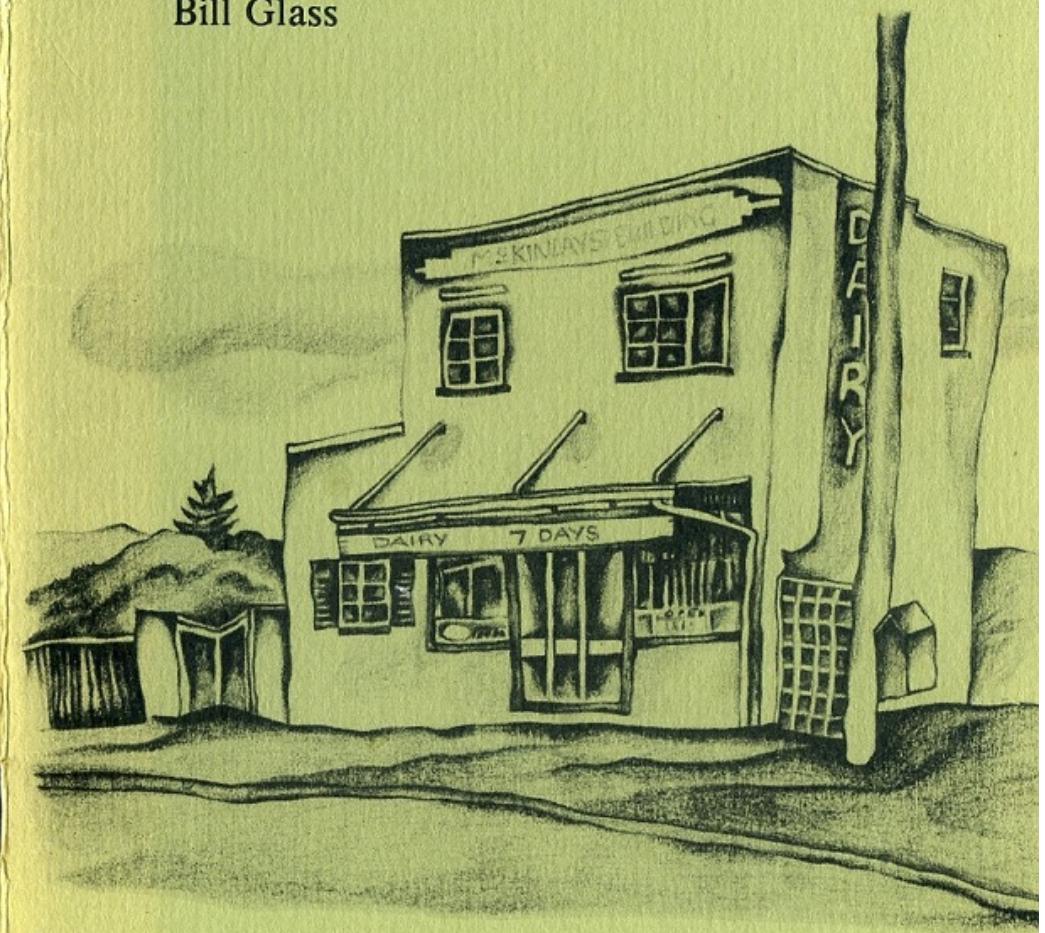


LUPIN COUNTRY

by

Bill Glass



To dear
Charlotte
with very best wishes
Bill Ali & Robbie

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Illustrations: Wendy Wadsworth

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A Walk to the Store

WE LIKED going to the store when it was windy and raining. We would walk along the beach with the waves crashing and the water chasing us up to the soft sand close to the lupins. When the water ran back, it would leave a rim of foam and the wind would whip the foam and send it scurrying along the sand, and we would run after it.

If the wind was in our faces, our skin would tingle and by the time we reached the store our cheeks would be glowing. The sea-gulls liked these windy days too; they would stand in order facing into the wind like the American soldiers on parade.

On days like this, we couldn't see Kapiti and the horizon would come close into the land. Even the hill at the back of the village would be lost in the rain. Sometimes we would be so busy chasing the foam along the beach we would miss the track to the store and be up by the surf club before we noticed.

The store had been there as long as we had been coming to the beach. It had MCKINLAYS along the top and was always called McKinlays even though they didn't own it anymore.

Stores had special smells a bit like kitchen cupboards. Some stores were dark and scary like Tutts store by the bowling green, others were friendly like McKinlays. The storekeeper at McKinlays would often give us a lolly when we went to buy the groceries.

Once inside the store we would take out our list. Creamota, flour, salt, sultanas, Farex and Lane's Emulsion for Ian, two vienna loaves, a pound of butter and if we were lucky, penny ice-creams for Pru and me. During the war ice-cream wasn't white like before. The storekeeper said it was because there was a shortage of white sugar and the Frosty Jack Company had to use brown sugar.

The walk home took us longer. Our feet weren't as tough as Johnny Rapana's, and we would pick our way between the sharp stones along the gravel road. Sometimes we would go the back way past the Donalds and up the hill to the road along by the American Army Camp.

Mum knew we didn't always come straight home. She knew the people we would call in to see and she didn't mind too much.

Today we decided to come back along the beach. It was a wild day, the tide was high and the waves were coming almost to the

road. We had just reached the track through the lupins when we heard a sharp cry. We looked down and saw the seagull lying with a broken wing. At first we couldn't get close, but after we gave it some bread it became more friendly and we were able to pick it up.

Mum was pleased we brought it home. She liked seagulls and always after lunch she would walk down to the beach hitting a dinner plate with a spoon to let the seagulls know it was time to get their scraps.

Dad made a splint with a thin piece of wood and some sticking-plaster and Pru and I built a house for the seagull out the front. It soon became quite friendly.

We knew it missed its friends. At night when the other seagulls were flying to their nests it would cry out to them. Then one morning it was gone. We used to think it came back to see us with the others when we threw the scraps out. Perhaps it did; we were never really sure.



The Shellfight

THE Rapanas lived in the last house along the beach, at the end of the gravel road and overlooking the creek. Johnny was my age. We used to smile shyly at each other but it never went any further.

The first time I saw Johnny, I was lying in bed on the sunporch looking out the big bay window at the sea. I had my usual asthma attack from the lupin pollen. Johnny was walking back from the store when a car passed him and a cigarette was thrown out the window. He picked it up and smoked it.

Johnny could do all the things I couldn't. He could run barefoot on the gravel road as fast as on the sand, he didn't have to wear jerseys when it was windy, or sunhats or funny old togs with stripes and straps over the shoulders. His mother didn't even mind if he walked to the store in the rain without a raincoat. But best of all, he could throw shells.

When Ann and Judy Thomas and my sister Pru were there we had enough for a gang. Sometimes we would make two gangs with Ann in charge of one and me the other. If we got too near the Rapanas' territory we were in trouble, and the shell fight would start.

Johnny was the best thrower. When Johnny threw shells they would skim low and straight over the sand then just at the end float up and you would have to duck to miss them.

The creek was our favourite place, but we never played there at the beginning of the holidays, Johnny did. We would watch him and his sister riding the logs down to the creek mouth while we built sand cars on the beach in front of the bach.

Then on the third or fourth morning it would happen, we knew when we woke up that it was the day. We dressed quickly and sneaked out of the bach before Mum was awake. The Thomas girls would be waiting, at the gate. Once at the beach we began to edge our way towards the creek all the time keeping close to the lupins.

We could see Johnny and his sister waiting at the sandhill below their house, a pile of shells beside them. Then the first shell would come and before it reached us the second was in the air and the third and the fourth. They would glide and swoop about us coming first from one side then the other while all the time we crawled closer and closer to the creek. Suddenly the shells would stop, the fight was over, we could go down to play at the creek now.

The Lupins

THE LUPINS were a special part of the beach. We could hide in them, make houses, and crawl through tunnels. Sometimes we even sneaked up and spied on the Americans and their girlfriends kissing.

The Bachelors were up for these holidays. Vivian, Bertha and Mark with Aunty Bertha and Uncle Norris. Uncle Norris was a parson. I was scared of him, he always looked so stern in his black vest and his collar round the wrong way.

Bertha was nine and I was eight when it happened. We were tired of playing with the other children and went off by ourselves to sit in the lupins. No one saw us go although we were only across the road from the bach and could hear everything.

We could hear the adults saying, 'Where are Bertha and Billy?' Uncle Norris's voice sounded angry. Then they started shouting for us. We didn't want to go back; there was something special just lying on our backs in the lupins staring up at the sky and the seagulls. We held hands.

Later we went back. Bertha was taken into the bedroom. We could hear all sorts of questions like, 'What were you doing together in the lupins?' Then Bertha began to cry. I got whacked, too. Mum said that it wasn't fair that only Bertha should get it, so Uncle Norris whacked me.

After that Bertha and I kept away from each other; we only smiled when no one was looking.

Kitty and Doris

KITTY and Doris were two or three years older than the others in our gang, yet they still played in our games each holiday. Make believe battles in the sand dunes, car races on the beach in carefully make sand cars, they even joined us in our shell fights with the Rapanas down the creek.

This holiday was different, the American troops had moved into the village. The golf course was now an army camp. The best baches had been taken for the officers.

We were chasing seagulls along the beach when we saw Kitty and Doris. They were walking arm in arm with some Americans. We wanted to say 'come and play' but somehow we couldn't. One of the Americans said, 'Would you kids like to have a coke?' A coke! We had seen pictures of coca cola in Mrs Donald's National Geographic magazines, but to taste it, that would be exciting. 'Come on, then.'

We followed them to the Thompson's bach, across the road from the beach. The Thompsons weren't there these holidays, the Americans were. Young men with close cropped hair and brown bodies, sitting around in shorts. They gave us a new sort of chewing gum, not the packet of four pieces we could buy at McKinlay's store but long strips without sugar coating wrapped in silver paper. Kitty poured us a coke and soon our nostrils were tingling.

Yet we felt lost in this bach. Kitty and Doris were chatting to the Americans in a new way, a quieter way, as if they had secrets we couldn't share.

We said goodbye and walked slowly back along the road.



The Creek

THE CREEK ran just beyond the Rapanas' house. We played there most of the time. Each day it seemed different. The mouth of the creek was always changing. One day it would be narrow and deep with the sides scalloped and undercut and we would walk along the edge pushing the sand into the creek. On other days it would be wide and shallow and spread out with islands of sand and we would try and jump from island to island without getting our feet wet. After a storm the sides of the creek would be littered with fine black sticks which had come down the coast from the Foxton River and if we went swimming the sticks would glue themselves to our skin and we would need to shower afterwards.

Sometimes the creek mouth would be blocked with seaweed, strange shaped thick rubbery stuff or fine fronded shapes like ferns as if the gardens of the deep had been uprooted. On those days Mum would send us to collect it for her garden.

Further up, the creek got deeper and the water brown. The sides became steep sandcliffs. It was quite dangerous; even on the edge our feet would sink into the wet sand and we would feel trapped between the creek and the sandcliffs.

Once we were round the first bend there was a flat area like a tiny beach where we could sit. It was here that we would plan most of our adventures. We had often talked about following the creek as far as it went; today we decided to.

We knew we couldn't get lost. The creek came down from the hills and once we reached the main road north we could walk back past the railway yards and through the dark mile home.

We were all together today — Pru, Ann, Judy and Mary Thomas and Gillian. If only we had a boat. There was an old tin boat made from corrugated iron lying on the edge of the creek, but it was leaky and rusty. We continued round the next bend when Gillian who was leading shouted, 'Look, there's a boat!' Sure enough, there it was, a plywood dinghy tied to a stake at the side of the creek. There was no water in the bottom. Should we take it? We argued for a while then decided to see how far up the creek we could go in the dinghy. There were no oars but we soon found some long manuka poles and began to punt our way up. It was hard going through the narrow parts where the flax overhung the edges

and we lost our poles more than once. We could hear the crackling of the lupin pods in the hot sun and the cries of the seagulls as they glided and swooped in the sky above.

We were beginning to feel tired and hungry. If only we had brought some food. We began to argue; should we turn back or go on. Then we saw some smoke. We pulled into the side, hitched the dinghy to a flax bush and walked towards the smoke. There in the clearing was a hut and in front an old man cooking over a fire. He was as surprised as we were.

'Where have you come from?' he asked us. We told him about our adventure trip up the creek and how we had left without any food. He smiled, 'Sit down and I'll give you a mugful of the best soup you've ever tasted.' He was cooking it in a big black billy. Then he told us about himself.

He used to be a flax worker up Foxton way. It was hard work cutting the flax with big knives, tying up the bundles and carrying them to where the horse-drawn carts would take them to the mill. He said it was a chancy way of earning a living; flax prices went up and down. In the early days, he said, there was a good price for New Zealand flax to make ships ropes, but later the manilla flax from the Phillipines was preferred and the industry in New Zealand slumped. He told us how the flax workers would watch the newspapers and if they read of a typhoon in the Phillipines, they would go and celebrate because that meant more work for them and better wages.

He had lived a hard life and now he was happy in his hut. It was all a bit illegal. It was really on Maori land but he had some Maori mates in the flax business and they let him build his hut on their land.

We told him about the dinghy. He said not to worry, just put it back as we found it. He knew the owners and they wouldn't mind.

The need to go further up the creek was less now. We had our adventure, for these holidays. We had made a new friend. We promised the old man we wouldn't tell anyone about him in case the council inspectors came round.

He told us to visit him again. He said he liked young people and the way they lived each moment as it came along. It's the only way he said.

My Surfboard

DAD'S old Overland car became his new truck. He had been working on the change all the holidays. We sometimes wished Dad had more time to do things with us — he was always working, except on Sunday. Mum didn't like him working on Sundays. She wouldn't let him hammer on Sunday mornings, not that the neighbours were that close, it was more a matter of principle.

There was a good surf at the beach in those days and surfing carnivals with teams from the other parts of Wellington and even further, would come to compete with each other. We would sit and watch for hours. We loved the snappy way they drilled. Each team would march on to the beach with great precision. They would line up along the water's edge and at the sound of the whistle the man to be rescued would swim out with a buoy. When the buoys were in position another whistle would blow and the race would begin with the rescue swimmers fighting the waves to reach the victim. If it was very rough the bright coloured swim caps would disappear and we would worry that a swimmer had really drowned. At times it was pretty close and the swimmers would reach the beach exhausted.

I used to imagine that one day I would be tall and brown and a good swimmer. When I look back now at old photos of a skinny knock-kneed pale child who was always getting asthma from house dust or lupin pollen, it is as well that childhood hopes depend largely on imagination. Still it didn't stop Pru and me taking the small surfboards Dad had made into the surf. We had lots of fun trying to catch a wave which would carry us on to the sand at the water's edge where we would lie till the final ripples died around us.

This night Pru and I planned our own competition. With the three Thomas girls and Gillian, we could make up three teams of two. Gillian was the best swimmer, so she could team with Mary, the youngest Thomas girl; Pru and Ann would be a team and Judy and me.

Next morning at breakfast we told Mum about the plan. She said we were to be careful and we weren't to go out too far.

Dad had been up early that morning working on his truck. He wasn't at breakfast. We could hear him sawing and hammering outside as we talked and planned.



After breakfast I went out to see how the truck was coming along. Then I saw it. 'Dad, that's my surfboard you've cut up. Now we can't have our competition.' I was close to tears. Dad said it was the only decent bit of timber around and he needed it to make a tool-box for his truck. He said he would make another surfboard for me.

Dad was a bit like that with timber, always cutting up one thing to make another.

The Budgie

ALL morning Pru and I had been watching the budgie fluttering around the bach. It must have escaped from someone's place and couldn't find its way back. It would come close but never close enough to catch. We asked Uncle Eric if he would catch it for us.

Mum had a strawberry bed at the beach and Dad had made wirenetting frames to put over the bed to stop the birds eating the strawberries.

Uncle Eric took one of the frames and propped it up with a piece of wood. He tied a piece of string to the wood, placed some food in a dish under the frame and we all sat down to watch.

Soon the budgie flew down. For a while it stood outside the wooden frame, each time it got close we would hold our breath but each time it would hop away again. At last it could delay no longer, it hopped under the wirenetting frame, its head twisting quickly from side to side. Uncle Eric pulled the string. He was too quick, the budgie was not quite inside. Uncle Eric helped us bury the budgie in the front garden.

We would bring billies full of them for him. He would steam them open in a big pot on the stove and eat them with vinegar. Sometimes Mum would mince them and make soup. Dad even ate them raw with vinegar and bread and butter. Pru and I could never eat them when we were little.

Now we go to an Auckland restaurant and pay five dollars for a few pipis on a plate.

Pipis

PAEKAK beach was a good pipi beach. The sand dunes covered thick layers of pipi shells. There was a shell crushing works up Henare Street from the bach when we first went there. Everyone had shell paths; some baches had shell walls and one had the whole front of the house decorated with shells.

We used pipi shells to dig with, to carve our sand castles and to decorate our sand cars. We had afternoon tea parties using the shells as saucers.

Dad liked pipis to eat. He came from England and was very proud to be English, but when it came to pipis he was proud to be in New Zealand.



Cats-eyes

WE HAD been picking blackberries all afternoon on the roadside up from McKay's Crossing. It was one of those outings we always looked forward to even though we cried when we scratched ourselves. Parents must sometimes wonder why they take children on these sorts of outings. Still when you grow up and look back, all you remember is the excitement, the warm day, the drive in the car, the sandwiches and cakes and lime juice, eating too many blackberries and filling up the milk billies with those you can't eat.

We would always look forward to the blackberry pie next day and blackberry jam on toast for breakfast.

The drive home was fun, too. We would sing songs on the way. Dad had a good voice, not strong, he said, but tuneful. He and Mum both sang in the choir at church, he sang at Lodge do's, too.

It was dark by the time we turned into Henare Street. The headlights were on and I was tired and nearly asleep, when suddenly I saw two glowing eyes in the dark. 'Look, there's a ghost, Mum. There, on the road.' I ran into the bach my heart thumping.

Later when Mum had stopped laughing, she said the only ghost she saw was my face.

Mum must have been very upset when Ian didn't grow properly. She once told me when I was much older, if she had known he was going to live so long she would have put him in a home and had more children. I don't think she could have put Ian in a home when it came to the point.

I was always embarrassed with Ian. He would yell and hit his head and when my friends came around they would look frightened and wonder what was happening. I think Mum found it hard, too.

Dad would always be away working. There wasn't much work for carpenters in Wellington during the depression days, so he would go to places like Napier and Wanganui, anywhere, in his old Overland truck. He was a good house builder; when Mum died I found a notebook she had kept of all the houses Dad had built.

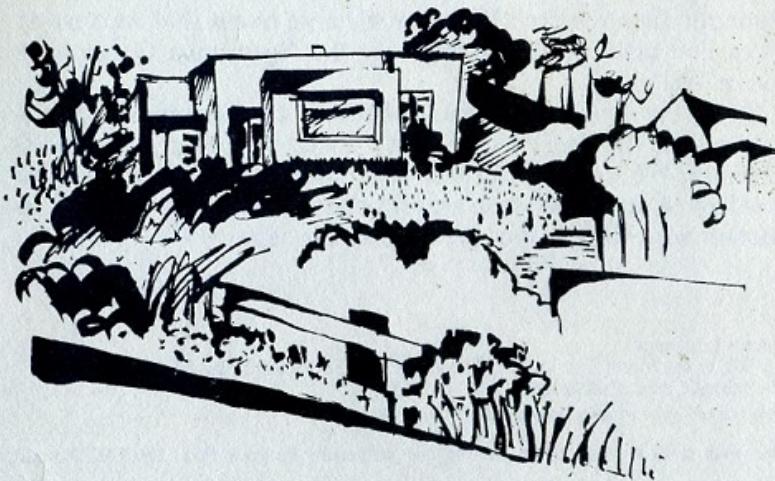
When we went to Paekak, Ian would be wrapped up in a rug and Mum would sit in the back of the car with him. If we stopped for ice-cream people would stare.

I suppose because we had Ian and the old couple had a mongol boy there was a sort of bond between the two families. At the same time it was a bond we didn't want. Mum used to talk to the old couple, but it never went further. Perhaps they too would have preferred a different reason for friendship.

The Mongol Boy

THE OLD couple lived in the last house along the Parade. We would see them walking slowly along the beach with their mongol boy.

At first we were frightened of him, but Mum said we should always smile and say hello. After a while he got to know us. We knew it was sad to see two old people who liked each other so much walking along the beach with a mongol boy. It was hard to know whether it was better to have an invalid brother like we did who was just like a big baby or a mongol boy who was neither a baby nor a boy.



Paekak Hill

WE WERE always scared going over Paekak hill. Going to Paekak we had to drive down the outside of the road and you could see right down the gravel side of the hill to the sea and rocks below. Halfway down was a rusty car that had been blown over. Dad had a car with a canvas top and celluloid windows. We were certain it would be blown over, too.

Further down the hill it wasn't so frightening; the road curved back into the hillside and there were trees growing on the slope. We used to think the trees would stop the car if it went over.

We were always glad to be at the bottom and soon forgot the hill once we were across the railway line and driving along the Parade to the bach.

We never minded coming home because then we were on the inside. The only bad spot was just at the top before the road went round the corner into the hills. You looked straight out into the sky and the sea and for a moment you couldn't see the road sloping down ahead. I still get scared there.

It was a long trip home in those days, Dad said about thirty miles, but often it would take two hours to get to Island Bay, especially if there was a baby Austin at the head of the queue. It would be dark when we got home, but I quite liked driving in the dark now that I knew that cats-eyes were not ghosts.

Pru and I always had a competition to see who could see the plum pudding tree first. We knew when we saw it that we were at Tawa Flat and then there was only the Ngauranga Gorge road before Wellington.

When the Americans came to Paekak, the Government put a road round the coast so we didn't have to go over Paekak hill anymore. We were glad in one way: instead of looking down we now looked up at that steep gravel slope with the rusty car. Yet, in another way, the trip was never quite the same.

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