

## **BANK OF NEW ZEALAND KATHERINE MANSFIELD AWARD**

**WINNER: Lessons to Learn**

**Natasha Leitch**

### **Fore words**

I spy, with my little eye, something beginning with D. It is a dog, but they don't know that yet. So they look at the book, at my face, my hair, and they then speak, all together, with no hand-raising, in the words I have taught them.

"Teacher, it is duck?"

"It is door?"

"D-D-Down? Yes?"

"Dad. The man is dad?"

"Dress?"

"Dog? Dog, there. Teacher! Dog, yes?"

And yes, yes, Do-Kuin, it is a dog. Look. Can you all see the dog? The dog is little, but we all can see it. It is behind the girl, in the blue dress, but we can all see it. Write down for me. Now. In your books.

"What colour is the dog?"

"Is it a happy dog?"

"Do you have a dog?"

It is a dog. Dog starts with D.

### **Natasha's ark**

On Sundays, the good mothers of Oratia go to church in their best shoes and lipsticks. They go to church, and ask that God provides a man to fix the front porch steps, a housekeeper and a few assorted certificates to display on the fridge. The five- and six-year-olds are left with me in the back room.

I've got Macy, who does all her work either holding my hand, or sitting on my knee. I've got Harry, Mr Sniffles, who I believe is solely responsible for the alarming number of colds I've had this past winter. I've got Paul, the only five-year-old in the world who can recite the 10 Commandments backwards, who honours both his father and his mother, and who would never dream of coveting his neighbour's ox, his donkey, or even his cool Mickey Mouse lunchbox.

I've got others too – in all their sticky-fingered, squeaky-shoed, messy-pigtailed, little-kidness, they sit in rows, and they look up to Miss Natasha (who is me). And, of course, at the end of the row, at the back of the back room, I've got Jack. Jack is seven now, but Mrs Wilson says that he doesn't yet have quite the concentration for the Upper Primary class. But he's not too bad, I guess. At least he's gotten over his hitting and spitting phase.

Today we're making animals, two-by-two. Two dogs from Macy, two spiders from Harry, two hippos, two elephants, two kiwis from Jack. All are cut out and blue-tacked to the ark on the wall, where they'll be safe when the rain comes.

"God makes the dogs so happy," says Macy. And then we pray.

### **A new language**

There are five other kiwis in Jeon-Ju, all teachers. All you need is a degree in anything to work here. Mine's in Latin: amo, amas, amat. Every Saturday night we wander around the city – Burger King, Movie Street, the arcades – until we find each other.

Then someone asks, "Who's hungry?". Well we all are. Let's eat, but not rice or noodles, or anything with traces of fish. Let's complain, but not too loudly about our students, our accommodation, the disgusting black stuff that Mr Park served up for lunch.

"It's worse than Marmite!" I say. And don't we all miss Marmite.

Then back home to bed for some, and usually me. But there are those nights when home seems too far away, and I join their midnight walkings. Past the homeless and the huge TV screens, past the shops that seem to sell all the same things, to the Westerner Club, a fine drinking establishment with toilets that flood and room for foreigners.

Our names are there, on 1000 won notes, stuck above the bar. We wrote those, in black felt-tip pen, in between shots of Soju and Long Island Iced teas and Happy 22nd birthday to me me me. The barman, Moon-Bong (how we laughed and laughed and laughed at his name), played "Here Comes the Bride" in honour of the occasion. "Happy birthday Miss Natasha. You are a good teacher and a nice friend".

"You know," said Leon that night at the Westerner, "we should really just choose one place to meet each week. Like, here even. It'd save so much time." But hey, next weekend I might be busy.

Leon's been here five years, says he likes it, got a good boss now, making good money, lovely Korean girlfriend, what more could you want? Sometimes, in his afternoons, my mornings, Greg sends me e-mails.

### **The Christmas concert (part one)**

We were always practising for some concert. Greg up the front, playing the piano. Mrs Wilson, between the pews, holding up the words and telling off the bad singers. Me in the back row, thinking about God or Greg or sometimes silently reciting the verb charts I had to learn for Monday's exam: servus, servum, servi, servo, servo.

"Can we sing the Rudolf song?" Jack asks. "I know all the words".

“Don’t think the Minister would be too happy with that one, Jack,” says Mrs Wilson, so we learn “Silent Night” instead. All is calm, all is bright, and in the week before the concert we decorate the tree.

The good mothers of Oratia have brought in old cards and margarine lids, and all morning I sit on the floor and cut, add glue, add glitter, add string. It’s a big tree, and a big tree needs lots of decorations, so it’s lucky I’ve got such great little helpers. Paul and Jack can hang decorations on the bottom branches, but only Greg’s allowed up the ladder. Only Greg. If you want to put something up the top of the tree, give it to Greg, and he’ll put it up there for you.

Jack’s sister, Christie, and Trent from youth group, hold hands in the corner of the hall and they cut their cards in heart-shapes. How cute, and I look around to point them out to Greg, but he’s up the ladder with one of my glittered creations and not looking. So I stick and string some more, and apply a band-aid to Paul’s finger, and I’ll tell Greg later.

And even later, we say remember when.

But by then it’s too late.

### **In red**

On the first day of teaching, on the fifth floor with a view of more buildings, I write the names of my students on the whiteboard with a red pen. See-Young, Do-Kuin, Won-Seok, In-Jae, Do-Jin. Two syllables per child.

“No teacher! No! Bad!” These are the first words spoken.

“Bad?” Five different shaking heads. I was told they’d all look the same.

“You write names in red. Very bad. We die.”

It is easier to die here, it seems. The buildings have cracks, there are no footpaths, the chips taste of fish, people don’t speak English. Sometimes the bus to the city costs 1000 won, sometimes 5000. Sometimes it doesn’t come at all.

Leon tells me that the red pen thing’s a custom in Korea. Lots of teachers make that mistake with their first classes, don’t worry about it. The he puts down his mug of Soju and asks why I’m crying.

### **M is for memory**

I spy, with my little eye, something beginning with M. It is my mirror, but Greg doesn’t know that yet. I can’t see it of course, it’s dark in my room. Greg can’t see it either, he’s in his room, in his house, down the road and round the corner a bit. He rings every 9pm to say Good Night. I love you. I spy.

Greg’s good at this game. He knows my room. Sometimes, when the parents are out drinking and it’s getting late, we lie on the floor and count my glow-in-the-dark stars.

Greg knows M is for mirror and M is for me.

## **The Christmas concert (part two)**

On the day of the Christmas concert, the good mothers of Oratia bring their husbands and a plate for morning tea.

“I made a star at weekdayschool for the tree,” says Jack. “Greg, can you put my star on the tree? Can you put it right at the very top?”

“Later mate,” says Greg. He’s holding Macy’s wings while I apply one last safety pin, and then we’re ready. Lower Primary are the angels and sheep, Upper Primary are the shepherds and wise men, the High School kids get the best parts. It’s always been that way. I was an angel once, and Greg was the sheep that followed me home.

We sing up the front of the church, smiling at the parents. Everyone is so proud of the children, who smile and sing and stay in straight lines. Afterwards we serve morning tea in the church kitchen.

While the adults are talking, the children are allowed to go play outside in the bush. They’ll lose their halos in the undergrowth, of course, their crowns in the creek, but that’s okay. It’s okay today to be a bit messy, but don’t go near the road and keep an eye on the little ones. Come and get us if there’s any trouble. Me or Mrs Wilson or Greg. Come and get us.

But no one comes, and then it’s almost time for Prize Giving in the hall.

“Can you make sure it’s all ready and tidy?” says Mrs Wilson. “I’ll be bringing the parents in soon.”

All the students in my class are getting prizes this year, whether it’s for best rendition of the Lord’s Prayer (that’d be Paul), best decorated folder, best behaviour, or just a “Makes Me Smile Award”. Greg says I’m good with children. I’m not. I have favourites, sometimes I shout. I just know they work best when bribed.

There are decorations on the floor by the door, I notice them first. The glitter has been dislodged and the wood sparkles. Then Greg’s ladder – horizontal, not vertical – then the tree, on its side too with branches broken, then Jack. He still has the star in his hand.

## **Lean on me**

Mr Parks wants a concert to welcome Miss Natasha, the new teacher. Miss Natasha this new teacher must organise the concert. Miss Natasha, the new teacher must organise the children and teach them songs. This is how Miss Natasha (who is me) teaches songs here:

First of all, there is nobody to play the piano. Also, there is no piano. In these circumstances, I must resort to buying “10 VERY great English Songs” from the music stall, under the green tarpaulin, outside Burger King where the staff already know my name.

Back at Jeon-Ju English school, I ask Mr Park for a CD player. He looks a bit unsure. This is the play button, he tells me, this is the stop. You put CD here. I have many lessons to learn.

So I press play and stop and rewind and play again. We listen to the whole CD one lesson, and in the next lesson, we listen to the whole CD again with the volume a little higher. This, says Mr Park, is a very

good way to teach English. The children hear English, then the children sing English. When he was a boy, he was going to the movie theatre place many times. He was reading the Korean words and he was listening to the American actors. That's why his English is perfect.

Children today are not so dedicated. Children today do not listen. On the stereo, Cyndie Lauper comes home in the morning light, much to her mother's dismay. In-Jae hits Won-Seok, See-Young falls asleep. A train passes. I can't hear it over the music, but the building shakes.

In the third lesson, it is the children's turn to sing. No CD this time, it's all up to them, and Mr Park and Miss Natasha are watching.

"Sometimes in our lives," they sing. And Mr Park says "More louder".

"We all have paint,

We all have soccer..."

I could stop them. I could teach them 'pain' and 'sorrow'. Make them copy down the words, all spelt right, in their books. Make them look up the definitions. Mark their work tomorrow with red pen ticks and crosses.

But then again, they could be right. We all have paint. We all have soccer. Some of us have more paint and soccer than others.

### **The last supper**

At Jack's funeral, Greg plays the piano. Afterwards we eat cake in the hall. The tree is gone. So is the ladder. So are all the decorations.

"Where is the star I made?" asks Macy, grabbing my hand. "Mummy wants to put it on my tree at home," and then later, "Do you think Jack likes heaven?" Of course he does Macy, of course he does. It's nice there. There are stars and dogs and angels, and God will watch over him and sing him to sleep. Jack will be happy in heaven, and in a few weeks' time it'll be Christmas. Are you looking forward to Christmas, Macy? I'm not, but Greg doesn't know that yet.

Then, when a few weeks' time has passed and Jesus is born again, Greg makes me dinner. Jesus is born once again. The wise men bring gold and frankincense and myrrh. Angels talk to the shepherds and to their sheep. Two places are set fork-knife-spoon, the turkey is not burnt, the sky is blue, and I have to go and spoil it all.

There's this job I found in the paper. In Korea. Teaching English. \$40,000 NZ a year, plus food and accommodation and obedient children.

"Of course it's not your fault." I say. "It's not anyone's fault. It's not a fault thing."

And there he is, chewing and chewing and not speaking with his mouth full. Such a good boy.

## Back words

Dog written backwards is God. Natasha written backwards is ah Satan. My friends discovered this when I was in High School. Sometimes life is hell, even here. On the fifth floor, my students teach me to write my name in characters I don't understand yet. I am learning their language – word by word – I am forgetting my own.

