

LARISSA MURPHY

## Wuhan

*Watered down vinyl detergent fills my room from the halls every morning. My eyes force themselves open; there is always a millisecond of hope that my waking life is a dream. It's always grey here. There's no clock in here; just a calendar, perhaps to count the days of my abandonment. Oh, how much I would give to have my own bathroom again. Long grey strands of hair hang dead along my face as I take small tired steps, shuffling towards the communal bathroom. Nanny Pa warned me how fast our whānau age. I refused to believe him. Loose skin flapping as I walk, and hard for me to ignore. I try to console myself; my skin reflects my story. Rays of morning sun weave through the hall and warm my delicate skin. I wish my room would get some light. I tilt my head, "stir it up, little darling, stir it up..." echoes through the hall speakers. I pause and feel my heart flutter.*

"My feet are cold Nanny Pa!" I throw myself at him every morning. We both have the same golden bronze skin; his eyes tell a different story to mine. I get my 'eyes from my mama' he says. "Āe, moko, you know what to do!" We only had two cows; the farm wasn't to house animals, but to house our upcoming generations. I slowly sunk my feet into the green gunk on the ground, the cows tilted their heads questioning us both. "Mōrena, Bob and Marley!" Nanny Pa laughed. Koro named the cows after his all-time favorite. I never thought much of it at the time considering Bob was the female cow. He was funny like that. "Stir it up, little darling, stir it up!" There was something magical about the morning crisp air and

chatting with Nanny Pa until our feet were warm. I think I was five when we first trotted out together on our morning rituals before school.

Nanny Pa was my hero, mine and my dad's. Dad was always working so Nanny Pa pretty much raised me. Our farmland was almost stripped away from us for, quote military purposes, unquote. "The government is hell bent on stripping Māori of their lands, Moko, and they will never stop. Over my dead body will they take what our ancestors left for us, and what rightfully belongs to my whānau". I developed my love for animals on our farm. As I grew older, I didn't have many friends, just Pa. I could never live in a city. I don't know what I was thinking moving to one of the most populated places in the world.

*I head into the main foyer racing towards the biggest speaker, latching onto every lyric. I look at my reflection, my eyes trace every inch of me down to my trembling hands. A faint tan line from where my wedding ring lived.*

27 years. Not even a phone call. Jack's late nights at work became so frequent, but I never questioned it. I assumed that's how men behaved when you become invested in supporting your whānau. Or maybe it was that. We didn't have one. I couldn't, how could I? Was it selfish of me? I grew up without a mother, my papa without a partner, why would I risk my own life?

Marching up the court stairs feeling more alone then when I was first here. Never did I think I would be taking my name back, for better or for worse? Yeah right. It was embarrassing seeing Jack. How did I not see the signs? He even walks with his wrist flicked upright and a slight limp as if to emphasize the long hair he pretends he has. Auē, he's receding now. I giggle. His new 'hubby' waits for him in the car. "Hi, Mārama, how..." I raise my hand to stop him; his voice sounds so unfamiliar. Higher. He seems comfortable with his new persona. "I don't know

how to talk to you right now, Jack,” his face drops slightly. I fight my emotions; the lawyers murmur between each other, I struggle to engage, reminiscing times when Jack was pretending to love me. Questioning what was real, if any of it was. I sign the paper and leave. Nanny Pa believed everything happens for a reason. Maybe I was destined to carry on my maiden name? But to whom? I was never planning on having children of my own. Mārama Peters always had a nice ring to it...

*I slump down into the olive-green armchair. This morning the chefs are cooking a big breakfast as if to reward us for making it to Friday. The smell of cooked sausages fills the main foyer. I rest my head back and close my eyes. Wuhan seemed a good idea at the time. Fight or flight? SOAR. Six days after the divorce papers were signed. Nanny Pa encouraged me, assuring I needed the break. He knew my job was important to me.*

Weaving through the cramped wet markets of Wuhan made my stomach curl. The amount of people eating live animals in front of me, revolting. Pa teased me, and addressed me as “detective” like on *Lucifer*, we love that show. I felt a gaze watching me, my curiosity must be obvious. A local woman dodges my attention and starts chatting to her co-worker, aggressively. I wish I knew what she was saying. Without looking suspicious I pull out my phone to start filming. “No, no, no, no, no, no,” flapping her arms, waving her hands like a wild goose. I refrain from laughing. I think she may have been staring at me for the fascination of my appearance. Children had already taken photos with me, what’s one more? “My food stall not bad! You Western people, leave me alone! Walk around corner, you find what you want!” Pulling up her face mask in a flump, I do as she says. I could not believe my eyes.

*The green armchair reminded me of the colour of the dirty foam squares covering the concrete footway at Wuhan’s*

*Seafood Market. I used to play hopscotch on those same foam squares with Nanny Pa. Although I never liked seafood, Ending Animal Cruelty Worldwide was my calling. Being Jack's manager was a bonus. Come to think of it, maybe that's why we never worked? Spending almost every waking moment together. Hey, maybe I'd turn homo if I had to deal with me for the rest of my life...*

4:37am February 28, I woke to 7 missed calls from my father. My voicemail flooded. Six hours later I'm on a flight back home. This has to be a dream, a nightmare. Why didn't Pa tell me? He must've been sick. He hid it so well. Oh, I'm so angry with you! I watch the clouds through my tiny window, but being in the air brings me comfort. I'm closer to you Pa. I can barely see, I didn't bother to put my contacts in that day or wear my glasses. No point. My tear ducts've probably burst. Nothing matters to me anyway. I ignore the announcements, the news, the radio in the Uber home from the airport. My heart hurts.

Takahiwae was not too far from our farm. There is something so special about coming back to my marae, although I always find myself here under poor circumstances. I feel bad. Work takes so much of my time. Hell, if I wasn't working I could've been with Pa in his final moments. I'm furious with Dad. Why didn't either of them tell me he was so sick! My heart hurts. I've lost two important people in the space of only a few short weeks. Jack! I really could use his comfort right now. The Māori 'priests' look so holy, their presence brings me relief. Dad and I walk hand in hand ahead of the small group of whānau that have come to grieve Pa. I examine his breathless body in the open casket. My legs give way as I start to wail. His skin no longer glows, face tired; Dad cradles me.

I'm not good with names and never have been. A lot of whānau offer me condolences. I feel rude, sure they can

tell I'm unsure of who they are. I'm tired of crying. I'm tired. I still smell animals on my clothing, like I've been eating raw fish. My eyeballs, red and puffy. Waiata sung by the aunties makes it worse. Their beautiful harmonies don't console me at all. Sob myself to sleep.

Some nights are better than others. I still cry myself to sleep, and often find myself sleepwalking the halls or crying out for my Pa. I'm weak. Have been ever since then. I pull myself up out of the armchair and hear an update on *Breakfast*. "Oh, that Jenny-May Coffin. Beautiful wahine," Nanny Pa had a crush on her, he barely watched any telly, but the news. I don't ignore the announcements anymore. Waddling over to the breakfast bar, the servers annoy me. Who is that bright and bubbly first thing in the morning? "Mōrena, Mārama!" A slop of scrambled eggs ooze on my plate.

The farm feels empty. I turn the telly on to fill the silence. Dad stayed behind at Takahiwae, I finally had the motivation to freshen up, so I left early. Pa never let me take baths because of water restrictions, living on a farm and all. "Breaking news, a worldwide virus has finally reached New Zealand. Epidemiologists are calling it COVID-19 which stems from animal to human contact. The government has confirmed one positive case in the Auckland region. Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern and cabinet will be making an official announcement on safety and security measures for the country, live at 4pm today." My mind races, animal to human contact? I retrace my steps from the past week. Worldwide virus? I have been so ignorant, running through the airport I saw many people wearing face masks, but thought nothing of it. The Uber driver specifically asked me to sit in the backseat putting some distance between us. Santising stations are more prominent in public places. Wuhan!

A loud bang on the door jolts me out of the bath. They're here for me. I am a person of interest. How did I turn into

the bad guy? I wrap my robe around me, dripping. "Good afternoon, is this the residence of Mārama Peters?" A middle-aged Pākehā man addresses me in his fancy suit. "Mārama Tahuri. Yes, what's going on?" My stomach curls in on itself. This modern day technology is a blessing *and* a curse. Shit they've probably seen me at the airport check in! The little square cube inside my passport tracks where I am. My palms are clammy. I wasn't planning on leaving the farm any time soon, I'm isolating myself here. No one else can get sick if I separate myself. He peers at me over the top of his glasses. "Yes, hi. My name is Mark Goodwin I work for Eugenie Sage the Minister for Land Information in Aotearoa, under the Land Transfer Act 1952. The department are formally notifying you of the potential repossession of this farmland upon the death of your grandfather Pa Tahuri." I drop to the ground and weep. Mark stands his ground. "You are due in court to discuss the matter, March 13<sup>th</sup> and you are advised to have a lawyer present," he says as he hands me a letter, then leaves.

*Jenny-May gives an update on the amount of cases we have. I take a bite of my cold, burnt toast. The small group of us here are super diverse. I befriended an Indian lady before she was released early. I'm not sure that's even something I want to happen anymore. Two years later, and scientists still haven't found a cure yet. Aunty Mihi and her sister lost their battle shortly after Pa's tangi along with another 273 deaths in Aotearoa. I've written every name down of each person I murdered and pray for their forgiveness every day. Haven't heard from Dad since I confided in him, he blames me for everything that's happened. I just hope he's well.*

*After kai, I sanitise my hands and head over to the wide window behind the armchair and gaze out into the distance. I picture me and Pa walking up the ranges, laughing. Smiling. I wonder what the golf course that used to be our farm. The old men complaining about their wives*

*over a game, having no idea of the significance the course has for my whānau. Am I any different to those men? I'm selfish too. "Mārama, you have a visitor!" I turn around, "Jack?"*