

*“We shape our buildings, and afterwards our buildings shape us.”*

*Sir Winston Churchill*

## **The Shape of Me**

Where we live shapes our lives. At eight years old I lived in a little shack of a house, in a little shack of a room. In that room, no matter if I was sweltering on a hot Hawke’s Bay summer’s night, or shivering in the early hours of a frosty July morning, my safest spot was in that room, in the depths of my bed under the pressing weight of at least six blankets above me, and at least three mattresses below. One kapok, one foam, one spring.

The blankets consisted of two hospital woollen ones, dark grey with a red stripe at the short edge. Then, a thick, ripped bedspread, calf-shit yellow, dotted with horses topped by riders wearing red jackets and jodhpurs. Next, my favourite, a candy pink and cream chequered number with a silk label that I stroked for comfort. It’s softness added to the illusion of a nurturing embrace. Over the top lay two crocheted beauties crafted by my Nana. One, a large square of smaller peggies, sewn together into a sea of scrap colours. The last, a mixture of concentric oblongs in tangerine, lemon, and mouse-brown. A tad prickly, but it was on the outer - so that suited me just fine.

That I was reversing and inverting the fairytale ‘The Princess and the Pea’ was not obvious to me as a child, however adult hindsight clarified how magic could be woven around understanding one’s life through extended metaphor, in this case *layers upon layers* - the first, a stack of blankets above, a barrier of sorts, and the second, a pile of mattresses disguising the discomfort of a mystical pea, or in my case a ripped book about pink bunnies that lay hidden underneath. It was the only book in our house that wasn’t the Bible, a war comic, or a Mills & Boon (don’t get me wrong - I love a good Mills & Boon).

The blankets transformed into magical armour and the mattresses a magical womb. As much magick as an eight year old girl could conjure, anyway. If I subscribed to morbidity, I would have compared my bed to a sarcophagus, or an *oubliette* like the one in the ‘Labyrinth’ movie. A place to forget. To be forgotten. It was a refuge from a childhood home that was often lonely and terrifying due the horror of alcoholism, neglect, and abuse.

At about ten years old I painted the window frames in my tiny bedroom. The wood was crumbling with rot, and black mould had gathered in the window corners. I didn't know anything about painting or black mould, but I found a half tin of white paint from somewhere, and some crumpled sateen ruby curtains at the back of the hot water cupboard. I cleaned the windows as best I could, put some tape around the edges as I'd seen on TV, and set to it. I hung the curtains and stood back, proud.

When my father (struggling with his own demons) got home from the pub, he stood at the bedroom door, a grim look on his face. He didn't talk to me for days. I thought I'd done something terrible, but later in life I realised he thought he'd discovered that at ten years old I wanted better. That I thought I was too good to live in this little shack of a house. I was above it. I was above *him*. Suffice to say, I had no concept of his self-hate, I simply needed to build myself a sanctuary. A pretty, safe room with curtains that weren't in tatters. I felt his disappointment and resentment, though I didn't know the words to describe it then. The resulting distrust left no space, no hope of telling him or anyone else that I had been sexually violated by another member of the family since I was five years old.

I'm very stubborn. Next, I painted the back of my bedroom door and pinned up posters of 'Garfield the Cat' that I bought with my own paper-route money. Garfield the cat seemed to have conquered life and found happiness despite various horrible circumstances e.g. never having enough lasagne. He was ironic. And most importantly, *content-ish*. This feline and his teddy-bear, Pookie, seemed to wield some sort of haughty power over the uncontrollable reality of being *owned*. I grasped the concept to literally build up the power in my little heart and soul to survive my lot in life.

Children have little to zero choice about where they live *or* survive. You stay with the people who have you in their possession at the time, and live in the places they assign. You do your best, then if you are lucky enough to grow older, and lucky enough to cobble together some resources, you can choose to live somewhere different.

I've met many people in many different living situations. Tents. Caravans. Garages. Sleep-outs. Sheds. Buses. Motorhomes. Houses. Flats. Apartments. Estates. Mansions. With families, caregivers, monitors, helpers, guards. From houses with scrim on the walls and dirt floors, to multi-roomed architecturally awarded show-homes, to sheer explosions of wealth on golden foundations, to a greasy sleeping bag in a bush at the local cemetery.

I've seen 70 year olds build a caravan into a home full of art and happiness and grandchildren who visit regularly. I've seen 70 year olds care more about the John Frizzell on the wall of their million dollar homes than their estranged children. I've smelt the nostril-clearing kick of Janola in houses of the poor where renters arrange flowers in jam jars on sparkling dinner tables, and I've gagged on the odour of filth and squalor scoured into ragged persian rugs in the falling apart lounges and empty dining rooms of the richest of the rich. This is also true in reverse.

I'm blessed at 50. For the past decade, I've been settling my bones into a peaceful, wonderful place. My now home. I'm so grateful. We've named our classic quarter acre property in the Takapau township our 'Mexican Fisherman' house. The moral of that allegory is *we already have everything we need*. Progress for the sake of progress is a nasty trick that leaves *you* as the punchline. It took us a few years to learn the lesson.

I love the cathedral ceilings in my house. I love the sunlit spaces to read and write and create. I love the paintings of the Ruahine pae maunga hanging on my wall, but not as much as I love seeing their rolling peaks for real on my walk. A view of the mountains is lovely, but not as wonderful as the profile of my 13 year old son who sits at the table and squints trying to wind up a copper and hare fly, ready to hook a rainbow trout in the local awa. The design of the house is as peaceful as a church is designed to be, daring anyone who resides there to create and love and be in awe of life.

My husband practices permaculture - a new learning that challenges his straight row and weed-free colonial mindset. Either way, he's built handsome gardens and grows the sweetest carrots, behemoth cauliflowers, and is dabbling in figs, golden queen peaches, and the healing properties of kawa kawa leaves. We're tracking the water flow from wide roof surfaces to develop our own water storage. We've installed solar and have halved our power cost. We're blessed. We fill wild birdseed feeders and ooh and aah over tiny baby sparrows and finches.

In between writing, I sit and meditate and breathe, calming a mind that has lived in terror at a constant pace for the longest time, always on guard, always alert. It's healing to slow down. It's soothing to feel safe and embraced by the whenua, the plants, the water, the air and the energy of a place. Our place. My place.

My father passed away in 2021 and I felt mixed emotions, though the long string of grief had been unwinding for years. His estate left a small legacy which allowed me to develop the

garden. I imagined it was a posthumous apology, or at least a peace offering. I built a circular space of pink and purple lavender. It has become a wonderful addition to the place where I live. A spiritual site to re-energise, to breathe, and to radiate love and forgiveness for him, for others, and for me. It's a pretty place. A sanctuary.

Most days, I sit on the garden seat I built out of old picket fence posts and there, I feel light and free. Sometimes I carry a blanket, kikorangi blue as the sky, and wrap it around my shoulders as I rest. It folds around my shape, warm and empowering rather than being a shield, and I only ever need one.