

## Apple wine

On Friday nights, if there are no parties on, we work our way through a flagon of apple wine and consider our options. The first time, I end up asleep under the ferns in the garden, face down amongst the shredded pine and chunks of bark. But that's when Carla and I are still sharing the flagon between us. Later, we find our own version of the golden ratio when I knock a full bottle off the kitchen table trying to hide Carla's cigarettes from my mother. We manage to salvage two thirds of it and that night neither of us passes out or throws up: it seems a third each is the perfect measure. The problem we have from then on is what to do with the rest of it.

The next weekend we invite a girl from our English class over. Midway through her second glass she tells us her dad isn't her biological father.

'He's really sensitive about it and no one is supposed to know,' she says. 'If people point out physical similarities between us, I pretend I see them too.'

When, the following Friday night, the wing attack from Carla's netball team tells us she's been fired from her afterschool job for stealing, Carla looks at me in awe. 'That wine's a fucking truth serum,' she whispers as she gets up unsteadily to go to the bathroom.

We invite Tracy Fleming a couple of times, but she's never able to make it. Tracy plays bridge: the serious competitive kind where you get prize money if you win. She's away almost every weekend playing in some competition.

'It's not that exciting,' she tells us. 'I usually only see the inside of community halls.'

Carla and I are pretty sure she's just saying that. We grab any opportunity we can to get away from town. Earlier in the year, I was selected for the senior basketball team to travel to the Nationals in Wellington. On the Saturday night, a few of us snuck out from our motel. We stood on street corners and waved at cars blasting thick basslines as they crawled from traffic light to traffic light. Eventually we ended up at McDonald's and, eating my cheeseburger, I had the incredible realisation that not one of the people walking past the window knew anything about me.

Our team came eighth at the tournament and because I had the highest points average my photo ended up on the front page of our local newspaper. The caption read, 'Fifteen-year old Michelle Archer assists team to best-ever national result.' It was well over a month before I got served at any pub in town.

Tracy lives with her nan in one of those tiny brick flats with the frosted porches down in Adderley Street. Whenever Carla and I go there her nan fusses over us, offering homemade ginger crunch and cups of tea in brown glass mugs. Tracy doesn't invite us round much

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though. Carla says she's probably embarrassed about living in a pensioner's flat. Carla's family own Hohepa Transport and live in a five-bedroom house that was only built last year and in my opinion that's how she thinks Tracy *should* feel. I just think Tracy is a very private person. That's one of the things we have in common.

'I'm around tonight if you want to do something Michelle,' Tracy whispers to me one Friday during Geography.

We are working through the question, 'How can music festivals minimise their impact on the environment?' Tracy has written, 'Money earned can be used to rehabilitate the site, for example aerating the soil.' My contribution is, 'They should separate recycling.' The afternoon sun is streaming through the windows, but it's July, so the heaters are on, and it's a struggle to think in the sluggish crawl of a Friday afternoon.

'Yeah great,' I reply yawning. 'Come over to mine for drinks and we'll walk into town later on.'

Carla brings the wine with her. 'You both owe me three dollars,' she says. She puts the flagon on my parent's kitchen table, and we admire her white cropped tank top with 'angel' printed in red letters across the front. Carla has so many new clothes we can hardly keep track. Once when I was at her place, she showed me an entire section hanging in her wardrobe with the tags still attached.

Tracy has on a yellow t-shirt with a man's black vest and tie that she got at the Salvation Army store where her nan volunteers.

'I could never wear that,' I say. 'On me it would look like I was wearing my dad's clothes. Looks great on you but.'

I mean it. Carla may have the most clothes, but Tracy wears hers better. As for me, I'm wearing the same version of hoodie and jeans that I always wear. I'm tall, which is great when I'm playing basketball, but makes me awkward when I'm not. Tracy is the prettiest of us too. She's tall as well, but not weirdly so like me. Her hair grows long and straight and tonight she wears it out except for two pieces either side that she's pinned up with silver butterfly clips. One of the clips has come loose and she fixes it with her left hand while she eyes the flagon.

'So this is the apple wine I've heard so much about?'

'Yup,' I reply carrying three glasses across to the table. I carefully fill each one and pass them around.

Tracy takes a mouthful. 'Tastes like shit.'

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‘Yeah,’ I agree, ‘But you get used to it.’

After a while, Carla walks out onto the deck and lights a cigarette. ‘So Tracy,’ she says. ‘You met any hot guys on your trips away?’

‘Nah,’ Tracy says. ‘But they’re nice enough.’

‘What about anyone freakishly tall?’ She exhales smoke over her shoulder into the garden. ‘Someone who might suit Michelle?’

‘Yeah, actually I’m fine.’ I nudge the flagon of wine towards Tracy.

‘Really? Are you planning on dying a virgin?’

‘Carla,’ I hiss glancing across at the door to the lounge where my parents are watching TV.

Tracy looks at me sympathetically. Her cheeks are flushed and when she goes to refill her glass she splashes wine onto the table. Outside the sky is faintly purple, almost black, our backyard cold and colourless. I shiver and am telling Carla to hurry up and finish when Tracy interrupts, ‘Actually, I’ve got something to tell you guys but you can’t say anything to anyone.’

‘Yeah?’ Carla says.

‘It’s about Lance.’

‘Your sister’s husband?’

‘Yeah.’

Carla flicks her cigarette butt into the garden and comes inside. ‘Well?’

Tracy takes a long breath, ‘I was babysitting for them a couple weeks ago and when Lance drove me home, instead of going straight to Nan’s, he took me to the Shingle Beach and parked the car.’

‘And?’ Carla asks.

‘And we ... you know,’ Tracy says.

‘What?’ Carla says.

‘We did it.’

Lance Tyler is old. He’s older than Tracy’s sister by a few years and she’s seven years older than Tracy. I reckon he must be at least twenty-eight. Maybe older. He has shoulder-length blond hair and the lean tanned look of someone who spends a lot of time surfing. From what people say, the rest of his time is spent growing and selling weed.

I glance at Carla and see her eyes widen. For once she doesn’t seem to have anything to say.

‘Do you like him?’ she says after a short silence.

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‘Dunno.’ Tracy replies. ‘Maybe.’ She trails her thumb over the dribble of wine that runs down the outside of her glass.

‘Are you worried about your sister finding out?’ Carla asks.

‘More worried about Nan finding out,’ Tracy says. ‘She hates Lance.’ She looks from Carla to me as if waiting for me to speak. ‘Anyway,’ she says looking back at Carla when I don’t say anything, ‘He’s hardly likely to tell anyone.’

‘Are you going to do it again?’ I ask eventually.

‘Dunno. I mean it’s not like I had much of a choice last time,’ she says.

‘What do you mean?’ Carla asks. ‘Like he made you?’

‘No,’ Tracy says. ‘Not exactly ... No. It wasn’t like that.’

‘Well, what was it like?’ I ask.

‘You know.’

‘No,’ I say glaring across the table at Carla. ‘Obviously I don’t.’

I have zero experience with guys and Carla never lets me forget it. I haven’t even kissed anyone except for one time when Carla made me practice with her. And that definitely doesn’t count. There is someone I like, and that person is Kyle Ngatai. Kyle has brown eyes, and a sweet smile, and is, at least, taller than me. But Kyle is our year, and we have nothing to do with guys our age who usually spend their weekends sitting in front of a PlayStation or, if they do make it out the front door, down at the skatepark. None of us girls would be seen dead at the skatepark. Most weekends we drink at someone’s house, make our way to whichever pub has music and then weave through the tables, heads down until we get to the dance floor. We’re always nervous walking in, especially if there’s a group of us, but most of the time no one cares so long as we don’t go up to the bar too often.

I haven’t told Carla about Kyle. She’s crushing on James Phelan who is seventeen and an apprentice builder. Earlier, she made me walk past the site where he was working on the off chance that we’d see him. He was unloading timber from a ute and, when we stopped to talk, said he’d probably head down to Larsen’s later that night.

‘Did you see the way he looked at me?’ she asks, flipping her hair over her shoulder.

‘Yeah, he’s really into you,’ I say.

Later, on our way to Larsen’s, Tracy asks if there’s anyone I’m into.

‘No,’ I say. I’ve had a few nights on the apple wine by now and it doesn’t have the same effect on me.

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Thursday night is pool night in town and if her sister feels like watching Lance play, she'll get Tracy to babysit. Tracy has started asking me and Carla to go along too. Mum says I'm not to go anywhere near Lance Tyler or his house.

'But that doesn't mean Tracy can't come around here though', she says. 'She's welcome here anytime.'

My parents like Tracy, despite what Mum refers to as 'her unsavoury connections.' Tracy has a way of speaking that appeals to adults. Whenever my mother asks how school is going, she puts her head to one side as if reflecting, and then tells her some actual detail. Like how our English teacher assigned us *The Outsiders* for our novel study even though we read it last year; or about a Physics experiment where we constructed a model of a tower crane using drinking straws, tape, and string. And then she asks Mum how her day is going and listens carefully to the answer. They like Carla too, but they prefer Tracy.

'She's nowhere near as devious as you and that girl of Hohepa,' Dad says which is factually incorrect because Carla doesn't have any secrets.

Every Friday morning, Carla comes late to maths, carelessly arranges herself across the chair next to me and tells me all about the previous night: how Lance's hair is blonder when you get up close and how she heard him read a story to his boy, putting on all the voices.

'Oh what, so you're crushing on Lance now?' I say.

'As if,' she says. 'Anyway, even if I was—which I am most definitely not—I'd never do anything about it.'

She doesn't have to tell me why. It wasn't that long ago we watched Tracy's sister work some girl over with a pool cue after she heard Lance had given her a ride home the previous weekend. When she finished, the girl was curled up in the foetal position making a low keening sound. Tracy's sister stepped over her, walked up to the bar—the cue still in her hand—and asked for change for the pool table.

'I wouldn't want to be Tracy if her sister ever finds out about her and Lance,' I say and for once Carla agrees with me.

We aren't worried about Tracy overhearing because she does extension maths and is in a different class.

One Friday morning Carla tells me how Tracy's sister took a Roses chocolate box full of weed down from on top of the fridge and rolled a joint that she left on the kitchen counter for them to smoke later. I make her repeat every detail: how the box was filled with tightly

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furled green buds; how Tracy's sister stuck two cigarette papers together, and ground one of the buds into small pieces.

Once Carla and I saw a small tin fall out of Floss Peterson's school bag in the corridor and when we opened it, we found a roach and a nearly empty packet of Rizlas. We smoked the roach—brown tip pinched tight between the nails of our thumb and index fingers—but the only thing it did was leave a burn on my lip and the taste of ash in the bottom of our mouths.

'So how did it feel?' I ask.

'It's kind of hard to describe,' she says. 'Like being drunk but with everything slowed down and everything was just so funny.'

I ask if she can get some for me the next time she's there.

'I can't just *ask* for it,' she says. 'There's like an etiquette.' She says this as if she's the expert on all things weed now.

I look at the graph the teacher has drawn on the whiteboard, stare hard at the information written next to it, trying to remember which is the y-axis.

'Yeah, well I really don't think you should be doing stuff like that when you're supposed to be looking after a kid,' I say.

On the day of the pool final, Carla is grounded after falling asleep in the back of James's car the previous weekend and not waking up until two in the morning.

'Can you come babysitting?' Tracy asks me as we get changed for P.E.

'Maybe,' I say carefully.

'Please Michelle,' she says.

I chew my bottom lip. A few Thursdays ago, after basketball practice, I detoured home past the skatepark, stopped my bike in plain view of the half-pipe and messed about with the chain until Kyle came over to ask if I needed help. Now I go that way every week and Kyle always bikes home with me. We hang around outside my house and talk: him balancing his weight on his pedals, his feet never touching the ground, and me standing up straight to my full height. Sometimes we hang out in the gym and shoot hoops. I don't know for sure what's going on but I definitely don't feel the brittle self-consciousness I feel around other guys.

One thing I do know for sure is that I am not ready to share this information.

Carla is at the mirror encircling each eye with a dark smudgy line, but even doing this she never stops watching me. She knows something is up. According to her, all the boys in

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our year are total losers and Kyle Ngatai is the biggest loser of them all. Whenever I ask her what she's got against him, she explodes.

'So, all Māori have to be friends now Michelle? That is just so fucking racist.'

It's not what I mean, and she knows it, but I don't argue.

'Please Michelle,' Tracy says again.

'Okay,' I say finally. 'I'll ask Mum again.' I reach down and take my trainers out of my navy-blue sports bag.

'Thanks,' Tracy says, her breath coming out in a rush. 'I really appreciate it.'

I see Carla's eyebrows raise in the mirror so that I can read her question in them. Like what's the big deal?

'Shit,' I say looking down and rifling through my bag. 'I forgot to bring socks.'

In the end, I tell Mum that I have a nutrition course after practice. Normally she would ask a million questions. Like why didn't she get a notice from school? Who's running it? How much does it cost? Tonight, she and my brother are arguing hard out over whether he can leave school. He wants to work as a plumber. Mum wants him to finish the year so he can go to university if he changes his mind.

'It's about keeping your options open,' she says.

'I might be late,' I say, but she waves me away without looking over.

I have several jobs that I am considering for my adult life. In order of preference these are: professional basketball player, physiotherapist, PE teacher. One thing I know for sure, I will not be spending my working day up to my elbows in other people's shit.

Lance is on the sofa in front of the TV when we arrive. I've never seen him up close. His hair is shorter than I remember it—more chin than shoulder length. He's wearing a white t-shirt and some sort of braided leather band on his wrist. He jerks his chin upwards by way of acknowledgement. I notice that he never looks at Tracy.

'The wee boy's asleep,' Tracy's sister says as she packs her phone into her handbag. 'So you should have an easy night of it.' She looks from Tracy to me, 'Do you girls want something to smoke tonight?'

I am about to say yes, when I remember the etiquette, so instead, I shrug. Like I could take or leave it.

Tracy says, 'Yeah, thanks,' and I watch as her sister lifts the Roses chocolate box down from the top of the fridge.

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‘One should be enough,’ she says and runs her tongue along the shiny edge of a cigarette paper. ‘It’s strong shit.’

She rolls another three and puts them into a cigarette packet that she places in her handbag. The bag fastens with a large gold padlock, and I can see that it’s made of cheap plastic and the stitching is starting to fray. Glancing up, she catches my eye and I quickly look away.

The house is down a long gravel driveway with flax bushes planted out front so that you can’t see in from the street. After they leave, we go outside. Tracy lights the joint, inhales sharply, and hands it across to me. We pass it back and forth without speaking. A slight breeze moves the flax so that it seemed to be shaking its head at me and I feel very very cool. When we’re done, I follow Tracy back inside the house, where we sit cross legged on the worn red and yellow carpet. Next to the TV is a framed photo of her mother wearing a white bikini top and short denim shorts. I think it must have been taken before she got sick, because she still has all of her hair, which is long and brown like Tracy’s.

Tonight, without Carla here, I ask Tracy to explain about bridge.

She looks surprised. ‘Like the tournaments I go to and stuff?’

‘No,’ I say, ‘About the game. How you play.’

‘How you play?’

‘Yeah.’

I listen while she talks about winning tricks and bidding. I watch a plant in a macrame hanger drop small brown leaves onto the floor and think how the leaves are falling in a way that is random and yet very beautiful.

‘Are you following this?’ Tracy asks.

‘No,’ I say. ‘But I like listening to you talk.’ My mouth is dry, and I think how the air around us seems suddenly clearer, more refined so that I can see everything—Tracy included—in perfect definition.

‘What else do you want to know?’

I think for a moment. ‘What makes you so good at it?’

‘Oh,’ she says without hesitation. ‘It’s the patterns. When I play, I see patterns in my head.’

Later, we sit at opposite ends of the sofa, legs stretched out so our feet cross in the middle, and I find myself talking about Kyle. I talk about the sinewy shape of his arms and the way he tosses his head back to laugh. I say that when he smiles at me, I feel something light me up from the inside.



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Then, because I'm worried I'm talking too much, I ask what is going on with Lance.

'Nothing's going on,' she says.

'It was a one-off then?'

She shrugs, 'It happened a couple of times. Now I just stay out of his way.'

I laugh and sweep my arms out in front of me, indicating the room around us.

'Hardly,' I say but she doesn't laugh with me. A car drives past, leaving a trail of thumping bass. Somewhere nearby a dog barks. Finally, she says, 'That's why you're here, Michelle.'

I look back down at the leaves underneath the plant. Now they just look like ordinary leaves.

I say, 'If you're not into him you should tell someone.' I speak very quietly like there is someone in the next room who might overhear, even though I know the boy is asleep and is too young anyway to understand.

'Like who?' she says. 'My sister?'

'Well, your nan then.'

She doesn't reply. There's a buzzing in my ears that grows louder as the silence stretches between us. The dog starts to bark again. I pick at my thumbnail and wish Carla was here.

Tracy takes a long breath and lets it out again. 'It's fine.' She tucks her hair behind her ear. 'Pool finishes tonight.' She smiles at me. 'And then I'll stay out of his way.'

The day of Tracy's nan's funeral is warm and dry, and the sun shines through the church windows throwing red and green strips of light across the tiled floor. 'It's a good turnout,' Mum says approvingly as we take our usual seats. Shirley Fleming went to Mass twice a week when she was alive and every one of the church regulars is here to pay their respects. The bridge club is well represented too, and the Salvation Army store where Shirley volunteered twice a week. Carla arrives with her parents and sits next to us on the hard, wooden seats. Some kids from our year group stand together at the back of the church with a couple of Tracy's teachers. Kyle is with them, and he catches my eye and smiles. Tracy sits in the front pew next to her sister. When she gets up to speak, she looks like a pale, shrunken version of herself, like she's been washed on too hot a cycle.

At the Workingmen's Club after the service, people eat egg sandwiches and sausage rolls that flake pastry all over the floor and quietly remark how similar Tracy was to her nan.

'Particularly around the eyes,' my mother says, looking at Shirley's photo on the order of service.

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‘Such a great speech,’ Carla says to Tracy when she comes over to us.

‘Eulogy,’ I say.

‘What?’

‘Eulogy,’ I repeat. ‘It’s what you call it when someone speaks at a funeral.’ My family is Catholic, and I’ve been to a lot of funerals.

‘Also known as a speech.’

‘Or a eulogy.’

‘Don’t be a dick,’ Carla glares at me. ‘Anyway,’ she says looking at Tracy. ‘It was great.’

‘Thanks,’ Tracy says with a small smile.

I struggle to think of something to say. Even Carla is quiet.

‘Have you thought about where you’ll live now?’ I finally ask.

‘I’m moving in with my sister.’

‘And Lance?’

‘Well yeah he does live there too,’ she says.

‘Do you want to?’ I ask.

Tracy shrugs, ‘They’re the only family I have. Where else would I go?’

Carla and I wait a week after the baby is born before we visit. We buy some baby clothes to take with us: a little grey Sherpa onesie with blue and green rabbits on it, a pale blue sweatshirt with the navy outline of a dinosaur, and a pair of tiny red leather shoes.

‘I don’t really think babies need shoes Michelle,’ Mum says doubtfully, watching me wrap everything in light blue tissue paper.

‘They’re super cute though,’ Carla says.

‘Yeah,’ I say. ‘She’ll love them.’

Mum gives me a beef casserole and a batch of savoury muffins to take as well. ‘Tell Tracy everything will freeze,’ she says and lets out a long sigh. For the second time today, she remarks how Tracy has no one since her sister moved up to Nelson. Carla and I are beyond offended because of course she has us.

Tracy is smitten by that baby. She tells us she’s going to give him all the things she missed out on, starting with a mother and father. I’m not convinced that Floss Peterson is the ideal candidate, but I keep that to myself. Tracy gives me the baby to hold while she puts the casserole in the fridge and makes us cups of tea. He smells like malt biscuits and has a bright

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red rash across one cheek. I jiggle him on my knee for a few moments and then put him down on the floor in case he's contagious.

One Friday after school, Carla tells me she's invited Tracy to come out with us. We decide to have drinks at my place first, and Carla picks up a flagon of apple wine on the way. She says it will be a laugh, even though we always drink vodka cruisers now. It's a warm evening and we carry the wine onto the deck, where we sit with our legs stretched out in front of us catching the last of the evening sun. Carla talks about the design course she wants to do next year. I still can't decide if I want to be a physio or a teacher. She asks what's going to happen with Kyle when I leave town, but I refuse to even think about that right now.

Lately I keep wondering, when did life become so complicated?

'Do you think she's coming?' I ask as I near the end of my first glass.

'She seemed pretty keen,' Carla says.

'Maybe I should I text her?'

'She'd run out of credit when I saw her yesterday,' Carla says. 'Give her a few more minutes.'

I watch Carla finish the last mouthful in her glass. The sun has moved, and the corrugated plastic roofing that covers my parents' deck casts stripes across the light brown skin of her arm.

'Did you know about Tracy and Floss before she got pregnant?' I ask.

Carla considers. 'I don't think so,' she says. 'But you know what she's like.'

I hear noises in the kitchen—the sound of plates clattering and cupboards being closed—then my mother comes onto the deck and puts a platter down beside us: olives, crackers and two different types of cheese. She hands Carla an ashtray. 'For the sake of my roses,' she says.

When I get to the end of my second glass, I check the time on my phone.

'I don't think she's coming,' I say.

'No,' Carla agrees.

I turn to look at the half-full flagon resting on the deck between us, and then back at Carla. 'It's going to be a big one then,' I say, and we both start to laugh. I pick up the bottle, filling first my glass and then Carla's.

'To us,' I say, and we clink our glasses together.