

@42

“.....what has the deepest and most permanent effect upon oneself and one’s way of living is the house in which one lives.”

Leonard Woolf, Downhill All the Way: An Autobiography

I was stoned the day I bought 42.

With a baby in my backpack and a thousand different stories no one wanted to hear, I had arrived at my parents’ house in Hunterville after a four-year adventure in London. My teenage brother, keen to show off in his recently acquired 1964 Pontiac Parrisienne Pillarless suggested a quick spin to Palmerston North.

A couple of joints later as we were aimlessly roaming the streets, we stopped to look at photos of houses for sale in a real estate office window. An agent came out and offered to drive us around to look at some of them. They were boring houses in boring suburbs representing a life I was never going to live.

Then we stopped at 42.

The house was in the middle of the city and had been on the market for a few years. Circa 1907 it was a derelict colonial cottage originally built for railway workers as the train line used to run into the city centre.

The bathroom and laundry were inside an old tin shed in the backyard. Beside it a lone plum tree was the only sign of life. The interior walls of the house were lined with ripped scrim. In two of the rooms, the external walls were so rotten I could put my hand through to the outside. The kitchen was the size of a small closet. There was no available heating source.

The ornate plaster ceilings in the front rooms were stained nicotine yellow. My stoned brain envisioned painting them ice white and gazing at them forever.

‘How much?’

‘\$34,000.’

I moved in a few weeks later. A cupboard door fell off its hinges and smashed my nose. I lit a joint, ignored the overflowing nappy bucket and took the baby out to explore.

In 1986, I was 22 years old and squatting in a council flat on a notorious drug-dealing estate in Brixton with my baby. I was settled enough skirting the fringes of a radical left-wing life when my mother wrote to say the Housing Corporation was giving out low interest mortgages to single parents to buy their own homes.

I was reluctant to return to New Zealand, but the baby was mobile and there was no safe space outside for us to play. The closest playground to the estate was strewn with used needles and dogshit and I wanted my son to grow up with outdoor freedom. There was also no upward financial movement for me surviving on a benefit with no educational qualifications.

The land of sea and sky and sun seemed like a good option for both of us.

Another generous gesture from the New Zealand Government at that time was to pay for single parents to attend university.

No-one within my extended whanau had set foot in a university.

I had completely failed high school. My English teacher had graded me EE and said, “there is not one pleasant thing I can say about such a pupil”.

Expectations for me had not been high. A lowly paid manual labour job of some kind till I married and had a few kids. I had deftly side stepped that future forecast and escaped to London on a one-way ticket as soon as I could scrape together enough cash.

At 42, I sat on the sunny front veranda surrounded by books and study guides and began to expand my world in a different way. There was much to absorb. Including how to survive within a society when I was a despised and ostracized single mother living off a state funded benefit.

At 42, I chain sawed internal walls to create bigger room spaces. I nailed gib board over the scrim and plastered over the joins. Spare cash transformed into cans of paint. Behind a cupboard I discovered a functional open fireplace.

The bathroom shed collapsed in a storm but the clawfoot bath remained staunchly resolute, so I moved it into the new bathroom. This one was attached to the house.

I clambered onto the roof on early summer mornings and replaced rusty sheets of iron. On a clear sky day, I could see both the Ruahine and the Tararua Ranges and I imagined myself walking along the top of the ridges.

The plum tree blossomed and grew two hundred bags of fat plums that I sold at the market. Bosch created a dishwasher that fitted perfectly into a closet sized kitchen.

Men I liked came and went. Some were helpful. Most wanted something I couldn't give.

I have always been attracted to good looking men.

42 wanted to frame them and hang them on the wall to look at.

She has aesthetically good taste.

The year after my father killed himself, I couldn't study. I had morphed into an A+ student and was on track for a scholarship. Instead, I spent the year drinking whiskey and losing my mind.

Outside of 42 I could hear the noise of the city as ninety thousand people went about their daily lives. No-one came to visit us because they didn't know what to say and neither did I.

It's hard to tell a story about someone who murders themselves, so I painted the interior walls black. For a long time, we lived inside a muted candle-lit cave.

42 likes to creak and moan but her solid Kauri strength held us tight until the light returned.

I met someone who was more than an abstract wall hanging and for a moment considered leaving 42. He wanted to advance his career on the other side of the world. If we were to go too, I would have to become a wife. I was fading in visibility. He had used my best ideas in his academic thesis and gained many accolades while I ceased to exist.

42 always demands your own truth be lived and refused to let me leave.

Outside of 42's black picket fence, a patriarchal storm was raging. There was no solid ground out there for me. Inside the fence an alternate universe was thriving. I repainted the walls scarlet red, terracotta orange and sunshine yellow. Each brush stroke moved me closer to myself and gave me a sense of belonging for the first time in my life.

At 42 you can become everything you want to be and everything you are meant to be.

All the women that I can name within my whakapapa have married abusive men. Men who were cruel to their families. Men who didn't love and nurture their children.

42 helped me cast off the ancestral trauma imprinted on my DNA and to rebuild myself.

After I returned home from a creative summer in New York City, I painted the interior walls art gallery white and the ornate ceilings metallic silver. The dark wooden antique furniture didn't welcome the new light, so I replaced it all with steel and glass and kitsch furniture and appliances.

In 2006 a new baby was born at 42, the same year my eldest son left home. I buried the placenta under the plum tree. His father whom I barely knew moved into house next door, number 38. There is no number 40.

40 is a liminal space where our relationship continues to invent itself.

42 contains my multitudes without expectations.

I am a Pakeha girl who grew up in a Maori community.

I am a rural girl and a cosmopolitan international traveller.

I am a working-class woman failing to find a comfortable fit in the middle class.

I am the ostracized single mother on a benefit lining up at the food bank.

I am an over educated woman who earns a living listening to people's sad stories and who trades shares for fun.

I am a fearless independent woman who hikes alone over the top of Mountain Ranges.

I am the daughter of diametrically opposed parents. My father, a war traumatized bipolar alcoholic and my mother, a staunch believer in the one Catholic Apostolic Church.

I am the mother of two children who know exactly who they are.

42 gave them a stable home with a solid foundation. Raised with love and clear vision they leave the confines of the black picket fence and negotiate with the world on their own terms. They are free to be whoever and whatever they choose.

As my ovaries wither and die, I tattoo my stories on my body.

Tui, Piwakawaka, Kowhai and Kakabeak wrap around my calf muscles.
Nebulae rage from my forearm.

42 stands strong beside a purple magnolia tree, her doorway shining a
welcoming light from my upper arm.

'No whea koe?'

'No te wha tekau ma rua ahau'

This house on this small piece of land in the centre of Papaioea is the only
place in this world I belong.