

Johanna AITCHISON

The Lucky One

When I first realized the panel that I had been selected for was on feminism, I thought, *Oh man, you're kidding me. I asked for that one.* Not because I'm not a feminist, but because I'm embarrassed to be presenting as a New Zealand woman in a context—the International Writing Program—where, to be frank, the women from some of the participant countries actually have real problems. New Zealand, on the other hand, is progressive when it comes to women's issues. We are fond of our image of ourselves as stropky sheilas with can-do attitudes. To go a little broader: New Zealand women were the first to be granted the right to vote in 1893; to put this in context, women's suffrage was not granted until 1919 in the US, 1934 for Cuba and 1947 for India and Taiwan.

Also, New Zealand was the first country to have all of its highest offices chaired by women in 2005 and 2006. Starting with Queen Elizabeth II (our Head of State); the Governor General, Dame Silvia Cartwright; Chief Justice, Dame Sian Elias; Speaker of the House of Representatives, Margaret Wilson; and Prime Minister, Helen Clark. So what do I have to complain about?

I've decided that, instead of moaning about being a woman, I'm going to look at the issue in a different way, by asking the question: When did I know I was a woman, and how did this affect my writing?

The moment that I really knew that I was a woman was when my then-partner grabbed me around the throat. It wasn't a serious assault, but it certainly gave me pause to think. I thought about it while I picked up the pieces of the cups he had smashed on the lino and cleaned up the coffee, which had splashed all over the walls. Fortunately, our 2-year-old son, Lennox, was asleep at the time.

I decided to take Lennox up to my parents' place for a week to clear my head, so I purchased \$1000 tickets to the Bay of Islands. However, when I told Kevin, he said, "I don't want you to go while we're like this." I realized after talking to him for some time that he wasn't going to change his mind, so in the morning, I rang my parents and said that Lennox and I would not be coming to visit them after all.

"That's a bit unreasonable," said my mother. "He can't tell you what to do."

"Ah, yes, he can," I said, trying to keep my voice even.

I played with Lennox on the rug on the lounge floor, with the sun pouring into the room, watching the time tick by. I pretended that everything was normal; Lennox played normally, Kevin's parents arrived normally and joked normally about us needing to keep our hands to ourselves.

Later that morning, I told Kevin that I was going to take Lennox for a playdate to Justine's place and would return in a couple of hours. I got into my car, drove down the driveway, and never went back. I was able to leave because I was born lucky. As a New Zealand woman, I was able to own and drive my own car and was blessed with an expensive tertiary education. After I left Kevin, I received a Domestic Purposes Benefit to support us until I landed a job; and legislation passed by Helen Clark's government meant I was entitled to a financial settlement, even though Kevin and I were not married. So how did it affect my writing? I never wrote directly about what happened to me, but the politics of male-female

relationships niggled at me through the coming years. Eventually, I wrote a poem based on the murder of a 22-year-old New Zealand woman at the hands of her former partner.

The poem goes like this:

From the house where he took her life

“I gave him his footsteps,”
said the stairs to her upstairs.

“I gave him five sharp knocks
on my door,” said her bedroom.

“I gave him all of my metal,”
said the lock on her door.

“I gave him her arms floating out
towards him,” said her open suitcase.

“I gave him her striped curtains,
her photos tacked to wallpaper,

the silver light shining
off her computer screen,

I gave him her trees, slashed
by wind outside her window,

I gave him blackbirds,
screaming off the power lines,

I gave him the chipped marble
waves of her harbour view,” said the house.