

BANK OF NEW ZEALAND YOUNG WRITERS AWARD

WINNER: A Perfect Life

Lara Markstein

All I ever wanted was a perfect life. And really, was that too much to ask? To own the moon and to conquer the sun to march to the beat of success' drum. To see the future, change the past, but most of all, to escape.

It's on the corner of King Street, Blacket is. You won't see it from the red cobbled street, we've simply an old oak door – no window. But no matter who you ask, everyone will tell you Blacket is the finest bookshop in Onaki. Not least because it's the only one.

If you did chance to ask, they might tell you it's the musty odour of history that draws them to our dim dimesne. They could say it's the shaft of light that puddles onto the faded ladder and shelves through the lattice. But I can tell you know already it's the bitter coffee bean aroma, and the smooth, jazzy texture of gossip.

We don't live it, we breathe it.

Familiarity breeds contempt, and we have one hundred very familiar souls.

Which was why it was so shocking to see her there. Contentedly the woman lifted each novel with love, dusted the shelf, then put them back on. Over and over, as if it were her mantra.

"Excuse me, can I help?" I asked, irritated with the feeling that I was the intruder in her secret world.

When she turned around my heart froze. Maybe it was her slightly unfocused eyes, or the way her pudgy hands clung to the cloth she held in fright; but I could have sworn it was the trusting innocence that forced me to my knees to help.

"You can put the books back for me," she ordered peremptorily. "What's your name?" But before I could draw a breath to answer, she continued. "My name's Georgia, like the American state. My mother always wanted to go there. She said when she looked into my eyes she swore she could see the lazy Georgian sky. But I think she made that up, because you can't see the sky in someone's eyes. Unless you look very close and you see your reflection. So, what's your name?" Her slurred speech and slight lisp caused my chest to tighten. "Robbie. My name's Robbie." I replied as I helped her to her feet.

She tried it out. "Robbie," testing each syllable on the air, as if she could taste candy floss in the letters. Giggling, she bit her tongue, looking down with embarrassment. "I like that. I can be called Georgie".

And as if a pact of pals had suddenly been signed she flung her arms around me. "See you tomorrow," she said, toddling off into the open street. A brush of cold air wisped around my feet.

In the lofty circle of the Onaki elite, Blacket is considered the one and only meeting place for a spot of afternoon tea.

“Robbie, darling!” Beatrice cries as she bustles through the door. Two kisses hover on the air by either cheek while her hand lingers on my arm. “How are you today, my love?”

Lightly prising her fingers from my cuff, I smile. “I’m fine, Mrs Wellsworth, and yourself?”

“Positively perky,” she twittered with a false flash of teeth and then the flock arrived. There’s Margaret, whose husband left her, Jan who only keeps dogs, Maria an horrendous flirt, and Lilliane – about as soft as an aardvark.

Ruffling their feathers they strut about, exchanging trills of excitement and malicious joy. “Oh dear, how are you?”

But as the steamy cup observes their hidden looks, the women perch upon their stools and settle into their religious reverie. “Do you know what I heard?” Lilliane whispers.

We all lean in, fearful of missing out. Knowledge is power in the land of people. And everyone wants power. “I heard that young Genevieve, well, she had to go to Timaru.” She pauses, taking a long draught.

“Why?” I query, knowing how the game is played.

“Oh dear, I can’t say!” There is silence and the metallic click, click, click, of the clock echoes across the room. “Only,” she draws tracing her name with a spoon in the foam. “It wasn’t weight that she’d put on, like we’d thought.”

Mock gasps fill the air – “No!” They coo. Outrage, horror at the reckless youths of today, and judgement passes across their scarlet lips. “A hussey! A slut!”

Lilliane nervously checks her watch, “Sorry darls, Chester’s coming in on the 3.30 train – and you know how he hates me to be late! Ta all, ciao for now my sweet Robert,” she smiles, blowing me a kiss which I dutifully catch, then throw in the bin.

A hush descends before we resume our business, and inadvertently we hear the muttered phrase “... even more when I’m late”. And the flick of our eyes is the only evidence of our guilt. We disguise our darting glances at the stretch of fabric over Maria’s stomach and inwardly we shake our heads at the deceit of those poor wretches.

“So, anyway, I hear a new girl came into your shop, Robbie, some blonde thing!” Jan remarks acidly.

With a vitriolic smile Beatrice silences her. “Don’t be jealous, dear heart, she’s ... how should I say?” She asks Margaret.

“Mentally not quite there....”

“Unfortunately lacking upstairs”

“In short.....”

“A freak.” They smile, plunging their cups to the counter. Jan turns for my opinion, their beady focus on my soul. A stray leaf flutters and sticks to the lattice, unable to escape.

“Quite”.

Everyday, without fail, Georgia merrily skips in. A natural progression of joy imposed itself on my solitary life.

It scared me then when one morning she arrived late. Her eyes were red, her nose swollen and glistening tracks of tears trickled under her chin. "What's the matter?" I cried.

She bit her lip so hard a little drop of blood slipped onto her crooked tooth and splayed into a star. "My, my boyfriend left me. He said I lived too far away."

I put down my cloth and enfolded her in my arms, rocking her back and forth. "It's alright, there are plenty of other men. Hush, you shouldn't cry."

"My mom used to say that. She said some people are special and when they're sad the angels cry. So she said I shouldn't cry, else her washing would get wet."

Tugging at my mouth was a smile, so I wiped her crystal tears and said, "She's right. You must get yourself someone else, a better boyfriend who'll love you no matter where you are".

At this she grinned, her eyes sparkling in the flickering artificial light. "Yes, yes, a new boyfriend."

Happily, she took out the broom and began to methodically brush and sweep. Then, without warning, she looked up and asked, "Robbie, why don't you like people?"

I floundered, shocked at the clarity of her question. "Um, because I, I'm not comfortable around them."

Sure enough, when she left that day, diamond droplets played a tune upon the roof.

The following afternoon I almost danced. Georgie rushed in, a huge smile stretching across her face. "Guess what?" she laughed, the happy gurgle of contentment.

"What?"

"I saw a dandelion today. They should all be dead. But I saw one. And I blew all the little fairy flies away. My mom was right, miracles can still happen." My chest seemed to ache.

As if an afterthought she continued. "Oh, and I got myself a boyfriend. And he's the bestest boyfriend in the world. Last night he took me to the most beautiful music concert. There were dulcet cellos, plaintive violins and at the end of the evening, he handed me a red, red rose. Then he kissed me on my forehead and left. I couldn't stop looking at the rose. It's love this time, Robbie, really. It's the most beautiful rose in the world." Spinning away she flung open the door to the frosty sun, whisking her away. Chin thrust up, a challenge to the world, and not a care clouding her mind.

I started, seeing a book on the floor and quickly picked it up to call out to Georgie when the blood-red letter caught my eye. "A red, red rose." Flicking through the pages the story fell open on page 274, and my mind whispered the sad words. "There were dulcet cellos, plaintive violins." My heart skipped a beat.

The heat was sultry in Blaket that day. The sun outside burned down upon the lattice. Beatrice insisted on keeping on her glasses, protecting her delicate eyes, as she desperately used a magazine to fan away the beaded droplets on her upper lip.

Methodically, the whisking of the fun lulled us to sleep "... so yes, Peter is off to Timaru, you know, important state business – hush hush."

The other women nodded vigorously, excited and expectant. It was cursory, my smile. It was either the flies, or the company, but I felt stifled, barely able to breathe. And I was frustrated by the whining ploys.

Gasping at the cool air that rushed in with the open door, I turned to see Georgie shaking the dust off her boots and crookedly grinning.

Seeing the other women nestled in their places, for a moment she seemed bewildered, as if she'd wandered into the wrong enclosure. Her eyes lowered, almost afraid, when suddenly something caught her interest.

Running over to Beatrice she let out a cry. "Oh no, your shoelaces are undone!" She bent down and began to tie them up, talking all the time, filling in the space between fear. "Left over right, under and pull... you must take more care with your shoelaces. My mom always said that your shoelaces had to be done or the goblins in the ground would hold them tight and make you fall over." She whispered conspiratorially, leaning in, "But just between you and me, I think she was lying. I've never seen any goblins."

Beatrice's eyes widened in confusion at the orders from this woman on her knees. I snorted, unable to contain the laughter that was bubbling up inside, threatening to erupt.

As if brought back to reality, Georgie turned around and rushed into my arms to hug me. The other women stared in disgust, their upper lips posed in a sneer.

"Charming," said Lilliane. "Do you often come here Georgia?"

"All the time," she laughed. "Robbie and I are best friends, I tell him everything."

Lilliane's ears pricked up, sniffing out the scent of blood. "Oh, like what?"

Before I could gulp some air and speak, the words tumbled out.

"Oh, about me and my boyfriends. I have a new one at the moment. He's super handsome. Today, we went to the beach and lay on the burning sand under his multicolour umbrella. We played in the crystal waters and then afterwards, he bought me a coke and we shared it, sipping out of straws as we looked into each other's eyes."

I could almost taste the salt in my mouth, feel the sugar slide down my throat, almost. But I hadn't been to the beach in years. Onaki was three hours from the coast.

A smile played on Beatrice's downturned mouth. "Ah yes, and what's the boy's name?"

"Harvey," she announced proudly.

"Harvey," Beatrice repeated over and over in question at her flock. Judgement passed with a collective shake of their heads. "I don't seem to recall a ... Harvey on Onaki."

Confused, Georgia insisted, "But there is."

They stand, masters of the land they control. "No, there isn't. And if you ask my opinion, you shouldn't tell others lies. It's evil, didn't your mother ever tell you that?"

"But I didn....".

“There’s no place for liars in Onaki, Georgia. No place!”

Frightened, her eyes darted as an animal caged, and she looked to me for help.

Her mother was right, I thought, as she ran out the door, you really can see the lazy Georgian sky in her eyes.

Shrugging, the prophet announced. “The trust hu..”

“Damn the truth! The truth doesn’t matter one jot in this town, it’s the story that counts. You think you’re so much better than her because your lives are real. But look at yourselves. Lilliane’s husband is sleeping with Maria, Margaret’s ran off, Jan is a spinster for God’s sake!”

“Leave our lives alone!”

“Take of your glasses, Bee.” Her jaw hardened. I snorted. “Just as I thought. You’re lives are no better, and by God, mine is worst of all. Trying to hide who I am, be respected. It’s shallow, there’s no meaning in it. I’m gay and I’m normal. Georgia, she’s happy.”

For a moment they stood in shock. Then, one by one, disgust clouded their eyes and they stormed out of the old oak door onto King Street. Lilliane, Maria, Margaret, Jan... Bee removed her dark glasses, the purple bruise swelling about her eye. I shook my head. My heart had splintered long ago.

But in Blackets, the bitter aroma of coffee beans still lingered on.