

Raiment

Also by Jan Kemp

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Raiment

A Memoir

Jan Kemp



MASSEY UNIVERSITY PRESS

In memory of my parents,
who gave me life.

Joan Anne Kemp, née Hooton, 1920–2001

Morice Harold Kemp, 1905–1988

‘And why take ye thought for raiment? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they toil not, neither do they spin; And yet I say unto you that Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these.’

— MATTHEW 6:28–29

Author's note

The names of many friends, family members, public figures and teachers who appear in this book have been retained, but some names have been changed or abbreviated for reasons of privacy.

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1.

Before I can remember, I am born on 12 March 1949 in the maternity ward at Campbell Johnstone Hospital in Claudelands, Hamilton. My mother Joan is almost twenty-nine, and my father Morice in his forty-fourth year. A few months later I'm flown to Christchurch with Joan for an operation to stitch my split upper lip. Luckily, I don't have a cleft palate, which would have made speech difficult.

I'm baptised on 13 August by Harald Heaslip, the vicar at St Aidan's Church in Claudelands, with Mum's best friend Wendy, her husband Jackson Madill, and Betty Turbott, another close friend of Joan's, becoming my godparents. Dorothy and Arthur Hooton, my maternal grandparents, and my eighteen-months-older brother Peter, as well as Garth Turbott are also present at my baptism. Betty must have taken the photos afterwards in the front garden of the Kemp house in Bains Avenue, Claudelands.

A year later my father is offered a job in Morrinsville. There the family settles into a large bungalow on a quarter-acre section with an orchard at 21 Alexandra Avenue.

I can see the dark panelling of the drawing room, the paisley-patterned carpet, hear my parents' voices outside as Pete and I run to the front door behind Nanny, who opens it. *Can we see Iwi, can we see Iwi?* we chant as our mother steps in through the door usually used only for visitors. She's cradling an armful. Our father follows, carrying her little brown suitcase. He's smiling too. She bends down, lowering the bundle, and she shows us our new brother, and we hold his finger and say *Hello Iwi*. He smells like warm milk. He has blond fluff on his head and huge blue eyes. We love him instantly.

Now there are three of us. Peter is nearly five and a half. I, Janet, am four years and two months, and Iwi (we cannot pronounce Ian) was born today. It is 8 May 1953. We don't know that Queen Elizabeth II is about to be crowned. We don't know that Iwi was born on the eighth anniversary of VE Day, or that *iwi* means bone, nation, strength.

Pete takes me to my first day at kindy on his red scooter. I stand behind, holding him round the waist with one hand, and he stands on his right leg, holding the stick handlebars, and scoots with his left foot. In my other hand I hold the leather strap of a little square tin box containing my lunch and playlunch. We come to a stop by a

big tree outside the Anglican church hall, and in I go.

Pete is my best friend. He can suddenly waft away from you like a puff of dandelion and you know he's gone inside his own thoughts. So, you just say *Pete!* and he's back. He always has ideas about what we can do. Once Mum was telling us off when we'd been naughty and he said, *Come on Jan, let's go.* So, we went. Mum was just left there. It was rude of us, but she laughed later and said not to tease her. Another time, to show her how much she talked when her friends were there, he took away his milk glass when she wasn't looking at it but at the friend she was talking to. She poured milk all over the tablecloth before she even noticed. She was a bit cross with him. But he told me when she came to give him his goodnight kiss he'd say to her, *Closer, closer* and she'd put her face so close their noses were touching. So, I know he really loves her.

And now we also have Iwi, who toddles round after us or sometimes just does things of his very own like spinning the wheel of the upturned pushchair or running to the back-garden tap to pretend to turn it on and grinning at us. Dad doesn't like us to leave the tap running. We must turn it off if we've used it. Just as we must put back his little nail scissors on the top of his tallboy next to his wooden hanky box with the little plaque on it. He doesn't mind if we use the nail scissors. He just likes them to be put back where they're supposed to be. Mum says, *He likes to be orderly.*

Our house is large and friendly, and looking in front of it towards the street there is a lawn big enough to play tennis and cricket on, and on the left-hand side, on the side next to the Harts, a stand of natives — a tōtara, a rimu, a kauri and a kōwhai — beside the honeysuckle hedge, and on the other a cracked path and the driveway and a lower hedge to the other neighbour, who we hardly ever see, and beyond them the Normans, our friends, Dr Jim in his brown suede shoes with doctor's rubber soles who was there when Mum gave birth to Iwi, his wife Betty with her jewellery, lipstick and bright red fingernails, and their fair-haired children Anthony and Sue. When Dr Jim walks, he slides past like a hovercraft over the shiny hospital floors and the nurses don't know he's coming. That's why his shoes are called *Hush Puppies*. He calls me *Janet Panet*.

Behind the house is the garage, then a space, then our washhouse-cum-tool shed with wooden slat gates and a fence on either side, and behind them is the orchard where the fruit trees are — an enormous plum tree that is lovely to climb, a Golden Queen, apple trees, a quince tree, some ordinary peach trees and a walnut tree — with a great high lawsoniana tree hedge all along the back that stops at the honeysuckle hedge that comes right up from the front, with patches of small lawsoniana underneath it.

Behind the huge apple tree there's a disused henhouse that we turn into a hut and wallpaper with the leftover green-white bobbly-surfaced wallpaper from doing up the boys' room, an asparagus bed, a vegetable garden and, at

one side between the washhouse and the garage, a sandpit under an ordinary peach tree, one of whose branches comes out and goes slightly up.

I turn the branch into a horse and call it Brownie. I make it a saddle out of felt and some stirrups out of bind-a-twine I always get tangled up in, as well as a bridle and reins. I use Dad's little wooden box to jump up from, reminding myself to put it back in the workshop afterwards, or I just heave myself up, over the branch, into the saddle and ride and ride, talking and singing to Brownie and patting the branch to encourage it. Occasionally I glance backwards to see my mother waving from where she's cooking by the kitchen window, and I wave back. Underneath me is the sandpit and next to that is the asparagus bed.

And though he didn't mean to, that's where one Guy Fawkes night Iwi set off Pete's whole box of fireworks all at once with a sparkler. A rocket shot off between Mum's legs as she was coming in through the orchard gate. Jumping Jacks and Golden Rains started firing off into the asparagus, and Catherine Wheels whirled on the grass. Pete had saved up his pocket money for weeks to buy it all. At least one or two Golden Rains were left which we did manage to see shooting off their sparks. Pete and Dad had already nailed them to a fence post near where the guy was waiting on the bonfire to be burned.

All day in the hot sun we'd trudge around Morrinsville, pulling along our stuffed guy. He wore a boiler suit and was full of the hay we'd got from Harold's hay shed and was

wearing one of Dad's old worn jackets on top of that. Kids trailed their guys behind them, and we shouted *Penny for the guy* as we went. I knew Guy Fawkes had tried to blow up the Houses of Parliament. But they'd caught him and put him on a bonfire to burn. Poor guy.

Sometimes, the orchard is full of long grass and the boys and I play hide-and-seek in it, burrowing our way along and making a furrow to lie in that hides you from view, and you lie face to face with the thin stalks and see grasshoppers and maybe an ant or a daddy-long-legs making its steady way up a stalk, and above all that the big blue space of the sky with a fluffy cloud or two, your heart beating wildly, waiting for shrieks and yells and *I've found her! It's my turn to hide now! You count to twenty! One . . . two . . .*

And sometimes we have sheep in the orchard to keep the grass down. I name what I decide are Pete's and my sheep Huff and Muff, which sound to me good woolly names, but Ian names the third one Joey which doesn't fit and is made worse because some of our mother Joan's friends sometimes call her Joey, and though she has wavy, sort of fluffy hair, she's nothing like a sheep.

The cry goes up, *The sheep are out! The sheep are out!* and if it is on the weekend and he is home we hear Dad call from deep in the workshop side of the washhouse, *Who left the gate open?* If not we all run up the driveway or the cracked path or round the side and over the lawn past