

Conversion

By Peter Dale

He leaned down to unhitch the gate and nudged Chloe to push it open. The ground around was beaten down to hard stone. He slowly brought his back upright. Sentimental old fool, should've brought the quad bike. Hell of a lot more comfortable. All the same....

Chloe snorted and shook her head, bridle straps slapping her cheeks. She plodded off to the right. Whistle between his teeth, he called his dogs lying down at the back of the mob, tongues hanging out. The huntaways barked and ran at the flock, brown and black flashes through the white. Sheep began to bleat again. The dust rose in late afternoon light. The two border collies moved in silently, eyes on the nearest ewes. For a time the sheep held out and then, a few at a time, began to move towards the gate. The trickle of dirty white became a flow.

'Lie down.'

Mac crawled slowly forward, ears pricked. The sheep strained to get through, leaping through the entrance.

'Stand up, Mac. Stand up, Lad.'

The dogs crept towards the gate, forcing the mob to slow. Left hand up, he counted the waves of ewes ten at a time as they came through, one finger of his right hand up as he reached a hundred, one finger down as he reached six hundred, left hand into a fist when he got to a thousand.

At 1820 a small group broke away from the flock. He continued the muster, eyes on the runaways momentarily till the heading dogs brought them back in.

He opened his left fist again, palm turned down and watched the last few race through. He looked down at his hands. 2189. He reached into his shirt pocket, pulled out a little worn notebook. It opened where the rubber band had set it. Should be 2214. He put the book away and buttoned his pocket, his eyes roving back along the steep and jagged hillsides. There was a gully full of pongas and manuka about a quarter of a mile away that looked likely. Whistle back in his

teeth, he sent the huntaways away back, blew twice to turn them left, then once to straighten them.

He eased back in the saddle, rolled a smoke, lit up and coughed. Chloe wandered forward, head down for some grass. He felt the grit of the dust on his lips, a brown scar on the cigarette paper. Dust in June! The Ruahines seem a little closer. Might be a bit of moisture in the air. Could mean rain. Certainly cold enough.

He stood in his stirrups and got down slowly from his horse, his boots feeling for the grass. Chloe's nose came up as he reached into his saddle bag and pulled out an apple. The old Mercator pocket knife cut the apple into four. One piece for himself, a smile at the horse and a piece held out on the flat of his palm.

'Want some? Here you go.'

Chloe leaned forward, made a slobbering grab. The apple crunched on the roof of her mouth. Her head came up again. 'Hungry, eh? Might've known it, you slack-gutted old nag.' He held out the other two pieces which disappeared with a drool left behind on his hand. As he sat down Chloe put her head over his shoulder, cheek against cheek. He stroked her nose, his eyes on the gully. 'That's all for now. Away you go.' He watched her wander off. Same routine for twenty-five years, and her mother for twenty years before that. Wonder how many apples that is?

At the gate, the collies lay on their paws, panting, ears pricked, eyes on him.

'Come on, then'.

Within a heartbeat they were at his side, soundless, black and white heads in his lap. He rubbed them both behind their ears, ran his hands down their sides, checked for cuts.

'Shake hands.'

Their paws came up and he took each one, rolling pads with gnarled fingers.

'Bit of a bruise there, Lad. Might rest you up tomorrow, eh?'

The dog looked disappointed. Suddenly both stood, noses pointed. He made out the faint sound of barking in the cold air, stood up and called for Chloe. Back in the saddle, he saw a straggle of sheep emerge from the scrub. Once they crossed the dry creek he whistled to the huntaways to sit.

'Get away back,' he said to the collies. They raced away to bring the mob through the gate, the wind and bleating the only sounds in the treeless holding paddock. Huntaways padded along behind, tongues hanging, the collies shaping the mob towards the gate. The stragglers saw

the larger mob of sheep through the gate and made a run for them, leaping and bleating. Chloe pushed the gate closed and he leaned down to hitch it.

In her own time the horse walked through the flock, dogs right behind her hooves, tongues out. Sheep scattered and filled in behind them, aware somehow that running was over for the day. At the concrete trough Chloe took a long drink and moved away. The dogs leaped into the trough, splashing, shaking and drinking, all in one motion. Then they simply lay in the trough until the cold drove them out. Another nudge and Chloe walked towards the hut, head down after a long day in the hills. A wisp of smoke drifted from the corrugated iron chimney.

‘Good girl.’

His hand stroked her withers as he pulled off saddle bags, rifle, saddle and bridle. He carried them to the lean-to, back bent forward from the hip, and slung them over the rail. He lifted the saddle bags and took them into the hut. Pulling two slabs of lucerne hay from the bale he made his way out to Chloe. Always such a fresh smell. Half a bucket of feed from the bin which he mixed with a little water from the barrel under the spouting and poured into a cut-off Roundup drum. Chloe left the hay and began munching the feed while he brushed her down, winter coat long and thick, tan skin shivering with each brush. He ran his hand down her ribs. ‘No amount of tucker’s gonna fatten you, girl. You and me both, we’re heading for the clover.’ It was time to check her feet. Her left hind hoof had a small stone lodged inside the shoe, making her tender. Opening his knife at the spike, he slowly prised the stone out, his head against her rump, and felt her shake a little as the stone fell to the ground. Back in the lean-to he picked up the horse blanket and slung it over her, tying up the buckles.

‘There you go, girl, warm blanket for a cold night.’

She blew softly into his face. He turned to his dogs. Each huntaway was sitting by its own kennel, oil drums, lids cut off, feed sacks and old hay on the floor. He lifted the heavy lid from the bin and took out a bucket of dog biscuits, gave a handful to each dog in turn, fastened chains to collars, sloshed water into troughs. The collies dogged his every move, ears pricked. They stopped at the door of the hut, noses over the sill. He put a handful of dog biscuits into the bowls by the stove.

‘Inside.’

The collies were through the biscuits within a minute as he watched them, his bony backside on the edge of the plank table. He took a bundle of manuka twigs from under the bunk,

opened the damper and lifted the lid of the stove. A seep of smoke drifted into the room until the new draft sucked up the rough chimney. Stick by stick, the fire was coaxed back into crackling life. A chipped enamel bowl of water on the back hob, kettle on the front hot plate. He opened the door of the oven, pulled out a cast iron pot and lifted it with the cuffs of his jersey onto the hotplate. He set the lid aside and reached for a wooden spoon from the rack. Hmmm! Even better than last night, the rich smell of goat stew, a few carrots and potatoes floating around in the gravy. Ladle to his lips, he reached for the salt, added two pinches. The collies were fully attentive, licking their chops. He replaced the lid, shut the door and turned the damper to draw past the oven. A rattle of chains told him the dogs outside had finished their biscuits.

‘Be perfect in half an hour,’ he said to the collies. From the meat safe he took out a battered roasting pan full of goat bones. One to each collie with a rub of the ears. The rest to the huntaways, at the ends of their chains, necks craned, tails wagging from the hip down. Bones cracked in the chill air. He checked the huntaways in turn. All were footsore and sat as soon as he left them. When they were sure no more tucker was coming their way they moved into their kennels, turned round and round, chains rattling until they settled.

Inside, he sat on the form beside the table and took off his elastic sided boots, inspecting each. He rubbed some fat from the scraps bowl into the leather and set them beside the stove. He bent down to take off his socks, revealing blue-veined, white, bony feet. Steam came from the spout of the kettle. He hobbled over to the stove, muscles stiff, reached for the teapot, threw in a small handful of leaves, filled it with boiling water. Three times to the left and once to the right. Taking a tin mug from its hook, he filled it half full and set it down on the table. From the saddle bag, a half bottle of whisky, three fingers into the mug. He sat back down, feet on an upturned bucket in front of the stove, back propped up against the table. The whisky steamed in amongst the tea. He took his hat off and rubbed his brow. The lower half of his face was burnt red with deep brown freckles, weathered with wrinkles on wrinkles from squinting into a lifetime of sun. The top half was smooth pale skin with freckles, hair patchy, bristling red. He took another sip, went to the stove, returned with the enamel bowl of water, set it on the floor, put each foot in, sighing with pleasure as the heat got to old bones.

He looked around the hut. Could be the last time. The roof and walls, sheets of corrugated iron he carted up on the sledge behind the Bristol crawler just on fifty years ago. Split kanuka posts and rafters, nailed and wired together. Started with a dirt floor, but he put some

pine slabs down when Rita said the kids would have to stay at home if he didn't make it decent. Same as the bunks, which replaced the wool sacks stretched between stakes driven into the floor. Top bunk empty for years. These days Murray went home on his quad bike to be with Aroha and the kids, came back at dawn next morning. Well, only an hour or so each way by bike, I suppose, so why not? Anyway, no reason for you to go home. Hasn't been for... how long? Nearly twelve years.

Nails on every post. A few coils of number 8 wire. Fly-specked calendar from Williams and Kettle, all twelve months on the one page, a little brass eye at the top for hanging, 1974. A broken float and valve from a trough that might be useful someday but maybe not. A bridle with its pony bit, leather hard and cracked. A child's picture of a horse, several dogs and a mob of sheep, well, so he said, when Murray gave it to him one night up here... nigh on thirty years ago. He would have been, maybe six?

'You know what, Dad? I'm never gonna to leave the farm. I'm gonna have my own horse, not a pony, my own dogs, and I'm gonna be a shepherd, just like you.'

He looked up at the empty bunk, saw his son finishing the drawing and hand it down to him.

'And make my own gates, Dad. And drive the Bristol.'

'Better put your jamas on, Muz. Your mum'll kill me if she finds out you didn't wear them.'

Well, maybe one day Ngarita will bring her kids up here, once they're old enough to help with the mustering. That is if she has any. Nearly nineteen and no serious boyfriend so far. Well, even then it won't happen. Gotta have sheep for a muster.

The window went in the year he pulled the wash-house down at the old house. The panes were covered in cobwebs. On the sill were old tubes of footrot ointment, assorted staples, empty shotgun cartridges, a broken dog collar. He sighed and sipped the last of his tea. All Murray's problem now. He slipped into his boots barefooted to check on the huntaways. All sitting inside, noses out, tails wagging on the steel sides, silent, but ready to bark if he wanted. Bones gone.

It was cold with the sun dropping below the Tararuas. Hands in his jersey cuffs, he strolled further into the holding paddock. The sheep were down for the day, chewing cud, watching his progress in that way that made them look like they were interested but there was

nothing going on inside. Chloe stamped her foot and blew her lips. She followed him back just in case there was any more hay.

‘Just this once, old girl. Pretty much the last big day tomorrow. Then you get a long rest in a flat paddock with a stall. You’re gonna get spoiled rotten.’

He stroked her nose for a long time, looking out over the scrub, the steep, slip-ravaged gullies. Cloud had come down along the tops of the Tararuas, a pale yellow sunset behind. Back to the east he could still see the outline of the hills at the back of the farm. The first stars were iridescent in indigo.

He ladled an enamel plate of goat stew, ate steadily for a few minutes, then picked at it. He set it aside, waiting for it to cool down. After a while he reached for two bowls and filled them, adding some cold water to each.

‘Inside.’

Two flashes of black and white reached the bowls almost before he had got them to the floor. Another cup of tea with four fingers this time. Why not? He stripped off, washed himself down from the enamel bowl with an old bush singlet and a cracked yellow piece of soap. Drying in front of the stove with its door open, fresh undies and a brushed cotton checked shirt from his saddle bag. Socks into the bowl with a bit of soap and on to the stove to boil. He rolled himself a smoke, lit it and coughed. His sleeping bag dropped feathers everywhere. Duct tape from the saddle bag, reading glasses on, he taped up a few little holes in the bag. More tape than bag, really. Still, been keeping you warm for a bloody good number of years. Twenty Below, same as Ed Hillary.

Tea and whisky finished, he picked up his plate and the dogs’ bowls and took them to the shelf by the stove. Socks wrung twice and hung on the string over the stove, along with his undies. He threw the water outside, rinsed his dishes from the kettle, put a rock on either side of the door to keep it ajar, stoked up the fire and climbed into his pit. The collies crawled up onto the end of the bunk without a sound and he decided not to mention it either. Mac moved up the bunk, grey muzzle just within hand’s reach. The fire crackled, socks dripped on the hotplate with a little sizzle. A draft of wind through the gaps between roof and rafters and the hut shifted slightly in the night.

Never thought you’d miss this bloody hut. But you will. Maybe come up here every now and again just to keep your hand in. Yeah, but why? It’s only a shitty old hut if there’s no sheep

and dogs and horses around to give a man a reason to be here. No bastard would come all this way up here for fun, would he? Well, maybe, who knows what you do when you're retired? Maybe help Ngarita to rebuild it? She's the one, all right.

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Deep sleep to wide awake in a split second. Eyes open, nose wide, ears strained. Change of wind direction. He pulled his sleeping bag down and hauled himself gingerly off the bunk, bare feet into joddies, woollen trousers and jersey on. Outside, clouds scudded along under a half moon. Cold wind from the south. Big one coming. Need to get started before dawn. Maybe seven hours to get down off the hills if we push it. He looked at the broken line of the Tararuas in the moonlight. Maybe three hours to dawn. No sign of light to the east. Chloe whickered in the lee of the wind.

Inside, he lit the gas lamp and threw an armload of wood into the stove. The kettle stirred and sent up a wisp of steam into the chill air. He tested his socks. Still damp. He laid them flat on the back plate to warm up and poured the first cup of tea. No sense in getting back into the pit. As he slowly stuffed the sleeping bag into its bag, the tiny size amazed him as always. He threw it back onto the bunk landing on the dogs. Mac's eyes were open. His tail began to wag and he farted. Lad stretched, looked around, sniffed and went back to sleep, neither dog wanting to acknowledge the new day. The man sipped his tea without rancour.

'You are fucking disgusting, Mac.'

He reached into the saddle bag, pulled out half a loaf of bread, put two slabs on the rack over the open hob and took the stew from the oven. It was still warm. The dogs' heads came up. Once the toast was done and buttered, he placed the steaming slices on the plate followed by a dollop of stew.

'No picking at it now, Gus. Big day ahead. Need as much energy as you can pack in.'

He took out the tube of condensed milk and squeezed a large glob into the mug, added some more onto his fingers and held them close by the table. The dogs were off the bunk in an instant, licking their treat. He gave them a small bowl of stew each, along with a couple of biscuits.

'You too, boys. Big day comin' up.'

He wiped the plate clean with another piece of bread and sent the last morsel down to his complaining gut.

On with leggings, tied down to his boots, his feet warmed by hot socks. Unleashed, the huntaways walked stiffly in the cold air, then ran around for a few minutes for a scratch and a shit. When he whistled them to the door, they arrived in a mass of high-tail wags.

‘Inside! Lie down!’

They sprawled on the floor in the warmth, tails thumping. He gave each a couple of dog biscuits and watched them crowd the stove. The collies returned to the bunk. Outside, he filled a bucket with oats, Chloe alongside him. While she munched he pulled off her cover and saddled up. He gave her a quick brush down and hauled on the cinch strap once more. Inside, he ladled half the stew pot into the enamel bowl and put both containers on the floor. Within a minute both were licked clean. Already the hut reeked of dog. Jesus, gonna have to leave the place in self defence. He grinned, picked up the pot and bowl and placed them on the rack. Leave it to the next bastard to clean! He damped down the fire, pulled on his heavy long oilskin coat and picked up his saddle bags. Hat jammed on his head, he took a last draught of tea and pulled the door to.

Just enough pale light to see the closest sheep grazing. The fleet clouds blocked out the stars intermittently, a morning star low against the hills to the east. He stayed in the lee, rolling a smoke. He lit up, went into a hacking cough that shook his lungs, got up into the saddle and took another drag. Hoowee, that felt better!

‘Stay!’ to the huntaways crouched by the hut. ‘Behind, Mac. Walk on, Chloe.’

The muster started, collies right behind Chloe, sheep making way for them like a dark white sea parting. By the time he reached the road gate the sheep suspected plenty and let him know it. Their bleating was swept away in the wind, now hard-edged. He hitched the double gates open, remounted and nudged Chloe. He turned in the saddle to whistle up the huntaways, heard their bark blow in from three hundred yards away. At least we are going down-wind. The mob made moving sounds that soon became a thunder of sharp hooves on stone and grass. He rode down the track without a look back.

‘Away, Mac. Away, Lad.’

The collies moved either side of him and drifted behind to keep the mob on the steep road.

‘Not too fast now, Chloe.’

He waited until the mob leaders closed up behind and walked on. He whistled for the huntaways to stop until he judged the whole flock was through the double gates.

Within half an hour the sheep had moved into a rhythm. The huntaways trotted along unseen half a mile behind him, heading dogs running the shape to keep the mob on the track. After an hour and a half the track became steep. He dismounted and walked ahead of Chloe, reins looped around his hand. He rolled himself another smoke and looked into the early dawn. Blood red. Not good. Still, at least we've dropped five hundred feet, and by sunup maybe only five hours from the shelter belt paddock. He picked his way down, making sure of his footing.

Built this track with the little thirty horse Bristol bulldozer. Took damn near three years on and off. Remember the first muster while Dad was away. Eight years old with Mum and Marjory. A nightmare of half-felled bush and small open patches of grass, stumps to trip over, pigs rooting everywhere. All we ate was wild pork. Touch and go days. Mind you, the price of wool after the war ended made it worthwhile. In later days he and Rita would drive up in autumn to stock the hut for the mustering. Kids in the back, twins crawling, the oldest two walking and getting into everything. She hated this steep part.

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'You can stop right here, Angus Kidman. I'm getting out with the twins. You can take the other two up to the top on your own. I am not going to have all my family killed in one day. What gear are you in?'

'I'm in low first, Rita.'

'Yeah, well, stay in it all the way up, and make sure those kids are warm up there! Her voice is edgy. The Land Rover crawls away up the steepest section. At the top of the hill the two older children climb down from the front seats and up onto the bank.

'You kids stay right here under this manuka. Colin, you are in charge. Margie, you do everything Colin says, right? Here's a spare blanket. You can have some of Mum's biscuits from the tin if you get hungry.'

'Yes, Dad.' A proud but nervous Colin.

'Yes, Daddy.' Margaret adores him, four.

'Now, if it gets dark, follow the track to the hut and stay inside until someone comes. The dogs will take you there, OK? I'm going to be about an hour.' He looks at his collies. 'Stay!'

He leaves them to wait, with no idea how long an hour is and drives back down in low third in the Land Rover, brakes fucked, using his handbrake on the tight corners. Two kids on the

hill and the twins below plus wife! You are a mad bastard all right, Gus Kidman. We just have to widen this road.

At the bottom of the hill Rita is all business.

‘Right, we’re going to strap the door open so we can jump.’

She ties the passenger door open against the front mudguard, sits with her left foot on the running plate, holds the twins tightly. ‘Angus, I want you to hug that bank all the way up.’

He grinds up the hill in crawler gear again, Rita giving him instructions, mostly with her eyes closed in fright from the drop-off. The twins are both asleep, wrapped in spare jerseys. At the top, Rita hugs Colin and Margaret like they are back from the dead.

‘From now on we use the Bristol and the sledge until you fix this road. You got that, Angus?’

She looks wild, but with her brood around her in the back under the canvas, she melts again, moves across into the middle seat, puts her hand on his thigh and squeezes.

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He rubbed his right knee. Not so bad now, this track. A lot wider, the worst corners cut off and levelled. Rita actually drove the Land Rover up here one summer with the kids. Plenty of room for a mob this size to pick its way down. No good for cows though. Hills are too steep, even for a run-off. Half of them’ll slip into the gorge. Still, not my problem. Murray’s cows. He peered down the slope, still couldn’t see the bottom.

The first big zigzag had a wide flat turning area steep-cut from the bank. He climbed back up on Chloe and settled his legs in under the wings of the shepherd’s saddle, turned his collar up against the wind, pushed his hat further down on his head. Fifty yards down the road he could see the mob above him still heading down towards the zigzag. Further up he could see the huntaways at the top of the steepest part. Not too bad, about an hour from front to back. Give them a rark up when we get to the next big corner. Mac was directly above him, running up and down the side of the road keeping the ewes from the edge. It started to drizzle. He turned his eyes to the front.

‘Walk on, Chloe. Not too fast now, girl, we’ve got two thousand pregnant ladies behind us.’

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‘Dad, got a minute?’

His father looks up from the bonnet of the Land Rover, hands covered in oil. He pulls a rag from his overalls, wipes them, turns off the engine, leans back on the mudguard. Eddie Fisher’s trumpet fades out on the old shed radio. “O My Papa, to me he was so wonderful....”

‘What’s on your mind, Gus?’

He takes a deep breath. ‘Rita’s pregnant. We’re thinking of getting married.’ He watches for his father’s reaction, sees the quick smile on sunburned face. Gonna be all right.

‘Pregnant, eh? You sure?’

‘Three months. Yeah, we’re sure.’

‘Not about pregnant. Sure about getting married?’

‘I reckon. We talked about it.’

‘You’re only nineteen, Gus.’

‘Same age as you, Dad, when you got hitched. Same reason too, way mum tells it.’ He waits to see how that goes down, folding his arms just in case it doesn’t.

His father takes his hat off and scratches his red hair, showing the big scar down his face from the war. ‘Yeah, well, that was 1935. This is 1954. So you’ve told your mother, then?’

‘Uhuh.’

‘What does she say?’

‘Asked a whole lot of questions about me and Rita.’ He watches his father mull that over, hat turning around in grubby fingers.

‘And what did you say?’

‘Told her that Rita and me are good friends. That it was bound to happen sooner or later. That there’s nothing about her that I don’t like. That I think she’s a one man woman. Loves farming, knows how to look after a shearing gang and will be happy living out here.’ He doesn’t take his eyes off his father, who ponders for a moment or two.

‘And what about you?’

‘What do you mean, Dad?’

‘Well, are you a one woman man?’

‘I reckon. Got one to learn from.’ He was ten when his father came home from the war. The three of them met him at the train in Woodville, khaki uniform, kit bag, tears and hugs from

a stranger with a red scar. He never left his wife's side since that day, apart from mustering, and mostly not even then.

'So, Gus, you'll stay on here, then?'

'I reckon, Dad. Life sentence, farming, like you said.' He watches his father's face soften.

'So what did your mother say?' Smiling now, waiting for the punch-line.

'She said, "See what your father says." Gave me a big hug, but.'

'Yeah, well. You should get a big kick up the arse, but that won't change anything. When's the big day?'

'Dunno, Dad. Wanted to talk it over with you first. Sooner the better, I suppose.'

He sees his father move forward, hand out. He moves forward too. They shake on it softly. His dad's other arm comes up and puts it on his son's shoulder. Moment over, they lean on the mudguard. The father rolls a cigarette, passes over the makings to the son.

'And what does Mattie Hohaia have to say about it?'

'Says he'll meet you in the top pub this afternoon while I ask Rita properly. Or else, he'll meet you out on the street with his 12 gauge, same time. You choose, he says.' He is grinning. Mattie Hohaia was Maori Battalion and fought at Monte Casino same time as his father, a gunner in the artillery. Went to primary school together. Neither went past Standard Six.

'Yeah, well, you'd better take the Land Rover then. Your mother can drop me off in the Hudson. She'll want to go down to Rangihuaia to see the Hohaias. You can pick me up at closing time. Away you go, then.'

'Thanks, Dad.' He looks up at his father. Freckles, wiry, big hands. 'I won't let you down, Dad.'

'Never doubted that for one minute, Gus. Tell you what, why don't you come to the pub at half past five? Have a beer with me and your father-in-law.'

'Sure. Rita too?'

'Christ sakes, Gus. First she's pregnant, second she's only just seventeen. Make sure you tell your sister.'

'Told Marge two weeks ago.'

He climbs into the Land Rover, drives down the rutted farm track to the main gate. He stops and remains sitting, thinks about getting married, fingers tapping on the steering wheel.

'Well, it's shake, rattle and roll. Shake, rattle and roll. Bill Haley, you are the most, Daddy-o!'

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Chloe stopped, ears pricked. He peered ahead. Through the drizzle he could make out a horse cantering towards him, four dogs at its heels. Murray riding Hoiho. Probably been going like that since he left the yards. Hoiho never tired. He felt the wind buffet his back, heard the bleating. He straightened up in the saddle.

The big man reined in the tall chestnut stallion and turned to walk alongside Chloe, the two horses snorting steam at each other. Murray's riding coat glistened in the driving drizzle. Rain dripped from the sides of his leather hat. He eased in his saddle and looked across at his father with a lift of the eyebrows.

'Dad.'

'Muz.'

'Thought I'd come up and give you a hand. Heavy rain warning in the Tararuas. You've done well to get this far down, though. What time did you get going?'

'Felt the wind change. Figured it might turn to shit, so we got away a couple hours before dawn. Pretty much soon as we could see our noses.' He looked across at the big man, so dark and solid. All shoulders, taller than him by a good six inches. 'Thanks for coming up, Muz. How long we got?'

'Forecast said major rain mid morning. Reckon we've got about three hours to get over the river.'

The two horses walked on, Murray's dogs close in behind.

Why did Murray come on Hoiho rather than the quad bike? Something on his mind. Wants a talk. He waited it out, watched as his son reached into the bag hanging around the pommel.

'Aroha made us a cup of tea and some biscuits.' He poured a cup for his father, balancing it in time with the horse's gait.

He took the cup from his son, and a peanut brownie, his all-time favourite. Aroha, too, would have been up when the wind changed. Had the nose for it. The rain slanted in the wind, pattering their backs.

'So, how's the pain then, Gus?' His son stared ahead.

Gus, is it? Man to man time.

‘Not bad.’ He too, looked ahead to the rolling land in the distance below them. Once they got across the river it would be easy. He eased his back again. ‘Not too good, either.’

‘Been taking the medicine, then?’

‘Yeah, most of the time,’ he lied.

Murray took a plastic bag from his pocket. ‘Aroha found these on your table. Says you should take the ones marked tramadol or something. Told me to watch you take two now and another two in two hours.’ He nudged his horse closer and whispered. ‘Go on then, Dad. Just take them. We all know you hate pills.’

He looked at the pill jar. ‘Might take a couple once we get across the river.’

‘That’s what Aroha said you’d say. Here, then, have a swig of your own medicine.’ He passed over a half bottle of whisky. He watched his father pour a good swig into his tea, had a small sip himself, returned it to the bag. ‘How long does one of these last you?’

‘Close to a week, maybe a bit less. You know I’m not much of a drinker, Muz. Hardly at all since your mother died.’ He rode on, thinking about all the tramadol he had given to Rita. No way he was going to take that shit.

‘Aroha found something else too, Gus.’

‘Uhuh.’ He knew what was coming. ‘What would that be?’

‘A letter. Open, on the table.’

‘You read it?’

‘We read it last night.’

‘So you know, then.’

‘We know, then. You going to try the treatment? Says you might get an extra few months, maybe up to six.’

He rode on, hearing the plea in his son’s voice. Might! He looked ahead. ‘Don’t really think so, Muz. Dunno that Rita would want me to go through all that. Bad enough watching her for all that time. All that pain. Anyway, I’ll take some pills when it gets too bad. Mightn’t be able to beat this one, but I’ve been giving the bastard a fair run for its money. How long till you open this merry go round that milks cows?’

‘A bit over six months, if I hold things up a bit,’ said Murray, with a sad smile.

‘That’s the target, then. Now, you want to go up the back and give the mob a rark up? Reckon the going’s easy enough now to crack the pace on a bit.’

‘OK. I’ll see you on the other side of the river. Trot on, Hoiho.’

He watched as his son wheeled away, dogs at heel, trotting up the steep road on the outside, sheep making way for the horse. He nudged Chloe. She started walking at a steady clip while he gazed at the valley floor below.

Rita was right about Murray. Loves this place. Aroha too, maybe the best farmer of us all. Doesn’t just work on the farm, more like she’s part of it. Just like Rita was. Got a shrewd head on her too. Children that’d make a man’s heart melt, especially Ngarita.

Mind you, all the kids have done well in their own way. All learned to speak Maori, which made their mother proud, because she never could. Colin and Roimata in London with Foreign Affairs. He must be well over fifty by now. Hardly ever see them, even though they are always asking you to visit. Not likely now. Margaret still teaching Maori at that high school up in Auckland, Deputy Principal. Still on her own. ‘Married to the job,’ she said when Rita died. Huia still in Pahiataua teaching and marrying off her kids. Life of the party, with a leg rope around Bill.

His mind clouded. And then there was Hine. Poor little Girly. Glandular fever wasted her away in front of our eyes in a matter of days, just seven years old. Sent Huia nearly mad with grief. When would that have been? 1966 maybe? She would be her in late forties. But Murray’s the right one to carry on out here. Rita knew he would be.

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‘Angus?’ she says, nestling up to him on the couch, feet tucked in.

‘Hmmm?’ He is looking at the fire over the top of his socks. Rita has put on the Everly Brothers. She’s got something on her mind.

“Don't want your lo-o-o-o-ove anymore.

Don't want your ki-i-i-i-isses, that's for sure.

I die each time

I hear this sound:

Here he co-o-o-o-omes. That's Cathy's clown.”

She strokes his thigh. 'I haven't got any Pakeha in me, have I?'

As always, he smiles slowly at her. 'Not as far as I know,' he strokes her hair, 'but if you play your cards right, I might be able to arrange something. When were you thinking of?'

She gets up, takes an old kitchen chair and puts the back under the door handle. She stands in front of him and loosens her shirt. 'How 'bout now?'

She is warm and tender. The fire crackles. They join, make comfortable love, and remain entwined for a long time afterwards.

'We've got another baby on the way, Angus. To make up for Girly leaving us.'

He senses her nervousness, relaxes and strokes her hair. 'Best news I've had in a year, Reets. How far gone?'

'About six weeks. Going to be a boy.'

'How can you tell? Anyway I thought you were on this new pill thing.'

'Was on the pill, and I just know. We will need a farmer in the family. Colin starts at St Stephens in February. Margaret and Huia will board at Queen Vic. We'll only see them in the holidays, Angus. They won't come back to the farm. We both know that. Colin's just not interested. Good worker, but his head is somewhere else, maybe university, even. This one can stay at home and learn to love this place, just like we do.'

'You mean, stay around Woodville and marry a pregnant seventeen year old when he's only nineteen? Do they still do that in 1967?' He cuddles her with both arms.

She giggles and squirms. 'Could do worse. Look at his father and grandfather. Not to mention the Hohaias. At least I made it to seventeen!'

He strokes her more tenderly. 'You're a good woman, Rita Kidman. You sure you're not too old or anything? Should you see Doc Thomas?'

'No and no, you cheeky devil. I'm only just thirty! In my prime. Men give me the glad eye in Woodville! And Palmy for that matter, especially the students!' She sits apart from him, laughs and kisses him softly. 'Only joking. You are a good man too, Angus. No luckier girl in the world.' She sits back. 'Besides, I can last longer in the saddle than you any day of the week.'

'Depends what kind of saddle you are talking about.'

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Chloe stopped in front of the double gates of the River Paddock, hard rain now driving near horizontal. Less than two hours and we should be across. He stood in the stirrups and winced as his guts moved around, climbed down, opened the gates and walked Chloe away from the entrance. Mac and Lad stood either side of him, tails wagging. He heard the thunder of feet through the wind and Murray's whistle. Long as they could get through the river before it started to flood.

He cut up an apple from his saddle bag and handed it dripping to Chloe, piece by piece. He looked down at his heading dogs and rubbed their ears.

'Away, Mac. Away Lad.'

The dogs ran, tails in the air, back to either side of the flock and began heading them through the gates. Smell of wet wool steaming. Chloe blew into his face.

'Good girl, Chloe. Come on, then.'

He started to walk, stiff at first, then a little easier as his muscles warmed up. In a few minutes he was walking at a fast clip, the horse following a few paces behind, followed by half a mile of moving sheep. Now that the valley floor had opened up, the mob was maybe eighty wide, the leaders close-in behind Chloe. After twenty minutes he climbed back into the saddle and they followed the potholed roadway down the widening valley, the willows leaning with the wind. Murray's whistle pierced through the sound of the storm. Aroha would be waiting for them at the shelter belt. With any luck there would be soup.

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'Angus, we're going into town today. Get your good clothes on, and have a proper shave.'

'But we were in town on Wednesday!' He grins at his wife. 'People will think we've got cabin fever, going in twice in one week. What's the story?'

She touches the side of her nose. 'Mine to know and yours to find out! We leave at half past nine. Don't forget your tie.'

He has long since stopped second-guessing Rita. At half past nine he is standing by the Holden, aertex short sleeve shirt and tartan tie.

Rita comes out from the new house, light green pastel twin set, white half heel shoes. He whistles at her, holding the car door open. Still cutting the mustard, slender and sexy, black hair glistening! She sees his look, flicks her green tartan scarf for him and gets in the car. They drive over the cattle stop and out onto the dusty road. He picks up speed.

‘Don’t hurry, Angus. We have to be there at ten fifteen. It only takes forty five minutes to the main road.’

‘We have be where at ten fifteen?’

‘Past our road junction.’

‘And then what?’

‘We are going into town to do some shopping and have lunch.’

‘Ngarita! I am going to stop the car right now if you don’t tell me the whole story in one go. You’re dragging it out like a yard of pump water!’

Her eyes shine. ‘Murray’s showing someone the farm today. He wants to do it on his own. Says he’ll know if she’s going to fit. If she’s still there by five, she’s staying for dinner.’

He drums his hands on the steering wheel of the Holden. ‘And?’

‘And her name is Aroha.’

The way she says it so soft.

‘So she’s Maori, then?’

‘Nothing wrong with that, Angus. Look at me. Anyway I guess so. Murray didn’t say. Not up to us, anyway. He’s Maori too, he can make his own mind up. You and me did and look where that got us.’

He takes his left hand off the steering wheel, puts it in her lap.

She pushes it away. ‘No hanky panky! That’s what I warned Murray.’

‘Yeah, well, fat lot of good that did us, Reets.’ He pushes his hand into her lap again for fun.

‘And you can stop that, Angus Kidman. I’m a respectable married woman of forty nine, with five mokopuna.’ All the same she puts her hand on his thigh and leaves it there. ‘What ever happened to bench seats anyway? These bucket seats have ruined Holdens!’ She giggles and sings,

‘Keep your mind on your driving

Keep your hands on the wheel

Keep your filthy eyes on the road ahead
We're having fun, sitting in the back seat
Kissing and a-hugging with Fred.'

He drops her off at the hairdresser so she can yak with her sister and drives slowly through town. At Williams and Kettle he wanders through the yard. There's a new baler that makes round bales but he will wait until someone else has one so he can see if it lasts. Girlfriend, eh? For Murray to go this far it'll be serious all right. Good way to do it, too. Show her the place like it's his. Will be too, some day. He'll know if she fits, that's for sure. Part of the land himself, just like his mother. That's what he'll be looking for. For him it's like a spiritual thing.

He finds himself at the Toyota dealer's yard.

'Not like you to be in town on a Friday, Gus?'

'G'dday, Magnus. Yeah, well, the missus...'

'You seen last month's bills for that Landcruiser of yours?'

He is rueful. 'Wanted to talk to you about that. You got gold plated mechanics these days?' It is without malice. He and Magnus Rasmussen went to school together.

'It's going to carry on costing you money, Gus. I'd say it's time to get another one.' He points to a new Landcruiser. 'Series Seventy pickup! Won the '85 Four Wheel Drive of the Year.'

'But my one's only done sixty thousand!'

'Sixty thousand hard ones, Gus. And eight years old. One trip to town every Wednesday in that time, the only time it's been on tar seal. Rest of the time in four wheel drive low ratio. Hard on a truck, even for a workhorse like a Toyota.'

'I'll think about it, Magnus.'

'Fair enough. Want to trade the Holden in while you're about it? These new Cressida's are bloody good. Comfortable as a Holden.'

He laughs at the dealer. 'Quit while you're ahead, Magnus. Don't forget Gary Fletcher was at school with us as well. I get his Holdens, I get your Landcruisers. Got to spread it around. Anyway, what do we get from you?'

He watches Magnus laugh.

‘You get a totally over the top price for a beat-up Series Forty Land Cruiser as a trade-in. Happy now?’

They both laugh.

‘Better get it ready then.’

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Driving rain got in between the brim of his hat and his coat. Low cloud twisted through the tops of the scrub on the valley sides. The road alongside was muddy, most of the potholes filled to the top. He could just make out the river bank but not hear the river. A good sign. He nudged Chloe. The rain drummed on her back. She snorted and skittered to let him know she was cold and tired.

‘Come on, Chloe. Let’s have a look at it.’

He leaned forward and stroked her cheek into a canter. Ten minutes later they were standing at the bank. The river was up, but the wide shingle bed was not yet fully covered. The mob should get across all right. The flock plodded towards him. Six, maybe seven hours non-stop. They would need to be pushed hard to cross the river. He turned to ride back and got up to a canter, but his gut complained. His knees slowed Chloe down to a trot, then a walk, hands tight on the pommel until his eyes cleared, deciding to wait for the flock to come to him. He reached back for the rifle and pulled it from its sleeve on the saddle bag, cocked it, made sure Chloe could hear what he was doing and fired two shots in the air. All good. As he returned the rifle to its sheath he heard two in reply from Murray.

Another wave made him close his eyes. This time he opened his bag and took out the whisky bottle, measured three fingers from the level and took it in two swallows. The first couple of hundred sheep were at the bank. The warmth spread through his body. He whistled to his dogs and trotted into the middle of the flock, backwards and forwards, until the first of them jumped over the edge to run across the shingle bed. He kept up the pace along the bank pushing them into the river. The water level was just below their belly wool.

Once there was a steady flow of sheep crossing the river he trotted upstream across the river himself to push the sheep up the other bank. His dogs nipped at their heels and ran across their backs. A wave of ewes surged up over the bank, dragging the flock along behind it.

The water was lightish brown and getting noisier. He whistled his dogs back over the river to push the flock along and saw them in the distance racing up and down the far bank, nipping at heels. When he could hear the sound of Murray's whistle and the huntaways in the distance he whistled his collies back across.

‘Away, Mac. Away, Lad.’

He trotted up to the front to lead the way to the shelterbelt. The dogs worried at the sheep now to force them on. The flock straggled along behind him, walking slow, heads down. Shelter belt paddock an hour away at this pace. We can afford to take it slowly now. He climbed down from Chloe to walk for a while. Too old for this cantering stuff.

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He stands with Rita and watches from the verandah as the two youngsters gallop down the home paddock in the late afternoon light. They slow to a trot and then to a walk to let the horses cool down. They walk close.

‘She’s riding Hoiho, Angus! She can handle a colt! He wouldn’t have let her if he wasn’t sure.’ She reaches for his hand. ‘She’s the one! I knew it.’

They watch the young woman hitch up the stirrups, lift the saddle in one easy motion and disappear into the tack room to emerge moments later with brushes and buckets of feed. She stands with Murray between the horses, brushing them down, their bodies close together.

He feels Rita’s arm around his waist. He knows she is crying.

‘Just like we used to do, eh, Angus.’

‘We’d better get the dinner out, Reets. They’ll be here soon.’

‘Just another minute. They’re in love. Isn’t that wonderful? Let’s meet them out here.’

They watch the two young ones walk towards them past the old house. She is almost as tall as Murray but slender. She walks confidently, a horsewoman’s stride.

‘Angus, she’s a Pakeha! She’s got red hair. Don’t they look beautiful together.’

He puts his arm around his wife. ‘I hope she’s got freckles too. I was starting to feel lonely.’ He nuzzles Rita’s hair, smells her perfume, special for the occasion.

The young people stop at the step up to the verandah. They are holding hands.

‘Mum, Dad, this is Aroha Erickson. She’s at Massey. Third year.’

The young woman steps up, all smiles and freckles.

‘Pleased to meet you.’

She kisses Rita on the cheek and holds her hand out to Angus. Her palm is hard from work, her look direct. He feels himself inspected, holds his breath for a split second and senses he has been approved. Her eyes sparkle.

‘Murray has told me so much about you both in his letters, and a whole lot about this place. And its all true. I feel like I’ve always been here.’

Wide-eyed, she is suddenly overcome with tears. Rita takes her in her arms, looks at the men and nods towards the door. They move, but she taps her foot on the floor. She nods downwards. They look. Aroha has already kicked off her joddies. The men ease out of theirs.

While the two women get the dinner arranged he and Murray stand in the dining room sharing a bottle of home brew. Through the curtains the sun is westering, sky bright. No rain in that. He grins at his son.

‘Letters then, is it, Muz?’

Murray shrugs his shoulders, embarrassed. ‘Pretty much every day.’

‘Got it bad by the looks of it!’

‘I guess so, Dad. She finishes at Massey end of October next year. We’re looking to tie the knot then.’

‘So, what’re you going to do for the next eleven months?’ He sees his son’s direct look. Not a challenge. Just matter of fact.

Murray takes a breath. ‘I thought we might put Aroha on the payroll. Weekends and holidays. Knows her stuff, Dad. Real handy in the yards. She comes from a farm over Pongaroa. Ericksons. They’ve been there long as we have. She’s nearly finished a degree in Animal Husbandry. Boards in Palmy. Her summer vacation has just started, so she can work here until the end of February. We thought we might move into the old house.’

He is taken aback. That would be the longest Murray has ever spoken. Must’ve rehearsed it!

‘Sort of like wages then, Muz? That what you mean?’ Neither man has ever drawn wages.

‘Something like that, Dad. She’ll need her independence. Me, I’m happy to draw what I need when I need it. Mum’ll organise it anyway. We might buy some new stuff for the old house. It could do with a fridge and a new washing machine.’

‘Fair enough, but don’t get too carried away. Your mother and I’ll move back there when you get married. No doubt wedding and baby in quick succession, the way the Kidmans do things! She a bit older than you?’ He sees his son’s happiness. Got it all nailed.

‘Four months and twelve days. But we will both still be twenty when we get married.’

At dinner he asks her, ‘So you are boarding in Palmerston North, Aroha?’

‘I board with my auntie and uncle just above the university. Uncle Bill is an oncologist at the hospital.’

‘And.... er, what does your family have to say about all this..., moving into the old house and all?’ He waves around to explain.

She smiles. He melts away.

‘Mum and Dad know Murray already. We’re going over to Pongaroa tomorrow to talk to them. They know about us. Anyway, Mum and Dad were sixties hippies, hence my name. They didn’t get around to getting married until five years after I was born. “ Ericksons are raised to make their own minds up,” is the saying in our family. A little bit like the Kidmans, from what I hear.’ She giggles. The low timbre of her voice warms the room.

Look at that cheeky smile! She feels at home already. He glances at Rita who has never been so quiet. She can’t take her eyes off Aroha. The only time he has seen her happier was when Murray was born.

‘Yeah, well, I’ll take those bales into Napier in the truck on Wednesday, Muz. You two can take the Toyota into town. Can’t have you taking Aroha into Palmy in that old dunger! Magnus has got a new one for us.’

He sees Rita raise her eyebrows, purse her lips and smile at him. He will pay for that later.

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Aroha’s Hilux was parked alongside the barn as he opened the double gates of the shelter belt paddock. He waited while the first of the mob surged through the gates and then pushed them ahead with the dogs to allow the rest to come through. They started to graze as soon as he moved away, sensing the end of the muster. He could see that Aroha had fed out a wide trail of sheep hay for the flock anticipating their tiredness. His daughter-in-law walked towards him, tall and slender, long riding coat and leggings, auburn plaits dripping from under her hat. Just seeing her

made him unsteady with relief. He stood, tiredness numbing him and waited for her. She kissed him on his cheek, took the reins, put her arm around him.

‘You all right, Angus?’

‘Well, I’ve been better, love, but we made it.’

‘I was just about to come to the river when I heard your shots. Got the engine running, nice and warm in the truck. I’ll look after Chloe and the dogs.’

He took off his coat and sat in the front, the heater on full, blowing drips off his nose. He watched Aroha brush down and feed Chloe in the barn. She turned the horse out and, noting her freedom, Chloe took a run and a kick. Then she ambled back and put her nose to the window. He wound it down enough to rub her nose. Aroha gave Mac and Lad some biscuits. They lay down on the hay bales, spent. *

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‘Angus?’

‘Yes, Rita?’ He reaches out from his chair to her face, touches it gently. Her hair is drained grey and thin in the early morning light.

‘I don’t think I’m going to make this one.’ Her handhold is weak.

‘Do you want me to get the kids over?’

‘They’ve seen enough of me like this. Let them remember me the way I was.’

He lies down alongside her. She is paper thin, almost weightless.

‘The Hohaias will want to take me back to Rangihua Marae, you know.’

‘I know.’

‘Are you happy with that, Angus?’

‘Of course I’m happy about that, Reets. I’ll take you down there myself with Murray.’

‘I want to be where Girly is, not over where my mum and dad are.’

‘Where I want to be myself in time, sweetheart. Gonna save a space for me?’

‘There will always be a space for you.’

She tries to squeeze his hand.

‘Look after the land, Angus.’

He feels her relax. Her spirit leaves so softly that he feels it only as a touch on his eyelids.

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‘Drink some of this soup, Angus. It will warm you up.’ Aroha handed him a mug of ham and pea soup. It warmed his hands. She watched as he drank, sipping slowly, resting it close to his lips, sipping some more, until he finished it.

He sighed with satisfaction. ‘You sure know the way to get to a man’s heart, Rita.’

She let the ‘Rita’ go. ‘Now, what about a couple of these painkillers, Dad. Uncle Bill says they will make a fair bit of difference.’ She held two tablets out to him.

‘Uncle Bill?’

‘The one who wrote you the letter. I called him this morning. He says you are a stubborn man. I told him he was telling me nothing. Runs in the Kidmans.’ She touched his arm, a faint smile. ‘The Ericksons too, for that matter.’

They looked out through the steamed-up window as Murray lifted the saddle from Hoiho, brushed him down, put out some hay and fed the dogs.

‘Maybe when we get home, I’ll take them if it gets too bad. Thanks for the soup. Any more?’

‘Plenty. I’ll just go and give Murray a hand.’ She hands him the thermos flask.

He watched Aroha and Murray as they closed up the barn, leaving slabs of hay and two buckets of feed for the horses. The whole flock had moved into the lee of the poplar shelter belt which was bending in the sleeting wind. Murray climbed into the back seat of the Kingcab, dripping wet, a yelp of dogs as they leaped onto the tray. He waited while his son gulped down some soup.

‘How’d you go at the river, Muz?’

‘It got a bit sticky at the end, Dad. Water was bank to bank. Lost a dozen or so stragglers half way across. Too tired to swim. Still, mightn’t have got any over at all if you’d waited for dawn. God knows how many we would have lost then. Hailing like stink towards the end. Got snow written on it.’

Aroha started down the rutted road, windscreen wipers on double time, rain lashing. They came to flatter country where the fences were new two-wire electric, the paddocks much smaller. The going improved and the truck sped up along the new central race. They passed the carousel milking shed. Construction work was stopped for the day, builders cleaning up their gear.

The thought of dairying depressed him. Cows! On this place! He understood the economics. God knew, the price of wool had fallen through the floor, lamb and beef prices were a joke. Herefords were OK. But dairy cows!

‘There’s something we want to tell you, Angus.’

Aroha, in charge, as usual.

‘Uhuh?’

‘Ngarita has brought a boy home. He comes from away over in the Huia Valley. One of the Simpsons, Justin. Big as a house.’

‘Simpsons, eh? The ones that are related to the Hohaias?’

‘No flies on you then, Dad.’ He felt Murray’s grin from the back seat.

‘And what does Ngarita say?’

‘She says he’s the one.’

‘And you agree, Aroha?’

‘No doubt in my mind, Angus. And, more to the point, there is no doubt in Ngarita’s mind. They want us to run the farm in two separate units. They believe we should cut our plans down to just six hundred cows, plus replacements, and operate that as one unit. The second unit, which they want to run themselves, would be two thousand breeding ewes for a start on the hill country. They want to build a new woolshed and yards up at the shelter belt paddock.’ She smiles at her men. ‘Looks like Justin’s moved in anyway. There’s a lock on her door. You’ll meet him at dinner time, Angus.’

His heart almost burst with pleasure. ‘So you will be keeping the breeding ewes, then?’ He thought of two lifetimes trying to improve the flock.

Murray took over.

‘Dad, they’re talking about counter cyclical farming, as insurance, so that when the bottom drops out of dairy there will be meat and wool to sell. We talked it through. It all makes a lot of sense.’

‘Well, those Simpsons certainly know how to grow wool. Gun shearers, too.’ He leaned back into his seat. Ngarita, the light of his life, had a man. Another wave got him. He gritted, then smiled. Ngarita and Justin would need to move into the old house until they could build a place across the river.

Soaking in the bath, he heard Aroha rattle plates in the kitchen, waiting to make sure he was all right. He dragged himself out and dried down, ignoring the hard lumps, decided to put on a jacket and tie to meet Ngarita's man.

In the old kitchen she put the teapot down alongside the whisky bottle.

'Not too much now, Angus. Don't want to give Justin the wrong impression.'

He saw the sorrow in her eyes. Such a handsome woman, same kind of beauty as Rita, yet so different in temperament.

'So what does your Uncle Bill say? That I'm pretty much on the way out?'

Aroha took his hands, hard at the touch but warm, love flowing into his veins. She was matter of fact, as ever.

'Pretty much, Dad. Uncle Bill says it won't get any better. He told me we should see Doc Thomas about some morphine because those tramadols aren't going to be strong enough. Says you've lasted longer than he expected seeing it was diagnosed so late.'

At the dinner table he let the family sounds waft over him. There was roast lamb and a table of healthy appetites. He picked and listened, the rain heavy on the roof, raising the level of noise. He smiled at all four of his grandchildren, but his eyes lingered on Ngarita, the oldest. Her freckles shone on light brown skin, gaze direct as always. Rita's eyes, but otherwise a darker spitting image of her own mother at nineteen. She was playing footsie with her man, confident and young, willing herself not to giggle. Aroha's concentration on Justin reminded him of another time twenty years ago when she was the subject of it.

He stood up with a silent wince that made Aroha and Murray both get up from the table. He waved them that he was OK and went to each of his grandchildren. They gave him a quick kiss.

'Night, Grandad.'

Ngarita stood and hugged him.

He whispered into her ear, 'He the right one, Ngarita?'

She cuddled into her grandfather. 'He's the one, Poppy. We're going to look after your flock, maybe build a house on the other side of the river one day. We won't let you down.'

'I never doubted that for one moment, love.' He turned to the young brown giant at her side. 'Take care of each other, and take good care of that land up there.' Justin stood up to honghi him, shook his hand and sat down again.

He left his hand on the young man's shoulder, drawing strength. 'Time for tired old men to call it a day.'

At the back door he hugged his daughter-in-law. 'Thanks for everything you do for me, Aroha,' kissing her cheek. She touched it and held it. He hardly ever did that.

He moved to Murray and hugged him, holding on for just a little bit longer, his head on his son's shoulder. He spoke softly. 'Muz, I might just sleep in tomorrow. Maybe you and Aroha could make sure the kids don't disturb me.'

Aroha joined them. The three held each other. Dry-eyed, he looked up at their tears.

'Is this the way you want it, Dad?'

A slow nod, still holding on to them. 'This's the way I want it. One last thing. I want you to take me down to Rangihuia Marae, make sure they put me alongside Rita and Girly.'

'I'll see to it myself, Dad.'

At the door to the old house, back stooped, he waved back to them. They stood in the light, holding each other.

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He changed into clean pyjamas and poured himself four fingers of whisky, topped up with warm tea. At the back door, two tails thumped.

'Inside.'

The collies ran for the lounge and flopped down on the carpet, eyes on him. He put more wood on the fire, sat on the couch and sipped, his eyes on Rita, the photograph of their wedding, her smile reaching out to him. He finished his drink and poured himself another. Before he sipped he went to his wardrobe, reached up and took out Rita's pills.

'Just give me the painkillers, Angus. Those ones make me sleep too much, and I want to look at you. Keep them for the time you need them.'

He stretched his legs out, sipping, her green tartan scarf in his lap between his fingers. The dogs crept up onto the couch. Mac moved close enough to be touched on the muzzle.

'You'll like this young Justin, Rita. One of the Simpsons from Huia Valley. Never saw Aroha look so happy. They're going to keep the breeding flock after all. Building a house on the other side of the river. The farm'll be fine in their hands. Murray and Aroha will bring me down to Rangihuia Marae some time tomorrow. I'm so looking forward to it!'

Her arms are warm and loving. The fire crackles. They join, make comfortable love and remain entwined for a long time afterwards.

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