

STATE HIGHWAY ONE

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Sam Coley

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FRIDAY

THEY SAY YOU CAN NEVER GO HOME AGAIN, except here I am at nine in the morning, still a bit drunk, still in the suit I wore yesterday, gunning one-forty up State Highway One, headed north, headed for the Cape, home again and getting away. Auckland is four hours away, three hundred kilometres and counting. My sister is next to me, in matching black, teeth clamped around the end of a cigarette she hasn't quite summoned the energy to light.

Our parents would be so proud.

We've long stopped speaking by the time we reach Cape Reinga. There's no music either; the playlist finished a while ago and I wasn't ready to have another argument about what does or does not constitute 'road trip tunes', so for the last hour I let the seas hug the car on both sides and stared through the windscreen at the road ahead as the sun baked us from above and the loose metal spat at the undercarriage below. The little black hatch really wasn't designed for this kind of trip, certainly not at these speeds, but held together by sheer force of will, together we'll make it.

There's no one else here yet. I turn to Amy.

'We made it.'

She doesn't say anything, doesn't look at me, just stares out the window. I exhale slowly, count to three, then rev the engine and slam

the car into reverse, executing an extremely ill-advised three-point turn, which, with the crash of the automatic clutch, might well have sent all 1300CCs of motor suddenly leaping out through the bonnet and out onto the road. So now we're parked and facing south, looking back at where we've been, backs turned to where we're going. It's still morning but the sun is already threatening the country I used to call home with another scorchingly high chance of sunburn and skin cancer. Amy looks at me and scowls, her yesterday's-makeup eyes perfectly conveying her lack of interest in, or shock at, anything. Preston Family Portrait Face.

'So we made it? Now what?'

'This was your idea. Now what *you?*'

She slips her sunglasses down onto her face and her seat back.

'Now, I dunno. What time is it? I'm tired, I'm going to have a nap.'

Maybe she's right. I'm tired too, and the still a bit drunk is turning into quite hungover, so perhaps I should try to sleep it off a bit. I've been awake for close to thirty hours now and I can feel my brain finally starting to switch off. I climb out of the car, find a spot on the grass under a tree nearby and lie down. I barely register the ground beneath me before the blue sky turns black.

When I'm awake, when I get back to the car, the sun's in the middle of the sky and Amy's moved to the back seat, her body squashed by the midget chassis. I open the door and give her ankle a tap. 'Get up.'

'Huh?'

'Get up. If you want to do this, if you want to see Te Aroha and the tidal race before this hill is swarming with tourists, we need to go now.'

There are already a couple of buses in the carpark, early birds come up from Kaitaia in the morning. It's the middle of the day, in the middle of February, in the middle of summer at the top of the bottom of the world and this is where we came to say goodbye. Amy climbs out of the car.

'Are you sunblocked?'

'No.'

'Me either. Did you bring sunblock?'

'If you didn't, I didn't. We can get some in Kaitaia on the way back down. Not that it'll be much use to us by then.'

She scrunches up her face. 'We do have enough petrol to get us back to Kaitaia, right?'

I tell her not to worry and we set off on the trail.

'Did you know this isn't even the northernmost part of the country? There's North Cape to the east, which is actually slightly higher.'

Amy Preston. St Christopher's College Trivia Champion 2009, '10, '11.

'So you want to go east, see if we can find Mum and Dad there? This was your plan, remember?'

She looks at me and frowns. I can't see her eyes behind her big sunglasses, but I'm sure she's trying her best to look wounded. Drama Award 2011, '12.

'I don't actually want to go east, I'm just saying—'

'You're not saying anything. I'm driving anyway, I'm the boss.'

'No, I'm the boss.'

'Okay, you're the boss.' I roll my eyes at her and she smiles, we walk. I feel the sun pricking the back of my neck, the no-ozonelayer radiation burns of childhood on every piece of exposed skin.

'Add after-sun to the list of things to get in Kaitaia.'

She nods and doesn't say anything and we move on.

At the lighthouse, Amy moves around to the front without stopping, plopping herself down on the grass on the wrong side of the fence, staring off the Cape, past the headland. She's looking out over the tidal race, where the blue Pacific meets the green Tasman, where the seas collide and fight endlessly for territory neither will ever relinquish. I take a seat next to her.

‘Did you know that that pohutukawa tree is over eight hundred years old?’

‘I actually did know that.’

‘And people say that—’

‘I know.’

I know the story, I don't need to hear it again. I remember it from primary school and I remember it from yesterday. That when you die, your spirit travels here and stops at the pohutukawa tree, Te Aroha. You take one last look back before jumping off the headland and taking Te Ara Wairua, the Spirits' Path, across the oceans and on and home. I get it. Why the last look though? Is it longing? Regret? Or a chance for one more goodbye before you're gone and it's like you never were. What about Mum and Dad? Did she go one way, and Dad went somewhere else? I can't imagine they would have ever let each other go, but how much of a say do you get in these things? Really though, they went into a box and into the ground.

It's just a tree.

‘Do you think we would do that?’

I don't know so I don't answer.

‘I could do it, you know. There's no fence or anything, there's nothing really stopping anyone. I could run over and jump off and fly out. I could.’

‘You wouldn't.’

She's right though, we both could. I never thought about suicide before. It gets better, right? Hang on, it gets better, life isn't so bad, life is worth living, and then you take a corner too fast and wrap your car around a tree. I could lean over, and it'd all be over, and would I get to see my family again? We weren't planned, they never really wanted us in the first place, and now it's only us left. Is that ironic? Probably not.

‘Why not?’

‘Well, it would hurt a lot.’

'I bet I wouldn't feel a thing.'

'It would hurt me.'

'Then I guess I'll stick around for a bit. Give me one of those.' She's stretching out a hand towards my box of Lucky Strikes.

'I only have one.'

'I only want one. Give it. I'm the boss, now give. When did you start smoking anyway?'

'Uh . . . Ramadan.' I throw the packet onto the ground and walk off. I'm the older one, by two whole hours, and the bigger one, and somehow she's still the fucking boss. She sat in the front and I sat in the back. She took the last pineapple lump and I got the black jellybean. She was the Queen of Auckland and I was 'Amy has a brother?' And then she went to uni and I went to work, I went to Dubai and she never went anywhere. Amy considers going to a party on the North Shore to be out of her way. Now I've been gone almost three years and it doesn't seem like anything's really changed.

I do the driving and she picks the music.

Back in Dubai I get asked a lot: Don't you miss home?

Not really.

'So what now?' Amy is sitting right where I left her, still slumped forward, holding onto her toes, sunglasses on.

I've gone for a walk around the lighthouse, around the Cape. It's mid-afternoon now, there are people everywhere taking the same stupid photo – the lighthouse, the tree, the same idiotic-looking families all gazing adoringly at an iPhone attached to the end of a stick. 'Serious' photographers with tripods take long exposures of the tidal race, probably hoping to snap a spirit or two, not realising that the endless click of the opening and closing of shutters is, in all likelihood, scaring them away. The mindless chatter, a sea of foreign languages takes me back to Dubai, briefly, before a '*kia ora*' at the wrong end of an American accent carries me home. Not home.

We better find something to do, somewhere to go. This seemed like a good idea however many hours ago it was, but now that the drunk fury has worn off and a crashing headache has well and truly worn in, I worry we're in danger of losing impetus. 'You wanna go to the beach or something?'

'Sure. Are we staying here tonight?'

The chances of Amy staying the night somewhere less than a five-star are about as—

'Might as well. We can head back tomorrow.'

'We don't have any food.'

'I'm not hungry, are you?'

I can't remember the last time I felt like eating.

No food, no shower, no cigarettes and no real reason to stick around, but still we're compelled to stay the night. The thought of getting back in the Mitzi Mirage and heading south, having come all this way in one night only to turn around and head back already – I can't be doing that today, I'm not ready to face Auckland yet. So we'll stay, and we'll sleep on the beach or in the car, and tomorrow we can pack up and drive back home. It'll be an easy six hours back through Northland, and I'm in no hurry to get to Auckland. There's a camp ground somewhere around here, I remember from the sign in the carpark, so we can probably head down there and sleep in the car. I can't imagine the Department of Conservation would be willing to let us stay here tonight, camped out under the old pohutukawa, see if Mum and Dad stop off to say the goodbye I never got, on their way on to wherever. Maybe they're moving slowly, hoping they'll bump into us on the way up. Always rushing, always in a hurry, always on the verge of being late for everything, a life of speeding cars and quick-fire phone calls, maybe they'll finally be able to take their time now. Waiting for a ferry at Rawene, or stopping off along Ninety Mile Beach for a swim, or queueing for an ice-cream at the dairy in Ahipara. Maybe

they're already there, in the shade of Te Aroha, waiting for Amy and me to show up for one polite head nod, maybe a handshake, given the circumstances.

'Do you want to see Te Aroha? We could go down and check it out, see what the big deal is?'

I can't.

'I can't be bothered. It's too hot, there are people everywhere and I don't think you're meant to go there, and I want to be somewhere quiet. It's like being back ho—'

I catch myself. 'Back in Dubai.'

But I haven't caught myself quickly enough and Amy's eyebrows knit together in a face I've seen a million times. She's trying her best not to start an argument before she's finished playing it out in her head so she can make sure she's going to win.

She doesn't say anything.

'Come on, little sis.'

One eyebrow goes up.

'Let's get out of here.'

So I throw one more look back at the seas, the tree, the people and the lighthouse, and I put my hand out to help Amy up and we leave this place. Leave the spirits to their own business.

There's a path you're not supposed to take, but we take it anyway, heading east from the lighthouse and down onto the beach. This is a sacred place, and I don't feel particularly good about what we're doing. I don't feel all that bad either, though, so we keep going.

It's maybe thirty minutes later and we're sitting on the shore, alone, watching the waves roll in and out. It's much better here, where it's quiet, after yesterday I could count on both hands the number of times I've spoken out loud, and I haven't said anything to anyone who isn't Amy. Mostly she talks and I listen.

'We'll be in a lot of trouble if we're caught out here. I'm pretty sure we're trespassing. And even if we're not, it's not like we look like we belong here. You're in a suit, for Christ's sake. Nice suit by the way.'

I nod.

'London.'

Even behind her sunglasses, I can see Amy roll her eyes. I can *feel* it.

'Nice dress.'

'Westfield.'

She starts to laugh and I can't not join in. And so here we are, in the wrong place, at the worst possible time, side by side and sides hurting, we can't help ourselves. And the more we laugh the more we laugh at ourselves laughing. I had almost forgotten Amy's all-but-silent cackle, punctuated with the occasional wheeze, while the laugh I practised on the plane, the laugh-at-your-boss's-jokes, over-accented *ha-ha-ha* has been replaced with something people would probably describe as a guffaw.

'Laugh on the *inside*,' Dad would hiss while trying to pretend they weren't his kids he was sitting next to in a movie theatre, before quickly glancing around to make sure no one was looking.

I stop.

Oh, Dad.

Amy stops too, she's holding her head in her hands as she shuffles and sits back up straight and takes her sunglasses off. She looks a complete mess and I can't imagine I look any better. My (polarised) Ray Bans come off too and the sun hits me right in the face.

I wipe my eyes and blink, adjusting to the glare, slowly, slowly closing and opening and there's a kind of

there's this

there's a

I can feel my face burn up, it's so hot, how does it feel hotter here than in the desert, two thousand percent humidity and a thirty-degree

wind coming off the tropics from the north, my shirt is soaked through and I want to take it off but we left the sunblock at the house and
we're there, at the house, it's almost 3am and it's cold out, a southerly is blowing in the night,
in the night
I can't see in the dark and Aunty Clare and Uncle Rob have left in a taxi, in a haze of white wine,
while Amy and I
barely able to stand
climbing into my old black hatchback, still in the garage after all this time wondering if it'll even run but somehow it starts first time, the engine turns on and turns over and I can't find the
and I feel like I'm going to throw up and—
'Breathe, kid. Breathe in, breathe out.'

I swallow hard and I wish we had some water with us, my body is as dry as the sand I'm sitting on. I dig my fingers into it and try to think grounding thoughts. I hate it when she calls me kid. She knows I hate it, which is exactly why she does it. She reaches out her hand and puts it on top of mine.

She looks at me, and I back at her. We're similar, but not the same. Her eyes are green, versus my blues, both striking considering our otherwise dark colouring. Mum's nose. Dad's ears with no earlobes. Our hair the wrong way around, hers dead straight and mine too wavy to keep under control so I keep it cut close, and the exact same bum chin. We can thank both of our parents for that. Thanks Mum and Dad.

I can see the pohutukawa off to the north-west.

'You're okay. You're okay?'

I'm okay.

'I'm okay.'

I take my hand back.
'Swim?'

The sun is getting low in the sky behind us as we pull into Tāpotupotu Bay, into the Department of Conservation campsite about ten minutes' drive from Cape Reinga, but there's a bit of daylight left. The camp isn't busy, maybe half full, even though it's Friday night. I see campervans, caravans, tents scattered around but mostly dotting the shoreline, the beach, taking up and blocking the best views. I make my way slowly down the gravel drive towards the office. It's still peak season so there's bound to be some DOC ranger roving around to make sure everyone is paid up and no one is causing trouble.

It's been a long time since I drove a car on grass. It's soft, and I remember school carparks and beaches and baches and trips to the Coromandel with Henry's family in the holidays. As we come down the hill I'm struck by the colour of it all. The blue of the ocean, the green of the grass, the bright red bursts of the pohutukawa trees, blossoms clinging to life after flowering at Christmas, the whole field is spattered with white daisies and yellow dandelions and toetoe, big white flowers at the end of sticks I would pull out of the ground in the park and chase Amy with, smacking her around the head before she would inevitably come after me with a bigger, nastier stick, something gnarled, twisted and bitten off into a jagged point by a ride-on mower, and she wouldn't hesitate to crack me right across the ribs, or the legs, or once, the back of my head and I would cry and run to Dad and he would say, 'You started it. You want to pick fights with your sister, pick fights you can win.'

He was right.

Something hits the front of the car with a thud. Fuck. I jump back in the seat. 'What the—'

‘It’s probably a soccer ball. Chill out.’

The car stays stopped for a minute while I wait for my heart to return to its regular pace and a completely oblivious kid rescues his ball from under the bumper. He passes it to his friend, his brother, someone he just met, who knows, and they run off into another corner of the campsite to play.

I should have turned the engine off.

The DOC worker looks up, looks at me, stares hard, looks away, looks back, looks down, takes a breath, looks up and smiles. This all happens in the space of about three seconds as I open the door to the reception area and step inside the office towards the desk. Smile crossfades to concern as I take my sunglasses off and put them in my jacket pocket.

‘Hey are you okay? You look kind of fucked up.’

‘Uh . . . Huh?’

‘Hey no worries mate. Where you from?’

‘Dub— Auckland.’

‘Jafa huh? You going camping in a suit? You here for a wedding or something? Or come from a wedding? Sometimes people come up here for weddings, stag dos, whatever. You having a party? Hey, no problems man, just, this is a family place eh? So watch it a bit. Don’t set fire to anything. So you on holiday or what? Uni holidays? Come up to see Cape Reinga? Everyone does, this time of year. Good time to see it. Better now that most of the little kids are back at school. You can actually move without tripping over a guy rope or a plastic bucket. Stood on a lilo once, popped the bloody thing. No one saw, I took off but shit it made a bang. Shouldn’t be leaving that crap all over the place anyway. So, how many?’

‘Two.’

‘Two?’

‘Me and my sister. She’s in the car.’

‘So, no party, huh? Maybe I was hoping it would get a bit rowdy, ha. You two come from a wedding or something then?’

‘A wake.’

He doesn’t register.

‘You barely look it. Find a free spot, there’s no reserved places or nothing. Pitch a tent, don’t cause trouble, no fires after midnight, don’t go swimming drunk, no loud music. Unless it’s ‘Ten Guitars’, ha ha ha. Six bucks a night each. Toilets are on the far side of this building, showers as well. Anything else?’

‘Is there a shop or anything nearby? Like, for food, and cigarettes?’

‘Run out, huh? Sorry mate, nothing that’ll be open by the time you get there. You’ll have to wait until tomorrow. But I checked in a bunch of Frogs this morning for two nights. So you might be able to bludge a fag at least. They’re on the far side, the dome tents.’

‘Okay. Thanks.’

‘Cheers mate, have a good one.’

‘Here’s hoping he doesn’t come around in the night and see we don’t have a tent. The DOC don’t let you sleep in cars.’

‘How would you know?’

How would she know?

‘You and Henry got kicked out of Tāwharanui, remember? Trying to sleep in the car? You had to come back to Auckland and ruin my party.’

It’s taking everything I have not to reach over, open the passenger door and push her out of the car, drive back to Auckland and leave her here alone. I’m suddenly so angry I want to spit, but I settle for gripping the steering wheel so tight and grinding my teeth so hard I’m in danger of breaking one or the other.

‘It was my birthday too, you know.’

‘No, it wasn’t.’

The Mirage lurches in and out of dips and holes as we make our way slowly across the grass. I aim for where the French people are supposed to be. Maybe he was right about being able to pinch a couple of cigarettes. I'm not desperate or anything, but I could really use something to do, even for ten minutes. The problem with drunk impulsive road trips is that you don't really think to bring a book or a deck of cards. That said, I can hardly see myself staying up all night playing euchre with Amy, winning tricks in the back seat, one forever trying to trump the other until we give up and pass out. I could beat her at cards, somehow she'd still be winning at everything else. I didn't even bring my phone. It seemed like a good idea at the time – leave the phone behind, head for the highway and go north until we hit the sea, we spend too much time on these things anyway so unplug and get away for a while.

It's a collective of five tents, all about the same size, say they sleep three on the label but really it's one+bag+shoes. They're arranged in a half-circle, facing east, looking out over the bay. On the north side is your typical 'wacky camper', a six-seater Toyota with average graffiti art and some travellers' aphorism stencilled on the side in drippy white. I take the car around to the south and park as close as I can get without looking like a complete fucking weirdo. Well, regardless of where I park the car I'm going to look like a complete fucking weirdo. Black suit, white shirt, no shoes, covered in dust and sand and salt and reeking of alcohol and stale tobacco. Maybe I can tell people I'm in a band. Amy's barefoot also, in her black dress with her hair all over the place, looking like she hasn't slept properly in days. She probably hasn't. Neither have I. We must look like runaways from the world's worst high-school ball.

Through the windshield, I look out onto the Pacific. The light is low but not gone, not yet. The sun is on our backs, so the whole sky in front is cast in purple and red with a tinge of blue, filling the sky like

a paint-by-numbers, big block colours bleeding all over each other. It's reflected down onto the ocean, where every ripple shines like a star. Here there are no skyscrapers, no world's biggest or world's tallest or world's first or any bullshit accomplishment, built just to say we did it, we have it, just to get in the way of the horizon.

'Do you miss it here?'

'Not yet.'

Amy finishes for me. 'But it's getting there.'

'Why don't you go? You're better at that kind of thing.'

'Because you lost rock-paper-scissors, that's why. Don't pussy out on this like you do everything else. No wonder you don't have a girlfriend. Wait. You don't have a girlfriend, do you? Back in the desert, waiting for you to come back, or even call? It *is* Valentine's Day tomorrow, you know.'

'Actually, I—'

'I didn't think so. So. Go over to those French dudes and try to get some cigarettes off them. They won't even care. I'm going to take a shower.'

I tell her we don't have any towels and she looks at me for a second, cocks her head to one side and tells me I'm wrong. She's right. There are always a couple of towels in the boot of the car. I can't think of a reason anyone would have moved them. Nothing else has changed. Same towels in the boot. Same AA road atlas in the glovebox. Same five dollars in loose change in the centre console. And if no one had vultured that up while I was gone, I could be fairly sure the beach towels would still be there in the back.

'Fine, but take Tweety Bird. I'm Bugs.'

I haven't moved from the driver's seat. The engine is off but the music is on and I kill it in the interest of battery life. The door is still open and so are both the windows.

I can smell the sea.

Not just the sea.

I can smell grass. And wet sand, salt spray on rocks and seaweed drying in rock pools around the cliffs. I can smell the estuary and cow shit and the ever-present, ever-fading pohutukawa blossom. Kids' fizzy drinks and parents barbecuing over paper cups of box wine.

A thousand hands hit a thousand piles of cards and a chorus of children we never were shout snap.

I dig my fingers into my palm, feel my nails bite into my hand. My shoulders tense up and as I feel my head begin to shake I bite my lip so hard I taste my own blood, dirty, salty and lonely on my tongue.

The light is fading fast. The sun has dipped behind the hills and in the twilight everything is rendered in dark blue and grey and brown. The pohutukawa are only shapes now, the Pacific a dark, inky nothing. The sky is blushed pink and burned yellow. This dumb fucking country. Everywhere you look it's another postcard from Mum and Dad, skim read and chucked in a desk drawer. I don't know if they were trying to lure me home, or just remind me that I chose to live in exile on the other side of the world and that I never call.

Never called.

The fake-fur fleece of the driver's seat cover is warm beneath my shirt as I press a three-year-old BurgerFuel napkin I rescued from the glovebox against my lip. As my blood dries on the '100% recycled, 100% Kiwi made' paper towel stuck to my face I watch the breakers break on the beach.

The tide is coming in and I need to be outside.

Leaning up against the car door, I hear the chatter of a language I don't understand, and smell the faint scent of tobacco smoke and weed. The French.

‘Hey.’

‘Bonsoir.’

It’s a question, heavily accented not with a what do you want but more like a why are you here. There are six of them sitting in a half-circle around a fire pit, some on fold-out chairs, a couple on the grass, facing out to sea. There are beer bottles everywhere and everyone has a cigarette hanging out of their mouth. I smell tobacco laced with pot, spliffs rolled in the European style, two-thirds cigarette and a little grass, spliffs you can smoke all day. The smell takes me back to the chalet on Mont Blanc last year, Slovenians lying around all day and getting stoned and playing in the snow for a bit before giving up at dark, retreating inside to make hot wine and laugh over-enthusiastically at new episodes of *Parks and Recreation*.

‘I, um . . .’

I stand there forever, trying to remember Level 1 Level 2 Level 3 French. It didn’t work on the Alps, I don’t expect it to here but—

‘Kee aura,’ comes from a girl lying right back in her chair, so far back she must be close to tipping over.

The way she says her r’s makes it sound silly, but it’s a little endearing and I can’t help smiling a bit. I can barely speak French and I can barely speak Māori, at least she’s trying. It strikes me then that I probably know fewer than ten words in Arabic. ‘Kia ora.’

‘Would you like to join us?’

‘Um. I just . . .’

I just want a cigarette really, but they’re already shuffling around, making space for me to sit on the ground, next to a guy who looks like he’s lived on a beach his whole life. He must be about my age, with green eyes, pale green like Amy’s. He’s in shorts and a racerback that look in desperate need of a wash. I sit south of him, on the other side of the ocean. Maybe I can hang here, make some friends. Maybe the

world can go back to normal for a minute while Amy is away, before she comes back and I have to move on.

I try my best. 'Bonsoir.'

He smiles, 'Ça va?'

I'm really not very ça va, but I can't remember how to say anything else so, 'Ça va.'

'You are here by yourself?'

'I'm here with my sister. She's in the shower.'

He looks over at the Mirage and so do I. There's no sign of Amy. She always takes ages in the bathroom. She probably managed to bum a deep-conditioning treatment from an unsuspecting caravan mum and is now using the entire bottle to de-stress and de-tangle and get the salt water out of her hair.

'You are a Kiwi, uh? You and your sister are on a trip?'

'We came up this morning to see Cape Reinga. Heading back tomorrow.'

The spliff makes its way to me and I pass, asking if I can bum a smoke instead.

'Of course.'

A girl in a bikini top and a sarong fishes a brown leather pouch out of a plastic bag at her feet. She throws it in my direction. I die a little inside.

'Can someone roll it for me? I don't know how.'

Bikini girl looks annoyed for a second before racerback on my left takes the pouch out of my hand and begins to assemble a cigarette. He moves slowly and deliberately; I suspect the spliff I just passed on isn't the first to go around tonight.

'I'm François.'

Of course he is.

I reach out to shake his hand before I realise he's using both to roll me a smoke, so I snatch mine away, but not before it has spent a long uncomfortable second hanging there in space.

'Alex.'

'Alec?'

'Sure.'

We go around the round.

The guy with the dreads is Raphaël.

The girl with the dreads is Ariel. I think they're a couple.

'Stéphanie.'

'Zachary.'

And bikini-top girl is Vanessa, which makes six, plus me is seven.

'Are you guys all on a trip together?'

Stéphanie explains that they've already done two months in Australia and have another month left in New Zealand. Flew into Auckland, saw the Bay of Islands, and today they've come up to Northland from Paihia. Tomorrow, Cape Reinga, then south all the way to the bottom of the South Island, back up as far as Wellington and then home.

'Where's home? I've actually been to Paris before.'

There's suddenly a lot of laughter coming from everyone. I feel my face going redder under today's sunburn. Is that bad? That I've only been to Paris? Is that like coming to New Zealand and only going to Auckland?

Stéphanie looks at everyone else before looking right at me.

'We are not French. We're from Canada.'

'What?'

'We're Québécois.'

And with that, everyone laughs again. I go redder and make a move to stand up and leave but François puts his hand on my knee and gently holds me in place.

'I really should get back to my sister.'

Vanessa flaps her hands in my direction. She's going to burn someone with that cigarette end.

'No, no. Stay. Please. She will find you here.'

I relax back into the grass. Raphaël throws a lighter at me; a white plastic Cricket lighter with a map of New Zealand on the side. I light the roll-up and throw the lighter back. Ariel digs a beer out of the box, opens it and hands it to me.

I forgot how many stars you can see when you're this far away from everything. It reminds me of driving out to Bethells Beach with Henry in the middle of the night. Sitting on the sand in the dark, under the Southern Cross, passing a hip flask back and forth.

There's still no sign of Amy, but I'm five or six beers in now and I've taken a few hits of the spliff by accident, thinking they were smokes being passed my way. How long has it been since she went for a shower? Two hours? Three? I've been dodging questions by answering with questions, firing back when I can and keeping things vague when I can't. The more people find out about you, the more they want to know.

And just as I think of her, there she is. I see her head in a gap between the tents.

I thought she'd look angrier.

And then François puts his arm around my shoulder and pulls me up closer to him. Amy frowns, studying me, him, us, for half a second, before returning to her neutral mask.

I stand quickly. 'I have to go.'

'Ah, come on, stick around. Have one more beer with us.'

Vanessa grabs a Lion Red and twists it open with the palm of her hand.

'No, really, I need to. My sister will definitely be missing me.'

François looks at me and I look at my feet.

‘Stay.’

Khalas.

‘Non, merci. Bonne nuit. Au revoir.’ My accent is terrible and I mumble as I run away, tripping over a guy rope and pulling the peg out of the ground on my way past.

‘Hey, sorry. I went to find cigarettes and I got kind of, um . . .’

‘Distracted?’

‘Sure. How was the shower?’

‘Not warm.’

‘You certainly took your time.’

Honestly, I could use a cold shower right about now.

‘I went for a look around.’

‘Find anything interesting?’

She offers the same frown as always and nothing further. ‘Did you get the cigarettes or not?’

I give her the leather pouch I smuggled out under my jacket.

‘Do you even know how to roll?’

‘Fuck.’

‘Fuck!’ She thrusts it back into my hand and I stuff it into my pocket, feeling my face getting hot.

The car is uncomfortable, at the least. The driver’s seat doesn’t quite go flat and I barely sleep. The Canadians are up late, not loud, but I hear their chatter long into the night. The language sounds nice.

It’s just one night, I keep telling myself. And then home.

And then home.