

## 18

by Nuku Tau

Statement of intent:

*This is a short story that aims to entertain. It is directed at a more mature audience of around sixteen up, from Christchurch. Many of the jokes and references make more sense to someone from the Canterbury area. It may appear in some sort of teenage writers' journal or just a general Kiwi writing magazine.*

It was a day I had passionately awaited since I was a small boy, only now I welcomed it for different reasons. No longer would I be told to fuck off by the local Dairy owner when I mumbled for a pack of the cheapest cigarettes, no longer would I eagerly await Mum in the liquor store only to be bitterly crestfallen when she returned with a six pack of low-carb beer and no longer would I need my Cando card with a gawky, awkward picture from many moons ago. Today I felt a hot rush of excitement. Today I was 18. Today I could do and be anything. Today meant freedom.

My eyes kept flicking to my watch, each second raking my body and nerves. I was in the last five minutes of my shift at New World. Throughout my labours I'd endured a father swapping nappies for a 12 box of Speights, an old man's abuse for not double bagging his juice and a mother's in-depth doctoral thesis on why she was just over the moon her son had agreed to move to St Andrew's. But that was all ok. I could stick it out. Tonight myself and a few of the fellas were hitting a bar in celebration of my 18th. I could get us all served, we would sink brews and most importantly hunt for that ever elusive beast, the Merivale cougar mum, in her natural habitat of Aikman's.

Clocking out I drove home, dressed and freshened up. Driving down State Highway One with the sun shining tepidly on my face and Biggie blaring from my speakers, I was ecstatic. Time passed in a blur and before I knew it, I was parking up in Merivale Mall. I strode through the carpark with newfound confidence and swagger, birthday boots clicking sharply on the tarmac. I saw the boys park up. Eight of them spilt out of Reuben's Ford Fiesta like a bunch of sweaty, lascivious sardines escaping from the tin. When Jack finally wriggled out of the boot, we all greeted each other warmly and headed for the doors.

"Sex on Fire" blared from the speakers as we strutted in. I felt it was an apt choice for my intentions. The summer sun was gone for the day so the bar was lit up in a sultry orange haze. The crowd chattered away in a warm fuzz and the smell of a sizzling steak wafted from the kitchen. With a lazy grin, I nodded to the boys and strutted on over to the bartender. In front of me two Year 12s from Villa I knew ordered Gin and juice. They left and I approached, the bartender's smile dropping when he saw me.

"ID."

His face blank, gone was the previously leery smile and sexually suggestive. I presented my ID like a poker player with a full house and watched him frown. His eyes probed my face and settled, squinting with extreme suspicion on my hair. Finally, he shrugged and gave it back.

"What will it be then?"

"9 pints of Double Brown cheers mate." I smiled casually. He frowned again.

"We don't serve that pisswater here on tap. Will Heineken do?"

"Sure, Cheers."

The total came to \$92.50. If my wallet could talk, it would scream. I walked back to the boys with a little less swagger but still in a fairly good mood. We sat down and talked about the usual. Girls, rugby, teachers, girls, weekend events and more girls. Jack gave me some money and we bought

another round. Two pints in an hour had seeped right into all 65 kilograms of me and I felt my head fuzz and cheeks flush. I motioned to Jack and he nodded. It was time to go to work.

We walked over to the bar counter, catching snatches of conversation from fellow patrons:

“... Funeral home on Rochdale is an absolute outrage! Who wants one of them nearby! ...”

“... Isn't Jamie Gough just to die for?...”

“... My account at Ballantyne's is four months overdue and I owe \$1800! God what a mare ...”

“... The Warriors and Crusaders just aren't what they used to be ...There's a culture problem I'm telling you John ...”

Desperation set in. I felt maybe my hunt for the Milf would be harder than I thought. The bar was full of middle-aged Cantabrians unwinding after a day at their soul-crushing jobs. This wasn't the paradise of Rachel Hunters and Kim Kardashians Year 13s had previously boasted about to us Year 9s as we gathered in a circle, clinging to every word of their bullshit sexual endeavors. It was just another bar.

I was about to head back to the lads for another night of chat to keep the savage tides of my loneliness at bay when a hand with what could only be a wedding ring touched my arm. Oh. My. God. I looked up and there she was. A real housewife of Christchurch. Karen Walker necklace and fake Louis Vuitton bag, she was the real deal. All my adolescent dreams had come true. I prayed the Hail Mary in my head to give thanks for this momentous occasion.

“Can I buy you a drink?”

“Sure, Pegasus Bay Sav?”

“No worries.”

We sat over our drinks and talked. She laughed and smiled warmly, her fake eyelashes batting every time. This was all too perfect; truly, Aikman's was my own personal heaven.

“Oh, I didn't catch your name! How rude of me! I'm Amelia. And you?”

“Pleasure, name's Ed, Ed Tanaka.”

“Oh lovely, is that Japanese or something?”

“Nah, I'm Maori.”

“Oh ...” Her face fell flat. “I need to use the restroom.” With that, she promptly strolled over to another man's table. Christ.

This night had gone all wrong. I'd thrown away \$150 on alcohol I could have bought myself for \$40 at any supermarket. The bar was just a bar and the Aikman's Milf was a myth, just like dragons, \$2 cheeseburgers and a good time at a Girls' High party. I put on my jacket, thanked the fellas for coming and headed to the door. The air was chilly and an icy wind swept the streets. I could feel the blood rise to my cheeks and my lips begin to dry. I dragged my feet with a heavy heart through the courtyard, a keen sense of failure settling in. While I wallowed in self pity and angst, a cold voice pierced the buzzing din of the bar.

“Just fuck off, James. I'm not coming home with you!”

“But please, come on ...”

“You're pissed James and I know what you've done! Just go!”

With that, a burly, blonde country boy in a checkered shirt and RM boots toppled out of the garden and back into the bar. After a few seconds, sobs filled the air. Strike time.

She had the delicate beauty of a rose. Tears sparkled in her eyes like a Prom Queen stood up at Homecoming. I walked into the courtyard and offered her the handipak of Kleenex tissues my mum always forced on me when I went out. She talked in quiet sobs and I listened, my words dripping with fake empathy. Her boyfriend had cheated and things had been rocky for a while. Being the despicable human being that I am, I thought one thing. Rebound guy. We sat there for a little longer. I patted her back and paid for some ridiculously priced flat bread and caramelised onion. Finally, enough courage bloomed in my black, black heart to make my move.

“Sooo ... Do you want to ... go somewhere else?” My heart plummeted as soon as I said it. It was totally and utterly the worst thing I could possibly have said. The temperature seemed to hit below zero and the look she gave me would give Jenny Shipley the chills. Her eyes were icy and her tone Siberia harsh and hostile.

“That’s all you lot think about, isn’t it? There’s always some fucking ulterior motive. You can’t just be nice for the sake of it, everything’s a transaction for sex! You see a crying, vulnerable woman as an opportunity? How fucked up are you?!” She gave me a vicious slap and stormed off into the leafy green streets. She was right and I knew it. My head bowed in palpable shame. The Villa girls from earlier sniggered as they walked by. I looked up to see a gang of youths slashing my car tires. You get what you give I suppose ...

I sat there for some time and reflected on the night as a whole, the complete and utter stuff up that it was. I’d wasted one whole week’s pay on a paltry amount of booze and some glorified chips and dip, made a dick of myself in front of several women, had a possibly-probably racist encounter and would now most likely be a joke at every girls’ school in town. In a city where there isn’t much else to do gossip spreads at an incredible rate. However, from all this, a lesson could be learned. Looking down at my shiny boots, Stockman jeans and Polo shirt I realised. I might be 18, but I still had a hell of a lot of growing up to do.