘live’, if you ask me, when they have to keep rushing back to a studio to broadcast it, but amazing, nonetheless. Imagine the possibilities for test cricket. Not something I thought would happen in my lifetime.’

Television was turned on and we watched news reports and speculation from reporters about what was happening in the dark waters, where the Wahine lay like a beached whale. I thought I could see people in the darkness, trying to swim but getting washed away from the shore. The news, and the feeling of the wind still assaulting the house, made it seem as if we had all known each other for a long time, as if we trusted each other. Television discouraged conversation, which seemed to make everything easier.

‘The dinner!’ my mother exclaimed. ‘We’ve been so busy talking...it’ll be ruined.’

They fled to the kitchen and I went to Susana, pulled her up out of her chair and held her close to me.

‘You are wonderful. You amaze me! I’m so proud ...I’m going to buy you a bottle opener for your birthday!’

We started laughing and it grew and grew until a voice from the kitchen called ‘Is everything alright out there?’ causing the laughter not to stop, but to try to go underground.

‘I decided a roast dinner was ...safer, perhaps?’ my mother said, when we sat down at the table. ‘I did ask the green grocer if he had any taro, but he said I would need to go to the central city for that sort of thing, or even one of the southern suburbs and I thought that might be going a bit too far. Besides I wouldn’t have known what to with it and would have had to ask Sam if they’d done taro on his Anthropology course. But you will be accustomed to potatoes by now, Susana, I should imagine?’

I waited.

‘Thank you, Mrs Hereford, these potatoes are just lovely. Thank you.’

She became very quiet, eating slowly and not looking at us.

After some minutes my father said: ‘Susana, we have only just met you, but you have been the brightest light to come into our house for a considerable time. Now that light seems to have, well, dimmed and I am wondering what’s happened...something we have done or said..?’

She looked at him and I knew her eyes would be saying more than he could cope with.

‘Those poor people in the water, I can’t stop seeing them. In my home we would pray for them...I know you don’t say grace. Sam doesn’t know any graces to say and I was ready for there not to be grace at your table, but tonight’s so special and I just feel bad we didn’t think of those people.’

‘You are so right,’ he said. ‘But we don’t pray, not out loud, unless we are at church. Funerals and things. But you are right and maybe you could say a prayer, on our behalf, for all those people. Perhaps in your own language...that might be more comfortable ...for everyone, I should think.’

Susana stood and started a long flow of Samoan words, her voice barely rising and falling. I stood there and grinned. If she had opened her eyes she would have been angry, but my grin was because I thought she was wonderful.

Both my parents thanked her and then thanked me. I didn’t know what to say.

The meal finished quickly and quietly, as if too much had happened and we needed time to take everything in. My father mumbled something about going to work early and dropping my mother off at a Rose Society meeting that would probably take all day. Goodbyes were said and it was no surprise to see Susana kissing both of them.

‘Take me home, Sam, home to where you can buy taro and no one forgets to say grace.’

I squeezed her hand.

‘You must be exhausted. You were so wonderful...you are so wonderful.’

‘I liked them, Sam. They’re good. I think it’s you who must be the problem, that’s what I think and...’

She couldn’t go on because laughter overtook her, rolling easy laughter full of yodels and please ask the greengrocer for taro, Sam, and I do so much like Albononi.

I kissed her quickly when we reached her house and told her all the good things I was feeling.

‘Yes, Sam,’ she said, ‘yes.’

She jumped out of the car and ran to the house. Some of her steps seemed to be at the edge of dancing.

When I reached the end of her road I realised she had left her bag full of books in the car. I went back to the house. As I walked towards it I heard noises in the kitchen. I knocked softly then pushed the door open, not wanting to wake the people I knew would be asleep. Siasosi was on the floor, his arms raised over his head. Susana was standing above him with a broom in her hands hitting him repeatedly. When she saw me, she dropped the broom and Siasosi slid across the floor and out the door.

‘Your bag,’ I said. ‘And it’s all over, whatever we had. Finished, destroyed.’

Chapter Twenty**Aftermath**

I took the longest way home, driving around the city and out to beaches I'd never been to before. There was no plan – I just drove, hurling the Mini into corners faster than I'd ever done and being surprised, disappointed, it coped so well. I cursed Susana. I cried, twisting the wheel from side to side as I yelled No! No! No! At times I didn't do anything except follow the headlights. I went back over all the details, again and again, particularly the dinner, and how things had seemed perfect. I hadn't realised I could feel so good about a person: I hadn't realised I could feel so bad.

The image of her beating Siasosi was fixed in my mind, a vivid, endless cinemascope movie going around and around. Each time I looked at it, her actions seemed more and more deliberate, not as if she was raining a frenzy of blows, but placing them, as if she was using a cat-o-nine-tails. Sadistic, calculated blows delivered by an experienced hand.

How could she? How could I have built up such belief about her? How would I survive? I envied Wellington, which would replace missing roofs, buy new ships, bury its dead, have an enquiry and not just allow itself to heal, but be applauded for that healing. Not me. No one would help me with my pain because it was the laughable pain of a fool who had been warned and should have known better. I would tell no one. Not my parents, who thought she was some kind of angel sent to illuminate their lives – an articulate, warm, intelligent, cultured and loving brown girl who could be an ornament as deserving of space on their mantelpiece as the finest of the Royal Doulton. They would be so disappointed to learn I wasn't going to bring them this trophy.

And Michael? I needed him. I needed another trip up his seaside mountain, but I'd ignored him when he'd told me to stay in my own paddock and he'd been so right. I would become a serious student. I would, of course, drop Anthropology and see if I could still get into Accounting. I'd get Mac to teach me how to bowl better and play harder. Eventually, I'd get Michael to take me to a basketball game.

The dawn saw the storm almost blown out and the promise of sunshine. I didn't know where I was, but headed towards home by some instinct. The red pebbles on the driveway whispered 'Susana, Susana.'

My father was up making tea.

'Son?' he said.

'Dad...oh Dad ...I can't talk. Just need to go to my room. Sorry.'

'Can't blame you, Sam. Lovely girl...these things happen. I was young once too, you know.'

'No, Dad. You don't know, you don't bloody know!'

He didn't follow when I ran to my room, slamming the door. I took off my clothes, folded them and placed them on a chair as I had been told to do so many times, but usually ignored. I put on a tee-shirt and pulled back the sheets on the bed. The woman who came to help my mother had made it up with clean, crisp cold white sheets, tightly tucked in and as inviting as a pathologist's marble plinth. I lay there, not able to focus on the ceiling or pick out the details of the Wedgwood blue frieze that ran around the top of the wall. Pictures of Susana, dressed as a sea captain, wafted through my head, each one making more tears run onto the pillow.

I must have slept because my next awareness was of the light having brightened and a persistent tapping at the window. At first I thought the wind had returned, but when I pulled back the curtain, I saw Susana's face, tear stained and drawn.

I shut the curtains. The tapping resumed until I opened them again.

'Please, Sam, Talk to me.'

I leapt out of bed; fist clenched, slammed back the curtains and hurled up the double hung window.

'No, bugger off!'

'Please, Sam, please.'

Her hands stretched towards me.

'You are a bully, just another bully, like your bloody uncle, and I don't want to see you again...ever!'

I didn't manage to shut the window and curtains in time to prevent her seeing the tears and snot that robbed the words of the power I wanted to give

them. I threw myself on the bed, face down, howling like a kid and repeating 'Bugger off Susana, bugger off!' Each repetition felt like I was being hit.

Anger and grief and tiredness battled with each other until sleep won. I don't know how long I slept, but I woke not wanting to see a clock or a person or even to open my eyes. I tried to sleep again, but couldn't. I went to the bathroom and had a shower so long it would have driven my father apoplectic. It even got through to my conscience a bit. I couldn't be bothered getting dressed and just slipped on some underpants and my dressing gown and walked around the house turning the radio on and off, looking in the fridge, picking up bits of food and putting them down. In the sitting room I grabbed a piece of the Royal Doulton, threw it in the air, caught it and kept throwing it up to see how close I could get it to the ceiling. I restored it to its place of honour and went back to the kitchen. There was nothing there I wanted, so I walked to my parents' bedroom, sprayed some of the perfume in the cut crystal atomiser on the dresser into the air and onto my arms and chest. I opened and shut the drawers of the bedside tables several times, but only glanced inside them. For some reason it seemed important to see if any mail had arrived, so I opened the front door and headed for the letter box.

Susana was sitting cross legged on the top step.

I didn't have any words. I reached towards her. She let me pull her upright. She was smaller and lighter than she had ever been. Her head remained bowed.

'You smell nice, Sam.'

I led her inside and made her sit in the alcove. Somehow, I let my hand run across her hair. It was wet.

'Shall I make a cup of tea?'

She nodded.

The kettle made the only sound in the room. We listened to it. I couldn't decide whether to try to find some biscuits or which cups to use and the difficulty of these decisions brought tears back to my eyes. In the end I chose round wine biscuits and the best of the gold rimmed tea set from the cabinet in the dinning room.

'Sugar?'

Small nod.

I put the cups on the table and sat opposite her. It was difficult for me to fit my finger inside the handle. I wondered what would happen if I gave one of these cups to Mac.

‘The storm seems to be over.’

She nodded.

‘Don’t be mad at me, Sam!’

She cradled the cup in her hands and held it in front of her, like a begging bowl.

‘You beat him. We had talked about Siasosi, but you beat him with the broom!’

She nodded again.

‘I had to.’

‘Fucking bloody bullshit, Susana, don’t give me fucking bullshit!’

‘You don’t know.’

‘No one has to beat anyone. He’s a whipping boy. Do you know about that custom? We gave it away about 500 hundred years ago.’

I stood up.

‘I am so angry with you! I’m so ...disappointed and ...’

She stood up.

‘Siasosi, he grabbed me. He was waiting in the kitchen and he ...’

She took my hand and placed it on her breast.

‘He stroked and squeezed until I threw him on the floor.’

Neither my eyes nor my hand moved.

‘Men grab girls sometimes. In the Island, this boy Viliami came up behind me when I was bending over in the plantation and he pressed himself against my bum like a village dog and my cousin whacked him with the side of the bush knife and he ran away, but later at night they had a big fight and some others helped my cousin...’

Her head was lifting.

‘If I told Uncle he would take Siasosi to the garage and maybe kill him. But if I did nothing...’

Her head lifted further.

‘If I did nothing he would grab me again, so I gave him a hiding myself...and I’m glad I did, glad Sam. And I’ll do it again if he tries to touch me,

but next time I won't be so careful about not hitting his hands and his head, I'll just...'

I looked at her.

'And now you hate me and swear at me and I can't bear that. You hate me but you don't know my life...'

I took her in my arms.

'Never hate, I never hated you.'

Chapter Twenty One**Daydream**

She stayed in my arms for a long time, neither of us speaking. I held my breath for a moment so it matched hers. Our breathing became slow, as if we were asleep. From time to time she would shudder.

‘I’m sorry, Susana. I judged you ... thought the worst. Straightaway, I thought the worst...’

She looked up at me then drew my head down to hers, kissing me.

‘Sam, Sam!’

Her kisses and the saying of my name seemed to slide together. Never before had I felt her body so close. I realised the previous times she had been in my arms it was as if she held her hips, her waist, her thighs slightly away from me, avoiding the erection that would happen as soon as she came near. This realisation came now because I could feel her pushing against it, exploring it. Her mouth was a trembling open circle as our lips fought to climb over each other, my tongue pushing against hers then losing whatever grip it had and sliding deep into her mouth, running over the teeth I had so admired, sliding back to her tongue. There were milliseconds when it seemed to not touch anything and I could feel both of us flicking around, desperate for this new contact not to be broken. I pulled away from her and held her by the shoulders, my arms extended. We were both breathing in the long gasps.

‘You know, don’t you?’

She undid my dressing cord, slid her hand down and touched my penis. She gave it a small squeeze, then her hand and breath recoiled.

‘I know and I don’t know and...’

We were locked together again, but I made us walk, like an ungainly, hesitant crab, towards my bedroom. We fell on the bed, Susana underneath me. Part of my mind was grateful to my parents for insisting I should have their old double bed, but the thought that I was going to make love, for the first time, in the bed in which I was probably conceived made me laugh.

She pushed me off.

‘You laugh? Do you laugh at me, Sam?’

We were lying on our sides, looking at each other across the counterpane. The softness of the bed meant one eye was half buried. I could see there were drops of moisture on the soft, dark hair of her upper lip. My free hand ran up and down her body, stroking her, undoing buttons. I stretched forward and gave her a series of little kisses. Our breathing slowed and I was grateful for this. I knew what was going to happen, I knew the game was not over and this was just half time.

‘Do you want an orange?’

She laughed. A small trembling laugh.

‘You are so silly Sam and I don’t understand most of you.’

I rolled over and looked down at her.

‘Do you understand this?’

I kissed her again as deeply and fully as we had before. This time the journey wasn’t going to stop. I’d never undressed a woman before. Finally her blouse came off. I sat up and looked at her, looked at the brown breasts pushing against her bra, nipples strong and prominent. I bent and kissed them. My lips felt the texture of the fabric. My tongue ran around the shape of each nipple, my fingers fiddled with the hooks that held the bra so tightly to her body.

She sat up, reached her hands behind her and quickly undid the hooks that had so bemused my fingers. The bra rested on her breasts until she reached a hand behind my head and drew it towards them. I didn’t know how long you were supposed to stay with a girl’s breasts, but I found it almost impossible to leave them. It was easy to undo the knot that held her long skirt and unwind it, leaving her clad only in a pair of pants. In my thoughts and dreams of Susana, I had always imagined her wearing white cotton pants, but these were purple, lacy with small embroidered flowers. As I kissed her I stretched down and began dragging them off.

‘No, Sam, no!’

I stopped and looked at her again, our legs still tangled, my hand resting on her shoulder. This was turning into one of those early season games, played in quarters instead of halves.

‘No, Sam. It is too light ... still daytime. Can we get under the blanket so you don’t see me ...down there?’

She moved quickly and was in the bed, sheets pulled up to her nose.

‘Hurry!’

When I wriggled under the sheets I realised she had somehow shed the purple pants and was naked. I struggled to get rid of my jockies, turned towards her and stopped.

‘I love you, Susana, love you love you love you...’

Michael’s warnings came to my mind and I started to feel some kind of fear, but she moved towards me and I was on top of her. Her hands slid around me and gripped my shoulders. I was between her legs and then deep inside her, feeling her move against me, lift me, carry me, and enclose me in the softest warmth I’d ever known. She was saying my name over and over, but I couldn’t speak, my teeth clenched as I drove on and on, wanting everything.

The final whistle came too soon. I lay there, feeling her warmth beneath me, feeling our breathing come back into unison. I smelt the coconut of her hair, the sweat and the lingering scent of my mother’s perfume. I had never felt less alone and I wanted to just stay where I was forever. As I wondered about what I should do, how long I should keep her pinned under me, she rolled me onto the bed beside her.

My eyes were unable to stop looking at her beautiful face, looking for signs of how she was feeling, fearful of how upset she would be.

She pushed herself up on one elbow

‘You know, Sam,’ she said, stroking my hair and smiling. ‘You know, I didn’t realise how good I would be at doing that!’

**Chapter
Airport****Twenty****Two**

My father laughed when I asked to borrow his alarm clock and made a series of his little jokes about my chances of waking at four in the morning. In the end he said he would set the alarm and wake me himself.

‘If nothing else, I want to be able to tell the chaps at work that I saw you upright and moving before dawn. Might have to take photographs or they won’t believe me!’

It seemed the prospect of doing this made him very happy. I wanted to protest, to tell him I’d manage, but wasn’t confident of waking without his help. The possibility of sleeping in and failing to pick Susana up on time filled me with terror. I loved her and believed she loved me. She was the most wonderful person in the world, but I also knew she would chew me up and spit me out if I failed this, my first opportunity to give practical help to her and her family. Again, I wondered why I was happy, even grateful; to accept this from her, knowing I would have raised all sorts of protests if a similar request had come from my family.

‘Thanks, Dad,’ I whispered, as he handed me a cup of tea. We moved together around the house, quiet conspirators, not wanting to wake Mum, not wanting our moment of minimal word companionship broken. He poached some eggs, which I would have declined had he asked. I ate them with the same careful pretence of enjoyment that had characterised my brief attempt to satisfy the parental need to have me learn to play the piano.

‘Susana,’ he said. ‘She is, how shall I say it? For all her excellent English, she’s still an Island Girl, isn’t she?’

I winced at how learning English wasn’t going to let her off the hook. I thought of how the lectures, both from Susana and the University staff, had taught me each Island had such a separate identity and culture that lumping them under the one title was a serious error indicating ignorance and prejudice. Usually I would have pointed this out to him, but it was too early in the day and dealing to the poached eggs was taking all my concentration.

‘Well, Samoa. I think you know she’s from Samoa. Western Samoa – Samoa I Sisifo’

‘But do you know you have to be so careful, don’t you Sam? I mean, I know she’s a lovely girl – we so much enjoyed meeting her – but just about all Island girls, by the time they’ve reached her age, they’ve probably had two or even three children already. And you’re too young, too much potential yet to be realised and...’

I dropped my knife and fork and pushed the plate away. I knew, straight away, that this was something he had been told to say, but it pissed me off that he had been able to say it.

‘She’s a church girl. You need to understand she’s a church girl who listens to her family.’

I spat these words at him. Did he have some idea of what had happened on Thursday afternoon?

‘Oh,’ he said. ‘Church. Well, that’s something, I suppose.’

He picked up my plate and took it to the bench.

‘Doesn’t look as if you’ll be doing anything with these eggs.’

I drove towards Otara, the Mini’s windscreen wipers clacking and not quite keeping pace with the squalls of rain that were being hurled across the city. After the Wahine storm I found rain and wind carried a threat and couldn’t be taken for granted anymore. I felt on edge, but this was also because I was about to meet the famous mother and didn’t know how to handle it. I had been feeling nervous about this for days. I’d also started to find thoughts about the world kept crashing into my mind, like bugs hitting a windscreen. Bombs had killed people in Germany only last week. Then, on Wednesday, Martin Luther King had been gunned down – Martin Luther King – Jesus, who would they get next, James K Baxter? A few days later, bombs had killed over forty people in Indiana. And yesterday, my hero, Jim Clark, the fastest Scotsman ever, was killed in a Formula Two race he shouldn’t have even been in. It all seemed mad and out of control, a world changing, poised at the edge of revolution, and here was I quietly doing my BA, being so bloody polite I let my father get away with stupidity and prejudice. I was so far from being a revolutionary I felt sick. Would I march in protest, join the universal student

movement trying to make the world a better place or would I just drive through the rain to the airport wondering how I could make some complete stranger think I was a nice person? I knew the answer and the only protest I would make was to throw the Mini around corners in a manner that would have made Jimmy Clark shake his head and make tut-tut noises.

Susana was waiting under an umbrella on their front steps when I arrived. The aunt and uncle were behind her. They waved to me, their hands happy, fast, making me think they were glad to see me, making me think I was part of it all. Susana ran towards the car and I raced around to open her door.

‘Oi Sole! Timu ...le’aga le timu!’ yelled Fred, laughing.

Susana splashed into the car, a giggling, umbrella shaking heap.

When I was beside her I asked what Fred had said.

‘He said: *‘Look at the dumb Pālagi boy standing in the rain. Doesn’t he know rain makes people sick, especially when it’s the cold horrible rain we have to endure in this terrible country we only came to so we could make a bit of money and try to get a bit of education from the horrible university, which probably won’t happen anyway’* ...that’s what he said.’

Her eyes shone and each word was wrapped in a bubble of laughter. I hadn’t seen her since we’d made love and all I wanted to do was to take her in my arms, to touch her, but knew I had to wait until we were well out of the family’s sight. I put my hand on top of hers, well below the line of the windows. She turned her hand over, slid her fingers up and down my palm, and then raised both her hands, waving as if we were going away for months, a thought that made me sigh.

‘Well, Sammy.’

I could hear giggles rising in her throat. ‘Well Sam, what shall we call the baby?’

‘God, Susana ...are you? How do you know?’

‘I don’t, but I could be for all you know ...except I’m not the dumb unscientific Samoan you think I am!’

I looked at her, but didn’t have the courage to ask if she was saying what I thought she was saying.

‘But you’re okay aren’t you? I didn’t hurt you or anything?’

She reached over and stroked my arm and the side of my face.

‘Hurt? No, you didn’t hurt me.’

I stopped the car on the side of the before-dawn empty road, just before the motorway, and kissed her as deeply as I had when we were wrapped in each other’s arms on my bed. For a while she was with me, fully, wonderfully with me. I wanted more and more, but then she pulled away, as I knew she would.

‘Church girl!’ I said.

‘No, not that – I don’t think you realise how far away you take me from that. But Sefulu, the airport...that’s what we have to do, have to think about.’

I moved back into my seat, allowing my hand to run over her breasts as I did so. I thought we would talk about her mother as we drove, or how making love had changed our relationship, and when we were next going to be able to do it again. But we didn’t. We talked about the bombs, Martin Luther King and student protests in Paris. And what we should be doing to make our voices heard.

‘You know,’ she said, ‘a few days ago Uncle drove me to pick up a book from the library. We took the little kids with us and I told them they could come into the university with me. They asked if there would be students there and when I said there would be they didn’t want to come in. Students were the people they had seen on TV, marching, waving flags, fighting police, lighting fires and looking wild. They were terrified.’

I laughed, and wondered if I should let those same little kids know I too was a student.

‘I want us to go together on the next Vietnam march. Queen St – will you come? Will it be OK for you to come, or don’t Samoans ...?’

‘We do. There was a famous march all around the Island in the 1920’s, when men called ‘The Mau’ wanted to tell your New Zealanders who ruled us not to be so ...so bloody bossy. And when they got to Apia the New Zealand police shot the leader Tamasese. There in the street, like the dogs they shot in the villages. But he forgave them. With his dying breath, he forgave them, so our people didn’t kill them after all. Yes, Sam, we march and I will march with you against bloody Americans and Lyndon B Johnson.’

‘Jesus, that’s terrible! Was it us who did that or the Germans?’

‘It was you-the murder and the blasphemy!’.

We had difficulty finding somewhere to park at the airport. The whole area had taken on the wide awake, bustling atmosphere that makes airports feel unnatural, a bit like finding the lights of your school burning late at night.

I turned off the engine and took her hands in mine.

‘I’m scared, Susana, and I don’t know how to handle meeting your mother. I don’t know what to say or anything and...You seem to do scary things so easily. Just decide and do them, like saying you’ll come on a march, even though you know some of your people will see us. Me, I just keep thinking about all the things that might happen.’

She ran her hands over my forehead, brushing my still damp hair away from my eyes.

‘Just be yourself, Sam. Just like you told me when I met your parents. Just be your lovely self and she will fall for you, just like me.’

I looked for the teasing in these words, but there wasn’t any.

‘And it’s OK to be shy – we like shy.’

Rain was still throwing itself down in cold handfuls as we ran to the terminal. It was crowded, and full of the warm steaming heat of bodies that had hurried through the rain. The plane hadn’t arrived. Almost immediately, Susana started talking to the people who greeted her when we walked in. They talked in loud, animated Samoan, their voices rising in laughter and long sentences. I stood at the edge of the group, waiting for an introduction. It never came. I formed words to say, but never said them. Without anyone seeming to notice, the group closed and I was standing outside it. I thought of Primary School games where they had not been enough places in a circle and two people had to race around in opposite directions until the lucky one could hurtle into the vacant space, breathless and laughing. I thought of running around and around the group, but knew that even if I did this, there still wouldn’t be a space for me to jump into.

I moved away and sat down. It was good they liked shy.

I waited for more than an hour. I didn’t spend the whole of this time sitting in the same place. I walked up and down the terminal, but no one in Susana’s group noticed, least of all her. After ten further carefully counted minutes I decided to make a stand. I moved back to them, tried to get

Susana's attention, failed, swore, and strode towards my car with a resolution Michael would have applauded. The familiar ritual of unlocking the door, getting into the driver's seat and starting the engine seemed to strengthen this resolution. I mean who did they think they were? Who did she think she was? Did they know I had seen her naked, kissed her fabulous breasts and left my seed deep in her body? Did they know she had become mine? Did they know we were going to be together whether they liked it or not and there were limits to my patience and I wasn't a fool. I sat there, revving the engine with each of these thoughts, then I turned it off, got out and headed back to the terminal. When I got there, Susana and the others had surrounded a short woman, with her hair pulled tightly away from her rounded face. Hair with a few grey streaks and a mouth in a smile I would have called fixed, but realised it went from being big to bigger as she turned and addressed each new person. She was wearing a traditional Samoan puletasi that covered everything except her face, hands and feet. I'd argued with Susana that this was in no way traditional, just a missionary imposed restriction to cover the splendour of the naked savage. I think she knew I was right but would never admit it. She seemed unable to accept she could ever dress in anything of less modesty than the puletasi. The German administration had employed Joseph Kramer, an ethnographer, to record Samoan society of the time. In his book, there is a photo of a topless girl in a grass skirt. I had found it in the library and each time I passed where it sat on the shelves I couldn't resist opening it at this page. The ethnography, with its German text, didn't enlighten me about Samoa, but the photo made even more excited about how Susana might look. It seemed the Germans didn't shoot village dogs.

Her mother had something regal about her which didn't come from her stature or from any particular beauty. She was what my parents would call 'handsome'. Whenever they applied this term to women it seemed to imply they were acceptable looking, sensible in their dress and outlook. Sefulu had eyes that were large, round and quick. They didn't flick from speaker to speaker, as I have seen the eyes of people in the centre of a group so often do. Instead, they rested on each person's face, and looked as if they willing to stay there for as long as that person needed them to. There was a quality about her I wanted to call 'serenity' but couldn't quite be certain if that was

right, because I'd never seen it before. I studied her and studied Susana, who never left her side, taller but still in her shadow. I knew my wait wasn't yet over.

One hour and 57 minutes after we had arrived, the group thinned, people calling back as they moved away. Susana and her mother started to walk towards me. I stood up, not knowing whether to move forward or not. Sefulu stopped in front of me and I became the centre of the warm intense focus I had been observing. It was like opening the curtains in winter time when I had slept in and finding a soft sunlight had taken over the world and wanted to warm and enlighten me. She took my tentatively offered right hand in both of hers.

'So you must be Samuel, you poor young man, waiting here so long while my relatives and I kept talking and talking. I am so sorry.'

She was perfect. Her voice and her English were perfect. It embarrassed me to think I had prepared a few careful words of Samoan to use when I met her. She kept smiling her perfect smile and making me feel I was the most important person in the world to her. Without realising it I had let my free hand join the one she was already holding and I could feel some of her serenity flowing into me. I knew I would do anything to please her.

'I have been happy to wait for you.'

I know I wanted to make myself speak accurately. This was no place for slang or abbreviations. But I didn't know what to call her. Mrs Manaiatele? Sefulu? Mum?

'I am so happy to meet you and I want you to know that Susana, your daughter is ... is very important to me, more important than ... than anyone else. And I am sorry you are sick, so sorry, and I want to help.'

I knew I was blurting things out. Things Susana had pleaded with me not to say. But I also knew it was OK and that in this moment I had a power I hadn't felt in any of my dealings with her and her family. I wondered if Susana knew this too, because she didn't say anything or give me the hand signals I'd come to look for when I was in Otara.

'Thank you, Sam. Thank you speaking about my health – no one else has been brave enough to mention it. And you and my daughter. There is much to talk about, but I don't want to talk about it now beyond saying that

she has told me about you and my shock and surprise at what she has said is diminishing, now that I have met you.'

Can a heart burst? Yes, many times over. Mine was, not just because I was standing here at Auckland Airport holding Susana's mother's hands and feeling her approval, but because I had discovered she was a person I could talk with, a person I wanted to talk with. And Susana had spoken to her about me.

'Shall we go to the car now? I understand you have been kind enough to offer to be our driver.'

'Yes, of course, you must be tired. But it's only a small car, I'm afraid, and it could be tidier and...'

She gave my hands a final squeeze and let them go. As we walked to the car Susana, who suddenly seemed much younger, gave me a look that told me while she was pleased, she still needed to give me some guidance.

She scrambled into the backseat, Sefulu gracefully folded into the front one and I took three attempts to get the luggage into the boot before having to ask them to get out so I could put one bag on the back beside Susana. They both laughed at me and said:

'Poor Sam!'

I'd been ignored, left to wait, nervous, angry enough to almost leave and very unsure of myself but, as I drove back towards the city all I could feel was a sense of privilege.

Chapter Twenty Three

Doctor

‘Your mother. I really like her. She made me feel sort of special, you know, special.’

“People say that and you are special, but we have to talk.”

“Talk? I thought maybe we could go somewhere, just us. It’s been three days since I saw you, even longer since...”

‘You know I can’t. Not now she’s here. Not even that. Now that I can see she’s so sick and I can’t think of me, of you. Just what I need to get organised. They all look at me as if I know, just because I go to University. You must help me Sam, please.’

My plans faded, but the desire that had driven them didn’t. I put my face in my hands, breathed deeply and then looked up at her across the cafeteria table, with its spilt coffee, sugar grains and chipped Formica. Her eyes were big with questions, her head tilted to one side.

‘So no playtime for Sam and Susana, is that what you are saying?’

It was her turn to put her head down, but when she looked up there was a grin on her lips and we began laughing. I squeezed her hands.

‘Soon,’ she whispered. ‘Soon, lots of playtime.’

It seemed nothing had been organised for Sefulu’s treatment. The doctors in Samoa hadn’t written letters, Valu’s ‘big doctor’ was away and they had little trust in the local clinic the family went to for coughs, colds and the medical certificates that got them through family crises and responsibilities.

‘There’s my doctor. He’s a good man. Fixes my injuries and ...’

I was going to say rashes but decided against it.

‘...and my colds. He plays the saxophone. We often talk about music.’

‘Is he Chinese?’

‘Chinese? Why?’

‘They’re clever. We think they’re clever. A Chinese doctor might be clever enough to make her better.’

‘No he’s not Chinese but he’s about 45 so he’s pretty experienced. But would she prefer to see a woman doctor?’

'I haven't met any woman doctors. I don't know. But can you talk to your saxophone player? Ask him and explain?'

Somehow it felt easier to go and see Dr Rudge than to ring up. Susana came with me and we drove again around the waterfront. No music, this time. No sense of anticipation. Not even much talk. The seriousness of the situation had reached me and I felt like I was on a mission.

Dr Rudge looked at me over his glasses, ran a hand through his thinning hair and spoke in a soft voice that carried concern and a hint of amusement.

'Sam and ..?'

'Susana. She's my friend, from Samoa. And University. We met at University.'

'And how can I help you two young people? Is there some trouble?'

Amusement was threatening to overwhelm concern.

'No! It's my mother. Not trouble for us, but big trouble. She is sick. They said in the Island that she has a lump. A lump in her breast and they said it might be...and she should come here but we don't know any Chinese doctors and Sam said you played the saxophone ...'

'And you're very worried and you want me to help? Can I suggest you get her to come and see me this afternoon? Let me examine her and maybe initiate some tests and then we will see what we need to do.'

I could see Susana's face relax when he said 'we'.

I smiled at him.

'Thank you, Richard. I knew you'd be our man.'

He had told me to call him Richard, but it still seemed as if I was pretending to be grown up when I did so. Doctors had always been very important to my parents, my mother hoping each new one would provide her with answers: Dad and I hoping this would be true, listening intently to her enthusiasm, dreading the slow changes that ended with her saying, 'I do so wish I could find someone who truly understood'. And we would watch her search for a new one, a messiah, a guru who would acknowledge her suffering and resolve her symptoms. In the meantime, we would know our sympathy and consideration were more essential than ever. It seemed wrong for me to call one of these people 'Richard'.

‘They did a biopoposy ...’

‘Biopsy,’ I said.

‘Thank you Sam,’ they both said in unison.

‘They did a biopsy in the Island, but it took so long to get results so we told her she had to come here. But there’s this paper. From the biopsy’

She looked at me as she said ‘biopsy’.

He took the paper she held out. He read it, sucking his lips into his mouth as he did so.

‘If this is correct, and we will need to do further checks, then you were right to get her to come here, very wise, I’m afraid. Susana, Sam – this almost certainly means hospitalisation and surgery and, I’m sorry to say, that will mean money. As I understand it, Western Samoa is independent now and unless she’s a New Zealand citizen, there will be expense, considerable expense, you understand?’

‘Yes. My family, my whole family. We will pay. We know that is the way now.’

She gave a slight shrug. Her hands started to stretch towards him, then she clasped them together in her lap.

‘We know.’

I remembered reading about convicts in Tasmania who would not listen to how many lashes the judge ordered – they were to suffer and the detail didn’t matter.

‘Thank you Richard. And how’s the saxophone playing going and...’

‘It’s fine, thanks Sam,’ he said, but he was looking at Susana, saying the important things with a smile and a series of nods.

Sefulu was sleeping when we got back to Otara. Susana woke her and she came to the kitchen, where I was sitting drinking the thin, grainy overly sweet cocoa Siaosi had given me.

‘Good morning Sammy. I see you like Samoan cocoa.’

She was wearing a white towelling dressing gown that was too big for her.

‘It is always cold when I first come back here. My feet and hands.’

Susana ran to the bedroom and brought back some thick socks. She knelt in front of her mother and eased them onto her feet. No words were

spoken. Could I have done this at home, without it being a big deal needing layers of words?

‘I don’t really like Samoan cocoa – it’s too sweet and sort of sandy.’

‘Yes Sam,’ she said. ‘There is always too much sugar. I worry about my people.’

Before I could say any more, she turned to Valu and Susana and began a long earnest speech in Samoan. It was time for me to wait again. Would it have been rude to bring a book to read? I listened to the flow of sounds. If I concentrated, I could break what had previously just been a continuum of sound, into what I thought were the words. Some I already knew: *falema’i* (hospital); *ta’avale* (car); *fa’alavelave* (trouble); *tupe* (money); *Sammy* (bloody idiot sitting at the end of the table, trying to use his tongue to remove the last of the cocoa grains from his teeth and waiting until someone, perhaps even his lover, could be bothered speaking to him.).

‘You are so patient, Sammy, while we gabble away about me and my problems. So patient. We congratulate people for being patient, with the phrase *malo le onosa’i*, which means congratulations on your wonderful patience. It’s one of the first phrases people learn when they come to Samoa, or ...get to know Samoan people, as you are. So *malo le onosa’i, Sam.*’

Everyone laughed. I felt pleased. I felt childish.

‘I do want to learn Samoan. I mean, if Susana and I are going to be allowed to spend time together, it seems important I learn her language and...’

‘Yes, said Sefulu, looking at my frowning face and her daughter’s bowed head. ‘Yes, that is something we must talk about. But later, when I have this silly medical problem fixed and out of the way. Soon, Sam, but please, for now, *onosa’i.*’

She smiled a big warm smile. It let me know she was a long way from being ready for any more of my speeches.

Susana told her about the visit to Richard Rudge and the three o’clock appointment we had made for her. She spoke in English, but there still didn’t seem to be room for me to say anything.

‘Thank you, my daughter, thank you Samuel, for all you are doing for me, but I don’t think I am ready to see a New Zealand doctor. Not just yet. In a few days, perhaps.’

Susana immediately reverted to Samoan. Her words were angry and insistent, beating at the ears in the way Valu’s had the night rules for behaviours had been spelt out to me. Her voice was at times loud, even shrill, but mainly it was at the level of the strong whispers platoon commanders used just before launching a night attack. Sefulu sat listening, making no attempt to reply, tears growing in her eyes, her hands moving in a small dance that seemed to address each person in turn and occasionally ended up clasped over her heart. When they next moved towards me I stood up and spoke.

‘Susana, Sefulu – I don’t know what’s happening, what you are saying? Why are you berating your mother like this? You have to tell me, you have asked me to be part of all this, so you have to let me be part of it, let me know what you are saying.’

‘Sit down Sam,’ Susana said. ‘Don’t you know how rude it is to talk to people, especially older people when you are standing up? So rude. And I don’t know what ‘berating’ means. It’s so rude to use words people can’t understand and she won’t listen Sam. She won’t come with us to see your nice doctor.’

She came around the table into my arms, leaning against me and sobbing. This was what I wanted. The two of us being the only people in a kitchen full of others, not defying them, just soaring over the top of them, needing each other, loving each other.

I made her sit down beside me and we faced Sefulu together.

‘Forgive me for being ignorant and standing up. There is so much I don’t know. But I do know this is breaking Susana’s heart. You are so important to her: she keeps telling me how important you are, how pleasing you is more important than University, and these people and me. Yes, and me. I have no right to tell you anything but I beg you to listen to your daughter, to come with us this afternoon, to get all the help you can.’

No one interrupted, no one told me how to behave, Susana didn’t give me one of her guiding looks. I had no idea how I was able to find the strength

to speak as I had. Was it from my parents? Was it from God? Both options were scary.

‘*I le taeao*,’ said Sefulu. ‘In the morning. I will go with you in the morning and face whatever is in store for me. For today, for what’s left of the afternoon, I want to let myself feel I have nothing to worry about and can spend some time with my daughter and her man. Time perhaps walking on a beach together so I can get to know him and see if a wise choice has been made.’

I rang and changed the appointment. The rest of the family seemed to move back and make room for us. I knew this, too, would be just for the day and the Red Sea of extended family would close again once we returned.

Chapter Twenty Four

Beach

Another

Susana wanted us to go back to Cheltenham beach, but I knew this was a moment for the West Coast. I wanted to sustain the emotions and the sense of power that had allowed me to speak. I wanted Susana to continue to have the fire that had allowed her to cling to me in front of her family. I had some kind of vision of Sefulu running into the wind across the black sands, her arms outstretched and yelling defiance to gods that had placed a living, growing lump in her breast. It seemed possible for all this to happen on the West Coast, on Kariotahi Beach, with its waves and sands made infinite by the curtains of spray hung at each end.

It took over an hour to get there, despite the motorway so recently carved through the suburbs and the new road designed to allow trucks easy passage to the new steel mill at Glenbrook. A smooth road, sweeping its way through fields and gardens, fuelling again my Jackie Stewart fantasies. One night I would come to this road, wearing a kilt, and the Mini and I would pay him proper homage.

'This little car seems to enjoy going around corners quickly,' said Sefulu from the seat beside me.

'Slow down you mad dumb Pālagi, *tama valea tele* 'oe!' yelled Susana from the back seat, giving my ear a bit of a hit. I knew *valea* meant idiot but it was all suddenly funny and we all started laughing. And we did indeed laugh until we cried. We were still crying when we kicked off our shoes and stumbled down the bit of a track and onto the black sands, the waves seeming to rise higher than the beach, their roar louder than any tears. Sefulu walked in the middle and we both put our arms around her, our walk becoming silent and rhythmical. How long had I known this short woman who trudged the beach pressing against my side, between me and her daughter, but allowing us to be closer than had ever seemed possible? We walked like this for about half an hour, not talking, but stopping while one of us used a toe to turn over flotsam on the beach - a horse mussel shell; a snake tangle of

kelp; a piece of thick orange rope, frayed and barnacled; an eyeless dead fish and a life ring with Japanese markings, partially buried and coming apart.

We stopped and sat on some logs the ocean had, at some point, dumped beside a stream that flowed onto the beach. The stream was shallow and wide, cold, making the sand hard and ridged beneath our feet. Toitoti and a large rock gave some shelter from the wind. We settled facing each other, chewing the apples I'd found in the car, waiting to see which one of us would start speaking.

Susana glanced several times at her mother, breath drawn in as if to speak, but her questions were not quite ready to leave the nest. Sefulu was the first to find words.

'Do you want to talk about my illness?'

'Yes, of course yes, but first I want you to tell me, to tell me...'

'You want me to tell you who your father is, I think.'

I wanted to listen, but knew I should move away. As I pushed myself up they both put hands on my shoulders asking me to stay.

'Yes. I have never asked.'

'You have asked. You have asked everyday. When you look at me in the morning, when you talk about the future, when you asked your thousand questions about everything. Every question, but not the one that must have kept rushing through your head, like the wind along this beach. Not that question.'

There was silence. A silence Sefulu had promised to fill. I had wondered why Susana had never mentioned her father, but not deeply, because all the talk had been of her mother and how she stood over her life as a colossus of example and expectation. It was as if there had been no room for a father and he had either died or been driven away. But there had been a father, and this little woman, who seemed to like me and not fill me with the fear she excited in so many others, was being asked to explain.

'I was a student.'

We laughed, firstly just Susana and I, then all three of us. Rolling, kind laughter. It was like John F Kennedy telling the crowd '*Ich bin ein Berliner!*' - We are not apart, we are not different. Balls of spinifex tumbled past, some getting trapped in our little haven, others hurtling on in their mad wind driven

drag race to beyond the mist veil that was the extent of our vision of the beach, but far from its end. Of course they were unable to resist the command of the wind, but there was something free and jubilant in their hectic dance.

‘He was a student.’

We didn’t laugh this time, but drew closer.

‘We were in London. The war had just finished and life was not easy, especially for foreign students. We had been away from our homes for so long, so very long.’

Susana squeezed her mother’s ring-less fingers.

‘No, I am not asking for sympathy or anything of that nature. I just want to tell you the story. Let you know what you should know already. Tell you as much as I am able before Sam’s doctor takes over my life. But it’s a simple story: lonely, cold, young. We found each other in the British Museum, going to each other because there were no other brown faces in sight. But he wasn’t, isn’t, from Samoa, so we had to speak to each other in English’

‘So, am I half Tongan or Maori or something?’

‘You are all Samoan, because you are my daughter. You grew up in Samoa, you think in our language, you fear our fears and have our dreams, old and new, your blood is full of Samoan dances, songs and beliefs, you ...’

Susana stood up and started running down the beach, spinifex rolling beside her and ahead of her. I jumped to my feet.

‘No Sam. Please stay. We will go to her later, or she will come back to us. This beach you brought us to will help. And there will still be time for me to tell her the rest of the story and help her to see, as I do, that it is a good story.’

‘There will still be time?’

‘I know I am going to die, Sammy. When I first felt this lump I knew what it was. It was as if a door opened and I could see the future, very clearly, with lots of detail. I will have the operations they want me to have, but they won’t make any difference.’

As she said this she passed her hands in front of her breasts in a cutting motion.

‘I know that it is too late for them to help but I must do everything I can, try to fight the future I have seen. A duty, I suppose and my poor relatives will

do their duty too and spend money. That's such a big sadness. That and leaving my poor daughter, my poor, poor daughter.'

Two people on horseback went by at a slow walk. We waved. They waved back, curt little waves.

'I used to ride horses on my friend's farm, in the school holidays.'

'That was Marjorie, wasn't it? Susana has told me things about your days in New Zealand...in London

Sefulu smiled at this and patted my shoulder. I didn't tell her about Susana seeing the white owl and having the same certainty about this illness being too strong to stop.

'Medical science keeps advancing, changing. They will be able to do more things than you realise. You can't know. You can't give up without a fight.'

'Oh, I'll fight it Sam, just as I've fought so many things, so many people, all my life. But I also accept that this enemy is stronger than the loneliness of being an overseas student, the missing of home, the assumptions made about me because of my skin colour, the enemies who wanted to have me disgraced because I came back with the degree they wanted in my pocket and a little girl in my arms, the loneliness and the expectations of everyone, and two cultures, both so strong I felt like I was two people living my life in two very different houses.'

'But you have your faith. The God and church that fill Susana's head and dictate her behaviour. You have that.'

'Do I have that, Sam? Sometimes, when I am in one of my houses I look at it all and think it is all missionary bullshit my poor people swallowed hook, line and sinker.'

'Jesus, I never thought you, any of you, could ever see that, let alone say it.'

'I don't say it, not to my family and my daughter and I don't know how much I truly feel it. Do I believe my non-belief? I know when you blasphemed, just then, my instinct was to give you a good slap. Is that instinct or culture or religion or habit? Can you tell me, as a student of Anthropology, can you tell me?'

I glanced at her. Was she setting traps, like my own mother seemed unable to stop herself doing? Was she testing me? Her face was as open as Susana's was the day I first met her. If anything it held a look of wanting, of appealing to me to give her something. Me! What the hell did I know? I had started this day hoping to get the daughter back into bed and now I was discussing the meaning of life with the mother. Jesus, could I swim in these waters?

'Isn't the answer in the middle, somewhere between the two houses?' I said. 'Isn't there a need for faith, but not an overwhelming full of rules faith with institutions that become more powerful and self sustaining than the beliefs they are supposed to foster? Kind of there when you need it, but not there in your every moment, every action, every decision?'

She laughed a gurgling quiet laugh and took my hand.

'Yes, Sam, you little Anglican, of course that's what you want. It's what I want too. But you are talking about free will. You are talking about indecision and uncertainty. About giving away the certainty of knowing you, and those around you, are right, are the righteous ones who will be saved. Freedom has a brother called anxiety. I want to hold on to freedom, just as I am sure I want Susana to, but right now I'd like a bit more certainty about eternal life because... you know.'

'So what about me and Susana? Susana and me?'

'I don't want her to lose her faith. It is so comforting to be a good Samoan. Old ways have so much beauty, so much complexity. But they are so simple to believe in, so reassuring. You watch our people walking down Karangahape Rd - they are guests in this country, but they look as if they are the ones who own the place. I want her to have that certainty, that arrogance even. But I also want her mind to be able to grow, to be open ...someone once said 'Minds are like parachutes, they work best when they are open!'

'I meant our relationship. Our chances of being together. Valu and Fred told me I didn't belong. They said you would never approve. You know, every time Susana kissed me it was as if you were there telling her she shouldn't, telling her I wasn't part of the plan, that I was in the wrong paddock.'

I stood up when I said these words, paced around and kicked the sand. I wanted to run down the beach and find Susana, to shrug off the burden of a

theological discussion with a dying woman. But I sat down. I stared at the sand and then at her. It was as if my eyes were trying to transmit all my longings and she was providing a pathway of understanding and acceptance. I felt she had taken on a kind of radiance, that drew me in and let me know she understood and accepted me. And loved me. Despite her needs, or because of them, she had found it in herself to love me, stumbling, bumbling, catch-dropping idiot that I was. I looked down at the black sand, noticing how fine it was and how amongst the black grains there were many shining clear ones bouncing the sunlight back at the sky. I became both small and strong. I felt her two hands rest on my bowed head and I knew I was being given some kind of blessing.

‘I will not be the one stopping you marrying Susana. I want her to have the love and fullness of life that I turned away from. But she will find it very difficult, even though I think she loves you, needs you. You will have to be very patient, Sam – lots of *‘onosa’i*. I can’t tell her I am questioning my faith and I can’t tell her to turn away from all the duties and obligations I have taught her all her life. But I can tell her, if she will let me, that I now regret, so much, moving away from her father and the love I found and left behind in London.’

We stood up and walked hand in hand down the beach in the direction Susan had fled. After a few minutes we saw her walking towards us out of the mist. Walking, then running. She threw her arms around the two of us. We stood in this three-way embrace, foreheads together, for a long time, while the wind sent sharp sand nipping at our legs and the surf piled its sound all around us.

‘I am ready now,’ Sefulu said when we dropped our arms and moved apart. ‘I am ready for you to take me to your doctor.’

‘

Chapter Twenty Five**Hospital****Susana**

My mother is now in hospital.

Sam's doctor was so kind to us, but he made her go there straight away. To the surgical ward. To have surgery. To have parts of her body cut off. To die.

She and Sam are very close. I can't believe she has taken him so quickly into her heart. Perhaps I can. When the specialist came into the room to examine her Sam started to leave, but she told him to stay. So he has seen my breasts and my mother's too. He was very uncomfortable and didn't know where to look and I had to tell him we are not all Hollywood about these things, like his people are. He laughed, but I know I can get him just by pressing my chest against him. Ha!

The x-rays and the new biopsy happened quickly. And blood tests and every other kind of test. I have never seen her so quiet, so obedient. I think she, too, may have seen the owl.

How can I tell her about the things that race through my head: the owl; my father; all about Sam and how her daughter is no longer a nice little virgin? I think when we were at that wild beach, and wonder if Sam and me, should have tried to get her talk about more things. Everything that happened in London and how I came to be born. I want to know everything, like how she felt the first time and did she want it to happen again as much as I do and how do you pretend it's not like this? Can I tell her I am so angry about my father and can't bear to think about who he might be? Do I want her to tell me he was a prince, or a rugby player or a Rhodes Scholar or even an African? I can't ask because I think I will just get mad and upset. But soon it will be too late.

I will massage her legs and her back, just like she massaged her grandmother's legs and back. I will be here all the time. I will pray. God versus the owl. Will the pastor be able to explain when the owl wins?

It is all about patience. Waiting for things to happen. Waiting until I can go back to my studies and maybe back to Sam. The doctor said we had

to take one step at a time, but he didn't say how slow each step was going to be.

Sam:

Am I part of the family now? It seems Sefulu wants me to be with her and Susana all the time. Am I just their driver, their guide to the medical services of Auckland? No. I think it's more than that. When we sat together at Kariotahi Beach, after Susana had stormed off, I felt Sefulu had not just taken me into her confidence, but into her heart. Can I really be thinking like this? *'Into her heart'* has to do with love. *'All you need is love'* seems true for me for the first time. This middle aged Samoan scholar, with the soft voice and the halo around her head has love for me and there is a pathway between our two hearts, even though I am certain she knows I have made love with her daughter. I feel I can say anything to her and it won't cause her to become silent or develop a headache. She might growl at me and instruct me, but the pathway will always be there.

The doctors keep referring questions to me and I have to tell them to talk to Susana or, better still, Sefulu. Tell them I am just a friend. They are learning they don't have to choose small, loud, slow words when they speak to them.

The others are arriving: Valu and Fred; others who I have seen at the house; others who I've never seen. The small room is very full and I am no longer at the bedside, but eased to the back corner by the window, where I can gaze out at the city and try and figure out which building is which. And watch the April day hurl quick, cold rain showers at the window. Susana will not leave the bedside and this seems to be expected. A young pastor starts praying a long soporific prayer that has others mumbling responses. He sweats as his voice grows in intensity and loosens his tie. Then he falls in a faint, sliding to the floor and twitching. The others breathe a long amen and he is gently dragged out into the corridor while someone else resumes the prayers. Sefulu's eyes are closed, her face soft. She is comfortable in this house.

They all stay, well past visiting hours and despite several nurses coming in and saying, 'Excuse me, excuse me, please!' An elderly Samoan man comes to the door, wearing a hospital badge. I think he has been sent to reinforce the 'excuse me's', but he makes a long speech that doesn't end until a large nurse with lots of red on her epaulets comes in and rings and rings a loud bell. Everyone leaves, but Susana and I are allowed to stay. Perhaps the nurse can see the pathways?

We sit on chairs on either side of Sefulu, each holding one of her hands. I look out the window and can see the lights on the upper floors of some of the taller buildings. Rain and mist come and go. I am learning the meaning of '*onosa'i*'.

Sefulu:

Is this still my body? I know I feel tired and that I am not functioning properly, but I don't feel truly sick. Not sick unto death. Yet I know I am. I keep feeling the lump. It seems to get bigger and harder every day. A foreign, evil thing growing in my body. When Susana was growing inside me I would touch my belly and smile every time I noticed a change or felt a movement, even though I knew I was in huge trouble. My dissertation was nearly finished and soon I would be able to leave the freedom and anonymity of dark and sunless London and go home to the warmth and judgement of my homeland. Go home, by myself, with a baby and memories. Get over the shame and do the job.

It wasn't as bad as I feared. In fact, it wasn't bad at all. People celebrated my degree and felt proud as a nation. I became important and helped set up our new Pacific university. Busy, vital times. Susana was swallowed into the '*aiga*' and people seemed to need to forget she was the little bundle wrapped in white that I clutched in my arms as I walked off the plane. My grandmother, as I knew she would, didn't forget and told me I was just a village girl who couldn't keep her legs together and what was the use of education if you were just a slut? I told her she came from a village and had too many kids and they all looked different so who was the slut anyway? She cackled and pretended to hit me with the *salu* and things were good after that, most of the time. Of course, when I applied for the Director's job, there were

some who suggested my morality should be investigated, but I showed them the research I had done on them and they decided not to say anything further. I hear there is some talk now of my illness being the price for sin and arrogance, but I just tell myself this is only the talk of very ignorant people and of the fearful voices that can come into my head in the middle of the night.

They prod me and test me and take pieces of my flesh. They try to talk to poor Sammy, but he makes them talk to me. He's not having any white man's burden, that one. He is such a dear boy. I can feel how much he wants to please me and this is both flattering and annoying. I know if I growl at him, he will take it into his kind heart and let it be painful way beyond my intention. I will look after him. I think he will look after Susana. I can tell they are already lovers and I can't understand why this makes me smile when I should be giving them a lecture. Is illness making me mellow? Am I having a premature burst of the acceptance of old age, while I still can? I blame the damn cancer and the drugs.

They are sitting with me, holding my hands, now the crowd has gone. I can see them gazing at each other over what they think is my sleeping face. So young, so vulnerable, so lucky. I hope they have more courage than I had.

The Surgeon:

A handsome, intelligent, articulate Samoan woman aged 51. I am told she has a University qualification, perhaps from a British University. Many relatives and a devoted daughter and son-in-law. He is shy, but is watching me very closely. We allow too many people to watch us these days and far too many to be with the patient. Regulations should be tightened up before the place descends into the chaos that seems to be turning Europe upside-down at the moment. Biopsy indicates a carcinoma. There will undoubtedly be secondaries. Her heart isn't up to scratch, but I don't think she knows this. Better tell her – I think the son-in-law is taking more notes.

There are no grounds for optimism, but I will do a radial mastectomy in the morning and have a look around. Then we'll make her feel miserable with radiotherapy and then she'll die.

God, I hate this fucking job.

Chapter Twenty Six

Demonstration

Susana and I walked around the Domain for many hours while we waited for Sefulu's surgery to be finished and for us to be allowed to see her. We looked at ducks and the hibiscus growing beside their pond. The last of their flowers were defying the beginning of winter with an intensification of colour.

'I will be seeing hibiscus all the time when I go home.'

'Are you going home?'

'Yes. If she dies I must take her body back. When she dies. There is a family place where she will want to be buried. What shall we write on the head stone? Shall we make it like Robert Louis Stevenson: *Home is the scholar, home from the libraries and museums and meetings. Home where I've longed for her to be?*'

She pulled the petals off the hibiscus she was holding, then threw it away and came to me for a long hug.

'Why, when I love her so much, am I finding I am so angry with her now? Angry, while they up there cutting her to bits. Why, Sam?'

Who did I know who would help me be able to answer these questions? My parents? Perhaps this was the same as Dad getting furious with other drivers? Michael? Sel, who was so wise about cricket? The pastor who had fainted and ended up twitching on the floor?

'I don't know? It's that you want her to live. Want her to be here, bossing you around as you tell me she always has. Maybe you just want your question answered?'

We walked up the hill, covered in oak trees in the centre of the Domain, stopping and leaning on one the trees, feeling its rough bark and some of its strength. I told her about coming here when I was about 13 to watch the final of the inter-schools cross country race. A boy from our school led all the way until the top of this hill when, with the finish line in sight, the runner who had been tucked in behind him since the start, sprinted away and won by about 500 yards. Our runner looked so powerless and sad we all ended up with lumps in our throats and blinking eyes. The winner later went on to win Olympic gold medals.

Susana nodded at my story and said it was time for us to go back to the hospital. We were allowed in, but told not to talk. The room was dark. There were machines. I placed a chair on one side of the bed for Susana, but when I moved a chair for myself it slipped and clattered to the floor. The small figure, tightly tucked into the bed, moaned and made sucking noises, her fingers straightening and snapping down into her palms.

'Fia inu.'

'She wants a drink. Can you ask them if she can have a drink?'

I came back with some ice and Susana held a cube to her lips. She settled back into a slow breathing sleep. The preface to R A K Mason's 'No New Thing' came to mind:

*'...my bitter verses are
sponges soaked in vinegar
useless to the starry eyed
but handy for the crucified.'*

I didn't share this thought with Susana in the hours we sat, listening to each breath, smelling the air laden with medicine and hearing the off-stage, cheerful bustle of nurses. Susana spoke to her softly, endlessly, in Samoan, without any traces of anger. Around four in the afternoon, Sefulu came back into our world. She didn't try to move, but her eyes were open and she smiled, squeezing our hands. Susana held some more ice to her lips.

'Talofae ...my poor dears. You have been here for such a long time. Go and let me sleep. Others will come. Others will come.'

Susana objected but, in her croaky voice her mother insisted we leave.

'Why don't you go on one of those protest marches and tell them damned Yankees to get out of Vietnam?'

Her laughter was stopped in its tracks by some stab of pain, making her grimace. I wanted to give her a sponge soaked in vinegar.

'Please go. Leave me and be together for a while. Go and be young. I will be here in the morning, God willing. Or even if He's not!'

Outside the hospital we started running and ran all the way to the University, arriving in time for the start of the Friday evening march. An athletic looking young man, with a permanent grin was addressing the crowd. His mouth appeared to open wider than most mouths and it let out a

seemingly unstoppable flow of rhetoric. As he underlined each American crime, each of Lyndon Johnson's untruths, each of Keith Holyoake's short sighted acts of obedience, his grin became larger and larger. I was yelling responses louder than I ever had before. Susana was shiny eyed and jumping up and down and all the time we willingly let the people press us closer together. Then the crowd parted and a large figure pushed his way beside us. It was Michael, grinning and smelling of beer. He grabbed Susana and kissed her, and then he put his arm around my shoulders.

'How are you, my little cross cultural love birds? My defiers and defilers of convention. My cousin and the beautiful, beautiful girl who has been keeping him away from the pub and the first rugby practices of the season.'

'Susana's mother is very sick. She had surgery today. We've just been there.'

This was not an explanation. It was a cue for him to shut up.

'Sorry,' he said. 'Dumb bastard blundering in, again. Sorry.'

He took Susana's hands.

'Hope she's gonna be OK. They're really good, these days. Really good.'

'How do you say it? She'll be right?' Susana said, smiling at him. 'She'll be right. She told us to come here and this is where I want to be, with Sammy and with you too. Outside for a while. Not thinking about things and yelling out against the Americans.'

Michael squeezed her shoulder then reached over and punched my arm.

'Sammy,' he said with a grin.

I looked around the crowd, which was a sea of brown and black duffel coats. All the women seemed to have long straight hair, parted in the middle with a small fringe. Their dresses were drab, but most of them had brightly coloured stockings – blues, reds and candy stripes. Susana looked so special in her orange and yellow puletasi, with a red hibiscus from beside the duck pond still in her hair. She had a black shawl around her shoulders and I thought she was unique and beautiful. My duffel coat was brown, with wooden toggles.

The grinning man motioned us forward and we headed for Wellesley Street, people finding walking space, shrugging back their shoulders, checking that they were safely in the middle, yelling to friends, getting ready. When we reached the Library, on the corner of Lorne St we stopped. The marshals, with their borrowed megaphones, made us sit and wait.

‘Cops aren’t ready – have to wait. Still traffic.’

‘Bugger this!’ Michael yelled, standing up. ‘We’re ready. Let’s go. One, two three four...let’s go!’

Everyone stood and the crowd moved forward, noisy, chanting, demanding space and attention. We became one, moving because others moved, grinning at strangers, linking arms, sharing energy. As we turned left from Wellesley St into Queen St, it felt like we all, all ten thousand of us, swung around the corner simultaneously and Auckland’s main street was confronted by our noise, our anger, our unity. Any cars that had still been moving were now stopped and turned into the rocks our river flowed around, their drivers looking resigned and hoping they wouldn’t end up being shaken and swayed as the Prime Minister’s car had been in Wellington a few weeks ago when he, and five thousand uninvited protestors, came to open Parliament.

Susana kept jumping up so she could see more. Michael and I grabbed her under the arms and, on each jump, lifted her higher. Once we got the timing right, we could lift her to a full arms length.

‘Bit like a bloody Springbok lineout manoeuvre. Cheating cunning bastards,’ said Michael.

All the while we were chanting:

‘One, two, three, four

We don’t want your bloody war!’

Susana became the leader for our section of the march, starting the *One two* as we lifted her and kept her there while she looked around, conducting, making *bloody war* an arm waving crescendo. Her voice loud and shrill carrying across the upraised faces, rising above the noises of other sections. As I watched her, I believed that as she flung her head back and yelled, she was yelling out all the tensions of the past days and weeks: yelling with the jubilation of knowing that her mother had told us to come here; yelling

with enough strength to scare the owl into flying away; yelling for her father. And she was yelling for the Vietnamese because the advent of live television broadcasts had made their plight so real to us. When we set her down, for the tenth time, I grabbed her and kissed her. We tried to stop walking but the crowd kept us moving. I hadn't known you can kiss and walk at the same time.

'Hey, you can't do that here!' said the tall thin man, who had moved beside us and linked arms with Michael, gently moving us forward despite our oblivion to the rest of the world. He was our Anthropology lecturer, but I don't know if he recognised us. Susana maybe. He was smiling and nudging us on as we kept trying to return for more small kisses.

'You can't do that here. This is Queen St on a Friday night and this isn't a society too keen on cross cultural relationships, in case you didn't know.'

'Shit, I've been trying to tell them that, but do you think they'll listen, dumb, lovely bastards that they are,' said Michael, looking for a bicep to punch.

The next time we lifted Susana, she yelled:

*'This society ain't ready
For me and my Sammy!'*

The crowd responded with its *'One, two three four.'*

Susana clapped her hands in front of her, making quick little rhythms.

'This is the first party we have been to together, Sam, and I'm having so much fun.'

But the fun suddenly stopped. We were no longer able to move forward, but the people behind us had not lost their momentum. The earlier pleasure of being nudged together was replaced by an uncomfortable crush. We could no longer lift Susana or move where wanted to move. In fact, she was being taken away from me as currents of force made some parts of the march stop, even move backwards, while others edged forward. She drifted forward, eyes and hands stretched back towards me. I hunched and pushed into the crowd as if I was pushing through a ruck, but was told to fuck off by a multitude of voices and forced upright by a multitude of hands. I could no longer see Susana, only the flashing lights of police cars. I thought I heard her voice, the distinctive musical shrill that had livened, united and amused the crowd for the

last ten minutes. But, if it was her voice, it had changed to something longer, with an edge of desperation. A wail.

I was no longer at the middle of the march. I had seen pictures of ants marching, the bulk of them safe, but those of the periphery ensuring that safety by sacrificing life and limb to the marauders around them, their vulnerability allowing the group to survive. I had become vulnerable, pressed up against a policeman who called me an asshole and seemed determined to hit me, only stopped by the press of the crowd keeping his arms by his side. I squirmed away from him and was immediately swirled away and forced through the small gap between two police cars. In front of me a large young policeman, with the misshapen ears that are rugby's badge of honour, was pushing Susana's arms behind her back and clicking handcuffs shut.

'Hey!' I yelled. 'That's Susana!'

'No,' he said, 'This is the woman who called me a white pig.'

'You called me a little black bitch, you bloody white pig, white pig!'

His face was set. He dragged at the tie that had been pulled tight in some scuffle, face red, willing me to try something.

'There are charges for insulting a policeman in the course of his duties. And deportation, I shouldn't wonder. This is not Chicago and you can't treat cops like that here, as you will find out, after your night in the cells, ya little...miss.'

'Ow for chrissake, Brian,' said Michael, heaving himself towards us. 'For chrissake, Brian, you're the filthiest, most illegal prop in all of Auckland rugby, and you should be bloody banned even if you have played for Ponsonby for bloody years and here you are, masquerading as a policeman trying to arrest my sister-in-law just because she called you a pig, when we all know you're really a fucking asshole, but she was too bloody polite to say it.'

They embraced each other, in a bear hitting bear kind of a way.

'You bastard, Mike,' he said. 'It took days for my to eye open again after that last game. I'm gonna fuckin get you next time, that's for sure and you can put a ring around it.'

He grinned.

'I didn't know you were one of these bloody commie protestor bastards, Mike. Very disappointing. It's usually the duffel coat wankers like him.' He

nodded in my direction. 'But not too many of our brown brothers and sisters, like this one, but I suppose that's education and that bloody university for you.'

He bent and undid the handcuffs.

'Sister- in- law?' he said. 'More like that bloody Stokely Carmichael's sister, if you ask me!'

'Bloody white pig,' she said, rubbing her wrists.

'Yes madam, thank you. And perhaps you'll be on your way now?'

He and Michael were now leaning against a police car, arms folded, relaxed, together. I felt as if I should run and get them a beer.

'What made the march stop?' I asked. 'Everything was fine and easy, no problems, but then we stopped.'

'We stopped you. Like you have to draw a line or we'll all be stuffed. But take them away Michael and keep them clean. You owe me – an eye for an eye and maybe a jug or six.'

The march had broken up and people were drifting off. Cars were starting to use the street again, running over discarded banners, breaking them, just as our euphoria had been broken. Susana said very little and when she did her voice was husky. We walked up Wellesley St and stopped outside the Kiwi Hotel.

'I'm meeting someone here,' said Michael. 'You're welcome to join us. Then I'm going to her place, so my flat's empty and you know where the key is and if you want to go there for a cup of coffee, or something, then that's fine. You'll be able to drink coffee in peace all night, if you like.'

Susana and I linked arms and walked up Symonds St towards Michael's flat at the top of Khyber Pass. I didn't talk and Susana seemed happy to be part of the silence. I wanted to get to the flat, but I didn't want our slow, close walk to stop. At the beginning of Grafton Bridge we paused and looked across at the lights of the hospital.

'Tomorrow,' she whispered. 'I will be there tomorrow.'

Michael's flat was tidy: no dishes on the stainless steel sink bench; no books on the table; no full ashtrays or empty beer bottles; no posters, apart from one of the 1956 All Blacks after the fourth test against South Africa at Eden Park. There were two bedrooms, but Michael lived there by himself.

‘You can’t trust no other bugger,’ he often said. ‘You need somewhere where you aren’t carrying some bastard and his problems and his mess and mates with bad habits. Somewhere where a girl will be happy to spend the night, clean and tidy enough for her to feel she’s still respectable, if you know what I mean.’

Susana and I went to the spare room and I turned down the clean white sheets of the bed. She leant against me, passive and quiet.

‘Is this OK?’ I asked. ‘You don’t have to.’

‘One, two, three four – please don’t talk any more,’ she said, pulling me towards her and collapsing us onto the bed.

Chapter Twenty Seven**Endings**

It was late when we woke and watched the sun edge its way past the scalloped bottom edge of the black Holland blind. There were enough tassels missing to allow small glimpses of the old Astor Hotel across the road. We were still in each others' arms.

Later Susana jumped out of bed.

'The shower's through there isn't it?' she asked, turning towards the door.

'You know, I've never seen your bum before, and it's lovely and...'

'And it hasn't got spots on it, like some people I know.'

She bent over, wagged her spotless behind at me, then ran to the bathroom.

When she came back I knew things had changed. She had made her puletasi look neat and almost severe, her hair was tightly disciplined, her mouth serious. Our time was over.

We toasted some of Michael's bread, found butter and marmite in the fridge. I made the first of the cups of coffee he had invited us here for.

'It's nearly eleven o'clock. We should go straight to the hospital, don't you think?'

She nodded, but sent me out to buy a toothbrush. I bought one, hesitated, then went back into the shop and bought a second one. We tidied the flat, tried to make the bed look as non evidential as possible and walked quickly towards Grafton Rd and the hospital, pausing only to look up at the wooden spire of Holy Sepulchre Church reaching higher towards its God than any other building in the city.

'My cricket club must have been around here once, because it's called Grafton.'

She didn't answer and I didn't try to speak again until, when we were almost at the hospital, I made her stop and held her in front of me.

'Susana, I know your mother, your family, are going to take over, take you back now, but I want you to know I'll always be somewhere nearby. And I will never forget last night, not ever.'

She kissed me.

‘And I won’t forget. For all my days, I won’t forget, either.’

We strode up the stairs and found Sefulu’s room empty. I put my hand on Susana’s open mouth.

‘Wait.’

I stopped a passing nurse who told me to go to room 12. There, in a ward with seven other women, we found Sefulu, sitting up, free from tubes and drips. Her hair was also free from its usual tight bun and fanned out across the pillow, grey now revealed, her face smaller, older. She reached one hand towards us.

‘My darlings... come ...come. You can see I am much better. Not on my own, but here, talking with my new friends. Talking about protest marches and students who go on them and march all night long until almost the middle of the next day and nearly forget to visit old women in hospital.’

Susana knelt at the bedside and buried her head against the bleached white cover. She did not see the small smile on Sefulu’s lips, but would have felt her hand as it kept tapping softly on her shoulder.

‘They make us get up and walk, those nurses. No time to lie around feeling sad. Up and moving, lifting our arms in the air, pretending our chests don’t hold any pain.’ She laughed, without opening her lips. ‘But we are learning to dance, which is much better than lifting our tired arms and chanting one two, three, like soldiers being made to march. I am showing them the Samoan *siva* and we sing together, like this.’

The other women, all still sitting on their beds, looked at her and raised their arms as far as they could, twirling their hands in imitation of her movements. Her hands were full of grace and surety, giving the illusion of endless motion, of waves unfolding on the shore, of the upward glide of smoke and dreams, of picking and enfolding treasures floating in the air. Their hands followed in a brave stumble, with the thick uncertainty of shadows, arm movements made tentative and painful from the surgeons’ destruction of their chests. Susana lifted her head from the bed, then in one movement rose and danced her way to the centre of the room, pausing only to bow low, with outspread hands, first in salute to her mother, then to each of the women in turn. She took the song her mother had been singing in a whisper and made it fill the room. Her movements were light, restrained, simultaneously sensual

and respectful, her youth and vitality overflowing. The dance seemed to begin at the soles of her feet, rippling its way through her body, and blossoming into the movements of her arms and hands. As the rhythm grew, she tipped her head back, and to the side, firstly in one direction and then in another as if her attention was being caught by a series of stars only she could see.

I choked, thinking of how she had shared herself with me. I worried the women would be saddened by her completeness and freedom. I desperately hoped she would not ask me to dance with her. But this was not about me. It was about her love for her mother, about rededicating herself to everything her mother represented and about the hope they would dance together again, mother teaching daughter, mother nodding at what had been learned and setting new goals. When she finished she bowed again and everyone clapped, some crying, some giggling. It seemed to me there had been a celebration that I, as a man, could not be part of, and maybe should not have witnessed.

Susana went back to the bedside and a silence fell on the room which was only broken by the arrival of visitors: husbands leading overdressed children, clutching flowers and trying to smile. Auntie Valu and Uncle Fred walked straight to Sefulu's bed and began singing a hymn, joined by a stream of other relatives, and the cleaner who had been quietly polishing the shining floor. I was eased back to my place in a distant corner.

The next ten days and nights passed like this. My role was to drive Susana to and from the hospital, to wait, to listen. I would arrive home late and tired, studies neglected and phone calls from my rugby coach ignored. Every day my parents asked about Sefulu and Susana. Their concern seemed real and I found it easy to talk with them, to tell them not everything, but a lot more than I had for a long time. They offered me the use of their car to ferry people around. Their car, the object of my father's quiet pride, his gleaming black 1966 Humber Super Snipe, with walnut dashboard, leather seats and the Royal Automobile Club badge he reverentially screwed onto each new car as soon as he got it home. It would have been so much easier to take it and get away from the difficulties of loading large aunts into the mini's back seat and watching it sag, crab like, closer to the road, its skip becoming a shuffle. But I knew it would have been too complicated, with timetables, reading of the petrol gauge, quiet inspections and oblique

questions about whether someone had dirty shoes and had the arm rest previously been able to go past the 90 degrees mentioned in the manual? I couldn't have coped, but I was grateful for the offer and for the kind messages they wanted me to take to Susana.

The best times were when only Susana and I were there and we talked with Sefulu about her student days and about books she had read. She told me of her dream to make education in Samoa 'free and compulsory', as it was in New Zealand. When I told her that 'secular' was the other key word in our system, she patted my hand.

'I know,' she said. 'But we won't be able to do it without God's help, so we better not try for secular, don't you think?'

'I thought you were having doubts about the whole church thing, the rituals, the institutions? When we were at the beach, remember?'

She took my hand again.

'I remember, Sammy. Yes. But, I have changed...have been changed. In my mind I can still have a good argument, especially if I listen to someone like that Professor Geering on the radio, but that is not the house I want to be in any more. Is that weak of me, Sam?'

I smiled, put my head on one side and raised my eyebrows – my father's gesture, but I couldn't find anything better.

Susana was moving around the bed, smoothing the already smooth sheets, tidying the top of the bedside locker. She bent to rearrange the locker shelves and her skirt stretched tightly across the bottom she had wagged naked, at me less than ten days ago. I felt the desire that seemed to fill my blood whenever I was near her, but knew my chances of seeing her naked again had become remote. Sefulu had moved away from her small dabble with religious doubt; her daughter had gone back to being untouchable. She would hug me, and wouldn't stop me touching her, but was passive, as if desire and curiosity had left her. Kissing her lips felt like kissing fingers.

'Why?' I had said to her one night in the car, after we had dropped some relative off and had a moment of being alone together, her eyes far away, her lips unresponsive.

'Why?'

My voice was loud.

‘My mother.’

‘She knows and has almost said as much. She told us about her time in London...your father. She accepts that we make love, sometimes, smiles about it, I think. So for godsake, what more do you want?’

‘I want her to live. She won’t live if we sin. I can’t do that with you anymore, because God is watching and her life is in His hands. I know this is dumb, but I can’t help it Sam. It’s like the tables I learned when I was little. They come into my head even when I don’t want them to, and I end up saying them over and over. When I think of Michael’s flat, or going back there, the words become *you sin and God will take her.*’

I walked with her from the car to the overcrowded sanctuary of Valu and Fred’s house with its grubby toilet. Siaosi was working in the kitchen. He grinned at us. I wanted to hit him.

As I drove away I kept yelling ‘Seven sevens are forty nine, seven eights are fifty six ...’ my hand hitting the steering wheel in rhythm with the chant. I didn’t know whether to go home, or to a pub or to one of our beaches. In the end, I went to Michael’s flat, not expecting him to be home, but his lights were on. When I banged on the door I could hear the sound of Miles Davis on his stereo.

‘Mate!’ he said when he let me in. I waited in the small lounge with Miles while Michael went to get beer from the fridge. It felt like I’d never been in this place before, that my night here with Susana was some fantasy I’d allowed to become real.

Michael gave me a bottle and flopped into the chair beside me.

‘Talk,’ he said.

I talked. No tears, no self pity – just the facts, each one underlining the impossibility of the situation.

‘So,’ he said, ‘it seems to me you are sailing towards the edge of the world and, despite the fact you have always known it is flat, you are just going to keep right on sailing. Is that about it?’

‘Am I going to keep sailing? Sailing? Drifting? Yep. Parts of the voyage, not that I really go along with your bloody metaphor, parts of the voyage have been the best things that’ve ever happened ... the night here, her without her family, her with her family, her mother too for that matter. It’s not just her, I like

being part of what they've got even when I hate them, or feel scared or, as happens most often, when I get bored waiting for them to remember to try to include me.'

He shrugged.

'How's your beer? If you're gonna keep your sails and everything hoisted I'd better do my best to make sure you're properly pissed so you don't see how scary the edge of the world really is.'

I raised my glass in his direction and was about to launch into some kind of a reply, when the phone rang. Michael looked at his watch, raised his eyebrows, heaved his leg off the arm of the chair he'd spread himself across and went to the hallway to answer.

'It's for you,' he called. 'Susana for you.'

I almost pulled the cord off the wall when I grabbed the phone from him.

'Susana! Are you coming over? How did you know the number? How are you and...'

'She is very sick, Sam. They think her heart was hurt in the operation, or the cancer has spread, or something. Can you come? To the hospital. Please.'

Chapter Twenty Eight

Gifts

Parting

Sefulu had been moved back into a private room. It was so crowded I couldn't get through the door, and stood outside, waving my hands in the air and calling Susana's name. She pushed her way towards me, but didn't throw herself in to my arms, as I had again imagined she would, but took my hands and dragged me to her mother's bedside. I had never seen anyone near death, but as I heard Sefulu using all her resources to climb into each breath, her skin tight and faded, I instantly believed she was dying. She turned her face towards me and I kissed her lips as softly as I could, feeling them flutter, like a soft moth caught in the hands. I smelt her breath, sharp and laden with the toxins of her body's final battle.

'Sam,' she whispered. 'Sammy.'

Susana reached across the bed and put an arm around me. Together we bowed our heads until they just touched Sefulu's shoulders. She reached her arms as far as she could around us and we stayed there for many minutes, eyes shut, not speaking, Susana and I stopping our breathing each time we heard her fight for hers.

'Bless you, my children,' she finally said. 'Bless you both.'

The people around us watched us, breathing and sighing as if they were one. They had no hesitation in watching the three of us. My parents would have turned away from the intimacy of this moment, but Susana's family, with their houses without walls at home, and their crowded accommodation in New Zealand, were far more accustomed to seeing life being played out in front of their eyes. They were comfortable, even fascinated, but they also seemed to be waiting to see which way the wind would blow – would Sefulu be happy to have me so close to her and her daughter, or would I need to be thrown out? Would we do anything that required us to be judged?

When we lifted ourselves from her fragile embrace Sefulu asked us to help her sit up. She grabbed my forearms and I could feel her shake with the exertion of getting upright, even though Susana had bent and was trying to lift

her, as one would lift a child. Once upright, she lent against the pillows, eyes closed, her breath being dragged in small, slow increments, with long pauses, like an injured man climbing stairs. The room waited.

She waved her hands in a circular motion and we understood she wanted us to be lined up around her, each of us in her sight. There was shuffling, perhaps some pushing, as the size of the hospital room imposed what Raymond Firth may have called its cultural expectations and boundaries. The situation was resolved when a number of the women folded themselves into cross-legged sitting positions beside the bed. Sefulu gazed, long and slow, around the room, making sure she could see every face, then she started to speak.

Her voice became strong, her eyes alight, her gestures firm. It was as if she was a fighting ship that had been masquerading as a lame duck, but had now thrown off this camouflage and become ready for the good fight. She looked at each person in turn and spoke. Her words, mainly in Samoan, but with bursts of English, started with expressions of her love and gratitude towards each of us, then long series of instructions, criticisms, hopes and beliefs. Susana's small whispers filled some of the gaps of my understanding. Nothing had been important enough for her to have done this before.

Each person Sefulu addressed hung his or her head and wept. There were nods, murmurs of agreement and apologies. The big men from the photos at Fred and Valu's house seemed the most affected and were unable to bring themselves to look at her. She told them not to drink too much, to walk away from fights, to be good husbands and to think about what they were being told in church. She spent a long time talking about education and bringing up children, pleading with them to move away from the old ways of discipline. The men shuffled when she made them think of their own childhoods and the punishments they had suffered.

'It doesn't have to be that way,' she said, smiling and perhaps remembering her grandmother's broom. 'It doesn't have to be that way.'

'But the Bible, it says,' one man started. 'It says not to spare the rod; it tells us our duty as parents.'

'The missionaries and nineteenth century Britain – they have so much power over us still, don't they? Jesus said, *Suffer the little children to come to*

me. He didn't say, *Make the little children suffer!* Remember, the English used to tie up prisoners and whip them, but they don't do that anymore. They have moved forward – we must move forward too.'

She seemed to be getting tired. I sensed she had tried to give this message many times.

Valu and Fred moved forward and she spoke to them at length, allowing, for the first time, water to come to her eyes and flow down her cheeks. I sensed she was talking about Susana and passing her guardianship to them. Fred started shouting, as if there was something he wanted to deny or reject. Sefulu shook her head and pacified him with a hand movement that was partly a stop sign and partly a soothing downward movement. He knelt beside her and buried his head on the bed and began making that grieving noise my father would call 'bawling.' Valu put her hand on his shoulder, the first sign of physical affection I had seen between them.

Sefulu spoke to Valu in a whisper. She was finding it difficult to swallow the water Susana tried to give her. There seemed to be an accord between Valu and Sefulu that allowed them to speak in half sentences. Valu made frequent sounds of agreement and did a lot of nodding. Finally, she put her head on the pillow and stayed for many minutes with her face pressed against her sister's. Then she kissed both her cheeks, stood up, drew in a sharp choke of breath and went out into the corridor. We could hear her sobs. No one went to her and I was tempted to do so, but I knew this would be because I feared Sefulu speaking to me and had an even greater fear she would not find me important enough to bother with. But she did motion me close and held my hands, a long smile on her lips.

'I wanted to get to know you Sammy. I wanted time to talk and have more of our debates and have you as someone who understood my Pālagi side: my books and my music. The funny thing is, there are not too many of your own people, especially the men, who want to think about these things and leave behind their rugby, their fishing, their houses and their sheds. Do you see how much they all love this new television? Watch TV and keep quiet. I was so lucky to know a world without it.'

She needed more water. Someone passed Susana some ice cubes, which she held to her lips.

'I know you love my daughter and that she loves you. This is a good thing.' She looked at Fred. 'This is a good thing', she said again. 'I loved, and I walked away from it because I knew that was what my poor country needed from me. Too late for regret - my people have been good to me. They have honoured me and praised me and not questioned and rejected me as they would have had I been a village girl with a baby. So unfair, so ...strange that almost no one mentioned my illegitimate child to my face. You, Susana, were the elephant in the room they needed to ignore if they were going to be proud of me and go to their workplaces and be able to talk about Samoans getting Ph Ds, if they were going to be able to hold me up as an example to their children.'

She gave a small laugh, which ended up in a burst of coughing.

I stood, biting my finger, still trying not to cry, despite all the tears around me. I wasn't winning and I wished I wasn't trying to.

'Understand, Sam, she will have to make the same decision – leave her heart and ask what's best for our Island. It's the thing about education. We hold it so high and believe it will do so much. You remember Dick Whittington thinking the streets of London were paved with gold? It's like that with us. We believe if we learn enough the streets will become gold. Don't you and your country let us down, Sam, or none of this will have been worthwhile. None of the study, the time away from our homeland, the early mornings and the late nights. None of these people, who work so hard cleaning and picking up rubbish, operating noisy machines, keeping your laundries and factories going, none of their sacrifices will have been worth it if education doesn't allow some of their children into the golden places of your land. '

She started coughing again. A small dry cough that sounded like motor needing new spark plugs. She closed her eyes and slipped down on her pillows. Susana moved to help her sit up again, but she grabbed both her hands in hers and in a whisper that carried across the silent room, she said:

'This is my beloved daughter, in whom I am well pleased.'

Susana uttered a small cry; the rest of the room sighed. Sefulu closed her eyes and her presence, which had filled the room for the past hour, faded, her store of energy and radiance expended and she again became a small, very sick woman struggling for every breath. There would be no more words.

Prayers were said and Valu led the singing of hymns, all voices soft without any hint of the strident notes some of the women usually employed to make sure their cry reached the ear of God.

Two nurses and a doctor came in. The senior nurse was carrying a clipboard and a look of determination.

‘You must leave. Visiting finished hours ago. You must go. Our patient is very ill and she must rest. You must all go.’

‘She is my mother. I am her closest relative. She is dying. I will stay. I will stay with my...with Sam.’

Some of the aura of quiet power had passed from mother to daughter. The family shuffled away without objection. The second nurse offered to get us a cup of tea, while the doctor and the older nurse tested and measured and noted and made adjustments to the intravenous drip. They then turned and walked out. I followed.

‘Tell me, tell us, please, your opinion, what you think is going to happen. Tell me.’

‘And you are?’ said the doctor.

‘Son-in-law, her son-in-law.’

‘And do you translate for the rest of the family? Help them to understand?’

‘Yes...no. Susana speaks perfect English and the patient has a PhD from the University of London and...’

He had interlocked his fingers with two of them resting, in steeple formation, over his lips.

‘Yes,’ he said, collapsing the steeple. ‘The facts are that her cancer couldn’t be fully removed despite the radical nature of the mastectomy. There are secondaries in most of her organs, which must have been fully established before the operation. Her heart has become irregular. I am surprised she is still alive, and even more surprised she found the strength to speak with you all for so long, although I have seen patients rally like this, in their...final hours. There is nothing we can do, except minimise pain. It will not be long. I am sorry. Tell them, tell them as best you can’

He slapped his hand a few times against his leg, then tapped it against my shoulder, looked as if he was going to say more, but turned and strode off down the corridor.

Susana didn't talk. We sat on either side of the bed. She stroked Sefulu's brow and ran iceblocks across her lips. Sefulu didn't open her eyes or speak. Her response to the iceblocks was a brief greediness, like an animal that had found a desert water hole just before it was too late. I felt awkward touching her. Now that she couldn't speak it felt as if the closeness and easy communication we had so quickly found was suspended and she had again become someone outside my sphere, someone I couldn't touch without feeling like an intruder.

Several times I went to the window and looked across the city. It was still only April, but it felt as if winter, its appetite whetted by the Wahine storm, had decided to come early. There was a grey coldness to the night sky and the wind hustled in and around the buildings like a hunter. There were no stars. Here, far above the ground I felt remote from the weather, but more able to observe its ill will. I moved my chair beside Susana's and we sat silently, listening to Sefulu continue her battle for breath. There were long moments when I was sure there wasn't going to be another one, but it came: a last second grabbing onto the rope she had almost let go. All our concentration rode on her gasps and splutters; her refusal to stop fighting.

There was a large plain faced clock on the wall, with a big second hand. I watched it, played games with it as the night became timeless. How many breaths would she take in the next minute? If she doesn't breathe before the second hand gets back to twelve, will it be possible for her to live? At two minutes past three Susana grabbed my hands and pushed herself into my arms, her head hard against my shoulder.

'I have prayed all night Sam, for her to live. Prayed and prayed. Now I am praying, I am praying that she will die, that the pain of being alive will stop for her, that she won't have to keep trying to make her lungs work. Is this bad?'

'That's not bad, Susana. Not bad at all.'

I held her, patted her back as I had seen people pat sobbing babies and thought of all the times I had heard people say 'That's not bad', the

phrase I knew as the great New Zealand understated compliment. But as I kept saying it to Susana it took on other meanings of not being evil, not being wrong, not needing to be punished.

A nurse came into the room and checked machines, pulse and bed. I think she gave Sefulu an injection.

‘I think you two should go away’ she said, ‘get a bit of sleep, have a shower, something to eat and drink then come back. She may go on like this for days and you need to keep your strength up, look after yourselves if you are going to be here, um, at the end. Give me a number and I will call you straight away if anything changes, straight away.’

To my surprise Susana agreed. We gave the nurse Michael’s phone number and went down in the lift and then outside. The wind had picked up and it was cold, but the air felt clean and refreshing after the closed-in warmth of the hospital. It gave us the energy to hurry through the gathering storm to the flat. As we turned into Grafton Rd, away from the hospital, I found myself thinking, this is wrong, this doesn’t rate a ‘not too bad’.

We crept into the flat and went straight to the spare room, took off our shoes and lay on the bed. I found an eiderdown to cover us. We lay in each other’s arms and went straight to sleep. Just before six o’clock the beginnings of traffic on Khyber Pass Road began to make its way to the central city. We both woke up and began kissing each other. We moved clothing as quickly as we could and made love. Susana held me with more intensity than ever, her body as hungry for what I could give as her mother’s dying lips had been for the solace of melting ice. I felt her power and both revelled in it and feared I might not be able to cope.

When it was over we lay back on the pillows, without playful whispers and giggles, without any words. I heard the phone ring and Michael’s muffled voice answering it. He knocked on our door and came in.

‘The hospital,’ he said. ‘She’s gone.’

**Chapter
Service**

Twenty

Nine

Susana got out of bed as soon as Michael gave his message. She straightened her clothes and looked for her shoes. He enfolded her in a big embrace.

‘I’m so sorry, Susana. So very sorry. I know she was hugely important to you.’

She slipped away from his arms, wordless, and started putting on her shoes. I leapt up and went to her, but she brushed me away and headed for the door. I followed as soon as I could, and had to run to catch up with her. It was cold, as if something from the Antarctic was coming up through the footpath and uniting with the wind.

‘Susana, stop!’

She stopped and turned towards me. Her face had lost all its open expressiveness. She looked at me and I felt colder.

‘Susana. I’m so sorry she has died. So sorry. And I wish we’d been there, wish...’

‘We weren’t there Sam. We left her and went to Michael’s place so we could sin again and she died, Sam, she died all by herself.’

Her words were said slowly, rising with such intensity that ‘*died all by herself*’ echoed down the empty street and stopped me from saying anything further. She turned and strode towards the hospital. I followed, but I knew she was beyond caring if I came or not. I prayed we would be the first there.

Susana ran to the bedside, drew the sheet off her mother’s head and lay down beside her. She stroked her face; her fingers initially recoiling as she felt the first cold, rigid tentacles of rigor mortis start to take hold. There was no weeping, no water coming to her eyes. This girl, who had so moved me when we first met with her ready tears and her readable face had become as set and emotionless as the Royal Doulton figurines my mother tended so carefully, only ever finding dust to brush away. Susana tidied the hair that had fallen over Sefulu’s forehead and tried to ease the dry lips that were starting to set in a tight grin, drawn over teeth as perfect as her own.

I turned away from them and went to the window, listening to Susana whispering small words. They were words she had taught me: *leai (no)*; *sesē*, *sesē tele (wrong, very wrong)*; *leaga (bad)*.

‘No Susana, you can’t say those things. You can’t blame yourself. Or me. Or us. You have been the most wonderful of loving daughters and she knew, knows, of your love for her. You weren’t to know she’d...go...so suddenly.’

‘Did she have any last words to say, Sam? Was there anything she wanted, Sam? Nobody knows, because nobody was here. I wasn’t here. You weren’t here. Her family wasn’t here because they trusted her to us. But we weren’t here, were we? No, we were at Michael’s fucking, like greedy little pigs, weren’t we?’

I looked at the face that always cried, but now held neither tears nor light. I looked at the mouth that had such difficulty saying ‘bloody’, but could now hurl out ‘fucking’, not as a generalised swear word, but as a specific curse on our love making. I could only turn away again, uncertain whether the blur in front of my eyes was rain on the window or something of my own making. Her words went on, some in English: *sorry; forgive me, please forgive me*.

‘Do you want me to get one of those little whips nuns beat themselves when they realise they have been lusting after the friar? You could beat the shit out of yourself and then out of me, if it made you feel better.’

She looked at me and then turned back to her mother’s body.

‘Le’aga, *sesē*, *sesē*, sorry, forgive me, forgive me.’

‘Please, Susana, please come back. Please, I love you so much. Please don’t hurt yourself, hurt us like this. Please.’

She didn’t answer and we spent the next hour in silence, me pacing around, getting to the edge of saying something, but thinking about it for so long it became meaningless; Susana keeping up her mantra of blame and regret. She sat up when a nurse came in and expressed sympathy as she had been taught.

‘What time did she die, please? Can you tell me?’ Susan asked.

‘Just before six o’clock, I think.’

Susana shot me a look.

‘I have to ask you, because you are the next of kin,’ said the nurse, ‘I have to ask you to sign this form which gives permission for the autopsy to be done.’

‘You want to take my mother, stare at her nakedness and cut her open so you know why she died? Is it not enough just to know she is dead?’

‘It is something that must be done...the law.’

‘Aaaee!’ Susana’s muted scream sounded like the noise I made when I was first hit with a cane at school and had not yet learned to pretend it didn’t hurt.

‘It has to be done...’

Susana took the clipboard and signed the paper. I put my arm around her shoulders and held her close. She let herself relax against me, but almost instantly tensed and moved away. I thought of the tow rope between two vehicles dropping to the road in a moment of free-wheeling and then being jerked to even greater tautness as the towing vehicle got back to business. There was to be no slack.

At eight thirty Valu and Fred arrived, followed by many others. Valu went to Sefulu, but Susana reached her arms over the body shielding it from her. The pastor took Susana’s hands and made her stand up.

‘We must share, even in our grief we must share. Let the others come to her, Susana, let them come.’

Susana shuffled to the wall at the far end of the window from me, gazing back at the bed and each person who came and kissed Sefulu and wept over her.

The pastor seemed to have gained new strength and became the one to organise things. He talked with doctors about release of the body, nodding at the mention of post mortem; with Valu about a venue for a service. He called Susana and me to his side.

‘The undertaker?’ he said. ‘Do you want me to...?’

‘Please, yes please,’ Susana answered, ‘but you know she must be buried in Samoa. We can have a service here and then I will take her back to Samoa.’

After these words, they all argued for three hours. I was there, still studying Park Rd, Grafton Bridge and the intersection of Symond’s St and

Karangahape Rd. As time wore on the oaks of the gully, leafless with the early onset of winter held my attention. I had lost Susana – the oaks would renew themselves in springtime, but knew I wouldn't, that my life was now condemned to being some kind of winter. The mother, who everyone said would forbid Susana having anything to do with me had liked me, even blessed our love on her deathbed, but she was the one, in the end, who would ensure Susana would return to her own paddock and send the Pālagi who loved her back to his. The irony made me want to cry out and swear, but I stood there silently, while the argument, which I no longer made any effort to understand, flowed around me. I could see some animation return to Susana's face as she steadfastly insisted she take Sefulu home. As she won over more and more of the people I found myself thinking she would make someone a wonderful wife.

In Samoa.

Chapter Thirty

Farewell

I did borrow Dad's car on the day of the service. Susana had asked me to pick up a cousin from Manurewa who had his elderly parents staying with him. She was worried they might not be able to do the agile flop needed to get into the Mini's back seat.

My parents insisted on coming to the service. I told them they didn't need to come, but they were excited, looking on driving my car and going to 'an island service' as an adventure.

'We're all Christians, in the end, you know, Sam,' said my mother. 'All Christians regardless of where we come from. We do know how to behave in church, so you needn't have any of your anthropological worries. And it's the least we can do for Susana, poor dear girl.'

The cousin loved the Humber Super Snipe. He kept saying the name; he drummed his fingers on the dashboard as he chanted:

'Hummm-baa Suupaa Senipaaa, Hummm-baa Suupaa Senipaaa; Hummm-baa Suupaa Senipaaa; Hummm-baa Suupaa Senipaaa'

He also wanted to know how much it had cost. I told him, adding that you had to have overseas funds to buy one.

'If you had some money in the bank in Samoa, that'd do.'

He laughed in the Beach Boys falsetto I had heard other Samoan men use and turned to recount the conversation to his parents, managing to include *Hummm-baa Suupaa Senipaaa* three times. There was lots of laughter – we were a very jolly little funeral party.

Fred was at the door of the church, looking wider in a suit that he shouldn't have buttoned up. He embraced me and kissed me.

'I want to say I only knew Sefulu for a little but, but I think I started to feel love for her and ...'

He grabbed me and kissed me again. I felt myself breathe out and relax against his shoulder wanting to pour out hurt I felt about the cold distance that now made Susana and I talk to each other so formally. I wanted to tell him how robbed I felt about Sefulu's death taking so much away not just from them, but from me. And from the country which so desperately needed

intelligent, articulate people who could move comfortably in two cultures. I wanted Fred to look after me, but just as I started to let things overflow, there was a sharp cough behind me. I looked over Fred's shoulder at my father.

'Sam? Samuel?' he said, shaking his head.

I introduced them to Fred, who shook my father's hand and grabbed my mother in a rag doll embrace that left her smoothing down her dress and searching for a handkerchief. Fred welcomed them. He called them '*Mr and Mrs Sam.*' He ushered us to a seat two rows from the front.

The coffin was in front of the congregation, just before the chancel steps. It was draped in fine mats, some with pieces of brightly coloured wool that seemed to have been hastily added at the end of the skilled and slow weaving in an effort to give each mat a gaudy individuality. Susana, dressed in white, sat beside the coffin, her hand still stroking Sefulu's face. Some of the congregation came forward and bent low, with kisses and words for both mother and daughter.

'Should we go up there?' my parents whispered.

'No, that's only for close family. Samoans.'

They didn't comment when two elderly Pālagi women went to the coffin a few minutes later.

The organist hit a loud chord. We all stood and a tenor, from somewhere near the back of the church sang the first line of a hymn. Then a man in robes came forward from the choir stalls. He stood in front of the congregation, and blew a pitch pipe several times. The tenor repeated the first line, then the man began vigorous conducting movements and the church was filled with the sound of human voices raised in song. My parents sang the English version of the hymn, but seemed to be fractionally ahead of the conductor. I didn't sing, nor did Susana.

A procession of fifteen men, both robed and in suits, moved up the aisle with slow deliberate footsteps and seated themselves in front of the choir. I knew from things Susana had told me that at least half of them would speak. Did my parents realise they were going to be here for at least three hours?

The first rose and began a long prayer, his voice rising and falling, seeming to fade then finding a new flow of energy that propelled him forward

again and again. I thought of the kindergarten song about the bear coming over the mountain and seeing another mountain, and another, and another. The clock, undiplomatically hung on the wall above the pulpit, was at five past eleven when he started. By the time he moved back to his seat, signalling the start of the next hymn, it was at twenty five past, and seventeen seconds, if you were watching carefully.

The dignified men in the front tag-teamed for the following hour. My parents whispered to each other. Then the oldest of them made his way to the pulpit. People shuffled in their seats. His sermon was delivered in a voice that filled the church. Careful, slow words, now intense, now gentle, flowing forward in what seemed to me to be a story. I tried to listen, to understand but it was a river flowing past me from which I could only pluck a few words. Words like *Tofua* and *sitema*, which I took to mean the boat that had originally brought Sefulu to New Zealand. Easier words like Niu Sela and Aukelani. And I thought I heard him repeat *mōlī*. I knew this meant 'light' because Fred had given it more than the thirteen meaningful repetitions Chomsky maintained were necessary for learning, when we had changed a light bulb together. I resolved to ask Susana about the sermon. To try to ask.

I looked out the window and saw bits of trucks and buses going by, together with brief flashes of a tree branch that was being blown briefly into my vision and then snapped away. I waited for each of its momentary appearances, trying to work out what sort of tree it was. I resolved it was an oak, but wasn't sure. Sounds of children, mixed with adult conversation and laughter drifted in. Didn't they know we were farewelling Sefulu? The clock, the tree, the sounds, the neck in front of me cut into by a collar, looking like the trunk of tree-tomato my father and I planted, but left for years before cutting the twine that held it to a now diminutive stake. And Susana, there for me to see, but not seeing me.

The man with the pitch pipe came forward again, to ensure fatigue hadn't robbed us of the chance for some final harmonies. Obedient to his baton and the lumberings of the organ we sang. Men's voices a sturdy platform for the women, at times too loud and shrill for my ear, at times with the men in a flow of sound so deep and united my heart wanted to burst. The hymn finished. A final prayer was shouted at us by a pastor hitherto

overlooked and wanting to make an impression before it was too late. The undertaker, dressed for a part in a Victorian play, came forward and placed the lid back on the coffin. I could hear Susana draw in her breath. Fred, the Humber Super Snipe cousin and other men I half recognised went forward, lifted the coffin, moved down the aisle, Susana and Valu following. When we got outside, the coffin was in the hearse, waiting to be taken to whatever storage was needed while it awaited its journey to Samoa.

‘Do you realise that was almost three and a half hours!’ my father whispered. ‘Three and a half!’

‘Beautiful singing, Sam. They can all sing so beautifully, the darker people, don’t you think?’ said my mother.

Susana came over and hugged them both. Why them?

‘Thank you so much, Mr and Mrs Hereford, for being here. For honouring my mother in this way. Thank you.’

She took my hand and then dropped it. My parents got kissed and I got a handshake. God!

‘Susana, the sermon? I could make out the Tofua, lights and Auckland. What was it all about?’

She took both of my hands and, for the first time in the four days since her mother had died, she looked right at me.

‘He said, Sammy, that he remembered when he was a very young man and first came to New Zealand on the ‘Tofua’. He went up on deck in the middle of the night while all the other passengers were sleeping and stood at the bow. The ship, the ‘steamer’, was just approaching Auckland and he could see lights, more lights than he had ever seen before, burning brighter than he had imagined possible. He knew he was the first to see them and would be the first to set foot on this magical new land. But he also knew the rest of them would wake up, sooner or later, and get off too. He told us Sefulu was the one on deck, seeing the lights of heaven, but we were all sailing in the same direction, to the same destination. He is a very famous pastor’

‘That’s so beautiful,’ said my mother.

‘Yes,’ said my father. ‘Not that Auckland can exactly be considered heaven.’

I just stared at her and held her hand.

There was some movement in the crowd as the engine of the hearse started and it began to ease forward, then gather speed as it took Sefulu's body away from Susana for the first time. She dropped my hand and stared after the hearse, then threw her head back and opened her mouth to the heavens, and let out a sound so ancient and powerful that all other movement and talk stopped. She refilled her lungs and cried out again, her cry carrying the breath of ancestors, the strength of every karanga that has sounded in this land, the chill of the keening that rang down the valleys when the cost of battle was counted. It contained the wail of the earliest ones, slashing themselves with obsidian knives when they saw what the sabre toothed tiger had left of their loved one. It went on and on. People started to move away. I grabbed her arms, pinned them to her sides, and held her as close to me as I could. I felt another breath being drawn in, another cry rise through her body.

'You are forgiven,' I told her. 'You never wronged her. The hospital wanted us to go so they could finish her suffering. I thought you realised that when you agreed to leave. It was not you, not us. She loved you.'

Her cry faded. She crumpled against me and her tears arrived.

'I must take her home, Sam, my darling love. I will be back. I promise you. I will come back.'

Chapter Thirty One

Season

End of

The rugby season is almost over. Murray and Sel have been ringing up about starting cricket practices. Sel wants to know how 'things' are, but I just say fine and he seems to accept that he has to leave it at that. Michael reckons I played better Rugby this season than he'd ever seen me play.

'Jes, mate,' he said after our last game, 'you seem to get meaner and hungrier every time you go onto the paddock. Those tackles! Man, don't you care what happens? You know my theory don't you? It's sexual frustration that's doing it to you. Sexual frustration – the rugby players' greatest driver. No wonder New Zealand teams do so well internationally, especially now every one overseas is getting so fucking liberated and we're still dragging some kind of love and marriage chain behind us. And what about cricket? If you bowl with the same levels of bloody rage you'll be a bloody menace. I'd better get you down to the basketball courts as soon as I can, for the sake of the batsmen of Auckland, that's what I reckon.'

I'd moved into his flat, shortly after Susana went back to Samoa. It's working out really well, except for the nights I lie in the bed and think of the times she was here with me. Michael pesters me to go out with him and find girls, but, you know, I just make excuses about study. He nods and thumps me. I try not to listen when he comes home.

Things with my parents are better than ever. It seems that when I go there to dinner we talk more easily, about the world and the anti-Vietnam war marches that keep bringing London to a halt. My mother is getting enthusiastic about feminism and thinks she will buy a book by Germaine Greer soon. They know I don't want to talk about Susana.

Sometimes mum leaves a preserving jar full of soup, or Irish stew, in our letter box. We laugh and say bloody hell, but always eat it. I think I will miss them when they go on their trip to Britain and Germany to see the great porcelain factories.

I've been to see Fred and Valu a few times. They look tired, but they greet me with smiles and kisses. They are both working extra shifts, to help pay Sefulu's hospital bills. Fred and I go to the sitting room with the bottles of

beer I bring and he tells me about things. Their big news, last time I was there, was that Siaoosi had run away and joined the 'King Cobras'.

'I saw him, that fella, at shopping centre, with his mates an' I went to him and I say: *You have to come home and leave all this bullshit and have the good life.* But his mates, they came to me and they had the sticks and bats and they want to hit me, so I fought about it and came home to my family, by my own self. They so bad, those people who want to use the violence.'

'But you, Fred, you are violent. I saw you here in your kitchen, being violent to Siaoosi.'

'Nah. You got it wrong, Sam. Can't you understand I was giving him the discipline an' you have to have the discipline? Not the same f'ing as violence, for goodness sake. I see the students on the TV burning the car and breaking the shop and that's the f'ing happens if the discipline goes away'

I don't know when I will go back there. The talk is not as easy as it used to be.

Anthropology has become a real interest and I even got an A for an essay recently. It wasn't about Tikopia or Samoa. More archaeology really – fascinating and a bit more objective. I go to the pub sessions every now and then. Usually one of them starts the inquisition about why I have missed so many times, but I don't give a shit and it all fizzles out in a couple of minutes.

Michael tells me I am safe, back in my own paddock, and Susana in hers. He thinks it's best for everyone. Maybe he's correct, but I believe she will write to me.

I believe she will come back.