

IAN C. SMITH

TINY FLIGHTLESS BIRDS

When Jude told her Year Nine students that we had chosen Tahiti for our second stopover, a girl whose neck was often bruised with love bites, had asked, *'Is your husband . . . oops. Is your friend the romantic type then, miss?'*

Jude claimed to be the romantic one yet it was me who was always willing to make love. Those school stories reminded me of my learning days. Jude said that her principal was slack.

'When we get back . . . I mean *if* we ever come home,' she said, 'he'll still be sitting there at his desk with no sign of movement, covered with cobwebs, with his shoe-laces tied together. The kids will have grown tired of waiting to see him trip up. They'll have gone off and got married, or wasted their tragic little lives in some equally-boring way. Nothing will have changed.'

Jude had told the girl that we were flying to New Zealand first to buy a kiwi charm for her bracelet. She said we needed the change of luck. I had snorted when Jude selected Auckland for our other stopover, instead of Honolulu.

The flight was my first, but not Jude's. She sat between me and a business man we met in the bar.

'Christ, these drinks were bloody dear!' I had commented.

Jude said, 'You always have to pay more at airports, darling.' The business man had agreed, and Jude said, 'Drink up, and relax. We won't be seeing our friends again for aeons.'

I thought of my Uncle Ian who was in trouble for joy-riding in stolen cars when he was a tattooed teenager. Now the tattoos have faded, and so has Uncle Ian.

In the aircraft, Jude and the business man enjoyed a lively conversation which I could never get near. I might have punched him when I was younger, and if there was more room. That would have been the finish of Jude and me, forever and ever, ah, business men. The thought of losing Jude scared me.

Nobody from my family saw us off. Those with jobs went to work and those without jobs lacked the money to waste on getting to and from the airport, and were not interested in us anyway.

'They must've known about the rip-off merchants behind the bar,' I had joked to Jude's sister when she politely asked where my relatives were. She had just looked at me as if she believed I should be behind bars.

That sister has a face like a cardboard box. It's odd how sisters can be so different.

I envied Jude for the way she handled the goodbyes. Straight into their arms for a *kissy-cuddly-look after yourself-take care* she had slipped as easily as ignoring your alarm clock on a frosty morning. I stiffened at the prospect, particularly with her sister, although I never had any trouble kissing Jude.

They had made us pose for the camera's interpretation of the truth. That niggles me. Somewhere — probably in Jude's travel photo album — is this historical evidence; but of what? A man who is too young, and whose grin is too wide, and an older woman with a sexy body, who is pulling a face, stand with their arms around each other, among strangers who hold cigarettes and glasses.

'You're so photogenic,' Jude had said. 'You should love having your looks captured for posterity.'

She then whispered something very private, something which would have made her sister choke, and I had laughed aloud.

'That's better,' Jude's sister said, throttling our camera like a crow gripping a rabbit's carcass, and recording my amusement.

Jude had *shooshed* at that moment, so perhaps she destroyed the photograph.

The meal interrupted their talking. While I was still unravelling mine, the business man tried to impress Jude by saying the food tasted of its packaging. She shared this game by judging the wine to be too sharp. I didn't enjoy the wine but drank it without making trendy comments. I thought the food was filling for what looked such a small amount.

When the captain issued the local weather report and time, I said, 'Give us your watch and I'll alter it for you.'

Jude was hopeless with digitals. After I had stolen two hours of her life, the business man asked if I would mind adjusting his time. I wanted to show him up for being hopeless but Jude looked at me with that *love-in-the-eyes* face she donated to kids whenever she was around them, and I just fixed the watch. I was glad the flight was only short.

When the first spacemen arrive at the Milky Way I wonder if the galaxy will look like a city seen from a descending aircraft at night, like twinkling stars embedded in ink. I stretched my fascinated stare past Jude's lovely smell and his thinning hair. As I leaned across, I pressed my hand on her thigh. *Twinkle, twinkle, little lights, I can feel your lucky tights.* She pressed my hand down harder, just for a moment, then firmly pushed it away.

Jude looked at me, her gaze travelling in the opposite direction from most of the other passengers', as we banked and circled. Her expression was the same as when we had closed our front gate for the last time. We sold the house Jude called a *cottage*. She had put a lot into that place. In the early days she laughed when I regularly bumped my head against the hanging baskets on the porch, bits of sphagnum moss clinging to my hair while purple creeper swung first one way, then the other, like a demented trapeze act.

'Some of these bags have been going around a long time,' I said.

'Like me.'

'I hope there hasn't been a stuff-up. Are you sure this is the right luggage escalator?'

Our packs appeared, and Jude said, 'There they are, and it's called a *carousel*.'

This seemed to inspire her to sing in a tender voice I could barely hear, about a shy lover. I had never heard the song before. Jude's face became gentler, more thoughtful, and even more womanly. She was always doing things like that, eccentric things which mystified me.

The business man looked as though he needed the exercise when he heaved his leather suitcases onto a trolley. Jude waved back and finished off a great evening for him with her smile which lit a honey glow in her eyes.

'You could have waved goodbye, Stu,' she said.

'What? Who? Oh, Baldy. I didn't see him.'

Auckland was my first youth hostel. Reading the notice-board produced that adventure tingle which is never so effective again once you have travelled a lot. *Y.H.* could have been for *Yanks' Home*, and the confident drawls I kept overhearing reminded me of our eventual destination.

Jude made friends with other tourists and insisted on calling them *travellers*. *Lights out* was too early.

'Your dormitory's down there.'

She pointed to a labyrinth of corridors, and repeated a number.

'I'd rather be sleeping with you,' I said. 'That's another reason we should be married.'

'Makes no difference. It's segregated sexes, married or not.' She gave me a little squeeze. 'Don't let's start that again.'

A list of hostel laws adorned the wall like Mum's calendars, or the pictures Jude's old parents had everywhere you swivelled your head. The

borders between the frames and the pictures in Jude's parent's house were bigger than the actual pictures.

'Who invented all these rules? Your bloody family?' I wished that I hadn't said it. Jude looked tired. 'Tomorrow we'll explore. I hope there are no poofs down that dark passage,' I clowned. 'I'm scared.'

I claimed a lower bunk which was shielded by bulky machinery on one side. A narrow bunk, a hard mattress, and a sleeping-sheet that twisted into a strait-jacket, didn't help me sleep. I had gone to bed two hours too early, and was upset by a vague something I couldn't handcuff to my brain.

The machinery was a boiler which played the midnight to dawn shift. I listened as each hour was signalled by its tiny *pip* in the night, and while my body tensed to rigidity, my mind gathered speed until it whirled like a wild dance of love. I tried to guess if any of the other hostellers were awake. The money-belt grew hotter as insomnia completely mastered me. I thought about our travellers' cheques, half in Jude's name, and half in mine, and imagined my sweat ruining them while the camera poked my bones. I remembered the Tattsлото ticket Mum had put through the wash when I left it in my pants pocket. When my bare arm lifted from the mattress it felt like ripping a band-aid off. I wondered who slept there last, and hoped that he had been clean.

I made faces at the time in that shadowy cavern of snores and coughs. It looked like nearly six o'clock, and then I heard the last mocking *pip*. No blanketed huddles moved when I soft-footed past. I followed the shower signs, and just as I creaked up a short flight of stairs, a red alarm bell on the wall rang. The noise was an outrage, a terrible violation of the dawn silence. I hurried into the first shower cubicle like a criminal.

I was cocooned in lather and relieving myself with steady accuracy down the centre of the drain-hole when some official farthing intruded his embarrassed head through the doorway.

'Quick!' he said. 'Vacate the building immediately. There's a fire.' I started to rinse myself and he added, 'Don't go back for your things. There isn't time.'

I believed that I was somehow responsible for triggering the screeching bell, but couldn't tell him. I was about to attempt a protesting explanation when he vanished into the warren, presumably to ferret out all the other bunnies. I wondered what Jude would say.

Half-dry, I scurried back to the empty dormitory where the rest of my travelling possessions looked like a deserted colony. I stuffed dirty

underwear into an outside pocket of my new backpack, jammed the zip, and hurled the pack over my shoulder.

A soft rain was settling the city dust, and the sleepy hostellers shared a comforting whinge. Jude told a strange female, 'See! I said he'd be the last out. He's useless at getting up.'

They swapped a smug, sexist look, so I let the remark sail past. The fireman in charge, a man with a beer-gut which stretched his uniform cruelly, directed us back inside.

I felt sorry for him when a bombardment of wisecracks crumbled his lecture. He tried to point out our numerous mistakes, and the possible consequences if the exercise had not been just a drill. He finally lost control of his audience when he said, 'You don't want to be like the Yanks in them Yankee films,' and a gentle ripple of laughter spread like a real fire. The laughter grew in volume while his face started to resemble the colour of that bell near those creaky stairs.

I was curious about America. I liked the American sense of humour so far, and guessed that their fire chiefs would all look like *Steve McQueen*.

In Rotorua we had a room to ourselves. I booked it. The sun was up well before us.

'Do I pass?' Jude said, pirouetting when she had finished dressing. 'Not bad for an old chook, eh?'

'I'd rather old chook than pullet.'

She looked gorgeous, even though she frowned at my remark.

After Jude had posted a letter, we sniffed our way to Whakarewarewa where she leaned over a geyser which seethed and bubbled like a witches' cauldron.

'That old geezer's pervy up your skirt,' I said, trying not to smile.

Two Maoris in leather jackets with silver studs that shone like war medals, watched her. They didn't bother hiding their smiles. I steered Jude away and we inspected the Maori graves.

'All dead,' she stated flatly. 'Life's so bloody futile. What does anything matter in the end?'

'Phwaa! This rotten egg stink. No wonder they're all dead,' I said. 'It reminds me of when my mates used to stay the weekend in our sleepout. Mum made us air the joint before she'd step inside after we'd spent a night telling filthy jokes under the blankets.'

'I wrote to my mother.'

I had wondered who the letter was for. 'I thought you weren't going to?' I said.

'My sisters would have told her eventually. I can't expect them to keep a secret like that.'

'Did you give her an address to write to?'

'How can I? We don't have one.'

'We will in the States.'

'I'm not looking forward to that. It's no use, I just can't cut myself off completely. Anyway, the damage has already been done. They'll never accept you.'

Now, if anybody farts, I always remember Rotorua.

We were cold in the airport bus despite the paua fritters warming our insides. Jude's new charm danced a silver jig and her earrings swayed like drunken plumb-bobs when the driver tried to emulate *Bruce McLaren* on the corners.

Our flight didn't leave until eleven that night.

London via Papeete and Los Angeles.

The announcement activated worms through my paua fritters. I thought if we could just keep moving we might outdistance trouble.

At the desk they had warned that security would be heavy because the Queen's son was travelling on our flight. He had been teaching in New Zealand and was going home to his mum. I tried to picture royalty with a grass-skirted beauty, but failed. I couldn't even see him in front of a class like I could see Jude.

'Perhaps we'll spot him?' I said.

Jude quietly explained about *First Class* and *Economy*. Her earrings, I noticed, were tiny flightless birds, like her charm.

'He probably won't even leave the 'plane at Tahiti,' she said.

I didn't understand then why I was suddenly sad. It was my upbringing which saved me from crying in public. The feeling only lasted seconds.

They let Jude straight through but stopped me. I felt such a dill, standing there with my arms held wide like a scarecrow in my *All Blacks* jumper while they carefully frisked me. The other passengers stared the way people do whenever another human being is singled out.