

## DUMBASS BLOND NEWBIE

Tomorrow it would be eight years. Eight years of learning to package the feelings and accept the unknown.

When he was a kid, Witi couldn't understand any of it – he just wanted things normal again – but as a teen he felt he was starting to make progress and things were finally getting better.

Yeah, just a little better than the day before.

And the day before that.

Like a new tide covering a shipwreck that tiny bit more. One grain of sand at a time.

Witi wrote that down in his book. He put it on the grass beside him and cradled his guitar on his crossed legs. His fingers picked at the strings as he stared down the courtyard of his college, past the students on their lunch break. How much longer would she be? She'd probably found others more normal to be with, leaving him hanging here on the sliver of lawn between the science and toilet blocks.

The loner whose old man disappeared eight years ago.

Yeah nah, just another thought to package there, eh.

Witi closed his eyes and let the notion drift away with the next few chords. When he opened them again a rugby ball was sitting beside his bare feet. In the distance some of the first-fifteen players had their

hands up, prompting him to kick it back. Like it was a natural thing to do. Witi put the guitar down and stood. Which end was meant to be kicked? He'd never bothered to learn that sort of stuff. Team sports seemed like way too much co-ordination. And too much talking to others. In the end he just threw a foot into it. The ball sliced off to the side and onto the roof of the science block.

The students made their way towards Witi. Like a set of six dumpers from the ocean's horizon. Except this wasn't the beach. This was all concrete and vertical walls and big egos with their friggin' ball stuck on a roof. Man, if only these guys were waves. He could handle them. Piece of piss.

What the fuck, said the guy in the middle. Go get our ball.

Witi looked up towards the roof and let out a quiet whistle. Gonna need the caretaker for that.

Just climb up yourself.

Witi looked at the bare wall of the building. Yeah nah, sorry, fullas.

Then throw his guitar up there, Jimmy, said one of the others.

Yeah, do it. That'd be a crack-up, said another.

Witi stood in front of the instrument. He'd stand his ground. Silent-as, but willing to fight with every dirty tactic necessary so not one of them could touch his dad's guitar.

But he wasn't expecting one of them to grab his notebook instead. The lankiest, seven foot of muscle sinew and not much else. His long fingers started swiping pages loudly. He stopped at one point and chuckled.

*Alana?* Aren't you meant to be gay or something?

The others laughed.

Witi knew how this would play out. No teachers around; guys juiced up on testosterone and what else; no rugby practice today. An injustice of sorts. A mismatch in the food chain. It was all kind of a cliché around here.

Except...

Witi threw the first punch. The other guy might've been tall, but he wasn't expecting it and when it connected comfortably with his chin he tumbled like a falling pine, dropping the book in the process. But it wouldn't stop there – not at this college.

Fists like a swarm of bees.

Stinging from every direction.

Witi dropped to his elbows and knees to cower over the guitar, to protect it. He reached out and snatched his notebook in under his torso. They weren't getting that, either.

He felt more punches, shoves. A foot or two.

Just another hold-down: Hold my breath. Wait for the set to pass. Just keep holding my breath.

The ground vibrated, like a tremor. Something around them was under pressure, frantic even, and with each hit he received he could feel it wanting to break free.

Surprised tones. Aggravated voices. A body landing on the grass next to him. The relief of no more hits. The principal's son, Jimmy, was sitting there, dabbing the flow of blood from his nose with the

back of his wrist. There was a new fight carrying on, but by now there were teachers trying to pull bodies apart, making it hard to see who had thrown themselves – and their reputation – into the lynch mob to help him out.

Everyone parted. One guy was left sitting on the grass.

Witi had never seen him before. He was missing shirt buttons and his hair stuck out all over the place. He flicked his head back and with a pass of his palms the strands of blond settled neatly back into place. He wiped blood from his lip and then looked at Witi.

Witi grinned back and even held the stare while the boy was hauled away, flanked by two teachers.

Has everyone round here got a ticket to themselves? Witi heard him ask one of the teachers.

Bugged if Witi knew what he was talking about.

One thing was legit, though – blond boys were a rarity round here. Specially ones not looking for the welcome mat. Dumbass should've known better than to interfere. Dumbass blond newbie.

Witi cradled his guitar and prepared to stand. A teacher offered a hand.

Another group of students started yelling as they piled out of the toilet block next door. There were shrieks and swearing from soaked kids who leapt into the yard to avoid water surging through the door.

Someone shouted, Water's shooting out of the taps and toilets. Someone better get a plumber 'cos I ain't cleaning it up!

## OUTTA MY LEAGUE

After school, Witi sat in his Telstar and stared at a fantail on the tip of the bonnet. It stared back at him and for a long time neither budged. Eventually Witi pulled the book from his satchel, opened it and wrote:

*Angels and feathers*

*And wings that soar*

*Heavy hearts*

*Anchored to the floor*

He slid the book back in the bag. When he looked up again the bird had vanished. Had it just been another delusion? Probably. He hadn't been back to that stuffy doctor's office for a couple of years now. Things seemed to be getting sorted, no dramas, but recently he'd had these visions, growing from something he experienced, first once a month or so, then every other week, then almost daily. Would his mum even have the clinic's details still? Man, he hoped not. Nothing was worth heading back to that building for.

A couple of seniors the same year as him walked past his window. They stared in at him, so he jerked his head back and raised his eyebrows. One turned and said something to the other and they both laughed.

Witi felt the surge inside him:

A fresh short emotional swell, like a wind swell, yeah, nah.

Manageable, just.

A bit of chop, a few whitecaps.

Still, it would be bloody good timing if she ...

The passenger door opened and Alana was with him.

Whaddya waiting for? Let's go.

Bout time, babe.

Stop calling me that.

She pulled her hair tie out and wavy brown settled across her shoulders, the surf board nudging at her head.

C'mon, she said, fixing her seatbelt. The tide turned an hour ago.

He smiled. His ocean now glassy.

They headed east, winding through the blocks of tradies' businesses where most of the college students' parents worked. Every street revealed another new *For Sale* or *For Lease* sign in front of an empty shell of a building. Witi and Alana counted the impact it was having by the empty desks in the classrooms. Students suddenly gone one day, packed up with the parents and starting afresh in some other town.

In the next suburb, each garden with its trees took the space of five from their own neighbourhood. Witi envied the security of the people living in these flash houses.

Jimmy had his nose broken today, Alana said. By some new guy, an Aussie.

I know. Had a ringside seat to it.

Heard you were amongst it. One day you're gonna –

I had them.

I also heard he saved you a few extra bruises. Lucky you'll still be able to surf this arvo.

*I had them.* Just rolling out my strategy is all.

*Pfft*, whatever. Good job about Jimmy, anyway.

Yeah, good job, he murmured.

What about when everything exploded in the bathroom, she said. How weird was that?

Much of the rest of the trip was, as usual, in silence. Witi liked the fact Alana didn't feel the need to fill the empty spaces with her voice, like so many of the other girls he knew. The only noise coming from her seat was the whistle from her partially open window whenever he went over fifty-five.

His mum worked in walking distance to home and he couldn't remember the last time she ventured far enough to warrant the use of a car. His dad had bought this one for her with cash he'd saved from the handouts the record company fed him. It'd been brand spanking, straight from the showroom. She told Witi it had been the flashiest set of wheels in the neighbourhood. Everyone thought they were crazy sticking roof racks on it. They didn't understand – surfers were a rare breed back then. Those same racks were now forever rusted to the roof, and while sticking the boards on top would give them

more room in the car, at a college like theirs, the boards would be gone by the end of first period. Not that it mattered – it was only ever the two of them anyway, a couple of water babies bound by solar energy and surfing heritage. Surfers were still rare in this part of the city – an oval ball beat a couple of surfboards every time. Whatever, it wasn't like Witi was complaining.

Not that he thought Alana was a beauty queen or anything, but truth was, she was still out of his league.

You're my only friend, he'd joke to her. But he figured she knew he meant it.

His girlfriend, but not his girlfriend. He didn't think, anyway.

She understood him better than most. Her old man was a wax-head too, eh.

Alana's dad didn't surf anymore, but he did a good job of planting the stoke in her way before he let the spiders and dust take over his boards.

It was their friendship glue, Witi was convinced. She understood when Witi told her: Last night I peeled back the duvet and it formed a barrelling right hander.

He saw weird stuff sometimes, like birds on bonnets, but she never judged him or got freaked out.

And at night he could hear the ocean talking to him over the noise of the traffic and the train track, because he had ocean trapped in his ear again.

The other girls at college didn't get him. Didn't want to. But she did.

And that was sweet with him.



At the end of a gravel road and the start of a tree plantation, the kind where the owners had buggered off for years to let the trees do their thing, Witi turned the engine off.

Look at that, Alana said. He's cute.

She was pointing at the fantail darting in the air at the front of the vehicle.

Man, that's weird, Witi said.

Weird? Bet he reckons you're the weird one.

It then flew over and perched on the farm gate that marked the next stage of their journey, before heading into the shadow of trees on the other side.

Witi swung a bag of wetties and towels over his shoulder and they grabbed a board each. Hanging off the locked gate was a sign number-eight wired to the fence: *Pirate Propaty, No Axecess*. With spelling like that, what was the worst that could happen? They ignored it—like always—and climbed over.

Further down the track, salt began to resonate with the smell of pine. The sound of wind through branches was joined by the beat of the ocean. Holding his head at an angle, Witi could swear it was faint voices calling to him.

They scaled down a small bank, across the boundary fence and out along a bluff overhanging the South Pacific.

Alana went straight to the edge to check on the surf. The swell hadn't dropped since they were here yesterday. She hooted so loud gulls nesting in the cliff took flight, signalling with their screeches

the surfers' arrival.

Below them, a decent fall away, a head-high set of waves entered the cove. From up here they could see giant submerged rocks amongst the moving kelp. Every time a wave peaked and peeled off in a left-hand wall, the boulders rumbled together. By low tide these same rocks would be exposed.

No wonder Alana had been in a hurry.

She was already back by the fenceline, halfway changed. She pulled her wetsuit up her legs, hopping on the spot to lift the tight neoprene over her backside. She zipped up her suit and Witi saw the curves a college uniform covered so well. She jogged past and gave him an exaggerated stare, which he returned with a wolf whistle. She stopped at the edge of the bluff and peered over.

She waited.

Waited.

Readied.

She threw her board as far off the ledge as she could.

First wave's mine, slow coach, she yelled and leapt off the headland.

Witi ran to the ledge. Below she was swimming to her board. Once she reached it, she looked up and gestured him to hurry up.

He waved back and finished zipping up his own wetsuit.

Who throws themselves off shit like this these days? Alana does, that's who, and all the bubble wrap in the world couldn't stick to her.

She was the toughest girl he knew, besides his mum.

Alana was into it for the simple raw adventure. Witi got that feeling too, understood it completely, but there was another reason for his deeper affinity with the ocean. His mum once told him that when he was born, the old man took him to the beach and dipped him in an ocean wave, he guessed like some sort of DIY baptism. But ever since his dad vanished, Witi convinced himself that the final dying seconds of energy from that initial wave – something that started much bigger and more powerful and many years before – had found a new life inside him, like some kind of reincarnation had taken place. Even now, eight years since the detective in charge told them they'd stopped looking and classed it as abandonment, Witi still fully believed this.

Hadn't told Alana any of that yet, though.

Didn't want to make out he was competing with her for the ocean's affection, eh, Witi figured. It's not what he meant and she could get huffy. Not keen on kicking around by himself if she bailed on him.

Witi's board spiralled through open space and after lining up the dark green of deep water, he launched after it.

He turned the surfboard back towards the beach and stroked into the first wave of a new set. The surge scooped under and pushed him forward like a giant's silent hand. He floated to his feet and accelerated down the slope. The wave pitched its lip over him. Like so many times before. The fingers on his inside hand clawed into the wave, but where the roar of water would normally be, he instead heard whispers, hundreds of them. Like a concert crowd in a library.

Must've lasted only a couple of seconds— the length of the barrel, not long enough for Witi to be convinced. Maybe it was just the angle of the swell. Or the cross-shore wind. Or simply another hallucination to rack up.

Through the daylight ahead he saw Alana sit up on her board, hold an imaginary camera to her eye and click before her own image disappeared up and over the wave. Witi adapted to the wave's mood and carved the surfboard back into the chaos. He found enough energy to push through turns and send feathers of water skyward. The whole ride may've only lasted a few seconds, but by the time he hit the final section and sent his board into the air, the barrel episode with the voices had become irrelevant.

The paddle back gave him an opportunity to watch Alana's ride: she did a series of cutbacks and driving bottom turns in her own way. Witi raised a hand and hooted loudly as she sped past close enough for him to touch her. Witi often thought of surfing as more a wahine than a guy thing anyway. Something to do with wanting to nurture rather than destroy. Same reason it was *Mother Nature* not *Old Man Nature*. Alana was all over this. She attacked waves for sure—last year she made some of the local upstarts feel a little inadequate in the nuts area when they watched her drop in on an eight-foot beast—but she always made it look like she was in no danger, like she'd signed a deal with Tangaroa himself.

Or perhaps it was because she was baptised by a waxhead of a dad too, fully charging on a lifelong connection with the ocean.