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Cape Reinga & the Curvature of the Earth

I am standing here, stunned, in heavy shifting winds, strong as the waves turning rock to sand. I am at one end of one very small country a very long way from any other, and impossibly far from the first place I called home. This is Cape Reinga, the northern-most tip of New Zealand, where the Pacific Ocean to the east meets the Tasman Sea to the west. The lighthouse on the point is white as sea foam with cherry red trim that my nearly-four-year-old son is picking at and trying to eat. Just behind it two tides break against one another, churning and competing and competing and churning back and forth in infinity. Bodies of water larger than sovereign nations compete for global space, neither relenting. As I survey the horizon I see the curvature of the Earth, glowing pink and orange and white, as the late afternoon sun kisses the mist ninety-three million miles away. In the space between the details of our weekend road trip and the entirety of this landscape, I realise there's nothing provincial about our existence.

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We are staying in Henderson Bay, about four or five hours from our house on the North Shore of Auckland, and just outside the last town with groceries and gas, an hour south of The Cape on State Highway 1. The Bunkhouse comes trimmed in precisely everything one would need. No more. No less. It's a living study of the connection between satisfaction and expectations.

The distinction between indoor and outdoor is a thin one at The Bunkhouse. When you rent the place, you get access to five buildings. An eating area, kitchen, toilet, shower, and of course the bunkhouse itself. I use the term "building" loosely. Someone certainly built these structures, and they are plenty sturdy and reliable, all things considered. But they achieve a level of no-nonsense that would give the closest embracers of minimalism pause. I was strangely comfortable in Northland in general and here in particular. The Bunkhouse and I are fish in water.

The eating area is post and beam with a hunter green corrugated iron roof. Everything is hunter green because you take what's available around these parts. The timbers are from the owner's property "down the road" he says. Could be a couple sections south, or it could be thirty kilometres. Either way, there's only one road to go down. Keeps directions and descriptions pretty simple. He told me they brought in a portable mill when they cleared their swath of investment timbers, and saved a few for themselves. They cut six inch square posts and cut those once down the middle to make beams. Smells like they treated them the old-fashioned way, with kerosene as a carrier. There are no walls, but they're unnecessary. They'd only create a need for a ventilation system, and there's no point in over-complicating things. Lighting is simple: sockets spliced into three wire line, a single switch at the head and the end doubled over and wrapped in tape in case another need arises. I want to say it's nothing fancy, but really it's luxurious simplicity. Need hot water? Boil it. Kettle comes with the place. Light the gas with the flint.

I'm sitting next to the cooktop, a Camp Chef Expedition three burner range, affixed to the corrugated iron wall that separates the fire from the toilet. The owner says he smuggled it back in a Dodge Ram that he imported from the States some years ago. Didn't realise you had to buy the lighters separate, he says. There's a clock pinned a metre above, set an hour and ten minutes fast, and hanging from it is a holiday decoration, "Merry Christmas" written in glitter red script punctuated by mistletoe. The stove is anchored to angle iron and leftovers from the picnic table construction. The table top is macrocarpa, about a metre wide, one solid piece. All the timber around here, farms included, is Californian. Mostly trees you'd see along the central coast and Monterey, to which this climate compares favourably. Reminds me of those days.

We grilled chicken and peppers last night and now it smells pleasantly of yesterday's char – like a barbecue pit in West Texas where they sell smoked roasts by the pound, minus the tare-weight of the waxed paper and tray. Here it's food without frill or inedible garnish. My kind of food. Only thing it's full of is flavour because this is a place with nothing to hide. Later I'll boil up some instant coffee crystals, probably sit on the fence and watch for cars, let the boy ride his bike in circles around the white stone driveway and skid down the close-cropped hill to the paddock where three old horses are living out their sunset years. Our kind of night.

I find myself looking closely at the stove and the construction of this place, at the iron and nuts and bolts and the precisely cut and angled pine bracing and the square washers levelled with the horizon. Done once. Done well. I imagine that Malcolm, the owner, planned, measured, drew pictures, calculated using geometry trigonometry and instinct. I imagine he cut by hand – you can see the up and down blade marks, not the tell-tale swirls of spinning motorised machines. In the details I can see the word “careful” defined in his terms, and his precision is something I can’t help but admire. I’m reminded: they say the clothes you choose are who you want to be, but what you do in those clothes is who you are. A harmony of the two is what we call beauty. Well, design and execution in building share the same connection, seems to me, and Malcolm brought the two together in style. If this place were a jacket, I’d wrap myself up in it no matter the season.

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Pukenui is eight kilometres south and there’s gas and groceries and a school and a playground with new equipment shining on the dusty roadside in the sun and there’s a fish and chips shop and a liquor store and they even have a Hare Krishna group with a cart full of leaflets and tambourines pulled by a horse who looked as happy as can be in this spot in this moment. A sound choice for any creature.

Might seem there isn’t much here, but it’s as whole a world as any other. Only falls short on convenience and proximity. You won’t find a place like Takapuna’s Antidote Café where you can take art classes on Wednesday mornings, buy pastels, paints and paper at your leisure, your choice of black or white coffee, and raw potatoes for one dollar twenty apiece. Next door is a European automotive repair specialist and directly across is the non-pedestrian exit of the mall parking garage. To be honest, I can’t grasp the logic of such a business model – especially the potatoes. Makes sense to me that Pukenui will never support this style of commercial indulgence or ethos. All they need. No more. No less.

We drove out of Henderson Bay after a morning at the beach, tide pooling and lounging, with no more than a dozen people for a kilometre in either direction. And this is tourist season. We stopped for lunch at The Hub, just off the state highway, then stopped for gas at the wharf. There are two pumps. One in the car park for diesel and petrol, and one on the

dock for the boats. Each has a self-serve kiosk at which you can pay and choose your fuel if you can make sense of the instructions and get the precise sequence of clicks and swipes just right. The two people ahead of us were talking – locals it seemed – musing about the good weather and the fishing in the lagoon just south. The one left and the next filled a red canister the size of a spare tire and while he was filling he nodded to me and shouted “Lucky there’s gas today. Half the time the pump won’t even turn on. Hell, they’re out up there too,” as he pointed toward The Cape. “Suppose that is lucky for me,” I said. But it wasn’t much more than a jinx and the instant he said it we all saw the future.

The pump didn’t work for the German tourists behind us either, and together we confirmed that the nearest fuel was thirty kilometres south, since the north was reported dry. Another hour tacked on the trip, I figured, the way this road runs. Well, we’ve no choice and that’s no matter. Proximity and convenience, after all. And we’re all in.

We drove south a fairly uninteresting thirty kilometres, neither singing nor shouting the whole way. We stopped in Awanui, home to a service station and the Ancient Kauri Kingdom where there’s a café that steams a decent cappuccino and a spiral staircase carved inside a fifty-tonne section of a fifty-thousand-year-old kauri that lived for one thousand and eighty-seven years before it fell, lying undiscovered until 1994, buried unceremoniously in a creepy old swamp. They say it took three hundred hours with a chainsaw to carve stairs into and through the log and another two hundred to finish it off with chisels and sanders. It leads to a mezzanine gallery that overlooks a workshop the size of a supermarket, an oasis of indulgence tucked just off the road in a building that looks more like a factory than a tourist trap. Good thing for descriptive signage.

We filled up with coffee then filled the car with fuel and road snacks because our boy was no more than an hour closer to four years old, and we didn’t figure that he’d suddenly developed a sense of patience retracing yesterday’s steps.

Thirty kilometres north again, just before the Four Square and liquor shop, we decided to take the turnoff on Hukatere Road, headed west to Ninety Mile Beach. The sign said only ten kilometres and we were keen to get a look at it, maybe drive along the coast a bit and double back some more. By now we were simply rolling with the road.

Well this road wasn’t all it cracked up to be. Ran out of asphalt pretty quick and it turned to mostly dust not long after. It’s a road used by

logging trucks and there were huge operations operating on either side of us. Gigantic machines, orange and yellow and spewing smoke like Mike Mulligan and Maryanne. The boy was fascinated. Thinking back, we got some funny looks in our subcompact Toyota, filled to the brim with a little boy and a bicycle, covered in grit and pieces of road. I kept track of the mileage and knew we were getting close. Couldn't see a thing through the trees and the road was getting worse and worse. A Range Rover crept up and passed us and since I didn't know any better I thought the driver was shaking his head at my leisurely pace. Yeah, see you on the beach, Buddy!

Then it ended.

I saw the Range Rover's tracks leading down the beach and we figured out right quick that "Coast Road" is the beach. An overloaded subcompact Toyota is not the tool for the job, so I made a hundred and seventy eight point turn in the middle of the road, bottomed out twice, thanked the transmission gods that the damned thing jammed back into drive, and puttered ten kilometres back to Far North Road – State Highway 1. We resolved to quit trusting road signs in Northland.

We passed the gravel dust road to The Bunkhouse and we were back to closing in on our destination. The highway is a two-lane sealed road that swoops up and around hills and curves, one vista after another. Green lush fields on either side, cows and bulls grazing among sheep, and enough horses to start competing rodeos. We were outside the reach of mobile communications and deep into some of New Zealand's most feral landscape.

To the east the Pacific Ocean appeared, just past the white silica of the Kokota Sandspit. No roads go there. The only access is from the Parengarenga Harbour and Great Exhibition Bay, or pay a koha to the Maori farmers whose land this is and they'll let you cross. But even from the roadside, a couple kilometres away, it's worth a stop to look and take a snapshot, so I turn around and pull off into a gravel clearing. I press the car door open against a ferocious wind, leave my hat in the car, and step around the back, the sun starting its afternoon descent and casting shadows across the valley and through the back window. The boy is buckled into his seat ready to move on because he can tell we're not there yet and he lets his preferences be known in a series of clearly articulated screeches and howls. Point taken, kid. Gimme a minute.

Some call the sand "snow white." From here, in this light, this weather, a warm afternoon in a dusty wind, molecules of the creosote-scented asphalt

whipping around and against the car and across the horizon – from here I can't calm my overloaded perceptions and find worthy terms to describe the enormity I'm looking upon from this tiny island. First time I saw the Grand Canyon, it looked to me like a painting on the backdrop of the universe. I quit trying to take pictures right quick. Didn't see the reason in it. Here is shaping up the same. It's no longer a visual experience. It's direct confirmation of the shape of our world, as minuscule as the individual pure white colloidal crystals blanketing the sandspit, worlds unto themselves, spinning in a universe bigger than gods and logic. A quick click with the mobile and we're off.

We carry on to the crest of the next hill, and beyond is another, then another. I figure the second must be the end, where the road gives way to ocean. There can't be too much world left, and along with the boy we're all starting to feel the exhilaration of there-yet.

Just before the last stop in Te Hapua, which did have gas incidentally, is a post box made of a discarded microwave oven bolted crooked to a cracked wooden post. It's all odd-sized nuts and bolts and faded safety orange numbers. This is a synecdoche if I've ever seen one.

Fifteen kilometres on, the road ends in a roundabout and a car park. You can see the ocean from one horizon to the next and you can hear the tour busses idling and a diesel generator powering a few points in the public toilets. Through a gate, wind whipping frantically, is The Cape. A short walk to the top of the world.

On the Tasman Sea side, the west, there's a beach with Motuopao Island just off the coast. The beach doesn't have a name on any maps I've seen, but it's got a peculiar trait I've never seen anywhere else. The waves stand upright, hardly ever crashing. You can zoom in a satellite picture and see why. The tides are cross-hatched here, fighting and falling into one another and standing up again to fight some more. From here the chaos and churning look paused, trapped in time, and I have to look away to make sense of it, then look back to confirm the sense I've been unable to make.

The path to the lighthouse switches back behind stone walls and overgrowth that supports a fledgling grey-faced petrel (oi) colony. Around half the bends it's dead silent and still, the other half it's whipping and blowing, relentless. I've got pictures I could show you. Video panorama from due east to due west. High definition, high frame rate footage of waves crashing against one another in the middle of the sea – or is it

ocean? They're still fighting it out, and I don't imagine they'll ever have their judgment day. I could show you all these things in photographs, describe them in words and compare them to places and sensations and memories and abstractions and ideas. But I don't think I can capture and convey this living contradiction, this overwhelming scale of power and beauty standing at the tip of one of the world's tiniest countries. My home, New Zealand.

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On the way back to The Bunkhouse we stopped at the Te Hapua general store and picked up some butter for our corn on the cob. We had a good few hours before dark and the boy needed to burn off energy. He took off to run around the sheds and paddocks while I lined up dinner ingredients. Steak and onions and a red pepper and a pot of rice. I'd gotten a mixed garlic and herb seasoning at the Four Square on the way in, and that combined with the salt and pepper I found in the cupboard suited our tastes.

I shucked the corn into a grocery bag and peeled off the stray silk and gave the cobs a rinse in the kitchen sink. The sun might have dried one of them out a smidge, but nothing some butter couldn't fix. I fired up the grill with the flint and waited for the ribbed iron to heat up enough, then put the corn on directly. I boiled some water for rice. I wanted to add some zing to the steaks so I put them in a mixing bowl and covered them with dry seasonings, oil, and half a Lion Red lager, then poked them with a fork to let the juices run together.

I gave each corn a quarter turn and repeated three minutes on, then six, then nine. After full circle, I cranked up the flame to sear the steak and onions. I finished those off and cut across the grain with the duller knife I'd used in years. Can't complain about the thickness of a steel edge in the scheme of things though. The sharpest blades have never cut, the same way unfulfilled satisfaction accompanies perfection. All the food was good and even the boy ate his share. He rode his bike around some more while we cleaned up and got ready for bed – for the bunkhouse itself, finally.

The door was barrel latched and padlocked. I unlocked it and slid the bolt back and it resonated through the door to the beams to the posts and through the iron roof across the paddocks and mixed with the crashing

Pacific. I swung the door open and walked in and removed my shoes as the sign asked. Tidy place. I pulled the chain to the single light bulb in the centre of the room and that was enough to get along in the twilight. I spread out pillows and blankets across the bunks, sturdy as the picnic bench and the beams and the fences and the piles of scrap yet to become structures.

Smelled like this must have been a workspace at one time for the quad bikes the owners hire out on beach tours, all chemical and oil. Then I realised it's the old-fashioned kerosene treatment on the posts and beams and I opened the windows and settled into the aroma. The light bulb gave a flicker so I gave it a jiggle and it stayed on well enough. It was getting dark and I took my flashlight from my backpack on the plywood bench and kept it in my back pocket just in case. I even took it to bed with me on the top bunk because I figured on needing it to find my way around the bathroom before dawn. No electricity in there. No need. They've got plenty of candles around. Hunter green, of course.

When we woke up we had milk and cereal and coffee crystals and packed up the car and I wound up with a coating of road dust on my hands. I rinsed them in the rainwater kitchen tap and we settled up with the owners and headed out. We took our time down the coast. Took the route through Kerikeri and the Bay of Islands and started to see familiar sights a couple of hours down. No doubt, we were headed home.

When you count up the nooks and crannies New Zealand has more coastline than the United States and that fact gets easier to grasp from on the ground in the car, ticking down the miles. Probably even easier to see from a canoe, and probably a good bit of the reason the Maori stopped here in the first place.

We got back home and got out of the car slowly and stretched to the sky and unloaded the car and threw some laundry in the washer and the boy in the bath and I cracked open a Double Brown lager and slipped it into my Kiwi beer cosy and I thought about the bubbles rising and popping off the surface and I thought about the radius of the can and the slightly larger outside radius of the holder and the curves down Achilles Crescent and back up to Lake Road and all the way north along the motorway and the inlets and the bays and the harbours and the coastline and the seas and the oceans and the arc in the horizon off Cape Reinga and the universe beyond and me in it and the boy in it, individuals in a whole, as sand on a beach.