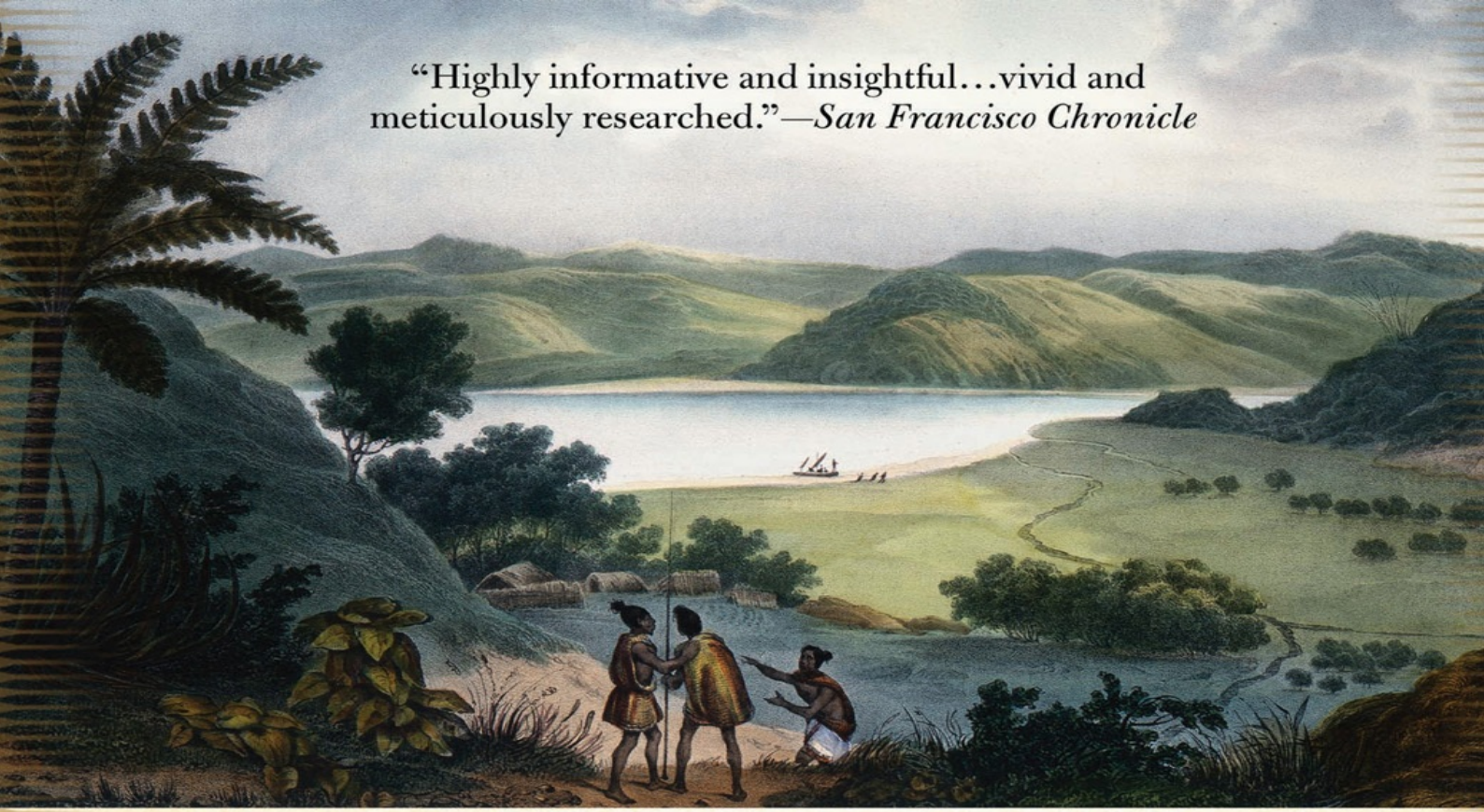


“Highly informative and insightful...vivid and meticulously researched.”—*San Francisco Chronicle*



COME ON SHORE
and
WE WILL KILL
and
EAT YOU ALL

A New Zealand Story

CHRISTINA THOMPSON



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BLOOMSBURY

For Aperahama, Matiu, and Dani Matariki

Time is a flattened landscape, a land of unlinked lakes seen from the air.

—Annie Dillard, *Living by Fiction*

CONTENTS

Cover

Title Page

Dedication

Epigraph

Prologue: New Zealand, 1642

- 1 Paihia
- 2 Abominably Saucy
- 3 Mangonui
- 4 Terra Incognita
- 5 Present Perfect
- 6 *The Venus*
- 7 A Natural Gentleman
- 8 A Dangerous People
- 9 Smoked Heads
- 10 Turton's Land Deeds
- 11 Nana Miri
- 12 Hawaiki
- 13 Once Were Warriors
- 14 Gu, Choki, Pa
- 15 Matariki
- 16 Thieves and Indian-Killers
- 17 One Summer

Author's Note

Acknowledgments

Maps

Epilogue: New Zealand, 1642

Glossary

Selected Bibliography

A Note on the Author

A Note on Pronunciation and Spelling

Imprint

It is the evening of December 18, 1642, about an hour after sunset, ten, perhaps ten thirty at night with the sky still holding the last vestige of light on the western horizon. The crews of the two ships, *Heemskerck* and *Zeehaen* see the light of many fires on shore and four canoes, two of which come toward them through the deepening gloom. It is not their first indication that this island or continent—they know not which—is inhabited, but it is the first time they have been close enough to make out the people.

For five days they have been following the coast, running north with a wide, open sea to their left, rolling in great billows and swells, and a high, mountainous land to their right, masked by low-lying clouds. They have been keeping well out to sea lest the wind, which is predominantly from the southwest, should freshen and drive them onto the shore. They are looking for a landlocked bay or sheltered harbor where they might safely go ashore and see what kind of country this is they have discovered. They want wood and water, fresh food, game, and greens. When they find a long, low spit curving round to the east enclosing a large, open bay, they call a meeting of the ships' council and make a resolution to land.

The two ships set sail in August from the Dutch outpost of Batavia, now the Indonesian city of Jakarta. They were under the command of Abel Janszoon Tasman, a captain in the service of the Dutch East India Company, and were commissioned to explore what lay south of Java between the Indian Ocean and the coast of the New World. Sailing west and south with the winds to Mauritius, Tasman's ships described a great arc through the Indian and Southern oceans. When they turned east in the high southern latitudes, they passed into a region that was largely unknown. They sailed south of mainland Australia, missing the continent entirely, and made their first landfall on the island now known as Tasmania, which they named Van Diemen's Land in honor of the governor-general of the Dutch Indies.

Here they landed long enough to see smoke and signs of fires. They heard people singing and playing a gong somewhere in the forest. They found notches cut into a tree at five-foot intervals and believing these to be steps, concluded that the people must be giants. But the Tasmanian Aborigines remained hidden in the bush, "with watching eyes on our proceedings," or so the nervous Dutchmen believed. There was, in any case, nothing of interest to the Company and so Tasman set sail again to the east. Eight days later they sighted "a large land, uplifted high": the first recorded European glimpse of New Zealand.

The evening of December 18 finds them anchored in fifteen fathoms. The wind dies with the setting sun and there follows an hour of glassy calm, broken only by voices and the splash of oars. The *Zeehaen's* boats have been sent to reconnoiter the bay and, when they return with the fading light, they are followed at some distance by two canoes. These come within a stone's throw of the Dutch ships and lie there, riding on the swell. Each of the canoes carries a dozen well-made men of average height with skin of a color between brown and yellow and thick black hair tied up in the fashion of the Japanese. Their chests are bare but around their waists they wear some kind of mat or clothing.

After a while, a man in the prow of the larger canoe stands and calls out in a guttural voice words that no one on board the ships can decipher. The master's mate calls back in Dutch and then the man in the canoe lifts something to his lips and blows a blast on what sounds to the sailors like a Moorish trumpet. The second officer of the *Zeehaen*, who has come out to the Indies as a trumpeter, is sent to fetch his horn and ordered to play a tune. This exchange is repeated a number of times and, when it finally grows too dark to see, the canoes turn and paddle back to shore. Uncertain of the native

intentions, Tasman sets a double watch and sees that the men have muskets, pikes, and cutlasses in hand.

Early the next morning, a canoe carrying thirteen men approaches. The Dutch sailors lean over the rails, showing white linen and knives and trying to indicate by signs that they want to trade. But the natives keep their distance and eventually they leave. Tasman calls a council of his officers and resolves to bring the ships inshore, since, as he notes in his journal, “these people (as it seems) are seeking friendship.”

But barely has this decision been reached when seven canoes set out from shore, speeding across the water. The *Zeehaen*'s skipper, who is on board the *Heemskerck*, grows nervous about having left his crew unsupervised and sends his quartermaster, Cornelis Joppen, back in the cockboat with instructions to the junior officers to be on their guard. The canoes, meanwhile, having reached the ships, take up positions on either side.

Joppen delivers his message and gets back in the cockboat, ordering his rowers to return to the commander's ship. As if on cue, the nearest canoe begins paddling furiously in his direction. Joppen has his back to the canoe and, at first, he does not see it coming. The sailors on board the ships begin to shout, but the natives in the other canoes are also shouting and waving their paddles in the air. The canoe, now flying over the water, rams the cockboat so violently that two of the sailors are tossed into the sea. Joppen reels and grabs for the gunwale but a native jabs him in the neck with a spear and hurries him overboard. The rest of the natives leap from their canoe and fall upon the sailors with clubs, beating them so furiously about the head that three sailors are killed instantly; a fourth lies bleeding at the bottom of the boat.

Joppen and the two sailors manage to swim away and the shallop is sent to rescue them. The natives drown one of the bodies and drag another into their canoe. The Dutch fire heavily with muskets and guns but miss their mark and the natives retreat to shore without suffering any casualties. The *Heemskerck*'s skipper is sent to recover the cockboat with its grisly cargo of dead and dying men, and Tasman gives the order to set sail, since “no friendship could be made with these people.”

The ships weigh anchor and begin to move but the sailors can see a fleet of twenty-two canoes massing like storm clouds in the distance. The canoes, which are much faster and more mobile than the heavy ships, advance with alarming speed, obviously intending to cut off the intruders before they can escape from the confines of the bay. The Dutch wait until the natives are within range and then fire, this time rattling the canoes with shot and hitting a man in the leading canoe who is standing with a little white flag in his hand. The natives abruptly stop paddling. The Dutch spread what canvas they have and the *Heemskerck* and *Zeehaen* sail away, leaving behind the Maori armada and the bodies of two of their men.

Tasman calls a meeting of the ships' council and then goes below to commit his account of what has happened to paper. “Since the detestable deed,” he writes, “of these inhabitants, committed this morning against four of the *Zeehaen*'s crew, teaches us a lesson, we consider the inhabitants of this country as enemies.” And to this place he gives the name of Murderers' Bay.

Paihia

If you stick a hatpin in at Boston and drive it through the center of the earth, you come out very near the Bay of Islands. The first Europeans to go south of the equator expected to find a sort of looking-glass world, backward but recognizable, like people who resembled them but walked on their hands. This, of course, is not how it was, though there were birds that scuttled and animals that flew, trees that lost their bark and kept their leaves, pools of bubbling mud and other wonders. But even today there is something about the antipodes that makes one feel estranged, as if time had stopped or begun reversing, as if under a different heavens one were breathing a different air.

The first time I was in New Zealand it was as a tourist. I had been living in the Pacific for about three years, studying at the University of Melbourne, and I was on my way back to Australia after spending Christmas with my family in the States. I was traveling alone with no real plans, only that I wanted to spend a week somewhere, and New Zealand, like Tahiti or Rarotonga, was conveniently on the way. I had been to the islands on previous trips and I was looking for something uncomplicated, someplace I could just relax before starting the new academic year. At the tourist bureau in Auckland they suggested I try the Bay of Islands. "It's beautiful up there," said the girl at the counter with a sigh. So I took a bus to Whangarei and got up early the next morning to catch the milk run going north.

There were only a handful of passengers on the bus, all half-asleep. The front two seats were stacked with mailbags and parcels. I took a seat halfway back and watched as we pulled away from the Victorian country railway station on a defunct stretch of line. The sun was climbing into the sky and the day promised to be hot and bright.

We left town by the industrial quarter, a series of low, corrugated aluminum sheds, chain-link fences, boats on blocks, and the hulks of rusting machinery. We passed a three-story Victorian corner hotel painted blue, the Golden Dragon Chinese Restaurant, the vast, empty parking lot of Pak 'n Pa. Then we were on the outskirts of town, row after row of little wooden houses, yellow and white, each with a concrete step and a patch of yard and a Hill's hoist gleaming in the morning sun. Every couple of blocks there was a corner store already open for business, the day's headlines blaring in four-inch type from posters propped outside—FINANCE MINISTER SACKED; FRENCH EMBROILED IN DIPLOMATIC SCANDAL. I caught a glimpse of dim interiors behind strips of fluttering plastic, the poor man's fly-screen door.

For nearly four hours we ground our way up steep, volcanic hillsides between dense patches of native bush, thickets of manuka and giant fern. Then down the other side, the engine whining in protest and the landscape opening out before us like a nineteenth-century painting. The names of suburbs and towns rolled by: Kamo, Hikurangi, Whakapara, Waiotu, Moerewa. I looked them up in my dictionary of place names: *Kamo*—to bubble up, descriptive of hot springs; *Hikurangi*—pointing to the summit of the sky; *Whakapara*—to make a clearing in the forest; *Waiotu*—spring or pool of Tu, the god of war; *Moerewa*—floating like a bird in sleep or, perhaps, to sleep on high. In between, the country was empty. Stripped of its native covering, it looked smooth and bald. Sheep the color of dust grazed on hillsides covered with a stubble of grass and the scoria of ancient volcanic explosions. In the vales and clefts the grass was startlingly green; on the hills it was burnt golden brown by the fiercest antipodean summer. There were farms every so often and once or twice a view of the sea, glimmering far off.

At Puketona we left the main road and made a steep descent through a twisting, deeply shaded ravine, emerging suddenly into a blinding world of sunlight and water. WELCOME TO PAIHIA, said a sign by the roadside, JEWEL OF THE BAY OF ISLANDS.

Paihia is not a Maori name. It is widely believed to be a pidgin expression: *pai* means “good” in Maori, while *hia* is thought to be a transliteration of the English word “here.” According to a popular story, the Reverend Henry Williams, who established a mission there in 1823, was so enchanted by the site that he exclaimed, “*Pai here!*” meaning “What a good place this is!” or “How good it is to be here!” The experts, though, cast doubt upon this explanation, arguing that it seems too good to be true. At least two other early commentators had spelled the name differently, referring to it as *Pahi*, which, in Maori, means “to slap.”

Today Paihia is a tight half mile of chip shops, milkbars, seaside motels, and concrete condominiums, a pale, patterned grid of balconies and awnings set against a backdrop of brooding prehistoric bush. Across the road is the Pacific Ocean. Not the open sea, but the Bay of Islands, a sublimely beautiful stretch of water with dozens of islets and a complex, meandering coastline, named in 1769 by Captain James Cook, who was the first European to see it.

My bus rumbled to a stop at the edge of the wharf. The passengers all got off and stood outside, blinking and stretching and putting on hats and shading their eyes with their hands. I stayed where I was for a moment, staring out at the glittering sea and thinking about the long January arc of the sun as it made its way across the southern hemisphere. In Boston, where I had just come from, it was pitch-dark at four thirty.

After a minute the bus driver stuck his head back in. “You need any help there?”

I got off the bus and walked out onto the pier. To my right an arm of the coastline reached out into the bay, enfolding a little harbor. A number of yachts and launches bobbed at anchor and I caught the faint, melodic clanking of wires hitting the aluminum masts. To my left and beyond was the open bay and the myriad islands like the hills of a drowned continent sticking up out of the sea. There were dozens of boats out on the water, their brightly colored spinnakers bellied out in the breeze. But the air on shore was still and the sun hot in a cloudless sky.

In Australia I often used to stand on the beach and look out to sea and think about what it must have been like to see these places for the first time. It was a curious thought, since the view from where I stood was exactly the opposite of what those first Europeans saw. They, seeing land from sea, recorded it in gently undulating profiles, taking note of any distinctive formations that might prove useful to future navigators. To them it was a stretch of rocky coastline, miles of inscrutable gray-green bush, a series of possible landfalls, inlets and bays where one might get water, reefs and sandbars to avoid. To me, standing there with my back to the cliffs, it was a great reach of emptiness, a stretch of possibility, the gentle curve of the horizon at the edge of the sea. Still, I thought I understood something of the sense of expectation those early explorers must have felt as they approached an unknown coastline for the first time.

The Pacific was an enormous challenge for Europeans. It was so far away, so difficult to get to, and when they finally reached it, so unexpectedly immense. The early explorers suffered terribly from scurvy, hunger, thirst, not to mention disorientation in the course of voyages that often lasted for years. But it was not just the size of the Pacific that confounded them. It was its emptiness, a reality all the more distressing for the fact that it was not at all what they had imagined they would find.

For centuries the map of the world showed a huge mysterious landmass to the south peopled by men with funny hats or the heads of dogs, wielding spears and praying to idols. It was known as *Terra Australis Incognita*, the Unknown South Land—or sometimes, more optimistically, *Terra Australis*.

Nondum Cognita, the South Land Not Yet Known—and its existence was an article of faith among European geographers for fifteen hundred years.

The theory, first articulated by the ancient Greeks, was that the landmasses of the northern hemisphere must be counterbalanced by an equal weight of continental matter in the south, or else the world would topple over. But although European explorers crisscrossed the Pacific, beginning with Magellan in 1520, the great South Land remained stubbornly elusive. There were tantalizing hints, rumors of sightings: an island auspiciously named *Austrialia del Espiritu Santo* by Quirós in 1606, something called Davis Land in the eastern Pacific, sighted by an English buccaneer in 1687 and never seen again, suggestions of continental shadows, of land birds too far out to sea, of unexpected cloud formations in places where they shouldn't be. There were bits of Australia, a tip of Tasmania, a coast of New Zealand, islands scattered here and there, but few complete outlines well into the eighteenth century. And in the absence of conclusive proof to the contrary, many continued to cherish the idea of a strange and marvelous country somewhere in the South Seas.

But if Europeans in the Pacific were always hoping to stumble upon some great good place, experience often disappointed them. The Solomon Islands, named for the biblical King Solomon (and his gold) by the sixteenth-century Spanish explorer Alvaro de Mendaña, turned out to be inhabited by cannibals. Australia, first visited in the early seventeenth century by the Dutch, was, in the view of Jan Cartensz, “the most arid and barren region that could be found anywhere on earth,” while New Zealand was inhabited by a people so treacherous and belligerent that anyone hoping to land there would, at least according to Abel Tasman, have to fight his way to shore.

Of course, none of this stopped Europeans from coming—far from it—but it did occasionally give them pause as they peered into the early-morning mist, trying to decide if that smudge on the horizon were the coast of some undiscovered country or a bank of low-lying cloud, or wondering, as they drew near some unknown coastline, what manner of men they might find.

I took a long last look out across the bay and made my way back up the pier to where the bus was idling. All the other passengers had vanished, merging into the crowd of tourists and shoppers on the opposite side of the road. For a moment I thought about following them. It was an appealing sort of place, touristy but recognizable in the way that resort towns often are, an easy sort of place to imagine staying. But the ticket I was holding was not for Paihia. It was for an inland agricultural center called Kerikeri, where, in an effort to economize, I had booked a bed at the local youth hostel.

The driver was already in his seat and he gave me a nod as I climbed back on the bus. It was just the two of us, and as soon as I was settled, he yanked the door shut and we pulled out into the stream of traffic snaking through the town.

We passed a series of gift shops and tearooms, a couple of real estate agencies, a one-hour photo lab, some restaurants, a hairdresser, and a bank. There were signs for at least a dozen motels that I might have stayed at: the Dolphin, the Outrigger, the Nautilus, the Admiral's View. There was one with a nice ring to it called Cook's Lookout and another with the oddly ironic name the Abel Tasman Lodge. But it was not a big place and before long we had reached the end of Paihia proper. The trundling over the Waitangi Bridge, we left the motels and spinnakers behind us and climbed back into the green and shadowed bush.

Kerikeri, known to the missionaries as “Kiddy-kiddy,” lies upriver from the Bay of Islands just beyond the navigable head of the Kerikeri River. There is a famous mission house there and the oldest stone building in New Zealand and, not too far from either of these, the ruins of a Maori *pa*, a fortified village, known in pre-European times as *Te Waha-o-te-riri*, or the Mouth of War.

At thirty-five degrees south latitude, well watered, and protected from the prevailing winds, the

inland Bay of Islands is a gardener's paradise. Charles Darwin, visiting the region in December 1839 on the homeward leg of his voyage in the *Beagle*, described crops of barley and wheat standing in full ear and fields of potatoes and clover. "There were large gardens," he wrote, "with every fruit and vegetable which England produces; and many belonging to a warmer climate ... asparagus, kidney beans, cucumbers, rhubarb, apples, pears, figs, peaches, apricots, grapes, olives, gooseberries, currants, hops, gorse for fences, and English oaks; also many kinds of flowers." Kerikeri, which means, literally, "dig, dig," still produces all this and more, including many fruits unknown to Europeans in Darwin's day, like passion fruit, feijoas, and tamarillos.

Like most ordinary towns, Kerikeri is made up of concentric circles. It has a small retail center with a handful of shops, a newsagent, a couple of banks, a Laundromat, a supermarket, a post office, and a pub. Outside this is a ring of marine and agricultural businesses: tractor sales and tire centers and places to get a boat engine overhauled. Then there's a suburban belt of ranches and bungalows on quarter-acre blocks, beyond which lie the commercial orchards and farms.

Kerikeri is a prosperous town with an air of solid, middle-class well-being. A sizable chunk of the population is made up of local farmers and businessmen, some of whose families have lived in the area for generations. In recent years it has attracted a large number of new arrivals: rose growers and hobby farmers and well-heeled retirees, drawn to the region by the gentle climate and the pleasant way of life. Somewhat less expectedly, Kerikeri is also home to a thriving alternative fringe. Tucked between the farm stands on the road to Whangarei are pottery barns and woodworking studios. You can easily find someone who does shiatsu massage or aromatherapy, and at least one store in town sells Indian cottons, crystals, and healing CDs.

On certain days of the week there are great congregations of Maoris in Kerikeri. They sit in parked cars and chat through the window. They buy fish-and-chips at the takeaway and eat it off butcher paper in the park. They splurge on lotto tickets, tailor-mades, pies with sauce, cream buns, and cans of beer. You can see them in the Laundromat, folding and gossiping while the kids play video games or queueing up at the supermarket, their trolleys piled high with staples: flour in twenty-kilo bags, sugar, tea, milk, potatoes, pumpkins, butter, eggs, and jam.

Most of the Maoris in Kerikeri live out beyond the smaller landholdings, beyond the orchards and the farms, past where the tarmac ends and the gravel takes over, on small residual blocks of tribal land. Some of these communities are inland, but most of them are on the sea, cupped in a sheltered bend of the coastline or perched at the back of a cove. Many of these settlements are ancient by New Zealand standards, dating from long before the arrival of any Europeans, and many of the people who live there today are directly descended from those who occupied them hundreds of years ago. Although they are not exactly hidden, these places are not easy to locate. A lot of Maori history can be found in the local tourist brochures and guidebooks, and there are maps showing how to get to the ruins of Kororipo *pa* or the recreation of Rewa's village. But there are few, if any, signposts to the places where most of the local Maoris actually live.

I spent just under a week in Kerikeri, much of it on my own. I hiked the trails to Rainbow Falls and walked down the hill to Waipapa Landing to see the Kemp House and the Stone Store. I visited the arts-and-crafts cooperative and a nursery specializing in lavenders and culinary herbs. I hung out in the tearooms and in the newsagent, where I found a surprisingly good supply of books.

I was always on the lookout for books when I traveled, and never went anywhere without some of my own. One, in particular, I took with me whenever I crossed the Pacific: a battered 1949 anthology called *The Spell of the Pacific* that my brother had given me when I first left the States. It had a worn rather lurid dust jacket showing the mauve mountains of a high island with its green coastal plain and in the foreground, a cluster of lateen-rigged canoes sailing on a coral sea, all framed with a bit

beach grass and a fringe of black palm. It was filled with accounts of poets and explorers, missionaries, sailors, scientists—travelers of all kinds—arranged geographically and prefaced with an epigraph from *Moby-Dick*: “There is one knows not what sweet mystery about this sea, whose gentle and awful stirrings seem to speak of some hidden soul beneath ...”

Plainly sensational in its presentation—the flap copy was addressed to “those whose hearts can thrill to romance and adventure,” while the back promised “Natives,” “Shipwreck,” and “Treasure”—it was nevertheless a serious, even a scholarly work, containing an astonishing array of European writings about the Pacific, from an eyewitness account of the death of Magellan in 1521 to a wartime dispatch from the Philippines in 1944. Anyone who was anyone was represented—Conrad, Melville, London, Maugham, Tasman, Darwin, Cook, and the unhappy Captain Bligh—over a thousand thin, brittle pages between fraying cloth-covered boards. My copy, which my brother had found at an estate sale in Santa Barbara, had been at some previous time inscribed on the flyleaf: *For your travels*. I packed it in my hand luggage and carried it with me, reading as I went.

It was organized by region: Melanesia, Polynesia, Australia, and so on. The New Zealand section began with Tasman’s arrival and the first recorded instance of contact between the Maoris and Europeans at a place thereafter known as Murderers’ Bay. This was followed by a couple of Maori myths; an extract from Charles Darwin’s *Beagle* journal; a grim uncharacteristic story by Katherine Mansfield about madness on the colonial frontier; some poems, including one with a dirgelike refrain that began, “Morning in Murderers’ Bay, / Blood drifted away”; and an excerpt from a curious book called *Old New Zealand*, written in 1863 by a “harum scarum Irishman” named Frederick Manning. This last was titled “A Maori Ruffian,” and it told the story of a fight between the author and “a bullet-headed, scowling, bowlegged, broad-shouldered, Herculean savage” who had “killed seven men in fair fight, and had also—as was well known—committed two most diabolical murders, one of which was on his own wife.”

None of this correlated well with the magazine in the seat-back pocket of my Air New Zealand flight or any of the other popular representations of New Zealand as a land of panoramic beauty dotted with sheep. Nor did it seem to have much to do with places I had visited like Kerikeri or Paihia, and I began to wonder about the history of the country and the undercurrents that might run through its society.

I was booked on the late bus back to Auckland and, looking for a way to spend my last few hours, wandered over to the pub. It was a Saturday evening at the height of summer and the place was full of smoke and people sitting at sticky tables crowded with pitchers of Lion and DB. At one end of the room, a jukebox was playing a loud mixture of reggae and rock. At the other stood a pair of pool tables surrounded by players waiting for their turn. There were a number of counter-height tables scattered around the room. The women perched on barstools and drank rum and Coke; the men stood and drank their beer straight from the jug, as if even the largest glasses were too small for their hands. Slumped in the corners of the room were a handful of people who’d clearly been there all day, but most had been trickling in since late afternoon, and by the time the fight broke out, there was standing room only.

How they all knew something had happened I have no idea, but the minute the punch was thrown every head in the place swiveled in the fighters’ direction. A space had opened up in the middle of the room and in the center of it were two young men, one of whom was standing stock-still with a hurt expression and blood running down his face.

The hitter was a Maori, a half-caste, with a compact body and fair, freckly skin. He could hardly have been more than eighteen, probably he was younger. The bleeder was a Pakeha, a New Zealand

of European descent. He was blond and wiry and older than the Maori boy, with a face already weathered by the southern sun. He was wearing blue jeans and a red plaid shirt, which was handy, remember thinking, since he was using the sleeve of it to mop up his face.

For an instant there was silence. And then it was over, just like that. The Pakeha vanished into the bathroom, the Maori sat down with a thump, and everyone else turned back to his beer.

“What happened?” I asked the fellow standing nearest, a tall, solid Maori with cropped hair, sunglasses, and a bright pink shirt. “What’s going on?”

“Guess someone said something someone didn’t like,” he said. “Gotta light?”

He was very big, I realized, studying him more closely. Not just tall but heavily muscled and dark, or maybe that was the shirt. His face was broad and perfectly impassive. I could see nothing behind the glasses, the lenses of which looked black.

I handed him my lighter.

“Ta,” he said. “You here on holiday?”

I explained that I was living in Australia, though, as he could tell from my accent, I was obviously Yank. “How about you? Are you from around here?”

He said he was a foundryman and that he made boat parts in Whangarei. He pronounced it the Maori way—FAHNG-ah-day—so that even though I’d just spent a night there on my way to Kerikeri from Auckland, I didn’t recognize the name. He’d come home for the Christmas holidays. His family lived out in Mangonui, about fifteen miles away.

I told him I’d been in Kerikeri for a week, staying at the youth hostel, and that I was headed back to Auckland that same night.

“Hmmm,” he said, looking past me in a manner I found oddly reassuring.

“My name’s Christina,” I volunteered.

“Tauwhitu,” he said, pronouncing it TOE-fee-too. “But everyone calls me Seven.”

“Why’s that?”

“*Tau whitu*. In Maori it means ‘seven years.’ “

But this, like everything else, was curiously misleading. He was not called Seven because his name meant “seven years.” He was called Seven because he was the seventh of ten children and because some wag among his cousins had nicknamed him “Number Seven” when he was a kid.

The way he told it, it was only an accident that he was even in the pub that night. He said he’d been out on the water all day diving for crayfish with his cousins—by which I understood him to mean the piratical-looking crew of Maoris at the next table. They were all wearing sunglasses and close-fitting jeans and some had leather jackets. “We only came into town for cigarettes,” he was saying. “We didn’t plan on stopping at the pub.”

The problem, it seemed, was that none of them had any money. But then someone had the bright idea of taking the crayfish, which they were supposed to bring home, and hawking them in the pub. At the last minute, the crays were saved when Seven found a twenty-dollar note on the men’s room floor. He laughed as he mimed handing it over to the bartender with the very tip of his forefinger and thumb.

Just then the noise in the pub, which had once again risen to a steady roar, died abruptly for the second time. A group of policemen, five or six, in hats and uniforms with handcuffs and billy clubs dangling from their belts, were standing in the door. They shouldered their way through the crowd to where the Maori who’d been in the fight was sitting. “Outside,” said one of them roughly. “Outside with yer mates.”

The boy and his two companions, one with dreadlocks and a crocheted cap and a thin, grizzled

fellow in his forties, got to their feet and left, followed by the police.

“Excuse me,” I said. “I’ll be right back.” And, leaving my drink on the table, I slipped out after them.

By this time night had fallen. The police had their suspects lined up against the wall and were barking questions at them: What were their names? Where did they come from? What were they doing here? They told the Maoris to empty out their car, a battered old Falcon stuffed with clothing, blankets, fishing gear, and trash. As the one with the dreadlocks went to open the door, a Doberman leaped out and he grabbed it by the collar. I took in the scene from the doorway—the police beacons flashing in the night, the whining dog, the staccato nonsense of the radio, and the dark mutterings of the men, whose disheveled belongings were now strewn around the parking lot—and wondered if this was normal for a Saturday night.

At last the police decided to take the oldest, most inoffensive member of the trio to the station, leaving the other two to stuff their things back into the car.

“You can pick him up later,” they told them. “Then you’re on your way.”

I went back inside, if anything even less clear about what had actually happened. Why were there so many policemen? Why did they take the wrong guy? Why did they even bother to turn up when the fight was over? What had happened to the Pakeha? And why was there no buzz about it in the pub?

I headed back to where I’d left my beer and put my questions to Seven.

“Ah,” he said, “they’re just troublemakers. They’re not from around here.”

Abominably Saucy

I have often thought of that night as a contact encounter. “Contact” is what we call it when two previously unacquainted groups meet for the very first time. It is what happened when Christopher Columbus reached the Bahamas in 1492 and encountered a tribal people henceforth known as “Indians” from his misconception about where in the world he was. Or when the Leahy brothers, trekking into the interior of Papua New Guinea in search of gold, came upon a group of highlanders who in 1933 still knew nothing about the outside world. It describes a moment of sudden wonder, a tectonic shift, that undermines old certainties and opens up whole new views.

Of course, there have been thousands, perhaps tens of thousands, of such moments. Contact, after all, has taken place in all corners of the world between all kinds of people, most of whom have left no written record of the events. Documented instances are comparatively rare and this, perhaps, is why so much glamour attaches to these moments—that and the fact that they no longer happen. *First contact*, unless it is with someone in outer space, is a scenario that will not be repeated on the terrestrial globe and this naturally adds to its attraction.

But contact, as a generalized concept, is still a very useful idea. In the context of the last five hundred years, the age of European expansion, contact has often been understood as an asymmetric event, an act, in which someone *contacts* someone else. But historians and anthropologists tend to speak rather of a “contact period” or “contact zone,” meaning a time and space in which two groups of people come together, part, come together, part, and come together again in a strange, unsettled period of uncertainty, like a dance that none of the performers has had a chance to fully learn.

Because contact, whatever else it is, is a matter of confusion. One side may have technological superiority; the other maybe have numbers on its side. But when they first come together, there is, for a limited time, a kind of parity, the parity of incomprehension. Each side constructs hypotheses, tries to assess the other’s strength, to parse the other’s utterances, to deduce the other’s purpose and intention. Neither fully understands what’s happening and neither can say with confidence what’s going on.

The absolute truth of this, and its applicability even to contemporary situations, was impressed upon me that evening after I left the Kerikeri pub. My bus to Auckland had been scheduled for ten o’clock, but somehow ten had come and gone and, before I knew it, the pub was closing and there I was with all my gear and no place to go. “You can come with us,” said Seven. And so I did.

Our destination, it turned out, was a house that belonged to somebody’s uncle. The owner was away at the time and in his absence the place had become a sort of flophouse for those of his relations who could not be bothered, or were too drunk, to drive back out to Mangonui. You could walk to it from the pub, which is what we’d done, stumbling through the schoolyard and across a lumpy paddock to a surprisingly suburban-looking street at the bottom of a hill.

It was a plain, rectangular timber house, sparsely furnished, with a living room, a kitchen, three small bedrooms, and a bath. Inside, it had a hard-worn, barren feeling, no knick-knacks or decorations, but all the surfaces were immaculately clean. When we arrived, the place was already filled with people, draped in various postures about the room. At one end of the lounge a couple of girls were playing cards at a table, at the other a bunch of guys were sprawled in front of a TV. Between them, pushed up against the wall, was a sagging couch, which is where, as the evening advanced, I found myself sitting.

Beside me on the sofa was a scruffy-looking guy in his midtwenties whom I'd seen earlier in the pub. He had a surly sort of expression and a handsome mop of curly black hair. He was wearing a singlet and a pair of black jeans and his hands were covered with homemade tattoos.

We'd been sitting there for a while when out of the blue he said, "I've been looking for an earring."

From the kitchen came the smell of frying onions and the sound of the kettle coming to a boil. A lean and wispy character with several missing teeth was strumming a Bob Marley song on the guitar. On the coffee table in front of us stood a half-empty bottle of whisky and an ashtray full of butts.

I fingered the earrings I was wearing, a pair of large engraved silver hoops that I had bought for myself at a shop in Melbourne. I wore them often and considered them my favorite pair. On impulse I took one off and handed it over. "Here," I said. "Have this."

He looked at me for a moment and then held the earring up and ripped the silver hoop from the ring that attached it to the wire. Then he tossed the hoop into a corner and put the wire in his ear.

I sat perfectly still, thinking about what had just happened.

I had left the pub in the company of these strangers because I wanted to know more about them and because I trusted the fellow in the bright pink shirt. It was instinct and nothing more, and now I wondered if perhaps I'd misjudged the situation.

Maybe it was because I was a tourist. Maybe it was because I'd come to the party with someone I didn't like. Maybe there was something insulting about my giving him the earring, as though I was making a display of the fact that it was easy for me to give something valuable away. Maybe he thought I was trying to placate him or buy him off. Maybe he just didn't like the hoop. Maybe he thought it looked like something for a girl. I wasn't even all that sure of my own motives, but I had absolutely no idea what was going through his mind. All I knew was that something had gone wrong.

Later the memory of this moment was like a flash going off inside my head. It was exactly the kind of thing, I realized, that had happened over and over in those early years when Maoris and Europeans were first coming into contact with one another. Not that this was anywhere near as serious—it was easy enough for me to get up and walk away, to seek out people in whose company I felt safer, to sneak back later when no one was looking and retrieve my silver hoop. But if you ramped up the risks and the consequences, you could see in this the sort of encounter that had so often been repeated in the history of New Zealand and had so often ended badly for one or the other side.

All the early accounts of contact in New Zealand have an air of peril about them. The Maoris, so numerous and brooding, seem perpetually on the verge of attack. The Europeans, full of uncertainty, sail in and out in a state of chronic trepidation. Neither side seems clearly in command.

After Tasman's misadventure in Murderers' Bay, no European ship reached New Zealand for 12 years. Then, in rapid succession, came Cook and the Frenchman Jean de Surville, separately but simultaneously in 1769, Marion du Fresne in 1772, Cook again with Tobias Furneaux in 1773-74, and then Cook once more on his third and final voyage in 1777. Of these expeditions, not one escaped New Zealand without confrontation and, in some cases, significant loss of life.

Surville, who reached New Zealand at virtually the same time as Cook, approached New Zealand only with the greatest unease. He had made a long and pointless passage through the Coral Sea with a crew that was dying of scurvy, and he desperately needed someplace where he could go ashore. New Zealand seemed to him the best of bad options. "According to the report of the travellers who have preceded us there," he wrote, "the natives of the country are ferocious and bloodthirsty." But it was the closest known landfall and the one he thought they would be able to find. And, "anyhow," he added, "we have no alternative in the state in which we are."

As it was, the Maoris treated him civilly. They came out in their canoes and traded fish for cloths and knives, led the visitors to a place where they could get water, and even helped them care for the sick on shore. But Surville did not trust them. “They stand close to you with marks of friendship,” he wrote, “and if you relax and they think they have time to flee after striking their blow, they will not fail to.”

Still, for a week all went well. Then one night a storm arose and a boatload of invalids returning to the ship was forced back to shore. The ship dragged her anchors and had to be moved, leaving behind a yawl that had sunk in shallow water. When the wind subsided, Surville spotted the yawl, which the Maoris had in the meantime refloated. He set off to retrieve it, but when he arrived, the yawl was gone. Determined to revenge himself for, in his words, “the theft which had just been committed under our very noses,” Surville seized the first Maori he could lay his hands on, confiscated a large canoe, and set fire to some thirty dwellings and storehouses full of food. Then, clapping his captive in irons, he sailed out of the bay. The prisoner, who later died of scurvy at sea, turned out to be none other than Ranginui, a local chief who—in the ultimate proof of the maxim “no good deed goes unpunished”—had fed and sheltered the sick Frenchmen when they were stranded by the storm.

Surville’s behavior, which seems not only wicked but bizarre, cannot possibly have made sense to the Maoris. But they themselves were often just as baffling: witness the story of Marion du Fresne. Marion’s view of the Maoris was exactly the opposite of Surville’s. An idealist and a romantic who had come under the influence of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Marion believed that the Maoris were nature’s children. “As I do only good to them,” he told his lieutenant, “assuredly they will do me no evil.”

Marion spent five weeks in the Bay of Islands in May and June of 1772. Relations there were quickly established, the local people expressing great interest in and apparent friendliness toward the French, who, in turn, described the Maoris as “a fine, courageous, industrious, and very intelligent race.” Both Marion’s lieutenant and the commander of his storeship, however, felt that their captives placed too much confidence in the Maoris’ goodwill. The lieutenant, particularly, thought he detected “a species of underlying ferocity” in their behavior. They “treated us to a great many endearments,” he wrote, but “when we permitted them to place their lips, either upon our hands or our faces, they sucked the flesh with a surprising greediness.”

One day, when the French had been in the bay for about a month, two chiefs took Marion to the top of a hill where a great many people were gathered. There, they embraced him and placed a crown of greenery upon his head. Marion understood these gestures to mean that they acknowledged him as their sovereign, but this is patently not what was going on. “Whatever these ceremonies may have meant,” writes the anthropologist Anne Salmond, “they sealed his death warrant.”

The next day Marion went on shore in the company of several Maoris. He told his lieutenant that he was going fishing in a nearby cove and that none of his soldiers need accompany him, since they would just be in the way. And that was the last that anyone ever saw of Marion du Fresne.

When the full scale of the tragedy became apparent—a reconnaissance mission to the cove reported that both Marion’s cutter and the longboat that had been sent after him were on the beach, that all but one of the longboat’s crew had been massacred, and that one of the chiefs had been seen wearing Marion’s velvet waistcoat and carrying his silver-mounted gun—the lieutenant led a punitive expedition against the local Maoris. Three hundred or more were killed, including women and children, some of whom were shot in their canoes as they tried to escape. The Frenchmen then set fire to three, perhaps four villages and, naming the spot “Treachery Bay,” sailed for Île-de-France.

Many years later, in the late 1820s, a traveling Englishman reported that he had met a Maori in the Bay of Islands who claimed to have been among the party that murdered Marion. “They were all brave

men,” the Maori said, “but they were killed and eaten.”

Even Cook, undoubtedly the most experienced and capable navigator to visit New Zealand in the years, found relations with the Maoris tricky. Cook spent a full six months circumnavigating New Zealand in the course of his first voyage round the world. He had the distinct advantage over other commanders, not only of this cumulative experience but of having a Tahitian on board who was able to serve as a translator. And even so there was confusion, misunderstanding, even death.

In their very first encounter at a place called Poverty Bay, Cook’s men, perceiving that they were about to be attacked, shot and killed a Maori, one of the very first they had met. A similar altercation the next day left three Maoris wounded, one mortally, and a fracas at sea that same afternoon resulted in four deaths, all Maori, and the capture of three adolescent Maori boys. Cook and his officers were not happy. “Black be the mark” for this day, wrote the young gentleman Joseph Banks, who sailed with Cook as an observer, “and heaven send that such may never return to embitter future reflection.”

All up and down the coast, whenever the *Endeavour* was sighted, Maoris would set off in canoes, sometimes no more than two or three, sometimes as many as fifty at a time. Paddling as fast as they could, they would come to within earshot of the ship and cry out, “Come here, come ashore, and we will kill you!” waving their weapons in the air and hurling stones at the vessel. The British replied by firing small shot over the Maoris’ heads. Sometimes the Maoris turned around and paddled back to shore. Sometimes they put down their weapons, entered into conversation, and began to trade: fish and *kumara* (sweet potatoes) for nails and cloth, weapons and cloaks for paper and hatchets. The daring and distinguished among them went aboard and examined everything in the ship, tasting the food, trying on the clothes, inspecting such novel instruments as telescopes and compasses. Cook, who became quite fond of the Maoris during his long circumnavigation, found their behavior remarkable.

At times they would dance the war dance, and at other times they would trade with and talk to us and answer such questions as were put to them with all the calmness imaginable, and then again begin the war dance, shaking their paddles, patoo patoos, etc., and make strange contortions at the same time. And as soon as they had worked themselves up to a proper pitch, they would begin to attack us with stones and darts and oblige us whether we would or no to fire upon them.

Cook had been coasting New Zealand for about a month when he reached the Bay of Islands on a fine spring day in late November. It was immediately apparent to everyone on board that this was no ordinary inlet. There were signs of occupation everywhere: plantations on all the larger islands, houses, villages, fortifications all along the shore. The people seemed in every respect more prosperous than any they had yet encountered. Their chiefs were better dressed and carried more weapons; their skins were darker and differently tattooed; their canoes were bigger and more elaborately carved; and they came out to the ship in great fleets numbering hundreds of men. The bay itself was safer, deeper, better protected than any Cook had yet seen in New Zealand, with sheltered anchorages and harbors “as smooth as mill pools.” Even the fish were unusually plentiful: the mackerel caught sharks, stingrays, bream, and mullet, while the mackerel, wrote Cook, “are larger than any I ever saw in any other part of the world.”

It was, in fact, no ordinary place. The Bay of Islands at the end of the eighteenth century was a hotly contested region in political flux. The *hapu*, or subtribes, of Ngati Awa, Ngati Pou, and Ngati Waikato were under pressure from Ngapuhi, a tribal grouping from the Hokianga and inland regions, who rose to supremacy in the area coincided with the arrival of the Europeans. It was Ngapuhi who would later use the Bay of Islands as its base of operations for the first major war of the colonial period—war fought by Maori against Maori with the use of the Pakeha’s guns. It was Ngapuhi who would

initiate the trade in timber, flax, and tattooed heads, who would sell the first land and build the first churches. It was a Ngapuhi chief who began the revolt against the Pakeha in 1844, and it was Ngapuhi who now confronted a European ship with European weapons in their bay for the very first time.

As soon as the *Endeavour* rounded the entrance to the bay, several large canoes set out from shore and quickly surrounded the ship. Some of the Maoris came on board but there was tension and misunderstanding. The Maoris seemed unfriendly, tempers began to rise. Sydney Parkinson, the ship's artist, described them as unruly, and complained that while he was greeting one of them in the local manner—by gently pressing noses—the Maori picked his pocket. Joseph Banks pronounced the Maori “most abominably saucy.”

Over the course of the day, no fewer than four or five hundred Maoris came out to the ship, in numbers and behavior such that Cook decided to take the *Endeavour* out of the bay before nightfall. They sailed north to the Cavalle Islands, where they bought fish and again were pelted with stones. But with the wind in their teeth they could make no progress and so back they went, determined to stay as long as the wind was contrary to make a closer inspection of the bay.

The next day it was raining. No sooner had the ship come to anchor than three or four hundred Maoris assembled near it in their canoes. At first, wrote Cook, they behaved “tollerable well,” but soon a group of youths tried to steal the buoy from the anchor. Nothing would make them stop but musket fire, and one of the boys, reported Cook, was hit. The captain then ordered a great gun fired over their heads, frightening them “not a little,” and moved the ship to deeper water.

And then an incident occurred that nearly spelled the end of things for Cook. Cook, Banks, and the *Endeavour's* naturalist, Dr. Daniel Solander, accompanied by an escort of marines, set off in the pinnace and the yawl to investigate one of the islands in the outer bay. They had only just landed when they discovered that all the canoes that had been gathered about the ship had followed them to this island, landing at different points along the shore. Within minutes they were surrounded by an unruly crowd of two or three hundred people. “Notwithstanding that they were all armed,” wrote Cook,

they came upon us in such a confused straggling manner that we hardly suspected that they meant us any harm. But in this we were very soon undeceived, for upon our endeavouring to draw a line of the sand between us and them, they set up the war dance and immediately some of them attempted to seize the two boats.

Finding themselves cornered and seeing the Maoris advance with what was now plainly hostile intent, Cook, Banks, Solander, and two of the marines fired into the crowd. This gave the attackers a pause, but only for a moment, and the Maoris quickly rallied, shouting and waving their weapons in the air. Luckily for the men on the island, the officer in charge of the *Endeavour* had been keeping a close eye on things and he brought the ship's cannons to bear on the island and fired a series of four pounders over the Maoris' heads. This time they retreated, but it was a dangerous skirmish for the British, and a foreshadowing of the way in which Cook, ten years later in Hawaii, would meet his death at the hands of a different group of Polynesians.

When I say that I thought of that night as a contact encounter, what I mean is that this is what it felt like to me. No doubt it had elements of oddness for the Maoris—they may have wondered what I was doing, going home with a bunch of people I didn't know—but at least I was recognizably a tourist, someone who had appeared on the periphery of their consciousness and would just as certainly disappear. For me, it was different. Seven was almost the first Maori I'd ever met, certainly the first I'd ever talked to, and the situation in which I found myself had all the hallmarks of a contact encounter: the excitement, the anxiety, the bafflement, the humor, the humility that ultimately come

from realizing *you've gotten it all wrong*.

What I thought I'd witnessed that night in the pub was nothing less than the unbridgeable gulf between Maori and Pakeha—a gulf no narrower for all the years that had elapsed since the two first faced each other across a narrow strip of beach. Had not Tasman sailed away leaving behind the name Murderers' Bay and the bodies of four of his men? Were not Cook's first days in New Zealand filled with death on the Maori side and dismay on the part of the Europeans? And what of Surville's irrational reprisals and the death of Marion du Fresne? Were not Maori and Pakeha from the very beginning locked in a belligerent embrace: no justice for Maori in a Pakeha world, no mercy for Pakeha among Maori?

"Nah," said Seven later. "That's not how it was. The Pakeha's a local lad—most of the fellas have known him for years. It was the other ones that caused all the trouble. I told you, they're not from around here."

The real fault lines, it seemed, lay that night between Maori and Maori and not between Maori and Pakeha, as I had assumed. I had been primed to see the incident in terms of a conflict between natives and colonizers, that is, between a fair, freckled Maori boy and a white guy in a red shirt. But, of course, that was far too simple.

The Pakeha who was involved in the fight, and who discreetly disappeared before the arrival of the police, was actually on the home team. He was the manager of an orchard outside town and was well known to most of the Maoris in the pub. The young Maori fighter and his two friends, on the other hand, had come from somewhere down the North Island and had no ties to the area. They were interlopers, "troublemakers," from the local point of view. Their manners were bad and they deserved to be punished. It was fine for the police to take them away. It was even fine for the police to harass them. In a certain, albeit ambiguous, sense, the police were on the home team too.

It was a while, though, before I really understood this. No Maori will tell you everything all at once and Seven was no exception to this rule. And even when I thought I had some of the answers, I was aware that there were things I didn't understand. This feeling of not quite getting what was going on would dog me whenever I was in New Zealand. Indeed, it seemed only to grow stronger with each visit. I like to think this is how astronomers feel: with each new discovery of something curious—quasars, black holes, dark matter—the universe grows not more comprehensible but less, though the hope endures of a simple, unifying explanatory narrative.

But back in the beginning, in the pub, I had only the merest signs to go on: the offer of a light, the flicker of a smile. It was like a code that needed cracking, a language that with effort one might finally comprehend. I was a tourist who should have been on a bus back to where I came from. Instead I found myself in a house long after midnight with a bunch of Maoris I didn't know. That was the night I missed my bus and then I missed my plane.

Mangonui

About fifteen miles as the crow flies across the Bay of Islands lies the village of Mangonui, a settlement of some two hundred people, each of whom can claim all the others as his kin. Mangonui occupies a secluded spot on a branch of the Taimarie inlet. The water there is quiet, the fishing is good, the mudflats are full of shellfish, and there are oyster beds nearby. Maoris have lived there, on and on, for centuries. In the old days they probably came there in summer, when the fish and shellfish were fat, and went back to their inland homes at Waimate and Whakataha when the rain came and the chill wet winter wind began to blow.

The road to Mangonui is only paved halfway. After that it's what they call "loose metal," a slippery gravel surface that gives off clouds of dust. The road winds uphill and down, through pastures, over creeks, past long driveways that disappear over the top of a pasture only to reappear again as a ribbon in the distance between two fields. There are pine groves and pockets of manuka and great balls of gorse in the paddocks. The local Maoris, who know the road, drive fast, sliding round curves and flying over bumps. Occasionally someone hits a power pole, but usually only when they're drunk.

About twenty minutes from the end of the sealed road, a narrower, bumpier road turns off and heads down in a sweeping curve toward the tip of a small peninsula that juts out into the bay. Mangonui sits on this finger of land, with one *marae*, or meetinghouse, at the first joint, and another at the knuckle. The presence of two such institutions in so small a place—where you cannot buy a newspaper or a quart of milk, where two or three hundred people have among them four or five surnames—suggests two things: a high degree of religiosity and a long-standing family feud, the one likely having to do with the other. On one side of Mangonui live the Ratana adherents, on the other the Rapana faithful, divided from each other by a consonant, a dirt road, and a lost ideological disagreement. Their dispute, once a matter of principle, has become a matter of habit, and just what originally caused it no one under seventy can now say.

Past the *marae* on either side are houses, sheds, a handful of gardens, a number of abandoned cars, the shingle, and the sea. Though set in a landscape of exquisite natural beauty, the houses are not much to look at. The nicest of them is the one that Seven's father bought from the government in the early 1960s. It had been built for the Mangonui schoolteacher, who would have been a Pakeha, possibly with a wife, and it sat on a section of Crown land given to the government by Seven's grandfather specially for the purpose. When a bigger school was built out on the main road to accommodate not only the Maoris but the children of the local Pakeha farmers, the Mangonui teacher's house was no longer needed and, with the help of a government loan, Seven's father took it up.

It was a beautiful little house, all handmade of kauri pine, with a wide overhang and casement windows and a set of outside stairs leading to the front door. It had a kitchen with a wood stove, a lounge with a fireplace, two bedrooms with a bath in between, an outside toilet, and a pair of water tanks that collected rainwater from the roof. It was perched on the side of a gendy sloping hill and gave a view of both *marae* and the road between them, and, beyond that, the inlet and the farthest shore. Behind it, going up the hill, was a twisted lemon tree and a shed and a washing line with two forked props, and then, at the edge of the mown meadow, the beginning of the bush. A tangle of trees and creepers marked the top of the embankment, which dropped abruptly on the other side to the flat where a cluster of houses sat separated from the beach by a shock of tufted grass and flax, like the

crest of a giant bird.

This was the house that Seven grew up in. His parents raised ten children in its five rooms, his father working multiple jobs, often far from home, building houses, packing meat, picking vegetables. His mother ran the post office and telephone exchange from a cupboard inside the front door until the government closed the branch and moved the business into town. When I first met them, they were still living there, with the last of their children, a girl, who was then about thirteen years old. She had all to herself the room that had at different times contained every possible arrangement of beds (two sets of bunks; a bunk and a double; a double, a single, and a cot) and slept every possible arrangement of children (two boys in each bunk; four girls in the bed; all the younger children in one bed together and a cot for whoever was the baby at the time). Her brothers and sisters had grown up and most had gone away, but a few remained in Mangonui, living in houses to either side, married with children of their own.

Seven's father was a man of not very many words, at least not to me. He was a minister of the faith that the people call Absolute Maori, or *Mana Motuhake*, a Rapana offshoot with roots in the Anglican Church. He wore a blue cassock with a white surplice and a red stole and conducted the service entirely in Maori. It was wonderful to listen to—the way any language one doesn't understand is wonderful—moving in a musical, purely emotional way. Seven's mother was a fine singer with a beautiful voice that filled the *marae* on Sunday mornings and kept the faithful on their toes in the *whare kai*, communal kitchen, whenever there were church events. They were the traditionalists in Mangonui and referred, in private, to their relations across the road as *paki paki* (meaning “clap clap”) because of their Pentecostal inclinations.

The day I arrived in Mangonui was hot and bright. I had gone to sleep in a house full of people and awakened to find the sun streaming in the windows and everybody gone. There were dishes with the remains of breakfast piled on the kitchen counter and cups with the dregs of the sweet hot drink that passes for coffee in New Zealand, a dusty, cocoa-colored powder, mixed with sugar, milk, and boiling water. But there was no one in evidence and the house seemed preternaturally still.

Seven must have heard me, though, because he suddenly materialized in the doorway.

“You want a cuppa?” he said.

We went outside and sat on the steps with our cups of coffee. I had a lot of questions. I wanted to know (again) how he spelled his name and how he pronounced it, and where he had come from, and what he was doing there, and who all those people were in the house, and what his relationship was with them. But I didn't ask any of them just yet. The sun was warm and there were some little birds pecking about in the grass and flitting back and forth between the bushes.

“So,” I said, “what are you going to do now?”

“Heading out to Mangonui. Want to come?”

“Okay,” I said, “sure.”

We arrived at Seven's parents just in time for lunch. They were having fish heads, boiled with slices of onion and salt in an enormous pot, and Maori bread with slabs of butter. Eating a fish head, as it turns out, is not as easy as you might think. The brain, a creamy, gelatinous substance, can get lost if you aren't careful, and you have to suck the insides out of the eyes and spit out the clear thin case and the white marble of the eyeball.

My uncertainty about the process must have been obvious, because, before I knew what was happening, Seven's mother was back at the stove, battering and frying fillets of snapper just for me. She did it out of politeness for a Pakeha who plainly did not know what to do with a head, and I was

grateful if somewhat embarrassed.

It was not much like the meals I had growing up. There was no more talking than what was needed to get something passed from the other side of the table. No one chatted about the weather or discussed political events. They ate with enormous concentration, not hurriedly, but with focus, and the only noise was the sound of sucking, as every bit of meat was extracted from the bones, and the clatter of silverware and dishes, and the quiet slurp of someone polishing off a drink, and, finally, the scrape of chairs pushing away from the table.

When the fish heads were all eaten and the bread was gone and everyone had had a big swig of water weakly flavored with powdered lemonade, we finished the meal with cups of tea.

“Milk?” asked Seven’s mother.

“Lemon, if you have any,” I said.

“Just like Dad. Faith, go get a lemon from the tree.” After that it became a point of honor for me to drink my tea with lemon, though I became aware that I was reducing the tiny stock of lemon juice in the tree, being old, was not much of a producer—and potentially, at least, depriving Seven’s father of one of his small pleasures.

Seven’s parents were discreet in their inquiries about who I was and what I was doing there, and they asked me almost nothing about myself. Finally, after dinner, his father, speaking quietly and looking past my head as though it would be impolite to confront me with a direct question, said “Your family, they’re far away?”

“They’re in Boston, in the United States,” I told him.

“*Long* way away,” he said. And then, after a pause, “You must miss your home.”

“I’m not sure I know where home is,” I replied with the insouciance of a twenty something. To which he said nothing.

I have since wondered what he must have made of such a remark. At the time I was deaf to its absurdity, but now I can’t help but think about the way it must have sounded to a man who lived on what could honestly be called ancestral land; who had never been farther than two hundred miles from the place where he was born; who, whether consciously or not, had spent much of his life defending his right and that of his children, against the pressures of commerce, modernization, and Pakeha land hunger, to remain where he was. It’s possible that he pitied me, though more likely that, with the wisdom of a man who had fathered many children, he just recognized that I was young.

But if I was a mystery to them, they were certainly a mystery to me. I knew nothing about how even the most elementary things were done, and was, in the local parlance, completely “useless.” Offering to do the laundry for one of Seven’s sisters, I washed the dark clothes first instead of the whites and had to throw out a whole tub of water that should, at that dry season, have been used two or three times. Trying to help another sister shuck oysters, I only succeeded in irritating her by breaking the tip of my blade. I can still see her, in her gum boots and apron, a big woman on an upturned bucket shaking her head and waving me away. I could not dig shellfish without slicing my hands, I could not pry sea urchins from the rocks, even in shallow water. And I inspired hilarity by going about with a sarong draped over my hat to protect my skin from the burning antipodean sun. The smallest children were cleverer, more useful than I. But mostly people were amused by my incompetence, and even I could see that it was funny.

I stayed in Mangonui for a week, camping with Seven in a shack by the sea with no running water, eating snapper that he caught with a hand line and cooked over a fire. When we needed more food, we turned up at a house, his mother’s or sister’s or sister-in-law’s, about the time that someone might be

making supper. We had pork bones with dumplings and *puha*, a bitter weed that grows in orchards and along fence lines and sometimes beside the road. We had oysters and *kina*, or sea urchin roe, which is salty and strong, with a flavor like iodine, and addictive to those who are raised on it. We had *pipi*, a kind of sweet little clam, steamed just until they opened, and *paua*, or abalone, minced and sautéed in cream. We had lamb chops, and sausages, and “smashed” potatoes, buckets of loquats and passion fruit and plums.

Occasionally Seven had things to do. One day his father sent him to shoot feral cats in the bush at the bottom of the embankment. Another time one of his brothers wanted him to go out in the boat. They left early and were gone all day, returning about sunset with half a dozen sugar sacks full of crayfish and abalone. I spent much of this time sitting and watching the water. The beach was pebbled down by the waterline and littered with shells. The slope was gradual and the tide went a long way out and crept back slowly, lapping at the mud. Across the inlet the hills were darkly clothed with plantations of pine, and then gold and green where it opened out into pasture with scattered clumps of trees. There were no buildings, or roads, or houses to be seen in any direction and my mind invariably turned to the question of what it must have been like for the earliest settlers, with their European memories and their European eyes.

Sometimes I went for walks, wandering up the road or into the bush beyond the houses. I liked the drone of the cicadas in the midday heat, and the crunch of the dry grass, and the strange, pungent smell of something, an aromatic tree or shrub that I could never locate but that would suddenly surround me like some kind of enchantment and then vanish if I took another step. I got quieter and quieter as the days wore on, one hot, bright, summer day after another, and I found myself talking less and less. One day I said to Seven, “You know, I might stop talking altogether if I stay here too long.” He just laughed and said nothing.

It was on one of these days when I was on my own that I first met Kura, the second youngest of Seven’s sisters. She was about eighteen at the time, a handsome girl with thick, curly black hair, long legs, and a raucous manner. She had been slightly deafened in her youth, probably by an untreated ear infection, and had a tendency to shout. Perhaps because Seven was her favorite brother, perhaps because she was stuck at home and bored, we quickly became friends.

“I had this terrible dream last night,” she told me.

“What was it?”

“I dreamed that all my teeth fell out!”

I laughed. “That’s a classic dream, you know. They say it’s got something to do with sex.”

“Really?” she said. “Uh-oh. Don’t tell Mum.”

But what I thought it really had to do with was tooth decay. Kura and Seven were among the few young adults in Mangonui who still had all their own teeth. In fact, if anyone over the age of about thirty had a full set, you could be almost certain they weren’t real. And a couple of people I met had had all their teeth pulled while they were still in their twenties because it was cheaper than getting them fixed.

I found this very shocking and the irony of it was inescapable, at least to me. One of the first things eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century European visitors to New Zealand noticed was the Maori’s dazzling white teeth, so very different from their own. But along with guns, germs, and steel, came flour and sugar, and a diet that has led not only to widespread obesity and diabetes but to rampant tooth decay.

The other person I got to know fairly well in Mangonui was an old lady named Nana Miri, who lived on the flat below the embankment, a stone’s throw from the sea. She was a small, energetic

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