

ACT I - JOINING

Scene 1 – The pickup

I blame my thumb.

When I saw that faded maroon Morris Minor gently cruising towards me on an otherwise lifeless highway through the north Coromandel backblocks, I gave it everything.

Four hours in the wet, ignored by the straggle of drivers passing, does that to you.

I waved that digit like a weapon, taiaha-ing it all over the place. Any sane motorist would probably have veered right round me, tut-tutting our mental health laws and tensing over a close thing - I might have jumped on the bonnet.

But a cooler, kinder mind prevailed and the Morrie glided to a halt in the gravel 40 yards down the road. I grabbed my backpack and guitar case and slightly-more-than-sauntered to the front passenger door.

Just one occupant, a woman. Scarfed-up and sumptuously garbed in a sort of hippy chic way. The scarf was classy – silk with that sort of stunning Japanese pattern and rich pastel colours that's hard to fault. I measured her age at anywhere between mid-thirties and mid-to-late forties – never my strong point pinning that down, past the obvious signs that someone was clearly in their twenties – nails, skin, manner and assurance (or maybe lack of it). Her hair was a striking auburn, full but tied back. And it wasn't the only thing that was striking.

I opened the door – as you do, no need to wait for an invite if you're hitching. They've stopped; the deal is set.

“Hi, thanks for stopping. It's getting pretty dismal out here.”

“That's fine. Where are you heading?”

It took a sec to scramble the answer as the scarf had me slightly preoccupied.

“Nowhere in particular. Just doin' a trip around the Peninsula. I might go north of Coromandel Town. Colville maybe. Depends a bit on the weather.”

“Well, I'm heading that way but will be turning off a bit sooner – near Te Rerenga. At least I can get you part of the way.”

“Cheers. Sounds good. I'm a bit wet, sorry.”

“Don't worry, the seat's seen worse. Put your stuff on the backseat.”

I rattled my jacket to ease most of the drips off and draped it on my pack. Kit stowed, and motor idling all this time, she eased into first and onto the road, fairly quickly getting up to a sedate 50mph. I told you it was a Morrie.

“I’m Tommy.”

“Cerise. Like the colour. Where have you come from?”

“Today, Whangamata. A young surfer got me past Whitianga but he lived up in the hills here which is why I’m in the middle of nowhere.”

“Where’s home?”

“For the moment, Cambridge. Been staying with a friend there for a while.”

“What do you do?”

The questioning was precise. Not much shooting-the-breeze stuff at this point.

“I’m kinda between jobs. I’m a teacher and a bit of a chippie but more a wannabe musician. But none of those pay that well, so I’m taking time out to work out what’s gonna make me a million.”

“What sort of music do you like?”

If the person behind the wheel hadn’t been one of the more relaxed people I’d encountered – the written word can’t convey tone and timbre, and Cerise’s was akin to her scarf – I might have felt a little under interrogation. She was rapidly filling out my bio and I had squat on her.

So, the classroom training kicked in. “Oh, a mix really – folk, rock, blues. Good tunes, good lyrics. But enough of me; what’s your story?”

The hazel eyes fluttered almost imperceptibly for a second or two. “I’m a natural therapist but my love is painting. I’m on my way back from picking up some new canvases and paints at Whitianga. I live north-west of here in a small rural settlement we set up a few years ago. A bit of a sanctuary from the mad world.”

It wasn’t a bad summation really. The boho’ kit went with the commune image. I was starting to settle for the usual stereotype when she must have read my face and added “But we’re not hippies.”

“Nothing wrong with being a hippie is there?” I threw back, trying to make up for the obviously errant look.

“Some people think so.”

I waited for a little more detail but the car went quiet.

I lunged for the first question that came to mind. “What’s your settlement like?” Then, “Was it someone’s land you built on?”

“Yes, to the second question. It was a small block with a few buildings cut off from a farm when the owner sold his block to his neighbour. What’s it like? Well, it’s what you might expect from a rural retreat. Four buildings, 12 people, gardens, chickens, a few sheep. We rely on rainwater and a nearby stream if we’re desperate but we have got power – though we’re trying to be more self-sufficient with a bit of solar power. We’re not totally shut off. We get groceries out of Coromandel or Whitianga. But we all like the peace and the isolation.”

The conversation meandered into detail about the setting – an inland pastoral valley bordered by state forest and native bush, accessed via a secondary road off the road through to Whangapoua – and the challenges of living remotely. I shared a bit about the teaching - primary trained, a few years under the

belt, liked the kids – and she was curious about the carpentry side: How did that fit into an otherwise artsy resumé?

We swapped relationship accounts, which was itself disarming. Complete strangers a matter of minutes ago, now sharing details that personal? Me, recently split from a long-time girlfriend but no kids. Hers, a brief reference to a less than happy marriage in the past and a son living with her. Then that pause. But the probing was gentle. Cerise didn't delve too deep. She spoke fluidly, in an almost singsong way at times, which was oddly mesmerising and I didn't notice the slow loss of light till we came to the turnoff at Te Rerenga, forking to the right – down a bush-lined alley.

“So, this is us Tommy, but I don't like your chances of getting a lift from here this late in the day. Why don't you stay the night at our place? I can drop you back here in the morning.”

It wasn't an entirely unexpected development and I'd been poised to put the question in case she hadn't. I was pretty relaxed about having to bunk down in under the trees if no cars stopped but the late autumn chill, brisk nor'easter and grey clouds didn't promise a fun night.

“Only if that's OK, Cerise. I can doss down anywhere. Don't need a bed.”

“Oh, I think we can do better than that Tommy. Wouldn't be much of a host otherwise, would I?”

The road snaked across low hills for a short while, as Cerise carefully ensured the Morrie didn't slip into the shallow ditches to the side. The Morrie lights flicked over a typical mix of tree ferns, manuka, broom and the more majestic presence back off the road of puriri and rimu and the occasional kauri – with broad stands of radiata pine adding a more recent forestry footnote. It was archetypal Coromandel: farmed and forested here and there, but with more than a passing nod to the natural history of the peninsula.

The chat was intermittent. I mentioned her car at one stage, how I was a bit of a fan of those old Brit models. “Yeah, I like it,” Cerise replied. “It's Cherry.” A pause while I took that in, thinking “OK I'd have thought more maroon...”, and what a sort of obvious comment to make.

“The car's called Cherry,” she added, seeing the glimmer of perplexity in my face.

“I can see the connection,” I chipped in, realising straightaway what a naff reply it was.

We emerged into a more farmed stretch of flat land. Lights, fences and a few people milling around.

Cerise turned into a wheel-rutted driveway and halted outside a solid, sprawling homestead; I picked 1920s with elements of villa styles and the subsequent influences of the bungalow. It was spruce and well-lit; I could see a thin plume of smoke trickling up from a chimney and people inside. Cerise turned off the motor and turned to face me.

“Welcome to Elfland, Tommy.”

Scene 2 – Meeting the residents

Elfand. Well, that did tend to raise the Q-mark over the earlier denial of hippie-dom. But I wasn't going to litigate it this late, and certainly not, given the offer of accommodation for the night.

I grabbed my gear and waited for a steer on where to head.

“Follow me.”

We mounted the porch and headed in through the front door, a striking kauri frame with ornate stained-glass and a sturdy doorknob. Cerise led the way to a small room at the end of the inner corridor, a storeroom of sorts but with a single bed to one side. “Drop your stuff here and I'll show you round the rest of the house – then we'll get something to eat.”

The tour was relatively quick: bathroom, toilet, kitchen, sizable dining room, then the spacious lounge where a tall, lean man, who definitely hadn't seen the young side of 50 for a while, was jamming a big chunk of macrocarpa onto a hearty fire.

“Toby, meet Tommy.”

Toby eased himself up and strode over with a hand out but a slightly questioning look flicked momentarily at Cerise.

“I rescued him from the road a few kilometres south of Kuaotunu. He's going to stay the night. Not much chance he'd get a lift north in this weather and didn't seem right to leave him out in the cold.”

Toby's well-worn mitt snagged mine fairly emphatically and he levelled his eyes at mine. “Giddyay Tommy. Whad'ya know?”

It was one of those disarming openings that I was never sure quite how you're supposed to respond, so I copped out. “Not a lot, Toby. Nice to be in out of the rain.”

I expected the train of conversation to carry on a little further but Toby cut the discourse off and turned to Cerise. “One extra for dinner then.”

Cerise nodded and turned to me, pointing to a sprawling leather sofa with a gaudy if faded shawl draped across it. “Have a seat and relax, Tommy. Would you like something to drink before we eat? Wine, beer...or something hot?”

It was well after six, but something hot appealed so I asked for a tea – green, if they had it. That brought another Cerise special – a look that said both “Why would we *not* have green tea?” and “...but you’re forgiven.”

She went to rustle up the drinks, which left me and Toby. I thought I’d at least try to relax the atmosphere. “How long have you been here, Toby?”

He left the log he’d been readjusting in the hearth and dropped into a single seater opposite me.

He looked at me for a few more seconds than I was really comfortable with, then said “About three years.” I waited, hoping he might open up a little.

He gazed at the fire. “I used to be a lawyer in Auckland. High-powered firm, I was a partner. But it got outta hand.” Another pause. “And I ended up here.”

Not quite the courtroom summation I expected and Toby spoke in a subdued way – above a whisper but not a lot, and weary.

“Big change from the big smoke I bet.” The bleeding obvious - but I was keen to avoid an uncomfortable mood when Cerise returned.

“Yep. Different planet. Coming here prob’ly saved my life.”

“Yeah?”

Another pause and Toby took a resigned breath. “Yeah, I fucked up. Work, home... all of it. But I’ve come right here.”

I was trying to think of another prompt when Cerise came in with a tray. A mug that looked unashamedly home-made, a stubby and a glass of red.

“So, Toby’s introduced himself?”

I took the mug, made it comfortable in my hand to buy a few seconds. “Yeah, he was telling me about his escape from the rat-race.”

Cue another Cerise special: a silent gaze directed Toby’s way that communicated something intense but warm.

“So, Elfland,” I said. “What’s the story behind that?”

Cerise put her wine on the side table. “It’s a bit of a folk thing, a spiritual thing. We wanted this place to be a bit special, like a haven. It’s from an old English ballad. But there’s also a bit of a spiritual connection with the Māori history of the area.”

I quizzed her for a while about the settlement and learned it had started nearly five years ago, when she bought the old farmhouse and a slice – 11 acres – of the surrounding farmland. Cerise had called herself a nurse but had undersold her status: she’d actually owned and run a health practice in the Waikato but grown weary of the bureaucracy and the marriage troubles she mentioned in the car. As a practitioner, she’d mixed natural health and the established bag of practices but found – as many did – the former wasn’t supported by the system. So, she sold the practice, separated from hubby – and shifted with her 11-year-old son Sam to the farmhouse. It wasn’t called Elfland at first – the name came years later – and she and Sam were the sole occupants for a while, as she put her energies into a vegetable garden, flower beds and the herbs and other healing plants she’d formerly promoted in her clinic – and picked up the teaching reins to tutor Sam.

She'd acquired a couple of barns close to the farmhouse as part of the deal and not long after picked up a cottage up the lane – a rabbit's temporary residence from those times when someone was needed to regularly cull what was then seen as a pest. When word got out about her foothold in the countryside, people started to turn up.

And now Elfland had a population of 12.

Toby had left the room early to set dinner going. An hour or so later, he reappeared at the door to say it was ready.

We entered the dining room and the resident population had turned out to see the newcomer, it appeared. Cerise took charge.

“This is Tommy everyone. He's staying the night then heading north tomorrow.”

She introduced me to those around the massive kauri slab of a table: “OK, from your left that's Mikel – he's Danish, Eva and her twin sister Maya, Della and her partner Dayne – yes, we've got *two* Danes, then we have Rawiri and Nita and their children Ben and Talia, Toby you know, and Sam.

It was messy to do handshakes so each intro was just a “hi” and eye contact and typically I was a bit hazy on names by the end. But my read was that the Dane was mid-to-late thirties, tanned and fit, the twins – not identical but similar enough to suggest the connection – were a bit older, Rawiri was fifties, his wife maybe 10 years shy of that and the kids were under five – Ben probably close to that and Talia a couple of years younger. Della and Dayne were maybe mid-20s, Della almost a clone of Cerise in dress and looks, while Sam was the youngest present, bar the preschoolers – 16 or thereabouts I guessed, with a bit of the surfie about him.

Dinner was an impressive haul from the garden – salads and vegies – and a rich platter of fresh fish, herbed-up and batter-free.

Big tables jammed with diners don't make for easy conversation and I was between Eva and Sam, and opposite Della. Cerise was at the head of the table, my end, with Toby. At the other short end of the slab sat Rawiri and Nita with their youngsters either side. Maya was next to Eva, Mikel between Toby and Della and Dayne on her other side. I got a sense this was the seating of custom, slightly jarred by the new body jammed in on one side.

Cerise gave a wee spiel about me, while plates circulated compiling food, and Toby took drinks orders – mainly wines with Mikel and Dayne opting for an ale. I went for a Merlot, thinking “what the heck”. May as well relax. What can go wrong?

When Cerise mentioned I was a part-time chippie, Rawiri – who'd been fairly quiet aside from a soft “Kia ora, Tommy” at introductions – looked squarely at me and said, “What do you work on Tommy?”

Well, where to start. “Dad was a builder, Rawiri, retired now but my brother is still keeping the family business going. So, I got involved quite young. Used to go to the site with dad as a little guy and learned how to swing a hammer and through uni' it was my holiday-earner. I've worked on a variety of stuff: houses, office fitouts, renovations, decks. Bit of everything really.

“But it was never going to be my career. I was interested in teaching from school on; just seemed like a good thing to do and I loved my literature, stories, poems...all that.”

I sensed I'd gone past what Rawiri wanted to know, so I stopped, and he did too. Nothing further, your Honour. It was Della's turn to quiz the guest.

“What do you play Tommy? What music I mean.”

Again, one-and-a-half minutes on my specialist subject, starting now. I gave a similar answer to the one I gave Cerise but Della wanted specifics. “Who’s your favourite musician?”

That’s always a tester so I put on the perplexed look for a second then ducked the question to a degree by citing a few musicians I liked. “Neil Young, Joni Mitchell, America. No one single favourite.”

“Will you play us something?”

I might have imagined it, but I thought the room went silent. I was feeling a little uncomfortable with the focus on me, and this took it up a notch. Talking about yourself is one thing and I was usually fairly reluctant to be centre of that kind of stage; but performing? With friends or to a paying audience – and given a decent bit of notice - I was OK with it. But only a few hours ago I knew none of these people.

Then the inner voice chimed in that it would be crass to refuse, so I said – trying to play it down – “Yeah, sure, I can do a couple of songs after dinner if you’d like that.”

Cerise’s soft tones followed. “I think we’d all like a little entertainment, Tommy if you’re happy to play for us.”

So, the mini-gig was booked. The table conversation split into smaller parts then, with Sam first picking up the music theme to tell me about his favourite bands. And, as Della brought an apple and rhubarb crumble with a generous coat of fresh cream around, Eva asked me about my classroom time. To be fair I was only half-engaged though; no pressure Thomas, but what *were* you going to play?

Dinner over, the table gradually emptied as we ferried plates and leftovers to the kitchen. Eva and Maya – who as yet hadn’t spoken - stayed to do the dishes, Nita and Rawiri took Ben and Talia to get their PJs on – though they were coming back for the “concert” (gulp), while the others headed back to the lounge, me in tow.

I diverted to the spare room to grab my guitar then found a seat in the lounge next to Mikel. Cerise took hot-drink orders and went off to make them. I opened the case and took out my song folder, still not sure what songs to do or how many.

By the time Cerise returned, tray of brews in hand, I’d settled on a couple that were likely to be known (by most), liked, and fairly easy to play. No matter how often you play, there’s always a bit of nerves around playing to an audience who’ve never met you before, let alone heard you play.

Everyone was seated, on sofas, chairs or cushions and it fell silent. My cue.

I started with an apology for any rustiness of voice or tone. I’d tuned the guitar, a still-pretty-pristine Yamaha acoustic-electric I’d had for more years than I could recall. I intro’d the first song, an America number that was a solid hit for the band – “Ventura Highway” – which seemed to be appropriate for this freewheeling stopover, then “Heart of Gold” by Neil Young. My audience clapped after both, with a few thumbs up and clips of praise – “nice”, “excellent” and so on.

I ventured a third and invited them to sing along, thinking it ought to be familiar (and go down well in a place called Elfland): “Where Have All the Flowers Gone?” And two or three did – in that very quiet way. Except Della who I could hear applying a pleasant harmony, no mean feat on that song and suggestive of a trained voice.

I thanked them and put the guitar down but they wanted more, so I smiled, shrugged and played a couple more. By the time I shipped the last chorus a glance at my watch told me we were pushing 10, so

I put the guitar down again and quickly said “Guys, thanks, but I’m struggling a bit here. It’s been a long day.”

Which it had. I’d hit the road around 7am, allowing – I thought – plenty of time to at least get to Coromandel.

Cerise took charge. “Thank you, Tommy. That was a real treat. You have a great voice and play like a pro. But we don’t want to wear you out.”

I nodded and pushed out a quiet “thanks”, but tired or not it wasn’t hard to feel the warmth in those words.

I packed the guitar and songbook away and the others said their individual thanks and goodbyes in turn, then left. Della was particularly fulsome in her spiel to me, making a point of saying she enjoyed singing along and wished we could do a few more songs together. Dayne was less forthcoming and you didn’t have to be Methuselah to see why.

Rawiri had hung back too, and as Dayne hurried Della away, he came forward. “That was kapai Tommy. The kids don’t get to hear much live music and they were stoked. But, hey, I wanted to ask you something. Given your chippie experience could I get your advice in the morning on a piece of work in the cottage? We have a little studio adjoining it, but it’s pretty rough. There’s a bad piece of rot in the walls and I’m not quite sure how to tackle the repairs.”

“Yeah, sure,” I replied. “I don’t have any tools but I can take a look.”

“That’d be great, Tommy. I’ll see you in the morning.”

That left Toby and Cerise, who were sorting the cushions and washing the cups.

I hadn’t quite figured out where everyone actually lived at Elfland yet, so asked Cerise.

“Toby, Sam and I are in this house. Rawiri and Nita have the cottage and the others live in various buildings around the property. We have a couple of old farmsheds we’ve been converting, one of which the twins have and the other is where Della and Dayne have set up, and Mikel has taken over a toolshed behind this house.”

I hadn’t seen any of those buildings when we drove in as the light was poor so made a mental note to take a look in the morning after I’d checked out Rawiri’s rotten walls.

I thanked Cerise again for putting me up, the meal and the warm welcome.

There was a pause while she looked at me a little more intently than I expected. “It’s nice to have you here Tommy. Why don’t you stay a little longer?”

That was the first unexpected development. I muttered something to the effect of “thanks but I probably should keep heading to Coromandel” – though I had no real urgency to do so. I then excused myself, feeling the effects of the long day, had a quick wash and went into the spare room.

The second surprise came an hour later when Cerise walked into my room where I was still awake but musing on the day – and shut the door behind her.

Scene 3 – Making a move

OK, so I was a little shocked. I'd assumed (ass of u and me) that Cerise and Toby were a couple. That aside, she was undeniably attractive and I didn't think there were too many years between us.

But I'd known her barely half a day.

She had a long nightie on and her hair was loose on her shoulders. She sat on the bed and must have picked the stunned mullet look on my face. "We should talk."

I needed to cut to the chase. "What's this about, Cerise? Aren't you with Toby?"

She smiled – itself a potent disarmer. "No. He's a good friend but not a lover."

'Fair enough. But this is a bit sudden."

"Don't you like me?"

"You're the most alluring woman I've met in a long while but like I said, this feels a bit rushed. And I'm not sure the others would appreciate some Johnny-come-lately like me, shacking up with the leader of the commune."

"They don't need to know, just yet."

At that point, it's fair to say the long day and the prospect of a warm person to lie with swung the debate and I folded, hopefully magnanimously. It wasn't a frenzied smorgasbord of lovemaking but enough to stamp home how enjoyable it could be. How tender by moments and physical at others.

Cerise didn't say a lot through the night – passion took charge and conversation was parked largely - but in one wakened lull she did mention the playing of the Neil Young song, which had been a big hit globally – and clearly very locally. "That sealed it," she said.

Later, quite early in the morning, she gave me one long embrace then said simply "I better go now. We don't want it to be too obvious. Just yet."

The aftermath of any session like that can be a bit bewildering. She was there, she's gone. Did that just happen? I was honestly far from a Casanova. Predatory guys creeped me out. So, I spent a fitful few hours post-amours chewing over the not-insignificant implications.

There was clearly an invitation to stay on – for how long I had *no* idea - and a strong emotional pull. Cerise was very attractive – not to say mysterious, intelligent, and, as far as I could tell, free of any other romantic tie at Elfland, unless I'd missed some chemistry through the evening.

My circumstances were similarly untangled really. My road trip with guitar and pack was a little of being blown by the wind and following my nose. I had no job, but money in the bank, no house or flatting commitments since the split with my girlfriend of seven years, Phoebe, and there was no one else in the frame emotionally though there'd been a few trysts since – mostly pretty dissatisfying and a million miles from my experience of the last few hours.

My plan, if you could grace it with the word, had been to see a bit of the Peninsula, delve into the music scene and jam or gig a bit, find a bit of casual work, learn to dive – so many mates from the coast raved about it - and maybe surf a bit. You can read into that a bit of a repair job: Phoebe had been an abiding love and we had tried for a family but struck medical obstacles – inability to conceive at first, then to carry to full term. That burden often falls on the female and it wore Phoebe down to the point I couldn't see a happy future together, no matter how rationally we approached it. I guess I fell out of love too.

So, the case for the affirmative weighed in. Cerise seemed to want me around. Rawiri had some work for me maybe. What was to lose? I landed on that settled, mental lily-pad - and finally went back to sleep.