

## BNZ Katherine Mansfield Young Writer Award winner – Clare Tanton



Clare Tanton was born in Hastings and has grown up in Hawke's Bay. She is currently a year 13 student at Taikura Rudolf Steiner School. From an early age she discovered a passion for stories, writing, and theatre, the latter taking her to the Globe Theatre in London in 2007 with the SGCNZ Young Shakespeare Company.

In their last year at Taikura the students have the opportunity to research an area of interest in a twelve month practical and theoretical project. Clare chose to explore the art of short story writing and it was through this that she entered the BNZ Katherine Mansfield Awards.

In 2009 Clare will begin a nursing degree. She hopes to pursue a double career; continuing to develop her writing skills.

### The Hole in the Fence

The kids have been let loose with their new Christmas toys. Up and down the street doors are being flung open, piercing shrieks of delight or jealousy left ringing in the air. The girls are out too, flaunting their bright new hairclips and shoes, puckering chocolate stained lips as they saunter down the footpath. Everyone knows where the girls are off to.

"Hey Kori, what are you guys makin' for Christmas lunch this time?" That's Therese.

Korianna giggles, "Aww no, it better not be as gross as last time!"

"Euw, that trifle was so yuck, I had to feed it to the dog when Mum left the room." That's Kori's sister, Rebecca. Except no one calls her that; she's Becs, unless her mum's telling her off for staying too long at the park, or wearing too much makeup, or stealing the last of the chocolate out of the cupboard. At my place chocolate never lasts long enough to see the inside of our cupboard, not between me and Mum and Dad scoffing it. But I don't tell the girls that.

"You know where we should go today?" Therese pipes up. We eye her in silence.

"The bandstand!" she pronounces.

"Aww, na..."

"Mum hates us going down there."

"We shouldn't really."

"Let's just go to the park like normal."

Therese glares at us. "Come on, you fullas are just wusses. Anyways, there won't be anyone there, not at Christmas."

Kori looks at Becs. Becs looks at me. If Therese wants to do something then there's no getting out of it. We turn and troop after her.

We've been down to the bandstand at the race track before, but that's with our mums and dads when the races are on. That's when I have to stick my hair up nice and stay with Mum in case I get lost. Me and her always share a punnet of hot chips together on the bandstand, with lots of vinegary tomato sauce, so really it's not all that bad.

But when the races aren't on, the bandstand's all quiet and echoey. You hear stories of queer fullas lurking in there too, in the corners you don't see 'cos of the bigness of it. And couples go there when they're not supposed to. The older kids at school whisper and laugh about it. Becs is one of the older kids, but she hangs out with us mostly, and doesn't go out so much like the others.

We've gone round the corner of our street now. The shrieks and hollers and hoots of the kids are fading away. The scuffing of our shoes on the footpath echoes in the unusual silence. I look along at the girls: Therese, Kori, Becs, and me. This is our crew.

"Hayden's got a new girlfriend." Therese again. Hayden's her older brother. He's gorgeous. Secretly me and Kori have a thing for him, but we could never let on to Therese. She'd go mad.

"Guess what Mum calls her?" She grins at us, mouthing S-L-U-T. "Bet you don't even know what that means, eh Miriam?"

She is looking at me. I don't know. They are all looking now.

"Course I do. It means...ummm..."

"Hmmp!" Therese snorts.

"Well what exactly does it mean?" I ask.

"That's for me to know," she grins, "and you to wonder about."

"Aw shut up Therese!" Becs starts suddenly. "That's stupid." She grins, reaching over to give Therese a playful punch on the arm, before turning to smile at me. But then she carries on walking, looking ahead, with a sour, sort of hard look on her face.

When we get to the hole in the fence that is the shortcut, I start to feel a bit sick. The vast track and the looming crest of the bandstand look so cold and empty without the crowds. Besides, the weather is starting to turn. The sky is now a wrinkled grey, and a cold breeze has picked up spreading goose bumps up my bare arms.

I follow Becs through. We have to make our way along the edge of the track, under the trees, to get to the bandstand. We've all been walking in silence for a while now. I don't like it when none of us are talking or laughing, 'specially not out here, so I try to start something up.

"Becs? Why do all the older kids want to come here when the races aren't on?"

Therese snorts again, "It's to do you-know-what, dummy!"

"What?" Me and Kori.

"Well have any of you ever seen the sunset from the bandstand? That's pretty cool." Becs, laughing, her mouth wide open. She shakes her head, chuckling, amused.

I give up and watch the clumpy ground go past instead. When we get to the bleak face of the bandstand, we clamber over the seats until we are sitting right at the top, looking out. Puffing hard, I gaze out over the sea of houses, at the faded hills and the huge, stretching sky. I can see all the way back to our street. If the trees weren't in the way I'm sure I could see my house even. It feels magnificent, like I could breathe in the sky, take a breath so big that I could slurp up the clouds.

But the thought of home reminds me, "Guys? What's the time?"

Becs pulls out her cell phone opening it with a click. "Oh shit! We've gotta get home. Lunch!"

We arrive back panting, clutching our sides. We didn't need to run. Kori and Becs' mum has burned all the roast veggies and had to start again anyway. Mum and Dad and Therese's mum are sitting round the table in the kitchen, eating chips and onion dip and laughing. Ever since I can remember, our three families have spent Christmas together. There are a few empty beer bottles on the table in front of Dad. Kori and Becs' dad comes in from the laundry carrying a box of beer. He sees us and grins, big white teeth glowing,

“Where’ve you kids been? At the park again?” We nod.

It’s just like usual, like every year. We get given heaps of jobs to do. “Clean this pot, put these on the table, and the knives and forks, and the sauce, oh and this too ....” We lay everything out on the table, then the boys turn up.

“Where the bloody hell have you boys been?” Therese’s brothers saunter in the door just as we are starting to sit down, not letting on where they’ve been.

BANG! We wrench open frilly gold crackers and put on the bright, fluttering hats. Then we tuck in, bowls clinking, glasses ringing, knives and forks scraping on full plates. Someone spills the gravy, like normal. The trifle is yuck: over-eggy custard and too-sweet jam, but I eat two bowls anyway.

And then, when everyone is pushing their plate in and starting to get up from the table, Mum says, “Right, now you girls can help clean up.” We all moan, but we get up anyway, clutching our stomachs. Only no one can find Becs, although I think I remember seeing her slip down the hallway and out the back door. Probably trying to escape the clean up business, I suppose.

So I follow after her. The back door whines as I open it. The garden is full of bees and fluttering cabbage butterflies, but no Becs. I peer round the side of the house, but she’s not there. I am just about to go back inside when I notice that the old gate at the end of the garden has been left wide open. Behind all the trees that drip and sway over the fence, there is a stream. She must be down there.

I make my way down quietly, hoping to give her a fright. I have just slipped through the gate, eyes searching for a flash of her yellow dress among the bushes. I’m getting ready to spring out at her, when I hear a crunching of footsteps off to my right. I whirl around, embarrassed about someone finding me crouched like this. But no one has seen me.

It’s a couple, and they are walking in the opposite direction along the path that borders the stream. My stomach clenches. I know who these people are. I can tell by their backs. It’s Hayden, and beside him, holding his hand, is Becs. I stare at them as they move away, swallowed up by the trees as the path curves into the distance. The sun stings my eyes, making them burn. I turn around and stumble back through the gate and across the lawn.

It is dark and cool inside the house. The clanging of pots reverberates around the walls. I wander into the kitchen.

“You didn’t find her?” Kori’s mum.

“Urm, no,” it comes out of my mouth as a mumble.

“Ugh, what a slack arse!” Therese exclaims.

I swipe a tea towel from the bench and take my place beside her, picking up a glass jug from the dish rack, and start to wipe it slowly.

“Therese?”

“Mmm?”

“You know the path down by the stream? That only goes to one place, eh?”

She looks at me, lowering her voice, “Yeah, only to that hole in the fence we use as a shortcut to the race track. To the bandstand. Why?”