

Invitation from Sam Mahon.

On Monday Sept 26 at 8.30 a.m. I will be presenting a sculpture to Ecan. The sculpture, 'Vigil', is a portrait of Catherine Sintenie; mother, musician, alpinist, conservationist and teacher.

Two years ago Catherine Sintenie died of breast cancer. She was a tireless advocate for the conservation of our rivers. For more than a decade she devoted herself to this most unequal fight. She was a good and reasonable person, she believed in the rule of law, and she wrote her submissions accordingly and awaited change. When there was none she sought a meeting with David Caygill. This is how she described their exchange:

Cathy; *'We have negotiated in good faith with farmers and Ecan for fifteen years and every promise made to us has been broken.'*

Caygill; *'That may well be so, but we didn't break the law.'*

In a 2003 email to Don Brash, Caygill prematurely congratulated the future Act party leader on achieving what he had yet to achieve, the position of prime minister.

'...I have no doubt that the country needs the kind of clear, radical leadership that I am sure you are keen to bring. I'm less certain that the country yet appreciates that need. The task now is to build the case for change without either alienating the electorate or so compromising your manifesto that the mandate you ultimately secure isn't worth having. This is by no means an easy task..'

What Caygill is advising here is very simple: keep the electorate happy by all means, but do not deviate from your agenda. So if the electorate becomes uneasy how do you keep it grinning without compromising your manifesto? You simply tell it what it wants to hear. In such ways, since the creation of the Ecan Act, Ecan governance has artfully distorted the precepts of the Canterbury Water Management Strategy by creating the illusion of a collaborative process with regard to the breaking up and distribution of the commons.

The Ecan Act was judged by the New Zealand Law Society Rule of Law Committee to be repugnant to the rule of law. Yet it is on this flawed foundation that the present Ecan is about to reinstall itself through a cartoon version of democracy. Caygill and his fellow functionaries stole from Cathy, as they have stolen from all of us, our precious time. I am presenting this sculpture to stand as a reminder to the new council that they are the inheritors of promises made. Like Cathy we are impatient for them to be honoured.

If you can join us even briefly we would be honoured. Bring with you a flower to place on the plinth and we'll brew a billy of gumboot tea together. Cheers, Sam.

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Cathy's story:

Some thirty years ago, with a trade in his pocket and his duty to his country served, Adrianus Sintenie put on a backpack and headed as far away from Holland as a boy without an appetite for penguins could go. Intoxicated by a wilderness he had never known in Europe he set out to explore the Southern Alps. This flatland boy with his shock of blond hair walked the mountain passes with a light pack and bare feet. Then one fine, blue skied day, while hitching through the apple fields of Central Otago, he caught a ride on the back of a red ute.

'Travelling?'

'Looking for work.'

'Take you as far as Con's if you like. He's got the largest orchard in the southern hemisphere. Jump in the back.' *The back* was a large dog cage.

It was the end of the day and the workers were coming by with dust at their heels; about fifty of them. Among them was a pretty girl wearing tight blue track pants. Her head was bowed. She looked up as she passed and caught the eye of the blond Dutchman in the dog crate. He smiled. She was crying.

'Three weeks work if you want it,' said Con. 'Five-sixty an hour.' Ad wanted it.

Next morning he arrived at the shed with all the other pickers. He'd picked apples before and chose a bag with wide shoulder straps. It was a good day in the orchard; the broken threads of home grown philosophies, the anonymous comments cast back and forth from the blind sides of trees; the careless, lilting conversation of casual labour. Next day when Ad shouldered his bag for the morning's work he turned to find the girl standing squarely in front of him. She looked stern. 'That's my bag,' she said, and held out her hand. Apologising, he took it from his shoulders and passed it to her. She turned and walked off down a row of trees. He watched her go, then quickly found a new bag and followed.

The pickers hugged the trees at the top of their ladders, their arms buried in the branches, their hands flickering like birds among the leaves; the badinage and chattering was like a troop of monkeys. Chernobyl had happened, cobalt ninety was falling over the northern fields of Belarus. Politics is the common tender among itinerants and the big global problems were torn, twisted and plucked from the air like apples. 'It's just the bloody Russians. You can't condemn nuclear power because of a failed system.'

'Systems fail everywhere, it's not specific to any country.'

'America wouldn't risk the lives of her own people. It would be anti-constitutional.'

From the other side of his tree came an angry ejaculation, 'Bullshit!' It was the girl in blue. He grinned. 'Why were you crying?'

'My grandmother died,' she said.

Every day he sought out the tree in which she was working, and as they laboured together under the pastel Otago sky she told him of her home in England, her family and her catholic upbringing. She talked about her adventures in the southern mountains, her heroes like Chris Bonnington, her early climbs in Scotland and Australia and crossing the Copeland Pass to the north-west. As the season thinned the pickers left. Ad and Cathy stayed on. Con and Eileen liked them, they took them for family. One night after an evening of dancing at the local pub Ad walked her home down the Earnsclough road where, under a canopy of southern stars, they kissed for the first time.

But it wasn't until Cathy took him to Mt Aspiring National Park, to the Kitchener Cirque, to one of the most beautiful and hazardous parts of the country, that she knew this one was forever. It was Ad's first time in the mountains with a heavy pack, it was hard work for a boy who had grown up on flat land. High in the cirque she saw how moved he was by the natural beauty of this new country and it pleased her. At the foot of a stone cathedral, with mountain lilies and altars of rough-hewn schist, amid ceremonies of wind and scudding cloud, the two northern travellers bound themselves to each other and to their adopted country.

A year later they found a wooden cottage by a stream with a mountain at its back, a perfect place to raise their two children. Ad found work with a wine maker and set up a business making organic yogurt. Cathy taught at the local school and played fiddle for an Irish band in the weekends.

There was only one cabbage tree when they bought the property thirty years ago. The cottage is closed about now with native trees and wide lawns and the old veranda is hung heavy with vines. Their children are grown with children of their own and they share their parents' love for the scent of a beech forest, the chill of a mountain stream, the burned smell of schist, the crisp sweetness of snow berries and the spread of a mountain top under their feet. Life cannot be lived more richly than this.

Then one day the river where they swam every summer began to sour. It was part of a slow awakening all over Canterbury as if a plague had come to the plains; like botrytis comes to grapes, like rust comes to the gentle undulations of poplar leaves. We all turned from our usual lives and took whatever tools we had to fight it. And like all fights it began to drain the sap from our lives. It wearied us, and the consequent Kafkaesque acts of futility stole from our children our precious time.

For twenty years Cathy came with her band to play at the mill, my home. The barn would fill with people, the very old, the very young, the very sap of life. At about ten in the evening she would put aside her fiddle and strip the willow down *The rocky road to Dublin*, hooking elbows with everyone, spinning as we clapped, her braid flying, her smile flashing. One early morning, when I had walked the length of the building putting out the guttering candles, the last soul awake, I came to my room to find the Dutchman, the fiddle-player, Anna and Jan, tussock-haired and freckled, curled together on my last mattress. I blew out the remaining candle and slept fitfully with a cardigan between me and the hardwood floor. In the morning as the mill slowly woke I made a huge pot of tea and lit the fire and someone

picked up an instrument and then some other and then the gentle interweave began, tired and smiling, in loose heavy jerseys, with bowls of muesli and pools of morning light spilling across the floor. These were the best of times.

I asked Cathy if I could sketch her. I asked her many times. 'I won't do,' she'd say. 'Choose someone else.' She'd laugh and shake her head as if the idea was preposterous. Just before her chemotherapy I asked her again. She acquiesced. I photographed her from all sides; her auburn hair tied in a beautiful plait, and then sculpted her in plaster. It's such a delicate and weighty thing to mould someone dear in your hands, to search for and find and lose and find again that line, hoping in the end to make it true.

We met in the botanical gardens when we knew nothing could save her. There were trees and the sound of water and I held her hand. 'This is bizarre,' she said, so matter-of-factly. We found a place by the river to pause, a place full of sunlight and hard shadows and daffodils. She sat in her chair with Jan at her feet, her hand gently stroking his blond hair. Anna stood and rocked her baby in her arms, smiling down at her child with her mother's eyes. Ad lay back in the rank grass, his jacket open, his heavy frame propped on one elbow. He gazed up at his beautiful wife, smiling all the time, recounting the story of their life, for us; the story I'm trying with some difficulty to tell you here.

'We have so little time. We should have music,' he said. Ten days later we met at Peel Forest outside the old hall where we had danced so often, summer and winter. It was a peerless day, it was spring, it was still, the sky was clear. A hundred and fifty people gathered on the lawns to witness the double wedding of Jan and Anna. They carried Cathy to a green velvet chaise longue where she lay propped on cushions, Ad beside her, cradling her feet in his lap. She was smiling. There were flowers and tears and music and the children ran through the trees and across the grass and woodpigeons blundered about in the high branches. As evening crept in on us the lights went down and the band began to play all the old tunes. And we danced. We danced so hard and we hooked elbows for *Strip the willow* and waltzed and jumped and swung and Cathy lay on her pillows and smiled and we laughed for her, we danced for her, and the band played *I will wait for you*. And I have it all on film; those beautiful faces, the children in their pleated cotton dresses, our hands reaching to each other wanting the music not to stop, for the dance to go on forever; while Cathy lay near us quietly dying. That was Saturday. On Monday a falcon came to the mill and killed a pigeon. Four hours later, with Anna playing the violin at her side, she died.

We spread her ashes on Mount Peel yesterday, forty people crowding onto that ragged summit; to the west lay the mountains she loved, to the east the creeping desolation she fought; at our feet lay her forest, her enduring monument.

Ad: Catherine cared about our beautiful country and the amazing uniqueness of this place. The more she learned the more she realised how precious it is. She tried hard to make other people understand the importance of looking after it and she worried much about the compromises being made. She never stopped worrying even in her last hours. On the morning of her passing, Jan and Sharon came into the room. Cathy opened her eyes and said between her agonising breaths; 'We won't be going

up Mt Peel today. It's raining.'

She was my true love, she is part of me. I'll miss her.