

White Elephant

The northern wind yowled through the valley. For three days sleep was impossible – wind whined through gaps in windows and people lay in bed imagining their roof peeled back by the northwester’s raging fingers. In the morning they woke with dark-ringed eyes. Feeling raw, they snapped at each other during breakfast, growled at their kids. And later when they flocked to the twilight school gala, the wind tormented them further – lifted skirts, swept aside comb-overs, blew grit into mouths, into hair, into glowering eyes.

Hēni slept peacefully. When the wind rattled her corrugated roof it lulled the old woman into dreams, and beyond dreams, deep into nothingness. In the afternoon when she finally woke, she rose with unusual buoyancy. The cloud of black starlings that always flew inside her head had gone, for now.

She reread the flyer that arrived in her mailbox the previous week, shucked off her threadbare nightie and slid on a green poly-cotton frock, pulled on her gumboots and a possum-skin coat her Papa made a lifetime ago. While looking in the lopsided hallway mirror, she donned a chipped pearl necklace, a present from a small boy who had once saved and saved his milk delivery money. She stood back, her smile revealing tea-stained teeth.

She petted the Jackalope that guarded the house, before slamming the salt-streaked door behind her. She whistled for her mutt and he bounded from under the house, swathed in cobwebs. Her bungalow was perched on crumbling rock at the edge of a bay. Large waves rolled in like silken sheets. Dolphins sometimes swam there and, once, a barnacled whale. But it was a deceptive place where hidden undercurrents sucked and swallowed.

Walking briskly up the hill towards the school, she leaned against the wind, pulling along her green vinyl trolley. Her mutt dawdled, cocked his leg against mailboxes, chased cats up moss-covered paths and shuddered with the effort of generating a turd, garnish for a freshly mown lawn. Hēni’s lips moved as she walked, her low mutterings accompanying the tune the wind played in the electrical wires above, a mournful theremin.

On the surrounding hills, the bush rippled, each gusty breath exposing the silver bellies of shivering leaves. Stands of manuka creaked and cowered, shedding bark chips and flowers like fragrant confetti. Low clouds were bullied towards the southern coast where the Cook Strait ferry heaved on white caps and waterspouts were conjured.

Nestled in a stand of pohutakawa, sat the old wooden school building, flanked by newer prefabs. At the school gates Hēni stopped and looked around with pukana eyes. She opened her mouth wide, let the rushing air expand her cheeks. Then with a sly smile she snapped her lips closed and took a great gulp. She held her breath. Her hair rose in greasy tendrils towards the pewter sky. The wind caressed her face. She exhaled and giggled.



Kelly Joseph

“I’m not a natural storyteller, but I do enjoy conjuring up settings, scenarios and characters – especially characters. Human nature is so weird and fascinating. I also like the way both reading and writing stories can help me see the world differently.”

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The adults heading to the gala tried not to stare at the apparition. Hēni the local bag lady. Mad but harmless they whispered, gripping their kids' hands tighter. They had heard the rumours about the old woman – tales of dog food consumption, hoards of junk, forts of yellowing newspapers and musty books, a mountain of rubbish bags filling the back garden and an inherited collection of creepy stuffed animals. And then there was the disappearance of her son. Some said she went funny after that. Others said she was born with strangeness, that taxidermy chemicals had leached into her Mama's blood and were absorbed by baby Hēni in the womb.

The kids at the gala gawked at Hēni openly. The older ones called her Stinky Seawitch because she smelt like piss and brine and because, after a king tide, she prowled the beach lifting bull kelp with a stick, poked around rock pools, searching for who knows what, chanting sad, watery songs to herself. But sometimes the younger ones offered gifts, an oblation of sorts. With their hearts thumpity thumping in their chests, they left at her gate knotted driftwood, weightless balls of pumice, baby paua shells and other sea treasure. Sometimes they gave her wandering mutt a bite from their sandwich when he visited the school at lunchtimes. In return, Hēni made small sculptures on the front lawn from their presents and from pieces of her own junk. Once she fashioned a fleet of tiny ships from wood, shell, stone and china shards from broken teacups. She let them sail upon the high grass, amongst the dandelions. The younger ones peeped over her rotting punga fence to admire them. See, they said. Magic.

Hēni felt those same small eyes on her as she ambled towards the school office. She pinched the heads off two marigolds growing in a garden, popped them casually in her maw. She winked at a small girl sitting nearby. "Mmmm, orange, she said." The girl's eyes and mouth sprung open, before her mother yanked the child away. Hēni shrugged and munched as she walked on. She passed a cake sale, plant stall and the quick-fire raffle. She stopped to admire the children's craft table, with painted pet rocks and swans made from soap, facecloths and pipe cleaners. The tombola tent billowed dangerously and two surly teenage boys were told to hold down its flapping corners. She made her way towards the school field where the mini-train and talent stage were set up. Nearby lay a deflated bouncy castle, cast aside by worried parents who imagined it flying to

Blenheim on air currents. Little ones hyped up on fizzy and lollies darted around the field in a blur, happy to be with their friends. Hēni drank in the sights and smells. She left her mutt to beg at the smoking sausage sizzle and walked on through the school.

When she arrived outside the hall a crowd was already assembled. A sign was taped next to the glass doors. Two words cut crudely from coloured paper with snips, glued onto card and embellished with glitter. White Elephant. Hēni crooned softly, craned her wattled neck hoping to get a glimpse of the goods laid out on tables inside. People were pressed against the doors obscuring the view. Mainly old biddies from the church with their pointy elbows ready to nudge competition out of the way and local second-hand dealers with thin pursed lips and shifty eyes. More people were lining up behind her. She leaned over to look at another punter's watch. Four minutes to go. The owner of the watch snapped his head towards her, eyed her suspiciously. He was Maori, thirties with a fleshy puku, a beard and a shaved head. His gaze softened and he grinned at her. Hēni recognized those large brown eyes. She looked away. Fingered her pearls.

"Mrs. Knight?"

"Mmm," said Hēni.

"Don't know if you remember me..."

Hēni looked again into those dark eyes and thought, course I remember. Little Matty. Sweet fatty. Big family, no money. Her gaze fell like a wounded bird to the ground.

"Nah, sorry, dear. I don't."

"Matthew Kopu. I used to hang out with your son, Jo. Years ago. Before I was sent off to live with my nana."

Hēni grunted a small acknowledgment, felt her good mood trickling away. He bent towards her to give a peck on the cheek. The old woman stiffened and leaned away so only his whiskers brushed her face. Wiry whiskers like Papa's. And hungry breath. Matty, always a ravenous boy.

"Yeah, I remember those neat animals you had."

Hēni rocked a little on the balls of her feet. Scratched at her arm.

"You were always good to me. Let me stay over. Fed me. Man, I remember your mutton-bird and watercress boil-ups. Mussel fritters. And creamed paua."

He smacked his lips and his eyes unfocused, remembering those rich treats.

"I just moved back. Me and my missus. We've got a son. Think he's wandering around

here somewhere. Probably in search of kai. Takes after me, eh.”

He let out a sharp snort. A few people looked their way. He rubbed his smooth pate self-consciously and moved closer to her. Hēni looked up at the sky, smelt ozone. Thought she could see the wind currents up there swirling and changing. Threatening to bring back the cloud of birds to rush and dive in her mind. Her fingers reached again for the pearls. She knew what was coming.

“So where’s Jo these days?”

She stepped away from Matthew then, with his bovine eyes and his questions and his hungry breath. Felt a familiar lightness in her head, a spreading ache in her chest. The school bell clanged suddenly, the doors opened and people surged forward, towards the bargains. Gripping her trolley, Hēni let herself be taken by the crushing tide and soon lost sight of him.

She found herself in the corner of the hall near the stage. Leaning against an old exercise bike, she looked around for Matthew, let out a long sigh when she couldn’t see him.

“Silly silly you,” she muttered. “Forget it Hēni Penny. Forget him.”

She plucked at black, feathery thoughts trying to recall the reason why she came there. Ah, yep yep, teacups. She needed more teacups. Hers were all smashed, always slipped from shaky hand to wooden floor.

She squeezed herself into a spot at the nearest table. People wrinkled their noses at the strange odours that were rising from under her possum coat. The hall became stuffy with cramped bodies and the hot longing for bargains. On the table there was a soda stream with a rusty gas canister. An assortment of tupperware. Twisty candlestick holders. Nothing Hēni wanted. Unable to move along because people were squashing themselves against the tables, she bent over with a groan, to see what was in the boxes under the table.

Nested inside a large cardboard box of cake tins and frying pans was a smaller box. Hēni pulled it above the table. Inside were two heavy mugs, one a rich brown and the other an emerald green. They were both moulded in the shape of a Tiki face, with whātero and fierce almond eyes. Hēni crooned to herself, delighted. They were the same ones Mama had in her china cabinet when she was small.

She placed them carefully back in the box and closed the lid. But a man beside her had seen the mugs and looked at the box with small, coveting eyes. He had a long neck and slicked-back hair – he was a mix of man and mustelid.

“Wharetana, those,” he said, licking his lips with a tiny pink tongue. “Worth a few bob.”

“Mmm,” said Hēni.

“I’ll buy them off you.”

Hēni shook her head.

“Look, I’ll give you a fair price,” he said, his voice becoming reedy.

“Nup, keeping these for meself.”

The man looked around with those feral eyes to see if anyone was watching. Then suddenly his paws were on the box, trying to tug it from her hands. Hēni had a good purchase on it, pulled the box towards her chest. No one was going to get her Mama’s mugs.

“Come on, you crazy cow. You don’t need them,” he said.

He yanked the box. As he lifted it away, one of his digits hooked on Hēni’s pearls. The beads were torn from her neck. Cream orbs bounced and scattered on the wooden floor, rolled under the table, under boxes and between feet. Low guttural noises burst from Hēni’s mouth. The Mustelid slunk into the crowd with the box under his arm.

She searched around her for friendly eyes, but there were only backs bent over tables. A tremble took hold of her hands and soon her whole body shook. The bird cloud gathered in her mind.

HĒNI IS TEN. Her Mama lies in an open coffin in the sitting room. She is still pretty, thinks Hēni. Her big brown Aunties have come to take her body back to the family urupa. Papa, a ginger-bearded Pom, is throwing a fit, begs them not to take her. When they do, he uses a broom handle to smash Mama’s cabinet with her crockery inside, and the paper nautilus, the gull feathers and small blobs of ambergris she collected at the beach as a child. Then he storms into his workshop and smashes his own vials of metallic dust, his fossils and rocks, his kauri gum, his bell jars, his glass eyes, his artificial teeth and beaks, and his clay forms waiting for their skin. Finally, he rips apart his best stuffed specimens.

Later, when he is calm, he sews them back together, but not as they were. He makes a menagerie of hybrids—mermaids, skvaders, griffins and creatures invented from his own madness. They become Hēni’s friends because she isn’t allowed real friends now. She loves the creatures, especially the Jackalope. She dresses them in her clothes, reads them stories and drinks tea with them, but what she really wants is a live dog. These are lonely days.

Later, her Papa becomes more and more like the animal skins he tans. A husk of a man with desiccated lips and parchment skin. She believes his heart is stuffed with sawdust. He hardly ever takes baths, or drinks water or tea. But he will drink a clear liquid from a bottle that he keeps in his workshop. His breath is acerbic and so are his moods. Inside him is a desert with furious, hot winds.

Later, when the Aunties come back for Hēni, to take her to their warm homes brimming with kids and life, Papa shows them his loaded rifle. When they leave empty-handed, he takes her to the special corner of the small farm where she sometimes talks to the elements, because the wind and rain and sunlight are Hēni's friends, too. It is dusk, and starlings chirp loudly as they flock above the poplars in a great dark cloud. She is mesmerised by the way they collect in the sky, how they undulate like water, how they tumble as one fluttering creature. Her father aims the rifle skyward. Black feathers and broken bodies fall to the ground. He says between shots, "You better not leave me, Hēni Penny."

Later, when she is older, braver, she does run away from his obsidian rage. Moves beside the sea with its breezes and mists, where she can watch the weather roll in. She finds a man who loves her, but he has his own shadows and flinty moods. He doesn't wait around to meet his son. When Joseph is born with his smiling heart, she feels she has done something right, that she has made magic.

And much later, the Aunties ring her up. "Your Papa shot himself, they say. Go back, sort out his estate." Grief and guilt nibble at the edges of her heart. She becomes the keeper of the animals. She brings her old friends home to meet Joseph. He loves them, too.

WINGS WERE FLUTTERING in her head. She bent down intending to scabble on the ground for the pearls, but her head felt light and her legs threatened to crumple under her. She grunted and growled at herself. Then she noticed a little one watching her. He moved towards the protection of his mother's legs. Hēni shut her eyes, covered them with her hands. She didn't want to see his frightened gaze.

"Mrs Knight? Hēni? You all right?"

She lowered her hands and blinked. Warm brown eyes filled her vision.

Matthew picked up her green trolley and led her away from the crowd, out a side door and down a ramp. It was almost dark outside and

there was an eerie hush. The wind had finally moved on.

Her mutt was waiting for her. He licked her hand, as she shambled past him. Matthew guided Hēni to a low brick wall and she flopped down. She gulped in the cool air, felt a little better. The sea sighed in the distance. The clouds had gone and in their place a crescent moon sat like a yellow grin on the horizon. The sky itself was the blue of Lapis and Egyptian kings, the blue of deep watery graves.

"He's gone," she said, barely a whisper.

"Who?" Matthew asked.

"Joseph."

"Where?"

"He went for a swim. Never came back," she said. "I look for him sometimes but Tangaroa won't give him back to me." Her hands reached to her bare throat, but the pearls were still gone.

"I tried to let him be a bit wild. Let him make friends. He was lonely after you left," she said. "Other kids stayed away. Teased him about me. It was 'cos of me he went swimming by himself."

Matthew shook his head. "Nah, Mrs. Knight. He loved the water, eh. Nothing could keep him away from it."

A stocky boy, ten or eleven, with Matthew's eyes appeared from the direction of the field. He sat by his dad and patted the mutt.

"Himi, say giddy to Mrs. Knight."

"Hi," said Himi. He stood, gave Hēni a peck on the cheek. He pulled a small paper bag from his pocket, untwisted the top and offered her the contents. Inside were squares of coconut ice. Hēni took a piece. The sweetness burned her throat, but she took another when Himi offered her one. She nodded at the boy and grinned as the bird cloud inside her curled away, scattering.

They sat for a while, eating, watching people pass by. Across the field, there were one or two kids crying, overly tired because their own sugar buzz had worn off. Stalls were being packed away. The day's takings were being counted. People returned to their cars with arms laden with loot. They seemed more relaxed.

"It's gone quiet, eh. We must be in between fronts," said Matthew.

Hēni cocked her head to the side, listening. She nodded.

"Yep, southerly's on the way," she said.