

COMMUTING

In the light coming through the bus window, a line of golden hairs marches up from her jaw and disappears into her smooth brown hair. I see her every day, this pakeha sheila. She gets off and on the same bus as me like clockwork. Well, *she's* like clockwork, but sometimes I don't get the bus home if I go to the pub with the blokes from work.

I call her Mary, but I don't really know what her name is. She looks like a Mary, fortyish, wears a lot of grey and black. She's got a look about her, not tired exactly, but as if she's done everything, and I mean *everything*, at least twice. I like that sort of look. None of the sheilas I know look like that because they're my age, twenty. Thing is, all of them *have* done everything, at least a hundred and twenty-five times – yeah, sometimes with me – but they've still got faces like unbaked bread.

Mary always sits in the same seat. I'm usually wearing my leather jacket, so she probably thinks I'm just some Maori punk who sits at the back of the bus. Today she's poking around in her kete, pulls out some seed packets and starts reading the backs of them. When we get to her stop, she gets flustered, grabs all her stuff and bolts off the bus. Ankles that could break your heart, real tiny with little hollows each side. I move up and into her seat.

I slide across next to the window because I like to sit where she's been, feeling her warmth. My foot hits something. I reach down, groping. It's a bag, one of those small, flat jobs without handles. I slide it up my leg and inside my jacket, close my eyes, and rest my head on the window till my stop comes around.

I run back to the house with the little bag burning against my side. Val's sheila, Haki, is sitting in front of the TV with her fat puku. She's just about due to pop with Val's kid, sitting around eating, waiting for Val to get home to run around after her.

“Yo, Matiu, how you doin', bro?” she asks me. This sheila does nothing but watch American TV.

“I'm had it,” I told her, grabbing a Speights from the fridge. “I'm gunna have a sleep, Haki.”

“Ho, man, I'm here all day and now you're gunna bugger off and leave me by meself again.” Haki sticks her lower lip out. She's lonely, so usually I sit down and talk to her for a while, but tonight I shake my head and go into my room with my beer, shutting the door.

The handbag's still stuck in my keke, a bit sweaty. I wipe it on my Indian bedspread and then let it lie there. I try to imagine Mary on the bedspread too, but I can only see her lying there in her raincoat, holding her Farmer's bag. Not too sexy.

I up-end the bag onto the bed. A red plastic comb falls out, a little bit dirty, but not as bad as mine. I like that. It shows she's not concerned about unimportant things, but she's not really filthy either. There's a lipstick and a few square inches of loo paper with a lipstick kiss on it. I lift it up and put my lips over the outline of hers.

I try the lipstick on the back of my hand. It's like my aunty wears. I look over at the photo next to my bed of Mum and Huriana and Aunty Tottie sitting on the verandah weaving kete. Mum's leaning across, showing Huriana how to do something.

The kete are how Mum earned the money for me to go away to Tip, get the best education a Maori boy could have, or so she said. Now it's how she and Huriana make a living. Mum weaves, and Huriana gathers the flax, berries, and plants to weave and dye the kete. Huriana also drives to Wellington, Rotorua, and Auckland every month to deliver the kete to the fancy hotels and shops that sell "the real thing" to rich tourists who want to be able to skite that they've got genuine Maori artifacts made by someone whose work is in museums. Huriana's got little pamphlets printed up with a picture of Mum, information about where her weaving has been exhibited, and tips on how to tell a good kete from a bad one.

Not that it's much of a living since Hemi and Paul came back home. My teeth clamp together as I remember Huri's voice on the phone. "Hemi tore through the house, Matiu, pulling all the drawers out and throwing Mum's clothes on the floor. When he found the money under her mattress, he called her a stupid old cow and left."

I turn back to the pile of stuff on the bed. There's a coin purse containing four dollars twenty, and a bus pass – oh, shit, she'll be pissed off about that. Maybe I can go and sit next to her tomorrow, and give her the bag. Tell her I found it on the floor. We'll get talking, and maybe she'll tell me about her garden. Women her age like to talk about their gardens.

There's still a little pile of stuff on the bedspread. A nail file, and a blue plastic case, like two cigars stuck together. I know what that is – a Tampax case. Huri has a pink one like that.

I pick up a torn strip of shiny purple paper, part of a Violet Crumble wrapper. I picture Mary, sitting at a desk somewhere, slipping her hand into her drawer and breaking off a piece to keep her going till dinner, sucking the chocolate off the honeycomb stuff. Sweet.

A dark red plastic folder is next. Slowly I open it. On the left is a faded photo of two little kids sitting on Santa's knee. On the right is a picture of maybe the same kids, a girl about seventeen and a boy about fifteen, standing together on a lawn, laughing fit to bust. The girl's got glasses, and the boy's got long hair and a fluffy upper lip. I pull the photo out and look at the back of it. No date or time.

Now there's nothing left but a driver's licence. I turn it over. Estelle Matthews – shit, she's already near enough got my name! That's definitely a sign. But she's definitely not an Estelle. That just doesn't fit, man. I can't figure out if the address is the state flats near the footy field or not. And there's her date of birth – she's forty-two.

I hear the door bang and voices in the sitting room. I quickly shove all the stuff back into the little bag and push it under my pillow. By the time Val opens my door, I'm sitting on the edge of my bed, unlacing my Doc Martens.

“Hey, man, what you doing?” Val comes in and plonks himself down on the spare bed. I stick my foot out toward him, and he yanks my boots off, one after the other.

“Nothing, man. Just having a quiet beer.”

“Haki's on my back for not coming straight home.”

“Jeeze, man, who can blame her? When's she gunna pop, anyhow?”

“Only two weeks, give or take,” Val says. “Shit, what are we gunna do with this baby, man? Think I'm gunna have to take her up home, leave her up there for a while.”

“Shit, how 's Haki gunna handle Kaikohe and those big scary sisters of yours, man?”

“Better than here, with everybody pissed all weekend, and the kid screaming, and me and Haki not getting any sleep. Mum will take care of them, and soon as I save some money I'll go back. I'm sick of it here,

anyhow. Haki's a pain in the neck right now, but she's okay when she isn't big as a flyblown sheep." He stretches out and puts his hands behind his head. "How's your job going, man?"

"Stinks," I tell him. "I hate sitting humped over a fucking computer all day."

"You been saying that for two years. What you gunna do about it?"

I shrug. "Dunno." I can hear whimpering coming through the door. "Listen, man, you better go out and spend some time with her. I can hear her bawling out there."

"Oh, shit!" Val sits up and heaves himself off the bed. "I'll make us a feed. That oughta shut her up."

"You get her up and take her for a walk," I told him. "Her fucking legs 'll drop off if she doesn't get some exercise. I'll make us a feed."

That night I dream my sister is standing on the front verandah of our house, holding Mary's purse in her hand. "Hemi found it," she says. "He took all the money out of it." She holds it out to me, and when I look inside I see Haki's baby in there, banging its little fists against the sides and bawling.

I wake up in a sweat and get up for a pee. As I pass Val's room I hear his voice, singing quietly. "I love you, you bastard," I hear Haki say, and then they both laugh.

Next morning I make myself scrambled eggs before the others get up. I can hear Tom and George snoring in their rooms, and Val and Haki talking quietly. I tap on the door. "You fellas want some coffee?"

"Too right," Haki calls out. "And bring me two wine biscuits, Matiu." Haki still pukes in the mornings if she gets up before she gets something in her belly.

Mary gets into the bus after me, as usual, and pays with small change, counting it out. Is she broke, I wonder? She sits looking out the window all the way to town, and I don't make a move. Gutless, as usual.

In the office I sit down at my desk, in a room full of desks, with windows high in the walls. I can see clouds floating by, but it might as well be another universe up there. I turn over to a new photo on the calendar, looking at the pungas and kauris and cool green shadows. Then I look down at the scarred wood of my desk and the gray plastic of my monitor and hard drive. I boot up as Karen flounces by and dumps a load of work orders into my in-tray. Two more days' work before the weekend.

That night I go out when it's dark, carrying the bag in my keke again. I don't have a plan but maybe I'll knock on Mary's door, tell her I found it in the bus. The address is the state flats, like I thought. I figure she lives on the ground floor, seeing she bought seeds to plant in the garden. I put my eye to a crack between the boards of the

front fence. I catch my breath. Through the french doors I see Mary in an armchair in the living room, head back, stretched out with one leg over the other and the top ankle waving around in time with some old bloke singing – maybe it's Frank Sinatra, stuffed if I know, I can barely hear it. She's got on a pair of white shorts and a blue shirt, and is holding a wineglass. Blood pounds in my chest and head.

I move around a bit, trying to see the rest of the room. There are big paintings on the walls, with patches, speckles and black whirly lines all over them. And there are books everywhere – in bookcases, stacked on tables, standing in piles on the floor.

Mary's stopped swinging her foot. She drops the glass onto the carpet, uncrosses her legs and leans forward, putting her face in her hands. A car horn blares right behind me, scaring the shit out of me, and I jump away from the fence and belt off down the road towards home, sweating all over the little bag. My panic lasts until I'm inside, safely shut in my room. I throw the bag onto a chair and myself onto the bed, heart pounding.

What was she crying about? Someone like her, who's got everything. A family, a job, her own place. Hell, she's even got me, her own personal Peeping Tom. I pull up the covers and toss and turn, trying to get off to sleep, seeing the wineglass on the carpet and Mary leaning forward with her face in her hands.

After a couple of hours I go out and get a beer out of the fridge. I hear the door of Haki and Val's room open, and Val comes out pulling on a tee-shirt. "Haki's water's broken, man. You think we should wait till morning or go to the hospital now?"

I knock the top off the beer bottle on the edge of the bench. "Shit, go now. No point in taking any chances. I'll come if you want. I can't sleep anyhow, too muggy." Better than lying around here, feeling like shit.

Val shakes his head. "No, man, this is between Haki and me. You call us a taxi, okay? We gotta get her stuff together."

Typical Haki, nothing packed. When the taxi comes, she comes out holding onto Val's arm, scared shitless. I give her a hug. "You'll be fine, little Mummy. In a few hours you fellas'll have a little baby of your own." I punch Val on the arm. "Make sure you call me, man, I'll be awake."

After they leave, I look around the kitchen. Beer bottles and dirty dishes everywhere. Greasy newspapers from fish and chips overflowing out of the rubbish bin onto the floor. I cart the rubbish out into the yard where there's not a tree, a plant, or a blade of grass. The house sits on a concrete slab, and behind that there's a gravel patch where George and Tom park their cars. When I finish the dishes, I sit for a couple of hours waiting for Val to call. Finally I give up, and get in the shower. When I come out, the phone is ringing.

“We got a girl, Matiu, a little perfect thing with her face all scrunched up.”

“Brilliant, man. How's Haki doing?”

“Shit, man, it was awful! The breathing and all that shit went right out the window. Haki screamed her head off. I puked when they cut her – man, it was ugly!” Then he starts laughing and I laugh with him.

“So tell me about the baby, man.”

“She's really little, dunno why Haki had such a big puku. We're gunna call her Lucy, after Haki's mum. She's already sucking. Haki's so pleased with herself you'd think she'd had fucking triplets.”

So Haki's got her kid, and Val's got Haki. What have I got? I spend the night staring at the lights from the cars on the road flashing across the ceiling.

In the morning, I pack some clothes into a kitbag. In the bus, right before Mary's stop, I sit down in her seat and drop the little bag onto the floor, right where she'll either kick it or see it when she slides into the seat. Then I move to the back of the bus.

As the bus slows at her stop I have this image of Mary getting on the bus, striding up to the back and asking me what I thought I was doing, spying on her. Then she gets on, wearing her shabby raincoat, counting out change for the driver just like she did yesterday. She slides into her seat, and goes still for a moment. Then she leans to the side, and looks down. She goes lower, picking up the bag and sits up again. I see her looking down into her lap, thinking. Then she turns and looks around the bus. I shrink down, pulling my collar up. After a minute or two, I sneak another look. She's got her head down again, looking through the stuff in the bag.

When Mary gets off, instead of walking off with her long stride like she usually does, she stands and looks into the bus. She sweeps her gaze down the row of seats as the bus takes off and her gaze catches on mine. I get a stab

in the gut like a sliver of ice and I quickly shut my eyes and keep them shut for the next few stops. When I open them, we're way past my office and close to the bus depot. I get off and collapse onto the sill of a shop window. I feel like a fantail is flapping around inside me.

With horns blaring all around me, I look down at the cigarette butts and McDonald's bags lying on the footpath and up at the people rushing by on their way to work, all of them with preoccupied faces and thin, hurrying bodies. They won't even miss me at work till after smoko time, maybe not even till Monday. After a few minutes I take off my jacket, shoulder my bag, and cross the street to the bus station.

As the bus pulls out I lean my head on the window and close my eyes. The tires on the road are saying Mary, Mary, over and over, but as I fade off to sleep I feel myself smiling as I leave her name behind me, part of the city, the job, and the dream that never was.