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Reserved, by Amber Jakeman

“Great writer,” he’d said to her, but her fluoro green marker pen had been almost dry. Preoccupied with her favourite task of the day – creating the menu – it had taken her a while to digest the compliment and look up.

Each day was much like another up here – warm, with a gentle sea breeze, enough sunshine for everyone, and set after set of perfect waves, enticing surfers from all over the world.

Creating the club restaurant's menu board each day was her favourite task, a quiet time when she could just think about the colours and the shape of each letter. All the cleaning from the night before was done, the rubber carpets hosed free of spilt beer and stacked against the railings to dry. The cutlery was back out again on the big table against the side wall, salt and pepper shakers wiped, serviettes stacked high, mugs all out, urn on.

She'd rotated the green pen, finished the line, frowned at it, and decided it would do. It was only as she took up the hot pink pen that she noticed him.

He'd walked on away from her, over to the glass doors – as most people did – to survey the rocks and two beaches, staring right, and left, and then right again, where newcomers always paused.

They'd watch the morning sunshine light up each wave as it rose, higher and higher, then start to trip, fizzing white at its zenith, like some kind of cliché.

The wave did its slow crash and burn – all shine on the inside and white hot, smoking froth as it rolled and broke – all the way north, away from them. The intensity of his gaze out to sea might have been slightly unusual, but his body was not. They all came in here, tall and lean and hungry for protein, with their perfect tans and scorched hair. Black, brown, blond or ginger, they wore their own kinds of crowns, burnished. He was one of the chosen, a son of the god of the surf. *I sizzle thee surfer*, she was thinking, as he suddenly turned and strode back to her table. They walked like animals, these surfers – intention and movement were one: lithe.

He smiled at her, teeth as white as his fresh t-shirt. Well, he'd obviously used that smile before, knew its effect. They usually made passes at her at the end of the evening, bolder with alcohol. This was early, different. Well, she was still immune. She was over all of that. She turned back to her menu board. Four more entries to go.

She wondered vaguely what he'd want. Probably pancakes and bacon. Maybe with three eggs. Was this a three-egg man? Maybe a vegan? They could do vegan. Kale, coconut, avocado. It wasn't difficult. That's what they did. Food and drink, all day, 10am to midnight, every day.

"So, great writer. What should I have?"

"Great writer, huh?" The irony. Was he making fun of her? She did actually want to be a great writer, but there wasn't much time to write when you were serving food and drinks at the surf club – and serving at the surf club was a great job up here, one of the few.

Was he having fun with her? She knew how to have fun.

"How about this one?" She pointed at the blank part of the board.

"Hmmm. Hot pink nothing, huh? Is that what you've got on offer?" Was this fun, or was it something more? Oh well. Made a bit of a change from the usual depth of conversation here, and things were quiet. She could afford to waste a bit of time, have a banter.

"Depends who's asking..."

"Who do you think's asking?" She couldn't place his accent. It kept changing.

“Well, you are, obviously, but I can’t say I know anything about you. Don’t even know if you prefer fluoro green to hot pink, let alone flounder, snapper, perch, barramundi or salmon. Coffee?”

“Sure. I like coffee. Do you like coffee? I’ll have coffee. Will you have coffee?”

Would she have coffee? When? Now? What was this? Was this a pick-up line or just some chit chat? Were they flirting now?

She gestured to her board, still incomplete.

“Oh. I see. You still have work to do. Won’t you stop and make me coffee?”

“In this place, you help yourself to coffee.” She pointed with the marker, over at the side wall. “Milk and sugar are there, too.”

“Sweet. ‘Help myself’, eh?” Was he looking her up and down? “What if I order some breakfast?”

“We’ll serve you the breakfast.”

“Okay. I’d like that one,” he said, pointing at the blank space below the one she’d indicated, “and I’m pouring you a coffee, too, for when you’ve finished your board.”

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Sure enough, he was out there on the deck with two coffees, waiting for breakfast and waiting for her. Well, she’d never had a date quite like this one,

although her cousin, visiting from Melbourne six weeks ago, had shouted her a beer at a corner table on a Monday night, the quiet night, to thank her for letting him use her lounge and doing his washing before heading north again. She didn't even like beer, but it had been a gesture, and good to hear his news and news of the family, news of his travels and plans.

Maybe this guy was doing the same thing. Travelling north. Or south. Maybe he wanted to use her lounge. That wouldn't be unusual – surfers with no money. It was all about the waves, wasn't it?

She finished the board, looked down the stairs. No more customers on the way just yet. No more excuses. She checked with the kitchen and brought out his breakfast, a steaming quiche with the works, bronzed and shiny mushrooms, roast capsicum, and even a sprig of parsley, luminous green against the gold of the eggs in the morning light.

He was leaning back in his chair, watching those sunny waves rise and break, rise and break. She didn't realise he'd even noticed as she slid the plate in front of him, thinking twice about the coffee offer, but just as she was retreating, he deftly grabbed her wrist, gently, like someone keeping a pet away from something harmful, in this case, her work.

“Smoko,” he said. “Isn't that what you Aussies call it? Smoko? Hoe-down? Elevesens? Morning tea? Coffee break? You said you'd have coffee with me, great writer. Come here. Sit with me for a few minutes.”

“But you’ve got no cutlery.” It was a good point. Better than that, it gave her a moment to reconsider escaping. She was feeling shy. Sitting with her cousin had been completely different to sitting with this stranger.

“I want to ‘help myself’,” he said. It sounded serious. Why did everything he said seem to have two meanings?

“You sit and mind my breakfast. I’ll bring the cutlery. Sugar?” She shook her head and they exchanged a smile.

He brought two sets of cutlery and they shared the breakfast. Before he left, she agreed to save the table for him for a very early dinner that afternoon.

As the breakfast rush subsided, she wrote a “reserved” sign for their table in hot pink, in her neatest writing.

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“I want to ‘help myself’,” he said to her as she brought his meal that evening. Again, he grabbed her wrist. Sonny, in the kitchen, was watching her. He wiped his hand on his apron and gave her a nod, so she edged onto the seat beside her customer. She liked it here, beside him. He reached for her hand, then moved his thumb across the top of it before letting it go. She couldn’t remember anyone touching her like that before, like something cherished.

“I’ve got to leave this evening,” he said. “But I’ll be back next week. Tuesday. Probably here Tuesday to Friday, working. Can you take some time off?”

Yes, she could probably take some time off. There was no shortage of people wanting the work.

“I’ll hire a car,” he said. “Get you out of here. We’ll go west, explore the hinterland.”

“Hinterland”? Who used words like that? None of the surfers she knew. Maybe geologists and real estate agents, or tour operators for swanky doctors’ conferences.

“Help ourselves to the hinterland,” she’d said.

“Help ourselves,” he’d nodded.

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Which was how they’d found themselves at the recently restored guest house in the hinterland the following Saturday evening, minds swirling with the vivid green of the mountains and valleys they’d seen. Someone else had written the blackboard menu and was serving the meals, while an ageing crooner sang covers in the corner with a guitar and drum machine, almost drowned out by tropical strength rain on a tin roof.

He’d held her hand as they’d driven under cathedrals of trees on the winding roads, interlacing their fingers as the topmost branches and twigs and leaves had met, gently, inevitably, closer and closer.

Here, sitting together in the bar, he took her hand again under the table. “Red or white?” he asked. “Or beer? What’s this local beer?”

“No beer for me, thanks,” she’d said. “You choose.”

“I don’t know. You chose me a great breakfast. Can I trust you to choose?”

“I don’t usually drink wine.”

“Water. We’ll drink water. We’ll help ourselves to water.” And he rose and filled a jug and brought the tumblers to their table.

She liked that he could be at a pub without having to drink. Usually everyone drank, except her.

She’d only ever gone to bed with another when drunk, as if having a useful excuse for a bad decision made it easier to live with the next morning, or next week, or next month – when what she’d known all along could no longer be ignored – that another relationship was over before it had even begun.

Now, in the soft light of the old pub, hands joined beneath the table, knees bumping, they shared a pizza. She heard about his career; how he’d grown up in the north of New Zealand, only son of a minister and his wife - only child in the community sandpit on Sunday afternoons wearing long pants and a tie; how it was his older sister who had lured him into the surf with a board.

She heard of the other surfers he’d met; how he was never quite good enough to compete, but loved the sound of the waves, the beauty of the beaches; the endless energy of the ocean; and how he’d started taking photographs of the shore, wondering about Noah’s Ark, and Jonah and the whale and even the Loch Ness monster. He’d wanted to wander; to see more of the world.

A competition had come to his stretch of coast, bringing all the big names and sponsors, and he'd seen his chance. With his local knowledge of the cliffs and the dunes and the light, he'd snapped some of the action – got some arty new perspectives, sold his first shots, discovered a way of making a living that combined some of his great loves – surfing, photography and travel.

“You're a great listener,” he told her. “Your turn. Local girl?”

She shook her head. “What. Not a local girl, or not going to share your story?”

There always came this point, where they made a show of wanting to find out about you, but what they really wanted was to go to bed with you. And the more you shared, the more you felt you'd lost when they moved on.

In the end, she'd found it easier to listen, to be happy to give without expecting anything in return – nothing except the comfort of another beautiful body – and the joy of being needed, even for those few moments when they would surrender utterly to what you could offer. They really did seem to mean it at the time, their gratitude, as they lay like spent forces beside you, like a flat sea. But then they would leave you to clean up afterwards while they rushed off back to their truest love – the surf – and some other beach, and the next convenient waitress.

In the soft light, he was still waiting for her to speak, watching her eyes, her lips, and smiling slightly, as if he already knew part of her story.

“Surfers,” she said, as if this was her explanation for silence.

“You still think I'm a surfer,” he said, and kept waiting.

She looked at his hair, the outdoor complexion, the broad shoulders. He was in a white shirt, ironed, collar open, the sleeves rolled up. She could imagine him as a child, in long pants and a tie.

“Boarding school?” she asked.

He nodded. “Christchurch. I was supposed to follow in my father’s footsteps. Made a good show of it. Joined the chapel choir, all that. But ... Come on. It’s your turn. You’re dodging my question. What about you? What are you doing at a beach town if you don’t even like surfers?”

“Followed a surfer of course. Damian McConachie, actually.”

“The Damo. Yeah. Hawaii. Got two cover pages with the Damo. Still in love with the Damo, eh?”

“Me and a hundred others.” She could laugh about it now. “No, not anymore. Got over the Damo, but not before I’d got myself a unit and the job. Well, I finally worked out that chasing him around wasn’t going to stop him finding someone new every week if I wasn’t there. They all move on. Not putting up with that anymore. Not interested.”

“Not interested,” he said, moving his knee away from hers, loosening his fingers and gently taking his hand away. She could still feel his knee and his fingers. They were like ghosts, still there, like a favourite ring you remove; like knowing your mobile phone is missing.

“Not interested,” he repeated, smiling.

Reserved, a short story by [Amber Jakeman](#)

“Definitely; not; interested,” she repeated, smiling back.

“Not even a little bit interested,” he asked, pressing his knee back against hers.

“Not; even,” she smiled, reaching for his fingers and squeezing them.

“Good.”

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