

Top Northland Story (2021): Viv Hamlin, Through a Glass Darkly

I shook the crumbs from my pouch and scraped them into a little heap on the wheel guard of my truck, then picked up every bit to roll a skinny joint with them. Two deep drags used up most of it in the time it took half the sun to crawl out from the horizon. I climbed back into the cab, turned the key and the rig coughed into life.

“What are you doing? I need to pee!”

I’d known the truck starting would wake her. “Well, hurry up then—we should have been moving an hour ago.” If I was on my own as usual, I would be back on the road each morning at first light, to take advantage of the cool mornings. But I’d let my passenger sleep a bit longer. I still had three days driving to deliver this load.

She climbed between the seats, opened the door, dropped ungraciously onto the red dirt road and scanned the empty terrain for somewhere to squat.

“You sick bastard,” she spat when she spotted me watching in the wing mirror. My laughter did nothing to ease the tension. I should never have picked her up – I just didn’t want anyone else to. She was a pretty, sitting duck, even behind those huge dark glasses.

I’d seen her sitting on the dusty bench outside the servo yesterday, pulled up beside her and yelled, “Get in.”

She took her time, and when she was settled in the passenger seat with her tatty denim backpack tucked possessively between her feet, I asked where she was going.

“Just go,” she’d said. She wasn’t in a chatty mood. I was used to that; marriage was like that for me. Days on the road and I’d be longing to talk to a face. It was like colour after the monotone of the RT, softness after the hardness of the handpiece. But my little piece of softness and colour was gone when I got home one day. Just a plain envelope with a note inside: she’d had enough and wished me well, 10-4, over and out buddy.

Days and weeks away at a time. She was alright until they closed the mine. Then I was out of work, home all day, depressed and money was becoming a scarce commodity. Jobs were hard to come by in an outback town, especially when everybody was going for the same ones. She said she was bored. We moved to a slightly bigger outback town, with slightly more boredom. I got lucky with a job driving road trains on long-haul. We started arguing about stuff and I started dreading coming home between runs. I guess I wasn’t the best company after driving 4000 ks.

It came to a head one night when a mate of mine just happened to mention he could tell me a thing or two between beers. When I asked her later that night what he meant she went ballistic and, not one to leave a loose end dangling, went to his house and confronted him. Turned out he’d hit on her and got turned down. Well, he lost his marriage over that, I lost a mate, and when I came home after my next run I’d lost my marriage too.

I’d wondered how long my passenger could keep the silence rolling, but two days in she was doing pretty well. The air inside the cab felt as icy cold as it was curry hot outside. Since she wouldn’t tell me where she was going I tried asking where she’d been.

“That’s not as important as where I’m gonna be.”

“You haven’t told me that either.” I reminded her.

“I can’t tell you if I don’t know myself.”

Cue the heavy silence again. Even I had no answer to that. I wound up Slim Dusty so he filled all the silent cracks while she lay back and, I suppose, closed her eyes under those glasses. You can’t tell what people are doing or thinking behind dark glasses. Me, I do a lot of thinking on the road. Having to walk in to an empty flat makes you think too. I would be

tired, irritable and mean when my wife was there. I guess I felt guilty for not wanting to do much, and the easiest way to shut her down was to make out I was the victim. I would drive home the point and sting with “I was only joking.” That makes the road pretty slippery and oily, you lose ground, and before you know it you’re in the sump. No, there’s nothing like aloneness to make you look at yourself and wish you’d done better.

I was just thinking the journey would have been more bearable with just Slim for company, when she sat forward and shouted above the music, “Why did you pick me up?” And then before I could think of a reason, “Do you do it often, pick girls—people—up?” She silenced Slim with a vicious poke at the CD player.

“Sometimes. I’m not one of those bad guys. Some truckies and people who work out here aren’t so honourable.”

“But why?”

Memories of the last argument with my wife filtered back from a month ago. We’d both thrown some very hurtful, personal comments at each other. She didn’t want me to do these long-haul jobs anymore. Neither of us wanted to concede or compromise.

“Why?”

“It can get lonely on the road.” I felt out of my depth, and anyway, I didn’t like having to justify myself. “And it can be dangerous for women, especially on their own.”

“But why?”

I thumped the steering wheel with my fist. Maybe silence had its virtues. “I told you...”

“No, why me? Why did you pick *me* up?”

I looked over at my wife, her dark glasses shining like pools of sump oil. “Why not?”

About Viv



Viv Hamlin has been writing the occasional short story for years, more now that she's retired. She has books in her head that threaten to stay there, but is busy researching the facts for a historical fiction about her family based on the lives of the Rev Joseph Matthews who came to New Zealand in 1832 as a member of the Church Missionary Society and his wife Mary Ann , nee Davis who was in charge of the missionary school when he first arrived. The Rev. was invited by the Māori chief Nopera Panakareao to form a mission station at Kaitaia. Viv and her husband usually spend their time between the batch at Taupo Bay and their lifestyle block close to Whangarei.

In 1997, then Viv Blutchter, Viv was the winner of the inaugural Northland Branch NZSA Short Story Competition. Her story *Hemi's Homework* was published in the *Northern Advocate* over the summer holiday period, and she was awarded Woods PaperPlus Trophy. The competition was judged by Auckland writer Stephen Stratford and had an 800-word limit.