

+ Places In The Heart **Winning Essay**

# Wainuiomata

By Sharon Stephenson

I was, in no particular order, 13, brown and nerdy, a tangle of hormones and insecurities. She was 14, cheerleader blonde and, to my suburban eyes, the most sophisticated person I'd ever met.

"You come from Wainuiomata? But that's where the poor people live."

It was the first time I'd crawled towards the notion that my hometown was a hardscrabble place with few redeeming features.

Suspicion had, of course, always been nibbling at the edges: my neighbours weren't exactly rattling tins outside Woolworths, but neither were they driving reliable cars or wearing clothes that hadn't started life with someone else.

Prosperity and luck were things that happened someplace else, usually "over the hill", a reference to neighbouring Lower Hutt which, at the time, seemed awash with money. My mother, a teacher whose ambitions were curdled by the Catholic Church's resistance to birth-control, once begged my father for \$20 to buy a pair of shoes for a wedding. He refused.

Wainui is at the arse end of the North Island, about as far as you can go without bumping into Cook Strait. Early settlers found timber to mill but most of the town was thrown up in a frothing zeal of house building after World War II. My parents arrived in the late 60s, cashing in their Family Benefit to buy a badly constructed, poorly insulated house that huddled close to its neighbours for warmth. When it leaked and we tried to pretend that the two-bar heater was adequate, they congratulated themselves that at least their house was in a "better" part of town. Which it was, if your barometer is fewer cars parked on lawns and three-day Mongrel Mob benders.

Limping into puberty is hard enough when you're bookish and not particularly destined for a career in modelling. But my

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family's Indian/English/Irish/Spanish genetic soup further singled me out. At the local supermarket where I spent two years of Thursday and Friday nights, I was asked not to bring food from home, in case the smell offended anyone in the staffroom. And I suffered the only black eye of my life when, drunk on a bottle of Lion Brown stolen from my father, a girl whose boyfriend I was talking to called me a "curry muncher" and I thumped her.

Alcohol, frustration and aggression: this was the thin duvet we wrapped around ourselves. *Once Were Warriors* was yet to come, but my hometown could have been the template; sneaking into the

pub to celebrate passing School Cert, I saw a bloke with more gold jewellery than was dignified beat his girlfriend senseless. And not one person intervened.

Wainui was as drab and uninviting a place as you could hope to find but there was a strange unity in poverty, in the collective thumbing of noses at those who had more than us. Even when I started university, taking two buses and a train was preferable to leaving a place where, like *Cheers*, everybody knew my name.

These days I live in a suburb where most people don't Hoover their own floors, or know my name. But if the traffic is kind, it's only 40 minutes from the valley where I grew up. I recently went "over the hill" to find nothing much had changed: Wainui still looks like a town with the life ebbing out of it, a smattering of \$2 shops, takeaways with badly spelt menus and hoodie-wearing youths who took an unhealthy interest in my camera.

I'm glad I don't live there anymore, but I credit Wainuiomata with teaching me how to stand up for myself, to handle any situation and, when all else fails, to throw a decent punch. +

+ Places In The Heart **Photography Runner-up**



Elliott Harris:  
"Sitting on the  
jetty at Lake  
Rotoiti."