

Bank of New Zealand Katherine Mansfield Premier Award winner – Carl Nixon



Carl Nixon is a professional full-time writer of plays, short stories and novels.

He was runner up for the Bank of New Zealand Katherine Mansfield Writers' Award in 1999 and has twice won the Sunday Star Times Short Story Contest (1997, 1999). His collection of short stories, *Fish 'n' Chip Shop Song* was published in early 2006 by Random House, and immediately went to number one on the NZ best selling fiction list. It was short listed for the 2007 Commonwealth Writers' Prize, Best first book Southeast Asia and South Pacific Region. His stories have appeared in numerous anthologies, and over a dozen have been broadcast by Radio New Zealand.

Carl was the 2007 Ursula Bethell / Creative New Zealand Writer-in-Residence at Canterbury University, where he completed a novel, *Rocking Horse Road*. It was published by Random House in July this year to critical acclaim: "brilliant novel....Carl Nixon has fulfilled the promise he showed with last year's book of short stories, *Fish 'n' Chip Shop Song*. He is a major talent and this is a very good book. You should read it," – North and South.

His recent theatrical scripts include: an adaptation of Lloyd Jones novel *The Book of Fame*, and an adaptation of Nobel Prize winner J M Coetzee's novel *Disgrace for Auckland Theatre Company*. The Raft opened on the main stage at the Court Theatre in July this year, as part of the Christchurch Arts Festival and received rave reviews.

Carl is currently completing a new play, a comedy, commissioned for the Court Theatre, called, *The Birthday Boy*, and is working on his second novel.

Carl Nixon has a Masters in Religious Studies from the University of Canterbury. He lives in Christchurch with his wife and two small children.

My Beautiful Balloon

It is obvious to you that the chairs should be facing the ocean. You are standing on the crest of the last dune before the beach, looking out at the sand and the waves and the grey/blue Pacific. It is cold and you can see your breath in the air. You watch as a woman in a dark dress-suit and coat methodically places the chairs on to the sand.

She looks up the beach and sees you. She is probably wondering if you are the first to arrive. But no, your faded jeans and hoody belong to someone out for an early morning walk. The invited guests will be dressed formally, especially the Japanese dignitaries. The Mayor is also going to be there.

The woman turns away from you. A pile of collapsed chairs lie behind a black SUV that she has driven down on to the sand. The name of an event management company is printed on the side doors. She opens each chair with a practised flick of her arm and places it carefully on the sand. You watch until she has eventually constructed a tight crescent of thirty-three chairs – you count them – three deep, facing back towards a rostrum. The guests will be looking toward the dunes, which form a natural amphitheatre.

It is just past nine in the morning and the sky is cloudless. There is no wind and the scattered lupins near you on the dunes do not stir. Small waves fold in to the beach below. Above the ocean, like a pale hole in the sky, is the moon. It is only a day or two off being full although whether it is waxing or waning you do not know.

You look back at the woman and the chairs. The guests will be arriving soon. Surely, she must see that the chairs are all wrong.

There was an unusual mix of tourists and locals. More tourists was the norm but on that day it was half and half.

The two Japanese, Mr and Mrs Nishiura, were both short but he was even shorter than she was. His face belonged on a young boy, round and padded, although you guessed that he was in his early thirties. You remember her as being Asian-air-hostess beautiful.

The Nishiuras had been married the day before. They had been limousined around the city. It was their second wedding. The first had been in Japan with family, friends and work colleagues. Their exotic Kiwi wedding was really all about collecting photographs to show the people back home. The photograph that had been taken in front of the Cathedral was printed on the front page of the following day's newspaper. You remember carefully cutting the photograph out. You still have it in the top drawer of your desk. Mrs Nishiura looks like a frail unsmiling fairy in her hired wedding dress. Mr Nishiura stands next to her in black coat-tails and a silver bow tie.

There was also an American on the flight. His name was Leibowitz. He spoke to you in the van after you picked him up from outside The Plaza. It was still dark. He leaned over the front passenger seat and spoke in the slow, easy way that the older Americans sometimes have.

'After my wife passed I decided to strike out on my own and see the world.'

'Good for you.' You were driving slowly. Winter's first ice was on the road.

'This is my seventh country in six months.'

He seemed to you to be about seventy but looked to be in very good shape; lanky and straight-backed in the American tourist's uniform of a Red Sox cap, jeans, and a padded jacket done up against the pre-dawn chill.

That trip also had three locals – Peter Johnstone and his son, Michael, and Michael's friend. It was Michael's eleventh birthday and the flight was a present from his parents. They thought he would have a better time if he had a young friend to share the experience with. You often recall how, in the park, while the huge envelope was filling, Michael and his friend stood closer to the flames than any of the others. The van's headlights illuminated the scene and gave you enough light to work.

'Watch out,' you said. 'Last week a couple of boys lost their eyebrows. Pheew! Gone.'

Michael's friend was a pale redhead. He took a couple of steps back, but Michael stood his ground. 'You're just joking, aren't you,' he said.

'Sure.' And you winked.

The envelope was filling quickly. Everyone watched as it tried to rise, slowly staggering up, like a fat drunkard getting out of bed. It looked like it was going to be a good flight. The sky was clear of clouds and there was no wind yet. The punters seemed to you to be a nice easy group. Still, you were disappointed that you only had six bookings that morning. Another three or four would have been better. But it was mid-week, when the numbers were sometimes down, especially when the ski season was late starting, as it was that year. On the bright side though, Saturday morning's flight was already full.

You see Mrs Nishiura after the speeches have begun. You have moved closer but remain up in the dunes. She is sitting in the second row, behind the group from the Japanese consulate. Their unshuffling, shiny black shoes are juxtaposed against the grey sand. The Mayor is well into her speech. You are close enough now to hear the phrase 'bonds of sorrow.' Those three words drift down the beach, almost, but not quite, drowned out by the sound of the waves, and land at your feet.

From this distance Mrs Nishiura is not as beautiful as you remember her. In profile, her chin may be slightly sunken, her shoulders just that little hunched. These are things that you do not recall. Her profile is not visible in the wedding photo that you still look at so often, even though you try not to. You watch her as she sits with her back to the ocean and listens to the Mayor. It is a struggle to reconcile your frequently revisited memories of her with the woman you now see.

Reaching down, you break off a piece of the cascade of ice plant at your feet. It curves to a point like a soft claw. You have a memory of your mother telling you that the juice from these things helps heal cuts, although you don't remember if she ever applied any to your own childhood wounds. You squeeze hard, using your finger and thumb, and watch the plant crush and the clear liquid drip down. It makes small dark circles on the sand.

When you look back again Mrs Nishiura is staring directly at you. You look away. It is possible she has not recognised you; that she imagines she is looking at a stranger. Perhaps she is simply wondering why a man would stand still and apart for so long. You know that seven years have changed you. Back then you were a few months off forty, but clinging stubbornly to your youth. Now you are a few months off forty-seven, recently divorced from your long-suffering wife, and between jobs. You have enough insight left to be aware that you now look older than your years.

You thrust your hands into the deep pockets of your hoody and start to slidewalk down the face of the dune. When you get to the beach you keep going towards the ocean, through the fringe of driftwood that marks the high-tide, until you are standing at the very edge of the water. Even though there is still no wind, the waves have picked up since you arrived, and roll in with a loud hiss.

When you look up the beach Mrs Nishiura has her back to you and is again listening to the Mayor.

The sun was just cracking the curve of the eastern horizon as you rose above the tops of the plane trees at the edge of the park. At two hundred metres you began your patter. My Beautiful Balloon Limited was one of the few commercial operations in the world lucky enough to take off from the centre of a city. You pointed out the cathedral, of course, and the botanical gardens, the Arts Centre and the new gallery with its walls of glass. The first cars were heading in to the city from the suburbs, their headlights still on.

'Where's he going now?' asked Mr Leibowitz. He pointed over the edge of the basket to where Grant was driving the van out of the park. The van's roof was a white rectangle in the half-light.

'He's going to follow us and pick us up when we land.'

'Is there some type of landing pad?' asked Mr Johnstone. Michael and his friend were listening intently.

'No. It's impossible to say precisely where we'll come down. Because we're dependent on the wind to steer, no two flights are exactly the same.'

Johnstone and Leibowitz nodded and went back to taking photographs. The Nishiuras had their heads close together and were speaking to each other in hushed voices. You were unsure how much English they had. Like most Japanese, and you had met a lot, they'd probably studied it at school for years but didn't speak more than a phrase or two.

Michael and his friend moved from one side of the basket to the other, craning their necks to see over the side. You didn't mind. They weren't annoying anyone and there was plenty of room, the basket could take up to eleven.

Only Michael's father seemed nervous. 'You OK, Peter?' you asked. There was nearly always a nervous one.

'Fine, fine, yeah, fine. Well, I've never liked heights that much.' He smiled a crooked smile.

'Don't worry. Statistically speaking this is safer than driving your car to work.'

The bright blue and yellow panels of the balloon were shining in the clear morning light. You turned the valve above your

head. Burning propane roared up the throat of the balloon lifting you all higher and higher.

'Did you check the weather forecast?'

The Air Accidents Inspector was named Morse: Inspector Morse. You would have found that funny under different circumstances. It was the day after, and the inspector was perched on a tall stool next to your hospital bed. You still remember moving your feet around beneath the heavy white sheets, making hills and valleys. That morning's newspaper lay on the metal side table. Your father had brought the paper in earlier during his stoic visit.

Mr and Mrs Nishiura stared up at you from the front page. You had already asked a nurse to bring you some scissors so that you could cut the photograph out.

'Of course I checked.'

He nodded and made a note on the form stuck to the clipboard that he was holding. 'Do you remember what the forecast said?'

'A southerly front was due, but not until midday.'

He nodded again. 'And you didn't consider cancelling the flight?'

'We took off at seven-thirty and were supposed to be on the ground again by nine. There shouldn't have been a problem.'

'I spoke to the driver of your chase vehicle, Mr Turnbull.'

'Grant.'

'Yes. He doesn't remember if you launched a pibal to check the upper wind currents. Did you?'

He asked the question casually, as though there was nothing of significance hanging on the answer, as though he was asking if you had had a cup of coffee with your breakfast that morning. You noticed that his nose was large and fleshy but that his eyes were a very clear blue.

'I think I did,' is what you replied. Morse raised an eyebrow. 'Yes. I'm sure I did.'

Your flights generally caught the easterly flows, which carried the balloon over the western suburbs and into the flat farmland beyond, though sometimes there were southerly or south-westerly currents such as the one you had entered. They tended to be stronger air streams than the easterlies, but well within the balloon's tolerance and your ability as a pilot to handle.

You radioed Grant in the van and told him what had happened. You said that you would land in the north-east of the city, closer to the coast, probably in the grounds of the old Commonwealth Games stadium, QE2. You had landed there dozens of times over the three years since you co-founded the company. Grant was unconcerned by the change in plan. He told you he was going to the McDonald's drive-through to get himself some breakfast.

'Just another day at the office,' he said.

'No worries.'

But fifteen minutes later the wind had picked up. There was some dark cumulus coming up over the hills to the south that you didn't like the look of. You pulled on the control line that opened the vent at the top of the envelope and let out some air. The balloon dropped a hundred metres but you could not find a new current. The roads and houses and back gardens were beginning to go by quickly.

You must have looked worried because Mr Leibowitz sidled over to you again. The two boys were excited by the increase

in speed. Leibowitz spoke quietly so that the boys didn't hear.

'Is everything all right, Chief?'

'Yes, fine. We might have to bring her down a bit early though, because of this wind.'

'It doesn't feel that windy.'

'We're moving along with it so you don't feel it the same as if we were standing still.'

The American nodded sagely. 'I get it. But everything's AOK, right?'

'Just dandy,' you said in your best cowboy drawl.

You remember that he grinned and winked. He moved over, as if to say, 'I'll leave you to it', and said something to the Nishiuras that you didn't catch. They both smiled, and Mr Nishiura said. 'We are hoping.'

You radioed Grant back and told him that you were still thinking you would be able to put down in the grounds of the Commonwealth Games stadium.

Grant had obviously seen the clouds in the south and he sounded tense. 'You sure? You could maybe try for Linwood Park? It's closer.'

'No, the power lines make it too difficult in a wind like this. I don't want to risk it.'

'Difficult, but not impossible.' That's what Morse had said to you in the hospital.

'I thought it was safer to try for QE2. It was a judgement call.'

He nodded. 'And how long before you realised that you weren't going to be able to land there after all?'

'About ten minutes. The storm front came through and we got pushed north-east, towards the coast. It was blowing maybe thirty knots.'

'The meteorological service recorded gusts of up to forty-five.'

'I guess they would know.'

A young nurse went by in the corridor and looked in curiously through the partially open door. Maybe she recognised you from page two of that morning's paper. Your photo was there, taken from the company's brochure, right next to a shot of a balloon in flight – though not one of yours.

Morse flicked over a few pages on his clipboard until he found what he was looking for. 'Am I right in thinking that you and the other two partners were in negotiations to sell My Beautiful Balloon Limited?'

You frowned. 'Yes.'

'And for the last six months you've been scheduling extra flights so that the company looked profitable.'

'It was profitable.'

'More profitable, I should say.'

'Yes, that's true.'

'So it wouldn't have been in your interests to cancel any flights.' He leaned forward over your bed so that he was almost above you, looking down.

You were no longer pretending that everything was all right. The southerly front had come through hard and fast. It

brought a sharp drop in temperature and it had begun to rain. The six passengers huddled together near the middle of the basket. No one spoke. They were all watching you and you were watching the altimeter. The houses and the roads flashed by eighty metres beneath you.

'It's OK, everyone. Everything's going to be fine.' You tried to sound like you meant it.

Mr and Mrs Nishiura both blinked slowly. His boyish face was now a mask of bewilderment. She looked very small, diminished by the danger. Michael's father had pulled his son towards him so that the boy was standing with his back against his father's chest. His dad's arms were clasped around him. Michael's friend stood next to them and raised his fist to his mouth and bit his knuckles. He began to cry, but silently.

'Have you ever been in this situation before?' Peter Johnstone asked. His voice was high and shaky, mainly, you imagined, because he was with his son and his son's friend.

'Sure, a few times.'

Actually you had only been caught in a wind this strong once before. It had been years ago, in Australia, before you had your licence, and even then it was in a much smaller balloon and over farmland, not rooftops and power lines. The guy who had taken you up had broken an arm in two places during the landing.

You were over the coastal suburbs now and low enough to make out a woman hurriedly pulling in her washing from the clothes line. She looked up as the balloon passed. You were low enough to see her mouth open wide in surprise, and the white of her teeth. Then she was gone.

'What's the plan, Chief?' A wry smile pulled at the corners of Mr Leibowitz's mouth. You were grateful to him.

'I'm going to put it down on the beach.'

You are still looking out at the sea when Mrs Nishiura comes and stands next to you.

'The weather is beautiful today,' she says. She speaks the words slowly as if they have been memorised from a textbook. Over her shoulder you see that the commemoration ceremony is finished. The Mayor and the group from the consulate have disappeared back over the dunes. The reporters and other guests have broken into small groups and are scattering along the beach, heading back to their cars. The woman in the suit is beginning to pack away the chairs.

'I have never heard you speak English. You speak very well.' You say it because you can think of nothing else to say to her, and because it is close to being true.

She smiles and shakes her head. 'I go to lessons in Sapporo. My teacher is also Kiwi. Called Jo.'

You nod and look back out to sea. She turns her head and follows your gaze. The balloon, having overshot the beach, crashed a hundred and fifty metres out from where you are now standing. In his official report, Morse estimated that you were travelling at between thirty and thirty-five kilometres an hour when the basket hit the water.

Again you hear the sound of the wicker snapping and remember the feeling of the basket lurching violently sideways, pulled by the partially inflated envelope. Winter's shockingly cold sea water surged in. Screaming. Shouts. Foaming water. Crying. When everything settled down a little, you saw that Mr Leibowitz had a streaming gash over his eye, but that he was helping Michael's friend hang on to the mostly submerged basket, which sloshed up and down in the large swell. There were tangled ropes everywhere. It was dim and raining and the sea was choppy, although you were, thank God, out beyond the big breakers. You could also see Johnstone and his son. They were clinging to the far side of the basket from where you were. You could hear a woman crying but did not know where the noise was coming from. There was blood in the water around you and it took you a long time, or what seemed to be a long time, to work out that it was yours.

Finally, two terrified surfers were there. They were shouting and one of them was pulling you onto her board. You felt her slick black wetsuit against your face. She said something about your leg and it was then that you saw the rip in your trousers and the exposed meat beneath, but there still wasn't any pain. Lying over the rough fibreglass board you could still hear a woman crying. You couldn't imagine who it was. That is the last thing that you remember before the ambulance.

'Are you still ... pilot?' Mrs Nishiura asks and looks up at the moon.

'No. I've had a lot of jobs lately. For a while I sold real estate.' She does not understand, and you explain the job to her in simple words.

She smiles and nods. 'We have in Japan also.'

'What do you do?' you ask.

'I marry again. My husband is teacher. I have two children and look after.'

You have not really looked at her since she approached you. Now you turn to her. She is not a frail fairy, and she is not tragic, as you have always imagined her to be. She is not even particularly beautiful. Here on the beach, free from the amber of your memory, she is just a normal-looking Japanese woman with passable English, who is standing on the edge of the ocean. She is simply a woman who was once unlucky enough to have married a man who never learned to swim.

It is suddenly clear to you that her life has moved on in the last seven years. She is not even Mrs Nishiura any more. You do not even know her name. You turn away and, although it is not that cold, you begin to shake uncontrollably. You push your hands deep into your pockets and hope that she will not notice. Neither of you speak for a long time.

'The chairs,' you say, at last. 'They should have been facing the ocean.'

'Yes. I think so too.'

She turns quickly and walks back up the beach. For a moment you think that she is leaving, that she is tired of you. You don't blame her. But then you see that she has stopped up by the SUV and is speaking to the woman whose job it now is to put away the chairs.

When she begins to walk back towards you she is carrying three folded chairs, which she holds cradled over her arm. She is small, and carrying the chairs on the sand is a struggle. You walk up the beach to meet her and help carry two of the chairs back to where you had both been standing.

You watch as she unfolds each chair and places it carefully, until there is a perfect line of chairs a short distance beyond where the waves push up the beach, darkening the sand. She sits on one end of the short row. You hesitate, and then you join her. Between you is an empty chair. Above the ocean the pale moon is low in the sky. You sit like that for a long time, contemplating the sea, and the sky, and everything in between.