

a hundred counterfeit stars

[Enter] Chorus.

CHORUS

Two households, both alike in dignity,
In fair Verona, where we lay our scene,
From ancient grudge break to new mutiny,
Where civil blood makes civil hands unclean.

From forth the fatal loins of these two foes
A pair of star-crossed lovers take their life;
Whose misadventured piteous overthrows
Doth with their death bury their parent's strife.

Star-crossed.

Stars cross.

Stars criss-cross and zigzag into their constellations outside the door, I watch them through a slit above the tin doorknob as narrow as a rolled-up newspaper.

I wish I knew how to spot them, these little, picturesque whānau of stars. How to point them out to my nephew. Get him to trace the outline of the bull, the grizzly bear, the Ancient Greek hunter. There's Taurus, Ursa Major, Orion.

But I can't.

The only things I know about constellations are whatever astrological musings I've heard Marama sister-splain to me over Weet-Bix and apple juice.

Frizzy almond hair used to hide her. Bury her manicured eyebrows, the hanafuda earrings she bought from a Tokyo night market. So, she borrowed a razor from Jack In Social Studies.

I don't know Jack From Social Studies, but I know his razor must be sharp, because when Marama came down the stairs next morning, her head was shaved to the point where it looked like she was covered in splinters.

We gave it one week to grow out, see if the look could mature on her a bit.

She dyed it axolotl-pink before we could really tell.

Her necklace is two kahawai swimming into each other, paua shells for eyes, it never leaves her chest. She owns an iPhone 3 with its GPS location switched off (so the government can't tell what her plans might be) and her horoscope app on the main screen (so the universe can).

Each step is covered in thin carpet, the design is tulips and bumblebees. I skip down them two, three at a time, keys rattle against my waist, the screwdriver in my sock pokes into my anklebone.

If you saw this place advertised in the local paper - the village one which prints five hundred and fifteen copies a month and is available for free outside the Hinenuitepō Avenue dairy - you might be enticed to pay a visit.

OLDEST STILL-RUNNING ARCADE IN AOTEAROA!!

FREE FUN FOR THE WHĀNAU.

The advertisement is slightly misleading.

It doesn't clarify that the fun is only free for *our* whānau.

Everyone who doesn't whakapapa to Ngātiwai better have coins jingling in their back pockets. Gold ones, at that.

That's why Koro built this place a storey underground. The downwards staircase means we can hear the jinglejinglejingle, jinglejinglejingle.

The louder, the more instrumental, the more orchestral it is, the more you can't help but to grin and guide them to the claw machine at the back.

I cracked how horoscopes worked pretty quickly. They're written in a way that's vague and general enough to be applicable to anyone, with *just* enough specifics in there to give the illusion that it's for you, only you.

Enough specifics for Jerry the dairy farmer in Timaru and Aroha the Sky City board member in Tāmaki Makaurau to believe that

May 14th - Ares - 'Be wary of your close friends and open to your
deepest rivals'

applies to them almost perfectly, almost flawlessly, so seamlessly that maybe there's something in these horoscope things, maybe the twelve dollar monthly subscription fee is worth it.

Marama disagreed with me, of course. Passionately. But when you're literally named after the moon, I guess you have an excuse for having some natural affinity with the stars.

Did she feel more love from those people and creatures in the sky, than from the figures in our own home? From our parents? From me?

We've got a few other games, a few other tidbits, sure. An air hockey table with pinewood pucks. One of those boxing balls you punch and see who hits the high score. A tabletop emulator we shipped in from Hong Kong in 2003. It's got all these different old-school games: *Galaga*, *Ms. Pac-Man*, *Street Fighter II*.

Only issue is (and it's a pretty important 'only issue'), the instruction manual is in Chinese.

Neither my Pāpā or my Uncle or I can read Chinese. Hell, Uncle Anaru struggles through the rugby articles in *The Herald*.

And so when it stopped turning on in 2005, it stopped turning on forever.

Most customers are underwhelmed when they get here.

We offer birthday parties, \$50 for two hours and up to twenty kids, but I've worked here for three years and haven't got a single email, front desk enquiry, landline call.

Don't have an email or a front desk, to be fair. And I'm not convinced Dad's ever even opened a phone bill. Could be why, on second thoughts.

Most people are bored after fifteen minutes here.

Someone wins and someone loses in air hockey, they pretend to be Mike Tyson for one right-hand swing, might chuck a glance at the switched-off emulator.

We left the instruction manual open nearby, just in case, but you don't get a lot of foreign language speakers in these parts. Our locals speak chicken feed prices, Lion Red, homophobia.

Hm.

There's one game we get people coming back for, though.

One game.

The claw machine.

It's what this arcade started off as. As a claw machine on the footpath outside the town hall.

Koro made it himself. Used spare parts from the toilet factory. A shoplifted screwdriver. A crafty DIY mind itself built from listening to Sammy The Foreman From Down The Road's tips and seven cents in library late charges.

Within a month, he had got it working: the prize slot, the five-pronged claw, the maroon-painted box.

Within two, he had it filled up: *Lord of the Flies*, *Fahrenheit 451*, *The Catcher in the Rye*.

Yes.

He packed it with books.

Rare ones, too. Second editions, mis-printed front covers, the odd signed copy.

I caught Marama once, kneeling on the trampoline in a puffer jacket and violet Canterbury trackpants.

Pāpā's torch strapped to her forehead. Switched off. The billions of lights in the sky must have been enough for her.

A notebook open on her left, with a leather case and crisp pages. Some other book on her right, dog-eared and orangey, faded.

She'd peek at one, scribble in the other. Peek, scribble. Peek, scribble. Peek, scribble.

I asked a question.

Yo, what's up? Roast chicken's getting cold, the cucumber's all gone. Sorry, I ate it all.

Copying out *Romeo and Juliet*, she answered. Word for word. Line for line. Front to back.

I asked another.

Where'd you get it? Did Ms Berry give it to you?

Won the book from Koro's claw machine. A first edition. Dates back to Victorian England. Probably worth a few million.

I asked a final one.

Didn't realize school started at 8 pm now. What's the point?

Wanted to know how it felt to write a masterpiece. To create something with permanence. To make something that mattered.

Sliding my fingers down my sock, I pull out Koro's screwdriver. It's a bit rusty now, but that's what years in this whānau will do to you.

I knew, obviously. We both did.

Both knew that you hadn't won that from his claw machine.

It's rigged. It's a scam.

The claw can't physically hold onto anything heavier than a square of Cadbury's Dairy Milk, the books slip out every time, collapse back into a pile that's never changed in size.

A pile of books which are empty. Blank pages with blank pages with blank pages, printed in Sammy The Foreman From Down The Road's garage for a few bucks a piece. There's no second editions. You won't find the signatures of Harper Lee, Ray Bradbury, J. D. Salinger.

Just fakes, fakes, fakes that a town played along with being real. Our own inter-generational secret.

I unscrew each of the four corners of the claw machine's back. The board peels off, but I still take it slowly, cautiously, respectfully.

Most of us would leave a note.

A note explaining the razor slits, the overflowing bathtub, the raspberry incense sticks, the blood, saying why they were someone's fault.

Puffs of dust creep off the covers, onto my forearms, cake my skin a mute gray.

I lift up my shirt.

From the elastic band of my trackpants, I take out your leather notebook. Tuck it, snuggle it into the bottom of the pile.

You left a masterpiece instead, the only *real* masterpiece.

It shines among a hundred counterfeit stars.