

Summer Snap competition



Laura Hsieh enjoys a soak in a thermal pool at Rotorua's Polynesian Spa in this photo by Kevin McDonald, from nearby Mamuku.



Shawn Scott, of Inglewood, recorded this night shot at New Plymouth's Pukekura Park with his Canon camera during the Festival of Lights.



Isaac Li and Oscar Field take a break to check out the Manawatu River while walking the Gorge Track last month. Photo by Steve Field, of Palmerston North.



Lower Hutt's John Flux converted his Waterloo garden to "no mow" in 2019 and says the increase in insects on flowering weeds has been wonderful. "Native plants will take over soon."

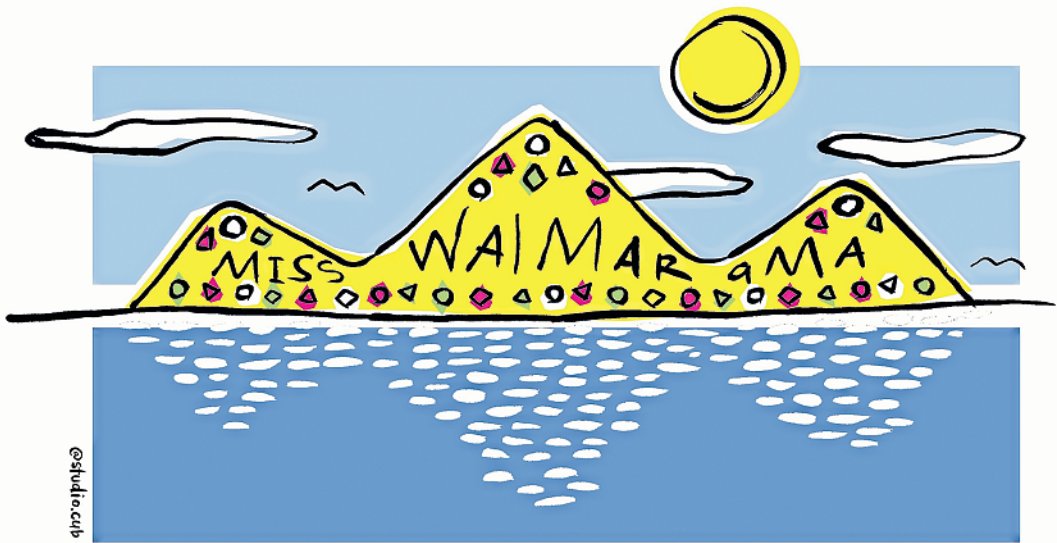


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Laura McMaster snaps Leon the Hungarian vizsla sniffing out the icecream van on Christchurch's North Brighton beach.

ILLUSTRATION: CALEB CARRIE



# Beach babes

For six weeks over summer, we're bringing you new stories from creative writing students at Victoria University's International Institute of Modern Letters. Today's story is by Wellington freelance journalist **Sarah Catherall**. It's from her manuscript called *Bare Island: Stories From The Life Of A Gen-X Woman*, which explores themes of family, religion, relationships, divorce, silence and repression, working life, body image and ageing.

Summer reading

W e're coated in coconut oil, lying on towels at the beach. Bob Dylan's crowing on the tape deck. My stomach grumbles for lunch. I hope I'll burn enough to peel. I want to ask Brigid something but I'm not sure how she will respond. "Do you think we'll hang out when we get back home?"

"Course," she says quickly, lighting a cigarette. She holds the smoke in her fanned fingers, then sticks it between her skinny lips, sucking in deeply. Her eyes shine like paua shells beneath her fringe. "Can you put oil on my back?" she says. We met just a week ago, outside Waimarama camp store when we shared a table and both ate hot chips. She'd told me to come back to her beach house, the one below the two towering Norfolk pines. "Can't miss

them," she said. Tomorrow, my family will pack up and leave the campground. But first, there's a beauty contest. Brigid's brother's girlfriend is entering it. She wants someone to go in it too. Brigid has refused. "I'm short and my legs are too short," she says. She reckons I should have a go. I don't think I'm pretty enough. I don't have her confidence, the way she sticks her chest out and struts as she walks.



Sarah Catherall

"Go on," she says. "Okay," I say, sipping from my Fanta bottle. I'm flattered that my new friend, who is a year older than me and goes to a private school in Havelock North, thinks I might have a chance. The tide is rising, crawling towards us. Bare Island looks far away, as though someone has pushed it out to sea like a boat. Somewhere out there, Brigid's two brothers ride three-metre waves, specks in the sea with other surfers. I smear oil across Brigid's bony shoulders. She's tiny, like a bird. Her skin is thick and firm to touch and never seems to burn. Every morning, she squeezes lemon juice on her hair to help it bleach in the sun. She hitches her black bikini bottoms higher up her rear so I can rub oil on. She doesn't have any cellulite, her bottom firm and perfect. "There he is," she says, nodding, as Brendan walks back and forth along the edge of the sand, ankle deep in frothy water, pretending to ignore us. Pacing the beach with a pack of mates from St John's College, he's so close I can see the Rip Curl logo on his

boards. Last night, while Mum thought I was dreaming on my camp stretcher, I snuck out and met Brigid outside her house. We went to a bonfire and I saw Brendan through swirling smoke, hanging out with another chick. This morning, I wrote in my diary: *LAME NIGHT. Brendan's such a spunk but he didn't notice me. I drank too much Chardonnay. Brigid pashed a guy she didn't know. 2/10.* Brigid helps me get ready for the contest, choosing an orange bikini with a floral pattern from my drawer in the tent. The campground bathroom doesn't have a mirror, so we go back to her house, where she has her own room. She teases my hair with a comb to make it look thicker, then I smear my lips with her strawberry lip gloss. Smacking my sticky lips together, I look in her mirror. I'm okay, I guess, although I wish my nose was shorter. Mark's girlfriend prepares in his bedroom, emerging in a white bikini that shows off her tanned curves. I don't know her name but Brigid's told me she's a school prefect and she's studying in America next year. I feel desperately inadequate. "Come on, let's go," she says, looking me up and down as I throw a sarong around my hips. I feel fat and heavy. We walk to Waimarama domain, where a truck is parked up. It normally carts hay bales into town but today we will apparently parade on it. There are a few dozen people waiting. They must be a few rows thick. A photographer stands near the truck wheel, his camera poised. "Welcome to the Miss Waimarama contest, and what a beautiful day for it," the compere bellows into a loudspeaker. Too nervous to listen, all I know is I'm third up. Mark's girlfriend goes second, behind a beautiful girl with long legs and hips swaying so slowly she seems to make the truck rock. "Number three, Sarah Catherall, aged 15, from Napier," the compere says, mispronouncing my surname. My feet refuse to move. I stand rooted to the spot. Three is my number - third grandchild on both sides, born on the third of July, one of three kids - but I don't think it will bring me luck today. "Go Sarah!" Brigid calls out, followed by a couple of catcalls. The steps are steeper and narrower than I expected. The truck smells of sheep dung mixed with coconut oil. I try not to breathe in. It's hot walking along the back of the truck, the sun baking down, and I try

to sway my hips but I have never walked like that, never learned to flirt or be sexy, and I suspect I just look stupid. Finally, after an inconceivable length of time, I'm beside Mark's girlfriend, who stands with her elbow jutting out on one hip. She reminds me of my youngest sister performing "I'm a little teapot" in our family living room. I suck my stomach in. I only ate a piece of toast for breakfast so I don't bloat. A man whistles from somewhere up the back, a whistle that's old and leathery. I turn slightly, sticking my right hip forward as Mark's girlfriend has done, so the curve of my hip faces the crowd. The photographer moves below us and drops down to one knee, his camera lens pointing up at my breasts and legs like the beady eye of a famished seagull. "We're almost there," the compere calls to the crowd, his back to us. He huddles with the other judges, two male presenters from the local radio station, who whisper behind their microphones. Last year's winner sashays along the truck in a shiny black bikini. She lifts the silk ribbon over her bottle-blond permed hair, then stands as still as a shop mannequin. Miss Waimarama 1984 flashes white teeth at the judges. The man whistles again. *Why am I here?* Miss Waimarama 1984 is right in front of me. Up close, she has thick makeup like cake icing. Slowly, she takes the ribbon and wraps it around my torso. The white silk ribbon slides across my sunburnt skin. I feel dizzy as the compere yells his announcement through the loudspeaker. God, I might fall off the truck. The only prizes I've won in my life have been for spelling and writing, and I really doubt this is what Sister Rose meant when she told us in school assembly that "girls can do anything". Mum claps so loudly I can hear her above everyone else. My youngest sister sucks her thumb and holds Mum's hand. My cheeks turn red. I've frozen. The photographer stands up now, his camera clicking and flashing like a gun. Brendan is a row back from Brigid, staring right at me. As our eyes meet, his fleshy lips unfold into a grin. All that time, I never knew he wore braces. I hold my shoulders back so far they hurt. The compere holds out a firm, hairy hand, squeezes mine, and hands me an envelope. Brigid blows smoke rings and sticks a thumb up. "Hey Miss Waimarama!" she shouts.