

I'd never had it so good. I felt like some guy off the TV. This was for me, I told myself. This was what I was made for. Even if I hadn't seen any cash pay yet.

And that car of Kingi Taylor's, ho! What I'd do with wheels like that! I was setting my sights good and high, I can tell you. I was ready to hang in there, learn how to reach out and grab all that kind of stuff for myself. (You seen a 45 inch colour telly?).

And then the guy came back to work and they said thanks and that's it. Goodbye. That was the finish of my career in groceries. Spaghetti brain, that's me. I'd believed them that they were going to keep me on, that I was getting on fine, that I'd get me a career in the business world.

Well at least I got a lift back home because Kingi Taylor decided he'd drive me back. My guess was he wanted to do some of his legal business up this way. We got out of his car when we got back to my place and he said: "Oh, I forgot." Shoves an envelope at me. "that's their thank you. We all really appreciated your helping, you know, saved a lot of trouble too."

And we walked in. And there was Dad laying into that Ngaire, the kid sister. (Her? Oh, about 13, 14, something like that). But was he giving it to her! Good job I reckoned. Wagging school again I was betting. Slippery as an eel that kid. And Kingi Taylor, he just picked out the best chair — so's he couldn't catch a thread on our old furniture eh — and he just sat down to watch! Yeah!

Dad gave up soon's he saw us. But he hung on good and tight to Ngaire. And she stood there spurring tears and snot all over the place, on and on and on.

"So what's going on then?" I said. And I told Ngaire "Shut it!" She was starting to suck in big grasping breaths making a noise like a kitchen pipe with an airblock. "Your uncle's come to take Ngaire home with him. Live with him again," Dad said.

"That right?" This was news to me. So why the bawling? I was thinking. "It's something I can do to help," says Kingi Taylor. "When things are bad a family needs to stick together, help each other."

"Things are bad all right," Dad said, and he rasped his hand over his unshaved chin. That noise got on my nerves. Just like all that sort of talk. It wasn't as if we didn't get the un-

employment. Well I'd be getting it pretty soon. And the family benefit. We were doing OK.

Ngaire was sniffing now, sucking in gobs of snot. "Stop that!" I yelled at her. And you wouldn't believe it, the tears all spilled over again. Next thing she'd suddenly jerked her skinny arm and shot loose from Dad right out the door. I belted after her, down the back path, grabbed her before she could nick over the fence.

"What's up then?" I said. "What's with all the howling?"

"Not going back with that fulla," she said. Real staunch she sounded too.

"Why the hell not? You been with him before. Sounds a good idea to me for this while. They —"

"Not just a while. Dad wants me to stay till I finish school."

"So you've got it made, girl. So what's your problem?"

"I can't say. But I'm not going. I'm just not and you can't make me. No one's going to do that." And she wriggled, trying to thrash her arm free.

We heard my uncle's voice raised in the house. Her shudder wobbled the flesh of my arm. A cold sweat licked up by back. A bad idea was poking at my guts. I took a look at Ngaire. Nah, couldn't be. But the expression on her face!

(Now listen. This bit is just between you and me, in the family right?) She looked scared and — I don't know — sort of as if someone had just given her the sort of hard time that leaves you feeling real sick.

"Come on you," I said. "You better tell me. Now. What happened? When you were staying with them before —"

She stopped dead. Looked at me. And I knew. I knew.

"He didn't — he — did he?"

She nodded. Once.

"You lie girl!"

She dropped her head.

"I want the truth. Just the one time eh?"

She shook her head. Then she lifted her face, looked at me, no expression at all on her face now.

"Lots of times. But I won't go there again. Not ever." And she shook off my hand, walked off down the road.

I stood there. I started to quiver all over. I was puffing. I could feel the blood tightening my arm muscles. I walked into the house. I went up to that man. I hit him. Full in the face, all my force.

I heard my father cry out. The blood on my knuckles felt good. He

stayed where he'd fallen, staring up at me, his face all white round the red marks.

I told my father: "Ngaire's not going." I was looking down at that fulla all the time. He didn't shift, not the slightest bit.

Dad was yelling at me. "Stop that. What you think you're doing? Get out, get the bloody hell out of here." His fist struck my shoulder. "You, you're useless, no use at all. Get out of here. Stay out."

"Listen —" But he was getting his step-brother up off the floor. "What'd he do that for?" Dad was saying in a shaking voice. He kept his back to me. "You all right, Kingi? I don't —" Kingi Taylor shrank back as I brushed past him on the way out.

"He's bad that one," I heard Kingi Taylor tell Dad as I went out. "You did the right thing there Wi." I gave his car a chop, just about busted my hand. The metal wouldn't even give. Ngaire was down the road, waiting.

"We've been booted out," I told her. "He'll cool off in a while. Better give him a few days eh. And that, that fulla time to get out of there back to his own place." She was staring at me, her face still the same mess of tears, posed like she was ready to take off in an instant.

"Aw come on," I said. "We'll be fine. Hey, I've even got me pay." I hauled out the envelope and yanked out — ten bloody bucks! Ten miserable stinking bucks! Ngaire's face cracked wide. Her laughter came screeching out, the tears went dribbling down her chin again.

"Ho sucker!" She got her words all mixed up in her laughing. "Fat pig sucker!"

"Shut you face," I yelled back at her. "Don't you get smart with me. I'll belt you one."

"Might drop your ten bucks!" she said. Then she said: "Look let's get us down to Aunty Tui's. She'll have us for a few days, she won't mind eh."

So here we are cooling our heels these few days. You know what's really bugging me right now? I've got to wait to get my unemployment benefit on the say-so of that Kingi Taylor's sister-in-law. You know, you got to get your previous employer to say you've stopped working. And that sheila, she's just saying nothing! I tell you, I've had it with that Kingi Taylor and all those. How can you get along with people like that? They're bad news, all right, they're the worst there are, you can believe it.