

THE NAPIER YEARS – PART 1

This is a collection of short stories and blog posts about my time growing up in New Zealand in the 1960s. They aren't meant to be deep or meaningful they're really just my memories and some people might be interested in them.

Enjoy.

Did you hear the one about the waitress and the travelling salesman?

I grew up in a smallish town in **New Zealand** called **Napier**.

Napier was, and still is, famous for two things; the 1931 earthquake, measuring 7.5 on the Richter scale, that destroyed most of the town and killed over two hundred and fifty people, and being one of the best examples of Art Deco architecture left in the world. As you can see the two are inextricably linked, if it hadn't been for the earthquake then the town would never have been rebuilt in the Deco style.

My mother was born in *Napier*, five months after the quake.

When *Mum* was twenty-five she was working as a waitress in a hotel in the city. The hotel was the base for many of the travelling salesman who plied their trade through the North Island of



New Zealand at that time.

My father was a travelling salesman and he had taken a shine to a rather pretty and naive girl who wanted more than the life she was living. He romanced and seduced her and then when he found out that she was pregnant he packed his bag of tricks and

he left her.

I was the punch line in a vaudeville sketch.

I can't begin to imagine what life for an unmarried catholic girl living in the 1950's in a small town in *New Zealand* must have been like. I am sure that there would have been pressure from every side to either put the baby up for adoption or to make 'other arrangements'.

My mother made a different choice and her extended family either accepted it or supported it or both. My mother wore my great grandmother's wedding ring and was always called *Mrs. Cross*.

So one month before her twenty-sixth birthday, on June 15 my mother gave birth to a healthy baby punch line; me.

I've never really made any serious effort to contact my father; I know he paid child support until I was sixteen. I heard that he was a taxi driver in *Wellington* with the last name of *Scott*. I once went to the law firm that handled the child support payments and asked them if I could track him down, I had visions of him being wealthy and feeling such guilt that he would endow me with vast sums of money to make himself feel better about his bad behaviour. They, the lawyers, said it would be expensive and I lost interest immediately. I have a photograph of someone who I think is him and he sits the same way I do but that seems to be all we have in common.

Although she had no husband her extended family was large: father, step-mother, grand mother, sister, two brothers and a black cat called '*Lucky*', all living in a two bedroom miner's cottage on Bluff Hill.

Her brothers, *Paul* and *Dennis*, had built a 'tent' at the back of the house and they used this as their bachelor pad or as we call them in NZ, a 'Bach' short for '*bachelor pad*'. *Paul* had served in *Malaya* during the rebellion. *Dennis* was still at school and often mistaken for *James Dean*.

There was another brother, *Peter*, who was killed in 1955. I was named after him.

Mum, her sister *Leona* and I slept in one of the bedrooms with my great grandmother, *Bridget*, while her father, *Evan* and his second wife *Daphne* had the other.

We were a family of nicknames: *Bridget* was *Nanna*, *Evan* was *Chippo*, *Leona* was *Nookie*, and *Paul* was *Kak* (god knows why), *Dennis* was *Splinter* and I was *Muscles* at first and then for a while *Mary*, (yes alright you can stop the giggling now). *Lucky the Cat* was called *Lucky* because he always slept in the embers of the fire in what was the lounge/dining/all-purpose room. *Lucky* was never singed; he seemed to be able to sense the exact moment when it was safe to jump into the warm embers.



It's confusing even to me but somehow it worked.

The house had no hot water, no inside toilet and no separate bathroom; in fact the bath was in the kitchen. Anyone who wanted to wash would have to heat the water in the copper on the wood burning stove and then fill the bath. Everyone took turns, one after the other with the youngest, me, going last.

By the time I was old enough to take a bath alone I had no idea what had been in the water before me.

Nanna, was born in 1875 and died in 1968; she saw amazing changes in the world during her ninety-three years, her daughter *Lillian*, a Nun, had been killed in the earthquake, her other daughter, my mothers mother, *Leatha* died in 1942. *Nanna* was profoundly deaf and had been for most of her life, and as it turns out was a divorcee, a family secret I only discovered in September 2009.

I remember snatches of so many things from that time; being thrown from uncle to uncle, like a rugby ball and loving every minute of it, sitting on the front porch counting the cars as they went up and down *Chaucer Rd.*, being given sweets by Mum's boss, *Mrs. Joseph* wife of *Jumbo Joseph* who owned the milk bar, where *Mum* worked, on *Marine Parade* under the T & G building; they lived in the rich area up the Hill.

Living in a house with no internal toilet was problematic especially in winter although the other seasons had their drawbacks as well. One night, in early spring, *Mum* had to pee; having an outside loo meant that you put it off for as long as possible, unable to hold it in any longer she reluctantly went outside to the 'out house', within seconds of her leaving a blood curdling scream woke up the entire family; *Mum* had sat on a slumbering hedgehog.

I think the hedgehog must have been the straw that broke the camel's back and *Mum* applied for a State House in the new, nearly completed suburb of *Maraenui*; a house with indoor plumbing, hot water, a separate bathroom as well as her very own bedroom. In comparison it must have seemed like a palace, but it did mean leaving the family behind.

I was five when we moved.

My mother was a determined woman who thought the world of me. She spoiled me rotten, as the saying goes. As long as I can remember I never once had to do dishes, everyday I was brought breakfast in bed before *Mum* left for work. It's only in the last few years that I have begun to appreciate just how much she did for me and what strength of character she had.

My mother died in 1987 aged 56 from bowel cancer.

Aunty Sissy

We only ever saw her once a year, usually at Easter. The entire family would meet at the railway station to wait for her railcar to come in which always seemed to arrive late, around nine o'clock. I remember it was red and huge and looked, to my small eyes, like the best thing ever. It held the promise of towns and cities far away. It was the A380 of its day.

It was sophisticated and the people who travelled on it were glamorous.

The family would wait in the small cafe and drink sweet, strong tea from heavy railway mugs with the crest of the *New Zealand Railways* stamped on them, and eat curried egg sandwiches and meat pies.

It was an event for me but I think it may have been a bit of a trial for everyone else.

Aunty Sissy was a mystery to most of the family. No one was really sure how she was related to us but she was known as 'Aunty Sissy' by all, even my grandfather, *Chippo*, called her that.

She was a tight, stout woman, no more than five feet five inches tall, in the old money. She always seemed to be bundled up in her best travelling clothes; clothes that belonged to an era gone by, perhaps post war *Britain* best describes her dress sense. She was never without a handbag, a hat with a fascinator and a pair of brown leather gloves.

So there we all sat; the children and the adults, three generations of Cross' waiting for *Aunty Sissy* to arrive by rail.

I have no memory of where she stayed when she came to visit but she seemed to be taken care of. I'm pretty sure she never stayed with my mother and me

Aunty Sissy had a cat. A rather moth eaten moggy called '*Anytime*.' I asked her once how it got its name and I remember clearly her telling me she had called it '*Anytime*', "*Because when she called it, it came anytime it was ready and not a minute sooner.*"

I liked *Aunty Sissy*; every year for my birthday she would send me a birthday card with two shillings taped to the inside. Two shillings was a lot of money, it was enough for a VERY large bag of assorted lollies: *Pineapple Chunks, Sherbets, Banana Boats, Milk Bottles and Jelly Beans etc.* and it was enough for the latest issue of a DC comic, specifically either *Superman* or *Batman*.

So *Aunty Sissy* was always very popular with me.

No matter how old I got, it was always two shillings taped to the card, from memory the last one arrived when I was about fourteen; shillings had become cents by then and *DC Comics* had gone up considerably.

In my head she was a *Mata Hari* figure who arrived late at night on a mission and then just as quickly left to save the Empire from the communist peril. I had images of her sitting by her small, coal fire in her neat sitting room, in *Gisborne* waiting for the black, bakelite phone to ring to send her off on another dangerous mission.

As Easter ended *Aunty Sissy* left as quickly as she came, back to her cat '*Anytime*', back to *Gisborne* and possibly back to her secret life as crime fighter.

There was always talk of her but apart from her annual visit and yearly birthday card *Aunty Sissy* remained an enigma wrapped in a post war gabardine overcoat.

Funny the things that come back to you when you lie in a hospital bed late at night drifting into and out of sleep.

The night we picked up Fluffy

To prove I had a life before the current events took over (cancer and stuff), I thought you might like to know a bit of my history pre this internet thingy, colour TV, men landing on the moon, back to a time when milk was served in little bottles to all the school children at play lunch, no matter what the season... or the temperature and *sp'getti sandwiches* were considered 'Haute Cuisine.'

Some things in life stand out and for me one was the night we picked up *Fluffy*.



When I was growing up *Mum* had a bike; a Raleigh women's bike with a wicker basket on the front and a seat attached on the back for me. *Mum* didn't know how to drive and even if she had we were too poor to afford a car. So she would ride to and from work everyday in all weather, this wasn't that unusual in Napier, in New Zealand in 1962.

In New Zealand when the seasons change, they change reasonably quickly; one day its summer then the next autumn and before you know it autumn has turned into the biting cold of winter. Riding a bike in winter, at night is hard work for most people but not for *Mum*.

We left home in *Maraenui* and cycled to *Marewa*, not a huge distance away but enough to put a rosy glow on anyone's cheek. My memory of the entire journey is the warmth of being bundled up in my miniature duffle coat and catching every second or third

sentence as the wind would snatch sentences from my mother out of the air and whisk them off into the ether as she pedalled stoically on.

When we finally arrived at the house that held the kittens I remember peering into a cardboard box full of wriggling Persian fur balls. One little bundle of fluff seemed determined to shine. This was a big moment; I was allowed to make the choice. I studied the box carefully and pointed to '*Fluffy*' then looked at my mother she nodded I'm sure money was exchanged although I have no memory of this.

Fluffy was to be my cat and it was up to me to see that she got to her new home safely.

Getting a kitten and a son home, at night, in winter, on the back of a bike is a feat few today could manage.

Fluffy was stuffed, purring, inside my duffle coat with her head peering out above between two of the buttoned flaps; I was stuffed in the seat on the back of the bike with my head peering out from under my rain hat.

Mum, with her shoulders hunched against the wind and the drizzle, began to peddle.

The lamp, on the front of her Raleigh bike, was powered by the dynamo that gained a charge as she pedalled; the faster she rode the stronger the beam of light. The quickest way back to our house was by taking a shortcut through the playing fields of *Maraenui Primary School*, (my primary school); this would save about twenty minutes from the journey. This was *Mum's* preferred option; she had done it many times before.

The school playing fields didn't have lights, so as she pedalled she had to keep to the line, that she knew in her head would get her safely across the field to the pool that would then lead her through the Poplar Trees and finally back to number *11 Lister Crescent* and safely home.

My mother was a determined woman.

The wind had picked up and the rain had started to pelt. The light on the front of the bike noticeably dimmed.

At night, in an almost total blackout, *Mum* didn't see the one, little hole in the middle of the field and as she hit it, the seat, carrying me and *Fluffy*, was dislodged and we were thrown, still strapped into the seat, to the ground as she cycled on lighter and faster now, unaware of her loss.

We sat there, *Fluffy* and me, unable to free ourselves, crying into the wind and the dark waiting for her, someone... anyone to notice. My last memory is of the diminishing red reflector light on the back of her bike disappearing into the distance.

I'm not sure how long we were left sitting alone in the dark in the wind and the rain, I tell people it was at least half an hour, *Mum* maintained she noticed straight away, I suspect it was probably only five minutes before I saw a pale white light flickering through the rain coming towards me.

She had returned to reclaim her only begotten son and his new best friend *Fluffy*.

Picked up and plopped back on the bike, with what I am sure was the sound of my mother giggling, we continued our journey home.

Fluffy stayed with us for fifteen years, I left when I was seventeen.

How I learned to kiss a girl - boy

As it happened, my mother, ***Marie***, and her best friend, ***Hazel***, both became pregnant at about the same time, they had been working at ***The Criterion Hotel*** together and I guess there must

have been a party and one thing lead to another as it inevitably does and babies were suddenly very much a part of their future. I never asked.

As luck would have it they both went in to labour on the same day in June, a Saturday, and they ended up in the **McHardy Maternity Home** in neighbouring beds puffing and panting, preparing to bring forth their issue, one with a husband the other without.

I think, but I'm not sure that I was born first and **Stephen**, Hazel's boy, just a few minutes later, although this is disputed.

Best friends with two newborn baby boys – the beginning of what we would now call “a mother's group”.

Hazel and Mum remained friends for the rest of their lives; every Friday night, right up until Mum's death, no matter what, they would meet for tea, usually fish and chips, at our house and there they would gossip, smoke cigarettes and consume copious cups of *Choysa Tea*, leaf not bag, never bag.

So it wasn't surprising that *Stephen* and I became best friends as well.

We grew up together, learned to crawl and walk together then started at *Maraenui Primary School* together; two peas in a pod.

I lived almost directly across the road from the school so each day *Stephen* and I would escape to my place for lunch and illicit cigarettes, we were young probably eight or nine.

We were both ‘*sports equipment monitors*’ in charge of setting out the rugby, soccer or cricket balls; whatever was required on any particular day and then making sure that everything was returned safely to the sport's shed after.

One day, just as we were finishing putting away the cricket equipment, *Stephen* asked me, “Do you know how to *pash a girl*?”

“No”, I answered honestly. In fact the thought had never entered my mind. Girls were not on my radar.

“I'll teach you” he said.

Well that seemed to make sense, I mean who wouldn't want to learn a new skill and being the older child it seemed unfair to be left without this life changing knowledge.

Stephen pulled the door to the sport's shed closed and in the warm, musty, half-light of that summer's day we sat on the gym mats facing each other. *He* leaned in and as I closed my eyes he kissed me, long and hard. I can still remember how quiet everything became and how fast my heart was beating as we *pashed*.

Everything was still.

Suddenly I was floating away and beginning to feel the stirrings of a desire that would become the driving force for most of the rest of my life. I can still smell the hay from the mats and taste the sweat as it ran down the side of my face and across my lips while we kissed.

"What are you doing? Ewww yuck, that's not right."

Stephen pushed me away and wiped a hand across his mouth as if he had been forced to take a bite from a rotten plum.

"What are you doing? You don't use your tongue!"

"I wasn't, I didn't know. You never told me" I protested feeling the flush of embarrassment beginning to redden my cheeks, fighting back the desire to run crying from the shed, wanting to get as far away as possible from him, the shed and the clumsy, pre-pubescent attempt at kissing.

"Do it again but don't stick your tongue in my mouth" he said.

And we did, and I didn't and it was good, very good, I mean *REALLY* good.

For the next five years even though we both eventually went to different schools, him to **Wycliffe Intermediate** and me to **Marist Brothers**, we grabbed every opportunity to explore each other in every possible way.

As we got older and, to borrow a line from *"The Boy from Oz"*, bolder and as our teenage hormones kicked in our exploration became less naïve; we knew what we were doing was not *"normal"* but that never stopped us. Although we were secretive we never felt guilty or ashamed of our, now six-year long, relationship and as we moved from the sport's shed to my bedroom and, on one memorable occasion, from the bedroom to a **Li-Lo** while we floated down the **Esk River** during a family picnic. Unfortunately we floated passed *Hazel* and her husband – nothing was said, perhaps they practiced selective blindness.

As with most things at that age there came a time when we drifted apart for one reason or another. Our lives took slightly different directions; *Stephen* discovered girls and I discovered that going to an all boy's school was just too good a chance to be missed.

It doesn't take much for me to close my eyes and be transported back; I can hear the clink of tea cups, the muffled sounds of *Mum* and *Hazel* gossiping in the kitchen and smell the fish and chips with too much tomato sauce while *Stephen* and *I* are in my room lying between the flannelette sheets under the covers on my bed, I can smell and feel him

The last I heard of Stephen, he was married, with two daughters, and happy – I wonder if he ever thinks of those years, if he even remembers them at all, as fondly as I do?

Television, Nanna and the Te Whares

The coming of black and white television to *New Zealand* was a big thing in *Maraenui*, well in *Lister Crescent* at least. Not that my mother could afford such a luxury being a solo parent bringing up her child while living in a State House and existing on a minimum wage, television was far too grand for the likes of us.

However the *Te Whares*, who lived opposite us, were a large family and television was a necessity. We were, even before the advent of television, very close friends with the *Te Whares* and we were always included in their family gatherings; at hangis, birthdays and anytime there was a rugby test on the wireless. So when *Mrs. Te Whare* asked *Mum* if she wanted to come over and watch television with her family we jumped at the chance.

Mrs. Te Whare was a large woman, with a large heart and from memory an even larger set of bosoms. Her house always seemed to be filled with people and laughter and at least one guitar.

The first programme I remember seeing on the 'box' that commanded so much respect was '**The Untouchables**'.

Mum, it seemed, had a crush on *Eliot Ness*, as played by *Robert Stack*, and each Tuesday night at approx seven thirty (yes even on a school night) we would travel across the road, after I had been fed and bathed, to watch the fighters for good triumph against the evildoers.

One night, as the theme music for '*The Untouchables*' faded and I sat up, bleary eyed and ready to go home and to bed, something peculiar happened... we stayed. There was a new programme that had captured the hearts and minds and probably souls of working class *Maraenui*, ***Peyton Place***.

Mum sat transfixed as this world of lust and love was opened up to her. She immediately dumped *Eliot* and transferred her affections to one *Dr. Rossi* as played by *Mike Nelson*.

Mum, as I later discovered, had a type. She liked men with neat 'brylcreemed hair'. I found pictures, when I was old enough to reach the cupboards above the bench, of *President John F Kennedy*, *Dr. Kildare* and *Richard Widmark* pasted to the inside of the cupboard doors. And in fact the only picture I have of the man who I am 99% sure is my father, is of a similar look, (see *earlier photo*.)

But this isn't really about him, the *father figure*; it's about the *Te Whares*, television and my *Nanna*.

The pattern of Tuesday nights continued for two years at least until *Mum* and *Lena*, one of *Mrs Te Whares* daughters had a falling out and suddenly we stopped going across the road to watch television.

Luckily at about the same time my, by now, increasingly frail *Nanna* came to live with us, this was about the same time colour television first appeared.

Nanna was bed ridden and unable to look after her self so the extended family decided that we were to be her carers. Mum set up *Nanna's* large double bed next to the window in the unused lounge room in our house. Next to her bed there was a very smart little cabinet called a 'commode'. *Nanna* was able to get herself on to and off the commode. Every morning and evening, Mum would empty the china bowl inside it out, rinse it and return it.

Nanna spent most of her day and probably night as well praying. I would hear her reciting the rosary over and over.

I loved my *Nanna* very much she had been a very big part of my life until I was five.



I never really believed *Nanna* was deaf; I would come home from school and creep in to the lounge room stroke bedroom, and, if her back was turned to me, silently sneak up behind her and shout out as loud as possible "HELLO." She never jumped so she was either a great actress or, in fact, was really deaf.

Since our television viewing had been cut off *Mum* hatched a plan. She decided that since *Nanna* was at home during day alone and there was nothing for her to do except stare out the lounge room window or pray, then it

was only proper that we should have a television for her to watch.

So using half of *Nanna's* pension and her own money Mum purchased a colour 18" television for the lounge room stroke bedroom. The first programme I ever saw in full colour on our very own television was *Thunderbirds.*'

Nanna had been born in the year before *Custer's Last Stand* (1875); she had lived through two world wars and sundry smaller ones, six monarchs, an earthquake that had killed one of her daughters and the change to decimal currency. When she was growing up people were riding horses now they were heading to the moon. For her this box in the corner of her bedroom was yet another miracle of the modern world. She would lie awake in the afternoon, silently reciting her rosary but staring at the screen while soundless images filled the room.

What must she have thought?

The lounge room stroke bedroom that *Mum* had set up for *Nanna* had a varnished wooden floor with a large rug that had a pattern of the Sphinx woven into it. It took up most of the room.

Late one night there was a very loud thump, loud enough to wake both *Mum* and me up.

Nanna had got up to use her commode and after doing her business had become slightly disoriented and turned in the wrong direction to get back into her bed, her foot had caught the edge of the rug and she had tripped and fallen heavily on to her side.

She was in pain.

Mum and I were unable to lift or move her so I was sent across the road to the *Te Whares* to wake them and get *Mr. Te Whare* to come and help get *Nanna* back to bed.

Between the two of them they managed to lift her and put her back to bed. *Nanna* never complained but even I could see that she had bruised herself in the fall. Indeed the next day the whole of her left side was covered in heavy purple bruises and *Nanna* had to be sent to hospital for proper treatment.

Something happened in that fall, some twist in *Nanna's* psyche, she seemed diminished after that. Her mind started to drift and she seemed to lose a connection with the present.

It was decided by the doctors and the family that *Nanna* wouldn't be coming back to live with us.

Three weeks after being admitted to hospital *Nanna* died in the early evening. *Mum* was with her, I wasn't, that night I had decided that I really couldn't be bothered riding my bike to the hospital to visit her.

After her death *Mum* and the *Te Whares* became friendlier again. I got *Nanna's* double bed to sleep in and *Mum* used the commode as her side table by the armchair she sat in to watch the television.

Nanna died in 1968 aged 92, I was 11. Her full name was *Bridget Anne Hendra*.

Driving Ms Marie

I think in some cosmic way I am tracking my mother's life. We both sat for our Drivers License very late in life, in fact I think we may both have been forty(ish) when we finally sat the exam, we're both unmarried, we've both had cancer and we're both from *New Zealand*.

Spooky, strange I know.

Let's just focus on the driving bit for now.

Mum got around, very well, on her *Raleigh Ladies* bike for a lot of years but finally bit the bullet when my *Aunty Leona*, '*Nookie*', offered to sell her car to *Mum* at a very good price.

Nookie was trading up.

The car was a very beautiful **Austin A40** (1948 'ish' model) in *British Racing Green*. *Mum* was taken with the idea of never having to ride to work, again, in the wind or rain.

My aunt was in the process of marrying 'up'; her husband to be, *Donald* owned a block of very modern 1960's units, (4), across the road from the house I was born in on Chaucer Road, Napier. So naturally the *A40* no longer suited her new status.

I remember vividly the night my aunt, my mother and I first took the car for a test drive. It was winter and it was raining and we were warm and dry inside.

My mother and aunt were very close but they did like to squabble.

I sat in the back of the car excited to be out on a school night unaware of the dramas about to unfold.

Let me tell you a little bit about the *A40*; it was a sturdy car, heavy, it had no power steering and the driver, especially a new driver, would need to hard wrestle this little beast of British manufacture to get around tight corners. It had two little arms that popped up out of the side panel to indicate a left or right hand turn, leather seats with out seatbelts but the back seat did have an armrest that slid out of the top of the back seat. It was the kind of car that when you closed the door it sounded well and truly closed.

My mother was tentative at first. The first corner we bunny hopped along with my aunt offering helpful advice, "*More clutch, less accelerator, get your foot off the brakes.*" That kind of thing. This did not have a calming affect on my mother. At the end of the street there was a very small hill, tiny, more of a gentle rise than anything, as the *A40* slowly gathered speed and actually, surprisingly, quite smoothly climbed the bump in the road that passed for a hill, even I could feel the tension in the car relax.



The problem was that just over this little hillock there was a sharp turn to either the left or the right and for some reason my mother decided that she would turn the steering wheel ever so softly and proceed on her way. My aunt sensing that the *A40* was about to plough through the fence and into the sheep paddock, reached over, grabbed the wheel and pulled it around, scaring my mother who let out a word I had never heard a lady use before. There they were the two of them, four arms fighting for control of the steering wheel, each shouting at the other.

I sat calmly in the back my arm resting on the armrest like some latter day, provincial Medici enjoying the ride.

They yelled at each other as only sisters can narrowly avoiding disaster but continued on with the rain getting heavier and the wind picking up to hurricane strength.

Both my aunt and my mother were smokers and after this near death experience they decided that they deserved a cigarette. Windows were wound down, cigarettes were lit and some sense of calm returned to the front seat.

Things seemed to be going well, 2ZC the local radio station was playing some tuneless pop ditty, they were puffing away happily, *Mum* seemed to have mastered the beast and all was well and good.

Through the rain splattered windscreen we could see in the distance the lights of an approaching car. My aunt made more helpful comments such as “*Look out for the car*”, which my mother took with good grace, ignoring her and puffing harder on her Capstan Cork ciggie. They both seemed to be puffing on their cigarettes with more determination.

Even though I was sitting quietly in the back felt the air tense. My mother’s hands gripped the steering wheel at ten to two, (the correct position); her body rigid, her eyes staring ahead, my aunt was tense, yet strangely quiet now but ready to wrench the wheel to the left at the slightest hint of danger.

The car got closer and larger, the rain seemed to get heavier and the only sounds filling the cabin of the car was the ‘thwack thwack’ of the windscreen wipers and the crackle from the radio.

The oncoming car which by now turned out to be the *Maraenui* bus filled the windscreen, barrelling down on the three of us at what seemed like seventy miles and hour. The bus seemed to fill the road, my mother to her credit held her nerve and with a rattling gust of wind the bus started to pass us by. Just as the tail of the bus was almost passed us its rear wheels hit a pot hole and a spray of water came in through the open drivers side window hitting my mother in the face, drenching her but such was her determination she never flinched but drove on until it was safe to stop.

With a soggy cigarette and wet cardigan, her auburn hair plastered to her cheeks she pulled the car over and slowly turned to look at my aunt. As one they both began to laugh so hard that my mother wet herself, just slightly... something else we both have in common.

Sisters - they were so close and both could see the ridiculousness in any situation.

Mum bought the car and it stayed with us for almost five years before she went all modern and traded it in for a *Hillman Imp* and then an *Austin 1100*, but to this day I have a soft spot in my heart for the *Austin A40* especially if it’s in *British Racing Green*.

Up, up and... away

Once my mother had mastered the *Austin A40* and moved on to the more ‘European’ *Hillman Imp*, we became a family of explorers. Areas that had been previously closed to us because of distance or weather suddenly became our playground.

Sunday was the day we decided was the best day to go exploring Napier and Hawke’s Bay. Over hill and dale, through city centre to the bustling Port Ahuriri, every Sunday we would search out new and exciting areas of our hometown.

We settled very quickly into our routine of 'extreme adventure' and like a well oiled machine on Sunday by twelve thirty we were ready. Mum with her packet of *Cameo* cigarettes, much more sophisticated than the *Capstan Corks* she was used to me with my *Benson and Hedges*, food would be purchased on the way and off we would motor.

Very quickly however we discovered that, for us, Napier and Hawke's Bay held no great interest except for one shining area, ***Hawke's Bay Airport***.

Air travel in New Zealand or more correctly Napier wasn't that common, yet on Sundays, at approximately one thirty in the afternoon two flights would arrive, almost at the same time; one from Auckland the other from Wellington.

So, more often than not, Sunday would find us parked in the airport car park, sitting in the car, eating our takeaway lunch, me with two sausage rolls and Mum with a pie. We never thought to get out of the car and go in to the actual airport, I mean we were just voyeurs... and happy to be so.

We timed it perfectly as soon as we had finished our '*gourmet picnic hamper*' and lit a cigarette each the first of the ***NAC Fokker Friendships*** arrived. We would crack the window slightly... more to let in the sound than let out the smoke

We sat there, watching with wonder, as the international travellers disembarked from these enormous beasts of travel.

Somehow we felt part of their journey; it was as if we were meeting exciting jet setters with tales of wonderment from around the world.

Just as we finished our first cigarette the next *Fokker* would turn up. The airport was abuzz with excitement, announcements made over the tannoy, travel bags being unloaded and loaded on to the tractor to be ready for collection, people hugging, laughing and crying everywhere you turned.

Just when you think it can't get any better the first *Fokker* now reloaded, refuelled and ready for departure would fire up its *Rolls Royce* engines and begin to taxi away from us. The roar of the engines would fill the little *Imp* and we would both light another cigarette as if we had enjoyed some orgasmic moment together, which of course a son and mother could never share, but there we sat in silence, each puffing on a cigarette, the noise of the aircraft, with just the hint of aviation fuel adding to the mystery of the afternoon.

First one *Fokker* then the other would taxi and depart and finally Mum would start up the *Imp* and we would return to our safe State home and dream of travel and lands faraway.

To this day the thing I enjoy most about travelling is the airport, I am well known for getting to the airport at least two hours before the earliest check in time just to get that taste that excitement that feel of 'travel'.

Mum never flew; in fact she refused to even consider stepping on to an aircraft. Perhaps in the end she was doing it all for me.

The Queen, that yacht and... me

Some things, events, place people in time and space; the smell of burnt toast always reminds me of winter in *Napier* and exams, the song '*Hotel California*' makes me think of *Palmerston North* and visiting *Eric Cox* in summer at his Teachers College and the light of a ship reflected on the ocean will forever remind me of the **Royal Visit to New Zealand** of 1970.

Sometimes at night in *Sydney*, if I am having dinner at the *Wharf Restaurant* or near the *Opera House* a ship will sail by, either on it's way to exotic ports around the world or arriving with a cargo of excited tourist set to taste the delights of our home, a light will be reflected from inside the ship on to the ocean, a soft yellow light will dance with the waves and for a moment I am transported back to an evening in *Napier*.

It will come as little or no surprise to most of you reading this that I am a monarchist, yes, yes I understand all the perfectly valid, logical and sensible reasons that *Australia* and possibly even *New Zealand* should become a republic. I understand the reasons and would never argue logic against them but I'm an out and proud follower of the Royal system of government. I like Kings and Queens.

However that's not what this is about... well maybe a little what it's about.



In March, 1970, one day **HMV Britannia** sailed into *Port Ahuriri, Napier* with **The Queen** and **Prince Phillip** on board. They were taking part of a tour to celebrate the discovery of *Australia* and *New Zealand* two hundred years before by *James Cook*. They were here for a day to allow the *Royal Couple* sixteen hours of visits, tree plantings, local dignitaries, roast lunches and hand shaking.

I was twelve and a Prefect at *Marist Brother's School*, we had been asked (told) by the Brothers that we were to form, with the boys and girls from other schools in the area, a guard of honour at the Port as 'the couple' finished their day in *Napier* and were about to leave.

It was mid march so the weather had turned from summer to autumn but the nights were still reasonably warm. We were all, standing to attention, in our best, darkest blue uniforms, lining the entry to the port when the *Royal Couple* drove by in an open black/burgundy *Rolls Royce*.

For a brief moment, like an image from one of those old movies or news reels that you see of Royal Tours, *The Queen* and *The Duke* seemed to slow, turn and wave as they passed us by, it was a second maybe two but it seemed forever.

Once they had driven by we were allowed, like everyone else, to crowd the dock to watch up close as the final farewells were being made. I remember listening to the bands beating retreat

as this majestic and beautiful Yacht towered over us with its *Royal Standard* fluttering in the breeze.

The crowd was excited; happy, united... in fact I can't think of the one word needed to explain how everyone felt that night.

Somewhere a voice started to sing '**Pokarekare Ana**' the words were soon picked up by the rest of the crowd as *Britannia* began to slip her moorings in preparations for her departure.

The Queen and the Duke stood, smiling and waving goodbye for what seemed like hours as the song floated across the water to them.

I remember the last of the heavy mooring ropes being let loose and hitting the water then being hauled on board; as it was dragged into the Yacht the lights from the aft cabins cast a warm yellow light onto the darkening waters of Napier's harbour.

I remember standing there; right by the edge of the dock looking out at the Yacht and those welcoming lights as they slowly disappeared. I remember thinking, "Take me with you. If I dived in now they would have to come back and get me... now, it's not too late... do it now, there's still time." Until, of course the Yacht disappeared into the darkness of the night, I found my mother and we went home.

It's funny how some moments of time are trapped at the front of your mind and stay with you as if they were yesterday while others slip away forever.

Life is a beach

There is something different about people who grow up living by or near the beach. They have a different attitude, not better or worse just different. There is something relaxed and trusting about people who live near the sound of the surf.

I grew up in *Napier*. (as you must know by now)

Napier is, as some of you know by now, a town on the east coast of the *North Island* of *New Zealand*. It is, or at least was, the 'capital' of *Hawke's Bay*, although the people of *Hastings* would argue this point. It is a deep water port and the terminus for trains and trucks carrying freight that needs to be shipped overseas.

Napier is a seaside town with two main beaches: *Westshore*, a sandy beach with a sometime surf break and *Marine Parade Beach*, kindly described by some as a pebbly beach, with a dangerous rip and rough surf.

Marine Parade faces the *Pacific Ocean* and was considered a prime point of invasion if the *Japanese* decided to land during the *Second World War*. In fact, gun bunkers were built along

the foreshore to help fight off any invading foe, only to be used as a trysting place for lovers after the invasion that never happened.

Westshore was always considered slightly 'uppity' by us working class kids. There were no State Housing Commission houses at *Westshore*. It seemed to be an area of milk and honey with its gentle sandy shore and genteel houses.

Marine Parade was my local beach.

Barry and *Diane Hard* and I spent most every day of every summer at the beach. During the school holidays we would walk or bike ride from home to the stony beach, only five to ten minutes away, and not return until we were covered in salt and exhausted late that afternoon.

Although the waves were large and unforgiving we were fearless, we were twelve maybe thirteen, and we would paddle out just beyond the break on large, inflated, black, truck tyres we had carried across our shoulders from home and then surf the waves back in, more often than not ending up being tossed around like corks in a blender before being dumped unceremoniously back onto the beach.

We were invincible, unbreakable, we were young and summer seemed as if it would never turn to autumn.

Napier is also known for its earthquakes, the biggest being in 1931. Following that devastating quake *Napier* had put in place a solid civil defence system, a system that had never really needed to be used again until the late 1960's when, after a

large earthquake across the Pacific in *South America*, a tsunami warning was issued. Just like all the folk in Sydney did, we rushed to the beach to watch the big wave come in. It became a family event; picnic hampers were packed and bonfires were lit, it was like cracker night without the crackers. No one seriously thought that a wall of water twelve foot high was about to swamp our city. We were all expecting some good old fashioned rough waves and a really high tide.

Thankfully we were all disappointed; hampers were repacked and fires extinguished as we all returned to our homes, dry and safe.



The *Marine Parade* in *Napier* is the playground of *New Zealand* and for a teenager it was rich in adventure; from the *Boating Lake* to the *Marineland* to the Trampolines to the art deco *Soundshell*, there was never a time when there was nothing to do.

Each year just after Christmas, to coincide with the arrival of the tourists, the 'Carnies' came to town with their rides, stalls, magic castles and games of chance; show-time was a fortnight of deep fried, fatty Hotdogs and riding the Ghost Train. In that first week of January every year I would ride my bike up to the foreshore to watch while the rides were assembled. Wishing they would hurry. It seemed to take them weeks to set up but I know it was just a day or two. There is nothing quite as romantic as the sounds of the carnival and the evening lights on the rides reflecting off the ocean waves.

I was sure each night as I lay in bed that I could still hear the sounds of the *Dodgem Cars* floating in through my bedroom window and occasionally catch the scent of spun sugar on the summer breeze.

Then just as quickly as it had begun it was over and the carnival folk were off to another town to spin their magic.

Childhood should always seem like a long extended summer; the autumn and winter of our life comes very quickly.

People who live by the beach are, mostly, a relaxed, trusting lot who are lulled to sleep nightly by the sounds of waves crashing in the distance. We grow up with a hint of saltwater drying on our lightly bronzed arms and our hair is thickened and blonded by the wind and spray of the ocean. We see things in a more romantic way than farmers or city folk do. I'm sure farmers and people who live in the Outback have their on special memories but I can't imagine ever living too far from the sea. I can't imagine never having that contact with the ocean.

When I think back over my childhood and teenage years my favourite memories are all to do with the beach and the water.

There is a season cuz

I wonder what the real cycle is, I mean how many years go by before something that was once fashionable becomes so again; is it ten, fifteen... thirty years?

Maybe it's just the even numbered decades that are really counted as trend-setters.

If we look back it's really only the 80s, 60s, 40s and 20s that set the themes, the other decades are the leftovers, the waiting rooms for the next '*BIG THING*'.

When I was in high school (1972), a leftover decade, I remember spending hours every night after my bath sitting in my chair watching television with a towel wrapped around my neck trying desperately to keep my hair straight.

You have to remember it was the year of '*The Partridge Family*' (1970) and I had a crush on **Keith (David Cassidy)**. He had such beautiful hair, so lustrous and long and most importantly straight.

My head of hair was a curly brown mess most of the time. I blame *Brother Gordon*, one of my teachers from *Marist Brother's School* for that. When I was younger and blonder for some strange reason he cut my hair one day after school using a pair of clippers. He gave me my first buzz cut. When it grew back it was wavy with a slight curl and had somehow lost its natural blondness.

No, this isn't a metaphor for me losing my cheery to a randy catholic Brother, even if he did grab my knee and let his hand rest slightly too long as he drove me home... in a car that is.

I liked *Brother Gordon* and I am pretty sure he was gay, we had a lot in common... we both liked the same type of boy. He was always very kind to me, I remember on our 1st Form trip to the *South Island* I had run out of money, I had spent it all on film for my '*Box Brownie*' (it was a camera, keep yourselves nice), and he very kindly paid for my banana milkshakes one day in *Invercargill*.

The only Brother I ever had trouble with at Intermediate school was *Brother Brendan*. He was young, twenty something, and I think uncomfortable with the choices he had made.

One late summer's day, as a few of us were leaving school one afternoon, he was working in the garden, wearing a dirty white T Shirt and pants. I remember there was, what I thought, good natured banter between us all until I piped up and mentioned that his underarm hair was poking out of his T. He seemed to take it in good humour at the time and nothing more was said, in fact I thought we all had fun... however the next day at school things took a turn for the worse.

I was summoned by him to appear in front of his standard 4 class where he proceeded to ridicule me and he tried very hard to force me to apologise for being rude to him the day before. I got on my high horse and refused, the more he tried the higher my horse got until there was an impasse but I do remember one of us was crying. Eventually I was sent to *Brother Malcolm*, the Headmaster, and given the cane, three strokes on each hand. To be fair to *Brother Malcolm* there was not much he could do, I mean after all he couldn't be seen to be taking sides and I have a memory that although the cane hurt it wasn't up to *Brother Malcolm's* usual standard.

He still made me a prefect and school captain the next year.

Anyway back to 1975, so there I sat, night after night, in my white vinyl rotating, rocking chair with matching footrest with a towel around my neck waiting for my hair to 'set' and for my mother to bring me my 'tea' on my tray for me to eat as we watched TV.

I was pretty groovy way back then, for a kid from New Zealand, my jeans were low cut, worn with a large heavy leather belt and they had large plastic buttons on the outside of the flies. They



were more than flared these jeans, they were bell bottomed, I mean they had **HUGE** flares. I remember thinking just how 'hip' I was. My shoes were the equivalent of *Dunlop Volleys* and I topped the whole ensemble off with a tight coloured *T shirt*. For casual beach wear I had many pairs of cut down denims and I would wear them low on the waist with the top button left provocatively open and accessorised with a pair of '*jandals*', as we called them, you may know them better as '*flip-flops*'.

I had a few pairs of sunglasses, all of them were large plastic numbers, some were '*Polaroid*' but most were just cheap coloured plastic and I remember that I had a transistor radio with earplugs that seemed to be permanently attached to my ears.

I was cutting edge.

So it's no wonder that I am amused and slightly jealous of the young '*gay-lings*' of today who with their hair and their jeans somehow manage to look much the same way I did way back in 1975.

I wonder how different my life would have been if I had use of a '*Hair Straightener*'.