

clamped in concentration. Wheels spinning. Or do they stand. Still. Is the reeling, wheeling, spinning in my head.

'Where you going?'

'Shop.'

'What for?'

'Smokes.'

'Hey you kids, hey you kids, you know what. She's going to the shop. She's getting smokes.'

Why not? Rangi and his big ideas. Power poles, spiking skyward, two more poles to go. Rolling forward on pneumatic legs. So what if George, (one more pole) wouldn't, (almost there) wipe his, (there and in) bum.

Take it from the envelope and put it on the counter. That's the worst of having a husband and a brother with big ideas. The till rings.

Out again, the box fitting the palm of my hand, hot slime feel of cellophane. Drop the one cent change into a pocket and step the Crescent in reverse. George wouldn't expect... flesh and blood... for want of a fag...

'Where you going?'

'Home.'

'What for?'

'Smoke.'

'Hey you kids, key you kids, you know what...'

Quickly home, inside and up the stairs, go to the loo, sandals off, turn the element on high and rip the cellophane open. Lean over the reddening coil and draw in, draw in. Mouth fills. Swallow. I walk into the sitting room smoke seeping from my nose and mouth. Ears... Eyes...

I lay back with my feet up, puffing and blowing, room spinning. Poof, I go; one for Rangi. Poof; one for George. Poof, poof; two for me.

Then I get up and walk about the room blowing streamers in every direction. Big ideas.

I blow a double smoke ring out of my eyeballs, my hand finds my pocket and turns the one cent over for good luck.

PARADE

Yesterday I went with Hoani, Lena, and the little ones up along the creek where the bush begins, to cut fern and flax. Back there at the quiet edge of the bush with the hills rolling skyward and the sound of the sea behind me I was glad I had come home in response to Auntie's letter. It was easy there, to put aside the heaviness of spirit which had come upon me during the week of carnival. It was soothing to follow with my eyes the spreading circles of fern patterning the hills' sides, and good to feel the coolness of flax and to realise again the quiet strength of each speared leaf. It was good to look into the open throated flax blooms with their lit-coal colours, and to put a hand over the swollen black splitting pods with the seed heavy in them.

And I thought of how each pod would soon cast aside its heaviness and become a mere shell, warped and empty, while that which had been its own heaviness would become new life. New growth and strength.

As we carried the bundles of fern and flax that we had collected and put them into the creek to keep fresh for the morning I was able to feel that tomorrow, the final day of the carnival, would be different from the ones recently passed when realisation had come to me, resting in me like stone.

'Please come for the carnival,' Auntie's letter had said. And the letter from my little cousin Ruby: 'Please come Matewai. We haven't seen you for two years.' I had felt excitement in me at the thought of returning, being back with them. And I came for the carnival as they had asked.

It was easy this morning to feel a lightness of spirit, waking to a morning so warm and full-scented, with odours rising to the nostrils as though every morning comes from inside the earth. Rich damp smells drenched every grass blade, every seeded stalk, and every cluster of ragwort thistle and blackberry. Steaming up through the warming rosettes of cow dung. Stealing up the stems of lupin and along the lupin arms, out on to the little spread hands of lupin leaves.

And a sweet wood smell coming from the strewn chips and wood stack by the shed. A tangle of damp stinks from the fowl yard and orchard, and from the cold rustiness of the cow-holed swamp. Some of the earth morning smells had become trapped under the hot bodies of cows, and were being dispensed, along with the cows' own milk and saliva smells, from the swinging bellies and milk-filled udders as the animals made their way poke-legged to the milking sheds. That was what it was like this morning.

And there was a breath of sea. Somewhere—barely discernable since evening had been long forgotten and the night had been shrugged aside—somewhere the sea was casting its breath at the land. It was as though it were calling to the land, and to us as we woke and walked into the day, 'I'm here, I'm here. Don't forget about me.'

The sun fingered the ridges of hills as we pulled the flax and fern from the creek and began to decorate the truck for the parade. We worked quickly, tying and nailing the fronds and leaves into place. And when we had finished, Uncle Hirini drove the truck in under some trees where the sun could not reach it, while we went inside to change into our costumes.

Auntie had sent all the children to wash in the creek, and as I watched them from the window it was like seeing myself as I had been not very long ago. As if it were my own innocence that they cast on to the willow branches with their clothes. Light had filtered through the willow branches on to the creek's surface, spreading in small pools to the creek banks and on to the patches of watercress and shafts of reed.

The sun had put a finger on almost everything by now. It had touched our houses and the paddocks and tree tops, and stroked its silver over the sea. The beach stones were warming from the sun's touching, and black weed, thrown up by the sea, lay in heaps on the shore drying and helpless in the sun's relentless stroking.

I watched the bodies falling into water warmed from the sun's touching, and fingers, not his, squeezing at large bars of yellow soap. Fingers spreading blistery trails of suds up and over legs and arms. Bodies, heads, ears. 'Wash your taringas.' Auntie from the creek bank. Backsides, frontsides, fingers, toes. Then splashing, diving, puffing, and blowing in this pool of light. Out on to the banks, rubbing with towels, wrapping the towels around, scrambling back through the willows, across the yard where the sun caught them for a moment before they ran inside to dress. It was like seeing myself as I had been such a short time ago.

Auntie stood back on the heels of her bare feet, puffing at a cigarette, and looking at me through half shut eyes. Her round head was nodding at me, and her long hair which she had brushed out of the two thick plaits which usually circled her head fell about her shoulders, and two more hanks of hair glistened under her armpits. The skin on her shoulders and back was pale in its unaccustomed bareness, cream coloured and cool looking. And there was Granny Rita stretching lips over bare gums to smile at me.

'Very pretty dia. Very pretty dia,' she kept saying, strok-

ing the cloak that they had put on me, her old hands aged and grey like burnt paper. The little ones admiring, staring.

Setting me apart.

And I stood before them in the precious cloak, trying to smile.

'I knew our girl would come,' Auntie was saying again. 'I knew our girl would come if we sent for her.'

We could hear the truck wheezing out in the yard, and Grandpa Hohepa who is bent and crabby was hurrying everyone along, banging his stick on the floor. 'Kia tere,' he kept on saying. 'Kia tere.'

The men helped Granny Rita and Grandpa Hohepa on to the truck and sat them where they could see, then I stepped on to the platform which had been erected for me and sat down for the journey into town. The others formed their lines along each side of the tray and sat down too.

In town, in the heat of late morning, we moved slowly with the other parade floats along the streets lined with people. Past the railway station and shops, and over bridges and crossings, singing one action song after another. Hakas and pois.

And as I watched I noted again, as I had on the other carnival days of concerts and socials, the crowd reaction. I tried not to think. Tried not to let my early morning feelings leave me. Tried not to know that there was something different and strange in the people's reaction to us. And yet I knew this was not something new and strange, but only that during my time away from here my vision and understanding had expanded. I was able now to see myself and other members of my race as others see us. And this new understanding left me as abandoned and dry as an emptied pod of flax that rattles and rattles into the wind.

Everyone was clapping and cheering for Uncle Hirini and my cousin Hoani who kept jumping from the truck to the road, patterning with their taiaha, springing on their

toes and doing the pukana, making high pipping noises with their voices. Their tongues lolled and their eyes popped.

But it was as though my uncle and Hoani were a pair of clowns. As though they wore frilled collars and had paint on their noses, and kept dropping baggy pants to display spotted underwear and sock suspenders. As though they turned cartwheels and hit each other on the head, while someone else banged on a tin to show everyone that clowns have tin heads.

And the people's reaction to the rest of us? The singing, the pois? I could see enjoyment on the upturned faces and yet it occurred to me again and again that many people enjoyed zoos. That's how I felt. Animals in cages to be stared at. This one with stripes, this one with spots—or a trunk, or bad breath, the remains of a third eye. Talking, swinging by the tail, walking in circles, laughing, crying, having babies.

Or museums. Stuffed birds, rows of shells under glass, the wing span of an albatross, preserved bodies, shrunken heads. Empty gourds, and meeting houses where no one met any more.

I kept thinking and trying not to think, 'Is that what we are to them?' Museum pieces, curios, antiques, shells under glass. A travelling circus, a floating zoo. People clapping and cheering to show that they know about such things.

The sun was hot. Auntie at the end of the row was beaming, shining, as though she were the sun. A happy sun, smiling and singing to fill the whole world with song. And with her were all the little sunlets singing too, and stamping. Arms out, fingers to the heart, fists clenched, hands open, head to one side, face the front. Piupius swinging, making their own music, pois bobbing. And voices calling the names of the canoes—Tainui, Takitimu, Kurahaupo, Te Arawa... the little ones in the front bursting with the fullness of their own high voices and their dancing hands and

stamping feet, unaware that the crowd had put us under glass and that our uncle and cousin with their rolling eyes and prancing feet wore frilled collars and size nineteen shoes and had had pointed hats clapped down upon their heads.

Suddenly I felt a need to reach out to my auntie and uncle, to Hoani and the little ones, to old Rita and Hohepa.

We entered the sports ground, and when the truck stopped the little ones scrambled down and ran off to look for their mates from school. Auntie and Hoani helped Granny Rita and Grandpa Hohepa down. I felt older than any of them.

And it was hot. The sun threw down his spinnings of heat and weavings of light on to the cracked summer earth as we walked towards the pavilion.

'Do you ever feel as though you're in a circus?' I said to Hoani who is the same age as I am. He flipped onto his hands and walked the rest of the way upside down. I had a feeling Hoani knew what I was talking about.

Tea. Tea and curling sandwiches. Slabs of crumbling fruit cake, bottles of blood warm fizz, and someone saying, 'What're you doing in that outfit?' Boys from cousin Lena's school.

'Didn't you see us on the truck?' Lena was saying.

'Yeh, we saw.' One of the boys had Lena's poi and was swinging it round and round and making aeroplane noises.

Mr Goodwin, town councillor, town butcher, touching Uncle Hirini's shoulder and saying, 'Great, Great,' to show what a great person he himself was, being one of the carnival organisers and having lived in the township all his life amongst dangling sausages, crescents of black pudding, leg roasts, rib roasts, flannelled tripe, silverside, rolled beef, cutlets, dripping. 'Great.' He was Great. You could tell by the prime steak hand on Uncle's shoulder.

Uncle Hirini believed the hand. Everyone who saw the

hand believed it too, or so it seemed to me. They were all believers on days such as these.

And the woman president of the C.W.I. shouting at Granny Rita as though Granny were deaf or simple. Granny Rita nodding her head, waiting for the woman to go away so she could eat her cake.

It was stuffy and hot in the hall with the stale beer and smoke smell clinging to its walls and floor, and to the old chipped forms and sagging trestle tables. Bird dirt, spider webs, mice droppings. The little ones had had enough to eat and were running up and down with their mates from school, their piupius swinging and clacking about their legs. Auntie rounding them all up and whispering to go outside. Auntie on her best behaviour wishing those kids would get out and stop shaming her. Wanting to yell, 'Get out you kids. Get outside and play. You spoil those piupius and I'll whack your bums.' Auntie sipping tea and nibbling at a sandwich.

We began to collect the dishes. Squashed raisins, tea dregs. The men were stacking the trestles and shifting forms. Mrs President put her hands into the soapy water and smiled at the ceiling, smiled to show what sort of day it was. 'Many hands make light work,' she sang out. We reached for towels, we reached for wet plates to prove how right she was.

Outside, people were buying and selling, guessing weights and stepping chains, but I went to where Granny Rita and Grandpa Hohepa were sitting in the shade of a tree, guarding the cloak between them.

More entertainment. The lines were forming again but I sat down by old Rita and Hohepa out of the sun's heat.

'Go,' Granny Rita was saying to me. 'Take your place.'

'I think I'll watch this time, Nanny.'

'You're very sad today, dia. Very sad.'

Granny Rita's eyes pricking at my skin. Old Hohepa's too.

'It's hot Nanny.'

A crowd had gathered to watch the group and the singing had begun, but those two put their eyes on me, waiting for me to speak.

'They think that's all we're good for,' I said. 'A laugh and that's all. Amusement. In any other week of the year we don't exist. Once a year we're taken out and put on show, like relics.'

And silence.

Silence with people laughing and talking.

Silence with the singing lifting skyward, and children playing.

Silence. Waiting for them to say something to me. Wondering what they would say.

'You grow older, you understand more,' Granny Rita said to me.

Silence and waiting.

'No one can take your eyes from you,' she said. Which is true.

Then old Hohepa, who is bent and sometimes crabby said, 'It is your job, this. To show others who we are.'

And I sat there with them for a long time. Quiet. Realising what had been put upon me. Then I went towards the group and took my place, and began to stamp my feet on to the cracked earth, and to lift my voice to the sun who holds the earth's strength within himself.

And gradually the sun withdrew his touch and the grounds began to empty, leaving a flutter of paper, trampled heads of dandelion and clover, and insects finding a way into the sticky sweet necks of empty bottles.

The truck had been in the sun all afternoon. The withered curling fern and drooping flax gave it the appearance of a scaly monster, asleep and forgotten, left in a corner to die. I helped Granny Rita into the cab beside Grandpa Hohepa.

'This old bum gets too sore on those hard boards. This old bum wants a soft chair for going home. Ah lovely dia.

Move your fat bum ova Hepa.' The old parched hand on my cheek. 'Not to worry dia, not to worry.'

And on the back of the truck we all moved close together against the small chill that evening had brought in. Through the town's centre then along the blackening roads. On into the night until the road ended. Opening gates, closing them. Crossing the dark paddocks with the hills dense on one hand, the black patch of sea on the other. And the only visible thing, the narrow rind of foam curling shoreward under a sky emptied of light. Listening, I could hear the shuffle of water on stone, and rising above this were the groans and sighs of a derelict monster with his scales withered and dropping, making his short sighted way through prickles and fern, over cow pats and stinging nettle, along fence lines, past the lupin bushes, their fingers crimped against the withdrawal of the day.

I took in a big breath, filling my lungs with sea and air and land and people. And with past and present and future, and felt a new strength course through me. I lifted my voice to sing and heard and felt the others join with me. Singing loudly into the darkest of nights. Calling on the strength of the people. Calling them to paddle the canoes and to paddle on and on. To haul the canoes down and paddle. On and on—

'Hoea ra nga waka
E te iwi e,
Hoea hoea ra,
Aotea, Tainui, Kurahaupo,
Hoea hoea ra.

Toia mai nga waka
E te iwi e,
Hoea hoea ra,
Mataatua, Te Arawa,
Takitimu, Tokomaru,
Hoea hoea ra.'