

Heat Pump

Tabatha Wood © 2019

It was the hottest summer since 1983, according to a story posted on Stuff, but I didn't need an internet article to report what I already felt. Temperatures up in the high 20's every single day for the past six weeks. The grass peppered with bare patches, crunchy underfoot. Water restrictions in place across the whole of the North Island.

It was a fat, heavy, smothering kind of heat. It had started out joyful and celebratory, but soon gave way to frayed tempers, poor sleep, and a pervasive sense of discontent. I hated the oppressive humidity, loathed the touch of the sun even more. I avoided it as best I could.

I was living alone in a rented house, a short distance outside of the city. A nice, neat little suburb, with a view of the sea in the distance. It had been a great find. Despite harbouring the usual problems of damp and condensation, any issues were offset by the benefits of a mostly decent landlord, friendly neighbours, and a thankfully short bus ride into the city.

It was a far cry from what I had been used to, put up with, and moved away from. It had felt strange at first, living on my own, especially after spending so long always sharing my space with others, yet I thoroughly enjoyed my newfound freedom. I was young, newly single — so long, Jason — and I had an exciting job doing what I loved. Best of all, I was getting paid good money to do it.

All the t's had been crossed, all the dots placed on the i's. To the surprise of almost everyone, perhaps even myself, I'd aced both my interviews, packed up my meagre belongings, and kissed my few family and friends goodbye. In the city, however, not everything had been quite so straightforward. The office building where I was to work had been closed off unexpectedly. It was yellow-stickered, and scheduled for possible demolition.

"Earthquake damage," my boss had told me. "Absolutely no-one is allowed inside until it's sorted. But don't worry, there are plenty of shared spaces you can use in the city. Or we can set you up to work from home."

They'd given me a laptop, a rucksack, some company 'swag', and a list of apparently great places I could go. The shared spaces weren't bad, but they were too fraught with noise and smells for me to be productive. I'd never found it easy to work among others; I always craved the silence that solitude brought, and the subsequent improvement to my focus. Even with my headphones clamped tight around my ears, the insipid tweet and buzz of busywork and meaningless small-talk always filtered through.

I didn't want to make conversation, too nervous and unsure of myself to be sociable. There were too many emotional triggers which I found challenging to ignore. At first I went to the city library to escape and find some peace, but even there I'd find myself too easily distracted. I'd told my boss that I would work from home until the new offices were completed, grateful for some quiet at last.

I found myself one Wednesday morning — after fighting to open windows which had been perplexingly painted shut — with an AC unit that would do nothing but belch out hot, stagnant air, and a putrid smell of used socks. It wasn't a real AC of course, merely a commonplace heat pump with a cold air function.

The house was stifling. I opened both doors, and as many windows as I could. My skin was slick and shiny with sweat, clad in only a singlet and shorts. My hair, frizzy and difficult at the best of times, was an untameable mess.

Even worse, the heat pump now refused to turn off. Unless I isolated it on the switchboard, and effectively cut the umbilical, nothing would stop its relentless purge. I'd read through the manual, checked all the settings, even reset the electrics at my landlord's suggestion, all to no avail. I called him again later that morning, asking him to help.

"I'll send someone round," he'd assured me. "They'll sort it out. Can you leave them a key to get in?"

I'd told him I would be present, working from home as I was, and he promised to let me know when to expect someone. I received a text a little later. Someone from Sparky Bloke Electrics would pop round that afternoon, exact time unknown.

I spent most of the afternoon working as best as I could and yet feeling slightly on edge. I hate waiting for visitors. Even more so when I don't know exactly when to expect them. It's always been one of those few things that give me inexplicable anxiety. I worry that I might miss the knock at the door, and I'm always unsure how to talk to and act around strangers. The anticipation of inviting someone I don't know into my house makes my skin crawl. Stupid really.

At almost three o'clock a booming thump on the front door signalled the arrival of Sparky Bloke, or at least one of their designated employees.

"G'day, darling," he drawled in greeting, looking me up and down. He leaned his shoulder against the door frame, one hand on his hip, the other on an oversized tool bag. He sported a worn and tattered grey T-shirt emblazoned with the company logo, matching shorts with frayed hems, and an apparently intentional dirty-blonde mullet. I shook the hand he held out for me — surprisingly very clean.

"I'm Vinnie. For the heat pump."

I nodded and introduced myself, and beckoned for him to follow me into the front room.

"The switchboard is in the hall there," I told him, gesturing. "And the heat pump is over here."

He grunted a reply and set his tool bag down on the floor. He stared up at the unit mounted on the wall, both hands on his hips.

"Bloody hot one today," he remarked. "Any chance of a drink of water?"

It was a simple enough question, but somehow he managed to make it sound like a demand. As if he was used to having women wait on him, to bow to his every whim. I nodded and went into the kitchen to fetch his water, leaving him to continue doing nothing. When I returned, he'd flipped the fuse switch on the circuit board and the heat pump had hummed into life.

"You know it wasn't turned on, right?" he asked me with a smirk. "Won't work without electricity."

He took the glass from my hands.

Watched me.

I stared back at him, trying as hard as I could to keep my expression blank despite the ire I felt.

"I know. I had to turn the electric off to make it stop. It just keeps throwing out heat otherwise."

"And did you make sure you set it to 'cool'?"

I took a breath before replying.

"Yes. I went through the manual and checked everything I could. I even reset the master switch outside, but it still just heats up. And it smells strange."

"Smells?"

“Like sweaty socks or something.”

He sniffed and scratched the back of his neck. Looked bored.

“Yeah, that happens sometimes. Wouldn’t worry about it.”

“But it makes the house smell awful. It’s almost worse than the constant heat.”

“Well, you can just keep the windows open. Burn some of those scented candle things or whatever it is you girls always seem to have around the place. It usually goes away. Heat pumps are useless for cooling the air anyway, you might as well just leave it off.”

You girls.

I was fighting the urge to pull him up on that, to question what he meant by it, but I knew this wasn’t the time or the place. Better to go along with it and swallow the words that rose like bile in my throat. Words that had got me into so much trouble with men like him in the past. I wanted him to do the job and get out of my house as soon as possible.

Still, I also wanted to say something. Show him I wasn’t merely a child he could brush off or belittle. That I was both competent and intelligent. Likely even more so than him.

“I read on the internet that it can be a sign of decaying organic materials, stuck inside the heat pump. Is that...”

He held up a hand to cut me off, and waved it dismissively.

“Yeah, nah. That’s hardly ever the case. UV light, you know, regular sunlight, it kills off most of that stuff. You just need to get right up there with the vacuum cleaner when you’re doing the housework, clear out the filter regularly.”

He turned his back to me then and took a long gulp of his water, draining almost half the glass in one go.

I knew his type, well versed in the kind of ‘bloke’ he was. I’d been surrounded by hundreds of them in Hicksville. I expected them in the Back Of Beyond, but I thought there would be less of them in the city. All he was missing was a flannel shirt and grubby snapback, a cigarette stub dangling from his dirt lip. People like him were one of the many reasons I had moved. That, and all the trouble with Jason. I’d grown sick of the torch-and-pitchfork crowd, those who took one look at me and judged me in an instant. I’d craved freedom and the ability to be anonymous, lost among the throng of the city. I’d needed a change.

In hindsight, I knew that I’d got more than I expected.

I took another deep breath.

“So, can you at least stop it from pumping out hot air right now, or get it to turn off properly?”

He sighed and scratched his neck again. I saw the thick vein at the side twitch and dance as his fingers moved. I felt my nostrils flare involuntarily.

“Well, I’m not strictly a heat pump guy, you know? I just do electrics. And, clearly it’s working, so...” He shrugged.

“My landlord called your company, surely he explained the problem?”

He sucked his teeth, screwed up his face.

“Well, yeah, sort of. I think he thought it was just a fuse or something. Or you’d not been using it right. ”

He turned and looked around the room, no doubt taking in the scarcity and lack of furniture. A few books and DVDs were piled on the floor. A sofa and chair had come with the house and had seen better days. My laptop and headphones rested on the only flat surface in the room, a cheap vinyl camping table from The Warehouse with a matching black chair.

“You’ve not been here long then?”

I shrugged.

“Living on your own?” he pressed.

I wasn’t about to answer that.

“I see a lot of girls like you, in my job. Not many of them as pretty as you though, eh? I always tell them the same thing. Living alone, it’s not a great idea, you know? Everyone says it’s a good country, and there’s so little crime, but women on their own... Yeah, nah. You need a good, strong man around, to help out. To do the heavy lifting for you. Someone to keep you safe.”

He winked at me then, and I felt sick.

“Are you going to be able to fix it?” I asked quickly, yet also as politely as I could manage.

He stood still for a moment, looking at me slowly, his gaze wandering across the whole of me, settling somewhere south of my face. He sniffed thoughtfully and looked up to meet my eyes, before draining his glass and replying.

“Yeah. I can take a look. For you.”

His words made my stomach drop. Old and unwelcome feelings came rushing over me. A sudden surge of blood and sweat.

I knew right then I should tell him to leave. I should get him out of the house. But I didn’t. I don’t even know what stopped me. Maybe a small part of me was still naive, still wanted to believe only the best in people. He was simply here to do a job, I reminded myself. Just let him get on with it and go.

He handed me his empty glass, his fingertips brushing mine as I took it. An involuntary and uncomfortable shiver traced its finger down my spine. The thick pulse of adrenaline beat in my head. I rushed to the kitchen, placed the glass on the worktop and breathed as deeply and as slowly as I could, trying to regain control. I could hear his footsteps behind me, a heavy yet unhurried tread.

“You alright?” he asked me. There was perhaps a tinge of concern in his voice. Mixed with some cruel amusement. I didn’t want to look at him. I could hear his smirk without seeing it. Jason had been exactly the same.

I knew what he was doing. I’d been through this before. He was playing the role of a hunter, no doubt imagining I was his prey. We were both simply acting out our parts, dancing towards the inevitable end. The climax he’d wanted from the start.

“I’m fine, thank you. Just a little thirsty. Please, just do what you need to do. With the heat pump.”

I could sense him behind me still, waiting in the doorway, only a few steps away. I willed him to move, to go back into the front room and leave me alone, but he stayed there, watching me. I could hear him breathing, the pace a little quicker, a little heavier than before.

I tried to keep my voice calm, my tone measured.

“Just go back into the front room, please. I’ll only be a moment.”

He moved closer.

“Are you feeling a bit crook, darling?”

“I’m fine, honestly. Just give me a minute.”

I felt his hand on my shoulder; those surprisingly clean hands, at odds with the rest of his nasty, grubby self. Every part of me ached with a nameless hunger.

I turned.

I shouted.

He saw the change in my face.

“It’s not safe!”

I registered his shock and fear as I lunged towards him. I couldn’t stop myself any longer. The heat, the smell, the rage built up in me. All the power I struggled to hold inside broke loose.

He was just another small-town bloke with an equally small mindset. Just like Jason, may he rest in his eternal damnation. Spouting small-world ideas as if they were something bigger, as if he were someone important. Assuming he could control me.

These foolish men never seemed to realise that I was not as weak and powerless as they thought. My experiences had changed me, in so many ways. Despite all my irrational anxieties, my self-doubt and insecurity, I also knew I held a great strength within me. All I had to do was let it free.

I'd survived against the odds, doing whatever was demanded of me to do so. Everything and anything it took. Those not like me only saw what they wanted to see. They never truly knew me, or what I could do to them. I'd stayed in the shadows for so long, hidden in the small towns and truck-stops, keeping out of the sun and the heat. Now it was time to taste the big city. To take a bite out of the bigger boys.

He tasted hot and sweet, like musk and copper. I drank him swiftly, drained him like the glass of water he'd asked me for.

He was right, it's not safe, a woman such as myself allowing a man into my house alone. Definitely not safe.

Later on, I saw the flecks of blood and flesh I'd missed while cleaning up, nestled in the open flaps of the heat pump. Decaying organic materials.

Yes, that would most certainly cause it to smell.