

Scattered thoughts

Our bay at Tawharanui was looking like a giant tourist poster slapped on the world, all blues, greens and sharp, metallic sunlight. It had taken me three years to choose this perfect day.

'Remember when we got naked and naughty on that grassy bank over there? You were so worried about someone seeing us but I eventually managed to distract you.'

'Rudey.'

'Yeah, but it was fun. Wish we could do that again now.'

'Well that's not going to happen, is it?'

'Guess not.'

I sat cross-legged on the grass, looking out at God's ruler line between the contrasting blues of ocean and sky. The only clouds visible hid at the edges like fur trim on a cobalt coat.

'You know I slept with another woman last weekend, don't you.'

'I had a feeling.'

'My first in three years.'

'Was it someone I know?'

'No. Someone new. I couldn't have done it with someone we both knew.'

'How was it?'

'I cried.'

'You didn't!'

'I did. I couldn't help myself. I thought I was going to be OK, but as soon as we had finished and I had just passed her some tissues, the tears started flowing and I got a big bowling ball of pain, guilt, loss, longing, all that shit, right in my chest. And I started gasping, sobbing and even laughing at myself.'

'Poor woman. She must have been terrified.'

'She hasn't called me back in the last week. Do you think that's a bad sign?'

I laughed until I suddenly felt that familiar spiky ache creeping up from my stomach to my chest to my eyes.

'I'm working up to an epic cliché here, you know . . . "the salt of his tears mixed with the salt of the ocean".'

'So, don't cry. It's been three years. Haven't you cried enough by now?'

'I'm not sure what enough is but certainly a lot. I've been much better. Before last weekend's embarrassing episode, it had been at least two months since my last outburst.'

'That's pretty good. What launched that one?'

'Seeing an old yellow scarf in the Hospice shop.'

'Why?'

'That first night you slept over at my place, and we went to the movies at Matakana the next day, you wore the yellow scarf my mum had knitted for me.'

'Oh yeah, I remember that. And that was enough to set you off?'

'It was. When I went next door to get a pie at Savan's, they must have thought I was on drugs because my eyes were so red.'

I lay back on my towel, felt the thick kikuyu mattress beneath me, closed my eyes and listened to the susurruration of the waves. The sea made pebbles chuckle and clunk as it shoved them up the shore and then slurped them back down again. Gulls circled and cried, wounding my already delicate soul and layering nostalgia upon melancholy. The yellow scarf, childhood mudflats, walking at dusk on the beach, watching you try to control your hair and getting frustrated. I talked about your bosoms a lot but I loved your hair.

'It might be time.'

'It's long past time really.'

'Yeah, I know, but it's not easy.'

'Just wade into the water, open the tin and let it go.'

'That's the thing, though . . . letting it go means letting you go.'

'You've already let me go. I didn't give you a choice.'

I rummaged in my backpack for the old, rusty biscuit tin, the one with the flowers of New Zealand on it, the one you loved but it made anything stored in it taste metallic. I carefully removed the sellotape that sealed the lid and placed the tin on the grass beside me. I looked at the faded flowers for a while, choosing my favourite – clematis – and tried to remember yours. A liquid gasp crept up my torso again when I couldn't remember which it was. I looked out at the sparkling bay, exchanged a couple of loud inhales/exhales and stood, picked up the biscuit tin, and walked purposefully towards the ocean.

'You've thought about this.'

'Yes I have. I've read too many stories about disastrous gusts of wind so I figured I would just swim out a wee way, sink the tin under the water and then pop the lid.'

'You'll get it all over you.'

'Maybe, but not if I'm careful. And it will wash off by the time I swim back in.'

'Keeping the tin?'

'Keeping the tin.'

'Go on then.'

I waded in up to my knees, stopped, looked around, suddenly a bit nervous about someone coming down to the shore and seeing me, maybe asking what I was doing. I checked the bay end to end – grey pebbles, pinky sand, lush grassy amphitheatre – but I had the beach, the bay, the world to myself . . . to ourselves. A couple more steps took me to waist-deep and I floated the tin on the surface of the water beside me. A slow, flushing panic rose up to cloud my brain; I wasn't ready, it wasn't the right thing to do, the day wasn't right, you wouldn't approve. I

grabbed the tin and waded back to shore, speed-breathing with fright, and sat myself down on the pebbles at the water's edge. Breathe in the sun, breathe out the pain. Breathe in the sun, breathe out the pain. I knew how to get myself back under control but it took a while.

'Are you OK?'

'I will be soon.'

'Just relax. Go with your instincts. It's all fine.'

'Easy for you to say.'

'Yes, but you just need to do this and move on.'

'I know you're right, but it's hard. It just is.'

'Take your time, keep the sun out of your eyes and be yourself.'

I laughed at that, one of my favourite movie quotes, and you can't have a panic attack and laugh at the same time. So, taking yet more deep breaths, I grabbed my tin and headed back into the water, determined, blanking out all thought besides that of lying on my back, kicking my feet and paddling out to deep water with a biscuit tin perched on my chest. Satisfied with the depth of blue beneath, I floated the tin beside me and eased one corner adrift with my fingers.

'Careful now.'

'I know. I'm just making sure it's going to be easy to get the lid off.'

'Maybe let a little trickle of water in so that it will be easier to sink.'

'Always with the unsolicited advice. Some things don't change.'

'Sorry, just want you to be happy.'

'Yeah, well, the better this goes, the less happy I will probably be so how about that for irony.'

'Stop over thinking it. Just do it.'

So I did. I lifted the corner up a little more, let in a slow trickle of water to replace the air inside the tin, and eased it down under the surface. A small wisp of grey dust rose out of the gap and swirled like a liquid ghost, and, that image being too much to dwell on, I quickly flicked off the lid and let your remains go for a final, eternal swim. I gently kicked backwards, swirling the tin a little in the water as I went to dislodge the ashes from all the corners, leaving a cloud behind me like a terrified squid. And I was terrified and elated and incredibly sad and relieved and confused.

I lay back down on my towel and sobbed for a good ten minutes, big chest-raking, snot dribbling, eye-puffing sobs. Then I ran out of water, breath and inclination.

'I'm so proud of you.'

'I'm tired. I think I'm in shock.'

'You did well, and what better place and day than this.'

'You're still here.'

'Of course. I'll always be here. I'm not some dusty old ashes in rusty old tin.'

'I love that tin.'

'I know you do. I love it too.'

'I love you. Really, truly, deeply, forever and I'm still really pissed off you died.'

'Understandable.'

'Actually, I think I'm starting to get some vague sense of relief.'

'That's because you probably should have done this two years ago.'

'Yeah, I know. Maybe I'll ring that woman back and see if she wants to go on another date.'

'Slow down tiger.'