

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Kim McKee is a wahine Māori (Māori woman). She is a mother, a young grandmother, sister, friend, partner and survivor. She has had early and deep familial links with a number of New Zealand gangs, which have informed her views on life and relationships. Due to strength of character, lived experience, and the qualities that have emerged in and outside of the prison, she is a leader. Kim did her first lag in an Australian prison as a teenager. On returning to New Zealand, she has done a number of lags from relatively short to ones over a number of years. Like many people inside, she is more likely to count the time that she is out of prison, rather than the time that she is in. She is coming up to five years of being out of prison, which is one of the longest stints since her first sentence of incarceration. In this piece, she writes about what the first day out can feel like. As someone who has had a number of first days out, she wonders what changes would need to be made to ensure that everyone who is incarcerated could, with real confidence, have a last day in.

ARTICLE

She gets released one year later. Walks to the Receiving Office. Happiest day of her life. Walks through to reception only to see that she does not have anyone out front to pick her up. She is sad but has a staunch mask on. She has been wearing it all year. Inside she is shattered, gutted, heartbroken. She takes a deep breath, sucks it up and walks towards the township. Cashes in her “Steps to Freedom” – \$350 buys her babies a gift at the 2-dollar shop, along with a packet of smokes and lighter. She is smiling now, feeling a lot better. Jumps into the next bus heading for home.

She sees the grass has not been cut for weeks. Kids could have hid in it. No one home. Has a stroll through the house, gate fever coming on strong and she is freaking out. She heads towards the kitchen and sees dishes stacked up with Weetbix and egg all dried and crusty. Opens the cupboard under the sink to get the dishwashing liquid and there is nothing but empty bottles. She walks to the bathroom. Empty shampoo bottles and a crusty old soap bar she thinks she bought over a year ago – it is down to the core. She sees mold in her bath, a dirt ring and it smells like piss. She feels like

yelling, but she is also used to dirty showers from jail, filled with girls' hair and old soap left in cells. She remembers she is not in jail and snaps back.

She walks into the laundry room, still thinking how white her bathtub used to be. She is hoping there is Jiff or Adaway in there, especially Adaway. It has been her favourite for a year and her bath could do with the strong stuff. She pushes open the door to the laundry and the washing machine is gone – 5kg capacity, gone. She is wondering if it is broken down – why? It looks like every piece of clothes her kids have ever owned is in the laundry room. There is fluffy mold growing all over the black rubbish bags with clothes falling out the sides of them. It stinks and she notices a mouse running from the rotting rubbish bag in the corner. It sprints fast under her legs, and she jumps. That is something she has not seen in a long time. She has an urge to catch it just to have some company.

She sees that she has got no Adaway or Jiff, so she goes to check her lounge room and hopes all the kids' photos are still safe on the wall. She saw her kids ten months ago and never got any photos sent in from anyone. She starts thinking they must be so much bigger and smiles sadly. Good, photos are still there. She goes in and decides she wants to turn on the TV. TV is gone. There is just a broken radio left. She had a better one in her cell. The tape is a bit broken off on the front and she pictured where the radio sat in her cell. She goes to turn on the radio and there is no power.

She is trying so hard to compose herself. Blaming herself for going to prison, she should have been here for her family. Tears start rolling down her face. Then she hears a little noise. It is coming from one of the kids' rooms. She creeps in, brushes the door open, and a cat jumps towards her. She just about shits her pants and notices there is a broken window on the top of the frame. She shakes her head and the words come to her mind. Thinking out loud she says, "piece of shit!", then cackles to herself "loser" – she goes to the phone, picks it up to ring the drunken grandmother who is grumpy even when she is happy. Phone is disconnected.

She starts to remember back to when the house was like the "little house on the prairie". Watery, her eyes start filling and she just thought about killing him off. She goes to her bedroom to get out of the clothes she got released in. Tight and small coz she has put on weight. As she walks into the room, she notices a string type thing on the floor. It is bright pink and she thinks, "I never had pink hair ties", but then realizes it is another woman's G-String. She saw a few of them in jail when the girls sat down on the

steps and their pants were down – their G-Strings sticking out. She was getting flashbacks of the women, the unit, the interactions. Then she sees her clothes have been raided, knickers and bras gone. She starts thinking of the time when she had a fight inside because someone accused her of taking a bra. She is laughing to herself cause the amount of undies and bras that are missing from her drawer now would have resulted in a homicide compared to that one missing bra inside.

She sits down on the bed, tilts her head back. No power, phone, cleaning products, food or TV. Washing machine gone. Only mice and rotten stinking rubbish. She feels like a pee and walks to the toilet. When she pushes open the toilet door, before she even sees the toilet paper holder, she spots yellow pages and knows instantly there is no toilet paper left. She wishes she had the sandpaper type of toilet paper you get every time you hand in your empty roll inside. She starts wishing she was back inside but then she remembers her babies, who she loves and adores, crying at court. She heard them all the way from the courthouse down the stairway to her holding cell on sentencing day and how her heart was aching with the security guard holding onto her arm escorting her away.

She walks out of the bedroom, walks around the house and sees a can of petrol sitting next to the lawnmower rusted now like it has been in the rain for months. About 50 rubbish bags leaning up against the house, along with mice and rat shit. She tries to picture the kids playing in the garden in a state like this and wonders if CYFS (Child, Youth and Family Services) have her babies.

She feels like pouring the petrol throughout the house and lighting it. She starts walking towards town, waves down a taxi and jumps in. He drives her through the town centre past all the streets she used to walk the kids down on their way to school. It is lunchtime and the kids are heading back into their classrooms. She is passing her son's school and looks for him in case she spots him. She thinks, "nah!", he can't be there, the father has let their kid's home go like that, run down, mice-infested, disgusting and manages to send them to school? She shakes her head, "hell no!"

The driver asks her, "how's your day?" Indian dude with a turban. Reminds her of an officer, Mr. Singh. Strict officer, quiet, but likes to dance occasionally. She had a two second thought that this guy's the first person she's spoken to since she left jail this morning. She is really not in a talkative mood and feels disrespected, but wonders if she said, "I just got out of jail

this morning”, would he still want to talk to her then? Probably not. She smiles slightly.

They pull into the car park, and she spots her once decent car with a large ding in the front. It is just after lunch and the stereo is playing loud as the pokie machines are going full tilt. She pops her head in and spots her so-called supportive husband, drunk off his nut, kissing a girl on the side of the face. As the girl walks to the bar, she watches her husband grab her ass and assumes they must have been seeing each other for a little while – they look like a couple. People are staring at her walking towards the loser and she taps him on the shoulder. He spins around and does not notice her straight away, looks away and then looks back. The girl comes back – she looks the wife up and down, and asks, “who the fuck is this?” She puts down the full glasses and stares at wifey, and says, “yeah, can we help you?” She does not say anything to the girl, turns and says to her loser husband: “keys – house and car”. The girl pipes up again and says to the wife, “bitch, fuck off”. The husband hits the girl so hard she falls off the stool onto the floor. As she falls, the wife spots a few bruises on her arms and legs, and notices under the makeup on her face that she has a faded black eye. He hands his wife the keys. She smiles and walks out of the pub. He looks down at the girl crying and watches his wife walk away. She could hear him yelling at the new missus, “that was my wife you stupid cow”. She wonders why she stayed with him and thinks she would never have tolerated that shit. She would have been in jail for murder.

She starts her car up and heads to his mother’s. She pulls up the driveway and she sees her kids. They are loved and have been looked after. Mother-in-law comes over and says, “hi”. Mother-in-law starts to tell her that she has had the kids since she went in. She is holding her babies, kissing them and gives them their toys – cuddling them with tears falling down her face. She tells her kids she will be back to pick them up and she leaves.

She goes to the supermarket, buys cleaning products, rents a bin and throws in all the house rubbish. Starts the rusty lawnmower and mows the jungle lawn. Throws all the bedding, clothes, and all the shit in the house out. Steps back, looks at what she has done and imagines her kids running around. She smiles and knows this is a start to a new beginning.