

Homecoming

Your family bought the Dairy next to our fish and chip shop. There were a few shops in a row—ours plus Mr. Chan's vege shop, a butchery run by South African Mr. and Mrs. Bauer, and a bakery owned by Glenda, a stout Welsh lady. "It's like a bloody League of Nations round here," Dad said. He said your family were Indian: dot not feathers.

I didn't have the foggiest what he was on about so I went to the school library and found India in a musty encyclopaedia. There were pictures of elephants, ornate temples and market stalls selling mounds of spices. When the librarian wasn't looking I ripped the pages out to take home. Your mum wore colourful silk saris and elegant sandals, not like my mum who wore stirruped tracksuit pants and Ug boots like everyone else. Your dad burnt incense in the shop whereas our shop reeked of rancid fat. You had a copper and brass statue with an elephant head behind the counter. All we had were grease spotted magazines and a purple light that zapped flies.

The first time we met was round the back of the dairy. You were on a milk crate, reading a book. When I saw you I began a skiting jig, holding high the raspberry lamington that I had just pinched from Big Glenda. Coconut sprinkled into my hair in dandruffy flakes and I brushed them away before you saw.

"Bet you're jealous," I said, holding the lamington in front of your face to see.

You shook your head, and said coolly "Not really."

"Want a bite? I don't have cooties," I said.

"No thank you." You continued reading your book.

I shrugged and bit into the lamington. Cream spurted onto my fingers and I licked them with gusto.

"Mmm. Yummy cream," I said, but you ignored me.

I booted the milk crate you were sitting on and smiled. You looked up and gave me the evils.

"My Dad says you fellas are curry munchers," I said.

"My father says Maoris are a bunch of lazy paua poachers."

I inhaled huffily, and a stray coconut flake flew down the wrong pipe. I coughed and coughed. Then with watering eyes I said, "Well, you stink like...like spices." I wasn't even sure what spices were. Back then iodised salt and ground pepper was as experimental as our kai got.

You snapped your book closed. "Well you stink like fish."

I scaled fish for my dad. Though I liked how the scales glimmered like sequins, the pong of fish oil was hard to wash off. I fidgeted with the hem of my skirt and changed the subject.

"Ever ridden an elephant?" I said.

"Eh?"

"I saw some pictures of India. There were elephants," I said.

"I was born in New Zealand. So was my dad."

"True? Me too."

I stood there awkwardly as you hopped off the crate and made for the back door of your shop. Your nose ring glittered in the sun.

I called after you, "I like your nose earring."

You looked back and when you realised I wasn't getting smart you said, "I like your necklace." You pointed to my pounamu pendant.
We smiled at each other, shyly.

After that we walked to school together, we ate lunch together, and sometimes after school I came to your house at the back of the dairy. Your dad always watched me like I was going to nick something; maybe Big Glenda had said things about me.
Surprisingly our parents got on well, and for Diwali your mum brought us Indian sweets to try.

"Ka pai," my dad said patting his puku. "They're like a party in my mouth."
Then one day you told me your family were going back to India for a holiday because your older sister was getting married. You went on and on about it in detail. You were flying Cathay Pacific. You were going to meet your mother's parents for the first time. There was going to be a lavish marriage ceremony. Maybe there would be bejewelled elephants. It would be a huge homecoming you said.

"Skite," I said, trying not to cry.

When the statue behind the counter went missing, no one pointed the finger at me. But when you got back from India, we weren't allowed to be friends anymore.

At Uni when I replied to a flatmate wanted ad, you answered the door, looking the same but different. We smiled at each other shyly. I moved in a few days later and sheepishly presented you with the statue—I had treasured him all that time.

"You can keep Ganesha if you like," you said.
So I lit an incense stick and placed him on the mantelpiece to watch over us both.