

## Escapism

by Sheila Lee

“Yes, yes, don’t go on about it”, said Barry. He paused to put more paint on his brush. His jaw was set like a sculptor’s work of art. “I’ve already said ‘Yes, I’ll talk to Emma’, so I will.” Tracey winced and was about to reply when her phone rang. It was their neighbour.

“Hello Beth,”

“Oh Tracey. I have heaps to do today. Could you look after Archie for me – just for a couple of hours this afternoon? I’ll give him a bottle before I bring him over and he should just sleep.”

“I really can’t, Beth. I have to....”

“Please Tracey, I wouldn’t ask if I wasn’t desperate.”

“No, Beth. I can’t. I am sorry.”

“I’ll make it just for an hour then, I promise.”

Tracey paused and Beth took those few wordless seconds as agreement.

“Thanks. I’ll drop him off around two. Bye.”

“Bye” said Tracey, to no-one as Beth had already stopped the call.

Tracey was aware of Barry’s questioning look, and knew his glimpse at her expression had given him his answer. She felt his eyes reach into the depths of her mind, where she did not want to go herself and certainly did not want him to go.

“Why do you always let her push you around? Help when you can, but when you need to do other things ‘No’ is no”.

“Beth said she was desperate and I’ve told her I’ll help her.” Tracey fingered the cross she wore, quietly adding, “It’s just for an hour this afternoon.”

As she turned to leave, she blinked a tear away and said, “I’ll be back for lunch.”

Tracey drove to the library, picked up some books and had a short chat to the ever-helpful staff there. Next stop the stationery shop, but she found herself driving straight past it and heading for the other side of town. She didn’t want to meet anyone else she knew today. When she saw the old bicycle surrounded by flowers, the yellow bench seat and a parking spot almost outside, she thought this café would give her the alone time she needed. She felt strangely at home in it, with its eclectic mix of tables and chairs, the comfy tartan corner sofa

and the book corner complete with a typewriter for anyone feeling the inclination to use it. Escapism she supposed, but thrust the thought away as it seemed defeatist and irresponsible. What had brought her here and why today? She delved into her emotional handbag and drew out irritation and disappointment, feelings directed specifically at Barry. They were prized gems, nuggets that she could draw on, perhaps to avoid things escalating into anger, or was it to avoid confronting herself?

She was upset at Barry's casual approach to something so important as their sixteen-year-old daughter's welfare. Emma's recent outburst flooded into her thinking in blacks and reds, dark and sinister. She poured out her heart silently to God as she poured the boiling water from the old china teapot into the cup sitting on the scallop-edged saucer. The crockery's dainty blue and yellow flowers reminded her of family holidays at her grandmother's home when life was simply sunshine and fun. She probably had irritations and disappointment then – "Time to bath, Tracey." "Put the light out." "I'm sorry you can't have that dress." – but, somewhere deep inside, even then, she had known that the boundaries were for her own good. Didn't she instil boundaries in Emma's life? Can this generation, saturated by social media, not see that there are safe and sensible limits and rules that are there for their own good?

The waitress came with the lemon slice she'd selected when paying earlier. "Thank you," said Tracey and added, "That looks lovely."

Lovely, Love. Did she really even have the capacity for love these days? As things got harder she felt an unbidden urge to detach, and wondered if love was still there. How could it not be, yet, where was it? The clink of the teaspoon, like the sound of a mini gong, brought the thought that without love, her recent words to Barry and Emma would have just been a jarring sound. She stirred the tea, watching the liquid swirl, just as her thoughts were twisting and spiralling. Barry, usually so dependable and Emma so sweet. What had happened? It seemed just the other day that she had watched four-year-old Emma crying, her little heart breaking because she thought that the puppy's squeals were squeals of pain. Barry had swept her up and explained that the little dog was just excited.

"Are you waiting on anything else?" Tracey shook her head and the waitress took away the wooden spoon with the number 11 on it. At age 11, Emma had won the cake decorating competition at her school. She had spent hours rolling icing and laying it just right on the

cake. The three intertwining hearts locked together in harmony. “It’s you, me and Daddy” she had whispered.

Tracey looked around her. The couple by the door were holding hands across the table and talking intently. She caught the man’s profile. He could have been a younger Barry. As she sat and sipped, Barry would be putting the last brushstrokes on the bedroom wall. It was like he put the house before his daughter. He had said he would talk to her. Why hadn’t he?

She glanced at the time. Lunch, then Archie, and another day would be gone. Actually another week. She had spent three days helping out at the op shop as they were short and then she had taken their old friend to visit his wife in hospital. On her return home, she remembered noticing the garden was looking unkempt. It hadn’t occurred to her then, but the thought now sliced through her mind causing her to physically flinch. That garden had been her “Yes” commitment to Barry.

“Painting the inside of the house is a big job”, Barry had said all those weeks ago. “I am happy to do it but, unless we’re going to be tripping over paints, drip sheets and the ladder for months, you’ll have to do the gardening.”

“No problem. I’ll do that.” Tracey had jumped in.

“Are you sure?”

Tracey had nodded and said a resounding “Yes”.

There it was, the “Yes” that now accusingly reverberated through her mind. Her “Yes” had not been yes at all and her “No” to Beth had not been no. She hastily searched her Bible app for the verses in 1 Timothy 3. They leapt out at her - the importance of managing one’s household and children. The buzz in the café was replaced by a thousand voices of accusation throbbing in her ears. Flushed and unsteady, she needed to get away. This time her escaping was for the right reasons. She was taking responsibility for her actions. Almost knocking over a chair she rushed for the door. Her shaky, over-the-shoulder “Thank you” to the staff wavered in the air.

She sat in the car, breathing deeply, seeking forgiveness for her dishonesty, for her casual approach to commitments and everything else that flooded into her mind. With a feeling of peace coming over her, she started her drive home. Her prayers continued like bubbles filling

the car. They flew out of the open windows and rose heavenward. Each one that left her, was replaced by forgiveness, grace, mercy.

The untidy garden greeted her, but, as she brought the car to a halt, she resolutely and rapidly summed up how she would tackle it. Calling “Hi” to Barry, she quickly organised lunch and, within ten minutes, the two were sitting on the deck eating together.

“I am so sorry, Barry. There’s that verse about seeing the speck in someone’s eye and not noticing the log in your own – well I have a log the size of Tane Mahuta in my eye.”

Barry smiled and took her hand.

“You aren’t the only one. I have a lot of apologising to do too.”

They sat together feeling a third person present with them, covering them, guiding them. What followed were flashes of clarity, times when words flowed like a refreshing stream, minutes when tears surfaced and moments of blessed and peaceful silence.

The ring of the doorbell invaded the stillness and Tracey went to open it. Beth, in a tumble of bags and rattles surrounding the baby capsule she was carrying, pushed past her into the lounge.

“He’s just been fed but needs a nappy change,” she announced dropping the bags on the floor and thrusting the baby capsule with Archie in it, into Tracey’s hand.

“I’ll see you in an hour.”

Tracey watched Beth hurry out of the door. Barry pursed his lips and raised his eyebrows. Archie looked first at Tracey and then at Barry, faces he knew well.

“Let’s get you changed” said Tracey. Archie sucked his hand in reply.

Barry was tidying up the paints in the bedroom when Tracey, rocking Archie in his capsule, came in. “The room is looking great,” she said. “So professionally finished. It’s been a huge job but so worthwhile.” She gave him a kiss and added, “Now I have to get on with my job!”

Under the shade of the Pohutukawa tree, Archie slept and Tracey clipped and weeded. The physical work allowed her mind to focus on Emma. After an hour, Barry, having finished inside, joined her and they agreed a strategy. The dishevelled garden was like the mess their lives were in, but now, already, it was looking much better, and together, they had a plan for helping their daughter.

Archie stirred and gave a little whimper. Tracey picked him up and gave him a hug.

“You slept for over an hour and a half and your Mummy isn’t back yet, and though I think you are the cutest, I’ll have to speak to her about deciding when she really needs help and when she just feels like time out.”

Archie smiled. Was it a knowing smile? Tracey thought it could be.