

told with increasing confidence, economical use of words and images and a sense of place.

Some of the writers are new but others have already begun building a place for themselves in New Zealand literature.

3.15

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Matilda always attracted the worst sort of workmate: the troublemakers, the lazy, the arrogant know-alls and the incompetent. It didn't bother her too much, not usually. It was only a matter of time until they moved on. Matilda could wait; everyone moved on eventually. In the meantime, she knew how to deal with difficult colleagues: keep your own counsel, put your head down and choose your battles. It wasn't easy, but it was bearable. Bearable, that was, until the New Girl started.

Matilda was making a cup of tea in the kitchen. It was 3.15—the perfect time for an afternoon break. Not too far from lunch, not too close to home time. Morning tea was best had at 10.30, ideally when the others were getting takeaway coffees from down the road. What a waste of money that was, buying coffee every day. Matilda wouldn't want to join them, even if they did ask her one day. She'd much rather be at the office, thank

you very much. It was a terrible shame they didn't all leave the building at 3.10 as well, leaving Matilda to enjoy her hot brew in peace. She dabbed the tip of her little finger into the hot liquid. Perfect. Matilda gripped the handle and lifted the mug toward her mouth.

'I can't believe Matilda did that.'

Matilda frowned. Someone should really tell the New Girl that conversations carry between rooms. She dropped her hand before her mug could reach her lips, moment ruined.

The New Girl continued, 'She's been scowling at me all morning. I am, like, so totally sick of it.'

'I wouldn't worry about it,' a voice said.

Matilda recognised the voice: Samson from Legal. Samson, who had rearranged the name plates at the work Christmas party to make sure he didn't have to sit beside Matilda.

'Matilda's just a sourpuss. Don't take it personally.'

Matilda felt cold. She wished she had her merino cardigan; she wouldn't be shivering if she'd worn it. She thought about how comforting it felt to wrap herself in the cardigan; how its familiar folds fell around her body, as if it had been handmade with her many curves in mind. She placed her hands around the mug, willing it to warm her up. She shouldn't be so cold, not in January. Maybe she shouldn't have left her cardigan where she had?

The New Girl scoffed, 'How can I not take it personally? You have to admit she's awful. Just because she's been here forever doesn't excuse how awful she is. It's awful working with her.'

Awful. Did the New Girl have to repeat that word so often? Matilda watched her tea slosh around inside her cup and cursed her useless, shaking hands. She placed the cup down on

the bench and busied herself with unloading the dishwasher. If Matilda hadn't felt so quivery she would have smiled about the New Girl's limited vocabulary. 'Awful' was such a boring word. Hadn't the New Girl heard of synonyms? At least Lazy Larry, the New Girl's predecessor, had the linguistic versatility to call Matilda a 'bartered, miserly old crone'.

'I wouldn't worry about it,' Samson said. 'Every workplace has someone like that; Matilda just happens to be ours. She'll retire one day, and then we can all throw a massive party.'

'That would be epic,' the New Girl said.

Samson laughed, 'Totally. We could celebrate not having to hear about her lost cardigan. Can you believe she emailed the whole floor about it?'

'I know,' the New Girl said. 'If she didn't give me the evil eye all the time, I'd tell her, like, just go to the shop and buy another cardigan, you sad old woman.'

'Totally,' Samson said.

'Well, I'm going to do something about her,' the New Girl said. 'She's just awful.'

Samson laughed again, 'Good luck.'

Matilda felt dizzy. Name plates aside, she'd thought Samson was one of the good ones. Matilda stepped away from the dishwasher and steadied herself against the bench. Breathe in, breathe out. Breathe in again, breathe out again. Keep unloading the dishwasher, one item at a time.

Matilda dropped a cup. It fell slowly, bounced off the open dishwasher door, and shattered on the shiny linoleum. Pink and white polka-dot shards of enamel littered the floor; the final remnants of a mug Matilda last saw in the New Girl's hand.

Matilda closed her eyes and took a deep breath. Now the New Girl really would think she was awful.

The New Girl's voice was shrill from the next room, 'What was that sound?'

'I think it came from the kitchen,' Samson said.

Matilda shook herself and opened her eyes. She needed to find a brush and shovel to clean up the mess. Quickly, before anyone saw and thought Matilda had done it on purpose. It would be like Lazy Larry's favourite plate all over again: the glares, the whispers, the conversations held in the room beside the kitchen where noise carried. Matilda eased down onto her knees, opened the cupboard door and reached inside. Rummaging around in the cupboard under the sink would be so much easier if her hands would stop shaking.

Footsteps echoed around the kitchen; the New Girl towered over Matilda, hands on hips.

'Matilda, how could you? It was, like, my special cup!'

Matilda pulled herself to stand, forced to look the New Girl in the eye. Matilda hadn't noticed how blue the New Girl's eyes were before, how piercing their glare. Samson stood behind the New Girl, eyes wide.

'Sorry,' Matilda said.

'Sorry won't bring my cup back,' the New Girl said. 'I got that cup from my Nan after she died. It was her favourite.' The New Girl sniffed, 'It bought me good luck.'

Matilda studied her feet, contemplating the New Girl's grammatical error. *Brought.*

Luck was brought, not bought. Luck isn't purchased; if it were, Matilda would have a much happier life. Besides, if the

pink polka dot mug was so special, why on earth had the New Girl kept it at work?

'What?' The New Girl said.

Matilda pinched the bridge of her nose. She'd spoken her thoughts out loud again, hadn't she? She sighed. In for a penny, in for a pound.

'Brought,' Matilda said. 'Not bought. You don't buy luck.'

The New Girl turned pink, 'What are you talking about?'

'Your conjugation of the verb "to buy" when you ought to have used the past tense of the verb "to bring." You said the wrong thing.'

The New Girl opened her mouth and then closed it again, before spinning on her heels and stomping out of the room.

'Aaargh!' Matilda could hear the echo from down the hallway.

Then a second time, even louder, 'AAARRGH!'

Matilda looked at the time, 3.05—only ten minutes until her afternoon cup of tea. As she watched, the time changed, 3.06. Matilda smiled. Only nine minutes to go. She only needed to work for nine more minutes before her break. Random, unconnected words drifted over from the cubicle where Samson and the New Girl sat: drinks, rugby, sourpuss, cardigan.

She snapped her head toward the sound. There it was again: Old Sourpuss; Cardigan. Matilda inhaled sharply. Had someone found her cardigan? It had been weeks—she'd given up all hope that it might be found.

A colleague Matilda barely knew stood beside the New Girl's computer. What was his name again? She thought it was a palindrome. Bob? That was it. His name was Bob.

'Lexi, isn't that the cardigan Matilda lost?' Bob said to the New Girl.

'Where? What?' the New Girl said, 'Why would I, like, have Matilda's cardigan?'

'You do,' Bob said, rummaging around behind a large pot plant that sat beside the New Girl's desk. 'Here, sticking out behind the pot. I recognise it from the photos Matilda put on the intranet.'

'It's Matilda's cardigan,' Samson said. 'I'd recognise it anywhere. What's it doing behind there?'

Bob pulled the cardigan out from behind the plant and recoiled.

'Ew.' He wrinkled his nose, 'It smells like poo. That's disgusting.'

Samson turned to the New Girl and raised his eyebrows.

'Why is Matilda's cardigan behind your plant, smelling like poo?'

'I have no idea,' the New Girl said. 'Matilda's a crazy old bat, maybe she put it there herself.'

'Why would she do that?' Bob said.

'Maybe, because she's, like, crazy?' The New Girl whirled her finger in a circle beside her head. 'C.R.A.Z.Y. Crazy.'

Bob frowned, 'But why was her cardigan behind your plant?'

Matilda rose to her feet. She longed to take the cardigan from Bob's hands and hurry to the dry cleaner; then she could erase the smell. Her poor cardigan. She'd missed it.

Matilda sighed and sunk back down. She would retrieve it later—the New Girl looked too cross right now. It would be like walking into an ambush. Everyone within a five-metre radius was looking up from their screens; they might all laugh at her. Besides, there probably wasn't time.

Matilda looked at the bottom right-hand corner of her computer screen, 3.14. Finally. It was time for her afternoon cup of tea. She would have her cup first. The hot tea in her belly

would protect against the wrath of the New Girl, and then she would be reunited with her lovely, warm cardigan. After, everything would be OK.

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Matilda looked at her watch, 3.05. Only ten more minutes until her afternoon cup of tea. She tried to focus on the screen in front of her, but couldn't help but sneak glances at the New Girl packing up her belongings. Matilda's mouth twitched as she heard the whispers: bullying, wilful destruction of property, unprofessional name-calling. Picking on poor Matilda.

'I'll see you later,' the New Girl said to Samson. 'Let's, like, catch up for a drink soon.'

'Maybe,' Samson said.

'I might be busy,' Bob said.

Matilda wrapped her cardigan around her body and watched as the New Girl teetered toward the elevators, box in hand. Matilda stroked her sleeve.

'I missed you, old friend,' she thought. 'I'm pleased to have you back.'

In the distance, the New Girl stepped out of Matilda's line of sight. Should Matilda have said goodbye? Probably, but she didn't want to. No-one would hold it against her, though. Especially given what had happened.

Matilda looked at the time, 3.15. At last, time for a cup of tea. As Matilda rose from her desk, she glanced at Samson sitting at his desk shuffling papers. She frowned, remembering what Samson had called her: sourpuss. What a hurtful thing to overhear; maybe he should be next?

Matilda's brow furrowed as she placed a tea bag in her mug. Yes, Samson should be next. Calling Matilda a sourpuss was unkind. Besides, Samson was more likely to get a promotion than Matilda, just as the New Girl had been. Matilda stirred her tea, and thought about how to do it this time. She'd learnt a lesson from the New Girl: don't use your favourite clothes in a set up, and don't hide things too well.

Matilda moved her cardigan to the plant while everyone was getting their morning coffee. Perfectly nestled away it languished, went unnoticed under the New Girl's desk for far too long. At least things had worked out in the end. The New Girl, Lexi was easy to get the better of: too hot-headed, too attached to that ridiculous mug, too loud and self-absorbed. Besides, who would be so stupid to call a colleague crazy while standing in the middle of an open plan office? Crazy, indeed. Once you start throwing names like that around, people tend to forget about the little things poor old Matilda might have done to deliberately aggravate you. Instead, they begin to worry about personal grievances and taking a stand against bullying. Complain about Matilda breaking your mug to too many people, and they forget the cardigan went missing before it had been broken; the mug that neither brought nor brought good luck.

Tears pricked the back of Matilda's eyes. She thought Samson had respected her, but he was just like the others. No-one understood her. No-one; she couldn't rely on anybody.

Matilda drank her tea, savouring its warmth as a plan began to formulate in her mind. It was such a shame that Matilda always attracted the worst sort of workmate: the troublemakers, the

lazy, the arrogant know-alls and the incompetent. Matilda knew how to deal with difficult colleagues: keep your own counsel, put your head down, work hard and choose your battles. It could be worse. After all, everyone moves on eventually.