

3rd Place (2021): Kayleen Hazlehurst, *Among the Cotton Tails*

In places the old coast road had dropped away. Last winter's rains had carved shallow gullies through the clay and sandstone, washing what was left of the gravel into narrow ridges of gunmetal against strips of pumice. Gusts of dry air toyed with dust and debris where water had once run.

Fallen trees covered with mosses and new growth saplings were familiar landmarks. The umbrella heads of ponga dissolved into the silver-grey of mānuka, while increasing numbers of shag and heron on inland ponds bore witness to the approaching coastline. A final burst through scrub brought them into an ivory expanse of dunes, cotton tails and other wild grasses.

Glass-fine sand under feet freed from jandals ensured that the last twenty yards of pathway to the beach house culminated in a celebration of the senses. The cry of seabirds, the pounding surf, the smell of seaweed—each strung, like so many more beads, into the awakening consciousness of girlhood and youth.

Unpacking was a kind of coming home. The companionship of travel had drawn the family closer. Irritation expressed in parents' voices during the hours of packing and 'getting away' was replaced by gentler tones of fond instruction. Children became co-operative and fleet-of-foot. Food and blankets, clothes and boxes, old rods and tackle were stashed in rightful places in readiness for holiday pursuits.

In the narrow kitchen their mother prepared an 'easy meal' of eggs and baked beans on toast with hot Milo. On either side of her, their father took charge of water-boiling manoeuvres for feet and face washing in aluminium bowls retrieved from cupboards and assigned to children on first nights, before the water tank heated.

Jamie and her twin flung themselves onto the bunks—Peter on top, she on the bottom—to bury their heads in the musty bedding. If the evening was inclement, hot water bottles would be tucked into sleeping bags 'to expel the damp', their mother said. After lights-out, reading in bed was conducted by stealth and torch light among memories of summers past.

Before venturing forth to spots known to be fruitful for fishermen, Dad would spend the morning untangling the tackle, muttering oaths over snarled lines and birds' nests abandoned the previous year. Mum would evict knots with her fingernails, threading new hooks and old sinkers onto lines of varying antiquity. Dad would be despatched bearing four lamb sandwiches, a cold sausage, a lump of cheese, an orange, and a packet of gingernut biscuits to dunk in his tea.

At mid-morning, Mum went to the beach for 'a refreshing swim'. Her sturdy turquoise swimsuit with its tummy support, skirted front piece and low cut back, framed the pleasantly freckled flesh of her generation. Her sorties were undertaken with the minimum of provisions—a thermos of tea, a buttered scone, a paring knife and apple, a magazine, beach towel and bathing cap all stuffed into an old straw kit.

From dawn Peter was out in the bay in his iridescent togs with the older boys. From the balcony Jamie watched his slim torso, well-proportioned for a boy of thirteen, plummeting down the green water, spinning his board over spent foam, or paddling out to sea in search of another wave.

As children, Peter and Jamie had often lain among the cotton tails to spy upon the teenagers. The first days of summer were important in these rituals of friendship. Beaches were dancefloors, where girls in hip-hugging costumes giggled and posed, while boys

displayed their surfing agility or threw themselves on the sand to flirt with the sisters of their friends.

Jamie longed to be a part of this, but her main wish was to see Johnny Allen again. After a quick orange juice, she tied a floral wrap around her waist, grabbed the largest beach towel, and ran towards the beach.

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Someone was holding her hand. She could feel the plumpness of his palm, the softness of his fingers. He was holding and turning her hand, stroking each side. Lifting and kissing it, then placing it back down on the bed. It was her husband; she knew his energy. He was not happy.

There was a noise—a squeak of door, a shuffle of feet, a rustle of bag and coat being placed on the chair.

‘How is she, Dad?’

‘Not bad. Quiet, anyway.’

‘Of course, she’s quiet she’s in a coma.’

‘Maybe she can hear us. They say people can.’

‘Wishful thinking. But if it helps, you keep talking. It can’t do any harm.’ Her tone was condescending.

‘It’s *not* wishful thinking, Annelie. There’ve been studies. People wake up. *Why* are you so cynical?’

‘I’m sorry. Let’s not argue in case it upsets her.’

There was a sucking-in of air. A sob. A murmur of sympathy. Was he crying?

‘Oh Dad, I’m so sorry.’

Please don’t take your hand away, John. She remembered the crumpling of his face, the tremor in his voice when he first heard the news. Ovarian cancer. She was only fifty-two.

‘Should I bring the kids in again, do you think?’

‘No, Annelie. She’s too unwell for the grandchildren. Let’s give her some peace.’

That’s right, dear. You be firm.

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The sand dunes were covered with fluffy white tufts that shifted gently on olive-grey sprigs—ocean grasses that had held together the hills against the years of tides and winds. She meandered down the trail. Soft sand made running difficult, requiring perseverance. A determined lifting of feet that sank deep with each footfall. Then there was an opening, a sloping away of the dunes. She had arrived.

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Annelie had gone back to her office, back to her life. John was eating sandwiches from greaseproof paper and pouring coffee from his thermos. She was conscience of rustling and the smell of warm liquid. *I’m glad you’re looking after yourself.*

The doctor came in, she recognised his heavy step, it was an appearance she dreaded. He took the chart from the bed, muttered something and replaced it with a ‘clink’. The surgery had been radical, he warned, she might not recover. He was troubled by this unexpected decline.

‘Mrs Allen, can you hear me?’ The specialist lifted her eyelids, found nobody home, apparently, and left.

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Friends were gathering on the beach. Talking. Laughing. Jamie held back. He emerged from the waves at the far end carrying a much larger surf board. He had grown taller. The two years difference in their ages didn't matter.

She chose a spot half way between them and lavishly spread out her towel, untied her wrap, and stretched out her bikini-fit body. It was important not to appear too keen. High school next year was co-ed, so they'd be seeing a lot of each other. Soon Johnny Allen would wander over and they'd talk about summer plans.

She sat up to examine the terrain. A ribbon of white traced the coastline. The dunes flowed from the hills to the rippling edge of the shore. It was a favourite location for sunbathers. A tide-firmed beach was baking in the morning sun. By midday a crust would form on the surface to break at the touch into triangles and squares. All glistened—the ocean, the people, the sand—as if handfuls of fine crystal had been spread over everything.

His figure loomed in shadow above her. They chatted.

'Can I hold your hand this summer, Jamie?'

'Yes. That would be nice.'

He jumped, almost spilling his coffee. 'Did you say something, darling?'

He placed his ear close to her mouth.

'Hold my hand, Johnny,' she whispered. 'Hold my hand, always.'

About Kayleen



Kayleen Hazlehurst was born in Warkworth and began to write stories and poetry as a child growing up beside the Mahurangi River. Before writing fulltime she worked as an anthropologist, medical herbalist and naturopath. Her research and community work took her on broad journeys to remote corners of the Canadian Arctic, North America, Australia and New Zealand. Her prose reflects a deep empathy with nature and a passionate interest in social issues. She divides her time now between New Zealand and Australia where she has families.

Hazlehurst's two novels are family sagas of love, war and high adventure. *A Caramel Sky*, set in New Zealand and the Pacific, is available online and in bookshops, or directly from www.copypress.co.nz. *Who Disturbs the Kukupa?* a story of campaigns and survival in Greece, Crete and Italy will be published in 2022.