

## Wellington 2016: an insight into living in the suburbs as a single, unwedded, childless woman

When the house was built in 1958, it was alongside many others, all of similar appearance, all for young married couples and their post war babies. Everyone was in a similar position with limited means and all had a clear understanding of what society expected of them. Those who were prepared to move out of the inner city were blessed with a ready, yet questionable supply of land and native timbers, at a time in history when questions were rarely asked. The floor and weatherboards are slow growing Matai; the internal framing and the architraves, solid heart ancient Rimu. As the tune goes, they were little boxes on the hillside, little boxes all the same and the people in the houses all went to the university where they were put in boxes and they came out all the same.<sup>1</sup>

The foundational ladies of this New Zealand 1950's community knew all too well that even the shelving in their linen cupboards were constructed of Rimu — a long since abandoned practice. Their aprons were more on than ever off, with university attendance being the domain of the men folk. It was a time when women married young, their individual talents forsaken to cultivate those of society's choosing. One such house, high up in the hills of Wellington, stands intact much the same way it did on completion. A testament to the native timbers that held off the import of 'ticky tacky' materials for as long as our forests lasted. Inside, now lives a woman that would be a curiosity to the first lady to call this place home. To the original man of the house, she would be nothing but a nuisance at risk of filling his wife's ears with fanciful tales of independence. For the crowbar wielding woman, who ripped up the carpet to reveal the now preciously rare Matai, is cut from a type of cloth still so new that its taxonomic ranking in the Hominidae family is being questioned. Its properties and potential uses are still being assessed.

Actually, that's not entirely correct — there have been many women in the past that have attempted, outside times of war, to 'vivre sans homme'; to contemplate 'libri aut liberi'. It's just that they ended up burnt at the stake, bullied into work houses or shamed with aspersions of being dysfunctional. Well, it appears we're back and growing in numbers. This time around, we will not settle our petals nor arrange them for public display. We've other things to think about. We may enjoy, yet do not need a man to mind over, mind us, nor take up unnecessary mind space where the likes of literature or a new language could otherwise fit. If there is a man around, hopefully that's nice and if there isn't, we respect their choice and ours for that to be. We don't want our purpose and value to be determined by male affection — there is too much suffering in that. The emperor is naked and if asked, we'll say so. We've moved on from burning bras and behaving like men in order to be heard. We just want to be.

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<sup>1</sup> 'Little Boxes' written and composed by Malvina Reynolds.

This new woman of the house still owns an apron — a vintage print appraising the virtues of Sunlight Soap — it's there as decoration. She still owns a pair of heels — they are of a sensible height for comfort, the same heel height afforded to men's shoes. There is no need for her to wear or partake of any womanly wiles to appease the male species. For what resides inside the house today, is a woman who owns the property, who runs her own business and who has neither a man, nor child. She is not a lesbian or even a 'tom boy' of any sorts. There is many a pretty dress in her wardrobe. She simply doesn't want to live the life of women in the past... or even the majority of women in the now. For she is me and it is I that has been living in this house for the past 15 years, mostly on my own which was never by design. The years whizzed by and it happened by default. There have been a few select men to have graced the place — their company enjoyed — they just weren't 'the one' and there were plenty other things to get on with. I didn't like it at first, not one little bit. It took time and the cherished gifts that come with time.

There is happiness in not having your wellbeing attached to the random fluctuations and affections of someone else; in knowing you are OK on your own. Being single and child-free also allows for the ability to keep hours of choice. If I want to work till 2am in the morning and sleep in, that's fine — flick goes the light switch. I get to enjoy the spaciousness that having a 'hers & hers' wardrobe provides for. There is not a meal made that I didn't feel like making — so much so that the oven has been turned into a kitchen cupboard. Salads and vegetable stir fry's don't require an oven and unused ovens don't need cleaning. Apart from the annual negotiations with a roof rat or two, there is no time spent doing things I'd rather not. Then there is the ultimate lady gift of having the bathroom all to myself. These are freedoms not to be given up for just any man or maybe even, any man at all. I think of the billions of oppressed women that don't have the chance to even ponder on what this might be like to experience.

Many women, even with the ability to experience this freedom, spend a lifetime avoiding time spent alone. It isn't for everyone. It's confronting — it goes against everything society feeds and conditions a woman to be. It takes years of uncomfortable work — the mind's hamster wheel revolves at speed in the slightest of breezes. It can take a decade to train it to sit still in the presence of life's perennial winds. Another decade to learn what breathing entails and decades more to accept the trade off's:

1. We are of the nature to grow old. There is no way to escape growing old.
2. We are of the nature to have ill health. There is no way to escape ill health.
3. We are of the nature to die. There is no way to escape death.
4. All that is dear to us and everyone we love is of the nature to change. There is no way to escape being separated from them.
5. Our actions are our only true belongings. We cannot escape the consequences of our actions.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> The five remembrances are from the Pali Upajjhatthana Sutta (Subjects for Contemplation), a Buddhist discourse advising that these facts are to be reflected upon often and by all.

To the uninitiated, a childless woman with no man is a life not lived. Who is to say which is best or better? It's likely that to experience joy on both sides of the coin is the life lived most fully. Are my family and friends amiss with disdain? Without doubt, yet pleasingly at a stage where most have given up sharing their thoughts on the matter. Neighbours that tell their children that it just isn't right, should bear in mind that children have no filters when wringing out their sponges – their biscuit tin visits are quite enlightening as to what is being said. What is misunderstood by many is that it is less so a life of loneliness and more so a life of precious time to pursue interests without compromise. The green grass though does not grow without rain – the suburbs are awash with men, women and teenagers with repulsive ideas on the purpose of being a woman. They struggle to grasp the concept that a woman would want to be on her own and that the fault in choosing to do so, does not belong to the person being judged. It's particularly confounding for them to accept that as desperate as they imagine me to be, I don't want to attract male attention as some last chance offer of hope. Neither do I want to become a staunch feminist or 'hard' in any way just to exist, just to be me – a feminine female who no longer views marriage or children as her *raison d'être*.

Of interest, there is an up and coming batch of young girls being fed a new narrative of equality and their young male counterparts haven't received the memo. Give it time and me and my ilk will be moving from the fringes to become the mainstream. I notice how boys are starting ever younger to comment offensively about the appearances of women and cat call brazenly in public with statements such as 'I'd like to rape that'. With so few men stepping up to correct and guide them, these boys will too, grow-up living alone. Not by their choice but by the choice of the females they will find themselves amongst.

For now, the single lady's life in Wellington is full of married men; due in part to the statistical deficit of 57,000 men. Their wives it seems, have far less time to spare for childless women not able, nor all that interested in sharing recipes and head lice remedies whilst rushing around at top speed. In between constantly interrupted conversation and overwhelmed gestures, they offer dating advice, tell me not to be a hermit and to come babysit. They imply I'm missing out and that I'll have no-one to look after me when I'm old, which for the record is a feral reason for having a child and a deluded one at that. There are ample rest homes full of over-medicated parents being sold seal-looking robots to talk to. Good parents too.

If I dared to let rip with the same amount of condescension, the friendship would be over in seconds. I want to impart, that far from being selfish or delaying adulthood, not having children is the most responsible and least selfish thing to do in 2016. Being single also requires stepping up to take on all the tasks that they otherwise farm out to their partners, thereby nullifying their argument that laziness is a factor. Instead, I say nothing – they know where I am should they ever find themselves separated.

and at a loss with being in their own company. For those and other reasons, I've come to find hanging out with elders simpler and more enjoyable. In their company, I am enough, just the way I am. They get that partners cheat, leave, lie and die – that they aren't a means to a secure future or any lasting source of happiness. They can look back and see what decisions were helpful for their happiness and give good advice. They understand the value of being content in your own company. They have slowed down and are smelling the roses. They sip tea and listen to RNZ. None are rushing around or constantly looking at their phones. It's nice. I fit. Well better than I do anywhere else. As for where all the other single, unwedded, childless women are? I read about them and imagine they are wisely living in modern, maintenance-free, inner city apartments. There are two men in the aforementioned category on my street but the women are either elsewhere or shamed into not speaking about it. The partnered have names for women like us. The Chinese refer to us as 'shengnu', a derivative of 'shengcai', meaning left-over food. They encourage women still unmarried at 28, to 'triumph against the odds' and if by 35, she is still unmarried, then she is deemed spiritually flawed for thinking she is above the mandate of marriage.<sup>3</sup> The Chinese at least, lay the rules out for all to see, the New Zealand way is far more subversive. It's there though and it varies little from the Asian standpoint.

As for the life of a working mother, married or separated, it is quite something how much they pack in and get done – I'm in awe, I truly am. It's not however something I've witnessed as being enjoyable or even workable, in terms of striving to 'have it all'; to being all things to all people. How many men do a full day's work as well as the lion share of childcare, cooking, lunch box packing, cleaning, gardening, caring for pets and the wider family and then volunteer for various causes whilst soldiering on with period bleeding? Society also gives women constant reminders to look pretty and smile whilst doing all of the above, lest a younger, less tired woman take their place and husband. On the whole, men come home, satisfied from doing a day's work and find a way to put their feet up guilt-free, even if it means eking out solace in the smallest room of the house or looking busy in their sheds. They know when enough is enough. They know the enjoyment of focusing on just one thing at a time. They also have no issues around putting themselves first, which is paradoxically not all that selfish. Check for yourself: when you are feeling content, how much more are you willing to give than when you are feeling worn out? It's just that most men give far less than they take.

Of the married men I know, none are happily partnered without some grievance of sorts. A rare few are beautifully devoted and in the older varieties, that's often a euphemism for dependant. Some are quietly resigned due to the prohibitive costs and sheer hassle of divorce. Some wish their wives would leave them to lessen the earache and effort involved in the process.

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<sup>3</sup> China's official Ministry of Education lexicons for unmarried women as translated by Eden Collingsworth in her book, *I Stand Corrected: How Teaching Western Manners in China Became its own Unforgettable Lesson*, 2014, Doubleday, USA.

A practical as ever German friend once shared his theory on dating – he saw it simply as choosing a woman with a problem that didn't bother him too much as all women come with problems. An adage that works both ways – Herr Praktikabel's partner left him for someone far more affectionate and far less of a spend thrift. Most though can weigh up the benefits and would agree that they don't cheat because they are necessarily unhappy enough to want to leave; they merely reason that if one is of some good, two is a chance for more. It is greed at play and play away they do. Not all, but anecdotally, more do than do not. If you have a husband who is only too obliging to go buy nappies at 10pm, be sure to question his story as to why it took so long. If you have a husband that can't be bothered to get off the couch to go run an errand – it's a good sign he doesn't. Although bear in mind, Stephen Hawking is wheelchair bound and he left his wife for his nurse.

Conversely, I asked a tradesman writing up his invoice after finishing a job under the house if he'd like to wash up. He replied, "Sorry, I can't. I'm married". Hello. He was filthy dirty, smelling distinctly musty and I merely thought it would be a good idea if he at least washed his hands before moving onto his next customer. Stunned, I said nothing. Did I hear him right? Did he really think that is what I meant? Not that it should matter, but in case you think it does, I wasn't wearing anything remotely suggestive. Such a proposition hadn't even crossed my mind in the slightest, yet it must have been ever present in his to say such a thing. Delivered dead pan too. Might it be that there are sufficient enough suburban women in Wellington seeking to be let off from paying, to warrant such a blasé response? It would certainly help account for the tradie practice of vagueness around arrival time and cost estimates. His virtue aside, he was not hired again.

In the interests of fairness, I once questioned a policeman for pulling me over. The conversation went something like this:

Policeman: *Good evening. Is your dog OK?*

Me: *Er hi. Did you pull me over to talk to me about my dog?*

Policeman: *No, but he's looking at me.*

Me: *Really?*

Policeman: *I did not pull you over to talk about your dog. You are driving slowly and I want to check if you have been drinking.*

Misunderstandings aside, a married man open to having an affair, is like a table with a wonky leg. They are annoying and even though everyone knows that quasi fix-it jobs don't last, many reason that it's worth a try. There is no wisdom on the part of any woman, other than a willing and well paid prostitute in propping up said leg to enable the table to function at its best. The seller and likely the table too, will only put up the price to be paid. There are no winners in affairs, no something extra on the

side — only an expensive loan from A, to give to B, thereby making living with A, an even more vacuous experience. Add to that, chances are, the loan shark will seek repayments, far in excess of the original calculation.

Whilst temping to raise funds for the business, a manager asked one Monday if I'd had a nice weekend to which I replied "Of course, who doesn't enjoy their weekends?" Long since erased from memory, was that in the partnered world, weekends often entail fulfilling the many desires of others, like that of their children, their partner, their in-laws and even their in-laws children. He didn't believe me when I added "Time is a gift making every weekend, a good weekend." After all, I get to spend them how I choose. Plus, there is a big difference in the fun of hanging out with a nice friend compared to having them in your home and hair or flat and face for everyday thereafter. He 'man-spoke' me on the law of averages and how this binding law applied to weekends too. With an ocean between our experiences, silently I wondered if his Scottish humour and twinkling eyes were in effect, like a kilt on the battlefield — a disarming form of distraction to the likely tsunami if rattled. I was tempted to recite a haiku beloved by singletons the world over:

*We fucked loudly,*

*Twice,*

*On a school night too,*

*Take that married friends!<sup>4</sup>*

I refrained and remained silent. Sensing that his wife calls the shots at home, I smiled and let him continue on to deliver his theory that I was in need of developing critical thought. Like a woman in a ghetto with a library card – he was not likely to find enlightenment all that kind. Least not, first thing on a Monday morning from his admin assistant.

Not being a proponent of sharing, swinging or stands of one night, due respect to all those that can make it work *and* last without subscribing to some notion that there will be a martyrs reward ceremony for going the distance... or that their children will thank them for it. Apart from having been a child of an unhappy home, I don't purport to have the answers. In honour of the women before me, that expanded their minds beyond retraction and who laid the pavement on which I now frolic, I offer up some questions instead. For the foreseeable future, where having children is no longer a public good and more akin to a public risk, if you choose not to have any, then what is the rush or even the need to marry?

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<sup>4</sup> Adapted from the haiku by Beth Griffenhagen: 'On my kitchen floor/ We fucked loudly, more than once/ Take that married friends. Published in *Haiku for the Single Girl*, 2011, Penguin Books

Of all the ways to declare your love amongst family and friends, why seek to legally tie someone to yourself [thereby making it difficult for them to leave] as the numero uno option? How much more loving would it be to let them decide each day if they choose to be with you? Should they opt to leave, would that not be better than to have them mentally check-out and use up your precious life, tending to their husk?

If I was to offer any advice, it would be to my younger self and it would go something like this. Your 20 self is very different to your 30 self and your 40's, a mere inkling of your 50's. What is attractive to your 30 self will change, as will the person you've pinned your hopes and dreams on. If you marry for looks, that's a shame and a sham. If you marry as you can't bear to be alone, that's a greater shame and sham. If you marry them for their mind, the things they do for you or their bank balance — all that will change too. At 50 though, the risk of experiencing buyer's remorse after signing on the dotted line is significantly reduced. You'll have a much better indication of what you're signing up for. So take your time, enjoy going on dates; get to know them. Weed out those not interested in sticking around to become your friend and then go walk the great walks together. If they have different values<sup>5</sup> to you, keep them as a friend only. Give yourself time to discover new interests, to become comfortable with yourself and skilful at what you have to offer. Slow down — there are no prizes for time spent being disappointed.

If there were to be no legal binding of people, incentivising them to stay together, the standard of our behaviour and that of our partners would improve. For if we or they could leave with greater ease, we'd treat each other better. It would also address the 'letting yourself go after the ink has dried' issue. From the sidelines, the practice of marriage appears far less sacrosanct than society holds it up to be. It doesn't prevent straying — some might say it actually encourages it. It also provides for a setting in which unacceptable behaviour is accepted. Without it, the opportunity to improve our relationships warrants consideration.

Also worthy of consideration is the male perspective. For all the benefits that being a man still entails, of those that have been willing to speak honestly, a fair few talk of the pressure they are under. They still feel the need to be a success, to be the bread winner but gone are the ancillary perks/support systems of yesteryear. Add to that, what they do bring home is compared to that of their partner, which may or may not be a pleasing realisation. They also have to do more on the home front and do it without being asked or praised — it's no longer a case of helping out the wife with expectation of a payback; it's becoming part and parcel of living with a Western woman in 2016. It's no longer women's work to cook the dinner and get the kids ready for school the next day — it's now extra work to be negotiated evenly or contracted out. Some admit to not knowing what they are

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<sup>5</sup> Hawkings is as aesthet as they come — his first wife was a devout Catholic. Divorce was a mere timing issue. That his nurse-come-second wife turned out to be a devout devil of a woman is yet another gift of wisdom he has to offer us. Marrying for on-tap care is no road to happiness either.

doing — of making it up as they go along, concerned that they will be exposed. Some fake not knowing how, so as to get their wife to do X Y and Z. In need of a release valve, some smoke weed, many drink, and many more invent reasons to work late and take business trips. I think about asking if being in a partnership with a Western woman is similar to their school yard days of needing to pull up their socks in the company of their headmaster, but don't. Their answer would be superfluous and my question unhelpful to women from other cultures seeking the same freedoms.

At best, they share 20% of what's really on their minds with their male friends and they definitely don't tell their partners what they can say without recompense to the likes of me. By a country mile, Google knows them best. They have secret lives depending on who's around or not around. A common theme is the desire for some peace and quiet with no-one asking them to do anything. They especially don't like women making noise in their ears and wonder why the need for all the crying that goes on. Outwardly, they appear to come with a simple manual for operation yet there's a multitude of cogs churning around inside that don't get a mention. They have moving parts that enable tears and that's always beautiful, but ladies beware of saying so. The man that learns to turn them on and off is a pest – perhaps much like us. In fact, all of the above could just as easily describe many a woman.

Here's where men differ: men are not able to be alone with themselves, their children, their secretary, their dogs, their cats, their laptop and maybe even their male friends without someone thinking 'Uh-oh...'. The man who finds himself living alone is not referred to as strong and independent. The man who parks his car alone to take in a nice view becomes more of a spectacle than the sunset he stopped for. It's no wonder our men are always on the lookout for Miss Plan B at the same time as seeking peace and quiet. They can do yoga but it will come with a wink and a nod of sorts that they are up to something. They can visit a park alone with their head held high if they are jogging, but should they slow down or dare to sit and watch the world go by, they would do well to have the company of a friendly looking dog to justify the purpose of their park visit. It's easy to see why they enjoy watching sport and why women should indulge them, to a point. With sport, it's the players under review — the viewers are out of the spotlight with time to just be. Precious time, in which they need not prove themselves to anyone. Yet for many, it's precious time wasted by nailing one's colours and foes to the mast, as if the game is somehow about them.

As for childless, singles living alone – heaven forbid in the suburbs so as to enjoy a garden – they, like all minorities instil a sense of unease and have to prove themselves many times over. I moved in at 25 and suspicious minds forewarned their husbands and constantly reminded them with 'the look' to steer clear. Birthday party invitations require a child, much like how a man in a park requires a dog. The whispers have varied across the spectrum from pity to outright jealousy. I have time to

read, time to write, and time to grow a vegetable garden. Time to feed the birds, time to think and time to listen. There is time to take in the beautiful view of the harbour at dawn and time of an evening to observe the space station fly by. There is time to post thank you gifts, time to talk to the elderly and time to notice how nice breathing feels. The caveats to all this spare time is that I am not on Facebook, there is no Twitter account and no television to pivot the furniture around. Together with my wayward Jack Russell, there is only time and the freedom of choosing how to use it.

Anti-feminists would swear they foretold of such an outcome back in 1893 with granting of the right to vote. They gave us an inch and we ran a mile. They predicted we would cause trouble, and now the worst offenders are getting off, child-free.

Houses in the neighbourhood have changed too. New sub-divisions stand out like town criers proudly announcing news of the day – NZ has returned to a two-tier society that no longer understands or cares for each other. Fences have grown both in height and opacity. Security cameras poke out where once a neighbour would have waved and chatted. Passengers arriving by boat, once welcomed are now spurned. We don't all speak the same language. We won't all have the means to attend university for a chance to turn out the same. Many of those arriving are content enough to have a house with walls, possessing ears or not, it's an improvement on their last lot of minders. They speak of atrocities in foreign lands, of wars between people who can still recall a 'sameness' once shared. The neighbourhood has always known change; it will come to know even more. Concern over women freeing themselves from past norms is misplaced – the ruin of society shares more parallels with the number of structures keeping us separate, making strangers of each other. This is a call for walls to act as insulating protectors, not protectors of insulated harmers.

New arrivals from foreign shores know what the neighbourhood is yet to fathom – there will be no return to 'normal'. In addition, China has long understood what the rest of the world is reluctant to learn: women who forgo motherhood for the benefit of the motherland are deserving of credit. The financial and social credits aside, it was a policy born of and into a man's world that was doomed to end with the enforcers being left bereft of daughters, sisters, female friends, aunts and wives. For the West to find itself with a growing number of women *and* men voluntarily opting out of reproducing, without upsetting the gender balance in any way, you'd think that in general, society would approve. It enables those making the children to continue on without restriction, the children being born face less competition for resources and the government avoids the need for unpopular incentives to limit numbers.

In the shadows though, lurks an imperialist fear that we will be overrun by 'the breeders' if we don't keep numbers up. It's a flawed view and it's fatalistic to adopt such a stance on a planet with disappearing land and dwindling resources. It is a blueprint for war and it's not necessary. Offer the already proven talent in highly populated countries the chance to immigrate and assimilate into our 'Kiwi' culture and chances are, you'll be overrun with applicants or run over by the stampede. Whilst there is plenty room for growth in New Zealand for millions more people, given the challenges that come with an increase in numbers, those who willingly forgo having children are offering up a gift, a spare place at the table. It's not a gift that is better or less than say a child is to society, it is equal in terms of the potential to be of benefit. Why then, I wonder in 2016, in a well educated city am I still hearing 'tick-tock' and 'you could try wearing dresses more often'.

Under what conditions might it ever be 'thank you'? The UN estimates that the world's population reached 7 billion in 2011. The forecast is for 9 billion by 2050 - the same time that the climate is predicted to impact severely on food production and when sea levels will be leaving millions in need of a new place to live. The average age of a mother giving birth in New Zealand is 30, so how far in advance might it be a good time to start a discussion around the 'taboo' yet pressingly ethical topic of procreating on an over-populated planet that's inter-connected? Be sure to factor in a generous allowance for the difficulties that the 3 year election cycle has in addressing long-term issues. Then factor in many more years to account for the difficulties that democratic governments face in making unpopular, yet responsible decisions.

If your answer ends up looking more like nature and warfare will be making the decision for us come 2050, can we agree that whilst it isn't pretty to discuss, it isn't going to be any prettier to live with the consequences of too many people. The more feral of the CO<sub>2</sub> chickens coming home to roost, are on their way. There is no way to stop them. What we do in the next 34 years will determine the size of the flock and the types of diseases they will be carrying. As the baton holders who benefitted from the petroleum age, we have a responsibility to help the children already born. They will be the decision-makers come 2050, amidst all the problems we've procrastinated over. Breeding more competitors for their remaining resources isn't likely to be helpful. Too much competition and they may make the decision that the elderly are not a priority to provide for.

Stubbornly entrenched societal norms can be changed due to an immutable law of physics: the rate of change of momentum is equal to the applied force. One person finds the courage to say yeah-nah, the next two say a clear no, and the next three say hell no and so it goes until there are tens of thousands of women fed-up and unwilling to ~~have it all~~ 'do it all' for unequal wages and treatment. Helen Clark cried on her wedding day and they weren't tears of joy. She was already doing plenty as it

was for her country and yet it wasn't enough until she conformed to marriage, left our shores and made a name for herself on the world stage. Some now want to be her 'Instant Kiwi' friend, whilst others still berate her for having a façade of a marriage as if it were any of their business or of relevance to her ability. No woman, or man should have to get married in order to function and fit in. It is a revolting custom that is causing untold suffering the world over.

Prior to spending time living alone, I could have easily conformed and gone along with the herd. The time out mat, bed and kitchen have been a gift – one that was made possible on the shoulders of others. I had the help of my Mother to guarantee the home loan, a best friend in the form of a dog that wouldn't let anyone near to offer the necessary courage and bravado, a Granddad that called daily to check on me, and two sets of neighbours to help keep an eye on my safety. They have all been blessings that enabled time to just be. They provided the scaffolding and the how-to came via the kindness of Dharma teachers offering their talks online for free. Kindness that I fully intend to repay as the house will soon be up for sale – it's likely it will be demolished with it being a small dwelling on a large section. By then, it will have provided 59 years of protection from the wildest of winds and enabled the sweetest of views from being perched on a hilltop. It has stood up to the Wahine storm and many a subsequent other. She will be thanked dearly and every effort will be made to implore her next owners to salvage what they can and forever protect the native trees and bush that is home to a beautiful variety of birds. After years of feeding and observing them daily during snatches of time when the dog is sleeping, i.e. not patrolling his backyard and all of its airspace from winged invaders, I've often thought that when the dog dies, he could be used as base fertilizer for another fruiting native to help the birds, once I've gone too. The dog must have read my mind as at the age of 16, he's still doggedly manning the fort that is his home and castle.

To me, it's been more of a hilltop sanctuary. The caveat being, in the words of the insightful teacher, Gil Fronsdal: *There will be times when it is helpful to climb a mountain in order to gain some perspective, it is also helpful to come back down again in order to learn how to be amongst the people.* Reluctantly, I climbed the mountain and now reluctantly I must come down. My mountain comrade is dying and it wouldn't feel right with him not around. Every inch of this place would be a reminder of him and his antics – Jack Russell terriers have a way of getting amongst everything, leaving their calling card in a variety of ways. The bathroom wall has his desperado scratch marks from trying to escape being washed with lavender shampoo. His wolf ancestors would have been proud of his aversion tactics. Every garden plant has a history of being dug up shortly after its initial planting. His operatic arias on being left alone are known to all within a decent radius to ensure I dare not go out without him. He must sound a nuisance, yet he had his ways of endearing himself by asking everyone to play with him. He'd bring neighbours

things to throw and wag the remains of his stolen tail on their arrival home. He had friendships with children who would scale fences and crawl through his dog door to visit him... and by proxy, a less than charmed version of me. In a group of strangers, he would work his way around to ask everyone for a ball throw or chest rub — everybody was a potential friend worthy of greeting and extending some love to. If you had a limb that could throw a ball and/or access to food, then you were on his radar for possessing great human potential.

Boys, aged 4–10 are his favourite humans and beach visits are a chance to meet new ones from outside of his locale. If he were human, he would have been arrested and locked up several times over for his talent to sniff them out. He gave everyone the benefit of the doubt whilst also retaining the memory of an elephant when harm came his way. On becoming a member of his inner circle, you could trust that he had your back and would guard it. That's a pretty sweet deal when the entry fee is a steak and cheese pie. He has performed his doggie duties superbly well and now it's time to thank him with a gift befitting of a well earned retirement. A home on the flat in a warmer climate within reach of watching the waves roll in — somewhere to sit in the sun and recall a youth spent swimming way too far out in order to hang with the surfers or say howdy to a bemused beach kayaker. The hill climbs are getting to be too much for him now and the house too cold for his failing joints. It took time to fall in love with our hilltop retreat and perhaps that's how it will be with our descent. I'm not the same person for having had the experience. I arrived in parts and with parts awaiting purchase; I'll be leaving priceless and whole. Wholly not as society wants but perhaps as society needs — another woman to have slipped through Disney's net with no desire to create new consumers.

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